

Chapter 7

Kanye West's Sonic [Hip Hop] Cosmopolitanism

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On September 2, 2005, Kanye West appeared on an NBC benefit telecast for Hurricane Katrina victims. West, emotionally charged and going off script, blurted out, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Early in his rapping career and fresh off the critically acclaimed sophomore album *Late Registration*, West thrusts himself into the public eye—debatably either on accident or purposefully—as a seemingly budding cultural-political pundit. For the audience, West’s growing popularity and visibility as a rapper automatically translated his concerns into a statement on behalf of all African Americans. West, however, quickly shies away from being labeled a leader, disclaiming his outburst as a personal opinion. In retrospect, West states: “When I made my statement about Katrina, it was a social statement, an emotional statement, not a political one” (Scaggs, 2007). Nevertheless, his initial comments about the Bush administration’s handling of Katrina positioned him both as a producer of black cultural expression and as a mediator of said blackness. It is from this interstitial space that West continued to operate moving forward, using music—and the occasional outburst—to identify himself as transcending the expectations placed upon his blackness and masculinity.

West utilizes music to tread the line between hip-hop identity politics and his own convictions, blurring discourses through which race and gender are presented to a (inter)national audience. It is important to note that hip-hop serves doubly as an intervention of American capitalism and of black agency. Hip-hop’s attraction abroad remains attached to its roots as a voice for oppressed groups. Tropological overlaps of trauma and prejudices about bodies of color—that is, police brutality and poverty—speak to a broader audience than African

Americans. In the same breadth, hip-hop is also a vehicle for understanding (American) blackness as a hyper-commodity. West grounds his international experiences afforded by his success as a rapper and producer within localized American hip-hop to negotiate his blackness and experiences as a cultural commodity. Thus, West's manipulation of sound allows him to engage hip-hop from a cosmopolitan perspective, a position of privilege and excess frequently doted in commercial rap.

Jon Caramonica's description of West highlights his complexities as a cosmopolitan figure:

No rapper has embodied hip-hop's often contradictory impulses of narcissism and social good quite as he has, and no producer has celebrated the lush and ornate quite as he has. He has spent most of his career in additive mode, figuring out how to make music that's majestic and thought-provoking and grand-scaled. And he's also widened the genre's gates, whether middle-class values or high-fashion and high-art dreams (Caramonica 2013).

As Caramonica points out, West's apt negotiation of oppositional experiences situates him as a privileged figure within hip-hop. He utilizes the criticism and fears surrounding his blackness—and his mouth—as cornerstones of his catalog. However, West departs from hip-hop's stiff emphasis on a local homesite as a space of negotiating one's identity politics. His personal conventions and creative complexity allow him to seamlessly move between hip-hop and broader popular music aesthetics seen and heard in other genres such as progressive rock, electronica, and trip hop. For example, West calls upon rappers such as Common, Twista, and Chief Keef to sustain his sonic and creative alliance with Chicago while pulling inspiration from European musical influences such as Daft Punk and Kraftwerk to establish himself on an international music stage. It is West's meticulous use of local and international music that positions him as a (sonic) cosmopolite. Where witty lyrics fall short, West picks up the slack with his manipulation of sound vis-à-vis sampling or intricate instrumentation. Whether a full-bodied orchestra or the stark and desolate use of 808 bass kicks and percussion, West uses sound to capture his emotional vulnerability and relay it to his audience. Because West, as Caramonica aptly describes him, is “above all, a technician, obsessed with sound,” there is a need to explore his catalog of work through the perspective of a sound study. A sonic analysis of West's work allows for the conflicting and oppositional popular cultural discourses through which West expresses himself to simultaneously coexist.