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Poetic Justice: Hip-Hop and Black Liberation Theology

Mimi Mendes de Leon

*"It's bigger than hip hop, hip hop, hip hop, hip hop
It's bigger than hip hop, hip hop, hip hop, hip hop"¹
– Dead Prez "Hip hop"*

When Macklemore, a white rapper from Seattle, won the 2013 Grammy for best rap album, *The National Review* joined the ensuing debate over the outcome of the awards ceremony, arguing that the Grammys put "politics before music."² By politics here, *The National Review* meant the public debate over social issues—in this case gay rights. Macklemore's album featured the chart topping "Same Love," the summer anthem for the marriage equality movement, and his win seemed, to *The National Review*, to be a statement of support from the music industry to the movement. Kendrick Lamar's album, *good kid, M.A.A.D. city*, however, should have won, according to the same article, because it is a "really gorgeous, moving album . . . about life in Compton."³ This makes the claim that Macklemore's album is political whereas Lamar's is not. However, Lamar describes his own album: "It's not just music to me. This is a story about the youth and the people that they call delinquents in my city."⁴ That is what *The National Review* missed: Hip hop, in its very nature, in its stories and its experiences, is political. It is political because it brings to the public a discussion that should be happening, a debate that affects the lives of citizens and how the government works for and against those citizens. Lamar narrates the situation of a community and the greater systematic effects of both the government and the economy on that community. In this way, *good kid, M.A.A.D. city* is political because its content discusses and challenges Lamar's hometown. As Chuck D of hip hop group Public Enemy states, "Rap is Black America's CNN."⁵ In this way, hip hop content is about people and the politics that affect their lives.

1 Dead Prez, "Hip Hop," in *Let's Get Free*, produced by Dead Prez (Columbia, Loud, and Relativity, 2000).

2 Betsy Woodruff, "Macklemore's Not the Best Rap Album," in *National Review*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/369551/macklemores-not-best-rap-album-betsy-woodruff>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Chuck D, interview by David Thorpe, *BOMB*, Summer 1999.

The Corner

*"The corner was our Rock of Gibraltar, our Stonehenge
Our Taj Mahal, our monument
Our testimonial to freedom, to peace, and to love
Down on the corner"⁶
– The Last Poets, The Corner*

Hip hop comes from the Corner. The Corner is often used in hip hop as a reference to the heart of the inner city community. Although the Corner sounds like it is on the outside, in hip hop it is the center of activity, a place of intersection and community. It is associated with the underground economy, in terms of the dealer on the Corner, but in this it has been lifted up as a place of knowledge. This Corner can be in any neighborhood or any community, and it reflects hip hop's dedication to the lives and experiences of its followers. The Corner is the active, present heart of the community, and it is a place that may be out of reach to outsiders, but vital to those in the inner city. In her book, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the invisibility : hypervisibility dynamic that exists in contemporary hip hop.⁷ Collins argues that while Black youth are the global face of hip hop, being made hypervisible by the music industry, the conditions of the majority of Black American youth are ignored. As Collins contends, mass media images of Black youth are of "athletes and entertainers," but the "actual ghettoization of poor and working-class African Americans" makes them invisible.⁸ Hip hop itself comes from this invisibility, and in looking at the content of hip hop, one can see the invisible being made visible.

Consequences of Invisibility

The Corner is a "least of these" location. Hip hop comes not from within the dominant consciousness, but outside of it. Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, authors of *Yes Yes Y'all*, an oral history of hip hop, mark the start of hip hop with the DJs and house parties of the 1970s. The two argue that hip hop "rose out of the gang-dominated street culture."⁹ This can be seen in three of the first hip hop DJs—DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash. All three were connected to turfs and crews that mimicked and grew from life in New York City. Hip hop

6 Common ft. The Last Poets and Kanye West, "The Corner," in *Be*, produced by Kanye West (New York, NY: GOOD Music, 2005).

7 Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 4.

8 *Ibid.*, 3.

9 Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip hop's First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), quoted in Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip hop Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 17.

centered, for these early starters, on peace, love, unity, and fun. Afrika Bambaataa and his crew the Zulu Nation worked hard to bring gangs together, especially warring gangs. DJ Kool Herc also had a crew, the Herculords, and The Five Percenters. The Five Percenters were a branch of the Nation of Islam who worked with DJ Kool Herc to maintain peace at his parties. Grandmaster Flash had the Furious Five, who used their new popularity to share “The Message” from their corner in the South Bronx. Their corner is “like a jungle sometimes / it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.”¹⁰ As Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five move through each verse, they describe their neighborhood, their situation. This perspective from the Corner is vital to hip hop. It takes in the systems of power and oppression that are invisible to those who are not on the Corner.

The system of empire that makes these neighborhoods the invisible, least of these, is new racism. Empire here will mean the networks of power—political, economic, social, and religious—that oppress primarily Black and Brown Americans within the United States. As Collins argues, hip hop “lived the shift from a color-conscious racism that relied on strict racial segregation to a seemingly colorblind racism that promised equal opportunities yet provided no lasting avenues for African American advancement.”¹¹ There are several systems working in this new racism, including the War on Drugs, prison industrialization, and market capitalism. In order to understand how these systems function and how they provide hip hop with its content as well as context, an analysis of the two is presented below.

Mark Lewis Taylor outlines the consequences of the War on Drugs and prison industrialization in his book, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. “Lockdown America” refers to our system of incarceration based on false pretenses and the theatrics of terror.¹² The government expands its power through terror by parading its large and growing prison industry to warn the marginalized to stay in their place. In *The Art of Rap*, Immortal Technique, a Peruvian born American rapper from Harlem, speaks about the inner city male community moving in and out of prison, and this has historically been the case for inner city Black youths.¹³ The reason for these arrests is often based on the drug trade. The War on Drugs is used as a tool of controlling the population and keeping bodies within the prison industry. Taylor describes the paradox of the prison system. When crime rates increase, prisons are built as a means of control, and when

10 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message”, in *Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five*, produced by Ed Fletcher, Clifton “Jiggs” Chase and Sylvia Robinson (New York: Sugar Hill, 1982).

11 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 3.

12 Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 21.

13 *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*, DVD, directed by Ice-T and Andy Baybutt (2012; Los Angeles: Indomina Films).

crime rates drop, the success is accredited to the prison system and more are built to drive the rates down further.¹⁴

What this misses entirely is the racist nature of the War on Drugs. In June 2013, the ACLU published a report on marijuana arrests by race.¹⁵ It found that although Blacks and whites use marijuana close to the same amount, Blacks were more likely to be arrested for it. Across the United States, Blacks are 3.73 times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana. In Brooklyn, one of the areas of the nation with the highest arrest rate, this rate goes up to ten times more likely. Although the War on Drugs has been given attention recently with the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington, the effect of this “war” on the lives of those on the Corner has been left invisible.

These bodies are paying for the success found in other areas of the city. These hip hop bodies are seen as disposable, and rappers know this. “Got a law for raw n----- now, play what it be like?/ when will n----- see they got us bleedin with three strikes,” the West Coast rapper Tupac raps in *Military Minds*.¹⁶ Yet Tupac and others are sacrificed as a means of preserving the upper class way of life. The prison system is seen as promoting the efficiency of our economy by keeping unproductive members behind bars. This means that those who do not have stable jobs are seen as a threat to the function of society. The unemployed, or worse, the unemployed finding alternative means of employment, are put behind bars in order to keep the image of a successful economic system in place. This does not account for the fact that these “unproductive members” are given few choices for legally making a livelihood. Their imprisonment covers for the fact that the current economic system does not provide access for everyone. Because these hip hop bodies are moved in and out of jail and affiliated with this way of life, they are rendered “virtually invisible.”¹⁷ The life on the Corner is one where the threat of imprisonment contends strongly with the threat of being unable to provide for oneself and one’s family.

Added to the War on Drugs is the economic system that marginalizes those in the Corner. This means that the urban poor are overlooked in free market capitalism and thus construct a transformed economic system from below. Free market capitalism, as based in privatization and accumulation, remains as a dominating system and lends to the public a faith in the system, not only as an economy that works, but as the only economy that works. According to Joerg Rieger, many

14 Taylor, *The Executed God*, 19.

15 “The War on Marijuana in Black and White: Billions of Dollars Wasted on Racially Biased Arrests” (New York: ACLU, 2013).

16 Tupac Shakur, “Military Minds,” in *Better Dayz*, produced by Afeni Shakur and Johnny “J,” (Atlanta: Amaru, 2002).

17 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 3.

believe that economic upturns will correct the downturns and that the income gap will disappear over time.¹⁸ We have hope in the market and trust that it will work. But the logic of downturn brings to light that the economy does not work for everyone. As Rieger points out, the economic gap is growing, and capitalism is only benefitting those who control production.¹⁹ Hip hop bodies are left behind in this system.

Hip hop relates to the fact that the market does not work for everyone. Those who rely on their own labor as their only source of income are overlooked in favor of those who have resources to begin with. Jung Mo Sung, also argues that the system of the free market creates necessary sacrifices.²⁰ These necessary sacrifices are those who are oppressed by capitalism, such as the bodies Taylor discusses in the prison system. They live outside of the mainstream economic system of capitalism in that they find alternative means of income. This means that their work is viewed as illegal and outside of the system. In Sudhir Venkatesh's *Off the Books*, he explores the underground economy of a Chicago neighborhood, and he depicts how life on the Corner relates to the neighborhood-wide system of living shut out of the mainstream market.²¹ By underground economy, Venkatesh means the constructed economy of the Corner that exists outside of the law and "off the books." While many assume gang activity to be the driving force of underground economies, most function in both illicit trade such as drug dealing as well as licit trade, like providing lunch or car repairs. Despite the off the books nature of the underground economy, there are still rules, codes, and systems to follow. And the motivations for participating are often a mix of short-term, cash-need basis, meaning that work comes in these communities as a mix of off and on the books jobs. In many ways this economy resembles the legal economic system and engages with it. However, in the public sphere, many view these underground economies as unlawful and blame participants for their own lack of success in the above-ground market—the epitome of the "welfare queen"—since, as Rieger points out, the system is believed to work for everyone. Sung adds to this argument with the myth of hard work.²² Hard work, according to liberal theory, will result in financial success. Thus, people are appreciated based on their capital, but since the system does not benefit all, as Rieger points out, those who have no capital are not seen as valuable and become the necessary sacrifices of the system.²³

18 Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 1.

19 Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, 35.

20 Jung Mo Sung, *Reclaiming Liberation Theology: Desire, Market and Religion* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2007), 43.

21 Sudhir Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 17.

22 Sung, *Reclaiming Liberation Theology*, 13.

23 Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 29.

This is where hip hop emerges from—the necessary sacrifices—and it informs a large part of hip hop content. On the Corner, Black youths, especially men, “started from the bottom,” in the words of the rapper Drake, with nothing except their own labor.²⁴ With a system that does not provide them access to good jobs or training, these hip hop bodies turn instead to the underground economy. As Nas, a New York-based rapper, comments, “a person’s status depends on salary,” and for many, the only access to a market is through the drug trade.²⁵ In *Misunderstood, Common*, a Chicago rapper, narrates the life of a man on the Corner:

He stood on the corner with the rest of them
Though he knew that this corner wasn’t the best of him
Hard streets and a life that crested him
Dirt police domestic beefs that’s festerin
He knew the President wadn’t addressin him
Though dead presidents was undressin him.²⁶

What Common gets at here is the problem with the belief in “rising tides” on the “least of these.” Because of the importance of capital, in terms of survival and power, men and women turn to illegal trade and activities in order to make money. This Corner thus has a perspective outside of the system, since it must work in direct opposition to the system in order to survive. This position makes the Corner a location of what Rieger would call a theological surplus.²⁷ As Kelly Brown Douglas argues, this belief that the “least of these” have preferential moral agency is grounded in both the life and words of Jesus. Preferential moral agency here refers to those who stand outside systems of “unjust privilege” and are granted to the least of these because “they are the ones most unlikely to be deceived into thinking that certain systems and structures of domination are not inherently evil but can be mended to be more just.”²⁸ Looking closely at the situation of Jesus’ birth, we see that God chose to come into this world not amongst kings, but in a manger with the marginalized shepherds. Jesus continued this siding with the poor throughout his life. He describes a new world where “the last are first and the first are last.”²⁹ This does not indicate a reversal of status, but rather, a world where

24 Drake, “Started From the Bottom,” in *Nothing Was the Same*, produced by Mike Zombie and Noah “40” Shebib (New York: Republic Records, 2013).

25 Nas, “Life’s a Bitch,” in *Illmatic*, produced by L.E.S. and Nas (New York: Columbia, 1994).

26 Common, “Misunderstood,” in *Finding Forever*, produced by Devo Springsteen (New York: GOOD Music, 2007).

27 Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 139.

28 Kelly Brown Douglas, “Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2008): 41.

29 Matthew 20:16, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

status is indistinguishable. Here the invisible become visible and the Corner is no longer a center of illegal trade, but a community hub.

Resistance and the Corner

It is also important to note here the historical background of the Corner. As Nas covers in “Bridging the Gap,” there is a connection between the language of resistance in previous Black music and hip hop. Performing the song with his father, Olu Dara—a jazz and blues cornetist, singer, and guitarist—Nas speaks of the “history of this track,” or how the resistant language of the blues and jazz led to the creation and language of hip hop.³⁰ These previous genres serve as the basis for much of hip hop, being the tracks that are mixed and re-mixed for the MCs to host on. As Ralph Basui Watkins argues, hip hop shares the four primary characteristics of the blues:

1. Hip hop affirms the somebodiness of the hip hop nation.
2. Hip hop preserves the worth of the hip hop nation through ritual and drama.
3. Hip hop transforms the life of hip hoppers by rapping and singing about the life and struggles of the hip hop nation.
4. Hip hop symbolizes the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the hip hop nation and thus creates the emotional forms of reference for endurance and aesthetic appreciation.³¹

What this demonstrates is that while hip hop has its own slang and its own codified language, it has roots in a long tradition of resistance in Black music. Early slave rebellions relied on the use of the talking drums, and masters worked hard to keep drums out of the hands of slaves.³² The blues spoke a language of social resistance, “I’m gonna leave you baby / And I won’t be back no more.”³³ Hip hop, as Nas says, “bridges the gap” from this language to the language of the streets.

Analyzing these four primary characteristics more closely, the Corner location of hip hop can be seen on a larger scale, not just with the blues, but with the Civil Rights Movement. The first point, the “somebodiness of the hip hop nation,” speaks to what Collins outlines as Black nationalism.³⁴ Although some view Black nationalism as a political movement, Collins defines it as “self-definition, self-determina-

30 Nas and Olu Dara, “Bridging the Gap,” in *Street’s Disciple*, produced by Salaam Remi (New York: Columbia, 2004).

31 Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011): 61.

32 Megan Sullivan, “African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slavesong to Hip Hop,” in *Discoveries*, 3 (2001): 21.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, 75.

tion, and self-reliance.³⁵ Hip hop content reflects this in that it defines and declares itself a culture. KRS-One, one of the original grandmasters of hip hop, had hip hop recognized as a culture by the United Nations. Tupac worked toward building a somebodiness for himself and his listeners in “Keep Ya Head Up” when he said “feelin like Black was the thing to be,” and “the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots.”³⁶ In hip hop culture, rappers are somebody, with a voice and a message.

The rituals and drama of hip hop, call-and-response and signifying, also come from a history in Black churches and culture. Call-and-response refrains from a pattern of leading lines and reply. Many spirituals by slaves were based on this technique as a form of sharing information like forms of African poetry and music brought over on slave ships. Call and response functioned as a means of both active participation as well as teaching of tradition, both of which were principle to the African oral tradition.³⁷ In the New World setting, these traditions adopted the guise of Christian narratives as a means of hiding the dialogue of freedom from masters. This tradition has continued on throughout Black literary and musical forms. In hip hop, call and response functions as a means of connecting the rapper with his audience. For example, in Jay-Z’s “Jigga My N---,” he shouts out to the crowd, asking his name, and they respond, sharing with Jay-Z in the chorus.³⁸ Or in Naughty by Nature’s O.P.P., the group asks “You down with O.P.P.?” to which the crowd responds, “Yeah, you know me!”³⁹ In using call-and-response, hip hop, like generations of Black music, embraces the act of active participation, drawing the audience into the sound and passing along information.

Signifyin’ is a African American literary tradition where the denotation and literal meanings of a word or concept are played with. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outlines the history of signifying in Black literary tradition in *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates, “signifying is the grandparent of rap, and rap is signifying in a postmodern way.”⁴⁰ What this means is that rap comes from a history of long oral resuscitation that exploits and turns on its head the work before it. Gates describes his father doing this in a tradition called the Dozens, and then the following generation picking this up in the form of Toasts. Rap functions in the same way as the long verse of Gates’ father in that it works to marry and re-marry language. For example, when Kendrick Lamar says, “I don’t smoke crack motherf--- I sell it,” in

35 Ibid., 75.

36 Tupac Shakur and Dave Hollister, “Keep Ya Head Up,” in *Strictly 4 My N.I.C.G.A.Z.* produced by DJ Daryl (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope, 1993).

37 “Call for Deliverance: The Oral Tradition”. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, ed. Patricia Liggins Hill (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 10-11.

38 Jay-Z, “Jigga my Nigga,” in *Ryde or Die Vol. 1*, produced by Swizz Beatz (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope, 1999).

39 Naughty by Nature, “O.P.P.,” in *Naughty by Nature*, produced by Naughty by Nature (New York: Tommy Boy Records, 1991).

40 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “An Anthology of Rap Music Lyrics,” in *The Financial Times*, November 5, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/87cca6b0-e7a9-11df-8ade-00144feab49a.html#axzz2uLjImrYu>.

his “Control” verse, he is twisting around the words of Eminem’s words, “I don’t sell crack, I smoke it,” in the song “Weed Lacer.”⁴¹ This itself is a reference to the TV show *COPS*, “I don’t sell crack, I’m a prostitute.”⁴² Although neither Lamar nor Eminem have created something new, each reworking of the former adds a new meaning to the lyrics, one for the next artists to jump off from. This is the characteristic “parody and pastiche” Gates describes in rap. The intertextuality of the genre means that language is worked and reworked within itself, complicating any type of literal interpretation. It is a performance, like the Dozens and Toasts before it, and in signifying, hip hop finds power in challenging and exploiting our concepts of language and of the world around us.

The final component of Watkin’s understanding of hip hop includes the “solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the hip hop nation.” This can best be seen in the discussion that takes place within the hip hop community. Hip hop tracks are never done. Artists remix and sample other’s tracks constantly, and they also appear in each other’s work. Rappers call each other out for slipping up or for misogynistic content or not being “real” enough. Lamar call out a stream of artists in a verse on “Control,” by Big Sean: “Mollies’ll prolly turn these n— to f— Lindsay Lohan / A bunch of rich a— white girls looking for parties.”⁴³ Upon hearing the verse in which Big Sean himself was called out, he said it “was just what hip hop needed.”⁴⁴ As Gates argues, rap does not “take itself too self-consciously, or try to overburden its lines with rehearsed wisdom, or the cant of ideology.”⁴⁵ Rather, hip hop pulls its strength from pastiche, from sampling other artists, collaborating with artists, and from building off of what has come before, just as the genre itself has done. Despite the multiplicity of riffs and arguments within the hip hop community, these artists are working and crafting the form, making sure the others do not forget their roots or the nature of hip hop.

In understanding hip hop roots as a place of theological insight and moral authority, it is clear why so much of hip hop deals with the inequalities of the mainstream market system and prison industrialization. Coming from the communities that were marginalized by these systems of power, hip hop has been able to see more clearly the system and has been liberated from it by its participation in the underground.

41 Big Sean, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay Electronica, “Control,” produced by No I.D. (New York: GOOD Music, 2013).

42 “Rock Refund, Fort Worth Police,” *COPS*, Spike TV <http://www.cops.com/rock-refund/>.

43 Big Sean, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay Electronica, “Control.”

44 “Big Sean: Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Control’ verse is just what hip hop needed,” *NME*, September 2, 2013. <http://www.nme.com/news/kendrick-lamar/72398>.

45 Gates, “An Anthology of Rap Music Lyrics.”

The God on the Corner

Despite the tension between the church and hip hop, hip hop bodies embrace the spiritual. Artists find a truth about God coming through their music to speak to the real needs of their communities. Most god-talk in hip hop is subtle. References are made throughout artists' anthologies that can be read in multiple ways, including a discussion of the God on the Corner. The God on the Corner is one who is active and present in the lives of the neighborhood. This God knows the pain and struggles of hip hop bodies and, despite their actions, continues to walk with them. Just as Douglas argues that the God of the blues is the God of a "radical Black faith," so too is hip hop as it presents a God that suffers with the people.⁴⁶

As James H. Cone, a founding figure in black liberation theology, argues, authentic speech about God would resemble treason and heresy because the true word of God is the word of revolution.⁴⁷ The God on the Corner takes the side of those outside power structures. In the Gospels, Cone has demonstrated that Jesus identifies with those cast as sinners by society, those who are pushed to the margins and oppressed.⁴⁸ He does this first through his baptism. Jesus noticeably does not baptize others for this act would place him as superior to them. Rather, Jesus chooses to be baptized with the followers of John, demonstrating that he is one of them. Throughout Jesus' life he takes the side of the oppressed. When he is tempted in the desert, Jesus refuses to divert his attention from the poor. He refuses to self-worship or to accept the devil's offering of land and power because worship does not come through power structures.

Acknowledging that Jesus stood on the side of the oppressed means that to speak of God is to support the oppressed against their oppressors. Most societies would consider this inherently treasonous because if so, then God talk calls for a radical break in social order. In this way, the idea of black liberation for Cone would be seen as a threat in a white society.⁴⁹ Speech about God would be calling for the end of the current order in the light of Black liberation. The result of liberation would mean the whites would lose their hierarchy, stability, and power in society.

Hip hop artists have engaged in authentic speech about the God on the Corner. Hip hop calls for revolution. In the song "Terrorist Threats," the rapper Ab-Soul raps, "If all the gangs in the world unified / We'd stand a chance against the military tonight."⁵⁰ Identifying oneself as a terrorist or as a threat to the nation is

46 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 142.

47 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 58.

48 *Ibid.*, 121.

49 *Ibid.*, 103.

50 Ab-Soul, "Terrorist Threat," in *Control System*, produced by Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith and Dave Free. Carson, CA: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.

not uncommon in hip hop. These artists understand that the system will not be in their favor, and therefore, will not rap to support it. In the song “Revolutionary,” the rapper Immortal Techniques raps, “My mission is to take you, lyrically break you / lyrically assassinate you / Lyrically incinerate your body and recreate you / To destroy the power that mentally incarcerate you.”⁵¹ Hip hop is revolutionary because it deconstructs the ways in which hip hop bodies are taught to think of themselves and are treated by society.

To make an authentic speech about God, Cone argues that one needs to include two points. The first of these is to “smash false images,” meaning to destroy the white god and put the Black God in its place.⁵² This means that a Black prophet would need to clarify God’s blackness in his speech to ensure that the Black people know he is not speaking of the false white god. Hip hop artists do this by claiming both God and Jesus as Black. For example, in Mos Def’s “Black Jesus,” but also by claiming God and Jesus as on their side, as walking with them.⁵³ Similarly, in “Jesus Walks,” Kanye West raps:

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the scrippers
 Jesus walks for them
 To the victims of welfare for we living in hell here, hell yeah
 Jesus walks for them
 Now, hear ye, hear ye: want to see Thee more clearly
 I know he hear me when my feet get weary.⁵⁴

The God on the Corner is with the people on the streets, and hip hop artists testify to that. Although many reject the churches that have rejected them, they still find God on the Corner because they know that God suffers with them.

The second thing a prophet needs to do to ensure true speech is to make sure he or she does not separate Black religion from the Black community.⁵⁵ Black religion must be specifically tied to Black experience, and it must speak directly to the community in order to inspire it to action. Liberation is the goal of God and the Black community; therefore, it will be the focus of any speech about God. While there are hip hop artists who leave their communities behind, many continue to speak to and for their communities as they move through the industry. In “Blessed,” Kendrick Lamar speaks to his community to motivate them to action: “Yes, my n—, you’re blessed, take advantage, do your best, my n— / Don’t stress,

51 Immortal Technique, “Revolutionary.” In *Revolutionary, Volume 1*, produced by Jean Grae. New York: Viper, 2001.

52 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 59.

53 Mos Def, “Black Jesus,” in *OMFGOD*, produced by Mannie Fresh, <https://soundcloud.com/omfgod/black-jesus>.

54 Kanye West, “Jesus Walks,” in *The College Dropout*, produced by Kanye West. New York: Roc-a-Fella and Def Jam, 2000.

55 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 62.

you was granted everything inside this planet/ Anything you imagine, you possess, my n—.”⁵⁶ Speaking about God, Lamar calls the community to action. Hip hop artists understand that the Black community to whom they speak will both know and need their music. As rapper Talib Kweli says in “The Hostile Gospel,” he is “preaching to the choir.”⁵⁷ When he asks “What the people want?” his backup screams out, “Please deliver us.” The God whom hip hop speaks of thus is engaged and active in a communal call for liberation. This revolutionary god-talk is thus a foundation for understanding the God on the Corner.

The revolution to which hip hop speaks in not naïve; rather, it fulfills the actual needs of the community. Ralph Basui Watkins calls this a “sheep theology,” after the parable of Matthew 25:31-46.⁵⁸ As the sheep and the goats are separated for the kingdom of heaven, the sheep are welcomed for providing for the needs of Jesus by providing for the needs of others. The goats, however, are not welcomed for they have not provided for the “least of these.” Hip hop provides for the least of these, offering a hope that feeds the soul and speaks to the real issues of the community.

The language of hope, which Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says has been “denied so long and suppressed so deeply,”⁵⁹ liberates the community. Hip hop does not present false hope. It addresses the despair and the hardship, “We got to face what lies ahead/ Fight for our truth and freedom and ride for the dead.”⁶⁰ In this creed there is no doubt that God is on the Corner, and with this God the community will realize the promises of the future arising in the present. In the song “Hope,” rapper Twista raps the following:

We will never break, though they devastate, we shall motivate
And we gotta pray, all we got is faith
Instead of thinking about who gonna die today
The Lord is gonna help you feel better, so you ain't gotta cry today.⁶¹

God on the corner is found amongst the harshest realities. The God on the corner is both always out of reach as a God of the future yet lives in the present struggles of the community. This God answers Tupac’s question “Where do we go from here? / Where do we go?”⁶² The God on the corner stands beside Tupac and other hip hop bodies and moves forward with them toward liberation. Although

56 Schoolboy Q and Kendrick Lamar, “Blessed,” in *Habits and Contradictions*, produced by Dave Free (Carson, CA: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012).

57 Talib Kweli, “The Hostile Gospel,” in *Eardrum*, produced by Just Blaze (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records, 2007).

58 Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption*, 113.

59 Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 65.

60 Talib Kweli, “The Proud,” in *Quality*, produced by Ayatollah. (New York: Rawkus, 2002).

61 Twista, “Hope.” In *Coach Carter*, produced by Toxic. Los Angeles: Capitol, 2005.

62 Tupac Shakur, “Where Do We Go from Here,” in *R U Still Down? (Remember Me)*, produced by Tony Pizarro and Tupac Shakur (Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records, 1997).

many have cast hip hop in a bad light, hip hop is not afraid to call out the obstacles in front of this goal. Hip hop names the problems that affect the community—prison industrialization, poverty, invisibility, and racism. Hip hop being seen as morally wrong is a result of hip hop calling to light the hip hop reality. Although hip hop artists know that their actions and the actions of their brothers and sisters have the potential to harm the community, they present the deeper cause of these actions and the pain of living their experience.

In the same way, Jesus named the reality of his experience that countered the dominant narrative. In the Gospel of John, the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus about a woman accused of adultery.⁶³ The scribes and Pharisees believed, in accordance with Jewish law, that the woman should be stoned. The men were testing Jesus to see if he would be faithful to the law, as their faith professed. Jesus replied that “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.” The men disband, knowing themselves for their own sin, and Jesus tells the woman to “go and sin no more.”⁶⁴

Like Jesus, hip hop artists reveal the reality of their experience and that their reality cannot be dominated by the moral codes of others. They call out for society to understand the evil that they perpetuate in the lives of hip hop bodies. Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees to recognize the humanity within themselves and within the woman. Jesus broke down the lines the scribes and Pharisees had constructed to separate them from the woman. In this way, Jesus liberates the woman from the system of oppression that has classified her as a sinner and lesser than the men. Hip hop, too, continues this work for freedom from stereotypes and assumptions about hip hop bodies. While the sin of the woman may be cast as negative, the woman herself is not evil, just as the actions of hip hop bodies may be seen as negative, but not evil.

By existing within the harsh realities of the corner, the hip hop God understands the needs of the community. The God on the Corner keeps alive a God that works with and for the oppressed. This God acknowledges the reality of the system and provides hope for liberation. Liberation here will emerge from a change in mindset that is a communal call to action and awareness. Hip hop reveals a prophetic voice from the inner city that allows for the God of the Corner to continue working within the community.

63 John 8:1-30.

64 John 8:11.

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