

THE ART OF NOTORIETY IN KANYE WEST'S PERSONA

BRANDY MONK-PAYTON
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Persona can be understood as a form of art that highlights different styles of fashioning the self for various media platforms and audiences. This paper explores what I term the “art of notoriety” through the creative pursuits of the notorious hip hop artist, Kanye “Ye” West. I argue that West’s public embrace of antagonism in American media propels not only his fame but also his increasing notoriety, which is predicated on negative affect made manifest through his persona and artworks. Teasing out the complex role that polarising media personas can play in current popular culture; this paper specifically emphasises the negative affect of irritation that orients public response to the figure of the ‘asshole’. I suggest that West’s notoriety is not only due to his attitude and behaviour, the latter of which cannot be separated from his mental health, but is also connected to his penchant for ‘bad’ design at the level of aesthetic form in his artistic endeavours, and especially with his career in fashion. This paper provides a close reading of West’s persona and aestheticized conduct that incites public discomfort. I link the U.S. public’s peculiar relationality to West to issues concerning race and racial difference that amplify his status as a notorious black celebrity subject. Ultimately, West’s creativity emanates from an oppositional space and his infamous mediated confrontations with the public confirm his artistic skill as a perennial provocateur.

KEY WORDS

Race, Art, Fashion, Celebrity Persona, Affect, Notoriety, Kanye West

INTRODUCTION

On October 3rd, 2022, at Paris Fashion Week, a surprise show took place: the premiere of the YZY collection created by the Black American rapper known as Ye. During the event, he debuted a T-shirt that read—on the back in bold letters—‘White Lives Matter’. The design was widely criticised and served as yet another example of his increasing contrariness; in this case, his dismissal of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which originated in the context of anti-Black violence in the United States (Thompson 2022).¹ The musical artist, formerly called Kanye West, is a cultural icon known for his outrageous antics and caustic public persona (Saad 2021).² During 2022, his social media tirades over his separation and subsequent divorce from socialite-turned-reality TV personality Kim Kardashian became only the tip of the iceberg for his bad behaviour. In addition to the contentious end to his partnership with Gap Inc. clothing company, West’s antisemitic rhetoric resulted in the loss of his multi-billion-dollar deal with sportswear manufacturer Adidas. Espousing hate speech targeted at the Jewish population culminated with a second suspension from Twitter in early December. West’s escalating propensity for negative exposure – of the aforementioned fashion controversy, he wrote on Instagram that “my one t-shirt took alllllll the attention” (Long 2022) – seemed to become

uncontrollable in the eyes of the public. Indeed, at the YZY Season 9 show, he defiantly stated: “You can’t manage me. This is an unmanageable situation” (Cartner-Morley 2022). Without a PR team, West’s resistance to any kind of aesthetic or politic being imposed on him results in a lack of positive publicity.

This article reflects on the negative aspects of West’s celebrity image in order to detail how the creative pursuits of the hip hop entertainer exemplify what I term the “art of notoriety.” Notoriety can be defined as the state of being well known for a bad quality or deed. Chris Rojek (2001, p. 31) describes how the status “usually connotes transgression, deviance and immorality”. A person who is labeled as notorious is likely to be publicly reproached, if not outright condemned and shunned. Such a “pejorative order of celebrity” ranges from the most morally reprehensible (often criminal) activities to the most outrageously benign behaviours such as individual outbursts that draw attention (Epstein 2005, p. 9). Notorious celebrities often commit disreputable acts in the public eye; they can be intensely scrutinised, yet ostracised, from society because of their transgressions. Over the years, West’s acts of disreputability that circulate within popular U.S. media culture have helped to reinforce what he sees as his marginalised position within contemporary celebrity. Commenting on his stardom in a 2013 *New York Times* feature entitled “Behind Kanye’s Mask,” West offers: “I don’t have some type of romantic relationship with the public. I’m like, the anti-celebrity, and my music comes from a place of being anti” (Caramanica 2013). I argue that West’s embrace of antagonism propels not only his fame but also his increasing notoriety, which is predicated on negative affect made manifest through his persona and artworks.

My examination of West as a celebrity is informed by persona studies with its focus on how the individual ‘publicises’, ‘presents’ and strategically ‘enacts’ their persona” (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2015, p. 290). In this way, the study of persona emphasises the agency of self-presentation across technologies of mediation. In the current social media era, celebrities often utilise an intercommunicative strategy of publicity, expressing themselves within both presentational and representational media flows. The turn towards studying persona can help illuminate what P. David Marshall determines is the “leaky nature of identity in celebrity culture” and the “contradictions of construction and agency” in the play between the individual and the collective (Marshall 2014, p. 166). The issue of identity and subjectivity becomes more complex when exploring the persona of a volatile celebrity like West. The notion of a public self as described by this scholarly field suggests that there is intentionality involved in the co-production of an individual’s outward appearance in its encounter with the collective. It is here that I want to underscore the collective discomfort elicited by the ambiguous persona of West. I am reticent to definitively ascribe explicit malicious intent to West’s self-presentation for a variety of reasons; most notably, his publicised admission of living with mental illness opens up a conversation about the extent to which his actions should be considered within the context of ‘madness’.³ The discourse on West cannot ignore his bipolar disorder diagnosis. Indeed, it seems aligned with the highs and lows of Black celebrity itself, what Nicole Fleetwood (2015) asserts are the cycles of public veneration and denigration associated with racial iconicity. The rapper publicly revealed his bipolar diagnosis for his eighth studio album, *Ye* in mid-2018. The cover of the album features an image of mountains in Jackson Hole, Wyoming overlaid by a phrase in neon green lettering that reads: “I hate being Bi-Polar its Awesome”. West joins Catherine Zeta-Jones, Demi Lovato and Mariah Carey in disclosing their battles with the disorder. One track on *Ye* specifically comments on mental health, and like “I Love Kanye” from *The Life of Pablo*, “Yikes” is self-reflexive in its emphasis on the machinations of fame, while connecting issues of celebrity and publicity to anxieties around the status of his disorder. The rap relays the experience of being on and off medication, exposing the complexities of his erratic mental state—so complex that he sometimes scares himself. However, West ultimately

understands his bipolar disorder not as a disability but as a “superpower” that allows for him to maintain the status of artistic genius (O’Malley Greenburg 2019). Such a superpower also inadvertently helps to sustain his notoriety, yet it is important not to excuse his antisemitic and anti-Black musings as due to his mental health. Rather, West’s bipolar disorder troubles any clear-cut distinctions between whether his antagonistic persona is sincere as a form of self-aggrandisement or is a form of self-harm. Thus, this article focuses on how an analysis of persona also crucially becomes a question of aesthetics as it is a form of art that produces different styles of fashioning the public self for various media platforms and audiences.

The art of theatrical masking produced the language of *persona*—the word itself means mask in Etruscan (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020). West is no stranger to covering his face for aesthetic purposes. For his 2013 *Yeezus* concert tour, West commissioned Belgian designer Maison Martin Margiela to create signature masks for his performances. Jewels and other shiny tactile objects adorned the elaborate avant-garde coverings. The rapper addressed his unusual wardrobe choice during a performance in London where he commented on his desire to enter the high fashion industry:

I’m just saying don’t discriminate against me. Because I’m a Black man or because I’m a celebrity you tell me I can’t create in that field...Stay in your place...Do what you’re paid to do!... Save face...That’s why I got this fucking mask on. But fuck whatever my face is supposed to mean and fuck whatever the name Kanye is supposed to mean (Coleman 2014).

The rapper refers to how his Black celebrity is seen as an impediment to his inclusion in the artistic field of fashion. West’s material self-fashioning in the form of masks, which has continued into the 2020s, serves as an obstruction of the countenance—arguably the most important feature of the celebrity image. West’s masking thus offers an insight into the creation of persona that also attempts to negate celebrity in part through racialised animus towards the public. Indeed, the politics of recognition are fraught for the Black subject. In the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, entitled “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”, Frantz Fanon provides an account of his exposure to the white gaze in French Algeria. The Martinican-born Fanon becomes an object of fixation for a young white child, which simultaneously fixes him within what he calls a process of epidermalisation (Fanon 1952). Such epidermalisation incites for Fanon a sense of representational entrapment in which he psychically erupts due to the debilitating condition of a multiply (dis)located self. What might be considered West’s Fanonian complex can be seen throughout his career as a hypervisible Black subject under the dominant gaze of the white art and entertainment industries.

It is important to note that “dissent has been a central theme in West’s construction of his Blackness” (Brick 2021, p. 160). However, that dissent is not neutral in its real-world effects when wielded by bad actors for nefarious purposes. For example, a display of banners hung from a freeway overpass in Los Angeles in late October 2022 after his antisemitic remarks, one of which read “KANYE IS RIGHT ABOUT THE JEWS”, as demonstrators raised their arms in a Nazi salute (Rector 2022). West’s current confounding artistic statements cannot be divorced from his political ideologies. The rapper has notably stated in the past that his own life is “like walking performance art” (Standen 2016). Indeed, Jerry Saltz (2013) explicitly calls him a “performer of fame” whose public persona increasingly reflects ‘the new uncanny’: an un-self-consciousness filtered through hyper-self-consciousness, unprocessed absurdity, grandiosity of desire, and fantastic self-regard”. West’s aestheticised conduct that provokes public discomfort and anger must be contended with due to its dangerous political implications. In a number of cases, that conduct might contribute to the normalisation of fascism. On December 1, 2022, the

rapper appeared in an interview on the American far-right website *InfoWars* with conservative media personality and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Wearing a Black ski mask that completely covered his entire face, West vocalised his admiration of the Nazi regime. In a particularly revealing moment, he notes that Adolf Hitler “seems like a cool guy, he had a really cool outfit, he was a cool architect” (Infowars 2022). Hitler’s appeal for West, here, is understood through style and form. The extent to which West desires to replicate that same kind of design “skill” and the ramifications of such an art of notoriety is explored in this article.

This analysis of celebrity and negativity, as exemplified by West, will tease out the complex role that polarising media personas can play in current U.S. public culture that exceed questions of disidentification and dislike. This article discusses the art of notoriety as it relates to the production of negative affect in cultures of fame. Negative affect, here, refers to what Sara Ahmed describes as an economy of emotion that is “social and material, as well as psychic” (Ahmed 2004, p. 121). Such an economy derives value through its generation of a maladaptive attachment to a celebrity subject of ire. I specifically emphasise the negative feeling of irritation that orients public response to the figure of the ‘asshole’. Additionally, I suggest that West’s notoriety is not only due to his attitude but is also connected to his penchant for bad design – especially within the realm of fashion – at the aesthetic level. Finally, I link the public’s peculiar relationality to the rapper to issues concerning race and racial difference that amplify his status as a notorious celebrity subject.

“A Kanye Place”: On Fame, Micropublics, and Cultural Injury

As Marshall et al. (2015) have suggested, examinations of celebrity ‘persona’ seek to understand how famous individuals navigate their multiple positions within media, culture, and society via public presentations. Such navigation is strategic and in the contemporary moment frequently centers “digital objects, network connections and mediated expressions” that convey “an individual pattern of negotiating one’s way through institutions and discourses” (Marshall et al. 2015, p. 290). In the contemporary era, a celebrity has the ability to create a persona through their social media engagement, generating affective affinity or aversion across micropublics. Days after his show at Paris Fashion Week, West tweeted: “Who you think created cancel culture?” (West 2022a). The question operates rhetorically and prompts a conversation about the rapper’s grandiose self-concept. What is called cancel culture “is now commonly used in a pejorative sense within mainstream commentary” and can exist within popular media in the form of celebrity cancellations “arising initially due to media content posted or produced by the cancel targets” (Ng 2022, p. 5 and p. 8). The discursive practice of ‘cancelling’ refers to the notion that an individual can be removed from public life for expressing an opinion or behaving in a way that causes large-scale offense. West’s tweet suggests that *he* precipitated the phenomenon of cancel culture through his own perceived cancelling. In these moments, West assumes an antagonistic posture as he commits to organising his public identity around negativity.

West can perhaps even be considered a *persona non grata* – an unwelcome or unacceptable person who, in this case, requires expunging (in other words, cancelling) from society. This status is in part predicated on his rebellious trickster sensibility that was seen as part of his genius for years, but that can now be considered a liability. According to Helena Bassil-Morozow, tricksters express “creative noncompliance” and “at the core of a trickster narrative is the disruption of the order of things” (Bassil-Morozow 2020, p. 30-31). Many icons who emerge from the music industry have also embodied the trickster. Such icons are shapeshifters that buck against social norms in their music and image. From David Bowie and Lady Gaga to Prince

and Beyoncé, these creative artists play characters as “fans construct and co-create the public identity—essentially the persona—of the popular music star” (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 2).

Black fans, as a kind of micropublic, psychically invest in particular high profile African American creative artists (especially music stars) and are faced with the difficult choice to support or abandon them after negativity publicity. Rebecca Wanzo outlines examples of cultural injury perpetrated by Black male celebrities like Michael Jackson and the negotiations that African American audiences make between the compulsion to defend their attachments and the “affective and social costs” of loss associated with breaking up with these icons (Wanzo 2018, p. 99). What should be made of those Black male love objects who commit acts of cultural injury that are not associated with sexual harassment and assault, but cause ideological harm that wound Black communities in their transgressive quality? As an (in)famous figure, West offends by virtue of his expressive presence that captivates the media. West has steadily become a ‘bad’ object in US Black popular culture over the past twenty years. Racquel Gates (2018) examines the “double-negative” quality of disreputable Black media texts and offers an important framework for examining their continued pleasures. In contrast to the Black bad objects that Gates analyses in film and television, a media figure such as West invites and even courts broader public feelings of *displeasure* beyond racial identification in his fall from grace from good to bad object.

Seeming to affirm West’s affective form of negativity in popular media is a sketch with African American actor/musician host Donald Glover on a May 2018 episode of *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present) called “A Kanye Place”. The skit spoofs the apocalyptic film *A Quiet Place* (2018), in which society is rendered silent and people are forced to communicate without speaking or making a sound in the face of creatures that hunt by noise. In the sketch, a group of survivors find themselves in harm’s way when David (played by Glover) looks at his phone and begins to relay West’s recent antics online. One by one, each person in the group is killed when they outwardly express shock, confusion, and outrage at West. At multiple points, the group questions their investment in West’s social media tirades. Someone asks: “Why are we talking about this?” to which David ominously replies: “Because it’s out there. It’s all out there” (*Saturday Night Live* 2018). Here, the parody highlights West’s almost singular ability to pervade the American media milieu via negative publicity. In this scenario, the amusement provided by West gives rise to cultural anxiety and terror. Ultimately, the SNL sketch deftly depicts how easy it is to succumb to the pull of West’s shenanigans, becoming part of his internet activity and production of self within the current digital ecology.

As Moya Lockett states: “An affective domain, celebrity prompts emotive public reactions, with fallen celebrities used to provoke anger, hostility, frustration and disappointment” (Lockett, 2019, p. 301). Emblematic of communicative capitalism run amok, the chaotic descent of West across different mediums of communication persists as a subject of intense fascination yet rebuke. In his online trolling via Twitter and Instagram and refusal of supposed contemporary groupthink, “he seeks to stir the pot – whatever the ingredients, whoever’s being fed” (Bruce, 2021, p. 167). His extreme attention-seeking ignominious behaviour generates an atmosphere in which different micropublics (including other celebrities and fans) are contradictorily compelled to function as both his primary enabler and detractor in the continuous construction of his destructive persona.

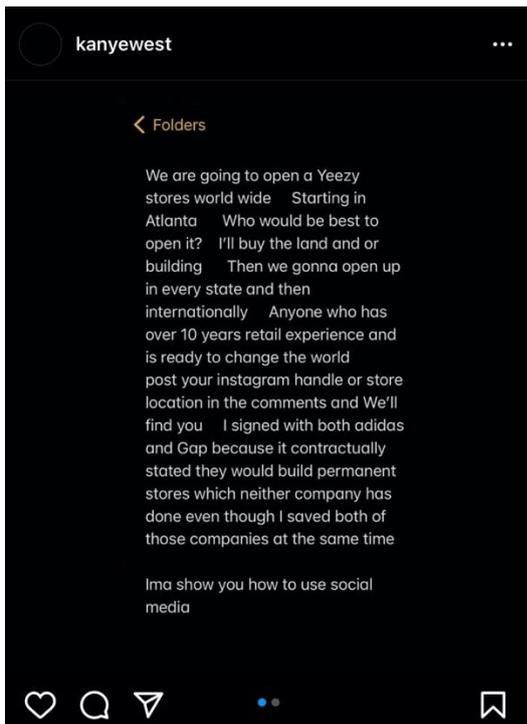


Figure 1: Screenshot of @kanyewest Instagram post (West 2022b)



Figure 2: Screenshot of @kanyewest Instagram post (West 2022c)⁴

Social media technology is crucial to West’s persona because it facilitates his interaction and connection with various micropublics through online sharing. When his Instagram page is “live”, it is constantly being edited as posts are subject to appear, disappear, and reappear within minutes. Posts feature images (artistic visuals, memes, as well as photographs culled from the

web), statements written from the iPhone Notes app (see Figure 1), and even screenshots of text message conversations (see Figure 2). Indeed, West is known to expose phone conversations that he has between his family, friends, and associates that exemplifies a context collapse between the interpersonal and the social. Brandi Collins-Dexter relays that West “has a persona that is perfect for the age of internet celebrity. He blurs the barrier between what people think should be private versus public. He does it in a way that feels camp and at times grotesque” (Collins-Dexter 2022, p. 177). The use of the term ‘camp’ connotes the stylistic and performative, while the use of grotesque indicates something seen and felt as repulsive. In the following, this article aims to examine the influence of both aesthetics and affect on West’s persona as an object of collective vexation.

“Let’s Have a Toast to the Assholes”: On Celebrity, Affect, and Negativity

Celebrity studies scholar Sean Redmond suggests that “To engage with the celebrity requires feelings, the activation of the senses, and the mobilisation of affects” (Redmond 2018, p. 12). Celebrities can prompt intense reactions from a phenomenological perspective. They can be experienced perceptually by *touching* both the individual and the collective as they circulate within popular media culture. In this way, the sensations that they generate through their mediated presence can give rise to emotions like love and hate that produce an affective economy of feeling in public discourse. Here, I focus on an affective economy of negativity configured as what Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings,” and how they help cultivate notoriety for West as the celebrity subject. “Ugly feelings” are minor, low-intensity affects that can transform our encounters with artworks (Ngai 2007, p. 6). One of these affects, irritation, can be both a physical and emotional response to an object of annoyance. West elevates notoriety to an aesthetic and relies on forms of negativity in his engagement with the public. West provokes intense affective reactions through what is widely perceived as his offensive behavior, which then breeds emotions like disgust, anger, and resentment amongst various (micro)publics. He has fully embraced the power of negative attention that perhaps reached an apex in April 2018 when he endorsed Donald Trump as US President, and asserted that African American enslavement was a choice. The public witnesses his monstrous media persona on television and social networking platforms, as well as through his music and other artistic endeavors.

In “I Love Kanye,” an interlude on his seventh studio album entitled *The Life of Pablo*, (2016) West playfully laments that he misses the “old Kanye” and hates the “new Kanye”. The tongue-in-cheek track relays how audiences perceive of his transformation from a fresh-faced preppy college dropout making infectious hip hop music to a foul-mouthed entertainer with a “bad mood” who is “always rude” and often a “spaz in the news.” The use of the third person aligns with West’s penchant for navel-gazing and embrace of megalomania. It also gestures to a keen awareness of his own construction and what he calls the “invention” of Kanye-as-persona. Such an invention is always in process; as Kirk Walker Graves writes, “In truth, it is unclear what he is, exactly, or what he might become” (2014, p. 7). This ambiguity and uncertainty contributes to West’s “It” quality, the quality of abnormally intriguing people. But while the It-factor is often associated with glamour and personality-driven mass attraction, ‘It’ can also be registered through the defilement of glamour. Repulsion, too, has a gravitational pull.

Douchebag and jerkoff. Scumbag and asshole. These are all words that West utilised in the chorus of the hit single “Runaway” (2010) to describe himself. Perhaps the most used term of disparagement from the above assortment, *asshole*, is the most apt label for West, and this character trait helps to inform his infamy. As Aaron James states in his theory of such a repugnant figure, the asshole is entitled and behaves in arrogant and even abusive ways because he “acts out of a firm sense that *he is special*, that the normal rules of conduct do not

apply to him” (James 2014, p. 6). Many different types of assholes abound in society, but James puts West in the category of the delusional asshole. In this way, the rapper exhibits an “utter failure to appreciate how he is seen” (James 2014, p. 75). Self-absorbed to a fault, West fails to realise his limitations, from fantasies of taking over the fashion world to winning a presidential bid. Put simply, he genuinely believes his own hype. Delusional assholes are exasperating to watch, and thus may occasionally conjure a modicum of sympathy from the public. It is important to note that his own delusional thinking of divine anointing—“I am a God,” he assuredly exclaims on a *Yeezus* (2013) album track—cannot be extricated from his bipolar disorder diagnosis.

The figure of the (almost always male) asshole, across different industries and organisations, is someone who causes offense as a source of interpersonal and group conflict. Such a figure exists in particular environments as an inflammatory substance. West publicly appears in the same volatile way amidst the hypervisibility of fame and his conspicuousness as an asshole who breeds public frustration. Thus, within the current mediatised environment of celebrity, his discomforting star text might be said to “summon the idiom of irritation both to ‘put us off’ and to ‘rub us the wrong way’ (Ngai 2007, p. 175). Music critic Jody Rosen (2013) seemingly agrees, arguing that “Kanye wants to get under our skin, to rile and appall”. In this way, West is experienced as a metaphorical and literal irritant who purposefully agitates and aggravates the senses. His controversial comments and erratic actions serve as provocations for the public to partake in the attention economy of celebrity whereby his image is seen as an “obscene sore” in its “irritated aesthetic” (Ngai 2007, p. 36). A vicious cycle of publicity emerges as his caustic personality comes to be fueled by the seemingly visceral audience reactions to his egoistic shenanigans. In a 2015 interview with the *New York Times*, West waxes poetically about himself through a tale of interior decorating:

I have this table in my new house. They put this table in without asking. It was some weird nouveau riche marble table, and I hated it. But it was literally so heavy that it took a crane to move it. We would try to set up different things around it, but it never really worked. I realized that table was my ego. No matter what you put around it, under it, no matter who photographed it, the douchebaggery would always come through (Caramanica 2015).

The rapper anecdotally discusses the encroaching piece of furniture in his home, where the marble table, installed without his consent, is deployed as a metaphor for West to reflect on his egomania. He describes the piece as an ostentatious object that reeks of the bad taste of the recently wealthy. Despite efforts to alter the surroundings in order to make the table look better, its obnoxiousness remained. Even a picture taken by a skilled photographer would not be able to hide the fixture’s ugliness from view. West utilises the language of aesthetic judgement to grapple with the public perception of his grotesque celebrity image. Through an emphasis on design, he offers up a working concept of an art of notoriety that highlights negative affect and the boundaries of taste associated with infamy.

Bad Design

In “Could Kanye West Be the World’s Most Committed Artist?” Bernard (2014) remarks that West “is an artist who commits, even when it isn’t prudent, comfortable, realistic, or flattering. It’s hard to explain his behavior at times, but that just might be what makes it relevant” (Bernard 2014). West, who initially rose to success as a prolific producer-turned-rapper, has become increasingly preoccupied with the art world, from avant-garde fashion to modern architecture. He has worked on various kinds of imagery for his music and apparel with leading visual artists like Takashi Murakami, George Condo, and Arthur Jafa. In terms of West’s entrepreneurial ethos, he now considers himself a visionary akin to early twentieth century

innovators like Henry Ford, Howard Hughes, and Walt Disney (Dessem 2016).⁵ Seemingly inspired by Disneyland, West even went so far as to trademark the idea of the “Yecosystem” – campuses around the country that would be considered mini communities with Ye-branded homes and items (Roundtree 2022). His passion for design, both concrete and abstract, informs all of his creative ventures. Furthermore, West has come to be known for *bad* design; in this way, negative aesthetic predicaments and perceptions arise from his artistic choices. Bad design has multiple meanings in this context and includes 1) a piece of work that is not pleasing to the eye, 2) a piece of work that is poorly conceived and executed, and 3) a piece of work that can be considered mean or cruel. It is in the spirit of the delusional asshole that the success and failure associated with bad design proves integral to—indeed, an organising logic of—West’s notoriety as an artist who experiments across different forms of media with questionable results.

Bad design manifests in many of West’s artistic ventures. Take, for instance, the rap icon’s notable entrance into the world of high fashion. As Heben Nigatu notes, West belongs to the “long history of Black artists who use fashion, art, and a couture-level interest in looking beautiful and self-fashioning as a powerful tool of self-actualization” (Nigatu 2013). The emphasis on the sartorial is not new in hip hop, a vibrant and vital element of Black popular culture. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the figure of the hip hop mogul became a dominant presence in mass media. The ascension of the Black male rapper from the harsh urban landscape of the ‘hood’ to the upper echelons of fame and fortune indicated individual achievement emerging from an entrepreneurial spirit (Holms Smith 2003). With an increased cosmopolitan sensibility, the mogul’s success was exemplified by the wearing of jewelry ‘bling’ and street clothing ‘For Us By Us’. Fashion lines like Russell Simmons’ Phat Farm and Jay Z’s Rocawear, to name a couple, became a crucial part of the fabric of the hip hop experience. West has become a mogul through his own foray into fashion, beginning with now-defunct brand Pastelle and continuing with his successful (albeit heavily criticised) Yeezy clothing and shoe line. One of his Yeezy shows at New York Fashion Week was dismissed by *The Washington Post* as “Worse than bad,” and the critic stated further that “Fame is easy. Good clothes are hard” (Givhan 2016). Another commentator wrote of his Adidas sneakers that “The Yeezy 350 is ugly. Deliberately so” (Thomas 2016). These reviews seem to suggest that his apparel brand is the antithesis of beauty. In spite of the reactions to his collection and runway shows, West insists upon the inclusion of his urban wear in the haute couture world, demanding a seat at the table with the most coveted designers and validation from *Vogue* Editor-in-Chief Anna Wintour, known for her widespread influence in the fashion industry around the globe (Voynovskaya 2015).

West’s aim to bring clothing to the masses commenced in the development of a business partnership with Gap in a bid to become the Steve Jobs of the fashion industry (Caramanica 2013). The Yeezy hoodie delivered more online sales than any other product in Gap’s history (Hartmans 2021). Good reviews poured in as another headline attested that “Kanye West Has Actually Made People Happy” (Sicha 2021). Implicit in such a statement is that his persona ordinarily engenders negative affects leading to irritation, anger, and hate. West’s desire to create a populist apparel line that is utilitarian and accessible extends to the way in which patrons came to purchase the clothing. The designer caused a stir when it was reported that Yeezy Gap would be sold in stores, but not in a conventional manner. Instead of being hung or placed on shelves, the clothes would have to be picked out of what looked like garbage bags. A caption on the now defunct yeezyxgap Instagram page described the function of the stunt: “THESE ARE NOT TRASH BUT CONSTRUCTION BAGS INTENDED FOR CUSTOMER TO INFORMALLY REACH IN & HELP THEMSELVES. YE GOAL IS TO MAKE LIFE EASIER. ZYYGAP IS THE FUTURE OF FASHION” (@yeezyxgap 2022). West’s offering of an alternative and egalitarian retail experience can be considered another bad design in its ill-conceived

presentation. While many of West's risky aesthetic decisions have been received negatively by the public, his clothing, shoes, and accessories do sell as their popularity is buoyed by the rapper functioning as his own hype machine for adoring fans.

West defended selling his Gap clothes in construction bags in an interview on the Fox News cable channel, stating that "They had no idea, you know, what you go through as an artist to innovate as a disruptor and just to fight to do something new" (Shawn 2022). Here, West articulates how his creative work is meant to disturb tradition and ultimately cause controversy. Returning to the wearing of the message T-shirt at the 2022 Paris Fashion Show discussed at the outset of this article, the Global Contributing Fashion Editor-at-Large of *Vogue* Gabriella Karefa-Johnson wrote on Instagram that it was "Indefensible behavior" and that "there is no excuse, there is no art here" (Friedman 2022). Remarkably, the 'White Lives Matter' T-shirt did not result in the loss of any of West's lucrative deals. It was not until his array of antisemitic comments that Adidas finally cut ties with the icon; along with Gap, the company pulled his product from stores when their own public image was threatened by his notorious persona (Meyersohn 2022). Then, on December 1, 2022, West tweeted a picture of the Nazi swastika inside the Star of David and was suspended from the platform (Milmo 2022). West's appropriation of the swastika can be thought of in tandem with his use of the "White Lives Matter" slogan described at the beginning of this paper. Such design choices approximate in popular US media culture what Walter Benjamin (1968) coined as the aestheticisation of politics.

West's use of art and privileging of fashion and design aesthetics as his primary form of dissent serves as an alibi to absolve him of ideology. For example, on October 6, 2022, West posted an image of Italian contemporary performance artist and frequent collaborator Vanessa Beecroft's self-portrait *White Madonna with Twins* (2006) with a statement below it. Though it is unclear if the entertainer wrote it himself, the lengthy caption states that "Ye cares about Black lives" but that "Grand narratives created by politics and media will always be in conflict with the artist. The artist is ultimately above the grand narrative" (West 2022d). Here, West seems to espouse a philosophy that removes him and his artistic expression from the perceived constraints of a particular kind of racialised thinking about the world as a Black American subject.

There are negative consequences for particularly cruel design choices like the antisemitic image, as exemplified by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago revoking the rapper's honorary doctorate (Blanchet 2022). West's purported challenging of the status quo in his creative direction has led to the aforementioned fashion fallouts and even the shutdown of his Donda Academy school. When his illusion of invincibility—"Adidas can't drop me. Now what?" he bragged to the Drink Champs American music podcast (Wiener-Bronner 2022)—was dispelled, West responded by voicing his identity as a persecuted Black man. Comparing himself to Emmett Till, an African American boy who became nationally known as a victim of anti-Black violence in 1955, West wrote that he had also become a victim of different forms of lynching: both economic and digital (Seitz 2022).⁶ Though the comparison can be considered obscene, it confirms how West's notorious persona is always already an issue of race, even if it sometimes contradicts his own self-presentation.

Slavery Was a Choice?: Anti-Blackness and the Production of Notoriety

A Fanonian complex of being "an object among other objects" (Fanon 1952, p. 89). provoked by the racialised³⁰ estrangement of masking can be found within West's art and persona; the ways in which he publicly deals with this estrangement inevitably creates scandal. In his play with masks, West may perform a kind of "off-script Blackness" that eschews what he views as the mental enslavement of the African American community (Brick 2021, p. 160). Even more apt,

West is what Collins-Dexter calls the “archetypal Black skinhead” who is a “disillusioned political outlier” and emblematic of a “Black person who rejects their societal value or cultural identity being defined by their willingness to vote for the Democratic Party during presidential elections” (2022, p. 57-58).⁷ In late November 2016, West ranted on stage at the Sacramento, CA stop for his Saint Pablo concert tour, revealing he would vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election and stated that: “I am putting my career, my life, my public well-standing at risk when I talk to y’all like this” (Tanzer 2016). With this affirmation of another infamous asshole, West’s photo at Trump Tower in New York City one month later with the then-newly elected President of the United States seemed to be an inevitable event. Indeed, West speaks from the standpoint of “populist narcissism” that explains his kindred connection to the real estate tycoon (Nigatu 2013). Trump’s infiltration of the American political system, spurred by his vocal white supremacist cult following and subsequent rise to the highest office in government, piqued the rapper’s interest as a model for charismatic leadership.⁸

On May 1, 2018, one month before the release of his next highly anticipated solo studio album, the rapper made headlines with a surprise visit to the *TMZ Live* newsroom. After commenting on a recent fashion statement in which he donned a “Make America Great Again” red baseball cap as a symbol of his continued support of Trump, he then turned to the topic of African American enslavement: “You hear about slavery for 400 years. 400 years?! That sound like a choice” (*TMZ Live* 2018). The fallout from the appearance came swiftly on social media. West’s remark prompted the creation of the hashtag #ifslaverywasachoice that trended on Twitter. Used by Black folks, the hashtag engaged the wrongheaded comment and turned it into a humorous hypothetical, creating fictional scenarios that attend to such a ludicrous prospect (Williams 2018). In this way, Black publics mitigated West’s damaging message through online comedy. Beneath such laughter, however, there seemed to be a sense of irritation amongst some in the Black community due to the suspicion that he knew better—his mother had been an English professor and his estranged father was a member of the Black Panther Party—that turned into outright anger. Writer Roxane Gay called him a “moron” and refused to engage his “nonsense” (Beaumont-Thomas 2018), while diehard fan and music journalist Touré commented “Ye’s making it harder to keep justifying him but for now, I still do. Because I still don’t believe that he really believes any of that conservative stuff” (Touré 2018). This desire to recuperate West amongst a subsection of Black media audiences stems from an inability to truly reconcile “old” and “new” Kanye. African American fans in particular can be dismayed and hurt by his abhorrent viewpoint, but also secretly hope that it is another performance: a façade that can be readily dismissed at the drop of another hip-hop banger. A variety of memes in response to the *TMZ* incident circulated on the internet, graphically asserting how West has now come to reside in the “sunken place”, a metaphorical liminal zone of debilitating anti-Blackness emerging from Jordan Peele’s hit racial horror film *Get Out* (2017). Similarly, West’s apparent obsession with Trump calls into question the double consciousness he expressed in much of his early music, as well as the critical second sight he began to develop with his radical reflections on Hurricane Katrina (Ciccariello-Maher 2009). West’s present-day refusal of so-called groupthink and championing of what is termed ‘free thought’ instantiates his racial notoriety.

Free Thinkers (or freethinkers) are said to promote secularist ideas and individual liberty for the common good. West, however, co-opts the term to describe his conservative and reactionary opinions under the ruse of critical insight (Heer 2018). The artist wields discourses of creativity and imagination to engineer his opinions about the state of humanity. In response to the criticism around his comment about chattel slavery, West went on the defensive in a Twitter rant, commenting that as Black folks, “we are programmed to always talk and fight race issues. We need to update our conversation” (West 2018a). West further argues against the purported mental imprisonment of African Americans and that his incendiary statement was merely an

example of free thought: “It was just an idea...once again I am being attacked for presenting new ideas” (West 2018b). West’s increasing technocratic optimism cannot be separated from a deeply-rooted anti-Black sentiment that circulates online via conspiratorial thinking.

The intersection of race, conspiracy, and celebrity antagonism is captured by West when he tweeted: “Kanye vs the media is modern day Willie Lynch [sic] theory” (West 2018c). The artist invokes the perpetually debunked myth of the early eighteenth century slaveowner William Lynch, who allegedly made a speech in Virginia theorising the making of a slave. The infamous ‘speech’ was posted and circulated on the Internet in the early days of the world wide web and gained traction amongst Black publics, and especially African American men at the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, DC (Adams 1998). Since then, historians and journalists have deduced that the text on how to keep the Black subject under control and domination is a complete fiction. The fact that West references the hoax in defining his stance against the media confirms his imbrication in economies of tabloidization central to his notorious Blackness and negative celebrity image.

CONCLUSION

When West lost the 2020 U.S. presidential election after officially appearing on the ballot in multiple states and imploring voters to write in his name if not, he simply tweeted: “WELP KANYE 2024” with a dove emoji and image of himself in front of an American electoral college map (West 2020). Thus, his presidential bid became another kind of bad design, but with disturbing implications. Brick (2021, p. 159) argues that although “West’s political machinations might appear erratic, they are broadly consistent with the unorthodox position West has assumed within American popular culture”. However, the difficulty in writing about West is the degree to which he wields his notorious stature as an entertainer not just for attention, but for high stakes political purposes that involve harmful ideological stances that promote anti-Blackness and antisemitism. To be sure, the collective capacity to tolerate West has diminished and this article does not attempt to repair his increasingly volatile persona. Rather, throughout this piece, I have explored the affective terrain of his notoriety. — perhaps indeed “A Kanye Place”, to refer back to the *Saturday Night Live* skit discussed earlier —that exemplifies toxic celebrity.

This article has elucidated how the lack of decorum reflected in West’s persona results in a fundamental friction between his celebrity image and the public. If persona can be thought of as a “sartorial style for moving through public spaces,” (Marshall 2016, p. 5) I read the entertainer’s material and conceptual self-fashioning as affectively designed to trouble the senses. West is a prime case study in how *negative* “visibility, reputation, impression management, and impact are at play as we work and labor on the production of our online and public personas” (Marshall 2016, p. 5). He presents a dynamic and extensive online archive of ephemera that exemplifies the perpetual conflict he constructs between what he deems his authentic self and various perceptions of how he is supposed to think and act. West’s creativity emanates from an oppositional space and his mediated confrontations with the public notoriously confirm his artistic skill as a perennial provocateur who incites and inflames within US popular culture.

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END NOTES

1. The Anti-Defamation League designated the “White Lives Matter” slogan as a white supremacist phrase that originated in 2015 in response to Black Lives Matter activism.
2. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to the entertainer primarily using his surname “West”. Though he officially changed his name to “Ye” in October 2021, the vast majority of news media outlets still refer to him as Kanye West. Additionally, the account handle @kanyewest is used for his social media presence. He is referred to as “Ye” in this piece when he or others have used the moniker since October 2021.
3. For an extended discussion of the relationship between madness and Blackness as it emerges with West, see Lamar Jurelle Bruce’s *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (2021).
4. While both these posts have since been removed, they were widely reposted and reported in entertainment media.
5. Upon debuting the music video for “Fade” in August 2016 at the MTV Video Music Awards, West gave a speech on stage in which he described himself as a “thought leader” and mentioned his desire to be an “artist-merchant” like these wealthy white male individuals.
6. The October 30, 2022 Instagram post contained the historic and widely publicised graphic image of Till’s bloodied and bruised face. In the caption, West explains that this is “what modern post social media #Blackmirror warfare looks like.”
7. “Black Skinhead” is also the title of a West rap track. Collins-Dexter determines that West is a canary in the coal mine for African American citizens who have an alternative conceptualisation of politicised Blackness, who “live outside of the bounds of fetishized Black political identity” (Collins Dexter 2022, p. 58).
8. I use the phrase “white supremacist cult following” to describe a subset of Trump supporters, such as the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, who endorsed him. Trump did not condemn the “Unite the Right” white nationalist rally that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 by commenting that there were “very fine people on both sides.” It is also important to note that the “birtherism” conspiracy began with Trump as a racist theory that Barack Obama was not born in the United States. For an extended discussion of all of these issues, see Priyanka Boghani, “Racism in the Era of Trump: An Oral History” (Boghani 2020).

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