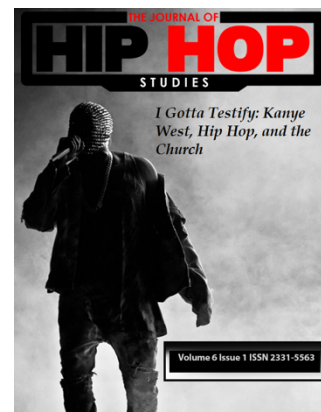

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VaNatta S. Ford and Adria Y. Goldman

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The complexity of Kanye West and his discussion of religion are topics worth exploring both inside and outside of higher education. Whether it is a new fan excited to learn about Kim's husband, an old fan wondering what happened to the *real* Kanye, or a minister curious about Kanye's contributions to Hip Hop theology—Kanye is a multifaceted person and topic. Discussions of him require insight from the various audiences he attracts (both fans and critics; friends and foes). Together with *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, this project offered the opportunity to have a conversation about Kanye, pulling in perspectives from various backgrounds, from academic to a dope poet. The essays and meditations presented in this special issue attest to Kanye's potential influence and complicated relationship to religion and the Black community.

Kanye has shown this complexity since the beginning of his career and often throughout. Part of his intricacy is his contribution to Hip Hop theology. He shows us anger, vulnerability, cynicism, but also triumph reminiscent of the forlorn and famous Biblical figure David. Though Kanye has boasted about Jesus walking with him in his multi-platinum opus, "Jesus Walks," later in his career it would seem like God is with him, but in a much different way. Not walking side-by-side, but giving him peace of mind as seen in the song, "Ultra Light-beam," which features Chance The Rapper and gospel star and pastor Kirk Franklin. Not only is God a place of shelter and peace for Kanye, but a light that keeps him going and illuminates his path amid the darkness that has come with this fame. In this album, we witness Kanye as a vulnerable seeker trying to figure out his life and without losing a grip on reality. While listening to this album, at times it feels like Kanye was asking for help, while other songs indicated that he trusted God's providence in his life, and was trying to discern real friends from foe. Kanye's music represents a space to praise, question, lament and converse with the Divine while trying to hold his Black life and mind in the balance. Kanye is just as righteous and problematic as our Biblical faves, which makes him both a human and a hypocrite—a dynamic explored throughout this collection.

The significance of Kanye's music is that it's timeless, thought-provoking, and spiritual while also exhibiting the ways toxic masculinity and respectability go hand-in-hand. This complexity in his music is demonstrated in songs like "All Falls Down" and "Addiction." Kanye uses his struggles of loss, family, fitting in, and fame thematically to

walk his audience through the ups and downs of life. Although these themes are part and parcel of the human condition, Kanye uses his faith and faithlessness to tackle the hardships and pleasures of life. His struggle as a fairly unknown producer, to music icon and fashion “god,” has safely situated him into an elite status of Black superstar musicians and artists, like the late Prince Rogers Nelson, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé and Aretha Franklin. His name carries with it both the good and bad, cool and contempt, power and problem, confident and cowardly.

Our goal for this special issue was threefold. First, we wanted to present articles and meditations that show readers the ways Kanye’s music, though controversial, adds to a genealogy of Hip Hop Theology in rap music, using similar rhetoric of Black Protestant Christianity. Secondly, we felt the need to give scholars, clergy, and activists a platform in the same volume to discuss Kanye’s influence and relationship with rap and religiosity. Lastly, we wanted this collection to continue the necessary conversation about Hip Hop and theology. In doing so, we learned some interesting perspectives on Kanye and the messages he communicates with his music and other actions.

Throughout the volume, we explored several elements of Kanye and his work. We learned about his ties to and similarities with past art forms, such as the blues; his influence on other musical artists; his discussions with and about God in his music; his (sometimes contradictory) messages about topics such as religion, suffering, women, and wealth; and his god-complex. We read examples of how Kanye contributes to Hip Hop’s theological discourse, as referenced in Hodge’s introduction to this collection.

The essays and meditations, in this volume, touch on the potential influence of Kanye. Whether he recognizes himself as a role model, Kanye’s music serves as a powerful tool of rhetoric. This project explores the various ways he uses this tool to:

- help make Jesus seem approachable.
- present an example of God in his own image.
- serve as a modern day prophet (who people may argue is trusted by some more than organized religion).
- offer healing to others, or to ask for help with his own healing.

It is still debatable whether Kanye exercises this influence in a positive way, especially with debates over the new Kanye and old Kanye. A common theme in this collection was Kanye’s journey as an artist and how his behaviors and music have changed – and not necessarily for the better.

What is especially interesting about this collection is it illustrates how audiences are calling Kanye out and bringing receipts. Some want to cash in on the promises offered as early as *The College Dropout*, and they are not afraid to use his lyrics and past behaviors to bring him to task. With Kanye still making headlines for his outrageous behaviors, from rocking his MAGA hat proudly to proclaiming slavery is a choice, people’s frustrations with his antics is growing.

But, should this be expected? For a man who self-proclaims to be god-like, should he expect others to hold him to a high standard? Is he naïve to expect less? Is it acceptable for him to say he does not care what we think? We do not pose these questions in hopes of one definite answer. Instead, we offer them as examples of how this discussion about Kanye and his complex relationship with religion and Hip Hop is only beginning. As Hodge mentions in the introduction to this collection, this project attempted to ‘explore Hip Hop’s theological paradigm in order to promote a true conversation and dialogue within the Hip Hop community.’ Although we began the conversation by offering insight through these essays and meditations, such discussions should still continue, as we are left with many questions. Hashtags, blog postings, and news media continue with themes of old Kanye vs. new Kanye. Kanye continues to give examples of why his rhetoric demands further discussion. And that brings us to the point we cannot ignore – Kanye’s claim that slavery was a choice.

Kanye’s visit to TMZ Live on May 1, 2018 happened after the completion of this project. Yet because of the weight of his statement and the response that it drew, it is imperative we discuss it before closing this collection. For one, his more recent behaviors illustrate how there is so much more to unpack when discussing Kanye. To claim slavery was a choice is problematic, and Kanye’s cultural identity and claims to be god-like only intensify the issue. In response to Kanye, Van Lathan did what likely many wanted to do that day. While explaining to Kanye that his statement was both wrong and insulting, Van said: “Frankly, I’m disappointed, I’m appalled and, brother, I am unbelievably hurt by the fact that you have morphed into something, to me, that’s not real.” Not only did Van’s comment and overall response garner a lot of support on social media, he brings us back to the theme highlighted throughout this collection – old Kanye vs. new Kanye.

So, again, Kanye leaves us with so many questions. What *really* happened to the old Kanye? Will we ever see the old Kanye again? Do we still *need* the old Kanye? Do we have a new Hip Hop prophet to fill his shoes? Is Yeezianity the new religion? Is Yeezus a worthy god?

Well – what do you think?