

University of Richmond

From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison

2018

Controversial heroism: Media martyrdom and the inspiration of Kanye West

Matthew B. Vandini, *University of Richmond*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/73/

2

CONTROVERSIAL HEROISM: MEDIA MARTYRDOM AND THE INSPIRATION OF KANYE WEST

MATTHEW B. VANDINI

“Kanye West validated Blackness in mainstream culture.”

- *Noisey by VICE*

“Kanye West is the biggest piece of s— on earth.”

- *Pink*

“One of the most influential people in the world.”

- *Time Magazine*

“Kanye West is living art.”

- *Rhymefest*

“West is brilliant; West falls off; West is a genius; West is an asshole.”

- *Noisey by VICE*

One of the most polarizing figures in popular culture today is Chicago native Kanye Omari West, also known as Ye, Yeezus, The Louis Vuitton Don, and Konman. The singer, songwriter, producer, fashion designer, and entrepreneur has been assigned titles of “misogynist”, “activist”, “a voice of the people”, and most importantly, “hero” and “villain”. The multiplicity of Kanye West’s public persona comes from a career laden in controversy amidst tremendous success that has awarded him over 21 Grammy awards and 100 million song downloads. This chapter explores this dichotomy of hero and villain that has surrounded West during his entire career, and it seeks to understand perceptions of Kanye as representing both the best and the worst of human nature.

THE HEROIC TRANSFORMATION OF KANYE WEST

When considering Kanye’s power as hero and villain, it is important to understand the popular music scene and its own influence in America when Kanye was growing up, before he was ever in magazines and changing popular culture as we know it. Kanye West began his heroic journey as a young boy who bounced around from home to home all over the world, even spending a brief amount of time in Nanjing, China before finally settling in Chicago, where he calls home today.

Allison and Goethals (2017) have written extensively on the hero’s journey, focusing on three types of transformations that the hero must undergo: a transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society. These transformations typically occur in this temporal sequence and culminate in true heroism that places the collective best interest ahead of self-interest. This classic hero journey applies to Kanye’s own transformation from a well-traveled, middle-class child to one of the biggest hip-hop icons in the world.

West’s father, a former Black panther and prominent leader in the Black community during the civil rights movement, teamed with West’s mother to give Kanye insight into the history of African Americans’ continued struggle for equality against a predominately white and oppressive

background. While Kanye did not grow up in poverty and racial tension had not been as aggressive as it was during his mother's and father's upbringing, Kanye was still exposed to ideas of racial injustice in America as an African American child in Chicago.

His mother, Dr. Donda C. West, was a prominent professor of English at Clark Atlanta University, as well as the Chair of the English Department at Chicago State University (Bailey, 2014). Dr. West noticed her son's talent for literature at a very young age, recognizing that he began writing poetry at the age of eight (Chicago Tribune, 2007). Kanye, to this day, cites his mother as being the greatest influence in his life, inspiring him to make music that was different from the classic house and hip-hop scene of Chicago (Chicago Tribune, 2007).

Traditional heroes are often mentored by influential figures in their life (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Football coach Tom Landry describes a mentor as someone "who tells you what you don't want to hear, who has you see what you don't want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be" (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Allison et al. (2017) consider transforming mentorship to be pivotal component of the hero's journey. Kanye would have two main mentors in his life who would expose him to the real world in ways that a formal education never could, the primary mentor being his mother Donda West. She imparted to Kanye the importance of education and the necessity for Kanye to utilize his exceptional gifts in life to help others (Boeck, 2013). Donda devoted significant chunks of her time and money as a single-mother exposing Kanye to the world through travel and education. Kanye was immersed in different ideas and cultures, and he was able to explore his affinity for art at a very young age. Dr. West encouraged and nurtured her son's love of music and learning.

Dr. West also instilled in Kanye the idea of an obligation to use one's gifts to help others. In many ways, Kanye exhibits what Bronk and Riches (2017) consider purpose-guided heroism. Purpose-guided heroism "proposes that the existence of an enduring purpose in life readies individuals for heroic action." In Kanye's life, his mother, being a well-known professor at an established university, instilled in Kanye his duty as a privileged African-American man to educate not only America, but the world. Kanye said in an interview with Jimmy

Kimmel, “my mother was an educator on the board at Chicago State. I wasn’t going to be an ordinary person.” She made Kanye truly believe his purpose in life was to impart knowledge onto the world, to educate people through not only his music, but through all his endeavors in life.

This purpose guided heroism gave Kanye what Kramer (2017) calls existential courage. This is defined as the courage to take “psychological and social risks in the pursuit of desired, but challenging future identities.” In this sense, Kanye was able to recognize his own strengths and gifts and then direct them toward his purpose of educating the world, despite the fact that he would be putting his future self at great risk in doing so. A vast majority of artists and performers do not experience success, but Kanye, due to his mother’s confidence and wisdom, was willing to risk it all.

Kanye was afforded a middle-class lifestyle that is unfortunately not available to many African-Americans to this day. However, the hip-hop scene in Chicago was booming at the time, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods, and Kanye was fascinated by it (Jeffries, 2011). He spent much of his time in the south side of Chicago, working on records and songwriting with other underground hip-hop artists from the time (Jeffries, 2011). Within the hip-hop world of Chicago, Kanye would become immersed in the variety of societal traditions of lower-income African Americans (Jeffries, 2011). Here marks another heroic transformation in Kanye’s heroic journey as an advocate for African Americans who Kanye felt lacked “confidence”. Researchers Ciccariello and Maher (2006) believe Kanye’s life experience within both historically “white” America and historically “Black” America gave him the ability to expose the social structures that exist within American institutions and challenge their validity through his art.

Chicago played an integral part in Kanye’s heroic transformation, but eventually he would begin the first step of his transformation to cultural icon, and a controversial hero figure to many. In the monomyth of the hero, the hero must experience a change of “setting”, which starts when Kanye left Chicago to pursue his career in music in New York. This change of setting is usually harsh, and it challenges the hero’s thought and ideas. Kanye’s ideas and public persona would be put to the test, as New York would prove to be where Kanye’s musical outreach would be at his all-time highest, but the move there would also trigger

the development of his controversial public persona, as well as transform him into a villain to some.

The second part of the hero's transformation is the transformation of oneself (Allison, Goethals, 2017). In New York, Kanye's classic Chicago hip-hop roots would push the limits of the modern popular culture in ways that Chicago could not. Here, he would come to understand more about himself, the media, and the significant influence of his music in the United States. It would also be where he would cultivate a relationship with the second most important mentor in his life, a mentor who would also go on to have a profound impact on the hip hop and popular culture of the Millennial generation: Jay-Z.

Jay Z formed his label, Roc-A-Fella records, in 1996. After being turned down by several of the major record labels, Jay Z was left with very little money and without many prospects in the music scene. To rectify his situation, Jay Z redefined the business model of music-making by creating his own record label to release his first album. After much commercial success, Jay Z proved that record labels were no longer necessary for the creation and release of music. Independent releases were enough to get a career started. This entrepreneurial attitude and unique way of taking on the music industry inspired Kanye to work independently and to never sell himself short for the sake of recording deals. Jay Z also helped Kanye get in on the ground floor of the upcoming pop-hip-hop boom by making Kanye the primary producer of all beats released through Roc-A-Fella.

Initially, Jay Z functioned as Kanye's boss, as Kanye was an original producer on several of Jay Z's albums. It wasn't until Jay Z heard Kanye freestyle rapping that he realized Kanye's unique ability for "introspective, complicated-rhyming" (Complex, 2013). Eventually, their relationship would develop into a light rivalry, with Kanye releasing records on Jay Z's Roc-A-Fella records, some of which would eventually go on to surpass some of Jay Z's album sales (Billboard, 2016). Jay Z and Kanye functioned as godfathers to the modern hip-hop scene, with Jay Z inspiring Kanye to reject the typical notions of the music industry and to rebel against the oppressive label structure. Jay Z's ability to question authority also inspired Kanye's distrust of the industry and American capitalism on the whole. He said of the music scene, "I hate business people.

Since when is music about getting rich? Since when is making art about getting rich? Remind me again why we in this shit. Remind me again why the Grammys couldn't suck my dick" (Fowler, 2013).

Kanye West's first album *The College Dropout* was released in 2005. Upon its release, Kanye became a world-renowned star. He was no longer a small-time hip-hop name in Chicago learning to hone his craft; he had become an overnight success. After the release, Jay Z said of Kanye, "He's going to change everything because he's really trying to test it and poke holes to make sure that it stands up. I admire that. It kind of works for me." Kanye's music and persona were ready to take popular culture by storm, and redefine celebrity for generations to come (Markman, 2003).

The third component of the hero's transformation is his transformation of society (Allison et al., 2017). This concept relates closely to moral heroism, and the idea of agency and communion (Walker, 2017). Agency is a need for achievement, pursuit of goals, and empowering oneself within a society. Communion is seeking to better community, concern for others' well-being, and general empathy (Walker, 2017). Kanye West, because of his influence and status within America, has great agency. To have agency is not inherently bad as long as it serves a community.

There are two ways of viewing Kanye as using and achieving his agency. One argument could be that Kanye exploits the traditional male community's fantasy of sexual prowess and power-seeking actions. He does this by using his lyrics to sell more music and accessories with the goal of gaining money and status, thereby increasing his own agency. On the other hand, another argument can be made that Kanye is not exploiting the stereotypical male fantasy but is actually exposing the stark reality of being an African-American male in a society that associates such males as hostile and aggressive. By doing so, Kanye would be using his own agency as a prominent singer and songwriter to shed light on a topic that is otherwise misrepresented in the media. In this way, Kanye would be improving the community as a whole.

One such instance of empowerment of African-American men comes in a recent album of Kanye's, *Yeezus*, in a song called *Blood on the Leaves*. Kanye raps:

*You see it's broke nigga racism
That's that "Don't touch anything in the store"
And this rich nigga racism
That's that "Come in, please buy more
What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?
All you Blacks want all the same things"*

Here, Kanye speaks on behalf of not only himself as an affluent African American, but also exposes the two sides of racism toward African Americans in both socioeconomic classes of “rich” and “poor”.

KANYE WEST: THE VILLAIN OR THE MARTYR?

Researchers Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou (2017) conducted a study that identified 13 “peripheral traits” of heroism. Among these traits were “humble”, “compassionate”, and “caring”. Few people would ascribe these traits to Kanye West. His brazen, unapologetic public persona implies a certain lack of care for the perspectives of other people, a lack of compassion for others, and a complete lack of humility. On September 13th, 2009 at Radio City Music Hall in New York City, the MTV Video Music Awards were held. Taylor Swift, a young female country singer, was giving her acceptance speech for “Best Music Video of the Year” when a drunk Kanye West grabbed the microphone from Taylor to announce that Beyoncé “had one of the best videos of all time” and should have won the award.

This incident is one of many examples of Kanye’s outbursts in the media that he has displayed without any regard for the consequences. Kanye seemed to exhibit no signs of “humility”, “compassion”, or “caring” for anyone, particularly for an artist who was deemed to have rightfully won the award. Countless celebrities and personalities alike went to social media to condemn his actions, with even President Obama calling him a “jackass” (Time Magazine, 2016). Kanye seemed to think so highly of his own opinion that he felt the need to speak out against what he would perceived as an injustice.

After the incident, Kanye issued an apology that read:

"It was rude, period. I don't try to justify it, 'cause I was in the wrong. Dealing with the fact that I hurt someone or took anything away, you know, from a talented artist -- or from anyone --because I only wanted to help people"

From this perspective, one can see slightly more clearly the intention, and perhaps even the "caring" element of Kanye's outburst.

Green, Tongeren, Cairo, and Hagiwara (2017) have researched the value of forgiveness, and how one can even find meaning through forgiveness. They hypothesize that forgiveness is "the process by which individuals replace negative emotions such as avoidance and anger toward a transgressor with more positive emotions such as compassion." Their research has found that forgiveness can require courage, as it requires one to acknowledge their own faults, which can cause significant cognitive dissonance (Green et al, 2017). However, Green et al. discovered in their longitudinal study of partners that reported marital offenses that those who sought forgiveness found an increase in meaningfulness in their lives. By seeking forgiveness, Kanye exhibits great courage, as well as likely finds more meaning in his own life by acknowledging his wrongdoing and then looking at life through new perspective.

Duntley and Buss (2016) have theorized a perpetuating process involving aggressors and victims of lethal aggression called "antagonistic coevolution". In this process, both the "killer" and the "victim" evolve together, so that as one's defenses grow stronger, the other's killer instinct grows stronger as well, thus increasing the evolutionary fitness of both parties due to each other's responses (Duntley & Buss 2016). In the case of Kanye, there is a coevolution, but not with two individuals. Rather, Kanye and digital media on the whole have been fighting and surviving each other since the inception of Kanye's career.

Historically, the media has not portrayed African American men in a completely positive light. In a predominately white industry, digital media portrays "the black image in the white mind" (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). This is to say that the media does not give an honest and accurate portrayal of African American men and women as well as African American culture. The implication is that African Americans are underrepresented within the media, and within popular culture as a whole. As such, Kanye again uses his agency to promote the underrepresented African American image in the media. In this sense, Kanye West functions more as a hero than as a villain.

Kanye's respect and love for art may have stirred in him the reaction to take the microphone from Taylor Swift to declare that Beyoncé should have won the award. Kanye genuinely believed that Beyoncé, an African-American singer/song writer, deserved the award over Taylor Swift, a white female. Regardless of whether Kanye was right or wrong, he rejected the norm of accepting what he believed to be an "injustice" and he had the courage to speak out against it. To him, announcing to the world that a Black woman was being mistreated and undervalued was worth risking his own social capital. Some might call his actions heroic, depending on how one defines heroism, whereas others might rightly call his actions villainous, again dependent upon one's view of villainy.

In another iconic Kanye West outburst, Kanye was featured in a Hurricane Relief Funding effort called "A Concert for Hurricane Relief" following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. During the live broadcast, Kanye West went off script and said "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" on national television. Again, Kanye voiced a seemingly wild opinion, but speaks for a group that is far underrepresented in the media. Kanye never apologized for the incident and offered this quote:

"I hate the way they portray us in the media," he said. "If you see a Black family, it says, 'They're looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.' And you know that it's been five days because most of the people are Black."

As the media has grown and become more influential, Kanye has grown with it. He has been omnipresent in popular culture since his first album, *The College Dropout*. As an African-American man, the media was not designed to work in his favor. To combat this roadblock, Kanye frequently made himself into the biggest and most controversial public figure. His vibrant personality, and sometimes neurotic ranting on television programs like *Ellen*, and in interviews with *Entertainment Magazine*, depicted a man who believed he was a god. While some were turned off by this, thinking Kanye's behavior was solely "egocentric" and only concerned with his own well-being, Kanye was doing what heroes do: stand out, risk criticism, and speak the hard truth regardless of criticism.

The word hero derives from the Greek word "heros", which means protector or defender (Kinsella et al., 2017). A sacrificial hero is one that takes a physical risk for others. Some sacrificial heroes are physical risk-takers, like a firefighter

going into a building and risking his life to save another. There are consummate heroes that go further and sacrifice their lives to save others. But there is also the moral hero, a person who risks their own social status within a group to do what is right (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). In an interview with Jimmy Kimmel, Kanye said, “I refuse to follow those rules that society has set up in the way that they control people with low self-esteem.”

Kanye takes a great risk by often rejecting the “rules” that society has placed on him as an entertainer, as an African-American, as a man, and as an artist, regardless of the consequences of his actions, or the impression that society will glean. One of the great eight traits of heroes as defined by Allison and Goethals (2011) is that heroes are “inspiring”. In this sense, Kanye produces a positive image movement with the message that groups of people should not feel limited by what society tells them.

KANYE WEST: THE MODERN DELUDED

The current trend of Kanye’s behavior over the past few years may have regressed from heroism to villainy. His community work seems to have diminished over the years, and his advocacy for disenfranchised groups of people has given way to more self-serving pursuits, like the start of a new clothing line. His behavior overall has been erratic, and his public outbursts have taken on a more delusional tone. What once seemed like activism and a calculated rejection of traditional roles of African American men, as well as the media, have devolved into a sexist, less pro-socially driven acceptance of his celebrity status.

Sexism and Hypermasculinity

Much of Kanye’s lyricism is about women and his desire for women. While Kanye seems to want to empower some women such as Beyoncé, his actions toward women have still been questionable over the years. Several of his songs make explicit mention of having sex with women purely for looks. His explicit lyrics also trend toward derogatory treatment of women in some cases. In the song “Famous”, on his album *The Life of Pablo*, Kanye raps:

*To all my south-side niggas that know me best
I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex,
Why? I made that bitch famous*

In these lyrics, Kanye raps about the infamous confrontation with Taylor Swift, claiming that he made her famous by doing so. Villains often seek to take away the “physical fitness” of others so as to give the villain a competitive advantage over the competition (Duntley et al., 2016). In this case, Kanye puts down an out-group of other celebrities, particularly female celebrities, to increase his own agency.

While Kanye’s explicit attitudes toward women may increase his own agency, Duntley and Buss (2016) also recognize the social cost to villainy as well. In this instance, Kanye received criticism from social media outlets, creating controversy surrounding his public image. Taylor Swift took to social media and said that the song carried a “strong misogynistic message”, while Rolling Stone, one of the largest music magazines in print today, said that Kanye’s flippant usage of the word “bitch” perpetuated a “misogynistic culture that still objectifies females with careless abandon” (Rolling Stone, 2016). Taylor Swift is not the only woman whom Kanye has said explicit remarks about. In several of his songs, Kanye accuses women of being “gold diggers”, “attention-seekers”, and frequently refers to women as “bitches”.

Kanye has also received criticism for his views on masculinity. Kanye’s lyrics and public statements have often revolved around his desired “conquests” of white women, possibly as a response to oppressive white culture in America. Kanye raps in his song *Gold Digger*:

*And they gonna keep calling and trying, but you stay right girl
And when you get on, he’ll leave your ass for a white girl*

Here, Kanye implies that if Black women do not have sexual relations with persistent Black men, then the men will leave them for a White woman who will. Rapper Nicki Minaj criticized Kanye, saying “I’m so tired of Black women feeling that when our men get rich, they’re going to leave them for a woman of a different race.” Kanye’s lyricism seems to derogate women as a gender and reduce them to objects rather than human beings. While not necessarily a violent action, these words can still be deemed evil as they often disenfranchise women and ultimately cause harm to the entire gender.

Mental Health and Cancellation of 2016 Tour

Throughout his career, Kanye West has struggled with being in the public eye. There have been several instances where Kanye exhibits erratic and sometimes violent behavior against paparazzi and journalists. In November of 2016, Kanye West was performing in Sacramento, California when he went on a rant about the current geo-political climate in the United States. At the conclusion of the performance, Kanye said:

“Hey radio! Radio, fuck you! Y’all don’t want to lose again. A lot of people here tonight felt like they lost. You know why? Because y’all been lied to. Google lied to you. Facebook lied to you. Radio lied to you. Radio, fuck you!”

Kanye then offered his support for president elect Donald Trump, before storming off stage after only a 10-minute performance to much outrage of the patrons of the show. Not even 24 hours later, Kanye West was involuntarily committed to the UCLA Medical center in Los Angeles, California for behaving in ways which health professionals deemed “a great threat to his own and others’ lives” (Entertainment, 2016). While this behavior does not seem much different from Kanye West of the past, his mental health status has led some to question his entire body of work. Many hold the suspicion that Kanye West’s public persona may have only been a calculated heroic attack on the modern social climate and the media’s influence. Kanye’s actions can be interpreted as symptomatic and delusional as a result of serious mental health issues that have afflicted him.

This question as to Kanye’s past actions being heroic or not heroic is open to great speculation. When considering heroism, some argue that intent matters immensely. Previously, this chapter reviewed Kanye’s use of community to gain agency. Many would deem those who use a community to gain agency for themselves as wrong-doers, even if the outcome for the community would be positive. B. F. Skinner believed that the reason we praise heroes for doing heroic deeds is because the motives of their actions are unknown to us (Skinner, 1971). Some people help others despite it not being in their own best interests, a commendable act deserving of credit. But if the true cause of behavior is known, then the lack of mystery often leads people to not view actions as heroic but rather as the simple product of environmental forces (Skinner, 1971).

In the case of mental illness, if Kanye's actions are as a result of delusions and an inability to control his actions, can he be credited or blamed for such actions? To understand the ownership of action, we can turn to Skinner to understand Kanye's behavior as not only good, but heroic despite his plausible inability to control them. Skinner noted in his essay on freedom and freewill that all behavior is controlled by environment in some way or another (Skinner, 1971). From this perspective, Kanye's actions are just as much his own as someone who does not suffer from mental health problems or delusions of reality. This reasoning suggests that while Kanye's current actions have taken on a somewhat villainous, violent, and aggressive role in his life, he is the true owner of his actions, and thus can be legitimately deemed heroic or villainous for them.

The Death of Donda West and Mental Illness-Driven Villainy

When considering Kanye West's life, it is important to remember the role that his mother Donda West played in making Kanye a well-cultured, well-travelled, well-meaning individual. On November 10, 2007, Donda West died during a cosmetic surgery procedure that Kanye had bought her for her birthday. To this day, Kanye blames himself for her death, claiming "If I had never moved to LA she would still be alive" (Boardman, 2016). Many of Kanye's closest friends and colleagues agreed that from that moment on, Kanye's behavior transitioned to being more erratic and out of control. While Jay Z did play a primary part in Kanye's transformation, Kanye always considered his mother his "rock". To lose that rock was to lose a key part of his heroic identity, his heroic purpose, and his heroic foundation.

From the perspective of the social influence-based taxonomy of heroism proposed by Allison and Goethals (2017), Kanye exists somewhere between a tragic hero and a transposed hero. Primarily, Kanye is a tragic hero. He wielded significant social influence and used his agency for the greater good, only to self-destruct when he could not put his life back together after the death of his mother. A transposed hero is one that undergoes a rapid change from either hero to villain or villain to hero. In this case, Kanye can be thought of as having undergone a traumatic life experience which caused him to transition from his heroic status to the status of villain.

An example from superhero films can be found in the character of Syndrome in Disney Pixar's *The Incredibles*. Syndrome begins his narrative on the path to heroism, trying to follow Mr. Incredible and do heroic actions with him, only to be rejected by Mr. Incredible for being unhelpful in his pursuit of good. This rebuke causes Syndrome to become cynical, leading to a transformation to harm-doing and villainy. Kanye may have become dejected and jaded to the world upon his mother's death, and thus no longer able to look at the world through the same vibrant, hopeful eyes that he formerly did. The loss of his mother might explain why he strayed from his ultimate goal of "educating" the world through his music and art. Furthermore, this moment could have exacerbated his mental illness, thus causing him to experience a darker, more deluded and distorted view of the world at large.

The possibility of Kanye's warped view of reality is further evidenced by his recent outburst and denouncement of his lifetime friend and partner, Jay Z. At his infamous show in Sacramento, Kanye exclaimed, "Jay Z, call me, bruh! You still ain't call me! Jay Z, call me! I know you got killers. Please don't send them at my head! Just call me! Talk to me like a man!" Here, Kanye implicates Jay Z as if he were attempting to assassinate him. These disturbing statements were but one portion of a much larger rant in which Kanye also claimed that rapper DJ Khaled had "hitters from Miami". Kanye implored him not to "send them at my head". Kanye's paranoia and distrust of others overall have contributed to a growing perception of his villainous persona.

However, although Kanye is exhibiting strong signs of mental illness, the media has reported without supporting evidence that Kanye is mentally ill. There has been no official diagnosis from a doctor, nor has anyone from the family reached out to the media to explain the personal details of Kanye's involuntary incarceration at the UCLA Medical Center. Despite this fact, sites such as TMZ display headlines such as "has Kanye lost it?" Other tabloid magazines hypothesize which mental illness Kanye is exhibiting.

In an analysis of trends in media, Wahl noted in his 1997 report an increasing movement toward inaccurate and convoluted depictions of mental illness in the media. "Unfortunately, media images of mental illness do not measure up well. Overall, the mass media do a poor job of depicting mental illness, with misinformation frequently communicated, unfavorable stereotypes" (Wahl, 1997).

Wahl also reported the historically inaccurate, and unethical approach of media depictions of mental illness. He wrote, “The words used by mass media to refer to mental illness and to the people who suffer from mental illnesses have such power, making it important to consider those words and the ways they are typically used -- and misused” (Wahl, 1997). Here, Wahl noted a troubling relationship that Kanye has also pointed out throughout his career: the relationship between media and the masses. Perhaps when Kanye ranted “Y’all been lied to. Google lied to you”, he was not far off the mark. Kanye is pointing out the inherent bias of the media, and it can be argued that he has acted heroically by speaking his truth despite the social consequences of his actions.

KANYE WEST’S HISTORICAL REFUSAL: WHY THE MEDIA FOUGHT BACK

Although there is evidence that Kanye is struggling with mental illness, it should be no mystery that the very media that Kanye fought against throughout his career is the same media that now crucifies him as a self-absorbed villain. The disenfranchisement of anti-establishment public figures has a long culture history. Major record labels have been taking advantage of African Americans in both the media and in their own productions of music. In the late 1950s a record company called Motown Records, founded by famous music businessman and pioneer Berry Gordy, capitalized on the growing popularity of blues-inspired “soul singers” like The Miracles (Motown Museum, 2016). Motown Records revolutionized the music industry for African American performers, finally giving representation to them for their popular styles of music over the years. In the 1980s Motown Records was sold to a Boston-based record company that completely overhauled the rich African American roots of the record label, resulting in a loss for many of the African American artists that were represented on the label (Motown Museum, 2016).

In the late 1980s, a group of African American men growing up in Compton, California, a particularly crime-fueled area of Los Angeles, started a music group called N.W.A. Consisting of singer songwriters Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, MC Ren, Yella, and Eazy E, the power group dominated the airwaves of popular music, pioneering a new genre of music called “Gangster Rap” (Rolling Stone, 2016). This style of rapping had hip-hop influences and expressed the deep-rooted issues

of violence, sex, and culture within African American “ghetto” society (Rolling Stone, 2016).

The music was wrought with controversy, with some cities not allowing them to perform because of their aggressive music and criticisms of social institutions, particularly their song “Fuck Tha Police” (Hoglund, 2016). Despite this backlash, the general population had a strong reaction to the music, making them one of the most lucrative rap artists in the past 20 years (Hoglund, 2016). However, since the inception of the group, the “owners” of their music was manager and record label mogul Jerry Heller, who owned a significant stake in the group’s financial dealings (Hoglund, 2016). When N.W.A. broke up in the early 1990’s, Jerry took former member and future partner, Eazy E, under his wing. Jerry would then make Eazy E a partner in their record label, Ruthless Records (Hoglund, 2016). However, Jerry took advantage of Eazy E’s lack of formal education and trust in him, eventually robbing Eazy E to the point where Eazy could not afford effective treatment when he became terminally ill only a few years later (Rolling Stone, 2015).

When Kanye was gaining popularity, his strong education background allowed him to traverse the world of music much more fluidly than many of the African American hip-hop artists that had come before him. Kanye possessed the savvy to refuse to “negotiate” with any record companies, not even with his good friend Jay Z. Kanye has been quoted as saying, “I think business has to be stupider. I want to do really straightforward, stupid business. And I refuse to negotiate. I do not negotiate. I can collaborate. But I’m an artist, so as soon as you negotiate, you’re being compromised.”

With this statement, Kanye demonstrates his understanding of how the music industry aims to take advantage of artists. Perhaps heroically, he has refused to play by the rules established by an industry that has historically disenfranchised and taken advantage of African American recording artists.

CONCLUSION

Kanye West raps in his song “New Slaves” on his album *Yeezus*:

*“You see there’s leaders
And there’s followers
But I’d rather be a dick than a swallower.”*

In these provocative lyrics, Kanye demonstrates his understanding of his controversial nature and his polarizing persona. Kanye rejects “the norm” that is perpetuated by the media and the oppressive establishment, and he exposes the generally negative attitudes these forces impart to people. For taking a stand against these dark forces, for utilizing his agency to give a voice to the people who are disenfranchised, and by being an example to those who feel that they are not worth anything because of modern popular culture, Kanye West is a hero.

Again, Kanye’s purpose-guided heroism and existential courage shine through, as he was willing to risk his entire career, and public persona, for his overall goal of educating the world about the pernicious role of media and inspiring confidence in the masses. Despite his critics and possibly his delusions, Kanye places himself at a great personal risk, displaying an immense amount of social and moral courage for the sake of a noble cause. However, his act of defiance did result in a sacrifice of self, in both health and social stature. The media has crucified Kanye West, making him a martyr for his life’s purpose. Despite setbacks and his own personal failings, one can still recognize the heroic side of his actions involving risk to his own life and health for a noble purpose.

Although the media portrays Kanye as a lunatic, a madman, or a narcissist, Kanye still tries to fulfill his purpose to this day. Even with celebrity status, fame, and fortune, Kanye still recognizes the importance of education and tries to fulfill his purpose of informing the world of social injustices. In November of 2016, Kanye teamed up with long-time friend and co-writer Rhymefest to turn Kanye’s childhood home into a learning and arts center called “Donda’s House” for local children in the South Side of Chicago. Their statement reads:

“Donda’s House envisions this facility as a gathering place for the community with events and concerts. We want to show bright spots in communities that’ve been divested from. We know more lights exists here, they just need to be activated.”

Popular culture is defined as “culture based on the tastes of ordinary people, rather than an educated elite”. Time Magazine (2016) labeled Kanye as one of the most “influential people in the world” due to his popular culture reach. His influence extends deep into all facades of American popular culture, not just the American hip-hop scene. Because of this far reaching influence, he has gained the ability to inspire the “masses” and thus tailor his art and his message directly to them. This immense amount of power is sometimes abused, but Kanye stayed true to his believed purpose in life and used his agency to fulfill that heroic purpose.

Allison and Goethals (2014, 2016) have proposed a “need-based” model of heroism called the *heroic leadership dynamic* that describes the deep-seated human need for heroes. Kanye West may not be a hero to all, but with his vast reach in the media and popular culture, he is able to be that heroic figure to a group of people that need him. He has sacrificed his social status for art and for the empowerment of people who never had the power that he was fortunate enough to gain. Despite alleged mental illness, a conflated ego, and his anti-establishment persona, Kanye has still been able to wield heroic influence, pioneering new ways of thinking about the world and inspiring millions to question their reality and look at today’s culture a little more critically. The United Nations lists “ensuring inclusive and quality education for all” and “promoting lifelong learning” among their top goals as an organization. Anyone who devotes his life to education and cultural illumination is a hero.

REFERENCES

- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2013). *Heroic leadership: An influence taxonomy of 100 exceptional individuals*. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2014). “Now he belongs to the ages”: The heroic leadership dynamic and deep narratives of greatness. In Goethals, G. R., et al. (Eds.), *Conceptions of leadership: Enduring ideas and emerging insights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2016). Hero worship: The elevation of the human spirit. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 46, 187-210.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2017). The hero's transformation. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

- Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., Kramer, R. M. (2017). Setting the Scene: The Rise and Coalescence of Heroism Science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Bailey, J. (2014). *The cultural impact of Kanye West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boardman, M. (2015, June 26). Kanye West Blames Himself for Mom Donda West's Death. Retrieved from <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/kanye-west-blameshimself-for-mom-donda-wests-death-2015266>
- Bronk, Kendall & Riches, Brian (2017) The Intersection of Purpose and Heroism: A Study of Exemplars, In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2007). A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness. *Journal of Black Studies*, 39(3), 371-401. doi:10.1177/0021934706297569
- Cunneen, C., & Stubbs, J. (2000). Male Violence, Male Fantasy and the Commodification of Women through the Internet *International Review of Victimology*, 7(1-3), 5-28.
- Davis, J. L., Burnette, J. L., Allison, S. T., & Stone, H. (2011). Against the odds: Academic underdogs benefit from incremental theories. *Social Psychology of Education*, 14, 331-346.
- Duntley, Joshua D., Buss, David M. (2017) The Evolution of Evil. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Entman, R. M., & Rojecki, A. (2001). The Black Image in the White Mind. doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226210773.001.0001
- Eylon, D., & Allison, S. T. (2005). The frozen in time effect in evaluations of the dead. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1708-1717.
- George, K., & N. (2016, February 12). Misogyny and Mr. West: Why I'm No Longer a Fan [Web log post]. Retrieved October 17, 2016, from https://noisy.vice.com/en_us/article/kanye-wests-misogyny-im-out
- Goethals, G. R. & Allison, S. T. (2012). Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence and virtue. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 183-235.
- Jeffries, M. P. (2011). *Thug life: Race, gender, and the meaning of hip-hop*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kafashan, Sarah; Sparks, Adam; Rotella, Amanda; Barclay, Pat (2017) Why Heroism Exists: Evolutionary Perspectives on Extreme Helping. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Kim, J., Allison, S. T., Eylon, D., Goethals, G., Markus, M., McGuire, H., & Hindle, S. (2008). Rooting for (and then Abandoning) the Underdog. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38, 2550-2573.
- Kramer, R. M. (2017) To Become or Not to Become? Existential Courage and the Quest for Identity. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., Igou, E. R. (2017) Attribute and Applications of Heroes: A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

- Markman, R. (2013, July 19). Jay-Z Explains His Big Brother Thing With Kanye West. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/1710886/jay-z-kanye-west-relationship/>
- Motown Music - The Sound that Changed America. (2014, November). Retrieved from <https://www.motownmuseum.org/story/motown/>
- Noisey, B. (2016, May). A Brief History of N.W.A. Collaborations Post-N.W.A. Retrieved from https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/a-brief-history-of-nwa-collaborations-post-nwa
- Richardson, N. (2016, November 21). Here's A Full Transcript Of Kanye West's Sacramento Concert Speech. Retrieved from <http://www.thefader.com/2016/11/20/kanye-west-transcriptsacramento>
- Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York: Knopf.
- Smith-Strickland, S. (2016, November 29). Celebrities Mental Health Matters. Retrieved from <http://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/11/29/celebrities-mental-health-matters/>
- Stasi, L. (2016, February 12). Kanye West demeans women — and we are all lesser for it. Retrieved October 18, 2016, from <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/kanye-west-demeans-women-lesserarticle-1.2529833>
- Rolling Stone. (2016, March 8). N.W.A Biography. Retrieved November 24, 2016, from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/n-w-a/biography>
- Time Magazine. (2016, July 29). A Comprehensive Guide to the Kanye West-Taylor Swift Feud. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4411055/kanye-west-taylor-swift-kim-kardashian-feud/>
- Tribune, B. C. (2007, November 13). Kanye and his mom shared special bond. Retrieved from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2007-11-13/news/0711130488_1_chicago-state-university-degree-from-auburn-university-kanye-west
- Wahl, O. (2014). Mental Illness and the Media. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Health, Illness, Behavior, and Society*, 1592-1595. doi:10.1002/9781118410868.wbehibs062