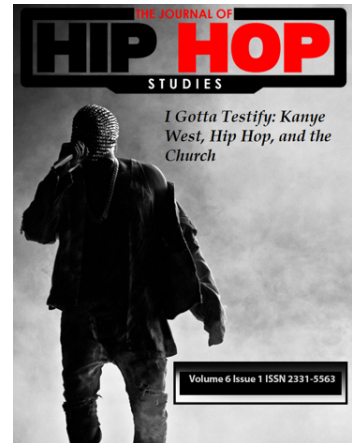


Introduction - Enigma Embodied: The Curious Complexity of Kanye West

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“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

¹¹ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2010).

American pop culture scene.¹² While Kitwana describes what the Hip Hop generation is, he also does a cultural study on the attraction of Hip Hop to White adolescents.¹³ Yvonne Bynoe¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ 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-religious¹⁷ 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 examined. This pioneering work began to explore what protest and prophecy was like in

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.

¹³ Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), Book; Internet Resource.

¹⁴ Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

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.

Hip Hop. William Perkins wrote an essay on the Islamic rudiments within Hip Hop,¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ often overlooked Hip Hop as a field of study, or, worse, footnoted it as an "emerging culture" and disregarded it altogether.²⁰

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

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.

¹⁹ Raymond F. Betts, *A History of Popular Culture: More of Everything, Faster, and Brighter* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, *Enchanting Powers: Music in the World's Religions*, Religions of the World; Variation: Religions of the World (Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997); Calvin Stapert, *My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipleship in the Music of Bach*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000); Davin Neely Mary Seay, *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock 'N' Roll, from the King and Little Richard to Prince and Amy Grant*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986); Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Michael J. Gilmour, *Gods and Guitars: Seeking the Sacred in Post-1960s Popular Music* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). While these texts offer good insight into religious quests within generalized and "popular" music, they do not give treatment to the Hip Hop context and tend to not mention Black music's religious experience and discourses.

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.²¹ 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.²²

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.²³

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 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

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.

²² Pertaining specifically to Christian rap and Hip Hop theology, one book and two scholarly articles stand out which delve deeper into the religion and Hip Hop: Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher’s “African American Christian Rap: Facing ‘Truth’ and Resisting It” (2003), and Cheryl Renee Gooch’s “Rappin For the Lord: The Uses of Gospel Rap and Contemporary Music in Black Religious Communities” (1996). Felicia M. Miyakawa’s book “Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission” gives a comprehensive overview of the relationship between Hip Hop and this Islamic sect.

²³ Christina Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap): Locating the “Spirit” in Hip-Hop,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006): 2.

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.²⁵ 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

²⁴ Christina Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap): Locating the “Spirit” in Hip-Hop,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006): 3-4.

²⁵ Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Emmett G Price III, ed. *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide* (New York, NY: Scarecrow Press, 2011); Andre E Johnson, ed. *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2013); Ebony A Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012); Monica R Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

²⁶ Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15-16.

²⁷ Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop*, 81-85.

of capital and social status.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,²⁹ theological truth in story, and the spiritual discourse within narratives of oppression.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 *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, *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 **does** Hip Hop construct a theological discourse and how **is** that theology formed? Let us now examine the paradoxes of Hip Hop’s theology and why that paradox is needed.

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,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. 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”

²⁸ Utley, *Rap and Religion*, 64-67.

²⁹ Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*, 39-65.

³⁰ Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*, Chapters 5-7.

³¹ Typically, those affiliated with a conservative and literal view of the Christian Bible and the appeal of ‘missions’ to ‘non-Christians.’

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.³² Big Syke asks if the church can even handle Hip Hoppers, while KRS-One has suggested that Hip Hoppers need to start their own church. The underlying assumption here is that God loves the Hip Hoppers.

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.³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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 God³⁶ – the study of how God³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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 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

³² Robin Kelly agrees, and further suggests that the term can permeate skin color as well. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York Free Press, Toronto, 1994), 207-12.

³³ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

³⁴ Sylvan, *Trace of the Spirit*, 4.

³⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Uniform Title: Formes Élémentaires De La Vie Religieuse. English* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 21-23.

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.

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.³⁹ 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)⁴⁰ 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,⁴¹ 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 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,

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.

and faith backgrounds.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

Therefore, Hip Hop begins to talk about a basic theology of life. This theological paradigm is not new.⁴⁵ Good and evil are common subject matters for the expressions

⁴² If studied, the core of Hip Hop’s cultural mores can be traced back to 5th & 6th century West Africa with connections to the Griot and core cultural attributes which are: consciousness, self-awareness, community, spirituality, unity, love of God & self. Darlene Clark Hine, William C Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, 4 ed., vol. 1 (New Jersey Prentice Hall, 2010), Chapters 1-2.

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.

⁴⁵ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); “The Blues: A Secular Spiritual,” in *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap*, ed. Jon Michael Spencer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991); Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2001); Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theology, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010); Anthony B Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995); “Black Theology in Historical Perspective: Articulating the Quest for Subjectivity” in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony B Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001).

and life of urban popular culture.⁴⁶ Likewise, a new type of spiritual rotundity is needed as society changes and people continue to 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,⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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 and the animated exhortation of the Sanctified preacher.”⁵⁰

This is the theological paradox—or neo-spiritual movement depending on how

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).

⁴⁷ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall, *Wake Up! Hip Hop Christianity and the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 89-115.

⁴⁸ Jon Michael Spencer, ed. *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap*, vol. 6 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap).”

⁴⁹ Jon M. Spencer, *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap*, vol. 5, *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 9.

⁵⁰ Teresa Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 15.

one poses the phenomenon— not just for Hip Hop, but also for those seeking answers when their theological highway has run out.⁵¹ 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.”⁵² 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.⁵³

This theological oxymoron—theology of the profane—is not a new concept.⁵⁴ 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—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

⁵¹ There is a growing case for those who live in oppressive conditions seeking a theology that “fits” within spaces in which normative theological inquires 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 Walkers 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.

⁵³ William E. McCutcheon Russell T. Arnal, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion”* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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.

in their writings and connections to Christianity from their perspective,⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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 themes⁵⁷ to African American humanism, “...a mode for religious orientation.”⁵⁸ 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 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:

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.

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.”⁵⁹

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.

⁵⁹ Earl Simmons, “The Prayer V,” in *Grand Champ* (2003).

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.”⁶⁰ 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...”⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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

⁶⁰ Noel Leo Erskine “Rap, Reggae, and Religion,” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 78.

⁶¹ Erskine, “Rap, Reggae, and Religion,” 78.

⁶² Taken from Dyson’s (2001) interview with Big Syke.

⁶³ See Robert Walter Funk and Roy W. Hoover with the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1993).

⁶⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 21–26.

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.

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