

“Am I Worth It?”: The Forgiveness, Death, and Resurrection of Kendrick Lamar

Matthew Linder

Matthew Linder is an adjunct professor of music at National University in San Diego, CA.

Abstract: In spite of growing up in desolated Compton, CA, Kendrick Lamar in his music is able to present his listeners with hope through the themes of forgiveness of sins, death, and resurrection, as found in the God of Christian faith. Similarly, Christian theologian Paul Tillich capstones *The Courage to Be* within the same theological concepts. This article explores three pathways to the intersection of Kendrick’s musical output and Tillich’s existential theology, to uncover the theological underpinnings of Kendrick’s search for meaning within the brutalized inner city. (1) Self-affirmation is found when one participates with something that transcends the self, namely God. (2) One must be accepted by God through forgiveness and one must accept God’s acceptance. (3) Eternal security is found in having to face one’s own death and Christian resurrection.

Keywords: Kendrick Lamar, Paul Tillich, resurrection, death, self-affirmation, hip hop, black liberation theology

In the penultimate rap in part 1 of the two-part song “Sing about Me/I’m Dying of Thirst” from *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kendrick Lamar asks, “Am I worth it?” Taken on its own, Kendrick’s question is of his existential value and purpose in the world. Within the context of the song and album’s narrative, the question becomes whether life has meaning in the brutalized urban environment of Compton, CA. Kendrick takes this question one step further, asking how one can face the reality of death on the streets every day, and yet find the courage to live another day. Is suicide the only option in facing the seeming meaningless of life, or is there another path by which one can find the ability to exist? While *Atlantic* journalist Ta-Nehsi Coates writes that because “the meek were battered” in urban environments, God must not exist, Kendrick swims in theological streams of black Christianity: in his view, because God himself was oppressed and battered on the cross of Christ, God, therefore, is for oppressed and battered black bodies.¹ Kendrick grounds his courage to exist within black Christian theological expressions of forgiveness, death, and eternal life, which encourage him to face existential doubt and twenty-first-century post-soul despair.²

And while black Christian faith permeates Kendrick's prophetic songs, Paul Tillich's Lutheran theology in *The Courage to Be* captures the spirit of Kendrick's religious discourses, particularly when he writes of Martin Luther's faith as an "unceasingly exclusive trust in God and rejects any other foundation for his courage to be, not only as insufficient but as driving him into more guilt and deeper anxiety."³ In "untitled 5 | 9.21.2014" Kendrick experiences greater anxiety and despair after he "put my Bible in the truck."

But when Kendrick participates with something that transcends the self, namely, God, his anxiety and guilt are diminished, first, by self-affirmation of his black body, second, with his acceptance of divine forgiveness, and lastly, the ability to face death and place hope in the peculiarity of Christian resurrection. In parallel to the Hebrew prophetic tradition, Kendrick expresses his personal suffering as representative of his community's and imparts a transcendent hope to a people struggling to exist in a city in ruins.

I Love Myself

In Kendrick's prophetic songs, he counteracts the anxiety he experienced in Compton by arriving at a self-affirmation rooted in Christian beliefs about God transcendent.⁴ Communicating to the oppressed in Compton a divinely rendered affirmation of their dignity and worth provides the transcendent pathway toward self-affirmation that Kendrick desires for his community.

Tillich, writing again of Luther, provides a transcendent conception of self-affirmation: "In spite of all the negativities which he had experienced, in spite of the anxiety which dominated that period, he derived the power of self-affirmation from his unshakable confidence in God and from the personal encounter with him."⁵ Kendrick acts as an avatar for the struggles of his community through his idiosyncratic narrative on *good kid, m.A.A.d city* by painting vivid musico-poetic soundscapes realistically reflecting on Compton's devastated landscape. It is not until almost the end of Kendrick's encounters with violence, death, and the meaninglessness of gang pursuits that God appears, in "Sing about Me/I'm Dying of Thirst," interjecting hope. Kendrick's confidence in his personal encounter with Jesus affirms his dignity and worth, and urges him to impart this transcendent hope to the people of Compton on the album's final track, "Real."

The repetitious quarter-note heart monitor beeping bedrocks Kendrick's pronouncements of "real," solidifying self-affirmation for Compton's residents. Kendrick defines realness in the negative, declaring what it is not—money, power, and respect—while his father (in a voicemail) defines it as responsibility, family, and God. With Kendrick's new exuberant confidence in God, his "conviction that he is God's child" shifts "the basis of his relationship with all his" homies.⁶ In the final voicemail skit of the album, his mom

encourages him to “tell your story to these black and brown kids in Compton. Let ’em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person.” By describing the reality of his community’s struggles with materialism, street violence, and broken relationships on the album, Kendrick, now transformed by a divine personal encounter, therefore, feels empowered to sing of their dignity, “But what love got to do with it when you don’t love yourself?”

Tillich writes, “The God of theism unites and transcends the courage to be as a part and the courage to be as oneself. It avoids both the loss of oneself by participation and the loss of one’s world by individualization.”⁷ Kendrick draws on this transcendent courage to continue his message of self-affirmation as community-affirmation in “i” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*. By addressing the negativity of his context, symbolized in the ancient Protestant “figures of death and the devil,” he raps, over a bouncy and joyous Isley Brothers sample, about trusting in God in spite of a devil who wants to control him and those who want Kendrick dead.⁸ From that spiritual context, he can proclaim to his audience “I love myself” because he is “illuminated by the hand of God.” The self-affirming statement is meant to empower and uplift a devastated community to see their self-worth through divine eyes. So it is fitting that the album version of “i” is a live performance in Compton and ends with Kendrick doing a freestyle rap, in response to street violence erupting mid-performance. In the unaccompanied rap, he affirms himself as a child of God by celebrating his and Compton’s blackness through a post-soul redefining of *nigger* to *negus*, the Ethiopian word meaning “royalty.”

Forgive Us, Father

The valuing of the black bodies in Compton that Kendrick proclaims in “i” and “Real” has another component that Tillich discusses as “the courage to accept the forgiveness of sins, not as an abstract assertion but as the fundamental experience in the encounter with God.”⁹ Songs such as “Kush & Corinthians,” “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe,” “Alright,” and “Mortal Man” function in this territory of forgiveness and the acceptance of divine forgiveness. There is the interplay between sin and spirituality in “Kush & Corinthians,” the opening confession in “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe,” the reliance and trust placed in divine forgiveness in “Alright,” and the interconnectedness of “Forgive me, God, as I forgive others” of “Mortal Man.”

Unpacking “Alright” further, Kendrick mourns his city and confesses sins for which he is not culpable. As Soong Chan Rah notes in *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*, this is the posture of Old Testament prophets (like Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations) who grieved over Jerusalem’s suffering and led their community in public confession to enact

a communal hope rooted in the divine.¹⁰ And like Jeremiah, Kendrick recognizes the suffering he and Compton have endured, but frames that suffering in the context of a transcendent and forgiving God. Strikingly, he ties Compton, known for its lowliness, with Nazareth, which is a byword for obscurity and unimportance in the New Testament.¹¹ Kendrick provides a litany of sins and temptations his community daily encounters, but models confessing “at the preacher’s door.” In that state of forgiveness, he is free to yell out for himself and Compton, over booming 808s and wailing saxophone, “We gon’ be alright.” Fittingly, this refrain was taken up by the Black Lives Matter movement as an announcement of hopeful solidarity among protesters.¹² While Lamar himself invites and welcomes these appropriations through his activism and imagery, it is important to note that this line emerges, directly, from his religious discourse of sin and divine grace.

It is useful, then, to see how Kendrick strings the lines together: “Nazareth, I’m fucked up / Homie you fucked up / But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright.” That is, the communal narrative of hope emerges precisely from an admission of collective sin, followed by a declaration of God’s valuing, and saving, of each individual.

Hope Inside of My Bones

Self-affirmation has a final element that, as Tillich further explains, includes not only accepting eternal security in “the Christian symbol of resurrection” but also facing “one’s having to die.”¹³ Kendrick is hyper-aware of his own mortality (as well as that of his community) during his struggle of growing up in a violent cacophony of street violence in Compton. (On “Sing about Me/I’m Dying of Thirst,” he wonders “why I’m infatuated with death.”) But within this recognition of accepting life’s finitude, Kendrick, like Tillich, bases his hope and self-affirming confidence in a particular Christian understanding of eternal security through the forgiveness of sins, God’s acceptance of him, and the surety of his belief in Christian resurrection. By wrestling with death as a self-affirming reality, Kendrick dismantles rap boasts like Kanye West’s on “Famous,” where Kanye raps, “We never gonna die,” which, in facing death, as Tillich writes, aspires to “make endless what, by definition, must come to an end.”¹⁴ Instead Kendrick rests his hope in his understanding “that heaven’s real,” which imbues his entire physical being, as he raps on the effervescent lightning-speed bass grooves of Flying Lotus’s “Never Catch Me”:

Ain’t no blood pumpin’ no fear, I got hope inside of my bones
This that life beyond your own life, this ain’t physical for mankind
This that outer-body experience, no coincidence you been died

Kendrick's reliance on and hope in Christian resurrection lies in tension with other black thinkers, who, like Jesse Williams in his 2016 BET Awards speech, say the "hereafter is a hustle," which does not provide hope for black lives now.¹⁵ W.E.B. DuBois saw the hope of heaven as religious fatalism,¹⁶ and even Kendrick's idol, Tupac, doubted in "I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto" if heaven included black spaces. But yet, bodily resurrection, as black liberation theologian Howard Thurman would contend, does provides a hope for the main concern of Kendrick community—not to be killed.¹⁷ Kendrick, in accordance with multiplicitous Christian theologies, views being raised in Christ as no longer fearing death, because there is confidence in receiving a renewed body that can no longer be battered and thus providing a hope in the present. Often this belief is also the very grounds of bodily resistance.

Kendrick understands the dignity and worth of his life by inscribing it within the story of Christianity, in which he can accept forgiveness and acknowledge death while still expressing confidence in bodily resurrection, a confidence tied to Compton's hope. The resurrection provides grounds for the courage to put aside individual fears and work for the collective good. At the same time, by focusing on the bodily resurrection of people like him, he emphasizes the importance—one guaranteed in God himself—of individual black bodies. Via his personal relationship with God, Kendrick's prophetic songs affirm the dignity and worth of the black bodies in Compton and echo Howard Thurman's grandmother, "You—You are not niggers. You—You are not slaves. You are God's children."¹⁸ Or, borrowing a phrase from Kendrick's own music, despite his doubts and anxieties, he is and his people are, in fact, "worth it."

Notes

- 1 Ta-Neshi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015), 28.
- 2 Reggie Ugwu, "The Radical Christianity of Kendrick Lamar," BuzzFeed, February 3, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/reggieugwu/the-radical-christianity-of-kendrick-lamar>.
- 3 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 167.
- 4 J.A. Himle, "Anxiety Disorders among African Americans, Blacks of Caribbean Descent, and Non-Hispanic Whites in the United States," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 23, no. 5 (2009): 578–590.
- 5 Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 148.
- 6 Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 51.
- 7 Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 172.
- 8 Ibid., 149.
- 9 Ibid., 152.
- 10 Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 122.
- 11 John 1:46.
- 12 Aisha Harris, "Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?," Slate, August 3, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/08/black_lives_matter_protesters_chant_kendrick_lamar_s_alright_what_makes.html.

13 Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 155.

14 Ibid., 155.

15 BET Awards, *BET Awards 2016*, Black Entertainment Network, June 26, 2016.

16 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 84.

17 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 69.

18 Ibid., 50.