

# RHYME, METRICAL TENSION, AND FORMAL AMBIGUITY IN KENDRICK LAMAR'S FLOW<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract.** The flow of Kendrick Lamar veers between old-school, metrically rigid and new-school, prose-like rhymes. Through manipulating rhymes within  $\frac{4}{4}$  time, Lamar increases and decreases affective tension, suggests formal ambiguity, and highlights changes in point of view and literary topic. Although rhyme manipulations have been discussed by Kyle Adams (2009), Mitch Ohriner (2019a), and others as sources of formal contrasts, their effects on affective tension, relaxation, and formal functionality have been unspecified. In this essay, we propose a more comprehensive model of rhyme-based tension and relaxation, then apply it to questions of formal norms and ambiguities in Lamar's songs. Analyses of songs across Lamar's output demonstrate how changing degrees of metrical tension suggest comprehensible formal subsections within verses. Our methodology codifies previously unnamed formal categories, highlights formal similarities with pop-rock repertoires, reflects the aims of Lamar's conscious rap aesthetic, and illuminates Lamar's lyrics.

**KEYWORDS AND PHRASES:** Kendrick Lamar; hip-hop; flow; rhyme; tension; formal role; formal ambiguity; narrative.

## INTRO: TENSION AND FORMAL AMBIGUITY IN KENDRICK LAMAR'S FLOW

KENDRICK LAMAR DUCKWORTH is arguably the preeminent hip-hop artist of his generation and has cultivated a diverse and loyal fanbase (Coscarelli 2019). A native of Compton, California, with influences ranging from Tupac Shakur to Nas (Braboy 2019), Lamar is famous for four ground-breaking concept albums: *Section.80* (2011); *Good Kid, MAAD City* (2012); *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015); and *DAMN.* (2017). In 2018, Lamar was the first musician outside of

classical and jazz traditions to receive a Pulitzer Prize in Music.

Lamar's rapping is emotionally, culturally, and philosophically complex (Wang 2017). It is aligned with the "conscious rap" genre, which advocates for social change, educates its audience about social and political problems, and encourages personal growth.<sup>1</sup> Despite Lamar rapping "I don't give a f\*\*\* about politics in rap..." Lamar's songs do

<sup>\*</sup> This essay originated in Simon Needle's senior thesis (2018) at Kennesaw State University. The threefold model of metrical tension proposed here was developed collaboratively by the two authors. We thank Mitch Ohriner and Kyle Adams for their many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Recent accounts of conscious rap include Adaso (2018) and JayQuan (2019). According to Lamarre (2017), Lamar admits (with some reluctance) to working within the "conscious rap" genre: in an interview with *Forbes*, Lamar says, "We all are conscious, whether you're doing gangsta rap, whether you're doing so called conscious rap, whether you doing whatever genre you may in because you have a post, you alive and you're telling your true feelings...these are your true thoughts and you're conscious of them, and you're aware of them" (Greenburg 2017).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
18	Look-	in' a-	round	and	all	I	see	is a	big	crowd,	that's	pro-	duct	of	me	And they
19	prob-	ab-	ly	re-	la-	tives	re-	la-	vent	for	a	re-	bels	dream		Yep,
20		her	Pres-	i-	dent	is	black			She	black		too,	pur- ple	lab-	el

Example 1. Tense and relaxed rhymes in “A.D.H.D.” (2011), mm. 18–20 (0:54–1:04).

not shy from political controversies (Kornhaber 2017; Woolf 2018) and have been used for activism: for instance, the single “Alright” (2015) has become an anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement. Lamar’s music, however, never calls for militant action. And finally, Lamar’s verses often address situations of inner-city, daily life while encouraging Black communities to celebrate their culture and heritage.

Lamar’s technical mastery of flow (delivery) is multifaceted. Accordingly, this essay proposes three techniques that are salient in Lamar’s flow: (1) the manipulation of rhymes, which subtly controls tension and relaxation (a listener’s affective response to changes in rhyme pacing);<sup>2</sup> (2) the adjustment of such tension and relaxation techniques to suggest formal categories and ambiguities; and (3) the correlation of formal categories with the lyrics’ points of view and literary topics.<sup>3</sup> Of these techniques, Lamar’s control of affective tension through rhyme pacing has been noted by Martin Connor (2015). In general, we propose that a more rapid pacing of a rhyme is more tense (implying a faster level of a metrical hierarchy), whereas a slower one is more relaxed (implying a slower level). Lamar’s rhyme manipulations result in different situations: some songs feature flexible, “new school” rhymes that evoke the 1990s, while others place rhymes in a rigid, “old school” style recalling the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a single Lamar song may contain moments of extreme tension, relaxation, and their intermediate states.

Example 1 demonstrates how Lamar’s subtle control of rhyme manipulates our intuitions of affective tension.<sup>5</sup> In this 3-measure excerpt from “A.D.H.D.” (2011), slower, faster, then intermediate paces of rhymes suggest a brief peak in tension. Like our other examples, this example depicts Lamar’s flow within a lyric chart having 16 quantized beat classes (BC). Lyric charts are preferable to staff transcriptions for Lamar’s songs since his rapping assumes norms of 16<sup>th</sup> notes and  $\frac{4}{4}$  time.<sup>6</sup> Following Mitch Ohriner’s practice (2019a, xxxvii–xxxviii), BC are ordered from 0 to 15, allowing us to calculate tension levels quickly and accurately.<sup>7</sup> Beats are expected on BC 0, 4, 8, and 12, all of which are congruent under modulo 4 arithmetic.<sup>8</sup> Members of the same rhyme are displayed using the same color; accented syllables are shown in bold or highlighted as yellow.

The peak of tension in Example 1 uses two rhyming techniques that foreshadow our coming methodology (Section 1). The first technique takes place in m. 19, which contains more rapidly paced rhymes than m. 18 does. The pacing of the “re-” rhymes in m. 19 involves quicker onset intervals of 3, then 5 positions, versus the slower interval of 8 positions in m. 18 (“see” and “me”)—we call this phenomenon a difference in rhyme periodicity. The second technique involves the placement of rhymes: in m. 18 and 20, rhymes oc-

<sup>2</sup> Affective tension and relaxation vary upon an emotional dimension between low and high arousal. In the psychological literature on emotion, our notion of affective tension approximates the arousal dimension (vertical axis) in Russell’s (1980) circumplex model, the other being the valence or pleasure dimension (horizontal axis). High arousal corresponds to emotions such as fear, surprise, and excitement, low arousal to boredom, sleepiness, and calmness. Recent overviews of psychological research on emotion in music include Eerola and Vuoskoski (2013), Juslin (2019), and Warrenburg (2020).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, a subsection of a verse with regular, stable rhymes (which we define later as a *rhyming block*) often maps onto a third-person point of view in the lyrics.

<sup>4</sup> Krims (2000, 49) distinguishes between “sung” (old-school) and “speech-effusive” (new school) flow styles.

<sup>5</sup> As white males, we acknowledge the delicacy of our position in reprinting and discussing speech within the Black community. We have therefore transcribed Lamar’s language as is into our lyric charts but have shaded out sensitive or explicit terms in our text.

<sup>6</sup> Ohriner (2019a, 48–51) concludes that the 16<sup>th</sup>-note duration is the most common in a rap flow, thereby supporting the 16-position metrical space.

<sup>7</sup> Quantization is necessary if we want a detailed description of an artist’s flow. Although some scholars avoid explicit quantizations in certain circumstances (e.g., Mattesich 2019, [7–8]), the resulting analyses lack detail on rhymes, metrical locations, and other raw data. Others (e.g., Connor 2015) pursue more finely grained rhythmic reductions that utilize many divisions of the beat, such as triplet sixteenths. Lamar, however, tends to use triplets only at moments of high tension, suggesting as a norm the 16-position space.

<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Adams (2009) uses the notation “1, 1x, 1y, 1z, 2, 2x, 2y, 2z, ...” Although this approach clarifies the beats of the measure, we prefer integers from 0 to 15 for analytical data since we can quickly calculate beat-class distances (e.g., beat class 3 to 11 is 11 – 3 or 8 beat classes distant) and the tension level of a particular beat class (e.g., BC 2 is at an eighth-note level).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
0															Got	me
1	breath-	ing	with	drag-	ons	I'll	crack	the	egg	in	your	bas-	-ket	you	bas-	tard
2	I'm	Mar-	-ilyn	Man-	son	with	mad-	-	Now	just	i-	mag-	-ine	the	mag-	-ic
3	I	light	to	ass-	-es,	Don't	ask	for	your	fav-	or-	-ite	rap-	-per		

Example 2. Initial chorus in "Rigamortis" (2011), mm. 0–3 (0:37–0:45).

Stage 1→	Stage 2→	Stage 3→	Stage 4→	Stage 5 (GOAL)
Rhyme Manipulation	Tension/Relaxation	Formal Roles	Formal Ambiguity	Formal Mentalities
Rhyme Placement Rhyme Periodicity Rhyme Prevalence	Relaxation slow manipulation	Relaxed: Chorus, Verse (Onset), Rhyming Block, Parenthetical Chorus	Formal blends Weak unit differentiation Unit overlap Ambiguity of level	Point of view Literary topics (boasts, disses, problem of song)
	Tension fast manipulation	Tense, Hybrid, Non-Flow: Excursion, Crisis, Intro		

Figure 1. Methodology linking rhyme manipulation with formal mentalities.

cur on the "ands" of beats 2, 4, and 3, a more stable metrical placement, whereas two of m. 19's "re-" rhymes are on the 16<sup>th</sup>-note BC 3 and 11, a more rapid and unstable metrical level. We call this technique rhyme placement.

Example 2 similarly demonstrates how Lamar's manipulation of tension and relaxation suggests formal ambiguities (Section 2). To a listener, the chorus from Lamar's "Rigamortis" (2011) is indicated definitively by its three occurrences in the song. However, this brief, 3-measure chorus has irregular and rapid rhyme locations that contradict our expectations for a memorable, repetitious chorus.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, this excerpt blends situational aspects of a chorus with internal aspects of a new formal category we call *excursion* (for now, a subsection type with a high level of affective tension and little internal repetition). Furthermore, Example 2's excursion aspect maps onto an imaginary perspective: references to fantasy subjects such as dragons and magic pose Lamar as an otherworldly rapper. This mapping of formal categories onto lyrics (and vice versa) may result in changes of viewpoint (Section 3).

Examples 1 and 2 offer informal support to our claims that Lamar's manipulation of rhymes controls affective tension, suggests formal categories and ambiguities, and maps formal categories onto lyrics. To date, however, the precise linkages between these concepts remain unexplored. Figure 1 demonstrates our methodology, which subdivides the link between rhymes and formal ambiguity

into five discrete stages: from stage 1 to 2, rhyme manipulation lowers and raises metrical tension through fast and slow rhyme pacing (to be defined shortly); from 2 to 3, affective tension and relaxation (resulting from rhyme pacing) interact with other parameters to suggest normative formal categories (hereafter called roles following de Clercq 2012; 2017);<sup>10</sup> from 3 to 4, the formal roles are occasionally manipulated to produce formal ambiguities; and in 5, the formal roles and ambiguities map onto lyrics to suggest formal mentalities, each of which associates a formal role with a point of view or literary topic. These five stages comprise our theoretical and analytical pathway into Lamar's distinctive flow style.

This essay, following Figure 1, asks three theoretical questions: (1) how do rhyme manipulations suggest states of tension and relaxation; (2) do Lamar's songs contain formal roles analogous to their counterparts in pop and rock genres; and (3) which mechanisms underlie formal ambiguity in Lamar's songs? For these questions, we examine a corpus of 80 songs from Lamar's 2010 mixtape and four studio albums.<sup>11</sup> We then demonstrate the benefit of

<sup>10</sup> As seen later, this essay considers formal roles to be relaxed, tense, hybrid, or outside a flow. With respect to form, relaxed and tense roles in Lamar are analogous to loose-knit and tight-knit themes in classical music (Caplin 1998, 84), and tense roles to metrically dissonant formal functions in rock (Biamonte 2014, Example 9).

<sup>11</sup> This corpus starts with the *Overly Dedicated* mixtape (2010) since it shows Lamar's first command of point of view and voices (Reeves 2017). Lamar's four solo albums are all concept albums whose reception has increased, successively, in acclaim. Lamar's compila-

<sup>9</sup> Criteria of chorus function in pop and rock genres are discussed by de Clercq 2012 (114) and explored later in the current essay regarding Lamar's practice.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
1		ah	ah				<b>Fuck</b>		<b>that</b>				<b>eight</b>		doo-	bies	8
2	to	the	<b>face</b>				<b>Fuck</b>		<b>that</b>				<b>twelve</b>		bot-	ties	(2) + 8
3	in	the	<b>case</b>		nig-	ga,	<b>fuck</b>		<b>that</b>		Two		<b>pills</b>		and	a	(2) + 8
4	half		<b>wait</b>		nig-	ga	<b>fuck</b>		<b>that</b>		Got	a	<b>high</b>		<b>tol-</b>	<b>er-</b>	(2) + 8
5	<b>ance</b>		when	your	<b>age</b>		<b>don't</b>	<b>ex-</b>	<b>ist</b>		Man,	I	<b>swear</b>	my	nig-	ga	(0) + 8
6	<b>trip-</b>	<b>pin'</b>	off	that	<b>shit</b>	<b>a-</b>	<b>gain</b>		<b>Pick</b>	him	up	then	<b>set</b>	him	<b>in</b>		(0) + 4 + (8) + 12
7	<b>Cold</b>		<b>wat-</b>	er,	<b>then</b>	I	<b>or-</b>	<b>der</b>	<b>some-</b>	one - to	bring	him	<b>Vi-</b>	<b>co-</b>	<b>din</b>		(2) + (6) + 12
8	<b>Hope</b>	to	take	the	<b>pain</b>	<b>a-</b>	<b>way</b>	from - the	<b>feel-</b>	ing	that	he	<b>feel</b>	<b>to-</b>	<b>day</b>	You	(4 + 8) + 12
9	<b>know</b>	when - you	part	of	<b>sec-</b>	<b>tion</b>	<b>eigh-</b>	<b>ty -</b> you	<b>feel</b>	like	no	one	<b>can</b>	<b>re-</b>	<b>late</b>	'Cause	(4 + 8) + 12

Example 3. Rhymes and metrical locations in "A.D.H.D." (2011), mm. 1–9 (0:13–0:41).

our analytical toolkit in full-length analyses of "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" from Lamar's 2010 mixtape *Overly Dedicated* and "King Kunta" from his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

## 1. RHYME AND ITS METRICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our methodology depends upon a careful definition of rhyme and consideration of its impact upon musical meter. Phonologically, rhyme is any correlation between at least two strings of semantic units (Brogan and Cushman 2012); in this essay, we call each string of semantic units a rhyme segment and the totality of all correlated segments a rhyme chain. Although rhymes that preserve the same rhyme class (Ohriner 2019, 15) are straightforward in analysis,<sup>12</sup> we allow inexact, slant rhymes ("crate" and "braid"), multi-syllabic rhymes ("set him in" and "Vicodin"), alliterations ("burning" and "bright"), and other, less familiar types.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the rhyme "f\*\*\* that" in mm. 1–4 of Example 3 is an identical rhyme; BC 2 in mm. 2–4 creates an

assonant effect through "face," "case," and "wait"; and "tolerance" and "don't exist" (mm. 4–5) preserve the same number of syllables and use similar middle vowels ("er-" and "ex-").

How might rhymes imply metrical structures? A rhyme segment can be reduced to a focal BC at its most prominent accent's location, and rhyme segments tend to be metrically parallel (Lerdahl and Jackendoff [1983] 1996, 75). In Lamar's songs, these accents may be phenomenal (e.g., louder or longer events), metrical (occurring on beats), or structural (at the ends of grammatical units).<sup>14</sup> In Example 3, for instance, "tolerance" and "don't exist" (mm. 4–5) have accents at BCs 0 and 8 (in bold). These accents are metrical since they occur on beats 1 and 3, phenomenal since Lamar's delivery descends to them in pitch height, and grammatical because "-ist" ends a sentence.

Note, however, that different metrical structures can be implied by the rhymes and backing track. The focal BCs in rhyme segments are often separated by periodic intervals—a property of meter. As more segments align, they create a rhyme chain. A longer, more regular rhyme chain will more easily convey a meter, while shorter chains may be heard as surface syncopations to the  $\frac{4}{4}$  beat track. Therefore, the affective tension in Lamar's flow is also metrical tension.

To enable a large-scale analysis of tension, we analyze accents (as rhymes) hierarchically by distinguishing between primary and secondary rhymes. In its right-most column, Example 3 shows metrical locations of rhymes: primary rhymes are unenclosed whereas secondary ones are within parentheses. Primary rhymes are more prevalent,

tion album *Untitled Unmastered* (2016) has been excluded since its songs were demos recorded in the process of producing *Butterfly* (2015); Lamar's 14 songs from *Black Panther* (2018) have also been excluded since they arose in response to the film's story line. More details of our corpus may be found at our website (<https://sites.google.com/view/wadsworthneedlerapanalysis/home>), which surveys formal analyses on the crowd-sourced website Genius.com, both in a large-scale distribution of all formal roles (Part A) and a more granular distribution of roles within each song (Part B).

<sup>12</sup> A rhyme class preserves the middle vowel and final consonant of words such as "part" and "heart."

<sup>13</sup> For a similarly expansive view of rhyme, see Komaniecki (2019, Chapter 3). Even more rhyme types are discussed by Brogan and Cushman (2012, 1185) and are applied in the coming analyses: assonance (only the medial verb is retained); reverse rhyme (initial consonant and medial vowel); frame rhyme (initial and final consonants); and identical rhyme (all three retained).

<sup>14</sup> Phenomenal accents are defined in classical music by Lerdahl and Jackendoff ([1983] 1996) as arising from "attack-points of pitch events, local stresses such as sforzandi, sudden changes in dynamics or timbre, long notes, leaps to relatively high or low notes, harmonic changes, and so forth" (17).

a) *Derivative vs. generative (Mattesich 2019)*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
18	Look	in- a-	round	and	all	I	see (OFF)	is- a	big	crowd	that's	pro-	duct	of	me (OFF)	And they
19	prob-	ab-	ly (OFF)	re- (OFF)	la-	tives	re- (OFF)	la-	vent	for	a	re- (OFF)	bels	dream (OFF)		Yep
20		Her	Pres-	i-	dent	is	black (OFF)			She	black (OFF)		too	pur- ple	lab-	el

b) *Inter-rhyme intervals (Ohriner 2019a)*

"ee" rhyme class: see→IRI 7→me→IRI 4→ly→IRI 11→dream
"re-" rhyme: relatives→IRI 3→relevant→IRI 5→rebels
"black" rhyme: black→IRI 4→black

c) *Rhyme Regularity (Komaniecki 2019)*

BC 12 rhymes: 0%
BC 6 rhymes: 100%

Example 4. a–c. Previous approaches to rhyme manipulation.

regular, and strongly accented, whereas secondary ones are more intermittent and less strongly accented.<sup>15</sup> So even though m. 6 contains two rhyme chains, one at BCs 0 and 8, the other at BCs 4 and 12, we hear BCs 4 and 12 as aligning with an implied backbeat and more prevalent within mm. 6–9 than BCs 0 and 8.

## 2. A CLOSER LOOK AT METRICAL TENSION IN LAMAR

Before examining the link between rhyme and tension, our choice of the terms "metrical tension" and "relaxation" over the better-known "metrical consonance and dissonance" (Krebs 1999; Biamonte 2014) requires comment. Following Connor (2015), tension and relaxation are more visceral concepts that are readily understood by fans of the genre. And second, "consonance" and "dissonance" invoke a Eurocentric tradition that we aim to avoid.

Previous approaches to rhyme manipulation have characterized formal similarities and contrasts but have not linked rhyme manipulations with degrees of metrical tension. We therefore critique these previous approaches' explanations of tension, then extend them to predict affective tension across Lamar's output. The three approaches, each demonstrated in Example 4a–c, include Mattesich's (2019, [2]) derivative versus generative model, Ohriner's (2019a) inter-rhyme intervals (IRIs), and Komaniecki's (2019) rhyme regularity. None of these approaches explains the subtle peak of tension in m. 19 of Example 4 (previously

discussed in Example 1). In Mattesich's work, a derivative flow relies on the metrical backing track, and aligns rhymed syllables with the beats, whereas a generative flow is one independent of the beat.<sup>16</sup> In Example 4a, however, Mattesich's approach does not distinguish tension levels since all rhymes are off-beat (denoted OFF). Next, Example 4b shows inter-rhyme intervals (IRIs) between all corresponding rhymed syllables, following Ohriner (2019a, 19).<sup>17</sup> Example 4b separates out the three different rhymes and describes the IRIs for each, but does not draw conclusions as to tension levels. And lastly, Komaniecki's rhyme regularity (Komaniecki 2019, 75) calculates the likelihood that a contextually determined BC, typically BC 12, will have some end-rhyme (Example 4c). However, in Example 4c no rhymes occur on BC 12, thereby resulting in a 0% regularity; but if we change the metrical reference point to BC 6, we get a 100% regularity. Regardless, Komaniecki's measure requires the analyst's intervention and does not explain the peak of tension in m. 19. In summary, none of these approaches explain Example 4's peak of tension. In search of a more comprehensive model of rhyme-based metrical tension, we lay out three new measurements.

<sup>15</sup> Hierarchical analytical methods can promote exclusionary sociological agendas (e.g., Schenker's late theory of structural levels); the primary/secondary rhyme distinction is intended here to facilitate long-range readings of metrical tension in Lamar's songs.

<sup>16</sup> See also Adams (2009, [8]), Ohriner (2019a, 19–23), and Komaniecki (2019, 75–83). Ohriner (2019b, [3.1]) has speculated whether the onbeat/offbeat distinction is analogous to "consonant versus dissonant" rapping.

<sup>17</sup> Adams (2009, [8]) and Ohriner (2019a, 16–18) also note the technique of increasing or decreasing the number of syllables per measure, and Komaniecki (2019, 75–83) focuses this on rhymed syllables. This is addressed in our second technique, rhyme periodicity.



Beats	"one"				"two"				"three"				"four"			
whole	.															
half	.								.							
quarter	.				.				.				.			
8th	.		.		.		.		.		.		.		.	
16th	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Beat Classes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

Figure 2. Lerdahl and Jackendoff's Attack-Point Hierarchy as a Model of Metrical Tension.

Beats	"one"				"two"				"three"				"four"			
whole													.			
half					.								.			
quarters	.				.				.				.			
8ths	.		.		.		.		.		.		.		.	
16ths	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Beat Classes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

Figure 3. Attack-point model adapted to Lamar's songs.

## 2.1 TECHNIQUE 1: RHYME PLACEMENT

In our threefold tension model, each measurement of rhyme manipulation—*rhyme placement*, *rhyme periodicity*, and *rhyme prevalence*—captures a change in pace. Faster pacing correlates with intuitions such as increasing tension, complexity, expressivity, amusement, surprise, and happiness: studies in music perception show that faster note values and tempi are rated as more tense than the reverse (Fernández-Sotos, Fernández-Caballero, and Latorre 2016). Likewise, syncopations are rated as more tense than on-beats, although this has not been shown to the point of statistical significance (Keller and Schubert 2011).<sup>18</sup>

If faster pacing is the basic mechanism behind increasing tension, how might BC position influence tension? In contrast with Mattesich's (2019) limited onbeat/off-beat focus, we adapt Lerdahl and Jackendoff's attack-point model of meter ([1983] 1996, 18) into a more exhaustive model of affective tension. Consider the assumptions of

Lerdahl and Jackendoff's model, as seen in Figure 2. This model views all metrical events as attack points, not as durations; it ranks some BCs as stronger accents (the higher stacks) and others as weaker (the lower stacks), and it assumes that beats on a level are evenly spaced (97).

Lerdahl and Jackendoff's framework in Figure 2 may be interpreted as a model of metrical tension for classical music by associating each BC with a metrical and tension level. Events on BCs linked to faster levels (toward the bottom) are more tense, while those linked to slower levels (toward the top) are more relaxed. Thus, BC 0 (whole note/red) is least tense since its topmost level is the slowest; BC 8 (half note/orange) is next-most tense; then BC 4 and 12 (quarters, yellow), BC 2, 6, 10, and 14 (eighths), and BC 1, 3, 5, 7, etc. up to 15 (sixteenths) are increasingly tense. Scanning Figure 2 from high to low, note that each more rapid level is more complex as the density of events per formal unit increases.

Because, following hip-hop conventions, rhymes most often occur around beat four, to adapt Lerdahl and Jackendoff's attack-point model to Lamar's manipulation of rhymes, we shift the most relaxed BC to 12 (Figure 3).<sup>19</sup> As a result, since beats are evenly spaced the metrical hierarchy has BC 12 (red) as most relaxed, followed by BC 4 (or-

<sup>18</sup> Fernández-Sotos, Fernández-Caballero, and Latorre (2016) found significant increases in tension when tempo increased from 90 to 150 bpm, and when note values accelerated from quarters to sixteenths. Keller and Schubert (2011) found that unsyncopated melodies followed by syncopated melodies yielded significant increases in happiness, but insignificant increases in tension; they surmised that this unexpected result might be due to the limited degree of syncopation used in their melodies (the eighth note being the fastest value).

<sup>19</sup> BC 11 and 14, which approximate BC 12, have reportedly high frequency values (about 14% and 8%, respectively) in Condit-Schulz (2016, 139).

ange), then 0 and 8 (yellow), etc. This preference for a referential BC 12 is supported by various lines of evidence: first, phrases often end late in the measure around beat 4, giving it a cadential quality (Adams 2009, [4]); second, rhymed syllables occur more frequently on later beats of the measure, increasing from beat 1 to 2, 2 to 3, and 3 to 4 in a roughly linear fashion (Condit-Schulz 2016, 139);<sup>20</sup> and third, the most relaxed BCs (12 then 4) are supported by the expected backbeat (or acoustic snare drum) of the “boom-bap” bass.<sup>21</sup> Despite aligning with the expected kick drum of the beat track, we consider BC 0 and 8 as less relaxed since emcees tend to establish their lyrics in opposition to such beats, a situation comparable to rock fans clapping (or jazz fans snapping fingers) on beats 2 and 4.<sup>22</sup> We thus distinguish five different metrical levels, thereby increasing the resolution of Mattesich's (2019) two-state approach.<sup>23</sup> Returning to Example 1, we may now explain the peak of tension in “A.D.H.D.” (mm. 18–20): the music moves from eighth-note BCs (e.g., 6 and 14) to 16<sup>th</sup>-note ones (3 and 11), and then back to eighth-note ones (6 and 10), demonstrating a contour of relaxation–tension–relaxation.

## 2.2 TECHNIQUE 2: PERIODICITY OF RHYMES

Our second measurement of tension correlates faster periodicities of rhyme segments with tension and slower ones with relaxation. Increasing tension in this regard also increases complexity since more rapid rhymes imply their increased density. We describe each level of tension as a duration in musical notation, with benchmark values of whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes being ordered from relaxed to tense—this is also true for irregular durations.<sup>24</sup> We can now enable Ohriner's IRIs to specify levels of tension. Reinforcing our previous remarks on Example 1 (mm. 18–20 from “A.D.H.D.”), this measurement shows an increase in tension: half-note periodicities (m. 18); irregular

periodicities including 3/dotted eighth and 5/quarter-plus-16<sup>th</sup> (m. 19); and then a quarter-note periodicity (m. 20).

## 2.3 TECHNIQUE 3: PREVALENCE OF RHYMES

Our third and final measurement of tension, prevalence, counts the number of rhyme segments in a rhyme chain and tracks their periodicities. This measurement enables us to distinguish between formal sections that imbue a particular BC with a focal quality, thereby resulting in metrical entrainment, versus those that flit between different BCs and do not result in metrical entrainment. This measurement is expressed either as a quantity (e.g., “4”) times a single, recurring periodicity (e.g., “8 BC”) or as a quantity (again “4”) times a series of periodicities (e.g., “8, 3, 5”); we interpret the former as focal and relaxed, the latter as irregular, non-focal, and tense. In Example 1 the rhyme “ee” in mm. 18–19 is labeled “4” since it occurs four times; the periodicities between adjacent segments are 8, 4, and 11 BC. Thus, this rhyme chain's prevalence would be “4 x (8, 4, 11),” a non-focal, tense result. Rhyme prevalence predicts two things: (1) as the number of rhyme segments increases, complexity (thus tension) decreases; and (2) as the number of differing periodicities in a chain increases, complexity (thus tension) increases. Whereas Komaniecki's rhyme regularity (2019, 75) calculates the percentage of a particular BC containing a rhyme (usually BC 12), our prevalence method enables the analysis of more situations. In Example 3, rhyme prevalence shows relaxation in mm. 1–4 with “f\*\*\* that,” since its calculation is “4 x (16),” showing multiple occurrences of the rhyme with a singular periodicity, whereas Komaniecki's calculation (assuming BC 12 as contextually stable) yields a 0% result.

Our three measurements of metrical tension enable the analysis of tension and relaxation on any formal level in Lamar's songs. We can then correlate measurements of metrical tension in the flow with techniques such as syllable density, vocal articulation, lyrics, and supporting vocals, thereby allowing us to define normative formal roles and ambiguous formal blends. Accordingly, we next investigate normative formal roles such as verses and choruses in Lamar's songs, drawing on de Clercq's (2012) research on formal prototypes.

## 3. NORMATIVE FORMAL ROLES IN LAMAR'S SONGS

In Lamar's songs, formal roles can be explained advantageously as modifications of formal roles in pop and rock.<sup>25</sup> These modifications are necessitated by the ter-

<sup>20</sup> Note that Condit-Schulz's sample of rap lyrics is derived from verses (not choruses), resulting in findings that align with our formal function of a *rhyming block* (a normative subsection of a verse, to be defined shortly).

<sup>21</sup> Adams (2020, [1.7–1.17]), however, views a phrase as activated by disrupted listener expectations and requiring directed motion.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, during “R.O.T.C. (Interlude)” (2011), Lamar's lyrics link beat 4 with BC 12: “I'm not just rhyming on the beat...” (Example 7b, m. 7).

<sup>23</sup> Two caveats: first, if a regular pattern of rhymes and accents does not fit the attack-point model, the analyst should consider patterns of unequally spaced accents or beats following Ohriner's (2019a, 72–75) model of vocal groove; and second, if an attack approximates a beat—e.g., a persistent BC 3 that sounds like an offbeat BC 4 or beat 2—then one should consider the possibility (based on context) that it approximates an onbeat event.

<sup>24</sup> We have not found 16<sup>th</sup>-note rhyme periodicities in Lamar's songs.

<sup>25</sup> How much formal terminology from pop and rock genres is appropriate in Lamar's songs? While this question is outside our cen-

minological overlap between hip-hop and pop-rock traditions, seen in their shared labels of verse and chorus.<sup>26</sup> Among recent studies of form in rock music (Summach 2012, de Clercq 2012, Ensign 2015), we draw upon de Clercq's theory of formal roles for its ability to explain mechanisms behind formal ambiguity. A role (de Clercq 2012, 34) is a formal category (e.g., chorus, verse, bridge) organized around a most typical member, or prototype: just as some members of a category are more representative of said category than others, so too are certain formal features more typical of some formal roles than others. For example, just as a robin is more representative of the "bird" category than a penguin, musical "bridges" are more likely to introduce new chord progressions than "verses." We define a normative role as a pattern of behaviors that occur across a range of examples, recall a role in pop-rock music, and contrast with other roles. Take the chorus: it occurs frequently in Lamar's music, has been analyzed previously in pop-rock songs, and contrasts with roles such as verses and intros. An ambiguous formal situation, as modeled by a blend (hybrid), instead combines behaviors of opposing formal roles (e.g., verse and chorus) and occurs within a narrower range of examples.

To define a formal role in Lamar's music as a modification of a pop-rock analogue, we align the criteria of the two analogous roles to highlight Lamar's distinctive practices, show how Lamar's modifications are informed by the genres of hip hop and conscious rap, and demonstrate Lamar's modified role in multiple songs. Since rhyme manipulations are salient in Lamar's flow, we classify his roles into categories based on their states of tension and relaxation.<sup>27</sup> These categories are relaxed, tense, hybrid (i.e., tense and relaxed simultaneously), and non-flow (unmeasured or instrumental). Figure 4 summarizes our normative (recurring) roles, noting each role's name, degree of tension or relaxation, expected formal location, expected formal level, contrasting roles, and distinctive aspects. Since hip-hop

artists discuss their songs as containing verses and choruses (Edwards 2009, 185–197), our section-level roles include choruses and verses (but not other pop-rock roles such as a bridge); to these, we have added the intro role given its presence in many of Lamar's songs (59 out of 80, or 74%);<sup>28</sup> and we have added roles at section and subsection levels that reflect fluctuations in tension and relaxation in Lamar's verses. In Figure 4, from top to bottom there are two well-known, relaxed roles of chorus and verse (the latter focused on a verse's onset), two new subsection-level roles called *rhyming block* and *parenthetical chorus*, a tense role on both levels called *excursion*, a hybrid role called *crisis*, and the well-known section-level role of *intro*.

In Lamar's practice, section and subsection levels are more ambiguous than in pop and rock, thereby resulting in ambiguous roles (as shown shortly). Sections may differ widely in length, with 16 or more measures in a verse but 4 to 8 measures in a chorus (Edwards 2009, 188–193); subsections tend to last between 2 and 8 measures and often overlap to prevent the breakup of a verse into sections. Rhyming blocks and parenthetical choruses closely resemble section-level verses and choruses, thereby telescoping the formal patterns of verse-chorus and chorus-verse songs within verses.<sup>29</sup>

To suggest variety and engage the listener, the technique of *stretching* breaks down a verse (particularly a long one) into a succession of subsection-level formal roles. It is particularly appropriate to story-telling rap, in which verses may comprise most, if not all, of a song (Edwards 2009, 194–195). Within a verse, the most normative role is the rhyming block, which is its baseline expectation; after this, other normative roles include excursion, crisis, and parenthetical chorus. As shown in Figure 5, instances of stretching include two temporal arrangements: (paradigm 1) a symmetrical scheme of rhyming block–excursion–rhyming block; or (paradigm 2) a goal-directed scheme of rhyming block–excursion–crisis. At any point, a parenthetical chorus may be inserted for additional variety. For instance, in the bottom three rows of Figure 5, verse 1 from "A.D.H.D." flexibly adheres to either of these paradigms. It contains two rhyming blocks in mm. 6–9 and 12–17 that are separated by a parenthetical chorus in mm. 10–11; an excursion occurs in mm. 18–21 and ends the verse; no final rhyming block or crisis is present.

We turn next to the seven normative roles, their derivation from pop-rock analogues, Lamar's adaptations of them within hip-hop and conscious rap genres, and

tral purview, we speculate that their forms exist on a continuum from *authentic* to *commercial* extremes. The authentic extreme highlights storytelling and an emcee's lyrical prowess: it is dominated by verses, choruses, intros, and outros. The commercial extreme instead approximates contemporary pop and rock practice, containing not just verses, choruses, intros and outros, but also more repetitious and memorable roles such as bridges, prechoruses, hooks, and refrains. For instance, we found that Lamar's 14 singles had 11 songs with choruses and 3 without, showing a commercial preference.

<sup>26</sup> Instances of writers on hip hop invoking formal functions from pop and rock traditions include the website Genius.com (as evidence of fan response), Edwards (2009, 185–197), Berry (2018, 3), and Komaniecki (2019, 1).

<sup>27</sup> For concerns of brevity, we do not address the reverse question, explored in Adams (2008): how does the beat track inspire a rapper's flow?

<sup>28</sup> While the outro role is also frequent in Lamar's songs (59/80, or 74%), for brevity we do not address it in this essay.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, a *verse/excursion* blend (to be described shortly) has a verse role on the section level and an excursion role borrowed from the subsection level.



Name	Expected Tension Degree	Expected Location	Expected Level	Contrasting Roles	Distinctive Aspects
<b>Relaxed Roles</b>					
<i>Chorus</i>	Relaxed + offset	Multiple locations	Section	Verse, Excursion, Intro	sung section repeated later in song; internally repetitious; aligns relaxed rhymes with beat track
<i>Verse Onset</i>	Relaxed	Multiple locations	Section	Chorus, Excursion, Crisis	one-off, rapped section having little internal repetition; has relaxed rhymes contrary to the beat track; tells 3 <sup>rd</sup> -person story with measure-long sentences
<i>Rhyming Block</i>	Relaxed	Beginning, end of verse	Subsection	Parenthetical Chorus, Excursion, Crisis	rhymes with a common BC focus (BC 12, 4 and 12, 8, etc.); otherwise, identical to verse onset
<i>Parenthetical Chorus</i>	Relaxed + offset	Between other subsections of verse or at end of verse before chorus	Subsection	Rhyming Block, Excursion, Crisis	one-off, repetitious, short chorus-like subsection, often couplet length
<b>Tense Roles</b>					
<i>Excursion</i>	Tense	Middle–2/3rds through verse or song	Subsection or Section	Rhyming Block, Verse Onset, Chorus	little internal repetition; one-off unit; tense, less regular rhyme placement and periodicities; lower prevalence than in rhyming block; improvisatory feel; quickly changing topics in lyrics; 3 <sup>rd</sup> -person story
<b>Hybrid Roles</b>					
<i>Crisis</i>	Relaxed and tense	End of verse or song	Subsection or Section	Rhyming Block, Excursion, Verse Onset	relaxed rhyme placement contrary to beat track; increase in density of rhymes or syllables; memorable names; violent situation
<b>Non-Flow Roles</b>					
<i>Intro</i>	N/A	Beginning of song	Section	Main section roles	either 1) relatively short section with instrumental samples; 2) unmeasured, introductory speech (e.g., skit); or 3) isolated bursts of measured or unmeasured lyrics with samples

Figure 4. Recurring roles in Lamar's songs.

typical examples. These roles include chorus, verse onset, rhyming block, parenthetical chorus, excursion, crisis, and intro.

### 3.1 CHORUS

As shown in Example 5a, although a pop-rock chorus tends to have a focal quality, as suggested by memorable lyrics, dense textures, and a sense of arrival, Lamar repurposes the role as a provocative diss, critique, or boast having variable loudness. Lamar's disses, critiques, and boasts show influences from both the hip-hop genre, which focuses on personal rivalries, and the conscious rap genre, which seeks to critique listeners' unexamined biases. As seen in the right column (bold), Lamar typically aligns rhymes with the beat track (favoring BCs 0 and 8), evenly spaces them, uses highly prevalent rhymes, uses first- and second-person points of view, and sings more often than

rap.<sup>30</sup> Otherwise, Lamar follows chorus conventions from pop-rock music such as background vocals, repetition later in a song, a shorter length compared to a verse, and high internal repetition. Lamar's choruses may or may not include hooks.<sup>31</sup> In Lamar's rhyme placement, the offset BCs 0 and 8 are most common, whether in isolation or embedded within other equally spaced schemes (e.g., BCs 0, 4, 8, and 12); BCs 4 and 12 on their own are less common but still occur. "A.D.H.D.'s" chorus is prototypical (Example 5b). As shown in Example 5b's lyric chart, the primary rhymes in "A.D.H.D.'s" chorus are on "thar" in BC 8 (red), thereby aligning with the beat track. The rhyme periodicity is a whole note with one disruption on BC 2 (secondary

<sup>30</sup> Following de Clercq (2012; 2017), we do not assign different hierarchical weights to each aspect of a role, a task calling instead for a computational approach.

<sup>31</sup> We found that only 43.8% of Lamar's songs from the studio albums and *Overly Dedicated* include their titles in the chorus.

	Beginning			Middle	End
Paradigm (1)	Rhyming block			Excursion	Rhyming block
Paradigm (2)	Rhyming block			Excursion	Crisis
"A.D.H.D." Verse 1	Rhyming block	Parenthetical chorus	Rhyming block	Excursion	
Measures	6–9 (0:15–0:30)	10–11 (0:30–0:36)	12–17 (0:36–0:54)	18–21 (0:54–1:00)	
Narrative	Friend's drug addiction	Loneliness behind addiction	Other addictions (e.g., technology)	Meets woman with ADHD	

Figure 5. Instances of role successions in Lamar's verses.

<p>Pop-Rock Chorus Role (de Clercq 2012, 114)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest focal quality</li> <li>• Contrasts with verse</li> <li>• Musical material basically same upon repetition</li> <li>• Sense of arrival</li> <li>• Shorter than verse</li> <li>• Loudest, thickest texture</li> <li>• High internal repetition</li> <li>• General message</li> <li>• Memorable, includes title</li> <li>• Short melodic units</li> <li>• Emphasizes ^1 in melody, tonal closure, Tonic, Ionian mode</li> </ul>	<p>Lamar's Chorus Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rhymes tend to align with beat track (favoring BC 0 and 8 over 4 and 12)</li> <li>• Evenly spaced rhymes favored</li> <li>• High rhyme prevalence</li> <li>• Diss, critique, or boast</li> <li>• First- and second-person point of view</li> <li>• Variable loudness</li> <li>• Sung (1<sup>st</sup> default) or rapped (2<sup>nd</sup> default)</li> <li>• Background vocals</li> <li>• Repeats later in song</li> <li>• Shorter than a verse</li> <li>• High internal repetition</li> </ul>
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Example 5a. Characteristic features of the chorus role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
1		ah	ah				Fuck		that				eight		doo-	bies	8
2	to	the	face				fuck		that				twelve		bot-	ties	(2) + 8
3	in	the	case		nig-	ga	fuck		that		Two		pills		and	a	(2) + 8
4	half		wait		nig-	ga	fuck		that		Got	a	high		tol-	er-	(2) + 8
5	ance		when	your	age		don't	ex-	ist		Man,	I	swear	my	nig-	ga	(0) + 8

Example 5b. Prototypical chorus in "A.D.H.D." (2011), mm. 1–5 (0:13–0:28).

rhyme, orange). The rhyme prevalence is a relaxed, focal 4 x (16). Lyrics criticize drug culture and take a second-person point of view. This iteration of the chorus in "A.D.H.D." is rapped at a low intensity relative to the rest of the song; likewise, its beat track is dynamically softer than in later sections (percussion only entering at 0:59). And lastly, its musical material appears three times in the song.<sup>32, 33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Notice the last 6 BCs are shown in a neutral gray color since they are external to the chorus role, a practice we continue in this essay.

<sup>33</sup> Other prototypical instances of the chorus role in Lamar's songs include "F\*\*\* Your Ethnicity" (Section.80) and "Swimming Pools (Drank)" (Good Kid). The former example (0:55–1:03) has equally spaced rhymes as well as primary rhymes on BC 4 and 12; the latter (0:52–1:17) has equally spaced rhymes plus primary rhymes on BC 8.

### 3.2 VERSE ONSET

As shown at the top of Example 6a, the onsets of Lamar's verses typically are rapped. Different rhymes are more unevenly spaced than in a chorus, highly prevalent and regular in periodicity within each rhyme chain, and usually not aligned with the beat track, thus favoring BCs 4 and 12. The verse role is the narrative center in Lamar's songs, just as other hip-hop artists have confirmed in interviews (Edwards 2009, 193). Otherwise, Lamar's verses align with pop-rock norms: they take the perspective of a background, third-person story and have longer, more speech-like sentences than choruses.<sup>34</sup> As shown in Example 6b's lyric chart, many aspects of Lamar's verse role are present.

<sup>34</sup> Lamar's verses can have focal aspects: we found 16.3% of his songs from studio albums and the *Overly Dedicated* mixtape had song titles in a verse.

Verse Role (de Clercq 2012, 114–115)	Lamar's Verse Onset Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low focal quality</li> <li>• Main section role</li> <li>• Unmemorable</li> <li>• Musical material repeats</li> <li>• 8–16 bars long</li> <li>• First vocal material</li> <li>• Develops a story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rhymes do not usually align with beat track (BC 4 and 12 favored)</b></li> <li>• <b>More unevenly spaced rhymes than in chorus</b></li> <li>• <b>High rhyme prevalence, regular periodicities</b></li> <li>• <b>Rapped</b></li> <li>• Measure-long sentences</li> <li>• Lack of internal repetition</li> <li>• Third-person point of view, story</li> <li>• Main section role</li> <li>• Longer than chorus</li> </ul>

Example 6a. Characteristic features of the verse onset role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
5	ence		when	your	age		don't	ex-	ist		Man	I	swear	my	nig-	ga	(0) + 8
6	trip-	pin'	off	that	shit	a-	gain		Pick	him	up	then	set	him	in		(0) + 4 + (8) + 12
7	Cold		wat-	er	then	I	or-	der	some-	one - to	bring	him	Vi-	co-	din		(2) + (6) + 12
8	Hope	to	take	the	pain	a-	way	from - the	feel-	ing	that	he	feel	to-	day	you	(4 + 8) + 12
9	know	when - you	part	of	sec-	tion	eigh-	ty - you	feel	like	no	one	can	re-	late	cause	(4 + 8) + 12

Example 6b. Prototypical verse onset in "A.D.H.D." (2011), mm. 5–9 (0:27–0:38).

First, in contrast with the chorus (Example 5), rhyme periodicity decreases from a whole to a half note. Second, primary rhymes are on the relaxed BCs 4 and 12 (the latter more common); secondary rhymes are on BCs 0, 2, 6, and 8. Third, the unevenly-spaced rhymes suggest a variety of pulses with blue-shaded values at 3 x (8, 16) (half, whole) and pink-shaded ones at 6 x (4, 4, 8, 4, 4) (quarter, half). Fourth, sentences in the lyrics are measure-long in mm. 7–9. And finally, Lamar relates (primarily in third person) a story of a drug-abusing friend or relative.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.3 RHYMING BLOCK

Within a verse, we call a subsection unified by a common rhyme a rhyming block (Example 7a). A prototypical rhyming block has primary rhymes on BC 12, or BCs 4 and 12; other BC rhymes (e.g., 8, 10) occur, but less frequently. Like a verse onset, the more local rhyming block has rhymes that do not align with the beat track, high rhyme prevalence, a third-person point of view and story, a rapped delivery, a typical length of 4–8 measures, measure-long

sentences with non-repeated lyrics, and unevenly spaced rhymes. Due to its relaxed state and salient position beginning and ending a verse, a rhyming block is a verse's default expectation.<sup>36</sup> Example 7b, from "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), shows a rhyming block in mm. 4–10 toward the beginning of the song's only verse. This rhyming block has many typical features: primary rhymes unified by their placement at BC 12, a variety of unevenly spaced rhymes (e.g., the blue ones on BC 0), measure-long sentences, an extraordinarily high rhyme prevalence (7 x (16) between primary rhymes on BC 12), lyrics that do not repeat, a subsection-level length of seven measures, and a third-person focus on an impressively long list of drugs.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.4 PARENTHETICAL CHORUS

Example 8a demonstrates the role of a parenthetical chorus, a brief, chorus-like passage that adds variety to a verse. Although this role's internal features tend to be chorus-like, its context and brevity dissuade listeners from

<sup>35</sup> Similar, prototypical instances of verse onsets include "F\*\*\* Your Ethnicity" (Section.80) and "Swimming Pools (Drank)" (Good Kid). The former (1:03–2:15) has primary rhymes on BC 4 and 12; the latter (0:25–0:51) has a slightly more unusual rhyme placement on BC 10, 4, and 12. Both situations do not align primary rhymes with their beat tracks.

<sup>36</sup> Example 6b was also an instance of a rhyming block, although there we focused on its differences with the preceding chorus.

<sup>37</sup> Another typical rhyming block is from "Swimming Pools (Drank)" from *Good Kid*. The role (at 0:25–0:38) is suggested in a four-measure-long unit by primary rhymes centered around BC 10 (not 12!), non-repeated lyrics, a third-person story, measure-long sentences, unevenly spaced rhymes, and high rhyme prevalence.

<p>Verse Role (de Clercq 2012, 114–115)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low focal quality</li> <li>• Main section role</li> <li>• Unmemorable</li> <li>• Musical material repeats</li> <li>• 8–16 bars long</li> <li>• First vocal material</li> <li>• Develops a story</li> </ul>	<p>Lamar’s Rhyming Block Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Area of common rhyme placement (e.g., BC 4 and 12)</b></li> <li>• <b>Rhymes do not usually align with beat track</b></li> <li>• <b>High rhyme prevalence (focal rhyme)</b></li> <li>• <b>3<sup>rd</sup>-person point of view, story</b></li> <li>• <b>Rapped</b></li> <li>• <b>Often 4–8 measures in length</b></li> <li>• <b>Measure-long sentences with non-repeated lyrics</b></li> <li>• <b>Unevenly spaced rhymes</b></li> </ul>
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Example 7a. Characteristic features of the rhyming block role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
0												Some	times	I	wa-	na	
1	say		fuck		rap-	pin		I	need		mon-	ey	now			Like	(2) + 4 + 12
2	should	I	start		trap-	pin'		If	what	I	write		down		don't	col-	(2) + 4 + 12
3	lect	this	ver-	y	mo-	men t	then	I'm	on	it	no		ques-	tion	in	the	4 + 8 + 12
4	streets			my	nig-	gas	is	well	con-	nec t-	ted	let's	see		Do	I	(0) + (9) + 12
5	cop	a	pound	of	kush	Pro-	meth-	a-	zine	or	push	some	E?		Ox-	y-	12
6	con-	tin	have	me	lay-	in'	on	soft	cot-	ton	when	I	sleep?		This	is	(0) + (8) + 12
7	deep	as	the	ab-	byss	I'm	not	just	rhym-	in'	on	the	beat	I	be	in	(0) + 12
8	spots		chop-	pin	the	rock s		like	Flint-		stone		feet		This	is	(0) + (2) + (5) + 12
9	me			Frust-	tra-	ted		bat-	ti-	in'	my	own	E-	vil s	Fin-	na'	(0) + (7) + 12
10	sad-	dle	up	that	work	a-	cross	O-	hi-	o	in	a	Ge-	o		Or	(0) + 8 + 12

Example 7b. “R.O.T.C. (Interlude)” (2010), mm. 4–10 (0:28–0:44).

inferring a section-level chorus, and its primary rhymes may also be on BCs 4 and 12, thereby lessening its contrast with surrounding verse material. This role has a rich analogue in de Clercq’s pop-rock “incipient chorus” (2012, 215): a short, chorus-like phrase subordinate to an overall verse. Parenthetical choruses have robust support across the hip-hop genre: first, Edwards (2009, 191) mentions the possibility of “hidden hooks,” and second, they occur in verses of emcees other than Lamar.<sup>38</sup> In Example 8b, the parenthetical chorus in mm. 10–11 is sandwiched between two rhyming blocks in mm. 6–9 and 12–17, of which mm. 6–9 and 12–15 are shown. In contrast with the song’s two rhyming blocks, this parenthetical chorus (mm. 10–11) is more repetitious with rhymes between BCs 0, 4, 8, and ≈12.<sup>39</sup> It also has more general lyrics (e.g., “you, are, you

are”), a second-person point of view, a sung delivery, and background vocals. It is the length of a single couplet to not suggest a new, full-fledged chorus. And lastly, its primary rhymes are on BCs 0 and 8, a placement that is not required for this role but adds to our sense of chorus quality. This parenthetical chorus injects some needed variety into what could have been a lengthy, overly static rhyming block. While surrounding rhyming blocks depict uncritically a story of someone using drugs, mm. 10–11 instead make a point expected in the conscious rap genre—drug use is not without reason, and, according to Lamar, underlying drug use is a lonely, disempowered individual.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Two examples mentioned to us by Mitch Ohriner include “Get By” by Talib Kweli, Verse 1, 0:22–0:26, in which “Just to get by...” is pitched, and “Cadallactica” by Big K.R.I.T., in Verse 1, 0:55–0:58, in which “Cadillac-lac-lac, ... too early for the hook” acknowledges in the lyrics themselves a brief chorus-like moment.

<sup>39</sup> In mm. 10–11, we hear the secondary rhymes on BCs 3 and 11 as approximating 4 and 12 since we sense metrical accents on BCs 0

and 8 and infer beats on BCs 4 and 12.

<sup>40</sup> Other typical instances of parenthetical choruses in Lamar are from “Night of the Living Junkies” (2:33–2:41, *Overly Dedicated*) and “P&P 1.5” (3:33–3:41, *Overly Dedicated*). Both instances have primary rhymes on BC 12. As well, the former foreshadows the coming chorus due to its quasi-sung delivery and position immediately before that chorus; this role can thus resemble a prechorus from pop-rock traditions.

Pop-Rock "Incipient Chorus" (de Clercq 2012, 215) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brief chorus-like passage</li> <li>Occurs within longer verse</li> <li>One phrase long</li> <li>Throwback to incipient verse-chorus form</li> </ul>	Lamar's Parenthetical Chorus Role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Repetitious</b></li> <li><b>Equally spaced, highly prevalent rhymes</b></li> <li><b>Short in length (e.g., couplet)</b></li> <li><b>Inserted before, between, or after subsections in longer verse</b></li> <li><b>Sung</b></li> <li><b>Texturally emphasized</b></li> <li><b>Memorable names</b></li> </ul>
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Example 8a. Characteristic features of the parenthetical chorus role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
6	trip-	pin'	off	that	shit	a-	gain		Pick	him	up	then - l	set	him	in		(0) + 4 + (8) + 12
7	Cold		wat-	er	then	l	or-	der	some-	one - to	bring	him	Vi-	Co-	din		(2) + (6) + 12
8	Hop e	to	take	the	pain	a-	way	From - the	feel-	ing	that	he	feel	to-	Day	You	4 + 12
9	kno w	whe n - you	part	of	sec-	tion	eigh-	ty	you - feel	like	no	one	can	re-	late	caus e	4 + 12
10	you	are		you	are			a	lo-	ner		lo-	ner		Mar-	i-	0 + (≈4) + 8 + (≈12)
11	juan -	a		en-	dor-	phins	make	you	strong-	er		strong -	er	I'm	in	the	0 + 8 + (≈12)
12	hous e		par-	ty	trip-	in'	off	My	gen-	er-	a-	tion	slip-	pin'	cough		4 + 12
13	sy-	rup	like	its	wat-	er	ne - ver	no	pan-	cakes	in	the	kitch-	en	Man	no	(4) + 12
14	won - der	our	lives	is	caug ht	up	in	the	dai-	ly	su-	per-	sti-	tion	That	the	(4) + 12
15	worl d	is	bout	to	end	who	gives	a	fuck	we	nev - er	do	list-	en	Un -	less - it	12

Example 8b. "A.D.H.D." (2011), mm. 6–15 (0:41–0:46).

### 3.5 EXCURSION

Example 9a demonstrates the tense role that we call an excursion.<sup>41</sup> As shown at the top right of the example, an excursion is a tense, bridge-like role at the subsection or section level; it typically occurs halfway to 2/3rds through a verse or song. Its improvisatory flavor results from irregular rhyme placement and periodicities, low prevalence, and quickly changing topics in the lyrics.<sup>42</sup> A pop-rock bridge is its closest analogue since it also occurs halfway to 2/3rds through a song, contrasts with other sections, and is tonally

unstable. In Example 9b, a typical excursion at the subsection level occurs in mm. 10–15 from "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010). This excerpt has tense rhymes on BCs 0, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 15 instead of BC 12 (except m. 10). Rhyme periodicities vary and prevalence is very low: m. 11's ".zip" and "zip" (green) have a periodicity of a quarter and a prevalence of 2 x (4) while "Kilo" and "needle" (mm. 12–13, yellow) have a whole-note periodicity and a prevalence of 2 x (16). Quick jumps in thought abound: Lamar alights upon travel, selling drugs, the music industry, and basketball in only six measures.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> As reported by Edwards (2009, 181), Big Daddy Kane notes that freestyling, a potential precursor to our excursion role, was once a style of rapping where an emcee would come up with ideas on the spot.

<sup>42</sup> Komaniecki (2019, 95) discusses similar "non-binary rhyme schemes" evocative of freestyle, improvised rap. Biamonte (2014, [7.9]) defines a "dissonant bridge" having the formal function of a bridge and tense techniques such as departure from the tonic, tonally open endings, increased harmonic dissonance and chromaticism, metrical dissonance, wider or higher register, sequences, and textural disruptions.

<sup>43</sup> Another prototypical instance of an excursion in Lamar's songs is from "Night of the Living Junkies" (*Overly Dedicated*). In this instance (2:10–2:33), a six-measure excursion on the subsection level leads to a couplet-length parenthetical chorus ("Lights will flash, cars will crash..."), which foreshadows (as a prechorus) a coming chorus.

<p>Bridge Role (de Clercq 2012, 115)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Halfway to 2/3rds through song</li> <li>• Most contrasting role</li> <li>• Follows 2<sup>nd</sup> verse or 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus</li> <li>• Leads to return of main material</li> <li>• Lacks harmonic or tonal closure</li> <li>• Harmonically distant, unstable</li> <li>• Textural contrast</li> </ul>	<p>Lamar's Excursion Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Tense, irregular rhyme placement, periodicities</b></li> <li>• <b>Lack of repetition</b></li> <li>• <b>Less prevalent rhymes</b></li> <li>• <b>Quickly changing topics in lyrics</b></li> <li>• <b>3<sup>rd</sup>-person story</b></li> <li>• Occurs halfway to 2/3rds through verse or song</li> </ul>
---	---

Example 9a. Characteristic features of the excursion role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metric al State
10	sad-	dle	up	that	work	a-	cross	O-	hi-	o	in	a	Ge-	o		Or	(0) + 8 + 12
11	sho uld	I	sell	my	mu-	sic	.zip	to	buy	yo ur	zip	and	hope	one	day	it	6 + 10
12	flou r-	ish	to	a	Ki-	lo			Track		record	of a	hust-	ler	Rat h-	er	(4) + 8 + 14
13	rec-	ords	on	the	need-	le	mak-	in'	Mus-	ic			Clock -	in	fast		(0) + (4) + 8
14	ban k		like	a	shot	from	Pat-	rick	Ew-	in g		My	nig-	ga	wha t	you	8
15	do-	in'	on	these	cor-	ners	whip-	ping?			I	tho ugh t	you	had	a	show	0 + 6 + 15

Example 9b. "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), mm. 10–15 (0:39–0:53).

### 3.6 CRISIS

As shown in Example 10a, Lamar's crisis role is an intensification, typically late in a verse or song, that imprints in listeners' minds the effects of violence in the Black community. This intensification is suggested by an increase in rhyme or syllable density in opposition to relaxed rhyme placement. The closest pop-rock analogues are lengthy, climactic plateaus at the ends of songs (e.g., in "Hey Jude" by the Beatles), though Lamar's crises can occur on the subsection level.<sup>44</sup> A crisis's mixture of tension and relaxation suggests catharsis, the powerful releasing and purging of strong emotions. Tension is created by an acceleration in rhymes, whereas relaxation is by rhyme placement at odds with the beat track—most typically on BCs 4 and 12. Lamar includes recognizable names to promote memorability. The crisis role shows the influence of the conscious rap genre on Lamar's songs: just as this genre seeks to build listeners' awareness of violence, a crisis attempts to imprint these issues on listeners' minds.

Example 10b demonstrates a typical crisis with mm. 42–51 from "Rigamortis" (2011). This excerpt is a crisis since

it includes both tense and relaxed aspects, an increase in syllable density culminating in m. 51 ("and y'all luck just ran out, you'll see"), and lyrics that threaten to kill all other rappers (albeit nonviolently and musically). Words such as "Kendrick" and "catastrophe" increase the memorability and sense of impending doom, respectively. In addition to the increasing number of 32<sup>nd</sup> notes, which increase syllable density and rising tension, increasing textural density and Lamar's rising pitch height offer added support (m. 46 on). Rhyme placement is relaxed, with primary rhymes on BCs 4 and 12 and secondary rhymes approximating BC 0 and 8.<sup>45</sup> At the climactic moment (m. 51, BCs 5–12), Lamar spits words intensely to sustain the long breath and maintain a loud dynamic level.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Lamar's delivery emphasizes rhymes on BC 4 and 12 by consistently delivering them at a higher pitch than the other BCs.

<sup>46</sup> Other typical instances of crises in Lamar's output occur in "M.a.a.D. City" (*Good Kid*) and in "DNA." (*DAMN.*). In the former (0:58–2:08), which occurs on the subsection level, an increase in rhyme density starts with "But ever since that day, I was lookin' at him different" and ends with "AK's, AR's, 'Ayy, y'all duck'...;" in the latter (2:02–3:05), which occurs on the section level, increased syllable density across the entire song is suggested by a move from duple to triplet sixteenths. Both crises include relaxed rhyme placement, memorable names, and violent situations.

<sup>44</sup> Intensifications to climaxes have been noted in pop-rock forms by Osborn (2013), who defines the concept of a terminal climax, or a climactic plateau at the end of a song that presents new material, and by Spicer (2004), who defines a cumulative form as working toward a climax of recapitulated material.



(1) Terminal Climax in Pop-Rock Form (Osborn 2013) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climactic plateau at end of song, new material</li> </ul> (2) Climactic Recapitulation in Cumulative Form (Spicer 2004) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climactic plateau at end of song, old material</li> </ul>	Lamar's Crisis Role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Relaxed rhyme placement not aligned with beat track</b></li> <li>• <b>Increase in density of rhymes or syllables</b></li> <li>• <b>Memorable names</b></li> <li>• <b>Violent situation</b></li> <li>• Late in verse or song</li> </ul>
--	--

Example 10a. Characteristic features of the crisis role.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
42	is	un-	der	my	feet,	and	I	come	in	peace	to	com-	pete	I	don't	run	(1) + 4 + (7) + (11) + 12 + (15)
43	if	you	rath-	er	leap,	my	stat-	ist-	ics	go	up	in	weeks	And I	go	vis-	4 + (≈8) + 12
44	it	the	near-	est	creek,	and I	get	bus-	y	on	many	M-	C	Really	ball-	ist-	(≈0) + 4 + 12
45	ic,	any	body	can	see	Any	as-	sist-	ance,	every-	body	de-	ceased	Some	per-	sist-	(≈0) + 4 + (≈8) + 12
46	ence	recog-	nize	I	be	Reall	too	vic-	ious,	the	perma	nent	beast	And the	demo-	li-	(≈0) + 4 + (≈8) + 12
47	tion	breaki	up	the	street	Bette	par-	ti-	tion,	better	dot	your	T	And I	gon'	men-	(≈0) + 4 + (≈8) + 12
48	tion	how	far	you	see	Putti	my	dick	in the	rap	in-	dust-	ry	Every-	body	bitch-	(≈0) + 4 + (≈8) + 12
49	ing,	getting	mad	at	me	Reco	nize	Ken-	drick	in the	batt-	er-	y	And I'm	charge	up,	(≈0) + 4 + 8 + 12
50	and the	cat-	ast-	ro-	phe	Is	charged	up,	and the	aud-	a-	cl-	ty	Of	y'all	fucks	4 + 12
51	neve	could	hass	le	me	And	y'all	luck	just	ran	out,	you'll	see				4 + 12

Example 10b. "Rigamortis" (2011), mm. 42–51 (2:28–2:54).

### 3.7 INTRO

We identify three prototypical intros in Lamar's songs (Example 11a). Some of Lamar's intros follow pop-rock practice and are instrumental (Case 1). Others (Case 2) feature unmeasured speech with an absent beat track or combine a beat track with isolated bursts of measured or unmeasured lyrics (Case 3). In Cases 2 and 3, speech is introductory and dramatizes a song's setting. As shown in Example 11b, Lamar's "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010) has an intro resembling Case 3 since instrumental samples at 0:10 support an unmeasured declaration of the time at night ("This is me thinking at 4:43 am, June 6"). These introductory lyrics dramatize the song's setting: Lamar's self-talk results from the fatigue and despair of nighttime, whereas during the daytime he has greater confidence. Similar intros in Lamar can be found that affirm these three categories.<sup>47</sup>

We have thus defined seven normative formal roles in Lamar's songs as modifications of pop-rock analogues. With the formal roles in Lamar's songs defined, we next examine how formal ambiguity arises in them.

## 4. FORMAL AMBIGUITY IN LAMAR'S SONGS

We examine the problem of formal ambiguity in Lamar by building again on de Clercq's prototype-based approach (2017). In this recent study of formal ambiguity in rock music, de Clercq proposes three ambiguity-creating strategies: successive formal roles may be telescoped, thereby making blends (i.e., hybrids); roles may be weakly differentiated, thereby lessening formal contrasts; and finally, a formal grouping may function on more than one level.<sup>48</sup>

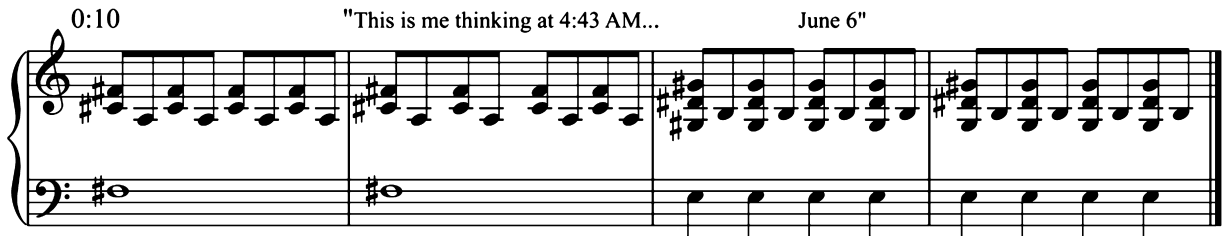
Does Lamar also use blended roles, weakly differentiated sections, and passages that function on multiple levels? These questions, such as the use of role blending in creating formal ambiguity, have not been sufficiently addressed in Lamar's songs. Bungert (2019) notes how Lamar's "King Kunta" (2015) has formal sections that face both forward and backward. Bungert explains the song's formal ambiguity as a rivalry between offset verse-chorus and chorus-verse cycles. In Figure 6, the verse-chorus view

<sup>47</sup> Additional examples include the intro to "Blow My High (Members Only)" from *Section.80* (0:0–0:19), a section that contains instrumental samples (Case 1); "HiiiPoWeR" from *Section.80* (0:0–0:10) features unmeasured speech (Case 2); and "Barbed Wire" from *Overly Dedicated* (0:0–0:20) is instrumental with short bursts of lyrics (Case 3).

<sup>48</sup> de Clercq (2017, [3.4]) shows weak section differentiation and ambiguity of level in the first verse from "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Lookin' For" by U2. De Clercq argues that the 24-measure verse can be heard as ending with an 8-measure refrain, or as a 16-measure verse plus an 8-measure chorus (ambiguity of level). Weak section differentiation in this situation results from a similar tessitura throughout the passage.

<p>Pop-Rock Intro Role (de Clercq 2012, 116)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrumental</li> <li>• Subsidiary</li> <li>• Contains material from main section roles</li> <li>• Contains link material</li> <li>• Fades in</li> </ul>	<p>Lamar's Intro Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case 1: instrumental samples without rapped speech (fade-in)</li> <li>• <b>Case 2: unmeasured, introductory speech with absent beat track, e.g., skit</b></li> <li>• <b>Hybrid Case 3: sparse introductory speech (measured or unmeasured) against instrumental samples</b></li> </ul>
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Example 11a. Characteristic features of the intro role.



Example 11b. "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), (0:10–0:18).

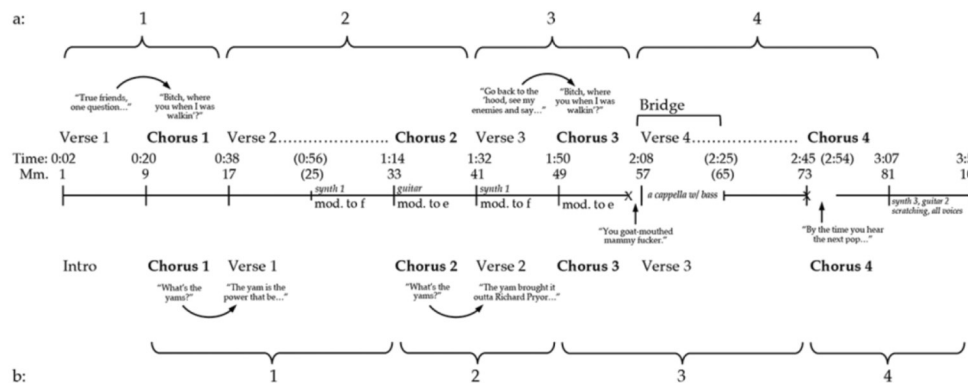


Figure 6. Bungert's analysis of form in "King Kunta."

(layer a) asserts a verse in m. 1, a chorus in m. 9, and then three more verse-chorus cycles; the chorus-verse view (layer b) instead asserts an intro in mm. 1–8 followed by three chorus-verse cycles and a final chorus. However, the verse-chorus view in layer a is contradicted by mm. 1–8's introductory character and sparse lyrics (e.g., "I'm mad (he mad)"), while the chorus-verse view (layer b) is richly supported by mm. 9–16's repetitious lyrics occurring four times in the song. An ambiguity assumes an irreducible duality of states. The verse-chorus and chorus-verse views, however, are not equally compelling and thus do not suggest one.<sup>49</sup> Instead, as we will argue, the forward- and

backward-facing qualities of "King Kunta" can be explained through formalizing the parameters involved in ambiguous roles.

In comparison with pop and rock genres, in which harmony, melody, and voice leading are primary in creating formal ambiguity, in Lamar's music rhyme manipulation and lyrics are primary. Working within these salient parameters, Lamar broadens the scope of de Clercq's mechanisms: formal blends may be independent of telescoping; and formal telescoping and weak section differentiation (hereafter called *weak unit differentiation*) are extended to the subsection level. In the remainder of this section, we note examples of formal blends in Lamar's songs and show how they result from the expressive needs of each song. In our final section, we will show how all the techniques dis-

traditions the expectation of a verse as preceding a chorus.

<sup>49</sup> Bungert's note 6 admits: "It could be argued that the 'verse-chorus paradigm' is more applicable to pop/rock than to hip hop." Although a few of Lamar's songs begin with a verse (e.g., "Ab-Soul's Outro" from *Section.80*), it is an overreach to import from pop-rock

Name	Tension in Rhymes	Location in Verse	Criteria	Examples
<b>Parenthetical Chorus/Intro</b>	Relaxed	Beginning	1 <sup>st</sup> -person lyrics, has diss, boast, or critique, is repetitious, has evenly spaced rhymes versus introductory lyrics	"R.O.T.C.," mm. 0–4, 0:17–0:29 ("Sometimes I wanna say f*** rapping...")
<b>Rhyming Block/Excursion</b>	Relaxed	Beginning	Rhymes on BC 4 and 12 versus quickly changing topics in lyrics	"Rigamortis," mm. 6–17, 0:27–0:59 ("And this is rigamortis and it's gorgeous...") mm. 36–39, 1:45–1:53 ("and made him Casper, I captured the likes...")
<b>Rhyming Block/Crisis</b>	Relaxed	End	Rhymes on BC 12 versus lyrics suggesting violence	"R.O.T.C.," mm. 35–40, 1:42–1:57 ("You'll know I always had a passion...")

Figure 7. Instances of subsection-level blends in Lamar's songs.

cussed—control of tension, formal roles, and formal ambiguity—explain comprehensible forms and correlate with lyrics in two of Lamar's songs, "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010) and "King Kunta" (2015).

On the subsection level in verses, so far we have found three instances of blends in Lamar's songs. Each type problematizes low tension in rhymes, demonstrates the salience of lyrics as formal criteria, and serves the expressive needs of each song. Following de Clercq (2012, 214), we format each blend as two terms joined by a slash, although we reverse this order and lead with a primary (or situational context) label, followed by a secondary (or content) label. The three instances of blends are shown in Figure 7: a parenthetical chorus/intro blend in "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010) combines chorus-like aspects such as evenly spaced rhymes with introductory lyrics; a rhyming block/excursion blend in "Rigamortis" (2011) combines primary rhymes on BC 4 and 12 at the beginning of a verse with quickly changing literary topics; and the rhyming block/crisis blend from "R.O.T.C." has relaxed rhyme placement against lyrics that imply impending violence. The blends are also motivated by narrative strategies: the rhyming block/excursion blend in "Rigamortis" aligns with the song's message that Lamar is an otherworldly rapper who will "kill" all competitors.

On the section level, we have found a variety of formal blends in Lamar's songs that show the centrality of lyrics within formal roles. Figure 8 shows instances of blends having situational contexts of verse, chorus, or intro. In the verse-based blends, a verse/excursion in "King Kunta" combines verse-like rhyme placement on BCs 4 and 12 with excursion aspects in the lyrics. A verse/chorus in "ELEMENT." has verse context combined with chorus features such as rhymes aligned with the beat track (BCs 0 and 8), critical

lyrics, and a first-person point of view. In the chorus-based blends, we have already seen how a chorus/excursion in "Rigamortis" (see also Example 2) combines a chorus context and repeated lyrics with an excursion's tense rhymes and quickly changing imagery. In this category, an intriguing chorus/verse in "Backseat Freestyle" has a chorus context, first-person point of view, and a threat (or boast) combined with a verse's rhyme placement on BCs 4 and 12, long sentences, and a lack of repetition. In the final category, intro-based blends, an intro/chorus in "Alright" continues the trend toward salient lyrics since introductory, sparse lyrics are counterbalanced by frequent repetitions, a chorus feature.

As demonstrated above, the exact choice of blended roles and their ordering in time is shaped by the expressive needs of each individual song. We will accordingly trace tension, formal roles, and formal ambiguities in two Lamar songs: his early song "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)," which is dominated by one long rapped verse divided into subsections, and the well-known "King Kunta," which is saturated on the section level with chorus-based blends.

#### 4.1 "R.O.T.C. (INTERLUDE)": A CASE OF FORMAL STRETCHING

In this section, we examine Lamar's song "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" from *Overly Dedicated* (2010), demonstrating our entire analytical methodology. This song, produced by Jaius "J-Mo" Mozee, exemplifies stretching since its flow is limited to a single, long rapped verse, thereby indicating authenticity and showcasing Lamar's lyrical abilities.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The larger mixtape marks Lamar's emergence as a thinking rapper with songs that change perspectives and tones (Reeves 2017).

Name	Tension in Rhymes	Location in Song	Criteria	Example
<b>Verse Primary</b>				
<b>Verse/Excursion</b>	Relaxed	Verse	Rhymes on BC 4 and 12 versus quick jumps in thought in lyrics	"King Kunta," mm. 56–72, 2:07–2:26 ("I was gonna kill a couple...")
<b>Verse/Chorus</b>	Relaxed	Verse	Verse context versus rhymes aligned with the beat track on BC 0 and 8, critical lyrics, and 1 <sup>st</sup> -person view	"ELEMENT.," from <i>Damn</i> , Verse 1, 0:20–1:00 ("I'm willing to die for this shit...")
<b>Chorus Primary</b>				
<b>Chorus/Excursion</b>	Tense	Chorus	Chorus context and repeated lyrics versus tense rhymes, wordplay, quickly changing imagery in lyrics	"Rigamortis," mm. 1–3, 0:13–0:21 ("Got me breathing with dragons...")
<b>Chorus/Verse</b>	Relaxed	Chorus	Chorus context, 1 <sup>st</sup> -person view, and threat/boast versus rhymes on BC ≈4 and 12, long sentences, lack of repetition	"Backseat Freestyle," from <i>Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City</i> , 0:15–0:40 ("All my life I want money and power...")
<b>Intro Primary</b>				
<b>Intro/Chorus</b>	Relaxed	Intro	Intro context, introductory and sparse lyrics versus rhymes on BC 8 and 0, repetitive lyrics	"Alright," from <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i> , Intro, 0:02–0:19 ("All my life I has to fight...")

Figure 8. Instances of section-level blends in Lamar's songs.

This song is one of only two in the corpus with one verse and one chorus, and one of seven with one verse. Within its single verse, formal ambiguity arises from weak unit differentiation, brief formal overlaps, and formal blends.

The verse explores a late-night, internal debate on whether the protagonist (presumably Lamar) should drop a stalled rapping career and take up selling drugs instead. The song's title repurposes the expected meaning of "R.O.T.C." (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) as "Right On Time Conscience," hinting at the protagonist's ultimate decision to focus on their rapping career. The chorus is sung by BJ the Chicago Kid, covering Billy Caldwell in "Open Your Eyes" (1980), a love song in which the protagonist decides to "take my chances" and "be by your side." The chorus and verse highlight parallel life choices: rapping versus selling drugs parallels going out versus breaking up.<sup>51</sup>

Figure 9 demonstrates our entire analytical toolkit on the verse of "R.O.T.C.": (from left to right) lyrics, primary rhyme manipulations, tension levels, formal roles, situational form, and formal mentalities.<sup>52</sup> From top to bottom,

our method reveals a comprehensible chorus-verse form embedded within the verse, as suggested by the succession of roles. Therefore, as seen in the "situational form" column, the unshaded subsections embed, in this order, a chorus C<sup>1</sup> (mm. 0–3), a verse V<sup>1</sup> (mm. 5–9), a second chorus C<sup>2</sup> (mm. 15–16), a second verse V<sup>2</sup> (mm. 17–22), and a third verse V<sup>3</sup> (mm. 35–40). This thereby suggests two complete chorus-verse cycles (mm. 0–9, 15–40). The "formal roles" column shows three formal overlaps (m. 4, 10, and 34, shaded gray), two excursions (mm. 11–14, 27–33), and a crisis (mm. 22–27). The verse is loosely consistent with Lamar's norms of subsection ordering since two excursions occur in its middle and the crisis occurs just after the midpoint (m. 22 out of 40).

In addition to showing a comprehensible chorus-verse form, Figure 9 shows an overall tension contour bounded by relaxation and working toward two peaks of high tension in the middle, thereby creating variety and interest. We may distinguish a spectrum for four degrees of tension/relaxation based on measurement inclusion: 1) high tension results from tension in all three rhyme manipulations, 2) moderate tension is from tension in two out of

<sup>51</sup> This sample is famous in the hip-hop community for being used in Common's "The Light" (2000).

<sup>52</sup> In this and Figure 10, we omit consideration of secondary rhymes

to aid comprehension of large-scale fluctuations in tension.

	<b>Stages 1, 2 →</b>				<b>Stages 3, 4 →</b>		<b>Stage 5 (GOAL)</b>
<b>Lyrics</b>	<b>Primary Rhyme Placement</b>	<b>Primary Rhyme Periodicities</b>	<b>Primary Rhyme Prevalence</b>	<b>Tension Levels</b>	<b>Formal Roles</b>	<b>Situational Form</b>	<b>Formal Mentalities</b>
"Sometimes I wanna say...": disses rapping, weighs dealing (0–3)	BC 4 + 12, then ≈0 + 4 + 8 + 12	wholes to quarters	"rappin," "now:" 2 x (16); "moment:" 3 x (4); "question:" 2 x (12)	Moderate relaxation	Parenthetical chorus/Intro	C <sup>1</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> person view, rapping/dealing dilemma
"In the streets my N**** is well connected...": considers question (4)	BC 12	whole note	"streets," "see:" 2 x (12)		Overlap		
"Do I cop a pound..."; describes temptation of drugs (5–9)	BC 12	whole note	"ee:" 9 x (12, 16, 4)	High relaxation	Rhyming block	V <sup>2</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person view, temptations
"Finna' saddle..."; describes travel (10)	BC 8 + 12	quarter note	"sad-:" 2 x (9), "hi:" 2 x (4)		Overlap		
"Or should I..."; fantasy of being successful rapper (11–14)	Various BCs: 0, 4, 6, 8, 10, 14: BC 8 primary by end	mix of whole, half, dotted quarter, quarter, eighth	Various 2 x, 3x (2, 4, 6, 8, 16)	High tension	Excursion		Fantasy
"My N**** what you..." (15–16)	BC 0 at beginning; BC 14 at end	≈whole note	"doin':" 2 x (8), "show:" 2 x (15)	Moderate relaxation to... moderate tension	Parenthetical chorus	C <sup>2</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> person views, rapping/dealing dilemma
"easy money sounds tempting..."; 3 <sup>rd</sup> -person focus on cars (17–22 BC 9)	BC 6, then BC 4 + 8 + ≈12, then 6	≈whole note	"tempting:" 2 x (16), "Rovers...up:" 3 x (16, ≈8), "solution:" 2 x (16)	Moderate relaxation	Rhyming block	V <sup>3</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person view, temptations
"Curve servin' though I..."; imagines robbing a gas station (22–27 BC 7)	Starts BC 0 and ≈8, then 0 + ≈4 + 8 + 12 (m. 26)	≈whole notes, then quarters	"elevens:" 2 x (4), "Hop:" 9 x (≈16, 8, 3, 5, 4, 3, 4)	Moderate relaxation to... high tension	Crisis		Fantasy
"Watch the plans..."; imagines rise as drug dealer (27 BC 8–33)	BC 0 + 2 + 4 + 8 + 10 + 12	dotted whole, whole, dotted half + eighth, dotted half, half + 16 <sup>th</sup> , half, dotted quarter	"plans:" 5 x (irregular), various 2 x (e.g., "Sherm" or ≈8, "F****" or 20)	High tension	Excursion		Fantasy
"and pick up a sack..."; Drops the mic and picks up a gun (34)	BC 8 + 12	quarter note	"toolie:" 3 x (20, 4)		Overlap		
"You'll know I always..."; Tells listener is in hard spot, decides to not start dealing (35–40)	BC 12	wholes	"writin':" 5 x (16)	High relaxation	Rhyming Block/Crisis	V <sup>4</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> -person views, rapping/dealing dilemma

Figure 9. Formal overview of "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), mm. 0–40 (0:19–1:57).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
0												Some	times	I	wa-	na	
1	say		fuck		rap-	pin		I	need		mon-	ey	now			Like	(2) + 4 + 12
2	should	I	start		trap-	in'		If	what	I	write		down		do n't	col-	(2) + 4 + 12
3	lect	this	ver-	y	mo-	men t	then	I'm	on	it	no		ques-	tion	in	the	≈0 + 4 + 8 + 12
4	streets			my	nig-	gas	is	well	con-	nect-	ted	let's	see		Do	I	(0) + (9) + 12
5	cop	a	pound	of	kush	Pro-	meth-	a-	zine	or	push	some	er		Ox-	y-	12

Example 12. Formal juncture in "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), mm. 0–5 (0:17–0:32).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
30	er				Sher m				con-	tra-	ban d		They	yearn	fo r	the	4 + 10 + 13
31	butt		nak-	ed			Fuck	a	verse		vers -	es	get		let	off	6 + 10
32		in	thir-	ty	min-	utes	six		sec-	onds	I	dis-	perse		to	the	12
33	world	of	un-		ru-	ly			wher e	I	put	the	mic	down		and	4
34	pick		up	a	sack		and	a	tool-	ie	if	you	knew	me		You' ll	8 + 12
35	know	I	al-	ways	had	a	pass-	ion	for	rid-	dle	whe n	writ-	in'		but	(9) + 12
36	late-	ly	I've	been	think-	in'	bout	tak-	in'	chanc-	es	to	bright-	en		my	(9) + 12
37	fut-	ure	fi-	nanc-	ia-	ly		so	pleas e	don't	be	ma d	at	me		I	≈4 + ≈12
38	got-	ta	do		what	I	got-	ta	do		no		shit		so	I	(0) + (6) + 12
39	tell	my	nig-	ga	front	me	let	me	put	it	on	the	strip			the y	12
40	give	it	back		when	I think	a-	bou t	the	con-		se-	quence				12

Example 13. Rhyming block/crisis blend in "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" (2010), mm. 30–40 (1:30–1:57).

three, 3) moderate relaxation is from tension in one out of three, and 4) high relaxation is from relaxation in all three. In Figure 9, the tension column matches these four states to a color gradient, with orange showing high tension, yellow moderate tension, green moderate relaxation, and blue high relaxation. Given this color scheme, in this verse we have eight subsections analyzed as: 1) moderate relaxation for the rapping/selling dilemma; 2) high relaxation for different drugs (5–9); 3) high tension for his fantasies of being a successful rapper; 4) moderate relaxation to moderate tension for a return to the rapping/selling question; 5) moderate relaxation for his envy of successful dealers; 6) moderate relaxation to high tension for his fantasy of robbing a store at gunpoint; 7) high tension for his fantasy of becoming a successful dealer; and 8) high relaxation for his decision to sell, then step away to continue rapping.

Example 12 shows an instance of a parenthetical chorus/intro blend and rhyming block. It also shows a formal overlap, weak subsection differentiation, and the central-

ity of lyrics within formal roles. The m. 4 formal overlap ("in the streets...") results from the combination of a primary rhyme on BC 12, which matches the primary rhyme in mm. 5–9, with introductory lyrics that set up the question: which drugs should he sell? Weak section differentiation arises from the presence of rhymes on BC 12 in the parenthetical chorus/intro blend (mm. 0–3), the overlap (m. 4), and the rhyming block (mm. 5–9).

The second blend of rhyming block/crisis (Example 13, below the second dashed line) demonstrates two trends: first, Lamar's verses tend to end with rhyming block and crisis roles, with both suggested here; and second, lyrics tend to be the most salient parameter in invoking formal roles, since here only the lyrics suggest the crisis role. The context of this blend is a subtle move from an excursion (mm. 27–33) to a brief subsection overlap (inside the dashed lines in m. 34), which has the rhyme placement of BC 8 from the excursion and BC 12 of the coming blend. In the blend itself (mm. 35–40), the primary rhyming block aspect re-



sults from focal rhyme placement on BC 12, a periodicity of a whole note, and a high rhyme prevalence of 5 x (16). Due to the rhyme manipulations, we hear a powerful whole-note pulse on the beat 4s of the blend, thereby signaling the verse's end. Against the relaxation in the rhymes, the secondary aspect (crisis) is suggested by the lyrics: "so please don't be mad at me/ I gotta do what I gotta do no shit/so I tell my n\*\*\*\* front me let me put it on the strip." But after seemingly making the decision to sell, he steps back: "they give it back when I think about the consequence... shit." His close call with selling drugs implies the violence of the crisis role. However, the relaxation in rhymes suggests catharsis of his frustrations: he accepts missing out on money and power and instead persists as a struggling rapper.

Returning to Figure 9, "R.O.T.C." has complex formal mentalities: three situational roles—parenthetical chorus, rhyming block, and excursion—have distinctive points of view or literary topics. Parenthetical choruses tend to take first- and second-person points of view: they explore the song's central rapping/selling dilemma. Rhyming blocks focus on third-person topics such as drugs, cars, and wealth—all temptations to Lamar. And lastly, the excursion role correlates with Lamar's fantasies, whether of being a successful rapper ("expand to the Hoover dam") or drug dealer ("hope one day it flourish to a kilo"). The one exception is the rhyming block/crisis blend in which Lamar confronts the rapping/selling dilemma (mm. 35–40); it instead adopts first- and second-person points of view as the protagonist decides to keep rapping instead of selling drugs.

#### 4.2 "KING KUNTA": ACCESSIBLE, CHORUS-BASED SECTION BLENDS

Unlike the sparing use of formal blends in "R.O.T.C.," "King Kunta" saturates chorus-based blends to create an accessible hit song. Co-written with Thundercat and Redfoo, and produced by Terrace Martin, Michael Kuhle, and Sounwave, "King Kunta" has an interesting background suggesting that it was intended as a hit: recorded March 24, 2015, it was the third of five songs from *To Pimp a Butterfly* that were released as singles. Lamar's 2015 concert tour promoting the album was entitled "Kunta Groove Sessions Tour," suggesting that the song's title refers to Lamar. Unsurprisingly, "King Kunta" has ranked well in Lamar's discography: it peaked at No. 11 on the U.S. Hot Rap Songs chart. Compared with Lamar's most successful song ever, "Humble" (2017), which has 830 million YouTube views as of February 2022, "King Kunta" is just shy of 150 million, a respectable total given its earlier release (compared to "Humble") and Lamar's increasing fame thereafter.

"King Kunta" examines the idea that Lamar is suspended within a power dynamic between the recording in-

dustry and his authentic Compton upbringing, so that he ambiguously takes (metaphorical) roles of both king and slave (Bungert 2019, [4.6]). In an interview (Lamar 2015), Lamar noted that the song originated as a play of words between King Kunta and Kunta Kinte, the fictional 18<sup>th</sup>-century slave (and protagonist of Alex Haley's historical novel *Roots*). Bungert (2019, [5.2]) views Lamar's situation within power dynamics as analogous to the formal "double consciousness" of the song, which he portrays as simultaneous verse-chorus and chorus-verse formal cycles (our Figure 6).

We argue instead that formal ambiguity in "King Kunta" arises through chorus-based section-level blends, formal overlaps, and weak section differentiation. Figure 10 provides our overview of its form that focuses on its rapped content, omitting its lengthy outro. Overall, "King Kunta" has an underlying situational form of Intro–C<sup>1</sup>–V<sup>1</sup>–C<sup>2</sup>–V<sup>2</sup>–C<sup>3</sup>–V<sup>3</sup>/Bridge–C<sup>4</sup> (seventh column). Compared with "R.O.T.C.," "King Kunta" has a low level of tension: rhymes move from BC 12 to BC 8 and back, and the greatest levels of tension result from low rhyme prevalence. The chorus role saturates the song since all sections (except one) have at least some chorus aspect. That is, after an intro/chorus in mm. 1–8, two chorus/verse blends alternate with verse/chorus blends leading to a third chorus/verse, a verse/excursion (mm. 56–70), and a final chorus/verse. Due to the overall lack of tension and the chorus role's saturation, additional formal contrast is provided by tonal centers (column 8): situational choruses (mm. 9–16, 33–40, 49–55, 73–80) are in E minor, whereas part of situational verse 1 and all of 2 (mm. 25–30, 41–48) are in F minor.

"King Kunta's" techniques of formal ambiguity aim for greater accessibility and memorability. First, the chorus role appears in all but one section, suggesting greater accessibility but also weak section differentiation. Second, as shown in the gray-shaded rows of Figure 10, at three locations the juncture between a situational verse and its following chorus is overlapped, thereby announcing that chorus as an arrival. And lastly, weak section differentiation can be seen in the rhyme prevalence column, which keeps high, consistent values throughout the song with two exceptions: the intro/chorus in mm. 1–8, which has four differing periodicities, and the verse/excursion in mm. 56–70, which mostly has values of 2 x (16).

Unlike Bungert's view that "King Kunta's" formal double consciousness is created by offset formal cycles, we view it as resulting from a persistent blend of chorus and verse in which one aspect predominates in one section, versus the other in the next section. Since choruses correlate with Lamar's boasts ("king-like," first-person view), and verses with his disses of other rappers (ghostwriters, third-person view), we find that the double consciousness in this song

Stages 1, 2→					Stages 3, 4→			Stage 5 (GOAL)
Lyrics	Primary Rhyme Placement	Primary Rhyme Periodi- cities	Primary Rhyme Prevalence	Tension Levels	Formal Roles and Blends	Situ- ational Form	Tonal Centers	Formal Mentalities
"I got a bone..." (1–8)	BC 8	greater than whole	"pick:" 5 x (28, 8, 40, 32)	Moderate tension	Intro/Chorus	Intro	Em	Disses other rappers, 1 <sup>st</sup> -, 2 <sup>nd</sup> -person views
"Bitch, where you when I was..." (9–16)	mm. 9–15: BC 12 m. 16: BC 4	whole	"walking:" 12 x (mostly 16, some 6, 10); "Bitch:" 5 x (24, 12)	High relaxation	Chorus/Verse	C <sup>1</sup>	Em	Boast as king, 1 <sup>st</sup> -, 2 <sup>nd</sup> -, and 3 <sup>rd</sup> -person views
"The yam is the power..." (16–30)	BC 7 (≈8) + 8	whole	mm. 16–30: "be:" 7 x (mostly 4) "rappin':" 4 x (24, 6, 10) "tell:" 7 x (4, various)	Moderate relaxation	Verse/Chorus	V <sup>1</sup>	Em→F m	Disses other rappers, 3 <sup>rd</sup> - person focus
"and if I gotta..." (31–32)	m. 31: BC 8 + 12 m. 32: BC 4 + 8 + 12	quarter	mm. 31–32: "brown:" 3 x (2, 4) and "bum:" 3 x (4)		Overlap		Fm→E m	
"Bitch, where you..." (33–40)	Same as mm. 9–16	whole	see 9–16	High relaxation	Chorus/Verse	C <sup>2</sup>	Em	See mm. 9–16
"The yam brought it out of Richard Pryor..." (41–45)	BC 8	whole	"Pryor:" 6 x (mostly 4)	Moderate relaxation	Verse/Chorus	V <sup>2</sup>	Fm	Critique of corrupt figures, 3 <sup>rd</sup> - person view
"Twenty- four..." (46–48)	BC 12	whole	"days:" 3 x (16)		Overlap		Fm→E m	
"Bitch, where you..." (49–55)	BC 12	whole	see 9–16	High relaxation	Chorus/Verse	C <sup>3</sup>	Em	See mm. 9–16
"I was gonna kill..." (56–70)	mm. 56–64: BC 4 + 12 mm. 65–70: BC 12	whole	mostly 2 x (16), sometimes (8)	Moderate relaxation	Verse/Excursion	V <sup>3</sup> /B	unpitch- ed →Em	Boasts about triumph as rapper, 1 <sup>st</sup> - and 3 <sup>rd</sup> -person views
"Straight from..." (71–72)	BC 4 + 8 + 12	quarter	"bottom:" 3 x (4 ) "prince:" 6 x (16)		Overlap		Em	
"Bitch, where you..." (73–80)	BC 12	whole	see 9–16	High relaxation	Chorus/Verse	C <sup>4</sup>	Em	See mm. 9–16

Figure 10. Formal overview of "King Kunta" (2015).

is not within Lamar himself, but within the community of rappers from Lamar's perspective (Figure 10, column 9). For instance, the situational C<sup>1</sup> glorifying Lamar (mm. 9–16) is a boast while the situational V<sup>1</sup> (mm. 16–30) disses other rappers. Therefore, although Bungert's aspects of "king" and "slave" certainly operate as layers of meaning, these are not amplified by the song's form.

We next examine formal ambiguity and accessibility more closely. The opening role of intro/chorus (mm. 1–8), as shown in Example 14, sets in motion a series of chorus-based formal blends. Its role results from situational aspects of an intro plus internal aspects of intro and chorus. The intro situation is suggested by the excerpt's temporal position beginning the song and by the lack of lyrical repetition thereafter. Internal intro aspects include sparse

syllables and rhymes—"pick" is 5 x (28, 8, 40, 32)—as well as lyrics that set up the "question" of the song: why were his friends absent when he was poor and unsuccessful? The chorus aspects include primary rhyme placement on BC 8, the first- and second-person perspectives, and lyrics that critique rappers who lack authenticity.

By mm. 9–16, the feel of a regular pulse suggests that the song is truly underway, thereby drawing the listener's attention and increasing this section's memorability (Example 15).<sup>53</sup> The chorus aspect is situational since the lyrics, key of E minor, and other identifiers return later three times, making four chorus sections in total; this section

<sup>53</sup> Bungert (2019, [2.3]) also notes that "the song only seems to get going with the onset of the first chorus."

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
1						I	got	a	bone		to	pick					≈ 12
2													I	don't	want	you	
3	mon-	key	mouth		mot-	her-	fuck-	ers	sit-	tin	in	my	throne		a-	gin'	8
4																	≈ 0
5							I'm		mad		(he		mad)				8
6					but	I	ain't		stress-	in'							8
7											true		friends				
8							one		ques-		tion						8

Example 14. Intro/chorus in "King Kunta" (2015), mm. 1–8 (0:02–0:20).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
9					Bitch,		where		you	when	I	was	walk-	ing			12
10	Now	I	run	the	game		got	the	whole		world		tal-	kin'	King		12
11	Kun-	ta,	Ev-	ry-	bo-	dy	wan-	na	cut	the	legs		off	him.			0 + 4 + 12
12	Kun-	ta,			Black		man		tak-	ing	no		loss-	es.	(oh	yea h)	0 + 4 + 12
13					Bitch		where		you	when	I	was	walk-	in'			12
14	Now	I	run	the	game,		got	the	whole		world		talk-	in'	King		12
15	Kun-	ta,	ev-	ry-	-bo-	dy	wan-	na	cut	the	legs		off	him			0 + 4 + 12
16	When	you	got	the	yams				(what's		the	yams?)					4

Example 15. Chorus/verse in "King Kunta" (2015), mm. 9–16 (0:20–0:38).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
17																The	
18	yam		is	the	po-	wer	that		be		(that		be		that		8
19	be		that		be		that		be		that		be)		You	can	8
20	smell	it	when	I'm	walk-	in'	down	the	street		(oh		yes		we	can)	8
21			(oh		yes		we	can)					I	can	dig		≈8
22	rap-		pin'														0
23						But	a		rap-	per'	with	a	ghost-		writ-	er	8
24					what	the	fuck		hap-		pened?				(Oh		8

Example 16. Verse/chorus in "King Kunta" (2015), (0:38–0:56).

also includes lyrical repetition (mm. 9–11 and 13–15), the song's hook ("King Kunta"), and background vocals ("What's the yams?"). The verse aspect is strongly present internally: rhyme placement is on BCs 4 and 12, the latter of which is primary until m. 16; Lamar's sentences are long (measure-length); and his delivery is rapped. Point of view suggests both roles: this section combines first- and second-person perspectives from a chorus ("I run the game," "B\*\*\*\* where you") with a third-person one from a verse ("King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him").

Example 16 shows a verse/chorus blend that demonstrates the song's continued saturation of the chorus role. Chorus qualities result from rhymes on or very near BC 0 or 8 and from ample echoes of words in background vocals (e.g., "that be"). The situational context is a verse since the lyrics do not repeat elsewhere in the song. Internally, the perception of verse quality results from a clear, third-

person focus on the symbol of the yam (mm. 17–21),<sup>54</sup> followed by a critique of inauthentic rappers who use ghostwriters (mm. 23–24). In addition, following this excerpt (0:58, not shown), the tonality shifts to F minor, thereby creating a tonal contrast with the E-minor choruses.

As shown in Example 17, the situational verse 3 functions both as a verse/excursion blend and as a pop-rock bridge. Verse aspects include the situational context of a verse, rhyme placement on BCs 4 and 12, and measure-long sentences in the lyrics. Excursion aspects include low rhyme prevalence, with rhymes relatively short (couplet-

<sup>54</sup> This symbol refers to the yams that the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* smells when walking down the street. Positively, it refers to authenticity, home, prestige, and success ("When you got the yams—"); negatively, it is tied to the temptations of power ("The yam brought it out of Richard Pryor...").

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
56	Goat-mouthed mammyfucker)												I	was	gon-	na	
57	kill	a	cou-	ple	rap-	per	but	they	did	it	to	them	selves		Ev-	ry-	12
58	bo-	dy's	su-	i-	ci-	dal	they	ain't	e-	ven	need	my	help.			This	12
59	shit	is	e-	le-	men-	ta-	ry,	I'll	pro-	bly	go	to	jail		if	I	4
60	shoot	at	your	i-	den-	ti-	ty	and	bounce		to	the	left.		Stuck	a	4
61	flag		in	my	ci-	ty	ev-	ry-	bo-	dy	scream-	ing	"Comp-	ton"	I	should	4 + 8 + 12
62	prob-	ly	run	for	may-	or	wh	I'm	done		to	be	ho-	nest	And	I	12

Example 17. Beginning of verse 3 in "King Kunta" (2015), mm. 56–62 (2:06–2:21).

long) and sparse, and quick jumps in thought ("they did it to themselves" transitions quickly to "I'll probably go to jail" in mm. 57–59). A pop-rock bridge role is suggested by a new, contrasting texture, increased syllable density, and the section's location just over halfway through the song.<sup>55</sup> This section's pop-rock aspects provide yet more evidence for the song's commercial leanings.

We have thus seen how "King Kunta" creates formal ambiguity through chorus-based section blends, overlapped arrivals into choruses, and weak section differentiation. These techniques help achieve the song's aims of becoming an accessible, memorable hit single, while also suggesting a formal duality of perspectives between Lamar's boasts as the "king of rappers" and his disses of competing rappers as inauthentic.

On the surface, the two songs—"R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" and "King Kunta"—seem contrasting: "R.O.T.C." subtly stretches the verse creating greater musical variety, whereas "King Kunta" contains a more homogeneous saturation with the chorus role. However, underlying these songs is a common set of techniques: rhyme manipulation, metrical tension and relaxation, normative formal roles, formally ambiguous techniques such as blends, and correlations between roles and lyrics.

## OUTRO: LAMAR'S FLOW STYLE

In conclusion, we return to the question of Lamar's flow style. We have suggested that three techniques underlie his consummate artistry: first, his manipulation of rhymes subtly controls metrical tension and relaxation; second, he adjusts tension and relaxation to suggest formal roles and ambiguities; and third, he correlates roles with lyrics to create "formal mentalities." We have supported these three techniques using five lines of evidence: our

measurements of tension are more comprehensive than previous methodologies; our formal roles are analogous to those in pop and rock traditions, but frequently reworked to fit aesthetic aims of Lamar's rap and conscious rap genres; we have codified patterns of tension and relaxation into new, previously unaddressed roles; we have uncovered comprehensible chorus-verse forms within verses; and our correlation of formal roles and lyrics has uncovered formal mentalities such as the duality in "King Kunta" between Lamar's verse-based disses of other rappers and chorus-based boasts of his own abilities.

Broadening our purview from Lamar's practice, this essay points toward further inquiries into rhyme manipulation, formal roles, and formal ambiguities in hip-hop music. First, do other rappers set up formal norms as Lamar does, or different norms; and do groups of rappers (perhaps defined geographically, chronologically, or by subgenre) have characteristic formal norms? Second, what are the expected attributes of other formal roles that are borrowed from pop and rock traditions in hip-hop, such as "bridge" or "prechorus?" And third, how widespread in other rappers' songs is the stretching of verses into subsection-level roles, for instance in single-verse songs? A mix of large-scale corpus studies and in-depth analyses of rappers (both individuals and groups) may be necessary to explore these questions. Regardless of these questions, though, what is not at stake is Lamar's consummate artistry and well-earned status as "hip-hop's reigning king" (Alvarez 2020).

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<sup>55</sup> The textural contrast results from the dropping out of the bass, and from a phasing (or filtering) of the vocals that continually pans from left to right, taking about four measures to return to the starting point hard left and giving them a sense of width.

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