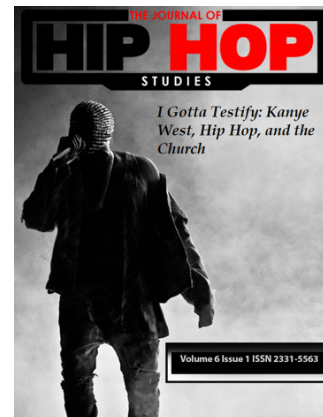

Meditation - "Ultralight Beam": The Gospel According to Kanye West

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“Ultralight Beam”: The Gospel According to Kanye West

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“We don’t want no more devils in the house, we want the Lord!”

This declaration from a shouting child-voice begins “Ultralight Beam,” the first track of Kanye West’s *Life of Pablo* (2016) album. Drawn from the 4-year-old Instagram sensation who was recorded having church in the car with her mother, West positions this word to be the invocation of his album. In a time of heightened antiblackness, the advent of a Trump presidency, and an attack on racial, gender, and sexual difference, such ministry here is beyond prophetic. Indeed, this reference could be read as a literal manifestation of “the gospel,” within the record. However, Kanye West’s consistent use of religious metaphors and symbols suggests a relevance for this religious text beyond religion. In fact, I argue that this is spiritual cleansing for America; particularly, not a call for moralism but a sincere admission that we must enter a new political moment emboldened by the voices of children. In essence, the centering of this 4-year-old sonic chant offers the listener an opportunity to deflect the religious overture, while paying attention to the voice and its demands.

I cannot hear Kanye West perform Hip Hop with gospel inflection, always adorned with a measured choral arrangement and anthem-like structure, without hearing a gesture to a historical Chicago gospel form. The use of Chance the Rapper and the Chicago references within the lyrics, drives me to reflect upon how West might be using a localized conversation for universal impact. Put differently, the “ultralight beam” in this particular track is not a suggestion that we are headed in the right direction, but a commentary on the speed at which everything seems to have changed. Nostalgia is at the heart of this anthem. Chance the Rapper sings:

*Foot on the Devil's neck
'til it drifted Pangaea
I'm moving all my family from Chatham to Zambia*

This short verse powerpacks a complex, but critical supposition: we are in a cultural drift which produces division and decay. This is not just a global phenomenon, but one that can be witnessed in Chicago’s Chatham Southside neighborhood conditions. Chatham, which was once a Black middle-class “panacea” of prosperity and community, has become an area divided between middle-class and poor, drug-addicted and drug-

free, old and young, invested and disinvested. Pangaea was an ancient understanding of how the once-connected continents were disconnected in a process of natural separation. However, here in West's ode to Pangaea via Chance the Rapper, the "ultralight beam" remarks upon the fast and unnatural shifts in Chicago's Chatham and other neighborhoods across the US—suffering from the housing market crash, income inequality and unemployment, reemergence of crack-cocaine and other perilous drugs, and the cyclical prison-industrial complex. The inclusion of this small, pithy statement in the sea of what can at first appear an optimistic anthem, disallows for the song to be seen within only a musical context. It is a political song, which calls upon the gospel sound as an instrument of lament and to package a political thesis within a sea of pious aesthetics. For me, this layering is what it at the heart of West's sonic genius; his most provocative contribution to Hip Hop music production.

The collaboration of Kanye West with Kirk Franklin is its own offering of what I might call in my forthcoming book, *On Kanye: A Philosophy of Black Genius*, a site of Black fugitivity. Kanye West, known for his unpredictable sonic and textual performances, partners with Kirk Franklin who has always been the popular gospel artist who offered cutting-edge, and sometimes unrecognizably gospel tracks, which push genre classifications to a new level. Together, West and Franklin offer us a "collaboration of the misfits," which challenges for some the gospel credibility given to "ultralight beam." As Kirk Franklin closes the track, he turns to a soliloquy for God:

*Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough.
This prayer's for everybody that feels like they're too messed up.
For everyone that feels they've said "I'm sorry" too many times.
You can never go too far when you can't come back home again.*

This prayer, when spoken by Kirk Franklin, inadvertently tells the story of he and Kanye West; they are testaments to God's grace "beyond bad behaviors." Like the preachers who were once "of the world," this portion of the track reverts to a gospel tradition of testimony and opens space for those who may need healing in the midst of the Pangaea that Chance the Rapper eludes. The other possibility here is that this moment anticipates the rest of the album—filled with perverse sexualities and deviant sonic modalities—which may be deemed responsible for the so-called "holy war" repeated in the song. Kanye West, in this formation, utilizes religious rhetoric and sonic gestures, to prepare the audience for what he knows may be controversial offerings. Put another way, he frames for us a reading of the album which facilitates an understanding of it as his own gospel, inclusive of his own version of the (un)holy.

And it is this latter point, that has brought me to the conclusion that Kanye West is unconcerned with the formal ideas of "gospel" or religion. Rather, it feels more accurate to say that he produces his own gospel, manifests his own truths. The inclusion of multiple voices, multiple sonic aesthetics—including the sound effects from the video game *Counter-Strike*—indicates his commitment to a polyphonic and polytextual experience for himself and listeners. This is no traditional anthem and he is not the traditional choral arranger. And thus, the refrain "this is a God dream," may not be a

reference to some “being out there,” but West’s own admission of his own Godliness. What is the dream, of which he speaks so loudly as a “God dream?” For me, it’s his own dream of a world of culture which has space for multiple realities and which is anti-Pangaea and not anti-Black – a space not terrorizing to those who cohere as different, or deficient. Here, in the enveloping ultralight beam, is a place where we all can dwell and attempt to put back together what seems so quickly torn apart. But, if we listen to the opening invocation, the belief in the God force within us (not the devils/destroyers), can get us to this place where the *Life of Pablo* can be at once gospel and Hip Hop.