Adrian Piper And Kanye West Cases

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The cases of Adrian Piper, Kanye West, and philosopher Paul Thagard appear to concern very different subjects: conceptual art, celebrity authorship, and philosophical theories of personal identity. Read together, however, they raise a common question about change. How can a person revise a public identity without pretending that the past has disappeared? Piper uses art and philosophy to expose the racial and gender categories through which other people interpret her body. West's 2018 discussion of a proposed philosophy book, *Break the Simulation*, challenged conventional ideas about authorship, editing, memory, and creative authority. Thagard's account of the self as a multilevel system explains why identity can remain continuous even while biological, psychological, and social processes change. These cases show that personal transformation is not simply a matter of "becoming one's true self." Identity develops through interactions among self-understanding, social recognition, institutional power, memory, responsibility, and changing circumstances.

Adrian Piper, Race, and the Social Construction of Identity

Adrian Piper is both a conceptual artist and a professionally trained philosopher. Her work combines performance, photography, drawing, text, sound, and direct encounters to examine how race, gender, appearance, and social expectations shape perception. Because Piper is light-skinned and has sometimes been perceived by strangers as White, her work demonstrates the instability of the assumption that race is visually obvious. Her art is not about discovering a hidden racial essence. Instead, it examines how people assign identity to others and how those assignments affect social treatment.

In works such as the *Catalysis* series and *The Mythic Being*, Piper used her own body to disturb ordinary expectations. She adopted unexpected clothing, behavior, and personas in public spaces, forcing viewers to interpret someone who did not fit familiar categories. Her *Calling Card* works addressed occasions when people made racist remarks in her presence because they assumed that no Black person was present. The cards made the social situation explicit and transformed an ordinary interaction into an ethical encounter. Piper's work therefore asks viewers to examine not only who she is but also how their own assumptions create the identities they claim merely to observe.

This perspective also explains why describing race as merely imaginary would be inadequate. Racial

categories are socially constructed rather than biologically pure, but their consequences are material. Housing, schooling, employment, policing, artistic institutions, intimate relationships, and public recognition have all been shaped by racial classification. Piper's practice resists both racial essentialism and the idea that society can simply stop noticing race without addressing the systems built around it.

Her work also challenges the idea that identity belongs completely to either the individual or the observer. Self-identification matters, yet social institutions and strangers can still impose categories with practical consequences. Piper exposes the tension between these two realities. A person may understand herself in one way while repeatedly being interpreted through another person's racial assumptions. Identity is therefore partly an internal narrative and partly a social relationship negotiated under unequal conditions.

Kanye West, Authorship, and Public Thought

In 2018, Kanye West discussed a proposed philosophy book called *Break the Simulation* and suggested that he wanted to develop ideas publicly and in real time. He spoke about photographs, memory, creativity, and the possibility that recording life can distract people from living in the present. This approach challenges the assumption that philosophy must appear only in conventional academic form. Philosophical ideas have historically been communicated through dialogues, aphorisms, lectures, letters, literature, art, and public conversation as well as through scholarly books.

At the same time, unconventional authorship should not be confused with freedom from intellectual discipline. Editing can test definitions, expose contradictions, improve evidence, and make reasoning easier for readers to evaluate. A celebrity can distribute an unfinished thought to millions of people instantly, but visibility is not the same as validity. Public improvisation can reveal creativity and openness, yet it can also spread unsupported claims before they have been examined carefully. The larger philosophical issue is therefore not whether West is entitled to think publicly, but how creative spontaneity should coexist with accountability.

His comments about photography illustrate the problem well. Photographs can encourage nostalgia, comparison, performance, and branding, but they also preserve family history, evidence, art, and experiences that might otherwise disappear. A stronger philosophical question asks who creates an image, who controls it, what it excludes, and how platforms convert memory into data and commerce. Thinking critically about images requires moving beyond a simple opposition between authentic present experience and artificial documentation.

Thagard's Multilevel Theory of the Self

Paul Thagard argues that the self is best understood as a system produced by interacting processes at several levels. Molecular and biological processes include genes, hormones, and other bodily

conditions. Neural processes include activity and connectivity in the brain. Psychological processes include memory, belief, emotion, goals, and habits. Social processes include relationships, language, roles, institutions, and other people's responses. No single level by itself constitutes the whole person.

This approach explains how people can change substantially while still remaining continuous with their earlier selves. Bodies develop, memories are revised, relationships end, beliefs shift, and social roles change, yet patterns of history and organization persist. A person can therefore become different without becoming a completely unrelated individual. This balance between continuity and change is crucial for responsibility. People can acknowledge that they have grown while still remaining connected to promises, harms, achievements, and obligations created by earlier actions.

Thagard's framework is particularly useful for interpreting Piper and West because neither identity is reducible to private intention. Piper's identity involves ancestry, appearance, philosophical commitments, artistic decisions, institutional categories, and the way other people racialize her. West's public identity involves music, media narratives, business activity, memory, audience interpretation, and changing self-description. Both individuals exercise agency, but neither controls every biological, social, or institutional process that shapes how that agency is understood.

Recognition, Power, and the Meaning of Change

All three cases reject a fixed picture of identity, but they also demonstrate that not every act of disruption has the same meaning. Piper often uses discomfort to expose structures of racial and gender power. West speaks from an unusually powerful position in which unfinished remarks can receive attention unavailable to most writers. Thagard works within a scholarly setting where claims are expected to be criticized, revised, and supported by argument. These differences matter because breaking convention can serve very different purposes depending on who holds power and who bears the consequences.

Identity also depends partly on recognition. Piper's performances require viewers whose assumptions become part of the work. West's public philosophy depends on media circulation and audience interpretation. Thagard's social level explicitly recognizes that language and relationships help constitute the self. Individuals are not passive products of society, but neither do they create themselves from nothing. A private identity becomes socially meaningful through interactions with other people and institutions.

Recognition can support or restrict change. A community may allow a person to develop beyond an earlier role, or it may continue to define that person by one reputation, stereotype, or past event. Conversely, powerful people may be able to redefine themselves publicly while those affected by their earlier behavior have less ability to shape the narrative. Ethical analysis therefore asks not only whether someone claims transformation, but whose recognition makes that transformation socially credible and whose perspective is ignored.

Ethics, Accountability, and Personal Transformation

Change becomes ethically significant when it includes responsibility. A person may sincerely believe that they are different from who they were years earlier, but transformation does not automatically erase commitments or harm. Apology, restitution, forgiveness, and rehabilitation all depend on holding continuity and change together. The person who caused harm remains connected to the act, yet may also become capable of behaving differently.

Public figures face an additional challenge because experimentation occurs before large audiences. Artists and thinkers need freedom to revise ideas, provoke discussion, and take creative risks, but criticism is part of that freedom rather than its opposite. Criticism allows claims to be tested and asks powerful speakers to consider the consequences of what they distribute. A society that permits change should also avoid trapping people permanently in one mistake, while refusing to use reinvention as an excuse for avoiding accountability.

Conclusion

Adrian Piper, Kanye West, and Paul Thagard illuminate different dimensions of identity and transformation. Piper demonstrates that racial and gender identities are shaped through social perception, embodied experience, and institutional power. West's public discussion of philosophy raises questions about authorship, creativity, editing, and the responsibilities that accompany extraordinary visibility. Thagard provides a theoretical framework in which the self emerges from interacting biological, neural, psychological, and social processes. Together, the cases show that people are neither fixed objects nor completely self-created inventions. Identity can change while preserving historical continuity, and meaningful transformation requires both freedom to revise the self and willingness to remain accountable for the past.

References

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