

“Compton’s Human Sacrifice”: Kendrick Lamar and the Identity of Exile



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Kendrick Lamar and the Identity of Exile

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*To my mom, dad, and brother:
Thank you for all your support, and for
exemplifying the kindness and compassion
that I strive to emulate every day.*

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I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power, full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screaming in the hotel room
I didn't wanna self destruct
The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went running for answers
Until I came home
But that didn't stop survivor's guilt
Going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned
Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was
But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was
entering a new one
A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mine's
Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets
If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us
But I don't know, I'm no mortal man, maybe I'm just another nigga

“Mortal Man” Outro: 1-22

Introduction

Kendrick Lamar ends “Mortal Man,” the final track of his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, with a poem that invokes many of the issues that this thesis seeks to address. He speaks to Tupac in the first lines of this poem,¹ before discussing his own process of moving away from the home and ultimately returning. Lamar emphasizes the importance of Compton, the city where his “loved ones was fighting the continuous war” (14). Lamar becomes intimately tied to the home here—a place that he continues to regard as the home even when he is away from it, a place where the primary people he loves live. However, the mention of war also indicates problems within that home space. He suggests that this war manifests in several ways, first mentioning gang warfare as he addresses a sort of general ‘you’ who “wore a different gang color” than his own (18). Alongside gang warfare, he also mentions the war against a larger enemy. This larger enemy is constructed through the systems of ‘apartheid and discrimination’ that control the home, directing the listener’s attention toward the colonial logic of the government. Lamar shows his need to separate from the problems of the home, as he goes ‘running for answers’ to these issues. He enters a war different from the one fought in the city, ending up in a ‘hotel room,’ indicating a separation from Compton. His desire to “go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned” suggests a need to return with a specific purpose from this separation (16). Lamar advocates for changes within the home upon the return, on both the levels of gangs and of the government. He encourages others to forget “all the pain and hurt” of the streets,

¹ *To Pimp a Butterfly* is largely constructed in relation to Tupac as a figure who inspires Lamar’s work. Many of Lamar’s tracks (particularly “Keisha’s Song,” analyzed in the first chapter) reference Tupac’s music (“Keisha’s Song” explicitly follows the messages of Tupac’s “Brenda’s Got a Baby”). The rappers share a desire to encourage positive change in their homes.

offering a peaceful alternative to gang violence (20). His newly unified audience in the home should work together to combat the larger enemy of governmental powers.

Lamar's representations of his separation from the home and the eventual return drive this thesis. Lamar reveals the intimate connection between the self and the home, as identity is constructed through various spheres of the home. When the home is constrained through problems of violence and colonialism, identity reflects these issues, and disentangling identity from the problems of the home is difficult. Lamar attempts to disentangle himself by fleeing these problems in exile, but his identity retains the characteristics established in the home. The self becomes fragmented as a consequence of the divisions in these elements of identity. Lamar attempts to reunite these divisions by returning from exile and reintegrating identity with the home spheres; while he gains new control over Compton in this return, he also remains alienated. Lamar's moves from the home, to exile, to the return thus have complex results. Ultimately, Lamar's music demonstrates that home and identity cannot be separated even through exile, and that alienation from the home continues even if one returns from exile. Lamar provides a way of rethinking these impacts of exile on identity.

Lamar's life provides additional context for understanding this commentary on the home and his separation from it. When discussing Lamar's messages, unless specifically speaking of his biographical realities, I do not intend to comment on the actual, physical Kendrick Lamar. Instead, the Kendrick of this essay refers to a construction of the self through music. By privileging Lamar's performances of identity over a biological or factual approach, I draw on works like those of Judith Butler, who suggests in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [original emphasis]" (519). Although Butler's theory addresses gender identity

specifically, this model can be adapted usefully as a way of thinking of all components of the self. Lamar's identity is stylized through his claims about the self in music and interviews, acts that construct a Lamar that can be studied in ways not afforded by his biological self. Further, his identity is also a tenuous repetition of acts within time. The identity Lamar enacts in his works reveals a circularity of experiences; a biological, chronological understanding of his life might suggest a direct progression towards some telos, but focusing on his representation of identity demonstrates that he remains trapped in repetitions of his acts. As such, while I will introduce Lamar's life to provide context for his music, I will only briefly address biological details, focusing instead on how he constructs his life through interviews and his music.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, who goes by Kendrick Lamar, was born in Compton in June 1987. His parents moved from Chicago to Compton, where they lived in an area with ongoing problems of crime and violence. Lamar speaks of these problems in an interview with MTV, noting that violence became the norm. He states that “[y]ou get used to the violence after a while so playing basketball or doing backflips stood out” (Tardio). Consequently, it becomes possible that “[o]ne day, I can be riding down the block, with my friends, poppin’ wheelies. The next day, it could be gunfire. That’s how it teeter-totters. Unpredictable” (Tardio). Lamar here recognizes the possibility for his home in Compton to be a place where children can do the things traditionally associated with youth. Equally possible, though, is violence, and Lamar was unable to benefit from a stable experience of the home. When Lamar speaks of the ‘continuous war back in the city’ in the “Mortal Man” poem, then, he recognizes the challenges that he experienced in his adolescence. In particular, he identifies colonial problems as the cause of many issues of Compton, as police presence and surveillance produce a social context of violence and danger. This problematic instability ultimately drives him away from Compton.

As a result of the pressures on identity that Lamar discusses regarding his adolescence in Compton, he goes into a period of separation from his home, a separation that defies any simplistic interpretation. He does not separate himself completely from Compton, and his separation is largely when on tour as opposed to a move to a distinct outside location. In another interview with MTV, he cites major periods of separation when he was on the “Kanye tour” and the “tour prior to that...when I went overseas” (3:08-15). Although these tours allowed him to both temporarily distance himself from the colonial realities of Compton and enjoy the wealth he earned as an international artist, he still speaks of the pain of survivor’s guilt and his inability to separate himself from those with whom he identifies in Compton. He states that while he was away, “three of my homeboys that summertime was murdered” (3:23-26). His touring allowed him to distance himself from a personal experience of these deaths, but he could not fully escape Compton. Lamar returned to Compton from this state of separation, as he says, “I gotta get back off that tour bus and go to these funerals” (3:43-5). Lamar separates himself from Compton only in limited ways; he no longer possesses the Compton house in which he grew up, instead owning a house in Eastvale, which, while economically much wealthier than Compton, is still in the Los Angeles area (Karmon; Muhammad). Consequently, Lamar attempts to separate himself from his home, but does not make the split complete. He tracks a trajectory from the home into a state of separation from Compton before making some moves to return home, both in his biographical experiences and his musical representations.

Defining this separation presents challenges relating to the field of study more generally. Because of the intricacies of Lamar’s understanding of his own separation from Compton, defining Lamar’s state is a difficult problem, and no singular explanation completely works. Lamar himself does not provide a definition of his own state in his music, defying any simplistic

categorization. In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said grapples with the problem of how to define a variety of terms revolving around a separation from the home, including “exile,” “refugee,” “émigré,” and “expatriate” (137). He illustrates one of the chief issues of this field of study: the boundaries of these terms are often unclear. Although such categorizations have a political function and are often used as ways of generalizing groups of people, I instead emphasize the way Lamar recognizes himself within complex combinations of the concepts surrounding these categories. So, when I discuss Lamar, I do not necessarily claim that he embodies a traditional definition of any one identity. Instead, I recognize within his works a relationship to his home place of Compton that combines qualities of the expatriate or émigré writer (as he moves onto an international stage of new opportunity and wealth), the refugee (as he seeks to escape his war-torn home), and the exile (as he flees an oppressive governmental regime). From these qualities, exile emerges as the most useful term because it invokes connotations both of fleeing from an oppressive regime and of seeking a new internationalism. Exile also allows unique ways of considering governmental pressures and issues of immigration in the contemporary moment.

Another key issue of Lamar’s exile is whether it is possible to return home. Lamar seems to return after his separation from Compton by visiting between tours and buying a new house within the LA area. The fact that he preserves some separation by never fully coming home or living in Compton once more, however, indicates that this return is incomplete. Can an exile come back to the home place and return to any stable identity within that place? Answering such questions helps to demonstrate the ongoing effects of exile for those displaced from the home through a variety of pressures. If an exile cannot truly return, perhaps the condition of exile is inescapable.

Exile proves particularly important as a topic for analysis in the contemporary moment. International movement becomes more and more pertinent with every passing political shift. At the same time as new globalism allows for increased mobility between different possible homes, xenophobia erects new walls and new limitations on travel. Although Lamar cannot speak for all those experiencing these challenges, he does present a useful lens for understanding the experiences of some in the contemporary moment. His voice—and the voices of many rappers more generally—adds to a conversation that too often hides the voices of the disenfranchised in favor of the educated elite. Hip-hop is formally useful because it places such emphasis on one's home as a determiner of social capital, but it also speaks to problems often hidden in society. Exile studies have long grappled with the issue of focusing on educated writers who can make their voices and experiences heard and who have the resources necessary to survive their shifting nationalities. Lamar and other rappers benefit from many of these resources, but, because they often flee truly life-threatening dangers, they can also speak to the experiences of the poor refugee or exile. Due to Lamar's difficult upbringing, he represents his understandings of the challenges that many experience within the United States. Lamar's voice demonstrates the importance of listening to those rejected by society, those who did not have the opportunities necessary to join the elite group of canonical writers most often studied.

Another difference between studying Lamar and studying canonical literary texts is the medium of these representations, which affects the ultimate interpretation of Lamar's messages. I primarily focus on Lamar's audio tracks and his music videos. Audio tracks allow for an investigation of Lamar's lyrical constructions, and music videos add to these discussions by manifesting the spoken word in a visual medium. I approach Lamar's audio tracks primarily through their lyrics, with only minimal consideration given to the aural qualities of the tracks.

While I do address the impact of Lamar's music on his lyrics at times, focusing on the lyrics helps me highlight the richness of his use of language and engage more easily with theories in fields like post-colonialism and cultural studies. Privileging Lamar's use of language allows him to operate as another theorist in fields that have typically excluded voices like Lamar's. Such conversations between Lamar's works and those of theorists provide useful techniques with which to approach his work, but they also allow Lamar's projects to reflect on often homogeneous theory.

Regarding Lamar's *oeuvre*, I briefly address tracks from Lamar's earlier *Section.80* (2011) and *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012). I focus primarily on his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* due to its critical and commercial success and its pertinence to the issues of this thesis. The album was nominated for eleven Grammys and won five, most notably for best rap album and best rap song ("Alright," which I analyze in my first chapter) (Bauer). The music videos I analyze in each section—for "Alright," "u," and "i"—all come from this album, but some of the additional tracks analyzed throughout come from Lamar's earlier works. Although it may seem odd to follow Lamar's chronological progression from his original home, to exile, and finally to the return home all within the same album, Lamar speaks of all these periods in his life throughout the album, and they often overlap, the lines between different periods blurring because of his fluctuating movements. The complexities of such overlapping experiences become clearer through analyzing music that also includes these complexities. Further, this overlapping model of Lamar's life helps to highlight the circularity and repetition of identity that prevents him from a single, teleological narrative. The complexities of these works provide the grounds on which I will base my discussion of home and exile.

Through analyzing these texts in relation to contemporary issues in exile studies, I will demonstrate Lamar's potential as a theorist of exile. His voice provides one model for understanding the issues of exile and the home in the contemporary moment, and he speaks to challenges not always considered in the major works of the field. In the first chapter, I will analyze Lamar's conception of the home and the results of its colonial forces on identity. The second chapter will explore Lamar's experiences in exile and their impact on his identity, dividing him between the home reality and the new one in exile. In the third and final chapter, I will demonstrate the results of Lamar's return home. Lamar's voice, in conversation with theorists of colonialism and exile, produces new understandings of issues central to current society: the construction and constraint of the individual within the home, the impacts of exile on identity, and the results of the return. Identity's connection to a colonial home cannot be broken even through exile, and, while returning home is the only method for attempting to reunite a fragmented self, the exile remains alienated even in a physical return.

Chapter 1: Compton as the Home

Introduction

In his track “Compton,” Lamar talks about his home city, repeating the phrase “Compton, Compton, ain’t no city quite like mine” (Hook). He invites the listener to visit Compton and its “tire screeching, ambulance, policeman/ Won’t you spend a weekend on Rosecrans nigga/ Khaki creasing, crime increasing on Rosecrans nigga” (Verse 3: 1-3). Rosecrans, one of the primary streets in Compton, sees much of the city’s activity, particularly the crime that Lamar addresses in this line. Lamar clearly identifies Compton as the home here; it is ‘his’ city, demonstrating that he has an intimate connection with the place, and his ability to invite the listener to visit provides him a semblance of authority over the city, since he can invite outsiders in. However, even as he makes these moves, he also recognizes the problems pervading his home. ‘Crime’ is ‘increasing,’ causing ambulances and policemen as responses to these issues. Lamar thus claims Compton as his home while noting not only its uniqueness (as there is ‘no city’ like it) but also its potential violence and danger. Lamar constructs Compton as part of his identity throughout his music, but he complicates his relationship to the place by revealing the problems characteristic of his home.

Lamar’s depictions of Compton are important because the home constructs his identity, making the two concepts inseparable. Attempts to define what home is and how it impacts identity have long sparked heated debate across the fields of anthropology, philosophy, and literary criticism. While each of these traditions provides potentially useful material,² the most effective definition of the home for this project is one that recognizes the complex structures of

² For an example of particularly literary conceptions, see Toni Morrison’s novel *Home*.

the home as intimately linked to identity. Václav Havel, a philosopher and former president of the Czech Republic, calls various levels of the home—everything from Lamar’s family to the country in which he lives—a construction of “concentric circles” producing one’s home in its entirety (qtd. in Tucker 182). These circles operate on levels from the “house” and “family” to the “village or town” and the “social” or “professional environment,” ultimately expanding to the “nation including culture and language...the civic society...the civilization...and the world” (182). As such, Compton is Lamar’s home sphere on the level of the city, but this sphere influences and is influenced by other spheres—most notably governmental structures and social forces like gangs. Lamar is the center of these concentric circles, meaning that his identity is constructed through the interactions among various spheres of the home. Since these circles provide the context for identity, separating these ideas is impossible. Home becomes a locus that grounds identity within a matrix of identifiable structures. Understanding Lamar’s various spheres of the home, then—from Compton as the home city to all other spheres—provides a way of exploring his constructions of identity.

Because these different spheres of the home often come in conflict with each other, the home problematizes Lamar’s identity even as it constructs it. Although Lamar’s conception of Compton provides the basis for much of his identity, the home does not provide him the control over this identity that the optimal home might. Aviezer Tucker’s article, “In Search of Home,” provides a useful example of an idealistic conception of the home, one not reflected in the complexities of Lamar’s experiences of Compton. Tucker states that “[h]ome is the environment that allows us to fulfil our unique selves through interaction with the world. Home as the environment that allows us to be ourselves, allows us to be homely” (184). Tucker argues for a conception of the home as the ideal place for constructing identity, the place in which one has

agency over one's identity. This model is a useful one for considering Lamar's work both in the ways it aligns with Lamar's understanding of Compton and in what it reveals when it fails to capture Lamar's experiences. In some senses, this definition fits with Lamar's claims regarding Compton, as he uses his identity as a rapper from Compton to further his artistic goals, and his most meaningful personal connections are to those from Compton. However, to consider this home as one truly allowing a fulfillment of the self ignores the challenges of Compton resulting from conflict among various spheres of the home. In this track, Lamar emphasizes Compton's problems resulting from other spheres even as he recognizes it as his home. He addresses issues of 'crime' and references larger governmental structures by mentioning the 'policeman.' Because Compton fails to be the ideal home for Lamar's construction of identity, Lamar operates in a liminal space between the ideal, desired home and the realities of conflicting spheres that problematize identity. I recognize Compton as Lamar's primary home not to ignore the complexities arising from other spheres but instead to highlight the way Compton necessarily influences and contains them. Exploring these challenges in more depth provides an understanding of the conflicts that produce the self. Ultimately, this exploration demonstrates that conflicts among various forms of the home produce contradictions within Lamar's identity.

Compton's political and social challenges make it impossible for Lamar to truly fulfill the identity that would align with his goals. In particular, the interaction between outside governmental powers and Compton makes this place a colonized entity, as Compton is subjected to outside governmental powers through violence, invasion, and surveillance. Lamar's address of the 'policeman' as one of the problems in the verse of "Compton" begins his critique of these structures, as the police force others Compton's citizens along racial boundaries. Police

colonization occurs in individualized ways but reflects on larger political dynamics relating to the outside powers controlling the city. Compton is operated upon by larger home spheres like the state of California and the United States as a whole, which subject the marginalized city to their rule.³ The colonization of Compton by these larger political powers not only physically subjects the citizens through the presence of police officers and the violence against black bodies, but also colonizes the minds of the subjects through its laws and structures. Temporal realities also influence Compton's colonialism, as Lamar was born in 1987, making him part of a generational sphere born too late to remember Ronald Reagan and too early to escape his legacy. Within this matrix of issues, the ongoing invasion of Lamar's home becomes inseparable from the elements that construct his identity.

Because of the influence of colonial forces on the identities of the colonized, social spheres within Compton also begin to operate through colonial logic, further problematizing Lamar's identity. Social interactions among the oppressed group in Compton follow the behavioral schema presented by the colonizers, and individuals perpetuate challenges to identity among one another as a result of colonial expectations. Gangs, an ongoing problem in Compton, operate in ways both constrained and exemplified by colonial structures, and they influence Lamar's social identity. Gangs and Compton's police function in ongoing opposition, as the police work ostensibly to combat crime and gangs strive to accomplish certain ends in spite of legal structures. Notwithstanding this conflict, gangs operate largely in response to political pressures, and their impacts on Compton's citizens imitate those of the police. Gangs take

³ For further discussion of U.S. governmental powers as colonizing cities of the disenfranchised, see Chris Hayes's *A Colony in a Nation*, in which he claims that these cities are "a colony in a nation," a "place controlled from outside rather than from within," and a "place where the law is a tool of control, rather than a foundation for prosperity."

political colonization as their example and invade the home through similar functions of violence and othering.

Both political pressures and social constructions limit Lamar's ability to produce the desired self, contradicting a conception of the home as a place in which desired identity can be created. Lamar's identity is constructed within an unhomey home; when the home becomes problematized, so too does identity. Conflicts between various spheres of the home, while inherently combative, create similar characteristics and produce contradictions within the self. Lamar's identity, while denouncing the colonial problems of Compton, also operates in response to them and is impacted by them, something that makes his identity colonial even as he denounces colonialism. Home is thus unique in that it influences identity in uncontrollable ways. These contradictory forces remain inextricable from Lamar's home identity and ultimately necessitate that his identity itself becomes contradictory. Lamar cannot escape this contradiction because even a physical separation from the home would not remove its influence on his identity.

Identity in the Colonized Home

The relationship between the home spheres of Compton and the overarching governmental structures presents a contradictory combination of influences that problematizes Lamar's identity. The larger-scale spheres of the home—California, the United States—control Compton in colonial ways. Multiple home spheres act in opposition, with the large-scale governmental powers denouncing the specific place of Compton. As Lamar is at the center of these circles, the conflict between two layers of home problematizes and complicates his identity. He criticizes and works to reverse colonial logic, but because his identity is so

interwoven with the realities of the home, he takes on the identity of the colonized subject even while striving against that construction. A large-scale colonial conflict consequently produces an identity that is itself contradictory, but these contradictions can also begin to reverse colonial logic.

Political structures controlling Compton create this conflict through a complex matrix of functions on the colonized identity. Historically, the relationship between these spheres and Compton has been one of suspicion, fear, and violence. The 1980s and 90s witnessed the solidification of a negative perception of many poor, usually black, urban neighborhoods in the United States, creating clear combative boundaries around these neighborhoods and encouraging racist and classist stereotypes (Quinn 66). Police presence in Compton controls its citizens directly through legal structures, while more abstract functions of stereotyping and othering control their identities indirectly. These othering functions create a colonial relationship between city and state, as the U.S. occupies Compton and treats its citizens as colonized subjects. The conflicts between overarching governmental structures and the city's citizens necessitates a consideration of the functions traditionally associated with colonial powers, such as Bhabha's theories of stereotype and mimicry and Fanon's discussion of intimacy. Lamar adds his voice to this conversation to demonstrate new ways of thinking about these issues as influencing identity.

The governmental control of Compton that Lamar discusses manifests primarily in the gaze of police officers. In "Keisha's Song," Lamar conveys the tragic story of a young prostitute in Compton and the actions of a police officer. Although Lamar emphasizes the role of Keisha's mother and her mother's boyfriend as leading to her prostitution, the influence of Compton's political occupation exacerbates her situation. Instead of providing her legal protection or support, the police present another threat for Keisha to deal with. Lamar proceeds to narrate the

officer accosting Keisha and demanding that she have sex with him or be charged with prostitution. The policeman's authority—given by the larger spheres controlling Compton—provides him the power to force one of Compton's citizens to do something she does not wish to do. She loses control over her very body, forced to act in response to the colonizer's wishes without retaining the ability to maintain a free identity. Due to her inability to escape pressures like that of the police officer, Lamar speculates that she would have “caught a knife inside the bladder, left for dead, raped in the street” (3:16). The impact of colonial forces on individuals within Compton is very real, forcing those like Keisha to lose control over identity and, ultimately, their own bodies and lives.

While police officers directly influence their subjects, they also create more insidious effects on their subjects through indirect methods like surveillance. In “Keisha's Song,” Lamar states that Keisha watches for “Undercovers, the dummies that look like decoys” (2.6). She must avoid revealing her profession to an undercover cop. This line employs the parallel language of uncertainty, ‘undercovers/dummies/decoys,’ in order to highlight the perceptive presence of political censure. This emphasis on vision as a method of controlling identity suggests the potential of Michel Foucault's panoptic theory for developing an understanding of Lamar's work. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that society operates like the Panopticon, as individuals conform to societal expectations based on the idea of surveillance regardless of actual visibility. Within society, however, power is not centralized, and all subjects control and respond to this power (200-8). Lamar's emphasis on the vision of police officers in “Keisha's Song” demonstrates the impacts of police presence, enacting social power over Compton's subjects.

The gaze of police officers, while operating on an individualized scale, represents a larger institutional othering that Lamar addresses in his music. Keisha's fear of police gaze does not end with the physical manifestations of power, as Lamar states that "She's always paranoid, watching the law inside the streets" (2.5). Rather than watching for 'police officers,' she watches for the 'law.' As the officers shift from individual agents to representations of the law itself, they no longer act independently, instead enforcing larger political dynamics. This shift demonstrates a conflict between a subject of Compton and the larger political spheres surrounding it. The police force, now a faceless structure of colonial pressure, operates on its citizens through diffuse methods of surveillance. The gaze becomes colonial as it others the citizens of Compton; Keisha's attempts to make a living are seen as immoral and punishable by the governmental forces controlling Compton. Post-colonial theory highlights these othering functions, as Homi Bhabha notes the importance of "the boundaries of colonial 'positionality'—the division of self/other—and the question of colonial power—the differentiation of colonizer/colonized" ("Signs" 150). For Compton to be a colonial place in relation to the governmental structures surrounding it, those structures must recognize it as other and separate themselves from it through legal and moral systems of expectation. When Lamar speaks of Keisha's attempts to distinguish undercover police officers, then, he demonstrates her need to hide herself from a gaze that seeks to place her within an illegal profession. The legal structures recognize Keisha as a prostitute because they expect such recognizable forms of iniquity and difference in their subjects. Bhabha addresses this expectation by stating that "[t]he 'part'...must be representative of the 'whole'" (153). Similarly, Keisha, as one individual in Compton, must fall into the categories expected of the colonized. Colonized subjects within Compton must

represent the identity expected of all Compton citizens in order for any individuality to disappear.

This visual power of colonialism functions on Compton in particular through stereotyping. Compton's individuals, as colonized subjects, suffer from expectations of inferiority. In "Keisha's Song," Lamar initially focuses on Keisha's beauty; he begins the first verse by stating, "And Lord knows she's beautiful" (1). Of course, this beauty is a facade hiding the tragedy of her story, as she "take the little change she make to fix her nail cuticles" and "capture features of a woman, but only 17" (1: 3; 1: 7). Keisha constructs the perfect image of a woman, which she can only accomplish by hiding the real elements of her body, such as her young age. However, Lamar contrasts the precision of her fabrication with the generalized expectations of a police officer, who demands that she have sex with him or be charged with prostitution. The officer ignores the specifics that Lamar brings to life and instead only wants to see "what's between her thighs" (2.8). As she complies with his demands, his "eyes was closed shut" (2: 12). After using his gaze to categorize Keisha as a prostitute, the officer enacts colonial surveillance by demanding to see an intimate part of her body. Nevertheless, he directly contradicts this goal by not actually seeing what he requests (with his eyes 'closed shut') and by ignoring the precision with which she constructed her appearance in favor of seeing only what he cannot. Lamar produces this contrast between his details and the officer's myopia to demonstrate the effects of stereotyping on Compton's citizens. The colonial power wishes to see everything, but, because it also demands for all subjects to be recognizable within constructed categories, the colonizer can only see what he wishes to see. Even as the subject becomes visible to the colonizer, the colonizer's bias makes any individuality in the colonized invisible. Subjects lose personal identity in this invisibility. For the subject to conform to societal expectations—for

the subject to become ultimately a transparent response to power—the subject must first become metaphorically visible, operating under the constraints of society.

The officer's desire for sex with Keisha also suggests an intimate connection between the subject and the colonizing power that contradicts the oppositional binary typifying colonial relations. While the police officer's actions may seem at odds with the colonial system, Lamar illustrates an element of the stereotype discussed in post-colonial theory. Compton's citizens cannot hide from the hatred of these governmental forces because the forces simultaneously work to keep these individuals within reach. This control makes panoptic societal expectations inescapable. Bhabha astutely uses the fetish as a parallel for stereotype in order to highlight the way the stereotype functions equally through hatred and desire. He states, "[t]he fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it" ("The Other Question" 75). Bhabha argues that the colonizer, while necessarily maintaining its opposition towards the subject, also takes pleasure in mastering and differentiating itself from the other. As a result, the governmental powers do not merely discard Compton; they also seek mastery and intimacy. What Keisha experiences, then, is the true contradiction of the stereotype. The police officer others her by pressuring her to hide and placing her identity into a recognizable, despised category, but he also enjoys the control and invades her intimate identity. He simultaneously condemns her and desires her, bringing her closer for his mastery. To dominate Compton's citizens and Lamar specifically, outside powers must keep Compton close and exercise their power as a home sphere through a matrix of hatred and desire.

While Lamar effectively represents the functions of othering on identity by representing other characters in his songs, his discussions of his own identity provide the most useful access into how he conceptualizes the home. Lamar experiences similar colonial pressures of stereotype and othering, pressures that lead him to a contradictory identity as both a colonized subject and an individual with goals outside these structures. By presenting the challenges caused by colonialism on his own identity, Lamar demonstrates both the issues he faces and the importance of race in stereotypes. Race certainly may be one factor in “Keisha’s Song,” but does not become as explicit as in “good kid,” a track in which Lamar relates his personal experiences with racial profiling. Lamar speaks to the ways racial expectations from police officers trap him within an identity that he seeks to denounce through functions of intimacy and stereotype.

Lamar makes clear in “good kid” that he must construct identity in opposition to the colonial expectations of him based on racial stereotypes. In this track, Lamar positions himself as a good kid, as there is “No better picture to paint than me walkin’ from bible study” (1.16). Lamar appeals to the intended role of the police to help him, asking them to “promise me you can help” (2.2). The police expect him to be a dangerous gang member, ignoring (and making more difficult) his personal goals. He states, “Every time you clock in the morning, I feel you just want to kill/ All my innocence while ignoring my purpose to persevere as a better person” (2.7-8). By pausing after the word ‘kill,’ Lamar hints at the physical violence of police officers. However, by turning instead to his innocence and his goals of persevering as a ‘better person,’ Lamar demonstrates the impacts of police officers on personal identity even while not physically harming him. He wants to be a good kid, but the police officers see him merely as a colonized subject, ignoring that constructed identity.

Lamar also demonstrates the importance of intimacy and race in the colonizer's attempts to silence individual identity. Relating a specific instance with a police officer in "good kid," Lamar states, "you ask, 'Lift up your shirt' cause you wonder if a tattoo/ Of affiliation can make it a pleasure to put me through/ Gang files, but that don't matter because the matter is racial profile" (2.12-4). This police officer hopes to see a tattoo claiming gang affiliation so that he or she can compare Lamar to other gang members and charge him for a crime accordingly. This issue does not merely represent colonial stereotypes in general, as the specific problem here is one of 'racial profiling,' revealing that skin becomes a signifier of difference. Race is a category recognizable in the gaze of the colonizers, one that ultimately makes invisible all nuance and individuality within that category. In his own experience, Lamar has not done anything to cause the officer's questioning; instead, the officer simply assumes that a young black man in Compton would participate in the violence and crime of gang warfare. By assuming that Lamar can be put through gang files and matched with a wanted suspect, the officer ignores Lamar's individualized characteristics as a 'good kid' and makes him part of a faceless collective of racial and social others. Consequently, Lamar begins to lose his personal identity within Compton. Once more, this denial of identity to the subject becomes possible through and in spite of intimacy; the colonizer wants to kill Lamar's innocence, but also depends on a close connection with Lamar in order to achieve this mastery. To find his tattoo of gang affiliation, the officer has him lift up his shirt, which demands personal control over Lamar's intimate body. Even more tellingly, he claims that the officer wonders if the tattoo could make it a *pleasure* to put him through gang files. He, too, experiences the fetishization and desire of the colonizer, which keeps him intimate and close even as it denies him identity.

As a result, the home place—intended to establish individual identity—now limits it, trapping Lamar between his need to perform identity through Compton as home and the resulting assumptions produced by the outside governmental spheres about this citizenship. Using this colonial model for Compton highlights the way conflict between these spheres problematizes Lamar’s attempts at creating his identity and makes him invisible within a larger collective by first exposing him to colonial vision. Although the colonizers do influence Lamar’s identity directly through these operations, the intimacy established among the spheres dictates that the large sphere of political colonialism influences all of the smaller spheres of Lamar’s home as well. These spheres themselves influence those they contain, producing an intimate interconnection in which colonial logic pervades each of Lamar’s spheres. In particular, colonialism influences the sphere of gangs in Compton, which then influences Lamar’s relationships with peers. The intimacy of the spheres allows colonialism to reach Lamar both directly and through influencing smaller spheres indirectly. Ultimately, these smaller spheres also affect the larger spheres that contain them through these interrelationships.

Lamar’s personal experience of the home demonstrates that, even when not interacting with the colonizers themselves, he operates in connection to the peers, which follow gang logic that itself comes largely from the colonial spheres. While he denounces gangs, Lamar also recognizes that gangs—as part of the home—influence his own identity as a social actor, and his social relationships often take gang systems as a model. Gang warfare comes as a response to political colonialism, revealing that a specific structure of Compton is intimately linked to the larger spheres of Lamar’s home. Lamar ends the second verse of “Hood Politics” by stating that “[f]rom Compton to Congress” there is “nothin’ new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-icans/ Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin’?” (10-2). In Lamar’s

explicit parallel between Compton and Congress, he emphasizes political structures as a model for gangs. Lamar suggests that political systems have spread to the gangs, even using the word 'flu' to highlight the infectious nature of colonial logic. Lamar combines specific gangs and political parties into 'Demo-Crips' and 'Re-Blood-icans.' By creating new, single entities from these supposedly disparate elements, Lamar presents the influence of politics on gangs. Lamar proceeds to state that the governing bodies "give us guns and drugs, call us thugs" (2: 13). The red and blue divisions of Compton gangs exist as effects of the political structures on the places they occupy. The larger sphere of political structures thus influences Compton's gangs, spreading colonial logic.

Gangs form another home sphere of Compton with problematic consequences on Lamar. While Lamar was never in a gang himself, his social identity necessarily responds to the colonial influences of gang warfare and violence.⁴ Lamar most clearly denounces gang violence in "m.A.A.d city," a track named for the insanity of his home in Compton as a result of warfare stemming from colonial influences. Lamar begins the track by stating that "[i]f Pirus and Crips all got along/ They'd probably gun me down by the end of this song/ Seem like the whole city go against me" (Bridge 1-3). Lamar makes several assertions in this complex statement. First, he emphasizes the divisions between gangs, demonstrating that even if they all agreed on a course of action, their separation prevents them from carrying such an action out. Lamar comments on his own identity in this move as well. By positioning himself as an enemy of the Pirus and Crips he separates from the gang warfare that rules Compton and many of its artists. Lamar furthers this idea by suggesting that his track itself is sufficient motive for gangs to kill him, since they

⁴ Lamar reveals in an article with *Rolling Stone* a loose affiliation with the Piru gang through his friends and his father's ties, but he himself worked to avoid becoming a part of gang warfare (Eells).

would want to gun him down ‘by the end of this song.’ Lamar positions his artistic project as a critique of gang violence. Finally, gang violence pervades Compton and makes Lamar’s connection to his home sphere difficult, as he states that ‘the whole city go against me.’ Gangs represent the whole city, and Lamar feels alien in his own home due to its warfare.

Although Lamar denounces gang warfare throughout his music, he cannot escape its influence on his social identity, an intimate sphere of the home in which he interacts with friends. Lamar draws a connection from colonialism into the smaller sphere of Compton’s gangs and finally to one of the most intimate social spheres. Because of Lamar’s complicated relationship with gang logic—denouncing it and yet often acting in a way that resembles it with his own peer groups—he presents a complicated relationship with his peers. He criticizes violence with his music, but because his relationship with his friends often takes gang systems as its model, he is subject to peer pressure against his will. In “m.A.A.d city,” he discusses his job as a security guard shortly after graduating high school. Instead of staying with the job, he “ended up leaving/ In fact, I got fired/ Cause I was inspired/ By all of my friends/ To stage a robbery the third Saturday I clocked in” (2: 6-10). Lamar was pressured by ‘all’ of his friends, which suggests a totality of peer pressure, to enact a crime that limited his professional goals. Further, he represents the conflict in two different ways, first stating that he left and then conceding that he was fired. Such contradictions within his representation reveal the challenge of coming to terms with actions that contradict desired identity. Lamar regrets giving in to peer pressure and tries to imagine a situation in which his own friends do not push him against his will. However, because Lamar follows their suggestions, he is forced to enact the crime so common in gangs in Compton. Lamar’s social identity becomes akin to that of a gang member even as he personally denounces the functions of gangs. The home sphere of the gangs does not always influence

Lamar's identity directly, but, because all spheres of the home are so intimately linked, gang logic infects one of his most personal spheres. Even when political colonialism does not affect Lamar directly, then, it pervades the home spheres that do influence his identity.

Although each home sphere necessarily influences the spheres it contains and consequently Lamar's identity, Lamar demonstrates that the smaller spheres also influence and reverse the logic of the larger colonial sphere. Both members of the colonial binary structure begin to mimic each other, producing something beyond mere difference. Ultimately, this embodiment of the characteristics of the colonizer makes a colonial identity inescapable. Lamar tracks the evolution of this dynamic, reuniting and reversing the colonial power structures, in the music video for "Alright." Through the medium of the music video, Lamar visually represents the individuals making up this colonizer/colonized relationship. "Alright" uses a positive message to unite the individuals to whom Lamar speaks, and it responds to the political viewpoints that produce racial profiling. In fact, its refrain has been used as a chant at Black Lives Matter rallies ("BlackLivesMatter" 0:45-1:00). The entire video is shot in black and white, a choice that emphasizes the binary nature of this racial conflict by rendering racial difference into a simplistic grayscale. The video proceeds to interrogate this binarism both through anatomical mixing of races and through behavioral means, tracking an evolution towards a new hybridity. Although hybridity demands that colonial subjects embody colonial logic, it also provides the possibility of reversing colonial logic by affecting both the colonizer and the colonized.

The video begins by representing a simplistic, faceless binarism between colonizer and colonized that it proceeds to reverse. Lamar narrates the beginning of the video with no music or rhymes. He states that he entered "a war that was based on apartheid and discrimination" as the

video shows a young black man pressed to the ground by a police officer. The man slips from his grasp and runs away, and the officer, instead of attempting to run after him, levels his gun and fires a bullet in slow motion (1:30-1:49). The camera's focus stays on the pistol, instead of the officer's face, and as such his identity is blurred out. His face is hidden and the only clearly visible part of him is a black hat with "POLICE" in large white letters. The video begins with the sort of faceless, anonymous governmental power that the colonizer strives to (dis)embody through a panoptic disappearance of personal identity. The direct focus in the close-up of the black man's face does allow him some identity usually taken away from the subjects of such intense political censure. Nevertheless, while he does momentarily combat his identity as a colonized subject by slipping out of the officer's grasp, the bullet will limit his potential for agency.⁵ The video never shows whether the bullet finds its intended target, hiding his fate; this narrative moment ends with its focus on the officer's pistol, not the black man, who, whether dead or not, becomes anonymous through these choices. The video uses this anonymity to demonstrate the power of colonization in silencing individual identity while remaining faceless itself. Those who remain in this society must lose life and freedom to a power hidden in the shadows, a stereotyping power that holds them in the intimacy of its colonial embrace.

This intimacy ultimately produces a confused hybridity of identity through mimicry. The remainder of the music video pushes back against the dynamics presented in this initial narrative. The identities of the police and the subjects begin to mimic each other, reversing colonial roles. This scene is followed by a boom shot of Lamar and three friends in a car, and

⁵ Agency in Lamar's music is not an absolute concept that subjects either do or do not possess; rather, agency is variable and constructed through relations within society. For more on the contingency of agency, see Joan Scott's claim in "The Evidence of Experience" that subjects "are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather [their] agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them...These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited" (793).

Lamar pays tribute to the “dead homies” and raps a short verse as the camera circles the outside of the car, focusing on its occupants (1:55-2:30). As this verse comes to a close, the camera pans out and the viewer sees that the car, which Lamar originally appeared to be driving down the interstate, is actually being carried by four white police officers with poles under the tires (2:30-2:35). This image complicates an understanding of the song’s relationship to police officers, as it either maintains colonial logic by stripping agency from Lamar and his friends or positions them as the masters of the police officers. On one hand, the viewer could interpret the officers’ actions as a removal of Lamar’s agency, since he does not have control over his own car. Further, the image suggests a sort of funerary procession in which the officers carry a coffin; this interpretation would demonstrate that these four men, apparently alive, are actually dead already because of the actions of police. Lamar would thus highlight the way political ideologies limit agency, since he and his friends seem to exercise agency while in fact being carried to their burial.

However, the viewer could also interpret the car as a litter that the police officers are being forced to bear. Such an interpretation reverses the racial roles of the video’s characters and puts the officers into the role of slaves, with Lamar and his friends elevated to the status of kings. Lamar complicates the relationship between the police and their subjects. By subjecting the police to the same metaphorical condition that they enact on others, the video reveals a sort of mimicry of the colonizers. To carry the black men as a coffin and limit their agency, the officers precariously expose themselves. To bear the car, they must recognize the black men they have killed, now able to see their living subjects, whereas the first officer in the video shot at a man off-screen. This intimate connection strips them of their faceless power and allows a reinterpretation of the scene, reversing their colonial identities because they have become visible.

Due to the intimate connection between the colonizer and the colonized, the police embody the reality of the colonial subject. Similarly, the colonized have reversed their identity and now mimic the identity they have observed in the police. Because it is unclear whether they are being carried as corpses or as kings, the video refuses any clear definition of their colonial relationship. Bhabha's theories become useful once more. He argues that, in a colonized place, the colonizer and the colonized begin to mimic one another. In such an intimate relationship between authority and subject, both identities begin to rehearse the identity of the other. Bhabha expands on this idea by discussing 'hybridity,' which he defines as "the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination...Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (154). Because the colonized and colonizers repeat the actions of the other, their separation begins to break down. Hybridity forms new identities through their intimate connection. Lamar's friends in the car simultaneously become deceased victims of police brutality and kings ruling over their colonized subjects; the officers simultaneously carry their colonial subjects to the grave and obey their new masters. Consequently, the differentiation between Compton's citizens and its police force must ultimately result in some reversal of domination through mimicry of these disparate identities.

The remainder of the music video returns control and identity to both the citizens of Compton and the police officers that control much of their lives. After the shot in the car, the actual track from the album begins, coupled with a variety of shots of Lamar floating through Compton and people dancing and driving cars. Several shots show Lamar rapping as part of a group of people dancing and singing along. While the majority of these individuals are black,

some appear to be other races as well, pushing back against the simplistic black/white binary presented by the grayscale in which the video is shot (4:05-4:15). Shots of people dancing also highlight their personalized identities, as each one becomes the individual focus of the video for a few seconds and each has a different style of dancing that presents some sense of individuality. As a result, the subjects of political control in Compton regain personal identity as the center of their constructions of the home, pushing back against their anonymity as a group of ruled, controlled subjects.

Lamar thus attempts to return individuality to the colonized people of Compton, working to extend the hybridity he presented in his earlier images. His emphasis on such particularized identities also works against one of the primary dangers of hybridity theory. Paul Gilroy argues in his *Between Camps* that hybridity dangerously suggests that each collective being hybridized has a single, whole identity that can be combined, negating the plurality of these groupings. He discusses the “lack of a means of adequately describing, let alone theorizing, intermixture, fusion and syncretism, without suggesting the existence of anterior ‘uncontaminated’ purities” (250). Consequently, Lamar’s choice of representing the citizens of Compton through so many different signifiers gives him the opportunity to negate not only the governmental expectations of the police but also the possibility of simplifying Compton’s citizens into a single entity that can be ‘mixed’ directly with those figures.

The music video’s final image of hybridity becomes more useful because it focuses only on Lamar, a single colonized citizen, and a single police officer. Within their interaction, the functions of hybridity in the home become clear while avoiding a generalization of all those colonized in Compton. During the second half of the music video, Lamar raps as he stands on top of a light pole. In the final narrative moments, a police officer pulls up in his car; this time,

his face is clearly in focus (5:40-5:43). He brings his hand up, pointing towards Lamar in the shape of a gun, and pretends to shoot (5:50-5:55). His face remains clear here, and the pointlessness—almost playfulness—of this action identifies him as an individual instead of operating as a faceless officer fulfilling the demands of a vast political entity. Although the officer’s gesture is an extremely serious one in the context of police brutality, it simultaneously mimics the sorts of gestures that frequently occur between friends. This plane of interaction establishes some intimacy between himself and Lamar. However, the video cuts to a long shot of Lamar in slow motion, and a spray of blood—rendered black in the grayscale of the video—comes from his chest. Whereas the impact of the first, real bullet was hidden in the video, this impact—that of the imaginary, metaphorical bullet—is evident and real. Lamar highlights the way political censure functions just as powerfully through conceptual ideologies as it does through physical means. This video’s first police officer resembled the faceless government; its final officer reveals that the police can and must operate through identified interactions with their subjects to maintain the intimacy of racial stereotyping.

In spite of this paradigm, Lamar retains his identity through increased agency resulting from hybridity. As Lamar falls, he continues to speak, flailing his arms as the ground slowly approaches. He speaks of his need to go “running for answers” because of the evils “all around [him]” in the home (6:20-30). His eyes remain open until his body hits the ground; when it does, he appears to be dead, and the video cuts to black. Lamar’s mere ability to speak as he falls returns agency to him as the subject. Whereas the first man experiencing the colonial pressures could not speak or even be seen, Lamar continues to speak after his death. The video shows a shot of the police officer watching him fall as well, turning the gaze of the colonizer onto the colonized subject performing an identity contrary to the categorized, stereotypical identity and

thus becoming visible. Even when Lamar lands and the video cuts to black, his newfound agency does not disappear; instead, he regains power through a mimesis of the police officer, ultimately producing a sort of hybridity between colonizer and subject. After two seconds of black screen, the video cuts to a final close-up of Lamar's face, smiling and looking directly at the camera (6:36-40). This playful gesture resembles the sort of shooting 'game' the officer plays when he is on the light pole. Lamar mimics the actions of the officer while denying the officer's ability to remove his individuality and freedom. Further, his glance at the camera—breaking the wall that separates actor from viewer—reclaims the video as his project, his performance of identity. He reveals the actions of police officers to produce a more complicated depiction of his home place while disavowing and reversing their actions towards a hybrid confusion that makes the colonial boundaries unclear.

Lamar's representation of hybridity within his work complicates traditional post-colonial conceptions of the results of assimilation. This video undoubtedly tracks a progression of differentiated relations, from an invisible colonizer separating his identity forcibly from the colonized subject to Lamar and a police officer interacting in an intimate way that allows a hybridization of identity. However, another progression doubles this one, as the originally faceless subjects stripped of agency ultimately develop into individualized agents performing their identity through and despite colonial power. This paradox requires a reconsideration of hybridity theory, one that provides an answer to Gilroy's criticism. Lamar reveals that hybridity cannot occur when the category supersedes the individual, when one remains invisible. Instead, mimicry can only occur when the individual has agency, since shifting an identity requires an identity in the first place. Lamar's discussion of the nature of his home thus reworks an understanding of post-colonialism. Frantz Fanon, a foundational post-colonial critic whose ideas

influenced Homi Bhabha, begins *Black Skin, White Masks* by arguing that “[t]he more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become” (2-3). Fanon claims that assimilation hinges on rejecting any original identity. Instead, Lamar demonstrates that the colonized gains his own identity precisely at the moment of assimilation, as hybridity changes and makes visible the colonizer. Lamar does not argue for assimilation, as it produces complications to identity, but he does demonstrate its possibilities for destabilizing colonial logic.

Lamar’s reclaiming of control over identity through the functions of hybridity does not make him victorious over colonial power. He has not gained an unproblematic home identity. His identity can only make itself present through a recognition of the mutual influences between colonizer and colonized. Because he claims some of the identity of the colonizer as a result of mimesis, his identity itself remains inextricable from the contradictory powers of Compton and the government. The intimacy leading to this hybridity means that Lamar’s identity comes not just from Compton, but from his governmental systems as well. He cannot reject national governments as part of his home spheres because they have reworked his identity. As a result, that home can never fully disappear, even were he to leave. He can directly resist colonial power in Compton or flee the city and nation in which he lives, but even the home spheres that challenged his performance of identity remain inextricable from that identity through hybridity. Consequently, the home spheres are revealed both as inseparable from each other—even when they operate in conflict—and irremovable from the self.

Chapter 2: Exile from the Self

Introduction

Lamar's intimate connection to the home spheres in Compton problematizes his identity in a way that feels inescapable. As a result of Lamar's contradictory identity in the home, he separates from the home for a period of touring and travelling as an international artist. This separation allows him to reach to a larger audience while distancing himself from the problems that he recognizes in his home spheres in Compton. However, Lamar's separation is not complete, as he remains intimately connected with those in Compton. He returns home on occasion throughout his exile, and the friends and family of Compton remain linked to his ongoing identity. Further, he does not go to any one specific place, instead travelling internationally as a placeless exile. Lamar begins to hint at the problems of such an exile through these realities; he wishes to distance himself from the home, but cannot deny the influence of the home spheres, even when separate from Compton.

With the complexities of Lamar's conception of exile come complex results on his identity. Lamar's separation from Compton allows him some distance from the colonial issues that problematized his identity in the home, but he cannot completely separate because his identity remains linked to his experiences in the home and the continued presence of friends and family in his life. At the same time, Lamar must construct a new identity because he has lost his direct connection to the complete construction of home spheres and his original identity as a result. The result of these conflicting identities is a fragmented sense of the self. Lamar illuminates these problems in an interview with MTV, in which he states, "it messes your brain up, because you live in this life...but you still have to face realities of this," referring to the

events occurring at home (specifically, the murder of his three friends in Compton while he was on tour) (“KL Talks About...” 3:34-42). Lamar brings this conflict most clearly into view in “u,” in which he addresses himself, criticizing himself for his separation from Compton and dealing with the depression to which this situation has led him. The track portrays Lamar’s difficult mental state as he tries to deal with his separation from Compton and his self-loathing, leading to a fragmented identity.⁶ Because of the fragmentation of Lamar’s identity, he ultimately becomes exiled from the self.

Placelessness and Fragmented Identity

In his exile, Lamar must construct a new identity due to his separations from the home that produced his past identity. This identity becomes hollow because Lamar’s exile is a placeless one that does not offer a new home; without a new home, Lamar does not have a new set of spheres in which to construct his identity. Exile requires the creation of a new identity, as Robert Edwards notes in “Exile, Self, and Society” that “[t]he prime consequence of losing social institutions is to remove external definitions of self, but its secondary effect can be the creation or discovery of a new personality” (20-1). Lamar attempts to create this new identity, but the identity lacks the grounding of a new home. Lamar’s failure to construct a new home separate from those of Compton manifests in the placelessness of his music. In “u,” Lamar reveals that what he experiences outside of Compton does not provide a sense of home potentially affording a new identity. The track adds an apparently diegetic set of lines after the first verse, as a housekeeper seems to knock on the door, her voice muffled through the door and

⁶ When using the term ‘fragmented identity,’ I do not intend to invoke any psychological theory, using it rather as a shorthand for the complex conceptualization of identity that Lamar presents in his music. Once again, my focus is on Lamar’s representations of the self rather than any clinical analysis of his psyche.

over the backing track. The woman calls out, “House keeping! House keeping! ¡Abre la puerta! ¡Abre la puerta tengo que limpiar el cuarto!” (Skit). These lines, roughly translated, mean ‘Open the door! Open the door, I have to clean the room!’ As a housekeeper is knocking on Lamar’s door, he demonstrates that this track takes place in a hotel room, a sort of new sphere of home. Instead of recording this track in a studio, the logical place for making music, he makes it in a hotel room. A studio would allow him access to his identity as a musician; a hotel instead suggests a placelessness in which he travels without truly having roots. And, because he does not have total control over the space of the hotel room, he loses full control over the musical process, since an individual from outside is able to interrupt the music. Lamar’s new place in exile is thus nameless, without a clear location, defined by Lamar’s inability to access his identity fully as an artist. Further, Lamar avoids responsibility over this place, as the housekeeper must clean the room. Lamar himself does not need to invest his own energies into establishing and maintaining the place, as the hotel guest exchanges money for others to put in this work. He replaces his neglect of the home of Compton with a repeated neglect of the new places he inhabits briefly in exile, making a new home impossible.

The music video for “u” helps to highlight the nature of this placelessness even as it brings to life Lamar and his context. The video shows Lamar shouting this track and drinking from a bottle of liquor in a room. The camera only shows one corner of the room, producing a disorienting effect as the setting for the music video never becomes entirely clear. In fact, one would have difficulty determining even that it is a hotel room without the voice of the housekeeper. The viewer can only see a fine wooden table and chair, on which Lamar sits for most of the video. The walls, which seem to be glass in front of some type of shelving, come to a corner behind Lamar, with a large bottle of champagne in an ice bucket in the corner. To the

right is a mirror, which often shows Lamar's reflection but does not provide any clearer context for the room, as it depicts the table and a blank wall once more behind Lamar. Because the camera rarely moves and never shows more than this corner, this place could be anywhere. The context is also free from any written words that would suggest a specific linguistic area. Even when the housekeeper knocks, it is not entirely clear whether she is a Spanish speaker in an English-speaking country or if Lamar is in a Spanish-speaking country himself. And, because her speech is the only indication that Lamar is in a hotel, the place could initially be a room in a house. Consequently, Lamar highlights the placelessness of his exilic experience; even when he makes his new exiled place concrete through the music video, he disorients the viewer and demonstrates his own lack of a concrete home.

Ultimately, the placelessness of exile means that Lamar's new identity lacks the home necessary for a complete reconstruction of the self. During the screams Lamar uses to introduce the track, the video cuts to show him in different places in the room, from sitting in the chair, to lying in the corner, back to the chair, to the floor, and even behind what is apparently the glass of the wall in the space of a few seconds (0:11-3). The same effect occurs synced to the rhythm of the housekeeper's knocks later in the track (2:13-5). By coupling Lamar's physical placelessness, ethereally moving within the room but never really getting anywhere, with an anonymous place over which he has little control, Lamar demonstrates that his lack of home makes his own identity and place unsteady. And, just as he disappears from each position in the room only to return to it with no apparent progress, Lamar finds his exile devoid of any purposeful goal.

Lamar does not gain a new sense of home through the spheres he reaches in exile because they do not produce the intimacy necessary for identity construction. Lamar's international fame

allows him to connect with vast spheres of his fans, but he requires a more direct connection. In “u,” Lamar asks himself, “where [was] your patience?/ Where was your antennas?/ Where was the influence you speak of?/ You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her [his sister]” (8-11). In exile, he has gained the ability to speak to many, but he has lost the ability to influence the most important parts of his life from his home. His newfound voice for the thousands outside Compton seems empty as well, as he later states in Verse 2, “You ain’t no brother, you ain’t no disciple, you ain’t no friend” (8). Because he does not take responsibility for helping his sister, he loses his very status as a brother or friend at all, further distancing himself from the home of his family and friends. However, this renunciation of responsibility ultimately deprives him from any possible work as a disciple either; he can ‘preach’ in front of thousands, but he can never truly reach them as the disciple he hopes to be because he has lost the ability to connect to those who matter the most. Without a concrete, intimate home sphere, Lamar is unable to operate in the new spheres he should be able to reach as an artist, spheres that could otherwise become his new home.

In conflict with the new identity Lamar attempts to construct in his exile, his old identity from the home remains as a set of fragmented, ongoing pressures. The continued influence of the home—both in universal colonial pressures and in individual relationships—demonstrates Lamar’s inability to separate completely from the all-important home spheres of Compton, maintaining his home identity even in exile. Because of the inescapability of colonialism as a home sphere, Lamar does not lose his colonial identity, instead becoming torn between his denunciation of colonialism and his ongoing experiences relating to home identity. In discussing colonial forces, Lamar notes the impossibility of a complete escape due to the universalism of the colonial sphere, a world-wide home that can never be separated from identity. Lamar’s

discussion of his exile often does not indicate the new places he occupies, but he speaks about a visit to South Africa in “Momma,” narrating an encounter with a young boy native to the country (Cuchna). Lamar relates to this boy, whose colonial realities resemble those Lamar experienced in Compton and return Lamar to the logic of colonialism. Lamar often speaks of the consequences of apartheid in his album, recognizing the colonial challenges of South Africans. These colonial pressures produce an identity for the boy that resembles Lamar’s own. Lamar describes the boy as in conflict with the legal structures that create a colonial reality, as he is “[b]reakin’ new laws” (3: 7). Much like Lamar, the boy must deal with the challenges of colonialism, fighting these pressures by breaking laws. Despite his separation in exile, then, Lamar continually comes into contact with the colonial identities he wishes to escape. Even if Lamar can escape the colonial structures specific to Compton, their motivators of racism and classism are universal. Lamar’s attempts to escape his colonial identity are thus rendered incomplete, as he cannot reach a place free from colonial power and the identity he established in the home place cannot disappear.

Lamar also addresses the pressures of peer and family relationships, the intimate home spheres, as continuing to impact his identity even in exile. Lamar’s guilt over his separation indicates both the advantages of his distance and his inability to reject the home identity. Whereas governmental colonialism remains inseparable from Lamar’s identity in exile because of the universal nature of colonialism, Lamar cannot separate from more intimate spheres because of his ongoing connection to and feelings of guilt regarding friends and family. In “u,” Lamar addresses his failure to enact a positive influence on his home. Speaking to himself as ‘you,’ he begins the first verse by stating that “I place blame on you still, place shame on you still” (1). Lamar proceeds to address the complex reasons for this blame. He asks himself later

in this verse, “What can I blame you for, nigga I can name several/ Situations” (6-7). Ultimately, of the possible situations to mention, he opts to “start with your little sister bakin’/ A baby inside, just a teenager” (7-8). Lamar criticizes himself for not being present to help his younger sister in her process of maturation, leading to a situation in which she was pregnant, with a ‘baby inside’ as ‘just a teenager.’ Lamar blames himself for the situations his family deals with, as he can no longer provide a positive influence on the home due to his separation. Despite this separation, his emphasis on the family and home here reveals that his identity remains intimately tied to their situation. He ‘still’ maintains this blame because he still recognizes those with whom he was intimately connected as essential to his identity. Lamar cannot separate himself completely from spheres of the home like that of his family or of large-scale colonial issues, so he retains the identity constructed by the home.

This new, hollow identity comes into conflict with Lamar’s ongoing home identity, producing a fragmentation of the self. As an exile, Lamar’s identity formed by his experiences in his home must grapple with his new identity as an international artist without a home. The very structure of this song makes the division evident; Lamar addresses ‘you,’ but that figure is himself. Because he can speak to himself as a separate figure, he reveals the division between these two parts of his identity. The new identity is the one that ‘preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her,’ that ‘ain’t no brother,’ ‘disciple,’ or ‘friend’ (1: 11; 2: 8). Conversely, the Lamar that speaks aligns closely with who Lamar was when connected to his home in Compton, critiquing Lamar’s mental state. Whereas Robert Edwards argues that the exile constructs a new self that replaces the self of the home, Lamar reveals that these identities continue to operate alongside each other, occupying and vying for control over the self. Lamar does not merely pose the identities as separate mental states occupying the same body; instead, he shows that his

identities can take different physical actions, as he claims that “I know you and a couple block boys ain’t been speakin’ nigga” (3: 4). While this apparent division between the new, hollow Lamar and those from Compton is posed as the actions of the exiled identity alone, it seems to have led to a physical action—not speaking—taken by the entire Lamar. Even in Lamar’s attempts to portray himself as a division between two personalities, he must recognize his actions as representative of his entire self. Such a division between perceived conflict of identity and the need to come to terms with the united, physical self becomes a profound, problematic contradiction.

When Lamar’s division of identity manifests physically, reunion of identity begins to seem impossible. The music video for this track once again makes concrete this portrayed division of identity in a way that reveals the impossibility of such a separation. The use of the mirror in the music video allows for a sort of doubling of Lamar, akin to the division he recognizes in his own identity. The mirror typically functions as a mirror is expected to, portraying accurately Lamar and the room behind him in its reflection. The beginning shots of Lamar screaming as he sits in the chair show him doing the same action, synchronized, in the mirror (0:16-8). In the beginning of the first verse, the camera shifts to show Lamar in a medium shot, with the mirror out of frame. However, halfway through the verse, the camera turns away from Lamar in a boom shot and shows just his reflection in the mirror (1:30-50). This shot continues into the bridge, and Lamar turns towards the mirror at this point, repeating the words “Loving you is complicated” to himself in the mirror (1:45-50). Lamar thus reveals the physical way in which he conceives of his identity; he yells at himself, but he does so through an apparatus that produces a second identity to which he can address his self-hatred. Further, the representation of the new, exiled self as a two-dimensional reflection in the mirror highlights its

hollow nature. By physically representing his two selves, Lamar produces concepts that exceed traditional expectations of the exile. Robert Edwards states that, in exile, “[i]t is not enough merely to reject what one has been because denial alone preserves the original norms; one has to posit something tentative in their place” (21). While Lamar does recognize a new identity resulting from his move away from the home, that identity does not replace his old identity from Compton. Instead, the music video shows that these two selves operate simultaneously; instead of replacing the old identity with a new one, Lamar must grapple with the conflict between two identities. Separating identity in this physical way indicates that a reunion may be impossible.

The separation between Lamar’s identities makes this exile an exile from the self. The video reveals once more that this division exceeds a mere conceptual sense of identities. Instead, Lamar conceives of these identities as producing physically different versions of Lamar, ultimately exiling him from himself. The mirror tends to portray an apparently accurate doubling of whatever actions Lamar takes in the physical room. After a few moments, however, the Lamar in the mirror moves independently of the Lamar physically in the space. After the second verse, Lamar turns to take a swig from his liquor bottle. At this point, he is closer to the camera, so his body is out of frame of the mirror. However, when he takes the drink, a reflection appears in the mirror. This reflection clearly does not represent Lamar accurately; the physical Lamar is turned away from the mirror, whereas the Lamar in the mirror is turned towards it while leaning against the table (3:29-32).

On one hand, this cinematographic choice demonstrates that the division between the Lamar who identifies with the home he has left behind in Compton and the Lamar who wanted to escape Compton’s violent realities has become actual and physical. The mirror initially allowed Lamar to criticize himself; now, his reality splits in two, as he has taken on two

manifestations of his identity. Thus, his separation of identity has become complete. Because the viewer sees two versions of Lamar separated by differing connections to reality, the video produces a sort of exile from the self. Lamar's identity is not merely divided; instead, he is physically separated from the self, just as the exile is physically separated from the home. This idea is not new to a conception of exile, as Robert Edwards notes that "there is in most classical and medieval thinking about exile a sense of alienation from the self" (16). Lamar demonstrates that, instead of interior and exterior exile as separate ideas, one can lead to the other. Consequently, Lamar's exile is not merely a physical one; it becomes an exile from himself as well.

On the other hand, this cinematographic choice to have an apparently different version of Lamar in the mirror can also indicate the circularity of Lamar's exile and the hollow nature of Lamar's new self. It is telling that—even as Lamar operates on two separate planes—he does the same thing. Both images of Lamar take a swig from a liquor bottle, more or less in tandem. As a result, the viewer witnesses Lamar's supposed physical separation, but even with this dual operation, neither figure operates differently. Both fall into Lamar's challenge of substance abuse, and neither makes any moves towards progressing away from his divided identity.⁷ Although the challenge of Lamar's perceived division in identity can have apparent physical effects on Lamar, the reality is that neither side can escape the realities of the other because they collectively create Lamar's overall identity.

Living with these contradictory identities becomes impossible, and Lamar is faced with the need to resolve the issue. Because Lamar cannot reject either the home identity or his new

⁷ Substance abuse resembles an exile from the self, as a method for dulling and denying identity by altering the senses. Lamar uses alcohol to represent an attempt to manage the pain of this contradiction.

one in exile, he only has two options: reuniting the self or destroying it. Lamar could silence both identities by committing suicide or attempt to work these identities into a new whole. A true reunion of identities that have split to this degree is a fantasy, but remains a goal to which Lamar can strive. The fact that the horizon of ending this conflict necessitates either a reunion or a complete denial of the self indicates the impossibility of allowing such contradictions to continue. The conclusion of this track and its music video indicate the decision Lamar must face in order to cope with this impossible division in identity. The track hints at the possibility of suicide throughout, discussing his depression and finally ending the third verse with thoughts of killing himself. He states that he “[s]houlda killed yo ass a long time ago/ You shoulda feeled that black revolver blast a long time ago/ And if those mirrors could talk it would say ‘you gotta go’” (3: 14-6). Lamar thus makes clear that he has considered the possibility of suicide for a while, framing it as a sort of murder, as he—the ‘original’ Lamar—wants to kill the new, hollow Lamar. His reference to the possibility of ‘mirrors’ talking and saying that he ‘gotta go’ adds an interesting dimension to the track. In the music video, he speaks to the mirror as a representation of the exiled identity that he hates. Now, however, he indicates that the mirrored Lamar agrees with him that he should die, suggesting a push towards reunion and agreement between the two disparate halves even as one speaks of killing the other. This is the major decision that Lamar must make: reunite into one whole or destroy the self.

In order to maintain the self, Lamar turns away from suicide towards reuniting the halves of his identity in a return home. A true, complete reunion may be impossible, but it provides a goal for Lamar to work towards, one that may allow him some sense of resolved contradictions. Whereas the track itself ends with a push towards suicide—its final line being “money can’t stop a suicidal weakness” —the music video ends before reaching this lyrical point, avoiding the

suggestion of suicide (3: 18). Instead, it ends abruptly with the possibility of returning to a unified identity.⁸ Lamar stands facing the camera at the end of the second verse, and turns away to move in time with the beat leading into Verse 3. A second Lamar appears in the mirror once more, clearly different from the Lamar in the physical scene. Now, the liquor bottle is on the table, and both versions of Lamar stand slumped in different positions (3:36-42). The physical Lamar turns to take a drink, and the reflected Lamar grabs his bottle just before the beat of the third verse drops. However, on the beat, the music cuts out as the reflected Lamar picks up his bottle and throws it directly towards the mirror. Even though he is supposedly just a reflection, the glass of the mirror shatters outwards, changing the physical face of the mirror and warping his reflection. The glass sprays into the room, and the viewer can see the physical Lamar's head thrown sideways by the impact (3:42). The reflected Lamar takes physical form here, directly influencing the space of the physical Lamar. Although this action only lasts a few frames, it suggests both the culmination of Lamar's divided identity and his potential for reuniting his identity.

While this action indicates once again that Lamar's divided identity leads to a physical division, it also demonstrates that the reflected Lamar now wishes to step from his conceptual space into the real space. On one hand, this moment presents the destruction of Lamar's identity in a complete form. The reflected Lamar enacts violence on the physical Lamar, knocking him sideways and showering him with glass. The sudden end to the track before the third verse suggests that Lamar's split identity finally takes action in silencing and destroying the new Lamar in exile, thus repeating the suggestion of suicide made in the track. However, this

⁸ This is not to suggest that the music video is a more valid representation of Lamar than the track; rather, understanding both representations as operating together allows for a more complex understanding of the overall artistic project.

moment also presents the possibility of reunion. By breaking the mirror, Lamar demonstrates his desire to move back into a single space. The reflected Lamar casts aside his bottle, denouncing substance abuse and preventing the physical Lamar from drinking again himself, interrupting him in the middle of his swig. The supposedly fictitious Lamar finally takes an action that not only breaks the cycle of self-hatred in which he lives but also uses that action to affect his other identity and bridge the gap between the selves. Since the video stops here, Lamar also dispels the hints of suicide that come at the end of the track, replacing them with the first step towards reuniting the divided self into one whole. Because of the two possible readings of this moment, Lamar highlights the horizon of resolving a contradictory identity. This action represents the extremes of Lamar's challenges in his exile from the self: he must either fight against his identities and destroy them through suicide, or come to terms with them in an attempt at reunion.

Chapter 3: Returning Home

Introduction

Writers in exile often fixate on one question in particular: is it possible to return home? Is it possible to go from the fragmented state of exile back to the home and, in so doing, to find some reunited identity? Most writers recognize this goal as impossible. Edward Said takes a useful stance on these issues in *Representations of the Intellectual* when he suggests that not only can the exile “never fully arrive, be at one with [the exile’s] new home or situation,” the exile also cannot “go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home” (53). Salman Rushdie notes of his exile from India in “Imaginary Homelands” that the “alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions...Indias of the mind” (10). Consequently, the exiled writer “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11). Rushdie states that the exile cannot return to the identity of the home because pieces and memories are lost. His quotation resonates with Lamar’s understandings of exile; Lamar recognizes returning home as an essential step towards reconstructing his identity, but the degree to which his identity is already fragmented suggests that this reunion may be impossible.

The possibility of Lamar’s return is a complex one, but Lamar does attempt to do so through a return to Compton. Lamar’s return does not entail a simple decision to go home for good, as interviews reveal that he often only returns in order to go to a funeral or visit friends and family. The house he now owns in Eastvale also allows him to be near the space of Compton without actually having to live in the home that he escaped. Even though the return is not

concrete in Lamar's biographical life, however, he does represent a return in his music. In the intro to "King Kunta," an outside voice says, "K-Dot back in the hood, nigga!" (4-5). Lamar represents a friend's reaction as he returns to the home sphere of Compton. He thus begins to map out the complexities of his return; he represents his return to the home spheres while also maintaining his distance from Compton.

In this reserved return to Compton, Lamar demonstrates that the results of the return home on his identity are complex, allowing him new advantages while also preventing him from reuniting into one self that is truly at home in his home. On one hand, he demonstrates the potential for a new sense of unity in his personal goals for the return home in relation to the spheres he has left. Lamar follows the progression from his inner divisions in "u" to a reclaiming of the self in the aptly titled "i," which illustrates Lamar's return from exile. The hook of "i" emphasizes the repeated phrase "I love myself." This message of self-love presents a reversal of the depression expressed in "u." Self-love allows Lamar to confirm his own identity while working to reunite the identity formed in the home and the new identity forged by his exile. His goals affect a wider sphere than his own identity, as he uses personal changes in identity to enact improvements in the home spheres he left. By returning, Lamar is able to speak directly to the communities that established his sense of home, and he attempts to improve Compton's colonial realities by communicating his own progression towards a new unity. However, returning home also produces new issues surrounding agency and identity for Lamar. While he attempts to move towards a reunion of identity by shifting from the logic of "u" to that of "i," the fragmentation of that identity maintains his alienation from the home even in his return. Lamar struggles to reunite the home he desires with its continuing colonial realities. He is unable to help others without returning himself to what he hoped to escape in exile, and

consequently he finds it impossible to reunite wholly with his home and with himself. Returning home may mean an end to exile, but, because it spells a return to the factors that limited Lamar's agency and led him into exile, increased alienation from his desired identity also occurs. For Lamar, although the return home allows a new ability to influence the home spheres of Compton, the reality of colonialism's inescapable pressures on identity makes it impossible for Lamar to return fully to the home spheres he wishes to influence.

Personal Goals in the Return

Lamar gains new agency over the issues of colonialism in his home spheres by returning with the goal of communicating his personal experiences to Compton. Lamar allows the listener to hear about the issues he faces. Lamar's purpose may primarily be to provide himself an outlet for speaking about his experiences, but, when he directs a discussion of the colonial issues of the home to those in Compton, he also gains the ability to work towards the improvements in the home that he desires. In his return home, Lamar uses his personal experiences to attempt to change the home into something that may align more closely with his wishes.

Lamar's track "i" has two audio versions, a studio version and a version set at a concert. Because of the controlled nature of this second version and the lack of factual information about the concert, it is likely that Lamar constructs this representation within a studio, but the representation allows for a supposed return home. While he does not directly state that the concert is in Compton, he poses it as coming 'back' from his international touring, suggesting that this track represents a return from exile through a performance in a concert. The beginning of the track sets up Lamar's goals in relation to Compton, but it also establishes the precarious nature of Lamar's return from exile. The album version of "i" incorporates an introduction (not

included in the studio version) that contextualizes this performance in Compton while presenting Lamar's purpose in writing and performing it. A hype man states,

Is this mic on? (Hey, move this way, this way)
Hey, Hey! Hey! Turn the mic up, c'mon, c'mon
Is the mic on or not? I want the mic
We're bringing up nobody, nobody...
Nobody but the number one rapper in the world
He done traveled all over the world
He came back just to give you some game
All of the little boys and girls, come up here
(One two, one two, what's happening, fool?)
Come right here, this is for you, come on up
Kendrick Lamar, make some noise, brother

Original Intro: 1-11

The first lines indicate that this speaker checks the microphone to make sure that the sound levels are correct. Lamar sets up this space as an organic performance instead of a recording studio with tightly-controlled conditions, where the ultimate musical product would not include a check like this. Because it is unlikely that this recording actually occurred at a concert, Lamar retains control over the product, but posing the track in this way provides a mode of envisioning Lamar interacting with the home. Further, the place of the studio still allows Lamar a figured return from exile, since all his new music that speaks to his spheres in Compton—whether posed as a concert in Compton or not—allows him to connect back to the home in a new way. However, Lamar's supposed return from exile becomes precarious even in his music, as the hype man claims that Lamar came back *just* to give the audience some game. He suggests that Lamar does not or cannot return permanently, and that he instead returns with a specific purpose in mind. If Lamar figures this return as a temporary one even in his musical representations, he remains in exile, able to return only to speak to his community in Compton.

As this introduction establishes Lamar's purpose in his return from exile, it begins the process of making a comparison between Lamar and Jesus that continues throughout the track, a

parallel that Lamar uses to establish his goals in relation to Compton. As Lamar addresses his audience in Compton, the young people seem particularly important, as the hype man invites the ‘little boys and girls’ to come closer to the stage because this performance is for them. Lamar identifies a specific group of the community that he wishes to influence. Instead of directing his message towards those he knew before his exile—to the friends and family that seemed most important in his initial experiences of the home—Lamar now widens his message to the next generation of Compton’s citizens. This new audience has the potential to create a different Compton. The act of beckoning the children to the fore is reminiscent of biblical accounts of Jesus preaching to the children. Lamar, too, seems to pose his interactions with the audience as a sort of preaching. Later in the track, Lamar claims that his goal is to “[g]ive my story to the children and a lesson they can read/ And the glory to the feeling of the holy unseen” (3: 12-3). Lamar combines the positive influences he hopes to have on the children of Compton with an understanding of spirituality.⁹ The comparison with Jesus allows for rich development of Lamar’s return; Lamar, too, returns home to ‘save’ his community, and he, too, hopes to do so through preaching a message of love free from violence. This structure—elevating Lamar above the level of the home spheres with which he interacts—does present a hierarchy of power not entirely dissimilar from colonial hierarchies, but Lamar sets up this structure with the purpose of improving Compton. The purpose of his return is not primarily to end his personal exile, but instead to impact his community in a positive way.

Lamar makes this purpose evident when faced with the opportunity to intervene and cease the violence symptomatic of Compton’s colonial problems. The third verse of the album

⁹ While Lamar’s personal spiritual beliefs are an interesting factor that plays into his purpose in his return, understanding how he figures himself through these connections is the most pertinent to the present discussion, and a full investigation of his spirituality would require more space than is available here.

version is interrupted by an argument in the crowd that Lamar attempts to stop before dropping an acapella verse not included in any of the track's other versions. These additions indicate Lamar's desire to improve the colonial realities in his community. Lamar has nearly completed the track's third verse when the sound of a fight offstage cuts into the music; the listener can hear loud voices arguing, suggesting that violence is imminent. Lamar stops rapping before telling the DJ to "kill the music" (Spoken Interlude: 2). Lamar speaks to them, stating, "[n]ot on my time/ We could save that shit for the streets/ We could save that shit, this for the kids bro" (3-5). Lamar reclaims control over his artistic project while attempting to prevent a fight. He begins to create a place within Compton that is separate from its violent colonial realities through music. Lamar hopes to enact positive changes for the entirety of Compton, stopping individuals—probably of his own generation—from enacting violence so that the 'kids' can benefit from his positive messages. Instead of merely advocating for peace, Lamar directly uses his voice to produce that peace. Lamar's return to Compton allows this direct connection, shifting his preaching from a general message that might not reach his intended audience to an active performance of his goals. This new agency over the home can only occur through return.

Lamar moves from addressing a specific instance of violence to proposing a new way of reversing colonial systems in order to implement lasting change for the community's future generations. The end of the album version of "i" incorporates an acapella verse in response to the fight that broke out earlier. He poses the verse as a message to a broad audience of the colonized, stating, "All my niggas listen/ Listen to this" (27-8). He begins the acapella verse by relating a promise he made to his friend Dave to stop using the phrase "'fuck nigga'" (1). Dave told him to "[t]hink about what you saying: 'Fuck niggas,'" which is "'No better than a white man with slave boats'" (2, 4). Lamar critiques a word steeped in colonial history and logic. The

conversation makes Lamar realize that he “needed some soul searching” (5). Lamar recognizes the power of colonial education on his conceptions, as he states that he “[r]etraced my steps on what they never taught me/ Did my homework fast before government caught me” (7-8). Lamar speaks of his attempts to rework his conception of society. To reclaim his identity from the institutional colonialism, Lamar must replace the falsehoods taught in the education system and replace them with new understandings. The education system is another method of instilling colonial state ideologies, as Althusser theorizes in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that “the Ideological State Apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations...is the *educational ideological apparatus* [original emphasis].” By recognizing the influence of these educational influences on his identity, Lamar begins to challenge the ways his capitalist, racist society instills colonial principles in its citizens.

Lamar takes control over this re-education of colonial principles by creating his own lesson for the audience. He introduces a way of reclaiming the word ‘nigga,’ suggesting a word from Ethiopia instead:

N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; King royalty—wait listen
N-E-G-U-S description: Black emperor, King, ruler, now let me finish
The history books overlook the word and hide it
America tried to make it to a house divided
The homies don’t recognize we been using it wrong
So I’ma break it down and put my game in a song
N-E-G-U-S, say it with me

13-9

Lamar reverses colonial logic by changing a word used as a way of defining otherness and inferiority. He rejects colonial linguistics and replaces them with an image of power and leadership. By invoking this word, Lamar reveals an identity hidden by colonial power in the ‘history books.’ Because of America’s ability to hide this identity, Compton is a ‘house

divided.’ Lamar breaks it down in the song to help the homies—not just his own friends but all those in Compton—recognize a way to repurpose a word central to colonial prejudice. Lamar comes back to Compton and, by reversing colonial logic, proposes a new reality for the colonized in Compton, a reality in which those divided by colonial logic create a positive identity. This action allows for a systematic change to Compton that could impact future generations.

Even as Lamar accomplishes these public goals, he also recognizes the personal problems resulting from the return home. As he responds to the offstage argument, Lamar addresses two of his friends: “TuTu, how many niggas we done lost?/ Yan-Yan, how many we done lost?/ No for real, answer the question, how many niggas we done lost bro?/ This, this year alone” (7-10). Lamar now notes the changes that have occurred in the home since he has been gone. Due to the deaths of his friends, the home is now a different place from the Compton he remembers before his exile, devoid of some of the people who constituted the home. Further, posing this question to his friends—while done rhetorically—suggests an uncertainty about the exact changes in the home, needing to ask ‘how many.’ Lamar reveals the impossibility of coming back to a stable condition of home because of its changes. Lamar’s return home here is not a return to the home that produced his identity. He is trapped between the memories of the home of his youth, the real Compton with which he now interacts, and the desired Compton of unity and agency. Because Lamar only interacts with Compton in a way that alters its reality, the real Compton becomes increasingly distanced from the home he remembers through his own workings. His return provides him some control over shifting the real Compton towards the desired one, hoping to make it a place where the identity he desires is possible. However, the desperation of Lamar’s public questioning about his deceased friends hints at the personal challenge that the track

ultimately demonstrates: while Lamar may improve the home through his efforts, he can never fully return while attempting to cope with such differing conceptions of the home.

Consequences of the Return

While Lamar uses portrayals of his personal experiences to influence his home spheres for the better, he also reveals how this work to connect with others problematizes his personal identity and experiences. The music video for “i” represents Lamar’s interactions with his community in order to reflect on his personal experiences in the return from exile. Lamar walks through the streets of Compton and speaks directly to the community, making his personal realizations public with the goal of sharing these newfound possibilities with his home (Blistein). In these depictions, Lamar takes direct control over his personal identity, but he faces the impossibility of truly reuniting the reality of the home with his hopes. The music video for this track, while making incarnate Lamar’s ability to improve the realities of Compton, also indicates the toll that returning home takes on Lamar’s identity and the ongoing exile he experiences even while physically present in Compton.

The music video’s introduction demonstrates Lamar’s separation from Compton even when he is physically present in the home. The video begins in a club in Compton, with groups of people dancing as Lamar sits in a chair, staring into the distance (Blistein). A woman comes up to him and begins to braid his hair. Music not included in Lamar’s track plays in the background (0:15-27). Lamar remains separated from his surroundings here, not interacting with others or participating in the actions of those in the club. Seeing Lamar sitting silently, disengaged from his environment, shows a separation from Compton even in his return home. He is not the focus of attention, and he does not seem engaged in influencing those around him.

By operating through this separation, he begins to make a personal space for himself even in a larger public setting. After a few moments, a fight breaks out, two men grappling and disrupting the dancers (0:32-37). Someone unplugs the music and the camera cuts to show a man in a white suit, possibly Lamar's hype man, striding towards the camera and telling the fighters to "stop! Stop!" because they should be "talking about peace!" (0:37-40). Lamar himself does not make the intervention here; the hype man breaks up the fight. Lamar seems unable to stop the fight himself, and only begins to interact with Compton's citizens later, after the fight has already stopped. This lack of agency over his own purpose begins to jeopardize Lamar's goals before he even begins to preach his message.

When Lamar does begin to interact with his community, he takes new control over his personal identity in relation to Compton's colonial structures, demonstrating his ability simultaneously to decrease the violence of the colonized and to address directly the colonizers. After the hype man's speech, the camera cuts back to the inside of the club, showing that the fight has stopped. The studio version of Lamar's track begins. When the track reaches the beginning of Lamar's lyrics, he stands up from his chair and begins dancing as he recites the words of the song. The others in the club begin to dance with him. Lamar's space here differs from that of the performance in the album, since he moves alongside those to whom he speaks. He proceeds to lead them out of the club, entering the streets of Compton. Lamar makes his return home vivid, as he walks through the very site of his childhood. Instead of dwelling on memories of the identity it created, however, Lamar reverses the colonial challenges he faced for others in the city. As Lamar asks "how many times the city making me promises," the camera cuts to show him reaching two police officers in the process of arresting a young black man in front of a police car with flashing lights (1:41-7). Lamar seems to encourage that the officers

join him while also working to free the man being arrested from their grasp in the next shot, as he and his group dance among the officers. They separate the man from his captors while also disrupting the boundaries of authority. Lamar works with the colonized in Compton to begin breaking down colonial systems.

As he helps the home spheres of Compton in this moment, Lamar reclaims some sense of control over colonialism by interacting not only with the colonized but also with the colonizers. Lamar approaches the officers first, walking up behind one of them. In an almost imperceptible gesture lasting less than a second, Lamar's arm raises and pats the officer on the opposite shoulder (1:43-4). Lamar breaks down the traditional barrier between colonizer and colonized, retaking control of established intimacy by encroaching on the officer's personal space. This action seems dangerous and reckless, but Lamar uses it as a way of deconstructing traditional paradigms. One possible interpretation of this move would be that Lamar pats the officer on the shoulder in a friendly manner. Lamar thus establishes a new connection with the officer, reversing colonial binaries through the love he preaches in the track. He bridges the gap between officer and subject through a friendly gesture. Lamar becomes the direct beneficiary of the message he spreads to his community, making his personal home one in which the colonizer and colonized can interact in a constructive way. This new connection could produce a Compton whose deconstructed colonial binary would align more closely with Lamar's goals. However, another interpretation would suggest that Lamar taps the officer on the shoulder to make him turn in the wrong direction to see who it is, while Lamar moves on his other side. Although the camera cuts almost immediately after this action, it does appear that the officer's head begins to turn to the right, as Lamar moves to the left (1:44). This action is a playful one, something one would do with one's friends. It harkens back to the officer's gestural 'gun' in the music video

for “Alright.” By taking control over the action himself and doing something that by its nature functions through deception, Lamar gives himself power over intimacy with the colonizer while forcing the colonizer to misuse panoptic perception. Within a single action, then, Lamar creates both a space in which the colonizer and colonized operate as friends and one in which he reverses colonial power. Lamar benefits personally from the changes he creates in Compton, gaining the agency to act as he wishes in his personal identity.

In spite of this newfound potential within Compton, Lamar’s efforts to make these changes possible take a substantial toll on him, revealing the challenges resulting from the exile’s conflicted understandings of the home. When not with the people he can help directly, Lamar is once again faced with the colonial realities he sought to escape. He aids his community, but he himself cannot completely ignore the challenges that occur between his goals for Compton and its ongoing reality. The third verse of “i” and the moves that accompany it in the music video illustrate the challenges Lamar faces while aiding his community. Despite the discussion of self-love throughout the track, Lamar begins the third verse by highlighting a personal conflict: “I went to war last night/ With an automatic weapon, don’t nobody call a medic/ I’ma do it till I get it right/ I went to war last night” (1-4). Lamar seems to slip back into the violence he has tried to escape by referencing the ‘automatic weapon,’ and he suggests self-destruction by telling others not to call a medic. He proceeds to specify the challenges he has faced in the past, saying, “I’ve been dealing with depression ever since an adolescent/ Duckin’ every other blessin’ I can never see the message/ I could never take the lead, I could never bob and weave/ From a negative and letting them annihilate me” (5-8). Lamar has dealt with depression as a consequence of his inability to avoid negatives or seek help through positive messages. Although he distances himself by speaking of these issues as having occurred in the

past throughout the beginning of the verse, he shifts to speak to his ongoing problems in Compton, as he states that “it’s evident I’m moving at a meteor speed/ Finna run into a building, lay my body in the street” (9-10). Lamar cannot escape the problems of Compton even as he tries to help others, since he falls back into the issues of his time before and during exile. Lamar thus begins to demonstrate a concept proposed in Robert Edwards’s “Exile, Self, and Society,” which states that “the sum of all songs of exile will not restore one to the homeland, and when writers create an imaginary home, the effect may be a further alienation” (20). Lamar’s home is imaginary in the sense that he hopes for something unreachable, a Compton free from colonial problems, one in which self-love abounds. Even though Lamar helps the people of Compton, he cannot escape its realities, both those that created his identity before exile and those that he now faces as distanced from his goals.

The moves at the end of the music video show that these challenges lead Lamar to further alienation despite his return home. Lamar brings his followers to what appears to be a bridge just outside the city, where they continue to dance, maintaining an image of positivity. They seem to have reached the pinnacle of their new self-love, but Lamar is unable to stay and goes to a car as they continue to dance (2:59-3:05). A chauffeur stands beside the car and, after Lamar enters the back seat, the car drives off (3:15-20). Once again, the video shows Lamar’s moves from the public space to the personal. The camera follows the car as it drives through the streets of Compton and Lamar begins his third verse. After the first few lines, Lamar leans out of the window and begins to rap the verse, with almost his entire torso outside the car (3:23-5). The cinematography here is interesting, as the camera remains fixed on Lamar. One can see that the car is driving through streets and that there are other vehicles on the road, but the camera uses a shallow depth of field to make everything but Lamar and the car blurry and thus unidentifiable.

These choices obscure the context of the video even as Lamar seems to address those outside. He speaks directly and vehemently to a generalized Compton about his desire to change its reality, but he himself is placeless, moving through anonymous streets. He has no control over the car, as the chauffeur drives and Lamar himself does not look where they are going, further enforcing the placelessness of the scene. As such, even when Lamar returns home, he seems to lack a true sense of place. He cannot escape his placelessness because both home identities he now recognizes—that of the Compton he remembers and that of the Compton he hopes to create—differ from its reality. Placelessness follows Lamar; even as he seeks to ground himself once more in a defined place, the home escapes him.

Lamar's physical actions as he concludes this verse and the track indicate that even in the return home, he cannot escape his exile. Lamar seems to have little control of his body as he hangs out of the window, seemingly in danger of falling out of the car at certain points. He yells the words out towards the streets, and even spits twice in a pause between the lyrics (3:26-7). Lamar's violent movements resemble those in the music video for "u," suggesting that he carries the problems of exile with him wherever he goes. Even though he can appear whole and happy when dancing with his community, he must return to the challenges of his identity when alone, stuck in the personal realities of exile and incapable of working towards a goal with others. After screaming the last words of the verse, he slumps with his body still leaning out of the window, his face staring blankly at the sky and his arms hanging loosely in the air (3:53-8). His posture here resembles his fall during the music video for "Alright," and he seems to be nearly unconscious. A smile does pass over his face after a few seconds, reminiscent of the playfulness Lamar tends to insert into his videos. However, the smile disappears after a moment, and his eyes roll back in his head, revealing empty whites (3:58-4:01). Lamar seems to have fallen

unconscious, incapable of movement due to his physical state. In this personal space, then, Lamar has no more agency than in his exile, and the parts of his identity constructed by his separation from the home remain present despite his return.

“i” ultimately demonstrates that Lamar’s experiences are cyclical, and his musical projects have positive effects on others but trap him within his alienated exile. The car pulls back up to the club, but Lamar is able to get out, conscious once more. He dances outside the car briefly and then walks back into the club, which is nearly empty and is being cleaned for the next day (4:02-16). Lamar sits down and the woman who braided his hair at the beginning of the video begins to do so again. Lamar’s face becomes peaceful as he sits in the chair and the shot slowly fades to black, ending the video (4:25-35). The cyclical nature of the video is fascinating. Lamar begins and ends in the same place, with the same expression on his face. However, his surroundings are very different; the club was initially crowded with people who fought one another, whereas now, almost no one is in the club and the place seems to be peaceful. Lamar thus symbolizes his return home. He can use his music to change the realities of those in his community, bringing them from a place of violence to a place of unity and self-love; at the end of the video, they remain at the bridge, celebrating self-love as a community. Lamar, by contrast, cannot access these new realities himself, and he must return to his own challenges in exile—physically moving back to the now empty club—despite his return to Compton. Even Lamar’s attempts to help others ultimately leave him in a place separate from the people who constitute the home. He has created the home he desires for those around him in Compton, but he goes back to the empty club, a place lacking the home spheres that would constitute an end to his exile. Consequently, Lamar does not escape his exile by coming back to Compton; he can

only use his music to symbolize an escape from colonialism for others. His own alienation in exile remains concrete despite the physical return home.

Conclusion

On January 27th, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order banning travelers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The ban did not affect merely new visitors or immigrants to the U.S.; instead, it led to the detainment of many with valid residency or visas (“Trump Travel Ban”). It separated thousands from their new homes and broke apart families, all in the name of preventing those of a certain religion from entering a country founded on the principle of religious freedom. At the same time, the new regime continued to clamor for a border wall with Mexico, and Trump proposed a budget that allotted \$2.6 billion for this project (this money made available, perhaps, by eliminating the Community Development Block Grant Program, or by slashing education programs for low-income students) (Soffen). With these statements of xenophobia that privilege exclusion over economic or racial equality, the ‘land of the free and home of the brave’ can only be a true home for those born in the right place with the right skin color, gender, sexual identity, and social class.

Every supposedly teleological marker of progress in the twenty-first century has brought with it a testament to the perseverance of colonial logic. A country that originated in a colonial expulsion of native people from their lands now closes its borders to new immigrants and forces the marginalized to operate as aliens within their own homes.

Lamar’s most recent works critique these current issues. On March 14th, 2017—Good Friday—Kendrick Lamar released a new album, entitled *DAMN*. In the album, Lamar is shot in the first track, and the following twelve tracks relate his final thoughts, memories, and emotions before dying; the fourteenth and final track returns to the moment of death. While the album

focuses on Lamar's personal experiences and spiritual messages, he also speaks of these contemporary political issues in a way that reflects his colonial critique in earlier projects.

One of the album's most powerful political statements comes in the transition between the first track, "BLOOD.", and the second, "DNA." "BLOOD." relates Lamar's death, noting that he attempted to help a blind woman to find something. While the identity of this woman is not entirely clear, Lamar perhaps references Lady Justice, who is figured as a blind woman, thus making her objective and fair (Bonn). When Lamar asks if he can help her find what she lost, she tells him, "'Oh yes, you have lost something,'" shifting the focus from herself to Kendrick (Skit). She finishes by stating, "'You've lost your life'" (Skit). The sound of a bullet immediately follows this line, indicating that she has shot Lamar, ending his life. Lamar begins to critique the current political system with this narrative, suggesting that he wants to help the justice system but that, though it is blind, it lashes out at a young black man who tries to help. Even though it purportedly cannot see Lamar's skin color, it still murders an innocent black man. Lamar thus addresses the racist bias in the system.

Lamar proceeds to situate this critique in the contemporary moment, addressing the media as well as the government. After the sound of the bullet that supposedly ends his life, Lamar samples a response by Fox News to his performance of "Alright" at the BET Awards, in which he danced on top of a police car. After a news anchor misquotes the track, "'And we hate the popo, wanna kill us in the street fo' sho'" (the real version is kill us *dead* in the street), another anchor—Kimberly Guilfoyle—gives the illuminating response of "'Oh please, ugh, I don't like it'" ("Geraldo Rivera...") (Outro). Lamar's sample highlights the vapidness of their critique, as they misunderstand the message of "Alright" as one promoting violence against police rather than as an encouragement of the oppressed within the United States.

After offering this critique, Lamar smoothly transitions into the next track, “DNA.” This second track is a reclamation of a complex personal identity that has been usurped by alternative stereotypical representations. He states, “I got, I got, I got, I got/ Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA/ Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA/ I got power, poison, pain and joy inside my DNA/ I got hustle though, ambition, flow, inside my DNA” (1: 1-5). Lamar highlights the conflicts of the self here, contrasting war/peace and pain/joy to show the binaries in play in his identity. In the track, he places this individuality in conversation with the stereotypes and racism surrounding his projects as a rapper; he includes another sample from the Fox News segment, a quotation in which Geraldo Rivera states that Lamar’s music is an example of ““why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years”” (Bridge 2). Lamar destabilizes this colonial logic by offering a contrasting understanding of the personal complexities embodied by individuals of the oppressed class.

Lamar provides his most direct critique of the contemporary U.S. administration later in the album in his track “XXX.” The track begins with an invocation of the American Dream: “America, God bless you if it’s good to you/ America please take my hand/ Can you help me underst—” (Intro 1-3). The speaker asks America to help, but the words are cut off, silencing the possibility of a benevolent America. Lamar depicts a less hopeful view, embodied by many of the oppressed class, saying, [I]eave him in the wilderness/ With a sworn nemesis, he’ll make it” (Verse 1: 3-4). Lamar thus critiques the ideas of self-reliance in a racist America. After rapping about the ongoing problems of gang violence in Compton, Lamar speaks about the contemporary state of U.S. politics in the second verse. He states, “[t]he great American flag/ Is wrapped and dragged with explosives/ Compulsive disorder, sons and daughters/ Barricaded blocks and borders/ Look what you taught us!” (2-6). By referencing the American flag in connection to

explosives, Lamar speaks to America's contributions to foreign conflicts. He specifically references the actions of the current administration by mentioning 'barricades,' 'blocks,' and 'borders,' critiquing key issues of immigration. And, by reminding the listener that these actions are what the government taught its citizens, Lamar demonstrates that these colonial influences pervade his structures of the home. He blames these issues on the elite and President Trump in particular, stating, "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/ But is America honest, or do we bask in sin?" (2: 8-12). Lamar thus laments the change in administration as exacerbating the issues he spoke of in earlier albums. Lamar brings the perpetuation of racist stereotypes to a head in the final lines of this verse, stating, "[y]ou 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" (2: 18-20). Lamar recognizes in the current political climate the ongoing struggles he has discussed in previous albums, speaking of the influence of colonial logic in President Trump's administration on other spheres. Lamar's project operates in conflict with these structures as he highlights his own identity in tracks like "DNA.," but, by recognizing these issues, he provides a useful critique of contemporary society. When he returns once more to the metaphor of the mirror as America's simplifications of his identity, he also reflects on America itself in all its ongoing problems.

In the moment in which Lamar operates, issues of exile, immigration, refugeeism, and colonialism become increasingly important. New technologies allow for novel methods of connecting to the home, as one can Skype family members or read blogs from countries halfway across the world. Simultaneously, however, the same technologies allow for increased pressures of colonialism that ironically result in decreased mobility and freedom within one's own home.

Governments can now seek out undocumented immigrants with increased firepower, and new weaponry and methods of surveillance provide the tools necessary to force even natives of the country into exile.

Lamar's theorizing of exile consequently produces implications that extend far beyond the sphere of hip-hop. His voice represents the issues faced by many in the contemporary moment. Although every individual experiences differing challenges, Lamar speaks to his understanding of the issues of the silenced and colonized in U.S. society, presenting one model for exile's personal consequences on identity and agency. This model demonstrates many new conceptions of exile. Exile can occur even while retaining personal agency over the move, demonstrating that governments can alienate their own citizens through indirect, clandestine pressures rather than having to engage directly with citizens in ways that might cause a public outcry. Exile can occur even while remaining in the home country, as exile becomes increasingly a problem of identity rather than place, and the colonial experience hinges on an inability to access true agency within the home. Exile also prevails even in the return home, and an attempt to change the issues of colonialism relies on subjecting oneself once more to a lack of agency. Lamar thus reveals that many of the ideas of the traditional voices in exile studies persevere, but the specific difficulties of the disenfranchised in the contemporary moment produce different understandings of agency and identity. More importantly, though, he reveals the pressures that cause this need for exile: the governmental prejudices that maintain racial and economic problems, hiding themselves as the cause even as they excoriate the symptoms. Although the perseverance of these issues across the centuries testifies to the impossibility of changing them, new awareness of the problems begins the process Lamar works towards in his music: re-educating the public towards a reversal of colonial logic.

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