

To Pimp a Butterfly: A Retrospective A Decade of Cultural Relevance

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ABSTRACT

Kendrick Lamar's award-winning album *To Pimp a Butterfly* changed the way music interacts with societal norms. I analyze this critical album to understand how music shapes public discourse, and vice-versa. I interpret the lyrical significance of each of the 16 tracks and study the interplay between Kendrick's storytelling and rhythm. I link each track on this album to the cultural relevance in 2015, the album's release year, and to cultural relevance today, nearly decade later. Topics addressed in *To Pimp a Butterfly* include, but are not limited to, institutional racism, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and economic injustice.

Introduction

Influential, inspirational, and masterful are just a few of the words which can be used to describe Kendrick Lamar's 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (*TPAB*). Sitting at a lengthy hour and nineteen minute runtime, *TPAB* provides a variety of sounds, covers many important topics, and reflects a wide range of emotions. The beautiful jazz samples, classic Hip Hop beats, and old-school groove throughout the album create an exceptional sonic appeal, while topics such as racism, depression, and income disparity make for introspective tracks. Nominated for an astounding 11 GRAMMYs—the most GRAMMY nominations for a rapper in a single year, and the second most GRAMMY nominations by any artist in a single night—and awarded seven wins, including Best Rap Album, *TPAB* catapulted Kendrick to “legend” status.

Each of the 16 tracks on *TPAB* is unique and meaningful in its own right. However, cutting or skipping any song alters the listening and learning experience. Each individual track is a single piece of a 16-piece puzzle—listening to the album in its entirety is what makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* one of the most impactful, powerful, and transformative musical adventures.

Track 1 | Wesley's Theory

With a groovy beat, layered production, and laser-focused rap performance from Kendrick, “Wesley's Theory” is an epic opener to *TPAB*. The track begins with the words “Every n*gga is a star” becoming louder and louder, suggesting the potential within the Black community will not be silenced—it will be praised and amplified. This theme of Black power introduces the album and is woven throughout the entire project.

After the short intro, the beat drops and Josef Leimberg says a few lines—most significantly, Josef challenges listeners: “Gather your wit, take a deep look inside / Are you really who they idolize?” Josef's words foreshadow the experience of listening to *TPAB*—he prepares listeners for the next hour and nineteen minute journey by making sure they carry their intelligence and “wit” as they take a dive into the mind of Kendrick Lamar, while simultaneously learning about themselves. By asking “are you really who they idolize?” Josef is challenging Kendrick to be the best version of himself. Has Kendrick metamorphosed into a man worthy of praise and admiration? Is he using his stature to inspire his fans to be the best versions of themselves?

Kendrick returns in the chorus rapping about his “first girlfriend,” noting: “At first I did love you / But now I just wanna fuck,” suggesting rap is Kendrick’s first true love, yet over time, his love for rap evolved into a lusty desire for money and fame.

Kendrick begins his first verse from the perspective of a young, immature rapper, saying, “When I get signed, homie, I’m a act a fool.” Instead of spending his money wisely and helping his family or friends, this young rapper simply wants to have fun and buy foolish things. He wants to “Take a few M-16s to the hood / Pass ‘em all out on the block what’s good,” illustrating the cursed mindset of young rappers and touching on the theme of gun violence.

After verse one, there is a refrain which repeats the lines “We should never gave n*ggas money / Go back home.” These lines appear to be from the perspective of the government, implying the government regrets giving African Americans opportunity and freedom, and wishes they could be sent back to Africa.

Before verse two, Dr. Dre makes a short appearance on a voicemail, providing sound advice to Kendrick: “anybody could get it / The hard part is keepin’ it.” Dr. Dre is saying anyone can make a hit and become famous, but not everyone can stay at the top and leave an everlasting impact. He challenges Kendrick to be great and become a legend in the rap game.

In the second verse, Kendrick raps from the perspective of Uncle Sam, a metaphor for the American government. The verse begins with the lines: “What you want you? A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?” Forty acres and a mule were offered to newly freed slaves after the civil war under General Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15,^{1,2} while houses, cars, pianos, and guitars all represent modern materials desires. Instead of acknowledging and repairing the reverberating crimes against Black Americans—by offering equality, justice, and restoration of dignity—Uncle Sam makes simplified assumptions about the desires of Black men. This naivety illustrates how the American government has failed to improve its treatment of African Americans since slaves were freed in the 1800s, as institutionalized racism continues to unjustly disadvantage the lives of so many Americans. Uncle Sam goes on to persuade Kendrick to recklessly spend his money, telling him to “hit the register and make [him] feel better.” Uncle Sam *makes it seem* as if he cares about Kendrick, telling him: “Get it all, you deserve it, Kendrick.” At the end of the verse, Uncle Sam mentions actor Wesley Snipes, claiming he will “Wesley Snipe [Kendrick] before thirty-five.” Snipes served time in prison for tax fraud after unsuccessfully employing a “tax protester theory” in his defense,^{3,4} and “snipe” also means to kill someone with a sniper rifle (hence the name of the song, “Wesley’s Theory”). The age thirty-five is significant because it’s the minimum age required to be president of America. Taken together, these metaphors suggest America is threatening to destroy Kendrick.

The song next transitions to a bridge sung by George Clinton, where he refers to Dr. Dre’s voicemail, saying “lookin’ down, it’s quite a drop / Lookin’ good when you’re on top.” Clinton is claiming Kendrick is levels higher than everyone else in the rap game. At the time of the album’s release in 2015, many believed this to be the case, and many believe this to be true today, a decade later. However, as Dr. Dre warned, Kendrick must be careful with his position, as it is easy to lose the top spot.

“Wesley’s Theory” ends with the words “Tax man comin’” becoming progressively louder and louder, mimicking how the song began with “Every n*gga is a star” becoming progressively louder and louder. The tax man represents the industry which wants to exploit Kendrick and “tax” (or “pimp”) him for his abilities.

¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/06/40-acres-and-a-lie/>.

² <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reconstruction-United-States-history#ref1096633>.

³ <https://www.justice.gov/archive/tax/usaopress/2008/txdv08343.htm>.

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertwood/2011/03/10/to-avoid-fate-of-wesley-snipes-skip-tax-protester-arguments/>.

Track 2 | For Free? - Interlude

While “For Free? - Interlude” is the shortest track on *TPAB*, it is arguably the most unique. During a 2015 Twitter Q&A, Kendrick revealed this was his favorite track on *TPAB*.⁵

“For Free?” picks up where “Wesley’s Theory” ends, debating the heavy themes of taxation, human worth, and the federal government’s mistreatment of Black Americans.

The jazz instrumental on “For Free? - Interlude” contrasts with the aggressive intro from Darlene Tibbs, and sounds fantastic behind Kendrick’s fast-paced, sassy flow. Tibbs’ aggression and cursing represents America’s treatment of Black men. Tibbs tells Kendrick he isn’t good enough for her, claiming he walks “around like [he’s] God’s gift to Earth,” even though he “ain’t shit.” She says she wants a “baller” or “boss,” however Kendrick is “off-brand” as he is not adhering to stereotypical expectations established by society for Black men.

Kendrick responds to Tibbs by declaring “This d*ck ain’t free,” a line repeated six times throughout the track. At first blush, this line sounds silly; however, Kendrick is saying he is not easily taken advantage of, or pimped out, like other rappers. Kendrick extrapolates upon this idea by telling Tibbs she’s “looking at [him] like he ain’t a receipt,” implying she sees Kendrick as free and worthless. Kendrick tells Tibbs, “Livin’ in captivity raised [his] cap salary,” implying Kendrick turned the trauma of growing up in hood into valuable art, and his ability to live outside of prescribed expectations increased his worth.

Later in the track, Kendrick claims he “need[s] forty acres and a mule,”—the second reference to General Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15 on the album. Kendrick proceeds to mention, “Not a forty and a pit bull,” implying the Black community does not want stereotypical “on-brand” items found in Black neighborhoods; the community deserves non-trivial investments, such as land and means to generate income.

Kendrick then adds the line “Bullshit, matador, matador.” Kendrick is comparing Uncle Sam to a matador and the Black community to a bull.⁶ Matadors take advantage of bulls—“pimping” them out for the sake of entertainment and money—as they chase matadors around the arena, looking like fools. Offering Black men “a forty and a pit bull” is political theater (“bullshit”) offered to Black men as a diversion, making them look foolish as they run towards the red cape to entertain the masses.

Later in the verse, Kendrick confronts the media and their role in promoting racism: “Fuck your sources, all distortion, if you fuck it’s more abortion.” Kendrick is claiming much of what the media says about the Black community is false—their sources are “distorted” implying the media does not know the truth. When the media “fuck[s],” meaning when they make a mistake, they must quickly remove or “abort” their mistake. Kendrick ends his long rant by saying “Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich.” Black Americans have been enslaved and suffered, yet in the face of oppression, the Black community continues to enrich America, culturally and economically. Case in point: a 2020 report by the Brookings Institute found *median* white household wealth in 2019 was 7.8 times that of Black households, while *average* white household wealth was 6.9 times that of Black households.⁷ America continues to profit unfairly from the contributions of the Black community.

Darlene Tibbs comes back for the last two lines of the track: “I’m a get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up / You ain’t no king.” On this track, both Uncle Sam and Tibbs express their opinions on Kendrick having power—they don’t want to see it.

On the next track, Kendrick shows his power to the whole world.

⁵ https://s3.amazonaws.com/filepicker-images-rapgenius/qXgdpcesR0K7YvoMnphI_image.png.

⁶ <https://genius.com/5047346>.

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/>.

Track 3 | King Kunta

“King Kunta” is easily one of the catchiest songs on *TPAB*. From the immaculate baseline to the catchy chorus and the funky outro, this song has it all. The instrumental begins with just the baseline, then progresses into a more layered beat as time goes on. The buildup of the beat is one of the reasons “King Kunta” is such a special song. However, Kendrick’s aggression and passion are arguably the best parts of the song—he sounds like he’s out for blood.

The song starts with Kendrick claiming he’s “got a bone to pick,” showing something has been upsetting him. He says he doesn’t want “money-motherfuckers / Sittin’ in [his] throne again.” In Kendrick’s mind, no one other than him should claim they’re at the top of the rap game—Kendrick sees himself as the lone king of rap.

In the chorus, Kendrick asks, “where you when I was walkin’? / Now I run the game got the whole world talkin’.” Kendrick is questioning his formal education in his hometown of Compton, California—he was never taught to manage his success, possibly because the system did not believe he would be successful.⁸ He follows this line by saying “King Kunta / Everybody wanna cut the legs off him,” referring to “Kunta Kinte,” a fictional character from the 1976 novel, *Roots: The Sage of an American Family* by Alex Haley.⁹ Kunta Kinte was a slave during the mid-1700s whose foot was cut off. Kendrick compares himself to Kunta Kinte—people don’t want him to continue to run the rap game, hence they “wanna cut the legs off him” to slow him down.

Kendrick begins the first verse saying, “The yam is the power that be.” Kendrick uses yams to represent a mixture of different things, from authenticity,¹⁰ to money, fame, and power.¹¹ Continuing the topic of the rap game, Kendrick claims he can “dig rappin’, but a rapper with a ghost writer? / What the fuck happened?” Kendrick is criticizing rappers who use ghostwriters and follows up with a clever simile: “most of y’all sharing bars / Like you got the bottom bunk in a two-man cell.” Sharing bars refers to criminals sharing a jail cell, but also refers to ghostwriters sharing “bars” or lyrics with different rappers. Kendrick is essentially calling ghostwriters criminals.

In the second verse, Kendrick mentions yams again, saying “the yam brought it out of Richard Pryor / Manipulated Bill Clinton with desires.” The yam—or the money, fame, and power—caused Richard Pryor’s public fall from grace, and Bill Clinton’s affair while in office. Kendrick claims he “was contemplating gettin’ off stage / Just to go back to the hood, see [his] enemy, and say...” He wants to return to Compton to tell those who didn’t believe in him that he won’t fall victim to the “yam.” He will continue to “run the game,” staying true to his authentic self and in control of his destiny—he won’t be negatively affected by money and power. Kendrick will not be “pimped.”

Kendrick uses an aggressive tone in his third and final verse, which begins with a bold claim: “I was gonna kill a couple rappers, but they did it to themselves / Everybody’s suicidal, they ain’t even need my help.” Kendrick is willing to “kill” or diss anyone who messes with him, but he doesn’t need to, as most rappers are self-destructive; they ruin their own careers as they fall victim to the “yam.” In their quest for fame, money, and power many rappers lose sight of their authentic selves—their true identity is compromised and hidden by ghostwriters.

Later in the verse, Kendrick says, “I made it past twenty-five, and there I was.” There is a notion that institutional racism causes Black men to end up either “dead or in jail” by age twenty-five,¹² as referenced in Kanye West’s “We Don’t Care” (Kanye claims he “wasn’t s’posed to make it past twenty-five.”). Additionally, Tupac, someone who is referenced multiple times in the album and one of Kendrick’s strongest influences, died at the age of twenty-five.

Kendrick ends the verse with the lines, “Straight from the bottom, this the belly of the beast / From a peasant to a prince to a motherfuckin’ king.” Kendrick refers to Compton as “the belly of the beast” as it is a dangerous and

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUEI_ep9iDs.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roots-by-Haley>.

¹⁰ Referencing Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

¹¹ Referencing Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

¹² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dead-or-in-jail-the-burden-of-being-a-black-man-in-america-804/>.

unstable place to grow up; a place from which it is hard to escape. However, now Kendrick calls himself a “king,” demonstrating how he is aware of his status, wealth, and most importantly, his influence.

After the final chorus, there is an amazing, funky jazz outro—one of the album’s instrumental highlights. “King Kunta” ends with a single line: “I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence.” This is the first line of an evolving poem which is recited throughout *TPAB*, and concludes on the final, 16th track.¹³ With this specific line, Kendrick is referring to rappers who don’t know what to do with their newfound fame; Kendrick is likely including a younger, less-wise (pre-metamorphosis) version of himself in this group. These young rappers influence their fanbase in detrimental ways, causing their fall from the top.

As we learn throughout the evolution of *PTAB*, Kendrick makes deliberate decisions to ensure he does not fall victim to the same fate.

Track 4 | Institutionalized

“Institutionalized” is one of the more laid-back songs on *TPAB*, with a slow, jazzy, chill beat. The track’s calm, easy-going vibe contrasts sharply with the lyrics, which address the complex notion of institutions in their many forms—including institutionalized racism, educational institutions, and the notion of Compton being an inescapable institution.

In the intro, Kendrick asks “What money got to do with it?” while also saying he is “trapped inside the ghetto and [he] ain’t proud to admit it.” Despite becoming rich, Kendrick’s mind is still in Compton—in “the ghetto.” No matter how famous or successful he becomes, Kendrick will always carry the hood inside him.

The song then carries into an interlude sung by Anna Wise and Bilal¹⁴ who appear to be singing from the perspective of Kendrick: “If I was the president / I’d pay my mama’s rent / Free my homies and them.” Tying these lyrics back to the intro, Kendrick continues to stay “trapped inside the ghetto.” Instead of fixing nationwide problems as the president, Kendrick would focus on issues specifically impacting Compton. These lyrics mimic Kendrick’s remarks regarding his complex relationship between success and Compton during a 2013 interview for *GQ* magazine: “From my perspective, it’s not just *I’m famous*—I still live in this world.”¹⁵ Despite his success, Kendrick has never left Compton; he will always remember where he comes from, and he will use his successes to benefit his community.

The first verse of “Institutionalized” contains a lot of bars about Kendrick’s rap game, a continuous theme on the album. Kendrick says his “flow’s so sick, don’t you swallow it / Bitin’ my style, you’re salmonella poison positive.” Kendrick’s rapping is so *raw*, taking a “bite” out of it will give someone salmonella, an infection acquired by eating raw meat. Kendrick continues his food theme by saying: “Milk the game up, never lactose intolerant,” showing how he’s going to continue to get the best out of rapping, but never get sick of it.

Kendrick then shifts topics by referencing his education: “Me, scholarship? No, streets put me through colleges,” revealing his knowledge comes from his lived experiences, not classroom instruction. He adds, “Be all you can be, true, but the problem is / Dream only a dream if work don’t follow it.” Dreams stay dreams if no effort is exerted to realize those dreams—Kendrick sets himself apart because he turned his dreams into reality.

The first verse ends with Kendrick saying, “I should have listened when my grandmama said to me,” then leads into the chorus which repeats the line “shit don’t change until you get up and wash yo’ ass.” While the chorus may seem flippant, the message it illustrates is anything but: nothing is going to change or improve unless action is taken.

After the chorus comes Snoop Dogg’s bridge, which he finishes by saying, “Took his homies to the show and this is what they said,” with “the show” likely being the BET awards which Kendrick briefly mentions in his first verse.

¹³ The completed poem can be found in Appendix A.

¹⁴ Bilal Sayeed Oliver.

¹⁵ <https://www.gq.com/story/kendrick-lamar-men-of-the-year-rapper>.

In the second verse, Kendrick changes his tone and raps from the perspective of a friend from the hood who he took to the BET awards. The verse begins with the friend asking, “Fuck am I ‘posed to do when I’m lookin’ at walkin’ licks?” The friend is intrigued by the “walkin’ licks,” wealthy people who look like they’d be good targets to steal from.¹⁶ Kendrick’s friend seems fascinated by his unfamiliar surroundings: “The constant big money talk ‘bout the manion and foreign whips / The private jets and passport, presidential glass floor / Gold bottles, gold models...fuck is this?” He then talks about his impulse to steal from the “walkin’ licks,” saying, “My defense mechanism tell me to get him / Quickly because he got it.” The “institution” of the hood teaches its residents to take valuables from “walkin’ licks” as a means of survival. So, that’s exactly what he does—he tells the “walkin’ lick” to “meet my four-four”—a reference to his pistol. Kendrick’s friend then says, “it’s gon’ take a lot ‘fore this pistol go cold turkey.” Gun violence is so prevalent in Compton, making it difficult for him to go “cold turkey” on his pistol—pulling a gun on someone is part of the “institution” of Compton. Kendrick’s friend “can watch [a celebrity’s] watch on the TV and be okay / But see [he’s] on the clock once that watch landin’ in L.A.” When the valuables are in front of him, his time in the “institution” (where time is referenced by “clock” and “watch”) taught him to steal as a means to “no more livin’ poor.”

Snoop Dogg perfectly summarizes the second verse in the outro: “you can take your boy out the hood / But you can’t take the hood out the homie.” Once one grows up in the hood, the hood mindset never leaves, even in places of extreme wealth. Through innovative storytelling, “Institutionalized” highlights the dangers of racial and economic inequality. Snoop concludes the song with: “Fuck you, goodnight, thank you very much for your service”—a reference to pimping—as residents of the hood are routinely exploited. Both Kendrick and his friend know this all too well.

Track 5 | These Walls

“These Walls” is without a doubt the grooviest, smoothest, and sexiest song on *TPAB*. Anna Wise’s beautiful vocals mixed with the funky production create a timeless track.

“These Walls” begins where “King Kunta” ends, with the first line of Kendrick’s evolving poem: “I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence.” Kendrick adds a second line to the developing poem: “Sometimes, I did the same.” Kendrick is reminiscing upon poor decisions he made during his early days as a rapper, before his metamorphosis into a butterfly. The poem is continued at the end of “These Walls,” as the story of “These Walls” is instrumental in the development of the emerging butterfly, suggesting “these walls” represent a cocoon.

Anna Wise sings the first verse from the perspective of a woman longing for her lover. While it is not immediately clear who Wise is portraying when the song begins, in the fourth verse Kendrick cleverly reveals Wise is portraying the baby mama of a man “currently servin’ life” for killing Kendrick’s friend Dave. Wise powerfully describes a woman’s desire to “close her eyes and sway / With [him],” showing her physical longing for her incarcerated lover. While the woman can’t be with her partner, she “deserves a night to play.”

During the chorus, Anna exclaims “If these walls could talk,” followed by Bilal saying, “I can feel it reign when it cries, gold lives inside of you.” While “these walls” may represent a cocoon or the entrapment of a secret, in this case, the walls refer to the baby mama’s vagina.

Kendrick continues the topic of sex in the second verse: “These walls could talk, they’d tell me to swim good.” If the woman’s vagina could speak, it would tell Kendrick to have sex with her, or “swim good.” The “walls” tell Kendrick that they are “full of pain, resentment / Need someone to live in them just to relieve tension.” The woman has been through trauma; sex will “relieve tension” and make her feel better.

In the third verse, Kendrick says, “I’ve been on the streets too long / Looking at you from the outside in.” Kendrick wanted to have sex with this woman for a while—sex with her will be Kendrick’s revenge against Dave’s killer. This line also refers to the fact that Dave’s killer is inside a prison cell, and Kendrick is looking at him from the outside. It’s an interesting play on words, as the expression “inside out” refers to knowing something or someone

¹⁶ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=walking%20lick>.

extremely well. Flipping the words, “outside in” alludes to the opposite notion—nobody truly knows another person—Dave’s killer does not know what Kendrick is capable of, and he is equally ignorant of his lover’s desires.

The instrumental changes and Kendrick’s voice goes deeper in the fourth verse.¹⁷ Kendrick begins the lengthy final verse by saying “If these walls could talk, they’d tell you it’s too late.” Dave’s baby mama may be telling Dave she has moved on and found a new lover, or “these walls” could be the walls of the murderer’s prison cell, telling the murder he can’t take back his actions. Kendrick refers to Dave as “a killer that turned snitch,” and claims the “walls is telling [Kendrick] [the killer] a bitch.” Snitching is an action considered pathetic and cowardly by both Kendrick and the prison walls. It is at this point in the track Dave is instructed “to listen to ‘Sing About Me,’”—Track 10 on Kendrick’s second album, *on good kid m.A.A.d city*, which details Dave’s tragic murder. Kendrick tells the killer to “play this song, rewind the first verse / About me abusin’ my power so you can hurt.” Kendrick reveals Wise is portraying Dave’s murderer’s baby mama in the first verse.

Kendrick ends his conversation with Dave’s killer by making it abundantly clear how he will abuse his power to hurt him: “About me and her in the shower whenever she horny / About me and her in the after hours of the morning.” Kendrick further twists the knife in Dave’s killer’s back with these powerful concluding lines: “About the only girl that cared about you when you asked her / And how she fuckin’ on a famous rapper.”

At the very end of the track, new lines are added to the evolving poem, reflecting upon this phase of Kendrick’s life and its resulting impact on Kendrick’s metamorphosis: “Abusing my power, full of resentment / Resentment that turned into a deep depression / Found myself screaming in the hotel room.” Kendrick’s vengeful designs manifested throughout “These Walls” cause Kendrick to succumb to depression, a subject discussed in depth on the next track.

Track 6 | u

“u” is not only the most heart-wrenching song on the album, it may also be one of the most heart-wrenching songs ever written—it is an artistic masterpiece. Kendrick’s tone is so raw, it feels as if his emotions are contagious and leaking through the track. The instrumental is haunting, yet simultaneously gorgeous and jazzy. The song feels as if all hope is lost, and Kendrick is buried in a dark hole with no escape.

“u” begins with Kendrick screaming, as hinted in the previous track, which ends with the line, “Found myself screaming in the hotel room.” He then repeats the line “Loving you is complicated” ten times in the chorus, where “you” refers to Kendrick. During this phase of his life Kendrick is struggling to love himself; he refers to himself in the third person, implying he is not himself—he is another person, unrecognizable to himself.

Kendrick dives into self-hate in the first verse: “I place blame on you still, place shame on you still / Feel like you ain’t shit, feel like you don’t feel / Confidence in yourself.” Kendrick has lost all sense of self-assurance and is riddled with guilt. This feeling continues on the next line, when Kendrick asks himself: “What can I blame you for?” He answers his own question by listing multiple sins for which he feels complicit, including the deep sense of guilt he carries for the pregnancy of his younger sister: “little sister bakin’ / A baby inside, just a teenager.” Kendrick’s aggression and self-hatred become intense—he screams the line, “I fuckin’ tell you fuckin’ failure—you ain’t no leader!” He follows that line by stating he “never liked you, forever despise—I don’t need ya!” These severe, harsh statements about himself show the deep, raw state of depression Kendrick is facing. He has no faith in himself—he doesn’t believe he possesses any useful qualities. His mind is focused solely on his perceived failures and leads to a layer of complete darkness.

A short post-chorus is performed next, which expands upon the chorus by stating, “Lovin’ you, lovin’ you, not lovin’ you, 100° proof”—a reference to alcohol. Kendrick proceeds to say, “I can feel your vibe and recognize that you’re ashamed of me / Yes, I hate you too.” Not only does Kendrick hate himself on this track, he hates the substance—alcohol—which causes him to behave and feel the way he does.

¹⁷ “These Walls” is the only song with a fourth verse on *TPAB*.

The track transitions to a female housekeeper speaking Spanish, apparently trying to enter the hotel room where Kendrick is staying. Kendrick doesn't bother opening the door—he ignores her offer of help. Instead, he continues into the second verse, where the song takes a sonic and vocal turn while the lyrical topic stays the same. The instrumental becomes jazzier, but still somehow dark and slow, while Kendrick's voice is breaking as if he is on the verge of tears.¹⁸

Kendrick continues reprimanding himself at the top of the second verse, claiming: “you the reason why mom and them leavin’,” then calls himself “irresponsible, selfish,” and “in denial.” Kendrick blames himself for leaving “Compton for profit,” and recounts the tragic murder of his friend Chad, which transpired in his absence: “You promised you’d watch him before they shot him.” Had he not left his hometown in pursuit of money and fame, Kendrick believes Chad might still be alive. Kendrick was “on the road, bottles and bitches” when he “FaceTimed him one time.” Kendrick discusses the circumstances surrounding Chad's death in a 2013 interview, noting, “I had to talk to him over Skype on the hospital bed before he passed.”¹⁹ Kendrick regrets his choices—he believes his absence from Chad's side during his time of need has been “unforgiven,” and “God himself will say, ‘You fuckin’ failed.’”

Kendrick is more sad than angry in the third verse, as he is completely engulfed in depression. He begins the verse by saying, “I know your secrets n*gga / Mood swings are frequent, n*gga / I know depression is restin’ on your heart for two reasons.” The “two reasons” could represent a range of paired events, from the murders of Dave and Chad, to drugs and alcohol, to the dichotomy between Kendrick's newfound wealth and the realities of daily life in Compton.

Later in the verse, Kendrick is heard drinking—a key reason his depression is at its peak. Connecting back to the top of the verse, Kendrick says “I know your secrets / Don't let me tell them to the world.” Kendrick's mind is warning him: *If you keep drinking, more of your secrets will be revealed.* The most confusing line in the song comes later, when Kendrick says, “I’m fucked up, but I’m not as fucked up as you.” If “I” and “you” both represent Kendrick, how can one be more “fucked up” than the other? Perhaps Kendrick's body is physically “fucked up” from alcohol, but his mental state is more “fucked up” because of depression. The self-hatred continues as Kendrick contemplates suicide; “[I] should’ve killed yo’ ass long time ago.” If he can't help those who need him, what is the purpose of existing?

On the final line of the song, Kendrick reverts back to mentioning money—“and if I told your secrets the world'll know money can't stop a suicidal weakness.” Throughout his youth, Kendrick believed if he was financially successful, he would be happy, and he would be able to use his money to make others happy. On “u,” Kendrick realizes that despite being rich and successful, he cannot escape depression, as money doesn't erase trauma. Happiness cannot be bought; it is a chosen state of mind. On this emotionally raw track, Kendrick bravely acknowledges his failures and ultimately challenges himself to change his mindset, which he addresses next in “Alright.”

Track 7 | Alright

“Alright,” is a dramatic change of pace from “u.” While “u” is dark and depressing, “Alright” is upbeat and optimistic, reflecting Kendrick's emergence from depression.²⁰ An npr article discusses the impact of “Alright” during the summer of 2015, a few months after the song's release: “News was spreading about Sandra Bland—a black woman who was found dead in a Texas jail cell after being arrested at a traffic stop, and just the latest in a long list of names that had become synonymous with police violence against black people. But there were moments of joy, too. During a break,

¹⁸ Kendrick is later heard crying in between the second and third verses.

¹⁹ <https://www.gq.com/story/kendrick-lamar-men-of-the-year-rapper>.

²⁰ While “Alright” feels like the opposite of “u,” technically, the opposite of “u” is “i,” the second-to-last track of the album. “i” is a contrasting companion piece to “u” because “i” celebrates self-love and acceptance as the caterpillar reaches its final stages of metamorphosis. “Alright” is not a conclusion, but an inflection point where Kendrick decides to evolve and seeks enlightenment; it is the start of his metamorphosis.

someone put on the song "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar, and a whole auditorium of people broke loose."²¹ "Alright" went on to become a Black Lives Matter anthem due to its message of hope.

The song has not lost its appeal since its release. The Pharrell Williams-produced beat is jazzy and inspiring, and Kendrick flows effortlessly over it.

The intro from Kendrick first acknowledges and then pivots from the previous track: "I'm fucked up, homie, you fucked up / But if God got us then we gon' be alright." Following this comes the chorus from Pharrell Williams where he repeats the lines "We gon' be alright." Despite the trauma Kendrick endured, he understands he cannot move beyond his issues and forgive himself unless he has a hopeful and positive mindset. He applies this logic to *everyone*—the chorus says "*we* gon' be alright," not "*I'm* gon' be alright."²²

Kendrick comes into his first verse with contagious energy. He begins the verse by saying "uh, and when I wake up / I recognize you're looking at me for the pay cut." When Kendrick "wakes up" and becomes wise, he realizes a lot of people, specifically people inside the music industry, don't care about Kendrick's emotions or feelings, but they do care about his money and sales. He also claims that "painkillers only put [him] in a twilight," and "pretty pussy and Benjamin is the highlight." These two lines connect to previous songs on the album: a "twilight" could represent a dark spot in Kendrick's life, connecting to the previous song "u," "pretty pussy" connects to the sexual desires on "These Walls," and "Benjamin," which represents the \$100 bill, connects to the recurring theme of money and income disparity.

After some impressive flow switch-ups in the first verse, the song transitions to the pre-chorus. Kendrick describes how Black Americans have been "down before" and their "pride was low." He also expresses the Black community's distrust of the police, saying that "we hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho."

Tragically, since the song's release in 2015, police brutality has not gotten better. There have been many incidents of police brutality in America over the last decade, making "Alright" equally relevant today as it was at the time of the album's 2015 release.

Later in the pre-chorus, Kendrick says, "my knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow." Kendrick's "knees gettin' weak" could refer to praying (foreshadowing the religious references to come on future tracks) or it might mean Kendrick is losing his patience with police brutality and racial injustice, as being on one's knees invokes images of subservience. When Kendrick mentions his "gun might blow," he may be referring to "u" when he dealt with suicidal thoughts, or he might be ready to fight back against police violence.

Kendrick juxtaposes these dark lines with lightness and joy, telling everyone "We gon' be alright." Kendrick chooses to move forward, unified (note the use of "we"), with a positive attitude, rather than sitting alone in his hotel room, despondent and lacking hope, as he did on the previous track.

The second verse opens with familiar lines: "What you want you, a house? You, a car? / Forty acres and a mule? A piano? A guitar?" These exact lines are on the album's first track, "Wesley's Theory." However, instead of following up these lines with "Anything, see my name is *Uncle Sam*, I'm your dog," as he does on "Wesley's Theory," Kendrick follows up with "Anything, see my name is *Lucy*, I'm your dog."²³ Lucy is a common reference for a female version of Lucifer, the devil. Because both these characters—Uncle Sam and Lucy—offer Kendrick the same thing, and one of them represents the devil, Kendrick is essentially calling Uncle Sam, or the federal government, corrupt and villainous. Despite being able to "see the evil" of Lucy, Kendrick decides to keep Lucy around, for reasons we discover on the next track.

Kendrick proceeds to mention some of his friends and loved ones who passed away, like his cousin Pat Dawg and his friend Chad. Kendrick ends the verse with the line: "my rights, my wrongs, I write 'til I'm right with God." Not only does this line showcase Kendrick's skilled wordplay, it also carries a deeper significance, illustrating how Kendrick displays his good and bad sides in his music. Kendrick is committed to revealing his authentic self.

²¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/26/753511135/kendrick-lamar-alright-american-anthem-party-protest>

²² Italics added for emphasis.

²³ Italics added for emphasis.

After the last chorus, the song transitions to the outro, which begins with the lines “I keep my head up high / I cross my heart and hope to die,” demonstrating Kendrick’s promise to keep a positive outlook and move forward with pride, and also showing his mental improvement from “u.” The next line of the outro is “lovin’ me is complicated,” reflecting how Kendrick’s depression will always be a part of him. This line is almost the exact same line repeated in the chorus of “u,” which is “loving you is complicated.” Kendrick is no longer referring to himself in the third person—he replaces *you* with *me*—illustrating self-acceptance. Living with depression will always be *complicated*, but Kendrick will be *alright* in spite of past grievances and trauma.

“Alright” ends with a continuation of the evolving poem which was last recited on “These Walls.” Kendrick adds the lines “I didn’t want to self-destruct / The evils of Lucy was all around me / So I went runnin’ for answers.” The devil is tempting Kendrick to self-destruct, a reference to suicide; Kendrick is trying his best to veer away from Lucy in search of answers—referencing truth and enlightenment.

Will Kendrick be able to resist the omnipresent Lucy?

Track 8 | For Sale? - Interlude

“For Sale? - Interlude” is the smoother, more sonically pleasing of the two interludes. The track contains a jazzy, upbeat instrumental, and goes much more in depth on the character of Lucy.

The intro on “For Sale? - Interlude” begins with Kendrick talking to himself, in a slightly confused state: “What’s wrong, n*gga? / I thought you was keeping it gangsta / I thought this what you wanted.” Growing up, Kendrick aspired to a life of fame and power—these youthful ambitions are referenced earlier on *TBAP* and can be found on Kendrick’s previous album, *good kid m.A.A.d. city*. After achieving fame, Kendrick is left unsatisfied, leaving his mind in a state of confusion. The last two lines of the intro connect to the theme of religion: “They say if you scared, go to church / But remember, he knows the bible too.” The “he” is likely Lucy, the devil.²⁴

The intro transitions to the chorus, where it appears Kendrick is singing from the perspective of Lucy. Lucy wants to be intimate with Kendrick: “Now, baby, when I get you, get you, get you, get you / I’m a go hit that throttle with you.” Lucy, the devil, wants to ravage Kendrick.

Kendrick is found talking to himself again in the first verse. He tells himself, “Sherane ain’t got nothing on Lucy.” Sherane is one of the main characters on *good kid m.A.A.d. city*—the opening track is named after her. Lucy appears to be hypnotizing Kendrick and convinces him their relationship can be better than Kendrick’s relationship with Sherane.

In the second verse, Kendrick talks to Lucy about a conversation they had earlier. During the conversation, Lucy says “usually I don’t do this but I see you and me, Kendrick,” overtly displaying her interest in Kendrick. Lucy then speaks in the third person, trying to convince Kendrick she will improve his life: “Lucy gon’ fill your pockets / Lucy gon’ move your mama out of Compton.” All Lucy wants in return is Kendrick’s allegiance: “Lucy just want your trust and loyalty, avoiding me?”

At the end of the verse, Lucy asks Kendrick to “sign this contract,” wanting him to sell his soul to her. Kendrick ultimately rejects Lucy, as reflected by the change in the tone of Kendrick’s voice²⁵ as well as his allusion to returning home at the end of the track. Specifically, after the final chorus, the ongoing poem continues—the only line added is “Until I came home,” reflecting Kendrick’s decision to turn his back to temptation and return to his roots.

²⁴ Lucy is referred to as a male here but is referred to as a female elsewhere on the track.

²⁵ <https://genius.com/5047796>.

Track 9 | Momma

“Momma” has one of the best beats on the entire album. The Knxwledge-produced instrumental is a stunning collage of heavenly vocal samples and beautiful percussion.

Kendrick’s first verse showcases his amazing rapping talents—he uses clever rhyme schemes and word play to detail his experience as a rapper. He talks about how he’s been in the rap game “before internet had new acts,” as Kendrick’s passion for rapping began before people looked to the internet for music. He mentions how people “admitted it once [he] submitted it, wrapped in plastic,” meaning people finally understood his talents once he “submitted it,” or turned in his album.²⁶ He ends the verse with the lines, “Thank God for rap / I would say it got me a plaque, but what’s better than that? / The fact it brought me back home.” This concluding lyric ties to the last line of the poem added on the previous track: “Until I come home.” Kendrick is more appreciative of returning “home” and escaping the allure of Lucy than he is of any award or accolade.

“Home” on this track could reference many different things. Based solely upon the title of the track, “home” could refer to Kendrick’s literal home in Compton, a location he mentions often in his music. Alternatively, “home” could refer further back in his lineage, symbolizing Africa—Kendrick visited Africa in 2014 and publicly stated that visit as being influential in the making of *TPAB*.²⁷

The short chorus provides the line, “We been waitin’ for you,” before repeating “Waitin’ for you” several times. But who is “we”? There are many possibilities, but most likely “we” is Africa, waiting for Kendrick to visit and be inspired by its culture and people.

In the second verse, the phrase “I know” begins nearly every line. Kendrick mentions how he thought he knew “everything,” but later “realized that [he] didn’t know shit, the day [he] came home.” He claimed to know “morality,” “loyalty,” “cars,” and so much more, but visiting Africa made him question his knowledge.

Kendrick dives deeper into his experience in Africa on the third verse. He “met a little boy that resembled [his] features,” and the boy tells Kendrick to “take a glimpse of your family ancestor,” and to “make a new list of everything you thought was progress.” The list refers to the second verse when Kendrick lists all of the things he thought he knew before visiting Africa. The boy explains the list is “bullshit,” and Kendrick’s life is full of “turmoil,” meaning the boy believes Kendrick doesn’t truly know anything. The boy tells Kendrick he feels bad for him, even though the boy most likely lives in poverty, as the boy has “ashy, black ankles,” and his “TV was taken.” Despite living in impoverished conditions, the boy tells Kendrick, a rich, famous rapper, “I feel bad for you,” due to Kendrick’s ignorance. The boy offers to “enlighten” Kendrick—he tells Kendrick, “If you pick destiny over rest-in-peace / Then be an advocate, tell your homies, especially / To come back home.” If Kendrick continues down the path of his “destiny” and fulfills his rap dreams, he should use his leadership position to tell all his homies to visit Africa for enlightenment and inspiration.

After these lines, the instrumental changes into a messier, crazier, jazzy beat, as Kendrick’s tone transitions. Despite the inspiration he received in Africa, he still feels lost. He’s looking for something, but doesn’t know what it is or where to find it: “I been looking for you my whole life, an appetite / For the feeling I can barely describe, where you reside? / Is it in a woman, is it in money or mankind? / Tell me something, think I’m losing my mind.” He then says he “thought I found you back in the ghetto / When I was 17 with the .38 special.” The feeling he’s searching for was almost obtained with a weapon at just the age of 17.

What is this feeling, and how can he get it back?

²⁶ It’s likely Kendrick is referencing *good kid m.A.A.d. city*, his second studio album and first major label album, which received critical acclaim including five GRAMMY Award nominations and “Best Album of 2012” nods from BBC, *Complex*, *Fact*, *New York* and *Pitchfork*.

²⁷ <https://www.complex.com/music/a/cmpltara-mahadevan/kendrick-lamar-recalls-how-trip-to-south-africa-influenced-to-pimp-a-butterfly>.

Track 10 | Hood Politics

On “Hood Politics” Kendrick showcases his amazing rapping ability with his versatile flow, high energy, and amazing bars. The song doesn’t have the most unique beats on the album, but the rapping makes “Hood Politics” a phenomenal listen.

The track starts with an intro by Dr. Dre, from the perspective of one of Kendrick’s friends, via voicemail. Behind the voicemail is a groovy, beautiful guitar instrumental. The friend is unhappy with how busy Kendrick has become with his rap lifestyle—he complains, “everytime [he] call[s], it’s going to voicemail.” The friend is hoping Kendrick is not “on some weirdo rap shit,” deepening the idea his friend disapproves of the “new” Kendrick and misses the Kendrick he knows from back in the hood.

After the voicemail, the beat switches, and Kendrick comes in with energy and passion on the chorus: “I been A-1 since day one, you n*ggas boo-boo.” Kendrick is relaying he is one of the best in the game, and he will not apologize for his success.

Kendrick starts the first verse strong, with the line: “I don’t give a fuck about no politics in rap,” which is an interesting thing for Kendrick to say, as he addresses politics throughout the album, including on this very song (which includes the word “politics” in its title). However, this line makes sense when paired with the following line, “Our lil’ homie Stunna Deuce ain’t never coming back.” Stunna Deuce represents all the fallen homies in the hood; with these lines, Kendrick is suggesting he doesn’t want to talk about politics when he is processing personal trauma.

Throughout the first verse, Kendrick continues to rap about his rise in the industry with some of the best bars on the album, such as: “Came in this game, you stuck your fangs in this game / You wore no chain in this game, your hood, you name in this game.”

In the second verse, Kendrick dives deeper into “hood politics” by saying, “The little homies called and said, ‘The enemies done cliqued up.’” Kendrick’s “enemies,” or rivals, are sending violent threats. Kendrick responds by saying “Oh yeah? Puto want to squabble with mi barrio? / Oh yeah? Tell ‘em they can run it for the cardio.” In Spanish, “puto” translates to “bitch,” and “mi barrio” translates to “my neighborhood.” Kendrick is calling his enemies “bitches” for thinking they can mess with his neighborhood, and he tells them to start running before things get too dangerous for them. Kendrick proceeds to talk more about life in the hood, mentioning how *slow* and *cautious* ambulances are when needed (“Slow motion for the ambulance, the project filled with cameras”), in contrast to how *fast* and *careless* the LAPD is to cause harm (“The LAPD gamblin’, scramblin’ football numbers slanderin’”).

Later in the verse, Kendrick says, “ain’t nothin’ new but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-icans / Red state versus a blue state—which one you governing?” These lines show the connection between hood life and politics, as Kendrick compares the divide between Democrats (symbolized by blue) and Republicans (symbolized by red) to the divide between Crips (symbolized by blue) and Bloods (symbolized by red). Kendrick’s use of “flu” to describe these organizations suggests they are highly infectious communal viruses, weakening and damaging society as they are transmitted from person to person. Kendrick adds, “they give us gun and drugs, call us thugs, make it they promise to fuck with you.” Kendrick blames the *suppliers* of guns and drugs for the violence in the hood, rather than the *users* of the guns and drugs.

The last line of the verse is “Obama say, ‘What it do?’” which transitions into an interlude with the line repeating three more times. This short line has many possible interpretations. Obama was the Democratic president at the time *TBAP* was released. “What it do?” means “What’s up?”²⁸—but why is Obama saying this, and who is he talking to? Possibly, Kendrick is alluding to the fact that Obama was not helping the Black community as much as Kendrick would have liked. Instead of addressing gun violence in Black neighborhoods, Obama is dismissively saying “What it do?” and moving on. Funny enough, Obama himself is a big fan of Kendrick: when asked who would win a rap battle between Kendrick and Drake, Obama chose Kendrick, and remarked *TPAB* was “outstanding”.²⁹

²⁸ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=what%20it%20do>.

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWEZgEieSDs>.

Kendrick begins verse three with the lines, “Everybody want to talk about who this and who that / Who the realest and who wack, or who white and who black,” reflecting how Kendrick values shared human experience as opposed to identity politics. Further down in the verse Kendrick mentions he doesn’t like when people ask him about his girlfriend or “vogues,” but he likes when people ask him “about power,” because he “got a lot of it.” Kendrick is prouder of his leadership and his ability to influence and inspire others than he is of any trend or stylish display. He follows this up by saying he’s “the only n*gga next to Snoop that can push the button.” Kendrick and Snoop Dogg are two of the biggest rappers to come out of the west coast. If Kendrick or Snoop “[press] the button” they could elicit a strong response from others or start a rap war.

The last line of the verse is possibly more relevant today than upon the album’s release in 2015. Kendrick recalls a conversation he had with Jay-Z, when Jay-Z said, “It’s funny how one verse can fuck up the game.” Nine years after the album’s release, in 2024, Kendrick released a verse on Future and Metro Boomin’s collaboration album, *WE DON’T TRUST YOU*. Kendrick’s verse on the track “Like That” throws shots at Drake and J. Cole. Kendrick literally “fuck(ed) up” the rap game with this verse. In the month following his “Like That” verse, J.Cole released a diss track, apologized for making the diss track, and subsequently deleted it, while Drake dropped a diss track of his own. Artists such as Rick Ross, The Weeknd, and A\$AP Rocky all got involved by dissing Drake as well. Moreover, Kanye West invited himself into the beef and started dissing Drake and J. Cole on a “Like That” remix. Ultimately, the conflict boiled down to Kendrick vs. Drake. When Obama said Kendrick would beat Drake in a rap battle, he was not wrong. As a result of the rap war, Kendrick put out one of the biggest songs in the world, “Not Like Us,” a Drake diss. Also, Kendrick’s “Meet the Grahams,” will go down as one of the most creepy, eerie, and unique diss tracks of all time. Drake did not drop a diss track even close to the level of either of these songs. Jay-Z was right: one verse can most definitely “fuck up the game.”

“Hood Politics” ends by adding the following lines to the ongoing, evolving poem: “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 a continuous war / Back in the city / I was entering a new one.”

Kendrick recounts his internal battle on the next track.

Track 11 | How Much a Dollar Cost

While Kendrick is known to be a great storyteller, “How Much a Dollar Cost” solidifies his title as one of the greatest storytellers in the rap genre.

The song begins with Kendrick asking a deceptively simple question: “How much a dollar really cost?” The obvious answer is one dollar, or 100 cents, but Kendrick explains why a dollar costs so much more than that.

He begins the story (which he mentions is a mostly true story in a 2015 interview with MTV³⁰) by parking his “luxury car” at a gas station and “feeling big as Mutombo.” Dikembe Mutombo was an NBA center who stood at an imposing 7’2” tall.³¹ Stated differently, Kendrick is feeling confident and brave as he steps out of his vehicle.

Kendrick asks for “20 on pump 6,” but must repeat himself because it is difficult for the man, who “only spoke Zulu,” a South African language, to understand him.

Kendrick leaves the gas station and encounters a homeless man, who asks Kendrick for “ten Rand” where Rand is the South African currency, and 10 Rand translates to approximately one USD. However, Kendrick doesn’t consider giving the man money, as he is convinced “he was smokin’,” so he tells the man to “beat it.”

The man asks again: “Listen to me, I want a single bill from you / Nothin’ less, nothin’ more.” Kendrick again ignores the man’s plea and gets back in his car. This leads to James Fauntleroy’s beautifully sung, angelic chorus: “It’s more to feed your mind / water, sun and love, the one you love / all you need, the air you breathe.”

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu4Pz9Pjoll&t=357s>.

³¹ Mutombo passed away on September 30, 2024.

Kendrick is receiving insightful advice about focusing on basic—and free—natural elements: water, sun, and air. Kendrick is encouraged to shift his perspective away from materialistic goals towards enlightenment and love.

The story picks up with the homeless man staring at Kendrick. Kendrick is about to leave the gas station, but “somethin’ told [him] to keep it in park until [he] could see / The reason why [the homeless man] was mad at a stranger / Like [he] was supposed to save him.”

Kendrick doesn’t understand why the homeless man is upset with him, as Kendrick is a stranger to the man. The two men continue to stare at each other, and Kendrick begins to feel “some type of disrespect.” Eventually, the homeless man asks Kendrick “Have you ever opened up Exodus 14? / A humble man is all that we ever need.” Exodus 14 tells the story of Moses parting the red sea.³² Moses was a leader, a “humble man,” who guided the Israelites out of the dangers of Egypt. The homeless man wants Kendrick to take leadership and be humble, just like Moses.

Kendrick continues fighting to keep his money at the top of the third verse. He tells the homeless man, “Crumbs and pennies, I need all of mines,” showing that as rich as Kendrick is, he refuses to lose to the homeless man. He accuses the man of being drunk, saying he’s “babblin’,” and his “words ain’t flatterin’” The man tells Kendrick his “potential is bittersweet,” while Kendrick responds by saying “Every nickel is mine to keep,” proving the man’s point: Kendrick has potential to do great things, but his greediness and selfishness are holding him back.

The third verse ends with a stunning reveal. The man looks at Kendrick and says, “Know the truth, it’ll set you free / You’re looking at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power.”

This entire time, Kendrick was not speaking to a random homeless man—he was speaking to God.

God proceeds to answer the deceptively simple question posed at the start of the song: “I’ll tell you just how much a dollar cost / The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss—I am God.”

One dollar proved to be the price to enter heaven, and Kendrick’s selfishness cost him his spot in heaven.

The outro is sung by Ronald Isley from the perspective of Kendrick asking for forgiveness. He asks God, “what more do you want from me?” and admits he isn’t “what it’s all meant to be.” Finally, he asks God to “turn this page, help [him] change to right [his] wrongs,” showing Kendrick wants to become a more pious and righteous leader.

Track 12 | Complexion (A Zulu Love)

“Complexion (A Zulu Love)” is a smooth, calm rap song, with great production all around.

The song starts with the simple, yet effective and catchy chorus sung by Pete Rock, who states “Complexion don’t mean a thing.” Rock’s lyrics connect to a point Kendrick made on “Hood Politics”—the government should serve all Americans equally, regardless of complexion, as “it all feels the same” on the inside. Kendrick reiterates this notion at the beginning of his first verse: “dark as the midnight hour or bright as the mornin’ sun / Give a fuck about your complexion.”

In the second verse, Kendrick adds many insightful lines about the importance of not judging someone by their appearance. “Beauty is what you make it”—anything and anyone can be beautiful, depending upon the perspective of the observer. Kendrick adds, “I used to be so mistaken / By different shades of faces / Then Whit’ told me, ‘A woman is a woman, love the creation.’”

The amazing female rapper, Rapsody, performs the third verse, the only rap verse performed by someone other than Kendrick on the entire album. Rapsody does a fantastic job relaying the theme of the song with her smooth flows and clever lines, such as “Enforcin’ my dark side like a young George Lucas,” and “black as brown, hazelnut, cinnamon, black tea / And it’s all beautiful to me.”

After Rapsody’s verse, Kendrick performs the outro, preparing listeners for the next track. Kendrick’s tone is darker in this outro, contrasting with most of the song and foreshadowing what’s next.

On the last two lines of the outro, Kendrick says “I don’t see Compton, I see something much worse / The land of landmines, the hell that’s on earth.” Compton is indistinguishable from a warzone—its citizens have been

³² <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2014&version=NIV>.

robbed of their dignity and basic human rights; Compton is a version of hell on earth. Beauty exists all around us—why isn't Compton afforded beauty? Why does having a darker complexion mean being relegated to a war zone?

Kendrick's anger is contagious—he snaps on the next track.

Track 13 | The Blacker the Berry

While racial discrimination has been a theme through the entire project, on “The Blacker the Berry” Kendrick dives deep into this topic, discussing the reality of being discriminated against as a Black man in America. Both the instrumental and Kendrick's tone grow in aggressiveness over the track, showing Kendrick's increasing anger and frustration with ongoing institutionalized racism.

The intro opens with vocals from Kendrick: “Everything black, I don't want black,” while another voice is simultaneously singing “They want us to bow / Down to our knees / And pray to the God we don't believe.” American institutions, from housing to education to the job market, deliberately segregate Black citizens, so Kendrick sees “everything black.” At the same time—represented by simultaneous singing—these institutions tell Black citizens to aspire to what is unfairly offered only to white citizens. Black Americans are denied access to the very things they are told to worship.

Kendrick proceeds into the bridge, where his tone isn't quite aggressive yet, as he describes an early morning fire (at “Six in the morn'”) suggestive of rage and destruction. Kendrick ends the bridge saying, “Black don't crack,” which not only reflects the strength and perseverance of Black people, but also references the crack cocaine epidemic which raged within Black communities in the 1980s and early 1990s. It has been alleged the United States government, the CIA in particular,³³ is responsible for the infiltration of crack cocaine in Black neighborhoods, which not only led to violence and death, but also led to mass incarceration of Black men.³⁴ This is not the first time Kendrick presents his views on the government's involvement in the crack epidemic, as his song “Ronald Reagan Era (His Evils),” released in 2011, explores this topic in detail.

The first verse—and the two verses which follow—begin with the same two lines: “I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015 / Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I mean,” It's hard to know why Kendrick refers to himself as a hypocrite in the first time; in the second line Kendrick acknowledges his hypocrisy is not immediately obvious, and asks listener to stay with him until the end of the track.

The proceeding lyrics throughout the first verse get straight to the point and hit hard. Kendrick proudly states, “I'm black as the moon,” which is interesting as the moon appears white at night. It is worth noting the moon is always present; however, it is more visible at night because it is illuminated by the sun's rays. Along the same vein, Kendrick's talent has always been present—it is now visible due to the spotlight of fame.³⁵

Kendrick proceeds to list notable physical features of Black men. He claims America hates his “people, [their] plan is to terminate [his] culture,” and that America is “evil,” alluding to “Alright” when Kendrick compares Lucy (the devil) to Uncle Sam (the federal government). Following this, Kendrick claims he is a “proud monkey.” A monkey is considered a racial slur when used to describe a Black person. Kendrick calls himself a “proud monkey,” showing he doesn't care what people call him because he's proud of who he is. Unlike the moon, Kendrick does not require light or validation from others to know his worth. Later, he threatens to “press the button,” which is a reference to the earlier track “Hood Politics,” where Kendrick claimed only he and Snoop Dogg could “press the button.” On “Hood Politics,” pressing the button represents starting a rap war. In this track, pressing the button represents exposing the underbelly of racism in America, which he does on this very song.

³³ <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/special/9712/ch01p1.htm>.

³⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/13/1186778651/crack-cocaine-epidemic-when-crack-was-king-donovan-x-ramsey>.

³⁵ This line may also be referencing the first time in the album, “Every n*gga is a star,” as stars are like in the moon in that they are only visible at night.

After the first verse, there's a pre-chorus which repeats the line "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." This phrase has multiple meanings, the first being the most literal: the darker the berry, the sweeter the taste, or juice. The second being the darker someone's skin, the more pride they should have for their skin color and identity. The last interpretation, which possibly makes the most sense, is the darker someone's skin color, the more likely they are to be victims of racism and murdered. This interpretation, suggestive of gang violence and police brutality, connects with the last line of the pre-chorus, "The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot."

This line leads into the chorus, performed by Assassin, where he discusses how the struggle of being Black did not stop him from achieving success: "How you no see the whip, left scars 'pon me back / But now we have a big whip parked 'pon the block." Even though he was attacked and tortured with a "whip," a strong reference to slavery, he now owns a "whip" of his own, which in this context is a nice car, as opposed to a tool used to hurt people.

Kendrick continues this theme of Black oppression in the second verse, referring to how past struggles did not prevent Kendrick from achieving success. Kendrick claims "It's evident that [he's] irrelevant to society," but later contrasts this by saying "Black and successful, this Black man meant to be special." Despite being made to feel "irrelevant" as a Black man in America, Kendrick found success. For a Black man to achieve greatness in a country built on racism, he must be "special," as America has constructed obstacles to keep him "irrelevant."

Kendrick continues exposing racism in the third verse by listing stereotypes about Black people, such as eating "watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays," and jumping "high enough to Michael Jordan endorsements." Such food and actions are not necessarily derogatory, but it is offensive when one *assumes* a Black person prefers these items or aspires to perform these actions.

Kendrick reveals why he is "the biggest hypocrite of 2015" at the end of the third verse. Kendrick asks himself: "So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / When gang-banging made me kill a n*gga blacker than me?" Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old Black male who was killed in 2012.³⁶ Kendrick sees himself as a hypocrite because he does not condone violence against Black men, and yet Kendrick himself engaged in acts of violence against a black man as a youth in Compton.

"The Blacker the Berry" ends with a jazzy instrumental outro which juxtaposes the beat underlining most of the song. This outro could represent how the American government ignores Black people and has decided their problems are not worth fighting for, as the outro seems to have a mind of its own, ignoring the powerful lyrics and beats preceding it.

Track 14 | You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)

"You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)" is one of the simpler tracks on *TPAB*. Its basic structure, smooth beat and catchy hook make for one of the easier and more accessible listens on the project.

Kendrick has a short intro which he concludes by saying, "I'ma tell you what my mama had said, she like." This line transitions to the first verse, where Kendrick raps from the perspective of his mother. His mother tells Kendrick she can "see [his] insecurities written all on [his] face." Kendrick exposes a lot of his insecurities on *TPAB*. On the last track, Kendrick discussed his feelings of hypocrisy, while on this track Kendrick reveals his fear he will not be a respected and inspirational leader. Kendrick's mother offers him sound advice: "Circus acts only attract those who entertain,"—Kendrick needs to drop the act and be himself in order to be the positive influence he wants to be.

The end of the first verse leads to a refrain where Kendrick reverts back to his perspective and discusses how people ask him questions to impress him, such as: "Where the hoes at?", "Where are the moneybags at?", and "Where the plug at?" While people ask him questions to impress him, these questions have the reverse effect—they expose people's insecurities.

On the hook, Kendrick shares this simple yet important message: "You ain't gotta lie to kick it." This message could be from the perspective of his mother, telling Kendrick he doesn't need to be flashy or act cool to be influential.

³⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/index.html>.

However, it could also be Kendrick sharing this message with his community, telling them they do not need to ask him irrelevant questions to try and impress him; it's important not to be anyone other than your authentic self.

In the second verse, Kendrick talks about “the loudest one in the room,” and how “that’s a complex,” illustrating how the loudest people are often the most insecure. This notion connects to the first verse, where Kendrick’s mom tells him she can see his insecurities—Kendrick could be calling himself the loudest one in the room.

Kendrick begins verse three by asking a question: “What do you gotta offer? / Tell me before we off ya, put you deep in the coffin.” Kendrick poses this question in a general form, challenging himself, his listeners, and the Black community to assume leadership roles to alleviate ongoing problems before it’s too late. Near the end of the verse, Kendrick claims, “loud, rich n*ggas got low money / And loud, broke n*ggas got no money / The irony behind it is so funny.” If you’re rich and show off your money (if you are “loud” about your money) you’re really not rich at all; you’re insecure. In the end, if you’re loud and *broke* you end up in the same position as someone who’s loud and *rich*: “deep in the coffin”—that’s the irony of success. We should use our limited time on earth to inspire, elevate, and support others, as opposed to being “loud” about material things which do not matter in the end.

“You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Mamma Said)” ends the noise of a gathering crowd, which transitions into the next track, “i”.

Track 15 | i

Serving as a sharp contrast to “u” (Track 6), where Kendrick describes his depression and self-loathing, “i” is a song about self-love and positivity. The energetic, danceable instrumental in “i” juxtaposes the dark and heartbreaking vibe of “u.” Instead of putting the pre-recorded version of “i” on *TPAB*, which won the 2014 GRAMMY for Rap Song of the Year,³⁷ Kendrick includes a live version of the track which has more energy all around, but especially from Kendrick’s vocals, which prove more passionate on the live version than the recorded single.

The song starts with an intro from Ronald Isley, who appears to be at the concert where “i” is being performed. Isley hypes up the crowd, saying, “We’re bringing up nobody...but the number one rapper in the world.” Next the instrumental comes in, and Kendrick begins his verse saying, “I done been through a whole lot / Trial, tribulations, but I know God,”—throughout his challenges, being close with God brings Kendrick comfort and provides him the strength to move past his obstacles. He adds: “so many motherfuckers wanna drown [him],” but he doesn’t care because of his newfound, positive mindset.

On the infectious hook, Kendrick asks the question, “When you lookin’ at me, ah, tell me what do you see?” followed by background vocals saying, “I love myself.” There’s a clear sense of positivity radiating from this chorus. It seems as if all of Kendrick’s personal insecurities and problems he’s faced throughout the entirety of *TPAB* have vanished—he’s reset his perspective and is focusing on self-acceptance and a more joyous existence.

On the first verse, Kendrick discusses some of his past issues—recognizing they still exist: “They wanna say it’s a war outside bomb in the street / Gun in the hood, mob of police.” Kendrick *chooses* to be positive while acknowledging hardships, stating: “Sky could fall down, wind could cry now / Look at me...I smile.” While his struggles no longer hold him back, they are ongoing in society and will also be a part of him.

In verse two, Kendrick states, “Everybody lacks confidence” and asks two questions: “How many times my potential was anonymous? How many times this city making me promises?” By posing the first question, Kendrick is challenging those who didn’t recognize his potential and didn’t see what he could become. This first question is not intended to be a bragging point, nor is it intended to make others feel bad; instead, it is meant to make listeners wonder: *How many other gifted individuals are out there, whose talent is yet to be discovered?* It is meant to cause listeners to open their eyes and see the beauty and *potential* in all people. The second question refers to Compton, challenging how many times the city will promise to improve before resolving its problems. Again, Kendrick is asking listeners

³⁷ <https://www.grammy.com/artists/kendrick-lamar/17949>.

to take ownership and responsibility to find solutions. Kendrick acknowledges the only promise he can make, in sincerity, is that he “love[s] [him]self.”

After the second chorus, there’s a bridge, where Kendrick uses “fe-fi-fo-fum” to portray himself as a giant, showing he’s bigger than all his problems, and nothing can get in his way or stop him.

Kendrick reflects upon his past in the third verse, claiming: “I went to war last night / With an automatic weapon.” He also says: “I’ve been dealing with depression ever since adolescence.” Kendrick has gone to war with his demons, and is emerging from the cocoon a stronger, healthier man.

After verse three, the music cuts out and Kendrick begins a conversation with fans at his concert. While his fans argue about how to solve problems in the hood, Kendrick explains more people will die if they continue arguing instead of taking action. He emphasizes time is of the essence; they “ain’t got time to waste.” Kendrick then pontificates about the meaning and importance of the N-word, explaining to the crowd how it originated from Ethiopia as the word *Negus*, which is defined by “royalty; king royalty.” He explains, “The history books overlooked the word and hide it.” Kendrick calls for the Black community to reclaim the word as something positive: “The homies don’t recognize we been using it wrong.” He ends the verse calling himself “the realest *Negus* alive,” thus calling himself a king: King Kendrick.

Track 16 | Mortal Man

“Mortal Man” serves as a beautiful closer to *TPAB*, as all the puzzle pieces click into place. While the song is lengthy with a duration over twelve minutes, not a second of the track is wasted.

The chorus begins with Kendrick saying he hopes his raps inspire and impress “The ghost of Mandela,” as he wants to carry Nelson Mandela’s legacy in his music—a legacy of uniting people with love, peace and patience. Kendrick wants his words to be the listener’s “Earth and moon,” illustrating how he wants to impact people’s lives, just as the Earth and moon impact everyday life, and perpetuating the astronomical references made throughout the album, from the album’s opening line, “Every n*gga is a *star*,” to his “bright as the mornin’ *sun*” reference on “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” to Kendrick’s claim he is “black as the *moon*” on “The Blacker the Berry.”³⁸ Kendrick wants his music to reverberate across all space and time.

After the chorus, Kendrick poses the question, “When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?” Kendrick is using both definitions of “fan,” as a fan is both an admirer/booster (as in a sports or music fan), and an instrument for producing currents of air.³⁹ This line exposes Kendrick’s vulnerability, as he is questioning his fans’ loyalties; he is asking his fans if they will continue to support him if he remains plagued by the problems he faced throughout the duration of the album, or if they will abandon him, blowing air in his face.

Kendrick continues questioning his fans’ loyalties in the first verse, as he asks his fans a series of questions, challenging whether they believe in him or if they are deceiving him. Later in the verse, Kendrick connects back to Mandela, saying he wants his fans to “love [him] like Nelson,” and claiming he freed his fans “from being a slave in [their] mind,” referencing Mandela’s role in ending apartheid in South Africa.

Kendrick notes his “song is more than a song, it’s surely a blessing,” referring to his music’s powerful impact on society. Kendrick’s vulnerability on *TPAB* is meant to advance discussions surrounding mental health, substance abuse, and racial injustice, and to promote self-love and positivity. Kendrick hopes *TPAB* inspires listeners to confront their demons and reach beyond synthetic expectations, in order to free themselves from internal and external confines and limitations.

Kendrick asks another series of questions in the second verse, one of them examining whether the people who claim to love him are just “pretending.” He continues the Mandela references, saying, “You wanna love like Nelson, you wanna be like Nelson.” On the first verse, Kendrick says he “wants you to love [him] like Nelson.” Now,

³⁸ Italics added for emphasis.

³⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fan>.

he claims it's "you" (the listener) who wants to love and act like Mandela, not Kendrick. Kendrick wants his fans to spread love to others, similar to the love Kendrick has shared with his fans.

In verse three Kendrick admits his actions, such as holding "grudges like past judges," are not "Nelson-like," as Mandela promoted peace and inclusivity. At the conclusion of the verse, Kendrick lists a series of leaders (including Moses—referenced on Track 11, Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John Kennedy) who share a common fate: betrayal. Kendrick wonders whether he will suffer the same fate, which explains why Kendrick uses his final track to question his fans' loyalties, and in doing so, Kendrick reveals his insecurities are not a thing of the past. Even the most beautiful butterflies are flawed.

About four and a half minutes into the song, Kendrick recites a completed version of the ongoing poem. The last time he recited the ongoing poem was at the end of "Hood Politics"—Kendrick adds a lot of new lines alluding to tracks since then. He talks about telling "the homies" what he learned about respecting all Black men (from "Complexion (A Zulu Love)") and about violence in the hood (from "The Blacker the Berry"). After Kendrick finishes reciting the completed poem, it's revealed he is reading the poem to Tupac. This is not entirely surprising—in a 2013 interview, Kendrick admits at age 21 Tupac appeared to him in a vision and told Kendrick: "Don't let the music die."⁴⁰ In a separate interview after the album's release, Kendrick reveals the original working title of the album was *To Pimp A Caterpillar* which would have been abbreviated to *TPAC* or *Tupac*.⁴¹

The rest of the track is a conversation between Kendrick and Tupac. Their conversation has a natural feel to it, making "Mortal Man" seem like an interview. Kendrick asks Tupac many interesting questions, one of them being "Do you see yourself as somebody that's rich / Or somebody that made the best of their own opportunities?" Tupac is both: he "built [him]self up so [he] could get it to where [he] owned it."

The two rappers discuss some of the themes on the album, such as violence, racism, and income inequality. At the end of their conversation, Kendrick explains the meaning of the title *To Pimp A Butterfly*. He tells a beautiful story about a caterpillar and a butterfly—Kendrick explains, "The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar." He ends this story by saying, "Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different / They are one and the same." These lines end the album in gorgeous fashion. Every person has the potential to become a butterfly; however, we all begin life as caterpillars.

Kendrick grows, learns and evolves throughout the duration of *TPAB*. He exposes his darkest side on "u," and emerges as a butterfly on "i," after finding himself in a cocoon for many of the tracks in between. When Kendrick asks Tupac about his thoughts on this story, Tupac is already gone. The final line of the album is "Pac?" which represents Kendrick trying to grab Tupac's attention, but it is too late. We are all mortal.

Conclusion

The puzzle is complete. The path Kendrick Lamar travels on during *TPAB* sees him through discrimination, depression, and self-doubt, while eventually reaching positivity and enlightenment. Kendrick bares his soul, revealing his evolution from a caterpillar to a butterfly—a butterfly the government and the rap industry fail to "pimp," as it proved unsuccessful in its attempts to take advantage of Kendrick. By sharing his transformation, Kendrick ensures the opening message of the album—"Every n*gga is a star"—resonates louder and louder throughout the world.

⁴⁰ <https://www.gq.com/story/kendrick-lamar-men-of-the-year-rapper>.

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu4Pz9Pjoll&t=357s>.

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Appendix A

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 color than mine's

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

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

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

But I don't know, I'm no mortal man

Maybe I'm just another n*gga

- Kendrick Lamar