



New Slaves: Kanye West, Brad Paisley, and Contemporary Confederate-Flag Discourse in Popular Music Iconography

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One hundred and fifty years after Appomattox, the iconographic remains of America's Civil War are still contested symbolic artifacts. Case in point: at the writing of this paper a state bill sat on California Governor Jerry Brown's desk which would ban the sale of the Confederate flag or any merchandise with Confederate flag imagery on state property. Thus California has become the most recent battleground of the war between the states, or to word it in more precise language, California legislators have entered the debate over who controls a flag's meaning and memory.

California Assemblyman Isadore Hall III, who sponsored the bill, explained that its near-unanimous passage is an instance of the state "standing together united to fend off the ugly hatred of racism that's been portrayed and demonstrated through the emblem of the Confederacy."¹ This is certainly not the first time that this flag has been attacked for its purported signification of racism, as many Americans believe that the banner still flies in defense of America's slave-owning past. While reception is often more powerful than intention as a symbol generates or facilitates the creation of meaning, this popular reading of the Confederate flag avoids author James L. Swanson's observation that it was in fact the stars and stripes and not the stars and bars which flew over slave-holding states for most of America's history.² Still, as a nation we are accustomed to constant debate over the memory and meaning of the Confederate flag, as many individuals violently oppose it as a tool of American racists while a vocal opposition uphold the flag as an image of tradition, history, and pride.

It is not too shocking, for example to see a young man walking down the street wearing a jacket with a Confederate flag patch sewn onto the shoulder.

After all, that the flag remains such a hotly-contested symbol speaks to its relevance; if no one ever flew it or wore it there would be no call to tear it down. Many music enthusiasts can be seen wearing the flag not as an overt political statement but as a form of conspicuous consumption as their Lynyrd Skynyrd or other concert t-shirts proclaim them to belong to a certain crowd. Most of these flag-wavers would argue that in this context the Confederate flag means something different than what is generally believed; for them it is not a symbol of slavery, hatred, or even the Confederacy, but of the good-time American tradition of Southern Rock n' Roll.

Yet, what if the Confederate flag jacket mentioned earlier were not hypothetical but were, instead, an actual jacket recently designed and worn by hip-hop artist and provocateur Kanye West. (Figure 1) No casual or thoughtless appropriation, this was calculated product placement, an advertisement for West's international tour for his 2013 album *Yeezus*. West was not only wearing the flag to bate the paparazzi, to stay on front pages, electronic screens, and in the minds of the masses as he prepared to perform around the globe, but in fact the flag was a central visual element of the multi-media spectacle that was to be the *Yeezus* tour.



Figure 1. Kanye West wearing his Confederate Flag jacket in 2013. Source: X17online.com (reproduced with permission).

Before the tour began in the fall of 2013, West opened a pop-up store in Los Angeles. Hanging on the wall behind the counter was a Confederate flag bearing the slogan “I ain’t coming down.” (Figure 2) Other flag merchandise was also for sale. Some items seemed to offer commentary, such as a t-shirt with a skeletal death figure wearing a Confederate cloak. Other pieces, like one simple canvas tote bag, carried the flag without further discussion.



Figure 2. Confederate flag emblazoned “I ain’t coming down.” Source: fashionbombdaily.com (accessed 23 January 2016).

These same offerings later appeared in the lobby at each performance for the *Yeezus* tour. The merchandise booth at a popular concert is set up in the liminal concourse space between the entrance and the auditorium and as such is a first stop for many concert-goers, a preface to the ideas elaborated throughout the evening’s entertainment. In this instance, this was no simple concert but instead a theatrical event full of esoteric and mystical symbolism, a mysterious and extravagantly staged journey complete with a sacred mountain stage set. For much of the show West’s face was hidden behind one of four different masks designed in collaboration with the French fashion design house *Maison Martin Margiela*. During the show’s climax the figure of Jesus appeared on stage to speak with West, after which the mask was removed. Themes of opposition, struggle, transformation, and transcendence played out in the dark theater, but when the show was over the fans returned to their homes with their tour souvenirs emblazoned with, among other things, the Confederate flag. (Figure 3) As is frequently the case, the material and visual components of popular music continued to do significant cultural work when the music was over. What would these Confederate flags signify, how would they continue to generate meaning for the audience at home or for those who had never

attended the show in the first place, but who wore and thus waved the flag as a visual adjunct to listening to West's adventurous hip-hop?



Figure 3. Example of Yeezus tour merchandise. Source: fashionbombdaily.com (accessed 23 January 2016).

I argue that Kanye West's appropriation of the Confederate flag can be best viewed as part of a powerful symbolic multi-media performance which demanded new reflections on this old flag, a flag that in West's words, flies now over "new slaves." This appropriation can be seen as an answer to an earlier but nearly contemporary musical defense of the flag, Brad Paisley's 2013 single "Accidental Racist." West, despite his tabloid-media magnetism, should be regarded as a serious artist engaged in dialog with other musicians, artists, and designers of the past and present. When he says the Confederate flag "ain't coming down," he is insisting that people will continue to use the flag and should be allowed to so long as they know what they are using it for.

West in Artistic and Theoretical Context

The general public is most familiar with Kanye West as a tabloid mainstay. This is in part due to his marriage to E-Channel celebrity Kim Kardashian and to his tendency toward brash scene-stealing episodes. Many who have not heard his music may recall the incident at the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards when in protest to Taylor Swift winning female video of the year instead of Beyoncé, wife of West's frequent collaborator Jay Z, Kanye stormed the stage to usurp Swift's acceptance speech time in a tirade against the network. In

another famous televised moment during a live telethon for Hurricane Katrina, West pronounced that the Federal government's late and deficient response to the hurricane was proof that President George W. Bush didn't care about black people. These very public demonstrations have unfortunately caused many to see West as a ridiculous figure. I argue that instances such as West's reframing of the Confederate flag reveal him to be not a fool but a sophisticated manipulator of sign systems through a process that Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates has called "signifying."³

To simplify Gates's argument, signifying is a practice of sign manipulation, usually linguistic, wherein the performer double-codes his or her pronouncements in such a way that most listeners are entertained, baffled, or outraged by what they believe is being said, while failing to understand additional underlying meanings. Gates based his theory on a trickster monkey figure common in many African American folk stories who outsmarted other more dangerous animals through clever wordplay and jokes. Gates further connected these narratives to African traditions of trickster gods, such as the Yoruba orisha Eshu Elegba. Other scholars have utilized Gates's theory to examine not only African American literary figures but musicians as well.⁴ While I am not aware of others explicitly framing West using this language, other scholars have described him in ways which root his performance firmly within the signifying traditions of appropriation, re-framing, and witty repetition. William Jelani Cobb, in his book *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip-Hop Aesthetic*, argued that hip-hop is a descendent of the blues through this tradition of signifying, or what he calls "trickster consciousness."⁵ When discussing West, Cobb clearly positioned him within this same tradition, saying: "Kanye West was never the best rapper going—but then again he didn't need to be. He had enough conceptual originality and wit to get over with the middle-range flow that he has."⁶ In other words, West is a hip-hop incarnation of the trickster, who, according to Cobb, was usually not as adept as his rivals but outsmarted them "with cunning and double-edged wit."⁷

An argument could be made, though it is beyond the scope of this project, that West's entire career has been a grand performance of signifying. His reputation as an impulsive outspoken cultural antagonist and media buffoon has accompanied a career of sincere political commentary. Jeffry O. G. Ogbar in *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, included West in a short list of rap artists who bucked popular tradition by being overtly political in spite of the fact that in his research: "political expressions are uncommon among mainstream R&B artists and pop musicians whose format typically encompasses low ballads and festive tracks."⁸ West's persona, in other words,

has given him a media platform for sneaking stinging commentary into mass popular consciousness, much to the frustration and befuddlement of commentators and media consumers who view him as a joke. It is telling that this *E-news* and *Us Weekly* mainstay has received a modest amount of thoughtful scrutiny from the ivory towers of academia, with numerous articles and at least one academic text published investigating his cultural and aesthetic contributions.⁹ It is in this vein that I wish to consider his Confederate flag appropriations, not only within the context of an overtly political career but as a component of one particular, critically acclaimed and intensely challenging album.

***Yeezus* and the Flag**

Yeezus, West's sixth solo album, arrived in June 2013 to near-universal acclaim. The aesthetically and lyrically confrontational record, which West claims was inspired by minimalist design and modern architecture, received not only positive but effusive reviews from *The Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork Media*, *The New York Times*, and others.¹⁰ While West's name-dropping of twentieth-century giants like Le Corbusier as inspirations for the album may seem lofty or pretentious, it is worth noting that his mother was a professor and head of the English department at Chicago State University and that West himself attended the American Academy of Art in Chicago for one year as a painting student before dropping out to concentrate on music. As such, the trips to the Louvre that he cites as formative in composing *Yeezus*'s startling sounds are not only pretension but practices in keeping with the artist's education and personal history.

These design inspirations paid off, as Sasha Frere-Jones of *The New Yorker* called the record "technically breathtaking," writing that its "many flashes are the sonic equivalent of interrogation lamps."¹¹ The minimal yet severe and abrasive music is a fitting match for West's lyrics that are sharp and combative. While rich in tropes typical to hip-hop, including boasts of his economic success and romantic prowess, West's songs also offer incisive criticism of contemporary racism and of America's celebrity culture, which some may find problematic considering the artist's presence in the media. This is not, however, a retracing of the racism of the past, but a post-modern, fractured representation of the present, a kaleidoscopic view of contemporary stereotyping and derision, which is evident in song titles such as "Black Skinhead" and "Blood on the Leaves," the latter referring to and containing a sample of Abel Meeropol's anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit" popularized by Billie Holiday in a 1939 recording.

Frere-Jones argued that the album was a personal declaration of West's self-proclaimed genius and cultural power. This reading is certainly appropriate given that the title *Yeezus*, is a portmanteau of Jesus and West's nickname "Yeezy," and that the album contains a track called "I am a God." Yet, Katy Khan has argued that references to religion and specifically Christian allusions in hip-hop are often veiled political statements. Though she does not use the phrase, it is a type of religious signifying in which sacred figures and stories are reframed as tools of political empowerment. As Khan said of West's single "Jesus Walks," West "uses images of Jesus, God, and African Americans as symbols of 'soldiers,' who are all being invited to participate in the struggle for a better form of life for African Americans."¹² I would argue that the same is true of *Yeezus*, that the boasting and delusions of grandeur mask powerful commentary on American society, racism in particular. In fact, Frere-Jones acknowledged *Yeezus*'s political angle by titling his *New Yorker* review "Black Noise," as the phrase is not only a clever play on the white-noise generators at the heart of the album's synthesized sounds, but also proclaims the record a uniquely African American expression.

Take for example the song "New Slaves," which West himself referenced when he attempted to explain his use of the Confederate flag. In a 28 October 2013, interview on LA's 97.1 AMP Radio, West answered the criticism he had received regarding his appropriation by saying: "The Confederate flag represented slavery in a way. . . . So I wrote the song, 'New Slaves.' So I took the Confederate flag and made it my flag. It's my flag now. Now what you gonna do?"¹³

While Frere-Jones believes "I am a God," is the central theme of *Yeezus*, I would argue that the record has two heartbeats: one personal to West and one outwardly engaged with contemporary society. The song "New Slaves," provides that second focus by attacking contemporary consumer and media practices that control social power dynamics including the institutionalization of racism.

In the song's first verse West describes two different types of racism. In his first example, poor black Americans are automatically treated as criminals, followed and put under surveillance, told not to "touch anything" when they enter a store. Wealthy black Americans receive opposite but equally offensive treatment in the patronizing manipulation of their financial position, or as West puts it they are encouraged to "come in and buy more." At the end of the verse he momentarily plays the part of a record company executive, manager, or some other sleazy salesman who says to his African American client: "Want a Bentley, fur coat, and diamond chain? All you *blacks* want all the same things."

In a powerful example of West's skill at signifying, at using and reusing certain words and symbols in surprising and disturbing ways, when he hisses the word "blacks" in the voice of this manipulative businessman, it sounds somehow more degrading and dismissive than when he uses the n-word, which happens so frequently in contemporary hip hop that it has become almost meaningless.

The title "New Slaves" argues that contemporary consumer culture and its interrelated fame complex keep all people enslaved, not only African Americans. This is an overarching theme in West's career, evidenced in a recent performance in Los Angeles when during one of his well-known rants he warned the audience that "Society is set up to control you—I'm keeping it real in an unreal situation."¹⁴ It is in this spirit that he delivers the song's dramatic and dour second verse, in which he invokes a musical memory of lynching in the Jim Crow South at the same time as he flaunts and questions the lasting power of his own wealth by invoking the name of a German luxury automobile brand:

I throw these Maybach keys
 I wear my heart on my sleeve
 I know that we're the new slaves
 I see the blood on the leaves
 I see the blood on the leaves
 I see the blood on the leaves
 I know that we're the new slaves
 I see the blood on the leaves.

In the interview previously cited, West stated that the Confederate flag was a symbol of slavery then claimed it as his own. He also linked his use of the Confederate flag to a song in which he repeatedly shouts, "we're the new slaves." It seems that while this flag is flying none of us have much hope of freedom. If the Confederate flag now belongs to West, as he claims, it flies over a severely troubled cultural landscape. Rather than re-imagining or reframing the flag as something positive or affirming, he claimed it then used it to indict a popular culture obsessed with money and fame while acknowledging his and his audience's place in the corrupted system. By pairing the flag with slogans such as "I ain't coming down," he suggested that this old banner and the new slavery it now represents aren't going anywhere anytime soon.

Consider the sheet-like mural that hung in West's pop-up store. The Confederate flag has become a tattered shroud wrapped around the iconic figure of death, a skeleton holding his ancient scythe for reaping souls. He is surrounded on all sides by simple cruciform stars that at once recall the stars of the flag and

suggest camera flashbulbs, as though the reaper is now a twenty-first-century celebrity hounded by paparazzi. Who or what is the winning team of the mural's slogan? Is it death, the celebrity cultural complex, or the enslavement signified by death's starry coat. From West's perspective the winning team could be all three. If we are all the new slaves then slavery, represented by the flag, has won. At the same time, in the production and consumption of fame, the paparazzi win when they find economic reward by "enslaving" celebrities, by limiting their freedom and movement to catch a successful picture. But death, the only release from slavery and exploitation, is perhaps the ultimate winner.

When Kanye West claimed the Confederate flag, he did not attempt to make it mute and lifeless. Instead he insisted that the flag's power did not die with the Confederacy and has instead evolved into something perhaps more insidious for its pervasiveness and hegemonic anonymity. At the same time, by using such a profoundly resonant symbol in ways that at once obscure and illuminate possibilities of its communicative potential, he participated in the literary trope of signifying as articulated by Henry Louis Gates. Just like many trickster figures who came in literature and folklore before him, he outsmarted powerful opponents, found personal success, and challenged accepted cultural beliefs and systems of communication, all while being perceived as a fool. Only time will tell if West's actions will become a lasting part of the flag's biography, but at the very least he used an old flag to say something new, even if he was only adding to an existing cultural dialog.

Is There Any Such Thing As an Accident?

Two months before *Yeezus* appeared, country artist Brad Paisley released his ninth album, *Wheelhouse*. The album is perhaps best known for its controversial single "Accidental Racist," a collaboration with hip-hop icon LL Cool J in which Paisley attempted to come to terms with America's racist history through a discussion of the popular appropriation of the Confederate flag. The song began:

To the man that waited on me at the Starbucks down on Main
I hope you understand
When I put this t-shirt on, the only thing I meant to say was

I'm a Skynyrd fan.

The red flag on my chest somehow is like the elephant in the room
Just a proud rebel son with an ol' can of worms
Lookin' like I got a lot to learn but from my point of view

I'm just a white man comin' to you from the Southland
 Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be
 I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done
 And it ain't like you and me can rewrite history.

Paisley's single was widely maligned earning the dubious honor of Saturday Night Live and Stephen Colbert's mockery, the latter performing his own spin-off song "Oopsie Daisy Homophobe" with actor and LGBT rights activist Alan Cumming. LL Cool J was also derided for his participation and for his cringe-worthy contributions to the song which included the lines: "If you don't judge my do-rag/ I won't judge your red flag" and "If you don't judge my gold chains/ I'll forget the iron chains."

In one particularly venomous essay, Ta-Nehisi Coates questioned Paisley's choice of LL Cool J for this dialog. Though he is a well-known rap artist and entertainer, LL Cool J rarely if ever has addressed race in his own music. As Coates asserted, "the only reason to call up LL is that he is black and thus must have something insightful to say about the Confederate flag."¹⁵ For Coates and others critical of Paisley's judgment, the inclusion of an apolitical black celebrity smacked of tokenism and thus exacerbated the charge of racism that the song was meant to refute.

Whatever Paisley's intent, a survey of reviews and commentaries demonstrate that the general public received "Accidental Racist" as a misfire. I do not believe Paisley to be a racist and presume he meant the song to communicate a positive message. Yet, the word *accidental* in the title speaks volumes. Just as Paisley did not mean to upset the possibly imaginary Starbucks barista by wearing a shirt emblazoned with the Confederate flag, he also had no intention of offending with the song that he wrote as a plea for forgiveness. But, as Coates articulated, the accident is the offense. That Paisley did not think through the possible reception of his song and instead assumed that people would come to understand his laid-back not-so-critical Southern pride as emblematic of a positive and friendly good-times attitude is a demonstration of the problem that many Americans simply don't think that their actions and beliefs have consequences.

Kanye West has not, to my knowledge, made public comment about Paisley's confederate-flag-wearing anthem. However, the timing of West's iconographic appropriation puts the *Yeezus* tour merchandise, pop-up store, and his comments about the Confederate flag in a discourse recently agitated by Paisley's misstep. West, in a sense, joined the debate as a rejoinder to LL

Cool J, who not only lacked the political grounding in his own work to offer a nuanced perspective on the flag but who is also better known to contemporary audiences as an actor and not a hip-hop artist, making him a doubly dubious choice for the discussion. I do not claim to know that West purposefully answered Paisley's flag-wearing song by donning the Confederate flag himself. But, a close look at West's visual appropriations and linguistic manipulations show that, unlike Paisley, he didn't do anything by accident.



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End Notes

1. Isadore Hall III, quoted in Melanie Mason, "California lawmakers OK bill that would ban Confederate flag displays," *Los Angeles Times Online*, 21 August 2014, accessed 29 August 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/local/political/la-me-pc-confederate-flag-bill-20140820-story.html>.
2. Paraphrased from a response James L. Swanson gave to a question while addressing museum professionals and docents at the National Museum of American History, The Smithsonian Institution, March 2012.
3. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
4. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rapper: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990).
5. William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on Hip-Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 21.
6. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 179.
9. See Julius Bailey, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
10. See Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *The New York Times Online*, 11 June 2013, for a discussion of West's design inspirations for *Yeezus*, accessed 29 August 2014, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html.

11. Sasha Frere-Jones, "Black Noise: Kanye West's Assaultive New Album," *The New Yorker*, 24 June 2013.
12. Katy Khan, "Religion, Music, and the Question of Social Justice in Selected African American Singers," *Muziki* 5, no. 2 (2008): 181.
13. Kanye West, interview, 97.1 AMP Radio, Los Angeles, 28 October 2013, accessed 29 August 2014, www.amp.cbslocal.com/kanye-west-drops-by-97-1-amp-radio/.
14. Kanye West quoted in Randall Roberts, "Made in America: Kanye West declares intentions, executes perfectly," *Los Angeles Times Online*, 1 September 2014 (accessed 1 September 2014), www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-made-in-america-kanye-west-declares-intentions-executes-perfectly-20140901-column.html.
15. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Why Accidental Racist is actually Just Racist," *The Atlantic Online*, 9 April 2013, accessed 29 August 2014, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/why-accidental-racist-is-actually-just-racist/274826.