



The Messianic Zeal: A Case of Radical Aesthetics in Black Cultural Production

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Abstract

This essay examines artwork by popular artists D'Angelo, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar and 2pac Shakur and compares their articulations to a larger discourse of messianic symbolism in (black) American popular culture. In this paper, messianic symbolism is a discursive chain of symbols that invoke the Black experience. Artists extend the legacy of earlier representations of black messianism by similarly representing themselves as Jews, saviors or folk heroes with a specific mission to save a world burdened by racial strife and oppression. These qualities manifest in lyrics, album covers, and other late 20th century rhetoric.

Introduction

Why are contemporary artists preoccupied with the messianic? In a genre known for moral shortcomings, conversations related to religion topics are less common especially considering the “secularization of the West.”¹ The messianic paradigm functions beyond religion and encompasses political conviction. This study posits W.E.B. Du Bois as an ancestor of public intellectuals/artists who represent Black American historical circumstances as a messianic experience. The messianic is a common trope among scholars that suggests Jewish culture has a fundamentally different relationship to time than their gentile neighbors. Various black cultural producers to restore meaningful subjectivity to a systematically oppressed ethnic group have used the idea of a messiah. One may view this representation as a tactic of self-fashioning meant to neutralize controlling images of slavery through notions and references to divinity.²

Unlike their contemporaries (Greco-Roman, Persian), ancient Hebrews did not see time as a cyclical, endless cycle, but rather, as moving forward to an end. They were moving toward a goal, or a destiny. This parallels the Western obsession with ‘progress.’ In the United States of America, rendering non-whites to an inferior, second-class social status was the norm.³ Enslaved people of African descent, stripped of human and civil rights, are appropriated from their labor, and considered 1/3 a person. Consequently, the repressive totalitarian American brand of slavery prohibits reading, writing, and liberty to access the power of language. This particular ‘slave code’ set the stage for an intergenerational literary backlash spearheaded by an infamous, enslaved Christian preacher.

“The prototype of the twentieth century revolutionaries, Nat Turner” used his literacy and the conceptual map of Judeo-Christianity to engage in violent protest of hell on Earth.⁴ “Consumed by the images and the visions of the Old and New Testament, Nat Turner turned the Book against the people who had given it to him.”⁵ The cultural trauma amassed through this systemic oppression resulted in subsequent generations of individuals w(riting) and speaking not only about the erroneous ways of the antebellum period, but the profane modern and contemporary world as well. Artists continue to enact their liberty in the world of letters, signs, and concepts to communicate their subjectivity and lambaste the destructive, fallacious logic of race and

¹ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture Vol. 1* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004).

² The Atlantic Ocean, known as the Middle Passage, brought at least 12 million people of African descent to the United States and the Caribbean, which undoubtedly contributed to not only the economic development of the region, but the cultural and demographic as well. From an Afrocentric worldview, it is the key space separating a dispossessed people from an ancestral homeland akin to the River Jordan in Hebrew culture.

³ I am intellectually indebted to Daniel Fawcett, a colleague who advanced my understanding of messianism, particularly as it relates to Orthodox Judaism.

⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Pioneers in Protest* (Johnson Publishing Company Inc., Chicago, 1968), 84.

⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

other institutions that hinder the social world from universal peace.

The Messianic asks how do past and contemporary cultural producers create, preserve, and contest knowledge in the realm of black popular music and literary field through a messianic posture. By highlighting the connection between contemporary artists performing discursive messianic speech/acts that oppose threats to black liberation through and earlier actors in the black intellectual tradition this project shows an intergenerational messianic zeal, to signify a political philosophy rooted in an idea of racial salvation. Music is an important feature throughout modern American history. It is a primary medium for people showing they are of the same culture. Furthermore, these critical performances imply a desire or expectation of black artists to serve dual roles as leaders toward enlightenment and leisure; to simultaneously entertain and be agents for social justice. This duality is a pre-colonial Africana cultural motif prominent in the history of black cultural producer pre-colonial.⁶

In *Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass remarks upon the sound culture in terms such as “haunting” and described the way improvised intonations were powerful.⁷ In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois described the sounds of the folk culture as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.”⁸

To Du Bois the “Sorrow Songs” were perspectives that provided a reflexive engagement with nationality.⁹ Although they both described the musical folkways of Blacks in equally reverent terms, Du Bois took it a step beyond Douglass in his analysis. “And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas,” Du Bois said. In the same passage, he went on to say black folk music “has been neglected...and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro People.”¹⁰ What these passages reveal is that the phonic substance produced is an integral aspect to Black culture.

Albeit more vulgar,¹¹ rappers bear semblance to the work of Du Bois and other radical thinkers of the 20th century. Public philosopher Cornel West urges the forging of

⁶ Barber, Karen. “Popular Arts in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1987), 3-12.

⁷ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Project Gutenberg, 50-54. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23>.

⁸ Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*, (Bensenville: Lushena, 2000), 179.

⁹ Benedict Anderson attributes the birth of the ‘imagined community’ to “the novel and the newspaper,” but the African diaspora relies as much on oral traditions for imagined communities.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*, 178.

¹¹ *Folk* is rooted in the German *volk*, which means people. Vulgar, comes from *vulgus* which also connotes the common people and shared historical identity of a group.

an imagined gap between the impressive oeuvre of W.E.B. Du Bois with contemporary black radicalism and public intellectualism, including material forged in the annals of Hip Hop.

In *Black Prophetic Fire* he states:

One of the things that I have been able to really both revel in and benefit from...is trying to unite this radical intellectual legacy of Du Bois that hits the issue of empire and white supremacy with the popular cultural expressions of genius and talent-be it music, be it dance, be it among the younger generation or older generation-so that you actually have a kind of an interplay between, on the one hand, Du Bois's radicality and militancy when it comes to politics and economics, empire and race, and, on the other hand, the antiphonal forms of call and response, the syncopation, the rhythm, the rhyme, the tempo, the tone that you get in the best of Black cultural forms that are requisite for sustaining Black dignity and sanity, sustaining Black people as a whole.¹²

West's suggestion to unite a "radical intellectual legacy" with "popular cultural expressions" reflects his belief that there is a common thread between a past and the future radical tradition. Contemporary Black musical performances continue a Black radical aesthetic.¹³ Like Hip Hop artists, Du Bois' sentiment links to "a self-styled spirituality that was not wedded to cognitive commitments to God talk."¹⁴ The purpose of this study is to establish an understanding and connection between the sublime nature of the late 20th century cultural phenomenon known as Hip Hop to previous traditions. Albums and other material released within twenty years of 2pac Shakur's first posthumous release, *The Don Killuminati* (1996) including *Yeezus* (2013), *Black Messiah*, and *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015) are analyzed and show how artists scribe sentiments in order to be paid, but there is also a political implication to their work.

The Messianic

In 1919, FBI monolith J. Edgar Hoover was hired to disrupt domestic threats to America. That same year, literary giant and social activist Du Bois helped organize the first Pan-African conference to display solidarity in the face of rampant racism. Nine years later Du Bois published *Dark Princess: A Romance* a fictional novel that imagined the birth of a Black Messiah. Later in the 20th century while Du Bois continue to publish meditations on race and empire, Hoover continued to surveil outspoken black leaders and liberation movements, especially militant organizations throughout the 1960s. In a memorandum dated March 4, 1968, "To prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant Black Nationalist movement," is listed as a primary goal of

¹² Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2014), 50.

¹³ The phrase 'black radical aesthetic' borrows from Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹⁴ West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 59.

the FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO).¹⁵ Hoover's fear that the expressions of Black Nationalist organizations could lead to revolutionary change correlates with the messianic idealism of Judaic thought. Under the guise of law and order, his campaign links sacredness with whiteness, yet receives resistance by vanguards who profane this ideology.

Efforts to thwart social movements were largely successful, however, decades later a new social phenomenon known as Hip Hop inherited the surveillance of prior movements. Nevertheless, Hip Hop also inherited the messianic zeal of prior movements. 2pac Shakur and others have used the messianic myth in order to describe conditions of blackness. Through popular music the complex life-worlds of black subjects continues to communicate in linguistic and non-linguistic ways.

Before Shakur released his debut album, *2pacalypse Now*, his lineage and activism rooted him in political discourse. However, the phrase '*2pacalypse*' grounds his work in a quasi-religious framework because of the play with the word apocalypse. This title ties the content to a concept of messianic time. His artistic persona and material heavily base on his personal worldview. One can hear his focus on police brutality, poverty, and the desperation that grows into criminal activity throughout his first project and subsequent work. 2pac assumes the role of a messiah, tasked with delivering a message to the masses. Throughout his career, he consciously straddled the sacred and the profane, underground and mainstream, which resulted in his signature, brand of ghetto gospel. In the course of his short impactful career, he used his platform to lambaste oppression facilitated by the establishment in a way, deemed messianic.

The concept of 'the sacred and the profane' as sociology notes originated in the early 20th century through the interventions of Durkheim.¹⁶ In her translation of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Karen Fields describes Durkheim's meditations on 'the soul' as a way to theorize about 'the real.'¹⁷ The sacred, whether embedded within religious discourses or not, concerns those ideas which are understood to be set apart from the rest of social life and which exert a profound moral claim over people's lives.¹⁸

¹⁵ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "FBI Cointelpro-Black Extremism," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Accessed July 20, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/FBI-Cointelpro-Black>.

¹⁶ Emilé Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), xvii.

¹⁷ Karen Fields illustrates in *Racecraft* how Du Bois and Durkheim were contemporaries whom may have never met, but scholarship and activist outlook paralleled one another in their studies of life-worlds. Du Bois and Durkheim lived through similar circumstances regarding the 'Negro problem' in America and the 'Jewish question' in France. Although both men were largely secular social scientists, both knew the cultural weight religious sensibilities played in their respective environments.

¹⁸ Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

The sacred and the profane concept is applicable to daily life and not just people in hunter-gatherer societies. Durkheim's theory highlights the various signs, symbols, traditions we consider sacred.

The acronymic socio-political title of his second title, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z* differs from the religious inspired first album title, but continues his description of the struggles of disenfranchised people and communities. Shakur's interplay with the term 'nigga,' was a brilliant strategy to empower people through a commonly used term. His third studio album title *Me Against The World* indirectly ties to the apocalyptic debut title whereas his final album, *The Don Killuminati: The Seven Day Theory* is packed with symbolism, from the album cover to lyrics throughout the album.

Shakur performed his last album under the alias Makaveli, operating under the pseudonym based on the founder of political science Machiavelli. At the outset of album, he criticized his contemporaries Mobb Deep, Jay-Z, and Notorious B.I.G. and posited the question, "Which side are you on?" The proverbial line drawn at the beginning denotes topics of real/fake, good/evil, normal/taboo explored throughout the album.

On this album, Shakur interpolated the Catholic "Hail Mary" prayer, and created a self-critique of the consequences of his fame. In the song "Blasphemy," he is heard signifyin(g) upon the symbolic value of the pope, questioning his cultural relevance in comparison to Malcolm X to the dispossessed repressed black masses. An overlooked quotable from the aforementioned song: "People in Jerusalem waiting for signs. God's coming *she's* just taking her time," suggests a female Godly presence and eschatological Judeo-Christian apocalyptic thought.¹⁹ Although she analyzes different textual themes in "Blasphemy," Ebony

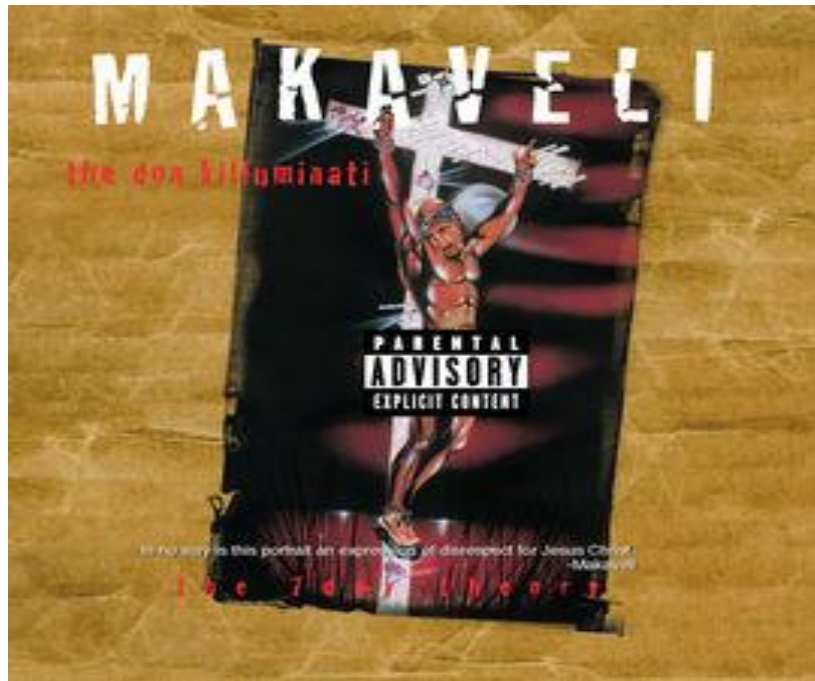


Fig. 1. The album cover to Shakur's first posthumous release. He is depicted as the biblical savior Jesus Christ. A statement from Tupac in white text reads, "In no way is this portrait an expression of disrespect for Jesus Christ."

¹⁹ Makaveli, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, Death Row/Interscope, 1996, CD.

Utley does not mention the subtly powerful lyric.²⁰ The poetic melancholy track “White Man’z World” is a change from the virulent tone of other tracks and reflects upon his experience with the prison-industrial complex and racial strife in general.

Like his songs “Keep Ya Head Up” and “Words 2 My First Born,” that deal with topics such as pro-choice reproductive rights for women and domestic violence, “Blasphemy” continues Shakur’s valuation of women through the invocation of a female Godhead. In spite of his criminal charge against a woman in 1994, Shakur’s messianic idealism aligns with historical figures like Douglass and Du Bois, whom were both interested in the womanist politics. These lyrics appear as evidence of Shakur’s critical concern with a more ethical body politics through taboo lyrics.²¹

Cultural theorists have critically analyzed *Dark Princess*,²² but fail to comment on the significance of the ‘Negro spiritual’ sang by Du Bois’ protagonist, Matthew Towns at the pivotal moment in the novel when the international guild of non-whites doubted ‘negroes’ adeptness towards civility in the modern world.²³ Townes evoked great emotion in his improvised performance of a Negro spiritual and through him; African Americans are trusted as coconspirators to disrupting white supremacy. *Dark Princess* shows the immovability of Du Bois’ versatility and his contribution to socially conscious popular culture.²⁴

The aggression and anger channels through Shakur’s messianic subjectivity. Miles White describes how “hardcore” rap performance has renegotiated, reconstructed and redefined notions of masculinity within the realm of popular culture.²⁵ White

²⁰ Ebony Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding The Gangsta’s God* (New York: Praeger, 2012), 100-101.

²¹ During a backstage interview at the House of Blues with the author, October 10, 2014 in Cleveland, OH Herbert “Ab-Soul” Stevens, describes rap and Hip Hop as “an intellectual movement.” He is a label mate of Kendrick Lamar. He proclaims on ‘Portishead in the Morning,’ “If I am not the Messiah, I’m a Mess,” further exemplifying Hip-Hop’s signification through rap language. Interestingly, “The Law” from his album *Do What Thou Wilt* uses 2pac’s lyric “God’s coming she’s just taking her time” as part of the chorus. The album’s title and much of the subject matter is derived from occultist Aleister Crowley and his religion Thelema, a divergence from his *These Days* messianic album cover, however, within the album contains the term ‘messiah,’ uttered on the song “Portishead In The Morning.”

²² “With its focus upon a roving intellectual protagonist who symbolizes not only the Negroes of the United States, but the tribeless,” Moses, Wilson J., *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

²³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 140.

²⁴ Work such as Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* directly deals with subverting the status quo through guerilla warfare with the help of reformed gang members as conspirators, which echoes the plot of *Dark Princess*.

²⁵ Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 26.

claims that “violent narratives and dress...are all subversive” and “hardcore hip-hop practices give new aesthetic expression to black urban rage by engaging an array of oppositional strategies, including the aggressive performance of the body, the dense layering of discordant sonic textures, incendiary and obscene language.” White suggests one must acknowledge the transgressive nature of hardcore rap and should do so from a critical standpoint inasmuch to the critique of its hegemonic, degenerative mass proliferated subjectivities.²⁶

When hardcore tropes, such as the brute, blends with other signs and symbols including religion, which “often compels us to redefine our categories and redraw boundaries (between good and evil, religious and secular, sacred and profane)”²⁷ transgressive subjectivities expressed through pop-cultural that addresses “tangible social evils” contributes “to the construction of a *communitas* of the oppressed.”²⁸ The use of religious content to indict corruption has embedded within Black diasporic discourses for centuries. German theorist Walter Benjamin’s secular philosophy of Judaic end-of-history as emblematic of the modern experience is a thought provoking theory for analyzing intergenerational trauma. In his *Theses on the Concept of History*, Benjamin’s articulation of a sense of salvation based on interaction with the past creates a framework to analyze Hip Hop considering the endless manipulation of the past, to affect the here and now, and future through the practice of sampling. ‘The messianic without messianism’ is what Benjamin envisaged. How does his radical theology of Orthodox Judaism fit with the Hip Hop nation? His theories support practices like sampling that take the material wreckage of History for purpose of montage. Benjamin’s promulgation that every generation has been “endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” correlates with groups that have resisted the encroachment of empire.²⁹

Artists continue to comment on anti-blackness, gender, and other topics through radical textuality. Funk maestro, R&B extraordinaire Michael “D’Angelo” Archer is unabashed about his Hip Hop beginnings. His debut, *Brown Sugar*, was a stellar showcase of his originality within a familiar sonic palate. After his breakout debut, his next two albums touched on aspects of spirituality. *Voodoo*, with its Africanist

²⁶ In “Savior of the Race: The Messianic Burden of Black Masculinity,” Ronald Neal references how influential Hip Hop artists whose subjectivity differs from the “messianic masculinity” of Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, and others, are “rendered abnormal or pathological for not living out these virtues.”

²⁷ Joseph Winters, “Unstrange Bedfellows,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 6 (2001): 261.

²⁸ Partridge, *The Lyre Of Orpheus*, 77.

²⁹ “The emergent agency is so often pacified, and folks suffer generation after generation with unjust treatment, unattended to, and then layers of suffering begin to mount, just like in the ninth thesis of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that history is a catastrophe, the piling of wreckage, generation after generation, all of those precious lives lost, wasted potential, witnessed generation after generation,” *Black Prophetic Fire*, 45.

syncopation, album and song titles, *Black Messiah*, with its spirit of protest and Judeo-Christian conceptualization in its album title, song titles, and lyricism.³⁰ *Voodoo* marks the beginning of D'Angelo's clear interest in spiritual and religious content and *Black Messiah* continues the unfolding of his meditation on spiritual and religious content.

Voodoo, his second offering was an introduction to his worldview beyond the auspices of love balladry, differed immensely from its predecessor both in terms of content and sonically. The polished, radio ready material of the former was replaced by funky, idiosyncratic rhythms, dense lyrical content and noises that sound as if they were recording a séance. The depth of the lyrical content, and instrumentation was a relic of the thick, multi-instrumentation laden grooves of Parliament-Funkadelic. Songs like "Right & Left" featuring Method Man, Redman, and the "Devil's Pie (Remix) single featuring Fat Joe and Raekwon aligns D'Angelo with four East Coast rappers equally known for representing marginalized communities. The latter by far the most critical song on the album is a prime example of why the "neo" has prefaced soul. Other songs can be described as romantic, some improvisatory and obscure. However, "Devils Pie" is focused and dialectical and his critique of the greedy, materialistic banality of the modern/contemporary world echoes the central concerns of Marxism.

Black Messiah continues the religious and spiritual musings of D'Angelo but contains explicit traces of political motivation. "Many will think it's about religion. Some will jump to the conclusion that I'm calling myself a Black Messiah. For me the title is about all of us. It's about the world. It's about an idea we can all aspire to. We should all aspire to be a Black Messiah." He goes on to say "It's about people rising up in Ferguson and in Egypt and in Occupy Wall Street and in every place where a community has had enough and decides to make change happen. It's not about praising one charismatic leader but celebrating thousands of them...*Black Messiah* is not one man. It's a feeling that, collectively, we are that entire leader."³¹

In a conversation with Hip Hop journalist Nelson George, D'Angelo spoke of the spirit of Jimi Hendrix inspiring him during the recording of *Voodoo* in Hendrix's Electric Ladyland studio. After George asked him about the importance of the church for harboring the most talented musicians, which he confirmed as fact, he described the improvisatory tradition unique to a black church ethos.

"They used to say this when I was going to Church... 'don't go up there for no form or fashion.' Ya know? So...I guess what that means is: 'Listen! We're up here singing for the Lord so don't be up here trying to be cute. 'Cause we don't care about all that. We just want to feel what the spirit is moving through you.' And it's the best

³⁰ See Loren Kajikawa's "D'Angelo's Voodoo Technology: African Cultural Memory and the Ritual of Popular Music Consumption," for an interesting discussion.

³¹ D'Angelo, *Black Messiah*. RCA 88875-05655-2, 2014, CD.

place to learn that. Ya know? So you learn to shut yourself down and let whatever's comin', come through you.³²

D'Angelo's description of a 'stream of consciousness' technique employed in churches provides insight to the improvisatory nature of black music culture. In *Negro Folk Music* Ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander's description of how "the ecstatic seizure, getting of the 'spirit [is] fundamental in African religious experience, [and] is a commonplace characteristic of religious worship...throughout Negro areas of the Western Hemisphere," could operate as theoretical underpinning for what D'Angelo said to Nelson George and attendees of the lecture.³³

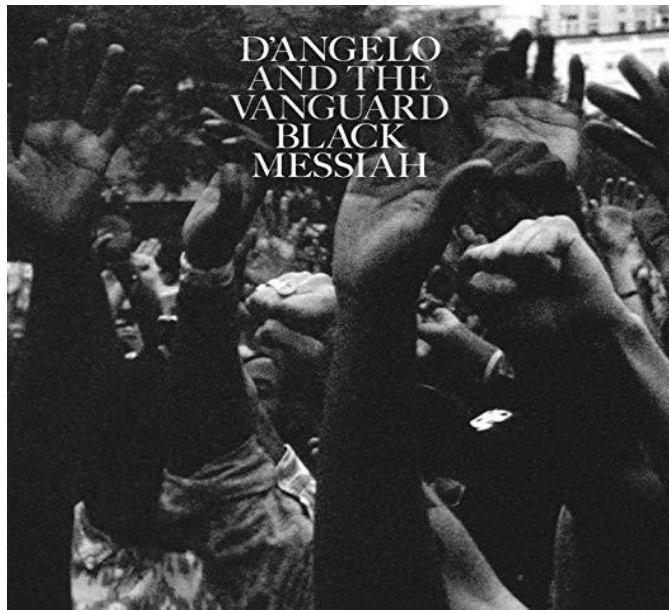


Fig. 2 The album cover shows a crowd with raised, clenched fists and raised open hands assumedly in reverence to solidarity. The dark, black based palette of the cover signifies 'blackness' as part and parcel to the spirit of the project.

His song "Prayer" written solely by D'Angelo is a funky interpretation of the Lord's Prayer wherein the artists improvises within the classic rendition and sings of confusion in his environment, a desire for peace and redemption.³⁴ In "1000 Deaths," a song title and lyrics directly correlate with the introductory statement on 2pac's "If I Die 2Nite,"³⁵ D'Angelo claims, "Yahweh, Yahushua/He don't want no coward soldier." A sample of former Nation of Islam vitriolic spokesperson Khalid Abdul Muhammad proclaiming the phenotype of a biblical savior as black, followed by Chairman Fred Hampton's condemnation of "megalomaniac war mongers," is further evidence of the conflation of spiritual and political topics within pop music texts. There is also "Till It's Done (TuTu)," a song seemingly inspired by the fight against apartheid by South African priest Desmond

³² Red Bull Music Academy, "D'Angelo (2014 RBMA Lecture)," *YouTube*, May 23, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WD1oaBCmZWA&t=744s>.

³³ Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 8.

³⁴ "See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus-invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation. This surplus lyricism...is what a lot of people are after when they invoke the art and culture-the radical," *In The Break*, 26.

³⁵ At the beginning of this song a voice utters, "A coward dies a thousand times, but a soldier only dies just once." Tupac Shakur, *Me against the World*, Interscope, 1994, CD.

Tutu, coupled with existential lyrics about the environment (carbon pollution, acid rain) reminiscent of Marvin Gaye's concerns in "What's Going On." This song places his protest beyond race and ethnicity by remarking on the humans' oft neglectful, abusive relationship to the Earth.

In comparison to his previous albums, *Black Messiah* did not gain as much commercial success whereas *Brown Sugar* and *Voodoo* are certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).³⁶ Yet, like Du Bois his venture into the realm of Afro-futurist fantasy realism was not as commercially viable as other contemporary art(iculations).

An artist who epitomizes success with racial, political content is Compton native and Pulitzer Prize for music recipient Kendrick Lamar Duckworth.³⁷ Similar to D'Angelo (*Voodoo*), Lamar followed up a critically acclaimed album (*Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*) with an album bolstered by live instrumentation and increased lyrical depth related to political and spiritual convictions. Before Lamar and his cousin Carl Duckworth discussed the idea of Hebrew culture and its relation to Black, Brown, and other non-White people throughout *DAMN*, his third album *To Pimp A Butterfly* has a subtext of a personal and group liberation struggle.

The cover art to his second certified platinum album depicts countless Black men and children in front of the Supreme Court adjacent to a seemingly maimed judge bringing to mind insurrectionary activities like that of infamous preacher

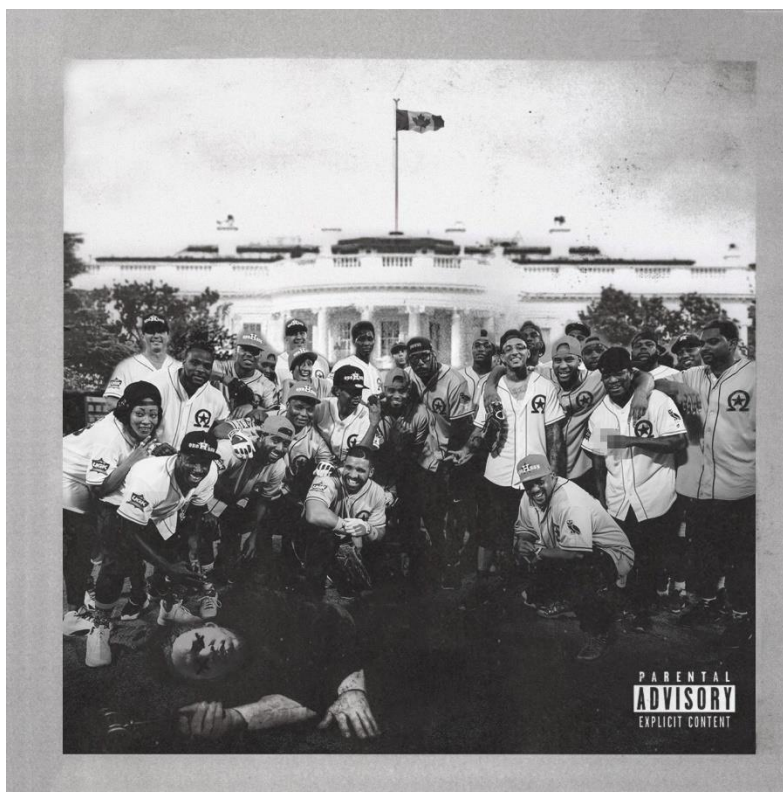


Fig. 3 Album cover for Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Lamar's position is in the center of the group, holding a child.

³⁶ "D'Angelo's Black Messiah Is #1 In Our Hearts, But Not On The Charts--What Gives?," Accessed November 10, 2017, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/613-dangelos-black-messiah-is-1-in-our-hearts-but-not-on-the-charts-what-gives/>.

³⁷ Associated Press, "Kendrick Lamar Breaks New Ground by Winning Pulitzer Prize," *The Telegraph*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/kendrick-lamar-breaks-new-ground-winning-pulitzer-prize/>

prophet Nat Turner or the *Appeal* of David Walker. The alto and tenor saxophone cut and shrieks through the traditional textures of a rap album.³⁸ On “How Much A Dollar Cost,” Lamar claims to be the Messiah, and his ruminations on Judaic concepts continue on “Yah,” when Lamar laments, “I’m an Israelite don’t call me Black no mo’(re)/Black is only a color it ain’t facts no mo’(re).”³⁹ The closing track on the album, “Mortal Man” contains an interview with Tupac Shakur from 1994. The conversation is presented as a conversation between Shakur and Lamar, the latter interviewing the former. Lamar’s tone is appreciative; he views Shakur a fellow, conflicted interlocutor tasked with addressing the racial, economic struggle that blocks the world from ‘messianic time.’ Shakur speaks of an inevitable bloody race war caused by poverty and racism. Lamar proclaims his belief that musical vibrations are the last hope for cultural salvation, Shakur shocks the former with a concept akin to D’Angelo’s statement about the spirits moving through the artist, when he says, “We ain’t even really rappin’, We just letting our dead homies tell stories for us.”

Kanye West has been a polarizing fixture in popular culture for nearly 15 years. Known for crashing award ceremonies⁴⁰ and off the cuff statements about presidential negligence and 400 plus years of slavery sounding like a choice,⁴¹ his output is beyond the parameters of musical art. For many, West’s criticism of then President George W. Bush’s response to Hurricane Katrina reflected his spirit of activism, but his latest comment regarding enslavement has placed him in a different light of scrutiny. In spite of this controversy, West, a self-proclaimed Christian, has represented messianic signs throughout his career.

Although many know he was merely a vessel for “Jesus Walks,” his performance of the song establishes him as an important modicum of the message.⁴² This song was an early example of West using messianic signs to engage sociological topics such as race, class, and gender. The song and its accompanying video includes choir arrangements salient in many Black American churches. Through his musical art and other speaking engagements, including Twitter, West portrays himself as a

³⁸ “It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts...horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection...,” *In The Break*, 14.

³⁹ Kendrick Lamar, *Damn*. Aftermath/Interscope/TDE, 2017, digital album.

⁴⁰ Paul Cantor, “Kanye West Apologizes to Taylor Swift for 2009 VMA Interruption,” MTV News, accessed July 20, 2018, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1647228/kanye-west-apologizes-to-taylor-swift-for-2009-vma-interruption/>.

⁴¹ He later commented that this comment was an example of “free thought” and claimed he was being “attacked” for it. Contextually, here is his response. Harmeet Kaur “Kanye West Just Said 400 Years of Slavery Was a Choice,” Accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/01/entertainment/kanye-west-slavery-choice-trnd/index.html>.

⁴² Jason Newoman, “How Rhymefest Avoided a Kanye Beatdown and Helped Craft ‘Jesus Walks,’” *Rolling Stone*, Accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/premieres/how-rhymefest-avoided-a-kanye-beatdown-and-helped-craft-jesus-walks-20150601>.

sacrificial figure for popular culture akin to 2pac, circa the Makaveli, *The Don Killuminati* period.

No matter where his journey through the world of art and fashion takes him, his roots are deeply in rap and Hip Hop culture. Arguably, one can find the most important part of his artistic voice in the records he repurposes to make montage style production for his own catalogue. His sample based crate-digging production amounts to a textuality. "New God Flow" featuring Pusha T samples a recording of a preacher of The Delta.⁴³ The sample connects with the folkways agrarian roots of the Deep South: the religion, oral tradition, and musical culture. West uses the sample of a 'reverend' for its sacred texture, for his secular purposes. Throughout West's verse, he raps from the point of view of a savior, drawing parallels between biblical text and violence haunting Chicago.

"Sanctified"⁴⁴ a song on artist Rick Ross' *Mastermind* album, co-produced by West whom is also a featured artist alongside soul singer Betty Wright and Big Sean.⁴⁵ Wright's first tenor to falsetto introductory soliloquy and chorus throughout the song about angels, being born again, spirits, and sanctification is juxtaposed with a bridge about paper chasin' and fornication, which sets the stage for a playful intercourse with the sacred and the profane.

Explicit, politically charged and at times absurd lyrical radicalism drives the certified platinum album *Yeezus*. Many regard this as the most atypical creation in his oeuvre. Throughout, 'over the top' lyrics operate as comic voice to balance out the scathing aggression on songs like "Black Skinhead" and "New Slaves." There is an intent focus, albeit vulgar, on leadership, which can be heard "New Slaves;"⁴⁶ this leadership is part and parcel of West's overarching belief that Hip Hoppers are the new rock and roll, avant-garde rock stars.⁴⁷ The Caribbean flavor scattered throughout

⁴³ On his album *Cruel Summer*, he uses a folk recording in different songs, invoking the vernacular event as affective space before constructing his own work. His usage of samples, particularly folk recording "A Sermon Fragment" by Reverend G.I. Townsel within "New God Flow." Kanye West, *Cruel Summer*. GOOD/Def Jam, 2012, CD.

⁴⁴ Sanctify-to make holy; set apart as sacred; consecrate.

⁴⁵ Rick Ross, *Mastermind*. Def Jam, 2014, CD.

⁴⁶ The politically charged song ends with distorted vocals of Frank Ocean singing over a Hungarian artist Omega's song "The Girl with the Pearls in Her Hair." He is the defendant in a suit for his use of this sample. Whether or not he uses this sampled song for its title is unknown. However, 'pearls' is a lude, sexual concept that can connect to his obscene leader/follower dichotomy in the lyrics of "New Slaves." Because of his own sexual ambiguity, Ocean's humming over the music complicates a simple classification of the music as hyper-masculine further suggesting the conscientious absurdity of West.

⁴⁷ In his interview with Zane Lowe, West says the project highlights his resistance to "speaking with today's textures." In this interview, he decries that rap is the new rock and roll, and he is the biggest star of them all. BBC Radio 1, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Part 1," YouTube, September 23, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2T0fMkZoMo>.

Yeezus and Lamar's, "Blacker the Berry" signifies "a form of Zionism [that] evolved within Jamaica...explicit in Rastafarianism and... frequently articulated in Reggae."⁴⁸ Reggae and dancehall artists regularly refer to Babylon. Between these artists and Hip Hop artists, there is a common heritage of Africa as ancestral homeland and myriad forms of resistance to colonial subjugation. Hip Hop uses the sound and aggressive content of reggae/dancehall as cultural capital for its own purpose.

Womanist Africana Studies scholar Salamishah Tillet notes, "How black radicalism is embodied, gendered, and memorialized within mainstream Hip Hop culture."⁴⁹ West has sampled the work of Nina Simone throughout his career. Simone defied genre through experimentation and contested oppressive racial structures. Tillet claims West samples Simone the most and credits Hip Hop for making her catalogue more accessible to wider audiences.⁵⁰ She notes controversy regarding his usage of Simone especially the song, "Blood on the Leaves." Tillet identifies Simone as key to what she terms sonic black radicalism. The messianic lens allows for the paradoxical framework. With the instrumental node of Hip Hop's unified system, the sample is a seed of simultaneity. The past, present, and an imagined future materialize on sonic palettes. Tillet describes Simone "as a figure who aurally ties the Hip Hop generation to the black freedom struggle."⁵¹ Simone is a signifier within a signified (Messiah) in the case of West's *Yeezus*. She is an authentic sound of dissent from an era of revolutionary discourse, used for the Avant-pop messianism of a pop culture icon.

Conclusion

Decades ago, traditional media outlets, television broadcast news and print publications emboldened parents like my own to prohibit the incursion of a profane/sacred genre known as Rap and Hip Hop. Now Hip Hop is at the forefront for its critical acumen and is arguably the most popular folk music of today. During a concert and panel discussion organized by Georgetown University and Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican and the Archdiocese of Washington, Talib Kweli (Greene) referred to his songs as "prayers," which is in stark contrast to the unpolitical, Pentecostal hegemony I experienced as a child. In fact, Kweli's description particularly aligns with the work of Black Nationalist pastor Albert Cleage who regards militant

⁴⁸ Partridge *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 221; Boomshots "Kanye West's *Yeezus* Full Up of Dancehall Samples," Accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.boomshots.com/index.php/2013/06/kanye-wests-yeezus-full-up-of-dancehall-samples/>, Biko Kennedy, "Dancehall the hidden inspiration of Kanye West's 'Yeezus'," http://jamaicansmusic.com/news/Music/Dancehall_The_Hidden_Inspiration_Of_Kanye_West_s_Yeezus

⁴⁹ Salamishah Tillet, "Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 121-122.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 119.

⁵¹ Ibid. 120.

leaders as messiahs in his text *Black Messiah*.⁵²

The ‘messianic’ concept is useful to understand the conviction, direction, and subsequent work of some of the most prolific cultural producers, including emcees, authors, and athletes. Former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s order to prevent the rise of a black messiah adds a layer to the conversation but contemporary artists’ usage of the concept fosters a critical conversation of race and empire. Hip Hop continues the culture of language and letters of the legacy of Frederick Douglass, Du Bois and others devoted to restoring subjectivity and humanity to people denied equity. There is considerable documentation regarding DuBois’ obsessive scientific journalism throughout his lifetime, but the conspiratorial, messianic fictional novel *Dark Princess* shows Du Bois as a progenitor of subversive fiction that engendered future artists of different genres to construct their own messianic subjectivities in the realm of popular culture.

For further reading on contemporary figures who signify messianic discourse, see Deidre Lyniece Wheaton’s “Seeking Salvation: Black Messianism, Racial Formation, And Christian Thought in Late Twentieth Century Cultural Texts” (diss., University of Michigan, 2008). Wheaton analyzes comics, photography, and fiction literature as sites where the tradition of Black Messianism maintains that their creative fashioning of black Messianism evokes the ideological and rhetorical power of previous black cultural producers. Wheaton framed her argument about “new millennium” black messiahs by focusing on *The Boondocks* by Aaron McGruder, the visual art of Renee Cox, and *The White Boy Shuffle* a novel by Paul Beatty. She argues that these cultural producers constructed imagined characters that radically analyze the institution of race to the extent that one can view the character as a leader of oppressed diaspora toward a world without racialized modes of thinking. The new millennium Black messiahs Wheaton describes are concerned with the American racial landscape which they see as a wild, Babylonian experience. Wheaton believes these cultural interventions “are the newest branches on a very old tree of black messianism—an element in African American culture with deep social, political, racial and religious roots.” Her dissertation is a continuation of literature concerning Black radicalism from the 19th century on.⁵³

There is no paucity of criticism on the spirit of negativity in Hip Hop. However,

⁵² In the documentary *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*, Kweli describes a moment when authorities apprehend and question him in an airport. He realizes the Stokely Carmichael speeches he was listening to in his headphones were flagged, which shows the militancy of Kwame Ture continues to cause trepidation for the (American) state apparatus. Kweli’s craft of political prayers is part of a larger discourse of artists who contest racism and inequity through cultural production.

⁵³ Also read, “Manufacturing a Messiah: How Nike and LeBron James Co-Constructed the Legend of King James” by Richard MocarSKI and Andrew Billings. The authors identify what they see as a calculative scheme employed by Nike and LeBron James, to represent the latter as a messiah figure in the commercial marketplace.

Hip Hop is also a genre/social movement ripe with narratives about survival from marginalized viewpoints. Moreover, the messianic verve throughout the black intellectual tradition shows how the complex issue of nationalism has been engaged in similar fashion by different generations of Black American cultural producers. It goes beyond utopian constructions of manhood promoted by liberal and conservative Protestant Christianity. If Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama represent messianic men, then artists like D'Angelo, 2pac Shakur, Kanye West, and others represent a more abstruse version of the (black) messianic idea.

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