

## Introduction

### *Death Dance for Capitalism: Watch the Throne as Prophetic Critique*

Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. For this reason musicians, even when officially recognized, are dangerous, disturbing, and subversive; for this reason it is impossible to separate their history from that of repression and surveillance.

—JACQUES ATTALI, *NOISE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MUSIC*  
(1977/1985)

Jay-Z and Kanye West's 2011 *Watch the Throne* is a self-avowed "luxury rap" album centered on Eurocentric constructions of nobility, artistry, and race. Notably, it is also an album about the *excess* associated with royalty. In this book, I perform a close reading of the album's sonic and social commentary while placing it in its social, cultural, and political contexts across the Black Atlantic. In particular, I examine how the album alternately performs and critiques the mutually reinforcing ideas of *Europe*, *nobility*, *old money*, *artistry*, and their standard bearer, *whiteness*.

In 1920 W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of this very network of white privilege in "The Souls of White Folk," chapter 2 of his *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*.

Here it is that the comedy verges to tragedy. The first minor note is struck, all unconsciously, by those worthy souls in whom consciousness of high descent

brings burning desire to spread the gift abroad,—*the obligation of nobility to the ignoble*. Such sense of duty assumes two things: a real possession of the heritage and its frank appreciation by the humble-born. So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks, receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; *and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste,—then the spell is suddenly broken.*<sup>1</sup>

It is in the connections between Jay and Ye's boastful luxury rap and this 100-year-old premonition of "swagger" that this book finds its *raison d'être*.

In this study, I argue that this system of racial privilege that has undergirded the global capitalist economy for the past 400 years is now in its death throes—that Black swagger has revealed the racial underpinnings of capitalism and broken the spell of capitalist hegemony. More specifically, I suggest that if we listen closely to this "dangerous, disturbing, and subversive" album we can hear, as Jacques Attali put it, that it "makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things." While much remains unclear at this time of global precarity, tumult, and realignment, I argue with certainty that Jay and Ye's Obama-era album—and its well-publicized fallout—can be shown to "herald the future." It prophesies nothing less than the end of capitalism. *Watch the Throne* is capitalism's death dance.<sup>2</sup>

In this book, I show how Jay and Ye seem to *accede* to Eurocentric signifiers of *Kultur*, but through a strategy that I dub "critical excess," performatively *exceed* the logics of Europe, nobility, and artistry and break "the spell" of white supremacy. Articulating the Black Atlantic, postcolonial, and critical theory of Du Bois, Houston Baker, Frantz Fanon, Tricia Rose, Paul Gilroy, Daphne Brooks, Fred Moten, Stuart Hall, Cedric Robinson, and Kimberlé Crenshaw to Jacques Attali's theorizations about the prophetic nature of music in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, I argue that the album brings the idea of Europe to its logical conclusion and heralds the final stage of late capitalism—our current one-percenter era, "the New Gilded Age."<sup>3</sup>

Further, through their performative Blackness and conspicuous consumption—their *critical excess*—on the luxury rap album, I show how Jay and Ye fashion a move directly from the subhuman to the superhuman.

Indeed, this move draws simultaneously on postcolonial technologies of “strategic essentialism” and critical excess, moving effortlessly from the jungle and the ghetto to the penthouse and the throne. While all of the following chapters work in and through the well-documented theory of strategic essentialism and elaborate my related theory of critical excess, the individual chapters are structured, respectively, around the compounding heuristic frames of essentialism (especially chapters 1 and 2), anti-essentialism (especially chapters 2, 3, and 4), and anti-anti-essentialism (especially chapters 3, 4, and 5)—and accordingly track, respectively, the categories of subhuman, human, and superhuman. In this way, the book analyzes the Jay and Ye album in all its maddening complexity while introducing us to the fundamental conceptual layers that the music is working through and against. Indeed, following Houston Baker’s entreaty for the critically attuned scholar to “heat up the observational space” in reading Black cultural performances and artifacts, this book follows leads far and wide to engage this album and its contexts in a manner befitting that complexity—and adding to it.<sup>4</sup>

As Justin D. Burton—author of the landmark study *Posthuman Rap*—writes in his double review of *Watch the Throne* and the Roots’ *Undun*, Jay and Ye’s album revels in duplicity, living a “double life of fun, sophomoric tracks juxtaposed with biting social critique”—usually in the same track. Most importantly, he writes, the album presents “a salient critical agenda hidden inside a collection of catchy tunes built from the debris of greatest hits past.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Burton’s analysis continues a long line of hip hop scholarship that illustrates the critical complexities of a seemingly blunt musical instrument.

Hip hop’s lifeblood of storytelling, playful allusion, and striking metaphor is, of course, a long- and well-established fact in the literature on Black music—stretching back from funk, rock and roll, and blues innuendo to “the dozens” and the slave spiritual codes. Yet in its *always already* racialized state of crisis, hip hop is also uniquely capable of getting people to forget about those poetic, sonic, and rhetorical hallmarks of Afrodiasporic performance cultures—to forget that this music is *music*. Scholars from Tricia Rose and Robin Kelley to Eithne Quinn and Loren Kajikawa have established in sonic and social detail how gangsta rap—the most glaring example—has been widely misunderstood in its decontextualizing cross-over into the mainstream of popular culture and its familiar fixations.<sup>6</sup>

In his groundbreaking book, *Race Rebels*, Kelley underscores this

foundational paradox of hip hop—that “the primary purpose” of this often violent form of social critique “is to produce ‘funky dope rhymes’ for our listening pleasure.”<sup>7</sup> He writes:

Unfortunately, much of this debate [around gangsta rap], especially in the media, has only disseminated misinformation. Thus, it is important to clarify what gangsta rap is *not*. First, gangsta rappers have never merely celebrated gang violence, nor have they taken a partisan position in favor of one gang over another. Gang bangin’ (gang participation) itself has never even been a central theme in the music. Many of the violent lyrics are not intended to be literal. Rather, they are boasting raps in which the imagery of gang bangin’ is used metaphorically to challenge competitors on the microphone.<sup>8</sup>

As we begin to interrogate the music, lyrics, images, and rhetorics of this album, it will be key to keep this foundational analysis in mind. Like most hip hop albums, *Watch the Throne* plays with genre expectations to enact its cultural critique. As Kelley explains, “Some gangsta rappers—Ice Cube in particular—are especially brilliant at showing how, if I may paraphrase Marx, young urban black men make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing.”<sup>9</sup>

Echoing Burton’s assessment, the scholar of North African hip hop, Kendra Salois, expands on Jay and Ye’s “critical hidden agenda” on *Watch the Throne* in a published roundtable, “Religion and Hip Hop.” Commenting on the knee-jerk reactions that might immediately pigeon-hole and shut down hip hop that demonstrates such critical play in the context of commercial catchiness, she counters:

But it’s also important to remember that, in some contexts, celebrating yourself in the way that I think you’re referring to [ . . . ] can be a form of critique. You remember Jay-Z and Kanye’s song “Otis.” I used to use it in my classes a lot, because if you were not attuned to the potential for critique inside even the most commercial of hip hop, then you would see it as just crass materialism, a complete celebration of wealth. But then you have to think about what they’re sampling, and how that changes how you have to read the lyrics, and you have to think about the history of systematic dispossession of black Americans, to recognize that what Jay-Z and Kanye are doing is saying, “In your face! We did this. We made it to this point that no one could imagine for us, including ourselves, in spite of you.” And that’s a really powerful critique, even if we don’t

necessarily personally agree that anyone should have that much money. That's a really powerful form of critique.<sup>10</sup>

This “double life”—of entertainer *and* artist; of fun *and* critique; of “In your face! We did this”—is central to this book's analysis.

## PROPHECY AND POSTHUMANISM

It is here that Jacques Attali's political economy and proto-sound studies will prove foundational for our understanding of the album and this book's most outrageous claim—that, on *Watch the Throne*, Jay and Ye prophesied Donald J. Trump. That, in many ways, they saw him coming. Indeed, in this book I support the claim that, through this “critical excess,” they willed him into being; *they made him*.

In the first chapter of Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, the economic and social theorist lays out the “double game” of the musician in society. It will be important to cite him at length here, as he writes:

The musician, like music, is ambiguous. He plays a double game. He is simultaneously *musicus* and *cantor*, reproducer and prophet. If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values. He speaks of society and he speaks against it. This duality was already present before capital arrived to impose its own rules and prohibitions. The distinction between musician and nonmusician—which separates the group from the speech of the sorcerer—undoubtedly represents one of the very first divisions of labor, one of the very first social differentiations in the history of humanity, even predating the social hierarchy. Shaman, doctor, musician. He is one of society's first gazes upon itself; he is one of the first catalyzers of violence and myth. I will show later that the musician is an integral part of the sacrifice process, a channeler of violence, and that the primal identity *magic-music-sacrifice-rite* expresses the musician's position in the majority of civilizations: simultaneously *excluded* (relegated to a place near the bottom of the social hierarchy) and *superhuman* (the genius, the adored and deified star). Simultaneously a separator and an integrator.

In the civilizations of antiquity, the musician was often a slave, sometimes an untouchable. Even as late as the twentieth century, Islam prohibited believers

from eating at the same table as a musician. In Persia, music was for a long time an activity restricted to prostitutes or, at least, considered shameful. But at the same time, the ancient religions produced a caste of musician-priests attached to the service of the temple, and mythology endowed musicians with supernatural and civilizing powers.<sup>11</sup>

Central to the structure of this book's argument is the premise that, through their performance of "critical excess" on *Watch the Throne*—through their "double game"—Jay and Ye constantly move back and forth between the categories of "excluded subhuman" and "adored superhuman," thus eschewing the normative category of "human."

In the pages that follow, I argue that through this doubled sub- and superhumanity and performed denial of humanity, they render the latter category a played-out remnant of individualized bourgeois capitalism. That is, in exercising their "human right to swagger and swear"—but doing so as unapologetically rich Black men—Jay and Ye undermine the racially coded language of "humanity," break "the spell" of white supremacy, and bring the enlightenment/colonial idea of Europe to an end.

Though I will add detail and substance to this argument in the pages to come, to give you a sense of what I mean by "humanity" up front, I encourage the reader to think "All Lives Matter" when confronted with the category of the human. Indeed, in recent years it has become increasingly clear that humanism and its universalist ideology is, as Etienne Balibar has argued, a trick.<sup>12</sup> And further, that universalism and its "free market" ideology are little more than good cover for a centuries-old system of maintaining European (white) supremacy. Indeed, in his *Posthuman Rap*, Burton uses the category of "neoliberal humanism" as a foil for his inquiries, a clarifying term that collapses the category of Western Enlightenment subjectivity with the context of its capitalist emergence (and most commonplace practice today).<sup>13</sup> As I show through close musical, textual, and visual analysis, *Watch the Throne* performs for us the reality that white supremacy *is* capitalism.

Indeed, recent global events have clearly indicated the limits of capitalism's supposedly colorblind ideology. As Ye puts it on track 9, "Who Gon Stop Me," "Heard Yeezy was racist? / Well I guess it's on one basis / I only like green faces." The line is the ultimate critique of neoliberalism—an ideology and world system that reduces human value to monetary value. Importantly, however, neoliberalism is also ostensibly an ideology

that denies white privilege—green faces are the only ones that matter. As we are seeing currently in our global political realignments, white people will not abide this privileging of green faces at the expense of white ones—and especially not where Black faces are involved.

Yet, as Cedric Robinson has convincingly argued in his *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, capitalism has never been truly colorblind. Indeed, the first chapter, “Racial Capitalism: The Non-Objective Character of Capitalist Development,” is a sweeping historical overview and masterful reading of capitalism’s tribalist underpinnings, and racialized blossoming over the 18th and 19th centuries. Far from ever having been colorblind, Robinson begins:

The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange.<sup>14</sup>

He concludes: “Feudal society is the key.”

In his detailed and incisive reading, Robinson shows how capitalism was not a distinct break from the premodern feudal, aristocratic, and religious order, but emerged as a reordering of particular ethnic peasant groups into racialized wage and slave labor classes. He writes: “The bourgeoisie that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds.” As such, capitalism was built through racial differentiation.

The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into “racial” ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

In this way capitalism was built in and through white supremacy. While its ideology cloaks this truth in meritocratic, naturalizing, and “free market” universalist language, capitalism has always been powered by racial differentiation. Indeed, we might say that “racial capitalism” is a redundant term. From its roots in premodern feudalism through today’s postmodern neoliberalism, capitalism developed through the systematic definition and subordination of racialized ethnic underclasses.

In addition to his theories about the prophecy and critical duality of music’s social function, Attali’s *Noise* is important for how it also traces that social function back to the *jongleur* of Europe’s premodern societies. I’d never put it together that the medieval-looking musician on the cover art for *Noise* was meant as a play on the cultural figure of the precapitalist *jongleur* that the author theorizes as both prophet and historian in the text. The well-chosen image, it turns out, is a detail from one of Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s lively village scenes titled *Carnival’s Quarrel with Lent* (1559). It is something of a diptych, depicting the duality of human pleasure and excess on the left and human piety and abstinence on the right, via a range of images associated with this pivotal moment in the Christian calendar. The image thus focuses our attention not only on the “ambiguous” (and doubled) *jongleur* figure, but on this ambiguous moment in the liturgical year. Further, we might suspect, this close-up was chosen to focus the reader on the pivotal early modern sea change from feudal and guild economic systems to early capitalism—a major focus of Attali’s analysis.

In her afterword to the 1985 English translation of *Noise*, Susan McClary suggests that the then-lively New Wave movement might rise to serve a similarly prophetic social function with its “compositional” grassroots, DIY critique. The “compositional” is Attali’s hopeful shorthand for a community-centered music that will emerge from the ashes of capitalism—or, rather, a musicking that predicts and models, for us, the economic order to come after capitalism. We’ll have to forgive McClary for her nonprophecy there, because she does go on to write insightfully about the transformative social function of hip hop later in the decade. Although New Wave never gained the globally socially transformative power of hip hop, it is worth recognizing that hip hop grew out of the same 1970s and 80s milieu in New York City that produced punk and New Wave—and was intricately interwoven with those subcultural communities, their parties, and their forms, an entanglement captured in the collaborations between



Blondie and Grandmaster Flash and the punk-to-hip hop maturation process of the Beastie Boys, among others.

In his recent *Dead Precedents: How Hip Hop Defines the Future*, Roy Christopher examines these continuities, building them into the thesis that hip hop—as a future-oriented culture rooted in the experimental tenets and counterhistories of Afrofuturism and cyberpunk—invented the twenty-first century. Recalling his first hearing of the remixed, recomposed mash-up of AC/DC and hip hop on Boogie Down Productions’ “Dope Beat” (1987), Christopher reminisces “That moment was a door opening to a new world. I didn’t realize it then, but that new world was the twenty-first century, and hip-hop was its blueprint.”<sup>16</sup> As we will see, the argument aligns nicely with Attali’s theory of “composition” and its interest in technological progress. Indeed, it aligns nicely with my argument about *Watch the Throne’s* prophecy.

More importantly, for anyone in hip hop studies today, Attali’s mention of “prophet *and* historian,” “shaman, doctor, musician” will instead instantly call up the figure of the West African *griot*—to whom countless hip hop MCs and DJs look as forbear today.<sup>17</sup> Attali writes: “before the advent of recording and modern sound tools, the jongleurs were the collective memory, the essential site of cultural creation, and the circulation of information from the courts to the people.”<sup>18</sup> The characterization perfectly captures the culture-bearer quality of the *griot*, a figure who “sings the people.” Further, Attali’s understanding of the jongleur also suggests the linkage between the *griot* and hip hop’s much-heralded function as an information technology—what Chuck D famously called “the Black CNN”: “informing people, connecting people, being a direct source of information.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Attali terms his first heuristic category in *Noise* “sacrifice”—a premodern “ritual code” central to the *griot’s* cultural function—which shares the community centeredness of “composition” but based its buy-in on fear (of sacrifice, of music’s ritual power). The second is the modern category of “representation,” a musical code centered on exchange and functional harmony that Attali claims predicted the age of revolution and representative democracy—and also capitalism.<sup>20</sup> The third is “repetition,” the age of sign exchange typified in the culture industry’s popular music and its prophesy of fascism from the 1930s to late capitalism’s reality-TV reality.

On the surface, nothing could qualify as nicely for Attali’s dystopian

musical category of “repetition” as hip hop—a popular genre structured on samples, loops, and repeated chants. Mirroring Adorno’s infamous critique of “jazz”—though we might dispute what he understood that musical praxis to be—hip hop too would seem like a nicely “predigested” form built on the repetition of signs of the global culture industry, a commodity well-suited to satiate (but further alienate) the tired, working masses. Notably, however, where Attali defines the code of “repetition” as a *code of normality* and one-sided “speech without response,” hip hop, like its Afrodiasporic musical forbears, is premised on call and response, on the musical community, be it the congregation, juke joint, or hip hop cipher. Indeed, as we will see in the coming pages, hip hop refigures those signs, those cultural inheritances, to subvert our late capitalist hegemony from within and create a new community. Hip hop is a fitting pivot from the normative age of “repetition” to the community-responsive age of “composition”—a disruption of the code of repetition, revolutionary “noise” as Attali (and, later, Tricia Rose) would have it. It is thus my contention that *Watch the Throne* represents a tipping point in the exchange of the signs and codes of capitalist hegemony.

Following Tricia Rose’s titular frame in *Black Noise* that hip hop’s repetition represents a revolutionary break from the code of repetition—that “rap music uses rhythmic forces that are informed by mass reproduction technology, but it uses it in ways that affirm black cultural priorities that sometimes work against market forces”<sup>21</sup>—I suggest that *Watch the Throne* exceeds twentieth-century codes of mechanical reproduction, both musically and discursively. In Attalian terms, it exceeds music and emerges as disruptive “noise,” portending the code of composition and heralding our current age of political realignment. It is a performance that lays bare the emptiness of the capitalist sign economy and *critically exceeds* the age of “repetition,” marking the return of the *jongleur/griot* with a signal difference: freedom. A storyteller that tells the stories of people rather than the stories of power, of “a single totalitarian code.”<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the *jongleur*, we might say, is the particular European inheritance of what is, in fact, a global history of bards and oral historian-prophets that stretches from ancient Ireland and pre-Homeric Greece to West Africa, China, Native America, Aotearoa, and beyond.<sup>23</sup> More than European commitments to abstract (and thus, uneven) universalism, it is the storytelling traditions around the world that provide us with a glimpse

of the truly universal, a network of deeply entangled, distinct-but-same archetypes.<sup>24</sup> While McClary's focus on New Wave was surely apropos in 1985, Attali's 1977 *Noise* is instead prophetic of hip hop's grassroots, DIY culture. Indeed, just as Rose would come to theorize the music and culture as *Black Noise*, Imani Perry would elaborate hip hop's own "double game" of heraldic dualities—such as the "prophet/profit" figuration that animates her *Prophets of the Hood*.<sup>25</sup> This is the critical trajectory that I pick up in the present study.

Before we move on, I also want to call attention to Rose's implication that not all hip hop works against the capitalist system. In suggesting that "rap music uses rhythmic forces that are informed by mass reproduction technology, but . . . in ways that affirm black cultural priorities that *sometimes* work against market forces" (my emphasis), Rose is working against a totalizing vision of all hip hop as politically resistant.<sup>26</sup> She is gesturing—rightly, I think—to the fact that hip hop is not simply a "resistance vernacular," but is also an increasingly valuable commodity and integral part of the global culture industry. The bifurcated discourse separating good, "underground" hip hop from bad, "commercial" hip hop has become accepted as common sense since Rose wrote her foundational text at the end of hip hop's much lauded "golden age" in 1994.<sup>27</sup>

While I agree with Rose's careful qualification, I want to suggest that hip hop's political economy is more complex than this good hip hop/bad hip hop binary might suggest. This music is deeply influenced by, indeed, premised on, "mass reproduction technology." While there are hip hop forms, subcultures, and communities that work at the margins of capitalist culture—and are often vocally critical of that culture—they nonetheless circulate in a capitalist global economy. Their possibilities are conditioned by capitalism and its technologies (think: the internet, the mp3, the microphone, the turntable). Some iterations of hip hop are critical of capitalism, while other forms seem to celebrate capitalist consumption, materialism and wealth accrual. But recalling our frame of the (im)possibility of Black humanity—subhuman/superhuman—I want to suggest that the good hip hop/bad hip hop binary presents us with a similarly bifurcated and *middle-less* discourse.

A central premise of this book's theory of critical excess is that, as an African American and highly racialized art form, hip hop is subject to the same racialized political economy. Just as humanity is systematically denied

to Black people, so too is the category of “normal” denied to hip hop. In mainstream discourse it has to be underground or commercial, conscious or crass. As such, commercial hip hop is put in an odd spot. Commercial hip hop is, in many ways, as nonnormative as underground hip hop—and with most commercial hip hop’s reliance on outrageous bling, sex, and violence, it often flouts bourgeois values even more than its underground doppelgänger. But unable to hide behind the *whiteness* of bourgeois values—and evade the fact that nothing is more capitalist than bling, sex, and violence—hip hop is rendered marginal despite its capitalist compliance.

The point is this: hip hop can never be *just* pop music. By performing capitalist excess so forthrightly and offensively on *Watch the Throne*, Jay-Z and Kanye West meet and exceed the limits of even hip hop’s excesses. By mashing up Martin Luther King, Nina Simone, and Fidel Castro with Rollies, threesomes, and murder in such an arrogantly unabashed manner they complicate the good hip hop/bad hip hop binary and complicate the subhuman/superhuman tropes that still dominate our bifurcated discourses of Blackness. As we will see, in so doing they drive racially essentialist notions right through the unmarked race-free, anti-essentialist dreams of capitalist pop and emerge in the realm of anti-anti-essentialism.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses just this paradox-laden double bind around “the popular” in her essay, “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular,” from *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). She writes:

I have insisted throughout this book that Gramsci’s attitude toward the state sees it as both medicine and poison and leads to a permanent educative activism . . . Subaltern is to popular as gender is to sex, class to poverty, state to nation. One word inclines to reasonableness, the other to cathexis-occupation through desire. “Popular” divides between descriptive (as in presidential or TV ratings) and evaluative (not “high,” both a positive and a negative value, dependent on your “politics”) and contains “people,” a word with immense range, from “just anyone” to the “masses” (both a positive and a negative political value, depending on your politics).<sup>28</sup>

Echoing Gramsci, she suggests that the way forward through the term’s contradictions is to “sabotage the Enlightenment.”

In a 2016 New York Times interview, she explains how such “sabotage” must master Western systems of oppression in order to undo them.

I used the term “affirmative sabotage” to gloss on the usual meaning of sabotage: the deliberate ruining of the master’s machine from the inside. Affirmative sabotage doesn’t just ruin; the idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticizing fully, so that you can turn it around from inside. The only real and effective way you can sabotage something this way is when you are working intimately within it.

This is particularly the case with the imperial intellectual tools, which have been developed not just upon the shoulders, but upon the backs of people for centuries.<sup>29</sup>

As we will see, this subversive affirmation of the “master’s machine” is Gramsci’s “war of position.” This is critical excess.

Like its continuation of the binary-complicating work of Tricia Rose’s (*Black*) *Noise* and Imani Perry’s *Prophets (Profits) of the Hood*, this book is also intended as a follow-up and complement to my 2017 monograph *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*.<sup>30</sup> In that study, I examine how the children and grandchildren of immigrants from the former colonies and peripheries of Europe employ the iconic African American model of musical protest, while simultaneously infiltrating and instrumentalizing the global culture industry—to various ends. A central claim of that book is that by studying European hip hop—and its communities that are on the front lines of history—we can hear US hip hop anew. This book flips the script on that claim, examining instead how this African American cultural artifact has much to teach us about the European inheritance. Indeed, this close reading of *Watch the Throne* offers a musically savvy and geopolitically attuned look at one hip hop artifact that places the cultural inheritance of Eurocentrism in the US at the center of its critique—touching on everything from the Socratic method, Christian hegemony, and feudalism to colonialization, slave capitalism, social Darwinism, Parisian *haute couture*, and museumized art.

## EXCEEDING EUROPE, EXCEEDING WHITENESS

Indeed, in this book I show how European patrimony not only casts a long shadow on the album’s lyrics, music, images, and performativities, but how its (impossible) inheritance is absolutely fundamental to *Watch the Throne*’s conceptualization and realization—and to Jay and Ye’s cri-

tique thereof. While African American artists and scholars have musically negotiated the idea of Europe since even before W. E. B. Du Bois first committed his thoughts on the Afro-European mingling audible in the “sorrow songs,” this book shows how this musical artifact from the recent past marks a turning point, undermining the very logic of Europe by laying bare and then exceeding its commitments to race—to whiteness.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, Josephine Baker, Sidney Bechet, Paul Robeson, Ralph Ellison, Dexter Gordon, James Baldwin, Nina Simone, Don Cherry, and countless other Black American expats would be drawn to the idea of Europe “After They’ve Seen Páree”; many reconciled themselves to the idea of Europe and its cultural *patrimoine*; and many also provoked, undermined, and altered that Eurocentric hegemony. Ironically, what these African Americans all had in common was that they helped to create the lion’s share of cultural wealth over the course of their century but pocketed a mere fraction of that wealth. Jay and Ye, on the other hand, have broken that trend in a most disruptive—and, for many, unacceptable—fashion. As Du Bois predicted, “when the black man begins to dispute the white man’s title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; *and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste,—then the spell is suddenly broken.*”<sup>32</sup>

In this book, I argue that on *Watch the Throne*, Jay-Z and Kanye West—with their collaborators, from Beyoncé and Frank Ocean to Mr. Hudson—stand on the shoulders of twentieth-century Black American artists and “Lift Off” (track 2) from the idea of Europe by exceeding the “excellence, opulence, decadence” (track 10, “Murder to Excellence”) of the white royalty that resides at the heart of the idea of Europe—the “nobility” and “high descent” of Du Bois’s “lordly and generous whites.” Indeed, recalling Cedric Robinson’s historical elaboration of the feudal order’s reconstitution in early capitalism, Du Bois was not the first to understand race as a sort of inheritor of feudal nobility. As early as the 1840s, “The Liberator,” Ireland’s famed anticolonial activist Daniel O’Connell, referred to the emergent racial order as “the filthy aristocracy of skin.”<sup>33</sup> To be sure, the invention of race was a way to ensure and enshrine the acquired affordances of European supremacy—of white supremacy—in the increasingly entangled era of (capitalist) colonial expansion.

Notably, in escaping the thrall of this most elevated form of white supremacy—European aristocracy—Jay and Ye also flatten Langston

Hughes's infamous "Racial Mountain." As Jay-Z puts it on the (secret) final track "Illest Motherfucker Alive" (track 13):

When I say it then you see it, it ain't only in the music  
Basquiats, Warhols serving as my muses  
My house like a museum so I see 'em when I'm peenin'  
Usually you have this much taste, you European  
That's the end of that way of thinking, nigga never again.<sup>34</sup>

Just as he seems to accede to the museumized logic of Western ideologies of high art, Jay exceeds the logic thereof by placing these icons in his bathroom. In just a few lines of verse—and a few bars of urgent sonic swagger—he undermines the ideology of art, nobility by birth, and Europe's *sine qua non*, whiteness. With poignant irony, however, he does so both artfully and passionately—as he does with countless other conceptual and performative gems throughout the album.

Similarly, on track 4, "Otis," Kanye West undermines the race and class logics of the racial mountain with his line, "Luxury rap, the Hermès of verses / Sophisticated ignorance, write my curses in cursive"—engaging aristocratic brands of luxury capitalism and literally flipping the "script" from a signifier of visual *élégance* (cursive) to sonic *vulgarité* (curses). On track 3, "Niggas in Paris," Kanye lays bare and further elaborates the ways that class and language work to uphold the fallacy of race and its entanglement with the received ideas about Europe and/as nobility, spitting the infamous lines:

*Bougie* girl, grab my hand  
Fuck that bitch; she don't wanna dance  
Excuse my French, but I'm in France, I'm just sayin'  
Prince Williams ain't do it right if you ask me  
'Cause I was him I would have married Kate and Ashley

In the first two couplets, Ye plays on the idiom "excuse my French," directing the listener towards the ear-catching, misogynistic red flag: "bitch." Yet all the while, he is slyly playing on the only French word in the lyric: "*bougie*"—a subversive bit of wordplay for his listeners patient enough to abide the apparent sexism.

Indeed, to use the new (digital) vernacular, the whole album seems to



have been conceptualized as a chance for these Black millionaires to “troll” white America, alternately gaslighting its familiar fixations, stoking its racial anxieties, and toying with its misguided “bougie” commitments to political correctness. As we will see, these affronts seem almost systematic in their totality—part of a performative strategy to attract mainstream ire and simultaneously shrug off the resentment directed their way. In the very next couplet Ye goes on to drag the beloved British Prince William (here rendered with the studied malapropism of “Prince Williams”) down to the gutter level of pop culture with his proposal for a polygamist arrangement with TV’s Olsen twins. In so doing, however, he also reminds the listener that both the royal and the B-list celebs exist in their truest form in *the tabloid press*—a fact that, today, is manifestly obvious in Brexit-era England.

The above are just a few examples of an album that systematically defaces and destabilizes the received idea of Europe—an idea that, today, is considerably changed since the Fisk Jubilee Singers first performed before Queen Victoria and since jazz’s royalty of *Dukes* and *Counts* first took on the mantle as the world’s most influential artists. Indeed, we can trace Jay and Ye’s Black American usurpation of white thrones back to those subversive yet ubiquitous naming practices that elevated Joseph Nathan Oliver to “King” Oliver and Bessie Smith to “Empress of the Blues.” Like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Lady Day, these noble European titles claimed Black musical superiority in an era of universal white appropriation of Black popular styles. Yet, in thinking about African American Kings, Empresses, Dukes, Counts, and Ladies, we must remember that these inversional discursive practices arose in an era when such gestures of Black nobility were premised on the cognitive dissonance they would engender. Compounded by the irony of Americans doing Euro-drag, these performances of eliteness were gestures of spell-breaking swagger playing on the perceived irony of Black excellence in a white supremacist society. As Jay and Ye—and, as we’ll see, Queen Bey—know, such performances remain subversive ones. There is still plenty of spell breaking to do.

In addition to the lyrical rhetorics and visual performances on *Watch the Throne*, this book also focuses on the swing, swag, and other sonic performative legacies of Black American musical excellence evident on the album. As just one noteworthy sonic example, the book performs a musical and political economy analysis of “Otis” centered on the track’s resignification of Otis Redding’s classic soul tune, “Try a Little Tenderness”—a song about the role of materialism in a love economy and the value of love



in a materialistic society. (Take, for instance, Redding's line "things that she'll never, never, never, never possess.") Indeed, on the track "Otis," the priceless soul tune (and costly sample thereof) is itself treated like a gem that is cut, refashioned, and polished, just as a pricey Maybach German automobile is cut, refashioned, and polished in the recombinatory narrative of the track's video. That both are commodities seems all too clear to Jay and Ye. That much has changed in the fifty years since the release of Redding's "Tenderness," too, seems clear. Nonetheless, on the Jay and Ye track, the vocal power and pure affect of the wordless climax to Redding's 1966 classic is beautifully recomposed, *acceding* to the aristocratic ideology of the European artistic tradition but *exceeding* that regal ethos to emerge into the domain of Du Bois's "swagger"—and Jay's boastful "swag." "In your face! We did this," as Salois puts it.<sup>35</sup>

While close reading and musical analysis are at the heart of this album-centered book, I also incorporate ethnomusicological and cultural historical methodologies to situate the album in its transatlantic, new millennium context. The book's visual, sonic, and social analysis of "Niggas in Paris," for instance, is also informed by Yasiin Bey's cutting parody, "Niggas in Poorest," and an interview-based examination of François Hollande's tone-deaf use of the hit track in his "unofficial" 2012 campaign video "48H avec FH" as part of his minority outreach strategy in the Parisian *banlieues*. As the French-language Swiss news site, 20min.ch, put it, "Pas sûr que ce soit de cette façon là que François Hollande souhaite devenir célèbre aux Etats-Unis" (Not sure that this is how François Hollande wants to become famous in the United States).<sup>36</sup> The book thus tracks the reception of "Niggas in Paris," drawing on work with artists, media accounts, and personal interviews with the Parisian duo *Blackara* and the founder of Paris's hip hop Radio *Génération*, Bruno Laforestrie.

In sum, in this book I look to the realm of music to explain nothing less than the unprecedented inequality of our "New Gilded Age" and its ongoing geopolitical realignment, from Trumpism, to Brexit, to the global resurgence of fascism—from Orbán to Bolsonaro to Duterte to Modi—and, notably, to the destabilization of the EU. As evidenced by Euro-American politics being reduced to the unsustainable poles of neoliberal globalization vs. ethnonational protectionism in the wake of Brexit and Trumpism, it seems we need to take seriously the prophetic force of hip hop—even, or maybe especially, luxury rap. For Jay and Ye's *performative* and *critical excess* seems to exceed the limits of conspicuous consumption

and usher in an age of deeply ambivalent hypercapitalism—a late stage that finally looks primed to eat itself.

Thus, I argue that the critical excess performed on *Watch the Throne* is a consumption so conspicuous that it amounts to a critique of capitalism; that Jay and Ye’s unashamed Black “excellence, opulence, and decadence” (track 10, “Murder to Excellence”) amounts to a full-circle, anti-anti-essentialist critique of *whiteness and/as capitalism*—a doubled critique exemplified in Kanye’s construction, “I adopted these niggas / Phillip Drummoned ’em” (track 4, “Otis”). As we will see, this is critical excess. Indeed, the gilded album art for *Watch the Throne* would fit comfortably in 45’s Trump Tower penthouse (as might Kanye himself as we’ve seen).

As recent political events have made abundantly clear, long-promised freedoms for some have been perceived as existential threats for others. This was true in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 as Reconstruction fanned the flames of racial violence; it was true during and after the fight for the Civil Rights Act in 1964 as Jim Crow fell, kicking and screaming, burning and lynching; and it has been increasingly true since the election of the nation’s first Black president as the edifice of white privilege succumbed to the greatest structural impropriety: Barack Hussein Obama and his African American family living in the White House—a Black man sitting on the throne.<sup>37</sup>

As we have already seen in the ironies of recent geopolitical realignments, once Black and Brown people gain a foothold and begin breaking the glass ceiling, capitalism’s racialized underpinnings will begin to erode because, to borrow a phrase from Ta-Nehisi Coates, the “people who think themselves white” will cease their buy-in to the capitalist hegemony and its globalist, free-market ideology.<sup>38</sup>

“What’s a mob to a king?” (track 1, “No Church in the Wild”). We’re finding out right now. Will we “make it out alive?” If we listen closely we might find some answers.

\* \* \*

Was Jay and Ye’s luxury rap swag instrumental in these political developments? I think so. Was Barack Obama’s presidency instrumental in the mobilization and politicization of anti-Black racism? Absolutely. Indeed, between the gilded excess of *Watch the Throne*’s album art and the thug-



Fig. 1. Album cover art for *Watch the Throne* (2011) and *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015). *Watch the Throne* is a “luxury rap” album and is packaged accordingly. In contrast, the cover art for *To Pimp a Butterfly* represents the contradicting frames of Black excellence and Black poverty.

gish stereotypes (camped out in front of the White House) on Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album art for *To Pimp a Butterfly*, we have a powerful rhetorical encapsulation of the bifurcation of subhuman and superhuman that echoed throughout the Obama presidency. (Here, I encourage you to visit this book’s companion website, [www.criticalexcess.org](http://www.criticalexcess.org), to examine these and associated media artifacts—images, musical recordings, music videos, and other accompanying materials arranged by chapter—in more detail). Where the cover art for *Watch the Throne* revels in the gilded bling of Black excellence, opulence, and decadence, *To Pimp a Butterfly* presents us with the image of *unrespectable* young Black men and boys celebrating shirtless in front of the White House, brandishing stacks of money, gold chains, and bottles. The thuggish stereotypes loom over the dead body of a white politician, eyes exed-out at the bottom left of the album cover. Indeed, the cover art renders a stark contrast with Obama’s expression of respectable Black excellence.

Where Jay-Z was, in fact, a welcome and highly visible supporter of Obama, the cover art for *To Pimp a Butterfly* calls to mind the line from Kanye’s 2010 “Power”: “They say I was the abomination of Obama’s nation / Well, that’s a pretty bad way to start the conversation.”

## HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE KANYE?

Before I continue this introduction, I must attend to the MAGA-hatted elephant in the room—if only briefly and provisionally. When I first proposed this book in the early days of the Trump regime, Kanye West was already a celebrity provocateur. Indeed, he'd already been called a (talented) “jackass” by fellow Chicagoan Barack Obama.<sup>39</sup> That said, Ye finding his “dragon energy” soul mate in Donald J. Trump is as scary and disconcerting to me as anyone—all the more so, now that I run the risk of being seen to defend his indefensible “off the rails” behavior.<sup>40</sup> How he went from speaking truth to power on live television in the heartbreaking aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (“George Bush doesn’t care about black people”) to seemingly being in thrall to alt-right power in Trump’s White House, I can’t exactly say.

Yet, perhaps we all should have been prepared. His work had grown increasingly dark, conspiratorial, and megalomaniacal after the trilogy of his first three albums—Grammy-nominated albums which, it warrants mention, were all finalists for, *but never winners* of Album of the Year. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Indeed, on the chorus to his 2008 “Amazing” from the album *808s & Heartbreak*, Ye pre-empts our Trump-era questions rather forthrightly, singing: “I’m a problem / That’ll never ever be solved.” In the following chorus, his self-assessment grows prophetic.

I’m a monster, I’m a maven  
*I know this world is changing*  
Never gave in, never gave up  
I’m the only thing I’m afraid of<sup>41</sup>

In setting himself up as a “monster” that would come to bow before Trump’s throne, the lines anticipate Ye’s well-founded fear that even he doesn’t know what he’s capable of. Certainly, our “world is changing”—and we still haven’t solved the Ye problem.

While I can’t say how Kanye ended up palling around with Trump—gleefully hovering over Resolute with Old Hickory looking on—it is a foregone conclusion that both men have fragile egos. Perhaps that’s the “dragon energy.” Or perhaps Kanye has contracted a particularly virulent strain of white fragility. My guess is that those mounting Grammy

snubs have something in common with Obama's roasting of Trump about his "birtherism" at the 2011 White House Correspondent's Dinner—a public humiliation widely credited as activating Trump's interest in seeking the presidency.<sup>42</sup> In my reading, 2011 had a profound effect on 2016. But as we can see in these 2008 lines, the writing was already on the wall for Ye.

In any case, Kanye's prophetic posture and increased noncompliance with the racial orthodoxies of US party politics in particular does seem to augur what I'm suggesting here—that we are in a time of great social upheaval and political realignment and do not know how this fast-changing world will turn out. Whether ultimately for good or ill, I won't pretend to know. We got some preliminary answers in the 2018 midterms when (nondisenfranchised) Americans went to the polls, but in the wake of the Mueller Report and dismantling of the Department of Justice, we have learned that our "nation of laws" is, instead, remarkably overreliant on "political norms" and "legal memos." As such, the US seems to be sliding into a fascist dystopia. But as a respected colleague of mine recently suggested, because of this global upheaval, socialism is back on the table. Indeed, it is. Again, I won't pretend to know how to read the tea leaves—I am not, myself, a prophet.

One widely read take may provide some answers (and a modicum of hope) in this regard. In her article for *the Nation*, "Time's Up for Capitalism. But What Comes Next?," Astra Taylor writes: "The resurgence of interest in traditional left-wing politics is a sign that times have changed. . . . In a remarkable reversal for citizens of the country that brought the world Coca-Cola, Ford, and Amazon, more American millennials now say they would prefer to live in a socialist society than a capitalist one, and this preference has helped send a new generation of self-described democratic socialists to office at the local and state levels."<sup>43</sup> Perhaps my colleague was right—if this global realignment means that even the "s-word" is becoming less taboo in American politics, anything is possible.

So how do you solve a problem like Kanye?<sup>44</sup> You don't. You just listen. I'm not terribly interested in Kanye's personal reality-TV reality—and this book will stay as far away as practicably possible from personal hijinks, social media buzz, and influencer culture.<sup>45</sup> But suffice it to say that the evidence of this once-unimaginable turn of events is scattered throughout the 2011 album. For instance, on track 6, "New Day," Ye raps about his son: "I mean, I might even make him be Republican / So everybody know he

love white people.” And, as we’ll see, those couplets about transgressing US racial-political orthodoxies are delivered over a Nina Simone sample—lines from her signature track, “Feeling Good,” in which Nina sounds *hell-bent on revenge* rather than simply “good.”

Of course, Nina is one of countless African American women and men who have struggled with mental health—what Frantz Fanon would call a healthy response to a racially sick society.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the subject of trauma and Black “madness” as trope, strategy, and social construction will be an important point of reference for us to consider as we look into Black celebrities and Black capitalism.<sup>47</sup> I’ll save that consideration—of Nina, of Kanye, of Audre, of Lauryn—for later.<sup>48</sup>

Enough Prognostication. Now, let us turn to the past.

## WHITENESS AND/AS POWER

“It’s the economy, stupid!” So goes the conventional wisdom that has ruled ever since James Carville made it a mantra for Arkansas governor Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. It was, of course, Thatcher and Reagan who first began to implement Milton Friedman’s deregulating and privatizing economic theories. But it was Clinton’s tacit acceptance of this worldview—and his own reduction of politics to economics and continuing liquidation of state assets—that consolidated the power of this ideology, known as “neoliberalism,” and established it as the new common sense on both sides of the American political duopoly. Since the early ’90s, neoliberalism has thus taken the day. As Clinton himself put it in 1996, “the era of big government is over.”

I remember, firsthand, the utter befuddlement of liberal common sense in the 1990s, the apoplectic reaction to working-class whites “voting against their interests.” “Can’t they see,” went the refrain, “that by voting for anti-welfare, anti-Medicare, anti-Social Security Republican candidates, poor whites are just shooting themselves in the foot!” But as Attali himself writes, “Music, as a mirror of society, calls this truism to our attention: society is much more than economic categories, Marxist or otherwise, would have us believe.”<sup>49</sup>

What was missing was the language—and thus the understanding—now widespread, of how white privilege works. Of course, some people had an understanding. Republicans had gained a very strong understanding



of the politics of white privilege and white supremacy after the success of Nixon's Southern Strategy and had learned to hone a dog-whistle politics centered on fear of Black advancement and racial resentment.<sup>50</sup>

Clinton's win seemed to prove neoliberalism right—if only temporarily. Economics seemed to predict politics. No more.<sup>51</sup> Today, culture rules. And as this book will argue, music *predicts*.

When Jay-Z and Kanye West released their “luxury rap” album in 2011 in the depths of the Great Recession, commentators agreed that it was a bad look.<sup>52</sup> We didn't need millionaires boasting about their Rolliers and “other, other Benzes” while the nation—and the globe—suffered the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. As we will see, the album was indeed widely resented. But it was also the biggest album of 2011, ultimately selling over two million copies in the US alone.

This book tracks this paradoxical story of the widely successful musical artifact that also epitomized a favorite target of white resentment: the entertainment industry and its rich African Americans. Indeed, this book will center on this African American cultural artifact from the music industry, but in the process of reading this album we will also come across other Black artists, entertainers, athletes, and media moguls—figures who are now, in the age of Trump and Brexit, favorite targets of conservative think tanks, alt-right media, their emboldened talking heads, and their Proud Boys and Coulter Girls.

Jay-Z and Kanye West's 2011 chart topper, *Watch the Throne*, not only epitomized how Black people had won the famed culture wars of the 1990s, it was proof positive for millions of Americans that this victory augured the end of decent, hard-working, middle-American values—from Nixon's silent (white) majority to Newt Gingrich's (white) nuclear family and its way of life.<sup>53</sup> The rise and ultimate victory of the Tea Party was dedicated to “taking back our country” and “not being replaced”; the ultimate aim to “Make America (White) Great Again.”

Community organizers, white liberals, Blacks, Jews, Muslims, and immigrants, along with their funders such as George Soros and their “antifamily” projects such as Planned Parenthood and Acorn were eroding the USA and its God-given freedoms. Was anybody going to protect the American way of life? And more to the point, was anybody going to protect the white womanhood at the center of those morally upright Christian values that made America great?<sup>54</sup>

Of course, recent activism, journalism, and scholarship have claimed

with increasing vigor that it was slave capitalism and immigrant labor that made America great (for some), not the boot-strap ingenuity that is central to the story that Americans (mostly white) like to tell about themselves.<sup>55</sup> Not surprisingly, however, these “revisionist” arguments have essentially been nonstarters for generations of white Americans deeply invested in the American Dream and its myth of meritocracy.

In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates put it thus: “the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.”<sup>56</sup> But Martin Luther King had already eloquently detailed the unfulfilled promise of this dream back in 1967, almost fifty years earlier.

America freed the slaves in 1863 through the Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln, but gave the slaves no land or nothing in reality, as a matter of fact, to get started on. At the same time, America was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and the Midwest, which meant there was a willingness to give the white peasants from Europe an economic base. And yet it refused to give its black peasants from Africa—who came here involuntarily, in chains, and had worked free for 244 years—any kind of economic base. And so emancipation for the negro was really freedom to hunger. It was freedom to the winds and rains of heaven. It was freedom without food to eat or land to cultivate and therefore it was freedom and famine at the same time. And when white Americans tell the negro to lift himself by his own bootstraps, they don’t look over the legacy of slavery and segregation.

Now, I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, but it’s a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.<sup>57</sup>

Surely, King’s economic argument would have gained traction some fifty years on? Surely this well-documented story describing the wholly discrepant experiences between “white peasants from Europe” and “black peasants from Africa” would find some purchase, allow us to recover some historical memory, and do something to undermine the exceptionalist myth of American equality?

But surely too, would this “revisionist history” threaten to expose the privileges many held dear. Even if it meant “voting against their economic interests,” lifting the veil from this history would threaten something many held much more dear, something intimately related to but even



more valuable than *economic* privilege. As it turns out, those voters knew *exactly* what was at stake. Increasingly, with the rise of the Tea Party movement, they took the long view and voted against the immediate economic gains—of a welfare state, of access to low-cost health care, of a solvent Social Security system—to maintain the much more valuable (in the long run) sociocultural edifice of white privilege, of white *power*.

In her 2015 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, Arlie Russell Hochschild offers a piercing insight into this mindset. Based on long-term ethnographic research with right-wing communities in Louisiana, she found that every nonwhite success is viewed as “cutting in line.”<sup>58</sup> And far from denying the *longue durée* of American history, she found that these white Americans conceived of their place at the front of the line—their entitlement—on the basis that their forbears, Dr. King’s “European peasants,” *were here first* (and forgetting, for instance, that the first Africans had been brought to Virginia Colony over a decade before the chaste and freedom-loving Mayflower “Pilgrims” at the heart of the American myth).

While we might disagree with the logic of entitlement at play here, it is hardly irrational. It is rooted in 400 years of history, 400 years of structural racism. It is, to use a now-familiar term, quite “transactional.” This is how we’ve gotten to Trump. If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.

In this book, I argue that a close look at the creative work of these Black millionaires on *Watch the Throne* confirms Hochschild’s thesis—that Black and Latino success is hateful to conservative whites and will have repercussions. And while Obama’s rise to power surely played a politically pivotal role here, I want to look at the cultural firmament that would enable such a fervent backlash against a moderate president who focused, unlike any before him, on reconciliation and rapprochement. “There are no blue states and red states” indeed.

Of course, this politics of white resentment may have been perfected in the crucible of American racial ideology, but it is proving quite transferable and localizable in European contexts (indeed, around the world). Recalling my befuddlement with “voting against your interests” in the US context, Nigel Farage famously bet that white Brits would also vote against their economic interests—as long as they did it on their own terms. Again, of course, that’s the point: they’re not wrong. They are voting in their interest—the interest of whiteness, of white privilege, of white power.

Indeed, Du Bois wrote with just this insight as early as 1935—fifteen

years after his analysis of “The Souls of White Folk.” As the specter of a reinvigorated white power grew out of the ashes of Germany’s post–Great War economic disaster, Du Bois wrote presciently of his own national context, post–Civil War, in *Black Reconstruction in America*,

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness.<sup>59</sup>

As Du Bois rightly suggests, this “psychological wage” of “public deference” and “courtesy”—of humanity—was worth far more than a few more cents for an hour’s work. And, sadly, Du Bois’s structural critique of racialized policing and white impunity sounds all too familiar in twenty-first century America.

In this book, I thus argue that on *Watch the Throne*, Jay and Ye devalued this supplemental wage of whiteness and purposefully stoked white resentment—a resentment that would ultimately spill over into public life, make audible right-wing dog whistling, and embolden white supremacists to come out from under their rocks. It is this well of resentment, of course, that led to the unlikely election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States.<sup>60</sup> While I will not claim that the election of an inarticulate, narcissistic, and openly racist oligarch is in any way a positive development, I will argue that this unthinkable development has shown the United States of America who it really is.<sup>61</sup>

In this book, I argue that *Watch the Throne*, as a high-profile and deliberate provocation, was pivotal in this development. Through the strategy that I dub “critical excess” on the album, Jay and Ye have drawn the worst elements of American society—those most entrenched realities of American history—out into the light of day. And while I don’t mean to suggest that their prophesy is of the literal Nostradamus variety, I do suggest that, recalling Attali, this “dangerous, disturbing, and subversive” album “makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things.” From the mainstream outing of “white privilege” to the reassessment of neo-

liberalism and resurgence of socialism, the new order of things is now becoming visible.

In the chapters that follow, I track how *Watch the Throne* heralds the future; how it prophesies nothing less than the end of capitalism; how it is capitalism's death dance.

### "CAN'T NOBODY TELL ME NUTHIN'"

In the spring of 2019, me, my university students from Ireland, the UK, the wider EU, the US, and listeners around the world reveled in the absurd brilliance of (and rubberneck-inducing discourse around) Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road." The story of the track is a rather too spot-on case study in white privilege, racial resentment, and the "you will not replace us" meme of the (global) Right. What's more it offers a chance to substantiate how structures of white privilege connect the cultural superstructure to the economic base.

The track itself was a short country-and-western track, inflected with hip hop imagery and swagger (notably, a song, not a rap), that might have been dismissed as pure camp were it not so über-catchy. In March 2019, the banjo-suffused track by the Atlanta hip hop artist Lil Nas X went viral and debuted on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart.<sup>62</sup> When country tastemakers and the *Billboard* charts realized that it was by a hip hop artist, they manufactured a case against its inclusion on the country charts and "*Billboard* quietly removed 'Old Town Road' from Hot Country Songs," lest it overshadow more purely country acts.<sup>63</sup>

For our purposes here, the lesson is: hip hop artists could easily *replace* country artists at the top of their own charts if not for the gatekeepers and structures that keep country, country (i.e., white).<sup>64</sup> Indeed, while white country artists regularly fiddle with hip hop sounds, the interpenetration of trap beats and country twang in the music of a Black artist here seemed to foster resentment and betray an underlying fear of sonic miscegenation in this episode of industry-policed resegregation.<sup>65</sup> While there's more to the story (much more . . . the father of the industry-sanctioned Black appropriator, Miley Cyrus, ultimately recorded a country-approved "remix" of the track), this basic outline should suffice for reference.

If this all weren't enough, it's also worth noting that the hook for "Old Town Road" is, itself, a microcosm of the ensuing scandal. After describ-

ing the accoutrements of his hip hop–inflected country style on the track’s verse (horse tack, boots, and of course, the brilliantly country bling of “Cowboy hat from Gucci / Wrangler on my Booty”), Lil Nas X sings “I been in the valley / You ain’t been up off that porch.” Given the *Billboard* removal scandal—and our continuing discussion of white privilege—these lyrics now read as though Lil Nas X has worked for his place (“in the valley”) while the country artist he presumes to *replace* has no real claim on the charts. He’s been on his grind while the white artist has been sleeping (“ain’t been up off that porch”). What’s more, these (and other) lines invert the age-old stereotypes about “lazy blacks” and turn the American myth of meritocracy back against its would-be (white) beneficiaries.

The hook underscores the rapper’s claim “can’t nobody tell me nothing”—a swaggering line that echoes countless hip hop lines, from Melle Mel’s signature message, “Don’t push me, ’cause I’m close to the edge” (1982), to *Menace II Society*’s “America’s nightmare: young, black, and didn’t give a fuck” (1993), to Jay’s “Nigga you broke, what the fuck you gon’ tell me?” (1996), to Kanye’s almost literal antecedent—the title lines to “Can’t Tell Me Nothing” (2007). The common message: “we’ve paid our dues. Now we’re going to take what’s ours”—lines that simultaneously master the neoliberal order, undermine the myth of meritocracy, and threaten white supremacy. Indeed, on track 9 of *Watch the Throne*, Jay and Ye offer a swaggering take together. The track is titled, “Who Gon Stop Me?”

Just as the end of segregation would augur the African American takeover of American professional sports, the “Old Town Road” affair suggests that Black entertainers could easily *replace* white ones on the country charts were it not for the entertainment industry’s enduring racialized structures.<sup>66</sup>

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW: SUBHUMAN, HUMAN, SUPERHUMAN

This book is organized around the unfolding narrative and conceptual terrain of the album itself. Indeed, *Watch the Throne* is a classic concept album, and my interest in it stems from its unified, if complicated and often vexing vision. By focusing on the first four tracks of the album in order, *Critical Excess* maps out this concept album’s trajectory on its own terms, tracking performative moves from racial essence to transcendence, from subhuman to superhuman, from jungle to penthouse. The focus on

the album's opening tracks also allows for the necessary depth of close reading while affording the possibility to examine how the rhetorical terrain of these hit singles spins out to the concept album as a whole. The book thus centers the opening of *Watch the Throne*, regularly referencing moments from the other seven tracks to highlight the album's conceptual unity and advance a better understanding of its ideas and production values without getting lost in the weeds.

Chapter 1, "Welcome to the Jungle: Essence and the Western Inheritance" centers on the album's first track, "No Church in the Wild" (feat. Frank Ocean), while taking forays into related tracks such as "Welcome to the Jungle" (track 8). Through close sonic, lyrical, visual, and rhetorical analysis, the chapter establishes the themes of essence and transcendence that are central to both the album's radical constructivist critique of our house-of-cards political economy ("what's a god to a non-believer?") and to my larger argument about the bourgeois category of "the human." By unpacking Jay and Ye's litany of references to icons of Western civilization on this track, I ask us to confront Frantz Fanon's landmark study, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), wherein the psychoanalyst and decolonial activist remarks pointedly, "The Negro is in every sense of the word a victim of white civilization."<sup>67</sup> Here, I also perform a close reading of the album art, which ranges from Givenchy gilded flowers to Jay and Ye depicted as catlike beasts—images that underscore the category of the "subhuman" that undergirds bourgeois ideology and the capitalist logics that rationalize exploitations of labor.

The second chapter, "Lift Off to Sunday Service: Transcendence, Black Capitalism, Black Rapture," develops the argument with a focus on track 2, "Lift Off" (feat. Beyoncé). This analysis continues to engage close reading methodologies, examining, for example, the Afrofuturist discourses engaged on the space-travelling track that overcomes "scars" and takes it to the "stars." The chapter, however, augments these approaches with more historical and political analyses of the fraught place of capitalism and entrepreneurship in the African American community. In particular, the chapter pivots on "Lift Off" to launch into the terrain of Kanye's more recent Sunday Service—a series of outdoor Christian worship services that use the stylings of the Black church to reframe Kanye hits and otherwise offer a creative outlet for the newly right-leaning, Trump-loving West. Indeed, "Lift Off" was one of the first original tracks to be rearranged for use in the Sunday Services—a continuity that demands an analysis of Black

transcendence from the Black gospel tradition of the Selah Singer's "I'll Fly Away" to the white "prosperity gospel" of Joel Osteen. In the chapter, I put these developments in dialogue with the end-times "rapture" theology of white evangelical Christianity legible on the "Not of this World" bumper stickers ubiquitous in Ye and Kim Kardashian's Southern California. The chapter thus further examines the idea of racial essence and the possibility of overcoming and transcending racial oppression via financial or spiritual means—or, as in this case, both. As Beyoncé puts it, "So many scars / 'Bout to take this whole thing to Mars."

The third and fourth chapters center the album's most controversial single—cut number 3, "Niggas in Paris"—moving from a textual analysis to a contextual one. Chapter 3 is titled "'After They've Seen Paree': The Mastery of Form" and examines the original luxury rap track itself—a posttranscendent escape scene featuring the two Black millionaires galivanting around the city of light. Indeed, the Grammy-winning single that name-drops artifacts of European *haute couture* like they were "going on sale," is at the heart of the album and its strategy of critical excess. The chapter thus spends time digging into the racially fraught references and performed paradoxes linking, for instance, the luxury fashion house Maison Margiela to the 1960s-era Hanna Barbera cartoon, Magilla Gorilla. As one commentator put it in a piece for *Slate*, "'Niggas in Paris' is the most popular piece of Western culture to ever feature the word *nigga* so prominently" and "is so pungently evocative because with it, Jay and Kanye proudly place the barbarians ('niggas') not merely within the palace gates ('Paris'), but high up on the social ladder."<sup>68</sup>

Chapter 4, "'Niggas in Poorest' to 'That Shit Creil': NIP's Realpolitik in the US and France," puts this high-profile cultural text in its Black Atlantic contexts examining Yasiin Bey's (aka Mos Def) parody of the luxury rap track, fittingly titled "Niggas in Poorest," and then turns to Paris itself. Here, I examine the track in relation to my work with Parisian hip hop communities over the past decades with particular focus on the reception of François Hollande's use of the hit track as part of his (not unproblematic) minority outreach strategy in the Parisian *banlieues* during his 2012 campaign for French president—a campaign that proved successful. Through an analysis of an extended interview that I conducted with the video's producer, the French radio executive and hip hop activist, Bruno Laforestrie, I unearth some of the logics behind the video and its meanings in the majority nonwhite French *banlieues*. Together, the chapter thus

situates the track in a history of Black American expat artists, develops the book's theory of "critical excess," and substantiates claims about hip hop's postcolonial politics with an analysis of its on-the-ground impact. The chapters thus examine the category of the human and move to the conceptual ground of anti-essentialism, examining Obama-era fantasies of a postracial society. As Jay puts it, "If you escaped what I escaped / You'd be in Paris gettin' fucked up too."

In chapter 5, "'Sophisticated Ignorance': The Deformation of Mastery" I argue that Jay and Ye's resignification of Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness" on track 4, "Otis," is a form of sonic and social subversion that Houston Baker terms "the deformation of mastery"—a mastery so complete and aggressively forthright that it undermines, *exceeds*, and *redefines* the category of mastery.<sup>69</sup> In this analysis, I track the history of "Try a Little Tenderness" back to the original Great Depression-era versions by Bing Crosby and James Reese Europe, suggesting that Ye's resignification of the Redding version during the depths of the post-2008 Great Recession expertly indexed how much had changed—and how much hadn't. With this background, I suggest that this performed attitude of deformation exemplifies my theory of critical excess and move toward my final argument, that in exceeding conspicuous consumption, the album exceeds Europe and heralds the end of capitalism. In other words, that by mastering capitalism in the context of the (then) worst financial downturn since the Great Depression, Jay and Ye pour salt in the wound of a severely compromised white supremacy and primed the pump for Donald Trump (and condescending "Bernie Bros," it should be noted). The chapter is thus a case study in Baker's theory of the deformation of mastery, examining the übermaster category of superhuman and centering the concept of anti-anti-essence—a critique of postracial (white) fantasies. Indeed, Kanye's line, "I adopted these niggas / Phillip Drummoned 'em,"—a metaphor on "Otis" in which Ye takes on the role of a white millionaire adopting Black kids—functions as a perfect encapsulation of the double move of anti-anti-essentialism. Indeed, the line weaponizes anti-anti-essentialism through the lyrical image of a Black man playing a white man playing father figure to Black boys.

In the conclusion, "*Black Noise*: Re-composition in the Last Gilded Age," I reflect on the years since *Watch the Throne's* release in 2011, considering what has come to pass culturally, economically, and politically. Examining the deep ambivalences of our historical moment through the



lenses of Black Lives Matter, Occupy, Me Too, Trumpism, and the politics of white resentment, I show how the album proved prescient; that long-promised freedoms for some—including the “human right to swagger”—have indeed been perceived as existential threats for others. To these telling developments, I relate Achille Mbembe’s work on the long legacy of Afrodiasporic “repertoires of practices of survival” and the more recent “blueprint for social resistance and affirmation” that Tricia Rose finds in hip hop’s *Black* noise. I project the luxury rap album’s claims to the future against the deeply troubling present state of geopolitics to conclude that our racial capitalist patriarchy—and the current global alignment, writ large—is in its last throes, for better or for worse.

A final note on reading this book. As we get into it I encourage you to grab your copy of the album or launch Tidal (Jay-Z’s very own streaming service)—or whatever streaming service is at hand—so that we can ride the coming wave of ideas with the sounds that perform them in our ears. For in hip hop ideas are not only textual, but performative; the rhetorics not only logical, but emotive. To best understand the performed ideas on *Watch the Throne* we need to hear the stories through the voices that deliver them—in all their sonic human swagger. As with most hip hop albums, it is the stories they tell that draw us in. Apropos of this point, I’ve gathered relevant sonic, video, and image links and compiled further resources at this book’s companion website, [www.criticalexcess.org](http://www.criticalexcess.org).

As the *Game of Thrones* character Tyrion Lannister put it in his final monologue to this recent blockbuster consideration of human power, greed, and excess—of “thrones”: “What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it.” The story of *Critical Excess*—and of *Watch the Throne*—is, then, a story we must read *and* hear to understand. As they put it on the album’s ninth track, nothing beats a good story. “Who Gon Stop Me?”