

Collective Empowerment

XXX. and DUCKWORTH.

Lamar's *DAMN.* attempts to uplift the Black community as he leads others through his music. In several songs, there are many moments where people look to him for advice and where Kendrick himself highlights the struggles of being a leader. A central narrative point in *XXX.* is a friend calling Kendrick about his son being murdered through gang violence and asks him for advice. Lamar advocates for violence responding with,

*I can't sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel
If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed
...
I chip a nigga, then throw the blower in his lap
Walk myself to the court like, "Bitch, I did that"
Ain't no Black Power when your baby killed by a coward.*

While indicative of language that Malcolm X and others would use in arming themselves in self defense, the morale of the song attempts to refute this notion. The comment at the end of the quote also highlights this, by showing how progression is stifled by murder and endless violence. And, even though an eye-for-an-eye goes against the idea of collective empowerment, by the end of the song Kendrick highlights the need for unity in order to make progress by saying,

*But is America honest or do we bask in sin?
Pass the gin, I mix it with American blood
Then bash him in, you Crippin' or you married to Blood?
I'll ask again, oops, accident
It's nasty when you set us up then roll the dice, then bet us up
You overnight the big rifles, then tell Fox to be scared of us
Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera*

America's reflections of me, that's what a mirror does

Throughout this verse, Kendrick shows the divisiveness in American politics and its trend towards extremism that was similar to the sentiment of African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. Those who saw progress as too slow would continue to advocate for change through Black Nationalism or advocating for a violent movement, creating even more divisions. Today, Lamar points out the brokenness in the Black community, as they struggle with gang violence, and how it prevents them from being able to overcome racist depictions in the media. That, in order to not be only known for gang affiliations, violence, and drugs, that they would need to fix the divisions amongst themselves. Although, Kendrick still highlights the government's role in creating these racist depictions of Black people through policies like the War on Drugs and the privatization of prisons, that disproportionately effected African-Americans and profited from their incarcerations. In this way, *XXX.* showcases modern collective empowerment from the Black Arts Movement through laying a foundation that describes problems within the Black community and how to solve them and, in doing so, Kendrick attempts to unify the Black community despite gang affiliations. Lamar would go on to break down barriers between gangs with his beef with Drake, in which he unified the community against him and performed with different affiliations at his “*Pop Out*” concert in 2024 that he then referred to as “I put one hundred hoods on one stage” during *reincarnated* on his album *GNX*.

The song *DUCKWORTH.* also features elements of collective empowerment, specifically his recollection of how Top Dawg Entertainment, Lamar's record label at the time, came to be. The main theme of the song is how kindness creates prosperity with Kendrick highlighting how his father, “Ducky”, would give Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith free food from the KFC he worked at, in order to prevent the restaurant from being robbed by Anthony's gang. Kendrick describes,

*'Cross the street from the projects, Anthony planned to rob it
Stuck up the place before, back in '84*

That's when affiliation was really at gears of war
So many relatives tellin' us, sellin' us devilish works, killin' us, crime
Intelligent, felonious prevalent proposition with 9's
Ducky was well-aware
They robbed the manager and shot a customer last year
...
Anthony liked him and then let him slide, they didn't kill him
In fact, it look like they're the last to survive, pay attention
That one decision changed both of they lives, one curse at a time
Reverse the manifest and good karma, and I'll tell you why

The “curse” that he mentions here, as well as throughout the album, is from the book of Deuteronomy where by disobeying God’s commandments people are made to suffer, while those who grow closer to God are given prosperity. Kendrick shows collective empowerment through *DUCKWORTH*. by telling this story of how two people destined, based on where they lived, for crimes, drugs or death turned their fates around by breaking the cycle of wickedness, that is told throughout the album, and created the prosperity through his career with the help of Top Dawg Entertainment. At the end of the song, he illustrates what would’ve happened if they didn’t practice compassion, where Anthony kills his dad and would lead Kendrick to be pushed into gang violence without a father figure to guide him. In doing so, Lamar outlines a path to success for the Black community in practicing kindness to one another and break the cycle of gang violence.