

## PERFORMING REDEMPTION

### *Metzian Theology in the Art of Kendrick Lamar*

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THE GERMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN JOHANN BAPTIST METZ MAKES A CONVINCING CASE THAT IN THE FACE OF THE CATASTROPHES OF THE 20TH CENTURY, CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY CAN NO LONGER ISOLATE ITSELF FROM ITS ROLE AS A PERPETRATOR OF INJUSTICE. TO THAT END, HE SEEKS TO CHALLENGE ABSTRACT ANSWERS TO THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS WITH A RENEWED SENSITIVITY TO PAST TRANSGRESSIONS. FOR METZ, CHRISTIAN FAITH CANNOT SIMPLY BE A MATTER OF ASSENT TO THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS, BUT RATHER A PRACTICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH “DANGEROUS MEMORIES” OF SYSTEMATIC INJUSTICE. IN THIS PAPER, THE AUTHOR TAKES UP METZ’S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND USES IT TO EXAMINE KENDRICK LAMAR’S “SING ABOUT ME, I’M DYING OF THIRST” AS A THEOLOGICAL, AND SPECIFICALLY SOTERIOLOGICAL, PERFORMANCE. BY RE-TELLING IN HIS OWN VOICE THE STORIES OF FRIENDS WHO HAVE DIED, KENDRICK BOTH DOCUMENTS THE STRUGGLE THEY LIVED AND REVEALS HIS OWN VULNERABILITY TO THE SAME CONDITIONS (OF SIN). BUT IN ADDRESSING THIS VULNERABILITY, HE TRANSCENDS IT, PROTECTING HIMSELF FROM SIN PRECISELY BY TELLING THE STORY. THE PAPER CLOSES WITH SOME REFLECTIONS ON HOW KENDRICK’S TRACK MIGHT GESTURE TOWARDS A MODE OF DOING THEOLOGY THAT SUBVERTS THE ABSTRACT TENDENCIES OF THE HEGEMONIC WESTERN TRADITION.

Towards the end of his life, the philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote that, “the true picture of the past flits by...[and] can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”<sup>1</sup> According to this view, philosophical inquiry cannot presuppose the accessibility of a universal history as such, but rather must seek absolute truth in and through the concrete “temporality” of every historical moment.<sup>2</sup> Through this thesis, Benjamin did not intend to merely criticize modernity’s prevailing bourgeois history (*qua* history of progress), but also to articulate the task of the philosopher as “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” and to establish these memories as the inaugural site of a constructive, critical response.

The German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz appropriates Benjamin’s thesis in his call for a Christian theology grounded in “dangerous memories” of suffering.<sup>3</sup> Reacting against a corrupted theological discourse that he terms “bourgeois religion,”<sup>4</sup> Metz articulates the need for a “practical, fundamental theology of the subject” that does not flee from history but rather attempts to talk about God in view of history’s victims.<sup>5</sup> At the center of this attempt is the theodicy problem, or “the question of how one is to talk about God in the face of the abysmal histories of suffering in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Metz criticizes mainstream theology for prioritizing soteriology over theodicy, producing a “soteriologically-overdetermined” discourse which he suggests functions as an “exoneration mechanism” alleviating the bourgeois subject’s responsibility for suffering in history.<sup>7</sup> Against abstract theologies of justification, Metz maintains that a “purely argumentative soteriology” (one that

does not account for histories of suffering) reenacts the bourgeois banishment of religion to the private (and thus, non-political) sphere, thereby uncritically affirming the prevailing socio-political order. Instead, following Benjamin, Metz re-articulates faith as a “praxis in history and society” that struggles to speak about God from the underside of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I read Kendrick Lamar’s “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” as a performance of dangerous memory.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, I read this song as a soteriological performance, one in which the artist struggles for redemption from what he explicitly frames as a condition of sin. The sin Lamar confronts is not the abstract, ontological sin of the dominant Christian tradition of theological anthropology, but rather a social condition of “dying of thirst,” described in the second half of the two-part track. Lamar’s performance of dangerous memory operates on two levels: On the one hand, Lamar’s stories of friends who have passed function as representations of the lived experience he characterizes elsewhere as “[growing] up ‘round some people livin’ they life in bottles.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the stories are descriptions of the sinful reality Lamar inhabits. At the same time, Lamar speaks from within that reality, and therefore presents himself as vulnerable to its destructive tendencies as well. As such, the song (including his embodiment of others’ stories) itself functions soteriologically.<sup>11</sup> Lamar does not simply represent his struggle against sin, but indeed performs that struggle in and through his music.

Thus, “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” is a musical performance of Metz’s soteriology, which is neither “purely argumentative” nor content to stop at rationally-deduced propositions, but rather represents the drama of salvation (and, truthfully, of theology itself). Lamar’s soteriology is unstable, resisting the pervasive influence of sin at the very moment that he performs his vulnerability to sin’s destruction and his ultimate inability to overcome sin on his own.<sup>12</sup> He expresses, we might say, a dialectic of resistance and vulnerability, which is the situation of a “good kid” in a “m.A.A.d city.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the theological resonances of his work are not important simply for understanding his musical project, but also make a contribution to theology itself. Following Metz, theological truth cannot be deduced from within the walls of the academy, but must ground itself in the dangerous memories that convey the ambiguity of speech about God. As such, my aim is to read Lamar in a way that problematizes abstract conceptions of salvation and reveals the danger of speaking about God.



LAMAR PERFORMING AT WAY OUT WEST IN AUGUST 2013  
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“PROMISE THAT YOU WILL SING ABOUT ME”:  
REPRESENTATION AT THE BOUNDARIES OF LIFE  
AND DEATH

“Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” is the penultimate track on Kendrick Lamar’s debut major-label album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012). Like every song on the album, it is a memoiristic portrayal of Lamar’s life in Compton. In many ways, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* is less a sequence of divergent tracks than it is a continuous, unified narrative of suffering, struggling, swaggering, sex, and much more. One hesitates to name a primary theme, for fear of obscuring other indispensable elements of the work; however, to the extent that we can venture to do so, we might draw on James H. Cone’s characterization of the spirituals and the blues: “Black music...is not an artistic creation for its own sake; rather, it tells us about the *feeling* and *thinking* of an African people, and the kinds of mental adjustments they had to make in order to survive in an alien land.”<sup>14</sup>

The particular focus of this study, “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” unfolds in two parts of about six minutes each. The first part opens with its hook: “When the lights shut off, and it’s my turn to settle down/My main concern: promise that you will sing about me.” Already, the Metzian resonances of this track come through, as the voice (perhaps Lamar’s but it is left somewhat unclear) implores someone (perhaps Lamar, perhaps the listener; again, it is not specified; as we shall see, the identity of both the voice and the addressee shift throughout the track in significant ways) to retell their story after they are gone. Even this opening line, simple as it is, conveys something important about the speaker: namely, that they feel compelled to consider how others will memorialize them. Important for a comparison with twentieth century philosophy and theology, the fact of death’s possibility (and even imminence) does not itself appear to be troubling; rather, what concerns this speaker is whether and how they will be remembered. Thus, it is already apparent that what we are hearing disrupts an abstract, existential mode of being in the world, in which the fear of death is the primary crisis of human existence.<sup>15</sup>

The following two verses present two stories of Lamar’s friends who have passed, suggesting an answer to the question of who it is that urges Lamar to sing about them. Both stories, however, are recounted in Lamar’s voice, presenting an interesting interplay between remembrance-ing (*Eingedenken*) and remembrance-er (i.e., the one who is remembering) that shall be explored in more depth below.<sup>16</sup> The theme suggested in the hook-of death’s imminent possibility, or, possible imminence-pervades the first verse. Beginning, “I woke up this morning and figured I’d call you/in case I’m not here tomorrow,” the verse’s “protagonist” is a gang member whose slain brother (identified in the previous track as Dave) was close with Lamar.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, we learn that Lamar held Dave as he died.<sup>18</sup> The verse centers around the inability of Dave’s brother to extricate himself from the gang life, which is presented as an irrevocable, almost intrinsic quality of his personhood. He draws upon the language of biology and disease, declaring his situation as the “prognosis of a problem child,” juxtaposed against Lamar’s musical “recovery.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, he has called Lamar to “borrow a peace of mind”; in other words, a brief (and temporary) respite from the ineradicable “piru shit [that’s] been in me forever.”<sup>20</sup> He displays a certain ambivalence about this condition. On the one hand, he acknowledges that he is “behind on what’s really important,” but he also describes his violent reaction to his brother’s murder in blood-chillingly mundane terms: “As blood spilled on your hands/my plan’s rather vindictive/...a demon glued to my back, whispering ‘get ‘em’/I got em/and I ain’t give a fuck.”

This verse’s seemingly contradictory dynamic exemplifies what I consider to be the central problematic of the song: being stuck in a seemingly irrevocable situation of violence, wherein resistance seems completely hopeless and passive acceptance inevitably results in death. There is a sense of proximity to death, evidenced by the verse’s opening, as well as its ending, in which Dave’s brother tells Lamar, “if I die before your album drop, I hope—before he is abruptly cut off by gun shots, and we are left to wonder for what he dared hope.”<sup>21</sup> His call to Lamar functions both to express that hope before the former’s

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impending death (to which he was especially vulnerable because of the conditions of his life), and to ensure an afterlife for his hope beyond bodily death. The desire to have one's story retold does not, in this instance, stem from vanity, but rather from the (perhaps unspoken) conviction that to be forgotten would be to reinforce the system responsible for one's death. If, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggest, "the capacity to be represented is the measure of power," then to insist upon posthumous representation is to hope that one might matter in death, even when one's life is systematically neglected and discarded.<sup>22</sup> This is the representation of the underside of Metz's *Eingedenken*, not the academic specialist seeking critical distance from bourgeois thought-forms, but the precarious subject himself anxious about the prospect of being posthumously disregarded.<sup>23</sup>

The second verse expresses similar themes—being stuck in cycles of destruction (and self-destruction) with death as a constant possibility—but in a somewhat modulated form. Here the "speaker" is the sister of Keisha, a slain teenaged prostitute whose story Lamar previously recounted (from a third person perspective) on the track, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)."<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the cordial tone of the previous verse, Keisha's sister criticizes Lamar for "judging her [sister's] past" by "put[ting] her on blast" in "Keisha's Song."<sup>25</sup> Immediately, though, the verse comes back to her present ("her past...well, it's completely my future"), as a prostitute for her sister's pimp. Juxtaposed with the first verse, her narration represents the second of two (gendered) roles available to Compton's children in situations of economic exigency: men can become gang members, and women can become prostitutes.<sup>26</sup> The latter shares the former's proximity to death; even as Keisha's sister proclaims that, "I'll probably live longer than you, and never fade away," she knows that her survival is at stake and in jeopardy ("I'm on the grind for this cake/I'ma get it or die trying"). Like Dave's brother, Keisha's sister characterizes her situation in biological terms, as a "family gene," thus underscoring its insurmountability.

Keisha's sister does not just criticize Lamar for using Keisha's story, but also calls into question the possibility articulated in the previous verse that Lamar's music might be a source of "recovery."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, her criticism of Lamar's previous attempt at representing black female experience articulates at the same time the possibility that the present representation will fail. This brings us to the second, and perhaps more important, layer of these opening verses: Lamar is not simply telling the story of others' but

is, in fact, telling us his own story through that very representation. Thus, we cannot simply read this as a portrayal of gendered navigation of the ghetto, but must also ask where Lamar is situating himself in this narrative matrix,



KENDRICK LAMAR AT GROÙE FREIHEIT 36, HAMBURG  
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

as well as what the track does for him; in other words, if the actual narrators of the two verses (whose words, it must be noted, we do not actually hear in an unmediated form) speak in order to both represent and resist their circumstances, what is being performed by Lamar's representation of those representations?<sup>28</sup>

To this point, we have seen that the opening two verses of "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" represent life on the boundaries of life, wherein death is constantly, to borrow a phrase from Tupac Shakur, just "around the corner."<sup>29</sup> The narrators narrate with the intent of reclaiming their humanity from death-dealing systems that have forced its negation, even as they acknowledge the ultimate impossibility of transforming their situation. It might, therefore, be unclear what the theological dimension of this track is.

As I have suggested, though, the primary locus of our analysis is not simply what is represented in those verses, but what is represented in Lamar's performance, which is explicitly framed not just in terms of death and life, but also of sin and redemption. Lamar's performance navigates the ghetto in search of redemption, which comes partially in and through his musical resistance to pervasive social sin, but ultimately only through a Messianic intervention that re-inaugurates, and thereby redeems, time itself.

### "I'M DYING OF THIRST": KENDRICK LAMAR'S SOTERIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Though this section of the paper deals primarily with the "Dying of Thirst" section of the track, we must begin our considerations with Lamar's verse in the "Sing About Me" section. As I have already suggested, Lamar's verse here marks the transition from the retelling of others' stories to a response to his deceased friends, as well as telling his own story. Indeed, Lamar situates himself within the social world of those whom we must sing about to keep alive, indicating the way in which the previous verses were also, in a meaningful way, "Lamar's verses," though this is the first one that directly expresses his perspective.

As with the previous two verses, Lamar is "infatuated with death" and aware of its proximity. Lamar himself confirmed in an interview with RapGenius that "that whole verse is about grasping the idea of death, for a kid [in Compton]." In the early part of the verse, he sounds a prayerful wish that "if I'm doomed/may the wound help my mother be blessed for many moons." This also captures an essential dialectic of the verse, and the song as a whole: Rap music functions both as "the wound," since his lyrics "make sure that my lifeline/reeking the scent of a reaper, ensuring my allegiance/with the otherside may come soon," and as a saving grace. Lamar suggests that the fate of his previous two interlocutors is "exactly what'd happen if I ain't continue rapping." Indeed, these stories form the basis of his music ("By any means, wasn't tryna offend or come between/her personal life, I was like, it need to be told"), and compel him to "count lives all on these songs" even as that very act draws danger to him. Lamar's self-implication in the cycle of destruction that killed his friends alters the meaning of the hook. No longer is the voice we hear simply the words that prompt Lamar to make the track; we now hear Lamar addressing himself to his listeners,

bringing us under the obligation of telling his story, precisely as he has done for others, in the (not inconceivable) event of his death. The conclusion of the verse sounds a poignantly simple challenge: "Am I worth it?/Did I put enough work in?"

Unlike the previous two verses, the nearness of death is conceived in soteriological terms. Lamar hopes to "hear a cry out from heaven so loud it can water down a demon/with the holy ghost 'till it drown in the blood of Jesus." It becomes clear, throughout this verse and into the "Dying of Thirst" section, that Lamar does not simply figure his situation in terms of suffering and pleasure (as one might wrongly surmise from tracks like "Swimming Pools (Drank)" and "m.A.A.d. city"), but precisely as sin and repentance, a reading that becomes more apparent with Maya Angelou's intervention at the end of the song ("See, you young men are dying of thirst. Do you know what that means? That means you need water, holy water. You need to be baptized with the spirit of the Lord").

Following a brief dramatic interlude (the significance of which we shall examine later), the track transitions into



GRAFFITI OF JESUS AT CORSO DI PORTA TICINESE (MILAN)  
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“Dying of Thirst.” The tempo speeds up as the “Dying of Thirst” beat rises underneath the frustrated final words of the interlude: “Fuck, I’m tired of this shit! I’m tired of fuckin’ runnin’, I’m tired of this shit!”<sup>30</sup> Lamar takes up this refrain (“tired of runnin’”), interspersing each repetition with an esophageal “uh,” as if to indicate a breathlessness induced by the *accelerando*. Lamar rehashes familiar scenes: casualties of gang violence,<sup>31</sup> unfulfilled hopes,<sup>32</sup> and his own sense of being trapped in sinful structures.<sup>33</sup> Here the operation of his music as resistance to sin is made explicit, as he “hope(s) we can tower/over the city with vanity with the music louder,” using success as an artist to drown out the sounds of gang violence. More specifically, he promises to “show you how to/dye your thirst,” suggesting that the expressions of “a black flower” (and here he evokes Tupac’s “The Rose that Grew From Concrete”) cannot *eliminate* sin, but can mitigate its influence.

This is a crucially important bar, insofar as it captures the central thrust of Lamar’s soteriological argument: Lamar’s music performatively constitutes itself as a necessary but not sufficient soteriological mechanism. This is to say, Lamar’s struggle for salvation from conditions of social sin takes place in and through his performance, rendering the performance soteriologically obligatory, but that salvation is not complete. Thus, though the second half of “Dying of Thirst” becomes increasingly, and more traditionally, soteriological, it would be wrong to read Lamar as advocating a simple “conversion.”<sup>34</sup> Though his final exhortation (citing his mother) is to “hop in that water, and pray that it works,” Lamar is not advocating an abstract “acceptance” of God’s grace as an entirely soteriologically efficacious act. Without attempting to situate Lamar’s logic of salvation within the Protestant-Catholic divide, one might read Lamar as saying that we cannot do nothing in our salvation. For Lamar, salvation is a struggle, a drama, a project, something that must be continually *enacted*. Importantly, Lamar’s soteriology questions its own efficacy, containing within itself a reflexive awareness of the possibility of its own failure. Because the struggle for salvation is tied to certain social con-

ditions, it is not a purely individual project, but one that we as listeners are exhorted to become partners in. Indeed, perhaps one of the effects of Lamar’s track is to enter into a relationship with those distant from himself, giving soteriology a translational character that implicates us all in each others’ salvation. We are called to discern our complicity in the perpetuation of sinful structures and reminded that our salvation is conditioned by the eradication of all sin. Lamar’s track is a call, which demands a response from those with ears to hear.

Lamar performs Metz’s critique of soteriology in another crucial respect: He ties redemption from sin with the anticipation of a future messianic intervention. As previously noted, the two sections of the track are divided by a skit that dramatizes the reaction of Dave’s brother to Dave’s death. Following Lamar’s “Dying of Thirst” verses, we return to that scene, but this time we hear a new voice: Maya Angelou, who recognizes that the boys are “dying of thirst” through their sin, and leads them through a version of the Sinner’s Prayer, pronouncing this action as “the start of a new life: your real life.” Of course, we know, or can at least suspect, that this did not actually happen, as we have already seen how Dave’s brother reacts.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Angelou’s intervention should be understood as Lamar’s imaginative dramatization of salvation itself, one that projects hope for a messianic future through the conjuring of a redeemed past. By dramatizing a past in which the arrival of death was not inevitable (for Dave’s brother, and, by extension, for Lamar himself), Lamar expresses hope in a future in which redemption is possible. In other words, Lamar imagines a salvific life where “death doesn’t reside” not as eternal life, but as “real life.”<sup>35</sup> Though he is not sure the water will work, he yearns for the intervention of someone who might give him a new life, a real life.<sup>36</sup> Further, despite the usage of a fairly standard evangelical prayer, I would suggest that to see Lamar as advocating a purely interiorized “acceptance” of Jesus Christ’s salvific status is a misreading. To the contrary, we must understand this skit in the context of what Lamar has already shown us regard-

*“By dramatizing a past in which the arrival of death was not inevitable (for Dave’s brother, and, by extension, for Lamar himself), Lamar expresses hope in a future in which redemption is possible.”*

ing the soteriological status of his music. Angelou's intervention represents a messianic vision of a life beyond the constraints of death's nearness. Salvation, then, is not "heaven" or "sinlessness," but rather life itself. Only with the coming of the Messiah will life not be tainted by the proximity of death, as it is elsewhere in the track. The hope in a messianic intervention does not negate the imperative of political and aesthetic struggle against sin (which is what the rest of the track does), but merely emphasizes that ultimate soteriological efficacy lays beyond the boundaries of struggle alone. Thus, Lamar's track functions as a "witness for the future" of redemption, without legitimizing the present on the basis of the future's possibility.<sup>37</sup>

We have seen the contribution that theological analysis can make to an appreciation of "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst"; what can theological discourse learn from Lamar's track? On one level, the contribution is obvious: Lamar's performance is an enactment of Metz's criticism, a demonstration of what a soteriology looks like when it refuses to be, because it cannot be, "purely argumentative." Another way of putting this (one that resonates with Metz's own language and the language of the Frankfurt School) is that Lamar's track is an example of a non-mythological soteriology. But on a deeper level, I want to suggest that Lamar's track functions as a critique of the theological enterprise itself. Once we acknowledge that Lamar is *doing* theology, we have already destabilized the hegemonic claim of the academy to be a privileged domain of Theology as such. Indeed, to even portray theology as something that must be *done* (understanding this verb in its most active sense) requires that we consider the possibility of theology beyond the academy. In so doing, we must distance ourselves from the label "theologian," at least to the extent that we acknowledge that a "theologian" might not simply be one who studies, teaches, and writes theology in an academic context. I see this self-critical distancing as a positive move, insofar as it urges us to continually discern whether we are truly *doing* theology, in conversation with the painful losses, unfulfilled hopes, and subversive beauty of the world we cohabit,<sup>38</sup> or whether we are simply going through the motions, however artfully, in a space that is ultimately not innocent.<sup>39</sup>

Reading Lamar's performative soteriology next to Metz's interruptive theodicy suggests that questioning the possibility of theology is an essential precondition of theology itself. Theology cannot simply seek to include the excluded (though it should certainly do this), but must also de-center hegemonic notions of what it is to do theology, essen-

tially undermining its own validity. Discourses of "inclusion," while not altogether unhelpful, risk maintaining the centrality of Theology, hegemonically understood, and merely establishing terms of entry for marginal voices.<sup>40</sup> The reading of "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" that I have proposed here challenges us to go beyond inclusion to re-conceptualizing theology itself, a move that I suggest is prefigured in Metz (though he remains rather vague about what such a theology beyond Theology might look like, and continues to do theology in a basically conventional way).

Lamar presents an alternative foundation upon which to build the theological guild: Rather than seeking to produce praiseworthy essays and books, or to bring people to conversion, the task of the theologian is to sing a song of hope in a world of sin, to attempt to demonstrate how to "dye your thirst" without resorting to naïve platitudes. Such a task is, as Metz suggests, basically apologetic, a defense of (Christian) hope that does not prescind from the darkness of history but rather struggles against it.<sup>41</sup> The theologian poses "disturbing questions" as a practical strategy for survival, carrying on the cause of the forgotten past while anticipating the real life of the salvific future.<sup>42</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History*, 253-264.
2. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 19-20.
3. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 109ff, 200ff.
4. Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Post-Bourgeois World* 1-16.
5. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 46-47, 60-70, 183-237.
6. Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, 56ff.
7. Metz, *Memoria passionis: eine provozierendes Gedachtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*, 57.
8. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 73.
9. From the 2012 album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Though the title is somewhat lengthy, I will continue to cite it in full due to the structure of the track, which consists of two distinct sections that could function as songs in their own right. The first repeats the refrain “promise that you will sing about me,” while the second is organized around the repetition of “dying of thirst.” Thus, to avoid the perception that I am referring to only the first half of the track, I will refer to it by its full title. See the full lyrics (with crowd-sourced annotations) here: <http://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-sing-about-me-im-dying-of-thirst-lyrics>.
10. Lamar, “Swimming Pools (Drank)-Extended Version,” *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (2012).
11. See also his “Poetic Justice” on the same album: “I could never right my wrongs unless I write it down, for real.”
12. Cf. Walter Benjamin’s “Theses,” in which “the Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist,” (p. 255). I read Kendrick’s resistance to history’s un-redeemed status alongside the salvific intervention of Maya Angelou at the song’s ending in a similar manner. The salvation Kendrick envisions is not merely a positive state of redemption, but an overcoming of social sin.
13. This framing is supported by the meanings of the acronym “m.A.A.d,” which signifies both “My Angry Adolescence Divided” and “My Angels on Angel Dust.” Both meanings (as well as the word as it is vocalized: “mad city”) represent the dialectic I describe here, of a subject who seeks to resist destructive social influences while simultaneously participating in them.
14. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, 98 (emphasis original). To be sure, this description cannot be uncritically appropriated in this case. For instance, Kendrick does not necessarily understand his project as navigating “an alien land” (Compton is his home), and one can debate what the label “an African people” might mean in terms of Kendrick’s musical project. Still, Kendrick’s album is, broadly speaking, an expression of the thinking and feeling of the good kid navigating a mad city. Moreover, though Kendrick seems to display a deeply-engrained need to be in the studio, creating, he has repeatedly emphasized that he intends his music to have a broader impact. It is thus not “an artistic creation for its own sake,” but rather a project that grapples with, and seeks to resist, concrete conditions of suffering.
15. J. Matthew Ashley describes how Metz’s theology seeks to move beyond an abstract problematic of finite/infinite: “Just as the *Seinsfrage* for Heidegger and Rahner irritates us, keeps us from closing ourselves off in some finite realm of beings in our attempts to understand what it means to be human, so in Metz’s thought does the theodicy question irritate us. It keeps us from falling into the various exculpation strategies which entrap us in the dialectic of enlightenment, opening up instead the possibility of a different existentiell stance toward our involvement in the world and history,” (p. 160). See also Metz in “Communicating a Dangerous Memory”: “The basic theological question...is not ‘who saves me?’ but rather, ‘who saves you?’...the question, ‘what dare I hope?’ is transformed for me into the question, ‘what dare I hope for you, and, in the end, also for me?’” (p. 40). This is not precisely what is expressed here, in the opening moments of “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” but it does shed light on Metz’s re-orientation of theological reflection towards the voices of those who suffer. Moreover, the perspective heard in Kendrick’s track, which is alien to the more theoretical fundamental anthropologies of thinkers like Rahner and Heidegger, validates Metz’s claim that sensitivity to dangerous memory presents an interruptive challenge to “mainstream” theology, a challenge that cannot go unanswered.
16. *Eingedenken* is a German neologism coined by Metz most nearly meaning “remembrance-ing” in the liturgical sense of “do this in memory of me.” See Metz, *See A Passion for God*, p. 181, n. 10; and Ashley, p. 161-162.
17. See “Swimming Pools (Drank).”
18. “You ran outside when you heard my brother cry for help/ held him like a newborn baby, and made him feel/like everything was alright.”
19. “In actuality, it’s a trip how we trip off of colors/I wonder if I’ll ever discover/A passion like you and recover.”
20. “Piru” refers to a street in Compton that is associated with the Bloods. Dave’s brother is underscoring his quasi-intrinsic inability to resist the gang life. It is crucially important to that his somewhat biological language not be equated to racist stereotypes of black criminality that often cite gang activity as “evidence.” The fact that he is unable to extricate himself from cycles of gang violence should not imply a negative moral judgment against him. Indeed, that Kendrick embodies the narration of a gang member (who, in this very verse, admits to killing a rival gang member) and, later, a prostitute, demonstrates that his intent is not to moralize, but rather to humanize.
21. Cf. J. Kameron Carter’s discussion of abjection as “a figure neither of life nor death but of living death” in “The politics of the atonement,” *The Immanent Frame*, July 18th, 2011, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/07/18/the-politics-of-the-atonement/>. See also his (theological) genealogy of racialized “death-bound subjects” in *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2008), p. 79-121, especially 118-121.
22. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 2002), p. 27. Tupac Shakur, whose music serves as a major influence on Kendrick,



articulates the (un)representation of black people (specifically men) as a socio-political problem. See, for instance, “My Block” (“Only time they notice a n\*\*\*\*a is when he’s clutchin on a four-five”), “Me Against the World” (“What’s the use/unless we shootin/no one notices the youth”), and “Thugz Mansion” (“No one knows my struggle/they only see the trouble”). Tupac also expresses the emotional dimension of society’s disregard for black men in an early poem: “[The world] is painful and sad and sometimes I cry/and no one cares about why.” See “Sometimes I Cry” in *The Rose that grew From Concrete* (Pocket Books: New York, NY, 1999), p. 7. Though Kendrick’s album (and especially this track) tends to stay in the register of narration rather than manifesto, the socio-political dimensions that Tupac articulates are undoubtedly present.

23. I borrow the concept of “precarity” from Judith Butler, who takes it to mean the basic state of physical vulnerability that is the precondition of embodied, socio-political existence. Butler suggests that the unequal social distribution of precarity (i.e., certain people and groups of people are systematically more susceptible to physical violence and death than others) inscribes a “hierarchy of grief,” in which the nation-state reproduces itself via public adjudication of whose life is grievable, and, thus, which people are people. See Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso: New York, NY, 2006), p. 19-49.
24. See Kendrick’s debut studio album, *Section.80* (2011).
25. It’s unclear if Keisha’s sister objects to a particular element of the song (one could imagine her taking issue with the ending, in which Kendrick plays the song for his little sister as a cautionary tale) or the fact that Kendrick made the song at all. Nonetheless, her objection to being represented stands in stark contrast to the previous verse, as well as the song’s hook.
26. Indeed, Keisha’s sister (or, perhaps here the voice of Kendrick) frames her prostitution as “a family gene that shows women how to be woman.” Prostitution, for her, functions pedagogically, to inscribe and reinforce particular gendered performances.
27. “You lying to these motherfuckers, talking ‘bout you can help them with my story/You can help me if you sell this pussy for me, n\*\*\*\*a.”
28. Another question that must be asked is what is left out of Kendrick’s representations. It would be a mistake to entirely identify Kendrick’s re-narration of their narrations with the narrations (and, even more so, experiences) themselves, and thus it is important to discern what is excluded. A full exploration of this dimension of representation, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Kendrick represents these narrations in order to express something about himself, and to do something; it is that “something” which constitutes the primary focus of this essay.
29. See Tupac, “Death Around the Corner,” *Me Against The World* (1995).
30. As we shall see, these are the words of Dave’s brother (the slain gang member voiced by Kendrick in the track’s first verse). We finally hear, in his own words, the anger he over the murder of his brother that he communicated to Kendrick, anger that, as we already know, leads him to kill in revenge, and ultimately

leads to his death.

31. “Daughter is dead, mother is mournin’ her.”
32. “Dreams of balling, like Spalding/but only shotty bounce.”
33. “It’s hard to channel your energy when you know you’re crooked/Banana split, split his banana pudding/I’m like Tre, that’s Cuba Gooding/I know I’m good at dying of thirst/dying of thirst/dying of thirst.”
34. The final two verses of “Dying of Thirst” (according to the numbering on RapGenius) declare that “hell is hot, fire is proven/to burn for eternity.” Interestingly, Kendrick returns to the use of biological language, terming his sinfulness “hereditary, all my cousins/dying of thirst, dying of thirst, dying of thirst.” In the final verse, Kendrick’s rapping is actually interrupted by a plea for redemption (“Lord, forgive me for all my sins for I do not know...”), and the track’s final lyrics are Kendrick’s recollection: “Back once my momma say/see a pastor, give me a promise/what if today was the rapture and you completely tarnished/the truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest/you dying of thirst, you dying of thirst/so hop in that water, and pray that it works.”
35. See Nas’s remix of Tupac’s “Thugz Mansion,” *God’s Son* (2002).
36. Cf. The track “Real” on *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (2012).
37. Pierre Bouretz, *Witnesses For The Future: Philosophy and Messianism*, 6-11, 200ff. The phrase “witnesses for the future” is found in a 1927 letter from Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, in which history is described “as a trial in which man as an advocate for mute nature makes a complaint against the nonappearance of the promised Messiah. The court, however, decides to hear witnesses for the future.” The artist, then, produces a vision of the future as a witness for messianic hope, even when the rest of society has left the courtroom entirely.
38. I evoke “cohabitation” rather than “inhabitation” in keeping Butler’s understanding of our political existence as constituted by the condition of sharing the world with others with whom we did not choose to cohabit. See Butler’s *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press: New York, NY, 2012), p. 23-24, 43-44, 125-131, 151-180.
39. Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blind Spots in Contemporary Theology*, 1-16.
40. Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blind Spots in Contemporary Theology*, 113-123.
41. See the introduction to *Faith in History and Society*. I put Christian in parenthesis because I do not believe that this reading of Kendrick’s soteriological vision need be relegated to a particular religious tradition, though obviously it may not apply equally well for all traditions.
42. Metz, *A Passion for God*, p. 66.
- 43.

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