

“I Remember You Was Conflicted”: Reinterpreting Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*

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*You can take the boy out the hood,
but you can’t take the hood out the homie*
– *The Comrads*, 1997¹

The individual cannot be removed from their cultural context, nor can these contexts exist without the individual. This we consider self-evident. Yet in discussing art of subjugated cultures, specifically African American music, these two spheres are often wrongly separated. This has cultivated a divide in which personal exploration through music has been decoupled from the artist’s greater comments on their cultural struggle. These works are necessarily grounded in the context to which they speak, however this greater context must acknowledge the experience of the individual. This essay aims to pursue a methodology centred on the relationship between the personal and the cultural, with a case study of Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*.²

Lamar straddles this divide. His personal difficulty with removal from the Compton community is inextricably linked with the struggle of African Americans in the wake of the Ferguson unrest. Lamar is in the optimal position to comment on this cultural struggle, however his fame and celebrity has partially removed him from the issues he attempts to articulate. As Lamar examines the relationship between himself and his community and context throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he gives authenticity to his voice despite its fallibility. The album received broad acclaim from critics, although their responses generally segregated the passages of self-

¹ T. Anderson and Kelly Garmon [The Comrads], “Homeboyz,” in *The Comrads*, Street Life Records, 1997.

² Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

reflexivity from statements on race and society.³ While most accounts mention some conflict between the price of fame and Lamar's statements about systemised oppression, they do not address the relationship between these two with any more than a passing glance. Consequently, the nuance of Lamar's voice is largely lost in mainstream interpretations of the album. Adopting, instead, what I label an "inter-relational" methodology highlights previously unobserved areas of Lamar's work, and may similarly provide new perceptions when applied across the rap genre and beyond.

This essay will first examine prevailing polarised methodologies of approaching the art of oppressed people, focusing on rap music in particular. It will then look at the flaws in examination through a singular theoretical lens, such as an essentialist model. Finally, it will study *To Pimp a Butterfly* under a central, inter-relational methodology. Its ultimate aim is to offer a more finely-nuanced interpretation of the text, illuminating aspects that, as of yet, have remained unexamined – in particular, Lamar's wrestle with the fallibility of his own voice against his wider call for African American unity. Subsequently, the conclusion is drawn that a methodology which does not solely look at the personal and the cultural, but instead at their relationship, is invaluable to understanding Lamar's work as a worthy and relevant representation of contemporary African American rap.

"Where Was the Influence You Speak Of?"

The first of these polarised methodologies is the observation and consideration of an artist only as a part of their culture and community. Specific to the struggle of African Americans, this has taken the form of creating a ubiquitous experience to explain all actions and to unify in mutual discontent. In doing so, however,

³ Greg Tate, "Kendrick Lamar: To Pimp a Butterfly," *Rolling Stone*, March 19, 2015, accessed December 21, 2016,

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-20150319>; Steve Mallon, "Kendrick Lamar: To Pimp a Butterfly," *The Quietus*, March 23, 2015, accessed December 22, 2016,

<http://thequietus.com/articles/17482-kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-review>; Jon Carmanica, "Kendrick Lamar, Emboldened, but Burdened, by Success," *New York Times*, March 17, 2015, accessed December 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-emboldened-but-burdened-by-success.html>.

one misses the spectrum of experiences across the group. The writings of Henry Louis Gates Jr. show this form of essentialist methodology in relation to African American works. In his essay “Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times,” Gates makes the claim that all African American literature stems from “a response to allegations that its authors did not, and *could not* create literature,” and throughout it he pits black criticism against white hegemony as a central characteristic of African American art and literature.⁴ Gates pushes for unification in creating a culture of black literary theory as a rejection of “the racist premise that theory is something that white people do, so that we are doomed to imitate our white colleagues.”⁵ This method of analysis, while providing insight into the greater struggle, funnels all understanding of African American creativity through a model of retaliation. Similarly, Gates’s “Signifyin(g)” analysis as found in *The Signifying Monkey* forces one to assume that all incarnations of double voicing present in black texts are an example of signifyin(g), and a descendant of the “Elu-Elegbara” tradition.⁶ This perspective forces the broader aspects of race and its inherent struggles to be examined for their cause and effect, but does not account for individuals who do not adhere to, or have no discernible links with, this perceived mass culture.

Likewise, Lakeyta M. Bonnette analyses rap and hip-hop as a form of retaliation to white cultural autocracy, and as a tool of political expression. Bonnette’s central theme in *Pulse of the People* is this “political resistance.”⁷ She illustrates how group standardisation can apply to innately African American music genres, homogenising intent across a broad spectrum of artists. Her book specifies areas in which hip-hop and rap were used explicitly to form a political or social weapon for underprivileged African American people. The “conscious” quality of rap, according to Bonnette, tends towards Black Nationalism. This ideology, she

⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times” [1988], in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd edition, ed. Vincent B Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 2427.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2432.

⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁷ Lakeyta M. Bonnette, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

states, "makes one more aware of issues that solely affect the Black community," citing rappers such as Trick Daddy, Big Daddy Kane and Brand Nubians.⁸ Similarly, hip-hop is defined as having explicit links to political affiliation, exemplified in the work of Nas, for example, who "follow[ed] in the tradition of Black culture that uses music as a form of resistance, in this case against media control and manipulation."⁹ Indeed, Bonnette's overall argument labels hip-hop and all African American music forms as "resistance mechanisms,"¹⁰ and it is through discussion of the structures of black music as a whole that Bonnette is able to explore this notion of political activism.

This broad methodological practice, however, forces one to examine all African American music as fundamentally political, regardless of its intent. Bonnette's ubiquitous narrative of hip-hop and rap is largely unable to account for works that are less overtly political. To politicise OutKast's "So Fresh, So Clean" or Method Man and Redman's verses on D'Angelo's "Left and Right" would be contrived, however their contribution to the hip-hop and rap tradition is no less significant.¹¹ These broad strokes of essentialism here lose their ability to relate to each individual case. Consequently, they place a limitation on interpretation of hip-hop, African American music, and music of the subaltern, and as a result, a new methodology must be adopted in order to allow for a more personalised, nuanced approach.

"If I Shoot at Your Identity"

In contrast to these broader strokes of essentialism, an individualist approach reduces analysis to only the experiences of the author. This suffers from the same effect of narrowed view, albeit from the

⁸ Bonnette, *Pulse of the People*, 55–56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

¹¹ Andre Benjamin, Antwan Patton, and David Sheets [OutKast], "So Fresh, So Clean," in *Stankonia*, Arista, 2000; Michael Eugene Archer, Kamall Fareed, Reggie Noble, and Clifford Smith [D'Angelo], "Left and Right," in *Voodoo*, Cheeba Sound, 2000. While one may argue that the social commentary which these songs provide on black pride and beauty is political, they do not explicitly fit the mould of politicised rap that Bonnette presents. Her argument is specifically political in so far as it pertains to structures and systems of government and their effect on African Americans.

opposite end of the spectrum. With such a method, disparity in experience from one individual to the next is accentuated. Utilising this, Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of each individual as “*la mestiza*,” an Aztec term meaning hybrid, stating that person transcends classification of single culture, and rather expresses their own experiences as they have unfolded to them.¹² Anzaldúa’s model finds no unity of experience, but disparity. This resolves issues inherent in the essentialist model, but produces new complications by disregarding greater social forces that pervade works of all cultures. Such a methodology starkly contrasts those wishing to examine the effects of socio-political contexts on the group, providing an alternate point of examination into the struggle of subjugation. In providing these alternative vantage points, the individualist approach that Anzaldúa presents is useful to a certain extent.

Anzaldúa’s methodology is less useful, however, when the work of the individual refers to the culture that they themselves reside within. When Kendrick Lamar declares “We gon’ be alright!” in “Alright,” he is not speaking about a personal and unique circumstance. Rather, he is dealing on the level of larger, social phenomena and cultural struggle. It follows then that an analysis of such a text requires recognition of the manner in which Lamar intersects with these greater struggles. Musically, the matching of a smooth jazz horn section and an 808 drum beat in “Alright” shows a conglomeration of elements from the black musical tradition that precedes and surrounds the song. To ignore the social, cultural, and musical forces that permeate the creation of such a work, and to look solely at the individual that produced it, would be to rob the text of an inherent complexity.

This individualistic mindset has permeated ethno-musicology. Jesse D. Ruskin and Timothy Rice’s inquiry into the frequency of works in this field that focus on the individual has concluded that such analysis has been on the rise, due in part to the fact that “for some ethnomusicologists... the developments of late modernity drove their interest in the theoretical and methodological

¹² Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

significance of individual musicians."¹³ Each work of ethnomusicology they present explores the diversity of experience of the individual. From this, we see the divide in study of works of the subaltern: one camp provides the methodology for examining the culture as a holistic force which is bound by context, heritage and socio-political forces, whilst the other centres on the individual as the perceiver of fundamentally unique experiences.

“Sound Like I Needed Some Soul Searching”

The inherent flaw in these disparate methodologies for understanding African American works is in their narrowing of the scope of examination. Taking only one approach to understanding the voice of the oppressed in African American music dismisses the complexity of the issues at hand. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. writes that “although we should work against the sense of romantic folk authenticity that does not account for diversity, we must also acknowledge the importance of this musical modality to African Americans and to audiences around the globe.”¹⁴ One needs to avoid the temptation to compartmentalise these facets of the African American musician, and instead embrace the role of the relationship between them. In this embrace, one finds an inextricable coexistence between these spheres as they inform one another.

The narrowed field of vision which accompanies total adoption of either the essentialist or the individualist approaches is all the more evident when one considers Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (hereafter *Butterfly*). Upon release, it was instantly labelled as an “important” album, especially in the wake of the Ferguson unrest.¹⁵ This overall cultural importance was decoupled, however, from the personal themes of self-doubt and actualisation which permeate the album; commentators simply gave these issues

¹³ Jesse D. Ruskin and Timothy Rice, “The Individual in Musical Ethnography,” *Ethnomusicology* 56 (2012): 300.

¹⁴ Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr, “Blues and the Ethnographic Truth,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13 (2001): 42.

¹⁵ Justin Charity, “Why Did Everyone Claim to Enjoy Kendrick Lamar's ‘To Pimp a Butterfly?’” *Complex*, November 4, 2015, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://au.complex.com/music/2015/11/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-overwhelming-blackness>.

quick praise, before returning to the more pertinent topics of African American identity.¹⁶ Such a lack of recognition denies the equally important relationship between these personal musings and the overall messages of unity that underpin the album's message. But this is not to say that one should focus solely on the personal confessionals in songs such as "u" and "Momma," or one would then overlook the inquiry into African American identity altogether.

"I Don't Know, I'm No Mortal Man"

If we then, as I have suggested, understand Lamar's personal exposé as interlocked with his cultural context, we find an establishment of a flawed narrative voice calling for unity. Such themes have not yet fully been explored in responses to the album, except in allusions by Lamar in interviews. This is entirely the result of such responses focusing independently on the personal and societal aspects of *Butterfly*, without acknowledgement of their relation to one another.

Lamar's questioning of the authenticity from which he speaks runs through the entirety of the album. In particular, Lamar questions his ability to speak about the oppression from which he is partially removed as a result of fame and celebrity – the very fame and celebrity he requires to be heard. The metaphor of a "pimped butterfly," from which the album receives its title, is the ideal guide for understanding this conflict. Unravelled as the climactic conclusion to a spoken word poem that permeates the album, the metaphor centres on a "caterpillar [that] is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it," consuming everything it can while finding a way to survive. Upon noticing "how much the world shuns him, but praises the butterfly," the caterpillar forms a cocoon in which he is trapped, but where new ideas take root. Finally, it emerges as a butterfly. From this new vantage point the butterfly can see the issues it – and its kind – face, and hopes that it may be able to "[shed] light on situations that the caterpillar never considered." However, the caterpillars try to "pimp" the butterfly, exploiting its

¹⁶ Kitty Empire, "Kendrick Lamar: To Pimp a Butterfly review – fearless in its scope," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2015, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/mar/22/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-butterfly-review-fearless-in-scope>.

name and nature. They disregard what it has to say about their lives, as it is no longer a caterpillar, and no longer part of their struggle. To them, the butterfly is weak. Lamar ends by stating that the "butterfly and the caterpillar are completely different, [yet] are one in the same."¹⁷

Here we see that Lamar is attempting to express what he has seen at the heart of African American oppression, but as he tries to do so, he is disregarded due to his new platform. This is the very platform that allows him to see the issues at hand, and from which he calls for unity. Lamar here wrestles with a concept raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she points out the manner in which "white men are saving brown women from brown men."¹⁸ Her argument, put simply, is that white men often assume the role of authority in telling other cultures how they should and should not act. In her scenario, white, Western men take the moral high ground over brown, Indian men despite their own patriarchal problems. Most important to her overall argument, however, is her idea that the subaltern – in this situation brown women – are the only group with the authority to speak out about what is wrong, as they are themselves the subjugated group. The issue with this contention is that in being the subaltern in a society, such groups do not have the means to speak and have their voices heard.

Lamar sees this issue, and sees his role in it. He wishes to speak on behalf of the subaltern community from which he came, however due to the fame and fortune he has amassed he no longer appears to authentically represent this community. But paradoxically, given his fame and social standing, he is only now in a position from which he can speak and be heard. His grappling with this paradox permeates the album, however little has been said on the importance of this idea, just as little has been done to connect Lamar's personal struggle with the struggle of African Americans. If we look then at connecting these areas, a richer

¹⁷ Kendrick Duckworth, Stephen Bruner, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, and Tupac Shakur [Kendrick Lamar], "Mortal Man," in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 296.

analysis of *Butterfly* is unveiled. The example of Lamar suggests that a holistic and nuanced analysis of African American music, and art of the oppressed at large, must be adopted that incorporates both these areas.

“I Need Forty Acres and a Mule, Not a Forty Ounce and a Pit Bull”

Lamar’s call for unity is the essential theme that brings this conflict to the surface. Following the unrest resulting from the shootings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others, Lamar is stirred to voice the systemic problems he sees. These problems can be seen in the song “The Blacker the Berry,” written in direct response to these deaths, where Lamar describes a strong sense of Black Nationalism alongside allegations of white oppression. What is vital is Lamar’s revelation of hypocrisy as he states in closing, following a verse proclaiming pride in stereotypical depictions of African Americans, “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / when gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? / Hypocrite!”¹⁹ This final line was received by many as aligned with the views of many conservative commentators; that anger over white-on-black violence is hypocritical given the amount of black-on-black violence. However, within the context of the song and album as a whole, Lamar does not appear to be excusing or diminishing the injustice of white-on-black violence. Rather, he views the continuation of gang warfare as the result of and tool for oppression. This is evident in the earlier line “You sabotage my community, makin’ a killin’ / You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga.” Lamar has said in defence and explanation of the final line, “That last line, that’s the conflict in me growing up. That’s me knowing my own demons and trying to reverse the curse. That’s why it’s so important.”²⁰ Within this context, we see the heart of

¹⁹ Kendrick Duckworth, Jefferey Campbell, Zale Epstein, Alexander Izquiero, Brent Kolatalo, Stephen Kozmeniuk, K. Lewis, and Matthew Samuels [Kendrick Lamar], “The Blacker the Berry,” in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

²⁰ Dorian Lynskey, “Kendrick Lamar: ‘I Am Trayvon Martin. I’m All These Kids,’” *The Guardian*, June 21, 2015, accessed December 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/21/kendrick-lamar-interview-to-pimp-a-butterfly-trayvon-martin>.

Lamar's album, that is, a call for unity amongst African Americans, particularly those in lower socio-economic communities such as Compton.

Unity, in the context of *Butterfly*, is in the confrontation and abolition of gang warfare and tensions, which serve only to further oppression. Such a confrontation is enacted in the second section of the song "i": after a series of upbeat and ignorantly blissful verses in a faux-live atmosphere, a crowd squabble presumably related to gang rivalry breaks out. Above this, Lamar asks the question "How many niggas we done lost?" repeatedly, surrounded by interjections of "That shit petty yo" and "2015, niggas tired of playing victim dog." Lamar then follows this with an a cappella verse tracing the etymological origins of the "N word" to the Ethiopian word "Negus," meaning royalty. This call for unity manifests musically in the vast cross-section of musical genres stemming from the African American tradition, as played by prominent members of those styles. The seamless blending of cool jazz with a classic hip-hop TR-808 beat in "Hood Politics" is evidence of this, as is the fusing of funk bass lines and backup singers reminiscent of Mo-Town and early hip-hop found in "King Kunta" and "These Walls." This exchange further highlights Lamar's call for unity amongst all African Americans, and his dismissal of gang violence and disruption – which allow for the exploitation and killing of black youths – as petty.

The exploitation of African Americans is indicated by Lamar from the onset of *Butterfly*. The album's opening samples the hook of Boris Gardiner's "Every Nigger is a Star," from a 1973 Blaxploitation film of the same name.²¹ The near-uncomfortable level of sarcasm in its use similarly permeates the majority of the early songs on *Butterfly*. In "Wesley's Theory," the chorus line "We should never gave, we should never gave / Niggas money go back home, money go back home" sums up the presumed attitude of "Uncle Sam," who is personified to have enticed Lamar into dreaming of fame and wealth:

²¹ Barrington Gardiner, [Boris Gardiner], "Every Nigger is a Star," in *Every Nigger is a Star OST*, Leal Productions, 1973. Blaxploitation is the name given to the barrage of films in the 1970s that used stereotypes of black culture under the false pretence of progress to cash-in on changing attitudes toward African Americans.

*What you want you? A house or a car?
 Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
 Anything, see, my name is Uncle Sam on your dollar
 Motherfucker you can live at the mall!*

Lamar is seduced into spending all of what he gains, only for it to backfire given a lack of financial education. This is pointed commentary on the idea that the American system is built to exploit African American musical culture. It deceives these participants so it need not give them a permanent means for advancement. Lamar has also stated this song was not written autobiographically, but rather as a warning to younger generations who may fall into the trap of ill-management of money.²²

The counter-argument from Lamar to this manipulation comes in “For Free,” in which an unidentified woman dispatches a barrage of criticism at Lamar for not giving her what she wants. In response to this, Lamar displays his lyrical and rhythmic mastery with four increasingly frantic and fast-paced stanzas over a free jazz accompaniment. Each of these stanzas begins with the motif “This dick ain’t free,” spoken in a syncopated staccato that stands out heavily from the rest of the song. This line, although intended for comedic purposes, denotes a metaphor of exploitation. The listener is only made aware of such a metaphor with the penultimate line “Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton that made you rich” followed by the last use of “now my dick ain’t free.” This statement gives clarity to the verse before, as in the lines “I need forty acres and a mule / Not a forty ounce and a pit bull / Bullshit,” a reference to broken promise of reparations for each freedman after the Civil War. It is evident here that Lamar’s major concern is for unity amongst African Americans, given the historic exploitation of their work and culture without reparation.

²² Rob Markman and Kendrick Lamar, “Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down Tracks From ‘To Pimp A Butterfly,’” *MTV News*, March 31, 2015, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUEI_ep9iDs.

"I Need You to Speak Your Mind Real Quick"

It is with this foundational understanding of Lamar's intent that we may then understand the interrelation of his personal struggle with that of the cultural struggle. In "u," we see Lamar drunkenly abusing himself for "[leaving] Compton for profit" at the expense of friends and family. Further musings such as "or leave [your] best friend / Little brother, you promised you'd watch him before they shot him," show his shame and guilt in leaving Compton. As of yet, the wider critical discussion of these lyrics has not progressed beyond this point, simply assuming Lamar is solely grieving and shameful. However, considering his role as a self-proclaimed "king" and voice of those in Compton, alongside the butterfly metaphor, we see how the personal struggle is both an extension of, and an informant to the cultural struggle. It can be seen in the lines "I fuckin' tell you, you fuckin' failure—you ain't no leader!"; "Thought money would change you, made you more complacent"; and "You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her [Lamar's sister]" that Lamar's anguish is also directed at his inability to speak on behalf of a community that he has been removed from. In a 2015 interview for MTV, Lamar states this song was filled largely with "survivor's guilt," which results in his question of, "How can I use my influence with other cats coming into the city and we still being involved in the activities inside the streets? How can I influence that in a positive way? That's part of survivor's guilt."²³

Similarly, we see the introduction of a secondary voice of a small child in "Momma" upon Lamar's arrival back home to Compton. This voice is introduced to destabilise Lamar's own credibility as an authoritative voice, thus showing the fallibility within it, as seen in the lines:

*He looked at me and said, "Kendrick you do know my language
You just forgot because of what public schools had painted
Oh, I forgot, 'Don't Kill My Vibe,' that's right, you're famous
I used to watch on Channel 5, TV was taken"*

This account perfectly encapsulates how Lamar straddles the divide between the introspective and the societal. Presenting the

²³ Markman and Lamar, "Lamar Breaks Down Tracks."

child's authoritative voice confirms the fallibility in Lamar's own. The stolen TV shows that the child is isolated within, is shaped by, and takes the brunt of the impoverished society that is his world – the world Lamar attempts to speak on behalf of. This is further exemplified with the child's following line "I can attempt to enlighten you without frightenin' you," here presenting the idea that although Lamar finds himself enlightened, he doesn't have the full account of the problem as those who it oppresses. A similar voice is found in the voicemail message left by ScHoolboy Q in "Hood Politics," who refers to Lamar by his teenage alias "K-Dot" before saying, "Don't tell me they got you on some weirdo rap shit, / nigga. No socks and skinny jeans and shit." ScHoolboy Q exposes a further removal from the Compton community by jokingly challenging Lamar's dress sense.

The above examples demonstrate Lamar's interrelation with the greater cultural context about which he speaks, and his imperfect role as a spokesperson for that culture. Subsequently, Lamar chooses to centre "Complexion (A Zulu Love)" on a verse from notable female African American rapper, Rapsody. The song focuses on the beauty of women despite skin colour, with Lamar using the metaphorical narrative of a slave sneaking into the room of another to court them. With the realisation that Lamar cannot speak on behalf of African American women, he ushers in Rapsody's verse stating, "Where the homegirl Rapsody at? I need you to speak your mind real quick loved one!" Here we see Lamar's self-reflection on the limits of his own voice as an authority, and so he reaches out to an individual who represents what he cannot. He said of this song himself, "what made [Rapsody] special was that I knew that she was going to bring the content from a woman's perspective about complexion, being insecure and at the same time having gratitude for your complexion."²⁴ It is through this inclusion of other voices that Lamar, having recognised the fallibility in his own, is able to bolster *Butterfly* as a work of cultural importance.

²⁴ Andreas Hale, "The Oral History of Kendrick Lamar's 'To Pimp a Butterfly,'" *Grammys*, February 15, 2016, accessed December 17, 2016, <https://www.grammy.com/news/the-oral-history-of-kendrick-lamars-to-pimp-a-butterfly>.

"Look Both Ways, Before You Cross my Mind"

To Pimp a Butterfly has stood in the years since its release as a new benchmark for rap music and the influence it can have on a culture. It has provided both a voice for the struggle of an oppressed people as well as, particularly in the affiliation of "Alright" and the Black Lives Matter movement, a mantra under which a unified people can further express themselves. Much of this influence must be attributed to Lamar's skill as a musician and lyricist, and his ability to couple powerful messages with creative beats and rhymes. However, it must also be acknowledged that the album has benefited enormously from Lamar's humility in including a wrestle with and final acceptance of the fallibility of his own voice. This valuable interpretation of the work is only possible through an exploration of the inter-relation between Lamar's personal struggle and the cultural struggle of which he speaks. Hence, an inter-relational methodology should be applied to other works within the rap and hip-hop genre, as well as the broader pool of works that deal with the nature of oppression or cultural commentary where applicable. If applied, a plethora of new interpretations on important texts would likely surface as a result.

ABSTRACT

In discussing art of subjugated cultures, specifically African American music, the individual and their cultural context are often wrongly separated. This has cultivated a divide in which personal exploration through music has been decoupled from the artist's greater comments on their cultural struggle. This essay aims to pursue a methodology centred on the relationship between the personal and the cultural, with a case study of Kendrick Lamar's 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Lamar straddles this divide. It is through examining the relationship between himself and his community and context that Lamar gives authenticity to his voice, despite its fallibility. Although the album received critical acclaim, it was met with responses that segregated the passages of self-reflexivity from statements on race and society. Consequently, the nuance of Lamar's voice was largely lost. Adopting, instead, what I label an "inter-relational" methodology highlights previously

unobserved areas of Lamar's work, and may similarly provide new perceptions when applied across the rap genre and beyond.

This essay will first examine prevailing, polarised methodologies of examining art of oppressed people, and rap in particular. Next, it will look at the inherent flaws in taking entirely one approach. Finally, applying a central, inter-relational methodology, it shall examine *To Pimp a Butterfly*, ultimately finding a more nuanced interpretation of the text that illuminates aspects that, as of yet, have remained unexamined – namely, Lamar's wrestle with the fallibility of his own voice against his wider call for African American unity. Subsequently, the conclusion is drawn that a methodology that does not just look at the personal and the cultural, but their inherent relationship with one another, is invaluable to understanding Lamar's work, and likely other works within the rap genre.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

John Lawrie is currently undergoing a combined undergraduate degree at The Sydney Conservatorium and The University of Sydney in contemporary music and arts, majoring in History. This essay is the result of a long-standing interest in the work of Kendrick Lamar, as well as John's accidental enrolment in the senior unit "African American Music Inquiry" in his first semester of university.