**Tracing Sonic *Ethos*: Sampling Kanye’s Character**

This presentation stems from the part of my dissertation research that tries to theorize what I’m calling “cumulative *ethos*,” or the accretion of rhetorical character over time.

*Ethos—*loosely defined by James 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 often figured as a-temporal because it typically exists without a clear antecedent event in the rhetor’s life. 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. In short, *ethos* is often characterized as 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*. In this way, cumulative *ethos* tracks the evolution of character across subsequent rhetorical situations. Unlike prior theories of *ethos*, however, cumulative *ethos* does not refer to a single rhetorical strategy or a feature that an agent *possesses*. Rather, cumulative *ethos* identifies an ongoing *process* of accumulation that shapes a rhetor’s *ethos* over time.

Figured in this way, cumulative *ethos* responds to two key problems in rhetorical theories of *ethos*. First, it resists simplified conceptions of *ethos* as a static entity, like the Romans who believed that character was marked, in part, by the immoveable force of one’s family name. And, on the other end of the spectrum, cumulative *ethos* complicates postmodern understandings of *ethos* as something that exists in an always already fragmented state. While cumulative *ethos* is heterogeneous, complex, and shifting it does not exist in isolated chunks. Instead, each display of one’s *ethos* is tied—with different degrees of strength—to prior and subsequent manifestations of that *ethos*. Together, this chain of ethotic instantiations gives shape to one’s cumulative *ethos*. Researchers can, in turn, trace the contours of this evolving *ethos*, however convoluted, as it surges and erodes with time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Since the ancient Greeks, researchers have been quick to deduce one’s *ethos* from discursive clues.[[2]](#footnote-2) And although there has been some scholarship on aural indicators of *ethos*, little research has considered the ethotic implications of other sonic elements beyond the speaker’s voice.[[3]](#footnote-3) Music, for example, can be a powerful tool for constructing *ethos*. And, in particular, the hip-hop technique of sampling—the incorporation of previously recorded sounds, music, and voices into a new piece of music—adds complexity to the linguistic construction of an artist’s character in the lyrics. Sampling, for instance, weaves a tapestry of sound that entangles the *ethos* of the artist with the *ethos* of past and future musicians.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this way, the cumulative *ethos* of the hip-hop musician reaches beyond their own former rhetorical engagements (songs, performances, interviews, and so on) and is now intertwined with the *ethos* of the other artists in the samples.[[5]](#footnote-5) As such, one’s cumulative *ethos* is never limited to the actions of a single individual. Rather, one’s cumulative *ethos* is always knit up in the larger communities and digital technologies that give shape to our rhetorical interactions.

To demonstrate the functioning of this sonic cumulative *ethos*, I examine the convoluted character of Kanye West in his track “Blood on the Leaves” from his 2013 album *Yeezus*.

Although West’s sixth studio album received a host of praise from critics, it elicited mixed—even polarizing—reactions from fans.[[6]](#footnote-6) These bifurcated responses stem, in part, from a set of overtly misogynistic and racist lyrics that seem entirely at odds with the civil rights rapping of the “old Kanye” from his earlier records.[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, listeners struggled to reconcile what seemed to be two competing sides of West’s *ethos*: the narcissistic “asshole” who he toasts on an earlier albumand the R&B-sampling social justice rapper.

Perhaps no song in West’s entire repertoire epitomizes this dichotomy better than the seventh track on *Yeezus*, “Blood on the Leaves.” Here, he layers auto-tuned vocals about a failed romance over a sped-up sample of the great civil rights song, “Strange Fruit.” Written by Abel Meeropol and first recorded by Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit” paints a devastating picture of the unabashed lynching of African-Americans. Since Holiday’s initial recording, many other artists have recorded “Strange Fruit,” including Nina Simone, Rene Marie, Jeff Buckley, the Labor Camp Orchestra, and others. For his track, West chooses to sample Nina Simone’s bluesy and heart-breaking rendition of “Strange Fruit” that she recorded during the peak of the civil rights movement in 1965. After singing one verse over this sample, West then juxtaposes Simone’s voice with a sample of the brash horns from TNGHT’s “R U Ready,” creating a wall of sound that drives, unrelentingly, toward its mournful end. Here is what the opening sounds like.

*(Play the opening 90 seconds of “Blood on the Leaves.”)*

But rather than offering a rhetorical analysis of this track that reveals how West’s lyrics combine in striking ways with his sampling to further complicate our understanding of his ever-shifting cumulative *ethos*, I offer you something else. Drawing on post-critical strands of contemporary scholarship, I give you, instead, a three-minute audio recording—composed by me—that is, I hope, evocative of this messy rhetorical thing we might call Kanye’s cumulative *ethos*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Before I play this recording, however, I want to offer three brief comments about this piece.

First, a disclaimer: I do not propose that my remixed track offers a “definitive reading” of West’s *ethos*. Instead, by creating this piece and explicitly acknowledging my role as artist-researcher, I seek to foreground the ways in which scholars of rhetoric are irrevocably tangled with the subjects-objects of their scholarship. Every time we argue with each other about Kanye’s politics or respond to one of his tweets, we too are implicated in the co-construction of his cumulative *ethos*. And, like any interaction, this relationship between researcher and subject-object of study is shaped by the same hierarchies of power—race, class, ability, social position, and so on—that structure cultural activity.

Second, a note about the contents. I have removed West’s lyrics from “Blood on the Leaves” to downplay—but not to erase—the discursive representation of his *ethos* in the words of this song and, instead, to foreground other sonic displays of *ethos* that emerge from his sampling. Also, while West only samples a few words from Simone’s rendition of “Strange Fruit,” I retain its full lyrics, spread across five different artists’ recordings of the song. And I have added audio clips of West and others speaking that trace key moments in the evolution of his cumulative *ethos* over time.

Finally, a glimpse of my composition process. To create this recording, I did *not* use the typical workflow: namely, I did not import dozens of different audio files into an audio editing software program and create a single master track with every entrance and exit of a sound clip perfectly balanced and synchronized with each other. Instead, I used a free DJ mixing software platform called Mixxx to layer each track, one by one, over previous ones in a series of “live” recordings. For instance, I first played Billie Holiday’s original recording in tandem with Nina Simone’s 1965 version. I recorded this mix live—adjusting levels and effects on the fly—and saved it as a new audio file.[[9]](#footnote-9) Then I imported this new Holiday-Simone mix into the DJ software and recorded Jeff Buckley’s live rendition of “Strange Fruit” on top of it (mixing on the fly again). After saving this sonic triptych as a new file, I imported it back into the DJ software as a single track and recorded the horns and drums from TNGHT’s “R U Ready” over it. I continued to repeat this process until I had included all of the relevant audio files.

The interesting thing about this method of sonic composition is, of course, that you cannot go back and erase or even edit prior recordings to make room for new content. Your prior compositions are, to some extent, frozen. You can, however, adjust the overall levels and apply effects to prior recordings, but only when engaged in a live recording with a new track. The past, in other words, cannot be modified except when put in dialogue with the present. And even then, you can only change the lenses (if you’ll excuse the visual metaphor) through which we engage the past. Moreover, to make these modifications on the fly means that a whole host of unexpected things may emerge from and influence any given recording and, by extension, future recordings. In short, unanticipated elements of the present may have lingering rhetorical effects in the future.

As you have probably sensed by now, this accretive mode of sonic composition mirrors my understanding of cumulative *ethos*. The momentary presentation of rhetorical character is always painted on a canvas already covered with past displays of *ethos*. But the paint on that canvas is never quite dry. And the collective force of those ethotic histories bleed—with varying degrees of rhetorical strength—into present and future compositions, marking yet another instantiation of cumulative *ethos*.

*(Play my three-minute recording that is evocative of West’s ethos as centered on “Blood on the Leaves”).*

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1. In some ways, this notion of cumulative *ethos* overlaps with the idea of “feminist ecological *ethos*” outlined by Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016). In response to the hegemonic oppression of women and the challenges they face in crafting an authoritative *ethos*, the authors contend that “women’s *ethos* construction can be read as ecological thinking” (2). More specifically, they suggest that “character is a negotiated, communal act, rather than an essentialized reputation, ‘voice,’ or inborn trait” (6). Following these scholars, I also view rhetorical character as “negotiated and re-negotiated, embodied and communal, co-constructed and thoroughly implicated in shifting power dynamics” (11). But where Ryan, Myers, and Jones emphasize the cognitive elements of crafting *ethos*, I focus, instead, on the ways that rhetorical character emerges from the intra-actions (Barad, 2007) of humans, objects, animals, machines, and materials in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For some language-based interpretations of *ethos*, see, for example, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1991), Baumlin and Baumlin (1994), Amossy (2001), Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cicero notes, for instance, that a speaker’s *ethos* might be effectively conveyed “by a gentle tone of voice” and “a quiet, low-keyed, and gentle manner” of delivery (182-184). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many scholars working at the intersection of rhetoric, writing, and sound studies turn to DJs and hip-hop music to challenge traditional conceptions of persuasion and composition (Best and Kellner, 1999; Sirc, 2002; Hess, 2006; Rice, 2006; Brown, 2012). Although some of this research examines the role of *identity* in sonic composition (Hess, 2006; Rice, 2006; Rickert and Salvo, 2006), rarely do these studies address the related concept of *ethos*. For more information about the subtle but important differences between identity, subjectivity, and *ethos*, see Anderson (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As other scholars have argued, sampling is similar to academic citation practices (Sirc, 2002; Hess, 2006). Like hip-hop sampling, the credibility of the sources that a researcher cites impacts their own *ethos*. For example, scholarly sensitivity about citing Martin Heidegger—a prominent German philosopher who was also implicated in dangerous Nazi ideologies—foregrounds the complicated relationship between the *ethos* of researchers and the *ethos* of their sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In a 2013 *Rolling Stone* article, Anderson aptly described this split public reaction at a live performance at the Governor’s Ball Music Festival: “Half the crowd cheered, half almost audibly rolled their eyes.” For more information about the album’s popular reception, see Hamilton (*The* *Atlantic*, 2013) and Frere-Jones (*The New Yorker*, 2013). For more information about the critical reception of *Yeezus*, see Dolan (*Rolling Stone*, 2013), Dombal (*Pitchfork*, 2013), Petridis (*Guardian*, 2013), and Roberts (*L.A. Times*, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The old Kanye” is a satirical term coined by West on “I Love Kanye” from his subsequent album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016); it refers to the “chop up the soul Kanye” who became popular for the R&B sampling and socially progressive lyrics on his first three albums: *College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), and *Graduation* (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Post-critical scholarship, as Hodgson explains, understands the verb “*to make* (and *to make available*), as necessarily a precedent for any conditional *to make sense of*” (2018). As such, a post-critical orientation emphasizes “the productive dimensions of working with digital media” and finds scholarly value in a methodology of producing and circulating (not just analyzing) digital media. A post-critical lens also acknowledges—and even embraces—the fact that objective distance is impossible for researchers to attain and that, in fact, scholars are always intertwined with the subject(s) of their research. And last but certainly not least, post-critical research resists the unequal power dynamics implicit in the relationship between the scholar and the object of study. For more information about post-critical and post-production scholarship, see Walsh and Boyle (2017) and Hodgson (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. To conduct this series of live recordings on Mixxx, I used Rogue Amoeba’s Audio Hijack, which allows users to record audio from any application. The free version is good, but it is only available for Apple operating systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)