‘pimping the butterfly’

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Research Methods and Ethics

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Kendrick Lamar is a beloved rapper hailed from Compton, California. He has released multiple multi-platinum albums that have garnered immense amounts of critical acclaim. Before the release of his second major label album, Kendrick embarked on a journey to Africa which included visiting Nelson Mandela’s cell during apartheid. This led to him coming home to newfound fame and fortune amongst a woe of other problems. In To Pimp a Butterfly, Kendrick Lamar’s second major label album, he discusses several themes throughout the album that focus on black people. We will discuss these socio-cultural themes throughout this paper with copious amounts of content analysis.

To first understand this album, we must first understand the artist and the album before it. As was previously mentioned, this is Kendrick’s second major label album. His first, ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’, explored him as an adolescent navigating the crime and gang ridden streets of Compton. From seeing his own homies getting killed to the Grammys stage can be a culture shock from someone who saw his life as a glass half empty. From a micro level of analysis, we can see a troubled youth that wants to leap out of his surroundings. For Kendrick, there wasn’t much to get him out of the life that consumed his family and peers. So he went running for answers.

Lucy is a principle character in To Pimp a Butterfly. Lucy is short for Lucifer in TPAB. Lucy can be seen as the deception, the lies, the tragedy, the crack cocaine epidemic, etc. Anything that has socially brought down members of the black community for years. From a meso level of analysis, we can look to the church as a body, an entity, a group of people towards a common goal. The church wants you to look for all of your answers in the good book but when your answers are not there they don’t want you to question it. Back to pimping the butterfly, black people especially black men have been pimped constantly by the powers that be. In Kendrick’s referencing it is the music industry that is the pimp and young black artists that are the butterfly trying to nessle its way out of the cocoon.

On the concept of race, Kendrick presents a striking argument that the powers that be aren’t being held accountable. That can be viewed from a macro perspective in that, corporations and global institutions such as governments aren’t being held accountable for the dirt they’ve done for centuries and will continue to do. It is not the person at the lowest level on the totem pole that should be held accountable for their actions but rather the implied presence of others that should be held accountable. Those that watch without us ever knowing they’re watching. The evils of Lucy all surround us.

Artists like Kendrick continually shift the paradigm. A paradigm is a way of viewing the world of a framework from which to understand the human experience. Essentially taking something so monumental as race and applying to the entire human experience. Imagine taking something like religion or politics or something minor such as someone’s favorite sports team and applying to humanity’s existence in order to understand why things the way they are. For example, someone might be a fan of the 2014 Patriots or Kendrick Lamar. Now take that fact and apply it to why humans are the way they are. That’s a paradigm. Taking the most random piece of information and trying to explain why that is important in the makeup of humanity.

Then there are theories. See a theory is a narrower lens that just aims to focus on something super specific without trying to have a broader rhyme or reason. So take that someone’s favorite sports team is the 2018 Warriors and just focusing on that. That’s a theory. No further explanations, just you like that team let’s explore that. Then move on to bigger and grander theories. See a common theory in To Pimp a Butterfly is being black in America. Let’s get narrower. Being a black man in America. Little bit closer, being one of the most popular rappers from Compton that has been hailed the voice of the people. That’s Kendrick, a little boy from Compton not yet in his 30s at this time, that has to answer the world’s biggest problems and has the weight of an entire city on his back. He feels resentment and responsible for the damage he has caused people back home. Some hail him as a hero, he hails himself as a monster.

When talking about Compton and Kendrick, there’s more to him than his friends and the experiences he had. There’s the people around him: his parents, his labelmates, the industry. We need to seek discussions from these various entities. Qualitative sociology stems from trying to understand human behavior by learning about it through either in depth interviews, focus groups, and/or analysis of content sources (books, media, journals). Let’s start with interviews.

Going through Kendrick’s press runs over the years, I’ve noticed something. At first, he wasn’t comfortable in front of the camera and speaking to various interviewers. Which is ironic because he is one of the most gifted artists to ever touch a mic. Gradually as he got bigger and more exposure to his brand, he started being more vocal, giving longer interviews, being more attentive to detail,etc. See back to how society and social constructs can influence someone, Kendrick wasn’t groomed for the music industry and media. He had built an armor, a guard of sorts to survive the mental tests everyday while in Compton, one of the most dangerous cities in America during Kendrick’s adolescence. Why is Kendrick so broken when he has all this fame and fortune? Let’s go to the Grammys.

February 15th, 2016. The date of the 58th Annual Grammy Awards. Kendrick is the most nominated artist of the night with 11 nominations, the most by a rapper in one night and the second most behind Michael Jackson. Let’s analyze the content leading up to the Grammys for Kendrick. At the 56th Annual Grammys, two years prior, Kendrick was up for 7 nominations. He lost every single award including Best Rap Album. He was heralded to win several of his awards that night and didn’t come up with a single one. This was a recurring theme throughout the Grammys long history of not awarding black artists with the awards they rightfully deserve for their hard work that year and instead giving that award to a) a less deserving artist, b) a not as successful artist, and/or the most common one c) a white artist. This has continued to happen for black artists besides Kendrick such as Kanye, Beyonce, Jay-Z. Etc.

Kendrick leaves with 5, the most of the night. During his acceptance speech for Best Rap Album, he shouts out the rappers that inspired him to tell the stories he tells. Back to the recurring theme of the Grammys not awarding black artists the awards they deserve. This is what we can call a mixture of idiographic and nomothetic research. Idiographic researchers use very specific case studies to make observations on matters that occur over time, whereas nomothetic researchers use generalizations to find patterns in their observations of matters that have occurred over time. A specific case study with the Grammys and black artists could pinpoint Kanye, Beyonce and Kendrick losing to non-black artists for the coveted Album of the Year award thrice. A generalization could be the voting committee usually consists of a majority of white voters therefore there is some biases due to the immense nature and subject matter these black artists present. Adele was so bold at the 59th Annual Grammy Awards whilst accepting her Album of the Year grammy to break her Grammy in half and acknowledge Beyonce as the rightful winner for her album. It is rare that white artists of the same stature of Adele do that for a black artist. U2’s Bono did that in 2006 when they won over Kanye and said he was next up. Very rare occurrences in the history of the Grammys.

By the time we get to the end of the album, Kendrick has been reciting this poem to a figure we have yet to hear from. Back to connecting to the society and social construct of the black male role model. In the 1980s it wasn’t rare to see the black male figure plucked out of the black family ecosystem. When the Ronald Reagan administration took heed, they cracked down on inner city communities that had been infested with drugs and violence. Crack cocaine is the hottest drug on the streets. In affluent neighborhoods, those people would have crack cocaine they weighed less than the weight of conviction. Meaning they wouldn’t get arrested for having crack, dealing crack, distributing etc. Bring it to the ghetto, it weighs more because it’s the purest uncut form (fishscale) and black men usually are convicted. Now Kendrick had a song early on titled, “Ronald Reagan Era”. in that song he details how everyone born during that time became known as crackbabies and it seemed there was no way out because of no father being in the home.

The fact of the matter is Kendrick displayed these evils and showed that black men have a way out of their ghettos and inner city communities. You don’t have to be marginalized and held down by the powers that be. You can be a gracious butterfly that doesn’t get consumed by the very nature of the people around yourself but except rises up like a phoenix from the ashes. Rebirth yourself and don’t let the evils of Lucy trap you.