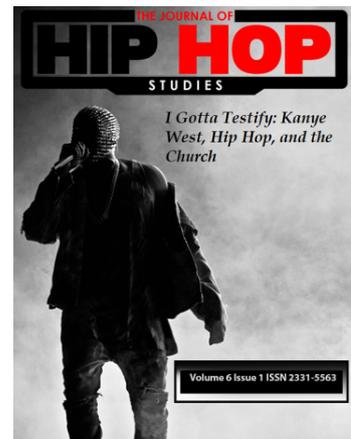


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The Prosperity Gospels of Superstardom: Kanye's Philosophy

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A little over a decade following the release of his debut album, *The College Dropout*, Kanye West has continued his progression as an artist and a public figure. His pattern of attention to detail, focus on innovation mixed with bravado overtones and stream-of-consciousness lyrics fuel West's constant evolution. This evolution from the backpack wearing "college dropout" we met in 2003, to the critically acclaimed artist of *Yeezus* in 2013 portrays the new West as a demi-god, operating in a sovereign capacity, hoping to obtain full Godhood through success and material gain. The transition from the 2003 lyrics, "God show me the way, because the devil's tryna break me down" to the statement "I am a god" in the 2013 song of the same name, suggest that West's relationship with God has changed from a commoner praying for guidance to direct conversations in the most opulent settings.¹ His steady spiritual evolution throughout his career represents the conflation of his material and spiritual pursuits.² West's approach to the divine, therefore, reflects Michael Eric Dyson's discussion of rap artists' God Complex. Rather than "playing god," the music of rappers like Kanye West and Jay-Z enable listeners to recognize that we are "complex human beings who are centers of moral gravity around which meaning and significance orbits, that, in one sense, we can control, or, at the least, generate, meaning and significance."³ Yet, as we know with Kanye, nothing is that simple or that straightforward.

If Kanye West's *Yeezus* and *The Life of Pablo* suggest an emerging god-complex, then the advent of the anonymously founded Church of Yeezus and the associated dogma of "Yeezianity" can be seen as proof of his superstardom, influence and prosperity all in one.⁴ In this sense, Hip Hop acts as what Greg Dimitriadis' describes as a

¹ Kanye West, "Jesus Walks," *The College Dropout*, (Def Jam 2004); West, "I Am a God," *Yeezus* (Def Jam 2013).

² Julius Bailey, "Existentialist Transvaluation and Hip Hop's Syncretic Religiosity" in Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman eds., *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 39.

³ Michael Eric Dyson, "God Complex, Complex Gods, or God's Complex: Jay-Z, Poor Black Youth, and Making 'the Struggle' Divine," in Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman eds., *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 61.

⁴ Eric Sundermann, "We Interviewed the Founder of Yeezianity, the First Religion Based on Kanye West." *Vice*, January 14, 2014, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/yeezianity-kanye-west-religion

“transformative cultural force,” in which religious meanings are found in the “everyday” thus stripping rappers like West of a “clear moral teleology.”⁵ Possessing such an approach to morality would downplay the fluid aspect of religion within West’s music. This article will address the convergences and divergences between Kanye’s philosophy and prosperity gospel ministry as well as his self-proclaimed god/hero status. We will also examine his philosophy and its development over the years as it relates to notions of bravado, revenge, and spiritual quest. Overall, Kanye West’s musical trajectory maintains an aspirational ethos due to his discussion of wealth and status for the purpose of a self-proclaimed higher calling.

Bravado & Wealth

Prosperity Theology is a Christian philosophy that claims that it is the will of God for believers to be wealthy.⁶ To receive affluence, one must adhere to certain guidelines and practices that vary depending on the ideology espoused by a congregation's pastor. Generally, however, these guidelines include faith, positive thoughts, and generous tithing to the ministry to which the believer ascribes. Preachers use passages from the Bible to support these claims while presenting their own lives as proof that allegiance to these interpretations of the gospel will result in wealth for their followers. Immaculately tailored suits, high-end cars, luxurious mansions, and even private jets are part of the external trappings of these preachers’ prosperity. They often speak of having a direct connection to God and talk about conversations with “Him” that makes them intermediaries between the divinity and the common person. Their lavish lifestyles are seen as manifestations of their divine truth and the implication is that the believer’s faith will “turn the spoken word into reality.”⁷

Stephanie Y. Mitchem, in her text *Name it and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church*, speaks of several types of Prosperity Gospels. She distinguishes three variations starting with the Black ministries of Charles Manuel “Sweet Daddy” Grace, founder of The United House of Prayer in Massachusetts in 1919, and his contemporary Father Divine who had an early 20th Century ministry and movement. Incidentally, both Sweet Daddy Grace and Father Divine were accused of proclaiming themselves to be God incarnate. The second school of thought comes from the post 1960s tele-evangelical white ministries of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland. The third school is a derivative of

interview.

⁵ Greg Dimitriadis, “Hip hop and Humanism: Thinking Against New (and old) Fundamentalisms” in Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard “Bun B” Freeman eds., *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 137-138.

⁶ Naomi Haynes, “Zambia Shall Be Saved!: Prosperity Gospel Politics in a Self-Proclaimed Christian Nation,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternate and Emerging Religions* 19 (2015): 6; Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, “Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity’s Gospel Impact On Contemporary Christian Worship” *Religion and Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24 (2014): 189.

⁷ Catherine Bowler, “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010), 4. For more on the lavish lifestyles of Prosperity theologians see pgs. 4-5.

the Science of Mind “New Thought” movements, rooted in affirmation-based spiritual beliefs and teaching. The United States experienced an increase in Prosperity Gospel churches during the first decade of the 2000s, according to scholar Catherine Bowler. Moreover, for “Pentecostals [who] traditionally separated the sacred [from] the [materially] secular,” these lines became blurred when the institution of the Black Church was impacted by modern prosperity gospels and televangelism in the 1990s.⁸

Kanye West’s rise coincides with the increase in this style of prosperity based preaching while his music and public persona have evolved in ways that bear some similarities to Prosperity Theology. By the mid-1990s, according to Erika Gault, “televangelists embodied the culture of hip hop and rap music making its ethos of consumerism acceptable among the black bourgeois.”⁹ In West’s world, if one embraces their creativity and acts as he does, one can live out one’s dreams. His lyrics separate him from “commoners” and with the advent of Yeezus, they portray him as an intermediary between humanity and a Hip Hop God. In the song “Gorgeous,” from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, he states: “Is Hip Hop just a euphemism for a new religion/The soul music for the slaves that the youth is missing/This is more than just my road to redemption/Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention.”¹⁰ If Kanye as Malcolm West is a Hip Hop god then Hip Hop, as stated above is the new religion, “the soul music for the slaves that the youth is missing.” The suggestion here is that the music, the culture and the movement hold a sway in the lives of the youth that may be more powerful than organized religion, and at its best, more compelling.¹¹ His description of himself as Malcolm West with “the whole nation standing at attention,” is given life by an online artistically constructed photo that combines half of Malcolm X’s face with half of West’s. His role as prophet, if not god, is collapsed and emphasized in this verse. His fans and followers fund his lavish lifestyle and ultimately elevate his brand in the corporate world. Going even further than mere prosperity preacher and tapping into the notion of himself as a healer, Kanye states, “My music isn’t just music – it’s medicine. I want my songs to touch people, to give them what they need. Every time I make an album, I’m trying to make a cure for cancer musically. That stresses me out!”¹²

⁸ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 79; Adrienne Gaines, “Revive Us, Precious Lord,” *Charisma Magazine*, April 30, 2003, <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/146-covers/cover-story/891-revive-us-precious-lord>; Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name it and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), xi-xii; Bowler, “Blessed,” 21.

⁹ Erik D. Gault, “My Soul Knows How to Flow: A Critical Analysis of the History of Urban Black Christian-Themed Rap” in Andre E. Johnson, *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 180.

¹⁰ West, “Gorgeous,” *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (Def Jam 2010).

¹¹ Tim Huffman and Amira De la Garza, “Rap with Soul and Pray with Flow: Youth on Hip Hop Musicality and Catholic Spirituality” in Andre E. Johnson, *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 117.

¹² Kevin Zimmerman, “For Kanye West, Music is Medicine” *BMI*, March 23, 2006, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/for_kanye_west_music_is_medicine.

He is able to instill a certain faith in himself, which appears to have influenced the zeal of his fan base, creating a sense of followers rather than mere fans. Kanye's self-proclaimed status as a healer reflects tenets of prosperity gospel ideology. With health an element of prosperity theology, followers of prosperity gospel embrace "positive confession" by using one's faith as an "instrument of Christian power."¹³ Through these "positive confessions," West forges a connection with his listeners by demonstrating the faith he has in his aim for redemption. Kanye as a healer in this "new religion" (hip hop) with the ability to heal through music, reflects Angela Nelson proclamation that hip hop centers "on the ultimacy of human beings rather than God."¹⁴ But how are we to comprehend the obsession with wealth in Hip Hop? Can it be explained exclusively with recourse to prosperity gospel ideology or the greed of a capitalist society?

Tressie McMillan Cottom, in her 2013 social media article post, "Why do Poor People 'Waste' Money on Luxury Goods?" argues that far from being frivolous indulgences, luxury goods have historically functioned as forms of social access for economically disadvantaged African Americans.¹⁵ Using examples from her life experiences, as well as those of her family members, she successfully demonstrates instances in which a designer purse, the right shoes or a particular car opened doors of opportunity that made the economic difference between having and not having basic resources or employment. Cottom's article suggests that excessive consumption is not only an overcompensation for the anxiety of being made to feel less than, but in some instances, it is also a strategy of survival.¹⁶

This is supported by the trilogy of songs, "Crack Music," "Gold Digger," and "Roses" on Kanye's 2005 sophomore album *Late Registration*. The skits throughout this album about the proverbial fraternity "Broke Phi Broke" whose motto is, "Got no money, got no clothes, got no cars, can't get no 'hoes'," sets the stage. The massively popular "Gold Digger," an interesting meditation on male and female dynamics as it relates to the push and pull around materialistic desires and needs, is often underestimated for its complexity. "I ain't sayin' she's a gold digger, but she ain't messin' with no broke niggas. Get down girl, go 'head git down!"¹⁷ Touching on three different scenarios, West's narrator first addresses a situation in which the man falls in love with a woman who is

¹³ Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity's Gospel Impact On Contemporary Christian Worship" *Religion and Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24 (2014): 189.

¹⁴ Angela M. Nelson, "'God's Smiling on You and He's Frowning Too': Rap and the Problem of Evil" in Michael J. Gilmour ed., *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 177.

¹⁵ Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Why Do Poor People 'Waste' Money on Luxury Goods?," *Talking Points Memo*, accessed July 1, 2017, November 1, 2013, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/why-do-poor-people-waste-money-on-luxury-goods>.

¹⁶ Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Why Do Poor People 'Waste' Money on Luxury Goods?," *Talking Points Memo*, accessed July 1, 2017, November 1, 2013, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/why-do-poor-people-waste-money-on-luxury-goods>.

¹⁷ West, "Gold Digger," *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

already notorious for only dating famous men. The second scenario functions as a morality tale highlighting the dangers of being unwittingly exploited for child support. The third and final scenario is one in which grudging respect and a hypothetical backstory is given to the kind of (black) woman who may become the proverbial “gold digger” – situations in which loyalty and fidelity through hard times is rewarded with abandonment for a white woman once wealth and status are achieved. The applicability of this last verse to Kanye’s real life is ironic, to say the least.

The notion of excess as part of the capitalist trappings of Hip Hop, internalized by artists who live in a society in which money equals power and respect, is also explained in a cultural sense by Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 notion, “The Will to Adorn” from her essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” She states,

The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression. Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator...Whatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes. His religious service is for the great part excellent prose poetry. The prayer of the white man is considered humorous in its bleakness.¹⁸

If Hurston’s words have any relevance all these years later, then part of the excess of opulence in Black life can be explained by a cultural love of adornment; stylization of objects in a way that fits with one’s worldview and showmanship. West’s dramatic flair in a range of areas can certainly be viewed from this perspective.

Revenge

The ideology of the song, “Crack Music” from *Late Registration*, the last of the three songs that can be linked to Tressie Cottom’s notions about why “poor people waste money on luxury items,” is suggestive because it extends Kanye’s philosophy on wealth beyond need and desire to a kind of revenge fantasy that continues in different ways throughout his career.¹⁹ Describing a world in which drugs were put into Black communities deliberately to stop revolutionary movements, West addresses the ways in which some of the very youth who were the intended or unintended targets of the drug war, invested in the very “rocks” and “powder” that created an epidemic of death and destruction. “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.” Destroyed by a drug strategy designed from above, he further states:

*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*

¹⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America Press, 1995), 830-46.

¹⁹ West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

*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!"
That's that crack music nigga
That real black music nigga.*²⁰

Crack, the drug and the music in the streets, merge symbolically to create "crack music," the kind of music that you make when you're forever surrounded by the breakdown of the family, drug sales as a strategy for wealth and overdosing relatives. Now "we" control this product that the dominant society consumes without being able to tell if the product is pure; the exploitation appears to be working in a kind of reverse.

In a clever re-signification of the Lord's Prayer, the speaker at the end of "Crack Music" asks God for "daily bread" before the Feds give him days in prison and force him to forfeit his livelihood, his bread.²¹ Making money from a drug whose arrival in the Black community devastated it, and then making money from what some would call equally destructive music by selling it to the children and grandchildren of the former plantation owners is a well-designed strategy of revenge; a fantasy that has become reality. This is one in which the former system of exploitation and submission, "Our mammas ain't got to be they cooks and nannies" is reversed, "we gonna repo everything they ever took from Grammy." The final lines of the song complete the inversion of power, "Now the former slaves trade hooks for Grammy's/This dark diction has become America's addiction, those who ain't even Black use it/We gon' keep baggin up this here crack music."²²

If one thinks about Kanye's statements here, the acquisition of wealth for the "boyz in the hood," moves outside of the realm of greed and competition as a drive purely rooted in excess and becomes a way of evening the score and reversing the power dynamic. West transcends any simplification of morality due to what Julius Bailey deems as a "rejection of sin" in his music. Instead, Kanye's moral compass "is not the automatic embrace of hedonism, but the rejection of an abstract morality that purposefully dismisses the concrete and embraces emotions, circumstances, accidents, struggles, etc."²³ While "Crack Music" is from *Late Registration* an album that is considered part of the "conscious" early Kanye before the god-complex and braggadocio of the later albums, the song "New Slaves" from *Yeezus* continues the thread of societal critique and revenge narrative as a form of symbolic vindication for crimes perpetrated against Black people historically and currently. Separating racism into the old and the new, the opening lines of "New Slaves" cryptically signifies the old with references to "clean water" and

²⁰ West, "Crack Music," *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

²¹ West, "Crack Music," *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

²² West, "Crack Music," *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

²³ Julius Bailey, "Existentialist Transvaluation and Hip Hop's Syncretic Religiosity" in Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman eds., *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 44-45

“picking cotton,” things that will immediately conjure up slavery and Jim Crow for the literate listener. The coding moves forward to the consumerist present with the distinction now being made between “broke nigga racism” – “Don’t touch anything in the store!” to “rich nigga racism” – “Come in, please buy [some] more.” Further stating that now “err’ body” not just poor, people are “wasting their money on luxury items.” West alludes to the fact that even in the world of the commodity, Black culture sets the trends. Ultimately, the new slaves are the followers, (“You see it’s leaders and it’s followers”) but also the Black contemporary class of “broke and rich niggas.”²⁴ He cuts back against the grain of assumptions that wealthy Black people no longer experience racism, the presumption being that if they do, it is both exceptional and petty.

Going “postal” in the second verse, West refers to the second line of Billie Holiday’s song about lynching, “Strange Fruit” which states, “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.” The notion of Maybach Mercedes and the like being used to pacify the “rich niggas” while there is still “blood on the leaves,” i.e., corporate violence and exploitation in the music industry, all this is seen by Kanye as part and parcel of this “new slave” system. Without some degree of cultural literacy, the coded nature of his statement “we the new slaves” may seem like empty rebellion.²⁵ The verse is a barrage of challenges that people like himself face in the corporate music prison, something that he juxtaposes with the “DEA” and the “CCA;” the link between the Drug Enforcement Agency and the biggest private prison company is a marriage that is literally creating new slaves of young colored bodies. Using a gangster tone and fast-paced rapping in the second verse, West becomes the proverbial “bad nigger” whose revenge fantasy, coded with specifically heterosexual male aggression, is made manifest among other things, against the pawn in the equation, “the Hampton wife.”²⁶

Wealth and power for West and his Hip Hop contemporaries function as a type of reprisal against the dominant society for historic exploitation without reparations. The game hasn’t changed; white power and black conditioned submission is referenced in Kanye’s song “Gorgeous” when he refers to his bags being searched at the airport despite being a superstar, similar to Mos Def’s *Black on Both Sides* “Mr. Nigga,” who goes overseas and is “over-seized” in London’s Heathrow airport without apology. These are self-made men; Ice Cube going from NWA to producing films and developing his brand; Jay-Z going from selling drugs on the streets of New York to prime seats at the inauguration ball for Barack and Michelle Obama; P-Diddy’s empire. “How we stop the Black Panthers?/Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer.”²⁷ The Civil Rights movement’s material gains did not trickle down for many. Instead the distribution of crack became the entrepreneurial approach to our death. No reparations. So as Notorious B.I.G. says,

²⁴ West, “New Slaves,” *Yeezus* (Def Jam 2013).

²⁵ West, “New Slaves,” *Yeezus* (Def Jam 2013).

²⁶ The concept of the “bad nigger” is explained nicely in Ronald Judy’s 1994 article, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *Boundary 2* 21:3 (Fall 1994), pp. 211-230.

²⁷ West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).

"If I wasn't in the rap game/I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game/Because the streets is a short stop/Either you slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot." Rap becomes the legal substitute for selling crack and Hip Hop becomes the new hustle, exploited by the corporations but giving Black men from the bottom the opportunity to feed their families "for generations," as Kanye West asserts.²⁸

Spiritual Quest

Despite an underlying critique of racism, capitalist aggression and hypocrisy that continuously runs through Kanye's body of work, with the advent of *Graduation* and his rise to superstardom, there was a shift in West's style and brand. In his later music, as sure as night follows day, the wasteland that accompanies the advent of fame – sexual decadence, endless money, suicidal thoughts, drugs, objectification of women – are the subject of his meditations. We are reminded of the phrase near the end of the song "Crack Music," "God how could you let this happen?" Indeed, this question recurs almost as a cry for help and West responds rhetorically with both the notion of himself as a god as well as the short film *Runaway*.²⁹

Yet there was a concrete incident that spawned the Kanye who would become more than just another flash in the pan rapper. Kanye West's life changed following his nearly fatal car accident in 2002. Journalist Kimberly Davis, describing West's post-accident life, wrote: "It's as if, given a second chance at life, he has to live it all out - at full speed-- picking up success and holding onto it for all it's worth."³⁰ The accident ended up being the most important element jumpstarting West's career. He realized a calling when it came to his music. Producer and mentor to West, No I.D., recalled in an interview: "One key moment that I can pinpoint...when I felt like he had the idea that led to [*College Dropout*] was the first time I talked to him after the accident. He was [previously] kind of a gangsta rapper..." The nearly fatal accident made Kanye think. No I.D. went on to say:

He said, 'I'm going to rap about this accident. I'm going to use a song and change the direction. I'm going conscious with my music...' I think from there the *College Dropout* concept took [on]...form because he let go of the gangsta persona and formed a good concept. Before that he would wrestle ideas, try to make it all line up but it wouldn't make sense. I think that was the moment when he put all the pieces of the puzzle [together].³¹

²⁸ The Notorious B.I.G., "Things Done Changed," *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy 1994).

²⁹ *Runaway* downloads as part of the *Yeezus* album but in actuality, the songs and content are actually taken from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.

³⁰ Kimberly Davis, "The Many Faces of Kanye West," *Ebony* 59 (2004): 93.

³¹ "Kanye West's 'The College Dropout': an Oral History," *Billboard*, February 5, 2014, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5893976/kanye-wests-the-college-dropout-an-oral-history?page=0%2C1>; psychologist Rachel Kitson describes West's near-death experience as Post Traumatic Growth, which for West "led to a revitalized and uncompromising pursuit of his goals;" see Rachel Kitson, "A Psychologist's Perspective on Kanye West" *Shrink Tank*, accessed December 29, 2016, <http://www.shrinktank.com/psychologists-perspective-kanye-west/>.

West had an epiphany. His brush with death enabled him to realize the fleeting nature of his life and develop a more authentic musical persona, one that represented his actual experiences. Years later, however, he needed a long-lasting concept to maintain his fan base and he was also now a partial victim of the decadence of fame. He also wanted “to feed his family for generations.” He experienced another rebirth. West’s compares his feelings before releasing *Yeezus* to the time before he released *The College Dropout*, a period of frustration and angst all while trying to gain approval from musical peers and the world.³² Similar to prosperity gospel, the spiritual calling in West’s music is often interlaced with references to material wealth.³³

The idea that Kanye would characterize himself as a “god,” has evoked cries of blasphemy and arrogance. “I am a god/Hurry up with my damn massage/Hurry up with my damn ménage/Get the Porsche out the damn garage.” Hardly the mutterings of humble deity, the in-your-face audacity of Kanye’s lyrics should at the very least provoke thought from serious students of his music.³⁴ By way of explaining this audaciousness, he states in an interview:

You don’t have to be a racist anymore, it’s called self-hate it works on itself. It’s like the real estate of racism...someone comes up and says, “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 I had a song that said, “I am a nigga?” or if I had a song that said I am a gangster?” Or if I had a song that said, “I am a pimp!” All of those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me right?³⁵

West is nothing, if not provocative. Exposing the average listener’s implicit bias, Kanye’s comments here are effective simply because of the thousands of Hip Hop songs in which artists claim the monikers “gangsta,” “pimp,” and “nigga,” all of which are often assumed to be authentic representations of “hood” Blackness. Reinterpreting his lyrics after his comments suggest more about the latter identities than his self-proclaimed “god-hood.” Has the stereotype become reality? What does it mean to attempt a disruption of the stereotype as Kanye does? The characteristics of “god-hood” for him are, ironically, resisting external affirmation and flattery, “Soon as they like you, make em unlike you/Cause kissing people ass is so unlike you,” and having “swagger” in the face of “hater-ism” à la Muhammad Ali.³⁶ Linking his prosperity to his real life persona he further claims that his goal is “feeding his family for generations” something few black musicians have succeeded in doing.³⁷ What this means, in a sense, is that he is caught in

³² Jon Caramanica, “Behind Kanye’s Mask: Kanye West Talks About His Career and Album ‘Yeezus,’” *New York Times*, June 11, 2013, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/18utDjG>.

³³ West, “The Last Call,” *College Dropout* (Def Jam 2003); West, “I Am a God,” *Yeezus* (Def Jam 2013).

³⁴ West, “I Am a God.”

³⁵ This statement can be found in a clip at the end of a string of interview moments with Kanye at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U_qY0r8Cs8.

³⁶ West, “I Am a God.”

³⁷ This can be found in the same YouTube clip of various interview moments https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U_qY0r8Cs8.

a genuine bind. Elevating social consciousness is one thing; staying wealthy enough to feed one's family for generations is another. The industry is merciless; sex, drugs, violence and misogyny sell. Still, the spiritual quest is real.

The short film *Runaway* is written and directed by Kanye West, and comes as a download with the *Yeezus* album, despite the fact that the song "Runaway" and the soundtrack for the film are from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. This may simply have been a clever marketing strategy to get fans to purchase both albums. The quest for identity amidst a range of contradictions appears to be a central theme in this movie. It opens with the main character played by Kanye, speeding along a deserted road through the woods in a luxury car. At the same time, a comet destined for earth coincidentally explodes on the road in front of him, bringing with it a fallen angel, a kind of female bird incarnate who is unconscious and wounded. She becomes the main character's girlfriend, although they are from two different worlds, but at some point she reveals that she has to burn like a phoenix and rise from the ashes in order to return to the world she came from. She says this after she realizes that the people in the human world she has entered (who all appear to be wealthy African Americans with white servants) only eat chicken and other birds. The film ends with her rising from the ashes of a flame and flying away while the man she has left behind wakes up, as if from a dream, and takes to his heels running through the woods in pursuit of her or his destiny. The film ends with Gil Scott Heron's spoken word poem, "Who Will Survive in America," which is also one of the tracks on the album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.³⁸

The pursuit of destiny and identity that the protagonist chases in *Runaway* is similar to West's pursuit of affirmation as an African American male throughout much of his career. Yet, his ascent from the world of "broke nigga" to "rich nigga" colors the ideals he has strived for since his near-death accident. The "broke nigga racism" West encounters before the release of *College Dropout* is a far cry from the issues he faced in post-*Graduation*. Yet becoming rich, in certain ways, magnified the unfair social institutions West failed to bypass with money and fame. Meanwhile, his breakout *808s and Heartbreak* album, according to writer Malcolm Musoni, is an album that attempts to reconcile the contradictions of a life of luxury with his mother's death from complications connected to plastic surgery.³⁹ In other words, West becomes a victim of the fame that essentially enabled him to transcend boundaries he, as a black man in America, was never expected to break. Moreover, his pursuit of god-hood could be read as an allusion to liberation from the fraught institutions that dampen black social mobility. Pursuing destiny within "the woods" of oneself is purer than the manufactured institutions that historically work against many.

³⁸ West, *Runaway*, directed/performed by Kanye West (New York, NY: Roc-A-Fella Records, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg5wkZ-dJXA>.

³⁹ Malcolm Musoni, "Kanye West's '808's and Heartbreak' Took on a Whole New Meaning After My Mom Died," *Complex*, October 13, 2016, accessed May 30, 2016.

The fallen angel in the film *Runaway* is represented as an innocent, despite the biblical notion as stated in the Second Epistle of Peter that, "God did not spare angels when they sinned but cast them into hell."⁴⁰ West fuses the concept of the fallen angel with the Greco-Egyptian idea of the phoenix who can rise from the ashes; one notion represents loss and the other, rebirth. This could be interpreted as a metaphorical duality that is symbolic of Kanye's philosophical crisis, i.e., his pull between the world of the flesh and that of the spirit. The female bird angel comes to earth, falls in love, sees the cannibalism and violence and departs. The male character by the film's end has abandoned decadence and luxury and is running, as if for his life, through the woods in hot pursuit of something with just the clothes on his back. The film's title *Runaway*, with the image of a black man running, suggests an escape from enslavement. Gil Scott Heron's "Who will Survive in America" is the vocal backdrop as the credits roll at the end. If we add this strategic commentary to the film's other themes then the critique of opulence and excess as ends onto themselves seem to be the ultimate message. As Zora Neale Hurston states in her essay, "High John de Conquer,"

Way over there, where the sun rises a day ahead of time, they say that Heaven arms with love and laughter those it does not wish to see destroyed. He who carries his heart in his sword must perish. So says the ultimate law. Moreover, John knew that it is written where it cannot be erased, that nothing shall live on human flesh and prosper.⁴¹

None of it will survive America or rather those who indulge in it will not survive America. There may not be any survivors. But one must at least attempt escape. If the phoenix rising at the film's end is supposed to represent what's possible then death and rebirth in symbolic form or otherwise seem necessary for a new set of humane values to emerge.

Can the music and the message both remain "pure" if one wants to feed one's family for generations in a system of capitalist domination and violence? The answer appears to be "no." West's strategy for addressing the spiritual in his music differs from Jamaican musician of old, Bob Marley whose notions of "the suffering duppy conqueror" gives consistent voice to the oppressed masses on a world scale without recourse to celebrating money and material as ends onto themselves. Kanye's film *Runaway* speculates about an alternative even as his lived reality manifests the contradictions that Rodney speaks of. At the end of the day, however his philosophy, as made manifest over the course of his musical career thus far, has left us with much food for thought.

⁴⁰ Peter. 2: 4 English Standard Version.

⁴¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1981), 71.

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