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## Kanye West is Wrong: Slavery wasn't a choice and the Enslaved Resisted

Kanye West has outdone himself. Even with a history of outrageous and mindless comments, this one takes the cake. In a [TMZ interview](#), regarding Transatlantic Slavery, West stated "For 400 years? That sounds like a choice," implying that enslaved Africans — from Canada to Argentina — chose slavery over resistance.

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Kanye West has outdone himself. Even with a history of outrageous and mindless comments, this one takes the cake. In a TMZ interview, regarding Transatlantic Slavery, West stated "For 400 years? That sounds like a choice," implying that enslaved Africans from Canada to Argentina, chose slavery over resistance. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a celebrity, West's ignorance is dangerous. His fan base (including almost 10 million Instagram followers) many impressionable white adolescents and young adults who often live in white-dominated spaces and whose access to black history and culture comes through narrow forms of popular media. Kanye's incendiary statement demonstrates too, that many black people also lack even a cursory knowledge of slavery.

However, unlike other histories, there is reason for us to be appalled, since it was slavery that literally constructed the modern west, enshrining an extractive, exploitative, capitalist, transatlantic system of trade which was built on the backs of colonized indigenous people and enslaved Africans. Contrary to the dubious reform of certain school curricula, Africans were not willing immigrants, but rather enslaved captives who were shackled, marched to slave forts in West Africa, subjected to invasive medical inspection and incarcerated for weeks in the bowels of disease-ridden slave ships, floating dungeons.

Despite West's pronouncements, resistance began immediately and continued at every moment from Africa to the Americas. The process of enslavement was designed to humiliate and brutalize, in the terms of the slave owners to "season" or "break" the enslaved, thereby imposing a psychological mindset of inferiority, what Harvard's Prof. Orlando Patterson calls a social death, based upon the strategic use of terror. Indeed, the enslaved lived in a world of radical uncertainty, and were preyed upon by all levels of white society. Slavery was deliberately enforced through systemic prohibitions and deprivations. Once in the Americas, the enslaved were summarily stripped under duress of their African names and new often deliberately

humiliating ones were imposed; the names of powerful people (Caesar), gods (Hercules), places (Ireland), common animal names (Jumper), or names designed to humiliate (Monkey).

Slavery was not merely about law, but also about violent cultural, social, political, and psychic appropriation and control. Enslavers whether in a tropical, slave-majority (like Jamaica) or temperate, slave-minority regimes (like Canada) lived in a world where their right to own humans was enshrined in law and their fellow whites could be counted upon to aid in the re-enslavement of any person who dared to seek their freedom.

Many did. Indeed, because slave resistance was ubiquitous, across the transatlantic world where printing presses existed, we find fugitive slave advertisements (newspaper notices to recapture enslaved runaways). In such notices, the slave owners' blanket of surveillance is revealed by the level of invasive detail which they provided about their enslaved "property". Beside describing the runaway's age, height, and build, owners listed clothing, languages, speech patterns, mannerisms, and not merely the day, but often the hour of escape. Such details could only have been ascertained from populations under constant surveillance. Even marks (branding), scars (whipping), and bodily injuries (bruises), often resulting from slave owner violence were commonly listed. In one such case, a 1772 Halifax, Nova Scotia fugitive notice placed by John Rock for a "Negroe Girl" (sic) named Thursday, proclaimed that she had a lump above her right eye. That Rock had no problem detailing, in a public notice, the bruise which was likely the result of his violent assault, speaks to the impunity under which slave owners operated. Such notices also routinely called upon local militia, law enforcement, and other slave owners to aid in the recapture of the runaways, while threatening ship captains (known to harbour fugitive males to exploit as sailors) with legal action and incentivizing public cooperation through the offer of rewards. Despite these odds, the enslaved continued to seek freedom through flight.

For every sphere in which slave owners sought to exploit and brutalize the enslaved, Africans and their descendants fought back, finding creative and sophisticated ways to preserve their cultures, spirituality, and familial bonds. But their legal status as chattel made enslaved people the perfect targets for sexual predators. The eighteenth-century English overseer Thomas Thistlewood recounted in his personal diary that he raped or sexually coerced every enslaved female on his Jamaican plantation, but for those he deemed to be too young or too old (whatever that meant!). But alarmingly, by his own accounting, Thistlewood was not an abnormal white man. Indeed, sexual predation against black females motivated white males to travel to places like Jamaica.

While enslaved people collaborated to rebel en masse in various slave revolts, the most famous of which produced the black Republic of Haiti, in places like Jamaica, Surinam, and Florida, maroon communities of self-liberated people were also formed, existing outside of the spheres of imperial control. The enslaved also resisted through work slow-downs, feigning illness, stealing much-needed food and clothing, and secretly becoming literate. Enslaved females, the targets of sexual predators like Thistlewood often fought off their attackers, but when that failed, they used lactation to delay fertility, and employed their African knowledge of herbs to resist "breeding" with abortion.

Transatlantic Slavery Studies is a vibrant, multi-disciplinary academic field in which all these subjects, and many more, are actively being studied. Just last week, I convened a two-day workshop at Harvard University with six esteemed scholars on the topic of the slave resistance. There are also many trade books written for a general audience as well as stellar TV shows and films accurately depicting slavery. In short, there is no excuse not to know that slavery was not a choice for the enslaved. Slavery endured for 400 years precisely because it was not just based upon a legal apparatus, but also cultural, medical, political, scientific, and social ones. The horrors of slavery were all-encompassing. The physical brutalization of Africans went hand-in-hand with the strategic prohibitions which denied the cultural and social access necessary to create other narratives. So, Kanye, our ancestors certainly did not choose slavery, it was violently and ruthlessly imposed upon them. In future, when in doubt, crack open a book!