



Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity

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Abstract

In Danielle S. Macon's "To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation through the Decolonization of European Ideology" about Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, she identifies Kendrick's three-step process of liberation for African-Americans through spirituality: exhibition, revelation, and community orientation. I seek to place her analysis of Kendrick's music within the context of Daniel White Hodge's exploration of the neo-sacred secular in Hip Hop, a theological concept containing three elements: a belief that God is in all things, viewing life as having good and bad elements, and a rejection of religionism as the only way to God. Firstly, I will explore how Kendrick takes on himself the tropes of Hip Hop and African-American Street life, not to promote their virtues but to subvert them. Secondly, framing Kendrick's presentation of an alternative identity built on his reframing of two Christian theological concepts: *imago dei* and identity as found in person and work of Jesus. Lastly, the process through which he bridges the gap between life in poor African-American urban spaces and Christianity to reconstruct Hip Hop realness in terms of sincerity and a common humanity, instead of the artificially-created litmus tests of Hip Hop authenticity. These three elements are then oriented in Kendrick's music as the spiritual processes through which he strives to liberate himself, Compton, and his African-American community.

Introduction

Spirituality in the music of the Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar is a means through which he liberates himself, Compton and his black community.¹ According to Danielle Macon in her exploration of the Afrocentrism in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick accomplishes this through a three-step process: exhibition, revelation, and community orientation.² Exhibition entails putting “capitalism and obsession with materialism on display to show” detrimental effects to African-Americans.³ Revelation through the discovery of “his spirituality by acknowledging a supreme being” and finding significance in a God who is greater than capitalism and materialism.⁴ Lastly, community orientation involves restoration of Compton through an elevated consciousness and African traditional values.⁵ I aim with this article to further refine and expand the understanding of this liberating spiritual process in Kendrick’s music by utilizing the theological concept of the neo-secular sacred.

Daniel White Hodge first applied the neo-secular sacred, a theology of the profane, was to Hip Hop in *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration*. In that work, he states “the reality[ies] of life... all come together and still find theological connections with a God who can sit in those tensions—not the idealized abstraction of good intentions... but the day-to-day nitty-gritty of life in hostile contexts.”⁶ Hodge notes: “Inside this theological paradigm, there is the opportunity finally to be human and be authentic with yourself and your God.”⁷ I contend that Hodge’s use of authenticity in this context aligns with the sociological notion of sincerity. In sociology, sincerity and authenticity, while related, are distinct in how they function within culture. Authenticity often limits to constraints of a predetermined set of acceptable conditions, which define within a given cultural context how real the identity of a person is. It turns identity into an object that needs to follow certain discourses and scripts, which creates litmus tests for people and their identity within a group.⁸ Sincerity, on the other hand, is being honest, emotionally vulnerable and earnest on purpose.⁹ The concern of sincerity is to re-infuse searches for authenticity with humanity, seeing people not as objects but as subjects who have complex emotions, desires and thoughts. That sincere humanity and sincerity in

¹ Danielle S. Macon, “To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation through the Decolonization of European Ideology” (Master’s Thesis, Temple University, 2017), 35.

² Ibid, 35, 38, and 40.

³ Ibid, 35.

⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁶ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 196.

⁷ Ibid, 197.

⁸ John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15.

⁹ R. Jay. Magill, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion That We All Have Something to Say (no Matter How Dull)* (New York: Norton, 2012), 206.

relation to God comes through in the neo-secular sacred in hip hop, according to Hodge, via three means: a pantheistic manner (a belief that God is in all things), viewing life as having good and bad elements, and a rejection of religionism as the only way to God.¹⁰

Hodge states that the neo-secular sacred is an "embracing the two conflicting, at times opposing, forces within life that make us all 'tick'"¹¹ It begins to answer questions about "pain and suffering, but, at the very least, give some hope in something beyond 'this life.'" It also allows for certain contradictions that humans possess—to flourish while they "work out" the details with God."¹² It is in this spiritual tension of the holy and the profane that Kendrick in his music seeks to liberate himself and his community. Firstly, Kendrick's music subverts African-American street culture, by utilizing common Hip Hop thematic materials and musical choices, which are identifiable within the genre but often, move beyond it. Secondly, his music seeks reconstruction through both lyrical and musical content to endow a new identity upon his listeners that grounds in Kendrick's use of Christianity. Lastly, Kendrick's music collapses the distance between, Christianity and urban African-American street culture, by placing them in conversation with each other instead of as dialectical opposites, in order to bring peace, hope and liberation to Compton.

While this article explores close readings of Kendrick's music in regards to a personal faith in Christianity (and his public persona often invites such readings of his lyrical and musical content), it must be tempered by the understanding that his musical narratives serve in purpose to liberate black communities through the spiritual over autobiographical accuracy. For instance, fans and critics have speculated if Kendrick killed someone at 16 because he rapped on "m.A.A.d City," "If I told you I killed a n**** at 16, would you believe me? Or see me to be innocent Kendrick you seen in the street."¹³ In addition, conversations on the spiritual content of DAMN centers on the personal sincerity of his belief in Hebrew Israelite theology, generally considered outside of historic Christianity.¹⁴ As Macon points out,

¹⁰ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, 198.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, 197.

¹³ Lisa Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar," *Vanity Fair*, June 28, 2018, Accessed July 4, 2018. When asked if he shot someone at 16, Kendrick replies, "I'll put it this way: I've seen my own blood shed, and I've been the cause of other people shedding their blood as well. There was a split second when I felt what my homeboys were feeling—like I don't give a fuck anymore—and that's when I knew something else had to happen."

¹⁴ See Kestenbaum, Sam, "Kendrick Lamar Goes Hebrew Israelite On 'Damn'," *Fast Forward*, April 14, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018 and Andre E. Key, "'Don't Call Me Black No More, I'm an Israelite': Kendrick Lamar, Black Hebrew Religion, and Black Suffering," *Religion Dispatches*, May 10, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018. In addition see Matthew Linder, "Kendrick Lamar's Duel with Damnation," *Christianity Today*, April 26, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018, where I argue that Kendrick's seeming embrace

“mimicking reality is not the sole purpose of art, at least not from an Afrocentric perspective.”¹⁵ Natalie Graham’s exploration of Kendrick’s “King Kunta” particularizes this Afrocentric perspective on art to Kendrick where “in many cases, the telling of ‘the true story’ happens at a remove, via fragments or by use of fictive conceit.”¹⁶ Yet, whether or not elements of Kendrick’s music are autobiographical or not, Kendrick performs his unique presentation of Christianity as the liberating force for himself and oppressed blacks in Compton.

The New Realness

Mark Anthony Neal writes in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, post-soul is concerned with “a reconstitution of community,” “a rigorous form of self and communal critique” and seeks to “undermine and deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes.”¹⁷ Kendrick’s music operates using the imagination of the post-soul aesthetic and points toward spirituality as a liberating force for himself and his community. As Macon argues “in order for African people to be liberated through Hip Hop and any other form of African art, a spiritual component coupled with an Afrocentric consciousness must be utilized at the core of its production.”¹⁸ In Kendrick’s music, he regularly collapses the space between ghetto/church, sacred/profane and Hip Hop realness/Christian identity, in service of subverting the narratives of each in order to reconstitute a new narrative, which seeks to liberate black bodies through a spiritually rich interior life. This occurs, as Kendrick notes, to effect positive change in the kids in Compton who are suicidal, as well as those who are in the penitentiary,¹⁹ by giving them a new conception of identity, a new realness. As Kendrick explained in a 2012 *Spin* interview, “The idea of me sparking change? It’s got to come from within.”²⁰

To understand Kendrick’s place in the formation of this new realness, I offer a brief review of three Hip Hop artists that relate to Kendrick’s music. They are the Hip Hop artists who have had the greatest impact and influence on Kendrick’s approach and purpose in creating his music, DMX, Tupac and Ms. Lauryn Hill. DMX was the

of Black Hebrew Israelite theology functions not as a tacit acceptance of the theology but further heightens the main theme of *DAMN*, Kendrick’s fears.

¹⁵ Macon, “To Pimp a Caterpillar,” 1.

¹⁶ Natalie Graham, “What Slaves We Are: Narrative, Trauma, and Power in Kendrick Lamar’s roots,” *Transitiom* 122, (2017): 125.

¹⁷ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120.

¹⁸ Macon, “To Pimp a Caterpillar,” 2.

¹⁹ Kendrick Lamar, Ebro Darden and Peter Rosenberg, “Kendrick Says Macklemore Went Too Far, Who ‘i’ Is for and the State of Hip Hop,” *Hot 97*, November 3, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

²⁰ Jessica Hopper, “Kendrick Lamar: Not Your Average Everyday Rap Savior,” *Spin*, October 9, 2012, Accessed July 4, 2018.

one who inspired Kendrick to rap in the first place after hearing DMX's album, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*. Comparisons between Tupac and Kendrick are common as both speak about street life and God, and enter the two worldviews in conversation with each other in interesting ways. Lastly, Lauryn Hill's vulnerability, prophetic voice and subversion of the real (as she does so eloquently and forcefully in her MTV Unplugged No 2.0 performance) echoes throughout Kendrick's music. On the track ("The Heart Pt. 3") posted on YouTube, the day before Kendrick's major label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, was released, he referenced the influence of all three musicians on his music. Tupac looms large, "When the whole world sees you as Pac reincarnated." DMX is recognized as Kendrick's original inspiration, "Thank God for the album I idolized/ It's dark and plus hell is hot, that's the start of this crazy ride." Kendrick places the themes of *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* on par with Lauryn Hill's one studio solo album, "the newer Miseducation." Beyond their influence on Kendrick, Hill, Tupac and DMX began with their music to redefine authenticity in Hip Hop, moving the conversation into elements of the sincere, explored within the context of their presentation and understanding of Christian faith. The wide-reaching effect of this shift from tests of authenticity to a rehumanizing sincerity in Hip Hop, allowed rappers to reveal a greater sense of vulnerability in their music and through this shift DMX, Tupac and Lauryn Hill would influence rappers as diverse as Kanye West, Vince Staples, J. Cole, Childish Gambino and Drake.

However, unlike DMX and Tupac, though similar to Ms. Lauryn Hill, Kendrick "uses our [African-American] culture and identity as agency for liberation."²¹ Operating through different spheres of meaning attached to being real in Hip Hop, Kendrick takes a three-pronged approach in his music in working on the axis between life on the street and a life of Christian faith. As he recounts in "Ab-Soul's Outro" from his *Section.80* mixtape, "I'm not on the outside looking in, I'm not on the inside looking out/ I'm in the dead fucking center, looking around."²² Firstly, he takes on himself the tropes of Hip Hop and street life, not to promote their virtues but to subvert them.²³ Secondly, he presents an alternative identity where he presents his understanding of two Christian theological concepts: *imago dei* and identity as found in person and work of Jesus. Lastly, he synthesizes life in poor African-American urban spaces and his lyrical presentation of Christianity to reconstruct realness in terms of sincerity and a common humanity, instead of the artificially created litmus tests of Hip Hop authenticity. To that end, separating the space of life from the world of spirituality is what would cause, according Kendrick's music, one to construct a false sense of the real, whether that is in Hip Hop or in the lives of blacks in Compton and beyond.

²¹ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 31.

²² Kendrick Lamar, "Ab-Soul's Outro," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

²³ Alan Noble, "I'll Write Til I'm Right With God," *First Things*, August 31, 2015, Accessed October 18, 2015.

Subverting the Real in Hip Hop

Stereotypically, performing realness in the sphere of Hip Hop in the United States often includes the search for material wealth, sexual prowess with women, and knowledge of and participation in African-American street culture.²⁴ These performative clichés of realness were so firm and cemented to Hip Hop culture during the Golden era of Hip Hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that the Chris Rock-led film, *CB4*, imagined a Hip Hop industry where rappers could co-opt the identity of the gangsta in order to garner more success in the music business. As Greg Dimitriadis writes in *Performing Identity/Performing Culture*, “The gangsta rap narrative stuck a chord in American popular culture, most especially with solvent young white teens... The violent outlaw, living his life outside of dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination, is a character type with deep roots in popular American lore.”²⁵ While the distance between actual experiences with gang violence and drugs during Golden-era Hip Hop in the United States were somewhat closer to reality, for many of the most popular radio rappers in the 2000s and 2010s, this type of realness was performative.

Kendrick, in his music, often subverts this type performative realness in Hip Hop. From the telling not showing-ness of “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said)” to the extreme braggadocio of “Backseat Freestyle,” Lamar uses the language of extravagant notions of being real and in subtle, and sometimes overt ways, informing listeners of the ridiculousness such pursuits of authenticity. In “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),”²⁶ from his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, after listing ways in which the categories of Hip Hop realness ring false for most African-American youth (hoes, money, drugs and alcohol), that for one to claim this identity in such extremes, makes one “sound like the Feds.”²⁷ The opposite effect of what was intended (the passing of an authenticity test) is what is communicated and comes off to Kendrick as a fake persona grafted on his “n****,” hiding their identity. In a *New Yorker* piece about the white Australian rapper, Iggy Azalea, and her performative identity, Andrew Marantz writes, she “apes clichés about realness without either expanding or subverting them. Realness, for her, is just another Hip Hop tic, like throwing one’s

²⁴ R.A.T. Judy, “On the Question of N**** Authenticity,” In *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 112.

²⁵ Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*, (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 34.

²⁶ Interestingly, the inspiration for this song is Ice Cube’s “You Ain’t Gotta Lie Ta Kick It” which features Chris Rock performing a type of Hip Hop realness that is similar his portrayal of realness in *CB4*.

²⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),” *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

hands in the air or staying on one's grind."²⁸ Moreover, that is what Kendrick's music is reacting against in seeing these kids put on an identity that is not their own, they are reducing the complexities of their humanity to a handful of Hip Hop tropes regarding real blackness.

Kendrick in the bridge to the song tells those who have gone over the top with trying to prove their realness, "Been allergic to talkin', been aversion to bullshit/ Instead of dreamin' the auction, tell me just who your boss is/ N****s be fugazie, bitches be fugazie."²⁹ This is Kendrick's call to bring Hip Hop back to a more grounded reality instead of the fabricated authenticity that pervades many elements of the genre. However, more than that, Kendrick lyrically explores how the culture of Hip Hop has created insincere identities among African-American youth. Kendrick's invitation to kids living in ghettos across America is to see their humanity and not to think that their identity as an African-American needs to fit within the limited Hip Hop characterizations of realness. As Bettina Love writes on Kendrick's conceptualization of living within the confines of black racial identity, "the existential consciousness present in Lamar's lyrics is an inner resistance central to the wellness of our youth."³⁰ Presenting Hip Hop authenticity as an ideal (realness), which one can achieve through conformity to practices of the ideal (hoes, money, drugs and alcohol) and arguing that a performance of authenticity makes a difference in creating realness is what Kendrick is fighting against.³¹

Kendrick is even more explicit in "A.D.H.D.," from his Section.80 mixtape, as he takes on the use of drugs within his community. An upward cascading synth with a continuously pulsating bass set a mellowed out mood characteristic of other Hip Hop songs about getting high. However, in the opening lyrics and hook of the song, while set amidst the soundscape reminiscent of songs about weed, he dismisses the major intoxicants of Kendrick's cultural context:

*8 doobies to the face
Fuck that
12 bottles in the case
N**** fuck that
2 pills and a halfway
n****, fuck that*³²

²⁸ Andrew Marantz, "Iggy Azalea and Realness in Hip-Hop," *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

²⁹ Lamar, "You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)."

³⁰ Bettina L. Love, "Good Kids, Mad Cities: Kendrick Lamar and Finding Inner Resistance in Response to Ferguson USA" *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 16, No. 3: 2016, 322.

³¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23.

³² Kendrick Lamar, "A.D.H.D.," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

When Kendrick finally lands on the song's title, as a major point of arrival, the snare echoing through the silence mimics a gunshot. But this shot is not directed toward another human being but is pointed at the drug culture of the 1980s, which, according to Kendrick discussing "A.D.H.D" with Complex, "not only did it speak about myself but it spoke about a whole generation around the world that went through the influence."³³ And Kendrick knows that the only way in which his anti-drug message will be heard is within the context of a rap song, as he states in the second verse:

*My generation sippin cough syrup like its water
Never no pancakes in the kitchen
Man, no wonder our lives is caught up
In the daily superstition
That the word is bout to end
Who gives a fuck? We never do listen
Unless it comes with an 808, a melody and some hoes³⁴*

Then in two songs, "Momma" and "Backseat Freestyle," he shows how he too once bought into conceptualizations of Hip Hop authenticity. "Momma" presents all the ways in which Kendrick pursued realness and attempted to gain as much knowledge as possible about rap, his hometown Compton, gangs, violence, spirituality and the benefits of being a famous rapper. His drawn out monologue on his knowledge of these various authenticity tests are subverted when in the last line of the verse he raps, "until I realized I didn't know shit/ The day I came home."³⁵ The polyrhythmic snare and hemiola feel of the hook further enforces the tension between a complete knowledge of various definitions of realness or being sincere in relationships with those from his community. Even Kendrick, who has been trying to subvert Hip Hop narratives of realness through his music, knows the temptation of delving into an identity created by the music genre he works inside.

On the other hand, in "Backseat Freestyle" from good kid, m.A.A.d. city, Kendrick utilizes the presentation of himself, as an aggrandized version of black masculinity, to subvert "negative symbols and stereotypes of black life."³⁶ Punch, President of Kendrick's record label, Top Dawg Entertainment, described to Complex, "That song is real reckless, that's a young man's song."³⁷ That type of young recklessness presented in "Backseat Freestyle" interprets through William T. Houston's Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society summary of

³³ David Drake, "Kendrick Lamar's Favorite TDE Songs," Complex, October 25, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "Momma," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment: 2015).

³⁶ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 120.

³⁷ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city,'" *Complex*, October 23, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018.

aggrandized black male identity, "I'm a real n****. I don't give a fuck."³⁸ The "I don't give a fuck"³⁹ stance of "Backseat Freestyle" Kendrick views as a way to escape reality: "It's about me and my homeboys really getting in the backseat and starting our day. Sometimes we'll rap, it takes away from everything else."⁴⁰ Kendrick presents the negative symbols of aggrandized black masculinity through hyperbolic extremes with a four-line hook, which incorporates money, power, respect, violence and sexual prowess:

*All my life I want money and power
Respect my mind or die from lead shower
I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower
So I can fuck the world for 72 hours⁴¹*

Furthermore, the production on this track is almost entirely percussive with a heavy emphasis on the clanging of bells, which one can interpret as a sonic representation of chains. Hit-Boy, who produced the track, speaks of Kendrick's involvement in the musical choices of "Backstreet Freestyle," "Kendrick [changed the beat I gave him by] looping this one part from the beginning that wasn't that way when I first gave him the beat. So he's hearing what he wanted to hear. He definitely had a hand in making it how he wanted it to sound."⁴² While Kendrick's lyrics promote hyper-masculinity,⁴³ the bare sonic space Kendrick and Hit-Boy created with clanging chains and lack of any musical tones, seems to present a narrative where Kendrick and his friends are enslaved, and not empowered, by violence, materialism and oversexualization. However, there is one lyrical moment where Kendrick flippantly nods to spirituality as an antidote to hypermasculinization: "And I pray you n**** is hating, shooters go after Judas/ Jesus Christ if I live life on my knees, ain't no need to do this."⁴⁴ A trajectory of inward reflection through the spiritual further developed throughout the rest of *good kid, m.A.A.d city* but also found in the rest of Kendrick's body of work.

Reconstructing a Liberating Christian Identity

Continuing the dismantling of the real in Hip Hop, Kendrick in "u" from *To Pimp a Butterfly*, turns on himself (similar to "Momma") and how he as a rapper, conforms to the game of being real. While he is deconstructing the role he has played in contributing to this narrative of authenticity in Hip Hop, Kendrick is also

³⁸ William T. Hoston, *Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 30.

³⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'."

⁴¹ Kendrick Lamar, "Backseat Freestyle," *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁴² Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'."

⁴³ Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 129.

⁴⁴ Lamar, "Backseat Freestyle."

constructing a new model of identity through his understanding and presentation of Christian spirituality. The song serves as a moment in Kendrick's career where he reflects on what he has achieved and if through his music he has brought any good, specifically to his hometown, Compton. In an oral history of *To Pimp a Butterfly* for Grammy, he explains that "u" reflects on his influence: "When you're onstage rapping and all these people are cheering for you, you actually feel like you're saving lives. But you aren't saving lives back home. It made me question if I am in the right place spreading my voice."⁴⁵ MixedByAli recounting the recording session for "u" states, "The mic was on and I could hear him walking back and forth and having these super angry vocals. Then he'd start recording with the lights off and it was super emotional."⁴⁶

That emotionality comes not only in his strained vocal delivery but also through lyrics, which self-reflect on Kendrick's ability to change anyone's hearts through his music, and feeling that even God would say to him, "you fuckin' failed."⁴⁷ Besides thinking he failed God, he raps that he is not a brother, disciple or friend to anyone in his community because he left Compton to pursue monetary gain. Now in his vulnerability he cries himself to sleep because he was not around when his old homies are shot or when his sister became pregnant. He admits to battling depression, contemplating suicide and in the second half of the song, while glasses of alcohol clink, he raps on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Kendrick in not shying away from emotional vulnerability in "u" goes against the grain of "the self-proclaimed 'n****', [where] vulnerability is not an option, and is an emotional state reserved for their 'feminine' counterparts."⁴⁸

By allowing himself to be emotionally vulnerable, Kendrick is able to reevaluate why he got into Hip Hop and if his music has had a lasting impact for the community that he grew up in. Kendrick's self-reflection on his attempts at liberating his community through Hip Hop, can also be seen in a 2018 interview with *Vanity Fair*:

I know a lot of people who could—I've seen it—like 'Fuck you, I've got money now, I'm outta here, I don't give a fuck about none of y'all.' But that was something I couldn't deal with. I had to sit back and analyze it and [figure out] other ways I could impact these people without physically trying to bring the whole hood inside a hotel.⁴⁹

In other words, if rapping has become more important than the people Kendrick loves and the black community he hopes to affect positive change in, then rap becomes

⁴⁵ Andreas Hale, "'To Pimp a Butterfly': Kendrick Lamar shares history," Recording Academy Grammy Awards, May 15, 2017, Accessed July 14, 2018.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "u," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁴⁸ Charise L. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It out Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 100.

⁴⁹ Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar".

worthless to him.

This recoiling away from an idolization of rap is apparent as he explained to *The Fader* about dressing up as Jesus for Halloween in 2014:

If I want to idolize somebody, I'm not going to do a scary monster, I'm not gonna do another artist or a human being – I'm gonna idolize the master, who I feel is the master, and try to walk in his light... It's hard, it's something I probably could never do, but I'm gonna try. Not just with the outfit but with everyday life. The outfit is just the imagery, but what's inside me will display longer.⁵⁰

This connects to the deconstruction found in “u” where he seeks to remove the idols he struggles with in order to have them replaced with his divine master.

Kendrick presents Christianity and details how he reconstructs a new identity by subverting Hip Hop realness in his verses on Flying Lotus' “Never Catch Me.” Overall, “Never Catch Me” addresses sin and death but ultimately, gives a picture of the hope of life after death. He opens the song with an acknowledgement of his own inner darkness and is amazed at what he sees in himself but in spite of this darkness, his view of “life and death is no mystery” and he “wanna taste it.”⁵¹ Kendrick summarizes this worldview as “hope inside of my bones” and throughout the song describes how one can embrace one's own death as “life beyond your own life.” Here he provides his listeners an image of a life of hope as experienced on earth and death as the state through which one enters into the greater hope of the afterlife. Within Kendrick's framing of Christianity on “Never Catch Me,” his fear and anxiety about death can relate to his awareness of his own “dark thoughts,” which make him feel insecure about his “final destination.”⁵² Eventually he embraces that death will come for him but through his conception of Christianity, he can rest, despite the fact that he still does wrong: “Tell me I can live long and I can live wrong and I can live right/ And I can sing songs and I can unite with you that I love, you that I like.”⁵³

As Kendrick explicates on his theology of death, the afterlife and how that informs his earthly existence, his rhymes increase in speed along with the jazz-like melodic underpinnings and bass drum kicking into high gear. As the rhythmic activity increases, the wide-spaced bassline becomes more narrowly spaced as it moves ever-upward towards higher pitches, signaling a move from earth to heaven. The accompanying music video further grounds this image of the afterlife as tied to the particularity of Christianity's views of life after death, namely, a belief in bodily resurrection. Beginning with a series of shots in an African-American church, focused on two small caskets (indicating the death of two children), the caskets suddenly open

⁵⁰ Deitch Maud "Exclusive: Kendrick Lamar Sings Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off'," *The Fader*, November 4, 2014, Accessed October 19, 2015.

⁵¹ Flying Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar, “Never Catch Me,” *You're Dead!* (Warp, 2014).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Flying Lotus, “Never Catch Me.”

and the resurrected children dance throughout the church in celebration. Their joyous dance eventually leads outside as they are weaving in and out through the children playing on the blacktop. Eventually they jump into the back of a black hearse only to reappear as drivers of the vehicle. As the hearse leaves the church parking lot, the other children chase it into the street and the final image is of the young boy outside of the window smiling. Reversing the tragedy of the two children's death, as now they have come to experience the afterlife in new bodies, can excitingly, and exuberantly dance their way to heaven.

"Never Catch Me" outlines a basic framework of how Kendrick presents Christianity in his rhymes and from that conceptualization, he is able to bring a theology of creation in God's image to his community, a community he believes lacks a helpful identity of self. Slightly reworking the lyrics for "I Am" from the Kendrick Lamar EP for Reebok's "Get Inspired" campaign, Kendrick uses his birth name to connect his identity to his listeners: "Because I am, we are Kendrick Lamar."⁵⁴ Therefore, he presents himself and his listeners, as royalty standing for family, God and honor:

*Like Malcolm X did, I stand for what I believe in
That's family, God and honor
From Chicago, my daddy and my momma
Came into Compton to accomplish one thing: reign supreme
Raise a king named Kendrick
I ain't lying, it stand for "King" and I am one
My unborn son and grandson will live royal⁵⁵*

Furthermore, Kendrick grounds his identity in his Christ as he raps, "Passion in your life, the passion of my Christ is in me/ And if you say it ain't, you may offend me."⁵⁶ It is through Kendrick's use of the spiritual in the presentation of his identity in "I Am" that he strives to bestow this same identity to his listeners.

The importance of utilizing his name as symbolic of the humanity in all of his listeners harkens back to Kendrick's early days as a rapper when he performed under the moniker K. Dot. He outlines in "Kendrick Lamar" from his Compton State of Mind mixtape, "No more K. Dot, my mother had named me Kendrick/ Fuck a stage name, that's the name that I was given/ The only thing that I can identify within this bidness."⁵⁷ To Kendrick, even a stage name is another mask of realness that rappers hide behind removing them further away from a sincere display of their humanity. For example, the white Detroit-based rapper, Eminem, in his music vacillates between

⁵⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Reebok Presents: Kendrick Lamar 'I Am'," Reebok, December 9, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar," *Compton State of Mind* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2009).

three identities: Eminem, Slim Shady and Marshall Mathers. However, identifying the real human being behind the rhymes is often difficult to locate. Kendrick's return and use of his real name, then, has the meaning of giving his audience the true Kendrick Lamar.

Kendrick not only constructs what identity in his Christ looks like to him but he makes it particular to the African-American experience with the live album version of "i" from *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In the opening stanzas, he discusses suffering, temptation, prayer, baptism, and then, defines the two overarching spiritual forces at work in the world, God and the devil. Sampling the energetic, effervescent and peppy "That Lady" by The Isley Brothers, the song is full of hope amidst the struggles of an existence that seems hopeless. A falling sky, tears, frustrations, misery and war all appear but yet, Kendrick still smiles and is able to preach to his fellow African-Americans raised in places of extremes, that their humanity matters. He leans into the African-American spiritual-blues impulse⁵⁸ with "i" by expressing "joys and sorrows... to affirm an authentic hope in the essential worth of black humanity."⁵⁹

Rapping, "When you lookin' at me, tell me what do you see?," with a lifting vocal inflection on "see," Kendrick asks his listeners whether they are African-American, Caucasian, Asian or any other ethnicity, to look past the identity that American culture or even Hip Hop has placed on him or themselves. To find an authentic identity, according to Kendrick, is to love yourself, telling his listeners to see him (and themselves) for his (and their) God created humanity, as someone "illuminated by the hand of God." "i" could be merely read as a promotion of positive self-esteem and self-image to combat the suicidal thoughts and violence in the streets that Kendrick desperately seeks to end with his music. When explaining who "i" is for, Kendrick invites such a reading:

I wrote a record ["i"] for the homies that's in the penitentiary right now. I also wrote a record ["i"] for these kids that come up to my show with these slashes on they wrist saying they don't wanna live no more. If I say something this blatant, this bold, this simple, they can take reaction from that, they can lock your body, they can't trap your mind for my homies that's in the pen. For the people that's outside they have something more to live for, it starts with yourself first, and you won't be thinking all these negative things that's completely corrupt in your brain.⁶⁰

But another possible reading of "i" is through Kendrick's understanding of Christian identity, where Kendrick is pointing toward a deeper reality of self-rootedness in his Christ, that he believes can transform identity completely. Before his

⁵⁸ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1988), 184.

⁵⁹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 97.

⁶⁰ Kendrick Lamar, Ebro Darden and Peter Rosenberg, "Kendrick Says Macklemore Went Too Far, Who "i" Is for and the State of Hip Hop."

message of the formation of a new identity through his Christ is given to his African-American audience in "i" (through an impromptu speech and then a freestyle acapella verse), the crowd erupts in shouts as a fight breaks out. Kendrick kills the music and converses with those he knows in the audience, arguing for the sanctity of black lives. After calming the crowd down, he freestyles a verse unaccompanied, particularizing the message of identity found in "i" to African-Americans.

One of the ways Kendrick does this is by reconstructing African-American identity, taking Hip Hop's most controversial word associated with questions of identity and authenticity and redefining it. Using the numerous instances of Oprah Winfrey asking rappers about their use of the N-word as a launching point, Kendrick provides his own reinterpretation of the term. "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 hold us." According to Kendrick, this new explanation of "n****s"⁶¹ comes 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 overlook 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 me⁶²

By giving his listeners this Afrocentric approach, that neither follows the original intent of the term as a means through which black humanity was stripped away or its redefinition as a term of endearment in Hip Hop, Kendrick has reconstructed the term to form a new identity and calls on his audience to embrace it. In addition, giving the weight of royalty to "n****s," like in "I Am," makes the term a recognition of black humanity as being wholly human. Kendrick's goal is to redeem the term to become an essential part of black identity and then, tie "Negus" to Hip Hop realness with the final line, "Kendrick Lamar, by far, the realest Negus alive."⁶³ Natalie Graham writing on *To Pimp a Butterfly* states that Kendrick views blackness through place (as is the case here, Ethiopia) "instead of universalizing blackness, Lamar's work calls into being a black universe of interlocked galaxies of evil and good where 'every n**** is a star.'"⁶⁴

Collapsing the Distance between Ghetto and Gospel

The subversion of the Hip Hop real and the reconstruction of Kendrick's

⁶¹ Kendrick Lamar, "i," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Graham, "What Slaves We Are," 124.

formulation of a Christian identity to remove the chains of oppression are continuous themes throughout Kendrick's music but the most intriguing aspect of his body of work is when Kendrick collapses the themes of life in the ghetto with his presentation of Christian spirituality. Not as a reconciliation of the sacred and profane⁶⁵ but to "provide marginalized communities with robust opportunities to wrestle with the "thickness" of life—grappling with those elements of their quotidian existence—negative and positive, in order to generate a sense of meaning and purpose."⁶⁶ Kendrick recounted to Vanity Fair, "What gives me an advantage in my upbringing is the duality of seeing one of the most beautiful moments of me being 6 years old, to the most tragic moment of being 13 or 14, and make that connection so the person [listening] can really see the conflict... And I wanted to tell that story."⁶⁷

In "Ab-Soul's Outro" on Section.80, Kendrick ends the song with, "I'm not the next pop star, I'm not the next socially aware rapper/ I am a human motherfucking being/ Over dope ass instrumentation/ Kendrick Lamar."⁶⁸ He takes on the two outer extremes of Hip Hop identity, trap and conscious, and constructs another identity not limited by either, "a human motherfucking being" who raps over beats, also known as himself. This is recognition of the restrictive forces of either Hip Hop identity that keeps one from being fully human. And humans are complex, not easily reduced to one stream of thoughts and beliefs, as he makes apparent when he raps earlier in the song, "So the next time I talk about money, hoes, clothes, God and history/ All in the same sentence/ Just know I meant it, and you felt it."⁶⁹ It is this side-by-side appearance of Hip Hop tropes and religion that aims to broaden the knowledge of Kendrick's audience wherever they fall on the spectrum of identity, Hip Hop or otherwise.⁷⁰ His knowledge of Compton and Hip Hop informs his spirituality, which allows him to see that the street and Hip Hop are not the totality of reality for him or other African-Americans. Kendrick discusses this in an instructive interview with the New York Times.

⁶⁵ Jon Michael Spencer, *Re-searching Black Music*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 70-71.

⁶⁶ Summary of Anthony Pinn on cultural productions in Hills, Darrius D. "We Gon Be Alright: Kendrick Lamar and the Theology of Affirmation" in *You Gon' Learn Today: The Aesthetics of Christians in Hip Hop* (Forthcoming, TBD), 7.

⁶⁷ Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar."

⁶⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Ab-Soul's Outro."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ab-Soul explains the song's perspective in Matt Conover, "Human Beings on Paper: A Night with Ab-Soul & Kendrick Lamar," *Pretty Much Amazing*, October 22, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018: "I really don't know man. I think that's really where spirituality might kick in. You have, somehow, a feeling to it. It's a... [pauses, looks across the room] lane. A way to... still, really be myself, the whole time, like talk about my things, but do it in a way that it could be played after Rick Ross. I'm kicking all the shit that Immortal Technique would, over Lex Luger. That's the goal. Doing it in a way that I'm not preaching. I don't know shit either. [Soul holds his hand out and apart, open palmed] It's just the left and the right, righteous and wrongs—smashed together [bringing his hands together]."

Joe Coscarelli explains:

Mr. Lamar is working to purify hip-hop, a genre he hopes to ground in his true experiences of growing up poor, the son of a former gangbanger. He offers a corrective, or at least an alternative, to the opulent fabulism of some mainstream rap.⁷¹

Kendrick states:

You know the songs that are out – we all love these songs, they sell a lot of singles and make these record labels a lot of money. But those ‘really living’ in the streets don’t want to hear boasts about murder and drug dealing, he continued. They want to get away from that. If it comes across as just a game all the time, the kids are going to think it’s just a game. From my perspective, I can only give you the good with the bad. It’s bigger than a responsibility, it’s a calling.⁷²

Where Kendrick mixes the themes the clearest is in the aptly titled, “Kush and Corinthians” a “quote-unquote religious song” where he is “trying to find answers” because according to Kendrick, “that’s the space I speak from and a lot of people can relate.”⁷³ Marijuana and one of the books of bible collapse into the space of a psychedelically vibe-laden beat similar to the feel and tone of “A.D.H.D”. Kendrick, here, is subverting a sanitized version of the narrative of Christian life (often espoused by mainstream American Evangelical culture), by injecting into that white-washed narrative, struggles had by those with addictions but wanting to live a more righteous life. Discussing “Kush and Corinthians” with MTV he said, “I’m a sinner and I’m trying to figure myself out,”⁷⁴ which he expresses in the song as: “Have you ever had known a saint that was taking sinner’s advice?/ Well it’s probably you, am I right? If I’m wrong, you a fucking lie.”⁷⁵ It is that both/and-ness of sinner and saint where Kendrick’s music rejects religionism⁷⁶ but furthermore, the faith context that Kendrick presents sees humans with the characteristics of sinner and saint. Kendrick’s flow on the chorus of the song lands heavily on the beat and is rhythmically square as he raps:

*Ride to it, ride to it, cause you never know
when a bullet might hit and you die to it, die to it
Die to it, die to it, live your life, live it right
Be different, do different things, don’t do it like
he did, cause he ain’t what you is, but we can win
Wait, let’s get straight to the point*⁷⁷

⁷¹ Joe Coscarelli, "Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity," The New York Times, March 21, 2015.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Andrew Nosnitsky, "Kendrick Lamar Talks Rap, Religion and the Reagan Era | MTV Hive," MTV Hive, July 11, 2011, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kendrick Lamar, “Kush and Corinthians,” *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

⁷⁶ Daniel White Hodge writes in *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel*, “Religionism is “either/or” never in between or maybe; it either is or it is not,” 168.

⁷⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “Kush and Corinthians.”

This fitting into the beat with his rhymes musically sets the place where Kendrick should be as he locks into the mode of holiness as a saint. But then in the first verse, his flow enters in on a sixteenth note pickup instead of on the downbeat and lyrically, Kendrick wavers between his two modes of being, sinner and saint, contextualized within life's purpose:

*To the meaning of life, what's my purpose?
 Maybe this earth is, ain't a good place to be
 How far is Heaven? Let's see
 Is it in the clouds like they said it would be?
 I wonder when I die will he give me receipts?
 I wonder will the eyes of the Lord look at me?
 Look at me, look at me, I'm a loser, I'm a winner
 I'm good, I'm bad, I'm a Christian, I'm a sinner
 I'm humble, I'm loud, I'm righteous, I'm a killer
 What I'm doing, I'm saying that I'm human⁷⁸*

Christian life, Kendrick explains, becomes murky with sin but on the other hand, a life of sin calls into question Christian faith. This falls in line with what New Testament writer, Paul of Tarsus, writes about himself, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."⁷⁹ Which generally surprises readers of the New Testament epistles since Paul, after a transformative experience with Jesus, is presented as one of the most righteous and selfless disciples of first century Christianity. The dual nature of Kendrick in this song operates in a more biblical pattern of thought where in the overarching and individual narratives of personalities in the bible, one can find God "in the oddest places of them all: the murk, the mire, and the sludge of life."⁸⁰ In "Kush and Corinthians" Kendrick is aware he is a sinner yet knows this is not his identity because when he presents Christianity, faith should transform him: "As I open this book and then burn up some of this reefer/ My plan is to figure out the world and escape all my demons/ I'm dying inside, I wonder if Zion inside the Heavens."⁸¹ Presumably, Kendrick is referring to the first book of Corinthians in this song and Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian church to move away from immorality, putting their trust in the absurdness of the resurrection of Jesus. Kendrick, in the song's narrative, sees this as the hope for himself but also his community and the world. In the closing of the song, BJ the Chicago Kid sings poignantly, "Lord, what kind of life is this?"⁸² and lets "this" hang on the highest note of the phrase, giving time for the listener to ponder the question in light of what

⁷⁸ Lamar, "Kush and Corinthians."

⁷⁹ 1 Tim. 1:15.

⁸⁰ Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, 168.

⁸¹ Lamar, "Kush and Corinthians."

⁸² *Ibid.*

Kendrick presented earlier in the song. Then BJ ends the song not with an answer but with: "Mama, I just wanna sing/ Mama said, according to get everything/ You gotta risk everything/ So I'm smoking my kush reading Corinthians."⁸³ Providing one last time the matrix of a lived Christian life, sinner and saint and BJ crooning and ad-libbing a melody on "war," Kendrick performs the spiritual war of the relationship between temptations and holiness.

"Kush and Corinthians" explores spiritual wrestlings within a mostly personalized narrative but interacts at moments with the communal, in how his family and friends have had a positive or negative impact on his life. "Alright" from *To Pimp a Butterfly* takes Kendrick's narrative of spiritual transformation in "Kush and Corinthians" and applies it to his community of Compton. He does not provide his community with a multi-step plan on how to address the issues of a life of struggle in an urban context but rather provides hopeful and liberating news, "Nazareth, I'm fucked up/ Homie you fucked up/ But if God got us we then gon' be alright."⁸⁴

As Travis Harris notes on the Sunday Oldskool podcast, the reference to the N-word in the song's hook is about recognition of the status of African-Americans in American society but despite this dehumanization of black humanity, Kendrick presses into that caricature of "n****" by telling its listeners, "we gon' be alright."⁸⁵ This banger song, which has the most traditional Hip Hop sound of all the songs on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, is infectiously cheerful and bright, with a jazz choir accompaniment and a sultry, growling saxophone appearing throughout. The drum machine, 808s and choir is consistent throughout the song, an embodiment of the continuous struggles of life in the ghetto. Nevertheless, the saxophone is continuously improvising, as a sign of freedom and hope but this does not go without warning as it begins to growl and explore notes outside of the key of the song. Simultaneously, Kendrick discusses the dangers of Lucy, a personification of Lucifer: "What you want, a house or a car/ 40 acres and a mule, a piano a guitar/ Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog/ Motherfucker you can live at the mall."⁸⁶

In a conversation with Hip Hop producer, Rick Rubin, Kendrick recalls Pharrell repeatedly saying "alright" over the beat and then wondered, "What does 'alright' represent? What does 'we gonna be alright' represent?"⁸⁷ Systemic, circumstantial, personal and spiritual suffering⁸⁸ all occur on the track and Kendrick is able to

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Alright," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁸⁵ Travis Harris, Cray Allred, and Sam Bennett, "Sunday Oldskool: 'Alright' by Kendrick Lamar," *Christ and Pop Culture*, July 28, 2015, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁸⁶ Lamar, "Alright."

⁸⁷ Kendrick Lamar, and Rick Rubin, "Kendrick Lamar Talks To Rick Rubin," *GQ*, September 28, 2016, Accessed July 14, 2018.

⁸⁸ Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010), 77-78.

address all of them with the lead-in to each occurrence of the hook. First, he speaks of being hurt and feeling low, wondering where African-Americans can go in a system that is unable to be followed by black-skinned folks in the first place, especially since it is a system of laws that disproportionately affects African-Americans.⁸⁹ Within that conversation is an understanding that enforcers of the law view black lives as less than other lives, more interested in killing blacks in the streets than going through the court system. Kendrick presents in "Alright" the tension between wanting vigilante justice against a system of laws that is broken and the desire to not give into killing another human being by rapping, "I'm at the preacher's door/ My knees getting' weak and my gun might blow but we gon' be alright."⁹⁰ It is this state of being on the verge of violence to right the wrongs done against the African-American community and also seeking out God's will that Kendrick is able to tell his audience that blacks as a people are going to be alright. Kendrick, with these lyrics, points his community to the spiritual as a liberating force, which had real world implications as Black Lives Matter protesters used the hook of "Alright" as a repeated chant in the same way that "We Shall Overcome" was instrumental to the freedom struggle in the 1960s.⁹¹ The song becomes a hopeful new black national anthem in spite of police brutality against African-Americans and the continued destruction of black bodies.

However, this song is also about Kendrick as an artist and his influence, trying to present who he really is to his listeners. He admits that he is difficult to love, afraid of change and despite dark prayerful nights, he is all right too. Furthermore, he explains his motivation for writing music, "I rap, I black on track so rest assured/ My rights, my wrongs; I'll write till I'm right with God."⁹² The spiritual aspect of Kendrick's music runs deeply as a continual inspiration, which is for not only his liberation but also engaging with a community that in the post-soul era was distrustful of the church. Those youth now look for answers from within their community and no longer look to the church, since the church is no longer interested in speaking from the sufferings of blacks in the ghetto but like much of Hip Hop, espouses a focus on material wealth over spiritual health. In that space Kendrick operates, discussing the suffering of blacks in their annihilated environment, he then presents liberation through his presentation and understanding of Christianity, which is how Black churches traditionally work within their communities.⁹³ However, "Alright" ends with the poem that is interspersed throughout tracks on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, cementing the conflicted feelings Kendrick has regarding his influence, but

⁸⁹ Harris, "Sunday Oldskool."

⁹⁰ Lamar, Kendrick. "Alright."

⁹¹ Aisha Harris, "Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?", *Slate*, August 3, 2015, Accessed February 10, 2016.

⁹² Lamar, "Alright."

⁹³ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 20-21.

with expanded content that speaks of the duality of "Alright": "I didn't wanna self-destruct, the evils of Lucy was all around me/ So I went runnin' for answers."⁹⁴

To Pimp a Butterfly is not the first time Kendrick has questioned his influence and looked for answers, as the twenty-minute song trilogy of "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst" and "Real" on *good kid, m.A.A.d city* reflects on similar themes. Here in grand and specific personal strokes, Kendrick sets these sacred and profane identities as co-equals to undermine the real in Hip Hop and reconstruct a new identity, one that has knowledge of the artifacts of Hip Hop and how Christian faith can intersect and interact with it. The song triptych begins after what listeners presume is the young Kendrick shooting a member of a rival gang, who turns out to be his own brother. In a typical narrative move for Kendrick, he lays out two different stories of the reality of life in the ghetto in the first two verses of "Sing About Me." Then in the final verse, he provides his commentary on both situations, as well as his personal response to the events that unfolded. Kendrick explained to *Complex* the personal nature of the song, "In that song I'm breaking down the actual incident that changed my life: One of my partners had got smoked and I was right there to witness it."⁹⁵

The first verse is from the frame of reference of Kendrick's friend, discussing life in the ghetto, gang violence and the absurdity of it all but still wanting to be part of that community. However, it is mainly about the brother of the friend who died in Kendrick's arms and the desire for the world not forget about him. Kendrick's goal is to portray a real story of death and violence from Compton so that he can communicate that the cycle of violence found in his community is not a means of escape but rather a trap. In the song, Kendrick's friend becomes vindictive and goes after those who shot the friend's brother. However, the sound of three gunshots cutting off Kendrick rapping the line, "And if I die before your album drop I hope,"⁹⁶ indicates that the friend also dies by gun violence. The beat continues without interruption but the hook delays in coming back in to let the reality of death and violence sink in. One can interpret this as a moment of silence for the dead, while the marching beat of the drum represents that the war in the streets continues. In addition, right as hope was about to enter the friend's story, it was dashed away forever in his death.

The second verse is about the friend's sister, vacillating between the friend telling the story of his sister and the sister explaining her situation through her viewpoint. The friend opens up with how upset he is at Kendrick for writing a song about his sister, who involved herself in prostitution in order to get by. The song

⁹⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Alright."

⁹⁵ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city.'" *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

⁹⁶ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst," *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012).

referenced is from the Section.80 mixtape, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)," which describes the sister's sexual molestation as a nine year old child. Experiencing sexual abuse in a community that views black women's bodies as objects, in Kendrick's estimation, is why Keisha fell into prostitution. Kendrick sees dignity in her life as he describes her in "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" through God's eyes as "beautiful," "God's temple" and a "castle," and then describes how he hopes that she will find Christian religion and liberation through Christ.⁹⁷ "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" is more than an honest interaction with Keisha, it also serves as a vivid and tragic story to tell Kendrick's eleven-year-old sister the reason why she does not need to fall into the same path of prostitution.

In "Sing About Me," however, the friend is upset that Kendrick related a song about his sister to the world, telling Kendrick that to him the song, "Just put her on blast and shit/ Judging her past and shit."⁹⁸ Then the friend's sister takes over the narrative telling Kendrick that "And I'ma need that 40 dollars even if I gotta/ Fuck, suck and swallow in the parking lot."⁹⁹ As she goes on to explain, her situation is so bad that the only way to make anything positive out of it is to survive by selling oneself into prostitution. When the brother returns as narrator, he yells at Kendrick, "But fuck that "Sorry for your loss shit"/ My sister died in vain, but what point are you trying to gain/ If you can't fit the pumps I walk in?/ I'll wait."¹⁰⁰ Here the vocals stop against the background of a persistent beat to build up enough tension so that when "Your rebuttal a little too late"¹⁰¹ comes in it slams like a door in Kendrick's face. The sister then tells Kendrick to leave any mention of her off the album and that her life is going great. So sure she is in her path that she brags that she will live longer than Kendrick and "never fade away."¹⁰² Then, as Kendrick channels her story, she goes on to describe how she feels Kendrick can help her by sending people her way for paid sex. The brag of "never fading away"¹⁰³ is derailed as Kendrick's rap fades until it is no longer audible, all while she hangs onto an identity born out of few options (through the avenue of prostitution), a subtle musical effect to indicate that her life led to a disastrous end. As with the first verse, the beat continues while yet another life is lost to the streets.

In the final verse, Kendrick adds his own voice in the story, responding to the now dead friend and how he sees within all three of their stories (friend, brother and sister), and except for the grace of God, he could have ended up very similar to them. Kendrick addresses his friend with empathy and understanding in very humanly

⁹⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

⁹⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst."

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

ways, not as another story that he can use to promote his own agenda or fame but to reach beyond the grave in love to a friend whose life was lost. It is important to note as Natalie Graham explains, "In 'Sing About Me,' call-and-response creates a dynamic series of possible narratives which simultaneously problematizes what might be interpreted as the official or original story and casts doubt on Lamar's authority to tell."¹⁰⁴ Operating on the axis between a life in the ghetto and a life of Christian spirituality, Kendrick in his lyrics produces an identity, which always questions its motives, and reassess how much good one is doing in the lives of others with one's work. It is that self-reflection and humbleness that comes across through the final verse as Kendrick, in conversation with his dead friend, is able to speak in real terms to him.

The verse opens with Kendrick thinking about these three deaths, how these deaths make him think about his own death and what these deaths mean within an eternal context:

*Sometimes I look in a mirror and ask myself
Am I really scared of passing away
If it's today I hope I hear a
Cry out from heaven so loud it can water down a demon
With the Holy Ghost till it drown in the blood of Jesus¹⁰⁵*

He moves from contemplating his own death, straight to the cross of Christ as the way through which death is conquered. Then similar to "Alright," Kendrick speaks about writing raps as a way through which he can show his "allegiance with the other side," namely, God. This spiritual opening to the final verse frames how Kendrick reacts and apologizes to his friend about how he unjustly used the sister's story.

*And your sister's situation was the one that put me
In a direction to speak of something that's realer than the TV screen
By any means, wasn't trying to offend or come between
Her personal life, I was like "it need to be told"¹⁰⁶*

Bringing it full circle, he uses his faith to empathize with those who are weaker by crying and praying for them to be strong one day. Furthermore, he confirms all their humanity by rapping that he's "Fighting for your rights, even when you're wrong."¹⁰⁷ Then, as Kendrick hopes that he too will be sung about when he is gone, the drum machine cuts out for the first time in the song as he raps, "Now am I worth

¹⁰⁴ Graham, Natalie. "What Slaves We Are," 126.

¹⁰⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst."

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

it?/ Did I put enough work in?"¹⁰⁸ These are essential questions of identity framed within conceptualizations of the worth of one's life. The continuing beat of life stops in that moment as Kendrick contemplates his worth in an American society that does not value black bodies and a community that sees too many killings. The returning hook now transforms to a plea from Kendrick that people will remember him once he dies and the voice of a woman takes the hook from him to end the song before a small skit unfolds.

In the skit, the young Kendrick tells his homies, "I'm tired of this shit. I'm tired of fucking running. I'm tired of this shit. My brother, homie."¹⁰⁹ Then "Dying of Thirst" interrupts the distraught teen with how the relationship between God's law and gospel fits into the context of the narrative of gang violence as found in Compton. But the song is also setting listeners up for the last song in the tryptic, "Real," where Kendrick provides another path out of the neediness of those struggling on the street, who can only imagine limited options to help them navigate that environment. He speaks, in "Real," about the reality of their situation, subverts what being real means and constructs what true realness is. However, before one can construct a new identity, a recognition must occur, where life no longer works in the muck and mire of one's own brokenness. To realize that the well of money, women and violence is dry, unable to quench the spiritual thirst that Kendrick sees in himself and the people of his community.

"Dying of Thirst" musically constructs from a choir of female voices, brittle bass drum, ringing hi-hat and for emphasis on certain lines, a synthesized bass. Kendrick's flow carries the short phrasing, cadence and inflection of an African-American preacher whooping a sermon, with "uhs" sprinkled in after each line to mimic that style of preaching.¹¹⁰ This purposeful callback to the stylistic sounds of black preaching ties the song into that spiritual heritage and grounds Kendrick as a preacher in the minds of his listeners. Within this imitation, Kendrick is telling his younger self from the skits, that he is having an identity crisis and the reason why has spiritual implications:

Tired of running
Tired of hunting
My own kind
But retiring nothing
Tires are steady screeching, the driver is rubbing
Hands on the wheel, who said we wasn't?
Dying of thirst
Dying of thirst

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 89 and 93.

*Dying of thirst*¹¹¹

When Kendrick begins to rap the line, “dying of thirst,” the bass comes in for the first time, grounding the song in the image of spiritual thirst that is leading to one’s death. Essentially, the root cause of Kendrick’s commentary is that it pains him to see individuals in his community chase things that do not satisfy their thirst. Throughout the song Kendrick continues the themes of violence, drug dealing, money and power but now defines that seeking after and engaging in those things as sin. So overwhelming is the amount of sin that Kendrick has engaged with in his life that he has lost count. He questions what he and his people are doing because these things have eternal consequences, “Hell is hot, fire is proven/To burn for eternity.”¹¹² His people are feeling the pain of running in this life of suffering and trying to get by but according to Kendrick, the church is reaching out to them. However, most in his community have no intention of visiting the church and return to the gang violence they already engage in. Nevertheless, Kendrick has the final word, telling them that their identity, which spans generations as if given at birth in his community, is one that is “dying of thirst.”

In the final verse, it is even more explicit in addressing Kendrick’s and his community’s temptations as well as their spiritual need. The verse opens with a line about sins and the need for a well to take care of the drought that is occurring in their souls. And where do these sins of “Fuck the world, my sex slave/ Money, pussy and greed what’s my next crave” lead?¹¹³ To the grave. Thus why Kendrick tells his listeners what his mother said:

*“Backwards,” my mama say.
“See a pastor, give me a promise
What if today was the rapture, and you completely tarnished
The truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest
You dying of thirst
You dying of thirst
So hop in that water, and pray that it works”*¹¹⁴

She addresses that Kendrick is completely without hope because he is tarnished and that if he does not change his ways he will not be part of God’s end times rapture. However, she directs him to find hope in a truth that sets him free, the truth that is the gospel of Jesus and if he accepts this truth, seek the waters of baptism. At the call of baptism, the music completely drops out to drive home the importance of this spiritual water in addressing the thirst that Kendrick feels. A call that Kendrick took up in real life at 16 and “again in my 20s—just for that reassurance and belief in

¹¹¹ Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst.”

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

God."¹¹⁵ This section of the song also contains the only literal reference to water, which packs a punch because the response to the sins and temptations of the song is to have faith in the grace of the waters of baptism. In addition, Kendrick unpacking "I'm Dying of Thirst" for *Complex* states as much: "[The song] represents being baptized, the actual water, getting dipped in holy water. It represents when my whole spirit changed, when my life starts – my life that you know right now, that's when it starts."¹¹⁶

The female choir comes back in and then so does the drum machine as if the beat of life that was consistent and never ceasing in "Sing About Me" would continue to march on. But no, the music is cut off, returning to the young Kendrick still yelling, "Fuck. I'm tired of this shit," only to be interrupted by a woman (voiced by Maya Angelou), admonishing Kendrick and his friends for having guns. Building off the themes of "Dying of Thirst," she too tells them that they are heading towards death and are in a spiritual drought. The answer is that they need holy water, to experience baptism with the spirit of God and receive Him as their personal savior. She then takes them through the Sinner's Prayer:

*Lord God, I come to you a sinner
And I humbly repent for my sins
I believe that Jesus is Lord
I believe you raised him from the dead
I would ask that Jesus come into my life
And to be my Lord and Savior
I receive Jesus to take control of my life
And that I may live with him from this day forward
Thank you Lord Jesus for saving me with your precious blood
In Jesus name. Amen.*¹¹⁷

However, she does not end there, she tells them that now that they have accepted Jesus as their savior that their identity has changed: "Alright now, remember this day: the start of a new life/ Your real life."¹¹⁸ As "Sing About Me" was rooted in the real life story of Kendrick's friend being shot, the skit at the end of "I'm Dying of Thirst" is also based on a real situation:

The same day [my homeboy got shot], I ran into an older lady. I don't want to say she was religious, but she was a spiritual lady who broke down what life is really about to us. 'I'm Dying of Thirst' represents being in a situation where all this happens throughout the day, but at the end of the day we run into this particular lady and she breaks down the story of God, positivity, life, being free, and being real with yourself. She was letting us know what's really

¹¹⁵ Lisa Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar." *Vanity Fair*. June 28, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'." *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

¹¹⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst."

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

real. Because you have to leave this earth and speak to somebody of a higher power.¹¹⁹

The collapsing of ghetto and gospel in “Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst” is building up to this point, to the creation of a new identity that is further explored in the final song of the narrative of good kid, m.A.A.d city, “Real.”

Conclusion

The hook of “Real” opens up sounding like a celebration, “Look in the mirror and know I’m there/With my hands in the air/I’m proud to say yea”¹²⁰ and the drums only come in when “I’m real, I’m real, I’m really really real”¹²¹ is sung repeatedly. This highly repetitive concentration on the word “real” cements this new reality of realness in the life of Kendrick Lamar. This is a welcome home to a new identity that one can find in his Christ, which can extend to the homies and women in his life. Following the narrative structure of “Sing About Me,” Kendrick in the first verse speaks of a woman obsessed with materialistic things, in the second a homie searching after money, women and violence, and lastly, Kendrick provides his response and commentary to lay out a larger point about what makes a person real.

“You living in a world that come with plan B,” he raps in each verse, and what is plan B? Kendrick’s meaning is clearest in the final verse where he states that Plan B is “a scapegoat,” which may be a possible reference to the Jewish Day of Atonement, where it was prescribed that the Levitical priests sacrifice a goat but then also send a goat out from the camp to bear all the sins of the people.¹²² Though Kendrick does not explicitly refer to Christianity in “Real,” given that the song occurs right after the explicitly Christian “Sinner’s Prayer,” Plan B could also be interpreted as reference to Jesus as the scapegoat.

However, Kendrick also presents two other options, what he calls Plan A and Plan C. Plan A is the giving into the world of sin as it is and not deviating from that path. It is a plan that cannot guarantee fulfillment, comes with a cost and ends in yet another mistake. Plan C on the surface appears as a solution to Plan A, but is so ephemeral that finding successful escape is impossible and is an excuse instead of transforming one’s identity. However, Kendrick as an alternative to both presents Plan B, in “Real”. Whether Plan B is a reference to the Jewish Day of Atonement, Christ or something else, Plan B, to Kendrick, is the reality of a world where love, hope, peace, and liberation exist. As Kendrick explained to Complex, regarding the meaning of “Real:”

That’s the start of me recognizing everything I was doing throughout that day, it wasn’t real. Everybody has their own perception of what a real ‘n****’ is. Most of the time a real n**** is a street cat or someone putting in some type of work and doing violence. That’s what we thought

¹¹⁹ Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’.”

¹²⁰ Kendrick Lamar, “Real,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment: 2012).

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lev. 16: 8–10.

they was. Someone who's about that life.

But on that record, it was me getting an understanding of what real is, and my pops breaking down on that record. It shows the influence he had on my life.

Real is taking care of your family. Real is responsibility. Real is believing in a high power, believing in God.

Real is having morals. Real is carrying yourself in a manner where you're not influenced by anybody else. You have your own mind, your own outlook on life. You're not doing what's just the trend or doing what people want you to do.¹²³

Kendrick operates out of love for both the men and women in his communal context, where in his final verse he raps "love" fourteen times, which accompanies Anna Wise singing, "love" along with him. He takes the things that his homies and the women he attracts love and flips it around to be about loving them and what their lives have to offer. Nevertheless, the one caveat to this love is that love does not matter unless Kendrick is able to see that his humanity is important, in spite of living in an environment and culture that does not value his life. Following this string of "loves," he questions, within the context of his liberated identity, if he should hate the very things he used to love: partying, women, street credibility, and in a callback to "Backseat Freestyle," money, power and respect. He summarizes these Hip Hop tropes of being real by rapping, "Or hatin' the fact that none of that shit make me real."¹²⁴

While Kendrick's rap ends with that line, the music continues as his answering machine plays back a message from his parents. His father redefines for Kendrick what realness truly means: "Any n**** can kill a man, that don't make you a real n****. Realness is responsibility, realness is taking care of your motherfucking family, realness is God, n****."¹²⁵ Kendrick's mom builds on the father's advice, telling Kendrick, "Look, the neighbors say they seen you and your little friends over there by the Food 4 Less, and they was preaching to you over there telling you about the good book because right about now that's what ya'll need."¹²⁶ For Kendrick and his parents, being real is finding an identity in God, not in the Hip Hop tropes of money, power and respect. Kendrick's mom further encourages him, now that he has found an authentic identity, to bring back this message of hope and liberation through the spiritual to the black and brown kids of his city, the very encouragement Kendrick believes they desperately need.

Liberation through the spiritual, as Kendrick relates in his music, becomes one birthed out of systemic, circumstantial, and personal struggles. Through Kendrick's

¹²³ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'." *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

¹²⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Real."

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

recreation of realness, he does not look at judgement on his brothas and sistas on the street but sees with renewed "optics," loving them, but not wanting them to remain in their struggles. By encountering the struggles of others as well as his own, he reflects on the impossibility of keeping God's law ("Alright"), the pain that comes with sin ("Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst") and why he needs to rely on his spirituality in the transformation of his identity ("Real"). As Macon argues, "For African people to be liberated through Hip Hop and any other form of African art, a spiritual component coupled with an Afrocentric consciousness must be utilized at the core of its production."¹²⁷ By moving along the axis between life in poor African-American urban spaces and Christian spirituality, Kendrick's music is providing a vision of liberation for his community. Kendrick arrives at realness through an identity from a higher power and able to address even contemporary issues found in the streets of the ghetto.

In Tupac's final interview with Vibe magazine, he claimed that the church, being more interested in making money for itself than speaking into the lives of those on the street, is the reason why kids of the Hip Hop generation were not going to church.¹²⁸ Tupac seeing the spiritual need and hunger of the people because of the church's lack of interaction with their community, sought to point his community to God through his music. In the same sense, Kendrick is looking to do the same, but he takes it a step further than Tupac does in this interview calling into question the very meaning of realness to liberate his community. Therein lies the focal point in which Kendrick can address the needs of his community; by showing that the whole system is broken and needs an entirely new structure. Not to simply turn to the next page with a new program aimed at addressing the woes of the Compton. Kendrick, on the other hand, seeks to transform the system of identity in Compton and then provides to his audience where he believes they can reconstruct an authentic identity, through and with God via spiritual liberation. To be real in Hip Hop but more importantly, in life, for Kendrick, is to become a sincere human being that makes up of a range of emotions and identities, which intersect with and transformed by the spiritual. Therein lies one of the goals of Kendrick's musical output, to transform Hip Hop identity by bringing into conversation with one another, spirituality and African-American street culture, in order to recreate realness through the lens of his framing of Christianity and provide to his community a sense of hope, peace, and liberation.

¹²⁷ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 2.

¹²⁸ Tupac Shakur, "Tupac Shakur: The Lost Interview, Pt. 6," Vibe, Accessed October 18, 2015.

Editors' Note on the N word:

Throughout the essay, we censor the N word because the author is White. We do not find it acceptable in any situation for Whites to use the N word, even when they are quoting Blacks. Relating directly to this article, while singing M.A.A.D City during Kendrick Lamar's Hangout Festival in Alabama, a White young woman repeatedly uses the N word and Lamar immediately stops performing the song, and tells her "You gotta bleep one single word."¹²⁹ This situation highlights the issue of Whites saying the N word, even when they are quoting lyrics. Our argument against Whites using the N word centers on the long history of White Supremacy connected to using the word with a particular emphasis on the slave trade. In one particular instance, the Harper's Weekly reported on July 13, 1862 that W.H. Russell wrote this about a slave auction: "The negro was sold to one of the bystanders, and walked off with his bundle God knows where. " niXXers is cheap," was the only remark of the bystanders" (pg. 447). This statement reveals the connection between, on one hand, a slave trade that directly rips apart Black families while dehumanizing them to property, and on the other hand, a phrase used to name, characterize the situation, and identify the enslaved people. This traumatizing history can be traumatizing to African descendant readers who may, while not expecting to, read the word and become triggered.

¹²⁹ BBC News - Kendrick Lamar Stops White Fan using N-word on Stage at Concert (May 22, 2018) Accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44209141>

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