

POLITICAL MELODIES IN THE PEWS?: IS BLACK CHRISTIAN RAP THE NEW VOICE  
OF BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY?

David L. Moody

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Committee:

Dr. Angela M. S. Nelson, Advisor

Dr. Frank Goza  
Graduate Faculty Representative

Dr. Khani Begum

Dr. Bettina Shuford

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## ABSTRACT

Dr. Angela M.S. Nelson, Advisor

Liberation from oppression, racism, and poverty is a long-awaited dream for many African Americans. The “liberating” dream for most African Americans in times past was achieved through a spiritual commitment to God and communal support from fellow believers within a given church body. How does one achieve liberation today? Is it through Christian theology? Is it through artistic musical expression? Or is through both? On the other hand, is it achieved through religious ideology packaged as political expository preaching?

Black Christian rappers are the latest in a far-reaching procession of African Americans to participate in a “redeemer exercise” dedicated to the safeguarding of ethnic-gender hierarchies. Similar to the social and psychological messages for slaves that were revealed in the old Negro Spirituals during the nineteenth- and twentieth-century, Christian rappers and Black liberation theologians, use a personified –social form of politics to convey meaning and substance to challenge racial intimidation in America. Moreover, these spiritual activists focus on liberation from social, political, economic, and religious oppression that has kept African Americans in bondage for many years.

This study argues that Christian rappers interpret the effects of postmodern and post-civil rights social, economic, and political transformations in a similar mode to the messages declared from the pulpit by Black liberation theologians. However, these

spiritual rappers adopt a different agenda for empowerment and religious freedom from the one proclaimed by their elder counterparts.

In particular, the study explores the views that Christian theology is a theology of liberation and by means of this spiritual deliverance, an innovative, yet, revolutionary voice (Gospel hip hop) has emerged from the pews of the Sunday morning worship hour in the Black church. It is my contention that the emergence of Christian hip hop based ministries has taken on the role of a new liberating theological theme among youth within the Black community. Moreover, as controversy surrounds the provocative sermons by the former pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a similar tone of discontent at present, challenges the discipleship and evangelism efforts of Christian rappers such as: Antonious, B.B. Jay, Elle R.O.C., Gospel Gangstaz, Grits, King Cyz, Knowdaverbs, Lil' Raskull, Mr. Real, Toby Mac, Willie Will, and Kirk Franklin.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE “LIBERATING” DREAM THROUGH BLACK CHRISTIAN RAP AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

*Three things characterized this religion of the slave, -the Preacher, the Music,  
and the Frenzy.*

W.E.B. Du Bois

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*

John. 8.32 KJV

Liberation from oppression, racism, and poverty is a long-awaited dream for many African Americans. The “liberating” dream for most Black Americans in times past was achieved through a spiritual commitment to God and communal support from fellow believers within a given church body. However, a *mêlée* is taking place within the contemporary African American church that challenges the traditional forms of worship, and questions the limits of artistic and religious freedom of expression within the Black ecumenical community. How does one achieve liberation today? Is it through Christian theology? Is it through artistic musical expression? Or it is through both? Alternatively, does one achieve liberation through religious ideology packaged as political expository preaching? It is my intention to analyze the differences in the agendas of these two liberating voices (Black liberation theology and Black Christian rap), while at the same time drawing a connection to the ways in which both groups have used the biblical emphasis on liberation as justification to maintain the Black nationalist state of mind that “the God of the oppressed takes sides with the Black community” (Cone 6).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Black Nationalism evolved from the efforts of several outspoken advocates who supported the vision of the Black freedom struggle. According to Collins and Crawford, the term “Black Nationalism” was inspired by Malcolm X’s call for collective self-definition, self-determination, self reliance, self respect, and self-

For over two centuries, despite the hardships of slavery, Black Americans creatively expressed their desires for freedom through the music of Black spirituals. James Cone suggests that the spirituals were not evidence that Black people reconciled themselves with human slavery; however, Cone asserts that the Black freedom songs emphasized Black liberation as consistent with divine revelation, and opened the door for a liberating way of thinking for many Black Americans. Therefore, according to Cone, "...it is most appropriate for black people to sing them in this 'new' age of Black Power. And if some people still regard the spirituals as inconsistent with Black Power and Black Theology, [it] is because they have been misguided and the songs misinterpreted" (Cone 775). Through rhythmic melodies and dance, the Black spiritual still remains a wonderful representation of human existence for most African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois states, "Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the true expression of people sorrow, despair, and hope" (Du Bois 2). Conversely, problematic for Du Bois is, somewhere within the avenging "Spirit of the Lord," Black Americans (especially those who subscribe to Christianity) lost the joy of this world, and seized upon the offered conceptions of the next. The next world (which for Du Bois is a world that evolves around religious fatalism) in the end, stifles the mindset of the liberation thinker. Du Bois suggests an "Awakening" is necessary in order for the social conflict that exists in America to finally end.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, for Du Bois, the Awakening is the strength of thirty million

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defense. Those that subscribed to the tenets of Black Nationalism supported the agenda of Malcolm X that promoted racial separation, sovereignty, and revolution (5).

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois refers to the conflict as one that exists between Blacks in the North and Black Americans in the South. According to Du Bois, "two extreme types of ethical attitude" existed within the culture of Black

African American souls who at one point lost the guiding star of the past and are seeking in the night a new religious voice.

Black Christian rappers (which some scholars consider rap nationalists) are the latest in a long procession of African Americans to participate in a “redeemer exercise” dedicated to the safeguarding of ethnic-gender hierarchies. Similar to the social and psychological needs of slaves that were revealed in the old Negro spirituals during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Christian rappers and Black liberation theologians, use a personified – social form of politics to convey meaning and substance to past and present racial intimidation in America. Moreover, these spiritual activists focus on liberation from social, political, economic, and religious issues that have kept African Americans in bondage for many years. My belief is that Black Christian rappers interpret the effects of postmodern and post-civil rights social, economic, and political transformations in a similar mode to the messages declared from the pulpit by Black liberation theologians. Moreover, these spiritual rappers send out an agenda for empowerment and religious freedom that is complementary to the agenda proclaimed by their elder counterparts.

During the late 1960s, when the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements were at their peak, James Cone introduced a radical theology based on the African American experience of oppression and the quest for liberation. *A Black Theology of Liberation*, which was first published in 1970, brought a new perspective to theology in the United States. According to James H. Harris, “In Cone’s view, liberation is the essence of Christianity and Jesus Christ is the liberator. Liberation manifests itself in the struggle for justice and

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America (estimated to be ten million people during the period in which he wrote *Of Faith and Fathers*).

freedom, and the black experience in the United States is the model of the struggle” (90). Black liberation theology grew from a desire to overcome the apparition of destitution, which has plagued the Black community for several years. The persistence of racism in America, led to an alienation of White culture, thus, forcing African Americans to create their own African American culture. Urban uprisings developed in protest of unemployment, public school segregation, welfare reform, and racial discrimination in federal housing programs. From Watts to Cleveland, several cities went up in flames calling attention to a Black revolution that could ultimately put an end to the most destructive force in the current construction of African American culture--racism.

The Urban explosion of “Black Power” ignited an aesthetic explosion of “Black is Beautiful” in various urban settings (Collins and Crawford 9). This explosion of Black Nationalism created an opportunity for African Americans to communicate a message of Black unity creatively through various forms of literary expression. Furthermore, according to Mark Anthony Neal, several artists and writers attempted to whet the appetite of Black people by using their literary texts as vehicles for social protest. Within the school of Black nationalist thought, artists, activists, and scholars such as [Amiri] Baraka, [Sonia] Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Afeni Shakur, and Haki Madhubuti created some of the intellectual--artistic building blocks of the post-soul generation (107)<sup>3</sup>. However, from a religious perspective, it was the views of several pastors in New York that sparked what some considered, a “militant voice” within the Black religious community.

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<sup>3</sup>In addition to the poetic voice of Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement also created the voice of Ohio native Nikki Giovanni. Recently picked by Oprah Winfrey to be one of the top twenty-five “Living Legends,” Giovanni’s career spans the course of over three decades of publishing and lecturing. Most notable works published during the Black Arts Movement include, *Black Talk* (1968); *Black, Black Talk/Black Judgment* (1970); *RE: Creation* (1970); *My House* (1972); and *The Women and the Men* (1975).

Black liberation theology was created by fifty-one innovative Black pastors in 1966. Calling themselves the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, these revolutionary men of the cloth bought a full page ad in the *New York Times* to promote their position regarding God's liberating message for the oppressed; the oppressed in this case were members of the African American community. *Black Liberation Theology*, which draws a parallel to *Liberation Theology*, focuses on the desire of the oppressed to overcome their poor economic conditions. The leaders of Black liberation theology, akin to the leaders of liberation theology, use Marxism as a construct through which their socio-political position is advanced.<sup>4</sup>

Cone avows that theology develops out of the experience of the people; the community itself defines what God means. Cone states that "Western European White theology serves the tormenter; therefore, theology for Black Americans should authenticate their struggle for liberation and justice." Cone argues fervently throughout his book that God is on the side of oppressed Black people and expands the concept of "Blackness" to include the notion that the God Black people serve, in reality, is a Black God. Thus for Cone, Black liberation theology becomes a means by which Black Americans can press forward towards a liberated state of mind.

An "expression of oppression" for many African Americans began when enslaved Africans forged "a new understanding of life-its pain and possibility through musical expressions" (Pinn 2). It was through this cultural expression that several musical genres were developed, such as, the Negro spirituals, the blues, gospel music, and some would argue the early beginnings of hip hop music. According to Anthony B. Pinn, rap music, which can

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<sup>4</sup> Liberation theology, a term first used in 1973 by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest, is a school of thought among Latin American Catholics according to their personal beliefs concerning the gospel of Christ.

be considered an extension of the creative voices and sounds heard during the nineteenth century, manifested itself into a new mode of musical expression in New York City during the late 1970s. Moreover, for me, the connection here is significant given the fact that both voices (Black liberation theologians and the Black rappers) were developing their controversial messages at the same time during the 70s. Several of James Cone's books: *Black Theology & Black Power* (1969); *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (1992/1998); and *God of the Oppressed* (1997), *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1992); as well as the work of Gustavo Gutierrez: *A Theology of Liberation, History, Politics, and Salvation* (1973) ; and Anthony B. Pinn's: *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003), will be used as a foundation for this study.

Black activists, scholars alike, and critics of Black liberation theology contend that Black liberation theologians and theorists use the tenets of Marxism as a milieu through which the struggles of an angry and oppressed Black community are examined. Based on this argument, alongside the work of James Cone, the scholarship of E. Franklin Frazier, C.Eric Lincoln, Jose Miguez Bonino, Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Gayraud Wilimore, Gustavo Gutierrez, Dwight N. Hopkins, Hidalgo y Costilla, Jose Maria Morelos, and the Rev. Dr. Marvin McMickle, are also used as support for this analysis.

Unlike their secular cousins, African American Christian rappers have not received much critical analysis.<sup>5</sup> According to scholar Garth Kaismu Baker-Fletcher, "One may find

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<sup>5</sup> The term "secular cousins" is a reference I use to reflect the relationship between non-Christian rap music and Christian rap music. Academic scholarship concerning the secular musical style of rap and hip hop has increased significantly since 2000. For example, Forman and Neal's *That's the Joint !: the Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004) spans 25 years of scholarship and criticism on rap and hip hop.



many descriptions of the [African American Christian rap] artists...with not so much as a mention of to what religious depth the rappers have plunged” (Baker- Fletcher 29). Baker-Fletcher suggests that, what has constrained the examination of African American Christian rappers is the difficulty for scholars of religion to make analytical judgments about this particular musical genre based on the resources available to them. Baker-Fletcher posits that,

The task of the scholar of religion is more telling, and more difficult, because she or he must call upon the resources available to make the best kinds of analytical judgments regarding how African American Christians utilize Christian rap’s structure, message, and musicality within the continuum of contemporary music--in particular, hip-hop culture and African American culture. (29)

A common misconception is that rap is simply a Black secular response to the pressing issues within the Black community. Throughout this study, I will refer to the scholarship of William C. Banfield, Cheryl L. Keyes, Mark Anthony Neal, Angela M.S. Nelson, Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Mark Lewis Taylor, James W. Perkinson, Anthony B. Pinn, and Ralph C. Watkins, in an effort to illustrate the deep and pervasive connections that Christian rap music has to African American religious traditions.

### **Religion and Politics**

According to Rev. Dr. Marvin McMickle, Black theology is a form of Christian theology that serves to remind the church of its historic tendency to overlook issues of racism and other forms of discrimination.<sup>6</sup> McMickle also states that:

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. McMickle has served as the Senior Pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio since 1987 (Antioch Baptist Church Website).

At a time when prosperity theology has taken hold in so many churches, it is especially important that the message of Black Theology be heard; God is on the side of the oppressed, and God wants the people of the church to be committed to the struggle for justice and equality of opportunity. Is it not enough to be saved if that salvation does not translate into a passion to address the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the hungry and homeless, and the victims of discrimination based upon race or gender? (McMickle)

Herein lies the crux of the problem: Religion and Politics. At what point does the Christian rapper assume the role of prophet, preacher, and liberator in the community? For the Christian rapper, as well as the secular rap artist, God takes sides and identifies with rappers in their attempt to challenge hostility with counter hostile “gospel friendly” actions.

According to scholar Noel Leo Erskine, “Their God is the God of the Old Testament who uses violence as a midwife to give birth to new possibilities and realities” (78). Given Erskine’s position, the question now becomes “is violence a necessary aspect of credibility for gospel rappers in their quest to reach the souls of their lost homies?” (Baker-Fletcher 45-46). Is violence also a necessary means for supporters of Black theology? If this is the case, then what distinguishes gospel rappers from their secular cousins? How does one separate the preachers of a Black liberated theological mindset from promoters of the political tenets of Black Nationalism? Other challenging issues that will be addressed in my research are the various roles of Christian rap as a medium for a “revolutionary” message within the church; secondly, what is the rapper’s view of Christ or, simply stated, their reality of Jesus?

Moreover, do Black Christian rappers present Christianity as an end all for the issues of poverty, violence, and oppression?

### **Viewing God from a Black Perspective**

The purpose of this study is to examine Black liberation theology and its relationship to a recent musical phenomenon that has crept into the Black Church--Christian hip hop and rap. According to *Boston Globe* reporter Carolyn Y. Johnson,

While rap's unholy trinity of profanity, sex, and bling seems an unlikely candidate for religious outreach, the medium has gotten a new message in area churches over the past few years. Gospel rap that trades guns, gangs, and drugs for God has crept into New England communities from centers in Philadelphia and New York, allowing area churches to get a foothold in groups of teenagers who might never otherwise step foot in a church.

(Johnson, *Boston Globe.com*)

Through the medium of religious rap ministries, teen outreach programs, and hip hop praise and worship services, Christian rappers are not only drawing attention to the gospel message, but they are also reaching out to teenagers who might not otherwise walk through the doors of the church.

In particular, the study will explore the views that Black theology is a theology of liberation that has helped to create an innovative, yet, revolutionary voice (Christian rap) from the pews of the Sunday morning worship hour in the Black church. It is my contention that the emergence of Christian hip hop (also referred to as holy hip hop, gospel hip hop, and Christian rap) based ministries has taken on the role of a new liberating theological theme among youth within the Black community. Moreover, as controversy surrounds the

provocative sermons by the former pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a similar tone of discontent at present, challenges the discipleship and evangelist efforts of Christian rappers such as: Antonious, B.B. Jay, Elle R.O.C., Gospel Gangstaz, Grits, King Cyz, Knowdaverbs, Lil' Raskull, Mr. Real, Toby Mac, Willie Will, and Kirk Franklin.

Viewing God from a Black perspective has recently provoked a controversial discourse in America regarding the realities of God; simply put, how should God be viewed? Problematic for White America is a Black perspective (or for the sake of this argument a Black theology); problematic for Black America is a perspective of oppression and a denial of creative expression which appears to always be the case when radical thought is delivered from the mouths of the Black theologian or from the lyrics of the Black Christian rapper. Taking into consideration the discussion regarding religion, politics, and God from a Black perspective, several key research questions become known, which address the central argument of this dissertation. They include:

- What is Black liberation theology?
- What is Black Christian hip hop and rap?
- In what ways has the hip hop culture influenced the various youth ministries of the Black Church?
- What resistance has there been by Black clergy to the emergence of hip hop as an instrument for discipleship and evangelism within the Black Church?
- Is the Black Church the “Messianic Refuge” for liberation?

## Viewing God from a Segregated Perspective

Biblical scholars as well as other lay members of the Christian church body have debated for years that the Sunday morning “eleven o’clock worship hour” is the most segregated hour in America. The debate stems from the fact that Whites have a tendency to worship in congregations that are all White, and Blacks too worship mostly with other Blacks (Winseman 109).

According to Alain Coulon, the notion of [membership] is critical to the mastery of natural language and the element of linguistic conception allows for member affiliation (26). Moreover, a “communal agreement” or “member’s pact” formulates because of the linguistic agreement. According to Coulon, “to become a member is to become affiliated to a group, to an institution, which requests the progressive mastery of the common institutional language” (27). Coulon states in his definition of [membership] that:

Using the notion of [membership] is not without risk... A member is not only a person who breathes and who thinks but a person with a whole ensemble of processes, methods, activities, and know-how that enables her to invent adjusting devices to give sense to the surrounding world. (6)

Moreover, according to Coulon,

a person who, having embodied the ethnomethods of a particular group, ‘naturally’ exhibits the social competence that affiliates [them] with this group, allowing [them] to be recognized and accepted... Once [members] are affiliated, the members do not have to think about what they are doing... This is why one is not a stranger to one’s own culture. (27)

Winesman points to a critical element regarding the segregation issue. He states that,

Whites and blacks could (and did), through the individualistic interpretation of the church and “salvation,” form their own churches that suited their own purposes. Issues of slavery and segregation could be addressed, ignored, or justified depending on one’s personal view of the Christian faith—thus the establishment of white Protestant congregations and black Protestant congregations. (3)

The question of segregation at the eleven o’clock worship hour, supports James Cone’s argument that since the White theologian does not belong to the Black community, how can he convey the gospel to that community?

Furthermore, Cone states, when White theology attempts to speak to Blacks about Jesus Christ, the gospel message is presented without taking into consideration the social, political, and economic interests of the Black community. Based on the paradigm that led to the separation of Black and White church membership, and because of this separation, how different are the sources and norms that shape the theology within a given community? According to Austin Cline, “White Christians in America might have preached a message of love and peace, but at every turn they failed to live up to their own words. The existence of segregated denominations and segregated churches proved this.” (Austin Cline, About.com). Moreover, Cone suggests that historically, White Christian theologians have used religious arguments to defend (or justify) both slavery and segregation.

### **Organization of the Study/Future Research Opportunities**

My research, based on the shared interests between the Black Christian rappers and Black liberation theologians, is innovative because it draws a parallel to three essential issues that are ubiquitous arguments of both the Black Christian rapper and the Black liberation

theologian. The three issues are Black oppression, Black liberation, and street evangelism. My assessment of the three issues, I believe, will help to define the foundation for my analysis of these two controversial voices. The dissertation is organized by chapters that not only address these three issues, but also concentrate on specific concerns with respect to the research questions noted earlier.

Going forward, my intentions are to continue the exploration of the issues discussed throughout this manuscript by conducting several interviews over the next two years (ethnographic qualitative research) with the Reverend Dr. James Cone, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary; Reverend Dr. Marvin McMickle, pastor of the Antioch Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ohio; Reverend Otis Moss III, pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Ill; Reverend Dr. Otis Moss Jr. pastor emeritus of the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio; and the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright, former/retired pastor of Trinity United Church. Furthermore, my goal is to attend the worship services of churches that promote a Black theology (i.e., Trinity United Church of Christ), and churches that promote Christian hip hop (i.e., the Greater Hood Memorial AME Zion Church in Harlem). Additionally, I plan to attend several Black Christian hip hop/rap concerts and conduct interviews with the bands and audience participants.

The ethnographic interviews will assist me in my analysis of the beliefs and behaviors of the Christian rapper, the Black liberation theologian, and their audience members. Moreover, I will continue to probe the processes of balancing multiple identities through a wide range of techniques including observing member participation, rituals, and language choices. The summation for chapters' I-III will briefly touch on the issues discussed in this introduction.

## **Chapter I: Black Liberation Theology: Political, Spiritual, or an Old Voice from the Past?**

Freedom, according to Karl Marx, “is the essence of man” (Cone 89). Marx suggests that the quality of human life is dependent on involvement and participation in societal structures for human liberation. When one attempts to define man’s essence, one must consider his quest for the essence for freedom. Chapter I explores the integration of Marxism and Black theology, in an attempt to try to identify the particular claims put forward by Black theologians and Marxist thinkers regarding their definition of the “essence of freedom.”

## **Chapter II: Performing Hip Hop in the Black Church: Political, Spiritual, or just Plain Entertaining?**

According to Anthony B. Pinn, “Stepping off the slave ships, weak and shackled, enslaved Blacks [developed] a new understanding of life through musical expressions” (Pinn 2). Spirituals during the nineteenth century reflected the experiences of an incongruous orb. Songs such as “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child,” “There is a Balm in Gilead” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” (a code message for the Underground Railroad), represented the early beginnings of the Black cultural experience and tradition. Moreover, the Negro spirituals, which were born from the cries of slaves working the cotton fields of North America from 1620-through the late 1800s, illustrated the pain and despair of being enslaved and disenfranchised (Carpenter 2). Chapter II will examine how the Negro spiritual called into question the callous and hypocritical practices of White Americans. Furthermore, emphasis will be placed on how these songs provided a vision of fulfillment, expressed with an eye toward the promises of Christian faith and liberation (Pinn 3).



Once considered by critics to be just another passing youth trend, hip hop has become an influential voice for youth around the globe. In spite of the recent explosion, there is a concern within the ecumenical community regarding the “biblical purity” of these fiery voices that can be heard from the pews on Sunday morning. Pastors, as well as other lay members of the Christian church body, have questioned the evolution of a musical genre called “Christian hip hop” (sometimes referred to as Gospel hip hop and Christian rap).

This chapter will also look at how young people involved in Christian hip hop combine Christian doctrine to express themselves with regard to their relevant audience members.

### **Chapter III: Jesus “The Brown Skin-Revolutionary”: Was Jesus a Marxist Rapper?**

According to Gustavo Gutierrez, the men of the cloth that minister in the most poverty stricken and exploited areas of Latin America have been zealous in their efforts to denounce the injustices they witnessed. However, because of their strong position, some Catholic bishops and priests were accused of “being friendly to Marxist beliefs.” Furthermore, Gutierrez states, because of their commitment to the oppressed people’s struggle for liberation, some of the priests, and bishops, received death threats from participants of groups that represented the extreme right in Latin America (107).

Was Jesus more concerned about redemption or a social gospel? How would Jesus respond to the construct of Black identity within the Black church? What would his approach be towards the suffering that is relevant not only to the Black experience in America, but also, in Latin America? Chapter III takes a closer look at what would Jesus do--or better yet, what would he rap about?

The **Conclusion** focuses on the three aspects of my life that make this study essential for personal development as a scholar. These are my personal relationship with Christ, my work as an activist, and my labor as an educator. My intention is neither to provide the reader with a 150-160 page overview of Black liberation theology; nor to produce a document that strictly records the historical background of Christian and secular hip hop. However, as I stated earlier, the goal of this study is to examine a subject that some consider to be a militant expression and negative representation of Black culture (Black liberation theology) and its relationship to a recent musical trend that appears to tussle between the sanctified and the worldly—Black Christian rap. Is there a connection?

*“The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords” (Ps. 55.21, KJV).*

**CHAPTER I: BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY: POLITICAL, SPIRITUAL, OR  
JUST A PLAIN OLD VOICE FROM THE PAST?**

*The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist,--all these he is...*

W.E.B. Du Bois

**America's Love Affair with Jeremiah Wright--The Controversy**

*The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, is the title of a book written by President Barack Obama in 2006. The book, which focuses on themes raised in his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, shares his personal views on faith, values, and according to Daphne Durham "offers a vision of the future that involves repairing a 'political process that is broken' and restoring a government that has fallen out of touch with the people." Inspired from a sermon delivered by the former pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ, Jeremiah Wright, *The Audacity of Hope* (in particular chapter 6 which is titled "Faith"), expresses the feelings that President Obama has for the attributes of the historically Black church. He writes,

I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change. Out of necessity, the [B] lack church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the [B] lack church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked and challenge the powers and principalities...

You needed to come to church precisely because you were of this world, not apart from it; rich, poor, sinner, saved, you needed to embrace Christ precisely because you had sins to wash away—because you were human and needed an ally in your difficult journey, to make the peaks and valleys smooth and render all of those crooked paths straight...

It was because of these newfound understandings—that religious commitment did not battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved--that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day and be baptized. (207-208)

Oddly enough for Barack Obama, the “change” that really affected his life and demanded a newfound understating was a political controversy involving his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

In March of 2008, a political concern became public knowledge to the American people, which ultimately called into question the character of then, Presidential candidate, Barack Obama. ABC News, after reviewing several of Wright’s sermons since 2001, reported that Wright on several occasions denounced American ideology and blamed the United States for the 9/11 attacks. From a 2003 sermon, Wright preaches:

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing “God Bless America.” No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human.

God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.<sup>1</sup>

The controversial words spoken by Wright were a topic of discussion by Americans for several weeks. At the forefront, were questions regarding Wright's mixing of the spiritual and the political from the pulpit; others however, questioned Wright's provocative approach to the preaching of the gospel.

The sermon (which ironically occurred just a few days before the true oppressive day of the year, April 15) was titled "Confusing God and Government." Wright's sermon, which lasted forty minutes, included a contentious saying that was ultimately played back as a sound bite on cable news channels and television stations across America. The phrase, " No, no, no, God damn America," was a reminder that there are several narratives regarding issues pertaining to religion in America. At the forefront are concerns pertaining to race and politics; however, entrenched within the storyline of religion in America, is the question of a Black and White perspective as it relates to God. According to Brian Ross, "An ABC News review of dozens of Rev. Wright's sermons, offered for sale by the church, found repeated denunciations of the U.S. based on what he described as his reading of the gospels and the treatment of black Americans" (Ross and El-Buri, *ABC.Com*).

Wright's "read of the gospels" as they pertain to the treatment of Black Americans, is based, fundamentally, on the liberation of the oppressed. Moreover, Wright would agree with James Cone that [Black people] must realize that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel message of Jesus Christ (Cone V). Wright's comments on September 16, 2001 and April 13, 2003, convey a complex message that

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri, ABC News.com—see Appendix A for the transcript of Rev. Wright's "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" and "Confusing God and Government" Sermons.

cannot be captured within a 60 second sound bite. However, it appears Jeremiah Wright's presentation of a controversial social gospel has added another chapter to the framework of American history, culture, and religion.

My interest in Black liberation theology started some years ago from my own personal encounters with the outwardly rebellious gospel message often heard from the pulpits of Black churches across America. Over and over again, I would hear the preacher in the churches I attended not only proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also state publicly the importance of liberation within the Black community. Liberation from sinful behavior is a key tenet of the Christian gospel message. On the other hand, the liberation of one's mind from White oppression, at times, appears to be the driving force behind many sermons that I have listened to (and still hear) from the Black preacher. The primary mode of God's presence in the life of a Christian (as it pertains to the mindset of Blackness) seems to play an important role in determining one's relationship with Jesus Christ according to many Black theologians that I have met over the years.

Wright's statements reflect the feelings of several Black preachers who were participants in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in America during the 1960s. A scholarly, ardent, talented African American preacher, Wright was not afraid throughout his career, to disparage U.S ethos and government. In addition, according to *Time Magazine* reporter Amy Sullivan there is more to the story of the Black church than the one depicted on the Disney channel.<sup>2</sup> She states that,

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<sup>2</sup> Walt Disney's *Song of the South* is a feature length film, which was produced and released by Walt Disney in 1946. The storyline of the film focuses on Uncle Remus' "Tales of Brer Rabbit" to help a young boy named Johnny deal with his concerns over his parents' separation as well as his new life on the plantation. The tales that are told by Uncle Remus focus on: "The Briar Patch," "The Tar Baby" and "Brer Rabbit's Laughing

Many Americans who were shocked by the clips of Wright's sermons have only known a Disney-fied version of the black church. We know about the good music, but don't listen to the lyrics of pain and suffering. We praise the rousing preaching without paying attention to the words. Civil rights leaders have become aging wise men revered for their inspirational sayings, not radical activists who preached truth to power...

(Sullivan, *Time.Com*)

Sullivan posits that Disney's "religious castle in the sky" mentality is very different from the pulpit of the Trinity United Church of Christ that Wright called home for many years. Albeit, considered confrontational, Wright is not the first preacher to criticize oppressive politics and White theology in America; however, perhaps his way of thinking, similar to the prophet Moses, kept him from going to the Promised Land.

### **The Biblical Foundation for Black Liberation Theology: The Exodus of the Jews**

As recorded in the Bible, the second book of Moses (called Exodus) reflects upon the redemption out of Egyptian bondage of the descendants of Abraham—known as the children of Israel. The theme of the book relates how God fulfilled His promise to Abraham by multiplying his descendants into a great nation, redeeming them from the land of bondage, and renewing the covenant of grace with them on a national basis (Archer 235). Additionally, the book teaches that redemption is essential to any relationship with a holy God; and that even a "redeemed people" cannot have fellowship with Him unless [they are] constantly cleansed from defilement (Schofield). According to Schofield, "...All redemption is unto a

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Place." Controversial themes within the film regarding the racist character depiction of Uncle Remus continue to be a subject of debate.

relationship with God of which worship, fellowship, and service are expressive, so Exodus, in the giving of the law and the provisions of sacrifice and priesthood, becomes not only the book of redemption, but also, in type, of the conditions upon which all relationships with God exist.”<sup>3</sup> By definition, the term Exodus refers to “going out”—an escape (in this case, a departure) from the influence of Egyptian oppression.

Moses, who is considered a servant of God, pens an account of the exit of the Jews from the land of Egypt. In the book of Genesis, Moses transmits the records of the church, while it existed in private families; in the book of Exodus, he explores the growth of a nation (Israel) and its ultimate resistance to Egyptian hegemony. The departure of the Jews from Egyptian slavery was a response to inhuman treatment and several tactics used by the Egyptians to suppress the Israelites and impede their growth. First, the children of Israel were charged with heavy taxes that they could not pay; second, because of their economic dilemma, they were forced into slavery as a means of paying off their individual debts.<sup>4</sup> Third, the Egyptians, for several years, had inflicted inhuman methods of suppression, by which, Jewish male children were murdered in an attempt to decrease Israel’s population. The Jewish midwives were commanded to murder the male children as soon as they were born. Fourth, the Egyptian task masters were determined to break the children of Israel’s spirits, thus robbing them of everything that was ingenious and generous. Fifth, the Israelites were discouraged from marrying, since their children would be born into slavery.

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<sup>3</sup> Black clergy have debated issues of a racist text presented by Schofield in his footnotes that places the curse of Ham upon Blacks (Gen. 9:20-29).

<sup>4</sup> According to Mathew Henry, the Jews were known as industrious laborious people, which the Pharaoh knew, thus exploiting their talents and using their productive work ethic to work against them.



Finally, sixth, the Egyptians encouraged the Israelites to incorporate themselves within the Egyptian culture.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Bible, based on these tragic events, Moses delivered a message (warning) to the Pharaoh, “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go.” However, Moses’ request was denied, prompting the Pharaoh to ask Moses this question: “Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice?” (Mathew Henry 102). After a series of plagues (which Moses had warned the Pharaoh about), the Pharaoh found out quickly who the God of the children of Israel was, and why he should obey His voice.<sup>6</sup>

The last plague, which resulted in the firstborn of all Egyptian children being slain and included the son of Pharaoh, was enough to convince the Pharaoh that it would behoove him to let the children of Israel go. Moses records in the twelfth chapter of Exodus that,

And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of the Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry’s Commentary does an excellent job of explaining the efforts put forward by the Egyptians towards the incorporation of the Israelites within the Egyptian culture.

<sup>6</sup> The ten plagues as recorded by Moses in the Book of Exodus. The first plague (Exodus 7:14-24) resulted in the waters in Egypt including the Nile River being turned into blood. Additionally, all of the fish in the river died causing a very strong unpleasant smell. The second plague (Exodus 8:1-15) multiplied the number of frogs in the land to the point of infestation. The third plague (Exodus 8:16-19) produced “lice in man, and in beast throughout all the land of Egypt.” The fourth plague (Exodus 8:20-32) resulted in swarms of flies that corrupted the land and the disease spread among the Egyptian people. The consequence from the fifth plague (Exodus 9:1-7) led to “a very grievous murrain” (bad sickness or disease) upon the cattle, horses, camels, oxen, sheep and goats. However, the cattle of the children of Israel were unharmed. The sixth plague (Exodus 9:8-12) produced boils that “broke forth with blains” (blisters) on the people and animals throughout all the land of Egypt. Strong hail storms developed from the seventh plague (Exodus 9:13-35) that destroyed all the crops. The impact from the hail storms were so severe that anyone caught outside in the storm was killed. The eighth plague (Exodus 10:1-20) created locusts in such great numbers that they “covered the face of the earth.” Furthermore, anything that survived the hail storm was devoured by the locust. The Ninth Plague (Exodus 10:21-29) resulted in “darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days...however, all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.” The tenth and final plague (Exodus 11:1-10, 12:1-42), the firstborn in the land of Egypt died (KJV). The exact date of the exodus according Gleason occurred in 1445 B.C. (239).

the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle...

And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go serve the LORD, as ye have said.

Also take your flocks and your herds, as ye have said, and be gone; and bless me also. (Exod. 12: 29; 31-32)

The Jews, in haste, assembled in groups and fled the land of Egypt only to be pursued by the Pharaoh. After a few days of contemplation about his decision to let the Jews leave, the Pharaoh mobilized his army in search of his former slaves. He reached them near the banks of the Red Sea. Moses led the Israelites onwards until they came to the very borders of the Red Sea. Then God spoke to Moses: "Lift up your rod, stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it; and the children shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground." Moses did as God ordered. A strong east wind blew all night, and the waters of the Red Sea were divided. The Israelites marched along a dry path through the Red Sea until they reached the opposite side in safety. The Egyptians continued their pursuit, but the waters of the Red Sea formed a wall of protection and drowned Pharaoh's army.

The departure of the Jews from Egypt was a departure from four hundred and thirty years of bondage.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, God's liberation of the children of Israel from the Egyptians, enabled them to witness God's great power, "And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses" (Exod. 14: 31). The story of Exodus recounts the birth of the Jewish people

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<sup>7</sup> Cone's foundation for liberation draws the parallel between Jewish enslavement and Black slavery. Canaan, which was land, populated and controlled by Black people, was the final destination for the Jews (better known as the "Promised Land").

as a nation whose ultimate goal was to renew their fellowship with God based on His forgiving grace.

Tragically, Moses' vision to one day reach the Promised Land with his people was never realized. After leading over 600,000 male Jews (biblical scholars have stated the total number of people was closer to 2 million if you include women and children) to the Promised Land, Moses was permitted to see it, but he was not allowed to go there. In the thirty-fourth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, God spoke to Moses and informed him of his decision:

And the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying I will give it unto your seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine own eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. (Deut. 34:4)

Reflection upon the social context of the Black experience (or “the Vision”) and the necessary features of all social existence should afford the Black theologian an opportunity to pursue more realistic, righteous, and liberating behavior (Walker 49). Conversely, one's efforts to triumph against oppression can lead to personal frustration and a divisive posture; thus, making the struggle for liberty even more difficult. Jeremiah Wright was able to see the Promised Land for Barack Obama, however, akin to Moses, Wright was not permitted to continue the journey; a journey that began with fifty-one innovative Black pastors in 1966.

### **The Grandfather of Black Liberation Theology: A Closer Look at the Work of James Cone**

“Unfortunately, American [W] hite theology has not been involved in the struggle for [B] lack liberation. It has been a theology of the [W] hite oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Americans and the enslavement of Africans” (Cone 4). Black

liberation theology originated on July 31, 1966, when 51 black pastors (National Committee of Black Church Men) bought a full page ad in the *New York Times* and demanded a more aggressive approach to eradicating racism. They endorsed the demands of the Black Power—Civil Rights Movements, but the new crusade found its source of inspiration in the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

In his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), Cone, who many claim to be responsible for the phrase “Black [liberation] theology,” posits the phrase is particularly appropriate for contemporary America based on its symbolic power to convey what White [folks] mean by oppression and what Black [folks] mean by liberation (Cone v). However, Cone’s perception of Blackness is not just confined to the United States. He contends that Blackness symbolizes oppression and liberation in any society. Moreover, according to Anthony Bradley, the notion of Blackness is a symbol of oppression that can be applied to all persons of color who have a history of oppression.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Cone makes it clear at the outset his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, was not written for a White audience (unless according to Cone, Whites are willing to be open to a deeper analysis of Christian doctrine); his target audience is the Black community. Cone states that, “Whites may read it...but an authentic understanding is dependent on the [B] lackness of their existence in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Theology and liberation are terms according to Gustavo Gutierrez that suggest several interpretations as they apply to the believer.<sup>11</sup> “Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking

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<sup>8</sup> Refer to Anthony Bradley’s essay and NPR story on Black Liberation Theology.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley emphasizes the fact the Cone’s reference to “persons of color” is non-inclusive of Whites.

<sup>10</sup> Authenticity is fundamental not only for the Black liberator, but also the Black Christian rapper; I will explore the spirit of the term in chapter two.

<sup>11</sup> A believer is one, according to Gutierrez, that has accepted the gift of the Word of God.

to be authentic and complete...there is present in all believers—and more so in the Christian community—a rough outline of theology” (Gutierrez 3). Gutierrez would agree with Cone that the concept of liberation theologically, especially as it applies to “people of color,” concerns itself with the elimination of existing injustices and the call for an urgent pecuniary development geared to the service of man (Gutierrez 33). Moreover, Gutierrez connects the theme of liberation to the Apostle Paul’s biblical message presented in the book of Galatians. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). Similar to Cone, Gutierrez contends that the biblical message, which presents the work of Christ as the “Great liberator” provides the foundation for the elemental meaning for the phrase liberation theology.

What is Black liberation theology? According to James Cone, Black [liberation] theology is equal to Christian theology. By Cone’s definition, the theology of the gospel (Christian theology) reflects and focuses on those individuals that function within an oppressed society. Thus, making the story told by Moses in the book of Exodus regarding the departure of the children of Israel from Egyptian hegemonic power so riveting. In the case of Black liberation theology, the oppressed, according to Cone, is the Black community. Furthermore, Cone states that Black [liberation] theology is Christian theology because it centers on the gospel message of Jesus Christ (Cone 5). Black liberation theology, which reflects on the plight of the Black community, does not deny the deity of Christ, but focuses on the complete revelation of God in the flesh, and His activity and compassion towards the Black community.

Commonly referred to as *Black Theology*, or *Black theology of liberation*, Black liberation theology seeks to characterize in terms of its history, the demands for racial justice

embodied in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Cone contends that the demands for racial justice embodied in these two movements, provided the basis for the emergence of Black theology. According to Cone, Black theology is the theology of Black liberation; the Black theologian's view of God must make a distinction from the distorted views of God presented by White theology; a theology according to Cone that often reflects a sense of White supremacy versus the biblical commandment of brotherly love and spiritual freedom through Christ Jesus.

Cone states that, "From the very beginning to the present day, American [W] hite theological thought has been 'patriotic,' either by defining the theological task independently of Black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with [W] hite racism (the conservative southern approach) (Cone 4). Problematic for Cone is the failure of White theologians to relate the gospel message of Jesus Christ to the pain of being Black in a "[W] hite racist society" (Cone 4). Therefore, taking into consideration the oppressive condition of Blacks in America, Black theology through the process of liberation, seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ as a necessary power to break the shackles of oppression.

James Cone poses an intriguing question from his critics concerning the subject of a Black theology. Cone states that "some will ask: 'Why Black theology? It is not true that God is color-blind? Is it not true that there are others who suffer as much as, if not in some cases more than, [B] lacks?' "<sup>13</sup> Cone argues that questions such as these from critics reflect

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<sup>12</sup> The terms Black Liberation Theology, Liberation Theology, and Black Theology will be used interchangeable throughout this dissertation. Additionally, the terms African American, Black American, and Black will also be used interchangeable.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of liberation according to Cone is not exclusive to Black America. Similar to the concerns expressed by Gustavo Gutierrez, Cone contends that liberation is a global concern. Refer to

a misunderstanding of the true meaning of Black theology. As I stated earlier, Cone views Christ from the aspect of oppression and liberation. He argues that in a revolutionary situation, there can never be nonpartisan theology. Moreover, theology according to Cone is always identified with a particular community.<sup>14</sup> “It is either identified with those who inflict oppression or those who are the victims” (Cone 6). A theology that dwells on the oppressed, is the “real deal” or authentic. However, a theology that focuses on oppressive teachings, according to Cone, is a theology of the “Antichrist.”

Cone maintains the fact that there can be no theology of the gospel, which does not arise from an oppressed community. Given the argument and the historical expressions of racism in America, to say that God is color-blind, is to say that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, and to good and evil. Cone contends that, this is not the picture we see of the God in the Old and New Testaments. I would agree with Rev. Cone that God throughout the Bible takes sides. He sides with Israel on several occasions; He opposes political oppression; and He reaches out to the Gentile believers, which is evident from the Apostle Paul’s ministry in the Book of Ephesians. However, problematic for me in Cone’s argument, is that he seems to overlook the fact that from a biblical perspective, scripture clearly points to God’s availability to everyone; not just the Black community, but to all communities regardless of ethnicity. The Apostle Paul writes in the Book of Romans that, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Paul’s declaration supports the biblical thought that there can be no theology, which does not have

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TABLE 1: Comparison of Social/Political/Religious Concerns of Black Liberation Theology.

<sup>14</sup> Community and how it is defined in the case of the Christian rapper is essential to authenticity.

Jesus Christ as its point of reference. Consequently, the suggestion by Paul is that the gospel message of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.

According to theologian Paul Tillich, biblical religion has a “historical view of reality.” Thus for James Cone, historically, biblical liberation, reflects the relationship between freedom and suffering—a familiar trope for Black Americans throughout history. For Cone, being free in America is based on accepting Blackness as the only possible way of exiting in the world; it means defining one’s identity through the marks of oppression. Cone frequently refers to the scholarship of Tillich and agrees with him that Christianity is the answer to the existential character of the human condition. For Tillich, “The God who is encountered as a person acts in history through persons and their inner experiences” (37).<sup>15</sup> Tillich suggests that the function of theology is to analyze the changeless gospel in such a way that it can be related to changing situations.<sup>16</sup> However, Cone warns the reader, that one must be careful on how the communal situations are used to define the meaning of “who Christ is.” He refers to the religious mindset of White America, which allowed White privilege to serve as a construct in determining the meaning of Jesus. Moreover, Cone contends that the historical Jesus must be taken seriously if we are to avoid making Jesus into our own image—so much for the blond hair, blue eyed images of Christ that are depicted in books, paintings and Bibles across the Orb.

Given Cone’s position on the historical construct of Jesus by White America, what would his view be, along with others, who support Black liberation theology on who Jesus is? Ironically, while Cone is critical of White America’s construct of Christ, it is obvious

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<sup>15</sup> Tillich defines and draws a distinction between “Biblical personalism and Biblical religion” (p. 37).

<sup>16</sup> An interesting thought that I will refer back to in Chapter II concerns the Christian rapper and their adaptability.



from his writings, that he believes Jesus was Black; thus constructing his own image of Christ to support his theology. Additionally, his slant on the fundamental nature of the Blackness of Jesus supports his position that Christ's sole existence was to be a voice for the oppressed; bind the wounds of the afflicted; and liberate those who are in prison (Cone 113). Prison for Cone represents a lack of physical and spiritual freedom. Therefore, Black liberation theology according to Cone reflects the true meaning of who Jesus really is. Moreover, the birth of Christ reflects and demonstrates the relationship between the historical Jesus and the oppressed.

Cone suggests several reasons to support his argument that the historical Jesus be identified with the oppressed. First, he refers to the biblical commentary on the birth of Christ and states that, "He was born in a stable and cradled in a manger—simply because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Cone compares the birth to "the equivalent of a beer in a ghetto alley" (114). For Cone, the story of Jesus Christ's birth signaled that Jesus was a man who defined the meaning of His existence as being one with the poor and outcasts. Additionally, the birth narratives reflect Jesus' self-portrayal of who he is and ultimately help to define His mission on earth (114). Secondly, Cone refers to scripture that describes how Christ ate with publicans (tax collectors) and sinners; an example of this would include the relationship between the Jewish tax collector Zacchaeus and Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Third, the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist also reveals Jesus' identification with the oppressed. Allowing himself to be baptized by John, Jesus defines his existence as "one with sinners" and conveys the meaning of the coming kingdom. Fourth is temptation, which according to Cone is a continuation of the theme already expressed in baptism. Cone posits

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<sup>17</sup> Zacchaeus, who lived in the city of Jericho and was a prosperous tax collector for the Roman government, invited Jesus into his home and later became one of his devoted disciples.

that the “tempter’s” (commonly referred to as Satan) main objective is to divert Jesus’ reality of his mission with the poor. Jesus’ refusal to worship the tempter can be interpreted as his unwillingness to identify or give in to any of the available modes of oppressive or self-glorifying power (Cone 115). Fifth, the ministry for Jesus Christ is an open expression of his birth and reaffirms the baptism and temptation. Cone asserts that Jesus makes a proclamation regarding God’s position on the condition of the oppressed in the Gospel of Mark. The writer Mark states in chapter one that,

Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

(Mark. 1:14-15)

Scholars have debated the true meaning for this passage of scripture, however, for James Cone, no debate is necessary. Cone contends that verse 14, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” illustrates the fact that slavery is about to end. Moreover, for Cone, the closing stages of slavery are the beginning steps towards racial solidarity.

I stated earlier that the principles of Black liberation theology do not deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it agrees with the emphasis that is placed on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospels, according to Cone, “are not biographies of Jesus”-- they are the good news for the oppressed, poor in spirit and lost sinners. In addition, the theological significance of the cross is what makes the life of Jesus more than just a message about a man who happened to be concerned about poverty-stricken people in the world. Cone’s description of the death and resurrection of Jesus is well-argued:

His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom. (Cone 118)

The Apostle Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians chapter sixteen that Christian freedom is the recognition that Christ has conquered death: “Oh death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? (1 Cor. 15.55). Cone states that the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be considered a form of protest. He cites the words of Moltmann who states that,

To believe in the resurrection transforms faith from a deliverance and from the world into an initiative that changes the world and makes those who believe into worldly, personal, social and political witnesses to God’s righteousness and freedom in the midst of a repressive society and unredeemed world. (qtd. in Cone 119)

For most Black theologians, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ symbolizes freedom and justice; however, in its attempt to examine the Black condition, Black liberation theology still struggles to connect the gospel message to the African American experience in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

According to scholar James Harris, Black [liberation] theology has little or no practical value apart from the Black church. Furthermore, Harris states the liberation of Black people cannot be achieved without the church’s engagement of Black Theology (94). “Although some Black preachers and theologians disagree as to the relationship of Black theology to the church, the time for antagonism between preachers and theologians has passed” (Harris 94). Even though the root of the message of Black liberation theology

focuses on the oppressive nature of the Black community by White America, there are other issues in the Black church pertaining to the subject of liberation that need to be addressed. Some examples would include the role and treatment of Black women and Black youth within the church.<sup>18</sup>

It is an ongoing narrative that African Americans must be liberated from multiply forms of bondage (which include social, political, economic, and religious). However, in an effort to convey this message, James Cone has been met with some difficult challenges. According to Cone, one of the most difficult tests has been to search for a viewpoint on Christian theology that would help the Black community acknowledge that the gospel of Jesus Christ is consistent with their fight for liberation and justice. Cone contends that it is difficult for White theologians to define the nature of the gospel to African Americans based on their affinity to supremacy. Moreover, Cone asserts that White theologians must learn something about the Black religious tradition in order to be genuine American theologians, “God did not call me into the ministry (as a theologian of the Christian church) for the purpose of making the gospel intelligible to privileged white intellectuals” (Cone xiv). The “call” to ministry is indeed a distinguished and splendid calling. It is a privileged invitation to state publicly God’s declaration towards the plight of mankind. Additionally, the “call” compels men and women into the ministry and sustains them to execute it. Problematic for Cone is that some White Christians, who claim they were “called” to preach a message of justice and peace, in reality, have been called to preach a gospel message of hypocrisy. Furthermore, Cone would argue that the historical evidence of segregated churches and the

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<sup>18</sup> Harris points to the role of women in the church in his essay entitled *Black Church and Black Theology*. Harris states that although women outnumber men by more than two to one in positions of authority and responsibility, very few hold leadership positions (95).

past use of Christianity by White theologians to endorse both slavery and segregation support his argument.

Debate over the theological interpretation of what the White master preached in the hush harbors of slavery poses genuine concern even today. Stories have often been told how the White slave owner cited various passages of scripture in the Bible to support his position that the slave must remain submissive to the demands of the master. Examples of such passages would include: “Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ...” (Eph. 6:5); “Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again...” (Titus. 2.9); “Servants, be subject to your masters, with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also forward” (I Pet. 2:18); and the apostle Paul states in the book of Colossians that, “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye service, as men pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God” (Col 3:22). Conversely, biblical verses have been used to justify the violence done to racial minorities, women, Jews, and homosexuals (Spong 127).

Although throughout the colonial period, the vast majority of African-born slaves continued to practice various religions, in the case of Christianity, Whites were positively resistant to slave conversion fearing that slave conversion would undermine and weaken the fueled slaveholder opposition. In addition, considering that a small percentage of Whites in any of the colonies were members of a church, it is not surprising that Whites did little to convert slaves to Christianity. The Christian experience for most Blacks, Michael Gomez suggests, was centered on frustration and hypocrisy. The few [White] people who did seek to evangelize slaves, were ministers and missionaries that were “notoriously decadent, many

being alcoholics and/or 'living in sin' with one or more African or Native American women" (Gomez 247). Cone contends, ultimately, Black theology evolved from the historical religious experiences of African Americans and their awareness of the contextual misinterpretations of scripture by White America, which occurred for many years.

### **The Controversy--Part 2**

In the 1960s, the dominant theme of the ministry of civil rights activist Malcolm X was the unity of Black America. According to Cone, Malcolm X (who he credits for influencing his theology), was disturbed at how Blacks had a tendency to culturally alienate each other; Malcolm X credits the evils of slavery for this phenomenon. Malcolm X, who was an advocate for Black separatism, was vocal about his resistance to the idea of integration. He states that, "Blacks need to recover their true identity as Muslims and begin to act for themselves instead of wasting their [time] trying to convert the [W]hite devils" (qtd. in Raboteau 117). According to Cone, without knowledge of who they are as a people, they cannot "think for themselves." Furthermore, Cone would agree with Malcolm that even those (African Americans) who have graduated from the steps of academic institutions across America, do not know who they are, thus, they do not use their intellectual skills for the benefit of the community. Conversely, when one views the problems associated with self-esteem within the Black community, why would anybody bother to analyze Black self-determination?

The revolutionary message of the story of the Exodus in the Bible points to God's support for determined souls. Although many (this would include Black theologians) have taken offense to comments made by Jeremiah Wright, the fact of the matter remains the defense of race and improvement for civil rights has been and, always will be, a central part

of the Black religious experience. The Rev. Leroy Fitts states, “Many of the possessions which we regard as most significant to our experience come to us as part of an accumulated inheritance from the past” (19). The past for Cone, revolves around American slavery and racism--however, the past for Jeremiah Wright is not only a personal reflection of slavery, but also, perhaps, it can be considered an outdated militant provocation. Liberation supports the Christian mission of bringing justice to oppressed people through political activism and solving their social and economic plight. Nevertheless, does Christian liberation support the attack of the nation’s White-run social structures?

The anger expressed by both James Cone and Jeremiah Wright are comments felt by many Black Americans. However, when one examines conceptually the core identity of Christians, where does the verse “Let brotherly love continue” fit within this paradigm? Marvin McMickle puts forward the question “What does it mean to have one’s identity in Christ?” McMickle suggests that authentic theological reflection flows out of a fresh and vibrant relationship with Christ, yet the deeper question of Christian identity could rest with one’s relationship and responsibility for the needs and conditions of one’s brothers and sisters both inside the church and beyond. Furthermore, McMickle states that, “The scriptures are clear on the point that people who are anxious to raise holy hands but slow to extend a helping hand to their neighbors in need will not enjoy God’s favor” (McMickle 3). After all, who is my brother? Perhaps this question has been ignored by White America. Ultimately, for James Cone and Jeremiah Wright, at some point, White America needs to address it.

**CHAPTER II: PERFORMING HIP HOP IN THE BLACK CHURCH:  
POLITICAL, SPIRITUAL, OR JUST PLAIN ENTERTAINING? HIP HOP AS  
A CULTURE: RAP AS AN ART FORM**

*The Music of the Negro religion is the plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.*

W.E.B. Du Bois

This chapter examines Negro spirituals, the blues, and the role that these two musical genres had on the early development of the Black urban church in America. The chapter's objective is to convey how the Negro spiritual called into question the insensitive and duplicitous practices of White America during slavery, along with an assessment of the historical significance of the blues, an expression often used to describe despair within African American culture. In addition, the chapter takes a closer look at how young people involved in Christian rap and hip hop combine Christian doctrine to express themselves with regard to their relevant audience members.

**The Spoken Word through Music Part 1: Black Expression through African American Religion, Negro Spirituals and the Blues**

The story of African American religion is a tale of variety and creative fusion. Enslaved Africans during the nineteenth century created a wide range of local religious beliefs and practices that reflected the many cultures and linguistic groups from which they had come (Kipp). "In studying any phase of the character and the development of the social and cultural life of the Negro in the United States, one must recognize from the beginning that because of the manner in which the Negroes were captured in Africa and enslaved, they



were practically stripped of their social heritage” (Fraiser and Lincoln 9-12). According to E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, the process by which the African Americans were captured and stripped of his social heritage, dehumanized him, and destroyed their traditional basis of cohesion (11). Frazier and Lincoln write:

Although the area in West Africa from which the majority of the slaves were drawn exhibits a high degree of cultural homogeneity, the capture of many of the slaves in the intertribal wars and their selection for the markets tended to reduce to a minimum the possibility of the retention and transmission of people is to know quite a lot about their fears, their failures, their understanding of who they are and what life holds for them.

(11)

According to scholar Michael Gomez a transformation in African identity occurred from 1619 to 1830. Gomez refers to two literary examinations of this transformation: Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People* and Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture*. Gomez states, “the premise of Baraka’s work is to reflect a changing self-perspective in conjunction with political and socioeconomic developments over time” (4). Gomez refers to examples, given by Baraka, of the various musical transitions that developed within the African American community. “From sorrow songs to primitive blues to jazz to classical blues to swing to bebop and beyond,” the African American musical evolution reflects a changing perspective (Gomez 4).

“Of the Sorrow Songs,” which is a chapter from the book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois echoes the concerned voices of the colored people Amiri Baraka refers to in his book *Blues People*. According to Du Bois, the central question within the chapter is, “What are these songs and what do they mean?” Du Bois not only speaks to the souls of

Black people, he also attempts to communicate a message to the consciousness of African Americans, which one might argue is, the true “soul” of the Black man. “The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development... In these songs, I have said, the slave spoke to the world” (Du Bois 180). As an interpreter of the spirituals, Du Bois conveys to his audience, the importance of the Negro spiritual in the formation of consciousness. According to Cone, “Not only was his essay, “Of the Sorrow Songs” the first significant interpretation of the slave spirituals, but it is so rich in feeling and observation that it defies classification” (12). Cone contends, when confronted with dehumanizing situations, it was the spirit-filled melodies of “these songs” that kept the mind and body of the African American together.

“The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us; our fathers [may not understand at times] what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music” (Du Bois 180). Cone suggests that DuBois was enthralled by the slave’s ability to embrace through music, issues of hope and despair, joy and sorrow, death and life (*The Spiritual and the Blues* Cone 13). African Americans may not fully understand the significance of the words, but it is evident by the presentation of these creative folk tales, the meaning of its music will always remain within the consciousness of their soul.

The ability to see another person differently is critical to the argument regarding the formation of race, ethnicity, and identity. Stuckey’s position that the ring shout was a principal mechanism, by which Africans of varying ethnicities were able to span their

differences, supports the argument that “black folk began to see themselves differently.”<sup>1</sup> According to Gomez, directly related to the issue of African American identity formation is the question of acculturation, a term used by Gomez to define what occurs when two different ethnic groups exchange cultural traits and complexes. Moreover, the process by which this exchange takes place (the process is defined as cultural assimilation), results in what Gomez refers to as “cultural hybridity.”<sup>2</sup> Within this paradigm, Gomez raises the question of what constitutes an African American identity, and what is the meaning of “Blackness.”

W.E.B. Du Bois states, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Gomez refers to Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” attempting to define the mantra of color and the continual significance of Blackness and Whiteness. According to Gomez, some [Africans] from select ethnic and regional groupings chose to perform tasks, which required certain trade skills that ultimately led to increased interaction with Whites. Gomez argues that the increase in contact with Whites by the skilled Africans produced an isolated situation from the main body of Black slaves.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, because of the isolation, the skilled Africans experienced a decrease in

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<sup>1</sup>After a regular worship service, congregations used to stay for a “ring shout.” It was a survival of primitive African dance. Therefore, educated ministers and members placed a ban on it. The men and women arranged themselves in a ring. The music started, perhaps with a Spiritual, and the ring began to move, at first slowly, then with quick pace. The same musical phrase was repeated over and over for hours. This produced an ecstatic state. Women screamed and fell. Men, exhausted, dropped out of the ring (NegroSpirituals.com)

<sup>2</sup> Several scholars (Derrick Bell, Stuart Hall and Cornel West), have addressed the issues of cultural assimilation through their scholastic endeavors on Critical Race Theory. In my opinion, Du Bois is the grandfather of Critical Race Theory. Until the late 70’s, very little application from this theory had been used.

<sup>3</sup> According to James Cone, Malcolm X felt that Black people’s alienation from each other (which Cone refers to as mental slavery) was the most damaging element of slavery (105).

ethnic consciousness that had sustained itself through generations. The result according to Gomez was an identity that resembled the White patrons, thus supporting the claim made by Du Bois.

Du Bois's assessment of the problematic issues of the color line supports the position held by Gomez that progression, within the African community, was at times hindered by the complexities of social formation. According to Gomez, a significant number of these formations did not conform to notions of ethnicity, so that the conscious loyalties of considerable numbers did not extend beyond the village, the village group, or the town. Based on this assessment, I would agree with Gomez that problematic to the pursuit of African unification, was the misunderstanding of the various cultural traits that contributed to the uniqueness of Africans as a people. These misunderstandings proved not only to be problematic, but also, created dissension and suffocation within the different groups of African people.<sup>4</sup>

The moral function of genealogy defends the historical picture of the way things were and how they came to be that way. Genealogies are a form of narrative, which affords one an opportunity to connect with their ancestors and trace the many details that are significant to their history. According to scholar John Lovell, "the slave songs reveal the social consciousness of [B] lacks who refused to accept [W] hite limitations placed on their lives" (qtd. in Cone 14). Lovell also states that,

The social mind of the slaves was a reflection of their African back-  
grounds, their life on southern plantations, and their encounter with

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<sup>4</sup> Gomez would agree with Malcolm X that the number one problem in the Black community today is the issue of "Self-Hate."

slave masters, overseers, auctioneers, and buyers. The songs were a reflection of this existence, and of the measures used to deal with the dehumanization. (14)

Moreover, Gomez supports the argument made by Lovell that through language and religion, Africans resented the dehumanizing experience of the plantation system and their removal from ancestral ground. He also emphasizes the slave's use of folklore, and illustrates that through song and "ring shouts" ancestral behavior can be traced.

In order to understand the creation of African identity, Gomez states, it is essential to recover the cultural, political and social aspects of Africans, recognizing that Africans came to the New World with certain coherent perspectives and beliefs about the universe and their place in it. African Americans were anything but passive victims unable to change. Additionally, the intense economic and environmental difficulties forced African Americans to reinvent themselves. According to scholar Nathan Huggins, "[African American History] is exactly this triumph of the human spirit over adversity that is the great story."

By 1810, the slave trade to the United States had officially ended and the slave population began to increase making way for the preservation and transmission of religious practices, which by this time were considered truly "African American" and led to a religious revivalism known as "Awakenings" (Kipp). According to African American historian, Carter G. Woodson, "The Dawn of the New Day" in the religious development of Negroes occurred when the Methodists and Baptists began proselytizing the blacks (qtd. in Frazier and Lincoln 15). "The proselytizing activities on the part of the Methodists and Baptists, as well as the less extensive missionary work of the Presbyterians, were a phase of the Great

Awakening which began in New England and spread to the West and South” (Frazier and Lincoln 15).

The structural design of the worship service by many clergy within the Methodist and Baptist faiths actively promoted and encouraged Africans to be enthusiastic in their praising of the Lord. African Americans demonstrated their praise for God through very emotional singing, clapping, dancing, and even spirit-possession (Kipp). Within the slave quarters, hush harbors were created which permitted believers the opportunity to freely mix African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity. Through signals and passwords, not discernible to Whites, African American Christians were able to communicate messages of religious salvation and freedom (Kipp).

The slave quarters served also as a venue for the early Black preacher. African males, who believed they were called by God to speak his Word, refined their “chanted sermons” and rhythmic intoned style of extemporaneous preaching on the enslaved church body (Kipp). The meetings (which date back to Africa) served as part church, part psychological refuge, and part organizing point for occasional acts of outright rebellion, which was the case with Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. These meetings were outlets for African Americans to explore, express, and enact their hopes for a better future (Kipp).

In order to understand the relationship of call-and-response, one must explore the significance of the transmission model of communication within the African American community. According to Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney,

The transmission model is based on the interpersonal context, in which the major concern is the fidelity of communicating, that is, the accuracy with the message is transported from one person to another in a linear

trajectory, although the model may allow for loops. This model assumes that all communication operates like interpersonal communication.

(16-17).

Furthermore, the model serves as a good foundation for understanding the transmission of the content of a message from sender to receiver. The sharing of meaning and clarity of message, from sender to receiver, was essential to the development of the lyrics and music created by slaves during the nineteenth century.

“They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (Du Bois 253). This particular quotation by Du Bois illustrates a dimension of Black life (referred to earlier by Baraka and Stuckey) that suggests the use of folklore as a communicative tool by a suffering group of people. Du Bois uses these *Sorrow Songs* to suggest a lack of personal agency for African Americans. However, I assert the lyrics from these songs and the rhythmic energy that comes from the Negro spiritual, is the historical base for Negro folklore and a catalyst for the “individual voice” which is the essence of *The Souls of Black Folks*.

Du Bois raises concerns that have haunted Black men for many years pertaining to the “color-line,” “the spiritual world,” the meaning behind “Emancipation,” the slow rise of “personal leadership,” the passion for “human sorrow,” and the struggle for “human equity.” Du Bois penned these words over one hundred years ago at a time when the African American voice was constrained by the forces of a White dominant society.

Reflecting on their pain and suffering, enslaved Africans embarked on a new understanding of life through musical expression. Spirituals recorded in the nineteenth century endorse this new found relationship:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 A long ways from home;  
 A long ways from home.

According to Anthony Pinn, spirituals existed for quite some time before they were recognized for their elegance; especially in terms of lyrical content. Additionally, Pinn states that, “It was through this cultural expression that enslaved Africans were able to express a sense of self in a hostile world” (Pinn 3).

Musical expressions developed in the “new life” addressed the hegemonic and hypocritical practices of White Americans. These songs (as referenced earlier by Du Bois) opened the door for hope and the possibility for a better life. Furthermore, Pinn avows that the songs called into question “the nastiness of life” and provided a vision of fulfillment, expressed with an eye toward the promises of the Christian faith:

Go down Moses  
 Way down in Egypt land  
 Tell ole Pharaoh  
 To let my people go  
  
 When Israel was in Egypt land  
 Let my people go



Oppressed so hard they could not stand

Let my people go

'Thus spoke the Lord,' bold Moses said

'If not, I'll smite your first born dead'

Let my people go

The lyrics of Negro spirituals were inspired by the gospel message of Jesus Christ and they were different from traditional hymns and psalms because they reflected a voice of deliverance with respect to the troublesome conditions of enslaved people. According to gospel pianist Eloise Temple, "Spirituals are spontaneously created. The exuberant spontaneity of faith of the believer in the power of God encourages others to faith. Thus the focus of Spiritual songs is man's relation to God" (Temple 9). Some Negro spirituals refer to "crossing over the Jordan," a reference used for escaping to the northern side of the Ohio River by means of the Underground Railroad:

Swing low, sweet chariot

Coming for to carry me home...

I looked over Jordan and what did I see

Coming for to carry me home

A band of angels coming after me

Coming for to carry me home

If you get there before I do

Coming for to carry me home

Tell all my friends I'm coming to

Coming for to carry me home

The Underground Railroad was a network of people who hid fugitive slaves and helped them escape to freedom in Northern states and Canada. According to Albert J. Raboteau, “These anti-slavery activists operated a series of ‘stations’ (safe hiding places) where escaping slaves could find shelter, food, and guidance...Because slaves by law were considered [chattel] it was illegal to help them escape” (35).

Moreover, given the dangerous travel to the North, supporters or conductors aided the escaping slave in secrecy (hence the name underground) to what was considered by many to be the “Promised Land.” Negro spirituals reflected memories of a former home and were used as a vehicle to encourage Africans with respect to their dehumanizing environment and the hope for a better tomorrow.<sup>5</sup>

According to Anthony Pinn, those that did not find value in the Christian teachings as represented in the spirituals gravitated to a different sound known as the blues. Pinn states that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date for the beginning for this genre; however, many scholars contend that the blues developed long before they were recorded on race records sometime during the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Pinn suggests that it is likely the blues emerged from the cotton fields during the antebellum period alongside the spirituals. To support his argument, Pinn states, “There are links between the blues and spirituals; for example, country or southern blues, like spirituals, make use of an eight-or sixteen-bar form. In addition, the existential realities encountered in the spirituals such as abusive [W] hites

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<sup>5</sup> In Ashtabula County, Ohio, over thirty stations served as a refuge for run away slaves. In particular, the Hubbard House, which is located in the historic Harbor area, was the last stop in Ohio for many slaves. The slaves were escorted a few miles down the road to a location where they were transported by boat to Canada. I mention the Hubbard House because it is located in my home town of Ashtabula. Moreover, I have visited the Hubbard Museum on several occasions and was always fascinated by the historical documents that are on display. Some of the documents available for public viewing are the lyrics from songs used by the slaves as they continued their journey to freedom.

<sup>6</sup> Race Records were performed by and targeted to African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

and hard work, are also the subject matter of many blues tones” (Pinn 3). While there are similarities with regard to form and thematic structure, there are some major differences, which ultimately led to controversy within the Black community.

The Negro spiritual offered African Americans a Christian foundation, which focused on the norms, values, and morality advocated by the Black church. However, problematic for many Black Christians was the lyrical content and seductive nature of the music found in the blues (Pinn 4). Commonly referred to as “devil’s music” some lyrics referred to a celebration of sexuality that was offensive to those who were involved in the Black church:

I woke up this morning with a awful aching head

I woke up this morning with a awful aching head

My new man had left me, just a room and a empty bed

Bought me a coffee grinder that's the best one I could find

Bought me a coffee grinder that's the best one I could find

Oh he could grind my coffee, cause he had a brand new grind

He's a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong

He's a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong

He can stay at the bottom and his wind holds out so long

He knows how to thrill me and he thrills me night and day

Oh he knows how to thrill me, he thrills me night and day

He's got a new way of loving, almost takes my breath away

Lord he's got that sweet somethin' and I told my girlfriend Lou

He's got that sweet somethin' and I told my girlfriend Lou

From the way she's raving, she must have gone and tried it too<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, the technique of using coded messages within the lyrics of Negro spirituals was also adopted by the authors of blues songs. Blues legend Ma Rainey sings:

If you don't like my ocean don't fish in my sea,

Don't like my ocean, don't fish in my sea

Stay out of my valley, and let my mountain be<sup>8</sup>

Controversial as the lyrics sometime were, Pinn contends the “blues had a humanizing-[religious] effect, pointing to the tenacity of the human spirit” (Pinn 5). In addition, the blues were not just songs for the purpose of survival or sexual conquest, but they were songs that created an opportunity for their audience members to balance what was right and what was wrong within the world. Furthermore, those who lived the life of the blues were people who tended to articulate their religious outlook in folklore and song rather than in intellectual conversations.

Owing much of its early beginnings to the Judeo-Christian narratives and doctrines, the early blues were in effect “the spirituals of an ‘invisible’ postbellum [B] lack religion that demystified Christianity and called into question some of its doctrinal tenets” (Spencer 35). According to Jon Michael Spencer, almost all blues of the country and city genres made reference to God with such phrases as “Lordy, Lordy,” “the good Lord above,” “great God

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<sup>7</sup> Several lyrics used throughout this study are from NegroSpirituals.com and Blues Lyrics Online. Bessie Smith, accompanied by Charlie Green, trombone and Porter Grainger, piano, performed this piece on March 20, 1928 in New York City. This two-part blues song included controversial lyrics that focused on sexual imagery.

<sup>8</sup> According to Pinn the symbolism and coded messages creatively expressed in the lyrical content of the blues played an important role in the formation of African American consciousness. Moreover, Pinn states “the blues reflected an early mode of expression born in enslaved Africans as they contemplated the crossing of water in a slave ship named ‘Jesus’”(5).

Almighty,” and the very familiar cry “oh Lord” (Spencer 37). Spencer suggests that these lyrics and in particular “oh Lord” were direct references to the despotic life of Black America. The sounds of blues artists’ (especially the vocal moans and groans) reveal the inner soul of the singer’s spiritual expression and unrestrained confessions; lyrical confessions, albeit, that frequently focused on the hard times Blacks faced in America.

Spencer credits James Cone as being the first scholar to write on the blues’ from the perspective of Christian theology. Spencer supports Cone’s argument that the blues theological message activated the divine Spirit that moved people toward unity. He states that, “What Cone means by saying ‘I am the blues’ is that he understands what it means to be Black in America, in part because he has fully immersed himself in conversations with the natives of [B] lack culture who also know the racial experience” (xxiv). Furthermore, Spencer credits Cone’s efforts towards revealing the misleading obstacles between blues and [B] lack religion. For Spencer and Cone, blues people engaged in an existential religion of mature self-reliance—liberation from immature dependence on institutionalized religion (Spencer 36).<sup>9</sup>

Liberation from an oppressive society is a theme that plays continually within the lyrics of the spiritual and the blues. According to Spencer, blues singers often referred to the cultural evil of racial discrimination and poverty by using the code word “bad luck” which represented the poor social and economic conditions for Blacks in America. “Bad luck” produced Jim Crow laws, Social Darwinism, and the lynching of many Blacks in the southern states, which ultimately resulted in the migration of many Blacks from the South to

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<sup>9</sup> Blues people” is a reference to an article written by Rod Gruver in 1970 titled “The Blues as Secular Religion.” Spencer credits Gruver as the first (along with Cone) to discover a theological aspect to the blues. According to Spencer, Gruver perceived the blues as the music of a “secular religion” that was presided over by blues-singing prophets and visionaries of the Black poor (35).

the North. The great Mississippi-Chicago migration has been referred to by scholars as a religious exodus, similar to the Jewish exodus from Egypt led by Moses.<sup>10</sup> Others, refer to the Mississippi-Chicago migration as an “economic awakening” for many African Americans. Beginning in 1914, wartime industrial opportunities in the North inspired a vast movement of Black Southerners to Northern cities (Appiah and Gates 107). In Chicago, the Great Migration established the foundation of Chicago’s African American industrial class, created business opportunities, and laid the ground work for union activism and Black political power (Grossman 13-14). Moreover, the migration produced a musical movement from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago; thus, crowning the Windy City as the blues capital of the urban north.

The Black blues singer who is often depicted as a trickster and tragic hero in African American folk-heroic literature was portrayed in the eyes of White America as the “bad man” or “bad nigger.” According to Spencer, folklorists have argued, “the ‘bad nigger’ is the prototype of the heroic ‘bad man’” (7). The bad nigger was a laudable character that captured the imagination of African Americans during the 1890s. This determined figure not only defined the boundaries of heroism for the Black community, but he also had an extraordinary ability to defy the law, trick the sheriff, and dupe the judge. R.A.T. Judy states, “For the slaves, bad nigger indicated an individual who, in challenging the laws of slavery, refused to be a nigger” (112). Consistent with the depiction as a heroic figure, Spencer asserts that “During slavery and afterwards, the ‘bad nigger’ did anything he wanted to do; he defied everyone—oppressor and the oppressed” (6). Conversely, Spencer refers to African American folklorist John Robert’s book, *Trickster to Badman*, stating that Roberts contends,

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<sup>10</sup> The comparison is made by Spencer to the exodus led by Moses. According to Appiah and Gates, from 1914-1930 approximately 1.5 million Blacks migrated from the southern states to the north.

not all Blacks perceived the “bad nigger” to be a hero. Roberts bases his argument on the fact that the bad nigger’s behavior threatened the solidarity that was their [the Black community’s] only defense against the destructive ways of White dominance (Spencer 7).

Traditionally, the term blues (similar to Rock and Roll) has reflected images of hard times, hard living, sex, drugs, and evil lyrics that were associated with the devil’s music. Spencer presents a convincing argument on how White blues scholars have tended to overlook the religious nature of the blues based on their lack of understanding of African American culture. Moreover, Cone and Pinn would agree with Spencer that the evidence strongly supports there is a musical connection between the issues commonly expressed in the blues and the issues expressed in traditional religious music. The political significance of the blues according to Cone may not be of much interest to those who have not experienced the denial of various social, economic rights and privileges. However, for those who live the blues and share the history with family members, blues music has become an extension of Black America’s quest for liberation. Let us now turn our attention to the culture of hip hop music. Special emphasis will be placed on the early beginnings of hip hop as I attempt to explore the cultural expression of rap music and analyze the social, political, and economic factors that led to its emergence as a powerful voice for urban Black youth.

### **The Spoken Word through Music Part 2: Hip Hop as a Culture: Rap as an Art Form**

“The birth of hip hop in the bitter belly of the 70’s proved to be a Rosetta Stone of black culture. Afros, blunts, funk music, and carnal eruptions define a ‘back-n-the-day’ hip-hop aesthetic” (Dyson 177). Once considered by critics to be just another passing youth trend, hip hop has become an influential voice for youth around the globe. According to scholar Halifu Osumare, “Hip-hop culture has become international in breadth and depth,

with thousands of cultures throughout the globe having embraced it in various forms...Given the impact and pervasive confluence of global communications and postmodern chic, it should come as no surprise that hip-hop youth culture has proliferated internationally” (Osumare 2,21).

Culture is the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; by definition, culture is a way of life. The youthful hip hop way of life started from the roots of activities such as graffiti, breakdancing and block-parties in NYC and dates back to the early 1970s (Anthony and Forman 13-14). Hip hop [which] is the music behind the lyrics that are rapped, originated from a style of music called *toasting* which is making music by speaking over records (Foreman and Neal 148). Rap, which is also referred to as hip hop, is focused around multiple voices (rappers) telling their story, thus storytelling is the foundation of hip hop music. In order to articulate their testimony, the rapper similar to a town crier, tells the narrative in an entertaining informative way. Charles Kraft states that the town crier (which was popular before the days of radio, television, and MC’s) was sent by the king to each kingdom to make official announcements. Furthermore, Kraft states that the content of the message could be about a special royal visit, impending danger, or even celebration:

It became the custom of the early church to employ the Greek Word *kerusso* and its derivatives as the preferred label for their attempts to communicate the gospel. This word, like many of the words the early church used, did not originally cover every kind of important announcements for which we today depend on radio and television.



The word was chosen by the early Christians and used in an expanded way to refer to a much wider range of communicational activity.

(Kraft 106)

Rappers use the same techniques as the competent town crier, utilizing a poetic or literary effect, which is mixed with a rhyming beat that carries a specific message to a target audience. The beat, which is a key part of hip hop music, is consistent, and flows throughout the entire song. A beat can make or break a song in other ways – if a rapper uses too many “old school” beats, they become prey for their critics and told to be more original (authenticity is key to the beat). The key to making hip hop music work is to find a beat that truly makes the story both entertaining and original (<http://articles.directory.com/>).

Hip hop music is often confused with R&B, funk, and soul. However, while these outward musical styles have influenced and inspired hip hop, the essence of hip hop music is comprised of rapping, (a quick delivery of adroit, musical vocals) and the skilled delivery of the *deejay* which is the musical composition. Rappers create varied instrumentals by sampling music, using turntables (to create a “scratch” effect), or beatboxing, a form of vocal percussion which primarily involves the art of producing drum beats, rhythm, and musical sounds using one's mouth and lips as live instruments (in Martin Bashir's documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*, Michael Jackson uses his lips as live instruments to produce the rhythmic introduction for the song “Billie Jean”). The beat behind the rapper is done in 4/4 time, a technique also found in soul, disco, and funk music. The beat is generally kept relatively consistent throughout the entire song (<http://articles.directory.com/>).

Rhythm in rap, according to scholar Angela Nelson, is especially important because it gives rap its movement, momentum, and a significant portion of its meaning (46). Nelson

states that, “Rhythm is the foundation of all African American popular and folk music...Since the art of rapping is based on precise knowledge, skill, and ability to use complex rhythms, rappers themselves boast of their skill in being able to control it” (46). Additionally, William Banfield contends that *rhythm* is the essence of Black expression. Banfield defines rhythm as “the science of coordinated movement in sound, [that] extends outward to include all creative works, thought, and performance that come with [B]lack art” (33). Furthermore, rhythm means the synchronized movements of the physical, spiritual, and intellectual expressions, which are often found in the ingenious works of Black art. On the other hand, rhythm is not the only aspect of the genre that is highly regarded by rappers. Nelson asserts that *rhyme* in rap denotes a sense of vocal rhythm; rhyme, simply stated, is a linguistic variant of rhythm (49). Moreover, Nelson argues that within the construct of rap, rhyme and rhythm are interconnected; when the rapper mixes the right words with the right beat, the connection between the rapper and audience members is electrifying. However, Nelson suggests that the manner in which the words are rhymed (or delivered) is critical to Black audience members for the purpose of promoting and supporting ‘communitas’ otherwise known as the state of liberation—a sense of reconciliation (or as Nelson refers to as mental and spiritual freedom) within the Black community (50).

The popularity of rap music spread from major cities such as New York and Cleveland, cities that had substantial Black populations. Rap can be traced back to revolutionary artists such as Clive Campbell (also known as Kool DJ Herc; Campbell is a Jamaican who is credited for bringing *toasting* to New York City), Gil Scott-Heron, the Last Poets and even to Bessie Smith rapping to lyrics in some of her blues songs (Foreman and

Neal 61). Michael Eric Dyson states that, the modern history of rap probably begins in 1979 with the song “Rappers Delight,” by the Sugar Hill Gang:

i said, hip hop, de- hibby-dibby  
 to the hip hip hop, a you dont stop  
 the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie  
 to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat  
 now what you hear is not a test--i'm rappin to the beat  
 and me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet  
 see i am wonder mike and i like to say hello  
 to the black, to the white, the red, and the brown, the purple and yellow  
 but first i gotta bang bang the boogie to the boogie  
 say up jump the boogie to the bang bang boogie  
 let's rock, you dont stop  
 rock the riddle that will make your body rock  
 well so far you've heard my voice but i brought two friends along  
 and next on the mike is my man hank  
 come on, hank, sing that song... (Foreman and Neal 148)

Afrika Bambaataa, a Bronx gang leader whom many scholars refer to as the “godfather of hip hop,” used the ritual codes of the Zulu Nation to create one of hip hop’s most authentic sounds in 1982 with the smash hit “Planet Rock”:

You gotta rock it, pop it, ' cause it's the century  
 There is such a place that creates such a melody  
 World's but a land of master jam,

Get up and dance

It's time to chase your dreams

Up out your seats, make your body sway

Socialize, get down, let your soul lead the way

Shake it now, go ladies, it's a living dream

Love Life Live... (Perkins 13-14)

According to Perkins, “Bambaataa is credited for giving birth to the sound he called ‘electro funk,’ a fusion of synthesized beats of disco with the sound-system bass of early Jamican Hall” (12). Moreover, during the early 90s, Bambaataa’s electro funk gave birth to an Africanized freestyle rap whose performance attire featured “Zulu beads” and hair colored punk orange, purple, and pea green (Perkins 13).

The ancestral influence of the “Mother Land” on rap music is evident in the call-and-response interpersonal communications tool.<sup>11</sup> The call-and-response is used by rappers in an effort to engage their audience in some form of participation. Although Bambaataa is given credit as one of rap music’s early founders, Bambaataa credits the call-and-response musical talents of Cab Calloway as being the real grandfather of rap music. Calloway’s form of call-and-response chants, known as Jazz Rhyming or “jive scat,” set the stage for what is known as freestyle, which is where rappers engage their audience spontaneously in a competitive display of call-and-response activities. According to William Eric Perkins,

Calloway called his style ‘jive scat,’ and it swept the country during the depression and lasted well into the 1940s. Calloway did not merely invent

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to the “Mother Land” is often associated with Africa in the Black community. Also, refer to TABLE 2: Black Liberation Theology and Rap Music Timeline for more information on the crossover between the two.

a new vocal style but created an entire culture of jive. Jive scat features the improvisational style characteristic of much African music, but it also includes the call-and-response form. (3)

Calloway's hit tune, "Minnie the Moocher," illustrates how effective the call-and-response form can be with an audience. According to Calloway, the creation of the legendary scat on national radio in 1931 went something like this:

"Hi-de-hi-de-hi- de-ho. Ho-de-ho-de-ho-de-hee. Oodlee-odlye-odlyee-oodlee-doo. 'The crowd went crazy,' Mr. Calloway recalled." "I asked the band to follow me. I sang 'Ho-de-hi-de-hi-de-do.' And the band responded." "I sang, 'Dwaa-de-dwaa-de-dwaa-de-doo.' I asked the audience to join in. They hollered back and nearly brought the roof down." (John Wilson, NY Times.com)

Rap expresses the ongoing preoccupation with literacy and oral traditions that have characterized African American communities since the inception of literally coerced illiteracy during slavery (Dyson 66). The rap artist, according to Cornel West, is a bridge figure who combines two potent traditions in [B]lack culture: preaching and music. Moreover, West states that, "The rap artist appeals to the cultural potency of black singing [and] musical traditions to produce an engaging hybrid" (qtd. in Dyson 66). In addition, Dyson contends that rap has emerged into a musical genre that combines social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression (67).

Rap music's thrust into the mainstream arena, was due in part to the commercial success of the rap group Run-DMC in 1984. Run-DMC, which produced the first rap song to be featured on MTV (the song was a cover for the Aerosmith classic "Walk This Way"), was

successful at creatively integrating socialist ideas, diverse musical elements, and cultural identification within the lyrical message and performance of their music. Furthermore, Run-DMC was also the first rap group to produce a rap album (1987's *Raising Hell*) to go triple platinum---which resulted in the sale of over three million albums. Conversely, Run-DMC's success, which helped to increase the visibility and commercial opportunities for rap music, did not bode well with certain public figures. In 1986, protests led by Tipper Gore were organized in an effort to spotlight the negative influence of rap music that, according to Gore, was counter-productive to the intellectual development of the youth in America. Gore felt that the core messages of rappers were focused on violence and destructive behavior. Furthermore, according to Michael Eric Dyson, Gore contends that rap appeals to angry, disillusioned, unloved youth, which after listening to the music, become motivated to "beat people up" (62-63). On the other hand, Dyson suggests Gore's view of rap reflects a shallow understanding of the musical genre, thus, promoting a distorted—biased opinion of the music. Moreover, problematic for me is that since the majority of rap artists happen to be African Americans, the comments by Gore suggest a dysfunctional Black family structure in America. However, what Gore does not point out is that the racial complexity of rap's audience is largely composed of White boys from the suburbs.<sup>12</sup> According to David Samuels,

Since the early 1980s a tightly knit group of mostly young, middle-class, black New Yorkers, in close concert with record producers, executives, and publicists, [have] been making rap music for an audience that industry executives concede is primarily composed of white suburban males...

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<sup>12</sup> See the ARB (Arbitron) Cume numbers for White male listeners on WENZ 107.3 in Cleveland, Ohio in Appendix B.

Rap's appeal to [W] hites rested in evocation of an age-old image of [B] lackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of [W] hite society are defined and, by extension, through which they may be defined. It was the truth of this latter proposition that rap would test its way into the mainstream. (147-148)

The lyrical debate over rap does not end with Tipper Gore; furthermore, Dyson states the controversy continues with parents in the Black community (particularly the Black Christian community). Although not as vocal as Tipper Gore, nonetheless, African American parents have also expressed concerns and negative reactions to the controversial melodies of the rap beat. Ironically, if Tipper Gore and members of the African American community would listen closely to the lyrics by rap artists such as Run-DMC, they will hear the prophetic message of "future hard times in the city" proclaimed by these rappers:

Hard times spreading just like the flu  
 Watch out homeboy, don't let it catch you  
 P-p-prices go up, don't let your pocket go down  
 When you got short money you're stuck on the ground  
 Turn around, get ready, keep your eye on the prize  
 And be on point for the future shock  
 Hard times are coming to your town  
 So stay alert, don't let them get you down  
 They tell you times are tough, you hear that times are hard  
 But when you work for that ace you know you pulled the right card  
 Hard times got our pockets all in chains

I'll tell you what, homeboy, it don't have my brain  
 All day I have to work at my peak  
 Because I need that dollar every day of the weak  
 Hard times can take you on a natural trip  
 So keep your balance, and don't you slip  
 Hard times is nothing new on me  
 I'm gonna use my strong mentality  
 Like the cream of the crop, like the crop of the cream  
 B-b-beating hard times, that is my theme  
 Hard times in life, hard times in death  
 I'm gonna keep on fighting to my very last breath.  
 (Run-DMC "Hard Times")

Furthermore, problematic for Dyson is the unwillingness by many mainstream Blacks and Whites to listen to the lyrics and accept the productive--progressive messages that are often reflected in so many rap songs. Moreover, when one considers that the lyrical content in most rap lyrics protest the "status quo," it becomes apparent that a culture which supports racism, classism, and poverty, will find it difficult to embrace musical expressions against oppression and support for liberation (Dyson 63).

Black Christian hip hop sounds almost exactly like secular hip hop with one exception: the lyrics are different. Lyrically, the Christian rapper uses hip hop music (which focuses on Christian themes) to express the songwriter's faith. The audience, which is typically Christian, becomes a participant in church services, missionary work, and prerecorded sounds that have been known to be engaging and entertaining. However, the



blending of the “sacred” with the “secular” has created a religious controversy similar to the one that called into question the moral ethics of the blues during the early 1920s.

### **The Spoken Word through Music Part 3: Carnal Melodies in the Pews? The Real Rap on Christian Hip Hop**

In spite of the recent explosion of Christian hip hop, there is a concern within the ecumenical community regarding the “biblical purity” of these fiery voices that can be heard from the pews on Sunday morning. Pastors, as well as other lay members of the Christian church body, have questioned the evolution of a musical genre called “Christian hip hop” (sometimes referred to as gospel hip hop and Christian rap). The debate stems from the fact that hip hop is a secular style of music that has caught the full attention of America’s youth for several years. Since the musical roots of Christian hip hop have ties to secularism, theologians have argued that a “biblical perversion” (which by my interpretation is a worldly, flesh-based gospel) has taken place within the Christian youth community. Given the argument, if a biblical perversion has developed because of Christian hip hop, then what constitutes a sincere and authentic Christian sound? It is my belief that as music becomes esteemed within the local church community, or accepted in foreign environments, the existing style begins a transformation based on the cultural standards of the community.

Historically, the transformation from what was considered the standards for musical authenticity within the church (traditional hymns) made a major switch to a new musical genre called Praise and Worship Music or also referred to as Contemporary Worship Music. Similar to a Pop-R & B sound, Praise and Worship Music was initially popularized in charismatic churches (both denominational and non-denominational) in the late 60s early

70s.<sup>13</sup> Praise and Worship is used at the beginning of the worship service as a way of “cheerleading” or encouraging the congregation to participate in the worship hour; in some cases, entire services are built around the music (Pollard 18). Arguably, a loosely defined term, Praise and Worship Music is commonly used to denote songs that are used to reverence God and has become popular in a variety of churches across America. Moreover, the genre has a strong following with teens (12-17) and adults (18-49).

The basis for Praise and Worship Music is to build and strengthen the relationship between God and man. According Deborah Smith Pollard,

Their lyrics are given to the congregation in call-and-response style, projected on the screen, or printed in the church bulletin. Individually, they are called praise and worship leaders, while collectively, as few as two or as many as a dozen in number, they are referred to as praise teams. Their mission: through example and exhortation, to move congregants from passive observation to active participation in the worship experience so that they might usher in and experience the presence of God. (17)

Furthermore, reverence for the Creator is the heart of the music, and it serves as one of the ways a Christian can give thanks to God for everything that He has done. Can Christian hip hop be considered a post-modern companion to Praise and Worship Music?

According to scholar Garth Kaismu Baker-Fletcher, “The task of the scholar of religion is more telling, and more difficult because he or she must call upon the resources available to make the best kinds of analytical judgments regarding how African American

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<sup>13</sup> Within the White evangelical community, scholars suggest that the musical style is rooted in the Jesus Movement, which parallels the Christian youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Christian coffeehouses and Jesus rock festivals emerged as the music gained momentum as a popular alternative to the mainstream industry. Efforts were made during the early 70s by Black and White Christian communities to reach youth that were not actively engaged in traditional church services.

Christians utilize rap's structure, message, and musicality within [...] hip hop culture and African American culture" (Pinn 29). In his essay "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It," Garth Kaismu Baker-Fletcher cites the work of religious historian Charles Long contending that the hip hop sound must be examined from two angles: opacity and oppugnancy; two terms that were promoted by Long in 1970.

Charles Long defines opacity as the experience of oppressed persons to live with their contradictory negativity and at the same time transform and create another reality. Opacity, for Long, was the African American's ability to confront the issue of what it means to be Black in a hypocritical White society that promoted itself as being the "Land of the Free and Home of the Brave." Moreover, the double standards presented by White America led to a spiritual awakening and the development of a political message that is still present within the structure of Black Christian rap music today. On the other hand, oppugnancy or, as Baker-Fletcher calls, the "creative forces of resistance to the embedded forms of oppression in society" first began during the early days of slavery. Moreover, Baker-Fletcher suggests historically, oppugnant behavior to oppressive activities by White America occurred under the leadership of two men who had a religious following—Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey fought to liberate their people and their efforts led to two significant slave uprisings; Turner in 1831 and Vesey in 1822 (30). Charles Long's analysis on oppugnancy is similar to Cone's argument on liberation in that both authors claim it took the power of an "All mighty God" to awaken the religious and political consciousness of Blacks in America.

The Christian message is expressed in rap music through the polarities of oppugnancy and opacity using religious symbolism and language (Pinn 30). According to Baker-Fletcher,

the message of “da world,” “da streetz,” and “homies” represents the heart and soul of the African American Christian rapper. The spirit of the gospel message, which is God’s soul-saving power, is proclaimed by “homies” who live in “da world” and preach the gospel message on “da streetz.” For Baker-Fletcher, all three terms represent the categories of both opacity and oppugnancy. “Homies” are people who are usually male who have grown up in the same “hood” (neighborhood), and share similar interests as their road dogs on “da streetz” (Spencer 31). The lyrics from these “homies” are testimonials, which proclaim their past lives before they became “saved” and gave their life to Jesus Christ. Christian rapper Lil’ Raskull puts it this way in his 2003 song titled “Bank on That”:

[...] Check this out,  
 Much is given when much is required,  
 I’m the last man standing when the rest get fired  
 First one hired when the rest get tired  
 I speak in tongues for an hour when the rest get tired of talking  
 I’ve got a whole lot riding on this  
 Two daughters, two sons, and they all get an inheritance...  
 Best thang ever happen to me,  
 I let my mind out of the box when He set me free  
 Every thought was reestablished by the G.O.D.  
 Cause I don’t want to going back to being me  
 It’s like, He anointed me to do this here  
 I thank God for his grace I would have blow it here  
 I see some old heads here; I see some new ones here

This is my second generation I'm going to do this here, Come on  
 If I tell you, He's the King,  
 You can bank on that  
 Watch the fire that I bring,  
 You can bank on that  
 From Corpus Christi to the Queens,  
 You can bank on that  
 A new song that I bring,  
 You can bank on that  
 Every knee shall bow; every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 You can bank on that  
 Never mind, get a rhyme, you can tank on that<sup>14</sup>

Lil' Raskull (A.K.A Delbert Harris) grew up in Trinity Garden, one of the toughest neighborhoods in Houston, Texas. A life that was influenced by drugs, Lil' Raskull's gift for rapping was noticed by an independent label, Deadgame records, which ultimately signed him to a contract. Tired of the secular rap game, in 1995, Lil' Raskull accepted Christ and began a journey that has led him to become one of the top underground Christian rap artists in America.

According to Garth Kaismu Baker-Fletcher, Lil' Raskull, like so many successful Black Christian rappers, bases his lyrics on a transformed or "new relationship" he has in Christ. Furthermore, Baker Fletcher suggests that the main object (MO) of the Black Christian rapper is to reach out to their lost brothers and sisters from their respective hoods in

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<sup>14</sup> To see a photo of Lil' Raskull on the cover of *Feed* magazine go to: <<http://www.feedstop.com/issue6/backissues.>>

order to “save” their souls. He states, “As transformed homies their current mission is to ‘save’ the souls of other homies so that they might also join the family of ‘homie Christians’ who are moving toward a glorious future in Heaven” (Baker-Fletcher 31). Moreover, trying to survive on “da streetz” without the guidance of Jesus Christ is problematic for rappers such as Lil’ Raskull.

The world Lil’ Raskull describes in his lyrics, is similar to the one proclaimed by the Black liberation theologian, however, the message is not so much on Jim Crow segregation, racism, and civil rights, but it is a lyrical message that concentrates on capitalism (the love for material things), money, and women. In particular, Raskull, highlights within his lyrics the impact of prostitution on the young Black female. Equally, according to Baker-Fletcher,

It is a ‘world’ of poor, urban youth whose search for respect and love draws them into the streets (da streetz) of the ghetto. The predators, evildoers, and torturers of ‘da streetz’ are not described as the ‘Man’ (white man or white people) but other Black men from other ‘hoods, interested in ‘busting a cap’ (shooting) into your body. (31)

The focus for Black Christian rappers has shifted from the traditional message preached by the Black liberation theologians that White theology and White supremacy has not supported the struggle for Black liberation. The Black Christian rapper appears to have a different agenda; one that still focuses on oppression, but to a larger degree, the focal point is on the “modern day cannibals” that live within the Black communities and prey on the souls of the Black youth in America.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The references to modern day cannibals are part of the lyrics from the song by rapper E-Roc titled “Modern Day Cannibals.” “Da world” according to E-Roc is filled with the spirit of Hannibal Lector (Lector’s character became popular from the film *Silence of the Lambs*).

The female homies of the ‘hood’ add another dimension to the discussion of African American oppugnancy and opacity. Baker-Fletcher cites the music of B.B. Jay’s “For the Ladies” and Elle R.O.C.’s song, “I Die Daily,” as examples for messages of hope (resistance to sin and nonconformity to worldly situations-oppugnancy) and encouragement for the transformation of one’s mind (transformation takes place according to the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:2 by the renewing of the mind-opacity).<sup>16</sup> “The Christian message is expressed in rap music through the polarities of oppugnancy and/or opacity using religious symbolism and language” (Baker-Fletcher 30). Additionally, according to Charles H. Long, the religious consciousness of African Americans in terms of oppugnancy, causes them to reflect upon who they are as a people, the historical reality and significance of where they come from, and the ultimate truth of where they are going (33). Lyrically, gospel rappers (both male and female) frequently reflect upon their personal hardships, their efforts for survival on “da streetz,” and the trials and tribulations they face on a daily basis. However, it is essential for the gospel rapper to understand the opaqueness of their conditions if they are to be successful at reaching lost homies for Jesus.

The song “Ghetto Dreams” written by Lil’ Raskull is an excellent illustration of how gospel hip hop can be used to comment on the obscurity of the streets for African Americans in urban settings:

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<sup>16</sup> According to CNN contributor Lisa Respers France, “Queen Latifah has been on the hip-hop scene for so long that she has seen artists come and go and trends change. But there has been one development that she said has disappointed her tremendously -- the lack of female rap stars” (Resper-France CNN.Com). According to JumpOff.TV, here are the top 5 selling female rappers (secular) of 2008: #5 Jean Grae, #4 Foxy Brown, #3 Queen Latifah, #2 Lil Mama, #1 Trina. A future discussion/research topic for me will focus on the extinction of the female rapper.

Ghetto Dreams

I'm living a Ghetto Dream

Lord please come down and rescue me

Ghetto Dreams

Lord please come down and rescue me

Lord please give me the strength to teach your people how to live in these  
times

You use the foolish things so who would look for answers in rhymes

A little luck and not the street of the Trinity God

I'm gonna tell them take it easy but I still got it hard

Ghetto Dreams

I'm living a Ghetto Dream

Lord please come down and rescue me...

For Lil' Raskull, the rescue involves saving his 'homies from the dog eat dog challenges of pursuing ghetto dreams of material wealth by selling drugs for profit in the hood (Baker-Fletcher 35). Furthermore, the song's lyrics speak out against the lifestyle of those who have no self-respect, and whose worlds revolve around violence and death. Similar to the slave who was brought to America in chains, the Black Christian rapper must come to terms with the oppressive nature of their condition, yet, at the same time opposing it (Long 27). Likewise, for the female rapper, historically, African American women continue rapping that the problems in this life can be overcome by the spirit of Christ (Baker-Fletcher 34-35). On the other hand, it was the Black Power ideology during the 60s that treated Black women like Queens--similar to the biblical portrayal of the impressive Black Queen, the Queen of Sheba



(1 Kings Chapter 10). The Queen of Sheba is depicted as a strong Black female leader, who is concerned about her family and community.

Baker-Fletcher suggests that a fuller understanding of resistance with respect to the construct of African American oppugnancy is necessary when we consider the role of the Black female within the Black community. He argues that resistance does not always involve “open rebellion, or flaming rhetorical flourish” but rather, it could be accomplished by “women gathering together, resisting in their own way the violence of their own lives—daily threats of rape, the threat of lynching for their men, the atmosphere of constant tension and so forth” (Baker-Fletcher 34). For the Black Theologian, the vocal cries of resistance and nonconformity are often heard from the pulpit; however, for the Black Christian female rapper, the cry for liberation carries more weight in unison from “da streetz.”

Christian hip hop has a history of being dismissed by churches worldwide as sacrilegious, or devil’s music, yet similar to Contemporary Christian Music, many see it as being on the threshold of conventional success. In addition, Black Christian hip hop is decidedly more “experimental” than secular hip hop, with more usage of acoustic and electric guitars, synthesizers and other instruments that are somewhat uncommon in the performance and recordings of secular hip hop music. Nevertheless, Christian rappers have taken a lot of criticism because of their secular cousins, gangsta rappers.

Seemingly, it might appear to be “all in the family,” however, the Christian evangelical community would love for these heathen family members (gangsta rappers) to disappear. Gangsta rap has taken the heat for years for a range of social maladies from urban violence to sexual misconduct (Dyson 178). Dyson writes:

Gangsta rap is often sexist and reflects a vicious misogyny. The link between the vulgar rhetorical traditions expressed in gangsta rap and the economic exploitations that dominant the marketplace is real. The circulation of brutal images of black men as sexual outlaws and black females as “ho’s” in many gangsta rap narratives mirrors ancient stereotypes of black sexual identity. Male and female bodies are turned into commodities. Black sexual desire is stripped of redemptive uses in relationships of great affection or love. (178)

Although, Christian rappers never refer to female homies as “hoes” they will at times use other derogatory terms that are used by secular rappers. Baker-Fletcher states that, “Sometimes young male Christian rappers, like their secular counterparts, use the term ‘hoochies’ as a term of derision for women who sell their body for money, or prostitution” (32). Problematic for many Black Christians is that gangsta rappers are portrayed as gang bangers, users of vulgar language, reefer smokers, and a bunch of baggy pant hoodlums that have no regard for societal ethics and morals. Moreover, perhaps, lyrical messages that dwell on oral sex and booty calls unearth the concerns of Black Christians regarding secular rap:

Is this all I get?

Is this supposed to be good dick?

Damn! You said you was a good lover

But you’re a two minute brother

Nigga--I ain’t even bust a sweat

Not to mention I ain’t came yet

Based on the booty rap lyrics by BWP (Bytches with Problems), Black Christians are not the only ones with challenging issues. However, despite the feminism of its cultural politics, BWP was censored for their controversial lyrics to the point of getting the boot from hip hop's mainstream (Perkins 27).

I referred earlier to Spencer's discourse on the construct of the "bad nigger" during the early development of blues music. A similar comparison can be made to the secular Black rapper. As I stated earlier, according to Spencer, the characters in African American folk-heroic literature were portrayed in the eyes of White America as "bad men" or "bad niggers." Nevertheless, for this discussion, the terms "bad" and "heroic" define a different type of "Nigga" within the Black Christian Community.

Secular rap artist Tupac Shakur epitomizes the bad Nigga image that conflicts with the good Nigga image of brotherly love portrayed by Black male Christian rappers. Shakur's confessional lyrics and his use of music to wage the East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry with rapper Biggie Smalls produced some very controversial soundtracks during the 90s (Gill 23). The East Coast/West Coast conflict centered on a rivalry of fans and rappers (who were from New York City and Los Angeles) that supported rap record labels Death Row and Bad Boy. "He was a gifted word-slinger and multi-platinum-selling recording artist in steady contact with the criminal justice system" (Gill 23). The iconic image of Shakur, which can be found displayed on the walls of many college dormitories in America, represents what some critics would consider to be bad art since it reinforces negative perceptions of Black culture (Dyson 181). Tragically, for Tupac Shakur, he was gunned down gang-land style in 1996.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rapper Biggie Smalls was also gunned down in 1997.

Conflicts regarding the acceptance of non-traditional musical styles are nothing new within the Evangelical church community. During the 1960s, a controversy developed within the African American local church body regarding a new style of gospel music called “Contemporary Gospel Music.” The roots of [contemporary] gospel music date back to Howard University in 1965. It was at Howard University that the first [contemporary] gospel choir was started. According to Bernice Johnson Reagon: “A group of brilliant musicians, Henry Davis, Wesley Boyd, and Richard Smallwood, all music majors at Howard, were forbidden to play their music in the university music rooms” (17). Reagon states that: “Changes only came after Black students insisted on a curriculum that acknowledged the presence and contribution of African Americans and a revision in the treatment of African American based history and traditions, including gospel music” (17). It was during this period that Edwin Hawkins’s recording of “Oh Happy Day” became a crossover hit:

Oh happy day

Oh happy day

When Jesus washed

When Jesus washed

Oh when he washed

He washed my sins away.

(Edwin Hawkins Singers “Oh Happy Day”)

Contemporary gospel music dominated by choirs found a new place in the congregations and schools other than the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations, such as Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian, as well as Ivy League institutions like Harvard and Yale. The style is

marked by a blend of classical gospel with Euro-classical and jazz ingredients in the accompaniment and voicing (Reagon 17).

Similar to the debate on contemporary gospel music and Black Christian rap, another genre of music is often charged with straddling the fence of authenticity. In the midst of this controversial relationship between [different] genres of music and religious messages, and as a response to a feeling of being “locked out” of the secular music industry, several artists within the Christian recording industry are using a style of rock music known as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck:

The sociology of music is more about society than about music. CCM is representative of a large Christian subculture. The members of this subculture reject to some degree, the values, morality, and worldview of [a] larger society. Through the creation of their own institutions, such as a Christian music industry, members of the Christian subculture are challenging the dominant ideology of modern society. Therefore, it becomes unclear whether this is a subculture or a counterculture. For some it is a subculture sharing in the overall values of society, such as the priority of pursuing material prosperity. For others, who find their values in conflict with the larger society, it serves as a counterculture and a basis for resisting hegemonic dominance. (Howard and Streck)

Like Black Christian rap, the aim of Contemporary Christian Music (which is a by product of the Jesus Movement that I referenced earlier) is to get the Church to question itself, thus creating an opportunity for the house of worship to look into the mirror, and reconsider a

change from their traditional views.<sup>18</sup> “By refusing to let the worldview of the Church beyond be closed beyond questioning, avant-garde CCM artists create “cracks in the walls of societal hegemony” (Howard).

In challenging the church and its role in society, Contemporary Christian Music, akin to Black Christian rap, also challenges the dominant ideology of a postmodernist culture. According to Howard, in a postmodern society, “...there is no human activity that is free from capitalism, commodification, and the profit motive.” The Christian Rock/Rap group DC Talk reflects upon the frustration of living in a capitalistic society as a believer:

Kamikaze, my death is pain  
 I've been marked by my maker  
 A peculiar display  
 The high and lofty, they see me as weak  
 Cause I won't live and die for the power they seek  
 There was a man from the desert with naps in his head  
 The sand that he walked was also his bed  
 The words that he spoke made the people assume  
 There wasn't too much left in the upper room  
 With skins on his back and hair on his face  
 They thought he was strange by the locust he ate  
 The Pharisees tripped when they heard him speak  
 Until the king took the head of this Jesus freak

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<sup>18</sup> According to David Di Sabatino another musical transition within the church was Jesus Music. The controversial combination of rock music and the gospel began in the late 60s and was an alternative to mainstream rock music. Artists and groups such as Ron Moore, Love Song, John Fischer, Larry Norman, Randy Matthews, Agape, the All Saved Freak Band, and Phil Keaggy are just a few of the performers that felt the need to communicate spiritual truths through a popular medium (David Di Sabatino).

What will people think

When they hear that I am a Jesus freak

What will people do when they find out that its true

I don't really care if they label me a Jesus freak

There ain't no disguising the truth. (dc Talk "Jesus Freak")

While the Christian community continues to wrestle with biblical principles concerning separation from worldly-flesh based living, they must also compete with the spiritual omnipresence of God versus the world's omnipresence of a capitalistic culture.

The current debate within the evangelical community focuses on the "visual portrayal" of hip hop and rap artists through television exposure. One of the most phenomenal transformations of culture has been the emergence of the hip hop movement from the African American community into the mainstream through television (Wright 50). Scholar Carl Jeffery Wright states that the current programming content of hip hop on secular television has created a negative image of the culture within the evangelical community. This leads to the question of whether these "so-called" Christian rappers are "genuine Proclaimers" or just simply performers. He writes:

The Black Entertainment Television Network (BET), which began as a programming alternative to serve the entire Black population, was soon reduced to a wasteland of infomercials and free music videos provided by record companies trying to sell spiral of misogynistic [women hating] lyrics, depictions of social critics' attempts to legitimize these videos and CDs as postmodern artistic expression 'keeping it real by keeping it raunchy,' the reality is that their existence owes much more to the market

capitalism and media oligopoly than anything else does. Some of the same companies that bring you television sell most of these CDs. (Wright 50)

Wright's posits that secular rap artists are sending a message to the youthful Black community that lacks positive qualities. He argues, that not only is the message degrading, the more repulsive issue is the financial backers of these "so-called" negative messages are the same media conglomerates that own television stations and video production companies.

Minority broadcast ownership (by definition is broadcast station owners of color in America) represents a very low percentage of station ownership. According to the Federal Communications Commission, of the 15,273 full power radio and television stations in the United States, 389 stations identify one or more minorities, which have a greater than 50% voting interest (fcc.gov). Based on the numbers by the FCC, less than 3% of the over the air, full power radio and TV stations are owned by minorities.

A denial of "economic privilege" with respect to media ownership also has global connections. According to Louise Meintjes, Black producers had some freedom of artistic expression, yet, at times, their quest for further development of an artistic voice was restricted due to escalating prejudice: "Black producers at the time had professional opportunities like never before... On the one hand, they were given enormous power to make artistic/reportorial decisions and to direct the flow and character of the overall product. On the other hand, they were constrained and disempowered by draconian racist legislation and rampant prejudice" (60).

The Black Christian rapper's biggest critic as of late, ironically, is a young Black pastor from Arlington, Texas. G. Craige Lewis has been very outspoken against the use of



rap and hip hop as an evangelical tool in the Black church. On his blog, G. Craig Lewis (which by the way is a one way street; Lewis will not accept comments to his blog) states that holy hip hop is just a bad idea. His argument is partially based on his perception of external appearances. Lewis suggests that the external appearance can say a lot about what a person is on the inside. Problematic for Rev. Lewis is that the outside appearance of many Black Christian rappers reflects similar fashion styles and behavioral traits displayed by the secular rapper. For example, Lewis posits that men that wear earrings are questioning their sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Lewis argues that outer appearances can signify a particular behavior pattern (the negativity of saggy/baggy pants has and still is a topic of debate within the Black community). The sag of the pants according to Lewis is something that prisoners do to show homosexual behavior.

The foundation for his argument is based on the fact that God has always been concerned about the outward appearance of men and women (1 Sam. 16:7). “God wanted explicit differences between men and women so their appearances could aid in their identity. God wanted differences in His people’s behaviors, rituals, and even music, so that a person could never be confused as to what was sacred and what was profane!” (Lewis Blog).

Contrary to the “sacred appearance,” Lewis feels that the hip hop subculture (I disagree with Lewis’s assessment that hip hop is a subculture; hip hop is a culture and rap is the art

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis is very clear on his position regarding men wearing earrings. On his website, he has stated that two earrings on a man have always signaled sins of bisexuality; one has always meant that a man is a player or stud. Conversely, nationally known and motivational speaker T.D. Jakes has been known to wear at least one earring; does that make Bishop Jakes a candidate for stud muffin of the year? To see a photo of the diamond stud earring Bishop Jakes wore at his daughter’s wedding in June 2008 refer to the 2008 article “Oh No! T.D. Jakes Wears An Earring!” Available at: <<http://thepopeofpentecost.wordpress.com>.>

form. Perhaps his point is that holy hip hop is a subculture of hip hop, however, he is not clear on that), is an invitation for people to look, act, and feel any way they want.

Furthermore, the “demonic movement” of hip hop (this is Lewis’s description of the musical genre) has filtrated within the Black church and extended an invitation to our youth to “come as you are and wear what you feel like wearing.” However, was it not the renowned evangelist Billy Graham who always ended his sermons with the song “Just as I Am” suggesting that one comes to Christ just as they are? Lewis sums up his disapproval of holy hip hop with the following concerns:

1. This is not a real world approach to the real world—in the real world, people are judged based on appearances, and they are picked for things based on first impressions. He contends that we must keep our young boys looking like males (again, he reemphasizes the effeminate appearances of some male holy rappers who profess to be preachers of the gospel).
2. The MySpace era (more so the “Facebook era”) has created identities that they feel are unique and important to them. According to Lewis, their quest for personal validation in the world (what they feel is right and wrong) may conflict with the biblical teaching of “Right and Wrong.” Hip Hop supports personal validation. Within this paradigm, Lewis posits that people pick and chose parts of the Bible to justify their own ideology.
3. Hip Hop has created hybrid Christians that look like thugs but serve God--Lewis refers to holy hip hop as a counterfeit version of secular

hip hop. According to Lewis, the copy cat appearance by the gospel hip hoppers is an affront to the hip hop culture. Lewis contends that there is only one type of hip hop and it sure ain't holy.

Furthermore, Lewis's contention is that, "It's hard to do youth ministry these days because hip hop has infused our youth with the idea that their opinion matters and that their personal feelings are more important than the truth" (Lewis Blog). His argument is similar to others that oppose holy hip hop. Author, J. Newcomb, states a distinction must be made between hip hop and music. What is the distinction? Newcomb suggests the distinction is that "music comes from the spirit; hip hop comes from man" (*BlackGospel.com*).

In his article titled, "The Failure of Christian Hip Hop" author Scott Schultz takes a different approach, and raises three concerns regarding the appropriation of gospel hip hop within Christendom. Schultz argues that:

1. *Evangelical Hip Hop is confessionally shallow.* Evangelicals' basic suspicion of doctrinal nuance and distinction leads to a shallow understanding of the gospel and the world. This generates an obnoxious reductionism, wherein believing the gospel is reduced to having a personal relationship with Jesus, and the world is nothing but the battleground of conversion. Thus, each song can only become reiteration of a single, simple theme.... The gospel [should] contain the entire narrative of the universe as it does involve the one in whom we move and live and have our being... [However], evangelical hip hop tells a lie by reducing that single theme of the entire cosmos to

something so dimly existential as yours and mine own “personal relationship with Jesus.”

2. *Evangelical Hip Hop is vocationally confused.* This is the classic problem of the parachurch. Christian rappers often view their own work as a ministry of God. That is, there is a very real and present consciousness among the Christian rap artist that not only is he an “ordained” minister of the gospel, but that he depends on that fact to validate his entire project... Rather than trusting in the encouragement of the sermon, many individuals feel that the grace granted through the publicly preached Word can be substituted with anything they like-- even hip hop. This is clearly a problem that goes much deeper than a subgenre of a subgenre, but it certainly shows its fruits here.
3. *Evangelical Hip Hop is a misapplication of a medium.* Rap is a specific genre developed in a very specific cultural context by a certain people that give it a special integrity. White evangelicals largely, do not share in the same history as most rap musicians. Thus, it ought to be an open question whether or not the medium of hip hop music is an appropriate medium for evangelical agendas. (1)

Schultz contends that trying to co-op a genre that has an established culture and history poses problems to the authenticity of the constructed genre (in this case Christian rap).

Moreover, similar to the parable of the “savourless salt,” a reconstructed genre can lose its effectiveness. According to St. Luke, chapter 14:34, Jesus states that, “Salt is good: but if the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?” Schultz suggests that tampering with

an established musical genre can cause an altered--confused flavor to the historical “savor” of the genre. Furthermore, through the construct of Christian rap the “street credibility” is lost; as a result, the listener does not take the music serious:

It makes light of the very romance and intrigue that rap music offers its outsiders, supposing that it can simply transplant a culturally saturated style from its origins, substituting in its own evangelical ideology and simultaneously sanitizing the genre of the very rough edges that distinguish it. Thus, no self-respecting music lover can ever take Christian rap seriously. (Schultz)

For Schultz, the misapplication of the medium has led to an aesthetic nightmare that has watered down the social commentary of rappers such as Mos Def and Talib Kweli (Schultz refers to the work of these two artists in his article). Mos Def and Talib Kweli (who developed their craft from the streets of Brooklyn) became known for their social commentary on the violence and corruption that is often associated with rap music. Breaking stereotypes of the Black man trapped in a vicious socio-economic cycle, Schultz states “they conceive of themselves and their work as less entertainment and more something like prophecy. The fusion of counterculture ideology with sensual beats and flowing rhyme is known in some circles as ‘conscious hip hop’ so named for its appeal to transcendent human qualities such as wisdom, contemplation, ethics, and reason” (Schultz). Qualities such as these, for Schultz, are difficult to duplicate within the construct of Christian rap music; thus creating a counterfeit rendering of the global version of rap and hip hop.

The real question (not that the previous arguments by Lewis, Schultz, and Wright are not legitimate) or perhaps “real rap” against Black Christian rap music (in particular by

fundamentalist Christians) continues to focus on the ethics behind the use of these so-called consecrated musical styles as a tool for ministry. Character flaws notwithstanding, the real sting, regardless of all the bling bling, is that Black Christian rap music has proven to be a successful vehicle for the spread of the gospel: case in point is the ministry of Kirk Franklin. Probably the hottest gospel hip hop artist today, Kirk Franklin has taken Christian rap and hip hop to the next level. Similar to the success story of Run-DMC, Franklin is credited for exposing the up tempo sounds of “gospel hip hop” to mainstream media and conservative churchgoers (Pollard 143). Since their 1993 debut, Kirk Franklin and the Family are one of the brightest stars in contemporary gospel music. The album, *Kirk Franklin & The Family* which spent 100 weeks on the gospel charts, crossed over to the R&B charts, and became the first gospel debut album to go platinum. Sandra Brennan writes:

Franklin’s road to the top, though quick, was far from smooth.

Abandoned by his mother and never having known his father, Franklin was reared by his Aunt Gertrude, a deeply religious woman who raised him a Baptist. When he was four, she paid for piano lessons by collecting aluminum cans. A natural musician who could sight-read and play by ear, at age 11, he was leading the Mt.Rose Baptist Church adult choir near Dallas. Despite his church background, Franklin began rebelling in his teens and getting into trouble until one of his friends was accidentally shot and killed at age 15. Realizing that he had chosen a bad road, Franklin began composing songs, recording and conducting. In 1991, Franklin formed a 17-member choir called “The Family” which consists of family members and associates from his younger days. (Brennan)

Like the secular rap artist, Franklin uses the poetic language of rap to express his own personal trials and tribulations; his adulation for Jesus Christ is spiritually choreographed internally and expressed outwardly through rap and hip hop music. Franklin reflects upon his relationship with Christ and his own personal trials and tribulations through the lyrics of the song “Stomp”:

For those of you that think gospel music has gone far

You think we got too radical for Christ.

Well I got news for you; you ain't heard nothing yet,

And if you don't know now you know. Glory, Glory!!

Lately I've been going through some things that really got me  
down.

I need someone to help me come and turn my life around.

I can't explain, I can't obtain. Jesus your love is so, it's so amazing.

It gets me high up to the sky, and when I think about your goodness it  
makes me wanna stomp.

Makes me clap my hands. Makes me wanna dance and stomp.

My brother can't you see I got the victory. Stomp.

(Kirk Franklin “Stomp”)

Franklin's holy hip hop/rap success is not limited to the playlists on Christian radio. He has become one of the biggest crossover artists on Urban and Christian radio selling over 12 million recordings since the inception of his group ([www.kirkfranklin.com/music](http://www.kirkfranklin.com/music)).

Franklin's music ranges from gospel ballads (his first single was a ballad called “Why We Sing”), to “Stomp,” which had a tremendous crossover appeal selling over 3 million

recordings. Franklin's *God's Property* from Kirk Franklin's *Nu Nation* recording (which "Stomp" is one of the tracks listed on the album/CD) reflects the musical styles of "old school funk" (George Clinton), the lyrical voice of Jay-Z, and the gospel sound of the Reverend Dr. James Cleveland.

According to Pollard, the elements that make Franklin so special with hip hop lovers are the same traits that dissuade his critics. Pollard states that,

In two of the three video scenes in "The Revolution," he and the singer/dancers perform in the casual and athletic wear popularized by hip hop culture. The choreography reflects Franklin's break dancing career in that it is far more street than sanctuary without being sexually provocative.  
(145)

Furthermore, Pollard states that Franklin takes on the role of a cleric (he wears White attire during church scenes in the video and black rimmed glasses signifying the appearance of a preacher), and he uses the communicative tool of call and response to plant the seed of the gospel. Moreover, from the outset, Franklin lets the audience know that his focus is ministry and the message they will receive pertains to the redeeming quality of Jesus Christ—"GP are you with me?"

Another recent entry into the world of Black Christian rap is scholar Cornel West. West, a professor of religion at Princeton, recently released his first rap album, "Sketches of My Culture." "The compact disc marks his furthest departure yet from the norms of academia in a career-long quest to lift the mentality and spirit of Black America" (MacDonald 119). West, who has a history of connecting with young minds and hearts, is committed to using rap music as a vehicle to reach Black youth (a similar goal to the ones



expressed by many Black Christian rappers preaching the gospel message on “da streetz”). According to Kwasi Thornell, canon vicar of Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, “A lot of young people don’t read anymore, but they do listen to rap music” (MacDonald 119). “With a sound like a preacher who has musical accompaniment for his prayers, West pays homage to such civil rights heroes as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers. In his lyrics, West gives special thanks to “God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, without whom nothing is possible but with whom all things are possible” (MacDonald 119). Cornel West reflects upon these goals through the lyrics of his song “Stolen King”:

To the heights of rich Africa humanity  
 To the depths of sick American barbarity  
 In the world winds of White Supremacy  
 Black people preserved their sanity and dignity  
 What a story, what a dream  
 Black people, preserving, persisting, and prevailing  
 From the love of the land, to something best in man  
 He held His head up high, for you and I  
 Had to keep hope alive  
 Oh that He could survive  
 So that one day, one day, one day,  
 We all be free (Cornel West “Stolen King”)

Based on the lyrics by West, does freedom result from an expressive mindset that ultimately leads to the preservation of self? On the other hand, is freedom a daily quest for sanity and dignity that can only be found in the emotional plot of life’s dramatic text?

The setting for life's dramatic text for most African American secular and Christian rappers has been a life involved with drugs, poverty, and various forms of social violence that exist within Black communities. Mixed with the sexist point of view that permeates the lyrical messages of rap music, the genre has been given a "bad Rap" making it difficult for the Black Christian rapper to creatively express what they feel through music. Additionally, the question of authenticity has to be taken into consideration concerning the appropriation of the music.

Lionel Trilling suggests the essence of sincerity could very well lie in the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self (5). Trilling states, historically, the word sincerity has lost its authoritative position within society:

A historical account of sincerity must take into its purview not only the birth of and ascendancy of the concept but also its eventual decline, the sharp diminution of authority it once exercised. The word itself has lost most of its former dignity. When we hear it, we are conscious of the anachronism, which touches it with quaintness. If we speak it, we are likely to do so with discomfort or irony. In its commonest employment it has sunk to the level of a mere intensive, in which capacity it has an effect that negates its literal intention. (6)

Trilling also suggests, "If one is true to one's own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others, is one being truly true to one's own self?" (7). Herein lies the question of the literal intentions (and sincerity) of the Black Christian rap artist regarding being "true to one's own self" opposed to the proclamation of the gospel message.

For many rappers (secular as well as Christian) the postmodern urban agenda items that are prevalent today focus on societal oppression, class politics, and a resistance to mainstream principles. The “post mod” urban agenda according to rapper Ice Cube, has created an image of a self-destructive Black America that has sold out to mainstream society, “thus losing one’s identity, as the social hindrances to self-empowerment” (Boyd 333). Ice Cube’s testimony on the sellout, reflects how rap music has become big business in America:

All hail to the West coast, I am the grand wizard

The West coast warlord, and the future is today

Cause tomorrow - that shit never come

I worry 'bout today and this urban decay

I worry 'bout hip-hop, when did it flip-flop

Get whack, and turn into gridlock

I don't know is it a government plot?

I don't give a f\*\*k whether you love it or not

That's all we got and if you throw it away

You dumb as OJ, off a for-tay

In your Izod, this the rap God

What'chu gon' put up, in your iPod?

Downloader, what'chu gon' do

when your favorite MC, got to sue you

Cause he got to eat ain't nuttin taboo

Get your ass beat by Erykah Badu

Cause you wanna steal this good music

Put me out of business, now you lose it

[Chorus: sung with ad libs]

Tomorrow, don't you worry 'bout tomorrow (that shit never come)

This is very hard to swallow

Keep your hand up on that throttle

Don't you worry 'bout tomorrow. (Ice Cube “Tomorrow”)

Tomorrow, albeit problematic at times for many rappers, has produced a certain type of free enterprise that has proven to be quite lucrative. “Hip hop capitalism” has not only created an opportunity for personal (agency), but has also developed a platform for rappers to engage in boisterous debates targeted at mainstream society. However, rappers (both the secular and Christian) have been careful not to dance too closely to the beat of assimilation and economic empowerment. They have choreographed their steps very carefully down the road of authenticity being mindful that the “real deal” in the recording industry is to sell music and preserve the history of the genre.

Artistic appropriation according to Richard Shusterman, is the historical source of [rap music] and still remains the “core of its technique and a central feature of its aesthetic form and message” (Shusterman 460). Although the aesthetic form of holy hip hop music is similar to their secular cousins, the historical significance behind the gospel message for the Black Christian rapper still remains the central focus. For those homies whose lives have been affected by the austerity of da streetz, the fact that “Jesus Saves” serves as a personal testimony for the gospel rapper and is repeated frequently within the lyrics of their songs. Contrary to mass media advertisers who have recognized the value of using rap to sell product, even though they do not have a thorough understanding of the subculture from

which it came, the Black Christian rapper not only identifies with the subculture, but musically, they use the medium of rap to express their personal allegiance to Jesus Christ (Blair 497).

For the Black Christian rapper from da streeetz, seeking the Lord while he may be found, and rendering a testimony regarding being found by Jesus Christ, denotes being saved from almost certain self destruction (Baker-Fletcher 44). Moreover, “conversion testimonies” articulate lyrically an interpretive way to present the gospel message of Jesus Christ to homies, thugs and other streeetz folks (Spencer 44). The message of the Cross for the gospel rapper is a message of redemption---deliverance from the ongoing saga of drug addiction, jail time, and death, which has troubled young Black Americans from the ‘hood for many years. Ironically for the secular rapper, these same disparaging issues that gospel rappers protest, appear to be fundamental tenets towards the construct of authenticity for the secular rapper. Moreover, to support their iconic image, secular rappers continue to push the envelope of morality and racial integrity. Consequently, at the end of the day, what is lost for the gospel rapper is neither his street credibility, nor his salvation. I would agree with Baker-Fletcher that what is lost are the many brothers and sisters who have succumb to prostitution, jail time, drug addiction, and death (44). Nevertheless, the parallel between the secular and the sanctified has tainted the evangelistic efforts of these holy homies from da streeetz.

*“Sing for joy in the Lord, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy” (Ps. 33:1-3 NASB).*

### **CHAPTER III: JESUS “THE BROWN SKIN-REVOLUTIONARY”: WAS JESUS A MARXIST RAPPER?**

*Finally the Frenzy of ‘Shouting,’ when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro Religion and the one more devoutly believed than all the rest.*

W.E.B. Du Bois

*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

Acts 1:8 KJV

#### **The Marxist Influences of Black Liberation Theology**

“These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wombs of frail world systems of justice and equality are being born” (Dr. Martin Luther King 189). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* evokes the notion that White America has never really been committed to helping African Americans out of poverty, exploitation, and other forms of discrimination. Similar to the thoughts echoed by King, Cone also asserts that it is not difficult for the oppressed person to recognize the value of the meaning of freedom. Freedom, according to Karl Marx, “is the essence of man” (Cone 89). Marx suggests that the quality of human life is dependent on involvement and participation in societal structures for human liberation. When one attempts to define man’s essence, one must consider his quest for the essence for freedom. In this chapter, I will explore the integration of Marxism and Black Theology in an attempt to identify the particular claims suggested by Black Theologians and Marxist thinkers regarding their definition of the “essence of freedom.”

In May of 1972, a group of more than 400 self-proclaimed “Christians for Socialism” representing twenty-eight Latin American countries, the U.S., Canada and Europe, met in Santiago, Chile to discuss the challenges of social reform. The participants consisted of social scientists, missionaries, teachers, theologians, social workers, and nuns. Their message: “a strategic alliance of revolutionary Christians and Marxists in the process of liberating the continent” (Che Guevara, *Time Magazine*). To what extent were the Santiago activists speaking for their Christian brethren throughout Latin America? To what extent were they speaking out on behalf of the oppressed around the globe?

According to Gustavo Gutierrez, the men of the cloth that minister in the most poverty stricken and exploited areas of Latin America have been zealous in their efforts to denounce the injustices they witness. However, because of their strong position towards liberation, some Catholic bishops and priests have been accused of “being friendly to Marxist beliefs.” Furthermore, Gutierrez states, because of their commitment to the oppressed people’s struggle for liberation, some of the priests and bishops, have received death threats from participants of groups that represented the extreme right in Latin America (107). Additionally, Cone asserts that in most societies where political oppression is sensitive and religion is related to the state, salvation is construed in ways that do not threaten the wellbeing of the existing government (Cone 126).

Was Jesus more concerned about redemption or a social gospel? How would Jesus respond to the construct of Black identity within the Black church? What would his approach be towards the suffering that is relevant not only to the Black experience in America, but also, in Latin America? What would Jesus do--or better yet, what would he rap about?

There are several lines of responses to these questions, each requiring an understanding of the relationship between the theologian and the common Bible reader. According to scholar Gerald West, the Bible is, and has been, one of the basic sources of liberation theologies (West 131). West states that, “This is certainly the case in South African and African American black theology, Latin American liberation theology, African American womanist theology, and feminist theologies” (131). Furthermore, West contends that in particular, for the poor, the Bible is the source of God’s liberating power—helping to define the process of oppression and exploitation. The dilemma that has existed for so many marginalized people through the years is the oppressor (the White man) has shared his faith and the Bible with the oppressed, yet, exploiting the very people, he solicits for pray. West quotes a familiar story often told within the Native American community: “When the White man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The White man said to us ‘Let us pray.’ After prayer, the White man had the land and we had the Bible” (131). Tales such as this one, help to simplify the oppressed person’s understanding of the meaning of freedom.

“Freedom, then, is not an abstract question. It deals with human existence in a world of societal enslavement” (Cone 89). Karl Marx’s definition of the human being as praxis means directed activity (Cone 89). Marx places emphasis on the relationship between freedom and the liberation activity and states that in order for one to be free, one must also engage in a liberation process. Thus, the two, according to Marx are inseparable. Moreover, for Marx, to be fully human, is to be involved and participating in societal structures for human liberation (Cone 89).



According to Anthony B. Bradley, Black liberation supporters James Cone and Cornel West have worked through the years to establish the presence of a Marxist thought within the composition of the Black church (4). Bradley states that, "For Cone, Marxism best addressed the remedies to the condition of blacks as victims of white oppression" (4). In his article "Black Liberation is Marxist Liberation," Bradley refers to Cone's book *God of the Oppressed* stating that, "Marx's thought is useful and attractive to Cone because it allows black theologians to critique racism in America on the basis of power and revolution" (4). Bradley also refers to Cornel West's 1979 essay "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," suggesting that West sees a strong correlation between Black theology and Marxism based on West's contention that both focus on the exploitation and alienation of marginalized people across the globe. Moreover, Bradley states that, "West's critical integration of Marxism and Black theology prompts West to call for a 'serious dialogue between Black theologians and Marxist thinkers'"--which I suggest is a position taken by West to support the dialectic principles often associated with the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Friedrich Hegel.

Problematic for Bradley is that Black Theology actually encourages a victim mentality among Blacks (4). Bradley cites John McWhorter's use of the term from his book *Losing the Race* suggesting that, "It is a subconscious, culturally inherited affirmation that life for Blacks in America has been in the past and will be in the future a life of being victimized by the oppression of whites...40 years after the Civil Rights Movement, Black men on a regular basis are still getting passed over by cab drivers" (3). Bradley references three main objections to victimology posed by McWhorter. First, according to McWhorter, victimology condones weakness in failure. People who show evidence of a "self-destructive

mentality are often considered to be products of unpreventable consequences from previous systematic patterns. Second, those who claim to be victims, stymie progression and focus their attention on obstacles. The example Bradley gives to illustrate his point, is that Black liberation theology represents “[B]lack freedom versus the Goliath of [W]hite racism” (4). Moreover, for Bradley, victimhood perverts the reality of true progression. Bradley contends that true progress equates to a Black man becoming elected to the highest land in the office-- President of the United States (Bradley questions whether Barack Obama is the model of an oppressed Black man or an example of racial unity). Third, according to Bradley, those who claim to be victims keep racism alive by depicting Whites as racist with no evidence to support the claims. In the end, Bradley’s concludes that forged racism creates “separatism” and ultimately leads to resentment by White America (3).

However, problematic for me is Bradley’s misrepresentation of what it means to be “the victim.” As Marx and Engel state, alienation and exploitation cause a loss of identity, especially within a capitalistic environment, “Insistence on history, on recognizing that social and cultural reality should always be regarded in process, has been one of the most enduring themes of Marxist theory... under capitalism, human beings are alienated from each other, and from their own natural characteristics and qualities” (Winders 629). Identity for Black Americans was put to the test some 400 years ago when the British imported twenty Africans to Virginia in 1619. The business of the slave trade, which was a critical component to the development of Western capitalism, also served as cultural caveat during the early formation of African American identity (Gomez 18).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix E for the U.S. Census Bureau’s statistics regarding the slave population of the United States from 1790 to 1850.

According to Cornel West, Marxist thought contains two specific elements: a theory of history and the understating of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, West contends that Black theology and Marxism share three related characteristics. First, he suggests that both schools of thought subscribe to similar methodologies (they approach their subject matter in the same manner and subsequently come to the same conclusion). Second, both schools of thought suggest there is a connection between the liberation and the future socioeconomic conditions of the oppressed. Third, West proposes that Black Theology and Marxism put forward acerbic critiques of the capitalistic structure in America, which according to Marx, is critical to the success of human liberation within a hegemonic society. Moreover, these three characteristics according to West have provided an opportunity for further discourse between Black theologians and Marxist thinkers (875).

From his essay, “Black Theology and Marxist Thought,” West presents an interesting view when he suggests that Black theology and Marxism never give a clear definition on what the “ideal society” should be. According to West, Black theologians have a tendency from the pulpit to draw attention to the racist practices in America and make a plea for empowerment. However, West states that,

Like the Black Power proponents of the sixties, [Black theologians] call for empowerment of Black people, the need for Black people to gain significant control over their lives. But neither Black Power proponents nor Black theologians have made it sufficiently as to what constitutes this Black Control. (880)

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on Marxist theory of History and Capitalism, refer to *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Criticism & Theory* (875).

Problematic for West, is, because of the lack of clarity, assumptions are made regarding the middle-class status of Black Americans in society. To equate middle-class status to a form of Black control is in error according to West. He asserts that, “The tendency is to assume that middle class status is equivalent to such control, [and] that a well-paying job amounts to such power” (West 881). For West, to make such an assumption is foolish. However, what is crucial is the role capitalism plays in the United States and to expose capitalism for exactly what it is. I stated earlier that Marx and Engel both contend that a disregard for history and the failure to recognize the essence of social and cultural reality within a given community has always been prevalent within the construct of capitalism—a position held strongly by the two scholars. Furthermore, they attribute the ideology of any given historical period to the dominant class. Thus, the dominant class ultimately decides what the power structure (or control) within a given community is, in this case, American society. The ability to convey racist practices and relating those practices to degrees of Black powerlessness has been a strong point for most Black theologians. On the other hand, the inability to provide a “lucid definition” of what power is, and who controls it, has proven to be an ambiguous adventure for most Black preachers (West 881). Ultimately, the Black theologian’s vagueness on what power is, leads to a false perception that power in America is synonymous with high wages.

For Marx, when one analyzes the power structure in modern industrial society, consideration must be given to the group participation in the decision-making process. West argues that most institutions of major production (nationally as well as from a global perspective) play an important role in the people’s lives; thus, these institutions should be held accountable for and to the people—people should participate democratically in the decision-making process; the process should be controlled by the citizens (881). According

to West, Marx's position of power within a modern industrial society is closely related to a group's authoritative position over what happens to products produced in a group situation. The group's input is critical to the direction and production flow of the goods and services (881). West states that,

The most powerful group in society has the most say and input into decision over this production flow; the least powerful group does not participate at all in such decisions. In liberal capitalistic America, the former consists of multiple corporate owners who dictate policies concerning the mass production of a variety of products produced by white and blue-collar workers who receive wages in return. The latter consists of the so-called underclass, the perennially unemployed, [Black Americans] who are totally removed from the work situation, precluded from any kind of input affecting the production flow, including negotiation and strike available to white-and blue-collar workers. (881)

Moreover, the high rates of unemployment within the Black community illustrates the point made by West. Racist practices intensify the degree of powerlessness among Black people and contribute to the oppressive environment Blacks have been forced to live in historically for so many years.

West argues that the more Black theologians dismiss or discard Marxist social criticism, the further they distance themselves from the underlying truth of Black oppression. Furthermore, West argues that this distancing of Marxist social criticism from a Black perspective, not only affects the direct relation of Black oppression in America, but also the

Black and Brown oppression in Third World countries (which is a similar position taken by Gutierrez regarding Latin America).

Based on Marx's assessment on the position of power within a modern industrial society, a parallel can be made to the structure of the Black church and Marxist social criticism. Within the Black church, the social criticism of the Black theologian reflects the mindset of the American liberal and radical criticism (West 882). Similar to the position of the Marxist thinker, the Black church has recognized the ways in which culture and religion has resisted oppression. However, unlike the position often taken by the orthodox Marxist thinker, Black liberation theology does not place all the blame of the oppressive conditions of the Black American on the ruling class. Furthermore, "...racist practices are not reducible to a mere clever and successful strategy of divide and conquer promoted by the ruling class to prevent proletarian unity" (West 883). For the church, the issue of oppression within the Black community is not just simply an issue of class struggle in America.

Orthodox Marxist analysis views culture and religion as instruments of domination and pacification (West 883). For the Marxist thinker, religion often serves as a "feel good" tool to escape the reality of a callous, unsympathetic dominant culture. Moreover, the opiate nature of those who subscribe to the tenets of religion (which for Karl Marx represents a psychological feel good used by the religiously oppressed) fosters a weakened position within the construct of political oppression. However, problematic for West, is that Marxist analysis ignores the liberating aspects of popular culture and religion, and their potential for the promotion of social change across the globe (884).

The Black church is no stranger to the endorsement of a social gospel and "social change" from the pulpit. If one were to trace the religious beliefs of Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr., one would easily find a connection between King's African American religious traditions and his politically engaged religious leadership. King, who was no stranger to the preaching of the *African American Social Gospel*, was influenced by the social activism of his grandfather and father, both of whom served as pastors and were very active in civil rights (Carson 696).

According to the Rev. Peter J. Gomes, “[Martin Luther King, Jr.] was a child of what is called the social gospel, and he felt that it was not good enough to keep the good news locked up in the Bible or restricted to segregated churches, or postponed until the eschaton, the end days” (163). Moreover, the elder King, (Martin King Sr.) established social gospel ministries at the Ebenezer Baptist church dating back to 1926.<sup>3</sup> Clayborne Carson states that, “King was aware that the accomplishments of his father's generation of African-American religious leaders represented more than just emotional folk preaching and scriptural literalism” (698). Additionally, when King's grandfather, the Reverend A.D. Williams, began his ministry in Atlanta in 1893, social gospel activism was common between both Black and White clergy in urban areas (Carson 698). Carson states that, “Williams built a large congregation through forceful preaching that addressed the everyday concerns of poor and working-class residents” (698). The endorsement of a “social” as well as a “Spiritual” gospel was a familiar trope within the framework of the Black church during the twentieth century.

Similar to the doctrine of Marxism, Dr. King proposed in 1967 that the revolution of values must begin with a shift from a “‘thing’ oriented society to a ‘person’ oriented society” (186). King states that, “When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Carson, King's father considers himself a social gospel preacher who believed his ministry should be focused on the everyday needs of his congregation rather than other-worldly concerns (699).

militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy” (186). Conversely, King contends, “The revolution of values must go beyond the traditions of capitalism and Communism” (186). Thus, the impact of activism within the Black community (or the lack there of) by the Black church becomes critical. King’s continual message during the 60s focused on the complacent nature of America concerning revolutionary ideas. Capitalism destroys the value system of a true revolution, especially when one considers the contrast of poverty and wealth within the United States. Yet, according to King, the richest and most influential country in the world (the United States) has the ability to lead the way for a true revolution of values.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, King argues that because of American complacency, adequate wages for school teachers, social workers and other public servants has taken a back seat to the personal agenda of individual capitalists in the West. What was once a revolutionary spirit initiated by Western nations has now developed into an antirevolutionary mentality. Consequently, many have been driven to believe that the true revolution hides behind the political and cultural concepts of Marxism (King 190). King contends, “Communism is a judgment on our failure to make democracy real and to follow through on the revolution we initiated” (190). I think King would agree with Marx, that the essence of freedom involves total participation in societal structures for the advancement of human liberation (Cone 89). However, the agreement would end there.

As an integrationist and outspoken supporter of a “Social Gospel,” Dr. King and many of his supporters during the Civil Rights Movement were identified as supporters of communist views; the accusations were made by White southerners in an effort to discredit

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<sup>4</sup> Considering, King’s book was written in 1967, I would argue that in terms of financial capital/wealth, China heads the list for the wealthiest country in the world.



the Black freedom struggle of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, King defined the Civil Rights Movement as an “American Movement—‘deeply rooted in the American Dream.’” King argues that the Civil Rights Movement did not receive its motivation from the thoughts of Marx, Engel, Lenin, or any other communist/socialist thinker. For King, reading the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution was enough evidence that segregation in America was ethically wrong (281).

I stated earlier that a parallel could be drawn between the Black church and tenets of Marxism. The definition of the Black church, which I base on the New Testament definition, focuses on the fact that the church is a body of believers that agree upon a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Believers, in this case, subscribe to the doctrinal teachings and band together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel message (Jackson 24). Similar to Marxist theory, the structure of the local church depends on the unity of the people. If people become “unified” versus “commoditized,” the essence of humanity can be prolonged. On the other hand, for Dr. King, in a sermon entitled, “How Should a Christian View Communism?” King argues that Christianity and Communism are not compatible. According to James Cone, King stated that,

[T]he former posits an “atheistic materialism” and the latter a “theistic idealism.” Communism is “based on ethical relativism,” believing that the “end justifies the means,” and Christianity sets forth a system of absolute

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<sup>5</sup> Similar to the accusations made against Dr. Martin Luther King and other Black activists by White Southerners during the 60s, it appears that when Black Americans become outspoken they are labeled as Communist supporters. Conservative radio-TV gabber Glenn Beck accused Barack Obama’s Green Jobs Advisor, Van Jones, of being a Communist. Beck called Jones an “Avowed Radical Communist Revolutionary” on his Tuesday September 1, 2009 talk show. Jones resigned at 12 midnight on 9/7/09.

moral values and affirms that God has placed within the very structure of this universe certain moral principles that are fixed and immutable. (281)

For King, the conditions of destitution, injustice, and insecurity are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops (189).

According to James Cone, Malcolm X was even more hostile towards the beliefs of communism than Martin Luther King. Malcolm X viewed communists as “White radicals who were no more interested in [B] lack liberation than their liberal and conservative brothers and sisters” (282). Problematic for Malcolm was the fact that, White radicals preached another White philosophy, and similar to the position taken by Dr. King, Malcolm X denounced the atheist views by the White communist.

Dr. Martin Luther King made a tremendous impact upon American culture and its churches (Cone 295). He effectively communicated the gospel message of being free from “sin” and the oppressive nature of White America. Both Malcolm X and Dr. King realized that racism is deeply embedded in American religion and society. Equally, Dr. King and Malcolm X taught in their speeches and demonstrated in their lives that there can be no freedom for Blacks prior to their solidarity with each other (Cone 292). Furthermore, Cone contends that we cannot get rid of racism by forgetting the past and simply urging Black and Whites to “Love one another.” Marxism, thematically, proposes a similar position emphasizing the importance of history and recognizing that social and cultural reality are key traits to the concept/construct of ideology.

King’s earlier assessment of Christianity and Communism addresses the deeper question of whether Jesus Christ could have taken on the persona of a “Marxist rapper.” Although similarities exist between the socialistic aspects of Christendom and Marxist

theory, I agree with King that the spiritual differences outweigh any similarities that might be present. In Christianity, Jesus is not only the focal point, but He is also the inspiration and role model for a particular way of life that is based on the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Messiah; thus, the Christian believer accepts the teachings of Christ contained in the gospels at face value. On the other hand, followers of Marxism (usually referred to as agnostics) have set up their own guiding force for the truth, which is based on history. As a result, the historical elements of society become their god, and the motivation for all activity around this is materialistic. Consequently, they deny God and Christ, however, emphasizing spiritual power in history and culture (O. Kay 11- 12).

James Cone argues that White churches have ignored the problem of racism and the Black church has passively accepted the consequences (295). However, Martin Luther King was successful at reaching out to other cultures, particularly to White America. King's efforts to integrate all cultures crossed racial barriers not only in the United States, but also across the globe. Dr. King understood the consequences, but unlike the passivity of the Black church, King aggressively sought to unite the world and make it aware of the racial injustice and problems of interrelations with poverty and war. Moreover, King challenged White Christians to do the right thing by being steadfast and unmovable to what they read in their Bibles. The Bible states that, "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now" (1 John 2:9). The right thing, according to King, would be for White Christians to treat all people as one human family (Cone 295).

Cone posits that Black Americans do not need to build more church buildings; what needs to take place is a building up of self-esteem and creating pride in being Black (292). For Cone, a "Black consciousness" fuels the thought process towards a cultural revolution—

a revolution during the 60s that affected and created Black art, Black studies, politics, and Black theology (290). Likewise, Malcolm X challenged Black Americans to dismiss the psychological consequences of self-hate, and embrace the essence of their Blackness as a defining moment of their being. According to James Cone,

[During] the 1950s, Stepin Fetchit, Aunt Jemima, Amos and Andy, and other demeaning characters dominated radio, movie, and television images of black self. Tarzan's Africa, with savages and cannibals, was the only one most African Americans knew about. Malcolm showed that negative images of Africa were skillfully concocted by whites to make African Americans hate their origin. (290)

Furthermore, Cone contends that Malcolm X's analysis of self-hate encouraged African Americans to appreciate their Blackness and changed the way Black people thought about themselves. So pervasive was the rhetoric of Malcolm X, that on the surface, a cultural renaissance emerged that created a new Black image of Christ; replacing the White depicted image of long straight hair and blue eyes that has existed in Christian homes and churches for many years.

As I stated in chapter II, freedom of religious expression was a difficult task for most enslaved Africans during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Moreover, a certain "brand of religion" was presented to Africans and African Americans in an attempt to deceive and influence the various African based communities. Central to Michael Gomez's argument (which I discussed earlier in chapter II) on the denial of religious expression during the transatlantic slave trade is the concept of "hegemony." Hegemony, a word associated with Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist of the 1920s and 1930s, is a term used to describe

relations of domination, which are not visible as such. Based on the Marxian idea of “superstructure,” the process of hegemony affords the cultural dominant class the ability to retain economic, political, and social control. As Gomez states, in order to seize control of Black religious life, White cultural hegemony was critical to the success of cultural containment. “Blacks, whether free or enslaved, could no longer lawfully assemble without the supervision of whites” (Gomez 259). Moreover, in response to cultural hegemony, Blacks attempted to “steal away” in secrecy for pursuing their own brand of religion (Gomez 259). According to Gomez, problematic to the success of the Anglo-American hegemonic efforts, was that most Africans were aware of the hypocritical message coming from the White man’s pulpit. Gomez states, “The white man’s religion was not only identifiable by its message, but also by its inherent hypocrisy.” Hegemony proved to be another form of black cultural suffocation in the tradition of white mendacity.

According to Cornel West, a present-day challenge confronting Black theologians is to explore what characteristics of Black culture can contribute to a counter-hegemonic culture in America. The Black theologian must take into consideration that both tradition and current practices have played an important role in the formation of Black identity. West states that, “hegemonic culture subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and world-views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate” (886). The survival of hegemony is based on people drinking the repressive Kool-Aid produced and distributed by the existing order. However, according to West, hegemony crumbles when the oppressed chooses a transformation and exposes the exploitative advances of the ruling culture.

Based on the work of Gramsci, West presents a theoretical framework that he suggests can be useful for both the Black and Latin theologians, as well as the Marxist thinker. West defines the structure of “cultural processes” by four categories: hegemonic, pre-hegemonic, neo-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic (886). For West, in order to understand the character of culture and religion, Black religious leadership should carefully look at these four categories in relation to contemporary American society.

West defines the four categories as: 1) Hegemonic culture reflects the world-views, sensibilities, and habits that sanction the established order; 2) Pre-hegemonic culture consists of those elements of the past that continue to shape the mind for the future; 3) Neo-hegemonic culture is a new phase of hegemony that supports an allegiance by the people to the status quo; and 4) Counter-hegemonic represents genuine resistance and opposition to the dominant culture.

West contends the framework presumes three major points. First, the framework emphasizes the fact that the character of culture and religion are critical instruments for freedom, liberation, domination, and pacification. Secondly, the framework serves as a focal point for the ideological function of culture and religion and reveals the impact that freedom, liberation, domination and pacification might have on society. Third, the framework views the struggles of freedom and liberation as open-ended. There is no guarantee, according to West, for freedom or liberation within American society; however, the only assurance he states, relies on the transformative modalities of society (887). Moreover, West’s framework clearly reflects the truth that human struggle continues to exist within the ethos of civilization.

Given the fact that nearly all Black preachers and pastors are in charge of their congregations, an incredible opportunity is available for them to “witness” and proclaim to their parishioners the importance for social change in America. I agree with West that the present challenge for Black clergy is to determine how their ministries can play a role in opposing the hegemonic culture in America. Nonetheless, if the liberation progress is to continue, the Black theologian must take a closer look at the issues of “class status” and the existing system of production and social structure as it relates to Black oppression and exploitation. Both Cone and West contend that the Black theologian has failed to address the issues of class, wealth, power, and corporate interests. Yes, the proclamation by Black preachers that racism is still alive and well is necessary; however, the bigger issue is the practices of a hegemonic capitalist system that for so many years has concealed the unequal distribution of wealth. Furthermore, what becomes even more problematic is the issue concerning class position and racial status. Thus the question now becomes, which one is the major determinant of Black oppression in America? (West 881).

One man who was successful at combining Black theological reflection and Marxist social theory was the Rev. George Washington Woodbey. Woodbey, who was a devout Christian and the pastor of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in San Diego, California, was a major player in the Socialist Party during the early 1900s. Woodbey, who some (even today) consider to be “the greatest living [Black American]” devoted his life to promoting structural change and creating a “counter-hegemonic culture” in liberal capitalist America (West 888). According to West, “his style is simple and his logic inconvincible. He knows the race question and one of his most popular lectures relates to the settlement of this vexed question under Socialism” (889). Akin to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Woodbey was no

stranger to the jail cells of America. His proclamation against oppression and promotion of Socialism landed him in jail frequently. In addition, Rev. Mr. Woodbey was hospitalized more than once because of police brutality, barely escaping murder during the 1912 Free Speech in San Diego (West 889).

Black religious leaders have a difficult challenge in the twenty-first century. However, as noted earlier, Black leadership can play a huge role in shaping the complexities of structural social change in America. They must be receptive to Marxist social criticism and conclude that region, sex, age, ethnicity, and race are not the only laudable nominees as decisive factors of oppression (West 882). Rev. Woodbey was receptive to Marxist social criticism and its compatibility with religion. His writings are important to us today because he clearly saw that racial discrimination and the oppression of the working class had a direct connection to the economic structure (wealth) of the United States.

### **The Socialist Influences of Black Rap (Christian and Secular)**

The Rev. G.W. Woodbey who was once a chattel slave had an ultimate wish for his life; he wished to be free from the slavery of capitalism (Woodbey 40). Additionally, Woodbey states in his writings that “Marx, the greatest philosopher of modern times, belonged to the same wonderful Hebrew race that gave to the world Moses, the Lawgiver, the Kings and prophets, and Christ the Son of the Highest, with apostles, who, together gave us the Bible that, we claim, teaches Socialism” (Woodbey 93). In his writings, Woodbey acknowledges that Karl Marx was not a Christian; however, Marx’s religious views were irrelevant since socialism had nothing to do with a man’s religion (Foner 17). Moreover, for Woodbey, socialism focuses on the issue of “class” and the exploitation of the poor, thus



confirming my views that lyrically, the Black Christian rapper echoes some of the same concerns Rev. Woodbey expressed for Black Americans.

Woodbey's socialist writings frequently support the position that socialism would create a society without poverty; a society in which equal ownership would entitle Black Americans to an equal part in all the goods produced in the United States (Foner 25). His aspiration was that White America and Black America would "lay aside their prejudices and get together for their common good" (qtd. in Foner 25). Additionally, Woodbey avows, "We poor whites and blacks have fought each other long enough, and while we have fought, the capitalists have been taking everything from us" (qtd. in Foner 25). According to Philip S. Foner, the function of bringing all working people together and providing them with ample food and adequate housing, fulfills Woodbey's socialistic views and what he believed were the fundamental ideas established in the Bible—opposition to rent, interest, profits, and the exploitation of the poor (Foner 17). Furthermore, Woodbey's dream was that the Bible and Socialism would one day free the African Americans from capitalism. He expresses his dream in this way:

The boy that was born a slave thought that it was natural for him to be one, and the young master took it for granted that he was intended to be master. But the boy that is born free never thinks that anyone ought to own him; nor does the youngster born at the same time think that he ought own him. But instead, they both go to the same school and often in the same class. They at once accept the conditions under which they were born. (qtd. in Foner 20)

Ironically, the role of “master” for most rap artists today (according to critics of rap music), symbolizes a love for “Bling”; the slave on the other hand represents the struggle for a continued existence and gratification within a capitalistic society.

The teachings of Karl Marx and other forms of socialist thinking are no strangers to the lyrics of Black rappers. Historically, “political rap” was inspired by Black Nationalism in the 60s as well as the lyrical sounds of the 80s and 90s. Rappers such as The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash, the Furious Five, Dead Prez, and Tupac Shakur often voiced their concerns over White capitalism. However, one group that is politically Marxist in its music is a group called “The Coup.” The Coup debut album, *Kill My Landlord* (which echoes a similar message to Woodbey’s biblical position on rent) was released in 1993. Their lyrics frequently criticize capitalism, and present it as a form of Black exploitation:

Now check it, the topic of discussion

Is more than a financial profit

United Snakes won't stop it

Blow for blow, the flow with the commentary gets

Seventy-six septillion tons a-spinnin'

[Steady steppin into a new phase

New thoughts representing our slavery days]

The seeds of weeds and crops is much more than you figure

Yo if he's a black man he must be a nigger

They make a gimmick I wouldn't doubt

[A sucker selling out for the sake of a scream and shout]

Elements don't grow with nonsense  
Rather kick a little bit of science  
[Science about controlling actions of another  
America was built on the sweat of black sisters and brothers]  
Never allowed to breathe but allowed to bleed and breed  
[Stripped of our creed and religion surviving on intuition]  
And what the master said give 'em  
[And besides the black man is the original lord of the land]  
So I'm clenching my right hand  
[Brothers and sisters we must fight this slumlord]  
Overlord of the concrete jungle but I'm humble  
As I witness my opponent crumble  
Like the shack that I live in the house that I rent from him  
[Roach infested I'm sure that the rats are nesting  
The heat doesn't work he still hasn't checked it  
Disrespected me for the last time  
I loaded up the nine stepping double time  
Bullseye]  
Another point scored  
Right between the eyes of my landlord  
(The Coup "Killing my Landlord")

The Coup would agree with Woodbey's assessment that:

[T] he capitalist of today and his children look upon the workers as he has them in the sweatshops, mines, factories of the country, putting in long hours for a bare existence, under the most sanitary conditions, living in the worst of places, and eating the worst of food; and like his brother the slaveholder, he is determined that he and his shall not be reduced to such straits.

(qtd. in Foner 19)

Moreover, group leader/member Boots Riley states, "I envision something so crazy that it should be more democratic. I think the people should have control of the profits that they create...that's what communism is, that's what socialism is, I'm a communist" (Riley, *Politically Incorrect*). For Boots Riley, genuine democratic control over the profits that people create represents true liberation.

Black Christian rapper T-Bone shares a similar perspective to Boots Riley, however, he places emphasizes on the fact that his music is not about the money, but about the ministry (*GospelFlava.com*). In addition, T-Bone states his music "is not about fairy tales" but that his rhymes reflect the trials and tribulations of living within a capitalistic environment in a dog-eat-dog world. He rhymes,

Another homie dies, so I wipe the tears from my eyes  
 And ask God how many lonely painful tears will I cry  
 Seems like nobody even cares out here in the hood  
 I tried to get a job, but they swear I'm up to no good  
 Misunderstood from a young age, on a rampage

From an adolescent carryin hollow points in a [Smith-&-Wesson]  
 For anybody second Guessin, if I'm scared to test em  
 Aint nothin even worth livin for  
 The richa gettin richa and the ghetto remains poor  
 Liquor stores and gun shops  
 And everybody wonder why thugs pack glocks and kill cops  
 Full of hurt since birth, why was I placed on this earth  
 Seems like, everybody in this ghetto is cursed wit a curse  
 And what's worse, is that my potnah dyin at a fast rate  
 Dear God can you help me out, I'm lookin for an escape.  
 (T-Bone "Street Life")

T-Bone's assessment that "The richa gettin richa and the ghetto remains poor" is a shout out against anti-collective ownership and the operation of industries. One of the continual concerns in a postindustrial economy is the attrition of employment opportunities and educational opportunities for Black and Latino youth in many cities across the United States (Watkins 560). What is more, several other factors similar to the ones mentioned constrain the social and economic mobility of Black youth in the inner-city. Perhaps Chuck D's cry for help in 1988 carries more weight today than it did several years ago, "Never before have you heard so many black male voices yelling at the world" (Foreman and Neal 307). Would this be something Jesus would rap about as well?

### **What Would Jesus Rap About?**

“Rap music is a continuation of the creative manner in which meaning is made out of an absurd world by promoting a style of living through which a sense of self and community is forged in a hostile environment” (Pinn 2). As noted earlier, was Jesus more concerned about redemption or a social gospel? Given the hostile environment, he was forced to preach in, I often wonder why he chose to proclaim the message that he did as it relates to humanity. The New Testament is full of parables and other stories often told by Jesus, or, in most cases, told by others who witnessed his ministry for three and a half years. So exactly what did he say? Was there a creative twist to his message that made him stand out more than the other Proclaimers of his time? What was the essence of his message? Furthermore, what would or did he rap about?

It was a snowy Saturday evening on December 24, 1966, and as I prepared for bed, I approached my mother who was ironing clothes in the basement of our home.

The conversation went something like this:

ME: Mom, what time do you think Santa will be here?

MOM: Who?

ME: Santa.

MOM: Son, there is no Santa.

ME: What do you mean?

MOM: Just what I said, now go to bed (she smiles).

ME: I thought there was a Santa...who ate the cookies I set out every year for him on the table?

MOM: Your father (her smiles gets even bigger).

ME: So why...I thought you said...

MOM: You thought what?

ME: I thought you said that he existed.

MOM: He does.

ME: (By now, I am confused). If there is no Santa, then how can he exist?

MOM: Son, Santa is a construct of American society. He may exist in your mind, perhaps, maybe even in your heart, but he is not real.

ME: So where did all of my gifts come from?

MOM: Your father and me.

ME: Oh.

MOM: Good Night. See you in the morning (she smiles and continues to iron clothes).

On that snowy evening, it was made clear to me that the story of Christmas did not center on an obese White man with a long white beard, in a funky-looking red outfit, riding in a slick looking sled pulled by reindeer. The message of Christmas (which at some point I lost or never really understood) was about the birth of Christ.

Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judaea around 4 B.C. to Joseph, a carpenter, and Mary, his espoused wife. According the writer Matthew, the birth of Christ happened in this mode:

When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her

husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her public example, was minded to put her away [privately].

But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. (Matt. 1:18-21)

It is obvious from the text that the primary purpose of Jesus' descent to earth was to save man from his sinful nature. Sin, in summary, is a transgression or overstepping of the law--a departure from right, a willingness to do wrong. Bottom-line, according to Christian interpretations, one has missed the mark and failed to meet the divine standards set by God (Schofield 1179). The focus of Jesus' rap (or first stanza) would probably start out with a lyrical message describing the character of "the sinner man."

The person of Jesus Christ has been a debated topic by scholars and theologians for many, many years. According to Emery Bancroft, "[As] the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ existed before his incarnation" (98). Moses writes in the book of Genesis that, "God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from darkness" (Gen. 1:3-4). Darkness in the Bible represents chaos, ruin and oppression as opposed to "light" which represents truth, understanding, and liberty-- Jesus was the light, the hope that God created. The Apostle John states that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus states himself that, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:56). Bancroft contends that the nature of his preexistence was twofold: as to God—Jesus



Christ is called the eternal generation, and as to the Creation—Jesus is the first born of every creature; he is the creation, the creator and the resurrection (98). “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:15-16). Thus, Jesus’ rap would continue with lyrical content that expresses “the character of his preexistence.”

Was Christ a man? Was he God? On the other hand, was He both? The character of Jesus Christ can be expressed in two natures: humanity and divinity. Jesus on several occasions referred to himself as a man and exhibited the elements of human nature—body, soul, and spirit (Bancroft 101). In the Book of the Acts, the Apostle Peter refers to Jesus as “a man accredited by God.” Peter’s statements regarding Jesus as a man were made during the day of Pentecost, a time where several were gathered together and being filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in “other tongues.” Biblical scholars refer to this period as the sixth Dispensation or the creation of the Church.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Peter’s assessment of Christ as man, concurs with Paul’s proclamation that “For since death came through a man, the resurrection came also through a man” (I Cor. 15:21). Both Peter and Paul’s exhortation on the risen Christ not only support the position that Christ was human, but also raises the issue of His deity.

Jesus Christ “the man” spoke frequently about the condition of man’s soul. For Christ, death actually serves as an agent of change for the body, soul, and spirit. However,

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<sup>6</sup> A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God (Scofield 3). Moreover, Scofield states that, “[the following] three concepts are implied in this definition: (1) a deposit of divine revelation concerning God’s will, embodying what God requires of man as to his conduct; (2) man’s stewardship of this divine revelation in which he is responsible to obey it; and (3) a time-period, called the “age,” during which the divine revelation is dominant in the testing of man’s obedience to God” (3). The seven dispensations recorded in the Bible are: Innocence (Gen. 1:28); Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 3:7); Human Government (Gen. 8:15); Promise (Gen. 12:1); Law (Ex. 19:1); Church (Acts 2:1); Kingdom (Rev. 20:4).

according to Christian Scripture, if a transformation of the sinful human nature of man has not taken place, then one forfeits his soul in exchange for worldly prosperity. Jesus states in the Book of Matthew that: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” [Moreover] what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matt. 16: 26).

Christ also displayed the human qualities of hunger, weariness, sleep, love, compassion, anger, fear, groaning, weeping, and prayer (Bancroft 101). Furthermore, according to Bancroft, he was subjected to the laws of human development; He asked questions, grew in wisdom, yet He was confronted with temptation, suffered pain, and ultimately, Jesus died (101). For Bancroft, Jesus’ human nature was ideal in that, His personality was in harmony with His divine nature—Jesus knew no sin and was free of genetic decadence. Suffice it to say, since Jesus gave up his human qualities when He gave up the Ghost, the lyrical message now would focus on the forfeiture of one’s soul for the continuance of human existence. Moreover, Jesus might rap that the “good news” is the poor don’t have to be poor anymore—God has anointed Him to release the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). In addition, as with Aretha Franklin’s song “R.E.S.P.E.C.T.,” Jesus probably would title this particular stanza “S.A.C.R.I.F.I.C.E.”

For those who argue that Jesus was simply human, the issue surrounding his deity becomes problematic. Lyrically, if Christ refers to himself as God, then within the construct of His lyrics, He must also prove that He is God. Lyrically, Jesus may rap that “He is not simply the revealer of God, but He himself is God revealed” (Bancroft 103).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, how does Jesus reveal to man that He is the God-man? If he possesses all the qualities of a human being, how can He justify equating himself with God?

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<sup>7</sup> Bancroft’s statement regarding the deity of Jesus Christ is supported by the Apostle John in John 1:18.

Several arguments exist refuting these historical claims and oppose the views made by followers of Jesus that, He is indeed “God in the flesh.” One of the earliest challenges to the Person of Christ, *Ebionism*, dates back to A.D. 100. The *Ebionism* position denies the divine nature of Christ and contends that Jesus was merely a man. *Ebionism*, which according to Bancroft was a form of Judaism, on one hand, supports the position that Jesus held a peculiar relation to God, however, the peculiarities of the Person of Christ, according to the belief, does not justify divine nature. A nonconformist named Cerinthus, founded another challenge that also dates back to around A.D. 100. Cerinthus posits that there were no real and essential natures (the divine and the human natures) of Jesus prior to His baptism. This particular point of view known as *Cerinthianism*, is considered an offshoot of *Ebionism* and supports the essence of the divine being. However, problematic is the fact that it excludes any evidence of a supernatural birth as a basis for divinity. A third challenge, *Docetism*, which is a Greek term, is a belief that Christ “seemed to be human” or “seemed to appear.” He suffered and died on the cross, however, that is where the story ends. This view not only denied the humanity of Christ, but also contends that matter is inherently evil, thus, if matter is evil, and Jesus is considered pure, then His body must have been a delusive appearance or a product of fantasy.

The fourth challenge to the person of Christ comes from a presbyter of the church of Alexander in Egypt named Arius. His theory, known as *Arianism*, supports the position that Jesus is the highest of created beings, but denies the deity of Christ and His eternal relationship to the Father. Questions surrounding this theory focus on a misinterpretation of Jesus’ humility as a sign of weakness and inequality, consequently, He could not be the eternal God. Challenge number five, refers to a notion advanced by a bishop in the church of

Laodicea in the fourth century named Appollinarius. The theory *Appollinarianism*, accepts the division of man's nature as body, soul, and spirit. On the other hand, Appollinarius argues that since the human soul is the battle ground for sin, and Jesus was sinless, He could not have possessed a human soul, thus denying the completeness of Jesus.

Additionally, another Bishop of the church, Nestorius, denied the unique personality of Christ by separating His two natures into two distinctions during the fourth century. Bancroft states that it was Nestorius' intention to make Jesus not one person, but two, thus denying His distinctive personality. During the fifth century, speculation regarding the person of Jesus continued with more assertions made by Eutychus, an abbot of Constantinople who coined the term *Eutychianism*. Eutychus argued against the two natures of Jesus contending that the mingling of the two should constitute a third. Thus, according to Bancroft, "the Eutychians were often called 'Monophysites' because they reduced the two natures of Jesus to one" (97).<sup>8</sup>

Given the past and present discourses surrounding the deity of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone for the argument rests in the Garden of Gethsemane located in the land of Jerusalem. It was here, during these final moments, that the identity of Jesus Christ would come to a climatic end. On the other hand, some would declare Gethsemane served as a true test of character and as fertile ground for his humiliation, exaltation, and, perhaps, his final rap against all forms of oppression. The person of Christ in the garden, comparatively speaking, parallels the life of rap artists across the globe, both the secular artist and the sacred. It was in the garden that according to Christian doctrine, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, who was one of His disciples. The Bible states that,

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<sup>8</sup> Monophysites, or the term Monophysiticism, refers to a position that Christ has only one nature.

Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons... [Jesus] asked them “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said—and Judas the traitor was standing there with them. (John 18: 3-5)

Similar to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, Public Enemy proclaims in their lyrics “Welcome to the Terrordome,” not every man can be considered your brother:

Crucifixion ain't no fiction  
 So called chosen frozen  
 Apology made to who ever pleases  
 Still they got me like Jesus  
 I rather sing, bring, think reminisce  
 'Bout a brother while I'm in sync  
 Every brother ain't a brother cause a color  
 Just as well could be undercover  
 Backstabbed, grabbed a flag  
 From the back of the lab  
 Told a Rab get off the rag  
 Sad to say I got sold down the river  
 Still some quiver when I deliver  
 Never to say I never know or had a clue  
 Word was heard, plus hard on the boulevard  
 Lies, scandalizin', basin'

Traits of hate who's celebratin' wit satan?  
I rope a dope the evil with righteous  
Bobbin' and weavin' and let the good get even  
C'mon down  
And welcome to the Terrordome.  
Caught in the race against time  
The pit and the pendulum  
Check the rhythm and rhymes  
While I'm bendin' 'em  
Snakes blowin' up the lines of design  
Tryin' to blind the science I'm sendin' 'em  
How to fight the power  
Cannot run and hide  
But it shouldn't be suicide  
In a game a fool without the rules  
Got a hell of a nerve to just criticize  
Every brother ain't a brother  
Cause a Black hand  
Squeezed on Malcolm X the man  
The shootin' of Huey Newton  
From a hand of a Nigger who pulled the trigger  
  
Welcome to the Terrordome.

The “Terrordome” for Jesus eventually led to a false arrest (at the Garden), which is a frequent trope in the lyrical construct of many rappers. In the case of Jesus, there was no lawful basis for the arrest. No one had presented an official charge of any wrongdoing against him. Moreover, those who accompanied Judas to have Jesus arrested included the priests and elders--His panel of adjudicators were the ones who persuaded Judas to betray Jesus (Luke 22:52). Additionally, two false witnesses charged Jesus with saying “He would destroy the temple made with hands” (Mark 14:58); however, He was condemned by the high court on another false charge--that of blasphemy. He was also condemned on His own testimony (rap) (Luke 22:67-71).

Public debates over the reality of police brutality have been discoursed within the rap community for many years, so it is no secret that rappers not only have a genuine dislike for the police, they also have a tendency to accuse them of bogus arrests and oppressive behavior within the lyrics of their songs (Lusane 358).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as the narrative of the spurious arrest unfolds concerning Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, a similar tale is told by rappers NWA. They reflect their personal frustration and rage in the song “F\*\*\* Tha Police”:

F\*\*\* Tha police  
 Comin straight from the underground  
 Young [Nigga] got it bad cuz I'm brown  
 And not the other color so police think  
 They have the authority to kill a minority  
 F\*\*\* that shit, cuz I ain't tha one

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<sup>9</sup> Recently, the New York Police Department hosted a Hip Hop training seminar, attended by several law enforcement agencies. At the meeting, a six-inch thick black binder was handed out. It included the arrest records and photos of dozens of rap artists and their companions. In addition, the *Village Voice* newspaper recently revealed the existence of a hip hop Intelligence Unit within the New York Police Department (Democracy Now.com 2004).

For a punk muthaf\*\*\*a with a badge and a gun

To be beatin on, and throwin in jail

We could go toe to toe in the middle of a cell

NWA's attention to the issues of police brutality, racial oppression, violence, human rights, and unemployment was a reflective voice for the many concerns expressed by Black Americans in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Garden of Gethsemane was not only the final setting for the controversy over the rhetorical statements made by Christ during his three and half year ministry, but it set the stage for Jesus' final journey to a place referred to as Golgotha, a location commonly known for public executions and the place where Jesus was crucified. Betrayed by a "so-called brother" and falsely accused by others, Jesus was a willing victim for the afflicted. However, "Jesus earliest critics were unhappy with him, and almost cast him off a cliff, because they felt that, in his famously unsuccessful first sermon, in Luke 4:18-19, he unacceptably collapsed piety and policy into a single obligation" (Gomes 177). Moreover, for Gomes, Jesus' proclamation that He was sent on a mission to give sight to the blind, liberate the minds of the captives, and let the oppressed go free, was problematic for those who were in opposition to His "Social Gospel."

In his song "Holler If Ya Hear Me," rapper Tupac Shakur draws a parallel between himself and the character of Jesus Christ. Several rappers have referenced Jesus' sermons, social commentary, and ultimate martyrdom as the foundation for their rhetorical remarks, but in the case of Shakur, his lyrical messages not only expands on the many issues that concerned Jesus during his three and half years of ministry, but they also speak to the frustrations of a Black man living in urban America.



They call me white devil, black jesus  
Heaven closes, hell freezes  
Egos trippin, scripts keep flippin  
Bloods keep bloodin, crips keep crippin  
Time keeps slippin and I keep fallin  
I cant see but I hear them callin, ballers ballin  
Players playin, haters fightin, righteous prayin...  
They call me black jesus, white mooses  
Heaven freezes, hell closes  
B-boy posin, punk rock chicks, kids are alright but I need my fix  
If you diggin the mix, feelin the drugs, if you keepin it real  
If you livin like thugs, I spit kisses and hugs like forty five slugs...  
Hey call me white sinner, black martyr, live wire  
Fire starter, jungle brother, red neck cracker, freak of nature  
New world slacker, sex junkie lookin for a dealer  
You can play the leper girl and I can play the healer  
Shit is only gettin realer, baby havent you heard  
That the bird, bird, bird, yes the bird is the word  
It go one for the trebble, two for the times, and three for my homies and  
four for the dimes...  
Black jesus, white mooses  
Heaven freezes, hell closes  
Singin na, na, na, na, na, na...

Tupac Shukur's cultural meaning has been the focus for discourse in Black popular culture for many years. Shukur, through his lyrics, articulates the pain and suffering that victimized his urban American persona. As a result, an image of Tupac created as a "type of Christ" (Black Jesus) ultimately raises the issue of his body as an object sacrificed in martyrdom.<sup>11</sup>

Critics argue that any comparison of Tupac to the martyrdom of Jesus (especially, since the essence of his lyrics frequently focus on thug life, violence, and a "misogynistic gospel"), demeans the work done by Christ at the Cross. Conversely, Michael Eric Dyson contends the opposite effect comes into play with those who loved him (Tupac)—which were his disciples. Dyson states:

The very notion that Tupac was a martyr, for the cause of thug life, Black male hardships, or economic inequality, or hopeless urban existence means that competing martyrdoms failed to adequately represent just what those who loved Tupac and proclaim his martyrdom lost: a figure who in the spirit of his song "Black Jesus" loved like they loved, smoked like they smoked, hurt like they hurt, and died like they may die. (264)

Moreover, Dyson posits that there are four crucial notions to the conception of martyrdom: 1)

*Embodiment*--the martyr's deaths embodies and anticipates the death of those who will

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<sup>11</sup> On the back of Tupac Shakur is the Gothic Cross with the Bible verse Exodus 18:11, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods." Some say that Tupac was the "Black Jesus." To see the photo of the Gothic Cross on the back of Tupac, refer to the article "20 Best Hip Hop and Rapper Tattoos of All Time" available at: <http://www.sojones.com>. Tupac's Gothic Cross is listed as "10: Artist Name: Tupac Shakur" Photo can also be accessed from <<http://www.bandswallpapers.com/img1442.htm>>.

follow; 2) *Identification*--the martyr identifies with the community that he associates with and is considered “the Leader of the Pack.” 3) *Substitution*--the leader dies in the place of his followers (which was the case in the crucifixion of Jesus); 4) *Elevation*--the martyr is elevated to another level; he elevates the condition of his followers, drawing attention to their (the believers’) personal sufferings (265). Ultimately, when one reflects on the social commentary and martyrdom of certain rappers, the argument can be made that similarities exist between them.

One of the most powerful moments for Jesus in his ministry occurred on a hillside in Galilee. It was at this location that Jesus delivered one of His most coveted sermons titled “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7). The context of his sermon describes to His disciples the principles of God’s Kingdom and states that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. In this particular sermon, Jesus reaffirms the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament and declares that the attitude of “Man” will dictate where they spend eternity. Moreover, Jesus makes the proclamation that He has come to fulfill the law and that the divine law deals with thoughts and motives as well as overt acts. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asserts that all men have missed the mark—the standards of righteousness demanded by the Mosaic law; therefore, salvation is not possible through the works of the law. Furthermore, Jesus emphasizes in his sermon that the Mosaic Law “cannot save anyone and the redeemed of the present age are not under law” (Scofield 975).

The essence of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount focused on the principles and rules of God’s kingdom better known as the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12). In summation, if I had to create a lyrical rap song for Jesus, it would begin and end with something like this:

The Bible states that “Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain side and sat down. His disciples came to Him and He began to teach them saying” (rapping):

Don't front me, or pimp me  
You not the one that sent me  
Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
They truly understand my lyrics  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
Seldom do they toot their own horn,  
Some may consider the lowly meek,  
As Social Gospel rapping Jesus Freaks  
I say bless them anyway,  
For they shall inherit the earth some day  
Are you hungry? You need to eat,  
Are you thirsty? You need to drink  
Righteousness will fill your soul,  
Righteousness will quench your thirst,  
Seek me while I may be found,  
Knock at my door while I am still around  
Too many brothers say, “Christianity ain't about S\*\*\*\*”  
Too many brothers say, “Jesus you need to quit”  
Nevertheless, you see my brother, I cannot stop  
Too many homies are ready to drop  
Blessed are the pure in heart that want to see God,

For they understand that Jesus is no fraud,  
 Blessed are the peacemakers, who are called the sons of God,  
 They rap about me in an era known as “Post Mod”  
 I came to heal the sick and give sight to the blind,  
 If you don’t believe that, then you can kiss my B\*\*\*\*\*  
 Rejoice, be glad, no need to be mad,  
 Great is your reward in heaven, and trust me it’s not bad  
 Be the light I asked you to be,  
 Don’t hide in darkness because that’s an affront to me  
 Praise your Father in heaven; give Him all you got for me  
 Time is running out, hey, hey, I say, time is running out

Given the theme of the Beatitudes, instead of focusing on violence and material things, perchance Jesus’ rap would focus on a generation (the hip hop generation) who has not heard a relevant message regarding the God of the Universe. After all, how can they believe in the one they have not heard about? (Rom. 10:14-15.) Jesus’ rap would probably concentrate on the fact that there is no difference between Black and White, Jew and Gentile; however, time is running out for a civilization that is at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all, continues to be at war with themselves (Kanye West “Jesus Walks”).<sup>12</sup>

*“I want to talk to God but I’m afraid cause we ain’t spoke in so long; God show me the way cause the devil trying to break me down...”* (Kanye West “Jesus Walks”)

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<sup>12</sup> “The Passion of Kanye West” on the front cover of *Rolling Stone Magazine* (January 2006) available at: <[http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/kanye\\_west\\_world](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/kanye_west_world)>

## CONCLUSION

*Sing to the Lord a New Song;  
Sing to the Lord, all the Earth  
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;  
Proclaim his salvation day after day*

Psalm 96: 1-2 NIV

### **The Role of the Church Today**

From the pulpit to the streets, the image and social thought of Black Americans has proven to be not only controversial, but a problematic pill for most White Americans to swallow. The liberation movement (which is often associated with Black liberation theology and Black Christian rap) is criticized, despite its emphasis placed on the plight of the poor and compassion for the oppressed. Moreover, the criticism the movement receives often stems from the fact that the oppressor is portrayed as being un-loving and un-human, thus, articulating a belief that “only the oppressed have any access to God” (McGrath 247).

This study’s central argument raises several questions regarding the “oppressed” and the relationship between contemporary Black Christian rap and Black liberation theology, which the chapter analyses have attempted to answer. In **Chapter I**, I examined the scholarship of James Cone and the role of Christian identity from a “Black perspective.” Additionally, my review revealed Christian identity could rest with one’s relationship and responsibility for the needs and conditions of one’s brothers and sisters both inside the church and beyond. Therefore, Chapter I served to reflect on the historical truths pertaining to the biblical foundation of Black liberation theology and the fundamental nature of freedom and liberation.

In **Chapter II**, I review the role of two musical genres that played an important part in the early development of the Black urban church in America—the blues and Negro

spirituals. Moreover, this chapter's objective was to convey the callous practices of slavery, along with an assessment of the historical significance of these musical genres, which were often used to describe despair within African American culture. Furthermore, I contend that through the musical expression of Black Christian rap, a new voice for liberation has surfaced. This new voice does not replace the cries of its forerunner; however, Black Christian rappers support the efforts of Black liberation theology by challenging issues of patriarchy, poverty, oppression, and racism, yet, still reflecting lyrically, the salvific work of Jesus Christ.

**Chapter III** reflects upon the integration of Marxism and Black Theology, in an attempt to identify the particular claims suggested by Black Theologians and Marxist thinkers regarding their definition of the "essence of freedom." In chapter III, I argue that the examination of Marxist cultural theory and its relationship to Black liberation theology allows for the analysis of religious and cultural discourses as realities of the social construct of contemporary capitalism and "its ideological partner, White supremacy" (Cummings 74). Additionally, George C.L. Cummings states that by definition, through the consumption of capitalistic goods, Marxist cultural theory examines the issue of White dominance (the goods are produced by White America), and male dominance (White males control the production of goods and services) which ultimately become the dominant pervasive language of a given society (74). I would agree with Cummings that Black churches have been influenced by the dominant culture, however, I have contended that the new voices for resistance, the Black Christian rappers, seek to articulate a innovative message of hope for the victims of racism; one that is consistent with the liberating message proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this dissertation as stated earlier is to examine Black liberation theology and its relationship to a recent musical experience, Black Christian rap. In addition, I have argued that the emergence of Black Christian rap based ministries has taken on the role of a new liberating theological theme among youth within the Black evangelical community. Teresa L. Reed states, “Powerful notions of good versus evil, of sanctity versus sin, and God versus the Devil governed the religious perspectives of blacks who viewed secular music as the forbidden fruit youthful excess” (90). Using examples of successful Black Christian rap artists, I have attempted to illustrate that regardless of the negative implications that surround the secular version of hip hop and rap, the co-opting of these musical styles by Christian rappers has proven to be an effective evangelical tool in reaching the “saved” as well as the “unsaved” adolescent. In the same way, I have argued that the central part of Black liberation theology, which dates back to slavery, reflects the cries of African American Christians concerning freedom, sin, and White oppressive behavior. Moreover, oppression and the sinful nature of man are two themes that create the spiritual foundation for both the Black liberation theologian and the Black rapper.

On the other hand, politics aside, from a Christian perspective the church is still seeking however imperfectly, to obey the purpose for which Jesus Christ established it. According Rev. Dr. Tony Evans, “He called out a people for his name to continue and complete the work he began. Now that Jesus is no longer among us in His body, the church is to be his body on earth” (32-33). Based on the historical information of the Black church, I argue throughout this study that the creative art of musical expression and Black theological proclamation is not a new phenomenon. “The essence of worship in the black church has always focused on the song, dance, and most importantly the Word of God” (Corbit 270).



Furthermore, my research has proven that African Americans traditionally have expressed their love for God through some form of emotional physical jubilation.

“The development of Black liberation theology has brought with it a number of tensions” (Cone 17). According to Cecil Wayne Cone, some of these tensions are a result of efforts by the Black theologian to remain true to the Black religious experience in their theological interpretation (17). Furthermore, while trying to maintain identification with the Black religious tradition, the Black theologian struggles with the question of whether Black liberation theology, as an academic discipline, will enhance the faith experience of African Americans or contribute to its destruction (Cone 17). Cone’s writings in 1975 pose some challenging concerns regarding Black theology’s identification within the academic structure of White seminaries. Cone feared that the Black Nationalism motif that is entrenched within the rhetoric of Black liberation theology could ultimately be misinterpreted and cause the demise of this provocative voice from the pulpit. The Jeremiah Wright situation in 2008, illustrates the concerns raised by Cecil Cone in 1975.

The problem of theological standards lies within the opinions and working conditions of White theology (Cone 18). Theology, according to Cecil Cone, like other fields of western intellectual activity, was developed in large part by White American theologians. Based on the paradigm of White theology in America, there is a lack of sensitivity by Black theologians concerning Euro-American theological customs and discourses (18). This lack of sensitivity challenged many Black theologians in the United States during the 1960s to confront the “hegemony of a European-American White theological perspective that had for centuries equated European-American White privilege and power with the omnipotence of God” (Cummings 71).

The historical significance of religious White privilege and power in America, inspired Black theologians to take a closer look at their own theological foundation and consider developing a theological discourse that would focus its message on the history, culture, and religion of African American people (Cummings 71). Moreover, for Cummings, from the inception of Black theology, the central concern has always been the racist values that have been woven within the seams of White theology. Ironically, while the first generations of Black Proclaimers were concerned with establishing an independent voice and continual critique of White Christian institutions, it has become the task of the second generation of Black theologians to elaborate and define the character of Black liberation theology (Cummings 71).

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness" to refer to the fact that African Americans always view the world through two lenses. First, they see it from their own perspectives as members of an oppressed community, living out the consequences of a particular history. Second, they perceive life from the point of view of a dominant culture that seeks to impose on African Americans its own false understanding of their status and worth. Christian educators working within the African American community have often drawn on this idea as they seek to apply the gospel to the spiritual formation of members of that community. The work of the Black theologian has been to combat the negative attitudes and perspectives that the larger society would dictate to African Americans, while providing positive and powerful images of their self worth drawn from the gospel message. However, in spite of the efforts made by the Black theologian to present a positive image of "self worth," skepticism surrounding the ethos of Black liberation theology continues to produce

resentment within White America; especially among conservative gabbers such as radio/TV talk show host Glenn Beck.

Beck who has become one of the most outspoken critics against Black theology and appears to support the continuation of Black oppression, equates the themes found in Black liberation theology to be a message of hatred for White America and a challenger to White supremacy. Beck has taken his personal reflections a step further by drawing a parallel to President Barack Obama's relationship with his former pastor Jeremiah Wright, thus, accusing the President of being "a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for White people and the White culture" (*Huffington Post*, July 2009). Even though President Obama has several White Americans serving in his administration, Beck contends that, "Mr. Obama is not only a supporter of Black liberation theology, he is also a racist." Moreover, it has become clear that critics of Black liberation theology and Black Christian rap seem to dwell on misinterpretations, and one-sided information ultimately resulting in personal agenda items for several people. Consequently, what you have is a false read and perceptual bias that in the end demeans the objective of both voices, which is to relate the gospel to the African American experience. Glenn Beck is a powerful voice on radio heard weekly on over 400 stations across America. His radio program, *The Glenn Beck Show*, is the third highest national talk radio program among adults 25-54 in America (Glenn Beck.com). However, his inflammatory statements and perverted truths have not only misrepresented the words of Jeremiah Wright, but he has also defamed the character of the President of the United States—Barack Obama.

Throughout this study, I have argued that the cries of oppression coming from the Black pulpit and through the ministry of song by Black Americans are not a new observable

fact. I can still hear my grandmother praising God's name through the ministry of such classic hymns as: "Amazing Grace," "Shine On," "His Eye is on the Sparrow," "Didn't it Rain Children," "How Great Thy Are," and "Soon and Very Soon, We are Going To See The King." One of her favorite melodies was the old gospel hymn "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" by Thomas A. Dorsey:

Precious Lord, take my hand  
 Lead me on, let me stand  
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn  
 Thru the storm, thru the night,  
 Lead me on, to the light  
 Take my hand, precious Lord  
 Lead me on

As I hear the moans of oppression through my grandmother's cries, and older saints shouting "hallelujah" to a message of deliverance from the Black liberation preacher, I can also hear young souls rejoicing through the ministry of the Christian rapper. According to biblical discourse, the ultimate goal of evangelism is to reach "lost" souls. Furthermore, from a Christian point of view, if souls are being "saved" and lives are being touched, subsequently, Christ's great commission "To go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" becomes a reality through the efforts of Black Christian proclaimers. I maintain that the same God who was present with the fifty-one ministers from the National Committee of Negro Churchman on July 31, 1966, is also present today with the Black Christian rapper. In 1966, someone listened to the provocative voices of fifty-one Black theologians; likewise, someone is listening to this new voice in the Christian community.

Conceivably, the Black rappers' communiqué parallels the expository message that stems from the pulpits of the Black liberation theologian; the only difference-- the Black rapper "mixes" their message to a different beat. At least, that is the rap according to Christian rappers Gospel Gangtaz:

Amazin Grace, to me it's the sweet sound  
 To catch a wretch like me, so let the beat pound  
 See, I was lost to the cross, now I'm found  
 I was once blind, but now I see...  
 Why did you want to get with me?  
 A foul mouth full of full of four letters verbs and nouns  
 If sin was water, I was in so deep, I'd drown  
 And even thou I thought clubbin' was fun and church was dumb,  
 He kept bidding me to come son...  
 Amazing, its so amazing  
 Amazin' Grace... (Gospel Gangtaz "Amazing Grace")

As music becomes sanctified to the local church community, or accepted in foreign environments, the existing style begins to be transformed to the cultural standards of the community (Corbitt 277-278). New styles are transformed to the likeness of Christ within the context of one's community. Furthermore, an authentic musical expression develops in the form of a truly "new song." Authentic music means that the community can call the music its own; authentic songs come from within the culture (Corbitt 277-278).

Charles Taylor states authenticity involves “creation and construction as well as discovery, originality, and frequently... opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality” (66). Taylor also states:

But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can have it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. (66)

According to Lionel Trilling, the moral life is always changing:

Now and then, it is possible to observe the moral life in process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formally placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling, which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue. (1)

Perhaps musical probity develops from the removal of political and theological boxing gloves and adapting to the changing climate within a given culture.

In closing, on October 22, 2009, on the campus of New York University at the College Music Journal conference, I had the opportunity to hear the inspiring story of Emmanuel Jal, a young African rapper who at the age of seven became a participant of the civil war in the Sudan during the mid 1980s; it was a war that lasted for more than a decade. The term liberation had a different meaning for Emmanuel Jal. Fighting for the physical and ideological freedom of the Sudanese people meant serving as a soldier in the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. Moreover, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army was a military body that

included ten thousand child soldiers, who like Emmanuel Jal, were fighting a war in search of peace.<sup>1</sup>

Emmanuel Jal presentation on October 22, included horrific descriptions of marching through miles of desert passing the bones of adults and children who had fallen victim to the terrors of war. Additionally, Jal starved to the point of near cannibalism stating that at one point he contemplated eating the flesh of his friend Lual in order to survive,

I knew that if God didn't save me, I would feed myself by morning. Lual was so close. His body still warm and the smell of him in my nostrils. I needed him...I could feel him so close, feel his smell reaching inside me and clawing at my stomach. It was so good. So sweet. But could I do this terrible thing? (172)

Emmanuel continues the story by reflecting on how God had delivered him from committing a sin that would stain his soul forever. Moreover, he states, "And soon [God] would save me again" (173).

Emmanuel Jal concluded his presentation by stating what kept him alive was the daily opportunity he had to pray to the "God of his mother." In his book, he discusses a hymn sung by his mother as she walked through the place that he once called home:

Jesus loves me this I know  
 For the Bible tells me so  
 Little ones to Him belong  
 They are weak but He is strong (9)

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jal, more people died during the war in Sudan than the casualties of Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, the Persian Gulf, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Rwanda. Estimates are that at least two million people died during the Sudan war.

Emmanuel Jal expresses his traumatic experiences through his lyrics; he raps about God and peace in an effort to tell his story on how God saved him for a reason. The first autobiographical song he wrote entitled “War Child” expresses a powerful message of God, peace, and purpose:

I believe I’ve survived for a reason  
 To tell my story, to touch lives  
 Lost my mother and father in this battle  
 My brothers too perished in this struggle  
 All my life I’ve been hiding in the Jungle...  
 I’m a War Child (248-249)

Moreover, Emmanuel Jal continues his testimony by reflecting on lyrics he wrote at a young age with his Aunt Nyagai for a rapping competition in his village. The lyrics went something like this:

God loves us ’ cause He has shown us  
 How to live right, how to imitate Christ  
 You wanna be like Jesus in every way?  
 Try to live right and pray every day? (214)

Jal states that “Everyone in my country has a story to tell, but I am telling mine to speak for all those who can’t. I’m still a soldier, fighting with my pen and paper, for peace till the day I cease” (254). Emmanuel Jal never gave up on hope; moreover, he never gave up on the God of his mother.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Photos of Christian rapper Emmanuel Jal on the cover of the “WARchild” LP are available at: <http://www.emmanueljal.com/>



According to Watkins, “Rappers are engaged in a culture war. They are reinterpreting, reframing, and reconstructing a social and religious worldview through lyrics and rhymes that provide and alternate orientation...In short, they are constructing a theology” (186). I assert that the musical roots of protest are nothing new and were often found in the celebrated hymns of the nineteenth century (Corbitt 93). Moreover, I agree with Watkins that the “songs of the street” reflect a new theology—perhaps a new liberation theology. Thus, the challenge for the Black Christian rapper should be to reflect on the historical significance of the sacred hymns, the revolutionary context of Black theology, and to enhance an awareness of the divine while exploring the religious meaning of life.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, I contend their future will be shaped by their storytelling abilities about repressive behavior in America. As Kirk Franklin proclaims in his song “Stomp,” “It ain’t over, it ain’t over.” Do I have a witness? Amen.

*“No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottle; else the new will burst the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved. No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better” (Luke 5:36-39 KJV).*

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<sup>3</sup> One of the hottest new voices in gospel hip hop and rap, is Israel Houghton. Houghton released the popular crossover single “Just Wanna’ Say” from The Power of One LP in 2009. Music video of Houghton available on YouTube at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6N7d3A39rls>>

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APPENDIX A

**From the sermon "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" September 16, 2001** (Transcript from <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=1>)

Rev. Jeremiah Wright:

I heard Ambassador Peck on an interview yesterday, did anybody else see him or hear him?

He was on Fox News, this is a white man, and he was upsetting the Fox News commentators to no end. He pointed out, did you see him John, a white man, and he pointed out, an ambassador, that what Malcolm X said when he got silenced by Elijah Mohammed was in fact true, America's chickens...are coming home to roost. We took this country by terror, away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arowak, the Comanche, the Arapahoe, the Navajo. Terrorism. We took Africans from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism. We bombed Granada and killed innocent civilians, babies, non-military personnel. We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers and killed unarmed teenagers and toddlers, pregnant mothers, and hardworking fathers. We bombed Qaddafi's home and killed his child. Blessed are they who bash your children's head against a rock. We bombed Iraq. We killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed a plant in Sudan to payback for the attack on our embassy, killed hundreds of hardworking people, mothers and fathers who left home to go that day not knowing that they would never get back home. We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye. Kids playing in the playground, mothers picking up children from school, civilians, not soldiers, people just trying to make it day by day.

We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and Black South Africans and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost.

**From the sermon: “Confusing God and Government” April 13, 2003** (Transcript from <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=1>)

Rev. Jeremiah Wright:

The British government failed, the Russian government failed, the Japanese government failed, the German government failed, and the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese decent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. The government put them in chains. She put them on slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in sub-standard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education, and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three strike law, and then wants us to sing God Bless America...no, no, no.

Not God bless America, God damn America. That's in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent. Think about this, think about this.

For every one Oprah, a billionaire, you've got 5 million blacks who out of work. For every one Colin Powell, a millionaire, you've got 10 million blacks who cannot read. For every one Condoleeza Rice, you've got 1 million in prison. For every one Tiger Woods, who needs to get beat, at the Masters, with his cap, blazin' hips playing on a course that discriminates against women. God has his way of bringing you up short when you get to big for your cap, blazin britches. For every one Tiger Woods, we got 10,000 black kids who will never see a golf course. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent.



APPENDIX B**Ethnic Breakout of Men 18-24, Monday-Sunday 6a-midnight**

<b>STATION</b>	<b>ESTIMATES</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
WENZ –FM	*Average Persons	1,500	1,000	500
Market/Cleveland	**Weekly Cume Persons	25,100	13,600	11,500

This report was created using the following Arbitron information: CLEVELAND; SUMMER 2009 / SPRING 2009; Metro; M-Su 6a-12m; M 18-24.

\*According to Arbitron, **Average Persons** represents the Average Quarter-Hour Persons (AQH Persons). AQH Persons are the average number of persons listening to a particular station for at least five minutes during a 15-minute period.

\*\*According to Arbitron, **Cume Persons** represents the total number of *different* persons who tune to a radio station during the course of a daypart for at least five minutes during the broadcast week.

Based on the ethnic composition of WENZ-FM, over 40% of the weekly cume audience (Men 18-24) are White males.

**WENZ is the Urban/Hip Hop radio station in Cleveland, Ohio.**

Source: 2009 Arbitron Inc.

## APPENDIX C

U.S. Census Bureau's statistics regarding the slave population of the United States from 1790 to 1850.

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## STATISTICS OF THE UNITED STATES.

## CHAPTER V.

## SLAVE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES.

1. *Aggregate Number.*—The number of slaves in the United States in 1850 was 3,204,313. The number in each of the States at this and every previous census will be found in the following table:

TABLE LXXI.—*Slave Population of the United States.*

STATES AND TERRITORIES.	1790.	1800.	1810.	1820.	1830.	1840.	1850.
Alabama.....				41,879	117,549	253,532	342,844
Arkansas.....				1,617	4,576	19,935	47,100
California.....							
Columbia, District of.....		3,244	5,395	6,377	6,119	4,694	3,687
Connecticut.....	2,759	951	310	97	25	17	
Delaware.....	8,887	6,153	4,177	4,509	3,292	2,605	2,290
Florida.....					15,501	25,717	39,310
Georgia.....	22,264	59,404	105,218	149,654	217,531	289,944	381,692
Illinois.....			168	917	747	331	
Indiana.....		135	237	190	3	3	
Iowa.....						16	
Kentucky.....	11,830	40,343	80,561	126,732	165,213	182,258	210,991
Louisiana.....			34,660	69,054	109,588	168,452	244,609
Maine.....					2		
Maryland.....	103,038	105,635	111,502	107,397	102,994	89,737	90,328
Massachusetts.....					1		
Michigan.....				24	32		
Mississippi.....		3,489	17,088	32,814	65,659	195,211	309,878
Missouri.....			3,011	10,222	25,091	58,240	87,422
New Hampshire.....	152	8			3	1	
New Jersey.....	11,423	12,422	10,851	7,557	2,254	674	230
New York.....	21,324	20,342	15,017	10,088	75	4	
North Carolina.....	100,572	133,223	168,824	205,017	245,601	245,817	288,548
Ohio.....					6	3	
Pennsylvania.....	3,737	1,706	795	211	403	64	
Rhode Island.....	952	381	108	48	17	5	
South Carolina.....	107,034	146,151	196,365	258,475	315,401	327,038	384,984
Tennessee.....	3,417	13,581	44,535	80,107	141,603	183,059	239,450
Texas.....							58,161
Vermont.....	17						
Virginia.....	223,427	345,796	392,518	423,153	469,757	449,087	472,323
Wisconsin.....						11	
Territ- ories.							
{ Minnesota.....							
{ New Mexico.....							
{ Oregon.....							
{ Utah.....							26
				1,538,125			
				* less 87			
Aggregate.....	697,697	823,041	1,191,364	1,538,038	2,009,043	2,487,455	3,204,313

TABLE 1: Comparison of Social/Political/Religious Concerns

<b>Black Liberation Theology</b>	<b>Black Christian Rap/Secular Rap Music</b>
Oppression Due to Racism, Black Identity, Black Self-Esteem	Oppression Due to Class and Capitalism
Black Theology and White Supremacy	Focus on the Individual and the Discontent of One's Life on the Streets
Freedom of the Black Community--"God is on the side of the oppressed"	Poverty, Racism And Social Violence within the Black and Latino Communities
Socialism, Marxist Ideologies and Christian Theology	Personal Testimony
Blending of Racial Oppression and Theology	Teen Pregnancy, Police Brutality, Drug Addiction
	Black-on-Black Crime in Urban America
	Black Male-Black Female Relationships
	Rap's Visibility and Self-Image

TABLE 2: Black Liberation Theology and Rap Music Timeline

1966—	Black liberation theology originated on July 31, when 51 black pastors (National Committee of Black Church Men) bought a full page ad in the <i>New York Times</i> and demanded a more aggressive approach to eradicating racism. They endorsed the demands of the Black Power—Civil Rights Movements, but the new crusade found its source of inspiration in the Bible.
1970-1979—	Early Influences on Christian Hip Hop (Secular Artists): The Last Poets; Gil Scott-Heron; Afrika Bambaataa; Clive Campbell (DJ Kool Herc); Grandmaster Flash; Kool Moe Dee; Sugar Hill Gang
1970—	James H. Cone publishes <i>A Black Theology of Liberation</i>
1972	James H. Cone publishes <i>The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation</i>
1973—	Gustavo Gutierrez publishes <i>A Theology of Liberation, History, Politics, and Salvation</i>
1980-1989—	Notable Christian Rap Artists: Michael Peace; Fred Lynch; Danny “D-Boy” Rodriguez; T-Bone; P.I.D (Prechas in Disguise); S.F.C (Soldiers for Christ)
1980-1989—	Influential Secular Artists: Run-DMC; Kurtis Blow; Grandmaster Flash; Russell Simmons; N.W.A.; Public Enemy
1985—	Stephen Wiley, first Christian Rapper, releases rap song “Bible Break”
1990-Present	Christian Rappers: Antonious, B.B. Jay, Elle R.O.C., Gospel Gangstaz, Grits, King Cyz, Knowdaverbs, Israel Houghton, Lil’ Raskull, Mr. Real, Toby Mac, Willie Will, and Kirk Franklin
1990-Present	Secular Rap Artists: Kanye West; 2 Live Crew; Ice Cube; Dr. Dre., Notorious B.I.G.; Snoop Doggy Dogg; Tupac Shakur; Lauryn Hill; Talib Kweli; Mos Def; Ludacris, Juvenile; Lil Wayne and the Hypnotized Mindz Camp; Jay-Z; Queen Latifah; 50 Cent; P. Diddy, The Coup.
1992	James Cone publishes <i>Martin &amp; Malcolm &amp; America: A Dream or a Nightmare</i> , James Cone
1993	James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore publish <i>Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume Two: 1980-1992</i>
1997	James H. Cone publishes <i>God of the Oppressed</i>

- 2001— Jeremiah Wright's September 16 sermon "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall"
- 2003— Jeremiah Wright's April 13 sermon "Confusing God and Government"
- 2006— Barack Obama publishes *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*