



“Can't Tell Me Nothing”: Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West

Chris Richardson

To cite this article: Chris Richardson (2011) “Can't Tell Me Nothing”: Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West, *Popular Music and Society*, 34:01, 97-112, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2011.539831](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.539831)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.539831>



Published online: 10 Feb 2011.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2295



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

“Can’t Tell Me Nothing”: Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West

Chris Richardson

In 2004, Kanye West burst onto the music scene with The College Dropout. His follow-ups, Late Registration (2005) and Graduation (2007), continued to advance a theme critical of institutional education and the broader social distinctions it produces. By examining West’s critique of higher education, this paper demonstrates how Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, defined as the ability to impose meanings while concealing their underlying power relations, is a valuable tool for analyzing discourses in hip hop and for moving beyond the hype about crime and physical violence that pervades popular debates.

Introduction

In 1982, *The New York Times* announced that Grand Master Flash’s “The Message” was “blasting out of radios and portable cassette players on the subways and in the streets all over the city, but especially in predominantly black neighborhoods” (Palmer C4). And it was “angry” (C4). This article was one of the first in a major American newspaper describing a popular new style of music called “rap”.¹ Within the next few years, *The New York Times* published dozens of articles linking the music to criminality and youth violence. Headlines included “Fights Follow a Film on Rap Music” (May B1), “7 Youth Injured in Concert Fights; Roving Groups Flow through Midtown after ‘Rap’ Music Show” (Kerr 23), and “18 Are Arrested after Rap Concert” (no author B3). By 1985, the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC), founded by a number of politically well-connected women, including the wives of two US senators, called for these “offensive” rap records not to be sold to young people and to carry warning labels (Binder; Chastagner). By the 1990s, moral panics linking hip hop to violence and aggression exploded in the popular news media.

Much of the literature on hip hop has been an attempt to come to terms with this notoriety. In 1994, Tricia Rose addressed the media’s fixation on rap and violence, suggesting that “the way rap and rap-related violence are discussed in the popular media is fundamentally linked to the larger social discourse on spatial control of black people” (*Black Noise* 125). More than a decade later, Rose remains caught up in this

debate, dedicating an entire chapter of *Hip Hop Wars* to deconstructing the ongoing argument that “hip hop causes violence” (33–60). She writes that “not only are the larger nonblack cultural reasons for these violent themes ignored but, worse, the reasons are attributed to black people themselves” (ibid. 53). Other critics argue that record labels are “selling Black violence, misogyny, and sexuality to a white teenage audience” (Asante Jr. 114) and assert that such violence is symptomatic of a more central notion of “American democracy and cultural self-expression” (Dyson, *Know What I Mean?* 93). Whatever one’s political leanings, there is no shortage of studies linking hip hop and its fans to violent behavior (see Chen *et al.*; Kelley; Mahiri and Conner; Squires *et al.*).

While “gangsta rap” entered the popular vocabulary in the 1980s, artists such as 2Pac, Eazy-E, and Ice Cube reveled in tales of guns, gangs, and prostitution and, as these artists have passed away or become more family friendly (Ice Cube recently starred in the child-centered comedies *Are We There Yet?* (2005) and *Are We Done Yet?* (2007)), many younger artists seem eager to replace them. By now everyone has heard NWA’s “Fuck tha Police” (1988) and Body Count’s “Cop Killer” (1992) as well as the myriad arguments suggesting these songs either perpetuate physical violence or reflect its ubiquity in America. Focusing on this particular element of hip hop, however, largely overshadows another form of violence that the culture has been documenting from the start—a *symbolic* violence that conceals and subjugates the practical knowledges and experiences of young, predominantly black Americans living in neighborhoods where drugs, poverty, and crime are pervasive. The concept of symbolic violence, which Bourdieu and Passeron define as a power “to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (4), is a valuable tool for examining how certain experiences continue to be silenced or ignored while issues of crime and violence pervade the discussions surrounding hip hop. Building on Weber’s description of politics as a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (78), Bourdieu and Passeron argue that modern society requires “the transmission of power and privileges to take, more than in any other society, the indirect paths of academic consecration” (xxi). This movement from a direct physical violence to a more subtle one prevents “pedagogic violence from manifesting itself as the social violence it objectively is” (ibid.).² This force works on a largely symbolic level by imposing dominant ways of seeing and acting in the world that become universalized.

This paper focuses on the work of Kanye West as a popular and revealing example of how symbolic violence can be negotiated within hip-hop culture. As West’s “big brother” Jay-Z points out “the folks from the suburbs and the private schools so concerned with putting warning labels on [hip-hop] records missed the point” (x). He argues that the realities of poverty, racism, and violence that hip hop addresses are symptoms of a broader social arrangement—not the causes. “People can act like rappers spread these things, but that is not true” (xi). West presents one of the more nuanced approaches to this issue by espousing certain dominant worldviews while also questioning the symbolic violence they perpetuate. Although a number of other

artists are pursuing more overt political discourses—Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, KRS-One, Lauryn Hill, Lupe Fiasco—West’s popularity and commercial success have left him generally free of the “conscious rapper” moniker that has condemned these artists to mainstream obscurity, allowing West to explore self-reflexively the misrecognition these dominant worldviews can foster while presenting his insights to a broad audience. To explore this side of West’s work, I first examine how he challenges the idea of the universal subject by placing his own unique point of view at the center of his music videos and the discourses within them. I then examine the imagery of school and the education system through which West articulates his experiences as an “outcast on the inside” (Bourdieu, “Outcasts” 421). I conclude by examining the message of hope and inspiration with which West infuses his songs through sampling older artists and using key musical and political figures from the past as reference points from which future generations can gain insights. Ultimately, I argue that West presents one of the most powerful critiques of symbolic violence in hip hop through these acts, which illuminate many of the underlying social problems that can lead to the physical violence emphasized in popular debates.

Identification: “Seen through Yves Saint Laurent Glasses”

In 2004, West earned celebrity status with his video for “All Falls Down.” Although he had made music videos for “Through the Wire” (2004) and “Slow Jamz” (2004), it was director Chris Milk’s stunning visuals that helped West capture the attention of the MTV and BET crowds.³ The video is cut as a series of point-of-view shots in which the viewer literally sees what West sees as he arrives at an airport and escorts his girlfriend, played by Stacey Dash, to her departure terminal. Even when a young boy spills mustard on West’s shirt and he steps into a washroom to clean himself, one sees the reflection of West’s face in the mirror, placing the viewer in West’s shoes as he raps about insecurity, college, and money problems. The dominance of this perspective in the video is a significant shift for audiences, who, as rapper Nas points out, can sometimes be more “comfortable watching a black man on a surveillance camera” (154). In fact, the only time the camera breaks from West’s point-of-view is when he is forced through a baggage X-ray machine by security guards (one then sees a skeleton rapping in the monitor as he slides along the conveyor belt).

By moving away from the particular filmic convention of treating the camera as an omnipresent, universal viewpoint, the video for “All Falls Down” works to subvert the idea of a single, dominant perspective that is often naturalized in popular films and television programs. Bourdieu writes that “the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education” (*Distinction* 3). How viewers learn to see and identify with television and film personalities is usually from the eyes of a dominant culture, which presents a “legitimate” worldview that coincides with the outlook of middle- to upper-class, white, heterosexual males (see Hall, “The Spectacle”; hooks, *Black Looks*; Mercer). Though not all viewers will necessarily identify with West as they watch the video, this disjunction between the point-of-view shots and the “natural” way of seeing the world

through the white male gaze represents a symbolic shift in power. Even when he is turned away at security and X-rayed, the viewer, after having walked the length of the airport in West's shoes, is likely to identify with West and feel belittled and dehumanized by this act of surveillance, rather than identifying with the white security guard who represents the "legitimate" authority figure. It is important, therefore, that the primacy of this worldview is called into question as West takes control of the camera in his first major music video, setting a precedent for others to come.

While the visuals in *All Falls Down* refocus the object/subject of identification, West's lyrical performance adds to the critique of dominant ways of seeing. As Bourdieu notes, the words and gestures one uses to describe the world greatly affect how one sees it. "The capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of knowledge (*savoir*)," he writes, adding that the concepts "available to name visible things . . . are, as it were, programs for perception" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). When West pronounces words like "secure"—which sounds like "skur" in the song—he not only emphasizes an alternative dialect but highlights a different way of seeing the world. This program for perception is an exaggeration of the black vernacular likely to be found on street corners of certain Chicago communities but definitely not in university campuses or mainstream media. By presenting these alternative ways of speaking about the world West demonstrates that alternative views of the world are produced not only through the eyes but also through the ears. In the video, he raps:

Now, tell me that ain't insecur [insecure].
The concept of school seems so secur [secure].
Sophomore three yers [years] ain't picked a carer [career].

West's emphasis on a different pronunciation of these words, whether made in jest or seriously, draws attention to the arbitrariness of the "legitimate" language. This is not to say that all utterances ought to be considered equal—Bourdieu even argues against slang, suggesting that it works to perpetuate symbolic violence by leading "stigmatized groups to claim the stigma as a sign of their identity" (*In Other Words* 155). The importance of this example rests not in the question of whether West presents a valid alternative to the dominant language but in challenging the primacy of academic discourses as the "natural" or only ways of communicating. West later raps "I can't even pronounce nothing—yo pass that ver-say-she [Versace]." This break with the Queen's English not only comments on the barriers between the "high" culture of designer fashion and the "low" culture of "the ghetto," it also critiques how hierarchies are constructed through distinctions in the objects and discourses that define the social world. In the foreword to his mother's memoirs, West recounts a time when he asked her whether the things he said were proper. Her response was that "[i]f you're in a room full of people and everyone is speaking Ebonics and you break out with the Queen's English, super proper, then even if you're speaking so-called correct English, you're not correct" (x). West writes that he "remembered that when I wrote my songs" (x). Thus, the pronunciations West emphasizes in his performances force

listeners to think about the “proper” language that ought to be in its place as well as to whom that language belongs. As West raps in another song, “They say I talk with so much emphasis, Oooh they so sen-sa-tive” (“Can’t Tell Me Nothing” 2007). Through this kind of word play, West draws attention to different ways of seeing and speaking and presents an alternative view to which audiences can relate.

Identification is an important factor in much of West’s world. In a *Rolling Stone* profile, Touré draws attention to a larger-than-life poster of himself that West hangs on a wall in his loft. The journalist interprets this decoration as evidence of “a certain arrogance” (52) and it would be difficult to refute this claim considering West’s

braggadocio musical persona. But the poster, I would argue, may point to something more—to a lack of role models with whom West could identify and to whom he could turn for support while growing up. West tells the journalist “I put me on the wall because I was the only person that had me on the wall at that time” (Touré 52). More than arrogance, this simple act illustrates how many young black students continue to enter schools and other social institutions only to be presented with European men who have become exemplars of the disciplines they study.⁴ As Cornel West argues, young people like Kanye West come from a history of “white-supremacist assaults on black intelligence, ability, beauty and character” that have required “persistent black efforts to hold self-doubt, self-contempt and even self-hatred at bay” (“The New Cultural” 128). He suggests that “we haven’t reached a point where we’ve convinced enough young black brothers and sisters that to engage in philosophical discourse in academic spaces is desirable, attractive, appealing or just hip or cool” (“On My Intellectual” 25). Cornel West attributes this problem to the image of the scholar whose work can be “clever, sharp and good at drawing distinctions, but who doesn’t really relate it to history, struggle [and] engagement with suffering” (“On My Intellectual” 25). Kanye West’s critique of the education system can be read as a similar, if much more dramatic, iteration of this argument.

Pedagogic Violence: “School Spirit, Motherfucker!”

From Boogie Down Production’s “Edutainment” (1990) to Dead Prez’s “They Schools” (2000) to Jay-Z’s “So Ambitious” (2009), hip-hop artists have been documenting struggles in the education system for decades. In songs like these, rappers use school and its imagery to talk about the ways dominant worldviews are imposed as universal truths that exclude their own experiences and practices. Kanye West, more than any other artist, has been taking up this critique of America’s education system and presenting it to a large and diverse fan base. His first album, *The College Dropout* (2004), featured half a dozen skits about nasty faculty members and out-of-touch students. A year later, he released *Late Registration* (2005), with an equal number of skits, this time featuring the fraternity “Broke Phi Broke” and lines like “Now I’m in the shop class or the basket weavin’ with all the rest of the motherfuckers underachievin’” (“Late” 2005). In 2007, he released his most successful album to date, *Graduation*, in which he announces “I guess this is my dissertation, homie” (“Good

Morning”).⁵ Despite some obvious differences, Bourdieu and West share a common concern relating to the way the education system can reproduce social hierarchies based on pretenses of equality and universality.⁶

Bourdieu writes that he was always interested in challenging institutional power, especially “the institution of the university and all the violence, imposture and sanctified stupidity that it conceals” (*In Other Words* 4). This goes beyond what Bourdieu calls “academic anti-academicism” (*Pascalian Meditations* 28), in which academics earn a certain amount of cultural capital by posturing as if they were against the system in which they take part. Rather, Bourdieu argues that his work represents an attempt to step away from the taken-for-granted position of many academics that “implies more or less triumphant ignorance . . . of the economic and social conditions that make it possible” (*Pascalian Meditations* 15). Similarly, Kanye West is one of the most outspoken critics of academe in the music industry, spitting lines like “Look at the valedictorian . . . complacent career student. Some people graduate but be still stupid” (“Good Morning” 2007).

West’s critique of higher learning often overshadows the fact that he *did* attend university. He took English and music classes for a few years before he became “the college dropout” that music fans know. This brief encounter with post-secondary education, and the fact that he grew up in an academic household where his mother was an English professor, could explain why education is a central theme in West’s work. As *Rolling Stone* has suggested, West may be “the most successful college dropout since Bill Gates” (Touré 52). Other magazines have argued that West is the first hip-hop artist successfully to incorporate a “Buppi” (black yuppie) sensibility into hip hop since the rise of gangsta rap in the 90s (Tyranigel, “Why You Can’t Ignore” 34). This claim points to a dramatic shift in the discourse of hip hop in the 21st century. Tyranigel notes that, while early artists like LL Cool J and A Tribe Called Quest managed to weave “suburban perspectives into rebellious music” (ibid. 34), gangsta rap stripped mainstream hip hop down to sex, crime, and violence. “When gangsta rap arrived, nuance was smothered by a blanket of extreme poses,” Tyranigel writes, reminding readers that Tupac Shakur had THUG LIFE inked across his chest when he died. The idea of a successful rapper from a middle-class family who wrote rhymes about pink polos, the suburbs, and college degrees was unimaginable in the 1990s.

With *The College Dropout* (2004), West discovered a formula that bridged the divide between middle-class sensibilities and ghetto-centric rap without alienating audiences on either side. In fact, some critics have suggested that West presents a Du Boisian double-consciousness in which he confronts many of the contradictions in black America (Ciccariello-Maher; Kitterman). Like Du Bois, who writes that double-consciousness is “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (364), West recognizes that a university degree is necessary for attaining status and the hope of a well-paying career but is also a way for the dominant culture to judge others and legitimate social hierarchies and segregation. As Kitterman argues,

“West has been called the Barack Obama of hip-hop, a golden boy whose mixture of soulful beats and social consciousness appeals to middle-class young people but has street credibility too” (B5). West’s ability to bridge these social spheres, Kitterman argues, demonstrates how “the College Dropout” can teach both young listeners and college professors a thing or two.

Perhaps this ability to reach multiple audiences can be attributed to West’s mother, Donda West, who was an English professor at Chicago State University. Before her death in 2007, she wrote *Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*, in which she recalls “I had that black, middle-class ethic that said you must go to school, do very well, and get at least one degree” (West and Hunter 104). But after her son dropped out, she supported his choice. With Kanye West’s success in the music industry, Donda West joined a circle of academic hip-hop moms that includes Dr Brenda Greene, mother of Talibe Kweli, and Dr Mahalia Hines, mother of Common. The not-so-concealed secret that a number of rappers have been raised by university professors provokes a couple of questions: How has West’s experience as the son of two academics—his father Ray West taught photography and media production—affected his views on the education system? And can West be put into the same category as rappers like 2Pac or Nas who left the education system in their early teens?

West was not pre-emptively weeded out of the education system like many hip-hop artists, particularly those from low-income areas where few people attend post-secondary institutions.⁷ However, the fact that West had access to higher education and was expected to earn a degree did not make the symbolic violence that can occur in university any less traumatic. Instead, West entered the “ivory tower” for a short time only to feel like what Bourdieu calls an “outcast on the inside” (“Outcasts” 422). West was part of a new generation of young people who, after being given access to higher education, soon learned that “academic success did not ensure access to the social positions it once did” (Bourdieu, “Outcasts” 422). As Bourdieu notes, students who entered university but failed to fit in with the dominant culture during this new wave of university expansion often felt more disgraced than earlier generations who were not expected to earn university degrees. West raps in “School Spirit” (2004) “This nigga graduated at the top of my class. I went to Cheesecake, he was a motherfucking waiter there.” Individuals like the one West mentions, who enter academe but fail to reap its perceived benefits, can become traumatized, argues Bourdieu, because “they seem to have ‘had their chance’ and because social identity tends more and more to be defined by the school system” (“Outcasts” 423). For these individuals, “the school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves toward it” (423).⁸

In “Good Morning” (2007), West raps about what he saw as the logic of university: “They tell you read this, eat this, don’t look around . . . look up now, they done stole your streetness.” The disjuncture between his own beliefs, values, and aspirations and the dominant culture of university was too much for West to take. As he says in

“School Spirit” (2004) he was finished “Chasing y’all dreams and what you’ve got planned.” Perhaps the most telling example of the effect university can have on students like West appears in “Graduation Day” (2004). While Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance” plays quietly in the background, an angry faculty member yells at West after he finishes “We Don’t Care” (2004):

What in the fuck was that, Kanye? ... You can give me your motherfucking graduation ticket right now ... I’m trying to get you out here with these white people and this how you gonna do me? You know what, you’s a nigga—and I don’t mean that in no nice way.

It is doubtful (one hopes) that anyone on campus was as vulgar and explicit when speaking to West about his ability to fit in with the dominant (white) culture of higher education. But this monologue is exactly how symbolic violence and misrecognition work. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that misrecognition occurs when “power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder” (xxii). This process involves actions or discourses that work as “a wish or a practice that, if presented in any other way, would be unacceptable” (Bourdieu, *In Other Words* 85). For example, one could not argue that African Americans and other marginalized groups should be segregated from wealthier, predominantly white populations. This kind of statement would be incendiary and socially unacceptable today. One may, however, quite easily rely on the courts, the police, and the education system to enforce private property laws, criminal codes, and academic distinctions that perpetuate a social order that segregates these populations in a less direct way. This deferral to “legitimate” authorities allows a symbolic force to be “fully exercised while disguising its true nature as force and gaining recognition, approval and acceptance ... under the appearances of universality” (Bourdieu, *In Other Words* 85). Though the adult in this skit is likely a composite character reflecting West’s feelings and experiences, it does not mean that such sentiments are not encoded and decoded—to borrow Hall’s language—in the looks, the pauses, and the interactions between those who “fit in” within this social order and those who do not.

Hall argues that “the idea of the university as an ‘open’ institution, ‘freely’ in pursuit of knowledge, was, of course, never quite the case. It has always been a bit of a myth” (“Universities” 110). He argues that “the people who come into the learning process come into it already placed in this hierarchical system” (118). Elsewhere, Hall writes that upon looking back on his work “it was the silences that told us something It was what was invisible, what couldn’t be put into the frame, what was apparently unsayable that we need to attend to” (“Race, Culture” 15). Building on these insights, one could argue that the character in West’s skit embodies those thoughts and sentiments that have been pushed below the surface of many social institutions and internalized in many of its participants. One cannot ignore the problem of an African-American graduation rate of 39 per cent versus 60 per cent for white students—a twenty-one-point difference (Kitterman). West’s depiction of the

dehumanizing effects of higher education and the symbolic violence within these spaces should be taken as a call to acknowledge these experiences and to improve this situation.

A key issue in contemporary education is thus not overt racism—though it is still an important concern—but that many young black men and women do not see themselves fitting in with academic culture and become disengaged from the university system, perpetuating the problem McWhorter highlights in *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, in which he argues that a culture of anti-academicism and apolitical fist-waving continues to hurt African Americans. In *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*, McWhorter applies this critique specifically to hip hop, arguing that “if the message of this supposedly revolutionary music is ‘Fuck!’ the message is weak. *Fuck!* is tap water” (10). And, while McWhorter may have a valid point in arguing that concerned groups must move beyond “simply shaking [a] fist and calling teachers and administrators racists” (ibid. 170), this argument misses the nuances popular artists like West present. Of course, *The College Dropout* (2004) is not going to save black America, but it presents an insightful look into the misrecognition and symbolic violence pervasive in places like college campuses and which must be overcome before one can speak of a truly democratic and egalitarian education system.

Bourdieu writes that the educational system “universally imposes the same demands without any concern for equally universally distributing the means of satisfying them, thus helping to legitimate the inequality” (*In Other Words* 76). This kind of logic can be found in the myriad critiques of television programs like *The Cosby Show*, which showcase educated, middle-class black families and leave out the social obstacles and constraints that can prevent others from obtaining the same degree of success. In essence, the argument in such representations is that, if others do not achieve the same lifestyle, it is a failing on the part of the individual (see Baker Jr.; Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*; Jhally and Lewis; Rodman). Erased in these representations are the social and systematic workings of symbolic violence within the dominant culture, which retains the legacy of racism and class distinction by rarely—if ever—mentioning it. By emphasizing these situations, West breaks with the symbolic violence that is created through concepts of merit, educational performance, and professional achievement. Though he may not go far enough to present a theoretical plan of action, he does highlight a history of subjugated knowledges through his samples, lyrics, and references that may spark others to take up this issue and look deeper into this obscured past while working to improve future conditions.

Habitus in Hip Hop: “Speaking to You from the Future”

In 2007, West released an online preview of his third studio album, *Graduation*. He begins by saying “I’m speaking to you from the future right now . . . I was always speaking to you from the future.” As Daft Punk’s “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger” (2001) pumps in the background, West continues, “They say music changed a lot since

you first dropped. I said music's gonna change a lot after I drop." And it would be difficult to disagree. In just a few years, West has created an impressive body of work that has helped rejuvenate what many critics and artists had deemed a dying genre (see Alridge; Dyson "Is Hip-Hop Dead?"; Hess; Serpick). A major aspect of West's work, which makes him an important figure in hip hop, is his musical appropriation of the past in order to keep it alive in the present and bring its messages into the future. Though West is not the only person frequently to sample older tracks—in fact, one could argue that hip hop was founded on this technique—West has created a distinct sound by remixing the rhythms of 1970s Motown, soul, and funk favorites, speeding them up, and infusing them with heavy bass beats. By my count, West has sampled hundreds of tracks in his songs, ranging from groups like the Chi-Lites ("I Never Had It So Good [And Felt So Bad]" 1971/"Guerrilla Monsoon Rap" 2002)⁹ and the Kay-Gees ("Heavenly Dream" 1979/"Celebration" 2005) to legends like Marvin Gaye ("Distant Lover" 1970/"Spaceship" 2004) and Aretha Franklin ("Spirit in the Dark" 1970/"School Spirit" 2004). In "Last Call" (2004), West even toys with Bette Midler's "Mr. Rockefeller" (1976), a song about a poor girl in New York asking J. D. Rockefeller for assistance, in an ironic juxtaposition to West's own situation asking the owners of Roc-A-Fella Records for a chance to rap. As he recalls in the song, one of the things that led him to the studio was a track he produced using an accelerated version of Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes' "I Miss You" (1972).

I made this one beat where I sped up this Harold Melville sample . . . At that time, like the drums really weren't soundin' right to me, so I went and, I was listening to Dre's *Chronic 2001* at that time and really I just, like, picked the drums off "Xxplosive" and put it like with a sped up sample and now it's kind of like my whole style.

West illustrates how he was able to take a song about a grown man breaking down emotionally after losing his lover ("I Miss You" 1972), mix it with a recent track from one of the original gangstas of rap ("Xxplosive" 1999), and create "This Can't Be Life" (2000), in which Jay-Z raps about breaking down from seeing the pressures of guns, drugs, and young people dying around him. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* may be a useful tool for grasping the significance of West's method. Bourdieu writes that *habitus* "is a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future" (*Outline* 82). In this way, "the past remains present and active in the dispositions it has produced" (*In Other Words* 64). West's talent for retrieving powerful elements from his musical roots and embedding them with references that compare such connotations, memories, and intertextual linkages with those of his own generation can be seen as a sort of *habitus* at work. In "School Spirit," for example, West uses a speeded-up version of Aretha Franklin's "Spirit in the Dark" (1970), an uplifting gospel-style song with a message about empowerment in "dark" times, and uses it for a track that addresses the symbolic violence within the education system that his generation continues to face. Similarly, West's "Touch the Sky" (2006) incorporates a re-energized version of Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up" (1970), a song about overcoming challenges in the 1970s to

introduce his own story of triumph in the 21st century. A noticeable difference in these songs, however, is that Mayfield sings lines like “hush now child” and “Bite your lip” while West is characteristically less compromising. There is no hint of submission in West’s version:

Back when they thought pink polo’s would hurt the Roc.
 Before Cam got the shit to pop
 Me and my momma hopped in that U-Haul van.
 Any pessimists, I ain’t talked to them.

On this track, West’s references, both lyrically and sonically, establish him as part of a larger field of hip-hop artists that fans can quickly recognize. As Bourdieu writes, *habitus* represents both “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works” and “the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products” (*Distinction* 170). One of the ways “Touch the Sky” highlights this ability to differentiate works is through its intergenerational references. West begins the song by rapping about his struggle to win the approval of his mentor, Jay-Z. Within hip-hop circles, it is well known that Jay-Z was a sort of protégé of the Notorious BIG—in *Hope on a Tightrope* Cornel West even compares the two to Plato and Socrates. The Notorious BIG opened for 2Pac before their famous feud in the 1990s and is associated with other East coast icons like P. Diddy and Lil’ Kim. Thus, the musical genealogy of Kanye West demonstrates a rich source for analysis, each artist linking to another who broke new ground and produced works which others have learned from and, in a sense, are responding to. In the other direction, West has become a mentor to Chicago-based rapper Lupe Fiasco, who gives a stunning performance in the third verse of “Touch the Sky.” No doubt in due time Fiasco will have his own protégés. This set of relations demonstrates that each song, like one’s *habitus*, can be seen as the embodiment of a past that survives in the present and looks toward the future. None of these artists resembles anything close to a reproduction of his or her mentors, but such works are greatly contingent upon those who came before them all the way back to Curtis Mayfield and beyond. These aural palimpsests tell a compact story of experiences, sentiments, and worldviews that often do not make it into textbooks.

Because the role of history can easily be missed by listeners unfamiliar with the original connotations in these tracks, West and his associates also name those from the past whom they admire and toward whom they wish to direct their listeners’ thoughts. For example, in “We Major” (2008) Nas and West provide a condensation of important figures in African-American music and culture.¹⁰ When Nas joins West on the third verse, he manages to comment on the exploitation of African-Americans in the music industry, the history of racism in America, the Civil Rights movement, and his own struggles in Queens Bridge, all within sixty seconds. Nas first draws attention to the superficiality that many artists have embraced: “First line, should it be about the hoes or the ice?” he asks sarcastically. Then he criticizes the way music has been co-opted and suggests reappropriating it: “I’m feelin’ it’s time to build my very own Motown ’cause rappers be deprived of executive 9 to 5s.” Finally, he names a number

of individuals worthy of further consideration: “I’m Jesse Jackson on the balcony when King got killed . . . Either way my change came like Sam Cooke.”

Unpacking this song could take an entire book. I will focus, however, on the use of Sam Cooke at the end to highlight how this process works. Cooke was one of the first African-American performers to develop his own record label, taking an active role in business and setting an important precedent for entrepreneurs like Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Kanye West. Cooke was also a vocal civil rights advocate and his song “A Change is Gonna Come” (1964) has become an anthem for the movement. President Obama even paraphrased it in his 2008 victory speech when he announced “It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America” (Jeffery). Thus, in only a few lines, “We Major” (2008) manages to evoke the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle against racism and early African-American entrepreneurialism and present a strong role model while countering the superficial raps oriented toward misogyny and commodity fetishism. Anyone unfamiliar with these associations can easily look up “Sam Cooke” and the other referents after listening to the song. West and Nas thereby provide a link to follow toward a past that is left out of the discourses that focus on rap as aggressive and violent but is particularly important for young people seeking out these subjugated knowledges. Highlighting this history of struggle and perseverance through musical sampling and allusions is one of the many ways West not only criticizes symbolic violence but also subverts it.

Conclusion: What Can Kanye West Teach Us? “Peep This, Preach Us, Teach Us.”

In 2005, *Time* magazine argued that “West’s rhymes against higher education make him a dangerous role model, in which case—good. Dangerous role models are the only ones, musically speaking, worth a damn” (Tyrael, “5 CDs” 70). This assessment begs the question: If West is a role model, what example does he set for his listeners and what lessons does he have to teach them? At his best, West is an engaging entertainer and a self-reflexive critic of symbolic violence in America. He is also, however, an arrogant and materialistic performer who has referred to himself as “the fly Malcolm X” because he will “buy any jeans necessary” (“Good Morning” 2007). In short, West is a contradiction who embodies the larger contradictions in American culture. Within hip hop, West demonstrates that one does not need to sell drugs, carry guns, or beat women to succeed. In fact, identifying with these parodies of black manhood and attempting to emulate them is a classic case of Bourdieuan misrecognition. The strength of West’s work is in his ability not necessarily to overcome symbolic violence but to draw attention to it. “I’m like any other nigga, buy ice to stay cool. Like any other nigga that claim they hate school” (“Apologize” 2005). In looking at himself critically, West presents a guiding framework for listeners to do the same. This recognition of symbolic violence is an important first step toward overcoming it.

In this paper, I have presented three ways in which West contributes something valuable and important to the dialogue about hip hop and symbolic violence. First,

he continues to question the idea of a universal subject, which, as Bourdieu and others point out, is usually a subtle way of privileging the middle-class, white, heterosexual male. Second, West tirelessly demonstrates ways in which the school system in America marginalizes those outside the dominant culture and works to perpetuate social hierarchies by making such power relations appear legitimate and universal. Finally, he points to a history of hope and struggle in African-American culture that is often erased in dominant discourses about hip hop. Like his late mother, West argues that “I’m kind of a teacher too. But the hood, the suburbs, MTV and BET are my classrooms, and I know how to talk to my class” (Tyranigel, “Why You Can’t” 39). Unlike the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps critics in black culture—think Bill Cosby—Kanye West critiques the existing social power dynamic while also self-consciously being a product of it. West’s reflective struggle with commodity fetishism and other ills within hip-hop culture provides a model for thinking critically about these issues while being situated within them rather than simply presenting dogmatic prescriptions. As Cornel West points out in *Race Matters*, his identity as a black man may be a social construct but this knowledge does not help him hail cabs in Harlem. Similarly, Bourdieu warns that, while it does no harm to observe that “race” is a social construct, “it is naïve, even dangerous, to suppose and suggest that one only has to ‘deconstruct’ these social artifacts, in a purely performative celebration of ‘resistance,’ in order to *destroy them*” (*Pascalian Meditations* 108). Kanye West’s ability to speak critically about symbolic violence in America not as an objective observer but as a participant within it presents therefore the beginnings of a poignant political message—even if West claims not to be political.¹¹

While many hip-hop scholars have had the wisdom to look beyond the hype of violence and question where this aggression comes from, physical violence remains central to the dominant debate about hip hop. The hope within this paper is not that cultural critics will now ignore physical violence but that this debate will take on a more nuanced and informed set of concerns. Physical violence is sad, destructive, and dangerous in society but it has come to overshadow a much more pervasive form of power that theoreticians like Bourdieu have worked tirelessly to understand. To ignore the symbolic violence that oozes from the pores of hip hop would be a great injustice.

McWhorter is right to assert that this form of expression alone will not save anyone’s America. But it may provide a way of addressing systemic problems that go unacknowledged and trigger a conversation which would not otherwise have taken place. This spark is one of the benefits of listening critically to artists like Kanye West, who provide insights into social institutions that can be missed in certain academic environments. As the *Time* reviewer concludes, West “knows a few things they don’t teach at Harvard” (Tyranigel, “5 CDs” 70).

Notes

- [1] This article blends many genres by appearing in the “pop/jazz” section of the newspaper and claiming that “rap” is now “king in rock clubs” (Palmer C4).
- [2] This is not to say physical violence disappears. One only has to think of the continued police presence at hip-hop concerts (Rose, *Black Noise*) to realize the threat of physical violence

- is still present—even though symbolic violence is the preferred method of the state. As Bourdieu argues, “The police recalls by its existence the extralegal violence on which the legal order is based” (*Pascalian Meditations* 95).
- [3] Milk later directed “Jesus Walks” (2004) and “Touch the Sky” (2005). All videos can be viewed at *kanyeuniversity.com*.
- [4] Of course, West had abandoned school long before Obama was named the country’s forty-fourth president—which will be an important section of new history textbooks—but even this event remains one of few examples in the dominant culture to which young African-Americans can look for personifications of perseverance, success, and accomplishment.
- [5] Between these albums numerous mix tapes appeared, including *Freshman Adjustment* (2005) and *Can’t Tell Me Nothing* (2007).
- [6] For more recent critiques of reproduction in the North American education system, see Aronowitz and Giroux; Giroux; hooks, *Teaching Community*; Morrow and Torres; Muzzatti and Samarco.
- [7] In *Better Dayz* (2002), 2Pac raps “The promise of a better tomorrow ain’t never reached me/Plus my teachers was too petrified in class to teach me.” Similarly, in *Blue Print 3* (2009), Jay-Z raps “I felt so inspired by what the teacher said/Said I’d either be dead or be a reefer head . . . I’ll teach his ass.” There are numerous examples of these kinds of stories in hip hop.
- [8] West incorporates this disjunction between the promises of education and the all-too-often lived reality in “School Spirit Skit” (2004): “So you finish college and it’s wonderful. If you continue to work at the Gap, after several interviews [. . .] if you kiss enough ass [. . .] you get to take messages for the secretary, who never went to college; she’s actually the boss’s niece!”
- [9] “Guerrilla Monsoon Rap” is on Talib Kweli’s *Quality* (2002) and features West as producer and contributor.
- [10] This song samples Orange Krush’s “Action” (1982). The original song features the line “Save your breath. You can’t tell me nothing,” which has clearly been a prominent sentiment with West.
- [11] In “Interviews,” a song West released on the internet prior to *Graduation*, he talks about being placed in the role of a political commentator after his comments on Hurricane Katrina—a role in which he felt uncomfortable. He raps: “I’m not really political . . . I’m emotional. I’m social. I’m an artist . . . I would never go on *Politically Incorrect* because I don’t know about politics like that. I just know about people.”

Works Cited

- “18 Arrested after Rap Concert.” *The New York Times*, 21 July 1986: B3. Print.
- Alridge, Derrick P. “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas.” *Journal of African American History* 90.3 (2005): 226–52. Print.
- Aronowitz, Stanley and Henry A. Giroux. *Education Still under Siege*. 2nd edn. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993. Print.
- Asante, M. K., Jr. *It’s Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2008. Print.
- Baker, Jr., Houston A. *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.
- Binder, Amy. “Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music.” *American Sociological Review* 58.6 (1993): 753–67. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986. Print.
- . *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1990. Print.
- . “Outcasts on the Inside.” *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. By Pierre Bourdieu et al. Trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999. 421–26. Print.

- . *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. 1977. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- . *Pascalian Meditations*. Trans. Richard Nice. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Trans. Richard Nice. 1977. London: Sage, 2000. Print.
- Chastagner, Claude. "The Parents' Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship." *Popular Music* 18.2 (1999): 179–92. Print.
- Chen, Meng-Jinn et al. "Music, Substance Use, and Aggression." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 67.3 (2006): 373–81. Print.
- Ciccariello-Maher, George. "A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness." *Journal of Black Studies* 39.3 (2009): 371–401. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1986. Print.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has The Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005. Print.
- . "Is Hip-Hop Dead?" *Ebony*, June 2007: 60–61. Print.
- . *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007. Print.
- Giroux, Henry A. *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies." *Rethinking Marxism* 5.1 (1992): 10–18. Print.
- . "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage, 2003. 223–90. Print.
- . "Universities, Intellectuals and Multitude." *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments against Neoliberal Globalization*. Ed. Mark Coté, Richard J. F. Day and Greig de Peuter. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007. 108–28. Print.
- Hess, Mickey. *Is Hip Hop Dead? The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Jay-Z. "Intro." *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. By Michael Eric Dyson. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007. ix–xii. Print.
- Jeffery, Simon. "Barack Obama's Debt to Sam Cooke." *The Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2008. Web. 24 Nov. 2009.
- Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. Print.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998. Print.
- Kerr, Peter. "7 Youths Injured in Concert Fights." *The New York Times*, 28 Dec. 1985: 28. Print.
- Kitterman, John. "'The College Dropout' Speaks on Campuses." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51.28 (2005): B5. Print.
- Mahiri, Jabari and Conner Erin. "Black Youth Violence has a Bad Rap." *Journal of Social Issues* 59.1 (2003): 121–40. Print.
- May, Clifford. "On L.I., Fights Follow a Film on Rap Music." *The New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1985: B1. Print.
- McWhorter, John. *All about the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*. New York: Gotham Books, 2008. Print.
- . *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. New York: The Free Press, 2000. Print.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Morrow, Raymond Allen and Carlos Alberto Torres. *Social Theory and Education: A Critique of Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995. Print.
- Muzzatti, Stephen L. and Vincent C. Samarco, eds. *Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Class, Identity, and the Working Class Experience in Academe*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print.
- Nas. "Outro." *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. By Michael Eric Dyson. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007. 153–56. Print.

- Palmer, Robert. "'The Message' is that 'Rap' is now King in Rock Clubs." *The New York Times*, 3 Sept. 1982: C4. Print.
- Rodman, Gilbert B. "Race . . . and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity." *Popular Communication* 4.2 (2006): 95–121. Print.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1994. Print.
- . *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. Print.
- Serpick, Evan. "5 Reasons Hip-Hop Is Dead." *Rolling Stone* 1035 (2007): 74. Print.
- Squires, Catherine R. et al. "Evaluating Agency and Responsibility in Gendered Violence: African American Youth Talk about Violence and Hip Hop." *Sex Roles* 55.11–12 (2006): 725–37. Print.
- Touré. "Head of the Class." *Rolling Stone*, 29 Apr. 2004: 52–54. Print.
- Tyrangiel, Josh. "5 CDs Worth Your Time." *Time*, 28 Feb. 2005: 70. Print.
- . "Why You Can't Ignore Kanye." *Time*, 29 Aug. 2005: 32–39. Print.
- Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Abingdon: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- West, Cornel. *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*. New York: Smiley Books, 2008. Print.
- . "The New Cultural Politics of Difference." *The Cornel West Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999. 119–39. Print.
- . "On My Intellectual Vocation." *The Cornel West Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999. 19–33. Print.
- . *Race Matters*. New York: Beacon Press, 2001. Print.
- West, Kanye. "Foreword." *Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*. By Donda West and Karen Hunter. New York: Pocket Books, 2007. ix–x. Print.
- West, Donda and Karen Hunter. *Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*. New York: Pocket Books, 2007. Print.

Discography

- 2Pac. *Better Dayz*. Interscope Records 0694970702, 2002.
- Boogie Down Productions. *Edutainment*. Jive CHIP 100, 1990.
- Chi-Lites. *The Homely Girl / I Never Had It So Good*. Brunswick B 55505, 1973.
- Cooke, Sam. *Shake / A Change is Gonna Come*. RCA Victor 47-8486, 1964.
- Daft Punk. *Harder Better Faster Stronger*. Virgin VSTX1822, 2001.
- Dead Prez. *Let's Get Free*. Loud Records 496864 2, 2000.
- Dr. Dre. *2001*. Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records 606949082321, 1999.
- Franklin, Aretha. *Spirit in the Dark*. Rhino Records R17525, 1970.
- Gaye, Marvin. *You Sure Love to Ball*. Motown TMGLTD 41, 1973.
- Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. *I Miss You*. Philadelphia International Records ZS7 3516, 1972.
- Jay-Z. *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia*. Roc-A-Fella Records 548 203-2, 2000.
- . *The Blueprint 3*. RocNation 7567-89586-6, 2009.
- Kay-Gee's. *Burn Me Up*. De-Lite Records DSR-9510, 1979.
- Kweli, Talib. *Quality*. Rawkus 088 113 048-2, 2002.
- Mayfield, Curtis. *Curtis*. Buddah Records 2318 015, 2318015, 1970.
- Midler, Bette. *Songs for the New Depression*. Atlantic ATL 50 212, 1976.
- NWA. *Straight Outta Compton*. 4th & Broadway/Island Records BRCD 534, 842 442-2, 1988.
- Orange Krush. *Action*. Mercury MDS 4018, 1982.
- West, Kanye. *The College Dropout*. Roc-A-Fella Records 9862061, 2004.
- . *Freshman Adjustment*. Chi Town Gettin' Down Inc. CTGD 8470, 2005.
- . *Late Registration*. Roc-A-Fella Records 9885153, 2005.
- . *Can't Tell Me Nothing*. Unity Records XCES 707, 2007.
- . *Graduation*. Roc-A-Fella Records 1745502, 2007.