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## From Yeezus to Pablo: An Existential Theology between God, Blackness, and Being

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### **Abstract**

Kanye West has transformed and transfigured from a young rapper representing the Southside of Chicago, to an icon, a rap genius, a god. His persona has continually evolved from his arrival on the Hip Hop scene, leading to his emergence as, "Yeezus." This essay argues for an investigation of Kanye's theological claims through the lens of his own body, particularly the balance between how he conveys what it is like to be a black man in an American culture plagued by racism and the potential of the black body to assert its incarnate godlikeness in his music. In addition, this essay explores West's newest record, *The Life of Pablo*, and its implications for Yeezus. The results of the study highlight Kanye's evolution—somewhere between "Yeezus," "black god," "new slave," and now, "Pablo" (Paul). I argue that Yeezus represents a deification and *The Life of Pablo* is a de-deification, as communicated in the words of Kanye himself.

## Introduction

*"I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High."*

– *Psalm 82:6, KJV*

Simply speaking the name Kanye West elicits conflicting responses. Whether one is a critic or a fan, one cannot deny that his music and persona continue to draw attention from millions of people around the world. This essay seeks to lift up the factors— beyond the artist, the Tweets, the fashion shows, the revelry — that shape the complexity of Kanye West's understanding and depiction of his identity as an artist, as well as his cultural influence within his social milieu. To that end, I utilize a method that Daniel White Hodge calls "ethnolifehistory," a method that "pushes beyond lyrical analysis and researcher-implied meanings, and asks for a much deeper and broader scope of the artist or artists behind the music, and what factors shape them and their cultural products— indeed, the 'mapping' of a 'new terrain.'"<sup>1</sup> Further, ethnolifehistory focuses on "major life events, the artists' cultural phenomena and the role and changing impact of religiosity throughout the artist's life and work."<sup>2</sup> I also rely on ideas from James Cone's ideas of black liberation theology, the realities of racism and oppression, and the notions of embodiment and incarnation, to explore Kanye's conflicting claims to be Yeezus, while simultaneously identifying as a "god," "new slave," and now, "Pablo." This approach opens out space to show the connection between the "why" and "how" of Kanye's cultural output and life philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, Kanye's "self-affirmation" is analogous to Cone's unapologetic assertion: "Black Power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. It means that the black man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of him, but will affirm from the depth of his soul."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the liminal, existential tone of *The Life of Pablo* echoes theologian Paul Tillich's idea of a self-estrangement: "Man is estranged from what he essentially is."<sup>5</sup> Paradox is inherent in both of these claims. Kanye's music sonically amplifies this existential tension, highlighting the implications of divinity and humanity, rising and falling, together. We begin by looking at the self-onto-theological assertion that Kanye is "a god." What are the listeners to make of Kanye's religious claims?

Approaching the songs, interviews, and major life events in this manner allows West's music to be the conduit for narrative and theological ideas that are true to his experiences and reality. In addition to the lyrics of his songs and notes from

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel White Hodge, "Methods for the Prophetic: Tupac Shakur, Lauryn Hill, and the Case of Ethnolifehistory," *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping New Terrain in the US*, ed. Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 127.

interviews, I have included theological ideas from James Cone, Paul Tillich, Kelly Brown Douglas along with the scholarly work of Monica Miller, Anthony Pinn, Daniel White Hodge, and other Hip Hop scholars that provide a multifarious, interdisciplinary approach to this essay. I am indebted to their scholarship. Essentially, my aim is to look at Kanye's life, his musical output, and to take his claims seriously.

### **Yeezus: A Politico-Socio-Theological Construct**

*"Is hip hop a euphemism for a new religion?"* – Kanye West, "Gorgeous."

In *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, Monica Miller gives careful attention to the emergence of ideas that are moving away from the strictly religious towards a personal construct of meaning. She advocates for a "redescription of the religious study of Hip Hop from assumptions of religious *presence* to religion as social formation and process."<sup>6</sup> She continues, "Instead of asking what 'is' religious about Hip Hop culture – I ask, what do *uses* of religion accomplish for competing social and cultural interests?"<sup>7</sup> In the world of religious studies, it is imperative, as Miller makes clear, to see religion as a social construct, like race or gender: "there's nothing *essentially* 'real' about race or gender beyond an inculcated performativity of cultural, social, and political norms and values."<sup>8</sup> Since religion is dependent upon social and cultural norms, personal experience is fundamental to constructing new theological claims that inform the social. Accordingly, we can ask, what does it mean for Kanye to assert and acclaim his own god-ness? How does he use religion to do so? Further, we can ask how the theological claims he makes deconstruct and reorient listeners towards a subterranean social reality? What is Kanye constructing?

This section looks at how the emergence of Kanye's album, *Yeezus* (2013), forever changed the Hip Hop landscape. My arguments are organized into three sequential songs from *Yeezus*: "Black Skinheads," "I Am A God" and "New Slaves." First, I unpack "Black Skinheads" in light of the Five Percent Nation, and explore the ways it unsettles racial stereotypes and norms, ending by signifying self-proclaimed divinity – a supreme status, "God!" Then, I explore "I Am A God," focusing on the issue of embodiment in relation to blackness. Finally, I look at "New Slaves" vis-à-vis the ideas of racism and classism.

### **Black Skinhead (BLKKK SKKKNHEAD)**

Listening to the tracks from *Yeezus* sequentially and in the context of the entire record, there is no surprise to hear the song, "Black Skinhead" preceding "I Am a God" and "New Slaves." It is a purposeful progression and juxtaposition of the

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<sup>6</sup> Monica R. Miller, "Don't Judge a Book By Its Cover," *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 67.

human and divine realities that Yeezus must manage - no doubt in tension. What does it mean for Yeezus to be a black skinhead, a god, and a slave? This Trinitarian formula seems to be contradictory, yet Kanye asserts them concurrently. The alternative spelling for the song, "BLKKK SKKKNHEAD," is indicative of West's tone and intent: He puts the letters "KKK" in both words, and puts the title in all capital letters. Perhaps the listener should think of the title yelled at them. We will see why that is appropriate.

From the first verse of the song, Kanye is letting listeners know he is indignant and has no qualms about saying why:

*For my theme song (black!)  
My leather black jeans on (black!)  
My by any means on  
Pardon, I'm getting my scream on  
Enter the kingdom  
But watch who you bring home  
They see a black man with a white woman  
At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong  
Middle America packed in  
Came to see me in my black skin  
Number one question they asking  
Fuck every question you asking  
If I don't get ran out by Catholics  
Here come some conservative Baptists  
Claiming I'm overreacting  
Like them black kids in Chiraq bitch<sup>9</sup>*

The interjections, "black!" alone, inform the listener of the purpose of the song. Thus, it is fitting that West references Malcolm X in the third line: "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence *by any means necessary*" (emphasis mine).<sup>10</sup> In short, perhaps West is venting his rage with perceptions of his black body as a threat—displayed by his comments about King Kong and Middle America. The words "kill King Kong" also form the alliteration, KKK. This is no coincidence; Kanye is playing with race, particularly racism that culminates in the devaluation of black bodies: "Claiming I'm overreacting/Like them black kids in Chiraq bitch." That Kanye focuses on the body foreshadows what is to come: Yeezus is Kanye's focus on his blackness, and that blackness is divine. In addition, his body is the locus of this divine incarnation. Yeezus suggests black supremacy.

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<sup>9</sup> Kanye West, "Black Skinhead," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992).

In the chapter “Black Churches, Hip Hop, and the Body” of *Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats*, the authors focus on the issue of embodiment. For their purposes, they reference Anthony Pinn’s definition that there are two definitions of the body: “(1) as a biochemical reality—a physical, material substance that navigates the world and engages with other bodies; and (2) as a social or discursive body—the body as it is ‘created’ and defined using language.”<sup>11</sup> Though there are two definitions, it is clear that the former shapes the latter. However, the social system includes the political, which “helps in this process of valuing and devaluing bodies by determining patterns for the presentation and function of our bodies.”<sup>12</sup> It is this system, with all of its expectations and regulations, which Yeezus is contesting in “Black Skinhead.” By focusing on the body, West is performing a double move: commenting on the treatment of black bodies and contesting that treatment with his own black body. This provocative move further intensifies in the end of the song when Kanye begins to assert, “God!”

Yeezy does not soften his tone in Verse 2:

*Stop all that coon shit (black!)*  
*Early morning cartoon shit (black!)*  
*This is that goon shit*  
*Fuck up your whole afternoon shit*  
*I'm aware I'm a wolf*  
*Soon as the moon hit*  
*I'm aware I'm a king*  
*Back out the tomb bitch*  
*Black out the room, bitch*  
*Stop all that coon shit*  
*These niggas ain't doin' shit*  
*Them niggas ain't doin' shit*  
*Come on homie what happened*  
*You niggas ain't breathing you gasping*  
*These niggas ain't ready for action*  
*Ready-ready for action*<sup>13</sup>

What might it mean to “stop all that coon shit?” Historically, the word “coon” represents a de-humanizing caricature (from the word raccoon) played by black male and female actors.<sup>14</sup> As the Museum of Jim Crow Memorabilia explains, the coon has a

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 5 quoted in Anthony Pinn, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats: Churches and Hip-Hop: A Basic Guide to Key Issues* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Kanye West, “Black Skinhead,” (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> The Coon Caricature - Anti-black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University. Accessed June 01, 2017, <http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/News/jimcrow/coon/>.

racist history:

The coon caricature is one of the most insulting of all anti-black caricatures. The name itself, an abbreviation of raccoon, is dehumanizing. As with Sambo, the coon's portrayal was a lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate, buffoon... Racial caricatures undergird stereotypes, and the stereotyping of blacks as coons continued throughout the 20th Century.<sup>15</sup>

As a response, West informs the listener that this song is a response to the ways blacks are not valued. Often, black male and female actors play the role of the "coon." Could Kanye also be calling out these actors for going along with the script of racism? Since he is both a "wolf" and a "king," (i.e., not a coon) West uses this song as a call to action. Thought of in light of his alternative spelling in the title, "BLKKK SKKKNHEAD," the action becomes quite clear. Unlike others that, "ain't doin' shit," Kanye is poised for action. In "Black Skinhead," Kanye takes on all those who are critical of his blackness, boldly exclaiming in the end, "If I knew what I knew in the past, I would have been blacked out on your ass."<sup>16</sup> On the outro of the song, he repeatedly exclaims "God!" as a transition to the next song, "I Am A God."<sup>17</sup> Because the social both constructs theology and constitutes understandings of the body, Yeezus is deconstructing and reconstructing harmful norms of the black body. That God's personification in the black man— how that body displays and reckons with— identifies Yeezus as the locus wherein the political, social, and theological coalesce. Yeezus signifies both the embodiment of blackness and the incarnation of a god.

### I Am A (Black) God

At the onset of the song, "I Am A God," Kanye's initial assertion that, "I am a god. So hurry up with my damn massage,"<sup>18</sup> resonates. Such a claim is undoubtedly meant to provoke shock and awe; but on another level, it is an important onto-theological statement: For Kanye, is not mere braggadocio; rather, "I am a god" is a proclamation, an exhortation (to use a theological word) of his being. Despite the realities of racism and the devaluation of his body, West is elevating himself. In addition, with this self-affirmation comes the existential, that is, as theologian Paul Tillich defines, the "attitude of participating with one's own existence in some other existence."<sup>19</sup> Yeezus is a form of self-participation with divine and human consequence. It is participation *with* and participation *in* the divine that undergirds the claim "I am a god"; and it is but a piece of the complex politico-socio-theological puzzle that constitutes Yeezus.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kanye West, "Black Skinhead," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kanye West, "I Am A God", (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Tillich, 125.

In an interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye talks about recording the track “I Am a God.” His demeanor escalates as he describes the words of those that spew hate upon his claim that he is a god: “Who does he [Kanye] think he is”? He responds, “I just told you who I thought I was, a god!” He then asks Zane if it would be better or more appropriate if he had a song that says, “I am a nigga... or I am a gangsta... or I am a pimp... all those colors and patinas fit better?”<sup>20</sup> West pointing out what the “haters” are actually asking concludes the segment: “How could you say you’re a god when you were shipped over to America and your last name is a slave owner’s”? His claim to divinity questions the tarnished history of slavery and the reality he must live with as a black man in the United States. (It is worth noting, however, that Kanye’s everyday reality is far from poverty and the anxiety of survival. Rather, West is speaks of receiving massages and eating croissants.) This attempt to diminish or erase his existence is precisely why he emphatically asserts, “I am a god.” It is a song about superiority, self-worth, and is a response to those who dismiss him because of the color of his skin. *Yeezus* is intentional, fully aware of what he is suggesting; West is reversing stereotypes and challenging norms he deems harmful. As a god, Kanye alone gets to decide.

The unabashed self-affirmation, “I Am a God,” echoes the Hebrew YHWH’s claim that, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14),<sup>21</sup> perhaps offering another layer of meaning. Coming after “Black Skinheads,” the listener realizes not only the political and social consequences of Yeezus, but now also the implications of Yeezus as a black god; for Yeezus, there is no separation between his blackness and his god-ness, they are one and the same. The thought of a black god – though controversial in a society that engages in continuous whitewashing – is not anomalous. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, scholar and theologian, James H. Cone, writes, “The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of black theology doctrine of God”.<sup>22</sup> It is this foundation that West uses to invert “God is black” into “a black god”; and it gives his claim a controversial edge. Yeezus, therefore, is not merely a god in speech only; rather, he is a black god to be revered, to be heard, and be reckoned with. In this way, Kanye is deconstructing social norms and stereotypes in a way that controverts them. In a society where white supremacy rules, how else to better unsettle power dynamics than to assert himself as a black god? To make his case, he uses theology.

As I mention above, West’s claim to be a black god is not unprecedented. Neither is his assertion of his blackness new. In fact, his claims are analogous to the Five Percent Nation. Started by Clarence 13X, who left the Nation of Islam after a

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<sup>20</sup>BBCviral. "Kanye West Zane Lowe (full interview)." YouTube. 2013. Accessed September 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mVmHdYZUI>.

<sup>21</sup> Exodus 3:14, NRSV.

<sup>22</sup> Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 69.

disagreement about W. D. Farad Muhammad's "purity" as a black man, the FPN claimed that "the black man was God personified, and that each black man could cultivate and eventually realize his godliness through meditation, study, and spiritual and physical fitness."<sup>23</sup> One of the nine tenets of the FPN was: "That the black man is God and his proper name is ALLAH – Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head."<sup>24</sup>

Though Kanye claims to be "a god," he still admits the existence of a God. In fact, he interchanges the two terms. We may think of a oneness and manyness of g/Gods. Which g/God should we stop playing with? Consider the lyrics:

*I am a god  
Even though I'm a man of God  
My whole life in the hands of God  
So y'all better quit playing with God.*<sup>25</sup>

This is further fleshed out in Verse 2:

*I just talked to Jesus  
He said, "What up Yeezus?"  
I said, "Shit I'm chilling  
Trying to stack these millions"  
I know he the most high  
But I am a close high  
Mi casa es su casa  
That's our costra nostra  
I am a god.*<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps we should see Yeezus and Jesus as brothers. In this part, Kanye acknowledges Jesus's superiority, while still maintaining his god-status. For those familiar with the New Testament scriptures, this brings to mind the famous passage in Philippians about Jesus's humility and the dynamics of his own god-status:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

There is implied incarnation in both the New Testament reference and the words of Yeezus. How might we take seriously West's proud claim of divinity in light of Jesus's own humble claims? Though Yeezus is a god, a "close high," he is not the "most high."

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Johnson, "God, the Black Man and the Five Percenters," NPR, August 04, 2006, accessed June 01, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5614846>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kanye West, "I Am A God", (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Like Jesus, there is an element of anthropomorphized divinity in West's claims of being a god. Unlike myths or ancient stories of gods that are distant or invisible, Yeezus is here, in the now, acting inside of history. Consequently, his message is loud, and he is a god among the social order. Insofar as Yeezus is a god, individuals must hear and reckon with his voice. Unapologetically, unreservedly, and creatively, Yeezus, god in participatory incarnation, makes clear he will not be silent; he will not be stopped; he will not be controlled. The complexity of the socio-theological construction of Yeezus further complicates by his concurrent claims in "New Slaves." However, as the Philippians passage makes clear, even Jesus took the "form of a slave," albeit in a different manner.

### New Slaves

Following the song, "I Am a God," is the song, "New Slaves." Moreover, the pendulum swings. As Kanye's music seems to stretch and transcend comfortable paradigms of divinity and humanity, "New Slaves" introduces a complicating tension: Yeezus, black god, is also a kind of "new slave." The question presents itself: How can Kanye identify as both a black god and a new slave? What is essentially *new* about slavery? How is it that one that has god-status can also be subject to a status of bondage? This ironic intersection meets Kanye's relentlessly unruly voice, "You see there's leaders and there's followers, but I'd rather be a dick than a swallower."<sup>27</sup> In other words, he would rather be the person speaking the truth – no matter how seemingly vulgar or offensive – than have to "swallow" it. Defiance, thus, in addition to bondage, emerges as a central theme in "New Slaves." West seizes control of his own body as if to say, "You cannot say this for me – I have complete power and control over my own body." It is both passive and active power. He continues by confessing he is a new slave and he sees the evidence of this phenomenon, or the "blood on the leaves" (a visceral reference to lynching in the song "Strange Fruit" written by Nina Simone and made popular by Billie Holliday). Though he admits his status as a new slave with the same ferocity that he claims to be a god, he uses the microphone as a way to, literally and metaphorically, give voice to or amplify his insubordination. As the song continues, the message becomes clear: just as Yeezus is a different kind of god, that is, a god rendered vulnerable by his blackness, he is consequently a different kind of slave.

The song begins: "My mama was raised in the era when clean water was only served to the fairer skin."<sup>28</sup> A statement in his own modern context subsequently follows the experiences to which his mother was subject: "Doin' clothes, you would have thought I had help, but they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself,"<sup>29</sup> speaking to his struggles in the fashion industry with racism. He continues a back-

<sup>27</sup> Kanye West, "New Slaves," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

and-forth, then-and-now comparison by saying that there is, in relation to black people, poor racism, which tells the shopper, “don’t touch anything in the store;” and then there is rich racism, which tells the shopper: “come in, please buy more”.<sup>30</sup> In both cases, Kanye is saying that racism exists no matter what the economic status of the individual may be. Kanye touches on the relationship between race and class – no matter the class, however wealthy or poor, racism still exists within these different levels of socioeconomic divisions. In short, racism trumps class. However, some might wonder whether race does in fact, trump class. I wonder how marrying into a white family has affected Kanye’s own understanding of class? Is Kanye conflicted by the stark contrast between the way he grew up and the lavish lifestyle he now enjoys?

Here is the emergence of an important dynamic: Because Yeezus is a black god, he acknowledges the real human challenges and limitations that he faces because of his blackness. The slave-language and imagery provides a powerful, poignant illustration, but Kanye’s type of slave is *new* in the sense that it is much more personal for him than racial issues of skin color. In the same interview with DJ Zane Lowe, Kanye makes the claim that everyone is a slave, saying, “I am a slave to my passions.”<sup>31</sup> He is thus bound by the chains of his own desires, mainly, fashion, art, creativity, materialism. This revelation brings with it an interesting dichotomy, one that almost implies Kanye’s existence, as a new slave, may, in some sense, be self-subscribed – a twist in contrast to his godness. Thus, there exists, here, an anxiety, and, to use Tillich’s phrase, perhaps an “anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness.”

What if one thinks of “New Slaves” in light of white supremacy? In the Trump era to “Make America Great Again,” American exceptionalism has resurged to the fore – that the answer to present problems is in the past ideals of the nation. However, as Kelly Brown Douglas argues in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, American exceptionalism is a metaphor for Anglo-Saxon Chauvinism (i.e., white supremacy).<sup>32</sup> Therefore, to pursue a return to historical values in the US is to invoke a society where black people are treated as chattel – American exceptionalism is a euphemism for racism. Whereas other immigrants have been able to assimilate into whiteness – a metaphor for hegemonic power – black people have not been able to escape the grips of different forms of (new) slavery because of the color of their skin. *Yeezus*, thought of in this light, is ironic. Thus, I ask, is income inequality not a form of new slavery? Is mass incarceration – where black bodies compose the mass of the imprisoned and work for pennies – not a form of new slavery? This is the reality behind Kanye’s lyrics,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> BBCviral. "Kanye West Zane Lowe (full interview)." YouTube. 2013. Accessed September 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mVmHdYZUI>.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly Brown Douglass, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 11.

*Meanwhile the DEA  
teamed up with the CCA  
They tryna lock niggas up  
They tryna make new slaves  
See that's that privately owned prisons  
Get your piece today.*<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, Kanye's words about new slaves have contemporary implications. Whereas "Black Skinhead" and "I Am A God" convey an aggressive and relentless West, "New Slaves" gives the listener a sobering paradox to deal with: Yeezus may be a black skinhead and a black god, but he cannot escape this form of new slavery. Yet, to some extent, Kanye has managed to stand outside the system – given his cultural power, wealth, and intelligence – to see the rise of a new kind of slavery that exploits black people. The ties between cotton-pickers and rap artists – the continued exploitation of black labor – is palpable in his lyric. The question remains: Is he claiming the identity of new slave for himself or flagging it as an injustice that may not fully impinge on him?

### Mixed Signals?

Yeezus, the black god of rap, may confine to a new form of slavery through his own passions; however, the terms of his slave-status arguably dictate by his own terms as a god (a self-hierarchy or division?). This control is manifest in the delivery of his message. When Kanye West decided to release his song, "New Slaves," he did so via holographic projection on the walls of buildings in 66 cities around the world. Yeezus is therefore creatively stating his existence as a god through omnipresence and theophany, revealing his message through his music (as a way of transcending the limitations of being human). *Rolling Stone* captured the moment:

Kanye West gave the world its first official taste of his new album on Friday night by projecting the new song "New Slaves" along with visuals on buildings across the globe. The video was projected at various times throughout the night on 66 buildings in cities including New York, Toronto, Chicago, London, Paris and Berlin. In West's hometown of Chicago, it was projected on a wall of Wrigley Field; in Toronto, on the Royal Ontario Museum; and in New York, Kanye's face appeared on the wall of a 5th Avenue Prada store, among other locations.<sup>34</sup>

Few would be surprised that the message and basis of *Yeezus* meets with strong opposition from various groups of people. After a *Rolling Stone* picture where Kanye poses wearing a crown of thorns in an obvious likeness to Jesus, critics emerged from all corners of society to raise their voices to condemn – or at least interrogate – his motives, life decisions, rhetoric, and so on. The controversy spilled

<sup>33</sup> Kanye West, "New Slaves." (Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Miriam Coleman, "Kanye West Premieres 'New Slaves' With Video Projections around the World," *Rolling Stone*, accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kanye-west-premieres-new-slaves-with-video-projections-around-the-world-171436/>.

over into his personal life, affecting his business decisions and musical output. Notice it was not his claims to be a new type of slave that irked these critics; rather, his identification with the divine caused the outrage. Said differently, a white supremacist society has no problems with equating blacks to slaves, but to exalt black people to a divine status is blasphemous. It is difficult to think of black equality, let alone, black superiority. All the critics, the pushback, the controversy, and the noise constitute the backdrop for Kanye's newest record, *The Life of Pablo*.

### **The Life of Pablo (Which One?):**

#### **Somewhere Between Escobar, Picasso, and the Apostle**

*"I miss the old Kanye, straight from the 'Go Kanye  
Chop up the soul Kanye, set on his goals Kanye  
I hate the new Kanye, the bad mood Kanye  
The always rude Kanye, spaz in the news Kanye  
I miss the sweet Kanye, chop up the beats Kanye  
I gotta to say, at that time I'd like to meet Kanye  
See I invented Kanye, it wasn't any Kanyes  
And now I look and look around and there's so many Kanyes  
I used to love Kanye, I used to love Kanye  
I even had the pink polo, I thought I was Kanye  
What if Kanye made a song, about Kanye?  
Called "I Miss The Old Kanye," man that'd be so Kanye  
That's all it was Kanye, we still love Kanye  
And I love you like Kanye loves Kanye."* –

Kanye West, "I Love Kanye"

*Yeezus* was released in 2013. In September 2014, Kanye West married Kim Kardashian. Did West, in some ways, assimilate into whiteness? Perhaps it is the only evidence one could find that might explain the digression in tone and message from *Yeezus* to *The Life of Pablo*. The release of West's newest album, *The Life of Pablo*, occurs amid several delays, problems with dates, and various puzzling public events (like a Jay-Z-sponsored Tidal-exclusive release). Not to mention, after Kanye's attestation that the record is a gospel record, directly following the first spiritual-type track, "Ultralight Beam," West begins with talk of strippers and, perhaps most astonishingly, claims that he: 1) might still have sex with Taylor Swift and 2) he "made that bitch famous." These puzzlements have only enhanced speculation and suspicions surrounding his personal and professional life. Some critics have suggested that, as Hip Hop artist shifting to a reality show celebrity and fashion designer, Kanye took on more than he bargained for and perhaps lost some of his clarity, fragmenting his identity in the process. Amid failures and harsh feedback of his fashion line, Twitter rants revealed a different, more vulnerable and frustrated side of West. Just as the *Life of Pablo* was to release, Kanye discloses a personal financial crisis via Twitter:

he is \$53 million in debt. Not all of these anxieties, failures, betrayals, and feelings are wasted, however; they invest and instill in his newest project. This section looks at Kanye's existential tone found in a few of the songs from *The Life of Pablo*, focusing on how the new album complicates—and walks back — some of the bold, politico-socio-theological claims of *Yeezus*. “Ultralight Beam,” “FML,” “Real Friends,” and “Saint Pablo.” I bring Paul Tillich into this analysis, particularly his thoughts about “the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness,” which connect my arguments to a philosophical tradition. I begin by looking at “Ultralight Beam,” as it presents the tension of the record, followed by the bleak picture painted in “FML” and “Real Friends,” and finally “Saint Pablo,” as it opens the door for a future to be Yeezus again.

### Ultralight Beam

With the first track of *The Life of Pablo*, it appears that West delivers on his promises to make a gospel record. The song begins with child fervently praying with a woman echoing in agreement. At first, it feels very spiritual indeed. Next, West's voice emerges with a statement: “I'm tryna keep my faith.”<sup>35</sup> That Kanye is trying to keep the faith speaks to the theological realities of *Yeezus* and his personal anxieties that have followed. He continues his prayer:

*Deliver us serenity*  
*Deliver us peace*  
*Deliver us loving*  
*We know we need it.*<sup>36</sup>

The reverently uplifting nature of the song reverberates in the hook:

*I'm tryna keep my faith*  
*But I'm looking for more*  
*Somewhere I can feel safe*  
*And end my holy war*  
*I'm tryna keep my faith.*<sup>37</sup>

This war is a war fought within. In a sense, West is not at war *with* his faith, but rather, *for* it. The massive sound of the gospel choir reifies the tone of the song — this prayerful intro. The song ends with a prayer from gospel artist, Kirk Franklin. The prayer is not only important to the song, but it serves as foundational for the entire record:

*Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough.*  
*This prayer's for everybody that feels like they're too messed up.*

<sup>35</sup> Kanye West, “Ultralight Beam” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

*For everyone that feels they've said "I'm sorry" too many times.  
You can never go too far when you can't come back home again.  
That's why I need...  
Faith, more, safe, war.*<sup>38</sup>

The beginning of *The Life of Pablo* feels like a church altar, the liminal place where one does business with God. Rather than a return to god-status, however, this song marks the beginning of a further unraveling. It suggests that, if – or before – Kanye can ascend again to divine status, he must reach rock bottom. Therefore, it is not coincidental that liberation theology occurs from the bottom-up.

### FML

FML, which most commonly is an acronym for “Fuck My Life” – though it could stand for “For My Lady” or any other combination of words and phrases – reveals a sight and sound of Kanye, not evident in *Yeezus*. Clearly, the song somberly speaks to Kanye’s regret and struggle: “I been thinking about my vision. Pour out my feelings. Revealing the layers to my soul, my soul.”<sup>39</sup> Call it honesty or existential angst or soul-searching, Kanye displays a vulnerability here that is unprecedented in his work – certainly following the bold claims of *Yeezus*. The hook, or chorus of the song, is the Weeknd’s chilling voice, singing: “They wish I would go ahead and fuck my life up. Can’t let them get to me. And even though I always fuck my life up. Only I can mention me.”<sup>40</sup> Along with the confession to fucking his life up, Kanye reserves the sole right of mentioning – or confessing – it.

Perhaps displaying what Tillich calls “the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness,” “FML” reflects indicatively, Kanye’s personal anxiety exacerbates by nonbeing – or not-being-Yeezus. Tillich writes, “Nonbeing threatens man as a whole, and therefore threatens his spiritual as well as his ontic self-affirmation.”<sup>41</sup> Kanye’s interwoven identities are distinguishable but inseparable; his spiritual and ontic self-affirmations are one, and the same. To balance a multiplicity of meanings, Kanye has the task of affirming himself in meaning that locates, ironically, in himself. Once the circle is broken, the fallout is detrimental to his identity in every aspect. There is death and loss in this place, as well as grief and anxiety. Tillich continues: “The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of existence.”<sup>42</sup> Moving from Yeezus, black god, to an indeterminate Pablo is proof of loss of a spiritual center; he has lost both a faith in and faith *with-in* himself.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kanye West, “FML” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tillich, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 47.

## Real Friends

“Real Friends” offers more insight into Kanye’s most intimate relationships, particularly within his family. He begins the song by asking, “Real friends – how many of us?” followed by asking “how many jealous?” and “how many honest?”<sup>43</sup> His spiraling out of control includes a disconnection between family and even church spaces: “I’m a deadbeat cousin – I hate family reunions. Fuck the church up by drinkin’ at the communion. Spilling free wine, now my tux is ruined.”<sup>44</sup> This statement, while cleverly worded, implies that he is at odds with two things that he has spoken extensively about in his music, family and religion. His busyness, along with his disinterest in family reunions, makes him a “deadbeat” cousin. In the same way, his concern only for his tux and wasting free wine underscores self-absorption. The spiritual center within himself and within the church seems to be lost for West, in an abyss of anxiety and self-doubt.

His family ties experience further strain when he speaks to rumors in 2015, confirming he had a cousin steal a laptop that had a sex tape of West with other women. Kanye got the laptop back after paying the cousin a fee of \$250,000. The song continues to paint a portrait of isolation and betrayal: “Real friends. I guess I get what I deserve don’t I? I guess I get what I deserve don’t I? Talk down on my name, throw dirt on him.”<sup>45</sup> Importantly, what does it say of West that he is estranged from his own family, while being primarily associated with the white Kardashians? How might one see this in light of Yeezy, the black god? In what ways are his former unabashed blackness and family ties squelched by his new family dynamic? The middle-to-end of *The Life of Pablo* is somber and dark, making one wonder: will Kanye ever be Yeezus again?

## Existential Theology and the Apostle Paul

In what ways can one view Kanye’s journey from Yeezus to Pablo as an existential crisis? Overall, worded differently, in what ways is it *not*? In a Tillichian sense, if one’s being includes a relation to meaning, then a “threat to his spiritual being is a threat to his whole being.”<sup>46</sup> Here is the place where Yeezus and Pablo coalesce: in the threat of nonbeing, asking questions to rediscover matters of ultimate concern. Might the answer, for Kanye, (i.e., the hopes of finding his godlikeness again) be found through what Tillich calls “power of being;” mainly, a power of potential, a defiance of his blackness, and further exploration and discovery into authentic being? For Tillich, this power of being transcends “the nonbeing which is experienced in the

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<sup>43</sup> Kanye West, “Real Friends” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Tillich, 51.

anxiety of fate and death, which is present in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which is effective in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation.”<sup>47</sup> Such is the place in which Kanye now stands: between the god that was and the man that could be. The acquiescence from Yeezus to Pablo, brings to mind the words of another Pablo in his letter to the Romans:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?... So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Romans 7:21-25, NRSV).

When the Apostle Paul (or, Pablo) talks about delighting in the law of God that is in his innermost self, he is speaking about an incarnation and bearing witness to that inhabited presence. Yet, like Kanye, he also speaks of his wretchedness, his flesh being a slave to sin. There is a battle between Paul’s innermost self and his flesh, a tug-of-war between who he is and who he wants to be. Could this be the inner turmoil that Kanye evokes in the persona of Pablo? How might we listen to “Saint Pablo” in relation to “New Slaves?”

In his letter to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul speaks at great length of a battle of two natures: the spirit and the flesh. Is Kanye, through his progression from Yeezus to Pablo, suggesting a similar struggle, between rap god and wretched man? The struggle brings to mind again Tillich’s definition of existential as an “attitude of participating with one’s own existence in some other existence.”

### Saint Pablo

Up from the dark places of anxiety, from the liminal spaces of emptiness and meaninglessness, Kanye ends *The Life of Pablo* with a late-added track, “Saint Pablo.” At first glance, Saint Pablo is likely a reference to the life of the Apostle Paul, adding another layer to the Picasso/Escobar/unknown possible identities. Upon further investigation, however, the significance and importance of the song as the closing track must be not understated. Knowing the progression – or rather digression – from Yeezus to Pablo and the coming to terms with the reality of an anxiety, that has so affected him, the listener hears hope for Kanye. The chorus of the song sings, “Yeah, you’re looking at church in the night sky, wondering whether God’s gonna say hi. Oh, you’re looking at church in the night sky, and you wonder where is God in your nightlife.” The chorus ends with, “The night sky, yeah, I feel like I’m home, yeah.”<sup>48</sup> He equates church with home (which echoes Kirk Franklin’s prayer in the opening track, “Ultralight Beam,” “you can never go too far when you can’t come

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 155

<sup>48</sup> Kanye West, “Saint Pablo,” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

back home again.”<sup>49</sup>) That Kanye suggests a type of homecoming – to church or God – should not surprise the listener. Hearing the humble and almost desperate lyrics throughout the record, “Saint Pablo” brings to an end one project and era, in hopes of a more self-actualized future project. Kanye’s god status may very well be outdated; however, finding his center again, his meaning, his center or ground of being, is where the song positions him.

Tillich’s aforementioned idea of courage as self-affirmation in spite the fact of nonbeing makes a connection with Kanye’s final track – via religious roots. Could “Saint Pablo” be indicative of a homecoming or religious return for Kanye? Just as Tillich posits that, “Every courage to be has an open or hidden religious root,”<sup>50</sup> perhaps for Kanye, it is a both/and: an open *and* hidden root, one within and one outward. The complicated relationship of religious roots, open and hidden, presents three questions to consider further: 1) By returning to the sanctuary, or the house of God, will Kanye once again find an inner presence of the divine (Yeezus)? 2) How might his outward religious roots inform and transform his own history of divine embodiment and empowerment? 3) To what extent do the lyrics of the song set up a future event of liberation? James Cone echoes this sentiment through the lens of black theology: “The doctrine of God in black theology must be of the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land...The God in black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation.”<sup>51</sup> Whether or not Saint Pablo can return to the black godness of Yeezus remains to be seen, but if the ending track is any indication, there may be yet a “courage to be” Yeezus again.

### Conclusion

Though Kanye has suggested divine likeness before on another project (e.g., his rap accolades in “New God Flow”), I limited the scope of this project to *Yeezus* and *The Life of Pablo*. Thus, appropriately, I chose a few songs from each record in a sequential manner to suggest a progression. Further, I posited that the uncertainty of *which* Pablo Kanye is identifying with exacerbates the existential liminality of his persona. Kanye’s claims to be Yeezus, found throughout his record, *Yeezus*, dissipate in *The Life of Pablo*. He uses the name Ye or Yeezy, but not Yeezus as an equivalent to god-status. Instead, Kanye’s tone and lyrics in the songs discussed from *The Life of Pablo* are more vulnerable, more introspective, and more human. Using ethnohistory and various scholars with theological and philosophical backgrounds, my intent was to explore the background that produced Kanye’s last two works. It is impossible to know what the loss of his mother and role his marriage and immersion into the Kardashian family may have played in these changes. Furthermore, as the song, “Saint Pablo” leaves open, it is

<sup>49</sup> Kanye West, “Ultralight Beam,” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Tillich, 156.

<sup>51</sup> Cone, 64.

unclear if there is a return to Yeezus' black godness in Kanye's future. (These findings are more complex by his bizarre political alliance with President Donald J. Trump and his recent hospitalization for mental fatigue.) Much remains unknown; however, the findings of the project leave room for further inquiry and ongoing discussion.

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