



### good community, m.A.A.d country

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**Citation:**

Kokkerala, Arnav. "good community, m.A.A.d country," *The Palo Alto Scholar J+A+C+I+D 21(3)*, The Palo Alto Scholars Institute.

<https://www.paloaltoscholar.com/downloads>

**Editor:** The Palo Alto Scholar Editorial Staff

**Received:** October 3, 2021

**Accepted:** October 18, 2021

**Published:** December 16, 2021

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*The Palo Alto Scholar  
Journal of Art + Culture + Innovation + Design  
for Pre-Collegiate Students*

Research-Based Essays, Critical Essays &  
Literary Non-Fiction  
Published by The Palo Alto Scholars Institute  
Palo Alto, California USA  
[paloaltoscholar.com](http://paloaltoscholar.com)

In the latter part of the twentieth century, an influx of addictive drugs from illegal trafficking rings plagued the United States. Urban centers such as Compton, a city south of downtown Los Angeles, arguably suffered the most as residents there had a much higher chance of being involved with substance abuse than in other communities like suburbs or rural towns. Not only did this damage the personal lives of those affected by the drug epidemic, but high drug use was also associated with increased incarceration rates. This by itself created a nearly intractable problem, an endless cycle where the poor can hardly escape, but what makes it worse is that the issue is further split along the lines of race as people in this situation are most often African American.

Due to the Rodney King influenced race riots in the early 1990s and the tenuous trial of O.J. Simpson in the mid-1990s, relations between the Los Angeles Police Department and African Americans were at their least amicable during this time. Police continued to enforce the law more strictly in these communities, and this entailed the continued practice of arresting or harassing Black citizens who had not done anything wrong or had committed extremely minor crimes. This in turn exacerbated the cyclic oppression of those in poverty, making it extremely rare for someone to make it out.

That is what makes Kendrick L. Duckworth, better known as Kendrick Lamar, so special. By witnessing these circumstances firsthand and maturing through this experience, he was able to walk a different path from many of his peers in the Compton community and become a world-famous hip-hop artist. In one of his chart-topping albums, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar reflects on his life growing



up in Compton. Released in 2012, the album is a window into the life of someone who experienced growing up in the street. His powerful lyrics and impressive storytelling reveal the extenuating circumstances of living in an impoverished neighborhood; most importantly, it illustrates how systematic racism and police oppression, along with the aftermath of the race riots in Los Angeles and a constant influx of drugs, created a continuous cycle of poverty and incarceration that damaged African American communities like Compton.

In March 1991, a car chase occurred in which Rodney King was evading the Los Angeles police because he did not want to be arrested and thereby violate his parole. When he was stopped by the police officers, he was violently beaten. The whole event was caught on camera and the video was and still is seen by millions worldwide. Although the police used brutal force on an unarmed man, they were not put on trial until April, 1992. On top of that, the four officers were acquitted despite the irrefutable video evidence of the event. This outraged African Americans as they felt that there was no possibility for justice if the stunning video of the merciless beating was insufficient evidence to convict. They felt the outcome showed equally clearly the systematic bias against African Americans. It also did not help that the jury was composed of only two minorities: one Asian and one Hispanic, while the other ten jurors were white (Los Angeles Riots).

As a direct result of the trial decision, the Rodney King race riots began. After just a few days, 50 civilians were dead, 2300 were injured, and there was \$1 billion in damage. The riots were catastrophic and were broadcast across the entire country and around the world. Just one day after the riots began, the mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, declared a state of emergency. National and state military forces were deployed in the region to contain the rebellion. Just five days after the riots started, George Bush



declared that Los Angeles was a federal disaster area (Los Angeles Riots).

The African American community made it clear that they would not sit back and tolerate this unjust verdict. This sentiment was largely attributed to the frustration that the mostly white Los Angeles police force was unaccountable for racially profiling African Americans and Hispanics, in addition to resorting to violence against them more often than against other races. The anger African Americans felt was so strong that the uproar only stopped once Rodney King himself called for an end to the violence. As a result of the riots, Tom Bradley, who was the city's first African American mayor, decided not to run again because he felt disheartened. This meant that African Americans lost a leader who they knew would pay mind to their concerns. Furthermore, these riots strained relations between the police and African Americans beyond even what they were before, so occurrences of police brutality did not wane (Los Angeles Riots). Still, the Rodney King outrage did crystalize the moment in time and ensure that the incident would be known historically for this powerful response in protest.

These experiences affected Lamar just like they did every other African American in the Los Angeles area. In the second verse of the song "good kid," Lamar comments on the issues he has had with the police for being the color he is:

*All I see is strobe lights, blindin' me in my hindsight  
Findin' me by myself, promise me you can help  
In all honesty I got time to be copacetic until  
You had finally made decision to hold me against my will  
It was like a head-on collision that folded me standing still  
I can never pick out the difference and grade a cop on the bill  
Every time you clock in the morning, I feel you just want to kill  
All my innocence while ignorin' my purpose to persevere*



*As a better person; I know you heard this and probably in fear  
But what am I 'posed to do when the blinkin' of red and blue  
Flash from the top of your roof and your dog has to say woof  
And you ask: "Lift up your shirt," because 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  
I heard 'em chatter: "He's prob'ly young, but I know that he's down  
Step on his neck as hard as your bullet-proof vest  
He don't mind, he know we'll never respect  
The good kid, m.A.A.d. City (Lamar)*

The main point of this lament resonates throughout but can be gleaned from just a few parts, one of which is the ending in which Lamar says: "Step on his neck as hard as your bullet-proof vest/ He don't mind, he know we'll never respect/ The good kid, m.A.A.d. City." This last lyric embodies how many police officers have viewed and treated African Americans, so the fact that Lamar can address the matter eloquently demonstrates how it has been a large part of his own life as well. This is important because it means that the situations that citizens in Compton have to live through are the same ones he had to endure himself. By speaking about it in his music, he brings light to the issues and communicates the trepidation and distrust that many African Americans feel when around those who are meant to protect them.

Like police brutality led to the race riots of the early 1990s, the drug crisis in Los Angeles that plagued impoverished neighborhoods damaged many African American communities there. Between 1984 and 1990, the crack epidemic reached its peak in the United States. The crack form of cocaine was highly addictive for those who took it and highly profitable for those who sold it. As crack cocaine rose in popularity, one of the main areas where it saw high use was in Los Angeles, which thereby implied Compton being



directly adjacent. Since crack was so cheap, it was far more accessible to impoverished families than regular cocaine was. This meant that this substance was easy to abuse and created a cycle for some families in which parents could not stop resorting to the drug. Sadly, this drug was not the only one of its kind that had a strong negative impact on under-resourced families in Los Angeles; around this same time, drugs administered by injection, certain types of opioids, ravaged families in cities like Compton as well (The Crack Epidemic).

According to a scientific study on the use of injection-based drugs in cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles, 71% of the people in the 1990's birth cohort began to use these narcotics (Bluthenthal). Furthermore, in the 1980's and 1990's birth cohorts the researchers found that it was taking less time between the first instance of the injection-based drug use and the first conviction for it. This led to a higher incarceration rate than seen in previous years. This was not helped by the fact that many methadone clinics for heroin addicts were allegedly overbilling the government, which showed that they valued profit over helping their patients. In particular, they were "cited over the years for numerous shortcomings, including inadequate counseling, shortages of medical services and poor record-keeping," which kept drug addicts in this vicious cycle (CLINICS INVESTIGATED). Due to the inability to escape drug addiction, it was harder for residents to escape poverty: making this a generational issue. Lastly, the researchers found that just being African American had a strong correlation with substance abuse. Thus, the researchers clearly believe that demographics should be addressed in relation to this issue (Bluthenthal).

The issue of race is further seen ten miles north of Compton on Skid Row, an area in downtown Los Angeles that has 11,000 residents, 85% of whom are African American (Rymer). Also, 80% of the residents



are men and 4000/11,000 of the people who live on Skid Row are homeless. However, where the real issue lies is in the fact that 70% of the people in the Skid Row neighborhood have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, which then means that anywhere from 40-82% of the African American population in the area has a history of drug or alcohol abuse. Furthermore, 33% of Skid Row citizens have some type of mental illness, which suggests that if these individuals also happened to use drugs it would be even harder for them to recover. Finally, relating back to the race riots, the Los Angeles Police Department arrests those on Skid Row at a higher frequency for minor crimes, and they will often stop people without reasonable suspicion (Rymer).

Like the race issues that were previously discussed, the drug crisis that was present in Compton also played a big part in Lamar's life. In the "Art of Peer Pressure," Lamar says,

*Yeah, ni\*\*a, we off a pill and Remy Red  
Come through and bust ya head, ni\*\*a!  
Me and the homies  
Sag all the way to the liquor store  
Where my ni\*\*as pour up 4 and get twisted some more  
Me and the homies (Lamar)*

In these lyrics, Lamar claims that when he is with his friends he takes drugs and he drinks, which reflects a theme throughout the song as seen with the repeated phrase "me and the homies". This illustrates the issue of the prevalence of drug use in areas like Compton and the perceived social norm and acceptability of partaking in such things. Since many families could not escape substance abuse, it necessarily became a large part of life in these communities that Lamar grew up in and around. Once again, being directly affected by this situation allows Lamar to speak on the issue. With the compelling way that he is able to string together



words to tell a story, it is hard not to sympathize with him and by proxy, the rest of Compton.

It was in these conditions that Kendrick Lamar grew up: witnessing his community in crisis, forced into the gang culture that formed as a result. Growing up at the time, Lamar was exposed to many of the largest figures in hip-hop like Tupac, DMX, and Nas, and he became involved in music from a young age. Some of the earliest rapping Lamar remembers was when he was thirteen; Lamar claims, at that young age, he would rap about killing people and selling drugs because that was what he grew up around and what was considered "cool" (Duckworth). Around this same time, when he was in seventh grade, his teacher asked him why he did not broaden his horizons in terms of what he read and to whom he spoke. This changed Lamar's view on life and continued to inspire him to become more than what he already was. Thus, as he got older and matured, Lamar realized that his music could be more than about killing and drugs. He could actually speak about something with greater meaning and substance (Duckworth). Therefore, this culture he grew up around is heavily mentioned in his music, and his commentary is profound.

With his own life experiences as his inspiration, Lamar set about making his album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, which Lamar says is "not only a reflection of him but also of the people he grew up around" (Duckworth). Furthermore, the album cover itself is a visual representation of his life, as it is a Polaroid photo of him with his two uncles on the left and his grandfather on the right in a small austere house. When Lamar was creating the album, he made the songs and the lyrics the embodiment of himself, causing many to consider it as an autobiography of sorts. The most important message in the album, however, is not necessarily the tragic aspects of his life, but rather how he escaped them and managed to make his way out of the situation he was born into. This message is seen in the song "Real" in a call from his father, who tries to tell him that the





street life is not the best way to live:

*Kenny, I ain't trippin' off them dominoes anymore  
Just calling, sorry to hear what happened to your homeboy  
But don't learn the hard way like I did, homie  
Any ni\*\*a can kill a man, that don't make you a real ni\*\*a  
Real is responsibility  
Real is taking care of your motherfucking family  
Real is God, ni\*\*a (Lamar).*

This moment is indicative of a pivotal time in Lamar's youth when he realized that being in a gang and being involved with the lifestyle it entailed was not what he wanted to do with his life. Instead, he was able to work hard enough and harness his talent to make a career out of creating powerful, storytelling music. By having this message come from his father, Lamar shows that there is hope for kids in Compton, using a father-figure to represent the light at the end of the tunnel.

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Lamar wanted to show African American youth in Compton that he grew up living the same life they did, yet he was able to emerge from it and become one of the most influential contemporary hip-hop artists. One of his prevailing goals throughout his career has been being a beacon of hope for those kids and showing them that anything is possible if they work hard enough and are not discouraged by their circumstances. This is a goal that he works on along with three other West Coast artists: Ab-Soul, Jay Rock, and Schoolboy Q. The four musicians formed a music supergroup called Black Hippy after all signing to the record label Top Dawg Entertainment. All four artists are a family of sorts and Lamar's "three brothers" acknowledge his dreams of bettering Compton and help him in his process so that one day Lamar's desires will become a reality (Duckworth).





With this in mind, it makes Lamar's imagery on the album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* all the more powerful as he discusses the circumstances that made it so difficult as a black youth in an impoverished area like Compton. Racial discrimination and rampant drug abuse created an oppressive system within the community where Lamar grew up, so, through this album and his community work, Lamar aims to represent the plight of others like him. He gives hope to future generations who aspire to escape the claws of the beast that is this cycle of poverty.



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