THE PREACHERS AND THE POWERS THAT BE(T): BLACK YOUTH, MORAL PANIC AND PUBLIC THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE ERA OF HIP-HOP

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To the memory of Michael McCormack,
father, mentor, coach, teacher,
and source of my relationship to all things religious.

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Introduction

In an article for *PopMatters*, an international magazine of cultural criticism, professor Marc Lamont Hill describes his visceral reaction to the local broadcast of a popular preacher sermonizing about the moral status of black youth of the hip-hop generation.[1] This polemic was delivered at the climax of a sermon entitled, "The Lost Generation." Hill recounts how the unrelenting criticism of a generation of "'hedonistic, 'selfish,' 'materialistic,' and 'lazy'" black youth lingered with him throughout the following week.[2] As a scholar and cultural critic, Hill acknowledges his familiarity with far more sophisticated and damning critiques of black youth culture, nevertheless, he admits to being particularly disturbed by the "rhetorical assault" waged by this clergyman. As Hill puts it: "Why would I care so much about a random preacher?"[3] What is at stake for Hill? Why does the sermonic discourse of a local preacher warrant the attention and ink of this cultural critic and university professor?

In this dissertation, I argue that sermons such as "The Lost Generation" demand scrutiny as they are performed, circulate, and consumed within a larger sphere of public discourse. Though the preacher delivered this message to a local religious community, it

[1] The use of "the hip hop generation" as a way of describing those who have come of age in the post-movement era, was popularized by Bikari Kitwana in his book, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002). Kitwana defines this generation as those born between 1965-1984. These dates are highly contested, as Kitwana recognizes, but nevertheless serve as a guide for thinking about those whose cultural context and sense of identity has been highly influenced by the rise and eventual globalization of rap music and hip hop culture. For an intriguing account of the notion of a "Post-Hip Hop Generation," see, M.K. Asante Jr.'s *It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation.* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin Press, 2008).
[2] Marc Lamont Hill, "I Bling Because I'm Happy," Pop Matters, August 5, 2005, http://www.popmatters.com/columns/hill/050805(accessed March, 19, 2012).
[3] Ibid.

was inextricably linked to wider discursive formations in the public sphere concerning black life in general and black youth in particular. As such, this middle-aged preacher's sermon was both shaped by and shaping a public discourse that constructs young black Americans as especially blameworthy, as if they had "cornered the marked on sin." Says Hill:

> According to much of America's ostensible moral leadership, both religious and secular, the hip-hop generation (those born between 1965 and 1984) is no longer in possession of the values, beliefs and traditions that have sustained our predecessors. In its place, it is argued, stands a selfish and hedonistic individualism that militates against our moral and social development.[4]

To be sure, such critiques from the perspective of "moral leadership" cannot be dismissed out of hand, especially to the degree that they are motivated by a commitment to the survival and flourishing of black communities. Yet, Hill finds such critiques to be particularly troubling when leveled by representatives of contemporary mainline black Christianity. He confesses:

> Unlike many of my peers, I can accept the legitimacy of that analysis on its face, although I tend to resist the romantic version of the past upon which it is often grounded. What troubled me so much, however, was the fact that the stance was articulated by a preacher who was representing the perspectives and interests of the 'New Black Church.'[5]

Put bluntly, Hill finds the public laments over black youth culture offered by the "New Black Church" to be thoroughly hypocritical. For Hill, the "New Black Church" functions as an uncomplimentary label to describe the "increased materialism, questionable theology, and dubious politics" that have often characterized the more prominent black churches in the latter post-civil-rights era. While such churches and their preachers regularly criticize the hip-hop generation, Hill points to their adoption of a

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

prosperity theology and its practices as a means of exposing the role of these religious critics in "replicating, reiterating, and resonating the same ideologies and practices that its critiques are intended to disrupt."[6]

Unfortunately, as Hill appropriately notes, far too much discourse emanating from the pulpits of black churches is indistinguishable from more conservative voices condemning black youth as *the* threat to the moral and social order of America. He writes: "Through their curious readings of Bible scriptures, depictions of Jesus as wealthy, and belief that people are poor because they 'ain't living right', the New Black Church reinforces the tired conservative argument that the problems of the disadvantaged are self-inflicted."[7] As such, Hill claims that the New Black Church has been absent from significant struggles for social justice, and has, "grown increasingly detached from politics except under very opportunistic circumstances."[8] For Hill, the fundamental problem is that this New Black Church, which he understands to be "increasingly unresponsive to the social conditions of its members," continues to engage in a "self-righteous onslaught" against young black Americans who are already socially marginalized and politically alienated. Moreover, on Hill's account, such unrelenting criticism from black churches and their preachers contributes to the "moral panic" surrounding black youth culture in the broader public sphere.

Like Hill, I am convinced that the sermonic and public discourse of black preachers concerning the intersections of black youth, popular cultural productions, and the wider public sphere demands critical investigation. As a part of such critical investigation, my concern is to map a set of crucial intersections, within African

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

American religious and theological studies as well as cultural studies, hip-hop studies, and other related fields of research. In particular, I will show that a critical analysis of the relationship between black youth, representational practices, and religious discourse, within the black public sphere, sheds light on what is often overlooked in both religious/theological studies and black cultural studies research. As a result, this dissertation helps to fill this gap by describing and clarifying the relationship between black religious discourse-deployed from pulpits to the public sphere-to the problematic of "moral panic" that surrounds black youth culture.

Deploying the theoretical and methodological tools of black cultural studies and critical homiletic analysis, this dissertation analyzes the cultural, ethical and theological encoding of sermonic and public theological discourses representing and responding to the perceived social, moral and religious crises plaguing young black Americans. This analysis opens into a critique of the complex ways in which these public theological utterances often reproduce dominant discourses that contribute to the pathologizing of young black women and men. This often leads to further marginalization, alienation and other socio-political consequences. Ironically, this is often the case even as religious leaders seek redemptive or emancipatory outcomes. As such, the dissertation contributes to the study of religion by taking seriously public discourse on black youth and their cultural productions (a population that is most often ignored within religious and theological studies). It also contributes to the broader field of cultural studies by focusing upon religious discourse and practice as a significant site of cultural analysis.

My approach to the problem described above is largely influenced by my reading of the work of political scientist, Cathy J. Cohen, who has done significant research on

the social and political status of black youth. Cohen deploys the concept of "moral panic" as a useful way of accounting for the exaggerated fear and resulting targeting, policing, disciplining and punishing of young black bodies. As an analytic concept, moral panic helps to clarify a set of relationships between black youth and dominant society as well as black elites and the leadership class within black communities- in this case black preachers. While black youth culture has long been offered up as a scapegoat for "moral decline" within American society, in the post-Civil-Rights/Black Power era, the emergence of hip-hop culture as a ubiquitous form of black popular culture has exacerbated this sense of "moral panic," and led to a range of disciplining discourses and practices aimed at "deviant" black youth. As film critic, S. Craig Watkins stipulates "discourse about and representations of black youth facilitate the making of a social and political climate that has become increasingly hostile toward them."[9] In her pioneering work on hip-hop culture, Tricia Rose described the ways that black urban youth come to symbolize the most dangerous threat to social order and the ways that "popular media perceive and construct young African Americans as a dangerous internal element in urban America; an element that if allowed to roam freely, will threaten the social order; an element that must be policed."[10]

In Cohen's most recent work, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Democracy*, she focuses not only upon the ways that moral panic undergirds mainstream public discourse on black youth, but more specifically on the ways that black elites such as Bill Cosby, and even President Barack Obama, reproduce a discourse of

[9] S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi.
[10] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyen University Press, published by University Press of New England, 1994).

blame and punishment that negatively impacts already vulnerable black youth. For Cohen, the demonization of black youth within black communities is potentially more vicious as it legitimates the aggressive surveillance, punishment and socio-political alienation of black youth. Sermons like "The Lost Generation," described in Hill's account are influential discourses circulating within the black public sphere, and very likely through wider publics, via television and other forms of media, which impact attitudes toward black youth within the social imaginary. Moreover, such sermonic discourses lend religious legitimacy to punitive public policies intended to discipline and punish "deviant" black bodies.

While Cohen does not bring religious leaders or their rhetoric directly into the focus of her critique, there is no doubt that many preachers are among the black elite and/or community leaders involved in "publicly policing other blacks whom they perceive as deviant, destructive and dangerous."[11] Sermons and public theological utterances that reductively construct black youth in terms of their perceived deviance are complicit in "replicating a rhetoric of blame and punishment directed toward the most marginalized in our communities," in this case, young black women and men of "the hip hop generation."[12] This dissertation, then, examines and critiques rhetorical and theological constructions of black youth culture, and particularly hip-hop, within the public theological discourses of black preachers, both in churches and society.[13] I argue that black preachers, as influential (and often elite) voices within the black public sphere,

[11] Cathy J. Cohen, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[12] Ibid.
[13] Victor Anderson defines a key meaning of public theology as "the deliberate use of distinctively theological commitments to influence substantive public debate and policy." For further discussion of public theology in relation to homiletic discourse, see Anderson's "The Search for Public Theology" in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture* edited by Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley.

play an ambiguous role in relation to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture. In their sermons and public theological discourses many prominent African American ministers often reproduce dominant regimes of representation that demonize and condemn the cultural expressions and personal choices of black youth as a (and often *the*) source of moral degradation.[14] As such, the problem of moral panic provokes critical questions for scholars within African American Religious and theological studies, and opens space for my research.[15]

This dissertation argues that given the historical and cultural significance of the institutional black church within black communities, and the centrality of preaching and preachers within these institutions, the rhetoric of African American ministers demands greater scrutiny. While African American scholars working in the field of homiletics have developed theoretical works defining and naming the distinctiveness of black preaching and offering homiletic theories for more effective practice, rarely has concrete homiletic discourse and practice been subjected to the sort of discourse analysis proposed in this study.[16] Black preaching demands scrutiny in order to expose the ways that these public theological discourses, within and beyond churches, both resist and reproduce

[14] For an excellent discussion on the increase in black conservatism and conservative themes in black public and religious rhetoric, see Christopher A. Bracey, *Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Peril of Black Conservatism from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

[15] Cohen's analysis is not isolated, but is a part of a larger discourse among African American scholars across disciplines on the relationship between middle class blacks and those of the "underclass" and particularly the young.

[16] See Henry Mitchell. *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Olin Moyd. *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1995); Teresa Fry-Brown. *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); James Harris. *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Cleophus Larue. *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). Katie Cannon. *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (New York: Continuum, 2003). In the following chapter, I discuss the ways that Michel Foucault's method of discourse analysis has informed the work of scholars in the field of cultural studies, whose work attempts to expose the ways moral panic is produced and circulated within and throughout public discourse.

dominant regimes of representation that lead to the inscription of harmful ideologies concerning poor black urban youth. I argue that the meanings and consequences of these narratives of black youth acquire religious legitimacy and greater moral and representational force when taken up within the homiletic and public theological discourse of black church traditions.

As such, a study of black preachers and their homiletics includes a critique of their impact upon the survival and thriving of black communities, including its vulnerable black urban youth. This is an urgent task, as uncritical moralistic sermonizing can exacerbate already existing forms of alienation within black churches and communities, especially along lines of class, gender and age. In his article, "Notes from a Hip Hop Preacher: How We Must Serve This Generation," for a special hip-hop edition of the *African American Pulpit*, Matthew W. Williams captures this need for greater scrutiny of black preaching vis-à-vis the hip hop generation. Williams writes:

> Those of us desiring to reach the hip hop generation must remain critically conscious of the success and failures of the black church and black preaching in meeting the needs of black people. One of the church's failures has been its arrogance in the face of apparent failure…Our postmodern peers are reading books and listening to a variety of sources that enable them to critically evaluate the church and its messages. We must be able to engage in self critique and accept critique from the communities we seek to serve.[17]

Throughout this dissertation, I show how black preachers are often complicit in larger public discourses that demonize black youth. At the same time, I complicate an understanding of black religious rhetoric that would simply reduce it to the morally repressive and marginalizing discourse described in the opening narrative.

[17] Matthew Williams, 20-21.

To be sure, progressive religious and social practices have the potential to intervene in the social and spiritual ills facing black urban youth and create the possibilities of flourishing. Indeed, black sermonic practices have long been integral to black cultural and socio-political quests for emancipation and empowerment.[18] As Jonathan Walton reminds us, "There is a space for a socially conscious and progressive class of African American preachers today that eclipses the staunch traditionalism of some and the moral cowardice fueled by the personal greed of others."[19] Yet, such emancipatory religious discourse must demonstrate a capacity for articulating complex issues, as well as an ability to name and critique socio-political conditions that constrain the flourishing of black youth in the era of hip-hop. Politically engaged preachers who seek to intervene in black youth culture in this post-Civil Rights/Black Power era, must remain consciously connected to a tradition of public theological discourse as a form of political protest and align themselves with other progressive forces of social and cultural critique.[20] Moreover, their discourses must be informed by theories (and theologies) of "intersectionality" that are able to account for the overlapping (and, at times, contested) struggles of race, gender, class, sexuality, and in this case *age*. Such a public theology would be akin to what womanist Christian social ethicist, Emilie Townes, describes as a public discourse that, "explore[s] the tremendous complexities and multiplicities of the nature of realities, truths, lies, and damned lies in which African American critical

[18] See Cornel West's "Introduction" in William H. Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother!: Old-Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), xii.
[19] Jonathan Walton, "A Church Divided: The Dilemma of the Black Preachers," *The African American Pulpit 10*, No. 1 (Winter 2006-2007): 31.
[20] For a discussion of the historic role of black preachers in political protest, see Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972). See also, Manning Marable's essay, "Blackwater: Religion and Black Protest Thought in Afro-American History," in *Blackwater: historical studies in race, class consciousness and revolution* (Dayton: Black Praxis Press, 1981).

religion finds its home, offers strategies of resistance, and seeks to embody a liberating transformatory praxis."[21]

Yet, this public theological discourse would need to not only build upon, but also go beyond much contemporary black and womanist theology, in that it must wrestle with the plight of black youth and the ways in which popular culture has become a dominant and dynamic site for struggle between an array of social forces that would attempt to fix the meaning and value of young black lives in the era of hip-hop. In this way, the challenges that socially conscious and progressive black preachers now face is one of bearing prophetic witness in the midst of what I refer to as the "Powers that BE(T)." Here, I play on the longstanding way of speaking about socio-political forces as "the powers that be." At the same time I am arguing for greater recognition of the ways that that in this moment, the culture industry, as represented by mass media institutions such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) function as significant disciplinary regimes of power that influence public discourses and policies that affect black youth. As political scientist, Richard Iton, reminds us, "those committed to progressive change must also engage with those arenas and voices that promote regressive and discomforting narratives."[22] For many scholars and religious practitioners committed to emancipatory struggles, images and representations of black youth culture circulated by corporate entertainment institutions such as BET and their parent company Viacom represent just this sort of regressive politics. As Iton puts it, within much of the public discourse of black communities, "most of the crises of black community that erupted toward the end

[21] Emilie M. Townes, "Searching for Paradise in a World of Theme Parks," in *Black Theology and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 105.
[22] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18-19.

of the twentieth century occurred against the backdrop of the omnipotent and spectacular but faceless and threatening b-boy."[23]

Nevertheless, responses to the representations and discourses within hip-hop, both religious and otherwise, have often failed to account for its complexity and its emancipatory elements. While powerful media corporations, such as BET, are largely responsible for the production and distribution of cultural productions such as hip-hop, black youth themselves exercise their agency in and through their consumption and uses of popular culture, which often resist the ways that they are constructed through these representational and signifying practices. As such, the "powers that BE(T)" are often mobilized or signified upon in ways that are potentially subversive of other dominant regimes of power that would subjugate black youth. Again, Iton explains, "Cultural work, then must be understood as a result of the interactions of the creative process and its embedded intentions; the potentially quite distinct and even contrasting- but equally creative- use made of them by others; and feedback mechanisms and interpolative possibilities linking these various stages (in both senses of the word)."[24] An emancipatory public theology, as a form of cultural criticism, must not loose sight of these various complexities as it makes its turn toward popular culture as a site of struggle on behalf of black youth.

Contemporary African American public theological discourse that is committed to the survival and thriving of black youth, or in more theological terms, their redemption, must be able to articulate a public theological voice that is nuanced enough to render an emancipatory critique at the contested and changing intersections of prophetic

[23] Iton, 129.
[24] Iton, 25.

Christianity, popular culture and political activism. As such, African American scholars of religion and religious practitioners cannot merely appropriate the theories or methodologies of previous theological and religious reflection that do not adequately, and rigorously, wrestle with the contemporary experiences of black youth and the diversity and complexity of their struggles. Rather, they must be able to engage in a form of public (theological) discourse that is able to both give voice to the particularities and complexities of black youth culture, as well as criticize and transform dominant socio-political and cultural discourses and practices that constrain the flourishing of black youth in the era of hip-hop.

Drawing upon work in Black Cultural Studies and African American Religious Studies (particularly critical homiletic theory and analysis), this dissertation follows current trajectories in much contemporary religious and theological study by making a turn to culture and or practices and doing religious and theological reflection that is informed by cultural analysis and criticism.[25] As constructive theologian, Sheila Davaney has argued in "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," this cultural turn involves "claims about culture, claims about religious traditions and communities as located within and as dimensions of culture, and claims about theologians and theologies as producers of culture and as themselves cultural artifacts or expressions."[26] Among

[25] For a discussion on this cultural turn in theology, see Brown, Delwin; Davaney Sheila Greeve; and Tanner, Kathryn eds. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (The American Academy of Religion Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Tanner, Kathryn. *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Hopkins, Dwight and Davaney, Sheila Greeve. Eds. *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Gordon, Lynch. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

[26] Sheila Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Culture," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (The American Academy of Religion Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series) Brown, Delwin; Davaney Sheila Greeve; and Tanner, Kathryn eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

African American religionists and theologians, Black British Cultural Studies, as developed in the Birmingham School of Contemporary Culture, has become particularly influential in recent years.[27] It is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter to provide an extensive account of the development and theoretical methods involved in the field of cultural studies, however, Cornel West provides a brief and useful account that captures the field's significance for black religionists and theologians, and points to its significance for this dissertation. West writes:

> Cultural studies consists of structural analyses and existential narratives of why and how meanings are made and feelings are felt. These analyses and narratives explain and describe the uses (and abuses) of sound, language, gesture, posture, posse, image, and symbol in the emergence, sustenance, and decline of cultural forms and personal styles. Cultural studies proceeds by subtle ways of historicizing, contextualizing, and pluralizing our catastrophic-laden moments in time and spaces.[28]

In *Changing the Conversation*, black theologian, Dwight N. Hopkins traces the development of the conversation between theology and cultural studies in general, and black theology and other liberation theologies in particular. In an essay entitled, "Black Theology and Birmingham: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture," Jonathan Walton traces this development further and critiques Hopkins' failure to adequately distinguish between understandings of popular culture as an "authentic" "folk culture" of the "people" and forms of "mass culture" influenced by the dictates of the culture industry.[29]

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[27] This has been the case especially in the U.S, where it has survived as a critical discourse beyond the closure of the Birmingham Centre. For a discussion of the ways that Black cultural studies has thrived in the United States, see, Henry Louis Gates', *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010). For a discussion of the influence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies on Black religious and theological studies, see Dwight Hopkins' "Introduction," to *Changing Conversations: Cultural Analysis and Religious Reflection*, edited by Sheila Davaney and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[28] Cornel West, "Foreword: On Jay-Z and Hip Hop Studies," in *Jay Z: Essays on Hip Hop's Philosopher King* edited by Julius Bailey (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 1.

[29] See, Jonathan Walton, "Black Theology and Birmingham: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture" in *Black Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2009.

Walton's account is helpful as it clarifies the relationship between the Birmingham school, the black theological project and contemporary forms of popular culture. Yet, Walton's work is more oriented toward televangelism and other forms of mass-mediated religious discourse than the cultural productions of black youth. Most valuable, however, is Walton's insistence that while black theologians have adopted the theoretical framework of cultural studies in order to critique hegemonic discourse operating in dominant discourse within the theological academy and broader society, African Americans theologians must now use those tools to critique black religious discourses and practices.

Along these lines, this dissertation examines the role of black religious practices such as preaching and public theology as both cultural practices and forms of cultural criticism. Moreover it situates, analyzes and critiques these religious practices within and in relation to the historical and cultural context of post-Civil rights America and the emergence of hip-hop culture. In terms of the latter, I am interested in the ways that these religious discourses and practices engage hip-hop as the cultural productions of black youth who have come of age in the post-Civil-Rights Era. Again, Davaney reminds us, "the move to popular forms of culture is among the most significant [shifts that have occurred] not only for cultural studies but also for modes of theology engaged in cultural criticism."[30] Of course, most theologians have not turned to black youth culture or hip-hop as a site for critical theological reflection and analysis. However, communications studies scholar, Murray Forman, insists, hip-hop is "a vital force in the articulation and expression of culture, politics, and identity for literally millions of people around the world. This is to say that hip-hop is an essential facet of everyday life and of experiential

[30] Sheila Davaney, *Converging on Culture*, 6.

being, a cornerstone of individual and communal existence."[31] As such, I examine the ways that black preachers, as public theologians and cultural critics, have engaged the popular cultural form of hip-hop as a site of struggle and intervention in black youth culture and the moral panic that surrounds it.

As I have suggested above, within the field of homiletics, this approach to analyzing and theorizing the concrete practices of preachers in their contexts has not been prevalent. Nevertheless, in recent scholarship, there are signs that point to the possibility of a move in this direction. For instance, in the recent volume, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, Thomas G. Long argues, "a focus on the practice of preaching begins with a description and an understanding of *actual performance*. In contrast to some homiletical approaches that begin by developing a theological or ethical theory of what preaching ought to be, a practice-oriented approach *begins with actual on-the-ground preaching as currently performed.*" Long goes on to argue, "Critical evaluation, comparative studies, and strategies for reform of the practice are not abandoned, but are developed in response to actual performance. *The question 'what should preaching be?' is posed only after the question 'How are things done here?' is answered*"[32] (emphasis mine). Nevertheless, Long's turn to "actual performance" seems less interested in critical homiletic and cultural analysis of preaching than in deriving homiletic wisdom and or "best practices" from examining the performance of preaching in local congregations.

Beyond the discipline of homiletics proper, however, African American scholars have taken up African American religious rhetoric in more culturally, if not theologically,

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[31] Murray Furman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds.,*That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

[32] Thomas G. Long, " A New Focus for Teaching Preaching" in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, Thomas G. Long and Nora Tubbs-Tisdale editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

critical ways. Jonathan Walton's recent work *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, Shayne Lee's *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* and *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (co-written with Phillip Luke Sinitiere), Milmon F. Harrison's *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* and Marla Frederick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* all critically analyze African American religious rhetoric. In particular, each of these scholars critically examines the performance and consumption of the sermons and other cultural productions of African American celebrity preachers. None of these works, however, examines the public discourses and practices of black preachers vis-à-vis black youth culture of the hip-hop generation. In this dissertation, the cultural critical questions that drive the works above will be pursued in relation to the intersections of black religious discourse and black youth culture. More specifically, this dissertation situates and locates black preaching within the concrete social, political, and cultural contexts of post-Civil Rights Black America, which historian Nell Irvin Painter refers to as "the era of hip-hop."[33]

As Cohen insists: "[I]t is important to examine the powerful words of black elites such as [Bill] Cosby not only because his analysis is incomplete, and largely incorrect, and based on at best anecdotal stories but also because the stories he tells seem to resonate with many in black communities."[34] I contend that such narratives about black youth likely resonate even more deeply among many within black communities when they are deployed by black preachers. As such, this dissertation analyzes a range of

[33] See, Nell Irvin Painter, "Authenticity and Diversity in the Era of Hip-Hop," in *Creating Black Americans: African American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 321.
[34] Cohen, 22.

African American sermons and other public theological discourses performed within the historical and cultural context of post-civil-rights-movement era black communities. Using various forms of homiletic and discourse analysis in conversation with black cultural studies, I examine the cultural encoding of a range of African American sermons with reference to young black Americans and the theological, ethical and ideological underpinnings and assumptions embedded within these messages. By clarifying and critiquing the problematic relationships between black religious discourse, moral panic, and black youth, I hope to clear the ground for the possibility of the emergence of more effective public theological discourse and practices that are committed to the flourishing of black youth.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter one lays out the central problematic of this study, the moral panic surrounding black youth culture and the response of black religious leaders. I turn to the work of political scientist, Cohen in order to demonstrate the usefulness of moral panic as an analytic category in relation to black youth. Subsequently, I demonstrate the ways that moral panic informs the rhetorical construction of black youth within a range of sermonic discourses. This chapter provides a theoretical grounding and methodological framework for my analysis in subsequent chapters.

I organize the remainder of the dissertation as a series of case studies to highlight the critical interventions that particular black preachers have made into the popular discourses surrounding black youth culture. For my case studies, however, I have avoided the temptation to choose preachers whose rhetoric clearly exhibits a disdain for black

youth and their cultural representations. Rather, I have chosen three ministers who have come of age in the era of hip-hop. Moreover, each of these preachers has been trained in a liberal/progressive university-based divinity school and positions themselves within the prophetic tradition of the black church. By choosing these preachers, I intend to highlight the complexity of the relationship between black religious discourse, moral panic and black youth culture. In short, commitment to progressive Christian theology and practice does not necessarily preclude the possibility of unwittingly reinforcing problematic constructions of black youth culture even while resisting other such constructions. Throughout these case studies, then, I demonstrate the possibilities and pitfalls inherent within black religious discourse as it relates to black youth culture. As such, my analysis throughout this dissertation attempts to resist a reductionist reading of the public discourses of black preachers as surely as it resists a reductionist reading of black youth culture.

Chapters two through four are a series of close readings and cultural interpretations of the discourses and practices of three black preachers: Rev. Delman Coates, Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. and Rev. Yvonne Gilmore. I draw upon the theories and methods of religious and theological studies as well as cultural studies to examine their public utterances and to articulate the strategies of intervention that each respective preacher deploys. In Chapter two, I explore Rev. Delman Coates' public theological *protest* of stereotypical representations of blackness in corporate media outlets- particularly Black Entertainment Television (BET) and its parent company Viacom. I demonstrate the ways that Rev. Coates' intervention both effectively resists a limited range of caricatured representations of blackness (i.e. pimps, gangsters, hos), while at the

same time further alienating those black youth who do not conform to a politics of black middle-class respectability.

Chapter three assesses Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.'s *political mobilization* of black youth through a linkage of the prophetic voice of the black preaching tradition and the "voices from the margins" of the hip-hop community. Through this case study, I show how Rev. Yearwood's intervention is able to use hip-hop culture to galvanize those black youth who have been largely alienated from institutions such as the black church. At the same time, however, I lay bare the ways that an uncritical embrace of the marginalized and their cultural productions (especially when exploited by the culture industry), leaves Yearwood's intervention vulnerable to significant critique- especially a feminist/womanist critique.

In Chapter four, I evaluate Rev. Yvonne Gilmore's *performance* of prophetic Christian witness as a form of counter-narrative through the *cultural production* of political hip-hop and the platform that it provides for other forms of social intervention in the lives of black youth. In this final case study, I describe how Rev. Gilmore works within the genre of hip-hop as a cultural producer and performer endeavoring to recapture its progressive and prophetic potential. This chapter also exposes the frictions inherent in such an approach, namely that such a public theological work is always vulnerable to the co-optation of the larger cultural industry, while simultaneously risking irrelevance at the margins of both ecclesial and hip-hop culture.

While these chapters are written as self-contained case studies with distinctive themes and can stand on their own, there are also intertextual relations among them. The analysis that begins in chapter two carries through chapter three and has a cumulative

relationship to chapter four. As I analyze Rev. Coates' strategy of protest, I anticipate my analysis of Rev. Yearwood's political mobilization. Likewise, in my evaluation of Rev. Gilmore's cultural productions, I look back to my analysis of the previous two strategies of intervention. In each of these case studies, I refer back to the central problematic of moral panic that I outlined in the opening chapter.

The concluding chapter summarizes the theoretical framework and findings of the dissertation and asserts the implications of the analysis for reimaging public theological discourse in ways that disrupt the moral panic surrounding black youth culture. I show the ways that the case studies analyzed in this dissertation reject simplistic or reductionist readings of black youth and their cultural productions as well as black preachers and their public theological discourses. At the same time, these case studies point to the possibilities of a progressive and prophetic public theology that resists premature closure of the possibilities of flourishing for black youth. The case studies do this work while simultaneously taking seriously the urgency of intervening within popular culture, as a strategic site of struggle on behalf of black youth in the era of hip-hop.

Chapter II

Black Preachers, Black Youth Culture and the Problem of Moral Panics

Introduction

"If you don't want to get shot by the police…*keep your ass out of stolen cars*!!!" These fiery words served as the rhetorical climax in a sermon delivered from the pulpit of a prominent African American church in the United States. This message came in response to community unrest around the latest in a string of police shootings, which sent yet another young black man to an early grave. Just prior to these remarks, the preacher had rebuffed the calls of the activist community for a massive demonstration of protest against the police department. "I'm not marching!" he thundered emphatically, "This is the wrong poster boy for social justice. He's a *criminal*! He's a *thug*…!" In subsequent sermons and public discourse over the next several months, the minister continued to insist that what African Americans need in this historical moment is not so much a renewed Civil Rights Movement, but a radical Civil *Responsibility* Movement.

This call for an ethics of personal responsibility was rooted in the perceived decline in morality among those generations who had come of age in the post-civil rights era. The so-called hip-hop generation(s) had lost that sense of dignity and respectability that was presumed to have always characterized the black community in previous generations. Simply put, there was no longer any communal standard regulating the behavior of young black people, which created an environment that produced criminals and thugs, like the young man who had been killed by the police. And it was these miscreants, according to the preacher, who were responsible for the decline of the black

community. In an essay entitled, "Black Youth, Pop Culture, and the Politics of Nostalgia," cultural critic, Michael Eric Dyson, describes the ways that such rhetoric functions and circulates within black communities as a means of constructing a narrative of "the strength, unity and durability of black communities of the past" as well as "to underscore the weakness, fragmentation, and collapse of black communities today."[35] For Dyson, these narratives serve the purposes of delimiting the forms of behavior that are deemed appropriate within black communities. Of course, the reciprocal purpose of such narratives is to define what is unacceptable within, and unworthy of the support of black communities. Dyson's way of capturing communal sentiments toward black youth and the cultures that they produce is worth quoting:

> It's clear that the rise of hip-hop culture has provoked a deep black nostalgia for a time when black communities where quite different than they are now. When children respected their elders. When adults, not young thugs, ruled over neighborhoods. When the moral fabric of black communities was knit together by a regard for law and order…When black folk went to church, and even if they didn't, respected the minister as a source of moral authority.[36]

To argue that the preacher above was most disturbed by the rejection of ministerial authority by black youth would be purely speculative. There is little doubt, however, that this black religious leader was rhetorically constructing a narrative of decline that began with black religious and moral respectability circa the 1950s and ending in the moral debauchery of the hip-hop generation. Of course, this preacher is not alone in this sentiment. For instance, in an interview with Michael Eric Dyson, one of the countries most visible and popular black preachers, Bishop T.D. Jakes, opined, "in the absence of strong unity in our community, these entertaining voices have been mistaken

[35] Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 116.
[36] Ibid, 117.

for the messiahs of a generation who has lost their way and desperately needs a compass that directs them beyond a lyric that excites them."[37]

Frustrated and outraged by this sense of moral decline, the preacher in the narrative above proclaimed, "The biggest problem in the black community, is sagging pants!" Sagging pants, then, became symbolic of the moral deviance of black youth and the black poor, deserving of disdain and denouncement as the single most significant problem in African American communities. Far from being a trivial statement from the pulpit, such an analysis of the problems facing black communities adds religious legitimacy to a dangerously conservative framing of the public discourse on black youth. In particular, the move to criminalize sagging pants within many states is a noteworthy concern in many black communities.

Such a position is motivated by a prevailing belief that this aestheic stylization signifies not only bad taste, but deviance and danger, and particularly when associated with young black bodies. While preachers, such as the one above, may hold such beliefs, as do many within black communities, what is significant is the ways that the public articulation of these ideas contributes to the targeting of black youth for greater surveillance, policing and incarceration. Political scientist, Cathy Cohen writes, "The example of sagging-pants laws helps to illustrate both how quickly both those with dominant power and those with indigenous, or community-based, power can unite to criminalize young blacks and black youth culture, as well as use that power to generate feelings of alienation among black youth across any class divide."[38]

[37] Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001), 208.
[38] Cathy Cohen, 143.

While this preacher and others are rightly concerned about violence in black communities, and criminal activity, such an exaggerated account of the moral condition of black youth that demonizes them as the source of moral decline justifies critics like Marc Lamont Hill in charging black preachers with contributing to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture. And it is precisely because they are black preachers, who have historically been spokesmen for the race, that their discourse demands our attention. Stanley Cohen writes, "when such appeals come from voices of authority (such as judges) or authoritative voices (experts, professionals, government) the moral panic is easier to sustain."[39] Within black communities, the authoritative voice of the preacher, as representative of the race, adds considerable religious legitimacy to the demonization of black youth in the public imagination. As the Rev. Osageyfo Uhuru Sekou has remarked, with reference to the sermonic assault on black youth by another preacher of the Civil Rights generation, "In [a] word, the problem with black folks is young black folks- a la Bill Cosby."[40]

Cathy Cohen and the "Moral Panic" Surrounding Black Youth Culture

In order to examine the social and political implications of such public theological discourse, I turn to the work of Cathy J. Cohen, a professor of political science and director of *The Black Youth Project* at the University of Chicago.[41] In her recent work, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, Cohen probes the

[39] Stanley Cohen. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3rd ed.(New York: Routledge, 2002), xvii.
[40] Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, *Gods, Gays, and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Campbell and Cannon Press, 2011), 50.
[41] See, "About the Black Youth Project" on the online website for the Black Youth Project at: http://www.blackyouthproject.com/. See also: http://chicago.blackyouthproject.com/

significance of "moral panic" as a useful concept for analyzing discourse surrounding black youth culture. The language of "moral panics" derives from the field of sociology and particularly research in the sociology of deviance and cultural studies.[42] In short, moral panic refers to discourse in which certain groups are demonized as the source of moral decline. Theorists of moral panic connect this social phenomenon to periods of significant social change and anxiety. In these historical moments when moral values are in question, certain groups, especially youth and racialized groups, are seen as a threat to moral and social order.

In his work on moral panics, Kenneth Thompson argues, "no age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of 'youth.'"[43] As the object of moral panics, youth are particularly noteworthy, as they may be perceived "as both at risk and a source of risk."[44] Thompson notes the significant influence of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) in the development of scholarship on moral panics- especially moral panics associated with youth. While moral panics surrounding youth cultures are often understood in terms of generational divisions, scholars in the Birmingham School also stressed the significance of class tensions in the development of moral panics.[45] In the work of the Birmingham School, particular attention was given to decoding the discourses and practices of youth subcultures in Britain. In this scholarship, Michel Foucault's work in discourse analysis was used to investigate the ways in which moral panics, in part, represent "signs of struggle over rival

[42] For an introduction to scholarship on moral panics, see Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics: Key Terms* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[43] Thompson, *Moral Panics*, 42.
[44] Ibid, 42.
[45] Ibid, 47.

discourse and regulatory practices."[46] This Foucauldian method provided social and cultural theorists in the Birmingham School with tools to deconstruct the "chain of signifiers in the coded discourse of moral decline."[47]

Implicit in the term moral *panic* is a sense of "exaggeration" or unfounded fears surrounding the behavior of the group in itself, as well as in relation to other more serious problems. This sense of exaggeration, however, is often highly contested and opens theories of moral panic to criticism. The notion that there is significant disproportionality between the responses of moral authorities and the object of panic raises questions as to "how…the exact gravity of the reaction and condition [can] be assessed and compared."[48] In his seminal work on social deviance in youth culture, Stanley Cohen, argues, "studying moral panics…allows us to conceptualize the lines of power in any society, the ways we are manipulated into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough."[49] With reference to black youth, it is often argued that responses to forms of popular culture that they produce and consume are greatly exaggerated with respect to their relationship to social and moral decline.

The tension pointed out above, between regarding youth as simultaneously "endangered and dangerous," is especially significant when discussing black youth. When such moral panics surround the behavior and culture of black youths, this often leads to the *public policing* and incarceration of young blacks perceived as morally deviant.[50] Beyond mere irrational fear or questions of class privilege, moral panics have

[46] Ibid, 44.
[47] Ibid, 102.
[48] Ibid, xxvi-xxxiii.
[49] Stanley Cohen. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxxv.
[50] For more on the role of black elite and the public policing of the black underclass, see Cathy J. Cohen. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). In particular, see her chapters "The Boundaries of Black Politics" and "Marginalization:

serious social consequences for those who are deemed to be *the problem*. Moral panics most often lead to moral and social campaigns to restore social order and "demands that an authority such as the state control the group of deviants, or 'folk devils.'"[51] As S. Craig Watkins has argued, "black youth seemingly have been in the eye of a public storm against crime, drugs, and the alleged erosion of traditional values. As a result, new punitive technologies and legislation have been initiated in order to exercise greater control over black youth."[52]

In *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Democracy*, professor Cathy Cohen probes this vicious process of vilification and demonization of black youth in public discourse.[53] In her chapter, "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It," Cohen argues, "[there exists] a *moral panic* surrounding black youth culture in America." Here, Cohen pays particular attention to the public backlash against black youth following the firing of radio shock-jock Don Imus over derogatory remarks referring to the young black women on the Rutgers women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos." In the midst of public outcry over his remarks, Imus deflected criticism by suggesting that such language did not originate with him, but rather among black youth in rap music and hip-hop culture. As such, rather than holding him accountable, Imus insisted that rap artists and other young black men were to blame. Black youth, then, were implicated not only as the source of misogynistic language, but also violence, hedonism, and other manifestations of moral decline.

Power, Identity, and Membership." For the role of the "black church" in this policing and marginalization see "Willing to Serve, but Not to Lead."

[51] Cathy Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 42.

[52] S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: hip hop culture and the production of black cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

[53] Cohen, *Democracy Remixed, 21.*

In *Democracy Remixed*, Cathy Cohen's most pressing concern is not simply how moral panics manifest within the broader public sphere, but more specifically within marginalized communities. Cohen's analysis focuses particular attention on the ways in which this public criticism of black youth, often thinly disguised as a critique of gangsta rap and hip hop culture, circulates not only within broad public discourse, but also *inside* black communities.[54] Here, Cohen insists that the panic concerning black youth that arose within black communities following the aftermath of the Imus affair was not primarily about the problematic dimensions of rap music and hip-hop culture. Rather, in her estimation, the public criticism of black youth by black leaders, "also encompasses a broader, urgent concern on the part of many black Americans that the current generation of young black adults, or at least the most visible segments of that group, are engaged in behaviors that not only threaten their very survival but also negatively affect the progress of respectable middle- and working-class black people."[55] Cohen's critique is aimed at the role of black elites and the leadership of black institutions in the reproduction and circulation of what Stuart Hall calls "dominant regimes of representation," which demonize black youth. Moreover, Cohen is concerned about intergenerational relationships within black communities:

> I am not concerned that people have negative opinions of some rap music, and for that matter, some black youth. My worry, instead, is that with little evidence or proof, large numbers of black Americans, across the class divide, are condemning black youth and the culture they generate and

[54] In *The Hip Hop Wars*, cultural critic and American Studies professor explains, "debates about hip hop have come to stand in for serious discussions about race, gender, sexuality and black culture." Political scientist, Ricky L. Jones, takes this further, arguing that too many (both black and white) reductionistically assume, hip hop culture *is* black culture. See, "Before and Beyond Don Imus: On BET, Hip Hop Culture and their Consequences" in *What's Wrong With Obamamania:Black America, Black Leadership, and the Death of Political Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008).
[55] Cathy Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 22.

> consume. This could lead to a generational impasse that will affect black communities and black politics for years to come.[56]

Cohen is most alarmed, however, that many black elite and black community leaders are wittingly and or unwittingly collaborating with more conservative constituencies that have supported public policies that have been devastating to the lives of black youth and the very future of American democracy.

While Cathy Cohen does not bring African American churches directly into the focus of her critique, the sermon above demonstrates the ways that many leaders of these institutions are among the black elite that Cohen sees as "replicating a rhetoric of blame and punishment directed toward the most marginalized in our communities." In this case, those marginalized individuals are young black Americans of "the hip hop generation." In this social context, the sermonic and public theological discourse mentioned above take on serious socio-political implications and call for rigorous scrutiny, not only among practical theologians interested in homiletic analysis or scholars of religious rhetoric, but also among a range of scholars interested in black religion and cultural studies.

Moral Panic and the African American Pulpit

In addition to Cohen's work on the Black Youth Project, Richard Iton's work on politics and popular culture helps to shed further light on the representations of black youth in public discourse, including the discourses of Black Churches. In his recent work, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Iton argues that in similar ways that "blackness" is the necessary "other" of the modern era, so "black youth culture of the post-civil rights era is the other…against

[56] Ibid, 26.

which many define their notions of black politics and/or launch their arguments *against* black politics, agency, and autonomy."[57] Iton goes on to argue, "The forms of black popular culture- including hip hop- that emerged in the late twentieth century as *the* dividing line in black life became important not only because of what was going on within these subgenres but also because of the reactions to the representations of these cultural developments. Hip hop in particular, became, in so many interesting, and problematic, ways, one of the most crucial tests of- and a laboratory for the testing of- the linked fate hypothesis".[58] In other words, a politics of black solidarity rooted in assumptions of the common plight and destiny of black communities, regardless of differences, was severely tested by the forms of black youth culture that emerged in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

In a significant passage, Iton focuses upon the responses of black churches and other "religious authorities" to contemporary black youth culture, and especially hip-hop. The Black Church is significant in Iton's analysis as it has functioned historically as the space where notions of a "linked-fate" within black communities have been most readily articulated. Yet in this passage, Iton sheds light upon the ways that black churches and their preachers contribute to public discourse in ways that potentially contribute to moral panics surrounding black youth culture. As Cohen suggested above, such discourse, threatens to undermine the solidarity of black communities across lines of generational and class division as well as other axes of difference. Iton writes:

> Indeed, the heightened contest between religious authorities and the agents of the secular world employed in the media of popular culture for supremacy over the definition of norms and symbols, while hardly new-

[57] Ibid, 129.
[58] Richard Iton. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 128.

> and these camps are not exclusive- has represented one of the more intriguing subtexts of the post-civil rights era.[59]

Iton's sense of contestation over norms and symbols is consistent with theorists of moral panic, mentioned above, who describe "signs of struggle over rival discourse and regulatory practices."[60] Inasmuch as the hip-hop generation is often described as the first generation of black youth to find its public voice beyond the walls of the institutional church, it is no wonder that homiletics and hip-hop are juxtaposed as "rival discourses." These oppositional voices are often described in terms of the righteous and religious voice of the civil-rights generation contesting the moral deviance of the morally wayward hip-hop generation. However, religionist and Dean of the Howard University School of Divinity, Alton Pollard, challenges such a framing of the discourse. In an essay transcribed from a sermon he delivered from the pulpit of Sisters Chapel at Spelman College, Pollard makes an unconventional argument. Here Pollard is worth quoting at length:

> Despite what some critics have said, today's young people are no less spiritual than their predecessors but live in a time when the loss of faith in social institutions- no less religious ones- is disturbing, understandable, and epidemic…To the point, there is a passionate quest for something deeper and more authentic than what often passes for religion in the current generation. If the Black faith community would serve the present age, it requires a far greater commitment to social struggle and a deeper dedication to young people than what is currently the case. Questionable theology, dubious politics, hierarchical practices, misogynistic behavior, mythic untruths, excessive materialism, and an utter captivity to custom are the hallmark of many African American congregations in the twenty-first century. It could even be said that Hip Hop had to be born because, among other reasons, Black believers were no longer being faithful to their own calling.[61]

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[59] Ibid, 129.
[60] Thompson, *Moral Panics*, 44.
[61] Alton Pollard, "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: A Meditation" in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational* Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage) edited by Emmett G. Price III (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 9-10.

Nevertheless, Pollard's position remains relatively marginal among representatives of the black church traditions and sermons such as "The Lost Generation" continue to dominate the discourse of many African American pulpits.

Moreover, it is not only preachers who use the African American pulpit and or sermonic discourse in ways that contribute to moral panics and the public policing of black youth. For instance, in August of 2011, Michael Nutter, the African American Mayor of Philadelphia followed in this vein when addressing the issue of "flash mobs"[62] in the pulpit of a black Baptist church. From the pulpit, this governmental official signified on the black sermonic tradition in order to drive home his tirade against black youth in Philadelphia.[63] It was not simply black youth, however, who were the object of criticism. In ways remarkably similar to Bill Cosby's infamous "Pound Cake Speech,"[64] Mayor Nutter argued that the ultimate blame of black youth criminality is to be laid at the feet of irresponsible black parents.

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[62] According to Wikipedia, the term "flash mob" was coined in 2003 to refer to, "a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform an unusual and sometimes seemingly pointless act for a brief time, then disperse, often for the purposes of entertainment, satire, artistic expression or—in some cases—violence. Flash mobs are organized via telecommunications, social media, or viral emails."

[63] Mayor Michael Nutter's speech at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Philadelphia can be viewed in its entirety at: http://www.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.philly.com%2Fphilly%2Fvideo%2FBC1099587135001.html&h=XAQBxDvkL

[64] Bill Cosby's 2004 speech delivered at the NAACP dinner celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education, has come to be referred to as "the Pound Cake Speech." In this speech, Cosby spoke hard words to those of the black "underclass," especially black youth and their parents for not holding up their end of the social contract. One such example, according to Cosby, is a young person who gets shot by the police for stealing pound cake, causing a cry of indignation from the community. Cosby insists that such a scenario only illustrates the lack of black parental responsibility. For an account of a black, Reformed, evangelical response to the Cosby Speech and its subsequent debates in the black community, see Anthony B. Bradley's, *Keep Your Head Up: America's New Black Christian Leaders, Social Consciousness, and the Cosby Conversation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

By now, the call for parental responsibility is a familiar trope in public discourse surrounding black youth culture in the post-civil rights era. Conservative commentator, Juan Williams, demonstrates the pervasiveness of this call for parental and personal responsibility. Black elites like Williams make little effort to conceal their sense of disappointment with and disdain for the perceived moral failures of those generations that have come of age since the decline of the civil-rights-movement. Much of the blame, however, is simultaneously leveled at parents for refusing to uphold their parental responsibilities. Williams' striking epigraph in his controversial book, *Enough*, helps to illustrate this point.[65] As the epigraph for *Enough,* Williams uses a scriptural passage in order to frame his discourse on black (ir)responsibility: "And the Lord said, I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons have made themselves vile, and he restraineth them not" (1 Samuel 3: 11-13). The appropriation of biblical writ as an epigraph to Williams' black conservative Jeremiad signifies this sense of disdain that many within African American communities hold toward younger blacks in general, and particularly those of the working and urban "underclass." Interestingly enough, however, it is the parents who are deemed to be most blameworthy for the moral deviance of the younger generation. Moreover, Williams' epigraph also lends religious legitimacy to this critique. In this hermeneutical act, the "sons" of the prophetic Civil Rights Generation, are rendered "vile" in the very sight of God, indeed immoral "criminals" in need of "restraint." The implications of Williams' epigraph- if black parents have not restrained these "villains," then it will be up to more powerful authorities and judges- even God.

[65] Juan Williams. *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That are Undermining Black America- and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Random House, 2006).

Consistent with Williams' perspective, if black parents were unable or unwilling to discipline their children, Mayor Nutter as the agent of the state, cum black prophetic preacher vowed to insure the necessary discipline and punishment. The mayor prophesied an increase of surveillance tactics, and public policies that would effectively criminalize already marginalized black youth in Philadelphia. Through strictly enforced curfew laws, and other forms of public policing, Mayor Nutter proclaimed that he and his cabinet would ensure that Philadelphia's streets would be "safe" from young black predators. Such pulpit rhetoric should be of concern to scholars interested in the black church as it trades in representational discourses that have stigmatized young black males as violent predators and threats to the moral and social order. The ideological construction of black youth as morally and socially deviant, justifies polices that have led to the disproportionate incarceration of young black men and increasingly, young black women.

Moreover, the Mayor's sermonic discourse, invites additional scrutiny, as it was simultaneously a rhetorical act of public theology, with profound consequences in both ecclesial and broader public spheres. Because this message was publically broadcast in local Philadelphia media outlets, and subsequently on YouTube and other popular cultural spaces, it seems apparent that the Mayor's rhetoric was intended for much wider (and presumably *whiter*) audiences. One might reasonably infer something of this politician-preacher's intended audience, from charges such as, "the reason black people are afraid of you, and don't respect you and white people won't hire you, is because you won't comb your hair or pull up your pants, or expand your vocabulary, and *you look like you crazy!"* These moralizing preachments of the mayor, elicited a rousing response from a mostly older black congregation. Unfortunately, however, this black Baptist

congregation was not the only rhetorical context for this political sermon. One might even argue that it was not even the *primary* audience. The black pulpit seems to be the symbolic site of black moral authority, from which the mayor sought to reassure white Philadelphians that a black mayor was not afraid to "get tough on crime." Cathy Cohen puts it this way in her analysis of black political rhetoric of personal responsibility, "But who is the real audience for such truth-telling? Is it a supportive and highly receptive internal black audience or the white public who hold similar ideas about 'black' personal responsibility and welcomes black legitimization of their feelings?"[66]

At this point, however, it is important to note Stanley Cohen's caution around deploying the term "moral panic" too quickly or easily. Cohen warns, that labeling a response as moral panic can be used as a way of playing down the legitimate fears and anxieties of ordinary people whose everyday lives are characterized by violence.[67] As such, the language of moral panic can easily become a "discourse of denial." According to Stanley Cohen, this sort of denial can manifest in either a disengaged apathy or a refusal to acknowledge the realities of human cruelty and suffering.

Labeling the Mayor's sermon and the congregation's response to the Philadelphia flash mobs as evidence of moral panic might be seen as an ideological denial of the justifiable fears of those who might be subject to such seemingly random and senseless violence. As Kenneth Thompson observes, scholars of the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCS), key theorists of moral panics, were often criticized "for downplaying real increase in violent crimes and the rational fears this

[66] Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 210.
[67] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxvi-xxxiii.

engendered, particularly among the working class, who were often its victims."[68] For Stanley Cohen, neither under-reaction nor over-reaction are appropriate responses to such episodes as the ones that the Mayor addressed. For Cohen, "proportionality" is crucial.

Cathy Cohen acknowledges the limitations of the use of the concept of moral panics to describe the discourse surrounding black youth culture. She further acknowledges the difficulty in answering the question, "How do we know when the response to an event is exaggerated beyond the impact of the issue or act?"[69] Moreover, Cohen insists that the emergence of moral panics within marginalized communities contests the idea that such responses are simply irrational. Cohen presses her point by arguing, "far from being irrational, a community based panic, even if due to behaviors considered inconsequential by that community but labeled deviant by the dominant society, might be appropriate and surely not be irrational, if the status and progress of black Americans continues to be tenuous and subject to the actions of the state."[70] Nevertheless, while she maintains that differentiations must be made between those irrational moral panics that emerge beyond marginalized communities and the more rational panics that arise within black communities, Cohen insists that there are serious consequence related to moral panics that place the lives of those considered to be "deviant" at considerable risk.

Whether Mayor Nutter's pulpit discourse was intended to address the moral panic of a white audience who views black youth in terms of criminality or the understandable panic of insiders to the black community, its effects seem to be 1) reinforcing growing generational disdain and division in black communities and 2) legitimizing the

[68] Thompson, *Moral Panics*, 57.
[69] Cathy Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 38.
[70] Ibid, 39.

discriminatory practices of whites in positions of social privilege and economic power. Scholars, activists and ministers concerned with the public discourse and practices of black churches must raise critical questions and subject such pulpit discourse to serious ideological critique.

Cathy Cohen is also among a number of scholars and critics who have pointed out the ways that even President Barack Obama's discourse has contributed to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture. In a 2007 article entitled, "Righteous Politics: the role of the black church in contemporary politics," Melissa Harris-Perry suggests:

> In addition to his capacity to employ traditional, racialized social gospel theology in his political self-understanding, Senator Obama has also appealed to the more individualist, private morality of contemporary megachurches. For example, Senator Obama explains persistence [sic] racial inequality in academic achievement as resulting form a youth culture that emphasizes cool over smart. This 'individual responsibility' narrative which criticizes youth cultural practices rather than structural inequality is likely to resonate with the dispositional analysis offered in the prosperity gospel.[71]

While Harris-Perry notes, "African American religious traditions have always blended concern with social justice and demands for personal righteousness," and within the realm of black politics, there has always been a combination of "political progressivism with personal conservatism," she suggests that such dialectics might be hard to maintain in the current political context.[72]

This tension can be observed in then Senator Obama's 2008 "Father's Day Speech." On June 15, 2008, Obama addressed thousands of African Americans gathered at Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. Obama began his address by quoting from the Sermon on the Mount, "Whoever hears these words of mine, and does them, shall be

[71] Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "Righteous politics: the role of the black church in contemporary politics" Cross Currents, June 22, 2007.
[72] Ibid.

likened to a wise man who built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and if fell not, for it was founded upon a rock." After acknowledging that the metaphoric rock in the text is a reference to, "Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior," Obama goes on to suggests two other foundational rocks for the congregation. First, he praises Bishop Arthur Brazier for his forty-eight years of service in the community. Obama lists a litany of achievements resulting from Brazier's ministry and concludes, "There is more community and less chaos because Bishop Brazier continued the march for justice that he began by Dr. King's side all those years ago."[73]

Then, as Harris-Perry suggests, Obama proceeds to wed this concern for social justice with a "demand for personal righteousness." As such, Obama proclaims, "Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation."[74] After naming the importance of fathers for the foundation of strong families, Obama quickly presses the congregation to admit that too many fathers, especially in the African American community, "have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men." Twice Obama repeats that the foundations of American family life are weaker because of the failure of fathers to uphold their responsibilities to their children.

While Harris-Perry notes the ambiguities and tensions in Obama's rhetoric, Cohen is much more thoroughgoing in her critique of Obama's pulpit discourse. For Cohen, Obama's "Father's Day Speech" echoes themes that he developed in his "More

[73] "Text of Obama's fatherhood speech" POLITICO.com June 15, 2008 (accessed October 4, 2012).
[74] Ibid.

Perfect Union Speech."[75] In her estimation, Obama's lecture to black fathers about their abdication of parental responsibility is a message that he only communicates to African Americans and not white audiences. More trenchantly, however, Cohen insists that Obama's "family values" message amounts to a harmful form of heteronormative proselytizing that touts a "return to the two-parent, Christian family in black communities" as the means of redeeming black communities. Here, Cohen is adamant, insisting that an intervention is necessary in order to transform the public discourse. Cohen argues:

> We can continue to spend time and energy *preaching* about the rapidly disappearing two-parent household, or we can spend our energy, time, and resource developing policies that will support the reality of family life without trying to transform these families into the heterosexual model that ineffectively guides our current policy around family, sex, and intimacy (emphasis mine).[76]

Cohen concedes that Obama's message is one of hope trading in both inspirational themes of overcoming obstacles as well as "tough love to 'urban youth.'" For Cohen, however, Obama's theology of hope comes at the cost of overemphasizing personal responsibility and requiring an accommodation to dominant cultural norms. As Cohen understands it, the message of Obama's political sermons is "centered on the belief that young black people, with their parents help, have to channel their agency, turn off the television and video games, pull up their pants or pull down their skirts, and stop buying and listening to most rap music."[77]

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[75] For a critical analysis of Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, see, T. Deneen Sharpley-Whiting's edited volume, *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union."* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).
[76] Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 98-99.
[77] Ibid, 113.

In *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Patricia Hill-Collins suggests that such language is indicative of the inability of black leadership- whether religious or secular- to address the fundamental social issues that disproportionally affect black youth. For Hill-Collins, such exhortations stem from at least two sources. First, they are the result of conservative backlash against the gains of progressive social movements. Secondly, however, they betray the insistence of African American leadership of following the Civil-Rights strategy of assimilation and integration even when such a strategy fails to offer any meaningful change for young black Americans who have come of age at the end of the Black Power Movement and the emergence of hip-hop culture. Hill-Collins argues, "Through strategies such as offering successful middle-class African Americans as role models for poor Black youth, and affirmative action for police forces, colleges, suburban neighborhoods, public schools and other social institutions to accept African Americans, integrationist projects advise young African Americans to assimilate into a social system that repeatedly signals that they are not welcome."[78]

From Hill-Collins' perspective, this is, at best, a well meaning, but failed strategy. If such integrationist tactics created opportunities for many within the black middle-class, this limited strategy has not effected substantive change for the majority of young black Americans, especially those that Eugene Robinson refers to as "The Abandoned," in his work, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. With reference to the mounting socio-political issues impeding the prospects of flourishing for many within the hip-hop generations, Hill-Collins writes:

> Joblessness, illiteracy, unplanned pregnancy, criminal activity, drugs, and alarmingly high rates of HIV infection spark the same response: Black

[78] Patricia Hill-Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism*, *Nationalism and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 9.

youth are told to 'speak proper English, pull up your pants, and take off that miniskirt.'[79]

Moving Beyond Moral Panics in Homiletic and Public Theological Discourse

Thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate the complex ways in which preaching and public discourse in black church traditions often, wittingly or unwittingly, contributes to a moral panic that demonizes and criminalizes young black women and men even as it seeks redemption. As such, this initial chapter has operated as a more critical and theoretical reflection on the public theological responses of black churches and their leaders to contemporary black youth culture. As Marc Lamont Hill writes in the conclusion of the article that began this chapter, "My point here is not to excuse the troubling condition of the hip-hop generation. Clearly, we have moral and ethical issues that must be resolved in order to approximate the level of service rendered by our foreparents."[80] Hill's aim is both to offer a defense of the hip-hop generation from further marginalization by the critical/hypocritical discourse of the black church while also inspiring in black preachers a more self-reflexive posture that might revitalize a legitimate prophetic voice for social change.

In what follows, then, the dissertation turns from a critique of the discourse of representatives of the "New Black Church," to an analysis of specific public theological interventions that preachers who position themselves within the *prophetic* black church traditions have made in black youth culture- and hip-hop culture in particular. As such, I concentrate on the public theological interventions of three black activist preachers from

[79] Ibid, 9.
[80] Marc Lamont Hill, "I Bling Because I'm Happy" http://www.popmatters.com/pm/tools/print/54475 (accessed March, 19, 2012).

the hip-hop generation. Each of these young ministers has been involved in significant efforts to challenge those powerful forces in society that would undermine the flourishing of those black youth who have and continue to come of age in the post-civil rights era. I have chosen a select group of young, theologically trained, African American ministers from a range of denominational traditions: Reverend Delman Coates (Baptist), Reverend Lennox Yearwood Jr. (COGIC/UCC) and Rev. Yvonne Gilmore (Disciples of Christ/UCC).

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the strategies that each of these black religious leaders deploys as a means of public theological intervention in the very hip-hop culture that shaped them and is the source of so much criticism from their elders within the community and the broader public sphere. With so much of the public discourse surrounding black youth culture of the post-civil rights era constructing a narrative of moral decline and deviance- pointing to the violence and misogyny of hip-hop culture as case in point- how do these black religious intellectuals and activists attempt to raise a voice of prophetic criticism without further contributing to the moral panic that surrounds black youth and the cultures that they produce and consume? How have these prophetic black Christian preachers attempted to function as organic intellectuals making strategic and important interventions in popular culture as a "site of struggle?" What are the implications of these interventions? In what ways do they disrupt public perceptions of young black Americans and challenge public policies that undermine their flourishing? In what ways do their oppositional practices unwittingly reinforce the dominant representations of black youth culture that they seek to displace with more positive images? Are their strategies of intervention in black youth culture, and

particularly in the culture of hip-hop actually effective interventions or are they merely "posing as politics" as political philosopher, Adolph Reed has claimed?

By describing and analyzing the public theological discourses and practices of three hip-hop generation black religious intellectuals from different traditions within the broader Black Church tradition, each of whom were theologically trained in university related Divinity Schools, I hope to contribute to the possibility of constructing a more effective practice of public theological cultural criticism and strengthen the role of black religious intellectuals in the ongoing struggle for justice in the 21st Century. In this context, the relevance and perhaps the very future of black church activism hangs on whether black churches and their preachers will prophetically address the social crises facing black youth in the present moment, or simply reinforce their demonization in popular and public discourse.

Chapter III

"BET Does Not Represent Me!": Rev. Delman Coates and the Enough is Enough Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment

Introduction

The Reverend Delman Coates, PhD is "deeply concerned about the coarsening of American popular culture."[81] As a scholar-activist-preacher rooted in the black church traditions, he is particularly concerned with the corporate sponsorship of "stereotypical and demeaning" images of young African American women and men.[82] As a Baptist minister who has come of age in the post-civil-rights era, his focus is upon the representational politics of corporate dominated forms of rap music and hip-hop culture. In a sermon entitled, "From Proclamation to Protest," delivered from the pulpit of the church where he serves as pastor- Mt. Ennon Baptist Church in Clinton, Maryland- Rev. Coates proclaimed:

> I have turned my proclamation into protest. I am leading rallies in front of area corporations and media outlets that sponsor, market, and promote misogynistic and demeaning messages about black women and men. And I want those of you who are tired of sitting by silently to join me. We have to tell the world that there is more to black humanity than the portrayals of black men as thugs, pimps, and players, and of women as sexual objects. It's time that it stops.[83]

As the title of the sermon indicates, Rev. Coates indeed moved from proclamation to protest by organizing Enough is Enough: The Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment. Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, Rev. Coates and The Enough is Enough

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[81] Enough Is Enough: The Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment. http://www.enoughisenoughcampaign.com/eie_campaign_statement.htm (accessed July 23, 2011).
[82] Dr. Coates graduated magna cum laude from Morehouse College with a Bachelor of Arts in Religion, received a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School and a PhD in New Testament and Early Christianity from Columbia University.
[83] Delman Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest." *The African American Pulpit* 11, no. 3_(Summer 2008): 41.

Campaign gained national attention in 2007 during their public protests of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and its parent company Viacom Inc. These weekly protests began in September, 2007 in front of the Washington D.C. residence of Debra L. Lee, the chairman and CEO of BET. In the following months, the campaign expanded to include a New York City Campaign, where New York pastors and their congregations united with Enough is Enough, holding public protests in front of the home of Philippe Dauman, the president and chief executive of Viacom Inc.[84] Rev. DeQuincy M. Hentz, of Shiloh Baptist Church in New Rochelle, NY and Rev. Roger Williams, of First Baptist Church of Glen Cove, in Long Island were among those pastors who galvanized their congregations for protest at the rally outside the Manhattan residence of Mr. Dauman. In an official statement, the Enough is Enough Campaign listed its statement of purpose in the following terms:

> The purpose of this campaign is to protest the commercialization and marketing of negative and derogatory images of black men and women in the entertainment industry. This movement recognizes the power of media and entertainment corporations to shape American attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and even policies by and about people of color.[85]

In an interview for *The New York Times*, Coates posed a motivating question of the campaign, "Why are these corporations making these images normative and mainstream?"[86] Resolved that such questions must be pursued both prophetically and publicly, Coates insisted, "I can talk about this in the church until I am blue in the face, but we need to take it outside."[87] Reflecting upon the movement from homiletic theory to

[84] Felicia R. Lee, "Protesting Demeaning Images in Media." *The New York Times*. November 5, 2007 (Accessed February 2, 2012).
[85] Enough Is Enough: The Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment. http://www.enoughisenoughcampaign.com/eie_campaign_statement.htm (accessed July 23, 2011).
[86] Felicia R. Lee, "Protesting Demeaning Images in Media." *The New York Times*. November 5, 2007 (Accessed February 2, 2012).
[87] Ibid.

practice, Rev. Coates argued that the public and prophetic role of the black church and its preachers demanded not only a denouncement of negative images from the pulpit, but also a more public theological intervention.

At the Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, The Enough is Enough Campaign became a defining episode in the historical narrative of the church and its public ministry. According to that narrative, "In September 2007, the membership of Mt. Enon Baptist church was a catalyst for a national campaign to challenge the commercialization and marketing of negative and derogatory images of black men and women in the entertainment industry."[88] Moreover, it is significant that the campaign is described in terms of its role in reconnecting the church to a more socially engaged ministry. Mt. Ennon asserts, "The church's participation in the Enough is Enough Campaign positioned the church to have a role in social justice and community issues."[89] Yet, it is interesting to consider not only why, but when and where Mt. Enon and Rev. Coates chose to re-enter the struggle for justice in the post-Civil rights era. In other words, what was it about the intersections of black youth and their popular cultural representations circulating through mass-media outlets such as Black Entertainment Television that galvanized Rev. Coates and the Mt. Enon congregation to engage in this quite public (theological) form of protest?

Answers to the latter questions began to emerge shortly after launching the campaign, in 2007, when Rev. Coates was interviewed on the Faith Matters segment of National Public Radio (NPR) in Washington, D.C. During the interview, host, Michel

[88] "About Mt. Ennon Baptist Church: Our History" http://www.mtennon.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16&Itemid=20 (accessed on July 15, 2012).
[89] Ibid.

Martin, raised the question of the relationship between such a campaign against representations of African Americans in popular culture and Coates' role as a religious leader. Reverend Coates responded by emphasizing his theological commitment to the public role of Christian proclamation as a form of cultural critique. "Faith is not just personal its also public. Jesus wasn't merely crucified according to the narrative to challenge instances of individual sin…but that [sic] he was deeply concerned about challenging the culture."[90] Through sermons, public proclamation, protest rallies, and media statements, Rev. Coates performed this theological conviction, in the public sphere, as a form of cultural critique and social intervention. Coates' criticism and intervention were in response to a sense of urgency concerning the social status of black youth, the influence of mass-mediated cultural representations, and the public perception of black humanity.

The aim of this chapter is to examine Reverend Coates' linkage of proclamation, cultural critique and social intervention. The chapter will analyze Coates' practical theological "turn to (popular) culture" as a site of struggle and point of departure for the mobilization of both church members and other activist groups for social intervention. This examination will focus upon the central problematic raised in the opening chapter- the ways that Coates' normative intervention within the representational politics of hip-hop culture both contests, but also potentially contributes to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture of the post-civil rights era. By resisting representations of black youth as "thugs, pimps, bitches and hos," Coates' Enough is Enough Campaign counters constructions of black youth as morally deviant and dangerous that fuel the current moral panic. Yet, the campaign's dependence upon binary oppositions between "positive" and

[90] "Pastor Says to BET: 'Enough Is Enough'." Faith Matters. National Public Radio. September 21, 2007.

"negative" imagery threaten to reinscribe this panic by its failure to adequately account for the political ambiguities and moral complexities involved in the production, distribution and consumption of hip-hop culture. According to this perspective, the possibility of redemption and or liberation lies in the eradication of "negative" messages and images of black women and men.

Central to this chapter is an analysis of the sermon, "From Proclamation to Protest." Initially delivered from the pulpit of the Mt. Ennon Baptist Church in the fall of 2007, the sermon was subsequently published in *the African American Pulpit,* Summer 2008. It is the published version that will be the object of analysis. Entitled, "From Proclamation to Protest," the sermon is an urgent call for intervention in mass-mediated forms of popular culture that affect public discourse and policies concerning African Americans. As a New Testament scholar and preacher, what interpretive and homiletic strategies does Coates deploy in order to mobilize his congregation for social intervention? What narrative does the sermon construct to connect the social interventions of the Civil Rights Era to those that Rev. Coates is advocating in the Post-Civil Rights Era? What does it tell us about the role of public theological discourse and practice as a form of cultural criticism? In order to address these questions, I will proceed by performing a close reading of Reverend Coates' sermon "From Proclamation to Protest." I will demonstrate that this sermon mediates a particular understanding of the relationship between the public theological voice of black churches and popular culture as a site of social protest and political struggle in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Towards this end, I will place this sermon in dialogue with another of Reverend Coates' sermons, "Race Still Matters," published in the "Preaching in a Post-Obama Era" issue of *The*

African American Pulpit, and a brief article, "Towards a Progressive Christian Interpretive Praxis." These latter two pieces help to tease out the cultural-critical implications of Coates' interpretive strategies as well as his strategies for public theological intervention.

I will then examine the ways that this understanding informs and shapes the mobilization of black churchgoers (and other activist groups) for engagement in late-post-civil-rights-era political and cultural struggle against media representations deemed to be stereotypical and demeaning to African Americans. Here, I will foreground the contestations between Reverend Coates' Enough is Enough Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment, and the agents of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and its parent company Viacom. Finally, I will offer a critique of the discourse and practice of the Enough Is Enough campaign, that 1) recognizes and commends its significance as an important cultural and public theological intervention 2) challenges the implications of its binary construction of 'positive' and 'negative' images; its failure to adequately account for both the complexity of the relationship between black popular culture and the 'culture industry', as well as the agency of those who produce and consume these cultural productions.

"From Proclamation to Protest": Preaching and/in the Public Sphere: Sermon Analysis

In his sermon, "From Proclamation to Protest," Reverend Delman Coates presents an historical, theological, scriptural and practical account of the public role of the church and its pulpit in relation to issues of injustice in society. In particular, Coates' sermon is concerned with the public theological discourse of the Black Church in response to

degrading messages about black women and men in the public sphere- especially those mediated by corporate sponsored forms of popular culture. Before delving into this more particular, and racialized religious rhetoric, Coates sets up his sermon by way of a more universal appeal to the role of the church as an arbiter of cultural norms and values as well as its involvement in socio-political concerns. Based upon passages from the New Testament book of Acts (4:13-22 and 5:27-29, 40-42), Coates' sermon constructs an historical narrative of the role of the early Christian Church in relation to its surrounding culture, the challenging of that role during the Enlightenment, and the privatization of Christian faith and practice by the late twentieth century. Ultimately, Coates argues for the inextricable link between internal religious practices of the church and their manifestations in the public sphere on behalf of those marginalized by oppressive structures and systems of power. The overall thrust of his sermon is captured in his insistence that, "If our preaching does not extend beyond the confines of the Church, our proclamation is in vain."[91]

Reverend Coates' homiletic strategy, for this sermon, hinges upon persuading his listeners that a dramatic shift has occurred, "from a public faith in the first 1600 years [of the history of the Christian Church] to a private faith in the last 400 years."[92] Moreover, Coates endeavors to demonstrate that such a shift, "has had profound implications for the way Christians understand the message of the Bible, the role of the Church, and the nature of Christian ministry."[93] The sermon begins with an acknowledgment of the various ways that Christian communities have understood the relationship of their beliefs

[91] Delman Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest." *The African American Pulpit* 11, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 41.
[92] Ibid, 39.
[93] Ibid, 39.

and practices to the wider societies in which they were embedded. Rather than tracing a genealogical account of the development and differences of the public role of religious practices over time and space, Coates' historical narrative develops from pure origins to compromised contemporary practices. There is some ambiguity in the development of this narrative, however, as it is not altogether clear whether the following assertion is intended to be merely descriptive or normative: "[For much of her history] there was little distinction between the Church and its mission and the society in which the Church was located. In many respects, the Church was the society."[94] Given the overall arc of the narrative, and its purpose of mobilizing a contemporary congregation for political activism, Coates' opening account of the Church's historical relationship to society conveys a more normative sense. The last several lines of this introductory appeal to origins only heightens this normative sense. The minister insists, "The Church was the primary propagator of cultural norms, ethics and values. The Church was the government, the Church was the court, and the Church was the source of popular culture, commerce, and intellectual life."[95]

In what follows, Reverend Coates narrates a decline from these origins during the centuries of the Protestant Reformation, the European Enlightenment and its intellectual and cultural project of modernity. During this historical period, the relationship between Church and society shifted dramatically. It is interesting to note, however, Coates' account of this shift. On Coates' account, it was between the 16th and the 18th centuries that, "the role of the Church in relation to society began to be destabilized as Christians

[94] Ibid, 39.
[95] Ibid, 39.

and the cultural elite questioned the cultural hegemony of the church."[96] For his rhetorical purposes, Coates' brackets the implications that follow from this account, namely that such a Church was not merely *involved* in the public sphere, but rather exerted a hegemonic control over the socio-cultural and political lives of the people within these societies. As the sermon develops, however, it becomes more apparent that such an elision serves Coates' purposes of constructing a church militant that exists in an oppositional relationship with an unjust society and an oppressive dominant culture. As such, the church, though it has been de-centered in contemporary public life, must reoccupy its "rightful" place as a "transformer of culture,"- particularly a culture that has become oppressive and degrading to those who are already marginalized. What is obscured in this account, though, is the role of the church in this oppression and marginalization. While Coates' later critiques the privatized faith of the contemporary church for its complicity with an oppressive order and its culture, he avoids suggesting that the hegemony of the church in the socio-political sphere and as "propagator of cultural norms, ethics, and values," has been responsible for contributing to such oppression.

To be sure, as one committed to the prophetic role of the black church in the United States, Coates would certainly not deny such claims. In his article, "Towards a Progressive Christian Interpretive Praxis," Dr. Coates writes that certain interpretive postures "impede the black church and the black pastor's ability to be prophetic."[97] This article is adapted from a presentation delivered at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference in February of 2004, which brought together a range of scholars, ministers and activists to

[96] Ibid, 39.
[97] Delman Coates, "Towards a Progressive Christian Interpretive Praxis." *The African American Pulpit 7*, no. 4 (Fall 2004):38.

address the theme of, "Global Vision and Action for the 21st-Century Black Church".[98] Dr. Coates addressed the gathering as " a scholar and historian of early Christianity," concerned with what he described as the, "methodological tyranny of biblical fundamentalism and historical criticism."[99] Throughout this article, Coates works to expose the ideological presuppositions of these interpretive paradigms and point toward an African American biblical hermeneutic that is consistent with the interests of the Black Church and its constituents. As Coates develops his argument, it appears that his critique of biblical fundamentalism and historical-critical approaches depends, in part, on arguing that these European influenced scholarly developments impose upon biblical texts epistemological paradigms that would have been foreign to the authors and the cultures in which the scriptures were produced. As a New Testament scholar, Coates insists upon the de-centering of these interpretive frameworks and argues for situating the experiences and social realities of the African Diaspora at the center of the interpretive task. If my reading of Coates is on target here, then he seems to suggest that centering African American and diasporic experiences moves the reader closer to the interpretive practices of the early Church, before the "fall" of European critical approaches to the study of the Bible.

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[98] Founded in 2003, The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference is a 501c3 corporation that focuses upon orienting African American Churches towards issues of social justice. The conference is named after the prominent African American clergyman and professor, who served as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, President of Virginia Union University and later Distinguished Professor of Education at Rutgers University. According to the Proctor Conference website: The mission of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC) is to nurture, sustain, and mobilize the African American faith community in collaboration with civic, corporate, and philanthropic leaders to address critical needs of human and social justice within local, national, and global communities. SDPC seeks to strengthen the individual and collective capacity of thought leaders and activists in the church, academy, and community through education, advocacy, and activism. See www.sdpconference.info

[99] Coates, "And the Bible Says: Methodological Tyranny of Biblical Fundamentalism and Historical Criticism" in *Blow the Trumpet in Zion!: Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church,* ed. Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes III and Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 97.

As such, while the Christian Church may have been corrupted over the years, the role of the Black Church should be similar to that of the early church- deeply engaged in public and social concerns. The latter ought necessarily be a prophetic bulwark against injustice and a counter-cultural agent of transformative action in the world. Yet, to this point in the sermon, Coates has not mentioned the Black Church tradition, but rather contends that, in the West, "Far too many Christians believe that the role of the gospel and the role of the Church are to serve as vehicles for self-centered, self-seeking, and self-interested wish fulfillment without regard for the broader culture and society."[100] For Coates, this state of affairs is inconsistent with a normative understanding of Christian proclamation as expressed by both the early Church and the most faithful bearers of the tradition.

In a shift from historical to theological perspective, the scholar-preacher invokes H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, *Christ and Culture.* Coates' use of Niebuhr allows him to construct a narrative of an ecclesial tradition, vis-à-vis culture, that stretches from the earliest Christian communities through Martin Luther King Jr. For Coates, the church, in this tradition, understands it's calling to be consistent with the fifth position in Niebuhr's typological framework- "Christ The Transformer of Culture." Niebuhr presents the relationship between Christianity and its surrounding culture as an enduring problem that various Christian communities have negotiated in a range of ways from rejection, to accommodation, to transformation.[101] With Niebuhr, Coates commends the latter. For Coates, when the Church has been true to the best of its tradition, it has:

[100] Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest," 39.
[101] H. Richard Niebuhr. *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). It is important to note, that within Niebuhr's framework, this position is essentially conversionist. As such, those churches or religious leaders working from this conviction are engaged in the work of transforming culture in ways deemed to be

> Understood the message of Christ as a transformer of culture in which the hope of the future after death is to be actualized in the present while we live; that eternity is not simply the promise of God after time, but is more so the presence of God in time; that the role of the Church is to bring about the will of God, '…on earth as it is in heaven.'[102]

With this historical backdrop and theological claim in place, Coates engages the biblical text by immediately placing the apostles, Peter and John, in "the public pulpits of their day preaching about the resurrection."[103] On Coates reading of the text, preaching about the resurrection was no merely private religious ritual with implications for only those within the gathered Christian community. Rather, the message of resurrection was a public proclamation that provoked the ire of those invested in maintaining the status quo-particularly, the Sanhedrin. Coates argues, "They were not prohibiting them from assembling for singing, celebration, and services. The Sanhedrin just did not want them preaching a revolutionary, counter-cultural, gospel message."[104] The language of revolution and counter-culture, as it is deployed here, connects with his use of Niebuhr's model of "Christ transforming culture." In light of his interpretive commitments, as disclosed in the aforementioned article, it becomes clearer that Coates is signaling the concrete forms that such counter-cultural proclamation will take in light of injustices perpetrated against the African American community. As the sermon moves closer to the focus of its homiletic aim, Coates deploys more of the language that he will ultimately use to persuade his audience towards mobilization for public and political action.

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consistent with the Kingdom of God. However, as will become more apparent latter in this chapter, the dialogue between church and culture is typically unidirectional in this paradigm. Therefore the possibility of a mutually critical dialogue between church and culture is virtually nonexistent. While this approach certainly encourages the sort of cultural intervention and activist posture that Coates' and other progressive intellectuals see as valuable, it risks closing down possibilities for dialogue and a mutually transforming relationship between church and culture. In this case, the church that would intervene on behalf of black youth culture, need not seriously engage the perspectives of black youth of the hip-hop generation.

[102] Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest," 39.

[103] Ibid, 40.

[104] Ibid, 40.

Two moves within the sermon demonstrate this rhetorical strategy. First, the minister follows up on his earlier claims about the preaching of Peter and John provoking opposition from the Sanhedrin, "The Sanhedrin's concern wasn't that Peter and John were simply saying the name of 'Jesus' with their mouths, but that their proclamation led to the transformation of the people and the communities in which they lived."[105] Moreover, Coates presses his claim further by suggesting that the name of Jesus and his resurrection were not merely words to conjure with, but rather their proclamation was intended as "*a public policy initiative* used to transform lives and challenge the status quo" (emphasis mine).[106] As lives were transformed, the sick were healed, and communities of formerly marginalized individuals began to become empowered, Coates proclaims, "those in seats of influence who oppressed the poor felt threatened." In a word, Christian proclamation was impacting the public sphere.

Moving from the first to the twenty-first century, Coates suggests that this scriptural text serves as an indictment upon contemporary churches that are more "oriented towards private wants rather than public needs, personal desires rather than social imperatives, and individual ambitions rather than collective struggles."[107] As a result, the contemporary church, in its refusal to confront the broader culture, has become complicit with an oppressive culture. It is worth noting here, that Coates' analysis of the complicity of the church with its surrounding culture is consistent with Marc Lamont Hill's charge against the "New Black Church". With Hill, Coates claims, "it seems that the Church has become silent, passive, and distracted by wealth, riches, and

[105] Ibid, 40.
[106] Ibid, 40.
[107] Ibid, 41.

prosperity."[108] Moreover, when Coates insists, "We have forgotten our mandate to serve this present age," he is quite consistent with Alton Pollard's critique in his address from the pulpit of Sisters Chapel.[109] Yet Coates' rhetorical aim differs significantly from Hill's and he draws a markedly different conclusion than Pollard.

Resolved not to remain complicit, Coates voices the driving concern of the sermon. If Christian proclamation is not to be in vain, it must engage the public sphere and for Coates this means a prophetic challenge to popular culture. Here, Reverend Coates makes plain what moving "From Proclamation to Protest," means for his context. Coates heralds:

> It is for these reasons that I am announcing today, in this service, that the Lord has led me to initiate a campaign to protest the degrading, derogatory, and demeaning messages about black women and black men in the popular culture.[110]

Immediately following this announcement, Coates seeks to clarify his position. Rather than a nostalgic understanding of the moral declension of a black artistic tradition, Coates insists that his position is rooted in a much broader socio-political perspective. Along these lines, Coates argues, "[…] I realize that in the global capitalistic and technological society in which we live, the media has tremendous power to shape attitudes, behaviors, and even policy about the poor and people of color. Media has the ability to affect how we see ourselves and how others see us."[111]

In this quote, Coates articulates his understanding of the relationship between popular culture, public policy and the discourse surrounding black youth in the public

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[108] Ibid, 41.
[109] See Alton Pollard, "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: A Meditation" in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012).
[110] Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest," 41.
[111] Ibid, 41.

sphere. It is precisely because of this nexus that Coates views the politics of black cultural representation as a site of public theological intervention. It is for this reason that the preacher declares, "I have turned my proclamation to protest."[112] Here, Coates' rhetorical strategy moves from historical-theological argument and scriptural interpretation to more racial reasoning. He surmises that, "If black people protested negative stereotypes in the early 20th century, there is no reason we should accept it now."[113] With this move, Rev. Coates attempts to link his cause to a wider historical narrative of black resistance to racial representations in the media. This historical narrative stretches back to the 19th and 20th centuries where degrading representations of African Americans reinforced white supremacist notions of black life and undergirded a social order in which blacks were held to be inherently inferior. Such depictions, served the larger society's cultural, commercial and political ends. Moreover, these representations shaped the ways in which African Americans constructed their own identities. Toward the conclusion of his sermon, Dr. Coates exhorted his congregation, "Just because some blacks are provided compensation for participation in our exploitation, it doesn't make it right. At some point, we've got to declare 'enough is enough.'"[114] This statement provides greater perspective on Reverend Coates' controversial decision to target the home of the chief executive of Black Entertainment Television (BET), Debra L. Lee, as the initial site of protest for his Enough is Enough Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment. On September 15, 2007, Reverend Coates and more than five hundred people demonstrated for nearly two hours near Lee's Washington D.C. home on the 2800 block of McGill Terrace, N.W. Protestors

[112] Ibid, 42.
[113] Ibid, 42.
[114] Ibid, 42.

wore white t-shirts that read "Enough is Enough" printed inside of red stop sign logos and carried signs with an array of messages including: "BET Does Not Reflect Me", "Lift Us Up, Don't Tear Us Down", "We are NOT Gangsters and Pimps" and "I am NOT a B I # * H- Respect Me!"[115]

"Enough is Enough!": An Examination of a Public Theological Protest

Rev. Coates' sermon, "From Proclamation to Protest," negotiates and articulates a particular understanding of Christian Proclamation. In this sermon, Coates constructs a theology of proclamation that commends this religious practice as form of cultural critique that mobilizes the church for social intervention towards the ends of social justice. For Coates, the historical context of post-civil rights America, demands that such an intervention include a critique of the role of mass-mediated forms of popular culture, including hip-hop, that circulate stereotypical representations of African Americans. In his analysis, these representations effect public discourse and policies that have adverse implications for young black women and men.

In what follows, I will examine the public theological intervention that Rev. Coates mobilized through his sermonic discourse. I will begin with a brief look at the some of the collaborating voices and constituencies involved in the protest. Subsequently, I will situate the discourse and practices of the protest within the broader public discourses that surrounded the campaign. These will include the widespread sense of disappointment with and ongoing critique of Black Entertainment Television, among African Americans, from its inception in 1980. Moreover, it will include the more

[115] Footage from this rally can be seen on a YouTube video linked to the www.enoughisenougcampaign.com website: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imkoDHc7u8u

immediate public backlash against and debate about hip-hop culture in the wake of the firing of radio personality, Don Imus in April of 2007. Towards the end of this section, I will lay bare the principal claims and strategies of the Enough is Enough Campaign in order to open them to analysis and critique in the final section of this chapter.

With his sermon, "From Proclamation to Protest," Delman Coates situated his proclamation as a form of cultural critique within the critical discourses of a broader range of scholars, activists and critics. Since the early 1990s, a number of scholars within the field of Black Cultural Studies have given increased attention to "the politics of representation," and strategies for "resisting representation."[116] For instance, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks discusses the historical relationships between mass media, racial representation and systems of domination and argues for the continuing need for resistance. hooks contends, "That the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people."[117] Later she implores the reader:

> To face these wounds, to heal them, progressive black people and our allies in struggle must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self determination…If this were the case, we would be ever mindful of the need to make radical intervention.[118]

It is just such a radical intervention that Delman Coates sought to make through Enough is Enough: The Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment. In his

[116] For an explanation of significant themes and issues in the discourse of race and representation, see bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Gina Dent and Michelle Wallace, *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representaitons and Signifying Practices (London: Sage Publications and Open University, 1997); Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005).
[117] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 3.
[118] Ibid, 4.

charge to Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, Rev. Coates proclaimed, "We have to tell the world that there is more to black humanity than the portrayals of black men as thugs, pimps, and players and of women as sexual objects."[119] At stake, for Dr. Coates, as a scholar, activist and minister, was nothing short of countering what hooks describes as a situation in which mass media has convinced both non-blacks and African Americans alike that, "[black] lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection."[120] Ironically, as it will become clearer below, Coates' campaign remains open to critique for its failure to wrestle with the complexities of black life beyond a binary framing of "positive" and "negative" images.

Recognizing the necessity of a collaborative and coalitional intervention, Dr. Coates not only mobilized his own congregation to "meet him on the protest lines," but also garnered the support of a broad range of activist and advocacy organizations as well as other "allies in struggle." These groups included the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Organization of Women (NOW), Feminist Majority, and the National Congress of Black Women (NCBW). Representatives from these groups joined their voices with Coates', creating the possibility for increased credibility and broader relevance for his public theological discourse- especially among those who might be suspicious that the campaign represents the attempts of a Christian minister to simply impose his own religion and moral agenda upon society.

[119] Coates, "From Proclamation to Protest," 42.
[120] hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.

Public Testimonies from Black Youth, Advocacy Groups and Other Allies

Among the range of activist groups bearing public witness at the initial rally in Washington D.C., it is significant to note that The Enough is Enough Campaign created space for black youth and young adults to offer their own public testimonies. In a reversal of the logic of black youth as deviant, these young black people testified to their indignation at BET's complicity in constructing a negative public image of black youth and called on the network to be more socially responsible. The inclusion of the voices of the young worked to lessen the force of the charge of "generational warfare" that is often leveled at other critiques of hip-hop culture. In this sense, younger African Americans were involved in an acts of "bearing witness," that demonstrated their ability to scrutinize the commercial domination of hip-hop even as they likely identify generationally, as audience members or as fans. This points to the complexity of black youth's consumption and uses of forms of popular culture such as hip-hop, as we will see below.

First, thirteen-year-old Amber Johnson articulated her disappointment with the representations of black women on the network. Johnson declared, "I don't want to be represented that way. I want to be represented as an intelligent, young African American."[121] Myla Worthington, also thirteen, echoed Johnson's concerns, while adding her sense of the ways that these images affected her personally. Said Worthington, "Every time I go somewhere, I have other people looking down at me, expecting something that I'm really not. I'm intelligent. I have a mind of my own. I don't go around shaking myself in front of people. I don't go around degrading myself all the time. And I don't think its fair to us that we should be portrayed like this when Martin Luther King

[121]See YouTube video of the Enough is Enough Rally on September 15, 2007: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imkoDHc7u8u

had a dream and I think we're letting it go to waste."[122] Two young black males also added their voices to those bearing witness. Michael Porter, an eighteen year old, insisted, "Every time I go somewhere, people think I'm a thug or I'm not well educated, because of what they see on TV."[123] Porter added, "How come we can't have images of us, African American males, going off to college, doing great things…not on the street, not selling drugs or robbery. I just get tired of it…and I think it needs to stop."[124]

Among the most vociferous of the young people who testified was 27-year old Carla Brooks, who was introduced as a media scholar and advocate. After demanding that BET demonstrate greater maturity and responsibility in its representation of black life, Brooks closed her public testimony-as-sermon by quoting 1 Cor. 13, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child…but when I became an adult, I put childish things behind."[125] This biblical reference became the interpretive lens through which Brooks presented her relentless criticism of the network and its representational practices. Born in 1980, the same year that Robert Johnson founded Black Entertainment Television, Brooks used this coincidence to add force to her sermonic testimony and a means for leveling her trenchant critique. Brooks declared, "BET and I are the same age, 27." Patterning her discourse after the Apostle Paul's rhetorical strategy, she inveighed, "It's high time for BET to grow up and start acting its age. We demand that BET become responsible, be accountable to the black community, and that it offer unique and varied perspectives on issues relevant to the black community."[126]

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

Representatives from the various advocacy groups added their voices to those raised by the black youth quoted above. Melanie Durnack, Vice President of NOW, proclaimed her solidarity with these young people as well as black women protestors and men of color. In her statement, Durnack declared, "We all know what happens when images of black men, black women, white women are presented in a negative and degrading way. What happens is violence against that community, the community of men, of women, of our communities."[127] Rose Afriyie, a field organizer for NOW, connected her work against negative media representations of black women in music videos to the Civil Rights protests of Martin Luther King Jr. insisting, "We want the media to know that…this is going to be the first of many marches…to make sure the sexism, the racism, the violence, the discrimination changes and ends."[128]

During the protest, Rev. Coates acknowledged that these efforts did not begin with the Enough is Enough Campaign, but began some fifteen years prior with the work of Dr. C. Delores Tucker and the National Congress of Black Women.[129] As such, he invited the current president of NCBW, Dr. E. Faye Williams to the microphone. Dr.

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[127] Ibid.

[128] As a Field Organizer for NOW, Afriyie speaks widely on the issue of images of black women in the media, and within the music industry in particular. See, Rose Afriyie, "Organizers Focus Awareness on Women in Music Videos," National Now Foundation Times, Fall 2007. http://www.nowfoundation.org/news/fall-2007/musicvideos.html (accessed 8/31/13).

[129] The National Congress of Black Women (NCBW) was founded by Dr. C. Delores Tucker in the early 1990s. The current president, Dr. E. Faye Williams' participation in the Enough is Enough Campaign represents an extension of the work Dr. Tucker began nearly two decades ago. Dr. Tucker's work was controversial, however, as she partnered in that work with conservative politician, Bill Bennett and also with pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, Dr. Calvin O. Butts. Dr. Tucker notably referred to rap music as nothing more than "pornographic smut," while Dr. Butts gained notoriety by steamrolling a pile of rap CDS in front of Abyssinian in June 1994. Many within the hip-hop community felt betrayed by Tucker's and Butt's alliance with Bennett and deemed their stance to be a betrayal of black youth culture and a declaration of "generational warfare." It is interesting to observe the ways that Dr. Coates has, on the one hand, attempted to avoid the perception of being anti-hip-hop and out of touch with black youth, in the ways that Dr. Butts was originally labeled, while on the other hand linking his campaign to the prior work of Dr. Tucker who received far more criticism than Butts from the hip hop community. The late hip-hop icon, Tupac Shakur's widely known lyric, "Delores Tucker you's a muthafucka instead of trying to help a nigga, you destroy a brotha," is indicative of the sentiment of a number of young blacks in the hip hop generation.

Williams narrated a history of the struggle against negative images of black women from the inception of the NCBW. As she moved to her climax, she insisted, "We knew that this was not our culture. You see we are the children of Fannie Lou Hamer. We are the children of Coretta Scott King. We are the children of C. Delores Tucker. We are the children of Constance Baker Motley. These are the great women who represent our cultures."[130]

Williams' comments are noteworthy as they hinge upon a certain discourse of authenticity, delimiting what is and is not "our culture." Such a discourse of authenticity, however, is double-edged. On the one hand it vehemently resists the representational practices of corporate media that would attempt to define black culture in narrowly stereotypical ways and limit the range of representations to only these images. On the other hand, however, for those young black women who, for various reasons, identify with certain representations and themes developed within hip-hop culture- sexual agency, for example, or a rejection of black middle-class respectability- Williams' rhetoric serves to render them bastard children of the black community. Or, to use Cathy Cohen's terms, these young women of the hip-hop generation, deemed to be beyond "the boundaries of blackness," and thus undeserving of communal support and resources.

Finally, Cassidy Johnson, a national organizer of the Feminist Majority Foundation, lent her voice to the protest, affirming the messages carried on the protest signs, "Black Entertainment Television no longer represents black people."[131] Wearing a black t-shirt that read, "This is what a FEMINIST looks like!" Johnson went on to say, "The world does not need to deem us B's or whores, or hos. I am not that! I am a 25-

[130] See YouTube video of the Enough is Enough Rally on September 15, 2007: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imkoDHc7u8u
[131] Ibid.

year-old woman. I am the demographic that BET is reaching to and I do not appreciate what I see on TV."[132] Standing in front of the CEO's home, Johnson called out to the black woman who is the chief executive at BET, "We need you…phenomenal woman, Debra Lee; we need you to be behind us in this cause…Why? Because you are the CEO of Black Entertainment Television…Why because these are your sisters, your daughters, your friends, your cousins." As the crowd applauded, some protestors gave their assent to Johnson's remarks and the collective witness of the speakers with their "amens."[133]

The public testimonies above lend greater credibility to Rev. Coates' religious leadership and the pubic theological witness of the Enough is Enough Campaign, as they offer a much broader range of voices from several important demographics. First, Coates' collaborative effort moves beyond the patriarchical attempt to speak for or in the best interest of black women, by allowing a range of black women and their white allies to speak for themselves. Second, these voices span the perceived gap between older African Americans of the Civil-Rights era and younger, hip-hop generation black youth, allowing for a common critique of exploitative practices in corporate media. Finally, the diversity of voices involved in the rally linked church members with individuals and organizations from wider activist communities.

Furthering the Ongoing Criticism of Black Entertainment Television

The Enough is Enough Campaign and the message of Reverend Coates resonated not only with activist groups, but also among a range of African Americans who have grown frustrated with the "negative" representations of black people on BET. Indeed, in choosing BET as a strategic site of intervention, Coates joined a range of scholars,

[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

activists and critics who have voiced deep criticism of the representational practices of the network for nearly two decades. As the most widely distributed U.S. provider of black imagery, Black Entertainment Television is perhaps the most influential, and certainly the most pervasive institution responsible for the circulation (though not necessarily the production) of black popular culture over the past three decades.[134] At a symbolic level, then, BET comes to represent the forms of corporate mediated black popular culture that have become nearly ubiquitous within the larger American (and global) cultural landscape in late modernity.

As the first African American owned television network, launched by Robert Johnson in 1980, a heightened sensitivity to issues of race and representation have always surrounded the programming and visual images aired on BET. Yet, from its inception, Johnson and BET have drawn criticism from many within black communities, leaders and everyday people alike, for what have been perceived as stereotypical and degrading images of black life. In an August 2007 segment of NPR, host Juan Williams puts the matter succinctly, "The dilemma for Black Entertainment Television ever since it was created in 1980 is that so much was expected of it."[135] In this segment, Reverend Barbara Reynolds who is both a minister and a journalist aired her grievances with the direction of the network, "BET was a group that I helped fight for. I did columns. I went on the radio. We need a BET. WE don't have a black cable network. And when it came on the

[134] Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Pimpin' Ain't Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xiv.
[135] Juan Williams, " 'BET' Gets Thumbs Down Award From Journalists," National Public Radio, August 10, 2007. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyld=1266874

air, I was appalled. I said, 'I can't believe this is what I fought for, half-nude women and gangsters. It was just trash."[136]

The criticism of the network reached new levels in 2000 when Johnson sold the network to media conglomerate Viacom for $2.3 billion, effectively relinquishing its black-owned status. In exchange, Viacom ensured the expansion of BET's subscriber base and greater potential earnings from advertisers.[137] In other words, Viacom effectively repackaged Black Entertainment Television, a niche market for black viewers, making it more "attractive" for consumption by a broader white American audience. For many within the black community, this transaction became symbolic of a literal "selling out" of black culture for Esau's metaphorical "mess of pottage" (albeit a financially lucrative mess for Johnson).It was this transaction, many argued, that was largely responsible for the vicious caricatures of black life in popular media culture. In an essay entitled, "Before and After Imus: On BET, Hip-Hip Culture, and Their Consequences," political scientist, Ricky L. Jones sums up the disillusionment of many initial supporters, writing:

> In theory, BET was founded to provide a media outlet that would present a myriad of complimentary and competing black images representing the infinite personas and perspectives encountered throughout the black experience. Unfortunately, over the years the network developed into little more than a haven for comic relief, occasional superficial romantic cinema, blaxploitation reruns, and music videos that have increasingly mutated into lightweight pornography.[138]

Attorney Gina McCauley, was among those whose patience with the network gave way to deep resentment. In line with Jones' perspective, McCauley has excoriated

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Smith-Shomade, xiv.
[138] Ricky L. Jones, *What's Wrong With Obamamania?: Black America, Black Leadership and the Death of Political Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), 109.

BET for its collaboration in the capitalist exploitation of young black women. She has described the larger problem of negative portrayals of black women in popular culture as nothing short of a "war on black women," that should be defunded by those with progressive commitments to women and black communities.[139] McCauley, who waged her own battle against BET, covered the Enough is Enough campaign extensively on her site www.whataboutourdaughters.com, and affirmed its mobilization against negative images of black women. McCauley's site was launched in April, 2007 with the purpose of "encourag[ing] Black women to organize to 'Stop Funding Foolishness.'"[140] Similar to Enough is Enough, McCauley's site was founded as an intervention to "impose economic sanctions on those who are producing destructive images of Black women and girls."[141]

The initial impetus behind McCauley's campaign was the launching of a BET program entitled, "Hot Ghetto Mess."As the title suggests, the program aired a proliferation of caricatured portrayals of poor and working-class African Americans. The name was subsequently changed, due in large part to McCauley's protest. The revised name became, "We Got to Do Better." While the name change rightly avoids the exploitation of the most reprehensible stereotypes, the chosen name remains problematic. This is, in part, due to its negative valuation of black women and men who choose not conform to rigid notions of black middle-class respectability. Nevertheless, McCauley's protest of BET is significant as a precursor to the Enough is Enough Campaign and because her blog site, which ran currently with the campaign, helped to reinforce its

[139] Gina McCauley, "After Imus, Now What?" What About Our Daughters, April 21, 2007. http://www.whataboutourdaughters.com/waod/2007/4/19/after-imus-now-what.html (accessed on 4/21/2013).
[140] See Gina McCauley's blogsite, www.whataboutourdaughters.com
[141] www.whataboutourdaughters.com

message. In an article for her blog, that ran in response to the national attention received by the Enough is Enough Campaign, McCauley argued:

> […] everyday all over this country Black men, women, and children get harassed by Viacom's programming. If they aren't watching it, they have to deal with the foolishness created by those who do. The reason Debra Lee is frightened of all of these common Black folks outside her gated compound is because she is out of touch and thinks that working class Black folks are like the common criminals and thugs her network chooses to present to the world as representing Black America.[142]

A Response to Don Imus and the Public Backlash Against Hip-Hop

Moreover, McCauley's whataboutourdaughters site is an important juxtaposition to Coates' Enough is Enough Campaign as both began, in large part, as a response to the Don Imus debacle in 2007. It is no small coincidence that both emerged within the context of a range of town hall meetings and a congressional hearing about the cultural productions of the hip-hop industry in the wake of the Imus affair. In a statement on NBC's *Today* show, Imus contended:

> I know that phrase [nappy-headed hos] didn't originate in the white community. That phrase originated in the black community. And I'm not stupid. I may be a white man, but I know that they young women and young black women all through that society are demeaned and disparaged and disrespected by their own black men and that they are called that name. And I know that, and that doesn't' give me, obviously, any right to say it but it doesn't give them any right to say it.[143]

With that comment, Imus effectively placed the onus of (personal) responsibility upon black youth and particularly hip-hop culture. In so doing, he sparked a widespread public conversation about race, racism and racial representations. Within black communities, no

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[142] Ibid.

[143] Brian Levy, "Imus' non-defense: The phrase 'nappy-headed hos' 'originated in the black community,'" *Media Matters for America*, April 10, 2007. http://mediamatters.org/research/2007/04/10/imus-non-defense-the-phrase-nappy-headed-hos-or/138562 (accessed on 4/21/2013).

less than the wider public sphere, hip-hop culture became the object of criticism- and often, the scapegoat.

An *Oprah Show* entitled "After Imus: Now What?" was cast as a town hall meeting that featured a panel of students from Spelman College who, in 2004 made headlines, after protesting a particularly offensive video on the now defunct program BET UNCUT. The *Oprah Show* also featured a range of "experts" associated with the hip-hop industry, from mogul Russell Simmons to Dr. Benjamin Chavis, a former president of the NAACP and current President/CEO of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), as well as Grammy-winning hip-hop emcee, Common. At issue in this show was the question, "Was Imus correct in pointing a finger at hip-hop culture?" Chavis responded in the negative arguing, "Hip-hop artists are not responsible for what Don Imus did. Don Imus was a racist. Don Imus was a sexist, and there's no way that Don Imus can blame hip-hop for what he did."[144] Chavis went on to say, "That is not to excuse hip hop. Hip-hop is not perfect. We've got to make it better. But we make hip-hop better by making society better, because hip-hop reflects the contradictions of society."[145] Chavis' position is representative of a broad range of critics who have argued that hip-hop, as a cultural production, is but a reflection of more serious issues within dominant culture and society that must be addressed prior to dealing with rap music. One of the Spelman students felt differently, insisting, "I feel that, as with the Don Imus situation, there's a lack of accountability. As rappers, I feel that accountability should be taken into

[144] The Oprah Winfrey Show, "A Hip-Hop Town Hall," Oprah.com, July 13, 2009, http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/A-Hip-Hop-Town-Hall/4.
[145] Ibid.

consideration- as well as with Don Imus- from a racial standpoint. Rappers from a sexist standpoint…It all needs to be addressed and we need to quit talking around the issues."[146]

On September 25, 2007, BET itself launched a three-part special examining controversial issues in and around hip-hop entitled, "Hip Hop vs. America: A BET Town Hall." The BET series was launched, in part, due to the perception that, in answering the above question of hip-hop's culpability, the *Oprah Show* did not adequately represent the views of the hip hop community. The BET Town Hall was hosted by Jeff Johnson (a minister and media commentator) and featured a range of intellectuals, activists and artists including: Michael Eric Dyson, Firyea Chidea, Nelson George, Stanley Crouch, Dianne Weathers, Clifford "T.I." Harris, and Cornell "Nelly" Iral Haynes, Jr. In an interview featured in the "It Ain't My Fault: Blame it On Hip-Hop" issue of *Words.Beats.Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture*, rap artist, David Banner (who was featured on the BET Town Hall) charged Oprah with a more malevolent intent. David Banner, whose birth name is Levell Crump, said of the Oprah Town Hall, "If you're not going to defend us, then you don't have the right to crucify us in front of white people. We have to make a decision to not worry about ratings. Sometimes we have to stand up for some type of merit."[147] Crump went on to insist, "Its amazing that Black people will stand up against their children but they won't stand up against the establishment…You lost your heart after they beat the shit out of you in the '60's? Instead of facing the real problem, you attack your kids."[148]

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[146] Ibid.
[147] "Interview with David Banner" in *Words.Beats.Life: The Global Jornal of Hip Hop Culture*, (Volume 4, Issue 1), 28.
[148] Ibid.

David Banner was also one of the rap artists who testified during the congressional hearing, "From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degradation." This hearing began on the same day as the BET Town Hall later that evening. No doubt, representatives from BET anticipated that their network would be implicated in such a hearing. The congressional hearing was initiated by former Black Panther, longtime Congressional Black Caucus member, and pastor of The Beloved Community Church in Chicago, Rep. Bobby L. Rush (D. Ill). Rush, like others present at the panel, and also Rev. Coates in his sermon, insisted, "This hearing is not anti-hip-hop. I am a fan of hip-hop."[149] Nevertheless, Rush insisted that those convened at the hearing sought, "to address the issue of violence, hate and degradation that has reduced too many of our youngsters to automatons, those who don't recognize life, those who don't value life."[150] During the hearing, Dr. E. Faye Williams, who also participated in the Enough is Enough rallies, remarked, "We have allowed greedy corporate executives- especially those in the entertainment industry- to lead many of our young people to believe that it is OK to entertain themselves by destroying the culture of our people."[151] Not surprisingly, corporate executives such as Phillipe Dauman, CEO of Viacom Inc., defended their practices arguing, "We have a responsibility to speak authentically to our viewers." Moreover, Dauman added, "it is not our role to censor the creative expression of artists."[152]

These events all provided a much broader discursive, cultural and political context for the sermonic and public discourse taking place within and beyond Mt. Ennon Baptist

[149] Jim Abrams, "Congress Examines Hip-Hop Language." USA Today. September 25, 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2007-09-25-hip-hop-congress_N.htm (Accessed 2/2712).
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

Church. That this larger public discourse shaped Reverend Coates' perspective is evident in a statement Coates' delivered for an article in the New York Times earlier in November. With reference to the firing of Don Imus, Coates remarked, "In the wake of the Imus affair. I began to think that the African-American community must be consistent in its outrage."[153] In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Coates provided a fuller account of his position. Here Coates is worth quoting at length:

> Here's the real concern that motivates and animates me. At a certain point within the African-American community, I believe that our struggle for freedom and equality is undermined when we're inconsistent in our outrage. And so, if we're going to be outraged when there are voices *outside* of our community who demean us and put us down, we have to be as concerned about voices *within* our community that do…the same thing.[154]

Coates was careful, however, not to engage in a frontal attack on hip-hop that could be construed as yet another African American clergymen taking aim at a young black rap artist. Rather, he insisted that the greater responsibility lay with those in power. During the initial protest, Coates made clear, "This campaign is not a campaign of censorship. It's not a campaign against any particular individual artist…This is about those who sit in seats of power. It is about those who make decisions about the kind of music that will be played…who make decisions about the kinds of videos that will be distributed around the world."[155] Coates' position here is quite significant in light of Cathy Cohen's critique of the rhetoric of black elites following the Imus debacle. Cohen argued, "It was [Imus'] attempt to deflect his use of the term 'nappy-headed ho' onto

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[153] Felicia R. Lee, "Protesting Demeaning Images in Media." *The New York Times*. November 5, 2007 (Accessed February 2, 2012).
[154] "Pastor Says to BET: 'Enough is Enough'" Faith Matters. National Public Radio. September 21, 2007. http://www.npr.org/templates/story.php?storyId=14587595&ps=rs (accessed July 23, 2011).
[155] See YouTube video of the Enough is Enough Rally on September 15, 2007: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imkoDHc7u8u

black rappers, and the ensuing response of black leaders and community members, that makes visible the existing moral panic surrounding black youth in black communities."[156] While Coates insisted that the black community should be outraged about "voices within our community" that use similar language as Imus, he attempted to avoid what Cohen referred to as most black (male) leaders' "incomplete framing" of the degradation of black women through an oversimplified attack on rap music.[157] While Coates' does not so easily avoid Cohen's critique of, "the role that class and status played in the response of black people to the Imus incident," a point that will be explored more fully further below, his campaign and message was consistent with Cohen's broader concern for a more complex and effective critique.[158] Cohen writes:

> Surely rap artists must be held accountable for their lyrics, but they operate with limited agency: to make largely invisible in this discussion the corporations that profit from such language and images- corporations like Viacom and BET- is again to produce partial truths when the complete story is desperately needed.[159]

It is this more prophetic task of "making seen the unseen" that informs Rev. Coates' message and mission. In December of 2007, Reverend Coates sponsored a similar town hall meeting in the sanctuary of Mt. Ennon to discuss, "Images of Black Americans in Entertainment." The meeting brought together a panel of black leaders, including activist Dick Gregory, talk show host Joe Madison and Dr. E. Faye Williams, president of the National Congress of Black Women. Panelists and community members gathered to discuss, "the cultural impact of negative images of people of color in the hip

[156] Cathy Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 32.
[157] For a very insightful discussion of the ways that black communal responses to the Imus incident worked to "other" those black women who do not conform to images of black respectability or normative mores of female sexually, See Monica R. Miller, "'I Am a Nappy-Headed Ho': (Re)Signifying 'Deviance' in the Haraam of Religious Respectability' in *Ain't I A Womanist Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought*, edited by Monica A. Coleman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 123-137.
[158] Ibid, 35.
[159] Ibid, 34.

hop industry."[160] In the advertisements for the meeting, community members were encouraged to attend and offer their input concerning the questions, "Should we challenge, and if so, how should we challenge the marketing of images and messages that degrade our people?"[161] Indeed, Reverend Coates *did* challenge the representations of black people in the hip-hop industry, and the *how* of his strategy hinged upon the mobilization of his congregation in collaboration with a range of other activists and concerned citizens in the Enough is Enough Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment.

Goals and Objectives of the Campaign

In a number of rallies and media statements, Reverend Coates listed three main contentions of the Enough is Enough Campaign, which were also published on the campaign's website. The campaign contends: 1) Music companies do not equitably apply standards for lyrical content that is offensive to blacks as for other groups. 2) American corporations have different standards for sponsoring artists whose music is offensive to blacks than they do for material that is offensive to other groups and 3) American corporations sponsor, through endorsements and advertising on radio and television outlets, artists who promote negative messages about black people, but would not provide such sponsorship for artists who degrade other interest groups.[162] Based upon these

[160] The "Images of Black Americans in Entertainment" town hall meeting, along with other activities and media productions sponsored by the Enough is Enough Campaign, was advertised on an internet group website, Prince George's Politics, which circulates current political news emerging within Prince George's County, Maryland. The advertisement for this Town Hall Meeting can be accessed at: http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/PG-Politics/conversations/topics/4585
[161] Ibid.
[162] Enough is Enough! The Campaign for Corporate Responsibility in Entertainment http://www.enoughisenoughcampign.com/eie_campaign_statement.htm (accessed July 23, 2011)

contentions, Coates and the Enough is Enough Campaign devised five goals. These goals are as follows:

1. To encourage the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to enforce its congressional mandate to regulate obscenity, profanity, and indecent content over the public airwaves between 6AM and 10PM. The campaign also seeks to expand how the commission defines the "contemporary community standards" for indecent material when it comes to television and (urban) radio.

2. To encourage music companies who regard themselves as good corporate citizens to establish and publicize universal creative standards for lyrical content that they produce, market, and distribute. Such standards should include not supporting material that objectifies and degrades women, promotes violence against women, glorifies gratuitous violence, criminal and illegal activity, and glorifies the portrayal of black men as "gangsters and thugs, players and primps."

3. To encourage corporations who advertise on media outlets to establish and distribute universal standards for corporate sponsorship according to the parameters above and to withdraw corporate sponsorship and advertising dollars from outlets and/or artists who promote these negative images.

4. To encourage American consumers, and black consumers in particular, not to support entertainment companies and other corporations that market, sponsor, and support material that does not conform to these standards. We will boycott those corporations who continue to sponsor and support these degrading, negative, and stereotypical images.

5. To encourage mutual fund mangers, pension fund managers, and investment bankers to divest funds from investments in publicly traded companies that promote, sponsor, and market material that objectifies and degrades women, promotes violence against women, glorifies gratuitous violence, criminal and illegal activity, and glorifies the portrayal of black men as "gangsters and thugs, players and pimps." We are calling on local, state, and federal government to divest public funds invested in these companies as well.

While each of these goals deserves attention, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus my analysis upon the second and fourth goals. These goals, in particular, address issues of cultural production, distribution and consumption of black youth/hip-hop

culture and demonstrate the tensions within the Enough is Enough Campaign between a progressive and prophetic intervention on the one hand, and on the other hand, a response that potentially contributes to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture.

A Critique of the Enough is Enough Campaign

As I have argued above, Rev. Delman Coates' intervention can be understood as a black activist preacher *protesting* the cultural productions of hip-hop. With the moral good of the entire African American community firmly in mind, Coates critiques the violence and misogyny that has long plagued corporate dominated hip-hop. In particular, his intervention illuminates how black religious leaders can lend their public voices and influence to a progressive critique of sexism, both within and beyond African American communities. Coates has certainly done that. Moreover, he has partnered with several feminist and Black women's organizations, and does not simply offer a male's perspective devoid of black women's perspectives and voices.

At the same time, however, this intervention deserves more critical interrogation as it simultaneously arises from a social and cultural position of black middle-class religious and racial respectability. As Cathy Cohen has argued, the moral panic that surrounds black youth is understandable, yet when that panic is linked to a politics of respectability, it has serious implications for black youth who are already deemed to be morally deviant. Because of this, the Enough is Enough Campaign represents an ambiguous and paradoxical intervention that simultaneously resists and reproduces harmful discourses concerning black youth culture of the hip-hop era.

Re-Thinking the Goals of the Campaign

That Coates' intervention arises from such a position becomes more evident as we more carefully examine two of the five goals of the campaign as well as Coates' account of the initial impetus behind his outrage at Black Entertainment Television and hip-hop culture. While the second goal was supported by a number of activists for is resistance to "negative" representations, critics decried these efforts as attempts at "censorship." This points us to the complexities involved in resisting "negative" representations and the risk that such efforts carry in closing down creative space for other forms of resistance through cultural productions that do not easily fit within "positive" and "negative" binaries. The fourth goal of the Enough is Enough Campaign focuses upon consumers. This goal encourages engaged and active consumers to challenge misogyny and violence that is distributed to them via mass media. On the other hand, Coates' understanding of the effects of mass media productions upon their audiences, and particularly youth, do not sufficiently account for the agency of audiences (including youth) in making meaning of cultural productions and using them in ways that resist the intentions of the "culture industry."

In the second of the five goals, articulated by the campaign, Reverend Coates calls for music companies to adopt, "universal creative standards for lyrical content." While Rev. Coates does not state explicitly what these standards should include, he is clear that such standards are intended to prevent a range of stereotypical and degrading representations of African Americans. No doubt, this is a progressive stance and is consistent with cultural critic, bell hooks' notion of resisting representations, as

articulated above. Moreover, Patricia Hill Collin's reminds us of the significance of intervening in and resisting representations given that:

> Mass media is vitally important within the global social relations of the new, seemingly colorblind racism. Multiculturalism, privatization, and other ideologies that justify inequalities not just of race, but also of class, gender, religion, sexuality, age, and ethnicity, are increasingly reproduced by an influential, global popular-culture industry that needs a continuing supply of new cultural material for its growing entertainment, advertising, and news divisions. Because of its authority to shape perceptions of the world, this popular-culture industry circulates representations of women and men of African descent in domestic and transnational contexts.[163]

Coates' strategy of protest as a means of resisting representations certainly avoids the kind of demonizing rhetoric of blame and punishment that is too often aimed at black youth. Yet, it is necessary to understand not only the abstract intentions of the goal, but how such a goal influences the response to concrete cultural productions. Attending to particular cultural productions and practices is necessary because of the complexity and range of potential meanings associated with forms of popular culture such as hip-hop. Nevertheless, such complexity is often flattened out by the corporate interests, which Coates rightly critiques. As hip-hop studies pioneer, Murray Forman writes, "Although hip-hop artists have long demonstrated a capacity for articulating complex issues and amplifying critical perspectives about constraining socio-political conditions- especially those that most directly impact African-American individuals and communities- this aspect is often deemed unsuitable to commercial interests."[164] Here, then, it is useful to analyze and critique the demand for "universal creative standards" in light of a particular music video that Rev. Coates deemed to necessitate such standards.

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[163] Patricia Hill-Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 8.
[164] Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (Second Edition) (New York: Routledge Press, 2012), 1.

"Read a (Muthafuckin') Book?": Perpetuating or Satirizing Stereotypes

In the Faith Matters segment interview on NPR, a week after the launch of the campaign, host Michel Martin asked Rev. Coates, "Can you tell us exactly when you started to think that BET was going down the wrong road?"[165] Rev. Coates explained what became the tipping point that led to the protest. Dr. Coates began, "I think there have been a series of precipitous steps- events that have taken place this year. Recently, Black Entertainment's animation department took the liberty and the initiative to produce the 'Read A Book' video."[166] After noting the significance of the video, in terms of its being an actual production of BET, as opposed to something produced elsewhere and merely aired on the network, Coates went on to express his dismay:

> Black Entertainment Television took the initiative to produce this particular animated video, which plays during the day, which has every sort of profane word that one can imagine. The images, you know, I think, you know, are completely disgraceful. And when I played it for the members of my church with the profanity and all, they were deeply outraged.[167]

The video in question, "Read a Book," was indeed the source of much outrage within the African American community. Rev. Coates' critique, therefore, must be understood within a wider range of vocal critics within the black community. Many black leaders (religious and secular alike), as well as a number of black parents, expressed indignation at the language and images contained within this animated video. The communal uproar was apparently significant enough that an entire CNN segment was devoted to the controversial video and the responses that it garnered within black communities. The CNN segment opened with excerpts from the video, which displayed

[165] "Pastor Says to BET: 'Enough is Enough'" Faith Matters. National Public Radio. September 21, 2007.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.

scantily clad, animated portrayals of black women. The video displayed close-up shots of these women shaking their behinds in front of (for?) the camera with the word, "BOOK" written across their bottoms. The bass-heavy track carried the lyrics, "Read a book, read a book, read a mutha-fucking book." For emphasis, or clarification, the rappers flowed, "Not a magazine, but a book nigga, a fuckin' book nigga!" Other lyrics were a variation on this theme, substituting "Raise your kids, raise your kids, raise your goddam kids," as well as, "Buy some land, buy some land. Fuck spinnin' rims!" While the profanity was slightly edited during the airing of the video, the images and the lyrics of "Read a Book" shocked not only Reverend Coates, but also a host of other African Americans into outrage.[168]

Ironically, "Read A Book" was not written or produced by a so-called "gangsta rapper," but rather by educator and Washington D.C.-based community activist, Bomani Armah. While the video is undoubtedly provocative, "Read A Book" was intended to be a satire, and thus a critique of the material excesses and perceived debauchery that have come to characterize the standard fare of videos aired on BET. Thus, while at first glance, it appears to be an amalgamation of every stereotypical representation of blackness and thus all that is problematic with BET, upon closer examination, the video appears to be motivated by quite different aims. This becomes evident from the first words of the video, when the animated rapper says, "Now I usually write songs with like hooks and concepts and shit right, but fuck that, I'm trying to go platinum."[169] Herein lies the first clue that this track is leveling a critique at corporate dominated hip-hop that often rewards the most crude forms of rap music. Further, from the outset, Armah's website,

[168] The "Read A Book" song and music video can be accessed via YouTube the following web address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlKL_EpnSp8
[169] Ibid.

www.notarapper.com appears in the upper right hand corner of the video. The name of the website alone suggests that the creator of the track might have had ulterior and even playful motives. For those viewers who bracketed their moral outrage long enough to follow the link, they were met with a greeting from Bomani that read, "Hi, I'm Bomani Darel Armah and I'm 'notarapper, but a poet with a hip-hop style.' This is my personal blog. I write about 'impolite conversations' (sex, drugs, social issues, politics and religion…My goal is to promote, create and empower great independent and socially relevant art."[170] Reading further, the inquisitive viewer learns that Bomani leads seminars and facilitates workshops for gradeschool children that focus upon creativity and media literacy. Bomani has also written for the Washington Post and TheRoot.com.

Neither Rev. Coates nor those who found the video to be a mere continuation of the standard fare of BET programming responded to the complexity of the text of "Read a Book." Paul Porter of the think tank, Industry Ears was one of the critics of the video who appeared on the segment. Porter, like Rev. Coates was most disturbed by the fact that the video was aired during "afterschool hours" when young children would most likely be watching. Such videos, on Porter's account should be reserved for afterhours. Yet, what Delman Coates and Paul Porter overlooked is that the satire was aimed at precisely this audience. For Bomani and Tyree Dillahey, the director of the video, "Read a Book" was intended to work subversively to call into question the content of the music videos that aired prior to and following their audio-visual text. What required a complex reading, was met by a flat, moralistic interpretation, taking the profane lyrics and sexual imagery at face value.

Rev. Coates' literalist interpretation of this satire missed the more subversive

[170] See Bomani Armah's website: www.notarapper.com

potential of both the lyrical and visual content of the video. By parodying some of the most hackneyed performances of hip-hop, Armah and the producers of the music video attempted to call into question the substance of such cultural productions. Early in the video, works from black literary artists such as Donald Goines and Zora Neale Hurston, are displayed and juxtaposed with popular magazine titles of questionable intellectual substance. To be sure, certain themes within the video, such as the call for better dental and bodily hygiene among young black males, rightly deserve scrutiny and additional critique. Yet, Coates' and Porter's critiques of "Read A Book," fail to acknowledge the ways that Armah's video offers a trenchant critique of the very aspects of hip-hop culture that they find to be so problematic.

According to Bomani, who was also interviewed on the CNN segment, "You all are juxtaposing the video with Sesame Street, when you should be juxtaposing it with 'Ay Bay Bay'…In fact 'Ay Baby Bay' played right before the 'Read a Book' video."[171] As such, the video was strategically inserted between such videos as a means of heightening the effect of the satire. According to Porter, however, such an argument is unconvincing because, "Kids don't understand satire."[172] On Porter's account, despite the subversive intensions of the video's creators, the intended audience, both black youth and a wider mainstream audience, would not grasp the satirical aims, but rather simply affirm the caricatures as literal and representative of black cultural dysfunctionality. Delman Coates articulated this same perspective in his response to the video as satire. Coates, however, went further in the NPR segment, arguing:

[171] "Ay Bay Bay" is the title of a song written by Chris Dooley Jr., a rap artist who goes by the stage name, Hurricane Chris. The track was produced and became extremely popular in 2007. The CNN segment featuring Bomai Armah, Paul Porter, Tyree Dillahey and host Tony Harris can be viewed in its entirety at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ4tTOeVp_g
[172] Ibid.

> There's no doubt in my mind that had the same video been produced by a white supremacist organization and they gave the same rationale for producing the video- that we're trying to send a message to the African-American community that this is the language that the young people speak we're just merely communicating that message in a medium that the young people into it would understand- there would be a zero tolerance policy for that among black voices. We'd be picketing and protesting.

The statement above demonstrates how wide of the mark Coates appears to be in his understanding of Armah's strategy of using comedy and satire as a form of resistance. Bomani is far less concerned with combating "negative" representations of blackness, with "positive" images that have been sanitized so as not to offend the moral sensibilities of the religious or the middle-class. Rather, his strategic intervention is rooted in an attempt to explode such limited and stereotypical representations of black youth from within the frame of their own cultural logic. Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, describes the ways in which representational practices and their meanings cannot be simply forced into rigidly binary categories of "positive" and "negative." In his work, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall argues, "we do not have a straightforward, rational or instrumental relationship to meanings. They mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, of both a positive and negative kind. We feel their contradictory pull, their ambivalence. They sometimes call our very identities into question."[173] This quote from Hall is particularly relevant to the emotional responses of Rev. Coates, and others in the black community, to the "Read A Book" video. Despite Rev. Coates' response, and the response of his congregation, the meanings of such a video are not straightforward and cannot be finally pinned down in terms of a "negative" representation of blackness. Rather, it is precisely the "contradictory pull and

[173] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Culture, Media and Identities Series) (London: Sage Publications and Open University, 1997), 10.

ambivalence" of these animated videos that cause the viewer to wrestle with its potential meaning(s). Is Bomani Armah simply reinforcing tired stereotypes about black pathology, or is he disrupting these stereotypes by using them to show their inadequacies? However one might answer this question, one thing is certain, a video like "Read A Book" is one that has the potential to "call our very identities into question." For Armah, the intended aim might have been to question an identity for black youth that has been constructed and sold back to black youth by an exploitative culture industry. For Rev. Coates, however, it appears that a black identity rooted in dignity and respectability was called into question by these representations in ways that was meant to demean and ultimately harm black youth and the wider black community.

What is perhaps most paradoxical about Coates' response to Read A Book is that this activist preacher, whose campaign demonstrates his interest in collaborating with other progressive activists in the interest of the black community, ends up protesting the cultural productions of a young black male artist who might have potentially been an ally in presenting a more humanizing vision of black youth. At least one explanation for this situation is Coates' framing of his intervention as one that hinged upon combating the "negative" (not respectable) images of blackness with those that could be seen as "positive" and dignified. The latter comports with black middle-class and religious values. As such, there was no possibility of dialogue or collaboration with an artist-activist, such as Armah, who was willing to deploy "negative" lyrics and images as satire, and thus as a means of resistance and critique. As religionist and critic, Monica R. Miller has argued convincingly, "In our efforts to thwart the darts and prove white supremacist attacks on the black body to be wrong, we have created an internal colony among

ourselves, whereby morality polices stigma and deviance."[174]

The BET Honors: Increasing "Positive" Images or Eliminating "Negative" Images?

While Coates' stance vis-à-vis Bomani Armah and the Read a Book video may be regrettable, there is little argument that his organization nevertheless had a legitimate critique of Black Entertainment Television and its unflattering representations of blackness. As I have demonstrated above, a number of progressive activists and intellectuals have leveled criticism at the cultural productions circulated by BET and its impact upon African American communities. Coates' campaign is consistent with this long history of criticism in its efforts to resist representations of blackness that restrict the depth, breadth and complexity of black humanity.

Ironically, however, the next phase in the Enough is Enough Campaign was a public protest staged outside of the first annual BET Honors- an awards ceremony aimed at highlighting black excellence. In the midst of growing criticism from Enough is Enough and others, Black Entertainment Television initiated the BET Honors in an attempt to highlight the achievements of African Americans who have provided outstanding service to the community. The inaugural ceremonies were held on January 12, 2008 at the historic Warner Theater in Washington D.C. The event was hosted by comedian, Cedric the Entertainer and the list of performers and presenters included an intergenerational who's who list of some of the most accomplished names in black entertainment, including: Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight, Danny Glover, Brian McKnight, Blair Underwood, Idris Elba, Kerry Washington, Raheem DeVaughn, Hill Harper, Vivica A. Fox, Jill Scott and Wyclef Jean. Moreover, the list of honorees for the

[174] Monica R. Miller, "I Am a Nappy-Headed Ho," in *Ain't I a Womanist Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought,* edited by Monica A. Coleman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 134.

first annual BET Honors included six luminaries: Tyra Banks (Media Award), Janice Bryant Howroyd, Alicia Keys (Entertainment Award), Richard Parsons (Corporate Citizen Award), The Honorable Maxine Waters (Public Service Award) and Dr. Cornel West (Award for Education). As such, BET would counter claims that its network was guilty of perpetuating the most vicious stereotypes of blacks by explicitly lifting up these "positive" influences within the community as being worthy of honor and emulation.

In a press statement, Debra Lee, chairman and CEO of BET, remarked, "We are thrilled to pay tribute to the thinkers, trailblazers and trendsetters whose accomplishments serve as inspirations for current and future generations."[175] Lee went on to say, "Each of these remarkable individuals has made significant contributions to the Black community and American culture overall, and BET Networks is proud to recognize them through this very special, new tentpole event." After nearly five months of protest by the Enough is Enough Campaign, it might be reasonably assumed that this programming event was initiated in direct response to the demands of the campaign for a more positive representation of young black women and men on the network. In a statement for the Washington Post, Lee acknowledged, "People are clamoring all the time for positive images."[176] Nevertheless, Dr. Coates was not persuaded.

While Lee's statement and the initiation of the BET Honors might be seen as a significant act of goodwill on behalf of the network, Coates refused to relent. Rather, he doubled-down on his critique, dubbing the BET Honors as nothing more than a "red-

[175] Chloe Logan, "BET Honoring African-American Successes in Upcoming Special Event" *Yahoo! Voices*, December 17, 2007. http://voices.yahoo.com/bet-honoring-african-americans-successes-upcoming-726935.html (Accessed 4/15/2013).
[176] Amy Argetsinger and Roxanne Roberts, "Positively Honored" *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2007. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/17/AR2007121702196.html (Accessed 4/15/2013).

herring." In a video recording released by Enough is Enough, Rev. Coates explained that such efforts to include positive programming on the network is simply meant to distract viewers from the criticism of its more negative elements. The lineup of stereotypical characters that have come to be representative of the music videos on BET, which critic, Tricia Rose refers to as the "gangsta, pimp, ho trinity," was interrupted, for at least, two hours, by an all-star cast of black respectability. But, the BET Honors was not the first or only effort to clean up its image and satisfy its critics. In fact, in 2007, BET introduced four new series including, Baldwin Hills, Sunday Best and Exalted- the latter where explicitly religious programming. Yet, for Coates, including the "positive" was insufficient. The demand of the campaign was a removal of the "negative." In Dr. Coates words, "While we appreciate the positive, we want BET to deal with the negative."[177]

This latter statement is significant as the initial rhetoric of the campaign suggested that what was at stake was a narrowed view of blackness that limited the representations of young black women and men to, "*nothing but*, pimps, gangsters and hos." This might be interpreted to suggest that a more expansive view of black life, as represented in the BET Honors, would satisfy the network's most vocal critics. To the contrary, Rev. Coates insisted that Enough is Enough would not cease its efforts until, "the handful of videos that do not live up to BET's own programming standards are removed from the air."[178] While this might seem reasonable at first glance, upon further scrutiny, the list of such videos that Coates finds to be so problematic are, much like "Read A Book," far more complex than he is willing to admit. It seems then, that the presence of any "negativity," as framed within a narrow conception of black respectability, invalidates the cultural

[177] Enough is Enough 1/6/08 Message from Delman Coates (on protest in front of BET Honors Awards)
[178] Ibid.

productions of black youth. As cultural critic Todd Boyd has argued, "In the end, this is a class-specific argument that wants the negative imagery of lower-class gangsterism to disappear."[179] Ironically, then, even as Coates' aims are emancipatory, when scrutinized, his project reveals a troubling set of ideological motivations. In other words, Coates' commitment to a "liberating Christian Praxis," does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a reactionary political intervention. As Miller writes, "a politics of respectability is often cloaked under more progressive constructions of the signifier 'liberation.'"[180]

In fact, this holds for Coates even when a particular artist or music video deploys seemingly "negative" lyrics and images as a means of exploring more complex themes within the experiences of black youth of the hip-hop generation. For instance, in his track, "Ignorant Shit," rap artist Jay-Z provides a fascinating response to critics such as Delman Coates. In the cut, "Ignorant Shit," the poet plays the role of the trickster, signifying upon the demand of audiences for his most trivial lyrics, while criticizing his most thought provoking and introspective poetry. "I got that ignorant shit you like," becomes the hook of the song, which chastises the listener while simultaneously resisting representations of the mindless stereotypical rapper who only talks about "ignorant shit" such as violence, illegal drugs, gratuitous sex, conspicuous consumption and other celebrations of crass materialism.[181]

In this track, on the *American Gangster* album, the artist quips, "I missed the part were it stopped being about Imus," referring to the ways in which rap artists and by

[179] Todd Boyd. *The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 52.
[180] Monica Miller, 132.
[181] Jay Z, "Ignorant Shit," *American Gangster* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006).

extension young black men were blamed and harshly criticized for the racist and sexist "nappy headed hoes" remarks of radio host Don Imus and a range of other social problems in American society. After exposing the hypocrisy of blaming black youth for being the cause of issues deeply embedded within the fabric of American society, while simultaneously overlooking the indiscretions of white "celebutaunts showing they kitten" such as Paris Hilton, the artist rhymes, "You kiddin? Let's stop the bullshittin'. Till we all without sin let's quit the pulpittin'."[182] This last line, then, signals the homiletical demonization of black youth, as well as the creative ways in which black youth respond to this criticism. It also signifies the kind of "pulpittin'" that lends religious significance to the criticism of black youth within African American communities.[183]

The example of Jay Z's rebuttal on his track "Ignorant Shit," is not meant to suggest that he and other rappers are absolved from their "sin," or beyond critique even though he maintains, "It's only entertainment!" After all, in the following track on the album, "Say Hello," Jay Z provides a brilliant account of the ways that he and young black men from the margins have been (mis)represented as little more than thugs and criminals. Further he takes issues with the role of preachers in this misrepresentation. Jay Z rhymes, "If [Rev.] Al Sharpton is speaking for me/ somebody get him the word and tell him I don't approve/ Tell him I'll remove the curses/ if you tell me our school gon' be perfect."[184] Nevertheless, for all of his critique and social commentary, Jay Z ends the track on a defeatist note, "When Jena Six no longer exists/ Tell him that's when I'll stop

[182] Ibid.
[183] For a more thorough discussion of these lyrics, see Sean Carter. *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 52-63.
[184] Jay Z, "Say Hello," *American Gangster* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006).

sayin' bitch….biiiiiitch!"[185] Obviously, the claim that Jay Z should be allowed to continue arguably misogynistic lyrics until other "more serious" issues like education and racism are dealt with is less than compelling- to say the least. However, what precedes this line displays a complexity that cannot simply be dismisses as "negative" or "degrading."

Here again, Coates' binary framing of the issues demonstrates the way in which his intervention is unable to account for more complex, morally and politically ambiguous representations. As cultural critic Todd Boyd reminds us, "Like most things in the culture, hip hop is neither Black nor White, and not simply good or bad. It does not fit into any neat and convenient category, for it is too complex for such a reductive reading."[186] The lack of nuance here threatens to undermine the efficacy of the Enough is Enough Campaign, especially among those identified with the hip-hop generation. The failure to wrestle with such complexity is further demonstrated in Coates' use of the study, "The Rap on Rap," to buttress his critique of BET and hip-hop culture.

The Rap on Rap: The Limitations of The Parents Television Council Report

On April 10, 2008, The Parents Television Council (PTC) published a 21-page study entitled, "The Rap on Rap: A Content Analysis of BET and MTV's Daytime Music Video Programming." The study, requested by Reverend Coates, provides more quantitative data to support the rhetoric of the Enough is Enough Campaign. In the Executive Summary of the study, the goal of the research was stated as, "to assess the quality and degree of adult-themed music video content marketed to and viewed by

[185] Ibid.
[186] Todd Boyd, 60.

children."[187] The report focused particular attention on three music video programs aired on BET and MTV respectively. These programs were 1) BET's Rap City 2) 106 & Park 3) MTV's Sucker Free. In an initial two-week period in December, 2007 PTC recorded 27.5 hours of programming across the three programs and in a follow-up period for a week in March, 2008, PTC recorded an additional 14 hours. Outlining the methodology for the study, the PTC reports that programs were viewed in their entirety and that each episode was viewed "by a trained analyst who conducted a detailed analysis of both visual and verbal content."[188] The categories for analysis of offensive/adult content in programming included the following: sex, explicit language, violence, and drugs and other illegal activity. The PTC listed six Major Findings of the report. Three are noteworthy and are listed below:

> 1). There were 1647 instances of offensive/adult content in the 27.5 hours of programming analyzed during the December study period, for an average of 59.9 instances per hour, or nearly one instance every minute.
>
> 2). Relative to the December study period, sex constituted the majority of adult content in the analyzed videos (45%), followed by explicit language (29%), violence (13%), drugs use/sales (9%), and other illegal activity (3%). Although March data revealed higher quantities of content, the percentages reflected similar findings (42%, 37%, 10%, 9% and 2% respectively).
>
> 3). Out of the three shows examined in December, Rap City featured the highest levels of sex (31.6 instances per hour), explicit language (25.3 instances per hour), and violence (11.7 instances per hour); but MTV's Sucker Free on MTV contained the highest levels of drug use/sales (10 instances per hour) and other illegal activity (2.4 instances per hour). Similar results were found in March.

The body of the report contains a detailed account of the content by the categories listed above, a report of the number of children under 18 reported to be viewing each

[187] The Rap on Rap: A Content Analysis of BET and MTV's Daytime Music Video Programming.
[188] Ibid.

program as well as the advertisers who placed commercials during these programs. The report also contains a number of tables detailing the relationship between the categories of assessment and the respective programs. These tables also include both the number of incidences that content from each category appeared on each respective show as well as the particular references within each category. For instance, in the commentary explaining Table #2 (Sexual Content By Show from March 2008 and December 2007), the report states, "The highest percentage of sexual content in the combined December and March videos fit innuendo (56%)". In terms of Language, the report details, "The most commonly used expletive during the December and March study period was (muted) 'nigger' (n=148 and 136 respectively). Aside from the use of the word 'nigger,' the words 'fuck,' 'bitch,' and 'shit' appear to be the next most frequently used words within the observed programming."[189]

The study proceeds in this manner detailing the findings for each category. Beyond these categorical tables, the report also lists advertisers, individual videos played during the study periods, as well as the albums promoted both within the shows and in the commercials between shows. In the conclusion of the report, PTC asserts, "This study revealed the highest numbers of explicit content seen in the history of PTC media research."[190] Moreover, the PTC raised further questions to be answered from the data. On their account, "the most daunting is the question of 'impact.'"[191] In terms of impact, the report questions, "How do these powerful impressions alter the values, goals and beliefs youth and children will formulate about the world, their neighborhoods, their

[189] Ibid, 11.
[190] Ibid, 20.
[191] Ibid 21.

communities and most importantly, themselves?"[192]

The difficulty, however, of these questions and all questions of "impact," is that such matters cannot be determined simply by a list of tables and figures. While important information, the figures do not fully explain the ways in which "violence" appears in these videos or the nature of the "sexual content." Moreover, it cannot account for the range of possible meanings associated with such complex representations. Finally, such a study is not adequate for determining "impact," as it does not do the more qualitative work of audience analysis. The latter would engage young people themselves, in order to determine how they make meaning from these video representations as well as what "uses" they put these representations to in their everyday lives.

Michael P. Jeffires' qualitative work on the varied meanings that black (and white) youth make of hip-hop cultures is directly applicable to this discussion. At the outset of his work, Jeffries poses a critical question that speaks to the heart of Rev. Coates' concerns. For Jeffries, a motivating question of his work is, "Should black men's hip hop thug narratives and performances be considered resistant to or compliant with black subjugation in an era when the range of representations of blackness available or consumption is heavily influenced by white demand?"[193] Yet, in *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip Hop*, he complicates his own question, insisting that, "interpretations of hip-hop cannot be neatly categorized as 'resistant' or compliant.'"[194] More specifically, Jeffries argues, "The question of rap music's effect on power relations cannot be answered using textual analysis alone, because texts contain both hegemonic

[192] Ibid, 21.
[193] Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.
[194] Ibid, 5.

and counterhegemonic elements."[195] Given the inability of strictly textual analysis of lyrics, or even a more semiotic analysis of images to determine the "impact" of the cultural productions of hip-hop on either black youth or the broader public, Jeffries argues for expanded methods.

Jeffries' work is significant, and worth juxtaposing with the PTC study, precisely because it seeks to move beyond only analyzing texts, to discover how everyday listeners make meaning of hip-hop. Jeffries commends his approach over studies similar to the Rap on Rap (though he does not name this study), on the basis that, while he engages in textual analysis, he combines this work with audience analysis. Jeffries notes, "My project pits my interpretation against the interpretations of forty other consumers in an attempt to more fully sketch the meaning that listeners draw from popular hip-hop."[196] In this approach, Jeffries' own interpretations of a particular cultural production must be considered alongside a range of other interpreters who may find meanings and uses for these hip-hop productions that are quite different from his own, and even the intentions of the artists and producers themselves. While Jeffries makes his own interpretation vulnerable to the critique of black youth, Coates' interpretation of hip-hop is not engaged with these younger voices, but rather unilaterally fixes the interpretive possibilities within a binary framework of "positive" and "negative."

In his chapter, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics," Jeffries is specifically concerned with the moral panic that surrounds hip-hop. In the opening section of the chapter, Jeffries observes, "Everyone who comes into regular contact with hip-hop, from New York Times columnists to everyday observers without a national platform, reckons

[195] Ibid, 15.
[196] Ibid, 15.

with the moral panic that engulfs it."[197] Jeffries addresses the moral panic debate, not simply with statistical data about the clearly problematic representations embedded within the music and the related videos, but with data drawn from a range of interviews with young respondents. Because this moral panic often arises in response to questions such as the one of "impact," raised in the Rap on Rap, Jeffries attempts to gain greater perspective on the ways that young people consume and make meaning of hip-hop. Jeffries focuses particular attention on three issues that he argues, "consistently provoke episodes of moral panic about the explicit content in rap music."[198] These include: the place and treatment of women in hip hop, use of the words nigger and nigga, and representations of gangsterism and criminality.[199] Jeffries demonstrates the dissonance in the ways that differently situated individuals make meaning of these provocative themes. For instance, one of Jeffries respondents, identified as Dwayne, complicates the data gathered by the PTC on the high index of the use of the word "nigger" in music videos and its impact upon young people. Dwayne relates:

> My understanding of 'thug life' is it stands for 'This Hate U Gave Little Infants Fuck Everybody.' And 'nigga' being 'Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished.' Of course, that's not how everybody understands it, but that was his [Tupac's] point.[200]

It is the perspective of Dwayne and others that the PTC's report is unable to account for. Instead, artists like Tupac, and listeners like Dwayne can only be categorized in terms of "negativity" in Coates' framework.

[197] Ibid, 151.
[198] Ibid, 153.
[199] Ibid, 153.
[200] Ibid, 151.

Conclusion

Rev. Coates' Enough is Enough campaign is indeed an emancipatory project, to the degree that it protests this real concern for the ways that such representations negatively influence public discourse and policies concerning young black Americans. At the same time, however, Coates' intervention fails to account for Jeffries' more complex interpretation of the effects of such cultural productions, which can only be determined through an attentiveness to the ways that black youth themselves make meaning of such images and representational discourses. Despite the inclusion of the testimonies of a few black youth during the initial demonstration in front of Debra Lee's home, the Enough is Enough Campaign lacks a significant organic link to and engagement with the voices of black youth and hip-hop culture. Without such a link, Coates' campaign is devoid of a legitimate public theological voice that has wrestled deeply with the lived experiences, cultural productions, and processes of meaning making within the communities that he claims to speak for.

The lack of real engagement with meaning-making within youth culture is, perhaps, the most glaring deficiency of Coates' particular intervention. While it is ostensibly motivated by a legitimate concern for the well-being of black youth culture, his campaign is largely disconnected from those black youth who most readily identify with and make meaning from hip-hop culture. To be sure, Rev. Coates is motivated by a pressing concern that also disturbs scholars such as Jeffries:

> Hip-hop's commercial success prompts concerns that the culture is now driven by white consumers who demand objectionable representations of blackness. Further, white men hold significant decision-making power within corporations that control commoditization and distribution of hip-hop, giving nonblacks a major stake in both the production and consumption of what is traditionally conceived as black American cultural

product.[201]

In light of this observation, protest of corporate dominated hip-hop, as a strategy of intervention in black youth culture, is certainly necessary, given its exploitation of vicious stereotypes of black humanity. Yet, alone, and without careful attention to the strategies of resistance already at work within black youth culture, it is inadequate. This is especially true when such protest emerges from an agent of the Black Church, which is often perceived by the hip-hop community to be judgmental of and unresponsive to their plight. A public theological voice and practice adequate to disrupt the moral panic that surrounds, and policies that subjugate, black youth culture, must be able to listen to, and learn from the hip-hop community even while it remains critical of that community as well as the wider societal forces that have shaped its emergence. In the next chapter, I will turn to the intervention of another activist preacher whose public theological voice and socio-political campaigns claim deeper roots within the hip-hop community and its culture.

[201] Ibid, 20.

Chapter IV

"Can't Stop, Won't Stop": Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. and the Hip Hop Caucus

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the political sermons and public theological interventions of the Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., an ordained minister in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and community activist. Rev. Yearwood is also the president of The Hip Hop Caucus: A Civil and Human Rights Organization for the 21st Century, based in Washington, D.C. If Dr. Coates represents the black activist preacher *protesting hip-hop culture*, then we might understand the Reverend Lennox Yearwood Jr. as a black activist preacher *politicizing hip-hop culture*. Put another way, if Rev. Coates' rallying cry is, "Enough and Enough," Rev. Lennox Yearwood adopts the hip-hop credo, "Can't Stop, Won't Stop!" This chapter examines the ways that Reverend Yearwood and the Hip Hop Caucus attempt to link the prophetic voice of the black church and its preaching traditions to those "voices from the margins" that have been largely alienated from such institutions, in order to struggle for justice in the realm of politics and public policy.

Lennox Yearwood describes his sense of ministerial vocation as a calling to a more public pulpit than those within the walls of the institutional church. According to Yearwood, by the time he was graduated from the Howard University School of Divinity (HUSD), "I didn't want to go to the steeples, I wanted to go to the streets."[202] As a result of this effort to connect a sense of vocational calling as a black preacher fighting for justice with the lived experiences of black youth who have come of age in the post-civil

[202] This is quoted from the documentary, "Hip Hop Rev: A Documentary Feature on the Life and Work of Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr.", produced by the Discovery Channel on Earth Day 2011.

rights era, The Hip Hop Caucus was founded on September 11, 2004. The Hip Hop Caucus states as its mission, "to organize young people to be active in elections, policymaking and service projects. We mobilize, educate, and engage young people, ages 14 to 40, on the social issues that directly impact their lives and communities."[203] As such, The Hip Hop Caucus began, in part, as a response to Rev. Yearwood's sense that hip hop needed a political arm. For Rev. Yearwood, like others activists and ministers of his generation, the turn to politics would be simultaneous with the 'turn to culture." For Rev. Yearwood and the Hip Hop Caucus, "Arts, entertainment, and cultural expression define our generation more than any previous generations. The Hip Hop Caucus harnesses the platforms of our celebrity, media and entertainment partners to inform and move the urban community to action."[204]

In this chapter, I will explore the ways that Yearwood deploys the rhetorics of both homiletics and hip-hop culture as a means of "energizing, organizing, and mobilizing," marginalized young people of color for socio-political interventions. The chapter will also analyze various campaigns initiated by the Hip Hop Caucus. The campaigns that will be considered in this chapter include the "Respect My Vote" campaign, the "Make Hip Hop Not War Campaign," protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the "Green the Block" campaign that attempted to raise consciousness about issues of environmental injustice in urban communities. The chapter will conclude with a critique of the use of popular culture, and celebrit(ies), as a means of political activism and public theological intervention.

[203] www.http://hiphopcaucus.org
[204] www.http://hiphopcaucus.org/company/index.php

"The Dream Re-born": The Sermonic Reframing of a Politicized Identity: Sermon Analysis

On the weekend of April 4th, 2008 Anthony Kapel "Van" Jones introduced the Reverend Lennox Yearwood Jr. as the keynote speaker at "The Dream Reborn Conference", in Memphis, Tennessee.[205] The conference brought together a cadre of young environmental activists to commemorate the passing of forty years sense the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to draw inspiration from his legacy for their own struggles for environmental justice. In his remarks at the opening plenary for the conference, sponsored by Green-for-All, Jones stated, "Our post-King generations must embrace the example that Dr. King set. And we must reimagine it to meet new challenges."[206] As an example of commitment to such an agenda, Jones hailed Rev. Yearwood, introducing him as "The hip-hop generation's version of Martin Luther King Jr."[207]

Van Jones' association of Yearwood and King vis-à-vis hip hop culture is significant, given that King's iconic image is often deployed by critics of the younger

[205] "The Dream Reborn" conference was described by its organizers as "a gathering to honor Dr. King and create green pathways to prosperity". The conference was held in Memphis, TN on April 4-6th, 2008. Green for all is a non-governmental organization (NGO), dedicated to working to building a green economy as well as helping to lift citizens out of poverty. Green for All was founded by Van Jones in 2007. Reverend Yearwood has worked closely with Jones on green initiatives that will be detailed later in this chapter. Van Jones is also the founding president of Rebuild the Dream.

[206] Van Jones, "Forty years gone: MLK's dream today would be colored green" Grist Magazine, April 5, 2008. http://grist.org/article/a-dream-reborn/ (accessed 1/22/2013).

[207] Rev. Yearwood's sermon, with opening remarks from Van Jones, was accessed on the website, Davey D's Hip Hop Corner. Davey D is a prominent hip-hop journalist and activist whose writings have covered the intersections of hip-hop culture and politics since 1999. Davey D is also an adjunct professor at San Francisco State in the Africana Studies Department where he co-teaches a course on Hip Hop History, Culture and Politics. http://hiphopandpolitics.wordpress.com/2008/04/13/the-dream-reborn-rev-yearwood-meets-dr-king/ (accessed 1/16/2013)

generation to condemn the latter's moral and civic failures.[208] In his book, *I May Not Get There With You*, cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson attempts to disrupt the force of this argument by making a rather provocative link between King's own flaws and the contradictions of black youth culture. In his chapter, "'I Have Walked Among the Desperate, Rejected, and Angry': Two Generations of Young Gifted and Black," Dyson proceeds first by suggesting that attempts to use King as *the* moral exemplar to excoriate black youth is misguided. The substance of Dyson's claim, here, is captured in his account of defending black youth against claims of pathology as a panelist on *Meet the Press*. Debating the moral status of black youth, Dyson recalled:

> How many times had I heard even black adults repeat in discussions about the hip-hop generation that if King were alive, he would be greatly troubled by them? They contend that King would be opposed to rap music and the violent imaginations of the youth who make and consume this dubious art. That may indeed be true, but it would not be all that King might have to say. He would at least attempt to understand the rage that burns in areas of hip-hop culture before he condemned its cultural expression. *Surprisingly, King and prominent members of the hip-hop generation have a lot in common that is worth examining* (emphasis mine).[209]

On Dyson's account, there are significant points of convergence (and divergence) between King and the hip-hop generation. Acknowledging that such a comparison might be considered "blasphemous," Dyson proceeds to juxtapose the lives of two of the most

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[208] An example of this line of criticism can be found in the introductory chapter of Juan Williams' New York Times Bestseller, *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America- and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 1. In this chapter, Williams begins by citing a popular cultural reference from Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* a highly politicized animated program broadcasted on Comedy Central's Adult Swim. In the episode that Williams references, Martin Luther King Jr. did not die from the assassin's bullet in 1968, but rather fell into a coma. King awakens from his comma in the 21st Century only to be disgusted by the state of black America and the younger generations in particular. In a controversial moment in the episode, King is standing in a pulpit and queries, "Is this it? This what I took all these ass whippings for?- I had a dream once." Williams uses this scene in order to launch his critique of the moral failures of the hip-hop generation and link them to Bill Cosby's speech criticizing black youth in 2004, at the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

[209] Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 177.

iconic young men of their respective generations- Martin Luther King Jr. and Tupac Amaru Shakur.[210] After comparing the vices and virtues of King and Shakur, Dyson insists, "Often King is set off in bold relief from such youth. But his personal and political struggles suggest that he was closer to black youth than we might admit."[211] Moreover, Dyson develops his argument by making comparisons between both the form (black sacred rhetoric, musicality and oral performance) and content (injustice, economic inequality, and theodicy- the problems of evil and suffering) of King's rhetoric and that of many artists of the hip-hop generation. To be sure, Dyson insists that King would have been opposed to many of the excesses and obscenities of hip hop, including its "crude misogyny and its public displays of shameless sexual lust."[212] Further, Dyson cites King's embrace of a philosophy of non-violence as reason to infer that King would likely reject the celebration of violence within much of hip-hop culture.[213] Nevertheless, Dyson insists that distinctions between King and the hip-hop generation are more arbitrary than real. More forcefully Dyson asserts, "King is indeed much closer to hip-hop cultural sentiments than we have up to this point admitted."[214]

In his recent work on King, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me*, sociologist, Jonathan Rieder advances another perspective on the associations between King and hip-hop culture. In a chapter entitled, "The Artistry of Argument," Rieder suggests that the initial ambivalence toward Martin Luther King Jr., among the hip-hop generation, was

[210] Dyson draws further comparisons between Tupac and the black religious tradition in his book length treatment of the Shakur, *Holler if You Hear Me: In Search of Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001). See especially, the chapter, "But Do the Lord Care?: God, Suffering, Compassion and Death in the Ghetto".
[211] Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You,* 178.
[212] Ibid, 191.
[213] Ibid, 178.
[214] Ibid, 196.

ironically, "consistent with the mainstream view of the comforting King."[215]Commenting upon hip-hop's embrace of the more fiery rhetoric of Malcolm X, Rieder suggests that the perspective of the hip-hop generation in the 1980s was more consistent with black power militants who claimed, "[…] that king and his crew weren't tough enough, weren't black enough."[216] Though King, with his Christian ethic of love and his Ghandian strategy of nonviolence may have been initially shunned by the hip hop community, in favor of Malcolm, Rieder suggests that hip-hoppers came to embrace him in the 1990s.[217] This was, in part, due to their recognition of not only his racial "authenticity," but also because they came to respect his rhetorical style, "relishing the beats and flow of the great sampler himself."[218] King's homiletical and proto-hip-hop stylizations carried ethical as well as aesthetic import on Rieder's account. Rieder contends, "For King was a turntablist in two senses. He turned the tables on whites, throwing their moral precepts back at them like a lance. But he was a turntablist in a more technical sense, always mixing and matching sounds and idioms. If the prophet was a performer, his endeavor was aesthetic as well as ethical."[219]

In his sermon, "The Dream Reborn," Reverend Yearwood also drew links between King and hip-hop. Yet, Yearwood did not advance nearly as controversial an

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[215] Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008)

[216] Ibid, 6. While it is certainly an overstatement to suggest that hip-hop completely rejected King, and or his Christian message in the early decades of the genre, the popularity of groups such as Public Enemy and their embrace of Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan, is well-noted.

[217] An intriguing example of this shift in perspective on King within hip hop culture can be found in the track, "A Letter to the King" by West Coast artist The Game ft. Nas on the album LAX (2008). In this track, Nasir "Nas" Jones admits that he initially viewed King as "soft," and could not fully appreciate the courage required to engage in nonviolent struggle. Nas' lyrics contained the following lines: "As a kid I ain't relate really, I was sayin' dreams speech jokingly/Till your world awoken in me/First I thought you were passive, soft one who ass kissed/I was young to be honest, I was feelin' Muhammad/
I ain't even know the strength you had to have to march/You was more than just talk you were the first real braveheart/We miss you/Feels like King be in me sometimes."

[218] Reider, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me*, 9.

[219] Ibid, 9.

argument as Dyson, stopping well short of reciting King's flaws as a rhetorical strategy of vindicating his own generation from the accusations of their critics. Neither did he offer Rieder's analysis of King as "performance artist" who incorporated into his rhetorical process of invention, the practices of "sampling" and "mixing" as a way of deconstructing dominant discourses and reconstructing them in a manner that blended oppositions, "between black and white…raw and refined, sacred and secular, prophetic and pragmatic."[220] Nevertheless, Yearwood asserted a bold claim that disrupts the dominant ideological position of black youth by closing the narrative gaps that are often constructed between the civil-rights and the hip-hop generations. Towards the end of his sermon, Yearwood declared, "When Martin Luther King Jr. gave his 'I have a dream' speech, he was thirty-five years old."[221] In this way, Yearwood attempted to narrow the historical and cultural distance between a civil-rights leader who was slain some four decades prior- more years than he and most of Yearwood's audience had been alive. In an attempt to draw his hearers further into the sermonic discourse, and rhetorically move them closer to King, he made a far more forceful claim, insisting, "[King] would have been hip-hop."[222]

While the polyvalence of language certainly allows Yearwood's signification of a hip-hop King to take on multiple meanings, including those of Dyson and Rieder, within the context of this sermon, he appears to be working a different line of argument. Whatever else Yearwood intended to communicate to critics of black youth culture, it seems clear that he intended to persuade the hip-hop generation to find inspiration in

[220] Rieder, 9.
[221] Rev. Lennox Yearwood, "The Dream Reborn." http://hiphopandpolitics.wordpress.com/2008/04/13/the-dream-reborn-rev-yearwood-meets-dr-king/ (accessed 1/16/2013)

[222] Ibid.

King's political engagement as a *young* man. Yearwood elaborated his sermonic aim in an interview published in *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. Yearwood contends:

> […] now it's important to also note that [King] was young. You know, he's 26 when he kind of really gets stared, and he's 39 when he's assassinated, and so he was young, and a lot of people don't understand that when he- for me it was inspiring because your voice can have a huge impact, and so I think a lot of us wait until we're old, and nothing wrong with being old. I think it's important. Age definitely brings a lot of wisdom. But I think the passion and the energy you have, particular using the Gospel for change, was amazing, and he used that in a very appropriate and a very strategic way.[223]

If the conclusion of Yearwood's sermon is intended to inspire black youth culture by naming (and claiming) King as hip-hop, the introduction attempts to rhetorically bind young people of color to King by designating them as, "the Dream Generation." Rev. Yearwood draws upon and creatively re-appropriates the biblical imagery of a "cloud of witnesses" gathered solemnly to observe the remembrance of King's assassination. Deploying a similar rhetorical strategy as the author of the New Testament homily, often referred to as the letter to the Hebrews, Yearwood uses this biblical imagery both descriptively, as well as a prescriptively, calling for an enduring faith-in-action that would mirror the sacrifices of those who have given their lives in the struggle. Similar to the unknown author of Hebrews, Yearwood includes unanticipated characters in his metaphorical cloud of witnesses, including Mohandas K. Gandhi, Malcolm X, United States troops slain in combat, and the victims of Rwandan genocide. With this representative list, Yearwood effectively links the efforts of spiritual social activists with the plight of victims of violence and injustice across boundaries of geopolitical space and time. The inclusion of Gandhi and Malcolm X introduces an interreligious dimension to

[223] Kim Lawton, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, Interview: Rev. Lennox Yearwood March 28, 2008 Episode no. 1130 http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1130/interview_yearwood.html?print (accessed 1/9/13).

Yearwood's sermon, while the implicit reference to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Rwandan genocide, positions his discourse within an international context.

In a moment of extemporization, consistent with the best of black vernacular preaching traditions, Yearwood improvised, "I'm glad its raining…It ain't wind and rain, its tears from heaven."[224] These tears, according to Yearwood's homiletic imagination, were falling from this cloud of witnesses as an expression of collective mourning on account of the absurdity of a man of nonviolence, such as King, succumbing to such a violent fate. Having captured the tragedy and pathos of King's assassination, Yearwood shifts his rhetorical emphasis from lamentation to celebration, by proclaiming that these same tears were simultaneously "tears of joy." The joy (or the "gospel" claim) of the moment was to be found in the fact that present in the audience were, "a bunch of young people who said the dream is not going to die."[225] Making use of double-entendre as a literary device, Yearwood addressed those weeping witnesses, calling them to "look to the left." Imaginatively summonsing Gandhi by name, Yearwood insisted that by looking to the left, he would discover, "some young folk…and they still fight for the dream."[226]

Pressing his claim, the preacher enjoined his congregation using a popular sermonic trope in the contemporary black vernacular tradition: "look at your neighbor."[227] This directive functions not only as an instance of antiphonal exchange between the preacher and the congregation, so common in black sermonic traditions, but also as a means of forging a communal identity of neighbors among those gathered in the

[224] Rev. Lennox Yearwood, "The Dream Reborn." http://hiphopandpolitics.wordpress.com/2008/04/13/the-dream-reborn-rev-yearwood-meets-dr-king/ (accessed 1/16/2013)

[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.

audience. By calling upon those in the audience to join together with one another, and more importantly to the cloud of witnesses, Yearwood sought to call attention to the encouraging prospect that, "the sons and daughters of slaves can work with the sons and daughters of slave owners."[228] Further signifying on the rhetorical climax of Dr. King's most famous political sermon, in the tradition of the (African) American Jeremiad, Rev. Yearwood proclaimed, "You are the dream generation!"[229] In his homiletic climax, Yearwood waxed poetically, both "embracing and reimaging" King's multi-cultural vision, "Black and white, yellow and brown, Native American, straight and gay, theist and atheist, male and female…we did not die on the balcony."[230] This narrative is constructed, not only to reinterpret the identity of young people of color, but also to provide them with a larger sense of purpose; they are to carry on what King and other freedom fighters had begun but remains yet unfinished.

For Reverend Yearwood, the role of the Hip Hop Caucus is to be an organization that is able to draw this diverse constituency of young people of color towards the ends of effecting political change. As Yearwood put it, "My organization…is a multiracial community that comes in and works together to fight against poverty, to fight against classicism, to fight against sexism and poverty."[231] This notion of racial and ethnic diversity is a critical dimension of Yearwood's strategy of intervention. As opposed to fragmenting along lines of narrow identity politics, Yearwood attempts to forge a coalition of young people of color that is able to address a range of cross-cutting political

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid. For an detailed description of the African American jeremiad tradition, see David Howard Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*; 2nd Edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
[230] Ibid.
[231] Lawton, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.

issues at once. Yearwood insists, "[…]we're not just black or white working separately for sometimes the same issues, but we're black and white working side by side. We are that dream generation, and we have some of the problems that are carried over from the last generation that we must deal with as this dream generation together."[232] Yearwood's sermon, therefore should be understood in the context of the shifting identity politics emerging in response to the multicultural realities of the post-civil-rights era.

If Yearwood's construction of "the Dream Generation" is consistent with Dr. King's strategy of building a multi-racial and interreligious coalition of activists and everyday people to challenge injustice, it is noticeable that this movement appears to lack the same rootedness in the institutional black church that grounded a previous generation of activists. While Yearwood acknowledges the centrality of the black church in the struggles of the civil-rights era, he contends that the church *as a space for organizing* has been lost to his generation. The minister argues, "A lot of these institutions have become institutionalized, and their doors are closed to the movement. Their doors are not open."[233] While Yearwood constructs a narrative of decline that extols a highly politicized church during the civil-rights-era, the vast majority of black churches did not actively participate in the civil-rights-movement. Houck and Dixon argue a more significant point in *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement*, insisting that "many even refused to offer their sanctuaries for meetings for fear of retaliation; thus did James Bevel deliver a speech in Savannah, Georgia at a popular local nightspot."[234] This

[232] Lawton, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.
[233] Ibid. This notion of a church with closed doors takes on added significance in light of Cathy Cohen's claim, in *Democracy Remixed*, that the sense of moral panic that surrounds black youth culture and the politics of respectability that often infuses mainstream institutions often combines to define the young black and poor outside of the "boundaries of blackness" and undeserving of the community's resources.
[234] Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon eds., *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 11.

account demonstrates that Yearwood's sense of the post-civil-rights era as a unique moment in history when the "doors of the church are *not* open," is far more consistent with the history of the relationship between black churches and social movements, than his narrative implies. Furthermore, the account of Bevel's speech being delivered at a popular place of entertainment lends historical precedent to Yearwood's public theological discourse and "movement rhetoric" beyond the walls of the institutional church. It also demonstrates the ways that popular cultural spaces have served and continue to serve as important sites for the articulation of messages both political and religious.

This is not to suggest, however, that Rev. Yearwood somehow dismisses the ongoing significance of the church to movements for social change. Yearwood readily acknowledges, "We have some wonderful churches," noting two prominent black churches that prove to be exceptions to his own account: Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and Community of Hope A.M.E. Church in Prince George's County, Maryland.[235] These churches, however, according to Yearwood, are more the exception than the rule. Such progressive churches have been overshadowed by the preponderance of churches that subscribe to "a prosperity message, which began to shy away form being about the people, about the community, but about yourself. Just take care of yourself and

[235] Trinity UCC and Community of Hope are especially noteworthy as churches where hip-hop culture is readily embraced and used as a means of connecting with black youth. The Reverend Otis Moss III, the son of noted minister and civil rights activist Otis Moss Jr., became the senior minister at Trinity UCC following the retirement of the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. Moss has attempted to build upon the activist foundations that Wright laid at Trinity in the latter's three decades of leadership. In one of Moss' popular sermons, entitled, "That Was Then, This is Now," the preacher uses the narrative of Joshua succeeding Moses in the leadership of Israel to articulate the hip-hop generation's ascendancy to spiritual as well as socio-political leadership. The Rev. Tony Lee is the founder and pastor of Community of Hope A.M.E. Alongside the church, Lee created The Hip Hop(e) Network in order to address the religious and political issues facing the hip-hop generation.

get your money."[236] While social ethicist, Jonathan Walton, has argued convincingly that such churches are hardly a new phenomenon in black communities, the access that black megachurches have gained to mass media technologies in the late twentieth-century has made their prosperity gospel a ubiquitous presence in black popular culture.[237] As a result, Yearwood insists, "…we've lost that message where the church was that community of hope, that place where we can come to and discuss politics and discuss our community and discuss our affairs. And so for my organization which works with the hip hop community, works with the streets, it's hard to then go into these places. And so even a lot of times they don't know that we even exist, and it's a problem."[238]

Ironically, Rev. Yearwood turns the critique of black youth culture vis-à-vis black institutions such as the church on its head. Whereas representatives of the institutional black church have constructed black youth as a (or even *the*) "problem", Yearwood counters that black churches, captivated by the vices of greed and individualism, have alienated a generation of politicized black youth in search for a place to organize. To be sure, those on both sides of the "black church vs. hip-hop" debate are equally committed to accusing the other of crass materialism and an abandonment of a serious socio-political agenda. From a slightly different vantage point, however, Yearwood laments that those young people who are being mobilized to confront issues such as poverty, militarism and racism in the 21st century are not being introduced to religious leaders who are equally concerned with these issues. Yearwood concludes, "And so we're not connecting, and

[236] Lawton, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.
[237] See Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). In the age of globalization, these televangelistic sermons not only circulate within the confines of black American culture, but are also distributed throughout the Diaspora and across the globe. Scholars of religion and media culture, such as Marla Frederick, are beginning to explore the implications of these prosperity messages as they are circulated and consumed in impoverished areas such as Kingston, Jamaica.
[238] Lawton, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.

I'm hoping that does change. I'm hoping that the church of old can become the church of new and fight theses issues."[239]

In response to Kim Lawton's question as to whether he thought that the hip-hop generation lacked a spiritual based due to the seeming disconnect from the black church, Yearwood answered, "It is true that my generation is growing up outside of the church, but the spirituality is not."[240] Here, Yearwood voices the popular "spiritual-not-religious" argument put forth by many within the younger generation. While any notion of the "spiritual" remains ill-defined and undertheorized in Yearwood's account, he offers as evidence the seriousness with which young people continue to engage in religious practices such as prayer beyond the institutional church.[241] Moreover, Yearwood interprets an affinity for the figure of Jesus over against the church through the lens of a black theology of liberation, suggesting, "they love the revolutionary Jesus, the one who fought in the temple and was there for the poor and the woman who could touch the hem of the garment—they love that. But they don't see the connection, because they see a lot of the hypocrisy sometimes in the church."[242]

Reverend Yearwood sees in the hip-hop generation a latent spirituality that is in need of a framing and focus that presses it into the service of social and political activism. He suggests, "Now the beautiful thing of the institution is that it can frame that

[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid.
[241] While this distinction-between "religious" and "spiritual"- remains under-theorized in Yearwood's account, significant attention has been given to the uses of these terms in religious and theological studies. For instance, Marla Frederick uses the term "spirituality" over against "religion" in her study of black women of faith in rural North Carolina. In *Between Sundays: Black Women's Spirituality and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, Frederick argues, "If religion and its constituent parts convey 'order' and the saliency of social institutions, spirituality conveys creativity, the ability to invent, to reinterpret, to move beyond some of the limitations of ritual and static notions of religiosity. The agency that spirituality confers allows for active work in the public areas of life as well as the more private areas." See *Between Sundays*, pp 10-24.
[242] Lawton, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.

spirituality, it can give it its *rhetoric*, it can give it its way to *communicate*, its way to *express* it (emphasis mine)."[243] It is important to note, here, Yearwood's implicit claim that the most valuable resources within the black church tradition, for his purposes, are primarily rhetorical or homiletical. It is the expressive cultural practices of rhetorical and oral performance in the black church traditions, which creatively appropriate the liberating narratives of Scripture, which Yearwood suggests would lend an additional force to the social movements of the hip-hop generation. While "rhetoric" might be understood narrowly here, it is important to note its wider implications. Houck and Dixon suggest much broader implications for the importance of rhetoric in the civil-rights movement. Here they are worth quoting at length:

> Speeches represent but one important sliver of the rhetorical constellation: sit-ins, boycotts, marches, pray-ins, wade-ins, public letters, songs, and of course, the televised images of vicious attacks caught on film at places like Birmingham and Selma were all part of the persuasive mosaic that changed the nation.[244]

Through the Hip Hop Caucus, Reverend Yearwood attempts to provide an institution that functions beyond the black church proper, but uses religious practices nurtured within that tradition to provide a "frame" for the spirituality of a diverse group of young people of color. In *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, Gary Selby discusses the use of religious discourse within social movements. With regard to King and his contemporaries, Selby states, "King and other movement leaders were able to draw on that tradition [of religious discourse] to construct a perspective or frame of reference from which protesters could see themselves, their history and present

[243] Ibid.
[244] Houck and Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement,* 6.

circumstances, and their crusade to overcome U.S. apartheid."[245] Working in a broader rhetorical context in which commitments to the particularities of black church identity increasingly seem to be lacking, Yearwood draws upon the orality and performativity of the black sermonic tradition, but unlike King, he tends to use biblical narratives such as the Exodus far more sparingly. By pointing out Yearwood's rhetorical reticence on explicitly Christian theological ideas, however, I am not suggesting that he does not remain engaged in a significant public theological discourse. It is clear in sermons such as "The Dream Reborn," and his other speeches and writings, that Yearwood strategically deploys the language and symbols of black Christianity in ways that are intended to resonate more broadly with his interreligious and intergenerational audience, many of whom are alienated from the institutional church.

"Respect My Vote!": Getting 'the Right Messages' to the Politically Alienated

In the sermon above, Reverend Yearwood deployed the biblical imagery of a "cloud of witnesses" to construct an identity for American youth of the post-civil-rights-era as "the Dream Generation." Yet, his other speeches and public activities demonstrate an awareness that most of these young citizens do not enjoy equal access to the "American Dream." As an effort to address the disparities between those marginalized among the hip hop generation, Reverend Yearwood initiated the Respect My Vote campaign during the 2008 presidential election. Respect My Vote was designed to be "a nonpartisan voter registration, education, and get out the vote campaign that targets 18-40 year olds in urban communities."[246]

[245] Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rhetoric of Freedom* (Waco:Baylor University Press, 2008).
[246] http://respectmyvote.com/

When it comes to the young, black and poor, the prevailing myth within public discourse continues to explain away such disparities on the grounds that these individuals suffer under the weight of their own problems. One of the intended aims of Rev. Yearwood's work with the Hip Hop Caucus is to, "dispel the myth that poor people are poor simply because they don't work hard enough or have enough ambition."[247] Noting the disproportionate numbers of African Americans and Latinos who are adversely affected by innumerable social inequalities, including "the neglect of issues like adequate wages, job security, affordable housing and educational equality," Rev. Yearwood enjoins the hip-hop community to unite with the Respect My Vote campaign, in order to fight against, "conditions that perpetuate poverty and a vicious cycle of the poor remaining poor."[248] By galvanizing young people in urban communities, Yearwood endeavors to hold elected officials to, "working on the problems that we are most concerned about, and top on that list is ending poverty by ensuring equal opportunity for all to achieve the American Dream."[249]

Central to the mission of the Respect My Vote campaign is the effort to empower, "the hardest to reach young voters by encouraging them to use their vote to affect the issues that impact their lives."[250] These "hardest to reach young voters" include many of the black youth that political scientist, Cathy Cohen describes as most often demonized

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[247] Hip Hop Caucus Media Alert. September 19, 2012. Respect My Vote! Along with millions of Americans wants to see a serious effort made by policy makers to stimulate prosperity for all Americans that helps lift people out of poverty, and thereby grows the middleclass. http://respectmyvote.com/, September 19, 2012 (accessed 10/15/2013).
[248] Ibid.
[249] Ibid.
[250] 2 Chainz Joins 2012 "Respect My Vote!" Campaign to Combat Disenfranchisement and Strengthen Democracy.Islanddefjam.com, May 2, 2012. http://www.islanddefjam.com/artist/news_single.aspx?nid=11153&artistID=7462

within public discourse and politically alienated from the democratic process.[251] In *Democracy Remixed*, Cohen insists, "Without the participation of young black Americans and other marginalized populations, our democracy is left vulnerable to the continued and increasing control of those with more power, more access, and more status, reinforcing and exacerbating divisions that will only lead to greater disparities and violent recourse."[252] The effort to include the voices of these marginalized "others" within the democratic process of political change is crucial to understanding Rev. Yearwood's social and religious intervention.

Through initiatives such as the Respect My Vote campaign, the Hip Hop Caucus attempts to mitigate the experience of political alienation among black urban youth by, "giving voice to those who are outside of institutions, folks who are not in college, who didn't graduate high school; we are able to tap people at the barbershop, on the block and in the beauty salon."[253] The Black Church, which has been referred to as "the principle linkage institution in black communities," is also an institution where urban youth are often conspicuously absent.[254] In an interview with the African American Pulpit, published in his edited volume, *Open Mike*, Michael Eric Dyson described the alienation

[251] In her work, *Democracy Remixed*, Cathy Cohen defines political alienation in terms of three related issues. First, *government orientation* concerns the opinions that individuals hold concerning government officials and how effective these officials are deemed to be with regard to issues facing their respective communities. Second, Cohen describes *political community*, or the individual's sense of connection to a larger political community. Finally, equal opportunity refers to an individuals sense of fairness and opportunity in society. For a more in depth discussion of these categories see Chapter 4 in *Democracy Remixed*, particularly pages 124-143.
[252] Cathy Cohen, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111.
[253] "Hip Hop takes over Capitol Hill" May 21, 2009 http://www.blackradionetwrk.com/hip_hop_takes_over_capitol_hill (Accessed 4/29/2012).
[254] The term "principle linkage institution" was used by political scientist, Adolph Reed to describe the black church as a social space where black people have historically connected across various axes of difference.

of black youth from the social vision of the Black Church.[255] Moreover, Dyson contends, "If in the past the black church was deemed by its critics to be politically irrelevant because it failed to translate its religious ethics into social protest, it is now even more the case that a particular segment of young blacks has discovered its authentic voice outside the boundaries of the black church."[256] It is this contingent of the young and alienated within urban communities that Rev. Yearwood and his numerous campaigns seek to reach. Furthermore, it is their "authentic voices," developed outside of mainstream black institutions that the Caucus attempts to amplify.

While many organizations purport to work on behalf of or in the best interest of black youth, oftentimes these organizations proceed without ascertaining or taking seriously the perspectives of the young people that they claim to represent. Cohen's work with the *Black Youth Project* at the University of Chicago is critical in this regard, as she has conducted extensive interviews with young black Americans to ascertain *their* perspectives on political issues, as well as allowing them to speak for themselves concerning the reasons for their feelings of cynicism and alienation from the government.[257]According to Yearwood, the Hip Hop Caucus and the Respect My Vote campaign follows a similar strategy of engagement with young people from marginal communities, and especially black youth. Yearwood writes, "We allow their perspectives so that voice doesn't get lost in the discourse."[258]

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[255] Michael Eric Dyson, "Speech is My Hammer: Black Preaching, Social Justice, and Rap Rhetoric," in *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 292.
[256] Ibid, 292.
[257] See http://www.blackyouthproject.com/
[258] "Hip Hop takes over Capitol Hill" May 21, 2009 http://www.blackradionetwrk.com/hip_hop_takes_over_capitol_hill (Accessed 4/29/2012).

In order to meaningfully connect with young people, however, Cohen insists that there must be a greater understanding of the ways that young people receive and understand socio-political and cultural messages. She states, "As we continue to examine the lives of young black people in the United States, it is important to know which messages and- informally- which messengers resonate with this group?"[259] Reflecting upon what she takes to be the competing messages of "hope," as represented by political authorities such as Barack Obama, and the more "skeptical" message of rap music and hip-hop, Cohen suggests that the latter is more likely to resonate with the younger generation of Americans who experience political alienation. In a particularly revealing statement on the website of the Hip Hop Caucus, the organization attributes the growth of their organization among their target demographic and their effectiveness in campaigns such as Respect My Vote to their, "ability to use the right messengers, carrying the right messages, through the right mediums of communication to reach young people and keep them engaged."[260]

Here, it is significant to note that the Respect My Vote campaign has partnered with Black Entertainment Television (BET) and a range of celebrities within the hip-hop community, in order to more effectively reach the young people in these respective audiences. While Rev. Delman Coates used his Enough is Enough Campaign to attempt to hold BET responsible for the detrimental effect of its programming upon black youth, Rev. Yearwood has used BET as a means of distributing messages of political empowerment for the same constituency. In addition to using prominent celebrity figures such as Clifford "T.I." Harris and Keyshia Cole as spokespersons for Respect My Vote,

[259] Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*, 112.
[260] http://hiphopcaucus.org/supporters/ (Accessed 4/29/12).

the campaign has also secured air-time to discuss political issues on programs such as 106 & Park, one of BET's most prominent music programming shows. In the weeks leading up to the 2012 presidential election, Respect My Vote positioned three young representatives on the show to discuss pertinent campaign issues with the 106 & Park viewing audience and register eligible audience members to vote. The use of recent college graduates such as Tradell Hawkins (Michigan State University, B.S. Social Relations and Policy) and Meah Denee (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, B.A. Communication Studies) was in part, an effort to encourage more positive images of young people of color on the network. In a statement concerning her role in the Respect My Vote campaign, Denee said:

> I feel the Respect My Vote! campaign is imperative during this election, especially for minority groups who are not as educated in politics and their voting rights. I want to educate teens and adults that are misrepresented and misinformed about their rights and how powerful their votes and voices are.[261]

As vice-president of Corporate Social Responsibility of BET Networks and executive director of BET Foundation, Sonya Lockett released a media statement expressing the corporation's eagerness to link its own efforts to increase voter education among young people with the work of Rev. Yearwood's organization. Lockett wrote, "BETs Vote 2012 campaign is thrilled to be working with Respect My Vote! and Election Protection because together we can reach millions of young people with critical voting information via our online and social media platforms as well as our television

[261] "Meet our 106 & Park Respect My Vote Reps!", October 28, 2012. http://respectmyvote.com/ (accessed 12/15/12).

programming."[262] With reference to a September 2, 2012, Respect My Vote! Town Hall meeting in Charlotte, NC, Yearwood said, "Young voters got the information, the tools, and the grassroots resources needed to protect their votes. When young people are informed of injustices, like discriminatory voter suppression laws, they are the first to stand up and they want to be heard."[263] Commenting upon the Town Hall, which was held during the Democratic National Convention and moderated by Rev. Yearwood, Locket, said, "BET is passionate about getting important information like this to our audiences because we know it will make them more effective citizens."[264]

In Yearwood's estimation, the increase in young voter turn out, and their demand to address issues that impinge upon their lives, directly effects the perception of this young demographic. In other words, Yearwood surmises that the sense of moral panic surrounding black youth culture will decrease as public attention is captured for the politically engaged efforts of young people of color, through the Hip Hop Caucus. In his words, "If we keep the movement growing by voting in higher and higher numbers, and being more and more vocal and active on the issues that matter most to us, like immigration, health care, jobs, education, and the environment, politicians have no choice but to *respect our votes*" (emphasis mine). [265] Ironically, Yearwood's campaign places an interesting spin on the politics of respectability that has often led African American leaders to distance themselves from those black youth deemed as morally deviant. "Respect," here, is won less by conforming to notions of a more "positive" image than

[262] "Respect My Vote! Town Hall in Charlotte, NC Mobilizes Young Voters to Fight Back Against Voter Suppression Efforts in Numerous States and to Get Out the Vote", PRWeb, September 4, 2012 http://www.prweb.com/releases/2012/9/prweb9868436.htm (accessed 11/1/12).
[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.
[265] "2 Chainz writes on why he is a spokesperson for the Respect My Vote! campaign." May 1, 2012. http://respectmyvote.com/

politicizing the politically alienated in order to make these "voices from the margins" heard within debates on public policy.

This perspective is perhaps best articulated by Tauheed Epps, a hip-hop artist whose stage name is 2 Chainz. Epps, who reports having a felony record since he was fifteen years old, became a spokesman for the Respect My Vote campaign in order to inform ex-felons of their voting rights and to help register them to vote. In a statement articulating his reasoning for becoming a spokesman for the campaign, the artist wrote, "If you have never lost your right to vote, you can't understand. But for those of us who have been disenfranchised, getting a second chance at having a voice and being *respected* means everything. It changes how you feel about who you are in relation to this country. You go from thinking you are powerless to knowing that you have a role in influencing the system" (emphasis mine).[266]

"Make Hip Hop, Not War": Resisting Violence and Politicizing Poetry

In addition to voter-registration and education campaigns, Rev. Yearwood has also sought to alter the negative light cast upon the hip-hop generation by increasing their involvement in other social movements, such as the anti-war movement. In order to address the lack of representation among these young people of color, Rev. Yearwood launched the "Make Hip Hop, Not War" tour at a press conference on Capitol Hill in March of 2007. The Hip Hop Caucus partnered with Iraq Veterans Against the War and the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition to produce the fifteen-city bus tour in order to inform and galvanize young people (of color) to act in opposition to the war in Iraq. Among the strategies for reaching this demographic was a focus upon "The

[266] Ibid.

disproportionate impact of war and war spending on communities of color…in an attempt to make it a central discussion within the peace movement and among legislators."[267] In part, this strategy involved making plain the interrelatedness of the wars being fought beyond the boarders of the United States and the violence experienced in urban communities on the domestic front. As a member of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Iraq and the broader Clergy and Laity United for Peace and Justice Coalition, Rev. Yearwood sees his efforts in this anti-war campaign in both religious and socio-political terms.[268] Yearwood declares, "As a minister, following Dr. King, I believe a country that continues to spend more money on warfare is heading toward a social spiritual death…The bombs that are dropping in Afghanistan are in essence dropping in American and urban communities all over our land."[269]

Throughout the "Make Hip Hop, Not War" tour, Rev. Yearwood spoke from pulpits and podiums across the country, including Monumental Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, PA and West Park Presbyterian Church in New York, NY. The bus tour also engaged college students in the auditoriums of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and elite private universities, such as University of California Berkeley and the University of Notre Dame. In a statement about the aims of the "Make Hip Hop, Not War" tour, Reverend Yearwood wrote, "To end this war we have to bring new energy and new voices to the forefront. The 'Make Hip Hop Not War' tour will begin to show the true political power of our hip-hop communities and of our young people. It is time

[267] "Make Hip Hop Not War Tour to Showcase Political Side of Hip-Hop Generation", Emerging Minds, March 20, 2007. http://www.emergingminds.org/Make-Hip-Hop-Not-War-Tour-to-Showcase-Political-side-of-Hip-Hop-Generation.html

[268] In a statement on the Clergy and Laity United for Peace and Justice website, the coalition states, "We embrace non-violent forms of righteous indignation and call upon people of faith to honor the sacredness of all life and to highlight the immoral character of the war in Iraq." See: http://cljp.org/

[269] "The Rev. Lennox Yearwood: 'One day at a time' for justice", Frost Illustrated Newspaper, December 23, 2009 by Makula Dunbar. http://www.frostillustrated.com/full.php?sid=6832 (accessed 12/15/12).

for young African American and Latino leaders in this country to establish a stronger, more unified voice in the movement to end the war in Iraq."[270] On his efforts to get the hip-hop generation involved in the Peace Movement, Yearwood writes:

> In the movements of the 60's, solidarity among the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement was never truly achieved. As the 'Hip-Hop generation'- a generation where the sons and daughters of former slaves work side by side with the sons and daughters of former slave owners- we have the ability to bridge the gap and link movements for peace, justice, civil rights and the environment in true solidarity.[271]

Rev. Yearwood's efforts, however, have been met with opposition. In "An Open Letter to America," Yearwood explained that it was six days after launching the Make Hip Hop, Not War tour that he received notification from the United States Air Force that it was pursuing the honorable discharge of the retired Air Force Reserve Officer. In his sermons and speeches, Yearwood frequently cites his being "targeted" by the United States military as a result of his antiwar efforts, including a sermon that he delivered at Andrews Air Force Base entitled, "Who Would Jesus Bomb?"[272] For Yearwood, the narrative of being under "surveillance" by the government serves as a discursive means of connecting with his audience. This is especially true for his young black male listeners who are often targeted and heavily policed both within their own environments as well as when they venture beyond the boundaries of black communities. Yearwood, thus deploys the narrative of being deemed a "threat to national security" as a means of resonating with a group of young people often demonized as subversive threats to "the American way of life."

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[270] "Make Hip Hop Not War Tour to Showcase Political Side of Hip-Hop Generation", Emerging Minds, March 20, 2007. http://www.emergingminds.org/Make-Hip-Hop-Not-War-Tour-to-Showcase-Political-side-of-Hip-Hop-Generation.html

[271] Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., "An Open Letter to America: 'Now is the time for us to stand up and stand together'" http://warisacrime.org/node/24208 (accessed 11/18/2012).

[272] Rev. Yearwood reports delivering this sermon at Andrews Air Force Base in his "An Open Letter to America." There is no transcript, video, or audio recording available for this sermon.

In the opening remarks of his "Dream Reborn" sermon, Yearwood went further by recounting his experience of being "beaten up" while trying to enter a September 2007 Congressional hearing of General David Petreus, who was scheduled to give testimony on the status of the war in Iraq. Yearwood was reportedly tackled by six Capital police officers while attempting to enter the hearing. Though the minister was hospitalized for torn ligaments in his ankle due to excessive force by the police, he was later charged with the felony assault of a police officer. On Yearwood's account, this instance of "democracy while black," was, at least in part, due to the fact that he had been organizing an anti-war march to the Capitol on the following Saturday, September 15, 2007. He explained that he desired to attend the Petraeus hearing for himself in order to report back to the young people of color that he was to lead in the upcoming march.

In a segment with Amy Goodman and Juan González of *Democracy Now!*, Rev. Yearwood explained his efforts to raise political awareness among the hip hop community:

> With the Hip Hop Caucus, it is our job to make government transparent, particularly for urban youth. What's so tragic about this is that we tried to go into the halls of Congress so that young people can come and become familiar with the process. And obviously they cannot be afraid of the process. A lot of young people of color- a lot of young people, period- don't trust the system. And so, not trusting the system, our job is to tell them to register to vote, to get them encouraged to make it more transparent.[273]

In Yearwood's estimation, however, such treatment at the hand of government officials was likely to dissuade the active participation of young people in the political process. The activist lamented, "If you can beat on a reverend in the halls of Congress, how many

[273] "'Democracy While Black'- Rev. Lennox Yearwood Arrested, Charged with Assault While Entering Petraeus Hearing" Democracy Now! A Daily Independent Global News Hour with Amy Goodman & Juan Gonzalez. http://www.democracynow.org/2007/9/13/democracy_while_black_rev_lennox_yearwood (accessed Jan. 16, 2013)

of you want to come out to these marches. You're going to think the same thing's going to happen to you."[274]

Nevertheless, Yearwood insisted that because the incident was captured on video, uploaded and circulated on YouTube, young people were emboldened to attend the anti-war march. In what would come to be a recurring refrain in his public discourse, the minister maintained that young people were beginning to realize "This moment in history is our generation's lunch-counter moment- Iraq is our Vietnam and New Orleans is our Birmingham."[275] Reverend Yearwood has consistently deployed this rhetorical refrain throughout his sermons, speeches, and writings in a variety of campaigns and movements, signifying on the student-led protests of the 1950s and 1960s. The "lunch counter" metaphor functions discursively and rhetorically in Yearwood's public discourse as a means of spurring the hip-hop community towards its own brand of activism in resistance to a range of interrelated injustices. Moreover, Yearwood's use of this narrative, recounting his abuses at the hands of an unjust government, and their subsequent surveillance of his words and whereabouts, does the work of igniting a young urban audience that is likely to resonate with a sense of mistreatment by and mistrust towards government officials.

This is, perhaps, best demonstrated by the performance of Peruvian-born hip-hop artist, Immortal Technique, at the West Park Presbyterian Church following a sermon where Rev. Yearwood recounted this narrative of violent abuse at the hands of government officials due to his antiwar efforts. In an essay entitled, "Twenty-first-century jeremiad: Contemporary hip-hop and American tradition," Paul Williams

[274] Ibid.
[275] Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., "An Open Letter to America: 'Now is the time for us to stand up and stand together'" http://warisacrime.org/node/24208 (accessed 11/18/2012).

describes the poetics of Immortal Technique as a hip-hop extension of the American jeremiad tradition.[276] In particular, Williams points to the ways that "hip hop jeremiahs," such as Technique use apocalyptic biblical imagery to "herald the end of the world in various forms [including] nuclear war as a product of escalating armaments manufacture…or religious and race wars brought about by the polarization of humanity during the War on Terror."[277] Moreover, Williams points to Immortal Technique's accusations of the Bush Administration for using the War on Terror "as the occasion to go to war for strategic ends against peoples (like America's domestic non-white population) those whose lives are devalued because of their skin colour and because they are not Christian."[278]

Williams' reading of Immortal Technique, as hip-hop Jeremiah, is instructive for interpreting his performance at West Park Presbyterian Church during the "Make Hip Hop Not War" tour. Technique began with the lines, "They used to call us communists for fighting America/and now they call us terrorists to spread hysteria".[279] Technique's use of a rhetoric of "us versus them" is striking as he casts a wide net binding the multi-racial hip-hop community together, especially people of color, who have been subject to charges of anti-Americanism due to their critiques of the war and other domestic injustices. After indicting the American government, and specifically the CIA, for their role in "[making] Bin Laden the man that he is," Technique rhymes, "The Christmas tree

[276] For a discussion of the distinctions between the American Jeremiad tradition and the African American Jeremiad variations on that tradition, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[277] Paul Williams, "Twenty-first-century jeremiad: Contemporary hip-hop and American tradition" European Journal of American Culture, Volume 27, Number 2, 2008, 120.
[278] Ibid, 118.
[279] Immortal Technique's performance at West Park was recorded and included in an interview with Jabari Johnson for HipHopGameTV. The interview was uploaded to YouTube and the performance can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PknFfWAX244

pyramid with the star as an eye/ Like a satellite orbit watching me from the sky."[280] With each line, the artist's words sound a more strident note, building to a trenchant critique of the military-industrial-complex. After questioning the legitimacy of American democracy for its failure to consistently critique human rights violations among its political allies, while being outspoken about issues in places like Cuba and China, Technique focuses upon the United States military. The artist scornfully proclaims, "I don't pretend troops are peacekeepers and don't commit murder/ And they don't create colonies whose governments serve us."[281] In the final lines of his polemic, Immortal Technique links the surveillance and policing of people of color, the "War on Terror," and the imperialist practices of the American government back to an unjust system of global economics. For technique, these interrelated issues are but, "A microcosm of Adam Smith's capitalism/cause that's America's *real* religion/ given as a mark of the beast to the Christians/ the destruction of Babylon, motherfucker, *that's* my mission!"[282] Ending on a defiant note, Technique raised his microphone in the air and proclaimed to his audience, "Make Hip Hop, Not War!"

"Green the Block": Fighting Pollution and Poverty at the Same Time

In a November 2008 essay published in The American Prospect, Yearwood lamented the lack of representation by the hip-hop generation in movements for environmental justice. Yearwood stated, that while he never expected the hip-hop generation to be the majority crowd, "What's been disheartening is over the past four years, I would go to the immigration rallies, and there'd be all brown people there. I'd go

[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid.

to police-brutality rallies, and it'd be all black people. I'd go to green or environmental or climate rallies, and it'd be all white."[283] In response to this disillusioning reality, Yearwood put it bluntly: "Hip-hop won't be able to sustain our movement if we have a segregated movement."[284] In response, the "Green the Block" campaign was launched in 2009 as a movement for environmental justice, co-founded by the Hip Hop Caucus and Green-for-All.

In a press statement, linking the Respect My Vote campaign to issues of the environment, the HHC made the case to those who might be skeptical of the relevance of such issues. The Caucus stated, "Environmental justice isn't just about loving trees and polar bears, environmental justice is about our health and wealth. When our communities are polluted, our families and neighbors get sick with disease like asthma and cancer. Meanwhile, a very few companies profit from using up these limited dirty energy resources."[285] Rev. Yearwood sounded a more trenchant critique of the injustice that urban communities face at the intersections of poverty and pollution in a statement leading up to his involvement in Seattle's Green Festivals. Yearwood proclaimed, "The fact that people cannot breathe clean air is un-American."[286] Drawing upon the biblical injunction to care for the poor and the rhetoric of American civil religion, Rev. Yearwood inveighed, "Illness and death from dirty air among our most vulnerable populations –

[283] Brentin Mock, "Green or Die" The American Prospect, November 26, 2008 http://prospect.org/article/green-or-die (accessed on 1/19/13).
[284] Ibid.
[285] "Respect My Vote for Environmental Health and Green Wealth," April 23, 2012. http://respectmyvote.com/ (accessed on 1/20/13).
[286] "Seattle Green Festival Features Rev. Lennox Yearwood on Asthma Epidemic"The Skanner, May 20, 2011. http://www.theskanner.com/article/Seattle-Green-Festival-Features-Rev-Lennox-Yearwood-on-Asthma-Epidemic (accessed 2/1/2013).

children and the elderly, particularly in poor communities – is a direct assault on American values of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness."[287]

Through the Hip Hop Caucus and its partnership with Van Jones' Green-for-All, Rev. Yearwood has endeavored to raise awareness about the cost of environmental degradation on communities of color. By articulating the ways that the hip-hop generation has suffered disproportionately from "poor environmental stewardship," Yearwood has sought to meet the difficult challenge of mobilizing his generation for environmental justice issues. In his estimation, however, this situation presents a dual challenge. First, it means that the mainstream environmental movement must take seriously the ways that race and class effect discussions of the environment. Subsequently, if these issues are broached within the broader movement, it must be in a manner that avoids engaging communities of color in terms of charity, but rather through a commitment to solidarity and the development of local leadership. Second, and perhaps more challenging, for communities of color, economic issues often take priority over environmental concerns, especially when solutions to environmental issues are more costly. With regard to the former concern, Yearwood argued, "[Mainstream environmental groups] can't be the only voice for the community. If all the funding is going only to certain groups, and young people are trying to get green environmental groups started and they don't have enough, we need to put resources into those organizations."[288] In terms of the latter, however, he acknowledges, "Keeping it real, people want jobs. People of color in urban communities want to work. You can say all

[287] Ibid.
[288] Ibid.

you want about the environment, but if you ain't eating, you can't worry about that."[289] As a strategy for moving beyond this seeming impasse, Yearwood advance the prospects of a "green-collar-job approach."[290]

In April of 2011, the Discovery Network's Planet Green channel aired an hour-long documentary entitled, "Hip Hop Rev: A Documentary Feature on the Life and Work of Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr." The documentary chronicled the work of Rev. Yearwood and the Hip Hop Caucus, and particularly their Green the Block campaign. The film captured moments from the campaign's "Clean Energy Now! Bus Tour" as well as visits to historically black colleges and universities to raise awareness of issues of climate change along with prospects for clean energy jobs. Throughout the documentary, Yearwood captures the essence of this approach through his slogan, "we're fighting poverty and pollution at the same time."[291] Along with Yearwood and Van Jones, the documentary also featured celebrities from the hip-hop community, including Biz Markie and Wyclef Jean, as well as actor Gloria Rueben.

The celebrity of these artists and actors helped to illumine the more political work of Rev. Yearwood with EPA administrator, Lisa Jackson, Congresswoman Barbara Lee as well as Vice President Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection. In addition to public and institutional appearances, the documentary also highlighted the more grassroots work of Hip Hop Caucus interns working with young people in urban communities such as Southeast Washington D.C.'s Woodland Terrace Projects. In a series of scenes, Kari

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[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid. For a detailed discussion of the "green-collar-job approach" see Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (New York: Harper One, 2008).
[291] "Hip Hop Rev: A Documentary Feature on the Life and Work of Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr." aired on Discovery Communication Planet Green Channel, April 23, 2011. See www.hiphoprev.com

Fulton, a youth activist and Tendani Mpulubusi, a Project Manager for the Green the Block campaign, collaborate to educate young people about green jobs and help them to imagine potential business plans. These mentoring relationships with young people encourage them to become environmentally conscious entrepreneurs, able to revitalize their own communities.

The film also followed Rev. Yearwood- a native of Shreveport, Louisiana- to New Orleans in order to document the relation of environmental issues to the national tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Through an emphasis on Katrina, the documentary showed the convergence between social, political, economic, and ecological issues that was exposed in the aftermath of storm in August 2005. As Van Jones, Yearwood's collaborative partner, argued in a speech nearly a year before the launch of the Green the Block campaign, "[…] in his time, Dr. King worked for equal protection and equal opportunity. We, too, must adopt that agenda. But ours is an age of both social crisis and ecological peril. Therefore, we must insist that vulnerable communities get equal protection from racial discrimination- and from the floods, storms, droughts, plagues and fires that global warming is causing. Equal protection means: no more Katrinas!"[292]

As Murray Furman points out, "While Katrina is described as a 'wake up call' it also serves as a catalyst, motivating hip-hop identified individuals of all ages to more directly engage in political activism and social change."[293] Prior to the Green the Block campaign, Rev. Yearwood was already involved with justice issues related to the social crisis that took place in the aftermath of the "natural" disaster. Yearwood and the Hip

[292] "Forty years gone: MLK's dream today would be colored green" Grist, by Van Jones, April 5, 2008. http://grist.org/article/a-dream-reborn (accessed 1/22/13).
[293] Murray Forman, "General Introduction" in *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, 2nd Edition, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.

Hop Caucus were integrally involved in the Gulf Coast Renewal Campaign (GCRC), which advocated for the rights of survivors of the flood. In 2006, the GCRC, a coalition of organizations, including local activists, national organizers and policy makers, was awarded the Letelier-Moffit 30th Memorial Human Rights Award by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) for its efforts to "advance a poor people's struggle for accountability and justice.[294] During the documentary, Yearwood's post-Katrina efforts are also displayed in his work to mobilize twenty-five African American mayors to travel to Washington D.C. for a "Green the City" summit, which included meeting with members of Congress and the Obama Administration to press for more environmentally responsible public policy.

Following the airing of the documentary, the Hip Hop Caucus encouraged its members to host screenings of the film around the country, particularly in urban communities of color. The Caucus created a Screening Toolkit, designed to elicit greater participation by young people of color in the green movement. The kit includes several questions for discussion, including, "In what ways is your community's health impacted by pollution? What improvements does your neighborhood and city need in terms of its environment? What are the best ways to inform people of environmental problems and solutions? What ways should the Hip Hop Caucus connect with your community?"[295] In this way, Rev. Yearwood deploys the cultural production of "Hip Hop Rev", the documentary, as a means of stimulating local activists and concerned community members to become involved in efforts for environmental justice at the local and grassroots levels.

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[294] "Letelier-Moffitt 30th Memorial Human Rights Award" Transnational Institute, October 1, 2006. http://www.tni.org/article/letelier-moffitt-memorial-human-rights-award (accessed 2/3/2013).
[295] "Hip Hop Rev Screening Toolkit" www.hiphoprev.com

With regard to the impact of such efforts with young people of color, and particularly black youth in these communities, Rev. Yearwood insisted that with the environmental focus, "we're not just recycling things, we're recycling lives."[296] Perhaps it is through the Green the Block Campaign that it becomes most evident that Rev. Yearwood's intervention in black youth culture is far more oriented toward "cleaning up" the environments in which these young people live than attempting to clean up their cultural productions. In Yearwood's mind, addressing the contexts of poverty, violence and pollution, in which young people of color are forced to live, through changing public policy, is a far more effective social intervention, than an attack on hip-hop culture. As it will become clearer below, however, these efforts have not been without criticism.

"We Voted and We Got Die": Analyzing the Intersections Between Popular Culture, Politics and Public Theology

In order to begin a critical analysis of this strategic intervention in black youth culture I want to consider the critiques of three scholars who have challenged the development of a hip-hop politics- conservative critic John McWhorter, political scientist Adolph Reed, and feminist critic Tricia Rose. Both McWhorter (from the right) and Reed (from the left) have argued that hip-hop as a production of black youth culture lacks the direction and sophistication of an organized political movement. The argument leveled by Tricia Rose, on the other hand, contends that despite the legitimacy of cultural politics as a form of ideological struggle and the more recent organizing efforts of organizations such as the Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), commercial hip-hop is inherently riddled with elements that undermine a progressive political agenda. In light of Rose's critique, I argue that Yearwood's relative lack of critique of hip-hop, and especially the

[296] "Hip Hop Rev: A Documentary Feature on the Life and Work of Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr."

artists who serve as spokespersons for the campaign, threatens to weaken the effectiveness of his intervention. Finally, I offer an analysis of the specifically theological dimensions of Yearwood's public discourse and practices, namely his problematic of redemption, in light of Rose's critique.

Rev. Yearwood is well aware of the moral panic that surrounds black youth culture and the ways that such a panic creates suspicion of the work of his organization. As the logic goes, hip-hop is to blame for the crisis facing black youth in the post-civil rights era. In this logic, organizing and mobilizing young people of color for progressive political action, under the banner of hip-hop, is a contradiction in terms. To put it bluntly, hip-hop and politics do not- cannot go together. Rather than attempting to clean up hip-hop, however, Rev. Yearwood insists that it is precisely by using hip hop to mobilize young people of color for direct political action that the public perception of the hip-hop generation will be altered. Not by protesting hip-hop culture as Rev. Coates' Enough is Enough campaign has done, but by politicizing the hip-hop generation, Yearwood works to intervene in the crises facing contemporary black youth.

John McWhorter and the Criticism from the Right

In *All About the Beat*, McWhorter lays bare the substance of his critique in the form of a probing question, "Is hip-hop really ready for the long, slow, undramatic work that changing laws requires in real life? Or is hip-hop- quick, fast, and dramatic to its core- just music?"[297] With reference to the title of the book, McWhorter is adamant, "Hip-hop is all about the beat, but real world activism is all about the work" (emphasis

[297] John McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008), 8.

original).[298] Rev. Yearwood might well agree with McWhorter to a point. Yet, he would undoubtedly retort that the Hip Hop Caucus is dedicated to linking the beat to the work. For McWhorter, however, the critique of a hip-hop politics is more thoroughgoing than his initial claim that if black people are to overcome, "it won't be to a beat."[299] On that point, McWhorter is unambiguous, "there is nothing hip-hop music or hip-hop 'culture' has to offer black America in terms of activism."[300] More importantly, in his estimation, it is also the case that black people's overcoming, "won't be with our middle fingers stuck up."[301] The latter quote captures McWhorter's overall disdain for the "radical" brand of politics that he believes those in the hip-hop generation represent. On McWhorter's account, hip-hop's political voice is mistakenly oriented toward "revolution" at best and an adolescent rhetoric of rebellion at worst. McWhorter argues that any notion of attempting to recreate a militant style of politics, reminiscent of the later years of the civil-rights-black-power-era, may be sincere, but it is a dead end. Instead, he insists that a political manifesto for those black youth who came of age in the post-civil-rights era should be along the following lines:

> Black America's politics must be about helping people be their best within the American system as it will always be, divorced of romantic, unfeasible notions of some massive transformation of basic procedure along the lines of what happened in the sixties.[302]

McWhorter expounds upon his position in the chapter, "Ain't Long 'Fore You Get Y'all's Acres: How Radical Politics Holds Blacks Back." In this chapter, McWhorter contends that the notion of a "revolution" occurring as a result of the political ambitions

[298] Ibid, 94.
[299] Ibid, 6.
[300] Ibid, 8.

[301] Ibid, 6.
[302] Ibid, 11.

of the hip-hop generation is a dangerous distraction from efforts towards concrete and achievable gains for black Americans. McWhorter argues this point on two grounds. First, he suggests that while a nostalgic political agenda that is virtually indistinguishable from the black power rhetoric of the early 1970s might be emotionally appealing, it is incapable of delivering the desired results. Here, McWhorter foregrounds the National Black Political Convention held in Gary Indiana, in 1972 as an example of a failed political project that, in his estimation, achieved no significant results for struggling black people. After chronicling examples of similar efforts over the past three decades, and their lack of political yield, he concludes that the more recent emergence of the National Hip Hop Political Convention is doomed to a similar fate.[303] Secondly, McWhorter argues that the Civil Rights "Revolution," which he acknowledges *did* yield meaningful political results, is not likely to be repeated as its emergence was more the result of chance historical developments than radical political agitation. To put it bluntly, times have radically changed and history is no longer on the side of creating another specifically black revolution within contemporary multicultural America in an era of globalization.

As a result, McWhorter declares that any political agenda of the hip-hop generation of the radical or nationalist type is merely "preaching a message of defeat, stasis, impotence."[304] Developing a political agenda that collaborates with artists who merely rehearse America's injustice towards blacks, in McWhorter's view, "is not

[303] The first Hip Hop Political Convention (HHPC) was held in Newark, New Jersey in June, 2004. Among its principle organizers is Ras Baraka, son of the influential black arts poet, Amiri Baraka. The HHPC is organized around a 5-Point Agenda that includes: 1) Education 2) Economic Justice 3) Criminal Justice 4) Health and 5) Human Rights.
[304] McWhorter, *All About the Beat*.

prophetic, but weak."[305] This critique is particularly sharp when applied to Rev. Yearwood, a preacher who positions himself within the prophetic tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. For McWhorter, calling the hip-hop generation to redouble its efforts at excellence on the terms set by dominant society would strengthen the "prophetic voice" of the Black Church far more than raging against a system that is not likely to change. In short, McWhorter's critique, from the political Right, is that rap music and hip-hop culture both lack a serious political agenda, beyond the beat, and fails to offer realistic political solutions for black people within the existing socio-political structures, despite its polemical lyrics.

Adolph Reed Jr. and the Criticism from the Left

Ironically, Adolph Reed Jr. has launched a remarkably similar critique of the political viability of rap music and hip-hop culture, from the Left, in his collection of essays, *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*. In his essay, "Posing As Politics," Reed juxtaposes a CSPAN airing of Senator Carol Mosley-Braun fighting a budget bill proposed by the Republican Party in 1995, with an episode of Rap City, a music programming show on Black Entertainment Television (BET). After attending a subsequent panel at a Democratic Socialists of America youth conference, where the panelists spoke of the political potential of hip-hop culture, Reed made his critique explicit. Reed declared, "These incidents threw into relief for me the key problem with progressives' current romance with youth culture and cultural politics in general; it rests ultimately on a rejection of the kind of direct political action that

[305] McWhorter, 136.

attempts to alter the structure and behavior of the institutions of public authority, what used to be called the state."[306]

At first glance, Reed's dismissal of the political potential of hip-hop is nearly indistinguishable from McWhorter's designation of "the 'Hip-Hop Revolution'" as little more than a form of "therapeutic alienation on a rhythm track."[307] Reed insists that a focus on youth culture, rather than a more serious engagement with state-centered politics, not only lacks emancipatory possibilities, but hinders a more progressive agenda. Reed writes, "It amounts to a don't-worry, be angry politics of posture. Beneath radical sounding rhetoric, the shibboleths of academic cultural studies and the presumptions of identity politics come together to celebrate alienation by labeling it 'resistance.' Alienation is the opposite of politics; it is by definition resignation and quiescence."[308] Reed's critique, like McWhorter's, provides a strong counter for much of the valorization of the political import within the field of cultural studies, and those invested in a defense of black youth popular culture from its critics. As Richard Iton acknowledges, "Adolph Reed is certainly correct to argue that youthful resistance by itself is hardly enough to sustain a progressive politics."[309]

Significantly, however, Reed parts ways with McWhorter concerning the brand of politics that the hip-hop generation ought to pursue. Whereas McWhorter is unwavering in his insistence that the destiny of black youth is inextricably linked to their ability to thrive within the current system of neoliberal capitalism, Reed is equally adamant that

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[306] Adolph Reed Jr., "Posing as Politics" in *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 167-168.
[307] See ,John McWhorter, *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 315-351.
[308] Ibid, 168.
[309] Iton, 101.

only a more radical class-based approach will bring about the transformation that is necessary for the survival and thriving of the younger generation. His discontent with the turn from politics proper to cultural politics, in many discussions among the hip-hop generation, is not so much that their rhetoric is too radical, but rather, that it is insufficiently organized and committed to real social change. By Reed's critical view, a focus on the radical rhetoric of hip-hop artists is simply displacing "politics" onto culture. In his estimation, this becomes a surrogate for political struggle over crucial public policy issues that affect the material conditions of these young people. Rather than investing politics in cultural work, such as rap music and the other cultural productions surrounding hip-hop, the "real" political work that needs to be done is oriented towards direct action aimed at the state.

Moreover, it is critical to note that from Reed's perspective, Yearwood's intervention might be seen as doubly problematic. Not only is Reed a sharp critic of the notion of cultural politics "posing" as "real" politics, but he is also deeply suspicious of the role of religious leadership in the formulation of black politics. Reed's position on religion, as an aspect of culture, is not surprising given his neo-Marxist commitments. Nevertheless, his critique of the ways that black religious leaders have entered the political arena, assuming an unquestioned authority derivative from their clerical status, is worth serious consideration. In his work, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, Reed argues, "This model of [clerical] authority is fundamentally antiparticipatory and antidemocratic; in fact it is grounded on a denial of the rationality that democratic participation requires."[310] One might read Reed, however, as not necessarily denying *a* significant role

[310] Adolph Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.)

for religious leaders in political activity, but rather calling into question the implications of their privileged status as black leaders on the one hand, and their commitments to progressive class-based struggle on the other. As Richard Iton keenly observes, "The suggestion that popular culture, and the various manifestations of 'Saturday night's' activities, should be seen as relevant to black politics provokes many of the same reactions and potentially legitimate concerns as have assertions regarding the political significance of the black churches, black church life, and Sunday morning's rituals."[311] Indeed, it is interesting that the role of black artists and black preachers is often understood to be analogous in terms of socio-political intervention. Nevertheless, both have labored under what critic Kobena Mercer has termed "the burden of representation." In fact, "preachers" might reasonably be substituted for "artists" in Mercer's influential essay, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation" where he argues, "Black artists have occupied a privileged but precarious role as 'spokesmen' [for black communities]."[312] Extending Mercer's argument to include the black preacher, both are often called upon to represent the interests of black communities, and most have always concerned themselves with the plight of the race. As Mercer rightly observes, however, in the post-civil rights era, that role is far more contested. The representative role of the preacher, however, is perhaps far more contested in the postmodern context. Black youth of the hip-hop generation also "represent" for the race(s), space(s), and place(s) that they occupy in the social order. Nevertheless, these artists simultaneously "represent" corporate interests that threaten to further disintegrate the solidarity of black communities and communities of color.

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[311] *Iton, In Search of the Black Fantastic, 10.*
[312] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 240.

"Can't Stop, Won't Stop": An Adequate Response to the Critics of a Hip-Hop Politics?

While both McWhorter and Reed advance important critiques of both the politics of hip-hop and the development of a hip-hop politics, Rev. Yearwood's work with the Hip-Hop Caucus serves as an example of an organized effort to mobilize young people for actions that directly affect public policy. Moreover, his status as a religious leader does not seem to undermine the participatory and democratic commitments that concern Reed. As I have described above, Yearwood's intervention moves beyond merely adopting the oppositional political posturing and rhetorical excesses of hip-hop culture as being necessarily transformational. Rather, his approach has been to attempt to (re)create a civil and human rights movement for the twenty-first century, by linking the cultural expression of the hip-hop generation to their political interests.

Yearwood avoids the charges that his organization uses hip-hop in a way that merely "performs" (McWhorter) or "poses" (Reed) as political, by engaging in the more mundane work of educating young people of color about policy issues that impinge upon their everyday lives and mobilizing them to become active in the democratic process of changing these harmful policies. By establishing a coalitional politics that links young people across racial lines with established political groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus as well as advocacy groups such as Van Jones' Green for All and United for Justice, Yearwood circumvents both McWhorter's critique of a narrow black nationalist approach as well as Reed's charge of avoiding direct action aimed at government and political institutions. While Yearwood admits that in too many instances, "a lot of people just showed up for the celebrity," he maintains that the support hip-hop culture can lend the movement is more critical to the politicization of the hip-hop

generation than previous political and social movements.[313] Along these lines, fundamental to the philosophy of the Hip-Hop Caucus is the idea that, "Arts, entertainment, sports, and cultural expression define our generation more than any previous generations. The Hip Hop Caucus harnesses the platforms of our celebrity, media and entertainment partners to inform and move the urban community to action."[314]

In a recent interview with Campus Progress, the youth division of the Center for American Progress, Yearwood states the issue even more forcefully, virtually inverting the relationship between politics and popular culture in the post-civil rights era. In this interview, Yearwood discussed the ongoing significance of Martin Luther King's work and the relation of hip-hop and popular culture to contemporary struggles for social justice. Yearwood began by noting the importance of King's ability to weave together seemingly disparate issues such as war, poverty and racism before insisting that contemporary struggles must expand upon King's vision to include the rights of LGBTQ communities and issues of environmental justice. While discussing the impact of King's *Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos* upon his own struggles for justice, the interviewer queried, "Why has it become essential for you, in this day and age, to use a T.I. or a 2 Chainz to engage young people in civil rights work?"[315] In a few sentences that strike at the heart of McWhorter and Reed's critique of hip hop politics, Yearwood responded by saying, "Culture comes before politics. Using artists like 2 Chainz or Immortal Technique allows us to create a drumbeat to march to, which makes our work

[313] For a critical account of the relationship between political activism and hip-hop culture, see Yvonne Bynoe's, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture.* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004).
[314] www.hiphopcaucus.com
[315] "Five Minutes With The Hip Hop Caucus' Rev. Lennox Yearwood" Campus Progress, January 22, 2013. http://campusprogress.org/articles/five_minutes_with_the_hip_hop_caucus_rev._lennox_yearwood/ (accessed 1/30/2013).

easier. Even Dr. King worked with Harry Belafonte. Every movement needs cultural game changers to make a difference."[316]

Here, Yearwood's argument is consistent with Reed's grudging admission of the positive potential of the use of popular culture in more formal political activity: "Cultural production can reflect and perhaps support a political movement; it can never generate or substitute for one."[317] Richard Iton, however, takes Reed's point further. Though Iton may contest Yearwood's claim that "culture comes before politics,"- especially if that is taken to imply the priority of creative expression over public policy- he nevertheless contends:

> At the same time, political movements' and campaigns' effectiveness in achieving particular policy objectives is affected by the broader atmospheric and symbolic discourses taking place. Indeed it could be argued that the development of broader solidaristic sensibilities, which are crucial to sustaining a progressive politics in an era of neoliberal individuation, is best accomplished by means of the actions of creative artists.[318]

On the other hand, however, Iton articulates an alternative perspective that troubles an uncritical embrace of commercial hip-hop artists such as 2 Chainz or other rappers as the spokesmen for Yearwood's political campaigns. As Iton puts it, "the desirability of incorporating specifically popular culture into formal politics is complicated by the extent to which the images of black life that have had an impact in mainstream circles have tended often to promote distorted notions of black humanity…despite their occasionally transgressive qualities."[319]

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[316] Ibid. For an in depth look at the relationship between Dr. King, Harry Belefonte and the Civil Rights Movement, see the documentary Sing Your Song (2011).
[317] Reed, 170.
[318] Iton, 19.
[319] Iton, 18.

Both John McWhorter and Adolph Reed have leveled significant criticism of the sort of political engagement with hip-hop that defines Rev. Yearwood's intervention. Neither of these critics can be easily dismissed, and they are certainly not alone in their voicing of skepticism as to whether hip-hop, as popular culture, has anything of real value to contribute to the presumably more demanding work of political mobilization and public policy change. By engaging their arguments, we see the ways that Rev. Yearwood's intervention has attempted to account for these critiques and offers a more robust way of linking popular culture to political activism. Moreover, attention to Rev. Yearwood's work with the Hip Hop Caucus exposes the limitations of these respective critiques, in terms of their conceptualization of the role and value of popular culture vis-à-vis a particular construction of "real" politics.

Tricia Rose and the Feminist Critique of the Politics of Hip Hop[320]

However convincing Rev. Yearwood's rebuttal to the political critiques of McWhorter and Reed may be, the claim that mainstream popular culture carries mixed messages when brought into political service opens Yearwood' intervention to a more specifically gendered line of critique formulated by Tricia Rose, a pioneering scholar in hip-hop studies. While Rose has also challenged the lack of a serious political agenda, her critique is not rooted in the construction of a dichotomous relationship between "cultural politics" and what is typically understood to be politics proper. In her seminal work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Rose argued that

[320] It is very important to note, here, that Tricia Rose's critique of the cultural politics of hip-hop should not be reduced to issues of gender. Rose's text *Black Noise* was among the first to offer a thoroughgoing analysis of rap music and hip-hop culture. Rather than reducing her critique to issues of gender, I foreground the ways that her work most forcefully throws into relief the ways that a specifically feminist critique provides an important angle of criticism for Rev. Yearwood's intervention.

the cultural politics of hip-hop, which drew so much criticism from McWhorter and Reed, are indeed an important, if insufficient, element in contemporary struggle at an ideological level. In light of the ways that black youth culture is stigmatized in public discourse and heavily policed in and beyond urban spaces, Rose argued that hip-hop artists use their lyrical performances to resist these discourses and practices. In her chapter, "Prophets of Rage: Rap Music and the Politics of Black Cultural Expression," Rose expounded upon this claim explaining, "Rappers are constantly taking dominant discursive fragments and throwing them into relief, destabilizing hegemonic discourses and attempting to legitimate counterhegemoic interpretations. Rap's contestations are part of a polyvocal black cultural discourse engaged in discursive 'wars of position' within and against dominant discourses."[321]

Yet Rose insists that this does not mean that hip-hop should be uncritically embraced within progressive political movements. Rose maintains that it is not simply an older generation of civil rights leaders or conservatives who level criticism at commercial hip-hop. An overemphasis on these anti-hip-hop critics, in her estimation, allows for an evasion of the crucial issues raised by black women of the hip-hop generation. Here, Rose makes the critical point that, "This has been the case primarily because attacking hip hop is read as attacking black men…As long as the equation between attacking sexism in hip hop and attacking black men remains in place, little critical commentary can occur within hip hop youth culture, and women and men will continue to be viewed as traitors for challenging it and for demanding less exploitative expression."[322]

[321] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994).
[322] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 157.

In a September 2001 article for Crisis Magazine, Rose discussed the "strategic alliance" of the NAACP, the SCLC, the Nation of Islam and Rap the Vote, that was subsequently named the Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), led by Minister Ben Chavis Muhammad and hip-hop mogul, Russell Simmons. While Rose expresses appreciation for the attempt to politicize the hip-hop community, especially around issues of race and economics, she maintains that such efforts all-too-often remain silent, and thus complicit, about contradictory and harmful elements within the culture that ultimately threaten to undermine a truly progressive political agenda. With regard to Russell Simmons' efforts, Rose wrote, "Simmons was steadfast in his refusal to be critical of hip-hop." According to Rose, Simmons stated, "we're not here to clean up rap. I love everything we have done so far…we're not here to do anything but celebrate."[323] It is Simmons' uncritical celebration of all things hip-hop that most disturbs Rose. She argues, "Understandably, Simmons wanted to counter the public disdain and disregard of young people, but can you be responsible without daring to venture any judgment or critical assessment?"[324] For Rose, "It became clear to me that the public hostility toward hip-hop- matched only by the self-destructive terms of embrace- were disabling progressive critique of this latest incarnation of commercial hip-hop."[325] While this critique is leveled at Russell Simmons' work with HSAN, a similar line of questioning is appropriate for Rev. Yearwood's relatively uncritical posture towards the culture in his work with the Hip Hop Caucus.

This critique comes into focus when considering Rev. Yearwood's use of rapper Clifford "T.I." Harris as a principle spokesperson for the Respect My Vote campaign.

[323] Tricia Rose, "The Hip Hop Summit," *Crisis Magazine*, September 2001.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars,* xi.

Yearwood's choice of Harris is especially noteworthy given that the rapper is a repeat felon and during the campaign, he was facing a sentence of up to ten years in prison in a very high profile case. Ironically, David E. Nahmias, U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia, agreed to a plea agreement that drastically reduced Harris' sentence on the premise: "Mr. Harris has the ability to reach thousands, probably tens of thousands of people, particularly at-risk young people. And that out of the tens of thousands of people he could reach, he has the real possibility of getting at least a few of them not to commit the kinds of crimes we would prosecute.[326] It is precisely this notion that T.I. is the "right messenger" to "reach the youth" that led Yearwood to partner with the artist in order to connect with those black [male] youth who were most politically alienated.

Redeeming Hip-Hop? or Reinforcing Patriarchy?

In "An Open Letter to TI," Reverend Yearwood articulated his support for Harris' efforts to "set a good example for the youth" through his community service projects and through the filming of an MTV reality television series, "Road to Redemption." In the opening lines of the letter, Yearwood describes Harris as "a righteous man" who is "embarking on a path towards redemption."[327] Yearwood goes on to commend Harris, not only for his efforts at moral reform, but also his service to the community, which the minister deems to have had a significant impact upon lessening the political alienation of his generation. Yearwood wrote:

> In recent years hip-hop artists and their fans were openly cynical about civic involvement, feeling that American government was not their own, nor its traditions. Seen as a system unable to admit or redress the

[326] Ibid, 59.
[327] Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. "An Open Letter to T.I." http://www.ballerstatus.com/2009/03/06/rev-yearwoods-open-letter-to-ti/ (accessed 12/5/12)

> harshness of the environment, hip-hop heads and urbanites grew up in, they simply ignored it. That is until you joined in the footsteps of Russell Simmons, Chuck D and P. Diddy by speaking truth to power and getting out the vote. Most importantly, you led by example.[328]

In the closing lines of the letter, Yearwood wrote, "From Chicago to Los Angeles, and all across America lives are being saved and souls touched, minds opened and hearts warmed, simply by your commitment to not give up on young people."[329] After praising Harris for his commitment to those young people that others had written off, Yearwood assures the rapper that he will ensure that the broader community does not give up on him, and by extension other young people who are own their respective, "road to redemption."

Therein lies the rub. Yearwood rightly insists that society doesn't "give up" on young black men like Clifford Harris. He even goes so far as to insist that Harris is uniquely suited to present a "salvific" message to marginalized black youth who could resonate with his "trials and tribulations." In a statement supportive of both Nahmais' and Yearwood's theory, Harris wrote, "I enjoy when kids who everybody else couldn't reach give me the look, like, I never thought about it like this. Lets me know all the bullshit I went through was worth it. If I hadn't never went through this stuff, they wouldn't listen to me, and it'd be just as hard for me to reach 'em as it would be for anyone else."[330] Using Harris is a prime example of Yearwood's efforts to ensure that the "authentic voice" of those young black Americans who are outside of the respectable institutions of black communities are not "lost in the discourse." Yet, Tricia Rose interrogates the implications of this "politics of authenticity." Rose quotes T.I.'s comments from October

[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Quoted in an interview with Harris, "Cell Therapy": Vibe Magazine by Benjamin Meadows Ingram April 2009, 60.

2007 (around the same time as the Respect My Vote campaign) during BET's Hip Hop vs. America forum, noting his statement, "This music is supposed to be about what we open our door go outside of our houses and see on our streets."[331] While she is supportive of the potential of hip-hop artists such as T.I. to give expression to the "authentic voice" of marginalized black youth, Rose continues to expose the consequences of an uncritical embrace of such spokesmen. Here Rose is worth quoting at length:

> If commercial hip hop has a special role as a 'voice of the downtrodden,' then shouldn't those who want to create justice for black communities be deeply disturbed by the constant peddling of ideas, images, and words that support such hostility toward the women of these communities? Isn't the point that hip hop has a special power- because of its credibility- to influence and reinforce a positive vision of community for black youth?[332]

As a panelist on Hip Hop vs. America, T.I. suggested that the use of sexist or misogynistic language should be seen as a pragmatic necessity for reaching his constituency. Harris argued, "If I have to throw some 'B's' and 'H's' in there to educate people, then so be it."[333] Rose on the other hand, probes, "But what kind of educating are we doing if we have to 'throw some 'bitches' and 'hoses' in there'?"[334] Taking her critique of "representing" and the purported "realism" that undergirds uncritical approaches to the sexist discourses and practices of hip hop, Rose questions the effect of such discourses when they hinder, "collective community action, mutual respect, and love for each other?"[335]

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[331] Quoted in Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 158.
[332] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars, 159.*
[333] Ibid,160.
[334] Ibid, 160.
[335] Ibid, 160.

The Dilemma of the Black Male Preacher as Critic of Misogyny

Yet the dilemma for Yearwood, *as a religious leader*, is especially pointed. While those black male leaders who have offered support for the hip-hop generation have been taken to task for avoiding a serious critique of sexism, black male *religious* leaders who have denounced hip-hop's misogyny have routinely been dismissed as hypocritical. With regard to Rev. Calvin O. Butts III's public campaign against "gangsta rap," which was framed largely in terms of an effort to protect black women, critic Mark Anthony Neal suggests that Butts' critique rings hollow because of the ministerial silence around the rampant misogyny within the Black Church. As a "black male feminist," Neal critiques the black male patriarchy that continues to thrive within black church culture, suggesting that religious leaders "often use criticism of the hip-hop generation to masks their own infidelities and investments in patriarchal practices that are also damaging to the black community."[336]

Rose also reserves a particular critique for religious leaders in black communities whom she sees as "getting on the 'respect'-black women bandwagon."[337] Here she makes specific reference to the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. Rose argues that Jackson and Sharpton rightly contest corporate-sponsored misogyny, but their efforts are insufficient as, "this protest does not generally include a black feminist analysis. Nor does it properly attack other, equally significant places where black women and men are regularly indoctrinated in male-dominant (female-subordinate) ideals."[338] With regard to the latter, Rose has in mind the Black Church, and particularly the pulpit, as a site of unfettered patriarchal discourse. Rose concludes, "Few are making the connection

[336] Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10-14
[337] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 120
[338] Ibid, 120.

between the entrenched forms of polite sexism and acceptable patriarchy being touted by most religious figures and most middle-class leaders."[339] Thus a black, male, middle-class, religious leader of the hip-hop generation such as Rev. Yearwood appears to be on the horns of a dilemma. By attempting to avoid the vicious anti-hip-hop rhetoric of his ministerial colleagues, and thus being dismissed for such pietistic moralisms, he risks an uncritical embrace of hip-hop that leaves its most harmful elements, including its rampant sexism, uncontested.

Love and Hip Hop: Theology and Popular Culture in Mutually Critical Dialogue

At this point, it seems necessary to point out a doubly ironic turn of events. While Rev. Yearwood makes a theological "turn to culture" in order to argue for his use of commercial hip-hop in the struggle for social justice, Tricia Rose makes a cultural "turn to theology" in order to argue for a model of criticism that is adequate to address black youth, hip hop, and the future of black America. If as Iton asks, "[the question in the post-civil-rights era is…should the struggle continue, and if so on what basis, in which arenas and according to whose terms?" then Yearwood has clearly responded in a manner that hinges upon assumptions both theological and cultural. First, Yearwood insists, "The role of the black preacher is always fighting for justice."[340] Second, the struggle for justice, for black Americans and people of color, must proceed not only in the realm of formal politics, but also in the realm of popular culture.

Though one might reasonably argue that Yearwood's rhetoric does not include a explicitly or distinctive theological voice, theologian Kathyrn Tanner's articulation of the

[339] Ibid, 121.
[340] "Hip Hop Rev: A Documentary Feature on the Life and Work of Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr."

relationship between theology and popular culture is useful for making sense of Yearwood's public theological discourse. Tanner argues, "The general nature of theological discourse is such that like popular culture, it does not provide for itself the cultural resources out of which it is constructed…like popular culture's relation to elite culture, essentially exists in a tensive relation to wider cultural spheres."[341] This "tensive" relationship is especially pronounced for Yearwood, who consistently attempts to work the lines between theology, popular culture *and* political action. In so doing, the distinctiveness of theological discourse is displayed not so much at a discursive level, but rather at the level of cultural performance (i.e. clergy collar and black sermonic practices). In this sense, Yearwood's public theological performance is akin to Tanner's notion of theological discourse in that he creates a distinctive theological discourse, "by working with what the wider culture gives [him], altering those cultural productions of the wider society."[342] In making use of the cultural materials at hand, Yearwood is not merely engaged in political strategy, but attempting to practice a revitalized social gospel that holds out the possibility of redemption towards a generation whose lives, experiences and cultural productions have been treated with contempt.

Rose, no doubt empathizes with efforts to affirm what has been consistently disaffirmed in the black American experience, and with the hip-hop generation in particular. She writes, "In the battle over hip hop, many hip hop fans- especially the black youth among them- feel that there has been too much hostility directed toward them, too little affirmation of them, and far too much reaction of hip hop artists' music and creativity. And, I would add, too much denial of what they have been asked to shoulder.

[341] Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and Popular Culture" in *Changing Conversations: Cultural Analysis and Religious Reflection* edited by Sheila Davaney and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Routledge, 1996), 113.
[342] Ibid, 115.

In many ways they are right."[343] Rose points to a trajectory of thought among black critics, including Patricia-Hill Collins, Cornel West, bell hooks, Toni Morison and James Baldwin that has "identified [the love ethic] as a vital form of survival."[344] Nevertheless, Rose maintains, "I am interested in a strategy that emphasizes the ability to experience some kinds of critique as a central part of the love ethic."[345]

Notably, it is here that Rose turns to the work of Christian ethicist, William F. May to articulate the distinctions necessary for an adequate critique. Making use of May's terms, Rose argues for the need for *both* an "affirmational love" that "affirms us fundamentally," as well as a "transforming love," that "demands that we wrestle with standards and challenges growth in the interest of society's well-being."[346] With regard to Tanner's notion of "working with" and "altering what the wider culture gives," Rose's argument stresses the latter. In her estimation, the majority of black leaders, civic and religious, who are supportive of hip-hop, have lent their energies toward "working with" and "affirming" the wider culture, without attending to a more radical "altering" or "transforming" of hip-hop for the purposes of "implementing a progressive racial, gender, and sexual justice project in schools, in churches, and in the mass media."[347]

Recognizing the limitations of appropriating May's thought without appropriate nuance, Rose situates his terms within the particularities of African American history. For Rose, public disdain for blackness, from slavery to the present, complicates the task of developing a progressive and internal critique of contemporary black youth popular

[343] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 271.
[344] Ibid, 271.
[345] Ibid, 272
[346] Ibid, 272.
[347] Ibid, 121.

culture. Nevertheless, Rose maintains that such a critique is avoided to the further detriment of the hip-hop community. Here is Rose:

> Given the larger history of denial about the powerful reach of racism and the continued attacks on black people, there is an understandably high investment in affirmative love just to break even. The universal need to have one's experience validated is exaggerated by such a history of refusals and denial. But transformational love is necessary and crucial. Giving and receiving transformational love is more challenging under hostile conditions, since the need of affirmation might be very strong and hearing critique might feel like adding salt to already raw wounds. But these circumstances- in which it is so easy to reflect the hostile world in which one must live- may only make transformational love all the more important. Affirmation for destructive responses to destructive conditions quickly fosters more of both.[348]

Conclusion

The problematic of redemption for those constituencies marked as deviant in the era of hip-hop remains central to Yearwood's understanding of public theological intervention and the role of popular culture in the struggle for systemic change in the post-civil rights and black power eras. During a moment of demonization of urban youth and black political alienation, Yearwood uses the genre of sermon [the black jeremiad] as a form of public discourse to address "the hip-hop generation" (and its critics) about their critical role in fulfilling King's Dream. Yearwood's redemptive sermons avoid the respectability discourse that threatens the effectiveness of Coates' public theological intervention. Yet his relative silence on the retrograde politics of the commercial hip-hop artists with whom he partners, which Coates rightly protests, remains open to the feminist critique of racial redemption coming at the expense of black women who remain subject to the misogyny of corporate hip hop.

[348] Ibid, 272.

As a result, Richard Iton's observation concerning the potential effects of such a silence are important for those religious leaders who would seek the socio-political redemption of the hip-hop community. Iton warns of the danger of a gendered discourse within hip-hop, the results of which can be, "writing off a cohort of women as insatiable, addicted, and *beyond salvation*" (emphasis mine).[349] Indeed, the problematic of redemption for black youth in the aggregate is complicated when young black men contribute to the production of certain gendered constructions that, "naturalize the deviance of a certain class of black women and mark them as unworthy of our investment and attention."[350] As such, the efforts to redeem the hip-hop generation, by means of an uncritical embrace of hip-hop culture, nevertheless continues to support a commercial hip-hop industry that is heavily invested in the preservation of masculine privilege at the same time that it resists the moral panic that surrounds black (male) youth of the hip-hop generation.

[349] Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 155.
[350] Ibid, 155.

Chapter V

"God is Not Content to be the Last Poet": Rev. Yvonne Gilmore and the Cornel West Theory

Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to the Rev. Yvonne Gilmore, a pastor, poet and member of the political hip-hop band, the Cornel West Theory.[351] If Rev. Coates' strategy can be described as black activist clergy *protesting* (commercial) hip hop culture, and Rev. Yearwood's efforts can be described as black activist clergy *politicizing* hip hop culture, Rev. Gilmore's intervention can be described as black activist clergy *producing* hip hop culture. To gain a better sense of Rev. Gilmore's intervention, I will begin with a close reading of a sermon that Gilmore delivered at McCormick Theological Seminary. In this sermon, Gilmore emphasizes the significance of spoken word poetry, an aspect of hip-hop culture in which she is most deeply engaged. I will then discuss the influence of Professor Cornel West upon the formation and cultural productions of the band. Here I will place one of West's lay sermons in conversation with his published work on the necessity of engaging the prophetic energies of hip-hop culture. Subsequently, I will provide an examination of the cultural productions of the Cornel West Theory, and locate Rev. Gilmore's role as poet and pastor within the collective. In order to locate Rev. Gilmore within the Cornel West Theory, I will explore her poetics in relation to the band's two albums, *Second Rome* and *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come*. Finally, I will analyze the particular tensions involved in this intervention, by focusing upon the

[351] The band of DC natives obviously derives its name from public intellectual and prophetic Christian thinker, Cornel West. West often appears on the band's tracks offering his typical nondiscursive stylizations of the word.

relationship of the Cornel West Theory to the commercial hip-hop industry and the ways that their resistance of commercialization through self-imposed marginality threatens to undermine their cultural and social impact.

"We Come a Symphony of Sound Around the Baseline": Sermonic Discourse as Poetic Performance and Prophetic Witness: Sermon Analysis

On August 13-15, 2010, The Common Ground Project at McCormick Theological Seminary hosted the "Throwing Down, Expressing Faith" spoken word and poetry conference in Chicago, Illinois. In *The Spoken Word Revolution: slam, hip hop and the poetry of a new generation*, spoken word is described as a diverse phenomenon, that encompasses multiple strands and movements.[352] What connects these various aspects of spoken word, however, is the emphasis on the oral performance of poetry before a live audience. The performance of spoken word poetry that has risen to prominence in contemporary popular culture is heavily influenced by the aesthetics of hip-hop culture and has been referred to as "the sister of hip-hop."[353]

According to Common Ground, the use of spoken word for this young adult conference was "devoted to creative expression at the crossroads of faith and identity."[354] More specifically, The Common Ground Project sought to explore ways that diverse

[352] Mark Eleveld, Ed. *The Spoken Word Revolution: slam, hip hop and the poetry of a new generation* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), xiii.
[353] Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 98. Spoken word poetry, in the hip-hop aesthetic, is also widely considered to be an outgrowth of the emphasis on the oral performance of poetry in the Black Arts Movement. See the introduction to Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka's anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Yet, the slam poetry movement, which is often used interchangeably with the spoken-word movement notably, has its origins in white working class Chicago. Marc Smith is typically noted as the founder of the slam poetry scene. Susan A.B. Somers-Willett traces these white working class origins in her book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*.
[354] For more information on the Common Ground Project and the "Throwing Down, Expressing Faith" conference, see the McCormick Theological Seminary webpage: http://mccormick.edu/content/upcoming-events-young-adults.

young people of color might meaningfully connect with the burgeoning spoken word movement as a means of performing alternative theological interpretations of their identities and lived experiences.

In her recent work, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, literary scholar, Susan Somers-Willett observes, "spoken word in the U.S. in recent decades is tied up in powerful social movements that reframed- and validated- cultural identities of minorities."[355] In particular, Somers-Willett suggests that this genre of performance poetry is overwhelmingly oriented towards, "celebrating marginalized racial, sexual and gender identities."[356] While the spoken word movement has not been widely acknowledged as a site or resource for theological reflection, theologian, Rebecca Chopp has suggested the black and feminist theologies (as well as a range of other "survivor discourses") have long been involved in what she describes as a "poetics of testimony." Chopp's definition of this theological work is not far removed from what Somers-Willett describes above. For Chopp, the poetics of testimony refers to "those discourses…that speak of the unspeakable and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorized to speak."[357]

For the opening worship service, Rev. Yvonne Gilmore delivered a sermon that both proclaimed and performed the significance of spoken word poetics as a public theological and cultural intervention into the lives of black youth and young people of

[355] Quoted in Susan A.B. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 6.
[356] Ibid, 6.
[357] Rebecca Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony" in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (The American Academy of Religion Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series) edited by Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61.

color.[358] In her sermon, "Advanced Acoustics", Rev. Gilmore embodies a performative homiletic that builds upon and expands the longstanding black American tradition of the preacher-poet-performer-as-creator of social values and cultural worlds of meaning .[359] As a poetic interpretation of the first five verses of the biblical book of Genesis, Gilmore's sermon is a multivalent text signifying various possibilities of meaning. Yet, a consistent theme runs throughout the sermon. The words, "You need a symphony of sound around the baseline," begin this sermon and variations on this theme are repeated no less than six times throughout the discourse.[360] Early in the sermon, Rev. Gilmore reframes these words as a question, "Where's the symphony of sound around the baseline?" As a poet, Gilmore interrogates the hegemony of the monological voice- of presumably white male authority- emanating from American pulpits and other sites of public theological proclamation.

Once the question is posed, these words are reordered in imperative form, demanding an expansion of theological perspective, altered by a plurality and diversity of voices. Here again, Gilmore's poetics echo the more theoretical constructions of Rebecca Chopp, who argues:

> Public discourse, in all its voices and shapes, can no longer be monological (monotonal) or translated through one type of argument, style or voice. Public discourse must now be polyglot, not a tower of Babel hoping to be translated into one primal voice, but a fluid, empowered, and

[358] In an interview for the Common Ground Project, Rev. Gilmore described her understanding of spoken word poetry as "the movement to bring poetry back to the people…for it not to be the work of just some elite group of folks who are trained classically [or] academically, but for everyday folks." A video recording of this interview can be viewed at: http://mccormick.edu/content/upcoming-events-young-adults.
[359] Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 5-9.
[360] Yvonne Gilmore "Advanced Acoustics: Reordering Solitude (Based on Genesis 1)" a sermon delivered on August 14, 2010 at McCormick Theological Seminary during the "Throwing Down, Expressing Faith" Conference sponsored by the Common Ground Project.

> spirited gathering space, understood in its differences, its connections, in ever changing re-creation of common places or tropes.[361]

In light of this notion of "public discourse as heterogeneous or polyglot," this verse is arranged into the declarative, "We come a symphony of sound around the baseline." Thus, a pronouncement is made that young people of color, who have formerly been marginalized by the hegemonic discourse of church and society, are now beginning to claim their own voices and bear witness to their lived experience. It is these "narratives of marginality" that evoke new sounds, which alter standard (i.e. "baseline") discourses in church and society.

Moreover, the notion of the "baseline" might signify other interpretive possibilities as within the realm of sport, the baseline demarks the limits or the boundaries of play. As poets, and meaning makers, these young people are now free to transgress such restrictive boundaries. As a generation that has come to be identified with hip-hop culture, the bass-line is also a prominent theme, which shapes the rhymes and cadences of spoken word poetry. As hip-hop has become a corporate dominated form of mass-produced popular culture, however, even its bass-line has become monotonous- inviting a "symphony" of poets to transgress its profit-driven margins.[362]

It is not until this final configuration that Gilmore invokes the scriptural text of Gen 1:1-5, inviting her audience to, "Begin again. Come back to the beginning."[363] It is from "the beginning" that Gilmore asks her audience- young people of color, gathered for

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[361] Rebecca S. Chopp, "Reimaging Public Discourse" in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 158-159.

[362] The latter theme is prominent in the track, "Dollar Sign on the Drum$" on the Cornel West Theory's The Shape of Hip Hop to Come album. I will comment upon this track further in what follows. At this point, the commodification of the drum, and the technological production of drum machines signals a co-optation of the creative impulses of black American culture by dominant society.

[363] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."

worship in Chicago's Hyde Park community- to join the Creator as cultural workers creating, "a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live."[364] Anticipating questions that might arise in response to this seemingly unconventional sermon, which invites the listener to "follow me" through a poetic labyrinth of meaning(s), Gilmore gives voice to her audience's unspoken disorientation, "Why would you begin in poetry?"[365] In response, the poet-preacher-performer points to the surplus of meaning inherent in such poetics. Such imaginative speech, which is able to perform the transformational ministry of bearing prophetic witness, is at the center of Rev. Gilmore's public theological intervention into the discourses surrounding contemporary black youth culture.[366]

In a context where the complex meanings of the lives of young black Americans and people of color are too often narrowed and constricted to narratives of deviance and criminality, a "surplus of meaning" becomes necessary in order to expand representational possibilities. Rev. Gilmore probes and presses at the boundaries of such truncated meanings by inquiring, "What does it mean to tell the whole story…the whole exhausting story [?]"[367] Here, Gilmore echoes Cathy Cohen's insistence that the stories of young black women and men are far more complicated than the ones told about them in the media and public discourse. According to Cohen, those who contribute to and are influenced by the moral panics surrounding the lives of black youth ignore the

[364] Hubbard uses this quotation, from Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, to describe the ways that the black preacher has functioned historically as "the primary cultural worker" within African American communities. See Hubbard, 4-5.
[365] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."
[366] For a more theological account of the inadequacy of prosaic language to bear witness to alternative worlds of meaning, see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).
[367] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."

complexities of their lives. Rev. Gilmore, however, conceives of the homiletic task as one that trades in the language of poetry and narrative in order to render a more exhaustive- and exhausting- account.

In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Somers-Willet describes the popularity of spoken word and slam poetry among young people of color, and black youth in particular, in terms of the space the genre creates for giving voice to "narratives of marginalization."[368] If the "whole exhausting story" is often silenced in mainstream public discourse, then spoken word venues and poetry slams function as "sites where poets claim, negotiate and sometimes refigure marginalized identities through performance."[369] In her essay, "Reimaging Public Discourse," Rebecca Chopp argues, that a central task of the poetics of testimony is to reshape the social and moral imaginary.[370] In this sense, Chopp describes the use of testimonies by marginalized communities in terms of poetic performances that use "words against words in order to [re]describe the real."[371]

Gilmore does not, however, deny the problematic dimensions of the lives of black youth- what she will later describe in terms of the biblical metaphors of "voids" and "chaos." Rather, she attempts to provide a more careful analysis and a more creative response. "Pre-conditions for creation are comprehensive observation," Rev. Gilmore intones in her sermon, "not chaos, void, darkness, wind sweeping/followed by the first breath of all conception, 'Let there be…'"[372] Such "comprehensive observation," here, is

[368] Somers-Willett, 17.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Rebecca Chopp, "Reimaging Public Discourse" in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).
[371] Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony"
[372] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."

not simply the work of the scholar and or activist, but it is also the vocation of the artist. The poet is not only interested in "observation," however, but also transformation. Through poetic speech-acts, the preacher is able to recover "the darkness that covered the face of the deep."[373] Significantly, "darkness" does not signify evil or criminality as it is used in this sermon. Rather, it seems to convey an appropriate sense of mystery, awe and wonder, or perhaps the silence that precedes interpretation.[374] While the "darkness" of black youth is often interpreted as a sign of their deviance, the metaphorical darkness of Genesis conveys the sense of a primordial covering of untold depths of meaning- chaotic as it may appear, at first glance.

It is the voicing of a divine poetics, daring to create in the midst of what appears chaotic, that Gilmore sees as holding the possibility of transformation. The spoken (W)ord, on Gilmore's account, holds out the possibility of "reordering voids and chaos."[375] With this conviction, Gilmore returns her audience to "the beginning"- to the poetic words, "Let there be…" It is these words of "poetic promise" that Gilmore intends to channel and invite her audience to channel as well. To the young people of color gathered for worship, Gilmore said, "The beginning of creation, our acoustic for today, God's pro-active grace poured out in the beginning in poetry. The corrective to the hearing loss of the community, our creative response to the voids we witness and experience is poetry."[376]

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[373] Ibid.
[374] See Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (The Aurora: Davies Group Publishers, 1999). In his chapter "Silence and Signification," Long uses the term "archaic silence" to connote the silence that must precede any theological discourse or hermeneutic activity.
[375] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics"
[376] Ibid.

With that, Gilmore links the divine and human. She theologizes, "God's voice invites and permits our participation. We are invited to follow up, to speak to and about the voids and the light within us and around us."[377] Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, puts the issue more forcefully arguing, "To address the issues of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets that speak against a prose world."[378] It is this calling, to become poets who disrupt the taken for granted realities and reductionistic accounts of the lives of the marginalized, that Gilmore advocates through her sermon. Gilmore's position here is consistent with Chopp's who contends, "Theological constructs are, in relation to narrative identity, always poetical: telling the truth, but telling it in performative ways in which, perhaps, we can see the real differently."[379] In light of this theological perspective, Rev. Gilmore concludes her homily by leaving young black and ethnic minorities with the charge, "This voice calls us to participate, to co-create, to follow in the example set forth in Genesis. Amen."[380]

"God is Not Content to be the Last Poet": Poetics and the Black Preaching Tradition

Just before concluding, however, Rev. Gilmore appropriately put her thesis in a far more poetic form, "God was the first voice but God is not content to be the last poet."[381] With these words, Gilmore invokes the venerable literary imagination of the black preacher in America. Indeed, literary scholar, Dolan Hubbard insists that, "the

[377] Ibid.
[378] Bruegemmann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 13.
[379] Rebecca Chopp, "Reimaging Public Discourse," 153.
[380] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."
[381] Ibid.

sermon is black people's first poetry in the United States." [382] Expounding upon this claim, Hubbard turns to James Weldon Johnson's classic, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, as a means of demonstrating the longstanding poetics of the black preacher. In particular, it is Johnson's poem, "The Creation," that Hubbard lifts up as demonstrating the ways that the black preacher "invites the congregation to join him [sic] in the making of a world."[383] This reference to the world-making dimensions of the black preacher's sermonic performance is captured in the opening lines of "The Creation":

> And God stepped out on space,
> And he looked around and said:
> I'm lonely-
> I'll make me a world.[384]

The notion of "stepping out on space" has particular resonance in Rev. Gilmore's understanding of a public theological vocation of creation. In a lecture entitled, "Poetry and Liminality," delivered at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Gilmore drew upon the work of anthropologist, Victor Turner, in order to argue that the "spaces" that are "between," are a "violation of norms that enables us to understand those norms and then to either incorporate or reject them."[385] It is precisely in these spaces of liminality where poetic speech can resist premature closure and reduction of meaning. In more poetic form, she insists that with regard to hip-hop and those young people who identify with this cultural phenomenon, "It is dangerous to simplify tensions…to close a case that is

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[382] Dolan Hubbard, "Sermons and Preaching" in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2001)
[383] Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, 13.
[384] James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 17.
[385] Yvonne Gilmore, "Poetry and Liminality" a Lecture and Performance at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, October 27, 2011. This lecture can be viewed at: http://news.vanderbilt.edu/2011/10/gilmore-essig/

still open in the name of God."[386] For those marginalized young people of color in the hip-hop community, Gilmore is adamant, "It is dangerous to abandon your own knowing even when [that knowing]…defies the forms you have to tell it."[387] As such, Rev. Gilmore describes her interactions in liminal spaces with young poets in the spoken word movement who confess, "I do not know any other way to pray."[388] It is in such liminal spaces of popular cultural production that Rev. Gilmore discerns ongoing acts of divine "Creation." Indeed, in Johnson's sermon, it is into the liminal space, "down between the darkness and the light," that God "hurled the world; And God said: That's good!"[389]

The latter two lines above, invite a reconsideration of the subtitle of Rev. Gilmore's sermon, "Reordering Solitude," in light of "The Creation." It is significant that in Johnson's poem, God creates, not simply because God possesses the sovereignty to do so, but rather because God confesses, "I'm lonely." Even after God has spoken a world into existence, Johnson's God looked over his world and said, "I'm still lonely."[390] Likewise, Gilmore's sermon presents God, and humanity as well, in a state of less-than-desirable solitude. As such, in this sermon, the divine creative impulse leads to a search for meaningful community.

In the opening lines of her sermon, Rev. Gilmore follows her poetic call for "a symphony of sound around the baseline" with a curious account of a young man posting random comments on multiple social media networks, including Facebook and Twitter. The young man tweets the seemingly inane words, "Burger King never tasted soo good!" The preacher-as-poet responds, "What is it you want me to follow?" Again Gilmore

[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 19.
[390] Ibid, 19.

invokes the symphony of sound, before asking the audience to "name the symphony." In what follows, she begins to hint at the importance of imaginative naming, and its ability to create worlds and communities. She insists:

> You need a symphony of sound around the baseline- name the symphony
> Call it facebook, call it poetry, change its name to encounter,
> Relations with roots to grow, name the symphony seeds,
> Blame the baseline if the seeds push it to the background,
> Adjust circuits for balance.[391]

As the young man sits in solitude, in front of his computer screen, in search of community through social media, so Gilmore's God is "lonely," and thus God creates a world through poetry. In the same way that Johnson's God, in "the Creation," is discontent in solitude, Gilmore's portrayal of God is that of a discontented poet, searching for an artistic community of co-creators. As such, Rev. Gilmore expresses the gravity of this vocational call saying, "I speak now with fear and trembling- you were not content to create alone."[392]

Here the sermon takes an unexpected turn, invoking the New Testament parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:2-14). Only obliquely referencing the biblical invitation to the feast, Gilmore re-imagines the summons to the banquet as "the invitation of the primordial, eternal twitter."[393] This move is significant. In the biblical parable, a certain King sends out an invitation for a wedding banquet for his son. Those originally invited made light of the invitation and did not attend. The King's servants are sent out once again to gather anyone who would come, so that the banquet would be well attended. Upon finding one man who was not dressed in the proper attire, the King has him bound

[391] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."
[392] Ibid.
[393] Ibid.

hand and foot thrown "into outer darkness, where there the weeping and gnashing of teeth will be."[394] While it is difficult to make sense of the references to this parable within the context of this sermon, Gilmore notes the dangers of following religious leadership characterized by flattened language that cannot grasp the complexities of lived experience nor the nuances of scripture. For Gilmore, "neatly phrased quandaries and witty preachers" only serve as inadequate guides for those in search of creative community. As she puts it, "You say come as you are to the church but to the banquet I must come prepared/This is a complex invitation."[395]

In keeping with this notion of complexity, I will read Gilmore's use of this parable as a means of getting at the tensions involved in articulating a critical and creative response to the predicaments facing black youth vis-à-vis broader African American communities. On the one hand she queries:

> Can you get lost in grace?
> Can you get lost translating symphonies of sound?
> O God, once again, you found me lost in cheap grace[396]

"Cheap grace," here, offers numerous interpretive possibilities. With reference to public theological interventions in black youth culture, however, cheap grace can rightly be understood in terms of an uncritical embrace of the hip-hop community and its cultural productions. Rev. Yearwood's intervention, in its failure to offer a significant critique of those artists that his campaign embraces, remains vulnerable to this charge of "cheap grace." On this reading, extending an invitation to those alienated from community, and who have traditionally been denied a seat at the table is crucial. Yet, this invitation is

[394] Matthew 22:2-14
[395] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."
[396] Ibid.

complex in that there must also be a critical moment that suggests that adequate self-critical preparations must be made in order to fully participate in community.

On the other hand, however, an alternate reading of Gilmore's allusion to the biblical parable might be one that exposes the politics of respectability that threatens to undermine Rev. Coates' intervention. On this reading, while religious leaders are ostensibly concerned about the well being of marginalized black youth and seek to invite them back into community, ultimately their moral sensibilities are offended by those who do not show up in the proper dress or decorum. This reading seems plausible in light of Gilmore's hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to the condemnation of the (young?) man in the text:

> He came with clothes not fit for a matrimonial banquet. How would he know? As if deep joy doesn't need a process. Carnival rides must be put together. They do not come pre-assembled. As if we stop hurting when we say so. As if the invitation were enough. As if the Kingdom of heaven doesn't defy description.[397]

Like James Weldon Johnson's preacher in "The Creation" and like black preachers and literary artists in the African American experience, Rev. Gilmore invites her various audiences to join her (and the Creator) in the making of a world that expands creative possibilities. In this regard, Gilmore can be understood in terms of Brueggemann's insistence that "prophetic construal of another world are still possible, still worth doing, still longingly received by those who live at the edge of despair, resignation and conformity. Our preferred language is to call such speech prophetic but we might also term it poetic."[398]

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[397] Ibid.
[398] Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 4.

Gilmore's line, "God was the first voice but God is not content to be the last poet," however, also does the work of opening a wider space for what Hubbard describes as the black aesthetic challenge of "work[ing] out the dynamic exchange between the church and extrachurch modes of religious expression."[399] According to Hubbard, the black aesthetic community uses the rhetorical forms of black preaching because of its expressive power, but appropriates the language of religion as a means of critiquing and moving beyond the political conservatism of the black church.[400] Drawing upon the work of historian of religions, Charles H. Long, Hubbard articulates a "dialectical tension in the secular and sacred visions" of the black community.[401]

On Hubbard's account, this tension is evidenced by a certain "blues sensibility" that pervades both the "religious" and the more "secular" expressions of black American experience. Hubbard, also sees a potentially irreconcilable tension between the articulation of a theology rooted in love and one that is the expression of black rage. Hubbard writes, "I am interested in the way in which the church and extrachurch modes of expression come to terms with the oppressive nature of the religious experience as well as with the anger, resentment, tension, isolation, frustration, and echoes of hate and revolt produced by man-made [sic] oppression."[402] While both black preachers and black literary artists might share certain sensibilities, Hubbard's work highlights the divergence of these two figures in order to discern what is distinctive about these cultural workers.

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[399] Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, 20.
[400] Ibid, 21.
[401] This tension has been described in differing ways in the work of a range of scholars of African American religion including, W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* , James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Micheal W. Harris' *The Rise of the Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church*, Teresa Reed's *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* and Anthony Pinn's more recent edited volume, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*.
[402] Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination,* 23.

Rev. Gilmore, however, blurs this line of distinction. She is both the black preacher-as-poet who deploys sermonic language from the pulpit as well as the performer-poet-as-prophetic preacher who uses the language of religion to express outrage against injustice and the complicity of the church. In both of these roles, she is engaged in the poetic task of making worlds and inviting the participatory response of her audiences. She is also not content to be the only poet, but rather seeks an aesthetic community to collaborate in the work of creation. While God's discontentedness to be an artist in solitude is signified by Gilmore's sermonic language, more subversively, she extends the poetic tradition of black preaching into the era of hip hop by signifying on those bards of the Black Arts Movement known as The Last Poets.[403] This group of spoken-word artists, with their politicized poetry, delivered over musical tracks, is widely regarded, along with the late Gil Scott Heron, as forerunners of hip-hop. Somers-Willett notes, "Indeed, the work of Black Arts icons Gil Scot Heron and the Last Poets, which teetered on the border of poetry and music, set the stage for the performance styles of rap."[404] As such, with def(t) poetry, and prophetic imagination, Gilmore connects the politics and poetics of homiletics and hip-hop culture.[405]

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[403] The Last Poets are a group of oral performance poets and musicians that emerged during the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s. As a group, The Last Poets have been committed to giving voice to the political struggles of the black community through the medium of poetry and music. They are perhaps most well known for their provocative piece, "Niggers are Scared of Revolution," recorded on their first album in 1970. See, Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan, *On A Mission: Selected Poems and a History of the Last Poets* (New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1996).

[404] Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 64. It should be noted that while Heron and The Last Poets are often linked to the emergence of hip-hop, women poets of the Black Arts Movement have often been in creative collaboration with a number of black male hip-hop artists. The depth of that solidarity is perhaps best perceived in Nikki Giovanni's tattooing of "thug life" on her forearm in memory of the late Tupac Shakur. Also, Sonia Sanchez's "Homegirls and Handgrenades" could easily be understood as a precursor to the creative work of a number of female (and male) artists in hip-hop and spoken word. Sanchez has also contributed to the volume of poetry in remembrance of Tupac entitled, The

It is in the spirit of the Last Poets, as cultural workers, that Rev. Gilmore extends her prophetic voice beyond the confines of the pulpit and into popular cultural spaces and the public sphere. As a female member of a "secular" hip-hop band, her identities as pastor and poet become hybridized as she bears prophetic witness to hip-hop culture. The Cornel West Theory is an eclectic group of emcees, poets, storytellers, visual artists and musicians, who seek to deploy the art and aesthetics of hip-hop as a means of bearing prophetic witness, challenging injustice and responding to oppression. As an ordained minister, Rev. Gilmore adds a distinctly theological voice to the collective. As a poet involved in cultural work, her public theological voice is shaped by her contact with the everyday lives of young people. In this sense, Gilmore's intervention is deeply informed by the sensibilities of hip-hop and a spoken word movement that "recognizes that to be a vital, relevant part of our culture, poetry must spread beyond [institutions such as the academy, and in Gilmore's case, the church] and reach people where they live."[406] As Rev. Gilmore puts it, "What so attracted my heart to hip-hop music is that it stays in critical conversation with concrete existential needs."[407]

Engaging Prophetic Voices in Hip-Hop: Locating Cornel West in the Cornel West Theory

In order to locate the influence of Cornel West (the scholar and public intellectual) in relation to *the Cornel West Theory* (the D.C.-based political hip-hop band) and the work of Rev. Yvonne Gilmore (the pastor and poet) I will place West's sermon

Rose that Grew from Concrete. She has also collaborated with Talib Kweli on his *Ear Drum* album. These are but two of many other examples.

[405] Russell Simmon's *Def Poetry Jam* on HBO is a popular series that provides a platform for a range of spoken word poets, rap artists, and poets from the Black Arts Movement to perform poetry in front of a live audience. This series also led to the development of Russell Simmon's *Def Poetry Jam* on Broadway.

[406] Eleveld, *The Spoken Word Revolution*, xiii.

[407] Gilmore, "Poetry and Liminality"

entitled, "From Addiction to Conviction" in conversation with his essay in *Democracy Matters*, "The Necessary Engagement with Youth Culture." From the pulpit of the historic Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, at Howard University, West performs a sermonic rendering of his earlier written essay for his young audience at one of the nation's most prominent historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).[408] I will also draw upon West's discussion of the intersections between democratic practices, the black musical tradition, and the black preaching tradition in Keith Gilyard's *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Towards a Deep Democracy*. Examining West's sermonic discourse alongside his more "secular" writings provides greater insight into both the socio-political and the religio-cultural influences of West upon the Cornel West Theory. This dual reading also aids in situating Rev. Gilmore's distinctive voice within the band.

In the opening remarks of the sermon, West recalled a list of heroic figures in the university's history, admitting that before preaching he felt compelled to acknowledge those who had gone before.[409] Such acts of memory, West exhorts, are the precondition for progress into the future. Likewise, the legacy of the venerable black freedom struggle must be bequeathed to committed young people, such as those gathered in the chapel. For West, those entrusted with this tradition must especially include those artists who are "free enough to tell the truth about what they feel in the depths of their souls."[410] West then took the opportunity to acknowledge "brother Hicks" from the pulpit. This was a reference to Tim Hicks, the lead emcee, or "chief spokesman," of the Cornel West

[408] Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel has been acknowledged as the religious and spiritual center of Howard University in Washington D.C. since 1894. For a history of Rankin Chapel and a description of its current mission, see: http://chapel.howard.edu/

[409] While he is not an ordained minister, as a professor of religion and African American studies, West has been a regularly invited preacher in Rankin Chapel throughout his academic career.

[410] In the sermon, West insists that "part of the problem" is the lack of individuals within churches, mosques, synagoues, political offices, and recording studios who exhibit this freedom.

Theory. With pride, West informed the congregation that the band, named in his honor, was voted the best hip-hop band in D.C.[411] West went on to frame the cultural production of the political hip-hop band in terms of the prophetic black church tradition that he champions, declaring that the group is "rooted at the cross, but telling the truth."[412] Finally, West further teased out the "prophetic" links between the black Church tradition and this political hip-hop band by informing the congregation of the group's anti-imperialist debut album- Second Rome.

In similar fashion, Hicks has regularly acknowledged the influence of West upon the naming of the band and the framing of its approach to the intersections of art and activism. As their name suggests, West's work as a public intellectual and professor of religion and African American studies, is a significant influence and inspiration of this unique hip-hop ensemble. According to their website, "With the blessing of Dr. Cornel West…the band takes its name from his prolific writings and philosophies, which have shaped contemporary thought throughout the world."[413] The band describes West as, "the ultimate griot."[414] This label signifies the breadth of West's interdisciplinary scholarship and public dissemination of social, political, cultural, religious and theological issues relevant to the everyday lives of black folks and marginalized people of all colors. It is this commitment to publicly accessible scholarship, or what West describes as "a danceable education," among other traits, that has inspired the band's use of West's name to express their artistic vision within the cultural medium of hip-hop. Rev. Gilmore explains, "We see ourselves as kind of the grandchildren of Dr. West and the 60's

[411] West, "From Addiction to Conviction."
[412] Ibid.
[413] http://thecornelwesttheory.com/

[414] Ibid.

generation, and that's why we've called ourselves the Cornel West Theory."[415] Cornel West puts it this way, "[The Cornel West Theory] primarily has to do with critical engagement with the world, prophetic witness to truth and justice- and just keeping the music funky and smooth."[416]

In his sermon, "From Addiction to Conviction," West portrays a "culture of addiction," where forms of idolatry and narrowly conceived forms of success threaten the survival of a tradition of prophetic truth telling that is necessary for the flourishing of democracy in America. West exhorted his congregation of young Howard students, faculty, administrators and community members, "We've got to keep alive a tradition that allows people to be free enough to be who they are," rather than being "drunk with the wine of the world."[417] Against the hegemonic discourses of American empire and market-driven messages of greed, West invokes a Jesus who "drove out the marketeers" from the temple. Moreover, it is this Jesus that West positions against the demonization of poor black people in the media and the complicity of the black middle-class in legitimizing such narratives of deviance. West's Jesus is a prophetic figure who is willing to bear witness to love and justice in the face of political and religious capitulation to the seductions of the Roman Empire.

It is out of a sense of burden to keep this tradition alive, West explained, that he is compelled to engage in collaborative work with black musicians. It is these musicians, at their best, argues West, that have been the ones who have been preservers of a soul-deep

[415] Lisa Han, "Cornel West Theory" The Daily Princetonian February 4, 2010.
[416] Ibid.
[417] West, "From Addiction to Conviction." The phrase drunk with the wine of the world is a biblically inflected metaphor drawn from James Weldon Johnson's hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is often referred to as "the Black National Anthem." To be so intoxicated is to forget both one's Creator as well as one's African origins.

freedom of expression that is ultimately liberating for an oppressed people. Towards the conclusion of the sermon, West returns to the significance of the black musical tradition, insisting that they are bearers of a discourse of love necessary for black survival and thriving. According to West:

> […]for a people who have been taught to hate themselves for four hundred years, [black music] is so liberating and emancipating […it] allows you to be free enough to speak your mind, even if the powers that be want to crush you. That's [the love ethic voiced in the music] where our spokespersons and leaders have come from…Willing to live and die because they love so.[418]

Yet, in a critical interview, published in Keith Gilyard's volume *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy*, West argues that music has been marginalized within intellectual discourse. But he queries, "Well, what happens when you end up with a people for who music becomes a privileged site for their definition of who they are in their world because its against the law for them to read and write? And when they do steal away and learn how to read and write, they still have to relate musically to the folk in order to inspire them, in order to empower, enable, and ennoble them."[419] For West, then, any notion of a split between philosophy, rhetoric, and musicality rings false in the face of suffering, and especially the suffering of African American experience. In the face of such suffering, one must acknowledge the limits of critical intelligence. In those instances, according to West, even words fail. Nevertheless, one cannot remain silent. Posing the rhetorical question, West probes, "So what are you going to do? Well, you fill it with music."[420]

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[418] West, "From Addiction to Conviction."
[419] Keith Gilyard, *Composition and Cornel West*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 104.
[420] Ibid, 105.

Throughout his writings, West has consistently described this black musical tradition and the black preaching tradition as deeply intertwined and together displaying the best of black culture. Moreover, West acknowledges that such practices and performances are often dismissed as mere rhetoric, or style without substance. In his countering of such claims, West makes reference to the black preaching traditions that have been both a source of influence for his work, as well as a reason for critique. West suggests that precisely because he has remained suspicious of a philosophical tradition that has not made room for the kinds of "danceable education" created by enslaved Africans and exemplified by jazz and blues musicians, that his work is often misunderstood as mere homiletic discourse. In his dialogue with Keith Gilyard, West explains, "…the problem is that to conceptualize it within the dominant Western form means 'He must be just a preacher. He must be just a performer. He must be just an entertainer.'"[421] West counters that it all depends upon what these terms signify. What sort of meaning is attached to performance or entertainment- especially within the frame of African American experience? In response to the dismissal of his public intellectual work as mere preaching, and by extension the dismissal of homiletic discourse in general, he argues:

> It depends on what you mean by preacher. Preachers are not just some prerational beings who merely emote. These are some highly sophisticated and intelligent folk musically expressing themselves with intellectual content, with performance, to do what? To make sure these people don't kill themselves and hate themselves and give up on themselves and don't love their children and so forth. So, you have to be able to speak at that deepest level, coming out of the African traditions that end up being transformed and transforming the modern world.[422]

[421] Ibid, 103.
[422] Ibid, 103.

However, West argues that this tradition of prophetic speech in the face of systems of oppression- whether through music, preaching or some other expressive form- is threatened in the context of a declining empire that bombards its citizenry with messages of "narcissism, hedonism, and materialism."[423] Signifying on the tradition of the Spirituals, West names the enticements of "Silver and Gold" as the essence of the addiction that undermines conviction.[424] In a religious sense, this leads to a state of "spiritual malnutrition." In the cultural realm, the result is the production of a "bubble gum music" that is ultimately insufficient to sustain democratic energies or build a social movement. This reality leads West to lament the addiction of too many young people to the accoutrements of wealth and status, due to their bombardment by dominant cultural messages. In the face of this perceived reality, West argues:

> There can be no renaissance…of love and conviction… unless there is a massive intervention of old school brothers and sisters into the lives of [young people].[425]

The intervention described at this point in the sermonic discourse is articulated more fully in West's text, *Democracy Matters*. In his chapter, "The Necessary Engagement With Youth Culture," West juxtaposes a market-driven media bombardment of young people with a democratic commitment to creating a more just society. Such bombardment, on West's account, has too often reduced young people to "addicts" of frivolous desires as opposed to the more substantive dedication to politically engaged

[423] West, "From Addiction to Conviction."
[424] The gospel song, "Silver and Gold," begins with the those words twice repeated, followed by, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold/No fame or fortune/Nor riches untold/I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold." In subsequent lines, the singer asks the biblical question, "What profits a man to gain the whole world and loose his soul?"
[425]West, "From Addiction to Conviction."

social change.[426] Nevertheless, however, West insists that black youth and young people of all colors continue to "long for energizing visions worthy of pursuit and sacrifice that will situate their emaciated souls in a story bigger than themselves and locate their inflated egos…in a narrative grander than themselves."[427] This can be witnessed, West argues, in the youth-led efforts to encourage a more democratic accountability from the American empire.[428] However, West charges that such efforts too often lack diversity. As such, West writes that he is committed to the task of diversifying these democratic practices by linking them to black youth culture, and hip-hop culture in particular.[429]

To be sure, West is not unaware of the potential criticism of such a linkage. Anticipating such criticism, West acknowledges the extent to which hip-hop has been co-opted by the very market-driven mass media (what I have referred to as the Powers that BE(T)), which he decries both in his sermon and within the essay. Nevertheless, West holds out a measure of hope for the potential of hip-hop to serve counter-hegemonic purposes. He argues:

> Although hip-hop culture has become tainted by the very excesses and amorality it was born in rage against, the best of rap music and hip-hop culture still expresses stronger and more clearly than any other cultural expression in the past generation a profound indictment of the moral decadence of our dominant society.[430]

In particular, West champions what he understands to be a strand of political hip-hop that resists incorporation into the corporate mainstream. While corporate dominated

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[426] West, *Democracy Matters*, 176. West argument here appears similar to that of Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, such as Theodor Adorno, who understood mass media in terms of its manipulative and diversionary effects upon the working class. In this school of thought, mass media production was nothing more than the tools of propaganda for totalitarian regimes. For an intriguing account of Adorno's perspectives on mass-media in the United States, see *The Radio Addresses of Martin Luther Thomas* and "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility".
[427] Ibid, 177.
[428] Ibid, 178.
[429] Ibid, 179.
[430] Ibid, 179.

hip-hop has been "diluted of its prophetic fervor," the political hip-hop, which he sees as thriving mostly in the underground, continues to express, "righteous indignation at the dogmas and nihilism of imperial America."[431] It is significant to note, here, that West uses the same language to describe hip-hop as he uses in his description of "The Crisis of Christian Identity in America," in the previous chapter of *Democracy Matters*. Identical to his characterization of a co-opted religion, he describes corporate dominated rap music as "Constantinian hip-hop," while the more politically engaged music is deemed "prophetic hip-hop."[432] West insists, "It is important not to confuse prophetic hip-hop with Constantinian hip-hop. Prophetic hip-hop remains true to the righteous indignation and political resistance of deep democratic energies. Constantinian hip-hop defers to the dogmas and nihilisms of imperial America."[433]

With a fervor equal to his sermonic performance at Rankin Chapel, West implores his readers, "It is important that all democrats engage and encourage prophetic voices in hip-hop- voices that challenge youth to be self-critical rather than self-indulgent, Socratic rather than hedonistic."[434] For West, "Prophetic hip-hop is precious soil in which the seeds of democratic individuality, community, and society can sprout."[435] Moreover, West has argued elsewhere that:

> […] to engage hip hop is not to be a spectator or bystander. One should be hip hop as one engages hip hop. One should try to shape and mold hip hop to make it better, to make it more liberating- full of creative genius, full of political courage, and connected to the best of those who came before, such as Grandmaster Flash, Chuck D., Lauren [sic] Hill, and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as the Las Poets, Nina Simone and Curtis Mayfield![436]

[431] Ibid, 180-181.
[432] Ibid, 182.
[433] Ibid, 182.
[434] Ibid, 185.
[435] Ibid, 185.
[436] Cornel West, "Foreword: On Jay-Z and Hip Hop Studies," in *Jay Z: Essays on Hip Hop's Philosopher King* edited by Julius Bailey (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 2.

As such, it is not surprising that in 2004 (the same year that *Democracy Matters* was published), Tim Hicks approached West at a book signing, seeking his blessing to name a political/prophetic hip-hop band in his name. In an interview with the band, West describes his own response to the idea of a group of hip-hop artists appropriating his name and claiming his work as inspiration, saying, "I'd be honored and delighted, if in fact, that group was preserving the dignity of poor people, working people, oppressed people and was sensitive to the struggles of black folk in America."[437] West says that Hicks detailed an artistic vision that was in line with each of his criteria. Further elated, West stated:

> …the notion of there being, in the younger generation, conscious, courageous, prophetic and progressive artists who wanted to keep that kind of legacy [of John Coltrane and Curtis Mayfield and Nina Simone] alive. So they know what Curtis is about, they know what Nina Simone is about, they know what Gil Scott was about.[438]

Thus, with West's support, the Cornel West Theory was born. In addition to being the band's namesake, West has also collaborated extensively and performed with the band, recording vocal tracks on the group's two albums and their intervening mixtape. In what follows, then, I turn to the cultural productions of the political hip-hop band the Cornel West Theory. In addition to examining the counterhegemonic discourse that they have produced in their two albums, I will give particular attention to locating the role of Rev. Yvonne Gilmore in the band.

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[437] A Conversation with Dr. Cornel West and the Cornel West Theory, July 12, 2011 New York City http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHufwz67GBU&list=UUfiJeJaZQXjyJylcQn-O-rQ (Accessed 7/5/2012)
[438] Ibid.

"The People are in Danger, the Preacher is a Stranger": Locating Yvonne Gilmore in the Cornel West Theory

Based in Washington D.C., the seat of American political power, the Cornel West Theory's first album, "Second Rome," is an exploration and prophetic critique of the effects of empire on marginalized people, throughout the African Diaspora, and evidenced more immediately in the gentrification of DC.[439] As a member of the band, Rev. Gilmore's poetic voice can be heard throughout the album. Her voice and presence stands in sharp contrast, then, to the critique of the Christian minister on the album's first track, "Knights of East and West." On this track, lead emcee, Tim Hicks, rhymes, "the people are in danger, the preacher is a stranger."[440] In light of this analysis and critique, I will explore the role of a preacher within the group who seeks to engage, rather than remain estranged from that which endangers the people. In order to situate the role of Rev. Gilmore within the band, however, I will first explore the implications of Hicks' verse in more detail.

The first half of Hick's line, "the people are in danger, the preacher is a stranger," evokes the ongoing discourse of crisis that surrounds black urban youth of the hip-hop generation.[441] However, the sense of danger is evoked less by the moral failure of deviant black youth and more as a result of the market-driven forces of greed and domination that West articulates in his sermonic discourse and writings. In fact, the first voice heard on this track is West's, which provides an interpretive framework for the sort of "danger"

[439] The band states that the title "Second Rome" was chosen as it was an original consideration for the naming of Washington D.C. It also signifies America an imperial power analogous to the Roman empire.
[440] the Cornel West Theory, "Knights of the East and West," Second Rome (Sockets Records, 2009).
[441] See Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: The New Black Youth Culture and the Crisis Facing Black America* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002).

that Hicks invokes. West intones, "Let us keep track of clandestine institutions that might have more influence than you think."[442] The danger facing black urban communities is linked to institutional forces that are not easily visible in the everyday lives and practices of the people. While the individual behavior of black urban youth- violence, sexual promiscuity, etc.- might be the most visible and readily available narratives, the prophetic task is to "keep track of" and articulate more structural narratives.

If the first part of Hicks' verse speaks to an inverted sense of "danger," then the second line, inverts what Michael Eric Dyson has described as the sense of "moral strangeness" with regard to black youth culture. In his essay, "We Never Were What We Used to Be: Black Youth, Pop Culture and the Politics of Nostalgia," Dyson argues that black youth are deemed by older blacks to be "ethically estranged from the moral practices and spiritual beliefs that have seen previous black generations through harsh and dangerous times."[443] Significantly, in this essay, Dyson critiques West's theory of "nihilism in Black America" or "the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America."[444] For Dyson, such an assessment of black youth, while it avoids demonization by focusing upon "market forces and market moralities," comes up short on at least two accounts. First, Dyson reads West's theory of nihilism as positing a source rather than a symptom of black suffering. Second, Dyson charges that such a theory places the burden upon poor black urban youth for "getting black America back on track."[445] Ultimately, Dyson

[442] the Cornel West Theory, "Knights of the East and West," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).
[443] Dyson, "We Never Were What We Used to Be: Black Youth, Pop Culture, and the Politics of Nostalgia" in *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2004), 432.
[444] Ibid, 433.
[445] Ibid, 433.

concludes that West's theory of black nihilism is "too nihilistic," leaving so-called nihilists with the burden of resolving their own nihilism.

If Dyson's critique has merit, then Hick's inversion of the notion of "moral strangers" introduces a noteworthy point of divergence from the thought of the band's namesake. In his sermons, public speeches and writings, West often asserts that black youth lack the "cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness" that was bequeathed to earlier generations by institutions such as the Black Church.[446] To whatever extent this assessment may be accurate, Hick's verse does not seem to indicate that this is because black youth are "moral strangers." Rather, Hicks asserts- "the *preacher* is a stranger." This might be taken to mean that preachers who are prone to level critiques of black youth and the cultures that they produce- namely hip-hop- are too often estranged from both. In his work on the redemptive possibilities of hip-hop culture, sociologist and theologian, Ralph Basui Watkins critiques Rev. Delman Coates' intervention for precisely this reason. While Coates maintains that he "*is* hip-hop," Watkins insists that Coates' critique was insufficiently nuanced due to a lack of serious appreciation for, and engagement with the culture.[447] Returning to Dyson's essay for a moment, he uses the term "aesthetic alienation" to describe the sentiment among

[446] See, for instance, Cornel West's dialogue with Michael Eric Dyson on West's track, "The N-Word," on Cornel West & BMWMB's hip-hop/spoken word album Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations (Hidden Beach, 2007). This recorded track/dialogue is particularly interesting in that West and Dyson debate the nuances of the "uses" of the word "nigger" among young black Americans, especially through the medium of hip-hop. I find this debate particularly instructive in that these two cultural critics sharply disagree over the uses and effects of the word, yet find common ground in their mutual concern for the plight of young black Americans without demonizing them or their cultural productions. Further, it should not be missed that West is engaged in the cultural production of hip-hop through this album and collaborates with a number of hip-hop artists, some of whom actively use the word "nigger" and other potentially "negative" representations of blackness in their art. Interestingly enough, while West actively collaborates with such artists, he simultaneously engages in a line of argument, concerning the circulation of the word "nigger" within the culture industry- beyond black communities- that lends greater credence to Rev. Coates' concern with the corporate exploitation of representations that potential degrade black humanity.

[447] See Ralph Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

older African Americans that hip-hop culture is a dramatic departure (and decline) from the genius of earlier black artistic productions. If read in light of Hicks' verse, however, it is the preacher who is alienated from the prophetic voices of the hip-hop generation, who are engaged in social critique and activism.

As a member of the Cornel West Theory, however, Rev. Yvonne Gilmore is not preacher as moral stranger. Rather, she is a minister as cultural worker, who is deeply embedded within the culture that she both embraces and critiques. As a theologically trained, African American, female, clergywoman, Rev. Gilmore's challenges to the misogyny, violence, crass materialism and other excesses of black youth and hip-hop culture are sharp and unrelenting, to be sure. Yet, as a spoken word artist, and member of an underground hip-hop collective, Gilmore's criticism is not hurled from a distance or behind the safety of the pulpit. Rather than standing beyond the culture, she positions herself within hip-hop as an artist and producer of alternative narratives. In an interview, Gilmore explained, "I think democracy is such a complex activity and it's exciting to be with five other people with different artistic visions and different ways of interacting with history…It's a way to live out the Socratic experience."[448] In particular, she is interested in the broader critique of American politics that serves as a backdrop for the emergence of hip-hop.

In what follows, I will examine Yvonne Gilmore's contribution, as a black female clergywoman and artist, to Cornel West Theory's two albums, "Second Rome" and "The Shape of Hip Hop to Come." By providing a close reading of the lyrical content of these two political hip-hop albums, and the visual images of select music videos, I will demonstrate how West's notions of "prophetic Christianity" and "prophetic hip-hop"

[448] Lisa Han, "The Cornel West Theory" The Daily Princetonian, February 4th, 2010

convergence in the cultural productions of the Cornel West Theory. In so doing, I will also explicate the ways that these respective albums, when taken together, reveal both a structural argument against American imperialism as well as an internal critique of hip-hop's capitulation to corporate interests.

Second Rome: Hearing the Preacher's Voice on an Anti-Imperialist Hip-Hop Album

In their debut music video, "Patriotic Me," the Cornel West Theory offers both a lyrical and visual exploration of their broad-ranging concerns. The lyrical point of departure for "Patriotic Me" is Yvonne Gilmore performing spoken word poetry next to a flagpole in front of a branch of the District of Columbia Public Library. With her hand covering her heart, and flanked by her two daughters, Rev. Gilmore begins her piece as if reciting the pledge of allegiance. Her piece begins, "I pledge allegiance to the United States of conscious uprising, and the republic for which it stands." After deviating from the expected script, Gilmore continues to poetically reconfigure the pledge, saying, "To the instruction of sterilized mendacity recorded for our children. To the annals of memory recorded in your body. To the structures and rhythms of love. I pledge allegiance to making love. Creativity's invitation to celebrate." Finally, Rev. Gilmore breaks completely with the official rhetoric of the pledge and proclaims a more potentially subversive message, "I pledge allegiance to uprising. Rise up. Rise up."[449]

In this video, lead emcee, Tim Hicks, challenges the blind patriotism that silences critique of the imperialist practices of the United States, especially with reference to the "War on Terror." Hicks comments upon the tendency of the Bush-Administration to frame such policies in terms of an oppositional religious exclusivism that appeals to the

[449] the Cornel West Theory, "Patriotic Me," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).

religious Right, but only exacerbates the conflict. Concerning the United States' anti-Islamic rhetoric, following 9/11, and the foreign policies rooted in such discourses, Hicks proclaims, "Christ versus Muhammad and the terrorists watch." Hicks links these foreign policies to the historical treatment of black American resistance to oppression on the domestic front. Referencing the "shame" of "what they did to Lil' Bobby," Hicks recalls the killing of sixteen-year old Bobby Hutton in a police raid of the Black Panther Party in 1968.

The emcee then widens the interpretive lens to reference the assassinations of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Bishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, and Mahatma Ghandi in British-ruled India. The brutal murders of all of these (religio-) political figures, Hicks implies, represent attempts to "crush opposition" to injustice and imperialism. Following these observations, Hicks gestures toward a liberationist theological perspective undergirding his political commentary, saying, "John the Baptist prayed/preached the way/…and then came Ernesto Che [Geuvara]/ Either roll with the gospel or stay/ out the city of magnificent distance/ where patriots do business."[450] Linking these international wrongs back to the United States, Hicks points to the "harsh life sentence" (literally *two* death sentences) that was handed down to Michael Bell in a 1993 Florida murder case.[451] In this track, Hicks spins a narrative of domestic and international targeting of people of color involved in efforts to expand democratic possibilities, and one man who represents

[450] In the music video for Patriotic Me, the cameras cut from Hicks to a copy of Ernesto "Che" Guevara's text, *The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo*. The book is sitting atop a Cuban flag resting upon Hick's lap. This visual production serves to intensify the link that Hick's makes between West's "Prophetic Christianity" and political struggles of people of color.

[451] Michael Bell received two death sentences from a Florida jury for the murders of Jimmy West and Tamecka Smith on December 9, 1993. While Hicks describes this case in terms of a "harsh life sentence," it should not be overlooked that Bell was also convicted of killing Lashawn Cowart and her two-year-old son in 1989 as well as Michael Johnson in 1993. For an account of this case and Bell's prior (and subsequent) incarceration history, see website for The Commission on Capital Cases: http://www.floridacapitalcases.state.fl.us/inmate-details.cfm?id=20.

the fate of young black Americans who succumb to "crime" in an unjust system. Subsequently, Hicks continues to remix the Pledge declaring, "We pledge allegiance to the poor and the war torn streets, with political, spiritual, cultural speech." It is precisely the intermixing of these genres of speech that characterizes the cultural productions of the Cornel West Theory.

Significantly, the final voice on the track is West's. After a spoken-word piece by Katrina Lorraine Starr and a verse by Rashad Dobbins, West connects the themes of the track with a sharp critique of the intersections of religion and empire. In the video, DJ Underdog can be seen setting up a pair of turntables in front of the Capitol, and digging into his crates of records. An Earth, Wind and Fire, "Last Days and Time" album can be seen in front of the camera, while the deejay places another album on the turntables. DJ Underdog is re-mixing sounds and scratching records that produce the stuttered sound, "The, the, the Romans" invoking the notion of Roman Empire as well as the United States as Second Rome. With this scratching in the background, West intones, "And how sad that the so-called Christians would put the flag over the cross. Is it not the case that truth and justice is always grander than any national identity or ideology? Or did Jesus just die for white Americans, and black folk who are well adjusted to the unjust America?"[452]

As West is speaking, the sample playing in the background is continually being mixed and scratched for effect. At first, the voice seems indecipherable, but soon the words, "The, the, the Romans" can be heard again. Then, "They have sold their Jesus of Nazareth," becomes audible. Along with Hicks' verse, and Gilmore's opening poem, West's closing piece is shot through with the notion of prophetic Christianity that he

[452] the Cornel West Theory, "Patriotic Me," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).

discusses in *Democracy Matters.* Together, these poetics bear out West's claim that the struggle over democracy in America is linked to the struggle over "the soul of Christianity."

If "Patriotic Me" is exemplary of the band's narration of their origins in 2004, "as a response to social oppression everywhere," their track, "Gentrifried Chicken," displays their deep roots in the local politics of their own home town- Washington D.C. As winners of the 2008 Washington Area Music Awards Wammie for Best Hip-Hop Duo or Group, it is not surprising that the Cornel West Theory has built upon the musical history in D.C. From Go-Go to hip-hop, this history has included a number of artists speaking out against the displacement of poor people of color through the process of gentrification. In an article entitled, "From the Curb to the 'Burbs: Gentrification and Washington, DC Hip-Hop," local DC writer, Jamie Benson chronicles the emergence of a discourse among socially conscious artists in DC and other urban areas that has "begun to critique what they view as a type of urban destruction."[453] According to Benson, "While positive results from gentrification include decreased crime rates in many inner-city areas, its negative effects- the diminishment of historically Black neighborhoods, primarily- are well-documented in the urban genre of hip-hop music."[454] In particular, DC hip-hop artists have offered commentary on the development of the politics of race, space, and place in the District in the decades following the 1968 race riots that ravished the predominately black U Street Corridor. As Benson points out, however, it is not simply race, but the intersection of racial and class politics that has shaped discourses about

[453] Jamie Benson, "From the Curb to the 'Burbs: Gentrification and Washington, DC Hip-Hop" in Words Beats and Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop (Volume 5, Issue 1. Untitled: Fall/Winter 2012), 43. Words Beats and Life Inc. is not only a Journal, but also a DC-based organization founded by Mazi Mutafa for the purpose of using hip-hop as a means of social change.
[454] Ibid, 45.

urban space and the place of black youth of the hip-hop generation(s) within it. Benson's point is worth quoting at length:

> In fact, there has been a fear among middle-to-upper-class African Americans since gangsta rap's emergence in the early 1990s that hip-hop could tarnish the image of the Black middle class, an important populace in Washington D.C. This "class fear" used the public's flawed perception of hip-hop as a lower-class, volatile entity to suppress the freedom of expression among Black, working class artists in the U Street Corridor.[455]

For Benson, the constriction of space for black working class artists parallels diminished space for the working class audiences of these genres- specifically go-go and hip-hop. As a result, Benson suggests that a number of DC emcees have taken on the role of social activists, raising awareness about and resistance to gentrification in Washington's historically black neighborhoods.

As such, the Cornel West Theory's "Gentrifried Chicken" should be seen in line with a tradition of politicized hip-hop in DC that addresses the issue of "urban revitalization." In this track, Rashad Dobbins begins with the staccato verse, "Move coons/bring back white flight to white landing/doom/ iron brooms/hood swept green/white trash tools/upgrade city/poor kids swoon/schools gloom/once learning ain't fixed for them/fenced in an upper class tomb."[456] Dobbins' references to "coons" as well as "white trash tools," "poor kids," and "upper class tomb(s)" weave together the racial and class dynamics that Benson argues infuse DC emcee's perspectives on gentrification.

Hicks picks up where Dobbins leaves off, deploying a culinary metaphor to connect the process of gentrification to the establishment of expensive dining establishments in areas where the remaining poor cannot afford the prices. Speaking in the voice of the gentrif(r)iers, Hicks demands the services of all of the (black) cooks and

[455] Ibid, 47.
[456] the Cornel West Theory, "Gentrifried Chicken," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).

waiters in the neighborhoods, informing them, "a piece of your land will go good/ with a milkshake, fries and downsize/ economic apple pies/ slice the neighborhoods."[457] Playing upon the dual meanings of "piece," the land becomes representative of that which is consumed, like a chicken dinner, by greedy capitalists/cultural imperialists who colonize the urban spaces that were once home to black and poor folks. In his book *Disintegrated: The Splintering of Black America*, Eugene Robinson describes this process where, "a row of former crack dens in Washington metamorphose into a happening nightlife district, anchored by a chic bistro serving mussels, fries, and Belgian beer."[458] Of course, as this track points out, fried chicken, a dish stereotypically associated with poor black people, is still on the menu. Yet, it has now become "gentrifried," and thus unaffordable to those who previously resided in the neighborhood.

Rev. Gilmore contributes to and expands this discourse on gentrif(r)ication through a poetic inquiry of the places where, as Robinson puts it, "refugees from gentrification [might find] precious sanctuary."[459] She begins by asking, "When will you tell me where home is?" This question gives voice to the displaced, who are forced to search for new dwellings on the outskirts of the District, or in the surrounding areas of Maryland or Virginia. As Robinson makes clear, "Once seized, territory is seldom surrendered. Push by shove, eviction by foreclosure, poor people are moved from the center to the margins."[460] Gilmore then poetically imagines a personification of "Autonomy" who is attempting to seduce "Lady Freedom." The male character of Autonomy realizes that Lady Freedom cannot simply be bought, and that he cannot thrive

[457] Ibid.
[458] Eugene Robinson, *Disintegrated: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 123.
[459] Ibid, 124.
[460] Ibid, 123.

without her "gifts." Of the character of Autonomy personified, Gilmore says, "his gendered dreams [are] ruled by lust for commerce." Yet, after establishing a superficial and exploitative relationship with Lady Freedom, "he is surprised that progress doesn't look like it does in their theories." Apparently, this disappointment leads to Autonomy's rejection of Freedom to pursue his lusts. Feeling rejected, Lady Freedom has only the (Gentrifried) Chicken with whom to commiserate. As such, she asks, "When did I become expendable?" To which the Chicken responds, "Right after they changed the packaging." To Autonomy, Freedom admits, with resignation, "I guess your lust for class was stronger than my Diaspora Dreams."[461]

Once again, the track ends with the voice of Cornel West performing the voice of an auctioneer, auctioning off the "pieces" of land and property to the highest bidder. Taking on the voice of a person from the community, he asks, "But what about the schools? What about the children?" West, here, voices concern about the decimation of once vibrant communal networks and institutions as well as the families that have been rooted in these neighborhoods for decades. The response to West's question is the voice of responsibility denied, "I'm only an auctioneer." The auctioneer proceeds to court the highest bidder, selling property for little more than $65,000- a small amount indeed in the DC real estate market. This points to the enticement of homeowners and owners of other properties to sell at a fraction of what gentrifiers will eventually command. With that, West simply states, "Gentrification."

Gilmore continues this line of criticism in the cut, "Jungle Hymn." On the track, voices of shouting, chaos and confusion can be heard in the background. Rev. Gilmore lifts her voice among the anguished voices of rage and lamentation shouting, "Self-

[461] the Cornel West Theory, "Gentrifried Chicken," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).

determination, Kujichagulia, I can't afford you anymore!" This reference to one of the central tenets of the brand of black cultural nationalism advanced by Malauna Karenga, and embedded in his Nguzo Saba, (the Seven Principles of Kwanza), is seen as no longer a viable (or perhaps desirable) option.[462] With gentrification comes inflated costs and affordable housing becomes a significant problem in places like Washington D.C. In the city that was once nick named "The Chocolate City," due to its high concentration of African American communities, it is nearly impossible for many working-class black D.C. residents to remain in the city. Robinson explains:

> In Washington, the Abandoned have been pushed steadily eastward- and even out of town. In 1970, the city's population was 70 percent black; today, the African American majority is down to 54 percent, and it's still falling fast. In 2009, for the first time since the advent of local government in a city ultimately ruled by Congress, a majority of the elected city council was white. The District of Columbia can be called Chocolate City no more.[463]

In those areas that Robinson describes as "Abandoned zones," places where those displaced by gentrification are forced to live, issues of drugs and crime have become commonplace. "Jungle Hymn," of course evokes the long-standing description of black music as "jungle music," by its critics. This term was used because black music, especially jazz in the 1920s, was considered to be both "primitive" as well as a dangerous threat to American society and values. As Tricia Rose observes, "Its black performers and black fans were considered criminals, drug addicts, and representatives of black cultural inferiority and vice."[464]

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[462] See Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Fourth Edition) (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010) 159-162.
[463] Ibid, 124-125.
[464] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why it Matters* (New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 66.

To stay with Robinson a bit longer, he insists, "the [m]ainstream institutions that held out the longest [in these areas] were the churches."[465] But Robinson points out that even those churches have begun to migrate to the suburbs where much of their membership has relocated. Perhaps, this is part of what is being referred to in "Jungle Hymn." Black churches, as bastions of black self-determination, have been pressured to uproot themselves from their communities, as violent crime has increased due to the influx of the displaced poor and their more established membership has relocated. This situation certainly sheds new light on Gilmore's insertion of biblical language into her piece, shouting, "The kingdom suffereth violence and the violent take it by storm." No doubt, it also potentially adds depth of meaning to Hicks' claim, "The people are in danger, the preacher is a stranger."[466]

The Shape of Hip Hop to Come: Proclaiming an Alternative Vision of Hip-Hip Culture

The title of the band's most recent album is *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come*. The Cornel West Theory describes this album as representing, "the tradition of hip-hop as a rebellious art form, one that pushes creative boundaries, champions the common man and speaks with a genuine love for humanity."[467] As West has suggested in an interview with the band, "Second Rome" represents a socio-political critique of American Imperialism. It is a structural critique of a range of injustices including: American foreign policy; the surveillance, policing and incarceration of the black urban poor; corporate greed; and the racial and spatial politics urban America. While this structural critique is certainly not

[465] Robinson, *Disintegrated*, 128.
[466] the Cornel West Theory, "Knights of the East and West," *Second Rome* (Sockets Records, 2009).

[467] From the Cornel West Theory website: http://thecornelwesttheory.com/

absent from *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come*, this particular album foregrounds the ways that an "empire state of mind" has come to narrow the expressions of corporate dominated hip-hop.[468] As such, this album represents an *internal* critique, *within* hip-hop culture, which resists its excesses while projecting an alternative vision.

Gilmore is the opening and closing voice on that album, offering words at once poetic and prophetic. On the first track, "Type 1- Change," Gilmore begins in sermonic form intoning, "For everything there is a season. Everything was made suitable for its time." These words are spoken with the seemingly anachronistic sound of a church organ in the background. This reference to the sacred wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes 3 is followed by a poetic allusion to the opening narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures. "The void moaned and darkness turned its face. All of a sudden, then, right there was light- and it was good." Rev. Gilmore provides an imaginative invocation of the creation narrative, in which the Spirit hovers over the chaos just prior to the voicing of a divinely spoken-Word that sheds light in those places where there is no illumination. With the lines, "The only created thing that never changes is change," Gilmore reveals the imperative and inevitability of change, as simultaneously the theme of her sermon, the inspiration of the album, as well as the hope for hip-hop. The latter becomes more explicit with Yvonne's use of familiar, yet paradoxical, language from the black homiletic traditions: "Hoping against hope." This conflicted hope is borne out in the competing aspirations that have always existed within hip-hop, as well as those within the religious communities that

[468] "Empire State of Mind" refers to the title of a popular single on rapper, Jay-Z's Blueprint 3 album featuring singer, Alicia Keys. At the same time, however, in an interview with the band, Dr. West uses this title to discuss the ideology of American empire and its influence upon the lyrical content of corporate hip-hop.

engage the culture. The preacher-as-poet acknowledges, "Your hope for abundance rubbing right up against my hope for redemption."[469]

Yet, with change as the thematic thread that runs through the sermon, Rev. Gilmore waxes poetic about the certainty of change insisting, "We are rooted in time and we change." Within the history of black musical tradition, Gilmore recognizes change. She says, "We go from bebop to cordless arrangements to chamber music to boogie down sound." In the midst of such changes, however, the poet suggests, "marginalized people don't control the margins of meaning or the margins of the music." Nevertheless, while acknowledging a relative lack of agency, Rev. Gilmore concludes theologically: "We surrender to the Spirit's leading- ascending in every season of change."[470]

Along with this transformational agenda, "The Shape of Hip Hop to Come" also takes up the ambiguities and paradoxes within hip-hop culture, and their own negotiations of such challenges as both artists and activists. In a track entitled, "The Contradiction," Hicks starts off admitting, "I wrote this rhyme under pressure." Certainly, the compulsory performance of "authenticity" within hip-hop culture pressures most artists to construct a narrative of struggle as the backdrop to their articulation of an authentic identity. Yet, since this narrative too-often conforms to and or contributes to the reifying of stereotypical black characters and plots, Hicks is adamant that though he is pressured, "…I ain't fitting the mold…so the younguns know/that somebody from they city is getting' busy." Moreover, because "authenticity" within hip-hop requires that artists "represent" the places from whence they hail- typically those urban spaces signified as "the ghetto"- Hicks' next line adds complexity and tension to the previous

[469] the Cornel West Theory, "Type 1- Change," *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come* (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).
[470] Ibid.

line. As an emcee who understands his role as one of social critic, Hicks rhymes, "I'm here to represent the Left, overcoming death, fuck being stressed, this is exercise, bench pressing, soul weapons, fortified live."

With that, Hicks moves beyond a narrowed understanding of "representin'" within hip-hop, to a more politicized understanding of representation. Ultimately, however, Hicks suggests that he aims to resolve the tensions of an artist seeking recognition within the industry, ironically by keeping it more "real" than those artists whose claims to authenticity rest upon the flaunting of material acquisitions. To drive home his point, Hicks flows, "Christ died and my mom's still praying/this is what I'm saying/that this time no more contradictions, platinum chains, plains and Benzes." This introduction of Christian soteriological dogma juxtaposed with lived religious experience foregrounds a set of contradictions inherent in commodified forms of both Christianity and hip-hop.

Following these reflections upon contradictions, sacred and profane, Katrina Lorraine Starr introduces her voice into the track, speaking directly to her listeners, asking them, "When do contradictions become complimentaries?...Some say it's a balance." Subsequently, she suggests, "How about we get the sacred feminine perspective." Following these words, the next voice is Rev. Gilmore's. Yvonne plays with the theme of contradictions, "One night stand, head first/mind over matter/suburban safety/American/ghettofabulous/fast money/organic connection outdated/planned community." After teasing the listener with witty socio-cultural contradictions, Gilmore slips in a line that can be read as a more weighty critique of those who are quick to condemn the behaviors of the black urban poor without giving due consideration to more

structural factors. As she puts it, "pass the cliché then call it original/can't pay your rent, but get your weave right."[471] The latter criticism of undisciplined spending on pleasure or "wants" rather than "needs," (especially directed towards poor black women) is regularly heard from middle-class black leaders- from the pulpit to the political podium.

However, in the context of an album that functions as an internal critique of hip-hop, "pass[ing] the cliché then call[ing] it original," takes on additional meanings. Situated within the larger critique of American capitalism and an exploitative music industry, this line also has the potential to challenge the materialistic excesses of hip-hop culture. This latter interpretive possibility is strengthened by Gilmore's subsequent lines in which she asserts, "spit the beat/beat it/beat it like it beats you."[472] With those words, the preacher highlights the ambiguities of commercially dominated forms of black youth culture. Black youth "spit" beats as a form of cultural expression, those "beats" often "beat" back the oppressive forces of society, yet when co-opted, those same drumbeats are used to "beat" black youth with stereotypical and harmful messages.

With those ambiguous and contradictory readings of hip-hop and black youth culture in mind, Gilmore's voice on the track, "Dollar Sign On the Drum$," takes on a more prophetic urgency. Rashad Dobbins commences this track with a gritty assault on the commercialization of black expressive culture in general, and hip-hop in particular. This critique is captured in the charge, "Sound taken hostage by imposters for profit." Dobbins proceeds to portray a sense of desecration of an ancient an sacred object, set

[471] The term "weave" refers to a form of hair extension sewn into a woman's hair in order to give the appearance of longer and more attractive hair. The market for such hair extensions, particularly among African American women, has pushed prices for the "best" grades of hair to exorbitant rates. Comedian Chris Rock has explored the subject of black women and the market for hair weave extensions in his documentary film, Good Hair (2009).
[472] the Cornel West Theory, "Contradictions," *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come* (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).

apart for edifying purposes, rhyming,

"Coptic/ancient/obnoxious/rhythm/hypnotic…/drum was an option for survival/now a market for idols."[473]

To this sense of the consecrated use of the drum in African Diasporic rituals, Rev. Gilmore advances Dobbin's line of argument. "More than beating wood on hard palate surface," Gilmore insists, "percussion is the temple of the temple/pain and rhythm/redemption songs suspended in portals between now and hereafter."
Duly noting the historic use of the drum to "stir up primal gifts" and to call warriors into action, she queries:

> Is it possible to commodify our heartbeat?
> Preserve the wrong page of beats recorded
> Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's
> Who knew Caesar liked drums?
> Co-opting the instruments of the priests
> Making them chattel, like us
> No longer alive,
> Manipulated on your thumb drive[474]

Rev. Gilmore's use of biblical reference to Caesar, recalls West's link between "Constantinian" forms of Christianity and hip-hop. Gilmore describes a Constantinian form of imperial domination, with its greed and lust for power, that has co-opted the liberative possibilities of both religion and culture. Moreover, it has effectively enslaved and exploited those most vulnerable within the empire. A nearly inaudible voice, however, cries out in resistance. The anonymous voice protests, "Hell no! We own these things. We made these things. We built these things. You trying to take these things and

[473] the Cornel West Theory, "Dollar Sign on the Drum$," *The Shape of Hip Hop To Come*, (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).
[474] Ibid.

make a hypnotism out of it? Trying to sell it for your own Dead Seas. Hell nah! This is ours and we refuse to let you win any longer."[475]

Again, Cornel West's voice concludes this track, historicizing the use of the drum within black cultural production. With the technologically produced drum machines faded into silence, the sound of the African djembe drum can be heard clearly as the percussion underscoring West's proclamation. With only the djembe in the background, West lifts his human(izing) voice announcing:

> [The drum is] the very center of the African tradition- the call and response tradition. It was a the core of the means of communicating and creating community and a sense of camaraderie. Isn't it a shame when the great drum itself becomes connected solely with the money; commodified, marketized, commercialized just to make money? You realize that Alvin Jones and Max Roach must be turning over in their graves. The drum is the symbol of a movement of a people that created great freedom even given their un-free situation. Let us not traduce the drum. Get the dollar sign out of the way and let the spirit be heard.[476]

This notion of changing hip-hop is expressed, perhaps more aggressively, on the band's 2010 mix tape, In Her Hands: Embryo Capital Vol. 1 mixed by DJ Underdog. In the five part track "Inevitable" (Acts 1-4 and Outro) the hook proclaims, "Death comes to the slave and master, run back to your money pots, the anvil drops." Here, the reference to both slave and master is a critique of both the commercial hip-hop industry as well as those artists who become its willing slaves. Rashad Dobbins continues the hook with the warning, "The jig is up, you running out of rope, wasting time, get the fuck out the booth, talking 'bout platinum suits, glitter hearts go into shock…zombie youth." With those lines, Dobbins provides a trenchant criticism of commercial hip-hop or what they refer to elsewhere as "glam-hop" for its lack of substance and its negative effect upon black

[475] Ibid.
[476] Ibid.

urban youth. Act 3 of Inevitable continues this line of critique by deploying the voice of Tim Hick's daughter as critic of not only harmful, but also inauthentic hip-hop. She announces, "This is a message to all you fake rappers. My name is Hannah Joy Hicks. Most of the music ya'll make is whack!" Tim Hicks' verse on Act 4 drives home this internal criticism of hip-hop, demanding, "Your street rep collectivist mind state is dead men's gospel…Is that what you call an artist?" His next few bars are relentless:

> Flossing while people are dying/
> as far as myself/
> that's the reason I'm rhyming/
> to either turn your heart or tear you apart/
> because my children are listening and starving/
> while you monkeys are glistening/
> you need to make a decision/
> either walk the planks or get crushed by the tanks/
> sergeant at arms in rank/
> God is my armor/
> Walking with the Eli revolver[477]

The album concludes with the track, "Type 1- Lift Every Voice." Immediately, this title calls to remembrance James Weldon Johnson's hymn, widely referred to as "the Black National Anthem." In this hip-hop version, however, we hear Cornel West narrating a progressive trajectory for hip-hop that is deeply rooted in those musical forms that have come before. West insists, "The shape of hip-hop to come has to do with what the spirituals and the blues and jazz was…but in the end it is our voices…rooted in our courage…motivated by our vision"[478]

As the final voice of the album, Yvonne Gilmore reinforces the theme of change that runs throughout The Shape of Hip Hop to Come. Yvonne concludes, "We're training

[477] the Cornel West Theory, "Inevitable (Act4)," In her hands: Embryo Capital Vol. 1 (Mixed by D.J. Underdog, 2010).
[478] the Cornel West Theory, "Type 1- Lift Every Voice," *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come*, (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).

hip hop not to stutter/spring cleaning/de-cluttering learned inhibitions in sound/we have sold out market driven vehicles/sometimes it seems that we forget our own story/act like we have never lived anywhere else but the edge/still willing to sell ourselves to the highest bidder at the auction/like getting by is all there is to our story." Beyond the incoherent stuttering of childhood, Gilmore advocates a more mature voice for hip-hip. Moreover, Gilmore provides an expansive vision for hip-hop. In essence, she argues that narratives of "surviving" are insufficient if artists do not also begin to narrate a form of "thriving" that is more substantive than merely learning to capitalize on the accoutrements of American Empire. The poet persuades her listeners that new stories are needed, and others must be laid to rest. As she puts it, "peace is best supported by a mattress/it might be time for Sabbath/lie down/ the story's tired/ needs rest/new dreams/more places to go."[479]

Offering a pastoral charge to the hip-hop community, Rev. Gilmore leaves her hearers with the challenge, "We need new skills to decode our own stories/new idioms new sensibilities to decode our own changing story." With these words, Gilmore speaks to her role as preacher-as-poet-and-performer within a political hip-hop band. She appears to be attempting to *embody* an answer to the question that she posed in her sermon at McCormick Theological Seminary, "What does it mean to tell the whole story? The whole exhausting story…"[480] As a preacher and an artist engaged in hip-hop culture, Rev. Gilmore attempts to offer alternative visions, more complex accounts, and more imaginative language to describe the lived experiences of those for whom the meaning of their lives has been over-determined by narratives of deviance, misogyny, violence and

[479] Ibid.
[480] Gilmore, "Advanced Acoustics."

materialism. By the end of these two albums, it seems clear that Gilmore sees her role in the Cornel West Theory as one of reinvigorating and reimagining the prophetic potential of both Christianity and hip-hop culture

"Save Them from the Limits of the Words that they Know": An Analysis of Public Theology as Cultural Production

Thus far, I have shown that Rev. Yvonne Gilmore is a black woman preacher and poet who uses spoken word both to claim a public theological voice beyond the pulpit, and to critically engage the cultural productions of hip-hop. As such she seeks to raise a prophetic voice that challenges both the anti-democratic practices of American Empire, while questioning and critiquing the internalization of impulses toward domination within hip-hop culture. Thus, like Rev. Coates and Rev. Yearwood, her critique of rap music is linked to a critique of the larger society. Yet, in ways consistent with theories of intersectionality in black feminist and womanist thought, Gilmore's intervention more consistently critiques messages and images within hip-hop at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality.[481] Significantly, her work also points beyond domestic affairs and toward issues of imperialism and Diaspora. Moreover, her poetics are both critical and creative, gesturing toward expanded possibilities for engaging black youth culture in the era of hip-hop. In the following pages, I will further analyze the role of the hip-hop generation black preacher attempting to claim a space of creativity and criticism *within* a culture that has been deemed morally estranged from the black community and wider

[481] For a discussion of intersectionality in black feminist theory, See Patricia Hill-Collins' *Black Feminist Thought, Black Sexual Politics* and *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). In the latter, Hill Collins describes intersectionality as "an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example shape any group's experience across specific social contexts. The existence of multiple axes within intersectionality (race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, age) means neither that these factors are equally salient in all groups' experiences nor that they form uniform principles of social organization in defining groups" (108).

American society. At stake in this analysis is exposing the ways that Rev. Gilmore has sought to position herself within hip-hip culture as a progressive cultural worker, while also raising a prophetic voice against harmful representations of black youth culture circulated within hip-hop.

Avoiding the Label of Christian Hip Hop

Before analyzing Gilmore's place within hip-hop culture in relationship to the Cornel West Theory, it is first important to emphasize that while she is an ordained minister, Gilmore does not consider her poetry to be connected to the genre of "Christian Hip-Hop." In other words, though there are many convergences between Cornel West's understanding of prophetic hip-hop and prophetic Christianity, the Cornel West Theory does not self-identify as a Christian hip-hop collective. While Rev. Gilmore is a Disciples of Christ pastor, and Tim Hicks claims the prophetic strand of Christianity that West advocates, the other members of the band do not self-identify as Christian.

Further, it is important to make this distinction, for two reasons. First, Gilmore is adamant that her art is not to be overdetermined by the signifier "Christian." Such distinctions, in her estimation, too often compromise the freedom and integrity of the art and artists. To be labeled "Christian" art- and in particular Christian hip-hop- is to be confined to a limited range of subject matters proscribed by prevailing popular understandings of Christian faith and practice. This leads to the second rationale. While a range of ministers who have come of age in the hip-hop generation perform Christian rap (also described as Gospel rap, Holy Hip Hop or a range of other descriptions of intentionally Christian hip-hop), most often the music functions narrowly as a means of personal evangelism, rather than prophetic social criticism.

Young evangelical Christian ministers, often conservative, have turned to the performance of a brand of Christian hip-hop that is inextricably linked to a conversionist agenda. As such, Christian rap, as connected to the broader industry of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) tends to lack a prophetic edge. Rather, Christian hip-hop artists most often intervene in black youth culture through a conservative framing of "sinful" behaviors associated with hip-hop and attempt to "redeem" deviant black youth through evangelical (often dogmatic) lyricism.[482] Moreover, Christian hip-hop, like mainstream hip-hop and conservative strands of evangelicalism, is often a male-dominated space where women's voices are seldom heard.

Rev. Gilmore's engagement with hip-hop and spoken word poetry, while drawing upon the resources of Christian theology, departs from uses of hip-hop by Christian evangelicals as a means of aggressive conversionist practices and the construction of conservative Christian identities. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Cornel West has often advocated a progressive "politics of conversion" as a necessary component of his democratic vision.[483] For West, this should not be confused with what he considers to be a parochial understanding of individual conversion "that precludes collective insurgency."[484] This would be the form of conversion advocated by his notion of Constantinian Christianity, which:

> places such a strong emphasis on personal conversion, individual piety, and philanthropic service and has lost its fervor for the suspicion of worldly authorities and for doing justice in the service of the most

[482] See Lecrae, Cross Movement, etc. An interesting exception is New York-based artist Corey Red. Corey Red is one of few Christian Rap artists who explicitly addresses issues of race and class in his music. Significantly, however, Red remains conservative on issues of gender and sexuality. In the end, Corey Red is committed to a politics of conversion that exalts Jesus as the solution to both behavioral and structural problems facing black youth of the hip-hop generation.
[483] For a discussion of West's politics of conversion, see Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).
[484] West, *Democracy Matters*, 18.

> vulnerable among us, which are central to the faith. These energies are rendered marginal to their Christian identity.[485]

Prophetic Christianity, however, does not so much abandon conversionist impulses, but rather reframes them. A prophetic politics of conversion insists upon transforming the "moral callousness" in American society into a "moral fervor" that resists imperialism and social injustice, while advocating greater empathy and care for the poor and vulnerable. In this sense, Rev. Gilmore's participation in the Cornel West Theory may be understood in terms of the convergence between the prophetic Christianity and prophetic hip-hop that West advocates, while avoiding the more sectarian genre of Christian hip-hop.

The Rub of "Abundance" and "Redemption"

One particular line, from Gilmore's sermon on the track "Type 1-Change," is worth revisiting in this analysis. In the opening track, Gilmore confesses to the listener that because her work is positioned within the conflicted and contradictory spaces of popular culture, it is fraught with potentially irreconcilable tensions. A certain frustration is voiced in her line, "Your hope for abundance, rubbing right up against my hope for redemption."[486] Though nameless, those addressed by "*your* hope of abundance," could be understood as referring to corporate labels and industry executives that exploit hip-hop culture for the sake of profits. At the same time, these words equally apply to those artists who become complicit in such exploitative practices out of a desire to become wealthy. Even as she offers this critique of corporate dominated hip-hop, however, Gilmore acknowledges that such exploitative practices are "rubbing right up against," her own

[485] Ibid, 149-150.
[486] the Cornel West Theory, "Type 1-Change," *The Shape of Hip Hop to Come* (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).

hope for redemption. It is interesting to note this "rub." While "abundance" and "redemption," are juxtaposed in her verse as divergent aims, a closer read suggests that these "hopes" are not as distant from one another as it may appear. Rev. Gilmore's theological hope for redemption is worked out, in practice, in ways that rub up against those who are hoping for more abundant lives- not to mention those who exploit those hopes.[487] As a preacher engaged in the cultural production of hip-hop, Rev. Gilmore's intervention into popular culture is subject to certain frictions.

Music professor, William C. Banfield, describes this friction in greater detail in an essay entitled, "The Rub: Markets, Morals, and the 'Theologizing' of Popular Music." Banfield opens his essay with the assertion, "Reinventing of the self through artistic expressions, marking existence and all the while selling records is a complex formula. There is an intricate relationship between artistic desire and goals, communal expectations, and the larger market demand."[488] For Banfield, the "rub" that is created within hip-hop culture, and particularly for those Christians whose "theology of culture" leads them to critically engage hip-hop, is "between the idea of music culture being an expression of morality or of marketism."[489] In other words, if West's contention that all would-be-progressives (religious or secular) must take seriously the necessity of engaging with contemporary black youth popular culture, what is at stake in terms of the negotiations between market-driven forces of greed and moral responsibility? In terms of

[487] There is no doubt that this "rub" between "abundance" and "redemption" is not only played out between the religious and the secular forces of commercial hip-hop. Rather, there is a significant "rub" between prosperity oriented preachers proclaiming messages of "abundance" that are nearly indistinguishable from certain forms of corporate hip-hop, and the more prophetic messages of the strand of Christianity advances by the Cornel West Theory. Of course, these two camps cannot be seen as entirely discrete. Indeed, they are "rubbing right up against" one another.
[488] William C. Banfield, "The Rub: Markets, Morals, and the 'Theologizing' of Popular Music," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 173.
[489] Ibid, 174.

morality, it is important to emphasize that Banfield is not simply concerned with a more conservative notion of personal responsibility, but rather a more expansive understanding of communal responsibility and social accountability. Moreover, Banfield is particularly interested in pressing the question of what effects such tensions might have on the popular cultural productions of contemporary artists. Banfield contends that even the most progressively minded artists and activists, when embedded within the culture industry, become vulnerable to being, "suffocated and pulled continually downward into vacuous marketability."[490]

Among other reasons, Banfield suggests that the significance of preserving the integrity of forms of creative expression, such as hip-hop, lies in the possibility that these forms are able to disclose something unique about the human condition. More specifically, rap music and hip-hop culture, may speak to "certain 'depths' that are unreachable by our more traditional modes of rhetorical redress [such as preaching, teaching, and theological discourse]"[491] Banfield lists four related issues that hip-hop culture discloses, which other forms of public discourse- including ecclesial discourse- potentially *cannot*: 1) It reports on today's young black males' relentless search for identity or place 2) It explains some of the difficulty and frustration in living in a world defined by materiality that is only achievable for a select group. 3) It explores, in an "organic language, the complex relationships what emerge among young, disadvantaged, angry, and disillusioned citizens 4) It considers the reality of rejection by social institutions and structures (e.g., churches and schools). Banfield's list is helpful insofar as it suggests the possibility of hip-hop disclosing realities that are often absent from other

[490] Ibid, 175.
[491] Ibid, 178.

forms of discourse, including sermons. Yet, his focus upon angry young black males obscures the voices of black women such as Gilmore who participate in the cultural production of hip-hop. Certainly, such artists experience this "rub" differently.

Susan Somers-Willett explores this rub from an alternative perspective in her book on spoken word poetry. In her chapter, "'Commercial Niggas Like Me': Spoken Word, Poetry, Hip-Hop, and the Racial Politics of Going Mainstream," Somers-Willett observes, "The image of the African American spoken word poet in popular culture emerged particularly in contrast to that of the gangsta rapper, whose music, also known as hard-core or thug rap, was popular with young white suburban audiences in the 1990s."[492] As a spoken word artist who is a member of a political hip-hop band, Gilmore's "rub" takes on an additional layer of significance. Yet, as mainstream corporate interests also absorb the counter-cultural aesthetic of spoken word, this form of cultural production has become subject to its own tensions. For Somers-Willett, the similarities and associations of spoken word with hip-hop "plays on a tension between artistic 'purity' and commercialism in popular American culture."[493] In particular, Somers-Willett suggests that with the mainstreaming of spoken word, the "rub" is captured in a formulaic portrayal of the interplay between an "authentic black male criminality" and the attempt "to be morally pure" through the expression of spoken word poetry.[494] Moreover, she argues "The politics of authenticity surrounding the reception of the African American spoken word poet can commodify black expression in very specific and limiting ways."[495]

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[492] Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 101.
[493] Ibid, 117.
[494] Ibid, 113.
[495] Ibid, 113.

It should be noted, however, that Somers-Willett also primarily refers to a form of urban black masculine authenticity that does not easily capture the particularities of Gilmore's perspective as a black woman. Although, Gilmore's discourse of redemption shares certain similarities with the artists that Somers-Willett describes as "the black male artist [who] is the gangsta reformed through poetic expression."[496] In her discussion of hip-hop poet, Black Ice, Somers-Willett makes specific reference to the religious themes expressed in his poetry. Here, the rub between commercial rap and spoken word poetry has led to redemption for the artist who "has been spiritually as well as socially reformed through his practice of verse."[497] Rev. Gilmore can also be read as encouraging this sort of transformative encounter with spoken word through her collaborations with the Cornel West Theory.

Yet, Somers-Willett articulates a significant irony in the ways that the discourse of authenticity surrounding spoken-word poetry contributes to its commercial success. Referencing the perspective of an African American spoken word artist, she notes his contention that, "most hip-hop is created with commercial interests in mind while spoken word poetry remains untouched by such interests and is therefore a more authentic mode of lyrical expression."[498] Yet, she complicates and critiques this notion by exposing the ways that it is precisely this perceived authenticity that attracts spoken word's ever-increasing paying audiences. Here, Somers-Willett is worth quoting at length:

> Indeed, it is precisely this tension that enhances the spoken word poet's current cachet with mainstream audiences. Displaying mastery of the rappers' idiom while critiquing the rapper's hackneyed and materialistic public image, the spoken word poet working in the hip-hop idiom lays

[496] Ibid, 125.
[497] Ibid, 127.
[498] Ibid, 117.

> claim not only to lyrical authenticity but to racial authenticity- a highly valuable commodity in today's mainstream youth markets. Under this highly stylized, politically conscious brand of verse, poetry has become cool.[499]

For Somers-Willett, mainstream expressions of spoken word, such as HBO's Def Poetry Jam, become sites where commercialized forms of hip-hop are readily critiqued, while spoken word artists are championed as, "more virtuosic, and hence authentic, than the rapper."[500]

Against this backdrop, however, Rev. Gilmore's articulation, "your hope for abundance, rubbing right up against my hope for redemption" can be heard as resisting such false binaries. Gilmore does not construct an image of the spoken word poet or political rapper as necessarily more authentic or morally pure than the mainstream artist.[501] Rather, there seems to be a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the possibilities of redemptive themes within the commercial sphere as well as market-influenced interests shaping the band's cultural productions. The latter becomes more pronounced as the Cornel West Theory struggles to negotiate the conflicting aims of maintaining its "prophetic voice," while at the same time striving to achieve financial stability and greater influence by reaching a broader (i.e. more mainstream) audience.

Somers-Willett captures the dynamics of Gilmore's perspective, perhaps more fully in her quotation of Staceyann Chin, a cast member of Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. Chin, a Jamaican-Asian-American activist-poet describes her sense of conflicted participation in the project as: "The dance of survival in this new world of art and money

[499] Ibid, 117.
[500] Ibid, 119.
[501] While this is true for Gilmore, other artists in the collective occasionally create such distinctions. For instance, Tim Hicks lyrically constructs such distinctions in the four-act "Inevitable" track on the *In her Hands* mix-tape. Hick's creates an even starker contrast between these camps in his solo track, "Jeffry," which is a trenchant critique of what he calls "glam-hop," over against the more politicized art that he and the Cornel West Theory produces.

is the dance of the middle ground- one has to straddle the commercial/mainstream and the not-for-profit/underground…I am walking a tightrope between poetic prostitution and art- and that, my dear, is the only way not to die as an artist."[502] With this quote, Somers-Willett further illustrates the ways that performances of hip-hop influenced spoken word in mainstream settings simultaneously succumbs to corporate interests, while also circulating oppositional messages that are potentially subversive. Here, Somers-Willett links tensions in spoken word poetry to critical observations on hip-hop culture. Referencing the early work of Tricia Rose, she suggests that resisting access to and the resources of the mainstream is "to almost guarantee a negligible audience and marginal cultural impact."[503] The Cornel West Theory realizes this precarious place in which their music is located. The effort to maintain this "uncompromised" voice threatens to ensure the marginality of the group among hip-hop audiences, and blunt the force of their interventions into black youth popular culture. Perhaps the band's awareness of this predicament is captured best in the title of a track on their 2010 mix-tape- "Prophetic Suicide."

Markets, Meaning and the Margins

Gilmore's opening "sermon" on "The Shape of Hip Hop to Come" demands further analysis. Her homiletic introduction to the album forces audiences to wrestle with the vulnerabilities of change. Towards the close of her poetic homily, Gilmore sounds an ironic note of seeming futility. While the track, and indeed the album, points toward the inevitability of change, Gilmore confesses, "Marginalized people don't control the

[502] Somers-Willett, 129.
[503] Ibid, 130-131.

margins of meaning, or the margins of the music."[504] The poignancy of Gilmore's confession lies in its range of meanings. Initially, this line recalls her prior assertion of the "rub" experienced in the artist's struggle for integrity. In many ways, to maintain artistic integrity within an industry that readily exploits the cultural production of hip-hop, is to opt for a marginal status and a relatively small audience. Ironically, then, the political brand of hip-hop that the Cornel West Theory produces is unlikely to make a significant impact on the production of commercially dominated hip-hop. Rather, the band is more likely to continue to struggle for recognition within the margins of the hip-hop underground. As such, the lofty claim of the album, "The Shape of Hip Hop to Come," is more idealistic than probable. This is not only the case in terms of popular culture, but also in terms of the band's more activist aims of disrupting anti-democratic practices. In this case, the "tension between dominant and marginalized cultures" is especially pronounced with the Cornel West Theory.

Yet, this problem of marginality is anticipated in West's work, which likely informs the perspective of the band. In an essay entitled, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," West contends that, "The choice of becoming a Black intellectual is an act of self-imposed marginality; it assures a peripheral status in and to the Black community."[505] Given Cornel West's veneration of the black musical tradition, the designation of "black intellectual" is certainly not limited to those within the academy in his thought. In this essay, West outlines four potential paths for African American intellectuals who would intervene in black life: 1) The Bourgeois Model: Black

[504] the Cornel West Theory, "Type 1-Change," The Shape of Hip Hop to Come (the Cornel West Theory, 2011).
[505] Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual" in *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (South End Press, 1991), 132.

Intellectual as Humanist 2) The Marxist Model: Black Intellectual as Revolutionary 3) The Foucaltian Model: Black Intellectual as Postmodern Skeptic 4) The Insurgency Model: Black Intellectual as Critical Organic Catalyst.[506] It is the latter model, however, that West commends as worthy of emulation. For West, this model has as its central task, "to stimulate, hasten, and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers."[507] On West's account, there are two preeminent examples of this intellectual tradition and both are committed to linking "the life of the mind" to a tradition of black oral performance. These two organic intellectual traditions, the Black Christian tradition of preaching and the Black musical tradition of performance, converge in the work of Rev. Gilmore.[508]

Feminist critic, bell hooks further develops West's argument in a response to his essay published in their co-authored text, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*. For hooks, marginality is also a site to be *chosen* as the space of creative freedom. hooks develops this idea further in an earlier essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." In this essay, hooks describes the choice to locate oneself in the margins of a culture of domination as a difficult, yet necessary choice that entails significant risk. While the risk of isolation and irrelevance is substantial, hooks insists that such spaces of marginality must be understood as "much more than a site of

[506] In West's essay, the Bourgois Model represents the quest of black intellectual to gain legitimacy within the academy by seeking white approval in terms of academic guilds and the like. This path typically leads to an avoidance of issues dealing with black life as it is seen as not scholarly or "rigorous" enough. The second model, the Marxist Model is in many ways a reaction against the first model. It places a primacy upon social and political engagement, yet West contends that this model often stifles intellectual creativity and sophistication. The Foucaltian Model, on the other hand, attempts to address the complexities of what West refers to as the "black postmodern predicament." While this model rightly interrogates discourses of power and "regimes of truth," West critiques it for providing intellectual justification for avoiding concrete forms of black political struggle. As mentioned above, it is The Insurgency Model that West ultimately commends, though he admits that there is wisdom to be gleaned from each of the others.
[507] Ibid, 144.
[508] West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," 136.

deprivation."[509] Rather, in hooks estimation, these are sites of radical possibility and resistance that hold the potential of becoming "a central location of the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives."[510] In light of hooks' essay, the marginality that the Cornel West Theory risks by resisting the centrifugal pull of the mainstream, is not to be shunned, but rather embraced as a space where the artist can cultivate a "radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."[511] On the other hand, however, the band's desires to expand its influence does not necessarily mean that it must forgo this chosen space of marginality. Following hooks, the challenge is to discern viable ways to "struggle to maintain that marginality even as one works, produces, lives, if you will, at the center."[512]

In this sense, the struggle of Rev. Gilmore and the Cornel West Theory is to hold in tension the interplay between the discourses and practices of the "popular" and the "prophetic." At is best, hip-hop has always maintained this critical tension. In her chapter, "Voices from the Margins: Rap Music and Contemporary Black Cultural Production," Tricia Rose describes this tension as follows:

> [hip-hop] is at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text's' center and always aware of its proximity to the boarder.[513]

Marc Lamont Hill argues that it is precisely this relationship "between the popular and the political that constitutes both the form and content of black public intellectual

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[509] bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 149.
[510] Ibid, 149.
[511] Ibid, 150.
[512] Ibid, 150.
[513] Rose, *Black Noise,* 19.

work."[514] For Hill, this relationship is always fraught with tension, yet this tension cannot and should not be dissolved. To do so would be to risk misunderstanding the ways that artists are able to make their unique contributions. Further, Hill insists that attempting to neatly divide artists into neatly separated categories such as "political" or "mainstream" fails for at least two reasons. First, like hooks, he notes the prevailing sentiment that "real" art must exist somewhere outside of the exploitative boundaries of capitalism and the marketplace. Second, and perhaps more important, it assumes that an artist's marginality vis-à-vis the commercial sphere is necessarily indicative of artistic integrity. Moreover, this line of thinking, "romanticizes the underground as a space untouched by the same corporate capitalist forces as mainstream spheres."[515] Thus, Hill reasons, "The construction of a conscious/commercial divide also undermines a sophisticated and evenhanded analysis of all hip-hop artists."[516] "Such distinctions are highly problematic, however, a they obscure the complexities and contradictions that operate within every artist's body of work."[517] Ultimately, Hill is interested in the notion of hip-hop as a form of public intellectual work, where artists use their lyricism to inform public discourse. John Wesley Moon, a member of the Cornel West Theory, describes their production of hip-hop in precisely this manner. For Moon, "It's about using music as a platform for discussion and debate as opposed to just using music as a tool for entertainment, but still retaining the important value of musical expression."[518]

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[514] Hill, "Critical Pedagogy Comes at Halftime," in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas' Illmatic. Edited by* Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009), 106.
[515] Ibid, 101.
[516] Ibid, 99.
[517] Ibid, 99.
[518] Lisa Han, "The Cornel West Theory" February 4th, 2010, The Daily Princetonian. http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2010/02/04/24984/print (accessed 10/2/2012).

Conclusion

While acknowledging the tensions and frustrations of attempting to transform public discourse from within hip-hop culture, Gilmore continues to lift her prophetic voice for change. As a black woman preacher and artist of the hip-hop generation, Rev. Gilmore's intervention is similar to a number of hip-hop feminists and artists within the industry. Gilmore's intervention can be understood in terms that theologian Ralph Watkins has used to describe other progressive women within hip-hop. Discussing the role of Lauryn Hill as both artist and critic, Watkins draws upon the work of feminist social theorist, Patricia Hill-Collins, describing Hill as "an outsider within."[519] Watkins goes on to write, "As both a member of hip-hop and a product of hip-hop, she is calling hip-hop culture and the hip-hop industry to task."[520] Rev. Gilmore is no doubt providing this important internal critique of hip-hop. Yet she is simultaneously bearing prophetic witness to the larger American society that has produced hip-hop. In and through her cultural work with the Cornel West Theory, on their two albums *Second Rome* and *The Shape of Hip-Hop to Come,* Rev. Gilmore is attempting to bear witness to this internal and external critique.

Of course, Rev. Gilmore should not be understood as speaking for all black women of the hip-hop generation. As hip-hop feminist, Joan Morgan, put it, "Trying to capture the voice of all that is young black female was impossible. My goal, instead, was to tell my truth as best I could from my vantage point on the spectrum."[521] To be sure, Gilmore's "truth" is only partial and fragmentary. Her poetic call for a symphony around

[519] Ralph B. Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and Rhyme* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 128.
[520] Ibid.
[521] Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: my life as a hip-hop feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1999), 26.

the baseline, however, speaks to her acknowledgment of the need for other voices- and especially the voices of black youth. In this way, Gilmore advocates what Morgan argues for young black women working within the genre of hip-hop, "Truth is what happens when your cumulative voices fill in the breaks, provide the remixes, and rework the chorus."[522] Such a perspective is instructive for those religious leaders who would intervene on behalf of black youth in the era of hip-hop.

[522] Ibid, 26.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: Towards a Public Theology Beyond Moral Panic

In September 2010, a gathering of scholars, ministers, seminarians and members of the larger Nashville community converged on Vanderbilt University Divinity School for the African American Lectionary's Forum on Culture, Worship and Preaching. The keynote speaker for the forum was the Reverend Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, a hip-hop generation minister, activist and public theologian. During a panel discussion on the second day of the gathering, Rev. Sekou recalled a provocative story that captures and further clarifies the precarious relationships between the social and cultural standing of black youth and institutional regimes of power (i.e. law enforcement, public schools, the culture industry, and the black church) in the era of hip-hop.

On Sekou's account, he was asked to deliver the eulogy for a slain black youth in St. Louis. In this eulogy, he made a public theological turn to hip-hop culture as a means of reaffirming the value and worth of those typically alienated from the institutional church and blamed for the moral decline of the black community. Taking his young audience into consideration, Rev. Sekou developed his homiletic discourse around "gangsta" rap artist, Ice Cube's, popular track, "It Was a Good Day." The upshot of the sermon was that despite the outrage and lamentation following yet another instance of senseless, "black on black crime," nevertheless, "indeed, it was a good day, too because God still loved us." As Sekou recalled, following the eulogy, the gathered congregation of young black people, including a number of gang-members, resonated with and responded viscerally to their affirmation by this young minister. Unfortunately, it was

what happened next that overshadowed the proclamation of good news in that sermonic moment. According to Sekou, "the pastor of the church followed me to the podium and spent the next thirty minutes trashing young people and youth culture." Moreover, the pastor went on to describe the police as "agents of God," and in no uncertain terms, told the young people in attendance that, "if the police stop and beat them, they deserve it." Sekou concluded that the words of the preacher "were so damning that I pushed them from my memory."

Reverend Sekou then described the aftermath of that pastor's rhetorical assault the next day when he returned to the local high school where he was working as a substitute teacher.

> 'Mr. Sekou, Mr. Sekou, Jimmy runnin' around here lying on you and we are going to kick his ass.'
> 'No, no, that is not an option,' I responded. My conflict resolution skills kicked in. Slowly and calmly, I queried, 'What is Jimmy saying?'
> 'His punk ass is runnin' around telling people you a preacher. He says you preached at his cousin's funeral. And we know you ain't no mutherfuckin' preacher because…'
> One of my defenders paused with a tear-soaked voice, and another picked up where he left off, 'because you love us. You don't look down on us. You let us listen to Tupac and you help us understand what he says about our lives and society. You ain't no preacher are you?'
> With flattered sadness, I smiled and lied, 'No, son, I ain't no preacher."[523]

For Rev. Sekou, this episode stands as an indictment of the Black Church and its relationship to those black youth who have come of age in the era of hip-hop. Certainly, Sekou's narrative provokes a series of questions that cannot be fully answered in this dissertation, but they accentuate problematic relationships between black youth culture, moral panic and public theological discourse that I have explored within this dissertation.

[523] Osageyfo Uhuru Sekou, "Hip Hop, Theology, and the Future of the Black Church," in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, Edited by Emett G. Price III (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 153-154.

Has black religious rhetoric become so overdetermined by moral panic that it denies the possibility of any meaningful public theological discourse about or with black youth? Why are such damning religious discourses allowed to circulate within the black public sphere without serious challenge or critique? How might we reimagine public theological discourse, as a form of cultural criticism, in ways that disrupt the moral panic surrounding black youth culture? What would be a more radical religious response to marginalized and vulnerable black youth? Would training in cultural analysis and criticism help black religious leaders make more effective interventions on behalf of black youth- both within and beyond the institutional church?

The situation of inequality and suffering, as well as resistance and pleasure, that characterizes the lives of black youth demands more than a narrow rhetoric of blame and punishment. Such discourses, whether from preachers or other black elites, construct black youth and their cultural productions in ways that virtually ensure their continued exclusion and alienation from black churches and other socio-political institutions. Sermonic and other public theological utterances rooted in, or responding to moral panic too often represent the biases and commitments of a black elite class that conflate responsible moral discourse with a politics of black respectability. In this way, black preachers become complicit in what Richard Iton describes as, "the circulation and promotion of respectability discourses and attempts to represent black community as a closed, coherent and manageable text."[524]

The responses of black preachers to black youth culture, however, are not entirely reactionary. In this dissertation, I have explored three more progressive responses of

[524] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149.

black religious elites to black youth and hip-hop culture. While I have acknowledged the potential of many of these religious responses, I have also problematized the contours of these interventions in order to expose the ways that these religious discourses and practices unwittingly contribute to the moral panic surrounding black youth culture or reinforce other discourses and practices they ultimately seek to resist.

The three case studies analyzed here expose the ambiguity and complexity in the contested relationships between black religious leaders, popular culture and black youth. Without serious reflection on the complexity of black youth and the cultures they produce, consume and use, black religious leaders cannot adequately address the socio-political- much less the spiritual- issues that threaten to undermine the possibility of survival, thriving and flourishing of young black Americans. These case studies demonstrate that the moral panic surrounding black youth culture refuses to acknowledge the remarkable resilience of black youth and the ways their cultural productions consistently defy moral reductionism. Furthermore, as Cathy Cohen has argued, this moral panic is not only exaggerated, but also dangerous in that it leads to increased surveillance, discipline and punishment of black youth. In addition, I have argued that religious rhetoric that is rooted in moral panic is especially dangerous because it adds religious legitimacy to discourses that already demonize black youth and policies that criminalize their behaviors.

Each case study complicates our understanding of the ways religious rhetoric functions in the public sphere. Out of a legitimate concern for protecting black youth from the vitriol of many black elites who are too eager to condemn the hip-hop generation, critics of public theological discourse can too quickly reduce such

expressions to forms of uncritically conceived "moral panic." Such critics fail to account for the ways that these public theological discourses also become disruptive of dominant and destructive narratives of black youth culture.

At the same time, as Jonathan Walton insists, "There is a space for a socially conscious and progressive class of African American preachers today that eclipses the stanch traditionalism of some and the moral cowardice fueled by the personal greed of others."[525] Rev. Sekou and the presiding pastor in the funeral described above occupied the same pulpit, during the same funeral service, constructing black youth and hip-hop culture in radically different ways. Critical wrestling with the ambiguities and complexities inherent within the discourses and practices of *both* black *youth* culture and black *church* culture is required. If we fail to see the ways that hip-hop videos like "Read-a-Book" simultaneously depend upon and disrupt stereotypical and "negative" images of black life, then we will not understand why otherwise progressive religious leaders such as Rev. Delman Coates end up alienating young black Americans who might be unconventional allies in the effort to further the work of liberative social action in the era of hip-hop. Likewise, if we fail to acknowledge the ways that religious leaders such as Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. collaborate with artists such as 2 Chainz, in order to reduce the political alienation of young black Americans who have been disenfranchised from the vote, we will not understand how religious rhetoric opens communal space for black youth who have been relegated to the margins. And again, if we uncritically celebrate the embrace of "voices from the margins," without interrogating the ways 2 Chainz simultaneously advocates felons rights while being handsomely rewarding by the culture

[525] Jonathan Walton, "A Church Divided: The Dilemma of the Black Preachers," *The African American Pulpit 10*, No. 1 (Winter 2006-2007): 31.

industry for articulating a deeply problematic gender politics, we will fail to acknowledge the significance of the Enough is Enough Campaign as a public theological intervention against the exploitation of young black women (*and* men!) by mass media corporations such as Black Entertainment Television and Viacom.

As a result, the case studies presented in this dissertation reject a simplistic reading of either the popular culture of black youth or the public theological discourses of black preachers. Both are complex and contradictory. Both resist premature closure and reductionism. When we look carefully at the strategic interventions of the three black preachers in these case studies, we see that in every instance, black youth culture is too complex and indeterminate to be captured by narrow discourses of moral panic. These case studies also demonstrate that when progressive black religious elites turn to popular culture as a site of public theological intervention, they often demonstrate a sophisticated analysis of the issues confronting black youth, which, again, cannot simply be dismissed as a function of moral panic.

The public theological discourse and practices of Rev. Delman Coates, Rev. Lennox Yearwood, and Rev. Yvonne Gilmore suggest different possibilities and strategies of intervention in black youth popular culture as a site of struggle that is moral, but also social, political, and potentially liberative. Each of these preachers, for various reasons, emphasizes the nexus between popular culture and political activism and locates hip-hop culture as a significant and strategic site of critical intervention. Yet, these religious leaders avoid a narrow framing of black youth and hip-hop culture as merely "deviant," whose redemption is made possible solely through the moral discipline of the institutional Black church. Rather, these black preachers take seriously the range of

urgent socio-political issues facing black youth without succumbing to the dominant narratives of deviance and the rhetoric of blame and punishment that typically follows from such narratives. As such, each of these preachers, in one way or another, resists the reductive lens of moral panic surrounding black youth culture. Nevertheless, neither black youth nor these "prophetic" black preachers are beyond criticism and there remains a need for a more critical assessment of the role of public theology as a form of cultural analysis and criticism- especially when it is directed toward an already demonized black youth culture.

By expanding our understanding of young black Americans and their cultural productions- in this case hip-hop- we see that their ambiguities should not be pejoratively narrowed by the lens of moral panic, but warrant a different and more complicated response. Simply put, moral panic, while understandable within the framework of middle class black aspirations, is an inadequate moral response given the complexities of black youth of the hip-hop generation. Any public theology, whether uttered from the pulpit or within the public sphere, that unequivocally equates black youth with deviance, criminality and moral viciousness inadequately describes how black youth have used the cultural resources at their disposal in creative ways to make life more meaningful- religiously and otherwise- within the shifting socio-political landscape of the post-civil rights era. Though many black preachers may deny the moral agency or complex subjectivity of black youth, their cultural productions and uses of mass mediated forms of popular culture accentuates the ways that they construct different moral, political and religious meanings within and beyond the institutional Black Church. Moreover, Matthew Williams's insight should never be lost upon scholars or practitioners of black

religion when considering the forms of popular culture that have emerged beyond the purview of the institutional church, namely the ways that "the black church's return to a posture of complicity with the sociopolitical crises faced by poor urban black youth during the latter quarter of the twentieth century…has resulted in a deep-seated resentment of the church and skepticism of its relevance to their condition of existence."[526]

If this dissertation has demonstrated that moral panic is ultimately an inadequate response to black youth culture, what does it point to as an alternative attitude that would inform a more effective religious response? Here, I want to return to the words of Rev. Gilmore who warns, "It is dangerous to simplify tensions…to close a case that is still open in the name of God."[527] As we have seen in the previous chapter, Gilmore's poetics offer multiple interpretive possibilities. For the purposes of this dissertation, I want to first suggest that public theological discourses as well as scholarly critiques that are oriented towards closure, foreclose on the possibility of a mutually critical engagement between black religion and black youth culture.

There exists a significant danger of simplifying tensions within black youth culture through a reactionary and reductionist reading of black youth within hip-hop culture that fixes their identities as "deviants" who are either beyond redemption, or who can only be redeemed through discipline, punishment or the embrace of black middle class religious respectability. A reciprocal danger of simplifying tensions becomes manifest through an equally reactionary romanticization of the "deviant" in ways that

[526] Matthew Williams, "Notes from a Hip Hop Preacher: How We Must Serve This Generation," The African American Pulpit 10, No. 1 (Winter 2006-2007): 19.
[527] Yvonne Gilmore, "Poetry and Liminality" a Lecture and Performance at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, October 27, 2011. This lecture can be viewed at: http://news.vanderbilt.edu/2011/10/gilmore-essig/

lead to an uncritical embrace of values within hip hop culture that threatens other vulnerable members of the community. Such a posture may be the result of progressive black religious leaders who seek to avoid the critique of black respectability. Yet, moving beyond moral panic and resisting respectability need not lead to the silencing of critique, especially when and where black youth culture becomes thoroughly co-opted by a culture industry that promotes ideologies that threaten the fabric of black communities.

Rather than these prematurely resolved tensions, any public theological discourse that would seek to intervene in black youth culture must come to terms with the complexity and contradictory nature of the lives of young black Americans and their various relations to popular culture. This necessarily leads to a theological posture of "openness" to the ways that black youth bear witness to possibilities of a potentially transformative "otherness." Here, this "otherness" might be understood in terms of a politics of difference that comes to value identities that have typically been deemed beyond the "boundaries of blackness." Read another way, this "otherness" might be understood in a more theological sense in which God as *the* "Other," is witnessed in the very faces of young, black, marginalized "others."

Borrowing from and building upon Gilmore's poetics, I maintain that the "cases" in this dissertation cannot simply be "closed" in a way that neatly wraps up all of the loose ends and provides an uncomplicated "moral of the story," or a simple programmatic agenda. To do so, in a real way would be to close cases that remain open- in the name of God. In other words, too often the desire for a "conclusion" that demands a compulsory constructive theological statement or practical theological agenda, can lead to forms of

closure that simplify tensions to ensure that the proverbial, "trumpet makes a certain sound." In such cases, dangerous forms of closure are advanced, "in the name of God."

In the name of God, and a concrete practical theological agenda, we might close each of the case studies in this dissertation as though they have been concluded and finally resolved. Resisting this temptation, however, I argue that the tensions must remain. To be sure, tensions remain in our analysis of black youth and their cultural productions. No doubt there is much that remains troubling within hip-hop culture, with its misogyny, violence, homophobia and the like. Certainly, the host of social ills that plague black youth demands a real sense of urgency among those concerned with the future of black communities. Yet, urgency is not to be confused with moral panic. The latter is out of order as well as the cynicism that tends to characterize much public discourse about black youth. Rather, the resiliency of black youth culture, and its resistance to reductionism points to towards the possibilities of their thriving and flourishing in the era of hip-hop and beyond.

But these "cases" are not only about the status of black youth. They also speak to the (im)possibility of black churches and their preachers rendering an effective critique of and, or normative intervention within black youth culture. I contend that this too is best left unresolved. Those within theological studies would likely insist upon a move towards closure, "in the name of God," that ensures the effectiveness of public theological discourse vis-a-vis black youth culture. Yet, I push back against such theological certainties with Rev. Sekou's narrative. It may indeed be possible that black religious discourse has been so overdetermined by moral panic and other such rhetorics of blame and punishment that meaningful dialogue about, and more importantly *with* black youth

culture has become nearly impossible. In this instance, the case for a relevant public theological discourse is simply closed in a way that leads to Rev. Sekou's duplicitous claim, "I ain't no preacher," as the only compelling response to black youth.

Yet, this response also simplifies the tensions that remain in the interactions between black religious leaders and black youth culture. In this dissertation, I have attempted to demonstrate that the case against black preachers, as little more than moral entrepreneurs, creating and enforcing rules intended to police the behaviors of black youth and the black poor, remains open.[528] In a published version of the narrative Rev. Sekou recounted at Vanderbilt Divinity School, the subheading preceding this story captures both the unresolved tensions as well as the openness of this case. Rather than signifying closure through the use of a period or exclamation mark (i.e. "I ain't no preacher!"), Sekou frames this story with the grammatically incorrect construction, "I ain't no preacher?"[529] It is precisely the use of the question mark in this otherwise declarative phrase that renders this case, "still open…in the name of God." As black preachers become more sophisticated in their deployment of public theological discourse as a form of cultural analysis and criticism, within the pulpit, the public sphere or the realm of popular culture, new possibilities may emerge for a more self-reflexive and transformative dialogue with black youth in the era of hip-hop.

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[528] In *Democracy Remixed*, Cathy Cohen draws upon the work of sociologist Howard Becker to describe moral entrepreneurs as the principle agents of the discourse of moral panic. Becker identifies two types of moral entrepreneurs: *Rule creators* and *rule enforcers*. The former identifies and challenges nonnormative behavior, presumably on behalf of society. Rule enforcers, on the other hand, are the ones charged with the implementation of the rules that have been constructed through the discourses of the rule creators. For more on this discussion, see Cohen, 37-40.

[529] Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, "Hip Hop, Theology, and the Future of the Black Church" in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide* Edited by Emmett G. Price III, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 153. Another version of this narrative appears in Rev. Sekou's earlier book, *Urban Souls,* (Saint Louis: Urban Press, 2001).

One final note of clarification is in order here. By a posture of "openness," I do not mean to advocate the kind of paralysis and inaction that perpetually deferring meaning and appreciating ambiguity and inderminancy can often lead to. This can undercut the very activist and interventionist impulse that the preachers in these case studies, and I want to advocate. When black preachers make a theological turn to cultural studies and cultural criticism, they would be wise to remember Stuart Hall's reminder that while we must resist premature closure, there is a need for certain "arbitrary closures," that allow activist ministers to "stake out a wager" in order to intervene on behalf of black youth. Hall writes that we must recognize the tension between closure and the need to stake out positions and argue for them. More specifically, he argues, "I don't believe knowledge is closed, but I do believe that politics is impossible without what I have called 'the arbitrary closure'…that is to say, I don't understand a practice which aims to make a difference in the world, which doesn't have some points of difference or distinction which it has to stake out, which really matter. It is a question of positionalities. Now, it is true that those positionalites are never final, they're never absolute."[530] Hall's perspective is significant here, precisely because he affirms the maintenance of the kind of tension that I want to argue for in black public theological discourse and practice. On the one hand, we must insist upon a kind of theoretical sophistication in our analysis of black youth culture that allows us to remain open to they ways that they continually defy our attempts to demonize, marginalize or finally condemn them. On the other hand, Hall will not let this theoretical necessity absolve us from critical intervention on behalf of real and suffering people. He raises a question that is most relevant to this dissertation's

[530] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies" in *Cultural Studies,* edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 279.

exploration of the intersections of black youth, moral panic and public theology, "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?"[531]

Here, I find Rebecca Chopp's language of "moral summons" to be a compelling alternative to moral panic.[532] Chopp has developed her theological and ethical position in dialogue with feminist, womanist and other forms of liberation theologies by placing them in critical conversation with the field of cultural studies. As with a number of other theologians who have made this cultural turn, the realm of (popular) culture emerges as a critical terrain of struggle and contestation to which theologians and religious leaders are ethically summonsed. This moral summons requires critical attention to the suffering of those on the margins of society and demands that their voices and perspectives be allowed to bear witness in a manner that challenges dominant representations of their lived experiences. To do so, however, means to be attentive and open to the forms of cultural production, such as hip-hop, which give voice to the contradictory expressions of black youth. In my estimation, such a moral summons offers us a way to think about the ways that black religious leaders might demonstrate a more "ethical responsiveness to the other"- in this case marginalized black youth. Such a moral summons would also require black preachers to stake out certain positionalities within and in relation to black youth culture that would allow for meaningful dialogue and social change without succumbing to the reductionism of too much public discourse about black youth.

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[531] Ibid, 285.
[532] See Rebecca S. Chopp, "Reimaging Public Discourse" in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 154-160.

Were black preachers to be morally *summoned*- as opposed to morally *panicked*- by the pains, pleasures and provocations of black youth culture, their homiletic and public theological discourses and practices might legitimately begin to disrupt the ways that black youth are narrowly represented and constructed through public discourse. In this way, black preachers would certainly understand their public theological utterances to be religious practices that are oriented toward intervention on behalf of black youth in ways that might have some real effect. Moreover, such prophetic speech- whether uttered from the pulpit, within the public sphere, or in the messiness of popular culture- might function as a form of cultural criticism and social intervention that leads to ways of reimagining public discourse about black youth that indeed resists premature closure and remains open to more creative, even poetic, possibilities for their future. Indeed, "It is dangerous to close a case that is still open…in the name of God."

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