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ENGL 1105 - Fez Fessenden

## Alls My Life I Had to Fight: The Power of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright"

Introduction:

Released in 2015, Kendrick Lamar's song "Alright," from his critically acclaimed album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, delivers a powerful message of resilience, hope, and defiance in the face of oppression and personal struggles. At its core, the song asserts that despite the challenges faced by Black communities—such as police brutality, racial discrimination, and economic inequality—there is hope for the future. The purpose of "Alright" extends beyond personal empowerment; it serves as a social and political anthem that speaks to the ongoing struggles of marginalized groups, particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Lamar's lyrics acknowledge the pain and suffering these communities endure while emphasizing the importance of faith and hope as tools for resistance. While Lamar's intended audience is broad, the song particularly resonates with young Black Americans directly affected by the issues he addresses. "Alright" became a defining anthem during protests against police brutality, reflecting the broader social context in which it was released.

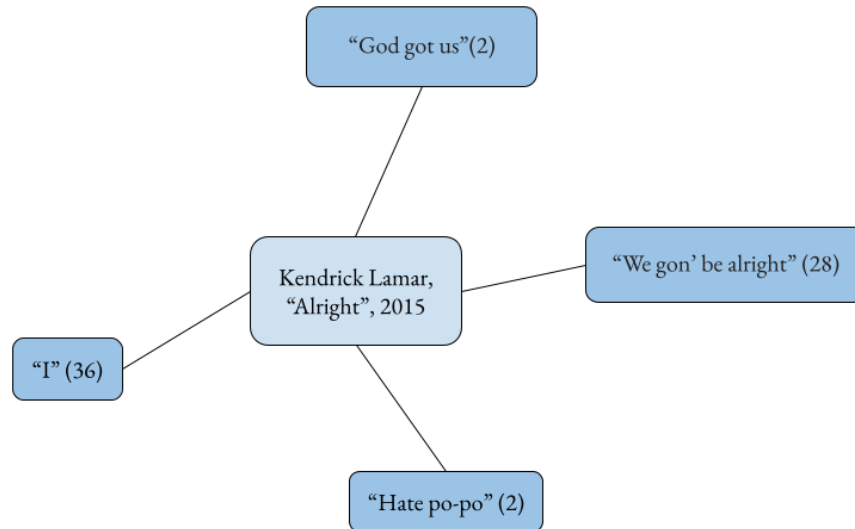
## Phase 1 - Semantic

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Orange: Phase 3 - Affinity-Based

Red: Phase 4 - Choric



Kendrick Lamar’s song "Alright" is a powerful piece that expresses his emotions, illustrating his struggle with a corrupt system—something that resonates with many others. He uses several key terms to enhance the strength of his message and ignite a sense of resistance in his listeners.

The most notable phrase in “Alright” is “We gon’ be alright.” Its repetition emphasizes its importance, acting as a mantra for those struggling to survive in a world filled with oppression. These words offer the listener a sense of hope, even in the face of adversity. Lamar's choice of "we" instead of "I'm" broadens the reach of his message, shifting the focus from his personal experience to a collective struggle, uniting those who are enduring similar hardships.

“Hate po-po” is another strong phrase that reflects Lamar’s relationship with law enforcement. Growing up as a young African American in Compton, CA, Lamar had numerous

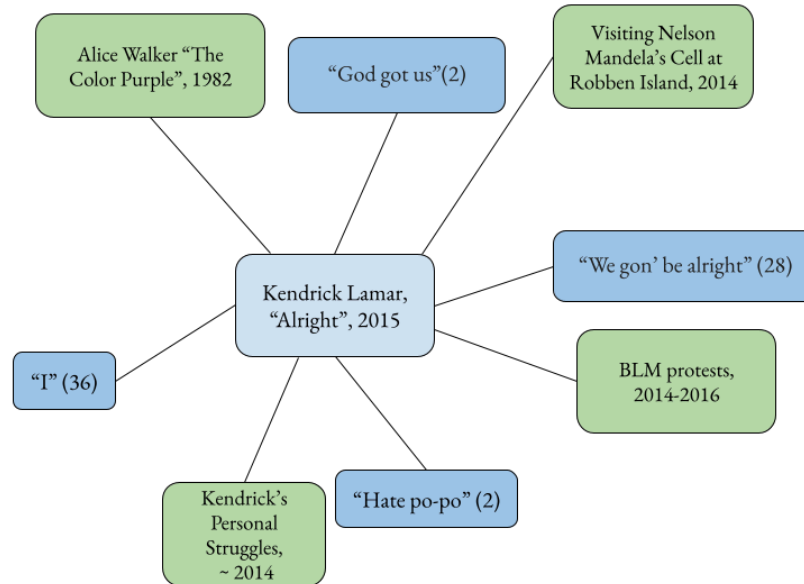
negative encounters with the police, including instances of racial profiling and wrongful arrests. The phrase "Hate po-po" also resonates with the protestors of the Black Lives Matter and Ferguson protests, a major period of unrest following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, underscoring the systemic issues Lamar and others have faced.

In addition to "We gon' be alright," Lamar repeatedly uses the phrase "God got us" to convey his faith in religion. His deeply rooted devotion to God serves as a source of strength, providing a spiritual anchor for him and anyone facing oppression or hardship. The repetition of "God got us" reinforces the belief in divine protection, offering hope for the future.

Lastly, Lamar highlights the word "I." Much of his work reflects on his personal experiences growing up as a young man. This introspective approach makes him a relatable figure, someone who is "in the same shoes" as his listeners. By speaking from a first-person perspective, Lamar adds credibility and authenticity to his music.

## Phase 2 - Bibliographic

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Red: Phase 4 - Choric



Kendrick Lamar drew inspiration for his song "Alright" from various sources, events, and personal experiences. While there is no single, direct source of inspiration, several key influences can be identified. These include the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, his visit to Nelson Mandela's cell, *The Color Purple*, and Lamar's personal struggles, among others.

One of Lamar's most significant sources of inspiration is his own experiences. As a young man, Lamar constantly faced numerous hardships. Police brutality, gang violence, and racial profiling were, and still are, major issues for many African American people in his neighborhood and across America. Compton, where Lamar grew up, was a violent environment,

especially unhealthy for a young boy. These personal challenges contribute to the song's central theme of perseverance. Despite facing obstacles from all directions, Lamar survived and rose to become one of the most well-known artists in his genre.

Between 2014 and 2016, the BLM movement reached its peak. Following the deaths of numerous African Americans due to police brutality, people gathered to form what is now known as the Black Lives Matter movement. Protests erupted in major cities like Baltimore and New York City, and professional athletes made powerful statements by kneeling during the National Anthem and speaking out against violence. During this period, Lamar drew from the injustice he and others had experienced, transforming it into a powerful and inspiring message that resonated with many. The chant “We gon’ be alright” became a rallying cry during the BLM protests.

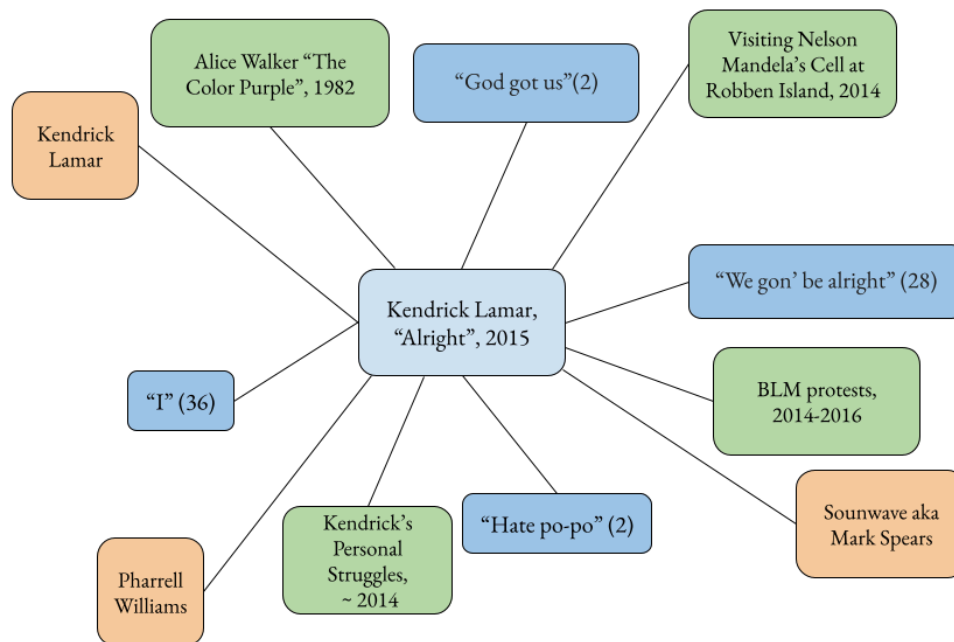
After visiting Nelson Mandela’s cell in South Africa, Lamar reflected on Mandela’s perseverance, stating, “This man, fighting for equality, served 27 years—18 months in that little cell—but still kept his mental capacity, his integrity, and his enthusiasm to motivate not only himself but the people around him. It inspired me a hundred percent.” Mandela’s strength and fortitude during such challenging times deeply moved Lamar, motivating him to express similar emotions through his music, which ultimately contributed to the creation of *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

Lastly, Lamar draws inspiration from Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, directly quoting a line from the book. The novel tells the story of an African American woman’s journey of self-realization between 1909 and 1947 in rural Georgia. Lamar opens his song with the line “Alls my life I had to fight,” setting the tone of his piece from the start. This reference to Walker's work allows Lamar to evoke themes of resilience, endurance, and spiritual survival, drawing parallels between the struggles depicted in the novel and the collective struggle of the

Black community. Like the protagonist in *The Color Purple*, Black people have had to fight against injustice, poverty, and discrimination to survive.

### Phase 3 - Affinity-Based

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Red: Phase 4 - Choric



Along with Kendrick Lamar, the song "Alright" was co-produced by artist Pharrell Williams and engineer Sounwave. Together, Williams and Sounwave created the beat used in "Alright," with both Lamar and Williams contributing vocals to the track. The song exemplifies the collaborative nature of music-making, though Lamar stands out for his originality. Unlike many artists, Lamar writes his own lyrics, drawing from his personal experiences rather than

relying on others to craft his message. Much of Lamar's work follows this pattern, reflecting his life as an African American man and the events that have shaped the contemporary Black experience.

Both Sounwave and Lamar grew up in environments marked by police brutality and gang involvement, experiences that have fueled their careers and inspired their music. Lamar's work continues to serve as a voice for those facing similar struggles—whether mental, physical, or ethical—giving a platform to marginalized voices. In contrast, Pharrell Williams' music often focuses on celebration, diversity, and upbeat vibes. His top hits, including "Happy," "Get Lucky," and "Feels," feature lively, joyful sounds that encourage listeners to move and enjoy the moment.

Kendrick Lamar has produced several acclaimed albums, including *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012), *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), *DAMN.* (2017), and *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers* (2022). He also curated and contributed to the soundtrack for the movie *Black Panther* (2018). Each of these works has been met with critical acclaim, and several have won prestigious awards, including Grammys and a Pulitzer Prize for *DAMN.*, making Lamar the first rapper to receive this honor.

Lamar's other works often explore themes of racial injustice, identity, inner conflict, and resilience, which are central to "Alright." For example, *To Pimp a Butterfly* is filled with social commentary on the Black experience in America, touching on similar themes of resilience and optimism amid adversity. Lamar's work frequently addresses systemic issues and personal struggles, often reflecting on his journey and growth within society.

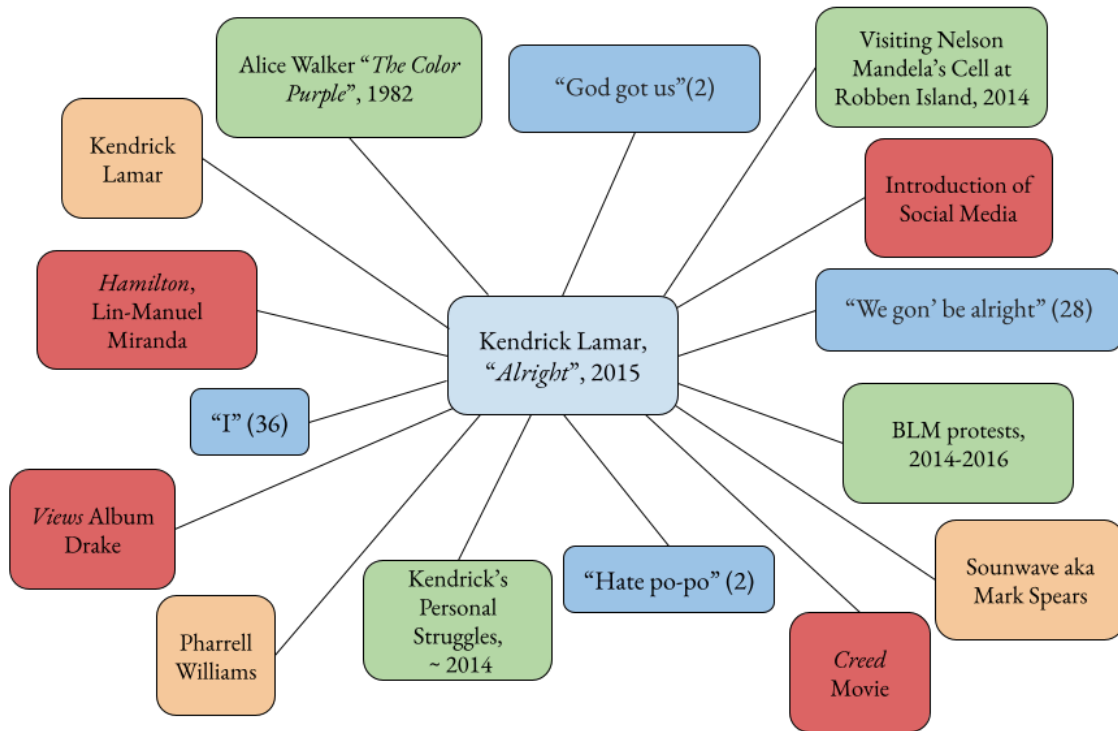
## Phase 4 - Choric

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The 2000s and 2010s were a time of rapid technological development. By the end of 2009, the internet had become a household term, with most Americans having personal access to it. By the early 2010s, handheld smartphones had become a standard of living—something few could live without. These two revolutionary technologies paved the way for the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Soon, people were constantly communicating in ways that hadn't existed just a few years earlier. Users could exchange information thousands of miles apart in the blink of an eye. These platforms provided a space for



participants in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to form an online community. Protests and riots were easier to organize, and ideas could reach more people more quickly.

During the release of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar found himself surrounded by other rising artists, most notably Drake, who released his hit album *Views*, featuring chart-topping songs such as “Hotline Bling” and “One Dance.” The close timing of these albums fueled a lasting competition between Lamar and Drake. Both are wildly successful artists with different rap styles, and they are often regarded as two of the best rappers of their generation. Their rivalry resurfaced in 2024 when both artists released diss singles.

In addition to musical releases, many award-winning films and performances debuted during this period. In 2015, both *Creed* and the musical *Hamilton* were released. These works, like Lamar's music, depict the struggles and growth of their main characters. *Hamilton* was notable for its racially diverse cast, predominantly featuring people of color. This casting choice allowed people of color to see themselves represented in American history through various roles. Similarly, *Creed*, starring Michael B. Jordan, focused on the journey of a young Black man striving to succeed in his boxing career. Both *Hamilton* and *Creed* reflect themes of perseverance and self-realization, aligning with the purpose behind Lamar's work.

## Conclusion:

After listening to and analyzing "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar, I have gained a new understanding of the world around me. The song has opened my eyes to the struggles African Americans continue to endure, even in a time when we claim that "all men are treated equally." Lamar's ability to evoke both frustration and hope through his music made me reflect on the endurance required to confront life's injustices. Although I do not face the same challenges Lamar describes, I still experience my own struggles. By remaining hopeful and pushing through difficulties, I know I will become a stronger person.

Lamar has masterfully crafted this song, telling his own story in a way that resonates with so many. His lyrical genius ignites something within the listener, inspiring a sense of rebellion and a desire for change. In this way, "Alright" was able to inspire a community and empower them to take action against their oppressors. Lamar's music continues to spark that same inspiration in listeners today, giving them hope for a better future.