

Kendrick Lamar, public theologian

On *Damn*, the hip-hop artist draws connections between guns, gangs, Wall Street corruption, and the 2016 election. It's a bold indictment of collective sin.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue



Kendrick Lamar. Photo by @kmeron via Creative Commons license.

If you didn't know Kendrick Lamar before, you probably heard the news in April that his most recent album, *Damn*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Music, becoming the first hip-hop album—indeed the first album outside the classical and jazz traditions—to

win the prize. The Pulitzer committee praised Lamar's virtuosic skills as a composer. His work draws on musical traditions as diverse as jazz, Afro-futurism, soul, classical instrumentalists, and gospel, as well as hip-hop and R&B.

But Lamar's compositional genius can't be separated from the force of his lyrics. Indeed, it is the aesthetic blending of sound and word (not just the voice as sound) that defines rap as a genre. I could live in Lamar's lyrics for a very long time and not exhaust their complexity.

Theological themes permeate all his work, but the full range of his theological power unfolds in his 2015 album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Over 16 tracks, he tells his story of growing up in poverty, rising to fame, wrestling with the temptations of wealth and power, and trying to use his influence for good.

Lamar opens the album with an indictment of consumer capitalism as a way of crippling real economic power. The character Uncle Sam, who appears throughout the album to stand in for American white supremacy and American capitalism, tempts the protagonist Kendrick: "What you want? A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar? / Anything, see, my name is Uncle Sam on your dollar / Motherfucker you can live at the mall."

In the very next track, "For Free? (Interlude)," Lamar makes it clear that the unpaid labor of enslaved black people created the wealth that is now denied to most ("Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich"). Those who achieve wealth through fame are expected to be grateful and spend their money instead of using it to achieve the kind of power that can build social institutions and politics ("I need forty acres and a mule / Not a forty ounce and a pitbull").

Lamar turns seamlessly from economics to theology as the album progresses. Uncle Sam becomes conflated with the character Lucy in the song "For Sale? (Interlude)." Like Satan tempting Jesus in the desert, Lucy comes to Kendrick with promises of wealth and security in exchange for Kendrick's loyalty and worship ("Lucy gone fill your pockets / Lucy gone move your mama out of Compton / Inside the gigantic mansion like I promised / Lucy just want your trust and loyalty"). Wealth is the key to power in a white supremacist society, but it is also a ruse to enslave Kendrick in empty consumerism and potentially put him on the path to spiritual damnation. The question of whether America can be spiritually redeemed is tied to the question of Kendrick's personal redemption.

Whether or not the redemption he seeks is real or even possible is the issue that shapes *Damn* (the title is stylized as *DAMN* on the album). The title is less an exclamation than a verb. Where *Butterfly* offered hope amid its prophetic fury, *Damn* is relentlessly plagued by doubt. In the post-2016 world, the promise that any wealthy entertainer can marshal the resources to save a culture feels hollow. The threat to Kendrick's soul intensifies amid political and social realities.

Damn opens with a spoken passage in which Kendrick stops to help an old woman search for something she lost. Turning the tables on him in parable fashion, she tells him he has lost something instead: his life. From there the album oscillates between braggadocio at the fame he has achieved, regarded as a sign of divine blessing ("I got hustle though, ambition, flow, inside my DNA / I was born like this, since one like this / Immaculate conception") and doubt and anxiety about the spiritual costs of fame ("I feel like a chip on my shoulders / I feel like I'm losin' my focus . . . I feel like friends been overrated / I feel like the family been fakin").

Kendrick's fame comes with a moral and spiritual vocation he feels inadequate to claim. In "XXX" he counsels a grief-wrecked friend whose son was killed: "He was lookin' for some closure / Hopin' I could bring him closer / To the spiritual, my spirit do know better, but I told him / 'I can't sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel: If somebody kill my son, that means somebody gettin' killed.'" He raps on about the inherent injustice of black children being gunned down while black parents are told to wait patiently for justice and then suddenly breaks off the conversation with his friend to speak at a youth convention on gun control.

His own hypocrisy is not lost on him, and he worries openly about whether his spiritual failings will lead to his damnation. But those spiritual failings are paralleled in American culture at large. At the end of "XXX" he ties together gun culture, gang violence, Wall Street corruption, and Donald Trump's election into a collective indictment of structural sin: "It's murder on my street, your street, back streets / Wall Street, corporate offices . . . Donald Trump's in office . . . But is America honest, or do we bask in sin?" Lamar refuses to give a hopeful answer to this question but asks repeatedly "Who's praying for me?"

Taken as a body of work, his albums make connections between wealth, power, race, and spiritual peril that are rare in theology. Add to this the irreducible musical genius that has propelled Lamar's work to the top of music charts and he has a reach few public intellectuals can dream of. Lamar didn't need the Pulitzer to

achieve this, but that validation might bring new people to listen to his work. They will find a performer who may be one of our greatest living public theologians.

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