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Pain, Misery, Hate and Love All at Once

A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

I remember the period well. It was the months following the 1992 LA Riots. We were young, full of energy, and having bore witness to the destructive forces that tore our community apart, we wanted to change the direction of the 'hood.

So what did we do? We organized gangs, nonprofits and people with like-minded worldviews to create something that had never been done, a gang truce.

A fifteen-city organizational effort involving gang leaders, community organizations and rappers like Tupac, the then lesser known Snoop Dogg and former members of NWA, as well as people who wanted to see a change from the violence of the 1980s, put together posters, banners, flyers and events that helped put a message of peace out in the community. Large gangs like the Crips and the Bloods came to park BBQ's to celebrate the newfound peace. MTV covered many of the events.

For the first time it seemed as though urban peace was beginning to take shape. I was truly amazed. Especially being as angry as I was after the Rodney King trial verdict, I was beginning to see some change that I could be a part of.

We decided that each city needed to take their concerns to City

Hall. We had hoped to file for a "state of emergency" to begin receiving federal funds to clean up our 'hoods and begin to restore our families. So we put together documents, papers, statistics, and firsthand accounts of what was happening in our communities. We knew it would be hard, but we also knew that we had a legitimate case. By now, it had been almost two years without a gang-related shooting.

Our first five attempts to talk with our mayor went unheeded. The next fifteen attempts, we were told, "Oh, you just missed him." Finally, on our twentieth attempt to reach someone in city council, someone who supposedly had the mayor's "ear" gave us about five minutes before cutting us off: "What exactly are you all doing here? Don't you have some drive by to do? Why are you wasting the mayor's time?"

His statements floored us all. But we persisted and began to explain our success in five cities. His response, "We don't entertain a bunch of thugs in the mayor's office, I suggest you get off these premises before we call the cops and have you forcibly removed." At this point, we were a little hot under the collar and demanded to see his supervisor, to which he responded, "Let me make this perfectly clear: *We don't care!*" He walked away as security guards escorted us off the premises with a warning that if we ever set foot on these premises again, we would be arrested like "the dogs you are."

Yes, that happened.

Most of the groups in other cities faced similar reactions from their local government. Some were even arrested, given violations to their current parole and sent back to prison for conspiring with known gang members. Within months, the media hype from the 1992 riots dimmed, and it was business as usual in the 'hood. Only now the younger generation was even more pessimistic about organizing and social justice.

I was stunned. I did not know what to do. I went to tell my pastor about what had happened; he looked at me as if I were just crazy to even be thinking about such a thing. He reminded me of how I needed to pick my pants up when I was in church, and that my language and attitude could have been a lot better. Moreover, he also reminded me that if we had just prayed harder, God would have opened up those doors for us.

Hip Hop was my only solace at the time. I have come a long way since those dark days, but one thing remains true. In those days, rap music was my Christological light.

Pain, suffering, and misery are nothing new to the human experience. It is part of life that we all suffer at some level. We all know that it's not true that the more money you have, the fewer problems you have. But you would not know it from the American media. Against a backdrop of romanticized suffering as portrayed by Hollywood, Tupac sought to shine a more journalistic light on the urban context of so much pain:

> It's like, you've got the Vietnam War, and because you had reporters showing us pictures of the war at home, that's what made the war end, or that s*** would have lasted longer. If no one knew what was going on we would have thought they were just dying valiantly in some beautiful way. But because we saw the horror, that's what made us stop the war.
>
> So I thought, that's what I'm going to do as an artist, as a rapper I'm gonna show the most graphic details of what I see in my community and hopefully they'll stop it quick. I've seen all of that—the crack babies, what we had to go through, losing everything, being poor, and getting beat down. All of that. Being the person I am, I said no no no no. I'm changing this.[1]

While much suffering is messy, confusing, dirty, dark and just plain miserable, some suffering looks "neater." Most of the "rich" experience a "higher level" of mild pain. Suffering in the 'hood looks a lot different. Hip Hop aims to give that suffering its due attention.

SUFFERING IN THE HIP HOP CONTEXT

Hip Hop defines suffering in five ways:

- suffering because of circumstances that you cannot control (e.g., financial hardships, family drama, physical ailments, mental disabilities)

[1]Tupac Shakur, Afeni Shakur, Jacob Hoye, Karolyn Ali and Walter Einenkel, *Tupac: Resurrection, 1971-1996* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).

- suffering for a cause you believe deeply in (e.g., socio-political issues, social justice concerns, racial matters)
- suffering because of who you are (e.g., resentment directed at you due to your personal prosperity or prestige)
- suffering as a result of something you have done or something someone has done to you (e.g., mistakes, life errors or difficult relationships)
- suffering as a result of social, political or spiritual oppression (e.g., persecution or marginalization due to your worldview or belief system, at an individual or systemic level)

These five suffering contexts are extremely fluid. For example, DMX talks about the struggles of forgiveness in his song "Look Thru My Eyes."

> Lost all control, my shoulders hold a lot of weight
> Just like first I'm sold an eight, then told it's not an eight
> But then it's out of state, and it's too late for changes
> to be made
> That's what I get for f***ing with strangers in the shade
> This is it, that nigga's got to give me a place
> For the same reason that fate, chose to give me away
> Take away hate, now I'm supposed to love the one that
> cursed me
> The one that wouldn't give me a cup of water when
> I was thirsty
> It was always his versus me, but now I gotta teach him
> Personal feelings put aside, cuz now I gotta reach him
> What I'd like to do is turn my head, like I don't know him
> But it seems like I've been called on to show him
> So I'ma show him
> And if you never met me, then you've no right to judge me
> I've got a good heart but this heart can get ugly[2]

[2]DMX, "Look Thru My Eyes," from the album *It's Dark and Hell Is Hot* (1998).

DMX here challenges his listeners to see life is full of paradoxes—struggles that result from a mixture of "personal feelings" and personal affronts ("the one that cursed me"). This is only one example of DMX exploring suffering because of social, political and spiritual oppression. In the song "Prayer III" he states:

Let us pray
Lord Jesus it is you, who wakes me up every day
And I am forever grateful for your love. . . . This is why I pray
You let me touch so many people, and it's all for the good
I influenced so many children, I never thought that I would
And I couldn't take credit for the love they get
because it all comes from you Lord;
I'm just the one that's givin it
And when it seems like the pressure gets to be too much
I take time out and pray, and ask that you be my crutch
Lord I am not perfect by a longshot—I confess to you daily
But I work harder everyday, and I hope that you hear me
In my heart I mean well, but if you'll help me to grow
then what I have in my heart, will begin to show
And when I get goin, I'm not lookin back for NOTHIN
Cause I will know where I'm headed, cause I'm so tired
of the sufferin
I stand before you, a weakened version of, your reflection
Beggin for direction, for my soul needs resurrection
I don't deserve what you've given me, but you never
took it from me
because I am grateful, and I use it, and I do not, worship money
If what you want from me is to bring your children to you
my regret is only having one life to do it, instead of two
Amen[3]

Here, we see DMX turning to God, finding a sense of vocation in

[3]DMX, "Prayer III," from the album . . . *And Then There Was X* (1999).

his processing of circumstantial suffering. The rap group The Outlawz paints a picture of suffering that is in a sense self-inflicted:

I know this young nigga who love to keep his gun in his pants
14, little Ant will snatch your s*** to enhance
He lost his moms at a early age, pops was cracked out
His brother ran a drug house where they slept with they
Mac's out
And where we from, f*** them basketball teams
And your neighborhood PAL cause it's all about makin cream
He stayed dirty, copped a clip for thirty
He'd rather be sellin drugs early instead of young, black and
nerdy
He had his hard hat, born ready for war
This young nigga heart's gone and I saw this before
He lived day by day, prey by prey, stray by stray
Blunted on Chancellor Ave. 380 hallway
He bought a AK and I know he gon' sway, it ain't no d*** way
That this young nigga can turn his life around, mang
Now where is God when you need him, he's internally bleedin
Little Ant's barely breathin but he gotta stay eatin
So he robs again but this time he all smoked out
He put his finger on the trigger and let the death fly out
Some man got hit, he's layin on the pavement stiff
Blood drippin from his face and he drownin in it
Now what a surprise that little Ant can't come around
That it's his own man dead on the ground
Dead on the ground[4]

Here pain and suffering result from someone making poor choices and decisions. The song echoes with a call to "turn from your ways" because if you do not, then the resulting consequences could be unfavorable for you. There are echoes, however, of suffering as a result of

[4]The Outlawz, "Lost And Turned Out," from the album *Neva Surrenda—The Rap-A-Lot Sessions* (2002).

forces and problems you cannot control, suffering from social, political and religious oppression.

For rappers like Bizzy (former member of Bone Thugz-N-Harmony), suffering is often beyond our control; life is hard in the 'hood and can force you to do things you never imagined possible.

Puttin' a pistol to my brain, one second before I squeeze
since I'm
A gangster, I'ma put myself on my knees, I'm to many
suicide I'm
Sick, of feelin' depressed, and I'm stressed out like a mothaf*****
I can't even rest, I smoke weed, drink liquor just to ease
the pain
They used to tell me that God was cryin' whenever it'd rain, I
Grew up without my momma and my father, just me and my
sisters, and
They split us all up with the foster, I've been molested and
I learnt
About love, I don't respect women, now I'm just sinnin',
nigga row
I'm livin', how long may this survive like this, if it's
Heaven and
The Abyss you will fry to the crisp now drinkin', and
drinkin' and
drinkin'
And smokin' and smokin' and thinkin' and thinkin' want a
little bit
More and more a my mind still slip a, it's ridiculous, can't take
it, come on
Save me I'll take death everybody's so all worked up[5]

Bizzy is dealing with deep social shortcomings like the foster care system and economic depravities, as well as individual shortcomings and missteps. He was molested, a deep and dark secret that many do

[5]Bizzy, "Blow you Away," from the album *Bone Brothers* (2005).

not reveal. Bizzy is crying out with his pain, much like David does in Psalm 69:1-3:

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.

Another dimension of pain and suffering comes when someone close to you has done ill toward you. Lauryn Hill discusses this well in her song "When It Hurts So Bad." Here, Hill discusses the pain of loving someone who has not loved back:

I loved real, real hard once
But the love wasn't returned
Found out the man I'd die for
He wasn't even concerned
I tried, and I tried, and I tried
to keep him in my life (to keep him in my life)
I cried, and I cried, and I cried
but I couldn't make it right

But I, I loved the young man
And if you ever been in love
then you'd understand

That what you want might make you cry
What you need might pass you by
If you don't catch it (if you don't catch it)
(if you don't catch it)[6]

[6]Lauryn Hill, "When It Hurts So Bad," from the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998).

Pains within intimate relationships are another essential element of suffering for the Hip Hop community. Mary J. Blige, queen of the R&B rap genre, sings about horrific relationships; in so doing she offers listeners suggestions on how to avoid the pain she has experienced. In songs like "Each Tear" ("You're much more than a struggle that you go through / You're not defined by your pain, so let it go") Blige is able to transcend her own experience and then empower her listeners so that they too can make it through rough times.[7]

HIP HOP AND PASTORAL CONCERN

In essence, artists like Blige, Hill, DMX and Tupac (whom many of my interview subjects consider a "martyred saint") become the pastors for their generation.[8] In the song "Heavy in the Game" we find Tupac conflicted about having to sell drugs, but his life circumstances demand that he survive:

> I'm just a young black male, cursed since my birth
> Had to turn to crack sales, if worse come to worse
> Headed for them packed jails, or maybe it's a hearse
> My only way to stack mail, is out here doin dirt
> Made my decisions do or die, been hustlin since junior high
> No time for askin why, gettin high, gettin mine
> Put away my nine, cause these times call for four-five sales
> cause life is hell and everybody dies
> What about these niggaz I despise—them loud talkin cowards
> shootin guns into crowds, jeapordizin lives
> Shoot em right between them niggaz eyes, it's time to realize
> follow the rules or follow them fools that die[9]

Without glorifying or excusing it, Tupac puts some context to this lifestyle. Continually mistaken for valorizing violence, in fact the

[7]Mary J. Blige, "Each Tear," from the album *Stronger with Each Tear* (2009).
[8]Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2001).
[9]Tupac Shakur, "Heavy in the Game," from the album *Me Against the World* (1995).

overwhelming majority of Tupac's lyrics actually talk against violence and dubious lifestyles.

> Everybody's tryin to make the news, niggaz confused
> Quit tryin to be an O.G. and pay your dues
> If you choose to apply yourself, go with the grain.[10]

In this respect Tupac and artists like him are assigning meaning to suffering, and pointing a way forward for those who suffer—actions that are highly pastoral in nature. Christina Zanfagna suggests that claiming your suffering actually makes you more alive:

> To claim your suffering in the moment, to truly feel it and accept it, is a powerful act of self-attestation. As DMX, 2Pac and others illustrate, suffering is a catalyst for a certain spirituality, a way to come to terms with deep-soul anxiety or alienation, and a possible route to freedom.[11]

Further, E. T. Long sees the experience of suffering as "a boundary, a limit to our ordinary experience of ourselves as beings in the world in relation to other persons and things where being and becoming seem closely linked."[12] Marian Maskulak argues that dealing with suffering is essential for moving forward in the Christian faith.[13] Jürgen Moltmann goes so far as to claim suffering as central to Christianity. "At the centre of Christian faith is the history of Christ. At the centre of the history of Christ is his passion and his death on the cross."[14]

Kathleen O'Connor sees an important moment of spiritual growth in the questioning that emerges during times of extreme hardship, questioning that is often quickly characterized in the Christian community as "backsliding" or walking away from the faith. "When faith

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[10]Ibid.

[11]Christina Zanfagna, "Under the Blasphemous W(Rap): Locating the 'Spirit' in Hip-Hop," *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006): 8.

[12]Eugene Thomas Long, "Suffering and Transcendence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006): 140.

[13]Marian Maskulak, *Theology Today,* January 2008.

[14]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 151.

in God comes under such intensive assault," she writes, "how can recovery take place and life begin anew? It seems impossible, for the ancient bonds of community turn to menacing uncertainty, and the community of faith itself appears destined to disappear. . . . To revive, people must maintain some continuity with their ancient story."[15] Many Hip Hoppers turn to rappers for that "ancient story"—what Louis Stulman calls "the symbolic super structure" of their narrative.[16] Rappers such as Tupac, DMX, Biggie, Common, Nas, and Ice Cube relate the suffering in their subject matter to this symbolic super structure, weaving the micronarratives in each song with what Jürgen Moltmann calls "the apocalyptic sufferings of Christ."[17] This is not done in an irreverent or blasphemous way. Far from it. Tupac raps:

> I'm fallin to the floor; beggin for the Lord to let me in
> to Heaven's door -- shed so many tears
> (Dear God, please let me in)
>
> Lord, I've lost so many years, and shed so many tears..
> I lost so many peers, and shed so many tears
> Lord, I suffered through the years, and shed so many tears..
> God, I lost so many peers, and shed so many tears[18]

Tupac is crying out to Jesus in his suffering and asking him to let him in to heaven, to take away his pain.

When listening to songs which dealt with pain and suffering by artists such as The Outlawz, Ice-T, Tupac and DMX., 95 percent of my interviewees—even those who did not subscribe to the Christian faith—made connections between the songs and Jesus, seeing Jesus as himself a sufferer. Many respondents stated having a "real-life experience" when listening to such music, suggesting that many people just want their struggle validated—not fixed or figured out, just lis-

[15]Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," *Interpretation* 62, no. 1 (2008): 35.
[16]Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
[17]Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, pp. 151-212.
[18]Tupac Shakur, "So Many Tears," from the album *Me Against the World* (1995).

tened to. Such spiritual engagement of suffering in Hip Hop is in line with much of the Black spiritual tradition, in which individual singers would speak, collectively, for the entire community's sufferings. Anthony Pinn traces this theology of suffering in the songs of American slave communities.

> In the mind of the slave, the interconnectedness between their condition, God, Christ, and heaven implied a concrete and contextual response to the problem of evil. God, through Christ, made victory out of human suffering. One way or another, they knew their life would mirror Christ's life and that they would be free in heaven.[19]

Pinn observes the communal nature of such songwriting: "Although these spirituals, for the most part, were created by individuals, they narrated the community's collective physical and psychological experience and development."[20]

In this way, Hip Hop is similarly connected to the blues, jazz, soul and Black Gospel. Sampling from these genres is one of the many ways Hip Hop artists pay respect to older generations.[21] This tradition of exploring the spirituality of suffering culminates in Tupac's theological message: Keep ya head up, cuzz someday we gonna be free in heaven!

HIP HOP, SUFFERING AND THE BIBLE

Hip Hop's five suffering contexts are connected to different biblical characters as well. Jeremiah, Paul, Job, and Jesus all experienced the suffering contexts in which Hip Hoppers go through daily.

Jeremiah, for example, spends chapters 11-20 reflecting on lament, pain and suffering as he reflects on the aftermath of destruction. Jer-

[19]Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 32.
[20]Ibid., p. 23.
[21]Zanfagna, "Under the Blasphemous (W)rap," pp. 2-5.

emiah wants God to vindicate him (15:15-16).[22] Kathleen O'Connor sees the confessions of Jeremiah as "prayers for people mired in loss and play[ing] a major role in the theological and spiritual process of healing."[23] Jeremiah is quite open with his issues and brings them before God (see chapter 11). But what is more interesting about Jeremiah is that he is able to connect with Hip Hop's suffering context's one and five; Jeremiah wants God to take out his enemies:

> But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge righteously
> and test the heart and mind,
> let me see your vengeance upon them,
> for to you I have committed my cause.

O'Connor states, "The confessions portray Jeremiah as a character with strong confidence in his own understanding of his suffering and with trust in his power to name and influence his relationship with God."[24] Still, by chapter twelve, we see the prophet struggling with God's dealing with the "wicked." In Jeremiah 12:1 we actually see Jeremiah questioning the justice of God:

> You are always righteous, O LORD,
> when I bring a case before you.
> Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
> Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
> Why do all the faithless live at ease?

Most pastors would condemn Hip Hoppers for such a straightfor-

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[22]This is similar when Hip Hoppers want justice in their communities but find none.

[23]O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," p. 34.

[24]Ibid., p. 40. O'Connor also suggests that the prayer in Jeremiah 11 is a form of "deceptive flattery." "[Jeremiah] names God as one upon whom he can rely, one who will even the scales against his enemies because of their mutual relationship of devotion and absolute loyalty. But this is a set up, an ironic claim that Jeremiah contradicts immediately" (ibid., p. 40). In the following chapter Jeremiah feels hopeless because "no matter what he says, God will claim to be in the right. He cries out to a God who is beyond reach, unavailable, indifferent to human testimony even from the chosen servant" (ibid., p. 40). This type of flattery, deception, and ensuing contradictions are no different for Hip Hoppers or any other God fearing human as well—they are part of a healthy Christ-following relationship.

ward confrontation of God, yet Jeremiah gets a free pass.[25] O'Connor sees the prophet's question emerging out of "his decision to challenge God's management of the world, a decision he arrives at from observing how the wicked prosper and the treacherous flourish."[26] This very human question of God's methods and motives is in fact a healthy spiritual discipline; O'Connor recognizes that such complaints "keep communication with God alive in the midst of destruction and despair."[27] In that respect Hip Hoppers, through the art that emerges out of the five suffering contexts mentioned earlier, are providing a forum for serious spiritual reflection.

Another significant story of suffering is found in the book of Job. Many scholars have had trouble interpreting the complex matrix of meanings in Job regarding suffering, pain, human affliction and God's response. Two questions dominate in the Hip Hop context: Why would God stand by and allow all of these afflictions to fall upon Job? And if God is all powerful and wise, why does he allow people like Job to complain for so long (in Job's case, thirty-eight chapters) before stepping in?

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez reads Job and raises some important questions regarding human suffering and the nature of God.

> Can human beings have a disinterested faith in God—that is can they believe in God without looking for rewards and fearing punishment? Even more specifically: Are human beings capable, in the midst of unjust suffering, of continuing to assert their faith in God and speak of God without expecting a return? Satan, and with him all those who have a barter conception of religion, deny the possibility.[28]

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[25]Many of the pastors I interviewed in 2004-2005 suggested that rappers who question the justice of God in light of the prosperity of the wicked were "complaining and whining" and should instead concentrate on "praising God."

[26]O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," pp. 40-41.

[27]Ibid., p. 34.

[28]Gustavo Guttiérez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), p. 1. Gutiérrez makes the connection between the book of Job

If Job had been a rapper, he would have gone platinum after his triumphal return to the stage. Here are the facts:

- Job has all of the riches.
- The devil hates on him.
- The devil takes everything from him.
- Job is in pain.
- His baby mamma leaves him.
- Job's boys let him down and actually contend that Job is a "sinner" incurring the wrath of God.
- Job lives in the ghetto and complains about it.
- Job does everything but curse God.
- God comes at the final hour and replenishes Job.
- Job's life is restored to ten times greater than before.

Three possible paradigms are applied to Job's context:[29]

1. Suffering is divine retribution. "Job, you must have done something to deserve this!" It is common for many Christians to see suffering in this category.
2. Suffering is divine chastening. "Job, God is going to teach you something important from this." Job's suffering is able to serve the "better good" of humanity and we are able to gain some type of benefit from his suffering.
3. Suffering is only temporary. "Job, you've lost perspective—in the end, everything's going to be all right." Many Black religious traditions subscribe to this paradigm, and thus it becomes easy to minimize pain in the context that it is only "temporary." But what hap-

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and the Latin struggle. His discussion deals with the language of Job, the Jesus of Job, and how Job's life is not that much different from ours. I agree and would add that the Hip Hop community connects with Gutiérrez's work too.

[29]Adapted from James T. Butler's syllabus for "The Book of Job" (Sacramento, Calif.: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2002).

pens when the suffering is life-long, part of an ongoing social oppression, connected to political tyranny or a consequence of physical disabilities?

\While all of these three paradigms can be true at different times, it is too simplistic to only narrow down suffering into these three categories. And yet many churches have done this very thing. So many devotees of Hip Hop culture look outside the church for artists to take up the question and really wrestle with it. Job is a complex book and does not offer any absolute answers in regards to suffering other than to say, it happens to all of us and that it is OK to question, argue, even yell obscenities to God. In the end, the symbolic superstructure asserts, our experiences of suffering give us communion with God.

DEATH AND HIP HOP

While many Christians would claim to have absolute knowledge of what is going to happen to them and their loved ones after they die, there still seems to subsist a wide variety of theologies and philosophies about it. Many people, not just Christians, see death in many different ways. These mechanisms for coping with death carry right over into Hip Hop culture:

- using technology to "flee" or escape from death[30]
- denying death by simply not talking about it[31]
- looking to "solve the riddle" of death in medicine[32]
- denying the reality of death by metaphors, as when morticians display dead bodies as "sleeping"[33]

[30]Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975).
[31]Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present,* trans. P. M. Ranum (New York: Knopf, 1974).
[32]Sherwin Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
[33]David Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence: Religion, Death, and Dying* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990).

- "removing death as a reality from ordinary experience and creating a 'buffer' between the living and the dead"[34]

Some scholars see race as a factor in how death is perceived. James Perkinson states, "People racialized as 'black,' for instance, give evidence of the highest disease and mortality rates, whereas society's dominant 'white' community lives longest."[35] Writer Amiri Baraka has stated that during slavery days, Black people perceived death as a gateway to freedom, a bridge to a better life. Many street Hip Hoppers tell me that death is just a rite of passage; the afterlife has to be much better than their current existence.

Consequently many rappers welcome death. This itself can be a survival mechanism, however. Peter J. Paris observes that "the practical meaning of life in the midst of the actual experience of suffering and the existential threat of death is the subject matter of survival theology."[36] Such survival mentality gives people hope of another day; death is only the next part to life. Moreover, Elijah Anderson suggests that the cultural "code" of the young person prioritizes respect, honor and power over life—must be adhered to as it relates to death. In other words, "if I gotta die" for respect, "I will"; respect means that much.

Cornel West sees a powerful current of nihilism among youth in the inner city. Some young people have already dismissed life as of no value; consequently, death is welcomed as better than what is in front of them. For other Hip Hoppers though, death is a mystery. For many it is seen in one of seven ways:

1. a transition into another dimension
2. a place of rest
3. unknown and therefore feared and rarely discussed

[34]James Perkinson, "Rap as Wrap and Rapture: North American Popular Culture and the Denial of Death," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilites of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 133.
[35]Ibid.
[36]Peter Paris, *The Spirit of African Peoples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 48.

4. an event that leads to greater enlightenment and consciousness
5. a better place than the current location
6. a chance to commune with God
7. the end—death and nothing more

The most noted rap group to begin a serious discussion on death is Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. Their song "Tha Crossroads" begins with a call to consciousness: a life on the streets will only lead to bad consequences. Moreover, the group asks the all-important question "Whatcha'gon do when you can't run no more?" The first lyric states:

> Let's all bring it in for Wally, Eazy sees uncle Charlie
> Little Boo, God's got him and I'm gonna miss everybody
> I only roll with Bone my gang look to where they lay
> When playing with destiny, plays too deep for me to say
> Lil' Layzie came to me, told me if he should decease well
> then please
> Bury me by my grand-grand and when you can, come
> follow me.

Rapper Bizzy's granddad is in heaven. Bizzy wishes to be buried next to him so that they can spend their physical death together. Rapper Layzie continues "Crossroads" with

> God bless you working on a plan to Heaven
> Follow the Lord all 24/7 days, GOD is who we praise
> even though the devil's all up in my face
> But he keeping me safe and in my place, say grace
> For the case to race with a chance to face the judge
> And I'm guessing my soul won't budge
> Grudge because there's no mercy for thugs
> Oh what can I do it's all about our family and how we roll
> Can I get a witness let it unfold
> We living our lives to eternal our soul aye-oh-aye-oh.[37]

[37]Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, "Tha Crossroads," from the album *E. 1999 Eternal*

Here Layzie encourages his listeners to have a relationship with God, to work on their "plan" for entry into heaven and to see death as only a gate into another dimension. The video to this song brings the lyrics alive. Beginning with a Black funeral in a church, we see grieved parents sitting in front of a church, when all of a sudden a man wearing black leather comes down the front of the aisle. Only the mother of the lost one sees him. The man dressed in black—presumed initially to be death itself—lifts the spirit of the young man out of the casket and carries him out. The mom is beside herself, and yet with one glance from death, she stops yelling and crying. All of this is taking place while the song "Mary Don't You Weep" is being sung—an old Negro spiritual sung during death ceremonies.

Initially, we are not sure the intentions of this ominous figure. The video continues showing death taking lives, one by one, as the artists continue asking the question of all Hip Hoppers: "What-cha'gon do when you can't run no more?" He even takes a baby, much to the protest of its parents. The crossroads only becomes more apparent near the end of the video. We see death going up a long mountain; following him are the souls of the people he has touched—all silhouetted in white. (In this group is the groundbreaking rapper Eazy-E, who died not long after the original release of "Tha Crossroads.") At the top, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony are singing, bearing witness to death bringing up all of these souls. The video then shows that death is not all that scary; still carrying the baby he took, the man drops his black jacket, revealing his wings and then leading people to heaven.

Bone Thugs-N-Harmony here contend that we will meet our loved ones at the crossroads and wind up in a better place. This is just one rap group's rendition of what death and heaven might actually be like. Different artists will have different interpretations.

In Hip Hop, everything is contextualized. Death is valued, feared and even glamorized in the ghetto. Dyson writes:

The sheer repetition of death has caused black youth to execute

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(1995).

> funeral plans. In its response to death, black youth have reversed perhaps the emblematic expression of self-aware black morality. Martin Luther King Jr.'s cry that "every now and then I think about my own death." They think about it constantly and creatively. With astonishing clinical detachment, black youth enliven King's claim that he didn't contemplate his death "in a morbid sense." They accept the bleak inevitability of death's imminent swoop—which, in truth, is a rejection of the arbitrariness we all face, since death to these youth is viewed as the condition, not the culmination, of their existence. Black youth tell funeral directors to portray their dead bodies with a style that may defeat their being forgotten and that distinguish them from the next corpse.[38]

In his song "Death on Every Corner," Tupac depicts death as a regular event in the ghetto:

> I see death around the corner, gotta stay high while I survive
> In the city where the skinny niggas die
> If they bury me, bury me as a G nigga, no need to worry
> I expect retaliation in a hurry
> I see death around the corner, any day
> Tryin to keep it together, no one lives forever anyway
> Strugglin and strivin, my destiny's to die
> Keep my finger on the trigger, no mercy in my eyes.[39]

Tupac continued to rap about the horrors and pleasures of death. On one track you might have him rapping about the horrible death of a friend, while on the other he is rapping about the joy of finally being free.

For most Hip Hoppers, death is a time to rest, a time to finally be out of the hell called the ghetto. Tupac states, "Don't feel bad for the people that died, Feel bad for the folk that gotta stay behind. They the

[38]Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me,* p. 227.
[39]Tupac Shakur, "Death on Every Corner," from the album *Me Against the World* (1995).

ones still in hell. The person who's dead is now at peace, and in joy, finally resting."[40]

This is one of the many reasons why Hip Hoppers have a hard time letting go of a rapper like Tupac. When I lecture on Tupac, the two most common questions I get are "Do you think Tupac is in Heaven?" and "Do you think Tupac is still alive?" Eazy-E, Biggie, Left-Eye, Aaliyah and others were all revered, but Tupac stands out. His prophetic voice and ability to connect to the despicable, depraved, immoral, disreputable elements of life have made Tupac both a spiritual icon and a prophet for his generation. Tupac even called himself an urban missionary, claiming that while Jesse Jackson was up at the White House, he was actually being a "reverend" to the 'hood. Many want to believe Tupac is still alive and in Jamaica somewhere, in part because Tupac is seen as someone able to identify with their suffering and pain, someone who actually experienced the same thing they were experiencing; someone who could connect them with God and Christ; someone who could see into future events and speak into lives through his music.

Tupac's canonization notwithstanding, death for rappers typically is thought of as the "final event." Christina Zanfagna states, "Unlike Biggie Smalls and Mobb Deep, AZ (and Nas as well) does not necessarily see death as the gateway to spiritual liberation. Rebuking the possibility of an afterlife, he must take his pleasures in the material world and get 'high' before he goes below."[41] So the immediate takes priority, because the afterlife is the end. Death is the final frontier and must be respected, even venerated. Record companies take on names like "Death-Row"; words like "Immortal" get their fair treatment and open discussion.

JESUS' CONNECTION TO HIP HOP'S SUFFERING

Jesus' life—and the theme of suffering running throughout—serves as a connection point to Hip Hop culture. Jesus, for example, had a

[40]Shakur et al., *Tupac: Resurrection*, p. 80.
[41]Zanfagna, "Under the Blasphemous (W)rap," p. 6.

baby-mamma. An unmarried woman with child could only mean one thing—someone's been dippin' in the field! I have often had to run intercession between fathers and their pregnant daughters. Those are rough times, and they would have been rough for Mary as well. Jesus was conceived in all spiritual righteousness, but the societal implications were scandalous. One can only imagine the amount of gossip that took place during that time. Joseph would have been, in Hip Hop language, straight trippin' with Mary when he heard that she was pregnant. What are people going to say? How was Joseph to maintain his reputation in the community with a wife that was pregnant before they were married? It took a prophetic dream to convince Joseph that Mary was OK to marry (Matthew 1:18-25).

Beyond the conditions of his birth, Jesus did not have a good relationship with the officials of his time, a point that many Hip Hoppers can relate to. Rev. Al Sharpton did a Christmas skit on *Saturday Night Live* where he and two other actors played the Wise Men, making their way by camel to visit the infant Jesus; they were pulled over by Roman soldiers for "Driving While Black." This is just one example of Hip Hop identification with Jesus' story as it relates to the authorities. The Gospels are full of identifiable stories. In fact, the chief—King Herod—tried to have him killed as a baby. "A king of the Jews? Not in my 'hood!" bellowed Herod. As an adult, Jesus had to contend with haters challenging him on all kinds of matters, including who to pay taxes to (Matthew 22:15-22). Never at a loss for words, Jesus called them out using a word that carried much weight during his day: *hupokrinomai*, or "hypocrite." In Jesus' day, this word was considered graphic, profane. We do not typically think of Jesus having a "foul mouth," yet we find Jesus several times using profane language for his context (more on this in chapter six).

When Hip Hoppers find out that Jesus was a "rebel" within his context, Jesus' image goes up five notches.[42] Some of his most pointed,

[42]This is, partly, because the image of Jesus has been primarily seen as soft, timid, "turn the other cheek." For others still, this is because Jesus as been painted as a White person who is so "holy" one cannot reach him without following strict rules

direct and harsh language was directed toward religious people. In John 2:13-20 we find Jesus in Jerusalem during the Passover. Finding the temple being defiled, Jesus goes off. He creates a "scourge of cords" that he uses to "drive out" people selling items in the temple. Several commentaries note that this whip Jesus made was part of the Roman tradition to publicly punish people. Could you imagine if this had been someone from the Hip Hop community doing the same thing? Couldn't Jesus have just spoken with these people? Did he have to overturn tables and whip people? After all, violence only begets violence.

Many Christians would not even dream of putting forth such questions about Jesus, yet rappers like DMX are held in contempt of Christ for even thinking about it. Could it be that some Hip Hoppers who have been labeled "profane" might in fact have godly motives for their words and actions?

This hints at another point of identification between Jesus and the Hip Hop community. The church of Jesus' day did not understand or relate to him. Likewise, KRS-One has said that often the Christian church has not understood Hip Hop. Many rappers like Immortal Technique are shunned by churchgoers because of his illicit and very graphic lyrics. Many Christians see KRS-One as a "new ager" and one who is "not representing Christ very well."[43] Jack Miles gives an excellent treaty of Jesus as a "crisis in the life of God"—a blasphemer in his context and time period, in the eyes of religious officials. Jesus flagrantly violated the Sabbath,[44] refused to condemn an adulteress[45] and gave new commandments such as kindness to strangers.[46] Jesus was thus a problem and a theological paradox—something to consider as we look at contemporary prophetic artists like Tupac.

One of the key elements of Hip Hop culture is loyalty, and so one of Jesus' boyz (Judas) doing him in is particularly scandalous to the

laid out by people who have little to no understanding of how Hip Hoppers are.

[43]Quotes taken from my interviews with people in the church.

[44]Jack Miles, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), pp. 145-47.

[45]Ibid., pp. 152-59.

[46]Ibid., pp. 178-84.

Hip Hop community. Jesus predicted this betrayal several times. In John 6:70-71 we find many of Jesus' disciples leaving him because his message was too much to handle; Jesus ask the twelve if they too will leave. Simon Peter replies by asking a question, "Where will we go? You are who we follow!" to which Jesus replies: "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" The text goes on to indicate that Jesus was speaking specifically about Judas. Most people would have taken out Judas right there. But Jesus suffered with Judas even longer, all the while knowing what his intentions were. Jesus would have even forgiven Judas if Judas would have had the sense to look beyond himself.

Given his experiences of disloyalty, most notably with Judas, Jesus is able to relate to those who have been betrayed by people close to them, such as Hip Hoppers who have had loyalties broken by crew-members. Moreover, Jesus died on a cross for all of humanity, so Hip Hop artists, while not rising to the level of atonement, can see in Jesus a point of identification in his suffering at the hands of others for something he's doing for them.

In Jesus' day, crucifixions were for people who the Romans wanted to make an example of, or for the hardened criminal who deserved such a harsh sentence. Jürgen Moltmann states:

> According to Roman law, execution through crucifixion was the punishment designed to deter against the political order of the Roman empire, or the social order of the Roman slave-owning society. Jesus was publicly executed together with two Jewish insurgents, who had been arrested for revolt.[47]

To see Jesus up there might have caused some confusion for those who had thought he was going to save the world. Even the disciples doubted Jesus' mission. In Luke 24 we find two such disciples walking with the resurrected Jesus, unaware that it was him (v. 16), talking about how they had "hoped" Jesus would have been the redeemer of

[47]Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ,* p. 163.

Israel (v. 21). Jesus then has to break it down for the disciples on what his suffering really meant:

> He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

For Hip Hoppers, this means Jesus not only knows about pain, suffering and death; he can actually be with you in the process of all of it. Jesus is both a divine person in whom we can confide in, and also someone who was "flesh" and "human" who suffered as the writer of Hebrews exclaims:

> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

The event on the cross connects Jesus with the five contexts of Hip Hop sufferings and thus make him Hip Hop. And yet in Western American culture, suffering is typically seen as resulting from having done something "wrong" in the eyes of God. So to hear a bunch of low-class rappers talking about their pain must suggest that they have brought it on themselves.[48] Carter Heyward argues that suffering originates in two universal areas, the first of which being "the suffering steeped in the unfinishedness of creation."[49] In other words, we all have trials and tribula-

[48]Of course, this perspective is not applied to events like the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It is hard for many U.S. citizens to admit the country might have some responsibility to bear in the events that led to 9/11.

[49]Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 23.

tions that come in different forms. For example, natural disasters are a part of an unsettled world. Did the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 "bring on" their own suffering? No, of course not. But they did suffer.

The second kind of suffering Heyward discusses is the "brokenness of creation."[50] In other words, there are "bad" people in the world and "bad" things will happen to us all if we live long enough. The same crime element that exists in the 'hood also exists in suburbia; suburbia just knows how to "dress it up" better. For Hip Hoppers, and humans in general for that matter, it is hard to understand this element of suffering. One thinks immediately to the old-time question," Why does God let bad things happen?"

Heyward is careful to note that "in real, everyday life [these realms of suffering] are never mutually exclusive. Both are ancient, tenacious realms with roots that reinforce and strengthen each other."[51] Bringing us back to Jesus and the cross, James Cone argues that Jesus had to go to the cross not just for the salvation of humanity but also to connect with the suffering of every person on earth.[52] The prophet Isaiah even proclaims in regards to Jesus:

> He was despised and rejected by men,
> a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
> Like one from whom men hide their faces
> he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
>
> Surely he took up our infirmities
> and carried our sorrows,
> yet we considered him stricken by God,
> smitten by him, and afflicted.
>
> But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
> and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)

[50]Ibid., pp. 24-25.
[51]Ibid., p. 23.
[52]James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 160-61.

James Cone further states:

> Jesus' death was a sacrifice. Thus the reality and the depth of God's presence in human suffering is revealed not only in Jesus' active struggle against suffering during his ministry but especially in his death on the cross. The cross of Jesus reveals the extent of God's involvement in the suffering of the weak. God is not merely sympathetic with the social pain of the poor but becomes totally identified with them in their agony and pain. The pain of the oppressed is God's pain, for God takes their suffering as God's own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives. The oppressed do not have to worry about suffering because its power over their lives was defeated by God. God in Christ became the Suffering Servant and thus took the humiliation and suffering of the oppressed into God's own history.[53]

Taken together, the image we then have of Jesus becomes identifiable to 'hood culture.

LISTENING TO THE SPIRITUALITY IN A HIP HOP NARRATIVE OF SUFFERING

While artists like Tupac become the archetype for rap artists seeking to discuss street theology, and rap music dealing with pain and suffering offers community and potential hope for youth seeking solace and identity, well known pastors like Bishop T. D. Jakes argue that "in the absence of strong unity in our community, these entertaining voices have been mistaken 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."[54] Other pastors that I interviewed exclaimed, "Rap represents a generation that is under the judgment of Christ. Sure they suffer; God is trying to get their attention."[55] Others contend that rappers like Tupac represent a "generation that has stomped on God's

[53]Ibid., p. 161.
[54]T. D. Jakes, interview with Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me,* p. 208.
[55]Taken from an interview in 2005.

law and moral authority." One pastor even told me that it is not enough to simply listen to the "pain" of the song, we must move beyond that to the "liberating power of Jesus."[56]

But whose narrative and story is "morally correct?" As Noel Erskine states, are we "circumscribing prophecy?"[57] While I agree that not all rap and Hip Hop culture is "holy" or "sacred," certain rap songs do produce, as Ralph Watkins describes, "a God-conscious awareness . . . defined by explicit referencing to God and Jesus within the context of questions related to the ultimate questions of life and being."[58]

More important, the narrative of suffering is extinguished for the Hip Hop community when pastoral figures devalue its stories of suffering. As Dyson states, such dismissal "slights the initiative and ingenuity of poor black youth who filled a leadership vacuum with artistic expression."[59] If we are to follow strict religious paradigms for spirituality and the search for God, then we run the risk of losing an entire generation.

Bishop Jakes and the many other pastors that I interviewed are not completely incorrect. We do have to critically evaluate the message of rappers, along with being able to decisively assess the differences between sheer entertainment and christological worth—particularly during this party/ strip club rap era. Yet, as Dyson argues, there are countless sacred narratives that are hardly distinguishable from rap.[60] From Jeremiah to Jonah, the Psalms, Job, Paul, and even Jesus, "we must not forget that unpopular and unacceptable views are sometimes later regarded as prophetic."[61]

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[56]Taken from an interview in 2005.

[57]Noel Erskine, Rap, "Reggae and Religion," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 79.

[58]Ralph Watkins, "Rap, Religion and New Realities: The Emergence of a Religious Discourse in Rap Music," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 185.

[59]Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me,* p. 208.

[60]Ibid., pp. 208-9.

[61]Ibid., p. 209.

What is the pain and suffering being felt by a particular rapper or community? Does it have merit? Is it just complaining? Even if so, is the complaining valid? These are just some of the questions I pose when listening to rap songs. Listening, for many Christians, means waiting for an end to a person's monologue before offering advice. The Hip Hoppers I have interviewed all agreed that what they needed was not pity, advice or even a solution—just someone to listen. Far too many times the suffering and pain of each person was whittled away by simplistic resolutions and belittling comments. One interviewee told me, "Christians are the worst! They never listen, they always too busy wantin' to give you answers fo everythin' man. I just don' need that all the time, you know what I mean? I just need someone to listen to me, ya know what I'm sayin'? that's for real."[62]

Hip Hop's theology of suffering brings about self-awareness and restoration within a person.[63] If we are able to listen to the pain in these narratives, we may actually learn something from it and actually take away a deeper understanding of the person telling us about it. But we must remain quiet long enough to actually grasp something from another person's experience. One thing Hip Hoppers will not stand for very long is inauthentic gestures and demeaning suggestions.

I suggest we begin connecting with the symbolic super structure of suffering within the Hip Hop matrix. It is deep. It is complex. It is a sea of mystery that can easily overwhelm. However, it is also a part of the narrative of Hip Hop, and therefore part of the narrative of Christ.

[62]Taken from an interview in 2006.

[63]Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 118-21.