Cumulative Ethos: Chronos, Character, and Kanye West

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Time has always mattered to rhetoric. The non-prescriptive nature of rhetoric means that its practitioners must be equipped to respond to the different exigencies that arise from unique temporal moments. Here, I refer, of course, to *kairos*, the ancient Greek concept of “right timing” (2002) that Phillip Sipiora—echoing James Kinneavy (1986) before him—identifies as the “cornerstone” of rhetoric. Yet despite the importance of *kairos* to rhetoric, foregrounding “the here and now” of temporality obscures the ways that persuasive forces also can accumulate over time, waxing and waning as they slip from one moment to the next. Kairotic moments, after all, do not exist in a vacuum. They are preceded by a series of other kairotic moments, and those collective kairotic histories seep—with varying degrees of rhetorical strength—into the present moment. Similarly, a kairotic interaction does not lose all its suasive power as soon as the moment passes; instead, traces of each kairotic moment linger and bleed into various rhetorical futures. In this presentation, I aim to account for this accretive force of kairotic moments by considering another Greek concept of time: *chronos*.

In Book IV of the *Physics*, Aristotle defines *chronos* as “the number of motion in respect of ‘before’ and ‘after’” (4.II.219b1). Unlike the Pythagoreans who viewed time as an eternal construct, Aristotle’s description of *chronos* in terms of motion, or *kinesis*, positions his theory of time squarely within the context of his larger natural philosophy. As Harry (2015) explains, Aristotle’s time emerges as “a result of an interaction between a being undergoing *kinesis* and one that is ‘taking’ or apprehending the time of *kinesis*” (41). In other words, rather than situating time in the Platonic realm of the Forms, Aristotle’s *chronos* arises from the kinetic interaction of two or more entities. Figured in this way, *chronos*, like rhetoric, does not exist in isolation. Both emerge from the cohabitation, collaboration, and conflict between actants in the world. *Chronos* marks kinetic change, and the possibility of change is, itself, a precondition for rhetoric. Thus, while *kairos* shapes a rhetor’s response to a situation, *chronos* functions as the “grid” (Smith, 2002) that allows for the demarcation of one kairotic moment from the next. If *kairos* is the cornerstone of rhetoric, then *chronos* may be conceived as the limestone deposit from which that cornerstone is hewn. And while plenty of attention has been paid to what we can build with rhetoric, I suggest that scholars not overlook the materials that make rhetoric possible in the first place.

My aim, however, is not to supplant *kairos* with *chronos*. Nor do I wish to position them as dialectical opposites. Rather, I advocate cultivating a richer understanding of rhetorical temporality by further investigating the implications of their dynamic relationship. To do so, I turn to a key rhetorical concept that demonstrates the complex entanglement of these rhetorical temporalities: *ethos*.

*Ethos—*loosely defined by Baumlin (2001) as “rhetorical character”—is often understood in two complementary ways. First, in its Aristotelian sense, *ethos* is a part of rhetorical invention and a product of discourse. Aristotle calls this *ethos*, “artistic,” because it is crafted by the rhetor. Other researchers describe it as “discursive” (Amossy, 2001) or “invented” (Crowley and Hawhee, 2011). This artistic *ethos* corresponds to kairotic conceptualizations of time because the rhetor crafts an *ethos* for a particular rhetorical situation that responds to the exigencies of that specific moment in time. A second kind of *ethos*, called “inartistic” (Aristotle), “prior” (Amossy, 2001), or “situated” (Crowley and Hawhee, 2011), derives from the rhetor’s subjectivity and social position. Race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and authoritative roles (such as “president” or “endowed chair”) give shape—unjustly, in many cases—to a rhetor’s inartistic *ethos* even before communication occurs. In terms of time, this second *ethos* is a-temporal because it typically exists without a clear antecedent event in the rhetor’s life.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even when an inartistic *ethos* appears based on previous historical events (being elected a departmental chair, for instance), rhetoricians often interpret the authority granted to that inartistic *ethos* as a static component of the immediate rhetorical context, rather than as an active element of the interaction. In other words, the bifurcation of *ethos* into two categories—malleable and inert; kairotic and a-temporal—struggles to account for the persuasive impact of ethotic histories on present and future rhetorical engagements. Without *chronos*, *ethos* is either ephemeral or fossilized but never liquid.

In an effort to attend to the accretive force of *ethos* over time, I posit a third kind of rhetorical character—“cumulative *ethos*”—that helps articulate the relationship between artistic and inartistic *ethos*. Cumulative *ethos* denotes the nonlinear procedure by which an artistic *ethos* in one moment may contribute to a subsequent instantiation of a rhetor’s inartistic *ethos*, and vice versa. According to this model, as each new artistic *ethos* folds into the past, it jostles and redirects the evolution of the rhetor’s inartistic *ethos*, which is, itself, the accrual of prior figurations of the rhetor’s artistic *ethos.* But this inartistic *ethos* is not passive or without suasive potential in present or future rhetorical interactions. Instead, it retains some degree of its rhetorical power by becoming both the constraints and the components for subsequent iterations of a rhetor’s artistic *ethos*. Unlike prior theories of artistic and inartistic *ethos*, however, cumulative *ethos* does not refer to a single rhetorical strategy or a feature that an agent *possesses*. Instead, cumulative *ethos* identifies an ongoing *process* of accumulation that shapes a rhetor’s *ethos* over time. Cumulative *ethos* is not possible, however, without a rhetorical theory of time that reaches beyond single kairotic moments. *Chronos*, in other words, stitches together past, present, and future instantiations of *ethos* into a vibrant, shifting, and active rhetorical force.

To demonstrate this process of cumulative *ethos*, I examine the track “I Love Kanye” from Kanye West’s album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016).[[2]](#footnote-2) I select this case study for two reasons. First, Kanye West—and, in light of recent events, this may be an understatement—has a polarizing *ethos* that has shifted dramatically over time. The emergence and evolution of his *ethos* is particularly complex because it resides at the intersection of hip-hop culture, black masculinity, white capitalism (Carrie Murawski), misogyny, disability, and—most recently—Trumpian politics. Second, West released different versions of *TLOP* to different streaming services over the course of several months, a move that complicates the relationship between *kairos* and *chronos* by leveraging the responsiveness of digital media to upend the traditional concept of a static “album release.” Rather than having a single kairotic moment in which the album “dropped,” *TLOP*—and West’s *ethos* along with it—evolved over time.

Unfortunately, I will not have time to analyze all of the digital and multimodal elements of this song during this presentation. Despite other important sonic, visual, digital, material, and nonhuman components of this track, I only have time to focus on the linguistic manifestation of his cumulative *ethos* in this song. In these lyrics, Kanye takes the perspective (“I”) of his fans and critics[[3]](#footnote-3) in an attempt to mock their displeasure with the disappearance of the more affable “old Kanye” and their frustration with the unruly nature of the “new Kanye.” In so doing, “I Love Kanye” reveals a highly self-aware West tracing the contested accumulation of his *ethos* over time.

***PLAY SONG***

I miss the old Kanye, straight from the 'Go Kanye,
Chop up the soul Kanye, set on his goals Kanye,
I hate the new Kanye, the bad mood Kanye,
The always rude Kanye, spaz in the news Kanye,
I miss the sweet Kanye, chop up the beats Kanye,
I gotta to say at that time I'd like to meet Kanye,
See I invented Kanye, it wasn't any Kanyes,
And now I look and look around and there's so many Kanyes,
I used to love Kanye, I used to love Kanye,
I even had the pink Polo I thought I was Kanye,
What if Kanye made a song about Kanye?
Called "I Miss The Old Kanye," man that'd be so Kanye,
That's all it was Kanye, we still love Kanye,
And I love you like Kanye, loves Kanye.

West’s opening lines refer back to his middle-class childhood in Chicago (“the ‘Go”) and to the sped-up sampling of R&B tracks (“Chop up the soul” and “chop up the beats”) that became West’s calling card as a producer-rapper. These lines outline the *ethos* of a more “wholesome” West, the “sweet Kanye,” the social justice and civil-rights-oriented rapper from early albums like *College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005)*,* and *Graduation* (2007). Then he contrasts this “old Kanye” with the “spaz in the news Kanye,” gesturing to his 2005 post-hurricane Katrina outburst on PBS: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” He also reproves the “always rude Kanye,” which likely refers to his infamous interrupting of Taylor Swift at the 2009 VMAs. This is the *ethos* of the self-identified “asshole” who he toasts in his song “Runaway” (2010). Near the middle of the song, West exclaims, “See I invented Kanye.” Here, the agent who does the inventing of West’s *ethos* is ambiguous. “I” could still be spoken from the perspective of his fans, but it could refer to the author and singer of these lyrics, West himself. In other words, West uses the deictic properties of the first-person pronoun to imply the conflicted co-construction of his *ethos*. Then he sings, “there’s so many Kanyes,” acknowledging that his *ethos* has never existed singularly but always as a plurality of competing *ethe* (plural of *ethos*) that *accrete* over time. Finally, in a cheeky reflexive reference to the writing of this very song, West asks, “What if, Kanye made a song about Kanye? / Called “I Miss The Old Kanye.” Recalling the opening of this song, this line acknowledges the next important moment in the accretion of his *ethos*: namely, the release and reception of this exact song. And the question of whether or not the latest instantiation of his *ethos* presented in this song aligns with previous versions of his *ethos* is—at least from the perspective of his fans/critics—affirmative: “man that’d be so Kanye.”

Every half-line in this song recalls one or more rhetorical encounters that significantly shaped West’s *ethos*. Each of the previous events that he refers to—whether it's the release of an album and its subsequent critical reception or a celebrity calamity like the VMAs—responded to specific kairotic exigencies and, at the time, constituted an “artistic” instantiation of his *ethos*. As time passed, each of these versions of his artistic *ethos* began to ossify into an inartistic *ethos* that West calls “the old Kanye.” But “the old Kanye” was not just a passive background that contextualized West’s future interactions. Instead, “the old Kanye” functioned as an active component of new interactions by shaping expectations for his subsequent albums and, in the case of this song, by serving as a caricature for West to pillory. The power of this track, in fact, resides in its parody of his fans’ fear that recent instantiations of West’s artistic *ethos*—the “rude Kanye” and the “bad mood Kanye”—may permanently overwrite earlier, more inviting versions of his inartistic *ethos* as “the old Kanye.” In short, both West and his critics acknowledge that *ethos* is not fleeting or fixed but, rather, in flux. And they demonstrate that the evolution of *ethos* over time is often a contested process with substantive political, social, and ethical consequences.

This is cumulative *ethos*. This is where *kairos* meets *chronos*. This is the accretive force of persuasion over time.

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1. Someone born as one of India’s Dalits, for example, did not engage in a particular act that marked that person as “untouchable.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hereafter, *TLOP*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It’s worth pointing out that many, perhaps the majority, of his fans and critics are white. And in many cases, the loudest of these critics—those, for example, who repeatedly call his interviews and social media discourse “rants”—are white. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)