

About Gods, I Don't Believe in None of That Shit, the Facts Are Backwards: Slaughterhouse's Lyrical Atheism

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Hip Hop group Slaughterhouse's multi-membered, perversely holy quadrinity provides a fertile site for a pseudo-non-theological theological reading—a theology with and without god, that is, with god's titular presence but bereft of any ethos of a mover and shaker god. God, in my reading of Slaughterhouse's lyrics, is impotent. Rather than the Word, Slaughterhouse publishes sacred texts (albums and mixtapes) that speak to Black embodied life; their albums are the scriptural holy ghetto-Word, the Gospels that of Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey, rather than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Through the lyrics of Slaughterhouse's songs, they craft a god that is but is not; a god that does lyrical "work" in the sense that the name of god has cultural capital and produces effects, but is not "God," that is, a being that commands the heavens and the Earth.

"About gods, I don't believe in none of that shit, the facts are backwards. Nas is the rebel of the street corner..." — Nas, "Represent"

"Hip-hop was more like the blues that signified religious beliefs than the spirituals that informed the content of my faith. I thought my religion provided liberation, provided an answer to life's worries, but hip-hop raised questions about this assumption." — Anthony B. Pinn, *Writing God's Obituary*

To me, hip-hop says, "Come as you are." We are a family. It ain't about security. It ain't about bling-bling. It ain't about how much your gun can shoot. It ain't about \$200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or wherever. — DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*

Hip Hop's origins are complex and multifarious along racial, gender, cultural, economic, and geographical lines. It is comprised of a medley of voices from various communities. But one of the more popular genealogical strands of Hip Hop touts that it stems from Clive "DJ Kool Herc" Campbell, a Jamaican-born American DJ, who is often credited with originating Hip Hop music in the early 1970s in the South Bronx of New York City. While some scholars argue that Hip Hop and a distinct Hip Hop generation begin after DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, the conditions of possibility for Hip Hop can be pinpointed to 1968: the year of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and the demarcated end of the Civil Rights Movement, ushering in a "post"-Civil Rights mentality: more militant, more individualistic, and in search of a new cultural ethos. Amidst gang violence, poverty, and a dearth of job opportunities, this brand of Hip Hop festered, fed by the abject conditions of Black and Latino life.

What's often talked about are the four elements of Hip Hop: DJing, spinning and scratching records, providing the musical backdrop for emcees; B-boying, or "breaking," a form of dance in which one would begin upright in "the top-rock, hands up and stabbing like a gang-member in motion, feet moving side to side like Ali in a rope-a-dope," then "explode into a Zulu freeze, tossing in a spin and punctuating it all with a Bruce Lee grin or a mocking Maori tongue" – B-boying was a way for dancers to write their generational narratives through the movement of their flesh;¹ emceeing, throwing down rhymes on the mic, rocking the party, and giving voice to those historically erased from the vocal tablet of society; and graffiti, the "outlaw art," an art that blazed trails out of the gang generation and left people's aliases, serving as extensions of themselves, in marker and spray-paint with the inherent message "I'm here" and "Fuck all y'all." Hip Hoppers—the generation of youth born, as Bakari Kitwana narrowly demarcates, between 1965 and 1984²—sought to create themselves for themselves drawing from their own lived conditions. They flouted the norms of everyone else: "Hip-hop was not just a 'Fuck you' to white society, it was a 'Fuck you' to the previous Black generation as well."³

But even though these four elements are the most noted aspects of Hip Hop culture, there are numerous others: the way one walks, talks, looks, communicates, and generally inhabits the streets. Indeed, the stylization and mobilization of one's walk for African Americans has long been a means toward liberty – from the Great Migration to those who walked for miles each of the 381 days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott – and reflects the din of footsteps in the political and social sphere – "speak through your feet if I'm who you thinkin' 'bout steppin' to," as Joell Ortiz says.⁴ Afrika Bambaataa even adds "right knowledge" to the list of Hip Hop's elements, explaining that "right knowledge, right wisdom, right 'overstanding' and right sound reasoning, mean[s] that we want our people to deal with factuality versus beliefs, factology versus beliefs."⁵

Hip Hop is a realm for music and lyrics to speak the lives of the marginalized; it is what Josh Kun calls an audiotopia: the space in which "music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, [where] music is not only experienced as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones," but becomes a "space that we can enter into, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, [and] learn from."⁶ With this audiotopic

¹ DJ Kool Herc, "Introduction," in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 118.

² Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003).

³ Quote by Bill Stephey in Eric Gutierrez, *Disciples of the Street: The Promise of a Hip Hop Church* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2008), 73.

⁴ Scott Poulson-Bryant, "'Put Some Bass in Your Walk': Notes on Queerness, Hip Hop, and the Spectacle of the Undoable," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 217; *Slaughterhouse - Funkmaster Flex Freestyle Part 1/2*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huUNrumwrNM&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁵ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*. 90.

⁶ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jessica N. Pabón and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, "Critical Intimacies: Hip Hop as Queer Feminist

ethos, Hip Hop has also exuded a theological ethos. God has appeared in Hip Hop music, lyrics, and iconography since its inception. This essay, however, will argue for a lyrical atheism in Hip Hop, via the rap group Slaughterhouse. Slaughterhouse reveals that Hip Hop can be read to refuse physical transcendence—refuse theological deification and immortalization of the body—and emphasize its life affirming inverse: entrenchment. Underlying Hip Hop's historical nihilistic existentialism and angelic sanctification of rap legends is a tumultuous wrestling with god and Black embodiment. As I will argue through Slaughterhouse, Hip Hop artists seek to rewrite the theological narrative of transcendence and give divine importance to their (Black) embodiment. Furthermore, this divinity is one that is not pure or perfect like the traditional god but one that is a polysemously Black fugitive.

Slaughterhouse, a veritable multi-membered, perversely holy quadrinity provides a fertile site for a pseudo-non-theological theological reading—a theology with and without god, that is, with god's titular presence but bereft of any ethos of a mover and shaker god. If Hip Hop and spirituality scholar Daniel White Hodge argues that "Hip Hop has taken theology outside the box. It is new. It is creative. It is holy. It is hostile," then perhaps here I can push that a bit further—Hip Hop, through my reading of Slaughterhouse, is hostile even toward god.⁷ Ultimately, Slaughterhouse lyrically renders god impotent. Rather than the biblical Word that is "with God, and [a] Word [that is] God" (John 1:1), Slaughterhouse publishes sacred texts (albums and mixtapes) that speak to Black embodied life; their albums are the scriptural holy ghetto-Word, the Gospels of Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey, rather than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Through the lyrics of Slaughterhouse's songs, they craft a god that is but is not; a god that does lyrical "work" in the sense that the name of god has cultural capital and produces effects, but is not "God," that is, a being that commands the heavens and the Earth.

I concede that in genres like Gangsta Rap, while scholars have critiqued its religious superficiality, have demonstrated a seeming obsession with god: thanking god first and foremost upon receiving awards; wearing large diamond and gold crucifix necklaces around their necks ("Jesus chains"); rapping lyrics like "ask ya reverend 'bout me, I'm the young god," "Homie chill, listen, I swear I'm God, / I give tracks a Holy-feel...," "God love us hood niggaz / 'cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas," and dubbing themselves "Jay-Hova" (Jehovah) and "God's Son."⁸ Extensive study has even been done on Hip Hop and the theological life and corporeality of specific artists, namely Michael Eric Dyson's books *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on*

Pedagogy," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 1-2, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2014.902650.

⁷ Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2010), 28.

⁸ Lil' Wayne, "Ain't That A Bitch" (Cash Money; Universal, 2004); Eminem and Slaughterhouse, *Session One* (Aftermath; Shady; Interscope, 2010); Nas, *God Love Us*, 1999. "Jay Hova," or simply "Hov" for short, is artist Jay-Z's alternative name, and Nas has called himself, on his eponymous album, *God's Son*.

Hip-Hop, Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture, and his study of Hip Hop legend Tupac Shakur, *Holler If You Hear Me*. But for the purposes of this essay, I contend that Hip Hop-through-Slaughterhouse presents a lyrical atheism. While meritorious is the claim that Slaughterhouse does not, in fact, debunk god, but has instead constructed a parallel deity functioning with some of the same patriarchal practices and perspectives, this is a misguided assertion. The assumption of a parallel deity in Slaughterhouse's lyrics does not acknowledge their radical deconstruction of deity-ness. That is to say, Slaughterhouse, as I will show, lyrically debunks god insofar as god-as-deity is emptied of all that is characteristic of powerful, god-like beings and thus is no longer "god." Indeed, it is true that Slaughterhouse attempts to venerate many of the same patriarchal and misogynistic templates as many other artists do, but this template is not a god or deity; Slaughterhouse, through their lyricism, dismember god and, rather than deify, ascribe abundant value to grungy, Black, embodied life.

Overall, there are numerous displays of divinity in rap and Hip Hop lyrics, and this essay will explore the specific Christian discourse of Hip Hop's symbols of divinity.⁹ In light of this pervasive display of Hip Hop's Christian ethos, it is worth noting that Hip Hop's relationship with god is far from the traditional mainstream interpretations. Hip Hoppers like Tupac and Nas reimagine god; indeed, they *recreate* god for themselves, a god that speaks to the grammar of Black ghetto life. Always, however, is the focus on *lived* Black experience. God is not abstracted from, but imbued into Blackness.

House Gang's Fugitive Atheistic Lyrical Resonances

I will use the rap group Slaughterhouse as a site of Hip Hop representation, their multi-member crew diversifies my study and speaks more accurately to the eclectic aspects of Blackness and Hip Hop. As the presence of rap groups wane, giving way to the post-Civil Rights bourgeois individual, Slaughterhouse follows in the footsteps of groups like Public Enemy whose theme was Black collectivity. Slaughterhouse, like Public Enemy, "roll[s] deep, because Black people always overcame through strength in numbers."¹⁰

The Hip Hop supergroup Slaughterhouse officially spawned after the members—Joell Ortiz, Royce Da 5'9", Joe Budden, and Crooked I—all rapped on Joe Budden's song "Slaughterhouse" from his 2008 album *Halfway House*. After vibing on the track, all four decided to form a group named after the song.

After releasing a few songs to build a buzz for their upcoming album, the crew released their self-titled first album in 2009 on E1 Music. After signing with Eminem and Shady Records in 2011, the group released the *EP* for their first album (2011); they released a mixtape entitled *On the House* to promote their second album, *welcome to: Our*

⁹ It is also important to note, however, that there are indeed rappers and Hip Hop artists who are avowedly atheistic, including Hopsin (see "Ill Mind of Hopsin 7") Angel Haze (see "Battle Cry"), and Ras Kass (see "How to Kill God").

¹⁰ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 252.

House (2012), the album debuting on the *Billboard* 200 at No. 2 and No. 1 on the *Billboard* Top Rap Albums selling 52,000 copies its first week; and they expect to have their third album, *Glass House*, forthcoming soon.

Each member had successful individual careers before joining the group, their own individual styles and following. Coming together gave way to a melding of personas and lyrical proclivities, much like Hip Hop groups of the incipient Hip Hop nation. Wrestling with racism, Blackness, and personal hardship, Hip Hop groups, Slaughterhouse in particular, provide a fertile locus for examining the interworking of language as it relates to race, music, and history. Furthermore, considering the tumultuous history notions of god and spirituality have within Hip Hop music, an examination of god in the music of Slaughterhouse reveals a new, nuanced description of a Hip Hop god, if you will. Slaughterhouse's "god" is discursively constructed in a way that puts the traditional god on the backburner, quite literally out of the way of their affairs, useful only in terms of "doing Him [*sic*]." Slaughterhouse, to be clear, is not avowedly atheistic, as they all believe in a nebulous version of a traditional monotheistic god. Rather, their lyrical and para-lyrical allusions to god and the spiritual have atheistic, this-worldly, Black life-affirming resonances. Their theological views as expressed in interviews and their lyrics provide fertile ground for the explication I seek to convey and illustrate a veiled theological atheism and fugitive Blackness.¹¹

To speak briefly to the notion of fugitive Blackness that will color this essay's deployment of "fugitive" and "Black/ness," I draw from Black Studies scholar Fred Moten. What is being spoken of when referring to Blackness-as-fugitivity is the contingency of a fugitivity that operates on the ontological modality Moten describes as "that desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its *telos*, is indexed to an original lawlessness...an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an outlaw."¹² To be noted, though, is that Blackness as fugitive and an ontological modality is not entirely severed from ontic beings. Blackness rests at the nexus of the social and the ontological, historical/temporal – which is to say the Blackness of raced bodies – and the essential. "The lived experience of blackness," writes Moten, nodding to both subjects said to be

¹¹ Commenting on Fred Moten, who says that Black lived experience is "fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic – a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said...to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life..." Erica Still says the following about Blackness and its fugitivity: "Already figured as pathological, black social life exists beyond the boundaries of normative social constraints – 'whatever externally imposed social logic' – and through its very existence interrupts all such logic. 'This movement is stolen life' precisely because it results from the agency of the black subject, an agency already pronounced impossible and illegal. Nevertheless, 'attained in this zone of unattainability' is the fugitive movement that gives evidence of the black subject – evidence that demands an alternative understanding of blackness itself." Erica Still, *Prophetic Remembrance: Black Subjectivity in African American and South African Trauma Narratives* (University of Virginia Press, 2014).

¹² Fred Moten, "Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 223, doi:10.1080/07407700701387317.

Black as well as the experience of the nothingness and insurgency of lawlessness, "is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events."¹³ This Black ontology of disorder is tied to the complex lived experience of Blackness. Thus the fugitivity of Blackness, or rather, the Blackness of Blackness, Blackness-as-fugitivity, is the refusal and subversion of categorizable logic, a logic governed by whiteness.

Like fugitivity, then, Hip Hop is not merely a "way of life" but more specifically a "way of struggle," a mode of inhabitation that is characterized by constant tension and ontological/epistemological/metaphysical fisticuffs—it is musical Black fugitivity. Hip Hop is an epistemological framework that nourishes those lives that are in Fred Moten's "break"; it speaks validity into those lives and bodies that do/are not "matter" in the cultural white gaze, which sees (god's) whiteness as the transcendental signified; Hip Hop, as Joell Ortiz says, "ain't just a way of life / It's all I know, it's what fill up my kid's cutty day and night"¹⁴—all while refusing normativity and existing in that liminal "vestibule."¹⁵ Slaughterhouse structures their Hip Hop ethos through an epistemology that figures them as a priori "dope," an example of which occurs in the refrain of their song "Y'all Ready Know." In the five-second interlude between each artist's verse resounds a scratchy "y'all [al]ready know." The refrain alludes to the fact that Slaughterhouse, their lyrics that "set it off," and their Hip Hop dexterity is always already known, always apparent to "y'all." Knowledge itself—or the only knowledge that matters: who has the dopest bars—operates under the assumption that what is axiomatic and self-evident is that Slaughterhouse's "bars [are] just as slick as my dick, and both stay up." All presumably because they "took a bite out the rotten apple by the poison tree."¹⁶ Their knowledge flies in the face of presumed normative knowledge; they supplant hegemonic means of knowledge acquirement with their own epistemological framework.

In this Black musical fugitivity, Slaughterhouse enacts a kind of theological play with the concept of god, in effect Blackening god-language. While this move is certainly not original and has been used by Black liberation and Womanist theologians, Slaughterhouse's discursive creation of god lends itself to a reading that *gives up* god in

¹³ Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 187.

¹⁴ Slaughterhouse, "Back the Fuck Up" (Shady Records, 2012). The lyric means, essentially, that Hip Hop allows Joell to make money and put food on his family's table. Also, the last line is an allusion to Kid Cudi, another Hip Hop artist, and his song "Day and Night," signaling a kind of transhistorical Hip Hop dialogue.

¹⁵ Here I am drawing from Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 177–218. Moten writes that Blackness "is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that escapes enframing is what I'm interested in—an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions."

¹⁶ Royce Da 5'9", "Detroit Vs. Everybody," 2014. Here, Royce makes a clear reference to Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit from the forbidden tree of Knowledge in Eden. Royce's apple, however, is "rotten," perhaps connoting the perverseness, the Blackness, of the knowledge he now possesses.

exchange for the artist himself, but holds the name of god in lyrical abeyance. Other emcees who have been influential to Slaughterhouse like KRS-One, Ras Kass, SKECH185, and Aesop Rock, were doing similar kind of work before Slaughterhouse, providing a template for the rap supergroup. (Ras Kass himself would likely identify as an atheist, considering the anti-religious bent of his songs “B.I.B.L.E,” “How to Kill God,” and “Nature of the Threat,” thus giving Slaughterhouse an atheistic lyrical forebear.) While none of the members of Slaughterhouse identify as atheist – all, in fact, believe in a presumably monotheistic, Christian god – Slaughterhouse gives up god via their concern with themselves and the physical realm; one could say that they engage in the Hip Hop adage “I’m doing me,” relegating god to “out there” and thus of little to no concern for the artists’ lived experience. But “god” still has linguistic purchase. My goal is to give a different account of Hip Hop, one that is different from the traditional nihilistic readings of the death-bound Hip Hop subject. Through Slaughterhouse and their lyrics, I seek to give a new perspective of an atheistic Hip Hop that reconceptualizes god by discarding a “mover and shaker” god and affirms (Black) life with a focus on lived, embodied Blackness.

“‘Cause I’m a Muhfuckin’ Renegade!”

“The Black Language is constructed of – alright let me take it all the way back to the slave days and use something that’s physical. All the slavemasters gave our people straight chittlins and greens, you feel me, stuff that they wasn’t eatin. But we made it into a delicacy. Same thing with the language. It’s the exact same formula. How our people can take the worst, or take our bad condition, and be able to turn it into something that we can benefit off of.” – Interview with JT the Bigga Figga

The primary means through which this paper will articulate Slaughterhouse’s atheistic reimagining of god is through lyricism, that is, Hip Hop language. Much of Hip Hop language, especially in its earliest stages, can be read as a countercultural language. It sought to express the lives and voices of those on the margins by writing those lives into the fabric of America, forcing hegemonic discourse to alter its narrative and shift under the pressure of the marginalized voices of Hip Hoppers. Slaughterhouse continues in this tradition. They in fact practice, like many Hip Hop artists, what I call “muhfuckin’ renegade” language. I am drawing from Eminem and Royce Da 5’9”’s song “Renegade,”¹⁷ in which the chorus states:

*Renegade!
Never been afraid to say what’s on my mind
At any given time of day
‘Cause I’m a renegade!*

¹⁷ The song was originally recorded by Eminem and Royce Da 5’9”, but after a falling out Eminem dropped Royce from the song and replaced him with Hip Hop artist Jay-Z, the song then appearing on Jay-Z’s 2001 album *The Blueprint*.

*Never been afraid to talk about anything.*¹⁸

“Muhfuckin’ renegade” language—not merely renegade—is to enact a lyrical Hip Hopness, a Black linguistic fugitivity that even in its appellation breaches the confines of “appropriate” language with the use of profanity, and it also bucks against proper spelling: “motherfucking” is redacted to read and sound like “muhfuckin’,” and on the track listing on Jay-Z’s album *The Blueprint*, the official version of the song (Royce and Eminem’s version was never produced and released on an album) after Royce and Eminem’s feud, is spelled “Renegade.” Not only is their language renegade, one that deserts or betrays a particular structured organizational establishment, but a “muhfuckin’ renegade,” one that betrays the very expected propriety of suitable desertion.

This “muhfuckin’ renegade” language follows from the Satanicness of Blackness. Blackness is Satanic in that it is an accusatory, critical, light-bearing adversarial stance in relation to the hegemonic forces attempting to govern (control) the unruly. “Muhfuckin’ renegade” language is Satanic because it flouts the established norms of language, critically altering the tenets of what should and can be said. Indeed, since hegemonic language erases Blackness—Black language being in fact the “breaks” in the hegemonic language—“muhfuckin’ renegade” language reveals its Blackness, critiques via its existence the realm of linguistic possibility, Blackens it. The hegemonic language acts as god, and “God’s objective is to secure order; He [*sic*] is the basis and foundation of the political, economic, and legal system of the United States of America.” Opposing this language—speaking like a “muhfuckin’ renegade”—is to oppose god; “It is to be a renegade angel, a Lucifer who must be cast into perdition.”¹⁹

Afrika Bambaataa, Hip Hop’s “Godfather” and “Amen Ra of Hip Hop Kulture,” speaks directly to the renegade nature of Hip Hop language: “The record companies would try to tell us what we should make, what we should do. We said, ‘Listen, we’re the renegades, we sing what we want to sing, dress how we want to dress and say what we want to say.’”²⁰ Slaughterhouse continues in this Hip Hop tradition. They, as Royce says, come “From the depths of he city where sinners dwell.” Where they come from, then, is where sinners dwell: Hell. Slaughterhouse hails from the home of Satan, the cozy den of Lucifer’s study. In fact, they not only dwell in Hell but also are in line to inherit it: “we inherited Lucifer’s property,” says Crooked I.²¹

But along with their linguistic fugitivity, Slaughterhouse also reimagines god, effectively rendering god un-god-like. God for them becomes less the established white discursive image surrounding them and more the (Black) legends of Hip Hop. Beloved Hip Hop legends become imbued with godliness, which dismembers the “God” of

¹⁸ Jay-Z and Eminem, “Renegade” (Roc-A-Fella Records; Def Jam Records, 2001).

¹⁹ Michael Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith*, The History of African-American Religions (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 107.

²⁰ Quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 190.

²¹ Slaughterhouse, “Where Sinners Dwell” (Shady Records, 2012).

popular religious lore and does away with it. Royce says in "Truth or Truth Pt. 1," an aptly titled fourteen-minute confessional track, "Jay-Z is god to me! / Nas is god to me!" Jay-Z and Nas, notable figures in the Hip Hop world, are akin to god. Turning briefly to the godly Nas, we can see the relationship between the divine and the realities of lived Black experience.

One of Nas's most well received songs, "One Mic," is a ballad for the importance of the extension of his voice: his microphone. For Nas, "all I need is one mic." His livelihood is adequately nourished simply by being able to voice his subjectivity. What's more interesting for this paper is what Nas says about god's son (interestingly, the title of Nas's sixth studio album), Jesus.

He raps,

*Jesus died at age 33, that's 33 shots
From twin Glock's, that's sixteen apiece, that's 32,
Which means one of my guns was holding 17
27 hit your crew, 6 went into you.
Everybody gotta die sometime.²²*

Here, Nas converts the biological clock of Jesus into murderous, mortalizing firearms. It acts as a kind of transubstantiation that converts the flesh and sin-erasing blood of Christ and uses it as deadly ammunition. Jesus, the immortal, is made mortal by being made akin to bullets, which have the sole purpose of killing and ending life. Jesus's very life-years are made into shells that kill. Moreover, Jesus and god are Blackened: by titling his album *God's Son*, Nas implies that he is the son of god, that he is Jesus, and Royce Da 5'9" calls Nas, a Black man, "God." Nas is both Jesus and god; Nas came from his own Black loins and subsequently converted himself into deadly ammunition, murdering others, quite literally through his flesh. So while the traditional begotten son saved the world, effectively opening Heaven and allowing immortality, Nas-as-Jesus kills, makes the world mortal, and ironically affirms human life by refusing immortality, actively quashing it in fact.

God, at least for Nas and Royce, is refashioned and Blackened. This god is very different from the traditional old white man god. The white man god is not needed; the white man god has effectively been killed by many Hip Hop artists. God for Slaughterhouse is embodied, entrenched in Black (male) skin, so while god is influential lyrically and artistically, god does not govern the world or mandate morality. Jay-Z and Nas are god; Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Budden are god; Hip Hop is god. They are all god. But if they are all god, then no one is "God." The traditional, immortal, abstracted god is traded in for these artists who put in lyrical work.

YAOWA!

²² Nas, "One Mic" (Ill Will Records; Columbia Records, 2002).

Real 'Em In

“Keeping it real’ has become just another fad word. It sounds cute. But it has been pimped and perverted. It ain't about keeping it real. It's got to be about keeping it right.”
— DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*

“Real’ is to the rap industry as ‘All-Natural’ is to the fast food supplier, as ‘New and Improved’ is to the ad agency. As ‘I Solemnly Swear’ is to the politician.” — William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*

Hip Hop seems to be obsessed with “realness” these days. Mention of “keepin’ it real” and “real niggas” pervade the genre’s lyrical culture and work to discipline the words and performances of artists. To be a “real nigga” has become the barometer of rap artist authenticity; “real nigganess” acts as the ticket to one’s Hip Hop respect, stamping a V.I.P. label onto those artists knighted with its moniker and granting them access into Hip Hop’s most sacred spaces of respect and approbation. Ironically, however, to be “real” in Hip Hop is characterized as a vapid adorning of glamorous signifiers of “ghettoness”: being raised “in the ‘hood” and coming “from the bottom,” cappin’ muhfuckas if they cross you, “fuckin’ bitches,” rockin’ chains and fly whips, and being “down.” As Black bodies make up the significant portion of Hip Hop artists, it is revealing to consider the historical parallels between Hip Hop’s fictive creation of Blackness and what Alain Locke calls the “fiction” of the Negro. Locke states that the Black body “has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction,” that “the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” This is what we are dealing with in the realm of Hip Hop real nigganess: that shadow of a creature, that “fiction” prancing around as real. This, as MK Asante incisively defines, is “reel Blackness.”²³ To be real marks the overt performance of a constructed persona. It is not authenticity but one’s ability to engage in the minstrel-like show of “niggadom.” Hip Hop “is just like Halloween. / A world where I masquerade, where rappers display acts of buffoonery not seen since massa’s days.”²⁴

To keep it real is to be as close to the ghetto, and all it’s said to mean, as possible. Everything “ghetto” is real; that which is not ghetto is fake, bullshittin’, “that shit that a real nigga won’t.”²⁵ But since performance of the Ghetto—real—is actually reel Blackness, then the “Ghetto” does not exist as such; it, too, is reel. All that is marketed

²³ Taken from M. K. Asante, *It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009), 22. Put succinctly by Asante on the following page, “The reel becomes the real” (23).

²⁴ Joshua Bennett, *Hip Hop* (The Strivers Row presents “Viewers’ Choice,” 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZu00zpcD4k&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

²⁵ Slaughterhouse, *Party*, 2013, (Joe Budden).

to be of the Ghetto is reel: "from the ignorant, womanizing, hypermasculine thug to the oversexed, loud, quick-to-get-an-attitude-over-nothing bitch. It's all reel."²⁶

The attributes of realness – or, more accurately, "reelness" – are not qualities that authentically exude from the artist but rather performed behaviors that are deemed to be representative of some kind of Black/Hip Hop authenticity. In fact, to "represent" is an apt descriptor considering that it too has also been used to hail artists into a mode of behavior deemed suitable for Hip Hoppers. But representation is in fact antithetical to the perceived definition of "realness," that is, that which is self-evident, un-performed, authentic, and effortless. Because realness is always mediated through a vehicle of deferred representation, it stands to reason that "representation is the absence of presence...[;] the real is never wholly present to us." In the context of particularly mainstream Hip Hop culture and commercial rap, signifiers of Black urbanity are reified and disseminated across the genre, making ghetto life, Blackness, and often times racially caricatured performative behaviors – a small sect of the vastness of Hip Hop culture – "represent" all of Blackness and rap. The danger in viewing that which is "represented" as real is that we lose the "insight into the institutions, actions and episodes through which the real has been fashioned," a fashioning not the product of the conscious acts of everyday people acting independently and autonomously but rather "a historically developing kind of imposition, now largely institutionalized in the prevailing kinds of meanings deeply inscribed on things, persons, and structures."²⁷

How does the idea of realness play out in the lyrics of Slaughterhouse? What does it have to do with god? To begin, the very notion of realness as it is defined through lived experiences, the very grit of the world, inherently refuses transcendence. Rather than seeking meaning for oneself through an abstracted, divine realm, that meaning is gleaned from the world and the ghetto's begotten sons, the locus that births

²⁶ Asante, *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop*, 29. Later on in the chapter Asante creatively inserts a fictional conversation/interview between him and a personified "ghetto." The fictional interview begins with the denizens of a ghetto and its historical origins:

All right then, so, who are you? Who is the African-American ghetto?

I'm a place where people are and have historically been forced to live.

Which people?

All types of people: brilliant, courageous, beautiful, crazy, funny, talented, strong, injured, soulful. All types. Geeks. Shoemakers. Scholars. Comedians. Athletes. Scientists. Lovers. The whole spectrum.

The common denominator is that they're economically poor and African-American.

I'm curious about your name, "Ghetto." What does it mean? Where does it come from?

Linguists trace it back to the Italian words "getto" (to cast off) and "borghetto" (small neighborhood), the Venetian slang "ghetto," the Griko "ghetonia" (neighborhood), and the Hebrew word "get" (bill of divorce).

The first time my name was written was when English traveler and writer Thomas Coryat, on a foot journey through Europe, described "the place where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together, which is called the Ghetto." The conversation continues and goes through the processes of redlining, Urban Renewal (unofficially called "Nigger Removal"), and white flight, all of which had direct effects on creating and perpetuating the abject conditions of Black ghettos pp. 34-52.

²⁷ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Political Analysis* (Madison, Wis: Univ of Wisconsin Pr, 1988), xii. One could say that this representation is *vertreten*, a speaking for, as in politics.

"grimy niggas"²⁸ rather than Christs. The search for "real niggas" is a search for the antithesis of god; it is a search for worldly, sullied personas instead of pristine, other-worldly deities.

Slaughterhouse's songs are riddled with calls for realness, veneration of realness, and denigration of non-realness. "I just wanna be the illest MC (That's all I want) / The same time being as real as can be"; "just a real nigga straight from my mother's stomach," says Joe Budden in "Our House" and "Hammerdance," respectively. What is also worth examining, though, is how realness relates to god in their lyrics. Joell Ortiz spits, "My real name my rap shit / The messiah of real rap shit" in "Who I Am." "My real name [is] my rap shit" is a line Ortiz has used in numerous other songs, which connotes the oneness of his Hip Hop persona and his everyday lived identity. But his realness is also juxtaposed with his identity as the messiah of rap, a sentiment echoed by Crooked I in their Funk Flex Freestyle in which he raps, "I'm the West Coast savior, why you think they yelling 'church' when the verse done?" To be real for Slaughterhouse is to be godly, but the godly is the gritty street of Crooked I's hometown of Long Beach, California, or the source of Joell Ortiz's unadulterated and seamless identity, that is, Cooper Projects in Brooklyn, New York. God is not out there watching over the ghetto, god is *made* in the ghetto; god is, as numerous Hip Hop artists tout for themselves, a product of its environment: grungy, elevator piss-filled, cracked concrete, crime-ridden 'hoods.

So if the god of the ghetto that bespeaks Joell and Crooked's personas is not that of the traditional snow-white god, what is its nature? As the god of the violent, Black ghetto, is it still in fact "god"? This god they speak of can actually be more accurately read as Satanic; Slaughterhouse's god is devilish, paradoxically a Satanic god. The artists tap into the divine not when they are lucid and clear-headed but when they are "cuckoo." In their song "Cuckoo" the artists rap about performing inane acts and being out of their right minds, "diss[ing] every legend that started it [Hip Hop]," "the insects is actin' like me, and me, I'm buggin'," being "into voodoo," having sex with menstruating women, and "hanging my baby mother off a thirty-foot balcony." *Cuckoooooo!* This state of being is what allows them to actualize their lyrical genius. By being "kin to sinning," as Royce says he is, Slaughterhouse demonizes themselves, which is welcomed, and thus is able to spit sicker than any other rapper. Sin lyrically oozes from their genealogical roots, which bolsters their ability to spit fire (hot lyrics), so much so that they're "on fire tryna make the devil proud of me." It is sin rather than virtue that marks them with sick lyricism, an inversion of the negative connotation imbued into the meaning of Cain's mark or Canaan's curse. The mark of sin (Blackness) is not a mark of ostracism for Slaughterhouse; it is a mark of dope lyricism.

*And I don't need a [b]ook for this one!*²⁹

²⁸ This alludes to Joell Ortiz's line in "Y'all Ready Know" in which he raps, "[I'm a] grimy nigga, might wanna hold on to your bitch."

²⁹ The veritable "hook" for the song "Cuckoo" ("I'm cuckoooooo. / I don't need a hook for this one") redacted and substituted with the word "book," in reference to the Holy Book, for "hook," playing

Black Prayers

Slaughterhouse's most overtly religious song, "Pray (It's a Shame)," offers a lamentation of the trials of living in poor ghettos and the hardships of Black life. God, or Lord, however, is addressed explicitly and taken to task for the less-than-glamorous upbringings the artists have had. Slaughterhouse's lyrical conception of god is one that places primacy in fugitive Blackness—theological and terrestrial—and critiques, even threatens, the sanctity of god.

Joe Budden, who has no verse of his own in this song, recites the intro and hook, asking god to "please continue to guide, direct, and protect my niggas from the world, and from themselves." But immediately following this brief prayer, Budden calls god out for god's seeming indifference to those same "niggas": "They sent you a million prayers, you ain't answered near one"; "I'm down on both knees, Father talk to 'em please / All you put 'em through is pain, but will it ever cease?" God here is being made to answer for god's lack of response regarding the troubles god's Slaughterhouse sons have faced. Joell Ortiz in the first verse provides a list of hardships from his childhood: his cocaine addicted mother, ill-fitting clothes and disheveled appearance, absent father, insufficient funds to pay for heating during winter months, cheap canned Beefaroni for dinner every night, and a dying grandmother. All of which he can only respond to in the form of the recurring echo interposed throughout each verse: "Oh it's a shame baby, baby." This "it's a shame," a veritable "tisk, tisk" and shaking of the head at the troubled experiences recited, because of its echoed and seemingly ethereal and omniscient characterization, can be read as god's response as well. Since god "ain't answered near one" of their prayers one is led to believe that god is also merely looking on in indifference or impotence saying "it's a shame."

Royce Da 5'9"'s verse, which follows Ortiz's, accosts the world and, more importantly, accosts god. Royce is under no illusions about the consequences of his actions as they pertain to his afterlife sentence: because he "pop[s] pills, abuse[s] liquor, and kill[s] niggas" he is under the impression that he is "going to Hell in a hand-basket." Perhaps this was his first-class ride to "the city where sinners dwell." But simply because he believes himself to be Hellbound does not mean he will never see god. In fact, he notes in the following bar, "When I die, God ain't gon' judge, he gon' deal with us," making clear that god is in no way off the hook. Royce does not ascribe to an image of god that fashions god as perfect, inscrutable, or off the hook. God will have to deal with Royce rather than judge him. In essence, Royce revokes god's right to arbitrate, which calls into question god's omnipotence and imbues Royce and his lyrical Blackness with a power that exceeds god's, and demands that god "deal" with him, meaning that god will have to answer to Royce, not vice versa, possibly by way of a kind of heavenly pugilistic bout.

with the notion of how Slaughterhouse, in the actual song, foregoes a traditional hook (chorus) for the song and, in this chapter's analysis, don't need a Holy Book for their pseudo-atheistic rap lyrics either.

The final verse, *Crooked I's*, reaches the apex of the tumultuousness that characterizes ghetto life and puts this in conversation with god and angels. As a "lost soul," Crooked remarks that he's "challengin' the Devil standing at the crossroads," this being less literal than illustrative of his theo-mental state, the crossroads being a crucial point especially where a decision must be made, the Devil being a kind of tempter which he must overcome or succumb to. After getting in a shootout with a "dirty snake" Crooked finds himself at the Pearly Gates confronted by the angel Gabriel to whom Crooked "came real." One can only wonder if Gabriel listened and relayed to god a message of understanding and forgiveness – or even approbation. Crooked himself asks god if having to kill someone who accosts you and challenges one's masculine being-in-the-world is "something that [god] can't feel?" How did god respond? "My man Crooked! That's what I'm talkin' 'bout – a lame step to you, you gotta aim that steel. Break yo'self, fool!" Or was Crooked castigated and sent to Hell with alacrity? Surely Crooked's god understands his situation, one which is centered in the 'hood, a place "that'll leave your mind baffled" and "Where we put haters in the past like time travel." Crooked's 'hood and his life, which is indeed a result of that 'hood, have constructed his experiences as a "murder story" that has taken him "past Purgatory." His very life is one thoroughly pierced with murder – or, one could say with Blackness, "murder" acting as a synecdoche for all that is fugitive and subversive – and shows no ambivalence as it bypasses the limbo state of Purgatory.

Because it counters the structuring and arbitrational tenets of (white) hegemony, Blackness, then, in all its subversiveness and fugitivity, is a site of pathology. But pathology qua Blackness is extracted of its negative connotation in Hip Hop and Slaughterhouse's verses. Hip Hop is awash in the postivizing of pathological acts and states of being: to be "sick," to have a flow "so retarded," to be the "illest," to spit crack (cocaine), to have bars "so ugly," to go dumb, and to be "crazy," among other things, are all desirable qualities when rapping. In the context of Slaughterhouse's songs, pathology is beatified and venerated as pseudo-divine traits. Joell Ortiz rhymes "Pick a disease, we got it, I vomit, snuffle, and sneeze lyrics..."³⁰ Here Ortiz equates the value of Slaughterhouse's lyrical abilities to how disease-ridden they are, lyrics actually being the residue of vomiting, sniffing, and sneezing. Furthermore, the song "Asylum" off of their album *welcome to: Our House* (the implication here signifying the lunacy of their "house," that is, the familial and lyrical structure they all familiarly inhabit) casts all of Slaughterhouse, as well as Eminem, as "lunatics" who "now run the asylum" and have killed the doctors and tied up the nurses – all of this, of course, being a metaphor for how Slaughterhouse has taken over the rap game ("They've taken it over and barricaded themselves inside it") and now run it. But "sick" lyricism is not only pathologized in the form of bodily and mental pathogens; the positive pathology of lyricism ventures into the realm of de jure pathology. To be a criminal is also a valued way to fashion oneself and one's lyrics. In the same song, Crooked I eloquently raps,

³⁰ Slaughterhouse, "Onslaught 2" (E1, 2009).

*I'm predicted to bring this G shit to its pinnacle zenith, lyrical genius
So sick with ridiculous English, niggas get squeamish
When they hear this criminal linguist...*

Again, Crooked draws on the “sickness” that makes lyrics in fact good, but he also makes linguistic criminality a desirable lyrical quality as well, illegal—or renegade—linguistic behavior making the artist more credible and valuable in the Hip Hop realm. Royce Da 5'9" even goes so far as shrouding lyricism itself in criminal activity, comparing it to illegal drugs: “I’m a lyrical ounce of piff!,” he says, equating himself and his lyrics to an ounce of a potent strain of marijuana. And of course the valorization of incarceration cannot be overlooked as to have been imprisoned in the U.S. prison industrial complex has become almost a rite of passage and badge of gangsterness in hardcore rap. But imprisonment’s glorification extends beyond the physical and into the linguistic and meta-lyrical realm as well: you have to bring your hottest “bars,” write so truthfully that you “put [your] life in this *sentence* like a convicted felon,”³¹ concoct those bars and sentences with your “pen,” and the entirety of one’s lyrical canon is metaphorically catalogued on their Hip Hop “rap” sheet.

Biblically, then, the positive connotation imbued into “Black” lyrics subverts and usurps the “pure white” (à la Amiri Baraka)³² discourse permeating Christianity in particular. As the Christian color dichotomy, many scholars have noted, has been used to demonize Blackness—indeed, *create* Blackness, that is, a Blackness that was epidermalized as all that was said to be “perverse”—Slaughterhouse’s lyrics invert that dichotomization and deem Blackness desirable and that which is of value. They supplant an “Egyptian ankh” for the Christian cross, reconfiguring it as a “Kemetic cross,” which Crooked I himself said is supposed to signify how

Kemet is the name for Alkebulan, which we call Africa. Before it was taken over by different continents and countries, Africa was referred to as Alkebulan. The Kemetic cross is another term for the Egyptian ankh, which is the symbol of life. If you’re a Christian you wear a cross to symbolize what you believe in: I wear a Kemetic cross. It’s a way of dealing with the motherland and origins: I’m a combination of Semitic and Kemetic.³³

³¹ Los, “Moment for Life” (*Freestyle*) (Platinum Records, 2011).

³² Amiri Baraka, “Dope,” accessed November 3, 2014, <http://poem.oftheweek.org/?p=4>. This is an allusion to Baraka’s poem “Dope,” in which he sardonically comments on the biblical rhetoric in the context of the constant denial of white supremacy and blaming of Black people for their plights: “It must be the Devil!” the refrain goes as a sarcastic response to the ever-present denials. Toward the end of the poem he alludes to the world-denying Christian imperative (“It’s all gon’ be good once you die,” Baraka say, “yo soul be clean, be washed pure white” once you get to Heaven, after experiencing Hell on Earth, so to speak.

³³ Kxng Crooked, “Slaughterhouse – Y’all Ready Know Lyrics | Genius,” 2014, <http://genius.com/4297920/Slaughterhouse-yall-ready-know/Egyptian-ankh-hanging-thats-my-kemetic-cross>. The full line, for context, is “Jewish tats on my arm like a Semitic boss / Egyptian ankh hangin’, that’s my Kemetic cross.”

Crooked I *crosses* over from the Christian discourse into a Blackened theological terrain that rewrites the Christian one and, effectively, Blackens it. As the historical locus of darkness and Blackness, Africa here is figured as the site of salvation—salvation becomes Black.

Linguistic Weaponry

"The most powerful part about me [hip hop] is my spirit – the spirit of resistance. Of rebellion against oppression. An outlaw." – MK Asante's personified Hip Hop, *It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop*

"Ayo! I shoulda been out, I'm deadly when I pull the pen out." – Big L, "Size 'Em Up"

Rappers specialize in harnessing their words in order to effect change and perform acts that cast them in a particular identificatory light. Hip Hop lyrics are veritable speech acts that often *do* what they say. To rhyme about how one has killed, fucked, and slang crack is to, in part, perform those acts, authenticating one's Hip Hop persona and sedimenting the "truth" of one's lyrically described life. The Hip Hop lyric has profound powers: as a form of truth-telling, to rap about deeds and acts is to speak those deeds and acts into existence. This lyrical "double duty"—being musical entertainment and cleverness while also alluding to the realities of the artists' historical experiences—works in the context of artists' Hip Hop personas (stage names) being not separate identities but extensions of the same agent: "the logic is an extension rather than a negation. Alias, a.k.a.; the names describe a process of loops. From A to B and back again. Dig beneath what lies on the surface only to arrive where you started."³⁴ Royce Da 5'9" is not a person unto himself but rather an altered iteration of Ryan Montgomery (his birth name), a limb, if you will, stemming from a single agential source. Therefore, it is believed that what Royce raps, Ryan has also felt, seen, heard, and did.

These words spewing from artists' mouths into microphones and broadcast to the masses after being sent to mastering and fine-tuned act as studied, researched, peer-reviewed narratives. Truth is a barometer of sorts for the impact of lyrics; rappers that spout lies are denigrated for their linguistic injustices: "I don't care if my profit rise, 'long as I prophesize, / 'long as I'm the nonfiction documentary and you the nigga that dramatize," says Crooked I.³⁵ Hip Hop lyrics are not merely words—they are Word. "Come on! You know I'm proud to' be Black / And *my Word is born*."³⁶ The Word is

³⁴ DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, "The Idiot—A Freestyle," in *Rhythm Science* (MIT Press, 2004).

³⁵ Slaughterhouse, "I Ain't Bullshittin'" (Shady Records, 2014).

³⁶ Run-D.M.C., *Word Is Born*, 1990. The popular Hip Hop phrase "word is born" started with Run-D.M.C. and essentially means that something is new and important, or serves as a way to say "truth be told." It derives from John 1:1, which reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word then answers, "I am the way and the truth and the life." "Word is born" is to speak truth, to give language—the Word—to such a divinely truthful event.

“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and Hip Hop is the vehicle for that Word, it speaks that truth, and gives resounding life to those whose lives were historically silenced.

And this Word, like much of Hip Hop’s utilization of hegemonic forms of language, is altered, “Blackened” one could say. Rather than the clean Word of the biblical terrain, Slaughterhouse enacts a “ghetto-Word”: the gritty, filthy, martial Word that, while speaking truth to the “sinners” of “Lucifer’s property,” also redefine the meaning of truth as that which is bound by Black life. The ghetto-Word is akin to Amiri Baraka’s militarization of poetic words: ghetto-Words are “like fists beating niggers out of Jocks”; ghetto-Words are

"[Words] that kill."
Assassin [Words], [Words] that shoot
guns. [Words] that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out...³⁷

Slaughterhouse deploys this ghetto-Word most explicitly in their songs “Sound Off” and “Lyrical Murderers.” “Sound Off” has militaristic resonances in its musical backdrop as military trumpets play as if to fire up the troops, the chorus has the military “hut!” ad-libbed in the background, and the lyrics ooze bellicosity. The song that rapgenius.com calls a “sort of blitzkrieg punch in your mouth,” “Sound Off” is a loaded semi-automatic that fires nonstop for almost six minutes. Coming out the gates “run[ning] up on you with an army” brandishing a style that’s “Stalin mixed with sick lyrics,” Slaughterhouse takes their ghetto-Word and uses it in the same way one uses a loaded gun to another’s head. Their words “[come] outta the barrel of my fifth [*click-click-BANG sound*].” The Word is a deadly type of ammunition that can indeed kill; rap lyrics are what Royce Da 5’9” calls “gun harmonizing” — “every bullet’s a note”; “that trigger’s my tongue.”³⁸

“Lyrical Murderers” puts forth the same kind of fatal lyrics. In it, they “bring them verbal Llamas³⁹ out.” Let’s lay ‘em out: “With the double-edged triple syllable sword, I’m iller than or — / — dinary, see I’m a literary genius / Bury niggas with words, a cemetery linguist”; “We them copycat killers, unleashing venom / Commit them lyrical murders and then we re-commit ‘em”; “Independently penning the best words that were ever said / The mixture of Leatherhead and Everclear”;⁴⁰ “This is lyrical murder / Me and every track have a physical merger when I stab it in the chest, I’mma

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Valerie A. Smith, Third edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

³⁸ Royce Da 5’9”, “Gun Harmonizing” (M.I.C. Records; One Records, 2006).

³⁹ A “Llama” has become slang for a gun in the Hip Hop world, primarily because of the gun distributor Llama Firearms.

⁴⁰ Royce is referring to Leatherface — the Texas chainsaw murderer — but uses Leatherhead to maintain the internal rhyme with “said” in the previous bar.

bit of a curver / So it bleeds to death, like the middle of a unfinished burger." Their "verbal Llamas" protect them from harm and off any other artist who attempts to cross them. Royce even invites his crew to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," a citation from Psalm 23:4, because, instead of an ineffectual god whose "rod and...staff comfort me," all the protection they would need is their murderous lyrics. God falls behind their linguistic weaponry in effectiveness. Stand in the way of sick lyricism at your own risk.⁴¹

And even while god wanes in effectiveness, falling behind that of their lyrics, these very lyrics become scriptural, dirty-sacred, messy-sanctimonious. The Gospel becomes one that is militarized and weaponized: "I'm about that Art of War Gospel," Royce Da 5'9" says in "Y'all Ready Know," "that Basquiat Picasso drawing a Roscoe / Usin' the blood of a usual thug..." Royce himself explains the lyrics' meaning on genius.com:

When you say gospel it automatically puts you in the mindframe of "preach." When you read that book, the Art of War, you know that's some real shit. Real spit. Basquiat Picasso puts you in the mindframe of being artistic, and then draw is a play on words: you can draw with a paintbrush and you can draw a Roscoe.⁴²

Joell Ortiz responds on the same site "Basically, just the dopest shit ever." Guest contributor Tyrant gives even more insight into the lyrics:

With reference to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, plus painters Jean-Michel Basquiat and Picasso – Royce describes himself as a lyrical killer. From drawing in a literal sense, to drawing a roscoe (gun) – Nickel Nine's weapon of choice is his pen. Put your money on Royce! His raps are so dope that he paints a lyrical masterpiece in the blood of his enemies.⁴³

The Gospel becomes an "art of war," a blueprint of sorts for surviving in the gritty streets of Black life. Just as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide guidance through troubled times, and inspiration for Bible-readers, Royce's Gospel is one that guides one through a world that is hostile and filled with gunshots. Further, he conflates the Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat with Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, a way to Blacken Western artistic expression, and likens painting—that form of art so saturated with connotations of the apogee of Western artistic intelligence—to *drawing* a gun, which stands in as a Black signifier. Royce effectively situates the "Gospel," the Word, in Black ghetto life. Moreover, Royce uses "the blood of a usual thug," rather

⁴¹ It should be noted that the comparison of lyrics to deadly ammunition is pervasive in Hip Hop: Eminem has a song called "My Words Are Weapons"; Anilyst, a relatively underground Hip Hop artist, raps, "I don't claim I'm a killer, but I murder syllables / I don't turn for my burner my words are killable"; Jarren Benton spits, "Every word I spit is murder on the page of this tablet"; Joell Ortiz: "I do niggas harm with these bars"; and Crooked I says that "Crooked's verses put 'em in hearses call 'em funeral bars."

⁴² "Slaughterhouse, Y'all Ready Know Lyrics | Genius," *Genius*, 2014, <http://genius.com/Slaughterhouse-yall-ready-know-lyrics/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

than the purifying blood of a Christ-like figure. A usual thug – that subject so mired in thoughts of perversity and criminality – is who will be used, presumably, to sanctify the world via the Gospel. The Gospel is the thug's – a thug Gospel.

The stakes are high for Black ghetto-Words, that is, Blackened language that subverts and casts prophetic light. Not only does Slaughterhouse's rhymes have the potential to "Bite your ear with a syllable, lay a hook that'll finish you,"⁴⁴ the fugitive nature of the ghetto-Word disrupts the very foundation of the traditional Word. As Joell Ortiz says, "they say the tongue is the perfect weapon."⁴⁵ Indeed it is: the tongue – particularly the Black tongue; the tongue that shrouds its words in subversive, weaponized meanings; the ghetto-Word – possesses the ability to foment revolution, violence, and uproar. The ghetto-Word is deeply Black as, in Gloria Anzaldúa's words, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language"; the Black tongue is a "tongue of fire." And "Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified."⁴⁶ Speaking with these tongues of fire, with this ghetto-Word, and drawing on the confessional, truth-telling nature of Hip Hop language as stated earlier, it becomes all the more striking considering the stark parallel between rappers throwing down rhymes in the studio booth and the Catholic confession booth, a site of truth-telling and confession. Instead of speaking one's sins to a proxy for god and asking for forgiveness, rappers enter the booth and spit that shit raw, speaking themselves for themselves while others get to listen in on the divine conversation, divine insofar as the artists themselves are the locus of importance rather than a heavenly god; the artist is not a deified saint like B.I.G. and Pac but rather something better, a "mixture of me and me."⁴⁷

The power of the ghetto-Word extends deep into a divine-like realm, drawing from the discourse of heaven and imbuing that divine ethos into the Word of the streets. As stated, the ghetto-Word and Hip Hop is a form of truth-telling, hence why rapping is the medium through which Royce can "...tell it like it is, fuck it, it's my Jeremiah (W)right."⁴⁸ The words that Slaughterhouse spits have meaning not because of god but because of the approval of other Black lyricists, fugitive wordsmiths, and "'hood niggas." Since identities and the "sickness" of lyrics are determined in large part by others – and those others that matter here are respected rap artists – the measure of one's linguistic dexterity is decided by the legends of Hip Hop culture, gods in a sense. Joell Ortiz raps, "ain't shabby with the nouns, . . . ain't shitty with the verbs / when I reach heaven I

⁴⁴ Joell Ortiz and Slaughterhouse, "Weight Scale" (Shady Records, 2012).

⁴⁵ Slaughterhouse, *Offshore* (Shady Records, 2014).

⁴⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, 1990, 203–11.

⁴⁷ Slaughterhouse - Funkmaster Flex Freestyle Part 2/2, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeLjBHnSIPk>.

⁴⁸ Royce Da 5'9", *I'm Me Freestyle*, 2008. An allusion to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who is notable for his media controversy of delivering a caustic sermon in which he stated, in the context of overly patriotic rhetoric at the expense of wrestling with America's historical racial injustices, "God damn America!"

want that nigga Biggie to be like 'Word.'"⁴⁹ Here, clever lyricism is equated with the utter divinity of god's Word. But god is replaced with someone much more important: Hip Hop legend Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.). The "shabbiness" or "shittiness" of Ortiz's words rests on whether the eternally venerated Biggie Smalls gives them his (or, "His") approval—whether Ortiz's words meets the requirements to qualify them as Word, as ghetto-Word.

Ortiz further showcases the waning need for god as opposed to the Black ghetto-Word, rapping in Slaughterhouse's song "Sun Doobie," "As long as I got my pen I don't need a friend, / we got ears that we each'll lend each other..." The physical manifestation of his ghetto-Word—the pen—serves the function god is said to, which is provide an ever-present listening ear. God's Word is supplanted by Ortiz's own Word spilling from his pen. The ink that stains the notepad of his rhyme book is truly Black: subversive of the whiteness, that is, hegemony, of the traditional god, the transcendental signified.

The ink from their pens proves to not only do the work of god but also the work of Jesus. As stated above, the pen listens to the lyrical prayers of the artists, but it is also their messiah. On a literal level, writing—an act of self-creation and for many a means of escaping the hellish environment of violent ghettos—has literally saved a number of artists from gang life. Symbolically, the pen's ink is the salvific blood that is shed for Slaughterhouse each time they write their rhymes—"I don't write, I kill a pen, leak its blood on the page," Crooked I says in the group's first song together, "Slaughterhouse." Instead of the blood of Christ, Slaughterhouse offers the ink of their pens as that which saved their world: "my ink take 'em to church, / guess you could call it Pentecostal," "this music so therapeutic, it could be our religion."⁵⁰ And since ink is the saving grace of these Hip Hop artists, it would follow that the words that this ink pens are divine, truly Word, truly *logos*, that is, Word and Way. They are "Messiah[s] of a dying art" who in "Cut You Loose"⁵¹ lament the fallen state of Hip Hop—" (What's goin on?) I thought you had to be mad nice, / but apparently you could be trash as long as you look good and have ice"; "this rap shit done gone a different way"; "Think I'd rather be water-boarded (you feel me?) / than to listen to what y'all recorded (for real, G)"—which parallels the biblical Fall of humanity. Slaughterhouse has come to save rap; Slaughterhouse is the Father that gives their one begotten son—their lyrics—to save the Hip Hop world. The divine "I" is no longer "the way, the truth, and the life," but Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey are. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that Joell Ortiz's catchphrase "Yaowa," a neologism he inserts into almost every song and is meaningless (in response to the question "What does 'Yaowa' mean?" Joe Budden interjects and gives a terse answer: "Not a fuckin' thing"),⁵² sounds so similar to the biblical god,

⁴⁹ Slaughterhouse, "Onslaught 2."

⁵⁰ Slaughterhouse, *Get Up* (Shady Records; Interscope Records, 2012); Slaughterhouse, *Ill Mind Interlude* (Shady Records, 2014).

⁵¹ Slaughterhouse, "Cut You Loose" (E1, 2009).

⁵² As well, however, Ortiz has said that "Yaowa" can also stand for "You're actually one world away."

Yahweh. With the utter biblical nature of their lyrics, with each album Slaughterhouse produces they are, in effect, writing and publishing a new kind of Bible, one in which god, Yahweh, means “not a fuckin’ thing.”

Infidels

“Dresses?! Nah, man. . . .What good is lookin’ fly if you rappin’ like a bum?” – Joell Ortiz, “Interview with Jenny Boom Boom”

And yet one can imagine that any religious grouping is deemed such by way of distinguishing itself from those who fall outside of its religious limits, in other words, by determining those who are so-called “infidels,” “heathens,” and “apostates.” First, Slaughterhouse creates the boundaries of their own “inside” by way of house, gang, and family metaphors. Not only in their group name are they constructing an inside that separates their “house” from those outside of it, their songs contain a number of house, gang, and family allusions and denotations that do this work as well. From their album *welcome to: Our House*; to their self-appointed group nickname “house gang,” which operates familiarly on the level of the gang and the structure that contains the family; to lyrical religious references like “house gang, rap’s holy alliance,” the interconnectedness of each Slaughterhouse member’s mereological importance to the group as a whole – “we merged, we’re an alliance... / Crooked I’s equivalent to four arms. / Joell Ortiz is the body... / Joe Budden is the pair of legs / he run shit alongside I, the apparent head” – which both bears resemblance to the Christian notion of members of the church being part of the body of Christ, as well as the 5% Nation and the Moorish Science Temple of America’s rendering of A.L.L.A.H. (Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head), an acronym Crooked I echoes in “Wack MCs,” saying “I Malcolm X the track, that mean arm-leg-leg-arm-head / Body the beat, the torso too, heh” – all of these instances cast the group’s members as a family, a collective community against which those who do not fit in with them are deemed outsiders or, more perniciously, negatively connoted infidels and “non-believers.”

Slaughterhouse’s ghetto-religious clique also has its own version of the well-known Ten Commandments. But rather than tenets forbidding coveting neighbors’ wives or stealing, they have “House Rules” that dictate their conduct:

[Royce] *Uh, no phones inside the telly, pics inside the celly
Baby, you know the House Rules.*

[Joell Ortiz] *Yeah, respect over a dollar, death before dishonor,
Partner, you know the House Rules.*

[Crooked I] *Uh, if I'm up you can't be down and I'm down
to tear shit up for you, homie, you know the House Rules.*

[Joe Budden] *Yeah, all bitches with flat stomachs, no cars under a hundred*

*My nigga, you know the House Rules!*⁵³

These tenets, or “House Rules,” demarcate the limits of acceptable behavioral conduct, less authoritative than the Ten Commandments, more concerned with loyalty to one another and others involved in the Hip Hop world considering the repeated familial terms (baby, partner, homie, my nigga). This sets them up as a collective governed, however loosely, by a certain set of rules and codes of conduct that distinguish them from others, from infidels.

As a “four-headed monster,” Slaughterhouse, as fleshed out throughout this essay, serves as a kind of perverse site of fugitive divinity and godliness. As such, they buttress that divinity by casting others as antithetical to their godliness, thus making those others heathens and infidels, in effect. Crooked I labels himself “Sinister LBC [Long Beach California],” who “came to give ‘em Hell / I’m Judg[ment] day, I’m judgin’ all you infidels” thereby making him the ultimate determiner of the quality of people’s souls in this allusion to the Christian rapture, Judgment Day, on which day Crooked I, not god, will judge the sins of the infidels. But what form do these infidels take? For Slaughterhouse’s conception of Hip Hop, the veritable biblical milieu of their world, those who flout their codes of conduct are not adulterers or idol-worshipers but primarily “rappers in skirts” and “ringtone rappers.” Most people who have any awareness of Hip Hop’s reputation know of its sexist and misogynist aspects, which here act as Hip Hop’s “thou shalt not”s. Slaughterhouse, for example, like many Hip Hop artists, make liberal use of the term “bitch.” Joe Budden offers a justification for its use, noting that “bitch is not gender-specific.” An interesting but unconvincing rationale as “bitch” denigrates women by virtue of its historical use and implied denigration of female subjectivity, and men (or even trans folks) by likening them to women, who themselves are seen as gender-ontologically inferior. (One wonders if Budden would say that with the term “nigger.” If a white dude goes around calling Black folks niggers or niggas and says, like *The Boondocks* character Ed Rummy [who is also white, but whose voice is played by Samuel L. Jackson], “Don’t start trippin’ and shit calling me a racist, ‘cause I don’t mean nigga in a disrespectful way. I mean it as a general term for ign’ant muhfucka,” one can imagine he wouldn’t fair too well if confronted with the at-times volatile Joe Budden.)

In response to Budden’s justification, Black female Hip Hop scholar Tricia Rose asserts:

If you wanna find the most blatant, celebrated brand of sexism against Black women – let me go back to that, Mr. Slaughterhouse; I appreciate being called a young lady in some ways, but in other ways I am a full professor and I would appreciate that to be on the record – but unless we can take very seriously the degree to which Black women's bodies, and Black male bodies, are

⁵³ Slaughterhouse, “House Rules” (Shady Records, 2014).

celebrated *only and primarily* when they capitulate to these narrow images, we're doing Hip Hop no favor by making room for that over and over again.⁵⁴

Through this exchange, we see that Joe Budden, and Slaughterhouse by proxy (in the video Joell Ortiz sits next to Budden and approvingly gesticulates), deeply disapprove of the academic reception of their work, particularly the charges of misogyny, sexism, and toxic masculinity. To these charges, Slaughterhouse, like the originary origins of U.S. Hip Hop, gives a big "Fuck you."⁵⁵

Any sign of femininity or effeminacy in Hip Hop's hypermasculine terrain is an immoral act, a blasphemous sin that shrouds its enactor in the miasma of abomination and infidelity, inviting the appellation of "bitch," a fraught phenomenon as indicated by the exchange between Budden and Rose. As such, rappers in skirts, used most by Joell Ortiz, are used as effete caricatures against which he buttresses his own masculinity. For Ortiz to say "Skinny jeans don't mean yo ass shoots, / it means your booty claps" or "you fashion rappers wear the kind of jeans that hardly get zipped" is for him to define his own holy Hip Hop masculinity against the derogated "femininity" of rappers who wear skinny jeans at the expense of devoting more time to lyricism rather than fashion trends. Under the umbrella of "rappers in skirts," Ortiz deploys typical feminization of other artists as a way to gain masculine brownie points and, in the context of Slaughterhouse's redefined capital "G"-Godless holiness, demarcate where their divinity ends and others' religious infidelity to "real" (or more accurately "reel") 'hood-nigga-gangster-thug Hip Hop begins. Secondly, "ringtone rappers" are those who seek only to make money by creating a catchy song, one that sounds good as a cellphone ringtone. Slaughterhouse implies that these artists defile the name of Hip Hop artists and put up no lyrical challenge; ringtone rap is bereft of lyrical complexity, lacking the clout given by "real" Hip Hop canonization by Slaughterhouse-as-musical gatekeeper. Ringtone rappers' lyrics are akin to apocryphal biblical texts, those books that were deemed unfit, or too unholy, to go into the divine Hip Hop Word.

And these infidels are given biblical faces as well. A metonym for all who don't ascribe to Slaughterhouse's conception of Hip Hop or possess inadequate lyrical skill, infidels are also those who naively challenge Slaughterhouse and think they can

⁵⁴ See Aaron McGruder, "Let's Nab Oprah," *The Boondocks*, 2005 and *versusdebates, Joe Budden versus Professor Tricia Rose!*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW_ZRO9aoTQ. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵For more about Slaughterhouse's relation with academics, see Andres Tardio, "Slaughterhouse: Rap In The Key Of Life," *HipHopDX*, August 12, 2009, /interviews/id.1391/title.slaughterhouse-rap-in-the-key-of-life. In this interview, Ortiz notes that he attributes the downfall of his academics to "the decision to not go to college with academic scholarships on the table and some athletic scholarships also. I think at that time," Ortiz says, "I don't think I made the smart decision, but I think I made the right decision. My mom was going through some things with her drug addiction and I just didn't want to be off away in school and get some kind of phone call or letter like, 'You gotta come see your mother.'" As well, Budden remarks that "My academics went wrong because I was smart. I was way ahead of the class...I was way smarter than everybody else in the class so my attention span was very short so I would go in there to crack jokes. The teachers never liked that. They always used to call my mom from school like, 'We see the potential! He's such a bright, bright kid. If he could just...' You know, that story. Until, I dropped out."

lyrically spar with them. Joe Budden and Joell Ortiz were unwaveringly confident that no other artists were on Slaughterhouse's level. When Funkmaster Flex off-handedly states "I don't know if a lot of you rappers, MCs...are touchin' this [Slaughterhouse's aforerapped freestyle], man," Budden and Ortiz interject with "*Budden*: They're not. *Ortiz*: They not. *Budden*: They're not. Let's be clear on that one. Let's remove the 'I don't know.'"⁵⁶ If these proverbial rappers who aren't touching Slaughterhouse's rhymes were to indeed try to touch them, the group would see it as a foolish act; they'd be, to quote Crooked I, "Foolish as Judas, nigga you're lost, / now I'm feeling like Black Jesus, wrong nigga to cross."⁵⁷ It is apposite that Crooked I compares artists who challenge his divine lyricism to he who ultimately betrayed Jesus (Jesus being the synecdoche for all that is holy): Judas Iscariot. As Black Jesus, Crooked I – and Slaughterhouse as a whole, since they are all parts of the same (ho)lyrical body – is the "wrong nigga to cross," meaning obviously one who others shouldn't make angry or wrong in any way but also the wrong person to crucify – to literally put on a cross – which signifies the taint with which Black-Jesus blood would saturate the world, rather than the salvific blood of the biblical Jesus. Crooked I's or any one of Slaughterhouse's members' crucifixion would "Ghettoize" the world.

Slaughterhouse's lyrics assert a discursivity that empties "God" of the deified, pristine, omnipotent ethos said to characterize the religious deity. God, in the lyrics of Slaughterhouse, is disjointed and rendered shallow, un-god, hollow. Herein lies the atheistic strain I argue. Slaughterhouse lyrically speaks a-theos ("without god") insofar as they shift the importance often given religious holy divinity to embodied Black life and, in a sense, terrestrially carry out what Nas says in "Halftime": "'Cause when it's my time to go / I'll wait for God with the .44." Slaughterhouse does the previous work of god, indeed, performs god-ness themselves by creating themselves ("How's Tyler the Creator when I keep reinventing myself!").⁵⁸ Through their lyrical ghetto-Word, linguistic fugitivity, and radical rewriting of theological language, Slaughterhouse voids god of, well, god.

⁵⁶ Slaughterhouse, *Freestyle – Hot 97 With Funkmaster Flex*, 2011.

⁵⁷ Slaughterhouse, "Get Up."

⁵⁸ Slaughterhouse, *Freestyle – Hot 97 With Funkmaster Flex*. Here, Budden plays on the Hip Hop artist Tyler the Creator's name, using him as a stand in for artists who claim to recreate and reinvent the Hip Hop game and playing on the last part of his name – The Creator – to allude to the popular conception of god as "The Creator" of everything. The implication, then, is that Budden does not need other artists telling him that they are doing significant lyrical work in Hip Hop but also he does not need a god commanding his perennial becoming because he, Joe Budden, does that for himself.

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