

**“That’s Enough, Mr. West, Please No More  
Today:” West, The Media And Representation**

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**“THAT’S ENOUGH, MR. WEST, PLEASE NO MORE TODAY:”  
WEST, THE MEDIA AND REPRESENTATION**

**Honors Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English**

**In the College of Arts and Sciences  
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**By**

**Leticia Torres Rozo**

**Dr. Michael Jaros  
Faculty Advisor  
Department of English**

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ABSTRACT: “That’s Enough, Mr. West, Please No More Today:” Kanye West, the  
Media and Representation

Kanye West would be the first person to tell you that Kanye West is not ordinary. He is an artist, a producer, a visionary. He is crude, egotistical, impulsive. My undergraduate thesis, from which the proposed paper is taken, examines how West’s music reveals that his albums are created for much more than entertainment. What sets Kanye West apart from many of the rappers of his time is his reluctance to commodify his art and his vision for profit. The proposed paper will examine how, in his first several albums, Kanye uses his platform to expose the trap of several prevailing ideologies through music. Soyica Diggs Colbert comments on his debut album as a rapper, “The College Dropout,” noting that it “decries alienated labor and incorporates bitter irony with notions of transcendence” (54). In the proposed paper I shall examine how Kanye mixes in his experience as a middle-class African-American to criticize the meritocracy in America, demonstrating that that “meritocracy’s” real purpose is to create social hierarchies and further segregate people. Specifically, and because of how predominant racial commentary is in his music, I will focus primarily on the complicated race relations in the U.S. and how they contribute to what I call his “conceptual martyrdom.” His lyrics suggest fame, fortune, and success are empty dreams because they foster a false sense of security and happiness. Furthermore, Kanye accuses black people specifically of being most oblivious to the emptiness of these dreams. In the song, “All Falls Down” off “The College Dropout,” he raps “Things we buy to cover up what’s inside// Cause they made him hate ourselves and love they wealth” (West). My proposed paper will argue that this reward system breeds a ferocious consumer culture that equates material possession with success. As Chris Richardson has asserted, “West recognizes that a university degree is necessary for attaining status and the hope

of a well-paying career but is also a way for the dominant culture to judge others and legitimate social hierarchies and segregation” (102). By questioning what is otherwise widely and passively accepted by most, Kanye’s likeability suffers. Ultimately, the proposed paper argues that Kanye’s character suffers an unfair metaphorical death because his vision promotes radical thinking about the current state of American culture. The media mistakes his confidence for arrogance, and remembers his passion as mania. This paper is intended to recover his character as a radical social critic instead of a methodless madman, revealing how his work provides insight and inspiration for those willing to listen.

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**Part I: Introduction**

Kanye West has a reputation for saying outrageous things to very large audiences. In interviews, he has compared himself to other celebrities, like basketball star Michael Jordan, and even Michael Jackson. Perhaps a more bizarre and obscure comparison came out of his most recent album, *The Life of Pablo*, where he calls himself “this generation’s closest thing to Einstein” (“Saint Pablo,” 2016). It’s obvious that Kanye is confident, but his confidence has gotten him a lot of media attention. MTV and TIME have respectively published “list” articles on their websites titled “HEARD HIM SAY! A TIMELINE OF KANYE WEST'S PUBLIC OUTBURSTS” (2007) and “Top 10 Outrageous Kanye West Moments” (2009). He’s shown many times that he is not afraid to speak up, out and off script, especially if it’s for something that he believes in. The two articles feature overlapping examples of his “outbursts.” Two of the many instances that have contributed to Kanye’s overbearing and erratic media persona include his passionate rant during a national television charity event for hurricane Katrina which ended with the quote, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” (2005), as well as his bold move at the 2009 VMA’s where he interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video to declare that Beyonce’s should have won, as her video was better. Media outlets and internet bloggers everywhere jumped at the opportunity to criticize him or demand apologies. And though Kanye apologized for both instances, the damage had been done. An article by The Guardian reveals that Kanye’s comment marked the lowest point of George Bush’s presidency (Michaels) and according to CNN, his VMA incident had angered lots of people, including other celebrities like Pink and Katy Perry, who took to Twitter to express their disgust. CNN’s article on the incident also commented that Kanye was speaking out of place, that he had crossed a line, and that he’s “well known for such behavior” (Respers). Even former U.S. President Barack Obama felt compelled to criticize Kanye’s behavior, calling him a “jackass” (Lang) for the VMA

incident. Note, too, that even in “favorable review of his art” (Biedenharn 8), it seemed imperative that Rolling Stones magazine’s review of Kanye’s album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* included mention of his “much-publicized emotional meltdowns” (Sheffield). These two moments helped the media to craft Kanye West’s image as a celebrity, -- as an erratic, loud-mouth, out of control celebrity-image -- and then operated as if this was the most defining character trait of Kanye West.

It’s true that the George Bush and Taylor Swift incidents were shocking in nature, but Kanye West has always shocked people with his stark confidence. Three years prior to the Taylor Swift stage invasion, and two years after the George Bush remark, Kanye had already stormed onto an MTV awards stage, in Europe, to declare his discontent that he had lost the award for best video to the artists Justice and Samian. The press called him a “sore loser” for having a “meltdown” (“Kanye West a Sore Loser at MTV Europe Awards”), but Kanye was only speaking up for the integrity of the award show. According to Kanye, he should have won because his video “cost a million dollars, Pam Anderson was in it. [He] was jumping across canyons.” To him, it was clear that he deserved the award because he put in the most artistic effort. Kanye said it himself: “If I don’t win, the award show loses... credibility.” And still, after explaining his concern for artistic integrity, magazine articles and blogs, news networks and talk shows, framed their content to antagonize Kanye. It seemed that the narrative was less concerned with his intentions, and sought more “to redirect readers’ attention towards ridiculing West and away from listening to him” (Morgan).

Why is it important that the media constantly reminds us of Kanye’s outbursts? For starters, Kanye is black and Kanye is a celebrity. Those two groups of people a great deal of media scrutiny. Herman Shah conducted a study that revealed the effect of conservative news

media coverage of racial issues on public opinion. He analyzed articles from leading conservative news print sources and found black people were written to fit a “longstanding narrative of irrationality where [they] were seen as violating norms of sound decision-making and accepted behavior” (Biedenhard 11). Although Shah’s study focused on conservative news, Biedenhard expands on his idea, explaining that implicit racism is just one of the ways the media also exercises social control, by framing “narrative elements such as familiar symbols, plots, and characters in order to create a neatly-tied and familiar package to present to its audience” (13). Kanye West’s celebrity status does not overshadow his blackness -- it actually intensifies it. Since black people are written to fit certain stereotypes by the media, and celebrities are also subject to media manipulation, Kanye is the perfect subject for intense scrutiny.

Race aside, celebrity visibility is a double edged sword naturally. The glorification or criticism of a celebrity by media outlets contributes to an ongoing narrative that is easier to sell to audiences, and easier to keep up with. For this paper, the term “media” will be used as an umbrella term for all the networks, websites, articles, blogs, apps that provide popular culture and celebrity information based on non-scholarly sources. Being the center of attention and the topic of conversation contributes to a celebrity’s fame, and it has certainly helped Kanye’s commercial success as a rapper. But the scrutiny can also hinder their reputation, as we see with Kanye’s tainted celebrity image. Media outlets manipulate the way stories are told by framing ideas and opinions to fit the narrative they want to sell. These implicitly racist narratives circulate, becoming “common knowledge” and influencing social dialogue (Daws 92). Part of this paper will examine how certain recurring narratives in the media negatively impacts Kanye West’s image.

## **Part II: Celebrity and Visibility**



To understand how celebrity image and media relate, it's important to understand "celebrity" as a concept. According to Biedenharn, there are three types of celebrities, which includes "the attributed celebrity, which consists of moving oneself into the public eye and remaining there; the ascribed celebrity, which one must be born into; and achieved celebrity, those who possess 'rare talents and skills'" (9). Of the three types of celebrities, Kanye West would be considered an "achieved celebrity," or someone who has worked his way up to fame. Biedenharn's research outlines three important aspects of celebrity image: "the relationship between celebrities and the media, celebrity apologia and image restoration, and use of social media and self-presentation" to show how "celebrities and the media sometimes work together, occasionally work against each other, and both may have pervasive audience influence" (21). According to Biedenharn, a long time requirement of fame has been visibility, or, exposure. It's important to a celebrity's fame to make headlines. This is one way the celebrities and the media work together: celebrities give media something to talk about, and the media talks about it. Celebrities are powerful social influencers, and many studies have been conducted to find the extent of celebrity influence on public opinion. It has been revealed that, in areas like marketing and politics, "celebrities can help motivate young people to become involved in civic affairs because the fans will imitate the celebrities' attitudes and behaviors" (Biedenharn 11). Celebrities have been used as promotional tools since advertisers and publicists figured out that celebrity endorsements directly increased product awareness and sales, while simultaneously giving the celebrity much needed exposure. However, even celebrity influence is governed by a greater force, the force of the collective media. Celebrities have always competed for media attention, but "occasionally, a celebrity will also perform an act or make a statement that is offensive to such a degree as to warrant a public apology" (15). Whether the celebrity called the

President of the United States a racist on national television like Kanye, or if a celebrity was caught with a prostitute like Hugh Grant, the public apology serves to restore public image that has been damaged by the offensive behavior.

All this visibility has been made possible by the new media. In the 21st century, the reach of celebrity influence is farther because opportunity for visibility has grown significantly. With many new outlets available, media coverage of celebrities comes from more than just television or print. There's a whole new world of digital media that has expedited the way information is shared and even received. Audiences now have more sources to get more information; they don't depend on tabloids and other media like they used to. Fans can get information on their favorite celebrities from social websites like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Tumblr without having to wait for information to be printed. It's hard to navigate through the surplus of information and opinions, but if it's coming from a celebrity's Instagram or Twitter, fans are more likely to trust such information and be inclined to imitate it. This shifts the power dynamics in the narrative, which was usually leveraged by the media and their vast audience. The rise of social networking and media sites finally give celebrities a voice in their own narrative.

Forbes magazine recently published an article that captures a recent example of the power of celebrity influence in numbers, which examines the recent incident between the social networking app Snapchat and RnB artist Rihanna. Snapchat, the multimedia messaging app owned by Snap, Inc., who features paid advertisements, released on March 15, 2018, for an app of the game "Would You Rather?" an ad asking users if they would rather "Slap Rihanna" or "Punch Chris Brown." Rihanna, who was a victim of domestic abuse in 2009 when she was dating rapper Chris Brown, took to Instagram to speak up for victims of domestic abuse and

condemn Snapchat for the releasing an ad that makes light of a triggering situation. She posted a rant on her Instagram account that ended with her saying “Shame on you. Throw the whole app-oligy away.” Rihanna took to one of her social media accounts to criticize another rival social media competitor that had published an ad that was obviously damaging to her image as a celebrity, as it alluded to a dark and traumatic time of her life. By the end of the day, Snap’s shares had dropped by 5%, then another 2% the following day (Berg). The Rihanna-Snapchat incident proves celebrities are able to intervene more significantly in their own representation, and that the power of celebrity influence is ever-growing. However, the same way these social sites gives celebrities direct power over their own narratives, it also gives more people -- journalists, anchors, scholars, but also less-qualified people and internet trolls -- the platform to voice their opinions about celebrities, and it’s easier for manipulated information to spread. Thus, with the new media of the 21st century, celebrities need to work extra hard to preserve -- or repair -- their public image because the media can over-glorify or over-criticize certain acts. Kanye West is just one of the many celebrities at the mercy of media outlets.

### **Part III: Representation of Black People by the Media**

Kanye West is also just one of the many black men at the mercy of media outlets. Referring back to Shah’s 2009 conservative media study, there are recurring narratives in the media about black Americans that serve to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes in the United States. Soyica Diggs-Colbert starts off her latest work, “Black Movements,” with a valuable question: “What histories and ideologies must be affirmed and what other ones denied for a slave to become a superhero” (1)? This is a loaded question, but it captures the modern, post-civil-rights plight of black people and their larger representation in the media. For over 400 years, black people were forced endure the legacy of slavery. Today, if you’re black, your identity is

implicated with the identity of your ancestors... who have been denied the right to an identity because of slavery. Colbert's question suggests that for a slave to become a hero, there must be an affirmation or denial of certain histories or ideologies. It's not as simple as possessing hero-like qualities. The psychic legacy of slavery is inherently tied to certain histories and ideologies which have denied rights and identity to slaves and to their descendants. As a result, the very existence of a slave that might be something more than just a slave is an inherent act of rebellion.

Colbert's question alludes to her previous work, "Psychic Hold of Slavery," where she examines "that our inability—or unwillingness—to "get over" slavery emerges in relationship to contemporary philosophical debates about whether slavery serves as the distinguishing feature of black social life" (3). It gets more complicated. To say slavery is not a distinguishing feature of black social life would be the same as ignoring hundreds of years of history. To say slavery is the only distinguishing feature of black social life would be a gross misrepresentation of how far black people, art, and culture have come since the abolition of slavery. Black people today are still living with the repercussions of slavery with specific regard to the negative racial stereotypes still in our culture, and how these stereotypes influence the way black people are perceived. If we reiterate Colbert's question to more closely reflect the intent and purpose of this section of the paper, it would be something like this: "What histories and ideologies must be affirmed and what other ones denied for a black man (who is a descendant of slaves) to be considered a good role model?" Kanye is the prime example of how black people have come a long way, but also have a long way left to go. The most notable way that Kanye exemplifies how far black people have come is his status as a celebrity. His status as a celebrity is also the most notable exemplification of how far black people have left to go. While he is in a position of power and influence to inspire a change, his celebrity status enhances the visibility of his

blackness, and the media is on hand to commodify that blackness by placing it a series of recognizable narratives.

Before Colbert, W.E.B. DuBois penned his own iteration of the psychic hold slavery. DuBois used the concept of a veil that results in a double consciousness, or “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others... of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (194). Du Bois explained that the educated negro struggles with the “two-ness” of his identity -- he is an American AND he is a negro. According to DuBois, the racist veil is a invisible line between white and black cultures and double-consciousness is bestowed upon those who have access to both worlds. In his essay, “A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness,” George Ciccariello-Maher points out the parallels between Kanye West’s work and the Du Boisian notion of double-consciousness, with specific relation to the seemingly universal condition of “second sight” among black Americans (374). He noted in the beginning, DuBois suggests the structures of segregation materialized by the veil can be “evaded and transcended” by rising above the veil. But, to rise above the veil would mean to reject the “temptation of political action oriented toward structural change” (373). Instead of tearing down the veil and the double-consciousness it produced, DuBois was happy to live above it - by getting an education and being the best negro he can be. His attempt to rise above it “by suggesting its superability through education” reduces the veil to the bounds of double-consciousness (372), meaning that ignoring the double-consciousness would make the veil go away. Through education, DuBois ended up learning that living above the veil was not enough, only action oriented toward actually tearing down the veil can help him overcome it. The veil is actually a metaphorical representation of the formal and informal structures of segregation, because it reveals that black people crave the acceptance of both sides but struggle

to receive approval from either. Thus, double consciousness is a “crucial reality that radical thought must confront” but it’s also a reality that “provides explosive radical possibilities” (373). Maher also examined how West’s interactions with double-consciousness mirrors those of Du Bois. As a black American celebrity, West has been subject to the contempt and pity of others as described by Du Bois and therefore has access to the “veil.” Being a celebrity or having status does not make him immune to institutional racism and the existing social and economic power structures that keep white supremacy in place.

It’s true West shocks people all the time with his opinions, but not many are inclined to ask why it shocks people. This is one way the media has control over the public’s perception of him. By focusing on his delivery, the media takes away from the impact of the deliberate and radical stance Kanye takes against dominant cultures, erasing his impact. What seems to earn Kanye a lot of heat from the media is his reluctance to follow the rules celebrities are expected to follow to maintain good public image. By way of questioning or speaking up about things that are otherwise widely accepted, Kanye West is blatantly “disregarding the self-discipline of live television to which celebrities supposedly must adhere” (Morgan) while simultaneously rejecting the celebrity culture that the media thrives upon. Kanye captured the essence of his struggle against the media in an inspiring monologue onstage of a 2014 London show:

Don’t let nobody tell you what you can do, what you can believe, what you can achieve. People be looking at me like I got a problem or something. Like I’m uncontrollable or something. Like I don’t do what I’m supposed to do. It’s like they want to have everybody so brainwashed. They want to control everybody, rumors, lies, media, marketing. It’s like they want to steal you from you, and sell you back to you after they stole it. They want to make you feel less than who you really are... The first thing they

do is crush your dreams. Crush your dreams. Then add a couple of drops of low self-esteem... And control you with lies... (Beaumont 406).

What is important about this monologue is that it is not unlike Kanye to get very serious and honest with his audience. There's a valuable degree of honesty present in his persona that often gets rewritten as arrogance so that the media regains control of the narrative. Kanye West's character is vilified/demonized by the media to the point that all other aspects of his character are dehumanized, dismissed, or otherwise, metaphorically killed.

West's metaphorical death is comparable to the religious concept of a martyr, someone who is killed for their spiritual beliefs. In his music, religion is a strong motif - but he is not metaphorically crucified for his spirituality. To better represent West's radical role, the concept of martyr as used in this essay can be "applied to a person who is persecuted or killed because of his or her staunch support for another principle or cause, such as human rights" (Ungvarsky). This is not an attempt to excuse, pardon, or justify West's erratic behavior. This is an attempt to reposition the argument by providing more context into his character than the media gives by looking at his artistic contribution as a celebrity. West's entire career represents a deliberate fight against the oppression of dominant worldviews that accommodate complicated race relations, divisive social hierarchies and public conformity. The celebrity culture that tries to define West is just one of the many forces opposing him. Ultimately, Kanye West has said plenty of important things to his fans; why doesn't he make headlines when he calmly, and over autotune, warns his fans about being brainwashed by the media? Or, more importantly, why don't his radical lyrics inspire more conversation? Referring back to Shah's study, we can see how implicit racism in the media helps perpetuate "racial boundaries... as means of social control."

(Biedenharn 9) The media seems to only be concerned with content that supports the familiar narrative of the angry black man.

#### **Part IV: Albums as a Narrative**

It's not helpful to the racial tensions that rap and hip-hop have long been associated with social disruption and violence because of all the lyrics related to guns, drugs, and violence. In his essay for *Popular Music and Society*, "*Can't Tell Me Nothing*": *Symbolic Violence, Education and Kanye West*, Chris Richardson notes in the weeks to follow the 1982 release of "The Message," by Grand Master Flash, "The New York Times published dozens of articles linking the music to criminality and youth violence" (97). By the 90's, moral panic had struck and hip-hop records everywhere had to carry warning labels that read: "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content." Richardson then explained that focusing on the violent element of hip-hop overshadows a symbolic violence, a form of violence that "conceals and subjugates the practical knowledges and experiences of young, predominantly black Americans living in neighborhoods where drugs, poverty and crime are pervasive... imposing dominant ways of seeing and acting in a world that become universalized" (98). Rappers use music as an outlet, venting in their lyrics about the struggles of growing up in crime-ridden and drug-infested poverty. Symbolic violence silences or ignores these experiences by promoting the discussion of crime and violence in hip-hop. The discourse disregards the already existing violent environments seeks to blame rappers for promoting said violence. According to Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*, this way popular media discusses of rap and rap-related violence is "fundamentally linked to the larger spatial control of black people" (125) and the ongoing attempts to antagonize black characters.



Public Enemy, N.W.A., Dead Prez, and KRS-One are a few of the antagonistic rappers who have over the course of their careers become known as “conscious” precisely for the content of their music. A basic definition of a conscious rapper is one that “directly [addresses in their music] the social, cultural, and political issues that will affect people in everyday life” (Ranker.com). “Conscious rappers” almost always remain underground rappers, meaning they stay away from spotlight of mainstream media and commercial success because their lyrics are rather cynical. It’s not to say that conscious rappers never go mainstream or achieve commercial success - because some do. But the cynicism of their lyrics is the ideal motif for the media to use in their constant attempts to frame black people as the antagonists. The cynicism is rewritten as anger, aggression and hate. Instead of cynics, they’re dangerous thugs. Now they’re not allowed to be played on the radio, or T.V. which drastically alters the reach of their message.

As far as “cynicism” goes, the word cynic has negative connotations that have been used to describe “a faultfinding, captious critic” (Merriam-Webster), but there’s more to a cynic than just pessimistic and misanthropic criticism. The concept of a “cynic” originated in Ancient Greece to describe a group of people who “believed that society’s institutions were both corrupt and harmful to man as he was naturally meant to exist” and they “felt compelled to spread their message and beliefs to the general public in protest.” Their form of protest went on to be known as “diatribe,” a rhetorical concept that uses “shock and offensiveness in order to call attention to a larger societal issue that requires productive discussion” (Biedenharn 22). Just like how the Cynics of Athens wanted to call attention to the harmful and corrupt social institutions of their time to provoke discussion, conscious rappers are also interested in dismantling the harmful and corrupt social institutions of their time. In his essay, “The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest,” Theodore Windt explains that the Cynics sought to “assault sensibilities, to turn thought upside-

down, to turn social mores inside-out, to commit in language the very same barbarisms one condemns in society” (Windt.7-8). With song names like “Fight the Power,” “Fuck Tha Police,” “Police State,” and “Know Thyself,” one could argue Public Enemy, N.W.A., Dead Prez and KRS-One are trying to do the same.

Conscious rappers have been around for as long as rap has, so why is Kanye West of special interest? Kanye West successfully broke through to the underground rap bar into mainstream spotlight. According to Richardson, “West’s popularity and commercial success have left him generally free of the ‘conscious rapper’ moniker that has condemned [the aforementioned artists] to mainstream obscurity” (99). There is very little use for message without a receptive audience, and because West is in the spotlight of mainstream media, his voice has a greater reach. Kanye West today is what a cynic with a megaphone would be in Ancient Greece. He is using his platform as a celebrity to inspire his audience to challenge social institutions. The danger is that he actually has a broad and diverse audience. People are actually listening to him. According to Windt, shock is the “first step toward rearranging perspectives” (8). If that’s true, Kanye West’s music can be used as a powerful catalyst for rearranging perspectives, and if we consider the power and influence celebrities are known to have, we can understand why the media might be inclined to censor, manipulate, and even kill off Kanye’s character. If the masses keep listening to Kanye West, they will be inspired to defy and poke holes in established systems and hierarchies, too. The quickest and most implicit way the media can prevent such a thing from happening is by directing the narrative in ways that perpetuate racial stereotypes and highlight Kanye West as a villain. The media’s attempts to discredit Kanye West’s conscious and influential content represents the metaphorical killing of Kanye West’s character.

So, by shifting the focus of the argument away from how he raises controversy to why he does so, the conversation around Kanye West and his legacy might move in a more productive direction. Kanye West's own career can be viewed, through his seven solo albums, as a performance of his martyrdom. In an autobiographical way, his music reveals his sense of self-awareness, an unwavering self-confidence and masterful use of the literary elements of shock, metaphors, and irony. These are the tools he uses to inspire change. In his albums, each of which has shown greater commercial success than the last, Kanye West criticizes institutionalized education and meritocracy as a scam that breeds a consumer culture that thrives off the insecurities of said consumers. He also recognizes the role he plays in perpetuating these cultures and is actively aware of his own contradictions. Thus, listeners can watch Kanye West "explore self-reflexively the misrecognition these dominant worldviews can foster" (Richardson 99). He pulls from his own experiences, even the uncomfortable ones, to make polemic statements against injustices still thriving in American culture. Kanye's own work/vision can be used to recover his character from metaphorical death at the hands of the media and reposition him as radical social critic whose work has (so far) surpassed the test of time. He uses his platform as a celebrity differently than most celebrities, choosing to "... focus his artistic energy on the idea of dismantling structural racism in America, with side goals of elevating American fashion culture, offering a richer and more constructive picture of male identity, and rejecting the premise that only the financial elite can participate in true culture" (Noisey). Because his music features criticisms of the flaws in America's social systems, and because the media is known to exercise varied forms of social control, his experiences with the media as a celebrity/artist gives the audience a deeper understanding of the flaws in the social systems he criticizes, which further reinforces the deep criticism present in his music.

Kanye entered the rap scene in 2004 with *The College Dropout* (2004) announcing himself as the “first nigga with a benz and a backpack” (“Breathe In Breathe Out”). West was hyper aware of the contradictions he embodied as a young, black and successful college dropout and every song and skit oozed this self-consciousness. The album is set up as a narrative performance of his “bitterness towards school, materialism, or the role of Christ in the life of the rapper” (Daws 91). *The College Dropout* represents Kanye’s introduction to the spotlight, and he came in already making polemic and controversial statements about the nature of our culture.

Ironically, the success of *Dropout* inspired Kanye to go back to school. His second album, *Late Registration* (2005), continues the theme of bitterness towards school from *Dropout*, through an extended metaphor that reflects he’s still at odds with institutionalized education. The album name suggests Kanye is attempting to work with the system, yet it is still a LATE registration...he’s still not playing by the rules. His criticism in the album become more aggressive and political as West continues to use his platform to spread awareness and critiques of dominant cultures. It’s important to note that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” happened a one month after the release of *Late Registration*, and about a year and a half after *Dropout*. The media framed his speech as an “outburst” (Montgomery) which suggests it was spontaneous, when Kanye had been directly criticizing America for over a year and a half. It’s important to note that *Registration’s* sales topped *Dropout’s*, an indicator that his audience was growing. In the U.S., *Registration* sold a little over 3 million copies, which was less than *Dropout*, which sold over 3.5 million copies. However, *Registration* beat *Dropout* on Billboard’s hot 100; *Dropout* peaked at #2, *Registration* was #1, for two weeks (“Kanye West Chart History”). If we needed a signifier that the masses were eagerly consuming his music, album sales are no longer an accurate representation. With the introduction of the iPod/mp3 and digital

media, people are buying less albums and just downloading or streaming using Apple Music, Tidal, Spotify and other applications.

West's third album, *Graduation* (2007) is a continuation of the play on words of his first two albums. Unlike the preceding albums that critical social messages, *Graduation* has more of a hedonistic tone. The name *Graduation* is symbolic of the progress he has made artistically and it relays how far he's come in terms of commercial success. Kanye West has made it – he's graduated the school of rap and has landed a successful career as a rapper. The name also suggests that Kanye's first two albums could serve to represent his journey to success, and this album celebrates his achievements. The content of his lyrics relate more to his success and finally “making it” versus the struggles of getting there. There is less criticism and more celebration. West doesn't abandon his radicalism; the album still features his keen sense of self awareness being used to dismantle popular opinion. In this album, we see Kanye start to struggle with his two opposing identities: black man and celebrity. Kanye reflects on all the drama and controversy his persona raises – including the 2005 George Bush comment and the 2006 London MTV awards show incident – and wears them proudly.

The next album Kanye released, *808's and Heartbreak* (2008), was drastically different than the first trilogy in many ways. First, he sang and used autotune throughout the album, which is different than the manly bravado associated with rap. Next, the humor and bravado in West's music up to this point gave way to a more serious and somber tone in his fourth solo studio-released album. Stylistically, *Heartbreak* was really like a journal entry, where the writer can both reflect and vent without fear of judgment. It's not the first time West reveals emotional depth, but slowed down songs and autotune helped soften the blow that is otherwise associated with his cynical messages. It was released after the death of his mother Donda West, an event

that drove Kanye into the deep pits of self-reflection and moral re-evaluations. He realized he has all this fame and fortune but is still unhappy and unfulfilled. In this album, Kanye honestly ponders the decisions he's made and expresses a deep discontent towards his lifestyle choices and this is directly contrasting the themes of *Graduation*. In *Heartbreak*, he feels discouraged by the same things he celebrated in *Graduation*. This album helped Kanye unearth another layer of his complex character.

Two years later, West released *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), his fifth and most critically acclaimed solo-album (Woolfe). After the death of his mother, West fell into a depressive state which he revealed in the emotional 808's and *Heartbreak*, but that manifested itself in the form of excessive drinking and erratic media outbursts. The most notable of these was the 2009 Taylor Swift incident at the MTV awards show, which angered a lot of people, even fellow celebrities, who took to the internet to vent their outrage. This album represents Kanye West's comeback into the music scene after a rough past couple of years. It was a passionate and aggressive comeback. In this album, West's double consciousness has certainly shifted from benign to radical, which can be attributed to the self-reflection and venting he did in *Heartbreak*. Ultimately, Kanye stands strong in the critical position he took back in 2004. *Fantasy* featured the same sort of confrontation against racist dominant cultures as his earlier albums, but with more conviction and a demand for justice than before.

*Yeezus* (2013) was West's sixth solo-album. In the face of his other solo-albums, *Yeezus* is deliberately the most confrontational. In his earlier works, Kanye might have used humor and satire to implicitly highlight the injustices he was dealing with. *Yeezus* traded in the humor that helped keep his work light in the past for an anger that added weight to his words. West starts the album saying "How much do I not give a fuck? Let me show you right now..." (On Sight). In the

songs that follow, West proceeds to explicitly criticize respected entities like the corporations, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Corrections Corporation of America. Kanye also engages in discourse about slavery, the war on drugs and mass-incarceration – the same polemic topics that he has been addressing since *Dropout* but this time over futuristic and spacey beats and with more anger. *Yeezus* came three years after *Fantasy* and, by that point, Kanye had been festering in three years of radical and critical double-consciousness. The album continued Kanye's passionate critiques but with more aggression and conviction than the other five.

*The Life of Pablo* (2016) was the seventh solo-album released by Kanye West. In the album, he combines his love of gospel with his love of truth-telling to create his most intimate contribution yet. After going through Kanye's first six albums, *Life of Pablo* is almost like a conclusion to a long narrative. For the first time since his debut in 2004, West drops the ego and leaves himself vulnerable to his audiences. He reveals in this album that, as a celebrity, his ego and confidence has been what has been saving him from being completely obliterated by public opinion. His larger than life persona and "I-don't-give-a-fuck" attitude has been a coping mechanism. He talks explicitly about his mental health, Taylor Swift, financial debt, and problems with his faith. Kanye ultimately reveals in Pablo a humanity that can be used to save him from the destructive clutches of the media aiming write him as an antagonist.

## **I. The College Dropout**

Kanye West's debut album as a rapper was a bold declaration of his position against the dominant worldview of institutionalized education being the only way to self-fulfillment. He uses spoken-word skits in between his songs that help convey his radical opinion on the state of our culture (Daws 91). The name *The College Dropout* is ironic because this is supposed to be Kanye's freshman album, his introduction to the school of rap, if you will, and he has already

made the decision to drop out. The name sends a message that Kanye is prepared to try non-traditional methods to success, yet his commercial success proves it worked. *The College Dropout* was on Billboard's hot 100 for 76 weeks, peaking at #2, and went on to be known as "the second best album in the country" by Rolling Stone magazine. His racially diverse audience proved "West's music has an influence on people from a variety of different backgrounds" (Daws 91).

It's important that people were listening to the album because of the critical position Kanye took in the lyrics. He was making bold political statements throughout the whole album. His ability to incorporate such radical messages into expertly produced beats in *Dropout* is what set him apart from other rappers at the time. At the same time that he was engaging in radical social critique, Kanye also clung onto religion and family for guidance. Songs with overarching themes of religion and family represent checkpoints that Kanye visits regularly to ensure he is still standing on good moral ground. *Dropout* would not be considered a underground rap album, however, because it achieved great commercial success. The album successfully mixed opinionated and radical lyrics with radio hits -- songs appropriate and popular enough to be played by radio stations -- like "All Falls Down," "The New Workout Plan" and "Slow Jamz." The entire album deserves attentive listening, but there are four songs that most encompass the powerful thematic elements of the album, which include, his struggles with materialism, the role of Christ, family as a support system, and more prominently, a disdain towards institutionalized education are best reflected in the lyrics of his songs: "Spaceship," "Jesus Walks," "Never Let Me Down," and "School Spirit." These four songs incorporate the cynical elements of conscious rap, yet aren't discussed critically at large by the media.

### **Spaceship**



The song “Spaceship” expresses Kanye’s distaste for materialism. He captures the struggles of working a minimum-wage job in modern day America and “confronts the misalliance of effort and reward even as it desires that system” (Colbert 26). The hook, two lines, said twice, accurately reflects the issues of consumer culture and materialism that are fostered by low-wage labor:

I’ve been workin’ this graveshift and I ain’t made shit  
 I wish I could buy me a spaceship and fly past the sky, oh  
 I’ve been workin’ this graveshift and I ain’t made shit  
 I wish I could buy me a spaceship and fly past the sky

The metaphor of “working this graveshift” emphasizes that people like Kanye are working all hours doing jobs no one else wants to do, putting up with all sorts of disrespect. The graveshift that Kanye is referring to is his job at the mall, where he is disrespected and discriminated against by management because of the color of his skin. In his workplace, Kanye has had to deal with racial stereotypes from management: “They take me to the back and pat me// Askin’ me about some khakis.” It seems that the solution is to buy a spaceship and fly away, but to do so, one has to afford a spaceship, and thus, has to continue working the grave shift. Even though the minimum-wage struggle can affect anyone, the race-relations discussed in the song add a layer of implications that are only specific to black Americans. In her book *Black Movements*, in the chapter titled “Flying Africans in Spaceships,” Colbert expands on Kanye’s metaphor of buying a spaceship and flying away. She introduces the idea of the “flying africans narrative” as an extension of black life -- a movement that aims to “repeal the death sentence that the Enlightenment has handed down to black people in the Americas through the dehumanization of blackness” (23). The dehumanization of blackness Colbert is referring to is slavery. Slavery was a system that aimed to forcefully exercise spatial control of black bodies. The concept of flying away, as described by Colbert in her “flying Africans narrative,” was a way to escape said

system. Though slavery has long been abolished, the flying Africans narrative can be used to represent any African descendant's attempt rise above, or escape his current, repressing condition. Kanye West, instead of being crushed or discouraged or killed by the discrimination, wants to buy a spaceship and fly away.

According to Colbert there are “four pivotal moments” in the flying Africans narrative, which includes “a depiction of exhausting labor, a confrontation with a brutal figure expressing coercive power, an enunciation on the part of an African gifted with supernatural powers, and a vision of an African or a mass of Africans flying away” (23). In the following verse, West surmises his feelings towards his current life condition, but remains hopeful for the future, in a way that supports Colbert's flying Africans narrative:

This fuckin' job can't help him  
 So I quit, y'all welcome  
 Y'all don't know my struggle  
 Y'all can't match my hustle  
 You can't catch my hustle  
 You can't fathom my love, dude  
 Lock yourself in a room doing 5 beats a day for 3 summers  
 That's a Different World like Cree Summer's  
 I deserve to do these numbers  
 "The kid that made that deserves that Maybach!"  
 So many records in my basement  
 I'm just waiting on my spaceship

In the first two lines, Kanye depicts both exhausting labor and a confrontation with a figure in power in the realization that his job is not helping him move forward and in his decision to quit. Further along, Kanye's superpower is revealed to be his hustle. It may not be a supernatural gift, but Kanye's determination is what got him a spaceship out of the struggle. There's no way to buy a spaceship on the wages he's earning working at the mall, and Kanye realizes this – so he quits. However, just as soon as he quits one graveshift, he takes on another. Doing five beats a day for three summers in a locked room doesn't sound like the escape Kanye hoped for, yet he still

remains hopeful, waiting on his spaceship. Colbert argues his “investment in consumer culture as a mechanism of escape” is a trap because it denies the “possibility of any form of transcendence in the absence of material gains” (54). But, it’s not Kanye’s investment in consumer culture that denies forms of transcendence in the absence of material gains – it’s the consumer culture in itself. He is simply working with a system that is already in place. This is one way Kanye helps to speak volumes on the contradictions of meritocracy in America - by identifying with the same system he’s criticizing. It boosts his credibility to his audience because he experienced it himself. By participating in the system, Kanye West puts himself in a position to demand more of the system, even if he doesn’t do so at first. He remains hopeful at the conclusion of the verse that he will get out of his current condition despite the odds against him. His hopefulness points in the direction of positive social change.

Bringing awareness to the ironies that make up the dominant ideology is the first stride towards change. By simply talking about it in his music, Kanye “provides a way of addressing systemic problems that go unacknowledged and trigger a conversation which would not otherwise have taken place” (Richardson 109). The song “Spaceship” is a good example of West’s initial attempt to rise above the contempt against his negro identity by sort of working with it. If he’s discriminated as a retail employee, fine -- he’ll be a rapper then. Except that in working with the system, West realizes the faults within it. Maher notes that like Du Bois, Kanye West soon realizes that “uncritical materialism is impotent as a vehicle for change” (389) and it’s not enough to rise above the warring ideals of double-consciousness. The songs that follow support Maher’s idea that West’s work undergoes a “steady shift from a benign double-consciousness of the ‘warring ideals’ of Black and White America to a more critical and radical double-consciousness.” In the beginning, like Du Bois, West may have been inclined to rise

above the veil, but the more he became exposed to this double consciousness, he realized “the need for radical social transformation” (386). The shift from benign to radical does not happen overnight, but over the years as Kanye continues to be exposed to the metaphorical veil.

### **Jesus Walks:**

Kanye alludes to the positive role of Christianity in his life often in his lyrics. The song “I’ll Fly Away” - which also fits Colbert’s flying Africans narrative -- is actually a gospel hymn that West uses to introduce the religious motif of the album. The sample is followed by “Spaceship” and then “Jesus Walks.” Because the song Spaceship captures a struggle, it’s symbolic that Kanye turns to Christ immediately after. The importance of the role of Christ in Kanye’s life is reflected by the song, Jesus Walks. Daws explained that Kanye “criticizes other rap artists for only acknowledging the works of God in their lives when convenient, not at all times” (94). Once again, in an act of rebellion, Kanye writes a rap song talking about how much he needs Jesus to an audience expecting lyrics about guns, sex and lies. Interestingly enough, Jesus Walks was a radio hit -- which was predicted by Kanye in the following verse:

So here go my single dog, radio needs this  
 They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus  
 That means guns, sex, lies, videotape  
 But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh?  
 Well if this take away from my spins  
 Which'll probably take away from my ends  
 Then I hope this take away from my sins  
 And bring the day that I'm dreamin' about  
 Next time I'm in the club, everybody screamin' out [“Jesus Walks!”]

In the verse, Kanye recognizes the importance of radio success to public discourse. In suggesting the radio needs a single about Jesus, Kanye is highlighting the problem with how well listeners accept messages about guns, sex, and lies as opposed to themes concerning more influential motifs, like religion. Such a controversial record might have a negative impact on Kanye’s radio

play, or his “spins,” which eventually impacts his “ends” but he seems more concerned with how it can take away from his “sins.” If Kanye is willing to sacrifice his material gains for a sense of religious belonging, then he already stands apart from the radio rap. Thus, Kanye is using the record to repent for his past wrongdoings. The role of Christ, then, is shown to be a substantial part of Kanye’s success. Kanye West’s line about playing “Jesus Walks” at the club can be seen as a direct response to Cornel West’s argument in *Race Matters* that religion used to provide a cultural unity that has been replaced by the fierce individualism of the get-rich-quick gangster mentality. Instead of only bringing God up when it’s convenient – and it’s NOT convenient to lose radio-play/money – Kanye is using religion to help him convey messages about the disappointing nature of our culture. In doing so, he is bringing the cultural unity back into religion. Earlier in the song, he raps “I walk through the valley of the Chi where death is.” This line is extracted and reinterpreted from the bible – Psalms 23:4 refers to “the valley of the shadow of death.” By replacing shadow with “chi,” Kanye is referencing the high murder and gun violence rates of Chicago, his hometown. If it weren’t for his song, the violence in Chicago would never receive radio play. By speaking up on these polemic issues, Kanye hopes his sins can be atoned for while simultaneously spreading a sense of unity and brotherhood through God.

### **Never Let Me Down**

As far as positive roles go in Kanye’s life, more influential than Jesus has been his family... specifically, his mother, Donda West. She and his father, Ray West raised Kanye to love and believe in himself and also to “question everything he was told rather than simply accept it” (Beaumont 20). These two values became deeply embedded in Kanye’s development and even he recognizes the driving force that his family’s values have had in his own journey. In the song “Never Let Me Down,” Kanye gives us some insight into his family:

I get down for my grandfather who took my momma  
 Made her sit in that seat where white folks ain't want us to eat  
 At the tender age of 6 she was arrested for the sit in  
 And with that in my blood I was born to be different  
 Now niggaz can't make it to ballads to choose leadership  
 But we can make it to Jacob's and to the dealership  
 Swear I hear new music and I just don't be feelin' it  
 Racisms still alive, they just be concealin' it

On the same breath that he tells us about his family, he tells us they are why he does what he does. Not sure I get what he's doing from these lyrics. In the first four lines, Kanye identifies his motivators of behavior to be the boldness that he inherited from his mother, who inherited it from her father (his grandfather). Donda West was arrested at a young age for participating in a sit-in protest, and Kanye uses her experience to explain why he has an elevated sense of purpose. His family's resilience through social upheaval is Kanye's inspiration. His mother stood up, or rather sat down, for what she believed in: an act of protest against the racial segregation prominent in the country. In the lines to follow, Kanye defends the need to take on the same role and confront the same type of racial issues his mother did. He contrasts low voter-registration rates among African Americans with the ease with which "niggas" find themselves out shopping for material items and new cars to show his understanding of how racism is still alive – just concealed – today. Kanye understood active forces in the political system hinder minority groups from actively participating in the electoral system, which were known as techniques of direct and indirect disenfranchisement. An article on University of Michigan's website describes "direct disenfranchisement refers to actions that explicitly prevent people from voting or having their votes counted" ("Techniques of Direct Disenfranchisement, 1880-1965"). Since the Fifteenth amendment outlawed direct techniques of disenfranchisement, there have been indirect attempts to disenfranchise black and minority voters. Daws notes, "West furthers the modern day

civil rights movement by expressing his opinions about the status of the differing cultures within the United States” (96). Kanye is alluding to an indirect disenfranchisement technique that white America uses to distract or discourage people of color from voting by promoting a consumerist culture that takes up all their time and money. Kanye has previously recognized this consumer culture, but the hefty realization that “racism’s still alive, they just be concealin’ it” is only possible after long exposure to the double-consciousness DuBois described. Kanye gains access to a second sight that allows him to see through the concealed racism and bring it to light. According to Maher, Kanye’s radical family heritage contributes in part to why “his exposure to the effects of the veil was always more pronounced than had been DuBois’s” (385). With insight into his family, the audience can understand where Kanye’s radical stance is rooted.

### **School Spirit**

Kanye is not the first artist to present criticism of America’s education system to a large audience. For decades, artists like Boogie Down Production, Dead Prez and Jay-Z have been rapping about the struggles in the education system. In songs like “Edutainment,” “They Schools” and “So Ambitious,” these rappers have been respectively using “school and its imagery to talk about the ways dominant worldviews are imposed as universal truths that exclude their own experiences and practices” (Richardson 101). Kanye’s approach is different than the aforementioned artists because unlike them, he had access to higher education. His mother was a college professor, and encouraged Kanye to go to school, too. Richardson notes, however, that “West was part of a new generation of young people who, after being given access to higher education, soon learned that academic success did not guarantee the social positions it once did” (103). The entire *Dropout* album is set up as a metaphor that represents Kanye’s personal conflict with institutionalized education. In her narrative analysis of the album, Daws suggests

“West’s personal story is one of rising to the top without an education, so the messages one may interpret from anti-school themes is that one does not need an education to succeed, contrary to what society says” (95). Ironically, the gist of his bitterness towards school is artfully summarized by the song, “School Spirit.” It’s ironic because that phrase is normally used to describe a certain pride or affinity towards one’s school, yet Kanye used it as the title of the song he dedicated to explain why exactly he hates school. Although the title of the song suggests he is about to show some “school spirit,” the first line is radical enough to suggest otherwise. He starts the song off by saying, “School spirit, motherfucker!” The curse word directly contrasts with the uniformity and complacency taught in school. Then, the following verse captures the everything that contributes to the anti-school themes to which Daws refers:

Told 'em I finished school and I started my own business  
 They say "Oh you graduated?" No, I decided I was finished  
 Chasing y'all dreams and what you've got planned  
 Now I spit it so hot, you got tanned  
 Back to school and I hate it there, I hate it there  
 Everything I want, I gotta wait a year, I wait a year  
 This nigga graduated at the top of the class  
 I went to Cheesecake, he was a motherfucking waiter there

What’s important about the dialogue Kanye plays out in the first three lines was that the people he was talking to decided to ask, “Oh, you graduated?” when he told them he finished school and started his own business. This response to the news he shared hints at the dominant worldview that college is the only way to follow your dream of starting your own business. On the same beat, Kanye refutes their assumptions and clarifies that by “finished school,” he meant he was finished “chasing y’all dreams and what you’ve got planned.” Richardson notes that Kanye “demonstrates ways in which the school system in America marginalizes those outside dominant cultures and works to perpetuate social hierarchies by making such power relations appear



legitimate and universal” (109). Kanye uses this casual, back-and-forth conversation to define school as a system that is more about living up to other people’s expectations than it is about higher education and self-fulfillment. He boldly declares he “hates it there” and complains about having to “wait a year” to do anything he wants, like having to go through prerequisites to get to the more interesting, engaging classes, or needing to be at a certain college level to qualify for internships, or having to wait for a degree to get a job. He also recalls running into a former valedictorian who was still working as a waiter at the Cheesecake factory. To graduate at the top of the class means this student followed all the rules, did all his work and got good grades. He may have even participated in extracurricular activities. All these things are supposed to fluff up resumes and boost hireability, but if a year later this kid is still a waiter, it only shows how ineffective the system really is.

*Dropout* revealed that Kanye “discovered a formula that bridged the divide between middle class sensibilities and ghettocentric rap without alienating audiences on either side” (Richardson 102). In other words, Kanye could talk to both sides (“middle class” and “ghettocentric”) about issues that resonates with each. By finding common ground between both cultures, Kanye has reach and influence across a broad audience. In this case, what unites these two sides is fact that people from both are subject to marginalization if they fail to fit in with universal dominant cultures and social hierarchies perpetuated by the American school system (Richardson 109). Furthermore, since Kanye was an active participant in the system and still looks at himself critically, people can be inspired to do the same.

## **II. Late Registration**

By late 2005, Kanye had released his second album as a continuation of his metaphor against higher education. His self-awareness is sharper -- you can’t tell him a thing about him

that he doesn't already know. This was important in light of the media events that lead up to the release of *Late Registration*. This seems an odd thing to say here - why do you say it? In the outro for the the song, "We Major," Kanye answers the question about the name of his album directly -- "And so they ask me, why you call it 'Late Registration,' Ye?// Cause we takin' these motherfuckers back to school." Kanye's decision to take us back to school is certainly a result of the exposure to double-consciousness that *Dropout* touched upon. One could argue that dropping out of college was Kanye's initial attempt to rise above the metaphorical veil -- by rejecting the same system that sought to confine/define him. Then, like DuBois, he realized that rejecting or rising above or ignoring the veil is not enough to dismantle it, only action will. So, back to school went he. *Late Registration* focuses on more political issues, like the healthcare gap in America, the idea of "conflict diamonds", and controversies surrounding the War on Drugs started by Reagan. Thus, Kanye continued his criticisms of the state of our cultures, but with such a conviction that suggests he is deeply concerned and dedicated to changing the outcomes of the issues he's discussing. By the time *Late Registration* was released, Kanye had already endured about a year and a half of fame and celebrity. He realized too that just as he escaped one social system that was trying to define him, college, he was absorbed by another, fame. Based on media articles, despite Kanye's musical success, he was not very successful on camera. If you contrast the music he released in this album with what the media was saying, there's a disconnect. Kanye is not blind to this disconnect, and often talks about it in the album. Songs like "Crack Music," "Bring Me Down," and "Diamonds from Sierra Leone" reflect how much more critical Kanye's second sight/double-consciousness has become:

### **Crack Music**

While Kanye West has no political background beyond the fateful rant during the telethon for Hurricane Katrina, and there are without a doubt more qualified scholars to speak on the war on drugs and the intricacies of post-civil rights race relations, Kanye has a huge platform as a celebrity with access to the consciousness of millions of people. The stuff he talks about sparks social dialogue in every sense, and Richardson believes “this spark is one of the benefits of listening critically to artists like Kanye West, who provide insights into social institutions that can be missed in certain academic environments” (109). In the song, “Crack Music,” Kanye creates a metaphor that conflates the drug and race issues in America with hip-hop by comparing this older epidemic in the black community, to a newer more relevant one. Chances are, schools are not talking about the similarities between hip-hop and crack, but the similarities are stark and relevant. Kanye points out the interconnectedness of these issues in the following verse:

How we stop the black panthers?  
 Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer  
 You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearing  
 When our heroes and heroines got hooked on heroin  
 Crack raised the murder rate in DC and Maryland  
 We invested in that it's like we got Merrill-Lynched  
 And we been hanging from the same tree ever since  
 Sometimes I feel the music is the only medicine  
 So we cook it, cut it, measure it, bag it, sell it  
 The fiends cop it, nowadays they can't tell if  
 That's that good shit, we ain't sure man  
 Put the CD on your tongue yeah, that's pure man

To continue his streak of publicly calling out U.S. Presidents, Kanye brought up Ronald Reagan and his contribution to the complicated race relations. Reword last clause. The Black Panthers originated in the height of the Civil Rights movement – a response to the assassination of Malcolm X and an unarmed black teen from Oakland. The radical political group was “part of the larger Black Power movement, which emphasized black pride, community control, and unification for civil rights” (“Black Panthers”). The government used anything in their power to

“control” the group, which often times included using direct oppositional force against activists through violence. In the song, Kanye is referring to more indirect attempts to dismantle the group. Genius notes in their interpretation of the song that the play on words that Reagan “cooked up” an answer “allude[s] to the connection between the CIA, Iran, and the Contra rebels in which the 1980s federal government, led by Republican president Ronald Reagan, invented and distributed crack to predominantly Black communities” (“Crack Music”). The number of crack dealers and drug-use sky-rocketed in Black communities. More relevant to Kanye’s point, Gil Scott Heron was a famous soul musician and poet who spoke a lot about the drugs and racism, and was arrested for possession of a crack pipe (Maycock). By getting their “heroes and heroines” addicted to crack, the government is “destroying the community that the Panthers came from” in hopes that the group would lose traction and cease their activism. In the next lines, Kanye continues to back up his points, noting the increased murder rates. He plays on the investment bank’s name “Merril-Lynch” and “lynching” claiming that black people’s investment in crack leads to their death at a rate much like the mass lynchings of black people in the south. The phrase “hanging from the same tree” suggests black people have not been able to overcome the crack epidemic, but his declaration that music is medicine helps him transition from the lynching metaphor to a new but related idea that hip-hop has become the new crack for black communities. Black people were invested in the production and distribution of crack, and now, they’ve invested in the production and distribution of hip-hop. In a way, the metaphor suggests that the effects of the crack epidemic are still relevant to black people today. The process for producing and distributing crack can be applied to the process of producing and distributing music: “cooking it (solidifying the product; recording the album, producing the beats), cutting it (adding something to the product to make it appear like more; lyrical fillers,

skirts), measuring it (putting enough of the product in each unit to sell), and bag it (product and distribute the product; CDs, tours, etc.)” (“Crack Music” – Genius). Hip-hop, like crack, became a product of black communities; except that hip-hop serves to reverse the destruction that crack has caused in the communities by unifying black people through their love for music. If hip-hop is a drug, it speaks volumes that black people control the distribution. It represents a sort of reclaim to a culture that was deliberately sabotaged by white-supremacy leaders.

### **Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix)**

In another song that brings together two distinct, serious issues, “Diamonds” reflects Kanye’s self-conscious struggle with materialism symbolized through “diamonds” -- jewelry, luxury, expensive taste” -- when he knows better. He references the controversial politics of Sierra Leone and “blood diamonds” as reasons he’s personally conflicted about spending excessive money on diamonds. The song starts of with the greeting:

Good mornin', this ain't Vietnam still  
 People lose hands, legs, arms, for real  
 Little was known of Sierra Leone  
 And how it connect to the diamonds we own

Alluding the 1987 film *Good Morning Vietnam* “about an American radio DJ in Vietnam during the war” (“Diamonds From Sierra Leone (Remix)” – Genius), Kanye introduces a familiar tragedy to segue into a topic that might be less talked about in pop culture: blood diamonds of Sierra Leone. Summarizing it roughly, the diamond history in Sierra Leone started in 1935 when the London based company De Beers took control of the prospects for the next 99 years. Although the company’s control was legal, “traders within Sierra Leone quickly discovered the immense profits that could be made by smuggling diamonds out of the country. As a result, illicit mining and trading soon increased throughout Sierra Leone” which ignited a long and violent civil war. (“Blood Diamonds”). The history is long and rocky, and attempts to ban conflict

diamonds have been made. Still, a lot of blood has been shed and innocent lives were taken yet no one talks about it as they go about purchasing diamonds. Thus, in a self-reflexive manner and in light of this conflict, Kanye questions the renowned celebrity jeweler, Jacob the Jeweler, about the origins of the jewelry he bought off of him:

My chain, these ain't conflict diamonds  
Is they, Jacob? Don't lie to me, man.  
See, a part of me sayin' keep shinin'  
How when I know what a blood diamond is?

He reveals that he is struggling with his materialistic urges when he knows information that should alter his decision to participate in an industry that has brought death and despair to so many people. But Kanye addresses a more serious conflict, one that accurately captures the concept of the veil DuBois talks about in “Strivings:”

I thought my Jesus piece was so harmless  
'Til I seen a picture of a shorty armless  
And here's the conflict  
It's in a black person soul to rock that gold  
Spend your life, tryna get that ice.

The concept of sight in these four lines is important. It wasn't until he saw the effects of war on civilians that he noticed his Jesus piece, which stands for materialism, could be problematic. Not only does rocking a diamond encrusted Jesus piece enable and support the conflict diamond industry, but it also perpetuates the concept of black materialism. In *Dropout*, Kanye captured the essence of the materialism that's promoted within the black community that “made us hate ourselves and love they wealth” (“All Falls Down”). Kanye reminds his people that “the white man gets paid off of all of that.” The black materialism to which Kanye refers has roots in slavery and reparations. He's aware that “we've been tryna buy back our 40 acres” (“All Falls Down”), which was an allusion to the “40 acres and a mule” promise, or “compensation made to freed African American slaves after the Civil War” (“Diamonds From Sierra Leone” – Genius).

By thinking critically of himself, Kanye can inspire his fans to do the same. If in Dropout Kanye brought awareness to this materialism, here, his stance is more critical as he uses an emotional appeal to reach his listeners. He accesses his double-consciousness, and chooses to focus on the consciousness that pertains to his black identity. On the original “Diamonds From Sierra Leone” track, which was released as a bonus track, Kanye focused more on the double-consciousness that pertained more to his American celebrity identity. He addresses some of the conversations he has sparked with his “outrageous” behavior and manic “outbursts” at some award shows: “I was sick about awards, couldn't nobody cure me// Only playa that got robbed but kept all his jewelry.” Kanye references a metaphorical robbery to describe how he felt when he lost the American Music Award for Best New Artist to Gretchen Wilson in 2004. West stormed out of the show while Wilson was going on stage, and later, he says, “I felt like I was definitely robbed, and I refused to give any politically correct bullshit ass comment ... I was the best new artist this year” (Montgomery). Two things are clear: (1) Kanye has strong opinions of himself, and (2) he is not concerned with being polite. Referencing back to Greek cynicism, Kanye’s use of honesty and shock are attempts to get people to pay attention and discuss things more critically. He continues the verse:

What more could you ask for? The international asshole  
 Who complain about what he is owed?  
 And throw a tantrum like he is 3 years old  
 You gotta love it though somebody still speaks from his soul  
 And wouldn't change by the change, or the game, or the fame

The first four lines are the criticisms he anticipates from people -- the media, the audiences, his fellow celebrities. People might think he’s throwing tantrums like a toddler, but Kanye sees it as speaking from his soul. Despite what the media says to discredit or dehumanize him, he insists on putting value on the notion of staying true to himself. In his eyes, Kanye’s refusing to

conform to societal expectations of celebrities that usually includes being changed by the fame and fortune.

What helps further drive home his points is his dedication to staying consistent with his audience. What good is rapping about all these radical and progressive topics if once you leave the studio, you leave that passion behind? One month after he released *Late Registration*, Kanye went on national television with Mike Myers to urge people to donate to Hurricane Katrina relief charities. When it was his time to speak, you hear an uncharacteristic nervousness in his voice as he goes off script to rant about the injustices black families are facing in light of the tragedy. Consistent with the topics in his albums, he starts by saying, “I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a Black family, it says, ‘They’re looting.’ You see a White family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food’” (Biedenharn 31). It’s evident in Myers’ face that that was not what he expected to come out of Kanye’s mouth. As he continued, Myers’ shock grew into complete and potent discomfort when Kanye concluded his rant with the famous uttering, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people!” before he was cut off by NBC. The following months were dedicated to public apologies where Kanye admitted that he made a mistake calling the President out on national television. However, to prevent the media from “framing his intentions and actions in an unfavorable light” (Biedenharn 17), he made sure to specify that he’s sorry for how he said it, not for actually saying it. The media failed to realize, whether intentionally or not, that what happened on the telethon really isn’t unexpected behavior from Kanye. For a year and a half before this “outburst,” he has been saying controversial things in his music. The difference is that Kanye control the narrative in his music, while the media controls the narrative that goes out to the public. Based on his lyrical content, it seems Kanye is becoming more keenly aware of the way he is being portrayed by the media.



### III. Graduation

Kanye set up his first three albums as a metaphor against higher education. When listened in order, the trilogy represents Kanye's metaphorical experience with systemic education. *The College Dropout* was his introduction, *Late Registration* he took us motherfuckers back to school, and in *Graduation*, he's summarizing his success up until this point. Kanye starts off the album with the declaration, "I guess, this is my dissertation// Homie this shit is basic, welcome to Graduation" ("Good Morning"). We see Kanye explore the controversies surrounding his image as an American-celebrity who is also a black man. By this point, Kanye was already a favorite topic for media outlets, with his award show tantrums and larger-than-life ego. *Graduation* also represents a shift in Kanye's music. If his first two albums had soulful beats and educationally critical themes, his third album has more arena rock sounds and hedonistic messages. He doesn't exactly abandon the altruism that was prominent in the previous albums, but *Graduation* is meant to be a celebration – his self-declared graduation into rap. He completed the work and now he is reaping the fruits of his pursuits. The album was nominated for 10 Grammy's and won 3 including "Best Rap Album" ("Good Morning" – Genius). What's even more remarkable about *Graduation* is that the date it was released became known as "The Day Kanye West Killed Gangsta Rap" (Bever). Kanye and rapper Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson released albums on the same day, September 11, 2007. Up until this point, 50 cent was topping charts after charts and his presence was potent in the industry. Then, *Graduation* out-sold 50 Cent's *Curtis*, and that was "the moment that Kanye transitioned from "successful other" to legit king status." Kanye worked for this, and the lyrics of the album reflect the glorious feeling of finally earning his place. The

hedonistic and self-reflective essences of the album are best captured in the songs, “Good Morning,” “Can’t Tell Me Nothing,” and “Everything I Am.”

### **Good Morning**

The first song in the album, “Good Morning,” is an extension of the metaphor against higher education that/which Kanye developed in *Dropout* and then continued in *Registration*. Kanye describes waking up in the morning of his graduation, and he looks back on his journey and does not seem to regret a thing. Since Kanye chose a “non-traditional” way of approaching college – first he dropped out, and then decided to go back to school – he didn’t reflect on his hard work and impressive grades. Instead, he he “barely passed any and every class// Looking at every ass,” cheated on every test.” He is equating his approach to school to the approach of the “underachievers.” The fact that he’s still graduating -- into success, into the fame, the fortune -- reinforces the critical stance he took in *Dropout*: you don’t need to follow the rules to succeed.

Kanye gets to this point in the third verse:

Good morning  
 Look at the valedictorian scared of the future  
 While I hop in the Delorean  
 Scared-to-face-the-world complacent career student  
 Some people graduate, but we still stupid  
 They tell you read this, eat this, don't look around  
 Just peep this, preach us, teach us, Jesus  
 Okay, look up now, they done stole your streetness  
 After all of that, you receive this

The juxtaposition of a valedictorian who is scared of the future while Kanye, the embodiment of what a valedictorian isn’t, enters a luxury Dolorean vehicle demonstrates why it’s wrong to push universal education standards on students. The complacency it demands causes students to graduate more scared to face the world than prepared for it. Students who don’t fit in with dominant cultures that are legitimized by the new wave of higher education feel more disgraced

than those in previous generations who were not expected to get a college degree (Richardson 103). According to Kanye, college tells you what to read, what to eat, to not look around, just to pay attention to what they are preaching and teaching. Then, you get a diploma for doing exactly what they told you to do. Ultimately, he claims that college “steals your streetness,” and replaces it with complacency. Kanye’s assertion that school steals your “streetness” supports the notion that education and being “street smart” are usually polar opposites on the intellectual spectrum. Yet, by bringing awareness to the disconnect between these two intellects, Kanye presents a legitimate problem. By calling attention to the contrast between him – someone who may be considered an underachiever for not following the rules - and the valedictorian – someone who may be considered an overachiever – Kanye urges his listeners to think for themselves. That way, at graduation, maybe you can hop into a Delorean too, instead of being ridden with anxiety about the world.

### **Can’t Tell Me Nothing**

By *Graduation*, Kanye has made himself known whether it’s through releasing successful albums, or speaking up for what he believes in. The deeper Kanye goes into fame and celebrity, the sharper his self-awareness becomes, and so does his bitterness towards dominant ideologies, which continue to be perpetuated even after school is finished. In fact, this song can be considered a direct response to what the critics have been saying. In the first verse, Kanye addresses the pressures he has felt with his new celebrity status:

I feel the pressure, under more scrutiny  
 And what I do? Act more stupidly  
 Bought more jewelry, more Louis V  
 My Momma couldn't get through to me  
 The drama, people suing me  
 I'm on TV talking like it's just you and me  
 I'm just saying how I feel man  
 I ain't one of the Cosby's, I ain't go to Hillman

I guess the money should've changed him  
 I guess I should've forgot where I came from

Kanye admits the scrutiny associated with celebrities has started to weigh on him. Acting more stupidly is directly referencing his outlandish media behaviors, from walking out of and criticizing award shows when he doesn't win to the George Bush comment on national television. According to a timeline MTV published on their website, Kanye has acted up outrageously during or after three award shows. At the 32nd annual American Music awards in November 2014, Kanye flipped out and left when he didn't win Best New Artist for *Dropout*. In February 2005, at the 46th annual Grammy Awards, he performs "Jesus Walks" as Jesus who is killed by the "haters" and resuscitated, or rose above it. Finally, he went up on stage after the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2006 to declare his disappointment that "Touch the Sky" off *Late Registration* lost Video of the Year to someone who's video he hasn't even seen (Montgomery). It appears that Kanye turned to materialism to alleviate some of the pressures and replace it with fulfilment. At the start of the verse, Kanye says, "I had a dream I could buy my way to heaven// When I awoke, I spent that on a necklace." This is a shift from "Jesus Walks," where Kanye placed great value on the role of Christ in his life. This symbolizes a decline or a disconnect in his identity. With greater fame, Kanye has become more exposed to the warring ideals of white and black cultures, and it's interfering with the connection to his black identity. Further supporting the disconnect in Kanye's identities, not even his mother, who he has in the past been his biggest support system, could get through to him. It is equally important to note that while Kanye is reflecting on this, he still insists that "he's just saying how he feels." He also mentions The Cosby Show and the fictional black university, "Hillman College." This is symbolic because the show was originally one of the few sitcoms on T.V. that featured black protagonists, but even then they had to be an upper-class family with a lawyer dad

and a doctor mom (“Can’t Tell Me Nothing” – Genius). Kanye separates himself from the Huxtables, which highlights the contrast between him and them. Unlike the characters of staged show, Kanye refuses to adhere to the script they assign to him, reflected by the Hurricane Katrina rant. He realizes that the media might wish he was more like a Huxtable: black, educated, but most of all, well behaved; but that is not who Kanye is. It’s not who he has ever been, and it seems that he’s struggling to be who they want him to be. He was raised in the hood, not the Hills.

By then end of the trilogy against higher education, Kanye has developed a deeper sense of self and social responsibility. Upon reflect, he feels confident in the decisions he’s made despite the reputation he’s earned along the way. He busted through the scene in 2004 with the soul hip-hop needed and was determined to debunk universal standards of success. He also had an ardent confidence that is often times more jarring than inspiring. On the topic of black role models, there aren’t many he can be compared to. In the song, “Everything I Am,” he concludes he will never be “picture-perfect Beyonce,” who is one of the few poster-children for acceptable black celebrity behavior. He also considers some criticisms made against him and his music, that there’s not enough “gun-talk, or I don't wear enough// Baggy clothes, Reebok's, or A-di-dos// Can I add that he do spaz out at his shows.” His music gets criticized for not being black enough, while his personality is deemed too black for the media. Instead of allowing himself to be manipulated, he chooses to stand up. The more the media tries to put Kanye in box with a label in it, the more he resists, and encourages his listeners to do the same.

#### **IV. 808’s and Heartbreak (2008)**

*808’s and Heartbreak* was the first album Kanye released that did not have an overarching metaphor against higher education. So far, each of the three albums acts as a

response to the events relevant while Kanye was working on the album. To continue his streak, Kanye released *808's and Heartbreak* in the wake of a personal tragedy: the death of Donda West, his mother and biggest supporter. Around the same time, Kanye also ended a long-term relationship/engagement with Alexis Phifer (“Welcome to Heartbreak” – Genius). His mother’s death sent him on a journey of self-reflection and life-revaluations, and he didn’t have a partner to help him cope. Thus, he turned to music. Since it was a product of his heartbreak, the album stands in stark contrast against anything he has produced thus far, or goes on to produce after. In this album we see another shift in musical sounds for Kanye. Stylistically, he sings his lyrics over autotune, instead of rapping to a beat. He reflects upon his the last few years and tries to make sense of the next steps for his life, career, self. Losing his lover and his mother made him realize he’s done a lot for his professional life but that his personal life was lacking. Kanye’s larger than life persona has made him untouchable, but lonely. The songs “Welcome to Heartbreak” and “Pinocchio Story” best portray the unfulfillment Kanye feels.

### **Welcome to Heartbreak**

The second song in the album, “Welcome to Heartbreak,” captures the regret that he feels for being too absorbed with his career. Up until that point, Kanye was unmarried, fathered no children, and just lost the closest family member to him. It prompted him to think about who is really there for him, and the realization that his lifestyle has alienated from his friends and family might have been his breaking point. In the following verse, he recalls:

My friend showed me pictures of his kids  
 And all I could show him was pictures of my cribs  
 He said his daughter got a brand new report card (card)  
 And all I got was a brand new sports car

Kanye has reached the point in his life where his social circle is revelling in their personal accomplishments, like marriage and kids. He sets up the four lines as two sets of contrasts. The

pictures of cars juxtaposed with the pictures of kids or families demonstrates a differences in priorities. The sports car is set up as the antithesis for a report card, which suggests Kanye took more pride in material possessions than interpersonal relationships. He only realizes this once he loses a few things that means more to him than the money does. Almost defeated, he asks, “Chased a good life my whole life long// Look back on my life and my life gone// Where did I go wrong?” For Kanye to ask a question like this in the album that was released right after *Graduation*, in which is basks in his glories and accomplishments, means the heartbreak really broke him. But it also means that Kanye is still being true to himself if he’s willing to share even his darkest moments with listeners. In one of his more hedonistic songs, he admits, “I always had a passion for flashing’ before I had it// I close my eyes and imagine, the good life.” In this one, he’s questioning if he has made the right decisions. These messages might sound contradicting, but they’re honest. Kanye has shared his journey with his fans since 2004, and has admitted to embodying contradictions all the time. What sets him apart is his ability to think largely enough about issues to admit to his contradictions. It’s speaks volumes that he’s able to be honest with himself, and it boosts ethos with his audience.

### **Pinocchio Story**

The last song of the album, “Pinocchio Story,” is a brutally honest metaphor where Kanye compares himself to Pinocchio in the sense that like a wooden puppet, who is at the control of others, he also just wants to be a real boy. The song is set up as if Kanye were performing it live – with an excited audience in the background. Stylistically, it’s as if Kanye was speaking directly to the audience (“Pinocchio Story” – Genius). In the first verse, Kanye confesses, “I got everything figured out// But for some reason I can never find what real love is about...” He is referencing his egotistical, opinionated character who is sure enough of himself

to call out the President on national television, to climb on award show stages to disagree the chosen winner, and stand strong behind his decisions. In the song, he admits that he's lacking personal connections. The death of his mother was eye-opening. Further down the verse, Kanye touches upon his materialism and how it has contributed to a made-up life where he's fake happy. Money can buy a lot of things, like fancy designer brands and vacations, but nothing will help him stop hurting. As he continues his open letter to the audience, he asks, "What does it feel like, to live real life, to be real// Not some facade on TV that no one can really feel?" Kanye asks how it feels to live a real life often throughout the song, and it's evident that he feels as if strings are pulling him. He finally acknowledges his mother's death, in the third and final verse, which happens to be the emotional. Kanye alludes to feeling at fault for her death. Donda West died of complications after a cosmetic surgery. Officially, she "died of heart disease while suffering 'multiple post-operative factors' after plastic surgery" ("Donda West Died of Heart Disease after Surgery"). Clearly it took a toll of Kanye's mental state. In the verse, he continues the Pinocchio metaphor by comparing Gepetto, Pinocchio's parent, to his mother:

And there is no Gepetto, to guide me  
 No one, right beside me  
 The only one, was behind me  
 I can't find her no more, I can't call her no more

In the Disney movie, "Gepetto was Pinocchio's puppet master and guided him throughout his life... the closest thing Yeezy had to that was his mother" ("Pinocchio Story" – Genius). If Donda was to Kanye what Gepetto was to Pinocchio, we can understand why Kanye feels like he lost his support system. Later in the verse, he considers the influence that the L.A. life had on his mother. Because she died of complications after a cosmetic surgery, it's easy to imagine that she wouldn't be dead if it weren't for the surgery. Since plastic surgery is often associated with the



fast life of Hollywood, he feels at fault for “chasin' the American dream// Chasin' everything we seen, up on the TV screen.” He feels guilty that his decisions all lead up to the death of his mother. It’s important that Kanye is confessing to these feelings, because they foreshadow the downward spiral he goes on while he’s grieving.

By the end of the album, Kanye’s disillusionment with his lifestyle choice was evident. Before *808’s and Heartbreak*, he progressively debunked material consumption through the albums. In previous albums, Kanye had recognized his material consumption as contradictory, but he did not fully reject it. He didn’t see how alienated he had become chasing this lifestyle of fame and excess until the rug was ripped out from under him and he was left alone. Without revealing too much about the albums to come, *808’s and Heartbreak* was definitely a turning point in Kanye’s career.

## **V. My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy**

In the two years that Kanye took off between albums, he managed to get himself a lot of media attention. The tragedy of losing his mother sent Kanye on bender. He had lost his sense of direction, and it was manifesting itself in the form of outlandish behavior. Leading up to the release of his fifth solo-album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, Kanye was at odds with quite some media, like the shows South Park and SNL. More significantly, *Fantasy* released two months after Kanye’s 2009 VMA stage invasion, where he interrupted Taylor Swift’s speech to declare he thought Beyonce should have won because her video was clearly better. He grabbed the mic from her hands and uttered the words, “Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you and Imma let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time. One of the best videos of all time!” (Lang 2016). If Kanye wasn’t misunderstood enough before, this Taylor Swift stunt certainly did it. She was 20 years old, brand new to the industry, and a big, scary black man

verbally attacked her on stage in front of all the entire country. Katy Perry, a fellow celebrity, tweeted that night: “FUCK U KANYE. IT’S LIKE YOU STEPPED ON A KITTEN” (Lang 2016). What nobody knew at the time was that a war had been started. In 2018, Kanye and Taylor Swift are still not on good terms.

Alluding his relationship with Amber Rose, Fantasy “is a genre-bending masterpiece that explores the darker sides of celebrity, fame and love” (“My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy” – Genius). The release of the album served as his comeback after a rocky few years. He alludes to some old themes from his earlier works, like existing racial tensions, social conformity and his own self-awareness. Now that he’s been in the spotlight for several years, he’s gained more insight into white American celebrity culture and realized how directly against it goes his black American culture. The album explores how the warring ideals of the two cultures contribute to the he has difficulty balancing both sides. By this point in his career, Kanye has been exposed to his double-consciousness enough that it’s evolved to a much more radical stance. In songs like “Gorgeous” and “Power,” Kanye examines his celebrity identity against his black identity and identifies where, and why, they are at a disconnect. He directly calls out those who have slandered him. These songs ultimately reveal Kanye’s eternal struggle: the media thinks he’s too black, while his fans think he became jaded by the fame, or in other words, abandoned his roots. Fantasy went on to be his most critically acclaimed album, receiving near perfect scores on many different music critic websites (“My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy” – Genius).

### **Gorgeous**

The second song in the album, “Gorgeous,” ironically explores the ugly racial injustices that still exist in America while still remaining hopeful, focusing on the beauty of things. As a black man, Kanye is predisposed to criticism. As a black man with as much visibility as a white

man can have, the criticisms seem inescapable. In the song he raps, “Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention.” By comparing himself to Malcolm X, a fearless civil rights activist, Kanye gives his actions more context. Despite the media’s attempts to dehumanize him, he brings attention to the fact that he’s following in the footsteps of his black predecessors. In the face of it all, Kanye remains confident in his strides. By bringing attention to uglier things in America, he hopes that the media’s manipulative narratives don’t distract his listeners.

In the first verse, he alludes to slavery to make the connection that the racist ideals from then are still alive today: “Based off the way we was branded// Face it, Jerome get more time than Brandon.” There’s double meaning to the way Kanye uses the word “branded.” It’s a reference to the branding that slaves endured as one of the many corporal punishments, but it’s also a referencing to the marketing concept of branding where a name is established. Jerome is a common “brand” in the black community, while “Brandon” is more of a white name. Here, Kanye is drawing attention to the disparity of prison sentences that seem to target people of color at a higher rate than their white counterparts. A man named Jerome is more likely to get a harsher sentence than Brandon for the same crime. He argues the racial tensions that are still present today are a result of the negative “brand” associated with black people, which was rooted in slavery but certainly not limited to it.

To continue his metaphor about the branding of black people, in the second verse, he raps, “As long as I’m in Polo smiling, they think they got me// But they would try to crack me if they ever see a black me.” Kanye uses the Polo brand to symbolize the ideals of white America. Since Polo is a popular brand for wealthy white people, wearing it symbolizes Kanye’s desire to be accepted. As long as he’s in Polo, or conforming to their standards and trying to fit in, they welcome him. The use of the word “crack” can be considered a reference to the same crack

epidemic mentioned in “Crack Music” -- trying to crack him as in, getting him addicted to drugs to derail him -- but also to the cracking sound a whip makes when it hits the back of a misbehaved slave. He realizes that as soon as soon as they see his black side, they try to crack, or stop, him. Kanye is realizing that America doesn’t have a problem with him; America has a problem with black people not being under control. He also addresses many ways the media exercises spatial control of black people:

I thought I chose a field where they couldn’t sack me  
 If a nigga ain't shootin' a jump shot, running a track meet  
 But this pimp is, at the top of Mount Olympus  
 Ready for the World’s game, this is my Olympics

To be accepted by white America, black people must participate in strenuous physical activity, as athletes, or dedicate their lives to entertaining, as artists. The field he chose is one of the few fields where black people are celebrated, yet the media still slanders him in attempts to control his story. His success, however, is proving to be a greater force than the media. He’s grown more “erratic,” according to the media, but this album went on to be one of the most unanimously liked. This means he’s doing something right, if his fan-base is growing. Kanye’s references to Mount Olympus and the Olympics create godly imagery that help convey the power of his influence. Later in the verse, he directly calls out the popular animated show by Comedy Central, South Park. Referencing an episode about him, Kanye’s response was: “Choke a South Park writer with a fishstick.” For an article for the Noisey website, Kyle Krammer describes the episode in great detail:

For those who aren't familiar, the idea of Kanye West as a “gay fish” comes from a 2009 episode of South Park called “Fishsticks,” in which Kanye is the sole person in the country who doesn't get a joke about the word “fishsticks” sounding like the words “fish dicks.” It's ultimately revealed that this is because Kanye is, in fact, a gay fish who enjoys

fish dicks. At the end of the episode, he comes out as such and sings this little Auto-Tuned ditty about it called “Gay Fish,” a riff on his unpopular choice to make an album slathered in Auto-Tune in 2008, 808s and Heartbreak.

Obviously, the media loved it. People were laughing about it for a while. Krammer also noted that at first, Kanye tried to be a good sport about the episode, but people took the joke too far, even holding up “gay fish” signs at concerts he performed... 5 years later! Once upon a time, he had a blog, where he took to respond to the episode. It was a thoughtful, and heartfelt response, and while it no longer exists on the blog, MTV managed to capture the best of it on their website:

“‘South Park’ murdered me last night, and it’s pretty funny. It hurts my feelings, but what can you expect from ‘South Park?’” he wrote. “I actually have been working on my ego. ... Having the crazy ego is played out at this point in my life and career. I used to use it to build up my esteem when nobody believed in me. Now that people do believe and support my music, the best response is ‘Thank you’ instead of ‘I told you so!’...I’m sure the writers at ‘South Park’ are really nice people in real life. Thanks for taking the time to draw my crew. That was pretty funny also” (Montgomery 2009)

Once again, in a self-reflexive manner, Kanye recognizes his own ego and this time even makes a call for action to himself. But the joke became a sticking point and eventually Kanye got frustrated with how it represented him. Krammer notes that although the episode points out that Kanye’s ego is why he’s at odds with the culture, the narrative is “willfully wrongheaded and in no way reflective of what Kanye actually stands for.” People like Krammer, who are catching on to certain narratives, are likely those who have listened to Kanye’s music from the start and see past the media’s attempts to debunk him. To those people, this album is definitely a favorite.

## **Power**

The song directly after “Gorgeous,” mirrors some of its themes, but as the name suggests, “Power” is about his growing power in American culture. Kanye has shown to be very aware of the things people say about him. To support his theme, he samples King Crimson’s “21st Century Schizoid Man.” In short, the schizoid man described in Crimson’s song is “one whose moral values are contradictory” (“Power” – Genius). It’s ironic because the media has been portraying Kanye’s values as contradicting by selectively choosing the focus of their narrative. The media purposely ignores the substantial and radical things Kanye has said in his music that might give him more context. It results in half-told stories, or at least stories that don’t critically unpack what he says but rather just reports it, and he is growing more aware of it. As a result, he heightened his defenses, and started fighting back. In the first verse, he recognizes he’s doing something to the 21st century “better than anybody you ever seen do it,” and that “in this white man world, we the ones chosen.” In the following verse, he immediately starts out slandering yet another popular media outlet, SNL, for their mention of him on their show. On one of the episodes, Taylor Swift’s boyfriend at the time, Taylor Lautner, spoke about the VMA incident and proceeded to physically assault a cardboard cutout of Kanye (“SNL Transcripts”). Kanye’s response was probably more aggressive than Lautner’s comic attempt at beating him up: “Fuck SNL and the whole cast// Tell them Yeezy said they can kiss my whole ass.” His rant continues and he reveals a little bit about where his mind has been:

And I embody every characteristic of the egotistic  
 He knows, he’s so fucking gifted  
 I just needed time alone with my own thoughts  
 Got treasures in my mind but couldn’t open up my own vault  
 My childlike creativity, purity and honesty  
 Is honestly being crowded by these grown thoughts  
 Reality is catching up with me  
 Taking my inner child, I’m fighting for custody

He has addressed his ego many times before, but in this verse, alluding to thematic elements of *Heartbreak*, he reveals he's been struggling with reality, specifically in regards to his mother's death. He comes off as this larger than life character, who carries himself like he's untouchable, but the seriousness of the personal tragedy got to him. Grown thoughts are as antithetical to his childlike creativity as reality is to a child. He admits he almost lost himself in the midst of all the negative press, but the overarching theme of the album is his determination to stand strong against all the negativity. In the third verse, he name drops yet another President:

They say I was the abomination of Obama's nation  
 Well that's a pretty bad way to start the conversation  
 At the end of the day, god damn it I'm killing this shit  
 I know damn well y'all feeling this shit

Kanye is alluding to when Obama called him a "jackass" for interrupting Taylor Swift (Lang 2016). He is calling attention to the fact that people used Kanye as the antithesis of Obama. He recognizes however, that if he's being mentioned with President, he's doing something right. The details of it are all about framing and perspective. Eventually, like they have been, people will catch on. Ultimately, this is the message Kanye conveys in "Power."

Like the four albums before, *Fantasy* was released just in time to respond to current events of the time. Listeners can see that the disillusionment that was prominent in *Heartbreak* has been replaced with conviction. He is clearly more angry, radical and unabashed. For five years now, Kanye has been pouring his heart out to his fans. If people are still misunderstanding him or clinging onto to the wrong narratives, it's evident those people "haven't bothered to pay attention to a single thing Kanye has said in the last five years" (Krammer). To the more critical listener, *Fantasy* helps bring to light some of the manipulation tactics the media uses to direct the narrative they want to sell.

## VI. Yeezus

Kanye has shocked people before with his opinions, but nothing like the controversies he raised with the release of *Yeezus*. Like the previous albums, it was released in response to some current events of the time. He revealed in an interview with Zane Lowe in 2013 that he was working on venturing into fashion, but was having some trouble working with certain designers. In line with his previous works, Kanye takes to music to vent. Also in line with his previous works, Kanye was ready to raise controversy if he had to get his message across. He starts the album with a song that directly addresses the media, “How much do I not give a fuck? Let me show you right now before you give it up” (“On Sight 2013). Before the media can take control of the narrative, he will speak for himself. Kanye said he deliberately set up the album with the most aggressive messages first, but that he knew if he started it with lighter messages, it “would have changed certain *Yeezus* naysayers about the album. But it wasn’t that time for it... [He] wanted to take a more aggressive approach” (“Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Full Interview”). His double-consciousness has certainly fully evolved to its most radical state and thus, *Yeezus* was born as a metaphor to represent his martyrdom.

Kanye’s sixth solo-album was released three years after *Fantasy*. Unlike his other solo-albums, *Yeezus* was not an immediate success, and reviews were mixed. Some called it the worst album ever “(Why Yeezus Is One of the Worst Albums of All Time (My First Review),” while others deemed it the best album of 2013 (MacInnes). While *Yeezus* remains one of his most misunderstood albums, collectively, the critics would agree the album has elements of “heightened desperation” (Dombal), mania, melancholy (Colburn), but most of all, anger. Kanye “swaps lush soul and anthemic hooks for splintering electro, acid house, and industrial force while packaging some of his most lewd and heart-crushing tales yet” (Dombal). *Yeezus* is boldly,



unapologetically angry. With songs like “Black Skinhead,” “I Am A God” and “New Slaves,” the album was intended to grab attention.

### **Black Skinhead**

Referencing a British cultural movement in the 60’s brought on by the post-war economic boom which allowed young people with disposable income to become absorbed in fashion, music and consumerism, “Black Skinhead” is a “dark, rebellious and near-tribal record that threads between both Ye’s traditional braggadocio and anti-establishment, anti-racism themes” (“Black Skinhead” – Genius). Kanye addresses the anger he brought head on in the first verse:

For my theme song (black)  
My leather black jeans on (black)  
My by-any-means on  
Pardon, I'm getting my scream on (black)

In past songs, Kanye has compared himself to Malcolm X, like in Good Morning and Gorgeous. Here, he alludes to Malcolm X once again, claiming to have adopted X’s “by any means necessary” mentality. The screaming in the album captured a “panicked sound of that ensuing free-fall, a rush of angst and despair with absolutely nothing left to lose” (Dombal). By comparing himself to X, Kanye sets up the grounds for the racial tensions he will discuss in the rest of the album. He continues the verse:

They see a black man with a white woman  
At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong  
Middle America packed in (black)  
Came to see me in my black skin (black)

When the album was released, Kanye West had begun a romantic relationship with reality T.V. megastar Kim Kardashian. Like King Kong, Kanye is black, loves a white woman, and is at the top (of the charts). Kanye is the ape of this white man’s world, and like King Kong, they’re

trying to take him out. The use of alliteration in the line “kill King Kong” is also a reference to the KKK, the well-known racist, American hate group, which adds an extra layer to the song. The King Kong reference alludes to the first time a black man was ever featured on the cover of Vogue magazine. The cover was published in 2008 and it featured basketball player LeBron James holding model Giselle Bündchen by the waist to recreate the scene in King Kong where the raging ape is flinging around a small, white woman (“Black Skinhead” – Genius). It speaks volumes that the first time a black man was featured on the cover of Vogue he was portrayed as an angry ape. Kanye draws attention to the fact that the narrative around black people tend to sell when they are portrayed as the aggressor. The racial tensions that Kanye sets up in “Black Skinhead” extend to the rest of the album and help explain his frustrations with the industry.

### **I Am a God**

According to Kanye West, he wrote this song as a response to a disrespectful request from a fashion designer, who informed Kanye a few days before the 2012 Autumn Fashion Week “that he’d be invited to a widely anticipated runway show only on the condition that he agree not to attend any other shows.” Kanye was extremely offended, and wrote a song in which he rejects being controlled by anyone else by taking on the persona of the most-high. The song perhaps earned Kanye the most heat for the blasphemy it seemed to promote. What people failed to realize is the name “I Am a God” was deliberately intended to make people feel uncomfortable because it’s the song where Kanye tackles the idea that black men can’t be great. The song is set up as if he’s making many lofty, godly demands: “Hurry up with my damn massage// Hurry up with my damn menage// Get the Porche out the damn garage.” These seem superficial, but it goes in line with the greatness Kanye is trying to portray and the godly theme of the song. In the first verse, Kanye recalls:

Soon as they like you make 'em unlike you  
 Cause kissin' people ass is so unlike you  
 The only rapper compared to Michael  
 So here's a few hatin'-ass niggas to fight you  
 And here's a few snake-ass niggas to bite you

He's compared himself to several successful Michaels over the course of his career, like Jackson and Jordan, who are other fellow record-breaking black men. He reflects on the controversial stances he's taken but recognizes that greatness comes with a few haters. In an interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye spoke directly about the controversy he raised with the name of the song:

...when someone comes up and says something like, 'I am a god,' everybody says 'Who does he think he is? I just told you who I thought I was! A God! I just told you! That's who I think I am! Would it have been better if a I had a song that said, 'I Am a Nigger'? Or if I had a song that said, 'I Am a Gangsta'? Or I had a song that said, 'I Am a Pimp'? All of those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me, right?"

Those who were offended by the metaphor seemed more bothered by his elevated sense of self than by what he was actually comparing himself to. He draws attention to the fact that if his song was titled something that wasn't so confident, people would not be outraged. Once again, Kanye alludes to the spatial control of black people where they are constantly written to fit antagonist characters.

### **New Slaves**

Channeling his earlier sounds, Kanye creates a metaphor that captures the dangers of the consumer culture that thrives in America. "New Slaves" is a song that tackles "the same issues he's been rapping about since *The College Dropout*, albeit with a fire-eyed stare" (Dombal). He opens the song with the following verse:

My mama was raised in the era when  
 Clean water was only served to the fairer skin

Doin' clothes, you woulda thought I had help  
 But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself  
 You see it's broke nigga racism  
 That's that "Don't touch anything in the store"  
 And it's rich nigga racism  
 That's that "Come in, please buy more"  
 "What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?  
 All you blacks want all the same things"  
 Used to only be niggas, now everybody playin'  
 Spendin' everything on Alexander Wang  
 New slaves

In one verse, Kanye West is able to pull from his personal experiences artfully compare how two generations of black Americans are still implicated by the ideals of slavery. America may not be directly supporting slavery, but Kanye notes indirect versions of slavery being perpetuated. For his mother, it was in the form of segregation and civil inequalities. The clean water that is served to those of fairer skin is metaphorical of the advantage white people have to those who are black. Though black people were no longer slaves, they were still alienated and forced to feel less than someone who was white in other ways. For Kanye, the “new slaves” he describes are those who buy into the consumer culture. Kanye’s terms “rich nigga racism” and “broke nigga racism” are representative of how the dynamic between the rich and poor stems from the dynamic of white and black people before segregation. Specifically, West referring to how consumerism/consumer culture is designed to only treat purchasers and shoppers with the courtesy of a worthy human being (Beder). “Broke nigga racism” is prejudice against someone who is poor. “Rich nigga racism” is prejudice in favor of someone who is wealthy. Kanye concludes the verse with the declaration that although it “used to only be niggas,” now anyone -- of any color -- can be a victim of this new slavery. Further down the verse, Kanye addresses his shift in approach:

They throwin' hate at me  
 Want me to stay at ease

Fuck you and your corporation  
Y'all niggas can't control me

By this point, we can assume that when Kanye says “they,” he either means white America or the media, both of which can sometimes be interchangeable depending on the song. With the continuous hate Kanye has gotten for his rants or other public displays of passion, it’s difficult for anyone to stay calm. His choice to speak up is one of the ways he fights back against the spatial control of black people. To further support his rebellion against “corporations,” Kanye name drops a few that have been linked to existing racial tensions in the U.S.:

See they'll confuse us with some bullshit  
Like the New World Order  
Meanwhile the DEA  
Teamed up with the CCA  
They tryna lock niggas up  
They tryna make new slaves  
See that's that privately owned prison  
Get your piece today  
They proolly all in the Hamptons  
Braggin' 'bout what they made

Kanye is bringing awareness to the fact that people are distracted by bullshit while the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Corrections Corporation of America are working together to lock black people up and profit off of them, like a new form of slavery. Similar to the thematic elements of “Crack Music,” this verse also alludes to the prison industrial complex that Michelle Alexander talks about in her book, *The New Jim Crow*. Roughly summarizing the findings of Alexander’s book, research showed that black people were no more likely to use drugs than a white people, yet the rates of drug arrests of people of color were rising at higher rates than that of white people. Additionally, black people only make up 12% of the American population, but make up 74% of the prison population. Ultimately, the book reveals that privately-owned prison is more about profit than it is about justice, as the name Corrections Corporation of America

suggests (“New Slaves” – Genius). This verse also brings to light the double standard of wealth. While Kanye is constantly criticized for his behavior, there are people out there that seem to get away with much more serious offenses, like profiting off of other’s lives.

The themes of *Yeezus* mirrored the themes of Kanye’s earlier works, but it was certainly angrier than he’s ever been. By the release of *Yeezus*, Kanye had been exposed to two worlds that seem to be constantly at war with each other: his black American world, and his white, celebrity world. Maher would argue that his prolonged exposure to the veil and double consciousness is what fueled the shift in radicalism that occurs in Kanye’s work. Now that he sees through all the systems in place to discredit him as a black man in power, Kanye is more determined than ever to stand tall against the dominant culture perpetuated by said systems.

## **VII. The Life of Pablo**

After the drop of an album that raised as much controversy as *Yeezus*, Kanye took another three year break before releasing his seventh solo-album. In that time, Kanye got married, started a family and had time to reflect long and hard on his career. Once again, he released an album to respond to current event surrounding his life. *The Life of Pablo* was released in June of 2016 and it was a complete 180-degree change from the sound of *Yeezus*. The anger and conviction that oozed out of *Yeezus* is replaced with elements of gospel and forgiveness. The first song of the album, “Ultralight Beam,” sets up parallels between the themes of *The Life of Pablo* and the story of the Apostle Paul, who was blinded for three days by Jesus who appeared in the form of a light beam, and then dedicated his life to serving the Lord (“Ultralight Beam” – Genius). Thus, the overarching theme of *Pablo* is closure. Kanye digs up old topics and current drama in an attempt to tie some ends that may have stayed loose in the fragmented narratives the media tells. He even alludes to the infamous Taylor Swift incident in

the song, “Famous.” In the first verse of the song, Kanye confesses: “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex// Why? I made that bitch famous (Goddamn).” This is the first time that Kanye directly addresses the incident in his music, no metaphors, no inferences... simply unabashedly claims to be responsible for Swift’s fame. At one of his concerts for Pablo in Manila, Philippines, Kanye called the incident “the beginning of the end of my life.” According to Kanye, the song helped him break through some serious writer’s block “because it’s something that I wanted to say so bad that they told me I couldn’t say” (“The Beginning of the End of My Life”). Kanye received a lot of negative media attention because of that fateful night in 2009, while Swift received a lot of sympathies. The first album she released after that night, *Speak Now*, outsold her 2008 album *Fearless* by 416,000 copies in the first week. It’s difficult to tell whether or not Swift sold her first million copies because of Kanye West, but her popularity did increase, and that moment was a significant moment in American television history (“Famous” – Genius). It’s not outrageous, then, to make the claim that Kanye West made Taylor Swift famous. At that same Manila concert, Kanye explains why he stands behind the events of the 2009 VMA’s:

‘I just said what everybody else was thinking. So if I get in trouble for saying the truth, what’s being said the rest of the time?’ he said. ‘And I had to fight every day for the rest of my life with the whole world turned against me for saying out loud what everyone else felt. But that’s the job of the artist, of a true artist -- not to be controlled by their finances, not to be controlled by perception, but only to be controlled by their truth’ (“The Beginning of the End of My Life”).

*The Life of Pablo* can be considered Kanye’s truth. He makes revelations about his family, his friends, and his foes throughout his songs, but there’s one song that really captures the essence of

the album. The last song of the album, “Saint Pablo,” listeners can hear the story from Kanye’s point of view.

### **Saint Pablo**

When *The Life of Pablo* was released, Kanye was in the middle of extensive Twitter rants that lead many people to believe he was mentally unstable and needed professional counseling (“Saint Pablo” – Genius). The song “Saint Pablo” was added after the album had been released, as a response to all the drama he had been stirring. It would be impossible to capture all the tweets and discuss them, but the subject ranged from “BILL COSBY INNOCENT !!!!!!!!!!!,” to “I’d rather teachers got paid more and books cost less ... #2020” which was a reference to his earlier claim of wanting to run for presidency in 2020, and “I love love love white people but you don’t understand what it means to be the great grandson of ex slaves and make it this far.” Kanye also addressed many people by name, like Bruno Mars, Bob Ezrin, and Beck, with whom he has had drama in the past (Baila). New media outlets like Twitter was supposed to give power back to the celebrity to control their image, but it seemed like the more Kanye tried to explain himself, the crazier people thought he was. That’s partly because it’s so easy to take his tweets out of context. For example, the Bill Cosby tweet is controversial, but Kanye explained himself in other tweets, but those don’t make it to the conversation. Taken out of context, the 160-character blurbs can be written to fit any narrative.

Just like Kanye has honestly explained himself in his songs before, “Saint Pablo” follows the same footsteps. To those who have been listening to Kanye from the start, the song has strong hints of closure. In the same self-aware manner that he has been using since *Dropout*, he opens up to listeners: “People tryna say I’m goin’ crazy on Twitter// My friends’ best advice was



to stay low.” After this, he proceeds to give listeners some context into the drama he’s addressing:

The media said it was outlandish spendin'  
 The media said he's way out of control  
 I just feel like I'm the only one not pretendin'  
 I'm not out of control, I'm just not in they control  
 I know I'm the most influential  
 That TIME cover was just confirmation  
 This generation's closest thing to Einstein  
 So don't worry about me, I'm fine  
 I can see a thousand years from now in real life  
 Skate on the paradigm and shift it when I feel like  
 Troll conventional thought, don't need to question  
 I know it's antiquated so sometimes I get aggressive

In the first two lines, he paraphrases some headlines that have been printed covering his latest and expensive venture into the fashion industry. Articles like “Ego Out Of Control! Kanye Paid \$2M Out Of Pocket For Disastrous Fashion Show” (Heger), and “Kris Jenner Is Reportedly Worried About The KUWTK Brand As Kanye West Spirals Out Of Control” (Hilton) were published as part of the collective effort of the media to write Kanye off as crazy. Once again, Kanye sees through the manipulation tactics, and recognizes that he’s simply not under their control, and that’s dangerous because of his extensive fanbase. In fact, Kanye was just named one of Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People of 2015. Big technology CEO of Tesla Motors, Elon Musk wrote the article in which he accredited Kanye for earning the spot on the most influential list:

In his debut album, over a decade ago, Kanye issued what amounted to a social critique and a call to arms (with a beat): “We rappers is role models: we rap, we don’t think.” But Kanye does think. Constantly. About everything. And he wants everybody else to do the same: to engage, question, push boundaries. Now that he’s a pop-culture juggernaut, he has the platform to achieve just that.

In the song, Kanye takes it one step further and compares himself to Einstein, who is known as a genius and was also featured on Time's Most Influential People. He has an understanding that he is here to shift paradigms and troll conventional thought. The fact that he seems so untouchable by the media only makes them try to dehumanize him further, as the attention-grabbing headlines suggest. As he's consistently done in his albums, he gives listeners context. When the proper connections are made, Kanye's behavior is a little less erratic. He reminds us he's been trying a different approach to conventional things since *Dropout*.

Hinting at his attempt to reach some sort of closure, Kanye raps: "God, I have humbled myself before the court// Drop my ego and confidence was my last resort." In his response to South Park's episode attacking his ego, Kanye admitted that he used his ego to build himself up when people didn't believe in him (Montgomery). Since the media is always trying to portray him in a negative light, it made sense for Kanye to adopt this untouchable ego to prevent himself from being affected by all the negativity. The intimate yet honest revelations in *The Life of Pablo* were intended to represent Kanye dropping his ego, or his defenses, leaving him vulnerable to the audience. The humanity that Kanye revealed in the album was the opposite of the holiness took on in *Yeezus*. Most importantly, *The Life of Pablo* fits in perfectly with the story that Kanye has been telling through his music since 2004. It was the context people needed during a time where the media was working hard to make him appear crazy.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the media's attempts to antagonize Kanye West, he's really not a bad guy. He shares a good and honest portion of his life story through his music, making his lyrics a good source of intellectual debate. Scholar Laura Daws conducted a narrative critique of his first album, which is "a means of rhetorical criticism though the analysis of stories told as part of the

everyday communication process” (92). Her studies revealed that West was using hip-hop as a channel for storytelling. Kanye was incorporating his own experiences into his work to create an intimate relationship with his audience. George Ciccariello-Maher suggested that like DuBois, West started out with a benign double-consciousness, which developed between his oppressed black identity and his educated, white-washed identity. The more he became exposed to the twoness into which his identity was forced to split, the more the double-consciousness evolved to a more bitter one. Chris Richardson argues West illuminates “many of the underlying social problems” linked to symbolic violence in hip-hop (99). What those authors noted in common was the relevance of Kanye’s work to larger, more critical theories that help give his music substance. Every album he’s released since his 2004 debut is a mixture of commercially successful radio hits and songs that reveal a deep recognition of personal and social responsibility, as well as his never-ending battle against the media. Kanye makes music people can bump to and enjoy but he also makes music that makes inspires contemplation and discourse.

Over the course of Kanye’s career, there is a progressive change in radicalism that can be traced and measured by the overarching themes of the albums. In his first three albums, Kanye is at odds with the higher education system and the universality it demands from people, so he does it his own way, and ends up succeeding. The trilogy was significantly more critical than music normally is, but it was only the beginning of Kanye’s exposure to the DuBoisian notions of the veil and double-consciousness. Maher would suggest that those three albums help him realize the “idealistic error” he committed in assuming he could simply rise above it, or sort of work with it. If so, the themes of *808’s and Heartbreak* are in line with what Maher would call “disillusionment,” where he’s coming to terms with having been wrong for so long, and preparing to adopt a more radical position (392). *Fantasy* was released two years after his period

of disillusionment, and it embodied a more fierce side of Kanye's character. When South Park attacked Kanye, he humbly responded, admitting he's aware of how big his ego had gotten over the years, and that he's working on it. His response hinted to the disillusionment he suffered, but in *Fantasy*, his responses grew more aggressive. In *Yeezus*, he was fully aggressive. By that point, Kanye was fully aware that the media decontextualizes him by focusing on how he behaves instead of why he does so, creating a manipulated narrative of him. It seems that the venting that *Yeezus* captured helped Kanye get the anger off his chest he needed to start healing. His latest product, *The Life of Pablo*, reflect Kanye's attempt at healing and reconciliation. Kanye has always directly addressed issues in his music that were relevant at the time of release, but the media seems to overlook the content of his music when they are evaluating his behavior. That's the biggest problem in the media's representation of him – it is fragmented and framed to fit recurring narratives that continue perpetuate negative stereotypes about black people. There's more to Kanye than the angry black man the media constantly writes about, and he has given his listeners all the content they need to make deep, meaningful connections. Not only has Kanye addressed polemic issues about the state of our culture in his music, but he has also been aware of how he has contributed to some issues. Ultimately, Kanye exposes his listeners to many underlying social problems. By addressing issues in his albums as they become relevant to him, Kanye makes connections between his work and larger, more critical topics. His ability to think critically about himself should inspire listeners to do the same. About Kanye, *Time* magazine wrote that his ability to critique conformity to such a large audience makes a dangerous role model, and "dangerous role models are the only ones, musically speaking, worth a damn" (Tyrangiel). The type of social influence Kanye has is powerful, which helps to explain why the media seeks to control the narrative.



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