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“Who Will Survive in America”: Kanye West and the Re-Imagination of Race in *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*

“One of the things hip-hop criticism should do, in addition to providing interesting and informative analyses of the art form, is to use the creativity and ideology contained within the music to enrich the ways we think about society and the ways we create contemporary theory”

– Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood* (101)

The shifting vocabularies of racial identity and signification in North America have become increasingly complex with the rise of popular post-racial discourse. Intimately linked with a move toward neo-liberal ideology and policy, the concept of the post-racial state relies on rhetorical strategies of privatization and personal responsibility. Since the 1980s, the framing of popular political and social discourse has shifted, severely, from a discussion of the collective rights and responsibilities of civil society to a more overtly privatized conversation wherein vocabularies of personal responsibility, wealth and economic stability eclipse the importance of identities rooted in communities or cultures. As a result of these shifting vocabularies, notions of criminality, poverty and social precariousness have also been demarcated as the space of individuals. Rather than recognizing such challenges as socio-political, the move away from civil responsibility has resulted in the privatization of blame. Despite the very real practices of racial inequality in contemporary North America the language of popular discourse has become “post-racial” insofar as it has dislocated race from understandings of community and culture. The effect of this dislocation is twofold: it is resulting in the disappearance of the vocabularies needed to engage in discussions of race as they relate to politics of meaning making and practices of inequality while simultaneously limiting the possibility for critique or resistance that is located in the collective, the common, or the good.
However, there are gestures being taken against this re-framing of popular discourse that leaves race out of popular conversation. In his role as one of hip hop’s leading figures, Kanye West has often been criticized for his insistence on explanations of social inequality that are inexplicably tied to race. The most immediate example of Kanye’s overtly racialized analysis came in 2005, when, in wake of Hurricane Katrina, he critiqued both the popular media coverage and the Bush administration for being racist in their response to the flooding in New Orleans. Significantly, on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010) Kanye begins a move away from explicit political critique and social commentary into a more nuanced world of racial signification. By framing the album as a psychological journey through the dreamlike and nightmarish fantasies of “The Kanye West Celebrity”, Kanye West the artist is able to talk about the more acute and subtle aspects of the way he experiences race. Ultimately, through an engagement with questions of racial identity, cultural memory, and communities of resistance, Kanye indicts neo-liberal “post-racial” rhetoric. He challenges listeners to imagine new ways of signifying racial meaning that move beyond the balkanization of communities and he instead suggests more flexible and fluid modes of collective identity.

Imani Perry’s *More Beautiful and More Terrible* (2011) and Stephanie Li’s *Signifying Without Specifying* (2011) offer insight into the fissures of post-racial language. Perry and Li suggest the potential of working through this discourse of ambiguity towards the re-introduction

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1 Rather than being an isolated instance, this very public moment of discursive transgression is often played out in Kanye’s music. One of the most obvious examples is the recurring suggestion that HIV/AIDS can be recognized not only as a medical problem but one with intimate ties to race relationships and systems of power in the United States. Kanye makes references to the problem of HIV/AIDS in the 2005 releases “Roses”: “you know the best medicine goes to the people that’s paid/ if Magic Johnson’s got a cure for AIDS/ and all the broke muthafuckers pass away”; and “Heard ‘Em Say”: “I know the government administer AIDS/ so I guess we just pray like the minister say”; as well as the 2010 song “Gorgeous”: “I treat the cash the way the government treat AIDS/ I won’t be satisfied ‘til all my niggas get it. Get it?”
and re-constitution of race in a way that suggests more flexible and permeable understandings of community and racial signification in the contemporary moment. The purpose of this paper is to not only examine the problems of the neo-liberal language shift towards post-racial colour blindness, but more importantly to examine the ways in which contemporary theorists as well as artists suggest the potential for new ways of understanding racial signification that moves toward what Li refers to as “difference without hierarchy: race without racism” (8). One way into a discussion of post-racial language is through an analysis of neo-liberal hegemony and the impacts it has on contemporary political and social discourse. While the breadth of this impact is too large to deal with in this paper in detail, focusing on how the development of neo-liberal hegemony has limited the acceptable vocabularies surrounding equality, identity, and culture provides insight into the ways in which discussions of racial inequality have been erased from popular discourse.

In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan begins her critique of the “neo-liberal attack on democracy” by breaking down the “construction of neo-liberal hegemony into five phases” (iii). Duggan lists the shrinking of popular political culture, attacks on “downwardly distributive social movements,” “pro-business activism,” and the resulting “upward redistribution of wealth,” the “culture wars” and “emergent ‘multi-cultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics” as the distinct phases of neo-liberal hegemony (xii). For the purposes of this analysis, Duggan’s fourth and fifth phases concerning the “culture wars” as “attacks on public institutions and spaces for democratic public life” as well the “stripped-down, non-redistributive form of neo-liberal “equality” are the most important to include in a discussion contemporary political and social discourse.

The strength of neo-liberal hegemonic discourse has been its ability to completely frame and regulate the appropriate debate surrounding the intersections of economics, politics and
culture. Duggan suggests that this framing relies on the separation of "economic policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise" that is "presented as separate from politics and culture" and thus highly resistant to any critique that falls outside of the logic of wealth and materiality (xiv). Within this framework, "opposition to material inequality is maligned as 'class warfare,' while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial" (xiv). Through this coding of language, intersections between hierarchies of class, gender, and race have been camouflaged and thus become increasingly difficult to articulate. For Duggan, the principal failure of "progressive-left politics" has been the "failure to grasp the shifting dimensions of the alliance politics underlying neo-liberal success" and the corresponding inability to respond to these new "languages" in an equally creative and nuanced way (xvi).

Unfortunately, this inability has seemingly resulted in the rise of a notion of equality linked to the privatization of race that is removed from the socio-economic factors and historical narratives that accompany it. The equality proposed by neo-liberal discourse is equality "disarticulated from material life" of class, race, or gender (XVIII) and is often limited to easily digestible "decorative or entertaining" differences (Perry 16). This strategy of equality that moves toward a "colour-blind" (Duggan 44) and "civil-privatist" (Perry 17) approach to diversity further stabilizes the "schism" between identity and cultural politics and economic debate by regulating problems of material inequality to the private sphere (Duggan 71). In other words, the success of neo-liberal discourse has been the formidable distinction made between economy, culture, and politics that in turn mutates discussions of social or civil responsibility into privatized concerns by privileging free market interests.

The rise of this post-racial discourse makes talking about the material realities of race very difficult. Especially when initially limited to conceptions of equality that are embodied in the
language of the free market economy, discussions surrounding race and racial inequality can be
disorienting. Imani Perry suggests that “anxiety and confusion about what race means and
doesn’t mean” in the contemporary moment shrouds the necessary conversations around the
discourse of race in thick ambiguity (3). Thinking about race in the post-industrial, post-racial
moment in relation to Barack Obama having been elected for a second time necessitates a new
way of talking about race that considers “race in terms of material realities; everyday race talk;
new, old, and corporate media; law; religion; geography; patterns of consumption; economic
competition; and human interaction” (15). Instead of a neo-liberal colour-blindness, the
complexities of racial signification in the contemporary moment call for a nuanced and
intersectional approach that resists easy framing of “racially discriminatory behaviour in terms of
intentionality” (21). Perry argues for a cultivation of a cognitive dissonance that challenges the
inconsistencies between “professed values and cultural practices” (22). One of the key elements
in this practice of redefining racism is a phenomenological approach to race.

Conceiving race as a highly dynamic practice that persists in the “decision making of
people at all levels of society”, Perry advocates a move toward understanding race as a living
matrix of belonging (27). Perry urges her readers to see beyond the divisions (re)presented in
popular media and neo-liberal rhetoric. She instead advocates to look for the “number of
divisions that demarcate racialized insider and outsider status…[divisions] that lie along
multiple axes and have a variety of metaphoric expressions” (26). For Perry, a successful
framework for nuanced racial analysis cannot be invested in the antiquated binaries of black
and white. Instead, appropriate engagement with the ambiguities of racism today has to
interrogate the neo-liberal logic of worth and belonging. This matrix of belonging signifies
through class: “high-status” (upper/middle class) and “low status” (working poor) as well as
acceptability: “insider” (citizen)
and "outsider" (non-citizen) in addition to race (27). On these axes, easy definitions of racism are elusive. It is precisely this elusive quality of racism that underlies neo-liberal, post-racial discourse. Since the articulated cultural meaning of "blackness" is no longer simply exclusionary or worth(-)less, identity can become highly reputation based. Because of the varying and "distinct relationships to privilege and access between, among, and within groups of people of colour", an analysis of racial inequality that is not intersectional cannot be appropriate for a critique of contemporary race relations (29). In this way, an engagement with race that focuses on the importance of status and reputation, in addition to colour, is better suited to deal with the ambiguities of contemporary racism.

Though Perry is deeply concerned with the legal, economic, and political consequences of racial inequality in the United States, one of the most important parts of her critique is the attention to consequences of racial narratives. Perry calls attention to how culturally important narratives are for acquiring and disseminating knowledge. As a result, the racial narratives alive in "daily conversations, in print, through the broadcast and news media, in literature, and in child rearing" are all an essential part of how people understand race, racism and equality (44). What is important to this argument is the insistence that racial narratives are not only descriptive. Instead, Perry suggests that racial narratives are also prescriptive to the extent that they "not only give you a particular image; they tell you something consequential that will follow in the lives of the people or characters" presented in the image (45). Popularized narratives of race that are presented as natural (and neutral) are problematic because they camouflage racial inequality in

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2 Perry suggests that "as the cosmopolitan elites of the United States have become increasingly heterogeneous...the category of "White" has become more porous and reputation based, rather than genealogical" (29). This understanding of racial identity relies more on "identifiability" and "collective attributes" than it does on heritage (29). The significance of this move toward an increasingly reputation rooted understanding of racial identity is that it presents race as fluid and flexible rather than necessarily exclusive and static.
objectivity. In the process of narrative meaning making, the intentionality of racism disappears. Instead, in a bizarre reversal of neo-liberal rhetoric, narratives of race disassociate individual choices from racial inequality through the construction of the “innocent knowledge” of racial narratives. Moreover, the continual use of “linguistic proxies for race like ‘inner city,’ fatherlessness,” and ‘crack baby’” evaporate racialized language from popular discourse while still articulating racist narratives (51).

Stephanie Li suggests that the disappearance of racialized language in popular discourse has not heralded a post-racial moment, but has instead increased the complexity of racial identity and race relations (4). In response to the increasing use of racial proxies in neo-liberal discourse, Li moves toward an alternative practice of signifying race that creates its own codes of racial meaning. Li advocates for the development of a new language that simultaneously rests on and “exploits the instability of racially loaded signifiers” (5). Reading racial coding within the tradition of signifin(g), Li poses the potential for a re-imagination of racial identity that signals the importance of racial specificity as well as “multiracial cooperation” (5). Through a close engagement with the work of Toni Morrison, Li suggests that the most powerful way to talk about race in the contemporary moment is through a “race-specific, race-free language” that looks to articulate “race without racism” (8). With the development of a new, racially coded language, signifying race while transcending racial hierarchies allows for a discourse where “history marks but does not determine the path ahead” (9).

The power of this discourse is that it does not deny the significance of cultural memory and shared history. Instead, new ways of imagining racial meaning conceptualize an identity that is based on shared knowledge and interpretation. In this way, race becomes a space of intimacy where those able to hear racial significaton join in a community based on a shared interpretive
framework (12). This gesture towards newly theorized racial meaning suggests a potentially more flexible and fluid conception of communities that are grounded in intimacy and collectivity rather than difference and hierarchy. As one of the most influential and complex artists in contemporary hip-hop, Kanye makes strong gestures towards this type of new racial signification on his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Through his use of language and samples, Kanye simultaneously critiques racial inequality while offering a new way of understanding racial meaning grounded in the intimacy of interpretation.

This analysis will focus on the moments that bookend the album. These moments not only function as the introduction and conclusion to the work, but also present the most successful articulations of a new system of racial signification. The first song on the album, “Dark Fantasy”, begins with a dreamlike vocalization from an unlikely figure: Justin Vernon. As the highly mythologized frontman of indie-folk heroes Bon Iver, Justin Vernon introduces the listener, if briefly, to a new type of hip-hop that is explicitly interested in alternative modes of racial identities that are fluid and flexible. By opening his album with this unconventional musical choice, Kanye presents a hip-hop community where racial difference can be transcended: a community that is forged through the intimacies of sound. Interestingly, this introduction is paired with an allusion to one of Duke Ellington’s most popular jazz standards, the 1927 composition “Black and Tan Fantasie”. An obvious reference to the Ellington classic can be heard in both the title of West’s album and more specifically in the title of his first track where the “black and tan” becomes the “dark and twisted.” This seeming juxtaposition is not simply a post-modern collage, but rather an invitation to two distinct types of listeners through subtle and specific significations. In this way, the opening note of the album is a significant step towards a new conversation about racial meaning in the contemporary moment.
Similarly, the album’s first verse, a spoken word skit performed in a British accent, is a direct critique of established reading (or listening) practices in popular culture. Nicki Minaj, playing the fairy-god-mother, tells the listener that her usual listening practice, “the watered down one, the one you know/was made up centuries ago”, will be an unacceptable way to hear this new type of hip-hop. Instead, Minaj issues a challenge to the listener: “gather ‘round children, zip it, listen!” (West). Before the listener has a chance to respond, a chorus of futuristic-gospel vocals and a soulful piano progression overwhelms her. However, the music is not a simple reference to hip-hop’s African American heritage. Instead the reference is complicated by a distortion of the vocals and the inclusion of distinctly non-hip-hop artists, such as Elton John, in the chorus. This crowd is in the process of understanding its place in society: “can we get much higher?” (West). The phrasing of the question betrays the group’s conflict by allowing them to acknowledge that they are significantly “higher” in society than they have been, but still not as “high” as they would like. However, the speaker responds to this question with a biting irony: “we stopped the ignorance, we killed the enemy” (West) as if to mock the suggestion that the chorus of voices is valued in society at all.

In this moment of reflexivity, Kanye offers a scathing critique of a post-racial, neo-liberal discourse. Instead of being able to embrace a new moment where race does not exist, Kanye’s speaker is haunted by the “night demons” (West) that still visit him. Moreover, he actively resists the suggestions of post-racialism by participating in a “séance” (West) where he tries to communicate with the spirits of his past. In his attempt, the speaker is introduced to the hellfire and pain of his history. But, as he awakens, he has no appropriate language to process or communicate what he has seen. Instead, he attempts to escape the vision of his past: “But after that, took pills, kissed an heiress/and woke up back in Paris” (West). The speaker’s rejection of
the post-racial illusion frames the rest of the album as an attempt to articulate new codes of racial signification. Echoing the challenge of the first verse, the speaker’s dismissal of neo-liberal rhetoric invites the listener into a new community of resistance if able to read the new system of signification effectively.

Interestingly, the commitment to this new imaginative community is also the closing theme of the album. In the final two songs, “Lost in the World” and “Who Will Survive in America”, Kanye uses his musical samples to signify new racial communities. Again, the use of a Justin Vernon song as the primary sample in “Lost in the World” challenges a notion of the conventional hip-hop community as hyper-racialized and exclusionary. Instead, West effortlessly incorporates the “white” indie-folk sample into his hip-hop text. In a moment of exquisite production, West blends his own voice with Vernon’s in a metaphoric gesture of polyvocalism that signifies race without specifying hierarchy. As the song develops, the music becomes increasingly chaotic and urgent in a way that evokes “Dark Fantasy’s” séance scene. However, where the first séance invoked demons, the second invokes the voice of African American poet Gil Scott Heron, who literally communicates from the grave through the sample of his 1970 spoken word recording “Comment No.1”. As “Lost in the World” breaks down and gives way to the reverberation and rhythmic pulsing of “Who Will Survive In America”, the voice of Scott Heron is given new life as West rewrites his poem to signify the importance of its social critique in the contemporary moment.

The song, and the album, ends with Scott-Heron’s emphatic repetition of “who will survive in America” (West). The staccato rhythm of the line gains momentum with

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3 It is interesting and important to note that no question mark appears in the official title of the song. The absence of the expected punctuation necessitates a deeper engagement with the meaning of the line.
each enunciation, and by the end of the song the question has seemingly transformed into a mantra for Kanye’s newly imagined community: “who will survive in America” becomes “we will survive in America”. By pairing the Gil Scott-Heron sample with the Bon Iver sample, Kanye ends the album with the same type of dual invitation he began it with. Combining the conventional understanding of hip-hop’s African American heritage in a dialogue with non-traditional hip-hop samples, Kanye suggests a new community of listeners that acknowledges, but does not place race within a hierarchy. Instead, the presentation of a fluid and flexible community holds the ability to read significations of cultural meaning as its pre-requisite for membership. By destabilizing a conventional hip-hop framework, Kanye participates in the forging of a new racial language as suggested by Imani Perry and Stephanie Li. Kanye’s enthusiastic attempt to transcend racial difference, while still acknowledging racial specificity, is a move toward reviving race in popular discourse. In My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, Kanye West rejects the popularized concept of post-racialism and instead challenges his listeners to not only think about how race functions in popular discourse but also how it can be re-imagined, re-figured, and re-presented as a site for new communities of resistance.
Works Cited


