“I KNOW THAT WE THE NEW SLAVES”:
AN ILLUSION OF LIFE ANALYSIS OF KANYE WEST'S *YEEZUS*

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ABSTRACT

THESIS: “I Know That We the New Slaves”: An Illusion of Life Analysis of Kanye West’s Yeezus.

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This work utilizes an Illusion of Life method, developed by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) to analyze the 2013 album Yeezus by Kanye West. Through analyzing the lyrics of the album, several major arguments are made. First, Kanye West’s album Yeezus creates a new ethos to describe what it means to be a Black man in the United States. Additionally, West discusses race when looking at Black history as the foundation for this new ethos, through examples such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nina Simone’s rhetoric, references to racist cartoons and movies, and discussion of historical events such as apartheid. West also depicts race through lyrics about the imagined Black male experience in terms of education and capitalism. Second, the score of the album is ultimately categorized and charted according to the structures proposed by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001). Ultimately, I argue that Yeezus presents several unique sounds and emotions, as well as perceptions on Black life in America.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

At twelve years old, I remember listening to Kanye West’s first single, “Jesus Walks” every afternoon after school. Eleven years later, in Columbus, Ohio, I saw Kanye perform live for the first time. As my friend and I crossed the street toward the venue, we were swallowed by the growing throng of young men and women all around us. Every Kanye concert is like this. The dull roar of excitement. The anticipation and adrenaline. But this time, those sensations were tinged with hesitation; did I belong in this crowd with these people? At one point, my friend, a tall African American man, leaned over and stage-whispered, “Sure are a lot of White people here.” He was right; everywhere I turned there were faces just like mine. White faces that expressed excitement and elation. After months of research about West, I tried to see the concert from his perspective. What must it be like to look out across a stadium and see faces so dissimilar from my own, night after night. To hear the crowd shouting back the words I had written from lived experience, while their experiences were so alien to me.

I cringed every time West rapped the n-word and the crowd echoed it without hesitation or remorse. It seemed I was witnessing first-hand the complete appropriation of Black, hip-hop culture by young White kids. It was surreal and jarring, but partly it was justifying this work. I will never forget that night and what it meant to me. It solidified my admiration for the art I have enjoyed for over a decade, it caused me to question my own place and intersecting identities, and it made me more certain than ever that Kayne West, and his music, are a subject worthy of the academic inquiry found in this research.

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Kanye West became a worldwide phenomenon after the release of his first solo, studio album in 2004, *The College Dropout* (Beaumont, 2015). Cullen (2016) writes that West’s initial album release occurred at a time when America had turned a blind eye to racial injustices and Black rage had all but disappeared. Since then, West has released seven consecutive Number One albums (Kreps, 2016). Beyond his Number One albums, West has also received a record 21 Grammy wins, both for individual and collaborative works (Caramanica, 2013). Combining his Grammy and commercial success, it is clear that West has had a prosperous career since his debut in 2004. Prior to his breakout into stardom, West was raised on the Southside of Chicago by his single mother, Donda West, a college professor. Kanye and Donda West arrived in Chicago after she separated from West’s father and left West’s birthplace of Atlanta, Georgia. (Beaumont, 2015). After one year at Chicago State University, West dropped out of school and moved to New York to pursue a career in music, producing for Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Ludacris. West was incredibly close with his mother until her untimely death in 2007. His early life in Chicago has been influential throughout his career.

After producing several albums and releasing his own, West released *Yeezus* in June 2013. This work examines *Yeezus*, Kanye West’s sixth solo studio album. This album is unique for West in a number of ways. First, it is his shortest album, clocking in at just 41 minutes. Second, and as Lou Reed (2014), a tremendously famous musician, wrote, it is beyond anything that had ever been done before and was “beautiful” and “poignant” (p.10, 22). Despite this, it is also the least commercially successful when considering album sales, and the least critically acclaimed having only received two Grammy nominations and zero wins (Zoladz, 2016).

I begin this work with a rationale for the project. In short, I make note of West’s diverse and multifaceted career. Next, I review the body of literature surrounding hip-hop culture, Black
masculinity, and Kanye West. Where I argue hip-hop culture provides a unique perspective on the differing perceptions of Black masculinity and women. Additionally, Kanye West is a unique rhetor for reflecting and challenging mainstream understandings of Black masculinity, but continues to be understudied in academic writing. Then, I discuss the critical orientation for the study, which is rooted in Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) Illusion of Life theory in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What depictions arise from the lyrics of *Yeezus* surrounding Black masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture?

RQ2: What emotions are conveyed through the score on the album *Yeezus*?

RQ3: In what ways do the lyrics and the score of the album *Yeezus* work congruently or incongruently?

Then, chapter four argues that the lyrics of the album create a new ethos about the Black male experience. Chapter five outlines the unique musical characteristics, as well as details the congruency and incongruency between the aforementioned lyrics and the score. Finally, I conclude the findings from my research, as well as some limitations and directions for future research.

**Justification**

In this section, I argue that Kanye West is an interesting rhetorical figure, and the album *Yeezus* are worthy of academic study for several reasons: his commercial and critical success, political moments in American history, and albums that make incredibly pointed comments about American culture.

First, both chronologically and in terms of significance, West has produced incredibly influential music. Kanye West released his first solo album, *The College Dropout*, in 2004
(Ramirez, 2014). *The College Dropout* is the most studied of West’s albums. Scholars have examined this album for its remarks about education, racial tensions in American society, and other important issues (i.e., Daws, 2007; Kitterman, 2005; Richardson, 2011). Richardson (2011) discusses at length the importance of West’s treatment of the issue of education, arguing that, “it presents an insightful look into the misrecognition and symbolic violence pervasive in places like college campuses” (p. 105). Richardson’s observation is important to note primarily because this is West’s debut album, and demonstrates that his attention to racial disparities has been clear since his arrival in the hip-hop music scene over a decade ago.

West’s second album, *Late Registration* was released one year later, followed by *Graduation* in 2007, and *808s and Heartbreaks* in 2008 (Beaumont, 2015). In 2010, West released *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* [MBDTF], which Pitchfork ranked as the best album of the decade (The 100 Best Albums of the Decade So Far, 2014). West seems to hold mixed feelings for the album almost 10 years later, stating, “That was the album where I gave people what they wanted. I don’t think that at that point, with my relationship with the public and with skeptical buyers, that I could’ve done “Black Skinhead” [from “Yeezus]” (Caramanica, 2013, p. 34). West does little to elaborate on this idea. While West may have felt confined while producing *MBDTF*, primarily because of his torn relationship with the public after his infamous moment with fellow musical artist Taylor Swift in 2009 that I will document later, his music still conveys powerful messages. West has denied, however, that he has only recently become race-aware. He argues that his previous music also holds these themes, but that they are now more clearly articulated (Caramanica, 2013). This suggests that West has been a racially conscious musical artist for over a decade, but that *Yeezus* provided a unique platform for expression.
West’s observation that he was restrained in his art during the production of *MBDTF* highlights a difference thematically between this album and the next - *Yeezus*. West released *Yeezus*, his sixth solo album in June 2013. It varied significantly from *MBDTF*, especially in terms of length, financial success, and sonically. Again, *Yeezus* is only 41 minutes long, compared to an hour and 15 minutes. *Yeezus* sold 327,000 copies in its first week, compared *MBDTF* which sold 496,000 copies (Caulfield, 2013; Concepcion, 2010). Curry (2014a) argues that *Yeezus* necessitates serious, academic study,

The lack of attention to his [West’s] discography in Hip-Hop studies and his performances in philosophical aesthetics is not because his work is not worthwhile; to the contrary, West’s analyses of anti-Black death, corporatism, and neo-liberal aspiration are enough to warrant more than one serious study of his art. The refusal to study West is not at all due to his lack of correctness about the world around him. In reality, West is not studied because his body, his Black male body, lacks the symbolic currency to motivate reverence for his thinking. (p. 18)

Curry (2014a) writes that *Yeezus* is an ignored text, not because West lacks serious insight, but because, simply, West is a Black man in America. When combining West’s Black body with his ego and eccentric behavior, critics are quick to write him off as simply crazy. However, his ego can be seen in itself as a political act (Nigatu, 2013). Leonard (2014) argues in relation to West’s various political moments that his greatest error was not participating in those moments, but instead “violating the expectations of a black male artist [sic]” (p. 46). The implication here is that because American society is one that typically rejects Black male bodies, works to dismiss them, and dominates the way they should behave, West is political in his action to preserve and present his ego.
While the ivory tower may ignore West’s sixth album, popular media expressed many opinions about the album. In summary, other reviewers disagree widely about the artistic integrity of the work. In fact, *Yeezus* may be the most controversial of his discography. The album is the least commercially successful, having only received two Grammy nominations and zero wins (Zoladz, 2016). However, the album was ranked number nine by Pitchfork (The 100 Best Albums of the Decade So Far, 2014). Regardless of the lack of traditional success the album received, it still garnered quite a bit of attention from those in the music industry and beyond. Criticism of the album varies wildly, for example Madrigal (2013), who argues that Kanye may have “given up on the very idea of imbuing the words in his songs with meaning” (p. 9). Some argue that the criticism is unfair, that reviewers and audiences “give Kanye a harder time than other rappers” especially when considering race and gender issues are pervasive in the rap and hip-hop genre (Rosen, 2013). Some find the album to be phenomenal, both lyrically and musically (Dolan, 2013; Petridis, 2013; Reed, 2014) while others find it completely lacking taste and finesse (Makarechi, 2013; Shepard et al., 2013), still others are left unsure about whether the album is brilliant or terrible (Rosen, 2013). In short, what makes *Yeezus* an interesting artifact to study is its controversial reception by scholars and popular press alike. *Yeezus* is interesting not just in its controversial reception, but also sonically and with regards to its release. West introduced the world to the album first through the release of the single “New Slaves.” In true West fashion, the single was not released as simply a video or a song. Instead, West projected a video of himself rapping the new track on 66 different buildings across the globe. As Coleman (2013) reports “In West's hometown of Chicago, it was projected on a wall of Wrigley Field; in Toronto, on the Royal Ontario Museum; and in New York, Kanye's face appeared on the wall of a 5th Avenue Prada store” (p. 1). After this video release,
West appeared on Saturday Night Live to perform live both this single, and another, “Black Skinhead”, both of which have been referred to as “liberation songs” (Shepard et al., 2013, p. 3). Eventually West released the entire album, with the opening track of “On Sight”, which is described as “a loud, lewd statement of purpose, designed to give offense and to hallow offense-giving as an end in itself” (Rosen, 2013, p. 6) and “sends me hurtling down the throat of saber-toothed synths for an immediate shift in hip-hop aesthetics” (Shepard et al, 2013, p. 13). “I Am a God (Feat. God)”, is the third track of the album, and is described as, “simultaneously incredibly powerful and deeply disconcerting” (Petridis, 2013, p. 5). One review of “I’m in It” can be applied to the entire album, as it “tosses together a bit of everything” (Rosen, 2013, p. 3). Each track from the album receives attention from critics, ranging from those highlighted above to simpler comments about the crass nature of the lyrics. Put simply, Yeezus is a unique album, especially sonically and lyrically, that should be examined for this reason.

Kanye West has made a name for himself in different arenas outside of the music industry as well, largely as an actor in several viral moments in American popular-culture. His initial notorious moment in American popular-culture history occurred at NBC’s Concert for Hurricane Relief in 2005. It was after West’s incredible success with his solo album The College Dropout that he was asked to participate in this concert to benefit the victims of Hurricane Katrina (Smith, 2015). West stood adjacent to Mike Myers and the two discussed the devastating damage that had occurred in New Orleans and across the Gulf during the third deadliest hurricane of all time (Hurricane and Tropical Cyclones, 2007). West went off the teleprompter script on live television and, after a short statement about the racial prejudices in the media, proclaimed that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people” (Smith, 2015). George W. Bush would later comment that this was the lowest point of his entire Presidential career (Smith,
2015). Not only did West articulate what millions of Americans, especially people of color, had been thinking about the disaster and the government’s response, West also had the perfect platform from which to deliver his message.

While the public response was mixed, Cullen (2016) proposes that West’s comment and the overall incident was important because “Black rage” had all but disappeared at the time. Further, the statement was less about President George W. Bush, and more so about a nation that was beyond apathetic towards Black people (Cullen, 2016). Further, “These off-script words, from internationally recognized rapper Kanye West . . . cemented hip hop’s role in our memories of the critiques of post-Katrina recovery efforts” (George, 2016, p. 18). While the moment may have cemented hip-hop’s role in political moments, it also exemplified the complicated lives of hip-hop stars. Staggers (2011) argues that this moment illustrates the struggle that hip-hop artists face to make political statements without fear of being rejected. This moment was political (Leonard, 2014), and moved West into a position to serve as a political commentator for years to come.

Years after West’s public outcry about Hurricane Katrina, he yet again hurled himself into controversial light during the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. On September 13, 2009, Kanye West interrupted White singer / songwriter Taylor Swift’s award acceptance speech for Best Female Music Video to proclaim that Black singer / songwriter Beyoncé had “the best video of all time” (Cullen, 2016). The incident continues to be discussed today (McRady, 2016). Immediately following the incident, Tessa Brown (2014) argued that West was harshly criticized by the public primarily because he was a Black man interrupting a White woman. Brown (2014) cited West’s similar incident with the musical group Justice, when he interrupted their acceptance speech at the Euro Music awards for similar reasons that he interrupted Taylor Swift.
However this incident received little media coverage and is viewed as further proof that America simply will not tolerate a Black man offending a White woman. While a majority of viewers interpreted the incident in the same vain as President Obama, who infamously referred to West as a “jackass” (Brown, 2014), some see the incident for what Kanye West intended it to be: a way of forcing the public to acknowledge that racism plagues the music industry. For instance, Cullen (2016) argues,

Bringing the voice of Black suffering back to the foreground was the artistic legacy of West’s intervention and its subsequent reinterpretation both by Swift and West himself, which was lost in the racialized, melodramatic response to the original incident, promoted both by Swift, her fans, and the larger media systems more generally. No one was innocent. (p. 47)

Further, “when West falsely assumed a supreme authority that evening, he enmeshed identity, racial difference and institutional power” (McClendon, 2015, p. 331). However, the public fails to interpret the message as political. As Leonard (2014) elaborates, “Rather than seeing West as a political artist who utilizes the platform afforded to him to disrupt and agitate in a political sense, he was reduced to a selfish thug” (p. 46). The incident at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards exemplifies further West’s position as a political, often controversial, rhetor in American culture, especially in relation to racial identity and politics.

Kanye West again demonstrated his affinity for combining awards shows and political statements in 2015. He drew significant attention at the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards when, at the end of his acceptance speech for the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award, he announced his intention to run for President of the United States in 2020. The speech was described as “candid and at times heartfelt” and “seemingly spontaneous” (Dockterman, 2015, p.
Following the initial statement, West remained serious about his desire to run as president, declaring himself an outside candidate who hates politics (Dockterman, 2015). However, some circumstances complicate West’s statement regarding his bid to run in 2020. In particular, West’s hospitalization in the fall of 2016 for physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation led to many questioning his mental health in a variety of incidents.

The hospitalization followed “a bizarre series of incidents involving the hip-hop superstar, including rants endorsing President-elect Donald Trump, calling out Beyoncé and Jay Z, cutting a concert short, [and] canceling the remainder of his Saint Pablo Tour” (Mental Health Experts, 2016, p. 6). This work does not aim to make any judgment regarding West’s mental health and stability. However, it is important to note that West’s public diatribes have changed in message and may have an alternative source beyond serious criticism of racial issues in America.

West also has established himself as a popular-culture icon through his high profile relationship with businesswoman and reality television superstar Kim Kardashian. The two entered into a romantic relationship shortly after West released a song confessing feelings for Kardashian (Lewis & Baxter-Wright, 2016). West and Kardashian welcomed their first child, North West, in June 2013, just days before the release of the album *Yeezus*. The couple’s relationship is noted here because it is so highly publicized, especially considering Kardashian’s role in her family’s incredibly popular reality television show, and West’s position as a father at the time of the album’s release.

West also has bold expeditions into other major industries, notably the fashion industry. He attempted to establish himself within the world of high fashion in early 2007. Whether for better or worse, West has made a significant impact on the world of men’s fashion (Woolf, 2016). West first partnered with Adidas to make a signature shoe line, and eventually created the
fashion line, “Yeezy” (Woolf, 2016). The work has a look that is typically described as avant-garde and street-style-like in design (Caramanica, 2015). Since his entrance into the fashion world, West has spoken extensively about his experiences being excluded from the fashion industry. Caramanica (2015) elaborates, “A couple of years ago, in 2013, West could be found inveighing against the gatekeepers he perceived as impediments to his success: the designers who wouldn’t collaborate with him, the financiers who wouldn’t back him” (p. 9). Throughout his music, West discusses this impediment, especially *Yeezus*.

However infamous these incidents and forays into the fashion industry may be, “West’s eruptions have made it all too easy for people to forget that he’s spent the past decade creating some of the most brilliantly original music of any genre” (Bagley, 2013). Brown (2014) echoes this, arguing that “Every time West expresses himself holistically or artistically, a member of the white media arises to bash him, demean him, make him look stupid again [sic]” (p. 30). Further, Professor of philosophy at Texas A&M Dr. Tommy Curry (2014a) argues, “… while his life and public proclamations are at tension with some of his work, it nonetheless necessitates serious study, rather than sophistry and condemnation” (p. 19). This work attempts to address the lack of serious academic study surrounding Kanye West through an analysis of his album *Yeezus*.

My work also attempts to fill another void in academic research, as Oware (2003) argues, “more dialogue surrounding black males and rap music should include not only critiques of the detrimental aspects of this popular cultural medium, but also areas of empowering and encouraging messages [sic]” (p. 33). Jenkins (2011) agrees that more attention should be paid to intelligence in the hip-hop music scene. This work will close the gap surrounding hip-hop research and Kanye West.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Hip-hop culture and, ultimately, Kanye West, are complex areas for rhetorical critics. To fully dissect and understand Kanye West, hip-hop culture must be examined. First, I review literature dealing with the history and growth of hip-hop culture, followed by a review of research related to Black masculinity and women in hip-hop. I then turn my attention toward the scholarship that has been done on Kanye West. Ultimately, I argue that scholars make a multitude of competing claims about West, however, the essential take away is that West is an influential figure within American hip-hop culture and American popular culture. Finally, I argue that, while West’s earlier work received ample attention from academics, his latest work is under-discussed. This, combined with his challenge of Black masculinity and serious political voice, make this study necessary.

Hip-hop Culture

There is a common misconception in American society that hip-hop is a genre of music, when in actuality hip-hop is a cultural movement rooted in Black identity. Hip-hop is a culture which is made up of several fundamental pieces, including “rapping (MCing), DJing, b-boying (break dancing) and aerosol art (graffiti)” (Foreman, 2010, p. 5). The celebrated and classic hip-hop group KRS One uncovered additional nuances of hip-hop culture: street knowledge, language, and entrepreneurism (Baszile, 2009). Rap music and hip-hop music are pieces of a larger culture. Hip-hop music and rap music are used throughout this work interchangeably. This is in part because major music industry giants incorporate the two into one category, such as Apple Music. The Grammys, for instance, do not use the term “hip-hop music” at all, but instead categorize West’s music as rap, while Billboard charts “rap” songs under the larger category of
hip-hop and R&B. Additionally, Shaw (2013) writes that many in the industry disagree about what separates and distinguishes the two terms, with some arguing for separation on the terms of tempo, and others in terms of quality. What is more essential than the debate between the differences between hip-hop and rap, is that rap is a part of a larger culture, *hip-hop culture*.

Hip-hop is a culture which holds Black identity at its core (Foreman, 2010; Ogbar, 2007). Wright (2012) elaborates, “Not only was rap music a black expressive cultural phenomenon, it was also a discourse of resistance against white American’s racism, and its Euro-centric cultural dominance [sic]” (p. 520). To better understand this resistance against White cultural dominance, I explore the literature documenting hip-hop history, growth, and expansion in this section.

**History**

Scholars divide the history of hip-hop culture into three distinct time periods: the golden age, or the beginning; the diamond age; and the post-Obama age (Staggers, 2011; Foreman, 2010). Most scholars agree that hip-hop began as a cultural movement in the United States in the Bronx, New York in the late 1970s (Corrigan, 2009; Hunter, 2011; Wright 2012) as a facet of the Black Power movement (Ogbar, 2007). As Pough (2004) explains,

> Rap music expresses the frustration of urban black Americans following the decimation of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s by the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Programs or COINTELPRO, which sought to discredit, undermine, disrupt, and destroy revolutionary social movements and groups in the Black Power movement…[sic]. (p. 234)

The civil unrest associated with the Civil Rights movement and the rise of the Black Power movement led to an increased need for expression in the Black community. The FBI’s involvement in activities to destroy these social movements also demonstrates the necessity of
hip-hop culture in the United States during this time, as it provided a space for expression and revolution. Additionally, “in the context of such conditions, hip hop emerged as a political strategy that represents, reproduces, and resists the politics of city living” (Baszile, 2009, p. 7). The conditions of resistance persist beyond the movement’s beginning stages, and well into the next periods of hip-hop culture.

The beginning period of hip-hop is considered by Staggers (2011) to be the “golden age” and reigns until the terrorist attacks in September 2001. Staggers argues that the “Golden Age” featured deep lyrics and socially conscious artists, while post-9/11 hip-hop is the “Diamond Age, concerned with material objects and status” (p. 108). An important development between these two time periods was the rise of gangsta/hardcore rap music.

The growth of hip-hop and gangster culture is intrinsically linked to the invention of crack-cocaine, as White (2011) notes, “Crack cocaine’s intrusion into the formation of hardcore music and culture is not often discussed by music scholars, but it’s nonetheless a critical discussion” (p. 76). The invention of crack-cocaine and its infiltration in predominately Black communities led to the rise of gangsta culture, and inevitably gangsta rap. White (2011) continues that the only upside, if it can even be considered, of the rampant spread of crack cocaine was the it produced some of rap’s greatest entertainers, including Jay-Z, 50 Cent, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Dogg (p. 76). Some may consider gangsta rap to have moved hip-hop music away from social conscious and into what Staggers (2011) considers the “diamond age.” The election of President Barack Obama in 2008 stimulated a return to conscious hip-hop (Foreman, 2010). It could be conceptualized then that following the election of America’s first Black president, hip-hop has returned to its roots of socially conscious music. It can be argued,
however, that the election of President Obama is not as foundational as Foreman (2010) argues, as hip-hop music that is not socially conscious continues to be produced and purchased.

_Growth & Expansion_

The growth of hip-hop culture is both undeniable and surprising (Hunter, 2011). Hip-hop has been described as “the definitive cultural movement of our generation (Kitwana, 2012, p. 452). In the 1980s, rap music was considered, by most audiences, “unfit even for music award competitions” (Ralph, 2009, p. 6). Staggers (2012) argues that the exclusion of hip-hop from mainstream American culture was “a move that parallels the social and political exclusion of African Americans” (p. 107-108). However, by 1998, hip-hop records were outselling everything else on the market in the United States (Ogbar, 2007; Ralph, 2009). By 1999, Mcleod (2012) writes, “hip-hop music and the culture from which it emerged were firmly entrenched within mainstream U.S. culture” (p. 166). Hip-hop music has impacted American culture in several undisputable ways. First, hip-hop music has created more politically engaged youth (Foreman, 2010). Second, Jenkins (2011) argues that “the lyrics penned by hip-hop artists are a valuable form of nontraditional knowledge and social critique of the American experience” (p. 1240). Hip-hop music also has a distinct part in shaping the linguistic styles of youth culture, and therefore culture more generally (Low, 2007). These influences are fundamental to understanding the overall importance of hip-hop culture. However, growth in the hip-hop industry did not occur without drawbacks.

Scholars make note that as hip-hop became more entrenched in America’s mainstream culture, the focus and scope of hip-hop music began to shift. Wright (2012) argues, “from its inception three decades ago, hip-hop has grown from an urban, predominately black and Latino youth culture into an international youth phenomenon transcending racial and ethnic lines [sic]”
Soon, hip-hop music could be found in the homes of White suburban youth in America and across the globe (Baszile, 2009). A study by the music-streaming service Spotify found that “hip-hop is the world's top genre, showing up on playlists more than all others, regardless of geography or language” (Hooton, 2015). Furthermore, Rabin (2004) argues that the quality and the crossover type style makes it appealing to a large audience. However, as previously noted, hip-hop culture and its music are irrefutably linked to Black culture. This made it difficult for White artists to achieve success in the genre. For example, Vanilla Ice failed to gain acceptance from the hip-hop community (White, 2011). One exception to this phenomenon was Eminem, who made his debut in the late 1990s. However, while he saw extraordinary commercial success, it was not without major criticism (Rodman, 2012). Eminem’s position and success as a White rapper in a previously African American dominated industry was gained through his association with producer Dr. Dre, a connection Vanilla Ice lacked (White, 2011). Eminem’s success also is “undoubtedly attributed to his internalization of black behavioral core values [sic]” (Giddings, 2011 p. 44). Additionally,

Like the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and a generation of young white male so-called wiggas, he [Eminem] chooses to inhabit ontological blackness as his own racialized comfort zone, but seeks the most extreme and profane interpretations of it from which to perform his version of the hypersexual, hypermasculine black brute [sic]. (White, 2011 p. 110)

Eminem, therefore, garnered tremendous success in the hip-hop industry by appropriating what was seen as Black culture and Black masculinity. Eminem’s edge as self-proclaimed “trailer trash” and his troubled adolescence also led him to be more easily accepted into the community (White, 2011). However, Eminem and other White rappers still threatened the culture at its core.
Given the division between White and Black masculinity, it can be assumed White artists changed the culture of hip hop.

McLeod (2012) writes about the need for authenticity displays after rappers began entering the scene who did not meet the previous expectations of hip-hop culture. He argues, “when faced with the very real threat of erasure via misrepresentation by outsiders like Vanilla Ice, major label executives, and out-of-touch advertising agents, hip-hop community members attempt to protect their culture by distinguishing authentic and inauthentic expression” (McLeod, 2012, p. 176). Simply put, when White people began to enter the hip-hop music scene, Black authenticity was threatened within the preexisting culture. As rappers began to display what others deemed as authenticity, those with the most cultural capital were able to determine what “authenticity” was within the hip-hop community. Ogbar (2010) explains, “Within this framework, rappers who extol ghettoized pathology (drug selling, gang banging, violence, pimping, etc.) affirm their realness. All other groups become peripheral and must conform to the standard established by this group” (p. 43). Due to the fact that authenticity is such an influential marker within the hip-hop community, the ability to set the norm of authenticity as “ghettoized masculinity” is important.

The selling of hip-hop as a commodity to mainstream culture also has greatly influenced the growth and direction of hip-hop music and culture (Staggers, 2011). As Wright (2012) argued, “corporate America’s control of hip-hop’s production, marketing and distribution, subsequently translates into control of its image and voice” (p. 520). The moment hip-hop is placed into the hands of those with power and money, its traditional voice as a movement against the system was lost: “hip hop’s success is perpetuated by white media institutions who determine what images (mainly negative ones in hip hop) are mediated to consumer audiences [sic]” (Cole,
Beyond hip-hop’s struggle to retain its voice in the face of commodification and loss of authenticity, there are several positive influences that come from its music. First, Kitwana (2012) writes, “As the national forum for Black youth concerns and often as the impetus for discussion around those issues, rap music has done more than any one entity to help our generation forge a distinct identity” (p. 455). Additionally, Foreman (2013) states, “Taken up along the key axes of race, class, age, gender, or locale, political themes and amplification of urgent social issues and tensions are now standard facets of hip-hop expressivity” (p. 247). The arguments that praise the impacts of hip-hop culture echo the arguments made previously that hip-hop is beginning to return to its roots as a politically-centered movement.

Representations of Black Culture

Hip-hop is a tremendous social movement that impacts American culture in multiple ways. However, the representations within hip-hop culture are nuanced and must be dissected carefully before a true understanding of hip-hop culture can be reached. In this section, I first detail several problematic perceptions of the culture and their possible sources. Next, I discuss several prominent figures in the hip-hop industry, and how their images impact America’s understanding. I then discuss issues of Black masculinity and female representation in hip-hop culture.

Skewed Perceptions

Some scholars argue that, while influential, hip-hop music may also play a part in disseminating stereotypes of Black Americans. Ogbar (2007) agrees that hip-hop holds an imperative place in our culture, but that it also “offers up only the most narrow and problematic
representations of black imagery [sic]” (pp. 11-12). These representations are typically hyper-violent and hyper-sexual. Spencer (2011) expands,

Hip-Hop has now become the predominant venue by/through which the “un-challenged” dissemination and subsequent validation of historic stereotypes and contemporary fallacies of universal racial inferiority and criminality are being promoted. And it is detrimental because it reflects not only the voluntary replication and presentation of the historic stereotypes of hyper-sexuality, violence, aggression, immorality, and irresponsibility. But, it represents the artist’s conscious and arrogant ownership of the constructs of identifications and representations of not only his or her self and/or experience, but as a universal identification and representation of the experience of the race and the inner city [sic]. (p. 100)

Essentially, Spencer (2011) argues that representations in hip-hop culture present “historic stereotypes,” and that the most problematic issue arising from these stereotypes is the perpetuation that there is only one identity for Black Americans.

The perpetuation of this stereotype may be credited to the commodification of hip-hop culture. As argued above, the commodification of hip-hop culture changed its direction in that, “the mass culture is literally not buying the persona of the intelligent, socially aware, and politically critical Black man. In music, we want our thugs, and in the White House, we do not want anyone that makes us feel dumb” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 1235). This suggests that mainstream American media and culture will continue to produce and prop-up stereotypes of hip-hop musicians as those stereotypically, and mostly falsely, associated with gangsta rap: “hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia” (Oware, 2010, p. 22). These negative portrayals often over-shadow other forms of hip-hop.
Because American mass media continually portrays hip-hop musicians as thugs, their intellectually brilliant lyrics and rhymes are often ignored or forgotten (Jenkins, 2011). Ralph (2009) complements this argument, proposing that rappers and other public figures argue that the commodification leads to the displacement of social issues. To simplify, rappers and other celebrities promote the idea that the commodification of hip-hop has diminished the idea that hip-hop is centered around social change. Finally, Wright (2012) observes that because mainstream media promotes these stereotypical images as a commodity, “and a reflection of mainstream America’s appetite for the reified black images, Black rage is now entertainment [sic]” (p. 522). Americans may see hip-hop as promoting negative Black American stereotypes, while in reality, hip-hop continues to be a creative outlet for politically charged messages.

There is an intersection between commodified, mainstream hip-hop and underground hip-hop music. For instance, “artists, who are considered mainstream, are signed to major recording labels and often rap about issues that are popular: drugs, sex, crime, and violence” while underground hip-hop music is typically seen as more culturally progressive (Belle, 2014, p. 290). Further, Cole (2011) argues that underground rap artists produce music and “resist hegemonic oppression in the music industry and in society” (p. 198). It is no coincidence then that underground artists are not likely to ever reach levels of success similar to Kanye West or other mainstream artists.

Narrow perceptions of hip-hop may also come from distorted portrayals of influential musicians. A prime example of this phenomenon is the artist Tupac Shakur. The image most commonly associated with the artist is of a “thug” or “gangster,” instead of the politically motivated artist he intended to be. Tupac created “politically conscious and oppositional raps in the early 1990s, his anti-establishment/gangsta image was crystallized closer to the end of his
career (Jeffries, 2009, pp. 35-36). The phrase “THUG LIFE” made famous by the rap group formed by Tupac, is also grossly misunderstood. Shakur described Thug Life as an acronym, “‘The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody.’ This acronym was designed to communicate that society will reap the seeds of hatred sewn in its abject disregard for impoverished people of color” (Jeffries, 2009, p. 36). Tupac’s orientation was not unique. As Jefferies (2009) continues, “many thug narratives and performances constitute subversive criticisms of race and class-based oppression, and should be counted as legitimate projects in resistance” (p. 40). Tupac’s example suggests that the thug persona can be tied intrinsically to criticisms of American culture and politics. Unfortunately, Tupac did not gain notoriety as a conscious artist because of the commodification and narrow perceptions often attributed to hip-hop artists. Tupac is only one example where a thug image was perpetuated to distract from the politically-motivated outright criticism of American culture.

Jay-Z, who is perhaps one of the most academically studied American hip-hop artists, serves as a unique example of the thug persona, as more often than not he is praised for having shed the persona to take on that of a businessman. Jay-Z is referred to as the perfect symbol of the American dream, born in the “projects” in the Bronx, New York and rising to an estimated net worth of half a billion dollars (Giddings, 2011; Greenburg, 2011; White, 2011). Jay-Z is perhaps so studied because he grew from an underprivileged child in the roughest high school in New York to a multi-millionaire, first from his involvement in drugs and “hustling” and later as a talented lyricist (Greenburg, 2011). In particular, White’s 2011 piece “From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity” provides a good explanation of the way hip-hop moguls and superstars contribute to understandings of masculinity and African American culture. At times Jay-Z is even credited with bringing hip-hop music to the American
mainstream (Greenburg, 2011). His marriage to fellow mainstream hip-hop music star Beyoncé only helped to solidify his transition from “thug” to mogul.

**Black Masculinity**

Black masculinity has a deep and complicated history in American culture. Original representations of Black men in American media posited Black men as docile, weak, and typically emasculated (Morris, 2011; Nichols, 2014). Prior to the 20th century, Black men were presented as victims, emasculated through lynching and slavery, and as docile through images as servants and butlers, and as minstrelsy (Morris, 2011; Nichols, 2014; White, 2011). However, this image changed dramatically in the 20th century. Morris (2011) argues, “at work in the depictions of black men and in the turn from the black man as docile to the black man as inherently violent is the co-present representation and manipulation of black masculinity [sic]” (p. 80). Balaji (2009) argues that Black masculinity cannot be understood “without first understanding the impact of mediated representations” (p. 21). This representation, hooks (2003) argues, “is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy [and] is the image of the brute, untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling” (p. xii). Gray (1995) reiterates this claim, stating, “Self-representations of black masculinity in the United States are historically structured by and against dominant (and dominating) discourses of masculinity and race, specifically (whiteness) [sic]” (p. 401). Black masculinity and its construction by the “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2003) is deeply entrenched, demonstrated, and countered by American hip-hop music.

Belle (2014) writes extensively about Black masculinity and its connection and perpetuation through hip-hop culture. She contends that “…many Black men who are mainstream hip-hop artists graciously accept their role as entertainers. This role is almost always
attached to hypermasculine and hypersexual identity construction” (Belle, 2014, p. 291).

White (2011) argues that in the subgenre of hardcore or gangsta rap, Black masculinity is a performance “historically marked by notions around criminality, deviance, and pathology” (p. 23). Further, in this subgenre, facial expressions hold significance in representing Black hypermasculinity and the perception of “hardness” that is critical in a rapper’s persona (White, 2011, p. 25). Intense aggression seen in hardcore hip-hop may be a rejection of and response to the previously circulated and perpetuated images of the Black male body as weak.

This display of hypermasculinity and specifically Black masculinity can impact society in a variety of ways. Belle (2014) argues that young Black youth and men take in these images from popular hip-hop musicians in a search for understanding of their culture and their identity. In turn, “these internationalizations are in fact destructive and further promote patriarchy, sexism, and racism” (p. 288). In addition, representations of hypermasculinity and intense aggression in hip-hop can be wrongly misinterpreted by those outside the community, especially Whites and other racial and ethnic groups that may have limited experience with Black males. White (2011) argues that with only the images perpetuated by hardcore gangsta rap, those people viewing from outside the culture may not realize that it serves more as a performance, and less as a reality. Black males are then understood only as the performances of mainstream hip-hop, instead of other perceptions perpetuated in underground hip-hop music. Last, Belle (2014) contends,

Why is it that the White supremacist mainstream gaze is accepting of lyrics that perpetuate the Black man as the “bad man” as opposed to the image of the Black man as

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1 This is not to say that some hip-hop artists do not work against this definition of Black masculinity. For example, Frank Ocean is a notable example of a Black man in the music industry who openly refers to himself as a bisexual and repeatedly writes music that challenges these preconceived standards (Zimmerman, 2016).
an activist and intellectual? Perhaps it is because Black masculinity performances in mainstream hip-hop continue to uphold patriarchal and racist ideologies, while Black masculinity in underground hip-hop pushes the need to transform urban Black communities from the bottom up. (pp. 298-299)

Here Belle returns to the argument that mainstream and underground hip-hop have diverging ideologies, in this instance regarding Black masculinity performance. It is important to note again that the mainstream culture provides a White supremacist perspective, and therefore influences views and understandings of hip-hop culture and rap music.

Within the hip-hop community, a performance of masculinity is typically required for a number of reasons. First, this performance enhances one’s status. As Belle (2014) notes, “often in mainstream hip-hop, one has to prove his manhood by committing violent acts in order to maintain his ‘street credibility.’ You gain ‘street credibility’ by being hyperviolent, homophobic, and heteronormative, while degrading women” (p. 296). At times this demonstration of Black masculinity is more forward, in the form of flaunting muscles on album covers or music videos, or rapping about personal strength (Oware, 2010). Some scholars view Black masculinity as leading to “blatant misogyny and homophobia in rap music” (Oware, 2010, p. 24). Typically, this display of Black masculinity helps to solidify a musician’s authenticity, an incredibly important currency in the world of hip-hop.

Hip-hop does not simply uphold standard patriarchal ideals, but also creates a space of freedom for Black men in working class communities (Belle, 2014). For instance, “by creating their own forms of entertainment and, subsequently, a viable market for their creations, urban youth negotiate the inadequate conditions of their cities” (Baszile, 2009, p. 7). While outsider’s perceptions of hip-hop culture may align with negative cultural stereotypes, conversely it
provides a space for youth to express complaints against their current state of life. Balaji (2009) presents a study of Black masculinity through hip-hop popular music videos, and found that Black masculinity in hip-hop is primarily a surface construction, not unlike stereotypes of women. Ralph (2009) argues, “there is . . . an urgent need to reframe the ongoing discussion about male emcees and the idea of masculine authority that structures the way that conversation tends to unfold” (p. 143). Further research must be done about the demonstration and authority of masculinity in hip-hop culture to better understand its impacts on Black masculinity and Black culture as a whole.

*Women in Hip-hop*

A discussion of Black Masculinity in hip-hop would be incomplete without a closer look at women in hip-hop culture and music—both female artists and how issues of femininity are addressed in hip-hop. Women have been actively representing themselves in hip-hop since the birth of the culture in the South Bronx in the late 1970s, and they continue to represent today (Pough, 2007). Unfortunately, female gender representations are typically either grounded in stereotypes or woman who work in this arena are sometimes left entirely out of the conversation. As Durham (2007) argues, “today, there seems to be less community outcry within hip-hop about the banality of rap music and rap videos when it concerns the consistent dehumanization of women of color” (p. 304). Durham continues, “there has been no viable, visible, national movement or campaign by the hip-hop generation to stop the violence black men commit against black women [sic]” (Durham, 2007, p. 305). Spencer (2011) echoes Durham’s argument stating that “no song or video in the Rap/Hip-Hop genre is promoted without the lyrical or visual sexploitation of women of color” (p. 102). Belle (2014) blames poor representations of women of color to commodification, arguing, “because of the desire of record label executives (mostly
White) to make profit from hip-hop artists, the overwhelming message in mainstream hip-hop music emphasizes misogynistic images of women in music videos and hypermasculine behavior among Black men” (p. 291). While a lack of empowering representation may be clear from a surface level observation, hip-hop may actually offer a space for feminist expression.

Hobson and Bartlow (2008) write of the relationship between feminism and hip-hop, arguing, “despite mainstream hip-hop's increasingly commercial and misogynistic focus, and with fewer opportunities for women in popular hip-hop to create or sustain politically conscious music, there is nonetheless an intrinsic relationship between hip-hop and feminism…” (p. 4). The authors continue that, while these narrow depictions may continue, women in the industry are increasingly fighting against the oppression of women with rage and insisting that men respect them. While some of these women resist being described as “feminist” (Hobson & Bartlow, 2008; Pough 2007), they have carved out a space in the hip-hop world (Morgan, 1999). Women continue to prevail in the industry, notably: Salt-N-Pepa, Eve, Missy Elliot, Lauryn Hill, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and Lil Kim. The resistance against misogynistic practices in the music industry has led to the development of an alternative ideology.

Hip-hop continues to serve as an important place for women, and even sparked an entire movement known as “hip-hop feminism” to represent a large population of women scholars who felt rejected from typical White feminism (Morgan, 2012). Peoples (2008) explains, “They offer that beyond the problematic of demeaning women via its incontestable misogyny, hip-hop provides a space for young black women to express their race and ethnic identities and to critique racism [sic]” (p. 21). It can be argued then, similar to more generalized notions of Black stereotypes in hip-hop music, women too are unfairly understood as cast aside and poorly represented.
Kanye West

As discussed in previous sections, Kanye West is a serious political and musical influence on American popular culture in the 21st century. This section will review relevant literature related to West’s history and image. West has had several influential moments in American history, most notably his direct outcry regarding racist decisions made by President George W. Bush during the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Second, West has several skewed representations perpetuated in the media, most notably those linked to understandings of Black masculinity. While West’s previous works garnered attention academically, his seven most recent albums have not received equally serious scholarly scrutiny. Therefore, this section argues that Kanye West and his sixth studio album *Yeezus*, are ripe for academic study.

**History: Kanye West**

Kanye West has received attention from scholars for his previous musical work, specifically his first album as well as his political comments. As mentioned previously, West’s pronouncement surrounding Hurricane Katrina and former President George W. Bush created notable waves of response worldwide. This direct accusation of prejudice, Staggers (2011) argues, illustrates the struggle of hip-hop artists to make political statements without fear of being rejected. West’s comment about the President, however, did garner some support from the hip-hop industry. For instance, NYOil, a rap group that released a video critiquing major rap artists at the time for glorifying the drug trade, applauded West for being the only musician at the time who criticized the President for his actions (Ogbar, 2007). Others argue that West represents the voice of those marginalized by the disaster (Cole, 2011). Still others argue that West oversimplified the situation (Henkel, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2006). Regardless of interpretations of the moment, a large amount of coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its seemingly racially-biased,
catastrophic handling by the federal government includes at least a small nod to the moment Kanye West spoke out (see Dyson, 2006; Elliot & Pais, 2006; Kahle, Yu & Whiteside, 2007; Levy, Mendoza-Denton & Kugelmass, 2006).

Other moments in West’s career garnered academic response, including his *Rolling Stone* cover in which he was portrayed as Jesus Christ. The magazine cover features West clad with a crown of thorns. The title of the article emblazoned on the cover reads “The Passion of Kanye West”, an obvious play on the famous film, “The Passion of the Christ”, which details Jesus’ last days on Earth, according to scripture. The media coverage was, as one could anticipate, incredibly negative. Cole (2011) writes of the incident,

The reaction to West's controversial cover is an example of the white-privileged religious ideology in this country and the juxtaposition of a young black man portraying the "son of God." How dare a rapper portray such a sacred image in a hegemonic and patriarchal culture where the worldview of Jesus is associated with purity and the "white" race? [sic] (pp. 203-204).

Incidents such as this that tend to dominate the overall conversation about West, both as a person and a musician.

Discussion of West in academic writing tends to focus on his music. A great deal of research centers on his debut album *The College Dropout*. Education seems to be the primary focus of both West’s debut album and the academic research surrounding it. Kitterman (2005) argues that the persistent theme of the benefits and costs of a college education may create a connection with the modern-day college student, but may also promote stereotypes of the anti-intellectual by stating it is unimportant to attend college. This connects to the over-arching theme
discussed above: hip-hop is studied in a way that pays attention to the stereotypes it upholds, instead of those it works against.

Daws (2007) also writes about West’s mostly negative attitude toward education. This piece looks deeper into West’s work, however, arguing, “nearly every song or spoken word segment makes commentary on his opinions about the state of our culture” (Daws, 2007, p. 91-92). Richardson (2011) also writes about West, detailing his linguistic stylings as specific choices to critique hierarchies created by language use. As illustrated in the above citations, *The College Dropout* is a widely studied album within academia. However, West’s other albums receive little to no commentary from the academic world, despite continuation of the themes mentioned above.

The focus of my project is West’s sixth solo studio album *Yeezus*, released in 2013. This album has not received much attention from scholars. Still, Curry (2014a) argues that the album is worthy of serious academic study, largely because of the influence and cultural meaning of several of the album’s tracks. Further, Pinn (2014) writes about the album’s relation and mirroring of Christian values, arguing, “In ‘I Am a God,’ West, having something of a split (divine) personality, constitutes *Yeezus* as a morphing of the Christological event and personality so as to highlight the roughness of Christ’s encounter with the world” (p. 22). This study of *Yeezus* is more narrow and highlights the need for more academic research on the album.

**Black Masculinity: Kanye West**

There are three consistently circulated representations of West in academic literature. First, West is often discussed alongside Jay-Z as a man simply understood for his ridiculous outbursts. Second, Kanye West can be understood through his representations of Black masculinity and Black excellence. Last, images are dispersed with West as a man with an ego he
does not deserve. Because of West’s inability to escape these pigeonholes, his key identity as an artistic genius goes largely unrecognized.

First, West is often discussed in academic writing as a small footnote in the grandiose life of fellow rap artist Jay-Z. For instance, when discussing Jay-Z’s life and growth in the music industry and beyond, Greenburg (2011) makes note that he has remained loyal to West, who he describes as “an unquestionably brilliant artist whose antics have nevertheless managed to alienate many supporters” (p. 96). Here, West is reduced to only his “antics,” oversimplified by Greenburg (2011) as simply a “fiasco” with Taylor Swift (p. 96). West is portrayed as simply a wild Black man who is at times, completely out of control, rather than a man who has grown just as large in the world of hip-hop as Jay-Z himself. Greenburg (2011) is not alone in adopting this stance, however, Jay-Z mentorship of West’s and later business relationship are mentioned briefly throughout pieces that highlight Jay-Z’s incredible career (Giddings, 2011; Persley, 2011; Johnson, 2011). These descriptions overwhelmingly lack any in-depth discussion of West as an artist.

Other depictions of West outside of academic writing are dependent on perceptions of Black masculinity. For example, Singleton (2015) published a piece entitled Why You Really Hate Kanye West that dissects several inflammatory remarks about West as a musician, and how these intersect with him as a Black man. At one point in West’s career, petitions were used to prevent him from performing at several large music festivals (see Singleton, 2015). One petition organizer described West as “an insult to music fans all over the world” (Singleton, 2015, p. 2). This argument clearly lacks any respect for West as a musician who has a record number of Grammys (Caramanica, 2013) and has sold 21 million albums worldwide (Singleton, 2015). This
example is more than a demonstration of serious ignorance, but instead rooted deeply in racial politics. Singleton (2015) argues,

And if you believe the dramatic increase in unfiltered hatred and the complete dismissal of the talent of one of the most accomplished artists in a generation has nothing to do with the racial discomfort precipitated by a black man "scaring" America’s white sweetheart and entering into an interracial relationship with America’s favorite guilty pleasure, you're sorely mistaken [sic]. (p. 6)

The dramatic hatred of West is therefore irrefutably linked by scholar and critics to our society’s tendency to privilege White women while attacking Black men.

These depictions of West as “an insult to music fans” are intertwined with legitimate arguments against West. As Singleton (2015) writes, “our social discourse has become one where both facts and prejudice intertwine to produce a highly combustible climate prone to violent outbreaks and sustained racial tensions” (p. 14). These racial tensions are undoubtedly perpetuated by society’s perceptions of and response to Black masculinity. West is seen as a musician who often challenges understandings of Black masculinity (Neal, 2011), but this does not alleviate him from the pressures of performing Black masculinity and simply existing as a Black man.

West’s existence as a Black man in a society that continues to privilege White bodies warrants discussion. It has been argued that Black men suffer at the hand of unfair expectations. This double-standard is often referred to as “Black excellence,” meaning that people of color are expected to work twice as hard as their White counterparts, while simultaneously acting more modest and humble (Rankine, 2015). West is held to a standard of Black excellence, and therefore, is not rewarded regularly as his White counterparts. For example, West has won a
record-breaking 21 Grammys, but never when a White person was nominated in the same category (Caramanica, 2013). The argument is not that White artists do not deserve these awards, or that they do not work as hard, but instead that White privilege is present in the music industry. As Chu (2015) argues, “white privilege is, even for hard-working, talented artists who deserve success, getting graded on a curve [sic]” (p. 12). This facet of White privilege is also responsible for West’s frequent depiction as a man with an ego he does not deserve. Chu (2015) addresses this unfair standard as well, arguing, “If Kanye symbolizes anything it’s not mindless, self-serving “ego”; it’s relentless, unyielding perfectionism, a perfectionism he applies as harshly to himself as to others” (p. 18). West is not a man with an unearned ego; West is a man who is, perhaps, obsessed with perfection and therefore, represents Black excellence.

As mentioned previously, West also is credited at times with fighting against the standards of Black masculinity. This occurs in several ways. First, West “presents an ostensibly anti-homophobic stance wherein he fully embraces the idea of demonstrating affection for another male, yet maintaining ‘manliness’” (Oware, 2010, p. 28). In fact, West has been attacked by others within hip-hop culture for his position as supportive of LGBT individuals, including a diss-track (a song which attacks another famous artist) from Brand Nubian’s Lord Jamar. Researcher Tim’m West (2014) writes about Kanye West’s entrance into the music scene with his appearance in brightly colored sweaters and eccentric displays caused people within the hip-hop community to question both his sexuality and masculinity. West’s music also distances him from traditional Black masculinity, primarily in lyrical content (West, 2014). Kanye West works to challenge the traditional interpretations of Black masculinity in hip-hop through both his actions and his music.
Music critics and scholars also discuss West’s depictions of and relationships with women. Neal (2011) argues, “at no point in his short career has he paid homage to any movement among women, black, white, etc. And there is not a single song or skit on any of his albums where anti-progressive male attitudes towards women are challenged directly [sic]” (p. 1). However, Neal (2011) argues that while West may not be the ideal feminist hip-hop producer and artist, he cannot be reduced to a simple misogynist. While *Yeezus* can be argued to feature misogynistic lyrics, Curry (2014b) seems to align with Neal (2011) who argues that his work cannot be ignored or categorized as simply anti-feminist. Kanye West’s complicated relationship with women and feminism only furthers the argument that his work should be studied. This lack of agreement and rigorous academic discussion suggests that West is a dynamic figure in popular culture who deserves deeper academic study—especially with *Yeezus* in mind.
Chapter 3

Critical Orientation

In this section, I explain the theoretical orientation of this project: The Illusion of Life as outlined by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001). First, I explain the fundamental reasoning behind their argument that song lyrics and scores should be studied together. Then I examine the theoretical underpinnings of the Illusion of Life approach to studying music and a detailed explanation of the process for such analysis. Next, examples of works utilizing this method for rhetorical criticism will be reviewed. I then describe the text being analyzed in this project. The goal of this project is to apply Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) theory to the album *Yeezus* by Kanye West to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What depictions arise from the lyrics of *Yeezus* surrounding Black masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture?

RQ2: What emotions are conveyed through the score on the album *Yeezus*?

RQ3: In what ways do the lyrics and the score of the album *Yeezus* work congruently or incongruently?

These research questions allow for the greatest freedom in investigating both Kanye West and the album, but also investigating the applicability of this method for rhetorical criticism of music.

The Illusion of Life as Rhetorical Method

One guiding principle of this project is that music is worthy of rhetorical analysis. Scholars have concluded that music is an essential and persuasive form of communication in our society and, therefore, warrants serious academic study. For example, Dewberry and Millen (2014) write that music is inherently symbolic and the delivery is important and influential to understand and interpret music. Further, they conclude, “music is a powerful and pervasive form
of communication” (Dewberry & Millen, 2014, p. 90). Bailey (2006) argues, “the rhetorical analysis of music provides a pervasive and influential area of rhetorical scholarship, warranting continued theoretical development” (p. 20). Scholars have concluded that music is an essential and persuasive form of communication in our society and, therefore, worthy of serious academic study.

Rhetorical critics also have argued that those who study music must address both the lyrics and the score. Throughout this work, lyrics will refer to the words spoken, sung, or rapped in a particular song or track. Score refers to the musical instruments, electronic sounds, and other nondiscursive symbols that accompany the lyrics. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that “any method designed to analyze music as rhetoric form must consider the dynamic interaction between lyrics and score to capture the full meaning of the message” (p. 396). The Illusion of Life method proposed by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) is not the only perspective that can be used to analyze the score and lyrics together; however, “it is one of a few perspectives designed to examine both lyrics and music as they work together to function rhetorically [emphasis added]” (Sellnow, 2014, p. 171). For example, Diamond, Bermudez, and Schensul (2006) analyze lyrics alone to understand drug trends among American youth. Unfortunately, their work lacks an interpretation of how the music works with the lyrics to create the message. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that music and lyrics must be analyzed together to understand the full meaning of a song since “the rhetorical power of music can only be ascertained effectively by considering both lyrical content and musical score” (p. 396). Before providing a detailed exploration of Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) Illusion of Life Analysis, the intellectual genealogy of this method must be explored.
Langer (1953) developed the original conception of the Illusion of Life. The Illusion of Life can be understood as music, and is made up of two primary constructs that work in unison: virtual experience and virtual time. Virtual, in this instance, applies to all art which is thought to be “created only for perception” (Langer, 1953, p. 107). Music as a whole is made up of several components, such as notes and tones, that is intended for perception alone. Virtual time relates to the score of the music and “is separable from the sequence of actual happenings as virtual space is from actual space. In the first place, it is entirely perceptible, through the agency of single-sense hearing” (Langer, 1953, p. 109). As Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) simplify, “In short, music sounds the way feelings feel. And, where words fall short in expressing the inner emotions of the inmost being, music is able to do so” (p. 397). Virtual experience relates to the lyrics of a song or album. In summary, Langer (1953) provides the theoretical base for understanding music as virtual experience and virtual time working together to create the Illusion of Life.

Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) propose a theoretical framework that builds on Langer (1953), arguing that “music communicates as an aesthetic symbol by creating an Illusion of Life for listeners through the dynamic interaction between virtual experience (lyrics) and virtual time (music)” (p. 399). These constructs overlap to create three goals for the critic: 1) the critic must analyze the lyrics similar to traditional rhetorical criticism; 2) the critic must analyze the score for emotions conveyed; and 3) the relationship between the lyrics and the score must be examined to understand the overall message. The first goal illustrates a need to analyze the lyrics of a particular song or album in a fashion similar to traditional rhetorical criticism. Sellnow (2014) argues that this first goal can be accomplished using almost any traditional form of rhetorical criticism, such as feminist criticism or Marxist criticism.
The second goal for the critic is to analyze the score of the album. The score of an album contains intensity patterns and release patterns. These patterns are the tools for defining the emotions conveyed in the music or score. Intensity patterns can be understood as feelings of tension, while release patterns can be understood as feelings of relief. Sellnow (2014) supplies specific terms for categorizing intensity and release in the rhythmic structure, harmonic structure, melodic structure, phrasing, and instrumentation (p. 174). Primarily, each track’s score will be dissected using the terms suggested by Sellnow (2014) for each category. For example, rhythmic structure may be categorized as intense if the tempo is fast or release if the tempo is slow. To achieve the second goal, the score or music of a track was analyzed and categorized using the terms provided by Sellnow (2014) to understand the prevailing emotional message being presented in the track’s musical score (see Table 1).

Sellnow (2014) also provides two categories of rhythm for the virtual experience: comic (protagonist as persevering) and tragic (protagonist as hopeless). Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) elaborate, “the comic rhythm is a symbolic representation of the endurance and persistence people display when meeting adversity” (p. 400). Comic rhythm is typically represented in intensity patterns in the score. Tragic rhythm, conversely, is typically more pessimistic and therefore represented with release patterns in the score. As the authors explain, “tragic rhythm, . . . is a fulfillment, and its form is often closed and final. The protagonist is aware of his or her fate and must discover a way to deal with it” (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 401). Both of these rhythms are examined in order to gain an understanding of the emotional message expressed by the score and the lyrics.

The third goal for the critic utilizing an Illusion of Life method is to analyze the relationship between the score and the lyrics. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) write that the
relationship between the score and the lyrics is understood as either congruent or incongruent. Sellnow (2014) defines a congruent message as “one where the emotional meanings of music and lyrics reinforce one another; making the argument abundantly clear and poignant” (pp. 174-175). Conversely, an incongruent message “is one where the emotional meanings of the music and lyrics contradict one another, which tends to alter the meaning that would have been conveyed via either lyrics or music alone” (Sellnow, 2014, p. 175). Both a congruent and an incongruent relationship between the lyrics and the score can have substantial influence on listeners. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that incongruent messages in music, “can appeal simultaneously to (a) some listeners who are drawn initially to its discursive message and (b) others who are drawn initially to the musical style and then lead incrementally to accept the potentially controversial message as legitimate” (p. 411). This particular understanding of incongruent messages in music gives a unique perspective to the interpretation of the album Yeezus. If the lyrics and the music work together as congruent or incongruent, the understanding of the message can be fundamentally altered. This is important for analyzing an album such as Yeezus, which I argue produces strong messages lyrically and musically.

In her textbook The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture, Sellnow (2014) outlines a guide for conducting an Illusion of Life analysis. As with any rhetorical analysis, first the critic must select an appropriate text, in this instance Yeezus from Kanye West. Sellnow (2014) explains that when analyzing the lyrics, the researcher may choose to conduct this analysis in conjunction with another framework. For this work, a close-textual analysis is appropriate for analyzing the lyrics because it allows for the greatest degree of freedom and has been used in the study of music lyrics previously (Radwin, 2004, 2006). A close textual analysis allows for a researcher to look “microscopically” at the text in a new way (Slagell, 1991, p. 155).
Additionally, “This enables the critic to analyze the developing responses of the reader or
listener in relation to the words as they succeed another in time” (Slagell, 1991, p. 155). The
fundamental protocol of a close textual analysis is to observe the text as closely and as slowly as
possible. This work utilized a close textual analysis in order to gain a perspective that would
have otherwise been missed in other types of rhetorical criticism.

After conducting an analysis of the lyrics, the researcher must turn their attention to the
score of the track or album. This was done using the terms developed and aforementioned by
Sellnow (2014) and illustrated in Table 1 below. These terms are more fully unpacked in
Chapter 5 during the analysis. Last, the analysis of the score and the lyrics was utilized to reach
a final conclusion surrounding the track as either congruent or incongruent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure:</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo</td>
<td>Slow tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing meter</td>
<td>Consistent meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure:</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending</td>
<td>Descending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disjunct (sporadic)</td>
<td>Conjunct (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short-held tones</td>
<td>Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing:</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accented (punched)</td>
<td>Legato (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crescendos (gets louder)</td>
<td>Decrescendos (softer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation:</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amplified</td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sellnow (2014)
Previous Use of Illusion of Life

Several scholars have successfully used this method. For example, Chuang and Hart (2008) utilize Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) theoretical and methodological perspective of the Illusion of Life in their piece about the famous alternative punk band Green Day. This work combined Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) with a close study of ethos to determine if and how the artist Green Day held credibility in the punk music scene. After establishing an understanding of the framework, Chuang and Hart (2008) analyze the song “Jesus of Suburbia” through both music and lyrics. They follow the same structure provided by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) and Sellnow (2014) in terms of analyzing intensity and release in the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic structure, as well as phrasing, and instrumentation. By breaking down the song into its separate movements, Chuang and Hart (2008) were able to better examine the intensity and release patterns and their impact on the song’s (in)congruity. The authors found that Green Day, through incongruity of music and lyrics, are able to maintain status in the punk rock scene, while appealing to a broader, more suburban fan base. The authors exemplify how incongruity may entice, rather than repel listeners. The fundamental understanding of music as an Illusion to Life and, more generally, a persuasive message guide Chuang and Hart (2008) and this work as well.

Other works utilize Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) in conjunction with other theories. Hurner (2006) combines the Illusion of Life with cultural identity formation theory, feminist critical perspective, and other theories and methodologies to analyze music from the suffrage movement. Hurner (2006) uncovered several themes alongside congruency and incongruity. Hurner (2006) observed that the incongruity in some suffragette music provides a hopeful tone. This was found consistently due to the nature of patriotic music during the specific time period,
arguing, “The songs of the enslaved patriot period relied upon congruency between the lyrics and melodies to construct compelling emotional impressions and to heighten the poignancy of arguments in the music” (p. 243). The argument can be made, then, that perhaps the music stylings of the time and the expectations for the music of a specific time impact the congruent or incongruent message of the music.

Last, Fatal (2012) analyzes the queer punk rock scene using Sellnow and Sellnow’s method (2001) for the musical score and Narrative Theory (Fisher, 1984) for the lyrics. This research discusses intensity and release, specifically the increased tempo (faster than the average human heart rate) as intensity in one piece. While Fatal (2012) does not focus the majority of the work on the theories and methodology provided by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001), he still demonstrates the importance of analyzing the musical score alongside the lyrics to obtain a clearer understanding of the song as a full piece.

Text Used for Analysis and Procedures Followed

Kanye West’s 2013 album Yeezus consists of 10 tracks and is a total of 41 minutes long. Each song was explored in the order they appear on the track list for the album. Following the Illusion of Life analysis method outlined by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001), I first analyzed the lyrics from the album. The lyrics were gathered from Apple Music, a music subscription service which provides the lyrics for music available for streaming. Each track’s lyrics were analyzed separate from one another, and themes were coded using close-textual analysis and organized as they related to Black masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture. Next, the score was analyzed. Due to the fact that recordings of the score without the vocal elements are unavailable, the score was analyzed from each track with the vocal elements. However, this proved useful as the nondiscursive vocal elements impacted the intensity and release patterns (e.g., parts of the album
where West is screaming or humming). However, while the vocal elements were playing over the score of the album, the words themselves were not considered when categorizing the score. The score of each track was examined using the terms and patterns found in Table 1, and subsequent tables were made to categorize the patterns for each track. Then, each track’s score and lyrics were examined together to discover congruity or incongruity. Finally, the album as a whole was studied to determine congruity or incongruity.

The first analysis chapter presents the results from the examination of each track’s lyrics using a close textual analysis method, particularly to examine themes of race, Black masculinity, and hip-hop culture. The next analysis chapter presents the results of analyzing patterns of intensity and release in each track. This follows the structure outlined by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) and Sellnow (2014) (see Table 1). Finally, my last chapter discusses the congruity and incongruity of both the tracks individually, and the album as a whole, to better understand the messages and their impact on listeners and to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes arise from the lyrics of *Yeezus*, specifically surrounding Black masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture?

RQ2: What emotions are conveyed through the score on the album *Yeezus*?

RQ3: Do the lyrics and the score of the album *Yeezus* work together congruently or incongruently?
Chapter 4

The Virtual Experience

On May 18, 2013, Kanye West stood on the Saturday Night Live [SNL] stage, illuminated only by a single spotlight on his face. According to Harris (2013) West “delivered an equally intense rendition of ‘New Slaves’ in front of a projection of his face in extreme close-up. ‘Dark’ seems accurate so far (p. 1). ‘Dark’ seems accurate so far (p. 1). Not surprisingly, the score rose while images of sale and price tags flashed on the enormous screen projected behind him. The images and the score came to a halt as West began to rap, with no musical accompaniment, “New Slaves.” Only the day before, West had projected a similar image on the outside of 66 different buildings around the world: places like Wrigley Field, an art museum in Ontario, and a Prada store. He had a message and he wanted everyone to hear it loud and clear. Kanye West was rapping, with no distractions, about the current status of Black America.

At the time of his SNL performance, “Black Skinhead” and “New Slaves” were the first singles released by West for his sixth solo studio album, Yeezus. This album works to conceptualize Black history and Black life in America. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) Illusion of Life framework conceptualizes the lyrics of music as a virtual experience. The virtual experience is broken into poetic or dramatic illusions and comic or tragic rhythms. Poetic illusions “look back into the virtual past and lack suspense because the events have already occurred” (Chuang & Hart, 2008, p. 188). Dramatic illusions, conversely, look into the future and therefore create suspense. As for the rhythm, comic rhythm is characterized by optimism “a positive outlook, a determined process” while tragic rhythm is pessimism and acceptance of fate (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 401). Both of these illusions and rhythms are recognizable in West’s album and work to reframe the Black American man. First,
West utilizes famous historical rhetoric and references in order to challenge and reclaim previous understandings of Black history. Next, West creates a new ethos, the new slave, which depicts the current struggle of Black American men. West’s conceptions of life as a Black man are vivid and detailed, but his portrayals of women were significantly less detailed or consistent, and therefore I do not discuss them in either of the analysis chapters. Instead, the conclusion chapter draws attention to West’s depictions of women and the complicated relationship between black masculinity and femininity. This chapter will illustrate the Illusion of Life (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001) by performing a close textual analysis of the lyrics from Kanye West’s *Yeezus*.

**The Historical African American Experience**

When West raps, “If I knew what I knew in the past / I would’ve been Blacked out on your ass” he nods to the reflection on Black history that is pervasive throughout the album, but also to his own position as a Black man making music for a White audience (West, 2013, Track 2). Of course, Kanye West is not alone in reconceptualizing Black history. According to O’Meally and Fabre (1994), “History is not so much a fixed, objective rendering of ‘the facts’ as it is a process of constant rethinking and reworking in a world of chance and change” (p. 3). This section of the analysis focuses on the poetic illusions of West’s album, which look at the history of Black America. West illuminates the importance of remembering history within the Black American community, while also reclaiming and rewriting the narrative in order to create distance from the dominant narrative. First, I outline several instances of West referencing historical moments. Then, I discuss the important implications of West’s uses and their connection to Black history and culture. Overall, I argue that history plays an important role in West’s work. The historical references West uses make a particularly compelling case that the
status of African American men is simultaneously made up of poetic and dramatic illusions and comic and tragic rhythms.

First, West evokes the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. twice in the album *Yeezus*. The first example is early in the album, “No sports bra, let’s keep it bouncing / Everybody wanna live at the top of the mountain / Took her to the ‘Bleau, she tried to sip the fountain” (West, 2013, Track 1). The lines that precede and follow the lyric referencing King’s final speech have no relevance to King or Black history. This occurs several times in the album, and the lyrics surrounding the lyrics used in analysis will be included at times in order to encapsulate the, perhaps, spontaneous nature of the references. It is important to note that West wrote the album spontaneously, “Kanye laid down vocals for five tracks (and wrote lyrics for “two or three”) over the course of one two-hour burst of creativity on the day of Kim Kardashian’s baby shower” (Shepard, et al. 2013, p. 9).

One of the historical references to Martin Luther King is altered dramatically from King’s original intention. West raps, “Your pussy’s too good, I need to crash / Your titties, let ‘em out free at last / Thank God almighty, they free at last / We was up at the party but we was leavin’ fast” (West, 2013, Track 6). These lyrics are simultaneously sexual and historical in nature. West utilizes both dramatic and poetic illusion, as the lyric turns back to the past through its use of King’s rhetoric, but also turns to the future through the depictions of contemporary sexual exploration. The intertwined presentation of dramatic and poetic illusion mimics both intensity and release patterns making the categorization of this track particularly difficult. The song is categorized as one of release because ultimately it looks into the past of Martin Luther King that is of utmost importance. Of course, some listeners may balk at the idea that he is sexualizing the notion of “freedom” or emancipation. I argue, however, that the important part
of the lyrics is his adoption of Civil Rights rhetoric and the nod to Martin Luther King Jr. and the assumption that listeners will understand the reference.

One historical example is present across multiple tracks. West references the poem, *Strange Fruit* in two different tracks. The poem was originally written by Abel Meeropol and famously covered by Billie Holiday (Blair, 2012). West samples Nina Simone’s powerful rendition of the poem for a track titled, appropriately, “Blood on the Leaves.” This track, however, is rather complicated as West’s words deal, almost in no way, with any racial issues, unlike other tracks featured on the album. West received quite a bit of criticism for using a serious poem about lynching in the 1930s alongside rap verses describing alimony and troubles with monogamy (Shepard, 2013 et al.). The track opens,

[Nina Simone] Strange fruit hangin'
from the poplar trees
Blood on the leaves

[Kanye West] I just need to clear my mind now
It's been racin' since the summertime

[Nina Simone] (breeze)

[West] Now I'm holdin' down the summer now

[Simone] (breeze)

[West] And all I want is what I can't buy now

[Simone] (Blood on the leaves) (West, 2013, Track 7)

The alternating between West and Simone creates an interesting feature of both poetic and dramatic illusion, similar to that observed in the lyrics about King. The poem is referenced also on the track “New Slaves”. The difference between the two is that West himself says the words
“I see the blood on the leaves” in the track “New Slaves”, placing himself in the place of Simone, Meeropol or Holiday and their first-hand account of the lynching of innocent Black men in the 1930s (West, 2013, Track 4). Now, West is the interlocutor, as he places himself at the center of this narrative. He uses this famous poem in order to reclaim history for himself, or perhaps to illuminate the reality that racial prejudice is not just relegated to the past but still occurs in the present. *Strange Fruit* is another example of the poetic illusions described by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001), a look into the past with the tragic rhythm of pessimism. The adoption of the poem *Strange Fruit* again relates back to history of Black America, specifically literal violence imposed on Black bodies as a tool of oppression, to make a powerful argument about what it means to reference history and what is considered appropriate.

West also draws upon key historical words to develop the historical lineage of African American identity. He references the racist and oppressive cartoons that dominated popular White American culture for decades in order to highlight the deeply problematic White view of Black America. West raps, “Stop all that coon shit (black)/ Early-morning-cartoon shit (black) / This that goon shit / Fuck-up-your-whole-afternoon shit” (West, 2013, Track 2). This lyric has layered meaning. First, the term “coon” is a racial slur developed in the 1800s to mean “shiftless, deceitful rural blacks. The minstrel character Zip Coon and the “coon song” craze of the 1830s helped to popularize the term as a racial slur” (Artz & Murphy, 2000, pp.96-97). This lyric references not only the racist term, but also the racist cartoons that were once a ubiquitous piece of American culture. The presence of racist cartoons began in the silent film era, and persisted for several decades. These cartoon films featured dangerous and offensive stereotypes of African Americans and Africans, and were challenged by the NAACP on several occasions, for instance in response to the 1948 work of Walter Lantz, *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (Cohen,
This reference again helps to create a sense of poetic illusion, or a looking to the past, as well as developing historical lineage.

Not all of West’s references of racial movements are those that occurred within the United States. Returning to the track “Blood on the Leaves,” West continues the pattern of pairing serious language with the rather unserious. He raps, “Now you sittin' courtside, wifey on the other side / Gotta keep 'em separated, I call that apartheid / Then she said she pregdna-nated, that's the night your heart died” (West, 2013, Track 7). Apartheid, of course, being a reference to the racially biased laws that persisted in South Africa well into the 1990s. West, similar to the sampling of Strange Fruit, received serious criticism for using the term apartheid to describe his woes of monogamy and basketball games (Shepard et al., 2013.). Again, West mixes traditional senses of historical moments with otherwise unrelated lyrics to stress his perspective on Black history.

These examples all work together to create West’s conceptualization of Black history. First, it is important to note that all of these references work to create an in-group and an out-group. Those who listen to these lyrics and understand their serious political meanings enter into the in-group, while those who are less knowledgeable fall outside of that group. This in-group scenario is made more important by the fact that Kanye West has an incredibly diverse fan base, a majority of whom are young White people. Their understanding of Black history, and their possible exclusion from the in-group may provide an interesting perspective on the purpose of Kanye West’s Yeezus.

As mentioned above, several of West’s lyrics use famous Civil Rights rhetoric, as well as examples of racist language and historical moments alongside lyrics that focus on issues such as monogamy, sexual exploits, and even restaurants. These examples make the audience
uncomfortable while demonstrating the importance of recalling and altering history within the African American community. The use of the recognizable rhetoric of King alongside a discussion of sex, as in the use of the line about a woman’s breasts and the iconic phrase “thank God almighty, they free at last”, West forces listeners to question what is and is not appropriate to do with the rhetoric of famous Civil Rights leaders (West, 2013, Track 1).

Kanye West is, of course, not alone in pressing questions about what is and is not appropriate when discussing Black history. O’Meally and Fabre (1994) probe,

And so blacks and whites—historians as well as other professionals, along with front porch observers—have been engaged in a struggle over what to say about America’s past and how to say it. Which parts of history matter most? Who makes history? Whose history will prevail? [sic] (pp. 3-4).

West alters famous historical words to add to the conversation regarding who makes history and what should be said about America’s history. It needs to be rewritten, not simply to include various characters inside the same narrative, but completely reshaped in order to tell the truth in totality (O’Meally & Fabre, 1994). The restructuring of the American narrative evolves, at least in part, from the idea that Black Americans cannot escape their history. O’Meally and Fabre (1994) argue, “The legacy of slavery and the serried workings of racism and prejudice have meant that even the most optimistic black Americans are, as the expression goes, ‘born knowing’ that there is a wide gulf between America’s promises and practices” (p. 3). White Americans, on the other hand, are able to escape their history, and ignore this gulf, in perpetuity. Willis (1994) questions mass culture as a place for historical revisions and memory, and makes a particular note about the incredible growth of hip-hop music in the 1990s. Black Americans have attempted to reclaim history through popular culture and mass media, long before Kanye West had made
his first beat. This reclamation is two-fold: Black Americans cannot escape their history and American history must be rewritten.

West references historical moments in Black history because history is inescapable for Black Americans. White Americans are able to ignore their history and pretend it is distant and separate from themselves and their identities, while Black Americans are tied to their history and it serves as a larger part of their culture. Because history is tied to a sense of self, West refers to historical examples throughout the album. More importantly, West has the possibility of addressing a larger White audience and presents Black history as a way of reminding White listeners that these events occurred. Last, West is reclaiming this history, at times through distortion, for himself and for other Black Americans.

Reclaiming historical moments and altering the dominant narrative is a strategy used, historically, by other Black artists. West’s altering of historical rhetoric demonstrates also a rejection and challenge to the respectability politics that loomed over W.E.B. DuBois, the Civil Rights Movement and again loomed over America during the Obama administration. Harris (2014) explains,

What started as a philosophy promulgated by black elites to “uplift the race” by correcting the “bad” traits of the black poor has now evolved into one of the hallmarks of black politics in the age of Obama, a governing philosophy that centers on managing the behavior of black people left behind in a society touted as being full of opportunity [sic]. (p. 33)

This political position to expect Black Americans to behave in a particular fashion in order to get ahead affected W.E.B. DuBois and other Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Further, “As white consumption of black art increased, so did the pressure to satiate white tastes,
strengthening white influence over black art [sic]” (Watts, 2001, p. 185). Meaning, not only did Black artists have to prescribe to a particular brand of respectability, they were also expected to produce art that was easily enjoyed and consumed by a White audience. Respectability limited not only those in the Harlem Renaissance, but also limited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his prophetic involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, West challenges the notion that those who want to be respected and get ahead in America must prescribe to a particular level of respectability—use particular words, present a particular brand of “black identity.” His rejection of respectability is also a stand against producing music and art to be consumed and enjoyed by a White audience. While White listeners may not be directly opposed to the language, his choice to possibly alienate the White audience through historical references typically associated with Black culture shows a rejection of the limitations imposed by White audiences that controlled previous Black artists and leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Dr. King. West uses King’s and Simone’s famous rhetoric to honor the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the engulfing pressure to act respectable to be respected in America. This, too, is a piece of what it means to be Black, at least for West: to challenge respectability politics while simultaneously respecting those who were forced to submit to them.

This rejection of respectability politics is illustrated not only in the examples of West’s language use with the rhetoric of Simone and King, but also in the line that references cartoons. The use of the derogatory, racist language is a clear example of West referring to those demanding he change and alter his behavior, as if to indicate that he needs to act less like the stereotypical Black man and more like the Black man expected through respectability politics. To simplify, West alludes to the idea that White audiences want Black people to stop acting the
way that Black people are depicted for White amusement, and start acting the way White people want you to act.

In Petridis’ (2013) review of Kanye West’s album, he argues that lyrics, in particular the reference to apartheid, could be a single piece of a larger attempt at provocation. This provocation, this lyric, and other lyrics rooted in historical examples of Black Americans rising up against their white oppressors work together to demonstrate West’s conception of history, but also his conception of the contemporary position of Black men in the United States. In short, his historical account of a black ethos sets up his new, more modern ethos, which I argue is called “New Slaves.”

The New Slaves

West opens “New Slaves” with the words, “my mama was raised in the era when clean water was only served to the fairer skin” (West, 2013, Track 4). This lyric works as the transition from the past, historical, poetic illusion of Black America to the new ethos of the “new slave” proposed by West. “New Slaves” is a remarkably powerful track which describes in serious detail, through both comic and tragic rhythm, the current position of the African American man. This concept, as noted above, not only guides this song but the entire album. I argue that West reconceptualizes the position of Black men in America and refers to them as “New Slaves”. After making numerous references to history, West carves out a reclaimed space for African American identity. The idea of the “New Slaves” is layered and comprised of notions of what it means to be “real” for West. While West makes important notes about religion, violence, and capitalism, all fall under his conception of the real.

West’s conception of the real is demonstrated first through notions of authenticity, which is a complicated construct that originates within the early days of hip-hop. First, West opens the
album with “On Sight” and raps, “Real n----- back in the house again / real Timbs all on your couch again”. This particular lyric alludes to West as “real”, a term used throughout hip-hop music to illustrate one’s position as authentic (McLeod, 2012). Another example, “since the tight jeans they never liked you / Pink-ass polos with a fucking backpack / But everybody knows you brought real rap back” (West, 2013, track 3). This lyric illustrates that, while his outward appearance was challenged in his career for being too flamboyant, or at times inauthentic, that West brings “real rap back” as opposed, perhaps, to other rap artists. This authenticity is essential, as exhibited previously, in the hip-hop community in order to gain notoriety or respect from others within the community. Last, West raps, “All them other n----- lame and you know it now / When a real n----- hold you down, you supposed to drown” (West, 2013, track 10). This lyric appears in the track “Bound 2” in which West is rapping and singing to a woman about her previous relationships, and their current relationship problems. This line can be seen as West positioning himself among one particular group of men, while above another group of men, as now that the woman has been with West she sees him as real, and other grouping of men as not-real, or not-authentic. The in-group in the new ethos is Black men who are “real” and the out-group is those that are not “real.”

West’s concept of the “real” and authenticity are also connected to nods to previous musical artists. For example, West raps, “The only rapper compared to Michael / So here’s a few hating-ass n----- who’ll fight you / And here’s a few snake-ass n----- to bite you (West, 2013, Track 3). This lyric discusses Michael Jackson, arguably the biggest pop-star in the history of American music. Further, West raps “This the greatest shit in the club, / Since "In Da Club" / It's so packed I might ride around / On my bodyguard's back like Prince in the club” (West, 2013, Track 9). This lyric again references two famous, successful, Black musicians: 50 Cent and
Prince. While West evokes the memory of formerly famous musicians in what appears to be traditional tactics to establish authenticity, I argue instead that West references older artists in order to assert himself as the new of the “New Slaves” conception, as well as the “real.” The overarching concept of the “new slave” ethos is to be “real” and authentic, and West demonstrates his place as both through his discussion of his place in hip-hop culture.

Even the word “Yeezus” and “Yeezy” are important to the development of the “New Slaves” ethos because of their connection to religion. West’s interactions with Christian iconography have a troubled past, and choosing to title the album Yeezus is no exception. His first offense occurred when he infamously posed on the cover of Rolling Stone as Jesus Christ, complete with a crown of thorns. The situation was intensified as the article was titled The Passion of Kanye West (Cole, 2011). West again situates himself in the place of Jesus Christ in this album. One of the songs on the album is titled “I Am a God (Feat. God)” and includes the following lyrics, “I just talked to Jesus / He said, “what up Yeezus?” / I said “Shit I’m chilling / Trying to stack these millions” / I know he the most high / but I a close high” (West, 2013, Track 3). Whether the lyrics are offensive in nature is less important; what is essential to note is that this lyrical set features a comic rhythm pattern in which West frames the “New Slave” in an optimistic light, as a man who can talk to “God.” The “New Slave” does not have to be presented only as a negative construct, which restricts and limits the Black man in society. Instead, this new ethos allows Black Americans to act freely and work to achieve goals that they set for themselves. This presents an interesting challenge to the “real” which persists as a facet of the “new slave” ethos. Perhaps for West, religion and interactions with God are the real. West further complicates the notions of the real when he details the struggles each Black man in America faces against oppression, violence, racism, and capitalism. Each of these constructs is
detailed in the meaning of “New Slaves”.

Inescapable, and at times institutionalized, violence is another construct tied to the Black male experience, according to Kanye West’s *Yeezus*. West’s view of Blackness is linked, at least in some part, to violence: whether it be inflicted by others or inflicted by the American prison system. Violence is also conceptualized as physical, literal, real or metaphorical in nature. The first example of real, tangible violence comes from the track “Black Skinhead,” a song which West described as something he would have never been able to perform earlier in his career (Caramanica, 2013). He raps, “If I don’t get ran down by Catholics / Here come the conservative Baptists / Claiming I’m overreactin’ / Like the Black kids in Chiraq bitch” (West, 2013, track 2). The term “Chiraq” is a politically charged term used to describe the dangerous, gang-violence plagued areas of Chicago, Illinois. The term is incredibly potent because “more Americans have been murdered in Chicago in the last 15 years than have died in Iraq and Afghanistan combined” (LeDuff, 2015). The intense terminology used in this lyric expresses the lack of racial equality or justice by illuminating the cavalier response that White people hold towards the violence experienced by Black children. West makes the decision to not say men or adults, but “kids,” forcing the listener to understand that some of the victims of this violence are children. These two lines are extremely powerful, as West is arguing that Americans believe that the Black children who are suffering in Chicago, and dying in large numbers, are “over-reacting.” West uses tragic rhythm to depict the plight of the children in Chicago as inescapable. It is important to note as well that West is comparing the experience of children in Chicago with a literal *war*. Thus, he sees violence against children as comparable to war. This lyric illustrates, then, the Black experience as one plagued by both literal violence, and the metaphorical violence inflicted on Black children by White people who lack any serious empathy.
Another example of illustrating the real violence experienced by Black Americans discusses the revelation of how those who die from violence are immortalized and how their death is discussed. While not rapped by West himself, this lyric featured on the track “Send it Up”, “Tattoos, how they break the news / It was real if you made the news” (West, 2013, track 9). Tattoos, according to the artist King Louie, may represent the idea that immortalization through tattoos was a way to “break the news” or disclose to someone else that a person had died, implied through a violent death. Further, the idea that “real” deaths made the news, as the murder rates in Chicago, where both King Louie and Kanye West are from, are extremely high and not every murder is reported on the news. This particular example is again an example of tragic rhythm: the fate of the protagonist is unalterable.

The third example of violence relates to the institutionalized, metaphorical violence against Black men carried out through the prison industrial complex. This term has been used to describe the “unprecedented expansion of the US prison system [that] has taken place with little public discussion and scholarly analysis” (PCARE, 2007, p. 402). The term was originally adopted from Eisenhower’s “military industrial complex”, which was coined because the military had become so incredibly intertwined in American life that it threatened democracy. Similarly, the prison industrial complex is a threat to democracy because the United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (PCARE, 2007). Perhaps one of the most profound lyrics featured on Yeezus, West raps,

Meanwhile the DEA teamed up with the CCA /
They tryna lock n----- up, they tryna make new slaves /
See that’s their privately-owned prison, get your piece today /
They probably all in the Hamptons, braggin’ bout what they make. (West, 2013, track 4)
While only several seconds of the song, this section features some powerful discussion of perhaps the largest issue facing Black Americans in the United States currently. The verse draws upon such an essential issue in the right for equality that the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published an article using these lyrics to discuss the prison industrial complex (Takei, 2013). The ACLU uses West’s popularity to highlight key issues with American prisons, such as the fact that more African-American adults are “under correctional control than were enslaved in 1850, before the Civil War” (Takei, 2013). Thus, these lyrics link those in the prison system to the “New Slaves” in America.

To begin with unpacking the layered arguments in this verse, West starts by explaining that the DEA, the Drug Enforcement Agency which operates to enforce laws regarding controlled substances, has “teamed up with the CCA,” Corrections Corporation of America, a for-profit organization. This line may seem to depict a conspiracy, but there is some truth behind it. For instance, White Americans are more likely to deal drugs, but Black Americans are more likely to be arrested for drug charges (Ingraham, 2014). West maintains that they “tryna lock n--- up, they tryna make new slaves” (West, 2013, Track 4). The parallel occurs on two planes. As illustrated above, more Black adults are incarcerated than were enslaved in 1850. However, not only are these Americans incarcerated, they are placed into privately owned prisons that profit from high incarceration. Those in prison are forced into working incredibly low paying jobs, in federal prisons “the pay range is between $0.12 and $0.40 per hour. A few states do not require prisoners to be paid at all” (Shemkus, 2015, p. 5). While the debate rages on about whether these jobs hurt or help those within the prison system, the argument remains clear that forced work without pay is slavery. West brings attention to the serious issue of the prison system and the Drug Enforcement Agency, and demands listeners at least consider that those imprisoned are
suffering and doomed to become the “new slaves” of the United States. West reconfigures the term “slave”, which is paramount to his new ethos, and relies on identifiable tropes like Black men being abused by the state. This is an example also of the tragic rhythm described by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001). While the lyrics feature a tragic rhythm, the important argument is West brings light to is the corruption of the American prison system. He is able to make a more meaningful argument because of his use of Black history and the Black experience.

West is making the point that this system of slavery and oppression is the same as before, it only presents itself differently in contemporary America. The shared history that West presents in the first section of this chapter provides the foundation for the new conceptions of oppression which West develops in other places. These lyrics are reminiscent of the historical Black narrative, but also incorporate the new ethos. To be a Black man means to suffer at the hands of the dominant culture: then and now. It also means to suffer at the hands of capitalism. West raps about the struggles of capitalism in several specific examples.

Capitalism is conceptualized in several ways. Yeezus provides one example of the inherent racism of the capitalist fashion industry. West raps, “Doin’ clothes, you woulda thought I had help / But they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself” (West, 2013, track 4).

One particularly important critique to level against West before analyzing this particular rhetorical statement is that West received a large amount of support, especially from the brand Adidas, in creating his fashion line (Woolf, 2016). This again confronts assumptions about the real and unreal. West challenges this imagined real, however, by arguing that “you woulda thought” that he would receive help, but instead that those who did help him required more from him than perhaps they would have required of a White designer. The imagery conjured is no coincidence, as West uses the imagery of slaves in order to remind the audience that participation
in the fashion industry once was non-voluntary. American fashion began with the enslavement of millions of Africans picking cotton. It could be argued that in the long history of the fashion industry, which was built off the labor of the enslaved Africans from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries, has not changed substantially. The values of the fashion industry have remained stagnant and continue to be predicated off the free or near free labor provided by those of a lower socioeconomic level, that typically do not live in the United States and are not White. This lyric and its powerful perception of America is not limited to only the fashion industry. West is again demonstrating that the history of Black people in American culture may still prevail and impact the ability of a Black man to act independently of standards forced onto him. This is the core of West’s new ethos, the “New Slaves”.

Capitalism is interlinked to all industries, not just fashion. West’s argument, however, is that he was not allowed to participate in the fashion industry unless he participated in the traditional role as slave and unequal partner. West could not satisfy those who were able to help him succeed in the fashion industry unless he himself picked the cotton. Combining this lyrical argument, with references above about his position in the fashion industry, the argument could be made by audience members that West falls victim to capitalism, in order to fulfill one of his desires.

One of the most profound arguments about capitalism and its impact on Black Americans occurs in the track actually named “New Slaves.” West raps,

You see it’s broke n---- racism, that’s that don’t touch anything in the store/
And it’s rich n---- racism, that’s that come in, please buy more /
What you want, a Bentley, fur coat, a diamond chain? /
All you Blacks want all the same things /
Used to only be n-----, now e’erybody playin’ / 
Spendin’ e’erything on Alexander Wang, new slaves (West, 2013, Track 4)

West describes two brands of racism that are predicated off of economic success: racism directed towards the poor and racism directed towards the rich and successful. Racism directed towards those of low socio-economic status is described as “don’t touch anything in the store.” Conversely, racism directed towards the rich is based off stereotypes understood as real by White audiences and control through spending. Capitalism is directly linked to the status of Black Americans.

This further supports the theme that Black Americans only hold value when they illustrate the traditional archetype of success. By explaining racism through capitalism, West illustrates that only through the ability and desire to spend money on exclusive high cost items typically associated with success do Black people hold any value. However, this value is not without its costs, as the people who spend money on things such as Alexander Wang are described as “new slaves” because they become “slaves” to the stereotypical material goods. The specific items West raps in the song are not random choices, but instead are items that are stereotypically associated with Black Americans, as West explains in the line that follows, “all you Blacks want all the same things.” West adds a condition to the value of American economic success: what a person does with their economic success is open to criticism.

This West’s illumination of the particular dichotomy of racism as intertwined with capitalism and success again connects into the theme of respectability politics and the double-bind faced by W.E.B. DuBois and other Black artists and leaders. Black artists must fulfill the expectations made by White audience members in order to be accepted in society. In this instance, Black artists are expected to gain economic success and notoriety, but upon achieving
that success, Black artists are critiqued severely for what they choose to buy. Further, the authentic Black male is expected to buy these particular types of items, so that West and other successful Black male artists are pressured in two opposing directions. If West chooses to buy expensive, luxury items, such as Alexander Wang, he is praised by fellow Black males. But he is nevertheless attacked by others, who see his participation in capitalism as only feeding into the machine, which he critiques.

The double-bind of respectability is demonstrated again when West describes the reception of his relationship with White reality-star and business woman, Kim Kardashian:

“Enter the kingdom / But watch who you bring home / They see a Black man with a White woman at the top floor / They gon’ come to kill King Kong” (West, 2013, track 2). This string of rapping holds various levels of specific meaning in regards to both West’s status and interracial relationships. First, the lyric represents the double-bind present in American society regarding Black men and power. While America prides itself on the idea of becoming rich and powerful, the double-bind presents itself in that Americans will judge and rally against Black men who become too powerful. Further, Americans tend to value, at least in theory, the idea of racial equality, but are quick to demonize interracial relationships. This is evident in the first two lines of the sequence, “enter the kingdom” meaning enter the world of power and success in American culture, while “But watch who you bring home” represents the caution of not entering into a relationship with a White woman if you are a Black man. Black men are encouraged to strive for economic success, but the woman they choose to share that success with is still under extreme scrutiny.

Here, given his marital status, audiences are invited to see this as autobiographical (assumingly his wife Kim Kardashian is the “White woman”). The top floor is an indication of
wealth and power. The “King Kong” referred in the line is a clear reference to the 1933 film where a large gorilla kidnaps a White woman and carries her to the top of the Empire State Building (Cooper & Schoedsack). The film is argued by scholars as a “cautionary tale about interracial romance” (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams & Jackson, 2008, p. 293). Simian insults are not simply present in “King Kong” but throughout American culture, and while “explicit representations of Blacks as apes may be relegated to history, the mental association lingers and appears to exert some influence on visual perception (Goff et al., 2008, p. 296). The “New Slaves” ethos may also mean a rejection and explicit confrontation of racial stereotypes. By coupling simian insults with the assertion of his economic success, West is rejecting the American value that wealth is always prized, and that success is measured by economic means. If wealth were truly a value held in high esteem in American culture, a Black man “at the top” would be revered, and not faced with violence. Additionally, West is demonstrating that it is more than simply being a successful Black man, it is being a successful Black man in a romantic relationship with a White woman, in a culture that strongly rejects interracial relationships. This further illustrates that success and respectability will continuously hold Black men to an unachievably high standard of action.

For West, capitalism is unavoidably linked to education as well. Two specific examples arise in *Yeezus* about the interaction of capitalism, education, and Blackness. First, again in “New Slaves” West raps, “Y’all throwin’ contracts at me, you know that n----- can’t read” (West, 2013, track 4). However, this sentiment did not go unchecked, Reed (2014) argues,

**Wow, wow, wow**. That is an amazing thing to put in a lyric. That’s a serious accusation in the middle of this rant at other people: an accusation of *himself*. As if he’s some piece
of shit from the street who doesn’t know nothing. Yeah, right — your mom was a college English professor. (p. 17)

Reed (2014) is correct, West is not an uneducated man. However, the lyric serves less as a critique of himself and more so as a critique of the American people and the education of Black Americans compared to White Americans. Here, West uses a noun to stand in for himself in order to make the lyric generalizable to all Black men. The use of the term “you know” insinuates that the audience is well aware at the educational differences, a real assumption perpetuated by the White audience. In fact, illiteracy rates for young African Americans are higher than their White counterparts (Thompson, 2016). It could be argued that West is making a well-grounded argument that African American illiteracy effects the levels of success they are able to achieve because they are unable to challenge contracts that are handed to them, whether it be in the music business, or otherwise. Conversely, the lyric may serve as a critique about the understood real White audiences assume about the Black experience. Additionally, without the construct of capitalism ruling over American education, Black students may be able to receive an equal level of education. Again, West’s new ethos, the “New Slaves” is tied to the metaphorical violence, the imagined and literal real of capitalism.

Another example of the connection between capitalism, the perceived real, and education is rapped not by Kanye, but by King Louie who was featured in this analysis previously. He raps, “Dropped out the first day of school / Cause n----- got cocaine to move” (West, 2013, track 9). Illegal drug culture is positioned in direct opposition and competition with education. The indication may be that this conflict is outside of the speaker’s decision; something fundamentally beyond his control. Cocaine has to be moved, and therefore he had to leave school to do so. Beyond the rapper King Louie, himself, there is an indication that the line would be
representative of a larger group, as he does not say “’cause I had cocaine to move” but instead uses a noun to stand in for a larger group of people, just as with the previous lyric about literacy. Just as with the example presented above, the lyric could serve as a critique about the real White audiences assume about the Black experience in terms of education.

Conclusion

The virtual experience, or lyrics of *Yeezus*, are divided into the old Black history, and the new ethos, or the “New Slaves.” West reimagines Black history through his alterations of famous rhetoricians, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in order to reclaim Black history and challenge respectability politics. This historical framework has been established through primarily poetic illusions, a looking back, and tragic rhythms, an acceptance of one’s fate. Next, West establishes the new ethos, the “New Slaves” to demonstrate the real and imagined life experiences of Black American men. The “New Slaves” is understood through notions of authenticity, violence, capitalism, and education. This is also conceptualized through poetic illusions and tragic rhythm, but it also features moments of dramatic illusion, or looking towards the future, as well as comic rhythm, a positive and optimistic approach to life although this is less common. Overall, the album’s lyrics can be understood as West’s view of the experiences and life of Black America.
Chapter 5
Virtual Time

When West performed “New Slaves” on the Saturday Night Live stage, it was not the rapped words alone which created a powerful experience. The score echoed human emotion. Music “can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey” (Langer, 1953, p. 32). The score of any song is virtual time, just as the lyrics are the virtual experience. As argued throughout this work, the lyrics of any song cannot be understood in totality until studied alongside the score.

An Illusion of Life analysis requires charting the musical score for intensity and release patterns. Most studies that utilize this method approach singular songs, while this work addresses an entire album. Kanye West’s Yeezus is comprised of ten tracks, each of which features its own approaches to rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic structure, as well as phrasing and instrumentation. Each of these properties of music will be charted and explored according to Sellnow (2014) below, as well as some of the individual unique qualities of each song. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue, “Music as an aesthetic symbol serves as an expression of the intensity-release rhythm of human living” (p. 397). Therefore, intensity patterns represent tension in life and release patterns represent the release of that tension. Some of the terms found in the chart developed by Sellnow (2014) demand further explanation. For instance, “staccato” means notes that are short and unconnected while “legato” signifies long notes that are connected in a more flowing pattern. Other terms used to categorize intensity and release patterns are defined according to Sellnow (2014) in the chart below.

Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) provide several examples of songs that are more characteristic of either intensity or release patterns. For instance, when examining rhythmic
structure, they compare “Deck the Halls” as intense with a fast tempo to “Away in a Manger” as release with a slow tempo. In terms of syncopated compared to predictable, Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) write, “a good deal of Rap music uses syncopated patterns and might be more representative of intensity when compared to much of folk music [sic]” (p. 404). When referring to the return to the tonic, or home tone, “Deck the Halls” is again referred to as the key example, as it returns to the same note throughout the entire score. Dissonant and consonant sounds are simply categorized as either pleasant or unpleasant, respectably. “Let There Be Peace on Earth” has many long held tones, and is representative of release patterns while songs like “The Star Spangled Banner” and “Deck the Halls” are representative of intensity patterns because they feature rather short tones (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). These rich descriptions, as well as those included in the chart developed by Sellnow (2014) were referred to when categorizing West’s album Yeezus.

Several unexpected phenomena were consistent throughout the analysis. Most notably, some scores featured several acts, though some featured only one consistent musical act, which repeated throughout. Acts are described and delineated here when a track featured major instrumental changes. This is consistent with other works which feature the Illusion of Life method (Chuang & Hart, 2008). Additionally, several songs featured nondiscursive vocal elements, such as screaming and gasping, and parts where the score completely ceased but the lyrics continued. It is important to note that while Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) outline “ascending” and “descending” as indicators of either intensity or release patterns, a majority of songs featured neither or both simultaneously, and therefore are not charted unless otherwise stated. Last, when neither column occurred (i.e. ritardando / accelerando) neither was marked and were not utilized when considering if the song fell into intensity or release patterns.
Ultimately, the Illusion of Life analysis approaches the lyrics and the score in order to determine if the song is congruent or incongruent. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) develop their method by analyzing several songs that discuss the AIDS epidemic. For example, Bruce Springsteen’s “Streets of Philadelphia” is a congruent song, the lyrics are representative of release patterns and “are focused in the backward-looking poetic illusion and the tragic rhythm” while the score is release as well (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 409). In contrast, Janet Jackson’s “Together Again” is incongruent, as the lyrics are again poetic and tragic, but the score is more representative of intensity patterns. Congruency can make the song more poignant, but at the expense of being too depressing which may deter some listeners. Incongruent songs, on the other hand, may seem more appealing to a broader audience, at the expense of losing their serious message. Each songs’ categorization as either congruent or incongruent, and the impact, will be discussed below. First, each song will be tracked for intensity and release patterns according to Sellnow (2014) before turning to Yeezus in its entirety. Several tracks were similar or lacked any unique characteristics, and are therefore they were grouped together in the analysis section.

**Track 1 – “On Sight”**

Zoladz (2016) gives an excellent description of the first track, Kanye West’s sixth album, *Yeezus*, released on June 18, 2013, begins with a violent, metallic crunch, like a dying robot gurgling blood. The song is called “On Sight” and the sound is a synthesizer run through a distortion pedal, a technique featured on some early songs by Daft Punk, who co-produced the song. (p. 9).

To put it simply, it is unlike almost anything produced in hip-hop before. “On Sight” features two distinct acts: Act I (Table 1) persists for almost the entire song, Act II (Table 2) is a 16 second interruption near the middle. This track also features several instances where the score
becomes completely unpredictable, and breaks all previous patterns, but these moments last for only a few seconds, such as at 2:35. I chose not to chart these particular moments as individual acts because they are so brief, but they are considered when classifying the song as ultimately one of release or intensity. While Act I and II seem at odds, the track is ultimately considered intense because Act I persists for the majority of the song.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“On Sight” ACT I</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;Consistent meter&lt;br&gt;Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending&lt;br&gt;Disjunct (sporadic)&lt;br&gt;Short-held tones</td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;Conjunct (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)&lt;br&gt;Accented (punched)&lt;br&gt;Crescendos (gets louder)&lt;br&gt;Loud&lt;br&gt;Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)&lt;br&gt;Legato (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Decrescendos (softer)&lt;br&gt;Soft&lt;br&gt;Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;Amplified</td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
</tr>
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Table 2

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<tr>
<th>“On Sight” ACT II</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo</td>
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<td>Amplified</td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lyrics discussed in the virtual experience section of this analysis which are present in this track are “everybody wanna live at the top of the mountain” (West, 2013, Track 1). Because these lyrics feature comic rhythm and a dramatic illusion, and these are characteristic of a release pattern. So, the song is ultimately categorized as incongruent (Table 16). The conclusion of this chapter will discuss the impacts of congruency / incongruency at length.

**Track 2 – “Black Skinhead”**

“Black Skinhead” features two acts as well. Act I (Table 3) persists through the verses of each song while Act II represents the chorus. However, all categories remain the same between the two acts except tempo, which transitions from fast and driving for the verses to a slow tempo for the chorus. The majority of the categories represent a pattern of release. However, it is important to note that the song features several unique characteristics which I could not chart using Sellnow (2014). For instance, this track features vocal yelling as a part of the instrumental musical score. The yelling is not considered a part of the lyrics as they are not discernable words.
and do not appear as words on the lyric transcript used for the lyrical analysis, but are nevertheless important for understanding the ultimate emotional message of the score. West’s choice to feature vocal yelling could have an overall impact on the song’s categorization as either intensity or release, however, it is not included in the framework provided by Sellnow (2014) and therefore is only noted for its uniqueness.

The beat also features several dramatic changes based on the lyrics that are rapped. For instance, when West raps, “Enter the kingdom / But watch who you bring home / They see a Black man with a White woman at the top floor / They gon’ come to kill King Kong” the musical beat accelerates, which is characteristic of intensity patterns, creating incongruity for this particular moment (West, 2013, Track 2). Another musical moment unable to be charted occurs with a lyric not featured in the analysis, when West says, “If I knew what I knew in the past / I would have been Blacked out on your ass.” Here, the beat almost stops completely, making West the most dominant sound for that moment, bringing direct attention to the words. This occurs again when West finishes the line, “Stop all that coon shit / Early-morning-cartoon shit / This that goon shit / Fuck-up-your-whole-afternoon shit.” I argue that these musical anomalies work to bring greater emphasis to the words West raps, as if to end all other distractions so that his message cannot be obscured.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Black Skinhead”</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (1) Rhythmic Structure | Fast, driving tempo  
Changing meter  
Syncopated, unpredictable | Slow tempo  
Consistent meter  
Predictable |
| (2) Harmonic Structure | Dissonant, harsh  
Avoids tonic (home) tone | Consonant, mellow  
Frequent tonic tone |
| (3) Melodic Structure | Ascending  
Disjunct (sporadic)  
Short-held tones | Descending  
Conjunct (smooth)  
Long-held tones |
| (4) Phrasing | Staccato (separated)  
Accented (punched)  
Crescendos (gets louder)  
Loud  
Ritardando (gradually slower) | Legato (connected)  
Legato (smooth)  
Decrescendos (softer)  
Soft  
Accelerando (faster) |
| (5) Instrumentation | Many  
Amplified | Few  
Acoustic |

Track 3 – “I Am a God (Feat. God)”

Musically, “I Am a God (Feat. God)” may be the most unique of the album. Not only does it feature the most disjunct melodic structure and staccato phrasing of the album, it also features the most prominent nondiscursive vocal elements, such as yelling and gasping. Unlike “On Sight” which features several seconds of unpredictable score changes, “I Am a God (Feat. God)” features unpredictable changes throughout. Additionally, the song has several seconds of complete silence at two separate moments. The song is ultimately categorized as intensity patterns (Table 4); its nondiscursive vocal elements only help to solidify this choice.
There are several moments of the song that feature no musical score and acapella rapping. Some examples carry more weight than others. When West raps, “so y’all better quit playing with God” the accompanying silence means the words are emphasized, as compared to “hurry up with my damn croissants” where the silence is most likely used for humor (West, 2013, Track 3). I argue that acapella is utilized to bring more weight to particular arguments, though as illustrated above may exist instead as a stylistic choice in certain instances. Other moments of the song feature dramatic changes to bring weight to lyrics. For instance, one line from the analysis section, “I just talked to Jesus / He said, “what up Yeezus?” / I said “Shit I’m chilling / Trying to stack these millions” / I know he the most high / but I am a close high” comes directly after a few seconds of vocal screaming and disjunct melodic structure, giving it more weight because listeners are perhaps more alert after hearing the previous several seconds.

**Track 4 – “New Slaves”**

This track features a repetitive act that persists throughout the entire song, until near the end (Table 5). However, similar to “Black Skinhead,” these acts are entirely similar in terms of
intensity and release patterns and therefore only one chart was created. The only notable feature sonically is the use of acapella for the first several lines of the album: “my mama was raised in the era when clean water was only served to the fairer skin / doing clothes you would’ve thought I had help but they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself”, and later when he raps, “I move my family out the country so you can’t see where I stay” (West, 2013, Track 4). “New Slaves” features incredibly explicit and poignant lyrics about the current experiences of Black American men. West’s use of acapella for the opening of the song allows, again, for all attention to focus on his words, without distraction.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“New Slaves”</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo</td>
<td>Slow tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing meter</td>
<td>Consistent meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending</td>
<td>Descending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disjunct (sporadic)</td>
<td>Conjunct (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short-held tones</td>
<td>Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accented (punched)</td>
<td>Legato (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crescendos (gets louder)</td>
<td>Decrescendos (softer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amplified</td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Track 6 – “I’m In It”

While this track features several independent musical acts, several of them fall under the exact intensity and release patterns categorized for Act I, and are therefore are not charted as separate, individual acts. Act II (Table 6) is distinct from Act I (Table 7) even though it only lasts for approximately 29 seconds. This track also features more nondiscursive vocal elements, such as moaning and the sound “oh” which is not featured on the lyrical notes. The only lyric featured
in the analysis section is sonically different from the rest of track. When West raps, “Your pussy’s too good, I need to crash / Your titties, let ‘em out free at last / Thank God almighty, they free at last / We was up at the party but we was leavin’ fast”, the score features background singing from an unidentifiable source only when West says “Thank God almighty, they free at last” (West, 2013, Track 6). This particular moment is another instance of West attempting to bring particular weight or reverence to this lyric. This score features a particularly slow beat, which at times makes the notes so far apart that the lyrics appear to be rapped without any musical accompaniment. However, the only words that occur without any score are at the end of the track, when West raps, “they be ballin’ in the d-league, I be speaking swaghili” (West, 2013, Track 6). Similar to the acapella moments occurring in “Hold My Liquor” I believe this is more of a stylistic choice, and less to give weight. Though, this lyric could function as another instance of West presenting himself as the “real” detailed above.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“I’m In It” Act I</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (1) Rhythmic Structure | Fast, driving tempo  
Changing meter  
Syncopated, unpredictable | Slow tempo  
Consistent meter  
Predictable |
| (2) Harmonic Structure | Dissonant, harsh  
Avoisin tonic (home) tone | Consonant, mellow  
Frequent tonic tone |
| (3) Melodic Structure | Ascending  
Disjunct (sporadic)  
Short-held tones | Descending  
Conjunct (smooth)  
Long-held tones |
| (4) Phrasing | Staccato (separated)  
Accented (punched)  
Crescendos (gives louder)  
Loud  
Ritardando (gradually slower) | Legato (connected)  
Legato (smooth)  
Decrescendos (softer)  
Soft  
Accelerando (faster) |
| (5) Instrumentation | Many  
Amplified | Few  
Acoustic |
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Fast, driving tempo</strong>&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;Consistent meter&lt;br&gt;Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Ascending</strong>&lt;br&gt;Disjunct (sporadic)&lt;br&gt;Short-held tones</td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;Conjunct (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td><strong>Staccato (separated)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Accented (punched)&lt;br&gt;Crescendos (gets louder)&lt;br&gt;Loud&lt;br&gt;Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)&lt;br&gt;Legato (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Decrescendos (softer)&lt;br&gt;Soft&lt;br&gt;Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;Amplified</td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Track 7 – “Blood on the Leaves”**

This track was perhaps the most controversial of the entire album. Zoladz (2016) writes, “A haunting ‘Strange Fruit’ sample is wasted on a song with petty lyrics about molly and “second string bitches, trying to get a baby” — but damn if I don’t still get chills when that TNGHT beat drops” (p. 18). Regardless of the discussion surrounding “Blood on the Leaves,” most reviews affirm that it is in fact “the best song of the album” (Shepard et al., 2013) and “sonically transfixing” (Rosen, 2013). Three years after its release, Zoladz (2016) writes that it is still giving them “chills.” “Blood on the Leaves” opens with Act 1 (Table 8) which continues to 1:07. Act II (Table 9) persists from 1:07-4:27, and the remainder of the song after that moment is representative of Act I in relation to intensity and release patterns. The score is ultimately categorized as release pattern.
Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Blood on the Leaves” Act I</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (1) Rhythmic Structure     | Fast, driving tempo  
 Changing meter  
 Syncopated, unpredictable | Slow tempo  
 Consistent meter  
 Predictable |
| (2) Harmonic Structure     | Dissonant, harsh  
 Avoids tonic (home) tone | Consonant, mellow  
 Frequent tonic tone |
| (3) Melodic Structure      | Ascending  
 Disjunct (sporadic)  
 Short-held tones | Descending  
 Conjunct (smooth)  
 Long-held tones |
| (4) Phrasing               | Staccato (separated)  
 Accented (punched)  
 Crescendos (gets louder)  
 Loud  
 Ritardando (gradually slower) | Legato (connected)  
 Legato (smooth)  
 Decrescendos (softer)  
 Soft  
 Accelerando (faster) |
| (5) Instrumentation        | Many  
 Amplified | Few  
 Acoustic |

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Blood on the Leaves” Act II</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (1) Rhythmic Structure     | Fast, driving tempo  
 Changing meter  
 Syncopated, unpredictable | Slow tempo  
 Consistent meter  
 Predictable |
| (2) Harmonic Structure     | Dissonant, harsh  
 Avoids tonic (home) tone | Consonant, mellow  
 Frequent tonic tone |
| (3) Melodic Structure      | Ascending  
 Disjunct (sporadic)  
 Short-held tones | Descending  
 Conjunct (smooth)  
 Long-held tones |
| (4) Phrasing               | Staccato (separated)  
 Accented (punched)  
 Crescendos (gets louder)  
 Loud  
 Ritardando (gradually slower) | Legato (connected)  
 Legato (smooth)  
 Decrescendos (softer)  
 Soft  
 Accelerando (faster) |
| (5) Instrumentation        | Many  
 Amplified | Few  
 Acoustic |

Track 8 – “Guilt Trip”

In “Guilt Trip” there are two major musical transitions: from Act I (Table 10) to Act II and a return to Act I. The only difference between the two acts is that Act II features a slow tempo rather than a fast and driving tempo, and therefore a new chart was not made for Act II.
Similar to other tracks from *Yeezus*, “Guilt Trip” features several unique sounds such as what can only be described as “laser gun shots” after the lyric “shot down” (West, 2013, Track 8). This sound then persists sporadically throughout the remainder of Act I. As I argue in the conclusion, it is hard to make explicit arguments about this because of the limitations of the method proposed by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001).

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Guilt Trip”</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo</td>
<td>Slow tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing meter</td>
<td>Consistent meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending</td>
<td>Descending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disjunct (sporadic)</td>
<td>Conjunct (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short-held tones</td>
<td>Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accented (punched)</td>
<td>Legato (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crescendos (gets louder)</td>
<td>Decrescendos (softer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amplified</td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Track 5 – “Hold My Liquor”, Track 9 – “Send It Up” & Track 10 – “Bound 2”

“Hold My Liquor” features three distinct acts (Table 11, 12, 13) which occur in this pattern: Act I, Act II, Act I, Act III. While Act III would be characterized as intensity, because the other two occur for the majority of the track, this song is characterized as release. Both “Send it Up” (Table 14) and “Bound 2” (Table 15) feature a consistent musical score which does not change. All of these tracks feature acapella rapping, although these do not carry any rhetorical weight, as they are done for stylistic reasons, such as to bring symmetry to a track, as is the case in “Hold My Liquor.” Both songs are charted for an understanding of intensity and release, but do not feature any unique or important characteristics.
Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Hold My Liquor” Act I</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Fast, driving tempo</strong>&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;<strong>Consistent meter</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Predictable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;<strong>Frequent tonic tone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending&lt;br&gt;Disjunct (sporadic)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Short-held tones</strong></td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;<strong>Conjunct (smooth)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)&lt;br&gt;Accented (punched)&lt;br&gt;Crescendos (gets louder)&lt;br&gt;Loud&lt;br&gt;Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td><strong>Legato (connected)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Legato (smooth)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Decrescendos (softer)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Soft</strong>&lt;br&gt;Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;<strong>Amplified</strong></td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Hold My Liquor” Act II</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Fast, driving tempo</strong>&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;<strong>Consistent meter</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Predictable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Dissonant, harsh</strong>&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;<strong>Frequent tonic tone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending&lt;br&gt;Disjunct (sporadic)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Short-held tones</strong></td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;<strong>Conjunct (smooth)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)&lt;br&gt;Accented (punched)&lt;br&gt;Crescendos (gets louder)&lt;br&gt;Loud&lt;br&gt;Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td><strong>Legato (connected)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Legato (smooth)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Decrescendos (softer)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Soft</strong>&lt;br&gt;Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;<strong>Amplified</strong></td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 13</td>
<td><strong>“Hold My Liquor” Act III</strong></td>
<td>Intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Fast, driving tempo</strong>&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;<strong>Consistent meter</strong>&lt;br&gt;Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Dissonant, harsh</strong>&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;<strong>Frequent tonic tone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Ascending</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Disjunct (sporadic)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Short-held tones</strong></td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;Conjunct (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Accented (punched)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Crescendos (gets louder)</strong>&lt;br<em>Loud</em>&lt;br<em>Ritardando (gradually slower)</em></td>
<td><strong>Legato (connected)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Legato (smooth)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Decrescendos (softer)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Soft&lt;br&gt;<strong>Accelerando (faster)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;<strong>Amplified</strong></td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 14</th>
<th><strong>“Send It Up”</strong></th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Fast, driving tempo</strong>&lt;br&gt;Changing meter&lt;br&gt;Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Slow tempo&lt;br&gt;<strong>Consistent meter</strong>&lt;br&gt;Predictable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Dissonant, harsh</strong>&lt;br&gt;Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow&lt;br&gt;<strong>Frequent tonic tone</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td><strong>Ascending</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Disjunct (sporadic)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Short-held tones</strong></td>
<td>Descending&lt;br&gt;Conjunct (smooth)&lt;br&gt;Long-held tones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Accented (punched)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Crescendos (gets louder)</strong>&lt;br<em>Loud</em>&lt;br<em>Ritardando (gradually slower)</em></td>
<td><strong>Legato (connected)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Legato (smooth)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Decrescendos (softer)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Soft&lt;br&gt;<strong>Accelerando (faster)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many&lt;br&gt;<strong>Amplified</strong></td>
<td>Few&lt;br&gt;Acoustic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Bound 2”</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Rhythmic Structure</td>
<td>Fast, driving tempo</td>
<td>Slow tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing meter</td>
<td>Consistent meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syncopated, unpredictable</td>
<td>Predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Harmonic Structure</td>
<td>Dissonant, harsh</td>
<td>Consonant, mellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoids tonic (home) tone</td>
<td>Frequent tonic tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Melodic Structure</td>
<td>Ascending</td>
<td>Descending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disjunct (sporadic)</td>
<td>Conjunct (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short-held tones</td>
<td>Long-held tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Phrasing</td>
<td>Staccato (separated)</td>
<td>Legato (connected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accented (punched)</td>
<td>Legato (smooth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crescendos (gets louder)</td>
<td>Decrescendos (softer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loud</strong></td>
<td>Ritardando (gradually slower)</td>
<td>Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accelerando (faster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Instrumentation</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Amplified</strong></td>
<td>Amplified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The Illusion of Life method was developed by Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) as a form of categorizing songs as either congruent or incongruent. In order to categorize a track as congruent on incongruent, Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) present that lyrics that feature a poetic illusion and a tragic rhythm are congruent when paired with release patterns in the score. Conversely, when the lyrics are characteristic of dramatic illusions and comic rhythm, they are considered congruent when paired with intensity patterns in the score. A majority of the lyrics analyzed in this work are considered poetic and tragic, only those featured in “I Am a God (Feat. God)” and “New Slaves” feature comic rhythm. Each song from *Yeezus* is categorized in Table 16 as either intensity or release, and congruent or incongruent.
Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that congruity or incongruity effects not only the songs message, but its interpretation and reception of the song by the audience. Songs which are congruent make the message “more poignant,” but are also sometimes less appealing (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). In regards to incongruity, they argue,

Incongruity between lyrics and music can also sometimes result in an emotional message that usurps the linguistic message altogether, conveying emotion devoid of linguistic meaning. Finally, incongruity might “couch” a potentially defense-arousing discursive message in ambiguity, thereby functioning persuasively to move listeners “gradually and systematically” to accept an argument as legitimate. (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001 p. 409)

This argument could help to explain why “New Slaves” may be an incongruent. The lyrics are some of the most persuasive and powerful of the album, and therefore may be “couched” in a less intense score to move the audience to being receptive and accepting. Alternatively, the incongruent nature of the song “New Slaves” may lead to a misunderstanding by the audience, as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Release</th>
<th>Congruent / Incongruent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“On Sight”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incongruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Black Skinhead”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Am a God (Feat. God)”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“New Slaves”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Incongruent / Congruent (tragic &amp; comic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hold My Liquor”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m In It”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blood on the Leaves”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Guilt Trip”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Send it Up”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bound 2”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>congruent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is the case with Janet Jackson’s “Together Again.” Ultimately, I argue that West presents “New Slaves” incongruently to present a more intense message to a potentially less receptive audience.

As noted above, “On Sight” is also primarily incongruent, when observing the lyrics featured in the first analysis chapter and the score of Act I (Table 1) and Act II (Table 2). This song’s incongruent categorization is similar to that of “New Slaves”, the message of those lyrics is potentially disconcerting, and therefore its pairing with intensity patterns can allow for easier reception by the audience.
**Chapter 6**

**Conclusions**

On the track “Black Skinhead,” West (2013) starts this lyric-string in a calm voice, but escalates to a tense snarl with the last line, “Middle America packed in / came to see me and my Black skin / Number one question they askin’ / fuck every question you askin’” (Track 2). The album *Yeezus* may just be a challenge to the primarily White audience I found myself surrounded by in Columbus, Ohio in September of 2016. Perhaps in this moment, West is telling every single White person, who screamed the n-word alongside him that night, that he does not care for their opinion, that he did not create this album for them. Almost in complete opposition to the respectability politics that loomed over so many Black artists, West is saying he is not concerned with the questions and positions of White America.

The conclusion of this work will begin by answering the research questions posed in the methods section. Next, the social and methodological impacts of this work will be examined. Last, I will discuss the limitations of this work, such as West as the central figure in the narrative, and the direction for future research.

**Findings**

**RQ1:** What depictions arise from the lyrics of *Yeezus* surrounding Black masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture?

As noted throughout the analysis chapters of this work, Kanye West’s album *Yeezus* creates a new ethos to describe what it means to be a Black man in the United States. While West’s depictions of masculinity are not as thoroughly discussed in this work, it is important to note that West’s portrayal of masculinity is caught up in himself. Important examples such as the lyrics from “Blood on the Leaves” where West discusses his troubles with monogamy alongside
Nina Simone’s *Strange Fruit* demonstrate West’s understanding of masculinity, however, the lyrics may not be applicable to a greater portion of the population.

More prevalent are West’s depictions of Blackness. Race is perhaps the most developed construct discussed throughout his album. The track “New Slaves” in particular is crucial to the development of his new ethos, which is named from this track. Lyrics which depict the real experiences, featuring both literal and metaphorical violence, about the prison industrial complex, racism in the fashion industry, and racism predicated off of monetary income are crucial to the understanding of the Black male experience, and therefore the new ethos. Additionally, West discusses race again when looking at Black history as the foundation for this new ethos, through examples such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nina Simone’s rhetoric, references to racist cartoons and movies, and discussion of historical events such as apartheid. West also depicts race through lyrics about the imagined Black male experience in terms of education, when discussing illiteracy and the opposition between drug trafficking and education.

As mentioned above, all of these depictions of race are constructed in terms of both the real, and the imagined real by White audiences, and complicate understandings of the Black experience as one centered ultimately around religion, violence, and capitalism.

The third depiction discussed in research question one is hip-hop culture. West respects and upholds traditional understandings of hip-hop culture in two, distinct ways. First, West refers to three famous Black musical artists who preceded him to place himself as a significant and historical piece of the culture. It is also important to note that these three artists are incredibly distinct from one another, each representing a different aspect of hip-hop culture: Michael Jackson as foundational, Prince as unique, and 50 Cent represents gangsta rap. These three artists are alluded to in order for West to place himself as separate but equal in the industry. The second
way that West depicts hip-hop culture in *Yeezus* is through his use of the term “real”. “Realness” is understood as an essential piece of the authenticity narrative that is all too important in hip-hop culture (McLeod, 2012). West raps that he is a “real n----” and that he “brought real rap back” (West, 2013, Track 1; 10) to demonstrate his own authenticity in the hip-hop community.

**RQ2: What emotions are conveyed through the score of the album *Yeezus*?**

Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that the virtual time, or score, of a song expresses human emotions that lyrics alone cannot express. The second analysis chapter of this work details the incredibly unique and sonically transfixing elements of Kanye West’s *Yeezus*. In his aforementioned review of the album, Lou Reed (2013) writes, “No one’s near doing what he’s [West’s] doing, it’s not even on the same planet” (p. 1). Elements such as vocal yelling, moaning, and gasping work together to create unique expressions of human emotions, most notably those of tension. For instance, “The persistent use of breath as a percussive element introduces a feeling of claustrophobia” (Shepard et al., 2013, p. 7). In opposition to these nondiscursive vocal elements, the score for most of the tracks featured on *Yeezus* represent patterns of release, meaning release of tension emotionally. The consistent, predictable and most often slow tempo, frequent tonic tone in the harmonic structure, conjunct melodic structure, and connected and smooth phrasing dominated *Yeezus*. According to Sellnow (2014), this demonstrates release patterns and feelings of released tension. This is important because release patterns are more pleasurable for an audience. Audiences are also more receptive of release patterns in music (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001).

**RQ3: In what ways do the lyrics and the score of the album *Yeezus* work together congruently or incongruently?**
As discussed in the second analysis chapter, *Yeezus* is almost entirely congruent. The lyrics function primarily in a poetic illusion and a tragic rhythm, and the score is primarily release patterns. This is typical of a majority of music, and usually results in the listener enjoying the music more (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). The most striking difference occurs on the track “New Slaves,” which is categorized as incongruent. When incongruence occurs, Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue this could be because the message is one that could be met with resistance, and incongruence can help to make this message more palatable. “New Slaves” features some of the most strikingly oppositional lyrics, and West’s decision to pair these powerful lyrics featuring both dramatic and poetic illusion, comic and tragic rhythm with a simple release pattern score may lead to a more receptive audience. Due to the fact that the rest of the album is congruent, excluding “On Sight,” West likely has a comfortable, receptive audience for a majority of the listening time.

**Impacts**

This work features several major impacts, both socially and methodologically. West’s debut in the hip-hop music scene was consequential because it happened at a time when America had turned a blind eye to racial injustices and Black rage had all but disappeared (Cullen, 2016). Now, Black rage is seen as entertainment (Wright, 2012). By observing West’s later work, this essay brings light to how West evolves “Black rage” over time, and how hip-hop music can turn Black rage from entertainment to education. When West raps about the past, he is educating his, perhaps primarily, White audience about the incredible injustices that have plagued Black Americans—then and now. This work also elaborates on the understanding that Black history is intrinsically intertwined with Black culture and Black identity. Ward (2016) writes, “how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; we
cannot talk about black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country” (p. 9). West’s album *Yeezus* is both intrinsically tied to the past yet pointed directly toward the future. The implications of this album supersede the traditional merit academics offer to the genre; *Yeezus* represents a formidable intersection of Black identity, hip-hop, and masculinity.

This work provides serious impacts to the methodological foundation of Sellnow and Sellnow (2001). First, The Illusion of Life method is typically utilized to dissect one song, while this work utilizes their method for an entire album. This has several benefits. First, approaching an entire album provides a more comprehensive look at an artist’s work. Second, changes in acts and consistencies throughout the entire album provide an interesting perspective on the work. Consider the above analysis which discusses “New Slaves” as one of the only tracks featured on the album which is incongruent. Only because the entire album was observed was “New Slaves” able to be understood as unique to West’s work. Last, an observation of the entire album as congruent or incongruent can provide interesting observations about how receptive an audience may or not be to an entire album.

There are other methodological impacts as well. First, Sellnow and Sellnow’s (2001) Illusion of Life method has never been used to analyze hip-hop music. I argue that this methodology may be ill-suited for the study of hip-hop music, and therefore could benefit from an update. First, it needs to be considered that hip-hop music often features multiple melodies and multiple samples simultaneously which can obscure the categorization of the score as either release or intensity patterns. While Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) argue that the dominant melody should be observed, hip-hop music is more challenging and does not always follow the concept of one dominant melody, as the melodies may interact at the same time and appear equally
dominant. Kanye West’s *Yeezus* is particularly well-suited to challenge previously understood ideas about melodies and acts. Acts are unique in hip-hop as well as they may not be as discernable or follow an easily understood pattern, such as in Chuang and Hart’s (2008) artifact, “Jesus of Suburbia.” This challenge to the conception of acts is particularly interesting in the study of hip-hop music because the beat can change, stop, and alter so dramatically for individual lines, congruency could be understood for each individual lyric. This provides an interesting new idea for the study of congruency and incongruency as a lyric by lyric basis.

Last, Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) should be updated to consider other musical score elements that can alter a song as being identified as either intensity or release patterns. Again, *Yeezus* provides the perfect artifact to challenge this conception, as the album is full of nondiscursive vocal elements such as yelling, gasping, and moaning. It also features musical elements not easily categorized, such as the laser gun shots during the track “Guilt Trip.” There are other vocal elements on *Yeezus* that could have effected intensity and release patterns but were unable to be categorized, such as the use of gospel choirs as a piece of the score, or the word “Black” featured as part of the score on the track “Black Skinhead.” All of these challenges during the analysis of this work show the complexity in hip-hop music that is not exactly accounted for in the Illusion of Life.

**Limitations & Future Research**

The final section of this work will outline some of the limitations of this work, as well as directions for future research. First, Kanye West as the center of this narrative must be examined. Many of the reviews of the album position West is a super-rich, super-famous musician who lives a life primarily of privilege. Makarechi (2013) elaborates,
There are references to larger black issues all over the album (“those kids in Chiraq,” a nod to the war-like state of Chicago’s South Side), but they seem to always be used as metaphors for West’s own experiences as a rich, super famous musician grappling with issues like materialism [sic]. (p. 7)

Ultimately, the question must be asked if West is able to make claims about the Black experience in America, when he lives a life so dramatically separated from the average Black American. Further, his position as a new father at the time the album was released was also questioned, as he does not stray from what many categorize as misogynistic lyrics, even after the birth of his daughter (Shepard et al., 2013). West’s position as a famous, new father complicates his ability to make claims about Black life, but it does not mean that his new ethos must be rejected. West on several occasions provides a noun to stand in for himself, in order to delineate the lyrics as applicable to someone else in the Black community, even if it may not apply directly to himself.

West as the center of this “New Slaves” narrative is also challenging because of his often tumultuous relationship with the American public. Throughout the beginning of this work, several of West’s infamous incidents are outlined, including his comments about George W. Bush following the disastrous handling of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and his interruption of Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. Because West is often viewed as a villainous character in American popular culture, his claims about Black life in America may be rejected outright. However, I argue that his consistent reputation for speaking honestly and openly, especially on issues of race, give him a particularly unique ability to vocalize these issues. It could be argued that those choosing to listen to the album Yeezus are already fans of Kanye West’s music and therefore more receptive than the general American audience.
There are several other limitations of this work beyond Kanye West himself. First, while this analysis looks closely at West’s depictions of masculinity, race, and hip-hop culture, it does not analyze the lyrics that depict women. This is partially connected to the overall theme found, but also the methodology used for this study, as it could be argued that Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) is not appropriate for analyzing gender representations. This limitation is incredibly important to highlight because so many of the reviews of the album were quick to discuss what they describe as misogynistic lyrics (Makarechi, 2013; Petridis, 2013; Shepard et al., 2013). As Petridis (2013) notes,

It is an album that paints a compelling pen portrait of what West calls "rich n----- racism" – the condescending luxury goods salesman hiding his contempt behind a mask of obsequiousness – that would be perhaps be more compelling still, if the man who came up with it didn't subsequently come up with the line: "Eating Asian pussy, all I need is sweet and sour sauce. (p. 3)

Lyrics such as these further complicate West as able to make serious claims about racial issues in American culture.

Further limitations come from only analyzing one of West’s albums. A view of his entire discography may have provided a more thorough understanding of West’s views of race and perhaps further developed or supported his “New Slaves” ethos. It is also important to remember that West’s other albums are more critically acclaimed in terms of Grammy nominations and wins, and album sales (Caramanica, 2013). However, as noted above, the Illusion of Life method is, until now, used only to analyze singular tracks, and may not be the appropriate method to observe an artist’s entire discography.
Finally, I suggest two distinct areas of possible future research. First, rhetorical analysis of music should look to connect entire albums together for themes, rather than looking at individual songs. This can help researchers understand which themes are given more attention by the musical artist. Further research should also approach contemporary hip-hop music and its perceptions of Black history and Black contemporary life. West is not alone in this phenomenon, surely.

Ultimately, Kanye West is not finished making waves in the music scene. In early 2016 he made headlines again with another unorthodox album release with *The Life of Pablo*. After its complicated release, originally slated only to be available through the streaming service Tidal, West released the album digitally everywhere. The album was the first Number One album “on the Billboard 200 where more than half of its units were generated by streaming equivalent albums” (Rys, 2016, p. 3). West continues to break records. Additionally, even though the *Saint Pablo Tour* was canceled due to complications with West’s health, and the fans disappointed, it will not take long before West is back on the stage, rapping about the racial injustices that plague America, all while a White audience hurls the n-word back at him. Kanye West’s place in American popular culture demands that continued, serious, academic attention be paid to his words, even if Madrigal (2013), argues that Kanye may have “given up on the very idea of imbuing the words in his songs with meaning” (p. 9). It is now clear that West imbued his songs with a great sense of meaning: what it means to be a Black man in the United States.
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