CHAPTER 15

Dying of Thirst: Kendrick Lamar and the Call for a "New School" Hip-Hop Pedagogy

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The contrast of images on the 2015 BET Music Awards stage seemed both flagrant and poetic: floodlights poured past the frames of two police cruisers—the doors and hoods covered in red and blue graffiti—while pyrotechnics surged and the red and white tendrils of a huge, tattered US Flag waved in the background. The music cued and a voice called out "Alls my life I has to fight nigga."[1] The dancers in front unfroze and drifted center-stage-left to surround one cruiser. On the roof of the squad car stood a rapper, holding a mic in one hand and straddling the flashing red and blue siren. "Hard times like, 'God!'/ Bad trips like, 'Yea!'" Smoke crept across the stage floor as the music swelled, and rapper Kendrick Lamar yelled, "But if God got us/Then we gon' be alright!" as fireworks burst behind him.

Erika Ramirez (2015) of Billboard Magazine called the performance "powerful," stating the words of Lamar's single *Alright*, which represent "unity and resilience," especially in the wake of increasing police violence against black

[1] Note on use of terms: As literacy researchers concerned with learning how language and words impact people, our aim was to manipulate or alter as few terms as possible in our textual analysis. Although there are reasons to omit terms like racial slurs or misogynistic phrases in public dialogue, doing so here would misrepresent the ways that hip-hop music affects the narratives of young people. Our decision was to preserve lyrics and related texts as they were originally written, welcoming critiques of terminology from readers at stake.

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men and women in the US.[2] Others were not as convinced. Conservative pundit and frequent hip-hop detractor Geraldo Rivera claimed the performance sent "exactly the wrong message," going as far to say, "Hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years" (Ramirez, 2015). Of course Rivera focused on lyrics such as "Nigga, and we hate po-po/Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho," highlighting violent themes while neglecting to focus on the song's critique of a brutal police state. Though anyone with a rudimentary understanding of either hip-hop or race discourse could view Rivera's standpoint as suspect, the pundit's words mirror the dismissive attitudes many people in the US hold toward contemporary rap music.[3]

There are plenty of scholars who advocate for hip-hop as an ideal vehicle for fostering dialogue about race and culture (Perry, 2005; Rose, 1994; Somers-Willett, 2009), particularly in educational spaces (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2008; Low, 2011) However, even within hip-hop circles, some people claim the good days of rap are over. In an interview with Jo Fuertes-Knight (2013), producer DJ Snips essentially claims there are no more true emcees and the quality is nowhere near old school artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A unifying claim among the "hip-hop is dead" argument is that commercialization is responsible for diluting what once was a culturally rich art form (Rose, 2008; Tanz, 2007). According to Watts:

> American popular culture is today constitutive of the vigorous exchange relations of spectacular consumption—an intensely overblown interactive consumer network where some black (and white) folk gladly sell their souls for a thrill ride toward ultimate juice and "manhood." Meanwhile, on the streets of the "United States Ghetto" rap artistry is celebrated as the profit-making industry that it most assuredly is. (2012, p. 724)

While the commodification of rap music has routinely affected its artistry, to say that contemporary hip-hop is uncharacteristically more commercial than its previous iterations ignores the priority shifts many artists are making in the digital age. For example, when veteran hip-hoppers El-P and Killer Mike formed the supergroup *Run the Jewels*, they decided to adopt a crowdsourcing

[2] Since our primary discussion revolves around social constructs of race and how they relate to issues of power, we typically use the uncapitalized terms "black" and "white" when referring to racial groups in our analysis, unless quoting or referring to other terms being used by another author. It should be noted that between the revision and publication stages of this chapter, Kendrick Lamar released his critically acclaimed album DAMN. One of the most notable aspects of the album is a shift in language regarding Lamar's racial identity. However, since analysis in this chapter refers to terminology used during the releases of Lamar's second and third studio album, the authors have decided to utilize the terms most commonly used by the artist during the time period.

[3] "Rap" and "hip-hop" are not synonymous terms, as "rapping" refers to the art of emceeing on a mic, while "hip-hop" refers to the overarching culture that includes emceeing, deejaying, breakdancing, graffiti writing, and so on.

model to fund their first three albums. After meeting their goal, the duo released links to digital versions of their albums for free download. The shift has affected the lifestyle choices rappers are traditionally known to promote as well. Instead of selling a narrative of lavish excess, Chicago artist Chance the Rapper has spent the last five years giving back to his community by raising money for Chicago schools (Crew, 2015) and hosting open mics for aspiring young poets and performers (Briscoe, 2015). The shift has also arguably impacted the content of rap lyrics. Notably, in a recent review of an Angel Haze concert, writer Chris Kelley said of the agender, feminist rapper, "Instead of the escapism of conspicuous consumption and recreational drug use, Haze opts for confessional catharsis, their heart not just on their sleeve but ripped out and exposed onstage" (2015).

However, when the quality of contemporary rap music is challenged, modern-day fans often conjure the name of one artist to serve as an exemplar: Kendrick Lamar. Although he has been releasing mixtapes since he was a 16-year-old local Compton favorite named K.Dot, Kendrick Lamar became known to a sizeable portion of mainstream listeners with the release of his second studio album *good kid, m.A.A.D. city (GKMD)* in 2013 (Barnes, 2015). Not long after, Lamar created a buzz in the fan community with his "Control Verse" on the song *Control*, part of a collaboration with label mates Big Sean and Jay Electronica (Shipley, Reeves, & Lee, 2015). The bridge of Lamar's verse begins as an all-out assault on industry rappers: "Miscellaneous minds are never explaining their minds/Devilish grin for my alias aliens to respond." Lamar won over a larger audience still with an impassioned "performance for the ages" of his single *i* on Saturday Night Live (Young, 2014). Wearing blacked-out contact lenses, his hair half-braided and half picked out, Lamar's explosive precision and sweaty energy reminded many older viewers of Golden Era rappers like Method Man and Old Dirty Bastard of The Wu Tang Clan (Balfour, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the most important conversation surrounding Lamar's work was sparked upon the release of his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly (TPAB)*. The album is an unflinching testimony of what it means to be black in a white supremacist, hyper-consumptive capitalistic society. The complex discourse over race and commodification present in Lamar's lyrics has deservedly captured the attention of numerous educators. In a blog post entitled *Why I Dropped Everything and Started Teaching Kendrick Lamar's New Album* (2015), educator Brian Mooney detailed his decision to embed lessons involving Lamar's album into his unit covering Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Mooney spoke to National Public Radio (NPR) about his decision to privilege a rap album as an ideal classroom text: "As our students and the demographics of our country are becoming more and more diverse, we have to start thinking about the nature of the canon, and what we consider texts, and what we consider worthy of study" ("A Visit from Kendrick Lamar", 2015). Mooney's post about his lesson plan gained so much traction online that it even reached the attention of Kendrick Lamar himself, who insisted on visiting Mooney's high

school as a guest lecturer and performer. Instead of relying on the music of bygone artists like Run-D.M.C., Mooney's hip-hop unit is refreshing because the texts being examined are part of students' lived culture.

The aim of this chapter is threefold: first, it is an attempt to provide an entry point for educators and hip-hop pedagogues who are unfamiliar with the work of new artists like Kendrick Lamar. Despite the resurgence of quality hip-hop music on the market today, there remains a gap in the field of hip-hop pedagogy between the artists privileged by educators and those cherished by students (Hill, 2009). Hip-hop pedagogues continue to write about the legacy of acts like Public Enemy and KRS-One, despite the fact many teenagers dismiss 1980s and 1990s era artists as the emcees their parents used to like.

Second, this chapter hopes to demonstrate how the age of digital distribution has transformed how rap music is deconstructed in educational settings. Whereas traditional methods of discussing rap focus solely on the textual analysis of song lyrics, the hip-hop canon in the age of digital distribution contains everything from posts on social media to interviews on online podcasts. A student in Brian Mooney's *Hip-Hop Lit* class explains, "We dissect album covers, we dissect advertisements, we go through songs and dissect the literature of the song" ("A Visit from Kenrick Lamar," 2015). We contend that a New Literacies focus could help educators discuss the multimodal texts inherent in hip-hop (Baker & Leu, 2010; Cazden et al., 1996; Street, 1993). In short, educators with a New Literacies paradigm believe students undergo rich literacy processes by dissecting multimedia hip-hop texts, ranging from YouTube videos to discussions on online fan forums.

Finally, we hope to pursue an understanding of how Kendrick Lamar's latest two albums—*GKMD* and *TPAB*—can be used in educational settings to discuss themes inherent in Critical Race Theory (CRT). By showcasing how hip-hop literacies can be used to examine issues of race and culture in US schools, we hope to provide strategies for educators who wish to decolonize their classroom curricula in search of a literary canon comprising fresh, engaging texts written by authors of color.

"The Ghost of Mandela, Hope My Flows They Propel It"

CRT presents a unique theoretical position that challenges mainstream theories within educational research. Three premises frame CRT: systemic racism is pervasive; permanent racism is structural; and racism must be actively challenged (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Milner, 2007; Tate, 1992). CRT rejects educational paradigms based on liberal and color-blind ideologies (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT, in theory, and practice, represents a break and a departure from the mainstream theories on pedagogy in several ways. First, it offers a radical critique of how the intersection of power and race shapes K-12 school curriculums. Second, CRT makes

explicit the importance of inviting the stories of marginalized youth in the classrooms. Finally, it offers an alternative to deficit notions based on cultural assets that all students bring to the learning environment.

CRT has critiqued whiteness in the overall curriculum in the K-12 classroom. Instead, CRT scholars have promoted decentering the curriculum in an effort to make it more culturally relevant (Hall, 2011). CRT scholars have suggested that it is important for students to locate themselves within racially constructed curriculums by engaging with and producing culturally relevant texts. Additionally, CRT proponents encourage counter-storytelling tropes that view each student's home culture as an asset in the learning process. CRT is ideal as an embedded framework in hip-hop pedagogy in this sense because, as Rose (1994) claims, "Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity as the observer or narrator" (p. 2).

CRT is empowering because it provides a vocabulary that can be used to critique—and ultimately change—the status quo. As a result, students are not only more cognizant of their position but are also well equipped to move toward the radical action necessary to transform society. Hip-hop has the potential to serve as a vehicle for those wishing to vocalize their frustrations when actions fall short of solving that which is critiqued. For example, Bell (1987) is resigned to the permanence of racism in society while also committed to the continual struggle against it. He describes the struggle as "both the recognition of the futility of action and the unalterable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken" (p. 198). Furthermore, CRT is a theory that enables students with opportunities to use their voice to challenge racial oppression.

A CRT emphasis on societal structures is essential to our work for several reasons: first, we can explore how hip-hop pedagogy can be employed to challenge racist structures without singularly implicating individuals or organizations. Second, we can adhere to the core assertion of CRT that racism is not merely an individual pathology but a socially constructed racial system embedded in the design of institutions in the US. Finally, hip-hop as a counter-narrative invites the voices of culturally marginalized youth to be represented. Throughout this chapter, we frame pedagogical goals within CRT to examine the ways the work of Kendrick Lamar recognizes and challenges racism and how students can use his "texts" to create dialogues of their own in the classroom.

When dissecting hip-hop texts in education settings, we advocate for the use of a New Literacy Studies approach. Street (1993) explains New Literacy Studies complicates the "divide" between literacy and orality. Whereas "autonomous models of literacy" treat it as a practical skill, absent of social context, proponents of New Literacies Studies "view literary practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and to recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and to write in different contexts" (pp. 4–5). Baker and Leu (2010) point out new methods of communication brought on by technological advancements and the development of the

Internet have fundamentally changed the ways "readers" process "texts." Therefore, a New Literacies approach in a classroom also tasks students with developing the digital literacy skills necessary to think critically about a tweet or blog from a hip-hop magazine, for example, or conduct a politically informed visual analysis of an artist's music video or album cover. These types of classroom activities subvert the traditional literary canon because the term "text" no longer refers solely to the printed script of authors institutions have long favored. In addition to narratives told through the print medium, a classroom that values multimodal literacy processes says a text can be a story by Sojourner Truth, a song by Billie Holiday, a graffiti piece by Jean-Michael Basquiat, or an online interview with a rapper named K.Dot. Essentially, New Literacy Studies is compatible with CRT because it explores relationships between power and identity and rejects the Eurocentric notion that literate rigor can only be conveyed through the written word.

Since an idealized "new school" hip-hop pedagogy tasks young readers with processing texts through numerous mediums, there are more opportunities for students to consider how art is consumed in capitalist societies and how the commodifying of texts into a sellable product negatively impacts artists. A popular example is documented in hip-hop journalism articles detailing a legal dispute between photographer Giordano Cipriani and Lamar's team over a claim they used his photograph for the album cover art for the *Blacker the Berry* single without approval or compensation (Gordon, 2015). In another incident, the owner of Lamar's label TopDawg blamed Interscope Records in a tweet for haphazardly leaking the album *TPAB* a week before its intended release day (Kyles, 2015). As texts increasingly become products of collaboration between multiple artists, it is essential that young people understand how systems of power affect the agency and authenticity of voices involved in such projects.

In order to give researchers and practitioners a better understanding of how a New Literacy Studies approach to hip-hop pedagogy can foster dialogue on race and privilege, we aim to demonstrate how "reading" the audio samples, cover art, music videos, advertisements, interviews, and hypertextual sources (like the fan-annotated site RapGenius) contribute to our understanding of Kendrick Lamar's latest two albums, *GKMD* and *TPAB*. A multimodal, new school text set reminds students of the ways "spectacular consumption" (Watts, 2012) informs how various cultures are represented through art. As will be made evident in this article, the trajectory of Kendrick Lamar's work serves as a stark testimony of the realities many black artists face when their texts are commodified into a product by white audiences.

"Compton, USA Made Me an Angel on Angel Dust"

The black lettering scratched across the cover of *GKMD* refers to the album as *A SHORT FILM BY: KENDRICK LAMAR*. Though the term "short film" is being used ironically—since the text it refers to is an audio recording—the

tightly woven narrative of Lamar's sophomore album utilizes storytelling techniques commonly found in cinema. As the opening track *Sherane AKA Master Splinter's Daughter* begins, the listener can hear the sound of a two-reel movie projector being switched on. Immediately, we hear a chorus of young, black male voices asking God for forgiveness; the prayer functions as a poetic invocation and establishes the prevailing theme of "redemption" in the album. As the prayer concludes, ambient tones fill the speakers, followed by a subtle bassline riff and a distorted cry in the distance.

As the elements of the beat congeal, we hear Lamar's voice, calm and reflective: "I met her at this house party on El Segundo and Central." Context clues like references to landmarks and popular music place the setting to around 2004 in West Compton, California. The album's story starts "in media res" or in the middle of things: a 17-year-old K.Dot (Lamar's younger persona) meets an unfamiliar teenage girl at a party near his high school:

> "Where you stay?" She said "Down the street from Dominguez High"
> Okay, I know that's borderline Compton or Paramount
> "Well is it Compton?"
> "No," she replied and quickly start batting her eyes and
> Strictly had wanted her thighs around me.

Though subtle, the dialogue of this conversation serves as the finger that flicks the first domino of tumultuous events that tumble across the remainder of the album. *GKMD* tells the story of an impressionable teenage protagonist (a "good kid") surrounded by gang violence, rampant drug use, and police brutality plaguing the city of Compton. The record presents an opportunity for educators because it functions as a "concept album," meaning that a cohesive narrative can be gleaned through the song lyrics, sound effects and cues, skits, and related album art. As the album proceeds verse to verse, track to track, perspectives switch, times shift back and forth, and Lamar as a protagonist ages and learns. For example, themes in song lyrics and skits inform the listener of K.Dot's decision to ignore his better judgment—he borrows his mother's van and drives into rival gang territory to visit Sherane. At the end of the first song, young Kendrick arrives at the girl's home and is immediately confronted by two men "in black hoodies," demanding K.Dot tell them who he is and "where he stay." This is just one example of how a theme like gang violence is brought up in *GKMD* only to be revisited in a later track through a different context or perspective.

The next song fast-forwards the narrative timeline: we hear the perspective of an adult Lamar reflecting on the state of rap in the music industry. Though the track does not propel the events of the story forward, the song both establishes Lamar as a reflexive narrator and urges listeners to adopt a more critical ear. It is not until five tracks later that we learn young Kendrick's fate: "For the record, I recognize that I'm easily prey/I got ate alive yesterday." Critic Ryan Bassil explains K.Dot's beat down serves as a narrative turning point. "The

run-in with the gangbangers kicks off the half of the story. It's like the bit in every good gangster story where the protagonist realises [sic] that they need to break out of the death-ridden community they're living in, before it eats them alive" (Bassil, 2013). The plot twist allows the narrator to reflect on critical themes such as peer pressure, self-medication, tribalism, and retaliatory violence, which makes *GKMD* a useful text for discussion on issues that many adolescent students face in urban schools and communities.

"If Pirus and Crips All Got Along/They'd Probably Gun Me Down by the End of This Song"

The nonlinear storyline of *GKMD* allows Lamar to serve as a multi-voiced narrator, who speaks from various reflexive points along the character arc of a naïve K.Dot evolving into a mature Kendrick Lamar. Whereas traditional gangster rap often promotes misogyny, lavish drug use, and a fetish for violence, Lamar instead represents such ideologies as the perspectives of his pre-enlightened self. On track 3, *Backseat Freestyle*, the timeline rewinds chronologically to the beginning of the narrative. A skit at the close of track 2 informs us that K.Dot is riding around with his homies, carelessly smoking blunts, and freestyling to a "beat CD." Lamar adjusts the pitch and resonance of his voice to signal that he is speaking as his younger self. "Goddamn I got bitches, damn I got bitches/Damn I got bitches, wifey, girlfriend and mistress." Instead of shaming young people for harboring toxic attitudes inherent in commercial hip-hop culture, Lamar offers such perspectives as a starting point for a young protagonist in need of ascension.

When viewed with a CRT lens and contextualized with the trajectory of the album, the tone and lyrics of the track suggest that K.Dot is just an uninformed kid. He wants nothing more than to transcend his marginalized standing but perhaps sees no alternatives other than the tools available to young black teenagers in Compton. "Martin had a dream/Kendrick has a dream/All my life I want money and power/Respect my mind or die from lead showers." Lamar switches tenses and fluctuates his vocal tone from track to track (and sometimes from verse to verse) in the album. This models for young people how a complex identity can be constructed by viewing life experiences through varied reflexive lenses.

In addition to adopting different voices, instrumental cues also signal to the listener a time shift in the narrative. At the end of track 6, we hear the aforementioned "Sherane" instrumental once again. Production duo Tha Bizness explains that they created the cue by adding distortion effects to found sounds, samples, and musical riffs (*Native Instruments*, 2013). The resulting tone of the beat is sorrowful and evokes a murky, dreamlike state. By focusing on audio-based narrative tools such as sound effects and orchestral cues, educators can promote a more nuanced pedagogy that does not solely promote print-based texts. For example, the beat also signals a metaphysical shift of voice for the narrator. While the love song *Poetic Justice* is an introspective examination

of Lamar's feelings for Sherane, the instrumental at the end of the track snaps the listener back to the external scene of conflict in her driveway: two gang members in black hoodies have surrounded K. Dot and his mother's van, as evidenced by the skit's concluding track 6. Focusing attention on hip-hop skits can be a lucrative practice for classroom educators because it gives students the chance to decipher oral codes and social cues related to systems of power and inequity.

The skits themselves also advance the story forward. Whereas skits on hip-hop albums often function as comedic interludes, the numerous skits in *GKMC* have a yarn-like quality that weaves strands of narrative throughout the album. Two tracks after Lamar gets jumped, we hear the voices of two teenagers arguing. "Pass Dot the bottle, damn! You ain't the one that got fucked up." Following his beating, K.Dot meets back up with his friends who offer him liquor. The skit reintroduces the themes of self-medication and peer pressure, subjects that are further explored in the following song *Swimming Pools (Drank)*. As a standalone single, *Swimming Pools* serves as a testimony of the alcohol abuse running rampant through the Section Eight housing Lamar once called home (2012). However, juxtaposing the lyrics of the bridge—"Pour up (Drank), head shot (Drank)"—with the break—"I ride, you ride, bang"—suggests young K.Dot has himself fallen victim to the cycle of self-destructive excess he witnessed as a child. When contextualizing the lyrics with the skits proceeding and following the song, the listener is presented with an additional narrative: as K.Dot and his friends get drunk they pressure him into retaliating against his attackers with a drive-by shooting. Skits on the following tracks depict the events to come. K.Dot's friend is killed in the crossfire, plunging the narrative into an introspective lament on the horrific impacts that systemic racism, neoliberal capitalism, gang-affiliated tribalism, and The War on Drugs have left on black communities in Compton.

Since *GKMC* is constructed nonlinearly, with multimodal narrative tools, the text can be dissected either as one epic-length work or as separate intersecting pieces. The fragmental story is ideal for secondary teachers who might have trouble convincing their school administration that there is literary value in songs like *Backseat Freestyle* where vulgarity, misogyny, and unabashed violence are essential themes. However, a track like *good kid* contains no curse words, racial slurs, or vulgar terminology, which makes it ideal for most classrooms welcome to using hip-hop as a text. While the song serves as the initial fork in the road for the protagonist in the album, as a standalone track the song acts as a powerful indictment against the pitfalls of systemic racism. The first verse presents the barrier of warring neighborhood gangs who hold influence over black adolescents while the second verse introduces a racist police force who pushes the same kids toward the prison pipeline. Themes including drug dependence and dysfunctional education institutions confound the conflict described in the song. Kendrick Lamar's *GKMD* serves as an alternative to "Crack is Wack" narratives espoused by some old school hip-hoppers like Kid 'n Play and DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince. Instead of modeling a narrative

of prohibition, K.Dot's transition to Kendrick models progression. It is important for educators to consider whether the narratives privileged in their classroom discussions allow students to reflect on their own transformations.

Near the end of the album a skit depicts a neighbor confronting K.Dot and his friends mourning the death of their friend and plotting revenge. She asks the boys to disavow their violent lifestyle and ask God for forgiveness, which brings the listener back to the prayer heard at the beginning of the album. Though this redemptive ending is told through biblical themes, such allusions also refer to Lamar's ascension as a successful rapper which has metaphorically elevated him above many of the societal ills highlighted in the album.

"Look Inside These Walls/and You See I'm Havin' Withdrawals"

The album artwork also adds layers of meaning to the narrative of *GKMC*. The cover of the deluxe edition depicts what seems to be a faded Polaroid photograph of a dark minivan with tinted windows. The surface of the photograph seems worn with age, the rough creases mirroring the texture of the cracked street in the image. As mentioned earlier, the title of the album is scratched along the bottom of the Polaroid in the same black lettering as a gang tag graffitied on a wall. The bold black-and-white Parental Advisory sticker at the bottom right corner of the cover punctuates the image with nefarious undertones.

The van functions both as a metaphorical vehicle for the protagonist's growth as a character and as an actual vehicle in the story that transports the protagonist from setting to setting. The image is complemented by select lines in the lyrics: "Pack a van with four guns at a time, with the sliding door." The line compliments the image by capturing the moment in the story when the protagonists' trajectories are compromised by selfish motives—a common trope in coming-of-age narratives. Dialogue from skits also enhances our understanding of the van as a narrative vehicle. Throughout the album K.Dot's mother leaves voicemails inquiring about the whereabouts of her car. While the dialogue gives the listener an insight to the poverty and drug dependency present in the protagonist's home life, it also establishes a rough timeline by correlating K.Dot's character arc with his time spent driving his mom's van. Whereas one vehicle drives K.Dot toward danger, the other "vehicle" drives Kendrick toward redemption.

Another powerful image is the cover of the single *Swimming Pools (Drank)*. The left side of the cover is framed by the edge of an ajar wooden door, suggesting readers are viewing an image not often shared. Inside the doorframe, we see bare walls and a dusty hardwood floor. The white flash of a window with cobweb-like pale curtains punctuate the drab background. Occupying the right half of the image is the silhouette of Kendrick Lamar sitting in a wooden chair, his shoulders hunched with elbows on knees. The bright color of the chair and Lamar's clothes contrast against his skin and the shadows in the room. At the

bottom center of the photograph, near Lamar's shoes, sits a nearly empty bottle of brown liquor. We can see the left side of Lamar's face, though his line of sight is turned slightly toward the distance.

The visual artifacts represented in the photographs are also replicated in mediums separate from album cover artwork. An official commercial for *GKMC* shows a black teenager driving a dented Chrysler minivan through the streets of Compton while the music video for *Swimming Pools (Drank)* shows Lamar rapping in the same musty room, sitting on the edge of the same wooden chair. The repetition of images across varying mediums establishes *GKMC* as a richly layered, multimodal text. By using a New Literacies approach to deconstructing hip-hop albums as intersecting, multi-genre works, educators promote a culturally competent pedagogy as an alternative to traditional teaching that privileges a textually bound, Eurocentric literary canon. Though his sophomore album undoubtedly changed the way critical hip-hop texts can be discussed and dissected in educational settings, Lamar's next release would become one of the most talked-about albums in the past decade.

"Now I'm Runnin' Game, Got the Whole World Talkin'"

Though a majority of our analysis of *GKMC* focuses on narrative elements present within the storyline, a substantial amount of discourse relevant to Lamar's third studio album has taken place through supplemental texts, such as news articles and interviews, and in digital spaces, such as fan forums and social media. A multifaceted text set is ideal for educators because including critically engaging informational texts in instructional units on hip-hop can show students how to use skills they have learned in class to deconstruct the stories they value in their home lives. Pioneer journalist William "Upski" Wimsatt claims, "The job of the hip hop journalist is to capture the attention of the rap listener, and to sharpen their thinking at the same time" (2008, p. 67). In similar ways, that literary theory and criticism can inform our understanding of traditional poems, the use of digital journalism in classrooms can enrich critical analysis related to pop culture.

In a January, 2015, cover story for *Billboard Magazine*, Lamar spoke of the clashes between protesters and police in the days following the shooting of Michael Brown and the grand jury decision not to indict Daniel Pantaleo for the murder of Eric Garner (Edwards, 2015). Given his reputation for fostering complex discussions regarding the impacts of racism on urban communities, some fans were surprised by K.Dot's response:

> What happened to [Michael Brown] should've never happened. Never. But when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within. Don't start with just a rally, don't start from looting—it starts from within. (Lewis, 2015)

Critics online accused K.Dot of promoting respectability politics, a set of principles that ignore the harms of systemic oppression and instead insist that the best way for black folks to achieve upward mobility is to adopt palatable attitudes and conduct themselves in a way deemed appropriate by white folks (Cox, 2015). Blogger Taylor Lewis said she "felt that [K.Dot's] comments gave the predominately white publication the wrong impression, suggesting to readers that there is a lack of self-respect in the Black community, and that that is the first thing to address in this fight for justice" (2015). Lamar's comments also caused a stir in social media communities such as "Black Twitter." Rapper Azalea Banks tweeted, "lol do you know about the generational effects of poverty, racism, and discrimination?" She added, "I really pray for the minds of the urban youth, I really do because I was once on the side of feeling like I wasn't owed anything" (2015).

Kendrick Lamar did not initially respond to the criticism. Instead, he spent the following two months with collaborators crafting perhaps the most prolifically dense commentary on race ever attempted in the hip-hop canon. In March of 2015, Lamar released *TPAB*. While *GKMC* functions as an examination of the mechanistic impacts of systemic racism, *TPAB* delves into the deep emotional turmoil internalized by black artists in a hyper-consumptive industry fueled by a white consumer fan base that fetishizes black suffering. In the bridge of the first single *Blacker the Berry*, Lamar draws a parallel between hip-hop consumers and media voyeurs who watched the events of Ferguson unfold on their televisions:

> Six in the morn', fire in the street
> Burn, baby, burn, that's all I wanna see
> And sometimes I get off watchin' you die in vain
> It's such a shame they may call me crazy
> They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or somethin'
> But homie, you made me
> Black don't crack, my nigga

The schisms described by Lamar—both mental and physical—allude to W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, "whereby one is both American and black, two identities inextricably linked and yet at times in conflict" (Perry, 2005, p. 19). Lamar unflinchingly portrays Du Bois' metaphor of "twoness" in *Blacker the Berry* as the internalized conflict, self-hatred, and shame he feels as an artist who has profited from narratives of racialized violence. The song ends:

> So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
> when gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
> Hypocrite.

In a review of *TPAB* in *Salon Magazine*, writer Priscilla Ward claims, "K.Dot's tell-it-like-it-is blackness sets the stakes high for the rebirth of a renaissance

movement: a paradigm shift back to raw black creativity. That's truth that can't be taken and pimped—if we're woke, that is." Lamar boasted in *Rolling Stone* that *TPAB* "will be taught in college courses someday" (2015).

"I Own Black, Own Everything Black"

Though K.Dot's journey in *GKMC* is personified as a van ride through Compton, the narrative yarns present in his third album are less bound to time and space. The result is a more metaphysical vehicle that transports the listeners across the numerous black soundscapes in US popular culture, including Jamaican Dancehall breaks, 1970s soul hooks, and samples from recognizable Blaxploitation movies. "Sonically, Lamar's new album is adventurous, incorporating elements of funk, spoken-word poetry, and free-jazz, augmented by lots of live playing" ("The Trials of Kendrick Lamar," 2015). Because of the album's eclectic influences, *TPAB* is brimming with allusions to a range of influential black icons, such as Alice Walker, Nelson Mandela, Michael Jackson, and Ice Cube. The album itself provides listeners with an alternative to the Eurocentric literary and historical canon, which helps to explain why an educator like Brian Mooney saw *TPAB* as an opportunity to cross-apply themes with less-represented works in school curricula like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

The dialogue of *TPAB* is undoubtedly driven by the "conversations" Lamar creates with elders and peers in the genres of black artistry he admires. DJ Spooky explains the replication of sounds and images in remix literacies is more than mere mimicry: "Replication as differentiated from mere reproduction. Replication as it stands derived from reply: the copies transcend the original, the original is nothing more than a collection of previous cultural movements" (Miller, 2004, p. 36). The result is a richly woven, multimodal mosaic that transcends the oft-streamlined, "single-story" pedagogic discourses that mitigate popular representations of black culture (Adichie, 2009).

The opening track *Wesley's Theory* begins with a sample of the 1973 Boris Gardner song, *Every Nigger is a Star* crackling and popping on an old vinyl player. The sample is a recognizable black power anthem in music and cinema and sets a bold precedent for an album which tasks listeners to examine the invasive dynamics between white audiences and black artists. A voice cries out, "Hit me," and the beat begins. The ad lib is an allusion to the Godfather of Soul James Brown but also functions as a nod to iconic hip-hop group *Public Enemy* who used the phrase to kick off their single *911 is a Joke*. The funk-infused beat itself serves as a discourse with Lamar's peers in the music industry, co-constructed by producer Flying Lotus and bass player Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner. The lyrics also allude to other black artists in the industry such as Dave Chappelle, the black comedian who infamously turned down a multi-million-dollar contract because he felt the racial themes of his television show were being maligned for the sake of white entertainment. The track title itself is a reference to Wesley Snipes, a black actor who was "sniped" (or targeted) by the entertainment industry when he was inevitably persecuted,

charged, and found guilty of income tax evasion. Legendary black musicians such as George Clinton and Dr. Dre appear in spoken cameos in the song, warning young Kendrick about the pitfalls of staying on top in the music industry.

The dialogue of *TPAB* is also conveyed through an examination of Lamar's fracturing senses of self. The theme of Duboisian double consciousness permeates throughout the album, exemplified by the duel metaphor of the butterfly and the caterpillar. Lamar explains in the resolution of the album how the two images personify the conflict he feels as a black rapper in a capitalistic society:

> The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it. Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city. While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive. One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him, but praises the butterfly. The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar. But having a harsh outlook on life the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak and figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits.

Lamar uses similar dueling perspectives throughout the album in interesting ways. For example, lines from a poem are threaded throughout the album. "I remember when you was conflicted/Misusing your influence/Sometimes I did the same." In the final track *Mortal Man*, we discover that the verse is actually an imagined conversation with late rapper Tupac Shakur, whose legacy is often contextualized with themes of violence and excess in popular narratives. At the conclusion of *Mortal Man*, Lamar has a simulated conversation with Shakur, splicing his own questions into a 1994 interview with the legendary Compton rapper. The discussion serves as an inspiring model for thoughtful intergenerational dialogue that is needed between new school and old school proponents of hip-hop pedagogy.

"I Recognize You're Lookin' at Me for the Pay Cut"

Like *GKMC*, the narrative of *TPAB* is supported by visual imagery. The album cover features a black-and-white "victory tableaux" of shirtless black men standing on the lawn of The White House, brandishing cell phones and 40-oz liquor bottles and waving stacks of twenty dollar bills (Clark, 2015). However, the starkest collection of images is undoubtedly represented in the music video (i.e., short film) for the song *Alright*.

Whereas music videos of 1990s era hip-hop mostly showcased artists rapping and living lavishly in front of crowds of people, the music videos of many contemporary artists like Lamar use sounds and images to build a much richer, layered narrative. The song *Alright* is an upbeat track whose primary narrative is the perseverance of the black community, while images in the music video contextualize the song with depictions of police brutality and

urban violence. Powerful music videos like *Alright* are ideal texts for classroom discussion because they give students an opportunity to reflect on ways an author or artist's worldview can serve as a focal point for reflecting on their own experiences.

Utilizing the same black-and-white style as the album cover, the opening images of the video paint an almost apocalyptic view of Compton: tennis shoes slung over a telephone wire; buffed-out graffiti on a dilapidated fence; a black boy's face lying on concrete; a police helicopter in the sky; the blackened frame of a car on fire. In one scene, the smoke clears and we see a waist-up image of a man with a *Crown Royal* bottle tipped up to the ceiling. The film cuts to a close up of a hooded protester; blood trickles down her face; and fire roars in the background. The film cuts to the scuffle of a gang initiation and then to a malt liquor bottle bursting against a wall graffitied with rainbows. Money in the air like confetti. More fire. A man spews malt liquor toward the camera. A boy runs from a gang wearing baggy, dark clothing. Then, in an extended sequence, we see the face of a man with dreadlocks being slammed against a wall. As handcuffs are slapped against one wrist, the man turns and shoves the white officer behind him. The officer turns, cheating his body toward the camera and pulls out a pistol. The gun fires and the bullet flies in slow motion. The scene switches to a lone streetlight against a distant city skyline. The opening credits appear.

The next scene functions as a bridge between the introduction and the portion of the video that contains the song. We see Lamar in the driver's seat of a car, with label-mate Schoolboy Q in the passenger seat. Lamar begins freestyling, and the four men bob their heads to the beat. "To Pimp a Butterfly, another classic CD/a ghetto lullaby for every one day MC." The man in the seat behind Lamar pours a sip of malt liquor out the window, and as the camera pans out, we see that the car has no actual wheels. The vehicle is being carried at the axles by four, middle-aged white police officers in uniform, huffing and puffing under the weight of the car. The image is a powerful depiction of a capitalistic society fueled by the state-sponsored persecution of young black men.

Throughout the remainder of the music video, Lamar floats above the city of Compton, as black folks cheer him on from the streets corners and fire escapes below. As Lamar effortlessly raps while drifting in the wind, he takes on an almost godlike persona. However, the climax of the video reminds us that celebrity cannot save him from the pitfalls of white supremacy. We find Lamar standing on the same streetlight seen earlier in the film. For a moment, it seems he is going to lose his balance, but he corrects himself. A police cruiser pulls up and an officer wielding a shotgun steps out of the driver's side door. Lamar dances on the streetlight unknowingly. The officer drops the shotgun to his side and instead points his finger in a gun gesture toward the sky. The officer carefully aims and flicks his forefinger. The sound of a gunshot rings out and the music stops. The scene cuts back to Lamar on top of the light. Blood spurts out of his shoulders and he tumbles in slow motion toward the ground. As he falls, flailing, the rapper recites the same poem from the album: "I remember

when you was conflicted/Misusing your influence/Sometimes I did the same." Lamar hits the dirt and the screen cuts to black. A few seconds later, the film cuts to a close up of Lamar's face in the dust. He opens his eyes and smiles at the camera. The film fades back to black.

"Ill Education, Baby"

In the song *momma*, an adult Kendrick Lamar meets a little boy he says resembles his features. "Nappy afro, gap in his smile/Hand me down sneakers bounced through the crowd." The boy reminds Lamar of his younger self who hoped to escape a mad city of poverty and delinquency:

> He looked at me and said, "Kendrick you do know my language
> You just forgot because of what public schools had painted
> Oh, I forgot, 'Don't Kill My Vibe', that's right, you're famous."

Because the two speak the same vernacular, the boy sees he too can follow a similar path as Lamar. However, this dialogue flips the common hip-hop trope of elders passing along wisdom to unlearned youth. The boy sagely encourages Lamar to listen to his ancestors, to stay true to himself, and warns him to stay away from excess and ignorance. The conversation reminds educators that ideal hip-hop pedagogy has Freirean roots that privilege the funds of knowledge (Freire, 1972, 1998; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that students bring to the classroom. In the song, Lamar shares his local knowledge:

> I know everything, I know cars, clothes, hoes, and money
> I know loyalty, I know respect, I know those that's ornery
> I know everything, the highs, the lows, the groupies, the junkies.

The song is a bold reminder to educators that a critically sound hip-hop pedagogy values the truths from lived experiences young people bring with them into the classroom and not exclusively the "wisdom" passed down by old head emcees. Ideally, there will always be space in new school hip-hop canons for pioneers like Grandmaster Flash and Rakim Allah but it is also crucial to include the artists who make the music students listen to when they go home. The album *TPAB* reminds us that elder voices like Dr. Dre and Tupac Shakur can be accessed through dialogic conversations with young artists. In a 2011 interview following the release of his first single "HiiiPoWeR" (Horowitz), 23-year-old rapper Kendrick Lamar stated that a silhouette of Tupac Shakur once visited him in a dream. The vision told him, "Keep doing what you're doing. Don't let my music die." While many educators may make Tupac Shakur the focus of their hip-hop unit, innovative albums like *GKMD* and *TPAB* remind us that it is also important to highlight the artists who've been impacted by the rappers we ourselves loved as teenagers. When Lamar won Best Rap Album in 2016, he thanked Ice Cube, the legendary Compton rapper who handed him his

Grammy. "This for hip-hop," he said (Ehrlich, Wild, Horvitz, & Restrepo, 2016). He dedicated his win to 1990s-era rappers Snoop Dogg and Nas. "We will live forever. Believe that. Aight," he said with a smile, and then he walked across the stage with the stature of the giants who'd paced in front of him.

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