

God wears Tom Ford: Hip hop's revisioning of divine authority

Anthony B. Pinn

The poetic quality of music and the imaginative style of lyrical expression have given African Americans ways to describe and critique life arrangements within a society always on guard against challenges to the status quo. Over the course of my fifty years, I've grown into this truth.¹

First within the context of church work, I came to know and appreciate the manner in which music often challenged the sermon as the dominant modality of theologizing. Music marked out the various phases of Sunday worship, leading parishioners through the order of service from the precession to the benediction. It often anticipated and addressed their thinking regarding particular concerns. The rest of the week, once the worship buzz ended, music marked the rhythm of life, with its messages becoming magical mantras for church folk “in the world but not of it”.

Message in the music

Despite the spiritual aura, musical articulations of the gospel message flirted with secular modes of expression. Sometimes, the result – as in the case of traditional and contemporary gospel – was the Christian faith with a new rhythm. But as so many in churches feared, this flirtation with secular musical aesthetics could easily draw the unsuspecting Christian into a full embrace of godlessness. For example, contemporary gospel too easily softened believers to the allure of R&B and Pop. But for young people like me, warnings against this danger meant nothing. We were determined to like what we liked, play the music we enjoyed playing, and still show up for Sunday ser-

vice – singing, “This little light of mine...I'm going to let it shine!”

After all, like our parents before us (to the extent they'd admit it) we found something of ourselves – an epistemological recognition and existential comfort – in the “questionable” musical forms that kept us tuned in. And, as I was growing up, no musical genre expressed this better than rap music – that lyrical dimension of the larger cultural world of hip hop.

Rap artists spoke so creatively and compellingly that resisting their stories was a futile act. Their language – grammar and vocabulary – was organic and captured so much of what I knew and felt about the world, regardless of my Christian filter. They recognized an ontological “truth” that brought into focus both the promise and the pitfalls of life in the United States as – in my case – a young black male. This appreciation, to be sure, wasn't without its tensions.

For instance, I was a Christian, but I was moving to the rhythm of rap artists whose ethics and moral codes were creative, organic, but not always in line with what I had been trained to privilege as proper conduct. In hindsight, this tension – at least in part – revolved around hip hop culture's reframing of religious authority, done through a signifying of theistic structuring(s) of meaning.

But should I have expected anything less than this signification of theological themes and assumption from rap, the child of the blues? That is to say, hip hop culture in the form of rap music was simply the most recent incarnation of philosophical-theological counterpoint – the marginalized manifestation of poetic protest.

Church and playing with “God”

Rap music had me, and I didn't mind or fight its grip on my imagination. This is despite the fact that I first encountered it while training to be a minister within the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

I was both insider and outsider – the young black male of concern within so many rap lyrics, as well as a minister-type who represented a particular hustle infesting black life. Put a different way,

many artists were speaking to me *and* about me. This made for a particularly stubborn epistemological dissonance. I walked the border between two worlds – hip hop and the church – finding in both something that appealed to my self-understanding and my relationship to human history.

Perhaps this was all a consequence of the world being a place of contradictions, of desires for meaning within a context best prepared to leave us frustrated and unfulfilled? My church life acknowledged this predicament but quickly turned to metaphysical claims. On the flipside, some rap artists brought into question many of my religious assumptions and shot holes in the narrative of ministerial excellence: the minister is the man (usually a man) closest to the will of God and best able to hear the voice of the Lord. No, rap artists exposed, in verse, the frailties of ministers and their abuses of resource and people. Lyrics, often without mercy, exposed ministers as pimps, frauds and other questionable figures; the holiness was exposed as hollow.

In a word, the preacher wasn't the only one who could weave a story, or frame moral and ethical obligation over against the cartography of life. The preacher might "whoop" but the MC spit fire, and that fire burned my mind long after the sermon (even my sermons) were over. Rap vibrated through my mind long after the echo of scripture had subsided.

Even after I left the church and rejected Christian ministry, I remained intrigued by rap music's ability to manoeuvre between worlds and in the process deconstruct and reconstruct religious sensibilities, responsibilities, and notions of authority. For instance, UGK argued that "the game belongs to me", and this allowed for a capturing of human agency or lucidity – and thereby an ability to work the systems of "production" to one's benefits.²

On top of this, UGK chronicled the structuring of life available to young people in the urban, southern context that spoke to the struggles for life meaning in ways that can't be captured adequately by the somewhat sterile and disembodied framings of life offered by many churches. Artists like the Geto Boys and then the solo artist Scar-

face chronicled in lyrics a life less certain. There is a roughness and grittiness to life within, for instance, "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me" and "Mind Playin' Tricks 1994" that speaks to the absurdity of our encounter with a harsh and unresponsive world.³ This harsh and unflinching take on life works over against the dream-like state of the church's response to the challenges of human existence – "Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right..." seems underwhelming in comparison.

Still, other artists pushed for the reconstitution of metaphysics to render theological themes highly unrecognizable to religious traditionalists. While examples of this abound, I think one of the more compelling would have to be Tupac's transfiguration of Christ in the form of "Black Jesus", who is the patron saint of thugs. Black Jesus's moral code runs contrary to the stuff of a standard Christianization of life; but what would one expect when this new figure of authority proclaims a genealogy composed of the thugs and killers? Rather than the biblical text, one could argue that Tupac – as Black Jesus at times – provides a sacred text written on his body, the ink of his tattoos over against the ink of the King James Bible, and this is coupled with the "10 rules of the game" over against the biblical Ten Commandments.

The new divinity

For some time now I have listened repeatedly to three tracks. The first is "No Church in the Wild" by Jay Z and Kanye West; the second is "Crown" by Jay Z; and the third is "I Am a God," by West.⁴ The first dismantles authority by cutting to the core of the Modern West – its traditions and epistemological safeguards. Jay Z challenges the framing of knowledge as associated with the Greeks by exposing the inherent bias in the crafting of knowledge; he dismantles the ethics of the Christian faith (the church), and challenges constructions of being that don't stem from a materialistic base – a hip hop twist on Sartre's proclamation that existence precedes essence.

What Jay Z and West offer in "No Church in the Wild" is a modality of the religious that reclaims its core meaning – to bind together. The authority of the metaphysical other – through re-

religious leadership for instance – can be dismantled because it can be challenged. In its place they establish a new religion framed by mutuality and, of course, lucidity – over against the violence, deception, and epistemological manipulation Jay Z exposes in the first verse.

West adds to this a new framing of ethics by maintaining the authoritative significance of the individual in connection to others. He does this by privileging exchange and consent as the bases of relationship. The chorus sums it up: “Human beings in a mob/ what’s a mob to a king/ what’s a king to a god/ what’s a god to a nonbeliever/ who don’t believe in anything?”⁵

This chorus exposes religious authority as premised on the crafting of stories and codes demanding and sanctioning compliance, and all this revolves around a privileging of obedience over will. Recognition of this situation, as West notes, as a point of theological insight, “is something that the pastor don’t preach, something that a teacher can’t teach.”⁶ It cuts against the authority of their pedagogy and flies in the face of their circumscribed and truncated ethics.

What Jay Z and West offer is not a mapping of life vis-à-vis negation – “thou shalt not...” – but rather it is premised on an affirmation: do as you like by means of consent and through recognition of mutuality present even in the context of a troubled world.

It is this reconstituted life (called a religion in the song) that makes possible the proclamation of divinity one finds in “Crown” – “you the presence of a king, scratch that, you in the presence of a god.” The miracles associated with divinity are distilled in this track and lodged in the workings of urban life, thereby marking out material desires. Jay Z (aka Hova), as god, pushes against restrictions, refusing to be “wiped out of history,” but instead imbuing said history with the narrative of urban miracles – “put in the belly of the

beast [New York’s public housing] I escaped/but a nigga never had a job.”⁷

He offers the American dream metanarrative turned on its head through an alternate epistemology of success, or salvation. “If it wasn’t for the bread,” he notes, “probably be dead.”⁸ The narrative of making it as a consequence of docility in the presence of the Christian God – who might give you a beat down, like Job received, but will finish the process by granting more stuff – is flipped and



Shawn Corey Carter, known by his stage name Jay-Z, is an American rapper, record producer, and entrepreneur. He is said to be one of the most financially successful hip-hop artists and entrepreneurs in America.

subdued by the metaphysics of a new saviour, aka the streetwise Jay Z and his communicative skills.

Like Black Jesus, Jay Z-as-god welcomes agency as a marker of having “game.” It is an authority premised on consistency rather than traditional markers of obedience – not following what others say, but doing what one does – i.e., “do you”. Divinity in this instance isn’t marked by super-human capacities to judge and punish; instead it is based on lucidity – awareness grounded in the material world and marked off by a measured realism embracing the workings of the world.

In “I Am a God,” West, having something of a split (divine) personality, constitutes Yeezus as a morphing of the Christological event and person-

ality so as to highlight the roughness of Christ's encounter with the world – not the garden and prayer, but hanging with the despised; not virgin-al qualities (tempted without sin as scripture suggests) but rather thoughts of Jesus with/in Mary. West, with a much more metallic and harsh tone, speaks his divinity by pronouncing a new relationship to the empirical quality of life.

Unlike Jay Z, West's divinity is not the most High, simply close to the ultimate source of truth, or the resurrection of hip hop as the epistemology of life. By controlling the life of hip hop, he controls ontology, epistemology, and the details of existential happenings. Again, lucidity – deep awareness of life – marks an intimacy with the dark corners of life acted out.

Whatever one decides to make of these claims to religion, or to divinity, the challenge to traditional modalities and framings of authority – religious authority – is clear and compelling. Church! ■

Notes

1. I want to thank my graduate student, Biko Gray, for proof-reading this essay and offering suggestions for improvement.
2. UGK, "Game Belong to Me," *UGK (Underground Kingz)* [New York: Jive Records, 2007].
3. Geto Boys, "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me," *We Can't Be Stopped* (Houston: Rap-A-Lot Records/Priority, 1991); Scarface, "Mind Playin' Tricks 1994," *The Diary* (Houston: Rap-A-Lot Records, 1994).
4. Jay Z and Kanye West, "No Church in the Wild," *Watch the Throne* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2011); Jay Z, "Crown," *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Universal, 2013); Kanye West, "I Am a God," *Yeezus* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2013).
5. Jay Z and Kanye West, "No Church in the Wild," *Watch the Throne* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2011).
6. Ibid.
7. Jay Z, "Crown," *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Universal, 2013).
8. Ibid.

Anthony B. Pinn received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1994. Other degrees include the BA from Columbia University, and the MDiv and MA, both from Harvard. Pinn began his teaching career at Macalester College (St. Paul, MN), where his research and teaching earned him early tenure and promotion to full professor within the first eight years of his career. In 2003, Pinn accepted an offer from Rice University (Houston, TX), becoming the first African American to hold an endowed chair at the University. While at Rice, Pinn founded and directed the Houston Enriches Rice Education (HERE) project, now the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning. He is also the Director of Research for the Institute for Humanist Studies Think Tank (Washington, DC).

