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“Call Your Brothers Magnificent, Call All the Sisters Queens”: Kendrick Lamar and the West African Griot Tradition

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In 2015, African American rapper Kendrick Lamar released his long awaited sophomore studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The album received widespread critical acclaim and commercial success inspiring one critic to call it “perfect…an immaculate amalgamation of rap, jazz, funk, soul, and spoken word…It’s the latest evolution of Black Music, and it’s nothing short of genius.”¹ At the 2016 Grammy awards, *To Pimp a Butterfly* received eleven nominations (one less than Michael Jackson’s all-time record),² won three awards (including Best Rap Album of the year) and has catapulted Lamar to the forefront of mainstream musical consciousness. But, along with giving Lamar their praises, the public has also interpreted him as a figure of fierce, schismatic controversy.

In 2015, the same year of *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s release, the rapper performed his song *Alright* live on television while standing on top of a graffitied cop car with an enormous American flag billowing behind him.³ The rapper received heavy criticism for this display from commentators who believed Lamar’s performance was disrespectful, degrading, and divisive; or in the words of one news pundit, more “damag[ing] to young African Americans than racism in recent years.”⁴ Lamar responded to this critique by asking his audience, “How can you take a song that’s about hope and turn it into hatred?”⁵ These ongoing arguments about and critiques of

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⁴ Geraldo Rivera qt in Brennan Williams, ”Kendrick Lamar To Geraldo Rivera: 'How Can You Take A Song That's About Hope And Turn It Into Hatred?,” *The Huffington Post*, (TheHuffingtonPost.com, 6 July 2015), 1.

⁵ Ibid., 2.
Lamar’s work beg the question: how should one interpret Kendrick Lamar as an artist? And more importantly, how does Kendrick Lamar interpret himself as an artist?

Lamar’s 2016 Grammy’s performance provides some clues into Lamar’s identity as a rap musician and hip hop artist. At the award’s ceremony, Lamar performed a three-song medley complete with backup dancers, actors in costumes, and three scene changes. The first scene is set in a prison; Lamar and his backup dancers emerge with chains around their legs and wrists. As Lamar raps, he and his backup dancers remove their shackles and begin to dance in brightly colored glow-in-the-dark costumes. After this song abruptly ends, Lamar walks across the stage accompanied by polyrhythmic African drums to the second scene, where dancers dressed in African clothes begin to perform around a 15-foot-tall blazing fire. Finally, Lamar walks across the stage into the third setting where he raps alone and finishes the performance as a large image of the continent of Africa with the word “Compton”—the name of his hometown in California—written across it flashes onscreen behind him. The performance (which Grammy host LL Cool J had previously teased would be “very controversial”) goes beyond the typical pop artists’ performance and reveals Lamar’s artistic vision and literary interpretation of his identity and purpose as a rapper.

By performing in America, then Africa, and finally in front of a literal image of “African American,” Lamar presents himself as a musician who transcends boundaries, wrestling with his self-perceptions, as well as his interpretations of what it means to be African American and a member of the black community. As a rap musician, Lamar also interprets himself as the hybrid of two artistic figures: the African American rapper who performs rap and frees himself and his people from their oppression, the African griot, a musician, poet, and storyteller who performs


7 Ibid., 01:19-01:29.

8 Ibid., 01:56-04:00.

9 Ibid., 04:00-05:41.

poetry praising African rulers, culture, and legendary heroes of history. Both the rapper and the griot interpret historical and contemporary events and express them through what is known as oral literature, a tradition present in both African and American contexts.

I. An Introduction to Oral Literature in Africa and America

In the Western world, the written literary tradition has been produced, promulgated, and presented so exclusively that it has been inscribed in the minds of students and critics alike as the only form of literature. But this misunderstanding of the nature of literature ignores the vast number of literary works in both Africa and America presented by oral means. If literature is defined as a “creative text,” then oral literature, in its simplest form, can be defined as any creative text delivered by word of mouth. How that literature is delivered has a profound influence on its interpretation. In her seminal text, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Ruth Finnegan writes, “Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion.” In this way the nature of performance and reason for its occurrence render meaning to the oral literature itself. For example, Lamar’s decision to rap “We gon’ be alright!” on top of a police car communicates a deep message of hope, empowerment, and rising above oppression when performed in front of a national audience which has been inundated with news about police brutality against black communities. Under these definitions, generic modes of performed storytelling such as folktale, song, riddle, poem, drama, proverb, and even dance could all be considered forms of oral literature when presented in front of listeners who in turn do their fair share of interpretation. While written literature can rest in ink upon the seat of a page, unwritten oral literature requires a performer to stand in front of an audience and speak it into existence.

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As producers of oral literature in West Africa, griots belonged to a special poetic caste and functioned as genealogist, storytellers, hecklers, and—most notably for the purpose of this paper—court performers.15 These court griots served as sources of entertainment, advice,16 careful critique17 and praises, (in the form of panegyric or praise poetry) all performed “with vocal and instrumental virtuosity”18 publicly and immediately in the presence of a wealthy family, ruler, or king.19 In many ways, griots acted as living history books,20 performing stories of legendary kings and heroes from times gone by. (According to Finnegan, every Zulu king had at least one griot who specialized in singing the praises of past kings as well as writing new poems for present and future rulers.21) And since the position of griot was often hereditary, and sons were expected to succeed their fathers as griot to the king,22 the griot’s poetic legends, histories, and praises were passed down for centuries, connecting modern West African griots and their audiences to their ancestral cultural traditions.

According to multiple scholars, the musical and lyrical traditions of the griot have been a source of inspiration for the African American performer of oral literatures known as the rapper. The rapper expresses his or herself through the performance of rapping, which can be defined simply as the rapid, rhythmic and tonal expression of lyrics accompanied by music. Multiple sources claim that while the genre of rap music emerged in the late ‘70s from the hip-hop movement in the Bronx, NY, the style of oral performance preexisted its modern incarnation.


David Toop, author of *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, argues that beneath a shallow understanding of the African American rapper lies a “vast expanse of sources reaching back to West Africa. The praise singing, social satires and boasting of savannah griots…appeared to reincarnate in [rap] groups.” Cheryl Keyes, author of *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* agrees, stating that many rap artists “view their music through a historical lens by which (West) Africa is primarily perceived as the place of origin for the rap music tradition.” As producers of oral literature reminiscent of the griot oral literature, African American rappers have been considered “modern griots” because of their similar styles of poetic and musical expression. In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., these American rappers have signified upon, or repeated and revised, the oral literature of their African griot ancestors.

Of particular interest and intrigue is how Lamar signifies upon the griot tradition on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Lamar is obviously conscious of this connection between the oral literatures of Africa and America, as evidenced by his Grammy performance, and he carries this connection into his album. But how and what Lamar decides to signify upon, that is, what he decides to include and adapt, reflects his perception of the griot, his art, and his relationship to the American rapper. In this way, signification can be understood as a process of interpretation. Elements of the griot tradition that Lamar signifies upon reveals Lamar’s perceptions of the role of the “modern griot” in a contemporary context. Viewers unaware of his historical and contemporary context interpret Lamar as a divisive, obscene, and radical performer; Lamar interprets himself, as well as his community, and his experiences through a signification upon the griot oral tradition, utilizing the artistic forms and themes of West African griot literatures to rap his own hip hop narrative in a contemporary American context.

**II. Kendrick Lamar and the West African Epic Tradition**

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The West African *griot* primarily performed a hybridized form of two styles of African oral poetry; the aforementioned panegyric and the epic. In his work, *The Epic in Africa*, Isidore Okpewho provides a thorough definition of the African oral epic:

An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a person or persons endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists.²⁶

The *Epic of Sundiata*, as possibly the most famous of the West African epics, exemplifies Okpewho’s definition. The epic attempts to explain the origins of the empire of Manden, Old Mali by celebrating the adventures of the epic hero Sundiata.²⁷ Though he is the rightful heir to the Manden throne, Sundiata is tricked out of his position and cursed to be lame for 9 years.²⁸ Through the help of magic, Sundiata is able to transcend typical human might eventually retake the throne from the evil usurper, the sorcerer king Soumaoro.²⁹

Likewise, Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* also easily fits Okpewho’s description; the album features the fantastic deeds of a hero, Lamar himself, a writer and musician whose uncanny rapping abilities have elevated him to great fame and critical acclaim, to the point where his abilities transcend the physical boundaries of normal human experiences. Like the traditional African artist, “a man with a very pressing sense of real and concrete presence, enjoying the closest intimacy with an environment that is both physical and metaphysical,”³⁰ Lamar raps at the intersection of natural and the supernatural, conversing with both human and supernatural figures. Lamar also transcends geographical boundaries, traveling globally and unifying the

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²⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

experiences of separated black peoples. This geographical transcendence is accented upon by Lamar’s musical accompanists, who perform a variety of musical instruments and styles of music from the black diaspora. Jazz, latin, and traditional hip hop styles support Lamar’s literary ambitions as he spits his rhymes, rapping his hip hop epic.

Oyekan Owomoyela adds to Okpewho’s definition of the African oral epic in his text, African Literatures: An Introduction, stating that the African epic is “an elaborate form that comprises all other examples of traditional verbal artistry—poetry, song, proverbs—and usually concerns the heroic exploits of ancestors. It sometimes purports to explain the origins of communal institutions, and it always celebrates qualities esteemed in the society.” Lamar demonstrates his traditional verbal artistry on To Pimp a Butterfly by seamlessly weaving multiple styles of oral expression—poetry, song, and proverb—throughout, transmitting those arts through various oral mediums—rapping, singing, spoken word, etc. Lyrics about ancestors appear throughout the album, as do explanations for the existence of institutions and cultural—his hometown of Compton, California—and ultimately a celebration of the beauty of his African American community.

Finally, like African oral epics (the performance of which can often span the length of seven days32), To Pimp a Butterfly spans a “substantial length”33 (a 78 minutes and 51 seconds-long work that dwarfs the length of any rap album produced by his contemporaries in that same year) and centers on the exploits of a legendary hero.34 That hero is Kendrick Lamar himself, and as the self-proclaimed King of Hip Hop, his epic exploits include defending his throne from any potential usurpers, wooing and bedding the women of his enemies, doing battle with the villainous supernatural deity Lucy, and rediscovering the ancestral history of his people.

33 Ibid., xviii.
Ultimately, Lamar revises the epic tradition by abdicating his throne at the end of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and in an act of great love and admiration, offers it to his people—black men and women in Compton, California, the United States, and across the black diaspora—establishing them as the rulers and himself as the griot who sings their praises.

### III. The Image of Lamar’s Hero

By presenting the album as an epic, Lamar enables himself to transverse grand geographical and metaphysical boundaries. Some may argue that Lamar’s heroism does not accurately parallel the heroism of the protagonists in West African oral epics; however, these critics perpetuate false ideas about a linear, rigidly defined hero.\(^{35}\) In contrast, the nature of the hero of performed oral epics constantly changes, since his or her characteristics and adventure changes in conjunction with the performer’s interpretation of the audience.\(^{36}\) Thus Lamar’s American hip hop hero will be different than the hero of a West African epic purely because of their dissimilar contexts. This difference does not exclude *To Pimp a Butterfly* from epic considerations, (especially when considered in relation to all of the similarities listed above) it simply means that its emphasis on contemporary American culture shapes its mythos in an unmatched, original way. Okpewho argues that epics often include contemporary digressions, yet exude a sense of timelessness and a concern for “broad cultural values.”\(^{37}\) Comparably, *To Pimp a Butterfly* is concerned with broad cultural values, but conscious of history (of rap, of culture, etc) which Lamar infuses into contemporary realities. By doing this, Lamar performs a new image of the epic hero, one that subverts preconceived notions of both blackness—that is, what it means to be black—and musical heroism—that is, what it means to use your music and art for a noble cause. By performing the image of a a new hero, Lamar directly fights back against contemporary images of the violent, lazy, aggressive, deviant black person, ultimately creating a completely new identity that subverts these degrading cultural images. In many ways, Lamar

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\(^{35}\) Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, 81.

\(^{36}\) J. A. Notopoulos qt in Okpwho, *The Epic in Africa*, 81.

\(^{37}\) Cf. A. Parry qt in Ibid., 79.
reveals how easy it can be to fall into the trap of thinking this way. On the song, *How Much a Dollar Cost?*, Lamar refuses to give money to a homeless African man because he stereotypes him as a crack addict. When this man reveals he is God incarnate, Lamar revises his perceptions, thus revealing how easy it can be, even for a fellow black person, to perpetuate harmful generalizations based on oppressive and demeaning imagery.

In his postcolonial work, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, author Ngugi Wa Thiong’o discusses how these images are promulgated through the process of colonialism. Thiong’o writes that the purpose of colonialism—the control of wealth and resources through military and political domination of other nations—depends on mental control, which is achieved by destroying or undervaluing the colonized person’s culture—“their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature [oral literature] and literature”—and the deliberate promotion of the colonizer’s language over the indigenous peoples’ language. This control of language, art, culture, etc. enables the powerful to perpetuate images of the oppressed that distorts a person’s self concept, thus internalizing and enslaving the people through control of their culture. Lamar recognizes this ethnocide and mental enslavement on *The Blacker the Berry*, in which he aggressively raps back against the colonizing forces of wealthy, colonizing White America. The rapper begins these lines by performing the internalization of black male stereotypes before using his control of language to fight back against his colonizer and his hateful depictions of blackness:

My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide
You hate me don't you?
You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture
You’re fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

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38 Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, XI.
39 Ibid., XI. 82.
41 Ibid., 15.
42 Ibid., 15.
You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me.\textsuperscript{43}

He declaratively states that he’s a “proud monkey,” a line that exemplifies Lamar’s inability to fully express pride in himself past the colonizer’s destructive, racist imagery.\textsuperscript{44} The rapper recognizes the futility of re-imaging himself in line 30, conceding that the colonizer vandalizes his perceptions. However, Lamar expresses that his style, his performance of black identity through his lyrical voice cannot be taken away. Lamar’s rap becomes a means through which he can control his language and thus fight back—or, \textit{perform back} against those who attempt to devalue black people by presenting a new, empowering image in his epic. Thus, Lamar utilizes various genres of oral literature performance—riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance\textsuperscript{45}—throughout the album to imaginatively explain a liberating means of constructing a new black identity, free from the destructive influence of his oppressive enemies.

Like the griot, Lamar performs his epic with spontaneity and selectivity, that is, the skilled bard knows his or her audience and adjusts his music accordingly to fit both the audience, and the occasion, as well as to highlight important moments in the Epic\textsuperscript{46}. Likewise, the griot of \textit{The Epic of Mwindo}, communicates the importance of four main heroic moments to his or her audience by breaking into a chant “when the hero challenges his opponents (“You are impotent against Mwindo” \textsuperscript{[65]}); when he summons the aid of his magical powers (“The cattle that Shemwindo possesses./May they join Mwindo” \textsuperscript{[82]}); when he glorifies his victories (“He who went to sleep wakes up” \textsuperscript{[118]}); and when eventually he establishes his authority over his subjects (“He who will go beyond that Mwindo has said,/He will die from seven lightnings” \textsuperscript{[141]}).”\textsuperscript{47} In the same way, Lamar recites the line of a proverb after every song, revealing it piece by piece as he signifies upon the rapper-griot connection. Lamar recites the


\textsuperscript{44} Lamar’s strength as an artist lies in his ability to utilize multiple meanings in the same line. This verse could also be intended to be heard ironically, as if to say, “You call me a monkey? Then I’ll say that I’m a proud one!”


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 83.
proverb after defeating his enemies (King Kunta: “I remember you was conflicted…”⁴⁸); after wooing women (These Walls: “…Misusing your influence/Sometimes I did the same/Abusing my power full of resentment/resentment that turned into a deep depression/I found myself screaming in the hotel room…”⁴⁹); after running from the demon Lucy (For Sale? [Interlude] “…I didn’t want to self-destruct/the evils of Lucy was all around me/ So I wen running for answers/until I came home…”⁵⁰); and, unlike Mwindo’s establishment of authority, Lamar recites his proverb after reestablishing himself as the griot and installing blacks into the throne (Mortal Man⁵¹). By doing this, Lamar emphasizes the most transformative moments of his adventure.

Given these similarities in structure and style, Lamar’s work should be interpreted as an epic quest—a quest by an African American man trying to revise the supernatural powers of oppressive, internalized racism by signifying upon several images of relationships and divisions that construct boundaries between and within black peoples. The first relationship (or image) that Lamar tackles is the idea of the “modern griot” and the connection between the West African griot and the African American rapper.

IV. The Griot and the Rapper

The connection between the rapper and the griot is a contentious topic. Critics of the connection between the rapper and the griot tend to lambast the contrary nature of the subversive rapper and hereditary court griot⁵² as a figure that was maintained the status quo,⁵³ largely

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⁴⁸ Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, III. 94.
⁴⁹ Ibid., V. 89-93.
⁵₀ Ibid., VIII. 75-78.
⁵¹ The completed proverb was too long to include here in its entirety, but it can be found at Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XVI. 133-139.
because their careers (and lives) depended on unceasing praise\textsuperscript{54} of their powerful, wealthy employers. In his article, \textit{Troubling the Trope of ‘Rapper as Modern Griot,’} author Damon Sajnani argues that this distinction separates the perceived connection between \textit{griot} and rap traditions. He writes, "On this view, the griot’s position is subservience to, and advocacy for, the powerful in exchange for patronage; by contrast, HipHop’s stance is understood as defiance and advocacy for ‘the people,’ avowedly rejecting any overture to ‘sellout.’"\textsuperscript{55} Senegalese rapper Thiat of the rap group Keur Gui agrees, stating that “The role of the griot and the role of the rapper are completely different, we are nothing alike. Ancient griots served kings and modern griots praise rich people and serve politicians. We are the opposite—we serve the people against the politicians, we are the voice of the voiceless.”\textsuperscript{56} Consider the Gandan panegyric of of the 19th century King Mutesa:

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
Thy feet are hammers,
Son of the forest [a comparison with a lion]
Great is the fear of thee;
Great is thy wrath;
Great is thy peace;
Great is thy power.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

Clearly, no advocacy for the common person exists in this formal, public praise of the King. Similarly, this Nigerian praise poem utilizes figurative and symbolic language to attest to the power of the ruler:

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
Mahama causer of happiness, Mahama \textit{yenagi yenaga}, Mahama slab
of salt who handles it tastes pleasure
—though thou hatest a man though gives him a thousand cowries
—thou hatest a naked man’s blood but if thou dost not get his
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}


\textsuperscript{55} Sajnani, ‘Troubling the Trope of ‘Rapper as Modern Griot,’’ 161.

\textsuperscript{56} qt in Sajnani, “Troubling the Trope of the ‘Rapper as Modern Griot,’” 161.

\textsuperscript{57} Chadwicks iii, (1940) qt in Finnegan, \textit{Oral Literature in Africa}, 114.
garment thou slayest him.\textsuperscript{58}

In this poem as well, the griot praises the power of Mahama, who brings happiness by generously giving his money to those he hates, and who hates to kill and only does so when he does not receive that he desires. However, this perception of the griot as a poet and musician who slavishly praised the powerful and sustained the status quo is an incomplete picture of the griot tradition.

Finnegan writes that praise poems often included “derogatory remarks” as well as well-intentioned advice.\textsuperscript{59} Toop goes a step further, stating that “Although they are popularly known as praise singers, griots might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy.”\textsuperscript{60} Consider these praises of emirs—or Arabic rulers—of Zazzau in Nigeria which include both clever critiques of their rulers, as well as areas in which the ruler could improve:

\begin{quote}
Look not with too friendly eyes upon the world,
Pass you hand over your face in meditation,
Not from the heat of the sun.
The bull elephant is wise and lives long.
\end{quote}

and

\begin{quote}
Be patient, and listen not to idle tales
Poisoned chaff attracts the silly sheep—and kills them.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

These critiques offer a much more complex function of the griot than either Sajnani or Thiat’s definitions give them credit for. For when the griot critiques the wealthy and powerful, he stands on the side of the people against those who mishandle their power. In contrast, Sajnani and Thiat’s generalization of hip hop and rap artists as subversive advocates for the people does not ring true.

\textsuperscript{58} Fletcher (1912) qt in ibid., 114-115.
\textsuperscript{59} Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, 115.
\textsuperscript{60} Toop, The Rap Attack, 32.
Rap’s association with black urban counterculture in the U.S. often leads people to perceive it as a threat to the conservative mainstream. As a countercultural movement, hip hop empowered artists like Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five and Public Enemy utilize rap’s rebellious nature to raise awareness for social and political issues. Since many American rap artists did use their lyrical abilities to speak out against those with power, Sajnani and Thiat’s comments about the generally political rapper make sense—that is, they make sense in the context of the 1990s. A study by University of Cincinnati’s Blue Ash College analyzed the lyrics of chart-topping rap songs from 1989 to 2003 and “found that rap lyric topics became less varied, concentrating on sex, partying, consumerism, violence, and self-promotion. Political advocacy has all but disappeared.” While party rap does have its place in the rap genre, the reason for this shift is wrapped up in power and wealth. As the genre of rap became increasingly more popular with wealthier, mainstream audiences—mainly white suburban teenagers—the genre “homogenized” as a party genre. Thus songs which Sajnani would call acts of “defiance and advocacy for ‘the people’” like N.W.A.’s 1988 *F**k the Police*:

> Fuck the police coming straight from the underground
> A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown
> And not the other color so police think
> They have the authority to kill a minority.

Have been replaced by verses on songs like will.i.am’s *Scream and Shout (Remix)*:

> Oh, it’s time to party

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64 Blatt, "Beyond Bravado,” 1.


67 Sajnani, *Troubling the Tropes of ‘Rapper as Modern Griot,’* 161.

Oh, it’s time to party
Smokin’, drinkin’, no passin’ out
YOLO, I’mma shout it out
We party hard, we yell it out.\(^{69}\)

In this way, the purpose of mainstream rap mirrors the purpose of griot court poetry insofar as it acts as a praise of the wealthy, powerful, and dominant, and thereby a sustainer of the status quo. This complex tension within both the rapper and the griot to balance entertainment and advice, praise and critique, as well as the way the two positions inform each other, can be understood using the term “rapper-griot” separated, yet connected by the dash in-between. Lamar takes this contentious relationship and signifies upon it by repeating certain aspects of each role, and revising them for his own particular artistic interests.

V. Kendrick Lamar and the Rapper-Griot Traditions

As stated above, both the rapper and the griot have a propensity to both praise and critique the wealthy and the powerful. The griot and for the U.S. American rapper share a commonality insofar as both figures express their praise and critique through the performance of oral literature. As an oral artist, Lamar is conscious of the tensions between and within the rapper-griot relationship and utilizes the West African oral epic tradition to signify upon this relationship, revealing his own adapted revelations about his role as a rapper-griot.

Lamar begins *To Pimp a Butterfly* like the griot begins the *akpalu* songs of Ghana, with a statement of the song’s main theme;\(^{70}\) a short clip (also known as a “sample”) of Jamaican singer Boris Gardiner’s 1970s tune, *Every Nigger is a Star.*\(^{71}\) Gardiner sings the phrase, “Every

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\(^{69}\) Waka Flocka Flame qt in will.i.am & Britney Spears, *Scream and Shout (Remix)*, Interscope, 2013, l. 61-65.


\(^{71}\) Joe Coscarelli, "Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity."
nigga is a star/every nigga is a star…who will deny/that you and I/and every nigga is a star”\textsuperscript{72} before the funk beat and bass kicks the listener into the song. As the album’s opener, these lines introduce Lamar’s stance as a rapper-griot for the people against those who would seek stardom—and its ensuing wealth and fame—for themselves. By opening the album with a thirty-year-old clip from a Jamaican musician like Gardiner, Lamar alerts the audience to interpret his epic through a multinational scope, and he will not restricted by geographical or temporal boundaries as he advocates for the people.

This introduction leads into the thick of \textit{Wesley’s Theory}, the first song on the album in which Lamar first exposes the temptation to use rap as a means of gaining social and monetary capitol. In a later verse, Lamar performs a scenario for his audience, in which he takes the form of Uncle Sam and transcends temporal boundaries to make promises of fame and fortune to a much younger Lamar just dipping his toes into the rap game:

\begin{quote}
What you want?
You a house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule,\textsuperscript{73} a piano, a guitar?
Anythin’, see, my name is Uncle Sam, I’m your dog
Motherfucker, you can live at the mall.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

Uncle Sam’s promises entice young Lamar, and he begins to seek after them. Lamar then reveals Uncle Sam’s motivations, rapping, “I can see the borrow in you, I can see the dollar in you”\textsuperscript{75} before finally revealing his ultimate trap; “And when you hit the White House, do you/But remember, you ain't pass economics in school/And everything you buy, taxes will deny/I’ll

\textsuperscript{72} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, I. 1-6.

\textsuperscript{73} This line is a reference to the proposed Reconstruction era plan struck down by Andrew Jackson that was intended to give recently emancipated slaves forty acres and a mule to jump start their reentry into society. This failed promise to Black Americans should be a warning to Lamar of the ephemerality of Uncle Sam’s pledged prosperity. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,”The Truth Behind ‘40 Acres and a Mule’,” \textit{The Root}, Ed. Lyne Pitts, (Univision Communications, 7 Jan. 2015), 1-3., this plan was originally devised by black leaders themselves (1). Lamar could be remarking on the fact that the failure of the Order is another example of White America’s continued oppression of Black Americans.

\textsuperscript{74} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, I. 55-58.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., I. 93.
Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five.”  

Lamar’s humorous pun signals a sobering truth: just as black actor Wesley Snipes was imprisoned for three years for not paying his taxes, so too will Lamar—an unlettered singer from Compton, California—be ensnared in Uncle Sam’s trap.  

The chorus of the song further warns of this outcome. Lamar and his backup vocalists perform in the present, looking back at Lamar’s mistakes, singing “We should've never gave/We should've never gave niggas money/Go back home, money, go back home.”  

In this way, Lamar does not disavow monetary gain. Instead, Lamar laments that he used his talents to make money that he then used to accumulate personal material wealth. Nevertheless, Lamar does buy into Uncle Sam’s financial promises, and he begins to praise materialism and excess.  

Lamar’s hero becomes so wealthy and successful that he begins to shift his praise singing from Uncle Sam’s luxurious offerings to significant praise of himself. In Africa, singing one’s own praises was infrequent, but sometimes practiced by wealthy and powerful people. According to Finnegan, sometimes wealthy and powerful rulers, like members of the Hima clan of Ankole would sing their own praises, celebrating their military conquests by performing poems based on the recitation of specific praise names:  

I Who Am Praised thus held out in battle among foreigners along
with The Overthrower;
I Who Ravish Spear in Each Hand stood resplendent in my cotton cloth;
I Who Am Quick was drawn from afar by lust for the fight.”  

Lamar repeats a similar style of praise naming when he dubs himself “King Kunta,” on the song of the same name, a reference to Kunte Kinte, an enslaved African whose foot was sliced off by his master after a failed escape attempt. Lamar raps:  

Bitch, where you when I was walkin’? 
Now I run the game got the whole world talkin', King Kunta

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76 Ibid., I. 105-108.

77 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, I. 35-37.

78 Morris (1964) qt in Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, 114.
Everybody wanna cut the legs off him, Kunta
Black man taking no losses, oh yeah79

As King Kunta,80 Lamar signifies upon the tragedy of losing a leg due to slavery, and speaks boastfully of his freedom, stating that he runs the rap game. Throughout this song, Lamar utilizes his rapping ability to defend his new throne at all costs by defeating his enemies.

In her book, Talkin’ and Tesifyin’: The Language of Black America, Geneva Smitherman writes that, “While some raps convey social and cultural information, others are used for conquering foes”81 According to Smitherman, when African American artists use rap to devastate their enemies, they tap into a long history stretching back to West African oral epics. In the Epic of Sundiata, for example, before the exiled King of Mali, Sundiata, can wage war with the usurper, Soumaoro, the griot states “those fighting must make a declaration of their grievances to begin with.”82 Thus, the rightful king Sundiata and the usurper begin to verbally battle, attempting to defeat through oral means:

I am king of Mali by force of arms. My rights have been established by conquest.’
‘Then I will take Mali by force of arms. My rights have been established by conquest….’
‘Know, then that I am the wild yam of the rocks; nothing will make me leave Mali.’
‘Know, also that I have in my camp seven master smiths who will shatter the rocks. Then, yam, I will eat you.’
‘I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit.’

79 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, III. 7-10.

80 Thomas Hale qt in Keyes, Rap Music and Street Consciousness, 18. By referring to himself as King Kunta, Lamar connects with “Kunte Kinte,” the ancestor of Alex Haley in his 1976 novel, Roots: The Saga of an American Family. In the series’ sequel, RootsL The Next Generations, Alex Haley travels to Africa and speaks with a griot about his ancestor Kinte. According to Thomas Hale, the appearance in Roots’ sequel Roots: The Next Generations caused a rise in public knowledge of the griot in the U.S. that contributed to rap identity during the 70s Hip Hop movement. Therefore, as King Kunta, Lamar embodies the bridge between America and Africa, and the reason for African Americans to turn their sight to Africa in search of their historical and ancestral traditions.


82 Ibid., 78.
‘As for me, I am the ravenous cock, the poison does not matter to me.’
‘Behave yourself, little boy, or you will burn your foot, for I am the red-hot cinder.’

Lamar signifies upon this concept in *King Kunta* by presenting himself as the King returning home to his kingdom of Compton in Odyssean style. He begins the song by warning any potential suitors or usurpers of his title as the King that they had better not step to him. Lamar raps:

I got a bone to pick
I don't want you monkey-mouth motherfuckers sittin' in my throne again
(Ay, ay, what's happenin'? K-Dot back in the hood, nigga!)
I'm mad (he mad!), but I ain't stressin'

True friends, one question

before dropping back into the chorus and proclaiming his own royalty. He goes on to dominate his enemies even further by sarcastically saying that he planned to verbally battle them (like Sundiata vs Soumaoro); however, they have already ruined their careers: “I was gonna kill a couple rappers but they did it to themselves/Everybody’s suicidal, they ain't even need my help.”

Whatever enemies Lamar originally had are dead and gone.

Thus, the song serves as a repetition of the griot’s praise of military leaders and the use of oral artistry to defeat one’s enemies and to maintain one’s seat upon their kingly throne.

The second of Smitherman’s motives for rap is attracting the attention of women. She writes, “While boastful raps are used to devastate enemies, love raps help in gettin ovuh with women. Both, of course, require speakers with intellectual adroitness and a way with words….it is believed that the spoken word has power, it is only logical to employ it with what many regard

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83 Smitherman, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, 78. (IT WOULD BE GREAT TO GET THIS DIRECTLY FROM THE EPIC)

84 Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, III. 1-6.

85 Ibid., III. 55-57.

86 Throughout the entirety of the song, Lamar boasts and brags with lines like these about his abilities, a style of rapping which could be identified as “signification” or “playing the Dozens” (Smitherman, 82) two largely innocent games of clever verbal put downs. However, the event is much more more drastic than a clever game of insults. As the song nears its end, the enemy appears with a gun and tries to shoot Lamar mid-line.
as men’s most formidable obstacle—women.”\textsuperscript{87} As King Kunta, or the King of Rap, Lamar begins to cash in on Uncle Sam’s promises which include increased female attention. On the song, \textit{These Walls}, Lamar jokingly remarks on his newfound popularity with women, rapping “I mean it's still amazing before they couldn’t stand me.”\textsuperscript{8889} In the song, he recounts a time when he got revenge on an enemy by using his fame and wealth to seduce his enemy’s girlfriend.\textsuperscript{90} For much of the song Kendrick raps about living “inside these walls,” a euphemism for the woman’s vagina (“These walls are vulnerable, exclamation/Interior pink, color coordinated/I interrogated, every nook and cranny”)\textsuperscript{91} until the third verse, where the sign of the “walls” becomes those of a prison, as Lamar begins to gloat about his revenge on Lamar’s imprisoned enemy. Lamar raps:

\begin{quote}
“If your walls could talk, they’d tell you it’s too late
Your destiny accepted your fate…
Wall telling you that commissary is low
Race wars happening no calling CO
No calling your mother to save you”\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

and then begins to rap more personally reflective statements, saying “Walls is telling me your a bitch”\textsuperscript{93} before finally revealing his cognizance of taking advantage of both the woman and his fame, “So when you play this song, rewind the first verse/About me abusing my power so you can hurt.”\textsuperscript{94} Lamar begins to recognize how the sustenance of the status quo—a praise of wealth, fame, dominance, and female attention—can hurt those around him.

\textsuperscript{87} Smitherman, \textit{Talkin' and Testifyin’}, 83.
\textsuperscript{88} Lamar, \textit{These Walls}, V. 32.
\textsuperscript{89} Lamar’s female characters are unfortunately not written three-dimensionally. Often they are pawns in a man’s game, like in \textit{These Walls}. Sometimes they are portrayed as greedy (\textit{For Free? [Interlude]}), other times they are devilish spirits (\textit{For Sale? [Interlude]}). This lack of strong, realistic female characters is one critique of an otherwise deep and thoughtful album.
\textsuperscript{90} Elizabeth Milch, “These Walls,” \textit{Genius.com}, 4.
\textsuperscript{91} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, V. 27-29.
\textsuperscript{92} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, IV. 60-61, 64-67.
\textsuperscript{93} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, V. 71.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., V. 78-79.
Lamar begins to revise this rapper-griot self-praise and praise of the ruler in the song *U*, in which Lamar does verbal battle with himself. He repeatedly berates himself for the failing to look after his now-pregnant little sister even though he promised to take care of her: “You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her/I fuckin' tell you, you fuckin' failure—you ain't no leader!/I never liked you, forever despise you—I don't need you!/The world don't need you, don't let them deceive you.”\(^95\) After a break in the song, Lamar’s voice returns, audibly slurred and accompanied by the clinking of bottles of alcohol. He continues to accuse himself of negligence, blaming himself for not using his fame to stop violence in the streets. Lamar raps, “You ain’t no brother, you ain’t no disciple, you ain’t no friend/A friend never leave Compton for profit or leave his best friend/Little brother, you promised you’d watch him before they shot him.”\(^96\) Like Sundiata and Soumaoro, Lamar verbally attacks himself, telling, (and then telling himself), “Shoulda killed yo ass a long time ago/You shoulda feeled that black revolver blast a long time ago.”\(^97\) Lamar realizes that wealth, power, sex and status are all offered by the king Uncle Sam. When rappers praise Uncle Sam, they are rewarded with wealth, power, sex, and status. But when they give themselves in fully to these desires, they allow for people to harm and to be harmed. Thus, Lamar critiques the his desires as he slowly realizes that a praise of power leads to ignoring the powerless.

VI. Esu-Elegbara and the Physical-Metaphysical Divide

“Lamar’s exploration of the boundaries of African and American identities as a rapper-griot transverses concrete and abstract world; a transversal that embodies Esu-Elegbara, a trickster character found throughout black diaspora literature. In his book, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states that while the Trans-Atlantic slave trade threatened to destroy the myths, stories, music of African culture, the appearance of Esu-Elegbara (also referred to simply as Esu) in geographic locations across the globe proves a connectedness

\(^95\) Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, VI. 16-19.

\(^96\) Ibid., VI. 38-40.

\(^97\) Ibid., VI. 63-64.
between black diaspora cultures and the West African Fon and Yoruba cultures in Benin and Nigeria from which the figure originates. According to Gates, Esu mediates between the gods and humans, whose qualities of “disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture” make him a “classic figure on mediation and of the unity of opposed forces.” This unification and mediation of oppositional forces is symbolized by Esu-Elegbara’s physical features, many of which Lamar describes himself as having on To Pimp a Butterfly.

To symbolize Esu’s mediation between the physical and metaphysical worlds, Yoruba mythology portrays Esu as walking with a limp, as if one leg walks in the human realm while the other walks in the spiritual realm. In keeping with Esu, Lamar refers to himself as the one-legged King Kunta and raps about walking with a limp: “I’ll probably go to jail/If I shoot at your identity and bounce to the left.” In these lines, Lamar refers to his work on the album—challenging and disrupting black identity while bouncing from leg to leg and from world to world. Gates also writes that Esu is “characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the preference, text with interpretation, the word (as a form of the verb to be) that links a subject with its predicate.” Obviously, as stated above, Lamar makes several references to his penis throughout the album (“this dick ain’t free,” “My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide” “If these walls could talk they’d tell me to go deep.”) These

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99 Ibid., 6.

100 Gates, The Signifying Monkey, 6.

101 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, III. 50-51, italics added.


103 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, II.

104 Ibid., XIII. 24.

105 Ibid., V. 40.
physical similarities are more than just bragging rights for both Lamar and Esu—they are a symbol of the ability to perform intimate, powerful connections that tear down walls of separation and division. As Lamar continues to signify upon the rapper-griot tradition, he finds himself at the crossroads between physical and spiritual contexts. he also finds himself in the crossfire between supernatural deities! Thus, the tensions between supernatural forces, as well as the tension between the physical and supernatural world can be understood by the term, physical-metaphysical. As Lamar interacts with these various sources, he is forced to reconcile their opposite strivings and consider his place, as well as the place of otherworldly entities, in society. Lamar’s similarities to su. suggest that he should also be interpreted like this character: a connector who spans multiple worlds. By playing a similar role to su., Lamar incorporates African culture into American and asks us to engage with his membership in multiple groups.

VII. Kendrick Lamar and the Physical-Metaphysical Traditions

As was stated previously, Okpewho writes that the traditional African artist is concerned with a reality that encompasses both concrete human existence and abstract extraordinary occurrences and ideas. As the griot of an oral epic, then, Lamar’s conception of reality stretches beyond the ephemeral into the ethereal. His hero, as the Esu-Elgebara figure, attempts to reconcile these disparate realities, with one leg standing in the human world, and the other standing in an invisible one which runs parallel to the first. Lamar first recognizes how the spirit world interacts with the human world on the song Alright.

Lamar utilizes the spontaneity, selectability, and improvisational qualities of the griot to reveal a startling truth about the true form of Uncle Sam in the song Alright. Lamar raps the same exact promise from Wesley’s Theory, although he replaces the name “Uncle Sam” with a new and, up until this point in the album, unnamed character: “What you want, you a house, you a car?/40 acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar/Anything, see my name is Lucy, I’m your dog/}

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106 Okpewho, The Epic in Africa, 66.

107 Ibid., 83.
Motherfucker, you can live at the mall.”¹⁰⁸ Lucy is a shortened nickname for Lucifer, a demonic presence on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and Lamar’s main antagonist. By substituting Lucy for Uncle Sam in this song, the rapper-griot makes an important claim; Uncle Sam and his promises of wealth, success, materialism, domination, and sexual exploitation are really temptations made by Lucy.

By giving Lucy agency in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar treats her as a griot treats his or her supernatural figures; as “dramatic characters—gods and spirits participating in the action of the tale—rather than just simply metaphors.”¹⁰⁹ Often West African epic heroes recognizes the divine’s omnipotence and either asks for spiritual aid during his or her quest, or “at least humbly acknowledges his indebtedness to it in his contest against insuperable obstacles.”¹¹⁰ An example of this can be found in *the Epic of Mwindo* in which Mwindo asks for the lightning god Nkuba’s aid in defeating the entire population of the village of Tubondo:

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My friend, Nkuba, may you be victorious
I shall fight here in Tubondo,
Even if Tubondo has seven entrances.
Here in Tubondo seven lightning flashes!
I shall fight here in Tubondo.
I want seven lightning flashes right now!¹¹¹
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In this instance, Mwindo asks for aid from a supernatural entity. Other times, those entities freely offer aid to the hero before the hero even knows the supernatural exists. In *The Epic of Sonsan of Kaartam*, the Bamana hero Sonsan is searching for land of his own when a spiritual genie king known as Jinna Mansa notices him and plans to aid his quest:

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There was a grove of trees at Dorko
It was known as the grove of the genies.
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¹⁰⁸ Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, VII. 50-53, italics added to emphasize the name change from *Uncle Sam* to *Lucy*.


¹¹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹¹¹ qt in Ibid., 107.
Nobody could defecate there because it was a sacred place….  

As Sonsan passed near this grove on his way to the bush, 

The Jinna Mansa saw him.  

The Jinna Mansa said to his wife, 

“Change yourself into a Maraka woman 

“and meet him along the way. 

“After he greets you, 

“Tell him to ask the Maraka to give him this sacred land where 

our grove is standing…. 

“His destiny, his fame, and his life, 

“they are all contained in the earth of this grove.”112 

The genie’s wife takes the form of a human woman and eventually relays this information to Sonsan, who agrees to establish his home in the sacred grove.113 In both of these examples, the hero receives aid from supernatural forces, allowing him to accomplish feats greater than anything he could have done alone.  

Like the genie King, Lucy also promises Lamar a destiny of fame and longevity of life. In the song For Sale? (Interlude) Lamar reminisces about a previous conversation he had with Lucy (before he realized she and Uncle Sam were the same enslaver) in which she explains all she can do for Lamar if he praises her with his talents: 

I remember what you said, too: 

My name is Lucy, Kendrick… 

Lucy give you no worries 

Lucy got million stories 

About these rappers that I came after when they was boring 

Lucy gone fill your pockets 

Lucy gone move your mama out of Compton 


113 Ibid., 62.
Inside the gi-gantic mansion like I promised
Lucy just want your trust and loyalty…. 
All your life I watched you
And now you all grown up to sign this contract if that’s possible”

Lucy’s promises come in the form of wealth, success, and Lucy’s seductive female voice (sung by female back up singers repeating “I want you more than you know” repeatedly throughout the song) symbolizes the promise for female attention. Like Nkuba the lightning god who followed Mwindo into his most difficult battles, so too has Lucy watched Lamar grow in his rapping abilities, triumph over his many life obstacles, and has helped him to defeat his enemies. Therefore, Lamar is enticed to praise her (and transitively Uncle Sam) as a symbol of material and physical satisfaction through his oral art.

Singing the praises of deities is something unique to the praise singers in West Africa. In the Yoruba cultures in Nigeria and Benin, praises of deities (orisha) are sung by priests. Consider a praise poem to Ogun, the god of iron:

Ogun has many gowns. He gives them all to the beggars…..
Ogun scatters his enemies…..
Ogun sacrifices an elephant to his head…..
Ogun eats two hundred earthworms and does not vomit…..
Ogun will never allow his child to punished…..

114 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly. VIII. 32-57.
115 Ibid., VIII. 15.
117 Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, 112.
118 Ibid., 112.
Ogun, do not reject me!”\(^{120}\)

Note the similarities between Lamar’s statements about Lucy above and the Yoruba priest’s statements about Ogun. While these poetic similarities may be mere coincidence, they do highlight the association between Lamar’s oral epic ambitions and the traditional supernatural subjects of the oral arts of West Africa. While the priests sing the praises of Ogun, Lamar sings the praises of Lucy and in exchange she gives him the “destiny, fame, and life” he desires.

In the continuing proverb that ends out the song, Lamar writes, “The evils of Lucy was all around me/So I went running for answers.”\(^{121}\) After he recognizes his praise of Lucy and the omnipresence of her evils (“Avoiding me?/It’s not so easy I’m at these functions accordingly”)\(^{122}\) and runs away to Africa where where he meets God, albeit in disguise. Like the genie’s wife in the *Epic of Sonsan of Kaartam* who disguises herself as a human woman to speak with Sonsan, so too has God disguised God’s self as a homeless African man to speak with Lamar in the song, *How Much a Dollar Cost?*

In the song, Lamar has just pulled up to a gas station to refuel his expensive car. The rapper is contemplating he consequences of his fame and success, rapping somewhat ironically “How much a dollar really cost?/The question is detrimental, paralyzin’ my thoughts/Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y’all/Gotta see how I’m chillin’ once I park this luxury car.”\(^{123}\) After paying for the gas, God as a homeless man asks Lamar for a single dollar. Lamar repeatedly denying the homeless man’s request, which inspires the homeless man to reveal his true identity:

> He looked at me and said, “Your potential is bittersweet”
> I looked at him and said, “Every nickel is mine to keep”
> He looked at me and said, “Know the truth, it’ll set you free

\(^{120}\) Gbadamosi and Beier 1959, p 21-22 qt in Finnegan, 114-115.

\(^{121}\) Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, X. 26-27.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., VIII. 44-45.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., XI. 1-4.
You’re lookin’ at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power
The choir that spoke the word, the Holy Spirit
the nerve of Nazareth, and I’ll tell you just how much a dollar cost
The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss,
I am God.\textsuperscript{124}

In this moment Kendrick-the-banished-hero realizes his condemnation. In traveling to Africa, Lamar has not escaped Lucy’s grasp insofar as he is still unwilling to give up the smallest amount of money to help someone in need. In this way, Lucy’s evils transcend boundaries. And as the truth of God’s existence in the impoverished man sinks in, Lamar begins to revise his praise of wealth-bringing deities and begins to unravel that which binds him up in Lucy’s grasp.

This relationship between enslavement and the knowledge of god appears in the \textit{Epic of Sara} as narrated by the griot \textit{Sira Mori Jabaté}. \textit{The Epic of Sara} follows the female hero Sara and is a poem about arranged marriage, marrying for love, and promising oneself to another for life.\textsuperscript{125} In the performance of the epic, the griot repeats the phrase, “No slave knows God”\textsuperscript{126} frequently as Sara struggles with an arranged marriage to a man she does not love. Like Lamar, who complains of stomach pain as he wrestles with his promises to Lucy (“Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y’all”),\textsuperscript{127} Sara complains of belly pain as she wrestles with what to do about her impending marriage until it is finally called off.\textsuperscript{128} In this way, both Sara and Lamar are enslaved to a single figure (Lucy, Sara’s fiancé), yet are also enslaved to systems that perpetuate the indoctrination of certain ideas. Sara operates within a system of arranged marriages where women do not typically marry for love, while Lamar operates within a system

\textsuperscript{124} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, XI.

\textsuperscript{125} Sira Mori Jabaté qt in Johnson, \textit{Oral Epics from Africa}, 114.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 116, 117, 119, 120, 123.

\textsuperscript{127} Lamar, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, XI.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 120.
that expects musicians to seek personal gratification and material gains. In both systems, no “slave knows God,” that is, nobody so fully entrenched and enslaved by any system can recognize God or God’s love—thus, why Lamar is unable to see God in the homeless African man.

In Oral Epics of Africa, editor John Williams Johnson explains why a griot would compose an Epic about such a normal figure like Sara. He writes that, “An important theme introduced [in The Epic of Sara] is that the bards sing of a person’s deeds. Their praise can not be bought.” In other words, choosing to chronicle the life of a character like Sara is a reflection of the griot’s desire to tell a meaningful story worth performing in front of an audience. This is another example of a griot writing not he side of the people against the wealthy and powerful who profit off of the same status quo that keeps characters like Sara in arranged marriages.

In the same way, God does not buy God’s praise. Rather, God asks for an almost worthless object, a dollar, to be given to God. Neither can God’s people—the powerless and the marginalized—buy praise. Only Lucy operates in such a way, buying rappers’ praise and influencing them to praise the status quo, ignorant of the plight of the poor and marginalized. Lamar revises the rapper-griot connection once again, stating that it isn’t enough to flee from praising Lucy or Uncle Sam; instead, the rapper griot must praise God’s people—the oppressed. Doing so is the only way the enslaved rapper and the oppressed people can find relief from the evils of Lucy. In this way, Lamar interprets himself as a spiritual leader as well, someone who is conscious of the evil influences of Lucy, and whose artistic achievements are intentionally made with the hope of praising God by lifting up the most marginalized people in society.

VIII. Bridging the African-African American Divide

As Lamar bounces from leg to leg over the boundary between the supernatural and natural worlds, the rapper embodies what Smitherman would call “the traditional African worldview” which espouses a “fundamental unity between the spiritual and the material aspects

of existence.” But the artist and epic hero also bridges the gaps between geographical locations, placing one foot in Africa, and placing another in America. The Esu-Elegbarian Lamar moves a step further, by seemingly growing new feet to place in countries and cultures across the black diaspora, thus presenting himself as a bridge between disparate peoples, unifying them through his music.

As the cause of this separation, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade forcibly removed black peoples from their homeland both physically and metaphysically. That is, Africans were enslaved and forcefully taken from both their geographical and their cultural homes in Africa. But while the slave trade attempted to extract music, arts, and language of enslaved Africans, it was ultimately unsuccessful. Gates explains that enslaved Africans “carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music…their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance.” Thus, the culture that the enslaved Africans brought to the West underwent a process of signification, fusing Western modes of expression with African modes which produced unique hybrids forms of poetry, music, art, etc. But despite the magnificence of these new forms, African-based cultures have been and continue to be treated with oppression and devaluation. Add to this that Lamar—as a rapper who identifies with the role of the griot—has been cut off from the griot position’s hereditary succession. To combat this division, as well as the ongoing devaluation of black cultures, Lamar continues his connection to the spiritual world and calls of the ghosts of several black leaders of the past.

Lamar begins the final song on the album by invoking the spirit of Nelson Mandela to aide his lyrics. He writes,

The ghost of Mandela, hope my flows they propel it
Let these words be your earth and moon
You consume every message

130 Smitherman, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, 75.
Ibid., 4.
As I lead this army make room for mistakes and depression

Like the verbal battles that would often lead into physical battles between armies in West African oral epics, so too does Lamar lead his army with oral artistry—the purpose of which Lamar hopes would be blessed by Mandela’s spirit of South African black liberation. Lamar invokes the spirit of several other—often considered to be oppositional—black leaders in his songs; in the song The Blacker the Berry, Lamar subtly invokes the spirit of Malcolm X by adopting an aggressive tone of voice to rap out combatively against antagonistic white oppressors, while also referencing the view of Marcus Garvey (“Tell Georgia State Marcus Garvey got all the answers”). At the same time, Lamar subtly invokes the spirit of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the song i say singing in an uplifting voice about nonviolently resisting the oppressive forces around you, while also referencing the voice of W. E. B. Du Bois (as will be discussed below). By calling together the spirits of black leaders from across the globe, Lamar crosses temporal and generational boundaries, thus disrupting chronology to show how the past and the present connect. He also does so to continue the griot’s praise of past legendary black heroes by showing how the spirits of the ancestors are intimately involved in the lives of black people as well as civil rights movements today.

Lamar is also particularly interested in invoking the spirits of often-considered contradictory figures like Malcom X-King and Garvey-Du Bois. In doing so, Lamar furthers an African worldview by reconciling their discordant beliefs in one body of work. Thus, Lamar presents an image of wholeness by representing the wide variety of beliefs about blackness. His invocation of their spirits matches Smitherman’s statements about the natural and the supernatural in African perceptions: “Harmony in nature and the universe is provided by the complementary, interdependent, synergic interaction between the spiritual and the material. Thus we have a paradigm for the way in which ‘opposites’ function. That is, ‘opposites’ constitute

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133 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XVI. 1-4.
134 Rap Genius FIND QUOTE
135 Ibid., FIND SONGE AND ALL
136 Rap Genius FIND QUOTE
interdependent, interacting forces which are necessary for producing a given reality.”

Thus, Lamar brings together seemingly oppositional forces on his album showing how ambivalence and tension breed reconciliation in reality.

Lamar continues this exposé of oppositional forces by relating gang violence in Compton California to the ethnocide of ethnic groups in South Africa. Lamar raps:

It’s funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy
Remind me of these Compton Cryp gangs that live next door
beefin’ with Pirus, only death settle the score

With these lines, Lamar recognizes the similarities between the Cryp-Pirus gangs and the Zulu-Xhosa ethnic groups. He sees how both have, according to postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, internalized violence—that is, how they have begun to believe in the perpetual violence of colonialism, oppression, slavery, and the ongoing devaluation of Black culture—and how they have utilized these ideas to act out aggressively against other black people. Lamar refers to this idea of mental enslavement as institutionalization, something which prevents black people from seeing themselves beyond violence, poverty, and self-destruction. On the song, Institutionalization, Lamar writes about the effects of this mental enslavement on the mind of an impoverished African American from Compton:

If I was the president
I'd pay my mama's rent
Free my homies and them
Bulletproof my Chevy doors
Lay in the White House and get high, Lord

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137 Smitherman, Talkin’ and Testifyin’, 75.
138 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XIII. FIND ACTUAL VERSE NUMBERS
139 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. C. Farrington, (London: Vintage, 1974), 69. CHECK ON THIS
Who ever thought?
Master, take the chains off me!141

According to Lamar, even if a Black American from Compton, California became President of the United States, he or she would still preoccupy themselves with what they’ve established as important: paying rent, getting out of jail, bulletproofing their car, and getting high.142 The singers’ plead to the Master is a cry for freedom from thinking in such a controlled, distorted way. Poverty, ignorance, police brutality, etc. all teaches black people to devalue and hate themselves and others. In doing so, they never reach their full potential. Lamar sees this occurring in both Africa and America, and he realizes that he needs to utilize his talents and abilities to affect change. As a survivor of Lucy’s mental enslavement, Lamar transcends human reality once again and calls together the ghosts of black leaders of the past, asking them to enter into the conversation as he finally liberates his people by bridging the gaps between ancestral pride and present institutionalization, unifying devalued and disparate black peoples throughout the black diaspora, and re-establishing the griot tradition.

IX. Kendrick Lamar Re-establishes the Rapper-Griot Traditions

After spending significant time in Africa, Lamar begins to concern himself with the two-ness of his African and African-American identities. In The Blacker the Berry, Lamar raps, “I’m African American, I’m African/I’m black as the moon, heritage of a small village/Pardon my residence.”143 In these lines, Lamar recognizes a sense of duality in his personal identity; he is both African and African American. Because of this, Lamar feels the need to sarcastically ask his listeners to “pardon his residence,” or excuse his presence in a white majority America. In these lines, Lamar exemplifies what African American author W. E. B. Du Bois famously describes as double-consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a

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141 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, IV. 8-14.


143 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XIII. 25-26.
world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. 144

As Lamar wars with Lucy’s temptations, God’s imperatives, his own desires, and the desires of his people, Lamar also begins to recognize a duality within himself and the way he and other Black Americans have been treated. In Du Bois’ words, Lamar “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”145 In the Blacker the Berry, the rapper recognizes how White America has oppressed Black Americans for ages:

You hate me don't you?
You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture
You’re fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey
You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me.146

He blames White America for perpetually vilifying Black Americans, treating them like second-class citizens, speaking out against them, taking action to harm them, perpetuating inequality for all of American history. But by the end of the song, Lamar realizes that he plays an active part in changing this status quo: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/when gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?/Hypocrite!”147 In these lines, Lamar calls himself a hypocrite for criticizing White America for its treatment of blacks while he himself has killed a black person.

By calling himself a hypocrite, Lamar severely revises the African oral epic tradition. According to Okpewho, many unlettered griots go to great lengths to convince his or her

145 Ibid., 4.
147 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, 91-105.
audience that their story is true. In *Epic of Sundiata*, the griot Mamoudzou Kouyate states, "My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father, it is the word of y father’s father. I will give you my father’s words just as I received them; royal griots do not know what lying is." In this way, Lamar revises the griot tradition, offering up a duality in his own perception of black peoples; his outrage over the death of Trayvon Martin and his own praise of actions that are destructive against women and his enemies are incompatible ideas. In order to better understand this two-ness, and the warring ideas inside of him, Lamar embarks on a journey on the song, *Momma*, to his homeland—or mother-county—of Africa.

In *Momma*, Lamar has a conversation about his fame with a young African boy Again, as he did with Uncle Sam, Lucy, and the homeless man, Lamar fragments himself and performs the identity of the African boy as he speaks to the hero. At first, the listener assumes that Lamar is going to impart some great wisdom to the boy. Instead, the young African challenges Lamar’s conceptions of life as a famous African American rapper-griot:

- you're here right now don't you mistake it
- It's just a new trip, take a glimpse at your family's ancestor
- Make a new list, of everything you thought was progress
- And that was bullshit, I mean your life is full of turmoil
- You spoiled by fantasies of who you are

The African criticizes Lamar’s understanding of success as an artist, challenging him to see his Lucy-loving American understanding of individual success as failure. The boy originally insults Lamar when he casually identifies him by the hit single *Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe* from his debut studio album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*; “Oh I forgot don’t kill my vibe, that’s right, you’re famous.” The African boy’s unenthusiastic response would certainly insult the man who rapped “Bitch, where were you when I was walkin’/now I run the game, got the whole world

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149 Mamoudzou Kouyate qt in Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, 67


151 Ibid., IX. 45.
“I been lookin 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, AH!”154 Lamar and his background singers begin to repeat the words,
“Jump” as if they were performing on stage, asking the audience to begin to dance. Another singer begins to croon, “(Let’s talk about love).” As the song slowly fades out, Lamar states to his unidentified, unknown subject, “I can be your advocate/I can preach for you if you tell me what the matter is.” After coming back home to Africa and connecting to his roots and the African *griot* tradition, Kendrick is now asking who is to be praised. Should he be praising women, money, or other human desires? The young boy tells Lamar to advocate for his homies, to bring them home and show them they belong to a rich cultural and ancestral heritage.

Lamar signifies upon this reconciliation of opposite forces in the album version of the song *i*. The song is presented on the album as a live performance, complete with the sounds of an audience. In the chorus of the song, Lamar’s female backup singers collectively sing “I love myself,” while Lamar raps in-between:

> And (I love myself)  
> When you lookin' at me, tell me what do you see?  
> (I love myself)  
> Ahh, I put a bullet in the back of the back of the head of the bully  
> (I love myself)  
> Illuminated by the hand of God, boy don't seem shy  
> (I love myself)  
> One day at a time, uhh.

Again Lamar invokes DuBois’ double consciousness as he asks to look through the eyes of the listeners and see how they perceive him. But, Lamar is ready to put the bullet in the back of the head of his enemy, Lucy, and vanquish her forever, led by the hand of God. However, the optimism of this song is cut short when two audience members begin to fight during the

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155 Ibid., XI. 96.

156 Ibid., XI. 97.

157 Ibid., XI.102-103.


159 Dubois, *The Souls of Black-Folk*, 3.
performance. Lamar stops the music and criticizes the two audience members for fighting during his performance. These two audience members could be understood as the relationship between the rapper-griot, the war between Lucy and God, or the tensions within Lamar himself—between his Africanness and his Americanness.

Lamar returns the audience’s attention back to himself as he begins to recite a spoken word poem, in which he redefines the infamous N-word, a word with a somewhat controversial history in rap music. He commits this verse to Oprah and other people who would say that using the N-word is a perpetuation of conflict, violence, and oppression. Instead, Lamar signifies upon the word and interprets it a completely new way through the reconciliation of African and American contexts:

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

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160 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XV. 94.

161 Ibid., XV. 41-48.

162 Ibid., XV. 48-58.
Lamar spells the Ethiopian word “Negus,” a homophone for “Niggas,” and a word with an exceptionally different context. Negus were the Kings, emperors, rulers that American history books overlook and the U.S. ignores. Lamar agrees with Oprah, that “niggas” is an offensive term, perpetuating slavery. However, Negus connotes beauty and praiseworthiness, a regal connection worth praise. At this moment in the album, Lamar realizes Boris Gardiner’s proclamation of the celebration of all black peoples at the beginning of the album by abdicating the throne as the King of Hip Hop and extending royalty to all black peoples. At the same time, Lamar reestablishes the griot tradition by throwing off the burdens of Lucy’s seductions and praising something other than wealth, status, women, and power: the African American griot has found the King worth praising—his community.

X. Conclusion

“We unify, stop the enemy from killing us.” Lamar speaks these lines at the end of the album during a fictionalized conversation with the late Tupac Shakur, a rapper from Compton whose lyrics and image would inspire young Lamar to begin rapping. In this moment, Lamar reveals his true hope of a unified black identity, glued together by respect for one another. His journeys across geographical, spiritual, and cultural boundaries have disassembled the political and social walls built between blacks. Now, African Americans in Compton can look across the ocean and reconnect with the people, traditions, and culture of their homeland of Africa. Lamar connects to this beautiful tradition to remind people of their beauty and the pride. No matter where black people are across the globe, they are connected by royalty through their motherland. It is this knowledge—and Lamar’s newfound “modern griot” identity—that ultimately can break the chains of mental enslavement and perform a new black identity.

To Pimp a Butterfly ends with an interview between Lamar and the late Tupac Shakur, a famed Compton rapper who heavily influenced Lamar’s identity and mission and could be considered “father” in the hereditary “modern griot” relationship. The interview ends when Lamar asks Shakur a question and receives no response. He frantically calls after Shakur

163 Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, XVI. 137.
("What’s your perspective on that?/Pac? Pac?/ Pac?!")<sup>164</sup> but hears no answer. Shakur—a rapper whose ideas about social justice, equality, and respect and love for all black people—is dead. And now, it is Lamar’s job to take up the mantle and sing the praise of the black community as the reestablished “modern griot.” Lamar’s interpretation of himself as the griot constructing an epic is important because it points to how black pride and achievement is epic and supernatural in proportion. As a griot writing a praise of his king, Lamar constructs the biggest, most legendary piece of West African art possible in an attempt to capture every nuance, every subtlety, every obstacle, division and relationship of black life and signify upon them. He does this in order to sing the greatest praise possible of the people. As a rap musician signifying upon the West African griot oral literary tradition, this is how Lamar interprets himself.

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<sup>164</sup> Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, XVI. 248-250.
Bibliography


