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HANGING FROM THE POPLAR TREE: KANYE WEST AND RACISM IN  
INTERNET FOLKLORE

by

Magen Erin Olsen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

Hanging from the Poplar Tree: Kanye West and Racism in Internet Folklore

by

Magen Erin Olsen, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Lisa Gabbert  
Department: English

Folk ideas regarding African-Americans in nineteenth century America fueled racially charged stereotypes that served to promote segregation into the 1960s. Despite the belief of many Americans that the Civil Rights movement has ushered in an era of “postracism,” artifacts of digital culture prove that racism is still prevalent in American culture. Members of online social groups spread rumors and memes of popular African-American figures to propagate old racist stereotypes and spread conspiracy rumors among younger audiences.

Folklorists Bill Ellis, Gary Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincente, and Patricia Turner provided foundational scholarship on rumors, conspiracy theories, and how they divide ethnic groups in wider American culture. This paper applies their works to an analysis of several memes and YouTube videos regarding Kanye West, an African-American rapper. It also considers how stereotypes of African-Americans as discussed in Marlon Riggs’ documentary *Ethnic Notions* still hold influence over current American attitudes towards African-Americans in the broader culture.

(69 Pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Hanging in the Poplar Tree: Kanye West and Racism in Internet Folklore

Magen Erin Olsen

Americans have long used rumor, conspiracy theories, and humor to socially divide Americans based on ethnicity. Despite the positive outcomes of the Civil Rights era and the efforts of socially conscious Americans to develop a more inclusive society, racist folk ideas dating are still found in pockets of modern culture. This thesis will explore the way that racism persists in memes and YouTube videos featuring Kanye West, an African-American rapper. It also discusses the use of racist stereotypes through history and the accusations against African-American celebrities as members of conspiratorial groups. This paper illustrates how Americans continue to unknowingly perpetuate racist ideas in digital culture.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in Kanye West as a person was previously nonexistent and based on little more than a passing awareness that he was often the subject of Internet folklore. I did, however, have an interest in celebrity culture as a phenomenon to be studied from a folklorist's lens. I wanted to write about how celebrities manipulate folklore to serve their own motives, but after digging deeper into Kanye West lore I found that the conversation between celebrities and fans is far more complicated. The resulting narrative suggests many things about West and his fans or detractors, but the theme of racism stood out.

For this project I want to acknowledge the ever-patient Dr. Lisa Gabbert, who has mentored me through the past few years. She has put in a great amount of time in reading drafts upon drafts, and has contributed research for this paper. She has challenged my thinking and has taught me how to focus even when I want to tackle the bigger fish. I've been deeply humbled by her input and willingness to stick through this with me.

I also want to acknowledge Drs. Christine Cooper-Rompato and Lynne McNeill as the two other sitting members of my thesis committee. Christine for helping me keep track of goals and creating deadlines, and Lynne for her contagious enthusiasm for the craft. I couldn't have asked for a more well-rounded group of people to help mold these ideas that I've been thinking about for over a year.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my brother Eric for introducing me to Kanye West's music. It's been on repeat several times in the writing of this thesis.

Magen Erin Olsen

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



Figure 1 I Am A God (memegenerator.net/instance/53462675)

Images of superstar rapper Kanye West accompanied by captions declaring him to be a god are commonplace in Internet culture. Memes such as the one above and YouTube videos serve as means of transmission for old cultural worldviews, or folk ideas (Dundes 1971), that predate the internet. In this case, the folk idea that seems to motivate the sharing of folklore revolving around West are racist ones that are inherent in American culture. This thesis will examine several examples of this folklore in order to argue that the Internet is a tool by which racist rumors, jokes, and conspiracy theories are resurging and driving the continuation of bigotry in the United States.

The meme above is derived from a 2013 interview with the BBC's Zane Lowe, in which West talked about why he had the habit of referring to himself as a god. The

interview was meant to promote West's album *Yeezus* (West 2013), in which West included a track titled "I am a God" (West 2013). West's explanation of himself as "a god" in the interview was met by implied criticism in several memes and rumors, some of which will be examined in this thesis. In the interview, West said,

We got this new thing called "classism." It's racism's cousin. This is what we do to hold people back... and we got this other thing that's also been working for a long time that you don't have to be racist anymore. It's called "self-hate." It works on itself. It's like the real estate of racism, where... someone comes up and says something like, "I am a god," everybody says, "Who does he think he is?" I just told you who I thought I was! A god... Would it have been better if I had a song that said, "I am a Nigger," or... "I am a Gangster," or... "I am a Pimp?" All those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me. (West 2013)

The passion with which West delivered this clarification shows his frustration with the way that critics misunderstand the context of his statements. His declaration of godhood reflects his personal philosophy rather than a claim to power. West's point that framing himself as a "gangster" or "pimp" would be acceptable suggests that he believes that his critics dismiss him because of implicit racism. West suggests that his confidence is perceived as a threat to the structure of power driven by a dominantly white population.

According to his own personal narrative, West is an innovative artist in Hollywood and the music industry. Originally a college dropout who started mixing in the Chicago music scene, West has proven himself as a prodigy poet, musician, and entrepreneur. Calling himself a god is West's effort to embrace his own success and show pride in his work. He doesn't intend to demean anyone else's success by his self-praise, a motivation called into question by others, including interviewer Zane Lowe; rather West insists that anyone can be something other than what society deems acceptable for them.

West's BBC interview suggests that racism is still prevalent in American society. Scholarship on race in the twenty-first century fully supports this statement. According to scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley Doane, the overt racism of the pre-Civil Rights era has given way in the modern world to a covert brand of racism called "color-blind racism," which whites use to assert their stances against racism while simultaneously defending traditionally racist views. Color-blind racism is a mode of bigotry that depends on the idea that discrimination has disappeared and that minority groups remain impoverished or segregated by their own actions instead of any institutional impedance (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000, Bonilla-Silva 2002). Doane points out that "the contested nature of 'racism' plays a significant role in recasting the politics of race and in reproducing white hegemony" (Doane 2006:267). He suggests that the idea of postracism, or the theory that society has moved beyond racism, is really a projection of color-blind racism because it asserts that American culture has successfully incorporated diversity and ignores the fact that racial minorities are consistently underprivileged and underrepresented in American culture and society.

One could argue that West is a victim of color-blind racism because his personal narrative largely has been contested using memes and other forms of digital culture, such as the ones studied for this paper. These alternative narratives and ideas suggest that Kanye West is an arrogant man who makes it his business to prey on his competition in the entertainment industry. They imply that West is undeserving of his wealth and only finds success by playing puppet to a secret society bent on brainwashing American youths to accept a New World Order. The more radical ideas state that he's antichristian, idolatrous, and not above sacrificing his family members to get what he wants. These

narratives attack West on his personality, rather than on race directly, but this is exactly how color-blind racism operates: that is, by stating that “the problem” is something other than race. I suggest that many anti-Kanye West memes are a form of color-blind racism and exist to reinforce stereotypes about Black people and ensure white superiority.

There is no doubt that West is a controversial figure who provokes people. Famous for once saying that his greatest regret was not being able to witness his own performances (*VH1 Storytellers* 2009), West makes it clear that he regards himself as an influential historical figure comparable to Jesus Christ by dubbing himself “Yeezus,” which is an obvious play on the name Jesus. He also has a habit of insulting other celebrities in both social media and in his lyrics, and his business demands are often perceived as bizarre and self-inflating. Many people respond negatively to his actions, and it seems that it is West’s apparent arrogance that drives some of these alternative narratives. However, an investigation into the folklore surrounding Kanye West shows something more sinister.

Bruce Jackson writes that “Narrative is one of the ways we apply order to [an] unimaginable overabundance of information” (Jackson 2007:4). In constructing a narrative, people give meaning to events, but they are also transmitting information that is constructed to suit the needs of other people. Most events and experiences are private, allowing those who experience them first hand to reconstruct them in a narrative as needed. In the case of celebrities, however, personal experiences are more public and susceptible to public interpretation and use. Thus, when West expresses his confidence in a particular way, such as claiming to be a god, others may use that information in alternative ways. The audience may mock, criticize, or use the statement as an example to justify

ideology. Many of the folk responses to West embody, mask, and encode older, racist ideas.

Early in the development of the Internet as a cultural platform, theorists suggested that the Internet presented an opportunity to encourage cross-cultural interaction. Trevor Blank writes, “The Internet has altered established notions of social identity, which has made stigmatizing constraints such as gender and race less relevant than they are in the physical world” (Blank 2009:8). Websites like 4Chan and Reddit, for example, are popular websites where users remain fairly anonymous insofar as age, gender, and race are concerned. Without the presence of identity markers such as skin color or gender, the Internet was idealistically envisioned as a place of total egalitarianism. Instead of race, gender, and class, users instead were identified as animated, customizable characters, .gifs of well-known characters from film and TV, or even quotes. The Internet was imagined as a place where people would be judged based on ideas rather than looks on blog or forum sites such as Tumblr. Yet, as more recent scholarship has shown, the Internet is shaped by traditional identity markers such as race, gender, and class. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have encouraged users to share their real-life identities. Activist and social justice movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter, are spawned through Twitter and their ideas are spread by means of YouTube.

Unfortunately racism and bigotry also continue to exist in online environments. Given the diversity found online, it is no surprise that views on race have followed from the real world to the digital world. White nationalism is experiencing a surge in popularity as new groups are being formed that speak to disaffected white Millennials

(Yandoli 2013). These groups use predictable arguments to attack minorities, as well as overtly racist insults, stereotyping, and threats. Sociologist Jessie Daniels writes,

The supposed invisibility online and the “decoupling [of] identity from any analogical relation to the visible [body]” rests in part on an assumption that the Internet is an exclusively text-based medium in which racial identity is not visible. While that may have been true at one point in time or may be true today in certain online contexts, it does not adequately describe the majority of life online now. (Daniels 2009:18-9)

Daniels asserts that the Internet is not a safe space for minority voices. She uses the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi white supremacist groups as examples of communities who use the Internet to project old racist attitudes (2009: 5-8). Members of these groups, and other groups like them, launch cyber-bullying campaigns against minorities on social media platforms. These attitudes go unchecked because governments are still unsure how far they may extend their influence to protect other users from online hate speech.

Many ideas about race are shared through social networks, videos, and blogs. New genres, memes among them, have appeared, variations of which are transmitted (Blank and Howard 2013:178-9) and transcend the digital sphere into the real world. In other words, racist and sexist ideologies emerge on the Internet, reenter the public sphere, and influence social interactions in the real world. Young people prove to be particularly susceptible to these ideas. Because they engage with culture most through a digital means, they are more likely to come across prejudices more often than older adults. They have responded to online bigotry by protest in the real world. Movements like #GamerGate and #BlackLivesMatter are born online and used to affect real world politics. They also show how polarized American Millennials are over social justice issues.

Millennials tend to adopt racist behaviors in the form of “hipster racism.” This form of racism uses racist stereotypes, terminology, and ideology in a manner that is intended to be ironic or humorous (Murphy 2013: 17). The term was coined by blogger Carmen Van Kerckhove in 2005 in response to hipsters appropriating cultural artifacts of minorities to absolve themselves of racist accusations (Van Kerckhove 2006). White Millennials, she claims, tend to believe in a postracist era and they use this idea to justify a range of behaviors from the appropriation of hip-hop culture to Jim Crow-like behaviors such as holding blackface parties and calling each other “nigger” regardless of race. These behaviors are often dismissed as harmless because they are not performed with the intent to offend or oppress minorities, and they supposedly signify a “transcendence” of racism. Millennials also share racially-charged materials online via memes, videos, rumors, and jokes. While they don’t directly incite violence against the minorities they exploit, these artifacts imply to minorities that they are unsafe and that the community sharing them harbor more harmful views than they let on. The fact that these materials and behaviors exist both offline and online, and that they are perceived by some people as being “postracist,” is evidence of both color-blind and hipster racism.

Alan Dundes, writing about folklore to enforce institutional identity and ideology within cultures, suggests that the transmission of ideology happens because the purpose of folklore is to act as a structural means to transmit folk ideas and help enforce cultural or group identity. He writes, “Folk ideas would not constitute a genre of folklore but rather would be expressed in a great variety of different genres” (Dundes 1971:95). While genres may be clearly defined, the folk ideas that underlie a particular genre can’t be as clearly defined or may never be fully divulged (Dundes 1971:96). I argue that the

alternative folk narratives about West found on the Internet are not motivated by any worldview directly related to West's personal worldview, but are motivated by an older, racist worldview consisting of a number of folk ideas in which African-Americans are perceived as threats to white people. The most prominent folk idea is that whites are more intelligent and deserving than Blacks, and this idea is expressed in memes and videos by mocking West's character and dismissing his personal philosophy. This stereotyping is a folk idea, although it would be better called a "folk fallacy" (Dundes 1971:101). Such fallacies are demonstrably false, yet they are perpetuated through folklore at the expense of outsiders and minorities.

To understand how racist folk ideas are perpetuated through the sharing of Kanye West folklore, it is necessary to understand the official narrative that this folklore is responding to. Therefore, in the next section I will summarize the narrative of West's life that he has created. Next, I briefly summarize of some of the folklore that resulted, and then I document and analyze two of pieces of Kanye folklore specifically. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the value of this study.



## CHAPTER 2

### NARRATIVE ACCORDING TO KANYE WEST

In the hip-hop community, Kanye West stands out as something of an enigma. As Afro-centric music genres, hip-hop and rap emerged in the late 1970s out of the impoverished African-American neighborhoods of America's largest metropolitan cities to greatly impact the music industry into the twenty-first century. The cultures coming out of these neighborhoods inform the lyrics written by rap artists themselves. Thematically, rap lyrics are often centered on personal experience, expressions of loyalty to the artist's community, or even social commentary. The language used is well known for being vulgar, but scholars believe vulgar languages is more reflective of the unique dialects of urban centers (Light 2016).

West is not a stranger to this culture, but his background is far removed from African-American street culture. Both of West's parents were well educated; his father Ray worked as a photojournalist, is a former member of the Black Panthers, and currently owns a business in Maryland. His mother, Donda West, held a PhD and was formerly the chair of the English Department at Chicago State University. Though they divorced when their son was three, Ray and Donda shared custody. During the school year, West lived with his mother in the South Shores neighborhood of Chicago (MTV.com). The area is well known for its status as an upper-middle class and primarily African-American neighborhood, and former residents include First Lady Michelle Obama.

West's education was no less privileged. As a teenager he spent a year in China where his mother taught as a visiting professor at Nanjing University. Once back in Chicago, he graduated from a prestigious high school for gifted students. According to

MTV.com, from a young age West was involved in the arts and humanities and received a scholarship to study English at Chicago State University. This ended after a year, however, when he dropped out to pursue a career in music (MTV.com).

Starting out in the local hip-hop scene in Chicago, West made connections that extended to major artists, producers, and eventually labels. He found a mentor in prominent rap artist and music producer Jay Z, who co-produced West's first album *The College Dropout*, which was released in 2004 (West 2004). This album was followed by two other albums that were about his life after leaving school; *Late Registration* was released in 2005 (West 2005), and *Graduation* hit shelves in 2007 (West 2007).

West's lyrical prowess on his first three albums garnered critical acclaim, and he was quickly picked up by more established artists for collaborative works, including Jamie Foxx, Jay Z, and Lupe Fiasco. As a pop culture icon of the day, West was known for bright pink polo shirts and shuttered sunglasses, the latter being known even today as "Kanye glasses." He was also known, at least in Hollywood, for being a provocateur (MTV.com). Upon losing the nomination for Best New Artist to country singer Gretchen Wilson at the 2004 American Music Awards, West stormed out of the auditorium and complained to the press that he deserved the award more (Manmade Multimedia 2009). Later, in his speech for receiving Best Rap Album at the 2005 Grammys, West referenced this episode saying, "Everybody wants to know what I would do if I didn't win. I guess we'll never know" (TheOkankayuza 2011), suggesting that the fact that he didn't lose shouldn't matter, but that he knew he may have caused a scene.

The controversy surrounding West did not enter into mainstream awareness until later in 2005 during a televised charity drive held to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina.

In a segment hosted with Saturday Night Live star Mike Myers, West chose to ignore the prepared script and expressed his frustration with the media's portrayal of African-American victims still trapped in New Orleans by his promise to donate as much money as possible. West further claimed that U.S. soldiers being sent into New Orleans were given permission to shoot African-Americans. This claim was still in its infancy at the time of the telethon, but the idea has since been corroborated by witnesses, including famed sniper Chris Kyle, who said he was sent to New Orleans specifically to kill looters. Despite these testimonies, no other evidence came to light, and the story became an urban legend. West also expressed his belief that the CIA was behind the AIDs crisis among African-Americans, a belief that Pat Turner discusses as being popular within African-American culture (Turner 1993). West is keenly aware of and shares in the belief that the government endangers ethnic minorities. While his monologue during the telethon was at times difficult to follow, it was clear that West believed that the aftermath of Katrina was a calculated disaster conceived by the U.S. government. Before the cameras cut to another actor, West made the statement, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (Shockroc1 2006).

Footage of West's telethon outburst went viral and helped to fuel negative press against George W. Bush. Bush has since said that the moment was the most embarrassing of his presidential career: "It's one thing to say, 'I don't appreciate the way he's handling his business.' It's another thing to say 'This man's a racist.' I resent it. It's not true, and it was one of the most disgusting moments of my presidency" (nsotd2 2010). As conservatives from Texas, the Bush family represents the traditional values of conservative white Americans. West's statement not only reflected poorly on Bush, but

also on Bush's family and other white conservatives. People who didn't know West as a rap artist were beginning to recognize him for his controversial and political statements and actions. West eventually apologized for his comments about President Bush, but the incident was only a precursor of more controversial things to come.

2007 through 2009 were landmark years for the formation of both the official West narrative and the counter folk narratives about him. In late 2008, West's fourth studio album was released under the title *808s and Heartbreak* (West 2008). It would be the official end of West's era as a college dropout-turned-rapper, and a new era focusing on synthesizing his rap background with experimental pop music. Critics loved the album, which was called one of the greatest albums of all time by music critics, and sales indicated a growing fan base (Music Times 2014).

The album's themes and sound reflected the change in West's state of mind and his personality in the year prior to its release. In November of 2007, Donda West, his mother, died suddenly and mysteriously following a routine plastic surgery (Riotta 2016). The loss was especially hard on West, who spent more of his childhood with his mother than with his father. Donda West left academia to serve as her son's manager, and was influential in the writing of his lyrics. In her memory, West founded his company DONDA, which is geared toward utilizing and inspiring creativity and innovative projects. Current projects include short films, art shows, fashion, and a recently announced video game based on her memory (Pasori 2014).

In the context of tragedy and a groundbreaking album, West became quite famous. West's new-found fame brought with it an onslaught of paparazzi, who are well known to provoke controversial encounters with celebrities. In 2008, entertainment news

site TMZ reported that West had been arrested for smashing a paparazzo's camera (TMZ 2014). The altercation was caught on video. West was shown yelling and cursing at paparazzi, but these incidents didn't seem anything out of the ordinary for a controversial celebrity. Rather it was West's artistic choices, his behavior, and his choice of words in official interviews that fueled counter folk narratives.

In 2006 West posed as Jesus Christ for the cover of *Rolling Stone*, which outraged many fundamentalist Christians. Some Christians demanded an apology and called West a blasphemer and Satan worshipper (BG News 2006). It was in 2009, however, that the tension broke. In September of that year Taylor Swift was the youngest nominee for the MTV Video Music Awards category for Best Female Video. Competing against older and more experienced artists, Beyoncé Knowles among them, Swift wasn't expected to win. When she did, the shock on her face was apparent as she made her way on stage. Before she could make it too far into her acceptance speech, West also came to the stage and took Swift's microphone from her and said, "Yo Taylor, I'm really happy for you, Imma let you finish but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time... one of the best videos of all time" (ArtisanNewsService 2009). West was booed offstage, and the cameras panned to Knowles' face in the audience. The music veteran was shocked by West's actions based on her expression of surprise as West came to her defense. West later apologized for interrupting, and Swift even praised West as a respectable artist, but it would not be the last time this would happen. Throughout West's career, he has often come to the defense of other African-American artists, likely because of his desire to promote racial equality in entertainment. These actions, however, are often used against him in counter narratives that circulate online.

West continued to make waves in Hollywood. He aligned himself with reality television royalty by marrying Kim Kardashian, whose family has been featured in their own series since 2007. West also keeps busy in the studio and has released three more solo studio albums: *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* was released in 2010 (West 2010) followed by the controversial but critically acclaimed *Yeezus* in 2013 (West 2013). His most recent album, *The Life of Pablo* (West 2016), was released in 2016.

West is well known also for his fashion forwardness and entrepreneurial endeavors. In 2015, West began showing samples from his fashion line titled “Yeezy.” Collaborating on the project with athletics-wear company ADIDAS, West’s Yeezy line has not been immune to his touch for controversy. For its most recent show, called “Yeezy Season 3” at Madison Square Gardens, West required his ethnically diverse cast of hundreds of models to follow a very strict set of guidelines which included instructions to not smile, not talk, not make slow or fast movements, and not pose (Chen 2016). Models were strategically placed on the stage to give the illusion that they were refugees standing in an over-packed refugee camp. Tracks from *The Life of Pablo* accompanied the show (Complex News 2016). At the end of the event, West revealed a teaser trailer for the company DONDA’s video game project based on the death of West’s mother. The project was set to be released in late 2016, but no updates have been released at time of writing (Game Station 2016). The event served to bring awareness in an artistic and humanizing way to the refugee crisis facing Western countries. West’s choice to use only ethnically diverse models in an untraditional setting seemed to also project West’s personal political beliefs regarding race and immigration policies.

Instead of discussing the political overtones of West's fashion show, the media chose instead to focus on what West was saying in the track "Famous," which was played at the fashion show. At the beginning of the track West makes a jab at Taylor Swift once again saying, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex. Why? I made that bitch famous" (*The Life of Pablo* 2016). After the show, Twitter users speculated about the meaning of the lyrics, prompting the media to investigate and interview West and Swift. West defended his lyrics, claiming that calling someone a "bitch" in rap lyrics is a sign of respect and that he asked Swift for permission to use the lyric. Swift responded by calling the lyric misogynistic and stated that she knew nothing of it until it aired at West's fashion show (Connolly 2016). She made subtle reference again to this at the 2016 Grammy Awards, where she won for Album of the Year: "There are going to be people along the way who will try to undercut your success, or take credit for... your fame, but if... you don't let those people sidetrack you, someday when you get where you're going, you'll look around and you will know that it was you... who put you there" (CBS 2016).

It's clear that West sees himself as a political figure as well as an artist. He seizes opportunities to make art political, as he did in his fashion show by humanizing the current refugee situation. West has also announced his intent to run for the presidency in the year 2020. When asked about her husband's announcement on the Ellen DeGeneres show, Kim Kardashian responded that she believed he was serious (TheEllenShow 2015). While it's still too early to know how West's fashion show, video game, or even his impending presidential campaign will influence the folk narratives surrounding him, what can be said is that the impact of these events in pop culture has been magnified in the related folklore circulating online. The controversy between West and Swift has not been

forgotten by the public. References to the 2009 incident continue to be made both by millennials and celebrities. At the 2015 Grammy Awards, as the artist Beck accepted his award for Album of the Year, West jumped on stage but was booed off before he could take the mic. This time the audience laughed, but after the ceremony West expressed his frustration at Beyoncé's loss and stated that he thought Beck (who has had an influential presence in the industry since the 1980s) should have respected true artistry and given the award to Beyoncé (HollywireTV 2015).

West's behavior comes across as arrogant to audiences, but his intention to engage in activism on behalf of Black artists seems warranted considering the recent controversies regarding ethnic representation in Hollywood. These issues revolve around the lack of ethnic representation in film and recognition of performances by people of color. In an age when equality should be universal, African-American performers are still overlooked for recognition despite their major contributions to pop culture. Only one African-American woman and four men have won Academy Awards for leading roles as of 2016. African-American musicians typically only win awards for music that is typified as "black" music, such as rap, hip hop, and R&B, but even these category wins are usually granted to white artists who identify as hip hop or rap artists. The white rapper Eminem, for example, has won Best Rap Album at the Grammys six times—more than any other rapper in the industry. West seems to see himself as a defender of African-American interests.

Because West is such a polarizing figure—being both successful and celebrated yet controversial—the counter-narratives that have built up around him are almost as popular as his own official narrative. Accusations of Illuminati affiliation, for example,



began to circulate on YouTube around the time of West's interruption of Taylor Swift at the 2009 VMAs. The event was also a catalyst for the invention of a new meme, which I discuss below, which remains popular today. Both memes and videos have played off aspects of West's personal public narrative, such as his marriage, personal statements, artistic choices, and the death of his mother. Before this paper can review what these traditions are saying, it needs to establish the variations, themes, and motifs of these traditions.

### CHAPTER 3

#### OVERVIEW OF KANYE WEST FOLKLORE

Perhaps no other genre is as popular on the internet, or as appropriately digital, as the meme. The internet meme draws on the idea of the meme as studied in the field of memetics, a discipline inspired by Richard Dawkins and his coinage of the word “meme,” which he based on the concept of the gene in biology. According to this idea, a meme is a particle upon which culture is built, just as a gene is a particle holding the information necessary to the foundation of all biology (Dawkins 1989). While this definition suits as an adequate foundation for understanding Internet memes, the genre has evolved and is studied quite differently by folklorists and pop culture scholars.

Limor Shifman has acknowledged the significance of memetics in the past, but proposes a new way of studying memes. She suggests defining an Internet meme as “a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics...created with awareness of each other; and... were circulated, imitated, and/ or transformed via the Internet by many users*” (Shifman 2013:7-8, italics in original). Monica Foote, in her article on LiveJournal user images, suggests that memes could be considered a form of digital “folk art” (Foote 2007). Her study of these images describes a phenomenon similar to the Internet meme; that is, memes revolve around the cultural knowledge of a community, which informs the way that variation takes place in the images and how each variation is derivative of the original. The term “meme” is popularly used to refer to user-generated images that identify users as members of a certain digital folk group based on the meme’s content and mode of variation.

Internet memes are images juxtaposed with phrases and quotes. Different types of memes will share elements, such as a specific image, phrasing, sentence structures, folk rules of grammar and spelling, or words.<sup>1</sup> Internet memes usually appear online soon after an event and are shared through social media, indicating that they are created by culturally related users. They stay popular as more variations are added over the course of time, but frequently memes fall out of favor and become scarce, though reference to them will happen at times that are indirectly deemed culturally appropriate to the groups that continue to perpetuate them.

Memes may be categorized into types much like tale types that exist among folk tales. Meme types can be classified by the elements that are unique to their type. Advice Animal memes, which I discuss later, always include an image of an animal (or sometimes a person), though the captions associated may not always contain advice. Motivational memes are modeled after the look of motivational posters, but are often not actually motivational. Meme types, like tale types, may cross over each other by blending the traditional elements of at least two memes. Meme types have yet to be formally indexed, since the study of Internet memes is still new, though projects like KnowYourMeme.com have attempted to classify and document memes for several years.

Much of the folklore revolving around West can be found in the form of internet memes. Internet memes are typically images associated with a traditional phrase or caption that may be varied slightly to re-contextualize the meme for different audiences or purposes. These images and phrases may be manipulated in a variety of ways to

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this would include the popular LOL Cat meme type. In these memes, photographs of cats are framed by captions that follow a specific tradition of improper grammar and spelling. Perhaps the most popular phrase associated with this meme is "I can has cheezburger."

express humor. They are then transmitted through social media, where they inspire more variations made by other users. The most popular of West-related memes has been the “Imma Let You Finish” type, which will be discussed later, but other memes have also used West as a source of inspiration.

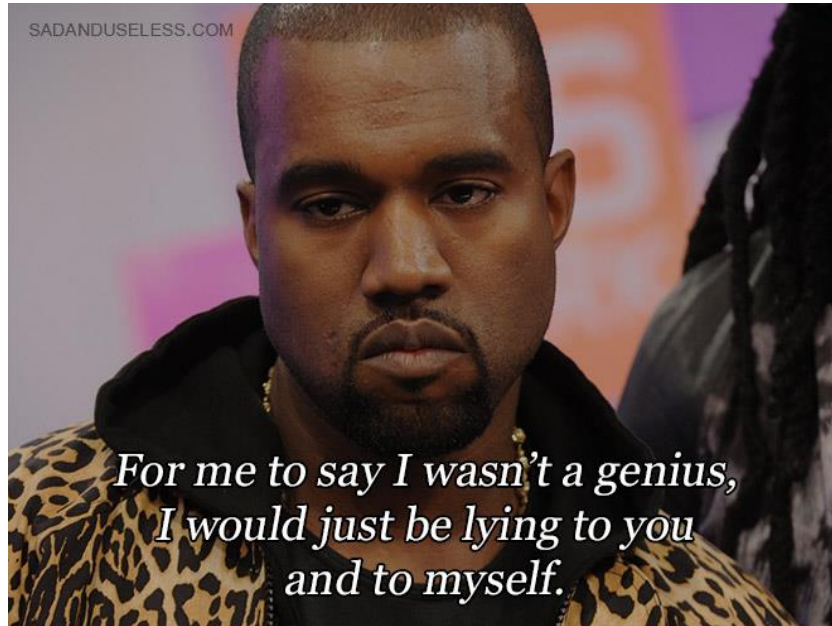


Figure 2 [imgur.com/gallery/D1niq](https://imgur.com/gallery/D1niq)

One of the most persistent memes uses a photo of West looking expressionless. Phrases associated with this meme include quotations by West that may be construed as arrogant such as, “For me to say I wasn’t a genius, I would just be lying to you and to myself,” or “I am so credible and so influential and so relevant that I will change things.” Perhaps the most popular quotation used is, “I am God’s vessel. But my greatest pain in life is that I will never be able to see myself perform live.” Other memes have used captions to ascribe actions to West, such as, “Sues compass manufacturer for using west as direction,” or “Kanye the type to fart on someone, then charge them for using his new

fragrance.” These projections make West into a caricature, and continue to perpetuate a theme of arrogance. Several of these memes use emotional captions whereas West’s expression lacks any response. “Kanye approves” and “LMAO”<sup>2</sup> are examples of these.

Memes based on West’s alter ego, Yeezus, are also popular. These memes often play off the controversial *Rolling Stone* cover where West posed as Jesus on the cross, or they manipulate a painting of Christ to look like West. Popularly associated phrases include passages of scripture or typical Christian phrases that replace “Jesus” with “Yeezus,” so instead of “WWJD” (What Would Jesus Do), a meme reads “WWYD?” (What Would Yeezus Do) The phrase has proven to be marketable, as it is sold on printed key chains and T-shirts.

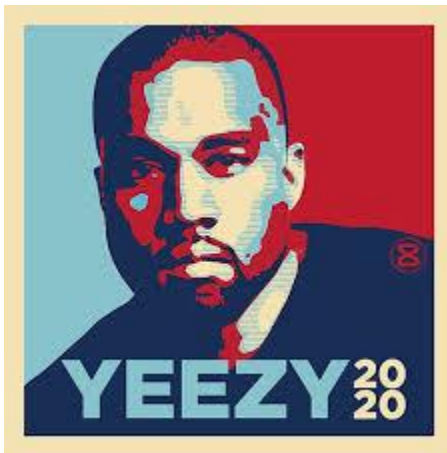


Figure 3 [kideight.com/yeezy-2020-yeezy-kanye-2020-obama-yeezytaughme/](http://kideight.com/yeezy-2020-yeezy-kanye-2020-obama-yeezytaughme/)

Another form of digital folklore emerged when West announced that he would be running for president in the 2020 election. People immediately started designing and sharing false campaign ads for him. Many of these played on Barack Obama’s first

<sup>2</sup> “LMAO” is short for “Laugh my ass off”

campaign poster, which survives as a popular meme in and of itself. The original poster of President Obama was a blue and red vectored portrait with the slogan “Hope” running at the bottom. The West versions sport a similarly styled portrait of West with the slogans “Yeezy,” “Yeezy 2020,” or “2020” at the bottom. T-shirt, poster, and sticker designs are also popular, and several YouTubers made reaction videos to his “campaign” announcement; these YouTubers often comment on the absurd state of politics when a rapper and a reality TV star feel confident enough to run for office.

Mememes are not the only form of folklore to circulate about Kanye West. Several videos parody West’s music videos. These are most often distributed via YouTube, though they are sometimes featured on television. In 2014, West’s video for the track “Bound 2” off the album *Yeezus* sparked a number of such parodies. The original video was panned by critics, since the video featured West on a motorcycle holding a naked Kim Kardashian in overly suggestive positions set to a background of stock nature footage. Parodies for the most part copied the video closely, but the humor lay in the fact that characters in the spoofs were unattractive, or they were played by straight celebrities pretending to be gay.

West’s presence on social media also inspires a great deal of the folklore surrounding him. With over twenty million subscribers to his Twitter feed, West uses the site as an artistic platform. One of his Tweets reads, “this is a stream of consciousness... twitter poetry...” (West 2016), and suggests that his use of Twitter is meant to be interpreted as being part of the artistic process. Since he chooses to word his Tweets in a vaguely poetic manner, they may come off as pompous and arrogant. Some of these tweets, such as “I hate it when I’m on a flight and I wake up with a water bottle next to

me like oh great now I gotta be responsible for this water bottle” are often quoted in memes about West.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE “IMMA LET YOU FINISH” MEME TYPE

#### Documentation

The most popular meme based on West’s behavior was inspired by the incident from the 2009 MTV VMAs. Since then, this type of meme has been dubbed “Imma Let You Finish,” “Kanye Interrupts,” or “Interrupting Kanye.” The first name specifically refers to what West said, while the second and third reference his action. The titles are interchangeable, and none are preferred over the others. Google searches for any of these titles will bring up similarly related images. The meme is structured around West’s original statement at the Grammys, when Taylor Swift was awarded a Grammy and West interrupted her speech. “Imma let you finish” is the most oft used portion of the quote and is the primary indication that a meme belongs to this tradition. Exact wording is not necessary and may be changed as the meme intersects with other meme types.

In its earliest forms, this meme uses photographs of West taken as he interrupted Swift’s award as the base image. The most popular photo is of him holding the microphone in his right hand and extending his left arm to point (presumably to the audience). Since then, images have included the Photoshopping of other subjects onto the photo of West, while others may Photoshop West onto other images. Sometimes an image of West is taken from a cartoon parody such as South Park or Family Guy (both of which have used West as a “guest character”) instead of using the photos from the MTV Video Music Awards. Other creators create images of West in the style of old video games rather than use existing images. In some very specific memes, no image of West is



used at all, though this is typically because the creator is intersecting memes, a process that I discuss later. Each image serves a different purpose and implies a different meaning for the audience.



Figure 4 Patrick Swayze (kanyegate.tumblr.com/)

One way these memes use West's quotation is to comment on current events. Five days after the VMAs aired on MTV, Patrick Swayze, an actor best known for his roles in *Dirty Dancing* and *Ghost*, died from pancreatic cancer. About a dozen or so memes popped up in response. All of them use a photograph of Swayze, which is Photoshopped to include West and a variation of his original statement at the VMAs. One example of the phrasing used to caption these memes is, "Yo Patrick, I know you just died and all and Imma let you finish, but Michael Jackson had one of the best deaths of all time!" Some of the memes compare funerals rather than deaths, but Michael Jackson always

serves as the comparison. This reflects the popularity of Jackson in American culture, and creates an intersection between Kanye West and Michael Jackson folklore, which is also prevalent online in the forms of memes and rumors. Patrick Swayze, however, is not as popular in Internet culture, which serves as a reason for West to mock him and trivialize his death. These meme variations project a lack of familiarity with the actor among younger viewers and meme creators. West is cast as a purveyor of ignorance and is disrespectful towards Patrick Swayze's death by suggesting that it wasn't as premature or sad as Jackson's. This use of West may be perceived as more acceptable and humorous because he is an African-American, and African-Americans are traditionally stereotyped by society as heartless or ignorant. It's also worth noting that in this meme, West is "interrupting" a white celebrity's death to point out the death of an African-American celebrity, just as he interrupted Taylor Swift to favor Beyoncé.

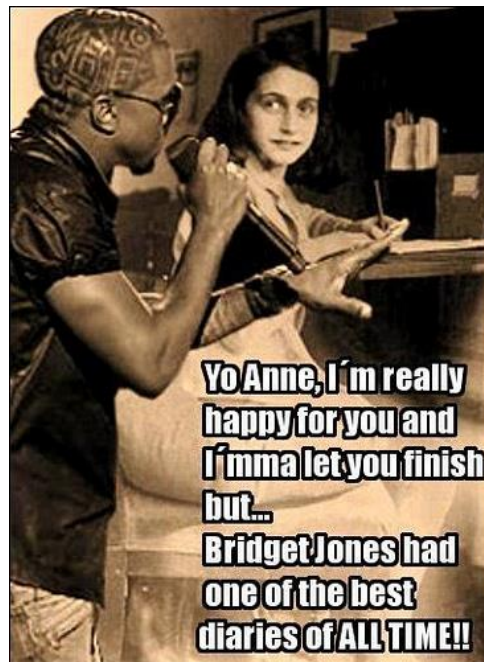


Figure 5 Anne Frank (kanyegate.tumblr.com/)

The “Imma Let You Finish” meme type is also used to trivialize important moments in history. One meme compares the diary of Anne Frank to the fictional *Bridget Jones’ Diary* by Helen Fielding. The meme uses the standard white Impact font, with West photoshopped into a photograph of Anne smiling at her desk. The photo of West from the VMAs is photoshopped onto the original of Anne with the caption, “Yo Anne, I’m really happy for you and I’mma let you finish but... Bridget Jones had one of the best diaries of ALL TIME!!” The joke here points to racist undertones both against Jews and African-Americans, but also points to generational differences. It does this by minimizing the experience of Anne Frank by comparing her to the protagonist of a popular romance novel. It also implies that younger Americans are ignorant and don’t pay attention to anything but popular culture, and suggests that African-Americans are equally ignorant. West, in this meme, represents Millennials and African-Americans, both groups that are stereotyped as ignorant.

Another use of the “Imma Let You Finish” meme type is to mock West directly. One meme plays on West’s arrogance by having several West clones photoshopped into the meme. Each of the images interrupts the former to declare his own superiority to the other clones. Another meme shows West interrupting Christ walking on water to declare that his song “Jesus Walks” was “the best example of Jesus walking of ALL TIME!”

Another subtype of this meme is the mocking of West’s hair as he styled it for the VMAs. These memes compare the swirling cut-outs in his hair to alien activity or crop circles, and portray West claiming that the circles on his head are the greatest of all time, or that they are the best proof of alien visitations. This hairstyle is common in African-American culture, whereas it is nearly unheard of in white culture, suggesting that this

memes is a subtle jab at Kanye's race as well. Another meme ignores the traditional wording and photoshops a screenshot of West and Swift to look as though he is stealing her Kentucky Fried Chicken, standing as a blatant use of popular racist stereotypes and is most revealing of the racist undertones that motivate much of Kanye folklore.

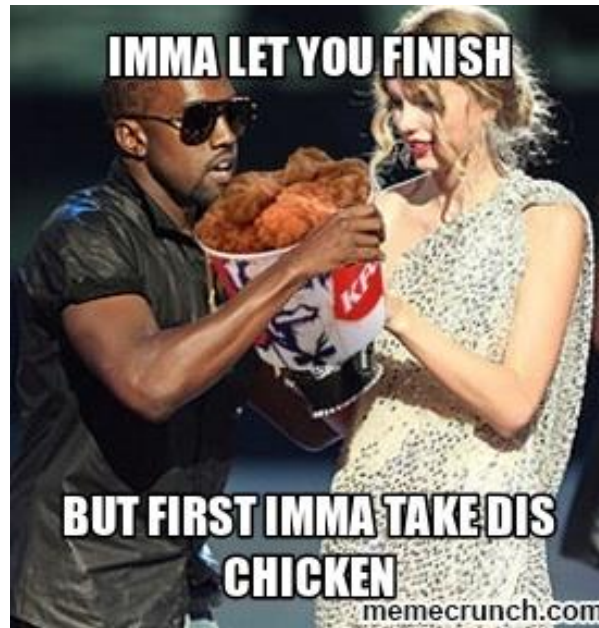


Figure 6 KFC (kanyegate.tumblr.com)

It is common practice to cross meme types. By blending two or three meme traditions together, memes introduce new dynamics that allow for further variation. The “Imma Let You Finish” meme type is most often crossed over with memes that were popular around the same time. “Joseph Ducreux/Archaic Rap” was one of these memes. Both were popular between 2009 and 2010. “Archaic Rap” is a meme inspired by eighteenth-century French painter Joseph Ducreux, who is best known for posing his figures in ways that were unconventional for the era. The meme traditionally uses his self-portrait, *Portrait de l'artiste sous les traits d'un moqueur*, as a backdrop. Early

meme creators associated the pose of Ducreux with the mannerisms of rappers and started transliterating rap lyrics to “fit” an alleged eighteenth-century context. Several of West’s lyrics are stylized in this way, but a few creators took it a step further. West’s interruption at the VMAs was incorporated into this meme several times and with several variations: “Lo! Taylor! For you I have much joy. I shall permit thee to carry on in good time, though I must enlighten the masses; m’lady Beyonce quite likely possessed the greatest moving image paired with music of all ages!” or “I am merry for thee and shall permit thee to conclude, however Lady Beyonce doth possess one of the finest musical moving pictures of the entire epoch... of the entire epoch!”



Figure 7 Archaic Rap (kanyegate.tumblr.com/)

Some meme crossovers are vague in the way they connect to West’s interruption at the VMA’s, but are nonetheless part of this general meme type. “Advice Animals” are

memes with the faces of animals centered on a color palette with a statement around the edges. Typically the statements are vague, but the expression of the animal (or sometimes a person) conveys the intended sentiment. Variation in these memes is only found in the statement itself. “Insanity Wolf” and “Courage Wolf” are two memes that incorporated Kanye West’s interruption. Both memes use an image of a wolf: “Insanity Wolf” places a black wolf with an intimidating snarl on a dark gray color palette, whereas “Courage Wolf” uses a gray wolf with a less sinister snarl on a gold palette. Both memes use captions that target West in a way that implies that the wolves depicted are stand-ins for West himself, though the actions suggested in the captions differ.<sup>3</sup> One variation of “Insanity Wolf” says “Kill Kanye... That Taylor Swift is a Nice Girl.” This meme plays into the stereotypical idea that African-American men are dangerous predators, and young white women should be defended. The wolf, in this case, should be killed. The caption is supposed to be the reaction to the wolf by the meme’s audience. “Courage Wolf” calls out West for his arrogance by saying “Steal Mic... Avenge Beyonce.” The wolf image is still meant to represent West, but the caption describes the wolf’s actions rather than the viewer’s. While both images are meant to evoke a certain response from the intended audience no matter what the associated statement says, the fact that they are both frightening wolves is striking.<sup>4</sup> Is their use meant to imply that African-American men are dangerous? Is this a nod to the predatory wolf character from fairytale traditions?

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<sup>3</sup> Further discussion of this point will be made in Section IV.B.

<sup>4</sup> “Insanity Wolf” is typically associated with a statement that suggests a degree of mental instability on the part of the character it represents. Kanye West, according to the meme, deserves to die because he acted in a way that suggests instability. “Courage Wolf” suggests that the statement it mocks someone for an act of courage. West shows courage in standing up for what he believes in, namely that Beyoncé deserves more recognition than another artist, but the expression on the wolf suggests that such courage is foolish.



Figure 8 Courage Wolf (kanyegate.tumblr.com/)

### Analysis

I suggest that in these memes, West functions as an expression of anxiety that white Americans may have regarding African-American men. He stands as a perceived threat to white privilege. This should come as no surprise considering West's background. Unlike his contemporaries, West came from a well-to-do family. Both of his parents are college graduates and at least one of them has a PhD. West himself had a specialized education and he found financial success before the age of thirty. West is married to a white woman known for her beauty, wealth, and fame. He feels no hesitation in verbally challenging white people on public television. As a reflection of the racial tension in American culture, Kanye West memes are a way to minimize West's impact and to dissuade people from accepting him as a serious artist.

As a high profile and easily recognizable African-American man, West is the perfect target for racial tension. His popularity as a celebrity means that assassinating his character will have a lasting impact. These memes mock West as ridiculous and strip him

of humanity using the guise of humor. They are a form of color-blind and hipster racism; instead of shrinking away from blatantly racist memes, people are free to share them and claim the right to appreciate the humor because these aren't framed as overtly racist. Sharing racist viewpoints in this way can be characterized as "the normalization... through irony" tactic (Murphy 2016:17) suggested to be the crutch of hipster sexism/racism.

Many Kanye West memes draw on very old ideas about race. The historian Larry Levine describes racial stereotypes in the 1987 documentary *Ethnic Notions* as difficult to eradicate. "When stereotypes and stereotypical depictions endure past a certain amount of time, they have to have meaning. They belong to the societal worldview and inform both the majority and the minority. They appeal to manufacturer and consumer" (quoted in Riggs 1987). Thirty years ago it seemed that the stereotyping of African-Americans might actually end. Towards the end of the Civil Rights movement, African-Americans became more visible as consumers and began to demand more realistic representation of themselves and their culture in products (Riggs 1987). Unfortunately, as the memes above illustrate, this has not been the case.

Stereotypes of African-Americans have been prevalent in American media for a long time. The two most enduring stereotypes used in literature and popular culture are the Sambo and the Predatory Black Man (Riggs 1987). Before the Civil War, Sambo was a popular character that represented a happy slave, dancing the Jim Crow and never wanting to leave the ownership of his master. Sambo was submissive and lived only to entertain a white audience. He stood as proof that African-Americans were better off as slaves on a plantation, where they could be controlled and not stand as threats (Riggs



1987). This stereotype remains, albeit more hidden, in the twenty-first century: African-American actors, musicians, and even athletes are contracted to film projects or commercial marketing that play on Sambo stereotypes. Bill Cosby, for example, is one actor who has been accused as having emulated a Sambo or Uncle Tom (RedFlagNews.com) stereotype.<sup>5</sup> Will Smith, who started out as a rapper, made his name in Hollywood as a carefree protagonist in the 90s sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. For several years after his television role, Smith was consistently typecast in films as a submissive, carefree, non-threatening, and entertaining character. Though he has become a reputable actor, critics still treat him as the butt of jokes. It is a popular claim of critics online that a film can't be a Will Smith movie without the one-liner he's said in several of his older action films, "Ah, HELL no!"

When slavery was abolished, a new stereotype emerged: that of the free Predatory Black Man (Riggs 1987). This figure became prominent around the turn of the twentieth century, and was just to justify fear and violence as urban neighborhoods in the North saw an influx of African-American migrants from the South. The proximity of white Americans to black Americans in the North created fear among white middle class Americans who were informed mostly by the stereotypes of threatening minorities. As Bill Ellis discusses, the presence of ice cream parlors—and by extension clubs, shops, and restaurants—owned by minorities in the early twentieth century posed a threat to the values taught to young white Americans of the period. "Foodways," or entertainment or

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<sup>5</sup> An "Uncle Tom" (sometimes referred to as "Uncle Ruckus) is a stereotype similar to a Sambo. It is an older male slave who is loyal to the master of a plantation and "wisely" encourages other slaves to find joy in being enslaved. These accusations against Bill Cosby came to light especially during the George Zimmerman trial. Cosby was criticized by African-Americans because he chose to be silent regarding the death of Trayvon Martin. Twitter users were recorded by several online news outlets calling Cosby a Sambo, Uncle Tom, or Uncle Ruckus.

fashion, “could embody subversive impulses, challenging traditional values by introducing new options. In this mode... people... try on new identities and explore alternative ways of life” (Ellis 2009:55). The minority culture was rebellious, exotic, and appealing to young people who were gaining more autonomy and independence as the twentieth century progressed. To counter their appeal, violence and rumors were used to draw the line between African-Americans and whites. White parents could use rumor to cast minorities as predators and maintain traditional values in their children.

Images of the Predatory Black Man continue to be exploited in news stories across the country today and these images continue to create fear. In cities with large African-American populations, crimes in poor communities where some African-Americans live are popular features on the evening news. These news features, and the high population of African-Americans in prisons, reinforce negative stereotypes of African-Americans and Black culture. Memes such as “Predatory Wolf” and “Courage Wolf” frame West as a Predatory Black Man by comparing him to a wild animal commonly seen as predatory, threatening, and dangerous.

The association made between West and the dangerous looking wolves in the Advice Animal memes complete the deconstruction of the “Imma Let You Finish” type,<sup>6</sup> as Foote suggests such trends have a habit of doing as they break down a person’s words to represent them in the most basic and animalistic way possible (Foote 2007), and West is diminished to monstrosity and inhumanity. While these wolf memes are meant to be

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<sup>6</sup> Foote uses the example of a particular userpic trend from 2005 that began with an image of a chimpanzee with the caption “OMG racecar bling bling.” The userpic was customized several times with pictures of Legos, George W. Bush, etc., until one was made using the picture of a chimpanzee—a cartoon one, this time—and the original caption. Meanwhile, the “Imma Let You Finish” meme has cycled from photos of Kanye West, to paintings of white aristocrats, to savage wolves. A logical next step in the trend might be to incorporate an image of an African-American and/or a criminal since they are stereotyped with “wolfish” behaviors and personalities.

humorous, the rage seen in the snarls of these animals are intended to remind the viewer of the tone West takes in his verbal attacks. These memes, shared via social media, also perpetuate the idea that West is no better than a rabid, dangerous wolf. Once again, people were meant to experience the fear associated with a Predatory Black Man. The difference, now that West is stereotyped and dehumanized in previous variations of the meme, is that West can be equated to a wild animal. The use of aggressive verbs, such as those seen in the caption “Steal mic... Avenge Beyoncé” imply that West, acting out the meme’s caption, is motivated to violently attack dissenters and protect Beyoncé.

The “Insanity Wolf” also equates West with a frightening image of a wolf, but the caption reads from the perspective of the viewer. It suggests that the wolf in the image is West and that he has committed a grievous crime against Taylor Swift who is “a nice girl.” This implies that the viewer should have sympathy for Swift, who is herself stereotyped as a helpless and hopeless romantic. Her songs, which she had largely written herself, contain the theme of pining after a white knight figure, rendering Swift as someone who needs protection. In the case of “Imma Let You Finish” memes, Swift is portrayed as needing protection from the “frightening” West. The meme, therefore, also suggests that the only thing to be done when threatened by something frightening is to kill it. A wolf can be shot, and from what we understand of wolves in fairytales and other pieces of folklore, a wolf *should* be shot. The suggested action extends then to the person being characterized by these wolves

Another stereotype that emerged in the nineteenth century was that of a Zip Coon. This stereotype mocked free African-Americans, particularly those who lived in the North before the Civil War. The Zip Coon was imagined as an African-American man

who attempted to assimilate into white culture by wearing high fashion, choosing intellectual conversation topics, and using refined language. As a character aimed to entertain white audiences, the Zip Coon consistently failed in these attempts and therefore was laughable. This stereotype reassured the white audience of the nineteenth century that educated and middle-class African-Americans did not constitute a real threat to the dominant culture (Riggs 1987). West, who uses his music and art to contribute to culture, is cast into this stereotype to minimize his significance. When West gets excited on a talk show while discussing his art, the online counternarratives project his actions as the ravings of a mad man. Ignoring his efforts to engage intellectually with other artists, memes allow people to laugh at him as though he were a Zip Coon.

The most obvious example of how this stereotype is employed is in the “Archaic Rap” meme. West’s English is changed from a modern African-American vernacular to “proper” aristocratic English. The broad smile and eased posture of the figure in Joseph Ducreux’s painting suggests a sense of humor and relaxation, which minimizes the negative implications of the meme. Replaced by a smiling white character, West no longer seems threatening. Rather, West is represented in white face and fancy language. Zip Coon’s character was exactly this in person. He was an African-American man dressed in fancier than normal garb, who conversed in a higher form of English than was expected of an African-American man. The Joseph Ducreux character’s relaxed, almost “gangster” like, pose is the only thing that hints to the viewer that the character is acting as a black caricature. Memes such as this act as devices to remind minorities of their “place.” These memes imply that African-Americans cannot be as well educated, cultured, and civilized as their white counterparts. Using stereotypes, images, or jokes

such as the “Archaic Rap” meme and the Zip Coon caricature are meant to be humorous to their white audiences, but warn their Black audience that efforts to fit in are laughable.

## CHAPTER 5

## ILLUMINATI CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND YOUTUBE

## Documentation

West's interruption of Swift at the VMAs is often referenced in online conspiracy theories and speculated about in YouTube videos. Several users on YouTube dedicate their channels to defaming West by alleging his involvement with a supposed secret and dangerous society called the Illuminati. These videos date from around the time of the 2009 VMAs, and many of them use West's behavior and comments as "evidence" of his Illuminati ties. These videos also further illustrate that Kanye West folklore expresses racial tensions.

Rumors and conspiracy theories have been shared through digital means for years, but the introduction of YouTube as a social media and video hosting platform makes it easier to take rumors from direct word of mouth transmission to image and video sharing. Not only may a YouTube creator pass on information with traditional text, but s/he can also share images, videos, and audio recordings to make her/his point. Many rumors and conspiracy theories that exist online are based on old beliefs that have been shared for years before the Internet, such as the Flat Earth Theory.<sup>7</sup> Such old rumors and conspiracy theories are revived and adapted for a younger generation who prefer to get information from the Internet. New rumors also emerge from YouTube content creators, like those of the legendary Slender Man made famous by the Marble Hornets series.

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<sup>7</sup> The belief that science can't be trusted and truth can only be observed by the naked eye. "Flat Earthers"- as they're known- use this method to argue that since horizon lines don't curve in photographs taken from high altitude aircraft, the Earth must be flat.

The theory that the Illuminati control the Hollywood elite has become popular in the last decade, but the idea dates back as far as the 1990s. The Illuminati originally was an eighteenth-century secret society based on the Freemasons, which were organized in Bavaria by a man named Adam Weishaupt in 1776. The society, which lasted about ten years, celebrated free thought and intellect over the superstitions of religion (Vila 2009). They took an atheistic approach to understanding the world, which was considered blasphemous (Henken 2015). Despite the Illuminati's short lifespan as an historic organization, belief in the Illuminati and its "New World Order" has generations of conspiracy theorists. Today, conspiracy theories about the Illuminati are popularly found online.

In the United States, Illuminati conspiracy theorists often claim that members of the Founding Fathers who were also Freemasons were associated with the Illuminati, and that the government they instituted was intended to bring the New World Order to fruition. Conspiracy theorists believe the layout of major cities and symbols within official US documents are evidence of the Illuminati's existence. By the end of the nineteenth century, these theorists also began to target the "New Money" families of the Progressive era as evidence of Illuminati existence as well. The Rockefellers, Rothschilds, and Morgan families have all been linked to the Illuminati by conspiracy theorists since the nineteenth century (Springmeier 2005). In the mid-twentieth century, conspiracy theorists began to target the Bush family, claiming that Barbara Bush was the secret daughter of famed occultist Aleister Crowley, and that her husband and sons found political success because of this "familial connection." This "connection" was apparently

orchestrated as part of the plot to bring about the Illuminati's domination over the United States (Anders 2015). Of course, such rumors lack any supporting evidence.

Véronique Campion-Vincent outlines a framework for conspiracy theories as beginning with an agent identified with a specific motive. In this case, the agent is the Illuminati, which allegedly is working to unite the globe under a "New World Order" where no governments exist but theirs. The agent is then judged as evil and bent on the destruction of government. Since the Illuminati is commonly associated by conspiracy theorists with Satanism, it is perceived as evil, and thus its plan is destructive. Because the historic Illuminati did believe in a "New World Order," and adhered to controversial atheist philosophies, the ideas are vaguely "plausible." Plausibility lends some credibility to the theory, so that some people may believe it without any more evidence (Campion-Vincent 2005:104-5).

Campion-Vincent also notes that "Conspiracy theories are strongly linked to the concept of nation. Often they targeted foreigners and other social deviants, demanding that they be expelled from the national 'body.' Conspiracy theories were effective in mobilizing the masses, turning them against outsiders" (Campion-Vincent 2005:106). Applying Campion-Vincent's ideas to the case of Kanye West, conspiracy theories are useful in discrediting him because they help to discredit the success of the Other. Furthermore, their arguments are sometimes characteristic of color-blind racism in that they claim that West would not be problematic if it weren't for his association with the Illuminati.

Illuminati conspiracies are particularly popular among white Americans, though other groups have taken interest. Hip-hop artists, for example, became obsessed with the



Illuminati in the 1990s and used Illuminati imagery as an inspiration for lyrics and fashion trends. Gold chains with Egyptian inspired pendants, hats, and T-shirts with phrases attributed to Illuminati propaganda were hip-hop staples by the end of the twentieth century. Elissa Henken proposes that it was this obsession, as it coincided with the development of Internet culture, which led people to accept the rumors that African-American hip-hop artists, and other African-American celebrities, were supposedly members of the Illuminati (Henken 2013:7). Well known figures accused of being members of the Illuminati aside from West include Jay Z, the rap producer who first discovered and signed West, and Jay Z's wife Beyoncé Knowles. It is believed by some conspiracy theorists that Jay Z recruited West into the Illuminati.

Illuminati conspiracy theorists also claim that several other African-American celebrities have been part of the Illuminati in the past, and that these members were silenced for trying to expose the Illuminati to the public. These include Michael Jackson, Dave Chappelle, and Tupac Shakur. All three men had complained publicly about the elitism in Hollywood and its treatment of African-Americans. Conspiracy theorists interpreted these complaints to be referring specifically to the Illuminati presence in the media. Michael Jackson, for example, was a controversial figure through his entire career and had suffered from media slander since childhood. Dave Chappelle at one point had contracted with a network that didn't pay him as much as his white counterparts (Robinson 2014). Tupac Shakur was a rapper whose involvement in a rivalry between hip-hop groups led to his murder in 1996. Illuminati conspiracy theories postulated that these men were killed or murdered by the Illuminati for their complaints. This idea

minimizes the legitimate complaints of African-Americans and ignores the fact that Hollywood often treats African-American celebrities unequally.

Elissa Henken calls YouTube the best means of transmission for these rumors because evidence of Illuminati membership is most often found in visual and/or audio sources (Henken 2015:7). Videos are an ideal mode of transmission for online rumors because they allow the tellers to incorporate their own commentary and elaboration on evidence and ideas. I now will focus documentation on these rumors as they are shared via YouTube videos and the way they are used to perpetuate alternative Kanye West narratives.

Marie-Laure Ryan writes, “[a] narrative is a mental image—a cognitive construct—built by the interpreter as a response to the text... it does not take a representation proposed as narrative to trigger the cognitive construct that constitutes narrativity” (Ryan 2004:9). Narrativity exists in the transmission of a narrative—whether it be oral or visual— and is perpetuated when a narrative is deemed valuable. Value is imparted when a teller chooses to share narrative, and value is inferred when that narrative is taken by a listener and internalized.

Rumors or legends are “communicative activit[ies]... which use unconscious fantasies held in common by members of [a] larger group... that leads to increased feelings of kinship and intimacy” (Kakar 2005:58). Rumors are a genre that solidify folk ideas. Theo Meder, in a similar vein as Dundes’ theory of folk ideas, writes that rumor is a “mind virus” which is “transmitted by storytelling from one human mind to the other. If the virus is contagious enough... it can successfully infect other minds by means of narration” (Meder 2009:261). Racist folk ideas act precisely like a virus online. While

prejudices have always existed, they have adapted over time for different venues, including the Internet.

The Illuminati conspiracy videos that target West generally follow a loose format and are styled differently based on the user's preferences and video editing skills. These videos range from the very amateurish, using default video editing software, to the impressively skilled. Popular content creators may include some customized animation, or professional mic and camera equipment, but the purpose of these videos are not meant so much to look professional as they are meant to share information. Of the many thousands of videos that exist, there are three major content creators who contribute to this body of rumor. The Vigilant Christian, PressResetEarth, and Mark Dice are content creators who will be used as examples of how YouTube is used as a means of spreading Illuminati rumors about West.<sup>8</sup>

The intent of these authors is to provide visual, audio, and commentary "proof" of West's membership in the Illuminati. This commentary is often delivered via microphone, though subtitles are also used as footnotes. Of the authors selected, only PressResetEarth uses film of himself in the videos, though this is infrequent. These content creators, or authors, may choose to hide their identities because of an innate fear of being "found out" by the Illuminati, since it is their belief that the Illuminati is capable of masterminding silencing campaigns. All three authors (who are all white males) declare themselves to be Christians. The Vigilant Christian points out that he feels it is his duty to share these theories to help prepare viewers for the coming of the Apocalypse

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<sup>8</sup>These authors are by far the most popular and active amongst Illuminati conspiracy theorists. There is variation between their videos in editing choices, but it should be noted that these are not representative of all theorists uploading onto YouTube. In order to maintain the discussion on racism in rumor, the focus will remain on content over editing.

and to warn them of Satanic activity in pop culture. Mark Dice promotes books that he publishes on the Illuminati conspiracy and the Apocalypse. PressResetEarth claims to be an “alternative” media analyst who proclaims Christian sentiments. In many ways, these videos are the twenty-first century version of the Doomsday prophets on city streets, wearing billboards and shouting similar warnings to passersby.

For visual evidence, authors prefer to include paparazzi photographs, screen-capture images, or marketing shots that include something that might tie West or other alleged Illuminati members to occult symbols. Conspiracy theorists look for hand gestures that they believe represent devil horns (index and pinky fingers extended), the number 666 (the common “O.K.” gesture,<sup>9</sup> or pyramids (index and thumbs touching with palms facing out). One photograph that is referenced by all three authors is one of West wearing a white T-shirt with a red goat head on it. The symbol of a goat head, they claim, represents the goat-headed demon Baphomet, and West’s wearing of it shows his alleged support of the Illuminati and Satanism according to these authors. The Vigilant Christian dedicates one of his videos to explaining how Jay Z and West both try to manipulate and hide their Illuminati membership by wearing clothing and jewelry with images of Jesus Christ. His belief is that the Illuminati is trying to soften Christianity to infiltrate and corrupt it by encouraging open worship or acknowledgement of Christ (The Vigilant Christian 2014).

These content creators also have other favorite photos, such as those that cover one eye of the subject, or include Egyptian or antichristian art motifs. West often uses

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<sup>9</sup> It has been pointed out that the three fingers extended in the O.K. gesture look like the tails of three separate sixes, with the circle made by touching the index finger to the thumb standing in as the circle portions of three overlapped sixes (IlluminatiRex.com 2014).

these kinds of motifs. For example, he posed as Jesus Christ for the cover of Rolling Stone, and he often uses religious and antireligious imagery in promotional photography that accompanies his albums. The cover for his album *Yeezus* includes an upside down cross, typically associated with occultist symbolism, as well as women with forked tongues and red eyes. West has also been photographed several times with his mentor Jay Z making the sign of the pyramid.

The favorite evidence that conspiracy theorists look for to link a celebrity to the Illuminati is blood sacrifice. This sacrifice is believed to be the initiation ritual into the secret society, and it has been allegedly done by all celebrities rumored to be involved in the Illuminati. Conspiracy theorists frequently think that mysterious or untimely deaths of a celebrity's loved ones is a sign that a celebrity has joined the Illuminati. When a targeted celebrity has not lost a loved one due to unusual circumstances, conspiracy theorists may then link these celebrities to other blood sacrifices, or they claim that loved ones were "borrowed" and killed by other Illuminati celebrities, or they claim that the Illuminati is simply waiting for the right moment to demand a sacrifice.

The three Illuminati conspiracy content creators mentioned above focus their arguments around the same articles and news clips. While photos and symbols are displayed with explanatory subtitles, most of the commentary is based on what the media has most recently said about West. For example, Mark Dice, PressResetEarth, and The Vigilant Christian made content based off the same article from *Entertainment Weekly*, which featured an interview in which West was asked about losing his mother, Donda West. In the interview, West said that her loss was the cost of fame and that it hurt him to talk about. The content creators ignored the fact that West was close to his mother and

that her loss caused him great pain and instead argued that the reason West couldn't talk about Donda West's death was because he would get in trouble for exposing an Illuminati ritual. This argument shows that these theorists perceive West as having more concern about his career than his own family. According to these conspiracy theorists, West is inhuman, cruel, and selfish. Only PressResetEarth showed any sort of sympathy, saying, "Yeah, I'm sure it would [bring him to tears]" (PressResetEarth 2015), though even his sentiments suggest sarcasm instead of sincerity.

This attack suggests two ideas. First, it reinforces the false idea that African-American celebrities are unable to be successful on their own talents or merits. Rather it asserts that they are only successful because they have had the outside help of a powerful and secret organization. Second, it claims that African-American celebrities are ambitious (and dangerous) enough to offer family members as blood sacrifices. Mark Dice, PressResetEarth, and The Vigilant Christian all focus most of their content on discussing blood sacrifice. They argue that West's fame is a direct result of his mother's death, whom West presumably sacrificed to become a member of the Illuminati. It is true that West's mother died around the beginning of his career and that dying from complications from cosmetic surgery is rare. In interviews, West also said himself that if he had not moved to LA, his mother would not have died. Conspiracy theorists use these facts to build their argument that West's success is due to Illuminati involvement. Instead of seeing West as a grieving son, they portray him as a Predatory Black Man—heartless, greedy, and dangerous.

Mark Dice, PressResetEarth, and The Vigilant Christian also use words or phrases that connote an affiliation with Christian doctrines and beliefs to support their arguments.

They imply that as a member of the Illuminati, West also is satanic, or a devil-worshipper. Words like “Satan,” “devil,” “blood sacrifice,” or “hell” are typically included. Other words that are used make the videos sound like tabloids. “Exposed,” “revealed,” and “tell-all” are usually included with all caps, emphasizing scandal and intrigue. An overuse of exclamation points and Caps Lock signal tone and are typically indicative in the digital world of shouting. The Vigilant Christian is especially fond of these title types. “BREAKING !!! MORE PROOF KANYE WEST SACRIFICED HIS MOM 4 FAME & FORTUNE!” and “Kanye West & Kirk Franklin SNL Satanic Illuminati Antichrist Fake Christians EXPOSED” are just a few such titles (The Vigilant Christian 2015, 2016).

These content creators also use West’s lyrics to frame him as being associated with the devil. They suggest that when West sings about selling his soul to the devil (which comes directly from his lyrics in several tracks); he means it literally rather than metaphorically. The Vigilant Christian and PressResetEarth both use a clip with this lyric and liken it to a clip of Bob Dylan saying that his fame was made because of a deal with the devil.<sup>10</sup> Considering that Dylan and West are both heavily influenced by blues artists, many of whom sing about the devil in a figurative way, it should be clear that West’s inclusion of the devil in his lyrics is meant to represent his struggle with being an ethnic minority in Hollywood. Despite the references West makes to his faith and family in his lyrics, theorists cherry pick his canon for lyrics that sound ambiguous enough to link to their idea of Illuminati propaganda.

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<sup>10</sup> It’s worth mentioning here that the clip used of Dylan doesn’t ever mention the devil but a higher power. Both The Vigilant Christian and PressResetEarth interpret this as the devil rather than God, but neither explains why they believe Dylan meant one over the other.

Interestingly, artists such as West and Beyoncé have started to fight back by leaving seemingly deliberate references to the Illuminati and the New World Order in their work. In her new single “Formation,” Beyoncé targets theorists with, “Y’all haters corny with that Illuminati mess” (Knowles 2016). The lyric shows her frustration with having to combat the rumors. West recently spoke out against Illuminati conspiracy theories by saying that if the Illuminati were real it would function more as an energy company than an entertainment production company.

A final example of “proof” that theorists like to provide are interviews and statements made by other artists supposedly trying to “escape” Illuminati control. These statements are often made by celebrities about the difficulties of fame, but Illuminati conspiracy theorists construe them as public statements against the Illuminati. One of Mark Dice’s videos goes into detail of the Illuminati murder of Tupac Shakur. Shakur had apparently been obsessed with the Illuminati, going so far as to name one of his albums *The Don Killuminati*. Mark Dice also points out in another video that Michael Jackson’s family members expressed their belief that the King of Pop died as an Illuminati sacrifice. PressResetEarth, in a video discussing Donda West’s death, uses a clip of Jackson speaking about the hypocrisy of Hollywood as a proof that the entertainment industry is controlled.

### Analysis

Why has West been the central figure of so many memes and rumors? As West suggests (cf above quote from BBC interview), the “haters” of the Internet may be suspicious or jealous of a confident, successful, African-American man. According to



West, these reactions are outdated, childish, and “something that was used to hold people back in the past” (Macatee 2015).

As the three web content creators show, the rumors they perpetuate are particularly popular among white males who are also religious. The content creators use their evangelical Christian views to appeal to their viewers to accept their arguments. These creators and viewers, however, also perpetuate racist ideas. They often claim that these platforms are not racist, but the fact that they feel compelled to add a disclaimer shows that they know their views may be construed as such. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls this the “I’m not a racist, but...” tactic, and says that it is used to “preserve the myth” that racism is over (Bonilla-Silva 2002: 61). It lays the responsibility for racial differences on the culture of African-Americans, perpetuates the idea that whites are color-blind, and insists that whites are on equal terms with minorities in all but culture. Maly, Dalmage, and Michaels indirectly suggest that these YouTubers’ appeal to religion shows that they “are creating a present that plays by color-blind rules, while reproducing, reiterating, and strengthening whiteness by making explicit claims about what it means to be a good American and a good human being” (Maly, Dalmage, and Michaels 2012:758), which is, apparently, to be white, Christian, conservative, and male.

Comments left by viewers are particularly instructive. They typically fall into one of two categories. The first set of comments refer to the content of the video. Because so many of these videos have religious overtones, many comments, both in agreement and against, will follow suit. These typically include a testimony of God like “YES you speak truth brother. This is all a part of the plan. people better wake up! STAY TUNED. GOD BLESS” (The Vigilant Christian 2016), a prayer/plea for Kanye West or the content

creator, and/or a plea to other viewers that they also come to God, “I believe ALL this EVIL is talking [sic] place, May The Most High GOD have MERCY on their souls. For those who have been sacrificed I pray they have found PEACE” (PressResetEarth 2015). Fewer comments engage the content by debating points or pointing out fallacies in the video’s argument. Of course, the examples of comments given above may be made in jest. Without a means to track down users and ask them to contextualize their comments, we can’t know for sure, but they seem to be evidence of color blind racism in that they are written in the same rhetoric that the videos use. Instead of questioning the fact that these videos revolve around ethnic minorities, viewers follow the example of the web content creator and comment as Christian disciples.

The second type of comment is an attack of character. These attacks may be directed at the creator, but many of them also attack West. Attacks against the creator are aimed at the creator’s logic, his/her education, or his/her faith in God. For example, on one of Mark Dice’s videos a user commented, “Dear Uploader, You are full of hate to post shit like this. If you really love Jesus stop posting crap like this and do some community service rather than posting horrible shit like this” (Dice 2015). The attacks against West are often more vulgar and include racial slurs, comparisons to filth, or express humor at the death of his mother, such as, “his alleged mother looks like a transdender [sic] sex freak if you know what I mean” (The Vigilant Christian 2015). These insults may be racially motivated and encouraged by the rhetoric of conspiracy theories and rumors. In some cases, the comment sections of YouTube videos about African-Americans have all but become the sights for hate speech from anonymous mobs. They are also places where people try to minimize the negative impact of these

statements by suggesting that they're not racist ideas, or that they at least shouldn't be taken seriously.

Bordia and DiFonzo write that there are three psychological motivations that perpetuate the spreading of rumors: fact-finding, relationship-building, and self-enhancement (Bordia and DiFonzo 2005:88). In terms of the first motivation, "fact-finding," the claims that rumors make are about what is "true" for the viewer. Truth is relative to both givers and receivers, but to its respective believers, these claims are facts. This is because "rumors conform to standards of evidence; they do not seem false, fanciful, unlikely, or even unreasonable to those who tell them and those who hear them" (White 2005:241). For the more passive viewer, that truth may be the viewer's faith in God, or their belief that the Illuminati exists and is bent on world domination. For the aggressive commenters, their "truth" relies on the assumption that African-Americans are inferior.

The rumors shared about West also facilitate the second and third motivations, relationship building and self-enhancement. The rumors unite people by allowing them to interact with the other viewers who share similar ideas, and to express tension about ethnic minorities. Mocking West or associating him with an evil power can also be construed as a means of self-enhancement. The user is NOT evil but rather Christian. It may be surmised that these conspiracy theories, as well as memes, "arise and spread when people are uncertain and anxious about a topic of personal relevance to them and when the rumor appears credible given the sensibilities of the people involved in the spread" (Bordia and DiFonzo 2005:87).

Pat Turner has examined somewhat similar conspiracy theories in African-American communities. The worrisome organization usually is the Ku Klux Klan, and rumors about the Klan owning various businesses such as the fast food chain Church's Chicken or clothing lines like Tommy Hilfiger, Liz Claiborne, and Troop have circulated historically as conspiracy theories (Turner 1993:92-98). Because the KKK historically terrorized African-Americans, it would make sense that conspiracy theories about the KKK might circulate among African-Americans.

Turner identifies similar rumors that circulate among different groups as Topsy/Eva rumors. These are "nearly identical rumors circulate[d] within white and black populations" (Turner 1993:204). Turner derives the name from a nineteenth-century doll which, when sitting one way, is a white little girl named Eva. When the skirt of the doll is pulled up over Eva's head and flipped over, the doll becomes an African-American little girl named Topsy. Like the doll, Turner wrote, a conspiracy theory may essentially be the same in both ethnic groups, but the perpetrators and motivations behind the conspiracies will change depending on the group sharing it (Turner 1993 and Fine and Turner 2001). Because content creators are largely anonymous, scholars must interpret meaning from the context in which rumors are shared. In this case, however, the Illumanti would be perceived as threatening to white fundamental evangelical Christians because of their historic atheism. Meanings and interpretations may change, and scholars might find the Topsy/Eva effect in play as digital culture continues to germinate.

There is, however, something to be said for the reasons why West himself is a target of rumor. There are a number of African-American rappers who have come before and after him, not to mention the African-American actors in Hollywood, who have yet to

be accused of Illuminati involvement. West's controversial actions, which he makes of his own accord and rarely apologizes for, make him an easy target. "Imma Let You Finish" is not the only meme that follows West's behavior, nor was his interruption at the VMAs the only event that motivated conspiracy theories. Blank writes "When living celebrities reveal themselves in a newly negative light, betrayal results, and reconciliation is needed before slanderous or dismissive responses can fade" (Blank 2013:68). When celebrities are labeled for bad behavior or insensitive comments, the public backlash in the media and online usually prompt them to apologize. West, however, is not one to ask for forgiveness. Rather than endearing him to the public, West's perceived pride only continues to encourage people to villainize him. For many Christians, it's his insistence that he is a new Christ figure or a god that is disturbing because it comes across as blasphemous. For others, it's his simple lack of humility. West just recently was caught on tape claiming to be greater than Stanley Kubrick, the celebrated film director, and Pablo Picasso, the twentieth-century painter (Blavity 2016). In the past he has called himself more influential than the Beatles and said Paul McCartney should feel honored to be in West's presence.

Responses to celebrity behavior are telling of the beliefs and morality of wider societies. Blank further states, "The folk response to celebrity culture reveals the rhetorical markers for societal beliefs and expectations about the individuals whom they often emulate. In doing so, they articulate the folk conceptualization of normalcy and decency. More important, these responses demonstrate a projection of the individual's own subconscious values, helping to cement his or her own ideas as being morally sound" (Blank 2013:68). In contributing to or continuing the transmission of the Kanye

folk narrative, the digital community chooses a code of morality that opposes West's own personal narrative. West wants recognition for his success, but the code of morality for those perpetuating an alternative narrative does not make room for confident, educated, successful and politically active African-American men.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

West publicly proclaims himself as an inspirational and influential figure, while his opponents circulate old and racist ideas in new digital forms. The fact that these forms exist and in some cases are circulated widely points to ongoing racial tensions in the United States and the continuance of racist ideas.

Some scholars have suggested that the Internet is an equalizer that diminishes ethnic differences. Campion-Vincent states, “Today’s conspiracy theories are likely to target groups with political or social status rather than ethnic or religious groups, who are protected by the prevailing rules of politically correct speech... Hostility toward minorities, especially alien minorities, is today no longer totally pertinent” (Campion-Vincent 2005:106). As I have illustrated in this thesis, however, this is untrue. Racism exists or is even highlighted in online environments, contradicting the claim that the Internet is a place more free from conventional identity markers such as gender, class, or race than other environments. Memes, rumors, and conspiracy theories mocking and demonizing minorities thrive in the digital sphere. Instead of a culture of respect idealized during the Civil Rights era, some Americans continue to espouse racist attitudes that activists must overcome. The “prevailing rules of politically correct speech” do not apply to the Internet, which is still in its earliest stages. As more people choose the Internet as their primary mode of cultural interaction through social networks, streaming services, and even education, a response to such ideas should be expected. New groups of people will begin to interpret, be offended by, and seek to eradicate racist folklore while others

are likely try to defend it as harmless or mere humor, covers that theories of “hipster racism” or “color-blind racism” seek to expose.

Social movements such as the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, the push for college administration to be more sensitive to the needs of diverse student bodies, and the #GamerGate controversy were all enhanced by digital culture, and lash out against the racist and sexist undertones that tarnish some veins of digital folklore. Twitter, Google, and Facebook are pressed to actively monitor for hate speech shared on their websites. Yet minorities are constantly bombarded by racism in the forms of popular memes, jokes, rumors, and conspiracy theories that exist at their expense. In accordance with what is suggested by multiple scholars writing for Gary Fine’s *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (2005), interaction with these negative perceptions builds tension that may result in violence.

Racism cannot be ignored by folklorists looking to the Internet as a new frontier for study. By condoning color-blind and hipster racism online, society risks not moving forward. As unpleasant as prejudice is, the only way that it can be put in check is by acknowledging that it exists and teaching people how to not perpetuate it. Having pointed out how racism exists in Kanye folklore, it should be clear that folklorists should actively look for the ways that ethnic diversity exists on a digital stage. Race matters online. Not only does prejudice need to be understood going into the digital age, but the way that ethnicity is celebrated and adapted online also should be documented. The Internet is not so much a new cultural frontier as it is a reflection of everything that has always existed.



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