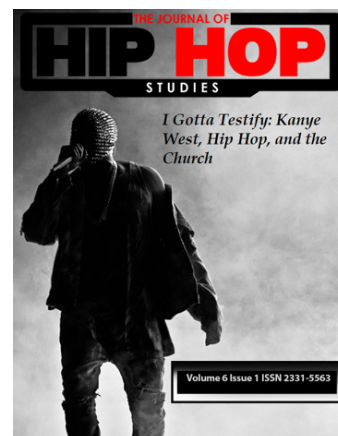

I'm so Self-Conscious: Kanye West's Rhetorical Wrestling with Theodicy and Nihilism

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Journal of Hip Hop Studies, Special Issue *I Gotta Testify:
Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church*

Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2019, pp. 80–96

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/gjpm-r752>





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Abstract

Whether Kanye's plea to God is to intervene because "the devil's trying to break [him] down," or that he (Kanye) is "tryna keep [his] faith," Kanye West's lamentations communicate his wrestling of succumbing to sufferings within the world. Despite the twelve-year span between "Jesus Walks" and "Ultralight Beam," Kanye West's rhetoric in both songs attempt to make meaning of theodicy—suffering; while simultaneously combating nihilism—the lack of hope. As a professed Christian who articulates the multiplicity of God through Jesus and himself (Kanye West), affirmed on his 2013 album *Yeezus* track, "I am God," West complicates religiosity and self-consciousness. He does so by situating himself as both God and human; recognizing limitations of God who has yet to impact his situation as a Black man in America, and his human-self that operates as a venerated deity. West's consciousness is an amalgamation of his warring with theodicy and nihilism. My essay implements a theo-rhetorical analysis of "Jesus Walks" and "Ultralight Beam" exploring meaning-making processes of locating God. In doing so, I define theodicy and nihilism as repelling mores that aid in self-preservation for West.

Introduction

Since the inception of his first nationally syndicated album, *The College Dropout*, Kanye West has teetered on these constellating mores of faith, God, humanity, theodicy and nihilism in an effort to mitigate warring inner tensions in response to the world around him.¹ His lyrics provide insight into individualized implications of torment, while simultaneously serving as case studies to Black millennials who are working through generations of God-talk that they have not felt concretized in their community.² While Kanye's recent life circumstances of canceling concert shows, being admitted to the hospital for mental care and boldly supporting President Donald Trump, might render answers to this warring of succumbing to theodicy with nihilism, this article will focus on his two songs in order to better understand how he consistently combats prescribing theodicy with nihilism and perhaps how he has come to these staggering conclusions as of late. This article highlights rhetoric used in two of Kanye's songs "Jesus Walks" and "Ultralight Beam," offering insight into dealing with the world around us.

This article will utilize a theo-rhetorical lens to analyze Kanye's lyrics. By theo-rhetorical, I refer to deriving meaning from the act of locating God. Rhetoric, as a discipline has developed into a field that privileges all cultures of deriving meaning within communication practices as opposed to simply applying Greek and Roman mores to other cultures' communication practices.³ Theology as a discipline seeks to check the relationship between beliefs and practices, while locating God in the process.⁴ Thusly, I will synthesize the two concepts, implementing them as a mode of analysis. The reader will gain a better understanding of how Kanye makes meaning of theological concepts throughout his music.

I will first define theodicy and nihilism to provide context for my claims. After having done that, I will explain them both in the context of Blackness in order to better understand rhetorical positionality of the lyrics used. I will then showcase how Kanye's rhetoric operates within these tenets.

"Devil's Tryna Break Me Down": Theodicy's Suffering Sinner and Human Agency

The concept of theodicy has developed over time to better understand its cause and capacity. Michael Eric Dyson explicates the basis of theodicy and its relation to God and humanity.⁵ Dyson uplifted Philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's 18th century Greek

¹ Stacey Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 57.

² Tyree A. Boyd-Pates, "Why Black Millennials Are Hopping from Church-to-Church," *Huffington Post*, April 12, 2016, accessed February 4, 2018.

³ Elaine Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson, *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2007).

⁴ Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 74–75.

⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, "Supernatural Distaste?: Theodicy and Black Faith" in *Come Hell or High*

etymology of the word theodicy, breaking it down to “theos” and “dike” which literally translates as, *God Justice*, although, throughout the chapter he refers to theodicy as human suffering and/or evil. Although Dyson’s work was trying to understand a natural disaster—Hurricane Katrina—in relation to governing matters with New Orleans surrounding the catastrophe, this work lends itself to the contextualizing theology and provides insight to how Kanye West finds himself situated in the main question that Dyson, myself, and Kanye are all posing, which is; “What is God’s role in human suffering?” Dyson puts conservative Christian parishioners as well as liberal scholars in conversation in order to better address this question. In doing so, the suggestion and/or solution is that there are varying theodicies taking place.

According to Dyson, there are two types of theodicy, (1) conservative and (2) liberative attributive theodicies. Conservatives suggest that suffering is caused by God punishing the sinner. Therefore, the suffering sinners deserve their punishment. This group of thought would be amongst those who would justify enslaving Africans because of Ham’s actions toward his father, Noah.⁶ Ham sinned; therefore, descendants of Ham would be enslaved. Also, per the conservative viewpoint, Katrina victims were taking part in Voo-doo and same-gender sexual activities which are considered sinful to particular sects of Christianity. Therefore, Hurricane Katrina was a condemnation on sinners. On the other hand, liberal attributive theodicy suggests that political leaders are at fault as opposed to simply God’s wrath towards sinners. This thought goes beyond the questioning of “why do bad things happen?” to indicating the role that humans and institutions play within suffering. This takes up human suffering in a philosophical manner. It is important to ask this question of God’s role in suffering in order to know where to direct sentiments and solutions. While liberals take a stance suggesting the suffering came at the hands of government officials and people, Dyson wrestles with the placement of God in suffering. Though he notes that after the Enlightenment, scholars did away with God’s role in suffering, they focused solely on “human agency.”⁷ As a result, Dyson’s answer to locating God in suffering--enable to resolve this dilemma and unwilling to let it go--is that God is located in Black faith (in relation to the victims of Katrina mostly being poor Black people).⁸ This section does not seek to solve the problem of suffering, rather to name theodicy as such.

James Cone, progenitor of Black theology, asserts that Christian theology must be

Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster (New York: Basic Civitas, 2007).

⁶ Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 60.

⁷ The Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century was a philosophical and intellectual shift from the church and utilized reason as a primary source. Foundational scholars of this era include Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel and Karl Marx. During and after the Enlightenment movement, Kant articulated the theological split between God ended where humans’ agency began. Hegel said that destruction was inevitable and Marx spoke of economics and humans created destruction. Thusly, suggesting that theology ends where theodicy begins.

⁸ Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, 10.

a theology of liberation as a direct response to oppressed communities.⁹ His theological offering begins as a response to suffering. It is within this understanding of a liberative theology as a response to suffering that Kanye situates himself. Jesus is a salvific figure.

Kanye's concept of the "devil trying to break me down" in his song "Jesus Walks" suggests that he understands theodicy as a force attempting to destroy his being or – break him down, in which he wishes to name, the devil. Why does Kanye do this? The reason is that his conception of God is good and liberating. He cannot fathom situating God as the very thing that is destroying him, so he situates the devil as such, the very entity that is antithetical to how Kanye has imagined God. It is not clear whether the devil can be realized or not – meaning if the devil is a force of sub-deitel being that conjures evil or if the devil is tangible resources, things and or people.

We also know that Kanye is referring to a devil that extends beyond simple individualism, as he opens "Jesus Walks" with, "we at war with racism, we at war with terrorism..." indicating that he understands the larger ramifications of suffering. He reiterates this suffering in "Ultralight Beam" by stating that he is searching for "somewhere I can feel safe and end my holy war...so why send oppression not blessings?" As a result, these works, become chanted reminders that Jesus is accessible and alive. He says this after speaking of the women's ills to jog his memory of a deity that is supposed to be working on his behalf. It is clear that Kanye believes that suffering can be combated with the power of Jesus and/or God as he calls out for them to help in the midst of turmoil. Kanye laments, "God show me the way"¹⁰ and "I'm tryna keep my faith"¹¹ inferring there is assistance in God. Therefore, the devil, Jesus and God are to operate on both institutional and individual levels. It is clear that the theodicy is taking place, however it is not as clear if Kanye knows that theology is the answer though he relies on it. It appears that he has faith that theology may be the answer.

"I Walk Through the Valley of the Chi Where Death Is": Black Suffering in America

Black communities have continued to endure suffering in America. Theodicy is a human condition, though some humans are on varying sides of suffering—some administering it and others victims to said suffering—and those suffering administer more suffering in a constellating continuum of human suffering. Black people have far too long been at the receiving end of suffering in this country; however, this is not to negate Black participation in patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia and other oppressions. Cornel West explains nihilism in Black communities in relation to Black suffering as he positions two dichotomous perceptions of how to combat the world. He posits two concepts of Black nihilism as 1) liberal structuralists and 2) conservative

⁹ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 1.

¹⁰ Kanye West, "Jesus Walks," in *College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).

¹¹ Kanye West, "Ultralight Beam," in *Life of Pablo* (Roc-A-Fella Records, G.O.O.D Music, and Def Jam Records, 2016).

behavioralists. West claims that liberal structuralists dwell on institutional racism and major structures that impact inequalities within systems of education, incarceration, health care, economics, politics etc. All the while conservative behavioralists focus on the behavior of Blacks in the community, what they wear and how they navigate business, taking on the notion of respectability politics. Marc Lamont Hill¹² and TaNehisi Coates¹³ would later take up these warring behavioralist and structuralist approaches to lived narratives of Black people in contemporary American culture.

It is important to note that while Cornel West critiques both parties for missing out on nihilism as a more detrimental source of Black stagnation, West does not refute that both hypotheses are valid in the discussion of Black suffering. He understands what many scholars and Kanye have been articulating – Black suffering is orchestrated by both institutions and individuals and it is on both levels that they impact the Black psyche.

Chicago as the valley of death signifies the complex realities of institutionalized and localized agency as well as an interjection of Black psychological rapport. It is important to note that along with being Kanye's hometown, Chicago is ridden with poverty, environmental racism and violence.¹⁴ This is the place whereby Kanye is raised into his consciousness of God, humanity, suffering and nihilism. Within this same stanza of labeling Chicago "the valley of death," Kanye alludes to suffering violence projected upon Black Americans by the police by suggesting that Blacks are "getting choked by detectives" and "harassed and arrested."¹⁵ He is speaking to a reality that plagues the streets of Chicago and the larger American context—mass incarceration, a condition Michelle Alexander's probes in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, in which she explains correlations between drug usage amongst Americans and Blacks and Brown people being incarcerated at unequal rates.¹⁶ Kanye explains a similar relationship between drugs and incarceration stating, "We ain't goin' nowhere, but got suits and cases/A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis."¹⁷ The cops are harassing them even though they are succumbing to the politics of how one must carry themselves. They are wearing the "appropriate" attire and driving an "appropriate" vehicle; yet, they are still criminalized. The absurdity is that they are assumed to have a trunk full of narcotics in spite of knowing the history among Black people and law enforcement, while following both legal and social laws. These

¹² Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2016).

¹³ TaNehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

¹⁴ Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 82–84.

¹⁵ West, "Jesus Walks."

¹⁶ Michele Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

¹⁷ West, "Jesus Walks."

circumstances create an environment of death—one that is created for Black suffering.

The condition of Black suffering is the theodicy which Kanye alludes to in “Jesus Walks” and “Ultralight Beam.” Kanye echoes repeatedly, “So why send oppression not blessings?”¹⁸ as a clarion call for the cause of suffering. It is the same suffering referenced by James Bell, progenitor of critical race theory, in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, his conglomeration of anecdotal accounts, that suggests racism in America is intrinsically linked to power and will never end.¹⁹ While it is not certain whether Kanye believes racism and/or suffering for himself and the Black community will ever end, it is clear that Kanye has held this sentiment of death in Black communities since his debut in 2004 and continues it through his latest project in 2016.

“I’m Trying to Keep My Faith”: The Lack of Hope, Love, and Meaning

Nihilism in the Black community should not be overlooked as a dangerous symptom of suffering. Cornel West writes:

In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle.²⁰

West suggests that though suffering exists, it is the psychological ramifications of that suffering that we must consider as the largest detriment to Black communities. The threat of a community losing the capacity to think that things can get better is the beginning of the end for West. The lack of hope stagnates a people from working towards solutions and liberation. Therefore, West’s assertions that nihilism is the greatest threat, gains legitimacy in that structuralist and conservative solutions will never be implemented if Black people have no hope and/or desire to fight, struggle and overcome Black suffering.

According to Cornel West, liberal and constructive nihilism are inseparable. Culture is just as structural as economics and politics.²¹ It is important to understand culture as structural so that we then could view despair, dread, lack of hope, and the collapse of meaning as structural. Conservatives contribute to nihilism by exceptionalizing people without taking into account structures, thus failing to admit that although Blacks adhere to American ethics, they are still on the bottom of the social ladder. They do not want Blacks to be “victimized” (but they are victims). Cornel West says, “For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive...without hope there can be no future, without meaning there can

¹⁸ West, “Ultralight Beam.”

¹⁹ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

²⁰ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 23.

²¹ West, *Race Matters*, 3–19.

be no struggle.”²²

These dichotomous ideations become polarized as they fail to take into account the necessity of the other and ultimately misses a critical component of Black consciousness that Kanye West addresses in his music. Incriminating institutions unearth historical backings for current manifestations of minority environments; however, it does not allow for agency within oppressed communities. Conversely, placing blame upon communities’ agency without fully taking into account systems that have strategically displaced certain people on the margins who have little political and economic power. These polarized camps of thought continue postulating theories and solutions, while they fail to posit psychological ramifications of it all—lack of hope. The psychological ramifications are real and there is no movement without hope. While academicians and activists alike struggle with privileging the other side of this dilemma of oppression and suffering, looking to Kanye West’s music provides us an entry point into conversing about the varying aspects of theodicy and nihilism through his understanding of his environment.²³

Likening those on welfare as victims suggests that welfare is one that preys on and subjugates people. “To the victims of welfare for we living in hell here hell yea.”²⁴ While dominant narratives would suggest welfare recipients benefit, suck up tax payers’ money and live lavish lifestyles, Kanye recognizes the hardships and bondage associated with welfare, the circumstances leading to it and the suffering restrictions that come along with it. Though the requirements differ from state to state to obtain welfare benefits, the main premise is that a family has been unable to provide basic resources for their family. No one would ever ask for such a situation, which is why Kanye emphatically states that this circumstance is hell. Most welfare benefits provide the minimum amount of resources for living and remaining in poverty with strict standards to keep up those benefits without any transition period or romantic involvement. Hell becomes not only a damned location, but redefined meaning and lack of hope in a system that has historically and contemporarily been against them, Black nihilism.

Kanye West also understands his surroundings as one that requires deliverance, “deliver us serenity, deliver us peace, deliver us loving, we know we need it, you know we need it...”²⁵ Requiring deliverance connotes a state of needing rescue or freedom which furthers this concept of nihilism as a state that lacks serenity, peace and love. This lament for escaping a place that lacks these essential elements (according to Kanye), is reminiscent of the hell that he speaks of in “Jesus Walks” being portrayed here in

²² West, *Race Matters*, 23.

²³ Tricia Rose, *Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) 138.

²⁴ West, “Jesus Walks.”

²⁵ West, “Ultralight Beam.”

"Ultralight Beam."

Theology is anthropological in that we, humans upholding religion or theos, have not been able to speak of or locate God within history devoid of God's relationship to humans, leaving us to distinguish this relationship between God and humanity. Nihilism encompasses the "profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness and social despair."²⁶ It's evident that Kanye seeks to combat the lack of hope through his emotive lament for help. His call is to help right his wrongs, keep his mind and stop terrorism, racism and self-despair. We could position his music before and after many events in his life from the death of his mother to the marriage to his wife to the birth of his children to his clothing/fashion involvement. Within "Ultralight Beam," Kanye has a plea to be rescued from nihilism and his conception of God's role has changed slightly in that in 2004 the devil was the source of evil and God or Jesus was the salvific figure. Now God becomes one that both sends oppression as well as the capacity to bring blessings and deliverance. This move of understanding God as a source of oppression allows for nihilism to grow in that if God, who was the only hope for liberation cannot and does not send blessings, but rather is complicit in Black suffering and galvanized oppression, where does hope lie? And it is within this place that Cornel West calls the greatest danger of Black communities because it stops action.

Kanye's nihilism interjects when his concept of theology fails to answer theodicy. His hopelessness serves as a pretext to his lyrics. "I'm tryna keep my faith" implies that his faith is at risk. His requests include wanting peace, serenity and blessings instead of oppression. How then can his conception of God be both all-powerful and all good God that his mother told him about while allowing suffering to take place? Is it because God allows free will thus allowing for the suffering of some? These questions are birthed out of Kanye's lament to keep his faith in the midst of Black nihilism.

"My Mama Said Only Jesus Can Save Us": Black Liberation Theology of Redemptive Suffering

Nihilism or hopelessness in Black communities has been the premise for Black religious' institutions and activism. The genius of Black people has been to create meaning, love, and hope in the midst of despair for the possibility to fight, dream and reach equality and prosperity.²⁷ Creating a space where Black people have space for liberation of some kind was needed.

Some forms of hope in Black communities were introduced by faith based institutions. For the sake of this article, I will reference the Black church as a pillar of faith in the midst of nihilism/Black suffering; however, I acknowledge other religious, spiritual and psychological forms of healing. As Dyson and Cone explain, Black people

²⁶ West, *Race Matters*, 23.

²⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 143.

situated God in the will of people, a concept derived from Black liberals. Black religious leaders have questioned their oppressive conditions since the 1700s. Richard Allen, Denmark Vessey and several others, challenged oppressive conditions and slavery by positing Black people as people of God.²⁸ Though, this narrative has become dominant, this theological situating of God in Black suffering has not been consistent throughout history. Black religious scholar, Anthony Pinn agrees with ethicist, Gayraud Wilmore in suggesting that during the Great migration, the Black church began to turn inward, in accordance to conservative thoughts to work on Black church endeavors.²⁹ It wasn't until the civil rights era that dominant narratives of locating God within Black and human injustices became more popular. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were huge influences as King played a role in shaping theology and Malcolm contributed to defining Blackness. Allen, Sojourner Truth, and King were catalysts in the formation of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen's (NCNC) that eventually took up the concerns of theologically addressing media and white Christians.³⁰ The NCNC wrote the first definition of Black theology.³¹ James Cone was then the first to systematize Black theology in 1969,³² furthering the previous definition, claiming that God was ontologically Black in that God's message was for the oppressed Israelites and Jesus' plight was likened to Black Americans'.³³ While his method has been contested by his brother Cecil Cone and Wilmore Gayraud as European theology with Black rhetoric, it has stood the test of time as one of the dominant definitions of a Black theology of liberation. Cone's work was also taken to task theologically by William Jones. In 1973, Philosopher William R. Jones questioned dominant discourses surrounding Black Liberation Theology by asking a pivotal question in his work, *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology*. His work sought to move progenitors of Black Christian liberation theology to critically engage theodicy or suffering with humanism, implicating men and women as agents of change in their economic and social environment, while in conversation with the omnibenevolent God of Black liberation theology. He deduced that, if suffering for Blacks (who Black liberation theologians have aligned with the suffering of the Israelites in Biblical text) is necessary for redemption, then God may very well be a White racist. Therefore, God cannot be located within Black healing.³⁴ However, this is not the conviction of many Black Christians as they believe that God is essential in their daily lives.

²⁸ Floyd-Thomas et al. *Black Church Studies*, 9–26.

²⁹ Anthony Pinn, "Black Theology" in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 15–26.

³⁰ James H. Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?" *Cross Currents* 27, no. 2 (1977): 147.

³¹ Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church," 147.

³² James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969).

³³ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

³⁴ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

Unlike William Jones' theology, Dyson, West, Kanye and many other Black Americans, believe that God can be located in Black faith. Christianity or Christian theology is a theology based upon liberation. That does not come into being without an oppressed people; it is within this context that Cone situates Black theology. It is with this theological premise that the politics of Black circumstances and conditions are worked out. Because White people have subjected and created a suffering disposition for Black people, Black people begin to locate themselves with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible or the people of God who were subjected by the Egyptians. There's no Black theology as we have come to know it as God being on the side of the oppressed if there is no Black theodicy, caused by White supremacy and theology. Black Theology and or religiosity serves as a theology of last resort to hope—or survival theology. Black communities spend most of its time trying to survive physically, psychologically, spiritually and economically in their daily lives.

Black sacred worldview holds the apostolic witness of the previous generations within the community serving as Truth. Therefore, it is understandable when Kanye puts his trust in his mother's witness that "only Jesus can save us," as opposed to his own witness of God's liberative nature. "The genius of our black foremother and forefathers was to create a powerful buffer to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip the black fold with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness."³⁵ These buffers, that West speaks of are what Cone calls survival theology and what Kanye's mother taught him about Jesus' redemptive powers. Privileging his mama, though he does not know for certain whether Jesus has redeemable qualities, he trusts that she is correct in her declaration. This is why, though God may or may not have worked over these twelve years between albums, Kanye asserts that "Jesus Walks" is living and operating, even if he cannot see it. In similar regard, an ultralight beam, or direct communication tool from humans to God is existing in the "God dream."

"But Most of all We at War with Ourselves": Human Agency of God

Kanye West, like academicians and theorists, does not provide concrete answers to conceptions of theodicy, rather he takes action; doing what he can to meet circumstances where they are. Thusly, in action he refutes nihilism, for without hope that something can be changed there is no redemptive acts that can be made. Through his music, Kanye provides redemptive agency to combat theodicy. His action enacts hope. He laments a bit more ring stronger in an attempt to challenge God as opposed to believing that God will act on his behalf, as earlier declared as a proclamation and conviction of his mother. When writing "Jesus Walks" Kanye's mother was alive and served as an inspiration. It would not be asinine to think that after the passing of his mother, her faith in God left with her—transitioning his faith in God's salvific actions to his own. This is Kanye's answer to God not helping the way he saw fit, not unlike philosophical thinkers that had to intervene. If he is to intervene as human, then he

³⁵ West, *Race Matters*, 24.

transcends to God in doing something about the suffering – blurring the lines of self and God.

Cone believes Black faith locates God as one who identifies with oppression. To locate God in suffering positions God to be against poor, Black, gay and other oppressed communities. Another implication would be that God is not all powerful and/or all good. If so, God would not allow such a thing to take place. And for those suggesting God loves humanity so much that God allows free will, it would imply that God loves us into human suffering, which is hard to digest as well. Therefore, in relation to human suffering – unrelated to natural disasters – humans have created evil. God has no role in the suffering – the creation or liberation thereof.

“End My Holy War”: Conclusion

Has Kanye’s holy war ended? While on the surface, Kanye’s recent outbursts of not voting in the U.S. Presidential election and exclaiming that if he were to have voted he would have voted for Donald Trump, seems antithetical to his consciousness of Black theodicy and Trump’s policies, seeks to perpetuate Black suffering. However, what if the war is over and nihilism “won”? If this were the case, Kanye’s recent outbursts, canceling of his Saint Pablo tour, and admittance to the hospital for mental concerns would be in line with succumbing to pressures of having to hopefully act in a space that has created and sustained Black suffering.

Kanye’s recent antics do not mean that we cannot learn from his warring. *Ultralight beam*, with the collaboration with Kelly Price, Kirk Franklin and Chance The Rapper, serves as a plea for Kanye West. The *Ultralight beam* is the confession that God is still there, still good and still on the side of the oppressed. Kanye says these words as if to stir up his faith and remind himself of God’s redeemable characteristics. This shows us that faith is fluid and war has casualties. Sometimes faith is high and at other times it is low or maybe even depleted, but Kanye’s actions of composing a last will call, if you will, in “*Ultralight Beam*” to proclaim God’s goodness, showcases his willingness to fight.

Action prohibits stagnation. If Kanye can continue to make music and call on gospel artists to work alongside him, so can we act and collaborate with others who may uphold ethics that we find slipping within ourselves. This is not to suggest stagnation will never occur; it suggests that we have record of fighting and living through the fight of theodicy and nihilism.

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Appendix A: Kanye West's "Jesus Walks" Lyrics

Order, huh
Yo, we at war
We at war with terrorism, racism, but
most of all we at war with ourselves
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me, with me, with
me, with me, with me)
You know what the Midwest is?
Young and Restless
Where restless niggas might snatch ya
necklace
And next these niggas might jack ya
Lexus
Somebody tell these niggas who Kanye
West is
I walk through the valley of Chi where
death is
Top floor of the view alone will leave
you breathless
Try to catch it, it's kinda hard
Getting choked by detectives yeah,
yeah, now check the method
They be asking us questions, harass, and
arrest us
Saying "We eat pieces of shit like you
for breakfast!"
Huh! Y'all eat pieces of shit? What's the
basis?
We ain't goin' nowhere, but got suits
and cases
A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis
My Mama used to say only Jesus can
save us
Well Mama, I know I act a fool
But I'll be gone 'til November, I got
packs to move, I hope
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down

(Jesus Walks with me)
The only thing that I pray is that my feet
don't fail me now (I want Jesus)
(Jesus Walks)
And I don't think there is nothing I can
do now to right my wrongs
(Jesus Walks with me)
I want to talk to God, but I'm afraid
because we ain't spoke in so long
(I want Jesus)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down
The only thing that I pray is that my feet
don't fail me now
And I don't think there is nothing I can
do now to right my wrongs
I want to talk to God, but I'm afraid
because we ain't spoke in so long, so
long
So long
(Jesus Walks with me)
To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug
dealers even the strippers
(Jesus walks for them)
To the victims of welfare for we living in
hell here hell yeah
(Jesus walks for them)
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee
more clearly
I know He hear me when my feet get
weary
Cause we're the almost nearly extinct
We rappers are role models we rap we
don't think
I ain't here to argue about his facial
features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I'm just trying to say the way school
need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's
the way I need Jesus

So here go my single dog radio needs
this
They said you can rap about anything
except for Jesus
That means guns, sex, lies, video tape
But if I talk about God my record won't
get played
Huh?
Well let this take away from my spins
Which will probably take away from my
ends
Then I hope this take away from my sins

And bring the day that I'm dreaming
about
Next time I'm in the club everybody
screaming out
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the devil
trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me, with me, with
me)
The only thing that I pray is that me feet
don't fail me now

Appendix B: Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" Lyrics

I'm tryna keep my faith
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
This is everything
Deliver us serenity
Deliver us peace
Deliver us loving
We know we need it
You know we need it
You know we need it
That's why we need you now, oh, I
Pray for Paris
Pray for the parents
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
Everything (Thing, thing, thing)
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
So why send oppression not blessings?
Why, oh why'd you do me wrong?
(More)
You persecute the weak
Because it makes you feel so strong
(To save) Don't have much strength to
fight
So I look to the light
(War) To make these wrongs turn right
Head up high, I look to the light
Hey, cause I know that you'll make

everything alright
And I know that you'll take good care of
your child
Oh, no longer am afraid of the night
Cause I, I look to the light
When they come for you, I will shield
your name
I will field their questions, I will feel
your pain
No one can judge
They don't, they don't know
They don't know
Foot on the Devil's neck 'til it drifted
Pangaea
I'm moving all my family from Chatham
to Zambia
Treat the demons just like Pam
I mean I fuck with your friends, but
damn, Gina
I been this way since Arthur was
anteater
Now they wanna hit me with the woo
wap, the bam
Tryna snap photos of familia
My daughter look just like Sia, you can't
see her
You can feel the lyrics, the spirit coming
in braille
Tubman of the underground, come and
follow the trail
I made Sunday Candy, I'm never going
to hell
I met Kanye West, I'm never going to
fail
He said let's do a good ass job with
Chance three
I hear you gotta sell it to snatch the
Grammy
Let's make it so free and the bars so hard
That there ain't one gosh darn part you
can't tweet

This is my part, nobody else speak
This is my part, nobody else speak
This little light of mine
Glory be to God, yeah
I'mma make sure that they go where
they can't go
If they don't wanna ride I'mma still give
them raincoats
Know what God said when he made the
first rainbow
Just throw this at the end if I'm too late
for the intro
Ugh, I'm just having fun with it
You know that a nigga was lost
I laugh in my head
Cause I bet that my ex looking back like
a pillar of salt
Ugh, cause they'll flip the script on your
ass like Wesley and Spike
You cannot mess with the light
Look at lil Chano from 79th
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
Everything
I'm tryna keep my faith
But I'm looking for more
Somewhere I can feel safe
And end my holy war
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
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