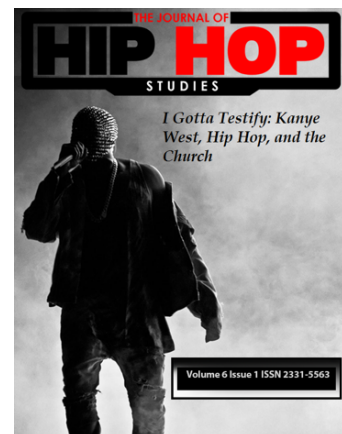

Foreword

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Foreword

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Hip Hop

Hip Hop is undergoing a spiritual awakening! Growing numbers of artists are incorporating their religious faith into their music and performances. At the 59th annual Grammy Awards in 2017, Chance the Rapper performed a medley of his hits “All We Got,” “No Problem,” and “Blessings (Reprise).” Chance was accompanied by an orchestra, an African American choir dressed in white robes, and gospel greats Kirk Franklin and Tamela Mann. Chance’s acceptance speech for the Best New Artist award ended with his mighty proclamation: “Glory be to God. I claim the victory in the name of the Lord.” Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole have included themes of spirituality, faith, and religion in their albums. This incorporation of spiritual themes in Hip Hop is not a new phenomenon. Lauryn Hill’s 1998 debut album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, sampled the chorus (we’re marching to Zion) from the hymn “Come Ye That Love the Lord.”¹

This theme of spirituality was also found in more *controversial* artists. DMX’s (Earl Simmons’s) albums in the late 1990s, such as *It’s Dark and Hell is Hot*, were full of profanity, hyperviolent rhetoric, sex, and drugs. Nevertheless, they always ended with a prayer.² DMX appeared on *The Breakfast Club* in 2016 taking sips from a fifth (of a gallon) of Hennessy as he talked about his desires to become a preacher. DMX would not be the first rapper to enter the pulpit. In 2004, soon after Run-DMC officially disbanded, lead rapper Run (Joseph Simmons) became an ordained Pentecostal pastor. Bad Boy Records top-selling rapper Ma\$e (Mason Betha), perhaps following in the footsteps of Rev. Run, put away his shiny suits to start his ministry, *Saving a Nation Endangered*, Church International (SANE) in 1999. Other rappers are finding ways to minister without becoming pastors. Former UGK member Bun B (Bernard Freeman) co-taught a course on religion and Hip Hop with Anthony Pinn at Rice University in Houston, Texas in 2015. Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus Jr.) released a gospel album titled *Bible of Love* in 2018. The album topped the Gospel Albums chart for seven non-consecutive weeks.

Ice Cube’s music underwent a monumental transition as a result of his conversion

¹ Lauryn Hill, “Zion,” *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998).

² DMX, “Prayer (skit),” *It’s Dark and Hell is Hot* (Ruff Ryders/Def Jam, 1998).

to Islam in the early 1990s. Other rappers have been heavily influenced by Islam. Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco symbolize the shift within Hip Hop and the larger African-American community toward Sunni Islam. Any history lesson on Hip Hop is incomplete without mention of Islam. Several rappers are affiliated with Sunni Islam, the Nation of Islam, or the Five Percent Nation. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was responsible for ending a feud in the mid-1990s between Common and Ice Cube which could have turned violent. The Universal Zulu Nation, founded by pioneer Hip Hop dj Afrika Bambaataa, adopted doctrines of the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation into their mission. The albums of Wu Tang Clan and their affiliates include references to gods, earths, seeds, and wiz, all terms in the Five Percent Nation. AZ references the influence of the Five Percent Nation on Hip Hop in Nas's song "Life's A Bitch":

*We were beginners in the hood as five percenters
but something must of got in us cause all of us turned to sinners.*

The Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam founded by Clarence 13X in 1963, teaches followers that the black man is God personified, and man can achieve godliness through prayer, meditation, clean living, and physical fitness. The messages of the Five Percent theology echoed throughout the lyrics of Wu Tang Clan, Busta Rhymes, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, and Erykah Badu in the 1980s and 1990s. Jay-Z refers to himself as Jova the god and has adorned himself with a gold Five Percent Nation medallion in past public appearances.

Thus far Judaism has not been as relevant in Hip Hop as Christianity and Islam, but that may soon change thanks to Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick's conversion to Judaism is the result of his cousin Carl Duckworth who changed his name to Karni Ben Israel and joined Israel United in Christ in Florida. Cousin Carl introduced Kendrick to Deuteronomy 28, which Black Israelites believe is a prophecy of the enslavement and forced migration of African people. Jacob S. Dorman studies the history of the Black Israelites in his book *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (2013). Dorman traces the influence of Israelite practices in the Holiness Christianity movement of the 1890s and the emergence of the Pentecostal movement in 1906. A second wave of Black Israelite synagogues arose during the Great Migration as blacks moved to the North. Arnold Josiah Ford, a colleague of Marcus Garvey, founded his own synagogue in Harlem during the 1930s. In 1969 Abba Bivens started the Israelite School of Universal Practical Knowledge (ISUPK) in New York. ISUPK spread their word through street preaching demonstrations. Kendrick weaves in the principles of ISUPK on the songs "Yah" and "Fear" from his 2017 album *Damn*.

Yeezus Walks

Many Christians see a sharp contradiction between God's teachings and the abundance of gratuitous materialism, misogyny, hubris, and violence in mainstream Hip Hop music. Hip Hop, like jazz and the blues decades earlier, is viewed as being the

“devil’s music” in some circles. Rev. Calvin O. Butts, III, the pastor of Harlem’s historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, threatened to drive a bulldozer over explicit rap CDs in 1993. T.D. Jakes, the senior pastor of The Potter’s House, a megachurch in Dallas, Texas, once said that the contradictions found in the music of Hip Hop artists are “indicative of a generation that is misguided and lost.”³

Hip Hop music is not the first genre of popular black music to be criticized by the church. Jazz and the blues were labeled as the Devil’s music by older generations. Theologian James H. Cone recognized the value of the blues. Cone referred to the blues as the profane cousin of the sacred (Negro) spirituals sung in the church. According to Cone, both forms of music provided blacks with an outlet to affirm their humanity in the face of oppression.⁴ Blues artists often walked a fine line between themes of the sacred and secular in their music. The same can be said of many of the previously discussed Hip Hop artists.

Since Kanye West’s debut album, *The College Dropout* (2004), religious and spiritual themes have permeated his music. Kanye appeared onstage with a white actor portraying Jesus Christ during his 2013 *Yeezus* tour. He marketed his seventh studio album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016), as a gospel album with a “whole lot of cursing.” The album opens with the moving gospel song “Ultralight Beam” featuring contemporary gospel legend Kirk Franklin. The next song on the album, “Father Stretch My Hands, Pt. 1,” samples the 1976 gospel song “Father I Stretch My Hands” by Pentecostal preacher Rev. T.L. Barrett.

In 2019 Kanye began hosting invitation-only church services which he called “Sunday Services.” The services featured a concert by a live gospel choir and band. The choir sang traditional gospel songs and gospel renditions of his mainstream hits. Snippets of the services were posted on Instagram and YouTube, helping out those who were not able to physically attend. Kanye delivered a live Sunday Service performance on Easter Sunday morning at the 2019 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Music Festival in Indio, California. Kanye’s choir—consisting of more than forty millennials—performed traditional and contemporary gospel songs such as: “How Excellent,” “This Is the Day,” “Brighter Day,” “Never Would Have Made It,” and “Satan, We’re Gonna Tear Your Kingdom Down.” The choir also performed gospel renditions of Kanye’s hits along with snippets of secular songs by Stevie Wonder, “Soul II Soul,” and “Aly us.” Memorable moments from the service included Chance the Rapper’s praise dance, DMX’s riveting two-minute prayer at the end of the choir’s performance of “Ultralight Beam,” and a tearful Kanye dropping to his knees in prayer.

The Easter service could be live-streamed worldwide on YouTube. This illustrated Kanye’s global platform and his ability to reach believers and nonbelievers in Jesus Christ—something not afforded to most pastors and choirs. Kanye’s Easter service

³ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 208.

⁴ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 6, 13.

received mixed reviews. While some viewers and concertgoers applauded his efforts to uplift the masses spiritually, others, including some members of the media, were skeptical of his motive. An NBC reporter questioned if this was a stunt to make fans forget about his controversial statements on slavery or his polarizing alliance with President Donald Trump.⁵ Another reporter from National Public Radio (NPR) said it was little more than vanity run amok. “He is the church,” wrote the reporter.⁶

Other critics called the Sunday service a fashion show for the next line from his Yeezy Season. Kanye, the choir members, and the musicians all wore matching mauve and rust sweat suits as they performed atop a grassy hill. The matching outfits were Kanye’s unique take on the robes that church choirs typically adorn. Kanye dyed his hair to match the color of his outfit. Concert attendees could purchase \$50 socks, \$70 T-shirts, and \$22 sweatshirts emblazoned with phrases such as “Trust God” and “Jesus Walks” from the “Church Clothes” merchandise tent.⁷ Days later it was rumored that Kanye wanted to launch his own church. “It wouldn’t be the traditional, 3-hymns-and-a-sermon thing. Instead, it would be a way to point people to Jesus through the arts and through a community of people who love and care for each other,” a source close to Kanye told *People*.⁸

We on an Ultralight Beam

In 2016, professors VaNatta Ford, Adria Goldman, and I placed a call for papers for a special journal issue on Kanye West, religion, and spirituality in Hip Hop. The goal of this project, “I Gotta Testify: Reflections on Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church,” was to add a new perspective to the scholarly discourse on Hip Hop and Christianity within classrooms, religious institutions, and popular culture by focusing on Kanye. We chose to focus on Kanye because he has been one of Hip Hop’s most influential artists in the past decade. Furthermore, Kanye is one of the most polarizing celebrities in America and across the globe. His music, fashion, political views, and family (which includes the Kardashians) dominate discourse on social media, blogs, television, and other forms of mass media. With the exception of Julius Bailey’s 2014 edited book, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, there has been little scholarly work published on Kanye.⁹ Bailey’s book

⁵ Michael Arceneaux, “Kanye West’s Sunday Service isn’t his redemption. It’s just another act of egotism.” *NBC News*. April 24, 2019. Accessed on May 31, 2019. https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/kanye-west-s-sunday-service-isn-t-his-redemption-it-nca998061?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma.

⁶ Audie Cornish, “At Kanye West’s Sunday Service, ‘He Is the Church.’” *NPR*. April 25, 2019. Accessed on April 26, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/25/717219251/at-kanye-wests-sunday-service-he-is-the-church>.

⁷ Tyler Watamanuk, “Kanye West Wants to Sell You ‘Church Clothes.’” *GQ*. April 22, 2019. Accessed on June 1, 2019. <https://www.gq.com/story/kanye-west-coachella-merch>.

⁸ Steve Helling, “Kanye West Considering Starting a Church, Says Source: ‘He Is Extremely Passionate About His Faith’” *People*. April 24, 2019. Accessed on April 28, 2019. <https://people.com/music/kanye-west-considering-starting-church-extremely-passionate-about-faith/>.

⁹ Julius Bailey, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

contained just one essay, written by Monica R. Miller, dedicated to the theme of Kanye and religion.¹⁰ We intended to produce a nontraditional journal issue, partly because Kanye has never adhered to traditional boundaries. We also chose this method because we wanted to provide a document suitable for both academic and popular audiences. Kanye West identifies as a Christian and primarily uses Christian themes in his music, videos, concerts, and messaging. This topic is important to us because far too often the masses who embrace this music and the artists are the most excluded from these scholarly conversations. This edited volume is composed of four multidisciplinary essays and eleven meditations that explore Kanye, religion, and Hip Hop. The meditations are a collection of short essays, poems, and sermonettes provided by academic faculty, doctoral students, clergy, media, a film director, and a noted poet. Each addresses Kanye West from different stages in his personal, musical, and spiritual evolution.

¹⁰ Monica R. Miller, “God of the New Slaves or Slave to the Ideas of Religion and God?” in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. by Julius Bailey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 167–179.

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