

POETICS WITH A PROMISE:
PERFORMANCES OF FAITH AND GENDER IN CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP

by

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To my parents, William J. Brooks, Sr. and Ranetta F. Brooks.
Thank you for your undying love, compassionate guidance, and selfless giving.

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ABSTRACT

Poetics With a Promise: Performances of Faith and Gender in Christian Hip-Hop

by

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Poetics With a Promise explores how African American Christian hip-hop artists negotiate tensions between the sacred and the secular in African American Christianity and in popular culture. Having first arrived on the church and popular culture scenes in the early-1980s, Christian, or holy, hip-hop music is unabashedly evangelical. But, despite its evangelical content, Christian hip-hop is often excluded from many African American churches. Some church elders consider Christian hip-hop to be an incomplete transformation of secular street culture, remaining inappropriate for the sacred context of church services. On the other hand, Christian hip-hop is only marginally accepted within secular hip-hop circles, as some rap artists question its authenticity and relevance. Both male and female Christian hip-hop artists face a myriad of artistic and religious pressures and expectations as they negotiate complex religious, gender and musical politics in their work.

Poetics With a Promise, the first full-length study of Christian hip-hop to date, analyzes on- and off-stage performances of gender and faith. I demonstrate how performers' racialized masculinities and femininities are constructed, performed, and represented as caught in between the secular demands of the hip-hop musical and cultural form that they utilize and the sacred nature of the messages that they endeavor to convey. I approach the study of religion and faith as "lived religion," examining faith as it is practiced and performed in day-to-day life. Through ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and music, lyrical and performance analyses, this project intervenes in African American and American Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and Popular Culture Studies in its examination of the intersections of the sacred and secular and how faith becomes the lens through which these artists perform their gendered identities.

The context of Christian hip-hop reveals that the historic and ongoing tensions between public and private, religious and secular, and spirit and the body hold similarities to controversies surrounding gospel blues in the 1930s and 1940s. But at the same time, technological advances, globalization, and youth's increasingly deinstitutionalized spiritual practices challenge our understandings of tensions between the sacred and the secular in African American life and culture.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD: NEGOTIATING THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR IN CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP

I've always found the expression "Christian hip-hop" to be a bit of an oxymoron. It's a phrase that seems as loaded with contradiction as, say, the emerging term "hip-hop feminist." But this is what happens when tradition meets the new. It's what happens when generations collide.

—Bakari Kitwana

In the International Institute in Detroit, Michigan on December 15, 2007, teens, mostly African American and between the ages of 13 and 18, eagerly awaited Lecrae's arrival. It was after 9:00 p.m. and Lecrae, the highlighted Christian rap artist for the night's 7:00 p.m. concert, still hadn't arrived. Nevermind the scheduled talkback session about the importance of hip-hop music to the church, just let him get here, their faces said. They had already participated in a full day of activities organized by Friendship Productions¹: a rap writing workshop with female Christian rap artist Mahogany Jones; a Vision workshop during which they charted their spiritual gifts, personal talents, and religious callings; and a cypher circle where each participant added a lyric, a snap, hum, or other musical offering as they created a circular

¹ Friendship Productions (FP) is a Detroit-based deejay service event planning & production company, and lifestyle ministry founded in 2003 by Esosa Osai, a Michigan State University engineering alum. FP's advertisement materials state, "Our operation is Kingdom Music, Kingdom Lifestyle, and Kingdom Leaders."

ensemble of improvised musical harmony. In their anticipation of Lecrae's performance, some teens stood around and chatted with each other – energetically, nervously – glancing outside at the heavy falling snow and the increasingly intense winds that proved to be a harbinger for blizzard conditions.

Other teens found ways to amuse themselves by playing piano in an adjoining room, singing songs that they all seemed to know. A male African American teen in the group suddenly breaks out into a seemingly improvised sermon about the “goodness of the Lord.” Seconds later, the piano playing hastens to a crescendo and emotional frenzy, including hallelujahs, amens, screams, and the religious shout breaks out amongst the group of teens. Is this feigned possession by “the holy ghost”? Playing church? “Authentic” ecstatic experience? Does this performance of spiritual sincerity signal the fact that preceding African American religious and musical traditions are in fact deeply embedded in the lives of young, contemporary fans of Christian hip-hop?

The teens that I observed seemed to be well aware of historical forms of African American religious and musical traditions. As they mixed gospel songs with contemporary Christian and R&B tunes with a hip-hop flair, they evoked the music of their African American past in their extemporaneous musical creations. Although some would argue that the hip-hop generation lacks a knowledge of and reverence for cultural and musical traditions of the past, the haunting presence of the black American religious and musical history poignantly resounds in their musical productions and performances. Through “musicking,” Christopher Small's term for all social activity surrounding music, black youth of the hip-hop

generation make religion mean something concrete in their lives, even as they perform the religious identities that they express.²

And while these teens anticipated a Christian or “holy hip-hop”³ performance, the sensibilities that they expressed in their own performances evoked ever-circulating, historical arguments about performative and cultural aspects of black religious and social life in the United States: sacred life versus secular culture, “good” versus “bad” images and representations of blackness, “backwards,” southern folk roots versus (post-)modern, contemporary and “advanced” cultures. In this dissertation, *Poetics With a Promise: Performances of Faith and Gender in Christian Hip-Hop*, I examine these historic dichotomies through exploring the embodiment of the Christian faith in performance and discourse. The performances that lie at the center of this project are both staged performances – taking place at concerts, youth workshops, and church services – and also performances of self, in routine self-fashioning and in face-to-face interactions, such as the interviews I conducted with fans and artists of Christian hip-hop. I also examine the discourse within these staged and interactive performances⁴ to explore how language, agency and ongoing power struggles coalesce in creating particular ways of talking about black faith in practice, and varied but clearly defined expectations for being young, black, evangelical

² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings and Performing and Listening*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

³ The term “holy hip-hop” considered to be synonymous with Christian hip-hop and is used by practitioners to signify the set apart or “holy” nature of their music as worship and as evangelizing tools.

⁴ Like scholars Judith Butler, Marvin Carlson, and many others, I make a distinction between everyday self-presentation or quotidian performances of self, and staged performances. I follow Erving Goffman's theorizations in *Presentations of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), as he deems interactions as “performances” that are informed by one's audience and environment.

Christians.⁵ In particular, I explore how Christian hip-hop artists' racialized masculinity and femininity are performed within contested power dynamics and tensions between the secular demands of the music form that they perform, and the religious nature of the messages that they endeavor to convey.

Through exploring the context of the Christian or holy hip-hop generation, and by comparing contemporary ways of negotiating the tensions between the sacred and the secular in African American popular and religious cultures to preceding models, we can begin to understand why Christian hip-hop is a burgeoning performance practice through which youth and young adults create unique Christian and evangelical identities. How these artists and fans negotiate the power dynamics surrounding perceived and real demarcations of sacred or religious and secular or "worldly" domains give us new knowledge for understanding the complexities of contemporary black culture. My project grapples with the messy and muddled tensions between the sacred and the secular in black culture; reveals that traditionalist black churches and officials, more so than those in "secular" black culture, are invested in maintaining and policing the boundaries and false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; and that tensions between religiosity and worldliness formulate the context for power relationships that characterize the critiques and attempted censorship of Christian hip-hop.

I define "gender" as the set of socialized and often stereotypical behaviors and characteristics that come to be commonly expected for males and females

⁵ Social structures include institutions and organizations such as churches that shape the social context of Christian hip-hop.

through the reproduction of hegemonic and heteronormative societal structures and rituals, such as in marriage, dating, and child-rearing, and in daily interactions. Performance includes both staged and everyday performances of identities such as gender; staged performances are often considered to be calculated and even artificial. However, I would argue that person-to-person interactions are also characterized by calculated performances of one's identity, which shifts according to group and social contexts. Both gender and performance are located in cultural politics, or the competing sides in culture wars that police individuals' interactions and self-representations. In this project I explore how gender, race, performance and cultural politics intertwine in the power relationships characteristic of Christian hip-hop culture.

Christian hip-hop music, or gospel rap, was born in the late-1980s, created by Contemporary Christian artists as well as newly-converted hip-hop fans who saw a need to make Christianity relevant to the cultural realities of youth and young adults who did not necessarily grow up in the church.⁶ One of the first mainstream groups thought to have popularized Christian rap to national audiences was dc Talk,⁷ a mixed-race, Contemporary Christian⁸ music group that began performing and recording what was then called gospel rap in the late-

⁶ One of my interviewees, Kim "Kiwi" Williams, a gospel and Christian hip-hop promoter and artist, also confirmed that Christian hip-hop has been in existence since the 1980s.

⁷ The "dc" in dc Talk stands for "Disciples of Christ."

⁸ By mixed-race, I mean that the group is composed of two white artists and one black artist. Contemporary Christian music (CCM), also known as inspirational music, is genre of popular music that incorporates the styles of rock, R&B and pop music produced primarily by white Christians. CCM reached popularity during the Jesus movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Amy Grant is one CCM artist whose inspirational music has garnered both praise from fans and criticism from skeptics who doubted the "sincerity" of her work. For more on CCM, see Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*. (Lexington: University of Lexington Press, 1999).

1980s.⁹ Their first all gospel rap album, *Nu Thang*, was released in 1990. Tracks such as “I Luv Rap Music” and “Nu Thang,” although hailed for their trailblazing status as some of the first Christian rap songs, bore the sharp criticism of mainstream hip-hop artists, who questioned the seeming co-optation of what was then a very political and largely anti-Christian music and culture that was informed by the neo-Islamic religions of Five Percenterism and the Nation of Islam.¹⁰ This criticism stemmed from the at times simplistic lyrics and instrumentation and poor production quality in much of the late-1980s and early-1990s holy hip-hop (HHH) music, which sonically contrasted with the socially-conscious lyrics and comparatively sophisticated musical tracks of secular, mainstream rap artists.

Those among the most revered in hip-hop and in popular culture seemed direct opposites of holy hip-hop artists. In 1982 and 1983, several years before dc Talk released *Nu Thang*, hip-hop guru Afrika Bambaataa was responsible for popular mainstream hip-hop tracks “Planet Rock” and “Looking For the Perfect Beat.” These quintessential rap tracks, and the Africanized culture Bambaataa performed, showcased Bambaataa’s funk music and Afrocentrism influences, and set the stage for a parallel urgency and social consciousness communicated by the militant and revolutionary-minded duo Public Enemy, who released *Fear of a Black Planet* in 1990, what is now considered a classic rap album. To both Christian and

⁹ Some Christian hip-hop artists do not consider dc Talk to be “real” Christian hip-hop. I explore controversies surrounding the history and context of Christian hip-hop more closely in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ This would later become the reason by G. Craig Lewis of EX Ministries would deem hip-hop a culture that is endemically evil and not suited for the expression of the Christian faith. I engage Lewis’s argument in Chapter 2. In some Islamic sects, hip-hop music and culture is either considered *haram*, forbidden or *halal*, permissible. For more on this issue, please see chapter 2 as well as Shanesha Brooks Tatum, “Spirituality and Religion in Christian Hip-Hop Literature and Culture” in Tarshia Stanley, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Hip-Hop Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008): 226-228.

non-Christian hip-hop fans and artists exposed to the beginnings of Christian hip-hop, it seemed that this musical form had quite a long way to go in order to gain peer status with the lyrical, musical, and stylistic sophistication of mainstream hip-hop artists, who had been crafting this cultural form since the late-1970s.

But, this is part of the “official” history of hip-hop, and similar to the media’s treatment of underground or subculture hip-hop, underground Christian hip-hop has not been engaged by the media on the same level. One of my interviewees noted that many Christian hip-hop parties were often performed in private venues, such as in friends’ or fellow artists’ basements, or in “secular” contexts such as lounges and clubs. This anonymous informant explained that he often performed his music in clubs throughout the Los Angeles area. He noted that he received very different responses, for instance, from club attendees, who enjoyed and supported the music, than from churches, who often questioned the verity of his faith based on his performances of Christian hip-hop music.

This dissertation takes up these tensions between the sacred and the secular by examining a living archive of black male and female voices, performances and conversations in the contemporary moment. I mobilize the voices, life stories, performances, music, conversations and debates around and about Christian and “secular” cultures. *Poetics With a Promise* aims to understand how and why urban black youth and young adults in Southeast Michigan configure and mediate tensions between religious messages and “secular” musical tools as they coincide in Christian hip-hop. Through locating sacred/secular negotiations in specific temporal and spatial sites, *Poetics With a Promise* takes a cross-sectional view of this issue

through the lens of Christian hip-hop while considering the larger issues that frame these negotiations. This dissertation, the first full-length study of Christian hip-hop,¹¹ pushes back against abstracted concepts of the interconnectedness of the religious or spiritual and secular in black¹² life by illustrating the material consequences and lifestyles of individuals who negotiate conflicting spaces, conflicted audiences and intersectional identities.

Taking the lead from Marla F. Frederick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (2003), E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), Kyra Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (2006), and *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* by Gayle Wald (2007), *Poetics with a Promise* examines embodied performances of faith, and argues that the Christian faith practice is the lens through which young, black

¹¹ The earliest known academic texts to explore the religious and spiritual dynamics of *secular* hip-hop music are two special editions of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* published in 1991 and 1995. The 1995 edition, titled *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap*, includes essays by authors such as Michael Eric Dyson and Jon Michael Spencer (the journal's editor), and it explores how secular rap music and culture continue in the tradition of black theological critique and protest. Following these special editions was Michael Eric Dyson's *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (1996), an autobiographical exploration of Dyson's experiences as an ordained Baptist minister and public intellectual concerning the transformative power of hip-hop culture. A more recent work, *Anthony B. Pinn's Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003), is the first edited collection to explore gradients of spirituality and religion evoked in *secular* rap music in a variety of traditions, from the evolution of African American Islam in contemporary hip-hop, to spiritual and religious metaphors, ideologies, and allusions in rap music by artists such as Tupac Shakur, to the exploration of ostensibly secular rap music as a spiritual practice. Robin Sylvan's *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (2002) includes a chapter titled "The Message: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture," which consists of an ethnographic study of *secular* rap music and its function as a transcendent, spiritual, or religious experience for devout fans. This dissertation is the first work to take up Christian hip-hop as a music and performance genre.

¹² I use black and African American interchangeably in this work to refer specifically to the African American experience, or the black experience in the United States, which has a particular set of social and historical realities – including slavery, racial uplift efforts, historical tensions between religious and secular life, and the particular history of race records – which enable a specific U.S.-black history of music and performance.

urban adults in Christian hip-hop perform their gendered, sexual and racialized identities. This dissertation speaks to these and other texts in the fields of cultural studies, performance studies, and African American Studies. As an interdisciplinary project, it engages with these and similar texts in so far as they explore embodied identities and spirituality in music and culture.

In *Between Sundays*, Marla F. Frederick illustrates that the moment-to-moment decisions black women make about how they will live out their faith gives us a more complicated and grounded picture of Christian faith practice. In addressing the accommodation vs. resistance¹³ argument that so frames much of our thinking about black Christianity with its European influences and African retentions, Frederick states: "...[W]omen's lives are not easily placed on a binary continuum between political and apolitical activity alone. Instead they manifest a diversity of belief, an often contradictory set of commitments, and a depth of religious engagement that defy easy either/or labels" (6). I extend this insight to the faith practice of both men and women that are featured in this dissertation. Easy either/or labels such as sacred/secular, traditional/innovative, or church/street do not define them, and their thinking and lives easily complicate these false binaries. Moreover, this dissertation takes a similar ethnographic approach as Frederick's, interviewing women and men within the Southeast Michigan Christian hip-hop community in order to understand how they define themselves.

¹³ The accommodation vs. resistance debate explores on the one hand, how black people have assimilated to white cultural values and acquiesced to oppressive, racist forces of white culture, and on the other hand, how black people have resisted these forces in clamoring for civil rights, for revolution, and for the institution of a new order that values their humanity. For more on the accommodation vs. resistance as it materialized in the lives of black enslaved women in the south, see Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness* theorizes the embodiment of blackness through performance, illustrating how the bounds of blackness are inscribed and reinscribed in an ongoing saga of identity negotiation politics. He examines the "dialogical/dialectical relationship" between blackness and performance and uses performances in each chapter as both methodology and disciplinary praxis (9). His call for scholars to examine the ways that performances have been intimately connected to blackness, and how black gender and sexuality complicate notions of blackness, is especially related to this project because while Christian hip-hop artists do not ostensibly name the racialized gendered identities that they are performing through the genre of hip-hop music and culture, this unspoken blackness, and its historical connection to performed identities, is always already foregrounded. Blackness acts as subscript and superscript in musical performances throughout history, and an examination of Christian hip-hop illustrates how race, class, and gender coincide to create distinctive performances of Christian faith based on these identities.

Kyra Gaunt illustrates this embodiment of not only blackness, but also gender in music performance. Gaunt argues that music performance as embodied by black women challenges histories of black music, which often examine only vocal or recorded performances, and overlook even highly visible everyday performances: "While the embodied musical practices of black girls are ordinarily visible in African American neighborhoods and urban communities, the appropriation of black girls' musical game-songs by male commercial artists is often overlooked" (2). When examining the embodied histories of black music and culture, different stories

surface than those that do when only examining audiorecorded or scored music. Who are the bodies visibly performing a particular genre of music, and why is this the case? How does bodily memory – dance, impromptu movements, and double-dutch in Gaunt’s case – give us a clearer picture of the politics and power dynamics underpinning music performance, a particular form of what Gaunt calls “kinetic orality”? Through examining the body’s articulation of cultural forms such as Christian hip-hop music, we gain a clearer vision of what the terms of engagement are within musical practice. Noting which bodies are performing what kind of music, and why – for instance, why black women in Christian hip-hop music and culture perform Christian hip-hop in particular ways – renders the often backgrounded power brokerage and culture wars in music more clear, community-specific and tangible. Moreover, attention to the black bodies performing the music reveals ways that artists negotiate and attempt circumvent racialized gender stereotypes, a theme that I explore in close detail in chapters 3 and 4.

Gayle Wald’s text, *Shout, Sister Shout!*, one of the most instructive recent texts on black female performer, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, illustrates the complexities of Tharpe’s lifestyle, and how she negotiated what others often saw as a conflicted performance: performing Christian music in secular contexts such as in clubs and dance halls. Understanding how Tharpe negotiated tensions between religious and non-religious expectations for her work gives us new insight into the cultural politics in which she was engaged. Tharpe, a black female vocalist and electronic guitarist, did not see a distinction between performing for religious and secular audiences. Her flamboyant performances of gospel, blues and a variety of other

music forms, and her vibrant and bracing stage persona stood in contrast to those of other religious performers of her day, such as Mahalia Jackson. Her life, rife with contradictions in the eyes of some lookers-on, including multiple failed marriages and a bisexual relationship history, held a form of incongruence to traditionalists who believed that there was a specific place, space and audience for gospel music, and a specific kind of person who must perform it. What Wald's text illustrates is how stereotypes about sanctification, self-comportment, and public/private – which are still debated today in Christian hip-hop music and culture – are constantly negotiated by individuals as they encounter novel types of audiences and circumstances; there are no scripts that remain static throughout time. The complexity of Tharpe's life, and how fully Wald captures it, greatly informs this project.

Read together, these texts, in *Black Religious Studies*, *African American Studies*, *Performance Studies* and *Black History*, illustrate the importance of examining embodied performances in multiple sites. For Frederick, this embodiment of Christian faith for black women takes places outside of the church walls, at home amongst the women's friends, and in weekly outings. Documentary film, comedic scenes, oral histories, pedagogy, and gospel music performance comprise the sites Johnson brings into conversation in his work, while musical games, language, hip-hop, and double-dutch are the loci through which Gaunt frames how musical memory and kinetic intelligence are learned through acculturation processes. And Wald's text, in its examination of the variegated sites of meaning that Sister Rosetta Tharpe created for herself and her fans, shows us that

meaning making happens in multiple places. In the case of research, it is not in the archive, in interviews, or in primary data analysis alone that we understand the complexity of human meaning making, but as we continue to challenge ourselves to read a variety of “texts” together, alongside each other, or against each other, we gain a fuller picture of what complex negotiations of identities, like spirituality or religious faith, actually mean for the people who are Christian believers. These texts constitute the conversation that informs this dissertation; they challenge simplistic framings of cultural politics, power relations and identity performances while locating theoretical and identity concepts in specific moments in time, with specific communities and the meaningful “texts” that they create.

What these texts also illustrate is the nature of intersectionality, or how multivalent and imbricated identities create complex realities that cannot be understood only along singular lines of race, gender, or class. As feminist scholars Trinh T. Min-ha, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Gunn, and others have argued, intersectional identities cannot be separated or compartmentalized, as they all speak to and inform one another. Hybrid identities mutually constitute each other and an intersectional approach enables us to break down binary representations, black-white, male-female, straight-queer, as Homi Bhabha points out in his work.¹⁴ I take an intersectional

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994). Theories of hybridity surfaced during what is called the postcolonial turn, in which scholars Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, and others focused on mixture, tainting or what is otherwise known as the impurity of cultures. Within literature, texts by Gloria Anzaldúa, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, and several other writers were used by postcolonial theorists to illustrate the hybridity of postmodern and postcolonial subjects. Also, Toni Morrison’s essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” originally a lecture given at the

understanding and approach in my entire dissertation, but where this work is most clearly showcased is in Chapters 3 and 4, which explore the music and performances of male and female Christian hip-hop artists. This intersectional approach informs the entirety of the dissertation.

The conflicts and contradictions surrounding Black/African American embodiment of spirituality, in this case Christianity, are located not only in Black Religious Studies but in Philosophy (e.g., the Cartesian mind/body split) as well. In American culture more broadly, the historical, puritanical split between the body and the spirit is encapsulated in the history of the time period, and also in early-American literature, beginning with the seventeenth century.¹⁵ This grappling with the demands of an inner, spiritual need to make sense of embodied, material experiences and the outward, societal expectations for a coherent, Christianized narrative is in part the ideological ancestor of Christian hip-hop.

But this is only one part of the story. The cultural syncretism¹⁶ that occurred when West Africans were stolen and brought to the Americas and other parts of the New World as slaves complicated this sacred/secular conundrum. Scholars such as Albert J. Raboteau, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., and Howard Thurman¹⁷

University of Michigan in 1988, illustrated the salient silences around blackness and the widely unacknowledged hybridity of American literature, life and history.

¹⁵ See, for instance, puritanical literature by Jonathan Edwards and Anne Bradstreet from this period, as well as the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammond and several other authors.

¹⁶ Syncretism is an important term in anthropology that denotes the mixture of cultures. An important text that explores this mixture in the context of religion is Sidney M. Greenfield and André Droppers, eds., *Reinventing Religions: Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001). This collection, however, explores African religions as practiced in the New World, and not the African retentions that manifest in European-rooted religions such as Christianity.

¹⁷ C.f. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*.

recount and explore the legacy of African retentions and slavery in black life, and how these experiences create a unique manifestation of African American Christianity. This project is not concerned with the African retentions debate, however, but rather with the historical dilemma and the conundrum surrounding the *embodiment* of the spiritual within the physical body. Although this conundrum can be traced, in part, back to the demonization of the black body through American racism stemming from the slave experience, in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (2004) Black Religious Studies scholars Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins locate this problem more contemporaneously within black racial uplift efforts, and in American Christianity's trouble with reconciling bodily desires and needs with spiritual enlightenment. Along with racism and religious conflict over the role of the body in spiritual practice, the added layer of gender identity expectations provided for specific ways that black women and men were to police their bodies – in Christian contexts and in the wider society – in order to meet the agendas of racial uplift.¹⁸ Within black Christianity in particular, believers have been forced historically to police the “Africanist impulses” within their religious practice; performances such as the

(Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); and *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. makes the argument in *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early 19th-Century Black America* (2000) that the story of Exodus in the Bible served as a tool for African Americans to uplift the race. With a Black Nationalist focus based on a politics of moral respectability, 19th-century African Americans also used the sacred text of Exodus as a political one to build the Black Nationalist enterprise. Moreover, “...black religious institutions, through their ability to sustain numerous newspapers and other activities as well as their ability to render black experiences in the dramatic terms of the Bible, rearticulated the racial practices of the U.S. racial state and helped construct a collective identity” (21). Later in this chapter, I also discuss the work of Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), to further the discussion on racial uplift projects.

shout, and the “holy ghost dance” brought attention to the black body and to the cultural specifics of Western Christianity and its unsettling realities of miscegenation and the syncretism of African and European cultures.¹⁹

In *Loving the Body* Pinn and Hopkins centralize an important and increasingly troublesome dilemma in Black Religious Studies: how do we reconcile the raw and honest attention that African American literature has given to black sexuality and the erotic to the “glaring lack of attention to the bodies of African Americans” in Black Religious Studies scholarship (3)? Texts that span the entire canon of black literature, from slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, to novels such as Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Morrison's *Beloved* explore the troubling status of the black body and the haunting of a spiritual past in American life. Contrastingly, at the same time that Black Religion seeks to enhance understandings of black subjectivity, “the black church”²⁰ privileges the spiritual over the physical “in ways that do damage to subjectivity by encouraging suspicion toward the needs, wants and desires expressed by the physical body” (ibid.). I would take Pinn & Hopkins's critique a bit further, and argue that we must explore how black bodies are implicated in *performances* of black Christianity, in both staged and everyday performances of self. In the cultural context of Christian hip-hop, I explore the complex identity performances that black youth and young

¹⁹ Africanist impulses and African retentions have been debated in black music studies and also within black religious studies. Within the context of music, Eileen Southern's classic text *The Music of Black Americans* (1971) takes up the issue the “African legacy” in black music cultures in the United States.

²⁰ The phrase “the black church” is a complicated term that is meant to encapsulate the great diversity in denominations and worship practices of predominately black churches across America. I use this widely circulated term deliberately in quotes, so as to not flatten out differences between the churches but to speak simultaneously to diversity and similarities across these differences.

adults take part in that challenge the structure of “the black church” as well as black Christianity's discourses surrounding representations of the black body in and outside of the church.

Barbara Savage's historiography *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (2008) argues that many of the problems within “the black church” since the nineteenth century persist in the present moment. What Savage's text illustrates is that historical critiques of “the black church,” from the absence of black men in church walls, to the lack of “the black church's” engagement with the “here and now” or pressing material needs of black people, need to be leveled with an analysis of the changing nature of “the black church” in the 21st century, and the increased individualized and technological mediations of spiritual practice through media such as television and the internet.²¹ Our understandings of “the black church” become more nuanced when we examine alternative spiritual practices that are part of the extended network of church and spiritual institutions, such as the services, virtual bible studies, conferences, and concerts that black urban youth today are holding. My field research illustrates that there is a need to expand our definition of “the black church” to include those partly non-institutionalized spiritual practices and rituals that take place outside of church walls, but remain very much part of “the black church” tradition, such as the concerts and conferences that The Yuinon and Friendship Productions host in the Southeast Michigan areas, which I explore in greater detail in Chapter 2 and in the Epilogue.

²¹ See Jonathan L. Walton's *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), which explores how black television ministers are reshaping the nature of black religious experiences.

Rather than engaging Black Religious Studies as a discipline within itself, my project explores performances of religious identity and “lived religion,”²² or how people live out their religion on a daily basis. There is extensive scholarship that explores the nature of black religious history but also an increasing number of texts that explore religion as lived experiences: Frederick’s *Between Sundays*, Anthea D. Butler’s *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, Evelyn Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent*, and Daphne C. Wiggins’s *Righteous Content*. These texts explore how black women’s faith shapes their day-to-day actions and decision making, and how black women fashioned themselves as creative powerbrokers within the male-centric space of black churches. Likewise, my project examines how artists, through living out their faith in daily moments, create and shape the contexts in which they perform their work onstage.

Through interviews, participant observation, and close readings of lyrics, music videos and live performances, I address the following questions: how do black youth and young adults, both artists and fans, negotiate complex spaces where the religious (Christianity) meets the secular (hip-hop), and when entertainment (music and performances) also serves as theology? What does it mean to take hip-hop, a performance practice so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the public as secular signifier of depraved, violent, materialistic, and misogynistic black life, and use it for evangelical and community-building

²² “Lived religion” is a term first utilized in the volume, *Lived Religion: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). The authors in this collection examine “American religious history in terms of practices that are linked to specific social contexts” and explore how faith is practiced in everyday social contexts. Similarly, this dissertation explores how Christian hip-hop artists’ faith *practice* informs the types of performances and self-representations that they manufacture and present for public consumption.

purposes? How do these black men and women within holy hip-hop cultivate their Christian practice alongside their racialized and gendered identities? And what does it mean for them to maintain a rather tenuous relationship between music culture, Christian communities, and everyday and staged performances?

The artists, music promoters, and producers that I feature in this project include Mahogany Jones, Kiwi, The Ambassador, Lecrae, k. TWO, Jay and Jay SOUL, Lloyd Sheldon, Shannon “Vessel” Gaston, and Esosa Victor Osai among others. Most of these individuals within the Christian hip-hop scene are college-educated; some have post-graduate degrees. A few of them are ministers, some co-pastors, and all of them are engaged in evangelical work not dissimilar to the mainstream evangelism in Christianity at large. As working-class artists, most of whom produce their music on the side, they work part-time or full-time jobs as teachers, consultants, and as customer care representatives. They perform and work across denominational divisions, and are a tightly knit group of artists that perform throughout Southeast Michigan as well as all over the world.

Methods

Over a three-year period, from 2006 to 2009, I attended several public Christian hip-hop events throughout the Southeast Michigan area as a participant observer, including concerts, workshops, awards ceremonies, weddings, and CD release parties. I also attended a handful of events in Northern California and in Atlanta, Georgia, including the annual Holy Hip-Hop Awards in January 2007. I interviewed a total of eight Christian hip-hop artists and promoters, two of them

being women, and performed follow-up interviews with several of them.²³ In Oakland, California I also convened a focus group of six Christian hip-hop fans (two of whom were artists, and one of whom was female). To better gauge the larger context and the public impulse around Christian hip-hop, I informally interviewed college students, middle-aged churchgoers, pastors, as well as gospel scholars and experts such as Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard. I listened to dozens of Christian hip-hop albums, watched and analyzed music and YouTube videos, album art and photographs, and read materials on Christian hip-hop-oriented listservs and websites, including, DJ Sos's (aka Esosa Osai) listerv, *Rapzilla*, and several other sites.

My approach in understanding the Christian hip-hop music and culture is informed by what Claudia Tate calls the cultural matrix, or the set of possibilities and the context that make possible the cultural forms under consideration.²⁴ As Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs explain in "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life" performances are multivalent "texts," burgeoning with layers of meaning and "speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, readings of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip,

²³ I interviewed as many recorded artists and performers as I could within this area. Some of the artists whose work I examine, such as Lecrae, are not from Southeast Michigan but made appearances in the area. I endeavored to interview more artists, especially female artists, but considering the small size of the *visible* Christian hip-hop artist community and the nature of my project, I could not get more interviewees, even after sending out a request over a very popular listserv. Also, one of the very few female artists who agreed to an interview was expecting at the time and, being in the late stages of her pregnancy, was not able to complete an interview.

²⁴ Tate outlines this approach in her Introduction to *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances, and the like)” (60).²⁵ In order to fully take stock of any given performance, one must catalog and analyze the framework or context in which that performance or set of performances are located. I take this approach in analyzing a wide range of performances, from scheduled and informal interviews, to live musical and ministerial performances, to audio- and video-recorded performances. While these activities occupy a spectrum of performativity, from the speech acts that compose an interview session, to the bodily movements and vocal choreography that comprise a staged musical performance, when read together they give us a sense of the range of performance material that make up what we call Christian hip-hop.

As someone who does not identify with the evangelical impulse of Christian hip-hop music and culture, I walked a very interesting path as I built trust and rapport with the Southeast Michigan Christian hip-hop community. The ways in which my interviewees assumed that I was aligned on some level with their politics and their evangelical mission continued to surprise to me, and it was something that I continually negotiated throughout the time that I researched this topic. Some of my interviewees’ remarks indicated that they saw me as a “sister in the struggle” in bringing the message to the youth, and some even saw the research project as a vehicle for getting their message out to the world about the good work that Christian hip-hop artists are doing. Further, some saw this project and its future publication as a way to ameliorate Christian hip-hop artists’ image in the eyes of

²⁵ Richard Bauman and Charles L Briggs, “Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19 (1990), 59-88.

Christian and secular hip-hop publics. At times I felt pressured, although not compelled, to assure them that the project would get the word out, and that it would do the “good work” that they hoped it would even though I did not personally identify with the evangelical politics they were operating under. But at the same time, I remained critical of the gender politics and exclusion of queer people and their identities, which are characteristic of conservative segments of black communities and churches, and in effect spill over into Christian hip-hop. Along other lines, however, I identified with many of the individuals I interviewed in my study. As an African American woman, I come from a Christian upbringing and was raised in an inner city with similar social and economic struggles and racial conflicts as Detroit, so I represented a kind of identity congruence with some aspects of the project in which they were engaged.

As an activist scholar, my goal in writing this project is to communicate and provide a space for individuals I interviewed to speak their life stories, but in doing so, as a scholar, I historicize, analyze and theorize in ways that make this project, in the end, a highly mediated scholarly one. This project is, therefore, not intended to “get the word out” or to “refine” the image of Christian hip-hop practitioners, nor is it a complete history of Christian hip-hop that seeks to engage with the nearly endless number of themes and dialogues that beg examination. Additionally, at the start of the project, I set out to engage central tensions around black sexuality, but due to the reticence of some of my informants, the already controversial nature of Christian hip-hop, and time and funding constraints, this objective did not materialize in this project; it is a focus that I plan to centralize in future work.

Instead, what I present here is a project that focuses on a tight knit group of artists and promoters in Southeast Michigan as a way to understand how individuals mediate tensions between the sacred and secular divide as they manifest in gendered performances in Christian hip-hop. Focusing on the contemporary moment, *Poetics With a Promise* outlines the major actors enacting their identities and their faith practices in contested spaces of Christian hip-hop and black churches, and examines how gender and faith are performed in a multiple contexts: the interview, the concert hall, the CD, the camera, the pulpit, the stage.

I asked interviewees questions about their upbringing, their musical influences, experiences with different audiences, and how they see their work influencing Christian culture and hip-hop culture. I attended concerts in dance halls, community centers, churches, and in hotels. I listened to CDs from a wide range of artists, many of them not residents of Southeast Michigan. I listened to sermons by pastors, radio pundits and hip-hop artists outlining the ills, potential, impact, threat and successes of Christian hip-hop music and culture. I saw artists perform and minister on stage to a variety of audiences, from Christian believers to religious skeptics to pure hip-hop fans who came simply to listen to some “good music.”

Christian hip-hop, a musical and cultural form that often remains a foreign one in many African American churches, presents an unprecedented challenge to how we have come to understand how artists negotiate the sacred and the secular in African American life and culture. I argue that where a crossover from blues to gospel, and then from gospel to soul is supported by musical precedents in sound, structure, and lyrics, hip-hop is largely a foreign musical form to black churches. In

fact, many black church elders and adult Christians do not even acknowledge hip-hop as “music,” and many of the older church members and officials that I have interviewed see Christian rap in particular as a diametric opposition to religious life. And while one could attempt to make a similar argument about the nature of blues music, the structure and even the *sounding* of blues music held parallels to Negro spirituals. For example, its lyrical repetition, musical metaphors, and chord structure have been shown by scholars to hold striking similarity to black religious music (Baraka 1967; Southern 1971; Murray 1976, 1996; Jackson 2004). While this similarity facilitated the secular-sacred (or *sacred-secular*) crossover of musical genres, hip-hop music, on the other hand, maintains a relatively lesser degree of sonic similarity to religious music in African American churches. So I argue that where a crossover from blues to gospel, and then from gospel to soul is supported by musical precedents in sound, structure and lyrics,²⁶ it can be argued that hip-hop is largely a foreign musical form to black churches, and in many ways Christian rap in particular is seen as a diametric opposition to religious life. The social context of Christian hip-hop, which includes challenges posed by generational gaps, traditionalism, and the evangelical and ministerial need for new, urban tools to reach disillusioned youth, bring about an embattled ground that I tease out in this dissertation project.²⁷

²⁶ There are widely cited connections between blues singing and preaching. Within music recordings in particular, one such example is Bessie Smith’s 1927 production “Preaching the Blues”, which draws a parallel between blues sensibilities and religious sensibilities in music and life.

²⁷ This divide is often evoked when there is a sacred-secular (or secular-sacred) crossover, as in the case of gospel blues, formed by a melding of spirituals and hymns with secular blues music, or in the case of soul music, deemed a secular form of music influenced by the gospel tradition and stemming from a range African American musical traditions.

Models of Negotiating the Sacred and the Secular

It is only expected that musicians and music consumers will be inevitably influenced by a broad range of secular and religious cultural influences as they come into regular contact with “secular culture” through the evangelical efforts that they engage in to “save” the non-Christian communities to whom they outreach. As a result, music and musical culture, as an expression and extension of religious belief are especially fruitful for exploring how individuals and communities (including churches) continuously mediate boundaries and tensions between the sacred and the secular. In this section I discuss artists who have negotiated the sacred and the secular to illustrate how preceding Christian performers, such as Thomas Dorsey, Rosetta Tharpe, Curtis Mayfield, Mahalia Jackson, and Aretha Franklin, have made sense of the intersection between music, religion, and public culture in their lives. These performers’ stories illustrate that this is not a new dilemma, but a continuation on a cultural theme that characterizes black musical practice and performances of religious faith and identity.

In Michael W. Harris' brilliantly written, groundbreaking biography of Thomas A. Dorsey, *The Rise of Gospel Blues* (1992), he illustrates one story of the complex and interconnected visions of worldly living and the spiritual belief, as illustrated by Dorsey's religious and musical practices in gospel blues, or the “blend of sacred texts and blues tunes” in the 1930s (xvii). Harris also illustrates that during early-twentieth century black urban migration, proponents of northern and southern musical and religious practices clashed with each other at the same time that tensions between secular and sacred music reached a heightened form.

Simultaneously, racial uplift efforts, as enacted through assimilation to white culture were sometimes paired with a rejection of southern black “folksy” culture. As the first major study of gospel blues, Harris delves deep into the heart of the conundrum between the secular and the sacred in African American culture to reveal a complex interplay of influences and connections.

Thomas A. Dorsey, considered the father of gospel blues, encountered some of the same opposition and judgment as the artists featured in this project. Blues music was deemed, by conservative Christians and those devoted to black racial uplift, as gutter music with raunchy, testy lyrics sung in a cultural context where pleasure and decadence were central.²⁸ Despite the parallels that William Jelani Cobb, Michael Eric Dyson, Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson draw between blues and hip-hop music and culture,²⁹ I'd like to argue that hip-hop culture, used by Christian hip-hop artists as an evangelical tool, presents a novel challenge to the sacred/secular divide and the contestations over the “appropriate” spaces to perform Christian hip-hop music.

²⁸ Kevin J. Mumford's *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) discusses dance halls and the specific “red lighting” of black neighborhoods for interracial prostitution. These districts became representatives of the blues and jazz culture due to the illicit activities these areas were known for, further cementing blues and jazz as decadent secular music forms in the conscious of observers. See also Roderick A. Ferguson's *Aberrations In Black: Toward a Queer Of Color Critique*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), which situates discourse about black cultural production within a larger understanding of the pathologizing of black cultural forms and sexuality.

²⁹ For more on the connections between blues and hip-hop, see Michael Eric Dyson's “Give me a Paper and a Pen: Tupac's Place in Hip-Hop” and “Blues and Negro Spirituals: The Parents of Hip-Hop” in *The Hip-Hop Church* by Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson. William Jelani Cobb makes the argument that hip-hop's heritage of addressing bawdy, explicit and testy topics comes from the blues. Drawing from Larry Neal's work, Cobb states that the willingness of blues fans (black and white) to purchase albums that “disproportionately” discussed sex and sexual relationships made this image of blues iconic and representative of the larger genre. This is an inheritance, Cobb argues, that hip-hop music still features, as this hypersexuality was a strong feature of many “commercially supported” female emcees that came to prominence in the 1990s, such as Missy Elliot and Lil' Kim (38). This emphasis on sexual rendezvous serves, I argue, to further figure hip-hop music and culture as anti-Christian.

Dorsey's first gospel blues song, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," was written after the death of his wife and child in childbirth. After this life transforming and tragic event, Dorsey would have a religious conversion experience where he would devote his once secular, blues-oriented musical career to "serve the Lord." For Dorsey and for many other religious African Americans who would listen to and produce gospel blues, blues "was never just music...the emotions it conveyed were connected to religious feelings," as it was a "digging, picking, pricking at the very depth of your mental environment and the feelings of your heart" (98). But where blues for Dorsey was a format, a toolbox of improvisational techniques, chord progressions, and notes to imbue with religious meaning, for other black Christian traditionalists, blues music could never aspire to religious sensibilities. As music of the world, or the "devil's music," it was to have its separate place in the dance clubs, juke joints and honky-tonks with the "unsaved" heathens of the world. Moreover, many of the old-line, Baptist or "assimilationist" churches had a long history of singing hymns such as "Amazing Grace" and "I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me." Harris rightly notes that "music in old-line churches was...more than sound; it was religious ideology," as "formal music symbolized their contribution to black cultural advancement, so [Dorsey's] gospel blues was destined to represent the errancy of their ways" as an unsettling reminder of their slave, folk roots (109, 116). Here, the sacred/secular conflict rests on the basis of a conflict between slave, folk roots and a desire to advance in a modern age.

Thomas Dorsey's negotiation of the secular and the sacred divisions was not the only model, however, as Jerma Jackson illustrates in her *Singing in My Soul*:

Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age (2004). Although Jackson does not mine any new information about Dorsey, she does shed light on the religious and worldly sensibilities of key female gospel blues figures such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Unlike Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson, and other key gospel figures, Tharpe had not been raised in the church, even though she engaged in missionary work and sang in churches and on streets, and her unique life trajectory “play[ed] a major role in pushing [gospel] beyond the church and into the realm of commerce” (27). Whereas many female blues musicians touted their sexuality on race records³⁰ of the time, “sanctified” gospel singers such as Tharpe had to visually distinguish themselves from them through their dress. The visual signifiers of sexuality and “looseness” versus purity and piety were understood and defined clearly by many women gospel musicians so as to avoid a visual, secular connotation of a blues singer.

Whereas for Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson space was an important part of the experience of performing gospel blues, as both of them refused to play in clubs and in juke joints, Rosetta Tharpe held a competing, different vision of the place of gospel music in public spaces. Stemming from her experiences as an itinerant missionary who sang gospel on the streets as well as in the churches, Tharpe would sing in the Cotton Club in the 1940s and in other clubs, believing that the souls in the clubs needed her more than those within church walls (94). Moreover, Tharpe saw her religious experiences as internal and independent of circumstances; her worship, whether in the club or at the altar, was for her about a solely personal

³⁰ Race records were musical recordings made by and for African Americans during the 20th century, and primarily during the 1920s and 1930s by recording companies such as Okeh Records and Emerson Records.

relationship with God, and for Tharpe, the use of her talent alone and the expression of God's gift to perform constituted her religious experiences. Tharpe believed that her calling was to save souls outside of the churches. Tharpe's approach to religion and performance are echoed decades later in Christian hip-hop.

In Craig Werner's book *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (2004), he explores the lives of these central soul music figures biographically as well as artistically in their historical contexts of civil rights, black nationalism, and black power movements. Deeming their music the aural backdrop to these movements, Werner's portraits of these artists provide a contextual understanding of musical and cultural dynamics in the 1970s and 1980s. While Aretha Franklin grew up in the church, performing gospel music at her father C. L. Franklin's church in Detroit, she was also later exposed to blues and other secular forms of music that informed her soul music tracks. Although her parents were a bit wary of having Aretha perform secular music with a gospel sensibility as she eventually would, they agreed to her signing to a record label and recording music in her pre-adult years, as they saw it as an opportunity to infuse gospel messages of redemption into the secular music of the age. Moreover, they also believed in the movements for equality and equal access for blacks, and they saw the music as a potential site for infusing these visions into the movement as well.

Curtis Mayfield, on the other hand, grew up in the church as well, with his family being strongly active in religious activities. He did not hear the blues and other forms of secular music until he listened to the radio, and he would later form a

doo-wop style group called the Alphas after performing with the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers, and before he would be instrumental in constructing the music and image of The Impressions. Stevie Wonder, on the other hand did not grow up in the church, but at an early age listened to music by B.B. King, Jimmy Reed, Bobby “Blue” Bland” and other musicians that would both inspire and influence his skillful harmonica and piano playing and his style of singing. Werner's recounting of these major influences in the lives of some of the most central artists to the genre of Northern Soul music illustrates the variety of differences, life visions and harmonizations of the sacred and the secular that played into the creation of the music.

Throughout the book, Werner makes a distinction between what he calls the “blues impulse” with the “gospel vision” of soul music; where the blues impulse articulates the desire for survival and persistence through odds, the gospel vision communicates a message of redemption, reformation and restoration (7). Werner also notes that despite the cross-racial appeal of soul music during the times of civil rights activism, which was a competing discourse with racial separatism (black nationalism and the Black Power movement), the music would ultimately win “the cultural battle but [lose] the political war,” (10) echoing a similar outcome of the Negro Renaissance at its end, which coincided with the Great Depression.

While some African Americans would attempt to reject their so-called folk roots in an endeavor to assimilate and uplift the race, others would concentrate on melding the old with the new to create music that reflected changing times. As an ongoing cultural and political battle between visions of sacred and secular life, and

the policing of boundaries between the two on the part of black church groups and leaders, black music and culture are especially productive sites at which to explore the ebbs and flows of this phenomenon as it continues to take place in the context of Christian hip-hop.

All music forms are birthed from a distinctive cultural context. Blues culture was marked by juke joints, house parties, and a culture of dress, talk and exchange that was informed by the music and the artists who served as musical icons. In the same way that blues music has a distinctive culture, so does hip-hop music. But in age of Internet, iPods and other communication tools, hip-hop culture has a far-reaching influence that blues culture did not.³¹ Blues culture definitely traveled through migration, early race records, and folklorists such as Alan Lomax, but the context in which hip-hop exists makes it a global force that is appropriated, contested and challenged worldwide. Other communication and representation tools exist as well; films such as *Boyz in Da Hood*,³² clothing brands such as FUBU and Cross Colours,³³ and popular music videos helped to cement a certain image and relevance of hip-hop music and culture in the minds of the

³¹ For more on the far-reaching cultural influence of hip-hop, see Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*, Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip-Hop Generation*, Michael Eric Dyson's *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, S. Craig Watkins's *Hip Hop Matters*.

³² See Guthrie Ramsey's chapter "Scoring a Black Nation: Music, Film and Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop" in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (2004), in which he makes a compelling argument about how the use of hip-hop music as soundtracks for black urban films like Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and John Singleton's *Boyz in Da Hood* (1991) created a correlation in audience members' minds between violent black ghetto life and hip-hop music. In effect, through these black urban films' use of this music, hip-hop became an aural and visual signifier for violence, gangster life, and brutal secularism, right around the time when Christian hip-hop music was beginning to take off.

³³ FUBU, or For Us By Us, was a black clothing brand founded in 1992. Cross Colours is also clothing brand, founded in 1989. Their clothing pieces included slogans that were meant to uplift and educate black youth (such as "Stop D Violence" and "Educate 2 Elevate"). Both clothing brands were widely popular among Black and Latino youth in urban communities, featured urban gear and were worn by hip-hop artists and fans in the early- to mid-1990s.

American culture.³⁴ The corporatization of hip-hop in the 1990s and in the present era exists on a more global and all-encompassing level than the use of blues and jazz music, for instance, in 1940s and beyond as a gesture of diplomacy and cultural intermixing.³⁵

What is the Hip-Hop Generation?: Hip-Hop and Popular Music Studies

Bakari Kitwana, author of *The Hip-Hop Generation* and former editor of *The Source*, a prominent hip-hop culture magazine, defines the hip-hop generation as those African Americans born between the years 1965-1984, or “Black America's generation X” (Kitwana 7). According to Kitwana, the hip-hop generation is composed of “three distinctive subgroups” that may all have a different picture of what hip-hop culture is. Kitwana, leaving these three subgroups unnamed, identifies them according to some possible musical likes and dislikes, which renders his definition of the hip-hop generation somewhat unclear and arbitrary. S. Craig Watkins, on the other hand, does not forward any particular temporal groupings of the hip-hop generation in his *Hip-Hop Matters*, arguing instead that hip-hop continues to defy definition, resisting the “monolithic” cultural or age groupings put forth by various assessments of the “hip-hop nation” or generation

³⁴ In “Blues and Negro Spirituals: The Parents of Hip-Hop,” a chapter in *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture*, Pastors Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson draw a parallel between the individualization of the blues singer and the hip-hop MC.³⁴ Hip-hop is more often paralleled to the blues than to Negro spirituals or other forms of religious music, possibly because there is a clear line of trajectory to draw between blues and funk and hip-hop than spirituals, gospel, contemporary gospel and holy hip-hop, simply based on the content of the music and the context in which these musics are played, performed and enjoyed.

³⁵ For more on this, see Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up The World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). She argues that during the time that African Americans were alienated and ostracized in their homeland, the US Department of State sent performers like Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong overseas as diplomats, and used jazz as a propagation tool, even though in the end their agenda wasn't as successful as they'd hoped.

put forth (Watkins 5).³⁶ However scholars choose to define or not define the constituents of the U.S. population that grew up on hip-hop music and culture, they all seem to agree that the hip-hop generation and hip-hop as a musical and cultural form has reached a cultural and political crisis.³⁷ Not only are rap musicians lamenting the supposed death or demise of hip-hop music and culture, but also academic, cultural and political figures reach back to hip-hop's past and ask, “Where did the real hip-hop go?”

One of the first academic texts on rap music and culture, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) by Tricia Rose celebrates hip-hop music and culture at what would be considered by some to be its height, from 1990 to 1997, and, ten years later, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (2004) by Imani Perry nostalgically recalls the “good old days” of hip-hop, the music by Notorious BIG³⁸ that helped her and her colleagues through the rugged realities of Harvard Law School, giving them an outlet for expressing their frustrations and their personal triumphs. Hip-hop artists from the conscious³⁹

³⁶ See also Mark Anthony Neal's work that frames that post-soul or postindustrial soul in ways similar and different to works that define the 'hip-hop generation' or the 'hip-hop nation.'

³⁷ The titles of the works alone point to this crisis or struggle, e.g., Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (2002) and Watkins's *Hip-Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (2005).

³⁸ Notorious BIG (Christopher Wallace) is a famed hip-hop artist from Brooklyn, New York. He produced popular albums in the mid-1990s before he was gunned down in March 1997. His death is believed to be part of the East Coast-West Coast rap feud that characterized hip-hop during this time.

³⁹ Conscious hip-hop music and culture has been defined in a variety of ways, but a basic definition of it is hip-hop music and culture that is centrally concerned with the critique of white supremacy and invested in educating black people and people of color about their subject positions. Historically, conscious hip-hop was an important part of the underground hip-hop movement. However, this terminology gets tricky when we consider the fact that early hip-hop music, by artists such as Public Enemy, Afrika Bambaataa, and several others could (in hindsight) be called conscious hip-hop. This distinction is further complicated by the work of iconic artists such as Tupac Shakur and many others, whose oeuvre include both “conscious” and party or gangster style tracks. I hope to tease out these tensions in definitions of hip-hop subgenres more fully in future work.

Common & Talib Kweli to mainstream maestros Jay-Z and Nas, along with underground artists, have all lamented the death of hip-hop, the destruction of its political potential for socio-economic and cultural transformation after being co-opted and commodified by corporate takeovers and media moguls.

The figurative death of hip-hop reached its pinnacle, its moment of distillation on September 25, 2007, when Congress held its first hearing on hip-hop culture, focusing on degrading and misogynistic lyrics and images in the music and music videos. Representative Bobby Rush, a Democrat of Illinois and founder of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers in the 1960s and Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, facilitated and helped to organize this congressional hearing. Although Representative Rush endeavored to make clear that the purpose of the hearing was not to lambast or indict hip-hop music and culture, during the course of the hearing, other musical genres and cultural forms were hardly referenced. The hearing, titled "From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images" was sparked by radio host Don Imus's controversial reference⁴⁰ to the Rutgers women's basketball team members as "nappy-headed hoes."⁴¹ Rappers Levell Crump and Master P, who now maintains a billion-dollar business conglomerate composed of a hip-hop clothing line, a record label and other businesses, public intellectual Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, and industry executives from Universal Music Group and Warner Music group were present at this hearing to give testimonies about the variegated

⁴⁰ For a contextualization of the Don Imus controversy, see Michael Awkward, *Burying Don Imus: The Anatomy of a Scapegoat* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁴¹ After Don Imus was questioned about his comments, he pointed to hip-hop as a site where the prevalent use of misogynistic phrases such as nappy-headed hoes are used.

economic, social, and cultural effects of hip-hop music and culture. While Crump's ultimate position was that "hip hop is sick because America is sick," Master P maintained an apologetic posture regarding his past musical productions and believed that there was no excuse for the degree of negativity in hip-hop and called for the unionizing of hip-hop artists and for the positive education of black youth. Dyson, an unabashed fan of the music, pointed to the need for women, Congress and other groups to take institutions to task when it comes to deep-seated misogynistic practices that are not only present in hip-hop, but seeped throughout media production agencies, religious institutions and other institutional powerbrokers that some continue to frequent and patronize regardless of their harmful imagery and exclusionary practices, such as the commercial film industry and African American churches.

Well before these hearings, the late C. DeLores Tucker, an activist during the Civil Rights Movement, engaged in a nation-wide indictment of gangster, or gangsta rap, which she also called "porno rap." In 1993, Co-founder and former National Chair of the National Congress of Black Women, Tucker began passing out leaflets with lyrics from gangsta rap, urging people to read them aloud. She picketed stores selling rap music and handed out petitions, and demanded congressional hearings, the first of which would take place two years after her death in 2005. Tucker also bought stock in Sony, Time Warner and other companies so that she could protest against rap music at shareholders' meetings. Deeming gangsta rap in particular a force of destruction in the black community, Tucker brought a lawsuit against Tupac Shakur in 1997 for the lyrics on his track "How Do You Want it?" (1996)

where he rapped “DeLores Tucker you's a motherfucker / Instead of trying to help a nigga you destroy a brother,” undoubtedly referencing her criticism and activism against rap music. Tucker brought the case against Shakur because she believed that this song and Shakur's lyrics on another track on the same album, *All Eyez on Me* (1996), had damaged her intimacy with her husband. This case was eventually dismissed, but remains illustrative of the history of the widespread criticism of and activist efforts against gangsta rap music and rap music more generally, forms seen to inhabit a secularly decadent and destructive context locally, nationally and globally. These cases also illustrate the ways in which rap music and hip-hop culture become scapegoats for wider societal issues.

Thrown into this tumultuous context is Christian hip-hop, which is often judged by the perceived shortcomings of rap music and hip-hop culture more generally. On the surface, it would seem that Christianity and hip-hop, as Bakari Kitwana stated above, would be an oxymoron, but rap, as a preachy style of music, lends itself to the Christian messages that artists such as Cross Movement, Mahogany Jones and Kiwi would like to communicate to their audiences. One of my interviewees, Lloyd Sheldon, calls hip-hop “a didactic music by nature.” Although Christian hip-hop music and culture is understood in context of sometimes vulgar, mainstream hip-hop culture, the two cultures, black Christianity and hip-hop, have more in common than one would think.

Much of the constant struggle over representation in hip-hop stems from the historical preoccupation by black cultural studies scholars, politicians, media gurus and others with textual and visual representations of self in the black

community. Arguments positing that hip-hop (and other 'black' cultural forms) should maintain positive lyrics and imagery that should uplift the black community and communicate positive images of blackness have been long standing since black racial uplift efforts of the late nineteenth century, post-emancipation United States. In *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (2004) Michele Mitchell examines the racial uplift efforts in which African Americans engaged, endeavoring to transform the racist discourse, stereotypical and negative images and the actual societal mistreatment and abuse of black people. These efforts politicized even the most private functions in black life, and natural acts such as sex, reproduction, and masturbation, as well as personal hygiene, dress, and male-female interpersonal interaction were the public stage for critique and censorship within black communities as they strove to shape the behaviors of fellow black Americans in efforts to assimilate, gain equality with their white counterparts. Many black religious and community leaders strongly believed that emulating or approximating white American values of chastity, sexual purity, and other “respectable behaviors” that they would transform negative, stereotypical images of African Americans as sexually loose, dirty and ill-mannered; blacks would eventually be *seen* – in action and in representation – as equally and wholly human.

This struggle over representation continued well into the twentieth century, into the Civil Rights generation and into the current hip-hop generation. In Nicole R. Fleetwood's “Are We There Yet? Yearnings for a Discursive Shift in Black Cultural Studies” she notes that “while scholarship is quite adept at analyzing the

complicated and prescriptive practices taking place in black popular culture and public discourse, as with the example of the 50 Cent and The Game battle,” scholars continue to struggle with formulating new ways of talking about and theorizing black cultural production that challenge the binary of positive-negative representation of black life.⁴² Even Tricia Rose’s follow-up to *Black Noise, The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (2008) addresses the positive-negative binary discourse in black cultural studies.⁴³ As mainstream hip-hop music and culture is continually lambasted for its “negative” textual and visual portrayals of black life, one must understand that the current debate over the viability of hip-hop for sustaining a positive future for blacks is predicated upon this good versus bad binary, and rooted in the context of a black/white racial and ethnic binary in slavery and in post-emancipation racial uplift efforts.

Thus, Christian hip-hop inhabits the space of this confounding contradiction at a deeper level than gangsta rap. As neither all “good” nor all “bad,” and as neither all positive or all negative in its content and imaginative portrayals, Christian hip-hop contends with forces in cultural and political arenas that denounce hip-hop’s supposed destructive, unproductive nature. Christian hip-hop artists also contend with the criticism from mainstream hip-hop artists and fans who at times question the “realness” or authenticity of Christian hip-hop and being “down for Christ.” And as an added layer, holy hip-hop artists inhabit the

⁴² Nicole R. Fleetwood, “Are We There Yet? Yearnings for a Discursive Shift in Black Cultural Studies.” *American Quarterly*, 59: 4, December 2007, pp. 1269-1278.

⁴³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

battlegrounds in churches, pushing for a wider acceptance of rap music as an evangelical tool for bringing youth into the Christian faith.

As the proverbial ripened fruits of hip-hop now fall to the grounds of what is seen by some as greed, decadence, and negativity, a particularly ripe moment for Christian hip-hop is born. Some, such as Afrika Bambaataa, hip-hop guru and one of its founding fathers, sees holy hip-hop as “the future of hip-hop,” the subgenre and culture that carries on a revolutionary and positive message for its listeners and practitioners. At this moment of the coincidental decline or “death” of hip-hop and the clamoring in the media, politics, and scholarship, for less misogynistic lyrics and positive images in hip-hop culture, the popularity of Christian hip-hop is born. Moreover, mounting disenchantment by both fans and critics of hip-hop parallels the disenchantment of youth in African American Christian churches, making Christian hip-hop a ripe commodity for production and consumption. As hip-hoppers struggle for the soul of the hip-hop movement,⁴⁴ many Christian church pastors, youth ministers, and other Christian leaders are struggling for the soul of the evangelical movement for Christ.

The Hip-Hop Generation and the Context of Christian Hip-Hop

Kitwana identifies six factors that have influenced the coming of age of the hip-hop generation and development of contemporary black youth culture: the visibility of black youth in popular culture; the redefinition of public space due to corporate mergers and the impact of globalization of hip-hop music and culture; heightened and persistent segregation; criminal justice public policy; media

⁴⁴ This phrase is taken from the subtitle of S. Craig Watkins’s book, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006).

representation of young blacks; and the shift in quality life for blacks in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁵ After the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans did not gain the level of equality that they had hoped. Segregated housing, inflation, and poor job and education opportunities stood in stark contrast to the meteoric rise of popular musical forms like soul and hip-hop, which centralized African American voices and experiences as iconic representations of realism, struggle, and cultural genius in the musical forms that circulated throughout the nation and the rest of the world. That African Americans were the prized creators of cultural products that revolutionized musical consumption and performance is no less than a paradox when one explores the lack of economic, social and political gains after the 1970s. Faced with the proliferation of drugs in the black community, criminal justice policy that unfairly targeted African American populations, and the negative representation of African Americans in the media as poor, ghettoized criminals who should be feared, hip-hop arose out of a context of economic struggle and social and political blight, and also out of a context of creativity, ingenuity and experimentation. But, what about the “holy hip-hop generation” in particular? What other factors might have influenced their coming of age within the context that Kitwana described?

What I am calling the Holy Hip-Hop Generation has encountered a number of unique struggles and factors that make them a distinctive subgroup within the wider hip-hop generation. Many of these youth are embedded in both religious

⁴⁵ Note that Kitwana in particular uses the hip-hop generation to point to black youth only, born 1965-1984. Kitwana is careful to make a distinction between hip-hop culture and the hip hop generation.

and secular cultures on a daily basis. They may participate in church services and functions while also maintaining a strong connection to 'secular' cultural products, such as movies, music, and sports, as well as cultural practices. In their daily lives, they live in the world of the church and in the realities of the world. They may contend with the "old-school" approaches of their parents to secular cultural forms, but many of them strive to strike a balance between spiritual and secular cultural influences. They are fully aware of the tensions between the sacred and the secular in black religious and cultural life, and they choose to make their own interpretation of this divide, either choosing to accept it, to reject it, or to question what it means individually, for their lives in particular.

While S. Craig Watkins defines the soul of the secular hip-hop movement as the political and social strength communicated by the music and culture, we can interpret the soul of the hip-hop movement to be the power of hip-hop music and culture to socially and politically transform the status quo in any arena of the world. The soul of hip-hop is in its emotive, hopeful force, its voice of opposition, dissent, and revolution in the face of utter financial hardship, social inequality, and social death. In the viewpoint of many, the 'soul' of hip-hop has been co-opted and compromised under the influences of corporate control, consumer preferences, and the dilution of its political force for change in the face of globalization.

This is a time when questions and controversy circulate about the viability of hip-hop culture to "uplift" the black community in particular, coinciding with the abandonment or rejection of Christianity by some African American youth who find the religion as it is presented to be irrelevant to their cultural background and life

experiences. As Efrem Smith, co-author of *The Hip-Hop Church* puts it, youth who are heavily into hip-hop culture before learning about Christianity are put off by the singing of hymns and gospel songs, which means nothing to them. Their feelings, at times, are best translated in the genre of hip-hop music, which they grew up on and are most familiar with.

Smith, endeavoring to bridge the gap between the Civil Rights generation and the Hip-Hop generation, calls on the elder generation to make an attempt to understand hip-hop and the various beliefs that they hold about the musical form. While “hip-hoppers” make the distinction between different subgenres of hip-hop music – conscious, hard core, gangster, underground, alternative, and crunk rap – the Civil Rights generation are less likely to take into account the fact that there are different subgenres of rap music, and are often times quick to group all rap music into a simple category of “that hippety hop music” that they hear on the radio. I am not suggesting that there are no hip-hop fans among the Civil Rights generation, but when non-fans dismiss all hip-hop in this manner, they homogenize both hip-hop music and the culture of hip-hop. As one interviewee put it: “To my parents, hip-hop music is all the same, and it's all garbage, and it doesn't belong in the church.”

In addition to the lack of knowledge about the subgenres of rap and the other cultural components of the music, almost every aspect of hip-hop music and culture makes it seem an antithesis to the traditions of the African American Pentecostal church. When Anthea D. Butler in *Women in the Church of God in Christ* explores the sanctification process for women in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)⁴⁶, she notes

⁴⁶ COGIC is the largest African American Pentecostal Christian denomination.

that a significant part of this process involved creating both visual and cultural signifiers of their holiness or set-apart nature, of the fact that they have been “saved, sanctified, and filled with the holy ghost.” This entailed women wearing long dresses that covered their necks reached well past their knees. No longer wearing makeup, and listening only to gospel music and singing hymns, every aspect of these women's cultural practices shunned the codes of worldliness that non-Christian practices would communicate. It is important to note that these practices not only extended to women, but also to men. Men in COGIC dressed in conservative suits and were urged not to participate in the activities associated with the “heathens” of the world: petty gambling, attending juke joint parties, and chasing “worldly” women. An important aspect of sanctified living was to shun all worldly appearance, behaviors, and endeavors. African American COGIC members took seriously the call to “...come out from among them, and be ye separate” (II Corinthians 6:17) and to “abstain from all appearance of evil” (I Thessalonians 5:22).⁴⁷

Decades later, individuals’ expectation for visual and cultural signifiers of conversion and of sanctification still hold in African American churches. Whereas the dress is less conservative and there is more of a 'crossover' between the cultural practices of the church and the world, there is still an expectation for newcomers to Christ to give some outward sign that they indeed have separated themselves from the ways of the world and can no longer be called a wayward sinner. So when the

⁴⁷ Even before the development of the Pentecostal church in the first decades of the twentieth century, there stands a long history of the process of sanctification, articulated in 18th-century slave narratives such as John Marrant, and in 17th- and 18th-century black women spiritual narratives by Julia Foote, Zilphia Elaw and Jarena Lee.

hip-hop generation enters the church without understanding this context, they are baffled by the fact that there is an expectation that they give up their music, their styles of dress, their cultural context as a whole, just because they have chosen to live a 'holy' life. Elder G. Craige Lewis of EX Ministries, one of Christian hip-hop's most strident critics, says, "Because of its origin and what Hip Hop originally represented in its earlier stages, we cannot embrace it as Christians. Their [sic] can be no Holy Hip Hoppers or no Christian Hip Hop because the culture cannot lend itself to the direction of the Holy Spirit." There is a place for hip-hop in Christian churches, holy hip-hoppers argue. But many of them speak in colloquialisms and dress in ways that older Christians do not understand. This may indeed be the first generation of new converts who held a cultural format so antithetical to what "the black church" has been used to; who, in many ways, refuse to assimilate to the culture of the African American church that is based on deep-seated traditions that are becoming increasingly less relevant to them and their cultural and musical languages. To some members of the Civil Rights generation, hip-hop music is an iconic representation of raw secular material; street politics, poverty, social struggle, strategies for survival, and gangster life are some of the historical concerns and cultural associations of hip-hop music. How could it possibly be used to worship God, let alone to bring "unbelievers" into the church?

Project Overview

This history and context of Christian hip-hop are further discussed in chapter 2, where I take up the challenges that holy hip-hop music and culture has faced, as a clear offspring of both the blues and gospel music, and explore how this unique

cultural and musical heritage creates a genre that is always in mediation, perpetually at the crossroads of urban streets and the halls of black churches. This chapter argues that Christian hip-hop is defined in terms of how it distances or approximates itself to secular hip-hop. It explores definitions of success and the obstacles to reaching wider audiences as articulated by my interviewees. The next chapter, “‘There Ain't No Sugar in Their Tanks’: Performances of Masculinities,” features two prominent male MCs from two different generations, The Ambassador and Lecrae. Examining how these men frame competition and perform their racialized masculinities gives us a clearer view of the conflicting discourses that they navigate, as well as an insight into the at times misogynist and sexist views that female artists and fans negotiate and respond to within the culture. In this chapter I focus on performances from the Detroit “From Milk to Meat” Christian hip-hop concert (2009) as well as the two most recent albums by these artists to explore how Christian hip-hop artists both challenge and recreate traditional notions of black manhood and fatherhood even as they are engaged with secular, hip-hop performances of masculinities. What becomes clear is that particular types of Christian, black, urban masculinities are enacted and performed by black male hip-hop artists, which they find necessary in order to mediate tensions between the sacred and secular, or the church and hip-hop culture.

Chapter 4, “‘Only For God, Not For a Girl’: Female Identity Performances,” features the experiences of black female Christian hip-hop artists, and explores how these women make sense of the “complexities of identity” as they negotiate spaces where male leadership is particularly dominant: the “black church” and hip-hop and

spoken word cultures. I explore how female emcees Mahogany Jones and Kiwi negotiate gender boundaries and expectations and how they challenge what we have come to know and accept as traditional black feminism and womanism. In this chapter I feature work from *The H.E.R. (Healing and Evangelism Through Rhyme) Project* (2004). The first all-female holy hip-hop album of its kind, it speaks to the identity negotiations and the needs of young, black, Christian women, and challenges the male-centric focus of Christian hip-hop evangelism. The women on this album effectively center women in what is an otherwise male-dominated movement and ministry at the same time that they support and uphold patriarchal forms of male leadership and men's domination in the home and in romantic relationships.

The final chapter, "Jay and Jay SOUL's Music Politics and the Cultural Divide," centers my interview with Jay and Jay SOUL. Taking a hybrid oral history/music history approach, this chapter argues that a higher-level understanding of the assumed sacred/secular divide lies in a close examination of the living archive of Christian hip-hop *musicking* and performance.⁴⁸ The chapter illustrates that the process of negotiating sacred and secular spaces and discourses is an ongoing practice where notions of the sacred/secular divide are never static, but are informed by identity negotiation politics and the ongoing, daily decisions individuals make about community, self-representation and the dialogue between them. Thus, Jay and Jay SOUL's life stories illustrate the larger dynamics around the

⁴⁸ As mentioned earlier in the chapter, *musicking* is a term coined by musicologist Christopher Small that illustrates the dynamic nature of music making, not as an event, but as an ongoing, participatory action process in which musicians and audiences take part. See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

sacred/secular divide at a personal and an interpersonal level. Their stories demonstrate the soul searching that many Christian hip-hop artists undergo when considering how to make the “right” musical choices, as well as the role of community in shaping what is considered to be “appropriate” musical choices for a Christian ministerial context.

The Epilogue explores how black youth’s decentralized, deinstitutionalized, anti-dogmatic and increasingly virtual and internet-based religious and spiritual practices redefine church outside of four walls; sums up the focus of the project; and returns to the title of the dissertation. *Poetics With a Promise* provides a cross-sectional, contextual examination of the complex dynamics that shape what we call the sacred/secular divide in African American culture.

CHAPTER II
**CONTESTED HISTORIES, FRAUGHT DISCOURSE:
LOCATING CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP**

At one of my first Christian hip-hop conferences and concerts in the field, I had an impromptu conversation with a Christian hip-hop and rock group whose members were predominately white.⁴⁹ As they stood near a table selling CDs right before their stage performance, I began telling one of the group members my understanding of the development of Christian hip-hop, from the “official narrative” of the songs and performances of dc Talk, to the present work of Cross Movement. As I told my version of the history of Christian hip-hop, one particular performer interrupted me to say, “No, you've got it all wrong. The Christian hip-hop that dc Talk was doing was for those straitlaced Christian kids.” Where the “real” Christian hip-hop developed, he said, was in clubs and in house basements as a seamless part of the underground hip-hop scene that was so popular in the 1980s. He described underground hip-hop clubs and house parties across the Midwest, where hip-hop and spoken word artists were free to express a variety of political ideologies and

⁴⁹ Most of the artists that I encountered throughout my fieldwork were African American, so I thought that this group’s story was interesting and important considering that it was coming from a different racial perspective. The group did not seem to be an anomaly and were not treated differently by the other performers or the audience, and I found this an interesting fact that I look forward to exploring for the book manuscript.

religious beliefs that formed the lyrical substance that audiences imbibed. In Deborah Smith Pollard's *When the Church Becomes Your Party*, she locates the history of Christian hip-hop primarily in the work of three Christian rappers. Based on her source of Tim Smith, a radio DJ who played holy hip-hop on the radio, and internet-based research, Smith Pollard states that artists Stephen Wiley, Michael Peace and D-Boy Rodriguez are credited with originating Christian hip-hop. According to Smith Pollard these artists popularized Christian hip-hop to a primarily white audience.⁵⁰

These contrasting, competing stories of Christian hip-hop's history, one located in the underground music scene, and the other in popularized music recordings, illustrate not only the complexities of space and music consumption, but also the variegated perspectives that comprise Christian hip-hop's historical narratives and the many cultural conduits that feed into the music and culture. Musicians, churches, independent labels, radio stations, live concert and church performances and subculture spaces are only some of the players in the constant creation, contestation and consumption of Christian hip-hop music and culture. Rather than an investment in a grand narrative or definitive history of Christian or holy hip-hop, this chapter outlines Christian hip-hop's history and context through a set of pivotal moments and discursive strands that have shaped Christian hip-hop music and culture. Many of the developmental moments highlighted within this chapter are crucial instances in Christian hip-hop's history as cited by my interviewees and in informal conversations with fans and critics. Some of the

⁵⁰ Smith Pollard's sources include Allmusic.com, *Cross Rhythms* magazine in addition to interview, fieldwork sources.

discursive strands that I showcase in the development of Christian hip-hop are those that I have identified through my research on Christian hip-hop and mainstream hip-hop culture. These critical occurrences encapsulate where and how the identity of Christian hip-hop took shape; they are fundamental events where the music and culture are threatened, praised, questioned, or detested. During these defining moments Christian rap is often juxtaposed, either explicitly or implicitly, to mainstream, secular rap music or culture. Consequentially, many of the debates about Christian hip-hop's relevance to the church, artist's sincerity and expertise, and wide-reaching influences are some of the same ones that we find in mainstream, secular hip-hop.

Through exploring these moments and discursive strands in Christian hip-hop, a distinctive narrative about Christian hip-hop music and culture develops. Even as Christian hip-hop artists, promoters and fans are often invested in a project that breaks down the walls between the sacred and the secular in black religious and popular cultures, Christian hip-hop artists and promoters disavow and distance themselves both from iconic representations of commercial secular hip-hop and from controversial performances in Christian hip-hop that remind audiences of its close kinship to secular hip-hop as an urban, mainstreamed, street-oriented performance practice. Ultimately, these moments of contestation and narrative making illustrate that through performances of authenticity, sincerity, and expertise, artists, promoters and fans create a dialogic history of Christian hip-hop music and culture. These narrative themes, or tropes, in Christian hip-hop rely upon a constant antagonistic discourse between Christian and secular hip-hop.

Ironically, Christian hip-hop's identity dependency on secular hip-hop becomes most visible in the moments that artists, promoters and fans reject and distance themselves from secular hip-hop in a manner similar to black racial uplift efforts of the twentieth century. What follows is a framing of the Christian hip-hop movement and musical context within Southeast Michigan, an exploration of the dynamics of the sacred/secular division within this context, and close readings of interview and focus group material focusing on major themes or tropes as they surface within fundamental moments and in the characteristic discourse of Christian hip-hop music and culture. First, I focus on positive and supportive forces that are internal to the Christian movement, such as the work of The Yuinon, a Christian hip-hop umbrella organization and Friendship Productions, a promotions company and Christian hip-hop DJ service. I also engage with challenging "moments" for the movement that stem from external, antagonistic forces through the work of Minister G. Craig Lewis and his *Truth Behind Hip-Hop* series. Within my discussion of these pivotal moments, I also address generative challenges to Christian hip-hop, such as KRS-One's Temple of Hip-Hop and hip-hop's Five Percenter roots, both of which offer competing visions of faith, religion and holiness.

The Christian Hip-Hop Movement: Background and Context

I use the term "movement" cautiously, as some Christian hip-hop artists would not characterize their work as a movement within itself, but as part of the broader evangelical movement to share the gospel and to encourage conversion to the Christian faith. Some artists, such as Kim "Kiwi" Williams, Mahogany Jones and Jay and Jay SOUL argue that Christian hip-hop music and culture is simply a tool by

which to evangelize, and the music and culture do not constitute a separate movement.⁵¹ Still others, such as those affiliated with the Holy Hip-Hop Awards, including Pastor Eddie Velez⁵² would describe Christian hip-hop as a movement, while others, such as some of the artists who I have interviewed, would describe it as a ministry.

The Christian hip-hop movement is broadly shaped and facilitated nationally by the Holy Hip-Hop Music Alliance, “a coalition of artists, labels, ministers, producers, writers, churches, media, individuals and organizations focused intensely on the world-wide proliferation of the Gospel.”⁵³ The Alliance hosts an annual Holy Hip-Hop Awards Ceremony and Holy Hip-Hop Week annually in Marietta, Georgia. The Holy Hip-Hop Awards Ceremony and Week began in January 2000 as a way to feature the work of artists who were not showcased at gospel awards ceremonies. Their website, HolyHipHop.com, facilitates communication between Christian hip-hop artists and music communities across America. Every year the conference and showcase feature artists from all over the nation as well as speakers and workshops geared toward assisting ministers and artists with image development, community outreach, marketing and widening exposure. Its leadership is headed by Eddie Vélez, known by his alias, “The Puerto Rican Preacher” and by several other volunteers and staff members who assist with the year-long planning for the showcase and HHH Week. In 2002 HHH Music Awards

⁵¹ Some of my interviewees shuttled back and forth between naming Christian hip-hop as a movement and as a ministry.

⁵² Pastor Vélez, “The Puerto Rican Preacha” is part of the leadership of the Holy Hip-Hop Awards and Holy Hip-Hop Week, both of which take place annually in Marietta, Georgia.

⁵³ “Holy Hip Hop Alliance to increase focus on schools and universities” (press release) <http://www.holyhiphop.com/Press/HHHPress38.htm> Accessed 12 January 2010.

partnered with Rapfest and FlavorFest, two music showcases, to put on music awards and entertainment events.⁵⁴ Since 2004, the Holy Hip-Hop Music Alliance has released an annual compilation of HHH artists entitled *Holy Hip Hop: Taking the Gospel to the Streets*,⁵⁵ and the alliance has partnered with Maverick Entertainment⁵⁶ to produce a documentary featuring many Christian hip-hop artists, titled *Holy Hip Hop* (2006). Christopher Martin, better known as “Play” from the late-1980s, early-1990s hip-hop duo Kid ‘n’ Play, was the Executive Producer for the debut release of the HHH CD compilation and was Director of the *Holy Hip-Hop* documentary.⁵⁷

Within the Southeast Michigan area, the Christian hip-hop movement and ministry are framed and facilitated primarily by two organizations, The Yuinon, a Christian Hip-Hop Collective, and Friendship Productions, a Christian events promotion company geared primarily toward youth and young adults. The Yuinon (pronounced *union*) is a self-defined “movement of people determined to reach, rescue and redeem youth and young adults who have been “negatively” influenced

⁵⁴ “Holy Hip-Hop Awards, FlavorFest and Rap Fest Form Tri-Alliance” (Press Release)

<http://www.holyhiphop.com/Press/HHHPress33.htm> Accessed 12 January 2010.

⁵⁵ Other subtitles include *Street Disciples* (2008 compilation) and *Next Generation Gospel* (2009 compilation).

⁵⁶ “Maverick Spirit, established in December of 2003, premiered with the direct-to-video hit *The Spirit of Comedy*. Seeking to diversify the product line and offer customers more choices, the Maverick Spirit label helps fill the void in the inspirational genre. Next, Maverick Spirit partnered with talent Christopher “Play” Martin of the rap duo Kid ‘n’ Play and Atlanta based Amen Films to provide inspirationally driven films under the Amen Films and Maverick Spirit monikers. Maverick Entertainment has continued to expand it’s [sic] Christian label, Maverick Spirit, with such original titles as the internationally award-winning *The Goal: An Inspirational Story*, *Grace & Mercy and Love Ain’t Suppose To Hurt*, a live gospel musical stage play starring, from the Grammy-nominated R&B group “AZ Yet”, Tony Grant (Tyler Perry’s *Why Did I Get Married?*).” “Our Company”

<http://www.maverick-spirit.com/ourcompany.php> Accessed 12 January 2010.

⁵⁷ “Christopher Martin Executive Producer of Holy Hip Hop Music’s Debut Album” (Press Release) <http://www.holyhiphop.com/Press/HHHPress75.htm> Accessed 12 January 2010.

by the current culture,⁵⁸ and help them find their purpose in Christ.”⁵⁹ Taking their call to lead the hip-hop generation away from the perceived immoral influences of secular culture, The Yuinon considers itself to be an umbrella organization and informational resource for youth and young adults “who struggle with issues of identity and morality within a culture eroding right before our very eyes.” Founded in 2003, the organization operates with two full-time employees while the rest are volunteers. They perform their work in four main ways. One mode is through their extensive website, which contains an archive of articles that analyze the shortcomings and “sinful” nature of several aspects of hip-hop and secular culture. The website also houses a forum where contemporary issues are addressed by site visitors and Yuinon members.⁶⁰ This interactive website provides a place where site visitors read and respond to articles on topics such as “Is Hip-Hop Stuck in the 5th Grade?,” “Who is Jesus Christ?,” “How to Dress if You Profess,” and “Racism in the Body of Christ.”

Many of the articles point readers to sources for further information, and the article section of website includes a subsection titled “Defend the Christian Faith” where readers are given “practical” tools and scriptural references for responding to religious groups such as the Hebrew Israelites and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as background for understanding the commercialization of Christmas and the “demonic” nature of “Hell-oween.” The website also includes a “Di-Section” where

⁵⁸ Although The Yuinon is focused on hip-hop culture, they consider the influences of popular culture writ large to be of major import to their evangelical efforts.

⁵⁹ <http://theyuinon.com/about/index.htm> Accessed 20 October 2009.

⁶⁰ The Yuinon is comprised of members and supporters from all over the country. Although the organization is based in Southeast Michigan, it accepts members who align themselves with its goals and mission, regardless of city or country of residence.

Yuion members “dissect,” or provide biblical analyses of secular hip-hop trends and current events. This includes historical, cultural and biblically contextualized analyses of the lives, music and performances of popular secular hip-hop artists over the last ten years, such as Ma\$, Beyonce, 50 Cent, DMX, Lil Kim, and Ja Rule, as well as a dissection of B.E.T., the Black Entertainment Television Network. One such article, “Will the Real Ma\$e Please Step Forward?!” dissects former secular turned Christian rapper and minister Ma\$e’s career and the “double life” that Ma\$e lives that leads onlookers to question the authenticity of the Christian faith.⁶¹ Through close readings of lyrics and contextual analysis of hip-hop culture, the author of this and a majority of the Di-Section articles, Shannon “Vessel” Gaston, points out many of the “inconsistencies” in Ma\$e’s life. Gaston, a minister and the Yuion’s Vice President and Administrator of Operation, concludes that Ma\$e’s materialism, music lyrics, and lifestyle create spiritual stumbling blocks for audiences who are attempting to embrace and consistently practice the Christian faith.

The second component of The Yuion is Yuion Records, which has produced and recorded Christian hip-hop artists such as The Mad Prophets, Mahogany Jones, and Light Da Flow Minista. Yuion production studio operates out of the basement of the home of Jason “Maji” Wilson’s basement in the Detroit area. The Yuion has newly acquired office space in Detroit as of 2008, and the organization aspires to construct a studio space in the new building that they operate out of. Notably, Yuion Records is the first recording label to feature a collaborative album comprised entirely of female hip-hop artists, secular/mainstream or Christian.

⁶¹ Ma\$e used to be known as Murder Ma\$e and was part of Puff Daddy’s (known now as P. Diddy or by his legal name, Sean Combs) record label, Bad Boy Records.

Titled *The H.E.R. (Healing and Evangelism through Rhyme) Project*, the album includes the collaborative work of female Christian hip-hop artists from all over country and is discussed in Chapter 4. The third and fourth components of The Yuinon consist of multimedia projects such as documentaries, “hood tracts” and special events and conferences “to raise awareness, strategize and fellowship.”⁶²

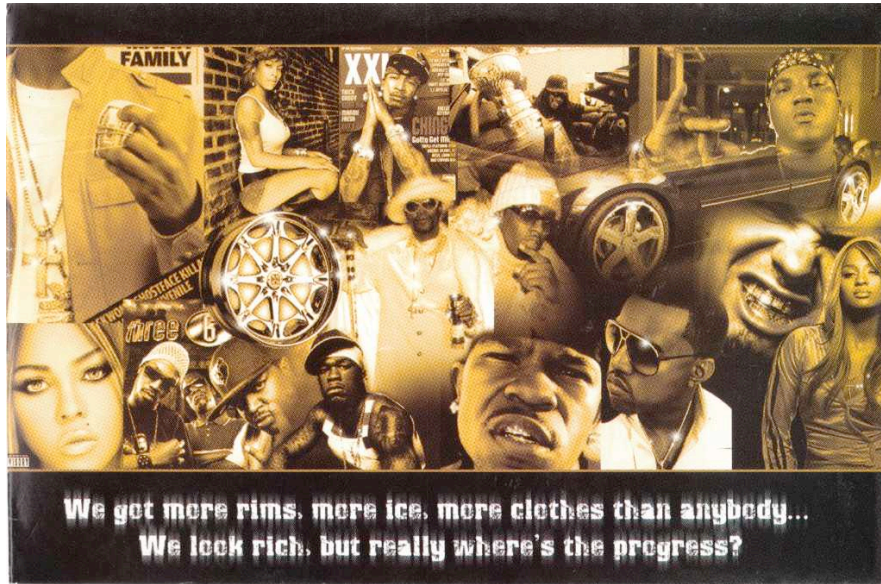


Figure 2.1: The front cover of one of The Yuinon’s Hood Tracts. Courtesy of The Yuinon

The message on the hood tract above reads: “We got more rims, more ice, more clothes than anybody... We look rich, but really where’s the progress?” The Yuinon’s *hood tracts* are a neo-evangelical subgenre of tracts, or pamphlets that religious and political organizations leave for or give out to passersby as a “fishing” or evangelical tool.⁶³ Titled “Genocide,” this tract includes statistics about STDs, including HIV,

⁶² The Yuinon website, <http://www.theyuinon.com>

⁶³ Tracts predate printing presses in the U.S. They were used as early as the thirteenth century and also throughout Protestant Reformation Movement in the sixteenth seventeenth century. Traditionally church clergy wrote tracts; today they are created by religious outreach organizations and are intended to have a popular appeal amongst “unbelieving” readers. Through pithy scriptures, cartoon images, and rhetorical questions, tracts are frugal outreach tools that

youth with parents in prison, African American murder victims and murderers, and the amount of money spent on custom rims for cars. The statistics are matched with graphic pictures of contracted STDs, a prison cell, and an image that suggests that there is a Black KKK. These striking images convey the urgency of their work, continuing in the tradition of religious tracts used throughout the world, while capturing the attention of a hip-hop culture-embedded, visually focused generation. On the back of the tract The Yuinon includes their website, www.yuhelp.com, and a phone number that interested readers can call for prayer and other forms of support.

In a given week, The Yuinon may receive up to three requests⁶⁴ to hold seminars for churches, secular organizations and youth-serving organizations who are all “struggling to understand hip hop and its influence. We [The Yuinon] find ourselves often times in settings that may not be Christian but may just be some organization dealing with youth and trying to understand the culture of hip-hop. ... If you can imagine that, that’s a tremendous need.”⁶⁵ Yuinon members, who are not only comprised of music artists, but also poets, and fans of Christian hip-hop music,

economize words and images for what creators intend to be greatest amount of impact so that readers grasp the seriousness of their message. In evangelicals’ viewpoint, tracts should pique intrigue and interest so that readers are encouraged to seek further information, either at a website, church service or a gathering specifically designed to appeal to “unbelievers.” Tracts are most well known in the general public today through the Watch Tower Series that Jehovah’s Witnesses distribute. In recent history, tracts regained their popularity with the Jesus Movement of the late-1960s, early-1970s, which included outreach to college campuses. Tracts remain widely distributed evangelical tools used in religious outreach ministries today, and were once thought to contain spiritual power within themselves. For more on tracts in a U.S., antebellum evangelical context, see Mark S. Schantz, “Religious Tracts, Evangelical Reform, and the Market Revolution in Antebellum America.” *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 425-466, and his book *Piety in Providence: Class Dimensions of Religious Experience in Antebellum Rhode Island* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998).

⁶⁴ The Yuinon endeavors to fill all requests as long as they have the funds and representatives to do so.

⁶⁵ Interview with Shannon “Vessel” Gaston, 2 June 2008, Detroit, Michigan.

are asked to present at and organize these events; some members present on panel discussions with broader audiences at colleges and universities such as Harvard.⁶⁶ An additional component, The Yuinon's mentorship program, cuts across all of their organizational offerings, and it is federally funded through the U.S. Department of Education. The Yuinon's general programming and organizational support come from donors who give to their ministry.

The Yuinon works closely with Friendship Productions (FP), which is a Christian DJ service, event planning and production company, and lifestyle ministry founded in March 2002 and directed by Esosa Victor Osai, a Michigan State University alum.⁶⁷ Osai was born in Chicago to a Nigerian father and an African American mother, both of whom he describes as "very strong Christians." His family moved to Detroit when he was a child, and his musical focus was influence by his mother, who used to play music all of the time, and his entrepreneurial pursuits were shaped by his father's property ownership and his business acumen. As an engineering major, Osai decided that instead of going into the industry he would focus his efforts on ministering to the hip-hop generation. Friendship Productions' mission statement is as follows:

We will fill the Detroit Area, and beyond with lifestyle disciples of Jesus (friends of God), by speaking the truth in love, and using music, websites, audio/video, live events, bible studies, fellowships, prayer meetings, and community service. This is to cause an increase of:

1. Growth in the Kingdom of Jesus- Individually & Corporately (Matthew 6, Acts 2)
2. Unity in the Body of Christ- Truth, Fellowship (John 17, 1 John 1)

⁶⁶ In the interview Gaston mentioned that a few weeks prior to our interview, a Yuinon Member, DJ Lady Grace, was part of a panel discussion at Harvard University.

⁶⁷ Michigan State University is located in East Lansing, Michigan. East Lansing is about 100 miles northwest of Detroit.

3. Music to Fill your Heart- With the Word & Spirit of God (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:18-19)⁶⁸

Friendship Productions' website provides links to contemporary gospel and Christian hip-hop albums for purchase, as well as links for purchasing individual and group tickets for upcoming concerts and events. In addition to their website, FP maintains a mailing list through which they announce upcoming events and conferences and distribute articles on contemporary topics that their small staff has written, as well as a Facebook fan page with over 1100 members.⁶⁹

Through organizing and implementing a broad array of media and events, Friendship Productions casts its event planning net widely in order to appeal to diverse and segmented youth and young adult populations. Friendship Productions financially supports and organizes many of the concerts and conferences that take place throughout the Southeast Michigan area, and they serve as a central hub for Christian events that occur throughout this area, along with Detroit City Entertainment.⁷⁰ The concerts, conferences and other events are funded personally through Osai's DJ service that he provides for churches, wedding ceremonies and other events, and Osai also utilizes his personal savings to cover the events' expenses.

Osai and a handful of volunteers mobilize a network of churches, youth and community centers, and concert performance spaces for Christian-centered events geared toward youth and young adults. Osai believes that their ministry is unique:

⁶⁸ "Mission" <http://www.fpdj.com/> Accessed 20 October 2009.

⁶⁹ This number was recorded in January 2010.

⁷⁰ Detroit City Entertainment's (DCE) website was defunct upon the writing of this chapter. However, from interviews I have gleaned that DCE events are targeted not only at youth but also at Christians of all ages.

There's a lot of Christian clubs outside of the state. And you know, there's people doing parties for their youth now. As far as outside of the specific church, there's not, I don't see a lot. I know there is one ministry in Florida, she hit me up and she said she was doing some similar things. I haven't talked to her in a while but she's, they should be doing some good things. I think our ministry is unique because it's not a church per se. There's a lot of churches that do concerts and churches that do parties for their youth, but there's not a parachurch ministry⁷¹ that focuses on promoting to the whole community. There's not a lot of those at all. And there's Christian clubs, you know, but they own property and they just, bring people into their club. They don't you know go out, they're not outside. They don't move around different places like we do. Our ministry is kind of unique. It's not we're unique as far as we do anything, you know, totally different from what anybody else does, but our ministry is unique because we don't just do one thing, we kind of try to do a lot of different things. And that might be good, maybe bad, we might need to focus better, we might need to get some property or something like that, but we'll see how that works out in the future.⁷²

Both The Yuinon and Friendship Productions operate as parachurch ministries, ministries that work outside of and across denominational lines, but both organizations maintain close relationships with pastors, ministers and church congregations. Together they redefine the Christian movement outside of conventional church walls and religious institutions. In my interview with Osai, he explained that he will personally call youth pastors and ministers and tell them about his events and the pastors will relay the information to their churches; sometimes pastors and other church contacts will buy twenty or thirty tickets on

⁷¹ Parachurch organizations are faith-based evangelical organizations that work independently of church oversight and across denominational lines outside of church walls. They include organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ, geared toward reaching college students, independent bible study groups, public service organizations (such as homeless shelters), publishers and TV and radio stations such as Trinity Broadcasting Network and James Dobson's Focus on the Family. For more on parachurches from a Christian evangelical perspective, see Wesley K. Willmer, J. David Schmidt, and Martyn Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch: Enlarging the Boundaries of God's Kingdom*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

⁷² Interview with Esosa Osai, 3 September 2008, Detroit, Michigan.

the spot for events like Christian rollerskating parties or music concerts.⁷³ Although The Yuinon and Friendship Productions operate as parachurch ministries, they rely on close working relationships with ministers, pastors and their congregations to bring out their youth and young adults to the events that they co-sponsor.

Parachurch ministries pose a challenge to churches as they seek to establish a strong membership and a visible and strong presence in the communities that they serve. While parachurch ministries may extend the ministerial bounds of one particular church or denomination as they work across congregational and denominational lines, parachurch ministries' threat to churches lies in their threat to the establishment of local churches.⁷⁴ Some even characterize megachurches, nondenominational churches with thousands of members, as parachurch operatives, in that in their all expansiveness they elide the work and the relevance of "local churches."⁷⁵ As early as the 1980s, ministers and church leaders began to identify the "uneasy marriage"⁷⁶ of the church and the parachurch, citing the erosion of local church culture in light of the power and prominence of parachurch ministries.

An interesting finding in my research is that many of the artists and figures central to the Christian hip-hop movement in Southeast Michigan are not affiliated

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ One example of a parachurch movement is the Promise Keepers. "Promise Keepers' mission is to ignite and unite men to become warriors who will change their world through living out the Seven Promises. Promise Keepers' vision is simply put in three words: "Men Transformed Worldwide." Based in Denver, Colorado, Promise Keepers has directly reached more than five and a half million men since its founding in 1990." "About Us" <http://www.promisekeepers.org/about> Accessed 12 January 2010.

⁷⁵ Jerry E. White, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Colorado Springs, CO: Mulnomah Publishers, 1983).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

with specific denominations. Even though they may have been raised in a certain church background, many of them considers themselves nondenominational Christian, and see denominations as a divisive characteristic of Christianity that they endeavor to circumvent in their work, hence the parachurch ministerial nature of The Yuinon and Friendship Productions. While the nature of the Christian hip-hop movement is not unlike other mainstream evangelical efforts, the unique focus on urban communities and on youth of color enables these artists and music promoters to fill a particular niche within the Christian evangelical movement. I will now turn to a discussion of one of holy hip-hop's strongest critics, G. Craigie Lewis.

Holy Hip-Hop Critics

In the Christian tradition, believers often repeat an adage, "What the devil meant for evil, God meant for good." This statement refers to the transformative nature of Christianity to make even those things that seem evil, or of the devil – misfortune, heartbreak, financial struggles, "negative" cultural trends, and even secular music – good when they are transformed and used for God's glorification. This ideology is central to the work of Christian hip-hop artists, who widely argue that music is not inherently secular, nor is it so embedded in a secular context that it cannot be "redeemed" for use for God's kingdom. Like Thomas Dorsey, the gospel blues musician responsible for branding and popularizing what we know as gospel today, these artists see themselves rescuing and redeeming a cultural form lost to secular materialism and "immoral" culture for the purposes of "rescuing" youth and young adults from "depraved" lifestyles. In explaining why they use hip-hop, pro-Holy Hip-Hop music and cultural critics evoke an evolutionary narrative similar to

the conversation narrative, one that mirrors discourse on the “evolutionary” nature of jazz and blues music.

Through highlighting progression, transformation, and redemption, Christian hip-hop artists and supporters focus on the positive, transformative nature of the music, and by extension, of the people who listen to the music. On the other hand, Christian hip-hop critics focus on what they perceive to be the devolution of church culture, as they argue that holy hip-hop “degrades” the spiritual, Christ-centered nature of the church. When we consider these evolutionary and devolutionary narratives together we find that the discourse surrounding Christian hip-hop does not only concern the debate over what is good or evil, but also concerns the relevance, authenticity and different visions of what evolves or devolves, supports or undermines, Christian outreach efforts.

Shannon “The Vessel” Gaston is a strong advocate of biblically grounded Christian hip-hop and is a pillar in the Christian hip-hop movement. He is a graduate of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, resides in Southeast Michigan, and is a self-described hip-hop cultural analyst. In June 1998 he began making a documentary titled *Next Level* on the development of Christian hip-hop nationwide. In December 2000, Gaston released the documentary at the Christian, youth-oriented IMPACT conference.⁷⁷ Gaston maintains an archive of eighty hours of footage, which he distilled into his three-hour documentary. In my interview

⁷⁷ According to their website, the purpose of IMPACT is to “empower and equip this generation through radical passionate worship, anointed relevant messages and powerful prophetic ministry that challenges young people to wholeheartedly pursue God as a way of life.” IMPACT was formerly known as the Elim Youth Conference and was conceptualized in the late-1990s. It is now run by the nonprofit Christian outreach and evangelical organization Campus Crusade. <http://www.theimpactconference.com/> Accessed 9 December 2009.

with him, he stated that Minister G. Craig Lewis, the well-known creator of the controversial *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop* DVD series, used some of his footage in his DVD without permission.

G. Craig Lewis is an evangelical minister and the creator and producer of the controversial DVD series *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop* (2004) and leader of EX Ministries in Fort Worth, Texas. For over fifteen years Lewis has traveled around the world preaching to youth and to church organizations about what he believes to be the negative impact of popular culture on youth today.⁷⁸ He has produced several DVDs and books with titles such as *The Truth Behind Teen Dating*, *The Truth Behind Abortion*, and *The Power of One: A Message to Christian Singles*. As holy hip-hop's staunchest, most publically visible critic, Lewis argues that there can be no Christian, or holy, hip-hop because hip-hop is itself a religious practice and way of life that is demonic and diametrically opposed to Christianity.⁷⁹ In *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop* DVD series, he discusses the Muslim and Five Percenter⁸⁰ roots of hip-hop, cites the roots of hip-hop in what he believes to be demonic and idolatrous practices, and more recently, criticizes the work of hip-hop artist KRS-One, a mainstream, secular hip-hop icon who established The Temple of Hip-Hop.⁸¹ I

⁷⁸ He addresses KRS-One's work more closely on his blog, <http://gcraige.blogspot.com>, and also in the fifth of what was supposed to be a final four-part DVD series *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop*.

⁷⁹ However, there are other ways in which spiritual belief systems are foregrounded beyond Five Percenterism and Islam. There are Hip-Hop Life Coaches, such as David "Minister Server" Tavares, who devotes his life to preserving and unpacking the complexity of hip-hop culture. He is also a co-host of a hip-hop spiritual talk show in Atlanta, Georgia, and is one of KRS-One's spiritual advisors. "The Founder" <http://www.hiphopministries.org/thefounder.html> Accessed 16 December 2009.

⁸⁰ Five Percenters are also known as the Five Percent of Islam.

⁸¹ According to the Hip-Hop Ministries' website, The Temple of Hip-Hop (TOH) was founded by KRS-One in 1996. It is "an international ministry, archive, school and society (M.A.S.S.) movement that teaches Hip Hop beyond entertainment. The TOH promotes and preserves Hip hop's accumulated historical/cultural/spiritual wisdom for the purpose of empowering the Hip hoppa

locate Lewis's DVD series and his persistent critique of Christian hip-hop as "disguised" secular hip-hop culture as pivotal moments in the development of Christian hip-hop. His work has forced holy hip-hop artists to clearly articulate their evangelical project, and many Christian hip-hop artists who I interviewed mention Lewis as someone whom they respond to in their work, either explicitly or implicitly.⁸² The following section considers Lewis's critique more closely and presents my argument for why hip-hop music and culture holds such a controversial place in many African American churches.

In October 2009, KRS-One and The Temple of Hip-Hop released a 650-page text titled *The Gospel of Hip-Hop: The First Instrument*, a self-described "life-guide manual for members of Hip Hop Kulture that combines classic philosophy with faith and practical knowledge for a fascinating, in-depth exploration of Hip Hop as a life path." *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* presents principles of hip-hop culture as the foundational structure for a new religion that is open to followers of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds. In an interview with AllHipHop.com, KRS-One suggests "in 100 years, this book will be a new religion on the earth."⁸³ As a "life-guide manual" *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* is structured similarly to the *Bible* with books and chapters. KRS-One believes that "time is up" for Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and that he has the authority to create a new religion himself because he has a direct

and guiding the Hiphop nation." From "The Temple of Hip-Hop"

<http://www.hiphopministries.org/temple.html> Accessed 16 December 2009.

⁸² For instance, Jay and Jay SOUL, Mahogany Jones, Shannon Gaston, The Ambassador, Kiwi,

⁸³ "KRS Plans New Religion With 'Gospel of Hip-Hop'" by Dawn Danz and Phalary Long.

<http://allhiphop.com/stories/news/archive/2009/08/20/21903171.aspx> Accessed 17 December 2009.

line of communication with God.⁸⁴ KRS One's work gives credence to Lewis's argument that hip-hop is a religion within itself, and most importantly, it illustrates one instance of how hip-hop functioned as a cultural, political guiding light for urban youth from its inception in Brooklyn, New York, to its adoption, propagation and resignification all over the world.

What Lewis's critique of Christian hip-hop centers around is his belief that music is a medium for transferring spirits. And rather than music possessing the capacity for functioning as a tool to explain the deep truths of the Bible, he believes that music is simply a tool for exposure, and the real truth is located in "The Word," or the Bible. He believes that when pastors invite Christian hip-hop performers to come perform for their youth group, and when they have Christian hip-hop parties and conferences, youth pastors and youth ministries are just copping out and giving youth what they want rather than what they need. Implicit in his argument is that Christian hip-hop is a reactive, misguided ministry rather than a proactive, spirit-led ministry. He argues that Christian hip-hop reacts to the power that hip-hop seems to hold in the world and endeavors to garner the power of hip-hop for supporting and conveying the Christian message to youth. These efforts, he believes, are devastating, regressive ways of reaching youth in the church, and he goes so far as to compare this method of evangelism to "using a crackhead to reach a crackhead."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Forum and dialogue respondents to KRS-One's work, whether they are religious or not, overwhelmingly believe that KRS-One has "lost it" or "gone crazy." For specific comments please see the dialogue following the article cited in the previous footnote as one contextualized example.

⁸⁵ A "crackhead" is someone who is addicted to crack cocaine, a cheaper, solid, smokable form of cocaine that is considered its most addictive form. The Crack Epidemic plagued black communities all across the nation throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. It is fitting that Lewis would choose crack cocaine addicts as an analogy to intensify his critique, as the epidemic still

For Lewis, Christian hip-hop is not a “reformed” music and culture, but is simply another point on the continuum of idol worship and the spirit of rebellion in secular hip-hop culture.



Figure 2.2: Album cover art for the holy hip-hop group Priesthood’s album *Thug Worship* (2009). This album cover contains many visual signifiers of secular hip-hop culture, from the graffiti style calligraphy, to the group’s clothing and style (jerseys, dickies-style shirts, etc). One would not know that this was a Christian hip-hop group just from the looks of the cover. Courtesy of HIGHLYFE, Inc.

holds powerful relevance in the immediate memory of black communities today. For a contextualized historical account of the Crack Epidemic and the war on drugs in black communities, please see Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2001); Sue Mahan, *Crack Cocaine, Crime, and Women: Legal, Social, and Treatment Issues* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); and Gabriel J. Chin, “Race, The War on Drugs, and the Collateral Consequences of Criminal Conviction.” *Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice*. 253 (Fall, 2002).

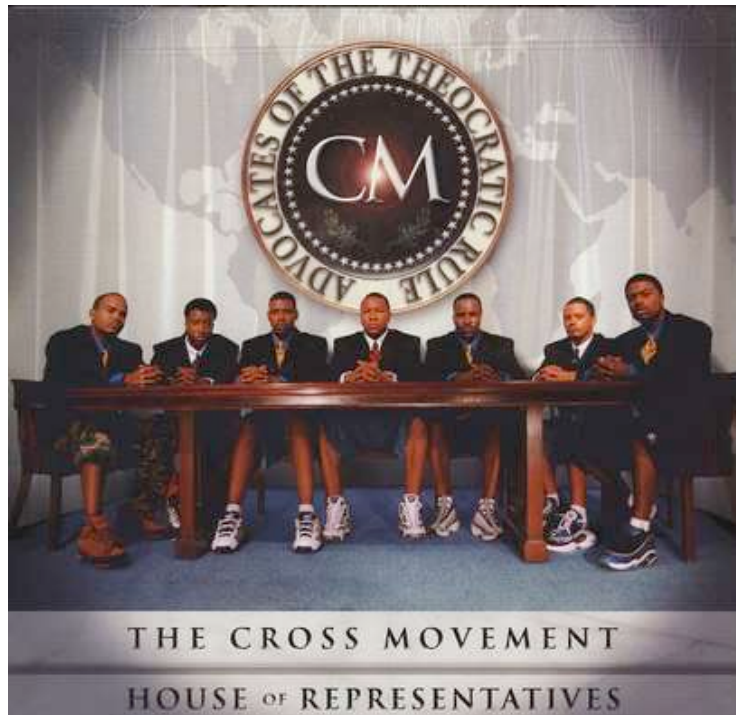


Figure 2.3: Album cover art for Cross Movement, *House of Representatives* (2000). Contrast Priesthood’s album cover with Cross Movement’s inaugural album, *House of Representatives*. Above the table, Cross Movement members are dressed in a suit coat and tie, below the table they sport jeans, army fatigues, shorts and tennis shoes, clearly visually signifying on the fact that they are representing “God’s house” through their own expression of hip-hop culture. Courtesy of Cross Movement Records.

Lewis, like many hip-hop scholars, musicians and others,⁸⁶ identifies hip-hop not simply a music genre but a culture: “The Hip Hop subculture says that people can look, act, and feel anyway they want. And because this demonic movement has

⁸⁶ For texts that examine various aspects of hip-hop culture, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002); Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans From the Hip-Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); S. Craig Watkins, *Hip-Hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture, and the Struggle for a Movement* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006); Tricia Rose, *Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-Hop – and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008); Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009).

bled over into our churches, the general flavor of most youth ministries nowadays is to 'come as you are' and wear what you feel. And many take this to mean that they should be able to look and appear any way they want in church. This is not the case."⁸⁷ He believes that there is nothing wrong with Christian *rap*, as in rap music *only*, but Christian hip-hop, as a cultural format composed of multiple elements in addition to the music, is an oxymoron with no place in the church because it he deems hip-hop culture (distinct from although related to rap music) an "organized religion."

Lewis's critique is not entirely unfounded. Felicia M. Miyakawa argues in *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* that there are a plethora of Five Percenter influences on hip-hop, from terminology, to dress, to the lyrical subject matter, and she illustrates that this Five Percenter influence still persists in contemporary hip-hop through the work of artists like Erykah Badu, Mos Def and Arrested Development.⁸⁸ Likewise, Ted Swedenburg illustrates the overwhelming influence of Five Percenter thought on hip-hop from the 1980s to the present day. I extend their arguments to assert that the stereotypical lyrical treatment and relative lack of female presence in hip-hop culture and in holy hip-hop culture in this case is traceable to elements of Five Percenterism, the religion practiced by several hip-hop artists such as Rakim and Eric B., influential emcees who helped to popularize and establish the artistry of hip-hop in the late-1980s. Although not directly situated within G. Craige Lewis' critique, this aspect of Five

⁸⁷ "Holy Hip Hop: A Bad Idea" by G. Craige Lewis, March 10, 2009 <http://gcraige.blogspot.com/> Accessed 27 December 2009.

⁸⁸ Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

Percenterism's influence on hip-hop is important in order understand the experiences of female Christian hip-hop artists discussed in Chapter 4. Five Percenterism also represents a competing discourse and vision of faith and religion in hip-hop culture.

Numerous hip-hop artists, including Queen Latifah, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Digable Planets, and Erykah Badu, to name just a few, have practiced Five Percenterism.⁸⁹ Five Percenters, considered practitioners of an offshoot of the Nation of Islam,⁹⁰ are also known as the Five Percent of Islam and as The Nation of Gods and Earths. As part of the explosion of black nationalist thought in the 1980s, Five Percenters sought to establish a new world order that would challenge the status quo maintained in America and worldwide.⁹¹ According to their belief system, the five percent are the “Poor Righteous Teachers” who are commissioned by Allah to teach the eighty-five percent, the uncivilized and those who are misled by the rich and corrupt ten percent, the ways of Allah and Knowledge of Self. White people are largely excluded from practicing the religion, and Five Percenter men are deemed *Gods* while Five Percenter women are referred to as *Earths*. According to the Five Percenter symbolism, men are metaphorically represented by the sun, women by the moon, and children by stars (they are also considered “seeds” as a

⁸⁹ These artists are listed as practitioners of Five Percenterism in *Five Percenter Rap* (2005) by Felicia Miyakawa and in “Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent” by Ted Swedenburg (1997).

⁹⁰ Some Five Percenters do not believe that they are an offshoot, but rather a distinct spiritual practice. “The Five Percenters would emerge from Harlem’s chapter of the Nation of Islam, but may also revel Moorish Science influence in the 7 on their flag and the precedent of Allah El” (Muhammad, *The Five Percenters*, 31).

⁹¹ Felicia Miyakawa, author of *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message and Black Muslim Mission* (2005) points to additional hip-hop terminology that comes from FP, including “word” or “word is bond,” and “dropping science” (41). Other hip-hop speech directly tied to Five Percenter thought is “What up, G?” short for “What up, God?”, God being the name for male Five Percenters (FP). Talib Kweli’s “Knowledge of Self (Determination)” also harkens to FP ‘knowledge of self’ teachings.

metaphorical extension of women as “Earths”). This celestial iconography mirrors the gender hierarchy in Five Percenter thought, as well as in hip-hop culture more generally.

Poor Righteous Teachers, a popular hip-hop trio from 1989 to 1996, released their album *Holy Intellect* in 1990, during the same year as Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*, the X-Clan's *To the East, Backwards* and Brand Nubian's *All for One*, which were all Islam-influenced and inflected albums during this moment of hypervisible, conscious rap in the late-1980s and 1990s.⁹² Their song “Shakiyla,” which personified Five Percenterism as “the mother of civilization,” or a black woman, was the most popular song on their second album, *Pure Poverty* (1991). The Poor Righteous Teachers (PRT) began the song by saying that “this is not a love ballad,” pointing to the fact that the many attributes of Shakiyla are indeed facets of Five Percenter religious thought and ideology. In the song, PRT admonish other black men “to wake up from their dreams” and to get rid of their “earrings and those silly chains, which are just a waste of time.” As a vehicle for communicating the morals of Five Percenter thought, which rejects materialism and any activity that jeopardizes the black community (such as the drug trade, which PRT mention in “Shakiyla”), this song uses a woman as a metaphorical representation for life, morality, and wisdom, similar to the personification of wisdom as a woman in the book of Proverbs.⁹³

⁹² Conscious rap is widely considered an underground or non-mainstream subgenre of rap music that specifically addresses social ills and political activism. Themes explored by conscious rappers include religion, politics, African and African American cultural heritage, and self-education, among others.

⁹³ Proverbs Chapter 3, verses 13-18 states: “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the

This metaphorical usage of a woman, central to the song “Shakiyla,” does not mirror the treatment of women in Five Percenterism, however. In both Miyakawa's *Five Percenter Rap* (2005) and in *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York* (2007) by Michael Muhammad Knight, the authors illustrate the sidelining of women that occurs within this religious practice. In Knight's painfully detailed exploration of the development of Five Percenter thought and community, not one woman is mentioned in this development process. The circle of Five Percenters primarily consists of men who are invested in creating a religion that speaks to their needs.⁹⁴



Figure 2.4: Five Percenters' symbol. Notice the sun, moon, star, and the number seven, which symbolizes God according to the “Supreme Mathematics.” Courtesy of <http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/nge.html>

gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her.” (King James Version)

⁹⁴ There is a brief reference to women in Muhammad's *The Five Percenters* in this interview with Ronald Robinson, a Five Percenter who converted at the age of sixteen. Summarizing his interview with Robinson, Muhammad states “...Allah taught the Five Percenters how to treat each other, as well as women, discussing the issue of a women in the Bronx who had been mistreated for having a hard time with her lessons” (84). Muhammad nor Robinson elaborate on exactly how Five Percenters were taught to treat women. Vagueness leaves much to be desired, especially since historical accounts of Five Percenters do not illustrate much central participation from women practitioners. This, I believe, carries over into hip-hop as established in a large part by Five Percenter artists who then communicate their ideology through the music.

The primary role of women as Earths is to reproduce, to produce seeds (or stars). While the Five Percenter religious practice may seem revolutionary⁹⁵ because it dismantles the idea of a spiritual, intangible God that does not have a human form, the faith's traditional and somewhat conservative definition of women has been criticized as questionable if not contradictory.⁹⁶ Women are not given any known leadership roles in the faith. Defined largely by their reproductive, birthing capacity, women are required to wear head coverings and to cover three-fourths of their bodies, since the Earth is covered three-fourths by water. In the Five Percenter parliaments, open forums in which Five Perceners speak on the ills in society and relay strategies for staying "righteous," women are not allowed to speak, although they are often present in the parliament audience. As hip-hop culture became steeped in Five Percenter ideology through its adherents who were also hip-hop practitioners, the imbalanced gender roles and assumed superiority of men in hip-hop that we see today may have seemed to some as innocuous, or as a natural extension of the culture of hip-hop as forwarded by Five Perceners.

Lewis's work and his critiques of Christian hip-hop have led to an avalanche of defenses of the Christian hip-hop movement. One artist, The Ambassador, a Christian hip-hop pioneer mentioned previously, wrote his Master's thesis on "The

⁹⁵ Five Percenterism was considered revolutionary in the context of 1960s black nationalist thought, including the Black Power movement in the United States and kin movements in countries all over the world with African-descended populations. For more on black nationalism and hip-hop, see "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism" by Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Social Text*, No. 34 (1993), pp. 53-84.

⁹⁶ This critique is an analogue with criticisms of the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, which were revolutionary in their fighting for the rights of African Americans but essentialist and sexist in regards to issues of gender equality and the acknowledgment of differences across the sexes. This approach to flattening out differences along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, and other identity categories is known in revisionist histories as "strategic essentialism."

Theological Implications of Hip-Hop” as part of his degree completion requirements for Dallas Theological Seminary.⁹⁷ Therein, The Ambassador argues that hip-hop is an “indigenous” cultural format that is translatable to various contexts. Through studying biblical and theological texts, he examines the ways in which God has sanctioned other cultures to use their culturally specific forms of music and culture for worship, praise and evangelical purposes. The Ambassador argues in his thesis, on his subsequent solo album titled *The Thesis* (2004), and in public concerts, conferences and seminars that African Americans’ use of blues music as gospel blues, and other ethnic and cultural groups’ use of their indigenous music and languages upon conversion to Christianity are sanctioned biblically; thus, there is also a precedent for blacks located in the cultural format of hip-hop to use this music as a worship and evangelical tool.

However, after G. Craige Lewis’s series release in 2004, Christian hip-hop artists were faced with picking up what The Ambassador calls “casualties of war” in his article, “Life After Craig [sic] Lewis: Let Us Move On” (2006):

It has been quite some time since Craig [sic] Lewis and Ex Ministries came on the scene and launched an assault on the whole of secular and Christian Hip Hop. Many of us laboring as indigenous missionaries to the hip hop community found ourselves ripped by the shrapnel of his claims. Internal bickering and disputing erupted within the church resulting in many casualties of this “war.” Sadly, there has been much damage to Christ’s body. Some people have been convinced that regardless of how Christo-centric and biblically laced a person from the Hip Hop community, he or she is an accomplice of the devil. Therefore, certain Christian Hip Hop heads have been repeatedly insulted by their Christian leaders, banished by their church family, boycotted, and despised because of their form of Christian ministry.

⁹⁷ William “The Ambassador” Branch completed his thesis for his Masters in Theology in 2000, before Lewis’s DVD series was released in 2004.

Our CD's have been burned in bonfires, and some individuals have been forced to renounce their affiliation with the Christian Hip Hop mission field.⁹⁸

The Ambassador argues that this fighting and bickering hasn't led to the demise of holy hip-hop only, but to the injury of the body of Christ.⁹⁹ Still, hip-hop artists have had to contend with a rejection of their work both before and after this incident. One of my interviewees, Kim "Kiwi" Williams, notes that after her performance at a local church, church and choir members broke their ties with the church to show their dissent for rappers performing in the church. Although responses have become more positive and welcoming since then, it has been an ongoing struggle with relatively small victories for Christian hip-hop artists.

This debate about the secular roots of hip-hop music has been an important shaping factor for Christian hip-hop. Where Lewis and The Ambassador disagree about the nature of Christian hip-hop most strongly is on the grounds of the nature of the music; although Lewis has stated that Christian rap *music* (and not Christian hip-hop *culture* at large) is okay, he contradicts himself when he states that Christian hip-hop music, with its beats, secular samples and rhythmic progression, is inherently evil and demonic. He goes as far in *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop* to say that certain beats are evil and that secular samples create hook and bait that will

⁹⁸ "Life After Craig Lewis: Let Us Move On" by William "The Ambassador" Branch. Published October 9, 2006 at TheAmbassadorOnline.com <http://www.theambassadoronline.com/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=26945&columnid=146> Accessed 22 December 2009.

⁹⁹ The body of Christ, or Christ's body, is a phrase used in Christian churches that describes all people who make up the church populace, from the pastor and the leadership of the church, to volunteers and staff, to the membership, or, one body composed of many "members." The body of Christ is also refers to Christians across churches and denominations, and the metaphor of the body is thought to have stemmed from Jesus Christ's use of the term at The Last Supper (where bread, consumed by his disciples, represented his body) and is referenced in the Apostle Paul's message to the church in Corinth in I Corinthians 12:12-14 of the *Bible*.

never deliver “demonically-bound hip-hoppers.” The Ambassador argues that there is no inherent goodness or evil in music, but lyrics, the musician’s intent, and the song’s overall message make the music what it is.

Historical debates about sacred or secular nature of the music itself, especially prominent in black culture beginning in the 1930s with gospel blues shape the discourse around Christian hip-hop. But, despite the controversy around gospel blues music and culture in the 1930s and 1940s, the musical form itself still held structural and performative similarities to Christian music of the time. Eileen Southern, Samuel Floyd and several other music scholars note that the blues chord structure and vocal delivery held similarities to Christian music forms such as spirituals. Some even argue that the only difference between blues and Christian music was the lyrics; instead of singing out “Oh Lord!” in Christian music, blues singers would shout out “Oh baby!”¹⁰⁰ But in the case of Christian hip-hop music, the vocal delivery (rapped rather than sung), the instrumentation (808 bass, electronic beats, secular hip-hop samples), and the larger secular and global context from which it is partly derived poses a challenge to its acceptance within the church, even to a greater degree than gospel blues, I would argue. On the other hand, Kiwi, a Christian hip-hop artist who I feature in chapter 4, sees Christian hip-hop as part of a longer trajectory of musical debates and discourse reaching back to the classical music period:

Even in the early, early days, the Mozart, Bach, Beethoven days, you know what I mean, they couldn't do certain intervals because people felt that a tri-

¹⁰⁰ Albert Murray gives such an example in *Stomping the Blues*.

tone interval,¹⁰¹ “all of that's demonic.” You know, they couldn't do certain chords, “oh that's of the devil.” So it's been going on for years. For years, you know? And like I said even in white communities when Christian rock came about you know they weren't real easy to embrace it. Although they are embracing it more now, and I find that their community embraces Christian hip hop more than Black communities, which I find is as odd. I mean not odd, but interesting. But yes, there is a divide. I think a lot has to do with upbringing, honestly. And a lot of especially Pentecostal denominations, they're very conscious or aware or cautious, that's a better word, cautious of not doing anything that's unholy, you know, whatever unholy to that particular denomination is. So anything that appears of the world in whatever gauge they're looking at, they want to separate from.¹⁰²

Kiwi utilizes her musical knowledge as a music major to go as far back to classical music in historicizing the debate over the secular significations or meanings in music. For Kiwi, evil or demonic signifiers in music are decided to be such based on a musical consensus on what is “right” and what is “wrong.” Later in the interview she explained that it is all a matter of preference, and that over time preferences change. What she describes, in effect, are the boundaries policed by certain churches, gatekeepers who determine what will and will not be accepted or embraced within the church. She also points to the history of Christian Rock, whose slogan in part cried, “Why should the devil have all of the good music?”¹⁰³

A Christian hip-hop artist from California, k. TWO believes that Christian hip-hop is one part of the larger “body of Christ” an evangelical “conduit” that does not work against traditional gospel music and church culture, but rather with it:

¹⁰¹ A tri-tone is a musical interval that spans three notes. It has also become known as *the diabolus in musica* or “the devil in music” and has been called such since the eighteenth century. Because of its early association with evil in western music when it is used it often connotes an evil presence or sound. Today the tri-tone is in widely accepted use. William Drabkin, “Tritone.” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/28403> Accessed 10 December 2009.

¹⁰² Interview with Kim “Kiwi” Williams, 21 June 2008, Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁰³ This is the title of a tack by Christian Rock artist Larry Norman and also the title of a documentary about Christian Rock released in 2006.

Even with the Mahalia Jacksons and James Cleavelands¹⁰⁴, things like that, they were kinda bringing in a different style, but now that's considered traditional. And you know now that Thomas Dorsey's considered traditional but at first it was like, "what is this?" 'Cause [it's] the same type of thing with gospel rap, holy hip hop ... It's I mean it's a majority I think. Being an artist I've seen it from all sides. So like a lot of the older people in the church they kind see it as devil music and you know you're just taking, your not being sanctified or set apart because you're using the devil's music. But I mean hip hop in itself is just an art form, it's not, the devil's music, you know? They just happened to jump on it before we did. But, with the ministry the great part about it is, it's like Paul was saying, we have the body. The body has the hands and the feet, so all these different parts work together to make the body function. So the church can work together you know with the hip hop artists, the gospel artists, choirs whatever. The gospel, hip hop can bring the kids into the church and then from there the pastor can minister to 'em , choirs minister to 'em, whatever the case may be. So it's like we're more of a conduit just to get the youth into the church.

k. TWO also argues that all Christian hip-hop artists are doing is "putting a sermon to a beat." However, for Lewis, hip-hop's apparel and accessorizing, such as sagging pants, pierced ears, head rags, and hoodies, are all related to and evocative of prison, gang and impoverished cultures, which go beyond the music itself and into its cultural influences and dictates.¹⁰⁵ The Ambassador and other Christian hip-hop artists would argue that these adornments do not simply signify poverty and

¹⁰⁴ Mahalia Jackson and James Cleveland are two foundational gospel singers. Mahalia Jackson's worldwide gospel performing career spanned from 1949 to 1971, and James Cleveland, was not only a gospel singer, but also composed and arranged songs in the tradition that have become gospel standards. Interestingly, Cleveland grew up in a church where Thomas Dorsey was the minister of music, which undoubtedly influenced him greatly.

¹⁰⁵ In *Queens Reigns Supreme: Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the Rise of the Hip Hop Hustler* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), Ethan Brown examines how crack drug pushers in Queens, New York during the crack epidemic in the 1980s influenced the violent nature of hip-hop culture in the 1990s. He argues that the performances of street credibility are derived from the actual survival tactics of hustlers in Queens, and traces derivatives of these behaviors in performances of rappers who hail from Queens, including 50 Cent and Ja Rule. What we must keep in mind is that text portrays a specific context in which hip-hop was practiced; while Brown's work illuminating certain segments of the Queens hip-hop scene, which influenced performances of hip-hop consumed at the national and international levels, it is only one context of violent, criminal activity (or performances of it) in the development of hip-hop, one that Lewis seems to magnify in his critique of the entire culture. Further, rap music and house parties were witnessed in the 1970s well before the crack epidemic; this further illustrates limitations in snapshot ontologies of hip-hop when attempting to account for a national, and now globalized, culture.

“criminal” cultural influences here in the U.S. but that some of these forms of self-expression, such as pierced ears and head and hair adornments, are rooted back to Africa and the expressive nature of blacks throughout the African Diaspora, signifying their familiarity with the larger historical and cultural influences on U.S. black culture.

There have been other reactions to the G. Craig Lewis work as well. While most Christian hip-hop artists and promoters either completely disagree with his argument or take serious issue with certain components of it, some artists, such as Jay and Jay SOUL agree. A Christian hip-hop duo from Detroit, they immersed themselves in secular hip-hop and culture before their religious musical work, and state that they were not influenced by the negative or “immoral” behaviors associated with mainstream secular hip-hop culture, such as drinking, sleeping around or doing drugs. As I will explore further in chapter 5, Jay and Jay SOUL watched Lewis’s series and found that Lewis’s argument resonated with them; they cited the rebellious, bravado “spirit” within Christian hip-hop as one major reason why they did not want to be identified as Christian hip-hop artists despite performing some Christian rap songs in their repertoire. The debate in Christian hip-hop over the music and culture’s appropriateness for use as an “authentically” spiritual, God-ordained worship and evangelical tool seems to lie in the difference between identifying hip-hop as a musical form that is easily resignified and wholly “redeemable,” and in identifying hip-hop as a culture and even a religious ideology, which some traditionalists believe to be opposed to the Christian faith and threatening to Christian churches. Moreover, nuances in these arguments may also

depend on the educational background of the critics, as Kiwi and The Ambassador hold differing opinions than Lewis due to their training and studies in music, worship and theology. This is a strand of influence that I would like to explore further in future research.

One may wonder why critics such as Lewis take such a strong position against music, but not against other cultural expressive forms such as poetry and dance. I argue, twofold, that it is both the power of the music and culture that makes it such a strong presence that people feel the need to respond to it, as well as the effects of globalization as we live in a digital age. It is a combination of these factors that makes hip-hop culture seem a big threat to tradition and ritual in black Christianity, and explains why many black churches are the ones invested in maintaining barriers between what they perceive as secular and sacred. It should be noted that the so-called “secular” side does not police boundaries between the cultures and cultural formats in the same way, and one could go as far to argue that the secular side, hip-hop culture and the wider American culture, even welcomes the so-called crossover between the secular and sacred and vice versa.

Hip-hop indeed is not only a musical form, or a cultural format with five main branches, DJing, graffiti, emceeing, breakdancing and beatboxing,¹⁰⁶ but it has been also presented and theorized as an approach, pedagogy, and a way of life. In the past fifteen years, texts on hip-hop as pedagogy, hip-hop as writing approach, and

¹⁰⁶ Some writers and hip-hop practitioners cite only four branches of hip-hop, DJing, Emceeing, Breakdancing and Graffiti as the main components of Christian hip-hop while others add a fifth branch, beatboxing, or the use of one’s mouth, tongue, and lips as a form of vocal percussion. Some even add a sixth component, which is the hip-hop urban stylization of dress or self-presentation.

hip-hop as stylization of life¹⁰⁷ have flooded the market, and many ethnographic and historical texts have illustrated the global influence of hip-hop culture.¹⁰⁸ The global impact of hip-hop has been facilitated by the digital age. The internet, computer use, cellular phones and PDA devices all propagate and seal images of hip-hop culture and style in the minds of youth and varied audiences around the world. Unlike the gospel blues context, the propagation of images of Christian hip-hop artists have arguably made the “sacredization” of the music and culture an even more arduous project than that of blues musicians in the first half of the 20th-century. *Under the Influence: Tracing the Hip-Hop Generation's Impact on Brands, Sports, & Pop Culture* (2009)¹⁰⁹ illustrates the widespread influences of hip-hop music and culture and how “Hip-Hoppreneurs” have redefined the terms of the market, from which automobiles are sold, to stylization in sports, to marketing luxurious merchandise.¹¹⁰ The corporatization, globalization and capitalism drive the

¹⁰⁷ In a similar way that Albert Murray argues that blues is a stylization of life in *The Hero and the Blues* (1973 original edition, New York, Vintage Press, 1996) and *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989, revised edition), authors of texts on hip-hop culture argue that hip-hop is a stylization of life. Interview with Albert Murray, 30 June 2000, Harlem, New York.

¹⁰⁸ A sampling of these texts include *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania* by Brad Weiss (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009), *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* by Ian Condry (Durham: Duke UP, 2006) and *East African Hip-Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization* by Mwenda Ntarangwi (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Texts on hip-hop as pedagogy include, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* by Marc Lamont Hill and Gloria Ladson-Billings (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009); *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* by Ruth Nicole Brown (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); *Knowledge Reigns Supreme: The Critical Pedagogy of Hip-Hop Artist KRS-ONE* by Priya Parmar (Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2009); and *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*, Revised Edition by Greg Dimitriadis (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

¹⁰⁹ Erin O. Patton, *Under the Influence: Tracing the Hip-Hop Generation's Impact on Brands, Sports and Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Paramount Market Publishing, 2009).

¹¹⁰ While it is important to consider the widespread impact of hip-hop music and culture, it is also important to explore how members of the hip-hop generation do not profit from this market in the ways that corporations do. One could argue that these corporations poach off of the hip-hop generation's culture and use their ideas to create best-selling products and then turn around and sell their ideas back to them and also to even wider markets. As corporate leaders have

consumed images and byproducts of hip-hop music and culture, and are elements in hip-hop culture that Lewis, other hip-hop critics and traditionalists are opposed to, as they see these elements running counter to a number of the core values of Christianity.

I now turn to a discussion of Christian hip-hop fans' perspectives in order to shed light on some of the larger issues within HHH from the eyes of the consumer, such as definitions of artist success and obstacles to exposure. In August 2008, I conducted a focus group made up of six Christian hip-hop fans. Two of them were also artists/performers, and one of the six was female. All members of the focus group ranged in age from 22 to 28. I asked them questions about what appealed to them in Christian hip-hop, how they define a HHH artist's success, and what obstacles they see in Christian hip-hop's future as a movement or ministry. What was striking is that all participants noted that they discovered Christian hip-hop in college through word of mouth, as many of them had a friend who listened to Christian hip-hop around them, or who made a copy of a Christian hip-hop CD and shared it with them. None of them were exposed to Christian hip-hop through record stores or television, which, even considering the small sample of Christian hip-hop artists and fans the focus group represents, illustrates that Christian hip-hop is still very much an underground musical subculture that is slowly gaining wider popularity.

successfully tapped into the mass appeal of hip-hop music and culture, they have often exploited the cultural informants that have made them billionaires.

Success

What makes an artist successful? Focus group participants defined success in a variety of ways. Some saw success in terms of an artist's talent; in the ability to reach youth; challenging people to the point of a response; showing people who they "really are"; songs with lyrics are "off the chain" and with a flow that is "on point"; and the sincerity of the artist that comes through clearly in the music. For one focus group participant, Christian hip-hop artists' success lies in reaching people where they are, in utilizing their talents through ministry and as extensions of their lifestyles:

It's a matter of ministry, so it's about living a lifestyle, upholding that lifestyle, once you're not, once you're off the stage, and that's the difference. I mean, kids can tell when something is fake, when it's counterfeit, whether it's gospel, whether it's secular rap, so I mean your lifestyle is gonna show through the music, it's gonna show when you're up there talking to 'em, when you're ministering to 'em. It's not just about getting you into the church, but it's about ministering to you, nurturing your spirit, nurturing your soul so that you stay in the church, so that you develop your own personal relationship with God."

For this artist it is "not about getting the numbers" but rather "it all comes back to the lifestyle that you live after the song is over." Christian hip-hop also challenges tradition and capitalizes on being strategic, according to one respondent:

... I think we have to be very cautious [about] being against the idea of being strategic. I think that one of the reasons why we are losing a lot of our youth, and people in general, in terms of they're just not dealing with the church or not getting down with Christians, is because it's almost like we, to my opinion kinda devalue being strategic.

Being strategic and ministering to youth through their culture is a central feature of Christian hip-hop that makes it relevant to the lifestyle, culture and preferences of youth today. This is nothing new, however, as respondents stated that Jesus

himself was very versatile in the way that he presented himself. For this respondent, Christian hip-hop music and culture is revolutionary just as Jesus was revolutionary:

I think Christian hip hop in a sense is also revolutionary in its nature but, to me it's like Christian hip hop is becoming, is climbing that uphill battle that original [e.g., secular] hip hop started climbing. So I think that's pretty interesting. But of course the main difference is that the revolutionary message in Christian hip hop is about Christ so there is a constant directionality where a couple people mentioned it, about lifestyle and obligation. ... I think I would argue that the old [e.g., 1970s/1980s secular] hip hop started that way, but now it's become, you don't even really, it's hard to see a real emcee anymore. ... They're like non-existent. Hip hop has kinda morphed into this mainstream commodity. And now Christian hip hop in my opinion is that only sole revolutionary voice that's out there, in terms of hip hop.

According to this respondent, Christian hip-hop brings a revolutionary impulse into the church as well as back into hip-hop music and culture more broadly. Christian hip-hop's "revolutionary message" reinvigorates hip-hop music and culture with its lack of "real emcees," who, in this respondent's opinion, are artists who skillfully relay socially conscious lyrics in interest of educating and not just entertaining their audiences.

In discussing which Christian rap artists have been most impactful to them, respondents named several artists, including Cross Movement, a holy hip-hop group foundational to the genre, Da TRUTH, Canton Jones, Trip Lee, and Sho Baraka, all of whom are male artists. They noted that they found enjoyment in the artists' wordplay and in listening to albums over and over to gain a deeper understanding of the artists' messages.

Obstacles

During our discussion of obstacles to Christian hip-hop's success and exposure in the next decade, one Christian hip-hop artist used the analogy of the PC to Mac switch between operating systems, where Christian hip-hop is a Mac and hip-hop is a PC. According to this analogy, Christian hip-hop is the "superior" Mac, but when people are exposed to it they cannot help but ask, "where's my right click button?" He went on to explain that the audience and the media are conditioned to "work with" or utilize PCs, or secular hip-hop, and audiences, including churches and the wider music industry, need to take risks in order to move forward, to upgrade or change operating systems, so to speak.

"[I]t's not so much about the money or advertising or marketing," one respondent explained when discussing obstacles to Christian hip-hop. "But it's warfare," or the war between good and evil on a spiritual level, a theme that occurs throughout Christian discourse. He further explained that the obstacles may lie in moving forward despite reception: "I mean just keeping the gospel like you were saying, continue preaching the gospel, no matter how you're received. That in itself is success. You have the mainstream artists already that are doing that like Da TRUTH, Cross Movement, they're pretty mainstream, considering how small gospel rap still is on a nationwide scale. So it's possible to do it; the artists [just have to] stay true to themselves, stay true to God, I think that it can go pretty far."

Another respondent believed that an artist's faith would enable them to overcome any obstacles standing in their way, including spiritual warfare: "Their [the artists'] faith and believing that the Lord will grow within their fanbase and that their music

can touch a lot more people [will empower artists]. As they work at it and as they produce more and more music and [they will] just grow in their art. The Lord will make a way for them to reach more people.”

If music is food, then secular hip-hop has a monopoly on what’s being fed, one of my respondents argued:

I like to use the food analogy ‘cause I think what hip hop does is it really, why it's so powerful is it speaks to a need. Rather, it's a need to unite, a need to rebel against oppressive forces, a need to have some kind of art form that connects with you personally, but what mainstream hip hop is doing right now [is that] it has a monopoly on what's getting fed. And then the people who are getting fed are being force-fed. But regardless of the content of the food or the quality of the food, I would argue a lot of it isn't good, but they're, that's all they're eating so they come to like it. And one definition I learned in class about power, a professor said that power is the ability to create you know a lie or idea and pass it forth to where the people who consume it believe it's true. Um, and I think if you keep taking in this food, eventually you're gonna like it not, really like it, but you like it because it's fulfilling a need and that's what that's what you're getting. Christian hip hop is that healthy alternative, but, it doesn't have the access in my opinion to provide that healthy meal. And my whole thing is, I'm a big hip hop head, I like freestyling, as I was in the hip hop group for like a semester when I was in undergrad, live hip hop group. I love freestyle and I would just love to see you could take, you know top 5 maybe secular MCs, whoever, who are just it. You know, the Jay-Zs, the Little Waynes, whatever, and put ‘em against who I would consider top 5 Christian MCs and just straight lyrics, freestyle battle. And let the people decide.”

Christian hip-hop, overshadowed by the monopoly secular hip-hop has on the music industry is continually sidelined as the industry offers “meager offerings” to the public. This respondent believes that the quality of Christian hip-hop “food” is much better than secular hip-hop, but due to the industry structure and the amount of financial backing and exposure that secular artists have, the music becomes the “meal” that Christian hip-hop fans are acclimated to. This metaphor of hip-hop and

spiritual teaching as food is taken up by The Ambassador on his album *The Chop Chop: From Milk to Meat* (2008), which I discuss in the next chapter.

Considering that many artists define success not in monetary terms, it is important to underscore the range of definitions of success, both from the artists' perspectives and from the fans' perspectives. In interviews artists have communicated that while exposure is important and essential to their careers, they do not look for personal fame or admiration from fans. One wonders though, how artists are able to maintain a critical or even spiritual distance between the performances that they do and the excited and enthusiastic responses by fans. The temptation to give into the pleasure of being praised versus remaining committed to pointing fans and listeners back to God is another theme that surfaces when artists negotiate being in the world – performing, ministering and evangelizing – but not *of* the world. Artists' negotiations of the tensions between their religious message and the “secular” form from which their musical message is derived, as well as critics' arguments about the irrelevance of their craft to the church and evangelical communities shed light on the competing narratives and discourses at work that challenge the Christian hip-hop movement's exposure, success (as artists and fans define it) and acceptance in traditional church contexts.

In the next chapter I turn to a close examination of male Christian hip-hop artists and their performances of black masculinities in a Christian, urban context.

CHAPTER III

“THERE AIN'T NO SUGAR IN THEIR TANKS”: PERFORMANCES OF MASCULINITIES

Despite a severe snowstorm, over 800 youth and young adult Christian hip-hop fans, youth leaders, music producers and church ministers showed up to attend the “From Milk to Meat” conference and concert, held at the Silver Garden Center in Southfield, Michigan on December 20, 2008.¹¹¹ Publicized as a “historical concert” and the ultimate “double bill” that could potentially serve as the “tipping point for the [Christian hip-hop] genre as a whole,” the concert was preceded by a conference where several key figures within the local Southeast Michigan and national Christian hip-hop industries and ministries made presentations on the practical aspects of discipling and evangelizing as members of the holy hip-hop movement. The event coordinators, inspired by Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, called Christian, or holy, hip-hop fans to the next level of spiritual growth and ministry: “beyond the beats and rhymes” and into a deeper relationship with God and with the youth-oriented communities that they serve. They took the following scripture as their thematic guide, where the Apostle Paul speaks: “I have fed you with milk, and not

¹¹¹ Notably at this event, there were more white and Latina/o attendees than at previous Christian hip-hop events that I have attended. Although white and Latinas/os were still very much in the minority (estimated at 20 African Americans to 1 white/Latina/o) they still held quite a presence, and were possibly attracted to this event given the national popularity of both Lecrae and The Ambassador, the evening's headline performers.

with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.”¹¹²

From Milk to Meat served as a clarion call to the HHH generation¹¹³ to be deliberate about sharing the gospel, to seek the biblical truths behind the appealing lyrics that emcees create, and to realize that being “down” with God is more than being down with holy hip-hop.

Before the musical festivities began, a surprising performance of masculinity and chastity occurred on the stage. Esosa Osai, founder and CEO of Friendship Productions, a Christian hip-hop promotions company was honored by Shannon Gaston, Minister and Administrator of Operations for The Yuinon, a Holy Hip-Hop Collective discussed in Chapter 2. Gaston presented Osai with a three-foot plus sword for remaining a virgin until marriage, stating to the predominantly male audience: “There are not a lot of men that are virgins when they enter their marriage beds, and whenever we find this is the case, we want to honor that. So if Esosa decides to put this sword on his mantle in his home, or wherever he decides to put it, people will see this sign of his virtue and it is something that can be passed down through generations.” This “sword of virginity,” both a phallic symbol and an icon of moral and physical strength, is one instance of alternative Holy Hip-Hop masculinities that stand in opposition to mainstream culture. While in mainstream secular and hip-hop cultures, men are often revered and presented with virtual trophies for sexual conquest, in this context, however awkward and embarrassing, Osai is publicly recognized for his decision to remain a virgin until marriage. The sword, an outmoded representation of martial skill and strength, symbolizes the

¹¹² King James Version of the *Bible*, I Corinthians 3:2.

¹¹³ HHH is my shorthand for Holy Hip-Hop.

value and rarity of Osai's pre-marital virginal status, and is a strong indictment of male sexual promiscuity. This sword presentation evokes many questions: How are black Christian men within hip-hop culture redefining expectations for masculinity and sexuality? What are the ways that Christian hip-hop culture is coded as masculine *and* black, even while these codes are submerged by the more dominant Christian and popular culture discourses in the music and performances? Why is it that, in this instance, Osai's virginity is put on display and celebrated while his wife's was mentioned only as an aside? And more generally, how is Christian hip-hop, which is marketed as an ungendered, race-less, evangelical music culture, immersed in the cultural politics surrounding gender, sexuality, and racial representations, as are all forms of popular, mass-consumed culture?

In an effort to begin answering these questions, this chapter explores the masculinized mission of the Holy Hip-Hop movement as articulated by my interviewees and by the multiple individuals engaged in holy hip-hop evangelism, primarily in the Southeast Michigan area.¹¹⁴ It is important to note that these perspectives are both individual and regional, and as such, they represent several facets of the Holy Hip-Hop movement but definitely not the whole. The perspectives shared by these individuals are part and parcel of the larger Holy Hip-Hop movement, a movement that extends beyond the borders of black America, and into Brazil, France, Jamaica and several other countries.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ For my study, this Southeast Michigan area includes the cities of Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Detroit, Southfield, Oak Park, and East Pointe.

¹¹⁵ While the Christian hip-hop movement is clearly United States based, many artists perform worldwide, making appearances in Australia, Brazil, Jamaica and other nations.

In this chapter I explore performances of masculinities within holy hip-hop. I argue that verbal and bodily performances of masculinities in holy hip-hop disengage with black racial identities, even while they are in implicit conversation with black-coded masculinities in popular culture, such as those represented within mainstream, secular hip-hop culture. I utilize the term “masculinities” rather than “masculinity” to account for the multiple ways of being masculine as presented in popular culture and in everyday life. In *Progressive Black Masculinities* (2006), Athena D. Mutua argues that progressive black masculinities are “unique and innovative performances of the masculine self that on the one hand personally and ethically and actively stand against social structures of domination. On the other hand, they validate and empower black humanity, in all its variety as part of the diverse and multicultural humanity of others in the global family” (5). The performances of Christian hip-hop masculinities that I explore in this chapter are aligned with Mutua’s definition of progressive black masculinities in so far as they question, challenge and resist domination of the secular media on concepts of manhood. The Ambassador and Lecrae, artists featured in this chapter, are among many Christian hip-hop artists who expose, critique and reject secular masculine values and performances of mainstreamed masculinities that are opposed to Christian manhood values. At the same time that Christian hip-hop masculinities disavow hip-hop and mainstream masculinities that are based on swagger, “gangster” lifestyles, drug use, materialism, and male-male domination, their masculinities are still predicated on a patriarchal privileging of the heterosexual black man over black women and black queer people. Christian hip-hop upholds

these social structures of domination that perpetuate patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, and male-female domination.

Outside of work by womanist scholars Kelly Brown Douglas, Katie G. Cannon, Delores Williams, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and others, and more recent work by Black liberation theologian James Cone,¹¹⁶ much of the scholarship on black identities do not account for the ways that black people's gender and sexuality intersect with their religious identities, which informs how articulations of their gendered identities are rendered through performance in different kinds of spaces. While there is much scholarship on black women's identities as Christian believers, there is very little work on how black masculinities shape performances of the Christian faith. A major objective of this study to contribute to this dearth in scholarship and to push back against simplistic views and analyses of masculinities and femininities, as does *Progressive Black Masculinities*, by incorporating a range of perspectives with integral, contextual grounding.¹¹⁷ This contextual grounding seriously considers the impact of intersectionality, or the compounded influences of race, class, gender, sexuality and religion, on the social experiences of Christian hip-hop artists. This chapter utilizes the site of Christian hip-hop as a lens through which we may understand how intersecting identities are understood, performed and practiced by individuals who position their religious faith first and foremost, even above their race.

¹¹⁶ C.f. James Cone, "Black Theology, Black Churches, and Black Women." In *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*, eds. Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000).

¹¹⁷ This range of perspectives includes the opinions of respondents, analyses of performances and music, and close readings of lyrics.

This is an important finding because many studies make the argument that race and gender, two identity categories that generally can be more readily observed than religion, class or sexual orientation, are more salient in instances of self-identification.¹¹⁸ However, for many individuals in this study, in their personal viewpoints of themselves and in their interactions with their surrounding communities, they argue that religion trumps race, and in some instances gender and class. Within holy hip-hop music and culture Christian hip-hop artists overwhelmingly do not discuss their race, and Lecrae, a male, African American holy hip-hop artist states in one of his songs: “It doesn't matter/your race, your gender/you're a Christian first!” (Rebel). Considering that many HHH artists believe their primary audience to be black and Latino youth who are steeped in hip-hop culture, the silent presence of the raced and gendered ways that these artists perform their religious beliefs – even while racial topics often do not appear in much of the music lyrics and in the performances to which I've been exposed – undoubtedly speaks volumes.¹¹⁹ Despite what artists claim in their lyrics or state in interviews, they are very much engaged performances of their intersectional identities, as their racial classification as “black” or African American informs their very claim that their religious identification is paramount. It is due to the history of

¹¹⁸ See identity scholarship by authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, and by other gender studies and intersectionality studies scholars. Some of the key works include Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Intersection of Race and Gender: Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. Eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas. (New York: The New Press, 1995: 357-383); Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. (London: Verso, 1990); and bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999).

¹¹⁹ Corey Red and Precise are one HHH duo that feature black history in their music, and they are a notable exception, as stated by one of my interviewees.

enslavement as Africans, and racism in the “body of Christ” that prompted black people to create their own churches and denominations, as well as the later rise of Black Liberation Theology, that today’s black Christian youth and young adults can and do perform their faith in specifically raced, classed and gendered manners.

The Holy Hip-Hop Movement

The holy hip-hop movement's¹²⁰ mission is to evangelize youth, and primarily urban black and Latino youth worldwide, especially those youth who do not attend church. Although the explicit message of holy hip-hop is inclusion for all of God's young people, male or female, what is centered in the HHH movement’s mission and message is a collection of heterosexual male-centric narratives that by their very nature exclude women and homosexuals, while utilizing divergent popular culture masculinities as productive foils to their conceptions of the Christian faith. Not unlike racial uplift movements in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and the black nationalism projects that so characterize many of them, the men at the center of this evangelical project are often invested in performances of Christian manhood that prize chastity, community development, and patriarchal forms of male Christian strength. In some cases, women and homosexuals are openly criticized for their perceived sinful influences within Christian culture. This characteristic of holy hip-hop evangelism illustrates that the project depends on problematic negation and exclusion of black women and queer black people as co-equal partners in this project.

¹²⁰ The self-identified Holy Hip-Hop movement in the Southeast Michigan area is comprised of groups like The Yuinon and Just Get Saved, local churches with strong youth populations, and promotions companies like Friendship Productions. This network is more fully explored in Chapter 2.

What emerges in the music and performances, I argue, is a triadic interplay between the ideal Christian man, the perverted worldly man who has been led astray, and the gay man or black woman, who occupy the third space interchangeably. This constant interplay works to render holy hip-hop Christianity legible to an unfamiliar and questioning audience. This is necessary because in several ways black male Christian hip-hop artists' masculinities go against the grain of accepted mainstream masculinities in popular culture. Generally, black male Christian rap artists do not glorify sexual promiscuity, as is the case in some mainstream masculinities in hip-hop and beyond. Instead, these men celebrate abstinence and celibacy. They shun materialism and the "bling" lifestyle so popularized by media and hip-hop culture. And when they use traditional metaphors of "war" and "soldiers" in their music they are aligned more with the black gospel tradition rather than mainstream culture, referring instead to being a warrior or a soldier for God. Instead of condoning alcohol and drug consumption, which has become an increasing focus with hip-hop business moguls creating their own alcoholic beverages, Christian hip-hop artists' focus is on getting "krunk" or high off of Christ.¹²¹ They performatively reject temptations, sexual and otherwise, rather than embracing them. Their swagger is based not on their bravado, but on their belief in the powerful relevance of their savior, Jesus Christ.¹²² But what some of these artists do have in common with secular hip-hop is their politics of excluding black women and queer people, whether explicitly or unintentionally.

¹²¹ *Krunk* is thought to be a combination of the words "crazy" and "drunk." To be *krunk* is to be wildly excited and exuberant, often in a careless manner.

¹²² *Swagger* is a man's sexual appeal and self-confidence, and sometimes arrogance, judged by others based on his perceived strength and confident demeanor.

Through the field of Masculinity Studies and through the intersectional, historiography of feminists and queer theorists we have come to understand the masculine centered nature of civil rights movements throughout history. In particular, Masculinity Studies arose from two strains of discourse, one that recognized men's profit from patriarchy historically, not only through mass movements for political and social rights, but also through the very nature of patriarchy that seeks to control and dominate women, and which also creates a hierarchy among men. The other strain of historical inquiry from which Masculinity Studies arose was an interest in exploring men's "internalized pain" from the destructive nature of male-male dominance and the negative effects of heterosexism on male and female identities.¹²³ The intersectional, historical scholarship on movements such as the Civil Rights Movement has illustrated that *strategic essentialism*, or the flattening out of differences toward one common goal, was utilized by movement leaders, who focused on black male issues and rights that they at times assumed would automatically extend to women after a successful fight against the dominant power. However, what occurred in actuality was a continual sidelining and obscuring of women's issues and women's rights, for the sake of advancing the race. At the same time that gender issues were elided for the "sake"

¹²³ Athena D. Mutua explores the history of masculinity studies further in her Introduction to the volume *Progressive Black Masculinities* and in her chapter in the anthology titled "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities." For more on theorizations of black masculinities and masculinity studies, see Devon Carbado (ed.), *Black Men on Race, Gender and Sexuality: A Critical Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003); E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (eds.), *Black Queer Studies, A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (Routledge: New York, 2006); and Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

of the entire race, blacks were also fully immersed in racial uplift efforts through a politics of respectability that privileged male visions of community, family, and nationhood. Michele Mitchell illustrates that as early as the eighteenth century, free blacks, primarily in the North, policed their dress, social interactions, children's behavior, as well as many aspects of their public and private lives to assimilate to white cultural norms as interpreted by black men's translation and extension of white patriarchy. Strategic essentialism combined with the politics of respectability, created an anti-queer, anti-female context in which black men maintained their power over black communities and the public presentation of those communities to others. It was not until black feminism and womanist theology rose in the late-1970s and early-1980s that a systematic critique of the oppressive nature of black liberation efforts, religious doctrine and practices and their alignment to racial uplift challenged the underlying male-centric understandings of black communities, families and the presentation of the self in everyday life. Even as a collective critique of civil rights movements and the hegemonic masculinity¹²⁴ of the public sphere surfaced during this time and continues to surface, many black Christian dominations as a whole remain male-centered through leadership opportunities that enable them to steer and shape majority female congregations.

Despite male leadership in the church, some of my interviewees believe that men in black churches are overwhelmingly effeminate and demasculinized. One

¹²⁴ Hegemonic masculinity is a theory that R.W. Connell, Australian feminist and foundational contributor to men's studies, uses to account for the ways in which men are socialized into embodying specific types of manhood and behavior that encourage dominance over women and over other men. This theory has been critiqued by authors in *Progressive Black Masculinities* (2006) and other gender studies scholars for its overwhelmingly negative portrayal of masculinity, and its inability to account for other masculinities, such as those of men of color.

interviewee in particular, Lloyd Shelton, a Pontiac, Michigan native, graduate of Eastern Michigan University, and founder of Just Get Saved Enterprises,¹²⁵ sees in holy hip-hop a chance for men to “masculinize” black church culture, as well as to propagate positive images of “strong,” moral black men where mainstream, secular hip-hop culture and secular media fall short. As he discussed the masculinity that he finds in his own church, he states:

I had the view of men in the church as gay men: the gay choir singer, gay choir leader. ... I love my church because there are so many strong men in this church. Not just physically built, but just strong leaders. There ain't no sugar in their tanks. And they are just straight up men. And it's a beautiful thing because it destroyed that [previous] image in my head. ... It showed me that as a man of God you are supposed to be strong. Not domineering, not controlling, not demeaning to women. None of that stuff, because that is ungodly, and a real man doesn't do that.¹²⁶

Shelton's vision of the masculine strength of a “real man” challenges his perception of “gay men” in “the black church.” The triangular relationship that he draws between strong, heterosexual Christian men, domineering (and perhaps secular) men, and Christian women and/or gays is a triumvirate that manifests in varying degrees throughout the context of Christian hip-hop.

“Worldly,” “materialistic” and “ego-driven” men and “weak,” “sinful” gay men continue to be casted as foils to the strong, black Christian men who are after the prize: the chaste, sanctified Christian woman. What also seems to be at stake in this project is the black female body and the black lesbian body, which continue to be

¹²⁵ “Just Get Saved Enterprises is a Christian lifestyle magazine and event promotion company. We are dedicated to serving and expanding the Body of Christ by encouraging and exhorting individuals to live holy lives in reverence to Christ through various media, including online publications, video, music, concerts, and print publications.” Just Get Saved was founded in 2008, and since then they have been co-sponsored a handful of Christian hip-hop music concerts in Detroit with Friendship Productions. <http://justgetsaved.com/about/> Accessed 1 January 2010.

¹²⁶ Interview with Lloyd Shelton, 2 June 2008, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

policed, exploited and censured with respect to hip-hop and within “the black church.”¹²⁷ Within the Christian hip-hop context, black Christian men's identities are so built upon the “worldly man” and “gay man” foils such that these two “genres” of men become foundational to the way that some male Christian hip-hop artists represent themselves. It is no wonder that in the midst of this performative foiling and politics of exclusion that black women and black gays and the issues they face as Christian practitioners are erased.

Similarly, Shannon Gaston of The Yuinon, a Christian hip-hop umbrella organization discussed in the previous chapter, believes the male-centric nature of Christian hip-hop is “good for the church”:

One of the things I've said is that Christian hip-hop will help remasculinate the church. And I don't even know if remasculinate is a word, but I use it to describe what I wanna see happen because I think that the image that a lot of unchurched men are saved, men even young boys, have of how a Christian man is perceived, you know, the way that they see him, they don't see him as rugged, they don't see him as a soldier for Christ. You know, a lot of times they see the effeminate, you know choir directors, or they just, they don't see men who are in shape, who take of their temple. A lot of times when you present yourself in a way that is disciplined, or you're able to defend your faith, or if you are in some type of physical shape...we've gotten people to assume we're Muslims, you know because they don't see strong Christian men, doing community outreach, or going door to door, or dressing in a way that's not a suit and tie, and so their immediate assumption is “you can't be Christian.”¹²⁸

For Gaston, Christian hip-hop is changing the way that people perceive “saved” black men; as physically fit Christian black men embedded in a hip-hop-influenced context and who dress casually and are active in their communities, they are not immediately recognized as Christian men. In Gaston's opinion, Christian hip-hop

¹²⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Lori Brooks for this insightful comment during my dissertation defense.

¹²⁸ Interview with Shannon Gaston, 2 June 2008, Detroit, Michigan.

artists challenge stereotypes about and perceptions of Christian men as effeminate, out of shape, and undisciplined:

It's important that they [HHH artists] don't perpetuate a Christian version of bravado, but I think that they can really add to changing the perception of what a Christian man is and what he looks like and how he carries himself. I do think that there are some blind spots that some of our brothers are operating in because if you aren't...[long pause]...it's like you know, um, you can be oblivious to your own sexism because it's a patriarchal world. You could have good intentions and you might not see yourself as a chauvinist or see yourself as someone who oppresses or, I think you can be oblivious to it in certain ways. Just like how some white people they don't see what their racism comes from or they could make a statement like "well, I didn't mean it like that" and so I think cause God has showed me that with myself.

Both Shelton and Gaston praise and defend Christian hip-hop performances of masculinity as assets that would attract other young men to the church. The ways in which they name sexism, chauvinism and bravado speaks to the fact that they have thought about these issues before our interview,¹²⁹ and the carefulness and hesitation in which they answered the questions, represented by long pauses, rephrasing themselves, and presenting a new idea mid-sentence, also spoke to their heightened awareness of the centrality of these gender issues due to my female presence. The narrative structure in which they responded to these and other questions, and their extemporaneous self-revisions exhibited their uneasiness in terms of where and how to place the role of women in the church and in Christian hip-hop. The uneasy place of women and gay men within the Christian hip-hop movement both silently and ostensibly marks Christian hip-hop performances in ways that I explore below and in the next chapter.

¹²⁹ Please note that I interviewed Shelton and Gaston separately.

What follows is a comparative analysis of two Christian hip-hop artists, The Ambassador and Lecrae. The Ambassador, a holy hip-hop father figure, evokes the legacy of the HHH movement while Lecrae performs, in part, the role of The Ambassador's accomplished apprentice. Examining the performances of The Ambassador and Lecrae at the "From Milk to Meat" concert and their performed identities as they are recorded and videotaped gives us a sense of the complexity of black Christian manhood and the patriarchal structure that informs them, since these two artists, The Ambassador, age 38, and Lecrae, age 29, represent two segments of the Holy Hip-Hop generation.¹³⁰ In my analysis of their lyrical and bodily performances, I illustrate the intersectionality of race, space and religion. Finally, I conclude by pointing to the ways that these artists negotiate what I have termed the *burden of congruency* between their public performances and their private lives offstage.

Purposeful Support: The Ambassador and Lecrae

During the "From Milk to Meat" concert, the Ambassador's leisurely, northeast style of rapping contrasted with Lecrae's upbeat, fast-paced Southern krunk¹³¹ style of rap music. Prior to the concert, a video posted on YouTube on September 17, 2008 titled "Kanye and 50 Cent vs. The Ambassador and Lecrae,"

¹³⁰ It is important to note the multiple layers of performance of black Christian masculinities, from verbal performances in interviews, to live performance and recorded performances, in order to gauge the gradients of how these identities are performed at different levels.

¹³¹ Krunk or Crunk, is also a form of hip-hop music that fuses Southern rap and electronic dance music of the early 1990s. 808 and 909 drum machine beats are used and the music itself is minimalist, stripped to primarily to the beat and the rapper's lyrical delivery. As I mentioned previously, Krunk most likely comes from the melding of the words "crazy" and "drunk" and signifies, according to Lil Jon, a "heightened state of excitement." However, Lecrae has redefined Krunk to refer to a spiritual high felt through Christ.

seemed to frame the release of The Ambassador's and Lecrae's albums, exactly one week apart from each other (Sept. 23rd and 30th, 2008) as problematic and grounds for “beef,” similar to the antagonism between mainstream, secular hip-hop artists Kanye West and 50 Cent. However, in this video, The Ambassador speaks first, taking us back to a “classic moment in secular hip-hop” when Kanye West and 50 Cent, “in a spirit of competition” talked negatively about each other, each stating that his own album would sell better than the other's. The regional beef was also evident in the fact that Kanye West hails from Chicago, representing the Midwest, and 50 Cent is from Queens, New York, iconic of the East Coast. The verbal battling between Kanye and 50 Cent was evocative of the antagonism between Tupac and Notorious BIG during the 1990s and resulted in public intrigue, boosting the sales of both artists.¹³² In the YouTube video, the Ambassador switches his discussion of secular hip-hop to Christian hip-hop by “fast forwarding” to the Christian realm to mention Lecrae, and the camera view widens to include Lecrae in the frame. The Ambassador describes himself as an older member of the HHH community and Lecrae as a younger member, and then asks a series of questions: “Are we going to conflict; are we going to clash; are we going to compete? We say 'never that!'," making a denouncing gesture. Lecrae then states “On September 23rd, go out and get that *Chop Chop* [Ambassador's album].” The Ambassador echoes, “On the nine thirty, [September 30th] cop *Rebel*,” Lecrae's album. Lecrae then explains that he

¹³² During the 1990s, the controversy between rappers 2Pac and Notorious BIG representative of the East-Coast, West-Coast hip-hop rivalry, reached a heightened awareness in the public with violence and shootings. Unfortunately, some state that these grudges and controversies were ultimately responsible for the deaths of both rappers, Tupac on September 13, 1996 and Notorious BIG six months later, on March 6, 1997.

and The Ambassador are releasing their albums so closely together because “in a way it's strategic...you get all of this nutritious music [at the same time], you can get your fill.”

Instead of claiming space and maintaining an antagonistic territorial stance, the performative norm in some mainstream hip-hop, The Ambassador and Lecrae engage in a display of strategic cooperation that sheds light on the evangelical purpose of their music and performances. This video performance in particular serves to dismantle any rumors of competition between the artists while placing the artists in dialogue with and against secular hip-hop music. Like Kanye West and 50 Cent, The Ambassador and Lecrae are two major headlining figures within Christian hip-hop, most likely to be known outside of the Christian hip-hop community. In their critique of the “spirit of competition” in secular hip-hop music, The Ambassador and Lecrae offer an alternative to the “disses” that have ended in deaths for hip-hop emcees in times past: mutual support for and encouragement of each other's success, and a call to discover the common ground on which they stand. Even while they use mainstream hip-hop as a convenient and effective pretext, this is an articulation of alternative Christian masculinities, which is not based on demeaning another man to increase one's status, but founded on celebrating the achievements of others. The Ambassador's positioning as a father figure and Lecrae's persona as his “apprentice” is a performance of male artistic kinship, foregrounding the patriarchal lineage of Christian hip-hop music, culture and ministry.¹³³

¹³³ In the video Lecrae noted that he listened to The Ambassador before he even started to rap.

One of holy hip-hop's founding fathers,¹³⁴ The Ambassador is co-founder and an original member of Cross Movement, the Philadelphia-based Holy Hip-Hop group credited for popularizing Christian hip-hop and culture worldwide.¹³⁵ Before the concert performances at *From Milk to Meat*, The Ambassador and Lecrae jointly presented on the theme of the concert, and their call to the Holy Hip-Hop generation to dig deeper into God's word, to take the inspiration that they feel from the music and translate that into inspiration to study different versions of the *Bible*, Bible commentaries and other spiritual study tools. Implicitly in their presentation, The Ambassador and Lecrae argued that the spiritual feelings and excitement that are evoked by holy hip-hop music should translate into sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. Both artists, along with the other presenters at the conference, admonished the predominately male audience to share their feelings about God with friends and also with strangers.¹³⁶ The sharing of feelings, emotions and deep spiritual conviction conflicts with representations of masculinity typified in mainstream hip-hop, as in this context men are supposed to be stone-faced, hard, and unmoved, or performatively so. The artists' discussion of emotions and feelings

¹³⁴ Although the multi-platinum artist and performer gospel/Christian hip-hop Kirk Franklin and the crossover hip-hop performing artist MC Hammer (Stanley Kirk Burrell) are most well-known to the public, these artists are not strictly Christian or holy hip-hop artists. In Franklin's case, he combines many different music genres in his work to appeal to fans worldwide. Hammer eventually became a pastor, and his song such as "Pray" clearly contrasted with work that did not have Christian themes, such as "Too Legit to Quit" and "Pumps in a Bump." For more on Hammer, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁵ The Cross Movement has released seven albums: *Heaven's Mentality* (1997), *House of Representatives* (1998), *Human Emergency* (2000), *Holy Culture* (2003), *Higher Definition* (2005), which received a Grammy Award nomination, *Chronicles (Greatest Hits, Vol. 1)* (2006) and *HIStory: Our Place In His Story* (2007), which received two Stellar Award nominations, one Grammy Award nomination and is the group's last album. At the same time, several of the group members released solo albums in between or during the group projects.

¹³⁶ Other presenters included Shannon Gaston of The Yuinon, Esosa Osai of Friendship Productions, and a parent who performed a lyrical analysis of secular hip-hop in comparison to Holy Hip-Hop.

challenges notions of emotionless men and enables young adults males to connect with their audiences in order to advance the evangelical message that is their primary purpose of performing.



Figure 3.1: The Ambassador
Courtesy of Cross Movement Records.

Throughout the evening, the Ambassador referred to the fact that Holy Hip-Hop “wasn’t always like this,” accepted by a growing number of urban churches and supported by Christian groups. “Our crowds were small” and hip-hop, as the “indigenous form of culture” in urban communities was the exception, not the norm. The Ambassador’s perspective from over fifteen years in Christian hip-hop ministry, and now as co-pastor of Epiphany Fellowship Church in Philadelphia, enabled him to take on a fatherly, or an elder, patriarchal role. Ambassador stated, “Sometimes

people come up to me and say, 'Yo man, you're, you're like the Run DMC of Holy Hip-Hop' [audience laughs] and I try not to get offended because I see what they are saying. I like to see myself as a kind of LL Cool J of Holy Hip-Hop, staying relevant at all times, naw, not really."¹³⁷ The Ambassador's complex naming and shunning of secular hip-hop artists illustrates the tangled relations that Holy Hip-Hop maintains with secular hip-hop, referencing the music and artists as a form of ancillary or analogic identification and then disavowing them simultaneously due to their secular nature. Even in the midst of this naming and shunning of artists, The Ambassador persists in communicating that he is a founding father of a music that has become more popular and accepted in recent years.

Throughout The Ambassador's performance, he pulled from songs on his three solo albums, *Christology* (1999), *The Thesis* (2005), and his most contemporary album, *The Chop Chop: From Milk to Meat* (2008). His lyrics were marked by slow-paced, deeply theological wordplay and cogitations. His music, in spite of its appeal, forced the engaged and aroused listener to listen to the lyrics over and over in order to decipher the wordplay and to extract multiple layers of meaning embedded therein. Lecrae's performances stemmed from his three solo albums, *Real Talk* (2005), *After the Music Stops* (2006) and *Rebel* (2008). Marked by plays on popular culture references such as *106 & Park*, his performance infused the

¹³⁷ Run-D.M.C. was an influential hip hop group from Hollis, in the Queens borough of New York City. They were founded by Joseph "DJ Run" Simmons, Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels, and Jason "Jam-Master Jay" Mizell, and the group is arguably one of the most influential acts in the history of hip hop. They were considered to be biggest act in hip-hop throughout the 1980s and are credited with breaking hip hop into mainstream music. LL Cool J, or Ladies Love Cool James, is one of the few hip-hop stars to maintain a successful career for more than two decades, from 1985 to 2008.

audience with danceable energy.¹³⁸ Upbeat tracks were matched by his impassioned, contagious intensity, augmented by the fact that the audience clearly knew all of the words to his songs. At some points the audience members sang along at such a high volume that they slightly competed with Lecrae, making the entire hall a site of dialogic, communal performance.

The substance of Lecrae's performance stemmed not only from provocative lyrics and his contagious energy, but also from carefully crafted with sermonic interludes, where he evoked old sayings in black churches such as "Only what you do for Christ will last" which were followed by seamless transitions into his next song. Lecrae's performance style exemplified youthful energy and living at all costs for God while The Ambassador's self-performance typified mature knowledge and deep consideration one's spiritual purpose and life choices. Considered together, these performers provide two divergent and collaborative representations of what it means to be a devout, masculine Christian in the Christian hip-hop context, as both Lecrae and The Ambassador disavow personal praise in interest of admonishing fans to reach a deeper understanding of belief and of faith in practice.

¹³⁸ 106 & Park is a hip-hop and R&B music show in countdown format that airs on BET, the Black Entertainment Television Network. The show also features performers and other segments in a live studio audience setting. 106 & Park was originally produced in Harlem, New York, and the title is derived from the original studio location at East 106th Street and Park Avenue. There was a new show created in 2009 called 106 and Gospel that featured Christian hip-hop and R&B but went off air due to low viewership.



Figure 3.2: Lecrae
Courtesy of NH Music Productions.

The Ambassador

The Ambassador, also known as William “Duce” Branch, is a self-proclaimed Paul figure, an “ambassador in bonds,” speaking the gospel boldly. Born in 1971, Branch was raised primarily by his father in New York City, and professes that he had strong connection to hip-hop on the streets of New York despite the fact that his father “saw absolutely nothing of value in the hip-hop culture.” In his early teenage years, Branch moved to Virginia to live with his mother, where he became entrenched in an environment and upbringing in opposition to that of his father. Instead of being reared “with a biblically-based Christian faith” Branch now took part in activities that were forbidden in his father's home: drug use, petty dealing, house parties, and sexual promiscuity. After becoming a teenage father in his eighteenth year, Branch understood that he had been duped by hip-hop culture's promises for fulfillment:

I realized I had been bamboozled. Hip-hop had not prepared me to be a man. I was unsatisfied and unfulfilled, stuck in the futility of my thinking and had

relegated Jesus to the realm of heaven. I wanted my eternal hope to begin when I died, not interfere with my earthly pursuits or pleasures.¹³⁹

As The Ambassador evokes sacred and secular tensions between “eternal hope” and “earthly pursuits [and] pleasures” he also indicts the shortcomings of mainstream, secular hip-hop for grooming him into manhood.

The Ambassador began to see how he could marry his faith with hip-hop culture in order to reach urban youth and transform their lives. Comparing himself to the Prodigal Son, who went back to his father after a reckless lifestyle, The Ambassador returned to New York and his father “put him in Bible College.” Branch graduated from Lancaster Bible College and then earned his Masters in Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary in 2004. Branch also co-founded and co-pastors Epiphany Fellowship Church in Philadelphia. He is married to Michelle Branch and has five children, and admits that at as a holy hip-hop veteran he has a level of maturity and recognition of responsibility that many youth may not have. In discussing *The Chop Chop*, his most recent album, The Ambassador states:

The new school in the game has rich talent, but is sometimes afraid of maturing into the deeper life. But it’s time to move from milk to meat, to unpack the fullness of our message. It’s time to chop up the meat and take it in. We tend to avoid the weighty, to choose the quick prayers and easy lessons, to do all things on the fly.¹⁴⁰

Using his own life story as a pretext, The Ambassador admonishes youth to move from the milk, or lightweight Christianity, to the meat, or the weighty issues that Christians must contend with if they desire to fulfill the necessity of going “into the deeper life” as disciples of Christ.

¹³⁹ Bio of The Ambassador, <http://www.theambassadoronline.com> Accessed 10 June 2009.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

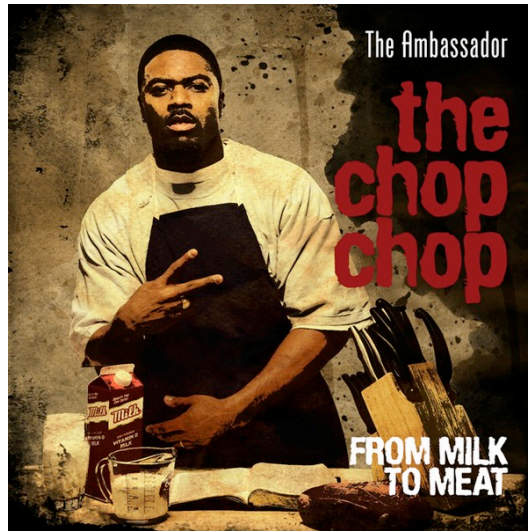


Figure 3.3: *The Chop Chop* Album Cover
Courtesy of Cross Movement Records.

The Ambassador figures himself as the master mediator of this process of sanctification and maturity. On the cover of the album *The Chop Chop* The Ambassador is positioned as a cook; as he wears a black apron he throws up the peace sign with his right hand, a popular gesture in hip-hop culture. The milk, represented in three forms, through a milk carton, a drinking glass full, and measuring cup of milk on the left side of the image, is contrasted with the singular slab of meat and the knife block set on the right side of the frame. Milk represents spiritual childishness and even femininity as “mother’s milk,” while meat represents and imparts the strength of a mature man. The open Bible on the table holds the position of what would be a cookbook and sits in the center of the table between the food items, symbolically representing that a passage from milk to meat is predicated upon consumption of the “recipes” for Christian living, or the “deep truths” in the Bible.

Figured as a master lyrical chef, combining the right ingredients in the right proportions so that they can be ingested, enjoyed and digested, The Ambassador's leadership role in Holy Hip-Hop culture is featured throughout this album. In the liner notes he includes a "Chop Chop Appeal" in which he defines chop chop as "a collective movement to grow the church from spiritual infancy to maturity" (Liner Notes). "I have labored to cook up what will hopefully be a batch of classics for your listening – and living – pleasure, and I pray that you will be nourished by the news that God has provided all that you need for spiritual maturation..." (ibid.). Later in the "Chop Chop Appeal" The Ambassador notes that when spiritual maturity happens "you'll begin developing a distaste for the world's menu." The Ambassador the spiritual chef is placed in a similar leadership role in the pictures present in the album's liner notes. Wearing a plain white t-shirt, The Ambassador talks to groups of men in two separate frames. In the second of the two pictures, The Ambassador stands on top of steps in front of a house, well above a group of five black men. The camera's angle from behind figures him as a triumphant leader, almost as a Christ-like figure, giving a rapped Sermon on the Mount. Curiously, these pictures feature men only, which implies perhaps that his audience is primarily or only men, that this is a brotherhood.

The album is framed, unsurprisingly, by an extended metaphor of The Ambassador's cookings. The first track "The Opener" is an "appetizer...to ease you into the discussion." In the song "Gimme Dat" his voice is mixed electronically for the chorus. It is the most mainstream, widely liked song on the album. "Gimme Dat" is about the higher desire, a "passion for Christ" and Christ-like living. In verse one

he distills his testimony: "I used to want blunts, to be blunt, I wanted trees to alter my mind, but now I'm finding that I want Jesus."¹⁴¹ The second verse is directed to men:

I know you got riches, I know you got ice,
Your life is a big party, you're partying all night
You don't mind not knowing Christ...in your mind, "that's all right"
You might not get this now but you're kind of a Saul type
You keep with the trends, "cool" is your middle name
On your pants you got a chain that droops like Little Wayne's
You're tattooed, in a Benz or maybe you're in a Range
Ladies you drive them crazy, nothing's crazier than your frame
This is a shame, but it's the age and I'm game to be an agent of change,
in an age that's like a page in a flame
Just smoke, just mirrors, just vapor, it's plain
to see a holy God's not one of your favorite things
I was just like you but God moved on a fellow
Gave me the good news that I could use on the ghetto
Maybe it's you who wants to u-turn to settle
Your debt, if you do, I'll tell you it's been settled!

In this verse he describes some stereotypical performances of masculinity found in hip-hop culture, the money, the chains and "ice" (diamonds), the partying, the women and cars – all smoke and vapors, illusions, The Ambassador argues, that will evaporate as material objects and secular desires with no spiritual substance. The music video for this most popular track features three men, two black and one Caucasian, digging through a trash dump in the back of a restaurant in the night, in order to retrieve discarded food to eat for dinner. As the video progresses, a chef comes out of the restaurant and motions to them to come inside. When they enter the restaurant, they find a table prepared with a full spread of appetizers, entrees, and desserts and they happily sit down at the table and enjoy the feast.

¹⁴¹ A blunt is a hand-rolled marijuana cigarette.

This metaphor of meager offerings and the meat of the feast extend the metaphor of the album in general while challenging both the materialism in hip-hop as well as the prosperity gospel impulse in Christianity. Instead of having these men walk into a mansion or obtain a Rolls Royce, he focuses on their needs, food, which is metaphorical for the nourishment of the soul and sustainment. It is important to note, too, that there are no cars, “bling” or half-naked women in this video. The video simply features an unembellished Ambassador in different urban scenes and against digitally created backdrops.

Other songs on the album continue The Ambassador's instructive tone. “Hardcore” follows up on the message in “Gimme Dat.” Stating “everyone wants to be hardcore,” The Ambassador redefines what it means to be hardcore for Christ. “Listen Up” speaks about women's bodies and temptations that men face while the sermonic interlude “Theology of Brokenness,” sampled from an actual sermon, provides a snapshot of the theological framework that grounds the album. In a rare moment of black father-son affection, The Ambassador speaks with his son Jeremiah on the very last track, telling him that he is passing the torch to him and to other children of his generation to continue the legacy of the Christian hip-hop movement. Branch's tone, affectionate, gentle, and loving, contrasts with his strongly didactic yet balanced tone throughout the rest of the album. After a brief conversation with Jeremiah, he asks his son to rap out the album.

Black fatherhood is rarely showcased in hip-hop culture and only marginally considered in portrayals of black manhood in popular culture. With the exception of Will Smith co-starring in movies like *The Pursuit of Happyness* with his son, and the

affection that President Barack Obama shows to his daughters Natasha (known as “Sasha”) and Malia, there are few images, lyrical, visual and otherwise, of relatively younger black men being affectionate toward their children.¹⁴² We, the public, are not meant to see hip-hop artists as fathers, their daily lives (as communicated by their wives on the show *Hip-Hop Wives*) is hidden. The artists are framed as perpetually sexually desirable and emotionally available, such as LL Cool J, and being married with kids takes away from this accessibility. It is important to note that many hip-hop artists don't wear their wedding rings, but both Lecrae and The Ambassador do, even in photo shoots and in performances.

Lecrae

In 2005 at the age of 19, Lecrae Moore co-founded ReachLife Ministries, a non-profit organization that partners with other organizations “to equip local leaders with culturally relevant tools and media projects designed to strengthen communities with the word of God” (reachlife.com). A graduate of University of North Texas, Lecrae now resides in the inner city of Memphis. Married and a new father, Lecrae says in his liner notes, “May you never have to know your daddy through his CDs,” which is a strong statement of fatherhood and commitment to raising his child despite his international popularity.

Lecrae's album *Rebel* (2008) is the first Christian Rap CD to ever sit in the number 1 position on Billboard's Top Gospel Charts. Once released, *Rebel* also claimed the number 3 position on the secular iTunes Rap chart. The album's title *Rebel*, which he says can be either rebel the noun or the verb, is a strong stance

¹⁴² There are some images of older black men in popular culture being affectionate toward their children, such as Bill Cosby and Bernie Mac.

against self-promotion. But at the same time, Lecrae is a wildly popular artist, reaching levels of exposure, appeal and income that many HHH emcees do not, as most HHH artists are working-class young adults who hold full-time jobs or several part-time jobs to support themselves as they record and perform. Lecrae's disavowal of this popularity as he endeavors to bring listeners back to the reason *why* he raps, which is to bring listeners closer to God, is a complex dance that is fraught with contradictions and challenges.

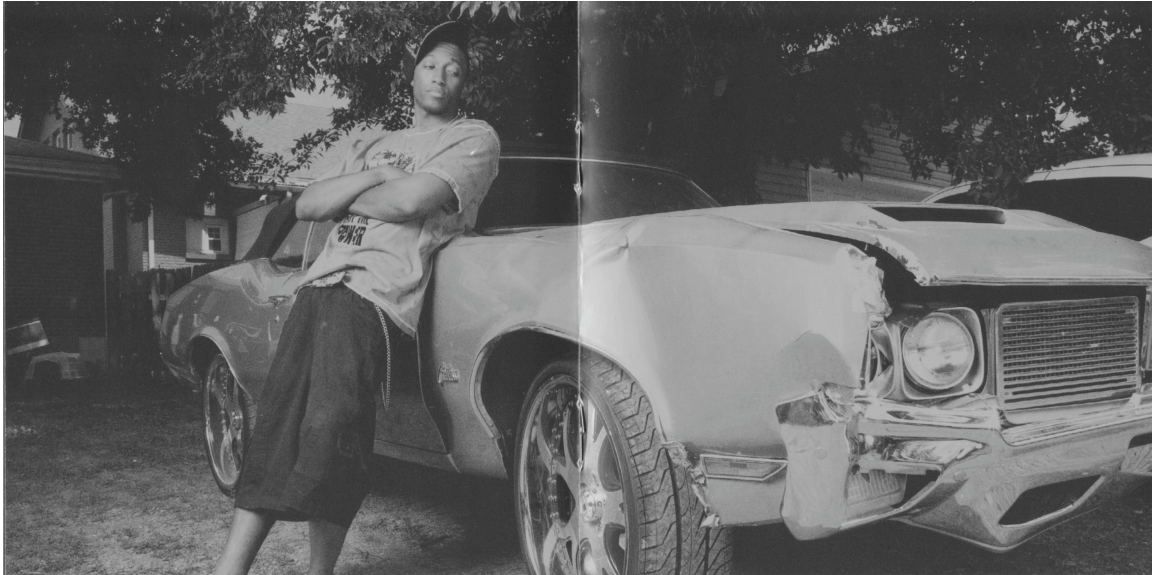


Figure 3.4: Image of Lecrae in *Rebel* Liner Notes.

Courtesy of Infinity Records.

Unlike The Ambassador's liner note photos, which present him as a father or Christ figure, Lecrae's only photo depicts him as an everyman mocking hip-hop materialism. He wears plain clothing and looks disparagingly, eyebrows raised, at a wrecked vintage vehicle that still manages to gain interest with shiny rims and a polished paint job. This image helps to bring home a sentiment that Lecrae repeats

often, and that hails from Black church traditions, that only what you do for God is eternal, and that material things can be easily destroyed and become useless. This riveting critique of materialism in mainstream hip-hop and in American culture generally would jolt Lecrae's audience, especially the potentially non-Christian listener who could happen upon his album. Often one will find an emcee on various album covers standing near a luxury car, showcasing their "bling" (gold, platinum and diamonds) and displaying exposed women. Lecrae, however, stands alone in a plain t-shirt, black shorts with his cap cocked to the side, scoffing at the ridiculous idolatry of material goods that plagues hip-hop and mainstream American cultures today. This message is especially poignant considering that before Lecrae converted to Christianity he was involved in a massive car accident, but emerged from it without a scratch on him. This experience, as well as escaping imprisonment on another occasion for trespassing and possessing drugs, simply because the police officer changed his mind after finding a *Bible* in his car, led Lecrae to walk a Christian life path.

Most songs on *Rebel* are in the Southern Krunk¹⁴³ style, and Lecrae's performance of strong and uncompromising masculinity comes through clearly on all of the tracks. The "Intro" encourages youth to go against mainstream culture. In this song he uses samples of sermon excerpts from Marc Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. This sermon speaks about Jesus as a rebel who went against mainstream culture. To drink, have sex outside of marriage, and to party every weekend is no longer being a rebel, Driscoll states. To be a rebel one must go *against* the popular

¹⁴³ The Southern Krunk style is marked by fast paced beats, a degree of musical minimalism, and vocal exclamations that communicate excitement and masculine energy.

forms of lifestyle and entertainment by being moral, Christianly purposeful and spiritually focused. The next track “Don't Waste Your Life” focuses on about how



Figure 3.5: Rebel Cover Art
Courtesy of Infinity Records.

precious life is and includes a lyric that states “you are Christian first, above your race,” which speaks to the backgrounding of race in favor of faith across ethnic lines. “Go Hard,” similar to The Ambassador's “Hardcore,” tells listeners to “Go hard [for God] or go home.” “Identity” plays off of the image discussed above, communicating that one's true identity is not “in looks and cars” or in the shoes one wears, but in God. “Indwelling Sin” explores temptations of women, drugs and alcohol and follows up on his focus on the album to instruct listeners in how to rebel against the “drowning” currents of mainstream society.

Speaking more about the album, Reach Life Records says:

Rebel is a redefinition. Not only of the word rebel, but of how many of us view the Christian life. Rebel rejects the notion that being a Christian means a

passive approach to our theology and an undedicated lifestyle.¹⁴⁴ The definitions of what we believe and value affect how we live in our short time on this earth. ... From belief to walking it out, our Faith is not a game. And with a majority of society pursuing a life away from Christ, we need rebels who will counter the culture and follow hard after Jesus. It's a call to action, it's a call to believe, it's a call to be radical. Be a rebel and go hard for Jesus.¹⁴⁵

In mainstream hip-hop terms, hardness or toughness is defined by how many bullets you can take and survive, the women you have successfully dominated, how deprived the ghetto was that you came from, and by the number of men that you can verbally and physically assault to prove your strength. In this case to be a rebel is to challenge both mainstream views of masculinity as well as the “passive approach and uneducated lifestyle” that some Christian fundamentalists have become known for. *Rebel's* “call to action” is partnered with *The Chop-Chop's* to communicate to youth the urgency of living a godly lifestyle.

The following lyrics from “Don't Waste Your Life” communicates Lecrae's conviction to minister to youth as well as his faith-based philosophy of living:

Suffer, Yeah do it for Christ, if you trying to figure what to do with your life
If you're making a lotta money hope you doing it right
because the money is God's, you better steward it right
Stay focused if you ain't got no ride
Your life ain't wrapped up in what you drive
The clothes you wear, the job you work
The color your skin, naw we Christian first
People living life for a job, make a lil' money start living for a car
Get 'em a house a wife, kids and a dog, when they retire they living high on
the hog
but guess what, they didn't ever really live at all
To live is Christ, yeah that's Paul I recall
To die is gain so for Christ we give it all, he's the treasure you'll find in the

¹⁴⁴ This is a response to popular, stereotypical portrayals of religion, such as the documentary film *Religulous* (2008), which portrays primarily Christian and Muslim believers as uneducated extremists who largely disregard science and destroy the earth.

¹⁴⁵ <http://reachrecords.com/audio/6441> Accessed 10 June 2008.

mall
Your money, your singleness, marriage, talent and time
They were loaned to you to show the world that Christ is Divine
That's why it's Christ in my rhymes, That's why it's Christ all the time
My whole world is built around him, He's the life in my lines
I refuse to waste my life, he's too true to chase that ice
Here's my gifts and time cause I'm constantly trying to be used to praise the
Christ
If he's truly raised to life, then this news should change your life
and by his grace you can put your faith in a place that rules your days and
nights

Here Lecrae outlines the Christ-centered philosophy that informs his entire album.

Although there is no mention of men or women here, his message is clearly directed to men who are enthralled and “tempted” by mainstream materiality. He speaks of men striving to get the best things of life and then eventually to get a house, wife, kids and a dog, or to live the American dream. Rather than making material gains and familial relationships the center of one's life, Lecrae argues that Christ should be the center and circumference of every aspect of one's lifestyle. Lecrae's philosophy depends upon a rejection of secular lifestyles. As he names material possessions such as “ice”, cars, clothes and cash, he performatively rejects them and builds his life philosophy upon this rejection and naming of the pitfalls of mainstream culture of which he hopes to dissuade youth.

Black Rap Nationalism and Black Masculinities

Masculinity Studies or Men's Studies is a comparatively new field, having arrived within the academy in the late-1970s—after the earlier development of Gender and Women's Studies—in order to more closely examine and critique male

privilege, patriarchy, and performances of masculinity.¹⁴⁶ Masculinity Studies does not, however, take account of Black Christian men's masculinities, which are informed by black nationalism as well as by black church culture and mainstream popular culture representations of manhood. Although there are points of convergence between Black Nationalist, popular, and church culture portrayals of manhood, the holy hip-hop masculinities performed by artists and fans in this study differ in important ways, which I explore in depth in this chapter. Whereas traditional, secular masculinities can prize sexual prowess and promiscuity, Black holy hip-hop masculinities generally praise virginity, marriage, and monogamy. Black Christian hip-hop artists trade bravado for humility, and swagger¹⁴⁷ for sainthood.

In *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (2005), Charise L. Cheney traces elements of rap nationalism back to the Black Nationalist impulses in Black American culture, beginning with Martin R. Delany's work in 1852 and reaching its pinnacle in the 1960s during the waning of the Civil Rights Movement and the height of the Black Power Movement. The mid-1960s, Cheney, argues, were devoted to the recuperation of black manhood, gender serving as “the guise—the mask—through which the male theorist/activist

¹⁴⁶ C.f. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), which is a very informative overview of Masculinity, or Men's Studies, the history of masculinity, its relationship to the Feminist Movements, and formations of manhood in the West. One of the shortcomings of this text is that it does very little to engage black masculinities and the racial hierarchies that allows for certain formations of masculinities to exist. Religion and the perpetration of religious-inflected forms of masculinity are also absent in this text.

¹⁴⁷ Swagger, or swag for short, is a masculine, arrogant gait or demeanor that displays one's self-absorption and/or confidence. Many hip-hop artists, such as Lil Wayne, are admired by both female and male artists for their swagger or “swag” in cases where they may lack rap skills or attractiveness. An artist's convincing, confident swagger is a major part of their appeal to audiences and fans.

translates his social role into a political one” (38). Black Nationalist politics were enveloped in what Gayatri Spivak calls *strategic essentialism*, or the flattening out and attempted erasure of differences within an ethnic or nationalist group in order to forward the civil and social rights of the whole. Black Nationalism advocated for Back-to-Africa movements (Martin R. Delany, Marcus Garvey), self-reliance (Malcolm X), and self-education (Amiri Baraka). Black Nationalists rejected mainstream, white culture and education while simultaneously eliding the differences among black men and black women. In some cases they denied the worth of women beyond their reproductive capacities, and rendered black homosexuals all but invisible (Cheney 42, 52).

In what Cheney calls the “Golden Age of Rap Nationalism,” Christianity, the dominant theological structure of Black Nationalism, was replaced with Islam and the rise of the “Asiatic Black Man” (121). Ironically, even though Islamic sects rejected Christianity as the “white man's religion,” black men still cited Christian scripture and teachings in their rap lyrics. In an extended analysis of lyrics from KRS-One and Poor Righteous Teachers, two Muslim/Five Percenter¹⁴⁸ groups, Cheney illustrates how these and other rap artists continued to utilize the *Bible* “as a (re)source of power and knowledge” (122). Despite their use of the *Bible*, rap artists remained critical of Christianity generally and “the Black Church”¹⁴⁹ particularly, both perceived as staunchly hypocritical, morally corrupt, and pacifist institutions.

¹⁴⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, Five Percenterism is considered an off-shoot of the Nation of Islam and is also known as “the Nation of Gods [men] and Earths [women].

¹⁴⁹ “The Black Church” is a term that, although singular, is utilized by Black Religious Studies scholars to refer to the diverse number of black Christian denominations, encompassing Baptists, Pentecostals, African Methodist Episcopalians, Church of God in Christ, and several other smaller denominations.

To the mainstream, secular hip-hop community today, Christianity is still largely regarded as weak, irrelevant, feminine, and simply uncool.

These criticisms of black Christianity and black churches are not located merely in hip-hop culture, but can be found among a host of other constituents that make up “the black community” as well as other communities. Critiques of contemporary black Christianity stem largely from the decreased political activism of many black churches since the social gospel movement, which dates back to 1900-1930. Marla F. Frederick accounts for these changes in her book *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (2003). In an age of increased prosperity gospel, a Christian faith practice geared toward gaining personal wealth and perpetual health, and not toward collective liberation and communal advancement, radical black Christianity as practiced by Dr. Martin Luther King and other Christian activists has been lost, Frederick argues. The powerful critique of systemic discrimination is now largely absent in prosperity gospel-oriented churches, replaced instead with televangelist preachers who push for Christian individualism more than for collective equality. “The historical 'black church' is caught between two different traditions,” Frederick argues (142). The first tradition encompasses the church's historical and radical critique of structural inequality, and the second tradition is marked by conservative individualism that sees race, for instance, “not as a systematic problem, but rather as a problem between individual people, a problem of individual prejudices” (153). In the context of Detroit, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (2007) by Angela D. Dillard traces the religious and political activism in black churches in

Detroit from the 1930s to the 1960s. She argues that black churches have always been politically contested spaces in the Black freedom struggle, even as they moved forward to fight for the rights of their members and wider black communities. Contemporary church culture threatens to renounce the progress that has been made by radical, relatively liberal approaches to social justice.

Some would argue that “the black church,” not only as a collection of congregations, but also as an icon of social and cultural mobility, has been reduced to a collective of reverberating individualistic impulses, losing a portion of its original social and political power that extends back to the eighteenth century. In the public consciousness, “the black church” has been weakened and metaphorically feminized, in the eyes of secular observers as well as in the minds of young black men today. So, many ask, what relevance does “the black church” have for youth today, and especially for the hip-hop culture of urban youth? How can one be a strong black man *and* a Christian during a time when black churches seem to be losing their (masculinized) power in the eyes of the general public?¹⁵⁰

However, the types of masculinity constructed and propagated by popular media perpetuate limited views of black masculinities, both secular and Christian. In his 2006 documentary film, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt exposes popular media’s creation of pathological black masculinity. Hurt locates the roots of this representation of black masculinity in the seminal film *Birth of a Nation*

¹⁵⁰ In 2003, Tavis Smiley’s the State of the Black Union was held in Detroit, Michigan. The theme was “The Black Church: Relevant, Repressive, or Reborn?” and featured panelists such as Tavis Smiley, Kwame M. Kilpatrick, former Mayor of Detroit, as well as several African American ministers and pastors from all over the nation. This State of the Black Union addressed the degree to which “the black church” is relevant to larger black communities.

(1915), an overtly racist silent film directed by D.W. Griffith that portrayed black men's masculinity and sexuality as threatening (rapists of white women) or as trivial and frivolous (via the Post-Civil War shuckin' and jivin' black Senators who don't take care of business). Since this early-twentieth-century production, representations of black masculinity have been mediated by corporate take-over projects, such as the mainstreaming hip-hop culture in the 1980s, and the proliferation of films that construct deviant, hypersexual black masculinities.¹⁵¹ Hurt points out in his film segment titled "Manhood in a Bottle" that these masculinities are false, impractical performances that are packaged for consumption by white, black, Latino and other men of color, as well as for women.

In the 1980s, gangster rappers performed the fact that they held little regard for lives other than those of the homeys and for those that represented their 'hood. Rappers like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg and Warren G performed a black male bravado located in party life culture. Thus marks the era when scantily clad women began showing up in the relatively new genre of the music video. This was a departure from Poor Righteous Teachers' "Shakiyla," which gloried women and used them as a metaphor for the Five Percenter faith even though women were absent in the video itself. It is not that women weren't denigrated before this moment, but the demeaning of women became more magnified at this point in the history of hip-hop culture. This treatment of women is one side of the gender binary that was created, along with the massive homophobia that was often acted out within larger hip-hop

¹⁵¹ One example is the John Singleton film, *Boyz in Da Hood* (1991), which framed black masculinity with a backdrop of intense gang violence and bloodshed, all while using hip-hop music as the film's soundtrack.

communities. Being a man meant not being a bitch, a “softy,” or a wimp. Women and homosexuals, then, were conflated as two sides of the same coin. To denigrate a woman and to beat up a homosexual (lyrically or actually) was to reaffirm one's identity as a man, to strengthen the brotherhood.

What is problematic about these images is not only their falsity but also the limitations they place in the consciousness of consumers about ways of *being* men. Hip-hop culture in particular, fraught with violent, misogynistic, homophobic representations of manhood, must come to terms with the performances of masculinities that present only one kind of man: a thug who builds a common bond with the brotherhood by woman-hating and gay-bashing.¹⁵²

A shorthand description of hip-hop masculinities is encapsulated in T. Denean Sharpley-Whitting's book title, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip-Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (2007). From the images popularized by gangster rap in the late 1980s, says Hurt, of block parties full of “partners” and “homeys”¹⁵³ and women who are passed from man to man, to more contemporary St. Louis, Midwestern hip-hop masculinities, such as that presented more recently by Nelly and friends in the “Tip Drill” video, hip-hop masculinities are stereotypical and therefore simplistic. Men who can seduce and have sex with as many women (also known as hoes or bitches) as possible are the most masculine and the most revered. But what some consumers (and sometimes critics) fail to realize is that these exaggerated

¹⁵² In 2004, women at Spelman College attempted to make hip-hop – represented by Nelly and his highly controversial, borderline pornographic music video “Tip Drill – come to terms with their representations of women.

¹⁵³ A homey is another word for comrade or close friend.

performances of masculinity serve as forms of entertainment that attempt to limit and pathologize black men's ways of being.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), bell hooks explores similar phenomena, arguing that “black men are taught violence and aggression as keys to survival” (18). hooks illustrates the ways in which Black masculinity is often consumed and defined as spectacle in sports, the music industry, and through pimp culture, drug pushing and hustling; black men are taught to make money by any means necessary, and even crime is believed to be like “any other job,” according to Ice T, who hooks quotes. Through these mediated depictions and expectations for black masculinity, what audiences can forget is that these are packaged images created for voyeuristic consumption. In a television special *Hip-Hop Wives*,¹⁵⁴ the wives of rappers Big Boi and Snoop Dogg testify to the fact that “at the end of the day, it's a fantasy world.” These wives bring the rare element of realism back into the images of these rappers as the hypermasculine men that fans come to “know” through music videos and performances are in some cases fathers who are responsible for raising their children, and in some of their households, women are the “Boss Ladies.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ *Hip-Hop Wives* is part of an E! Entertainment True Hollywood Story series that was first aired on July 7, 2006. This first part of the series featured the wives of rappers Ice-T, LL Cool J, Snoop Dogg, Diddy (formerly known as Puff Daddy and P. Diddy), and Big Boi of the former duet OutKast. The second of the series aired on April 29, 2009 and featured the wives of rappers Paul Wall, DMX, Uncle Luke, Mos Def, and Big Pun. <http://www.rapbasement.com/mos-def/040709-the-e-network-will-debut-the-latest-true-hollywood-stories-where-wives-of-rappers-talk.html> Accessed 1 January 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Snoop Dogg's wife, Shante Taylor Broadus, is known in her family circle as “the Boss Lady” (*Hip-Hop Wives*).

Conclusion

The different models of performance and ministerial work by The Ambassador and Lecrae call to attention the potentially stringent and difficult standards that they hold themselves and others to, and begs the question: in what ways may black Christian men be forced to speak and perform within the discourses of traditional or mainstream masculinities in ways that might render their work contradictory? On May 18, 2009, a Christian record label released a statement announcing that they would be “discontinuing the forwarding and promotion” of one of their signed artists “due to recent findings of moral failure in his marriage.” In November 2009, another statement was released about another Christian hip-hop artists concerning moral failure in his marriage. These scandals were large and far-reaching, as they involved one of their most popular artists with whom they held a long-standing relationship. On forums where fans discussed the scandal, comments ranged from utter disappointment at the artist's moral shortcomings, to support for the artist and frustration with the label's explicit statement that continued to circulate and further defame the artist. From my work on Christian hip-hop, I have found that artists bear a burden of expected performance authenticity, which I call *the burden of congruency*. My focus group data illustrates that more than pastors and popular performers in mainstream culture, Christian hip-hop artists seem to be expected to perform a Christian identity congruent with their actual daily lives.

What are the implications of a *burden of congruency* to this degree? As some HHH artists are so invested in eliding racial, sexual and class-based identity issues,

they could, at the same time, benefit from a close look at how all aspects of their identities inform the struggles that they face as Christians from a distinct background. Even while the Christian hip-hop project seems to be more concerned about saving the lives or souls of men than the lives of black women and black gay people, male artists frequently utilize perceptions of homosexuality and mainstream hip-hop masculinities as convenient foils for advancing their evangelical project. Conflicted and contradictory, both inclusive and exclusive, these multifarious threads of understanding and engagement within the Christian hip-hop movement are fraught with problems and issues not unique to the twenty-first century, but very much connected to the history of black cultural politics, racial uplift projects, and the culture and structure of African American churches. A deeper exploration of how particular racialized notions of masculinity as well as femininity is imperative for exploring how these dilemmas play out. The blackness that is not named or explicitly engaged with in their work greatly informs how they are perceived by a variety of audiences, and it is a theme that I hope to take up more fully in future work.

In the next chapter, “Only For God, Not For a Girl” I explore how women position themselves within the male-centric, masculinist context of Christian hip-hop and how they carve out space for addressing and centering young girls’ and women’s issues.

CHAPTER IV

“ONLY FOR GOD, NOT FOR A GIRL”: FEMALE IDENTITY PERFORMANCES

On New Year's Eve 1999, Christian rap artist Japhia Life released his sophomore album, *Hell's Diary: The Healing LP*. An album reviewer compared his flow, the rhythmic progression of his rapping, to “the authentic street appeal of Jay-Z,” while also relating that his work “has the heartfelt substance of Nas & 2Pac.”¹⁵⁶ The flow of his message has mainstream hip-hop analogues, and Japhia Life is far from being heavy-handed in his musical theological explorations. The crossover album seems to appeal to both Christian listeners and mainstream hip-hop fans. “I Don't Know You” stands out on this album, not only for its easy, relaxed flow and creative sampling, but also for its encouragement to Christian men to keep up the good fight, avoid women who mislead, and live a godly life at all costs:

Remember when He [God] flamed Sodom and Gomorrah
But found favor with Lot and his daughters?
Not in his wife, the good times got in his wife
Me change? Dog, not in this life
Not for the church, definitely not for the world
only for God, not for a girl
Never, I'd rather stay single
Man, don't let 'em bend you
Stand firm man, look what I've been through

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.musicchristian.com/sys/product.php?PRODUCT=168384> Accessed 14 May 2008. Nas and 2Pac are two prominent, mainstream, secular hip-hop emcees. Both artists, coincidentally, play with religious themes in their work.

Japhia evokes the Genesis story of Lot's wife, who, when escaping from the inflamed city of Sodom, looked back to the city longingly and was consequently transformed into a pillar of salt. Japhia's interpretation of this biblical story is that Lot's wife morphed into a salt pillar because she found pleasure in the city, in the "good times" that she did not want to leave behind. In this verse, Japhia also references Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that, according to the *Bible*, were destroyed because of their sins, sexual sins being among them.¹⁵⁷

In this brief lyrical passage, Japhia Life explores sexual deviance, the "good times" that Lot's wife had trouble turning away from, as well as the need for men to stay strong and to resist allowing women to "bend" them – to be single rather than give up one's life and higher spiritual purpose for "a girl." Japhia alludes to his own pain and deviant behavior in times past – "Stand firm man, look what I've been through" – as an instructive and cautionary tool. In effect, he admonishes an assumed male-only audience to resist the temptations of sexual promiscuity and the sinful influences of women, and to do what they do *only* for God. Japhia further hammers this point home with the parallel structure that he constructs between "church/God" and "world/girl," illustrating the degree to which women (referenced here as "girls") are enrobed with worldly, ungodly significations, even in cases in which they are the wives of "godly men," as in the case of Lot.

These lyrics comprise just one example of the recurring, binary iconography of women in Christian hip-hop music and culture. While women may be referred to

¹⁵⁷ In contemporary speech and in religious doctrine, these two cities serve as metaphors for a range of behaviors and places that are considered sexually deviant, including homosexual acts, prostitution, and fornication, with Las Vegas called by some the modern Sodom and Gomorrah.

as bitches and hoes in some mainstream, secular hip-hop,¹⁵⁸ demeaning references of a different vein abound in some holy hip-hop. An examination of lyrics by several male Christian hip-hop artists uncovers a pattern. These artists draw largely from controversial female figures in the Bible in historically framing the perceived contemporary immorality and sexual impropriety of women. Eve, the mother of the “original sin,” Jezebel,¹⁵⁹ the “pagan idolatress,” Lot’s wife (who remains nameless), and Delilah,¹⁶⁰ the ultimate temptress, become quotidian reference points in Christian hip-hop to explain the purported misbehavior of women.

Moreover, representations of women, and in this case black women, inhabit a binary opposition, with the Jezebels and Delilahs – devious and sexually loose women – on one side, and the Virgin Marys and Ruths – righteous, godly and faithful women – on the other.¹⁶¹ The former must be avoided by men at all costs so that

¹⁵⁸ It is not my intention to conflate all of secular hip-hop with the misogynistic hip-hop that we experience in certain instances of hip-hop music and culture. However, there are misogynistic trends in hip-hop historically and in the present moment that are explored in more depth in Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1994); Joan Morgan, *When the Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004) and in the more recent T. Denean Sharpley-Whitting’s *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip-Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), which focuses entirely on gender and sexual politics in hip-hop culture.

¹⁵⁹ In the *Bible*, Jezebel turns Ahab away from the God of the Israelites and the Jews and toward the worship of Phoenician god, Baal. Together, Ahab and Jezebel allow temples of Baal operate in Israel, and the pagan religion receives royal patronage. In effect, Jezebel draws Ahab and the Jews away from God and into what was considered pagan idolatry and worship. Today, the Jezebel is widely found throughout popular culture as an iconic representation of a wicked woman who will usurp one’s morality and discretion in any given situation.

¹⁶⁰ Delilah means “the one weakened or uprooted or impoverished” and she is the woman in the book of Judges in the *Bible* who is given a monetary bribe to seduce Samson and to find out where his strength lies, which she discovers is in his hair (which he never cuts because it is literally his strength). After seducing him and coaxing him to sleep, Delilah cuts his long hair and after a final display of strength in which he breaks down the pillars of a courtyard, Samson dies. Today, Delilah symbolizes the cunning, mysterious woman who takes away the very strength of men. She is, metaphorically, considered the utmost seductress.

¹⁶¹ Ruth is a noted figure in the Bible for staying by her mother-in-law’s side after all of the male heirs in the family (including their husbands) die. After moving to a new location to live with her mother-in-law, Naomi, she gleanes the fields of Boaz, a distant relative, in order to provide some

they may maintain their godly, Christian walk. The latter group, which includes the ideal Christian wives and mothers-to-be that some men endeavor to wed, are exemplary of what a Christian woman should be.¹⁶² These binary representations of women in holy hip-hop, as well as the dearth of female Christian hip-hop artists, work in tandem to pigeonhole the performative possibilities for women in holy hip-hop culture.¹⁶³ In this chapter I examine the double othering of women in Christian hip-hop and in the black Christian faith more generally. I use the term “double othering” in light of intersectionality scholarship to reference the simultaneous decentering of women in both hip-hop and in the public practice of the Christian faith by African American believers. A great majority of hip-hop emcees are male, and women, due to denomination-specific rules concerning pastoral and ministerial leadership, often do not pastor or lead congregations. I argue that these intended limitations on the performative possibilities of female Christian hip-hop artists are distinct from those of secular, mainstream hip-hop while at the same time manifesting uncanny similarities to them. Despite these similarities, women in Christian hip-hop engage in a womanist critique of the hip-hop industry and of

food for herself and Naomi. Boaz, after meeting Ruth, allows her to continue gleaning the fields and tells his workers to purposefully leave more grain for her to collect. Impressed by her faithfulness, Boaz marries Ruth and their family once again has a male heir. Ruth is a Christian cultural icon for faithful, steadfast devotion.

¹⁶² Throughout the *Bible*, men are admonished to avoid tempting women, as in the book of Proverbs, chapter three: “My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: That thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge. For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.” (Proverbs 3:1-5)

¹⁶³ Performative possibilities are the range of identity performances that female Christian hip-hop artists can manifest in their performances to a variety of audiences. These performances are simultaneously performances that are considered to be feminine, respectable, and relevant to their audiences. Performed identities, explored later in this chapter, are also discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

male-female relationships, even when these critiques are not named as such. Kiwi and Mahogany Jones, two artists featured in this chapter represent part of a surge of the womanist voice in Christian hip-hop, whereas a black feminist voice in contemporary secular mainstream hip-hop is relatively less prominent.¹⁶⁴ As womanists, the work of Kiwi, Mahogany Jones, and the other female artists on *The H.E.R. Project* privileges patriarchy and traditional gender roles in ways that black feminist projects may or may not. It is important to distinguish between black feminism and womanism, as black feminism is a response to the exclusion and eurocentrism in (white) feminism movements. Black feminism interrogates the complexities of black women's subject positions as intersecting class, race and gender identities. In both black feminism and womanism, community is prized; however, womanism is distinct in that it links black women and their spirituality as of central concern in projects by black Christian womanists and other womanists of African descent who do not share the Christian faith.

Women in (Holy) Hip-Hop

In "Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip-Hop, 1976-2004" authors Phillips, Reddick-Morgan and Stephens argue that through hip-hop music and rap culture, black and Latino women rappers maintain a "dually oppositional stance" within the culture that both critiques sexism and expresses solidarity with men of their same

¹⁶⁴ Lauryn Hill was considered to be a strong and prominent feminist voice in mainstream hip-hop. Upon leaving the industry, she left an empty space in hip-hop feminist performance and discourse that has yet to be filled. Although there are a number of female emcees in hip-hop, especially considering that conscious and underground hip-hop more actively includes female hip-hop feminists, in hypervisible secular hip-hop in the mainstream, we do not encounter feminist artists on the same scale, and therefore they are generally unknown or lesser known in the wider public.

race or ethnicity” (255).¹⁶⁵ Despite women being outnumbered by men in hip-hop, and the fact that the hip-hop industry operates like an “old boys’ club” (254), women have been rapping in secular hip-hop since 1976, and Christian hip-hop artists have been rapping since the early-to-mid-1980s, according to the information that I have gleaned from discussions and interviews.

Despite the fact that there is indeed a female presence (however limited) in Christian hip-hop, a challenge for me in this project was to locate black women in the Southeast Michigan area who I could interview and watch perform. Many conferences and concerts featured male performers, and when women performed, they were either opening performers for headline male acts, at which they performed one or two songs, or they were not included on the official program at all. Women mentioned to me that they were often challenged and critiqued for doing hip-hop at all, and so in more traditionalist church or religious spaces, they have chosen on occasion to perform spoken word poetry instead. This decentering of women within these two cultural contexts (Black Christianity and hip-hop) coincide in Christian hip-hop, bringing together the constricting and prescriptive nature of both of these cultural contexts to create a unique challenge to women artists who endeavor to create a space for themselves and for other women in holy hip-hop, as well as a challenge for myself as a researcher to locate the women in holy hip-hop.

Although women comprise sixty to seventy-five percent of the membership in black churches across the nation, their large numbers do not nullify the

¹⁶⁵ Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan and Dionne Patricia Stephens, “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip-Hop, 1976-2004” *The Journal of African American History*. (90:3): 253-277.

challenges that they face in the church environment.¹⁶⁶ However, as scholars Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Telia U. Anderson, Judith Weisenfeld and Marla F. Frederick illustrate, black women have been and continue to be creative power brokers in church life, even in the face of doctrinal double standards in regards to leadership opportunities for women.¹⁶⁷ Leadership standards and expectations vary along a spectrum according to denomination and the history and culture of the specific churches of which black women are part, but they all come into play in regards to the acceptance or rejection of female Christian hip-hop artists.

Examining the performance roles and the unique challenges that female Christian hip-hop artists navigate in appealing both to the church and the world at large, I explore the changing roles, representations and reception of black female Christian rap artists, according to the constantly shifting social and cultural contexts that they find themselves in. This is especially interesting to explore because as Kyra Gaunt has illustrated in *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (2006), black girls' games have formulated the center of hip-hop rhyme. One example of this is Nelly's song, "Down Down Baby" from his *Country*

¹⁶⁶ From The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, demographic portrait of Historically Black Churches. This data was collected through a nationwide survey from May 8, 2007 to August 17, 2007. <http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits> Accessed 29 December 2009.

¹⁶⁷ See for example: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880-1920*, (Harvard University Press, 1993), Telia U. Anderson's "'Calling on the Spirit': The Performativity of Black Women's Faith in the Baptist Church Spiritual Traditions and Its Radical Possibilities for Resistance" in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Judith Weisenfeld's "Truths That Liberate the Soul: Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance," in R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, eds., *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), and *African-American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), also authored by Judith Weisenfeld; and Marla F. Frederick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Grammar album (2000), whose lyrics lift freely from a popular rhyme chanted by young black girls. In addition to black girls' games, black women's voices are sampled on a plethora of hip-hop songs, formulating what I am calling the invisible foundation of hip-hop.¹⁶⁸

Phillips, Reddick-Morgan and Stephens concur when they state that “women have been integral to the evolution of hip-hop from the beginning” (254). The authors reference the fact that former R&B singer Sylvia Robinson founded the Sugar Hill Records label, through which the all-male hip-hop group Sugarhill Gang went on to record the popular song “Rapper’s Delight,” a track that put hip-hop on the commercial music map in 1979. Since then, women’s presence in hip-hop has been relatively limited but still present, with 1980s and early 1990s rappers such as Yo-Yo, MC Lyte, Sister Souljah, Roxanne (a Puerto Rican MC) and Queen Latifah to more recent mid- to late-1990s and 2000s rappers TLC, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Eve, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu and Missy Elliott among many others. While there is a clear trajectory of female secular hip-hop artists, who engage feminist issues, as Phillips et. al argue, such a trajectory does not exist for female Christian hip-hop artists. Although the women that I interviewed were able to name several female Christian hip-hop and spoken word artists from all over the country, many of these women are not recorded, perform only locally, or are not recognized by holy hip-

¹⁶⁸ I call this female presence an invisible foundation because many times these women are sampled and unless one recognizes their voices, these women are rendered simultaneously voiceless. Their disembodied voices are featured on tracks like Kanye West's popular debut “Through the Fire” (the voice of Chaka Khan) in some cases without giving any credit to these women. If samples are less than a given number of seconds long, even if they are repeated throughout the track, the artist and producer are usually not required to gain permissions, nor are they obligated to cite where the sample comes from. This invisibility keeps the women anonymous and the male artists “original” so that other artists cannot copy their sample (if they do not recognize the voice of the source of the sample).

hop at large. They very much exist at the periphery of the music and culture, as the holy hip-hop “canon” remains male-dominated. A greater number of male hip-hop artists have the resources and the backing to reach national acclaim, while female artists such as Mahogany Jones, struggle to get their albums marketed and sold due to a shortage of resources and exposure.¹⁶⁹

I open this chapter with background on the masculine-centeredness hip-hop culture through the life story of Mahogany Jones. I then turn to music from the album *The H.E.R. (Healing and Evangelism Through Rhyme) Project*, the first recorded music project that featured all women Christian hip-hop artists, released in 2004. As I discuss these lyrics I engage with themes in the works of Black feminist and womanist scholars to explore “discursive strands” that surface in the music. Next, I chart signifiers of identity – voice, lyrics, clothing, and hair – that inform an audience's reception of a musical artist, specifically one who is black, female and Christian. This section incorporates the voices of two Christian hip-hop artists, Charyse “Mahogany Jones” Bailey and Kim “Kiwi” Williams. I explore how these separate signifiers of identity collectively create *performed identities* through examining a popular hip-hop and R&B group from the 1990s, TLC, as an example of performed femininities presented for marketing purposes to teens and young women in America at the time. I end this chapter by returning to the women's voices as they describe how they mediate sexism and cross-denominational expectations in their music and performances.

¹⁶⁹ Shannon Gaston of the Yuinon holy hip-hop collective mentioned to me that for Mahogany Jones's new album *Morphed*, The Yuinon would like to publicize her more and create a music video for a leading track on her album, but due to a limitation of resources, they are not able to do so.

Expressing Womanhood, Claiming Spaces: Black Female Christian Hip-Hop Artists

The women that I interviewed for this project are self-defined black female Christian hip-hop artists. I conducted two interviews, each with Mahogany Jones and Kiwi, and did follow-up interviews with both of them. I was scheduled to interview Erica Lee “The Energy Provider,” but she and her husband were expecting a child at the time of this research, so she was unable to keep our appointment due to the proximity of her due date. I aimed to interview more women artists, but due to their paucity, at least in the performance circles in Southeast Michigan that I was introduced to, I choose to focus on Mahogany Jones and Kiwi in this research. In the interviews I asked them questions about their performance styles, their reception by various audiences, and the choices that they make in representing themselves as artists. What I found is that these women navigate a range of religious and secular spaces in their performances as they communicate their musical, evangelical messages to a range of audience members. While these women's objectives and performance styles are varied and nuanced, together these female artists express the challenges and the uniqueness of black, Christian womanhood while also claiming space within hip-hop culture and within black Christianity as empowered, socially-conscious music artists and ministers.

Despite the many obstacles that they face, several women take part in the Christian hip-hop ministry locally, nationally, and globally. Robin Ayers, the founder and director of Hip-Hop University, a Christian hip-hop dance ministry in Northwest Florida, uses hip-hop dance as a worship and ministry tool in churches and in youth

groups. Light da Flow Minista, a Christian hip-hop artist who is often compared to secular artist Da Brat in her vocal delivery style and in the way that she “comes hard” with her hip-hop stylistics,¹⁷⁰ has been widely-acclaimed by both Christian and secular audiences. Mahogany Jones is a New Yorker who now lives in Southeast Michigan and is a Christian hip-hop artist. She has performed globally in both religious and secular venues, teaches a hip-hop writing and production class to youth in Detroit, and is a four-time B.E.T. “Freestyle Fridays” spoken word battle competition winner.¹⁷¹ Kiwi, born in Norfolk, Virginia and raised in Detroit, Michigan, is a well-known Christian spoken word and rap artist who also serves as President and CEO of G-Praise Music, an independent radio promotions and music production company that has worked with gospel artists such as Lisa McClendon and with numerous record labels, including Cross Movement Records.¹⁷² Mahogany Jones and Kiwi utilize creative ways to surmount challenges based on their gender identities.

In this chapter I provide the perspectives of two of these women,¹⁷³ Mahogany Jones and Kiwi, two Detroit-area artists who I have interviewed extensively. These women often do not utilize the traditional terminology or discourses of feminism, womanism and women's rights to define the work that they

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Light Da Flow Minista on *Holy Hip-Hop* DVD, 2004.

¹⁷¹ Freestyle Friday is a regular portion on the popular BET show 106 & Park. During Freestyle Friday two up and coming rappers compete in a freestyle battle before the study audience and also before judges. Freestyles lyrics are composed in the moment, impromptu and the battlers engage in a dialogic, lyrical battle, responding to each other's lyrics and building on them.

¹⁷² Cross Movement Records is a Christian urban and hip-hop recording label that produces some of the most-acclaimed, well-known artists such as The Ambassador, Trip Lee, and more recently, Michelle Bonilla, Flame and Lecrae. The record label is distinct from, although related to, the Christian hip-hop group Cross Movement.

¹⁷³ I conducted an extended follow-up interview (for a total of two interviews) with each artist and also corresponded with them over the phone and through email before and after each interview.

do. But close readings of their responses to my interview questions and informed analyses of the ways that they perform their identities through music and stage performance illustrates that these women are laying claim to a Christian-inflected feminism. Phillips et. al note that “even those women who do promote women’s interests and well-being [in hip-hop] do not always call themselves feminists or womanists, choosing instead to let their lyrics and actions speak for themselves” (272). Black feminism and womanism are related but distinct from each other; whereas black feminists posit that racism, classism and sexism are multiplicative and inextricably bound together, womanists argue that race, class and gender cohere in oppressive forces, and are concerned with the well-being of all individuals and has a strong connection to spirituality and Black theology. As Delores S.

Williams states,

Womanist theology is a prophetic voice concerned about the well-being of the entire African American community, male and female, adults and children. Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm, and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African American community.¹⁷⁴

This womanism in Christian hip-hop is aligned with mainstream feminism, womanism, and even black feminism as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins and other black feminist writers in three main ways.¹⁷⁵ First, these women are part of a

¹⁷⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993): 67.

¹⁷⁵ Patricia Hill Collins (1990; 2005) has illustrated that black feminism holds many points of departure from white or mainstream feminism due to the intersectional nature of race, class and gender identities. Moreover, black women's bodies were demonized historically since slavery due to the chattel status of their bodies and their sexualities as pleasuring tools and breeding machines for slave masters. Stereotypes of black womanhood as deviant (Jezebel), frumpy and unattractive (the Mammy), the unfortunately doomed (the tragic mulatto), and the more contemporary Welfare Queen are only a few of the images and historic and contemporary

generation of “musical ministers” that make up the hip-hop generation. Secondly, they face unique challenges in a Post-Soul moment with the proliferation of iconic representations of hip-hop that shape and challenge their identities. And lastly, these women may at times appear to uphold the status quo in their engagement with Christian spaces¹⁷⁶ and within the Christian faith, but their negotiation practices simultaneously make them strategic power brokers in the face of confounding challenges. These women seek to intervene in the lives of youth, and especially in the lives of young black women, through the powerful potential of Christian hip-hop music and culture.

Despite the forays that women have made into Christian hip-hop music and performance, the gender segregation and masculine-centric nature of the culture can be in part traced to the roots of hip-hop culture in Five Percenterism, a religion thought to be an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. This gender segregation in hip-hop is illustrated by an experience of Mahogany Jones. Born in New York, Mahogany Jones moved to Michigan in 2006 to pursue her music ministry. She is a part-time teacher at Westside Christian Academy¹⁷⁷ where she teaches ninth-grade World

realities that encumber black women's incorporation into and acceptance of traditional models of feminism and femininity, coded white. For more on this subject, please see “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority” by Katie G. Cannon, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” by S.A. Williams, “Woman’s Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory” by Hazel V. Carby, and the anthology *Feminism and “Race”*, edited by Kum-Kum Bhavnani (2001).

¹⁷⁶ Religious spaces are church spaces, youth ministry events, and other spaces considered sacred or religious by virtue of the nature of its use. One could ask, however, that if artists are invited to perform at a rental space in Detroit, but the performances are all Christ-centered, is this still a sacred space or a secular space? This is a question that I hope to address in future work on this topic.

¹⁷⁷ “Westside Christian Academy is a non-denominational school that offers a strong academic curriculum and a firm Christian perspective for life. Our goal is to provide a nurturing atmosphere that will permit each child to develop at his/her maximum potential. We are equipped to educate the total child so that each individual will develop academically, socially and emotionally.” “About Us” <http://www.westsideca.org/aboutus.htm> Accessed 14 January 2010.

History, seventh- and eighth-grade English, and tenth-grade Speech. Mahogany has also devised course curriculum for teaching Black Studies, which she teaches to eleventh-grade students. She also teaches Hip Hop 101: Rhyme and Reason, an eight-week program in which she partners with other instructors and artists to instruct youth in hip-hop music and culture by offering theater lessons, vocal lessons, dance and movement lessons as well as sessions on health and nutrition and one-on-one consultations with students about the core of their musical message. In this course she also covers the history of hip-hop music and the music business side of hip-hop. On Sundays, Mahogany works with youth in her home church, Evangel Ministries, a nondenominational church and ministry in Detroit that includes “two Christian Academies, a Bible College, Job Training and Placement, missionary programs, food and charitable outreaches, radio/television/audiotape ministries, prison outreaches, and new building development specifically for reaching the heart of the men of Detroit.”¹⁷⁸

When I asked her how she became involved in hip-hop music, culture and performance, Mahogany explained that she had been into hip-hop since she was a young girl growing up in New York. She would rap so much and would “wait for [her] throat to get sore so that she could sound like MC Lyte” and would memorize her raps. She explained:

¹⁷⁸ “Church History” <http://www.evangelministries.org/ChurchHistory.htm> Accessed 12 January 2010. Evangel Ministries was formerly known as Faith Temple Church (1955-1964) and then as Evangel Church (1964-1990s) before becoming Evangel Ministries in the 1990s. EM also has a radio broadcast “The Equipped for Life radio broadcast [that] reaches more than 5 million people daily, broadcasting throughout southeastern Michigan; northern Ohio; Ontario, Canada; as well as extending to the African nations of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.”

But, it's just something about hip-hop, it just seemed to be somewhat intimidating. It's definitely a male-dominated genre of music. And, I guess, I would try to rap when I was sixteen and I would hook up with people, and I would be like, I didn't like my voice, and I didn't sound good, and I didn't flow, so I got into spoken word. I always wrote poetry ever since I was thirteen. And I started going to open mics and doing the whole, underground scene as hip-hop and spoken word were beginning to burgeon, when movies like *Slam!* came out, *Love Jones*¹⁷⁹ started to come out. My love for spoken word grew, but then at the same spots I would see emcees. My first love, I guess, so to speak, he was an emcee. And just being at the spots and it was 3 o'clock in the morning, people would be outside, standing around, you know, freestylin' in cyphers¹⁸⁰ and stuff. And it was kind of like, wow, you know? I want to do that. It would be all the dudes huddled up, and then all of the girlfriends in the background like, you know, come on, let's try. And then just for me, I was like, I think I really want to try this again. And I guess it was in 2000, when I decided I'm really, you know, I do spoken word, but I don't want to be boxed in, and I want to be able to blend it. And so I started working with this organization called Freestyle Union¹⁸¹ that Toni Blackman heads up, and she's a hip-hop activist, and actually ambassador for different countries, in Africa, just worldwide really for hip-hop. And I did her program for about a year and was like, this is it. And it so happened that that year, when it was finished, I re-dedicated my life to God and decided that I wanted to, you know, give my gift to him as well.¹⁸²

In addition to describing the experiences that led to her decision to rededicate her life to God,¹⁸³ Mahogany describes what she sees as a clear trajectory in the development of her interest and involvement in hip-hop culture. Having to contend

¹⁷⁹ The setting of the widely popular film *Love Jones* (1997) is Chicago, where the central male character's spoken word skills serve as the artistic fuel for the start of a new romantic, complicated relationship between a black man and woman. The movie is considered to have invigorated interest in spoken word spaces and cafés. It is interesting that Mahogany chooses "Jones" as in *Love Jones*, as her stage surname. *Slam!*, an independent film released in 1998, is set in Washington, D.C. with co-stars Saul Williams and Beau Sia, featuring the story of a young man who recites poetic verses that communicate the reality of hardships black men face. The film won the Grand Jury Prize for a Dramatic Film at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival and spotlighted Williams, who would later become a globally-renowned, published spoken word poet.

¹⁸⁰ The "cypher," a word from Five Percenterism that signifies the number zero or Allah, is used in hip-hop slang to reference a circle of battling emcees.

¹⁸¹ Freestyle Union is "a cipher workshop that uses free styling as a tool to encourage social responsibility." From "About" <http://www.toniblackman.com/about/> Accessed 29 December 2009.

¹⁸² Interview with Mahogany Jones, 26 February 2008, Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁸³ For many Christians, rededicating one's life to God can signify a range of actions and sentiments. For Mahogany Jones, she grew up as a Christian and later in life felt the need to renew her commitment to God in order to use her talents to "glorify" God and to help others live godly lives as well.

at first with the fact that she did not like her voice when she began performing, as well as the intimidation that she felt when initially involving herself in the “male-dominated genre” of hip-hop, Mahogany became more involved in spoken word scenes in New York City. Utilizing her poetry writing and oratorical talents, Mahogany Jones won numerous awards and eventually involved herself in hip-hop music and performance. The gender segregation of the hip-hop scene that Mahogany describes illustrates the male centering in hip-hop that attempts to de-centers women performers. Male performers are in the center “huddled up” and all of the “girlfriends” are in the background, creating a space where men show off their verbal skills while women stand back to admire or affirm their manliness and oratorical skillfulness. The scene Mahogany describes also mirrors many scenes in the films *Slam!* and *Love Jones* where the black male poet, his voice, and his body serve as the central representation of well-crafted, spoken word performance.¹⁸⁴ Despite the masculine-centered nature of the hip-hop cypher that Mahogany observed, she and the other women in the background decided, “let's try.”

Healing and Evangelism Through Rhyme: *The H.E.R. Project*

In 2004, The Yuinon Records released the first, all-female hip-hop album ever produced in both the secular and Christian music industries. *The H.E.R.*, or *Healing through Evangelism and Rhyme, Project* featured six black female Christian rap artists, Sistah Dee, Techniq, Light, EP (A.O.N.), Shekinah, and Mahogany Jones. *The H.E.R. Project* firmly places women and girls at the center of an otherwise

¹⁸⁴ It is important to note that since the release of these films in the late 1990s, female artists have become more internationally prominent, such as Detroiters Jessica Care Moore and Philadelphia spoken word and R&B/Soul artist Jill Scott.

predominately male Christian hip-hop evangelical project. It illustrates that young girls and women face many of the same temptations that young men do, in addition to the possibility of pre-marital pregnancy, and seems to give young women a religious-based alternative to being encumbered by these societal issues.

The front cover of this album features a young girl wearing headphones that are “plugged” into the bible that she hugs tightly. As she sits on the chessboard floor, she is surrounded by various drugs and drug paraphernalia, an “XXX” parental advisory CD, as well as money, alcoholic beverages, gambling chips, a gun with bullets, and a picture of a pregnant woman. The young girl seems relaxed; a light surrounds her head as she tunes out the temptations that surround her.



Figure 4.1: Album cover, *The H.E.R. Project* (2004)
Courtesy of Yuinon Records.

The songs on this album range in topic from addressing themes such as spiritual warfare¹⁸⁵ (“Manifesto”), body image and “being happy with how God made you” (“36” 24” 26”), and the different worlds that a man and woman live in once a woman becomes “saved” and her love interest is not (“2 Worlds Apart”). What is notable about this album is that many of these songs address male-female relationships, exploring the nature of courtship in “the black church” (“What’s That?”) and giving an ode to the man of God who stopped hustling and started going to church every Sunday (“Proud of You”). It is unusual to find three songs on one Christian hip-hop album addressing the nature of male-female relationships because, as Mahogany Jones stated, most Christian songs focus on evangelism and worshipping God:

Holy hip hop, it's so funny like, Christian music as a whole; you would think it's androgynous. We never talk about love and God. That's one of the greatest institutions that God has put amongst us, ... marriage. But it just seems in gospel music we never [discuss marriage and love]. Yes, it's important to praise God, but you know music is good because it helps people to know about life, and get it touch with life or relate to things and it just seems like we rarely write music about love.

Mahogany Jones made it a point to include two songs about relationships on her new album *Morphed* (2009) to help remedy the lack of music addressing love, relationships and God.¹⁸⁶

Overall the songs on *The H.E.R. Project* fit into the discursive strands in rap and hip-hop that Phillips, Reddick-Morgan and Stephens outline in their article: 1)

¹⁸⁵ Spiritual warfare is a concept in Christianity and in other religions that deems that there is a spiritual battle between good and evil. This battle can exist within a particular person and in the wider society.

¹⁸⁶ Mahogany Jones’s CD was released after the work for this chapter had been completed. I hope to engage with her work more in future articles and in the book manuscript.

talking back to men in defense of women and demanding respect for women, 2) women's empowerment, self-help and solidarity, and 3) defense of black men against the larger society (261). The authors argue that these themes are all aligned to a communal value system in which black women discursively create a rap and hip-hop version of feminism and womanism. Since Christian hip-hop is an evangelical project, I find additional discursive strands surface in black women's Christian hip-hop that include, 1) admonishing men and women to (re)turn to God as they point out sins and temptations, 2) male-female relationships and ideals of beauty in a Christian context 3) expressing thankfulness for God's goodness. What follows is an analysis of three songs that illustrate the three discursive strands that characterize female Christian hip-hop, "Untold Truth," "What's That,?" and "Blessings."

Untold Truth

By Light Da Flow Minista

Verse One

I rhyme for Christ, I'm on my grind for Christ.
My King James is double action like a nine for Christ
Don't duck, I got something to hit y'all with,
Ya daughter gave up Barbie for Barbiturates.¹⁸⁷
I know you think I'm too harsh for gospel and I'm trippin'
But you think your baby girl works at McDonald's but she's strippin'.
She wears pretty dresses, barrettes and bows
Capri pants and sneakers, she's got plenty of those
But if you check her backpack she has a change of clothes
Because at night she's got a ring in her nose,
Swingin' on poles. You need to see truth with a spiritual eye,
Or God'll bring strong delusion and you'll believe the lie.
Christ is the Son of the Truth, and people miss it cause they don't receive

¹⁸⁷ Barbiturates are drugs that act as depressants on the central nervous systems and are used for sedation and anesthesia.

All of the love of the truth. Baby girl, don't let your body be the passion of a guy, because your soul is the passion of the Christ.

Hook:

I'm an imperfect vessel, still on the wheel, but I know
I live in a fake world that's real so I flow
The truth of God whose love is diverse, so I go
To the grimeiest parts of the earth.

"Untold Truth" opens *The H.E.R. Project*. Light Da Flow Minista begins her song by stating explicitly that she rhymes, or raps, for Christ. In this verse, Light shuttles back and forth between her own positionality, as a singer whose voice is too harsh for gospel, while speaking directly to an older generation of somewhat naive parents as her imagined audience. She sheds light on the secret life that a young girl (the imagined audience's daughter) lives as a stripper without her parents' knowledge. She then speaks directly to the girl she references: "Girl, don't let your body be the passion of a guy..." In this verse and in the hook that follows it, Light addresses the themes of temptation and sin, while also implying that the girl in her story should seek help, not self-help in the case of feminist secular hip-hop, but help from God so that she can realize that her "soul is the passion of the Christ."

In the second verse, Light speaks to all of the hustlers on the street, both those who are "momma's boys" pretending to be hardhearted hustlers, and those selling drugs and engaging in crime. She compares them to prostitutes: "On the real, who's pimpin' who? Check it, you're standing on the corner and you might as well be naked. 'Cause all the money that you make you hand over to ya man over there in the black and tan Rover." She calls out men and uses the exploitive industry of prostitution as an analogy to shed light on how hustlers are being exploited by drug lords. In this way, Light simultaneously speaks to two social issues affecting urban

black communities, drug dealing and prostitution, making her social critique both race and class specific to black urban communities. In verse three she states, "I'm called to hard cases with hard faces and hearts hardened so forgive me, all my joints ain't for kids in kindergarten." In this song she speaks to numerous constituents in the black community, shares her message freely, and admonishes the deceptive stripper and the perpetrating hustler to return to Christ.

On the track "What's That?" female Christian hip-hop artist Shekinah addresses the hesitancy of Christian men in approaching Christian women in the church in order to get to know them and to potentially develop a romantic relationship. Unlike "Two Worlds Apart," another relationship-themed song on the album that illustrates the huge gap in experience and understanding between a Christian woman and an "unsaved" man, this song argues that men may be hesitant to approach women in the church due to fear and intimidation:

HOOK:

What's that? I hear you want me by your side!
What's that? Why you be acting like you shy?
What's that? I see that look that's in your eyes.
What's that? Fear? What's that? Fear?

Verse One

In your heart you be asking for a wife, wanting to live a holy life.
But you ain't seeking what you're speaking.
Go beyond the norm of teaching.
How to you plan to obtain if you ain't reaching?
Let's be real! Emotions overwhelm us.
Sometimes we tend to hide behind what it is we fear.
Say you scared if you scared. Are you scared? I ain't scared.
Listen, intimidation comes in so many forms.
Like finances, anointing, rejection, and slick advances.
Hurtful memories that leave us damaged, emotionally scarred,
because that is what Satan's plan is.
I hope you manage to step out that box of fear,
and let me know you're interested and that you care.

Just because you step to me don't mean you're trying to mack me
God designed woman for man. Exactly!

Shekinah wonders why certain men's actions don't match their desires, and concludes that fear that holds some men back from taking the first step to approach a woman. The song illustrates that Shekinah expects women and men to take on traditional roles where the man pursues the woman, which is characteristic of some traditionalist and conservative evangelical Christians. Men are considered to be the head of the household and women as the "help meet" as they submit to their husband's leadership. While in mainstream hip-hop lyrics and in the wider culture more generally it has become more acceptable for a woman to express her interest in a man, in the context of this song and the relatively conservative Christian context in which it is located, it is not appropriate or desirable. This song in effect acts as a stand in, as a rhetorical conversation that romantically curious Christian men and women may not have directly in this context. Directed at shy or fearful Christian men, this song supports patriarchy even while it encourages men to overcome their fear of approaching women so that they can develop a relationship together, and illustrates the communal investments of black feminists that Patricia Hill Collins outlined in *Black Feminist Thought*.

Four female Christian hip-hop artists teamed up to write and record "Blessings": Sistah Dee, Mahogany Jones, Shekinah and EP. As one of the few songs on the album to include male vocals as the hook, "Blessings" discusses all of the things in the women's lives that they are thankful for, including being protected from their own shortsightedness and self-will that they believe could've destroyed

their lives. In the first verse, each women metaphorically renders their blessings, using images such as “angels,” “hot stoves” and “whispers” of the enemy or Satan:

Intro

Lord, I thank you for the blessings you have given me.
Lord, you're so sweet. Your grace, it just comforts me.
(Vocals by Maurice Jacobs.)

Verse One

Sistah Dee: In Christ alone do I live and move and have my being
I'm so thankful Lord. My blessings go beyond what I'm seeing
Whispers of the enemy try to make sis retreat
But he don't know your faithfulness makes this soldier more believing.
Mahogany: My blessings manifested through learnt lessons and burnt flesh
When my hand couldn't resist touching the stove.
When the Judas in my heart betrays you it's mercy that you show.
'Cause you still share your fish and your loaves.
Shekinah: Forget the past 'cause in the present I've resented
And contended with your will. Doing my own thing
It was a quick fling. Yet you still chose to build through
Raining power on me, grace and mercy showered on me.
EP: It's a wonder that I am still here,
A wonder that you're still near.
Even when I tried to play the rear
And my vision wasn't clear
You were there to lead me, guide me, provide me
With angels right beside me to keep my soul from dying.

Collectively all of these women give thanks for God's “grace and mercy” that kept them moving forward despite personal mistakes, fear, and resentment. This theme is not unique to Christian hip-hop; it continues the black gospel tradition of praise and worship.

The H.E.R. Project ends with a prayer recited by a young girl, Maji's daughter, the project's producer:

God, thank you for giving me Christian women as role models. Women who love you and put you first. God, please protect me from evil, like when my friends try to get me to use drugs, kidnappers, having sex before marriage, and being touched in places where I shouldn't be touched. I pray for all of the

women rappers and singers who the devil has tricked into using their bodies for money and things. Please bless my dad and the Yuinon family. I love you, in Jesus name I pray, Amen.

This prayer reminds listeners that this project is for young girls and young women, to present them with role models, to give them tools for tackling tough issues like drugs, sex, and molestation or rape. *The H.E.R. Project* centralizes the temptations and the societal ills that face women, and places women and young girls at the center of this conversation in a holy hip-hop context. This social activism around the issues of rape and molestation distinguishes this project from a great majority of secular hip-hop as well as Christian hip-hop. But at the same time, the project upholds and supports male leadership and male dominance in the household and in romantic relationships, forms of patriarchy that seem to persist despite the fact that *The H.E.R. Project* effectively centers women in Christian hip-hop discourse.

Signifiers of Identity: Femininity and Sexuality in a Christian Hip-Hop Context

While Japhia Life focuses on the immoral and questionable actions of women in “I Don't Know You,” The Ambassador, an acclaimed Christian hip-hop artist who is also a member of Cross Movement, critiques the self-presentation of certain women, primarily the tight and revealing clothing that they may wear.¹⁸⁸ In his “Body Talk,” Ambassador expounds upon the sexual temptation to which he believes that Christian men are prone due to how some women present their bodies:

Most women have care in their genes
Where's the care? You killin' us today the way you're wearing those jeans
A few of us really care for the King

¹⁸⁸ The Cross Movement is a Philadelphia-based all-male African American Christian hip-hop group who is considered amongst both Christians and hip-hop fans more generally to be the most accomplished, well-known group since releasing their first album, *Heaven's Mentality* in 1997.

We've got to fight when you're in sight
For other men staring's no thing
"Well don't look then"
Well sis, I wasn't lookin'
But if I've gotta nose can I help smellin' the cookin'?¹⁸⁹
I know you can blame it on the weakness of men
But the weakness is made weaker when we see your skin

This song argues not only for a natural, biological difference between women and men in their genetic makeup, women being more caring and loving than men, but also assumes that men have a natural weakness that makes them prone to temptation by the visual appeal or sexual attractiveness of women. This open display of physical attractiveness poses an impediment for men who "care for the King," or Jesus Christ, because they must fight not to act on those implied sexual thoughts and feelings that may be aroused by the women who walk past wearing "those jeans."

For the women artists who succeed in surmounting challenges to their participation in hip-hop and in holy hip-hop in particular, they must be especially careful to craft an image that mediates between hip-hop culture and Christian church culture. As Imani Perry notes in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (2004), several dialogic layers of self-representation and performance work together to create the public image of artists, in this case, female emcees. There are times when facets of these interconnected "multitextual spaces" (Perry 181) conflict with one another; a female artist's skimpy clothing and self-objectifying body language may seem, for instance, to be at odds with the artist's feminist lyrical stance in the eyes of consumers. Despite the perceived conflicts that

¹⁸⁹ Using the sense of smell as an apt analogy, the Ambassador is stating that since he (and other men) have eyes, they can't help but look at what is presented before them.

may exist when collectively judging dis/continuities communicated by vocal, lyrical, and body language messages, and by the visual representations of artists through music videos and through apparent clothing, hairstyle and adornment choices, with each one of these individual signifiers of identity we take stock of the different ways that gender – masculinity and femininity – and sexuality are communicated through these stylistic choices for female Christian hip-hop artists.

Indeed, in my interviews with women artists for this dissertation, one theme in particular stands out: the dilemma that women artists face when visually representing their femininity. Several artists stated to me that they struggle with finding the perfect image: being feminine without being distracting, and avoiding appearing too unfeminine lest they look “manly” to their audiences. They endeavor to strike a balance between looking “feminine” in the appropriate ways for a church audience without looking “plain” and “old-fashioned” to non-religious audiences.

An artist presents his or her public image or persona to an audience through the stylistic choices that are made by the artist and the artist's image crafter. Changing one aspect of an artist's image, such as his or her hair, clothing or vocal style, can, and has, upset audience reception and created “confusion” in the ways that the artist should be read, perceived or understood.¹⁹⁰ It is important to note, however, that artists themselves – no matter how independent or anti-establishment they may be – rarely, if ever, have complete control over any one signifier of their identities, let alone over the “whole package.” Thus, while taking

¹⁹⁰ Here I am thinking of numerous cases in a variety of musical genres in which the performing artist's hair, vocal style or other performed aspect of their identity has changed too drastically from one album to the next, or from his or her debut to the next project, creating an upset in his or her reception by the fan base.

stock of the perceived or relative differences between an artist's self-representation in one area (dress) and in another (lyrical content or delivery), we must consider the industry forces that shape the end “product” of an artist's image as a complex, hegemonic process that in many ways renders the artist's public persona not as a whole, but rather, as a sum of parts.

Understanding various signifiers of identity in the context of an actual performance gives audiences a fuller picture of musical artists. While each signifier may be judged singularly at certain moments by audience members (“Look how she wears her hair?” “What an outfit,” “Did you hear what she just said?”), it is in actual staged performances, and not in static observances of dress, hair and makeup, that the identity categories of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, are performed. In the context of holy hip-hop, there are a number of identity signifiers that influence the reception of female Christian hip-hop artists, including voice, lyrics, clothing, hair, and adornments. Together, these signifiers of identity come together to illustrate to an audience how female Christian hip-hop artists perform their faith.

Voice and Lyrics

How you rock the mic as a female emcee can range from the sassy and feminine to the hardcore and masculine. Voice, used here to signify vocal quality, including pitch, range and timbre, strongly shapes audience perceptions of the artist. Without the visual privilege of knowing what an artist looks like, a listener, when first hearing a vocalist on a recording, usually forms an imagined picture of the artist in his or her mind. Likewise, the voice can set a mood for a song.

Depending on the artist's pitch, range, timbre and overall delivery, the song can be

considered romantic, sexy, angry, or hopeful, amongst other emotive signifiers. Deborah Smith Pollard, author of *When the Church Becomes Your Party* notes that as a gospel radio announcer and radio show host, she makes a conscious choice to use a higher-pitched voice, rather than her more relaxed, deeper-pitched voice so as to avoid comments from male callers stating that her voice is “sexy” or sultry.¹⁹¹ To other listeners, a deeper voice may seem masculine and therefore off-putting and unattractive for a woman to possess. Depending on the context and culture, there are variations in the connotative significations of a person's public voice. But in any case, all of the elements of vocal style work together to create the emotive ambiance of a song or vocal performance.¹⁹²

While vocal style creates the ambiance, the song's subject matter can determine whether a song seems masculine or feminine, serious or lighthearted, or somewhere in between. Artists are often criticized for the content of their lyrics: Is it original? Does it tell a compelling story? Is it believable, and can I imagine the picture that the artist endeavors to paint for me? Artists, classified often by the subject matter that their songs address, such as a “Christian” artist or a “Hardcore rock” artist, create an image for themselves through the type of songs that they sing. In some church members' imagination, women's voices should not sound “rough

¹⁹¹ She may also want to avoid being seen as an ungodly or secular artist who is using her image to attract male listeners.

¹⁹² Moreover, we must take into account the nuances of vocal delivery with ministers and preachers: the whoop, the climax, the pacing, the undulations of voice that signify different meaning, all working together to create ambiance, tone, and setting for the message being delivered. For more on this topic, and on orality in black culture more generally, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988) Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (2005), and “The Performed Word: Music and the Black Church” in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya (1990).

and tumble” as they do in rap music (as compared to gospel and other traditional Christian music forms). Their voices, embodying to some a male-only, brash hip-hop culture, can be off-putting to older audiences. Kiwi mentioned to me that when she performs, she usually starts off with spoken word, to get the audience used to her voice through poetry, and then transitions into a slow rap song before introducing an upbeat rap song that is more indicative of the relatively quick pacing of rap music. This way, she gradually introduces diverse audiences to her performance style without losing their attention at the beginning as would have been likely had she rapped a fast track from the start.

Clothing

As cultural practices of dress and self-presentation in black communities change over time, there have been increasing controversies in many black churches, from the most conservative to the more liberal, concerning the dress and appearance of women. In the black Pentecostal tradition in particular, there have been shifts in women's dress styles that mirror the nature of women's engagement in contexts outside of the church. Anthea Butler notes in *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (2007), that there was a shift in women's dress between 1911 and 1964 in the Church of God in Christ (C. O. G. I. C.) denomination. Assuming simple, plain attire that included wearing dresses that reached the ankles, these women wore very little or no make-up and wore their hair in natural, chemically-untreated hair styles. Serving as visual signifiers of sanctification, these stylistic choices communicated that these women were undergoing a process through which a person is incorporated more fully into the

spiritual reality of Christianity by being made holy, or set apart.¹⁹³ This attire and manner of appearance served as important signals of sanctity during a time when flashy, colorful dress, heavy makeup and chemically-treated hair signified a “worldly woman.” At a time when black women were often mistaken on the streets as prostitutes or loose women due to the nature of their attire and stereotypes about black women's hypersexuality, it was absolutely crucial for these sanctified women to use their dress as a clear indicator of their Christianness to avoid being mistaken otherwise.

While it may seem restrictive from a presentist and secularist point of view, this conservative, plain form of dress was empowering for women inside of the church. Dressing in such a manner allowed women to gain a foothold in leadership positions within the church; and while women were rarely ministers or preachers in a formal sense (then and even now, in some churches, considered male-only roles), titles such as “missionary” and evangelist,” provided women with travel and ministerial capacities under other guises. Women such as Elizabeth “Lizzie” Robinson held great sway within the church as the overseer of “women's work.”¹⁹⁴ She would later face challenges from younger women church leaders, however, as

¹⁹³ Sanctification is a term with varying definitions and understandings across denominations and churches. First used by John Wesley in “Christian Perfectionism” sanctification is generally noted as an experience following one's conversion that enables the new Christian to live a sanctified, or holy, life. This experience, described in detail by several Christian conversion narratives, is an important emotive and spiritual experience for Christians who seek to make their inward professions of faith and belief visible in their outwardly actions and appearance. For sanctification experiences represented by African American women's nineteenth-century literary texts, see the narratives of Julia Foote, Zilphia Elaw and Jarena Lee, anthologized in *Sisters of the Spirit*, by William L. Andrews.

¹⁹⁴ Elizabeth “Lizzie” Robinson (1911-1945) is considered the first Church of God in Christ, or C. O. G. I. C., Mother. C. O. G. I. C. is an African American Holiness Pentecostal denomination founded in 1895 and is considered to be the largest African American Pentecostal denomination in the United States.

they engaged with the world outside of the walls of the church. As women interacted with the world that needed their spiritual as well as practical help and encouragement, they gradually changed their dress, embraced materials such as furs and silks, transformed their hairstyles and began wearing the glamorous suits and the big, fashionable hats that Pentecostals and church women of other denominations are so known for today.

As female “representatives” of Christian hip-hop culture, these artists often desire to be relevant to their audiences and respected by them. In this case, and in others, clothing serves as a non-verbal language that communicates to an audience so many unspoken details about an artist. While striving to remain “relevant” to hip-hop culture, women Christian performers must also be respectful of a church culture's rules of dress and personal conduct if their message is to be accepted by the wider congregation. Deborah Smith Pollard notes that “the problem for many churchgoers who are gospel artists involves staying within the confines of the dress code outlined by their local church.” However, once they choose to move into the larger worship and performance arenas where multiple denominations are represented, the decision regarding dress can become more complex since, despite the use of the collective term 'The Black Church,' as Gwendolyn S. O'Neal has noted, 'there is no essential African American church dress'" (Pollard 87). Already, there is the burden of counteracting the image of women as presented in many hip-hop music videos as scantily-clad, booty-shaking and (often) silent women who function as décor and as objects of desire and domination by the centralized male rappers in the videos. Their bodies are disposable and fungible – any “girl” with a figure, long

hair and light skin can replace the next. By contrast, women rappers are the central figures and thus not voiceless as the women who are so often in hip-hop music videos.

Deborah Smith Pollard traces the changes in dress in the contemporary gospel music scene. Christian, or holy, hip-hop is also considered part of the general genre of contemporary gospel music. In discussing the language of dress she states,

Virtually every person who meets another individual for any reason “reads” the garments of the other as if they were actual texts or books... The same is true for those witnessing a gospel music performance; they too judge whether the clothing is attractive or disturbing, secular or sacred, traditional or contemporary, decisions that can be as subjective as the judgments made about the music itself. (80)

Building on the work of Allison Laurie, who has theorized clothing as a language, she states that clothing includes a “vocabulary” that includes hairstyles, accessories, jewelry, make-up and other body decorations (ibid.). There are multiple languages of style and dress that Christian female artists must appeal to as they dress up for performances in different venues. While the traditional choir robe dress of gospel performers desexualizes them or neutralizes their gender, the hip-hop style of clothing can emphasize their gender as either masculine or feminine.¹⁹⁵ Many hip-hop artists, and many Christian rap artists, including women, wear jeans, t-shirts and other casual dress as part of their culture. In churches this type of attire is often considered “street clothing” and not appropriate to the church setting.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Many churches have now embraced choir dress that can be classified as business casual in a color-themed or otherwise themed format so that there is some consistency amongst members, but hip-hop style dress for the choir seems to remain inappropriate in many traditional churches.

¹⁹⁶ Some churches, however, encourage casual dress including jeans, especially during youth services and evening meetings.

While these transformations in women's attire and appearance occurred within a little over fifty years in black churches across the nation, there still remains pointed controversy over women's attire and self-representation. Should women wear pants within the church? Is showing one's arms in a sleeveless blouse or dress okay? What about form-fitting or tighter clothing? How much cleavage, if any, should a woman show and still be "respectable"? True, these concerns and controversies affect women wherever they may go. In a church setting, however, an artist, missionary or evangelist may be rejected for an indefinite amount of time due to the nature of her dress. Kiwi notes that when she is invited to perform in a church or other Christian setting with which she is not familiar, she always asks two questions to the event organizer: "are women allowed to wear pants?" and "where should I stand?" to avoid wearing inappropriate clothing for the occasion, and also, to avoid standing near the pulpit when she performs if the church considers it a sacred space to be inhabited only by men. Even with the transformations in women's dress since the early-twentieth century (in culturally-specific and in mainstream contexts) and with the wider acceptance of certain types of dress that may be more revealing, women still face the challenge of being relevant, in terms of their clothing, to their audiences.

Hair

Hair, particularly within black communities and among feminist communities worldwide, holds an almost unending array of significations depending on context. Short, long, natural, straightened, permed, dreadlocked, curled, braided, weaved, wigged, colored and highlighted hair formulates a variety of

hairstyle choices for a black Christian female artist. Assumptions are made, especially in black and feminist communities, about the politics of the person based on how she may wear her hair. Straightened and permed hair can be considered assimilationist or more stylish than natural (unprocessed) hair or dreadlocked hairstyles. Wearing short hair, in a feminist community, might be interpreted to mean that the wearer is a “diehard” feminist or has been “liberated” from the trappings of longer hair, the traditional, feminine aesthetic praised by wider culture. In other communities, shorter hair may be deemed masculine and unattractive.¹⁹⁷

Women with shorter hair in black communities have long discussed the different treatment that they may receive compared to friends or relatives with longer hair. The preference for “good hair,” or hair that is long and not short, curly and not kinky, or the thick “wash and go” type in part contributes to the rejection of women with natural, kinkier hair types. One of the criticisms of African American marketed magazines is that usually the women featured in these magazines, especially in articles about hair styling or fashion, usually have either processed, straightened hair or “good hair.” And ironically, when “natural” hairstyles are featured, they are often “jazzed up” with dreadlock extensions, artificial hair or with other materials.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, there is a trend among certain sectors to wear one’s hair naturally, but to use a “silkenner” or a lengthener to “stretch” or define one’s curls. Wearing what is considered more permanent natural styles – dreadlocks,

¹⁹⁷ For more on the complex conundrum of hair in the African American community, see *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* by Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps (2002), which historicizes the complex significations of black hair from slavery to the twentieth century.

¹⁹⁸ For more in black women’s hair care, see *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women’s Hair Care* by Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006), which takes a linguistic ethnographic approach to examine the layered politics of black women’s hair in a variety of cultural contexts, from internet discussions to comedy clubs.

sisterlocks, “nappylocks” and braidlocs – and more temporary, natural styles without artificial extensions – cornrows, braids, or twists – can peg an artist as anti-establishment, revolutionary, or even as Rastafarian, due to the history and perceptions of such hairstyle choices, when the wearer may just simply like the style and enjoy the freedom from processing methods that the style affords them.¹⁹⁹

In some African American churches, natural hairstyles may be less acceptable for women to wear, including braids, which according to a scripture in the *Bible*, read literally and conservatively, limits the wearing of braids in the church: “In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided²⁰⁰ hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.” (*Bible*, II Timothy 2:9). Later this same passage instructs women in the ways that they should and should not *perform* their faith in the church. This passage has been quarreled over by scholars of black religion for decades if not centuries. This biblical scripture, consequently, is used in some conservative churches to discourage women from dressing, adorning themselves or behaving in a certain manner. In this passage, directives for women's apparel, adornments and behavior coincide, providing an apostolic vision for how women, including black women today, should perform their faith in all aspects of their appearance and demeanor.

Of the female Christian hip-hop artists whom I am familiar with, most of them wear their hair straightened. Despite their varying reasons for doing so, what

¹⁹⁹ Dreadlocks are considered permanent because after the hair has “locked” or matted together, the style is very difficult if not impossible to untangle. Thus most dreadlock wearers must cut off all of their hair or a significant portion of it to begin a new hairstyle. Natural styles such as cornrows, braids and twists can be unbraided or untwisted by the wearer to create a new style.

²⁰⁰ “Braided”

must be understood is these artists see their images as consistent and informed by their faith practice. They may have makeup artists and image consultants at various times in their career, but overwhelmingly they state that they desire to remain themselves at all times and in a variety of contexts:

Kiwi: "Overall, my identity lies in Christ. So, you can call me a tulip, I'm still fine, and if it takes you calling me a tulip for me to help spread the gospel in your church or whatever [venue] [laughs]. I'm who God made me."

Mahogany Jones: "I don't change it up. I am who I am and regardless of what people think, God will still use me. Whether I perform in secular venues versus Christian venues, I am ready. I also don't want people to think that I am stuck up or that they can't talk to me because of the way I dress. ... Sometimes I get 'Oh, she is going to rap in heels and a dress?' I dress classy and feminine but I don't overdo it because I still want people to know it's me."

This is especially poignant because Mahogany Jones is a former fashion and wardrobe stylist, having helped style celebrities such as soul/hip-hop artist Mary J. Blige and actress Nia Long. In light of wider significations of stylistic choices, black female Christian artists are faced with diverse and complex stylistic options in crafting an image that speaks both to their Christian faith and to their heritage as African American women who are part of the hip-hop generation.

Public Images, Performed Identities

Together, these signifiers of identity create performed identities, as the artist's public persona is a collective rendering of these individual stylistic choices. And, as the saying goes, "image is everything." This couldn't be truer for female Christian hip-hop artists in particular who must consider so many different variables as they present their images to an array of audiences. I use "image" to encapsulate everything that is public about the artist, including physical appearance,

performance style, and their ways of interacting with fans, media and fellow artists. The public images of female *secular* hip-hop artists (in its many forms) range from “hardcore” personas, such as Da Brat and Queen Latifah, paralleled by Light Da Flow Minista in Christian hip-hop, to the somewhat softer, sexier images of Lil’ Kim and Eve, while Salt-N-Pepa falls somewhere in between. These are the expectations for women in hip-hop that cause audiences to believe that there is a conflict when women rap in high heel shoes and a dress, as in the case of Mahogany. Just as it is rare to see a female Christian artist perform in more traditional churches in pants, it is unlikely to see female hip-hop artists in the mainstream perform in a dress.

As a group that presented a mixture of different iterations of femininity (and masculinity), TLC,²⁰¹ a widely-popular hip-hop/R&B group from the early- to mid-1990s, presented a collective image that embodied different versions of black female identity and sexuality that inform that images of female hip-hop artists (including female Christian hip-hop artists) that we are familiar with today. TLC was signed to LaFace records after being identified by “Perri” Pebbles Reid, music producer Antonio “L.A.” Reid’s wife. *Billboard* ranks TLC as one of the greatest female music groups of all time; they are the biggest selling female R&B group of all time and won a Grammy Award for Best R&B Album for their second album, *Crazy, Sexy, Cool* (1994).²⁰² I use this group as an example because of their widespread popularity in the 1990s, and as an illustration of how the different signifiers of

²⁰¹ It is interesting to note that “TLC” plays on the common rendering of that acronym as Tender Loving Care.

²⁰² TLC sold 22 million units during their career according to The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). From “Top Selling Artists.” <http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=tblTopArt> Accessed 10 January 2010.

identity explored above come together to create public images and performed identities. TLC's success and image was so popular that Kenneth Grant, former manager for Trinitee 5:7, a Christian R&B female trio, based their image on TLC in order to “appeal to the masses” (Pollard 99).

T-Boz (left in Figure 4.2) represented both masculine and feminine traits. With her short hair and bare, muscular midriff, her image presented an embodiment of masculine and womanly physical traits.



Figure 4.2
Hip-Hop/R&B group TLC, an acronym standing for T-Boz, Left-Eye and Chili (l-r).

With short hair, a trim, muscular frame and a fairly deep voice (low alto) T-Boz visually and vocally embodied the meeting points of the feminine and masculine. While T-Boz would sing in a low voice, Left-Eye (center) would often rap her verses. Often wearing either a black streak under her left eye, reminiscent of a common practice in football culture, or a pirate's eye-patch over her left eye, Left-Eye would

also wear baggier clothing, and her midriff would be covered more often as is the case in Fig. 4.2. Chili (right) represented the most feminine image of the trio. As a visually mixed-race woman with long, curly black hair, her soprano voice contrasted both to that of T-Boz (lowest vocals, sung-style) and Left-Eye (mid-vocal range, rap style). Playing up each of these women's different 'versions' of femininity ensured not only that female (and male) fans would be able to identify with at least one member of the group, but also that collectively they would represent the (somewhat limited) possibilities of what images could be considered feminine in popular culture.



Figure 4.3
Trin-i-tee 5:7
Angel Taylor, Chanelle Hayes, and Adrian Anderson

Although not an exact replica of TLC, Trin-i-tee 5:7²⁰³ still holds many similarities to TLC. It is clear that the woman on the right in Figure 4.3 has an earthier and slightly masculine look than the other group members. Her dreads and highlights contrast with the wavy and straightened hair of the other two. There is also a range in the

²⁰³ The group's name is based on I John 5:7, the biblical scripture that refers to the holy trinity: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."

voices of each of the women and slight variations in dress, but the contrasts are not as stark due to the fact that there is a narrower range of stylistic choices for a female Christian artist due to the desire to appeal to both religious and secular audiences. Viki Mack Lataillade, owner of GospelCentric Records, the label to which Trin-i-tee 5:7 is signed, states: "A great deal of attention was put into their [Trin-i-tee 5:7's] imaging because there's a fine line you have to walk with female talent with relation to church and secular audiences as well. ... Nobody wants to think a female group is not clear about who they are and what they're singing about. They had to be attractive and trendy, but a class act as well." (*Billboard Magazine* 1998). Whereas TLC's lyrical focus included songs about relationships, love, and beauty, Trin-i-tee 5:7's music explores the Christian faith practice and includes many praise and worship songs, featuring artists such as R. Kelly and Kirk Franklin. Trin-i-tee 5:7 also reached similar levels of success as TLC, having debuted at number three on the Billboard gospel chart and in the top 20 of the R&B chart. Considering these groups together, we gain a better sense of the performances of femininity in the mid-to-late 1990s in the context of music production and consumption.

Gender identities meet at a crossroads with sacred and secular discourse in interesting ways because women are expected to take on specific kinds of gendered roles as women artists who are also Christian. In this context, gendered signifiers of dress also become sacred or secular signifiers; depending on how tight, loose, covering, revealing, or otherwise appealing articles of clothing is, an artist may be deemed either worldly or pious. An added signifier of identity is encompassed in the racial and classed connotations that an article of clothing may hold. While what

is called “urban wear” is most popular among young Christian hip-hop artists, the urban wear, as with any other type or style of clothing, must look good and have appeal to a wider audience than those who are in their immediate circle of friends (or community). For Christian female artists, it is not just about whether she dresses in a masculine or feminine way, but also about whether her clothing is “godly” or “holy.”

Reception of Female Holy Hip-Hop Emcees

As mentioned previously, in Christian churches, many artists will encounter obvious and unspoken doctrinal traditions in churches of different denominations and of different generational influences. This is important to note because women are often invited to engage in different degrees of preaching and ministering in churches of different denominations. For instance, Pentecostal churches are considered to be the most conservative regarding women taking on leadership roles in the church, while Baptist and Catholic churches are considered to be more lenient and flexible in this area. Still, despite these denominational differences, the diversity of black churches is still subsumed under the category of “The Black Church.” Not until the Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy has the wider public (black and otherwise) become more invested in teasing out the doctrinal and denominational differences among black churches.²⁰⁴ Yet, even with the broad doctrinal and denominational differences that can be charted among Baptists,

²⁰⁴ During the 2008 Democratic primaries, mixed race (Kenyan/white) Presidential candidate Barack Obama was criticized for attending Rev. Wright's Trinity Church in Chicago, Ill. for over 20 years when Wright held what some considered to be anti-white and anti-American sentiments, openly expressed during his church services in his sermons. Only after the controversy built up to the point where Obama had to verbally chastise and denounce his affiliation with Wright did media outlets from the O'Reilly Factor to NPR dedicated segments of their shows to exploring variations in black churches.

Catholics, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, and others, there still exists an additional layer of differences between churches even of the same denomination. One Baptist church might allow the use of guitars and other non-traditional instruments in church services and may encourage women to serve as ministers and pastors while another may not. As Michael Partridge notes in “Performing Faiths – Patterns Pluralities and the Problems in the Lives of Religious Traditions”:

“Christian tradition” is itself a broad cluster of tradition(s); there is huge internal diversity here. The performance of Christian faith varies from group to group and person to person. ... There is constant yeasting in the tradition, and a growth which tends to be fissiparous and branching, though there are also various kinds of coming together – and various kinds of “unity.” There are, then, in history, many traditions (or “sub-traditions”) under this broad-head of “Christian”, with complex links to one another in time and space. (Partridge, “Performing Faiths” in *Faithful Performances*, p. 77)

These differences pose a challenge not only for female artists visiting various churches to perform, but for male artists as well, as they never really know how they will be received. While the artist may receive an enthusiastic invitation from a minister or youth pastor of the church to perform for their congregation, the church itself is still made up of *individuals* of different socio-economic, educational, and generational backgrounds, holding different attitudes about hip-hop and the role of women in the church, which are informed by their particular interpretations of scripture and religious practice. These idiosyncrasies within different churches affect the reception of the music and the women's messages in ways that may be too numerous to recount completely.

Kiwi, a black female Christian hip-hop and spoken word artist from Detroit, Michigan, comes from what she calls a musical family. At the age of eight she began singing, and by sixteen she began to rap and perform publicly. Just two years before

she graduated from Wayne State University with a degree in Music Business in 2001, Kiwi was invited to perform Christian rap by the minister of music at a local church and received what she called a “stonefaced” response:²⁰⁵

I remember ministering at one church, and it was just *stone face*. They were just sitting there, like “Oh.” [laughs] And I kept going and going... I remember I was praying inside like, “Lord, help me.” So anyway, afterwards the minister of music at that church, he said that he caught a lot of flack for having me in, and choir members left the choir, and all of this other stuff because he allowed me to come minister,²⁰⁶ which really blew my mind.

The strong reactions that the audience had to Kiwi’s performance, to the degree that some of them would take the step of giving up their choir membership, illustrates the hostility in some churches to Christian rap music, especially as performed by women.²⁰⁷ One wonders if the reception would have been different had Kiwi been male, but Kiwi concludes that she received this response “because I was rapping” and not because she was a woman.

Later, addressing the challenges that female artists face within their musical practice as Christian hip-hop artists, Kiwi explained:

It's rough, I mean, a lot of times I go to events and I am the only female there. One of the biggest challenges I personally had was dress. I like to be comfortable so that I can really minister, but there's this thing, this conflict where you can't go too tight with your clothes, you know, because you don't want to be a distraction and you don't want to give people more things to talk about. But then if you go too loose, you're manly, you know? Constantly I am praying and I'm like “Okay Lord, where, how can I find a balance?” Because I want to be me but I don't want to offend anybody, I don't want to come off a certain way. So that was one of my personal dilemmas, but I think I finally kind of found a balance. ... Also, me and Mahogany Jones will often talk about this a lot too, we would go to certain events [to perform] and they would

²⁰⁵ Interview with the artist, Detroit, Michigan, June 21, 2008.

²⁰⁶ Several Christian artists call what their musical performances “ministering” or ministry. I will explore this in more detail in another chapter.

²⁰⁷ Later in the interview Kiwi noted that churches are more accepting now than they were several years ago.

have all of these guys up [before us performing] and then when it is time for us to go up, they will say, “Okay, now we have something for the ladies!” And it's like, wow, really? A guy can't receive from what I have to say? Sometimes it's unintentional, the host or the emcee, they don't realize that they are being, I hate to say it, sexist.



Figure 4.4
Kiwi

Courtesy of www.kiwionline.com.

Kiwi sums up some of the major challenges that women face when they perform for various audiences. From being the only woman performing at various events, at both secular and religious venues, to the “conflict” over dress, female Christian artists face many challenges that affect how their performances are received. Additionally, because they are women performers, men assume that their musical messages will only be relevant to women, and not to the entire audience.

Mahogany Jones recounts her reception by various audiences and the gendered expectations that she faces when she performs in religious venues, including churches and Christian youth groups.²⁰⁸ When asked “What do you do to try to surmount that challenge of people not being receptive to you because of your gender?” she replied:

Before I used to, I would find myself always, I mean, I dress very feminine, I've never been the “boss” type of rapper. I've never been the “yeah, yeah,

²⁰⁸ Mahogany also performs in what would be considered secular venues.

yeah," it's never been my steeze.²⁰⁹ I'm definitely, I'm gonna come and people always ask, "Oh, what you do, you sing?" You know, so, No [laughs]. So, in that regard I'm very whatever, but I am very passionate about what I do and sometimes, I don't know, I think I used to try and combat it by being, I don't want to say, extra-authoritative, authoritative, or just being a bit more aggressive so that you get okay, don't take it for a joke. But then, I'd find that, I mean sometimes it does call for me to be aggressive or God will just lead me that way and just I won't take over. But then sometimes I just find myself just always having to prove myself, and it just gets tired. And you know, I would see, after I work minister or rock, and I would see men ministers or other hip-hop artists go and do their thing and it would look like they were just having so much fun. Whereas sometimes I do events and just feel so drained or so burned out, or so like, aah, I told you so. And it's just, it took the enjoyment out of what I really love, I really love this, I love to show other people how to do this, I love just sharing in this way. And I try to be cognizant of that, and try to say, okay, audiences are one, okay, yes it's for the people, but whether they like it, don't like it, that's not your job, just, you just do what God told you to do and leave the rest to God. So, I used to try and be "Errr!" And now it's like, I'm just going to do me and let God use me however he wants to in that moment, and we'll see what happens [laughs].

Mahogany describes the feminine image that she communicates in her dress and in her presentation. Tempted at first to take on a more authoritative (read, masculine) approach, she encountered individuals in some churches who assumed that she was there to sing and not rap, singing being coded as a more feminine and therefore more appropriate form of performance for women. Thus, she felt the need to "come harder" or be more masculine in her performance so that her audiences would take her seriously. Having enrobed her performance with masculine signifiers, a deeper voice and harder attitude, Mahogany's comments point to the general struggle of women in hip-hop to straddle the boundaries between being hardcore and being a "lady" as Kiwi described above regarding attire.

²⁰⁹ "Steeze" is a melding of the words "style" and "ease" and it means the manner in which one does particular things, in this case, perform.



Figure 4.5
Mahogany Jones (2008)
Courtesy of Mahogany Jones.

In what Mahogany calls her “sassy and sanctified” look, she is dressed in a bright yellow hoodie, which is a hip-hop clothing staple.²¹⁰ The hoodie is covered in what appears to be graffiti-inspired silkscreen images. The exposure of her upper chest, accentuated by her hands, tightly clasped on the zippered edges, is contrasted by the almost mysterious aura evoked by the mostly dark background of the picture, by her closed and downcast eyes and lips. The masculine “street” or urban look of the hoodie is also contrasted by her flawless makeup. The exposure of or emphasis on Mahogany’s femininity can be contrasted with the enrobed choir pictured in Figure 4.6. And although contemporary choirs may not dress in this fashion every Sunday, in many church circles the choir robe is still considered to be the formal dress, which is often worn for choir competitions and for events such as church anniversaries.

²¹⁰ The hooded look is also evocative of the Virgin Mary.



Figure 4.6
African American choir with traditional robes.

While the robe renders both male and female performers gender neutral, in so far as the performers' bodily contours and differences are flattened out or erased by the voluminous nature of the robe, personal clothing and styles worn in the church by female vocal artists give them feminine “personality” and a portrayal of sexuality that can be problematic to some church officials and members. Moreover, some African American Christians consider urban, hip-hop clothing, including jeans, t-shirts, du rags,²¹¹ hoodies, and baseball caps, as street clothing that does not belong in the church. Churchgoers, especially in African American Christian traditions, make it a point to dress in their “Sunday's best” and street clothing

²¹¹ A du rag is a head covering worn mostly by males for the purposes of maintaining a hairstyle, such as cornrows, waves or dreadlocks. Usually, it is considered inappropriate to wear a du rag outside of one's home and in public, but it has, in the last 10 years, become increasingly acceptable to do so, at least among youth. Du rags, while providing a primarily functional purpose, become a fashion statement of hood life, as worn by hip-hop devotees and by hip-hop artists in countless music videos and live performances.

clearly presents a contrast to the traditional idea of what constitutes Sunday's best, while also, to some, signifying hip-hop culture's larger connection to commercialism.²¹²

Conclusion

Precedents establishing roles for women in the church, and various church policies for dress, self-presentation and interaction between men and women, are only a few of the controversial issues that black women confront when they decide to become Christian hip-hop artists and perform in a variety of venues. Female Christian hip-hop artists and fans also face the reality that holy hip-hop articulations of internal and external temptations to one's faith and practice are often presented by male holy hip-hop artists solely in masculine terms; the “struggles of the Christian walk” presented in songs, videos and live performances often do not take into account the unique and differing faith struggles that girls and women may face in upholding their beliefs. *The H.E.R. Project* seeks to remedy the gap in female representation in Christian hip-hop, but it also upholds patriarchy and traditional gender roles in ways very similar to the male-centric Christian hip-hop project as discussed in Chapter 3.

This framing of Christian faith and struggle as masculine in holy hip-hop, through representations of male sexual temptations, homosocial²¹³ gangster pasts, and internal struggles with one's masculinity, further establishes Christian hip-hop

²¹² Christian hip-hop's connection to commercialism is explored in greater depth in chapter 6, “The Christian Hip-Hop Music Industry.”

²¹³ Homosocial relationships are same-sex relationships that are absent sexual and/or romantic interactions. Eve Sedgwick, author of *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985) is often associated with the application of this term to literary and cultural studies.

as a male-centered space and assumes the absence and irrelevance of female cultural producers and consumers in this religious, evangelical project. Christian female rap artists still make an impact within holy hip-hop culture despite the constrictions in the Christian faith and hip-hop contexts. They utilize the complexities of their identities as black female, Christian artists to speak to women and men about their faith, their struggles, and their aspirations. This chapter illustrates how black women perform their identities as Christian hip-hop artists in the context of the restricting spaces of both Christian and hip-hop culture. As these women posit a womanist critique of these cultures, they effectively center women in their evangelical project.

In the next chapter, I feature a male music duo, Jay and Jay SOUL, who endeavors to break down the divisive and misleading musical categories that characterize both secular and religious musical forms. Through sharing their personal faith struggles, musical conundrums, and performance choices, I reveal the complexity of negotiating tensions between the sacred and the secular as articulated, understood, and mediated by this Christian music duo.

CHAPTER V

JAY AND JAY SOUL'S MUSIC POLITICS AND THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

On June 5, 2008, I interviewed Jay and Jay SOUL at the Detroit Public Library on Woodward Avenue. Jay and Jay SOUL, a Christian music duo who performs a hybrid mixture of musical forms, R&B, gospel, hip-hop and soul, hails from Detroit, Michigan. The "SOUL" in their name stands for "Serving Only You Lord." Jermaine Johnson and W. Jermaine "J. Wil" James, the two African American men who make up the musical duet, grew up and attended grade school on the Eastside of the city. In the interview they both described similar backgrounds: growing up in single-parent homes with their mothers, attending the same high school in Detroit, and turning to music as a form of cathartic release from stress and the pressures of adolescent life. In my interview with them, they gave almost equal attention to their similarities and their stark differences: J. Wil, born in 1983 is the oldest of nine children while Jermaine "Jay" Johnson, born in 1985, is the youngest child in his family. While they share the same first name, they have very different personalities. J. Wil is a self-described loner while Jermaine "Jay" Johnson's outgoing and sociable personality comes through clearly in many of their musical co-creations.

Coincidentally, a black music exhibit housed in the Detroit Library during the time of our interview was an appropriate coda to our meeting. After the interview, we walked around the exhibit, observing much of the historical phenomena that we'd discussed in the interview: authenticity debates, black Northern migration, and conflicting perceptions of various genres of music in black communities. The curators' choice of pictures, how they described the music and culture, and even the constricting space that limited the scope of the exhibit all spoke volumes about the decision-making that happens even in the everyday choices we make about how we represent ourselves. The exhibit, functioning as a reiterative space, gave some of the same themes that surfaced in our conversation visible, tangible form.

The interview that I performed with Jay and Jay SOUL turned out to be one of the most complex and data-rich interviews that I conducted for this project, and it is the reason why I chose to focus an entire chapter on it. The questions that I walked into the interview with, questions addressing their performance style choices and how they see Christian hip-hop fitting into black churches, gave way to a complex mediation of counternarratives and metanarratives in which multiple levels of dialogue surfaced. While Jay and Jay SOUL spoke to me during the interview, they also dialogued with each other, presenting deeply self-conscious and complex his/tories. They engaged in extemporaneous revision and mediation of their stories as they qualified their statements, used biblical analogies and evidence, and shared their journey from secular music production to Christian music creation with a distinct level of openness. The complex mediations and the multivalent narrative

that resulted from this transcribed performance complicates the narrative foregrounded in this project, and tells a story that I could never tell alone.

This chapter centers my interview with Jay and Jay SOUL and argues that a higher-level understanding of the assumed sacred/secular divide lies in a close examination of the living archive of Christian hip-hop *musicking* and performance.²¹⁴ This interview material illustrates that the process of negotiating sacred and secular spaces and discourses is an ongoing practice in which boundaries and tensions between religious and secular cultures, which often overlap and bled into each other, are never static. Tensions between these cultures are informed by identity negotiation politics and the ongoing, daily decisions individuals make about community, self-representation and the dialogue between them. Thus, Jay and Jay SOUL's life stories illustrate the larger dynamics in black cultural politics at both the personal and interpersonal levels. Their stories illustrate the soul searching that many Christian hip-hop artists undergo when considering how to make the "right" musical choices, as well as the role of community in shaping what is considered to be "appropriate" musical choices for a Christian ministerial context.

This chapter is organized by extended quotations from the interview, broken up only with reflexive analysis of the material. While I do not argue that this is an oral history in its strictest definition, this chapter is certainly informed by oral history approaches: allowing subjects to speak for themselves with little mediation,

²¹⁴ As mentioned in Chapter 1, *musicking* is a term coined by musicologist Christopher Small that illustrates the dynamic nature of music making, not as an event, but as an ongoing, participatory action process in which musicians *and* audiences take part. See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

acknowledging and foregrounding the complexity that already exists within the stories themselves, paying close attention to temporal lapses and extemporaneous revisions that shape the narrative, and understanding the limits and the possibilities of orality as a form of history.²¹⁵ I also contextualize the material within this chapter, placing it in dialogue with the contexts of preceding chapters and the within larger contexts that Jay and Jay SOUL's stories evoke.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing: Mediations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander argues for a reformulation of the understanding of the sacred and the secular and divisive politics: “[P]edagogies that are derived from the Crossing fit neither easily or neatly into those domains that have been imprisoned within modernity’s secularized episteme. Thus, they disturb and reassemble the inherited divides of Sacred and secular, the embodied and the disembodied...” (7). In other words, experiences that are located *both* in the sacred and secular domains upset “neat” categories and binaries established by modernity. In *The Games Black Girls Play*, Kyra Gaunt argues for a specific form of *kinetic orality* that shapes embodied practices and performances of knowledge and bodily memory.²¹⁶

The interview with Jay and Jay SOUL illustrates the kinetic orality that Gaunt refers to, even while “disturbing” the historical understanding of the sacred/secular

²¹⁵ In Tricia Rose’s *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Intimacy and Sexuality* (2004) she illustrates the importance of understanding the larger context behind the particular weighty topics scholars and historians explore, which is in her case women’s sexuality and relationship in the context of familial relations, father-daughter relationships and other key details. In a similar way, I argue, it is important to understand the nature of individuals’ upbringing in order to understand such issues as why they believe it is appropriate or inappropriate to use certain forms of music, worship and praise within a church context.

²¹⁶ A discussion of *kinetic orality* takes place in Chapter 1.

divide in black popular and religious cultures as Alexander theories. Jay and Jay SOUL's relationship is marked by an aggregated philosophical conflict with each other that has now evolved into a subtler one. They also challenge mainstream notions of a fairly fixed division between sacred and secular worlds, a division that is highlighted in moments of crossing but functions as an assumed truth during moments when challenges to this divide do not exist.²¹⁷ Moreover, the fact that neither of them are completely embraced by the black gospel community, even while they distance themselves from Christian hip-hop or the Christian hip-hop movement as composers and performers who write and perform hip-hop- *and* gospel-style Christian songs, make this interview a bountiful space for teasing out cultural contradictions and categorical conundrums that shape discourse around the sacred/secular divide. Finally, this chapter illustrates that, similar to some traditionalist black churches, Jay and Jay SOUL are partly invested in maintaining boundaries between secular hip-hop music and religious (gospel) music; they refuse categorization into any musical genre, and especially as Christian hip-hop due to the music's proximity, actual or assumed, to secular hip-hop culture. Their viewpoint contrasts with those of other artists presented in this dissertation, who generally praise and align themselves with Christian hip-hop music and culture.

²¹⁷ In several of the materials explored thus far, we see an explicit framing of the tensions between sacred and the secular when a genre of secular music is introduced into the church, such as in the case of gospel blues, but we do not see this same level of anxiety when religious forms of music or religious musical influences are utilized in secular spaces, as is the case with soul music's gospel influence. Consider, for instance, these tensions in the context of blues music becoming gospel blues.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Avery

F. Gordon acknowledges the complex personhood that we all inhabit as subjects who inhabit multivalent, dialogical spaces throughout historical and subjective time:

Complex personhood means that all people...remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. ... Complex personhood means that even those called "Other" are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. ... At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4-5)

This interview showcases the complex personhood that these particular artists inhabit. Through acknowledging the complexity of self-making, we are no longer shocked or surprised by contradiction, but gain insight into some of the most complex identities that individuals negotiate. Their stories raise and address questions such as, how does a person whose life was so ingrained in secular hip-hop music and culture decide to abandon secular hip-hop and deeply question Christian hip-hop after a revelatory moment? How does one participate in a musical form and culture that are judged as unremitting antitheses to one's faith practice? What is the place for performances of one's race, gender, and sexuality in the sometimes constricting spaces of black Christian music and culture? These are some of the questions that surface in this chapter. While many of the answers to these questions are tentative and raise even more questions, they speak to the complexity of personhood that make the muddled and messy tensions between the sacred and the secular divide an ongoing conundrum in black culture, especially in the context of "the black church." With uneven cultural ebbs and flows of questioned, demonized,

accepted, and praised musical forms, young and older generations in black churches continually contend with these cultural forms in the manner that George Lipsitz refers to as “dangerous crossroads.”²¹⁸

After giving a description of Jay and Jay SOUL’s performance style, I present a thematic rendering of extended interview excerpts, interspersed with contextual and historical analyses of the main themes and concepts as they relate to preceding chapters as well as to overarching formulations presented in this dissertation. What emerges in this chapter is a dialogic interface between the interview and the rest of the project, as well as a *call and response* between Jay and Jay SOUL’s analyses and mine. I include block quotations from the interview as a way to showcase and center the artists’ voices. As biographer and historian David Dunaway notes, “the anthropologist records interviews not for historical fact but rather to learn the structure and variety of a society or culture, as manifested by a representative individual’s world view, cultural traits, and traditions” (10).²¹⁹ Through the lens of Jay and Jay SOUL, we gain a greater understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics that shape the lived realities of Christian hip-hop musicians. Through the complexities of the metanarratives, counternarratives and dialogues that exist between the artists and the interviewer, we understand the contours and the creative substance of lives lived in the context of circulating anxieties about the

²¹⁸ Lipsitz’s work specifically explores how intercultural connections form when cultural and ethnic groups take up a mainstream form of music and performance different from their and create a hybrid form, in effect lifting the music from its original context to a nontraditional one, attributing to some forms of ethnic anxiety and spectacle. I evoke Lipsitz here to speak to the ways in which black artists lift forms such as blues and hip-hop from their original secular contexts to sacred space, thereby bringing about anxieties about proper locations and boundaries. See more in George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso Press, 1997).

²¹⁹ David Dunaway, ed. “Introduction” *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (New York: Sage Altamira, 1996, 2nd rev. edition).

mixture of religious and secular cultures as if they were always separate to begin with.

Setting, Performance, Dress

A few weeks after my interview with Jay and Jay SOUL, I had the opportunity to see them perform live as part of a wedding reception. The wedding and reception were both well-attended public events and took place at an events center in Southeast Michigan.²²⁰ With more than 500 people in attendance, the public celebration of the love and dedication of the young African American couple included immediate and extended family members, church members, youth, young adults and their families, who'd either attended past events that the groom hosted, or who were subscribers to his public, Christian events publicity listserv.

Similar to gospel crossover vocalist and electric guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe's public wedding, which took place at Washington, D.C.'s Griffith Stadium on July 3, 1951, this wedding ceremony, fully enveloped in the culture of Christian hip-hop, bridged the gaps between private and public, rendering the matrimonial vows a performance event of great magnitude. In "From Spirituals to Swing: Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Gospel Crossover" Gayle Wald illustrates how Tharpe's public wedding ceremony "playfully and unabashedly merged church and state, secular and spiritual, service and spectacle" (407).²²¹ Tharpe's marriage itself did not last long; however, the spectacular nature of the event was featured in

²²⁰ A small private wedding ceremony took place before the public events, where only close friends and family attended. The center regularly hosts conferences, concerts, weddings, holiday parties and other social events and gatherings.

²²¹ Gayle Wald, "From Spirituals to Swing: Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Gospel Crossover." *American Quarterly*. 55:3 (September 2003).

newspapers and magazines all over the country. In this case, the young black couple, by including a concert line-up of young adult Christian hip-hop and spoken word performers during and after their ceremony, rendered their wedding a captivating spectacle for consumption by a wide range of audience members.

Despite the public, entertaining nature of the ceremony, its spiritual purpose and intimate nature were clearly felt by many of its attendees. Throughout the wedding ceremony and reception, audience members cried and even sobbed, while some individuals broke out in shouts of praise and thanksgiving. The performance line-up included several artists who were close to the family. Mahogany Jones²²² performed a spoken word piece that praised the spiritual, *agape*²²³ love that the couple represented, and Jay and Jay SOUL, who performed slow tempo gospel standards and along with some of their original songs while ministering to the audience between sets.

By the time Jay and Jay SOUL were on stage, the audience seemed to be exhausted from the emotional and spiritual energy that they expended during the ceremony and the first part of the reception. The mellowness of Jay and Jay SOUL's set calmed the audience, and while many of them were not as familiar with them as they were with Mahogany Jones they still showed interest and engagement. The audience's reaction to their music was not as enthusiastic as it was for several other artists like Jones. Dressed in their usual style, a mix of black urban professional and hip-hop wear, Jay and Jay SOUL's attire was slightly more formal with sweater vests

²²² Mahogany Jones is a female Christian hip-hop and spoken word artist who I discuss in Chapter 3.

²²³ *Agape* (usually pronounced *uh-gah-pay*) love is considered to be the highest form of love that transcends *philia*, or brotherly love, and *eros*, or erotic, romantic love.

and business casual shoes, in light of the nature of the event. Although some of the clothing that they wear on set and on stage, such as hoodies are reminiscent visual signifiers of urban hip-hop cultural forms of blackness, their overall style and demeanor comes across as polished and put-together. Their musical repertoire consists of a mixture of slow tempo gospel ballads, emotionally rendered praise and worship songs, such as “Make Me Over” and up-tempo hip-hop songs that are rapped in a much slower pace than typical southern or “Krunk” rap songs.²²⁴ Sonically, their music is less aggressive than other Christian hip-hop artists’, and the hard-hitting beats that usually drive hip-hop music are softened to allow their lyrical messages to be the featured musical material.

At the beginning of their first music video for the track “Bible 2,” Jay and Jay SOUL state that they wrote the song because they “got tired of people using the Bible as an excuse to sin,” undoubtedly pointing to the hypocrisy in the church as one motivating reason. Utilizing the dramatic setting of a live news report, they state to the news reporter that they aren’t afraid of the controversy that will result from the song because Jesus himself was historically a controversial figure, raising the dead and healing the sick in what were considered in appropriate contexts according to doctrine. In Jay and Jay SOUL’s case and throughout Christian hip-hop music and culture, Christian hip-hop artists identify with the image of Jesus as a rebel warrior: someone who challenges dogma and unfounded ritual, heals all people regardless of

²²⁴ “Krunk” or “Crunk” rap is marked by musical minimalism and often fuses electronic music with rap music signatures, such as the 808 base for a heavy beat. It is known as a hardcore or aggressive genre of hip-hop music and once popularized because representative of southern rap as a whole. As mentioned in chapter 4, Krunk is a slang term that reportedly combines the words crazy and drunk, and means to be crazy and out of control.

time, space or appearance, and who ultimately gave his life for the sins of the world. This rebellious martyr Jesus figure, as opposed to the humble, composed Jesus figure is central to Christian hip-hop's formulations of community and identity, as they challenge the status quo of the church, intend for their music to reach the "saved" and the "unsaved," and constantly state that their music is not about garnering fans but about bringing souls to Christ. Their Jesus is not primarily the one who prays to God in silence and humility, the one who says "of my own self I can do nothing,"²²⁵ but the young Jesus who conversed with religious scholars in the temple, being "about his father's business," and the angry, adult Jesus who turned over the money changers' tables in the temple.



Figure 5.1: Jay and Jay SOUL (W. Jermaine "J. Wil" James on left) during their "Bible 2" video shoot. Courtesy of www.jayandjaysoul.com.

²²⁵ "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." (Bible, John 5:30)

By situating themselves in a visibly decaying urban context in their video, the artists signify their connection to Detroit, and their commitment to ministry at home. Their clothing choices do not ostensibly reveal brand names, nor do they sag or wear gold and diamond jewelry, other than their wedding bands. Their straight-faced, almost melancholic facial expressions communicate the urgency of their message to save, to communicate the truth about God and the Bible to “lost souls.” J. Wil’s brightly colored hoodie and white and gray tennis shoes contrasts with Johnson’s black and gray striped hoodie, black puff vest and black casual shoes, almost communicating the young playfulness of J. Wil and the serious, almost elderly wisdom of Johnson.

Locating the Self: Background, Musical Influences, Spiritual Maturity

J. Wil situates himself as the younger brother in the “big brother – little brother” musical relationship that frames Jay and Jay SOUL musical productions. As discussed in Chapter 3, The Ambassador and Lecrae’s relationship mirrors a master/apprentice framework, which implies a degree of distance that the big brother – little brother relationship does not, as Jay “J. Wil” James and Johnson are closer both in age and in the development of their craft. They each bring different elements to their musical relationship, as is revealed in the interview: Johnson brings the artistic expertise from having worked with gospel singers, as well as his musical experience in writing chord progressions, lyrics and working within the industry. James brings his analytical and improvisational nature and poetic wit to the crafting of the lyrics.

After explaining what my project was about, I asked the artists to introduce themselves:²²⁶

Jermaine “Jay” Johnson: Alright, I’m Jay Johnson, of Jay & Jay Soul. Born and raised in Detroit. I was raised downtown among the King Home projects, or, apartments, and I don’t like to call them projects, though some may have called them the projects...that’s neither here nor there...let’s see, basically a single-parent home, am I to go just, in-depth?

Shanesha Brooks Tatum: Yeah.

JJ: Basically a single-parent home, church all my life. I think I began to understand the difference between religion and relationship in the later teens, so somewhere between 16 and 18, 15 and 18, somewhere between there. I didn’t really take it too serious in terms of my relationship with God until about 20. Of course I knew, I say the religious side of it...church on Sundays 2-3 times, and within that day you’ve got your Bible studies on Wednesdays and Tuesdays, choir rehearsal, that type of thing. My entire family is into music. And my father plays the drums, thinks he can sing.

SBT: (laughs)

JJ: I’m used to singing a little bit. One of my older brothers is a professional organist/pianist; he does both. He’s traveled; he’s played, with a few people. Pretty much all of my cousins sing. It’s just a musical family. So my whole, my first influence honestly, was MC Hammer (laughs), when I was about 8 or 9 years old, (laughs) I had a birthday party...

SBT: And how old are you now?

JJ: I’m 24.

SBT: Okay.

JJ: When I was about 8 or 9 years old my grandmother made me an MC Hammer outfit. It was blue...

SBT: And the pants too? (Laughs)

JJ: (Laughs) Pants and the cutoff shirt, it was blue with the gold and black sequins. It was off the hook. And you know, remember the casual shoes, with the silver on the toe? I had the whole outfit. And I was in a dance group, J. Wil doesn’t even know this...by the name of J.E.R. It was me, Jermaine Johnson, my friend Lamar Evans, so E, Evans, and another friend Sonny Roundtree, so J.E.R. And it was kinda sweet 'cause my name is Jermaine, JER, this is how you spell it. So, anyway, I can go on for days with that. So, music was my thing.

SBT: mm hmm

JJ: Of course, everybody kinda got this kind of story a little bit, their parents always played the music in the house, and stuff like that. My mom around me only listened to Luther Vandross, however he was not a direct influence on

²²⁶ In this interview I have deleted thought words like “um” and the interviewee’s repetition of words that represent the thought process for the sake of a continual narrative.

music to me. I'm just sayin' I've always been around it. To jump a little further along, my brother got started professionally playing for some pretty well-known people at about 15 [years old' himself, and we're like a 5-year difference. So when I was about 10, I was really around the Winans, the Clarks, um... Orlando Wright. It was a couple of gospel people that are actually from Detroit that I got a chance to be around. Some really are prom... I mean they're still prominent now, but you know, right when they were really, really buzzin. Michael Powell, I got the chance to hang around him a lot, Anita Baker, Vanguard Studios...so I was really, really influenced by a lot of different [artists], but it was real music. So, I didn't even listen to hip-hop, start listening to hip-hop till I got to high school. And I was turned on to a few different people I could, I don't really care to name those, but hip-hop became...it was a hobby, but a passion grew for it. So, I started rappin'. And, but my music was a direct reflection of who I was, not what people wanted to hear, or even my environment. Because I still grew up, in certain amount of violence, or just bad influences. But I never talked about those things. I only talked about, you know, I have, I'm kinda silly, my personality was displayed through my music. Um, so, I could say Will Smith in terms of...you know, clear, clean cut, but then I could go as far as, like, you know, more...hip-hop more oriented type rappers in terms of musical selections, or as far as tracks, or, concepts in songs. You see what I'm sayin'?

Jermaine Johnson describes his musical influences as a conglomeration of different forces both in religious and secular circles. Although he states that his music was a direct expression of who he was, “not what people wanted to hear, or even my environment” it was a conscious choice on his part to limit his environment’s extension into his music: “When I saw my friends go off to smoke weed, to go drink, or go rob somebody, to go do something foolish, I opted to go and listen to a song or to write one myself.” Later in the interview, Johnson speaks of how he wrote a song called “What Makes you a Thug?” which was inspired by his friend who got shot numerous times and lived a life of crime, contradicting his statement that his music was not influenced by his environment. This contradiction, understandably, also speaks to the fact that Johnson used music to escape from his environment and the negative influences in his life, so that even before he became a

Christian music artist, music for him functioned as a sacred space for mitigating the challenging situations he faced as a child in a single-parent home living in the King Home projects in Detroit.

While Johnson freely names gospel artists and relatively “cleaner” secular artists such as Luther Vandross, MC Hammer and Will Smith, on two occasions in the interview he chose not to name the secular hip-hop artists who influenced him, stating “I don’t really care to name those” and referring to them ambiguously as “hip-hop oriented type rappers.” His musical influences also illustrate the “melting pot” of musicality in black life even while he highlights the positive musical influences in his life. His silence around secular hip-hop musical influences illustrates that he is consciously distancing himself from this aspect of his musical past. His familiarity with artists from Luther Vandross and MC Hammer to the Clark Sisters and the Winans shows that, even though he grew up in a thoroughly “churched” lifestyle, where he attended services and meetings four to five times weekly, these musical influences from both inside and outside of the church or gospel tradition had a profound influence on his development.

While Johnson grew up in a context where churchgoing characterized his life for much of the week, the music that he created was ostensibly secular in nature. Later in the interview he explains that although his music wasn’t “negative,” it wasn’t Christian, either. He focused on exploring topics in his music that interested him outside of the traditional Christian music topics such as salvation, redemption and secular temptations. This is a case in which Johnson’s Christianity informed his musical outlook without having an ostensible presence, and speaks to the debate

about whether Christian hip-hop should ostensibly discuss their Christian faith practice, or if artists who happen to be Christian should be accepted while producing well-crafted, quality music that does not engage Christian themes or the Christian faith practice lyrically. Clearly Johnson's work would've fit into the latter category, as his music did not contain any Christian themes but explored phenomena that interested him from a positive outlook. His work also illustrates how artists can shuttle back and forth between crafting ostensibly Christian lyrics and non-Christ-centered lyrics, and the dynamic and complex nature of this process for all artists.

Johnson names his musical influences as a conglomeration of mostly gospel or "positively secular" influences. If we chart Johnson's musical influences along a continuum, gospel artists are the primary influences that he mentions, followed by "clean" or relatively "clean" hip-hop artists, and then secular hip-hop artists, who remain nameless. Johnson clearly foregrounds certain influences on his work more than others. When discussing MC Hammer as his first influence, he names a memorable figure in rap music and in early Christian hip-hop. Starting in the late 1980s, MC Hammer gained popularity for his unique hip-hop dance style, rapping and his "Hammer pants," baggy trousers that are loose in the crotch area and tapered at the ankles.²²⁷ Hammer produced popular songs such as "U Can't Touch This" and "Pray," the latter of which clearly held to Christian themes about praying to God for protection and guidance. He is an artist who shuttled between performing songs like "Pray" (1990) and others such as "Pumps and a Bump"

²²⁷ These pants are also known as Harem pants and are thought to be a cross between a skirt and pants, because of the looseness in the crotch area and the fittedness of the leg and ankle portion.

(1994),²²⁸ a controversial song that discussed the desire for women's derrieres and that featured Hammer in the music video wearing only a Speedo and having what looked to viewers to be an erection. Hammer's incendiary and provocative performance styles blended the sacred and secular in ways that would influence subsequent performers.

Kanye West was not the first rapper to perform live with a choir. In 1990 MC Hammer performed live on the Arsenio Hall Show with a full choir, performing the gospel standard "Do Not Pass Me By." On the same show, Hammer rapped, danced and created a complex performance medley of several of his hit songs, showcasing his own influence by Pentecostal music traditions and hip-hop culture, blending sacred and secular styles almost seamlessly. Six years later, in 1996, MC Hammer went bankrupt and later became an evangelical minister, returning to his Pentecostal roots with stints in and out of music production. He took out the MC in his name and became simply Hammer, but later added MC back to his name and mentioned that it stood for "Man of Christ." Hammer's musical performances received criticism from traditionalists in black churches, but even so, many agreed that despite what seemed to be religious hypocrisy, Hammer was a skilled and captivating showman with incredible dance moves and a stage presence that made him the first rap artist to reach diamond status for his album *Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em* (1990).

²²⁸ The "Pumps and a Bump" video was banned from frequent play on MTV due to these controversial elements, which policed what viewers believed to be offensive (and possibly exploitative and borderline pornographic) portrayals of black sexuality.

Will Smith, however, may be the cleanest cut rapper out there. Under the performance name The Fresh Prince, Will Smith performed with DJ Jazzy Jeff during the 1980s and 1990s. His music is known for its clean lyrics (no profanity), and he is one of the few rappers, along with LL Cool J, who have managed to stay relevant to the industry for more than two decades while also cementing a career as an accomplished actor and film, television, and record producer. Smith is not the showman that Hammer was, but rather has produced albums that garner attention and wide popularity, possibly building off of his simultaneous successful acting career. Johnson's evocation of the music and performances of these two performers signals a distinctive relationship between Johnson's former musical production and his current musical career with Jay and Jay SOUL. He firmly places himself within a musical trajectory framed by two prominent, well-received and relatively "clean" musical artists to illustrate the context in which he wants his musical history read, heard and understood.

Johnson also locates himself as part of the rich musical heritage in Detroit. He names the Clark Sisters, who hail from Detroit, Michigan and are considered pioneers of contemporary gospel music. The distinctive "Clark Sisters' sound," filled with riffs, signature emotive shrills, and melismas, or the elongation of single syllable while moving rapidly through multiple musical notes, cemented The Clark Sisters in the contemporary gospel tradition as its leaders and shapers. Still today, The Clark Sisters are revered in gospel music and all except one of the sisters are

still recording music together and as solo artists, now for over 25 years.²²⁹ Anita Baker, another artist Johnson mentions as an influence, grew up in Detroit and graduated from Central High School, the oldest public high school in Detroit. She is recognized for her R&B love songs, songs in the smooth jazz style and also for her distinctive voice. Orlando Wright is a gospel artist who released an album *titled All About Love* in 1996 under the label Sounds of Gospel at the L'Amour Recording Studio, Detroit, MI. This album included collaborative performers Donnie McClurkin,²³⁰ Juliette Cooper, Kayla Parker,²³¹ Meri Thomas, Regina Winans,²³² and Ronald Kelly. The Winans Family, like The Clark Sisters, also hails Detroit, Michigan and are a strong force in the gospel music industry. The family of ten children boasts several members who are accomplished gospel singers, including brother and sister BeBe and CeCe Winans, who also produced songs that would be considered inspirational or contemporary Christian songs, such as “Heaven” (1988). Marvin L. Winans is pastor of the well-known Perfecting Church in Detroit, Michigan, which popular gospel artist Donnie McClurkin calls home. Johnson’s naming and evocation of the work of these musical artists clearly locates him as part of the Detroit gospel music lineage, and as part of the “clean” or widely appealing rap music culture.

²²⁹ For more on The Clark Sisters’ sound, see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.’s discussion of the Clark Sisters in “Santa Claus Ain’t Got Nothin’ On This!: Hip-Hop Hybridity and the Black Church Muse” in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²³⁰ McClurkin is a popular gospel artist who was an associate minister at the Perfecting Church, where Marvin L. Winans pastors. McClurkin is now senior pastor at the Perfecting Faith Church in Freeport, Long Island.

²³¹ The late Parker is a Detroit-born and raised gospel music artist. Before her passing in 2007, she performed with several of the Winans,

²³² Regina Winans is the spouse of the fifth Winans child, Michael Winans.

Johnson also makes the distinction between religion and relationship here, religion being the doctrinal do's and don'ts in a belief system that are upheld for tradition's sake, while a relationship encompasses the intimate understanding and communication between believers and their God. Both J. Wil and Johnson articulated the difference between religion and relationship, and understand their faith practice as a relationship, which is partly why their faith practice is not seen as static, but as a constant evolution or progression as in any relationship. Along with the evolution of their relationship with God, Jay and Jay SOUL's music evolved along side it.

Here J. Wil, or W. Jermaine James, introduces himself:

I'm J. Wil of Jay and Jay Soul. I'm 26 years old. For me, startin' off, I was my mother's first child, so I'm the oldest. [I] grew up in Detroit East Side, Seven Mile, pretty much right in the vicinity of Pershing High School,²³³ that was pretty much where I grew up. Startin' off, I guess my mom and my father had dated probably like from like 13 or 14 up until she was about 21 or 22 when she had me. I guess it got kinda rocky with me, and I have a younger brother. I'm 26, he's 24, but he, we're a year and 10 months apart, so almost 2 years. So you know, it was rocky with me with them, and then, guess after my brother was born, pretty much, you know they had broken off whatever, so, single-parent home, same situation. A little different because my stepfather actually came into the picture, at around, when I was about 2 years old. So growing up, just with that situation alone, I was pretty much... mmm, I don't have a word, like a loner type person. I mean I still am to a certain extent, I just kinda like, that whole situation kind of put me a little bit in a shell because maybe I didn't understand it that much growing up. You got two daddies, and you know, had my mother, both of my parents basically remarried. I had my stepmother and stuff, so I kind of went back and forth. But I always stayed with my mom though, that was my primary. I only stayed with my father for one year. But, growing up, an oldest child, [I] was silly pretty much. For me basketball was where everything started at, that was my dream. I still have stuff from when I was like 5 years old to this day. I can go in my box when I was like 5 years old, teacher asked me what I want to be when I grow up, I wrote down I wanna go to the NBA. Got another one [memorable object] I wrote it in 5th grade, you know, so I did the whole you

²³³ Pershing High School is a Detroit public high school near Seven Mile Road.

know, grab a basketball every mornin' at 7 o'clock in the mornin', woke up the neighbors, dribblin' a ball before anybody was woke type thing. So I played basketball in elementary, played basketball in middle school, I went to high school. 9th grade was the first time I didn't play basketball in my life. That was the first time since I had started, you know, that I didn't play. And then 10th grade I went out with the kids in high school and played basketball, and it went really good on JV²³⁴, it went really good, especially towards the end of the season. I had really started ballin'. By the time I got to like 11th grade basically I didn't make the team for the first time in my life. 9th grade I decided not to play.

JW: 11th grade was the first time in my life ever, that I ever didn't make a basketball team. So that was a huge turning point in my life personally. Leading up to there all parental stuff, with havin' my stepdad there, and I won't put my father there like that, he was still always in my life; we'd be on and off basically. It wasn't the best relationship. We'd spend the night at his house a lot when we were younger, but when I got into my teen years that's when stuff really got – as far as the parental stuff – really started bothering me 'cause, my stepdad, he was raising me, he was strict, and we were bumping heads [and with] my stepmother, when I went over to my father's house, we were bumpin' heads. So pretty much wherever I was it was always somethin'. But you know, God always carried me. I was raised in church too, just about my whole life.

JW: And then, it was really serious. What I'm sayin' wasn't really serious; I didn't really understand it. I went to church, I believed in God. The biggest thing that had always kept me was that my mother was a prayer, so I'm a prayer. That's just what God has given me even before I really understood. Before I understood anything I understood prayer. At a young, at very young age, I understood prayer, so all of the stuff I had problems [with] in my household, whatever... [I] never really got into trouble though as a kid, I wasn't never really got into nothin'. I was always kind of to myself, very mature, at the same time almost, kind of weirdly mature. I didn't play certain games. I wasn't gonna knock on anybody's door and run, that didn't make sense to me. As far as gearing all of that into music, where it shifted for me was 11th grade [when] I didn't make the basketball team. That was pretty much for me and him where we met, me and Jermaine met before that, but we got cool that year.

J.Wil describes in great detail how his upbringing and familial factors have shaped him into who he is today. J. Wil later describes how, as the eldest child, he experienced some feelings of resistance concerning being Jay Johnson's musical "little brother." Johnson had extensive experience performing and working with

²³⁴ Junior Varsity.

major artists in the music industry, knew how to write music and catchy lyrics, and took on a big brother role in guiding J. Wil through the music creation processes. As an oddly mature child, J. Wil experienced a distance from other children his age, and as a self-described loner, was able to connect with others and with his life's passion through basketball. He marks the eleventh grade as the turning point in his life, as it was the first year that he did not make the basketball team, which was such a defining aspect of his identity. He identifies basketball and being a prayer as important parts of his identity, whereas Johnson's musical surroundings comprise an important part of his identity. As J. Wil tells his personal story, one observes how he simultaneous endeavors to make sense of his life for himself. The temporal lapses in time and his in-the-moment revisions showcase the complexity of his life story, as he edits, revises and adds to it in attempting to make sense of it for himself and for me as the interviewer.

Here J Wil discusses some of his earlier musical influences:

SBT: You were in the same school, or?

JW: We were in the same high school. We actually grew up, on and off, in the same church. People tried to introduce us and they all would say "y'all got the same name, ya'll act alike, look alike," and [when] we'd meet each other it was like, "what up," and then whatever. So, his [Johnson's] brother had this basketball team though, and that's how we got cool because he needed some more players. He knew I could play. As for where it started with me and him, as far as the hip-hop music in general, my parents didn't listen to hip-hop music, my mother only listened to gospel. My stepdad like for one year when we was like real broke, stuff was hard, he listened to The Geto Boys,²³⁵ but I didn't even really understand it. All he listened to was the song "My mind is playing tricks on me." And to me it didn't mean anything, 'cause I didn't understand it. So, as far as music, I used to like old stuff. I was, for whatever

²³⁵ The Geto Boys originally known as the Ghetto Boys, was a hip-hop group composed of Scarface, Bushwick Bill and Willie D who performed from the mid-1980s until 2007.

reason, I was like a “lover boy”²³⁶ in school, so I loved music. I would go to sleep listening to stuff like [singing: “I’m still wearing your ring, things are not the same”]. I actually listened to old sad music. That’s what made me happy, sad stuff as far as music. And Brian McKnight, Mariah Carey, stuff like that, I guess that was considered R&B, but for me at 15 and 16, it was just like love songs. R&B was a little different then too, so as far as music, I started...I first got into hip-hop... I got a car in 1999, my first car, and I bought a Will Smith [album], *Big Willie Style*,²³⁷ and that was what I liked to listen to. [I] never got into the whole Biggie and Pac thing.²³⁸ So as far as music, I never listened to any hip-hop. I got into hip-hop same thing as him [Johnson]. [In] high school I started [thinking] I guess this is cool. It started off like I never really heard this before, but drivin' in the car [with] your friends you turn on the radio, it's like “ah, that's alright.” I was always an idealist, and into R&B. I listened to a lot of love songs, but as far as rap, it's alright, whatever, what is this? So...

For J. Wil, getting into hip-hop is tied to having a car, and high school student driving around in his car with his friends. As he came of age, he increasingly acquired his own space to listen to the type of music that he wanted to. J. Wil also became a fan of Will Smith as did Johnson, even though he was primarily an R&B fan and listened to what he calls love songs and “old sad music” as well as the music of popular contemporary artists like Brian McKnight and Mariah Carey. In J. Wil’s case, he did not seem to be a fan of gospel music or listen to it on a regular basis as is the case with Johnson, and his musical exposure and influences did not consist of local Detroit artists as neither Smith, McKnight nor Carey are from the city. Johnson was able to musically influence J. Wil through his wide exposure. He stated, “I was his [J.

²³⁶ I believe that by “lover boy” J. Wil is referring to male crooners in the 1950s and 1960s who sang songs about love, breakups and relationships.

²³⁷ *Big Willie Style* (1997) is actor and rapper Will Smith’s first album. It included tracks such as “Gettin’ Jiggy With It” and “Big Willie Style” featuring the late Lisa Lopes, a female rapper who was Left-Eye in the black R&B/rap group TLC, who is briefly discussed in Chapter 3. As a rap artist, Will Smith’s work was known for its absence of vulgarity, which so characterized mainstreamed hip-hop music and culture. Prior to Smith’s solo career he was the emcee in the rap duo DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince in the 1980s and 1990s. For more, see <http://www.jazzyjefffreshprince.com/> Accessed 25 November 2009.

²³⁸ J. Wil is referencing the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac hip-hop rivalry, which is speculated to have resulted in their deaths.

Wil's] hip hop influence...I kinda introduced him to hip-hop...I knew he could rap.” Johnson explained that he had the musical concept, “I would write the chords, I wrote my verses out,” and J. Wil would rap them. Before they started performing together, rap “was silly to me,” J. Wil explained. As part of an artistic extension of his class clown acts, during his last year in high school, J. Wil would take popular rap songs, such as songs by Master P and write and perform full-length parodies of them, and later sell them to his classmates and neighborhood friends for a dollar each. Despite his original view of rap music as silly and as a musical form to parody, gradually hip-hop music, and the thrill he received from competing with other rappers in college became his primary focus.

“Different Routs to the Same Place”

Both J. Wil and Johnson were raised with strong Christian values and attended church on a regular basis, and they both found themselves turning to music for comfort, enjoyment and self-expression. They are self-described good “church boys” who never smoked, drank alcohol (except for trying it once or twice), and they both married in their twenties. Both have brothers who are musicians, and both of them attended college at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan; later J. Wil would transfer to Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Before and during college, they had a close working relationship. For several years in high school and immediately following it, J. Wil and Johnson wrote and recorded songs together, performed all over Detroit, and became somewhat local hip-hop music stars. But a few years later, despite their similarities, J. Wil and Johnson

would begin to diverge on their beliefs concerning the relevance and the role of hip-hop music in their lives.

In college, J. Wil was exposed to G. Craig Lewis's *The Truth Behind Hip-Hop* DVD series. He became more aware of his changed demeanor and how hip-hop seemed to take over his life. "Now the difference between me and J. [Jermaine Johnson] was that the music for me did have more of an influence on me...not on what I did, not like it influenced me to sleep around and influence me to drink or smoke, but it did bring about a certain arrogance in me." He explained that hip-hop was "this great rebellion for me." Since J. Wil was shy and quiet, he found freedom and excitement in being able to get on stage and act confident and somewhat arrogant, "amazing" people with his persona. To highlight his performance persona even further, J. Wil explained that he got his ears pierced, started "dressing flashy" and got braids, "the whole look." "Each day I'm falling with in love with music more and more," he explained. Meanwhile, a friend in college kept asking J. Wil to come to prayer through a campus ministry group, but he kept deciding against attending the prayer meetings because he knew that once he went he "was gonna get for real." After being asked several times to attend, J. Wil finally consented. He began to attend prayer meetings with his friends, but without Johnson. After attending the prayer meetings a few times the prayer and bible study group convinced J. Wil to watch G. Craig Lewis's *Truth Behind Hip-Hop* DVD series. After he watched it he was so touched by the message that he brought the DVD to his friend Kel to watch.

J. Wil and Kel watched the DVD and cried together, "cried crazy tears." After watching the DVD J. Wil and Kel immediately destroyed every secular hip-hop and

R&B album that they owned, and Kel became “saved” and began attending J. Wil’s church. J. Wil later exposed Johnson to the DVD as well, but Johnson was impacted in a different way. He explained his reaction to the DVD series as being slow to respond to the series of “spiritual knocks” on the door of his conscience: “This was the sense of...a spiritual knocking.” After J. Wil exposed Johnson to the DVD, it took Johnson six months to come on board. For six months, which is a relatively brief period, J. Wil and Johnson stopped doing music together after what Johnson calls J. Wil’s “transformation.” Johnson tried to continue to go to the studio and record music without J. Wil, “But every time I went I found myself fighting between doing a song and doing a song with God in it.” He explained that he was “never about submitting fully to the Holy Spirit,” or open to following the leadings of God in regards to his musical productions. He and J. Wil argued and discussed back and forth about what was “right” and what was the “wrong” music to produce and sing: “We were kinda battling within self and [with] each other. ... We just knew that something was wrong about something, and it was only one right way to do, or to live life, or to project life on whatever facet that you project.” Without music, Johnson described himself as “full blown walking dead.” He didn’t have any inspiration or focus on life. “I’m working at Arby’s. I am doing nothing with my life. Don’t have any goals, no nothin’.”

J. Wil explains that their story is not a “pretty picture” or an “easy flowing story.” “We actually went different routes to get to the same place.” Using an analogy of dress, J. Wil explains his transformation in the following terms: “For me, I went completely, it would almost be like, instead of just changing my clothes, I just

took everything else off, and redressed. You know, as opposed to trying to make what I have around work, I just started all over.” He also explains the conflict that he had with Johnson in the terms of “opinion, or intent, versus reality.” J. Wil’s opinion was what he would call “extreme” immediately following his complete redressing, or transformation. He believed that music could not have a beat, only a “raw instrument” like a piano, whereas Johnson would still feel comfortable with creating “hip-hop beats” with 808 bass, hard hitting snares and a deep bass line in his music. For J. Wil, anything that sonically evoked hip-hop was out of the question, whereas Johnson would put the beats to use to make songs out of them. J. Wil referred to these beats as “secular beats” and believed that they represented his abandoned past while Johnson considered them appropriate raw material for building a musical track.

Because of their differences, they went their separate ways for six months, but then came back together to perform. In Summer of 2006, they came up with the name Jay and Jay SOUL and began performing together again locally: “We were agreeing to disagree. The common thing that was that I was talking about Jesus Christ and he was talking about Jesus Christ” (J. Wil). J. Wil explained further:

I’ve had my opinions about music; he had his opinions about music. One thing that we kinda learned in the midst of everything is that sometimes, sometimes there is no right or wrong answer. ... Who am I to say that, you know, only fiction books or only non-fiction books are good? We started realizing that there are some gray areas.

What they both agreed upon is that music is a thing of the heart: “There has to be some type of real submission to God, some type of real sincerity about what you’re doing. It can’t just be the words changing. And the heart in the music and

everything else, the personality, everything stays the same.” (J. Wil). It was a process for them to get back together and they didn’t agree 100% on everything when they did. Their relationship shows a deep conscientious process of working through difficulties, teasing out meanings, terminology and their intents, and the complexities around creating music as Christian young men. It illustrates how their counter and competing narratives about music and its use for evangelism and worship conflicted, and how metanarratives about the sacred and secular, both from Lewis’s DVD and teachings from their church and bible study groups overlay their personal stories to create multiple layers of meaning.

Hip-Hop and Holy Hip-Hop

When I asked Jay and Jay SOUL about their musical style, they explained that “categorizing it doesn’t work.” And, despite the fact that they do perform Christian songs in the hip-hop style, they don’t consider themselves to be Christian hip-hop artists:

JW: We are, we don't believe in rebelling, and, and this is, I'll say this, this is why we don't quote/unquote categorize ourselves as holy hip hop because we, the way we did it was not just to say we don't carry ourselves like regular hip hoppers, so we can't be holy hip hoppers because regular hip hoppers probably sag, they come in church with do-rags,²³⁹ it's kinda like this whole movement and it's big like it's almost like you're trying to prove something. I'm saying this to say that I'll wear a do-rag I don't see anything wrong with wearing a do-rag. But I do see something wrong with wearing a do-rag if I'm wearing a do-rag to prove a point. I don't personally, I want, I wouldn't, I don't believe I'mma wear a do-rag to church. It's just not something I'mma do. So the common theme with Jay & Jay SOUL is that our songs are very diverse. We could do a very slow song, we do worship, we do praise, we do songs that people would categorize as hip-hop songs, because we don't get

²³⁹ A do-rag is a piece of cloth specifically designed for covering the head and protecting one’s hairstyles. Although it is considered a form of headwear for indoor usage, many hip-hop artists wear them publically, as well as come youth in urban areas. Although they can be worn by women, they are primarily worn by men.

involved in the style, like what style of blouse is that ²⁴⁰is that a business casual or whatever—no I just dress and I dress tastefully. I don't really get into ... this is Jermaine, he's wearing sporty wear, and you look at us now he [Jermaine Johnson] has on a full suit and I have on a jacket with jeans, you know. We dress different, but we're still being ourselves so our music was, its soulful, but that, but the biggest thing is that it's sincere and it's not rebellious. We don't, we love music we don't get on stage and jump around and say [imitating hip-hoppers: “wuwuwuwuuuuu”] you know we'd like you to hear us, and then be ministered to, we don't just do songs. We talk to you and we minister so, um, I actually think that I'mma let him talk. I actually think that was the biggest thing, and maybe the biggest difference where people were drawn to us in the beginning was that, okay, they're rappin', but they not just...they not carrying themselves like rappers. That throws people off. You know what I mean because, when you're a rapper, it's this certain swag, you know. They keep lookin at us. You know what I'm sayin'? ... So even with, even with the holy hip hop in general, and this is not, I didn't say all of that uh, to, to take a shot at holy hip hop or anything like that. Because like I say, it, it to us we just don't get involved in that category, that's why we just call ourselves gospel. Or gospel rap.

As artists, Jay and Jay SOUL see the image of holy hip-hop, it's growth as a movement, and certain artists or holy hip-hoppers who try to prove a point by bringing certain hip-hop styles into the church as a problematic domain that they do not locate themselves in. They make it a point *not* to carry themselves as rappers, and they attempt to avoid categorizations, labels or style naming, as they believe that it is only divisive. Moreover, they seem to follow in the vein that there can be no holy hip-hop like Lewis argues, due to the rebellious, idolatrous nature of mainstream hip-hop music and culture. However, they do distinguish *rap music* from *hip-hop culture*, and this is why they call themselves gospel rap. They believe that through the way that they are carrying themselves, not as aggressive, self-centered, arrogant or rebellious imitators of secular hip-hop culture, but as

²⁴⁰ J. Wil was referring to the blouse that I was wearing at the interview.

ministers steeped in biblical “truths” they are changing the public image of Christian rap and hip-hop.

It is important to note that this is only one version or type of hip-hop. As mentioned in chapter 3, The Ambassador and Lecrae’s performance styles are clearly different from Jay and Jay SOUL. While Lecrae’s style may be more aggressive, The Ambassador’s is laid back; these artists see themselves redefining notions of rebellion in hip-hop through resignifying it in a Christian context, as in Lecrae’s definition of rebel (noun and verb) in explaining the focus of his album. While other artists discussed in this dissertation have had revelatory or educational moments that confirmed that Christian hip-hop was “ordained by God” for use in the church and as an evangelical outreach tool, Jay and Jay SOUL’s revelatory moment was not about how relevant hip-hop was or is to evangelical ministry; their revelation concerned how hip-hop music and culture can be a potential pitfall in evangelical ministry when focusing on distinguishing oneself according to style.

Johnson went on to distinguish between rap music and hip-hop culture, and explained that “gospel people don’t look at this [their music] as gospel”:

You know, not because, trust me we've gone into situations where people quote/unquote gospel look at us and turn they face because we don't fit into their category either. To be honest more holy hip hop people have accepted us overall. They, they, you know, -- go crazy or whatever, where gospel is 50/50, we'll have a lot of even older people who like us and stuff, but gospel people are really up in the air, and the reason um, I don't, I don't feel, I don't feel like um...I don't feel like you know, one or the other is necessarily uh, right or wrong, this is not in my opinion based like on like a right or wrong thing or to say holy hip hop in general is wrong. My thing is that just like when he was doing a certain type of music, some people are a little confused. You know, because I see very even in holy-hip hop itself, and in gospel, and that's what I said it's not really about; that's why we don't get caught up in the category. Because for instance, Beyonce can do a gospel song,

quote/unquote a gospel song. To me, that doesn't make her saved. And that doesn't make her better than Da Truth who does holy hip-hop because she decided to do a certain style of song. R. Kelly did the Happy People album whatever and half of it was quote/unquote gospel and half of it."

J. Wil explains believe that "categories are really just oxymorons that are negative.

One is erasing the other." (J. Wil). Both artists take issue with musical categories

because they are superficial and don't provide any depth. They have a problem with

holy hip-hop because it is still being influenced or "tainted" by secular culture:

JW: [T]hat's why we totally erase--, take ourselves out of the secular part of hip-hop so that we're not influenced. And that's the part where for me, where I'mma let him come in, the part where I have a problem with some holy hip hop is that they're still being influenced by, [Holy hip-hop] is still influenced by the secular part. They, they're still hand in hand with it. And they feel like they're doing a good deed because they're using the word Jesus or God when it goes back to our righteousness is filthy rags. You know you, you, you can't be lukewarm and be involved in something so, I, I have no problem with it, I don't, I don't, we don't judge things by the core, is what tryin to say, we don't say aw, that beat is kinda hard, so I ain't gon' mess with him. We give it a chance, we listen to it, some of it is right some of it is wrong, just like you can't look at any one race and judge it, you can't look at any one culture and judge it, it's the same thing with music. You know like I said, with a jazz song, if you hear a jazz song just cause it's a sax, you might be vibing to it, what if you found out that song is called "I worship the devil"? You know what I mean, it don't have the words that's tellin' you that, but obviously that he found a way to worship him through his gift, you know?

Things should be judged by the core, not the genre or category of music.

"New creatures" are not supposed to be influenced by hip-hop. They use Paul as an

analogy in his transformation, God changed his name from Saul to Paul. In the same

way, Jay and Jay SOUL believe that Christian hip-hop artists should be changed from

their old selves to new creatures, which for Jay and Jay SOUL means in part

abandoning the culture of hip-hop:

Okay, that's my opinion. What I feel like um, what's been revealed to me through God's word is, when you go to, the word of God is not cliché, but

people use it in a cliché, in cliché ways. You always hear “Ye man that be in Christ, he is a new creature” you know what I’m sayin? I’m always reminded of like he just used Paul being one of the most, more, um, not-, um, popular characters in life. When God changed his name, well I could, I coulda used Abraham, but Paul, I’ll use Paul. When God changed his name, he didn’t change it to Paul Saul. He just flat out changed it to Paul. Now, (laughs), I can’t get into the depths of, you know, the meaning of Paul and all of that, I don’t, I don’t, I don’t say it before you or to anybody else as a Bible scholar. But I’m just putting out when God made changes...he, he never, he never did it with any type of representation or presence of what was old. And then to have Paul be the one that teaches to get those things which are behind us pressed towards the mark.

Johnson also uses the Sodom and Gomorrah story in the Bible and discusses Lot’s wife who turned back, illustrating that upon “deliverance” from something “evil,” or as a transformation from something, one should “not look back.” What they conclude is that hip-hop only signifies secular living to audiences and cannot be remade for utilization in a sacred context:

JJ: Hip hop is so aggressively, so widely associated with the world that when they hear hip hop, one thing comes to mind. And that’s the way that secular people do it. Yes, gospel can be a genre. And gospel is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, but when you say gospel, it’s only associated with one thing. And that’s Jesus.

I then took some time in the interview to explain the history of gospel blues to Jay and Jay SOUL, to make our conversation more relevant to the historical use of music in black churches. Jay and Jay SOUL were unfamiliar with gospel blues, but even when I posed the argument to them that Thomas Dorsey engaged in a similar resignification of “secular” music as Christian hip-hop artists today, they still proceeded to make the argument that they rap but they “are not hip-hop.”

This illustrates how artists can be so submerged into a musical culture and still not know the history behind it that shapes their contemporary practices. It was clear that they were not familiar with the history of the blues, the cultural context of

it, and how it has shaped what we call gospel music today. It also illustrates the wide range of performance knowledge and educational levels that individuals have that engage in the debate about the sacred and secular divide. It seems that an important historical understanding of recurring trends in the history of black churches are important, otherwise artists, even entrenched in the music and culture and traveling their own personal journeys, are somewhat misguided without this larger contextual and historical knowledge.

However, Jay and Jay SOUL admits that for them, their learning about these issues is an ongoing process:

JW: I wanna make this big point. And I think this is a huge point. Something that I learned and, I wanna be very clear that we don't feel that we have all the answers. I just wanna keep restating that.

JJ: Oh yeah, definitely.

JW: Because this is not at all something where we're saying we closed minded in the story Jay and Jay SOUL said it is done, not at all. You know, guided we'll continue. With this subject and with this thing we are learning daily, seriously. When I say daily, every day I'm on MySpace, I'm trying to learn more about people. I love when you talkin' about Jesus, I'm close-minded to all this other stuff. But with Jesus, I'm tryin' to learn okay, what are you saying again? Okay, let me see if I can get with this. ...

Passion

In Jay and Jay SOUL's outdoor concert performance of their original song, "Passion" they rapped at a very slow space. There were no hard-hitting beats in the background, but rather they were softly accompanied by a drummer, a saxophonist and a keyboardist. This musical performance combined elements of jazz and instrumental music, gospel, rap, illustrating most clearly that their music crosses musical genres. Their lyrics are easily understandable, and youth, young adults and older adults join in singing with Jay and Jay SOUL. Their performance seamlessly

weaved in and out from a slowly rapped track to a worship song clearly situated in the gospel tradition. Their music, even for this one moment, bridged the gap between the sacred and secular, the young and the old, as they communicated their faith from a place of sincerity that many in the audience clearly felt.

This is my passion, y'all
When the world seems full it ain't my passion at all
This is my saved life, versus my wrongs
Taste and see that the Lord is good, come on.
Jesus, he is my passion, ya'll...

Conclusion

Jay and Jay SOUL engaged in constant and extemporaneous revision of their thoughts about their faith, musical practice and wider black religious and music culture as they were being interviewed. It was clear that the arguments that they were making were very deeply and well-thought out, but they also referenced and framed some of the “grey” areas in music and religious culture with a deep level of thought and acceptance of the in-between, asserting that sometimes “there is no right or wrong.” As the interviewer, I undoubtedly asked questions that challenged their viewpoints and asked them to go deeper, while also presenting related historical information and counterarguments that helped them delve even more in their analysis and presentation of their ideas. Together they illustrate the contested discourses that shape hip-hop and holy hip-hop. These embodied musical histories, life stories, help us to understand how musical and religious practice in an African American context are fraught with ongoing contradictions, revisions, and conundrums that can only be truly understood through the lives of those who mediate the ongoing tensions and linkages between religious and secular cultures.

While other artists in this study see Christian hip-hop as just one more point along the continuum of contestations about which music and cultural forms are appropriate for black church contexts, Jay and Jay SOUL see music as something that should not be circumscribed by categories and genres, which only serve to divide artists and audiences from each other. They believe, similar to some traditionalist black church elders, that hip-hop culture as a whole is a perpetual signifier of the secular, even as they utilize the rap music style in some of their songs. While Jay and Jay SOUL did not engage gender issues as other artists in this project did, their stories instead illustrate how musical, cultural and social forces in and outside of black churches coalesce in shaping the musical identities and the musical choices of Christian music artists.

EPILOGUE

THE VIRTUAL CHURCH

In November 2008, I attended the Third Annual Conference on *Black Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* held at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. The conference theme “Challenges and Opportunities: Past, Present and Future,” addressed the changing nature of black religious and spiritual practices, especially with the advent of podcasts, Skype, YouTube, blogs and other communication tools that enable youth to create their own religious and sacred spaces outside of institutionalized religion and beyond church walls.

During the conference lunch discussion, a guest speaker asked the large number of undergraduate students in attendance if they attend church, and how they cultivate their spiritual and religious communities. A majority of the students who spoke stated that they do not attend church, but “attend” church services virtually, through conference calls or videoconferencing. The students also shared that they discuss academic, relationship, spiritual and other challenges in their lives with individuals close to them or through campus bible studies and spiritual meetings, where they receive prayer, mentorship and guidance. Students also mentioned that they anonymously seek support and prayer through online discussion boards and forums where virtual friends post words of encouragement and state that they are praying for them.

This anecdotal evidence from students with diverse religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds illustrates youth's increasing redefinition and de-institutionalization of religious and spiritual practice. The ways that youth and young adults participate in religious and spiritual rituals that exist outside of churches necessitates greater attention by "the black church" and by religious studies scholars, who aim to understand how and why some fast-paced and wired youth populations may find church attendance undesirable or irrelevant to them and to the social circles that they inhabit. Similarly, as Christian hip-hop's events, conferences, concerts and dances also often take place outside of church walls, what we find is that the Christian faith as practiced by some youth and young adults is becoming increasingly independent of church edifices and denomination-specific traditions and rituals.

Is it because youth believe that churches are irrelevant? Is it due to some traditionalist churches alienating youth of color from distinctive urban or impoverished environments? Or is it because some youth, including youth raised in the church, find attending church simply uncool, or perhaps unnecessary because they have so many spiritual supports elsewhere? These questions merit attention from future work that addresses the nature of youth spirituality and religion as lived in practice.

In summary, this dissertation intervenes in the fields of African American and American Studies, Popular Culture and Media Studies, and Performance Studies. I have argued that the unique context and history of Christian hip-hop music and culture, an ostensibly evangelical, male-centered project, challenges the ways that

we have come to understand tensions and linkages between black religious and popular cultures. In particular, I assert that through understanding the cultural politics of negotiating gender identities in the spaces where religious and secular cultures meet, we find that these negotiations are structured and mediated by the power relationships between religious and secular cultures, with some traditionalist black churches being most invested in maintaining the boundaries between the two. I explored how black youth and young adults navigate the “dangerous crossroads” between religious and secular spaces and ideologies in their use of hip-hop music and culture as evangelical tools in and outside of church walls.

The first two chapters explored competing narratives about the development of Christian hip-hop. I examined particular strands of the culture wars in Christian hip-hop from critics’ and supporters’ viewpoints, while also examining how fans talk about obstacles to Christian hip-hop’s exposure as well as artists’ success. The next two chapters closely examined how male and female holy hip-hop artists perform racialized masculinities and femininities with and against both mainstream secular and black Christian ideas of manhood and womanhood, upholding the patriarchal structure of both Christianity and hip-hop in their music and performances. The last chapter explored the work of alternative Christian hip-hop artists working both with and against the mainstream of the Christian hip-hop subgenre.

Poetics With a Promise explores the intersections among urban youth culture as it encounters multi-generational religious communities. It takes as legitimate and serious the self-understanding of black, male Christian performers, and particularly black female, Christian performers, who have been largely overlooked both in

popular culture studies and in religious studies. This project challenges discourses about youth religious practice in the context of Christian hip-hop culture as it explores how black male and female artists fashion their racialized gender performances in the context of tensions between religious and secular cultures.

“Poetics with a promise” means that the lyrical and musical techniques that these artists use, from signifying on secular popular culture, to evocative wordplay and rhyme, to scriptural citations with innovative interpretations, convey not only the promises of the *Bible*, but also the promises of the artists themselves to act on what they communicate in their lyrics as they endeavor, with varying degrees of success, to be stellar examples of the Christian walk, to be “soul winners” for Christ in a black urban context. This theme, or promise, is deeply embedded throughout all of the Christian hip-hop that I’ve explored, but it does not exist outside of the messy and confounding cultural, religious, racial and gender politics that persist throughout history.

APPENDIX

TIMELINE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP²⁴¹

The evolution of Christian Hip-Hop from a few commercially-recognized artists to the nationally and internationally-recognized artistic force that it is now has occurred during the past twenty-five years. In particular, the genre's evolution can be characterized as a progression of three general phases: (1) the pioneers who paved the way in the mid-1980's, (2) the emergence of major record labels and artists in the mid-1990's, and (3) the genre's increased mainstream visibility and popularity in the 21st century.

Evolution of an art form. Considered the pioneer for Christian hip-hop, Stephen Wiley began rapping in the early-1980s before releasing the album *Bible Break* in 1985, which is often considered the first commercial Christian hip-hop record. Shortly afterwards, a couple of other Christian hip-hop artists would help pave the way, with Rap Sures releasing *Gospel Rap* (1985) and Michael Peace releasing *RRRock It Right* (1987). The following decade saw the creation of major record labels that focused on the marketing, distribution, and management of Christian hip-hop artists (among other Christian artists). Record labels such as Gotee Records (founded in 1994), Cross Movement Records (CMR, founded in 1997), and *Uprok Records* (1999) gave a voice to many Christian hip-hop artists

²⁴¹ I thank Justin Martin, Doctoral Candidate in Human Development and Education at the University of California, Berkeley, for his assistance with this timelining and research on the development of Christian hip-hop.

endeavoring to convey the message of Christ throughout the already popular and constantly expanding hip-hop culture. With artists on Gotee (GRITS, 4th Avenue Jones, and LA Symphony) and CMR (Cross Movement) achieving mainstream recognition and Uprok artists making noise among the underground scene, Christian hip-hop solidified its status as an emerging and relevant form of hip-hop in the years to come.

In the twenty-first century, Christian hip-hop continued to gain visibility, with many albums making solid showing on Billboard Music Charts. For instance, 4th Avenue Jones' album *Respect* (2000) made the R & B/ Hip-Hop Chart in 2001, Cross Movement's albums *Holy Culture* (2003) and *HIStory* (2007) placed among the Billboard Top 200 a month after its release and in the Top 10 Gospel Albums upon its debut, respectively, and (c) since 2006, GRITS have had three albums that have placed among the top 20 Gospel albums at some point. Furthermore, newer Christian hip-hop artists such as Lecrae and Da TRUTH have also had albums make the Billboard Charts, with Lecrae's last two albums, *After The Music Stops* (2006) and *Rebel* (2008) among the Top 5 Gospel albums at one point and debuting on the Billboard Top 200, respectively.

Evolution of a culture. In addition to the record labels' and the albums' mainstream exposure, Christian hip-hop has expanded its prevalence within the general hip-hop culture as well. From the Gospel Music Association (GMA) recognizing Christian hip-hop artists every year during the DOVE awards; to the national concert tours such as *Unashamed* (2008) and *Don't Waste Your Life* (2009) spanning many states in the U.S.; to the establishment of major Christian hip-hop radio stations and websites

such as *www.holycultureradio.com* and *www.3hmp3.com*, its influence on both Christian, hip-hop, and youth culture is both far-reaching and steadily increasing. Moreover, this influence is also evident in the wealth of diversity within Christian hip-hop, with artists and record labels representing the East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, and Down South each having a distinct sound and lyrical style.

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