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Articulations of displacement and dissonance from Compton: Kendrick Lamar in the twenty-first century

ABSTRACT

Kendrick Lamar's lyrics and subject matter often require repeated listens that reveal perspectives ranging from his upbringing in Compton, his parents' migration from Chicago to California and broader questions of identity, place, displacement, belonging and home. A self-described Southern California '80s baby', Lamar's music nevertheless imagines Black self-identification in a broader and global sense. His work reflects rootlessness among continental and diasporic Africans across time and space. Utilizing approaches of British Cultural Studies and African diaspora studies, this article analyses Lamar's critically acclaimed album To Pimp a Butterfly *(2015). The pursuit of home as a response to the unbound nature of diasporic existence – connected to histories of transatlantic slavery, the Middle Passage and the plantation enterprise in the United States, the Caribbean and South America – reverberates for Lamar as an African American millennial yet also situate him within a continuum of Afro-Atlantic artistic innovators. In places as varied as Chicago, Compton, Jamaica, South Africa and London, Black people reckon with the meanings of home and Lamar offers his unique Afro-diasporic perspective. Lamar's ruminations on intra-national migrations within the United States allow for a theorization of various iterations of* home *that include specific communities, families, cities, nations, gangs and the comforts of a bottle of vodka. Lamar's lyrical*

KEYWORDS

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confessions embrace identification as process, a brilliant and probing strategy that references histories of movement in the United States as well as ethnic tensions in South Africa, post-independence political economic realities in Jamaica and the history of migration from the Caribbean to metropolitan Britain. I suggest that Lamar introduces a particularized twenty-first-century Black racialized humanism where his own position vacillates between predator and victim. Who Lamar is and who he is said or seen to be recurs and reflects the specific conditions he and contemporary diasporans negotiate across the globe.

A diasporic sensibility has underpinned hip hop music from the jump. The earliest turntablists and emcees in parks from the Bronx to Brooklyn were influenced by the sounds and musical cultures of the Caribbean, specifically in the way DJ Kool Herc imported the Jamaican sound system as an apparatus and cultural formation, and transformed it into the basis for the park jam in New York. Kendrick Lamar, leading a class of contemporary rappers, has inherited and built upon the legacy of highlighting displacement and a longing for home in his body of work. In the case of Lamar, the longing is both a literal one – in that he often harkens to his parents' own origins in Chicago, despite his upbringing in Compton, California – and a conceptual one – ruminating on the very meaning of home. Indeed, Lamar's output suggests that home is a process of honest self-reckoning, discovery and knowledge.

Lamar's lyricism, ranging from tales of his youth in Compton to inhabiting multiple personas, allows for densely packed narratives. Lamar's insights provide a stylized rendition of the self-reflexive consciousness of the millennial Black self-image. Moving beyond the idea of the individual track as a self-contained narrative, he often ends tracks without resolving central narrative. Therefore, Lamar also instils a sense of displacement into his music by leaving listeners waiting – all while structuring his albums as journeys.

This article is concerned primarily with the profound Black diasporic articulation within Lamar's multi-layered raps, a particularly unique perspective in contemporary hip hop. References to Africa and Black identification inform much of Lamar's output. His reverence for Black musical forms often linked to diasporic identity, including jazz and soul music, featured prominently in the dark cadences of his 2015 LP, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. I analyse this album as a tribute to his musical forbears and place Lamar firmly in the tradition of radical Black protest music. Considering the narrative of migration that sees Lamar's parents move from Chicago to Compton and the prominence of this narrative in Lamar's writing and sound, this article situates his oeuvre within a diasporic framework. I argue that Lamar's work – though firmly rooted in the experiences of a self-described '80's baby' from Compton – must also be considered a rumination on family migration history. Although he raps about the streets on which he lived in Los Angeles, the soul of Lamar's music stretches back to the Chicago of his parents' youth.

Lamar's soundscapes connect to transatlantic Black diasporic musical traditions in a number of ways. His albums reflect the rootedness of his own experience undergirded by Black diasporic connectivity. Lamar articulates the nuance of dispossession and displacement that diaspora suggests; his work has meaning specifically within the context of the circumstances out of which it was produced. The work is thusly an articulation of Lamar's sensibilities and is embedded with meaning distinct to his own reimagined self-consciousness.

Lamar's innovation is an articulation of Black millennial double consciousness. He is aware of social perceptions of himself, articulates those notions as misguided and refashions his own self-identity through his own agency. I will utilize British Cultural Studies and African diaspora studies methodologies to analyse Lamar's compositions as reflective of his particular circumstances while also situating his production as another example of the heritage of diasporic arts.[1]

Hip hop as resistance places it within the continuum of Black expressive cultures that reflect the unique perspective of anti-colonial, marginalized and exiled diasporic personalities and thinkers. Within the hip hop idiom, Lamar is connected in multiple ways to the Afro-centric sensibilities of the Native Tongues collective. Through engaging and interpolating soul and funk, Lamar's forebears in the form of A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers and De La Soul also experimented with sounds indebted to a rich sampling tradition and lyrical content reflective of ongoing articulations of identity and self-consciousness.[2] Lamar's insistence on an internal reckoning and the pursuit of knowledge-of-self ties his oeuvre to the Trinidadian C. L. R. James and the Martinican Frantz Fanon in particularly illustrative ways. Fanon's investigations and explorations of the psychopathologies of racialization and their consequent expressions in the form of Black inferiority complexes is especially relevant to Lamar's reckonings. According to Fanon, 'ontology […] does not permit us to understand the being of the Black man […] not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man'.[3] Furthermore, Black histories, identities and 'customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he [the Black man] did not know and that imposed itself on him'.[4] Fanon thus explains the precondition for the pursuit and articulation of identity for Black people – forged in the context of violent imposition and exploitation. Lamar then, dutifully asks *who am I actually*?

C. L. R. James, in *Beyond a Boundary*, his memoir and commentary on the role of cricket in the social and historical development of imperial Britain as well as its highly contextualized expression in the context of his home island of Trinidad, encourages his readers to contemplate the psychology and aesthetics of cricket in colonial Caribbean societies. As we uncover the meanings of who Lamar understands himself to be, we can immediately relate these processes to James's ruminations on how he sees and does not see himself reflected in the sport of cricket. James's famous refrain, '[w]hat do they know of cricket who only cricket know?'[5] actually reflects his own coming-to-terms with understanding his identity across the terrain of diaspora, colonial subjecthood and migration. Regarding the autobiographical frame of *Beyond a Boundary* James explained, 'the ideas originated in the West Indies, [but] it was only in England and in English life and history that I was able to track them down and test them'.[6] Responding to the 'other' status Fanon – and Lamar too – would certainly recognize, James embodied the Shakespearean Black anti-hero Caliban noting, 'to establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew'.[7] James's personal history and his developing knowledge-of-self therefore can be read as wound up in centuries of displacement, subordination and resistance that the hegemonic counterparts could not countenance nor even imagine. Lamar's work suggests his articulations have also emerged in the face of uncertainty, supposed criminality and reflect his ingenious response.

1. In particular, British cultural studies allows us to consider texts such as *To Pimp a Butterfly* as expressive art created for commercial purposes that also construct meaning rather than being strictly or solely autobiographical. Much of the discourse of this 'intentional fallacy', derives from its introduction by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946).
2. See in particular: A Tribe Called Quest, *The Low End Theory* and *Midnight Marauders*; De La Soul, *3 Feet High and Rising*, *De La Soul Is Dead* and *Stakes Is High*; Jungle Brothers, *Straight Out the Jungle*. See also: Neal (2002); Morgan (2022) is especially potent in its appraisal of these traditions and the particular Black global dimensions of Lauryn Hill's work. Forman (2002) also suggests the significance of 'place' in hip hop and Lamar's work reflects a contextual grounding in various spaces in the United States and Africa.
3. Fanon (1967: 110).
4. Fanon (1967: 110).
5. James ([1963] 2005, Preface: n.pag.).
6. James ([1963] 2005: n.pag.).
7. James ([1963] 2005). See also Dash (2017); Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) interprets Caliban as an exiled figure representing Commonwealth writers and their dread. Also see: Brathwaite (1973: 191–95).

AFRO-DIASPORIC MUSICAL TRADITIONS

African diasporic artistry has often reflected a pursuit of the knowable and tangible links between the creators/artists and Africa as the ancestral home.[8] Expressions of Africanity in reggae and rap, in particular, have recurred throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Central to these expressions is a longing for Africa as home in response to the forced displacement of transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage and the plantation slavery in the Caribbean, South America and the United States. Consider earlier expressions of Ethiopianism in Jamaican reggae groups the Congos, the Abyssinians and Black Uhuru, as well as their British counterparts in London. In all of these contexts, we can appreciate art struggling with the liminal space of diasporic racialization – the reckoning/convergence of African *and* American, Jamaican, British.

One need only to look at the names of seminal post-independence Jamaican reggae groups to see how Africa and notions of Africanity were utilized by these musical vanguardists. Black Uhuru, the Congos and the Abyssinians all exemplify looking back towards Africa and engaging directly in the continent's histories and spiritualties for diasporic inspiration and guidance. *Uhuru*, meaning 'freedom' in Swahili and the very direct references to the Congo region and Ethiopia suggest that these groups understood themselves to be foremostly African. Beyond their names however, the music they created reflected African-informed sensibilities. The Congos's *Heart of the Congos* and *Image of Africa* both produced during Lee Scratch Perry's *Black Ark Era* (1973–79), the Abyssinians's *Satta Massagana* ('He Gave Praise' in Amharic) and *Arise*, as well as Black Uhuru's *Anthem* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* were all important sound-stones of African-influenced roots traditions.[9] In the decades leading into independence in the Anglophone Caribbean, thousands of West Indians ventured to metropolitan Britain with aspirations for work beyond the sugarcane plantation and to a society, which they believed they knew from an ocean away.

Upon arrival on the *SS Windrush* in Tilbury, England, in June 1948, Trinidad-born calypsonian Lord Kitchener (born Aldwyn Roberts) sang 'London Is the Place for Me' as the steamship docked. Kitchener exuberantly played to the cameras stationed at the docks, encapsulating his unique colonial perspective upon reaching the so-called 'mother country' of Britain.[10]

> London is the place for me
> London this lovely city
> You can go to France or America,
> India, Asia, or Australia
> But you must come back to London city
> Well believe me I am speaking broadmindedly
> I am glad to know my Mother Country
> I have been travelling to countries years ago
> But this is the place I wanted to know
> London that is the place for me.[11]

Similar to Lord Kitchener, Lamar centres notions of belonging throughout his musical output.[12] Kitchener, among the thousands of migrants from the West Indies who arrived in Britain soon after the end of the Second World War, sought a fuller experience of their British nationality in the metropole. They

8. See: Floyd et al., *The Transformation of Black Music: The Rhythms, Songs, and the Ships of the African Diaspora*; Floyd (1983); Veal, *Dub*; Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*; Gilroy (1991: 111–36). A useful treatment of the Afro-Caribbean origins of hip hop can be found in 'Necropolis: The Bronx and the politics of abandonment' and 'Sipple out deh: Jamaica's roots generation and the cultural turn', both in Chang (2005) and Rose (1994).

9. Historical and anthropological investigations of the African retentions expressed through and despite the Middle Passage and the plantation are substantial. They include Stuckey ([1987] 2013), Warner-Lewis (2003), Gilroy (1993) and Gomez (1998). These histories direct us to phenomena such as the 'ring shout' on antebellum plantations that embodied the expression of retentions of African-originated cultural material by enslaved Africans. Hip hop can rightfully be understood as yet another development in this long historical continuum. Scholarship on the Jamaican roots of hip hop in the South Bronx including, Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* and those that highlight the ways sampling draws from previous compositions to connect new ideas and identifications with their antecedents, such as Schloss and Chang (2014) illustrate this further.

10. See Gilroy (1993, 1987, 2000) and Hall (2018).

11. Kitchener, 'London is the Place for Me' (1951).

aspired to participation in the greater opportunities and promises of Great Britain, sharply contrasted with the limited potential economic and employment prospects in the largely monocrop agricultural political economies of the plantation Caribbean. Kitchener's effusive embrace of Britain as home is overwhelming upon his disembarkation at Tilbury. He further references colonies across the British empire, from India to Australia, which also fall short of providing the actualized expression of Britishness – only the metropole could lay claim to this conceit.

For Kitchener and many other West Indians who travelled to Britain, their status as Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC) allowed them to move freely to Great Britain because their place of birth was within the British imperial realm. Kitchener's pining for the imperial centre is obvious in his incantation upon arrival. Despite the central place of London in the political imaginations of citizens across empire, Kitchener may also have been levying a critique against the permanence and ubiquity of British imperial enterprise. Britain's status as the nexus of the universe necessitates that its colonial citizens go to the centre to enjoy the privileges that resulted from the pillage of their home territories. Historians such as Walter Rodney have emphasized the exploitative nature of European colonial endeavours in Africa and the Caribbean, identifying both the emergence of widely unbalanced mercantilist and later transatlantic political economies that marked the colonial period and progressing further into severe 'underdevelopment' across Global South societies in the postcolonial era.[13] Others have aptly described the world of the depressed inner-city, racially segregated and potentially representative of internal colonialism in the case of the United States.[14] Here, we better understand Lamar's position and the recurring connection between Africa and diaspora.

We must first recognize Lamar's status within the canon of West Coast gangsta rap music as a means to locate his work within a larger narrative structured around the problems particular to Black youth communities in Southern California dating back to the mid-twentieth century. Niggaz Wit Attitudes (N.W.A.) announced their frustrations, fears, paranoia and aggression defiantly and unabashedly with their 1988 debut *Straight Outta Compton*. Dr. Dre's magnum opus, *The Chronic*, would soon follow the success of *Straight Outta Compton* and the follow-up smash *Niggaz4Life* as N.W.A. dissolved through internal conflicts – head producer Dr. Dre felt slighted by original leader Eazy-E's seemingly too-close rapport with their white manager Jerry Heller and the subsequent contestations over rightful monetary compensation for group members. Lyrical talisman Ice Cube departed before the recording of *Niggaz4Life*, frustrated to the point of exit sooner than his band mates. It was with *The Chronic* that Dr. Dre introduced new soundscapes to hip hop production and an altogether novel sonic experience for audiences. By sampling funk and disco records with a deft sense of mixing the soulful break beats of funk records over heavy drums, *The Chronic* gave birth to the G-funk sound.[15]

The lasting legacy of *The Chronic* was not, however, limited to the way that Dr. Dre popularized gangster lyricism but also in affirming funk's indigeneity within the realm of African diasporic musics. *The Chronic*'s G-funk rhythms confirmed its indebtedness to the ingenuity of the Afro-futuristic realm. Along with appearances from a plethora of Southern Californian rappers: Kurupt and the Dogg Pound, RBX and the Lady of Rage for instance, *The Chronic* represented Dr. Dre's position as the organizer and architect

12. For literature on the Great Migration in the United States see: Wilkerson (2010), Baldwin (2007) and Boustan (2016). Watkins-Owens (1996) addresses the interactions between Southern Black American and Caribbean arrivants in Harlem, New York. For literature on the *Windrush* migration to the United Kingdom see: Perry (2016); Cantres (2020); Bryan et al. ([1985] 2018); Hinds, *Journey to an Illusion: the West Indian Experience in Britain*; James and Harris (1993).

13. See Rodney (1972).

14. A particularly critical comparison of the racialized systems of anti-Black subordination in the United States and an African nation state can be found in Cell ([1982] 1989). For a rigorous study of internal colonialism in the United States, see Gutiérrez (2004: 281–95).

15. See Kajikawa (2015).

of an entire sonic movement. Additionally, Dre sampled heavily from the psychedelic Afro-centric surrealist work of George Clinton, Parliament and Funkadelic. The album was thusly an opportunity to allow a wide variety of talented artists to showcase their skills and essentially carry the movement. *The Chronic* remains seminal *not* because of Dre's rapping but especially *in spite of* his own lyrical efforts. The introduction of fellow West Coast rapers, however, exhibited Dre's interest in providing a space for others to work within. The enormous success of Snoop Dogg in the 30 years since the release of *The Chronic* and his support of many others clearly shows the way in which Dre and his fellow California cohorts wished to pass on a tradition of music making to one another.

That Lamar would have been heavily impacted by the traditions of West Coast gangsta rap though his work is significant in the ways his lyrics are attenuated specifically to his own personal and generational context. Born only in 1987, Lamar was a small child when N.W.A. first emerged, though he has expressed an awareness of the group's initial success by virtue of his upbringing in Compton. For Lamar and other children of the late 1980s in Compton, N.W.A. were simply unavoidable.[16]

As we will see, on Lamar's third studio album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he articulates the in-between spaces of Black identity and projects a new perspective on the condition of poor Black youth. On the album, he approached a novel position in hip hop – paying tribute to his personal family history and the history of the Afro-descended in the United States. Central to the album's conception was a sonic re-interpretation and a unique rendering of major facets of Black musical production in the United States. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is heavily influenced by jazz, funk, spoken word poetry and soul musics. Lamar's references to Compton and Chicago as home situate his perspective neatly within a tradition of Black diasporic protest music in the United States.

On his second studio album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Lamar's mother provides a brief cameo on the track 'Real'. Over a voicemail recording, his mother explains, '[t]op Dawg called the house […] take this music business serious […] put out something me and your dad can step to […] you know we from Chicago and that's what we do'.[17] Reminding her son that Anthony 'Top Dawg' Tiffith was facilitating Lamar's path to professionalism in music, Lamar's mother also reminds him of the tunes she and his father preferred – those they could dance and 'step to', in the style typical of their hometown, Chicago.

Chicago continues to figure in Lamar's lyrics in later productions including 'DUCKWORTH', from his 2017 album *DAMN*. Lamar retells his parents' movement from the Midwest to Los Angeles and identifies his father:

> His name was Ducky, he came from the streets, the Robert Taylor Homes
> Southside projects, Chiraq, the Terror Dome
> Drove to California with a woman on him and $500 dollars.[18]

Listeners now know that Lamar's parents absconded from the infamous Taylor Homes in Chicago – 'Chiraq' – to arrive in California, making home in another environment of strife and struggle. Patterns of internal and transatlantic movement defined histories of migration for Africana peoples in the twentieth century and others have also articulated their perspectives on rootlessness, mobility and longing for home.

16. For biographical notes on Lamar and his development as a person and rapper, see Lewis (2021) and Moore (2020).
17. Lamar and Oliver (2012, track 11).
18. Lamar (2017, track 14).

BROADER DIASPORIC PARADIGMS: UNWILLING CIRCUITS OF MOBILITY

For Kitchener and many other West Indians who travelled to Britain, their status as CUKC allowed them to move freely to Great Britain their colonial birthplaces notwithstanding.[19] Like many Black residents of greater Los Angeles, Lamar's family traces its roots elsewhere in the United States, in particular the South Side of Chicago. Los Angeles and Oakland became important destinations for Black Americans throughout the twentieth century, leaving the oppressive realities of life in the Jim Crow South and escaping the difficulties and lack of opportunities of the industrialized de facto racist Northern metropolises. Like West Indians in Britain, who understood their own arrivals in the metropole as often relocating within the vast British empire (and exercising their political rights as CUKC), Black Americans migrating throughout the United States were travelling and resettling based on their own notion of belonging to the larger body politic. Their ensuing alienation and continued disenfranchisement highlight the integral role of race prejudice and discrimination in both contexts.

The place of Africa and the liminal space diasporic musicians contemplate might also be read through Lamar's sojourn to South Africa following the release of his first studio album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*. After his trip, he expressed an immediate connection to that nation and Africa writ large based on the shared racial identity of Black existences and similar histories of racialized exclusion. Reflecting on his time in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg, Lamar explained he understood the severity of the struggles of Black South Africans in a newfound way. Despite his upbringing in Compton, Lamar explained that South Africans, 'struggle ten times harder and were raised crazier than. […] I was'.[20] On the album *Untitled Unmastered*, Lamar remembered South Africa and rapped, 'your projects ain't shit/I live in a hut, bitch; I'm living to keep warm/you livin to pay rent'[21] putting the different contexts of Black diasporic struggle into stark relief.

Stuart Hall's notion of 'identity as production', and the 'politics of enunciation' is particularly useful in this case (1990). Lamar articulates his identity from the position of a repressed/exploited/excluded person – he is a young, Black, man. Much as Hall asked readers to consider the in-flux nature of identification, we can read Lamar's emergent knowledge-of-self as journey rather than a destination. The more Lamar learns about the experience of Africans on the continent and across the globe, the more he recognizes the lacunae in what he knows of himself. This serves to, in turn, elicit a further grounding with himself and those he does not know.

LIVES IN COMPTON

> If Pirus and Crips
> All got along
> They'd probably gun me down
> By the end of this song.[22]

On *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*'s nearly eponymous track, 'M.A.A.D City', Lamar articulates a unique observation. As a neutral youth in Compton, with no loyalties to Bloods or Crips, Lamar effectively situates himself as a common enemy for the gangs. Lamar, thus, effectively isolates himself within the context of the seemingly ubiquitous gang activity of 1990s

19. See: Paul (1997), Peach (1986: 62–84) and Grant (2019).
20. Lamar (2015c: n.pag.).
21. Lamar (2016, track 8).
22. Lamar (2012, track 8).

Compton. Lamar's neutrality is a singular experience and his lack of affiliation further excludes him from a distinct type of belonging – the gang as home. If Lamar's lyrics imagine Afro-diasporic longings for home across the United States and the Black Atlantic, they also yearn for belonging within the city he calls home.

> You killed my cousin back in '94
> Fuck yo truce.[23]

Family is never far from the focus in Lamar's music. Despite his own misgivings regarding gang affiliated relatives or his attempts to recognizing his home, Lamar often emphasizes the centrality of notions of family across his body of work. His cousin's murder at the hands of a rival gang-member further exacerbates Lamar's estrangement from the gang lifestyle as a family unit. For Lamar, gang affiliations notwithstanding, his cousin's life took precedence. Thusly, for Lamar and other young Compton residents, family and gang affiliations conflicted and often forced the choosing of sides.

Lamar forces listeners to reckon with the narrative of masculine-driven street violence he witnessed as a youth but, in a departure from mainstream trends dominating hip hop for decades, Lamar also provides a unique perspective on the *women* who so often have been overlooked, cast out or dismissed as incidental. This violence makes creating home difficult – for Lamar but also for the titular Keisha. On his earlier work, *Section.80*, Lamar offers an ode to a young woman swept away by circumstances leading to prostitution. On 'Keisha's Song (Her Pain)', Lamar ends the track exclaiming,

> my little sister eleven,
> I looked her right in the face
> the day that I wrote this song,
> sat her down and pressed play.[24]

Through the exceedingly violent content of the song – a recounting of the brutal treatment a young sex worker is subjected to, along with references to a historical consciousness – Lamar evokes both Rosa Parks and Tupac Shakur to relate Keisha's struggles to that of the promise of justice and fairness represented by the civil rights movement and the legacy of hip hop in attempting reckonings with masculinity, respectively. Lamar provides a unique perspective on the trials and tribulations of life in the ghetto, particularly as he relays problematic gendered experiences of young women and girls. Furthermore, Lamar does not offer concrete solutions nor does he assume an authoritative position in relation to Keisha or any of the men in the community. His ambivalence suggests that perhaps he can identify and articulate the conditions that drive teens to, or ensnare them in, sex work, without at the same time outright moralistically condemning them.

The narrative of *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* oscillates between Lamar's observations and the reflections encapsulated in his subconscious. Furthermore, Lamar uses drugs, alcohol and intoxication as tools to convey the subconscious underpinnings throughout the album. On 'Swimming Pools (Drank)', Lamar recounts his struggles with alcohol in multiple ways. First, Lamar makes an important link between his own desire to integrate among his peers – all searching for outlets that provide a respite from crime and poverty – and a historical, familial pattern of drug and alcohol abuse. This reflects the fragility of the space of home and the precarious nature of safety even within families.

23. Lamar (2012).
24. Lamar (2011, track 11).

> Now I done grew up round some people living their life in bottles
> Granddaddy had the golden flask,
> back stroke every day in Chicago.[25]

He also attributes the permanence of the intoxicating effects of alcohol to escaping the realities of his lived experiences.

> Some people like the way it feels,
> some people wanna kill their sorrows
> Some people wanna fit in with the popular,
> that was my problem.[26]

Lamar expresses his unflinching awareness of the role alcohol had played in his own family history and ensures listeners that drug abuse was a constant in his life. Before he came of age to any significant degree then, Lamar was surrounded by those closest to him seeking intoxicating havens from Chicago to Compton.

Lamar deftly manipulates notions of drinking beyond expressions of dissociation or subconscious but also to illuminate a type of spiritual pining. Immediately following 'Swimming Pools', is the twinned composition 'Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst'. Lamar contends that his spirit and soul, corrupted by surviving adolescence on the streets of Compton, is parched and in desperate need of salvation. Lamar recognizes in himself – and by extension his peers and neighbours – a sense of despair and hopelessness that might only be assuaged through a spiritual cleansing or rebirth.

TO PIMP A BUTTERFLY

Lamar released *To Pimp a Butterfly* in March 2015 and situated himself at the peak of hip hop acclaim. Central to the album's conception was a sonic re-interpretation and a unique rendering of major facets of Black musical production in the United States. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is heavily influenced by jazz, funk, spoken word and soul musics and was largely inspired by Lamar's first visit to South Africa in 2014. 'Mortal Man' samples Fela Kuti's 'I No Get Eye for Back', rendering a perfect sonic encapsulation of diasporic aesthetics. The album's impact was immediate. *To Pimp a Butterfly* was described as 'perfect' by The Verge who praised Lamar as 'Black America's poet laureate'.[27] Pitchfork lauded the 'dense and complex' album as 'wry, theatrical, chaotic, ironic, and mournful, often all at once'.[28] *The Fader* commended the album as 'critic-proof' explaining *TPAB* 'matters because it isn't speaking for everyone'.[29] Critics and fans praised Lamar's wordplay and the depth of the sonic textures resonating throughout the composition.

Central to Lamar's oeuvre is a confounding notion that young Black male sensibilities, despite being informed and impacted by the forces of white supremacy and mythologies of Black pathological criminality, are nevertheless in and of themselves a quagmire. Lamar thusly does not strive to simply elide the complexities of the Black male Comptonite experience but rather to more fully articulate it and perhaps to question the very legitimacy of initially calling into question his (and his peer's) humanity. Lamar inaugurates a unique and novel twenty-first-century Black racialized humanism within which young Black men across the United States and the African diaspora are both antagonist and victim.[30] On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar's follow-up to *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, these sentiments are most thoroughly posed and explored

25. Lamar (2011).
26. Lamar (2012) 'Swimming Pools (Drank)', track 9 on *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*.
27. Singleton (2015: n.pag.).
28. Jenkins (2015: n.pag.).
29. Kameir (2015: n.pag.).
30. Osendorf (2000: 217–36).

on 'The Blacker the Berry'. Jamaican novelist and essayist Marlon James quite aptly refers to Lamar as a 'prophet of rage' and it is on 'The Blacker the Berry' that Lamar fully actualizes this designation.

Lamar displays his keen sense of Black diasporic connectivity and affinities through the seemingly unrelated pattern of conflict across the continent and its diaspora. He raps:

> It's funny how Zulu and Xhosa[31] might go to war. [...]
> Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door.[32]

Lamar connects the historic interethnic violence of South African peoples with the battling street gangs of his own experience. Despite the many thousands of miles and more than 100 years separating African conflict in Cape Colony and the Bloods and Crips in Reagan-era Compton, Lamar nevertheless sees an important similarity between the two contexts. Indeed, for Lamar, Black people can choose sides – they develop and honour identities within their racial predilections, and they absolutely can be antagonistic towards one another.

For Lamar, the coincidence of race is therefore not the singular determining factor *within* Black communities, colonies or nation states. In fact, Lamar insinuates that this sort of conflict actually exists within the psyche of all Black people.

> So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
> Or tell Georgia State 'Marcus Garvey got all the answers'
> Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day
> Or eat watermelon, chicken and Kool-Aid on weekdays
> Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements
> Or watch BET cause urban support is important
> So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
> When gangbanging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
> Hypocrite![33]

Here, Lamar suggests a multitude of contradictory impulses he articulates through his words and actions. First, he dismisses the pre-eminence of stereotypes of Black peoples – the love of watermelon and chicken, a blind commitment to the radical racial politics of the Black Panther Party, a farcical notion of the shortest month, February's designation as 'Black History Month', Black athletic achievements serving only as vectors of commercialism for sneakers and sports drinks, the centrality of Historical Black Colleges and Universities to the Black American educational tradition. Next, he turns many of these 'pro-Black' sentiments (no matter how trivial, satirical or historically significant) upon their heads by recognizing himself in the murdered Trayvon Martin, both as victim and perpetrator.

Martin, who was killed in 2012 by a 'neighbourhood watchman' in central Florida, despite his lean stature and only being a teenager as well as presenting no threat and having committed no crime, became a central figure in the emergent Black Lives Matter movement across the United States. Along with scores of other Black women and men killed at the hands of police and civilians, Martin's death was well-known to Lamar and the deaths of countless others would also have been reflected in his memory. Lamar, however, complicates the discussion around Martin, himself, gangs and warring nations. He admits that he 'wept' as Martin lay in the street dying but concedes that gangbanging also contributes to Black death.

31. Lamar pronounces Xhosa 'Zo-sha', devoid of the click that would be typical of local/native South African languages. This mispronunciation illustrates the differences between diasporic notions and perceptions of the continent and the realities Indigenous Africans live.

32. Lamar, 'The Blacker the Berry', track 13 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

33. Lamar (2015) 'The Blacker the Berry', track 13 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Frantz Fanon expands on these notions in *Black Skin, White Masks*, especially when exploring the phenomena of racialized dependency, inferiority and inadequacy of Black populations within colonial and repressive orders.

Although the politics of respectability have undergirded a great deal of Black political representation and articulation, especially in the United States, Lamar nevertheless offers a different approach to the question of 'who is to blame?' that previously superseded any argument to the contrary. Lamar offered, '[w]hen I say, "Gangbanging made me kill a nigga Blacker than me," this is my life that I'm talking about. I'm not saying you; you might not even be from the streets. I'm not speaking to the community, I'm not speaking of the community', he continued. 'I am the community'.[34] Lamar thusly was not eliding the problem of Black youths killing one another, nor was he wholly accepting his own role in perpetrating these killings but rather providing a conceptual space to recognize the difficult metaphysical and psychological space of Black identity.[35] Fanon addressed this phenomenon, regarding it as 'a genuine negation of common sense' when, 'the colonist or police officer can beat the colonized subject day in and day out […] it is not uncommon to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject'.[36] Across geographies and abutting different apparatuses of white supremacist violence and subjugation, Africans and diasporans contest as Lamar suggests among and against themselves as well as the structures that repress them.

Marlon James has rightfully characterized the unique voice Lamar brings to 'The Blacker the Berry' as upsetting typical appraisals of Black artists that judge them 'based on a warped idea that legitimacy can come only from experience'.[37] Reflecting listeners' expecting 'either confessional or reportage', James instead notes that Lamar's confessions upend these notions because they are 'neither'.[38] Lamar's articulations, therefore, problematize conventional notions of hip hop as being oriented solely around reporting back from life on the streets or a deep-seated and hidden confessional or a braggadocio boast but rather a warbling and sometimes less than coherent articulation borne out of a state of paranoia and a reckoning with the psychological context of Black urban youth. 'The Blacker the Berry' is a testament to the in-between spaces of rumination and self-conceptualization inherent in the notably unfixed and introspective nature of Lamar's work.

Lamar's uneasiness and insistent contemplation of his identity, which can also be regarded as a longing for home, might best be heard on the song 'i'. The album contains a version that emulates a live performance with Lamar encouraging the crowd to run up to the stage, to engage more fully in the performance. It is broken up during the third verse when a fight breaks out in the crowd to which Lamar responds:

Kill the music
Not on my time
Save that shit for the streets
2015 niggas tired of playin victim
How many niggas we done lost bro?
This year alone? …
Make time…
The judge makes time…
It shouldn't be shit for us to make time
And appreciate the little bit of life we got left
I love all my niggas.[39]

34. Markman (2015: n.pag.).
35. The recurring theme of 'Black on Black crime' as a leitmotif specific to hip hop has been explored by many, notably: Rose (2008), especially Chapter 1, 'Hip hop causes violence'. See also Kelley (2008).
36. Fanon ([1961] 2004: 17).
37. M. James (2016: n.pag.).
38. M. James (2016: n.pag.).
39. Lamar (2015a, track 15).

Stopping the music allows Lamar to break from his performance while forcing the audience and the record's listeners to pause and reflect on their lived reality rather than the revelry of the song. Lamar loves himself, as he insists on the track, and in this moment asks the audience to consider the same about themselves. Here, Lamar's internal reckoning – contestations between the proverbial devil on one shoulder and angel on the next – emerge in the space of the show's crowd and Lamar implores attendees to save that for the streets. Thus, the concert might instead be home.

Rapping a capella on the same song, Lamar quiets the crowd and seemingly his spirit:

> So I'm a dedicate this one verse to Oprah
> On how the infamous, sensitive N-word control us
> So many artists gave her an explanation to hold us
> Well this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia
> N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty
> King royalty – wait listen
> N-E-G-U-S description: Black emperor
> King, ruler, now let me finish
> The history books overlooked the word and hide it
> America tried to make it to a house divided
> The homies don't recognize, we be using it wrong
> So I'ma break it down and put my game in the song
> N-E-G-U-S, say it with me
> Or say no more; Black stars can come and get me
> Take it from Oprah Winfrey, tell her she right on time
> Kendrick Lamar, by far, realest negus alive.[40]

Here, Lamar responds to Winfrey's characterizations around Black self-representation and seemingly points the finger towards 'self-haters' whose art and expression she does not approve of. Lamar counters by articulating an effusive self-love, *despite* negative components of his own history and identity.

Flipping the term 'nigger' or 'nigga' into 'negus', Lamar rejects wholeheartedly a politics of bourgeois Black respectability not through dismissing the term 'nigger' but rather through a reclamation of the African (and specifically Ethiopian) roots of a near-homophone, 'negus' that represent nigger's antithesis. His frustration with efforts in the United States to 'make it a house divided' through establishing and intensifying fissures within Black communities in the United States reflects his critique of politically engineered self-hatred, self-loathing and the multiple ways the entertainment industry profits from racial stereotyping. One might look to Walter Rodney who famously decried British efforts in British Guiana to divide the Peoples' Progressive Party – a rare institution in that former colony that thrived through interracial collaboration between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese. In fact, Rodney noted the British, 'had historically divided both communities to better rule over them'.[41]

Lamar contributes to a history of distinct self-reflexive perspectives in contemporary hip hop. Drawing on the tradition of clever and contemplative unfixed narrators, including both members of OutKast, Prince Paul, DMX and Kanye West, Lamar continues in this vein in the current hip hop moment. Perhaps, reflective of his generation, Lamar's concerns may be read as wide-ranging although also lacking in depth as he (along with others in the millennial generation) has unprecedented access to knowledge in the

40. Lamar (2015a).

41. Chukwudinm (2022: n.pag.).

Internet Information Age and an almost unmitigated desire to identify with other diasporic and continental Africans. Lamar is therefore reintroducing and expressing similar conceptualizations of modern Black sensibilities previously foundational to earlier traditions of West Coast G-funk sound.

Dr. Dre's 'Little Ghetto Boy' is a case in point:

> So, all of you Africans
> All of you Africans that wanna do thangs
> that's workin for other people
> Y'all need to open your own business
> Save your money, quit payin motherfuckers with jheri curls
> Quit payin motherfuckers with perms
> Save your money, start your own business
> and you true Africans, will have put hundreds to work
> This is our future right here, this out future right here
> (This some shit! The new generation is on! The new generation!)
> Hey, I'ma tell you right now…
> If if if I have to die today, for this little African right here
> to have a future I'm a dead motherfucker.[42]

Rapping from Compton in 1992, Dre pointedly included a song introduction that referred to his audience and his subjects, ostensibly African Americans in Southern California environs primarily as Africans. Their claims to Black identity were never in doubt, yet their African identities perhaps required this articulation. Even as a 'gangsta', Dre could therefore imagine a history and framework for identity outside of his immediate surroundings – one that was connected to Africa proudly and with the intent to resist.

Dr. Dre's 'The Day the Niggaz Took Over' furthers this disaporic connection and militarizes Afro-solidarity:

> I'ma say this and I'ma end mine
> If you ain't down, for the Africans here
> in the United States, period point blank.
> If you ain't down for the ones that suffered in South Africa
> from apartheid and shit
> Devil you need to step your punk ass to the side
> and let us brothers, and us Africans, step in
> and start puttin some foot, in that ass![43]

Dre's militancy, often regarded as mindless violence, actually more precisely reflects a sensibility particular to the strivings of Africans in the United States. This want exceeded the pursuit of US-specific civil rights as he encourages his listeners to also be down for those suffering in South Africa.

Lamar's insistence on highlighting the connections between the ghettos of Southern California and Chicago with the struggles of disenfranchised Black people in South Africa and across the African diaspora has a place within the underreported legacy of race consciousness in West Coast gangsta rap. Furthermore, Lamar's innovation is a critical historical turn. Rather than equating the contemporary moment solely with the affairs and developments happening concomitantly across Africa and its diaspora, Lamar suggests a historical rootedness in the struggles of Black people against the forces of white supremacy but also acknowledges and ponders the problems of identity,

42. Dr. Dre et al. (1992, track 7).

43. Dr. Dre, RBX, Snoop Dogg, Dat Nigga Daz, (1993) 'The Day the Niggaz Took Over', track 4 on *The Chronic*.

44. C.L. R. James (2003: 83).
45. C.L.R. James (2003: 87).
46. C.L.R. James (2003: 88).
47. C.L.R. James (2003: 88).
48. Gilroy (1996: 383).

home and belonging within Black communities as embedded in specific historical moments and reflective of a continued relationship of unbelonging.

As I suggest, the notion of *unbelonging* that is so prevalent in Lamar's output may best be understood through employing the tools of the Black British Cultural Studies school. The linkages between Lamar's calling for home, his search for his originary and safe space – one that he can rightfully lay claim to – is also present in the pining of Lord Kitchener's calypsos and the reportage and literary musings of George Lamming and C.L.R. James as West Indians in relation to the British 'mother country'.

James penned a series of letters for the *Port of Spain Gazette* upon his arrival in London in 1932. One of them, 'The men', explored the fraught intra-gendered relationships and social mores among professional classes of men in the capital. James noted that despite his nightly conversations with West African academics, Abyssinians and white British businessmen and barristers who were 'on the surface quite polite […] the average man in London is eaten up with colour prejudice'.[44] At a dance, in the company of a white woman on the dancefloor, James noticed a white man, 'this Anglo-Saxon member of a ruling race', who 'despised me to such an extent that he could not contain his wrath at seeing me with a girl who was not from the street'.[45] Racial difference in the metropole for James, meant 'an Englishman […] makes your acquaintance […] is agreeably surprised'.[46] One may even invite a Black man to tea but James alerted readers, 'let him see you sitting in the park with Miss X […] let Mr. Black beware […] in England watch your step and, however much at home you feel, watch it in this particular direction'.[47]

Lamar's music, however, is a contextual and contemporary account of the search for home and contestations with alienation despite the increased interconnectedness of the twenty-first century. The specific ways in which his immediate and local environment impact his perspectives are unique to Lamar though his music is an attempt to reconcile his hyperawareness with the realities of its relative ubiquity. Lamar is not necessarily, in his own estimation, all that different than many other Black women and men in the United States. Furthermore, his references to the diaspora suggests that the links he identifies within American Black communities also tie them to other Afro-descended populations.

DIASPORA AND DISSONANCE

Lamar's ruminations on Black identity fit squarely within dominant modes of British cultural criticism. Paul Gilroy argued that identity could be marshalled not for political ends but rather for 'more authentic and powerful forms of self-knowledge and consciousness that are coming into focus'.[48] In this rendering, Lamar's focus on more fully actualizing his identity has less to do with specific political goals and is an attempt to flesh out the internalized racialized self-consciousness of Black identification. Lamar's lamentations – articulating a fuller consideration of Black peoples rather than judging and diagnosing them, is a distinctly novel approach that emphasizes building self-knowledge rather than a political platform.

Returning to 'The Blacker the Berry', Lamar gives voice to this diasporic vision by collaborating with Jamaican dancehall artist, Assassin, who laments:

I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me Black
Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we Black

> And man a say they put me in a chain, cah' we Black
> Imagine now, big gold chain full of rocks
> How you no see the whip? Left scars 'pon me back
> But now we have a big whip parked 'pon the block
> All dem a say we doomed from the start, cah' we Black
> Remember this, every race start from the Black
> Just remember that.[49]

'The Blacker the Berry' provides an ingenious take on Lamar's insights into the problems of racialization that pervade the United States and other sites of diaspora. Assassin inserts both his Jamaican accent and a historical reference to racialized plantation slavery, the physical and psychological damage it causes, as well as the affirmation that race is the primary determinant identity in the lives and histories of Black peoples. Despite a 'big gold chain full of rocks' or 'a big whip [car] parked 'pon the block' Assassin confirms that his race has him 'doomed from the start' even in contemporary Kingston, Compton or Kinshasa. Sometimes lost in the hyperlocalism of hip hop's hood-adjacent 'dusty-foot philosophy' (K'naan) is the fact that even 'gangsta' artists like Dre evince Afro-diasporic thinking. Lamar's self-conceptualization is here, particularly on point. The racial lens prioritizes the blatant ways in which Black racial categorization supersedes other forms of identity – either material or metaphysical.

Perhaps it is fitting that Lamar utilizes the Jamaican inflection of Assassin to bridge himself closer to the diasporic and ergo African past. Much like earlier roots reggae acts, Assassin ties his contemporary experience of subjugation and disenfranchisement to the historical legacies of white supremacy in the Caribbean. Lamar's inclusion of this perspective in his work broadens the Afro-American experience in its focus – Black Americans can be both *American* and *diasporic* in contemporary and historical ways – diaspora as inclusivity is a rare American perspective.

Through his collaboration with Assassin, Lamar acknowledges the legacy of the roots tradition by repurposing it for another context – contemporary Black America. Assassin stands in for other reggae musicians such as the Congos, Abyssinians and Black Uhuru who, as mentioned earlier, provided ruminations and protestations over race, inclusion, spirituality and exploitation in the island and throughout sites of diaspora. Reaching beyond a broader definition of Africanity by including Caribbean traditions, Lamar also looks directly at Africa in an effort to claim belonging – and effort to find home.

Lamar's confessional on 'The Blacker the Berry' centralizes the psychological import of racialization for its anti-hero invoking a conceptualization of Black consciousness first articulated by Frantz Fanon. Lamar levies a searing criticism of intra-Black community relations when he remembers:

> I mean it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society
> That's what you're tellin me, penitentiary would only hire me
> Curse me 'til I'm dead
> Church me with your fake prophesizin that I'ma be just another slave in my head.[50]

Lamar professes his acute awareness of his status within his community. As a young Black man, he questions his worth and contests with the voices and attitudes of elders in Compton. Lamar reacts to the notion that he would be fit

49. Lamar and Assasin (2015) 'The Blacker the Berry'.

50. Lamar and Assasin (2015) 'The Blacker the Berry'.

only for work in prison – perhaps either as a corrections officer or more probably as an inmate forced to toil and labour as punishment.

Additionally, he critiques the religious politics of his home community. Lamar may be pushed to Church but in his own consciousness, the traditions and mores of the Church themselves are also methods of self-denial and perpetuate another degree of inferiority complex. He continues:

> Institutionalize, manipulation and lies
> Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes
> You hate me, don't you? I know you hate me just as much as you hate yourself.[51]

Here, Lamar most clearly articulates a Fanonian perspective. Much like the elite French West Indian intellectual returning to the Antilles after completing an advanced degree in Paris, Lamar suggests that the upwardly mobile and privileged classes of Blacks (in this case the Church hierarchy) internalize an inferiority complex with relation to whites and express a superiority complex in relation to other Blacks. The 'self-hatred' Lamar critiques is firmly situated by Fanon as it emphasizes the ways in which the racially disenfranchised attempt to ameliorate their positions, often relative to others within their racial group. Fanon surmised that the 'colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards'.[52] Lamar extends this notion and appropriates it for his contemporary condition. The politics of respectability advocated by church leadership in Black communities for Lamar are evidence of perpetuating a psychopathology of victim blaming without the requisite acknowledgement of the role of systems of oppression that ultimately are responsible for inequality, crime and disenfranchisement. Lamar furthers this precept by critiquing the Black elite as self-hating, noting that their perspectives are much too limited for them to recognize their own contributions to an internalization of white supremacist thought in the very communities they aim to serve and represent.

Fanon and Lamar express similar sentiments in their self-conceptualizations. When Lamar explains that 'I'm not speaking to the community, I'm not speaking of the community', he continued: 'I am the community' (Lamar 2015c: n.pag.). His perspective thus mirrors Fanon's notion that '[a]s I begin to recognise that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognise that I am a Negro'.[53] Both Fanon and Lamar articulate a critical revelation – they are able to critique and acknowledge the realities of racial disenfranchisement and the problematics of self-hatred within Black communities but cannot absolve themselves from responsibility because they are both perpetrators and victims of these characterizations.

At the conclusion of the final track on *TPAB*, 'Mortal Man', Lamar engages in an imaginary conversation with Tupac Shakur, utilizing soundbites from earlier interviews with Tupac. On the song, Tupac says,

> In this country a Black man only have like 5 years we can exhibit
> Maximum strength, and that's right now while you a teenager,
> While you still strong or while you still wanna lift weights,
> While you still wanna shoot back.
> Cause once you turn 30 it's like they take the heart and soul out of
> A man, out of a Black man in this country.

51. Lamar and Assasin (2015) 'The Blacker the Berry'.
52. Fanon (1967: 18).
53. Fanon (1967: 174).

And you don't wanna fight no more.
And if you don't believe me you can look around,
You don't see no loud mouth 30-year old muthafuckas.[54]

This further encapsulates Lamar's precarious position – navigating youth in the hopes of growing up yet continually marked by the threat of retribution and punishment. Fanon described this phenomenon as the 'colonized subject […] constantly on his guard […] [in] a world configured by the colonizer […] always presumed guilty'.[55]

CONCLUSION

Lamar's innovative and genre-shifting perspective – the aggressor and victim – is an important contribution to contemporary hip hop. On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar dispenses with singular and shallow notions of rap's central protagonists. His aim is neither to merely brag nor solely to lament his past missteps and tragedies. Rather, Lamar articulates an identity in flux – subject to socio-economic realities of the Black urban underclass – without prescribing solutions nor wholeheartedly accepting these facts. Lamar thus realizes critical acclaim and popularity while bringing listeners on a journey wherein he is identifying, questioning and reorienting his own identity and consciousness. Like his self-referential forebears, Lamar's work is at once an announcement of his identity and a suggestion towards what that identity may actually mean. Rather than a fixed notion – Lamar's identity is a process that he offers a sometimes awkward and uncomfortable but ever-evolving self-reckoning.

Lamar invokes the spirit of Afrocentrism and draws out a connection to the African past that he wishes to claim as his own heritage and ancestry. As mentioned earlier, referencing *negus*, the Ethiopian Semitic languages term, which served as the royal title and honorific of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, Lamar points out the linguistic similarities between 'negus' and its Afro-Atlantic cousin 'nigger/nigga/Negro'. He cleverly dismisses the connotations that *other* n-word is weighted with and instead self-articulates as emperor/king/sovereign.

The history of Afrocentric and African-oriented scholarship and artistic production is long and varied but the reclamation of a kind of kingship or nobility is a common trope. One needs only to look at the innumerable references in Black American art to African elegance, superiority and distinction.[56] This is especially illuminating given the ways that Lamar juxtaposes the experiences of Black folks throughout his music. They are at once, the *Wretched of the Earth* but also inheritors of a legacy not merely of decency and perseverance but really of royalty and prestige. Lamar thus asks listeners to perhaps reconsider dominant narratives. Perhaps there is space for flawed heroes? Perhaps the contemporary socio-economic and historical plights of Afrodiasporic populations are not the totality of their histories and cultures.

Reckoning with a fuller and more complex rendering of articulations of Black identity might, for Lamar and others, allow for a more meaningful discourse and an avenue towards self-discovery predicated around the particularities of the Black experience. By rewriting and revising a dominant mainstream narrative that villainizes Blacks (and has for centuries), Lamar's simple declaration of his own untold mythology serves as an epistemological innovation – creating Black history from a new, positively oriented and nuanced perspective. In many ways, the unbelonging/exclusion/alienation

54. Lamar and Shakur (2015) 'Mortal Man', track 16 on *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

55. Fanon ([1961] 2004: 16).

56. There is a long tradition of venerating a creatively narrated African past that posits the American slave populations descended from pharaohs, the glories of Egypt, Mansa Musa and the empire of Mali, Shaka and other Zulu warriors.

that Blacks in the United States (and other diaspora sites) frequently must contend with might be mitigated by the refashioning of their own images, or in some radical estimation, *by literally travelling to Africa*, as Lamar did.[57] By utilizing the music of the Caribbean interspersed with his own, Lamar seemingly meanders towards a kind of reckoning, idealized and virtually impossible to grasp. By directly engaging Africa, Lamar reiterates intellectual and artistic pursuits common to diasporic art and knowledge production.

Finally, it is evident that Lamar's concerns reflect his unique perspective on the search for home and consequently a distinct insight into the racialized foundation of Black millennial consciousness – in the United States and abroad. Lamar's consistent appeal for home and belonging is part of a larger tradition of Afro-diasporic musical and literary traditions across multiple contexts in the Black Atlantic world. His home base of Compton allows Lamar to further extend this framework and utilize the notion of unbelonging across the experiences of Black peoples in a wider conception of diaspora. The direct attempts to engage and repurpose other diasporic expressions because of their familiarity and resonance highlights the ubiquitous problem of the liminal space between African and diasporic.

57. There is a capacious literature associated with Afro-Americans/Caribbean folks/Afro Europeans returning to the continent. Their experiences leave a tremendous space to discuss their successes, failures, disappointments and expectations. Major figures that come to mind include Robert F. Williams, DuBois, Fanon, Césaire, Kamau Brathwaite, Michael Manley, et. al. See for example: Markle (2017) and Fanon (1964).

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