

Even when I'm bragging, I'm Being Sincere: Kanye West's African American Parrhesiastic Ethos
& Burkean Tragi-Comic Identification (Unmastered version)¹

People always try to be so fucking perfect and I think there is beauty in imperfection. Damn Your Grandma isn't perfect, but you still love her! People should embrace their flaws. I'm not the perfect artist, but the imperfection is what represents the world. —*Kanye West*

In the short 20 odd years of hip-hop studies, there has been a fight to persuade outside audiences that hip-hop is vital, respectable, and productive to study, yet most disregard hip-hop's humor. For the dedicated hip-hop fan, Eminem is not Eminem without his sense of humor, Jay-Z isn't the sly hustler without his sarcastic wit, and most notably Kanye West's Dave Chappelle meets slick rick braggadocio/court jester comedic performance. Yet humor in hip-hop predates hip-hop's social commentary or consciousness. The rhyming raunchy comedy of dolomite, Blowfly and Dick Gregory predate early rap and are forbearers of the art form (Moon, 2008). America's introduction to hip-hop, Rappers Delight is a panoply of funny anecdotes that move from braggadocio to joking on grandma's poor cooking. Or Run DMC's early hits "It's Tricky" "You talk to much" were schoolyard insults put to rhythmic pentameter and percussion or the incomparable Fat Boys or the early frat hop of the Beastie Boys. Fast forward to the 90s and what Krims (2002) calls comedy rappers such as Biz Markie, Redman or the comedic criticism of contemporary rapper Kanye West who uses comedy to critique black essentialism, systemic racism, and fat girls in the same breath.

¹ This is an abridged version of Antoine Hardy's dissertation *When I Rhyme it's Sincerely Yours: Kenneth Burke and Hip-hop Heroes*. It is not a final version by any means so I appreciate any comments or suggestions. Antoine Hardy is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Communication at Saginaw Valley State University

Kanye West is a multi-millionaire star, a late night punch line and a spokesperson who is valued by black communities for “speaking up” about the treatment of black people a week before his album *Late Registration* is released, challenging hip-hop homophobia, or critiquing rappers who brag about murder as Chicago’s murder rate skyrockets in the late 2000s. How West balances this *parrhesiastes* status, the rhetor /speaker willing to engage in *parrhesia* the enactment of bold speech with risk of significant loss, with his successful reality becomes the crux of his work. How he persuades audiences to identify with his failings yet trust his sincerity claims of commitment to a black community, is my focus in this essay. My theory is that his use of a tragic-comic frame, topoi of black identity (authenticity, blackness, community) and *parrhesiate* ethic of sincerity are his recipe to negotiate the African American dialectic of *African collectivism and American individualism*. West is not the only rapper to perform this function by any means, but his success and position offer a rich case study for these tensions of identity.

My dissertation examines much of West’s work, but this essay will hone in on his latest album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, his comeback album after his bold speech praising Beyonce’s *Single Ladies* Video and upstaging Taylor Swift, saw him lose what Nunley frames as the potential risk of outspoken *parrhesia*, as risking a loss of legitimacy, resources, and influence. In looking at West’s album, we can view his narrative of negotiating his individual and communal desires as an exemplar of Burkean identification, being joined yet separate to a community, being a spokesperson but someone with individual joys and desires.

One of Kanye’s chief influences are Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock (Who appears on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*) who have been described as post soul artist who “ride the wave” between challenging and maintaining black cultural representations and common topoi.

Kanye explains in an early *Jet* magazine interview (2004) that his identity is that of a ‘class clown’ a guise predicated on being a poet with a therapeutic mission, when he states, “The class clown thing is kind of an act. I would compare my style to Dave Chappelle, because I might bring up serious issues that I cover up with a joke so that we laugh to “keep from crying.” Thus, he speaks to tragic-comic style that has kept black folks sane and also he explains that in the context of Super hustlers and gangsters of hip-hop, that fans could also “relate to a regular guy who also makes mistakes.”

West indicates a symbolic motive based on not his magnification, but as Bobbit notes it reflects Burke’s notion that the comic technique exalts man’s imperfections as noble, via the process of relating one’s truths; i.e. identification. Kanye’s flaws are his calling card, whether admitting to materialism on “all Falls down”, falling for conniving women on “Golddigger” or eschewing heaven for riches on “Cant Tell me Nothing.” From a rhetorical criticism standpoint I posit that Kanye’s work is dedicated to discussing the dialectical tensions of black post soul identity and identification, specifically through a mix of tragic observation, comic awareness and *tragic-comic correctives*.

Chiefly, West’s situation is not new or dynamic. Willam Van De Burg in his brilliant study on black musicians as cultural heroes notes how they must enact a negotiation between being above and more learned than their audience-- going to places they never dreamed of so they can dream—yet maintaining a communal connection. In regards to hip-hop Hudson highlights the paucity of critical discussions of the use of black tropes such as comedy in hip-hop music, as the above statements are often mentioned but rarely interrogated. Moreover, much of the recent research on post soul media focuses on the work of black comedians and

satirist as indicative of the hip-hop generation who negotiate their individual and communal aspects by juxtaposing and questioning norms of black identity, but never actually study the rappers they apparently are informed by.

In this essay I argue that rapper Kanye West's rhetorical performance of identity an enactment of an ethos of sincerity acts as a nexus of these intersecting strains of black rhetorical practices: rap and comedy; and their adjoining baggage of black identity, individual vs community, and most notably the notion of *parrhesia* or speaking truth to power. In the next section I connect the black comedic tradition, hip-hop and *parrhesia* in a brief overview.

Tragi-Comic Framing Parrhesia, and Identification

Historically black comedians personify the dialectic of black identity; as the individual comedian relates his personal mistakes, foibles, miscalculations as a means to critique the world at large. Watkins work on black comedians explains that the use of cultural enthymemes, topoi of black identity and style to identify with an imagined black audience citing similar experiences shaped a shared sense of kinship for black audiences that is notable in times of transition. For instance, Tolson writes that Pryor's brilliance in the 70s and early 80s was that he was so open about his mistakes and insecurities and the mistakes and insecurities of working class black folks. Pryor, was the proverbial tragic-comic comedian in both his own drug addled and sordid life, but also in his ability to perform that "comic resolve" as medicine for himself and his audience; sharing coming substance—spirit and emotion (Condit 1992) to a black audience. The comedian in general is noted for being outspoken. Haggins recent research on post soul comedians explains how what I term their, *parrhesia* was embraced by mainstream audiences but featured social commentary about race, gender and class usually barred from the public sphere.

This outspoken, bold, and authentic nature undergirds the commandment of not bearing false witness, but also not being scared to share inconvenient truths that may aid your audience. Thus *parrhesia* and the black comic tradition are interdependent.

In contrast to epic heroes, or the eventual martyrdom of tragic figures, comic heroes ask us to identify with their “maladjustments,” their struggle to not be the “laughingstock,” yet admitting that we all “play the fool and the laughingstock (Burke, 43). For Ralph Ellison, America’s enduring joke is that its enslaved and disenfranchised blacks, had the “comic resolve” to cultivate a comic consciousness that believes they can beat or trick the odds, as the trickster ethos of black culture is indicative of Burke’s comic frame (Karenga, Hatch)

. Linguist and black language expert Geneva Smitherman’s locates hip-hop discursive performance as an exemplar of the African trickster tradition not only for its use of comedy, but its use of *perspective by incongruity* and signifying double meanings, often in an entertaining yet educational tone that is double voiced in the same vein as say *Brer Rabbit*. Hip-hop culture is based on appropriating and incorporating these rhetorical traditions yet restructuring these traditions, using them merely for laughs, social criticism (Wheeler, 1998), storytelling, or cautionary tales. It is this tragicomic tradition, Ellison is best known for his enduring theory that black folks laugh to keep from crying, or as Burke wrote about black folks, the nations most mistreated also bless us with the best songs of joy.

In total, they note that in the 90s comic approaches were often used to as oppositional discourse, shock value as entertainment, and establishing a black identity that was self-actualized. Self-Actualization is in my opinion the chief imperative or gift of hip-hop. For artists the idea of “keep it real”, despite commodification and essentialism, always come back to representing one’s

self-hood and the music is largely based on the self-actualization of the artist's position in their community. For example, in response to the dominance of gangsta rap, alternative artists as they were once called, chiefly the Native tongue collective (De la soul, Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, Black Sheep)s. These satirists, who in rhetorical theorist Wheeler's words used subversion, comedy and strategic ambiguity to erect an alternative black identity, mocked hip-hop norms while reshaping the form, in true post soul comedic fashion. Although these artists still deployed what I term the thematic triumvirate of a black sincere identity: authenticity, blackness, and community in erecting their alternative black identities. Most notably groups such as A Tribe Called Quest, avoided the preachiness of some of their peers, conciliatory message of black unity but mocked absolutism and favored gender and class equality in black communities. Tribe called Quest would see larger success, but De La Soul's debut album *3 Feet high* and rising would use skits, complex rhymes, and scathing satire of hip-hop's materialism, treatment of women, and rigidity towards black diversity in style, thought or class.

Yet they also argued that it was "Hood thing" framing "the hood" as not just the ghetto but black environs universal—an important detail utilized by Kanye West. Kanye West on his debut opined his love for these artists, suggesting that "this called West give you flashbacks to A tribe called quest." West would employ Tribe's ethic of respect black individuality and diversity of thought yet support black unity and represent the realities of their imagined rhetorical community. In my opinion Native tongues and their later progenitors (The roots, Mos Def, Common, Little Brother) were embraced for their rhetorical sincerity, their use of *parrhesia*, speaking inconvenient truths about gender, intraracial relations, commercialism, community and hip-hop influence. A self-proclaimed student of the game, West I argue employs this 90s ethic,

with an appropriation of the black comedic tradition in his rhetoric, a use of identification “to garner acceptance” (Burke 1965, p.118) with multiple communities.

This notion of speaking truth to power is popular in African American rhetoric, most notably by Geneva Smitherman who argues that hip-hop’s dominant form of narrativizing, or testifying one’s experience hinges on the African griots responsibility to deliver harsh truths even in the guise of a trickster. Another West, the sermonic Cornel West has argued that hip-hop artists such as West speak to the reality of black bodies holding on to their tragic-comic and prophetic speech (*parrhesia*) roots while dealing with the gains and losses of a capitalist and racist society. West takes the biblical meaning of *parrhesia*, where it is employed as bold speech when Jesus challenges the Pharisees. For Dr. West *parrhesia* is a concept that describes black folks faith in *nommo*, the power of words to incite change by speaking sincerely, a form of speech that unites communities to challenge oppression.

In reference to *parrhesia* and community Judith Butler frames *parrhesia* as speaking truthfully as a means of relating one self truthfully to the present situation and to others, which for this student of Burke reads very much like his notion of rhetorical identification as being a practice of relating one self to community. For rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke language can constrain and liberate humankind and his goal was “Towards a better life” where truths could be shared to better the world. Butler, highlights how *parrhesia* is a benefit that gives the rhetor freedom and the audience connection through ‘truthful dialogue’ In black rhetorical studies Vorris Nunley’s recent work on black hush harbors frames this trope as central to black rhetoric when he explains that, *Parrhesia* requires the rhetor to put herself at risk, that could lead to loss of status, influence, resources, legitimacy...African American *parrhesiates* deploy African

American truths and knowledges..the” *parrhesiate* who is willing to *wedge (my emphasis)* African American knowledge forms and truths into the public sphere is highly valued.” This is why rappers are valued despite their endorsements, corporate relationships or mainstream acceptance.

More germane to this essay, the rub in using parrhesia and rhetoric, is that traditionally in rhetorical studies, usually seen as antithetical to rhetoric as it is not deemed strategic, it is seen as confessional especially due to the connection to Foucault. In cultural studies Foucault most notably made *parrhesia* public knowledge, although a seeming departure from his discussion of power structures and surveillance, Foucault argues that to take care of the self and the self's relationships, the *parrhesiate* believes he is in possession of the truth and must share it. Moreover, for critics of marginal identities, Foucault's notion that the *parrhesiate* is marginalized and challenges the mainstream is especially vital.

Yet Richards and Throne (2008) proclaim that the *parrhesiate* is antithetical to the professional rhetorician. In contrast I agree with Zachary Taylor's argument, that reading Foucault thoroughly and seeing his idea of resistance and counterdiscourse and specifically truth is helpful. Foucault's argument that "truth" is produced and not natural is classic postmodernism. In a rhetorical vein, Kenneth Burke aids us when he states that poetic realism has to be true in the audience mind, derived from reality but still fictive. Taylor elucidates that Foucault's concept is about the marginalized producing truths, imaginative or social, within power structures.

Thus, I argue that the concept of *parrhesia* can be applied to rhetoricians and specifically black musical rhetors. The *parrhesiastes* rapper takes a risk in speaking the truth, and I argue that West embodies Foucault's concept that a *parrhesiastes* "opens his heart and mind completely to others through his discourse." Whether he really does share everything is not the point, it's the impression, the performance, the cultural discourse of West being outspoken regardless of risk even for his most ardent critics. It's West claim that his job is to "speak the truth, for those who don't get to the other side of the Tv." (Access Hollywood, 2010). The role of commodification, economic trends, and American racism are power structures that have always constrained black voices, but the power of the word still can get out (especially in this internet age but that's another story), language still functions within power structures as counter discourses.

This ethos of *parrhesia* I argue is undergirded by a notion of sincerity, thus an a *parrhesiastes* ethos for sincerity can be found in African American speech.. Sincerity is self-reflexive performance, in that a sincere speaker is concerned that he is who he tells his community he is, per Lionel Trilling. Yet unlike Trilling this performativity does not invalidate sincerity for black audiences who recognize that masking is necessary life skill. According to John Jackson's anthropological interpretation, the performance of black sincerity is rooted in creating dialogue and having concern with sharing and acknowledging black experiences, it is an act to demonstrate kinship and credibility that the speaker cares about this relationship—the former term nodding towards Burkean identification and the later term nodding to my conception of an ethos of sincerity.

Sincerity is a responsibility of the speaker, and for the black musician it is how he convinces the audience to believe she is giving soul food, medicine, feel good tunes that aid

black folks and the world at large. The *parrhesia* attitude pushes the sincerity towards being risky or challenging speech in hip-hop and black comedy especially. Black artists, who deploy the credibility of their discourse through performative, outspoken and bold ethos of sincerity activated via rhetorical identification help black folk identify, and make sense of social barriers, inequalities and political, economic and cultural shifts in America—equipment for living. It offers faith that the powers that be can't stop our sharing of ideas and experiences; the popular culture medium of constructing one's cultural consciousness.

Hence, an ethos of sincerity is demonstrated through one's mastery of common topoi of black identity, a management of articulating one's virtues and selfless tendencies for the audience, and arguments that contend that one's rhetoric is for the good of the community. West is an exemplar of a post civil rights generation marked by their aesthetic production centered on negotiating black communal solidarity and a desire to be a free willed individual without being sell out to the race. Or as President Obama often states “to be proud to be black, dedicated to your community but not shackled by the weight of race solidarity.” It is the Ellisonian notion of witnessing the tragic realities of racist America but rendering them absurd enough to laugh at and engage a “comic resolve” to weather such calamities that I employ in my analysis. A comic frame to equip man to make sense of his losses, foibles and frustrations (Burke, 1964). Thus, how West uses his failures as practical wisdom—a marker of Aristotelian ethos---for his imagined audience.

Comedians are praised for speaking “the truth,” revealing a new way to look at something we found true in life is the work of an artist using a comic frame (Hale, 2008). A truth that taps into a “man concerned with his problems” and recognizes his humility, a poetic

truth that reduces the scope of “truth” but uses language, style and performance to relate their “social truth” to an audience (Burke, 1969, 77; Bloom 1987).

Hale, explains that Burke’s comic frame is about considering the attitudes of the audience to demonstrate a care for sustaining life and community. It is about recognizing that in Burkes term imagination and capitalist embodiments can be match together to help audiences cope with their own tensions of identity.

As a literary frame of acceptance, a comic frame is the authors or artists strategy for a man to make sense of his identity and how he fits in it, it’s a mode of identification. Yet it also allows man to repossess the world by finding humor and insight from life’s failures and frustrations. Hale highlights that a comic frame connotes a certain level of sincerity and responsibility; a comic frame demonstrate a willingness and ability to not acquiesce but to use language to challenge “the thinking and *actions of* themselves and others.” And this challenging views man as always in process—a enthractly—artist, a project in composition.” Similar to the black idiom of blues singers saying “god is still working on him.” Central to the comic frame is perspective by incongruity. Rueckert explains that a comic perspective should treat errors as an a perspective of truth and perspective by incongruity—merging categories or concepts of unlike perspectives to make something new—what Burke lectured on as moment of transcendence to make life less hopeless. This concept is tailor made for hip-hop, and Kanye’s pop culture performance pastiche of black comedy, soul music, euro dance music, pop art and traditional boom bap hip-hop. The comic frame juxtaposes through metaphor, hyperbole and fantasy common realities of the day.

Rueckert's extensive work on Burke highlights how the tragic and comic meet for burke and the misconceptions that burke prefers comedy over other frames. He explains that a comic frame is a way of dealing with the tragic realities of life; demarcating how the location of tragedy always is visited by comedy. For Ellison, tragic comic was a invocation of black humanity; a salve for the divisive notion of uplift or depiction; a view of blacks as both tragic victims but also effective tricksters who "make a way." Making one's rhetoric about the tragic losses of black life and repossessing black identity through a comic criticism.

Comedy disarms people enough to listen with new ears, says Bakhtin and comedy in hip-hop often has been used that way (Patel 1999, 1992 Wheeler). Burke (1984) argues that adopting a comic frame instills a reflexive awareness of one's world and the world around him that helps to correct imbalances in our social perspectives (Ingrham 2002). This allows for the critique of misguided policies. In relation, Jones contends that West is a "great rhetorician wrapped in a black aesthetic working in a post civil rights and challenging listners and the status quo. (Jones, 2010 47). I contend West uses his comic frame to critique and advance his "multiple truths" about African American life.

West notably argued that he was the "realest rapper" instead of the norm of gangsta rappers because " I'm the regular person. I'm a person who believes iin God. I'm a person whose dick gets hard when he looks at strippers. I drink alcohol. I drink water. I'm versed in Black history. I like nice cars. But I've ridden the train." West framed his persona as magnification of the nuanced post soul black identity. When asked what he wanted to remembered for as an artist in 2010, West cites jazz legend to make sense of his symbolic motives, "Miles Davis was once asked what he wants to be remembered for, he said "I was

black.” Regardless of how many polo shirts, or white celebrity friends, fashion shows I attend or who I date. My foundation is black. My main ingredient is being black. People KNOW Kanye is black. . . when I make my music it is to try and put wherever “we” are in a time capsule. So you can play a Kanye album and it will touch on a lot of the main things that black people in America are going through. that’s what I’m here for. (2005; 2011).”

This framing of spokesperson by Kanye speaks to the Burkean concept of identification discussed so far—the poet as spokesperson who is a part of and speaks for an imagined black community, by sizing up situations in their work. Marlowe writes that the hermeneutics of rap, demand these oral griots be more than artists but leaders who voice black experiences in an increasingly crowded public marketplace. Yet hip-hop is also about individual ambition and speaking from one’s vantage point. Likewise if you moved from projects to section 8, hood to the burbs, inner city high school to college, or from community activist to capitol hill politician; for post soul young adults this strain is all too familiar yet more complicated than the 80s. On one end venturing into places or occupations previously limited to blacks gains acclaim from varied circles of black life for “excelling” as a race, or using your assimilation to voice black concerns in white dominated spaces is also heralded and can land you a variety of black magazine covers (Kennedy, Simpson, Hooks, Neal).

Yet this interaction with the mainstream generates questions of earnestness, commitment and sincerity as imagined black audiences wonder how a black artists can maintain such a commitment, when assimilation often lead to more wealth. Prior to *MBDTF*, Kanye’s previous album *808’s and Heartbreaks* was focused on relationships, discarding his social commentary; whereas *Graduation* his breakthrough international album found West ‘dumbing down’ his lyrics

and veiling his black commentary in songs not named ‘Everything I am.’ In addition, West’s hobknobbing with fashion barons and European lifestyle appeared to be evidence that West no longer wanted to be connected to his black community from some critics. Thus, his comeback album is more than just recovering from Taylor Swift, but reaffirming a relationship, a liaison with his imagined black audience.

Kanye’s Tragic-Comic Journey:

Why I pray so hard/This is crazy God/ Just when I thought I had everything/ I lost it all-Kanye West, 2011

After drinking copious amounts of Hennessy Cognac on the red carpet, an irate Kanye West hopped on stage and interrupted 20-year-old blonde country chanteuse Taylor Swift’s “Best Female Video”, West—a friend and collaborator of Beyoncé—was outraged that her video satirized throughout popular culture that year was not the winner. West felt it was his job to speak for the fans, a drunken West respectfully—minus the tact—defiantly stated “I’mma let you finish but Beyoncé had the best video of all time”, sticking up for what he felt was the truth—although he had little to nothing invested in the song or video. Rush Limbaugh would argue this was West sticking up for black peers and haranguing white talent in the process. In my view of parrhesiastic ethos, I argue that He couldn’t help but tell truth in Foucauldian fashion.

West would later explain that “I was completely in the wrong, even if people agreed with me it was not the right time—it was Taylor’s moment (West, 2010). The *parrhesiastic* would not bow out quietly, as his press tour for *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* ramped up he snuck in more “truths” about the incident. The truth-telling spokesperson felt his individual motive reflected his audience, but was wrong in this instance, or at least in the audacious presentation. Many fans claimed to never support West again for his rude antics. In critical response, West explained that it was a neo

Emmit Till moment, “I was neo Emmitt Till’d if I can make that a verb, a media massacre for upstaging this little white girl—who um, ahem was 21 at the time.” West apologizes and mocks the hypocrisy of the incident simultaneously, later joking “I’m not the first to crash an award show, but has anyone lost more for it?”

West explained that for those not familiar with Till, the Chicago boy (see the connection) who whistled at a white woman and was killed, he felt the media was upset because of the racial dynamic of a black man threatening a white virgin, by saying something that he didn’t think would lead to such a reaction. Moreover, that like Till he had no idea the world would react in such a way, despite his extreme analogy. The savvy West indicates history as a topos of black *nomoi*, black cultural memory to employ his sincere identification with a black audience who made similar comments on blogs, websites and in barbershops. In my barbershop for example, many black men often compared Kanye’s incident to Adrien Brody’s kiss of Halle Berry was “all good,” in mainstream media; although he kissed a black woman who was married at the time, was not seen as a violation. The idea of the black brute ruining the white virginal princess *vis a vis* American film of the 20th century mixed with the reality of Emmitt Till violating this symbolic notion, allows West to employ a sideways glance at critics. Citing that he was not motivated by race, but the coverage and outrage clearly was. This prophetic speech I argue was for a black audience and his global audience who identify with his symbolic motive. Moreover while the wrong action he stands by his belief that he must be a truth teller despite the obvious risks he incurred.

West soon had to cancel his tour with pop star Lady Gaga, which he thought would bring black and gay audiences together (West 2011) lost his sponsorships, his tv licensing deals

and Louis Vuitton quit production on his exclusive sneaker. While this sounds like rich people issues, for West an artist that spends millions on studio time, samples*, multiple music videos, he has stated “Touring is my livelihood, I make little , well not little, but you no less money off of my own music.” Days later he apologized on Leno and promised to take a break and realize his job is not to tear down the world. He then took a year long hiatus as an expat working as an intern at Marc Jacobs and other fashion houses and later moving to Hawaii to record his comeback album.

West would later recant that it was the first fake thing he ever did, doing what the system wanted (West, December 2010). West explained later that artists were booed for mentioned me, on his blog and later twitter “die nigger die” was a constant message. After the Swift debacle, West announced he was going in exile and became an expat for nearly a year and half with no media interaction in Japan and Italy(Callahan-Bever, 2009). Similar to peer Dave Chappelle, West seemingly quit music and was studying Fashion with marc Jacobs as an intern. West noted how fashion designers didn’t respect a rapper and definitely a black designer regardless of his wealth and tastemaking influence. West said he threw a “Molotov cocktail on his career” but when it all burned down what was left was his base: being a black man lost in the world and this would be the theme of his most recent solo album released in November 2010, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.

Analysis

West would invite his favorite artists and producers ranging from indie folk singer Justin Vernon of Bon Iver, cartoonish sexpot Nikki Minaj, his epic hero Jay-Z and heralded hip-hop producers of the 90s Pete rock, Q-Tip and Rza, along with Elton John and Alicia Keys, to name

a few for his comeback album (Callahan-Bever, 2010). The album West explained was influenced by Maya Angelou's *Why I Caged Bird Sings*, Mark Twain satire, Andy Warhol and what he proclaimed as Rosewood movement of sophisticated black men in suits, based on the Rosewood, the story of black working class folks in an all black community folks rebel against racist whites.

In his hiatus, the record industry was having its lowest sales with the rise of iTunes singles and internet downloading. Moreover, rap had seen a mainstream sea change as regional and underground staples such as Gucci Man and Lil Boosie and Rick Ross from Miami saw mainstream success. In contrast the biggest star was rapper Aubrey "Drake" Graham a Canadian biracial former child star who praised Kanye and effectively used his outsider ethos in his work and Lil Wayne a former child rapper who was a hodgepodge of all hip-hop identities reigned supreme.

Randomly popping up on the internet we heard from West in true rapping form for over 2 years was "Power" a 6 minute song and first single for the album leaked in March 2010, interpolating Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* movie and *Autobiography of Malcolm X* quote "no one man should have all that power" detailing his struggle to get out of his own way and to not succumb to suicide. The opening lines announced a reinvigorated racially conscious West as the opening lines state, "*The system broken, the schools closed the prisons open, we aint got nothing to lose motherfucker we rollin/ in this white man's world we the one's chosen.*"

West's testimony begins with the comic hero as witness, explaining the social realities of the day, invoking his authenticity and community topoi early on. Emotionally we hear the *parrhesiate* ethic in the couplet "in a white man's world we the one's chosen." Not a shock line

for 90s rap, but rare in contemporary hip-hop where systemic racism critiques are rare if not non-existent beyond police profiling songs. The strategic ambiguity of *Graduation* is discarded as West lists recent sociological facts that disproportionately affect black communities, school closings, the release of many prisoners due to overcrowding, and the high unemployment rate; thus the rise in drug use the reference to “rolling” or the recreational use of prescription pills is cast as a byproduct of the system. This alone doesn’t make his identity or performance sincere, but it conjures up that commonplace of authentic witnessing of the world he views and his imagined audience views. As well as noting that despite the president, it is still a white man’s world.

Yet despite the tragedy, West taps into that topos of blackness used since Tubman days, that similar to Jews, Blacks were also god’s chosen people. West inverts this as being chosen is a curse in the white man’s world, so he instead ingests the pills and “says good night cruel world I’ll see you in the morning.” Is this West’s drug confession or is it his commentary on his audience is unknown, what we do know is with the raucous “Jesus Walk” like march behind him Pastor West is conflicted, pumped up and ponderous.

In the hook West addresses claims he was addicted to cocaine but also his comic retort that despite his stressors “fuck that, the world is ours,” not the white man in power but the black or non-black rebels who identify with west. His rebel attitude indicates a topos of black rebellion as a commonplace of counterdiscourses to oppressive situations. His ethos of sincerity proclaims that despite his mistakes he will not stop telling his “truths” he will not stop attempting to strive for sincerity about his emotions or perspective on the world writ large to his audience. Along with this truth telling mechanism though is, his black comedic attitude of

regardless of the situation “we” as in an imagined black community are in fact God’s chosen and the meek shall inherit the worth, or “the world is ours.” It is West’s classic strategic ambiguity that works for the universal but laser pointed focus towards a specific black audience. Sticking to this rhetorical strategy throughout his career, the spokesman then speaks about the tragic struggles to be a spokesperson through his comic lens of admitting his foibles.

My childlike creativity, purity and honesty / Is honestly being crowded by these grown thoughts / Reality is catching up with me / Taking my inner child, I'm fightin for custody / With these responsibilities that they entrust in me / as I look down at my diamond encrusted piece

Now if one is familiar with West’s image, the diamond piece would be his noted Jesus Piece, followed by “no one man should have all that power.” I am not saying this is proof of West’s anti Jesus strain, but instead a resemblance to classic blues artists who were ambivalent both tragically resigned to reality and God’s lot for them yet comically hopeful that God would make a way (Vandeburg, 2006). West reflects on how his egotistic attitude and life situation affected his ability to make music or make sense of his life. He may not be modestly humble, but he indicates humility as a topos of authenticity, a sign that this is his inner emotions being expressed in a confession. Interestingly he compares himself to Colin Powell and Austin powers, lost in translation with a whole fucking nation,” one a black man duped by the government who misspoke and Austin Powers a comedian whose vernacular and jokes can be misunderstood yet enjoyed—a quick perspective by incongruity comic criticism deployed. We view West in a new light as he compares himself in a way that allows audience to see his perspective of court jester and important spokesperson. West follows this comedian meets communal spokesperson mistaken act, to frame his own mistaken identity in society when he jokes “they said I’m the abomination of Obama’s nation, well that’s a pretty bad way to start a conversation.”

West reveals how felt he was a scapegoat in the supposed post racial Obama presidency, but the song frames him as a tragic-comic hero depressed yet triumphant, ambivalent yet motivated, seeking to identify with a similar ambivalent black audience confused about the positives and tragedies of the Obama presidency. The system is literally falling apart as West notes earlier, but people are more concerned with asking the president about West and Taylor Swift. When he learned of Obama's notion that he was a Jerk, West retorted he has more important things to deal with. Yet at songs end, West admits that he has considered his own tragic suicide but in the end sounds like a killing of his self-doubt and belief that he has some power over his life. Stating in plain voice "are you strong enough to let power go." The song revealed a darker West and a more seasoned by life West and a infusion of his broad identification and his imagined black audience identification minus the deliberate ambiguity.

After *Power*, West would release free and brand new music every Friday online with brand new music or songs from his upcoming album called Good Fridays via his twitter and website for about 13 weeks leading up to the album. Frequently West discussed the need for black excellence and speaking truth about "our community;" digital appeals to his sincerity and his need to find re-acceptance with his base audience who supported him before he became a mainstream sensation. Moreover, instead of the industry mixtape model West would ask twitter followers for feature suggestions, artwork suggestions, and general feedback on records that might make the album, often making new songs during the week.

West explained on his hyper twitter feed that his exile showed him it's all about making music that fans can relate to and get them through life. That when people sent him death threats, fans appreciation inspired him. Yet his free singles also featured more statements specific to his imagined black audience. On songs such as "Good Friday" he instructs the

audience “to tell the radio stop playing that bullshit they don’t want black people to think and drive. Or “The Joy” where he states “the irony of planned parenthood, is that I never knew anyone who planned to be a parent in the “hood—syntax for ghetto. West would say in an interview that his new album was about how do I get people to find humor in my ego problems, but also display black excellence, and speak to things real people go through, just being smarter, less impulsive is the key (West & Callahan Bever nov. 2, 2010)

Released on November 8, 2010 *MBDTF* is West’s *mini-bildungsroman*—*coming of age narrative* tracing back to his early desires for fame, charting his fall from grace and closing with a comic optimism that he can work out his dialectical tensions of identity. Similar to Ellison the album is framed in terms of light and dark, as darkness denotes his confusion and sense of being lost and light is the “truth” that emerges. As Hale (December 2010) describes, *MBDTF* finds West traveling between the darkness of his exile and his desire to get back to the spotlight as a spokesperson for hip-hop, black communities, and West fans everywhere. I will only discuss “Gorgeous”, “All of the Lights” and “Lost in the World/Chain Heavy” as these songs center on my thematic concern with identity and identification with black audiences. My concern with negotiating individuality and communal solidarity, my critical concern with how does one use rhetoric to demonstrate that they belong in a community yet encourage the community to identify with their alienation from said community. In short, viewing *MBDTF* from a critical rhetorical standpoint we can see that identification is not about simply hitting the right notes. It is negotiating, disengaging, appealing, and remixing the tonalities, traditions, customs of your audience in a manner where speaker and audience can co-create a meaning of identity.

The metaphor of custody battle heard on “Power” endures throughout the album, as West explains his own existential battle between meeting his responsibilities as an artists and

dealing with his own personal issues. He once again observes himself to confess his foibles to his audience, authenticity is found in his argument that “honestly” he is struggling to make music and juggle life. Unlike the epic hero of magnification West authenticity is trying to bringing himself back down to a human level not a super human level. Aesthetically he combines the soul and hip-hop break beats of his past with the electronic stadium sound of Graduation and 808’s.

The album opens with a remix of Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes* version of Cinderella, another tragic-comic writer who sampled the past to create a new perspective and was maligned for it; West appropriates it to indicate his story as both imaginative and “the real story” of his exile and delivered by Nikki Minaj a rapper known for different voices and identities employs a Slick Rick Children’s story meets Princess Di patois proclaiming:

You might think you've peeped the scene, you haven't/ The real one's far too mean/ The watered-down one, the one you know/ was made up centuries ago/ They made it sound all wack and corny/ Yes, it's awful, blasted boring/ Twisted fiction, sick addiction/ Well gather 'round children - ZIP IT LISTEN!/ CAN WE GET MUCH HIGHER!! (Choir)

A mock Greek chorus of pop music’s finest from Beyonce to Elton John backs up the 60’s Prog rock sample of Mike Joyce singing “Can we get much higher,” answering with a concordance of shrieks and cries, reflecting the polarizing figure of West in 2010. This can be viewed in many ways but I agree with Hale’s assessment that the song connotes West actually achieving his dreams and at his height, he was hit with some of his worst tragedies. The intro song “Dark Fantasy” features West reminiscing about his first year of success converting from being just a “Chi-Town nigga with a Nas flow” who helped his audience find “bravery in my bravado” to being an indulgent and conflicted, saying “Mercy mercy me that lambo murcielago”

with slight regret about his stature. By the second verse we see the chief dialectic of the first half of the album: Kanye the spokesperson versus Kanye the successful hedonist ignoring his emotional pain. Speaking of himself as hip-hop's teacher and offering authentic medicine; he references Slick Rick to ponder how do you give the audience what they want in the midst of his issues:

Beyond the truest/ Hey Teacher+ teacher, tell me how do you respond to students/ and refresh the page and restart the memory/ Respark the soul and rebuild the energy/ We stopped the ignorance, we've killed the enemy/ Sorry but the night demons they still visit me/ The plan was to drink until the pain over/ But what's worse, the pain or the hangover?

West recognizes his community; a broad community of 'students' who listen to his lyrical lectures and indicates an awareness of his role with the audience, using a teaching metaphor to indicate a topos of community, the cultural *nomoi* of black art as education (Van DeBurg, 2005) and dialogue. Moreover, West contends that his ethos of sincerity fuels his teaching and concern to "respark the soul and rebuild the energy." Thus his therapeutic rhetoric is framed as a critical praxis, that combats the forces against his imagined audience; yet his comic awareness admits that he is still haunted by nightmares and alcohol therapy, closing with his requisite one liner of perspective by incongruity with his rhetorical question of: pain or the hangover? The song closes with West's apocalyptic and fantastical vision of his failure at responding to his students:

At the mall, there was a séance/ Just kids, no pa-rents/ Then the sky filled with herons/ I saw the devil, in a Chrysler LeBaron/ And the hell, it wouldn't spare us/ But after that, took pills, kissed an heiress/ And woke up back in Paris.

West's book of revelation vision meets Hunter S. Thompson trip is a metonymic reference to his audience needing what he calls "spirit music" (Ansel, 2005), his comic criticism of perspective by incongruity juxtaposing an apocalyptic séance in a shopping mall. In the above

lyrics our protagonist in song Kanye, watches the inevitable devastation of his audience, but shrugs, pops a pill and puns about sleeping with heiress Paris Hilton ignoring it all. He became too high in identity and forgetting to “respond to students” his sincerity is a spectrum, as the tragedy of his foibles is met with the comic self-criticism of his mistakes. West asks us to identify with his awareness of, attempts of and failures of his responsibilities as a spokesperson.

In short this is hip-hop *apologia* and this rhetorical apologia is extended in the album’s following song, “Gorgeous.” In dealing with Burkean comedy irony is vital as it gives the audience “ways to transcend either/or binaries” and see varied sides of a situation. Gorgeous is an ironic title that speaks to this function of ironic comedic thought as the song’s focus is racial inequality in America the beautiful is the country where racism is as American as it gets. Moreover for the black community many things are “gorgeous”, with new forms of black success seen in the public sphere, but several issues are the opposite of gorgeous for black America.

The opening hook I posit is the internal dialogue of West the artist and the spokesperson as singer Kid cCdi switches from defiant bass to emotional cry until the coda ends:

I can feel it slowly drifting/me/away from me/not for nothing I wont
 No more chances if you blow this, you bogus(EC)
 I will never ever let you live this down, down, down

and I argue frames the imagined black audience as finding his sincerity “bogus” if he doesn’t bring it on this next album.” But are you really “down, down, down,” for black people Mr

West?, the imagined audience asks. Using a vocal filter that sounds like a megaphone, West surmises the tragic situation of his imagined black America:

*Penitentiary chances, the devil dances/ and eventually answers/ to the call of Autumn/ all of them fallin' for the love of ballin'/ get caught with 30 rock/ the cop look like Alec Baldwin/ intercentury anthems based off inner city tantrums/ based off the way we was branded
face it, Jerome get more time than Brandon/ and at the airport they check all through my bag/ and tell me that it's random*

Poetically, West relates the high rate of black incarceration as something that pleases the devil, who similar to the blues and gospel trope of the devil's temptation answers the call of would be hustlers dreaming of success. An efficient West shifts to explaining how hip-hop music can function as an expression of black identity and countering the "branding" of black identity by outsiders;" these inter-century anthems of hip-hop how hip-are a poetical reflection of the emotions of a frustrated black America; once again arguing that audiences are mistaken if they don't view this side of hip-hop's truth.

West relates how despite his success he is not immune from mistreatment critique of systemic racism as he uses the stereotypes of "names" and Jerome being a popular black name in this era to comment on mandatory sentencing for selling crack instead of cocaine; yet his rhetorical pivot is in offering to the audience that he's not above it either. Random airport checks may not seem commensurate, but I can say from personal experience, the propensity of random checks speaks to the same emotion of unfairness. The key though is the next line "but we stay winning." West's ethic of comic optimism, is his comic frame fighting back against the slim odds his tragic frame indicate; soon after he pits the frames against each other until he makes his invocation of sincere commitment. The perspective of incongruity ultimately casts a comic corrective to tragic experiences his audience endures when he takes on the voice of his frustrated audience:

this week has been a bad massage/ I need a happy ending/ and a new fitted(hat) / and some job opportunities that's lucrative/ This the real world/ homie school finished/ they done stole your dream you don't know who did it! I treat the cash the way the government treats aids I won't be satisfied to all my niggas get it. GET IT?!!!!!!

The above couplets could speak to any audience member affected by the recession and unemployment crisis, but unlike *Graduation*, West intimates that it has been particularly hard for African Americans, who aren't reaping the benefits. Black male unemployment is more than double that of White Americans and blacks with a graduate degree have an unemployment rate near the national level nearly triple that of white peers. Recent studies have shown housing crashes and predatory loans disproportionately affected black communities and decimated the black middle class. The narrative of going to school and chasing your dreams and dealing with the sad reality of the job market is polysemic speaking to broad and specific audiences. The final line, also a resuscitation of his "Heard em say lyric," indicating black folklore that the government had role in the spread of AIDS. West announces that his American dream is Black America share in the success he and others have fostered. The joke (get it!) asserts in plain view that even in Obama's America, West still thinks the government or the system is set up to disenfranchise black folk.

Seemingly inspired Reverend West explains that he is just carrying on tradition when he spits, "Is hip-hop just a euphemism for a new religion/the soul music of the slaves/that the youth is missing?" Once again, West synthesizes the therapeutic power of black music from spirituals to soul music to hip-hop, to change the audience view of hip-hop. This perspective by incongruity uses his comic frame that critics are mistaken to not see hip-hop as the descendant of soul music, slave spiritual. It is this sermonic attitude in hip-hop (Perry 2001), this *parrhesiate*

ethic that his rhetorical sharing is for the audiences goodwill. In many ways it is the crux of my project that hip-hop is the soul music of the post civil rights generation, a secular congregation where people testify, witness and learn who they are, what their identities mean and can possibly mean. Slave spirituals were both for protest and for pleasure. West finishes stating again that he is a spokesperson and his personal drive to overcome the obstacles:

This is more than just my road to redemption/Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention/as long as I'm in Polo's smilin' they think they got me/but they would try to crack me if they ever see a black me/I thought I chose a field where they couldn't sack me/if a nigga aint shootin a jumpshot, running a track meet

There is an argument to be made about guilt and redemption in Kanye's work, but as he states this more than redemption, this is about being a poet as spokesperson, a tragic-comic hero as witness giving the people medicine like Malcolm X, in his view. West retorts that White America viewed his country club fashion and jokester image as a sign that he was not concerned with systemic racism, or being an outspoken black voice quickly stating that when he "acts out", displays emotions or critiques racism the status quo tears him down or will not view him as an artists informed by Black America. West rails against his own position as a black musician, appropriating Run DmC's "King of Rock" to critique the valorization of the Beatles, to state how history doesn't always honor black artists in the same manner:

I was looking at my resume feeling real fresh today/ they rewrite history/ I don't believe in yesterday/ and what's a black Beatle anyway, a fucking roach?I guess thats why they got me sitting in fucking coach/

West cleverly interpolates The Beatles classic “Yesterday” and juxtaposes it with the inner-city symbol of poverty “the roach”, to describe how black artists do not get the acclaim or respect he feels they deserve. The symbolic “they” is a floating signifier of the powers that be and the gatekeepers of music historicism. West is dancing from witnessing and testifying, commonplaces of authenticity and community interweave the thread of his argument. West verse closes with

*but God said I need a different approach/cause people is looking at me like I'm sniffing coke/it's not funny
anymore try different jokes
tell 'em hug and kiss my ass, x and o/ I aint got it
you blowing up, that's good, fantastic/that y'all, its like that ya'll
I don't really give a fuck about it at all/cause the same people that tried to blackball me/forgot about 2 things,
my black balls*

West speaks to the rumors of his drug addiction and how he was blackballed from the industry during his exile; but in true black comic tradition he relates that his critics forgot that figuratively, he has the balls to say what he needs to say and his struggle as a black man gives him the balls to not give up speaking his mind. West celebrates his *parrhesiate* ethos of black sincerity by literally saying that he has and will continue to speak his mind—from a black state of mind. It’s a rhetorical rejoinder to the mythic post-racial world of media fiction. As well as standard hip-hop braggadocio and Kanye getting the last laugh.

On “Gorgeous” West negotiates the liminal balance between his individual stories of America the beautiful and the tragic story of large segments of black America: from the drug dealer with tragic limitations, to the college student with fewer opportunities, to the rapper blackballed for saying he really loved another artists video. If the epic hero attempts to motivate us by the grand nature of their deeds, the comic hero attempts to note that see life from the underdog’s perspective, for those who don’t always win. The song closes with a feature from

Raekwon, a legendary member of Wu Tang Clan best known for his song C.R.E.A.M (Cash Rules Everything Around Me) a tale of the conflicting motives behind drug dealing but also offering audiences a cautionary tales of inevitable street death or incarceration. The song personifies West desire to have audiences identify with his experiences and believe that he is invested in his responsibility as a community spokesperson. The album soon turns to his tour de force meditation on lost fame and the desire to maintain his spokesperson role.

On “All of the lights” West uses a known hip-hop trope, speaking of the cultural genre as a ‘woman,” most notably his Chicago comrade Common’s personification in “I Used to Love H.E.R.). Also rappers The Roots “The Love of My Life” personify hip-hop as the love of their life. Many reviewers wondered why a song so anthem like--with blasting horns and over the top chorus was about such a sad domestic violence story, as Kanye has no children. I argue that the song personifies his internal struggle with his one true love, music and the acceptance that it brings him. It remarks on his foibles and the dangers of what Burke calls the “bureaucratization of the imaginative” the tensions involved when employing identification in a capitalist society.

Yet the song also offers a optimistic hope and attempt at regaining his position, his legitimacy, his fans, and his influence. In other words it’s a cleverly veiled, comeback song where Yeezy is both scapegoat, victim and hero in a song marked by an attempt to correct the imperfect. When he says he threw a “molotov cocktail on his career” it is reasonable to assume juxtaposing it with domestic violence is not a stretch. Not that west slapped Swift, no, his actions were a slap in the face he argued “to the fans who always defended and supported me”; and egotistical view but one that I think can be viewed below.

In the context of West's backlash following the Swift incident I argue *All of the Lights*, is his personal pep talk; where he admits the dark moments of feeling he would lose his "baby" his career but pleads that hip-hop and the world take him back, because they need him to bring "all of the lights" to the public. Harold Bloom writes that for Ellison "light and dark" is central to *Invisible Man's* protagonist, as he deals with the black and white world, the public and underground world, and his inner emotions and outward performance. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the 1369 lights in his underground lair are a means for him to "see himself, "light confirms my reality gives birth to its form" even if the world refuses to see him. Moreover, in several instances we are told that the "truth is the light", a Christ allegory but also a notion of identity. Harold bloom and postock tell us that for IM, light represents mental illumination, insight, and the need to be seen as black americans. The motif of light, speaks to Ellison's notion that there are multiple lights of "truth" about black America, as his protagonist learns of the darkness in "light" from nationalist black groups, talented tenth and liberal whites.

I argue that the light is about witnessing; Ellison witnessing his own fictionalized version of testifying his black experience and giving light to his people to consider the conflicting and nuanced life of being black in America. Burke writes that Ellison's character "learns" and speaks to the tragic circumstances of the tensions, disenfranchisement and "lie of the american dream" sold to the descendent of black slaves, but unlike protest novels argues that inspired by his jazz and blues music that definition of life is possibility.

In listening to Kanye West's 'All of the lights' this black musical tradition is invoked to speak to his exile and his desire to express what he terms the "truths of society that musicians and entertainers bring to the world (Samuel, 2008). However, it also speaks to the darkness in

these truths, as in the incest of the True blood incident or the Battle Royale scene in *IM*. For West he pleads for his woman ‘his music’ to give him another chance to show the lights after he has ‘abused her’ with his actions backed up by a power chorus of Elton John, Drake, Alicia Keys, Elly Jackson, Charlie Wilson and Rhianna, the cacophonous yet melodic chorus:

Turn up the lights in here baby/ extra bright, I want y'all to see this/ turn up the lights in here, baby/ you know what I need/ want you to see everything/ Want you to see all of the lights

The chorus announces to the audience that the artists want to “shed light” in order witness , testify and inspire, moving from an announcement and encouraging the audience that they too can have this successful life. Ironically the song is about West’s lost of success, which happened weeks after his idol MJ died. A taking off point for his domestic violence meets career comeback song:

*Something wrong/ I hold my head/ MJ gone...our n-gga dead!
I slapped my girl/ she called the feds/ I did that time and spent that bread
I'm heading home, I'm almost there/ I'm on my way, heading up the stairs
to my surprise, a n-gga replacing me/ I had to take 'em to that ghetto university*

West employs a simplistic style akin to *Graduation*, but far more complex internally. West intimates that he was already emotionally distraught and indicates the community trope heard throughout Michael Jackson memorials that he was “ours,” as in the black communities as well as the worlds. In short, several tributes and commentators spoke on how black audiences stuck by him even when many abandon him after sexual abuse charges. West relates how his death leading up to the VMA’s and unresolved depression from his mother similar suspicious ‘accidental death via plastic surgery in LA led him to “slap” his career and the industry. The public he argues, sent him away and took away large amounts of his income for the coming

year. Moreover, the song's common man tale of regret for an unforgivable action in public society acts as an ongoing metaphor of his identification with audiences.

As we see at the end, West is planning on making a comeback and finds that the industry has new pop stars or rap stars that have taken his place. His inclusion of ghetto university is a juxtaposition of his own common topic of juxtaposing the streets and college to express similarities and differences (see College Dropout). In this case, the ghetto university, is an appeal to his style, a statement that he gives music that mix of both ghetto witnessing and university lecture. The manic chorus of

cop lights, flash lights, spot lights/ strobe lights, street lights/ (all of the lights, all of the lights)/ fast life, drug life/ thug life, rock life/ every night/ (all of the lights)

The chorus lists the varied truth or “lights” that West and his band of pop artists he contends gives to audience who experience the “night” the misfortunes of life, or the confusion of life.. But specifically in contrast with the optimism of lights in the (Vegas and shooting star) section, these lights are the scene of crimes, rave overdoses, drug dealing, but truths that I argue he feels still demand exposure. Ellison writes that a writer must be true and not moral, true in displaying the particularities of life the audience cannot express in words. In this case authenticity, or a true testimony narrativizing Kanye's experience is expressed as a common topic through metaphor, through double-voiced signifying of blackness, which allows West to hint at the dichotomy of spotlight fame and the responsibility to spread love.

In hip-hop vernacular, *shine* denotes getting recognition and having success. West attempts to get the audience to identify with his mistakes by comparing himself to one of the most hated archetypes a woman beater, to demonstrate how he felt in his exile as well. The song closes with West pleading that he made mistakes, he bumped his head, but that “his baby” needs her daddy because he can’t let her grow up in the ghetto university. Here, West expresses that “hip-hop needs him” but his impassioned verse also reveals that he seemingly needs her as well. Moreover, he combs his own common topoi of a both/and black identity, to argue that while he has learned lessons from the “ghetto university” he has to grow up; as does hip-hop.

“All of the lights” is *perspective by incongruity* on steroids, as West with his verses, broad mix of pop voices as his chorus, and the uplifting stadium sound of the song, give the audience a way to view his actions in a new “mistaken” light. To view the domestic abuser in a mistaken light; it is the comic frame that pictures people “not as vicious but as mistaken. The Burkean notion that if “people are exposed to situations in which they act as fools, that every insight comes with its own type of blindness (Burke, p.41). The comic critic must turn metaphor into perspective, and disregards absolutist arguments and societal norms as unchanging (Rueckert 1992, p.120) West’s domestic abuser metaphor highlights the comic circle of “dealing with man in society” and how his foibles should expose him to “the lesson of humility.” In critical reflection, West’s all-star jam is a comic corrective whereby in “being a student of himself makes it possible to transcend occasions in which he has been cheated, but chalking it up as a win under experience (Burke, 166). In other words, his use of perspective by incongruity and the protagonist as mistaken, invoke the Burkean notion that a comic frame helps people to get by in a cruel world—a notion I believe West could vibe with.

Gorgeous and All of the lights demonstrate that West is both the artist audiences came to love, but also a transformation in his own awareness. His sincerity is not evaluated on how many references to black America exist. It is in maintaining your identity claims or offering rhetorical arguments that allow audiences to identify with the change or shifts in identity without feeling duped. MBDTF goes on to look at West being a witness of his tragic and comic self, allowing the audience to see “two vantage points” at once, to see the dialectic of black identity, the tortured black soul: American Individualism vs African collectivism, Du Bois called it.

On “So Appalled” he critiques rappers for writing ‘bullshit’ to get pop hits, instead of something that speaks to a guy out of work, but the chorus of the song goes “Champagne wishes, 30 white bitches, I mean the shit is fuckign ridiculous.” West ironically admits that even if he does write something with purpose, he’s real life of excess is ridiculous and alienated from his audience. On the single “Runaway”, he explains his relationship troubles and his troubles with music industry. The somber song finds West jokingly offering a “toast to all the douchebags, a toast to the assholes, a toast for the scumbags , everyone of them I know. Lets have a toasts for the jerkoffs who never take work off.” West the comic, asks the audiences to identify with the fact they too have been the fool, the jerks, the assholes, or the jerks” who say the wrong thing, have a hero in Kanye who recognizes that he’s never been good at love or being humble. The foolish men and women of society can take solace in their flaws as West again discusses lost love and his lost career.

The blade-runner via Neptunes track “Hell of a life” West critiques sexual mores, highlighting that despite his fame white porn stars wont sleep with him, as it “makes their price go down” in the industry, but also argues that racism still denies freedom dating back to the

white supremacist fears of the 19th century when he says “ I guess we all in the same gang, runaway slaves all on the same chain, bang bang bang” *In pulp fiction fashion the last half of the album actually leads us back to West’s feeling of alienation, after the Swift incident where he felt “lost” in the song “Lost in the world” an epic closer featuring African drums, his greek chorus from “Dark Fantasy”.

The song samples indie singer Bon Iver’s “Woods” which states “I’m building a still, to slow down the time” a reference to alcoholism, but also a pun on trying to slow his life down after a year of public mistakes. Burke writes that the artist has to be able to take his audience on his transformations, make them identify with his new substance and still view it as common. Thus the form of Kanye’s confession is not a shock to his audience but introduces new perspectives and experiences that exhibit the rhetorical virtues, values, and content of his earlier work. The song features a vague poem that West said could be about a relationship, his relationship with music, his relationship with fame, his relationship with success:

*You’re my devil you’re my angel/ you’re my heaven you’re my hell/ you’re my now and forever/you’re my freedom
you’re my jail/ you’re my lies your my truth/you’re my war/ my truce*

Almost a retread of his earlier spoken word style West lists contradictory influences of life’s pleasures, leaving the topic open to his career, music, drugs, etc, a strategic perspective of incongruity to help his audience see double, how the things they love are often simultaneous to their pressures and frustrations, relating his experience with his mass audience. West offers to “break out of this fake ass party, turn into a classic night, if we die in each others arms still get laid in the afterlife.” The classic trope of heavenly transcendence is dominant in black performance culture; The comic ambivalence of West recognizes he may not be able to solve his dilemma, but he can transcend the situation by “changing the conversation.” Yes his identity is

conflicted, but the only way an underdog can identify with his audience is to show that he's gonna get up off the canvas or do it to the death as the colloquialism goes.

Thus in the end, Kanye goes down in history, just by trying to change the rules in order to win the game (Burke 98), taken his losses as wins and observing his mistakes and “still getting laid in the afterlife” in his beautiful dark twisted fantasy. West's tragic comic frame allows him to view the struggles but also offer solutions to a fragmented and ambivalent post soul black audience. Similar to Ellison West, employs the near absurd and fantastical to tell the mini bildungsroman of his most eventful 2 years. West explained that he wanted people to find the humor in his ego so they could see that he was just like them, “I'm the fan who got too close to the screen. I'm just the average insecure stressed out person who says the things people think or at least I think so (West, 2010). Most notably, Mr. West seemingly opens his heart and mind revealing suicidal thoughts, being a horrible boyfriend, financial losses, bad relationships, and most notably taken his audience for granted and not realizing his role as spokesperson. To do what he says is his “duty to bring multiple “truths” to the world through my music (West, twitter 2010). “

In the closing of *MBDTF*, Kanye West goes back to hip-hop's origins and black musical origins matching tribal West African Ibo drums and the outro of “Lost in the World” with the Gil Scott Heron hip-hop's socially conscious pioneer's “Who Will Survive America.” Ellison writes in *Invisible Man* of how tapping into his black cultural history allowed him to see around corners and a way to take the pieties of the past to create a new vision, a take on Burke's view of artists using the past to make sense of the future. Scott-Heron's blistering poem from 1973, is strikingly apt for 2011 as he describes an America disillusioned by the American dream all the

while employing West's love for perspective by incongruity and puns, "*America is now blood and tears not milk and honey*", *Youth woke up digging Paul revere and Nat turner as the good guys.*" Heron is West's most noted past musical influence sampling him often and citing him as a chief influence on his spoken word style of rapping and as seen here his use of perspective by incongruity, black cultural nomoi and community discourse.

Heron's general statement speaks to Ellison's "American joke" as Ellison once noted that America is inherently African American; as black life, language, style and customs are as American as apple pie, but the irony is that blacks are still fighting to be a part of the American narrative (Grey 1999). Thus when Heron says that the story hidden in history is that America, was "the illegitimate daughter of the (African) Mother country" he signals that black freedom is his birthright. Heron closes bringing us back to soul, the activation of therapeutic rhetoric of the civil rights era, saying "what does Webster say about soul, all I want is a good home and a wife, a children and some food to feed them at night."

The final lines of *Who will Survive in America* and driving drums stand as a final move of identification as he attempts to bridge the civil rights and post civil rights era by sampling the testimony of the past to speak to his own ambivalence and what he feels is his audience's ambivalence. Yet the indication of blackness, nods to a dialogue with black audiences is apparent. In a final missive to his critics and his audience, West reminds us via digital séance of Scott-Heron of the ongoing legacy of American racism and black strivings for a decent life; as well as noting what is missing from his own life. Sadly the song that was supposed to close the album and this pro-black theme was taken after sample clearance issue. After the album release

however; West reinstated the last Good Friday, to release the song for free online in the early Winter of 2010.

“Chain Heavy” is probably West’s most sermonic, bold and confident moment in years. The song is another metaphor as West relates that his expensive chain is heavy, but also that the chains of slavery still weigh on him. His commitment to stereotypical gaudy jewelry worn by a black person also weighs on him and the post soul generation harangued for not knowing their history. The first verse finds West announcing that this is the era of black excellence and that he feels he is at a NAACP conference, before launching into an angry brio of racial disenfranchisement in film, black heroes not getting credit while alive, and scientists claiming the aliens built the pyramids (a belief in the afrocentric view of Egyptian history).

The final verse West finds West harkening back to late 80s afrocentric hip-hop of Krs One and Public Enemy citing a black Jesus then praising his heroes Muhammad Ali, and Michael Jackson, Jordan and Kobe as exemplars of black excellence and inspire him to “write hooks about slaves that were slaughtered in the 1800s, ya’ll forgot that/ I got called nigger on twitter so many times yo I lived that.”

Here West encapsulates his identity dialectic in one punchline as he relates his tragic witnessing of his personal experience and his audience—joined yet separate, slavery’s gone but its legacy endures in American race relations is the argument at work. West interestingly proclaims that “I am when Ice cube meets Michael Jackson” this personification of his duality of identity, references the pop star status of Michael Jackson but the social commentary of Ice Cube in his legendary years. The song closes with West’s desire for Scott-Heron’s view of soul and the systemic racism that endures,

“Now I’m just trying to find where to raise my kids at, cause they don’t want niggers living where they kids at/hey realtor I’m looking for a nice park, she said 12 noon / your family gonna make it too dark!!/This is the real soul that eclipses/the bullshit they got us listening too/in this existence/ don’t give up now!/just a lil more persistent/this is the making of a master piece/so we broke out the chains and told the master, peace!”

West deployment of a topos of community speaks to the persistent issue of black disenfranchised systematically when looking for a house. On August 5, 2011 a government report demonstrated that for middle class blacks making over 80,000 the average median income was close to less than half and locations of massive white flight. Thus as, Wright explains “income is not a predictor for living in a great neighborhood or school district.” Thus, for the post soul generation professionals and even entertainers the “chain is still heavy.” West closing line is a dancing attitude of comedic blackness as he comically puns and juxtaposes a master piece work to breaking the chain of white hegemony and tossing “massa” the “peace sign”

The Springsteen myth of looking like you haven’t made money is eschewed by West. For Burkean enthusiasts and rhetorical critics. West shows us how the poet sizes up a post soul situation of ambivalence, contradictions and intra-group conflict. For hip-hop fans of the post soul generation, West demonstrates that getting past “soul” or race is not the symbolic motive of the Joshua Generation. Instead in true 21st century fashion, it is managing the ever present influence of the past, making sense of the present and fulfilling the dream of black acceptance. That is, a both/and anti essentialist view of identification and identity that is invested in a black consciousness predicated on being multi-dimensional. West is no doubt a performer, but my above critique is positioned to illuminate that hip-hop is mindful, strategic and deliberate rhetoric.

Burke wrote in a private letter to Ellison that his story of the negro's mistreatment and comic resolve in *Invisible Man* is both a story of America and a specific story of those only separated by a few generations from slavery. *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* is a story of an artist that is both a part of the post soul aesthetic and a rhetorical praxis rooted in its countering of norms and desire for an imagined black community via Media (Ashe, 2008). A meditation on black celebrity and identity that music critic Andreas Hale argued actually made you feel like you can relate. Or as I would say, we identify with our tragic-comic hero; his doubts, his fears, and the undying spirit of proving the critics wrong. In total, the album and the Good Friday Series were rhetorical arguments asking audiences to accept West as both a changed man and the artist they loved for speaking his mind boldly yet more strategically. The album would be the best reviewed album of 2010 and no.1 in 20 countries despite little to no radio airplay. In a private session at the Blue Note Jazz club in early 2011, West would appear at a small show with friend Mos Def, that was uploaded to youtube in seconds. The venue was a predominately black crowd harkening to the days when Jazz musicians played in the inner city after Carnegie Hall. Similar to the past shows at the jazz club audiences got to witness some improvisation and prophetic speech from Kanye in a rambling but pointed freestyle addressing criticisms and chiefly his struggle to be a black man in America still. With lines such as

Who you keep playin with them white folks/ Cant even take a piss/ They gon' test your urine

Cut all the sponsorship for the touring! Enough lashes like I aint seen enough/ On the real, this is like the Neo-Emmitt Till/ Whistling- Get yo f-cking ass killed/ They playin' wit niggas careers/ Felt like I'm the only real nigga here/ As I felt like a slave as they try to put my shit up in the grave/ Nigga behave, nigga behave?/ I bet ya no one else would ever say nuttin' and stay frontin'

Most notably he contends that institutionalized racism in media, recording industry, or maybe public attitudes was gonna mess up his livelihood. It's the *parrhesiate* turn, and authentic topos in the last line that West's rhetoric is built on, that brings it all home as he challenges the audience to name anyone else willing to speak what he deemed the truth. In other words, West is arguing that he refuses to assimilate to white power structures request for him to play the game solely by their rules and not speak his mind. Although lets be serious it is just an award show, but situation not withstanding it's a complex rhetorical move. In closing West cleverly notes in Richard Pryor fashion his losses yet his comic resolve:

I cannot afford it, I cannot afford more shit to be in more debt/Uh, it's too real for this nigga/
you feel for these nigga? How it feel to be a black man?/ you say something wrong, nobody
understand/

Money, power, black, opinion/ pick two/ or else they will kill ya.

The thematic concern of imagined black audiences is that "thou shalt not bear false witness." His invocation of an ethos of sincerity throughout his oeuvre on record or at telethons is predicated on an earnestness, a confessional testimonial style and content based on his mistakes, his foibles. West is the laughingstock, in comparison to his boss, hero and latest collaborator Jay-Z's epic hero status. West once explained that Jay-Z is supposed to be a super hero to admire, my claim to fame is being honest." (Mendez-Berry, 2004).

This essay is not a “West is the voice of hip-hop” paper. It is a West is a skilled rhetorician paper, as demonstrated by my criticism of his use of topoi of identity, tragic-comic frames and an ethos of sincerity to offer “equipment for living” to a post civil rights black audience. If we discard positive /negative arguments about hip-hop influence for a second and instead consider why a rapper offers these arguments to an audience? To look at the substance of their rhetoric, the tango with the audience, and a contemporary understanding of black rhetorical production offers new critical paths. To demonstrate that hip-hop is the soul music of the slaves that black folks need to make sense of this Beautiful dark twisted America is a learning function for anyone trying to study Burke or Hip-hop.

As a matter of taste, I would say that West is still a sloppy technical rapper, obsessed with public perception and exhibits an adolescent sexism towards women. But criticism is not just a matter of taste, and such claims ignore his rhetorical praxis and why audiences identify with him. This essay is demonstration of attempting to escape from the pieties of black cultural criticism that look for a positive or negative appraisal of media. I invoke Valerie Smith’s argument that positive/negative arguments about black culture constrain discussion and understanding, as there is no essential grounding for what is positive or negative for black folks. However, I argue there is a grounding for black modes of identification, as West post modern pastiche conjures up the slave spirituals, Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, Chris Rock and Wu Tang Clan to find acceptance and a sense of consubstantiality. In regards to Burkean critics, I position an ethic of sincerity as the key ingredient to consubstantiality. In order for one to identify with the tonalities, customs, values, virtues of an artist the audience must believe she feels responsible, believe she is credible for providing therapeutic rhetoric to an audience, believe she is committed yet separate from his community

I cannot say I know West's inner motives or if this is all a ploy just to make money. Or that his rhetoric works or is loved by all black audiences, its surely overdetermined. What I can say is that, I turned to Kanye's "Spaceship" when I felt like the "token blackie" (Spaceship) in Grad school, or listening to "School Spirit" when I struggle to explained to people that I was not a talented tenth professional, a black nationalist or a gangster, just a regular black dude but I am close with black people who are. I pumped Kanye West, when having my own "Chain Heavy" realty experience the past two years. When I was celebrating publications and hearing of family members incarcerated the same day, I pumped "Family business." Or struggling to open up my own thoughts and feeling the responsibility to represent the race in each essay I turned up "Power." Maybe I'm just a student of hip-hop and West is right when he says, "I'm a teacher and I know my students (Thompson, 2004).