

## Preface

### **The Cultural Impact of Kanye West**

*A Preface to the Anthology by Julius Bailey*

*The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* includes critical essays that highlight the importance of the artist in the study of Hip Hop, Culture, English Literature, Philosophy, Gender, and the Africana/African American experience.

This project is divided into three sections that will guide readers through analytical approaches, theoretical frameworks, and pedagogical strategies required for reading and teaching Kanye in the classroom. The only way to study Kanye, according to Rhymefest, is to study history:

Like we have to study the movement where people come from. . . Well, for him [Kanye] it starts with Dr. Donda West and then it extends to the Chicago experience, then it expands to his affiliations. Who does he affiliate himself with and why? And I think that's what's important for academia. . . well; I think it's more important. Maya Angelou said, "It's a shame that the people I write my books for, may never read them." And when she said that, it was profound for me.<sup>1</sup>

On another level, the function of this collection of essays is to give students, especially the college student, a lesson in history and its three-dimensional character: past, present, and future.

#### **Kanye's Cosmo**

The cultural theorist Harold Bloom (1973) writes in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, "Poetic influence. . . always proceeds by a misreading. . . an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence. . . is a history

of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism (30).” With a noteworthy reputation as a versatile “beatmaker” and innovative producer for Roc-a-Fella Records, Kanye West encountered major obstacles when he decided to shift from music producer to recording artist. West was initially considered unmarketable as a rap artist due to his clean-cut and seemingly soft image in a musical genre that celebrates a collective of street-wise hardcore rappers.

When he finally burst into the music industry as a solo performer in 2004 with his ground-breaking album, *The College Dropout*, West filled an as-yet-unnoticed void in rap music and hip-hop culture. The Hip-hop audience, apparently tiring of an endless string of interchangeable gangster rappers, found Kanye West’s college boy image and intellectual musical narrative a refreshing change. Rhymefest was not surprised at this as he cites Kanye’s mom as heavily influencing the breadth of the rapper’s voice:

So what she did was say “Hey, you know, I think it would sound better if you kind of moved into the realm of. . .talking about. . .what means something to you, and your family life, and not just. . .money and not just this and that.” And what’s interesting is when she would talk like that, Kanye would stop everything and look at her like God was speaking.<sup>2</sup>

West’s debut album was a critical and commercial success making him an overnight sensation, in high demand not only as a producer, but also as a recording artist.

Despite his continuing success as a solo performer, and fashion and cultural icon, Kanye West has struggled to establish a consistent and concrete persona or branding image in the American public sphere. While his music industry contemporaries, Jay-Z, T.I., Lil’ Wayne, and several others have effectively carved-out recognizable hip-hop brands, West’s brand is craftily

chameleon as it shifts and changes. His public and professional image is sometimes at war with his own highly publicized personal demons or self-perceived defects.

After about a six-year stint as a producer in the industry, Kanye, within a relatively short period beginning in 2003, has wrestled through multiple representations of his public self, his perceived image, and his self-selected branding. He has veered wildly from the clean-cut good guy to angry militant activist, from fashionable lady's man to eccentric ego-driven artist, and to bad boy wannabe thug. His recent incarnation as one-half of an entertainment power couple, with reality television star Kim Kardashian, reinforces West's place in the public imagination and marketplace. More often than not, however, Kanye West's shifts in public brand are not so much driven by changes in the music industry or by market demands, but more by West himself. He seems to be deeply dissatisfied with his well-established position as one of the most talented and critically acclaimed artists in rap music. He appears determined to become not only a larger-than-life personality in comparison to his current contemporaries in rap music, but also a more memorable and marketable public brand than the most well-known icons in hip-hop—Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. West's unyielding quest for a particular kind of brand identity suggests that he seeks a kind of public-figure status like music icons, Prince, Madonna, and the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. Such a position has arguably eluded most hip-hop artists.

*The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* is a study of the artist within a philosophical framework that intersects with his brand. The freedom of the artist is somewhat appropriated by the public in the marketplace. The public who identify with the artist's message feel a sense of ownership that the artist himself cannot escape. The artist who is able to embrace fame while maintaining the power to control his or her public face becomes iconic. However, this position is imaginary. If we consider the late Michael Jackson, then we understand how fragile an iconic

position is when brand is at stake. Jackson was unable to control his public image thereby unable to construct and reconstruct his brand. Conversely, West's human elasticity allows for nonracial positioning of virtues and values often associated with the quest for success, a positioning that Jackson failed to master.

Kanye's corpus is of interest to cultural theorists for his challenges to racial stereotypes, and social structures. Further, his worldview can be seen through the lens of a picaresque novel where the reader encounters a rogue character that uses his wit to overcome follies in a world that is always undermining him. The picaresque worldview in America is exemplified by Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. In Kanye West's hands, the book would have "Nigger Jim"<sup>3</sup> talk as if he were able to claim his agency over the author. West adopts this picaresque attitude in his sophomore album *Late Registration*, in his song "Crack Music," in his next album *Graduation* in the songs "Good Morning" and "I Wonder," and in *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* with "Gorgeous" and "Power"; with their references to Malcolm X.<sup>4</sup>

Kanye, much like the philosopher Diogenes,<sup>5</sup> is sprinting in broad daylight with a torch in search of credibility in the form of humanity. Each song is what we encounter as we run with Kanye on his race. What we are asked to understand in our journey with him is that the human race has a recent history of violence from world wars to racial lynching, from uprisings and revolutions in Africa, the Middle East, and South America to youth violence in his hometown of Chicago and other urban areas. We take a walk with the bastards of Marquis de Sade: those males exercising unremitted violence against their mothers and their daughters behind closed domestic doors and open microphones. Kanye contiguously gives voice against both the tacit and blatant attacks upon Black maleness that seek to render an essentialized ontology of it as pathological, and that dismisses the analytical violence that these micro and macro aggressions

create within and outside of the Black community. Engaging in a Kanye song is often a free-for-all of violence, porn, horror, gangster proclivities, and revisited memoirs from pimps, prostitutes, and intellectuals alike serving tragically as lament that unbalances the psyche yet elucidates amusement. . A careful look at Kanye's work recapitulates the Du Boisian question of being seen as a problem<sup>6</sup> and in Richard Wright fashion, brashly revolts against Black man's acceptance of an identity as a menace to society.<sup>7</sup>

For Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, the child wears the mask of the comedian attempting to make sense of the world, yet for the adult the tragedy is realized in our inability to take possession of the world. Kanye asserts from his first album, *College Dropout*, to his most recent, *Yezzus*, a a complex child-like, yet sophisticated nihilistic analysis where there are no social guidelines to help us cope with inequities and racism. As adults, our lives become a full-blown tragedy primarily because the expectation is that we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that follies come with a price and they are burdens we cannot evade. Thus, the family structure is essential in its ability to be a buffer between the child and society so that the child can experience the world in its multifaceted nature and learn to develop a character, personality, and attitude to wear in order to face the world for the rest of his or her life. The ideal cannot be actualized by everyone. So we understand through Morrison's work that what is tragic about youthful comedy is the ignorance toward the experiences of the parents in their search for approval and love. Parents are acutely aware that the ability to create freedom for youth comes with tragic responsibility. It is this same disposition that is Kanye's cosmos in his music. He is a jester in the form of the child attempting to come to grips with the world through the memories he shares with society. It is through the tragedy of the duality of freedom and responsibility and the inability to reconcile them in adult time and space that we share in Kanye's story.

Kanye's life embodies art. Rhymefest puts it this way: "Some people, when they look at Kanye's life, hate him, or they love him, and it affects how they feel about his music. You know, he's a living piece of art. He just is."<sup>8</sup> Kanye West primarily uses music that provides what essayist Albert Murray (1976) called "the blues impulse"<sup>9</sup> in his collection titled *Stomping the Blues*. It is one of the most universal antidotes of the human experience we have that combats misery and sustains hope. The American blues is not limited to Black "folk" but provides to all an existential response to the death shudder of misery, failure, loathing, feeling unloved, and the schism between the American dream and the attempt to reach it. Kanye's blues was birthed in the American South in Georgia and then migrated to Chicago where it was reborn as urban blues. The blues are like Saturday night gospel and like the character Levee in August Wilson's (1982) play *Ma Rainey Black Bottom*;<sup>10</sup> we must learn to stomp the blues before they muffle our voices. Hip Hop is the most misunderstood arbiter of this blues-like condition and, at its best, is one way we enter into dialogue with the world and people around us. All instruments lead back to the natural instrument of the human body—the voice. Humans come to know the world through two modes; the world as experience belongs to the "I-It" world, whereas the basic "I-You" establishes the world of relation.<sup>11</sup> Yet, since we are surrounded by a world with other human beings, the "I-You" experience takes primacy. Hip Hop is the predominant I-You relationship and the mode of dialogue between artists and fans, fans with other fans, critics and fans, artists with critics, and artist with artists. Hip Hop is a visceral art form that comes from the bellies of global youth in search of Dionysian wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Hip Hop, much like its jazz predecessor, is an improvisation of the eclectic music scene that gave birth to it. Yet, what is distinct about it is the multilayered form of storytelling the emcee wields on tracks. The language can be brash, full of

braggadocio, violent, sexist, and tragic partly because the genre is derived from extending the worldliness of language (in context).

Hip Hop solicits extraction of beauty from the ugly, a perquisition of telos in drugs, prostitution, death, poverty, absence of education, and faulty upbringing. But what kind of I-You relation do we expect to hear from kids attempting to find meaning beyond the nihilistic conditions that urban youth, that Kanye likes to refer to, find themselves in and how do we come to deal with the worldview of these youth without dismissing them as arch examples of vulgarity? Thus, we assume that language as a homogeneous mode of expression in any culture carries a homogeneous code of ethics that the subjects speaking that language articulate. Unfortunately, this is why the genre of tragedy is often seen to be universal as the code of ethics we assume to be part and parcel of the world as a divine order has not been experienced the same by everyone. What we see in the tragic figure is one who is cursed and thus justified in cursing the world. Since much of the poetics Hip Hop uses include language some refer to as vulgar, in most respects it realistically communicates, ranging from the linguistically plebian to the sophisticated, how one relates to the world. In a 2012 interview with The Fader magazine<sup>1</sup>, Kanye said it clearly and introspectively, "I'm like a vessel, and God has chosen me to be the voice and the connector" It seems therefore that hip-hop in general, and for Kanye West in particular, has a license to follow in the trajectory of American obscenity in the public sphere that evolved from comedians such as Lenny Bruce, down to Red Foxx, Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Chris Rock, and Dave Chapelle, while simultaneously tapping into a speculative realm that dreams for human decency and equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Mancia, P (2012) Kanye West: I'm Amazing. <http://www.thefader.com/2012/11/29/kanye-west-im-amazing/>  
Accessed: August 11, 2013 Read more: <http://www.thefader.com/2012/11/29/kanye-west-im-amazing/#ixzz2k9vM0S8f>

## **The Challenge of the Project**

We take for granted the comedian's ability to make us laugh, the poet's ability to inspire, the orator's ability to move us, so that the issue of expressing oneself to others while articulating individuality and the experience of belonging to a particular group is often pushed to extremes. Should a poet be political, entertaining, and inspirational? Hip Hop scholars face a challenge of interpretation—listening to formulation of a text. The challenge is threefold. How do we interpret the voice we hear layered under emotions augmented by instrumentation? How do we describe the use of language and conjecture of words that not only direct the song but also serve as a narrative for the listener? How do we underscore the environment and the silence of language to fully explicate it? The distinction between fiction and testimony is the entry point for the Hip Hop scholar, as we maneuver through the world of the voice on the album while being cognizant of the demarcation between being a fan and a critical listener/scholar.

*The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* examines the content and forms of Hip-hop expression as well as the assessment of performance, lyrics, brand, and media images. The critical essays are interdisciplinary. They are studies of the impact of Kanye West by dynamic teachers and proven facilitators who seek to provide a blueprint for curriculum modules for fellow teachers, youth-group directors, and other youth influencers to engage in an organized learning space, utilizing several fields of study.

*Section 1 Revisiting the Pharmakon: Artistic Gifts / Human Complexities* provides accessibility to this project that broadens Hip Hop Studies. This section opens with one of the most respected cultural theorists in America, Mark Anthony Neal, as he engages the reader in a cultural history of soul music and Kanye West's foray into its legacy. Akil Houston takes on the

issue of genius in Art and wrestles with the public's many references to Kanye as an artistic genius. David J. Leonard, as he most often and deftly does, challenges those who deny the insurgency in political protests that are not conventionally packaged in the expectations of the dominant white culture. He also raises the question of whose consciousness gets to be deemed as respectable within dominant media discourses. Contributors like visual artist John Jennings and Reynaldo Anderson take us into the Afro-futuristic world by critiquing the digital-mediated cultural production of the visual images and lyrics produced within the artist's videos and demonstrate how the power of software is creating new spaces where cultural forms collide or coexist. Heidi Lewis provides a very accessible reading of the Kanye-trilogy (*College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *Graduation*) and how the poetics impact society and the historical tradition of black musical expression.

*Section 2: Unpacking Hetero-normativity and Complicating Race and Gender* situates Kanye's image within a tradition of inquiry using race, masculinity, and hetero-normativity as various points of departure. This section demands that the reader delve deeper into some, possibly untapped mental spaces. Philosopher Tommy Curry provides what may be the most polarizing essay of the project. Never deterred by conformity, he argues that Kanye West is adamant that Black men should be the interpreters of the Black male experience, and as such responds not only to Black and but also to white feminist mythologies of Black masculinity. Sha'Dawn Battle presents a critique of Kanye West arguing that he "at times challenges stereotypes of the construction of blackness," while simultaneously conforming to a hip-hop misogynistic status quo in his treatment of women, thereby "questioning the authenticity of the revolutionary discourse he offers." Tim'm West's essay takes a decidedly homo-centric approach as an effort to focus on the precise nature of anxiety produced when Hip Hop artists such as

Kanye are confronted with questions about their relationship to gay men. While Regina Bradley suggests that West reflects a type of sonic cosmopolitanism that uses sampling and sound to illuminate his views that may conflict with the normal impulses of black masculinity seen and heard in commercial hip-hop. These discussions aim for more carefully developed arguments and a circumspection of popularized views of race, class, gender and identity theories.

*Section 3: Theorizing the Aesthetic, the Political and the Existential* aims to focus on arguments that expand the theoretical framework of studies of Hip-hop. It is the cornerstone of the work I do in Hip Hop, namely, providing tested ways to teach Kanye (and by default, Hip Hop) in the classroom. Literature aficionados will be dazzled by teacher and artist A. D. Carson's essay where he creatively, and in a prosaic fashion, fancies himself as Nick Carraway.<sup>13</sup> In his imagination, Jay Gatsby<sup>14</sup> is Kanye West. Monica R. Miller suggests we bypass unnecessary debates about moralism and the "rightful" place of religion as confined within, and tied to, fabricated normative notions of "good," "truth," and "value" and begin to see these notions as products in the competing marketplace of social and cultural interests. I provide a humble reading of Kanye and his quasi-Nietzschean sensibilities. Nicholas Krebs suggests that West continues to master the meritocratic merry-go-round with a pragmatic and relative form of humanism while Dawn Boeck treats three artistic periods of West and proposes that in each the aesthetic products and West's lived reality become a global commodity. She makes the claim that West's dynamic artistic platform is created through various social, historical, and cultural influences, which have empowered him to construct future visions, or models of modernity

Mikhail Bakhtin (1982), in his book *Dialogic Imagination*, describes four criteria to view the use of language in the novel, two being dialogic and heteroglossia. In Hip-hop, the dialogic can be heard through the sampling of other music while heteroglossia can be heard through puns,

irony, and satire, ad-libs of other artist's work or the real world. The challenge to Hip Hop scholars is compounded by the reverence the academy has for writers over musicians so that an attempt to explicate a philosophy for music has to run through literature then to the music as opposed to grappling with the music itself as a literal critic would with a book, digging through its allusions, characters, motifs, contradictions, reverence, and the author's world-view. This study is not a class on Beethoven where students might expect to engage in the music and its complexities by playing the piano to get a feel for the song. Hip-Hop studies the voice of the poet as an instrument and we give credence to sound. To that end, Hip Hop, in the academy, is often regarded as material for philosophical and sociological study rather than a subject for the music department. Yet the Hip Hop scholarship in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, just like the Hip Hop artist, is versed by various academics, music professionals, and cultural connoisseurs using different cultural and theoretical approaches. These chapters will engage you, the reader, with actual studio producers, university professors, poets and rappers, journalists and visual artists in an effort at creating a democratic space for learning and Socratic engagement and provide a substantiated claim for the burgeoning area of academic inquiry in response to those who resist "academic hip-hop" as a field of study..

Hip Hop scholars, much like producers, avid fans, or backpackers,<sup>15</sup> must roll up their sleeves and dig down into the volumes of the music that inspire us. Hip Hop scholars learn to appreciate the poets and the conditions they attempt to articulate, even when their work doesn't fit nicely into our canons, so that our best work comes from speaking on artists who influence us. The medium is equally important. We have to take the question of technology seriously. From new technology comes a new sense of being. Books transformed our sense of time the way we think of character and their emotions. Movies transformed what we see and don't see in the

world, and now the Internet transformed what we know and what is still to be discovered, waiting for us like artifacts in digital clouds.

Here is the crisis for our generation. If books have come under attack by realist critics, movies faulted for feigning reality with talking robots and aliens, and the Internet slammed for its vast and uncensored knowledge, what serves us best as a mirror of our condition? Or precisely, how will we speak about the conditions of our bodies and the moods we embody in the technological world we find ourselves in? With the fight over what constitutes the appropriate knowledge within our institutional walls, books, movies, the Internet, no wonder education has become less relevant for a contemporary-generation feelings cheated by pricey fragments that are qualified by a diploma. Yet one of this generation's most influential figures, Kanye West, a college dropout from American Art Academy and Chicago State University, explicitly expresses his discontent with US educational practices. But before we dismiss Kanye West as being egoistic or pompous, we must excavate his catalogue and uncover the best of what we can learn from him even in his most outrageous escapades. He extends the trajectory of hip-hop beyond the comic style of Biz Markie,<sup>16</sup> and artistically situates himself among the late African American painters Romare Bearden,<sup>17</sup> Jean-Michel Basquiat,<sup>18</sup> and the New York painter and social activist Keith Haring.<sup>19</sup> These experiences provided a springboard to his worldview and continue to propel his career. Sit back and enjoy *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Chicago Rapper Che "Rhymefest" Smith. \*\*this was a personal interview specifically for this project. It was taken by phone on July 15 and 23, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Nigger Jim" is a freedom seeker and a friend of Huck's in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

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- <sup>4</sup> The chorus to power is a re-articulation of a famous line in the 1993 Spike Lee movie *Malcolm X*, in which a police officer says to another, while watching hundreds of Nation of Islam gather, that this much power should not be in the hands of one person.
- <sup>5</sup> Diogenes of Sinope was a philosopher and cynic in ancient Greece. Lore claims he would walk around in the daytime with a torch looking for wise and honest men.
- <sup>6</sup> Found in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903) Chapter 1, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." 1995 New York, NY: Penguin Group
- <sup>7</sup> Menace to society should be taken both literally as well as an equivocation on the 1993 Allen and Alvin Hughes aka "Hughes Brothers" of the same name.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Chicago Rapper Che "Rhymefest" Smith.
- <sup>9</sup> Term influenced by Albert Murray's, *Stomping the Blues*.
- <sup>10</sup> Levee is a young trumpeter, in prominent playwright, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* navigating his way in a band of older members attempting to articulate his (blue) condition with new music.
- <sup>11</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Charles Scribners, 1970; 36th edition (1970) pg. 56. For Buber, the I-You relationship is through language, or as he argues, language creates an inter-subjective. In other words, I cannot know how a cup feels on the inside when I pour hot water in it, but I can know what another human feels on the inside when he drinks hot tea and explains to me how that heat feels. Each experience is meaningful, drinking too hot water forces one to be cautious in future encounters with it.
- <sup>12</sup> According to Craig Hovey in *Nietzsche and Theology* Dionysian wisdom "is knowledge without grasping, without mastery . . .the power necessary to endure reality," 31.
- <sup>13</sup> Nick Carraway is the narrator in *The Great Gatsby*.
- <sup>14</sup> Jay Gatsby is in search for a past in the present, a reliving of a historical euphoric moment.
- <sup>15</sup> The urban dictionary defines a Hip Hop backpacker as "A snob who prides him/herself on being a fan of all the hip-hop you never heard of. Considers any artist not selling CD's out of a Backpack on the train a 'sellout'. Usually a college-aged suburban kid of any race (dreadlocks optional) who discovered his consciousness at school and dives blindly into underground hip-hop and hates all commercially successful styles of rap music, not realizing that the artists he worships are trying to sell records too."
- <sup>16</sup> Twentieth-century American rapper, DJ, and beatboxer, who is also credited to have set in motion the legal challenges against rappers for copyright infringement for his (mis)use of Gilbert O'Sullivan's 1972 number one hit "Alone Again. . . (Naturally)" in his own "Alone Again" (1991).
- <sup>17</sup> The late Romare Bearden, one of America's most popular African American painters, was also a cartoonist and collagist. One of his famous works that is widely found is "Jammin' at the Savoy."

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<sup>18</sup> The late Jean Michel Basquiat, painter, social commentator, and graffiti artist, has been repopularized, now within Hip Hop, thanks primarily to Jay Z who has quoted him in “Ain’t I” and “We Kings” and many references are found in his newest release *Magna Carta Holy Grail* as well as his 2011 book, *Decoded*.

<sup>19</sup> The late Keith Haring was an American graffiti artist and inspired lore from subway stations to later be exhibited in museums.