Wright et al.: I Gotta Testify: Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church
Sponsored By:
North Park Universities Communication Arts Department
(https://www.northpark.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/majors/communication-arts/communication-studies/)

Save The Kids Foundation (http://savethekidsgroup.org/)

STK, a fully volunteer grass-roots organization rooted in hip hop and transformative justice, advocates for alternatives to, and the end of, the incarceration of all youth.
Foreword

Joshua K. Wright

Hip Hop is undergoing a spiritual awakening! Growing numbers of artists are incorporating their religious faith into their music and performances. At the 59th annual Grammy Awards in 2017, Chance the Rapper performed a medley of his hits “All We Got,” “No Problem,” and “Blessings (Reprise).” Chance was accompanied by an orchestra, an African American choir dressed in white robes, and gospel greats Kirk Franklin and Tamela Mann. Chance’s acceptance speech for the Best New Artist award ended with his mighty proclamation: “Glory be to God. I claim the victory in the name of the Lord.” Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole have included themes of spirituality, faith, and religion in their albums. This incorporation of spiritual themes in Hip Hop is not a new phenomenon. Lauryn Hill’s 1998 debut album, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, sampled the chorus (we’re marching to Zion) from the hymn “Come Ye That Love the Lord.”

This theme of spirituality was also found in more controversial artists. DMX’s (Earl Simmons’s) albums in the late 1990s, such as It’s Dark and Hell is Hot, were full of profanity, hyperviolent rhetoric, sex, and drugs. Nevertheless, they always ended with a prayer. DMX appeared on The Breakfast Club in 2016 taking sips from a fifth (of a gallon) of Hennessy as he talked about his desires to become a preacher. DMX would not be the first rapper to enter the pulpit. In 2004, soon after Run-DMC officially disbanded, lead rapper Run (Joseph Simmons) became an ordained Pentecostal pastor. Bad Boy Records top-selling rapper Ma$e (Mason Betha), perhaps following in the footsteps of Rev. Run, put away his shiny suits to start his ministry, Saving a Nation Endangered, Church International (SANE) in 1999. Other rappers are finding ways to minister without becoming pastors. Former UGK member Bun B (Bernard Freeman) co-taught a course on religion and Hip Hop with Anthony Pinn at Rice University in Houston, Texas in 2015. Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus Jr.) released a gospel album titled Bible of Love in 2018. The album topped the Gospel Albums chart for seven non-consecutive weeks.

Ice Cube’s music underwent a monumental transition as a result of his conversion to Islam in the early 1990s. Other rappers have been heavily influenced by Islam. Mos

2 DMX, “Prayer (skit),” It’s Dark and Hell is Hot (Ruff Ryders/Def Jam, 1998).
Def and Lupe Fiasco symbolize the shift within Hip Hop and the larger African-American community toward Sunni Islam. Any history lesson on Hip Hop is incomplete without mention of Islam. Several rappers are affiliated with Sunni Islam, the Nation of Islam, or the Five Percent Nation. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was responsible for ending a feud in the mid-1990s between Common and Ice Cube which could have turned violent. The Universal Zulu Nation, founded by pioneer Hip Hop dj Afrika Bambaataa, adopted doctrines of the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation into their mission. The albums of Wu Tang Clan and their affiliates include references to gods, earths, seeds, and wiz, all terms in the Five Percent Nation. AZ references the influence of the Five Percent Nation on Hip Hop in Nas’s song “Life’s A Bitch”:

_We were beginners in the hood as five percenters_
_but something must of got in us cause all of us turned to sinners._

The Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam founded by Clarence 13X in 1963, teaches followers that the black man is God personified, and man can achieve godliness through prayer, meditation, clean living, and physical fitness. The messages of the Five Percent theology echoed throughout the lyrics of Wu Tang Clan, Busta Rhymes, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, and Erykah Badu in the 1980s and 1990s. Jay-Z refers to himself as Jova the god and has adorned himself with a gold Five Percent Nation medallion in past public appearances.

Thus far Judaism has not been as relevant in Hip Hop as Christianity and Islam, but that may soon change thanks to Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick’s conversion to Judaism is the result of his cousin Carl Duckworth who changed his name to Karni Ben Israel and joined Israel United in Christ in Florida. Cousin Carl introduced Kendrick to Deuteronomy 28, which Black Israelites believe is a prophecy of the enslavement and forced migration of African people. Jacob S. Dorman studies the history of the Black Israelites in his book _Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions_ (2013). Dorman traces the influence of Israelite practices in the Holiness Christianity movement of the 1890s and the emergence of the Pentecostal movement in 1906. A second wave of Black Israelite synagogues arose during the Great Migration as blacks moved to the North. Arnold Josiah Ford, a colleague of Marcus Garvey, founded his own synagogue in Harlem during the 1930s. In 1969 Abba Bivens started the Israelite School of Universal Practical Knowledge (ISUPK) in New York. ISUPK spread their word through street preaching demonstrations. Kendrick weaves in the principles of ISUPK on the songs “Yah” and “Fear” from his 2017 album _Damn._

**Yeezus Walks**

Many Christians see a sharp contradiction between God’s teachings and the abundance of gratuitous materialism, misogyny, hubris, and violence in mainstream Hip Hop music. Hip Hop, like jazz and the blues decades earlier, is viewed as being the
“devil’s music” in some circles. Rev. Calvin O. Butts, III, the pastor of Harlem’s historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, threatened to drive a bulldozer over explicit rap CDs in 1993. T.D. Jakes, the senior pastor of The Potter’s House, a megachurch in Dallas, Texas, once said that the contradictions found in the music of Hip Hop artists are “indicative of a generation that is misguided and lost.”

Hip Hop music is not the first genre of popular black music to be criticized by the church. Jazz and the blues were labeled as the Devil’s music by older generations. Theologian James H. Cone recognized the value of the blues. Cone referred to the blues as the profane cousin of the sacred (Negro) spirituals sung in the church. According to Cone, both forms of music provided blacks with an outlet to affirm their humanity in the face of oppression. Blues artists often walked a fine line between themes of the sacred and secular in their music. The same can be said of many of the previously discussed Hip Hop artists.


In 2019 Kanye began hosting invitation-only church services which he called “Sunday Services.” The services featured a concert by a live gospel choir and band. The choir sang traditional gospel songs and gospel renditions of his mainstream hits. Snippets of the services were posted on Instagram and YouTube, helping out those who were not able to physically attend. Kanye delivered a live Sunday Service performance on Easter Sunday morning at the 2019 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Music Festival in Indio, California. Kanye’s choir—consisting of more than forty millennials—performed traditional and contemporary gospel songs such as: “How Excellent,” “This Is the Day,” “Brighter Day,” “Never Would Have Made It,” and “Satan, We’re Gonna Tear Your Kingdom Down.” The choir also performed gospel renditions of Kanye’s hits along with snippets of secular songs by Stevie Wonder, “Soul II Soul,” and “Aly us.” Memorable moments from the service included Chance the Rapper’s praise dance, DMX’s riveting two-minute prayer at the end of the choir’s performance of “Ultralight Beam,” and a tearful Kanye dropping to his knees in prayer.

The Easter service could be live-streamed worldwide on YouTube. This illustrated Kanye’s global platform and his ability to reach believers and nonbelievers in Jesus

---

Christ—something not afforded to most pastors and choirs. Kanye’s Easter service received mixed reviews. While some viewers and concertgoers applauded his efforts to uplift the masses spiritually, others, including some members of the media, were skeptical of his motive. An NBC reporter questioned if this was a stunt to make fans forget about his controversial statements on slavery or his polarizing alliance with President Donald Trump.\(^5\) Another reporter from National Public Radio (NPR) said it was little more than vanity run amok. “He is the church,” wrote the reporter.\(^6\)

Other critics called the Sunday service a fashion show for the next line from his Yeezy Season. Kanye, the choir members, and the musicians all wore matching mauve and rust sweat suits as they performed atop a grassy hill. The matching outfits were Kanye’s unique take on the robes that church choirs typically adorn. Kanye dyed his hair to match the color of his outfit. Concert attendees could purchase $50 socks, $70 T-shirts, and $22 sweatshirts emblazoned with phrases such as “Trust God” and “Jesus Walks” from the “Church Clothes” merchandise tent.\(^7\) Days later it was rumored that Kanye wanted to launch his own church. “It wouldn’t be the traditional, 3-hymns-and-a-sermon thing. Instead, it would be a way to point people to Jesus through the arts and through a community of people who love and care for each other,” a source close to Kanye told People.\(^8\)

**We on an Ultralight Beam**

In 2016, professors VaNatta Ford, Adria Goldman, and I placed a call for papers for a special journal issue on Kanye West, religion, and spirituality in Hip Hop. The goal of this project, “I Gotta Testify: Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church,” was to add a new perspective to the scholarly discourse on Hip Hop and Christianity within classrooms, religious institutions, and popular culture by focusing on Kanye. We chose to focus on Kanye because he has been one of Hip Hop’s most influential artists in the past decade. Furthermore, Kanye is one of the most polarizing celebrities in America and across the globe. His music, fashion, political views, and family (which includes the Kardashians) dominate discourse on social media, blogs, television, and other forms of mass media. With the exception of Julius Bailey’s 2014 edited book, *The Cultural Impact of

---


Kanye West, there has been little scholarly work published on Kanye.9 Bailey’s book contained just one essay, written by Monica R. Miller, dedicated to the theme of Kanye and religion.10 We intended to produce a nontraditional journal issue, partly because Kanye has never adhered to traditional boundaries. We also chose this method because we wanted to provide a document suitable for both academic and popular audiences. Kanye West identifies as a Christian and primarily uses Christian themes in his music, videos, concerts, and messaging. This topic is important to us because far too often the masses who embrace this music and the artists are the most excluded from these scholarly conversations. This edited volume is composed of four multidisciplinary essays and eleven meditations that explore Kanye, religion, and Hip Hop. The meditations are a collection of short essays, poems, and sermonettes provided by academic faculty, doctoral students, clergy, media, a film director, and a noted poet. Each addresses Kanye West from different stages in his personal, musical, and spiritual evolution.

Bibliography


# Contents

**Foreword**  
Joshua K. Wright  

**Introduction - Enigma Embodied: The Curious Complexity of Kanye West**  
Daniel White Hodge  

**Meditation - On Millennials, Hip Hop, and Faith**  
Larrin Robertson  

**Essay - The Prosperity Gospels of Superstardom: Kanye’s Philosophy**  
Catherine John, Leroy Myers, Jr. and Zachary Leacock  

**Meditation - Yeezy’s (Impossible) Love in Fugitivity’s Strings: A Meditation on “Runaway”**  
James Manigault-Bryant and LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant  

**Meditation - “Ultralight Beam”: The Gospel According to Kanye West**  
Jeffrey McCune  

**Essay - Yeezus Is Jesuz: Examining the Socio-Hermeneutical Transmediated Images of Jesus Employed by Kanye West**  
Daniel White Hodge  

**Meditation - Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks,” Black Suffering, and the Problem of Evil**  
Angela M. Nelson  

**Essay - I’m so Self-Conscious: Kanye West’s Rhetorical Wrestling with Theodicy and Nihilism**  
Conā S. M. Marshall
| Meditation – We Killed Kanye: A Manifesto to the Old Kanye Fans | 97 |
| Tari Wariebi |

| Poem - Untitled | 99 |
| Jasmine Mans |

| Poem - Footnotes for Kanye | 103 |
| Jasmine Mans |

| Essay - For Colored Girls and Boys Who Have Considered Suicide / When Prayer and Good Music Weren’t Enough | 106 |
| Joshua K. Wright |

| Meditation - Losing Kanye | 123 |
| Cynthia Estremera |

| Meditation - “How Great:” Reflections on Kanye’s Best Prodigy, Chance the Rapper | 125 |
| Joshua K. Wright |

| Meditation from Rev. Nathaniel Yates, Metropolitan Youth Pastor | 128 |
| Nathaniel Yates |

| Closing Thoughts | 133 |
| VaNatta S. and Adria Y. Goldman |

| Contributors | 136 |
Introduction: Enigma Embodied: The Curious Complexity of Kanye West

Daniel White Hodge

“There’s no way Hip Hop and religion work. No way!” “I just can’t see anything coming out of religion and Hip Hop. It’s like the two don’t even go together.” “Rap music is of the devil. To say there is any God in it is blasphemous!” These were direct quotes I received when I began my journey into the field of Religion and Hip Hop. I was met with firm opposition and the very notion of combining Hip Hop and religion left many angered, bewildered, confused, but definitely not speechless. It was a trifling time and the very thought of me pursuing a PhD that focused purely on the theological aspects of Tupac Amaru Shakur gave off blasphemous overtones to even the strongest “progressives” of that period. Well, times have changed. The study of Hip Hop in academic settings has grown exponentially.

The Field of Hip Hop Studies

The study of Hip Hop spans, now, over two decades. Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Anthony Pinn, Jeff Chang, Nelson George, Bakari Kitwana, and Murray Forman, among others, were among the first scholars to give Hip Hop academic “feet” and legitimacy. Rose’s work Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994) discussed the context and cultural attributes of Hip Hop culture and gave insight into the contextual elements of the culture and musical genre. Dan Charnas writes one of the most exhaustive books on how Hip Hop developed into a commercial, trans-global, multi-billion-dollar entity and gives direct insight into how Hip Hop “lost its soul and went corporate” over the last thirty five years. He gives a powerful historical account of the culture from a socio-economic posit.11

Using Black popular culture as a backdrop, much of the scholarship engages the historical and socio-political areas of Hip Hop. Jeff Chang and Nelson George give accurate social portraits of the historical settings, which gave rise to Hip Hop. They lay out Hip Hop’s historical ontology and argue for the legitimacy of Hip Hop within the

American pop culture scene. While Kitwana describes what the Hip Hop generation is, he also does a cultural study on the attraction of Hip Hop to White adolescents. Yvonne Bynoe continued this conversation and asserted both the political leadership within Hip Hop and the growing need for it within the young Black community.

These works give a solid foundation to the field of Hip Hop studies and legitimize it in academia. Hip Hop studies, as coined by scholars such as Mark Anthony Neal and Michael Eric Dyson by the mid 2000’s, is a field which encompasses sociology, anthropology, communication studies, religious studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, missiological studies, and psychology. It is a multi-disciplinary area of study—much like the culture of Hip Hop. In its early phases, Dyson, West, and Pinn began the conversation of the socio-religious within Hip Hop and the dimensions of the quest for meaning in the lyrics of artists.

These studies, while groundbreaking in their right context, tended to focus largely on the lyrical features of artists and did not engage the broader social, religious, political, and cultural contexts. In 1991, Jon Michael Spencer published a special edition of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology titled “The Emergency of Black and The Emergency of Rap.” In this issue, the elements of Hip Hop’s socio-religious context were

12 The mid to late 1990’s gave rise to a multitude of scholarship focused around Hip Hop culture. Scholars such as Russell A. Potter, Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism (New York: State University of New York Press / Sunny Series, 1995); Michael Eric Dyson, Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Todd Boyd, Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997); Mark Anthony Neal, “Sold out on Soul: The Corporate Annexation of Black Popular Music,” Popular Music and Society 21, no. 3 (1997) all gave treatment to the multi-levels of Hip Hop within communication, cultural, and African American studies. These works were critical in understanding Hip Hop beyond its historical aspects.


15 This of course is arguable, but in the last decade of Hip Hop scholarship, most academic professional associations have started a section or group on Hip Hop studies. This along with the growth of doctoral candidates doing their dissertations on or around a Hip Hop issue is grounds to suggest that Hip Hop has, in fact, grown from just a sub-cultural study.

16 A little known work published by Russell Potter (1995) examines the rhetorical aspects of Hip Hop culture from the point of view of communications. Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism was the first to argue that Hip Hop vernacular might in fact be part of the postmodern language.

17 By socio-religious, I mean the conflation and connection between the religious and the sociological. In other words, the interaction between what is religious, spiritual, and, faith sensibilities of a particular group, culture, people, musical genre, and/or space (geographic). This can also embody the social constructs, social developments, and social conditions within that which is religious and spiritual; something especially helpful to comprehend for the missiologist.
examined. This pioneering work began to explore what protest and prophecy was like in Hip Hop. William Perkins wrote an essay on the Islamic rudiments within Hip Hop, and Angela Spence Nelson argued for the theological scopes of Hip Hop within rap artists Kool Moe Dee and Public Enemy. This work broke ground on the religious arenas of Hip Hop. Then, in 1996, Michael Eric Dyson forged new pathways at the height of the Golden Era of Hip Hop (1987-1996) with his book Between God & Gangster Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Popular Culture, which took elements of the Black religious experience and applied them to Hip Hop culture. An avant-garde work, Dyson would also follow up with his work on Tupac (see chapter three). Anthony Pinn, in 1995, digs even deeper with his work on suffering, pain, and evil within the Black theology in Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology. This book also created fresh arguments around what it meant to be Black, to suffer, and still desire some type of response from God. Pinn broke from the Black Christian lens so many scholars had taken. He peered deep into the issue of suffering within the Black community and challenged typical notions of Judeo Christian suffering: how a ‘good’ God could allow suffering for a specific group of people. Within this work, Pinn peers into what suffering looks like within a Hip Hop context by arguing for “nitty-gritty hermeneutics” — a hermeneutics for life that goes beyond a ‘just pray about it’ worldview. This is the essence of Hip Hop. Pinn continued by publishing an edited volume in 2003, Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music, which was also pioneering as it exclusively explored theological and spiritual extents within Hip Hop. This work was foundational for the study of religion in Hip Hop context. It challenged the notions that the study of religion was limited to popularized music, such as Rock & Roll, Jazz, and Metal. Works which explored music and religion, often overlooked Hip Hop as a field of study, or, worse, footnoted it as an “emerging culture” and disregarded it altogether.

18 During this time, the era known as the “Golden Era” of Hip Hop (the era commonly known between the years 1987-1996), a strong Muslim element existed within Hip Hop. Ice Cube was known to be part of the Nation Of Islam and rap groups such as X-Clan and Gang Starr were associated with the Zulu Nation—connected to the Islamic roots.


This type of “disregard” is typical for ethnic minority arts and media. Hip Hop’s bravado, hard hitting social messages, and Black male power is often seen as a threat to hegemonic systems of domination; thus, it is either labeled as “evil,” “immoral,” “racist,” and/or “violent” when, in comparison, White male artists such as Insane Clown Posse, are able to sing about death, killing others, and morbid fantasies of sex and “sin” and receive nowhere near the negative press that rap artists receive. Therefore, Pinn’s work was foundational in establishing links between rap and religion, the spiritual and the profane, and a quest for a contextual deity in Hip Hop contexts.

Related approaches to Hip Hop and religion have also been emerging within the last decade. Christian perspectives on Hip Hop such as Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson’s work *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with The Movement Shaping Our Culture* (2006), gives deference to Black youth and Hip Hop engagement from a Christian context. Smith and Jackson explore what a “Hip Hop church” may look like for a new approach to “church.” Alex Gee and John Teter created a “Bible study” text exploring the lyrics and theological stances within Tupac Shakur and Lauryn Hill’s work in *Jesus and The Hip Hop Prophets: Spiritual Insights from Lauryn Hill and Tupac Shakur* (2003). These works are crucial, although niche, and focused largely on “evangelistic tools,” for the study of Hip Hop and religion.

Christina Zanfagna, an ethnomusicologist, investigates Hip Hop by understanding the people’s responses, reactions, and worldviews within the culture of Hip Hop under an ethnomusicological background. Zanfagna writes,

…my study seeks to redefine the parameters of “spirituality” – that is, what is considered spiritual – it is not my intention to give a hard fast definition of Hip Hop’s spirituality or even define what kind of God figure Hip Hop music might point to, for such theological preoccupations would obscure the flexible, adaptive, ecumenical nature of Hip Hop’s anatomy of belief and the spiritual experience it produces.

Here Zanfagna, also evoking the importance of a theomusicological study, begins to explore the profane nature within Hip Hop culture and pushes deeper than lyrical

---

21 Note that groups such as The 2Live Crew received negative press regarding their lyrics and sexualized messages which went all the way to the Supreme Court. Problematic yes, but White male Rock and Metal groups such as Poison received none of the same treatment who, in videos, openly engage in sexualized imagery very similar to The 2Live Crew.


analysis within the culture. Zanfagna argues that the profane aspects of Hip Hop—connecting them back to Black musical genres such as Blues and Jazz—actually offer theological insight once you move past the seemingly sinful façade.24

Recent works by Monica Miller, Ebony Utley, Andre Johnson, Emmitt Price, and Ralph Watkins offer a broader, yet specific, look into the dimensions of Hip Hop theology. These works are more focused on critically examining the theology of Hip Hop and also provide a much needed “outside” perspective. Miller, for instances, comes from secular humanist space and offers critical insight into the study of Hip Hop’s religion.

Miller offers a strong critique of Hip Hop’s religious areas while challenging the notions that Hip Hop’s religion is Christian centered. Miller explores Hip Hop’s religion and pushes us to look beyond what Russell McCutcheon calls a “private affair” in religion when the narrative becomes a tradition and experience that is universalized in the world and argues that we should not limit the religious narrative to just a singular phenomenon.26 Miller also challenges the study of Hip Hop and religion by naming works which approach it from Hegemonic studies, mainly within Christian contexts which limit the study of Hip Hop and religion broadly.27 Miller plainly questions whether the religious is actually religious, or whether it is hyper-imposed by creative authors wanting to find something that is not there. These are tough, yet needed questions for us as Hip Hop scholars to wrestle with. I will discuss more on this perspective later.

Johnson’s reader provides what a construction of Hip Hop’s spirituality looks like and creates a dialog between religious expressions and the space in which they were created. These essays provide a two part focus on theoretical and methodical approaches—which, as the field of Hip Hop Studies develops, is a much needed conversation. How might one conduct extensive and longitudinal research specifically focused on the religious expressions? The second section examines Hip Hop and religion—what are the aspects of and dimensions within the religious in Hip Hop? Johnson provides a needed resource for Hip Hop Studies by creating a reader to engage its religious spaces.

Ebony Utley describes the “Gangsta’s God” as a rhetorician’s study into the socio-spirituality in Hip Hop. Utley covers the racial implications of Biggie’s “Jesus Piece” (a

gold and diamond encrusted medallion of a personified White Jesus) within Hip Hop, who tend to criticize White images of deity, yet connect with it in the social market place of capital and social status.\textsuperscript{28}

Watkins is creating a romantic view of Hip Hop and its theological and spiritual dimensions—while this could be viewed negatively and prematurely given the newness of the emerging field of religion and Hip Hop, Watkins addresses such issues as Hip Hop’s spiritual connection to the Blues,\textsuperscript{29} theological truth in story, and the spiritual discourse within narratives of oppression.\textsuperscript{30} Watkin’s work provides a needed framework in understanding the “how” of Hip Hop’s theological capacities.

And for those seeking a more concise reading in the field of Hip Hop and religion, the anthology \textit{The Hip Hop and Religion Reader} (2015), edited by Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, gives an exhaustive look into the scholarship, both Christian and non-Christian alike, with Hip Hop at its core and context. This volume stands alone as the first anthology to examine Hip Hop from a religious perspective. It is joined by a reader, \textit{Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US} (2015), edited by Monica Miller, Anthony Pinn, and rapper Bun B, which delves into emerging scholarship and methodology in the field of religious and Hip Hop Studies. By using a rap artist as an editor, the scholarship is much sounder and provides that emic perspective for those seeking a broader understanding. Once again, this is crucial for any missiologist seeking to have a knowledge about this generation and Hip Hop.

Works such as these have broadened the study of Hip Hop and religion and have thereby expanded Hip Hop Studies. It is within these studies, that this special issue picks up the conversation. Theologically speaking, how \textbf{does} Hip Hop construct a theological discourse and how \textbf{is} that theology formed? Let us now examine the paradoxes of Hip Hop’s theology and why that paradox is needed.

\textbf{The Virtuous in The Paradox of Hip Hop’s Theology}

The obscure part of Hip Hop is its theology. Would anyone outside of scholars consider it to be theological? What is it? Moreover, what kind of theology is it? Is Hip Hop rooted in religion? Or is Hip Hop truly misunderstood by those professing to be pious and theological? Those who only see rap music through the media’s eyes or who do not understand cultural matters, tend to see loud music, rough sounding lyrics, deep bass, low riding pants, long white T-shirts, and ominous facial expressions in opposition to ‘God’s plan.’ As I have interviewed those who claim to have an Evangelical Christian heritage,\textsuperscript{31} Hip Hop is as much of an enigma to them as is, say, The New Age movement, or Muslims. Hip Hop continues to appear ‘worldly’ and ‘secular’ in all of its dimensions.

\textsuperscript{28} Utley, \textit{Rap and Religion}, 64-67.
\textsuperscript{31} Typically, those affiliated with a conservative and literal view of the Christian Bible and the appeal of ‘missions’ to ‘non-Christians.’
Yet, artists such as Kanye West, in “The College Dropout” album, argue that God loves the hustlers, pimps, killers, prostitutes, and people that society would otherwise not deal with. Tupac questions if there is a Heaven for real Niggaz. Tupac changed the letter “S” to “Z” to indicate a deeper meaning of the word suggesting a “class” or lower socio-economic status rather than the more racialized term, “nigger.” In this sense, Tupac has contextualized a word that was once meant for negativity. Hip Hop is a powerful cultural phenomenon which has dominated the popular culture scene for over twenty years. Gordon Lynch argues that Hip Hop culture has permeated almost every facet of American mainstream culture. Marketing executives try to sell just about anything using rap music. As scholar of rhetoric, Ebony Utley has suggested elsewhere, when Jay Z made it to Oprah, Hip Hop had truly arrived as a mainstream phenomenon. Further, Robin Sylvan has argued that “music is one of the most powerful tools for conveying religious meaning known to humankind. Music and religion are intimately linked in almost every culture and in almost every historical period.” Rap is that music and Hip Hop is the culture in which it is housed. Historically, the last forty years have had many societal shifts.

Within almost any type of cultural genre in the West, the search for God or a type of God is inevitable. Hip Hop is no different. First, I will define theology and how it will be used for this chapter. Theology, in its basic sense, is the study of God — the study of how God interacts, intercedes, speaks, lives, thinks, wants, and is. In the West, God is a supernatural creator who shaped the Universe and intervenes, albeit limited or daily, in the lives of humans for the betterment of society and a journey towards a space defined as “heaven.” Therefore, by that definition we can see how God is constructed and is developed in Hip Hop and within a post-soul urban context. This does not and will not

---

34 Sylvan, Trace of the Spirit, 4.
36 It is important to note here that theology as a formal academic discipline focuses on the study of God in the Christian religion. While I will discuss Hip Hop’s inclusion and expression of different religions, the main discussion of a Hip Hop theology will make references to the Christian religion and Christian religious expression.
37 Interrogating God is something reserved for another study. However, for this study, God will be, in a simplistic sense, a supernatural persona. Yet, it could be argued, from a gendered perspective, that God is not just a “He” in the masculine sense, but also embraces a feminine side. This is something which arose in the interviews about understanding God’s “female” side. Although, most Hip Hoppers see God in a masculine form. This does present problems for a more egalitarian approach to God and theology.
38 While there are numerous versions of this story, for the purposes of this book and research, I will primarily refer to an Abrahamic God rooted in the three main faiths which stem from this ideological theology, Islam, Christianity, and Jewish belief systems.
assume that every person associated with Hip Hop culture is seeing a God like symbol. Nor does it presume that MC’s—often thought of as a God figure—are to be left out of the spiritual equation. In fact, it is the opposite. Most of the lyrics are from MC’s creating a spiritual discourse. To take this a step further, I would suggest that Hip Hoppers reflect on divine action in community while together, and in the proximity of pain and suffering. Hip Hop theology shows that God “shows up” in the most unusual of places and the most interesting locations—more often than not, in the intersection of the sacred and the profane, in the wild. For those in a post-soul context, those unusual places and curious places need to be examined with both a missiological and hermeneutical lens; it is a part of life. In other words, violence, sexuality, “sin,” and the nuancing of the secular is taken into consideration and sought after; a difficult premise for traditional evangelicalism. Therefore, Hip Hop theology is, in essence, the study of a Godhead (God, The Son or Daughter, & The Spirit) in the Hip Hop post-soul urban context/environment, to better understand the rich and complex manifestations of spirituality, divine interactions, God presence, and the revelation of a contextualized God from within the Hip Hop community while being liberated from oppressive conditions. That is core.

While Hip Hop is not without its problems, as seen constantly in media outlets, and even some elements of it which deal with the occult, it does not deserve the ridicule and scorn that many in the Church—including those in academia—have given to it. More importantly, it does not deserve the alienation that many religious institutions (Christians, Jews, some Muslims) have given it as well. What is even worse is when some Christian churches—who in all fairness believe they are doing “right” by Hip Hop—give up one Sunday every quarter to the youth and believe that this “reaches out” to the community. This is just a fallacy and does not promote a true conversation and dialogue with the Hip Hop community, which is what this study is attempting to explore, with an exploration of Hip Hop’s theological paradigms.

Part of the reason why religion and theology in Hip Hop might appear so vague

---

39 This ideology of God at the center of theology is a changing conversation in the field of religious study. Anthony Pinn discusses this well in his book *The End of God Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*; Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Thus, for this book, while not the main focus of this book, deserves to be noted. This is not to assume that there are other forms of finding spirituality. For example, assuming the God would be at the center of a theological conversation is much different than assuming that a community or people are at the center of that theological conversation. MC’s also facilitate much spiritual meaning and, in that sense, become a type of God for that space. These are all areas that need further studying and research in.

40 In some manner, this might be seen as a Christian Hip Hop theology. I would make the case that while Christian theology does provide this type of sensibility, but, in say, for example, Zulu theologies, there is room for a three-person Godhead.

41 While this is not the focus of this book, it does bear mention and deserves attention. This is based on interactions with those who have stated they are dealing with the occult and “dark magic” while rapping from the interviews I have conducted over the last decade.
to outsiders and other scholars, is that its roots, history, and religious backgrounds have both multiple and complex sources. We are dealing with a culture, Hip Hop, which originates in poor Black and Brown communities with a myriad of religious, spiritual, and faith backgrounds. Many of those traditions, in turn, seep into the norms of Hip Hop—for example, the social employing of Christological symbolism is a regular custom for some rappers. Kanye, DMX, Tupac, and even Kendrick Lamar have a situated fascination with the deity yet claim no specific denomination or church affiliation. This presents many problems for scholars and lay people attempting to deconstruct Hip Hop within a standard hermeneutical lens. Hip Hop cannot be defined easily. Nor can Hip Hop be boxed into a five-step process in order to “reach” into the culture; it is just too complex.

One aspect of Hip Hop’s complex theology is that it engages the realness of life as it comes at you—in real time. Christina Zanfagna states:

Mainstream Hip Hop percolates with unlikely and multifaceted religious inclinations. Despite its inconsistent relationship to organized religion and its infamous mug of weed smoking, drug pushing, gun slinging, and curse spewing, rap music is not without moral or spiritual content. On the flip side, religious music continues to draw upon popular music idioms—a smart mission strategy to reach today’s listeners.

Therefore, Hip Hop begins to talk about a basic theology of life. This theological paradigm is not new. Good and evil are common subject matters for the expressions

---


43 What I mean by this is that most Christian pastors are “classically” trained and have a modernistic way of approaching sacred scripture. Thus, the issue of salvation, for example, then becomes very mechanical, predictable, and “efficient.” In other words, the pastor would rely on “traditional” methods of evangelism to reach a Hip Hop nation. This simply will not work with most in Hip Hop culture. Moreover, traditional ways of approaching the Bible will not work. You are dealing with a culture that loves who Jesus is, but despise the institutional aspect of religion. Most seminaries still train their pastors to be a part of the church (little C) while not truly understanding the community of Church (Big C, the biblical aspect of church which means that it goes beyond not only the four walls of the church, but also the programmatic aspect of church.)

44 Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap),” 1.

and life of urban popular culture. Likewise, a new type of spiritual rotundity is needed as society changes and people continue the wrestle with the problem of evil. A spirituality that takes into account:

- Racism within White patriarchal Christian traditions
- Suffering and pain from an ethnic-minority perspective
- The potential and possibilities that the Black Church has for suffering, pain, and lament for Christianity
- The God of the secular, sacred, and profane all in real time

Hip Hop has the space and historical complexity to deal with, for instance, someone questioning their faith or wondering how a God can exist in the face of continued suffering. A Hip Hop theology does not offer up simplistic and elementary forms of theological responses. Instead, a Hip Hop theology wrestles with the individual, group, or situation; uses art and music as forms of therapy and coping mechanisms; fuses dance with faith and allows for issues, problem, or concern to be held up in community, not in solitary.

As descendants of Black musical traditions, we realize that there is more to the story for Hip Hop. Hip Hop begins the complex theological discussion of how the profane, secular, and sacred all meet at one place. Moreover, within Black musical traditions, there is this ideology within the music that infuses and sees the sacred in the profane. Spencer believes that the Black secular music of the masses, while still “sinful,” secular, evil, and corrupt, is not completely unreligious and might actually present a spirituality and theology for everyday life. This is critical to understand. God is doing something within those secular, evil, and corrupt spaces and in those spaces, the chance and possibility of the Gospel to actually do what it is supposed to do, can bloom and prosper. Teresa Reed reminds us that “James Brown captures the soulful spontaneity of the Sanctified church

---

46 For example, artists such as Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, and Ray Charles all provided a diverse spiritual message in their music. Ray Charles, in his time, was considered “profane” and “unholy” yet his music today is heard in the forays of many churches. Jon M. Spencer argues that there is much protest within Black Gospel music and that stories from the Bible were told through old Negro spirituals (1990). Moreover, in the time of slavery, music became the message for church and for life—as detestable it may have been; there was no delineation between sacred, profane, and secular; all were one. See (Spencer 1990, 3-34).


and the animated exhortation of the Sanctified preacher.”

This is the theological paradox—or neo-spiritual movement depending on how one poses the phenomenon—not just for Hip Hop, but also for those seeking answers when their theological highway has run out. Could “sin” actually produce a theological paradigm? Could the debauchery actually have a deep theological archetype? Could rappers like Scarface and Geto Boys, with all their violent discourse and the stark viciousness of life in which they have lived, actually be creating a space for God to enter and create new meanings within that muddle? These are areas which need more exploration. There is not a definitive word on this, but it does in fact require us, as scholars of religion, to investigate and not to dismiss the pursuit of God in awkward, strange, and even disreputable places. Or, could it be that we who study religion, are more afraid than we care to admit, about dealing with the real nature of the profane? These are not questions for the scholar of religion, necessarily, but more an ecclesial commitment to justice in theological dialogue. Zanfagna tells us, “To accept this, presupposes that popular culture could be a sacred place—an area in which one may encounter God even in the most unholy of places.”

Hip Hop theology not only embraces the sacred, it dines, sleeps, laughs, cries, loves, hates, and lives with the profane. It is just a part of everyday life. If one is to truly understand Hip Hop, then a basic theological worldview of the profane must exist.

This theological oxymoron—theology of the profane—is not a new concept. If, for example, we investigate the time period in which Jesus lived, then we must look at the controversy Jesus created. We must look at the profane language Jesus used when describing the Pharisees and Sadducees, and we must also contend with the fact that there were multiple messianic narratives of Jesus (some of which do not align with the current Judeo Christian theological prototype).

Hip Hoppers can resonate with the eccentricities of many Bible characters: Noah—

---


51 There is a growing case for those who live in oppressive conditions seeking a theology that “fits” within spaces in which normative theological inquiries cease to exist. Issues such as violence confound theological inquiries which promote a peaceful message, but in the face of injustice as that in Ferguson MO and Baltimore MA, how does one respond when “peace” has failed? Could there be a theology of violence for Black and Brown youth who are brutally murdered by White police officers such as the case in New York city? Is David Walker’s Appeal much more relevant now, in 21st century America for the Black youth? Is Hip Hop part of that “appeal?”

52 Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap),” 2.


54 In fact, theologians and church heroes such as Martin Luther assert that God meets us first in the profane, or “shit” of life. Therefore, only those who enter the “shit” can encounter the God of Jesus Christ. Of course, Luther used much more “colorful” language than this. However, the point of strong language and its connection to a strong theological message is noted.
who was a drunk and cursed out his kids; David, not only was promiscuous, he sold his “boy” out in order to steal that same friend’s wife (e.g. placed Uriah on the front lines of the war just so that he could attain Uriah’s wife Bathsheba in II Samuel 11); Women in the Bible such as Mary, Martha, and Apphia were left out of the New Testament canon in their writings and connections to Christianity from their perspective, yet provided rich, first-hand knowledge of Jesus. These are narratives to which Hip Hoppers can relate, engage with, and connect to.

Hip Hop says, “Man, we’re dealing with it all!” One of Tupac’s greatest sins was that he called out his own “sin,” which made others extremely uncomfortable. For example, Tupac confessed of his very active sex life and “love” for female “beauty” at the same time he was receiving an NAACP image award. Black leaders such as Jessie Jackson strongly criticized the NAACP for that decision yet Jackson has been noted to have had several interactions with women other than his wife. Bill Cosby was also outspoken of Tupac’s “womanizing” yet, as time has revealed, Cosby has had his own “womanizing” problems. Artists such as Tupac continue to be problematic for many religious zealots who hold fundamental views of religion.

Hip Hop can be, at least partially, based on Hip Hop scholar Anthony Pinn’s five central themes to African American humanism, “...a mode for religious orientation.” While these principles derive from an ideology which rejects the God idea — in particular, the notion that God will break into history or could. The “controlled optimism” arises from recognition of no help from God just by waiting. Thus, in many regards, a portion of Hip Hoppers have taken a more gnostic position towards God. Yet, I use these central themes as a critical position toward traditional modes of theological inquiry; that is, a more conservative fundamental approach to God in which God somehow “blesses” those who are “good” and in turn, a bounded set of theological parameters are established making the rules clear, normative, and standardized. So, in that sense, Hip Hop creates an alternate way to find God and since many Hip Hoppers—even though living in...

55 I am not arguing for the absence of women in the New Testament. I contend that the women who did play an active role in the New Testament were not canonized.
56 The figure and symbol of Cosby comes under scorn and heated ridicule for those in the Hip Hop community. Because Cosby situated himself as a moral authority over poor and disenfranchised Blacks and because Cosby’s continued strong push for “moral” and “ethical” values of and for the Blacks, those in the Hip Hop community — and others too — call out the hypocrisy and pharisaical behavior of Cosby and interrogate the morality, of not just Cosby and his symbology for Black Americans, but of those in the civil rights generation too.
57 These themes are taken from Anthony Pinn’s chapter “Rap’s Humanist Sensibilities,” in Terror & Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 8–88. Pinn’s themes are focused around African American religious traditions, but I use these five themes here to illustrate the connection with Hip Hop theology and culture.
58 Pinn, “Rap’s Humanist Sensibilities,” 87. I am not arguing that Hip Hop is entirely humanistic. However, humanism is not without educational and theological positives. Part of Hip Hop’s theology connects with Pinn’s five themes; that is what this work is attempting to get at.
conditions which could create an impatience in that “wait for God”—are still on the journey to find a God that fits their circumstances. Thus, I have reframed Pinn’s central themes for this current study, the central themes are:

1. Understanding of humanity as fully (and solely) accountable and responsible for the human condition and the correction of its plight—especially as it pertains to social justice.

2. Suspicion toward or rejection of supernatural explanation and claims, combined with an understanding of humanity as an evolving part of the natural environment as opposed to being a created being unable to change its path. This is one of the many reasons why traditional evangelistic tracks do not work on Hip Hoppers.

3. Appreciation for African American cultural production and a perception of traditional forms of Black religiosity as having cultural importance as opposed to any type of “cosmic” or “supernatural” authority that remains unnamed and vague.

4. Commitment to individual and societal transformation—this is a key aspect of all Hip Hop culture which reaches well into its theology.

5. Controlled optimism that recognizes both human potential and human destructive activities while leaving room for God—in that God would be able to intervene, at times, in the lives of humans.

I use Pinn’s five elements here to provide a sort of theological premise in which to begin this conversation. These five elements are essential, in part, to Hip Hop’s theological mantra. These are building blocks for the structure of its theology and, on context, help create a type of meaning of God, and also forces and necessitates an alternate approach and/or re-description to/ of how we as scholars and academics think of theology.

Artists such as DMX and Tupac argue that we can have a sacred relationship with Jesus, commune with Jesus, even grow in community without ever setting foot in a church. Tupac even asks the epistemological question, does Heaven have a place for a “G?” For most, even the asking of this question is profane. In addition, it raises the important question that states, “If you can reach Jesus without the ‘church’ what good is the ‘church’?” Hip Hop puts that and many other questions like that at your front door. Hip Hop questions the institutional church while challenging the very moral fibers of pastors, reverends, deacons, and priests. Hence, this is one of the main reasons an artist like DMX can begin an album such as Grand Champ (2003) with illicit language regarding life and end the album in a prayer “thanking God for making me righteous.”

This neo-secular /sacred theology does three major things for Hip Hop:

1. It provides a basis for understanding life and not allowing simplistic answers to be used in order to explain pain, distress, suffering, anxieties, and evil acts.

2. It allows for everyday life, language, culture, and contexts to be given a fair examination. In other words, nothing is too “sacred” to talk about or deal with.

3. It gives room for rap music, as one of the vehicles for Hip Hop’s message, to give critical insight, pose deep theological questions, reject the current hegemonic powers, and allow for change in its music.

These three concepts are central to many artists such as Common, Mos Def, Odd Thomas, Propaganda, and Tupac, who use these three theological tenets in their music. This type of schema is nothing new, once again. Noel Leo Erskine, in his chapter “Rap, Reggae, and Religion” states, “Rap theology…is intimately linked to notions of how society functions and who operates the levers of control.” Consequently, rappers then become the reporters—in some cases the preacher if you will—of life: both the sacred and the profane.

Erskine further states that, “In rap theology, God takes sides and identifies with rappers in their attempt to confront violence with counter violence. Their God is the God of the Old Testament…” Rappers like Big Syke argue that God was both a killer and all-loving, but He will take the side of the marginalized to vindicate them and kill the oppressor. While this may be a radical and even violent view for some, keep in mind that for many years, God did operate in this realm. Read the Old Testament books of Joshua, Deuteronomy, Judges, and/or Genesis, and you will find this type of God. For many centuries, scholars and lay people alike argued that there were two different God’s, one of the Old Testament and one of the New Testament. So it stands to reason why artists such as GZA challenge the status quo and find alternate narratives which they can relate to especially in violent living conditions. And even more so when dominant culture pushes “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” from you even when they themselves are not willing to exercise the same thing. Hip Hoppers say we cannot and will not accept a mediocre theology that is biased, often against us, and lifts up oppressors. We desire a God who can exhume oppressive conditions and create space for lament while still celebrating God. A paradox for a Christian faith, who, by in large, continues with a theology of celebration, as described by Soong-Chan Rah.

---

62 Taken from Dyson’s (2001) interview with Big Syke.
These paradoxes make Hip Hop and religion a fertile space to be studied. This special edition of The Journal of Hip Hop Studies is therefore concerned with one of the enigmas within the field of Hip Hop and religion, Kanye West. One might ask, why Kanye? Why not Kendrick, Chance, J-Cole, Eve, or Cardi B. While those are all valid queries, and each of those Hip Hoppers need further study, Kanye presents an interest that generates discussion from all sides; whether you love him or hate him, Kanye presents an enigmatic persona that is not easily matched. Kanye also presents a persona that is worth critical inquiry and investigation; even more so given his 2018 rantings and connection with 45. Therefore, using frameworks from the sub-field of Hip Hop and religion, this special issue will explore Kanye West and thereby present an inquiry of him and his contribution, not just to the Hip Hop cultural continuum, but to our current socio-religious era.

Lastly, it is important to note that this volume presents a narrative approach to the study of Kanye. This means that some of the works here are reflectional insights and thought pieces into the societal impact of West on both Hip Hop and the popular culture at large. It is also important to note that some of these pieces were written prior to the 2016 election and did not have the space to include the complexities and serious issues that West presents with comments such as “slavery was a choice,” and “I feel like Superman when I put this hat on [referring to 45’s Make American Great Again slogan].” Therefore, those areas are still vastly overlooked and deserve attention in the field of Hip Hop Studies. This journal is committed to scholarly excellence and that takes many forms. Please enjoy this issue as it adds to the rich dialogue of our field.
Bibliography


Meditation - On Millennials, Hip Hop, and Faith

Larrin Robertson

**Question considered:** How do you view the influence of Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West on the spiritual lives and mental health of your millennial members and those millennials that you are hoping to bring into the church?

The millennials with whom I engage have the metropolitan, suburban experience of living in and around Washington, DC. Much like the lyrics of the hymns of the church are best appreciated with time and experience, where millennials developed an appreciation for Hip Hop as a musical genre through its musicality, time and experience helped them to better appreciate its lyrics. Their faith development was uniquely their own, but often, they valued the lifestyle of others who more closely identified with the inner-city culture they identified as Hip Hop. Like most, and like myself, the millennials with whom I engage, had to come to grips with how much of church and Hip Hop have been accessible to them. What some heard as social or moral failings in both realms, others viewed as social or moral norms. Reconciling these to produce one set of doctrine, even a personally held doctrine that may not have matched the church or the culture, created a struggle.

A heart that wrestles – struggles, even – with questions about the reality and presence of God is not a heart that has necessarily failed the faith test. Passing the faith test does not require an unquestioning existence. In the same way, a mature, or at least maturing, faith is not characterized by the absence of suspicion of who God is, or how God chooses to act. Of this, many of the heroes of the Biblical and our own personal witness would give assent. Among these witnesses are Abraham (concerning God’s promise of a son and a future linked to the Divine) and Jesus (particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane). It seems that Kanye West, Chance the Rapper, and others have also become witnesses.

I suppose that part of the conversation should center around whether it is one’s faith or their practice of said faith that creates the conditions which lead to a falling away. As Tyrell Jemison references in his article, *Coloring Book Faith*, these can be different or in opposition to one another. Jemison further refers to “his” faith as being different than that of his father, whom it seems Jemison respects, but apart from whom Jemison developed
a different ideation of faith.

Lauren Chanel Allen writes in her article on Kanye’s “Ultralight Beam” of the cognitive dissonance felt by Black Christians, which is a result of the reality that “Black people are being murdered.”\(^1\) As evidenced by Black Lives Matter, The Black Youth Project, and similar movements, millennials will not be satisfied with the status quo for the sake of maintaining the appearance of stability. They ask questions and desire answers so they can process them, test them, and either advocate for a cause or resist said cause. On this point, millennials do well. As a pastor, part of my calling is to disciple believers—newly converted and maturing. One way to do that is to create space for questions and to demonstrate faith in practice. To the extent that Hip Hop thrives in this space, I view the genre’s influence on the reflective millennial as a positive.

Hip Hop requires its practitioners and its adherents to reflect on a multitude of life and cultural experiences. The vast catalog from which one chooses to explore narrows the field only by theme, leaving open for analysis how one will examine and report on their experience. There is not one clear lens through which all analysis takes place. This avails space for creative expression within the culture as experienced and learned by the artist.

In the same way, faith permits its practitioners space to examine their thoughts, intentions, motivations, and actions. But there is a standard against which this examination takes place. For Christians, the standard is that of love, as initiated by God, as demonstrated through Jesus and regenerated among one another. Space remains for creative expression of faith, but the Christian is granted boundaries within which safe faith expression can take place.

For the millennials with whom I engage consistently, the challenge is often the idea that there are boundaries. In other words, even modern expressions of Christianity has limits on how far is too far before one’s professed faith is no longer aligned with one’s practiced faith. Of course, charges of hypocrisy may be leveled when one has crossed the line, but the logical conclusion should not be that their professed faith was at fault.

My concern about the faith of Christians, generally, and for the sake of this response, millennials, is the belief that faith in Jesus the Christ for eternal salvation is being replaced by faith in Jesus for temporal satisfaction. This is not the Christian message, and attempts to persuade others on this basis are to be condemned. The Christian faith was neither born nor developed during a time of peace for its adherents. Modern Christianity has this as its foundation. The church would do well to point here for help with navigating the cognitive dissonance which Allen addressed in her article on Kanye’s “Ultralight Beam.” The message is that we are the legacies—ancestral and

spiritual – of persons who endured hardships. We are not the only ones to endure, and we will not be the last ones to endure. But endure we must.

Where I am not concerned is with the ability of millennials to navigate the empty spaces created by the absence of answers to the questions they are asking. First, I have determined to credit young adults, namely, today’s millennials, with the ability to navigate spiritual and mental health complexities with a skill that exceeds my own at the same stage of development. Often what many fail to acknowledge is that millennials ask courageous questions. Arriving at, and responding to, a courageous question requires reflection, research, introspection, and a willingness to advance the conversations around them, or a determination to create their own movements toward progress. I believe that those who can ask these questions are capable also of holding on until revelation comes.

Second, I have determined to consider millennials as no different than previous generations of young adults. Of this opinion, I acknowledge that many others disagree. Opposing views would point to technological, cultural, and legislative advances, among others, that reflect these vast differences. I would agree with aspects of those points. Where I separate from this view is the consideration of what this demographic seeks. At the basic level, people desire to be honored as human beings. To the extent that Hip Hop recognizes the complexities of human experiences and teaches positive ways to live, hopefully, I view its influence as positive.

In an era of deepening concern about the church’s ability to attract, engage, welcome, and disciple millennials – both members and non-members alike – I view the influence of Hip Hop as I do other elements of the culture. As stated, some elements of Hip Hop should be considered, others condemned. My concern is that the church will determine not to blur the line such that the culture no longer views the church as distinct. This, I believe is the greater need for millennials – that they recognize the church as the bastion of hope.
The Prosperity Gospels of Superstardom: Kanye’s Philosophy

Catherine John, Leroy Myers, Jr. & Zachary Leacock

A little over a decade following the release of his debut album, The College Dropout, Kanye West has continued his progression as an artist and a public figure. His pattern of attention to detail, focus on innovation mixed with bravado overtones and stream-of-consciousness lyrics fuel West’s constant evolution. This evolution from the backpack wearing “college dropout” we met in 2003, to the critically acclaimed artist of Yeezus in 2013 portrays the new West as a demi-god, operating in a sovereign capacity, hoping to obtain full Godhood through success and material gain. The transition from the 2003 lyrics, “God show me the way, because the devil’s tryna break me down” to the statement “I am a god” in the 2013 song of the same name, suggest that West’s relationship with God has changed from a commoner praying for guidance to direct conversations in the most opulent settings. His steady spiritual evolution throughout his career represents the conflation of his material and spiritual pursuits. West’s approach to the divine, therefore, reflects Michael Eric Dyson’s discussion of rap artists’ God Complex. Rather than “playing god,” the music of rappers like Kanye West and Jay-Z enable listeners to recognize that we are “complex human beings who are centers of moral gravity around which meaning and significance orbits, that, in one sense, we can control, or, at the least, generate, meaning and significance.” Yet, as we know with Kanye, nothing is that simple or that straightforward.

If Kanye West’s Yeezus and The Life of Pablo suggest an emerging god-complex, then the advent of the anonymously founded Church of Yeezus and the associated dogma of “Yeezianity” can be seen as proof of his superstardom, influence and prosperity all in one. In this sense, Hip Hop acts as what Greg Dimitriadis’ describes as a

---

1 Kanye West, “Jesus Walks,” The College Dropout, (Def Jam 2004); West, “I Am a God,” Yeezus (Def Jam 2013).
4 Eric Sundermann, “We Interviewed the Founder of Yeezianity, the First Religion Based on Kanye
“transformative cultural force,” in which religious meanings are found in the “everyday” thus stripping rappers like West of a “clear moral teleology.” Possessing such an approach to morality would downplay the fluid aspect of religion within West’s music. This article will address the convergences and divergences between Kanye’s philosophy and prosperity gospel ministry as well as his self-proclaimed god/hero status. We will also examine his philosophy and its development over the years as it relates to notions of bravado, revenge, and spiritual quest. Overall, Kanye West’s musical trajectory maintains an aspirational ethos due to his discussion of wealth and status for the purpose of a self-proclaimed higher calling.

**Bravado & Wealth**

Prosperity Theology is a Christian philosophy that claims that it is the will of God for believers to be wealthy. To receive affluence, one must adhere to certain guidelines and practices that vary depending on the ideology espoused by a congregation's pastor. Generally, however, these guidelines include faith, positive thoughts, and generous tithing to the ministry to which the believer ascribes. Preachers use passages from the Bible to support these claims while presenting their own lives as proof that allegiance to these interpretations of the gospel will result in wealth for their followers. Immaculately tailored suits, high-end cars, luxurious mansions, and even private jets are part of the external trappings of these preachers’ prosperity. They often speak of having a direct connection to God and talk about conversations with “Him” that makes them intermediaries between the divinity and the common person. Their lavish lifestyles are seen as manifestations of their divine truth and the implication is that the believer’s faith will “turn the spoken word into reality.”

Stephanie Y. Mitchem, in her text *Name it and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church*, speaks of several types of Prosperity Gospels. She distinguishes three variations starting with the Black ministries of Charles Manuel “Sweet Daddy” Grace, founder of The United House of Prayer in Massachusetts in 1919, and his contemporary Father Divine who had an early 20th Century ministry and movement. Incidentally, both Sweet Daddy Grace and Father Divine were accused of proclaiming themselves to be God West.” Vice, January 14, 2014, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/yeezianity-kanye-west-religion-interview.


7 Catherine Bowler, “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010), 4. For more on the lavish lifestyles of Prosperity theologians see pgs. 4-5.
incarnate. The second school of thought comes from the post 1960s tele-evangelical white ministries of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland. The third school is a derivative of the Science of Mind “New Thought” movements, rooted in affirmation-based spiritual beliefs and teaching. The United States experienced an increase in Prosperity Gospel churches during the first decade of the 2000s, according to scholar Catherine Bowler. Moreover, for “Pentecostals [who] traditionally separated the sacred [from] the [materially] secular,” these lines became blurred when the institution of the Black Church was impacted by modern prosperity gospels and televangelism in the 1990s.8

Kanye West’s rise coincides with the increase in this style of prosperity based preaching while his music and public persona have evolved in ways that bear some similarities to Prosperity Theology. By the mid-1990s, according to Erika Gault, “televangelists embodied the culture of hip hop and rap music making its ethos of consumerism acceptable among the black bourgeois.”9 In West’s world, if one embraces their creativity and acts as he does, one can live out one’s dreams. His lyrics separate him from “commoners” and with the advent of Yeezus, they portray him as an intermediary between humanity and a Hip Hop God. In the song “Gorgeous,” from his album My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, he states: “Is Hip Hop just a euphemism for a new religion/The soul music for the slaves that the youth is missing/This is more than just my road to redemption/Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention.”10 If Kanye as Malcolm West is a Hip Hop god then Hip Hop, as stated above is the new religion, “the soul music for the slaves that the youth is missing.” The suggestion here is that the music, the culture and the movement hold a sway in the lives of the youth that may be more powerful than organized religion, and at its best, more compelling.11 His description of himself as Malcolm West with “the whole nation standing at attention,” is given life by an online artistically constructed photo that combines half of Malcolm X’s face with half of West’s. His role as prophet, if not god, is collapsed and emphasized in this verse. His fans and followers fund his lavish lifestyle and ultimately elevate his brand in the corporate world. Going even further than mere prosperity preacher and tapping into the notion of himself as a healer, Kanye states, “My music isn’t just music – it’s medicine. I want my songs to touch people, to give them what they need. Every time I

10 West, “Gorgeous,” My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (Def Jam 2010).
make an album, I’m trying to make a cure for cancer musically. That stresses me out!”

He is able to instill a certain faith in himself, which appears to have influenced the zeal of his fan base, creating a sense of followers rather than mere fans. Kanye’s self-proclaimed status as a healer reflects tenets of prosperity gospel ideology. With health an element of prosperity theology, followers of prosperity gospel embrace “positive confession” by using one’s faith as an “instrument of Christian power.” Through these “positive confessions,” West forges a connection with his listeners by demonstrating the faith he has in his aim for redemption. Kanye as a healer in this “new religion” (hip hop) with the ability to heal through music, reflects Angela Nelson proclamation that hip hop centers “on the ultimacy of human beings rather than God.”

But how are we to comprehend the obsession with wealth in Hip Hop? Can it be explained exclusively with recourse to prosperity gospel ideology or the greed of a capitalist society?

Tressie McMillan Cottom, in her 2013 social media article post, “Why do Poor People ‘Waste’ Money on Luxury Goods?” argues that far from being frivolous indulgences, luxury goods have historically functioned as forms of social access for economically disadvantaged African Americans. Using examples from her life experiences, as well as those of her family members, she successfully demonstrates instances in which a designer purse, the right shoes or a particular car opened doors of opportunity that made the economic difference between having and not having basic resources or employment. Cottom’s article suggests that excessive consumption is not only an overcompensation for the anxiety of being made to feel less than, but in some instances, it is also a strategy of survival.

This is supported by the trilogy of songs, “Crack Music,” “Gold Digger,” and “Roses” on Kanye’s 2005 sophomore album Late Registration. The skits throughout this album about the proverbial fraternity “Broke Phi Broke” whose motto is, “Got no money, got no clothes, got no cars, can’t get no ‘hoes,” sets the stage. The massively popular “Gold Digger,” an interesting meditation on male and female dynamics as it relates to the push and pull around materialistic desires and needs, is often underestimated for its

---


complexity. “I ain’t sayin’ she’s a gold digger, but she ain’t messin’ with no broke niggas. Get down girl, go ‘head git down!”

Touching on three different scenarios, West’s narrator first addresses a situation in which the man falls in love with a woman who is already notorious for only dating famous men. The second scenario functions as a morality tale highlighting the dangers of being unwittingly exploited for child support. The third and final scenario is one in which grudging respect and a hypothetical backstory is given to the kind of (black) woman who may become the proverbial “gold digger” – situations in which loyalty and fidelity through hard times is rewarded with abandonment for a white woman once wealth and status are achieved. The applicability of this last verse to Kanye’s real life is ironic, to say the least.

The notion of excess as part of the capitalist trappings of Hip Hop, internalized by artists who live in a society in which money equals power and respect, is also explained in a cultural sense by Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 notion, “The Will to Adorn” from her essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” She states,

> The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression. Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator...Whatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes. His religious service is for the great part excellent prose poetry. The prayer of the white man is considered humorous in its bleakness.

If Hurston’s words have any relevance all these years later, then part of the excess of opulence in Black life can be explained by a cultural love of adornment; stylization of objects in a way that fits with one’s worldview and showmanship. West’s dramatic flair in a range of areas can certainly be viewed from this perspective.

**Revenge**

The ideology of the song, “Crack Music” from *Late Registration*, the last of the three songs that can be linked to Tressie Cottom’s notions about why “poor people waste money on luxury items,” is suggestive because it extends Kanye’s philosophy on wealth beyond need and desire to a kind of revenge fantasy that continues in different ways throughout his career.

Describing a world in which drugs were put into Black communities deliberately to stop revolutionary movements, West addresses the ways in which some of the very youth who were the intended or unintended targets of the drug war, invested in the very “rocks” and “powder” that created an epidemic of death and destruction. “Crack raised the murder rate in DC and Maryland/We invested in that it’s like we got Merrill-Lynched/And we been hanging from the same tree ever since.”

---

17 West, “Gold Digger,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).
19 West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).
Destroyed by a drug strategy designed from above, he further states:

*Sometimes I feel the music is the only medicine*
*So we cook it, cut it, measure it, bag it, sell it*
*The fiends cop it*
*Nowadays they can’t tell if that’s that good shit “We ain't sure man! Put the CD on your tongue yeah, that’s pure man!”*
*That’s that crack music nigga*
*That real black music nigga.*

Crack, the drug and the music in the streets, merge symbolically to create “crack music,” the kind of music that you make when you’re forever surrounded by the breakdown of the family, drug sales as a strategy for wealth and overdosing relatives. Now “we” control this product that the dominant society consumes without being able to tell if the product is pure; the exploitation appears to be working in a kind of reverse.

In a clever re-signification of the Lord’s Prayer, the speaker at the end of “Crack Music” asks God for “daily bread” before the Feds give him days in prison and force him to forfeit his livelihood, his bread. Making money from a drug whose arrival in the Black community devastated it, and then making money from what some would call equally destructive music by selling it to the children and grandchildren of the former plantation owners is a well-designed strategy of revenge; a fantasy that has become reality. This is one in which the former system of exploitation and submission, “Our mammas ain’t got to be they cooks and nannies” is reversed, “we gonna repo everything they ever took from Grammy.” The final lines of the song complete the inversion of power, “Now the former slaves trade hooks for Grammy’s/This dark diction has become America’s addiction, those who ain’t even Black use it/We gon’ keep baggin up this here crack music.”

If one thinks about Kanye’s statements here, the acquisition of wealth for the “boyz in the hood,” moves outside of the realm of greed and competition as a drive purely rooted in excess and becomes a way of evening the score and reversing the power dynamic. West transcends any simplification of morality due to what Julius Bailey deems as a “rejection of sin” in his music. Instead, Kanye’s moral compass “is not the automatic embrace of hedonism, but the rejection of an abstract morality that purposefully dismisses the concrete and embraces emotions, circumstances, accidents, struggles, etc.” While “Crack Music” is from *Late Registration* an album that is considered part of

---

20 West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).
21 West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).
22 West, “Crack Music,” *Late Registration* (Def Jam 2005).
the “conscious” early Kanye before the god-complex and braggadocio of the later albums, the song “New Slaves” from Yeezus continues the thread of societal critique and revenge narrative as a form of symbolic vindication for crimes perpetrated against Black people historically and currently. Separating racism into the old and the new, the opening lines of “New Slaves” cryptically signifies the old with references to “clean water” and “picking cotton,” things that will immediately conjure up slavery and Jim Crow for the literate listener. The coding moves forward to the consumerist present with the distinction now being made between “broke nigga racism” – “Don’t touch anything in the store!” to “rich nigga racism” – “Come in, please buy [some] more.” Further stating that now “err’ body” not just poor, people are “wasting their money on luxury items.” West alludes to the fact that even in the world of the commodity, Black culture sets the trends. Ultimately, the new slaves are the followers, (“You see it’s leaders and it’s followers”) but also the Black contemporary class of “broke and rich niggas.” 24 He cuts back against the grain of assumptions that wealthy Black people no longer experience racism, the presumption being that if they do, it is both exceptional and petty.

Going “postal” in the second verse, West refers to the second line of Billie Holiday’s song about lynching, “Strange Fruit” which states, “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.” The notion of Maybach Mercedes and the like being used to pacify the “rich niggas” while there is still “blood on the leaves,” i.e., corporate violence and exploitation in the music industry, all this is seen by Kanye as part and parcel of this “new slave” system. Without some degree of cultural literacy, the coded nature of his statement “we the new slaves” may seem like empty rebellion. 25 The verse is a barrage of challenges that people like himself face in the corporate music prison, something that he juxtaposes with the “DEA” and the “CCA;” the link between the Drug Enforcement Agency and the biggest private prison company is a marriage that is literally creating new slaves of young colored bodies. Using a gangster tone and fast-paced rapping in the second verse, West becomes the proverbial “bad nigger” whose revenge fantasy, coded with specifically heterosexual male aggression, is made manifest among other things, against the pawn in the equation, “the Hampton wife.” 26

Wealth and power for West and his Hip Hop contemporaries function as a type of reprisal against the dominant society for historic exploitation without reparations. The game hasn’t changed; white power and black conditioned submission is referenced in Kanye’s song “Gorgeous” when he refers to his bags being searched at the airport despite being a superstar, similar to Mos Def’s Black on Both Sides “Mr. Nigga,” who goes overseas and is “over-seized” in London’s Heathrow airport without apology. These are self-made men; Ice Cube going from NWA to producing films and developing his brand; Jay-Z

going from selling drugs on the streets of New York to prime seats at the inauguration ball for Barack and Michelle Obama; P-Diddy’s empire. “How we stop the Black Panthers?/Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer.” 27 The Civil Rights movement’s material gains did not trickle down for many. Instead the distribution of crack became the entrepreneurial approach to our death. No reparations. So as Notorious B.I.G. says, “If I wasn’t in the rap game/I’d probably have a key knee deep in the crack game/Because the streets is a short stop/ Either you slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.” Rap becomes the legal substitute for selling crack and Hip Hop becomes the new hustle, exploited by the corporations but giving Black men from the bottom the opportunity to feed their families “for generations,” as Kanye West asserts.28

**Spiritual Quest**

Despite an underlying critique of racism, capitalist aggression and hypocrisy that continuously runs through Kanye’s body of work, with the advent of Graduation and his rise to superstardom, there was a shift in West’s style and brand. In his later music, as sure as night follows day, the wasteland that accompanies the advent of fame – sexual decadence, endless money, suicidal thoughts, drugs, objectification of women – are the subject of his meditations. We are reminded of the phrase near the end of the song “Crack Music,” “God how could you let this happen?” Indeed, this question recurs almost as a cry for help and West responds rhetorically with both the notion of himself as a god as well as the short film Runaway.29

Yet there was a concrete incident that spawned the Kanye who would become more than just another flash in the pan rapper. Kanye West’s life changed following his nearly fatal car accident in 2002. Journalist Kimberly Davis, describing West’s post-accident life, wrote: “It’s as if, given a second chance at life, he has to live it all out - at full speed-- picking up success and holding onto it for all it’s worth.”30 The accident ended up being the most important element jumpstarting West’s career. He realized a calling when it came to his music. Producer and mentor to West, No I.D., recalled in an interview: “One key moment that I can pinpoint…when I felt like he had the idea that led to [College Dropout] was the first time I talked to him after the accident. He was [previously] kind of a gangsta rapper…” The nearly fatal accident made Kanye think. No I.D. went on to say:

He said, ‘I’m going to rap about this accident. I’m going to use a song and change the direction. I’m going conscious with my music…’ I think from there the College Dropout concept took [on]…form because he let go of the gangsta persona and formed a good concept. Before that he would wrestle ideas, try to make it all line up but it wouldn't make

27 West, “Crack Music,” Late Registration (Def Jam 2005).
29 Runaway downloads as part of the Yeezus album but in actuality, the songs and content are actually taken from My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy.
sense. I think that was the moment when he put all the pieces of the puzzle [together].

West had an epiphany. His brush with death enabled him to realize the fleeting nature of his life and develop a more authentic musical persona, one that represented his actual experiences. Years later, however, he needed a long-lasting concept to maintain his fan base and he was also now a partial victim of the decadence of fame. He also wanted “to feed his family for generations.” He experienced another rebirth. West’s compares his feelings before releasing *Yeezus* to the time before he released *The College Dropout*, a period of frustration and angst all while trying to gain approval from musical peers and the world. Similar to prosperity gospel, the spiritual calling in West’s music is often interlaced with references to material wealth.

The idea that Kanye would characterize himself as a “god,” has evoked cries of blasphemy and arrogance. “I am a god/Hurry up with my damn massage/Hurry up with my damn ménage/Get the Porsche out the damn garage.” Hardly the mutterings of humble deity, the in-your-face audacity of Kanye’s lyrics should at the very least provoke thought from serious students of his music.

By way of explaining this audaciousness, he states in an interview:

> You don’t have to be a racist anymore, it’s called self-hate it works on itself. It’s like the real estate of racism...someone comes up and says, “I am a god!” Everybody says, “Who does he think he is?” I just told you who I thought I was, a god! I just told you – that’s who I think I am. Would it have been better if I had a song that said, “I am a nigga?” or if I had a song that said I am a gangster?” Or if I had a song that said, “I am a pimp!” All of those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me right?

West is nothing, if not provocative. Exposing the average listener’s implicit bias, Kanye’s comments here are effective simply because of the thousands of Hip Hop songs in which artists claim the monikers “gangsta,” “pimp,” and “nigga,” all of which are often assumed to be authentic representations of “hood” Blackness. Reinterpreting his lyrics after his comments suggest more about the latter identities than his self-proclaimed “god-hood.” Has the stereotype become reality? What does it mean to attempt a disruption of

---


33 West, “The Last Call,” *College Dropout* (Def Jam 2003); West, “I Am a God,” *Yeezus* (Def Jam 2013).

34 West, “I Am a God.”

35 This statement can be found in a clip at the end of a string of interview moments with Kanye at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U_qY0r8Cs8.
the stereotype as Kanye does? The characteristics of “god-hood” for him are, ironically, resisting external affirmation and flattery, “Soon as they like you, make em unlike you/Cause kissing people ass is so unlike you,” and having “swagger” in the face of “hater-ism” à la Muhammad Ali.\(^36\) Linking his prosperity to his real life persona he further claims that his goal is “feeding his family for generations” something few black musicians have succeeded in doing.\(^37\) What this means, in a sense, is that he is caught in a genuine bind. Elevating social consciousness is one thing; staying wealthy enough to feed one’s family for generations is another. The industry is merciless; sex, drugs, violence and misogyny sell. Still, the spiritual quest is real.

The short film \textit{Runaway} is written and directed by Kanye West, and comes as a download with the \textit{Yeezus} album, despite the fact that the song “Runaway” and the soundtrack for the film are from \textit{My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy}. This may simply have been a clever marketing strategy to get fans to purchase both albums. The quest for identity amidst a range of contradictions appears to be a central theme in this movie. It opens with the main character played by Kanye, speeding along a deserted road through the woods in a luxury car. At the same time, a comet destined for earth coincidentally explodes on the road in front of him, bringing with it a fallen angel, a kind of female bird incarnate who is unconscious and wounded. She becomes the main character’s girlfriend, although they are from two different worlds, but at some point she reveals that she has to burn like a phoenix and rise from the ashes in order to return to the world she came from. She says this after she realizes that the people in the human world she has entered (who all appear to be wealthy African Americans with white servants) only eat chicken and other birds. The film ends with her rising from the ashes of a flame and flying away while the man she has left behind wakes up, as if from a dream, and takes to his heels running through the woods in pursuit of her or his destiny. The film ends with Gil Scott Heron’s spoken word poem, “Who Will Survive in America,” which is also one of the tracks on the album \textit{My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy}.\(^38\)

The pursuit of destiny and identity that the protagonist chases in \textit{Runaway} is similar to West’s pursuit of affirmation as an African American male throughout much of his career. Yet, his ascent from the world of “broke nigga” to “rich nigga” colors the ideals he has strived for since his near-death accident. The “broke nigga racism” West encounters before the release of \textit{College Dropout} is a far cry from the issues he faced in post-\textit{Graduation}. Yet becoming rich, in certain ways, magnified the unfair social institutions West failed to bypass with money and fame. Meanwhile, his breakout \textit{808s and Heartbreak} album, according to writer Malcolm Musoni, is an album that attempts to

\(^{36}\) West, “I Am a God.”

\(^{37}\) This can be found in the same YouTube clip of various interview moments https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U_qY0r8Cs8.

reconcile the contradictions of a life of luxury with his mother’s death from complications connected to plastic surgery. In other words, West becomes a victim of the fame that essentially enabled him to transcend boundaries he, as a black man in America, was never expected to break. Moreover, his pursuit of god-hood could be read as an allusion to liberation from the fraught institutions that dampen black social mobility. Pursuing destiny within “the woods” of oneself is purer than the manufactured institutions that historically work against many.

The fallen angel in the film Runaway is represented as an innocent, despite the biblical notion as stated in the Second Epistle of Peter that, “God did not spare angels when they sinned but cast them into hell.” West fuses the concept of the fallen angel with the Greco-Egyptian idea of the phoenix who can rise from the ashes; one notion represents loss and the other, rebirth. This could be interpreted as a metaphorical duality that is symbolic of Kanye’s philosophical crisis, i.e., his pull between the world of the flesh and that of the spirit. The female bird angel comes to earth, falls in love, sees the cannibalism and violence and departs. The male character by the film’s end has abandoned decadence and luxury and is running, as if for his life, through the woods in hot pursuit of something with just the clothes on his back. The film’s title Runaway, with the image of a black man running, suggests an escape from enslavement. Gil Scott Heron’s “Who will Survive in America” is the vocal backdrop as the credits roll at the end. If we add this strategic commentary to the film’s other themes then the critique of opulence and excess as ends onto themselves seem to be the ultimate message. As Zora Neale Hurston states in her essay, “High John de Conquer,”

Way over there, where the sun rises a day ahead of time, they say that Heaven arms with love and laughter those it does not wish to see destroyed. He who carries his heart in his sword must perish. So says the ultimate law. Moreover, John knew that it is written where it cannot be erased, that nothing shall live on human flesh and prosper.

None of it will survive America or rather those who indulge in it will not survive America. There may not be any survivors. But one must at least attempt escape. If the phoenix rising at the film’s end is supposed to represent what’s possible then death and rebirth in symbolic form or otherwise seem necessary for a new set of humane values to emerge.

Can the music and the message both remain “pure” if one wants to feed one’s family for generations in a system of capitalist domination and violence? The answer appears to be “no.” West’s strategy for addressing the spiritual in his music differs from Jamaican musician of old, Bob Marley whose notions of “the suffering duppy conqueror”

---

40 Peter. 2: 4 English Standard Version.
gives consistent voice to the oppressed masses on a world scale without recourse to celebrating money and material as ends onto themselves. Kanye’s film *Runaway* speculates about an alternative even as his lived reality manifests the contradictions that Rodney speaks of. At the end of the day, however his philosophy, as made manifest over the course of his musical career thus far, has left us with much food for thought.
Bibliography


Sundermann, Eric. “We Interviewed the Founder of Yeezianity, the First Religion Based on Kanye West.” *Vice*, January 14, 2014.


———. “Gorgeous.” 2010 by Def Jam. MP3.
———. “Gold Digger.” 2005 by Def Jam. MP3.
———. “I Am a God.” 2013 by Def Jam. MP3.
———. “Jesus Walks.” 2004 by Def Jam. MP3.
———. “The Last Call.” 2004 by Def Jam. MP3.
———. “Pinocchio Story (Freestyle Live From Singapore.)” 2008 by Def Jam. MP3.

There is a rich, inescapable irony that haunts writing about Kanye West, especially writing by scribes like us holding “those degrees.” Kanye’s debut trilogy of music—The College Dropout (2004), Late Registration (2005), and Graduation (2007)—modeled his ascension to the pinnacle of Hip Hop on truancy, a turning away from America’s expected path of formal education. Cleverly mocking those who aspire to enter the Black bourgeoisie through pursuing precious diplomas, regardless of the financial sacrifice or loss of dignity endured along the way, Kanye told the fools of “Broke Phi Broke” to follow him to the front of the line. We would be lying if we did not admit that Kanye’s sermonic words did not leave us questioning the wisdom of our career path, especially during those late nights of graduate study when we were forced to read some obscure text or write about some prompt we knew would be useless to our future thinking. But beyond those fleeting moments that now seem worth the price of the ticket (at least somewhat), Kanye was gesturing toward something deeper in the very fabric of our lives, a sourness in the very mix of post-Civil Rights life.

Black folks enter professional machineries of all sorts to make it up and over mountains of struggle, but once enduring the fires of training, whether in College, or in other networks, what awaits us on the other side of financial and commercial success can resemble more of a nightmare than a dream—a dark twisted fantasy. As affluence and celebrity open doors to new worlds of economic prosperity through access to the world of things, it also brings with it expectations for performances of masculinity and femininity to acquire and hold onto those things. Ascendancy as Kanye articulates, harkens to a Booker T narrative of self-uplift, an actualizable, distinct version of Horatio Alger's mythical immigrant narrative. Adopting this story places slavery as that position to emerge from instead of inhabiting it as a—if not, the—fundamental dimension of social being, that we are in a cosmic dimension of servitude and cultural cannibalism. While Kanye willingly claims the slave’s condition in much of his music—take, for example,
references to the nature of labor on *The College Dropout* to “New Slave” on *Yeezus*—Kanye, nor anyone for that matter, has escaped the strangeness awaiting anyone who drifts off into the American Dream. It is no surprise then, that lyrics about pressures brought about from the world of consumerism have pulsed throughout Kanye’s music as much as those mocking the ridiculous, if not foolish, costs of higher education.

*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2011) (hereafter *MBDTF*), Kanye’s fifth studio album, voiced many of his ongoing struggles with consumerist culture. It was born from one of what would later become several, self-imposed hiatuses from the celebrity limelight, a wilderness period if you will. Well worth the nearly three-year wait, *MBDTF* was certified platinum, nabbed the Grammy for Best Rap Album in 2012, and was lauded with critical acclaim for its release of hit after hit (“Power,” “Monster,” and “All of the Lights”). More notably, however, *MBDTF* signaled what many in Hip Hop already knew (or if they did not know would come to understand): Kanye West is simply a musical genius. In addition to being declared (still) as Kanye’s most comprehensive album in terms of lyrical scope and productive value, *MBDTF*, quite frankly, “does nothing less than articulate a new sound.” The breadth of the album’s varied instrumentation, sonic depth, and stellar arrangement reflect a particular musical ambition that is couched beneath and between lyrics expressing his longstanding commitment to Hip Hop, and the depth of his internalized, and arguably spiritual struggles.

“Runaway,” the ninth track in Kanye’s amazing collection, is a spiritual rumination on contemporary Black heterosexual intimacy. The song opens with a single, lonely “high E” played on the piano, slightly reminiscent of the first few bars of LL Cool J’s “I Need Love,” and which creates an emptiness that launches the phrase “Look at ya,” a sample from a live performance of Rick James’s “Mary Jane.” But instead of following Cool J’s smooth emotion-laden verses on love, Kanye abducts the listener into shamelessly sung bars: “And I always find, yeah, I always find somethin' wrong / You been puttin' up with' my shit just way too long / I'm so gifted at findin' what I don't like the most / So I think it's time for us to have a toast.” Making his own claims on George Costanza’s favorite breakup strategy—“it’s not you, it’s me”—Kanye sounds like he’s ready to come to the light of his own cowardice, and celebrate a woman who has shielded herself from his dirty ways, but instead he sings an ironic chorus: “Let's have a toast for the douchebags... / Let's have a toast to the jerkoffs... / Baby, I got a plan / Runaway fast as you can.” Kanye remains steadfast in bad faith, even as he is consciously aware that he is behaving terribly. In other words, he knows that he is running from intimacy, and instead of conducting himself differently, he encourages his partner to join him in flight. “Runaway” stands out for the ways Kanye uses Black church ritual to articulate what words cannot quite capture. His celebrity status permits him freedom to explore his sexuality with multiple partners, so that intimacy takes a backseat to being an asshole, and inflates his ego so much that he can hide his shortcomings behind it.

And in “Runaway,” Kanye testifies. His confession: arrogance, guilt, and
misplaced blame amplified by his submission to the life of a superstar. Ye’s particular sins are steeped in the mishandling of women ("I don’t know what it is with females / but I’m not too good at that shit"); a disconnect from the reality of his flawed humanity ("Yeah I always find something wrong"); braggadocio resulting from a skewed sense of self ("I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most"); and a lack of intimacy and skeptical (at best) romanticism ("never was much of a romantic / I could never take the intimacy"). Ye admits that his choices have wreaked havoc on the lives of those around him, and especially the women ("And I know I did damage / ’Cause the look in your eyes is killing me"). Kanye’s resolution: to advise those close to him to “run away from me baby,” to abscond from the boundaries of what risks overtaking all relationships over time—apathy, unfulfilled expectation, and disappointment.

Kanye’s testimony possesses layers beyond the chorus. He also pulls in Pusha T, of Clipse, as a foil for his regretful character. Pusha T would later reveal that Kanye pushed him towards this role in the song: “The ‘Runaway’ verse was my first time that I probably was made to rewrite a verse. And every other time I’ve been like, if I rewrote a verse it’s because I just felt like, oh I thought of another idea. But Kanye literally made me rewrite this verse. He wanted more, you know, more arrogance. The verse and the song came from a conversation. We were just talking about relationships—just the attitude of it, the reality of relationships and music business relationships, and how outsiders have a perspective about a relationship when they just don’t know.”

As the song swells, Kanye summons cellos to harmonically swirl around the single piano note that introduces “Runaway,” a technique he also used in “Gone,” a track from Late Registration. The symphonic feel of “Gone,” supplicated by powerful lines from Cam’ron and Consequence, concludes with Kanye, lifted by strings, admitting his consideration to leave the rap game behind: “I’m ahead of my time, sometimes years out / So the powers that be won’t let me get my ideas out / And that make me wanna get my advance out / And move to Oklahoma and just live at my aunt’s house / Yeah, I romance the thought of leaving it all behind / Kanye step away from the lime / Light.” Receding from celebrity does not mean he wishes to leave Hip Hop alone, but that he fantasizes about creating his own dojo for instructing aspiring artists in navigating the music industry. In the end, he realizes that assuming the role of a sensei in the rap game would be contributing to the mechanistic production of replaceable Hip Hop artists, and also depriving the world of his irreplaceable talent.

So Kanye continues to bless us by not running away from the industry, but in “Runaway,” the strings are an omen for another kind of escape. The last verses of the song seem to be sung through a vocoder run through Auto-Tune, which hyper-instrumentalizes the musical sequence while making the words indecipherable. It’s an interesting strategy given that the listener is well aware of the lyrics of the chorus by this point in the track— that Kanye is a douchebag, an asshole, and a scumbag—but the feeling invoked by the singing is remarkably different, moving even. Ye doesn’t decipher his
cries, nor should we assume that he is translating previous lyrics. The words are transformed into wordless moans, like a Deacon lining a hymn on a Sunday morning or, more aptly, a sinner lamenting at the mourners bench. In this highly synthetic, computerized moment, Ye is most human, and pours out his soul. We sit with him, touch and agree, and nod our heads in full knowing as he articulates the ineffable, and pulls us into that space of vulnerability where nobody could hear him pray.
“Ultralight Beam”: The Gospel According to Kanye West

Jeffrey McCune

“We don’t want no more devils in the house, we want the Lord!”

This declaration from a shouting child-voice begins “Ultralight Beam,” the first track of Kanye West’s *Life of Pablo* (2016) album. Drawn from the 4-year-old Instagram sensation who was recorded having church in the car with her mother, West positions this word to be the invocation of his album. In a time of heightened antiblackness, the advent of a Trump presidency, and an attack on racial, gender, and sexual difference, such ministry here is beyond prophetic. Indeed, this reference could be read as a literal manifestation of “the gospel,” within the record. However, Kanye West’s consistent use of religious metaphors and symbols suggests a relevance for this religious text beyond religion. In fact, I argue that this is spiritual cleansing for America; particularly, not a call for moralism but a sincere admission that we must enter a new political moment emboldened by the voices of children. In essence, the centering of this 4-year-old sonic chant offers the listener an opportunity to deflect the religious overture, while paying attention to the voice and its demands.

I cannot hear Kanye West perform Hip Hop with gospel inflection, always adorned with a measured choral arrangement and anthem-like structure, without hearing a gesture to a historical Chicago gospel form. The use of Chance the Rapper and the Chicago references within the lyrics, drives me to reflect upon how West might be using a localized conversation for universal impact. Put differently, the “ultralight beam” in this particular track is not a suggestion that we are headed in the right direction, but a commentary on the speed at which everything seems to have changed. Nostalgia is at the heart of this anthem. Chance the Rapper sings:

*Foot on the Devil’s neck*
*t’il it drifted Pangaea*
*I’m moving all my family from Chatham to Zambia*

This short verse powerpacks a complex, but critical supposition: we are in a cultural drift which produces division and decay. This is not just a global phenomenon, but one that can be witnessed in Chicago’s Chatham Southside neighborhood conditions. Chatham, which was once a Black middle-class “panacea” of prosperity and community,
has become an area divided between middle-class and poor, drug-addicted and drug-free, old and young, invested and disinvested. Pangaea was an ancient understanding of how the once-connected continents were disconnected in a process of natural separation. However, here in West’s ode to Pangaea via Chance the Rapper, the “ultralight beam” remarks upon the fast and unnatural shifts in Chicago’s Chatham and other neighborhoods across the US—suffering from the housing market crash, income inequality and unemployment, reemergence of crack-cocaine and other perilous drugs, and the cyclical prison-industrial complex. The inclusion of this small, pithy statement in the sea of what can at first appear an optimistic anthem, disallows for the song to be seen within only a musical context. It is a political song, which calls upon the gospel sound as an instrument of lament and to package a political thesis within a sea of pious aesthetics. For me, this layering is what it at the heart of West’s sonic genius; his most provocative contribution to Hip Hop music production.

The collaboration of Kanye West with Kirk Franklin is its own offering of what I might call in my forthcoming book, *On Kanye: A Philosophy of Black Genius*, a site of Black fugitivity. Kanye West, known for his unpredictable sonic and textual performances, partners with Kirk Franklin who has always been the popular gospel artist who offered cutting-edge, and sometimes unrecognizably gospel tracks, which push genre classifications to a new level. Together, West and Franklin offer us a “collaboration of the misfits,” which challenges for some the gospel credibility given to “ultralight beam.” As Kirk Franklin closes the track, he turns to a soliloquy for God:

*Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they’re not good enough.  
This prayer’s for everybody that feels like they’re too messed up.  
For everyone that feels they’ve said “I’m sorry” too many times.  
You can never go too far when you can’t come back home again.*

This prayer, when spoken by Kirk Franklin, inadvertently tells the story of he and Kanye west; they are testaments to God’s grace “beyond bad behaviors.” Like the preachers who were once “of the world,” this portion of the track reverts to a gospel tradition of testimony and opens space for those who may need healing in the midst of the Pangaea that Chance the Rapper eludes. The other possibility here is that this moment anticipates the rest of the album—filled with perverse sexualities and deviant sonic modalities—which may be deemed responsible for the so-called “holy war” repeated in the song. Kanye West, in this formation, utilizes religious rhetoric and sonic gestures, to prepare the audience for what he knows may be controversial offerings. Put another way, he frames for us a reading of the album which facilitates an understanding of it as his own gospel, inclusive of his own version of the (un)holy.

And it is this latter point, that has brought me to the conclusion that Kanye West is unconcerned with the formal ideas of “gospel” or religion. Rather, it feels more accurate to say that he produces his own gospel, manifests his own truths. The inclusion of multiple voices, multiple sonic aesthetics—including the sound effects from the video game *Counter-Strike*—indicates his commitment to a polyphonic and polytextual
experience for himself and listeners. This is no traditional anthem and he is not the traditional choral arranger. And thus, the refrain “this is a God dream,” may not be a reference to some “being out there,” but West’s own admission of his own Godliness. What is the dream, of which he speaks so loudly as a “God dream?” For me, it’s his own dream of a world of culture which has space for multiple realities and which is anti-Pangaea and not anti-Black—a space not terrorizing to those who cohere as different, or deficient. Here, in the enveloping ultralight beam, is a place where we all can dwell and attempt to put back together what seems so quickly torn apart. But, if we listen to the opening invocation, the belief in the God force within us (not the devils/destroyers), can get us to this place where the Life of Pablo can be at once gospel and Hip Hop.
Yeezus Is Jesuz: Examining the Socio-Hermeneutical Transmediated Images of Jesus Employed by Kanye West

Daniel White Hodge

Abstract

Kanye is enigmatic in many ways. His continuous reference to deity while still embracing a person like 45 makes him worth the study and effort to explore his contribution and effect in the Hip Hop cultural continuum. This article investigates, Kanye West from a theological and spiritual standpoint to provide insights from his theological aesthetics. While the ever-growing field of Hip Hop studies begins to explore religion in Hip Hop, the present work seeks to address this and develop new theologies/theories that fit both a Hip Hop and Black theology context. While the formal discipline of theology in the United States focuses on Christianity, and a good scope of this project takes a Judeo-Christian approach, it is noted that Black theology is much larger and complex than Judeo Christianity—such is the case with Kanye West as well. This project seeks to add to the study of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context. Using a duo methodological approach—qualitative media analysis and Jon Michael Spencer’s theomusicology—this article explores the symbolism and transmediation of Jesus in Kanye West’s music and concerts between 2011 and 2013. This research explores West’s transmediated images of Jesus through a socio-hermeneutical process—a qualitative analysis of language (verbal & non-verbal), imagery, and the tropes it produces for a Black theological discourse. Finally, this article will argue that West’s imagery of Jesus expands the imagination and worldview on the concept of Jesus and provides a Hip Hop socio-hermeneutic for Black theology.

---

1 Socio-hermeneutical transmediation is both text and image delivered in electronic media using narrative or allegory as its delivery system. Thus, for Kanye, he employs both lyric and image to relay his message within a social context; in this case being Hip Hop.

2 Editor’s Note: The author intentionally decided to say the name of Donald Trump. I have decided to include it for future references when the reader may not be aware of the reference.
Introduction: A Post-Civil Rights Symbol

Tupac and the Outlaws said they were “Searchin’ for Black Jesuz.” DMX stated that “Jesus loves me,” while Biggie Smalls wore a jewel encrusted “Jesus piece” around his neck. Conversely, Kanye West, who flirted with a Hip Hop form of “salvation” in his song “Jesus Walks,” has evoked the name and images of Jesus in multiple forums. West’s even claims “I am a God” while epistemologically nuancing aspects of the Jesus image into his concerts and music. Kanye West\(^3\) represents a myriad complex trope of issues for not just Black Theological praxis, but also for the broader study of Black people. In this post-civil rights era\(^4\) we, as Black people, find ourselves in a locality that is neither post-racial nor public Jim/ Jane Crowism; neither fully equal nor fully separate; not fully human yet celebrated in full, for culture and entertainment; it is an era that contains all the elements of hope and forward momentum in the symbol of what was the President of the United States and the nefarious nature of racism poignantly symbolized in Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and countless other Black lives, both male and female, lost at the hands of racism and profiling. West’s symbolism rises as a figure and presents an anomaly of sorts on a post-civil rights era. Located in Kanye is a mixture of voices; the narcissist, the pain, the disillusioned, the proud, the critical interrogator, the double standard, and even the push for a contextual pursuit and understanding of God. In that slurry of complexity, West presents a voice that speaks to and for voices on the margins; nihilistic voices; narcissistic voices; voices which desire social media likes and follows; voices that present on the one hand, a direct interrogation of White supremacy (George Bush doesn’t care about Black people) and on still the other, a complete embrace of White security (I would’ve voted for Trump). What to make of Kanye’s double rhetoric?

Still, West offers a complexity that is not just worth exploring, but paying attention to as he is a part of Hip Hop culture in a post-civil rights era. Thus, Kanye West. Kanye is important for three reasons: 1) in my 2013 research among Hip Hoppers and urban emerging adults, he was ranked above Tupac as a spiritual and religious figure in Hip Hop,\(^5\) 2) White emerging adults have come to appreciate and love him and, have grown up on his music, and 3) Kanye is a symbol for a post-civil rights context and represents

\(^3\) The research for this article comes from my work in Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration ed. Warren Goldstein, Center for Critical Research on Religion and Harvard University (Boston, MA: Brill Academic, 2017) and is grounded within that study.

\(^4\) I will be defining this term as such, this is the generation of young adults born during the post-soul era/ context (1980-2001), raised on a transmediated diet, disconnected from previous generations both locally and ideologically, and currently have non-binary issues to contend with in a post-9/11 society living in Western society. This generation does not have the binary issues to contend with that the Civil Rights generation did (e.g. more Blacks in leadership or the right to vote). While those issues are still present, they manifest themselves in a matrix of problems, which involve police brutality, sexuality, sexual orientation, socioeconomics, transgender, class, and race.

the sacred, the secular, and profane exceptionally well in one persona. This is where we must begin, at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular.

This article, therefore, investigates, Kanye West from a theological and spiritual standpoint to provide insights from his theological aesthetics. While the ever-growing field of Hip Hop studies begins to explore religion in Hip Hop, the present work seeks to address this and develop new theologies/theories that fit both a Hip Hop and Black theology context. While the formal discipline of theology in the United States focuses on Christianity⁶ and a good scope of this project takes a Judeo-Christian approach, it is noted that Black theology is much larger and complex than Judeo Christianity⁷—such is the case with Kanye West as well. This project seeks to add to the study of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context.

Using a duo methodological approach—qualitative media analysis and Jon Michael Spencer’s theomusicology ⁸—this paper explores the symbolism and transmediation of Jesus in Kanye West’s music and concerts between 2011-2013. This

---

⁶ Arguably, within the U.S. the study of God, theology has been mostly relegated to the study of the Christian God e.g. Monica R. Miller, Religion and Hip Hop (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Anthony Pinn, The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Teresa L Reed, The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003). Most universities offering degree programs in Theology go to great lengths to describe the Christian religion and pay little to no attention to other religious interpretations of God. Some Hip Hop artists found their first critique of the God language as a critique of the Christian religious expression of God talk. Others have used the medium of Hip Hop to further explain misinformation and other reflections of theology (Nation of Islam, Five Percenters, etc.).

⁷ For example, the groundbreaking work of James Cone which discussed Jesus from an Afro-centric perspective and situated Black theology within a liberation framework, this was written at a time when Black theologians were not truly respected by publishers or the academy (not that we have ever arrived at a place of total acceptance), but Cone created a shift in how we think about Christian theology James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 20th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 5th ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997); God of the Oppressed (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997). Moreover, the works of Herbert Edwards, Dwight Hopkins, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Monica Coleman disrupt the White hegemony on theology and make space for womanist, a divergent take on sexuality and Blackness, along with dealing with racism within theological traditions Monica A. Coleman, Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology, Innovations; Innovations (Minneapolis, Minn.) (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008); Kelly Brown Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999); Herbert O. Edwards, “Black Theology: Retrospect and Prospect,” Journal of Religious Thought, no. 32 (1975). Kanye is doing similar things with his own theological canon. He is disrupting views of theological, body, and race. Now, I will admit that West has some problematic issues that need to be engaged—such as his ongoing rants, political views, and even a continually changing position on most social issues. Yet, even through his issues, Kanye continues on that disruptive tradition within Black theology.

paper explores West’s transmediated images of Jesus through a socio-hermeneutical process—a qualitative analysis of language (verbal & non-verbal), imagery, and the tropes it produces for a Black theological discourse. Finally, this paper will argue that West’s imagery of Jesus expands the imagination and worldview on the concept of Jesus and provides a Hip Hop socio-hermeneutic for Black theology.

Methodological Approaches

Employing a mixed methods approach, semi-structured interviews\(^9\) were used along with primary data from previous research to explore Kanye’s overall connection to Black theology. The second of the mixed methods approach is that this study is a theomusicological study using the methodological approaches established by Jon Michael Spencer.\(^{10}\) Theomusicology is defined as, “...a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy.”\(^{11}\) It is, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall state, “Music as spiritual practice...[to] hear the challenges and evils in the church and the world as the music reveals.”\(^{12}\) What distinguishes theomusicology from other methods and disciplines such as ethnomusicology is:

\(^9\) About 30% of the data for this article came from research gathered for my manuscript _Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration_ which focuses on a much broader Hip Hop context and post-soul era.


\(^{11}\) Spencer, _Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology_, 3.

Its analysis stands on the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist’s authoritative/normative sources. For instance, while the Western music therapist would interpret the healing of the biblical patriarch Saul under the assuagement of David’s lyre as a psychophysiological phenomena, the theomusicologist would first take into account the religious belief of the culture for whom the event had meaning. The theomusicological method is therefore one that allows for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied.\textsuperscript{13}

Therefore, the theomusicologist is concerned with multi-level data within the context of the people they study, and subsequently analyze the material within the proper time, culture, and context in which it was created. The trinary approaches of theomusicology are:

1. The Sacred: not only those elements within a society that are set apart and forbidden for ritual (such as communion, marriage), but those elements within the given society and culture that are aspiring toward both a pious stance and search for deity.
2. The Secular: Those items which are designated by a given society and culture who have little to know connection with a form of deity.
3. The Profane: Those areas in a society labeled or given the designation of being outside the given morals, codes, ethics, and values established as “good” and/or “right” by the society and culture being studied.

This trinary approach best discloses what the religion within the Hip Hop community is. Theomusicology rises above simple lyrical analysis and the imagining of what the artists might be attempting to say, and goes into the complex arena of where the sacred, secular, and profane intersect. This means that songs which express an explicit sexuality might, in fact, be connecting to a spiritual realm. Theomusicology broadens the discussion of religion within not just Hip Hop contexts but also for Black Theology, it asks the question “What is the Hip Hop community saying in the context in which the music, art, album, and artist were created in?” In this sense, it is interrogating what Kanye is engaged with and the context in which that engagement is taking place. The following is also used in this study to provide a clearer picture of Hip Hop’s theological construction\textsuperscript{14}:

- Cultural context
- Political climate
- Artists upbringing and background
- Album cover and art

\textsuperscript{13}Spencer, \textit{Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{14}Spencer asserts that these areas are crucial in the understanding of the theological message \textit{Protest \& Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology} at the time the song was created.
In their article, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear state:

Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred ... As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths.\(^\text{15}\)

Similarly, this particular study examines theology and spiritual pursuits beyond moralism established by White dominant structures and asks complex questions about God (or Gods) and the performativity within religious domains for focus on a post-civil rights Black theology rooted in Kanye West.

Within theomusicology there are three analytical approaches that this project will utilize: descriptive, normative, and predictive.\(^\text{16}\) Descriptive theomusicology, is a non-judgmental approach to the culture, music, and people being studied and allows the space for the researcher to take in the bulk of data for what it is rather than placing a judgment label on it (e.g. perceived sexual behaviors, ‘bad language’). It also examines the creators of the music and the consumers within the context of it; in this project chapters one and two will be part of the descriptive analysis.

Normative theomusicology, continues the analysis previously listed while comparing the tenets of canonical authority that the culture being studied describes as a norm and the broader standardized canon. In this sense, West’s own discourse of God, salvation, and claims of Christianity are taken into consideration. In other words, normative theomusicology examines the sacred texts that a culture—in this case being Kanye West—determines as canonical and compares that with what, say, the “Bible” is discussing. Normative theomusicology allows this project to delve into a canonical space that West may or may not be espousing.


\(^{16}\) Spencer, Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology.
Lastly, *predictive theomusicology* is an analysis of the future state of affairs to which music speaks or directs a society and / or culture.\(^{17}\) Attempting to avoid condemnatory polemic statements, this book will offer this analysis in chapter six, the conclusion, and begin to assert what a Hip Hop theology might in fact look like. Predictive theomusicology is important as it establishes what the culture may be saying about God; or the lack of a God. As Spencer states

> Analogously, the theomusicologist recognizes that human beings not only *exist in time* — in the present that is shaped by the past and perceptions of the future—but that during ritual they are caught in another, numinous time: in black religious ritual, because time stands still, and in African religious ritual, because time progresses counterclockwise to the time of the ancestors. Hence, while musicology historically examines music created *at one time*, and ethnomusicology anthropologically investigates music contemporary ethnic cultures produce in *present time*, theomusicology theologically studies music produced in the *diety’s time* — the ‘wholly informed, the pure mood.’\(^{18}\)

Here, Spencer discusses the prominence of such a study and within a space such as Hip Hop—that is constantly changing—the predictive analysis is vital. Spencer is also correct in asserting that theomusicology provides a more balanced approach to understanding the theological messages within music. As a culture and society such as Hip Hop grows, it is important to engage in a predictive nature and allow its members to speak of the direction in which it may possibly be headed in.

Contrariwise, lyrical analysis limits the scope of a study on, say, a contemporary artist such as Kanye and does not produce an accurate picture of what Hip Hop, as a full cultural continuum, is communicating theologically. I must interject here that from a rhetorician’s perspective, word/ lyric/ hermeneutic is imperative and needed for study. It is clear that those are still used to study and for study of not just Hip Hop Culture, but Black theology. However, to place meaning on a lyric that the song never intended to say, is problematic on many levels. On a much more comprehensive level, I seek to establish the “why” an artist would construct an album like Nas’ “God’s Son,” or Remy Ma’s articulation of a female version of Jesus and the social conditions which helped created — rhetoricians, I would imagine, are interested in this too. Moreover, lyrical analysis requires an ethnographic dimension to it in order to clearly grasp what the artist was trying to implement in that song. And while some of Kanye’s lyrics will be examined in this project, the analysis uses theomusicology and its trinary approach, while taking into account the context and environment the song/ album was created in.\(^{19}\)

---

\(^{17}\) Spencer, *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*, 4.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{19}\) It must be noted that this methodology, while robust and will provide greater insight, will not fully produce a shift in what we understand theology to be.
Kanye’s albums were analyzed along with cover art, production places, producers, instruments used, and date released. Those albums include:

2. Late Registration (2005)
3. Late Orchestration: Live at Abbey Road Studios (2006)
5. 808’s & Heartbreak (2008)
7. Watch The Throne (2011)
8. Yeezus (2013)

In collaboration with that data, mediated images from West’s Twitter, website, and Facebook page were analyzed using predictive themusicology. Images that had a form of spirituality or religion were captured paying special attention to those which connected with the Jesus figure. Finally, interviews from 106.1 KMEL, Breakfast Club Power 105.1, and Zane Lowe’s promo show were also analyzed using normative themusicology and to garner a broader scope of West’s spirituality away from his music.

We have discussed the methodological framework. Let us now turn our attention to the concepts of what Kanye defines as Yeezus. This will give the context for the next section, West’s transmediation of Jesus in his persona.

**Kanye’s Context & Space**

Kanye West has risen to a socio-theological status within Hip Hop that few other rappers have attained. “John,” in my interviews, stated that Kanye was indeed the “new Tupac.” While “Lady J” told me that Kanye represented a newer more practical approach to the Christian God. In Ebony Utley’s work\(^\text{21}\), Kanye’s name was the highest on the list of “spiritual rappers” beating out Tupac.\(^\text{22}\) Kanye, who worked as a producer and musical arranger for artists such as Jay Z and John Legend, was raised in a Christian home. His music is a reflection of the influence of artists from the Funk era, such as The Commodores, Kool And The Gang, Marvin Gaye, and myriad of 80’s popular culture artists such as Tears For Fears, Cyndi Lauper, Pet Shop Boys, and Peter Cetera. He is a musician at heart and combines samples, live drums, electronic rhythms, and

---

\(^{20}\) Because the scope of the research was complete, *The Life Of Pablo* (2016) was not able to make it into the canon of research.


\(^{22}\) This could signify a shift in the way newer generations espouse and respect deity within Hip Hop moguls. For the last two decades Tupac has been the primary rapper who represents a “God Connection” but as of recent, Kanye, Kendrick Lamar, and in some circles even Jay Z, are beginning to represent the broadening of this title. Time will tell how newer generations view Tupac and endear him to theological and spiritual pursuits.
musicianship to all his music. His first mainstream album, *The College Dropout* (2004), made headlines as he addressed the issues of salvation, Jesus, Jesus’ love, sin, and the profane with his song “Jesus Walks.” Here, Kanye continued the conversation which Tupac had started in regard to heaven, final destinations, and Christological manifestations in indigenous settings.

“Jesus Walks” is a song about contextualizing a “good news” message that, for too long, had been a White, Western, perfected image of deity in which many from urban centers could not aspire nor connect to (we will discuss this further in chapter five). Rappers have had a keen feeling toward the historical Jesus because of the persecution he endured, and the narrative of suffering Jesus’ story has. Kanye’s song acknowledges the secular and the profane within the sacred. The song begins with an opening designed to seek a higher personal consciousness:

*Yo, We at war
We at war with terrorism, racism but most of all we at war with ourselves
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me) with me with me with me (fades)*

The beginning of the song sets the tone and demarcates a search for a Jesus who can “walk with him” and help in the war. In the second verse, Kanye begins to uncover that contextualized “good news” and offers up an image of Jesus that detours from the standard Evangelical one. It is this Jesus that Hip Hoppers appear to identify with:

*(Jesus Walks)*
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me)
The only thing that I pray is that me feet don't fail me now
(Jesus Walks)
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs
(Jesus Walks with me)
I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long
To the hustlas, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers
To the victims of Welfare for we living in hell here hell yeah
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly

---

23 Kanye did release a less known album called *I'm Good* in 2003, but this was a “mix-tape” and did not receive much radio airtime. Still, four interviewees remarked how this album was “inspirational” and “Kanye’s better, ‘underground’ work.”

24 It is not just this particular song which Hip Hoppers are able to relate to. Kanye’s constant comparisons to Jesus, suffering, martyrdom, and being crucified is yet another pathway Hip Hoppers connect with his “Christ like” image.

I know he hear me when my feet get weary
Cuz we’re the almost nearly extinct
We rappers are role models we rap we don’t think
I ain’t here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I’m just trying to say the way school need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that’s the way yall need Jesus
So here go my single dog radio needs this
They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus
That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes
But if I talk about God my record won’t get played Huh?
Well let this take away from my spins
Which will probably take away from my ends
Then I hope this take away from my sins
And bring the day that I’m dreaming about
Next time I’m in the club everybody screaming out26

Note the implications that Kanye makes in this verse: a call to secularized individuals (hustlers, drug dealers, strippers), a space for those who are labeled as profane (killers, murders), and the beginnings of journey toward a Jesus that can relate to them. Kanye also skirts the issue of race and reminds us that “skin color” does not matter to him; he is in pursuit of the actual relationship and the “need” for a higher power; a God; a deity that is relatable and reachable.27

Still, even within this veneer of perceived genuine spiritual pursuits, Kanye struggles with some of the same issues other rappers have regarding misogyny, nihilism, and a hyper braggadocio. In a 2013 interview with Hip Hop DX, Kanye stated that, “I ain’t your fucking role model. Don’t label me that. I’m an artist. Period. That’s what I do. Don’t expect anything else from me.” Hip Hop DX columnist Omar Burgess describes Kanye as a “walking contradiction” yet also asserts, “I think the fact that he generally embraces the inconsistencies in his ideology makes for some interesting tension within his music.”28 That “tension” is precisely what makes Kanye a strong secular and profane articulation of theological matters.29

26 Ibid.
29 This also connects with Kanye’s 2005 statement during a Hurricane Katrina live telethon regarding George Bush’s response to the victims of the hurricane. It was a sign that Kanye was not going
In his 2013 New York Times interview with journalist Jon Caramanica, Kanye deals with this tension himself:

I don’t have some type of romantic relationship with the public. I’m like, the anti-celebrity, and my music comes from a place of being anti. That was the album where I gave people what they wanted. I don’t think that at that point, with my relationship with the public and with skeptical buyers, that I could’ve done “Black Skinhead” [from “Yeezus”].

Kanye sees himself as this model for this tension and, conversely, also views himself as a sort of Hip Hop hero. He continues:

I am so credible and so influential and so relevant that I will change things. So when the next little girl that wants to be, you know, a musician and give up her anonymity and her voice to express her talent and bring something special to the world, and it’s time for us to roll out and say, “Did this person have the biggest thing of the year?” — that thing is more fair because I was there.

Some bloggers and scholars view Kanye’s confidence as arrogance and pride, while almost all of the interviewees saw Kanye as a visionary and modern day prophet. Kanye does, however, present a contradictory stance on some issues; especially regarding gender.

In his 2013 album, Yeezus, Kanye drew critics when he called himself “God.” While a lot of the album deals with a strong involvement with indigenous forms of theological inquiry, much of the hyper male posturing is done on the backs of women. Kanye describes oral copulation and ejaculation on women as normative for sexual exploration and dances in the controversial space of religion and sexuality — a good space, but women are not in power within this space. Does that still make him a Jesus figure? In an online article Ebony Utley tells us that:

Throughout the album, West asks audiences to embrace a similar “and without contradiction” acceptance especially of his social commentary about race and his social disdain for women. West’s album is filled with typical rap posturing. No successful rapper has ever spent an entire album rapping about how he can’t read, can’t get a job, and can’t keep a girl. Rap is a fantasy world, where men’s success is premised on making their.

31 Cited in ibid interview with Kanye West
32 A term typically held for artists such as Tupac who were able to future cast events.
wildest dreams seem true. The catch comes if you’re a black man without any real power. How do you convince an audience that you do have power when the fashion world won’t take you seriously, detractors upbraid you for having a baby with Kim Kardashian, and people publicly make you apologize for words and deeds you’re not sorry for. Well, apparently, West came up with an answer in the 48 hours he spent finishing lyrics for the album. You accrue power by taking it from someone else. Thus, women take the brunt of West’s anger usually via some (oral) sex exchange.\(^{33}\)

These do present some contradicting posits for Kanye. Still, the Christian Jesus was not without controversy either. The relationship to Mary, the adulterous woman at the well,\(^{34}\) the strong words toward the Syrophoenician woman,\(^{35}\) the absent teen years of Jesus all leave an open gap for ideas surrounding the historical Jesus.\(^{36}\)

Still, Kanye continues to push forward, and his 2013 album makes numerous references to God and the connections that Kanye has to God. This, once again, is a continual tension with the sacred, profane, and secular\(^{37}\) and allows a more comprehensive view of the complexity surrounding religion in Hip Hop contexts. Utley again, reminds us:

Does this type of misogyny, which, let us be fair, is common in rap, undermine West’s religious allusions? No. Both religion and rap are notorious for perpetuating patriarchy and heterosexism. Any system designed to empower must do so at the expense of someone else. Whether it’s a believer over a nonbeliever, whites over blacks, men over women. How does a new slave get his power back? He becomes “a dick instead of a swallower” and “fucks a Hampton spouse.” Does that excuse West from his cavalierly sexist commentary? No. But a man obsessed with Jesus does so because he wants to imitate the power of Jesus. When rap and religion turn to power, there will be hierarchy, and the person controlling the story will always come out on top.\(^{38}\)

Thus, Kanye’s religious dance continues and in that dance the search for power is critical—albeit at the expense of misogyny. Yet, what makes Kanye West such an appealing figure, not just for Hip Hoppers but for American popular culture in general, is that he is, in his public persona, transparent and hostile towards dominant forms of


\(^{34}\) John 4: 7-38

\(^{35}\) Matthew 15: 21-28

\(^{36}\) This does raise questions as to who was Jesus? How has Western Christianity deteriorated the image of the historical Jesus? How might his reputation as a “friend to the sinners” still hold true today? And, how would that friendship be seen by, say, evangelicals in the U.S.? These are continuing and pressing questions that linger. Much like that, Kanye is attempting to work through some of those complications in the work he is doing.

\(^{37}\) Spencer, Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap.

\(^{38}\) Spencer, Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap.
norms—especially as it relates to religion and spirituality. While at the same time, Kanye represents the human experience and is contradictive, proud, hypocritical, and arrogant—this is true though, of many well-known pastors, priests, rabbi’s, and religious leaders; no one gets a pass and is all perfect.

I have shown using a Theomusicological approach the macro context of Kanye West. This now lays the groundwork for exploring his transmediated religious symbolism and of Jesus.

**Transmediated Religious & Jesus Imagery**

Let us now explore some of the more theological imagery that Kanye employs through his various social media platforms.

*Image 1: Kanye & Mom.* On West’s Twitter account, he posted a picture of a sunset with the caption “Hi mom.” The reference here being to his mother (Donda West), whom he had a significant relationship with, who had passed away on November 10, 2007. It was noted throughout the interviews that Kanye was “never the same” once his mother passed away and that he was struggling to find “meaning” after her death. This image might suggest some of that struggle. Kanye was also reported to have “blamed himself” for her death and those closes to him have said the anniversary of her death is still painful for him.

*Image 2: Cosmic Deity.* On both his website and Facebook account, West had this image below which is a myriad of meaning, messages, and color. While he takes a central position in the shot, there are numerous other bodies, mainly female, around him. A composite shot consisting of HDR (High Dynamic Range) photography and digital art, Kanye utilizes a socio-sexual-spirituality here and connects a cosmic realm to his own imposed deity while subjugating mostly women to his power. It is interesting to note the use of White women and Whiteness in general, throughout Kanye’s imagery.
**Image 3: Angelic Kanye.** This is a widely used image of Kanye at one of his concerts. It was rumored that West developed this image into the theatric use of Jesus in his concerts—more on that momentarily. This image has Kanye wearing a traditional color representing “holiness” and/or “purity,” white. Kanye’s use of angelic imagery is also seen as a process for him to be that deity; a conduit if you will. That conduit being Kanye and his theological stance and position—but not unlike Tupac who was rooted in a more Judeo ethos of Christianity.  

**Images 4, 5, & 6: Kanye & Jesus:** here we begin to see the use of Jesus and Kanye in an everyday sense. Jesus is conversing with him, almost as if to advise him on life, in the kitchen no less (below). Kanye, at least here, seems to be heeding the advice, while image 5 (right) is suggesting that he is carrying his own cross. Kanye’s use of the crucifix was evident in Rolling Stone’s cover (left) picture of him with a crown of thorns atop his head. Kanye’s connection to Jesus seems, at times, symbolic and genuine—when asked in his KMEL interview if he was a Christian, his response was, “yes, I am a Christian.” Yet, what does that mean for Kanye and his imagery of women and sexuality? Moreover, might one interpret Kanye’s use of Jesus merely as promotional and for album sales?

---

39 In other words, Tupac followed more of the narratives of a Christian faith; resurrection for those who are in Christ, God judges, salvation in heaven, and salvation through Jesus.
Karl, an interviewee, stated:

Shit, Kanye is this generations Pac. He’s making them connections to religion and Jesus. He’s trying to make Heaven accessible…feel me? Sure he’s cocky. But, shit, so was Jesus! [laughs] Wasn’t he the one who was always talking shit to the religious officials and saying he was God? [Smirks] Shoot, Jesus was a controversial cat.

To this, does Kanye’s intention meet with an actual “relationship” with Jesus, as evangelical Christians would insist is critical? That is not known, nor is it known the why of Kanye’s purpose here; this is much different than someone like DMX, Tupac, or even Lecrae who have implicit connections to Jesus.

Images 7 & 8: God, Space, & Time: Between 2011-2013, West created a theatric concert event complete with extras, C.G. effects, and a Jesus figure. The imagery, as seen in images seven and eight, reflected an interstellar scene in which Kanye spoke, rapped, and even connected to the Jesus symbol. For West, his Twitter account was filled with set images and imagery from these concerts and captions from West that talked about “God being present” or “I am God-like.” These themes, West referring to himself as a God, are common and even more so after his mother’s death in 2007. Note the use of triangular symbolism throughout. This is a connection to central and western African Christian traditions during the 4th & 5th century that West wanted to focus on.
Images 9, 10, 11, 12, & 13: Yeezus Imaginings: In the final group of images, we see direct links to Jesus and Kanye at his concerts. Still part of the theatric concert, Kanye has a place in the show where he arrives on stage wearing a mask covering his entire head (image 9). This was to represent his “blindness” to the truth. Jesus, then enters and helps in removing the mask to reveal “truth” and “consciousness” as Kanye is humbled to his knees (images 10-12). These are particularly interesting because Kanye chooses to transmediate a White Jesus\(^{40}\) – even though he has had a strong critique of White racism on many occasions – and a Jesus that still embraces Hip Hop.

\(^{40}\) Now, I do not believe that Kanye is trying to reconcile the racial fatigue between Blacks and Whites. I do however think that Kanye chose a more recognizable form of Jesus that could get him more social capital rather than a Black Jesus; that is just speculation, however.
In a 2013 interview, Kanye said,

I had a friend of mine who's a pastor there as we started discussing how we want to deliver it,” West said of the Jesus (set) piece. “My girl even asked afterwards, 'Hmm, is that weird if Jesus comes on stage?' No, we do plays all the time. People play Jesus. You know what's awesome about Christianity is we're allowed to portray God? We're allowed to draw image of him, we're allowed to make movies about him. Other religions you're not allowed to do that. That's what's really awesome about Christianity. That's one of the awesome things.41

Kanye has taken this position on multiple occasions, so his reply here to criticism is just, in his mind. Yet, the question remains, what is his purpose here? And, to that, how might we begin to interpret Kanye’s use of Jesus in application to a praxiological connection? In other words, does this connect to “real life?” Some would say, yes, it does. Tanisha, an interviewee stated,

Yeah Kanye a fool for trying to get at Jesus! But...there's a but...he's a pastor and a reverend for the kids. He’s coming from the street perspective and wanting to make you think about these things. That’s deep. He can reach way more people than even like a T.D. Jakes or any pastor, really.

The imagery spoke to at least 80% of my interviews as they viewed it as a contextualized manner in which to make accessibility to a deity figure—once seen as unreachable and oppressive—much more reachable and relatable. The total transmediated imagery Kanye employs was:

- 1 Jesus
- 129 minutes of music, rapping, & theatrics

Concluding Thoughts

I cannot and will not defend all of Kanye’s actions, comments, or wild rants. His use of heteronormative rhetoric while still embossing a form of deity is problematic in many regards. While Kanye is not a savior for “all of Black Theology” nor is he the prime example of “what to do,” he does provide some broader symbolic transmediated imagery which gives us a premise in which to begin a dialogue. Five reoccurring typologies arose within this analysis which should be given heed too as we dialog about the outlook of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context:

1. Hip Hoppers create their own view of God, Jesus, and church in association to suffering, pain, and inequality.
2. The post-soul context helps to create a climate to question authority, rebel from current religious standards and worldviews, and to create a new path to God and church.

3. The felt need from the Hip Hop community aides in creating a spiritual avenue in order to make meaning of the suffering, pain, and inequality.

4. Human action is directed toward problem solving. In this case, Hip Hoppers create a way to problem solve through their music, poetry, and lyrics.

5. Distrust of current systems, institutions, and social structures is a part of the worldview of Hip Hoppers within a post-soul context

For West, he is a part of these five typologies throughout his career—especially his early career between the years of 2002-2006.

Kanye taps into a figure of deity that is not without issue. Jesus was, and still is in many ways, a controversial persona. He was not one to neither mince words nor miss an opportunity to connect with the disinherited. Utley discusses that,

Jesus fraternized with sexually licentious women, cavorted with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, had a temper, used profane language with religious people, praised faithfulness over stilted forms of religious piety, and honored God more than the government. Gangstas respect Jesus because they see the parallels between his life and theirs.42

However, most of the critical, radical, and post soul images of Jesus have been lost and too often domesticated for either political or racial reasons—West, I believe, comprehends this dilemma. For Black theologians, there is a sense of urgency in reclaiming this historical Jesus; a contextual Jesus that many Hip Hoppers, like Kanye, employ. Is it possible that seemingly blasphemous images of the sacred Christ create spiritual awareness? Theologian Tom Beaudoin has told us that, “Offensive images or practices may indicate a familiarity with deep religious truths.”43 One must understand the authority of “official” sacraments to forcefully de-value them—in other words, to critique, one must have an understanding of the element of critique to give an honest evaluation; Kanye is doing just that and attempting to create a different form of a sacrament for a Hip Hop context. Likewise, it takes a true believer in the power of worship to turn curses into praise, the word “nigga” into a nomination of the highest respect. The point here is not to allow degrading terms, but to acknowledge that such rhetorical devices are making a serious theological attempt at grasping a practice of inequality that is very real.44

---


Kanye presents a Jesus that is not only relatable, but one who is able to connect with the inequalities of life. Questioning if Jesus can connect is part of a Hip Hop critical sense. Moreover, a Jesus who can relieve the burden of ghetto life. A Jesus, who, in the Psalmist’s terms, is a shepherd and causes those in dire straits to lie down in green pastures; a Jesus is who able to blow through the blunt smoking persona and redeem those who hurt, back to him. From my own research, I have found that Kanye, especially in his early career, was in search of this—in some way still is.

Problematic to all this is West’s continual unpredictability, double rhetoric, and seemingly pointless public rants that would almost erase the “good” that is being done. Further, Kanye’s own use heteronormative language and hyper-masculine postures, present an ongoing impasse within the broader culture of Hip Hop. Gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and misogyny are all areas that present Hip Hop’s Achilles-heel and fundamental flaw. While this is not the sole doing of West, he does capitulate to this ideological structure and worldview. Moreover, by presenting a male deity, and a White one at that, West meddles in an ongoing debate of theology being dominated by Whites. One cannot overlook the connection that West has to and with Donald Trump—a figure that most in Hip Hop culture have fiercely disagreed with. This presents that dilemma which West has come to be known for. His open rant about not voting, but desire to vote for Trump presents, yet again, a disconnect with, say, his earlier critical statement toward George Bush in 2005 after hurricane Katrina. West’s own credibility is affected by actions such as these and his views on gender continue to be opaque, at best.

Still, these sensationalized images of Jesus are needed. More importantly, they are needed in the discourse of Black Christian theology as many of these personas of Jesus get lost within the dominant Eurocentric Roman Catholic model of Christianity. Suffering in context is nothing new. The search for meaning within that suffering is nothing new. Neither is the rejection of dominate models of deity.

Sensationalized images of Jesus such as Aaron McGruders Black Jesus, Lil Wayne’s Trap Jesus, Tupac’s Black Jesuz, and Kanye’s transmediated Jesuz represent a fundamental attempt to make deity, the divine, and the sacred more accessible to those who typically do not grace the sanctuaries of Christian Churches. They represent the fusing of the sacred and profane—a space that Spencer argues is vastly misunderstood. They use culture to help interpret the sacred scriptures while utilizing humor to break away some of the seriousness characteristically associated with Jesus.

Finally, the Hip Hop Jesus is more relevant and applicable to those seeking a deity from the post soul, Hip Hop, and urban generation. This generation is not interested in a God that sits in multi-million dollar churches. They reject pastors who net more than their congregations make in a year combined. They despise the double standards of the Christian church. And they do not want a Jesus “too perfect.” What Tupac, The Outlawz, and Kanye do well is present a Jesus in human form for this current time and generation;
with imperfections, arrogance, pride, love, pain, and hope, the Hip Hop Jesus represented is one that is a much more approachable one and someone that has a broader scope to deal with ambiguity and doubt—something ever present in the post-civil rights era.45

45 Something that needs more examination with Kanye’s work, is his use of images in their relation to suffering and lament. The images he uses tend to focus on that and it would be interesting to investigate further, their meaning and significance to suffering.
Bibliography


Meditation - Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks,” Black Suffering, and the Problem of Evil

Angela M. Nelson

The hook in Kanye West’s 2004 Hip Hop song “Jesus Walks” touches on black suffering and the problem of evil. The problem of evil, or theodicy, is a Christian theological explanation that vindicates God from having any responsibility for the nature and cause of the presence of evil and suffering in human lives. In other words, the problem of evil is expressed through rhetoric, language, and aphoristic phrases that do not “blame” God—a perfectly good, unlimitedly powerful, benevolent, and just God—for the suffering and evil in human lives. If Christians did not vindicate God, then that would mean that either God is not perfectly good or that His power is limited. Anthony Pinn in Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology (1995) argues that the “theodic issue is the foundation (recognized or not) of Black theological thought” and that “the centrality of oppression within Black theology combined with talk of a sovereign God makes Black theology an extended Black ‘theodicy’” (91-92).

“Jesus Walks” is representative of the perpetual comment on Black suffering and oppression and conceptions of God and Satan (or the Devil) in Hip Hop music in general. West opens the song stating that we are at “war.” Terrorism, racism, and “ourselves” are the war zones. Perhaps, West uses “we” on three levels: global citizens worldwide, the citizens of the United States of America, and/or African Americans in particular. Although it is not entirely clear, many of the scenarios and episodes mentioned in the song point to situations in which African Americans could relate. Some of these issues are “restless niggas,” detectives “choking” them, drug dealing, personal concern about talking to God, and “victims of welfare.”

In the hook, West states that the “Devil” is attempting to “break” him “down.” The hook repeats four times and it serves as a petition to God. At the same time, the hook informs God of two things: why West needs God to “show” him the “way” and why West needs Jesus to “walk” with him. However, at the same time, West expresses apprehension in talking to God because West has not talked to God in “so long.” In mentioning the Devil, West is speaking of a major figure in Christianity who is the chief antagonist and adversary of God, Jesus, and His people. West’s petition to God implies that the Devil is
not a “good” and benevolent persona. As Jon Michael Spencer shows in Blues and Evil (1993) since moral evil (sin) and not natural evil (environmental cataclysms) was of paramount concern to bluesmen and blueswomen, the Devil was a convenient and customary means for them to explain the existence of certain kinds of travail in their lives (76). West, too, is commenting on moral sin, e.g., the “wrongs” in his life, police choking Black men, and “restless niggas” stealing jewelry and expensive cars.

West lays the blame of this oppression and suffering at the feet of Blacks and Whites. In “‘God’s Smiling on You and He’s Frowning Too’: Rap and the Problem of Evil” (Call Me the Seeker, 2005), I describe two types of humanocentric theodicies: “white supremacy” theodicy and “slave mentality” theodicy. Humanocentric theism, or secular humanism, puts the responsibility for human actions and evil upon human beings. The white supremacy theodicy says the choices, values, and resulting actions of African Americans are the direct cause of the oppression and suffering of African Americans (179). The “slave mentality” theodicy puts the responsibility for continued Black oppression and suffering upon African Americans who are unable to realize that they carry the “scars” of the slavery experience in both their social and mental lives (180).

What is not as clear is which group of people are “breaking” West “down.” Whites are actively involved in the “breaking down” that the Devil is attempting to do, but so are Blacks (for hurting other Blacks), corporate media (for not playing West’s song on the radio because West raps about Jesus), the police (for their brutality against Black men), and the United States government (for perpetrating racism and supporting terrorism). West in particular and (Black) rappers in general are well aware that African Americans are oppressed and suffering from evil. Throughout his commentary and as is the case with the music of bluesmen and blueswomen, West does not propose a heavenly solution to the pain and suffering. Heaven is not an option; it is Earth or nothing.
I’m so Self-Conscious: Kanye West’s Rhetorical Wrestling with Theodicy and Nihilism

Conā S. M. Marshall

Abstract

Whether Kanye’s plea to God is to intervene because “the devil’s trying to break [him] down,” or that he (Kanye) is “tryna keep [his] faith,” Kanye West’s lamentations communicate his wrestling of succumbing to sufferings within the world. Despite the twelve-year span between “Jesus Walks” and “Ultralight Beam,” Kanye West’s rhetoric in both songs attempt to make meaning of theodicy—suffering; while simultaneously combating nihilism—the lack of hope. As a professed Christian who articulates the multiplicity of God through Jesus and himself (Kanye West), affirmed on his 2013 album Yeezus track, “I am God,” West complicates religiosity and self-consciousness. He does so by situating himself as both God and human; recognizing limitations of God who has yet to impact his situation as a Black man in America, and his human-self that operates as a venerated deity. West’s consciousness is an amalgamation of his warring with theodicy and nihilism. My essay implements a theo-rhetorical analysis of “Jesus Walks” and “Ultralight Beam” exploring meaning-making processes of locating God. In doing so, I define theodicy and nihilism as repelling mores that aid in self-preservation for West.
Introduction

Since the inception of his first nationally syndicated album, *The College Dropout*, Kanye West has teetered on these constellating mores of faith, God, humanity, theodicy and nihilism in an effort to mitigate warring inner tensions in response to the world around him.¹ His lyrics provide insight into individualized implications of torment, while simultaneously serving as case studies to Black millennials who are working through generations of God-talk that they have not felt concretized in their community.² While Kanye’s recent life circumstances of canceling concert shows, being admitted to the hospital for mental care and boldly supporting President Donald Trump, might render answers to this warring of succumbing to theodicy with nihilism, this article will focus on his two songs in order to better understand how he consistently combats prescribing theodicy with nihilism and perhaps how he has come to these staggering conclusions as of late. This article highlights rhetoric used in two of Kanye’s songs “Jesus Walks” and “Ultralight Beam,” offering insight into dealing with the world around us.

This article will utilize a theo-rhetorical lens to analyze Kanye’s lyrics. By theo-rhetorical, I refer to deriving meaning from the act of locating God. Rhetoric, as a discipline has developed into a field that privileges all cultures of deriving meaning within communication practices as opposed to simply applying Greek and Roman mores to other cultures’ communication practices.³ Theology as a discipline seeks to check the relationship between beliefs and practices, while locating God in the process.⁴ Thusly, I will synthesize the two concepts, implementing them as a mode of analysis. The reader will gain a better understanding of how Kanye makes meaning of theological concepts throughout his music.

I will first define theodicy and nihilism to provide context for my claims. After having done that, I will explain them both in the context of Blackness in order to better understand rhetorical positionality of the lyrics used. I will then showcase how Kanye’s rhetoric operates within these tenets.

“Devil’s Tryna Break Me Down”: Theodicy’s Suffering Sinner and Human Agency

The concept of theodicy has developed over time to better understand its cause and capacity. Michael Eric Dyson explicates the basis of theodicy and its relation to God


⁴ Wright et al.: I Gotta Testify: Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church Published by VCU Scholars Compass, 2019
and humanity. Dyson uplifted Philosopher Gottfried Liebniz’s 18th century Greek etymology of the word theodicy, breaking it down to “theos” and “dike” which literally translates as, God Justice, although, throughout the chapter he refers to theodicy as human suffering and/or evil. Although Dyson’s work was trying to understand a natural disaster—Hurricane Katrina—in relation to governing matters with New Orleans surrounding the catastrophe, this work lends itself to the contextualizing theology and provides insight to how Kanye West finds himself situated in the main question that Dyson, myself, and Kanye are all posing, which is; “What is God’s role in human suffering?” Dyson puts conservative Christian parishioners as well as liberal scholars in conversation in order to better address this question. In doing so, the suggestion and/or solution is that there are varying theodicies taking place.

According to Dyson, there are two types of theodicy, (1) conservative and (2) liberative attributive theodicies. Conservatives suggest that suffering is caused by God punishing the sinner. Therefore, the suffering sinners deserve their punishment. This group of thought would be amongst those who would justify enslaving Africans because of Ham’s actions toward his father, Noah. Ham sinned; therefore, descendants of Ham would be enslaved. Also, per the conservative viewpoint, Katrina victims were taking part in Voo-doo and same-gender sexual activities which are considered sinful to particular sects of Christianity. Therefore, Hurricane Katrina was a condemnation on sinners. On the other hand, liberal attributive theodicy suggests that political leaders are at fault as opposed to simply God’s wrath towards sinners. This thought goes beyond the questioning of “why do bad things happen?” to indicating the role that humans and institutions play within suffering. This takes up human suffering in a philosophical manner. It is important to ask this question of God’s role in suffering in order to know where to direct sentiments and solutions. While liberals take a stance suggesting the suffering came at the hands of government officials and people, Dyson wrestles with the placement of God in suffering. Though he notes that after the Enlightenment, scholars did away with God’s role in suffering, they focused solely on “human agency.” As a result, Dyson’s answer to locating God in suffering—enable to resolve this dilemma and unwilling to let it go—is that God is located in Black faith (in relation to the victims of Katrina mostly being poor Black people). This section does not seek to solve the problem

6 Floyd-Thomas et al., Black Church Studies, 60.
7 The Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century was a philosophical and intellectual shift from the church and utilized reason as a primary source. Foundational scholars of this era include Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel and Karl Marx. During and after the Enlightenment movement, Kant articulated the theological split between God ended where humans’ agency began. Hegel said that destruction was inevitable and Marx spoke of economics and humans created destruction. Thusly, suggesting that theology ends where theodicy begins.
8 Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster, 10.
of suffering, rather to name theodicy as such.

James Cone, progenitor of Black theology, asserts that Christian theology must be a theology of liberation as a direct response to oppressed communities. His theological offering begins as a response to suffering. It is within this understanding of a liberative theology as a response to suffering that Kanye situates himself. Jesus is a salvific figure.

Kanye’s concept of the “devil trying to break me down” in his song “Jesus Walks” suggests that he understands theodicy as a force attempting to destroy his being or break him down, in which he wishes to name, the devil. Why does Kanye do this? The reason is that his conception of God is good and liberating. He cannot fathom situating God as the very thing that is destroying him, so he situates the devil as such, the very entity that is antithetical to how Kanye has imagined God. It is not clear whether the devil can be realized or not—meaning if the devil is a force of sub-deitel being that conjures evil or if the devil is tangible resources, things and or people.

We also know that Kanye is referring to a devil that extends beyond simple individualism, as he opens “Jesus Walks” with, “we at war with racism, we at war with terrorism...” indicating that he understands the larger ramifications of suffering. He reiterates this suffering in “Ultralight Beam” by stating that he is searching for “somewhere I can feel safe and end my holy war...so why send oppression not blessings?” As a result, these works, become chanted reminders that Jesus is accessible and alive. He says this after speaking of the women’s ills to jog his memory of a deity that is supposed to be working on his behalf. It is clear that Kanye believes that suffering can be combated with the power of Jesus and/or God as he calls out for them to help in the midst of turmoil. Kanye laments, “God show me the way” and “I’m tryna keep my faith” inferring there is assistance in God. Therefore, the devil, Jesus and God are to operate on both institutional and individual levels. It is clear that the theodicy is taking place, however it is not as clear if Kanye knows that theology is the answer though he relies on it. It appears that he has faith that theology may be the answer.

“I Walk Through the Valley of the Chi Where Death Is”: Black Suffering in America

Black communities have continued to endure suffering in America. Theodicy is a human condition, though some humans are on varying sides of suffering—some administering it and others victims to said suffering—and those suffering administer more suffering in a constellating continuum of human suffering. Black people have far too long been at the receiving end of suffering in this country; however, this is not to negate Black participation in patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia and other

---

oppressions. Cornel West explains nihilism in Black communities in relation to Black suffering as he positions two dichotomous perceptions of how to combat the world. He posits two concepts of Black nihilism as 1) liberal structuralists and 2) conservative behavioralists. West claims that liberal structuralists dwell on institutional racism and major structures that impact inequalities within systems of education, incarceration, health care, economics, politics etc. All the while conservative behavioralists focus on the behavior of Blacks in the community, what they wear and how they navigate business, taking on the notion of respectability politics. Marc Lamont Hill\textsuperscript{12} and TaNehisi Coates\textsuperscript{13} would later take up these warring behavioralist and structuralist approaches to lived narratives of Black people in contemporary American culture.

It is important to note that while Cornel West critiques both parties for missing out on nihilism as a more detrimental source of Black stagnation, West does not refute that both hypotheses are valid in the discussion of Black suffering. He understands what many scholars and Kanye have been articulating—Black suffering is orchestrated by both institutions and individuals and it is on both levels that they impact the Black psyche.

Chicago as the valley of death signifies the complex realities of institutionalized and localized agency as well as an interjection of Black psychological rapport. It is important to note that along with being Kanye’s hometown, Chicago is ridden with poverty, environmental racism and violence.\textsuperscript{14} This is the place whereby Kanye is raised into his consciousness of God, humanity, suffering and nihilism. Within this same stanza of labeling Chicago “the valley of death,” Kanye alludes to suffering violence projected upon Black Americans by the police by suggesting that Blacks are “getting choked by detectives” and “harassed and arrested.”\textsuperscript{15} He is speaking to a reality that plagues the streets of Chicago and the larger American context—mass incarceration, a condition Michelle Alexander’s probes in \textit{The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness}, in which she explains correlations between drug usage amongst Americans and Blacks and Brown people being incarcerated at unequal rates.\textsuperscript{16} Kanye explains a similar relationship between drugs and incarceration stating, “We ain't goin' nowhere, but got suits and cases/A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis.”\textsuperscript{17} The cops are harassing them even though they are succumbing to the politics of how one must carry themselves. They are wearing the “appropriate” attire and driving an “appropriate” vehicle; yet, they are still criminalized. The absurdity is that they are...
assumed to have a trunk full of narcotics in spite of knowing the history among Black people and law enforcement, while following both legal and social laws. These circumstances create an environment of death—one that is created for Black suffering.

The condition of Black suffering is the theodicy which Kanye alludes to in “Jesus Walks” and “Ultralight Beam.” Kanye echoes repeatedly, “So why send oppression not blessings?”18 as a clarion call for the cause of suffering. It is the same suffering referenced by James Bell, progenitor of critical race theory, in Faces at the Bottom of the Well, his conglomeration of anecdotal accounts, that suggests racism in America is intrinsically linked to power and will never end.19 While it is not certain whether Kanye believes racism and/or suffering for himself and the Black community will ever end, it is clear that Kanye has held this sentiment of death in Black communities since his debut in 2004 and continues it through his latest project in 2016.

“I’m Trying to Keep My Faith”: The Lack of Hope, Love, and Meaning

Nihilism in the Black community should not be overlooked as a dangerous symptom of suffering. Cornel West writes:

In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle.20

West suggests that though suffering exists, it is the psychological ramifications of that suffering that we must consider as the largest detriment to Black communities. The threat of a community losing the capacity to think that things can get better is the beginning of the end for West. The lack of hope stagnates a people from working towards solutions and liberation. Therefore, West’s assertions that nihilism is the greatest threat, gains legitimacy in that structuralist and conservative solutions will never be implemented if Black people have no hope and/or desire to fight, struggle and overcome Black suffering.

According to Cornel West, liberal and constructive nihilism are inseparable. Culture is just as structural as economics and politics.21 It is important to understand culture as structural so that we then could view despair, dread, lack of hope, and the collapse of meaning as structural. Conservatives contribute to nihilism by exceptionalizing people without taking into account structures, thus failing to admit that although Blacks adhere to American ethics, they are still on the bottom of the social ladder.

18 West, “Ultralight Beam.”
21 West, Race Matters, 3–19.
They do not want Blacks to be “victimized” (but they are victims). Cornel West says, “For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive...without hope there can be no future, without meaning there can be no struggle.”

These dichotomous ideations become polarized as they fail to take into account the necessity of the other and ultimately misses a critical component of Black consciousness that Kanye West addresses in his music. Incriminating institutions unearth historical backings for current manifestations of minority environments; however, it does not allow for agency within oppressed communities. Conversely, placing blame upon communities’ agency without fully taking into account systems that have strategically displaced certain people on the margins who have little political and economic power. These polarized camps of thought continue postulating theories and solutions, while they fail to posit psychological ramifications of it all—lack of hope. The psychological ramifications are real and there is no movement without hope. While academicians and activists alike struggle with privileging the other side of this dilemma of oppression and suffering, looking to Kanye West’s music provides us an entry point into conversing about the varying aspects of theodicy and nihilism through his understanding of his environment.

Likening those on welfare as victims suggests that welfare is one that preys on and subjugates people. “To the victims of welfare for we living in hell here hell yea.” While dominant narratives would suggest welfare recipients benefit, suck up tax payers’ money and live lavish lifestyles, Kanye recognizes the hardships and bondage associated with welfare, the circumstances leading to it and the suffering restrictions that come along with it. Though the requirements differ from state to state to obtain welfare benefits, the main premise is that a family has been unable to provide basic resources for their family. No one would ever ask for such a situation, which is why Kanye emphatically states that this circumstance is hell. Most welfare benefits provide the minimum amount of resources for living and remaining in poverty with strict standards to keep up those benefits without any transition period or romantic involvement. Hell becomes not only a damned location, but redefined meaning and lack of hope in a system that has historically and contemporarily been against them, Black nihilism.

Kanye West also understands his surroundings as one that requires deliverance, “deliver us serenity, deliver us peace, deliver us loving, we know we need it, you know we need it...” Requiring deliverance connotes a state of needing rescue or freedom which further this concept of nihilism as a state that lacks serenity, peace and love. This

---

22 West, Race Matters, 23.
24 West, “Jesus Walks.”
25 West, “Ultralight Beam.”
lament for escaping a place that lacks these essential elements (according to Kanye), is reminiscent of the hell that he speaks of in “Jesus Walks” being portrayed here in “Ultralight Beam.”

Theology is anthropological in that we, humans upholding religion or theos, have not been able to speak of or locate God within history devoid of God’s relationship to humans, leaving us to distinguish this relationship between God and humanity. Nihilism encompasses the “profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness and social despair.” It’s evident that Kanye seeks to combat the lack of hope through his emotive lament for help. His call is to help right his wrongs, keep his mind and stop terrorism, racism and self-despair. We could position his music before and after many events in his life from the death of his mother to the marriage to his wife to the birth of his children to his clothing/fashion involvement. Within “Ultralight Beam,” Kanye has a plea to be rescued from nihilism and his conception of God’s role has changed slightly in that in 2004 the devil was the source of evil and God or Jesus was the salvific figure. Now God becomes one that both sends oppression as well as the capacity to bring blessings and deliverance. This move of understanding God as a source of oppression allows for nihilism to grow in that if God, who was the only hope for liberation cannot and does not send blessings, but rather is complicit in Black suffering and galvanized oppression, where does hope lie? And it is within this place that Cornel West calls the greatest danger of Black communities because it stops action.

Kanye’s nihilism interjects when his concept of theology fails to answer theodicy. His hopelessness serves as a pretext to his lyrics. “I’m tryna keep my faith” implies that his faith is at risk. His requests include wanting peace, serenity and blessings instead of oppression. How then can his conception of God be both all-powerful and all good God that his mother told him about while allowing suffering to take place? Is it because God allows free will thus allowing for the suffering of some? These questions are birthed out of Kanye’s lament to keep his faith in the midst of Black nihilism.

“My Mama Said Only Jesus Can Save Us”: Black Liberation Theology of Redemptive Suffering

Nihilism or hopelessness in Black communities has been the premise for Black religious’ institutions and activism. The genius of Black people has been to create meaning, love, and hope in the midst of despair for the possibility to fight, dream and reach equality and prosperity. Creating a space where Black people have space for liberation of some kind was needed.

Some forms of hope in Black communities were introduced by faith based institutions. For the sake of this article, I will reference the Black church as a pillar of faith

---

in the midst of nihilism/Black suffering; however, I acknowledge other religious, spiritual and psychological forms of healing. As Dyson and Cone explain, Black people situated God in the will of people, a concept derived from Black liberals. Black religious leaders have questioned their oppressive conditions since the 1700s. Richard Allen, Denmark Vessey and several others, challenged oppressive conditions and slavery by positing Black people as people of God.\textsuperscript{28} Though, this narrative has become dominant, this theological situating of God in Black suffering has not been consistent throughout history. Black religious scholar, Anthony Pinn agrees with ethicist, Gayraud Wilmore in suggesting that during the Great migration, the Black church began to turn inward, in accordance to conservative thoughts to work on Black church endeavors.\textsuperscript{29} It wasn’t until the civil rights era that dominant narratives of locating God within Black and human injustices became more popular. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were huge influences as King played a role in shaping theology and Malcolm contributed to defining Blackness. Allen, Sojourner Truth, and King were catalysts in the formation of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen’s (NCNC) that eventually took up the concerns of theologically addressing media and white Christians.\textsuperscript{30} The NCNC wrote the first definition of Black theology.\textsuperscript{31} James Cone was then the first to systematize Black theology in 1969,\textsuperscript{32} furthering the previous definition, claiming that God was ontologically Black in that God’s message was for the oppressed Israelites and Jesus’ plight was likened to Black Americans’.\textsuperscript{33} While his method has been contested by his brother Cecil Cone and Wilmore Gayraud as European theology with Black rhetoric, it has stood the test of time as one of the dominant definitions of a Black theology of liberation. Cone’s work was also taken to task theologically by William Jones. In 1973, Philosopher William R. Jones questioned dominant discourses surrounding Black Liberation Theology by asking a pivotal question in his work, \textit{Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology}. His work sought to move progenitors of Black Christian liberation theology to critically engage theodicy or suffering with humanism, implicating men and women as agents of change in their economic and social environment, while in conversation with the omnibenevolent God of Black liberation theology. He deduced that, if suffering for Blacks (who Black liberation theologians have aligned with the suffering of the Israelites in Biblical text) is necessary for redemption, then God may very well be a White racist. Therefore, God cannot be located within Black healing.\textsuperscript{34} However, this is not the conviction of many Black Christians as they believe that God is essential in their

\textsuperscript{28} Floyd-Thomas et al. \textit{Black Church Studies}, 9–26.
\textsuperscript{30} James H. Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?” \textit{Cross Currents} 27, no. 2 (1977): 147.
\textsuperscript{31} Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church,” 147.
\textsuperscript{34} William R. Jones, \textit{Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
daily lives.

Unlike William Jones’ theology, Dyson, West, Kanye and many other Black Americans, believe that God can be located in Black faith. Christianity or Christian theology is a theology based upon liberation. That does not come into being without an oppressed people; it is within this context that Cone situates Black theology. It is with this theological premise that the politics of Black circumstances and conditions are worked out. Because White people have subjected and created a suffering disposition for Black people, Black people begin to locate themselves with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible or the people of God who were subjected by the Egyptians. There’s no Black theology as we have come to know it as God being on the side of the oppressed if there is no Black theodicy, caused by White supremacy and theology. Black Theology and or religiosity serves as a theology of last resort to hope—or survival theology. Black communities spend most of its time trying to survive physically, psychologically, spiritually and economically in their daily lives.

Black sacred worldview holds the apostolic witness of the previous generations within the community serving as Truth. Therefore, it is understandable when Kanye puts his trust in his mother’s witness that “only Jesus can save us,” as opposed to his own witness of God’s liberative nature. “The genius of our black foremother and forefathers was to create a powerful buffer to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip the black fold with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.”\(^{35}\) These buffers, that West speaks of are what Cone calls survival theology and what Kanye’s mother taught him about Jesus’ redemptive powers. Privileging his mama, though he does not know for certain whether Jesus has redeemable qualities, he trusts that she is correct in her declaration. This is why, though God may or may not have worked over these twelve years between albums, Kanye asserts that “Jesus Walks” is living and operating, even if he cannot see it. In similar regard, an ultralight beam, or direct communication tool from humans to God is existing in the “God dream.”

**“But Most of all We at War with Ourselves”: Human Agency of God**

Kanye West, like academicians and theorists, does not provide concrete answers to conceptions of theodicy, rather he takes action; doing what he can to meet circumstances where they are. Thusly, in action he refutes nihilism, for without hope that something can be changed there is no redemptive acts that can be made. Through his music, Kanye provides redemptive agency to combat theodicy. His action enacts hope. He laments a bit more ring stronger in an attempt to challenge God as opposed to believing that God will act on his behalf, as earlier declared as a proclamation and conviction of his mother. When writing “Jesus Walks” Kanye’s mother was alive and served as an inspiration. It would not be asinine to think that after the passing of his

---

mother, her faith in God left with her—transitioning his faith in God’s salvific actions to his own. This is Kanye’s answer to God not helping the way he saw fit, not unlike philosophical thinkers that had to intervene. If he is to intervene as human, then he transcends to God in doing something about the suffering—blurring the lines of self and God.

Cone believes Black faith locates God as one who identifies with oppression. To locate God in suffering positions God to be against poor, Black, gay and other oppressed communities. Another implication would be that God is not all powerful and/or all good. If so, God would not allow such a thing to take place. And for those suggesting God loves humanity so much that God allows free will, it would imply that God loves us into human suffering, which is hard to digest as well. Therefore, in relation to human suffering—unrelated to natural disasters—humans have created evil. God has no role in the suffering—the creation or liberation thereof.

“End My Holy War”: Conclusion

Has Kanye’s holy war ended? While on the surface, Kanye’s recent outbursts of not voting in the U.S. Presidential election and exclaiming that if he were to have voted he would have voted for Donald Trump, seems antithetical to his consciousness of Black theodicy and Trump’s policies, seeks to perpetuate Black suffering. However, what if the war is over and nihilism “won”? If this were the case, Kanye’s recent outbursts, canceling of his Saint Pablo tour, and admittance to the hospital for mental concerns would be in line with succumbing to pressures of having to hopefully act in a space that has created and sustained Black suffering.

Kanye’s recent antics do not mean that we cannot learn from his warring. Ultralight beam, with the collaboration with Kelly Price, Kirk Franklin and Chance The Rapper, serves as a plea for Kanye West. The Ultralight beam is the confession that God is still there, still good and still on the side of the oppressed. Kanye says these words as if to stir up his faith and remind himself of God’s redeemable characteristics. This shows us that faith is fluid and war has casualties. Sometimes faith is high and at other times it is low or maybe even depleted, but Kanye’s actions of composing a last will call, if you will, in “Ultralight Beam” to proclaim God’s goodness, showcases his willingness to fight.

Action prohibits stagnation. If Kanye can continue to make music and call on gospel artists to work alongside him, so can we act and collaborate with others who may uphold ethics that we find slipping within ourselves. This is not to suggest stagnation will never occur; it suggests that we have record of fighting and living through the fight of theodicy and nihilism.
Bibliography


Appendix A: Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” Lyrics

Order, huh
Yo, we at war
We at war with terrorism, racism, but
most of all we at war with ourselves
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me, with me, with me, with me, with me)
You know what the Midwest is?
Young and Restless
Where restless niggas might snatch ya necklace
And next these niggas might jack ya Lexus
Somebody tell these niggas who Kanye West is
I walk through the valley of Chi where death is
Top floor of the view alone will leave you breathless
Try to catch it, it's kinda hard
Getting choked by detectives yeah, yeah, now check the method
They be asking us questions, harass, and arrest us
Saying “We eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast!”
Huh! Y'all eat pieces of shit? What's the basis?
We ain't goin' nowhere, but got suits and cases
A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis
My Mama used to say only Jesus can save us
Well Mama, I know I act a fool
But I'll be gone 'til November, I got packs to move, I hope
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me)
The only thing that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now (I want Jesus)
(Jesus Walks)
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs
(I want Jesus)
God show me the way because the
Devil's tryin' to break me down
The only thing that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs
I want to talk to God, but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long, so long
So long
(Jesus Walks with me)
To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers
(Jesus walks for them)
To the victims of welfare for we living in hell here hell yeah
(Jesus walks for them)
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly
I know He hear me when my feet get weary
Cause we're the almost nearly extinct
We rappers are role models we rap we don't think
I ain't here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I'm just trying to say the way school
need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus
So here go my single dog radio needs this
They said you can rap about anything except for Jesus
That means guns, sex, lies, video tape
But if I talk about God my record won't get played
Huh?
Well let this take away from my spins
Which will probably take away from my ends
Then I hope this take away from my sins
And bring the day that I'm dreaming about
Next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me, with me, with me)
The only thing that I pray is that me feet don't fail me now
Appendix B: Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam” Lyrics

I'm tryna keep my faith
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
Deliver us serenity
Deliver us peace
Deliver us loving
We know we need it
You know we need it
You know we need it
That's why we need you now, oh, I
Pray for Paris
Pray for the parents
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
Everything (Thing, thing, thing)
I'm tryna keep my faith
But I'm looking for more
Somewhere I can feel safe
And end my holy war
I'm tryna keep my faith
So why send oppression not blessings?
Why, oh why'd you do me wrong?
(More)
You persecute the weak
Because it makes you feel so strong
(To save) Don't have much strength to fight
So I look to the light
(War) To make these wrongs turn right

Head up high, I look to the light
Hey, cause I know that you'll make everything alright
And I know that you'll take good care of your child
Oh, no longer am afraid of the night
Cause I, I look to the light
When they come for you, I will shield your name
I will field their questions, I will feel your pain
No one can judge
They don't, they don't know
They don't know
Foot on the Devil's neck 'til it drifted Pangaea
I'm moving all my family from Chatham to Zambia
Treat the demons just like Pam
I mean I fuck with your friends, but damn, Gina
I been this way since Arthur was anteater
Now they wanna hit me with the woo wap, the bam
Tryna snap photos of familia
My daughter look just like Sia, you can't see her
You can feel the lyrics, the spirit coming in braille
Tubman of the underground, come and follow the trail
I made Sunday Candy, I'm never going to hell
I met Kanye West, I'm never going to fail
He said let's do a good ass job with Chance three
I hear you gotta sell it to snatch the
Grammy
Let's make it so free and the bars so hard
That there ain't one gosh darn part you can't tweet
This is my part, nobody else speak
This is my part, nobody else speak
This little light of mine
Glory be to God, yeah
I'mma make sure that they go where they can't go
If they don't wanna ride I'mma still give them raincoats
Know what God said when he made the first rainbow
Just throw this at the end if I'm too late for the intro
Ugh, I'm just having fun with it
You know that a nigga was lost
I laugh in my head
Cause I bet that my ex looking back like a pillar of salt
Ugh, cause they'll flip the script on your ass like Wesley and Spike
You cannot mess with the light
Look at lil Chano from 79th
We on an ultralight beam
We on an ultralight beam
This is a God dream
This is a God dream
This is everything
Everything
I'm tryna keep my faith
But I'm looking for more
Somewhere I can feel safe
And end my holy war
Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough
This prayer's for everybody that feels like they're too messed up
For everyone that feels they've said “I'm sorry” too many times
You can never go too far when you can't come back home again
That's why I need Faith, more, safe, war
Meditation - We Killed Kanye: A Manifesto to the Old Kanye Fans

*Tari Wariebi*

Dear Old Kanye Fans,

It seems like there are more of us than there are actual Kanye fans. We flood social media and blogs with our provocative opinions on how Kanye has let us down and derailed us from his mission that we were all so avidly and passionately behind.

How did we get here? Who is to blame? Stop right there, I can already hear your responses, Kanye, he got caught up in the fame, lights, started dating Kim and the rest is history. Nope. We let it get here. We let the “old Kanye” die, right before our eyes, and we did nothing.

“Wait, how?” Easy. We missed all the signs.

Kanye, like very few artists to grace this planet, poured his truest and most honest self into his music, his lyrics, his melody conjured up from the soul, an intangible place, and for that very reason, his music hits you. His music hits you, like a warm embrace, like a smile from the heart. But when your art does that, when your music does that, it is no longer just music. Kanye gave us his soul and trusted us to always be attentive and hear everything he shared. He let us in and all he asked for in return was affirmation, and emotional support. We signed up without thinking twice and Kanye told us his proudest moments, his deepest disappointments, his wildest dreams, and his shame-filled struggles. We identified and we let his words fuel our souls. He gave us the gospel.

We are a society of idealist and romantics. We aspire and fantasize about the ideals of life, and because we are humans, flawed creatures, we will never come close to those ideals. In our eyes, Kanye Omari West was never human. He lived those ideals that we dreamed about and read in fiction books. He wore his heart on his sleeve. A young black man fearless enough to immortalize his emotions and personal trials on wax for the world to hear forever, no facade, just sheer honesty, complexities, his shortcomings, his transgression, and his uncertainty.
We idolized Kanye for this; the music reassured us and gave him the affirmation and acceptance that he so desperately sought from us. Then in a terrible turn of events, life hits hard, like it does for most, and in typical Kanye fashion, he came to us and told us everything; it was poetic, beautiful, and clear as day. Some of us stopped listening when he gave us 808s and Heartbreak. “Too weird,” we believed he was not talking to us any more. We were selfish. He had brought us to such a happy place and we could not allow ourselves to be there for him. He never got the overwhelming affirmation that he needed and he continued to spiral. Still talking to us and sharing with us, even going so far as to reshape and retool the music, so just maybe we could see ourselves again like we did and come to his rescue. My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy did not seem too whimsically.

We lost him.

Kanye’s music had become a religion, and we were his disciples. We lived by the words of College Dropout and Late Registration. Kanye was the head of the church. For years, we attended service at the House of Kanye, and just like that, we stopped attending. At that moment, Kanye too had to believe that he was not human, instead a god, that was the best defense to dealing with the betrayal that we, his congregation had set ablaze. Old Kanye fans, spawning left and right, growing rapidly as each subsequent project released. Kanye, growing more and more hardened, and feeding the only thing that he could count on to affirm him, his ego.

It all fell down. Kanye shared with us all his hurt, and showed us, like any human, he could bleed. We let him bleed out. To die is to lose force, strength or active qualities. We had never witnessed a person move with such force and strength as Kanye did, that energy inspired and gave birth to a generation of honest artist.

We killed that energy.
Poem - Untitled

Jasmine Mans

The audience asks
Kanye If he
remembers The
song about God...

To speak about the spirituality of Kanye West, we first have to discuss the spirituality of the Black Man, because that is the identity he holds. It’ll also be valuable to explore, what the Negro spiritual is and the relationship between music that Black slaves used and how we see remnants of those origins in contemporary Hip Hop. Negro people held on to song as a means of communication, education, and religion. Though, I never considered the actual term “Negro Spiritual.” These songs held together the spirit of the Negro. These Negro Spirits outlined literal maps to freedom. The Black song is still very much so rooted in ideas of “freedom” and “God”. The slaves relied on song for the truth. The Negro slaves relied on the metaphor in those songs for strategy. We still see it.

Many Black men often see themselves in the symbolism of God. God as a Father, God as a protector, God as someone to be worshipped. Each person learns and participates in spirituality differently;

Black Boy be given song
Song be sway and hymn
Black boy be given song
Even before God Black boy
be given tick, and bang.
Silence and bang

What a imperialistic white slavemaster thought was a simple sing-along, was a road map that led the Negro to freedom. It was a song of hope and liberation. Lives depended on the lyrics. The Harlem Renaissance, an era that birthed a new age of poetry and jazz, too, was created in search of a “freer” America. Maybe, ideas of “freedom” and “God” exist interchangeably within the work and vocabulary of black folks. Maybe this is true because black folk have an intrinsic relationship with this
search for a freer world. Today, songs that many non-Black people use as pure entertainment often mean much more for us.

So, what does this have to do with Hip Hop, and, specifically, Rapper Kanye West?

We know that rappers have materialized symbols of religion for example, the cross and the Jesus piece pendants. There's this constant use in language, which seeks to compare man to God, or language that explicitly calls the rapper, God. Jay-Z is Jehovah and Kanye West is Yeezus, (a mash up of Yeezy and Jesus) there is also a handful of rappers that call themselves “The God,” or “Gaud” as an extension of their name. Rapper Tupac Shakur, in his video, was even nailed to a cross.

“I’m just tryna say the way school need teachers
the way Kathie Lee needed Regis
that’s the way I need Jesus” (West, 2004)

Kanye West covered Rolling Stone Magazine with a controversial photo (LaChapelle, 2006) wearing a crown of thorns and blood dripping down his face J. Cole referred to Kanye West as a “False Prophet,” in his 2017 single, False Prophet” Mainstream Rap music has contextualized an idea of Christ, the same Christ that died for the sins of the people. That, too, connects us to this constant theme of freedom. Or maybe rap music presents the same American “Christian” narrative of “man-as-savior” and man recreating God in his own likeness. Is that what Kanye and many rappers like him are doing, when they compare themselves to the Christian Savior?

In rap music, there does ring this constant narrative of “desiring God’s forgiveness,” and knowing sin, death, and martyrdom. Throughout his most outwardly religious songs, Kanye mentions his belief directly, mentioning praying, attending church, and needing saving.

With these ideas, come a few additional questions, such as can an artist access a language of spirituality without believing in the context of the Bible? Does the Bible add a tone of femininity that renders itself unacceptable in the mainstream Hip-Hop sphere? Does the Bible not fit within the controlled narrative of hip-hop?

Kanye exists in this dichotomy. First, mainstream rap doesn’t contextualize the “worship” of God in the music. On the other hand, Kanye West has a strong musical palette, that extends across time and genre. Kanye has the creative capacity to celebrate aspect of religion in his work, that other artists don’t. He has the freedom to investigate how he feels about his own Christianity, and the way it has transformed through the years.
The audience asks Kanye if he remembers The song about God How the choir exclaimed that prophet be alive That he be alive amongst the poor & brown
Bibliography


Footnotes for Kanye

Jasmine Mans

You look hungry,
like that girl don't make you no fried chicken
or macaroni & cheese
like she don't feel you on the inside,
like you haven't had a home-cooked-meal
since your momma died.
You look like
you lost the Psalm in your own song--
like you want to talk to God
but you're afraid
because ya'll ain't spoke in so long.*
Do you tell your daughter about me,*
how we were bittersweet,*
“to never mess with entertainers because they always leave?
He'll get on and he'll leave your ass for a white girl”* and he'll give her your style, your language, your waist
damn near try to give her your face,
and somewhere in his Post Traumatic Twisted Fantasy *
he'll make it all okay
but what's the worth in loving a man
whose lost his smile anyway?
When Kim fucks up the lyrics to the College Dropout *
like them white folks used to fuck up your name,*
do you pretend not to notice?
Do you regret the Marilyn Monroe in your decision,
and wish you could've taken Billie Holiday as your bride?
Do you ever want to run back to your wedding day
and have it all over on the South-side?
Do you wake up in the middle of the night and think
that she wasn't the right girl
like you should've found
one of them “i like art type girls.” *

Can you hear all the black kids calling your name
wondering why the boy who rapped
about his momma getting arrested for the sit-ins
didn't sit-in--
why he traded in his Nat Turner for Ralph Lauren.
Do you know how many kids
at the protest had your sneakers on?--
None of them.
Do you know how many of your songs
were played at the protest?
All of them.
Could your hear all of the lights,
the flashing lights,
the new slaves,
the runaways--
on their road to redemption
waiting for Malcolm West
to have the whole world at attention.
Nigga they got you quiet!
Like how come only at awards shows-- he riots.
Maybe Yeezus was all talk.
Jesus never needed Adidas to walk.
Why is he outlining sneakers
when the South-side is outlined in chalk?
Can someone go and find the man
who could make a diamond with his own b(e)ar(e) hands, *
we are looking for you.
Because these kids still want to be-- just like you *
they want to rap and make soul beats-- just like you *
even though you just not you.
Even though you traded in your spaceship *
to buy back your 40 acres in a mull,
purchased the plantation and master's daughters too.

Nigga why you got these white folks claiming you
like they built you,
like they made you,
like they polished you,
like the readied them a good nigga for the picking.
like they got you for sale,—
oh how they love Kanye
let's put him all in front of the store *
like you their black boy,
you forgot you black boy? *
They got you lost in this world? *
You getting blackmailed for that white girl? *
You don't see how your lies is effecting me,
you don't see how our lives were supposed to be? *
And I never let a nigga get the close to me,
and you ain't cracked up to what you were supposed to be.*
I guess its bitter sweet poetry. *
For Colored Girls and Boys Who Have Considered Suicide/
When Prayer and GOOD Music Weren’t Enough

Joshua K. Wright

Abstract

Lauren Chanel Allen, a 22-year-old Christian graduate student at Howard University, struggled with mental illness for years. Like so many blacks, Lauren expected her faith to serve an elixir for her problems, including depression. However, her prayers were not sufficient. When she was unable to find solace in the church, she sought out an alternative source: the music of Kanye West. She shared her story in a 2016 article, “How An Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression,” which she published in Abernathy magazine. Lauren’s story speaks to the disconnect that many millennials have with the church. Nowhere in her article did she use the word – therapy – or mention seeking professional help for her condition. Lauren’s avoidance of medical specialists speaks to broader issues in the African American community related to mental illness.

This article addresses the following questions: Why do some blacks place more faith in their churches than professional therapy to address their mental health concerns? How does the church’s inability to properly address mental illness contribute to the fact that some black millennials find more solace in Hip Hop than in the church when they experience suffering? What do black pastors think about millennials turning to Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West for comfort instead of the church? How much reliance should black millennials who are struggling with their mental health place in their faith in Hip Hop musicians such as Kanye West that uplift their spirits?
Lauren Chanel Allen was a doctoral student studying Social Psychology at Howard University as tensions began to rise in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of Michael Brown. Brown’s death and other tragic losses in her life caused Lauren to experience renewed bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts. Lauren had grown up in the church and could always find solace in her faith. She wore T-shirts proclaiming “Jesus Is My Homeboy” throughout high school and joined a Christian student organization in college. However, as the dark clouds formed around her, the 22-year-old graduate student no longer felt the same support from the church. She shared her story in a 2016 article, “How An Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression,” which she published in Abernathy magazine. Lauren recalled,

I worried I lost my faith over the past years. I would pray and for the first time in life, I felt as though I was talking to the ceiling… One suicidal period and a hospital stay later, Ferguson happened… Just when I got the strength to take back my life, cops were taking Black lives… So yeah. I lost my faith…¹

Lauren says that amid her storm, it was not prayer or a pastor’s words that gave her the strength needed to heal her troubled mind. On the contrary, it was Hip Hop that saved her life. It was the music of Kanye West and the performance of his gospel-infused song “Ultralight Beam” on Saturday Night Live that saved the day. She explained:

When times get hard, we defer to our faith. Or we used to… More and more millennials lack a belief in a higher power because we’re stifled when we enter the sanctuary… We’re told to become completely different. To hide our true selves. Don’t curse. Don’t party. Don’t wear that. Don’t even how we praise is under scrutiny. But this “Ultralight Beam” performance had Negroes dabbing in the choir, leaning and snapping, milly rocking on the SNL block, and unapologetically so… This is a God dream. This is everything.²

Lauren’s article intrigued me for several reasons. In 2015, my pastor tasked me with overseeing a new Young Adult Ministry for individuals between the ages of 18 and 40. One of my initial tasks was to explore why millennials felt disconnected from the church so that the church could find ways to reach them. Like so many blacks, Lauren expected her faith to serve as an elixir for her problems, including depression. However, her prayers were not sufficient. When she was unable to find solace in the church, she sought out an alternative source: the music of Kanye West. Perhaps she felt that the church elders would have been too judgmental of her condition since they were already judging her on far less critical matters. Or maybe their prayers rang hollow in her ears. Lauren’s article speaks to that disconnect some millennials are facing. What I also found interesting was her commentary on mental illness. Nowhere in her article did she use the word — therapy — or mention seeking professional help for her condition. Lauren’s


² Allen, “How an Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression.”
avoidance of medical specialists, at the time, speaks to broader issues in the African American community related to mental illness.

This article addresses the following questions: Why do some blacks place more faith in their churches than professional therapy to address their mental health concerns? How does the church’s inability to properly treat mental illness contribute to the fact that some black millennials find more solace in Hip Hop than in the church when they experience suffering? What do black pastors think about millennials turning to Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West for comfort instead of the church? How much reliance should black millennials who are struggling with their mental health place in their faith or in Hip Hop musicians that uplift their spirits?

A Cure for Wellness: Diagnosing Black Mental Health

King Davis, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, has been conducting groundbreaking research projects on the history of mental illness in the African-American community for years. According to Davis, the common belief in colonial-era medical schools was that only wealthy whites experienced mental illness due to their stressful lifestyles. On June 7, 1870, the Central Lunatic Asylum was opened in Virginia to treat blacks labeled mentally insane. A similar hospital was opened in Crownsville, Maryland, in 1911. The black patients in Crownsville were forced to participate in “industrial therapy,” which meant working in the tobacco fields, basket weaving, and other forms of agricultural labor. They were also given “hydrotherapy,” a practice of placing patients in ice-cold tubs. It was believed that this treatment was not only therapeutic, but also helped to uplift the race.

Racist attitudes often tainted the diagnoses of black patients in the 19th and early 20th century. In addition to manic episodes and depression, blacks could be committed to mental asylums for religious excitement, unhappy marriages, idiocy, masturbation, talking back to white superiors, criminal deviance, and freedom. Physician Samuel A. Cartwright coined the Greek-derived phrase “Drapetomania,” in 1851, to refer to a mental illness that caused slaves to run away from their plantations or seek freedom. In his book Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and

---

3 In his 2016 paper, “Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane 1865-1900: The First 50,000 Admissions,” King Davis presents an overview of the earliest recorded cases of blacks with mental illness.

4 Ayah Nuriddin, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University, presented the following paper at the 100th annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History: “‘Something Needed to be Done for the Black Patients’: Integrating the Crownsville State Hospital, 1945-1970.”

5 King Davis was a panelist in a session on African Americans and Mental Health Issues at the annual meeting of ASALH in Richmond, VA on October 6, 2016.

Reconstruction (2012), Jim Downs documents the number of diagnosed cases of newly freed blacks who experienced a host of sicknesses. Consequently, black families and individuals developed a distrust of psychiatrists causing mental health to become a stigmatized topic in African-American households and institutions.

Today, even though mental health assistance is more readily available, research indicates that many blacks still feel uncomfortable with the idea of therapy. Keli Goff reports that many black men and women do not seek professional medical attention due to a stigma, lack of insurance, a distrust of doctors, and the belief that blacks are naturally better equipped to handle emotional pain because our ancestors endured slavery and Jim Crow. On the FOX series Empire (2015 -) the eldest son of the fictional Lyon family, Andre (Trai Byers), is suffering from bipolar disorder. His mother Cookie (Taraji P. Henson) derides mental illness as a white person’s disease. In his 2016 action-comedy film Central Intelligence comedian Kevin Hart says black families do not seek professional treatment, they simply go to the barbershop. Psychology Today notes that black men are less likely to seek treatment than black women and white men. Some use drugs to help them cope. “Niggas ain’t Molly Percocets cuz it’s all good. … that’s why we see people overdosing on the lean, Xanax and heroin because they’re self-medicating,” says Vic Mensa. “A lot of people are going through trauma and are too embarrassed to get help,” adds Jay-Z.

Mental Illness and the Souls of Black Folk: Prayer v. Therapy

A large number of black Christians believe that prayer is all they need to cure their mental ailments. King Davis tells a story of a black pastor in Texas who was encouraging his members to bring all their prescription drugs to the front of the church and give them over to the Lord. I spoke with Rev. Danielle Graham on January 20, 2017, when she was an associate minister in her thirties at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Largo, Maryland. After a suicide attempt, while in seminary, she went to her pastor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for counseling. She was saddened by the lack of support and understanding from church leaders whose best advice was: “Pray about it.” Her family and other church members gave her advice that echoed the pastor’s sentiments. There are two popular scriptures in the New Testament section of the Bible that are often used

---

9 Vic Mensa was interviewed on The Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM on July 31, 2017.
10 Jay-Z was interviewed on Rap Radar on August 18, 2017.
to address mental illness:

Psalm 34:17–20 “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.”

Philippians 4:6-7 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

Rev. Graham soon realized that prayer and the church were not enough to solve her problems. She needed self-care, which included consulting with professional clinicians. She believes that most black churches lack staff members trained to handle mental health issues properly. “You would not tell someone with diabetes or cancer to just pray it away,” says Graham.12 This problem, as she sees it, was depicted in season one of Empire. The character Andre Lyon stops taking his medication, thereby exacerbating his condition, after he gets baptized and begins regular prayer consultations with his pastor. According to Rev. Graham:

Mental health is different for everyone. You have to find out what medication, and what dosage, works best for you so that you are not a zombie or [risk] becoming addicted. The medication doesn’t get rid of the disorder. It helps curb the intensity of it and keeps you from getting too low. A psychologist is going to help you function using the lowest dosage of medication as you continue to seek therapy to learn the proper coping skills.13

Rev. Graham has made mental health awareness an essential component of her ministry. She started an online group for open dialogue about mental health and moral support in 2013. For a while, she served as the ministry leader for Metropolitan’s IAMA Counseling Ministry (IAMA), which is committed to the emotional and spiritual health of all people. The ministry provides Christian-based counseling and prayer support to members of Metropolitan and the general public. Professional clinicians and trained paraprofessionals staff the IAMA, and the IAMA team is on-call during worship services to address any mental health or emotional issues that arise. IAMA also sponsors community-based workshops and forums throughout the year on a variety of topics, including grief, loss, stress, and depression.

Metropolitan is among a small number of black churches in Maryland to offer professional mental health assistance. Reid Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church in Glenn Dale, Maryland, provides mental health support from licensed counselors to congregants and residents in the community.14 The Renaissance Center of Morning Star Baptist Church in Woodlawn, Maryland, offers similar resources to members and

---

12 Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on January 7, 2017.
13 Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on May 1, 2018.
14 "Restoration Center Incorporated,” https://reidrestoration.com/?page_id=73.
residents in the surrounding Baltimore neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{15} The \textit{American Journal of Public Health} published the article “Alternative Mental Health Services: The Role of the Black Church in the South.” The findings in this article revealed that the pastor in the black church often serves as a proxy for professional mental health advisers.\textsuperscript{16} Kimberly D. Farris examined how black pastors conceptualized mental illness in her dissertation “Innovative Ways to Address Mental Health Needs of African-Americans.” Farris’s findings revealed that black pastors were among the most influential and easily recognizable leaders and support systems for African American families. Nevertheless, her data also showed that there was a lack of collaboration between most black clergy and professional mental health providers.\textsuperscript{17}

Dr. Sherrill McMillan, Minister of Counseling and Family Services at Metropolitan Baptist Church, was a co-founder of IAMA in the 1990s. Dr. McMillan, who received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from California Coast University, shared the following sentiments with me:

For the most part divinity schools do not offer this type of study. You may get a couple of basic counseling courses, which is not nearly sufficient to address mental health. Most pastors do not understand the treatment and are not able to properly assess or diagnose the problems. I have had numerous people come to my office for counseling because they could not find the help they needed from their pastors. There is a fear of mental health in the black community, which dates back to misinterpretations of Freud and the notion of people messing with your head.\textsuperscript{18}

Mental health in most of the divinity/theology schools is secondary to their more direct mission of education for the traditional or circumscribed pastorate. In 2012 The Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis at the University of Texas at Austin released a report that evaluated the effectiveness of four black divinity schools in equipping their students to deal with mental health appropriately. The schools were (1) The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia; (2) The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia; (3) Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, DC; and (4) American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee. The assessment was conducted using a qualitative, explorative design which involved interviewing university deans, program directors, and professors at each school of divinity.

\textsuperscript{17} Kimberly Dawn Farris, “Innovative ways to address mental health needs of African Americans: An exploratory study examining the importance of understanding how African American Clergy conceptualize and attribute causation of mental illness” (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2005).
\textsuperscript{18} Dr. Sherrill McMillan was interviewed by the author on April 23, 2018.
At the time this policy report was published Interdenominational Theological Center offered courses entitled “The Psychology of Pastoral Care,” “Clinical Introduction to the Psychology of Pastoral Care,” and “Introduction to Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy.” However, the school did not offer any collaborative programs with the nearby medical school at Morehouse College. The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University offered dual degrees in conjunction with other schools, as a Master of Divinity/Master of Social Work and a Master of Divinity/Master of Science in Patient Counseling degree to improve mental health training. Howard University’s School of Divinity was criticized in the report for failing to offer any dual degree programs with the university’s Medical School, School of Social Work, or certifications in mental health training. Courses in mental health training appeared to be on an elective basis. American Baptist College offered a Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies Clinical Counseling that prepared graduates for the state of Tennessee licensure in Clinical Pastoral Therapy and Marriage and Family Therapy.  

No Church in the Wild: Black Millennials, Faith, and Religion

Dr. McMillan believes that a growing number of black millennials are moving away from the church due to a generational divide, homophobia, and reluctance to address issues that older church members may not feel comfortable dealing with because they are viewed as sinful or something that can be prayed away. She adds:

As a result, growing numbers of young adults and teens are looking to social media and music to find spiritual healing. This [behavior] points to the need for more churches and pastors to get on board so that we can minister to people in a broader context to meet them where they are.

The Barna Group, a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization, surveyed 843 Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 about their reasons for and against church attendance. According to their findings, “two in five say the church is not important because they can find God elsewhere (39%), and one-third say it’s because the church is not personally relevant to them (35%). More than one-third say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership (35%). And substantial majorities of Millennials who don’t go to church say they see Christians as judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), anti-homosexual (91%) and insensitive to others (70%).”

Huffington Post reports that even though black millennials still attend church at higher rates than other millennials, many are church hopping because they have a difficult time finding churches that speak to them. The report says that some black millennials are seeking out nondenominational institutions where they are allowed to

---

19 Davis and Thompkins, “Mental Health Education in African American Divinity/Theology Schools.”
20 Excerpts from an interview with Dr. McMillan.
dress more casually, and they find music and sermons that are more contemporary. They also find that services do not shy away from discussing issues like police brutality which might be causing them mental and emotional trauma.22

Since the 1990s no Gospel artist has been more successful connecting to black millennials than Kirk Franklin, with his blend of contemporary gospel and Hip Hop. Franklin’s hit songs have garnered airplay not just on Sunday mornings, but also on secular radio stations and in Hip Hop clubs. Besides having beats that mirror those used for secular music, his songs address issues facing young adults and teens. Franklin has collaborated with many secular Hip Hop artists. He delivered the benediction after Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam.” At first glance, Franklin’s relationship with Kanye may appear at odds with his overall message. However, Kanye West has tried to walk a fine line between the sacred and the profane dating back to his 2003 debut album, The College Dropout. Pastor T.D. Jakes introduced Kanye at the 2004 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards. Kanye rose from his pew and walked up to the pulpit on the stage to perform his song “Jesus Walks” alongside gospel music legend Yolanda Adams, an African American church choir, and liturgical dancers dressed in white. An energetic Kanye did a praise dance on the stage covered with white candles. “Do you know about Jesus,” sang Yolanda Adams and the choir. Kanye left the stage and went into the audience, who were all standing up and swaying along with the music. Rev. Tony Lee, at the time the youth pastor of the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church in Fort Washington, Maryland, invited Kanye to perform for that congregation. According to Rev. Lee, over 300 young people walked up to the pulpit to give their life to Christ that day.

Scholar Monica Miller referred to Kanye’s “Jesus Walks” as a liberating theological facelift that reminded the public that Jesus was “kickin’ it” with those outcasts who were criminal and deviant.”23 Miller says that some Kanye fans viewed his other song “No Church in the Wild,” from his 2009 collaboration album with Jay-Z, Watch The Throne, as a statement about the way millennials perceive their style of worship. Rather than attending the traditional church, Christian and “un-churched” millennials are “finding ‘cathartic release and social transformation’ in music today – especially Hip Hop.”24 Kanye promoted his sixth album, Yeezus (2013), with a tour that was a spectacle of self-aggrandizement and religious iconography. Kanye’s concert set included a 50-foot high mountain dubbed “Mt. Yeezus” which led to a triangular center stage serving as the hallowed ground for his 12 female dancers in white robes who carried candles. As Kanye

performed the album’s most polarizing track, “I Am a God,” the women held him up in the air. Additional props on the stage were a golden cross and angel wings. The climactic moment of the concert came when an actor dressed as Jesus came on the stage. The concert ended with Jesus ascending atop the mountain as Kanye and his dancers knelt to pray. For his Saint Pablo tour three years later, Kanye took concertgoers to church with uplifting performances of “Ultralight Beam.” In 2019 Kanye began hosting his “Sunday Services,” which feature a concert by a live gospel choir and band. The choir sings traditional gospel songs and gospel renditions of his mainstream hits. Kanye hosted a special Sunday Service on Easter Sunday morning at the 2019 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Music Festival.

Father Stretch My Hands: Black Clergy’s Thoughts on Hip Hop

How do African American pastors view the influence of Kanye West and other Hip Hop artists on millennials who are unsatisfied with the traditional church experience? In order to answer this question, I interviewed four pastors under the age of 45 who, in July 2017, were working with a sizable millennial population. These pastors are or have been fans of Hip Hop. My interviewees included Rev. Nathaniel J. Yates, Sr., (Pastor Nate), the former youth pastor at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Largo, MD; Rev. Jeffrey Allen Johnson, II (Pastor Jay), an associate pastor at Eastern Star Church in Indianapolis, Indiana; Rev. Larrin Robertson (Rev. Larrin), the senior pastor of Word For Life Church Ministries in Fort Washington, Maryland; and Rev. Ronald E.F. Triplett (Pastor Ron), the lead pastor of Gethsemane United Methodist Church in Capitol Heights, Maryland. I conducted a follow-up interview with Pastor Nate in May 2018.

Pastor Nate said in 2017:

As it relates to their impact on mental health, I would contend that the mental state of those that I hope to bring into the church is impacted by far more than a rapper’s description of things in the “bars” they write. The situations that they describe resonate because they are viewable even in the communities where millennials live. It is this common picture that draws millennials to their music; the common questions being, “who am I, why is my life what it is, and how do I become more?” Lyrics like “We Gone Be Alright” call on a group of people who feel the harsh reality of feeling like there is no answer to their suffering, even in the church.26

Pastor Nate notes that for earlier generations, hope was garnered by leaders who spoke out and acted to improve the situations of those in the community. By contrast, he says that today there are communities with several thriving churches, however, the neighborhood lacks the presence of hope. When some churches thrive, and their direct

25 Other notable artists have included 2Pac, DMX, Lauryn Hill, J. Cole, Chance the Rapper, and Kendrick Lamar. Anthony Pinn argues that 2Pac’s song “Black Jesus” identifies with the everyday struggles of those who are hopeless and discarded as wastes such as crack addicts, drug dealers, thugs, and poor single mothers. Cornel West observes that many rappers relate their conditions to the suffering and redemption symbolized by Jesus Christ.

26 Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on July 11, 2017.
impact on their communities does not appear to match their own success, cognitive dissonance occurs. Pastor Nate suggests that the perception of hypocrisy, however faulty the logic, sends millennials running either from the church, or in the direction of a church that will accept them, speak to real issues in a relevant manner, and, when necessary, do more than just speak.  

Pastor Jay cautioned:

We make fun of people who go out and seek therapy. Maybe it’s because those people living with mental illness aren’t getting the help they need from the church go out seeking it from a figure like Kanye West. From the perspective of the church, we have to do a better job being more transparent. These artists speak to the heart and soul of our generation. Historically, black music has always come out of experiences of oppression. Fast forward today, and you hear that in hip hop. You hear the souls of these artists crying out. If you listen closely, you will hear the Gospels in the music of Chance The Rapper, J. Cole, and Lecrae. Theologically speaking I always say that [Israel’s] King David is the first gangsta rapper. If you read his story, he got caught up in all of this craziness from adultery to killing people. He wrote about it, and these rappers express similar feelings in their lyrics. 

Pastor Larrin observed:

Hip Hop requires its practitioners and its adherents to reflect on a multitude of life and cultural experiences. The vast catalog from which one chooses to explore narrows the field only by theme, leaving open for analysis how one will examine and report on their experience. There is not one clear lens through which all analysis takes place. This avails space for creative being within the culture as lived or expressed by the artist. In the same way, faith permits its practitioners space to examine their thoughts, intentions, motivations, and actions.

Pastor Larrin’s concern about the faith of Christians, generally, as well as millennials, stems from his observation that, for many, faith in the Lord Jesus for eternal salvation is being replaced by faith in the Lord Jesus for temporal satisfaction. He wants them to remember that the Christian faith was neither born nor developed during a time of peace for its adherents. The message he wants to emphasize is that we are the spiritual offspring of persons who have endured hardships. He quickly adds:

Where I am not concerned is with the ability of millennials to navigate the empty spaces created by the absence of answers to the questions they are asking. First, I determine to credit young adults, namely, today’s millennials, with the ability to navigate spiritual and mental health complexities with a skill that exceeds my own at the same stage of development. I believe that those who can ask these questions are capable also of holding on until revelation comes. In an era of deepening concern about the church’s ability to attract, engage, welcome, and disciple millennials – both members and non-members alike – I view the influence of hip hop as I do other aspects of the culture. Some elements of hip hop should be considered, others condemned. My concern is that the church will determine not to blur the line such that the culture no longer views the church as

27 Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on May 4, 2018.
28 Rev. Jeffrey Allen Johnson was interviewed on July 14, 2017.
Pastor Ron believes music is just as influential and powerful for millennials as it is/was for older generations. The difference is that our culture has shifted, especially as it relates to religion in our country. Christianity, more specifically, the church, was more of an anchor of most communities, black, white, Hispanic or other in our country. He surmises that while people in earlier generations may have been entertained and motivated by the music they listened to, the bulk of their religious and moral instruction was still received through their communities of faith.

Pastor Ron says,

Since there is a rising number of millennials who choose not to engage their faith through the vehicle of the traditional church, they are not hearing or resonating with a sermon from the pulpit on Sunday or a Sunday school class, lesson or teacher. To some, artists such as Kanye, Drake, Jay-Z, Nas, Common, and others have become the preachers, Sunday school teachers, mothers, fathers and missionaries having a major influence on the faith, mentality, and philosophy of those who listen. It is my belief that Hip Hop, Rap, and any other form of music can be used to accomplish “God’s plan” and purpose in the lives of God’s people.

Searching for Solace in a Sunken Place: The Hip Hop Dilemma

Kanye West made the following statement during an interview. “My music isn’t just music – it’s medicine. Every time I make an album, I’m trying to make a cure for cancer musically.” Kanye has always used his music as a therapeutic source to deal with emotional issues and personal challenges. His mother Dr. Donda West passed away as the result of complications from a cosmetic surgical procedure on November 10, 2007. She had undergone liposuction, a tummy tuck, and a breast reduction, a day before fatally collapsing in her home. Following her untimely death, Kanye released 808s & Heartbreak, a melancholy album performed by singing through an auto-tune vocoder. 808s, which sounded like a long musical lamentation, focused on themes of mourning, loneliness, depression, doubt, and angst.

Kanye has dealt with bouts of depression and anxiety since his mother’s passing. He admitted to pondering suicide in a June 2018 New York Times interview. His past

29 Rev. Larrin Robertson was interviewed on July 20, 2017.
30 An interview with Rev. Ronald E.F. Triplett was conducted on July 21, 2017.
erratic fits led to much speculation over his mental health. Danielle Belton, the managing editor of *The Root*, posted an article in February 2016 insinuating that Kanye West was showing signs of bipolar disorder or some form of mental illness. Belton, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder years ago, wrote the article from her personal experiences of ignoring the warning signs that led to her emotional breakdown. She often masked her illness at parties with excessive drinking, self-deprecating humor, and by making herself the center of everyone’s attention. “I don’t know what issues West does or doesn’t have; but I know that he drops verses about Lexapro and Xanax, two drugs I’m familiar with in my own journey from bipolarity to stability,” wrote Belton.34

Belton’s article followed several disturbing outbursts from Kanye. He begged his fans to tweet, FaceTime, Facebook, and Instagram Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Google Inc., co-founder Lawrence Page to give him the money to support his Yeezy fashion line which had put him $53 million in debt. The series of angry tweets came nearly 24 hours after Kanye debuted two new songs from his forthcoming album *The Life of Pablo on Saturday Night Live (SNL)*. His behavior was unusually frenetic on stage that evening. Thirty minutes before the show came on the air, he had a backstage meltdown because he was irritated with *SNL* executives because of an abrupt alteration to his stage. Kanye began screaming, threatened to leave, and compared himself to filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, the Apostle Paul, Pablo Picasso, and the drug lord Pablo Escobar. He proclaimed himself to be fifty percent more influential than anyone else on Earth.

During concerts for his 2016 Saint Pablo tour he would stop the music to go on 30-minute rants. On November 19, 2016, Kanye appeared in Sacramento, California. After making fans wait 90 minutes for him to start the concert, he performed three songs and then went on a 30-minute profanity-laced tirade, dropped his mic, walked off the stage and abruptly concluded the concert. A couple of days later Kanye West canceled the remaining 21 shows on the tour. Days later the police were called to his trainer Harley Pasternak’s home. Kanye’s erratic behavior forced paramedics to transport him to the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center for evaluation. He was hospitalized at the Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA for eight days.35

After a long absence from social media and the public, Kanye was interviewed on a broadcast of TMZ. He talked about his support for controversial President Donald Trump and admitted that his hospitalization was caused by an opioid addiction which resulted from elective liposuction surgery in 2016 to lose weight. The interview went viral.


due to Kanye’s insistence that 400 years of slavery was a “choice” for black people. He later tried to clarify that he was referring to mental slavery and a victim mentality, not the physical act of forced bondage. Charlamagne Tha God and Andrew Schultz discussed the TMZ interview on their podcast, The Brilliant Idiots. Schultz wondered how much of Kanye’s public breakdown on the TMZ was due to anxiety, medication, or something else related to his mental health.

Charlamagne, author of Shook One: Anxiety Playing Tricks on Me, conducted a nearly two-hour exclusive one-on-one interview with Kanye on April 18, 2018. Charlamagne’s first question was about the current state of Kanye’s mental health. He admitted to being on “meds,” but refused to say what kind of or how much medication he was taking. Kanye referred to his breakdown as a “breakthrough.” He said that he wanted to change the stigma associated with mental health. He believes that critics call him “crazy” to diminish the value of his creativity and free thought. When Charlamagne asked him if he was receiving therapy, Kanye’s response was, “the world is my therapist.” He said that he found more relief and healing by seeking advice from friends, family members, and people he meets rather than a professional clinician who lacks a personal relationship with him. Kanye’s wife Kim Kardashian West brought in celebrity life coach Tony Robbins to counsel him. Charlamagne failed to ask Kanye how much of a role his faith has played in his breakthrough. Nor did he ask him if any pastors were included among the friends who were serving as his therapists.

Mental health is an underlying theme on his eighth studio album, Ye, released on June 1, 2018. On the album’s cover are the words “I hate being Bi-Polar/It’s awesome.” Kanye admitted to being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, at 39, during an interview with radio host Big Boy the night before the album’s release and again on the album’s second track, “Yikes.”

“They take me on meds, off meds ask yourself... That’s my third person. That’s my bipolar shit, nigga what? That’s my superpower, nigga ain’t no disability. I’m a superhero! I’m a superhero! Agghhhhh!”

Kanye addressed his condition again on Kids See Ghosts, a 2018 collaborative album with Kid Cudi (Scott Mescudi). He provided his most in-depth analysis of his condition on the season two debut episode of David Letterman’s Netflix series, My Next Guest Needs No Introduction. Kanye admits to not taking his prescribed medicine or receiving professional therapy. How much of his “disturbing” behavior in recent years can be blamed for this negligence? Should his behavior be excused due to his health condition? A growing number of individuals from the African American community have rebuked him, relegating him to the film Get Out’s metaphorical “sunken place” due to his love for

President Donald Trump. More importantly, what does Kanye’s current behavior mean for millennials who relied on his music to cope with depression, anxiety, suicide, or a loss of faith? I spoke to Ms. Lauren Chanel Allen on May 3, 2018, to see if she still uses Kanye’s music to deal with her depression and questions about faith. Lauren said:

I've long wrestled with the question of “can you separate the art from the artist” or what is now commonly referred to as “cancel culture.” I think often of the lyrics to Kendrick Lamar's song “Mortal Man.” I want to leave room for Black people to be problematic. My personal credo (and I don't know if this is a cop-out) is if you are actively harming someone, I can't keep supporting. Then there's Kanye. I essentially grew up on Kanye. I was 14 and just starting high school when College Dropout came out. Ye wasn't like anyone else. He was kinda lame and didn't fit into rap at the time, but very arrogant. And I mean what weird teenager can't relate to that? He grew, got bigger, told us George Bush didn't care about Black people, declared with all his heart that Beyoncé had the best music video of all time, and in general made it okay to be insecure. He also gave us “Izzio” and My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy. Then in 2016 after 50+ women accused Bill Cosby of drugging and raping them, Kanye Omari West tweeted “BILL COSBY INNOCENT!!!!” and I officially separated the man from the music. Everyone has their line. He egregiously crossed mine. As someone who had experienced sexual assault, I was physiologically repulsed by Kanye, the person.

For the last two years, I've been able to “separate the art and the artist” and enjoyed Kanye West's music as much as I did when I first discovered him - if not more. But then the “slavery sounds like a choice” stuff happened. Going back to my line-- that crossed it. You cannot and will not disrespect my ancestors like that. Kanye's songs come on shuffle, and I just don't feel the passion I did. His words sound empty, his music a farce. And that sucks. I mourn the loss of the relationship I had to Kanye's music. If other people still get something out of his music - especially like I did with my depression and “Ultralight Beam,” I see no problem with it. In fact, I hope that's still the case. I'm not a churchgoer any longer, yet I still have a gospel playlist that uplifts me. Maybe Kanye's music will do that again for me one day. But not now.

Conclusion

This research has enlightened me on multiple issues related to black millennials, their faith, and their mental health. In terms of millennials’ faith, the black church needs to be more mindful of issues facing today’s young adults and teens. When millennials feel alienated and disconnected from the church, they will seek other paths – such as hip hop – to find God. Pastor Nate warns against millennials expecting too much from Kanye or any other musician. He says,

While there may be flaws that people [readily see] among those in the church, I come to the same conclusion that the message is received at the level that the messenger is believed. I would not encourage anyone to gain their theology from those who lack the evidence of following Christ. It is interesting that people will give him a pass because they like his music in the same way that some give politicians a break because of their party. Kanye and others have shown that by adding

---


38 Lauren Chanel Allen was interviewed on May 3, 2018.
a little religion to their music that they would gain credibility. I do not believe this to be valid. The issue as I’ve stated in the past is that those who profess faith don’t always walk in it, therefore becoming stumbling blocks for those who have less of a foundation and even some who have faith. No person should look to Kanye for their faith. This is true beyond him. What does the lifestyle of the person reflect? What do the scriptures say? Too many of us are looking to others to feed our faith like a baby bird waits for their mother, instead of studying for themselves. When people say the messenger does not matter, I would ask would they believe the words of a notorious liar, or marry someone notorious for cheating? The answer would be no. Likewise, would they follow someone whose life does not reflect their words, and if they do match their words, do their words match the Word of God? We should walk according to the Word, not according to the fame of someone whose life does not reflect Christian principles.

In terms of mental health awareness in the African American community, there is still a stigma associated with it. Several black churches and pastors are still not fully equipped to provide the proper therapeutic counsel to their members. Prayer is not a sufficient solution to mental illness. Likewise, uplifting music – be it Gospel or hip hop – is not a solution either. Rev. Danielle Graham concludes:

Mental health is not something that a song or album can fix. You can feel better for the moment, but you are not cured. This is the same [outcome] with church folk saying pray about it. Praying does not stop you from wanting to die. Kanye’s music cannot stop you from wanting to die. I don’t like when people say you choose to be happy. You can choose things in your life that make you happy, but that does not guarantee happiness. It’s not just an emotion. For example, people with mental illness like me have to have positive thoughts, eat well, exercise, etc. But those things alone may only help my energy level, but not pick me up from a downswing. Sometimes you need professional counseling and medication.

Lauren Chanel Allen says:

I would definitely tell others to seek professional therapy if they are experiencing symptoms of depression. I think music is a spiritual experience that can help you through things and help you figure out things and is an important aid, but you must go with the mental health professionals.

In my work with the young adult ministry at my church, I have tried to be conscious of their concerns and needs. We launched a Friday night service geared towards millennials, and offered focused Bible studies, open forums, and discussions on topics such as self-care and mental wellness. Although emphasis is placed on the scriptures and forming a close relationship with Christ, the ministry always refers anyone experiencing mental health issues to a professional mental health clinician who can accurately diagnose them. Faith in God can certainly help individuals, just as music can uplift one’s soul. But these cannot diminish the vital role of professional therapy.

---

39 Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on May 4, 2018.
40 Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on May 1, 2018.
41 Lauren Chanel Allen was interviewed on May 3, 2018.
Bibliography


Dawn Farris, Kimberly. “Innovative ways to address mental health needs of African Americans: An exploratory study examining the importance of understanding how African American Clergy conceptualize and attribute causation of mental illness” PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2005.


Meditation - Losing Kanye

Cynthia Estremera

“All I listen to is old Kanye,” is what so many people say because they are ashamed of the Kanye they now know and the Kanye they knew. Maybe, I was so nostalgic that I was missing all the signs of his unraveling, I thought for a moment that his genius had arrived just with complicated nuances. I thought his god-like perception was simply grounded in his short-circuited human flaws, the same flaws Kanye identifies in his epically historic songs like “Diamonds (from Sierra Leone)” and “Jesus Walks.”

But...

En route to greatness was his latent desires to be accepted, not for his in-depth human perception based in an ontological genius, but rather for his prescribed role as “Negro” to give the whole world a show. How can you be “this generation’s version of Einstein,” or even one of the Pablos, when you cannot find your way home? Kanye’s unraveling signals his collapse as an artist who has everything but lost it all; he has lost his mama, his roots, and his “gana” (his will in Spanish). It took me a while to find these words because I had lost what I felt about him, until I realized I did not lose anything at all.

In Jasmine Mans’s powerful bittersweet poem, where she finds her own words for him, “Footnotes for Kanye,” she references all the songs that made him what he is today FOR us. Mans indelibly harnesses his titles and lyrics and throws them back at him with finesse and fire, but all to plead with this man to come back to us as his true self. She describes the scenes of protests where songs like “Blood on the Leaves” and “New Slaves” were being blasted, but no person of color was wearing his Yeezys. Her chilling voice, calling Kanye West’s actions into question about getting on and “leaving [her] ass for a white girl,” resonated as a voice from a powerful Black ancestor from the heavens, hoping to check him back into reality. Mans strategically asks “Can someone go and find the man who could make a diamond with his own bare hands?” Losing Kanye West right when he had the power to lead, revolutionize and truly transcend beyond his human limitations into his Yeezus legacy for good reason is heart wrenching. His spaceship never took off because he “traded [it] … to buy back 40 acres.”

1 Jasmine Mans, “Footnotes for Kanye,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_sGUVHID-8, or pp. 103-
Attending the last “real” show of his Saint Pablo tour in 2016, made me feel and think differently about the way white people praise him like a god, despite his betrayal of his truest followers (and I ain’t talkin’ bout Instagram). They screamed out songs like “Blood on the Leaves,” you know the one played at protests, which pierced my ears as I cringed with fear that they sang this song. How many people knew it was Billie Holiday’s ode to black humanity, a humanity that had been strung up on trees like strange fruit? They held up their hands as if they hailed Hitler, which stopped me dead in my tracks and made me mourn the days when Hip Hop was reserved for us and made because of us. He transformed in front of me when they sang this and allowed them to feel free, singing it without fully knowing the context of this song, and the consequences of extending this art form to those who use it like their house slave, and keep it close but never close enough to sit at the table. Close enough to have sex with, but not respected enough to be called by her proper name in public.

He has betrayed Hip Hop more than anything...

I long for the days when there were traces of Dr. Donda West in his rhetoric, her life’s work in his discourse. I mourn him like a slain rapper who was robbed of his life in his prime. Looking through his latest albums set adrift on memory bliss of him. It was as if they were released post mortem by a collection of people wanting to make a profit, not truly knowing his real genius was speaking to the boys and girls of Chi-town and other hoods in America. But on his hypothetical death bed, instead of sending flowers, we the roses.
“How Great:” Reflections on Kanye’s Best Prodigy, Chance the Rapper

Joshua K. Wright

“I miss the old Kanye, straight from the ’Go Kanye. Chop up the soul Kanye, set on his goals Kanye. I hate the new Kanye, the bad mood Kanye. The always rude Kanye, spaz in the news Kanye.” Kanye West, “I Love Kanye” (2016)

When Kanye West debuted his seventh studio album The Life of Pablo on Saturday Night Live (February 14, 2016) few people were expecting to witness a passing of the torch. Halfway through Kanye’s performance of “Ultralight Beam” Chance The Rapper, stepped on stage with a mic in hand and not so quietly announced to the world that a new king was here to watch the throne. Fans who have been alienated by the recent profane direction in Kanye’s music, his erratic behavior during concerts, his confounding pro-Donald Trump tweets, and ignorance about American slavery and institutional racism, no longer have to recite the lyrics “I miss the old Kanye.” Chance The Rapper, affectionately known as Kanye’s best prodigy, is the embodiment of Kanye’s best musical qualities and the promise that he once gave Hip Hop enthusiasts to shift paradigms on Christian masculinity, faith, and spirituality with the release of his debut album, The College Dropout (2004). Chance performed at Kanye’s Easter gospel concert at the 2019 Coachella Music Festival. While critics were skeptical of Kanye’s sincerity and motives, as he was moved to tears, there was little doubt about Chance’s faith.

Chance The Rapper, born Chancellor Bennett in 1993, like Kanye is a native of Chicago’s South Side whose entry into Hip Hop defies the stereotypical origin stories. He was raised in a two-parent middle class household. His father Ken was an aide to Chicago’s first black mayor Harold Washington before working with then-senator Barack Obama. Ken currently serves as the deputy chief of state to Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chance grew up listening to jazz, soul, and his grandmother’s gospel albums. Kanye’s The College Dropout introduced Chance to Hip Hop and inspired him to rap. Chance recorded his first mixtape, 10 Day (2012) while he was suspended for having marijuana in school. 10 Day addressed his struggles and some thoughts about God on songs “Missing You” and “Long Time.” The following year, Chance caught mainstream
media’s attention with his sophomore mixtape, *Acid Rap*, which questioned why God’s phone dies every time he calls upon him. Chance was still at odds with his faith; however, there was an intellectual curiosity about religion that was starting to shine through his music. Then came “Sunday Candy,” an ode to the praying grandmother who kept his butt in church and instilled in him “the faith of a pumpkin-seed-sized mustard seed.” The tender track, appearing on Donnie Trumpet and The Social Experiment’s 2015 album *Surf* was a prelude to his career-defining mixtape, *Coloring Book* (2016).

During an interview with Apple’s Beats 1 radio host Zane Lowe, Chance gave testimony on his spiritual evolution. During a five-month stay in Los Angeles in 2014, he felt like he was losing touch with God. So he began blasting gospel tunes from Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and Byron Cage from his speakers daily at 6:00 AM. He was having “a four-hour praise dance every morn.” Chance did not set out to make his next mixtape a gospel album, more so an album deeply rooted in his faith. It was “music from me as a Christian man,” says Chance. “Before I was making music as a Christian child.” *Coloring Book* is not purely gospel in the traditional sense. Only eight of the 14 tracks have strong spiritual themes. He may rap the scriptures in one verse and then talk about Harry Potter or roller skating in the next verse. The mixtape has profanity and does not shy away from “worldly” topics like sex and drug use. However, *Coloring Book* is the best “secular” rap album, that heavily promotes religion and spirituality, of all time (earning Chance a Grammy for Rap Album of the Year and Best New Artist). *Coloring Book*, with its themes of faith, a Christian-centered marriage, fatherhood, and redemptive joy, is the “gospel album” that Kanye West promised fans *The Life of Pablo* would be, but was incapable of making. “Coloring Book makes Kanye look like a Christmas and Easter Christian,” wrote music critic Madeline Orr.

Chance’s Christian raps are deeply rooted in gospel music, church hymns, and the scriptures. “Sunday Candy’s” ode to grandma puts 2 Timothy 1:5 about the faith-filled grandmother Lois to a rap beat. “How Great,” which samples Chris Tomlin’s gospel hit “How Great Is Our God,” is one long sermon. After Chance’s cousin, Nicole Bennett, sings the Tomlin anthem he begins with a verse coded in Deuteronomy 32:3, Psalm 34: 1-3, and Philippians 2: 5-11 which say “Praise God who Reigns above” and “Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.” Chance weaves in Matthew 17:20 which alludes to the faith of a mustard seed. The track “Blessings” opens with vocalist Jamilla Woods singing a hook that is reminiscent of the gospel anthems “Praise him,” “When Praises Go Up,” and “For Every Mountain” and the hymns “Count Your Blessings” and “The Lord is Blessing Me Right Now.” Chance’s verse eludes to the goodness and blessings of God found in Isaiah 40: 28-31 and Psalm 103:1.

Chance, unlike his mentor Kanye, lives by the teachings of James 2:14-26 which says “faith without works is dead.” Rather than going into debt to launch an overpriced high-end fashion label, he uses his platform to fight gun violence in Chicago and donated one million dollars to Chicago public schools. Furthermore, Chance is not shy about using his music to minister to his listeners. Check out his performance of “Finish Line/Drown”
on the 2016 Christmas episode of Saturday Night Live. As Chance performed with a choir and live band, he repeatedly recited “Happy birthday Jesus. Jesus, it’s your birthday.” He told his choir “I like when you say his (Jesus) name on network TV like that.”

Another example is his televised performance at the 2016 White House Christmas tree lighting. Cameras showed 16-year-old Sasha Obama and her friends singing “Rain down Zion, it’s gonna rain” from the hook to “Sunday Candy.” And finally, there was his rousing performance of “How Great” and “All We Got” with Kirk Franklin, Tamela Mann, and a church choir at the 2017 Grammy Awards Ceremony.

Tyrell Jemison is one young man who has heard the word of God in Chance’s music. The 25-year-old preacher’s son shared a moving story in Abernathy magazine about his battles with depression, mental illness, attempted suicide, and disillusionment with the church. Listening to Coloring Book has helped him remember that God is the source of his strength. Jemison has found total praise during the time of his storm. “My Coloring Book consists of ways to engage who we are as individuals and how to use that to help the world around me. I believe I’m ready for my blessing,” says Jemison. While many fans hate the new Kanye, as a Christian I pray that Kanye’s evolution – no matter how ugly and toxic it may appear to be at times - is in line with God’s ultimate path for his life. But in the short term, we as fans of Hip Hop music no longer need the old Kanye because we have a much better version in the form of Chance The Rapper.
As I consider the influence of Hip Hop and rappers on the spiritual lives and mental health of millennials, I find it interesting to note the overt rejection of the genre of Hip Hop as a whole by most of the Christian community. In large part, the church culture seems to explicitly reject the notion that such a musical style should grace its doors. Many churches do not consider the positive effects of Hip Hop and rap when the message is uplifting and in some cases explicitly faith-based. The issue here is that the preference has become the priority, not necessarily the connection. The idea of rap and Hip Hop in some circles is immediately rejected, regardless of the message within the material. The genre is not the true issue that should be considered; instead the message should be the priority; as should be the case in all music. The connection between Hip Hop and rappers, like Kanye West, Jay Z, and Kendrick Lamar, with millennials is largely tied to the authentic flaws that are both on display and accepted by those who follow them. Artists like these, in many ways, exemplify the internal conflict that many millennials face within themselves. It is the tale of the flawed, and yet those still seeking to achieve freedom from those flaws; even as we struggle with the reality that however much one desires to change, they enjoy the state in which they remain.

It is this group that the church needs; the group of the flawed who are honest enough to declare such and hope for more. The dilemma for the church is that these individuals do not find the same authenticity within the church walls. It is the perceived absence of an honest answer that many millennials reject. While some church members contend that certain music is inherently sinful, they do not seek to understand the reality, that while distasteful at times, these same lyrics portray a perceived reality for those we desire to reach. There is no argument here to include distasteful, offensive, or non-biblical music into the church; however, the nature of a single song or artist’s lyric is not indicative of a style or genre of music in its entirety.

The greater question is what is the impact on the spiritual lives of millennials by these artists and their lyrics? The influence is very significant. While I contend that the genre of music is not the issue, the reality that the music impacts the listener, to me, is without question. Consider a millennial who seeks to model after a rapper; seeking to live out what they hear. This millennial may completely overlook the nature and
character of the artist in pursuit of the connection. This failure to factor in the nature and character of the artist when seeking to model after them causes a deeper issue in spiritual matters. When we overlook the character of an individual in order to find a connection, we also run the risk of lessening the importance of such character; thus diminishing our need to change in order to walk according to the word of God. Do I blame the artist for this? The answer is unequivocally no. The rappers speak to the realities of their lives or the perceptions that they desire to convey. The greater issue within the church community for these millennials is the inability of previous generations to form real, relevant, relational connections with a generation that is often criticized and harshly judged; often leaving them a singular path right out of the church. We tend to forget that rappers in many cases are millennials that, in some cases, grew up in the church and still need spiritual growth and development themselves; not just criticism.

Some may argue otherwise, but what is evident is that the same numbers of those leaving the church, are found buying and singing the lyrics of those that the church has sought to expel in many cases. The very rejection that millennials feel is reflected in the lyrics of the same artist that impact their thinking. These artists speak to spirituality in terms of believing in a higher power; just not the one they believe they see displayed in churches. The problem is that the very experience that the rappers are speaking to, is the one that millennials feel; “How do I connect to a church that no longer feels like family, condemns the things that attract me (forgetting that they [those that condemn] have their own attractions or temptations), does not include me, and in many cases does not reflect me?” Thus we find ourselves with the true question: “Are millennials rejecting the ‘culture of the church’ or the ‘character of Christ?’” Some may argue that these are one in the same; however, some millennials may contend that the church culture, with its traditions, does not always reflect Christ. In conversations with some millennials, they have even gone as far as to say that the church looks more like the Pharisees that Jesus confronted in the scriptures. In this, they convey that it is not Christ they reject, but the church. In leaving the church, many lose the avenues to spiritual growth, development, and health.

So how do we answer the question on the influence of Hip Hop and rappers on spirituality? The answer is that I view the influence as one that, depending on the message, can be counterproductive to spiritual development in many ways, and yet these rappers achieve something that “spiritual authorities” do not always accomplish; they connect with a generation that longs for a connection. The issue with this is that one cannot lead someone to a place they do not go; specifically, a non-believer is not in a position to lead a believer in matters of Christian faith. Some may question how such a statement (referring to some of these artists as unbelievers) can be made about an artist that is not personally known. It is displayed in the lives they live, and the lyrics of their lips; for from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Consider this: if a believer (better yet a disciple of Christ) never opened their mouth, the ideal situation would be that you would notice their beliefs in their actions; thus the idea that we act on what we
believe. This does not always occur, which is a problem in of itself; however, the same holds true for everyone, as one's actions often are a great representation of the values they hold, and their beliefs. “We act on what it is we truly believe” is a reality in everyday life. Therefore, each person is recognizable by their life choices and their hearts are known by what they say and do. This reality is, likewise, true within the church itself. One cannot claim to believe on Sunday and then live contrary to those very beliefs for the remainder of the week.

As it relates to their impact on mental health, I would contend that the mental state of those that I hope to bring into the church is impacted by far more than a rapper’s description of things in the “bars” they write. The situations that they describe resonate because they are viewable, even in the communities that millennials live. It is this common picture that draws millennials to their music; the common questions being, “who am I, why is my life what it is, and how do I become more?” Lyrics like “We Gone Be Alright” called on a group of people who felt the harsh reality of feeling like there is no answer to their suffering, even in the church. In previous generations, hopes were nurtured by leaders who spoke out and took action to improve the situation of those in their community. Even rappers addressed their circumstances while looking to improve them. This use of lyrics to elevate a community, seems contrary to some of the lyrics of today which glorify the very failures of society. Today there are communities with several churches within blocks of each other, that may be thriving, and yet the community lacks the presence of hope. The perception of hypocrisy, however false the logic, sends millennials running either from the church, or in the direction of a church that will accept them, speak to relevant issues in a relevant manner, and when necessary, do more than just speak; instead, putting actions behind their words.

I view the influence of Hip Hop and rappers to be the same as other forms of music that affected previous generations. The material, while more overtly vulgar at times, speaks to the same topics as in the past; money, sex, drugs, love, success, realities of life, and material possession. The issue with the content beyond its language and vulgarity, at times, is that while they highlight certain circumstances of life, in many cases no actual hope is garnered within the lyrics.

Youth and young adults fill themselves with content that speaks in some cases to lives that they have not lived but is easily viewable as a way of escape. The impact of virtual living, through such lyrics, is that this generation finds itself caught up in a fad, misdirection, and hopelessness wrapped in a beat. They look to these artists, as though they offer some semblance of hope, yet find either grievances or fantasies. While some artists highlight issues, they do not provide the answer, do not offer salvation, and dilute what it means to have faith that changes one's behavior. Some artist will quickly seek to thank God for awards, but not live their lives according to God’s will. This is reflected in the generations of believers who are not truly disciples of Jesus; the impact resulting in a generation of bi-lingual believers, who seek to speak in both belief and non-belief. They
live counter to the Bible and yet claim Christ, failing to recognize that while there is sin in our lives, there is a distinction between one who sins while trying to live upright, and one who lives a lifestyle of sin. On the other end of the spectrum, some go further, and instead of living in two worlds, simply turn to some form of spirituality that is external, and contrary to Christianity.

Is this on the music, rappers, or Hip Hop? I say no. The situation we face as we seek to bring millennials into the church is in the reality that some function as though the church is simply the walls, a place you go, and not something that you are. Those who say to millennials, “you need to come to church,” are not always representative of the church (disciples of Christ) except for their display on Sunday mornings; and only when they are inside the sanctuaries. Failure to authentically represent Christ in our daily lives is as detrimental to millennial faith as much as any musical form. The Kanye Wests of the world are perceived to be authentically themselves every day, even as the cameras are rolling and judgment is thrown their way. The lyrics of the song, “Legacy” by Jay-Z speaks to his reality and perspective on Christianity. He speaks directly saying,

“You see my father… son of a preacher man, whose daughter couldn’t escape the reach of the preacher’s hand… that charge of energy set all of the Carters back… it took all of these years to get to zero in fact… I hated religion cause, here was this Christian, he was preaching on Sunday versus, how he was living Monday, someday I’ll forgive him…”

Lyrical content like this directly addresses what some call “church hurt.” His perspective on Christianity is not based on those who are “Christ-like,” but the actions of those who claim to be Christian. This perspective results in a rejection of religion and the church, forgetting that the purpose is about a relationship with Christ. Is the artist detrimental to the mental or spiritual health of the millennial? I would contend no more detrimental to the mental or spiritual health of the millennial than others and in some cases even the “church.” However, the influence held by the artists, and the lack of connection that some millennials have with the church may leave an opening for the listener to adopt the perceptions of the voice they hear and relate to the most.

I believe that there is a place for any genre of music so long as the message aligns with the word of God. The issue here is that the message being conveyed is not received and therefore not heard, and no change seems to occur within the church. In some ways, our own traditions may have more of a negative impact on the millennial and their beliefs than those that they run to after they feel they have been rejected. The spiritual and mental health of this generation is impacted by the thing they need most but cannot reach because we, the church folk, may be in the way. Instead of seeing Christ, they see us, and then the church appears to seek to push the blame toward others. Amazingly, those who abandon the church seek authenticity, in some cases, are simply missing the reality that even those in the church are authentically flawed and seeking the remedy to their flaws in Christ.
Yes, there is influence in Hip Hop and rappers, the question is “should spiritual and mental health be left in the hands of artists? And is such an expectation realistic?” Where is the church in the lives of millennials? Consider that the danger is truly in the inconsistency of those who profess Christ. This inconsistency is also on display in the music industry. Consider artists like Kanye and Chance the Rapper, whose music danced between the “secular” and that of the church. Should those who are inconsistent be marked and condemned for being such? That is not left to me; instead, we should show them and those who follow them the love of Christ, not just the culture of the church; and seek to walk alongside them as we point them to the Cross, even as we ourselves strive toward it.
The complexity of Kanye West and his discussion of religion are topics worth exploring both inside and outside of higher education. Whether it is a new fan excited to learn about Kim’s husband, an old fan wondering what happened to the real Kanye, or a minister curious about Kanye’s contributions to Hip Hop theology—Kanye is a multifaceted person and topic. Discussions of him require insight from the various audiences he attracts (both fans and critics; friends and foes). Together with *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, this project offered the opportunity to have a conversation about Kanye, pulling in perspectives from various backgrounds, from academic to a dope poet. The essays and meditations presented in this special issue attest to Kanye’s potential influence and complicated relationship to religion and the Black community.

Kanye has shown this complexity since the beginning of his career and often throughout. Part of his intricacy is his contribution to Hip Hop theology. He shows us anger, vulnerability, cynicism, but also triumph reminiscent of the forlorn and famous Biblical figure David. Though Kanye has boasted about Jesus walking with him in his multi-platinum opus, “Jesus Walks,” later in his career it would seem like God is with him, but in a much different way. Not walking side-by-side, but giving him peace of mind as seen in the song, “Ultra Light-beam,” which features Chance The Rapper and gospel star and pastor Kirk Franklin. Not only is God a place of shelter and peace for Kanye, but a light that keeps him going and illuminates his path amid the darkness that has come with this fame. In this album, we witness Kanye as a vulnerable seeker trying to figure out his life and without losing a grip on reality. While listening to this album, at times it feels like Kanye was asking for help, while other songs indicated that he trusted God’s providence in his life, and was trying to discern real friends from foe. Kanye’s music represents a space to praise, question, lament and converse with the Divine while trying to hold his Black life and mind in the balance. Kanye is just as righteous and problematic as our Biblical faves, which makes him both a human and a hypocrite—a dynamic explored throughout this collection.

The significance of Kanye’s music is that it’s timeless, thought-provoking, and spiritual while also exhibiting the ways toxic masculinity and respectability go hand-in-hand. This complexity in his music is demonstrated in songs like “All Falls Down” and...
“Addiction.” Kanye uses his struggles of loss, family, fitting in, and fame thematically to walk his audience through the ups and downs of life. Although these themes are part and parcel of the human condition, Kanye uses his faith and faithlessness to tackle the hardships and pleasures of life. His struggle as a fairly unknown producer, to music icon and fashion “god,” has safely situated him into an elite status of Black superstar musicians and artists, like the late Prince Rogers Nelson, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé and Aretha Franklin. His name carries with it both the good and bad, cool and contempt, power and problem, confident and cowardly.

Our goal for this special issue was threefold. First, we wanted to present articles and meditations that show readers the ways Kanye’s music, though controversial, adds to a genealogy of Hip Hop Theology in rap music, using similar rhetoric of Black Protestant Christianity. Secondly, we felt the need to give scholars, clergy, and activists a platform in the same volume to discuss Kanye’s influence and relationship with rap and religiosity. Lastly, we wanted this collection to continue the necessary conversation about Hip Hop and theology. In doing so, we learned some interesting perspectives on Kanye and the messages he communicates with his music and other actions.

Throughout the volume, we explored several elements of Kanye and his work. We learned about his ties to and similarities with past art forms, such as the blues; his influence on other musical artists; his discussions with and about God in his music; his (sometimes contradictory) messages about topics such as religion, suffering, women, and wealth; and his god-complex. We read examples of how Kanye contributes to Hip Hop’s theological discourse, as referenced in Hodge’s introduction to this collection.

The essays and meditations, in this volume, touch on the potential influence of Kanye. Whether he recognizes himself as a role model, Kanye’s music serves as a powerful tool of rhetoric. This project explores the various ways he uses this tool to:

- help make Jesus seem approachable.
- present an example of God in his own image.
- serve as a modern day prophet (who people may argue is trusted by some more than organized religion).
- offer healing to others, or to ask for help with his own healing.

It is still debatable whether Kanye exercises this influence in a positive way, especially with debates over the new Kanye and old Kanye. A common theme in this collection was Kanye’s journey as an artist and how his behaviors and music have changed—and not necessarily for the better.

What is especially interesting about this collection is it illustrates how audiences are calling Kanye out and bringing receipts. Some want to cash in on the promises offered as early as *The College Dropout*, and they are not afraid to use his lyrics and past behaviors to bring him to task. With Kanye still making headlines for his outrageous behaviors,
from rocking his MAGA hat proudly to proclaiming slavery is a choice, people’s frustrations with his antics is growing.

But, should this be expected? For a man who self-proclaims to be god-like, should he expect others to hold him to a high standard? Is he naïve to expect less? Is it acceptable for him to say he does not care what we think? We do not pose these questions in hopes of one definite answer. Instead, we offer them as examples of how this discussion about Kanye and his complex relationship with religion and Hip Hop is only beginning. As Hodge mentions in the introduction to this collection, this project attempted to ‘explore Hip Hop’s theological paradigm in order to promote a true conversation and dialogue within the Hip Hop community.’ Although we began the conversation by offering insight through these essays and meditations, such discussions should still continue, as we are left with many questions. Hashtags, blog postings, and news media continue with themes of old Kanye vs. new Kanye. Kanye continues to give examples of why his rhetoric demands further discussion. And that brings us to the point we cannot ignore — Kanye’s claim that slavery was a choice.

Kanye’s visit to TMZ Live on May 1, 2018 happened after the completion of this project. Yet because of the weight of his statement and the response that it drew, it is imperative we discuss it before closing this collection. For one, his more recent behaviors illustrate how there is so much more to unpack when discussing Kanye. To claim slavery was a choice is problematic, and Kanye’s cultural identity and claims to be god-like only intensify the issue. In response to Kanye, Van Lathan did what likely many wanted to do that day. While explaining to Kanye that his statement was both wrong and insulting, Van said: “Frankly, I’m disappointed, I’m appalled and, brother, I am unbelievably hurt by the fact that you have morphed into something, to me, that’s not real.” Not only did Van’s comment and overall response garner a lot of support on social media, he brings us back to the theme highlighted throughout this collection — old Kanye vs. new Kanye.

So, again, Kanye leaves us with so many questions. What really happened to the old Kanye? Will we ever see the old Kanye again? Do we still need the old Kanye? Do we have a new Hip Hop prophet to fill his shoes? Is Yeezianity the new religion? Is Yeezus a worthy god?

Well — what do you think?
Contributors

Co-Editors

Joshua K. Wright
Associate Professor of History (Global Affairs), Trinity Washington University
Department of History
Office Main 325
Washington, DC

Adria Y. Goldman, PhD
Assistant Professor of Communication
University of Mary Washington
Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
Combs Hall - Room 315
agoldma3@umw.edu
Office Phone: 540-654-1131

VaNatta S. Ford, PhD
Assistant Professor
Africana Studies
Williams College
Williamstown, MA
T: 413-597-2060
E: VaNatta.S.Ford@williams.edu

Contributing Authors

Cynthia Estremera, PhD Candidate
Community Engagement & Equity Strategist (Strategy Arts)
Lehigh University
James A. Manigault-Bryant, PhD  
Professor of Africana Studies  
Williams College  
Hollander Hall 148  
jm6@williams.edu  
413.597.2107

Tari Wariebi  
Directing Fellow, American Film Institute  
tariwariebi@gmail.com  
(484)-477-2986

LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, PhD  
Associate Professor of Africana Studies  
Williams College  
rmanigau@williams.edu  
office: 413.597.2217

Rev. Larrin Robertson  
Pastor of Word For Life Church Ministries  
11519 Fort Washington Road  
Fort Washington, Maryland 20744-5814  
larrin@hotmail.com  
(301) 467-8452

Rev. Nathaniel Yates  
Pastor of Bethany Community Church  
office@bethanylaurel.org

Conā Marshall  
Assistant Professor of Religion  
University of Rochester  
Department of Religion and Classics  
Rush Rhees Library Room 428  
cona.marshall@gmail.com  
office: (585) 275-5378
Jasmine Mans
Author, performer, poet, teacher
https://www.jasminemans.com/

Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr.
Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and of African and African-American Studies
Washington University in St. Louis

Leroy Meyers
PhD Candidate
Department of History
University of Oklahoma
leroymyers71@gmail.com

Catherine John, PhD
Associate Professor of English
Department of English
University of Oklahoma
cjohn@ou.edu

Zachary Leacock
Call Tyrone Show (WOLB 1010 AM Baltimore) – host, producer
Independent scholar, vocalist (rapper), songwriter, producer, engineer
http://zacharyleacock.com/

Angela M. Nelson
Associate Professor
Department of Popular Culture
Bowling Green State University
anelson@bgsu.edu