

[DECODED:] READING “U”

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Seamless incorporations of funk and jazz, perfect features, visually stunning music videos, startling and somewhat humorous cover art, a nearly flawless linkage of brutally honest self-examination with the pride and woes of an entire race. What I have just described for you is the 2015 Rap Album of the Year, Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*, an album so perfect that Harvard felt the need to archive it in their library. There are so many things that make *TPAB* timeless, but a majority of the credit must be attributed to the message of the author. You see, *TPAB* is so lyrically dense that many critics gave it a perfect grade before actually understanding what its message was, copping out and likening the album to a complex statement of Black power. While this is definitely a theme that plays a big role throughout the project, a theme that plays an even bigger role is Lamar’s lack of identity. How now that he has reached the top, he feels disconnected from a community that has traditionally been constrained to the bottom. This forces the listener to ask the question: is it a necessity for those who identify as Black to be restricted to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder?

This is something I have struggled with a majority of my life. My mother is a Caribbean immigrant, so the way I was raised was a little different than those of my African-American peers, and even though I’m grateful for it, by my freshman year of high school, it felt as if I was yearning for more—or more accurately, yearning for less. We weren’t rich by any means but compared to some of my friends we were blessed. It didn’t start off this way, but by the time I had reached middle school, I always had food on the table, running water, a roof over my head, and no fear of the lights going out. My mother worked hard to make sure me and my sister could go to a decent private school, and every day we left the house, we didn’t worry if we locked it. Some of my friends saw this side of me, and even though I know they loved me, it felt like I wasn’t completely part of the group because I couldn’t comprehend what they were going through. It felt like I was isolated.

Throughout *TPAB* it is Lamar's mission to make the listener feel this sense of isolation, not just through the instances where he blatantly states it, but also through throwing up a facade and showing the listener the fronts he puts up in his everyday life. This can be seen most clearly on the song "U," where Lamar employs several rhetorical moves in order to create an aura of darkness and despair so as to convey to the listener the sense of loss and self-loathing he feels due to the disconnection he perceives between him and his community. The first and simplest of these rhetorical moves is the use of second-person language, as it makes it seem like Lamar is addressing the listener directly, blaming them for taking him away from his family and friends. This move has two purposes, the first of which being to force the listener to not just sympathize with Lamar, but empathize with him as well. When Lamar screams obscenities such as, "I place blame on you still, place shame on you still/Feel like you ain't shit, feel like you don't feel" and "I fuckin' hate you, I hope you embrace it..." he is demanding the listener to confront their own sensations of separation in hopes of achieving the second purpose of this point of view, which is to give the listener a peek into Lamar's mind and show the amount of hatred Lamar's conscience directs toward him on a daily basis due to his supposed betrayal and banishment.

The wielding of a second-person point of view is powerful in and of itself, but when combined with the second move utilized, the different inflections and tones of Lamar's voice, it succeeds in drawing in the most hardened of listeners to the darkest corners of Lamar's mind. Lamar utilizes two different tones on the first and second verses of "U" to achieve this purpose. In the first verse, the guttural tone Lamar employs over the spiraling saxophone makes it seem as if he's gone over the edge. In a drunken rage he forcefully lays every tragic, bleak thought he has ever had on a platter, so when the listener hears lines such as "I can feel your vibe and recognize that you're ashamed of me/Yes, I hate you, too," it's as if Lamar is shoving all his hardships down the listener's throat. Even without watching the music video, the gruff timbre of his voice along with the rapid flow of the verse are vivid enough to give one the ability to close their eyes and imagine Lamar shouting with unbridled fury, "Loving you is complicated," into a mirror with a bottle of alcohol in his hand.

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After Lamar concludes the first verse, he hits the listener with an interlude where he seemingly succumbs to the alcohol that inspired the rage of the first verse. Lamar then returns to consciousness to deliver the second verse. This is where Lamar adopts the second, more defeatist tone. All the rage and anger has left his voice and all that is left is almost palpable heartbreak and sorrow that succeeds in showing the effects his seclusion has had on his tattered psyche. Over the waning trumpet, the squeakiness of his voice along with the cracks on every downbeat never cease to make every hair on my body stand on end. The desperate and hopeless tone evokes boundless quantities of negative emotion in the listener, making them feel a heaviness in their gut. Without even getting into the lyrics, Lamar has already succeeded in perfectly conveying to his audience what it is like to have no one around you. The intensity of his voice coupled with the aforementioned point of view are thus extremely effective in making them feel his pain. Even if you have never gone through a situation similar to Lamar’s, you can feel his depression.

I think all of this put together is meant to serve as a warning to the listener—not just about the misery of fame and fortune, but the problems that those can bring especially when you grow up in a Black community. Even though it’s not true, Lamar feels like a sell-out now that he has made it, and worse yet, judging by the first verse from “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),” he isn’t seen as a peer by his community anymore. There are many things that I still don’t understand about this album, but one of the main things is Lamar’s motive behind this warning. Is Lamar fully accepting of the fact that his views and alliances have been perverted with fame and telling the world he’s trying to change, or is he showing the hardships that he is going through in hopes that people will see his struggles and rally to change the ethos of Black culture? I cannot make heads or tails on which motive is more likely, but I choose to believe that Lamar is saying people like him, people who have made it out of the worst of circumstances to live productive lives, should be celebrated in the Black community. That Black culture should be more about the community’s ability to fight through struggle, rather than simply the fact that it struggles. He says it best in the song “Element” on his next album *DAMN*: “Last LP I tried to lift the Black artists...”

Works Cited

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