

# From Resistance To Incorporation: How Kendrick Lamar Turned From Black Saviour To Black Salesman

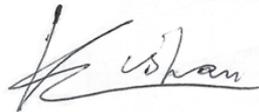
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I certify that the dissertation presented by me for the degree of Bachelor of Music (Honours) comprises only my original work except where due acknowledgement is made in the text to all other material used.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>		iii
<b>Chapter 1</b>	Introduction	1
<b>Chapter 2</b>	Literature Review	6
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Public Reception	11
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Resistance	18
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Incorporation	34
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Conclusion	49
<b>Notes</b>		53
<b>Reference List</b>		54
<b>Filmography</b>		57
<b>Discography</b>		59

## List of Figures

1. Segregation in the City of Angels: A 1939 Map of Housing Inequality in L.A. 4
2. How Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly" Artwork Is the Lasting Document of America's Hip-Hop President 25
3. Kendrick Lamar "Damn" Album Cover 46
4. "Kendrick Lamar – i (Official Video)" Comment Section 47
5. "Kendrick Lamar – HUMBLE." Comment Section 47

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2015, rapper Kendrick Lamar released his breakthrough album, *To Pimp A Butterfly* (*TPAB*) to widespread acclaim from fans and critics alike. His fusion of jazz, soul, and hip hop, laced with incendiary critiques of institutionalised racism in the United States, struck a chord of pro-Black<sup>1</sup> sentiment at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. His hit single “Alright” became an anthem for protestors following a clash with police in Cleveland, Ohio over the attempted arrest of a 14-year-old boy, cementing Lamar’s place as the new political face of hip hop and the most important rapper of the decade. While his position seemed uncontested amongst his musical peers, conservative media felt differently. Fox News criticised the lyrics to “Alright,” with anchor Geraldo Rivera going so far as to say, “Hip Hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years” (Unruly 2015<sup>2</sup>).

In 2018, Lamar became the first rapper to win a Pulitzer prize for his 2017 triple-platinum album *DAMN.*, the first musical album to win outside of the jazz or classical genres. On *DAMN.*, however, Lamar distanced himself from his political views and delivered a much more accessible sound at a time when hip hop had become the most consumed music genre in the US. As he changed his sound to one more in line with mainstream trends, catering to a homogenous, white audience in the process, Lamar found the kind of success rarely seen by African-American artists. While many will see this as a grand achievement not only for Lamar, but for hip hop as a whole, the de-

politicisation of his music and mass consumption by mainstream audiences also comes as a betrayal of hip hop's history of political resistance.

This thesis argues that by moving away from his politics of resistance and catering to a mainstream audience, Lamar has fallen victim to the process of incorporation by the mainstream culture industry. By cultivating an audience that ignores or misreads the political history of hip hop and Black resistance, he is failing the audience he once spoke for. To explore this phenomenon, I will discuss Lamar's two most recent albums and how his position as an artist has evolved. I analyse his 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly* and discuss the meanings encoded into the music before examining his most recent album, 2017's *DAMN*.. I then draw connections to larger socio-political problems of resistance, consumption and identity.

To properly interrogate how Lamar's musical identity has been co-opted by the culture industry, we must first comprehend how it was constructed. Growing up in the spiritual birthplace of West Coast hip hop – Compton, California – Kendrick Lamar was primed for a certain kind of life whether he knew it or not. Born in 1987 after his parents fled their involvement with a Chicago street gang, Gangster Disciples, Lamar grew up on welfare in government housing (Eells 2015). The city of Compton itself was a victim of structural racism: after the "Second Great Migration" and the fiery 1965 Watts Riots, the larger South Los Angeles area experienced "white flight" as middle-class whites fled the area in fear of brewing racial tensions. In addition, property owners engaged in the practice of "redlining:" reserving housing areas considered hazardous for minority applicants by marking them out in red on city maps, relegating them to areas increasingly

subject to urban decay. Contrary to the belief that racial divisions are a natural process of the free market, such practices systematically enforced them. By 1969, Compton had the highest murder rate per-capita in the United States, a fact that was pushed into the spotlight during the birth of West Coast Gangsta Rap in the late 1980s. It was during the 1980s and early 1990s that the US was affected by a crack cocaine epidemic, severely affecting South Central Los Angeles and its surrounds. In 1986, US congress passed incredibly harsh laws resulting in a sentencing disparity of 100:1 for the possession or trafficking of crack cocaine as opposed to powder cocaine. This disparity came with clear racial divisions: crack cocaine was predominantly used by black people, while powder cocaine was more common amongst whites. A 2015 report by the Department of Justice found that incarceration rates still reflect this disparity: 54% of federal prisoners convicted of drug offenses were trafficking cocaine and 88% of crack cocaine felons were black (Taxy, Samuels and Adams). In 1992, Compton was heavily affected by another major riot following the acquittal of four officers charged with use of excessive force in the Rodney King trial.

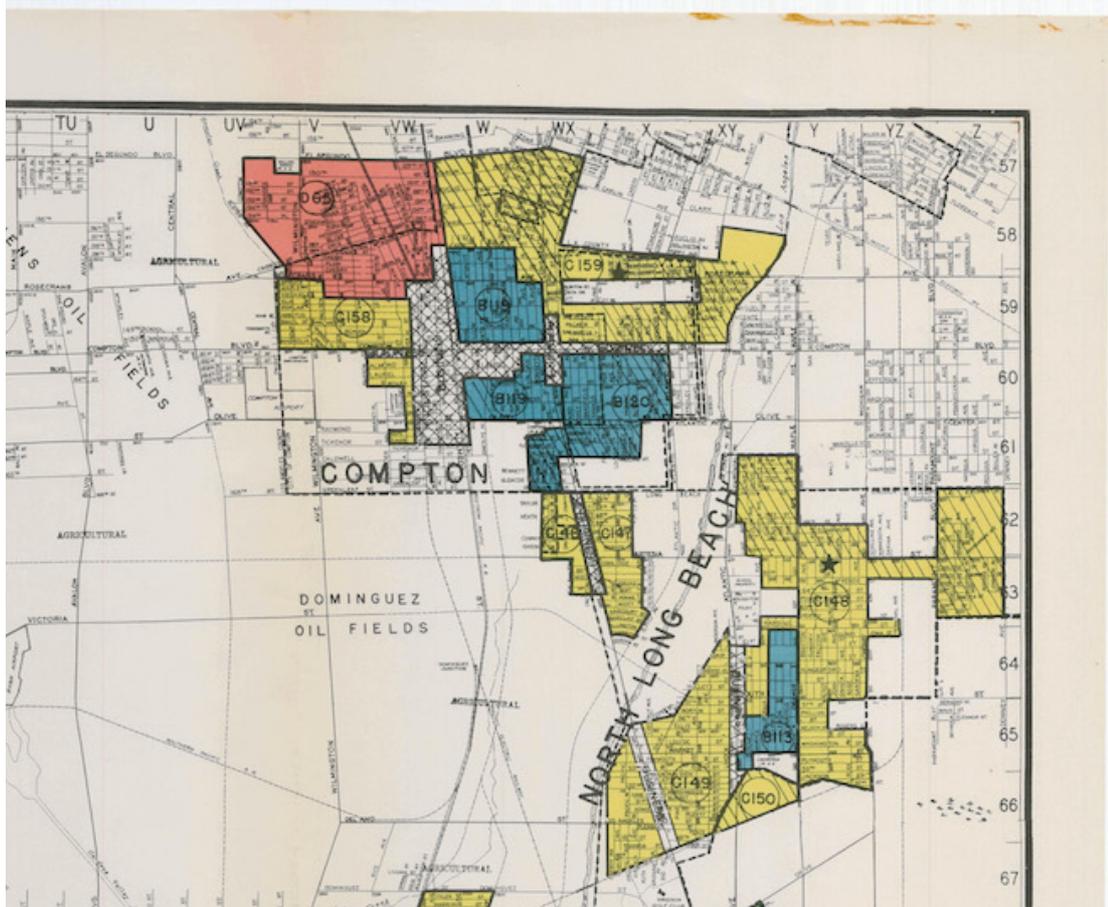


Figure 1: “Segregation in the City of Angels: A 1939 Map of Housing Inequality in L.A.” (Reft 2017)  
 (Blue = Desirable, Yellow = In Decline, Red = Hazardous)

This was the city that Kendrick Lamar was born into, a city carrying a legacy of drug abuse, violence, urban decay and systemic racism. This was the city where Lamar witnessed his first murder, a drug dealer shot outside of his apartment building, at age five. He witnessed his second murder at age eight. Learning to survive in these conditions, Lamar managed to avoid gang life and became an artist with a message of hope. Following on from the previous generation’s harsh depictions of reality in Compton, on the lead single “HiiiPower” from Lamar’s debut album *Section.80*, he raps, “Visions of Martin Luther staring at me, Malcolm X put a hex on my future – someone catch me / I’m falling victim to a revolutionary song, the Serengeti’s clone.” Lamar knew the system they lived under was

broken and dreamed of the world Martin Luther King envisioned, a world where people would be judged not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. However, he also knew that his people needed the revolution of which Malcolm X spoke. He knew that to escape the everyday violence of life in Compton was not to escape from the systemic violence of life as a black man in the United States.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Lamar's upbringing illuminates one side of his racial identity: blackness as a political construct born of oppression. A relationship to blackness that is forced upon a subject through their lived experiences of racial discrimination. This discrimination crosses class boundaries and reduces fully formed humans to a single colour, an unfortunate by-product of the legacy of white supremacist domination that liberal democracies are founded upon. "The challenge is to create the awareness among committed liberal democrats that this right-wing cultural politics is an unacknowledged aspect of their political history and national identity," Love explains. "The cultural-political roots of liberal democracy include conquest and genocide along with freedom and equality" (2016, 62). As M.K. Asante elaborates, the images of blackness we are sold in liberal democracies are simply another form of control (2009). More than just unconscious biases, stereotypes function as a way for oppressors to justify their treatment of the oppressed. The images oppressors produce – the gangster, pimp, hoe, person of colour, even the "real" or "conscious" rapper – are all one-dimensional prisons of image. These images are accepted, internalised and reproduced by the oppressed, pushing them to enact their own defeat. If minorities cannot control how "real" is constructed, how can we live an authentic life? How can our cultural practices speak truth to power? How can someone like Kendrick Lamar truly free his community from a system that seeks to destroy them?

As Tricia Rose has argued, all contemporary cultural practices are deeply shaped by the commodity system. This has created an institutionalisation of cultural practices amongst capitalist countries that Theodor Adorno dubbed "the culture industry." Within

this industry, Black cultural practices must speak to both a Black audience and a larger, predominantly white context (Rose 1994). As many post-colonial, liberal democracies are founded upon systems of white supremacy, racial minorities must develop what Du Bois influentially labelled “double consciousness” (2007). This entails an understanding and acceptance of normative behaviour to minimise one’s marginalisation within a society, whilst simultaneously being able to identify the shortcomings of the system, retaining a sense of personal identity and a link to one’s cultural heritage. Without this double consciousness to cultural practice, mainstream representations of Black culture have an othering effect; a forbidden narrative or symbol of rebellion with the power to fascinate white audiences without directly involving them. And so, according to Hancock Rux (2003), race must not be thought of as real but as a constructed Dream. Blackness and whiteness are not inherent, but exist only as social constructs to affirm racial identities. These identities are expressed through symbolism, with skin colour being but one such symbol.

If we view hip hop from this postmodern perspective, where political contestation is central, Lamar’s musical output has become, as Cornel West feared, “highly packaged, regulated, distributed, circulated and consumed” (quoted in Brooker 2014, 222). Because these aesthetics are defined by and serve white hegemony, Lamar’s racial symbolism drifts from blackness towards whiteness. The irony here is that white audiences are unable to decipher these symbols from within the white hegemony they have created, lacking the double consciousness it takes to view representations of black people as more than a racialised other (Love 2016). As racial divisions have slowly broken down, white audiences

may conflate white privileges with class privileges and even take umbrage as Black people try to reclaim the aesthetic symbols that are taken from them.

While hip hop as a postmodern phenomenon may not have the power to breakdown these racial divisions in liberal democracies, Brooker claims that it does have the power to breakdown the divide between “high-brow” and “low-brow,” divisions commonly tied to class structures. An example of this is the song “For Free? (Interlude)” from *TPAB*. Here, Lamar effortlessly blends the “institutionalised, upper-class, highbrow” practice of bebop jazz with “the working-class, lowbrow” language of African-American slang to critique institutionalised racial divides in the US. However, these socio-political contests are not so apparent on *DAMN*.. Lead single “HUMBLE.” sees Lamar rapping over a repetitive, mainstream trap<sup>3</sup> beat for the first time in his career while his political stance is watered down and non-threatening to white audiences.

Another question worth asking is whether or not Lamar has a responsibility to help “free” his community at all. If blackness is, at least in part, oppressed upon people, does escaping this oppression void a part of one’s identity? Of course, identity is not such a black and white construct. While Lamar did speak directly to his desire for revolutionary change early in his career, it may seem ludicrous to hold an artist to something they said in their mid-twenties. However, the issue here is not one man’s individual desire to create change, but a social responsibility to avoid further disempowering racial minorities. We might assume that people have a responsibility to avoid harming others. In this thesis however, I view the commodification and sale of Black symbolism as an abstracted form of harm: one that has real-world effects. Another African-American man who appeased white

society was the infamous O.J. Simpson, a man who distanced himself from his blackness both verbally and aesthetically. While Simpson's intentions may have differed to Lamar's, Simpson allowed his image to be used by white companies like Hertz to market products across racial boundaries. Although race played a pivotal factor in Simpson's trial and eventual acquittal for his 1994 double homicide allegations, the fact remains that little has changed for blacks facing the justice system. Simpson's acquittal was meant to be a win for African-Americans across America, but it appears to only have been a win for Simpson. Indeed, Simpson found himself shunned from white society after the trial despite his acquittal, eventually leading to his ongoing financial troubles and harsh sentencing in a second trial for robbery thirteen years later. Despite Simpson's seemingly post-racial declaration that – "I'm not black, I'm O.J." – the moment he found himself no longer palatable to white society he was "re-racialised" as black and slid down the "racial hierarchy" until he found himself where White America thought he belonged: behind bars (Walton and Chau 2018).

Lamar on the other hand, speaks directly to Black audiences, creating art that is born of the Black experience. While not completely inaccessible to white audiences, *TPAB* does make numerous references to Black history and iconography in addition to its afro-centric stylistic heritage. By coding messages into his work about historical Black icons and almost exclusively sampling African-American artists, Lamar constructs a form of blackness that is what Arzumanova calls, proprietary (2016). It is owned by, and speaks directly to, Black audiences, all from the relatively powerful platform of a major music label within the culture industry. While blackness can be a tool employed by state powers to create and

disempower a racial “other,” blackness is of course, defined by Black people. Black cultural expressions operating within the culture industry are expected to speak to the aforementioned larger white context. To speak directly to a Black audience then, is a radical move; a prioritisation of Black desire over white expectations that poses a tangible threat to the American state.

As Butsch (2015) describes, there is an ongoing intellectual battle between hegemony and resistance within capitalist structures. While resistance is reliant upon an understanding of hegemonic power, hegemony itself is in constant flux, giving it the power of incorporation. This is the process by which practices of resistance are “corralled and rearticulated within the framework of hegemony.” Butsch however does not suppose incorporation to be the end of resistance, as hegemony and resistance can never truly be complete. Instead, he calls for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Untangling Lamar’s process of incorporation may then prove fruitful to understanding cultural resistance.

## Public Reception

Following the killing of seventeen-year-old black youth, Trayvon Martin, and the subsequent acquittal of his shooter, the “Black Lives Matter” movement was born in 2013. Rapidly gaining global exposure, the movement became known for numerous street demonstrations around the US. A key focus of the group was bringing attention to the institutional violence and discrimination facing African-American people, often at the hands of police officers. In July 2014, Eric Garner was accused of illegally selling loose cigarettes and subsequently killed by an NYPD officer who used excessive force while arresting him. As the officer forced him to the ground in a chokehold, Garner repeatedly exclaimed, “I can’t breathe” [before dying of asphyxiation]. Two months later, Michael Brown was fatally shot in an altercation with a police officer during an arrest, igniting riots in the city of Ferguson, Missouri.

Black Lives Matter was instrumental in bringing attention to these incidents, making t-shirts with the slogan “I can’t breathe,” staging protests, and spreading awareness through social media platforms. That December, an African-American shooter killed two police officers as an act of revenge, prompting a counter protest movement by police forces dubbed “Blue Lives Matter.” In May 2016, Louisiana passed legislation that made targeting police officers and firefighters a hate crime. A 2019 study found that black men are still roughly 2.5 times more likely to die from use of police force than white men (Edwards, Lee & Esposito).

*To Pimp A Butterfly* was released on March 15, 2015 in the midst of this moment of global visibility for Black activism. With references to Compton street gangs, Trayvon

Martin and Kunta Kinte, Lamar's message resonated not only with his immediate community in Compton, but with African-Americans across the nation. Further still, racial minorities around the world found solace in *TPAB* as it reached the number one position on charts in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, not to mention the endless top-ten lists from music publications. Lamar had previously been proclaimed the "King of The West Coast" during a 2011 live performance by the likes of Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre and The Game (Quinones 2011), but *TPAB*'s success made it undeniable that he was bigger than hip hop.

Seemingly without effort, Lamar manages to combine jazz, soul, funk, early West-Coast hip hop, and modern hip hop stylings, all while sampling a plethora of African-American artists. "I don't know what to call this album," co-producer Terrace Martin says in an interview with *Complex*. "Some people call it jazz. I just call it a bunch of the homies playing, and going hard. It's heavily jazz-influenced, but it's heavily black in general! We didn't listen to the Beatles to do this record. No disrespect" (Charity 2015). With guest features from big names like Kamasi Washington, Thundercat, Flying Lotus, Snoop Dogg and George Clinton, Lamar managed to bring together artists across generational and stylistic divides to create something uniquely interconnected; a tapestry of African-American voices pushing an urgent, underrepresented political perspective into the spotlight. A perspective that explicitly rejected the roles black musicians must typically play to be accepted by white hegemony. Lamar does not play into any singular trope of Black identity on the album: the gangster, the pimp, the soul brother, but neither does he reject their spiritual birthplaces in African-American cultural expression. By carefully balancing political motives with music enriched by historically African-American sounds and

identities, Lamar created a platform of Black liberation and found an audience ready to enter a new era of intersectional political change. People had no choice but to take notice.

On July 26, Black Lives Matter activists held an event at Cleveland State University where police arrested a 14-year-old African-American boy for allegedly being intoxicated on a bus. As Jeremy Gordon reported for *Pitchfork*, attendees of the event blocked the police vehicle from leaving, prompting an officer to pepper spray the crowd (2015). This did little to deter the protestors who continued until the boy was released back into his mother's custody, prompting the nearly 200-strong crowd to erupt in celebration. "We gon' be alright!" was the chant that broke out, the hook to Lamar's hit single "Alright." And so the anthem for a movement was born. In the song, Lamar raps:

Nigga, when our pride was low  
Lookin' at the world like, 'Where do we go?'  
Nigga, and we hate po-po,  
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'

This highlights the tension between African-Americans wanting to express their culture and identity, and the widespread police violence and discrimination they are met with. A tension symptomatic of the white supremacist foundations of the American State, and liberal democracy's inability to address this issue. The existential angst Lamar tapped into rang true at just the right moment. While he was not the first rapper to engage in Black history or make political statements, *TPAB* was a landmark moment in bringing hip hop back to its political roots and ushering in a new era of popular interest in the genre.

An immensely popular online music reviewer, Anthony Fantano, gave *TPAB* a perfect score in his video review, only the third album to receive one from him at the time. It remains Fantano's most viewed video, with over 3.5 million views to date. "*To Pimp A Butterfly* not only comes back to the trappings of fame," he states, "but also trying to use one's status in the music world for a positive gain. Not just for you, but your listeners, and just the world that you exist in" (Theneedledrop 2015). It's also worth noting that Fantano is a white man with an overwhelmingly white, male audience, a fact he himself acknowledges in the video, "My Unbearably White Audience" (Fantano 2019). I bring this to attention to illustrate that even though the perspective Lamar voices through *TPAB* may be a black one, its *musical* perspective reaches beyond racial divides. We also see that Lamar's message transcends strict ideological alignments. After all, who does not want to see the world become a better place? What is important here is that Lamar's *musical* statement effectively captures the imaginations of *musical* audiences, irrespective of political beliefs. As Fantano puts it:

...there will always be people who, the moment they hear something political is going on in a piece of art, they will reel back, thinking they're too good to be told anyone else's point of view because, they know the way the world works! But even if you are that kind of person, I ask you to give this album a fair shot because it's not like Kendrick half-asses his bars on this record. I think he tries to give these topics a lot of care...If you listen to these songs and all you get is "Kendrick's just bitching about being black in America. Kendrick thinks white people suck," well, that's really a basic point of view. And not because Kendrick's being basic, because *you're* being basic. So, get off that, and really listen to what he's trying to say on this record. Because the way Kendrick goes about addressing things like race, and sex, and fame, and money on this album is so *artful* that this record could go toe-to-toe with any album that tries to address wider social issues (Theneedledrop 2015).

In a video interview with Rob Markman for *MTV*, Lamar disavows working with ghostwriters. “As a new artist,” he proclaims, “you have to stand behind your work man, and you have to really truly honour the code of hip hop.” Markman replies, “I’m glad you took that stance...I commend you for that” (MTV 2015). A YouTube commenter on the video posts, “Kendrick is pure. You can see in his eyes that he's a true person. He doesn't make music for money, he makes music because this is the way he found to express himself and his thoughts. I'm really proud of him. Success didn't change him. Well done Kendrick” (Lucyhippy95 Big, 2015). Lamar’s appeal here is not purely political or musical, but a combination of both. By delivering his message upon a strong musical foundation, Lamar utilises the music industry as a platform that can circumvent many of the political blockades that stymie Black perspectives. He manages to provide a voice to the voiceless through the medium of music, and importantly, connect with an audience willing to listen. In combination with the ongoing political tensions that were occurring, this proved to be an effective method of communication as one can see from the reactions within mainstream media channels, even across racial divides. Unfortunately, there are always two sides of the story when discussing political tensions.

While Lamar’s expression of black experiences was not met with the police violence or censorship that groups such as N.W.A. or 2 Live Crew faced before him, it was met with strong criticism from conservative media. In 2015, Lamar opened the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards with a live performance of “Alright” delivered from the rooftop of a vandalised police car while a tattered and torn USA flag flew in the background. A Fox News panel took particular umbrage with the display. “Oh please. Ugh. I don’t like it,”

Kimberley Guilfoyle says. “I get it, that’s his right to express himself, let the free market decide, personally it doesn’t excite me” (Unruly 2015). The panellists go so far as to accuse Lamar of inciting violence. “Not helpful with those song lyrics,” describes Eric Bolling. “To say the least, not helpful at all. This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years,” replies Geraldo Rivera. He continues on to say that linking the white supremacist 2015 Charleston church shooting, with systemic police brutality towards black people is, “So wrong, so counter-productive, it gives exactly the wrong message.” While this may seem like little more than a misreading of the work from a group of people catering to a conservative demographic by manufacturing drama and outrage, the panel takes a somewhat sinister turn. “It doesn’t recognise that a city like Baltimore...7 percent the size of New York, has just as many murders as New York.” Here, Rivera implies the real issue is not the effects of institutionalised racism, but black-on-black crime. Crime that should be policed more comprehensively, as Rivera gives the call to action, “We’ve got to *wake up* at a certain point and understand what’s going on here.”

Many people, Lamar included, denied these accusations. But *DAMN.* saw Lamar address the incident in an unexpected manner. With three direct references to the incident throughout the album, on the song “YAH.,” Lamar raps:

Somebody tell Geraldo this nigga got some ambition  
I'm not a politician, I'm not 'bout a religion  
I'm a Israelite, don't call me black no mo'

That word is only a colour, it ain't facts no mo'

By dubbing himself an Israelite, Lamar positions himself as a kind of messiah, preaching the word of god as opposed to a member of a community facing systemic oppression.

The title "YAH." itself references Yahweh – the Hebrew name for god. On the album's second track "DNA.," Lamar makes more references to Judaism stating:

I was born like this, since one like this  
Immaculate conception  
I transform like this, perform like this  
Was Yeshua new weapon

From this religious perspective, Lamar implies that he has authority to speak on issues such as police brutality, not because he has firsthand experience with them, but because of divine right. By responding to Rivera through this lens, Lamar not only distances himself from his own blackness, calling it only a colour, but places the onus of addressing such systemic issues upon individuals. Individuals that, if they were to partake in criminal activity, should be policed.

Although *DAMN.*'s success afforded Lamar a level of fame he had never experienced before, his ascension came at a cost. It seemed incomprehensible that Lamar's message could change so dramatically in the short space of two years. For a man dubbed America's hip hop president and the voice of Black liberation, to immediately change his message was an unexpected move. New fans did not seem to have understood the politics that *TPAB* espoused. Lamar himself stated in an interview for Beats 1, "The best way for me to put it, *To Pimp A Butterfly* would be the idea of...changing the world...*DAMN.* would be the idea: I can't change the world until I change myself" (2017). If Kendrick Lamar truly is

bigger than hip hop, then something bigger than Kendrick Lamar must be at play here. To interrogate this phenomenon, first I will analyse the messages of resistance encoded into *TPAB* before moving onto *DAMN*. to understand why his message changed, and how his identity was incorporated into racial hegemony.

## Resistance

Coming off the success of his second studio album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, Lamar was in prime position to spread his message to a wide audience. It has always been clear that Lamar had something to say, but *TPAB* was the first time that listeners received something so clearly focused.

Rob Markman: When did you decide upon *To Pimp A Butterfly*? Did you know coming in that's what it was gon' be?  
Kendrick Lamar: I knew that was gon' be the concept....It represents using my celebrity for good, not getting pimped by the industry, through my celebrity. You know, so, it gets even deeper than that for me, I could be talking all day about it. (MTV 2015)

Right from its inception, *TPAB* was a way for Lamar to use his newly appointed position to make a positive change in the world, to resist the methods of control within the music industry and remain authentic as an artist. The result is an album packed with messages targeted specifically at Black audiences, an educational text as much as a musical one. Foregoing the traditional themes and sounds expected of high-profile rappers, Lamar constructed a proprietary Black text that speaks out against the music industry while existing within it. A symbol of rebellion. A symbol of hope. The beginning of a new era for a generation of hip hop fans today, fans growing up in a world with a post-modernist understanding of how knowledge is constructed and used to marginalise minority groups.

Much of the disempowerment faced by minorities is a result of a divisive status quo set by state powers. When we examine the culture industry, this translates into a

devaluation of minority cultural practices, racial or otherwise, that can have lasting effects on communities. On “Wesley’s Theory” from *TPAB*, Lamar tells a tale of how the music industry was something that he originally participated in out of love, but he soon became enthralled with the power it afforded him. Initially, he hopes to use his power to create political change:

I'ma put the Compton swap meet by the White House  
Republican run up, get socked out  
Hit the prez with a Cuban link on my neck  
Uneducated, but I got a million-dollar check like that

He soon finds that this newfound power is an active threat to the status quo and as such, the powers that be may have an interest in tearing him down. This is illustrated through a break featuring long-time rap industry titan, Dr. Dre who states:

Remember the first time you came out to the house?  
You said you wanted a spot like mine  
But remember, anybody can get it  
The hard part is keepin' it, motherfucker

Lamar goes on to discover that the material riches his wealth suddenly afforded him were not desires of his own, but in truth, actively pushed upon him to take back his newfound power.

What you want you? A house or a car?  
Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?  
Anythin', see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog  
...  
And when you hit the White House, do you  
But remember, you ain't pass economics in school  
And everything you buy, taxes will deny  
I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five

This reference to African-American actor Wesley Snipes is an allusion to the criminal charges for tax evasion and ensuing imprisonment he was faced with. Snipes had avoided \$7 million in taxes by working with anti-tax advocate Eddie Ray Kahn who claimed you did not have to pay taxes, the IRS was not a legitimate government agency and that Snipes was a non-resident alien to whom tax law did not apply (Reed 2008). In 2010, he was jailed for three years after being convicted of three misdemeanour counts of failing to file tax returns (Wood 2018). Kahn spent much of the trial refusing to leave his jail cell, claiming the court had no jurisdiction over him. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

A celebrity with Snipes' profile getting involved with a man found guilty of conspiracy to defraud the United States seems like it should never have happened. How does a man with the power and money to start a film company and a security firm end up with a conviction for failing to file a tax return? Snipes himself argued his sentencing was unreasonable and that his trial in Florida was unfairly based upon his race. "People who do it openly and notoriously, you've got to go after them," said Sheldon Cohen, who was IRS commissioner and general counsel in the 1960s. "Not because he's that important or the amount of money is that important, but because there are others who may be foolish enough to follow" (Reed 2008).

By using the character of Uncle Sam to represent how US institutions exploit black artists, typically lacking economic education, Lamar illustrates the education system's failure to empower marginalised communities to make informed decisions. This failure allows powerful institutions like the IRS to further exploit those communities, preventing

them from gaining independence, and continuing the cycle of marginalisation. Lamar also implies that this is an intentional tactic, that the music industry itself is designed to rob black artists of their power and maintain the institutionalisation of white supremacy. He confirms as much in his interview with Markman:

It talks about something that we weren't taught in school. When we get this money. I've spent all my time in school, and in escaping prison, and escaping the system. So you mean to tell me, the moment I become successful and I get some money and I don't know how to manage my money, that you gon' throw me back in jail? For taxes?  
(2015)

Lamar encoding this message into his music works on two levels: to illustrate the pain of black experience, and to turn his art into an alternative mode of education, one that speaks directly to black audiences. "I put that through my music to give game to the kids that's not being taught in them schools, it's up to me, 'cos I'm going through it."

It is important to note that Lamar says he is *going* through it, that he is still actively in search of answers. Oppression of racial minorities is not a singular experience that can be reduced to economic motives, there are many structures upholding (hetero-normative, patriarchal, imperialist) capitalist white supremacy. On the song "Institutionalized," Lamar delves into the struggle of escaping the behaviours and mindsets he had learned growing up in Compton.

What money got to do with it?  
When I don't know the full definition of a rap image?  
I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it

Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit, hol' up  
Get it back  
I said I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it  
Institutionalized, I could still kill me a nigga, so what?

Here, we see Lamar struggling to reconcile his newfound fame and fortune with his personal identity. As he does not understand the “full definition of a rap image,” he becomes entrapped within the stereotypical tropes rappers are expected to fulfil. Although Lamar grew up around gang members, poverty and violence, he has never fit the role of “gangster” or “pimp” etc. “He’s a nice guy,” proclaims rap icon Snoop Dogg, “So they have a problem with it” (Thisis50 2013). These lyrics expose a troubling issue for black artists and African-American cultural expressions within the culture industry. Not only are black artists forced to play into hegemonic stereotypes, but these stereotypes conversely mould black artists. Unable to reconcile his new powers with his marginalised identity, Lamar finds himself running back to the ghetto “for a visit.” Despite gaining the upward economic mobility he had been chasing, he finds his identity in conflict.

[Interlude: Anna Wise & Bilal]  
If I was the president  
I'd pay my mama's rent  
Free my homies and them  
Bulletproof my Chevy doors  
Lay in the White House and get high, Lord  
Whoever thought?  
Master, take the chains off me!

Although Lamar finds himself free from economic institutions, he remains trapped by social ones. He finds that no one is free until we are all free. “After a lifetime of embodying

difference, I have no desire to be equal,” writes Black feminist author Reni Eddo-Lodge. “I don’t wish to be assimilated into the status quo. I want to be liberated from all negative assumptions that my characteristics bring” (2017, 184). Until action is taken against this type of epistemological violence to transform institutions to be wholly inclusive spaces, change will never be realised and Black knowledge will continue to be devalued and eradicated.

This cultural clash between “ghetto behaviour” and “presidential behaviour” is also a clash between black and white social divides, one that provides a source of internal struggle so profound, Lamar begs for an unseen “Master” to remove his chains. The cover art for the album shows a similar struggle: a group of shirtless black men in front of the white house throwing up gang signs and flashing wads of cash in defiant jubilation, as a judge lies dead on the floor with crosses over his eyes. The choice to make the photo black and white is also a significant one; it is difficult to definitively discern the judges’ race. The obfuscation of skin colour here suggests that the true divide runs deeper than that, in truth, it’s about power. Whether it’s governmental, cultural or economic, Lamar and his Compton crew are showing up to usher in a new era.

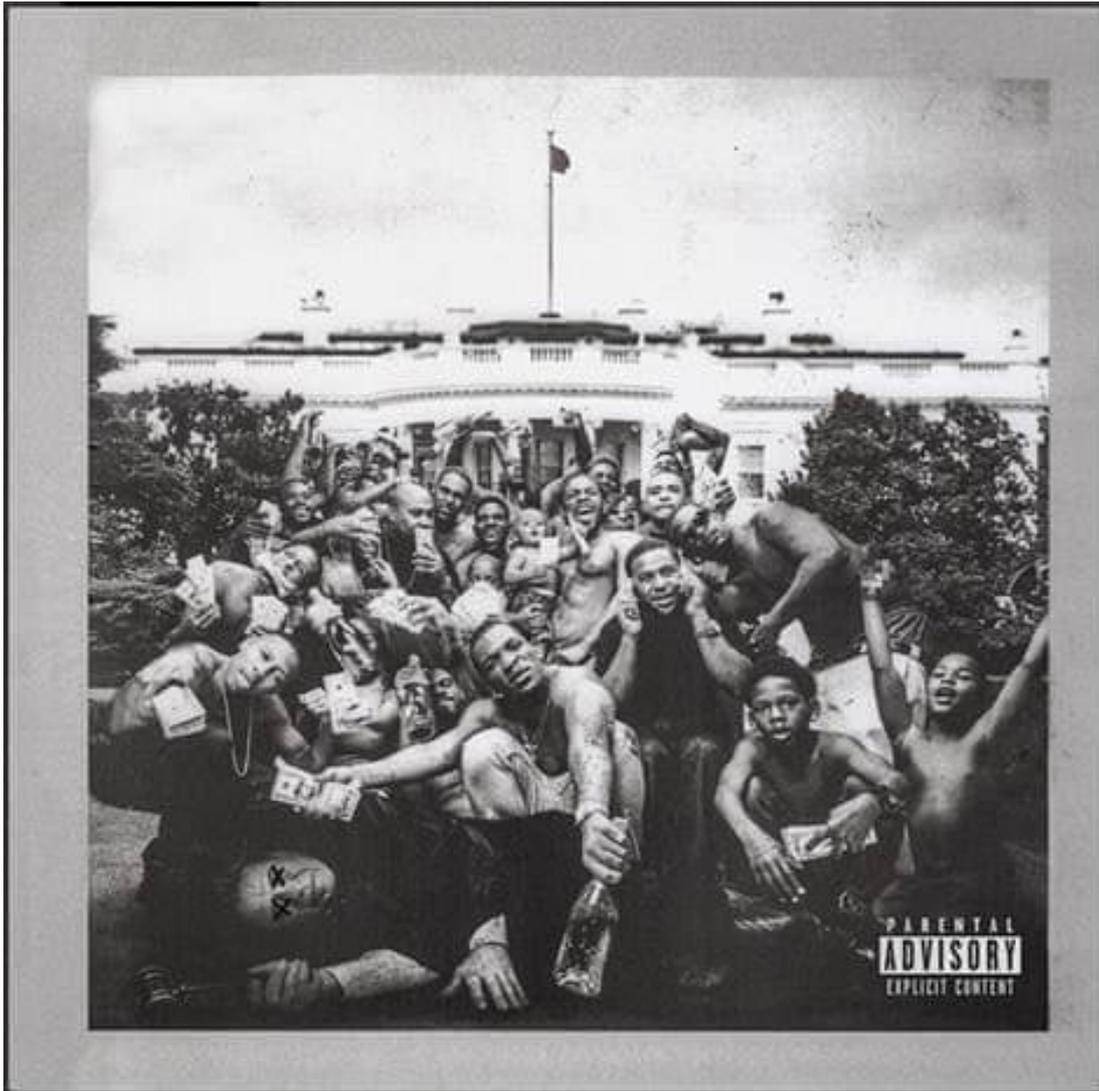


Figure 2: “How Kendrick Lamar’s ‘*To Pimp a Butterfly*’ Artwork Is the Lasting Document of America’s Hip-Hop President” (Weekes 2017)

On the song “Hood Politics,” Lamar delves further into this divide of power.

From Compton to Congress, set trippin’ all around  
Ain't nothin' new, but a flu of new Demo-CRIPS and Re-BLOOD-licans  
Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin'?  
They give us guns and drugs, call us thugs  
Make it they promise to fuck with you  
No condom, they fuck with you, Obama say, "What it do?"

Here, Lamar outlines the similarities between politicians and gangsters referencing the book *DemoCRIPS and ReBLOODlicans: No More Gangs in Government* by former Governor

of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura. Lamar employs this metaphor to illuminate similarities between the gangs he grew up with in Compton and the major political parties in congress: both use red and blue colours, vie for control over territory, and push guns and drugs onto citizens. “Well, the point is they’re just like the street gangs only they’re worse, because the street gangs only affect a minority amount of people in the area they’re located,” Jesse Ventura explains on a live broadcast (Martin 2012). “The Democrats and Republicans affect each and every American and the decisions that they make and what they do.” This critique is more than just a cheap attack on inept governments; the US has a storied history of using drugs for political motives. Speaking on the “war on the drugs,” former Nixon domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman states:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders. Raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did (Baum 2016).

Combined with practices like redlining, racially motivated and state sponsored forms of violence force many into a life of crime to escape the drugs, poverty, and police brutality around them. Having found an alternate escape route from the ghetto, Lamar sadly discovers that in Congress, people play similar games. Despite their “presidential behaviour,” the lust for power over people and territory is strikingly similar. Even if Lamar himself were the president, he admits he wouldn’t know what to do differently.

In his final line, Lamar discusses former president of the United States, Barack Obama, the first African-American to assume the role. Assuming Obama's perspective, he turns back to talk to the black people his own government has played a part in systematically turning into thugs and says, "What it do?" This phrase works on two levels: on one hand, it conveys a message of feigned ignorance, hiding a considered indifference. On the other, Obama uses African-American vernacular to directly address black people, saying there is little he can do. Ever so succinctly, Lamar tells us that while Obama rose to power as a spokesperson for the African-American community, he exploits them all the same, regardless of his intentions. He tells us that the very roles of President or Congressperson and the power they afford you, are built upon the backs of marginalised peoples. No matter who the person in power is, the ideologies they work for are still founded upon a history of white supremacy, and are unable to make meaningful changes to African-American communities within the confines of liberal democracy. Like O.J. before him, Obama was forced to give up aspects of his blackness and forego Black politics to assume the role of President, enacting his own defeat and condemning African-American people to continued marginalisation.

This marks a turning point for Lamar. Comprehending that these behavioural categories – "presidential," "ghetto," "rapper," "thug," – are not truly based upon blackness, whiteness, or any other form of personal identity, engenders internal turmoil. As he begins to understand that institutional power structures are stronger than even the President of the United States, he realises that the power required to liberate Black people is well and truly out of reach. Even though he escaped from the violence of the ghetto he

was raised in, he is trapped by a new kind of symbolic violence. A set of social expectations and institutional forces that seek to contain him and other African-American artists, controlling their power to affect change for Black people. He finds himself lost for answers; his calls to a “Master” to free him from his chains will never be answered. For an album that works as an educational text for African-American communities this is a hard truth to face. The following few songs turn to themes of facing up to one’s own flaws, dealing with insecurities, and finding self-love before ending with Lamar reciting the following poem:

I remember you was conflicted  
Misusing your influence  
Sometimes I did the same  
Abusing my power, full of resentment  
Resentment that turned into a deep depression  
Found myself screaming in the hotel room  
I didn’t wanna self destruct  
The evils of Lucy was all around me  
So I went running for answers  
Until I came home  
But that didn’t stop survivor’s guilt  
Going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned  
Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was  
But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city  
I was entering a new one  
A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination  
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned  
The word was respect  
Just because you wore a different gang colour than mine's  
Doesn’t mean I can’t respect you as a black man  
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets  
If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us  
But I don’t know, I’m no mortal man  
Maybe I’m just another nigga

Lamar explicitly details what he has learned in this poem. Returning home after his rise to fame, he enters a new war based on apartheid and discrimination. He believes that

gang colours, and by association, political colours, are simply ways to divide people. He believes that these social divisions cause nothing but pain and hurt for African-American communities. He does not blame Black people for black-on-black crime, but he does recognise it as a problem and asks his audience to grow past that, to respect each other as Black people. Because if they are able to find respect for one another, they can unify against their common enemy. They can stop the systems of institutional marginalisation and violence (both physical and symbolic) they are faced with every day. He does, however, end his poem with a hint of internal conflict and confusion. In the last two lines, he says he is not a mortal man, priming the audience to think he is potentially something more. But instead, he reduces himself to “another nigga.” This conflict proves to be central to Lamar’s eventual incorporation, but on *TPAB* we instead find him having a conversation with the legendary Californian rapper, Tupac Shakur. Asking Shakur to explain a metaphor about the ground, he gets this response:

Shakur: The ground is gonna open up and swallow the evil  
Lamar: Right  
Shakur: That’s how I see it, my word is bond  
I see—and the ground is the symbol for the poor people  
Lamar: Right  
Shakur: The poor people is gonna open up this whole world  
And swallow up the rich people  
...  
They might eat the rich, you know what I'm saying?  
...  
Lamar: Would you consider yourself a fighter at heart or somebody that,  
somebody that only reacts when they back is against the wall?  
Shakur: Shit, I like to think that at every opportunity I’ve ever been, uh  
threatened with resistance, it’s been met with resistance  
And not only me but, it goes down my family tree  
You know what I’m saying, it’s in my veins to fight back

...

Lamar: That's crazy, because me being one of your offsprings  
Of the legacy you left behind, I can truly tell you that  
There's nothing but turmoil goin' on so, I wanted to ask you  
What you think is the future for me and my generation today?

Shakur: I think that niggas is tired of grabbin' shit out the stores  
And next time it's a riot it's gonna be like, uh, bloodshed  
For real, I don't think America know that  
I think America think we was just playing  
And it's gonna be some more playing but  
It ain't gonna be no playing  
It's gonna be murder, you know what I'm saying?  
It's gonna be like Nat Turner, 1831, up in this motherfucker  
You know what I'm saying, it's gonna happen

Lamar: That's crazy man, in my opinion  
Only hope that we kinda have left is music and vibrations  
Lot a people don't understand how important it is, you know  
Sometimes I can like, get behind a mic  
And I don't know what type of energy I'ma push out  
Or where it comes from, trip me out sometimes

Shakur: Because it's spirits, we ain't even really rappin'  
We just letting our dead homies tell stories for us

In this exchange we see a number of important points brought up by "Shakur." He initially characterises rich people as the evil in the world, prophesising their eventual demise at the hands of the poor, even echoing the popular leftist slogan, "eat the rich." This consolidates Lamar's realisation that behavioural categories are not purely based upon personal identity, but upon power, understanding social divides through class divisions instead of racial divisions. He then moves on to say resistance is in his veins, that his proverbial family have been resisting the powers that be for generations. We can understand this family both as a metaphor for working class peoples resisting upper class domination, and Black people resisting white supremacy. The centrality of Black, working-class resistance is a legacy he has now passed on to Lamar. As Lamar asks him about the

future of the today's generation, he forewarns of a violent revolution to come. He believes (white) America does not yet know it, but African-Americans are tired of being poverty-stricken and are willing to shed blood if necessary. To drive the point home, he invokes the name of Nat Turner, an enslaved African-American who was executed in 1831 after leading a violent revolutionary uprising against white slave owners. Shakur believes that if the working class truly wants freedom, revolution is inevitable.

Finally, we hear Lamar speaking about his belief in the power of music to lead political action. He states that sometimes, he does not even realise his power until he begins performing. Many do not realise the potential for music as a method of disseminating information, unifying people for political causes, or the hope it can give communities. To this statement, Shakur replies that this power comes from the history of Black politics: that he and Lamar do not truly tell their own tales, but simply recite the stories of those who have died before them. To close out the album, Lamar has this to say to Shakur:

I wanted to read one last thing to you  
It's actually something a good friend had wrote  
Describing my world, it says:  
"The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it  
Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it  
In order to protect itself from this mad city  
While consuming its environment  
The caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive  
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him  
But praises the butterfly  
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness  
And the beauty within the caterpillar  
But having a harsh outlook on life  
The caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak

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

Again, we hear Lamar weaving multiple layers of depth and interpretation into his work. He starts by saying this is actually something his friend wrote, ratifying Shakur's claim that they simply tell the stories of "our dead homies." Lamar then uses the metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly; he believes that the caterpillar is a prisoner of its environment whose only method of self-sustainment is consumption. As the caterpillar goes on, it cannot see its internal beauty and seeks to control the external beauty of those around it, represented by the butterfly. This control and consumption of the identity of others engenders further madness in the world surrounding it, seeing beauty as no more than a weakness, an opening ripe for exploitation. As the caterpillar consumes enough to build its cocoon, it becomes completely trapped and institutionalised by the walls it has built, the only way it can break free is to transform into a butterfly itself. Only as a butterfly is the caterpillar free from its life of consumption and internal struggle, finally able to see the world around it from a new perspective, ending the cycle of

marginalisation. Crucially however, Lamar states that while the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same. Both are bred from the same ilk, but one is trapped and one is free. This appears to be the key to salvation as Lamar sees it. Despite the differences of class, race etc., people are all born into the same world and can all find the beauty and talent the butterfly possesses. With his final line, Lamar asks for Shakur's perspective to no avail, for Shakur too was murdered by a suspected Crips gang member in 1996. The entire conversation Lamar had with Shakur was reconstructed from a 1994 interview recording Shakur had with Mats Nileskar on a Swedish radio show (Jang 2015). Lamar was simply carrying on the story of another "dead homie."

## Incorporation

To this day, racial hegemony has successfully perpetuated whiteness as the default in neoliberal democracies. As Black liberation politics cements itself in mainstream discourse, a new method of self-protection must be devised. If explicit racism or racial violence is no longer a common part of life, does this mean racism is over? Rather than exclude racial groups through these means, we experience what Kwak calls, “racial realignment,” that is, “the resignification of multiculturalism as part of neoliberal governance” (2019). This phenomenon gives the American state the power to define what is and is not racially acceptable, to control racialised bodies so that they cannot further destabilise neoliberal democracy. By carefully selecting “acceptable” racial minorities to be included in state sponsored media, hegemony corrals racialised others into political frameworks of whiteness. In turn, minorities idealise white standards and legitimise symbolic racial violence instead of advocating for structural change. This culminates in a reproduction of whiteness as normative, morally superior and culturally dominant, at least in terms of racial symbolism.

Symbols of “acceptable blackness” are then commodified and consumed by white audiences, controlling the boundaries of black identities. In developing the idea of “gender as consumption,” Kay Siebler has proposed that “[i]n a culture where consumption is a way of life, a way to validate one’s existence, a way to display one’s status and worth, queerness has been co-opted” (2015, 139). Applying this framework to racial identities, the fetishisation and commodification of African-American experiences allows whites to buy into blackness. By signifying elements of blackness through consumption, whites are able

to adopt the “cool” of African-American cultural practices and inoculate themselves against accusations of racism whilst ignoring demands for structural change. In this way, black bodies become incorporated into the politics of whiteness, moulding boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through commodity.

Although I have argued here that blackness is a political construct that exists outside of, and in resistance to, hegemony, this does not mean black people within the mainstream should be denied their status as Black. No minority group has ever been freed without help from those in power, and appealing to, collaborating, or even identifying with such groups, in this case, mainstream white audiences, is not inherently wrong. Building solidarity across racial lines, particularly from a Black perspective, is an important act. Black people do hold power in shaping Black symbolism, even though it may serve white interests. My issue lies not with mainstream Black artists, the trap sound, or those who perpetuate or play into stereotypical representations of blackness. My issue lies with artists such as Lamar who move away from a politics of resistance to maintain their access to the power of mainstream representation. While I do not believe this to be an active choice on Lamar’s part, I do believe it functions as a way to commodify Black politics as cultural capital rather than enact those beliefs to create systemic change. It is not the act of becoming mainstream or catering to white audiences that erodes blackness, but the sale of a cultural movement for personal gain. In Lamar’s case, we see this manifest as a shift in his political goals on *DAMN.*

*TPAB* saw Lamar searching for an answer to his internal conflict and finding it not from an external master, but from Black political resistance. On *DAMN.*, we find him

searching for a different perspective. A central theme throughout the album is the relationship between wickedness and weakness, exemplified in the opening track “BLOOD.”

[Intro: Bēkon]  
Is it wickedness?  
Is it weakness?  
You decide  
Are we gonna live or die?

A decided move away from the hints at class conflict and social power divisions, these lines about wickedness and weakness consider personal choices. Right from the start, we find Lamar returning to the internal conflict he seemed to have overcome on “Mortal Man.” Confusingly, this new message about personal demons undermines his previous work of raising class-consciousness. He asks the listener whether his demons are a sign of one of two options and to deliver judgement upon him, granting life or death. It seems that Lamar has regressed to his “caterpillar” state and once again sees the vulnerability of the “butterfly” as a weakness to be exploited, now trying to avoid a path of wickedness.

As Lamar asks, “Is it wickedness? Is it weakness?” he speaks to an unseen Other, implicitly the Judaeo-Christian embodiment of God. With this question, the musician seeks judgement from without rather than finding the Self from within. Therein lies the dishonesty of this question, for no Other can answer it. It is not for “You” to decide, it is a question each person must ask of themselves. Whether or not one is wicked is not truly an absolute, but a response to a belief system and one’s adherence to its code. Weakness too is contingent upon the demands being placed upon a subject and an ensuing failure to

meet said demands. No Other is able to deliver a judgement of wicked or weak upon us, rather we must find the answer in ourselves in each encounter with an Other.

Continuing this theme, on “DNA.,” Lamar finishes the song with the lyrics:

Tell me when destruction gonna be my fate  
Gonna be your fate, gonna be our faith  
Peace to the world, let it rotate  
Sex, money, murder—our DNA

With these lines, Lamar condemns those who engage in criminal activity to damnation and pronounces such behaviour to be an unavoidable trait of one’s genetic code. While this is certainly a departure from the pro-Black rights views Lamar expressed through *TPAB*, this brand of “respectability politics” is one Lamar has previously espoused. In an interview during the lead up to *TPAB*’s release, Lamar stated, “What happened to [Michael Brown] should've never happened. Never. But when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within” (Edwards 2015). This quote elucidates Lamar’s belief that for society to grant rights and freedoms to racial minorities, they must first behave in a manner deemed acceptable by state representatives. This necessarily entails that for marginalised communities to gain the freedoms they demand, diversity of expression must first be erased.

A pivotal moment on the album takes place during the song “FEAR.” when a voicemail from Lamar’s cousin Carl Duckworth plays. In the voicemail, Duckworth says:

But you have to understand this, man, that we are a cursed people  
Deuteronomy 28:28 says, "The Lord shall smite thee with madness And blindness,  
and astonishment of heart"

See, family, that's why you feel like you feel

...

Verse 2 says, "You only have I known of all the families of the Earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

...

The so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American Indians  
Are the true children of Israel  
We are the Israelites, according to the Bible  
The children of Israel  
He's gonna punish us for our iniquities, for our disobedience  
Because we chose to follow other gods

...

That's why we're in the position that we're in  
Until we come back to these laws, statutes, and commandments  
And do what the Lord says, these curses is gonna be upon us  
We gonna be at a lower state in this life that we live  
Here, in today, in the United States of America

Here we find Lamar's central narrative for the album. He finds the answer to his internal conflict in this message: his internal wickedness is a result of God's damnation. Until they are able to return to God's commandments, racial minorities are doomed to live in a "lower state" in life. We find more references to this belief throughout the album; on "YAH." he raps:

And Deuteronomy say that we all been cursed  
I know He walks the Earth  
But it's money to get, bitches to hit, yah  
Zeroes to flip, temptation is, yah  
First on my list, I can't resist, yah

Instead of preaching self-love and Black unity, we find Lamar doing the exact opposite. On "DUCKWORTH.," he mournfully comes to this realisation:

It was always me vs the world  
Until I found it's me vs me

On “FEAR.,” he sings:

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?  
Earth is no more, won't you burn this muh'fucka?

Lamar discusses his ideological shift in an interview with Zane Lowe for *Beats 1*:

Lowe: The success of that record [*TPAB*] in those terms. That it reached so many people in a deep way, and ultimately you had to try and detach yourself from that connection...But also, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I hear real themes of self-preservation on *DAMN*.

Lamar: Yeah.

...

Lamar: The best way for me to put it, *To Pimp A Butterfly* would be the idea of...the thought of changing the world. Y'know, in how we work and how we approach things. *DAMN*. would be the idea: I can't change the world until I change myself.  
(Beats 1 2017)

Here we see Lamar explicitly state his belief that the responsibility for social change rests solely on the shoulders of the individual. No longer does he believe institutional change is the key to restructuring society and ending marginalisation of minority groups, instead he embraces the neoliberal doctrine of changing oneself to meet the expectations of society. Lamar's rise to fame appears to have cost him his “double consciousness” and led him to internalise hegemonic ideals, othering himself in the process.

When Duckworth claims that “these curses” of African-American history are caused by religious disobedience, he chalks up the gang violence, widespread poverty and political disempowerment Lamar discussed on *TPAB* to divine punishment. Accepting this worldview, Lamar falls into a pattern of self-destruction. And how can we blame him? Who

would not find themselves in a pit of despair if they believed the entire history of Jim Crow, slavery, genocide and every other injustice racial minorities have was little more than a curse? “The roots of these injustices are political, they’re social, they’re economic, to blame it all on God’s will just kinda seems disgusting to me,” Anthony Fantano declares in his review of *DAMN*. “Bordering on self hatred and, most definitely self-flagellation. And, in my opinion, the exact *opposite* of being conscious” (2017). It is hard to disagree, Lamar’s religious perspective here conflicts so strongly with the message of *TPAB*, it undermines his entire legacy. As he used his platform to educate and empower his people in a way that circumvents the institutional barriers Black people face, changing his message to one that condemns Black people altogether comes as a slap in the face. “When you hear certain things, and, certain things you may not like, you have discomfort from. It’s out of my hands,” Lamar explains in his interview with Zane Lowe (2017). “I always feel like god use me as a vessel, period...To share his message. All across the border...These are ideas that’s coming [from] way beyond me. Man that’s just how I feel about it.” By deferring the responsibility for his words to God, he exercises his assumed divine right to spread this message. He turns his back on the unique identity he created on *TPAB*, creating a new work that is no longer proprietarily Black. In doing so, he opens himself up to the tropes of blackness that are more palatable to the culture industry.

It may seem peculiar to see Lamar regress to his internal conflict, instead seeking redemption through religious salvation. However, if we remember incorporation as the process by which practices of resistance are “corralled and rearticulated within the framework of hegemony” (Butsch 2015) we can begin to understand what is happening to

Lamar through *DAMN.*. Despite critics almost universally giving the album lower scores than *TPAB*, Lamar won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for the album, a surprising move from the institution as it was the first time an album outside of the jazz or classical genres had ever been awarded. Why would an award for critical achievement endorse *DAMN.* over *TPAB*? As the critic Kyle Gann stated in 1991, “The Pulitzer has become a Reward for Conformity and a Compensation Prize for Ineffectuality. But it gives the public the idea that the winners represent the best modern music, and an excuse to conclude that American music sucks” (2006). Recognising *DAMN.* with a Pulitzer has little to do with its social importance or musical qualities, but rather, a way for mainstream institutions to pretend hegemony is accepting of African-American music and Black politics. Rather than acknowledge the cultural significance of *TPAB*, rewarding *DAMN.* functions as a way to direct attention away from *TPAB* and signal to mainstream audiences, and Lamar himself, what people should really listen to. Following *DAMN.*’s release, Lamar was asked to rank his four studio albums in an interview for Big Boy TV (2017) where he placed *DAMN.* first and *TPAB* third, favouring the solipsistic narratives of *Good Kid*, *M.A.A.D City* and *DAMN.*.

Working within state-enforced boundaries provides artists with these kinds of perks: larger audiences, institutional support, money, power. It is a sad reality of the culture industry that for an artist to achieve such great heights, the state *must* endorse their media. Although *TPAB* grew Lamar’s reach and success considerably, it was largely due to the fact that it managed to circumvent the American state altogether. However, as the methods of censorship and criticism that are used to control such practices of cultural resistance have slowly eroded, incorporation has become an increasingly sophisticated

tool. Rather than simply commodifying the cultural products of artists – turning songs into recordings to be sold on CDs, an artist’s image into posters and figurines, live performances into exclusive DVDs – practices of incorporation have begun to commodify artists identities altogether. Artists’ personas have been turned into one-dimensional tropes that enforce boundaries upon what they can and cannot say.

On March 30, 2017, the lead single from *DAMN.*, “HUMBLE.” was released. This track featured a beat originally intended for popular trap artist Gucci Mane, the first time Lamar had appeared on a track in the subgenre’s style. The trap style typically features upbeat, danceable rhythms with themes revolving around the “trappings” of gang life, a stark contrast to Lamar’s more socio-politically conscious, message-oriented work. The track features a reference to the brand of mustard, Grey Poupon, a popular hip hop trope that connotes the upper-class status and wealth historically associated with older, white men. Typically, this signifies an artist’s ascension from poverty to upper-class status; a way for rappers to display their power over others in verbal combat. The chorus of this song sums up its message succinctly:

Bitch, sit down (Hol’ up, lil’, hol’ up, lil’ bitch)  
Be humble (Hol’ up, bitch)

Since his predecessors have anointed Lamar as King, his contemporaries must respect his throne and show humility around him. His words are no longer merely those of a mortal man, but delivered unto him by God. This trope of the “king of rap” is a longstanding and effective one for artists hoping to top the charts, but it also plays directly into the hands of

American state control. African-American rappers must distract themselves from political action by competing for an imaginary throne. Once they get there, they spend their time controlling the behaviour of those who might threaten their crown. A symbolic form of black-on-black violence if you will.

The music video for the song “ELEMENT.” was released a few months later on June 27. It opens with symbols of poverty and violence in black communities while Lamar raps, “I don’t give a fuck.” The video continues to show footage of impoverished neighbourhoods and black-on-black crime; one man punching another in the street, a father teaching his son how to throw a punch, children hanging off a barbed wire fence pointing a pistol, Lamar himself slapping a man lying on the floor. It is important to take note of this last point: Lamar inserts himself into the narrative of black violence. While this song continues the theme of other rappers and African-Americans being a threat to Lamar’s status, he notes that he himself is also a part of the problem. During the third verse, Lamar raps:

Niggas thought that K-Dot real life  
Was the same life they see on TV, huh?  
...  
Last LP I tried to lift the black artists  
But it's a difference 'tween black artists and wack artists

He acknowledges that he (K-Dot being Lamar’s nickname) is not the perfect person he portrays in the media. He mentions his work on *TPAB* was trying to help black communities, but then also acts as a gatekeeper for blackness itself, drawing a barrier between “black artists” and “wack artists.” As he has already outlined he is part of the

problem, he admits that maybe he is unable to live up to the standards he set out on *TPAB* either. Again, this new narrative we find on *DAMN.* works against the message he laid out on *TPAB*, mooring him back to the control of state powers.

The next day, the music video for “LOYALTY.” was released featuring Lamar physically attacking another black man to win the affection of his love interest: the pop star Rihanna. “I love everything about her, her artistry, how she represent women,” Lamar says in his interview with Zane Lowe (2017). But his portrayal of femininity here follows a strictly hetero-normative, patriarchal model. As he fights for her affection, she looks on with pride from the side of a luxury car, draped in furs and jewellery. By portraying her in this light, Lamar propagates the kind of gender tropes that have controlled people for centuries. Idealising violence as a display of masculinity while a “damsel in distress” looks on from the sidelines, albeit, one adapted for modern, empowered, Black women. This is then labelled as “loyalty” within a heterosexual relationship, upholding the frameworks of dominance and submission that protect patriarchy. Later, a group of black men in ski masks surround Lamar and release sharks on him, symbolising the active threat they pose to Lamar’s status as both “king of rap” and the “knight-errant.”

These examples portray a very different side to the Lamar we find on *TPAB*. On *DAMN.*, he criticises the very community he was brought up in for its history of crime as a sign of internal wickedness, leading to the political weakness black communities are often faced with. He also positions himself as a symbol of the upper-class status typically associated with White America. By referencing historically white, upper-class condiments, placing blame on black individuals for systemic issues, and playing into black tropes, Lamar

distances himself from the political advocacy he became known for. As he allows his work to be de-politicised and accessible to white audiences, he offers up another Black identity to commodify, silencing a voice that once spoke truth to power.

As Lamar's audience changes, his music is not truly *de*-politicised, but *re*-politicised. New ideologies are attached to his work that may cause less trouble for state structures. On "Mortal Man" from *TPAB*, Lamar had this to say about Michael Jackson:

How many leaders you said you needed then left 'em for dead?  
...  
Is it Jackie? Is it Jesse? Oh, I know it's Michael Jackson—oh  
When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?  
When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?  
That nigga gave us "Billie Jean," you say he touched those kids?

Lamar defended Jackson for being a revolutionary (artist) despite some quite serious flaws and faced no criticism for this move. Yet, on the lead single from *DAMN.*, "HUMBLE.,"

Lamar faced much criticism for his lyrics about women. He raps:

I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the Photoshop  
Show me somethin' natural like afro on Richard Pryor  
Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretch marks

As African-American writer Sesali Bowen wrote for *Refinery29*,

Kendrick is cute, but my self-worth is not contingent on whether or not he (or anyone else) would fuck me on my mom's couch... The unfortunate truth is that fitting into hetero-normative beauty standards is a very real commodity for women. There are social benefits and privileges that come with being considered beautiful under a male gaze. Instead of challenging that system of value, Lamar is prioritizing his preferences in it (2017).

While I agree with Bowen's critique and do not wish to excuse these lyrics, asking for more naturalistic beauty standards than we currently have within a genre often criticised for explicit misogyny is a far cry from defending an alleged child molester. So why the sudden pushback from some African-American listeners? One possibility is that moving away from the socialistic political perspective Lamar espoused on *TPAB* has recast him in a neoliberal light, stripping him of his political voice and opening him up to such critique. And rightfully so. If *DAMN.* itself is Lamar's "Mortal Man" moment, when "shit has hit the fan" in a legacy of positive social change, then it is Lamar's duty to listen to his critics and grow as both a person and artist. Asking for judgement alone cannot absolve a person of their sins. Though his fanbase has grown, their depth of engagement appears to have deteriorated, and Lamar's potential for a sustainable career along with it. For his shift towards religious salvation does a disservice not only to *TPAB*'s legacy, but the people it spoke for.

As his politics have shifted and catered to a new audience, we find the quality of engagement with his work begins to strike a new tone. The cover art for *DAMN.* features Lamar with his head down and eyes looking forward sullenly with a red, all capital serif typeface across the top. Almost immediately after it was released, twitter users began releasing memes of the artwork; a phenomenon that Lamar, unlike many of his contemporaries, had not previously been a part of. Soon after, the graphic artist, Vlad Sepetov, tweeted a justification of this "bad design" as intentional (Johnson 2017). For an album that takes itself seriously enough to tackle such grandiose themes as love, pride,

loyalty and religious salvation, this “anti-art” angle is a little hard to swallow. Could it simply be a ruse to win back “high-brow” audiences?

When you look at your checking account after a long weekend of bad decisions.

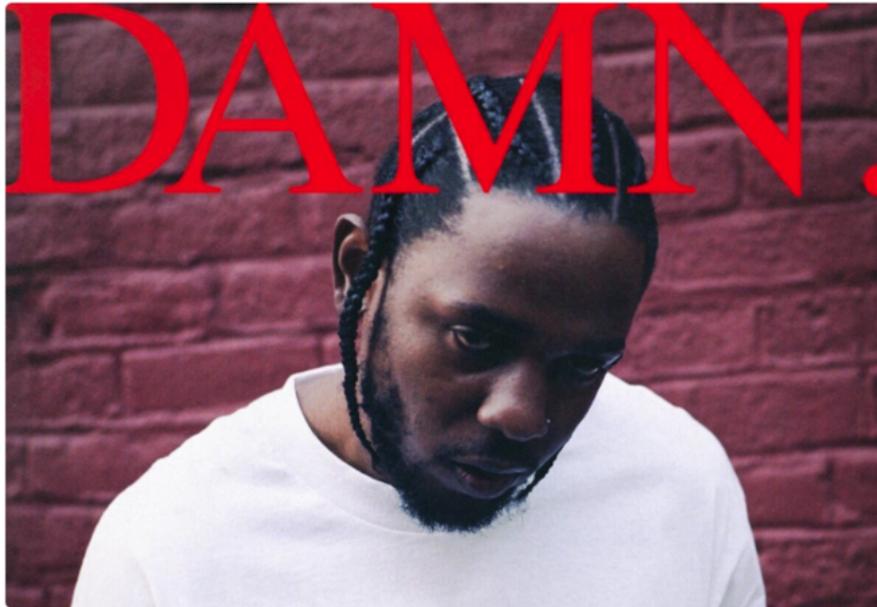


Figure 3: “Kendrick Lamar ‘Damn’ Album Cover” (Know Your Meme, 2019)

In the comments sections for his video clips, we can also see a shift in tone from his audience. Comments on *TPAB*'s songs focus on aspects such as Lamar's artistic prowess, connections with Compton, and personal affectation, but songs from *DAMN.* are almost entirely repetitive jokes or vaguely offensive insights on race and women.

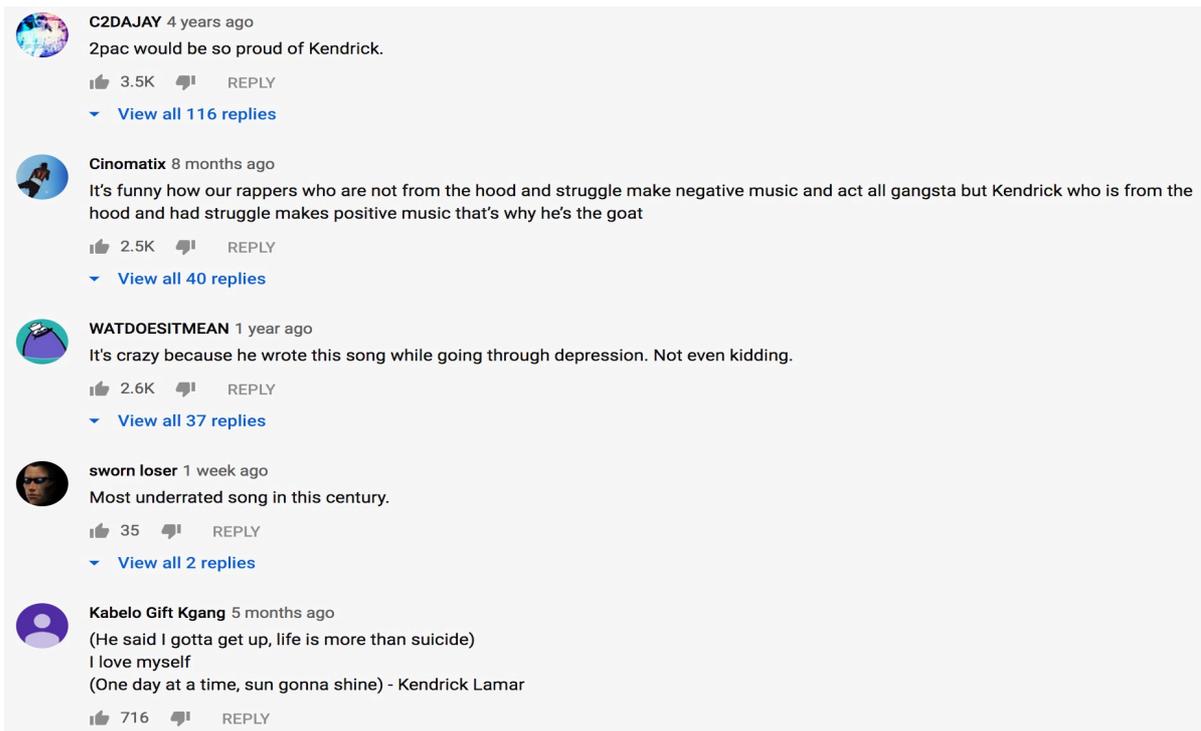


Figure 4: “Kendrick Lamar – *i (Official Video)*” Comment Section (KendrickLamarVEVO, 2014)

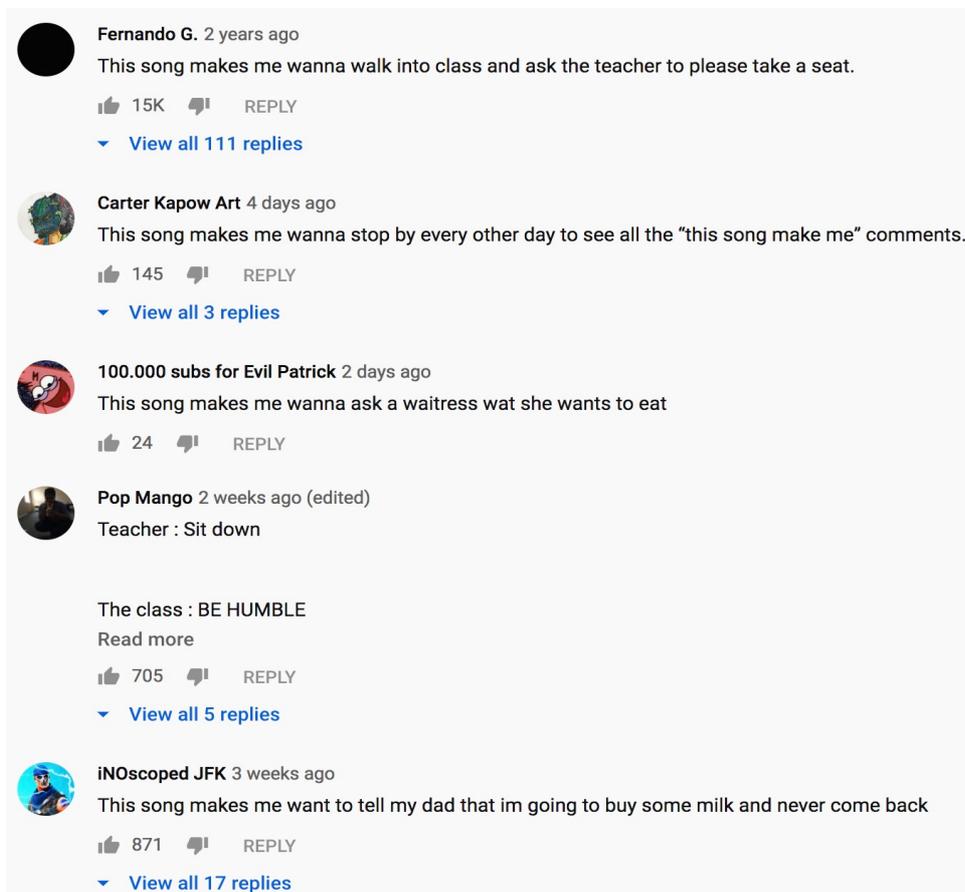


Figure 5: “Kendrick Lamar – *HUMBLE.*” Comment Section (KendrickLamarVEVO, 2017)

Here lies the crux of the issue, Lamar's political shift between albums has resulted in a new audience being brought into this world. One that can buy into blackness, claim to be "woke," and ignore the structural changes required to end racial inequality. Lamar's long-time fans, those who believed in him and his message, are drowned out, tossed to the side and forgotten.

## Conclusion

As I argued above, *To Pimp A Butterfly* represented a landmark moment for Lamar and racial minorities around the globe. Creating a text that spoke directly to Black audiences and circumvented state enforced boundaries was no small feat; it was a radical move that brought hip hop back to its political roots. By discussing how neoliberal democracies protect whiteness as default and disempower racial minorities, Lamar promotes class-consciousness and advocates for social change on a major platform within the culture industry. His musical work functions as an educational text that can circumvent institutional barriers, promoting Black socialist change and hinting at working class revolution. Lamar uses the metaphor of the butterfly to disavow the trappings of capitalist mass consumption. In doing so he defends the expressive freedoms represented by the butterfly as an ideal for societies to achieve. Lamar had seemingly freed his mind from the confines of neoliberal democracy and its white supremacist origins, yet a mere two years later, his stance on *DAMN.* had completely changed. Casting aside socialist politics, Lamar returns to a place of internal struggle and finds solace in religious salvation instead.

Some might see Lamar's changing political beliefs as nothing more than a symptom of his ambition or religious beliefs. They very well might be. However, they are also a symptom of operating within a music industry built for a specific kind of audience. While *DAMN.* afforded him a larger audience, Lamar has failed to address his newfound fans in a way that is politically meaningful, allowing for them to misread his previous messages of Black liberation. For his ambitions of braggadocious financial success to be realised, Lamar must be able to cater to white audiences and voice messages about African-American

citizens and communities that do not pose a radical threat to the status quo. By de-politicising his art in this way, Lamar allows liberal democrats to engage in his music without a critical examination of its socio-political context, including the racial formation of neoliberal democracies themselves. His work on *To Pimp A Butterfly* may have aided the cause of Black liberation, thrusting long running issues into the public spotlight, but *DAMN.*'s reach has far exceeded it and managed to drown out many of those issues in the process. The critical reception it has received from white institutions like the Pulitzer Prize has only served to cement its place as a "superior" album and affirm his voice as non-radical.

The concept of incorporation is not new. Historically, Black cultural practices like blues and jazz have been adopted, institutionalised, and appropriated by white artists. This may just be the beginning of the end for hip hop. As capitalism begins to consume another genre of music, it also consumes another Black identity. It consumes the diversity of racial representation people of colour have desperately been calling for, reducing it to the highly packaged and regulated commodity Cornel West warned us about. It remains to be seen where Lamar and hip hop will move to next, as the process of incorporation is a non-linear one. It is not as though there is a shortage of critique for Lamar's new work, if he is able to look past audience numbers and financial success, Lamar may regain the audience that so desperately needs a champion to unite them. I believe it is important that further research is undertaken to examine methods of reclaiming resistance from incorporation, and the nuance marginalised artists can utilise within a system that seeks to destroy them. If we are to truly gain freedom from the capitalist machine that controls our cultural practices,

our identities and our hopes at sustainable life on this planet, we cannot allow artists like Lamar to be “cancelled” and discarded. Artists and celebrities do not exist outside of such socio-political discourse and should be included in conversations of aesthetics, culture and politics.

# Notes

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1. I use uppercase B Black as opposed to lowercase b black to make an ideological distinction between political agency and skin colour. While black denotes a racial category that reduces a person to the colour of their skin, Black represents a framework of Black liberation politics that is not necessarily exclusive to African-Americans.
2. The Fox News broadcast in question was a live broadcast and could not be found in a more reliable location. The source quoted (Unruly, 2015) is a YouTube video of the broadcast on TV, filmed by a member of the public. See filmography for source.
3. The trap sub-genre is distinct from hip hop as it does not have a history of political resistance. It originated in the early 2000s in the Southern US and typically comprises of triplet rhythms, sub-divided hi-hats and heavy sub bass sounds. The term “trap” refers to places where drug deals occur. By the early 2010s it became a hugely popular and influential sound and continues to appear in top charting songs.

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