

Complexion (Don't Mean A Thing)

How is blackness Signified and discussed in Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp A Butterfly?

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the way blackness is Signified and discussed on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*. The album's narrative structure is discussed by using the concept of the encyclopedic novel, and how this structure provides a detailed understanding of black America and the ghetto. The presence of blackness in Lamar's lyricism is analyzed by using W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness, which manifests itself in self-reflection and condemnation of the ostensibly unsurmountable racism in American society. Furthermore, the thesis discusses in what way Lamar both lyrically and musically engages in the African-American tradition of Signifyin(g), a term demarcated by Henry Louis Gates Jr.. A musical analysis is added, inspired by Adam Krims' musical poetic. This analysis focusses on the musical choices Lamar makes, showing his awareness of the black cultural connotation of his sampling and live instrumentation. While most articles on hip-hop focus solely on its lyricism, this thesis posits that scholars should also pay attention to artists' intentions when looking at hip-hop. The article concludes that Lamar Signifies his blackness in order to present himself as a diplomat and a preaching figure for the emancipation of the African-American.

Index

Introduction	3
Method	4
Chapter 1: The narrative of <i>To Pimp A Butterfly</i>	
The narrative of metamorphosis	5
Encyclopedic narrative	6
Chapter 2: Lyrical analysis	
Double-consciousness and Signifyin(g)	9
Critique on double-consciousness and the way to emancipation	12
Chapter 3: Musical analysis	
The musical choices of <i>To Pimp A Butterfly</i>	16
The aural characteristics of <i>To Pimp A Butterfly</i>	18
Chapter 4: Discussion and conclusion	
Discussion	21
Conclusion	21

Introduction

Following the fatal arrests and shootings of numerous African-Americans by police brutality in recent years, the polarization amongst Americans concerning race issues has grown. A Compton native, rapper Kendrick Lamar is no stranger to crime and police intervention, documenting his experiences in his lyricism. His politically charged 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly*¹ was met with critical acclaim and commercial success. It was praised for its eclecticism of musical styles, as well as Lamar's dense and ambiguous writing style.² *TPAB* deals with a range of topics such as racism, materialism, the music industry, mental health, fame and self-love. Furthermore, third single 'Alright' was adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement as anthem, giving the album political momentum and cementing its place as one of 2015's most celebrated albums. Lamar was granted the key to the city of Compton, with Mayor Aja Brown stating that "[Lamar's] work has served as a catalyst to raise a new level of consciousness for this generation."³ So how is this image for positive change and emancipation of the African-American constructed in Lamar's music? Furthermore, how does Lamar reflect on himself as a black man and his community, while America is in the midst of political tumult? The main question of this article will be: 'how is blackness signified and discussed on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*?'

Most academic writing revolving Lamar (and hip-hop in general), tends to focus on lyricism. James D. McLeod Jr. and Matthew Linder focus on the theology and existentialism of Lamar, while also paying attention to Lamar's lyrical discussion of race relations. Casey Michael Henry focusses on the lyrical content of *TPAB*, investigating its traits of a black postmodern writing style by using Edward Mendelson's concept of the 'encyclopedic novel'. However, while research on lyricism is fruitful, few writers also try to incorporate what the music as a whole emits.

That is not to say there has been no writing on the musical aspects of hip-hop. Robert Walser writes about how the rhythms in the music of Public Enemy, writing how their music "enacts survival in a complex, dangerous world; however oppressive and dissonant that world, it is made to seem negotiable through dialogue and rhythmic virtuosity."⁴ Walser writes that to grasp the meaning and influence of hip-hop, analyzing the lyrics is not enough, discussing the production process and the arrangement of rhythms. However, Walser uses traditional musical terminology, not used by the artists and producers themselves. Adam Krims recognizes this problem, using the jargon of the hip-hop community to construct his argument. In *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* he discusses the 'musical poetics' of rap music⁵ and contextualizes the meaning of the music. By looking at musical layering and the rhythmic delivery of rappers, he investigates how a cultural identity is created by hip-hop artists. However, he mainly focusses on the aesthetics of rap music, while not paying much attention the genealogy of sampled material in rap. Elizabeth A. Wheeler does do this, as she looks at hip-hop and

¹ Henceforth abbreviated as *TPAB*.

² Craig Jenkins. "Kendrick Lamar, To Pimp A Butterfly." *Pitchfork*, March 19, 2015.

<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20390-to-pimp-a-butterfly/>

³ Lamar has since also won a Pulitzer Prize and was also named a Generational Icon by the California Senate.

David Renshaw, "Kendrick Lamar given keys to hometown of Compton", *NME*, January 6, 2016,

<https://www.nme.com/news/music/kendrick-lamar-25-1194528>

⁴ Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy." *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 2 (1995): 193-217. doi:10.2307/924425.

⁵ While Adam Krims notes a significant difference between rap music and hip-hop, this thesis does not. When talking about hip-hop, this article points the genre Kendrick Lamar operates within.

black musical expression, delving into the cultural implications that flow out of the act of sampling.

Regarding blackness, W.E. Du Bois writes about an inherent ambivalence African-Americans struggle with, in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He writes about 'double-consciousness', a concept he uses to describe the burden of racism one feels, when being an African-American. Du Bois' theories are often used in research on blackness and rap, as Du Bois has written extensively on African-American culture, of which Du Bois finds a great part of its inception lies in the African-American's striving for distinction from white culture. Regarding African-American literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes about the literary tropes of African-Americans. Gates uses the term Signifyin(g) to study the intertextuality and revision of texts written by African-American writers. The term Signifyin(g) is then also relevant to the genre of hip-hop, because of the revisiting and revising of past cultural artefacts through sampling. Blackness in music is then discussed by Olly Wilson, as he delineates certain aspects that are commonly found in black music.

Method

First, this thesis will investigate the narrative of *TPAB*, by using Mendelson's concept of the encyclopedic narrative. Then follows an analysis of the album's lyrics, using Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness. Uncovering manifestations of double-consciousness in the work of Kendrick Lamar will help to define Lamar's experiences as an African-American, and how he envisions the emancipation of the black community. To describe the representation of blackness, Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) will be employed. As the lyrics discuss African-American life, the music to *TPAB* seems to contribute to the inherent blackness of the music as well. Using Krims' and Wheelers' terminology, this thesis will analyze in what way Lamar the blackness is then Signified in the music. Important to the musical analysis of hip-hop is a focus on timbre, musical organization, but also cultural connotation. Interspersed throughout, there are quotes presented from interviews with Lamar and his collaborators, to also shed light on their perception of what makes the music black.

Chapter 1: The narrative of *To Pimp a Butterfly*

The narrative of metamorphosis

TPAB contains a rich narrative, encompassing religion, consumerism, mental health, poverty, hero-worship and, most importantly, racism. Raised in Compton, Lamar has always faced the immediate dangers of the gang-life that has become so affiliated with the southern Los Angeles city. His upbringing and his introduction to crime was chronicled in his major label debut, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. On 'The Art of Peer Pressure', he addresses how he abstained from a life of crime, although also being unwantedly entangled in it. "I never was a gangbanger, I mean I was never stranger to the folk neither" he raps on 'The Art of Peer Pressure', off that album.

On *TPAB*, Lamar approaches his storytelling in a religious manner, as he describes himself as "the closest thing to a preacher that [many fans] have... My word will never be as strong as God's word. All I am is just a vessel, doing his work."⁶ This manifests itself in *TPAB* in the religious imagery that is used throughout. There is 'Lucy', a play on the name Lucifer, who symbolizes the evils that surround Lamar. Lamar describes Lucy as "all the [things] that I was thinking of that I know can be detrimental to not only me but the people around me, and still be tempted by them."⁷ On the other hand, there is also the hand of God at work, which is disguised as an insistent beggar in the track "How Much A Dollar Cost", who Lamar initially distances himself from. Cleverly, the evil that Lucy represents is cast in an attractive female mold, while the hand that offers forgiveness is ostensibly merely a nuisance. Lamar seeks for redemption through the album, and most often does this by reverting to his religion.

Built upon the concept of metamorphosis, *TPAB* tells a tale of self-discovery amidst chaos. This metamorphic symbolism is used by Lamar to capture the journey from the nihilism of the ghetto to the polished splendor of stardom. Dispersed throughout the album, between songs, are fragments of a prose which Lamar reads to his idol, Tupac.⁸ These fragments increasingly give away more of the full prose, which is read in its entirety at the end of the album. In this prose, Lamar expands on the concept of the theme of metamorphosis that runs throughout *TPAB*. The personal journey described by Lamar on the album navigates towards the final state of metamorphosis, the butterfly, which Lamar describes as "representing the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar."

While the metaphor of the caterpillar is discussed at the end of the album, it is mostly the phase of the cocoon Lamar is focused on. Though addressed literally only two times, the cocoon is a central concept to the narrative, as the ending prose shows: "Already surrounded by this mad city the caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon which institutionalizes him. He can no longer see past his own thoughts. He's trapped." The album starts off with the braggadocious 'Wesley's Theory', with the first verse containing a flashback to a younger unsigned Lamar: "When I get signed, homie I'ma act a fool ... I'ma buy a brand new Caddy on fours" The youthful Lamar bears a resemblance to the caterpillar Lamar describes in the prose: "the caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it... Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city". The mad city being Compton, this part of Lamar's life was addressed on his previous album, *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*.

⁶ Joe Coscarelli, "Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity." *New York Times*, March 22, 2015.

⁷ Dorian Lynskey, "Kendrick Lamar: 'I am Trayvon Martin. I'm all of these kids.'" *The Guardian*, June 21, 2015.

⁸ For the full prose, read the lyrics to 'Mortal Man' in the appendix.

Chronologically, 'Wesley's Theory' depicts Lamar leaving Compton for the first time, touring his first album. The concept of the cocoon is introduced, as George Clinton wails 'As the four corners of this cocoon collide...' While the meaning of the cocoon metaphor is left ambiguous, its constrictive nature is clear. Whether it resembles the trappings of fame or the ghetto one cannot seem to get out of, the cocoon serves as a metaphor for obstruction.

Encyclopedic narrative

The narrative of *TPAB* can in some ways also be deemed as an encyclopedic narrative. The genre of encyclopedic literary works "attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge."⁹ Mendelson demarcates the traits of an encyclopedic work as a one that "include[s] a full account of a technology or science"; "attend[s] to the complexities of statecraft and, like the New Testament which in many ways they imitate, they proclaim a new dispensation on earth"; "is an encyclopedia of literary styles"¹⁰. Considering Mendelson only recognizes two American works as encyclopedic, and states that "each major national culture in the west ... produces [one] encyclopedic author", hailing Kendrick Lamar as such an author might be premature. Still, even though Mendelson focusses on the monumental pieces of literature, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, *TPAB* arguably showcases traits of an encyclopedic work. To discuss why, it is important look at Mendelson's definition of an encyclopedic work.

The first trait of an encyclopedic narrative, the "full account of technology or science", is less all-encompassing, or as 'full', as Mendelson's definition implies. His examples include the "encyclopedia of cetology" in *Moby Dick*, or the detailed account of "embryology embedded in ... *Ulysses*."¹¹ These books describe contemporary technology and the way it is used by a certain community. In other words, it is time-bound and discusses a paradigm. The way the information is presented by encyclopedic authors however, plays a big role in creating the all-encompassing nature of its narrative. Vesa Kyllönen calls this the "illusion of the totality of knowledge", claiming that "as an epistemological narrative, the encyclopedic novel is fundamentally an act of window dressing." Kyllönen states that synecdoche is a huge part in creating an encyclopedic narrative, in which jargon is used to create the sense of the all knowingness of the author. More importantly, he writes "While an encyclopedic novel contains tons of minor characters, fragmentary snapshots, stylistic shifts, runners and loose ends, together all these elements are bent on making the reader pay attention to the sense of totality."¹² The point is not to reduce the iconic works Mendelson's praises in his article to a lesser status, but more so to consider modern contenders like *TPAB* as having encyclopedic traits. For *TPAB*, the account of technology can also be viewed as jargon, as Lamar names technology to give an anthropological description of his surroundings. Lamar reports the daily life of Compton through its weaponry (.22 (or Deuce-deuce), .38 special, .40, .44, M16's, Mac-11, Desert Eagle); its cars (Chevy, Cadillac, Mercedes Benz with 24" rims,

⁹ Edward Mendelson, "Encyclopedic Narrative, From Dante to Pynchon." *MLN* 91, no. 6 (December 1976): 1269

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1270-1271.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1270

¹² Vesa Kyllönen, "Information and the Illusion of Totality: Reading the Contemporary Encyclopedic Novel." In *Reading Today*, by Hax Arnoldo and Olavarría Lionel (2018): 32

Katzkins interior design); the materials to boast with one's affluence (gators, Cuban links, Brazilian wavy 28", gold bottles, Rollies) and the mention of contemporary mobile technology (Instagram, to a lesser extent voicemail).

This merges with the second point in which *TPAB* "attend[s] to the complexity of statecraft..." More so, *TPAB*, "like the New Testament [...] proclaims a new dispensation on Earth."¹³ Lamar does a fair bit of preaching on the album, prophesizing pastures new for the black community. One of the times this is exemplified is in a speech by Lamar, halfway in the song 'i'. In the song, –in which a live concert is staged and enacted to depict the return of the prodigal son to the neighborhood– he proposes to shift the valence of the word 'n*gger' or 'n*gga' by presenting the audience with the word 'negus'. In Ethiopian societies, Negus was the title to refer to the ruling black monarchs. By addressing the weighty term 'n*gga', and attempting to shift its connotation to a more positive one, Lamar encourages self-love and increased integration of African-Americans in American society. What is troubling though is that what seems to keep between this envisioned emancipation from becoming reality is the double-consciousness, as shall be addressed. *TPAB* is very much concerned with (black) politics, and a striving for a better societal position of the African-American. Regarding the album's political outlook, Lamar stated: "[to call] *To Pimp a Butterfly* a political record would be shortchanging it... It's a record full of strength and courage and honesty, but also growth and acknowledgment and denial."¹⁴

The third point, the encyclopedia of literary styles, is exemplified in *TPAB* by its postmodern approach in its lyricism and treatment of subject-matter. Casey Michael Henry describes this postmodernism in *TPAB*, referencing Mark McGurl's concept of 'university and MFA on postwar fiction'. McGurl has three significant categories tied to this system, namely "technomodernism," "high cultural pluralism," and "lower-middle-class modernism."¹⁵ For his definition of the "'encyclopedic" black postmodern novel", Henry finds primarily the shared reflexivity of the first two categories important. He describes technomodernism's reflexivity as being "employed in its substituted "technicity," or knowledge of a specialized scientific field."¹⁶ High cultural pluralism then is "reflexive in its self-aware performance of racial identity, and hence effects a modernist aesthetic in its "reflexive realism."¹⁷ According to Henry, one of the last black American literary pieces to merge these two categories was the 1972 book *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed, as it "playing within the complex historical language, codes, and backgrounds of African-American art, language, and culture in the same style Pynchon does with missile technology or thermodynamics."¹⁸ Now, he argues, *TPAB* is its worthy successor, as Lamar weaves the two categories into his own product of poetical street wisdom, integrating the grit of the urban life with intellectual hopefulness.

What *TPAB* also has in common with the encyclopedic novel is the fact that it uses "epic structure as its organizing structure, but the subjects of epic have become increasingly vestigial to the

¹³ Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1271

¹⁴ Coscarelli, "Weight of Clarity"

¹⁵ As quoted in Casey Michael Henry, "Et Tu, Too?: Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly" and the Revival of Black Postmodernism." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 26, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/et-tu-too-kendrick-lamars-tpab-and-the-revival-of-black-postmodernism/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

encyclopedic form.”¹⁹ Mendelson notes that the events of encyclopedic narratives take place “near the immediate present”, whilst epic narratives are set in the “legendary past.” For *TPAB*, most of the narrative is set in this near past, as it starts at the caterpillar phase, in which Lamar does not have a recording contract yet. Only at the album’s apotheosis of ‘The Blacker the Berry’ and ‘Mortal Man’, its events are set in the present. This allows it to “maintain a mimetic or satiric relation to the world of its readers”²⁰, allowing the work to have certain prophetic characteristics. What the encyclopedic narrative does for *TPAB* then, is to render an overview of black American culture. While focusing largely on the dire circumstances of the criminal Compton, Lamar strives for an all-encompassing account of blackness, allowing a revised contemporary outlook regarding blackness. While it does not represent an entire ‘national culture’, it does express a detailed understanding of black America and the ghetto. The narrative in *TPAB* is created to reflect upon blackness, while unescapably relating it to whiteness. It is this reflection upon the black self in relation to the white other where Du Bois’ double-consciousness comes in.

¹⁹ Mendelson, “Encyclopedic Narrative”, 1269

²⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Lyrical analysis

Double-consciousness and Signifyin(g)

One can wonder to what extent, in Lamar's quest to redeem himself, the attempt to 'lift the veil' (as coined by Du Bois), is nestled. Bois writes about his first realization of this veil: "The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, -- refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others ... shut out from their world by a vast veil." Later on he writes "...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."²¹ The color veil that separates the world of black man from the white, is what creates the double-consciousness, which Du Bois initially describes as "a peculiar sensation ... this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."²² As observed by Stanley Brodwin, Du Bois's thinking is dialectical, and aims for the "regeneration of the Negro". With blackness as thesis, and 'Americanness' as antithesis, the aimed synthesis is the "[black man's ability] to penetrate to his own self-consciousness and culture."²³

Central to Lamar's work, this definition of self-consciousness is constructed in relation to the traditions of the white man. In order to create an autonomous black culture, one has to shake its ties from white culture first, if one can ever fully do so. Regarding African-American literature, Gates makes a similar argument by exploring the parameters of Signifyin(g). He found that black art and literature relied heavily on its white predecessors, showcasing a lack of originality.²⁴ Du Bois observed this problem as well, writing about the "drowning of [black people's] originality in imitation of the mediocre white folks."²⁵ Gates mentions African-American literature shifting from play of the tradition, to a play *on* the tradition, stating "much of the African-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature."²⁶ In this creation of the black literary tradition, it has become self-reflecting in its attempt to avoid mimicry. It has become a process of revision, often satirizing its predecessors while doing so. This is an element of the literary trope Gates calls 'Signifyin(g). Part of African-American culture, Signifyin(g) was initially regarded as solely a verbal tradition. As two people would rhetorically duel in a 'the Dozens', they would 'Signify' at each other, in this context primarily meaning to "make fun of a person or situation"²⁷. However, as Gates argues, it has gained a broader definition than that, also becoming a literary trope of paying homage to or revising one's own culture. Signifyin(g) involves elements of formal

²¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 8

²² Ibid.

²³ Stanley Brodwin. "The Veil Transcended: Form and Meaning in W. E. B. DuBois' "The Souls of Black Folk"." *Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 3 (March 1972): 310

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118

²⁵ Ibid., 114

²⁶ Ibid., 111

²⁷ Ibid., 75

revision, figuration, intertextuality and “encoding messages or meanings which [involve], in most cases, an element of indirection.”²⁸

On ‘King Kunta’, Lamar revises the state of hip-hop. In an attack on mimicry, he disapproves of the ubiquity of “rappers with a ghostwriter”, implying that it tarnishes the tradition of hip-hop lyricism and its literary potential. The ‘warring ideals’, as mentioned by Du Bois, can be also found. Lamar elevates himself to royal status, albeit by borrowing the name of Kunta Kinte, the enslaved protagonist of the Alex Haley novel *Roots*. As Lamar raps about his newfound fame “Now I run the game got the whole world talkin' / King Kunta Everybody wanna cut the legs off him / Kunta, black man taking no losses”, the ‘unreconciled strivings’ seem to manifest. Even though Lamar has obtained fame and fortune, this self-proclaimed title of king among slaves is ironic to say the least. He is removed from the oppression of racism due to fame and wealth, but only partially.

On King Kunta, Lamar shows both the ambiguity of Signifyin(g), as well as the intertextuality. The ambiguity is present as Lamar raps about the ‘yams’, which are supposedly ‘the power that be.’ Lamar continues, as he raps that the yams “brought it out of Richard Pryor” and “manipulated Bill Clinton with desires.” Possibly, it is a reference to a passage in Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*, in which a yam the protagonist has bought from a street vendor stands for nostalgia and authenticity.²⁹ However, regarding Clinton’s desires, it also alludes to corruption. Pryor’s registered cocaine habit, would make the connotation of yams more about drug fueled depreciation of the self than. Lamar acknowledges his survival out of the ghetto, while now being confronted with new temptations. He revises the state of hip-hop as credible musical genre, whilst also considering the weight of fame and fortune as a black artist. The Signifyin(g) on King Kunta continues, as Lamar references lyrics from other black artists like Michael Jackson, Jay-Z and James Brown. This intertextuality shows an awareness of the black musical vernacular, paying homage to other black cultural icons.

While Ernest Allen Jr. critiques the idea of double-consciousness, there is one example of the warring ideals by Du Bois he agrees with. It is the conundrum of the black artist, as Allen distilled it “as an artist remaining true to aesthetic standards drawn from one’s own people, the only such standards that one truly knows / seeking recognition from a potential audience which rejects one’s people and one’s aesthetic standards as well.”³⁰ This fits within the narrative of *TPAB* of Lamar leaving his hometown of Compton, to tour his first album, playing for white audiences. Suddenly surrounded by a predominantly white demographic, Lamar became more self-aware about his blackness.³¹ The double-sidedness of Lamar’s new life as a touring artist is addressed in the final prose: “Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the eternal struggle. Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same.” While essentially remaining the same person, attempting to cross the veil, or seeking recognition, has made a different person out of Lamar. His departure and estrangement from his hometown is documented further, exemplified in skits as the one at the start of “Hood Politics.” Here, featuring rapper ScHoolboy

²⁸ Ibid., 124

²⁹ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 203

³⁰ Allen Ernest, Jr., “Du Boisian Double-Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument *The Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 2 (summer 2002): 233

³¹ In the Guardian interview with Lynskey, Lamar tells about how being around white people made him feel insecure, as he first started touring. Lynskey, *Kendrick Lamar*, 2015.

Q addresses Lamar with his teenage-alias 'K-Dot', signaling a relationship between the two that dates back to Lamar's pre-fame days. Schoolboy Q leaves a message on Lamar's voicemail, saying "Don't tell me they got you on some weirdo rap shit, n*gga. No socks and skinny jeans and shit," ridiculing Lamar's new fashion sense and exemplifying Lamar going astray.

Lamar's lyrics on *TPAB* encircle blackness from multiple vantage points and through various characters throughout. The lyrics deal with racial tension in America, fueled by the painful and ever-present aftermath of slavery. This conflicted relationship with America is presented in the first two tracks of the album, 'Wesley's Theory' and 'For Free? (Interlude)'. Loosely based on the life of actor Wesley Snipes, who was incarcerated for tax-evasion, 'Wesley's Theory' reflects on the economic position of African-Americans. As Lamar chronicles his way to prosperity, he addresses the urge to retain this wealth. The song's chorus implies the inability to handle the possession of this money, while also stating that America resists the notion of the black man growing affluent: "we should never gave / n*ggas money, go back home." America is portrayed here by the character of Uncle Sam. In an interlude, he offers Lamar several things: "What you want you? A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?" Uncle Sam, depicting consumerist and materialistic America, with his offer of "forty acres and a mule"³² shows the ever-present racial tension. The line also alludes to the liberation and self-realization of black people by engaging in excessive materialism. The black bourgeoisie preoccupied with such strivings are deemed by Du Bois as "vulgar money-getters", whose "lust for gold" is an "attempt to overthrow the remains of slave feudalism."³³ According to Du Bois, this "deification of bread" is the wrong way of attempting to cross the veil. The ideals of goodness, beauty and truth would be jeopardized when trying to obtain credibility through solely chasing material prosperity.

Fittingly then, in 'Wesley's Theory' Uncle Sam tries to persuade Lamar to give into such materialism, encouraging him to "Put it all on your wishlist / Gget it all you deserve it Kendrick." However, while Du Bois points at the quest for self-worth through materialism as an internal flaw on behalf of the black community, Lamar seems to explain his materialistic cravings as externally enforced upon him by society. A society that does not encourage riches for African-Americans, Lamar suggests. Uncle Sam's verse continues, as he reassures Lamar that he may have political aspirations for the White House, but that "everything [Lamar] will buy ... Taxes will deny / I'll Wesley snipe your ass before thirty-five." These lines refer to the relentless American tax-system, stripping citizens of their chances in society when they have slipped up once. Taking the chorus into account, and the fact that Lamar uses a well-known African-American movie star as leading example, Lamar states that black wealth is unwished for by American society. It is unclear then, who the chorus of 'Wesley's Theory' is directed at, as Lamar sings "at first I did love you / but now I just want to fuck." It might be directed at America once more, signaling that love has been replaced by lust, as Lamar has been striving for fame as a rapper. This would then be Lamar Signifyin(g) at America, criticizing it's inner-workings from behind the masquerade of heartbreak.

³² Mentioned three times on the album, the line is a reference to Special Field Orders no. 15. This Civil War agrarian reform promised to redistribute land and assign it to formerly enslaved black farmers. It had little effect, however, as the order was swiftly overturned by President Andrew Johnson. It has since then come to symbolize an unsettled score between America and its African-American citizens, which is the connotation that Lamar points to here.

³³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 55

The critique on America continues on 'For Free?' Lamar is aggressively taunted by a woman, who displays stereotypical blackness. Potentially serving as the American Dream, she criticizes Lamar's inability to provide her with the high standard of living she is accustomed to. The song suits the third description of the encyclopedic novel as it combines several literary styles, as Lamar juxtaposes high and low subject matter, rapping "Pity the fool that made the pretty in you prosper / Titty juice and pussy lips kept me obnoxious." In context of the song, the needy female Lamar addresses, plays part of a larger concept of America "as a titillating vixen, drugging "people less fortunate" with lower desires"³⁴ as Henry puts it. Lamar shrugs off the gold digging woman, and thus also America, repeatedly rapping "this – dick - ain't – free". Another way Lamar includes encyclopedic elements in the song, is the way in which the woman in the song is portrayed. As Mendelson writes, "... encyclopedic narratives find it exceptionally difficult to integrate their women characters at any level more quotidian or humane than the levels of archetype and myth."³⁵ Likewise, the woman in the song seems to have no other purpose than merely portraying certain values, instead of being granted a backstory for her character. As Lamar tells her "Oh America you bad bitch, I picked the cotton that made you rich", it becomes clear that the woman depicts a certain aspect of American society. Positioning himself as formerly enslaved, Lamar settles the score with white supremacist America, by taking it out on the woman in the song. She responds by telling Lamar "I'mma get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up." This raises the question as to why the woman portraying these faulty American values is chosen to be black. It might be a critique by Lamar similar to that of Du Bois, criticizing the way in which the black bourgeoisie wishes to accumulate wealth in order to gain a higher social status. This would then point at a certain paradox Lamar constructs, along the lines of double-consciousness. As American society seemingly enables African-Americans to prosper, it also berates them for doing so. Sometimes then, this even manifests itself as self-critique from within African-American society itself.

Critique on double-consciousness and the way to emancipation

There are points on the album where Lamar's investigation of blackness exposes a certain unsustainable aspect to the concept of double-consciousness. This is when Lamar considers blackness in comparison to lighter, or either darker, skin complexions. On the aptly titled "Complexion (A Zulu Love)"³⁶, Lamar discusses skin complexion, rapping "Color should never rival / Beauty is what you make it, I used to be so mistaken / By different shades of faces." Mentioning the African Zulu tribe, the song discusses the superimposed hierarchy between people based on their complexion. While Lamar formerly addresses blackness in juxtaposition with the white American, here he reevaluates what 'blackness' essentially is. In the song, Lamar takes on the identity of a slave, who sneaks into the room of a fellow enslaved woman. He raps "Dark as the midnight hour or bright as the mornin' sun / Give a fuck about your complexion. I know what the Germans done", referring to either Nazism's racial theories or the racism in Rwanda under German colonization. Elsewhere on the song, Lamar calls on his listeners to undo black-

³⁴ Henry, "Revival of Black Postmodernism."

³⁵ Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1272

³⁶ The South-African Zulu tribe are known to have a fairly light skin complexion.

on-black racism: "Let the Willie Lynch theory reverse a million times."³⁷ On 'How Much A Dollar Cost', Lamar takes on a similar approach. Written about his experiences in Africa, he puts double-consciousness in another perspective as he talks to a beggar that only speaks Zulu: "Indigenous African only spoke Zulu, My American tongue was slurry." Now, Lamar finds himself to be more American than African, showcasing the twoness, the ambivalence, of his African-American character. Lamar rejects the beggar's requests for money. As the beggar turns out to be a saint, or even God, Lamar's denial of another black man's humanity points to a certain hypocrisy.

As Lamar encourages the acceptance of people of all color, he inadvertently points to a problem in the idea of double-consciousness. When looking about the gradual spectrum of skin color, when is one considered to be dark? There is the eternal question of the importance of ancestry, and the tribalism that flows out of it. While Lamar does not seem to address heritage more so than physiognomy, there is an interesting critique on double-consciousness present. One that delves into the problem of the spectrum of human complexion, when trying to find the origins of racism. It brings forth a problem in the idea of double-consciousness, namely that of how to categorize people of mixed race. John Moffatt Mecklin writes about the 'mulatto'³⁸: "Biologically he belongs to both and yet to neither, and corresponding to the anomaly of his physical traits is his social status. He is a *Zwischending* [in-between thing] ethnologically and socially."³⁹ These lines evoke the same idea as the "peculiar sensation" Du Bois writes about. This argument might challenge the idea of double-consciousness, as it would then be more of an existential crisis, than a racial one. However, it might also argue, which is the side of the argument Lamar seemingly adheres to, that racism is gradual, but also too seemingly inconsistent to define.

Lamar addresses this inconsistency on 'The Blacker the Berry'. One of the most political tracks on *TPAB*, the song ostensibly tackles white supremacy in America. Each verse starts with Lamar claiming "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015", after which he fires off a scathing attack on white America. The oppression Lamar feels by the existing white hegemony is described in lines like "You hate my culture / Your plan is to terminate my culture." Then there is also a line of double-consciousness at play: "You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it / I'm African-American, I'm African." At the end however, Lamar's true intentions become apparent, as he flips the scope. Referencing one of the fatal shootings of young black men by a police officer, which triggered the Black Lives Matter movement, it becomes clear why Lamar dubs himself a hypocrite: "So why did I weep when Treyvon Martin was in the streets, when gangbanging made me kill a n*gga blacker than me / Hypocrite." How can one resolve the confines of racism, when simultaneously feeding the problem as well? This is the question Lamar poses. Initially appearing to be Signifyin(g) at a white audience, the plot ending reveals that Lamar is in fact talking to either a mixed audience of black and white, or solely a black one. Nevertheless, the element of indirection is important to Lamar's statement, furthermore showcasing the inescapable ambivalence of double-consciousness.

³⁷ In 1712 white slave owner Willie Lynch delivered a speech in which he advised fellow slave owner on how to control their slaves by pitting them against each other. This tactic included setting up young slaves versus older ones, but also light-skinned versus darker-skinned slaves.

³⁸ An archaic word, in between apostrophes because of the current racist connotation.

³⁹ As quoted in Allen Ernest, Jr., "Du Boisian Double-Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument *The Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 2 (summer 2002): 238

The critique on the African-American community on the 'Blacker the Berry' points to a similar self-critique of Lamar as seen earlier on 'For Free?', with Lamar stating that the black community is internally fighting itself. It might be argued however, that the self-destructive behavior of gang-violence, as seen on 'The Blacker the Berry, is rather a result of the bad socio-economic position of the African-American community in areas such as Compton, than it is a result of self-hatred of the black community. Seemingly being stripped of economic opportunities because of one's race, encourages the double-consciousness to grow. Self-hatred then would then come forth out of an internalized racism, an inherited and distorted self-image of the underprivileged African-American community. Or, in the words of Booker Cook: "... if a person begins to believe another's definition of who they are and what their history is, then the believer becomes imprisoned in a world with no self-identity. Which is in direct conflict with finding oneness."⁴⁰ This inability to progress out of underprivileged life because of the confines of structural racism is addressed on 'The Blacker the Berry.'" However, Lamar also uses the song as a manifest to state that not all social change must be initiated on the part the oppressor, and not all solutions must come from revolting ideologies.

Lamar stresses the importance of discovery of the self. When talking about the shooting of Michael Brown⁴¹, Lamar told *Billboard*: "I wish somebody would look in our neighborhood knowing that it's already a situation, mentally, where it's f--ked up. What happened to [Michael Brown] should've never happened. Never. But when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within. Don't start with just a rally, don't start from looting -- it starts from within."⁴² The remarks were met with controversy, as it seems to reveal Lamar putting the blame for these shootings on the black community. However, Lamar clarified his position in a different interview: "It's not me pointing at my community; it's me pointing at myself."⁴³ This emancipation of the self might be seen as a way out of 'the cocoon', or to cross the veil, perhaps. This is where Lamar seems to differ from Du Bois. Du Bois initially posed crossing of the veil could be achieved through academic endeavors. He used the term 'the Talented Tenth' to invoke the idea of ten black men becoming leaders and advocates for blacks across the world. This aristocratic construction would be the ideal construction for the social progress of the black race. Lamar's view on emancipation differs, and seems more in line with one of Du Bois' contemporaries, Booker T. Washington. Washington preached for the amelioration of the social position of African-Americans by improving the position of lack by improving oneself, or "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps", pertaining to the American Dream. However, Lamar then distances himself from Washington regarding the materialism that coincides with the American Dream, or "vulgar money-getting", as Du Bois described it.⁴⁴ This is exemplified in 'Institutionalized', in which Lamar mentions he's "trapped inside the ghetto" and "aint proud to admit it." However, he criticizes his

⁴⁰ Booker Cook. "Double Consciousness" *McNair Scholars Journal* 15, no. 1 (2013): 4

⁴¹ Michael Brown was an 18 year old African-American man, who died after being shot by white police officer Darren Wilson. Many believe that Brown was innocent, and had been shot for no reason, other than that he was black. Wilson was eventually not indicted for shooting Brown, which intensified racial tension in America further.

⁴² Joe Lynch. "Kendrick Lamar Talks Ferguson: 'What Happened Should've Never Happened'" January 8, 2015. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6436333/kendrick-lamar-on-ferguson-police-michael-brown>

⁴³ Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar: 'I Can't Change The World Until I Change Myself First'" Interview by Renee Montagne. Morning Edition, NPR, December 29, 2015.

⁴⁴ George Ciccariello-Maher, "A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness." *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 3 (January 2009): 387

friends that want to “[snatch] jewelry”, instead reminding them that “Shit don’t change until you get up and wash your ass.” Lyrically, Lamar seems to advocate emancipation through self-discovery and hard work, instead of the aristocratic solutions imagined by Du Bois.

Lamar’s lyrics often display a certain double-consciousness, manifesting itself as self-reflection and condemnation of the ostensibly unsurmountable racism in American society. While Lamar laments the dire socio-economic conditions many African-Americans have to cope with in impoverished urban areas, he does not resort to solely vengeance and rancor to balance the scale. As seen on ‘the Blacker the Berry’, Lamar pursues political progress not only through challenging the status quo set by white society, but also by revising his own shortcomings and hypocrisies as an African-American.

Chapter 3: Musical Analysis

The musical choices of *To Pimp A Butterfly*

TPAB touches upon multiple black musical genres, including R&B, g-funk, jazz, bebop, gospel and more traditional beat-based hip-hop. Co-producer of 'King Kunta', Terrace Martin, states it was Lamar's trip to Africa that inspired the eclecticism of musical genres on the album, saying: "It was important that everybody [understood] what being black is really about [...] We just wanted to be the soundtrack to his experience. What other music to do behind that but black music. Soul music."⁴⁵ In a sense, the album could be seen as 'musically encyclopedic' as well, as it incorporates a great collection of black musical forms. Known for being selective in his musical choices, Lamar chooses specific beats, presumably to suit a song's lyrical message.⁴⁶ Gates notes that besides being a literary trope, Signifyin(g) was also part of the African-American musical tradition. Part of musical Signifyin(g) is also the act of revising songs by other black artists, while there are also instances where Signifyin(g) means to pay homage to predecessors.⁴⁷ While the lyrical analysis is significant to the study of *TPAB*, it is important to also review its musical characteristics and what they Signify.

Part of *TPAB* is sampled, in accordance with a more traditional 90's hip-hop aesthetics. Elizabeth A. Wheeler defines three different attitudes hip-hop producers can have towards the original material: "homage, irony, and blank pastiche." So, building on Wheeler's definition, sampling can be respectively seen as an either act of representation, revision or merely sonic copying, depending on the context. However, who's to say which of the three attitudes applies? In an interview with De La Soul's producer Prince Paul, Joseph G. Schloss presented him with an analysis by Wheeler. In the analysis, Wheeler describes De La Soul's sampling of 'Hall & Oates' as "ironic sampling" and "blank pastiche that links hip-hop most closely with postmodernism."⁴⁸ Paul however contests this interpretation, saying "We didn't consciously think "Hall and Oates [...] "Postmodern" We was just like, "Wow remember that song? That's hot!"⁴⁹ To prevent analysis from superimposing meaning onto music, one should try to look at the intention of the composer and the production process of the music, in order to not float too far from the original intention and message of the music. Still, of course it need also be said that not all valid things about art have to be said by the one that created it, and not all meaning is created intentionally. As hip-hop has progressed, the emphasis on sampling lessened, as hip-hop shifted more towards sharp, digital beats, made with 808 drum machines.⁵⁰ By using mostly older samples from black soul records, and by

⁴⁵ Justin Charity, "Interview: Terrace Martin Talks the Traumas and Close-Knit Collaborations That Inspired Kendrick Lamar's New Album", *Complex*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.complex.com/music/2015/03/interview-terrace-martin-producer-to-pimp-a-butterfly>

⁴⁶ Lamar apparently has up to 97 gigabytes worth of beats in his possession, knowing exactly which ones to use. Sometimes he digs up beats from years ago. "Kendrick Lamar Currently Sitting on '97,000 Gigs of Beats From Everybody,'" *Complex*, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.complex.com/music/2019/02/kendrick-lamar-currently-sitting-on-97-thousand-gigs-of-beats-from-everybody>

⁴⁷ Gates, Jr., *Signifying Monkey*, 63

⁴⁸ Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sampling* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 148.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Dale Chapman investigates the influence of Timbaland on the musical aesthetics of hip-hop music, as "other producers have adopted [his] approach, replacing the old, unbroken sequences of breakbeats with drum samples used in isolation—a short snare hit, a hi-hat click, a bass drum kick—or with the sonic palette of drum machines such as the Roland TR-808, a staple in earlier genres such as electro, techno, and Miami bass.

using live instrumentation, Lamar distinguishes himself from his contemporaries. Richard L. Schur writes about rappers' awareness of the cultural background of their samples, writing: "To produce a text, the hip-hop aesthete must understand the sociohistorical context of the sampled material and comment ironically on it through layering and rhythmic flow."⁵¹ Lamar's attitude towards his sampled material seems to lean towards homage and irony, with him being very calculated in his musical choices. When talking about the re-recording of the Isley Brothers' 'Who's That Lady?', Lamar stated: "the classifications of music is totally twisted because now we have a generation where you take an Isley Brother's sample, which is soul, and now people consider it pop. And I knew that would come of course, but me as a leader in music, I want to revamp that whole thing and put it back to its original origins. And not be scared to step out and say this is not that, this is black and this is soul."⁵² As Lamar lyrically revises hip-hop and blackness, his samples are also meant to signify blackness.

Lamar's consciousness behind his sampling becomes clear from the first seconds of music on the album as he opens the album with a Boris Gardiner sample of the song 'Every N*gger Is A Star'.⁵³ The inclusion of the sample seems a form of ironic commentary, passive-aggressively Signifyin(g) territorialism towards a white audience. Then again, it may also be a celebration of blackness, Signifyin(g) reassurance and self-pride. Either way, the sample firmly Signifies to the listener that what one is about to experience is certainly a black album. The Signifyin(g) of blackness is then continued on 'King Kunta', described by one of Lamar's producers and instrumentalists Thundercat as sounding "funky and very black".⁵⁴ To produce this signification, Lamar samples other Compton natives, Mouskogee and DJ Quik. Here, the sampled material Signifies a Compton heritage, displaying Lamar's knowledge of the Compton scene, paying tribute to Mouskogee, who was shot in Compton in 2000. The sampling of these black artists praises the lineage of black musical art and places Lamar in it.

The other part of *TPAB* features live instrumentation, contributed by a large musical cast of mostly black jazz and R&B musicians. Lamar's choice to use live-recordings sets *TPAB* apart from most contemporary mainstream hip-hop albums of 2015, as Lamar does not use drum machines as a compositional tool on this album often.⁵⁵ The choice to feature jazz and R&B instrumentals places Lamar in the bloodline of black music once more, as a Signifyin(g) act of homage. An example is 'For Free?', which opens with a gospel choir, followed quickly by a jazz ensemble playing fast bebop. Paired with the lyrics, which criticize white oppression, the music becomes juxtaposed with the message. While the musical prowess of jazz serves as an awareness of the rich cultural heritage of African-Americans, the lyrical content reminds the listener of the scars of slavery. Furthermore, the fast tempo the jazz

⁵¹ Schur, Richard L. "Defining Hip-Hop Aesthetics." In *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law*, 42-67. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

⁵² Tom Barnes. Kendrick Lamar's Latest Music Video Is the Most Uplifting Thing You'll Watch All Day. November 4, 2014. <https://www.mic.com/articles/103314/kendrick-lamar-s-latest-music-video-is-the-most-uplifting-thing-you-ll-watch-all-day>.

⁵³ Blaxploitation film were an ethnic subgenre of exploitation films in the 1970's, directed primarily at black audiences. Penned by Gardiner as the soundtrack for the 1974 Blaxploitation film of the same title, its sole lyrics are "Every n*gger is a star."

⁵⁴ Andreas Hale, "The Oral History of Kendrick Lamar's 'To Pimp a Butterfly'." *Medium*, Februari 9, 2016, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/the-oral-history-of-kendrick-lamar-s-to-pimp-a-butterfly-622f725c3fde>

⁵⁵ Ironically then, the song 'Alright' - which featured 808 drums - was the one that would go on to have the most appeal commercially, although sonically differing from most of the other songs on the album.

ensemble upholds enhances the franticness of the song, in that sense complementing the dizzying grapple with double-consciousness displayed in the lyricism. The inclusion of live instrumentation playing black musical genres Signifies pride of blackness, often in contrast to the descriptions of oppression in Lamar's lyrics.

A notable example in Signifyin(g) in the music then, is that of the musical backing to 'The Blacker the Berry'. With sampled drums set in a typical 90's hip-hop loop, the music evokes an old-school gangsta rap feel. Juxtaposed with the lyrics that angrily criticize both the white and the black community, the music seems to intermingle the Signifyin(g) of irony and homage. The song differs from the rest of the album, both sonically and thematically. While the music is a celebration of 90's gangsta rap, the song's message condemns the same behavior that led to the birth of the genre. Once again the music contrasts the message, as it shows the hypocrisy in feebly demanding political change, whilst not doing anything constructive to initiate it. This highlights its importance on the album, as it sonically represents part of Lamar's view of the emancipation of the African-American and the systemic injustice that prevents this from happening. Lamar picked his samples with great care, with eye for the cultural undertones and the inherent blackness of them. These musical choices amplify the revelation, ambiguity or anger of the lyrics, through contrast and connotation.

The aural characteristics of *To Pimp A Butterfly*

When looking at the construction of a black cultural identity, one must not overlook the aural aspects of hip-hop music. As Krims writes, "the question is not so much sincerity... It is to examine *how* that the genre is demarcated for whatever social function it might serve."⁵⁶ The aural characteristics of *TPAB* are crisp, though overall bass-heavy and sometimes dizzying in density. The construction of black identity on *TPAB* is done in two ways. Firstly, it is found in the way in which Lamar's delivery, timing and vocal timbre are multi-faceted, as Lamar alters these to suit the emotional valence of the songs. Then, there is also the musical production (the timbre and arrangements of the recordings), that evokes a certain sense of blackness.

Krims describes three different styles of rhythmic delivery, or *flow*. The first one being 'sung style' similar to the vocal delivery of pop music. The two remaining styles are rhythmic, or *effusive*, which Krims describes as "not necessarily refer[ring] to an effusion of syllables, but rather to an effusion of rhythmic patterns and polyrhythms."⁵⁷ These are then called 'percussion-effusive' and 'speech-effusive'. The flow is essential to the construction of identity of a rapper, as one could view it as a process of accentuation and demarcation of the semantic information transferred to the listener. On *TPAB* Lamar incorporates all of the styles mentioned by Krims across the album's tracks. Lamar's delivery of rhythmic patterns differs greatly across several tracks, sometimes even within tracks. On 'For Free', when reacting to the female antagonist, he uses short-note syncopated triplets. The fast delivery creates an aggravated effect, signaling a certain displeasure with her character and the drawbacks of the American Dream she represents. He alternates this fast delivery with pauses between quarter note staccatos, when rapping the previously mentioned line "this dick ain't free", emphasizing his pride as a

⁵⁶ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51

black man. Lamar often leaves noticeable pauses like these between the words, when emphasizing important information. On 'The Blacker the Berry' Lamar emphasizes the double-consciousness of the line "I'm African-American", by pausing a quarter note before rapping "I'm African". On 'These Walls', the pause is even more dramatic, as the music is stripped away when the ambiguously Signifyin(g) line "that sentence so important" is rapped. 'Sentence' referring to both the previous sentence, as well as a jail-sentence. Lamar's flow is instrumental in emphasizing his meaning, guiding the listener towards central points of attention.

Lamar uses his voice in different ways, when conveying various emotions, or when portraying certain characters. He alters his vocal timbre on numerous occasions, incorporating everything from his natural tone, to a raspy growl, or a nasal falsetto. When portraying Uncle Sam on 'Wesley Theory', he pinches his voice, resulting in a persuasive tone of voice. On 'u' Lamar's vocal quality is harrowing, as Lamar raps lines of scathing self-critique, in a voice that sounds like he is at the verge of crying. 'For Sale? (Interlude)' sees Lamar pitching up his voice at the end of sentences, when talking to Lucy. He adds a lisp to his rapping voice, and raps in a loose timing, resulting in a rambling, mumbling sort of speech. Lamar's timing is then also an important facet to his delivery, proving himself skillful in purposefully landing either in front of the beat or behind it. Rapping in front of the beat can create a claustrophobic effect, as seen on the last verse of 'Momma' or the ending of 'i'. The rapid delivery of rhymes laying in front of the beat causes the listener to feel restricted. Behind the beat can invoke a sense of bravado, as seen on 'Hood Politics', where he calls out unnamed contenders to be "Boo boo", arriving fashionably late while doing so. His vocal timbres and sense of timing give Lamar an eclectic quality as a rapper and is part of his overall representation.

Another part of this representation, and thus the construction of identity, is the overall timbre and arrangement of the music. Courtesy of a small army of producers, the album's soundscape is well assembled and varying in timbres. The presence of a multitude of different timbres in music is what Olly Wilson calls "a manifestation of the heterogeneous sound ideal", which he defines as a "common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre) [, which] is sought after in both vocal and instrumental music."⁵⁸ He finds that African and African-American music always incorporates multiple vocal and instrumental timbres, having a tendency to⁵⁹: "approach playing and singing in a percussive manner; to create a high density of musical events within a relatively short musical time frame."⁶⁰ This resembles Krims' notion of 'hip-hop sublime' in which "massive, virtually immobile and incompatible layers of sounds are selectively and dramatically brought into conflict with each other, [which] would surely not work were timbre not available as a crucial means of organization."⁶¹ However, Krims' definition is based on the sampling of tonal qualities,

⁵⁸ Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music." In *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin, and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagele Caponi (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 160

⁵⁹ These are two of the five approaches Wilson distills, the others being the tendency to: "approach the organization of rhythm based on the principle of rhythmic and implied metrical contrast; approach create musical forms in which antiphonal, responsorial or call-and-response musical structures abound; to incorporate physical body movement as an integral part of the music making process." Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 159.

⁶¹ Krims, *Poetics*, 54

as a consequence of hip-hop producers layering samples on top of each other. This implies a certain nonchalance or incomprehension of musical theory on the part of the producer. However, as Lamar's album was crafted together by professional jazz-musicians, all instances of chaos and even cacophony would appear to be very deliberately done so. Still, Krims' notion that it is important in hip-hop scholarship to investigate timbre is what is most important here. So how are various timbres presented on *TPAB*? And what do they add to the lyrics?

While the musical choices concerning genre may sometimes contrast the subject matter of the songs, the aural qualities on *TPAB* often mirror them. On 'u', Lamar's depressive, frightened state of mind is replicated aurally by echoed screams and a meandering saxophone solo, backed by dark-sounding pads, keys playing in a low register and muffled bass sounds. The constrictive sounds grow in intensity, as the music itself starts to distort, ending abruptly by the sounds of knocking on the door by the housekeeping of a hotel. As the woman urges Lamar to open the door, a tinny, saturated sample of WhoArel's 'Loving You Ain't Complicated' bounces between the left and right channel of the stereo image in sharp, fragmented stabs. As it ushers in the second part of the song, the fragmented state of Lamar's mind has also become audibly clear, as the sound is equally as upsetting as Lamar's confessions about suicidal thoughts. On 'The Blacker the Berry', Lamar's final statements '... when gangbangin' made me kill a n*gga blacker than me' are followed by a long reverberated low blast, after which it swirls into a cadence of smooth jazz tinted music in triple meter. This is particularly in contrast with the ominous sampling and harsh drumbeats of the rest of the song. This contrast is equally as large as the leap Lamar makes from pointing the finger to the white community, before turning the gun on himself. The delirious outro of 'Momma, is the moment with the highest musical density on the album, a moment of hip-hop sublime as Krims would have it. As the song's lyrics reflect on Lamar's fears and panics, the music grows increasingly chaotic as well. At the base is a muffled drumbeat and a slithering saxophone, with a high register pitch-gliding synthesizer added. Joining in Lamar's performance are vocal shrieks of panic, voices shouting "jump, jump, jump!", while simultaneously someone repeatedly sings "let's talk about love" in a low baritone voice. Then, nearing the end, Lamar shifts his voice up in pitch to a squeaky high. His flow is on the front of the beat, rapping in very syncopated patterns of sixteenth notes, as he alternates with high 'AH!' squeals to increase tension. As a result, the song becomes packed full, to the point where almost all musical space is filled with Lamar's voice. This different use of voices corresponds with Wilson's observations of African-American music featuring a "myriad of vocal sounds used in performance (moans, groans, yells, screams, shouts, shifts in sonority) a seemingly inexhaustible repertory of vocal injections used to intensify musical expression."⁶²

Often overlooked, the musical production and performance contribute to construction of a cultural identity in hip-hop. When investigating what the cultural significance of hip-hop music is, it is crucial to look at the way the music is delivered. It is important to look at not only the different timbres of voices, but also at the different sound layers, which are constructed through the meticulous work of hip-hop producers. While the production of a musical work may ostensibly be merely something to enhance the aesthetic of a musical work, it can bear a cultural significance through pedigree and tradition.

⁶² Wilson, *Heterogenous Sound Ideal*, 160

Chapter 4: Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

As seen in this thesis, *blackness* is essential to the message of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Most of the sampling is of the music of black musicians, and the live instrumentation features typical African-American music. This connotation of blackness is intentional, with lyrics discussing the pitfalls of African-American life, with the music celebrating black culture. As such, the combination of the two often effectively displays the burden that Lamar feels being African-American. The question is then what makes music intrinsically black and why it matters that it is labelled as such. Moreover, *who* labels it as such? The research into connotation is one that becomes increasingly important as hip-hop grows more eclectic in musical styles. The aesthetic choices by hip-hop musicians then say something about their motivation and intended message. This would demand an analysis in the style of Krims and Wheeler, in which one looks respectively at the construction of identity and the connotation of hip-hop music. Neither Krims nor Wheeler however, are that interested in the artist's intention regarding the construction of the music, instead drawing conclusions merely from their own interpretation of the music. As close reading is always a slippery slope for analysts, including an account by the artist of the intended meaning of art would prevent scholars from overanalyzing. The same goes for the way the music has been assembled by the producers. It would benefit future research by having a more detailed description of the musical production on hip-hop albums, with the vision of the producer in mind. As hip-hop is a genre that is practically built on intertextuality and revision, it is interesting to view the motivations of the artists when it comes to the music to represent them, the music that enhances their lyrical statements. Especially when music carries out a political message, it will benefit knowing the intention of the music, to understand the political aims of an artist. Lastly, while not discussed in this theses, the image portrayed by an artist is also an important part of the message of the music. It will be fruitful to address this in further investigation in construction of a cultural identity in hip-hop.

Conclusion

The central question to this thesis has been: 'how is blackness Signified and discussed on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*?' Through a narrative that encyclopedically chronicles the bad socio-economic circumstances and inner ambivalence black people are confronted with, Lamar presents himself as a preaching figure for the emancipation of the African-American. This blackness is enhanced by the music, which Lamar constructs by both lyrically and musically Signifyin(g) upon the rich cultural heritage of African-Americans. The struggle of identity of the African American is discussed in the album's lyrics, in a way that bears close resemblance to the idea of double-consciousness by Du Bois. When it comes to emancipation however, Lamar differs from Du Bois' vision. Lamar advocates emancipation through hard work and self-discovery, rather than through the aristocratically tinted political constructions Du Bois imagines. As Lamar also discusses shortcomings in his own community, he positions himself as a diplomatic figure with a conciliatory message.

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Discography

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Appendix

The prose at the end of the last track: **Mortal Man**

"I remember you was conflicted

Misusing your influence

Sometimes I did the same

Abusing my power, full of resentment

Resentment that turned into a deep depression

Found myself screaming in the hotel room

I didn't wanna self destruct

The evils of Lucy was all around me

So I went running for answers

Until I came home

But that didn't stop survivor's guilt

Going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned

Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was

But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was entering a new one

A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination

Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned

The word was respect

Just because you wore a different gang colour than mines

Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man

Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets

If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us

But I don't know, I'm no mortal man, maybe I'm just another nigga

[...]

I wanted to read one last thing to you. It's actually something a good friend had wrote describing my world. It says:

"The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it

Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city

While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive

One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him, but praises the butterfly

The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar

But having a harsh outlook on life the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak and figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits

Already surrounded by this mad city the caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon which institutionalizes him

He can no longer see past his own thoughts

He's trapped

When trapped inside these walls certain ideas start to take roots, such as going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city

The result?

Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant

Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the eternal struggle

Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same."

What's your perspective on that?

Pac, Pac, Pac"