

Kanye West on slavery and Trump: Ignorance and the self-deluding influence of wealth

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Social media and news outlets have been alive with commentary over the recent conduct of multi-millionaire rapper, producer and entertainer Kanye West. West, 40, reemerged on social media last month after nearly a year of silence, tweeting dozens of comments expressing admiration for and kinship with President Donald Trump, while sporting one of the president's trademark "Make America Great Again" caps in photos.

West's words and actions immediately drew a response from his social media followers. In a tweet Wednesday, April 25, West replied: "You don't have to agree with trump [sic] but the mob can't make me not love him. We are both dragon energy. He is my brother."

Elsewhere, West proclaimed himself to be an admirer of Candace Owens, a black spokeswoman for the ultra-right Turning Point USA. The organization operates a McCarthyite web site, Professor Watchlist, dedicated to "exposing college professors who discriminate against conservative students, promote anti-American values, and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom."

Drawing even more heat on himself, West remarked in a rambling interview on May 1 on *TMZ Live* that the ideals of "free thought" had led him to believe that Africans had been enslaved in the US because they had made a choice to be. "When you hear about slavery for 400 years... for 400 years? That sounds like a choice. You was there for 400 years and it's all of y'all? It's like we're mentally imprisoned," he said to host Harvey Levin. The comment provoked a heated in-studio response from TMZ senior producer Van Lathan, who confronted West on the air about his statement.

In the face of mounting calls for West to be dropped

from lucrative sponsorship and spokesperson contracts, the rapper defended his comments, stating on Twitter: "Of course I know that slaves did not get shackled and put on a boat by free will... the reason why I brought up the 400 years point is because we can't be mentally enslaved for another 400 years. We need free thought now. Even the statement was an example of free thought."

The media onslaught was instantaneous: "At his worst, West is like a three-year-old trying out swear words," wrote *Guardian* commentator David Olusoga on Sunday. According to CNN commentator Ernest Owens, "The time has come to stop amplifying [West's] platform when he continues to misconstrue facts and distract the public from truth."

What is one to make of this spectacle? No doubt, a good many fans and supporters of West's music, which has been billed for years as "socially conscious" and even "progressive," are justifiably appalled by the entertainer's actions and comments.

At the same time, the media's denunciations, associated in many cases with support for the Democratic Party, are hypocritical and self-serving in the highest degree.

After West's comment in September 2005 that George W. Bush's non-response to Hurricane Katrina showed the president "doesn't care about Black people," the rapper became the darling of the identity politics crowd and the pseudo-left.

Excuses for his selfish and erratic behavior were often provided by "left" sources such as *Socialist Worker*, which ran a comment in 2009 claiming that "There's no doubt a portion of the industry that would love it if he [West] kept his mouth shut, still another

that loves the attention he grabs for them as long as he does it within their parameters. The only problem is that Kanye, as a living breathing person with free will of his own, isn't ultimately under their control.

"It can never be forgotten that Kanye is indeed a Black man living in a white man's world. He is a performer in an industry that is greatly dominated by exploitation and oppression. As LBoogie over at Democracy and Hip-Hop Project explains: 'Kanye's arrogance, his braggadocio, his loud-mouth interventions are scattered pieces of an anti-racist sentiment that historically has been a rallying cry for people of color to reclaim what is rightfully ours.'"

Contrary to this racist nonsense, why should it surprise anyone that West, a man possessed of a reported net worth of over \$145 million (and whose wife Kim Kardashian has her own net worth of \$150-\$175 million and "has monetized fame better than any other," according to *Forbes*), is self-absorbed and out of touch with social reality?

Like many other contemporary performers, hip hop or otherwise, West has been praised far out of proportion to his merits. Claims as to his being the 21st century's "most important artist of any art form, of any genre" were simply absurd. Such commentary is merely the crass worship of money and success in the guise of music criticism.

Despite the current denunciations of West coming from nearly every quarter, few have seen it fit to hold the rapper's musical output up for criticism. The general tone of the commentary remains reverential in regard to West's "musical genius," merely regretting the recent turn he has taken in his political views.

West's statements and actions are thoroughly in keeping with his musical persona. In reviewing 2013's single "New Slaves," the WWSWS suggested that "derisive laughter might be the most fitting response" to West's self-pitying claim of being oppressed by over-zealous jewelry salesmen. On "Blood on the Leaves," a song that lifts substantial portions of a well-known rendition of the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit," West complains about his inability to obtain preferred seating at a professional sports game due to fear of being seen by an ex-girlfriend (a dilemma he compares to South African apartheid)!

In any event, as noted, there is immense dishonesty in

the comments of various media commentators, who are primarily angered that West has temporarily ditched the Democratic Party and identity politics. West, for example, tweeted recently, "Obama was in office for eight years and nothing in Chicago changed." His embrace of Trump notwithstanding, the comment is quite accurate.

African American journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates leads the parade of outraged hypocrites. Coates' sycophancy toward Barack Obama while in office became something of a legend. Recently, in a pretentious, rambling, empty article in the *Atlantic*, he decried West's cozying up to Trump, as though there were anything to prefer in his own abject toadying to the previous resident of the White House.

Coates's reactionary claim is that West aspires to be white: "West calls his struggle the right to be a 'free thinker,' and he is, indeed, championing a kind of freedom—a white freedom, freedom without consequence... freedom to be proud and ignorant; freedom to profit off a people in one moment and abandon them in the next... a conqueror's freedom, freedom of the strong built on antipathy or indifference to the weak."

Who is Coates, a well-heeled media figure, to posture as a defender of "the weak"? In 2016, Coates penned an unabashed love letter to Barack Obama, proclaiming the president of drone assassination, Wall Street bailouts, budget cutting, unlimited spying and police militarization as "the best of black people, the ultimate credit to the race, incomparable in elegance and bearing."

The West-Coates controversy demonstrates the bankruptcy of an orientation to either big business party, each of which stands for poverty, war and authoritarianism. There is nothing for the working class here.



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