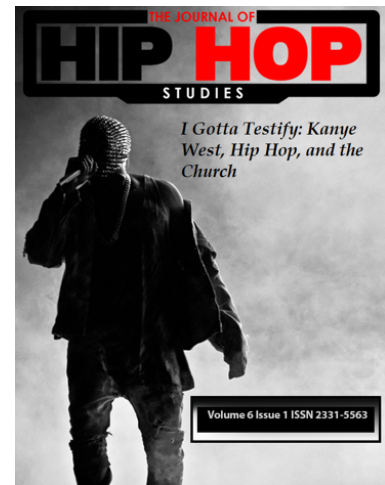


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James Manigault-Bryant and LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant

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There is a rich, inescapable irony that haunts writing about Kanye West, especially writing by scribes like us holding “*those degrees*.” Kanye’s debut trilogy of music—*The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), and *Graduation* (2007)—modeled his ascension to the pinnacle of Hip Hop on truancy, a turning away from America’s expected path of formal education. Cleverly mocking those who aspire to enter the Black bourgeoisie through pursuing precious diplomas, regardless of the financial sacrifice or loss of dignity endured along the way, Kanye told the fools of “Broke Phi Broke” to follow him to the front of the line. We would be lying if we did not admit that Kanye’s sermonic words did not leave us questioning the wisdom of our career path, especially during those late nights of graduate study when we were forced to read some obscure text or write about some prompt we knew would be useless to our future thinking. But beyond those fleeting moments that now seem worth the price of the ticket (at least somewhat), Kanye was gesturing toward something deeper in the very fabric of our lives, a sourness in the very mix of post-Civil Rights life.

Black folks enter professional machineries of all sorts to make it up and over mountains of struggle, but once enduring the fires of training, whether in College, or in other networks, what awaits us on the other side of financial and commercial success can resemble more of a nightmare than a dream—a dark twisted fantasy. As affluence and celebrity open doors to new worlds of economic prosperity through access to the world of things, it also brings with it expectations for performances of masculinity and femininity to acquire and hold onto those things. Ascendancy as Kanye articulates, harkens to a Booker T narrative of self-uplift, an actualizable, distinct version of Horatio Alger’s mythical immigrant narrative. Adopting this story places slavery as that position to emerge from instead of inhabiting it as a—if not, the—fundamental dimension of social being, that we are in a cosmic dimension of servitude and cultural cannibalism. While Kanye willingly claims the slave’s condition in much of his music—take, for example, references to the nature of labor on *The College Dropout* to “New Slave” on *Yeezus*—Kanye, nor anyone for that matter, has escaped the strangeness awaiting anyone who drifts off into the American Dream. It is no surprise then, that lyrics about pressures brought about from the world of consumerism have pulsed throughout Kanye’s music as much as those

mocking the ridiculous, if not foolish, costs of higher education.

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (2011) (hereafter *MBDTF*), Kanye’s fifth studio album, voiced many of his ongoing struggles with consumerist culture. It was born from one of what would later become several, self-imposed hiatuses from the celebrity limelight, a *wilderness period* if you will. Well worth the nearly three-year wait, *MBDTF* was certified platinum, nabbed the Grammy for Best Rap Album in 2012, and was lauded with critical acclaim for its release of hit after hit (“Power,” “Monster,” and “All of the Lights”). More notably, however, *MBDTF* signaled what many in Hip Hop already knew (or if they did not know would come to understand): Kanye West is simply a musical genius. In addition to being declared (still) as Kanye’s most comprehensive album in terms of lyrical scope and productive value, *MBDTF*, quite frankly, “does nothing less than articulate a new sound.” The breadth of the album’s varied instrumentation, sonic depth, and stellar arrangement reflect a particular musical ambition that is couched beneath and between lyrics expressing his longstanding commitment to Hip Hop, and the depth of his internalized, and arguably spiritual struggles.

“Runaway,” the ninth track in Kanye’s amazing collection, is a spiritual rumination on contemporary Black heterosexual intimacy. The song opens with a single, lonely “high E” played on the piano, slightly reminiscent of the first few bars of LL Cool J’s “I Need Love,” and which creates an emptiness that launches the phrase “Look at ya,” a sample from a live performance of Rick James’s “Mary Jane.” But instead of following Cool J’s smooth emotion-laden verses on love, Kanye abducts the listener into shamelessly sung bars: “And I always find, yeah, I always find somethin’ wrong / You been puttin’ up with’ my shit just way too long / I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most / So I think it’s time for us to have a toast.” Making his own claims on George Costanza’s favorite breakup strategy – “it’s not you, it’s me” – Kanye sounds like he’s ready to come to the light of his own cowardice, and celebrate a woman who has shielded herself from his dirty ways, but instead he sings an ironic chorus: “Let’s have a toast for the douchebags... / Let’s have a toast to the jerkoffs... / Baby, I got a plan / Runaway fast as you can.” Kanye remains steadfast in bad faith, even as he is consciously aware that he is behaving terribly. In other words, he knows that he is running from intimacy, and instead of conducting himself differently, he encourages his partner to join him in flight. “Runaway” stands out for the ways Kanye uses Black church ritual to articulate what words cannot quite capture. His celebrity status permits him freedom to explore his sexuality with multiple partners, so that intimacy takes a backseat to being an asshole, and inflates his ego so much that he can hide his shortcomings behind it.

And in “Runaway,” Kanye testifies. His confession: arrogance, guilt, and misplaced blame amplified by his submission to the life of a superstar. Ye’s particular sins are steeped in the mishandling of women (“I don’t know what it is with females / but I’m not too good at that shit”); a disconnect from the reality of his flawed humanity (“Yeah I *always* find something wrong”); braggadocio resulting from a skewed sense of self (“I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most”); and a lack of intimacy and

skeptical (at best) romanticism (“never was much of a romantic / I could never take the intimacy”). Ye admits that his choices have wreaked havoc on the lives of those around him, and especially the women (“And I know I did damage / ‘Cause the look in your eyes is killing me”). Kanye’s resolution: to advise those close to him to “run away from me baby,” to abscond from the boundaries of what risks overtaking all relationships over time – apathy, unfulfilled expectation, and disappointment.

Kanye’s testimony possesses layers beyond the chorus. He also pulls in Pusha T, of Clipse, as a foil for his regretful character. Pusha T would later reveal that Kanye pushed him towards this role in the song: “The ‘Runaway’ verse was my first time that I probably was made to rewrite a verse. And every other time I’ve been like, if I rewrote a verse it’s because I just felt like, oh I thought of another idea. But Kanye literally made me rewrite this verse. He wanted more, you know, more *arrogance*. The verse and the song came from a conversation. We were just talking about relationships—just the attitude of it, the reality of relationships and music business relationships, and how outsiders have a perspective about a relationship when they just don’t know.”

As the song swells, Kanye summons cellos to harmonically swirl around the single piano note that introduces “Runaway,” a technique he also used in “Gone,” a track from *Late Registration*. The symphonic feel of “Gone,” supplicated by powerful lines from Cam’ron and Consequence, concludes with Kanye, lifted by strings, admitting his consideration to leave the rap game behind: “I’m ahead of my time, sometimes years out / So the powers that be won’t let me get my ideas out / And that make me wanna get my advance out / And move to Oklahoma and just live at my aunt’s house / Yeah, I romance the thought of leaving it all behind / Kanye step away from the lime / Light.” Receding from celebrity does not mean he wishes to leave Hip Hop alone, but that he fantasizes about creating his own dojo for instructing aspiring artists in navigating the music industry. In the end, he realizes that assuming the role of a sensei in the rap game would be contributing to the mechanistic production of replaceable Hip Hop artists, and also depriving the world of his irreplaceable talent.

So Kanye continues to bless us by not running away from the industry, but in “Runaway,” the strings are an omen for another kind of escape. The last verses of the song seem to be sung through a vocoder run through Auto-Tune, which hyper-instrumentalizes the musical sequence while making the words indecipherable. It’s an interesting strategy given that the listener is well aware of the lyrics of the chorus by this point in the track – that Kanye is a douchebag, an asshole, and a scumbag – but the feeling invoked by the singing is remarkably different, moving even. Ye doesn’t decipher his cries, nor should we assume that he is translating previous lyrics. The words are transformed into wordless moans, like a Deacon lining a hymn on a Sunday morning or, more aptly, a sinner lamenting at the mourners bench. In this highly synthetic, computerized moment, Ye is most human, and pours out his soul. We sit with him, touch and agree, and nod our heads in full knowing as he articulates the ineffable, and pulls us into that space of vulnerability where nobody could hear him pray.