

Aliya Daniels

ENGL398A-1601

April 5, 2021

Art Review of *To Pimp a Butterfly* as it Transcends Hip-Hop

Kendrick Lamar is a Compton-based rapper known for his rhythmic beats and poetic lyricism. In his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* he explores the complexities of what it means to be Black in America from the lens of storytelling. Lamar includes five powerful singles on this album to frame the narrative at play in this body of work. The musical genius behind this album is noted in the mixture of genres. Lamar utilizes jazz elements, spoken word, neo-soul production and traditional West Coast hip-hop components to make *To Pimp a Butterfly* unique and expressive. In this album Lamar demonstrates a different type of artistry, he is able to push on the confines of what it means to be a rapper and does so in a way that is unique and refreshing not shying away from mixing genres and talking about real issues.

When reviewing *To Pimp a Butterfly* the theme is incredibly clear. Lamar is articulating what it is like to be Black in the United States and he utilizes several artistic choices to depict this. Namely, he uses the form of a storytelling narrative to inform his audience of this unique experience, in doing so he also mentions national politics and issues specific to urban America. This album is fully encompassing and leaves no stone unturned. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is able to mix a narrative structure while infusing multiple rhythmic techniques. There are recurring moments throughout the album, both lyrically and musically, that listeners are able to recall and create connections. Ultimately, Lamar is able to deliver *To Pimp a Butterfly* as one of his best albums to date, due to the artistry that went into making the music and the importance behind its overhauling themes.

From the introduction song on this album, the audience is able to see that Lamar is going to be addressing more serious and personal issues. He utilizes storytelling to get several themes across and this is a popular tactic seen in several of Lamar's albums. As I've stated, Lamar centers *To Pimp a Butterfly* on the many issues African Americans have faced. He begins most prominently with slavery. In the song "Complexion" he discusses the advantages and disadvantages to being an enslaved person who works in the field as opposed to one who predominantly works within the master's home; once again pointing to the disparities that take place, even in enslaved groups. Enslaved people who worked on the field were not given clothing to cover their bodies and they were subject to laborious work. To juxtapose, enslaved people who worked in their master's home, were dressed with modesty and at times had the opportunity to wear clothing from their masters and mistresses. The lyrics in the song "Complexion" include, "Sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field n****. I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you". Lamar is following a storyline in this song in which he is an enslaved person who works in the field and hopes to be good enough to make it in with those in the home. This album is centered around Black struggle in America and Lamar begins discussing this on the basis of slavery.

Moving past *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s first song in which Lamar is interacting with and talking about slavery, he begins to look inward and discuss how urban America has been let down on systemic levels. Lamar looks to elected officials to own up to the ways that they have let inner-cities, like his hometown of Compton, down. In his song "Hood Politics" Lamar says, "From Compton to Congress, set trippin' all around...Ain' nothin' new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Red-Blood-licans...Red states versus a blue state, which one you governin'?" He is relating the partisan politics of Washington, D.C. to the 'hood politics' of gang affiliations

in Compton, CA. Lamar is toying with the idea of juxtaposition in which he is relating his upbringing and his background to a larger scale problem of the United States government not paying attention to these neighborhoods in need. The storyline within this song is important because the audience is shown both sides of the issue and taken on a journey in which they begin to scratch the surface on inner-city living.

As Lamar progresses through the album he begins to look outward at how the dynamic in the United States is unfavorable to his people. He moves beyond the historical progression of slavery and Black liberation and begins to talk about contemporary issues largely relating to brutality against Black people. In the hit piece, “Alright”, the album is able to transcend the confines of what it means to be a hip hop album. This song affirms Black people that things will be alright and the fight continues. It has become anthemic and even soothing to those on the front lines of these marches and rallies that continue to demand change. The lyrics point to a collective struggle and depict persistence in the face of injustice. As I stated, Kendrick’s past in Compton truly shaped him and in turn it allowed him to make a song like “Alright” in which he tells his audience that “If God got us then we gon’ be alright!”. He has seen hardships all his life and this has therefore allowed him to grant this drive and persistence to others.

To Pimp a Butterfly is rhythmically a masterpiece. The elements within this body of music make it ideal and highlight just how clever Lamar is. As I stated, he mixes several genres to make this album unique and set apart from the rest. While artists are mainly confined to their genre and the powers that be, Lamar utilized his network of jazz producers and influences to alter the sound of *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The album sits at the intersection of jazz and hip-hop with jazz musicians and producers like Robert Glasper, Kamasi Washington and Ambrose Akimusire, offering their talents to the work. Additionally, there is the implementation of big name

producers within the hip-hop conscious such as Pharell who offer an alternate point of view to this already rhythmically diverse body of music. The album's mix of genres is done with intention. Lamar is highlighting a theme of the album within its production and creation. The theme of Black struggle and Black history is prevalent throughout the album therefore the inclusion of generically "Black genres" is of no shock. Songs on the album such as "Alright" and "u" utilize traditionally jazz instruments such as the saxophone and the bass. Moreover, on the song "For Free?" he adjusts right into slam poetry and spoken word. Lamar is not shying away from branching out musically and this is a powerful tool that helps with this album's success. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is successful in its mix of genres and production elements and this is tied into Lamar's larger themes centered around Black life in America.

To Pimp a Butterfly is a highly acclaimed album receiving accolades and praise from several outlets. Renowned music publication *Rolling Stones* gave this album a number 19 position on the "500 Best Songs of All Time"; once again pointing to the impact this album has on society not only for its strong lyricism but its interwoven themes on race and unapologetic expression. In addition, popular music blog *Pitchfork* gave this album a 9.4 out of 10 making it Kendrick's third album receiving an 'A' rating. The album went on to receive seven GRAMMY nominations including "Album of the Year" and "Best Rap Album". Hit single from the album "Alright" also received a nomination at the 2016 GRAMMYs for "Song of the Year", "Best Rap Performance", "Best Rap Song" and "Best Music Video". This cemented *To Pimp a Butterfly* as one of the most prolific albums of the year, additionally, these awards and highly rated reviews make it stand out for decades. This album works incredibly well in several facets (lyrics, rhythm and beats, themes, etc.) and this is evident with its long list of accolades and critical acclaim.

To Pimp a Butterfly has undeniably made a mark on the music industry as seen with its mountain awards and critical acclaim in music publications, but it has made headway within American culture namely for social justice movements. The social movement Black Lives Matter has utilized this album (specially the song “Alright”) as a rallying cry for their coalition. This album dives in deep on issues centered around being Black in America, therefore making it a perfect anthem for liberation. This album has been out for nearly six years and its songs continue to be a point of solace for people as the Black Lives Matter movement has only gotten bigger. *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s impact is far reaching and it is of no surprise that years later this album and its songs are still touching people and inspiring a generation of change.

To put it lightly, this album is simply like no other. It has been able to take on a life of its own and becomes influential to the fabric of American pop culture. Lamar used all creative elements at his disposal from lyrical rhymes, diving into large thematic purposes and bending the idea of what it means to be a hip-hop artist. He was able to fuse hip-hop and jazz while leaving room for African-inspired beats and do it all within the frame of 16 songs. All of these musical purposes are infused with important themes of being Black in America and fighting back against systemic issues; it once again points to why this album has longevity and why it is a great piece to review. This album pushes the boundaries on what a hip-hop album now should, and can, look like. While *To Pimp a Butterfly* is only 78 minutes and 51 seconds long, it makes a name for itself and solidifies Kendrick Lamar as a true artist.