

Adrian Piper And Kanye West Cases

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Introduction

The cases of Adrian Piper, Kanye West, and philosopher Paul Thagard appear at first to concern different subjects: conceptual art, celebrity authorship, and theories of personal identity. Read together, however, they raise a common question about change. How does a person revise a public identity without pretending that the past has disappeared? Piper uses art and philosophy to expose the racial categories through which other people interpret her body. West's 2018 announcement that he intended to write a philosophy book called *Break the Simulation* challenged conventional ideas about expertise, publishing, memory, and creative authority. Thagard's account of the self as a multilevel system explains why identity can remain continuous even while biological, neural, psychological, and social processes change. These cases are most useful when they are treated critically rather than as simple stories about courageous individuals "becoming their real selves." (Cotter)

The original essay correctly identifies change as its connecting theme, but it oversimplifies all three cases. Piper did not discover that she was Black and then return to an authentic racial essence. Her work examines how racial identity is assigned, performed, denied, and enforced in social encounters. West's desire to write in real time did not prove that editing or expertise was obsolete; it raised questions about whether celebrity visibility can substitute for disciplined argument. Thagard does not claim that a person becomes entirely different whenever one hormone or social relationship changes. He proposes that personal identity emerges from interacting mechanisms whose patterns can persist while their components develop. Together, the cases show that change is not freedom from history. It is a negotiation among self-understanding, public interpretation, institutions, and responsibility. (Thagard)

Adrian Piper: Race, Conceptual Art, and the Social Gaze

Adrian Piper is both a conceptual artist and a professionally trained philosopher. Her work joins philosophical analysis with performances, photographs, drawings, text, sound, and direct encounters. Because she is light-skinned and has often been perceived by strangers as White, her art examines racial passing and the unstable relationship between ancestry, appearance, self-identification, and social classification. It would be misleading to say that she simply changed into her "real" Black self. The problem she exposes is that race is treated as visually obvious even though observers often misclassify people and then attach expectations to those classifications. Racial identity is socially

powerful precisely because it is neither a transparent biological fact nor a private choice that other people automatically respect.

In early performance works such as the *Catalysis* series, Piper used her body in public spaces to interrupt ordinary expectations. In *The Mythic Being*, she adopted a masculine persona, wore an Afro wig and sunglasses, and repeated language drawn from her journals. These works did not ask audiences merely to admire personal transformation. They made viewers experience their own assumptions about gender, race, danger, respectability, and public behavior. Her later *Calling Card* pieces addressed situations in which people made racist remarks because they assumed no Black person was present. The card turned an otherwise hidden social structure into an explicit encounter. Piper's artistic method therefore combines self-presentation with an ethical demand: the viewer must examine the categories through which another person is being seen.

Her work also complicates the claim that racial identity is simply a "delusion." Social categories may lack the biological purity people attribute to them, but their effects are material. Housing, education, employment, policing, intimate relationships, and artistic institutions have all been shaped by racial classification. Piper's philosophical and artistic practice refuses both racial essentialism and the fantasy that race can be ignored. Change begins not when an individual chooses a new label in isolation, but when the social rules governing recognition are made visible and challenged.

Kanye West, Authorship, and the Performance of Thought

In 2018, Kanye West stated that he was working on a philosophy book titled *Break the Simulation* and suggested that he wanted to develop ideas publicly and in real time. He discussed photographs, memory, and the way images pull attention away from the present. The announcement belongs to a long tradition in which artists treat interviews, fragments, music, fashion, and public statements as parts of one creative practice. West's instinct that thought need not appear only in a conventional academic book is defensible. Philosophy has been communicated through dialogues, aphorisms, letters, lectures, films, songs, and digital media as well as through scholarly monographs. (West)

Yet resistance to convention is not automatically intellectual depth. Editing is not merely an attempt by publishers to control an author. It can test definitions, expose contradictions, distinguish evidence from intuition, and help readers follow an argument. A celebrity can distribute an unfinished thought immediately to millions of people, but reach does not establish validity. Public improvisation may reveal creativity and vulnerability, while it can also transfer the cost of confusion to the audience. The freedom to write whatever one feels is compatible with responsibility for false claims, harmful generalizations, or the effects of using other people as material.

West's reflection on photographs illustrates this tension. Images can produce nostalgia, comparison, branding, surveillance, and the illusion that a recorded moment is more important than present

experience. At the same time, photographs preserve evidence, family memory, artistic expression, and histories that institutions might otherwise erase. The philosophical question is not whether people are simply “obsessed” with photographs. It is how images organize attention, identity, ownership, and memory. A serious treatment would examine who takes the image, who controls it, which moment is excluded, and how platforms convert personal memory into commercial data.

Thagard’s Multilevel Theory of the Self

Paul Thagard proposes that the self is not one invisible substance but a system produced through interacting mechanisms at several levels. Molecular processes include genes, hormones, neurotransmitters, and other bodily conditions. Neural processes include patterns of activity and connectivity in the brain. Psychological processes include memory, emotion, belief, goals, and habits. Social processes include relationships, language, institutions, roles, and the responses of other people. None of these levels by itself is the complete person. Identity emerges from their interaction.

This account explains how people can change without becoming unrelated strangers. The body develops, memories are revised, friendships end, political beliefs shift, and social roles change, yet patterns of continuity remain. A person may remember earlier commitments, recognize responsibility for previous actions, and be recognized by others through an ongoing history. Continuity is therefore neither perfect sameness nor total replacement. It resembles a living system that maintains organization while exchanging material and revising its internal structure.

The theory is especially useful for interpreting Piper and West. Piper’s identity involves ancestry, embodied appearance, philosophical commitments, artistic choices, legal and institutional categories, and other people’s racial perceptions. West’s public identity involves creative work, media narratives, business arrangements, personal memory, audience response, and changing self-description. Neither person can control every level. Agency exists, but it operates within biological limits and social systems. Change is real without being unlimited.

Comparing the Three Cases

All three cases reject a fixed picture of identity. Piper shows that the social gaze assigns identities that may conflict with self-understanding. West presents thought and authorship as ongoing creative performance rather than a finished private product. Thagard explains theoretically why a self can be dynamic and still continuous. The cases also differ in their relationship to power. Piper often places herself in vulnerable or confrontational situations to expose racism. West speaks from extraordinary celebrity power, where even an unfinished remark receives attention unavailable to most writers. Thagard works through scholarly concepts designed to be criticized and revised within an academic community. (Piper)

These differences matter because “breaking norms” is not always progressive. A marginalized artist

may violate convention to reveal exclusion, while a powerful celebrity may reject editorial or institutional restraint that protects accuracy and accountability. Change should be evaluated by its content, context, and consequences. Novelty alone is not a moral achievement. A person can become more honest, more exploitative, more thoughtful, or more careless. The language of transformation becomes meaningful only when it identifies what is changing and who bears the effects.

The cases also show why identity cannot be separated from recognition. A private conviction becomes socially effective through audiences, institutions, and relationships. Piper's work needs viewers whose responses become part of the piece. West's public philosophy depends on media circulation and fan interpretation. Thagard's social level recognizes that language and community help constitute the self. Individuals are not passive products of society, but neither are they self-created from nothing.

The Ethics of Personal and Public Change

Ethical change requires continuity of responsibility. A person may sincerely believe that they are no longer who they were ten years ago, but transformation does not automatically cancel promises, harms, debts, or the need to repair relationships. A multilevel self can change while remaining the appropriate subject of accountability because present identity grows from earlier actions. Apology and restitution make sense only if continuity and change are both possible: the person who caused harm remains connected to the act and may also become capable of responding differently.

Public figures carry an additional obligation because their experiments influence large audiences. Artists and thinkers need room to revise, provoke, and take risks, but criticism is not an attack on creativity. It is part of the social process through which claims are tested. Piper's practice models this reciprocity by making discomfort intellectually productive and by submitting her own identity to analysis. The lesson is not that every provocation succeeds, but that art can create an encounter in which the creator and viewer are both implicated.

Institutions should also permit meaningful change. Rigid labels can trap people in one mistake or one externally assigned category, while complete forgetfulness can protect powerful people from consequences. A humane society preserves relevant history, allows evidence of growth, and distinguishes accountability from permanent humiliation. The balance depends on context, but it begins by rejecting both the fantasy of an unchanging essence and the fantasy that identity can be reinvented without obligation.

Conclusion

Adrian Piper, Kanye West, and Paul Thagard illuminate different dimensions of personal change. Piper's art reveals how race and gender are produced through social perception, embodied experience, and institutional power. West's proposed real-time philosophy challenges conventional authorship while also demonstrating why visibility, editing, and accountability must be distinguished.

Thagard offers a framework in which the self is a dynamic system of biological, neural, psychological, and social mechanisms.

Together, the cases show that people are neither fixed objects nor completely independent inventions. Identity persists through changing patterns, and public recognition affects which transformations become possible. The most valuable form of change is not simply disruption. It is reflective revision that recognizes history, tests its own claims, and accepts responsibility for the worlds it helps create.

References

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