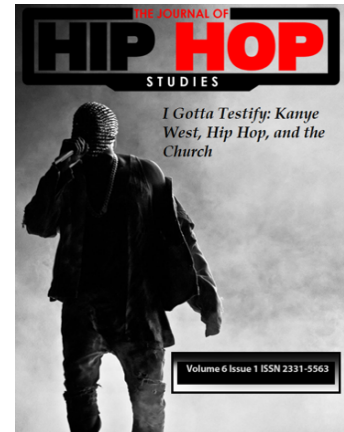

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Abstract

Kanye is enigmatic in many ways. His continuous reference to deity while still embracing a person like 45² makes him worth the study and effort to explore his contribution and effect in the Hip Hop cultural continuum. This article investigates, Kanye West from a theological and spiritual standpoint to provide insights from his theological aesthetics. While the ever-growing field of Hip Hop studies begins to explore religion in Hip Hop, the present work seeks to address this and develop new theologies/theories that fit both a Hip Hop and Black theology context. While the formal discipline of theology in the United States focuses on Christianity, and a good scope of this project takes a Judeo-Christian approach, it is noted that Black theology is much larger and complex than Judeo Christianity – such is the case with Kanye West as well. This project seeks to add to the study of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context. Using a duo methodological approach – qualitative media analysis and Jon Michael Spencer’s theomusicology – this article explores the symbolism and transmediation of Jesus in Kanye West’s music and concerts between 2011 and 2013. This research explores West’s transmediated images of Jesus through a socio-hermeneutical process – a qualitative analysis of language (verbal & non-verbal), imagery, and the tropes it produces for a Black theological discourse. Finally, this article will argue that West’s imagery of Jesus expands the imagination and worldview on the concept of Jesus and provides a Hip Hop socio-hermeneutic for Black theology.

¹ Socio-hermeneutical transmediation is both text and image delivered in electronic media using narrative or allegory as its delivery system. Thus, for Kanye, he employs both lyric and image to relay his message within a social context; in this case being Hip Hop.

² Editor’s Note: The author intentionally decided to say the name of Donald Trump. I have decided to include it for future references when the reader may not be aware of the reference.

Introduction: A Post-Civil Rights Symbol

Tupac and the Outlaws said they were “Searchin’ for Black Jezuz.” DMX stated that “Jesus loves me,” while Biggie Smalls wore a jewel encrusted “Jesus piece” around his neck. Conversely, Kanye West, who flirted with a Hip Hop form of “salvation” in his song “Jesus Walks,” has evoked the name and images of Jesus in multiple forums. West’s even claims “I am a God” while epistemologically nuancing aspects of the Jesus image into his concerts and music. Kanye West³ represents a myriad complex trope of issues for not just Black Theological praxis, but also for the broader study of Black people. In this post-civil rights era⁴ we, as Black people, find ourselves in a locality that is neither post-racial nor public Jim/ Jane Crowism; neither fully equal nor fully separate; not fully human yet celebrated in full, for culture and entertainment; it is an era that contains all the elements of hope and forward momentum in the symbol of what was the President of the United States and the nefarious nature of racism poignantly symbolized in Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and countless other Black lives, both male and female, lost at the hands of racism and profiling. West’s symbolism rises as a figure and presents an anomaly of sorts on a post-civil rights era. Located in Kanye is a mixture of voices; the narcissist, the pain, the disillusioned, the proud, the critical interrogator, the double standard, and even the push for a contextual pursuit and understanding of God. In that slurry of complexity, West presents a voice that speaks to and for voices on the margins; nihilistic voices; narcissistic voices; voices which desire social media likes and follows; voices that present on the one hand, a direct interrogation of White supremacy (*George Bush doesn’t care about Black people*) and on still the other, a complete embracement of White security (*I would’ve voted for Trump*). What to make of Kanye’s double rhetoric?

Still, West offers a complexity that is not just worth exploring, but paying attention to as he is a part of Hip Hop culture in a post-civil rights era. Thus, Kanye West. Kanye is important for three reasons: 1) in my 2013 research among Hip Hoppers and urban emerging adults, he was ranked above Tupac as a spiritual and religious figure in Hip Hop,⁵ 2) White emerging adults have come to appreciate and love him and, have grown up on his music, and 3) Kanye is a symbol for a post-civil rights context and represents

³ The research for this article comes from my work in *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* ed. Warren Goldstein, Center for Critical Research on Religion and Harvard University (Boston, MA: Brill Academic, 2017) and is grounded within that study.

⁴ I will be defining this term as such, this is the generation of young adults born during the post-soul era/ context (1980-2001), raised on a transmediated diet, disconnected from previous generations both locally and ideologically, and currently have non-binary issues to contend with in a post-9/11 society living in Western society. This generation does not have the binary issues to contend with that the Civil Rights generation did (e.g. more Blacks in leadership or the right to vote). While those issues are still present, they manifest themselves in a matrix of problems, which involve police brutality, sexuality, sexual orientation, socioeconomics, transgender, class, and race.

⁵ Daniel White Hodge, “No Church in the Wild: An Ontology of Hip Hop’s Socio-Religious Discourse in Tupac’s ‘Black Jezuz,’” *Nomos* 10, no. (2013).

the sacred, the secular, and profane exceptionally well in one persona. This is where we must begin, at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular.

This article, therefore, investigates, Kanye West from a theological and spiritual standpoint to provide insights from his theological aesthetics. While the ever-growing field of Hip Hop studies begins to explore religion in Hip Hop, the present work seeks to address this and develop new theologies/theories that fit both a Hip Hop and Black theology context. While the formal discipline of theology in the United States focuses on Christianity⁶ and a good scope of this project takes a Judeo-Christian approach, it is noted that Black theology is much larger and complex than Judeo Christianity⁷ – such is the case with Kanye West as well. This project seeks to add to the study of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context.

Using a duo methodological approach—qualitative media analysis and Jon Michael Spencer’s theomusicology⁸—this paper explores the symbolism and transmediation of Jesus in Kanye West’s music and concerts between 2011-2013. This paper explores West’s transmediated images of Jesus through a socio-hermeneutical

⁶ Arguably, within the U.S. the study of God, theology has been mostly relegated to the study of the Christian God e.g. Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Teresa L Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003). Most universities offering degree programs in Theology go to great lengths to describe the Christian religion and pay little to no attention to other religious interpretations of God. Some Hip Hop artists found their first critique of the God language as a critique of the Christian religious expression of God talk. Others have used the medium of Hip Hop to further explain misinformation and other reflections of theology (Nation of Islam, Five Percenters, etc.).

⁷ For example, the groundbreaking work of James Cone which discussed Jesus from an Afro-centric perspective and situated Black theology within a liberation framework, this was written at a time when Black theologians were not truly respected by publishers or the academy (not that we have ever arrived at a place of total acceptance), but Cone created a shift in how we think about Christian theology James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 5th ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997); *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997). Moreover, the works of Herbert Edwards, Dwight Hopkins, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Monica Coleman disrupt the White hegemony on theology and make space for womanist, a divergent take on sexuality and Blackness, along with dealing with racism within theological traditions Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Innovations; Innovations (Minneapolis, Minn.) (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999); Herbert O. Edwards, “Black Theology: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, no. 32 (1975). Kanye is doing similar things with his own theological canon. He is disrupting views of theological, body, and race. Now, I will admit that West has some problematic issues that need to be engaged – such as his ongoing rants, political views, and even a continually changing position on most social issues. Yet, even through his issues, Kanye continues on that disruptive tradition within Black theology.

⁸ Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap*, vol. 5, *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

process—a qualitative analysis of language (verbal & non-verbal), imagery, and the tropes it produces for a Black theological discourse. Finally, this paper will argue that West’s imagery of Jesus expands the imagination and worldview on the concept of Jesus and provides a Hip Hop socio-hermeneutic for Black theology.

Methodological Approaches

Employing a mixed methods approach, semi-structured interviews⁹ were used along with primary data from previous research to explore Kanye’s overall connection to Black theology. The *second* of the mixed methods approach is that this study is a theomusicological study using the methodological approaches established by Jon Michael Spencer.¹⁰ Theomusicology is defined as, “...a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy.”¹¹ It is, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall state, “Music as spiritual practice...[to] hear the challenges and evils in the church and the world as the music reveals.”¹² What distinguishes theomusicology from other methods and disciplines such as ethnomusicology is:

Its analysis stands on the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist’s authoritative/ normative sources. For instance, while the Western music therapist would interpret the healing of the biblical patriarch Saul under the assuagement of David’s lyre as a psychophysiological

⁹ About 30% of the data for this article came from research gathered for my manuscript *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* which focuses on a much broader Hip Hop context and post-soul era.

¹⁰ Jon Michael Spencer, *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*, Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1991); *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap*, vol. 6 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); *Sing a New Song: Liberating Black Hymnody* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), Biography (bio); Government publication (gpb); State or province government publication (sgp). Created initially as a discipline, theomusicology is a methodological inquiry as it seeks to understand the theological inferences within the studied cultures music. This method has been used by scholars to examine other areas of music and popular culture such as issues of sexuality and promiscuity Angela McRobbie, “Recent Rhythms of Sex and Race in Popular Music,” *Media, Culture & Society* 17, no. 2 (1995); Heidi Epstein, “Re-Vamping the Cross: Diamanda Galas’s Musical Mnemonic of Promiscuity,” *Theology and Sexuality* 8, no. 15 (2001), understanding poetry in context Sandra L. Faulkner, “Concern with Craft: Using Ars Poetica as Criteria for Reading Research Poetry,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (2007), understanding the basic elements of Hip Hop spirituality Jon Michael Spencer, “Book Notes Rhapsody in Black: Utopian Aspirations,” *Theology Today* 49, no. 2 (1992), to examine the sacred and profane within Black music Melva Wilson Costen, “Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion by Jon Michael Spencer Minneapolis, Fortress, 1990,” *ibid.* 48, no. 3 (1991), and examined as a methodology in practice Stephen A. Reed, “Exodus by Terence E. Fretheim Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991,” *ibid.*

¹¹ Spencer, *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*, 3.

¹² Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall, *Wake Up! Hip Hop Christianity and the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 77.

phenomena, the theomusicologist would *first* take into account the religious belief of the culture for whom the event had meaning. The theomusicological method is therefore one that allows for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied.¹³

Therefore, the theomusicologist is concerned with multi-level data within the context of the people they study, and subsequently analyze the material within the proper time, culture, and context in which it was created. The trinary approaches of theomusicology are:

1. The Sacred: not only those elements within a society that are set apart and forbidden for ritual (such as communion, marriage), but those elements within the given society and culture that are aspiring toward both a pious stance and search for deity.
2. The Secular: Those items which are designated by a given society and culture who have little to know connection with a form of deity.
3. The Profane: Those areas in a society labeled or given the designation of being outside the given morals, codes, ethics, and values established as “good” and/ or “right” by the society and culture being studied.

This trinary approach best discloses what the religion within the Hip Hop community is. Theomusicology rises above simple lyrical analysis and the imagining of what the artists might be attempting to say, and goes into the complex arena of where the sacred, secular, and profane intersect. This means that songs which express an explicit sexuality might, in fact, be connecting to a spiritual realm. Theomusicology broadens the discussion of religion within not just Hip Hop contexts but also for Black Theology, it asks the question “What is the Hip Hop community saying in the context in which the music, art, album, and artist were created in?” In this sense, it is interrogating what Kanye is engaged with and the context in which that engagement is taking place. The following is also used in this study to provide a clearer picture of Hip Hop’s theological construction¹⁴:

- Cultural context
- Political climate
- Artists upbringing and background
- Album cover and art
- Cultural era
- Religious landscape
- Geographic location

¹³ Spencer, *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*, 3-4.

¹⁴ Spencer asserts that these areas are crucial in the understanding of the theological message *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion*; *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology* at the time the song was created.

In their article, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear state:

Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred ... As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths.¹⁵

Similarly, this particular study examines theology and spiritual pursuits beyond moralism established by White dominant structures and asks complex questions about God (or Gods) and the performativity within religious domains for focus on a post-civil rights Black theology rooted in Kanye West.

Within theomusicology there are three analytical approaches that this project will utilize: descriptive, normative, and predictive.¹⁶ *Descriptive theomusicology*, is a non-judgmental approach to the culture, music, and people being studied and allows the space for the researcher to take in the bulk of data for what it is rather than placing a judgment label on it (e.g. perceived sexual behaviors, ‘bad language’). It also examines the creators of the music and the consumers within the context of it; in this project chapters one and two will be part of the descriptive analysis.

Normative theomusicology, continues the analysis previously listed while comparing the tenets of canonical authority that the culture being studied describes as a norm and the broader standardized canon. In this sense, West’s own discourse of God, salvation, and claims of Christianity are taken into consideration. In other words, normative theomusicology examines the sacred texts that a culture—in this case being Kanye West—determines as canonical and compares that with what, say, the “Bible” is discussing. Normative theomusicology allows this project to delve into a canonical space that West may or may not be espousing.

Lastly, *predictive theomusicology* is an analysis of the future state of affairs to which music speaks or directs a society and / or culture.¹⁷ Attempting to avoid condemnatory polemic statements, this book will offer this analysis in chapter six, the conclusion, and begin to assert what a Hip Hop theology might in fact look like. Predictive

¹⁵ Harold Dean Trulear and N. Lynne Westfield, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and the Ethics of Control in the Rap of Mc Hammer,” *Theomusicology: A Special Issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 8, no. 1 (1994): 219-20.

¹⁶ Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*.

¹⁷ Spencer, *Theological Music: An Introduction to Theomusicology*, 4.

theomusicology is important as it establishes what the culture may be saying about God; or the lack of a God. As Spencer states

Analogously, the theomusicologist recognizes that human beings not only exist *in time*—in the present that is shaped by the past and perceptions of the future—but that during ritual they are caught in another, numinous time: in black religious ritual, because time stands still, and in African religious ritual, because time progresses counterclockwise to the time of the ancestors. Hence, while musicology historically examines music created *at one time*, and ethnomusicology anthropologically investigates music contemporary ethnic cultures produce in *present time*, theomusicology theologically studies music produced in the *diety's time*—the 'wholly informed, the pure mood.'¹⁸

Here, Spencer discusses the prominence of such a study and within a space such as Hip Hop—that is constantly changing—the predictive analysis is vital. Spencer is also correct in asserting that theomusicology provides a more balanced approach to understanding the theological messages within music. As a culture and society such as Hip Hop grows, it is important to engage in a predictive nature and allow its members to speak of the direction in which it may possibly be headed in.

Contrariwise, lyrical analysis limits the scope of a study on, say, a contemporary artist such as Kanye and does not produce an accurate picture of what Hip Hop, as a full cultural continuum, is communicating theologically. I must interject here that from a rhetorician's perspective, word/ lyric/ hermeneutic is imperative and needed for study. It is clear that those are still used to study and for study of not just Hip Hop Culture, but Black theology. However, to place meaning on a lyric that the song never intended to say, is problematic on many levels. On a much more comprehensive level, I seek to establish the "why" an artist would construct an album like Nas' "God's Son," or Remy Ma's articulation of a female version of Jesus and the social conditions which helped created—rhetoricians, I would imagine, are interested in this too. Moreover, lyrical analysis requires an ethnographic dimension to it in order to clearly grasp what the artist was trying to implement in that song. And while some of Kanye's lyrics will be examined in this project, the analysis uses theomusicology and its trinary approach, while taking into account the context and environment the song/ album was created in.¹⁹

Kanye's albums were analyzed along with cover art, production places, producers, instruments used, and date released. Those albums include:²⁰

1. The College Dropout (2004)
2. Late Registration (2005)
3. Late Orchestration: Live at Abbey Road Studios (2006)

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ It must be noted that this methodology, while robust and will provide greater insight, will not fully produce a shift in what we understand theology to be.

²⁰ Because the scope of the research was complete, *The Life Of Pablo* (2016) was not able to make it into the canon of research.

4. Graduation (2007)
5. 808's & Heartbreak (2008)
6. My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (2010)
7. Watch The Throne (2011)
8. Yeezus (2013)

In collaboration with that data, mediated images from West's Twitter, website, and Facebook page were analyzed using predictive theomusicology. Images that had a form of spirituality or religion were captured paying special attention to those which connected with the Jesus figure. Finally, interviews from 106.1 KMEL, Breakfast Club Power 105.1, and Zane Lowe's promo show were also analyzed using normative theomusicology and to garner a broader scope of West's spirituality away from his music.

We have discussed the methodological framework. Let us now turn our attention to the concepts of what Kanye defines as Yeezus. This will give the context for the next section, West's transmediation of Jesus in his persona.

Kanye's Context & Space

Kanye West has risen to a socio-theological status within Hip Hop that few other rappers have attained. "John," in my interviews, stated that Kanye was indeed the "new Tupac." While "Lady J" told me that Kanye represented a newer more practical approach to the Christian God. In Ebony Utley's work²¹, Kanye's name was the highest on the list of "spiritual rappers" beating out Tupac.²² Kanye, who worked as a producer and musical arranger for artists such as Jay Z and John Legend, was raised in a Christian home. His music is a reflection of the influence of artists from the Funk era, such as The Commodores, Kool And The Gang, Marvin Gaye, and myriad of 80's popular culture artists such as Tears For Fears, Cyndi Lauper, Pet Shop Boys, and Peter Cetera. He is a musician at heart and combines samples, live drums, electronic rhythms, and musicianship to all his music. His first mainstream album, *The College Dropout* (2004),²³ made headlines as he addressed the issues of salvation, Jesus, Jesus' love, sin, and the profane with his song "Jesus Walks." Here, Kanye continued the conversation which Tupac had started in regard to heaven, final destinations, and Christological manifestations in indigenous settings.

²¹ Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 145-70.

²² This could signify a shift in the way newer generations espouse and respect deity within Hip Hop moguls. For the last two decades Tupac has been the primary rapper who represents a "God Connection" but as of recent, Kanye, Kendrick Lamar, and in some circles even Jay Z, are beginning to represent the broadening of this title. Time will tell how newer generations view Tupac and endear him to theological and spiritual pursuits.

²³ Kanye did release a less known album called *I'm Good* in 2003, but this was a "mix-tape" and did not receive much radio airtime. Still, four interviewees remarked how this album was "inspirational" and "Kanye's better, 'underground' work."

“Jesus Walks” is a song about contextualizing a “good news” message that, for too long, had been a White, Western, perfected image of deity in which many from urban centers could not aspire nor connect to (we will discuss this further in chapter five). Rappers have had a keen feeling toward the historical Jesus because of the persecution he endured, and the narrative of suffering Jesus’ story has. Kanye’s song acknowledges the secular and the profane within the sacred.²⁴ The song begins with an opening designed to seek a higher personal consciousness:

*Yo, We at war
We at war with terrorism, racism but most of all we at war with ourselves
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me) with me with me with me (fades)*²⁵

The beginning of the song sets the tone and demarcates a search for a Jesus who can “walk with him” and help in the war. In the second verse, Kanye begins to uncover that contextualized “good news” and offers up an image of Jesus that detours from the standard Evangelical one. It is this Jesus that Hip Hoppers appear to identify with:

*(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me)
The only thing that I pray is that me feet don't fail me now
(Jesus Walks)
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs
(Jesus Walks with me)
I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long
To the hustlas, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers
To the victims of Welfare for we living in hell here hell yeah
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly
I know he hear me when my feet get weary
Cuz we're the almost nearly extinct
We rappers are role models we rap we don't think
I ain't here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way yall need Jesus
So here go my single dog radio needs this
They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus*

²⁴ It is not just this particular song which Hip Hoppers are able to relate to. Kanye’s constant comparisons to Jesus, suffering, martyrdom, and being crucified is yet another pathway Hip Hoppers connect with his “Christ like” image.

²⁵ Kanye West, “Jesus Walks,” in *The College Dropout* (New York, NY: Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).

*That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes
 But if I talk about God my record won't get played Huh?
 Well let this take away from my spins
 Which will probably take away from my ends
 Then I hope this take away from my sins
 And bring the day that I'm dreaming about
 Next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out²⁶*

Note the implications that Kanye makes in this verse: a call to secularized individuals (hustlers, drug dealers, strippers), a space for those who are labeled as profane (killers, murders), and the beginnings of journey toward a Jesus that can relate to them. Kanye also skirts the issue of race and reminds us that “skin color” does not matter to him; he is in pursuit of the actual relationship and the “need” for a higher power; a God; a deity that is relatable and reachable.²⁷

Still, even within this veneer of perceived genuine spiritual pursuits, Kanye struggles with some of the same issues other rappers have regarding misogyny, nihilism, and a hyper braggadocio. In a 2013 interview with Hip Hop DX, Kanye stated that, “I ain’t your fucking role model. Don’t label me that. I’m an artist. Period. That’s what I do. Don’t expect anything else from me.” Hip Hop DX columnist Omar Burgess describes Kanye as a “walking contradiction” yet also asserts, “I think the fact that he generally embraces the inconsistencies in his ideology makes for some interesting tension within his music.”²⁸ That “tension” is precisely what makes Kanye a strong secular and profane articulation of theological matters.²⁹

In his 2013 New York Times interview with journalist Jon Caramanica, Kanye deals with this tension himself:

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Daniel White Hodge, *Heaven Has a Ghetto: The Missiological Gospel & Theology of Tupac Amaru Shakur* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Academic, 2009); Utley; Christina Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(Rap): Locating the “Spirit” in Hip-Hop,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006).

²⁸ Omar Burgess, “Yeezus Saves: Kanye West, Black Power & Consumerism,” *Hip Hop DX* (2013), <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/editorials/id.2126/title.yeezus-saves-kanye-west-black-power-consumerism>.

²⁹ This also connects with Kanye’s 2005 statement during a Hurricane Katrina live telethon regarding George Bush’s response to the victims of the hurricane. It was a sign that Kanye was not going to “play nice” in regard to social issues. Moreover, his live interruption of Taylor Swift during the MTV 2009 Music Awards, racially speaking, Kanye—a Black man—“rudely” interrupted a “White woman” at her moment of glory. This controversy has also created a Christological brand for Kanye as many in the Black and Latino community felt that this “interruption” was exactly what Whites have done for decades to Blacks and the fact that he had the nerve to do this and speak up for another Black woman who did not win (Beyoncé), gave him not only social credit, but also a messianic one for the “voice” of the voiceless.

I don't have some type of romantic relationship with the public. I'm like, the anti-celebrity, and my music comes from a place of being anti. That was the album where I gave people what they wanted. I don't think that at that point, with my relationship with the public and with skeptical buyers, that I could've done "Black Skinhead" [from "Yeezus"]³⁰

Kanye sees himself as this model for this tension and, conversely, also views himself as a sort of Hip Hop hero. He continues:

I am so credible and so influential and so relevant that I will change things. So when the next little girl that wants to be, you know, a musician and give up her anonymity and her voice to express her talent and bring something special to the world, and it's time for us to roll out and say, "Did this person have the biggest thing of the year?" – that thing is more fair because I was there.³¹

Some bloggers and scholars view Kanye's confidence as arrogance and pride, while almost all of the interviewees saw Kanye as a visionary and modern day prophet.³² Kanye does, however, present a contradictory stance on some issues; especially regarding gender.

In his 2013 album, *Yeezus*, Kanye drew critics when he called himself "God." While a lot of the album deals with a strong involvement with indigenous forms of theological inquiry, much of the hyper male posturing is done on the backs of women. Kanye describes oral copulation and ejaculation on women as normative for sexual exploration and dances in the controversial space of religion and sexuality – a good space, but women are not in power within this space. Does that still make him a Jesus figure? In an online article Ebony Utley tells us that:

Throughout the album, West asks audiences to embrace a similar "and without contradiction" acceptance especially of his social commentary about race and his social disdain for women. West's album is filled with typical rap posturing. No successful rapper has ever spent an entire album rapping about how he can't read, can't get a job, and can't keep a girl. Rap is a fantasy world, where men's success is premised on making their wildest dreams seem true. The catch comes if you're a black man without any real power. How do you convince an audience that you do have power when the fashion world won't take you seriously, detractors upbraid you for having a baby with Kim Kardashian, and people publicly make you apologize for words and deeds you're not sorry for. Well, apparently, West came up with an answer in the 48 hours he spent finishing lyrics for the album. You accrue power by taking it from someone else. Thus, women take the brunt of West's anger usually via some (oral) sex exchange.³³

³⁰ Cited in Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. interview with Kanye West

³¹ Cited in *ibid* interview with Kanye West

³² A term typically held for artists such as Tupac who were able to future cast events.

³³ Ebony Utley, "Kanye West's Yeezus May Be Sexist but Is Not Blasphemous," (2013), <http://www.rapandreligion.com/yeezus/>.

These do present some contradicting posits for Kanye. Still, the Christian Jesus was not without controversy either. The relationship to Mary, the adulterous woman at the well,³⁴ the strong words toward the Syrophenician woman,³⁵ the absent teen years of Jesus all leave an open gap for ideas surrounding the historical Jesus.³⁶

Still, Kanye continues to push forward, and his 2013 album makes numerous references to God and the connections that Kanye has to God. This, once again, is a continual tension with the sacred, profane, and secular³⁷ and allows a more comprehensive view of the complexity surrounding religion in Hip Hop contexts. Utley again, reminds us:

Does this type of misogyny, which, let us be fair, is common in rap, undermine West's religious allusions? No. Both religion and rap are notorious for perpetuating patriarchy and heterosexism. Any system designed to empower must do so at the expense of someone else. Whether it's a believer over a nonbeliever, whites over blacks, men over women. How does a new slave get his power back? He becomes "a dick instead of a swallower" and "fucks a Hampton spouse." Does that excuse West from his cavalierly sexist commentary? No. But a man obsessed with Jesus does so because he wants to imitate the power of Jesus. When rap and religion turn to power, there will be hierarchy, and the person controlling the story will always come out on top.³⁸

Thus, Kanye's religious dance continues and in that dance the search for power is critical—albeit at the expense of misogyny. Yet, what makes Kanye West such an appealing figure, not just for Hip Hoppers but for American popular culture in general, is that he is, in his public persona, transparent and hostile towards dominant forms of norms—especially as it relates to religion and spirituality. While at the same time, Kanye represents the human experience and is contradictory, proud, hypocritical, and arrogant—this is true though, of many well-known pastors, priests, rabbi's, and religious leaders; no one gets a pass and is all perfect.

I have shown using a Theomusicological approach the macro context of Kanye West. This now lays the groundwork for exploring his transmediated religious symbolism and of Jesus.

³⁴ John 4: 7-38

³⁵ Matthew 15: 21-28

³⁶ This does raise questions as to who was Jesus? How has Western Christianity deteriorated the image of the historical Jesus? How might his reputation as a "friend to the sinners" still hold true today? And, how would that friendship be seen by, say, evangelicals in the U.S.? These are continuing and pressing questions that linger. Much like that, Kanye is attempting to work through some of those complications in the work he is doing.

³⁷ Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap*.

³⁸ Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion; The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap*.

Transmediated Religious & Jesus Imagery

Let us now explore some of the more theological imagery that Kanye employs through his various social media platforms.

Image1: Kanye & Mom. On West's Twitter account, he posted a picture of a sunset with the caption "Hi mom." The reference here being to his mother (Donda West), whom he had a significant relationship with, who had passed away on November 10, 2007. It was noted throughout the interviews that Kanye was "never the same" once his mother passed away and that he was struggling to find "meaning" after her death. This image might suggest some of that struggle. Kanye was also reported to have "blamed himself" for her death and those close to him have said the anniversary of her death is still painful for him.



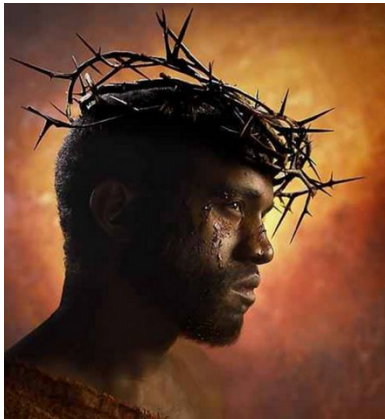
Image 2: Cosmic Deity: On both his website and Facebook account, West had this image below which is a myriad of meaning, messages, and color. While he takes a central position in the shot, there are numerous other bodies, mainly female, around him. A composite shot consisting of HDR (High Dynamic Range) photography and digital art, Kanye utilizes a socio-sexual-spirituality here and connects a cosmic realm to his own imposed deity while subjugating mostly women to his power. It is interesting to note the use of White women and Whiteness in general, throughout Kanye's imagery.



Image 3: Angelic Kanye. This is a widely used image of Kanye at one of his concerts. It was rumored that West developed this image into the theatric use of Jesus in his concerts—more on that momentarily. This image has Kanye wearing a traditional color representing “holiness” and/ or “purity,” white. Kanye’s use of angelic imagery is also seen as a process for him to be that deity; a conduit if you will. That conduit being Kanye and his theological stance and position—but not unlike Tupac who was rooted in a more Judeo ethos of Christianity.³⁹



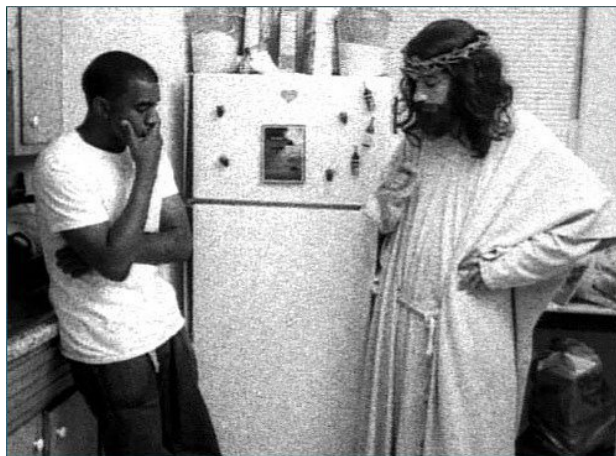
Images 4, 5, & 6: Kanye & Jesus: here we begin to see the use of Jesus and Kanye in an everyday sense. Jesus is conversing with him, almost as if to advise him on life, in the kitchen no less (below).



Kanye, at least here, seems to be heeding the advice, while image 5 (right) is suggesting that he is carrying his own cross. Kanye’s use of the crucifix was evident in Rolling Stone’s cover (left) picture of him with a crown of thorns atop his head. Kanye’s connection to Jesus seems, at times, symbolic and genuine—when asked in his KMEL



interview if he was a Christian, his response was, “yes, I am a Christian.” Yet, what does that mean for Kanye and his imagery of women and sexuality? Moreover, might one interpret Kanye’s use of Jesus merely as promotional and for album sales?



³⁹ In other words, Tupac followed more of the narratives of a Christian faith; resurrection for those who are in Christ, God judges, salvation in heaven, and salvation through Jesus.

Karl, an interviewee, stated:

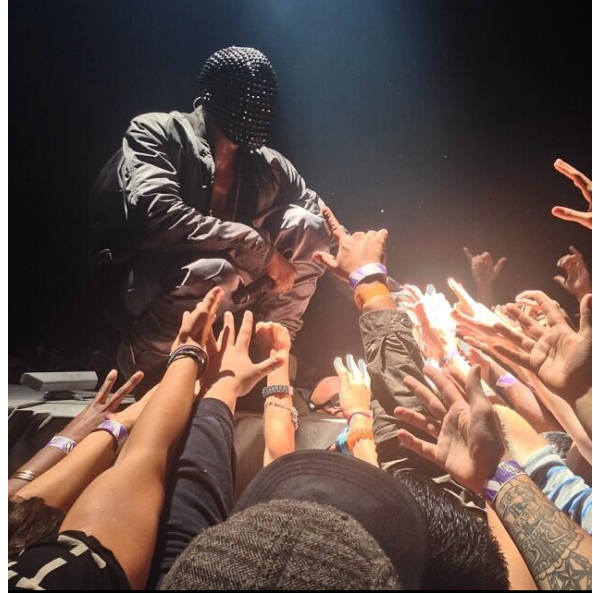
Shit, Kanye is this generations Pac. He's making them connections to religion and Jesus. He's trying to make Heaven accessible...feel me? Sure he's cocky. But, shit, so was Jesus! [laughs] Wasn't he the one who was always talking shit to the religious officials and saying he was God? [Smirks] Shoot, Jesus was a controversial cat.

To this, does Kanye's intention meet with an actual "relationship" with Jesus, as evangelical Christians would insist is critical? That is not known, nor is it known the why of Kanye's purpose here; this is much different than someone like DMX, Tupac, or even Lecrae who have implicit connections to Jesus.

Images 7 & 8: God, Space, & Time: Between 2011-2013, West created a theatric concert event complete with extras, C.G. effects, and a Jesus figure. The imagery, as seen in images seven and eight, reflected an interstellar scene in which Kanye spoke, rapped, and even connected to the Jesus symbol. For West, his Twitter account was filled with set images and imagery from these concerts and captions from West that talked about "God being present" or "I am God-like." These themes, West referring to himself as a God, are common and even more so after his mother's death in 2007. Note the use of triangular symbolism throughout. This is a connection to central and western African Christian traditions during the 4th & 5th century that West wanted to focus on.



Images 9, 10, 11, 12, & 13: Yeezus Imaginings: In the final group of images, we see direct links to Jesus and Kanye at his concerts. Still part of the theatric concert, Kanye has a place in the show where he arrives on stage wearing a mask covering his entire head (image 9). This was to represent his “blindness” to the truth. Jesus, then enters and helps in removing the mask to reveal “truth” and “consciousness” as Kanye is humbled to his knees (images 10-12). These are particularly interesting because Kanye chooses to transmediate a White Jesus⁴⁰ – even though he has had a strong critique of White racism on many occasions—and a Jesus that still embraces Hip Hop.



I had a friend of mine who's a pastor there as we started discussing how we want to deliver it," West said of the Jesus (set) piece. "My girl even asked afterwards, 'Hmm, is that weird if Jesus comes on stage?' No, we do plays all the time. People play Jesus. You know what's awesome about Christianity is we're allowed to portray God? We're allowed to draw image of him, we're allowed to make movies about him. Other religions you're not allowed to do that. That's what's really awesome about Christianity. That's one of the awesome things.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Now, I do not believe that Kanye is trying to reconcile the racial fatigue between Blacks and Whites. I do however think that Kanye chose a more recognizable form of Jesus that could get him more social capital rather than a Black Jesus; that is just speculation, however.

⁴¹ Taken from Gil Kaufman, "Kanye Explains That Surprising 'Yeezus Meets Jesus' Concert Collabo," MTV News, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1716028/kanye-west-jesus-yeezus-tour/>.



Kanye has taken this position on multiple occasions, so his reply here to criticism is just, in his mind. Yet, the question remains, what is his purpose here? And, to that, how might we begin to interpret Kanye's use of Jesus in application to a praxiological connection? In other words, does this connect to "real life?" Some would say, yes, it does. Tanisha, an interviewee stated,

Yeah Kanye a fool for trying to get at Jesus! But...there's a but...he's a pastor and a reverend for the kids. He's coming from the street perspective and wanting to make you think about these things. That's deep. He can reach way more people than even like a T.D. Jakes or any pastor, really.

The imagery spoke to at least 80% of my interviews as they viewed it as a contextualized manner in which to make accessibility to a deity figure—once seen as unreachable and oppressive—much more reachable and relatable. The total transmediated imagery Kanye employs was:

- 1 Jesus
- 129 minutes of music, rapping, & theatrics
- 1 red-eyed demon
- 28 songs performed
- 12 female dancers (at times wearing facial coverings; see image 13)
- 4 designer masks



Concluding Thoughts

I cannot and will not defend all of Kanye's actions, comments, or wild rants. His use of heteronormative rhetoric while still embossing a form of deity is problematic in many regards. While Kanye is not a savior for "all of Black Theology" nor is he the prime example of "what to do," he does provide some broader symbolic transmediated imagery which gives us a premise in which to begin a dialogue. Five reoccurring typologies arose within this analysis which should be given heed too as we dialog about the outlook of Black theology grounded in a Hip Hop context:

1. Hip Hoppers create their own view of God, Jesus, and church in association to suffering, pain, and inequality.
2. The post-soul context helps to create a climate to question authority, rebel from current religious standards and worldviews, and to create a new path to God and church.
3. The felt need from the Hip Hop community aides in creating a spiritual avenue in order to make meaning of the suffering, pain, and inequality.

4. Human action is directed toward problem solving. In this case, Hip Hoppers create a way to problem solve through their music, poetry, and lyrics.
5. Distrust of current systems, institutions, and social structures is a part of the worldview of Hip Hoppers within a post-soul context

For West, he is a part of these five typologies throughout his career – especially his early career between the years of 2002-2006.

Kanye taps into a figure of deity that is not without issue. Jesus was, and still is in many ways, a controversial persona. He was not one to neither mince words nor miss an opportunity to connect with the disinherited. Utley discusses that,

Jesus fraternized with sexually licentious women, cavorted with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, had a temper, used profane language with religious people, praised faithfulness over stilted forms of religious piety, and honored God more than the government. Gangstas respect Jesus because they see the parallels between his life and theirs.⁴²

However, most of the critical, radical, and post soul images of Jesus have been lost and too often domesticated for either political or racial reasons—West, I believe, comprehends this dilemma. For Black theologians, there is a sense of urgency in reclaiming this historical Jesus; a contextual Jesus that many Hip Hoppers, like Kanye, employ. Is it possible that seemingly blasphemous images of the sacred Christ create spiritual awareness? Theologian Tom Beaudoin has told us that, “Offensive images or practices may indicate a familiarity with deep religious truths.”⁴³ One must understand the authority of “official” sacraments to forcefully de-valorize them—in other words, to critique, one must have an understanding of the element of critique to give an honest evaluation; Kanye is doing just that and attempting to create a different form of a sacrament for a Hip Hop context. Likewise, it takes a true believer in the power of worship to turn curses into praise, the word “nigga” into a nomination of the highest respect. The point here is not to allow degrading terms, but to acknowledge that such rhetorical devices are making a serious theological attempt at grasping a practice of inequality that is *very* real.⁴⁴

Kanye presents a Jesus that is not only relatable, but one who is able to connect with the inequalities of life. Questioning if Jesus can connect is part of a Hip Hop critical sense. Moreover, a Jesus who can relieve the burden of ghetto life. A Jesus, who, in the Psalmist’s terms, is a shepherd and causes those in dire straits to lie down in green pastures; a Jesus is who able to blow through the blunt smoking persona and redeem

⁴² Ebony A. Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 49.

⁴³ *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1998), 123.

⁴⁴ Don Cupitt, “Post-Christianity,” in *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

those who hurt, back to him. From my own research, I have found that Kanye, especially in his early career, was in search of this – in some way still is.

Problematic to all this is West's continual unpredictability, double rhetoric, and seemingly pointless public rants that would almost erase the "good" that is being done. Further, Kanye's own use heteronormative language and hyper-masculine postures, present an ongoing impasse within the broader culture of Hip Hop. Gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and misogyny are all areas that present Hip Hop's Achilles-heel and fundamental flaw. While this is not the sole doing of West, he does capitulate to this ideological structure and worldview. Moreover, by presenting a male deity, and a White one at that, West meddles in an ongoing debate of theology being dominated by Whites. One cannot overlook the connection that West has to and with Donald Trump – a figure that most in Hip Hop culture have fiercely disagreed with. This presents that dilemma which West has come to be known for. His open rant about not voting, but desire to vote for Trump presents, yet again, a disconnect with, say, his earlier critical statement toward George Bush in 2005 after hurricane Katrina. West's own credibility is affected by actions such as these and his views on gender continue to be opaque, at best.

Still, these sensationalized images of Jesus are needed. More importantly, they are needed in the discourse of Black Christian theology as many of these personas of Jesus get lost within the dominant Eurocentric Roman Catholic model of Christianity. Suffering in context is nothing new. The search for meaning within that suffering is nothing new. Neither is the rejection of dominate models of deity.

Sensationalized images of Jesus such as Aaron McGruders Black Jesus, Lil Wayne's Trap Jesus, Tupac's Black Jesuz, and Kanye's transmediated Jesuz represent a fundamental attempt to make deity, the divine, and the sacred more accessible to those who typically do not grace the sanctuaries of Christian Churches. They represent the fusing of the sacred and profane – a space that Spencer argues is vastly misunderstood. They use culture to help interpret the sacred scriptures while utilizing humor to break away some of the seriousness characteristically associated with Jesus.

Finally, the Hip Hop Jesus is more relevant and applicable to those seeking a deity from the post soul, Hip Hop, and urban generation. This generation is not interested in a God that sits in multi-million dollar churches. They reject pastors who net more than their congregations make in a year combined. They despise the double standards of the Christian church. And they do not want a Jesus "too perfect." What Tupac, The Outlawz, and Kanye do well is present a Jesus in human form for this current time and generation; with imperfections, arrogance, pride, love, pain, and hope, the Hip Hop Jesus represented

is one that is a much more approachable one and someone that has a broader scope to deal with ambiguity and doubt – something ever present in the post-civil rights era.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Something that needs more examination with Kanye's work, is his use of images in their relation to suffering and lament. The images he uses tend to focus on that and it would be interesting to investigate further, their meaning and significance to suffering.

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