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Essay 2: Monuments, Myths, and Land

KENDRICK LAMAR CRITIQUES THE “SELF-MADE” SYSTEM

The American myth of the self-made man suggests that success is solely the result of personal effort, resilience, and discipline. This ideal promises anyone, regardless of their background, the opportunity to achieve success, but it frequently ignores the deep-rooted inequalities of American society, like the historical trauma of race and class. In his third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar’s song “U” challenges the simplistic self-made-man myth through his precise lyricism and the disorienting visual imagery. *God Is Gangsta*, a short film that weaves together the songs “U” and “For Sale?”, illustrates the psychological burden that can accompany personal success, particularly when that success exists alongside the ongoing realities of systemic oppression. Specifically, Lamar’s critique of the self-made myth extends beyond individual ambition to call attention to the structural barriers that quietly but powerfully shape who gets to succeed in America.

The idea of the self-made man is a hallmark of American exceptionalism, represented as a nation where anyone, regardless of their beginnings, could transcend their circumstances through perseverance. The idealism of this myth ignores the substantial role that race, class, and privilege play in determining who has access to success. The myth assumes that everyone begins at the same starting line, a fundamental misrepresentation of the violence, theft, and exploitation that run through American history. For marginalized communities, particularly Black Americans like Lamar and his Compton communities, historical and ongoing discrimination proves the self-made myth not just improbable but often impossible. The myth of the self-made man has deep historical origins in the accumulation of wealth and land by privileged white Americans, both of which were systematically

denied to Black communities. Kendrick Lamar directly engages with these realities in "U" as he wrestles with the emotional cost of surviving such a legacy.

Lamar's "U" challenges the myth of the self-made man by confronting the racial and systemic barriers that have influenced his life. As scholars have shown, cultural narratives about race and class play a major role in shaping the American Dream and the myth of the self-made man. As Morrison discusses in *Playing in the Dark*, "Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression" (Morrison, p. 7). The quote highlights how race and cultural narratives are deeply intertwined with ideas of success in America. Lamar's personal experience mirrors this in "U". He openly critiques his escape from poverty and guilt over his success, revealing how race and class have shaped his ability to rise while others remain stuck. For instance, in the lyrics, "You ain't no brother, you ain't no disciple, you ain't no friend / A friend never leave Compton for profit or leave his best friend," Lamar questions the authenticity of his success, emphasizing how his rise is complicated by his perceived failures to stay loyal to his roots and community. Lamar's self-criticism in "Loving you is complicated" (a repeated line in "U") underscores the emotional toll of his success, where the internal conflict is rooted in his awareness that his achievements are not isolated, but part of a larger narrative molded by systemic inequities. He acknowledges his failure to reach the people he cares about, saying, "I fuckin' tell you, you fuckin' failure you ain't no leader," as a way of confronting how the pursuit of success, driven by personal ambition, often leads to abandonment and betrayal of those left behind. His rise to fame is not just a result of his effort; it is a complex negotiation with a system that has long defined his worth, a system that is built on the very racial dynamics scholars like Morrison describe.

In "U," Lamar directly critiques the notion of the "self-made man" by expressing the emotional costs of his success within a system that continues to oppress his community. However, the song, paired with the short film *God Is Gangsta*, confronts the psychological burden of survivor's guilt arising from having escaped the socio-economic hardships of Compton, while many of his family members and peers remain stuck in cycles of poverty and violence shaped by systemic racism and economic inequality. Lamar's lyrics express his guilt and

self-loathing, such as when he says, “You ain’t no brother, you ain’t no disciple, you ain’t no friend.” Though uses the address “you,” the accusations highlight Lamar’s internal conflict over leaving his community behind as well.

Lamar represents the fractured self-image resulting from the “Self-made” myth. He expresses frustration in lines like, “The world don’t need you, don’t let them deceive you,” which reflects his sense of failure and the tension between his personal success and the ongoing struggles of his loved ones. Lamar’s lyrics show how his emotional struggles are amplified by the ongoing systemic barriers, challenging the myth of the self-made man by showing that success is inextricably tied to the larger socio-economic forces at play. Delia Grosu explains, “Whiteness and Blackness do not exist independently of each other, but rather they co-inhabit a space of mutual violent acts” (Grosu, p. 40). Grosu’s framing illuminates Lamar’s personal anguish as not just internal but deeply tied to the historical and ongoing structures of racial oppression that continue to shape American life. Illustrating that survival and success are collective, complicated experiences rather than isolated triumphs, Lamar dismantles the American myth of the self-made man and exposes the emotional cost of systemic inequality.

Lamar’s portrayal of survivor’s guilt makes it clear that his success is not a purely individual achievement, but something constructed by the forces of systemic violence that surround him. Lamar uses emotionally charged lyrics in “U” to confront the psychological weight of survival and to challenge the idea that success is purely the result of individual effort. The song’s lyrics are saturated with self-loathing, as Lamar expresses guilt over his escape from a system that continues to oppress his people and his community. Guilt, mixed with his survivor’s anxiety, reveals a key truth: success is never an isolated achievement but instead the result of a complicated relationship between individual effort and structural forces.

Kendrick Lamar’s experience resonates with scholarship that shows hard work alone cannot guarantee success, drawing attention to the systemic obstacles that make success inaccessible for many. This idea is reflected in the work of American historians like Kyle T. Mays, whose exploration of *survivance* provides a framework for understanding Lamar’s experience. In *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States*, Mays builds on Gerald Vizenor’s concept of ‘survivance,’ which describes a mode of existence that goes beyond mere survival within

oppressive systems. Mays writes that “Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (Mays, p. 25). Vizenor describes ‘an active sense of presence’ that emphasizes that survival is not passive but filled with meaning, memory, and resistance. Lamar’s work reflects this active presence, where his survivor’s guilt in ‘U’ is not just personal anguish but part of a larger legacy of enduring and resisting systemic erasure. His guilt is not a burden; it teaches him to carry the stories, struggles, and limitations of his community with him. In this way, ‘U’ becomes more than just an emotional breakdown; it is a work of survivance, where Lamar wrestles with the cost of his success in a society that continues to devalue Black lives.

Through both his lyrics in "U" and the visual imagery of the short film *God Is Gangsta*, Lamar portrays the emotional and psychological costs of achieving success within a system of oppression. The song’s lyrics are made even more haunting by the visual imagery of the accompanying music video, which is shot in a distorted, surrealistic manner. In it, Lamar is shown in a dark, claustrophobic space, confronting himself in a distorted mirror, a metaphor for his internal conflict over his success and the guilt he feels for leaving his community behind. The lyrics of 'U' reflect relentless self-criticism, as Lamar sings, “I’m a man of my word, I’m a man of my worth / I don’t deserve to be loved, but I’m still looking for it.” These lines capture the central emotional tension of the song: the conflict between his desire for validation and the overwhelming weight of his survival in an unjust system. Lamar’s raw vulnerability exposes the emotional toll of surviving systemic oppression and challenges the notion that success can ever be reduced to individual effort. Lamar’s critique of the self-made man aligns with the work of W.O. Brown, whose 1931 writing still resonates today. Brown explains, “Men do not believe this creed of inequality of the races because of the compulsion of facts, but rather because of emotional needs” (Brown, p. 56). Although the quote is nearly a century old, it remains relevant in the context of Lamar’s work. Brown’s assertion about the emotional defense of racial inequality directly connects to Lamar’s self-loathing in “U”, where his success is more than a personal achievement but also a burden shaped by the racial inequalities surrounding him. This insight demonstrates that myths like the self-made man, which justify success and failure, are created to comfort those in power, even as racial inequalities persist. By confronting these

emotional systems that excuse inequality, Lamar shows that personal success cannot be separated from the historical and structural forces that continue to disadvantage marginalized communities.

Lamar expands his critique of the self-made man by showing that survival itself is never an individual act but always part of a larger, interconnected struggle. His work points beyond personal guilt to expose how survival depends on the health and survival of entire communities who continue to resist systemic oppression. Achille Mbembe's assertion in *The Universal Right to Breathe* that "Human-kind and biosphere are one. Alone, humanity has no future" (Mbembe,

p. 60) supports this idea by emphasizing that existence is fundamentally relational, not isolated. Lamar's depiction of inner turmoil in "U" captures this tension between personal survival and collective suffering, revealing that the cost of success is not just emotional but rooted in the ongoing survival of a historically marginalized community. By tying personal achievement to the well-being of the collective, Lamar dismantles the idea that success can be purely earned through individual effort, exposing the deep, structural forces that continue to shape opportunity in America.

In *God Is Gangsta*, Lamar visually represents the psychological toll of surviving systemic oppression, deepening the critique of the self-made myth portrayed in his song "U." In the video, Lamar is seen drinking heavily in a motel room, speaking directly to his reflection in the mirror. To further highlight this emotional conflict, Sillyman observes that Lamar's struggle with survivor's guilt and self-loathing is most intensely portrayed in "U," where the speaker's breakdown is both personal and confined. "In 'u,' Lamar directly evokes the idea of a double consciousness. The track is the most personal on the album, and the most confined, taking place inside a hotel room, the screed of self-loathing self-contained in the speaker's mind" (Sillyman,

p. 23). Sillyman's observation about the track's confinement mirrors the imagery in *God Is Gangsta*, where Lamar is trapped in a motel room confronting his reflection, amplifying his feelings of guilt and disillusionment. The confined space in both the song and film highlights Lamar's internal breakdown and his struggle to reconcile personal success with the ongoing suffering of his community. This emotional dissonance, caught between pride

in his achievements and the weight of survivor's guilt, undercuts the very foundation of the self-made myth, reminding us that individual success cannot exist in isolation from the structural forces that shape it.

Lamar's work acts as a cultural performance that challenges dominant narratives about success and individual achievement in America. Phil Deloria, in *The Object of American Studies*, argues that culture is a performative act, a way people enact and interpret the stories that shape society. He explains, "Cultural interpreters are therefore like literary critics, trying to unpack the meanings of texts as they appear in a myriad of interconnected forms, not simply printed texts, but oral communication, individual and social performances, material culture, film, television, tweets, websites, and so on" (Deloria, p. 131). Deloria's point that meaning is made through performances helps illuminate how Lamar's music operates not just as entertainment but as a critical commentary. Through his lyrics and the visual storytelling in *God Is Gangsta*, Lamar urges listeners to question the myth of the self-made man and confront the deeper systemic forces that shape American life.

In his exploration of survivor's guilt, emotional vulnerability, and the weight of systemic oppression, Kendrick Lamar confronts the holes in the narrative that the American Dream is accessible to all who work hard enough. Lamar makes clear that the American Dream, while deeply ingrained in American culture, overlooks the structural inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Lamar's personal story reveals how external forces including racial, economic, and historical can play a significant role in determining one's ability to succeed. The myth of the self-made man, then, is not only misleading but dangerous, as it erases the very real barriers that prevent so many from reaching that "pure success," or being able to say one made it from "rags" to "riches." By deconstructing the myth of the self-made man, Lamar urges his audience to rethink success not as an isolated individual achievement, but as a complex, shared experience influenced by larger social forces. To truly grasp the complexities of success, we must confront these inequities and dismantle the myth that individual effort alone can overcome the deeply entrenched systems of power and privilege.

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