



Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers

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Abstract

“Hip Hop Hermeneutics” essay lays out findings of current research into how Hip Hop culture has been formational for African American preachers, and how that culture informs their preaching. There is a generation of preachers leading congregations today that have grown up with Hip Hop. Hip Hop culture has left an indelible mark upon them; just as the church has. How does the cultural influence of Hip Hop affect their preaching? Hip Hop hermeneutics is the response put forth by this article. This article traces the practice and theology of early African American preachers, the work of James Cone in Black Liberation theology, and Womanist theologians to demonstrate how Black theology has always included the Black experience as part of its theological norm. The article then posits that the next generation of Black theology must take into account that Hip Hop is also part of that Black experience, before going on to delineate a Hip Hop hermeneutic. A Hip Hop hermeneutic is a particular way of reading scripture that embraces the honest and raw fullness of the Black experience.

Introduction

The decline of congregations and mainline denominations in the West has been a source of scholarly attention.¹ During this same decline, however, there have been two rather drastic increases: (1) the meteoric rise and worldwide influence of Hip Hop and (2) the increase in small communities of Christian believers ‘doing life together,’ but refusing to accept the term ‘church.’ Hip Hop’s influence resounds with global populations who also experience poverty, oppression, and injustice. This is not to debit or credit the universality of music, but rather to assert that the appeal goes beyond a genre of music. Additionally, with the recent passing of the giant-of-a-theologian, Dr. James Cone, it is timely and befitting to discuss the frontiers of Black theology and the future vitality of the church. An examination of Hip Hop hermeneutics allows us to focus on the future implications of Cone’s work for the next generation of preachers.²

The nexus of Hip Hop culture and theology is a rich vein that has yet experienced exhaustive mining. Although scholars have done much work in our current era of interdisciplinary studies and contextualized theologies, the nuances of this nexus are still a source of debate. Mapping this terrain will take years of scholarship to come, but proves to be exciting for cultural and theological scholars alike. In this landscape, one area has received less scholarly attention. Namely, how has Hip Hop culture been formative for African American preachers; and how does this understanding inform their preaching, or their engagement of the mission of the Christian church?³ These are the questions at the core of “Hip Hop Hermeneutics.”

“Hip Hop Hermeneutics” posits that preachers, deeply impacted by Hip Hop culture, develop a Hip Hop hermeneutic – a lens or way of reading scripture.⁴ This Hip Hop hermeneutic is the same type of work that early African American preachers engaged in when formulating their own interpretation of scripture and is a continuation of the legacy of Black theology. Hip Hop hermeneutics is a theological inquiry that pushes for the inclusion of Hip Hop within the Black experience and reveals how Hip

¹ For a brief overview, see Bolger, Ryan K., *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

² Dr. James Cone is The Father of Black Liberation Theology. One of the hallmarks of his work is validating that the lived experiences of Black people in America is a legitimate source, and theological norm for doing theology.

³ Ralph Watkins’ book, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007) discusses how the church can reach the Hip Hop generation. Watkins’ work primarily gears toward reaching youth and utilizes both theological and sociological frameworks. Daniel White Hodge asks missiological and theological questions of Hip Hop, although there is still a focus on youth. See Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010); “No Church in the Wild: Hip Hop Theology and Mission,” *Missiology: An International Review* *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 97–109. The work in Hip Hop Hermeneutics deals directly with scriptural interpretation and the formation of adult preachers.

⁴ For the sake of this essay, includes those who willingly engage Hip Hop content in their preaching and those who may not outwardly engage the culture, but still confess to its influences in their adolescences and adulthood.

Hop can be a source of theological interpretation. The work of early African American preachers was primarily rooted in a foundational understanding of what Cornel West called the Black experience.⁵ This experience is an affirmation, and specific engagement, of Black culture,⁶ rooted in an African worldview that rejected Western dualism and honored Blackness at a time when White, American Christianity refused to ascribe any value to Black bodies other than that of chattel. The Black experience also depends upon an understanding of the incarnation that posits Jesus as experiencing human life as an oppressed Jew in first-century, Roman-governed Palestine. This understanding of the Black experience was key for the first generation of scholars working with a theology from a Black context.

Hip Hop is culture; it is a form of the Black experience. It is much more than music, attire, and rappers. In fact, such a reductionist view completely ignores that even when one considers Ting-Toomey and Chung's understanding, one must consider Hip Hop a *culture*, at minimum, due to its processes of sharing, interacting and transmission of ideas.⁷ Those who study Hip Hop closely have concluded that Hip Hop is indeed a culture,⁸ wielding power and influence. The cultural status of Hip Hop has also been declared and cemented by pioneering scholars like Tricia Rose, who defines it as a cultural form,⁹ and M. K. Asante, who affirms that Hip Hop is a cultural expression of Black America.¹⁰ Making this statement is not an epiphany by any measure, and the statement only appears to be blasphemous when persons of color begin to highlight and affirm the seedbed of their own cultural formation. White scholars have long studied the impact and effects of culture on people, theology, and preaching.¹¹ Hip Hop culture

⁵ West refers to the totality of this experience; from lived experience, to critical and philosophical thought, to jazz and poetry. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Anniversary Edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 2002).

⁶ While Cornel West seems to conflate the two (experience and culture), Cone separates them. Cone details that the Black experience is the emotions and impact of what is lived. Culture, he holds, is the "creative forms of expression," James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1970), 28.

⁷ Ting-Toomey and Chung offer the following definition of culture: "A learned meaning system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community." Ting-Toomey, Stella and Leeva C. Chung, *Understanding Intercultural Communication* (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury, 2005), 376.

⁸ Daniel White Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2004); Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Kindle (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁰ Although, Asante's focus is also on youth. M.K. Asante, *It's Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

¹¹ See Crouch, Andy, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008); Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a*

informs and influences preachers, who lead congregations today. Like the unreleased songs of Tupac or Prince, it is important that we tell these stories.

In this essay, I will briefly describe the methodology employed. I will then provide a socio-historical context of the Black Christian faith as a way of discussing the first generation of Black preachers in America and provide a model. Next, the essay will demonstrate how contemporary preachers are following this model before moving on to describe Hip Hop hermeneutics in detail.

This essay views contemporary preachers as a continuation of the lineage of African American preachers who have deeply engaged and understood their context and their faith. Further, this work hopes to be a faithful continuation of the tradition of Black Liberation and Womanist theologians that developed their own Black hermeneutic as they also relied heavily on the Black experience and a rejection of Western constructs of womanhood. This essay builds on work done by recognized scholars like Ralph Watkins. Watkins has already published the next iteration of Black theology will be conducted by the Hip Hop generation.¹² The thesis of Watkins' work here is that this new wave of Black theology will be much more Afrocentric than previous drafts. Watkins' focus is on identifying socio-theologians, locating them outside of the church, and delineating the African locus of their search. Unlike Watkins' work, this essay focuses on those practitioners within the church. Both projects are placing the future trajectory of Black theology firmly within the Hip Hop generation. Watkins' publication contends that the Hip Hop socio-theologians are refusing Western constructs of God and reaching to African roots in order to begin their God talk. These Western constructs, worldviews, and philosophical language have made non-Western, indigenous peoples feel alien or "homeless" to the good news of the Gospel.¹³

This rejection of Western worldviews and orthodoxy is exactly what Watkins says is happening with Hip Hop socio-theologians. This is exactly what this essay describes in the first sections with the early African American preachers. This is exactly what Cone described in his early work. Moreover, this is exactly what is happening currently with preachers who are engaging Hip Hop culture. Following Watkins' and Cone's rejection of White, Western worldviews, contemporary preachers are utilizing Hip Hop culture to connect with their audiences, make theology relevant, question the hypocrisy of American religion, and rail against the continued suffering of the Black experience. For these preachers – just as Cone described – there is no accurate and vivid description of the Black experience without Hip Hop culture. A Hip Hop hermeneutic

Changing Culture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) et al.

¹² Ralph Watkins, "From Black Theology and Black Power to Afrocentric Theology and Hip Hop Power: An Extension and Socio-Re-Theological Conceptualization of Cone's Theology in Conversation with the Hip Hop Generation," *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (2015): 327–40.

¹³ Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

is necessary for the continuation of the Black theological exercise and the revival of the local church.

Methodology

I took a qualitative methodological approach in completing research for “Hip Hop Hermeneutics.” I chose this method because my goal was to provide a “...credible, rigorous, and authentic story...[giving] voice to people in their own context.”¹⁴ In order to identify participants, basic criteria were established. All participants had to be 1) adult, 2) African American preachers, 3) with some knowledge of African American culture and Hip Hop, 4) who were engaging Hip Hop to some degree, and 5) have developed some theological opinion about Hip Hop. Male and female participants were from the West Coast, East Coast, and Midwest. Guided by qualitative methodology I engaged in semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Twelve interviews were complete during this research. The questions posed to each participant focused on three areas. The first area allows the participant to share their connection to Hip Hop via their memories and descriptions of Hip Hop. The second focus was on the participant’s formation as a preacher – their influences, sense of calling, and vocation. The last category was a synthesis on the first two. The participants respond to questions regarding their theological engagement or opinion of Hip Hop. Also, and key for this essay, had they considered how Hip Hop influences or informs their preaching. The indexing of these data into categories simultaneously accounts for the myriad of responses and major similarities.

Early African American Preachers as Model

Historians, theologians, and scholars like Gayraud Wilmore, Dwight Hopkins, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, and others have done foundational work chronicling the history and faith of African Americans.¹⁵ Much of their work illuminates that the forced arrival of Africans on American soil did not rid them of their African roots, identity, faith, or worldview. Will Coleman’s work, *Tribal Talk*, recount some of the complexities and variety found in African religious practices and their influence on African American Christianity?¹⁶ Coleman notes the birth of African American Christianity was not simply an uncritical supposing of an existing, racist, oppressive faith. Wilmore and Hopkins attest these early Black believers identified with the themes of liberation found in Christianity, which seemed to feed their pre-existing understanding of a God that created Blackness as part of the beauty of diversity God intends upon the creation of humanity in the divine image; not as a curse in response to

¹⁴ David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998), 1.

¹⁵ I will use African American and Black interchangeably. One should not assume any difference with either usage. In addition, I will cite the works of these authors as this essay progresses.

¹⁶ Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park, PA: Penn State, 2000).

sin.¹⁷ The early pioneers of Black, Christian faith are engaging in complex and advanced contextualization. At least this is what academia would later label this process – or perhaps even syncretism.¹⁸

Gayraud Wilmore and Marsha Snulligan-Haney outline some of the key characteristics of the African American preacher from his genesis.¹⁹ As White preachers, missionaries, and denominations, who hold power within the institutional church, release African American preachers into ministry, it was required that members of the latter group fill several functions. Unlike his White counterpart, the Black preacher/pastor did not usually have full backing and financial support of larger communities and institutions. From its antebellum inception, the role of the African American preacher was both bi-vocational and multi-faceted. There was an expectation that African American pastors be: 1) pastors, 2) fundraisers, 3) educators, 4) community activists, 5) and racial spokespersons.²⁰ As pastors, they were to gather people for worship and preach the gospel message to their congregations. As fundraisers, they raised money to build sanctuaries, to provide for their own families, and to help purchase the freedom of other enslaved family members. Often the pastors (along with the women who served in roles as missionaries and Christian education teachers) were among the only educated people in their communities. The responsibility, then, of educating Blacks fell directly upon them, or the church. These obligations were foreign to White ministers, especially in Presbyterian and Methodist settings, unless they were engaging in mission work abroad. As community activists and racial spokespersons, there was an expectation that Black preachers would lecture and advocate for abolition; humanizing Blacks and lobbying for their improved living conditions and freedoms.

¹⁷ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

¹⁸ Although syncretism often carries a negative connotation, recent scholarship has posited that Christianity is a constant act of contextualization and syncretism. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Rev Ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); Daniel Shaw, "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-First-Century Model for Enabling Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (October 2010): 208–15; Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Kindle (Maryknoll, NY; Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 1996).

¹⁹ I use the male pronoun here but not out of oversight or a lack of a desire to use inclusive language. The use of the male pronoun for preachers/pastors through the bulk of this essay is a sad, but true, testimony that the pastors and ordained preachers of the time were mainly male. One should note that although Black and African American history does not begin with slavery, the story of the first African American preachers does. This term "African American preachers" describes the African slaves that arrived here and adapted the American Christianity they encountered. The works referenced are Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*; Marsha Snulligan-Haney, *Evangelism among African America Presbyterians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

²⁰ This list expands from Haney's list of three, although the other functions are also in her text. Haney, *Evangelism*, 55-74.

While there were, of course, White preachers who were part of the abolitionist movement, it was particularly the Black preacher's responsibility to affirm to Blacks, and Whites alike, that Black bodies also carried the divine image of God's creation.

The importance of this bi-vocational and multi-faceted model for this essay will become lucid in the proceeding paragraphs. For now, it is important to see this structure, or model, as necessary due to the overall impact of overt racism and segregation limiting the options for African American clergy. One must also note that the faith of the African American preacher was incarnational and holistic. Incarnational in that their faith sprouted from the seedbed of the sociopolitical reality of Jesus' birth, life, and ministry. The Jesus of scripture was born into poverty and oppression.²¹ Jesus' reality, then, was experiencing humanity as a member of an oppressed group during a time of hostile, and often violent, systemic oppression. The preachers' faith was also holistic in that any God, or faith in that God, must be about, "freedom, and justice, and redemption for all humanity."²² Their faith did not fall into Greco-Roman frameworks of spirit and flesh - denying the importance of existential freedoms and liberties. Rather, their faith maintained African characteristics, in that all spheres of life were included and part of their faith.

The model presented here is that of early preachers engaging their entire lived experiences. They did not see their communities and the cultural realities of their life as a separate realm from the church; to be excluded by the preacher and deemed unnecessary for their faith. Rather, they engaged their professions and daily life out of necessity, and out of an understanding that it was not something that tainted the calling of the preacher. This model shows the activity and preaching of these preachers to be rooted in a revelation of a God who understands oppression and violence. This constructed model, of the early African American preacher, holds up for several key figures in Haney's text - as well as information presented by the texts of Wilmore and McMickle.²³ Figures such as John Gloucester (the first African American to be ordained in the Presbyterian church, and an educator and missionary),²⁴ Elymas P. Rogers (a poet and missionary),²⁵ James W.C. Pennington (a trained blacksmith, turned abolitionist lecturer),²⁶ and Henry H. Garnet (an organizer and publisher),²⁷ all reflect this model. Specifically, they demonstrate early African American preachers were holistic in their faith and saw the entire expanse of their lived experience as part of their theological engagement.

²¹ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 35.

²² Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 51.

²³ Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*; Marvin Andrew McMickle, *An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002).

²⁴ Haney, *Evangelism*, 58-59.

²⁵ Haney, *Evangelism*, 58-59.

²⁶ McMickle, *Encyclopedia*, 157-158.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 141-142.

Each of the aforementioned figures were bi-vocational – working in jobs outside of the Christian ministry to provide for themselves and their congregations, but also seeing their work as tools for their respective ministries. Henry H. Garnett’s paper was not an exclusively Christian newspaper, but the articles he chose to write and publish were in agreement with his overall Christian convictions as a preacher. In that vein, he uses the newspaper as a tool to fight against the systemic injustice that he believed marred the image of God in Black humanity. Rogers, also, uses his poetry to dismantle the alleged supremacy of whiteness. Each of these men were African American preachers and pastors who understood that various spheres of life were included in what it meant to preach the gospel.²⁸ They refused indoctrination into the European worldview that created a false binary of sacred and secular, and a tension between the two. These preachers had a deep investment in their African identity. Many of them better understood the plight of those they preached to, through the lens of their other vocations. Their holistic approach to preaching and to missionary work meant that engaging literary, public, arts and justice arenas was not optional – but necessary if they had any hope of improving the lives of believers.²⁹

Wilmore, Hopkins, and Haney suppose, as stated earlier, that part of the reason for this embrace of a holistic approach to mission and preaching was due to the powerful imprint of an African worldview.³⁰ There is not space in this article to delve into a full discussion of African worldviews and how they contributed to the formulation of African American faith.³¹ This however, requires a few words here for the sake of grounding the conversation. Dwight Hopkins is helpful as he declares:

Enslaved African Americans creatively forged their own understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and the purpose of humanity. Through scriptural insights, theological imagination, and direct contact with God, black bondsmen and bondswomen combined faith instincts from their African traditional religions with the justice message of the Christian gospel and planted the seeds for a black theology expressed through politics and culture.³²

²⁸ This has already been noted above but bears repeating here, that this essay is focusing on male preachers in this early model because of the patriarchy of the time and not as a celebration of it. The work of numerous women like Maria Stewart and Amanda Smith were vital to the life of congregations and communities. However, due to the overt patriarchy of the time, they were not allowed to function in the same roles as their male counterparts. Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); Smith, Amanda, *An Autobiography, the Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist: Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and ... in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India and Africa, as an Independent Missionary*, 1893.

²⁹ See the list at the beginning of this paragraph for specific examples.

³⁰ See also Valerie Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 2012).

³¹ Much more can and should be said about this, but for further treatment see the following works: Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, Kindle (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Spencer, Jon Michael, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1991).

³² Hopkins, *Shoes*, 13.

Haney points out it is no wonder that many of the early, and even current, African American political figures were, and are, clergy.³³ This model of the early African American preacher still exists today; whether through deliberate retention, societal necessity, or subconscious imprint. This historic model of the role of the African American preacher is vital to the discussion of how African American preachers today are able to engage Hip Hop culture. The activity of engaging the arts, engaging culture, speaking out politically, and educating communities is a rich legacy of Black preaching and Black missionary activity in this country. These concepts did not come to birth during the Civil Rights or Post-Civil Rights eras; they are the legacy of Black Christian faith in this country. This legacy continues in preachers and pastors who engage Black culture – or more specifically for this article, Hip Hop culture.

Contemporaries to the Model

The participants in this study validate that there are African American preachers today, who are thoughtfully engaging Hip Hop. The participants are all practitioners, but there are others doing this same work in the academy. There are many like Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman and Dr. Otis Moss III who function as academic practitioners.³⁴ All, however, seem to be following in the tradition of the model set forth in this work. Returning to the model of the early African American preacher, it is necessary to recall that the engagement of literature, commerce, poetry, etc. done from a decidedly Christian perspective. This is not to say that the literature, poetry, and published articles focused on Christian doctrine. It is, however, an affirmation that those preachers who were writing the literature, poetry, and articles spring from an underground spring of Christian faith that railed against overt oppression in society. Silence or refusal of engagement, when it came to injustice, would have been an affront to their very faith. Hence, social justice was not an optional accessory to Christianity, but part of the very heartbeat of their God. For this reason, the role of the African American preacher has historically called for social and cultural engagement – even at the risk of receiving the negative label of syncretism.³⁵ The barrier between sacred and secular in a more African worldview, as already discussed, is permeable at most and absent at least.

Black preachers today (male and female) who are thoughtfully engaging Hip Hop culture, see Hip Hop as part of the overall Black experience, rather than a music genre one can edit from a playlist or an optional soundtrack to elicit fond memories.

³³ Marsha Snulligan Haney, *Evangelism among African America Presbyterians*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007.

³⁴ That all of these mentioned are practitioners in some way is of vital importance. It shows the continuation of the model into contemporary times. It also shows this constant engagement of the entire lived experience.

³⁵ Although, as said earlier, Christianity is the most syncretistic of all the major religions and potentially the most translatable. In addition, the fear or concern of syncretism would not have come up until later periods of history; not truly being an issue for preachers of the time. See Walls, *Missionary Movement*; Sanneh, *Translating*.

Many of these preachers grew up with Hip Hop; meaning that they, and Hip Hop, went through growth, maturity, changes, successes, and failures together. Essentially, Hip Hop is not some culture 'over there' that can be left to youth or others. It is a vital part of African American culture (or perhaps, more specifically, a subculture), that is part of the very fabric of their being and must be engaged. Further, Hip Hop today is a global phenomenon³⁶ that is part of the reality and experience of countless other people spanning various socioeconomic backgrounds, and multiple generations.

These modern descendants of the early model, much like their ancestors, do not see a contradiction in engaging Hip Hop, as some of their contemporaries may.³⁷ Rather, they readily and passionately discuss how they interpret Hip Hop, and how they understand Hip Hop's impact upon their own lives and those they serve. Some of the respondents spoke of their coming to Hip Hop using Christian and salvific terminology.³⁸ Another group of respondents reported that the emcee and preacher both have a similar sense of calling.³⁹ In this group, they saw the emcee and the preacher both as gifts being created and used by God. Yet other participants see a unifying effect to Hip Hop culture - in that it gives the preacher language and imagery common to the people, they communicate with.⁴⁰

The modern orators, here, fit the model described in key ways. These contemporary preachers are functioning in several roles in their communities. They are engaged in the arts. They are educators and community organizers. They are spokespersons for their faith and for their people. One of the respondents in this study works in primary education; another is a Hip Hop artist. One respondent even uses the poetic books of the Bible and Hip Hop to teach poetry to inner city youth. Another respondent in the Southern California area is a respected advocate and community organizer. These preachers subconsciously - or by the direction of God - follow in the

³⁶ Marina Terkourafi, *The Languages of Global Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010).

³⁷ It should be sufficient to state here that Christianity is not monolithic in its regard for and approach towards culture. There are many pastors and traditions within Christianity that still hold a European dichotomy of sacred and secular. As such, they interpret scripture as mandating a type of holiness that separates itself from 'secular' culture. To see more of this, see Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*; Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

³⁸ One female respondent from the East Coast acknowledged that God used Hip Hop to save her life. She ranks the experience of 'coming' to Hip Hop just after her experience of 'coming' to Christ.

³⁹ Several respondents from various regions affirm that both the preacher and the emcee can have a 'calling' from God. Each of those who made this connection went on to describe emceeing and preaching as gifts that are given, and that the receiver has the obligation to use that gift.

⁴⁰ The work of Charles Kraft is important here as he works with communication theory from a missional perspective. His work shows that language is the most important symbol system for humans, as it conveys meaning that goes beyond the words and symbols expressed. Communication, for Kraft, must focus on the receptor. In this case, the preachers are engaging a shared vocabulary and system of symbols that both parties can encode and decode to grasp meaning. Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

footsteps laid before them. They are bi-vocational and multi-faceted. They firmly believe in a Jesus that identifies with their experience and the oppressed.

It is important to note, however, that none of the respondents (thus far) cites African American slave history or missional tradition as their impetus. They all, however, identify (to some degree) with the tradition of Black preaching. Further, they are engaging Hip Hop out of necessity. This means that they see Hip Hop as part of their identity and expression as African Americans. Hence, to deny an engagement of Hip Hop culture would be a denial of self-identity. To see the extent of what I describe in this section, simply peruse the biographies of the bishops of the Full Gospel Baptist Church.⁴¹ There, the reader can see the indelible impact that Hip Hop has made upon the lives of people who are leaders in the Christian community. Alternatively, one can scan the bookshelves (or browse Amazon) and you will find more and more preachers and pastors writing about Hip Hop culture.⁴² Preachers and pastors today, much like the model presented at the beginning of this essay, are relying upon their own Black experience to preach to their congregations. They see their culture and their experience as part of their identity, and not some separate sphere of their reality. Further, many of them are working outside of the church as well as inside. Many of these preachers are artists, entrepreneurs, writers, and scholars who view their engagement in these vocations as a natural extension of their calling. Their ancestors were bi-vocational, or multi-vocational, by necessity. Some of these contemporary clergy are also engaging in other work out of financial necessity, but large numbers of them are doing so out of passion and calling. As such, this cultural engagement with their entire lived experience influences and affects how they see scripture. They do not submit to the European bifurcation of reality. Rather, they engage all aspects of life as part of the Black experience and validate that experience as necessary for hearing and interpreting God's words contained in scripture.

Hip Hop Hermeneutic

Preachers who are engaging Hip Hop are reporting how Hip Hop influences their reading and understanding of scripture. They read the biblical narratives with contemporary, Hip Hop lenses; not as ancient stories disconnected from a present life. Engaging the language of the model presented in this work, these preachers are utilizing their lived experience to interpret and proclaim their faith in Christ.⁴³ For

⁴¹ "About Full Gospel Baptist," *Full Gospel Baptist* (blog), accessed July 14, 2017, <https://www.fullgospelbaptist.org/about/>. No less than three of the executive cabinet members refer to hip-hop culture or hip-hop artists as important aspects of their own experience or identity.

⁴² Smith and Jackson, *Hip-Hop Church*; Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*; and Hodge, *Soul* have already been mentioned. See also Stephens III, Benjamin and Ralph C. Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching & Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2009); Hudson, Willie, *The Holy Ghost Got a New Dance: An Examination of Black Theology and Holy Hip-Hop in Inner City Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016) et al.

⁴³ Paul engages within his letters in the New Testament this same work. It is also the same type of master teaching that Jesus engages in; speaking in parables and teaching the masses.

example, one can see the historic friction between the Northern and Southern kingdoms of the Old Testament through the lens of the East Coast-West Coast beef. For example, one can hear the long-suffering biblical Job's declaration that man is but a few days and full of trouble as the tune of Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life*.⁴⁴

What exactly, though, is a Hip Hop hermeneutic? Dini Metro-Roland, out of Western Michigan University, uses the term "Hip Hop Hermeneutics" in relation to multicultural education.⁴⁵ She uses Gadamer's work on extricating hermeneutics from biblical theology to philosophy to build her framework.⁴⁶ This work, however, is seeking to return the phrase to its biblical context. By including the term "hermeneutic," this work can build upon the tradition of Black theology.⁴⁷ Specifically, this essay builds upon Cone's premier work and definition that a hermeneutic is the "theological norm" that determines how sources are used.⁴⁸ Cone's early work focused on the liberation of Blacks as the hermeneutic, stating: "Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology."⁴⁹ This then determines the interpretation of scripture for the oppressed as well as the existential realities of Black lives. A Hip Hop hermeneutic, then, is a theological norm that allows an interpretation of scripture and embraces a view of the existential realities of the oppressed and marginalized.⁵⁰

Hip Hop hermeneutics builds on a tripod. The legs of this tripod are fundamentals for Hip Hop hermeneutics and correspond with cardinal elements and procedures for Black theology. First, one must see Hip Hop as part of the Black experience. Second, the Black experience, including Hip Hop, is an established source for Black theological exploration. Third, utilizing Hip Hop in this way is a continuation of the legacy and tradition of Black theology.

James Cone's, *The Spirituals and the Blues* informs the first leg of this hermeneutic tripod. At the time of Cone's writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, he was dealing with the tension between the church and the blues. Contemporary tension between the church and Hip Hop directly correlates to the issue Cone addressed for previous generations. He even argued that the contemporary issue is but a generational

⁴⁴ Jay-Z, "Hard Knock Life", by Shawn Carter, Charles Strouse, Martin Charnin, and Amin Ramoul. recorded October 27, 1998, in *Volume 2...Hard Knock Life, Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam*, MP3.

⁴⁵ Dini Metro-Roland, "Hip Hop Hermeneutics and Multicultural Education: A Theory of Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Educational Studies* 45 (2010): 560-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2010.524682>.

⁴⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (The Crossroad Publishing Corporation, 1991).

⁴⁷ Including Womanist theology.

⁴⁸ Cone, *Liberation*, 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, ix.

⁵⁰ To use the language of Howard Thurman, the disinherited who constantly live with their backs against the wall. Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Reprint (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

evolution of the same apprehension.⁵¹ Cone concluded that both the spirituals and the blues flowed from the same fount – the black experience. According to Cone, there are two key issues at hand. First, the blues (and Hip Hop, by extension) are misunderstood. The blues is determined to be of no value to the spiritual life; or, at worst, contrary to it, because of the often-graphic content, the focus on existential realities, and the physical body. Cone contends, however, one must properly understand it as a *secular spiritual*. “They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.”⁵² This concept of a secular spiritual refers, again, to the discussion of the philosophical, binary Western construct of spiritual and physical; sacred and secular. Cone specifically asserts that, “Africans viewed life as a whole and did not make the distinctions between the “secular” and the “sacred” that are found in Western culture.”⁵³ What Cone puts forth is an alternative to this Western worldview and a more indigenous African view that affirms the body as part of the spiritual.⁵⁴

The blues and the spirituals (by extension Hip Hop and the church), for Cone, flow from the same experiential fountain; they are dependent upon each other. “Indeed, I contend that the blues and the spirituals flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without the commentary of the other.”⁵⁵ Hence, they are not at odds nor are they mutually exclusive. In fact, the Black experience is incomplete without both voices. To apply Cone’s language then, Hip Hop is a secular spiritual. This may account for how modern preachers so readily engage it as part of their hermeneutic. This work affirms that Hip Hop extends from the same seedbed as the spirituals. Therefore, it inextricably links to the Black experience, to the church, and to any proclamation from the church.

Hip Hop, then, is a needed voice that completes the Black experience, and flows from the same source as the spirituals. If indeed Hip Hop is part of the Black experience – part of the lived experience of African-Americans – then it must be part of any honest theological exercise built upon or working out of the Black context.

⁵¹ Cone identifies the spirituals as the mother of gospel music. For this research, we will see the spirituals as the mother of the black church in general – and by extension, of black preaching. Cone also identifies the blues as the mother of rap (as he called it at that time) and hip-hop.

⁵² Cone, *Spirituals*, loc 1423.

⁵³ *Ibid*, loc 587-589.

⁵⁴ Cone is not alone in this view. Travis Harris detailed that Charis Chaney, Charles Howard, and Andre Johnson have also addressed this. Harris concludes that the use of sacred and secular language, with regard to Hip Hop, is unnecessary, problematic, and recommends avoiding this practice. Travis Harris, “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012), <http://jhsonline.org/?termID=130&portfolioID=45#ut-portfolio-items-45-anchor>.

⁵⁵ Cone, *Spirituals*, loc 1416.

The next segment of the hermeneutic tripod requires that Hip Hop be a source for Black theology, due to it being part of the Black experience. The Black experience and/or culture have always been a source for theology in the Black context. Cone rightly asserts in *A Black Theology of Liberation* that, "Culture, then, is the medium through which the human person encounters the divine..."⁵⁶ Cone built his theological enterprise upon the precedence set by Karl Barth and Paul Tillich.⁵⁷ In this, Cone continued the tradition of critical assessment, contextualization, and validation of the Black experience that his ancestors modeled. As Cone worked through this seminal piece, he lists the Black experience as the very first source for Black theology. He is dogmatic that no Black theology can exist without an eye on the reality and suffering of Black life. In Cone's generation, he demanded, "Black theology must speak to and for black people..."⁵⁸

Womanist theology informs the third leg of the hermeneutic tripod. After James Cone and others lay out the foundation of Black theology, a new generation of scholars began asking important questions of Black theology. Scholars like Jacquelyn Grant and Katie Canon assert Black theology had not properly considered the entire Black experience. Canon and Grant highlighted the patriarchal blind spot, detailing that Black women were the oppressed of the oppressed. While Black theology champions the experience of Black men in the church and academia, Feminism was doing the same for White women. Black women, however, did not feel represented by either. Here is where Canon, Grant, and others push the oppression of Black women by their own race due to their gender, and by their own gender due to their race. Hence, Womanist theology affirms all Black bodies. As Grant talks about Womanist theology, she affirms that interpreting scripture in light of the Black woman's context is a source for Womanist theology.⁵⁹ While Grant and Canon critically assess Black theology, they also continue the tradition of affirming the Black experience as a source for a theology done from a Black perspective. Womanist theology forced Black theology to recognize the oppression and suffering of all Black bodies; not just the male heterosexual bodies.⁶⁰ Emilie Townes and Kelly Brown Douglas, then, remind us that the Black experience was not isolated to one voice or perspective.⁶¹ The Hip Hop hermeneutic continues this operational legacy. This Black experience now, however, narrates and curates by Hip Hop culture, as well as those who grew up in a Hip Hop generation. Thus, to take the

⁵⁶ Cone, *Liberation*, 23.

⁵⁷ Both of which Cone says would agree on the importance of culture; though to different degrees. See Cone, *Liberation*.

⁵⁸ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997)118.

⁵⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, 1st ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁶⁰ Also, see Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995); Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

⁶¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Emilie Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil & Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Black experience seriously, one must consider Hip Hop in any interpretation of scripture.

Relevance for Black Preaching

Henry Mitchell and Cleophus LaRue ground Black preaching in the soil of the Black experience, just as Cone and James Evans have done for Black theology.⁶² LaRue and Mitchell also detail that the lived experience of Black persons is a reality that comes to bear on any reading of the sacred scriptures. This is in concert with what Black and Womanist theology put forth. Olin P. Moyd would add that Black preaching is a form of doing and practicing theology.⁶³ These conditions and experiences play a pivotal role in the preaching event. Henry Mitchell details the importance of a hermeneutic in Black preaching that connects the preacher to the audience:

The best Black dialogues between preacher and congregation that I have studied have been uniformly prone to start with familiar biblical and living materials, which stretch the thinking and increase the insights of the hearers. The familiar is used as a model for understanding the unfamiliar. Minds and spirits are propelled into the unknown along trajectories established by association with previous experiences. At times these dialogues included parables, even as did Jesus. At other times they simply included such colorful descriptions that ancient biblical experiences were entered into vicariously and bridged over into modern life...The Black preacher must be ear-deep in the condition of the people, and out of this comes the easy dialogue between the preacher and the people, whose lives are so intimately close together – so close that the themes which invade the consciousness of the one also invade the other.⁶⁴

The contemporary preachers engaged in this research are doing this work, as their predecessor have. They are developing their own hermeneutic. They are affirming that Hip Hop culture is part of the larger African American culture. Hip Hop is part of the familiar that helps the congregation connect to the unfamiliar. Hip Hop continues to tell the gritty and grimy stories that other cultural products and genres tend to ignore. The preacher that engages Hip Hop does so out of faithfulness to the tradition of Black faith, not out of rebellion to orthodoxy. Although many would argue that an orthodoxy that rejects a Hip Hop narrative, is merely a veiled Western construct that is alien and hostile to Blackness anyway. These preachers maintain that Hip Hop is a powerful voice for the historic and contemporary realities of Black life. As such, these preachers are looking at texts with Hip Hop lenses and engaging a system of symbols and vocabulary that connect them with their audience. When they read the ancient truths of scripture, they hear it in the raspy, feminine voice of MC Lyte, or the storytelling flow of

⁶² James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975); James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); James LaRue Cleophus, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, Kindle (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁶³ Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 102, 106.

Slick Rick. They see the battles and wars of the bible as gang warfare or illegitimate wars fought by power-hungry nations today. They see the oppression and poverty in these divine pages and hear the prophetic lyrics of Tupac and Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five. The minor and major prophets are emcees through the generations calling out as a reminder to God's presence, even in times of rebellion.

Summing It Up

Gayraud Wilmore makes it clear that the Christianity embraced by slaves and former slaves was not simply the faith of slave owners handed down to poor, wretched Negroes. Rather, the faith of these Africans on American soil had undergone a rigorous theological and existential process.⁶⁵ African Americans saw the lack and contradiction in this expression of Christianity and dared to imagine (prophetically and practically) an alternative.⁶⁶ So, then, the first missional activity that we see African Americans engaging in is the work of rigorously engaging and contextualizing a faith that would speak to their cultural and existential realities; validating their own experience. A God of the great by-and-by, that gave no thought to the dignity and deliverance of Black bodies, was no God at all. An African American faith would have to speak to the marred image of Black bodies, the eternal reassurance of Black souls, and the improvement of the conditions of Black life. This is what Haney, Wilmore, and Felder speak. African American faith, from its inception has been concerned with the lived experience. Black and Womanist theologians would continue this tradition in developing their own hermeneutics that affirmed the Black experience. It is easy to assume that this theological thinking and missional activity birthed solely out of a need for survival. This reductionist view, however, does not take into account the deep Christological roots of the incarnation and the understanding of God's image that fed and nurtured this survival.

This essay posits the preachers described herein are continuing the work of the early African American preachers and Black theologians by engaging the total existence of Blacks in order to forge a faith that embraces the divine image God placed in Black bodies. Hence, the next iteration of this historic drive is a Hip Hop hermeneutic. A theological praxis that insists that the Black experience of the Hip Hop generation is just as valid as that of the generations of the blues and jazz. These preachers are serving several functions in their communities and demolishing the traditional Western wall between sacred and secular, that stands firmly in place by Western philosophy and religion. This is not a trend; it is the continuation of the legacy of Black faith. As the theologians, scholars, and practitioners before them have done, they are affirming the Black experience and boldly declaring that it is also part of the process of reading and

⁶⁵ Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*.

⁶⁶ J. Kameron Carter calls this kind of prophetic daring, 'poiesis' - envisioning, imagining, or creating another world. Carter, J. Kameron, "Naked in the Frequency: Christianity's Postracial Blues," 2017.

interpreting scripture. If the church is to thrive in the coming years, especially in African American contexts, it will do so through a Hip Hop hermeneutic.

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