The Throne Is Burning: The Rise And Fall Of The Gendered Utopia In *Watch The Throne*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the best-selling rap album from Kanye West and Jay-Z entitled *Watch The Throne*. Using the theoretical framework established by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, I define and explore the utopia aspects present in the album. However, this is not a pure paradise, as it will quickly become evident that the gender relations present in the album are incredibly problematic. This will necessitate a feminist analysis and, most importantly, a historical analysis of black masculinity and femininity as is defined within the context of rap music. It cannot be over-emphasized that the misogyny found within this album is not unique to this album, but is in fact present in the larger culture it was created within. Finally, because of problematic gender relations and issues of identity, the utopia created by Kanye West and Jay-Z self-destructs. This leaves us with a brief discussion of the utility of utopias.
Introduction
This is something like the Holocaust
Millions of our people lost
Bow our heads and pray to the lord
Til I die I’mma f***in’ ball
Now who gon stop me?

(Carter & West, 2011)

In examining the experience of the black diaspora, it has become fruitful for academics to analyze previously ignored forms of artistic expression that, while not necessarily a part of the academic community and dialogue, are often times the outlets most readily available to a community silenced by various forms of institutional oppression. It is because of the push in academia to discover new forms of knowledge from various forms of art that one sees a desire within academia to better understand “black music,” a diverse medium that encompasses many different musical genres such as jazz, blues and rap. ² It is this final genre of “black music” that I will focus on over the course of this essay. Rap, unlike many other mediums available to the black diasporic community, such as both the blues and jazz were forms of social protest. Rap specifically began as an artistic movement for the expression of frustration experienced by the black community, who often were socioeconomically disadvantaged in a post-industrial United States. It was a movement that attempted to critique and analyze the larger forms of oppression supported and created by national and international institutions. In its formation, rap began as a form of protest. Yet, to examine rap purely from this standpoint is to ignore how it has evolved over the past forty years into a music that includes a multitude of voices and ideologies. Just one of those ideologies is that of utopia or, rather, the idea that “a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished” (Gilroy, 1993, p 37).

It is with this in mind that I turn my eye to the utopia crafted by rap artists Kanye West and Jay-Z over the course of their hit 2011 album, Watch The Throne. As will be more thoroughly analyzed in this paper, both artists juxtapose a particular black experience, that of the economically and racially oppressed, with a world of grandeur and opulence that they, leaders of a new cultural black nationalist movement, define as “Black Excellence” and hope to bring to the diasporic black community. However, this is not a perfect utopia particularly because it is highly gendered. Women, black women in particular, are denied full rights and access to the utopia created by these two artists. In fact, when they are allowed to take part in the utopia it is often to serve the males of the community either sexually or as an obedient wife. I argue that it is because of this that this utopia fails to exist as a true paradise for the black community. Furthermore, because of the complex and diverse nature of the black experience in America, this attempt to create a universal black identity proves futile and eventually leads to its self-destruction. Since this utopia is nothing more than a fraud and filled with internal division, the creators of this promised land are left with no other option but to let it burn to the ground and abdicate the throne to the next leaders of the black music community.

Significance Of Watch The Throne And The Analysis Of The Album
Prior to the actual analysis of the album, I feel it important to first justify the examination of it. Unlike many of their peers, Kanye West and Jay-Z have a cultural recognition that transcends their activities within the musical realm. When more ink is used in speculation over the naming of their child than on the
music actually produced by the artists, it quickly becomes apparent that the lives and cultural dialogue surrounding these artists are more closely associated with the British royalty than of the common musician. Of course, this similarity is not lost on the artists as one of them Kanye West, comments on “Ni**as in Paris” (the ubiquitous single from the album) that “Prince William’s ain’t do it right if you ask me/Cause I was him I would have married Kate & Ashley” (Carter & West, 2011). Given their success, one can fairly speculate that any attempt to make an admittedly muddled political statement is only to further their success, gain more popularity and sell more records. This is further complicated by the fact that there are certainly contemporary artists (EL-P, Killer Mike, Nas and Angel Haze all come to mind) that are more overtly political and have made more of an attempt to criticize larger institutions of hegemonic power. Furthermore, one must question the attempt to create a black nationalist movement that is mainly supported by a largely white consumer base (Yousman, 2003, p 367).

While this is true, there are several issues with these arguments. First, while these artists (just a few of the many rappers that identify as a part of the conscious rap movement) are certainly more political in terms of content, it is this politicized content that often limits their audience solely to that of the most devout rap fans. Further, while Nas and his magnum opus, Illmatic, certainly have a great deal of relevancy in terms of popular culture, the album is over a decade old and much scholarship has already been written on its importance and deeper meanings. Furthermore, while the majority of consumers of this album are in fact white, I feel that it is because of this that their message contesting global white supremacy is only strengthened. I argue that the act of getting a majority white consumer base to purchase an album that openly challenges its hegemonic power is nothing short of a coup d'état of these global forces of oppression. This, of course, is assuming that the whites who purchase the CD are the oppressors. It could be that they are also oppressed in a variety of ways and empathize with the general messages in the rap music.

Finally, I feel it important to note that even though the album has been out for approximately two years it remains culturally relevant for several reasons. First, in spite of its existence in an increasingly competitive music world, the album was able to acquire platinum status (the sale of one million copies) just one month after its release in August 2011 (Lamy, 2011). This is particularly noteworthy because the RIAA (Record Industry Association of America) had yet to include digital sales in its calculations, thus ignoring the approximately three hundred thousand digital albums sold in its first week of release through various venues like Amazon and Itunes (Kaufman, 2011). Furthermore, the success of this album marked one of the few times in the new millennium that a collaborative album was able both to top sales charts and to receive high critical praise. Finally, the album has been able to accomplish what no other major album has been able to in recent years due to the proliferation of online piracy: avoid an album leak. By keeping the album shrouded in secret, the duo were able to repeat what Kanye West had accomplished previously with his album My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy and hold to its shipping day. This created an event in which the entire global music community was able to access and experiences the album together and at the same time. Of course, this all occurs within a context where rap, formally a small subculture of hip hop, has been transformed into a billion-dollar industry that is “exploited by corporate capitalist and the petit bourgeois desires” (Neal, 1999 p. 150). It is because of this global reach that I argue that it is important to examine the various messages found throughout the album.

With the justification provided, I will now, prior to my analysis, review both the importance of music in general for diasporic communities and how “black music,” rap in particular, is important to the overall understanding of both the black experience and the formation of black identity in the United States.

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3 This is a slightly problematic line of argument if only because while approximately 70% of the consumer base for rap is in fact identified as White, this measure does not include the pirating of music, the individual sharing of music between peers and underground mixtape releases. This means that the album could in fact have a larger cultural impact than is indicated by its sales’ numbers. This does however does not diminish the fact that the majority of the money made by these artists in terms of the actual sale of music is in fact from a largely white population (Yousman, 2003, p. 367).
Music As A Site For Diaspora

I feel it important to briefly examine the role music plays for diasporic communities at large. Simply put, a primary aspect of music’s existence is its ability to connect both the past and the present. This is because time is contained and limited to the song itself, thus transcending traditional notions of time and its passage. Furthermore, a song is the embodiment of human community because no portion of a song exists alone, as each piece must work in conjunction with the other to create a functional piece of music. Failure to do this results in the creation of disorder, pain and noise. To stretch this metaphor, it has been argued that the totality of life can be found within a song. Like life, a song is nothing more than an abbreviated journey with a beginning, middle and end. As we grow with the song, our perception of it changes and when it ends, we sometimes can experience a loss. We as listeners enter into an intimate relationship with the piece and have, whether emotionally or physically, been altered. Thus according to Prosser (2011) song is a world and a life in it of itself.

It must also be noted that music is able to affect displaced communities in a more tangible manner as it often acts as the bridge between these communities and their “homeland.” As the music enters the ears of displaced persons, it is able to invoke memories of home for the listener. Depending on the experience had by the listener this can either invoke a feeling of longing or, as will be seen in the case of rap in the context of the black diaspora, a hope for a better tomorrow (Prosser, 2011). This is because the music does not necessarily invoke the memory of a homeland (while Africa plays a central role in many songs and in the music of many artists, this is often of the mythologized variety and cannot be returned to as such), but a history of racial subjugation and oppression in the land of supposed opportunity.

Utopia For The Black Diaspora: The Creation Of Black Identity And Utopia In Rap

To begin, much of the theoretical framework used for the purposes of this paper is derived from the scholarship found in Paul Gilroy’s influential piece, The Black Atlantic. First, it is of great importance to briefly describe his theories concerning modernity and the black identity as it stands now. In describing how scholars and political leaders had originally positioned the black community, Gilroy explains that the black experience was often either viewed in an essentialist manner or in a pluralist manner. The former often came in two varieties with the more important being (for the purposes of this paper) that of the strategic variety employed by Black Nationalist leaders throughout the Civil Rights movement. The “strategic essentialism” employed by these individuals harkened back to the mythical Motherland of Africa that black individuals in the Americas shared in common. This homogenization of the black experience was used to collectivize against global white supremacy and racial inequality found in many Western nations. The second position, plurality, is similar to that of the postmodern critique of race because it states that any attempt to homogenize the experiences of the black community is essentialist because race is a social construction. Furthermore, it argues this collectivization often ignored the lived reality of Africa, as it exists today. Finally, those that hold to this position have stated that they feared that this homogenization only furthered the power had by racist institutions that stereotype black identity for its own exploitative purposes. However, the problem with plurality has been in its inability in creating a movement based in its negativism (Gilroy, 1993). Given the problems found in both these positions, Gilroy offers an alternative view of modernity and the black identity. Specifically, he explains the modern black identity, to some degree, lies between these two positions. While all identities, race included, are socially constructed, there is at times a common experience based in the location, history, and culture that a person finds themselves to be a part of. This experience then interacts with larger discourses and helps inform an identity, which is constantly in flux. It should be noted that this identity may in fact combine with and influence other identities and discourses. This makes it possible to collectivize in a manner that avoids the essentialist trappings found in previous Black Nationalist movements (Gilroy, 1993).

It is in this hybrid, or creolized identity that one finds rap’s placement in the modern black community. Rap is considered to be a part of this modern definition of “blackness” because of its origins as the creolization of various cultural elements stemming from black experiences in The United States, the Caribbean and
Africa. Furthermore, the music is thoroughly influenced by the convergence of past and present as the diaspora, specifically the slave trade, is often “actively reimagined in the present” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 74) to connect listeners historically, criticize the larger powers that created this situation of destitution and benefit from it, and show how the effects of the slave trade continue to have real world consequences.

“Black music,” and rap specifically, has been integral in this effort to connect the past and present because it transcends the realm of academia and allows individuals to actively take part in the formation of an identity, which was often in opposition to the monolithic definitions espoused both by academia and those in power. The gatekeepers of this experience are seen in the musicians as they are often the ones that directly speak about a black experience that the masses deem more readily accessible and easier connect to (Gilroy, 1993, p. 76-78). Simply put, while there can be no universal black experience, rap music exists and flourishes because of its use of a “common fund of urban experiences, caused by the effect of similar segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by both” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 83).

The importance of rap in terms of the experience had by the black diaspora does not end simply in the description of what occurred and what currently is. Instead, rap is able to create a new community not based in reality, but instead in the desires and fantasies had by the artists. Rap often uses the invocation of a world that exists free of racialized oppression that is not far removed from the world as it exists today. This is not some civilization that exists in the minds of science fiction authors, but simply a society that holds equality as a central value. This is important for members of the black diaspora (both listeners and musicians) because “by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 36).

**Playa Daddy, Sapphire And Jezebel: Complex Gender Relations In Rap Music**

With a brief examination of both the utility of music for communities in diaspora and rap music’s particular role for the black diaspora complete, it is now possible to begin the examination of contemporary debates within the rap community. Specifically, the next section will examine the complex and ever-evolving history of gender relations within the genre. This will entail a close examination of the three gendered archetypes that we see present in this particular utopia: The Playa Daddy, the Sapphire and the Jezebel.

To begin, let us first examine the evolution of the “Playa Daddy,” as it is this role that will be most readily present throughout the course of Watch The Throne. This is a relatively new phenomenon in rap. With its creation came a new definition of masculinity that largely counters previous definitions found within one of the more popular subcategories of the genre, gangster rap. Within that subcategory, black male entertainers were defined by a “fearsome, criminal masculinity” (Randolph, 2006, p. 206) that emphasized violence as the best possible means of gaining power within a society filled with hate. However, unlike previous rap artists like Public Enemy, this violence was not directed at the various institutions that benefited from the subjugation of the black community, but at the community itself. Male artists were generally pictured in angry poses and in all black clothing to further project a sense of authority. It is here that I feel it appropriate to re-emphasize the fact that the consumer base during this period was largely white and it has been theorized that the reason for the proliferation of this violent subgenre lay in the fact that it confirmed the hegemonic racist ideologies had by its consumers (Randolph, 2006, p. 215). Of course, it should be noted that this was understood and used strategically by many artists that performed this masculinity, as one of the leaders of gangster rap, Ice Cube (son of two professors at UCLA), explained that white consumers in the United States would never

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4 It should be noted here that this paper is specifically examining “playa rap,” one of the many subcultures found within rap music. This particular genre began in the late 1990s and differs greatly from the “gangster rap” subculture that defines most common media presentations and academic discussions on rap music. While it is still present, the most popular artists would most likely fall under the new “playa rap” subgroup. Furthermore, it differs from the self-conscious rap community whose main focus is to critique larger institutions of oppression (Randolph, 2006, p. 206).
purchase music that offered nuanced examinations of the black community (Randolph, 2006, p. 206).

“Playa Rap” differed greatly from this type of music because of its emphasis on both sensuality and consumption. While sex has largely been a part of rap since its inception, “playa rap” altered its gendered dynamics and the role of the male in this largely heteronormative activity. Specifically, the male is to woo his partner in some manner (though usually done with either smooth words or the purchase of gifts) and together they form a relationship that is to last for either that night or a lifetime. This directly contests previous notions of black male sexuality as described by “gangster rap” that was hyper-aggressive and, at times, made reference to sexual assault (Randolph, 2006). Furthermore, this emphasis on sensuality is of particular importance as it can “be understood as Black men reclaiming the autonomy of their own bodies” (Randolph, 2006, p. 207) because black men have, throughout history, been “denied the pleasure of enjoying their own bodies” (Randolph, 2006, p. 207) for the sake of various agendas had by institutions and ideologies in power. Consumption and participation within the capitalist system, previously feminized activities within rap, became particularly important in this genre within the context of a post-industrial United States. Informing this desire to consume is a context in which one sees poverty disproportionately affect the black community and little effort on the part of the government to rectify this situation. Due to this institutional indifference and because capitalism is unlikely to be destroyed, artists took it upon themselves to emphasize consumption and the display of wealth as a new method to demonstrate power (Randolph, 2006, p. 207).

However, masculinity does not stop here, as this new genre of music will place emphasis on a new role previously ignored by rap music: fatherhood. This new definition takes place in a cultural context that largely paints and stereotypes black fathers as either invisible agents within the household or completely removed from the house, thus abdicating any responsibility as a parent. While it is true that single-mother households are common within the black community (and many other racial communities), this discourse and cultural dialogue ignores many of the institutional and economic oppressions that cause tension within the household. This tension, caused by the inability to work as a “provider” then led to a flight from the home for some black fathers (Oware, 2001, p. 1-2). It is this context in which “playa rap” finds itself forming, thus further altering the previous definition of black masculinity in rap music. In “playa rap” artists place an incredible amount of importance on the role of the good father who is able to both love and provide for his wife and children. This is usually juxtaposed with criticisms of their own fathers who are often portrayed as absent from the artist’s life. While they are far from perfect (particularly with regards to their relationship with their partner), these new fathers want to be a part of their children’s lives to avoid the pain they had felt growing up in a single-mother household (Oware, 2001).

In spite of the changing definitions of masculinity, how women and femininity are defined within rap music has largely been static. Specifically, one sees both the role of the Sapphire and the Jezebel present early on in rap and only further reified by its various forms. Before unpacking and explaining these terms, I feel it would be beneficial to first address the academic debate centered on gender, specifically on the objectification of and misogyny directed at black females in rap music.

First, it must be understood that the misogyny found in rap music does not exist in a vacuum, but instead is created within a largely patriarchal and misogynistic society that contributes to the music’s view on women. Furthermore, there is often little attempt to actually criticize the institutions that support ideologies that support violence against women. Instead one sees the individualization of violence at the level of the artist and it often appears to be more of an attempt on the part of critics to “further stigmatize black males as violent and/or criminal” (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012, p. 119). Simply put, it is within this context that both sex and violence become important

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5 According to the most recent supplemental poverty measure, approximately 24% of black males fall under the poverty line and 29% of black females fall under the line (Institute For Women’s Policy Research 3)

6 It should be noted here that rappers, by and large, are highly respectful of their mothers. One can find numerous songs dedicated motherhood and mothers; however, express some pain and anger from lacking a father figure (Oware, 2011, p. 6).
for one’s marketability within the music industry. Yet, to fully excuse the genre for its problematic views on women would be to fail as an academic examining a supposed utopia because a paradise cannot exist if only certain persons are given freedom. Otherwise, one is simply exchanging one oppressive society for another. In rap, one often observes an active attempt on the part of the male artists to reduce women to their physical attributes and silence their voice to the point where the female that “remains is self-less, senseless, fuck-able and mute” (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012, p. 127). Given the popularity of the genre internationally, this implies that these views, whether or not they are actually believed by the artists, possibly reify ideologies that lead to the oppression of women. At this point, academics feel that the sexism found within rap may cause females to develop poor self-image and “desensitize individuals to sexual harassment, exploitation, abuse, and violence toward women” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 952). With this in mind, I feel that we can now examine the role of the Sapphire and the Jezebel in rap. 

To begin, it should first be noted that both these definitions have their roots in US history and often stem from outside the black community. These figures were often employed by a racist white population as a means of empowerment through the continued disenfranchisement of black women. Because of the continued use of these stereotypes, one sees black women stigmatized by general US society and the permeation of these roles into the black community (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947). Historically and within rap, a female identified as “Sapphire” was seen as being a “money-hungry, scandalous, manipulating and demanding women” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 948). While the term is not often employed directly by rappers, the term most closely associated with this definition is the word “b*tch.” This is a female that has a strong will and thus must be silenced by her male counterpart because of the fear that she will challenge his masculinity. More so, these attributes are seen as unsavory because larger discourses define these traits as the reason for black poverty. Poverty was not the fault of systemic oppression, but of strong-willed black women who that challenge male authority and cause them to flee from the household. This method of individualizing blame was employed by larger racist institutions as a method to distract people from questioning the actual institutions responsible for poverty (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947-948). The second term, “Jezebel” has some resonance in other communities, but is particularly pronounced in its use in rap to describe black women. This individual is a “sex object that can be used and abused in any form to satisfy the sexual desires of a man” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 948) often in the hope to receive some kind of material good. Once again, like in the case of the “Sapphire,” the new term in place of “Jezebel” is “ho.” While the terms and identities are sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to note the differences between the two with the central being that the “ho” exists to please her male partner and is often defined by him (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947-948).

With gender roles within this particular genre of rap explained, it is now possible to define the particular utopia created throughout the course of Watch The Throne.

**Definition Of The (Gendered) Utopia: Contestation Of Global White Supremacy, The Embracing Of Global Capitalism And The Push For Better Fathers**

With the general theoretical background necessary for this paper explained, it is now possible to conceptualize this particular utopia. The promised-land created by Kanye West and Jay-Z is made possible thanks to the universalization of the black experience and the invocation of black history. Furthermore, the concept of “black excellence,” a phrase used by the artists in discussing the status of black Americans within the utopia of this album, is defined by the following: contestation of global white supremacy, sensuality and consumption, and fatherhood. Before analyzing individual songs, let us first briefly define each of these sections.

In examining global white supremacy, it becomes important to first note that this is an ideology rooted in the history of colonization and global exploitation of persons from the Global South. This ideology is often to the service of individuals that identify as Caucasian and is sometimes the basis of racialized oppression of non-white individuals. The effects of this have been explored in previous sections; however, I would like add one caveat to this theory. Specifically, global white supremacy has become particularly important in terms of beauty standards for
men and women. Simply, in many regions and communities throughout the world, one sees a push to have a lighter skin tone. This is because a lighter or whiter skin tone is often associated with a higher socioeconomic class and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, power (Pierre, 2008, p. 21). Both of these versions of global white supremacy will play an important role in terms of defining this utopia. In this utopia, one sees the desire to create a land that has racial equality, not only in terms of political and economic power, but also in what is considered beautiful.

Within this utopia one sees the codification and reification of the masculinity formed and supported by the “playa” aesthetic. Specifically, this will be a realm that offers men freedom to enjoy their sexuality in a multitude of manners. Of course it should be noted that these sexual relationships are problematic because the power most certainly resides with the male partner females, barring only a few exceptions described in this utopia are left with little power and must depend on men both for support and happiness. They are, like in the case of the Jezebel/ho described previously, both defined by and created for the pleasure of men residing in this utopia. Completing the reliance on the “playa masculinity” for this utopia, both artists will pay particular attention to the importance of displaying wealth so as to display one’s power. Money and the use of it are key to this Eden, thus framing the utopia within a pro-consumerist ideology.

Finally, the role of the good father cannot be left out of discussions of this utopia. Much like many other contemporary rap artists, both Kanye West and Jay-Z come from single-mother households. It is because of this experience that both artists hope to create a utopia, in which fathers are present in the household, love their children and provide for their family. While one could problematize their emphasis on the father/son relationship, I feel this directly relates to their personal experience and a desire to reach some personal fulfillment.

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Future scholarship would benefit from an analysis of the complexity of heteronormativity over the course the album. While both individuals identify as straight, the usual heteronormative framework used to analyze and critique rap albums is problematized by the high-profile presence of Frank Ocean, one of the biggest stars within the hip hop community and who also happens to identify as bisexual.

Black Excellence: Watch The Throne as a New (Gendered) Utopia

In order to best define this album as a utopia within the parameters described above, I shall compartmentalize the album in the following manner: “Promise to Never Repeat Him” (the role of a good father), “A Playa’s Paradise” (validation of the playa masculinity), and “All Black Everything” (examination of the contestation of global white supremacy). Furthermore, as will quickly become apparent when examining the third subsection, “A Playa’s Paradise,” this is an incredibly gendered utopia and mainly to the benefit of men. A more complete analysis of the gendered dynamics of this utopia will follow in the next main section. I will first establish, through lyrical analysis, this album as reflective of the black diaspora. Specifically, it is in its use of the black history of forced migration and institutional oppression that one sees the album’s placement within the community.

Not Bad For Some Immigrants

This album does not hide its reliance on the black diasporic identity, as it is this identity and the history of it that proves to be most important in terms of the creation of a utopia. More so, this shared history will be employed by both Kanye West and Jay-Z strategically in order to develop the new black nationalist movement needed to bring about this utopia.

As quoted in at the beginning of this paper, Kanye West, in the soaring and aggressive chorus to “Who Gon Stop Me,” memorably invokes the black diaspora in the lyrics “Something like a Holocaust/ Millions of our people lost.” Not only is this a direct reference to the African slave trade, but it also hints at the fact that while we, as a society, are approximately one-hundred and fifty years removed from the actual event, its effects continue to reverberate and resonate within the black community. By placing such a political line at the forefront of a possible single, West demonstrates an unwillingness to abandon or ignore the event that is most influential in terms of shaping black experience in the Americas. While this is the
most assertive use of the slave trade, one quick scan of the lyrics to “Otis” (the album’s first hit single) shows another reference to it in Jay-Z’s verse stating:

Welcome to Havana  
Smokin Cubanas with Castro in cabanas  
Viva México, Cubano  
Dominicano, all the plugs that I know  
Drivin Benzes, with no benefits  
Not bad, huh? For some immigrants  
Build your fences, we diggin tunnels

While not necessarily apparent at first glance, this verse works as a subtle reference to two historical events the African slave trade and colonization. Jay-Z lists several locations, the Dominican Republic specifically, that play a key role in the slave trade. Furthermore, by including other areas affected by colonization, he demonstrates the integration of cultures and experiences that help shape new Caribbean and Latin identities. What is of most interest is his ironic use of the word “immigrants” given the forced nature of black migration to the Americas. Finally, he adds in a little humor in undercutting societal expectations of both Black and Latino communities, both disproportionately affected by European colonization, by showing the grandeur that the communities have and hope to achieve. One might ask why the artist decided to make the reference as subtle as it is, to which I can only speculate that it was done as an effort to avoid the alienation of fans. Those aware of the history of the black community are more readily able to decode the language used by Jay-Z and are thus privy to knowledge others may overlook.

The duo does not simply use the history of the African slave trade to unite the black community, but instead also examines the history of institutional oppression and indifference directed at blacks in the United States. While one could argue that this alone allows for the demystification of a universal black identity, the artists still position the black experience in America as one filled with gang violence and drugs. This is best exemplified in the deeper cut, “Murder to Excellence,” in which the artists take turns detailing various contemporary societal ills befalling the black community, while also explaining this is also an opportunity for the community to rise to excellence with Kanye West and Jay-Z at the leadership position. West beautifully details violence experienced within the community and the apparent lack of care displayed by the national government when he raps:

And I’m from the murder capital, where they murder for capital  
Heard about at least 3 killings this afternoon  
Lookin’ at the news like damn I was just with him after school,  
No shop class but half the school got a tool,  
And I could die any day type attitude  
Plus his little brother got shot reppin’ his avenue  
It’s time for us to stop and re-define black power 
41 souls murdered in 50 hours

The paper read murder, black on black murder,  
The paper read murder, black on black murder again  
Murder again…

Is it genocide?  
Cause I can still hear his momma cry, know the family traumatized  
Shots left holes in his face, bout piranha-size  
The old pastor closed the cold casket  
And said the church ain’t got enough room for all the tombs  
It’s a war going on outside, we ain’t safe from I feel the pain in my city wherever I go  
314 soldiers died in Iraq  
509 died in Chicago

This stark description of black on black violence both shocks the listener and, important for the accomplishment of the goals had by West, elicits empathy on the part of listeners that identify as a part of the black diaspora. Most impressive is his description of the personal psychological effects created by this violence such as depression, hopelessness, and a general feeling of insecurity. All of these traits are common for individuals displaced from their homeland and given little aid by the host country. Further complicating this analysis of violence

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9 The phrase “deeper cut” usually refers to a track on an album that is not going to be a released as a single, or a song that is to be consumed on mass outside of the context of the album.
is the indictment of institutional indifference. This can be found in the final stanza in which West questions whether or not this rampant violence can be classified as a self-inflicted genocide or, at the very least, a war. In spite of this warlike environment, one that tops the conflict in Iraq in terms of fatalities, the US government has largely ignored the plight of the community and allows it to self-destruct. It is this void in security that allows for the beginning of a new black nationalist movement, led by Kanye West and Jay-Z, towards “Black Excellence.”

Promise To Never Repeat Him

As described previously, both fatherhood and family becomes particularly important in the shaping of “Black Excellence” within this utopia. In this utopia family is a peaceful arena that must be supported and enjoyed by black males. In “Made in America,” Jay-Z raps,

I pledge allegiance, uh, to my Grandma
For that banana pudding, our piece of Americana
Our apple pie was supplied through Arm & Hammer
Straight out the kitchen, shh don’t wake Nana!
Built a republic, that still stands
I’m trying to lead a nation, to leave to my little man’s
Or my daughter.

While sweet and filled with a nice sentiment, these lines play a more important role in demonstrating the importance of family to Jay-Z and within this utopia. Not only does Jay-Z express interest in participating in family life, but he pledges allegiance to the matriarch present in his life, the grandmother. This act, while small in actual effect, is important to note because it shows the value of family as something that supersedes previous loyalty to the United States. This is because within the context of an uncaring government that may in fact actively participate in the continued oppression of the black community, it is one’s family that can be counted on for protection and love. Family is the new nation.

While the whole family is important within this context of “Black Excellence,” the relationship between father and son plays a central role in defining masculinity in this utopia. This ideology is epitomized on the track “New Day,” in which both artists write brief odes to their theoretical sons. As previously seen, it is the lyrics of Jay-Z that best demonstrate this thought.

I just wanna take ya to a barber
Bondin’ on charters, all the sh*t that I never did
Teach ya good values, so you cherish it
Took me 26 years to find my path
My only job is cuttin’ the time in half

When Jay-Z raps these lyrics, he defines his central role as a responsible father. A father that will both be present in his son’s life for the most trivial of events, like a haircut, and to offer advice on how to best find one’s way in the United States. He, realizing the various mistakes that he has made over the many years, wants to circumvent this and help his son find the right path. While one could argue that this line of argument does in fact, to some degree, fail to take into account the various institutional issues affecting black fatherhood, these lyrics read less of a criticism of an absent father and more as a rally cry for a connection to one’s child.

A Playa’s Paradise

In examining this new world, it quickly becomes apparent that it is very much modeled by the various desires had by the archetypal “playa.” Specifically, one finds the world of Watch The Throne divided between the two artists with Kanye West’s lyrics most indebted to the pursuit of male sensuality and sexual pleasure. While certainly interested in living the life of luxury, West’s most interesting and impassioned verses are often those involving sex. His partner, Jay-Z appears less focused on sensuality more interested in displaying his power in a different manner: spending money. Instead of challenging the capitalist system that has benefited globally from the destitution of the Global South, Jay-Z sees little chance of a true revolution against this system and openly embraces it.

To be frank, sex is a key aspect of this album. Specifically, sexual gratification and sensuality, previously shunned by older forms of rap, come to be

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10 The removal of troops from Iraq had not yet occurred at the time of this album’s release.
defining aspects of this utopia. I should note here that two of the songs used here will be examined through a feminist lens in the next section. As discussed in the specific examination of black masculinity within the context of “playa rap,” the album is focused on male sexual pleasure, which one can see when West raps on “Ni**as in Paris”:

She said Ye can we get married at the mall?
I said look you need to crawl 'fore you ball
Come and meet me in the bathroom stall
And show me why you deserve to have it all.

Within these lyrics one quickly sees that women within this utopia are seen to be only as valuable as their sexual prowess. More so, West displays little interest in whether or not the female addressed is interested in sexual pleasure because he defines feminine pleasure as material. In this utopia, it is men that receive sexual pleasure from women and in return, women are given material goods through this heteronormative coupling. Further, within this relationship and in the bedroom men have sole control. In “No Church in the Wild” he states, “You will not control the threesome/Just roll the weed up until I get me some.” West quickly demonstrates that the act of sex is solely for his pleasure. As argued in the previous section, lines and lyrics such as these have been theorized as the attempt by black male rappers to reclaim their bodies in the face of a history of being denied access to sexual pleasure from various racist institutions. This very well could be true; however, we shall reexamine these songs in the next section as the reification of racialized archetypes (“The Sapphire” and “The Jezebel”), thus further stigmatizing black women in the wider culture.

Jay-Z pays little attention to sex and sensuality in this album. Instead, Jay-Z is more interested in wealth because this is how one largely gains respect in a global capitalist culture. Returning to “Otis,” Jay-Z demonstrates the importance of money in this utopia when he raps,

Yeah, photo shoot fresh, lookin’ like wealth
I’m ‘bout to call the paparazzi on myself
Uh, live from the Mercer

Run up on Yeezy11 the wrong way I might murk ya
Flee in the G-450 I might surface
Political refugee asylum can be purchased
Uh, everything’s for sale
I got five passports, I’m never goin’ to jail

This verse demonstrates that money is not a thing of evil, but the item needed to be comfortable in this new society. With money, not only is one able to access items like a Mercedes Benz (shortened to “Mercer”) and a G-450 (private jet commonly owned by celebrities), but also fame as demonstrated by his reference to the paparazzi. Furthermore, money does not simply buy one material goods and fame, but, most importantly within this utopia, political power. With little of the subtlety seen previously in “Otis,” Jay-Z explains that money is the most important tool for one to gain power. With it, one is able to avoid jail time and purchase access to other nations at will. One can speculate that like in the case of the vow to his family, this appeal to a cosmopolitan identity can be seen as an attempt to limit the power had by a US government that has been indifferent to the needs of the black community.

All Black Everything

Black collectivization is central to the creation of this new utopia and is seen in the constant evocation of the color in everything from the color of a car to the color of one’s clothing. This is the hidden meaning behind the title for this subsection and the line popularized by Jay-Z. However, it is not material goods that I wish to focus on in this subsection as I feel that is often more demonstrative of consumption than of political power, which I feel to be the purpose of this particular attempt at collectivization. Specifically, I feel that both artists wish to use black collectivization to contest global white supremacy. I argue that they wish to do this on two fronts: politically and with beauty standards.

In examining the political dimensions of “All Black Everything,” it behooves this analysis of Watch The Throne to return to “Murder to Excellence.” In particular, it is this verse sung by both Kanye West

11 Yeezy is the common nickname used by Kanye West.
and Jay-Z that best demonstrates the power of collectivization:

The new black elite, they say my black card bear the mark of the beast
I repeat, my religion is the beat
My verse is like church, my Jesus piece, now please, domino, domino
Only spot a few blacks the higher I go
What’s up to Will\textsuperscript{12}, shoutout to O\textsuperscript{13}
That ain’t enough, we gon’ need a million more

Yea it’s all messed up when it’s nowhere to go
So we won’t take the time out til' we reach the T.O.P.
From paroles to hold G’s, sold keys, low keys
We like the promised land of the OG’s
In the past if you picture events like a black tie
What’s the last thing you expect to see, black guys
What’s the life expectancy for black guys?
The system’s working effectively

These lines are not subtle and they are employed strategically by individuals who hope to begin a movement towards a better society for the black community. Within the first set of lines one sees Jay-Z discuss the creation of a new black elite in the United States by invoking figures like Will Smith and President Obama. These are individuals, very much like Jay-Z and Kanye West, who have been mainstreamed into US culture and exist in places of power in spite of a global culture of white supremacy. And yet, as noted by these artists, the movement is far from complete as there are still millions of members within the black community who that live in poverty and face racialized acts of violence. It is because of this that the movement must carry on. In the second quoted section, one sees Kanye West tackle the lack of power often afforded to the black community because of institutional oppression. He states that while the community has made great strides in terms of gaining socioeconomic power, it continues to fall victim to racist discourses that stereotype the black community as forever destined for poverty. As noted previously, he hints that this is the result systemic oppression directed at the community.

And yet, it is not simply political freedom that Jay-Z longs for, but freedom from beauty standards that define whiteness as the global measure by which all men \textit{and} women are compared to. Ironically, this sentiment is captured in the most problematic song of the album, “That’s My B*tch.” In it, Jay-Z raps

How can somethin' so gangsta be so pretty in pictures?
Ripped jeans and a blazer and some Louboutin slippers
Uh, Picasso was alive he woulda made her
That's right ni**a Mona Lisa can't fade her
I mean Marilyn Monroe, she's quite nice
But why all the pretty icons always all white?
Put some colored girls in the MoMA
Half these broads ain’t got nothing on Willona
Don’t make me bring Thelma in it
Bring Halle, bring Penélope and Salma in it

Parenthetically it should be noted that the individual that Jay-Z is referring to at the beginning of this verse is his wife, Beyoncé. In this verse, he examines and typifies white beauty standards by alluding to Pablo Picasso and the \textit{Mona Lisa}, a piece often times referred to by casual fans of art as the standard to which all other artwork should be compared. Obviously, he finds this highly problematic and contests this idea by exclaiming that this individual does not hold a candle to his wife. More so, he openly questions this white standard and lists off various non-white and international actresses that counter the idea that one must have a lighter skin tone in order to be deemed beautiful by society. By reconceptualizing and challenging white beauty standards, these artists continue to contest global white supremacy.

\textbf{That’s My B**ch: A Paradise Based In Domination And Objectification}  
While one can argue, as I have, that this utopia created over the course of the album is noble in some respects, one cannot ignore the problematic gender
relations found throughout *Watch The Throne*. This is because while the promised-land created by Kanye West and Jay-Z certainly sounds like a paradise for men, this is largely no safe space for black women. Yes, there is a challenge to global beauty standards; however, the themes of domination and objectification are too pervasive, which dilutes this positive message to a large degree. Much of this sexism is based in the employment of the previously discussed characters, the Sapphire and the Jezebel.

To begin, let us first examine the Jezebel, or “ho,” archetype reified throughout the course of this album. I choose to begin with this role because it is more commonly employed in the album. Within minutes of the album’s beginning, one hears Kanye West rap,

- Thinkin’ ’bout the girl in all-leopard
- Who was rubbin’ the wood like Kiki Shepard
- Two tattoos, one read “No Apologies”
- The other said “Love is cursed by monogamy”

Thus, he defines women as there for his sexual pleasure. Personality and aspirations mean little to West, as women, within the context of this utopia, are defined by their ability to provide men sexual gratification. Interestingly, one could extrapolate from his discussion of monogamy the idea that he is contesting heteronormative ideologies that often demonize other sexualities like polyamory. However, given the context of the album I would argue that this is used by West as a justification to further sexualize women because these multiple partnerships are unlikely to be equal. Furthermore, the agency of women is limited to that of an inanimate object, which is seen in a throw-away line from “Ni**as in Paris,” in which he proudly boasts to Jay-Z, “You know how many hot b*tches I own?” The use of the word “own” implies that women are nothing more than property to be traded among men for sex. Women, in this context, are not future leaders or even equal members, but simply “something” there to provide men with some form of gratification.

Women that contest this objectification are dealt with swiftly and are silenced within this gendered utopia. This leaves little room for the existence of the Sapphire, an individual who challenges the masculinity of the men by either criticizing male domination or by maintaining independence. This is because these acts, while seemingly positive, are framed as negative traits that fracture the utopia due to the fact that it challenges male authority. This person is belittled and characterized as a person that only cares about her own pleasure and, when engaged in a partnership with a male, is only present for material benefit. Unlike the Jezebel, the Sapphire (or “b*tch” as referred to in contemporary rap music) is defined in opposition to the male. This hostile relationship can first be seen in “Ni**as in Paris” when Kanye West plainly states “Bougie girl, grab her hand/ F*ck that b*tch she don’t wanna dance.”

The economically independent female, or “bougie girl,” rebukes West’s aggressive advance and is quickly ostracized by the utopia. She challenged his authority, and thus his masculinity. This act causes her to be deemed unfit to exist within the utopia. This all can be seen throughout the course of Kanye West’s lyrics on the track “That’s my B*tch.” Specifically, when he raps,

- I paid for them titties, get your own
- It aint safe in the city, watch the throne
- You say I care more about them basquion's, basquiats
- She learning a new word, its yacht
- Blew the World up as soon as I hit the club with her
- Too Short called, told me "I fell in love with her"
- Seen by actors, ball players and drug dealers
- And some lesbians that never loved ni**as

Opening this silo of highly gendered language, West quickly states that if the Sapphire wishes to live without him, then she will have to live without his money and that the world outside a relationship with him is dangerous. Furthermore, he proclaims that her success and entrance into the world of luxury was dependent on his aid. Finally, one sees the use of

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14 It is unclear why the lyrics analyzed for this section belong solely to Kanye West.
homophobic language to disparage women that choose not to enter into a relationship with him. This is because, as defined within this utopia, a female’s role is to either offer up sex or enter into a docile relationship with her male counterpart, in the hope of creating a family in the future. If a female decides against this arrangement than she is defined as a “b*tch” that must also be a lesbian. Simply put, this is no paradise for women, but the exchange of one patriarchal and misogynistic system for another.

Rome Is Burning: Destruction Of The Utopia

It is fair to ask as the listener, given this new knowledge of the gendered dynamics of this album, what is to become of the utopia in Watch The Throne? This is answered by the creators of the album and that answer is that it must self-destruct or face insurrection. Fittingly, one sees the destruction of this kingdom on the final track of the album, “Why I Love You.” While it would benefit this paper to quote the entire track, I shall instead focus on this portion to begin the analysis of this fallen paradise:

Picture if you will, that the throne was burning
Rome was burning, and I’m sitting in the corner
all alone burning
Why does it always end up like this?
Something that we don’t determine
Same people that I fought for
That I fight for, that I ride for
That I live for, that I die for
Be the reason that these ni**as is alive for
And they want me dead
But I’m so sorry but I just can’t die for you

Immediately, Jay-Z declares himself as the leader of this movement (or the king of this kingdom) towards “black excellence.” Not only is he the leader of this movement, but he explains that the only reason for his existence has been to fight for the liberation of the black community against the various institutions of oppression described previously. Of course, this line of argument is similar to that made by the feudal lords of yore that only ruled because the people were supposedly unfit to govern themselves. And yet it is not this act of condescension that brings about the collapse of his empire. Instead, I argue that the reason Jay-Z (and Kanye West, though he seems positioned as a second-in-command) loses his utopia is because of his attempt to universalize the black community under this banner of “black excellence.”

This is because the album does not fully embrace the modern hybrid identity described by Paul Gilroy. While the album does in fact make a noble attempt to combine the history of the black community (invocations of the African slave trade and colonization) with contemporary issues facing black individuals specifically in the United States, it fails to take into account one key detail. That detail is that there is no homogenous black experience in the United States, thus making any attempt to universalize it based on one’s personal life inherently problematic. While there is some similarity in terms of experience, the black community in the US is still a fractured community that has distinct histories, desires and needs. Furthermore, the attempt by Kanye West and Jay-Z to create a utopia was doomed to fail if only because it also alienates approximately half the black community, women. By positioning women as only existing within the utopia to either please men sexually or be docile wives, these artists are undoubtedly going to feel a great deal of resistance. Given these complications, it should come as no surprise that this utopia was a futile enterprise. Given the option of destruction through internal conflict and suicide, Kanye West and Jay-Z choose the latter.

No Church in the Wild: Lessons Learned From Watch the Throne

As this paper comes to a close, I feel it important to reflect on the lessons learned from the ashes of this utopia. Specifically, this is an opportunity to ruminate on the utility of a utopia in modern society. While wonderful in concept (a land that promises to rectify contemporary or past sufferings), most utopias are framed within the author’s own experience. This means that they, to some degree, are an imposition of one’s idea of perfection and paradise over another’s idea. This is further complicated when one examines the problematic gender relations present in this album and other supposed utopias. Yet, with that said, I feel it premature to completely reject the idea of a utopia in literature because, as discussed by Paul Gilroy, this idea of a utopia, works less as a promise and more as a catalyst. If used properly, a utopia can be used to inspire the hope needed to bring about societal change.
and revolution. While both artists fail to inspire this social revolution over the course of Watch The Throne, I, an avid consumer of rap, look forward to traveling to the “new utopias” created by rap’s next generation of Queens and Kings.

References


