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Modern Existentialism within Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth was born and raised in Compton, California. Growing up in Compton, his family came from a lower socioeconomic class ranking. He is no stranger to the street violence and intense gang environment that he lived in, yet he never allowed these conditions to negatively impact him. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is Lamar's second major-label studio album. He found the inspiration for this album after a trip to Africa that influenced a lot of the topics discussed throughout the album as well as different musical elements such as spoken word, hip-hop, jazz, funk, and soul. By challenging such elements and using his journey from childhood moving up into the rap game, he confronts such existential realities in his work.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is Humanism*, he explains how there are two types of existentialism, existential Christians and existential atheists. He describes existential Christians by comparing the way in which an artisan manufactures a paper-knife to the way in which God created man, "God makes man according to a procedure and a conception... following a definition and a formula" (Sarte 4). This concept is coined by philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard. In Christian existentialism, Kierkegaard believed God is equated with love. A man's independent choices are what constitutes their existence. He viewed individuals as both finite and infinite elements. Finite elements are restricted to one's physical body and physical actions while infinite elements are more on a broader spectrum and they branch out to mental and spiritual elements. When one is not fully in terms with their infinite side, they are considered to be in despair. Kierkegaard explains a man who has sinned is a man who is exposed to this idea

of despair. Throughout Lamar's work, he is battling this notion of despair and his existence in the world he comes from versus the world that he finds himself in.

Kendrick Lamar expresses how he struggled with being exposed to this idea of despair. The song "u" experiments with Lamar's struggle of his existence in the world he comes from and the world that he finds himself in, this made him feel "condemned to be free." He expresses his guilt in rising to fame and fortune while his community in Compton is still struggling, "Your trials and tribulations a burden, everyone felt it/ Everyone heard it, multiple shots, corners cryin' out/ You was deserted, where was your antennas again?/ Where was your presence? Where was your support that you pretend?" (Lamar 2:40). On Lamar's rise to fame and success, he encountered many trials and tribulations, as he describes, making him feel like a burden to others and family back home. He feels selfish to complain since people back in Compton are still dying. He feels his existence is to help his community and be able to communicate with his community while living in an entirely different world. This being why he asks himself "Where was your antennas again" (Lamar 2:40) as him losing connection with those he feels he was put here to help. When discussing the influences and story behind "u," Lamar explains "When you're on stage rapping and all these people are cheering for you, you actually feel like you're saving lives. But you aren't saving lives back home" (Academy, "The Oral History of Kendrick Lamar's 'To Pimp a Butterfly'"). He faces a dilemma on who his target audience is and whom he should be spreading his messages out to. Modern existentialism plays into his music as he situates his own personal experiences with the experiences of those in Black America.

Kendrick Lamar makes a modern existentialism connection between his personal experiences and the reality of Black America in his song "The Blacker the Berry." The unfortunate events of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown served as inspiration for this song and

addressing the existence of Black America. By speaking on the matter, he describes himself as a “conscious rapper” and believes that being conscious is a gift from God. In the song, he speaks on Black features “my hair is nappy... my nose is round and wide,” appropriation of Black culture, “you vandalize my perception but can't take style from me,” and the harsher realities of living in Black America, “this plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred/ it's genocism, it's grimy, little justification” (Lamar “The Blacker the Berry”). Lamar recognizes his roots and his existence as a Black man in America despite acquiring wealth and such a grand platform. With this platform, he wants audiences to feel uncomfortable and acknowledge the message that he sends in his lyrics. By starting this song by touching on Black features then honing in on heavier topics of Black injustices in America, existentially speaking, Lamar is making a point that Black people exist outside of these stereotypes and how they are viewed on the surface level. He also finds it hypocritical for someone to condemn police killings of young Black men while they are participating in the same activity, just a different motive. He challenges his own existence in this reality and whether his actions matter in the grand scheme of how the world around him works.

Kendrick Lamar throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly* acknowledges his existence in Compton and his existence in Hollywood and in the rap game. Among other musical elements, he uses spoken word to confront existential realities presented throughout his album. In the last song of the album “Mortal Man,” he concludes the song with a spoken-word outro. Each part of the spoken outro corresponds to a specific song within the album detailing his rise to power, leading to his personal reflection of where he is now and where he sees himself in the future. Lamar makes a statement about being “no mortal man” then juxtaposes this statement by saying, “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****r (Lamar 6:13). Lamar recognized his existential as possibly being just another normal human being, but what he hints at in his spoken outro is that his lyrics and his message are what will immortalize him.

In the album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar challenges his existence as a Black man in America who comes from a violent, gang-related community. He journeys through stages of self-realization and what his purpose is in this world. At times, he is in despair and goes through a depression as he struggles to find how to help his Compton community while adjusting to the lifestyle he has found himself in and the platform he has acquired. By going through this journey, he supports the notion that there is a point for our existence and anything that we do. His purpose is to spread his message to both those in need back in Compton and those blind to the struggles of people living the reality of Black America.

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