

**NOTICE:**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of reproductions of copyrighted material. One specified condition is that the reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses a reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

**RESTRICTIONS:**

This student work may be read, quoted from, cited, and reproduced for purposes of research. It may not be published in full except by permission by the author.

“We been waitin’ for you:” An Analysis of the  
Poetical, Literary, and Political Realities of  
Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*

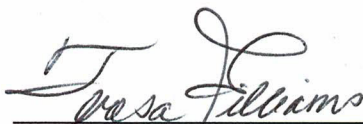
Kyle Bernadyn

Candidate for the degree

Bachelor of Arts

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

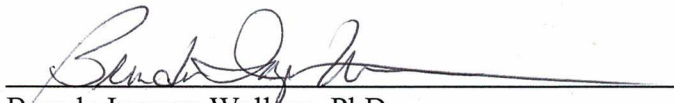
Departmental Distinction in English



Teresa Gilliams, PhD.



Alberto Cacicedo, PhD.



Brenda Ingram-Wallace, PhD.

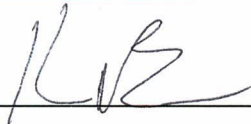
Albright College Gingrich Library

F. Wilbur Gingrich Library  
Special Collections Department  
Albright College

Release of Senior Thesis

I hereby grant to the Special Collections Department of the F. Wilbur Gingrich Library at Albright College the nonexclusive right and privilege to reproduce, disseminate, or otherwise preserve the Senior Honors Thesis described below in any noncommercial manner that furthers the educational, research or public service purposes of Albright College. Copyright privileges remain with me, the author.

Title: "We been waitin' for you:" An Analysis of the Poetical, Literary, and Political Realities of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Signature of Author:  Date: 4/17/18

Printed Name of Author: Kyle Bernadyn

Street Address: 310 S. Front St.

City, State, Zip Code: Saint Clair, PA 17970

Albright College Gingrich Library

Kyle Bernadyn

Senior Thesis Project

19 April 2018

“We been waitin’ for you:” An Analysis of the Poetical, Literary, and Political Realities of  
Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*

African-American history began with plantation slavery, “the bottom of mankind” as Kendrick Lamar describes it in line 23 of “The Blacker the Berry.” For centuries, institutional and hegemonic powers associated “blackness” with subordination, inhumanity, and weakness, fostering centuries of resistance towards these powers as the black community became stronger and more emboldened. One of the methods through which the black community accomplished this growth was the establishment of its own unique art forms, namely blues and jazz. While the former captured the emotive storytelling and poetry that some might argue to be innate to the black community, the latter captured the community’s ability to live through improvisation and invincible rhythm. To the extent that art has existed as a crucial tool in the black community’s resistance to institutional racism and oppressive societal expectations that have worked to eternally place them within a perception that deems its members to be less than human, perhaps the most important mode of artistic expression came in the form of a literary canon dedicated specifically to the telling and retelling of the black experience.

The African-American literary canon grew out of a sanctioned and organized community of philosophers and artists determined to present the African-American perspective to the world. The literary canon dedicated itself in large part to the education of black people and the establishment of black voices in cultural, social, and political realms. It, therefore, was, and to this day, is dedicated to the validation of black America as a collection of minds and voices that deserve to be examined and heard, respectively. Like any movement, the African-American

literary canon came to represent a diverse collection of these voices, evolving and shifting as the community it represented did. One of the evolutions the African-American community underwent was a shift towards the wider propagation of its musical artforms, including R&B, soul, and eventually, hip hop. Hip hop, however, quickly and poignantly came to encapsulate a mindset different from that of the blues, jazz, soul, and other music genres within the black community. Hip hop encapsulated a concerted effort among many of the community's members who sought to resist openly and vigorously the oppressive white hegemony aimed at keeping them mentally and physically chained their slave pasts.

The importance of hip hop lies in this open protest to the powers that be, powers that are and have always been white and wealthy in nature. The genre seems to have taken up the mantle of the literary canon in its quest to challenge and expose the institutionalized mechanisms that fed the theft of African peoples from their homeland and their eventual subjugation under the umbrella of racially-charged social stratification. Hip hop at its core is a political protest of the fabric of American history, positioning its proponents in the same staunch opposition to white hegemonic powers that the African-American literary canon championed. Kendrick Lamar, one of the world's premiere artists both within hip hop and across the entirety of popular music, lends his voice to those expressing hostility against the destructive practices of white supremacy and the educating of the black community towards its triumph above such institutions. Lamar's critically-acclaimed and legendary hip hop album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, is at once a celebration of the cavalcade of artistic modes of expression that the black community has utilized through the annals of its history and a resolute critique of the problems, both internal and external, that continue to plague its members. Kendrick doesn't just illuminate the ways in which the white hegemony has sought the prolonged destruction of the black community; he also seeks to educate

his fellow community members about the various ways in which they are weakening each other politically, socially, culturally, and economically. Where a hip-hop album deploys its innate political makeup through its protest of external powers, Kendrick couples this heavily-politicized act with a resistance to the politics of his own community, namely that of his own 'hood and others. Furthermore, hip hop begins and defines itself as a poetic movement, with artists deploying and manipulating language to elicit visceral reactions from their audiences. The genre captures the very same storytelling and poetic ability that lies at the heart of blues, jazz, and the African-American literary canon. *To Pimp a Butterfly* presents the strongest, most poetic, and most philosophical extension of the legacy of the African-American literary canon here in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, and it is for this reason that the album deserves a place within the halls of the canon as a monumental black artistic achievement worthy of a deep and prolonged treatment as a well of literary power and reflection. While I won't be analyzing every single song from the album, I believe the ones I have chosen to reflect on in this thesis embody the messages and artistry that are most important to my goal of demonstrating *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s rightful place in the canon.

### **“Wesley’s Theory”**

The track begins with a record being played; the record in question is Boris Gardiner's "Every N\*\*\*er is a Star" (1-4), a track dedicated to the affirmation of black pride during the racially-tense decade of the 1970's. When questioned as to why he chose to begin "Wesley's Theory" and, by extension, the album with this song, Lamar responds: "It represents how I felt when I first got signed. That's the first initial state—you get money, you feel like this" (*Appeal Magazine*). The song represents a high level of self-worth and sense of accomplishment that young black artists experience when they obtain their first music deal, finally gaining a platform

from which they may tell their stories and become financially and emotionally independent of their hoods. The young black youth in this song, and the artist acting as the narrator for the entirety of the album, is Kendrick himself, who details his own rise to stardom and the tribulations accompanying. The subsequent lyrics detail these tribulations, which originate from a mindset that is predicated on excess, an abuse of youthful freedom.

The song's focus quickly changes to the financial irresponsibility that plagues black artists, specifically in the beginning or prime of their careers. In the he first verse, Kendrick declares, "At first I did love you / But now I just wanna fuck" (11-12), the "you" being the rap game itself, which Kendrick is addressing as "my first girlfriend" (16). Kendrick used to rap for the sake of the art, but now he just wants to "fuck" it, using it for his own benefits whilst not giving anything meaningful or substantial in return. What occupies his mind isn't the art, but the money that success in the rap game produces, money that constitutes his excitement and sense of accomplishment: "When I get signed, homie, I'ma act a fool / Hit the dance floor, strobe lights in the room...I'ma buy a brand new Caddy on fours / Trunk the hood up, two times, deuce-four...When I get signed, homie, I'ma buy a strap / Straight form the CIA, set it on my lap / Take a few M-16's to the hood / Pass 'em all out on a block, what's good?" (19-20, 23-24, 27-30). The speaker, a younger Kendrick feeling the high of his newfound success, offers examples of wealth that others from his 'hood would acknowledge as significant. However, his prior lack of financial security and insight informs this perspective, and the final line of the verse captures this reality: "Uneducated, but I got a million-dollar check like that" (34). This line highlights the economic disparities prevalent within America that create the very mindset that a young Kendrick celebrates.

Kendrick delivers the second verse of “Wesley’s Theory” as “Uncle Sam,” changing the tone of his voice to reflect the viewpoint of someone less inexperienced and more sinister. The force that is feeding this life of excess is “Uncle Sam,” the American capitalist system itself, and Uncle Sam does this so a young Kendrick and other black artists can lead lucrative lives only to watch their money disappear into a cloud of possessions and symbols of wealth, leaving nothing on which to fall back. Uncle Sam presents himself as a docile being, asking Kendrick, “What you want?” (55) and listing all that which he has the power to give the artist if Kendrick can simply “wear those gators / Cliché, then say, ‘Fuck your haters’” (61-62). Uncle Sam offers Kendrick a wealthy and privileged lifestyle if he simply dilutes his art to the basest aspects of hip-hop that some artists create strictly for mass consumption. August Wilson details a similar diluting of art in his play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. The play, set in the period where jazz was on the rise during the later stages of the blues’ popularity, captures the evolution from music as a storytelling art form to one that was concerned primarily with rhythm, physicality, and sexuality. Ma Rainey found herself at the heart of this transition, and the producers of the studio where she recorded her music even approached her with the idea of transforming her act into something much more sexual, thus removing the focus her distinctive voice. For the modern music world, the goal on the part of most record companies is to ensure that a young, uneducated artist like Kendrick becomes a slave to Uncle Sam’s lust for money, a slavery that makes other, more knowledgeable black voices in the song lament, “We should’ve never gave n\*ggas money / Go back home, money, go back home” (35-41), thereby demonstrating a despair with the system that is corrupt that it compels black Americans to return to Africa.

Lamar dedicates the song to the career of Wesley Snipes who was guilty of committing irresponsible financial acts that resulted in his being guilty of tax evasion. The spirit of Snipes



lives in the Kendrick Lamar found in this song, someone whose main concerns gravitate around immediate self-gratification that involves lavish spending styles fueled by mass excess.

Moreover, the single instance where Lamar mentions Snipes by name is the very last line of the second verse where Kendrick ventriloquizes Uncle Sam once again, telling young Kendrick, “I’ll Wesley Snipe yo’ ass before thirty-five” (78). The double entendre of Snipes’ last name paints the picture of Kendrick’s lyrics; Uncle Sam’s sinister plan is to kill the career of Kendrick by fueling his irresponsible desire to brandish his newfound financial independence with wild spending. Uncle Sam not only plans to “snipe” Kendrick’s career, but plans to “Wesley Snipe” it, meaning he intends to use the same machinations and inspirations on this bold new rapper that led Snipes to incarceration. At the song’s end, a frantic chorus of female singers scream the final lines of the song, “Tax man comin’, tax man comin’ ...” (90-94) signaling an attempt to give Kendrick a heads-up about the trap ahead. These lines directly follow the aforementioned lamenting lines, “We should’ve never gave n\*\*\*as money / Go back home, money, go back home,” joining the effort to save yet another black star from the same fate as Wesley Snipes.

### **“King Kunta”**

In “King Kunta,” Kendrick, a little older and a little wiser than he appears on “Wesley’s Theory,” returns to his ‘hood with plans to take it back from those he views as “monkey-mouth motherfuckers” (2). These “motherfuckers,” with whom Kendrick says he has “a bone to pick” (1), constitute the type of commercial art that has plagued his ‘hood and its perceptions of reality. They have been sitting on Kendrick’s “throne” (3) while he’s been away in Hollywood (presumably) securing himself as a financially independent agent within modern America. Upon his return, he is shocked to discover that areas like his ‘hood have been overrun by “rapper[s] with a ghost writer” (19), fellow members of the hip-hop community who have decided to

dedicate their art more towards mass consumption than to accurately sharing their personal stories with their community and their fan bases. At this stage of the album (i.e. his life), Kendrick desires nothing more than to demonstrate to his hood and all of his detractors, whom he calls out in the subsequent hook, his success and power within the rap game. Focused on braggadocios posturing and the celebration of success, Kendrick proves to be much more confrontational towards those by whom he feels he's been wronged.

Kendrick furthers his presentation of his authenticity by utilizing the symbolic resonance of yams as evidence of his connection to the heart of the black community. He describes the yam as "the power that be" (16), i.e. that which informs his skills as an artist and, by extension, informs his art. Ralph Ellison has a similar take on the yam in his *magnum opus Invisible Man*, wherein the unnamed narrator of the story is able to form a stronger connection to his black ancestry through his consuming of a homemade yam he purchases from a street vendor. In two different songs, he identifies the yam as a natural bridge for modern African-Americans to their heritage. As hip-hop has become one of the most seminal modes of black expression and certainly the most iconic given its ties to commercialism, Kendrick thus presents the yams as the primary source of power for this mode of expression. Kendrick boasts, after saying that the yam is "the power that be," that "You can smell it when [he's] walkin' down the street" (17), indicating to those listening to him that he has the power of his heritage coursing through his veins, the smell of the yams literally emanating off his body. Those who surround Kendrick are able to easily discern his authenticity as a black man in modern America.

Kendrick presents himself as an authentic representative of the black artistic tradition that constitutes the foundation of hip-hop itself. In this same stanza where Kendrick boasts of his connection to the yam, he contrasts his relationship with the yams with the perceived crimes of

fellow rappers who Kendrick believes are guilty of contaminating the art and the community at large. These artists, “most” of whom Kendrick claims are “sharing bars / Like you got the bottom bunk in a two-man cell” (21-22), are the very same “monkey-mouthed motherfuckers” who have been occupying Kendrick’s throne during his absence, indirectly implying that his time away from the ‘hood (i.e. his roots) has resulted in inferior artists with no sense of respect for themselves or the art to become their ‘hood’s primary representative in hip-hop culture.

Kendrick rounds-out this stanza by proclaiming, “And if I gotta brown-nose for some gold / Then I’d rather be a bum than a motherfuckin’ baller” (24-25) thereby problematizing the previous track's emphasis on his newfound wealth and enjoyment he’s received from his success in the rap game by boldly stating that he would rather be poor and, essentially, a nobody than stoop to the level of these inferior rappers. This resistance is reminiscent of Kunta Kinte’s in Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Kunta consistently rejects the name “Toby” that his slaveowners choose to force upon him, symbolically resisting the institution of slavery as a whole (Haley). Kunta goes as far as attempting to run away from the plantation in which he resides, resulting in the removal of his foot (Haley). At this stage, Kendrick has revealed to the listener an important step in his maturity as an artist and as a man, taking careful steps to emphasize his commitment to being authentic in all aspects of his life. However, despite seemingly handling the politics of his hood’s power struggle with a confidence that one would want to see from a young black performer, he nevertheless showcases an immature outlook on his environment.

Kendrick spends the third verse sharing his desire to be the “king” (62) of what he perceives to be the world, i.e. “Compton” (52), but this desire is one that notes success in the eyes of his hood as the highest possible pinnacle for himself as an artist. Where one would

expect a young, successful black artist to want to rebuild his neighborhood, or at least wish to transcend its oppressive confines, Kendrick instead desires not only to remain within the “cocoon” of the ghetto, but also to rule over it, using his “authenticity” as an artist. He goes as far as to celebrate “ma[king] it past twenty-five” (56), no small feat given the destruction and violence that pervade his hood to this day, and this accomplishment causes him to believe that “the world [is] behind him” (57) and thus under his complete control. Kendrick illustrates at once the normalization of violence in his ‘hood, the unfamiliarity of the hood’s inhabitants with the concept of long life, and the inhabitants’ perception of the very concept of accomplishment. Where privileged communities view reaching the age of twenty-five as a fact of life and nowhere near a cause for celebration, an underprivileged and oppressed community in Compton like the one in which Kendrick grew up embraces it as a reason to have hope for a better future.

If one black youth can transcend the hood and find success in whatever discipline he decides to follow, then the entire neighborhood feels compelled to celebrate that person’s success, regardless of how overwrought it may seem. This mentality, however, runs the risk of breeding harmful complacency and a misplaced sense of what the pinnacle of black life ought to be as Kendrick’s desire to return ultimately to his hometown affirms his neighbors’ assumptions about the black community’s purpose. Kendrick’s return inspires the members of the black community to buy-in to a proverbial ceiling that oppressive external institutions constructed in the name of their community’s corruption. The next song in the album, “Institutionalized,” further illuminates these ideals of complacency and self-worth and their origins in an institutionalized perspective originating from the ‘hood.

### **“Institutionalized”**

If “King Kunta” is the celebration of Kendrick’s relationship with his ‘hood, then “Institutionalized” is the regret he feels through the exact same relationship. Almost immediately, Kendrick confesses a change having transpired since the previous song: “I’m trapped inside the ghetto and I ain’t proud to admit it / Institutionalized, I keep comin’ back for a visit” (3-4). For the first time in the entire album, the listener hears Kendrick admit that he feels trapped inside the ghetto; not just *his* ghetto, of course, but “the ghetto” (i.e. the ghetto that exists not in a physical plane, but in the mind stemming from the American institutionalization of ghettos). Here, Kendrick establishes the way in which the listener must treat the ghetto in this song: not as a physical place to be ruled over like in “Kunta,” but as a mode of thinking that the artist now realizes to be toxic.

Moreover, Kendrick declares that since he’s “trapped inside the ghetto,” he “can still kim [him] a n\*\*ga” (6-7), revealing that despite the success he’s celebrated in “Wesley’s Theory,” and despite the inferiority he’s attached to his opponents in “King Kunta,” he is still able to succumb to the same vices that constitute his hood’s daily life, one of which is violence against members of his own race and/or community. The interlude within the song further details Kendrick’s lamentation towards the institutionalization of the ghetto mindset. He declares, “If I was the president / I’d by my momma’s rent / Free my homies and them / Bulletproof my Chevy doors / Lay in the White House and get high, Lord / Who ever thought? / Master, take the chains off me!” (8-14). Even if Kendrick were the President of the United States, he could see himself still being concerned with the everyday happenings of his hood; he’d pay his mother’s rent, free his friends from jail, deck-out possessions like his car with upgrades (that, in this case, would protect him from ghetto vices), and simply get high in the Oval Office as if it were his living room in Compton. His beseeching of the ghetto with the command “Master, take the chains off

me!” presents the ghetto in its worst incarnation yet – an institution as harmful and as oppressive as the institution of slavery. “Institutionalized” thus presents a Kendrick that is far more cognizant of the negative and far-reaching effects that living in the ghetto can have on a black man like him.

The first verse of “Institutionalized” paints the ghetto as a burden upon Kendrick, in relation to both his career and for his friendships. One of the major differences in this song compared to “King Kunta” is Kendrick’s lack of interest in his hood’s rap politics. Where the listener hears him boast about his progression stemming from his saying, “From a peasant to a prince to a motherfuckin’ king” in “Kunta,” now Kendrick believes himself to be such a master of his craft that he “can just alleviate rap industry politics” (26) altogether. He no longer concerns himself with what his hood deems to be good and bad; in fact, he finds difficulty trusting the very relationships with his homies he helped construct. He describes the main issue he perceives with them, stating, “I’ll tell you my hypothesis, I’m probably just way too loyal / K Dizzle will do it for you, my n\*ggas think I’m a god / Truthfully all of ‘em spoiled” (33-35). His homies have relied on him, not just for possessions, a list of which Kendrick presented earlier in “Wesley’s Theory” (55-56), but also for ideas about what constitutes of success and skill. Kendrick’s interest in being a supporter of the members of his community has created a dependent relationship where so much lies on his shoulders, and yet he sees nothing come his way in return for his demonstrations of loyalty. The one thing that Kendrick admits “the ghetto” did for him was “put [him] through colleges” (29) (i.e. putting him through the proverbial school of hard knocks where he learned about the previously mentioned vices that pump life [and death] into his hood). However, these lessons of pimping, gangbanging, and politicking do not suffice for Kendrick, leading to the animosity that he feels toward his hood and to what his hood

propagates: the “ghetto” mindset. While Kendrick compartmentalizes these emotions and interactions with the ghetto in his mind, he’s able to see the effects of its practices on his friend whom he’s taking to an awards show.

Kendrick, by taking his friend to the BET Awards, sees how the mindset of “the ghetto” negatively affects the mind of its inhabitants. The subsequent verse details the crux of the song, which offers an example of the “institutionalization” that comprises the clarity of mind in someone who can’t free himself of the “ghetto” ideology. Kendrick accuses his friend of “lookin’ at artists like they’re harvests / So many Rollies around you and you want all of them” (37-38) thereby exposing his friend’s desire to lift valuables from the stars who have shown up to the awards show. The “ghetto mindset” of which Kendrick’s friend is a victim causes him to view “artists” at the show, Kendrick’s colleagues and friends in the industry, as “harvests,” entities whose bodies and wealth don’t belong to them but are instead up for grabs (like objects) for any passerby. Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* writes about the institutionalization of violence in his own ‘hood, citing “the culture of the streets [as] a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body” (24). This culture forced Coates to prepare himself mentally and physically at a young age for any threat to his ownership of his body despite his internal resistance to such preparation, meaning that “any ‘toughness’ [he] garnered came reluctantly” (24). Kendrick’s “grandmama” (40) then comes in with the hook, advising her grandson that “Shit don’t change until you get up and wash yo’ ass” (41). She argues that the main reason why his friend is being so troublesome at the awards show is because he hasn’t taken the necessary steps to rid himself of the “ghetto mindset” that teaches him to view everyone around him as bodies with possessions instead of living, breathing people. However, Kendrick’s friend finally offers his verse, and the audience learns that it’s not simply a matter of

pulling oneself out of the rigid confines of the “ghetto mindset,” but that it’s also a process that necessitates contextualizing and combatting the institutional practices that birth the “ghetto mindset” in the first place.

The verse that Kendrick’s friend delivers details his own powerlessness in the face of the mindset that informs his actions at the awards show. The tone of the verse is angry, almost desperate, as his friend says immediately, “Fuck am I ‘posed to do when I’m lookin’ at walkin’ licks?” (49), a “walking lick” denoting one who flaunts his opulence. At the BET Awards, this kind of characters has become commonplace. One then can only imagine the urges that are pulling Kendrick’s friend in any direction when Kendrick raps, “The constant big money talk ‘bout mansions and foreign whips” (50) to the point where it’s aggravating him. He picks one particular person out, a “sucker wavin’ wit a flashy wrist” (54), confessing to Kendrick, “My defense mechanism tell me to get him / Quickly because he got *it*” (55-56, emphasis mine). What “it” captures in this line is pivotal to understanding what is going through the mind of Kendrick’s friend. The “it” represents not just the opulence and showings of wealth that the “walkin’ licks” take part in, but also the financial power and independence that they all enjoy to a certain degree as artists. Kendrick’s friend believes that the best way he can enjoy this same level of financial solidification is by taking it from someone else, declaring “No more livin’ poor, meet my four-four” (58), but at the heart of this plan is the way in which members of his ‘hood (i.e. “the ghetto”) defines success in the first place. Within the “ghetto mindset” is the definition of success as *demonstrative of* wealth and power regardless of whether one truly possesses it or not. In other words, while the “walkin’ licks” (49) certainly look like they have a lot of power, their power and independence don’t rest merely in the possessions they carry, but instead reside in their bank accounts and entrepreneurial work. Kendrick’s friend, however, as a result of the



education he's received in "the ghetto," views these possessions as the source of these "artistses" power, not the products, leading him to believe that all he has to do in order to transcend his impoverished life is to violently take things that belong to others. Despite having the opportunity to be in an environment that his 'hood would view as a haven, the BET Awards, an event dedicated to artistic achievements from black artists, he nevertheless says that "it's gon' take a lot 'fore this pistol go cold turkey" (61), illustrating his enslavement to the "ghetto mindset."

### **"These Walls"**

In the transition between "Institutionalized" and "These Walls," Kendrick offers a spoken word poem, stating, "I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence / Sometimes, I did the same" (lines 1-2), immediately informing the audience of the theme of the next song. After a recording of a woman moaning plays, Anna Wise, the feature artist on the song, utters a single word: "Sex" (10). A chorus of women are also chanting, "If these walls could talk" (4-9) prior to the utterance of this word, and so at the beginning of the song Kendrick has at once fused the act of sex with his confession of his abusing of his own power not just as an artist, but as a man as well. Where the audience has seen the relationship to the body in "Institutionalized" as one that lives through violence and the stripping of possessions, Kendrick presents yet another relationship with the body as one that involves the using/abusing of the body, in this case a woman's, in order to perform emotional violence towards another person.

The "walls" at the center of the song's message are, literally, the walls of a woman's vagina and, reflect, metaphorically, the entrapment Kendrick feels due to his lust for sex and his lust for violence against fellow black men. The language that captures these concepts are almost entirely suggestive, relying on innuendo instead of ever directly pointing out what Kendrick is specifically doing. The first lines he raps are as follows: "If these walls could talk, they'd tell me

to swim good / No boat, I float better than he would” (23-24), and the “he” in the latter lines bears with it the central idea of the song. The “he” denotes the man whom the owner of the “walls,” i.e. the woman Kendrick is talking about having sex with, is currently dating, introducing the audience to her infidelity but also Kendrick’s interest in competing with another black male through a woman’s body. Tragically, then, the rhythmic and sensual tone of the song cloaks the dangerous and vindictive purpose behind it all: Kendrick’s attaching the value of sex to something other than the woman he is with, ultimately positioning her as a tool he is using to achieve his own goals. Kendrick, again, in an indirect way, details his relationship with the man as the song progresses.

The absence of the woman’s boyfriend makes possible her infidelity with Kendrick, and the reason for his absence has everything to do with his history with Kendrick. Kendrick speaks directly to the woman, telling her that he’s “just a tenant / Landlord said these walls vacant more than a minute / These walls are vulnerable, exclamation / Interior pink, color coordinated” (29-32), the “Landlord” being the woman’s boyfriend who is currently in jail. The language in these lines delineates the concept of ownership, specifically the ownership of another person’s body, immediately bringing with it a connotation similar to that of slavery. The institutional origin of this irony shines through later in the song, but in this verse, Kendrick celebrates the woman’s emotional vulnerability, seeing her simply as her “walls” and allowing that part of her body to constitute the entirety of his perception of her. Similarly, the infidelity between Joe Trace and Dorcas that upsets Joe’s marital bond with Violet from Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* falls along the same emotional lines, as Joe seeks refuge from his fractured past instead of facing it head-on. While Kendrick here in this song isn’t using the woman as a shield from looking inward, the woman nevertheless acts as a tool the man uses for the purposes of his own desires. In the place

of emotional stability and at the least a stable and loving relationship that she may fall back on when times are tough, she receives sexual intercourse, the kind in which Kendrick “interrogate[s] every nook and cranny” (33, emphasis mine), bragging to her that “These walls never could hold up / Every time I come around, *demolition* might *crush*” (37-38, emphasis mine). Kendrick’s presentation of sex in this context involves destruction, the breaking down, literally and figuratively, of a woman’s “walls” in her time of great emotional need. Moreover, Kendrick’s ability to perceive of his abuse of the woman further emphasizes his lack of respect and care towards her, telling her plainly that he can see that her “defense mechanism is [his] decision” (45), and that “Knock[ing] these walls down,” not loving her, has become his “religion” (45). Furthermore, the word “walls” in this song contain another meaning that extends the dialogue on institutional dangers that “Institutionalized” introduced.

The other meaning that “walls” carry are the restrictions informed by a “ghetto mindset,” or what Kendrick refers to in the album as the “cocoon.” Kendrick dedicates the third and final verse of the song to the incarcerated man whom the woman he’s using is currently dating, complete with a change in his tone along with insight into the reasons why the woman’s man ended up behind bars in the first place. Kendrick addresses him immediately, sternly telling him, “If your walls could talk, they’d tell you it’s too late / Your destiny accepted your fate” (62-63). Within the confines of “the ghetto,” there’s a perpetual notion that many of its inhabitants are simply destined to live the rest of their lives in a cell, fueling much of the destructive behaviors that constitute the lives of many gang members and the like. The man’s being in the prison cell at this stage of his life thus has cemented his fate as a lifelong prisoner thereby affirming the fears of his friends back in his ‘hood. However, this man’s situation is one that brings nothing but trouble in terms of his relationships with others. In one of the most unambiguous lines of the

entire song, Kendrick defines the man as “A killer that turned snitch” (71), a man who wouldn’t allow himself to accept full responsibility for his crime and instead decided to throw his friends and others under the bus to end up in jail with him. As a result, the “Walls is telling me you a bitch” (72); in other words, the “walls” of the “ghetto mindset” or “cocoon” are telling Kendrick that because this man decided to snitch on his friends, he will forever be a “bitch,” quite possibly the worst moniker someone from the hyper-masculine “ghetto” could receive. The person the man killed was Kendrick’s “homeboy” (77) which exposes the true meaning behind Kendrick’s lust for revenge in the form of his lusting after the man’s girlfriend. Knowing the man would one day hear his album, Kendrick makes a special request:

So when you play this song, rewind the first verse  
 About me abusing my power so you can hurt  
 About me and her in the shower whenever she horny  
 About me and her in the after hours of the morning  
 About her baby daddy currently serving life  
 And how she think about you until we meet up at night  
 About the only girl who cared about you when you asked her  
 And how she fuckin’ on a famous rapper  
 Walls could talk (79-87).

Kendrick’s education in “the ghetto” still manages to seep into his life. Despite his obvious success and power, he continues to hang onto instances and feelings tied directly to his ‘hood. Continuing the short-sightedness of his actions in “King Kunta,” specifically about wanting to be the mayor of Compton when it’s all said and done, Kendrick is short-sighted to the point where he will abuse his power and the body of a vulnerable woman if it means hurting another man, a man who, as far as the artists has allowed us to know, has never personally harmed him or made transgressions toward him. Kendrick, thus, is fighting someone else’s fight in the worst way.

\“**Momma**”

“Momma” is, in many ways, Kendrick’s realization of his own blackness as well as his realization of his limited amount of knowledge of the world prior to the events that take place in the song. The song highlights a life-changing experience for Kendrick: his trip to South Africa, in a sense, his homecoming. He begins the song bragging about his rap skill, telling other rappers, “We don’t share the same synonym, fall back” (11), which reaffirms his confrontational and competitive attitudes towards others in the rap game. He takes to reminding the audience that he has “Been in it before internet had new acts” (13) (i.e. before this new wave of artists who rely more on streaming than on album sales), and that his “Mimicking radio’s nemesis” (14) (i.e. putting on a front that he was the antagonist to mainstream music), “made [him] wack” (14). The first verse thus is his abridged testimony of his journey from a no-name rapper to an artist who “can live in a stadium, pack it the fastest” (21) and a “master who mastered it” (25). However, Kendrick confesses that what’s most important to him isn’t that “rap...got [him] a plaque” (27), but that “it brought [him] back home” (29) to Africa.

The second verse is a presentation of Kendrick’s mentality prior to his attitude in the first and to his experience in the third, a mentality that is as brash as it is narrow-minded. Where Kendrick dedicates the first verse to his current thought process on his career, the second verse brings the audience back to a younger version of him, as the album has done consistently. The hook, prior to the second verse, beckons Kendrick a la a chorus of women: “We been waitin’ for you / Waitin’ for you...” (30-33). The “We” bears a special connotation as it represents Africa, the origin of Kendrick’s heritage and the origin of humanity itself. Africa has been waiting for Kendrick, waiting for him to return but also waiting for him to think of himself as one of its own. Before that, however, Kendrick gives the audience a taste of who he was before he listened to this call. All but four of the 23 lines that constitute the second verse begin with the words “I

know,” and so Kendrick reveals his focus on the way in which his younger, less aware self made sense of his knowledge and experiences. The phrase, “I know everything” (34, 35, 38, 40, 42, 45, 47), constitutes the first half of a considerable number of the lines, emphasizing the young Kendrick’s belief that he truly knew everything at that point in his life. The problem, however, lies in his interpretation of what “everything” truly means; to him, “everything” means “Compton” (38), which includes “cars, clothes, hoes, and money” (45), but “everything” to him also includes “lawyers, advertisements...sponsors” (40) as well as “the price of life” (53). In other words, the totality of life, from Kendrick’s perspective, is “the ghetto” and his transcendence beyond it because both include all his experiences. Therefore, Kendrick’s perspective is lacking something essential: that which is beyond his perspective. Now, he claims to “know history” (42) already, but the third verse tells the audience that he couldn’t be more wrong.

In the third verse, Kendrick comes face-to-face with a young, black boy, a native South African, who speaks to Kendrick as a representative of their African heritage and unlocks a part of the world before which time he had never considered. In his narration, Kendrick describes the boy as simply someone who “resembled [his] features / Nappy afro, gap in his smile / Hand-me-down sneakers...” (61-63) complete with some behaviors he recognizes, such as “Tossin’ footballs with his ashy black ankles / Breakin’ new laws, mama passed on home trainin’” (66-67). In a sense, Kendrick is using images and experiences from his childhood and attaching them to the boy as a means of translating what he’s seeing and treating their features and their childhood experiences as the only gateway into their connection. However, the child immediately dilutes this notion: “Kendrick, you do know my language / You just forgot because of what public schools had painted” (68-69). What Kendrick sees in the child is his African

heritage claiming him, informing him that the reason why he feels a slight disconnect between himself and the child is because there is a system that has been dedicated to an insistence on forgetting history. Institutional racism, he reveals, has seeks to strip African-Americans of their ties to their heritage and motherland, using the educational system to teach them that their “history” began strictly with plantation slavery. Langston Hughes also captures this disconnect between African-Americans and their roots in his “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” wherein he laments the desire on the part of one of his students “to be a poet, not a Negro poet” (91). This single line demonstrates at once the perception of black art and black people to be lesser than white art and people and the association with inhumanity that many have made with the black community. Kendrick, having been a man who experienced this racialized indoctrination firsthand in public school, is able now to experience the dismantling of this indoctrination at the hands of this African boy. The child even criticizes Kendrick: “Oh I forgot, ‘Don’t Kill My Vibe,’ that’s right, you’re famous” (70). “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe” was a hit song off *Butterfly*’s predecessor, *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, thus mocking Kendrick by ensuring he’s not “killing his vibe” by revealing the powers that shaped his upbringing. But now that Kendrick is looking at this child, his “family’s ancestor” (74), he now has the opportunity to “Make a new list / Of everything [he] thought was progress” (75-76), i.e. the list of “everything” that he claimed to know in the previous verse, because all of it was “bullshit” (77). Now that Kendrick occupies space, physically, in South Africa, the child says that he has a chance to enlighten Kendrick beyond how “Spoiled by fantasies” (79) of himself he has become. Ultimately, the child wants Kendrick to put his ego aside and learn the story of his people, one that has been silenced for the purposes of institutionalizing a master narrative predicated on dehumanization and abuse of “Others.” The purpose? So Kendrick can go back to his ‘hood, or

the BET Awards for that matter, and “Tell [his] homies especially / To come back home” (87-88). Thus, seemingly in the spirit of Marcus Garvey’s dream of Pan-Africanism, the South African boy wants to educate Kendrick so he may take his newfound knowledge and bring it to his friends, too, in an attempt to free their people and community from the chains of institutionalized racism and inhumanity.

### **“The Blacker the Berry”**

Kendrick, now older and wiser, demonstrates a brand of anger that no previous song on the album captures. In “The Blacker the Berry,” Kendrick ventriloquizes an enemy of his community; this enemy doesn’t come fully-clad with white hoods nor police badges, but rather with the same features and experiences of Kendrick himself. The enemy that Kendrick focuses in on is a specific aspect of the black mentality that he views as utterly detrimental to his community and an integral factor of the black community’s stagnation in America. In this song, Kendrick finally details and attacks an origin of the “ghetto mentality,” an origin that sponsors violence against another yet, in Kendrick’s mind, disallows the mentality’s proponents to realize the damage they are causing. As a result, the mindset that Kendrick ventriloquizes is one that focuses completely on the damage that white America has created for the black community without looking internally at the black community’s partial guilt in the state of its condition. The problem Kendrick seeks to shed light on then is the reality of an alarming number of African-Americans partaking in each other’s ensured destruction whilst simultaneously blaming white hegemonic powers in America for the entirety of this destruction.

The song’s introduction articulates this dichotomy in simple yet striking detail. If the title is any indication, Kendrick emphasizes the worth, meaning, and context of the color black, and our introduction to it is one that gravitates entirely around possession: “Everything black, I don’t



want black...I want everything black, I ain't need black...Some white, some black, I ain't mean black...I want everything black" (1-4). The repetition in Kendrick's words and the emphasis on "want[ing]" places the attitude of this intro right at the heart of consumerist America, which, above all else, values possessions as true indicators of financial independence and power. In stark contrast to these foreground lyrics, however, are the background vocals that round-out each of the same lines: "(They want us to bow)...(Down to our knees)...(And pray to a God)...(That we don't believe)" (1-4). The "God" in which "we," i.e. the black community doesn't believe is the seemingly divine force that lies at the heart of the same consumerist America that constitutes the mindset Kendrick seeks to focus on in this song. Here, Kendrick presents life in America for black people as a struggle of faith; on one end is the god of money, and on the other is the god of their salvation. Kendrick, as previously mentioned, will focus on those who are guilty of following the former.

As the first line of the first verse indicates, Kendrick is attacking the hypocrisy he sees plaguing his community. He declares, "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015" (16), the "I" here, again, symbolizing the diseased mindset of many of his fellow black Americans. As previously noted, Kendrick illuminates a dichotomy present for black Americans, that being fealty to either the Almighty Dollar or the Almighty One, the former bearing a striking white context. Thus, this mindset has Kendrick proclaim that he's "African-American...African / ...black as the moon, heritage of a small village / Pardon my residence" (20-22). When presented with the opportunity declare himself as "African-American," Kendrick foregoes this categorization, expunging the "American" in his identity or the African in his blood. This mindset then is placing itself in resistance to that which America stands for, in this case the denouncing of black Americans as American in the first and the plan to "terminate [their] culture" (26) in the end. Tragically, while

this Kendrick seems mindful of this plan of the physical and cultural extermination of the black community, his reaction is primarily to the white hegemony's preoccupation with his skin color: "Came from the bottom of mankind / My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide" (23-24). His defense of himself and his community is reactionary, and verges on being more damaging to his cause than helpful. He even goes as far as imploring these white hegemonic powers to "recognize that [he is] a proud monkey" (26), quite possibly in his attempt to champion such a caricature in a similar manner to how many in his community have taken to reclaiming the n-word as one of endearment. As this championing is a reaction to such prolonged racial discrimination, Wallace Thurman, in his novel *The Blacker the Berry*, presents an opposite reaction on the part of the protagonist Emma Lou's family. Thurman details that her "maternal grandparents, Samuel and Maria Lightfoot, were both mulatto products of slave-day promiscuity between male masters and female chattel" (Thurman 4) and were proud of such a fact. So proud, in fact, that Samuel and Maria took to favoring the "whiteness" in their blood and outright rejecting their "blackness" in their attempt to put "as much physical and mental space between them and the former home of their parents as was possible" (4).

At the core of what Kendrick focuses on is accountability, and the mindset he ventriloquizes in "The Blacker the Berry" believes itself to be unaccountable for the condition in which its community currently resides. The end of the first verse consists of a vitriolic accusation from Kendrick to white America: "You sabotage my community, makin' a killin' / You made me a killer, emancipation of a real n\*gga" (32-33). Kendrick places the undermining of the black community squarely on the shoulders of the destructive and oppressive white hegemony that surrounds it, yet he reiterates the beginning line of his first verse at the beginning of the second, that being, "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015" (46). Kendrick details this hypocrisy more deeply

here in the second verse, seemingly accepting the oppressive practices and indoctrination that the white hegemony deploys. He concedes, “it’s evident that [he is] irrelevant to society” (48) due to how the system has been successful in their mission to “Church [him] with [its] fake prophesizing that [he will be] just another / slave in [his] head” (51-52). Kendrick’s reserving himself to the expectations and propaganda of the white hegemony is in effect his accepting of a disempowered position in society despite swearing that he is still the one in control, claiming that he is “[b]lack and successful, [a] black man meant to be special” (61). He accepts the diseased ideas of the oppressive system while simultaneously presenting himself as its enemy, which only accomplishes in validating those same ideals and further worsening the perception of the black community as a whole. Juxtaposing Kendrick’s hypocritical claiming of the system’s polluted ideas of his community while also fighting this system is a hook by the artist known as Assassin that seeks to educate the listener on the true essence of the black strife and of the very heritage of humanity.

Assassin’s take on the aspect of “blackness” runs counter to Kendrick’s as expressed in the song’s intro. Assassin’s goal in this hook is to strike at the heart of the hypocrisy of which Kendrick is unaware. He details the experiences that constitute African-American history up to our modern day, describing that to be “black” means to be “treat[ed]...like a slave” (38), “feel a whole heap of pain” (39), and be “put...inna chains” (40), not simply having nappy hair nor a nose that is round and wide. Suffering for the explicit reason of being of a darker hue has been at the foundation of African-American history, a suffering that has fueled both the black community’s supreme artistry as well as its resistance to the forces that have warred upon them. Assassin continues, imploring his brothers and sisters to open their eyes and see the parallels between their lives and those of their ancestors: “How you no see the whip, left scars pon’ me

back / But now we have a big whip parked ‘pon the block” (43-44). This fuels of acknowledgement on the part of those who purchase and flaunt these “whips” (i.e. cars) fuel the mindset that Assassin is lamenting heavily in this hook. Most importantly, however, is his illuminating of humanity’s origins, which have everything to do with Africa.

The ending of the hook reveals Assassin’s true message, that being the need for his community to learn about the importance that Africa maintains within the history of humanity. In his dedication to what “blackness” means to him, Assassin states that, “All them say we doomed from the start, cah’ we black / Remember this, *every race start from the block*, jus ‘member that” (45-46, emphasis mine). The words I italicized present an important double-entendre that demonstrates the kind of communal love and appreciation that Kendrick seeks to advocate in “The Blacker the Berry.” Just like every foot race begins from starting blocks that officials place in the ground, every “race,” or biological race, starts from “the block,” or “the black” race, a simple change in annunciation comprising the difference between the two meanings. This emphasis on the importance of the black race to the story of human history functions as the central message that attempts to shine through this song amidst the uninformed and angry lines spewing from the mindset that Kendrick is imitating. Kendrick, in the third and final verse, finally unveils the hypocrisy that, in his mind, has been a bane for the growth and redemption of his community.

The hypocrisy he speaks on is precisely that of a member of the black community who allows their anger of the oppression and abuse at the hands of the white hegemony to cause the deaths of their fellow members, thus playing into the hands of the hegemony itself. Even after Assassin plays his hook for the second time (69-76), reaching the ears of this mindset that Kendrick personifies, the mindset maintains its view of “blackness,” claiming that he’s “black as

the heart of a fuckin' Aryan / ...black as the name of Tyrone and Darius" (82-83). This mindset that shapes the character that Kendrick embodies believes the best way to capture the essence of "blackness" is through likening it to the hatred found in a white supremacist's heart, which is a stab at the white hegemonic powers and their brand of white supremacy, and to common names found in the black community, also a comment particularly tongue-in-cheek. Whether Kendrick's character truly believes that these figures capture his "blackness" is indiscernible due to the sheer hate emanating from his lyrics and vocals. His anger challenges him to define himself based on the abusive powers that define him on a regular basis. These same powers, according to Kendrick's character, have succeeded in pitting "Compton Crip gangs" (92) against "Pirus" (93) like "[t]wo tribal armies that wanna build and destroy" (91) in the same way that apartheid has forced peoples like the "Zulu and Xhosa" tribes (90) into constant war with each other. However, this, again, falls into the hypocrisy that Kendrick details here, meaning that the Zulu and Xhosa tribes had as much choice in the matter of their warring as the Compton gangs of today do. His final and central diatribe against the lost members of Kendrick's community comes at the end of the third verse, containing some of the angriest lines he as utilized yet:

So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers  
 Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"  
 Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day  
 Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays  
 Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements  
 Or watch BET 'cause urban support is important  
 So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street when gangbangin'  
 made me kill a n\*gga blacker than me?  
 Hypocrite! (94-102)

How is it possible for those who kill fellow members of their own community through gang warfare to lament the death of another member of the same community at the hands of oppressive and racist institutional powers? Kendrick suggests that it is possible only when those

members refuse to respect their own communal responsibilities. Kendrick's weeping over the death of one black child whilst causing the deaths of others has left him in a state of anger and shock, and "The Blacker the Berry" presents a vitriolic critique of a perception of "blackness" and "black power" that only serves the widespread stagnation of his people.

### **"You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)"**

The final song I would like to focus on is "You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)," which I wish to argue reflects the most understanding tone of all the songs on the entire album. Kendrick in the song takes on a parental role as he explains to the homies from his 'hood the reality of their façades as "real black men." Instead of the bombastic anger representing a diseased "ghetto mindset" evident in "The Blacker the Berry," Kendrick instead deploys a rhythmic approach to his ventriloquizing his own mother, which emphasizes his mission to strictly educate and guide his listeners through his proclamation that "I'ma tell you what my mama had said" (6). Once again, Kendrick removes himself from the narrative of the song in order to make room for one of his characters.

"You Ain't Gotta Lie" contains some of the shortest verses in the entire album, forcing the listener to absorb each word they hear. Kendrick, as his mother, speaks directly to the black Americans whom Kendrick accuses of acting out a part, specifically that of a "real" black man. These men assume they "can just come and hang / With the homies but *[their] level of realness just ain't the same*" (10-11, emphasis mine). Ironically, while these men claim to be "real" with their 'hood and present authentic representations of African-American men, Kendrick "could spot [them] a mile away" (7), seeing right through their performance. The question then is simple: why are these members of Kendrick's community supporting these performances instead of simply being themselves? The bridge of the song (15-22) tells us that they seek to "impress"

Kendrick. They plan to accomplish this by reiterating common hip-hop language, which includes their “Askin’ ‘where the hoes at?’” (15), “Askin’ ‘where the moneybags?’” (16), claiming they “got the burner stashed” (17), “Askin’ ‘where the plug at?’” (19), “Askin’ ‘where the juug?’” (20), and “Askin’ ‘where it’s at?’” (21). The hip-hop community has come to expect these phrases from their members and proponents, their iterations demonstrating a closeness between them and the rest of community, but Kendrick tells his listener(s) that “It’s all in your head, homie” (18). In other words, these phrases do not represent reality, specifically reality in the black community, yet hip hop as a movement has championed to a large degree, the mystification and misrepresentations of life in the black community. Tricia Rose, in her critically-acclaimed book, *The Hip Hop Wars*, claims that “[t]he notion of keeping it real is about both representing a particular black ghetto street life and being truthful about one’s relationship to that life” (136). However, Rose also contends that “[i]f black ghetto street life were really being represented, we’d hear for more rhymes about homelessness and the terrible intergenerational effects of drug addiction...about fear and loss, and *real* talk about incarceration” (139, emphasis hers). With such representation in mind, Kendrick deconstructs a trend in hip hop to push a specific view of “the ghetto” as one that seeks the validation of others, and in this case, Kendrick’s. In response, Kendrick simply tells his homie, “You ain’t gotta lie to kick it, my n\*gga” (23), echoing an Ice Cube song by the same name.

Kendrick dedicates the latter half of the song to demonstrating that he and the culture (i.e. his perception of the true heart of the black community and hip-hop culture) reject these men who would rather perform than be themselves, who would rather be “real” than true. He claims that “the world don’t respect you / And the culture don’t accept you” (31-32), ousting these frauds from two different groups. This struggle of which Kendrick writes reflects Thomas

Chatterton Williams's in his memoir, *Losing My Cool*, where he found himself in the liminal space between "white" and "black," not yet understanding the meaning of "blackness."

Possessions such as shoes and alcohol were attributed to "blackness" in Thomas's mind because they were "real." Ultimately, this façade on the part of these disingenuous members of the black community is a manifestation of the perception that louder is stronger and better, prompting Kendrick's desire to banish the homies who want to be "[t]he loudest one in the room" (38) instead of the truest of most helpful to the community. Moreover, Kendrick asks these members "What do you got to offer?" (56) and threatens them to "[t]ell [him] before we off ya" (57), the "we" consisting of him and the community that has had enough of the misrepresentation.

Furthermore, the titles that these members champion, such as "n\*ggas" and "bitches," Kendrick claims are "fugazi" (60), outright declaring that the entire song itself is "for fugazi n\*ggas and bitches who make habitual lyin'" (61). They do their community a discredit and only feed the hip-hop community's traditional crusade of presenting an interpretation of black life that celebrates that which weakens it.

*To Pimp a Butterfly's* greatest accomplishment is its illumination and exposure of the essential issues, both internal and external, that continue to plague the black community even now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the massive amount of success that Kendrick Lamar has garnered for his revolutionary work in hip-hop, he demonstrates a refusal on his part to simply create art that is meant to sell online and in stores. His goal with this album was to educate each and every listener fortunate enough to get their hands on it. This desire to educate and to dispel dangerous illusions about the African-American experience emulates the very same desire that lies at the heart of the African-American literary canon. *Butterfly* exists as an essential lifeline to the black writers of yesterday, allowing my generation and those of the future to embrace the



spirit of the African-American literary canon and the philosophies that constitute its catalogue. The inclusion of the album moreover demonstrates the poetic and literary value that constitutes the foundation of hip-hop, and I truly believe that scholarly effort at contextualizing and analyzing its catalogue may offer an even richer perspective of the problems that surround the black community in the ongoing battle against America's white supremacist past and present.

Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. 2nd edition, Vintage International, 1995. Print.

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, edited by David Levering Lewis, Penguin Inc., 1994, pp. 91-95. Print.

Lamar, Kendrick. *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015,  
<https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-tracklist-album-art-lyrics>.

Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. 1992. 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Vintage International, 2004. Print.

Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry*. 1929. Dover, 2008. Print.

Williams, Thomas Chatterton. *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd*. Penguin Books, 2010. Print.

Wilson, August. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Plume, 1985. Print.