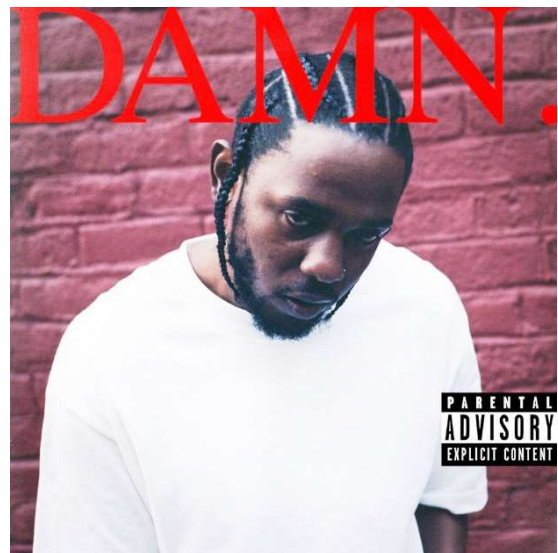
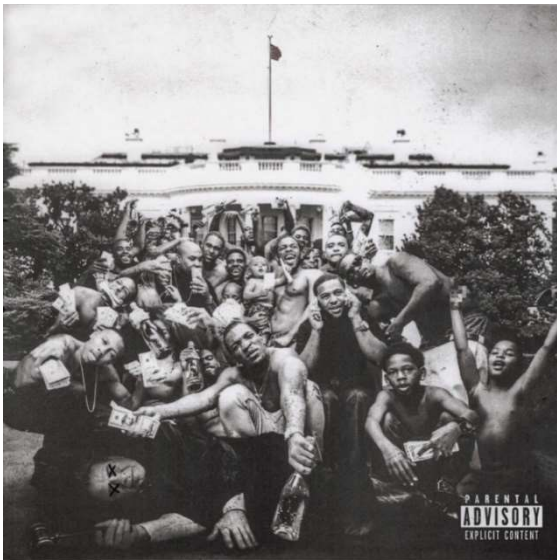


From 'Proud Monkey' to Israelite

Tracing Kendrick Lamar's Black Consciousness



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Contents

- Introduction 5
- Chapter 1: Theoretical framework..... 9
 - W.E.B. Du Bois’ double-consciousness 9
 - Regular and critical double-consciousness 13
- Chapter 2: *To Pimp A Butterfly*..... 17
 - “Wesley’s Theory” 18
 - “Institutionalized” 20
 - “Alright” 23
 - “Complexion” 25
 - “The Blacker the Berry” 27
 - Conclusion 31
- Chapter 3: *DAMN*..... 33
 - Determined by God: I’m an Israelite 34
 - The Great Duality 37
 - Addressing the problem 39
 - “FEAR” 41
 - Conclusion: acceptance as critique 44
- Conclusion: a post-critical double-consciousness 47
- Works cited 51
 - Books 51
 - Music 51
 - Online sources 51
 - Scholarly publications 53
 - YouTube..... 53

Introduction

In 2015, hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar released his third studio album *To Pimp A Butterfly*. His previous record, the 2012 album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* was an exploration of Lamar's upbringing in gang-ridden Compton, California. The album propelled him to fame, and on his 2015 effort, Lamar's scope has broadened. No longer confined to Compton, he explores fame, money, power, and survivor's guilt from the perspective of a black man in an America that cannot seem to shake its racial divide. Race plays a large part on the album, with songs such as "Complexion" and "The Blacker the Berry" directly addressing the complexities of being black in a culture that claims to be color-blind, yet simultaneously begets the type of institutionalized racism that has given rise to a new generation of black activism. Featuring eccentric elements such as experimental jazz, spoken word poetry and a make-believe interview with long-deceased Tupac Shakur, the album still struck a chord with mainstream audiences and peaked the charts both in the U.S. and abroad. It was critically lauded, too: *The Guardian* declared it the best album of 2015 (Petridis), and accordingly, it took home that year's Grammy for Best Rap Album. *Rolling Stone Magazine* claimed that "Thanks to D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015 will be remembered as the year radical Black politics and for-real Black music resurged in tandem to converge on the nation's pop mainstream" (Tate).

Academically, as well, the work has garnered attention. Siebe Bluijs sees in *To Pimp A Butterfly* a laying bare of the "internalization of a dominant discourse that regards itself as civilized" and a confrontation with "the discourse that interpellates [Lamar] as a black man in opposition to a 'civilized' community" (73). For Bluijs, the album aims to "discover the means for the creation of a new site where the violence of internalized racism and fear sublimated into rage can be transformed to target institutionalized racism" (83). And people recognized this potential: the song "Alright" was "taken up as an anthem" at Black Lives Matter protests around the United States "in response to increasingly visible police violence" against African-Americans (73). *To Pimp A Butterfly*, then, can be seen as a work of art that interacts with and has an impetus to change the social realities of today's America.

This reception of the work is comparable to George Ciccariello-Maher's view of Kanye West¹ as expressing "a vision of hip-hop as a medium that penetrates American society and that is oriented in explicit opposition to a history of oppression and attempted extermination" (394). His article "A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness" explores W.E.B. Du Bois' seminal notion of double-consciousness, the sense that black people in America have of "looking at oneself through the eyes of others" and internalizing the "contempt and pity" coming from those eyes (Du Bois 39).

For Ciccariello-Maher, double-consciousness is a concept that, though criticized, maintains its relevance and critical potential today. In his article, he explores the development of Kanye West's "critical Black consciousness" in the mid-noughties in analogy to W.E.B. Du Bois' development

¹ A rapper whose political stance is not so easily determined today, as statements such as "slaves took too long to free themselves," pledges of support to Donald Trump and well-documented mental health struggles have covered him in a cloak of controversy (Lebron).

of his concept of double-consciousness roughly a century earlier. He sees in West, as in Du Bois, a move from an “idealistic and ultimately flawed attempt to cross the veil²” (394) to a more radical awareness of “the materiality of the color line created by the veil” (395) and the “need for radical social transformation” (386). For Ciccariello-Maher, there are two types of double-consciousness: “one regular and one critical” (379), and as I will explain in what follows, it is in the latter that he sees a potential power to address and possibly alter political realities. In the case of Kanye West as well as Du Bois, this critical double-consciousness increases through time, over the span of successive albums and scholarly publications, respectively. One wonders if this is the only path that double-consciousness traverses: other than staying ‘regular’ forever or at some point evolving into something more critical, may it move in a different direction?

The question arises when I think of Kendrick Lamar’s last two albums. If *To Pimp A Butterfly* took him to the top of the hip-hop Olympus, his 2017 album *DAMN.* solidified his spot there. Again, accolades abounded, most notably perhaps in the form of a Pulitzer Prize for music. The high-brow institution called the work “a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life.” While it has been noted that this description “could apply equally to Lamar’s previous two albums” (Lynskey), *DAMN.* and its predecessor are distinctly different in tone. Where *To Pimp A Butterfly* was often brazen, explosive and direct in its exposure of the black-white dichotomy that governs the United States, *DAMN.* presents itself as a more solemn work. While bombastic and boastful songs like “HUMBLE” are certainly part of the playlist, most of the tracks offer more minimalist compositions and lyrics turned inward.

With songs heavily themed around internal conflict and personal spirituality, Black Lives Matter protesters would be hard pressed to find an anthem on Lamar’s new album quite as suited to their cause as “Alright” was. Race is still a theme on the record, but the rage that fueled a song like *To Pimp A Butterfly*’s “The Blacker the Berry” has at times made way for something akin to resignation. Several songs on *DAMN.* mention the belief that black people, as Israelites, are “cursed” to be at a “lower state in this life” (“FEAR”). Lamar’s announcement on the mellow “YAH” that he “[is] a Israelite, don’t call me black no mo’/That word is only a color, it ain’t facts no mo’” seems a far cry from the powerful “The Blacker the Berry,” where Lamar calls himself “black as the moon” and wants us to recognize that he is a “proud monkey.”

With its deeply spiritual undertones, *DAMN.* may be read as a move away from earthly concerns, and towards God. In a *New York Times* interview, Lamar himself suggests as much:

“‘To Pimp a Butterfly’ was addressing the problem. I’m in a space now where I’m not addressing the problem anymore,” he said. “We’re in a time where we exclude one major component out of this whole thing called life: God. Nobody speaks on it because it’s almost in conflict with what’s going on in the world when you talk about politics and government and the system.” (Mason)

² The “formal and informal structures of segregation, represented metaphorically in the veil” (373).

Imagine, as an artist, “addressing the problem” so boldly, only to see the polarization within American political life flourish to the point where Donald Trump is able to take office. Would one be triggered to keep pushing in the same direction, or would one take a step back and redirect his creative energy? Could it be that Kendrick Lamar has given up on trying to make a change through his music? Or could it be that he is seeking a way to alleviate his and his community’s consciousness in a new way?

In this thesis, I will trace the black consciousness of Kendrick Lamar over the span of his albums *To Pimp A Butterfly* and *DAMN*. A disclaimer is in order here: throughout this thesis, I will make extensive mention of Kendrick Lamar as a subject. However, I do not wish to postulate that the ‘Kendrick Lamar’ that I speak of is the same subject as Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, the human. The Lamar in this thesis is a persona constructed through music, lyrics, and public appearances, and although he may overlap in large part with his worldly counterpart, I am aware that the two are not the same. Kendrick Lamar, the human, is not the object of my study – his work is.

Before diving into *To Pimp A Butterfly*, I will expound on the theoretical framework for my thesis and discuss work by W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Ernest Allen, and George Ciccariello-Maher. Through the lens of Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness and Ciccariello-Maher’s distinction between regular and critical double-consciousness, I will close-read five songs on *To Pimp A Butterfly* that directly tackle issues of race and double-consciousness. I will regard the album predominantly as a manifestation of a critical black consciousness that, though complex and not unambiguous, is under no illusion that the color line is a thing of the past. Moving on to *DAMN*, I will show that the lens of double-consciousness is less apt to read the lyrics through, as the focus shifts from earthly to religious matters. So, besides a consideration of the lyrics that do engage with double-consciousness, I will read *DAMN* through an exploration of two other themes that are prominent on the album: the Black Hebrew Israelites and a duality between the Godly and the earthly. My comparative analysis of both albums will shed light on the question: how does Kendrick Lamar’s critical black consciousness develop over the span of these two albums?

Having brought the theory to bear on the specific case of Kendrick Lamar, I will conclude by bringing my findings back to the theoretical framework that spawned them and suggesting a broadening of that framework through my engagement with Lamar’s work by offering an addition to the body of ideas surrounding double-consciousness. Specifically, I will posit that Ciccariello-Maher’s notion of critical double-consciousness may not suffice to fully appreciate the development we see in Kendrick Lamar’s work. As we will see in what follows, Lamar moves from a critical double-consciousness to a double-consciousness that is not necessarily uncritical, but that does require a level of acceptance in order to create new, emancipatory possibilities for self-identification. I will describe the double-consciousness I see on *DAMN* as ‘post-critical’.

In devising a new term for this double-consciousness, I have taken my cue from Brian McHale. Considering the ‘post’ in ‘postmodernism,’ he emphasizes “the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*” (5). Postmodernism, although it does come after modernism temporally, does not simply succeed it: it “follows *from* modernism... more than it

follows *after* modernism” (ibid.). A continuation as well as a deviation, postmodernism needs its predecessor to move on from it. Similarly, Kendrick Lamar’s black consciousness on *DAMN* would likely not have developed without the critical double-consciousness we see on *To Pimp A Butterfly* - I view the late double-consciousness of Kendrick Lamar as evolving from its critical precursor. Therefore, the term ‘post-critical’ seems apt.

Finally, it may be worth addressing my own position regarding the subject matter. I came to this topic firstly from a place of plain appreciation: I am incredibly fond of Kendrick Lamar’s music and consider it a luxury to be able to write my master’s thesis about an artist whose work I have enjoyed for years. Now, the education that allows and inspires me to write this thesis, has taught me always to scrutinize the position of the person writing a text, even if I am the one writing. The fact is: I am a white, Dutch woman writing a thesis about the black consciousness of an African American man. I will never experience the double-consciousness I write about. I cannot but approach the matter from an outsider perspective, which certainly does not suggest a more objective approach, but is merely an acknowledgement of the fact that I will not understand everything that I am trying to understand.

Still, I do not feel it is ‘not for me’ to dive in and at least try. Kendrick Lamar’s work does not exist in a vacuum. Though originating from a set place, his music moves in a cultural space that transcends borders, be they geographical or mental. In all its specificity, his work emits a sweeping potency begging to be explored – and that is what I will set out to do.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical foundation for my research. Rather than wondering what race is, I am interested in what race does. Therefore, I will not dive into questions of biology, taxonomy practices or the notion of social constructs. I will take for granted that race ‘exists’ as a social determinant and explore ideas about the effects of the phenomenon, rather than its origins. W.E.B. Du Bois’ seminal notion of double-consciousness is a classic observation of such effects, and thus serves as the starting point for my research.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ double-consciousness

Du Bois first introduced the concept of double-consciousness in his 1897 essay “Strivings of the Negro people.” Writing more than three decades after the Emancipation Proclamation,³ Du Bois laments the fact that “The freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land” (40) – even though slavery is over, the black American remains chained. Du Bois recalls the moment in his “early days of rollicking boyhood” when he realized that he was “different from the others,” and that he was “shut out from their world by a vast veil” (39). Once acknowledged, he did not wish to “tear down that veil” or “creep through”; indeed, he lived happily on his side and “held all beyond [the veil] in common contempt” (ibid.). However, with age the desire to creep through did develop, as he realized that “the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine” (ibid.). Du Bois resolves to somehow “wrest from them” these prizes, but realizes that “with other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny.” He quotes William Wordsworth when saying “The ‘shades of the prison house’ closed round about us all,” and although this citation is meant to describe the universal experience of black boys in America, citing a canonical Western poet simultaneously hints at why Du Bois’ strife would be a lot more “sunny” than others’: he is well-educated and belongs to the upper echelons of black society. This is precisely why some scholars have questioned the universality of Du Bois’ claims, a point I will discuss at a later stage.

His experience as a black man, however well-off, leads Du Bois (who is but twenty-nine years old at the time of writing “Strivings”) to claim that to a Negro, the American world “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (ibid.). Because the dominant viewpoint in America is the white viewpoint, the black American is unable to see himself without incorporating the prejudice that permeates this society. An American and a Negro, the African-American is both yet neither, and for Du Bois, the desire “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self” marks the history of the American Negro. Double-consciousness, then, is “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, and measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (39). It is the mental condition not just of knowing that one is looked upon by others, which after all goes for every person who is part of a community. It is knowing that one is looked *down* upon, not for any action taken or word spoken, but just by being, or more specifically, by having a certain look.

³ The 1862 executive order by Abraham Lincoln that declared slaves in 10 Southern states free.

It is what Frantz Fanon described as being “overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me,⁴ but to my appearance” (Fanon 95). A psychoanalyst from the French Antilles, Frantz Fanon tackled “the black problem” through a psychoanalytic lens more than half a century after Du Bois wrote “Strivings.” Though different in context and approach, Fanon’s work shows that Du Bois’ ideas carried over well into the 20th century. In his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon aims to “liberate the black man from himself” (xii) and to “discover the various mental attitudes the black man adopts in the face of white civilization” (xvi).

Fanon starts from the idea that “white civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man” (xviii) and that “the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a massive psycho-existential complex” (xvi). In the fifth chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” Fanon strikingly describes how such existential deviation is lived. In a famous passage, he recounts an episode on the train, where a white child calls out “*Maman*, look, a Negro, I’m scared! Scared! Scared!” (91). The encounter leads him to an awareness of his body “in triple,” being responsible “not only for my body but also for my race and ancestors” (92). It is the result of his body being an “image in the third person” (90), projected onto him by the white gaze. Beneath this body lies a “historical-racial schema” built with data “provided not by ‘remnants and feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature’ but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories” (91). What Fanon ‘knows’ he ‘is’ is the result of this weaving, his objective gaze on himself “deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism ...” (92) A peculiar sensation, no doubt.

Both learned men find that attempts to escape the blackness imposed on them by the white society prove futile. In Du Bois’ time, the abolition of slavery had been the ultimate goal, but when it finally happens, it does not put an end to the “vain search for freedom.” New ideals arise, but each meets resistance: engaging politically results in “suppressed votes, stuffed ballot-boxes, and election outrages that nullified his vaunted right of suffrage” (41). The ambition of “book-learning” likewise seems impossible to fulfill, handicapped as the black man is through “poverty and ignorance.” Such a race, says Du Bois, should be “allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems” (ibid.). But here we encounter the biggest handicap yet: “the shadow of a vast despair. Men call the shadow prejudice” (ibid.). Fanon likewise finds that “neither my refined manners nor my literary knowledge nor my understanding of the quantum theory could find favor” (97), and it is explained to him that “some people have adopted a certain opinion ... Color prejudice” (ibid.). For both, prejudice is at the root of the trouble. Du Bois describes the giving end as “personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systemic humiliation ... the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black” (42), while Fanon relays the receiving end: “I was hated, detested, and despised ... by an entire race” (98). Another half a century later still, Kendrick Lamar suspects the same:

⁴ The citation is from a comparison between Jews and Blacks. “The Jewishness of the Jew” can go unnoticed, for he is “a white man” whose “acts and behavior are the determining factor,” rather than his outward appearance per se (95).

You hate me don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture⁵

Whereas the emphasis in Fanon's work differs from that in Du Bois', both works deal, in the language of their discipline and time, with what today we might call "the internalization of a dominant discourse that regards itself as civilized" (Bluijs 73), i.e. the dominant discourse of the white world. With the notion of double-consciousness surviving for more than a century, it is not surprising that George Ciccariello-Maher argues for double-consciousness as a "crucial reality" that provides "explosive radical possibilities" (373) for political change. Not everyone is equally convinced of the concept's usefulness, though: Ernest Allen, Jr. sees the formulation of double-consciousness as "little more than *double sleight of hand*" (217, emphasis in the original).

The subtitle of Allen's article on Du Boisian double-consciousness is "The Unsustainable Argument," yet Allen's arguments to support the unsustainability of Du Boisian double-consciousness are not entirely sustainable themselves. Allen's first issue is the fact that academics have "misconstrued Du Boisian double consciousness as a broad-based Afro-American *cultural* dilemma" (217), seeing the clash of Negro and American ideals or strivings as a clash between cultures in the sense that we see culture now, as a "way of life." Allen claims, however, that in Du Bois' time, "there existed no concept to express the kind of cultural conflict that many of today's academics have tried to impose upon Du Bois' earlier views of the world" (218). Allen claims that while many have regarded African American double-consciousness "in a broad anthropological sense," and, "stripped of its historical context, Du Bois' work can certainly be *read*" that way, such a reading would be a misreading, as that is "emphatically not how Du Bois himself viewed the matter" (ibid.). While I doubt that anyone other than Du Bois himself is privy to how he views matters, Allen does bring forth a few arguments worth examining.

Allen's refutation of Du Boisian double-consciousness in a cultural sense hinges on a number of arguments that do not necessarily complement each other. The main idea is that double-consciousness is not an affliction shared by all African Americans, but is a malady that Du Bois conjured up for his "designated leadership class to achieve desired recognition as human beings ... without confrontation or begging" (235). As a member of the so-called Talented Tenth, the "exceptional men" (Gates) of the Negro race, Du Bois recognized the need to appeal to educated whites in order to be able to make a change for the black population at large. Rather than turning to "self-assertion" or "openly [pleading] for respect" (Allen 235), Du Bois would have to establish "an ethical basis for black leadership" by "appropriating nineteenth century themes with which his white, educated readers" would have been familiar (236). The trick, according to Allen, was to "reconceptualize the problem of black *Angst* – at base a despair associated with an assault

⁵ The development between the three men's modes of address is worth noting: Du Bois speaks in the third person, as if the "personal disrespect and mockery" do not affect him personally. Fanon is in first person, more directly relaying his "lived experience." Lamar, finally, forces a dialogue by confronting the white world with its hatred in second person. A positive outlook might see in this development the emancipation of the black man's voice, becoming bolder through time. A negative perspective could see in this same development the failure of actual emancipation, the passing of time calling for ever stronger voices to combat the unwavering oppression of black folk.

on the self-respect of *all* Black Americans – as one *specific* to the Afro-American Talented Tenth” (235).

Allen does not expound too much on how the problem of black Angst was reconceptualized as a Talented Tenth-only malady; rather he seems to think that because Du Bois himself was a high-class African-American, his conception of double-consciousness could not have applied to all African-Americans. As such, Allen has a large issue with Du Bois’ idea that black people suffer from “two warring ideals in one body” (39). Allen refutes the possibility that a late 19th-century high-class African American such as Du Bois would be “torn between the values of ... upper- or middle-class whites and ... black sharecroppers, domestics, and other working people” (220), as there was no shared black ‘culture’ to speak of. For Allen, African American intellectuals in Du Bois’ day “were already culturally assimilated Americans” (218) whose set of values was “thoroughly Eurocentric” (219), so there would not be much war going on between the ideals in someone like Du Bois’ body. In fact, when looking for examples of such warring ideals, Allen finds that “the highest black ideals envisioned by Du Bois were *identical* to those of educated whites” (230), learned as they were through the education system of America-at-large.

Allen turns to the four “explicit illustrations of conflicted double-consciousness” that Du Bois provides in “Strivings” and subjects them to a logical analysis. It turns out that the dilemmas that Du Bois poses are difficult to portray as being “Negro ideals” at war with “American ideals.” For example, Du Bois describes the “double-aimed struggle of the black artisan – on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde” (40). Allen rightfully asks how we can “possibly read this as a struggle between substantive Negro and American ideals?” - though it could be mentioned that technically, Du Bois here is speaking of double aims, not ideals. Although I understand Allen’s point, I think it is indicative of a rather rigid reading of Du Bois’ text. Allen demands dry logical soundness from a text that suggests a broad mental affliction, not a philosophical axiom. While ‘escaping white contempt’ and ‘working hard for the poor’ certainly do not translate neatly to one Negro ideal and one American ideal, they do point at the fact that for African Americans, ‘normal’ ideals that any American might have (i.e. working hard) are handicapped by the prejudice coming from the white community. So it is not so much that the American ideals in a black man are at war with his Negro ideals, it is that the material reality of the black man does not *allow* for him to strive unencumbered after his ‘American’ ideals and forces him to devote part of his attention to proving his humanity. In fact, it is questionable to even suggest that something like ‘Negro ideals’ exist a priori – the Negro is only a Negro insofar as he is part of the white world that designates him as such, and thus his strivings will always be in relation to the American ideals that surround him and live in him. We might say that ‘Negro ideals’ only develop in reaction to the realization that one is not considered fully American.

For Allen, the above example and Du Bois’ other illustrations of double-consciousness lead him to the conclusion that it was “not so much a usable concept as an exquisitely crafted metaphor” (233). I join Ciccariello-Maher in wondering why a metaphor cannot be useful, but moreover, Allen himself admits that “any discussion of Afro-American double consciousness” is “not quite”

of “dubious value” (242). It turns out that far from being a useless concept, Allen just finds its formulation in “Strivings” inadequate. When Allen cites a different text in which Du Bois wonders whether he is American or Negro, he declares it “a manifestation of African American double consciousness” (244), quickly adding that “acknowledging the existence of objective grounds for the formation of a specific form of Afro-American double consciousness at a particular moment in history does not imply that every Afro-American individual felt the pulls of divided loyalties in the same way, or even that he or she experienced such tensions at all” (ibid.).

So essentially, after trying to undermine Du Bois’ concept by criticizing its internal logic and failing to find its “empirical validation” (241), Allen comes to the conclusion that we *can* admit there exists a foundation for such a thing as African American double-consciousness, but “much depended on one’s class position, socialization, and perhaps even individual temperament” (244). To which I can only say: but of course. Nowhere does Du Bois state that every single black American experiences double-consciousness in precisely the same way, regardless of class or individual temperament. He himself describes how various black boys lived their “strife” differently, and even how his own views of the veil changed through time.

While Allen’s analysis offers some good points, overall he fails to convince me that Du Boisian double-consciousness is truly an “unsustainable argument” – because it is not an argument. It is an observation of a mental state, a generalized diagnosis perhaps, or even “an exquisitely crafted metaphor.” We must allow for some flexibility in its application and acknowledge that its survival through time shows that at the root of the idea there is the reality of a lived experience, no matter the specific historical context of the time in which it was conceived or the individual who conceived it. I feel comfortable now in using George Ciccariello-Maher’s notions of Du Boisian double-consciousness as a tool in my analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s work.

Regular and critical double-consciousness

For George Ciccariello-Maher, Du Boisian double-consciousness can be useful indeed, but “the fruitfulness of the concept lies in its own self-destruction or radical self-transformation” (372). Rather than pinning double-consciousness to its original conception in “Strivings,” Ciccariello-Maher allows for the concept to evolve through time. He states that “the earliest formulation of the concept ... took a severely limited form, one in which the segregationist veil is seen idealistically and in which crossing (or rising above) that veil remains a possibility” (ibid.). In “Strivings,” Du Bois is convinced that the ideals of school-learning and political power, however “incomplete and over-simple” (42) they had been thus far, were part of the road across the veil. The “belief that one can effectively cross the veil” (Ciccariello-Maher 376) was still firmly in place for him, because he mistook being able to move between the white and black worlds as an elite black man for an actual crossing of the institutional veil. Du Bois’ social status, then, is still crucial to his conception of double-consciousness, but unlike for Allen, it does not render the concept irrelevant and useless to the African-American community at large. Its critical potential lies precisely in its beginnings as a middle-class concept.

Ciccariello-Maher sees in Du Bois’ later work a transition from this “idealistic manifestation” of double-consciousness to a more critical form in which “the materiality of the veil” (373) is

recognized. He quotes “Of the Coming of John” (1903) as a text by Du Bois that shows his foray into more critical thinking concerning the permeability of the veil. In the story, Black John is “introduced to the White world through education” and starts to feel the veil, which he experiences as oppression. Later, he “pays with his life” for a “gesture of defense that would be acceptable if he were White” when he sees White John attacking his sister (ibid.). Had Black John behaved according to his proper place on the dark side of the veil, i.e. bowing down to his oppressor and accepting White John attacking his sister, he may have lived. But because he behaved “as though the veil did not exist,” defending his sister as a white man would, he paid the highest price.

Du Bois’ approach to the race question would become increasingly less idealistic and more pragmatic in later times, undoubtedly in part due to his move from Massachusetts down to Atlanta and the harsh realities faced there, with the 1906 race riot⁶ as the clearest signal that the veil was not to be crossed. Du Bois’ intellectual and political development leads Ciccariello-Maher to state that double-consciousness serves “as the groundwork for the very transition away from its own idealistic manifestation” (384). To obtain a clear understanding or consciousness of the two worlds, at least in Du Bois’ time, one would need access to the white world via education. That access would lead one to think that crossing the veil is indeed possible – I am here in the white world, aren’t I? Yet there must come a time when the veil is pushed into one’s face and it becomes clear that “a crossing or rising above was limited to the level of consciousness and that the material veil remained impenetrable” (385).

Precisely those people who, in their double-consciousness, think they know what it takes to cross the veil, are shocked to find that there is no crossing to be made at all. In consciousness, one may switch from one side of the veil to the other, but in the material world, there is no hole to creep through. It is when one’s double-consciousness leads to this realization that its critical potential comes to the fore, or as Ciccariello-Maher puts it, “when one’s idealistic presumptions are dented by the reality of institutional racism, we find a moment of radical possibility” (383). And when, through this new critical consciousness, the institutions that keep the veil in place are attacked, all layers of the community are served – not just the upper echelons.

By way of illustrating the critical potential of the concept of double-consciousness today, Ciccariello-Maher turns to hip-hop artist Kanye West for an example of a shift from “double-consciousness in its limited, uncritical sense” to a “more critical ‘second sight,’ a more radical position from which to view the worlds separated by the veil” (384). On West’s first album *College Dropout* (2004), Ciccariello-Maher sees a “recognition of the contradiction of [West’s] own life and willing participation in that contradiction” (388). West focuses on the material side of the American dream and describes how by buying diamonds and fancy cars, “we tryin to buy back our 40 acres.”⁷ Although he seems to acknowledge the futility of participating in a capitalist

⁶ A three-day “attack of armed white mobs against African Americans” (Wikipedia).

⁷ Forty acres and a mule were promised to freed slaves after the Civil War, but the order was quickly revoked, and most African Americans were duped out of their land. For West, consumerism today is an attempt for black people to secure their position in American society, much like the forty acres would have done back in the nineteenth century. On both “Wesley’s Theory” and “Alright,” Kendrick Lamar makes a similar reference (see pages 19 and 25).

system that is stacked against him as a black man (“we buy our way out of jail but we can’t buy freedom”), there is a willingness to participate nonetheless. Material consumption, that pillar of American success, is not fully rejected as a “potential method for crossing the veil” (392).

On the follow-up *Late Registration* (2005), Ciccariello-Maher points out that “much (but not all) of West’s materialism is relegated to the past tense – as he recalls that ‘I just wanted to shine’” (392). In songs such as “Diamonds from Sierra Leone” and “Crack Music,” West turns his vision outwards to point at the U.S. government’s involvement in the drug trade and “counter-insurgency strategies against the Black community” (393). On the album, West displays a “full recognition of the materiality of the color line created by the veil” and dismisses the ideals of book-learning and materialism as methods of crossing the veil. This is the critical “second sight” that Ciccariello-Maher sees as “universal among Blacks only as a potentiality” (379).

To come to a truly critical black consciousness, then, it is not enough to be aware or to be conscious of the existence of the color line as a concept. Concepts are to be circumvented, concepts can be side-stepped or circled around. Only when one realizes that the color line has a material manifestation, an attempt can be made to tear it down. In the next chapter, I will explore the position Kendrick Lamar takes vis-à-vis the color line on his album *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Chapter 2: *To Pimp A Butterfly*

To Pimp A Butterfly was released in March of 2015, about two and a half years after Kendrick Lamar rose to widespread fame with the release of his prior album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. *To Pimp A Butterfly* saw Lamar branching out lyrically, spatially and musically. The album features tracks reminiscent of poetry slams and a spoken word poem interweaves the songs; Compton is traded for the greater sphere of the music industry and several songs reference a trip to South Africa; and aside from mainstream hip-hop productions, many tracks are recorded by jazz musicians and nod to the rich heritage of African American music – funk legend George Clinton makes an appearance, and single “i” samples the Isley Brothers’ “Who’s That Lady.”

The album came out in a time of heightened racial tensions and a revived black activism in the U.S. The killing of unarmed black teen Trayvon Martin by police officer George Zimmerman in 2012 sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, which protests racially motivated police brutality and systemic racism at large. In 2014, the murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown led to weeks of unrest in Brown’s hometown Ferguson, Missouri (Luibrand). Through its presence in Ferguson, Black Lives Matter garnered national attention and the mainstream media spiraled into endless debates on institutionalized racism in America. Many news outlets did not subscribe to the notion that the recent shootings of unarmed black men and women by police were indicative of a broader, systemic racism, and instead focused “attention solely on individual-level acts of racism” (Desmond-Harris).

In her analysis of Fox News’ coverage of Ferguson, Colleen E. Mills notes that “Within one week of Brown’s death, Fox News has turned its attention to ‘black-on-black crime’” (46), shifting attention away from police brutality and toward the failings of the black community. Mills recalls a segment with politician Rudy Giuliani “arguing with sociologist Dr Michael Eric Dyson [and asserting] ‘the white police officers wouldn’t be there if you weren’t killing each other’” (ibid.). Along with this attention shift, Mills sees “attacking the black protesters and their movement against police brutality” and “discrediting attempts to address issues of racism as the ‘politics of racial division’” as major strategies that Fox News utilized to “[obstruct] meaningful discussion of racism in the criminal justice system,” and ultimately to “[sustain] racial ideology” (52).

Now people in my relatively liberal (in the sense I understand Americans to use this word) social bubble may snort and say, “you are addressing Fox News, which is conservative, extremely biased, and represents almost a fringe of U.S. society!” However, as of July 2018, Fox News is “the most-watched basic cable network” in the United States and ranks second only to the BBC in the “most trusted TV brand” category (Katz). In America, Fox News is thoroughly mainstream, regardless of how borderline ridiculous my snooty European sensibilities judge its screamy antics. And the idea that Mills sees broadcast on Fox News, is that in this day and age, institutional racism is not really a thing anymore.

Supposedly, the abolition of slavery, the overturning of the Jim Crow laws that relegated African Americans to a lower social position in the country, and - the cherry on top - the election of Barack Obama as president have ushered The United States into an era of colorblindness. However, some argue that Jim Crow lives on, just in different configurations. In *The New Jim*

Crow, Michelle Alexander argues that the current American criminal justice system and its resulting mass incarceration is designed to create a new undercaste of brown and black people in America. Rather than the time served in prison fulfilling the purpose of ‘paying one’s debt to society,’ it is a gateway into lifelong second-class citizenship: upon release, “ex-offenders are discriminated against, legally” (17) through disadvantages in “employment, housing, education, public benefits” and voting rights (141). Mass incarceration for Alexander is thus a rearrangement of the Jim Crow system in that it “operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group largely defined by race” (12).

Perhaps this is what Lamar means when he states that *To Pimp A Butterfly* is “addressing the problem” (Mason). With a large part of media and the populace denying the existence of the problem, i.e. systemic racism, it is no wonder that Lamar addresses the problem so directly, for example on “Alright”:

Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'

It is lyrics like these⁸ that would lead one reviewer to declare that *To Pimp A Butterfly* was a sign of “radical Black politics and for-real Black music” resurging in tandem (Tate). Still, not all lyrics are as straight-forwardly critical as these. In what follows, I will go through a selection of lyrics to try and determine to what extent my interpretation of Ciccariello-Maher’s critical double-consciousness comes to the fore on *To Pimp A Butterfly*. I have selected five songs that are explicitly themed around race and I will discuss them in the order of their appearance on the album.

“Wesley’s Theory”

The title of the record’s opening song refers to Wesley Snipes, the *Blade* star who spent three years in prison on a tax evasion charge (Penn). In the first verse, Lamar describes the ways in which “When I get signed, homie, I’m a act a fool.” The verse describes classic, materialist fantasies of the wealth that comes with being signed to a major record label, like buying cars and putting “platinum on everything.” The end of the verse hints at what is to come: “Uneducated, but I got a million dollar check like that.”

The second verse is rapped from the perspective of Uncle Sam, the personification of the United States government, i.e. the “tax man”:

⁸ The same lyric caught the attention of Fox News anchor Geraldo Rivera, who called the it “not helpful at all” and stated that “hip-hop has done more damage to African-Americans than racism in recent years” (YouTube). Lamar went on to sample the news segment in question on the album *DAMN*.

What you want you? A house or a car?
 Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
 Anythin', see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog
 Motherfucker, you can live at the mall
 I know your kind (That's why I'm kind)
 Don't have receipts (Oh, man, that's fine)
 Pay me later, wear those gators
 Cliché? Then say, "Fuck your haters"
 ...
 Too much ain't enough, both we know
 Christmas, tell 'em what's on your wish list
 Get it all, you deserve it, Kendrick
 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 Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five

The verse is critical double-consciousness at its sharpest: Lamar does not just acknowledge the other side of the veil; he steps into its symbolical shoes and addresses himself. From Uncle Sam's point of view, he paints the cliché picture of the rapper in alligator shoes bought with credit, tempted by the materialism that the American Dream promotes, but not educated to deal with its traps – and Uncle Sam knows just how to profit from that. “I know your kind (that's why I'm kind)/Don't have receipts (Oh man, that's fine)” suggests that the tax man is cunning and targets precisely those whom he knows he can hit hardest. Indeed, slithery Sam shows his true face in the final line: “I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five.”

“Forty acres and a mule” is a direct link to Kendrick's blackness, as it is the promise that was made to freed slaves at the end of the Civil War in 1865. The order was “not to be realized for the overwhelming majority of the nation's former slaves, who numbered about 3.9 million,” because “Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor and a sympathizer with the South, overturned the Order in the fall of 1865” (Gates Jr.). Similarly, the riches that Uncle Sam dangles in front of black entertainers today can be snatched away from them just as easily – just look at Wesley Snipes.⁹ Lamar is sharply aware of this, and it is known that he does not fall for these consumerist traps easily. *Huffington Post* deemed his home, which he purchased for \$524,000, “modest” in comparison with other rappers' multi-million-dollar mansions (Zupkus), and his graduation gift for his sister was a “practical” rather than a swanky car – a Toyota Camry (Brown).¹⁰ Gifting a car is obviously a gesture reserved for the wealthy, but with *Forbes* estimating his 2017 income at 30 million, a larger splurge would not have been unimaginable.

⁹ Who in the song is but a token for the many black entertainers who have faced tax charges – Lauryn Hill, Ronald Isley and Lil' Kim are just a few (the Griot).

¹⁰ This actually led to Twitter users calling Lamar “cheap,” which just goes to show how deeply the norm of big spending is ingrained into black celebrity culture.

Through “Wesley’s Theory,” Lamar shows himself aware of this aspect of the veil: black entertainers who enter the realm of the music industry are often uneducated and lured by the riches their social position had previously denied them. In this sense, the song is almost a critique of the type of uncritical double-consciousness that would lead emerging black artists to dive head-first into materialism, naively thinking that it would lead them to cross the veil, but not acknowledging that their conditioning by the veil has made them more vulnerable to the risks of precisely such materialism. Try to cross it as you might, the veil maintains its reach.

“Institutionalized”

The veil shows itself in full force on the song “Institutionalized,” which might be summarized by this lyric rapped by Snoop Dogg:

You can take your boy out the hood
But you can't take the hood out the homie

Earlier, I discussed Ciccariello-Maher’s idea that even though the veil may be crossed in consciousness, its materiality will remain (see page 15). “Institutionalized” tackles not the material, but precisely the mental entrapment on the dark side of the veil. The interlude at the beginning of the song imagines the ultimate crossing of the veil materially – reaching the highest institutional power possible – combined with a ‘ghetto mindset’ that would prevent a ‘true’ crossing of the veil:

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
Who ever thought?
Master, take the chains off me!

President Kendrick would live out the dreams the ghetto instilled in him: pay rent for his mom, free his friends from prison, bulletproof his car. Instead of making the changes necessary to challenge the system that constitutes the ghetto, he would just do the things that improve life within the ghetto. He has been institutionalized by the ghetto to the degree that he cannot let go of the rules and codes that govern it. He is not blind to his entrapment, as he calls out for his Master¹¹ to free him from these chains.

In the intro, Lamar questions whether money alone will transform a man from his former self to a true ‘rap star’:

¹¹ The Genius lyrics website sees in this Master “a biblical reference to the heavenly Father,” but it may also be a slavery reference. The word is pronounced “massa,” which was a common colloquialism in the slave dialect (Wiktionary).

What money got to do with it
When I don't know the full definition of a rap image?
I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it
Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit

He acknowledges, begrudgingly, that the institutionalization¹² he has been subject to remains within him. Institutionalized as he has been in the ghetto, the wealth he has acquired through his rap 'escape' has not magically taken him out of the Compton mindset. Still, in the verses that follow, Lamar uses a story about a friend of his, rather than himself, to illustrate the point. Kendrick is doing well and taking care of his friends:

I can just alleviate the rap industry politics
Milk the game up, never lactose intolerant
The last remainder of real shit, you know the obvious
Me, scholarship? No, streets put me through colleges
Be all you can be, true, but the problem is
Dream only a dream if work don't follow it
Remind me of the homies that used to know me, now follow this
I'll tell you my hypothesis, I'm probably just way too loyal
K Dizzle will do it for you, my niggas think I'm a god
Truthfully all of 'em spoiled, usually you're never charged
But somethin' came over you once I took you to them fuckin' BET Awards

We can relate the scholarship line to Du Bois' initial ideal of 'book-learning' as a means to cross the veil. Lamar acknowledges that he did not experience education in the 'normal' sense, but flips the conventional idea of education through his claim that "streets put me through colleges." Education knows many forms, and for Lamar, the streets provide as valuable an education as a college would have been – *colleges*, even (although the plural is likely there primarily to make the rhyme scheme function). At the same time, the fact that he is "trapped inside the ghetto" may be the result of precisely his education at Streets College – he has only learned the ways of the streets. It remains uncertain whether, had he gone to 'real' college, he would have been able to step out of the ghetto mindset. In that sense, the line does not provide a definitive answer to the question whether Kendrick Lamar subscribes to Du Bois' early and uncritical notion of book-learning as a means to cross the veil.

Lamar does show himself a proponent of the American Dream: if you work hard, your dreams will come true. There seems to be a limit to what one can achieve, though. Where the classic conception of the American Dream is "work hard, and you can be whatever you want to be," in

¹² Institutionalization, described by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as the "process of developing or transforming rules and procedures that influence a set of human interactions," carries strong notions of incarceration. Being institutionalized by the ghetto is thus compared to feeling mentally locked up ("trapped") inside the ghetto, while at the same time, the institutionalization of the ghetto often leads young men into actual incarceration. Considering the reach of the word, the institutionalization described in the song may point beyond Compton and aim at the broader institutionalization of black men and women in America at large.

Lamar's world, it is "work hard, and you can be *all you can be*," i.e., you can reach the particular potential that is within you as a person heavily institutionalized. In the case of Kendrick Lamar, an exceptionally talented and likely extremely hard-working man, that has led him to be the number one rapper in the game, "milking" the industry with his "real shit" that is born precisely out of his background. His friends back home, on the other hand, show what happens "if work don't follow it": dreams remain dreams.

The next verse is rapped from the perspective¹³ of one such friend who joins Kendrick at the BET awards:

Fuck am I 'posed to do when I'm lookin' at walkin' licks?¹⁴
The constant big money talk 'bout the mansion and foreign whips
...
My defense mechanism tell me to get him
Quickly because he got it
It's a recession, then why the fuck he at King of Diamonds?¹⁵
...
Now Kendrick, know they're your co-workers
But it's gon' take a lot 'fore this pistol go cold turkey
Now I can watch his watch on the TV and be okay
But see I'm on the clock once that watch landin' in LA
Remember steal from the rich and givin' it back to the poor?
Well, that's me at these awards

The institutionalization in his friend is strong: he is so used to taking advantage of easy opportunities to steal, he does not know what else to do when "walkin' licks" are among him. The ghetto has instilled him with a "defense mechanism" that tells him to take from those who have it, and his use of firearms, or in a broader sense, violence, is like an addiction ("it's gon' take a lot 'fore this pistol go *cold turkey*") that is not so simple to break. The verse ends from Lamar's perspective and follows with the hook, sung from the perspective of his grandmother:

I guess my grandmama was warnin' a boy
She said...

Shit don't change until you get up and wash yo' ass, nigga
Shit don't change until you get up and wash yo' ass, boy
Shit don't change until you get up and wash yo' ass, nigga
Oh now, slow down

¹³ Signified by a notable change in Lamar's voice.

¹⁴ One Urban Dictionary entry defines 'lick' as 'any instance when you come upon easy money.'

¹⁵ A famous strip club in Miami where celebrities were known to spend big money. It has recently been shut down (Alvarado).

If there is poop on your bum, you will need to wash it off yourself – things will not change unless you make them. This is the sentiment weaving the song together, and it creates a tension with the notion of institutionalization. On the one hand, there is the feeling of being determined by your conditioning and surroundings, being “trapped inside the ghetto” and unable to get out no matter how successful you become. On the other hand, we have Kendrick’s grandmother telling us change is possible, if only you work for it: you are an autonomous subject with the agency to change the course of your life. So where does Lamar stand?

Somewhere in the middle, it seems. In the rap industry, he is on top, and he knows it. Compared to his friend, he has moved beyond wanting to “steal from the rich and givin’ it back to the poor” – he is the rich one now, and he happily shares his wealth with the people back home. At the same time, he is able to identify with his friend through the BET awards verse and acknowledges that his ghetto mindset would accompany him if he were ever to land a job at the White House. Lamar treads the line between being determined and being autonomous, as both inform each other.

In this sense, it seems as though Lamar is doubly double-conscious. There are levels to the institutionalization one experiences on the dark side of the veil, signified in the song by ‘the ghetto.’ Kendrick’s friend is aware of his ghetto mindset, but does not mention the institutionalization that lies at the base of it. That is, he has double-consciousness in the economic sense, i.e. rich versus poor, but he does not relate his poverty to the larger system he is a part of. Song-Kendrick is aware of his ghetto mindset, but also recognizes that he is institutionalized. Kendrick-the-artist, then, places his and his friend’s ghetto mindset in the broader realm of society, and he is able to do so precisely because he has entered other strata of society through his rap career. Having taken steps toward the other side of the veil, he possesses more awareness of the mental entrapment that precisely the material reality he is walking away from has instilled in him. When we return to Ciccariello-Maher’s notion of critical double-consciousness, “Institutionalized” seems to fit the bill. Although through distancing himself from his friend, it may seem like Lamar sees himself as having crossed the veil somewhat, both his identification with his friend and his acknowledgement of his own institutionalization show that he makes no mistakes about the impermeability of the veil.

“Alright”

As previously mentioned, Black Lives Matter protesters took up “Alright” as their anthem to demonstrate against police brutality. It is fitting that they only used the chorus, though, as the verses do not paint as optimistic a picture as the chorus would have you believe. The song tells a tale of hardship, vices, and doubt, starting with an intro that emits only the teensiest bit of hope:

Alls my life I has to fight, nigga
Alls my life I...
Hard times like, "Yah!"
Bad trips like, "Yah!"
Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But if God got us, then we gon' be alright

We aren't even necessarily going to be alright; it is only *if* "God got us." Kendrick Lamar is not shy about his strong religious beliefs, though, so for the sake of positivity, let us assume that Lamar believes that indeed, "God got us." This is the only time that "we gon' be alright" is preceded by the condition of God having our backs. For the remainder of the song, the chorus follows the hook:

Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
Nigga, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright

Strictly speaking, this verse gives little reason to actually believe that we will be alright. The fact that "We been hurt, been down before" is but a painful reminder of the never-ending duress the black community finds itself under. The po-po wanting to kill us in the street is likewise a distressing notion that has enough base in reality not to be cast off immediately as 100% paranoid. Kendrick's knees are weak from kneeling in prayer so much, and his gun still might blow... but – we gon' be alright. The "but" says it all: there is no reason to feel like everything will be okay; we will be okay despite everything not being very okay right now.

The first verse tells of death, painkillers and other vices. It ends:

Tell the world I know it's too late
Boys and girls, I think I gone cray
Drown inside my vices all day
Won't you please believe when I say

Again, not the most uplifting of verses – our hero is going crazy and drowning in vices. Knowing this, he has to appeal to the listener's belief in the hook to follow.

The beginning of the second verse is almost a repetition of the second verse in "Wesley's Theory," but Uncle Sam is replaced by Lucy:

What you want you? A house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar?
Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog
Motherfucker, you can live at the mall
I can see the evil, I can tell it, I know it's illegal
I don't think about it, I deposit every other zero
...
I don't talk about it, be about it, every day I sequel
If I got it then you know you got it, Heaven, I can reach you
...
My rights, my wrongs; I write 'til I'm right with God

Lucy is likely a reference to Lucifer, a.k.a. Satan the Devil. “I’m your dog” gains meaning here, for when we reverse “dog” we get God, and Lucifer could be seen as God reversed. The fact that with his new name, Satan has become a lady, may serve to emphasize the attraction Kendrick has to the devil: she is a wily temptress.

The introduction of Lucy and the lines about Heaven and God push the song into the realm of the religious. Perhaps the earthly vices that Lamar struggles to resist do not stem from his earthly position on the dark side of the veil; they are ignited by Lucy. Still, the song certainly displays a critical double-consciousness in the way it describes the suffering of Lamar’s people. But the religious elements add a level of consciousness that looks beyond either side of the veil, all the way up to heaven. A possible reading of the song is that when it comes to the poor position of African Americans, the religious is both cause (Lucy) and solution (“I write ‘til I’m right with God”). In this respect, the song that was used most to “address the problem” may actually be the biggest prelude to the *DAMN*. that brought God back into the equation.

“Complexion”

The precursor to the angry “The Blacker the Berry,” “Complexion” is soft in comparison. Harp-like sounds and dainty piano strokes over a steady beat accompany the lyrics that tell a tale not so much of racism, but of colorism within the black community.¹⁶ The mantra of the song is in the chorus: “complexion don’t mean a thing.” With a nod to the era of slavery, when colorism was used to divide the black community along a white-to-dark axis (Nittle), Lamar relays how, with the insight of his long-time girlfriend Whitney Alford, he overcame his own color prejudice:

¹⁶ It is worth noting here that the title of the following song “The Blacker the Berry” alludes to a 1929 novel by the same name written by Wallace Thurman. The book deals with precisely “Complexion”’s subject matter, as it tells the story of a dark-skinned girl dealing with the prejudice she faces from within her family and the African American community.

Sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field nigga
 I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you
 You know I'd go the distance, you know I'm ten toes down
 Even if master's listenin', I got the world's attention
 So I'ma say somethin' that's vital and critical for survival
 Of mankind, if he lyin', color should never rival
 Beauty is what you make it, I used to be so mistaken
 By different shades of faces
 Then Whit' told me, "A woman is woman, love the creation"
 It all came from God, then you was my confirmation
 I came to where you reside
 And looked around to see more sights for sore eyes
 Let the Willie Lynch theory reverse a million times with...

The Willie Lynch theory is based on a speech that was supposedly given in Virginia by an English slave owner in 1712. Willie Lynch claimed to have a “fool proof method of controlling Black slaves.” His strategy: “to [outline] a number of difference(s) among the slaves,” to “take these differences and make them bigger,” and to “use fear, distrust, and envy for control purposes.” Historian William Jelani Cobb is convinced that the speech is “absolutely fake,” because “much of the text of his ‘speech’ remains anachronistic” (n.pag.). Whether Lamar is aware of the hoax is unknown, but it does not matter that much – he is making the point that black people should unite rather than stay divided.

Female rapper Rhapsody takes the song home with her verse:

Let me talk my Stu Scott, 'scuse me on my 2Pac
 Keep your head up, when did you stop loving thy
 Color of your skin? Color of your eyes
 ...
 12 years of age, thinkin' my shade too dark
 I love myself, I no longer need Cupid
 Enforcin' my dark side like a young George Lucas
 Light don't mean you smart, bein' dark don't make you stupid
 ...
 And spike your self esteem
 The new James Bond gon' be black as me
 Black as brown, hazelnut, cinnamon, black tea
 And it's all beautiful to me
 Call your brothers magnificent, call all the sisters queens
 We all on the same team, blues and pirus, no colors ain't a thing

The gaze is seemingly turned inward here on the dark side of the veil, imploring its constituents to value each other and to dismiss the importance of shade. Still, double-consciousness underlies the song. The James Bond line refers to the rumors that have been whirring since 2014 that Idris

Elba, a black British actor, might replace blond and blue-eyed Daniel Craig as 007 in the movie franchise. The reference illustrates the predominantly white character of popular mainstream entertainment – whereas Daniel Craig being cast did not do anything to spike my blond and blue-eyed self-esteem, someone “as black as” Rhapsody being cast would be an exception such as to bring a confidence boost to her community. I would not call this a *critical* display of double-consciousness, though. Rather than questioning the fact that James Bond has been strictly parchment-colored so far, Idris Elba possibly being cast in the role is presented as a successful crossing of the veil that spikes self-esteem, i.e. the belief that “if Idris can do it, so can I.”

The background slave narrative and the mention of Willie Lynch display a more critical double-consciousness, as they indicate the roots of colorism in slavery, arguably the sharpest material expression of the veil that ever was. Lamar rapping from the perspective of a slave transfers the subject matter of the song from the former to the current time period. It shows an awareness that the veil that was instated during slavery has not been lifted and informs his view on color to this day.

“The Blacker the Berry”

“The Blacker the Berry” is the song that most directly tackles race. Still, its message did not leave all critics satisfied. The lyric that sparked the most outrage and debate is the final line:

So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
When gang bangin make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
Hypocrite!

One reviewer noted that through this final line, “the rhymer turns what seemed like an introspective track about his own anger and conflict into a finger-wagging session aimed at his own people” (Williams). Lamar had already caught flack before the release of the album for a statement he made in an interview with Billboard:

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.

The quote was taken by many as a “classic example of respectability politics” (Noire), which Timothy Welbeck describes as “the idea that marginalized people must successfully demonstrate their collective social values comport with those of mainstream norms and mores to receive a modicum of equality” (n.pag.). In Du Boisian terms, it is the idea that through the internalization and display of mainstream values, one might be able to cross the veil. According to Ciccariello-Maher’s standards, this would fall under the uncritical type of double-consciousness. And judging by the outrage Lamar sparked with his comments, it appears that in the 21st century, a more critical stance is expected from leaders of the black community such as himself.

When “The Blacker the Berry” was released, criticism in the same vein poured out. Lamar starts his verses with “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015,” and when we reach the final line, we see what he means: if engaging in gang activity makes him kill a man “blacker than [him],” who is he to cry in outrage when a black boy is murdered in an act of violence as unjust as that of the gangs? If he

himself participates in the deterioration of his community, what right does he have to point the finger at institutions that do the same? In his critique of the song, Stereo Williams points out that “the ‘what about black-on-black crime’ argument is used to deflect and silence conversations about systematic oppression of black people” (n.pag.). Williams “[hates] the way [Lamar] turns his gun on himself and his people,” and wonders whether “If there is a hypocrisy, doesn’t it fall on those who would use gang violence to silence public outrage against oppression while ignoring the fact that the gang violence is also a product of that same racist oppression?”

Indeed, it could be argued that the very emergence of gangs in the 1950s resulted from the systemic racism that prevented African Americans from joining pre-existing clubs like the Boy Scouts and becoming an active part of such associations (Greene and Pranis 25). Later, when criminality enters gang culture, the same gangs serve as an instrument to maintain the subjugation of black and Latino communities. The Youth Justice Coalition in California states that “by criminalizing gang membership and gang activity, California’s antigang laws result in discrimination on the basis of race, class, and age” (28).

One such instrument of criminalization is The California Gang database, which lists people who fulfill two out of ten criteria. Some are as flimsy as “5. Is in a photograph with known gang members and/or using gang-related hand signs” or “10. Writes about gangs (graffiti) on walls, books, paper, etc.” (28). By these standards, I could go on holiday in Los Angeles, have my picture taken with someone wearing a blue bandana and sporting a Crips tattoo, then scrawl “Crips Rule” on a park bench, and if a police officer were to see it, I would be entered into the CalGang database and be a suspected criminal from then on. That is, if these criteria were applied consistently. The suspicion exists that I, as a blond woman, would not be entered into the database quite as rapidly as the “47 percent of African American men in Los Angeles County between the ages of 21 and 24” that by 2003 “had been logged into the Los Angeles County gang database” (27). So while there is no question that the gangs of today engage in serious criminal activity, law enforcement chooses to tackle the issue in a way that does not seem to diminish the desire or need for youths to join a gang, but rather one that “sweeps entire communities into a net of police surveillance” (28).

Taking all this into consideration with regards to the “gangbanging” line in the song, one may wonder, like Williams, whether “Kendrick’s perspective on black oppression could benefit from being more informed and more thoughtful” (n.pag.). Yet I do not think Kendrick Lamar is oblivious to the fact that gangbanging is fueled by the socioeconomic realities of a system stacked against him. I do not suspect his felt hypocrisy to be an absolute indictment of his (or the black community’s, for that matter) character. Hypocrisy is but another symptom of the ailment he describes. Feeling hypocritical is another negative aspect of the mental condition we may call double-consciousness.

When we look at the song as a whole, it pulls no punches in its charge at racism and its actors. In a second-person address, Kendrick spits:

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

Not only does Lamar see the hatred aimed at him and his people, he judges it “evil,” reversing the usual white-good/black-bad dichotomy. In the same verse, Lamar appears to acknowledge that the violence he claims to have committed in the last verse may be a result of the racist system he is in:

You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'
You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga

The second verse, too, makes no mistake about the materiality of the veil:

I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society
That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me

So far, the gun is steadily pointed at “you,” and sharply so. The last verse sees Lamar aiming at himself. First, he draws a comparison between South African tribes and the Los Angeles gangs:

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 Crip gangs that live next door
Beefin' with Pirus,¹⁷ only death settle the score

The comparison between L.A. gangs and the “tribal armies” of South Africa can be read as a judgement of the former as “tribal,” with its connotations of primitivism and barbarity. But the general consensus on the perceived tribal battle raging in South Africa is that “The clear-cut distinction made today between the Xhosa and the Zulu has no basis in culture or history, but arises out of the colonial distinction between the Cape and Natal colonies” (South African History Online, n.pag.). The colonialists in South Africa “[deepened] the differences between Zulus and Xhosas, Ndebele and Vendas, Tswana and Qwaqwa and so forth” (Baloyi n.pag.). In the scramble for power, “tribalism became an effective tool for divide and rule policies implemented by the apartheid regime” (ibid.). Lamar’s comparison, then, does not have to mean that Crips and Pirus are like tribal men among the civilized nation of the U.S. Instead, it may hint at the nation’s efforts to divide and conquer: to weaken the black community by, if not stimulating, then allowing the distinction between internal groups to deepen and to lead to violence amongst them.

Lamar proceeds to list a number of African American stereotypes he subscribes to, to end on the notion of hypocrisy previously mentioned:

¹⁷ Note that Rhapsody’s last line in “Complexion” is painfully contradicted here. “We all on the same team, blues and Pirus, no colors ain’t a thing” turns out to be an ideal, rather than a reality.

So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
 Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"
 Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day
 Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays
 Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements
 Or watch BET cause urban support is important
 So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
 When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
 Hypocrite!

The verse creates a tension between Lamar's actions and morals that are deemed typically 'pro-Black' (including weeping for the murder of an unarmed black boy by police) and his act of violence against a black man, carried out in the name of an organization that is detrimental to the community. The hypocrisy thus exists in Lamar's simultaneous support and destruction of the black community, or if we zone in on the Trayvon Martin line, his hypocrisy lies in the simultaneous lament of one act of systemic violence against the black community and the partaking in another.

Interestingly, the gangbanging line is not even the most "hypocritical" lyric in the song. Before the song proper starts, Lamar sings in a lispy voice:

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

Lamar admits he sometimes "[gets] off watching you die in vain," i.e. he finds some dark enjoyment in watching his community perish. They may say he suffers from "schizophrenia or somethin'," which means roughly the same as "hypocrite" in the sense of the song: you support the community yet take part or pleasure in its demise. The same tension we saw in "Institutionalized" between being determined from without and having the agency to act, appears between the notion of being 'schizophrenic' and being a 'hypocrite': whereas schizophrenia is generally considered a mental disorder with causes both genetic and environmental, hypocrisy is a practice. With regards to his supposed schizophrenia, Lamar knows that external factors have led him down this path: "homie, you made me." His gangbanging could have surely been avoided – you can always choose not to pick up the gun and kill the man. But at the same time, his is not a strictly autonomous hypocrisy, as gangbanging itself is fueled by institutional racism, and the judgment of hypocrisy is informed by a dominant discourse that focuses on black-on-black crime rather than the system that sustains it.

"Black don't crack" is an ironic statement here. It is a colloquialism meant to indicate that black people generally age well and with few wrinkles (the "crack" referring to the skin). With regards

to the verse, it points at a “crack” in the mind, i.e. being schizophrenic. The phrase seems to imply that however “cracked” his mind may seem, that is just the result of the “you” who made him that way, not of some intrinsic schizophrenic quality. At the same time, the phrase may precisely illustrate the schizophrenia that he suffers from: claiming “black don’t crack” while simultaneously admitting to being some type of cracked in the head while black is as much a double move as weeping in the street for Trayvon Martin while having killed a black man. This small line, to me, is indicative of Lamar’s confrontation with the complexity of the issue. He does not shy away from hypocrisy and double ironies, because the issue at hand is not, pardon the terrible pun, so black and white.

To return to the question of critical double-consciousness, we may state that yes, in judging himself a hypocrite and pointing at black-on-black crime, Kendrick Lamar is reiterating some of the rhetoric from the other side of the veil that is keeping the veil in place. But he is not copying this rhetoric out of a belief that it will earn him a spot on the other side. He is copying the rhetoric while critiquing it, because it is precisely the dominance of this rhetoric that leads him to feel schizophrenic and hypocritical. Kendrick Lamar is the epitome of critically conscious here, because he does not just show an awareness of the veil, but he illustrates how exceedingly difficult it is to live with consciousness of both sides.

Conclusion

The five songs I have read offer a view into the full complexity of a double-conscious mind. Lamar embodies the tribulations one faces being black and American, and his lyrics display an acute awareness of the veil as an insurmountable reality. Be it the conditioning black people undergo in their segregated living spaces, the police brutality that lurks around every corner, or the gang violence that crushes communities, Lamar knows that these things serve their function in the structure of American society. He knows, too, that no amount of book-learning or materialism on his side of the veil will effectively allow him to cross over to the other side.

Aside from the duality of being black and American, Lamar seems to struggle with the tension between being a determined subject or an autonomous subject. The two dichotomies largely overlap: we see how on “Institutionalized,” the potential to “be all you can be” is constricted by the institutionalization in the black space of the ghetto, which determines to what extent this potential can be fulfilled. Likewise, “Wesley’s Theory” shows that while black entertainers have the autonomy to reach success in America, their conditioning on the dark side of the veil puts them at a higher risk to lose all they have accomplished. In “The Blacker the Berry,” being schizophrenic and being a hypocrite allude to the same tension and complicate matters further: even a seemingly autonomous, self-defining hypocrite might have arrived at that position with the push of determining factors.

“Complexion” offers a careful touch of positivity among the critique, but still manages to address the veil through its allusion to slavery. “Alright,” as well, proposes an uncertain optimism in a sea of negativity. The song that inspired masses also hints at the direction Lamar will take on his next album: the presence of God in the song foreshadows His growing role in the pursuit of ‘being alright’ moving forward.

To Pimp A Butterfly confronted and inspired its listeners, carrying an urgency and power that felt consequential at a time when change seemed imminent. But the system doubled down. Described by some as “the revenge of the white man” (Filipovic), Trump’s victory at the 2016 presidential election was seen as a blow to the black community (and many others). In the next chapter, we will see the direction Kendrick Lamar’s black consciousness takes in Trump’s America.

Chapter 3: *DAMN.*

DAMN. was released in April 2017. The follow-up of the musically experimental *To Pimp A Butterfly* was a return to a more ‘classic’ hip-hop, with jazz grooves and funk pioneers making way for thick beats and nineties legend Kid Capri MC’ing in between songs. Although Lamar certainly addresses the same social and political issues as on his last record, they are less prominent on the album, showing up here and there rather than shaping entire songs. Even the album covers reflect this difference: while *To Pimp A Butterfly*’s image of black men posing in front of the White House on top of a dead white judge is outright provocative, *DAMN.*’s cover shows Lamar by himself, in front of a red brick wall, solemn but not situated in an explicitly politicized setting.

As mentioned in the introduction, some light was shed on *DAMN.* by Kendrick Lamar himself in a *New York Times* interview conducted by Wyatt Mason in March 2017. When asked “what’s been on his mind,” Lamar replies:

“Been thinking about my little brothers ... Family.” Lamar paused, picked it up again. “I think now, how wayward things have gone within the past few months, my focus is ultimately going back to my community and the other communities around the world where they’re doing the groundwork. ‘To Pimp a Butterfly’ was addressing the problem. I’m in a space now where I’m not addressing the problem anymore,” he said. “We’re in a time where we exclude one major component out of this whole thing called life: God. Nobody speaks on it because it’s almost in conflict with what’s going on in the world when you talk about politics and government and the system.”

Lamar reveals his stance on the current state of affairs in his country: things have gone “wayward” within the past months, which most likely alludes to Trump being elected president in November 2016 and taking office in January 2017, a couple of months before the interview took place. So, if we thought things were wayward already on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, they got worse.

Lamar considers the conflict between “what’s going on in the world” and God “very urgent.” When asked what that urgency might sound like, he spins an analogy about his hypothetical daughter:

One day, I may have a little girl ... She’s gonna grow up. She’s gonna be a child I adore, I’m gonna always love her, but she’s gonna reach that one point where she’s gonna start experiencing things. And she’s gonna say things or do things that you may not condone, but it’s the reality of it and you know she was always gonna get to that place. And it’s disturbing. But you have to accept it. You have to accept it and you have to have your own solutions to figure out how to handle the action and take action for it ... Learning to accept it, and not run away from it, that’s how I want this album to feel.”

Acceptance. That is what the album should feel like. Learning to come to terms with an inevitable evolvment into a disturbing place that one must not, cannot run away from.

How does such a mind state relate to the critical double-consciousness we have been seeing in Kendrick Lamar’s work on *To Pimp A Butterfly*? Is it possible to remain critically double-conscious

while accepting the state of affairs you critique? To what extent does (an attempt at) acceptance interfere with being critically double-conscious, or critical in general? Does a turn to God imply resignation? This chapter is an attempt to find out. It is structured differently than the previous chapter, because double-consciousness is spread more thinly throughout the album, and other themes – Black Hebrew Israelites and a duality between the earthly and the Godly - play an important role. I will go through the album by the three themes that are in interplay with the question: what direction does Kendrick Lamar’s critical double-consciousness take on *DAMN*?

Determined by God: I’m an Israelite

Whereas God played some role on Lamar’s previous albums, on *DAMN*. He takes center stage. It seems that Lamar has reinvigorated his relationship to God by subscribing to a new belief system: that of the Black Hebrew Israelites. He first mentions he is an Israelite on the third song of the album, “YAH,” the title of which refers to the Hebrew word for God, ‘Yahweh’:

Somebody tell Geraldo¹⁸ this nigga got some ambition
I'm not a politician, I'm not 'bout a religion
I'm a Israelite, don't call me black no mo'
That word is only a color, it ain't facts no mo'
My cousin called, my cousin Carl Duckworth
Said know my worth
And Deuteronomy say that we all been cursed

Being an Israelite appears to replace being black, or at least it inspires a desire not to be labeled as such anymore. Henceforth, black is once again a color, and not a determining signifier carrying all kinds of connotations. Cousin Carl returns to explain more on the song “FEAR.” by way of a voicemail message that envelopes the song:

What's up, family?
Yeah, it's your cousin Carl, man, just givin' you a call, man
I know you been havin' a lot on yo' mind lately
And I know you feel like, you know
People ain't been prayin' for you¹⁹
But you have to understand this, man, that we are a cursed people
Deuteronomy 28:28 says, 'The Lord shall smite thee with madness
And blindness, and astonishment of heart'
See, family, that's why you feel like you feel
Like you got a chip on your shoulder
Until you finally get the memo, you gonna feel that way
...

¹⁸ A reference to Geraldo Riviera, the Fox News host who criticized “Alright.” Lamar samples the news segment in question at the end of album opener “BLOOD.”

¹⁹ The line “ain’t nobody praying for me” is pivotal in the song “FEEL.”

Verse 2²⁰ says, ‘You only have I known of all the families of the Earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’
So until we come back to these commandments
Until you come back to these commandments
We gonna feel this way, we gonna be under this curse
Because He said He's gonna punish us
The so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American Indians
Are the true children of Israel
We are the Israelites, according to the Bible
The children of Israel
He's gonna punish us for our iniquities, for our disobedience
Because we chose to follow other gods
That man chasten his son, so the Lord, thy God, chasten thee
So, just like you chasten your own son, He's gonna chastise you
Because He loves you, so that's why we get chastised
That's why we're in the position that we're in
Until we come back to these laws, statutes, and commandments
And do what the Lord says, these curses is gonna be upon us
We gonna be at a lower state in this life that we live
Here, in today, in the United States of America
I love you, family, and I pray for you²¹
God bless you
Shalom

Cousin Carl refers to Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Old Testament. In his interpretation, because “The so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American Indians/Are the true children of Israel,” they are at a “lower state” of life in today’s America. Yet Deuteronomy 28 does not provide the grounds on which to claim that blacks, Hispanics and Native American Indians are indeed the true children of Israel. Instead, it is a summation of the “Blessings for Obedience” (verse 1-12) that will befall those who “fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands” and the “Curses for Disobedience” (verse 13-67) that will plague those who do not.

The idea that ‘blacks’ are the true children of Israel is a claim made by Black Hebrews and contested by many others. Common sense dictates that the children of Israel, the people whose stories compose the Old Testament, are the people, from, well, Israel, or the larger region we call the Middle East today. Yet the Black Hebrews have found signs to believe that Israel belongs to Africa, not the ‘Middle East’ as constructed by the West, and concurrently, Africans belong to Israel.

In the mid-nineties, anthropologist Fran Markowitz dove into a Black Hebrew community of former African-Americans who had settled in Dimona, Israel. Through its inhabitants’ narratives,

²⁰ Amos 3:2

²¹ Here, Carl disproves his cousin’s “feel” that nobody’s praying for him.

she explored the “links between the circumstances of Black American urban life and the search for alternatives beyond that scene that led their protagonists to the Black Hebrew Israelite Community” (196). She relates that “The Black Hebrew Israelite Community began in Chicago during the middle 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights movement” (ibid.), and most of her respondents moved to Israel in the seventies and eighties, when a new wave of what one might call ‘curses’ swept over black communities in America: gang violence and drug problems.

By reimagining the African continent as including Israel (it was only the construction of the Suez Canal that separated the two, after all), black Americans constructed a new identity that at once explained their position and offered a way out. As Markowitz puts it, “Black Americans transform themselves into Black Hebrew Israelites by forging symbolic and actual links between Israel and Africa” (195), and as a result, “a new, self-defined culture and community could flourish” (202).

One of Markowitz’ respondents, Yafa, echoes Kendrick’s cousin Carl almost word for word:

“Once I was shown that in Deuteronomy it is explained if you sin and turn away from God you will be punished, I could understand why Black Americans were in this [terrible] position. I didn't want to be a nothing Black American, Afro-American, Negro American, and the Community answered my questions by providing an order, a solution, a righteous path to life.” (198)

Again, Deuteronomy plays a pivotal part. A closer look at the verses reveals why African-Americans see themselves reflected in the book, as a little imagination allows for the curses to take the shape of their plight. Apart from God cursing the infidels with such delights as the “boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured” (verse 27), the unbelievers will suffer a fate that is reminiscent of slavery:

36 The Lord will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your ancestors. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. 37 You will become a thing of horror, a byword and an object of ridicule among all the peoples where the Lord will drive you ... 41 You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity ... 64 Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known ... 68 The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

The 68th verse, especially, is hailed as evidence that the children of Israel are indeed the Africans, as it invites visions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

It would not be difficult to go on a skeptical rant and challenge the Black Hebrews’ beliefs on the basis of my non-religious worldview. But that would be pointless - the power of faith is precisely its ability to remain untarnished after rational debunking. Still, the Black Hebrew Israelites’

vulnerability to reasonable critique says something about Kendrick Lamar's shift toward the movement: to start believing, especially at a later age, is a choice.

Of course, Lamar already believed in God, and so the transition from Christian to Black Israelite was probably smoother for him than it would be for, say, myself to start subscribing to the Black Hebrew's claims. Yet, inspired by his cousin Carl's remarks, it was still Kendrick's choice to dive in, to research, and to start believing that he and his fellow African Americans are the true children of Israel, and that it is God who is responsible for their "lower state" in life. And so, in a beautiful move, Kendrick autonomously turns himself into a subject determined by God.

Let us look at Markowitz' final thoughts on the Black Hebrew Israelite Community and circle back to Lamar's transition:

Despite changes in African Americans' legal status and group identity, discrimination and minority status have as yet to disappear. This knowledge laid the groundwork for members of the Black Hebrew Israelite Community, while still young American men and women in Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, to search for explanations for their, and their people's, tragic history. While thousands of Black Americans found these answers in long-standing European racism and the discriminatory legal code of the United States, and then *addressed these problems* by battling to bring about political change, Yafa, Adiv, Yadiel, Batya, and others in the Community were unconvinced that 'legislated equality' or 'a piece of the pie' was the answer to Black America's plight. With the knowledge they had at their disposal, they looked outward and sought further than the United States and Europe for explanations and alternatives: they explored the implications of their acknowledged roots in Western Africa, and the messages of the Bible. In striving to counter the inadequate Negro-Black-African American identity foisted on them and its attached demeaning minority status, they became receptive to a different knowledge scheme that could provide an *explanation* for their people's noble but fallen history and, as well, give to them and their people a *sense of mission, a purpose in life*. (202, emphases mine)

Much like Lamar's description of his two albums, the above shows a similar journey: from addressing the problem through one explanation to finding an alternative, metaphysical one in order to move on. This explanation and the accompanying sense of purpose in life may be what he means when he speaks of finding acceptance. Yet this religiously inspired sense of acceptance does not occur easily, as I will discuss in the next section.

The Great Duality

Even from the tracklist, we see that Kendrick Lamar's relationship with God is not clear-cut. For him to be right with God, he would have to "do what the Lord says," and as it turns out, that is hard to do. Aiming to be pious while being the biggest rap star alive causes tension. Some of the song titles are in direct conflict with each other, with the boastful "HUMBLE" following the self-conscious "PRIDE" and "LOVE" following "LUST". The songs themselves, too, display a tension between religious introspection and Earthly boastfulness, sometimes between songs, and sometimes within one song.

This tension between piousness and sinfulness informs a return of the theme of hypocrisy we saw on “The Blacker the Berry.” An example is found on “YAH.” Right after cousin Carl and Deuteronomy are mentioned, Kendrick continues:

I know he walks the Earth
But it's money to get, bitches to hit, yah
Zeroes to flip, temptation is, yah
First on my list, I can't resist, yah
Everyone together now, know that we forever—

Becoming an Israelite does not automatically free him from his Earthly desires – temptation is still “first on his list”. The mention of “yah” at the end of these lines serves a rhythmical purpose in the song, but is also a nice way of interjecting God into his sinful life. It is almost as if, mid-sentence, God shows up to remind Kendrick of His existence, or conversely, Kendrick conjures Him to weaken the temptations that plague him.

Hypocrisy returns on “XXX,” a song that, with its critique of America, is possibly the most reminiscent of *To Pimp A Butterfly*. In the second verse, Lamar gets a call from his friend who tells him “they killed his only son because of insufficient funds”. The friend asks Lamar to pray for him and says he knows “you anointed,” i.e. he ascribes a certain spiritual authority to Lamar. He continues:

He was lookin' for some closure
Hopin' I could bring him closer
To the spiritual, my spirit do no better,²² but I told him
'I can't sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel:
If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed.'

He goes on to describe exactly how and why he would kill the man who killed his son and finishes:

You should chip a nigga, then throw the blower in his lap
Matter fact, I'm 'bout to speak at this convention
Call you back—

After this advice to kill the man and throw the gun in his lap, we hear the beginning of his talk at “this convention”:

Alright, kids, we're gonna talk about gun control
(Pray for me) Damn!

²² Or: “do know better.” I do not see it as being either/or; it is both. His spirit knows better, but does not necessarily do better – the essence of his hypocrisy.

The irony is thick here, and we may take this “Damn!” to be a reflection on the whole album: damn, it is hard to marry faith with reality, and damn, am I damned – by God and the world.

Typically, the song called “GOD” does not seem to be about God:

This what God feel like, huh, he-yeah
Laughin' to the bank like, "A-ha!", huh, he-yeah
Flex on swole like, "A-ha!", huh, he-yeah
You feel some type of way, then a-ha!

Equating “what God feels like” to “laughing to the bank,” i.e. making an ungodly amount of money, Lamar seems to celebrate wealth over anything else.

“PRIDE” is a song that is not proud, but rather delves into Lamar’s realization “I understand I ain't perfect, I probably won't come around.” Again, the tension between reality and an ideal world at God’s service is at the forefront:

See, in a perfect world, I'll choose faith over riches
I'll choose work over bitches, I'll make schools out of prison
I'll take all the religions and put 'em all in one service
Just to tell 'em we ain't shit, but He's been perfect, world

In these lyrics, we see a subject newly determined by God through his own volition, but in conflict with the choices he makes, which may be informed by his being-determined as a black man brought up in Compton and now warped by success and fame. Of course, his success is due largely to the fact that he precisely captures what it means to be (constructed as) black in America. The struggle, then, is between his old determination and his new determination. Much like on *To Pimp A Butterfly*’s “Institutionalized,” Kendrick’s new identity is at odds with his old one. On “Institutionalized,” Kendrick-the-rapper was fighting his hood rat mindset; on *DAMN.*, Kendrick-the-Israelite is fighting his stereotypical rapper mindset. And while these seem like vastly different identities, ‘hood rat’ and ‘rapper’ are both African American identities that the dominant discourse has adopted to foster stereotypes and determine subjects that fit their mold. So indirectly, the duality discussed above shows how difficult it is for African Americans to reshape the identity constructed for them. In that sense, we can recognize critical Kendrick, albeit in a new cloak.

Addressing the problem

So far, I have not discussed many textual elements that directly evoke the critical double-consciousness so prevalent on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, because there simply are not that many. Still, at times *DAMN.* does ‘address the problem’ of race relations and ‘the system’ at large in the U.S. On “XXX,” Lamar takes aim at America:

Look what you taught us!
 It's murder on my street, your street, back streets
 Wall Street, corporate offices
 Banks, employees, and bosses with
 Homicidal thoughts; Donald Trump's in office
 We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again
 ...
 It's nasty when you set us up
 Then roll the dice, then bet us up
 You overnight the big rifles, then tell Fox to be scared of us
 Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera
 America's reflections of me, that's what a mirror does

The first part addresses part of why things have gone wayward in the previous months: Donald Trump's election. "Donald Trump" following "homicidal thoughts" suggests a mental association of the two; Lamar may have felt a little murderous toward his new president. In any case, Trump's election is presented as a loss for the community. The final lines are reminiscent of "The Blacker the Berry" in that they address and indict a "you," yet their tone is starkly different. Musically speaking, this verse is the 'relaxed' bit of the song, whereas the verse about killing a man who kills his son (discussed on page 38) is tonally much more aggressive. And the "et cetera, et cetera" displays almost a boredom, a being-tired of even having to make this accusation again.

Trump gets another mention on "LUST," a song whose repetitive verses and record-scratching sound effects reflect its theme of people living life according to their lusts, which in this song are mundane rather than passionate ("Watch you a comedy, take a shit, then roll some weed up/Sip some lean, go get a pistol, shoot out the window"). The second verse refers to the 2016 election:

We all woke up, tryna tune to the daily news
 Lookin' for confirmation, hopin' election wasn't true
 All of us worried, all of us buried, and our feelings deep
 None of us married to his proposal, make us feel cheap
 Still and sad, distraught and mad, tell the neighbor 'bout it
 Bet they agree, parade the streets with your voice proudly
 Time passin', things change
 Revertin' back to our daily programs, stuck in our ways
 Lust

If we take "we" to mean the black community here, we see how Trump's election was met with a swirl of negative emotions that inspired proud protest. Still, the anger that fueled "The Blacker the Berry" seems to have subsided here. Not only is the verse rapped apathetically rather than fiery; the parading down the streets appears but an interlude to the daily programs of people's lives. Whether Lamar is mad about this, is hard to tell. While "stuck in our ways" has a negative ring to it, it may be an indictment not of political apathy, but of the sinful behavior described in the previous verse (smoking weed, sipping lean, et cetera). His voice certainly does not betray

much emotion, but this may also be a vocal representation of the apathy he is describing. Taking the *New York Times* interview into account, though, it appears more likely that the verse is an illustration of the acceptance Lamar wants the album to emit. “Time passin’, things change” sounds a lot like the analogy of his little girl growing up, and “revertin’ back to our daily programs” could parallel the “learning to accept it, and not run away from it” described in the interview.

The line “Race barriers make inferior you and I” features on the song “PRIDE,” but is not surrounded by lyrics in the same vein. As mentioned on page 39, the song is an introspective exploration of Lamar being pulled in two directions, and the race line is just one of the many conflicts Lamar grapples with.

We see that compared to *To Pimp A Butterfly*, *DAMN.* does not allow for many songs to be read through the lens of critical double-consciousness, which may lead us to believe that Lamar really is starting to accept the veil as-is and is finding another way to deal with the reality of it. One more song does address the problem quite directly, and as it also contains the Israelite and the duality thematic, it deserves its own section.

“FEAR”

Besides containing the voicemail message from cousin Carl discussed on page 35, “FEAR” offers a glimpse into the struggles of African American life. Against the backdrop of a slow and steady pulsating beat, Lamar travels through time. The verses provide visions of the rapper’s fears at ages seven, seventeen and twenty-seven. The first verse is rapped from the perspective of 7-year-old Kendrick’s mother, who repeatedly threatens to “beat [his] ass”. The reasons for these potential ass-whoopings are pretty typical: “talkin’ back,” “[jumping] on the couch,” not finishing homework, et cetera. At the end of the verse, we catch a glimpse of the mother’s worries:

I beat yo' ass, you know my patience runnin' thin
I got buku²³ payments to make
County building's on my ass, tryna take my food stamps away

The fragment is a peek into circumstances that disproportionately hit African Americans: living in poverty and depending on food stamps to feed one’s family (CBPP, n.pag.) In the second verse, Lamar’s voice turns flat and apathetic. Again, a phrase repeats itself:

²³ As in ‘beaucoup’

I'll prolly die anonymous, I'll prolly die with promises
 I'll prolly die walkin' back home from the candy house
 I'll prolly die because these colors are standin' out
 I'll prolly die because I ain't know Demarcus was snitchin'
 ...
 I'll prolly die from thinkin' that me and your hood was cool
 ...
 I'll prolly die from one of these bats and blue badges
 Body-slammed on black and white paint, my bones snappin'
 Or maybe die from panic or die from bein' too lax
 Or die from waitin' on it, die 'cause I'm movin' too fast
 ...
 I'll prolly die 'cause that's what you do when you're 17
 All worries in a hurry, I wish I controlled things

The threat of death encompasses Kendrick at seventeen, growing up in Compton. “Colors standin’ out,” Demarcus snitching, and “thinking me and your hood was cool” refer to gang violence, while “bats and blue badges” signify police brutality. Dying from “panic” or “being too lax” as well as dying from “waitin’ on it” or “movin’ too fast” shows that it really does not matter what stance you take or how you deal with life: on both ends of the spectrum, death is always around the corner. Of course, in a better environment, a list of ‘typical things kids do at seventeen’ would probably not contain ‘dying.’ The verse is a terrible glimpse into the life of a young man surrounded by violence, where fear is normalized and the future does not exist.

The verses from Kendrick’s 27-year-old perspective paint a different picture: he has ‘escaped’ Compton, after all. Still, fear persists:

When I was 27, I grew accustomed to more fear
 Accumulated 10 times over throughout the years
 ...
 The shock value of my success put bolts in me
 All this money, is God playin' a joke on me?
 Is it for the moment, and will he see me as Job?
 Take it from me and leave me worse than I was before?
 At 27, my biggest fear was losin' it all
 Scared to spend money, had me sleepin' from hall to hall

His newfound life of fame and money does not alleviate his fears; rather it enlarges them. Later in the verse, he mentions reading “a case about Rihanna’s accountant,” who gave her bad advice and left her effectively bankrupt a decade ago (Daily Mail). The verse is reminiscent of *To Pimp A Butterfly*’s “Wesley’s Theory,” which tackles the issue of black entertainers entering the realm of the music industry without the financial knowledge necessary to maintain their wealth and vulnerable to a system stacked against them (see page 18). In this sense, Lamar’s fear of “losin’ it all” may be read in the same double-conscious vein.

The verses, then, do emit the critical double-consciousness we saw on *To Pimp A Butterfly*. But because cousin Carl's extensive voicemail message envelopes the song, the critical double-consciousness interacts and is almost integrated with Lamar's newfound Israelite beliefs. God is summoned not just by the voicemail, but also in the bridge that follows Carl Duckworth's mention of Deuteronomy, which outright asks God the question of suffering:

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle
Why God, why God do I gotta bleed?
Every stone thrown at you restin' at my feet
Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Earth is no more, won't you burn this muh'fucka?
I don't think I could find a way to make it on this earth
akcuƒhum siht nrub uoy t'now ,erom on si htraE
reffus attog I od doG yhw ,doG yhW
teef ym ta 'nitser uoy ta nworht enots yrevE
deelb attog I od doG yhw ,doG yhW
elggurts fo lluf snedrüb yrrac traeh ym ni niaP
reffus attog I od doG yhw ,doG yhW
teef ym ta 'nitser uoy ta nworht enofts yrevE

That second half is not a typo of extreme proportions; it is the bridge being played in reverse. It sounds about the way it looks: like unintelligible gibberish.

The question “why God, why God do I gotta suffer?” is answered in a twofold way. The reversal of the bridge can be interpreted as a turning back in time, but forward in the song, to the verse rapped from Kendrick's seven-year-old perspective. Traveling through time past ages 17 and 27, we see that his fear is informed by his and his community's being-black: his mother threatening to beat him because life in poverty is stressing her out; adolescence in Compton bringing the threat of death with it; and the escape to success not bringing any relief, because living as a black man has instilled a fear that will remain with him, no matter his circumstance. The answer to the question of suffering is then: because you are black in America.

On the other hand, the reversal could bring us back not in time, but in the song, to the beginning of “FEAR”: Carl's voicemail. Cousin Carl provides an answer to the question, too: you suffer because you are an Israelite.

The two explanations for the suffering come from different sources: suffering because you are black is an earthly explanation, suffering because you are an Israelite is Godly. It is obvious that the latter, at least to someone as religious as Kendrick Lamar, is preferable – God is good, after all. But Lamar cannot have the religious explanation without accepting and accentuating the earthly one. To be a Black Hebrew Israelite, one must first accept their blackness. Being black precedes being an Israelite: the Black Hebrew Israelites originate from, and do not exist outside the African American community.

Returning to Fran Markowitz' reflections on the Black Hebrew Israelites, we see how they utilize their religion to explain their status and relieve themselves from their identity as constructed for them by America:

In striving to counter the inadequate Negro-Black-African American identity foisted on them and its attached demeaning minority status, they became receptive to a different knowledge scheme that could provide an explanation for their people's noble but fallen history and, as well, give to them and their people a sense of mission, a purpose in life. (202)

Becoming a Black Hebrew Israelite, then, is a way to make life as an African American bearable and worthy. But how does such a move relate to the veil?

Conclusion: acceptance as critique

We have seen that to be critically double-conscious is to acknowledge the materiality of the veil in the form of the institutions that sustain systemic racism. A critical double-consciousness does not subscribe to the idea that the veil can be 'crossed,' rather the veil itself must be destroyed through the dismantling of the structures that keep it in place. On *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar addressed these structures and directly or indirectly called for their demise.

On *DAMN.*, critique on the veil is scarce, and where it is found, it lacks ardor. Sure, the veil is still intact and acknowledged, but there are few sharp shots fired at it. This is in line with Lamar's statements about wanting the album to sound like acceptance, rather than addressing the problem. But I would argue that there is more at play here than solely an acceptance of the veil – Lamar *needs* the veil in order to construct a new identity. The veil is at once the cause and the solution for his suffering: it suppresses him in America, and it makes it possible for him to claim he is an Israelite. The veil is what makes him the kind of 'black' that being an Israelite allows him to move away from.

"I'm a Israelite, don't call me black no mo'" – he is not saying he is not black anymore. He is telling us not to *call* him that. He is claiming his blackness as his own and reconstruing it on his terms. It is not for others to name. So, if on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, to quote Bluijs, Kendrick Lamar was "[exploring] the risks and possibilities of trying to redirect interpellating, internalized discursive forces" (72), it seems that on *DAMN.*, that exploration is entering a new phase. *To Pimp A Butterfly* shows that redirecting these forces in the earthly realm is arduous, if not futile. *DAMN.* diverts the discursive forces that shape Lamar to a space where they may actually be altered: the Godly.

Now as to the question of critique, it may appear that if Kendrick Lamar is accepting the veil, surely he cannot be said to be critical of it anymore. But I would like to argue that his acceptance of the veil is a move rooted in his critical double-consciousness. The veil as an identity-constructing force is so powerful that one cannot shape an alternative identity without it. So Kendrick Lamar takes the identity given to him by the veil as a starting point to walk a new path. Who cares about crossing the veil, when at the end of it all you can cross the clouds? In accepting the veil, Kendrick Lamar is not embracing it. In accepting the veil, he attempts to re-route and

counter its all-encompassing power. Unhappy with the identificatory options both sides of the veil provide, Lamar looks upward on his side of the veil for a new perspective. Through becoming an Israelite, he expands the space on the dark side of the veil in a direction where the other side cannot reach. It is precisely in accepting the identity constructed for him that he can bend it, twist it, reshape it and have it evolve into something self-defined. Thus in his acceptance of the veil, he is able to turn his criticism of it into a form of agency.

Conclusion: a post-critical double-consciousness

Over a hundred years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois diagnosed the African American population with a case of double-consciousness, an internal two-ness that black people experience in a country that does not regard them as simply American. Since Du Bois' days, much has changed, and the sharpest institutional expressions of racial divide have been dissolved. Yet it seems that the Du Boisian 'veil,' though changing shape through time, maintains its primary function: to separate the white world from the black. Jim Crow is gone, but in its place, there are new mechanisms that continue the suppression of African Americans, in ways apparent, concealed, and ambiguous.

If the veil is intact, then so is the condition that it engenders: double-consciousness remains a concept of discussion and finds expression in a wide array of artworks, public discourse and academic work. In 2009, George Ciccariello-Maher made the distinction between two types of double-consciousness: one regular, and one critical. Departing from Du Bois' early notion of the term, Ciccariello-Maher sees how double-consciousness releases itself from its naïve, idealistic conception and turns critical of the system that generates it. Thus, while the 'regular' form of double-consciousness seeks possibilities to cross the veil from the black world into the white, a critical double-consciousness accepts that the veil is a material reality that does not simply allow one to cross over it.

On *To Pimp A Butterfly*, rapper Kendrick Lamar shows himself aware of this reality. He addresses systemic inequalities and shows their effects on the lives and minds of the people subjected to them. In songs angry, passionate and painfully honest, Lamar's raps invite the listener to experience the tug-of-war at play inside a black consciousness at once critical, confused, and complex. At no point does Lamar seem to be under the illusion that the veil is easily crossed; his is a critical double-consciousness.

Ciccariello-Maher states that "when one's idealistic presumptions are dented by the reality of institutional racism, we find a moment of radical possibility" (383). But what does that 'possibility' entail? What can one achieve once these idealistic presumptions are damaged? Ciccariello-Maher does not expound on his definition of 'radical,' but offers an analysis of two of Kanye West's albums to illustrate his point. Over the span of these two records, Ciccariello-Maher sees West's black consciousness growing more critical and inspiring a type of hip-hop "in explicit opposition to a history of oppression and attempted extermination" (394). The radical possibility, then, was for a sharp and anti-establishment expression of the realities of institutionalized racism through art, and in West's case, for subsequent interventions in the public political arena.²⁴ West was not the first and will not be the last to turn such a radical moment into a critical expression. But can these moments grow to be emancipatory?

A report from the Economic Policy Institute that reviews the development of African Americans' social status between 1968 and 2018 states that "While African Americans are in many ways better off in absolute terms than they were in 1968, they are still disadvantaged in

²⁴ West famously deviated from the script of a televised Hurricane Katrina relief concert to say that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (Ciccariello-Maher 390).

important ways relative to whites” (n.pag.). The following sentence reads: “In several important respects, African Americans have actually lost ground relative to whites, and, in a few cases, even relative to African Americans in 1968.” So 50 years after Martin Luther King’s death, the lower status of African Americans remains, as “black workers still only make 82.5 cents on every dollar earned by white workers, African Americans are 2.5 times as likely to be in poverty as whites, and the median white family has almost 10 times as much wealth as the median black family.”

I am sure that from 1968 to 2018, a myriad of black people has experienced a ‘moment of radical possibility.’ But that moment, and the expression that might follow from it, does not seem to lead to radical *change*. That is to say: it is unclear to what degree critical double-consciousness and its “more radical position from which to view the worlds separated by the veil” (Ciccariello-Maher 384) are capable of actually engendering change, rather than just critique.

Kendrick Lamar must have reckoned the same after having released *To Pimp A Butterfly*, an expression of critical double-consciousness which certainly seems to have sprung from a radical place. The album made Lamar more rich, more famous, and more lauded, but it did not make America more just. In fact, regarding the current political climate in the United States, it seems that the louder critique grows, the harder the system pushes back. Addressing the problem, as Lamar does on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, does not diminish it. As Lamar said himself: things only went more wayward.

If such continuous confrontation with the racial reality of the United States leads to increasingly radical critique, Lamar shows us a different path on his next album. Still acknowledging the injustices faced by his people, on *DAMN*. Lamar redirects his attention to something he may be able to actually change: the identity bestowed upon him by a system that disfavors it. On *DAMN*., Kendrick Lamar explores what it means and how it feels to be black, to be called black, to be construed as black – not just as an established fact, but as a process of identification that one might intervene in. If to be black in America subjects him to insurmountable challenges and locks him up in a subdivision of Americanness, can he be something else?

No and yes. While he cannot simply dismiss his blackness, Kendrick Lamar shows that it is possible to reshape it to mean something else. The veil is powerful, but for Lamar, the greatest power is in God. Unable to escape his earth-given identity, he finds a way to incorporate it into an identity shaped by a force that he sees as more benevolent. It is not America that gets to decide that Kendrick Lamar is black – his plight on Earth is in the hands of God. By sharing his journey from ‘proud monkey’ to Israelite, Kendrick Lamar shows that however impossible it is to wrestle himself free from the identity shaped for him, he can take ownership of it. Kendrick Lamar takes his given blackness and, with the help of God and the necessary struggles, transforms it.

In the introduction to this thesis, I wondered whether double-consciousness might take a direction other than staying ‘regular’ or becoming ‘critical,’ and suggested that the answer is yes: it

can become ‘post-critical’.²⁵ In what follows, I will outline my suggestion for this theoretical tool that, though derived from the specific case of Kendrick Lamar and the Black Hebrew Israelites, might be useful in reading other expressions of a double-consciousness not quite regular and not quite critical.

So far, I have been somewhat skeptical and uncertain of the role of critical double-consciousness in bringing about change. But Kendrick Lamar’s work shows that this concept plays another valuable role: critical double-consciousness is necessary for him to reach his potentially emancipatory post-critical double-consciousness. In order to reshape his identity, Lamar must first accept the veil. And an acceptance of the veil logically requires an acknowledgement of its material reality, which is precisely what critical double-consciousness entails.

If regular double-consciousness is an awareness of the veil, and critical double-consciousness adds to that awareness the realization that the veil is not to be crossed, post-critical double-consciousness plays with the notion that in order to counter the veil, it needs to be neither crossed nor destroyed. Post-critical double-consciousness explores the potential - not critical but constructive – of being on the dark side of the veil. That is to say, a post-critical double-consciousness no longer has its gun pointed at the veil; it puts down the gun and picks up a toolbox.

In the case of Kendrick Lamar, he uses the tools to reshape his ‘black’ identity into an identity marked by religion. The veil is still intact, but it does not absolutely define him – taking the definition given to him by the veil, he adjusts it to define himself. In this sense, post-critical double-consciousness moves away from the societal and zooms in on the individual, or the smaller community of which they are part. It scales down the scope of critical double-consciousness, which takes aim at a system so vast and so unyielding, one wonders whether the small dents that critique make in it are worth the efforts of critique at all.

The move from critical to post-critical double-consciousness, then, is at once a narrowing down and an opening up. No longer aimed at the large-scale workings of the veil, a zoomed in perspective on one side of the veil opens the possibilities for an individual or a community to expand the parameters of their identity. Post-critical double-consciousness acknowledges and accepts the materiality of the veil, but does not focus on it. It takes from the veil the identity that it cannot regift and explores how it may be reshaped.

One might imagine other expressions of such a new perspective within a range of artforms. The film *Black Panther* (2018) may serve as an example. Featuring Marvel’s first black superhero, *Time Magazine*’s Jamil Smith considers it a “major milestone” for African American culture: “What

²⁵ The ‘post-critical’ emerges in a broader theoretical field. According to Mussel (2017), critical theory, with its “normative orientation,” is losing steam: “for many today the very idea of a critical theory has become an obstacle to more ‘productive’ and additive reading practices. In response to this, a new, more affirmative consensus is emerging through the figure of the ‘post-critical’” (26). The debate is too extensive to elaborate on in detail here, but we may recognize that Lamar’s post-critical double-consciousness emits a “rejuvenated sense of agency, becoming, and spontaneity” which is seen as a trope in the broader sphere of post-critical thought (31).

seems like just another entry in an endless parade of super-hero movies is actually something much bigger ... It's a movie about what it means to be black in both America and Africa—and, more broadly, in the world” (n.pag.).

While the film certainly addresses the veil, for example in villain Killmonger's “rage over how he and other black people across the world have been disenfranchised and disempowered” (Smith), it offers an imagined alternative to the American black-white dichotomy. Superhero²⁶ Black Panther is the king of fictional African country Wakanda, a nation untouched by colonialism and thus, largely unveiled. Wakanda's inhabitants are royals, inventors, warriors – black people with agency, whose actions, rather than their relation to the white world, define their identity. In its conception as a black space outside of the realm of white America, Wakanda may serve as a starting point to imagine an expanded identity much like Kendrick Lamar's: “I'm a Wakandan, don't call me black no more.”²⁷

Wakanda is just a quick example of the expressions a post-critical double-consciousness may engender, and I am sure there are many more. Perhaps it is even possible to imagine a form of post-critical double-consciousness within individuals and communities other than the African American – marginalized people everywhere might build on the identity bestowed upon them by devising their own reshaping strategies.

Post-critical double-consciousness elicits a notion of increased freedom, as it loosens the shackles of identity and opens up a range of possibilities. But whether the emancipatory moves we see in expressions of post-critical double-consciousness carry actual long-term relief for the subjects involved, remains to be seen. Perhaps Kendrick Lamar's next album will give us a clue.

²⁶ Of course, the fact that a blockbuster film features a black superhero alone offers new perspectives on potential black identities.

²⁷ It is all the more fitting that the artist responsible for the film's soundtrack is none other than Kendrick Lamar.

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