KANYE WEST’S USE OF THE DIATRIBE:

An Offensive “Scumbag” or A Modern-Day Cynic?

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ABSTRACT

Kanye West is a musical artist whose shocking public statements often remain in the news for weeks on end. Throughout the past six years of his extremely successful career, at least three of these public acts have received tireless media coverage both for their perceived offensiveness, and for their direct connection to larger societal issues. This project examines three statements: (1) West’s 2005 claim during Hurricane Katrina that “[President] George Bush doesn’t care about Black people;” (2) the moment in 2009 when West stormed the MTV Video Music Awards stage during singer Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech and grabbed her microphone, stating that he would let her finish, “but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time;” and (3) West’s 2010 appearance on NBC’s Today Show and the series of angry messages he posted to his Twitter page claiming that the interviewer, Matt Lauer, tried to “force” his answers. These statements are analyzed to determine whether West may have unwittingly employed the rhetorical method Theodore Windt describes as the diatribe. The paper concludes that West’s statements in 2005 and 2010 meet the criteria for the diatribe, using a shocking act or message to catalyze important discussion of major problems existing in society. However, West’s 2009 incident fails to meet the criteria, and cannot be categorized as a diatribe, but instead as simply an offensive act that provided no greater benefit to society. The process of these analyses may serve as a way to examine future celebrity statements to determine whether certain individuals are striving to elevate society or, through their offenses, may be adding to a cultural downfall.
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

As a collective whole, celebrities are constantly generating outlandish public statements that catch the attention of the media and the public. Whether these statements are self-promotional or simply made to attract attention and merit a longer stay in the spotlight, they often flood even the most respectable news sources, drowning out stories that may actually be far more important. However, in some cases, a celebrity may use his or her press-stopping influence to bring an issue to light that would otherwise remain unnoticed. In order to do this, the person creating the message or statement must find a way to break through the noise of countless others to ensure that the appropriate audience receives it. The diatribe, used by the Cynics of Ancient Greece, is a method designed to cause shock by using an offensive act to gain the audience’s attention, which will consequently initiate a productive discussion of the previously ignored issue.

Kanye West is an artist whose shocking public statements frequently make headlines for weeks on end. Each act seems to be tied to a larger societal issue. In 2005, West proclaimed, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!” at the American Red Cross’s Concert for Hurricane [Katrina] Relief. Four years later in 2009, West stormed the stage during singer Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for “Best Female Video” at the MTV Video Music Awards, grabbed Swift’s microphone, and informed the audience that, “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time.” Finally, in 2010, West appeared on NBC’s Today Show after President George Bush wrote that West’s statement in 2005 marked the lowest moment in his presidency, but then released a series of angry messages on Twitter describing his anger and frustration at the interview.
Through close analyses of these statements, all of which received heavy media coverage, this paper seeks to determine whether Kanye West may have unwittingly employed the diatribe: using shock to commit these offensive acts, which in turn inform the audience of societal issues that need to be revealed, discussed, and eventually solved. Only if nearly all of the diatribe’s requirements are met can any of these statements truly be labeled as such, thus elevating them from a category of inconsequential celebrity offenses to the status of a crucial and time-sensitive impetus for discussion, which will ultimately benefit a corrupt society.

Chapter Two provides recent background information about Kanye West’s career and perceived personality. Chapter Three outlines the body of scholarly research related to the topics of celebrity as a concept, racism in the media, the ways in which the media frames stories about celebrities, celebrities engaged in apologia, and analyses of emergent forms of social media. In the fourth chapter, there is an overview of the project’s methodology, which is based upon the rhetorical method of the diatribe. Chapter Five provides an analysis of West’s statement at the 2005 Concert for Hurricane Relief, when he declared during a live television broadcast that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!” Chapter Six examines the moment in 2009 when West grabbed the microphone during Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech at the MTV Video Music Awards to proclaim, “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time!” Chapter Seven analyzes West’s 2010 appearance on NBC’s *Today Show*, and the subsequent messages he posted to his Twitter account accusing the television program of framing and forcing his answers. Finally, Chapter Eight describes the implications and effects of the aforementioned public statements, and Chapter Nine discusses the conclusions of the project.
CHAPTER 2

Background on Kanye West

Since he stepped onto the music scene, first as a producer, then as a performer in his own right, Kanye West has been a regular fixture both in the news and on the music charts. His first album, *The College Dropout*, debuted at number two on the Billboard Top 200 in 2004. Each of his subsequent albums—*Late Registration* in 2005, *Graduation* in 2004, *808s and Heartbreak* in 2008, and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* in 2010—proceeded to debut at number one when released. His music has been appreciated not only by fans and consumers, but also by critics. From 2005 to 2011, West won 14 Grammy Awards and was nominated for 22 others. As his album sales and awards demonstrate, West’s initial foray into music proved to be no fluke, and his professional career has been both lucrative and critically acclaimed.

West has frequently headlined music festivals such as Lollapalooza, Bonnaroo, and Coachella, and his own tours sell out entire arenas. His 2008 “Glow in the Dark” Tour, combined with sales from *808s and Heartbreak*, and side projects like his Nike “Air Yeezy” shoe line, brought him revenues of $25 million in 2009 (Greenburg, 2009). Also in 2009, West designed a line of sneakers and loafers for luxury brand Louis Vuitton, which were shown at Paris Fashion Week.

West’s professional success and talent may be matched only by the criticism he receives for his outlandish personality. *Rolling Stone* magazine’s review of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* states that while *808s and Heartbreak* was melodically minimal, “on *Fantasy*, he gets ridiculously maximal, blowing past all the rules of hip-hop and pop,
even though, for the past half-decade, he’s been the one inventing the rules” (Sheffield, 2010). Later, the article reads:

Coming off a string of much-publicized emotional meltdowns, Yeezy [a nickname for West] is taking a deeper look inside the dark corners of his twisted psyche…. With *Fantasy*, he makes everybody else on the radio sound laughably meek, but he’s also throwing down a challenge to the audience. Kanye West thinks you’re a moron if you settle for artists who don’t push as hard as he does. And that means pretty much everybody (Sheffield, 2010).

Even in such a favorable review of his art, it seemed imperative to also mention West’s “much-publicized emotional meltdowns.” This juxtaposition is testament to the amount of publicity and attention West garners from both his extremely successful music and apparently “twisted psyche.” Because the general public has been so fascinated both by West’s work and his personality, it seems crucial to study three of the moments in which his public statements have garnered the most media attention. An examination of these moments shows that in two cases, he truly does seem to have an important message that he succeeds to convey to society, but one moment is simply an offensive act that, for the most part, West seems to regret.
CHAPTER 3

Past Literature

Scholarly research was examined in areas related to this project, focusing on the ideas of “celebrity” as a concept, racism in the media, the ways in which the media frames stories about celebrities, celebrities engaged in apologia, and celebrities’ use of emergent forms of social media. Each of these categories relates directly to aspects of Kanye West’s career, his public statements, and the ways and reasons why he likely made the statements.

*The Modern Concept of “Celebrity”*

Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) argue that the term “celebrity” as used in their article has three definitions. It can refer to “the actual human being represented by the term, or to the tradable commodity that a celebrity generates, or to the theoretical concept” (3). They also argue that there are different types of celebrity: attributed celebrity, which consists of moving oneself into the public eye and remaining there; ascribed celebrity, which one must be born into; and achieved celebrity, those who possess “rare talents and skills” (3). Kanye West’s fame would be classified as “achieved celebrity.” Hellmueller and Aeschbacher discuss visibility as a necessary facet of celebrity in the twenty-first century, as most public figures must attempt to compete for the media’s limited attention. However, this visibility means that while certain acts will be glorified, the media and others are quick to intensify a celebrity’s sins. And while celebrities do seem to carry a god-like status in our culture, they are surely not without sin.
Rarely a soft-spoken class of people, celebrities have often taken it upon themselves to actively support or attack a variety of institutions. One area of research has focused on the influence of celebrities on the political stage. Every election year countless ads run featuring celebrities urging young adults and other citizens to “Rock the Vote” or “Vote or Die.” Austin et al. (2008) studied the effects of celebrity political endorsements on young adult voters during the November 2004 elections. The subjects filled out a questionnaire the week before the elections, measuring participants’ receptivity to celebrity-endorsed campaigns, as well as their self-efficacy, situational involvement, apathy, receptivity to promotions, and complacency. They found that the celebrity-endorsed promotions appeared to positively affect self-efficacy by directly predicting higher self-efficacy levels in potential voters, and lower levels of complacency and higher involvement. The authors suggest that youth appeals by celebrities can help motivate young people to become involved in civic affairs because the fans will imitate the celebrities’ attitudes and behaviors.

Some critics, however, argue that the political arena itself is becoming a celebrity spectacle. Barney (2001) argues that the 2000 Election blurred the line between the government and celebrity/spectacle permanently, as the media searched for foul play all over the place, and words like “recount” and “chads” became part of dinner conversations and the cultural lexicon. In a similar vein, Rossman (2004) discusses the Dixie Chicks’ 2003 anti-Bush statement at their concert in London, when the lead singer claimed that they were ashamed George Bush was from Texas. Rossman wanted to find out whether the immediate reduction of the Dixie Chicks’ radio airplay was the result of corporations or civilians. The analysis revealed no evidence that corporate elites were responsible for
this media “blacklisting,” and instead argued, “In this instance, citizens imposed conservativism…on corporations” (76).

Implicit Racism in the Media and in Public Perception

While some of the articles cited above focused on celebrities stating their own opinions, the media is able to convey its own ideas, opinions, and specific angles by framing its stories in certain ways. Owens (2008) conducted a content analysis of network news programs in 2005, using the theory of incognizant racism. This theory states that journalists cover communities of color differently than they do the White community. In studying the three most-watched and most influential outlets—ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly News—for one month, Owens found that Whites were the dominant presence in televised news coverage, comprising over 75% of her coded sources.

Shah (2009) focused a similar analysis on conservative news media, making arguments about the way conservative media has affected public policy and opinion in the recent past. He analyzed one month of commentary from the leading conservative news sources (newspapers, magazines, columnists), focusing his detailed textual analysis only on those that devoted at least 50% of their paragraphs to racial issues. He found that the articles supported and promoted a longstanding narrative of irrationality where Blacks were seen as violating norms of sound decision-making and accepted behavior. He organized findings into three recurring narrative themes: “a different breed,” socio-cultural flaws, and unworthy victims. Shah finally argued that racial boundaries are created as a means of social control—a statement that both West and the ancient Greek Cynics would likely see as valid.
Although these analyses did find rampant racism in the media, it is also crucial to look at the public perception of the same issues. Public attitudes and opinions hold incredible influence—if the public believes something is racist, others may begin to share this belief simply because it seems to be public “knowledge.” De la Pena (2010) and Kaiser, Eccleston, & Hagiwara (2008) both studied public perception of racism during the response to Hurricane Katrina. De la Pena distributed surveys to subjects who were both Black and White, and asked whether the government would have responded faster if the Hurricane had affected different groups: Rich White, Poor White, Rich Black, and Poor Black. He found that it was more likely for Whites to blame socio-economic status and for Blacks to blame race, although both groups did agree that discrimination existed.

Kaiser, Eccleston, & Hagiwara (2008) surveyed 93 White and 60 Black subjects, showing them videos describing Hurricane Katrina and then asking the subjects to provide their reactions toward the videos. The videos first showed hurricane footage from National Geographic, then diverged—some showed victims, journalists, and public figures claiming that the government’s slow response was due to racism, and the other set showed victims, journalists, and public figures claiming that the ineffective response was due to government’s incompetence. They found that Whites reported greater attachment to their racial “ingroup” when exposed to the racism videos, whereas Blacks showed high levels of ingroup attachment and positivity regardless of which video they watched. The authors suggested reasons for this discrepancy in their discussion, such as the idea that Blacks hold far fewer “system-justifying beliefs” than Whites. This article is important to note because it seems as though the Whites were predisposed to be defensive about racism, while the Blacks were predisposed to distrusting the system.
The Symbiotic Relationship of Celebrities and Media

Another area of research focuses on studies of specific celebrities and the ways in which the media framed coverage of each celebrity’s life. In telling these stories, the media may include narrative elements such as familiar symbols, plots, and characters in order to create a neatly-tied and familiar package to present to its audience. Kitch (2007) conducted narrative analyses of the life stories of four celebrities, now deceased, who were known throughout their careers as “dark” celebrities: Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Marlon Brando, and Richard Pryor. These celebrities were classified as “dark” through their well-known misbehavior and tragedies in life—“the kinds of public figures whose stories would have to undergo some sort of narrative repair to have a happy ending” (37). Although he is still young and healthy today, it seems as though Kanye West could easily be described in the same way—his is well-known for his misbehavior, and the world watched as he mourned the tragic death of his mother in 2007.

Kitch identified a recurring plot trajectory to which journalists seemed to adhere when chronicling the lives of each of these men. This plot consists of “an unhappy or very difficult childhood, exceptional talent or beauty, the lucky break or ‘discovery,’ genius or beauty misunderstood, surrender to temptation followed by public disfavor and midlife crisis, recovery and comeback, and the ironic cruelty of death just when the person was being appreciated anew” (38). She noted that each man’s story did not end in exactly the same way, and that significant attention was paid to how willing the celebrity was to share emotions publicly and seem accessible to their audience. It seemed that the stories of Marlon Brando, who was famously reclusive and shunned the media, stood out as the least redemptive of the four. The media constantly focused on his weight gain and
the way he had “let himself go” over the years. This may provide clues or hypotheses as to the media’s attitude toward celebrities who are not as compliant as others.

Michael Jackson is another instance of a “misunderstood” celebrity who has received scholarly attention. He is celebrated for his genius and talent, but is also the subject of frequent attacks for the mystery and eccentricity of his private life. Fast (2010) wrote about how “the irreconcilability of Jackson’s differences…made him in effect unknowable, producing profound anxiety in many,” and suggests that this anxiety “accounts for the particularly venomous media coverage of his life” (259). Fast identifies many aspects of Jackson’s long, prosperous career that were only brought back into the mainstream media upon his death in 2009. She notes the varying themes his music spans, including loss of romantic love, religion, global warming, race relations, alongside simple pop and funk tunes. Fast also writes about Jackson’s innovations in popular music—essentially creating the stylized ensemble dances for which he is famous, and releasing brilliant short films and videos. She argues that onstage, his “glitzy spectacle might be cheesy if it weren’t followed by two and a half hours of non-stop spectacular dancing and singing that somehow justifies his self-deification at the beginning” (261).

Most of these claims can also be applied to Kanye West—his discography explores a diverse catalog of themes, his innovations as a producer, performer, and most recently filmmaker have been unprecedented and critically acclaimed, and his arrogance can often be seen as “self-deification.” Fast argues that since Jackson had already sold out fifty shows in London just before his death, this can be seen as proof that audiences still cared about him as a performer, even though the media was not always supportive. When studying West, it may also be important to take data such as concert and album
sales into account to reaffirm his success as a performer even in the face of adverse representations of his life in the media.

**Apologia and Celebrity Image Restoration**

Another area of scholarly research deals with public figures that have damaged their public image and must employ strategies of apologia in order to repair it. Momentarily stepping away from the field of entertainment, Kampf (2009) analyzed 354 apologies made in the Israeli public discourse between 1997 and 2004 in order to determine language of “non-apology.” Kampf writes that scholars have labeled this the Age of Apology, as public apologies become both more prominent and increasingly expected. In studying these apologies, he determined that certain words and phrases were frequently employed in order to minimize the offender’s responsibility for the act. He identified 14 tactics, such as “Apology for the outcome (and not for the act),” “Apology for the style (and not for the essence),” and “Apology for a component of the offense (and not for the entire occurrence)” (2264-5). These 14 tactics were placed in four broader categories: “compromising the apology’s performative verb, blurring the nature of the offense, questioning the identity of the offended, or questioning the identity of the offender” (2269). It is important to look at this discourse of “non-apology” because without identifying these tactics, one might miss the lack of sincerity that characterizes them and may undermine the legitimacy of the apology itself.

Occasionally, a celebrity will also perform an act or make a statement that is offensive to such a degree as to warrant a public apology. There is an increasing field of study on celebrity apologies and image restoration, and Benoit (1997) is a leader in this field. Benoit studied the actor Hugh Grant’s image restoration strategies after he was
caught with a prostitute. He notes the importance of the public’s expectations for Grant’s behavior prior to the event—as an Oxford graduate with “boyish charm,” he was not expected to misbehave, as opposed to rebellious types like the “Stallones and Depps” (Corliss qtd. in Benoit, 1997, p.251). The purpose of Benoit’s essay was to compare an entertainer’s image restoration techniques to those of politicians or public corporations, and he drew many crucial differences among the three, while also focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of Grant’s strategies within the context of his case alone.

A key strength was the fact that Grant’s public appearances on three evening and two morning talk shows were already scheduled before his arrest because he was promoting his movie, *Nine Months*. Benoit notes that Grant could have cancelled these appearances and blamed it on the advice of his lawyers, but he instead chose to use them as opportunities to publicly apologize to his girlfriend, family, and the public for his behavior. This strategy is similar to West in that his appearance on *The Jay Leno Show* was also scheduled before his incident with Taylor Swift at the 2009 VMAs, and he chose to keep the appointment and use it to address the situation. Benoit also argued that because *Nine Months* ended up being a fairly successful film, and because Grant went on to star in *Sense & Sensibility*, and other successful films, one could argue that he succeeded in restoring his image, or at least not tarnishing it further. This persisting career success is important to note because while it is arguable that West’s image or reputation may suffer, his consistent professional achievement may provide a telling counterargument.

While Grant’s behavior seemed both uncharacteristic and unexpected, other scholars have examined celebrities that are expected to shock, as was the case with
“shock jock” radio personality Don Imus. McGuire (2009) studied Imus’s image restoration strategies after he made offensive and racist remarks about the Rutgers University women’s basketball team during his radio program. According to McGuire, Imus primarily employed mortification (expressing disappointment in one’s actions and seeking forgiveness) and reducing offensiveness, specifically through bolstering his image (reminding the audience of the speaker’s positive qualities). This analysis provides a beneficial example because McGuire noted a moment during an interview with Al Sharpton when Imus attacked his accuser by saying, “Don’t tell me I didn’t understand what we were saying. I said, I wasn’t thinking that” (Imus qtd. in McGuire, p.18). McGuire writes, “This is an example where Imus, although having admitted culpability, was still willing to argue with Sharpton about perceptions of Imus as a racist” (18). This situation is similar to West’s appearance on The Today Show, when he admitted to certain mistakes during a revisit to his Hurricane Katrina comments five years prior, but had to stop Lauer from framing his intentions and actions in an unfavorable light. Like Grant, Imus was able to keep his job, which could be seen as an adequate signifier of his image restoration’s success.

The Impact of Celebrity Use of New Media

Although the aforementioned apologies were generally received as the offenders intended, at times the media can employ a filtration system that may distort the message from the way it was meant to be received. The rapid rise of social media sites like Twitter (often defined as a “micro-blogging” site) and the increasing popularity of personal blogs are allowing celebrities to create and distribute messages to their audiences without the media’s interception. Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) address
these ideas, claiming that celebrities use social media to gain back power taken from
them by popular gossip blogs and magazines (18). The mainstream media now makes
use of Tweets and blog posts as legitimate sources of information on a given celebrity,
often treating these excerpts as firsthand quotations, giving these messages authenticity
and credibility. As the social media industry grows, Hellmueller and Aeschbacher argue
that social media use is necessary in order to maintain control over one’s image and to
maintain presence in the media’s and audience’s agenda. The researchers note that the
relationship between celebrity and audience is generally one-way, though celebrities can
continue to control the message by enabling or disabling comments on a blog, or
choosing to respond to messages on Twitter. They claim that skepticism may rise over
the authenticity of the words as the celebrity’s true voice, because some sites are run by
managers or publicists. However, in Kanye West’s case, his outlandish personality
seems to emerge in his posts through his word choice and writing style, so it is likely that
he would be exempt from accusations that his messages are inauthentic.

West has made ample use of his personal blog in order to publish his thoughts and
messages to send to his fans and to the media, using his blog after the 2009 VMAs to
apologize to Taylor Swift and her mother. More recently, West makes frequent use of his
Twitter account to relay messages, as seen after his November 2010 appearance on The
Today Show.

Sanderson (2008) analyzed posts on Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling’s
personal blog in order to explore the self-presentation strategies he was able to employ
outside of the reach of sports journalists and other mainstream media, using his own blog
to escape the media’s filter. Sanderson frequently looked to Dialogical Self Theory to
guide his analysis, explaining that this theory “views the self, or I, fluctuating between multiple positions as the individual adapts to change,” thus endowing “each position with a ‘voice’” (913). These voices then “exchange information resulting in a complex, narratively structured self with a hierarchy of positions” (913). Sanderson then identified three self-presentation strategies that emerged from Schilling’s blog posts, each representing a different position: critic, committed individual, and accountable person. In some posts, Schilling employed multiple personas, but in others, such as the “Public Apology” entry, he chose only to identify as an “accountable person.” Sanderson also cited research supporting the idea that life is a stage on which people perform for social audiences, and the self tries to construct an identity that complies with audience expectations. For a performer like West, this theory may not be far from the truth.

Daws (2007) has conducted research that is directly focused on the messages and themes West weaves into his albums. Her research culminated in a narrative critique of West’s debut full-length album, *The College Dropout*. Despite her most recent research being from 2004, Daws was already able to make an argument for West’s popularity and success using album sales, radio charts, and popular music magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard*. She uses Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm as the basis of her analysis, writing that humans are storytelling beings who judge a narrative’s believability on the bases of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness) (92). Daws argues that West composed the album’s song lyrics and intermittent spoken-word “skits” as a series of narratives, which can be analyzed as short stories reflecting upon his life experiences. She found that most of all the songs and skits on the album contained elements of at least
one of these three themes: bitterness toward school, materialism, or the role of Jesus Christ in West’s life.

Daws writes that the most interesting stories, according to prior research, contain mythic elements, and the most inspirational contain moral elements. In her essay, she shows how West’s lyrics provide both of these elements, which, according to the narrative paradigm, “qualify them as stories that listeners should heed” (93). She also cites research which provides evidence that music can serve as a legitimate rhetorical artifact, that it has a “powerful, almost persuasive influence” on listeners, and that it “has been noted to perpetuate dominate ideologies” (97). While the purpose of Daws’s essay was to conduct a narrative critique of the album, she states that if listeners did not enjoy the messages West communicates through his album, it is not likely to have sold as well as it did.

Thus, through examining the previous scholarly research conducted in the areas of celebrity and its influence, implicit racism in news media and subsequently in public perception, the relationship between celebrities and the media, celebrity apologia and image restoration, and use of social media and self-presentation, it can be seen that celebrities and the media sometimes work together, occasionally work against each other, and both may have pervasive audience influence. In a world of complex and innumerable messages constantly barraging the public, it is important to conduct a scholarly analysis of the source, quality, and potential effects of these frequently competing and heavily critical voices from all sides.
CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

*The Diatribe*

The overarching theme that Kanye West’s public statements examined in this paper share is that they all became newsworthy due to their shocking nature. The element of shock invokes the rhetorical concept of the diatribe, which is defined by its use of shock and offensiveness in order to call attention to a larger societal issue that requires productive discussion. In his essay, “The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest” (1972), Theodore Windt outlines the diatribe as a rhetorical method which originated in Ancient Greece. I will provide a brief outline of this methodology, which will be expanded upon through my analysis of West’s messages. Windt argues that the diatribe was first used by the Cynics of Athens, who had a “pessimistic and misanthropic” view of the world” (1972, p.5). The Cynics and their leader, Diogenes, “made a clear distinction between humanity and society. The former is natural and good; the latter is unnatural and corrupt” (Windt, 1972, p.5). Diogenes believed in “absolute humanism,” and felt that “to live by men’s conventions is to embrace the death of person; to defy society is to embrace life” (Windt, 1972, p.5). Because they believed that society’s institutions were both corrupt and harmful to man as he was naturally meant to exist, the Cynics felt compelled to spread their message and beliefs to the general public in protest.

A crucial aspect of the Cynic belief system is that their beliefs needed to be substantiated through symbolic acts. Windt writes that “they took their beliefs out of the abstract and made them part of their lives. They did what they professed, especially when it came to money” (1972, p.5). To the Cynics, earning money meant succumbing
to the conventional ways of both earning money and of living (Windt, 1972, p.5). The most obvious way to enact abstract beliefs was to engage in an alternative lifestyle, supporting these things literally by begging for money, “eating food for nourishment only and wearing a single garment” (Diogenes Laertius qtd. in Windt, 1972, p.5). This is not to say, however, that by withdrawing from conventional society Cynics wanted to withdraw from humanity altogether.

In fact, as Windt writes, “The Cynics were the first to celebrate the universal brotherhood of mankind... they served a higher purpose—the human community which knows no race, creed, or nationality” (1972, p.6). They believed that “the compromises that politics and politeness demand,” as outlined by societal conventions, were repressive of the way humans were naturally meant to interact with each other (Windt, 1972, p.6). For the Cynics, “every question is an ethical question” (Windt, 1972, p.5), and “every action, they believed, should be guided by moral principles founded upon a belief in absolute humanism” (Windt, 1972, p.6). Thus, each Cynic saw his duty as twofold: to live within society “without compromising himself,” and, “if man can be redeemed,” to lead the way to such redemption (Windt, 1972, p.6).

The best way to comply with these duties was to roam the country, “delivering diatribes to whomever would listen” (Windt, 1972, p.7). The diatribe is, as Windt describes, “an attempt to criticize, to entertain, to shock and to convey impressions of public figures, all in one” (1972, p.7). The Cynics believed that when speaking to such an immoral society, traditional methods would not apply, such as the attempt to establish the speaker’s “ethos by reflecting the ethos of his audience,” seeking “identification with his constituency” (Windt, 1972, p.7). They argued that “Man’s conscience, his logic and
his emotions, his perspectives and attitudes have been corrupted by immoral institutions,” and “man must be cleansed of unclean expectations and thoughts” (Windt, 1972, p.7). The only way to speak through this corruption would be to “assault sensibilities, to turn thought upside-down, to turn social mores inside-out, to commit in language the very same barbarisms one condemns in society,” (Windt, 1972, p.7-8). In other words, for the diatribe to be successful, it must be shocking.

Shock, according to Windt, “gathers an audience when orthodox speeches will not” (1972, p.8), which is crucial to the process of the diatribe – there is little use for a message without audience. Windt also writes that shock “functions as the first step toward rearranging perspectives. People seldom become concerned about problems until they are shocked” (1972, p.8). So in summary, the diatribe is rooted in the Cynic belief that society is against humanism and corrupts individuals, and the Cynics act out these beliefs through symbolic acts and shocking speeches in order to attempt to save mankind from society’s evil, flawed ways. The weakness of the diatribe, though, is that it has an expiration date: “Once attention has been gained and criticism voiced, the diatribe diminishes in usefulness. People demand serious remedies, seriously treated. Moral dramaturgy must give way to conventional rhetorical forms” (Windt, 1972, p.8-9). Thus, once the Cynic has gained attention and taken the first step in planting ideas in the audience through shock, he must allow room for more traditional speakers to take over, providing serious speeches for these serious issues.

This paper conceptualizes the criteria established in this review of the diatribe, and analyzes the elements that define this rhetorical method alongside three of Kanye West’s most prominent public acts. The degree to which these criteria are present in each
act determines whether or not, in each specific situation, West seems to employ the method of the diatribe in his beliefs, statements, and actions. If the criteria are met and subsequently, if a productive discussion of the societal issue presented is initiated, only then will any of West’s public acts be considered a diatribe, and only then will he be considered influential enough to merit the title of a modern-day Cynic.
CHAPTER 5

“George Bush Doesn’t Care About Black People!”

Kanye West’s Statements During Hurricane Katrina, 2005

The popular website AskMen.com conducts an annual poll to determine the Most Influential Man of the Year, and generally the selection is comprised of politicians, sports figures, businessmen, and celebrities. The 2010 list, however, was addressed in the media with perhaps a bit more interest than usual because rapper Kanye West came in at number five, and was ranked as more influential than Barack Obama, the President of the United States (AskMen.com, 2010).

This is not the first time, however, that West has been associated with a President in a shocking light. In 2005, he made an unforgettable statement at the Red Cross’s Concert for Hurricane Relief, a live telethon to raise money for victims of Hurricane Katrina. After making a nervous and impassioned plea for aid and alerting the audience to the alleged racism of the hurricane media coverage, West uttered eight words that will forever exist in internet-fueled immortality: “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people” (Byrne, 2005). This statement marked a moment that seemed uncharacteristic for West, a performer known for his purported arrogance, and was a subject of fervent debate for weeks afterward.

Five years later, with several other controversies behind him, West’s statement from September 2005 is back in the public mind. Former President George W. Bush, the star recipient of West’s attack, recently released his first book, Decision Points (2010), in which he recounts West’s statement. President Bush writes, “I faced a lot of criticism as president…. But the suggestion that I was a racist because of the response to Katrina
represented an all-time low. I told Laura at the time that it was the worst moment of my presidency. I feel the same way today” (Bush, 2010, p.326). For the President who was in office during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and who declared the still-raging Iraq War to confirm, *in his own book*, that West’s statement was the worst moment of his presidency may be even more shocking than the original statement itself.

Even without considering the public uproar and discussion that followed the Concert for Hurricane Relief broadcast, the fact that this moment stood out among all others in President Bush’s memory should be enough reason to study West’s message and its effects on society. However, the fact that it did spur discussion and influence public opinion is also crucial. By viewing Kanye West’s statements through the lens of the diatribe, this chapter will explore how West unwittingly employed the techniques of the ancient Greek Cynics in order to catalyze discussion of possible corruption and definite flaws in the American political system, especially in the wake of this natural disaster. The hurricane’s desperate circumstances called for a shocking setting and a core-shaking message in order to alert people to the devastation in New Orleans and the puzzling problems with the relief effort. With the statement once again circulating through public discussion even though the storm, some of the damage, and Bush’s presidency are long gone, it seems imperative to explore these two unscripted minutes that simply will not be forgotten.

Long before Hurricane Katrina was even a tiny droplet of rain, the United States was suffering through disasters that were anything but natural. The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 had signaled the start to President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror.” Later, on March 19, 2003, the Iraq War was officially declared as a crucial
aspect of this larger, encompassing “War on Terror.” After 9/11, the Bush administration underwent an extensive reorganization, during which government departments were created, eliminated, and shifted—a process whose consequences would not be realized on American soil to their full extent until about four years after the original attacks.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was drastically affected by this reorganization. According to the Boston Globe, “FEMA used to be a stand-alone body whose head reported to the President” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). After the Department of Homeland Security was created, FEMA became a part of that department. However, while still considered the lead emergency-response agency, FEMA’s new focus was counterterrorism, not natural disasters (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Perhaps to facilitate this shift in focus, FEMA’s “preparedness function was given to another division of the new department” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Furthermore, while the Clinton administration had employed a professional emergency manager as its FEMA Director, the head of President Bush’s FEMA was a man named Michael D. Brown—a man who, upon his acceptance of the position, had no prior experience in emergency management. What Brown and his associated agencies did have, however, was a new document: the 426-page National Response Plan, which told every government agency what to do if disaster struck (Savage, 2005, p.A26). As the Globe’s Charlie Savage writes, “Hurricane Katrina… presented the first real operational test of the administration’s new homeland security system” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). While there are, of course, critics on both sides of every issue, many of the failures of this “test” would soon prove too obvious to deny.

The storm that formed near Nassau in the Bahamas on Tuesday, August 23, 2005 began simply as a “tropical depression” (Tracking Hurricane Katrina, 2006). Katrina was
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elevated to a Category 1 hurricane on August 25, and when she became a Category 3 on Saturday, August 27, a Hurricane Watch was placed on New Orleans and surrounding areas (Tracking Hurricane Katrina, 2006). As noted by the Miami Herald, the current prediction for landfall was about 48 hours. Although the emergency management plan for the city advises a mandatory evacuation at or before this two-day mark, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin failed to order the mandatory evacuation until noon on Sunday, August 28 (Tracking Hurricane Katrina, 2006). This order occurred almost five hours after Katrina’s elevation to a Category 5 hurricane with 160-mph winds (Tracking Hurricane Katrina, 2006). Finally, on Monday, August 29 at roughly 7:10 a.m., Katrina touched down as a Category 4 Hurricane, with 125-mph winds (Tracking Hurricane Katrina, 2006). “Categorically,” it may have seemed as if the storm would not end up as bad as it could have been. But in reality, the devastation would surpass everyone’s predictions—not only did the storm itself create inconceivable damage, but the blame-shifting and delays in assistance would later make headlines for months.

According to an August 30th New York Times article, Hurricane Katrina “left more than a million people in three states without power, and submerged highways even hundreds of miles from its center” (Treaster & Zernike, 2005, p.A1). Even after Mayor Nagin’s mandatory evacuation order, over 100,000 people remained in the city. Globe reporter Charlie Savage wrote, “Emergency plans did not address that many were too poor or sick to get out without help, and there was no system for removing them” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Failure to assist at least a quarter of New Orleans’ population with the evacuation process was terrible enough, but it was still just the beginning of the complex and tragic situation. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour was quoted as
blaming some of the refused-evacuees’ behavior on “hurricane fatigue”: “deciding not to evacuate this time after having done so in the past,” only to be sent home fine each time (Treaster & Zernike, 2005, p.A13). For those who stayed, however, the problems only grew worse as the 17th Street Canal Levee suffered a breach on Tuesday, August 30, causing “gushing” water from Lake Pontchartrain to cover over 80% of the sub-sea level city of New Orleans (MacQuarrie, 2005, p.A1). It was not until the day after the levee broke, Wednesday, that President Bush officially invoked the National Response Plan, “efforts to establish clear lines of authority in a national disaster” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Even after this late plan invocation, lines of both authority and communication remained blurred, or perhaps water-logged.

While President Bush and the federal government pledged to send immediate aid, “days after the storm moved on, food, water, ice and medical supplies were still only trickling into the city because of late-arriving military supply trucks” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff argued that because water levels from this secondary flood were anywhere from three to eight feet, it “dramatically impeded” FEMA’s ability to get the supplies into New Orleans (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Excuses and poor communication followed from all ends of the spectrum. According to Savage, “Homeland Security Specialists attributed the delay to a series of holes in the federal plan,” citing “the failure to require that local officials buy proper equipment, the lack or preparation for an evacuation, and the officials’ sluggish reaction” (Savage, 2005, p.A26).

Also regarding FEMA, it was reported that Director Brown “also discouraged fire and emergency agencies outside the storm area from sending in crews unless they had
been asked” (Treaster & Zernike, 2005, p.A13). As the problems were not solely confined to the federal level, local officials excused themselves saying “they had to concentrate on search-and-rescue missions rather than bringing in sanitary items,” although Savage points out that “the lack of sanitary items...contributed to the spread of disease” (Savage, 2005, p.A26). Times reporter Todd Purdum conducted interviews with victims, citizens, politicians, international observers, and historians, finding that, at least according to his interviewees, blame was spread: “It was the combination of specific and systemic failures that many of those interviewed—experts and ordinary people alike—echoed” (Purdum, 2005, p.A17).

Potentially-racialized media portrayals of victims also seemed to play a large role in describing and prolonging the devastation in New Orleans. Hemant Shah writes, “In a city whose metro area population of 400,000 is two-thirds Black, questions about race, social justice, housing patterns, and government neglect surfaced repeatedly in the news” (Shah, 2009, p.1). Many asked if race or socioeconomics have been a factor in the poor and delayed governmental response to Hurricane Katrina. This opinion grew more prevalent as the conflict raged, and perhaps nowhere was it more public than in rapper Kanye West’s statements at the American Red Cross’s “Concert for Hurricane Relief.”

The “Concert for Hurricane Relief” was a star-studded telethon, put together to raise money for Katrina victims. It was broadcast live from New York’s Rockefeller Center on Friday, September 2, 2005, airing simultaneously on NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, and Pax (Byrne, 2005). The concert, hosted by The Today Show’s Matt Lauer, featured celebrities as both performers (such as Wynton Marsalis, Harry Connick Jr., and Faith Hill), and presenters (such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Richard Gere, Hilary Swank, Mike
Myers, and Kanye West). The first 45-minutes of the event ran smoothly, with the presenters reading the pre-scripted facts and pleas they were assigned to discuss. When Mike Myers and Kanye West appeared on the screen, West decided to ignore the teleprompter in favor of his own speech.

As an especially vocal representative of a more “notorious” musical genre, West had already “earned a reputation as a live wire” at the November 2004 American Music Awards, where he had, as one E! reporter put it, “a hissy fit after failing to win any trophies and threatened to boycott future ceremonies” (Byrne, 2005). At the time of the relief concert, Chicago-based West had three Grammys to his name and had released his second album the week prior, on August 30, 2005 (Byrne, 2005). Known for his arrogance, West appeared visibly and uncharacteristically nervous when he began to speak. First, he waited for Myers to dutifully recite his scripted sentences about New Orleans’ tragedy. Then at his turn, West said:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. 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, it’s been five days [waiting for aid to arrive] because of the people are Black. And for me to even complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help-with the way America is set up to help the poor, the Black people, the less well-off as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way. And they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us! (Byrne, 2005)

Myers, still in the shot, was clearly taken by surprise, but continued with his own scripted lines until it was West’s turn once more. Then, West said, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!” (Byrne, 2005)
Myers said, “Please call…” but immediately, MSNBC President Rick Kaplan cut West’s microphone and switched the shot to comedian Chris Tucker (Byrne, 2005). For the West Coast broadcast three hours later, NBC cut out the sentence about George Bush but left the rest of the statement on air.

NBC and the other networks broadcasting the concert saw West’s statement as quite a catastrophe. NBC issued its own statement immediately:

Kanye West departed from the scripted comments that were prepared for him, and his opinions in no way represent the views of the networks. It would be most unfortunate if the efforts of the artists who participated tonight and the generosity of millions of Americans who are helping those in need are overshadowed by one person’s opinion (Byrne, 2005).

Clearly the networks were also concerned about their own audiences, as well as the important group of potential donors who may or may not have changed their minds after seeing the broadcast.

In addition to the network-loyal audience and potential-donor audience, fans of West or any of the other celebrities constitute a third audience; in our celebrity-obsessed culture, it is highly likely that many people simply watched the “Concert for Hurricane Relief” to see the actors and musicians participating. In contrast to this, West is likely to have a foe-base as well as a fan-base, especially after his angry outburst at the American Music Awards; this audience could work against his credibility or believability. Another audience could be Katrina victims themselves, who, if they had access, were probably relying on television in order to find out whatever news possible about their home. Also, the simple fact of the event being simulcast could add another audience of more passive viewers who ended up watching just because it appeared on four channels at once.
The American Red Cross is a major audience, as they put the event together in the first place and they will be the ones receiving and spending the relief money—thus, the Red Cross had much at stake if they lost donations due to West’s remarks. It is also crucial to note an individual audience of President Bush himself, who was personally attacked, and additional audiences of local, state, and federal governments who were criticized in the statement as well. Government officials are those who seemed to have the power to actually affect the post-Hurricane relief efforts, and as they had already begun to be criticized for shirking their duties, it would likely be a sensitive subject to be criticized again. The news media (branching out from simply the broadcast television networks) was under accusations of racism as well, with West’s point about the difference between captioning photos as “looting” versus “looking for food.” If the general public were to inquire into this accusation and find it to be true, the media could lose its credibility. This situation, then, could easily turn into a battle of ethos: who has more authority, the media, celebrities, or the government?

Analysis

In order to analyze West’s rhetorical message through the lens of diatribe, his identity as a modern-day Cynic is proven first. Cynics arise when there is a major problem in society that demands attention because of both its corruption and immediacy. Windt considers the Yippies (Vietnam protestors) to exist in the same vein as Cynics, and writes, “Perceiving circumstances as they did, neither the Cynics nor the Yippies could use traditional strategies for protest” (Windt, 1972, p.3). The shocking method of diatribe, then, is not something that is employed out of boredom, but out of necessity. The speaker must feel that there is no other choice—traditional means have been
attempted and thwarted, and the diatribe is a last resort (hence the title of Windt’s article “The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest”).

It is quite apparent from both the circumstances of Hurricane Katrina and the delivery and occasion of West’s statement that he believed traditional strategies would no longer succeed in getting his message across. The Concert for Relief was held on September 2, and the Hurricane had reached land on August 29, meaning that people had been suffering without enough aid for five days. While media coverage was instantaneous, it was suffocating. When West said, “I hate they way they portray us in the media. You see a Black family, it says ‘They’re looting.’ You see a White family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food’” (Byrne, 2005), he identified the media’s apparent racial bias. If the media itself ran rampant with racism, there would be no way for people—loved ones of victims, potential donors, potential aid—to hear the full story of what was happening in New Orleans.

In true Cynic fashion, West makes a claim that can easily be substantiated. According to a Salon magazine article from the previous day, the photographs to which he refers actually do exist. They were also both published on the same day by Yahoo! News (Kinney, 2005). Reporter Aaron Kinney writes:

One of the images, shot by photographer Dave Martin for the Associated Press, shows a young black man wading through chest-deep waters after ‘looting’ a grocery store, according to the caption…. In the other, similar shot, taken by photographer Chris Graythen for AFP/Getty Images, a white man and a light-skinned woman are shown wading through chest-deep water after ‘finding’ goods…according to the caption, in a local grocery store. (Kinney, 2005, my emphasis)

Because this bold claim was validated, it is clear that, whether intentional or not, there was some sort of racial slant occurring in news coverage. As West was aware of this
slant, he may have also been aware that he needed to find a different outlet through which to correct this wrong. The media is a crucial player in crafting public perception, and if potential donors are inundated with images of Black “looters,” it is unlikely that they would feel compelled to make further donations. In order to ensure enough time for the victims to actually receive aid and relief, West desperately needed to reach the general public, and no “traditional strategy” seemed trustworthy.

Another aspect of the Cynics’ rhetorical strategies and symbolic acts was that they “were a product of circumstances and moral commitments” (Windt, 1972, p.3). The desperate timeline and the unreliable and possibly racist news media were mentioned above. In addition to these dire circumstances, there was a moral component to West’s message as well. As a prominent Black figure, West defined the Black victims of Katrina as members of his larger family, saying, “those are my people down there” (Byrne, 2005). Elliott and Pais (2006) argue that “blacks of high class standing often maintain a higher level of distrust of mainstream institutions than their white or even low-income, black counterparts,” going on to write that it is “unsurprising” that West “seized the opportunity” to make this statement at the Concert (p.300). They further maintain that, “even if racial hatred ceases, persistent social patterns can endure over time, affecting whom we marry, where we live, what we believe, and so forth” (2006, p.300). As Cynics were “the first to celebrate the universal brotherhood of mankind” (Windt, 1972, p.6), West again shows his modern-day Cynic traits by emphasizing the connections among himself, his audiences, and the victims as part of the same “people.” His actions also support the Elliott and Pais passage, because they claim that racial ideas can affect social
institutions including “who we marry,” and in a universal brotherhood, there should be no such divide between “those we marry” and “those we do not marry.”

West’s reaction to the images of his suffering brethren also underscores the moral pull he felt to try to help the victims. He calls himself a hypocrite to complain, “because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch” (Byrne, 2005). West also indulges in a moment of reflection, saying, “just to imagine if I was down there” (Byrne, 2005). These statements highlight the struggles he has faced watching people suffer while he stood idly by. Before, he avoids watching the scenes on television, but he eventually realizes that once a person is aware of the suffering going on, he or she is thenceforth implicated in the problem. Upon learning what was truly happening, he became inextricably involved and was morally compelled to act as a spokesman and help spread the word.

It has been established that the temporal and situational circumstances demanded urgency—an urgency that simply did not allow for traditional methods of rhetoric, which were both corrupt and clearly failing in collecting enough aid for the victims. West had to determine a setting to relay his message that would be shocking enough for him to stand out, and would also allow him to reach an extensive audience. One of the reasons for the diatribe’s shock is that “it gathers an audience when orthodox speeches will not” (Windt, 1972, p.7), and to create this sense of shock, West delivered his radical and accusatory message in the inappropriate setting of the Red Cross’s Concert for Hurricane Relief.

If West were going to give a traditional, scripted speech about racism in the media and in the government, people might dismiss or ignore it altogether. His audience would
likely be comprised of fans that agreed with him anyway. Elliott and Pais (2006) discuss the differences in how Blacks and Whites understand race, writing that “Research has long shown that blacks talk and think about race much more often than whites, in part because whites have difficulty recognizing the privileges that their skin color generally affords them in U.S. society” (p.300). This means that if many White people are unaware of racial inequality and do not often talk about it, they are unlikely to begin talking about it unless they are shocked. Furthermore, the best (and perhaps, only) way to reach them must be to speak to them at a time when they are already open to listening.

In addition to increasing West’s audience size, the Concert setting also served to shock them because he completely violated the expected tone and atmosphere of a relief concert. It was a serious event, involving (but not exclusively) many older celebrities like Wynton Marsalis and Richard Gere. These actors, musicians, and public figures were to read scripted statements that documented the suffering in New Orleans, and, according the script, make calm but firm arguments to draw in donations from the audience. Thus, the tone was respectfully urgent, and relatively somber—a calculated, organized event. West “insult[ed] sensibilities” (Windt, 1972, p.7) and violated the expected norms of this televised benefit. He did this by going off-script, making radical statements that did not reflect the opinions of NBC, its affiliates, or the Red Cross, and by engaging in a harsh and merciless critique of the government and the President when his only job was to urge the public to donate a few dollars.

Also extremely important, as someone who had been in the public eye for years prior to this event, West had to understand how much press he would generate from making such shocking comments in general, and even more in this inappropriate setting.
He was likely all too aware of the frequency with which this comment would be reprinted in magazines, newspapers, and on the Internet, and replayed on television and radio. This repetition would only serve to spread his message even further and etch it into peoples’ minds. Though possibly a spontaneous decision, his choice to make the comments during a live broadcast may have been a conscious decision as well, because the only way he could reach so many people with such radical accusations would be if no one knew they were coming until it was too late. As Fanon Che Wilkins writes in her essay, “Thank You, Kanye!,” he “knew that the NBC platform was a precious opportunity to cut the charade and challenge the federal government for its failures in New Orleans. Instinctively, knowing that only a few seconds remained, a steely-eyed West summed up his sentiments in seven words: ‘Bush doesn’t care about Black people.’” (Wilkins, 2006, p.31). He was aware of the importance and necessity of his setting, and used it to his full advantage.

It would be exceedingly hypocritical not to act in the same ways in which one pushes society to act, so supporting their belief system by engaging in symbolic acts—practicing what they preached—was of paramount value for the Cynics (Windt, 1972, p.8). Additionally, another of their beliefs was to reject the “striving-achieving ethic upon which Athens…was built” (Windt, 1972, p.5). As a wealthy pop star, this is a rare instance in which Kanye West does not seem to adhere perfectly to the Cynic belief system. America, like Athens, also places high value on striving-achieving. West, unlike the Greek Cynics who begged for their livelihood, has striven and achieved. His album sales, Grammy wins, and fame are testament to this. In America, working for your
success is an oft-told and oft-celebrated story of achieving your own dream, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. We strive to participate in this story, and we respect it.

In this day and age, spurning the idea of work would likely be seen as grotesquely lazy, and one professing such an attitude would immediately lose respect. West, however, by proving himself as a hard worker at least in his field of industry, preserves an aspect of *ethos* that the Cynics would not have today (and did not have then). While West does not act to substantiate the Cynic distrust in the societal institution of work, he acts to substantiate a belief that is far more important considering the task at hand. If people are suffering in New Orleans and West calls for people to do “anything that we can” (Byrne, 2005) to help them, he must, then, do anything that *he* can as well.

West would not be able to preach to people to donate money without doing anything himself. In fact, he even admits his own flaws, calling himself a hypocrite for turning away from the television and because “I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation” (Byrne, 2005). However, after this admittance, West defines the way in which he will remedy his errors, saying, “Now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there…. ” (Byrne, 2005). The hurricane victims need aid, West urges the public to provide aid, and he plans to provide aid himself as well. If it were not for his striving-achieving ethic that the Greek Cynics so vehemently opposed, West would not have had the means to symbolically act in support of *his* beliefs: that citizens should do whatever they can to help their suffering brethren. Thus, West’s major split from Cynic sensibilities is precisely what will help him remain true to the message he professes.
While he does adhere to and benefit from America’s systems commercially, West is still able to identify flaws politically. After identifying racist media portrayals, West moves to a larger-scale cultural critique, alleging signs of racism in American governmental structure, in the Presidential office, and in the National Guard. Windt writes:

Most men make distinctions between moral problems and political problems, between professional responsibilities and personal commitments. The Cynics denied, even condemned, these distinctions as artificial, as products of societal conditioning which has corrupted man’s mind and sense of right. (Windt, 1972, p.6)

West “Cynically” removes the distinctions between moral and political, and professional and personal as well. He describes “the way America is set up to help the poor, the Black people, the less well-off as slow [sic] as possible,” which may have shocked the audience into a defensive mode (Bryne, 2005). Morally, there should be no difference between well-off and poor, between Black and White, but West accuses America of being corrupt in just this way. Instead of drawing a distinction between morality and politics, he implicitly argues (whether or not his claim is substantiated), that the two should never be apart. Rather than committing a direct, evidence-based attack on the system, West simply introduces the idea of a racist government into the audience’s collective mind so that people will think about it. Shock, of course, is “the first step toward rearranging perspectives” (Windt, 1972, p.8), and with this shocking idea, perhaps West’s audience will see that the political system should be arranged to adhere with the moral code, beyond any shade of doubt.

Arguably the most memorable claim of West’s entire statement is, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people” (Byrne, 2005). This assertion is a perfect illustration of
his subversion of the “professional responsibilities and personal commitments”
distinction. Though he first attacked the structure itself, West’s second claim, his final,
desperate statement, was a direct attack on the President himself. The fact that he does
not use the title “President” but instead seems to speak directly to the man himself by
using his first and last name makes this an attack on President Bush’s personal agenda.
Also implicit in the statement, all audiences would be perfectly aware that the man West
spoke of was indeed the President, which would immediately bring ideas of his
“professional responsibilities” to the surface of thought.

Elliott and Pais write, “the veracity of West’s claim is unimportant” (2006,
p.300), arguing that even if racial hatred is no longer an outright issue, the social patterns
it influenced are still intact. Thus, looking at the larger picture through the lens of
cultural critique, it does not matter if President Bush actually was racist. The deeper
meaning of West’s attack is that personal commitments and professional responsibilities
should be one and the same—as the Presidency calls for unbiased behavior, so should
one’s personal life. And if one is to claim that he is not racist, then nothing in his
professional behavior should show otherwise. For others to defend President Bush, or
themselves for that matter, they must also come face-to-face with any disconnect that
exists between professional and personal behavior. For one to truly act in a moral
fashion, this morality must pervade throughout every action, in every facet of his or her
life.

In this moral vein, Windt writes that to the Cynics, “no institution had any
legitimate authority unless it was based on the natural rights of man” (1972, p.6). Again
proving his identity as a modern-day Cynic, West acknowledged during his statement
that “the Red Cross is doing everything they can” (Byrne, 2005), supporting the humanist organization verbally in addition to lending his physical presence to the concert. However, while supporting the Red Cross, he condemned the National Guard without directly using its name. West says, rather ambiguously, “We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way. And they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us!” (Byrne, 2005).

This powerful statement, the idea of the government giving soldiers permission to shoot its own people, was absolutely made in Cynic fashion. Windt writes that each Cynic act “was intended to shock sensibilities, to scandalize by profaning societal customs” (1972, p.6). The image is shocking, to be sure, and the accusation that a soldier would have permission to shoot civilians is a clear profanation of the military’s mission to protect its citizens. Fanon Che Wilkins substantiates the claims, writing, “Indeed, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco told reporters that the National Guard had M16s that were ‘locked and loaded.’ ‘They know how to kill; they are more than willing to kill, and they will kill,’ the stern governor declared” (Wilkins, 2006, p.30). If the diatribe works as intended, the shock of West’s assertion would “function as the first step toward rearranging perspectives,” since, Windt writes, “people seldom become concerned about problems until they are shocked” (1972, p.8). If this shock led audiences to look into the veracity of this claim, they would undoubtedly find Governor Blanco’s statements, hopefully then understanding the gravity of the situation.

Wilkins also writes, “West was no fool. He made the connection between racist media images and how those depictions would structure the relationship between the military and those labeled as ‘looters’” (2006, p.30). Returning to the earlier discussion
of photo captions, it becomes clear that the way the news is presented to audiences will affect the way those audiences view the situation, subsequently defining future action. If the remaining Katrina victims (especially those who were Black) were rhetorically structured as “looters” and criminals, this might lead to higher likelihood of military aggression. It could also make it less likely for the general public to feel compelled to donate to “looters” who clearly appeared to have their own ways of finding sustenance.

In order to truly analyze the effects of Kanye West’s statement that September night, it is crucial to make one last return to the purpose of the diatribe itself. Windt asserts, “the Cynics did not possess power and by all accounts did not seek political influence. They were cultural critics, not politicians” (1972, p.5). West could not change policy or order more federal aid himself—he only possessed the power to make a very public critique. This said, Windt also makes it clear that the diatribe is “limited in effectiveness: Once attention has been gained and criticism voiced, the diatribe diminishes in usefulness. Moral dramaturgy must give way to conventional rhetorical forms” (1972, p.8). After the shocking critical statement is made, the question then becomes who, if anyone, will pick up the discussion where the Cynic left off? Who will process the jolt of information that has shot through and stirred the audience’s core? In this vein, then, if no one continues the discussion or pushes for change in a more serious manner, the diatribe has failed.

Fortunately for West, his diatribe resulted in nothing near failure. The purpose of the diatribe is to spur discussion and shake conventional thought, and West’s statement did just that. In the sentences immediately following President Bush’s retelling of the Concert statement in his book, he writes, “Jesse Jackson later compared the New Orleans
Convention Center to the ‘hull of a slave ship.’ A member of the Congressional Black Caucus claimed that if the storm victims had been ‘white, middle-class Americans’ they would have received more help” (Bush, 2010, p. 325). These statements, only made after West’s, seem to follow directly in his footsteps to continue the discussion.

*The Washington Post* published a column shortly after West’s statement, entitled, “Was Kanye West Right?” The column states that, “West’s seemingly radical off-script assertion…has become a full-blown topic of public policy debate” (Froomkin, 2005, p.1). It also cites “the latest Gallup,” which “cuts to the chase and asks: ‘Do you think George W. Bush does – or does not – care about Black people?’” The poll concludes: “Among blacks, 21 percent say he does and 72 percent say he doesn’t. Among whites, 67 percent say he does and 26 percent say he doesn’t” (Froomkin, 2005, p.1). While White poll respondents do not seem to have their minds drastically changed by West (and realistically, Black respondents could have held the same opinion prior to the statement as well), the column’s headline seems to summarize his influence in its four words. The rest of the article contains a moderately long collection of different opinions and theories about the hurricane response, not mentioning West’s name after the first section. However, the reporter titled his column, “Was Kanye West Right?” This seems to mark exactly where the debate began, giving all credit to West for sparking it.

In fact, an incredible number of scholarly articles, across many disciplines, seem to employ this same method. No matter whether the subject is about public perception, disaster response, racist media, or otherwise, almost all of the articles that discuss Hurricane Katrina aftermath seem to either work West and his statement into their introductions, or use his words directly in their surveys (Dawson, 2006; de la Pena 2010;
Harris, 2006; Henkel, Dovido, & Gaertner, 2006; Kaiser, Eccleston, & Hagiwara, 2008; Shah, 2009; Sweeney, 2006). Scholarly articles give his statement legitimacy in the academic world, but as a discussion-starter, first and foremost—not necessarily as a statement of paramount truth. In fact, one article pits his statement against opposing words from former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and says:

From a social psychological perspective, both sides appeared to oversimplify the situation, and polemics obscured the potential roles of historical factors, institutional discrimination, and contemporary subtle forms of individual racism, all of which likely played parts in the impact of Hurricane Katrina and the government’s response to it (Henkel, Dovido, & Gaertner, 2006, p.100).

Again, though, the purpose of diatribe is to create shock in order to bring societal flaws and corruption into the public eye so that more traditional voices, like the social psychologists above, will finally discuss them. The goal was not to write a well-researched dissertation, or provide a voice of moderate compromise in a debate. West needed to identify the problem before those who were actually in power could work on the solution—including the general public, with the power to vote and to donate.

While this support from the world of academia legitimizes and credits West’s statement with catalyzing and prolonging the discussion of racial inequality and political flaws, it is also important to explore the way mainstream media and other public figures have responded. Russell Simmons, entrepreneur and co-founder of Def Jam Records, wrote an “Open Letter to Kanye West,” in which he praises West, not necessarily for what he said, but for the fact that he said it. Simmons writes:

With great power, as you know, comes great responsibility. When you spoke about President Bush during the Katrina telethon, it was not the particulars of your words that mattered, it was the essence of a feeling of the insensitivity towards our communities that many of us have felt for far too long” (Simmons, 2010).
Thus, five years later, Simmons still felt the need to express his gratitude to West for putting words to this feeling of neglect from which people had been suffering.

Aaron McGruder, creator of the popular hip-hop comic strip “The Boondocks,” told *Rolling Stone* magazine that West’s “was definitely a courageous move…. He didn’t know what the ramifications would be. He didn't know if it would end his career, and you could see all of that on his face. You're not just dissing another rapper. You're dissing the president of the United States. That's real beef” (McGruder qtd. in Ogunnaike, 2006).

McGruder acknowledges here that West had to push all polite convention aside, and that he succeeded. Sasha Frere-Jones of *The New Yorker* seems to agree that this was a momentously risky, albeit successful, act:

> West’s unmanageability is a gift. His sins are usually only offenses to the gods of etiquette…. They’re also, occasionally, valuable. George Bush may or may not care about black people, but West’s outburst in the aftermath of Katrina was a genuinely political act. A population was being ignored, and benefits and tributes may not have had as much effect as West’s pointed reduction of the situation. If we let him blurt, lunge, and embarrass himself, we might just come out ahead, even if he has to go into hiding for a month or so afterward (Frere-Jones, 2010, p.2).

This passage captures the essence of the diatribe perfectly, along with West’s use of it.

She supports every point—he had to be offensive, not necessarily truthful, but had to cause a reaction. In her description, the diatribe almost seems akin to martyrdom – the *ethos* of one suffers for the good of many.
CHAPTER 6

“I’ll Let You Finish, But…”

Kanye West’s Statements at the MTV Video Music Awards, 2009

This paper has already examined West’s controversial statements at the Concert for Hurricane Relief in 2005, and will soon focus on another shocking public act: the now-infamous moment when he grabbed the microphone and interrupted country singer Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. Before recounting this scene, it is important to examine major events that occurred in the years leading up to that evening in September 2009.

On November 10, 2007, West’s mother Donda died suddenly and unexpectedly after undergoing cosmetic surgery for liposuction and breast reduction. According to the coroner, 58-year-old Donda West died of heart disease while suffering from “multiple post-operative factors” during the recovery from her procedures (Hernandez, 2008). West and his mother were extremely close: she left her position as an English professor at Chicago State University in order to manage his career, and for her, West wrote the Late Registration track titled “Hey Mama.” Earlier that year, Donda had also published a book entitled Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar. Her death had a profound effect on West, who seemed to immerse himself in his work in attempt to deal with the loss. At a concert in Paris only a week after Donda’s death, West broke down onstage. He attempted to introduce “Hey Mama,” but after saying, “This song is for my mother…” Parisian journalist Meddy Magloire is quoted saying, “He said the word, ‘Mother’ and just couldn’t go any further…It looked like he might collapse. He just couldn’t continue. He stood there in a spotlight, crying, while the band continued
playing” (Magloire qtd. in Aswad, 2007). In the midst of this tragedy, West threw himself into planning a tour to correspond with *Graduation*, which was released on September 11, 2007.

During the spring and summer of 2008, West embarked on the North American leg of his Glow in the Dark Tour, featuring other performers such as N.E.R.D., Lupe Fiasco, and Rihanna. Then, on September 7, 2008, he debuted his song “Love Lockdown” at the MTV Video Music Awards. The fall months of 2008 saw the European leg of Glow in the Dark Tour, and then on November 24, 2008, West released his fourth studio album, *808’s and Heartbreak*. In December of 2008, West held a press conference in New Zealand, where he discussed his intense work on the new album, the countless hours he spent working on his “long-awaited” clothing line, Pastelle, and finally spoke in public again about his mother’s death (“Kanye breaks,” 2008). West told the New Zealand journalists that *808’s* was “about loss,” and said that his mother’s death was “like losing an arm and a leg and trying to walk through that” (“Kanye breaks,” 2008). Finally, he addressed his break-up with his fiancée Alexis Phifer, which also inspired much of the album as the break-up occurred shortly after his mother Donda’s death.

At the same time that Kanye West was dealing with immense success and crippling tragedy, another new star was on the rise. Taylor Swift, a young pop-country singer from Nashville, was enjoying increasing popularity since the release of her debut single, “Tim McGraw,” and first album, *Taylor Swift* in 2006. She was nominated for the coveted “Best New Artist” Grammy Award in 2008, but lost to singer Amy Winehouse. Her second album, *Fearless*, was released on November 11, 2008, debuting at Billboard’s
number one spot. According to *Rolling Stone* magazine, “One key to Swift’s success was that she expanded country music’s demographic to include suburban adolescent girls – something she accomplished in part by using social networking sites and by drawing on confessional teen-diary lyrics in ways unprecedented in the genre” (Eddy, 2011). When Swift was featured on the music magazine’s cover in February 2009, the caption read, “Taylor Swift: Secrets of a Good Girl,” which provides some insight into the public’s favorable opinion of the well-behaved nineteen-year-old.

On September 13, 2009, Swift made history for her genre when she became the first country artist to win a Video Music Award. She received the award for Best Female Video for her song “Love Story,” and it was during her acceptance speech that the infamous event of the night transpired. According to *Rolling Stone*, Swift began by saying, “Thank you so much! I always dreamed about what it would be like to maybe win one of these some day, but I never actually thought it would have happened. I sing country music so thank you so much for giving me a chance to win a VMA award” (Swift qtd. in “Kanye West Storms,” 2009). At this point, West, who had been seen earlier drinking Hennessy and sitting in the front row, “stormed the stage” (“Kanye West Storms,” 2009), took the microphone from Swift, and spoke the words that would encompass the standout moment of the entire show: “Yo Taylor, I’m really happy for you, and I’ll let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time. One of the best videos of all time!” (“Kanye West Storms,” 2009). The Beyoncé video to which West referred was for her song “Single Ladies,” which went on to win Video of the Year.

According to CNN, “Elliott Wilson, founder and chief executive officer of [online rap blog] *Rap Radar*…said the mood quickly turned from one of surprised amusement to
anger” (France, 2009). Immediately afterward, “according to reports from inside the house, West flipped off the crowd and returned to his seat. [Rapper] Wale then said to the crowd, ‘You can’t blame a man for speaking his mind,’” but when the audience booed his words, he said “‘Kanye, I tried’” (Rodriguez, 2008). Later in the show, Beyoncé invited Swift onstage during her own Video of the Year acceptance speech so she could “have her moment” (France, 2009). Various celebrities, including Pink, Katy Perry, Kelly Clarkson, and blogger Perez Hilton, immediately expressed their disgust with West’s action via their blogs or Twitter accounts (France, 2009).

West’s first apology appeared on his personal blog, originally appearing in his characteristic, all-caps style:

I’M SOOOOO SORRY TO TAYLOR SWIFT AND HER FANS AND HER MOM. I SPOKE TO HER MOTHER RIGHT AFTER AND SHE SAID THE SAME THING MY MOTHER WOULD’VE SAID. SHE IS VERY TALENTE! I LIKE THE LYRICS ABOUT BEING A CHEERLEADER AND SHE’S IN THE BLEACHERS!
…………………… I’M IN THE WRONG FOR GOING ON STAGE AND TAKING AWAY FROM HER MOMENT! …………… BEYONCE’S VIDEO WAS THE BEST OF THIS DECADE!!!! I’M SORRY TO MY FANS IF I LET YOU GUYS DOWN!!!! I’M SORRY TO MY FRIENDS AT MTV. I WILL APOLOGIZE TO TAYLOR 2MRW. WELCOME TO THE REAL WORLD!!!! EVERYBODY WANNA BOOOOO ME BUT I’M A FAN OF REAL POP CULTURE!!! NO DISRESPECT BUT WE WATCHIN’ THE SHOW AT THE CRIB RIGHT NOW CAUSE … WELL YOU KNOW!!!! I’M STILL HAPPY FOR TAYLOR!!!! BOOYAAAWWWW!!!! YOU ARE VERY VERY TALENTE!!! I GAVE MY AWARDS TO OUTKAST WHEN THEY DESERVED IT OVER ME… THAT’S WHAT IT IS!!!!!!! I’M NOT CRAZY YALL, I’M JUST REAL. SORRY FOR THAT!!! I REALLY FEEL BAD FOR TAYLOR AND I’M SINCERELY SORRY!!! MUCH RESPECT!!!!! (West qtd. in Mary, 2009)
Soon after, West posted another apology on his blog: “I feel like Ben Stiller in ‘Meet the Parents’ when he messed up everything and Robert De Niro asked him to leave... That was Taylor's moment and I had no right in any way to take it from her. I am truly sorry” (Mary, 2009).

The next day, West was scheduled to appear on the premiere episode of The Jay Leno Show to perform the song “Run This Town” with Jay-Z and Rihanna. Instead of cancelling his appearance, West chose to discuss the events of the previous evening with Leno and to offer another apology. When Leno asked if he “had a tough day today,” West replied:

Yeah, it’s been extremely difficult just dealing with the fact that I hurt someone or took anything away from a talented artist or from anyone because I only wanted to help people. My entire life I’ve only wanted to give and do something that I felt was right and I immediately knew in this situation that it was wrong and it wasn’t a spectacle or … it’s actually someone’s emotions that I stepped on. It was very – It was just – It was rude, period. I’d like to be able to apologize to her in person. (Hawks, 2009)

Then, in a move that was later compared to his treatment of Hugh Grant in 1995, Leno asked West what he thinks his late mother “would have said about this?” (Hawks, 2009). After West took an emotional pause, but did not answer, Leno added, “Would she be disappointed in this? Would she give you a lecture?” (Hawks, 2009). West eventually answered:

Yeah. You know, obviously, I deal with hurt and so many celebrities they never take the time off and I’ve never taken the time off to really – you know just music after music and tour after tour and tour – and I’m just ashamed that my hurt caused someone else’s hurt. My dream of what award shows were supposed to be caused – I don’t try to justify it because I was just in the wrong, just, period, but I need to, after this, just take some time off and just analyze how I’m going to make it through the rest of this

1 Exact time unknown, as http://www.kanyeuniversecity.com/ is no longer online.
life, how I’m going to improve because I am a celebrity and that’s something I have to deal with and if there’s anything I could do to help Taylor in the future, or help anyone – I want to live this thing – it’s hard sometimes. (Hawks, 2009)

The next day, September 15, Swift appeared on The View and said that West had not apologized, saying, “he has not personally reached out or anything, but if he wanted to say hi…” (Lynch, 2009). Later that day, West reportedly called Swift and apologized, and Swift told ABC News Radio, “Kanye did call me, and he was very sincere in his apology, and I accepted that apology” (Lynch, 2009). However, while the conflict seemed to be resolved on a private and personal level, the public would not let it die as quickly. On Monday, the day following the VMAs, “Taylor Swift,” ‘VMAs,’ ‘Kanye’s,’ and ‘Beyoncé’ were top trending topics on Twitter” (France, 2009). Countless auto-tuned videos of remixes of West’s proclamation sprung up on YouTube in the days and weeks that followed. The event even spawned a website called “yoimaletyoufinish.com,” which superimposed a microphone-holding West onto various images with captions inspired by what he had said onstage. The website also provides users the option to download a template and create their own parody image, and is still available in 2011, albeit no longer frequently updated.

The shock of this event calls the diatribe to light once again, as shock and offensiveness are two of the rhetorical method’s initial identifying factors. However, only careful analysis can show whether the other components are present. Without the Cynic’s moral compulsion and the will to sacrifice his or her own ethos in order to catalyze discussion of societal corruption, it is possible that what remains may simply be an offensive act for the sake of shock itself, with no higher purpose.
Analysis

In this situation, West’s actions are shocking and offensive as required by the diatribe, but do not meet enough of the method’s other criteria to be considered as such. For this event, seven criteria of the diatribe have been isolated and conceptualized. After examining both the VMA statement itself and the blog posts and interviews that followed shortly after, it is clear that only one criterion truly fits this situation: the Cynic making his beliefs part of his daily life. Another criterion is the intention shock, and while this event was shocking, West later admitted that he thought interruptions at awards shows were actually a normal occurrence, thus negating the aspect of “intent” from the shocking act. The other elements shown not to be present in this scene are: dire circumstances that render traditional strategies obsolete, the Cynic’s moral obligation to speak out against the situation, removing the distinctions between moral and political issues and between personal and professional responsibilities, defining the audience as “whomever would listen” (Windt, 1972, p.7), and finally, celebrating the universal brotherhood of mankind.

The artifacts analyzed in this chapter are: (1) the transcript of the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) which occurred on September 13, 2009; (2) Kanye West’s initial apology on his blog; (3) West’s brief follow-up apology on his blog; and (4) the transcript of his appearance on the premiere episode of The Jay Leno Show on September 14, 2009. Toward the end of the chapter, the analysis will also reference transcripts of two of West’s radio show appearances to aid in further discussion of the ways in which this public statement does not fall into the vein of the diatribe.

Perhaps more than the other chapters, the following analysis involves heavy focus on the idea of perception versus reality. The Cynics seemed to possess a different means
than mainstream society had of perceiving the culture in which they lived, especially when evaluating the moral value of certain societal practices. At times, the Cynic’s perception may prevail as the correct view, and at the very least may catalyze a discussion that causes mainstream society to experiences a sort of awakening. This phenomenon was seen in the discussion and debate that followed West’s Hurricane Katrina statement. However, at other times, it may be that the Cynic is suffering from an overly skewed perception of his culture’s wrongs, and since his message lacks validity it likely will not catch on. Furthermore, West later showed through interviews that his perception at the time of the awards show changed after he reflected on the situation.

The first criterion for a situation that would call for diatribe is, “Perceiving circumstances as they did,” the Cynics could not “use traditional strategies for protest” (Windt, 1972, p.3). From both his blog posts and his appearance on The Jay Leno Show, it appears that West had a completely different perception of the way that award shows should be structured. On Jay Leno, West said, “It’s been extremely difficult…. Just 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…. I’ve only wanted to give and do something that I felt was right” (Hawks, 2009). Continuing this thought, he also said, “I’m just ashamed that my hurt caused someone else’s hurt. My dream of what award shows are supposed to be, cause – and I don’t try to justify it because I was in the wrong…period” (Hawks, 2009). Thus, in the moment when West jumped on stage, he seems to have mentally defined the “circumstance” as the award show not running as it was supposed to, because the wrong person received the award. In the moment, he seemed to feel compelled to speak out. However, upon reflection, West seemed to
realize that the circumstance was actually more trivial—the awards show did not adhere to his dream of how such a ceremony should take place, and he does not “try to justify it” because he saw that this was not a dire situation. There were no lives at stake if he did not speak, as there were during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This was simply a matter of one person’s vision not being completed.

To further this idea, Windt (1972) wrote, “the rhetorical strategies and symbolic acts were a product of circumstances and moral commitments” (p.3). On one level, West stood by his original claim that, “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time” (“Kanye West Storms,” 2009), which shows that morally, he still believed that Beyoncé should have won. But in his first blog apology, West acknowledged that Taylor Swift was “very talented” and that he was “in the wrong for going on stage and taking away her moment!” (West, qtd. in Mary, 2009). Admitting that he was “in the wrong” seems to remove any moral obligation he truly had to defend Beyoncé, because he essentially admits that his actions toward another singer, Swift, were immoral. However, he also made a point to restate his original message, writing, “Beyoncé’s video was the best of this decade” (West, qtd. in Mary, 2009). In the same blog post, West wrote, “Welcome to the real world! Everybody wanna booooo me but I’m a fan of real pop culture!” (West, qtd. in Mary, 2009). Thus, West negates his complete moral commitment to Beyoncé by admitting that his actions toward Swift were also wrong and immoral. At the same time, though, he takes “away her moment” again by restating his claims about Beyoncé and defining his actions as “real pop culture” and “the real world.” A true Cynic should feel a moral obligation on one side only, yet West admitted being morally wrong in his actions
toward Swift and still continued to make the same claims that Beyoncé deserved Swift’s award, taking away Swift’s moment over and over.

West verbally stood by his beliefs by frequently repeating that Beyoncé should have won, but true Cynics also “took their beliefs out of the abstract and made them part of their lives. They did what they professed” (Windt, 1972, p.5). For West to be considered a true modern-day Cynic, he would have to take part in the very act he was advocating—passing awards that had been unjustly received along to those who rightfully deserved them. This is the only criterion of the diatribe that West actually fits in this situation, because he had done “what [he] professed” two years earlier.

As West references in his blog, “I gave my awards to Outkast when they deserved it over me...that’s what it is!! I’m not crazy yall [sic], I’m just real. Sorry for that!” (West, qtd. in Mary, 2009). He was referring to the 2007 BET Hip-Hop Awards when he won the Video of the Year award for his song “Stronger,” but onstage said, “he thought the groups UGK and Outkast deserved the award instead for their collaborated song ‘International Players Anthem’” (US Weekly, qtd. in JayBird, 2007). Before he called UGK and Big Boi of Outkast up to the stage, West said, “I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to win an award I shouldn’t win,” (US Weekly, qtd. in JayBird, 2007). He tried to hand Big Boi his statue, but the rapper gave it back and told West he deserved it. From this anecdote that West re-invoked in his blog, it is clear that he actually did back up his symbolic actions with physical proofs in his own life.

By definition alone and on the surface, it may look as though West should be categorized as a Cynic because he believed, at least at the time, that the travesty of the award show (Beyoncé being cheated out of a trophy and title she deserved) called for
protest, that he had a moral obligation to correct the situation, and that he believed so strongly in his actions he had already employed the same practice himself. During the show, he seemed to perceive the situation that way. However, through further analysis of his Jay Leno appearance and subsequent interviews West gave to radio stations, it seems that there are important facets of Cynicism that were clearly missing or rescinded in this situation. The only aspect of Cynicism he held true was to take his beliefs out of the abstract and enact them in his own life. But above, it was shown that the circumstance of the awards show did not call for a use of nontraditional protest strategies, and that West did not feel a complete moral obligation toward Beyoncé, or he would not have admitted to mistreating Swift. This paper will now examine the rest of the diatribe criteria that West does not fit: the intention to shock, the distinctions between moral and political, and personal and professional issues, and the idea of delivering diatribes to any available listener.

Windt’s (1972) essay makes it clear that the Cynic’s “acts were intended to shock sensibilities, to scandalize by profaning societal customs” (p.5). Cynics specifically chose non-traditional settings and shocking actions in order to awaken their audience into action or at least discussion of the culture’s serious shortcomings and issues. Not only was this awards show dispute shown to be a trivial matter earlier in this discussion, but it was later shown that West did not even believe his shocking act would be a shock at all. During a November 5, 2010 interview with Minneapolis radio station 101.3 KDWB, West admitted, “The idea of cutting someone off at an award show…I didn’t know that was so new. I didn’t know it was the first time…that the music ever played on someone. If you take The Dream, who wrote ‘Single Ladies’ at the Grammys, as soon as he wanted
to say something they completely played the music before he could say ‘Hi’ to his mom or anything” (101.3 KDWB, 2010). With this statement, two important points become clear. For one, West said he believed that cutting people off at award shows was a common practice, which completely removes the element of intended shock from his statement—and shock is a definitive aspect of the diatribe. Additionally, while this point also seems to highlight another issue West has with award shows (that the producers can cut off a recipient’s speech before they are finished), he clearly views it as a “traditional” aspect of such shows. He uses the example of The Dream’s speech to justify his own actions—as The Dream’s acceptance speech was allowed to be cut off, surely it would be normal and acceptable for him to cut off Swift’s speech. Thus, it appears that he neither intended to shock nor to use a “non-traditional” protest strategy, because his invocation of The Dream’s interrupted speech shows that he felt this was a normal occurrence within an awards show ceremony.

Another inconsistency with the elements of the diatribe is that while West did not believe his act would be shocking, he was actually regretful and apologized for the way it was received anyway. In an August 14, 2010 interview with New York radio station Power 105.1, he seemed to make an attempt to rescind or apologize for the shocking acts themselves—something a Cynic would never do if he believed wholeheartedly in the higher cause of his statements. West said, “Queen, and Kurt Cobain, people like Thom Yorke, Trent Reznor, DMX…where these people are the greatest at what they do…it’s almost like we always get in our own way…. Everything is really really really from our heart and what we really really feel, and the world is not prepped to deal with what you really feel. You gotta walk in line a little bit more” (Power, 2010). Not only was he
advocating for the “greatest” outspoken celebrities to try to comply with societal standards, but he also dismissed another Cynic principle immediately after. West said that there were two things for which he had become known in his six-year career: “It was making good, uplifting music that people wanted to listen to in the club and that touched them in a certain way, and it was also these ‘crashing the Internet’ moments. And the thing is, those ‘crashing the Internet’ moments could somehow hinder the making of good music…. And I won’t compromise, but I will sacrifice that” (Power, 2010). West uses the term “‘crashing the Internet’ moments” to describe the amount of content that has been generated online as a direct result of his actions. This is an explicit privileging of music over shocking acts; without taking back the intentions behind those acts, he seemed to agree that he should not approach problems in ways that might isolate him from his audiences or fans. The Cynics lived in isolation—begging for food, committing atrocities to call attention to societal flaws. Here, West actually advocates for societal compliance in order to not be isolated from his audience.

A central tenet of Cynicism is that, “Most men make distinctions between moral problems and political problems, between professional responsibilities and personal commitments. The Cynics denied, even condemned, these distinctions as artificial” (Windt, 1972, p.6). In the aforementioned case, West seemed to express his intention to maintain the distinction between his moral problems and his professional problems—he would prefer to solely create music, even if that means diminishing his outspokenness. Also, after Jay Leno asked West what his mother would have said about his VMA act, West said, “You know, obviously…I deal with hurt, and you know, so many celebrities, they never take the time off. I’ve never taken the time off to really—you know, just
music after music, and tour after tour” (Hawks, 2009). He followed with, “I need to take some time off and just analyze how I’m going to make it through the rest of this life, how I’m going to improve. Because I am a celebrity, and that’s something I have to deal with…. I want to live this thing. It’s hard sometimes” (Hawks, 2009). It appears, here, that West saw his personal problems as encroaching too much onto his professional responsibilities as a celebrity, as someone constantly in the spotlight. In order to maintain what clearly seems to be a crucial distinction to him, West believed the solution was to take time off from his professional career to deal with his personal grief, ostensibly over his mother’s death, so that one would not affect the other.

The notion of audience is also a crucial point in this discussion, as the Cynics characteristically “delivered diatribes to whomever would listen” (Windt, 1972, p.7). At the moment in which the event occurred, it seemed as though West was attempting to speak to the entire audience. However, from his quotations from The Jay Leno Show, it appeared that even the next day he realized that both his delivery and choice of audience might have been poorly timed. Also, in his first blog post, West wrote, “I’m in the wrong for going on stage and taking away from her moment!” and in his second post, “That was Taylor’s moment and I had no right in any way to take it from her. I am truly sorry” (West, qtd. in Mary, 2009). That said, West also put his own twist on the apology by never explicitly taking back the idea behind his words—the fact that he believed Beyoncé still deserved the award over Swift.

In his 101.3 KDWB interview, West acknowledged his lack of compassion for Swift, but then immediately seemed to undercut her validity as an artist: “Taylor, this 12-year-old…18-year-old girl…me cutting her off showed a lack of compassion with
everything she went [through] to deserve this one moment… that caused her to, like, go off and have 100 magazine covers and sell millions in the first week… that shouldn’t even be categorized with the greatest living artist that we have to date” (101.3 KDWB, 2010). Another Cynic trait is that they were the “first to celebrate the universal brotherhood of mankind” (Windt, 1972, p.6). By imposing this artistic hierarchy and sticking to it, it does not seem that West believed any sort of artistic, celebrity, or human brotherhood should have been in place. Explaining his artistic preference further, he said:

No one just wants to sit and look at the reality…. Okay it’s the best album, the best video of the decade. The most influential, the most memorable…. So the audacity of it losing anything, anything—it should be like Lauryn Hill, she won all those Grammys and she couldn’t lose. Guaranteed if it was the other way around and Taylor Swift was 12-15 years into the game and on her 40th or 50th video and she made the video of her career, do you think she would have lost to a brand new artist? Hell no! (101.3, KDWB, 2010).

Again, while standing by his original opinion would have been an important example of a Cynic staying true to his beliefs, the fact that West was rooted in the idea of any sort of hierarchy opposes fundamental Cynic values. The Cynics also rejected the “striving-achieving ethic upon which Athens…was built” (Windt, 1972, p.5), but West’s entire argument about Beyoncé’s video seems to be based on the assumption that because she has striven and achieved so much in her lengthy career, she is in a position now where a mere neophyte should be unable to touch her. West argued that Beyoncé had a comparatively long and extremely successful career behind her, having made countless albums and videos since the debut of her former singing group, Destiny’s Child, in 1997. Not only had she built up her credibility and proved her lasting talent through the years, but in 2009, West viewed “Single Ladies” to be the paramount video of Beyoncé’s entire
career. Thus, it seems he felt that when a newcomer, Swift, won the award over Beyoncé, the awards committee ignored the success of her video and the grand achievement it represented within her overall body of work as an artist. It was too early in Swift’s career, then, for her to win such an award when positioned against a far more established competitor. The Cynics rejected the idea of striving and achieving and the hierarchy that is therein created through that process, but here West is privileging that hierarchy above all else as the factor that should be used to determine the recipients of awards.

On the surface, West’s outburst at the 2009 Video Music Awards seemed to adhere to some key diatribe tenets, as did the aftermath that followed. His actions did cause a shock because they scandalized a cultural custom, and he stood by his belief that Beyoncé deserved the award above Swift. He also practiced a crucial Cynic act—translating abstract beliefs into physical actions in one’s own life—by reminding the public that two years prior, he had tried to give away his own award that he thought was undeserved. He perceived the situation to be a hopeless one that called for protest because it was conflicting with his “dream” of the way award shows should be—but one person’s dream is not necessarily a proper, morally sound blueprint for society, and he later rescinded his actions and deemed it an inappropriate moment to express his frustration. One “dream” is far too trivial to be placed in the vein of the diatribe, which is meant to deal with serious and dire moral issues.

Fundamentally, however, West’s intentions, beliefs, and moments of regret revealed serious holes in the attempt to link this act to the diatribe. In the first place, one of the main criteria for diatribe is the intention to shock, and as seen in West’s later radio
interviews, he did not necessarily believe his act would be shocking. Additionally, the Cynics believed in drawing no line between moral problems and political problems, or between professional responsibilities and personal commitments. As soon as the day after the event, West told Jay Leno that he needed to take time off from his professional responsibilities to deal with the grief he was experiencing after his mother’s sudden death, using her death as an explanation for the inappropriateness of his actions. A true Cynic would have believed his actions to be fully appropriate, given the dire circumstances of the situation.

He also suggested on the radio that outspoken celebrities needed to “walk in line” a little more because the world is “not prepped to deal with what you really feel” (Power, 2010). The ancient Greek Cynics, who adopted a completely alternative lifestyle that involved begging for money and whistling in the midst of crowds to gain attention, would likely have been disgusted by West’s decision to compartmentalize his feelings—feelings which he believed he *did* have a moral commitment to express, but should suppress in order to remain in good societal standing. Finally, the Cynics also rejected the concept of striving and achieving, denouncing it as unnatural and imposed on civilians by a corrupt society. By privileging Beyoncé over Swift because she had already achieved so much and was at the highest point thus far in her career, West showed that he believed the striving-achieving ethic to be of paramount importance. This also showed that he seemed to believe this tenet should guide cultural decisions, such as determining who rightfully deserves certain awards. Thus, even though West’s acts at the 2009 VMA appeared to contained a few elements of diatribe, only one truly remained—supporting one’s beliefs in his own life. The fact that every other aspect of the situation was vehemently opposed
to Cynic beliefs leads to the conclusion that at this particular moment, West cannot truly be classified as a modern-day Cynic.

However, although West was not a Cynic and was simply offensive in this 2009 situation, his somehow retained his ability to use the diatribe again in 2010. By generally staying out of the public eye for the next year to focus solely on his music, it appears that he regained his credibility as both an artist and a celebrity, setting the stage for the diatribe to be resurrected when another moral problem arose that was truly of societal concern, and was not just a trivial matter like an ostensibly unfair awards show in the eyes of one person.
“IT WAS VERY BRUTAL AND I CAME THERE WITH ONLY POSITIVE INTENT.”

Kanye West’s Statements on NBC’s Today Show, 2010

Just over a year after the incident at the 2009 Video Music Awards, Kanye West seemed to have put his public side to rest in favor of months of relatively reclusive studio time, focusing on the creativity that had initially thrust him into the public eye. His newest album, My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, was scheduled for a late-November release, but West used his website—which no longer hosts his blog—to offer fans free downloads of new tracks each week. Beginning on August 20, he called these releases “G.O.O.D.2 Fridays.” According to The New York Observer, these free downloads were a “great success,” and “The approach built buzz without killing demand for the final product, even though the album contained many of the same tracks. Rap artists like Swizz Beatz and Timbaland quickly followed suit” (Popper, 2011). Thus, these tracks seemed to pave the way for the critical acclaim that would later be given to the album itself.

Around this same time, former President George W. Bush, who had also been removed from the public eye recently, was in the midst of a press tour for the November 9th release of his memoir, Decision Points. In his book, President Bush wrote, “I faced a lot of criticism as president…. But the suggestion that I was a racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low. I told Laura at the time that it was the worst moment of my presidency. I feel the same way today” (Bush, 2010, p.326). While reviews from such prominent sources as The New York Times (Kakutani, 2010) and The

2 The G.O.O.D. acronym stands for “Getting Out Our Dreams,” which is the name of the record label West started.
Washington Post (Yardley, 2010) did not mention the excerpt in which President Bush recounts West’s statement, the news media seemed to feel that it was of great importance.

On November 8, 2010, the eve of the memoir’s release, Matt Lauer interviewed President Bush for the NBC Evening News. Lauer brought up the fact that he had hosted the Hurricane Katrina Concert for Hurricane Relief, and asked President Bush if he remembered what Kanye West had said. President Bush answered, “Yes, I do. He called me a racist” (Decision Points, 2010). Lauer corrected President Bush, reminding him that West had actually said, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” (Decision Points, 2010). President Bush then said, “That’s ‘he’s a racist.’ And I didn’t appreciate it then. I don’t appreciate it now. It’s one thing to say, you know, ‘I don’t appreciate the way he’s—handles his business.’ It’s another thing to say, ‘This man’s a racist.’ I resent it. It’s not true, and it was one of the most disgusting moments in my presidency” (Decision Points, 2010). Lauer proceeded to tell President Bush that people might “give you some heat for that” because “you’re not saying the worst moment in your Presidency was watching the misery in Louisiana. You’re saying it was when someone insulted you because of that” (Decision Points, 2010). President Bush answered, “No, I—that—and I also make it clear that the misery in Louisiana affected me deeply as well. There’s a lot of tough moments in the book. And it was a disgusting moment, pure and simple” (Decision Points, 2010).

In response to these statements from President Bush, NBC filmed an interview with Kanye West the next day, again with Lauer as the interviewer. The footage was not scheduled to air until November 10, when President Bush would return to NBC on The Today Show, presumably so NBC could roll a clip of West’s apology while President
Bush was in the studio. However, the studio time with West did not run as smoothly as planned. After leaving the studio on November 9, West unleashed a series of angry messages on Twitter, which he later deleted. In these “Tweets,” West provided short, emotional descriptions of what had occurred in the Today Show studio: “I went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush because I labeled him a racist and years later I got labeled as a racist…” (West, qtd. in Itzkoff, 2010). He continued: “While I was trying to give the interview they started playing the ‘MTV’ [2009 VMAs] under me with audio!!!!!!!” (West, qtd. in Itzkoff, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). Two minutes later, West typed, “HE TRIED TO FORCE MY ANSWERS. IT WAS VERY BRUTAL AND I CAME THERE WITH ONLY POSITIVE INTENT” (Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). The entire series was comprised of about 16 Tweets.

Other Tweets included “I don’t trust anyone but myself! Everyone has an agenda. I don’t do press anymore. I can’t be everything to everybody anymore”; “I can’t take anymore [sic] advice!!! I create, I’m creative, I have a good heart, everyone will see and understand one day”; “He played clips of Bush and asked me to look at his face while I was trying to talk to him. I wish Michael Jackson had twitter!!!!!!!”; and “Maybe Mike could have explained how the media tried to set him up!!! It’s all a fucking set up!!!!” (Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). Predictably, West’s Tweets did not disappear into thin air, but were immediately picked up by the media, which quickly began to speculate about and discuss the incident. According to MTV News on November 10, “West has spoken out in the past week about the [Katrina] incident…though he’s tried to express his empathy with Bush over the incident, West said he was thrown under the bus by Lauer

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3 See Appendix A for West’s original Tweets
4 See Appendix B for the Tweets that remained on West’s homepage as of 2/1/11
during their interview” (Kaufman, 2010), showing that the public and the news media seemed to understand the general message West was sending from his Twitter.

The first taste the public received of this now-anticipated interview was when *The Today Show* ran a clip of West’s apology to President Bush during the former President’s November 10 appearance. The clip showed West saying, “I would tell George Bush, in my moment of frustration, I didn’t have the grounds to call him a racist. But I believe that in a situation of high emotion like that, we as human beings don’t always choose the right words” (Jefferson, 2010). After viewing the clip, President Bush responded, “I appreciate that…it wasn’t just Kanye West who was talking like that during Katrina. I cited him as an example, I cited others as examples as well. And um, you know, I appreciate that” (Jefferson, 2010). Lauer then asked if his faith allowed him to forgive West, to which President Bush said, “Oh absolutely, of course it does. And I’m not a hater, I didn’t hate Conway [sic] West, but I was talking about an environment in which people were willing to say things that hurt” (Jefferson, 2010). From that morning’s segment, it would appear that the matter had been laid to rest.

However, the next morning, November 11, *Today* decided to air the majority of the interview that had upset West to such an intense degree. It began calmly, with Lauer bringing up the “worst moment of my presidency” quotation. West responded:

As far as it being the worst moment of his presidency, you know, I can't--I can't really speak to that, you know? But as his take, his explanation, I completely agree with and I empathize with totally. And I felt like that the entire time that, you know, that I was being, you know, hailed as a hero and everyone saying, `Y'all, I'm so happy you said that,' and `I didn't like you before, but now I like you because you said this.' And you just sit there and you know--you know in your heart as a person that...you know, in a moment of emotion, to peg someone or to call a name, or peg someone as a racist, is not--it's just not right. (NBC News, 2010)
Then Lauer said, “But while most people expressed frustration, you did take it across a line and...you made it a little more sinister...do you regret having said that now?” (NBC News, 2010). West answered, “I don’t want to speak on the word regret. And I think a lot of things that happen in America period are because of race, just the way this country was built...it’s a way bigger conversation than that. But what I wanted to speak to with Bush was just to say that I empathize with the idea of being pegged as a racist” (NBC News, 2010). After this, Lauer said, “Just play the tape. Don’t even listen this time. I want you to just look at his face—” (Here, West says, “Okay.”) “…when he is commenting about you...what would you say to him if he would meet with you face-to-face? And I’m not sure he would, but if he would?” (NBC News, 2010).

At this point, West became visibly irritated and said, “You know, I mean, I didn’t need you guys to show me the tape in order to, like, prompt my emotion—” (NBC News, 2010). Lauer replied, “No I’m just—I’m just asking you, when you look at his face, what would you say to him?” (NBC News, 2010). More agitated now, West said:

I mean, pre looking at his face, I came up here because I wanted to say something to him right after the fact, you know? I would--I would say--you know what I'm saying? It's like I don't even have to do the TV stuff with me. This is reality. This is--this is the real thing going on. This is--you know what I'm saying? I don't--I don't need all the jazz. I would say to—[turns to address the backstage crew] can we be quiet for a second? I would tell George Bush, in my moment of frustration, that I didn't have the grounds to call him a racist. (NBC NEWS, 2010)

Then, seeming to prompt him, Lauer said, “And you—you’re sorry?” West said, “Yeah, I’m sorry for...” and paused to think, at which point Lauer said, “I think I get the point” (NBC News, 2010). Explaining his hesitation, West said:

I want to give it the exact perfect wording because everything that I say gets taken and drawn into headlines. And I’m here to man up to different mistakes that I’ve made and speak to ... the moment when I pegged George
Bush as a racist. I came here to say that I made mistakes, that I’ve grown as a person, and that it’s not as easy as boxing someone into a villain role or into a race role. I did not have...enough information in that situation to call him a racist. That might have been the emotion that I felt. But...being a rational, well thought-out, empathetic human being and thinking about it after the fact, I would have...chosen different words. Even...when I was considered to have done something so wrong, my motivation was from a good place. Maybe mistimed...not...realizing the power of my words and the way they would stop the Internet. But nonetheless, that it’s very pure and from a good place. (NBC News, 2010)

After this, Lauer made reference to the 2009 VMAs, when West was accused of racism for saying that Beyoncé was better than Taylor Swift. West agreed with Lauer’s statement, saying, “Yeah, exactly...it was so funny to me that it could be a race thing because what I was expressing was my frustration from years and years of seeing, you know—” (NBC News, 2010), at which point the screen filled with footage of the scene in question. As it played, West, who could clearly hear his previous mistake in the background, said, “Yo, how am I supposed to talk if you’re going to run this thing in the middle of while I’m talking?” (NBC News, 2010). Lauer claimed, “It’s just—it’s under. You won’t be hearing it much,” to which West replied, “But I’m hearing it while I’m trying to talk” (NBC News, 2010). Finally, Lauer said to the crew, “Ok. Can you take the sound out of the overheads please?” and the clip stopped rolling. Lauer attempted to continue, saying, “Just pick up. You said it wasn’t a race thing?” But West, still extremely irritated, said, “Please don’t let that happen again. It’s, like, ridiculous” (NBC News, 2010). After this, The Today Show cut back to its anchors, Matt Lauer and Meredith Viera, engaged in a brief discussion of the West clip, with Lauer defending the VMA clip as “something we do every day” (NBC News, 2010).

While audience opinions may have been split as to the validity of both West’s anger and The Today Show’s actions, West himself was pleased that the interview was
shown almost in its entirety. Taking to Twitter once again on November 12, he first cancelled his *Today Show* performance that had been scheduled for November 26: “I’m not performing on the ‘Today’ show for obvious reasons” (West qtd. in Montgomery, 2010). He continued with, “I’m so happy the world got to see a small piece of ‘the set up’ …. I want you guys to look at that footage and start to put everything together now. It’s very simple to call someone angry or spoiled or the one thousand names I’ve been called, but it’s harder to try to take a look at what’s really behind the curtain…. Did you see them try to justify playing the audio under my interview?” (West qtd. in Montgomery, 2010). He took a more optimistic tone in the following Tweets, writing:

> I’m not complaining. I’m tweeting because I’m so happy you guys got to see this shit really go down…. I don’t hate Matt Lauer…we don’t promote hate. That’s the whole point. I promote love and truth…. They made a mistake. They thought they could pull it but they couldn’t. That [sic] was just a small representation of a bigger media play that’s been going on since the beginning of time. All positive energy…all smiles. Much love to Matt and the whole ‘Today’ show. I accept ya’ll [sic] future apology in advance. (Montgomery, 2010).

With this, the “hubbub,” (NBC NEWS, 2010) as Lauer called it, essentially came to a close. Like his previous public statements and outbursts, in the end there seemed to be a minimal (if any) effect on West’s career. *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* was released on November 22, and was met with arguably more critical acclaim than any of his albums thus far. According to the album’s review in *Rolling Stone* magazine, “Being crazy is this guy’s job, and judging from the sound of his music, business is booming. *[MBDTF]* is his most maniacally inspired music yet” (Sheffield, 2010). The review also states that on the album, West blows “past all the rules of hip-hop and pop, even though, for the past half-decade, he’s been the one inventing the rules…he makes everybody else on the radio sound laughably meek” and, “West thinks you’re a moron if you settle for
artists who don’t push as hard as he does. And that means pretty much everybody” (Sheffield, 2010).

According to another popular music magazine, *Spin*, in his lyrics West “was calling himself an asshole, in the chorus of an epic, piano-driven, ear-worming single. *Fantasy* is filled with similar moments, as if West is working from a checklist of his faults…. See what he did there? Loss becomes win” (Martins, 2010). Reviewer Chris Martins also writes, “*Fantasy* isn’t a flawless album…. But West isn’t claiming to be flawless anymore. He’s trying to make a masterpiece. Trying to be honest with us. Trying to be honest with himself. Trying to figure out if he’s closer to God or to something else entirely” (Martins, 2010). As these reviews demonstrate, it seems that, by using outlets in his own way, West may finally be getting his messages across with the raw honesty he intended.

Analysis

In this chapter, the artifacts analyzed are: (1) the series of Tweets Kanye West sent on November 9, 2010, after his *Today Show* interview was taped but had not aired; (2) the transcript of West’s aforementioned interview with Matt Lauer, which aired on November 11; and (3) West’s second series of Tweets about the *Today Show*, sent on November 12. Additionally, transcripts from both of President Bush’s NBC interviews—one discussing his memoir, *Decision Points*, on the evening of November 8, and a follow-up interview on *Today* on the morning of November 10—will be considered secondary or referential artifacts.

To determine whether or not West can be considered a modern-day Cynic in this situation, the setting and desired message has been examined first. As Windt writes,
“Perceiving circumstances as they did,” the Cynics could not “use traditional strategies for protest” (Windt, 1972, p.3), which led them to seek unconventional rhetorical strategies to broadcast their messages. In this case, it seems that West did not initially intend to take a Cynical stance. When he took to his Twitter account to explain the events of the Today Show taping, West wrote, “…but before I take off [for Abu Dhabi] let me tell you how they did me at the Today show….I went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush because I labeled him a racist and years later I got labeled as a racist…." (West, qtd. in Itzkoff, 2010). From this, it seems that West was attempting to use traditional methods to broadcast his apology by appearing on a popular talk show. However, this strategy immediately proved futile, as he explained online: “While I was trying to give the interview they started playing the ‘MTV’ under me with audio!!!!!!!” (West, qtd. in Itzkoff, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). By defining this specific problem with the Today Show interview and continuing to detail the issues for sixteen Tweets, it is clear that the original message he intended to send morphed into something completely different.

According to West, he originally agreed to the Today Show interview in order to apologize for past actions and to explain himself in his own words. His Tweet said, “I went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush,” and in the interview with Lauer, West tried to do just this, saying, “As far as it being the worst moment of his presidency…I can’t really speak to that…But as his take, his explanation, I completely agree with and I empathize with totally…you know in your heart as a person that…to peg someone as a racist is not—it’s just not right” (NBC News, 2010). When asked if he “regret[s] having said that now,” West answered, “I don’t want to speak on the word
regret…I think a lot of things that happen in America period are because of race…it’s a way bigger conversation than that. But what I wanted to speak to with Bush was just to say that I empathize with the idea of being pegged as a racist” (NBC News, 2010). From these answers, it appears that West had a preconceived idea of the points to which he wanted to respond, and to those he did not. He clearly wanted to stress his empathy with the actual term “racist” itself, as he repeated it twice in this segment of the interview, and it was the first detail he mentioned later on Twitter.

However, it also seems that there was still an aspect of his Hurricane Katrina statement that West was not prepared to rescind, when he said, “I don’t want to speak on the word regret,” and defended his claim that racism is still a major problem in America today. Because he felt the need to qualify the question of “regret” and divide it as he did, it appears that it was extremely important for West to choose his wording carefully to ensure that he was only apologizing for the piece of his 2005 statement that he truly felt was “just not right.” In fact, shortly after this exchange, West brought up the problem of word choice. Lauer asked, “And…you’re sorry?” and West said, “Yeah, I’m sorry for…” and then paused to think. When Lauer broke in with, “I think I get the point,” West said, “I want to give it the exact perfect wording because everything I say gets taken and drawn into headlines” (NBC News, 2010), perhaps suggesting one problem of traditional media outlets: the tendency to take quotations out of their original contexts and reapply them elsewhere.

In this same part of the conversation, West also said, “being a rational, well thought-out, empathetic human being and thinking about it after the fact, I would have…chosen different words. Even…when I was considered to have done something so
wrong, my motivation was from a good place. Maybe mistimed…not…realizing the power of my words and the way they would stop the Internet…” (NBC News, 2010). Again, West mentioned the concepts of empathy, selective word choice, and the power that those words can carry, especially when they come from a celebrity whose every word is “taken and drawn into headlines.” As they have been repeated so frequently throughout both the interview’s discourse and West’s Twitter, it seems safe to assume that the main points he wished to discuss on the Today Show were his poor word choice in essentially calling President Bush a racist in 2005, and his newly-found empathy after being called a racist himself in 2009.

These messages of apology and empathy, however, began to fade into the background as others arose. Upon entering the Today set, it does not seem that there was any sort of hopeless situation or societal corruption that would have required West to resort to the diatribe as a means of protest. He was simply there for purposes of apology and clarification, possibly to put an end to the recently reignited public discussion of his calling President Bush a racist five years prior. In fact, in his own interview (albeit after viewing the clip of West’s apology), President Bush had clarified, “it wasn’t just Kanye West who was talking like that during Katrina. I cited him as an example, I cited other examples as well…I didn’t hate Conway [sic] West, but I was talking about an environment in which people were willing to say things that hurt” (Jefferson, 2010). Thus, it seems that the media had been doing just what West alluded to before, that is, taking quotations out of context in order to use them to their own ends. Instead of focusing on why West claimed to accuse any American institutions of racism in 2005, the media seemed more inclined to dwell on who exactly he said did not “care about black
people.” In President Bush’s memoir, he explicitly states that he cited other people alongside West who had added to the environment of racist accusations. The media again seemed to package the situation neatly into a “President vs. Rapper” personal feud, while both men, in 2010, were clearly not angry with each other, but with the political environment at the time of Hurricane Katrina.

A New Message Emerges

Through analyzing the dialogue of West’s Today Show interview and the Tweets that followed, it appears that his first message was sidelined when what West perceived to be a larger problem materialized. In another Tweet that followed those mentioned above, West said, “HE TRIED TO FORCE MY ANSWERS. IT WAS VERY BRUTAL AND I CAME THERE WITH ONLY POSITIVE INTENT” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). It is clear through West’s use of capital letters that he believed Matt Lauer to have committed a serious offense. He described the interview as “brutal,” and asserted that Lauer “tried to force my answers,” which seemed to affirm his own status as an innocent victim. Whether or not this truly was a case of the media abusing a celebrity, it is important to examine why West may have been compelled to react to the situation as he did, and how he chose to do so.

After the Today Show taping, it appears that West realized the shortcomings of using traditional media—the morning talk show—as a broadcast platform. He seemed to feel that Lauer tried to “force” his answers, was angry that “While I was trying to give the interview they started playing the ‘MTV’ under me with audio!!!!!!” and that “He played clips of Bush and asked me to look at his face while I was trying to talk to him” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). Just as the Cynics “could not use traditional
strategies for protest” (Windt, 1972, p.3), West had attempted to use a traditional strategy and felt that he failed. This failure then became another problem—the manipulative tactics of the mainstream media. Thus, there was no way for him to complain *about* traditional media through *using* traditional media, so he tried to find another way.

Twitter, commonly known as a social media website, became West’s new platform of choice. However, to use diatribe, “non-traditional” rhetorical strategies are not the only criterion. These speech acts are also “intended to shock sensibilities, to scandalize by profaning societal customs, to challenge what existential theologians describe as man’s preunderstanding about how one should talk and respond to ideas” (Windt, 1972, p.6). Twitter itself, with an average of 460,000 new accounts created per day, and one billion Tweets sent per week (Penner, 2011), is not a shocking outlet through which to make a public statement. The shock, in this case, was created not through West’s *use* of Twitter, but through his *misuse* of the site.

As with many emerging social websites, after days and months of constant use, one may begin to notice certain norms or unspoken rules with which people comply while using the site. While there are no official manuals published, nor a specific rulebook for behavior, it is common for technology websites or blogs to compile etiquette guidelines to help new users become accustomed to the norms of the site. Online magazine, *The Morning News*, has been publishing articles daily since 1999. In 2008, two years after Twitter was founded, the magazine published an article on Twitter etiquette. Analyzing West’s Tweets alongside these guidelines, it seems that he has been using Twitter in the completely “wrong” way.
According to Margaret Mason (2008), one of the etiquette guidelines is to “Consider pausing between tweets,” as “Twittering 30-plus times an hour pushes other people’s messages off followers’ homepages, and sends mobiles into convulsive twit-fits (to say nothing of excessive SMS charges)”. The sixteen Tweets West sent on November 9 occurred within a span of only 28 minutes, which, according to this article, would likely have overtaken his followers’ homepages for quite some time before being pushed off. Twitter also provides West with a uniquely diverse audience because he is followed by fans and celebrities alike, and both audiences would view his Tweets in an equally personal way—right on the front of their homepage. Whether or not this occurred to him (it is possible that West simply had too much to say but did not realize the advantage of his method), sending a multitude of Tweets in such a short time span ensured that his messages would garner attention, even if they were initially noticed for their inappropriate quantity, not for their actual content.

Another etiquette guideline is, “What’s rude in life is rude on Twitter” (Mason, 2008). Mason (2008) continues, “Passive-aggressive tweets are never as inscrutable as the sender thinks. When you’re being mean, even covertly, everyone eventually figures out the target.” West’s violation of this guideline is clear, although he seemed to take the issue even further than Mason might have expected. Instead of being passive-aggressive, his Tweets seemed solely aggressive, seen in the following three messages: “HE TRIED TO FORCE MY ANSWERS. IT WAS VERY BRUTAL”; “Everything sounds like noise!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! EVERYTHING SOUNDS LIKE NOISE!!!!!!! I don’t trust anyone!”; and “It’s all a fucking set up!!!!” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). It seems that West also refused to be “covert,” as he specifically wrote, “…let
me tell you how they did me at the Today show [sic]…” and “I don’t mess with Matt Lauer or the Today Show [sic] … and that’s a very nice way for me to put it!” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010). He had no qualms about overtly labeling Lauer and *Today* as the clear targets of his frustration, another act that may have shocked the Twitter population with its direct, raw attack on specific parties.

One trait that sets Twitter apart from other largely user-run sites is its limit of 140 characters per Tweet. The limit was set at this level because Twitter was created with the idea that users could Tweet by sending text (or SMS) messages, which are capped at 160 characters (Sagolla, 2009). This said, one of Mason’s guidelines reads, “Try to keep within the character limit…. Twitter is best suited to messages that stay within its 140-character limit. Otherwise, users have to scroll back and track your name through multiple posts…it can become galling if you make it a habit” (Mason, 2008). West clearly intended his Tweets to be read sequentially, linking some together through ellipses, and linking the entire series through their subject matter and timeframe. While many of them can stand alone, one would need to go back and read the entire sequence in order to understand, for instance, why West would Tweet, “I don’t trust anyone but myself! Everyone has an agenda. I don’t do press anymore. I can’t be everything to everybody anymore” or “I feel very alone very used very tortured very misunderstood very hollow very very misused” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010). It seems as if he was using Twitter as a direct replacement for his former blog, KanyeUniverseCity.com, on which he formerly posted his thoughts and messages in paragraphs of roughly the same length as this series of Tweets. However, since blogs themselves are still a widely used
medium of communication, it was not imperative for him to resort to using Twitter in this inappropriate way.

It might be argued, then, that since West had violated so many common guidelines, his followers simply could have gotten annoyed and consequently have discounted the messages he was sending about the media’s “set up” and “agenda.” One of Mason’s (2008) guidelines is, “Plug moderately,” but she adds, “The exception is if you’ve set up an account named after your product or service, which sets a different expectation among subscribers.” In Hellmuller and Aeschbacher (2010), the researchers argued that the term “celebrity” had three definitions. One is the theoretical concept of celebrity itself, but the other two are: “the actual human being represented by the term” and “the tradable commodity that a celebrity generates,” or in other words, the celebrity as a product (p.3). Thus, West’s Twitter account seems to be a two-fold manner of representation: on one hand, the account belongs to Kanye Omari West, the human being, but on the other hand, West uses his Twitter to promote himself as a product or brand, as almost all celebrities on Twitter do from time to time. In this respect, he was not necessarily violating the “Plug moderately” guideline, as his 2,960,778 followers were likely aware that West would use Twitter to promote “Kanye West” as a person and as a product.

It has been established, then, that West chose Twitter as his rhetorical platform upon which to “shock sensibilities” through “profaning societal customs” and challenging “man’s preunderstanding about how one should talk and respond to ideas” (Windt, 1972, p.6). He used Twitter in a shocking manner that profaned its customary behaviors,

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5 As of April 7, 2011
literally used profane language (“It’s all a fucking set up!!!!!” [Emphasis West’s]), at the same time seeming to challenge the way celebrities should respond to poor treatment from the media. West referred to Michael Jackson, notably abused by the media (whether warranted or not), when he wrote, “I wish Michael Jackson had twitter!!!!!!!” and “Maybe Mike could have explained how the media tried to set him up!!! It’s all a fucking set up!!!!” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010 [Emphasis West’s]). Referring to someone else with the same problem adds another layer of meaning to the situation.

While the first message seemed to revolve around West as an individual, the Cynic needed to look out for society as a whole, and “was the first to celebrate the universal brotherhood of mankind” (Windt, 1972, p.6). Because the modern-day Cynic must believe that culture and society are corrupt, he also must feel a “moral commitment” (Windt, 1972, p.3) to shock people into “rearranging perspectives” and becoming “concerned about problems” (p.7). When he mentioned Michael Jackson, West seemed to be invoking him both as a victim and as a type of big-brother figure within this emergent group cause. As a precursor to himself, West seems to believe that if Jackson had Twitter, he could have addressed the public as well, breaking away from the filter of the mainstream media by speaking directly to audiences and fans, while simultaneously fighting the media’s “agenda” and refusing to let them “force” his answers. This way, Jackson would have been able to warn the audience of the media’s “brutal” treatment of celebrities so West could refer to a precedent, and Jackson could have also served as an ally in this new battle. However, judging from Tweets like, “I don’t do press anymore. I can’t be everything to everybody anymore,” and “I want everyone to know I have lows all the time but I make it through them!” (Jefferson, 2010), it seems that for West, the
battle was not a new one at all; he might just have finally gathered the strength to speak out from this incident.

The problems with which the ancient Greek Cynics dealt were problems of a moral nature. As Windt (1972) writes, “Most men make distinctions between moral problems and political problems, between professional responsibilities and personal commitments. The Cynics denied, even condemned, these distinctions as artificial, as products of societal conditioning which had corrupted man’s sense of right” (p.6). In this situation, it seems quite apparent that West sought to eschew these distinctions. If moral problems and political problems were to be combined, the media should have let West apologize in his own words. West Tweeted that Lauer “played clips of Bush and asked me to look at his face while I was trying to talk to him” (Jefferson, 2010). During the interview, when Lauer rolled the clip of President Bush’s *Decision Points* interview and said, “I want you to just look at his face when he is commenting about you,” West initially complied, but then Lauer asked, “What would you say to him if he would meet with you face-to-face? And I’m not sure he would, but if he would?” (NBC News, 2010). Then West became irritated and said, “You know, I mean, I didn’t need you guys to show me the tape in order to, like, prompt my emotion—” (NBC News, 2010). After Lauer asked him again to look at President Bush’s face, West said, “I mean, pre-looking-at-his-face, I came up here because I wanted to say something to him right after the fact, you know?...It’s like I don’t even have to do the TV stuff with me. This is reality…I don’t need all the jazz” (NBC News, 2010).

During this exchange, West grew visibly more heated, perhaps attempting to be compliant until he finally had to tell Lauer point-blank that he does not need “the jazz” or
“the TV stuff. This is reality.” From a political and professional standpoint, Lauer seems to be dealing with the politics of media—using cameras and other effects to “prompt emotion,” such as implying he was “not sure” President Bush would ever meet with West face-to-face. However, from a moral and personal standpoint, West was clearly attempting to apologize in his own way—“I came up here because I wanted to say something to him right after the fact”—and Lauer seemed to be trying to control and manipulate this process, while on a personal level he should have waited until West said exactly what he was trying to say. As West Tweeted, Lauer seemed to have “his own agenda” and was using techniques such as telling West to look at President Bush’s face, and shortly after, rolling the footage of the 2009 Video Music Awards when West took the microphone from Taylor Swift.

This latter instance is a crucial point because of what West was saying at the moment the 2009 footage began to roll on the Today Show. West had calmed down from his earlier agitation about both Lauer making him look at President Bush’s face while he was trying to apologize, and also about Lauer’s interruptions (“And you—you’re sorry?”… “I think I get the point”) while he was trying to articulate his response. Lauer referred to the fact that some called West racist after saying that Beyoncé deserved Taylor Swift’s award, and West agreed, saying, “Yeah, exactly…it was so funny to me that it could be a race thing because what I was expressing was my frustration from years and years of seeing, you know—” (NBC News, 2010). At this point the clip began to play, quite audibly, interrupting West’s voice and his thoughts. West seemed to have been on the brink of making a point about something that had frustrated him for “years and years,” something about a subject as serious as racism, and Lauer and the Today
Show seemed to brush this aside in order to run the clip, when they could have waited until West made his point before playing it. The Cynic would surely disapprove of the decision to override a potentially serious discussion in order to play a clip at the request of media politics.

Another important tenet of Cynicism is that “no institution has legitimate authority unless based on the natural rights of man” (Windt, 1972, p.6). One of the paramount “rights of man” in America is the freedom of speech, and from West’s assertions that his answers were being forced and that he was being set-up, he clearly seemed to believe that NBC refused him his freedom of speech. Because the network seemed to deny West this right, he, as a modern-day Cynic, would likely begin to doubt the media’s authority as an institution itself. In order to subvert this authority to his own end and get his own message across, West resorted to another method—Twitter. Through his own Twitter account, he has an audience of almost three million followers. Furthermore, since the mainstream media frequently uses quotations from celebrity Twitter accounts as legitimate sources of information, West seemed to have successfully found a loophole in the “traditional” system of the media filtering through quotations and re-contextualizing them as they see fit. Instead of being filmed by the lenses of NBC video cameras, being framed through the editorial decisions made in the NBC editing room, and presented during the timeframe of NBC’s choice, West was able to choose his own words as he typed them onto Twitter, and those were the same words that other news media outlets had to use when reporting on the situation.

An important detail to keep in mind is that the Cynics “did not seek political influence. They were cultural critics, not politicians” (Windt, 1972, p.6). Clearly, in this
case, West is not trying to gain a position of political power. He is simply attempting to save his own reputation, and possibly save others who have undergone similar situations, such as Michael Jackson—a prominent celebrity whose invocation brings race back into the discussion as well. Even though it may not have been his primary goal, West is criticizing culture—a culture in which the media control, manipulate, and spin stories to their own political ends, completely discounting the rights of the individual. If it seems as though West is only arguing this for the rights of celebrities, not for society as a whole, that may not be entirely true. Celebrities may fall victim to the manipulation and filtration of their words by the media, but they are also more likely to be on that side of the camera. However, if there truly is a problem of unfair media control, the average citizen is also liable to feel the effects of this, as he or she will only receive filtered, skewed news broadcasts when tuning in to any media outlet. Similar to the way West pointed out the racist media images during Hurricane Katrina, it seems that as a modern-day Cynic, he may be attempting to keep the media in check so the public is not fed biased or false information.

After the initial taping and Tweeting of the *Today Show* interview, the next step was to actually air the footage. The initial clip aired during President Bush’s November 10 appearance on *Today*, and showed West giving a sincere monologue about empathizing with President Bush and not having the grounds to call him a racist. With this clip, West’s initial message returns to the foreground, and in a swift turn of events, it seems that he has gotten his way after all. West repeatedly asserted that he “went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush…” (Jefferson, 2010), and most of his frustration seemed to stem from the fact that he felt his message kept getting twisted or
interrupted, or that he was not given adequate time to choose his words correctly.

However, the clip that Today aired appeared to cover every base that West had intended. So, by the hand of the “corrupt” Today Show with its “own agenda” (West qtd. in Jefferson, 2010), West was able to achieve exactly what he wanted in the first place—an articulate apology to President Bush for calling him a racist, but not necessarily for opening his mouth.

Returning to the second message, it seems that West once again employed the shocking rhetorical strategies of the diatribe, constrained by the moral commitment he may have felt to stand up for himself, other mistreated celebrities, and perhaps society in general. The purpose of diatribe is to spur discussion, and through the buzz generated from his November 9 Tweets, West succeeded. In fact, both West and Lauer acknowledged that if it were not for those Tweets, NBC might not have aired the footage of West’s interview at all, aside from the original clip they intended to film to show President Bush the next day. The full West interview aired on November 11, and on November 12, West Tweeted, “I’m so happy the world got to see a small piece of ‘the set up’…. I want you guys to look at that footage and start to put everything together now. It’s very simple to call someone angry or spoiled…but it’s harder to try to take a look at what’s really behind the curtain…. Did you see them try to justify playing the audio under my interview?” (West qtd. in Montgomery, 2010). West also wrote, “I’m tweeting because I’m so happy you guys got to see this shit really go down…. They made a mistake. They thought they could pull it but they couldn’t. that [sic] was just a small representation of a bigger media play that’s been going on since the beginning of time” (West qtd. in Montgomery, 2010).
they couldn’t,” it seems clear that West believes he had a hand in showing his fans and the public “what’s really behind the curtain.” From West’s standpoint, then, he appears to have gotten both of his intended messages across to the public.

After the entire West interview aired, the *Today Show* cut back to Matt Lauer and co-anchor Meredith Viera at the table. Lauer defends rolling the VMA clip as “something we do every day” (NBC News, 2010), and Viera agrees with him. The Cynic needs to provide “symbolic proofs” for what he believes and professes (Windt, 1972, p.8), and *Today* provided these proofs for him by airing the interview ostensibly edit-free, as the viewers can easily see the tension on both sides. The clip seemed to present itself exactly as West described it in his Tweets, proving that he spoke the truth when he pointed out the media’s actions, such as trying to “prompt” his emotions with images or playing audio under his words. The diatribe also appears to have succeeded because Lauer also says, “So that’s what all the hubbub was about” (NBC News, 2010), and in this sentence alone its effectiveness is proven. The object of the diatribe is to start a discussion about something that has previously been ignored, and Lauer makes direct reference to this discussion by calling it “hubbub.” The choice of this word, “hubbub,” seems as though Lauer is attempting to be deliberately dismissive, writing off the fervor that emerged from the Tweets as some sort of idle chatter. However, he also appears incredibly defensive and on-edge when he says, “it’s something we do every day,” showing that even though he tries to consider the “hubbub” over, he still feels the need to defend his actions against those who might question him.

While West and Lauer seem to have clear positions, it is also crucial to examine the aftermath in the eyes of the general public, who must be participants in the greater
discussion if the diatribe is to truly succeed. In its November 12 report, MTV News wrote, “On Thursday morning, the ‘Today’ show aired its much-discussed interview with Kanye West,” (Montgomery, 2010), verifying Lauer’s reference to “all the hubbub.” Clearly, West’s Tweets built anticipation and possibly pressure for NBC to air the interview, spurring public discussion or at least curiosity. The pop culture blogs of major newspapers also seemed to engage in this debate. The Los Angeles Times published an article entitled, “Kanye West’s ‘Today’ interview with Matt Lauer—who, if anyone, is the real villain?” in which the reporter wrote, “During the interview, Lauer summed up – some might say undercut? – West’s lengthy, nuanced discussion of motivations and consequences” and “The last time we checked, ‘We do it all the time’ didn’t necessarily mean ‘it’ was right” (D’Zurilla, 2010). The headline seems neutral, but the reporter appears to be on West’s side.

However, in a New York Times blog, the reporter wrote statements equally biased on Lauer’s end, such as, “Mr. Lauer calmly explains that it is customary to use archival footage in television interviews, and he and Mr. West go on to finish their conversation” (Itzkoff, 2010). Thus, it seems that all parties involved—West, Lauer and NBC, the media, and audiences—are able to spin the story to their own advantage. Through particular word choice and commentary, each tries to hold his or her own in the discussion. With this, it appears that West may have succeeded on at least two counts: showing the power of careful word choice, and catalyzing this debate in the first place. In fact, it may be that West succeeded in a third realm as well: continuing to shock the public time and again, despite the fact that the diatribe is supposed to eventually
“diminish in usefulness” (Windt, 1972, p.8). Somehow, it seems that almost anything West says ends up causing a stir in the public and instigating heated debate.
CHAPTER 8
Implications and Effects

A twist occurred during the Today Show situation that could only be possible with a Cynic who managed to reuse the element of shock to implement two successful diatribes. In the seemingly endless discussions and constant re-broadcasting of footage that followed West’s Today Show interview and the two NBC interviews with President Bush, the societal issues West brought to light with his 2005 Hurricane Katrina diatribe were resurrected. As has been repeated throughout this paper, the purpose of the diatribe is to use shock to initiate discussion about an important issue. Not only did this 2010 Today Show diatribe initiate discussion about the immediate problems West saw with celebrities and the media, but it also managed to reopen the discussion of the perceived racism in the way the Bush administration’s handled Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In addition to broadcasting the footage of West’s interview where he felt mistreated, NBC also seemed to unwittingly resurrect and refuel the discussion West initiated in 2005 by conducting three high-profile and consecutively-aired interviews centered around one extremely specific topic: the possibility of racism during Hurricane Katrina. The fact that this first diatribe is still shocking enough to be newsworthy and able to spawn even more debate five years later is testament to both its initial and lasting success. Also, if the effects of the 2005 diatribe are any predictor of the way West’s 2010 diatribe might continue debate and reappear later, West may still have a bright future as a modern-day Cynic.

This leaves the 2009 Video Music Awards situation to stand as an isolated event—one that seemed at times to adhere to the diatribe, but ultimately did not meet the
criteria and might be better classified simply as an offensive act. However, as there seemed to be no greater moral or societal component, the situation may be reduced to a personal dilemma between two artists—Kanye West and Taylor Swift. While it took a couple of days, West did eventually apologize directly to Swift, although he had also done so publicly through his blog and appearance on The Jay Leno Show. If anything, Swift’s popularity only increased after the event, as West described when he said that the incident “caused her to, like, go off and have 100 magazine covers and sell millions in the first week” (101.3 KDWB, 2010). The number of magazine covers may have been an exaggeration, but Swift’s album, Speak Now, was released on October 25, 2010, and was certified multi-platinum, selling over three million copies (RIAA, 2011). Much of the album was comprised of songs Swift openly wrote about fellow celebrities, including, “Innocent,” which was written about West after the VMAs. Swift’s lyrics seemed to have a tone of transcendence and forgiveness, as seen in the following lines: “You’re 32, and still growin' up now / Who you are is not what you did / You're still an innocent // Time turns flames to embers / You'll have new Septembers / Every one of us has messed up too / Lives change like the weather / I hope you remember / Today is never to late to / Be brand new” (Swift, 2010). It appears that Swift channeled her forgiveness into this song, repeating the title of “Innocent” as an identifier for West, and allowing that since “Every one of us has messed up too,” she is not singling him out as the only celebrity to make a mistake.

West’s My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy was released on November 22, 2010—a year after the VMAs, and just over a week after the Today Show situation. The album sold over one million copies and earned a platinum title (RIAA, 2011), which
serves as evidence that even though West has committed offenses that are not always performed for the greater good of society, he still seems to be respected as an artist. Public opinion about West as a person may still not be (nor ever was) completely favorable, though, as he acknowledges in the first song he debuted from *Fantasy*:

“Runaway.” In this song, West sings, “And I always find, yeah, I always find something wrong / You been putting up with my shit just way too long / I'm so gifted at finding what I don't like the most / So I think it's time for us to have a toast // Let's have a toast for the douchebags / Let's have a toast for the assholes / Let's have a toast for the scumbags / Every one of them that I know” (West, 2010). West incorporates names he is frequently called into the lyrics of this song, which became extremely successful along with the album itself. By claiming these names and using them in reference to himself, West may have stripped them of some of their hurtful power and perhaps is able to take some control away from those who constantly criticize his behavior. This seems to be an act of reclaiming his credibility by accepting the fact that some of his past actions may have earned him certain names and an unfavorable reputation. This acceptance may, in turn, serve to help reestablish West’s credibility as an artist, an individual, and a celebrity who possesses rhetorical sway over large and multiple audiences. With credibility and *ethos* once again intact, perhaps West is unwittingly setting his stage to embark on future diatribes if the situations arise.
Kanye West has played numerous roles during his advent and reign as, arguably, one of the most prominent celebrities of this era. In addition to his lucrative and respected professional career as a rapper and a producer, West has also garnered a reputation for his outspoken public persona, making statements that have been both beneficial to society and at times, simply offensive. Analyses of these statements have shown this broad range. In 2005, West seemed to unwittingly employ the rhetorical method of the diatribe, used by the ancient Greek Cynics, to shockingly call attention to the possibility of inherent racism in the way the United States Government handled Hurricane Katrina. His shocking and offensive act of speech catalyzed a discussion that has not yet closed over five years later.

However, in 2009 at the MTV Video Music Awards, West again committed a shocking and offensive act, proclaiming during Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech that another artist, Beyoncé, deserved the award Swift had won. In this case, the situation lacked the moral urgency required for a Cynic to impart a diatribe, so West’s act seems to have had no purpose or effect other than to offend. To be sure, a discussion began as a result of this act, but it consisted largely of the public turning against West and acknowledging his meaningless offense. Then, in 2010, despite the fact that the diatribe characteristically becomes less effective after each subsequent use causes the force of shock to dissipate, West successfully seems to have employed it once more. This time, not one, but at least two important discussions resulted from West’s shocking “meltdown” on Twitter and his behavior during an interview on the Today Show. Not
only was West’s 2005 diatribe re-invoked and the discussion of racism during Hurricane Katrina relief continued, but another point was brought to light regarding the media’s treatment of celebrities, and whether or not the media’s framing of events and quotations could have detrimental effects.

The fact that West has been able to maintain an extreme level of shock each time he commits one of these traditionally offensive acts is testament to his success as a modern-day Cynic. While he may not be a flawless model for the ancient Greek character, it is clear that he has employed the Cynics’ techniques for over half a decade, successfully shocking the public and instigating debate with each move. This analysis suggests that if West has been able to surmount the diatribe’s main weakness—losing effectiveness over time—he may be a key character to examine in the future as a modern-day Cynic and a constant catalyst of productive debate and discussion with the potential to improve society’s issues.
APPENDIX A

Below is a screenshot of West’s Tweets on November 9, 2010, moments after they were posted.

1. Sometimes it's not simple, some days it's not easy... I just want to create. I love you guys, thanks for the support!
   4 minutes ago via web

2. This is rock and roll life my people... you can't stop the truth you can't stop the music and I have to be strong or "they" win!!!!
   10 minutes ago via web

3. Maybe Mike could have explained how the media tried to set him up!!! It's all a fucking set up!!!!
   11 minutes ago via web

4. He played clips of Bush and asked me to look at his face while I was trying to talk to him. I wish Michael Jackson had twitter!!!!!!
   12 minutes ago via web

5. Very judged very scrutinized very criticized! I want everyone to know I have lows all the time but I make it through them!
   14 minutes ago via web

6. Everything sounds like noise!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! EVERYTHING SOUNDS LIKE NOISE!!!!!!!! I don't trust anyone!
   19 minutes ago via web

7. I can't take anymore advice!!! I create, I'm creative, I have a good heart, everyone will see and understand one day.
   21 minutes ago via web

8. I can't be everybody's hero and villain savior and sinner Christian and anti Christ!
   22 minutes ago via web

9. I don't trust anyone but myself! Everyone has an agenda. I don't do press anymore. I can't be everything to everybody anymore.
   24 minutes ago via web

10. I feel very alone very used very tortured very forced very misunderstood very hollow very very misused
    25 minutes ago via web

11. HE TRIED TO FORCE MY ANSWERS. IT WAS VERY BRUTAL AND I CAME THERE WITH ONLY POSITIVE INTENT.
    27 minutes ago via web

12. I don't mess with Matt Lauer or the Today Show ... and that's a very nice way for me to put it!
    28 minutes ago via web

13. While I was trying to give the interview they started playing the "MTV" under me with audio!!!!!!
    29 minutes ago via web

14. I went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush because I labeled him a racist and years later I got labeled as a racist....
    30 minutes ago via web

15. ....but before I take off let me tell you how they did me at the Today show...
    32 minutes ago via web

16. Man I'm heading to Abu Dhabi finna go to Ferrari Land YESSSSS!!!
APPENDIX B

Below are screen shots taken of Kanye West’s Twitter profile on February 2, 2011. Note that West’s Tweets appear in order of the date they were most recently posted.

1. **kanyewest** 
   Kanye West
   All positive energy ... all smiles. Much love to Matt and the whole Today Show. I accept ya'll future apology in advance LOL!
   12 Nov

2. **kanyewest** 
   Kanye West
   ...representation of a bigger media play that's been going on since the beginning of time.
   12 Nov

3. **kanyewest** 
   Kanye West
   You know what ....WE OFF THAT!!!... They made a mistake... they thought they could pull it but they couldn't! That was just a small...
   12 Nov

4. **kanyewest** 
   Kanye West
   ... we're all products or our environments ... reflections of our surroundings...
   12 Nov

5. **kanyewest** 
   Kanye West
   ...And I don't hate Matt Lauer... We don't promote hate. That's the whole point!!! I promote love and truth!
   12 Nov
Kanye West

kanyewest Kanye West
Right now I'm not complaining. I'm tweeting because I'm so happy you guys got to see this shit really go down!!!! : )))))!!!! FINALLY!!!
12 Nov 🌟 Favorite 🔗 Retweet 🔖 Reply

kanyewest Kanye West
under my interview. Yo sometimes you're just wrong and it ain't nothing you can say to justify it believe me I know!
12 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
I'm so happy that my real fans are not as "basic" as the media makes them out to be... Did you see them try to justify playing the audio...
12 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
the one thousand names I've been called but it's harder to try to take a look at what's really behind the curtain.
12 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
I want you guys to look at that footage and start to put everything together now. It's very simple to call someone angry or spoiled or...
12 Nov
If I hadn't tweeted about how they set me up at the show they would have never played the extra footage that displayed how disrespectful...
12 Nov

... the idea that I such an asshole.... cause when I don't perform oh noooow I'm the one that's crazy or a jerk!
12 Nov

Do you guys see what I'm saying now... this is just a small slice of the day to day bullshit that goes on that helps to precipitate...
12 Nov

I blatantly said I'm not performing on a tweet and to everyone around me and the next day they still announced a performance.
12 Nov

I'm not performing on the Today Show for obvious reasons. I'm so happy the world got to see just a small piece of "the set up"
12 Nov
kanyewest Kanye West
http://www.rollingstone.com/music/reviews/album/45342/232350
This is amazing and very humbling ... thank you so much 5 STARS!!!!!
9 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
I am a creative person.... I'm not a good celebrity but I'm a great artist... I'm tired of using my celebrity to sell my art.
9 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
No more Bush questions ... no more Taylor questions... no more relationship questions.... and the music is unquestionable sooooo.....
9 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
I've made mistakes I've paid the price now it is what it is. I'm gone make this art but I'm not going to be scrutinized as a human being.
9 Nov

kanyewest Kanye West
I've decided to fall back a bit on interviews in order to "sell my album" I can't come up with some magic trick to make people like me
9 Nov
REFERENCE LIST


