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Hip-Hop:

A Call and Response to God’s Self-Communication

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“How is it that something that has no definitive theological intent”, underground hip-hop “being our prime example, provides such a spiritual encounter, and how then can we dare say that one might experience a connection with the true God” in and through hip-hop? (Chung 4) In order to make such an argument possible several theological dilemmas must be addressed. But first, I must qualify that these arguments are a personal attempt at understanding how and why hip-hop is not only liberation but also a point of contact between God and creation. The significance of this exploration reveals the music’s potential to convey the living Word in a manner that moves the minds and bodies of youth around the world. The underlying arguments, however, reveal a deeper message: God’s relationship with humanity is shrouded in mystery, but God and humankind are always seeking ways to communicate with one another, and part of that communication is mediated in and through creation. I take this journey under the guidance of the musicians, teachers, and theologians who have helped shaped my understanding of spirituality and hip-hop music.

The first three chapters of this thesis will attempt to show that God’s saving grace is present outside of explicitly religious situations, and provide reasoning for the claim that God is not only working in the world, but also that we can encounter God in profound ways through authentically human experiences. The last three chapters will examine hip-hop in light of a theological anthropology, to help determine whether or not the music is an efficacious medium to experience liberation, which is in essence, God’s saving grace.
Chapter 1.2

Grounded in a Theological Anthropology

Hip-hop is a powerful symbol for God’s presence in the world. God is present in the socio-political and intellectual liberation that conscientious hip-hop provokes. Through the beauty of music that is self-expressive and authentically human, hip-hop can bring together a community of listeners who share a common cause. Ra Scion, an Emcee of two man group, Common Market expresses the intent of his hip-hop, in a track called Connect For:

Connect For: The sake of my beloved mentor,
Connect For: Those exposed to rain when it pours
Connect For: The benefit of every last fan
Who raised a hand on your command, let’s
Connect For: The chance to support the amateur
Connect For: Revival of the vibe of ‘The Score’
Connect For: The sake of the kids, if nothing more
They can’t afford to face another closed door, let’s
Connect For (Common Market).

Listeners who connect with its cause and relate to its content, experience a music that is both visceral and empowering. The attributes and affects of hip-hop are for me audible symbols of an invisible Christ working right here and now in the world.

The first step of this argument is proceeding with an open-mind, one critical toward the common Christian conception that grace and revelation come only through the sacred scripture and the Christian church. Written into the Christian tradition is the idea that Christianity provides the most efficacious medium for “saving” grace. In addition, the Christian bible is viewed as the only source of true revelation. I see this all too often
in many denominations where Christians dismiss the wisdom and spirituality of other religions and cultures. When this happens Christianity loses out on the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of God’s work in rest of the world. This thesis explores the divine presence outside the context of the Christian religion, and questions the efficacy of underground hip-hop in providing spiritual nourishment. As a Christian, however, I cannot help but frame my spirituality within the Christian tradition. The point, more so, is to not limit my spirituality to one source, less I be “trapped by our own views and prejudices” (quoted from Van Beeck). Rather, this thesis is for my own encouragement, to not limit my spirituality to one source, but to find ways of harmonizing important aspects in my life, like music, with more traditional forms of spirituality, like being a Christian.

I believe in a God who saves. One who emptied himself and entered into humanity, in all its finitude and particularities to show us, important levels of salvation occur within the human condition. One of the theologians who has helped shape my theological understanding is Karl Rahner, a German Catholic theologian writing during the Second Vatican Council. Beginning in 1937, in a collection of lectures given at Salzburg, titled *Hearers of the Word*, Rahner began discussing the “transcendental human condition that made knowledge of God possible” (Attunement). He proposed a theory known as God’s self-communication, where he argued, God freely involves himself in creation. To the extent of which God is somehow invested in creation, his self-less nature entails a longing for creation, especially humankind, to reach fulfillment.

According to Rahner, humankind is the finite being at the heart of the infinite. Therefore, any form of incompleteness in people reflects a freely chosen void in God. Because of this freely chosen act, God longs for our fulfillment, for it constitutes the
actualization of the salvation process. God’s self-communication is the essence of grace and its purpose is to achieve the fullness of the eschatological vision-salvation which is perfect communion among God and creation. The first step of God’s self-communication is to give us ears to hear his message, hence the title of Rahner’s lectures, *Hearers of the Word*.

Rahner builds this theory around a theological anthropology, where he explores the “subjective human condition that enables human beings to attain knowledge of God” (Attunement). His theory begins with the human person, the hearer of God’s self-communication. By the very reality of the incarnation, considering an anthropocentric theology is not in opposition to more classical theo-centric theologies. God and humanity are inextricably linked. Although God is infinitely above and beyond human comprehension, He nonetheless reaches out to us. That alone warrants a theology whose point of departure is the human person; for we play an essential role in God’s self-communication, not only as hearers of the Word, but also as beings who can respond to God. In her article, *Starting with the Human*, Anne E. Carr describes Rahner’s theology as such:

Rahner’s vision of the whole of theology opens with the human person, who is the “hearer” of the Christian message. Thus he begins, not with God, nor with scripture, nor with the teachings of the Church, but with the one who is presupposed by Christianity as the hearer of its gospel. He addresses the person as a whole, both as human—in our everyday experience of ourselves, others, the world—and as Christian—familiar with and already influenced by the Christian message. (A World of Grace 23)

How can we hear God’s self-communication? “It is customary to speak of his theology as following what Rahner himself called a transcendental anthropological method. His
thought is focused on the human subject, analyzed transcendentally, historically, and existentially” (Attunement). As beings created in the image and likeness, Rahner maintained, we are ontologically positioned to receive God’s self-communication for three interrelated reason. First, human beings, and all of creation for that matter, are dynamically oriented toward salvation. St. Thomas Aquinas provided the logic to this claim when he essentially argued, “Since God is the creator of all and the final cause of all, all creation tends toward God.” (Thompson 18). This is what Rahner referred to as the objective dynamism. God placed in every person an internal compass that functions as a guide toward the eschatological vision. This divine spark enables us to recognize important steps along the journey. Michael Chung, author of the *Artist and Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, describes the divine orientation as a free and loving act of God. Chung writes:

> The human person, therefore, is the ‘event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God. God’s self-communication means that God makes his very own self-the innermost constitutive element of the human person. (8)

Chung argues that we are “not merely recipients of grace *a posteriori* in terms of a visible faith but also exist with an inherent component of grace that is *a priori* in existential terms” (8). This is what Chung refers to as “the innermost constitutive element of the human person” (8). Human beings created in the image and likeness, possess a divine orientation, which represents an implicit desire to be in relation with God, even before we are fully aware of it. This orientation is accompanied by several ontological and existential postures that characterize the human condition. The human condition, in light
of the incarnation, becomes the very platform from which we receive God's self-communication and therefore respond.

“A central aspect of Rahner’s transcendental or existential analysis, outlined in Spirit in the World, is the view that human knowing is characterized by a dynamic orientation toward, and in anticipation of being as a whole, as the infinite horizon of all particular things” (Attunement).

The human dynamism which is what implicitly moves us toward encounters with the divine is partly rooted in an intellectual capacity to grasp the infinite horizon of being each time we observe particular beings. Rahner develops his ontology under the influence of Martin Heidegger, the 20th century German existentialist. Put very simply, every individual thing, both animate and inanimate, has its own particular being. Underlying every particular being, is being as such, or as Rahner labeled it, in an essay titled Openness of Being, “the infinite horizon of all particular things” (8). Heidegger claimed that the infinite horizon, being as such, is the grounding of all of reality. Rahner takes this notion a step further and moves to the deeper conclusion that God is the ultimate grounding, beyond being as such. Therefore, according to Rahner, God is the ultimate mystery, but somehow God is revealed implicitly whenever we understanding particular beings in creation.

Although God is the ultimate mystery which we shall never fully grasp, we are created in such a fashion, that when we come to know particular beings, in essence we come to experience God. According to Boyd Coolman, author of Gestimmtheit: Attunement as a description of the nature-grace relationship in Rahner's theology, “for Rahner, it is God who is given as the un-objective, co-intended horizon of being, and
who is experienced non-objectively and unthematically as such” (Attunement). Grasping the totality of being through particular entities, functions as a “pre-understanding of God, in as much as God is that being that is implicitly and unthematically sought in all thought and action” (Attunement). The use of the word “unthematically” describes a type of encounter with the divine that is experienced outside of an explicitly religious context. Rahner suggests that in the background of our experiences, even without fully acknowledging it, God is present, albeit implicitly. The potency of this unthematic religious experience will, of course be determined by the individual’s receptivity.

The third reason Rahner believed humans are positioned to hear God’s self-communication is because humankind is the question to which there is no answer. This, Rahner contends, is precisely what allows human beings to be “incomprehensible” (3). He identified this aspect as the transcendental human condition, which he discussed in his later work, *Spirit in the World*. The transcendental human condition operates on two levels, an intellectual and existential. Human beings blessed with an intellect can always raise questions about particular beings, not necessarily in a quantitative sense, but in a deepening sense; our intellect allows us to ask questions about origin and purpose. These types of inquiry naturally lead to questions about God. Rahner developed his notion of transcendentality in *Hearers of the Word*, where he “argued that questioning, the radical openness of thinking to being, represented in fact the dynamism of the mind as open to God” (Attunement). Our ability to grasp God unthematically can therefore be enhanced toward a more definitive spiritual examination, through our radical questioning and a natural orientation toward God.
The next part of the transcendental human condition operates on an existential level. The two, however, should not be regarded as separate. This latter condition is our ability to transcend our facticity. Facticity, in a Sartrean sense refers to our givens, race, sex, age, past events, and so forth. Essentially, Rahner contends, human beings are not simply the outcome of environmental and biological factors. Instead, we are endowed with the gift of novelty and freedom. The transcendental human condition, therefore, refers to a part of our humanity that enables us to transcend facticity and to be open to the realistic possibilities that we are able to set for ourselves. To phrase this far reaching notion quite simply, humanness is not a stagnant reality; everyone can grow, change, and redefine themselves. The transcendental human condition seemingly refers to the potential to progress. When this notion is coupled with our orientation toward the divine, Rahner seems to argue that human beings can move toward God, even before we come to a full realization of our desire to seek God. In addition, the ability to transcend manifests itself as an affinity that we share with God, mainly incomprehensibility. Of course, God is divinely incomprehensible. Nonetheless, this affinity establishes mutuality, upon which communication and knowledge of God is further made possible. This triad of human postures constitutes our ability to hear God in the world. When these three “postures” are examined in relation to one another, we find that human beings are creatures poised to receive God’s self-communication in the world.

Proving our receptivity is the first step of God’s self communication. “In an anthropological sense, humankind exists in an essentially elevated state by God’s decided self-communicative expression in our being which is indicated by an openness to God—even if we are less than fully aware of it”(Chung 7). In other words, Rahner believes we
are divinely oriented, or as he says open to transcendence—even before we come to a full realization of our desire to seek God. Rahner’s message is quite clear: The human person already possesses an orientation to receive God’s self-communication outside of an explicit faith context. Coolman writes:

Rahner saw the human being as poised to be addressed by God, that is, in its ordinary, temporal interaction with material things, the human being is listening for a possible word of revelation in history. This ontological structure is the condition of possibility of being addressed by the Word itself, which the Father speaks to humankind, primarily in Christ, but in other ways as well. A human being, then, is that creature whose basic posture is an “attitude of listening to an eventual revelation” from God. Thus, the human person’s ontological posture—as that of one who is called to listen in history, listen in her ordinary, everyday concourse with ordinary, everyday things for a word of revelation from God—is the natural orientation of human beings toward God (Attunement).

Rahner’s notion of God’s self-communication implies that God is presencing himself in and through creation. Furthermore, theologians like Coolman and Chung believe that what immediately emerges, then, “is a picture of God’s revelation not limited by His own self-communication but by the limits of apprehension by the recipient,” hence the need to look beyond a particular faith tradition, and an individual’s own views and biases so as to be more receptive toward God’s presence in the world. Paul Knitter provides his thoughts on how such divine resonance in our being might appear in our experiences. “Throughout his career, Rahner tried to describe the manifold ways in which…the Divine makes itself felt in our natures…as a deep feeling, vibrating within our most human activities” (Quoted by Chung 5). Hip-hop symbolizes the deepening of one’s humanity. In creating and listening to the music, people can actualize and strengthen the ontological and existential postures that enable them to encounter the living Word in creation.
Rahner’s idea of God’s self-communication establishes our capacity to be hearers of the Word. The next chapter will explore how God communicates to humanity. In exploring this topic, we ultimately are forced to rethink how we view grace and revelation.

Chapter 2
A Single Plane

One...Love, one...music, one...people,
One...movement, one...heart, one...spark
If we are hearers of the word, what is God communicating, and how does he communicate with us? The traditional response to these questions were in part answered by the Christendom model, a mentality based on certain doctrinal positions and church teachings that bifurcated the world into two separate realities; the sacred and profane. The eternal world of the sacred is occupied by God. His grace and revelation are then mediated through church teachings and sacraments, and through them grace enters into the profane and temporal sphere. The historical and theological developments that led to this overall position need not be discussed at length. But the decisive mentality is still present in many important sections of the Christian religion. The belief that the Church, representing the sacred is somehow in opposition to the profane world is called the Christendom model. For the purpose of this argument, the question of Christendom is essentially this question: can grace and salvation be present in creation? The Christendom model is problematic because it frames God’s salvation and revelation as events that are independent of the profane world.

In order to make my argument, however, I need to place God outside the church, and prove that He is present also in the temporal sphere of creation. The Christendom model, therefore must be addressed. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez describes the Christendom mentality:

In the Christendom mentality, and the point of view which prolongs it, temporal reality (the world) lacks autonomy. They are not regarded by the Church as having an authentic existence. It therefore uses them for its own ends. This is the sequel of the so-called “Political Augustianism” The plan for the Kingdom of God has no room for a profane, historical plan. The
Church is regarded substantially as the exclusive depository of salvation: "Outside the Church there is no salvation" (189).

Due to this Christian ideology, Gutierrez argues that "the Church feels justified in considering itself as the center of the economy of salvation" (Gut 189). Creation, because of its material and temporal nature is somehow an inadequate medium for God's grace and revelation to flow into the world. The Christendom model maintains that because the material temporal world lacks autonomy, creation outside the context of religion is not worthy to be part of God's redemptive and salvific work.

From the Christendom perspective, salvation is an event that occurs independently and outside of the temporal sphere of human history. As for grace and revelation, they are revealed through the medium of the Christian religion. This, however, takes God outside of creation and on a very significant level, divides the human person between the divine image and likeness and material and temporal condition of our being. But it is precisely in and through our material and temporal nature that our divine image and likeness becomes actualized.

Gutierrez' theology of liberation seeks to "recover the idea of salvation as an intra-historical reality". Gutierrez writes: "There are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, 'juxtaposed' or 'closely linked', the history of salvation is the very heart of human history" (86). Essentially, what thinkers like Gustavo Gutierrez and Edward Schillibeeckx, a Belgium Catholic theologian, hope to portray is the image of God involved in human history, working in creation, and therefore achieving a single plane model of salvation-history. Both theologians posit the notion of salvation-history. Their arguments can be summarized as such. God has a plan for salvation, this is the greatest
Christian hope, that perfect communion among God and humankind will one day be a reality. The Christendom notion of salvation views it only in an eschatological sense, as in salvation occurs at the end of time. God’s salvation, however, is in fact an ongoing reality, which began with creation, blossomed in Christ and continues to work toward salvation through human liberation. This must be the case; otherwise we would already be in perfect communion. Salvation therefore, is a dynamic process of becoming. If salvation is present in history and creation, God must be present in the temporal sphere of creation. God is not limited to creation. Nonetheless, Emmanuel! God is present in a saving way in creation.

At this point, the lines between the sacred and profane world dissipate. Through the eyes of thinkers like Schillibeeckx and Gutierrez, we see creation as sacred, existing on a single plane with, and partaking in God’s saving work. Through this contemporary perspective of salvation-history, we gain an image of God who meets us where we are in our finite human condition. This reaching out to us reflects the objective reality of God’s love for his creation, which was exactly what God articulated most elegantly by becoming human in the first place.

How is salvation on earth possible? There are always two destinations in life: every step along the journey and the destination itself. The eschatological destination provides hope for the present, and living in the present, striving to make the final vision a reality, are small instances of salvation that keep the hope alive.

God’s involvement implies that his self-communication, which carries with it the message of salvation, speaks to all dimension of our humanity; that means from an abstract ontological level, to an existential temporal nature, all the way to our intellectual
and socio-political areas of humanity. After all, salvation in its original sense referred to wholeness. This truth is expressed deeply in the incarnation, God taking on the fullness of our humanity. If Christ came to save every person and the whole person, and salvation is an ongoing event that occurs in history (salvation-history), then salvation is tied closely to human liberation. Gutierrez makes an important connection between human liberation and salvation. He writes:

Salvation embraces all persons and the whole persons; the liberating action of Christ made human in this history and not in a history marginal to real human life-is at the heart of the historical event of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history (87).

The implication is that any act that liberates the human person from the oppression of sin, which is what separates us from one another, and it impedes upon salvation history, is an act of liberation performed by God in part through human and material efforts. Therefore, our temporal and physical nature becomes sacred and relational to the salvation process. Hip-hop is liberation; as such, God must be present in the music.
Chapter 3
Salvation, Creation, and Human Liberation

So far we have shown that because God is involved with his creation, He is communicating himself to us. And although this message is proclaimed most thoroughly through the incarnation, it is certainly not the only form of revelation. In the last chapter, concerning Rahner’s conception of the transcendental human condition, we discussed the universal capability of receiving revelation. It is a capacity given by grace a priori, to receive revelation unthematically, which is connected to our orientation toward God. Next, I showed how the incarnation expresses God’s concern and involvement with humanity. When these two ideas come together, we find an image of a God willing to work within our given conditions as finite imperfect human beings- hence a salvation in history. His self-communication and salvation are therefore, in part, manifested in creation.

Through creation God continues to reveal himself. Creation that serves in the purpose of human liberation, the whole human in all our dimensions is almost definitely a point of contact between the human and the divine. These encounters are salvific. For God to self-communicate is for God to be active in the lives of humanity. This point is made clear in biblical imagery where “the active presence of God in the midst of the
people is part of the oldest enduring Biblical promises” (Gutierrez 86). “The story of God’s relations with his creation and especially with humanity is none other than the story of his ever more generous, ever deeper presence among his creatures” (Quoted by Gutierrez 107). This objective reality is shown in the ontological postures that enable human beings to hear God’s self-communication.

The next step is to argue how God communicates through the human condition. Edward Schillibeeckx, a Belgium Catholic Theologian writing after the time of Karl Rahner, formulates a doctrine of creation that is held in “dialectical unity with salvation,” meaning that essentially, creation plays a significant role in God’s self-communication (Thompson 50). Schillibeeckx defined creation as “the continuing act of the infinite and transcendent God who establishes and preserves creatures precisely through their finitude” (Thompson 50). Schillibeeckx writes:

"Creation means that we may therefore be men in our humanity, albeit also in morality and suffering. However, what is itself a very oppressive burden means at the same time that God is with and in us, even in our failure, even in our suffering and death, just as he is in all of our positive experiences and sensations (Quoted from Thompson 49).

Schillibeeckx argues his position working from a Thomistic tradition. All of creation including the human person is entered into an open dynamism toward salvation. In other words, because all things have their beginning in God, the journey ends in God. For thinkers like Gutierrez and Schillibeeckx, the ending St. Thomas referred to is none other than salvation in an eschatological sense, which is perfect communion especially the “communion of human beings with God and one another” (Gut 85). From the view of salvation-history, however, creation partakes in the dynamism, and becomes the grounding and material upon which salvation proceeds. Schillibeeckx and Gutierrez re-
paint the Thomistic view of creation in a more contemporary light. Their theological reflection helps us move pass the Christendom model, to understand creation as a medium for salvation to flow into the world. The incarnation supports this position.

The incarnation reveals many truths. One of which is worthiness of our own humanity to be in relation with God. “Schillebeeckx argues that salvation coming from God only encounters human beings as they exist, that is in their historical and subjective reality” (Thompson 54). The life of Christ teaches us the most important guidelines in proceeding forward in a salvation history. Love your neighbor, and look out for God’s little ones. The salvation Jesus brings is not only the initial step toward the eschatological vision. His life, death, and resurrection teach us the important lessons like “being at the disposal of others, losing oneself for others and within this conversion, also working for the happiness, the goodness, and truth of humankind” (Thompson 57). This message of salvation, occurs in history, and is therefore made relevant and real by encountering theses messages in human experiences. Schillibeeckx writes:

Through the intermediary or agency of the liberating conduct of men in the quest of salvation-from-God, God reveals himself indirectly, as salvation for men. It is more especially in surprising, discontinues, historical events, experiences, and interpretations that God’s saving initiative is shown (Quoted by Thompson 60).

The incarnation therefore, demonstrates God’s willingness to meet us where we are. In addition, Christ’s humanity presents a definitive connection between human wholeness and liberation, which are both of course, steps in the direction of salvation. As previously mentioned, God’s message of salvation was articulated most elegantly though Christ, who represents a definitive step in Gods salvation. God became fully human; therefore, salvation entails the actualization of our own humanity. Because salvation
occurs on all levels of our humanity, including on an ontological and existential level, human development is necessary for the salvation process. Therefore, God must be present working in and through things in creation that promote human development. The next section will explore ways in which hip-hop promotes human development, if this is the case, then the argument can be made that God is authentically present in hip-hop.

Chapter 4.1

The Spirit of Hip-Hop in History

There is no music more powerful than hip-hop. No other music so purely demands an instant affirmative on such a global scale. When the beat drops, people nod their heads, “yes,” in the same way that they would in a conversation with a loved one, a parent, professor, or minister. Instantaneously, the same mechanical gesture that occurs in moments of dialogue as a sign of agreement which subsequently, releases oxygen to the brain, and this, broadens one’s ability to understand, becomes the symbolic and actual gesture that connects you to the beat. No other musical form has created such a raw and visceral connection to the heart while still incorporating various measures from other musical forms that then appeal to the emotional core of an individual.

–Saul Williams, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls.*

Hip-hop music is transformative. No longer is it strictly African American music made for the ghetto street plight, nor is it simply rhymes riddled with misogynistic lyrics that glorify sex, violence, and materialism, crafted over cheap and repetitive commercial beats. Hip-hop is bigger than all that and very multi-faceted. I intend to focus my thesis
on a specific thread, a sub-culture found in the diverse tapestry of hip-hop genres- the underground “good medicine” music, the conscientious and honest self-expression-type rap with symphonic styles and gospel-like values (Kingz). It is the more grassroots-type hip-hop, in general that I intend to focus on as I investigate hip-hop’s connectedness with the human and the divine. More specifically, I will examine the rap/poetry of underground hip-hop; the history from which it comes out of, the process of making the music and its affects for the artist and the listeners. A brief history that includes some monumental figures will help to articulate the spirit of hip-hop; the spirit that characterizes the old school and helps give shape to the post underground hip-hop generation. Drawing from common themes seen throughout the music’s rich history, I hope to make certain theological connections that support my claim that in and through this music one can encounter the divine, precisely because hip-hop is self-actualizing and liberating.

Let’s start with some hip-hop essentials. There are four main sub-divisions that make up the core of hip-hop: deejaying, emceeing, break dancing, and Graffiti (also called tagging). My brief history revolves primarily around the music and poetry of hip-hop, i.e. the DJ and the MC. Hip-hop is musically inclusive. It has its roots in “griots, spirituals, and African jives, bee bop, poetry, jazz, and R & B” (Toop 27). But hip-hop’s official beginnings can be traced back to the early 1970’s, in the West Bronx, a place affectionately known as “the Boogie Down Bronx” (DD). The 70’s was the era directly after the Civil Rights Movement. The generation of black and browns who followed directly after the movement, experienced for themselves, the racism and segregation that still plagued the minds of many Americans. Inner city Black and Latino life demonstrated
the failure to take to heart what the Civil Rights Movement was all about—equal opportunities.

Craig Watkins, an African American Studies Professor, describes the historical and political context in which hip-hop was bred:

When the historic aftershocks of urban renewal, resegregation, and capital flight settled, a new social and economic order had emerged in America. In the wake of massive shifts the gulf between America’s cities, populated increasingly more by black and brown bodies, and the suburbs, whiter and more affluent, grew wider and more severe. But in the midst of the volatile surge of social and economic change an exuberant youth culture started to take shape (Watkins).

Chronic joblessness and low-wages severely crippled Black communities in the 60’s and 70’s. Part of what urban renewal did was displace the local businesses within black communities; barbershops, mom and pop stops, corner stores and record shops across American cities were demolished and replaced by corporations and private investors. This created terrible job crises for African Americans.

Urban renewal also led to a dramatic loss in affordable housing. “Black communities were seen as eyesores” (Rose 43). Commercial industries built new neighborhoods to replace these black communities; ironically, the people who once lived in these communities could no longer afford the housing. The affects were not only physical poverty and homelessness. Tricia Rose, the author of Hip-Hop Wars, argued that the psychological effects were equally crippling for members in these urban black communities. She cites psychologist Mindy Fullilove “who refers to the destruction caused by urban renewal as ‘root shock’ the ‘traumatic stress reaction of the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem’”(Quoted by Rose 44). The culture, the pride, the sense of community and self-identity were all at risk in these communities. Hip-hop
scholars like Craig Watkins, Davey D, M.K. Asante, and David Toop argue that hip-hop became a way to deal with the hardships that Black and Latinos faced living in the slums of America during these volatile economic and political times. It gave a generation of disenfranchised youth a place to be- at the park, competing in rap battles, on the street corners break dancing with clubs instead of rolling with gangs. Most importantly, it gave those displaced by urban renewal and gripped by ghetto life a sense of community and culture- in essence hip-hop became a source of liberation.

If we are to take the notion of salvation history seriously and we believe in a God who saves, we need no longer ask the question, “What Would Jesus Do?” But rather, “What is Christ doing in the world right now, and to whom is he speaking to?” Almost always the least of God’s people- the adulterers, the widow, the sick, the tax collectors, they are the people who Christ pays particular attention to. They are hearers of God’s saving Word. If we take the work of Christ as a reality still happening in the world today, we ask the question, “Who are our modern day outcasts abandoned by mainstream society?” Based on the four gospels, Christ bestows his loving and life-changing care to the ones who need it most. Slavery, racism, segregation, gentrification, urban renewal, the root shock it caused, and the displacement of generations of black and brown bodies into ghettos suggest that the people who Christ was reaching out to most were the hip-hop generation. This generation was the first wave of black and brown bodies living in the late 60’s early 70’s that partook in the formation of the hip-hop culture. They would be the subjects of God’s love, and therefore the ones who experience liberation. The brief history of hip-hop provides some insight as to how God was present in the music doing exactly that. This is not to say that all of hip-hop served as liberation for the oppressed.
That would be a lie. However, you can find instances in which God was certainly there in an authentic and efficacious way. Why we can identify God’s presence in hip-hop is because anytime human liberation occurs, which entails the actualization of our humanity, our whole humanity, there is salvation present in history. Salvation comes only from God but is mediated through our finite human condition. Therefore, God is present and easily identifiable in certain threads of hip-hop that promote human development.

Historians trace hip-hop’s immediate roots back to the musical pioneer, Clive Campbell, more famously known as DJ Kool Herc. Herc and other early DJ’s, like Grand Master Flash, turned “a seemingly passive exercise-spinning records-into a dynamic display of personal expression and musical performance” (Toop 26). Kool Herc was born in Jamaica, where he was exposed to the newly developing musical form of the poor and working class communities: competitive deejaying. The music centered on the DJ and the turntables, an instrument used by the DJ to cut segments from other records to sample them over powerful bass rhythms and kicks.

When Herc moved from Jamaica to New York in 1967, he brought the music style with him. He performed at house parties and at competitions in public parks and people’s basements. Reggae, however, during the 70’s did not appeal to many New Yorkers. So Kool Herc, in an effort to connect with fans, brought in more familiar sounds to his music. Following in the Jamaican tradition, Herc incorporated musical clips into his performances, usually the most popular segments of songs. He then added percussions, or new bass rhythms to accompany the musical sample. Watkins describes this act:
A conga or bongo solo, a timbales break or simply a drummer hammering out the beat—these could be isolated by using two copies of the record on twin turntables and playing the one section over and over, flipping the needle back to the start on one while the other played through. The music made in this way came to be known as beats or break beats" (60).

Including segments from popular songs-of-the-day in his sets attracted a much wider fan base. “Herc is credited with introducing some of the earliest and most raucous block parties that define part of hip-hop’s lore” (Toop 26). Kool Herc demonstrates an important element in hip-hop: the desire to connect with your community. Through music, he found ways to reach out to people by creating something novel: music that was a relatable extension of himself. In addition, the music provided a boisterous, black-musical alternative that characterized the hood and fit the lifestyle for people living in the Bronx. Herc spoke the same slang and dealt with the same conditions that many of his listeners experienced. This only strengthened the role hip-hop music played in building community, especially among the youth culture. The parties gave young people a place to be and something to identify with, therefore creating more social ties, and renewing to some degree what urban renewal took away.

All people need a sense of community. Theologians like John Zizoulas argue that to be truly human one must exist in communion with others. The notion of community can be described as such:

Community is a group of people interacting in a shared environment. “Intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, risks, and a number of other conditions may be present and common, affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of cohesiveness” (community).

Therefore, hip-hop because it was local for inner city youth and the local artists were willing to adopt certain values in a community, the music represented a tool for social
cohesion and even community rebuilding. This was one way the music was liberating for these black communities in the 1970s, otherwise known as the hip-hop generation.

Another monumental figure that helped developed modern day Deejaying was Grandmaster Flash. Flash, born Joseph Sadler, grew up admiring Kool Herc. But the young and ambitious Grand Master Flash knew ways to improve upon Herc’s techniques. Through innovation and meticulousness he developed the famous backspin technique.

Craig Watkins describes some steps in Flash’s musical performance:

Grandmaster Flash learned that by using duplicate copies of the same record, he could play the break on one record while searching for the same fragment of music on the other (using his headphones). When the break finished on one turntable, he used his mixer to switch quickly to the other turntable, where the same beat was queued up and ready to play. Using the backspin technique, the same short phrase of music could be looped indefinitely (Watkins 28).

Along with other techniques, like scratching and Flash’s famous clock theory, in which “individual instruments on records were punched out and placed over beats, Flash turned the traditionally passive act of playing music, into an innovative art” that produced new music on the spot (Watkins 28). According to Watkins, what Flash wanted was, to “take sections of songs from vinyl and reinvent them by producing newer, longer, funkier, versions: essentially, making new musical soundscapes from previously recorded material” (Watkins 28). Flash converted the act of deejaying into an art and even a science. The conditions under which Flash developed his skills in deejaying make it all the more astounding, as Watkins describes:

What makes the accomplishments of Flash and his contemporaries so impressive is how they imposed their creative will on what was, in reality, a hardscrabble landscape that provided few resources or opportunities for
young people who lived on society’s margins. At that particular time, Flash created most things from scratch (29).

Flash, in an interview, elaborates upon his experience: “I had to take microphones mixers and turn them into turntable mixers. I was taking speakers out of abandoned cars and using people’s thrown-away stereos” (28). Watkins argues that “how Flash and his contemporaries invented the modern DJ through sheer hustle, imagination, and innovation is not simply their story; it is, in a very real sense, the story of hip-hop” (28). As Marcus D, an emcee from Seattle once said, “going from nothing to something, that’s what hip-hop is” (Hip-hop is).

In many gospel narratives, those who know Jesus, experience a life-conversion. Take for instance the Samaritan women at the well, found in the gospel of John. The woman in this story is retrieving water at mid-day, alone. She is a woman who does not have a husband; she actually had five, and was living with a man who wasn’t her husband at that time. She is obviously an outcast, with little or no social status. In the story, as Jesus describes his parable of the water of life, she begins to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Excited with her discovery she heads back to town. In the end, she leads her whole village to a conversion toward Christ. She not only regained her status as a woman, she surpassed it, for after the conversion she was looked upon as a religious leader. John writes:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers (John 4 39-41 NIV).
This theme of conversion that leads to a transformation of the self is seen in so many biblical tales; the story of Joseph in Egypt or David’s rise to power, for instance. If there is one thing we can draw from these narratives, it is God transforms us. If we take salvation history seriously, we ask how God is transforming us today. Hip-hop was certainly transformative for many who partook in the creation its music and culture back in the early 70’s.

Flash signifies the transformative power present in hip-hop music. His artistry serves as a reminder that a situation should not define us. As creatures who strive and persevere, we can “origami a situation from what is considered unsuitable to something beautiful” (Living Legends). Sheer hustle, hard work and determination, along with creativity pays off. Hip hop music symbolizes this truth, as seen in the musical career of Flash. Hip-hop music provides the creative outlet that can lead an artist to personal agency. Personal agency is of course an act of transcendence, as such it is the actualization of our transcendental human condition.

When deejaying became more prevalent at the party scene during hip-hop’s early days, “young party goers began reciting popular phrases, using the slang of the day” (DD). The activity became known as rapping. Early raps were mainly clever shout outs of the MC hosting the event. The MC (Master of Ceremonies) would speak in between instrumental sets, shouting out to individuals or groups in the crowd. Eventually, listeners began shouting out their own names and slogans, typically in rhyme form. Most raps consisted of re-mixed versions of old play ground rhymes. However, MC’s would add their own clever twist into the mix to frame the rhyme with in a more fitting context. Davey D, a prominent hip-hop journalist and scholar states: “As this phenomenon
evolved, in an effort to be different, MC’s began to develop more elaborate rhymes to convey stories and messages” (DD). Rhymes evolved into more complex schemes, and eventually raps incorporated literary devices such as alliteration, word play, and double entendre.

Raps were nothing new, they have their roots in “disco street funk, radio Dj’s, accapella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-robe rhymes, prisons and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens all the way to griots of Nigeria and Gambia” (Toop 19). Although rap’s official title emerged in the early 70’s, speaking messages above a drum beat is a tradition that can be traced back to West Africa. The reason for citing this is that many artists that I enjoy today carry on the tradition of using rasps to convey important social and political messages. In Rap Attack volume 3, musician, author, and writer David Toop references Ruth Finnegan, and her book Oral Literature in Africa. Finnegan describes how “poetry and music could function as a social weapon”, she writes:

Lampoons are not only used between groups but can also be a means of communicating and expressing personal enmity between hostile individuals. We hear of Galla abusive poems, for instance, while among the Yoruba when two women have quarreled they sometimes vent their enmity by singing at each other, especially in situations-like the laundry place-when other women will hear. Abusive songs against ordinary individuals are also sometimes used as a means of social pressure, enforcing the will of public opinion (Quoted by Toop 31).

To use words that express feeling is to vent in a non-violent fashion while actually solving conflicts that are internal and external to the performer. The act demonstrates the powerful functions lampoons had among African tribes. Hip-hop has its roots in lampoons. Toop goes on to say, “in the savannah belt of West Africa this social pressure is embodied by the caste of musicians known as griots” (31). BBC News, in an article
titled *Africa*, writes that “centuries before hip-hop music existed, the griots of West Africa were delivering stories rhythmically, over drums and sparse instrumentation. Griots functioned like a “news paper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity” (quoted by Toop 32). Toop references Paul Oliver’s book *the Savannah Syncopators*, to demonstrate how much time and skill went into this verbal art form, Paul writes:

> Though he has to know many traditional songs without error, he must also have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene. His wits can be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable (quoted from Toop 32).

Griots also served as social commentary. “Griots might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy (Toop 22). This art form according to David Toop is the ancestor of protest rap. “Most hip-hop aficionados identify Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” as rap’s initial foray into social and political commentary” (Watkins 20). In the song, emcee and lyricist Melle Mel “revealed a window into the conditions of urban blight that were ravaging many of America’s biggest cities in the early 1980’s” (Watkins 20). The idea of rap as social commentary was met with strong apprehensions. But this apprehension was surpassed by the creative and raw lyrics of Melle Mel. “He is recognized for his heartfelt performance and biting critique of American apartheid-like conditions” (Watkins 28). Melle Mel raps: “You grow in the ghetto, living second rate and your eyes will sing a song of deep hate” (The Message). I would even argue that rapping about his struggles was a proficient way of dealing with these hardships on many levels. T
Another monumental figure in the development of socially conscientious rap is KRS-One. KRS was born Kris Parker in 1962 in Brooklyn. He grew up poor in New York, where he was abandoned at the age of 13 and left homeless on the streets. At the age of 19, he met Scott Sterling at a Franklin Avenues’ men’s homeless shelter. Sterling, a social worker by profession, was also DJ Scott La Rock by night (Watkins 240). Together the two developed their love of hip-hop by forming the group, Boogie Down Productions, originally a gangsta rap duo that glorified the gun culture and gangsta way of life.

In 1989, the gang related murder of Scott La Rock sparked a conversion in KRS. It inspired him to form his Stop the Violence Movement, a movement dedicated to ending the rise of gang violence in black communities. KRS also gave public lectures regarding his music, clarifying his stances on important social issues such as the violence and sexism that pervaded the lyrics of many hip-hop artists of the time. “Along with hip-hop artists like Chuck-D, Sista Souljah and Paris, KRS-one began putting socially conscious rap on the map (Watkins 240). KRS’s basic messages surrounded the issues of “poverty, violence, racism, the ravages of drugs, corrupt law enforcement, the shake down ways of the music industry, and the commercial take-over of hip-hop” (Watkins 240).

With the help of rappers like KRS, Chuck D and Public Enemy, who viewed themselves not only as conscientious rappers but as street philosophers, musical scholars, and community leaders, hip-hop developed into a voice for new school consciousness. Hip-hop at this point, in the late 80s was much more than a musical genre. Listening to hip-hop became associated with a kind of political consciousness and an oppositional stance against the status quo. At lease this is what KRS hoped to instill among his listeners and “where venerable organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League
failed to fashion a political personality that excited young people, the bombastic styles and rhymes cultivated by socially conscious rapping with conviction did” (Watkins 240). Author and African-American Studies professor Craig Watkins believes the medium coupled with the connotation the music has is precisely what makes hip-hop such a powerful form of communication. Because the message is conscientious, it affects the listeners all the more deeply. KRS acknowledged this, and even viewed hip-hop as educational. KRS is one of the first artists to use the word *edutainment*—hence the name KRS-ONE-Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everything. This is another reason why hip-hop is liberating; on an intellectual level the music can free you from your own views and prejudices. Rappers expose a range of cultural experiences and perhaps terminology, alliterations, and allusions that can lead to further questioning, especially if the rapper is respectable.

Hip-hop for KRS was so much more than edutainment, the music was also spiritual. In 1991 he started the temple of hip-hop. “The Temple of Hip hop is a ministry, archive, School, and Society (M.A.S.S.). Its goal is to maintain and promote hip hop culture” (KRS-one). The temple of hip-hop is very communal with members from all around the globe and obviously takes on a religious character. KRS took the idea of turning hip-hop into a spiritual venue even further in his 600 page book titled, the *Gospel of Hip-hop*. In an interview, KRS clarifies this position:

I’m suggesting that in 100 years, this book will be a new religion on the earth... I think I have the authority to approach God directly, I don’t have to go through any religion [or] train of thought. I can approach God directly myself and so I wrote a book called The Gospel of Hip Hop to free from all this nonsense garbage right now. I respect the Christianity, the Islam, the Judaism but their time is up. ...In a hundred years, everything that I’m saying to you will be common knowledge and people will be like,
'Why did he have to explain this? Wasn’t it obvious (Quoted from KRS-one)?

My argument is not to make the hip-hop culture out to be a new religion or church, because it is not. I would simply like to note KRS’s contribution to viewing hip-hop as affecting us on an intellectual and even deeply spiritual level. I find this to be true about hip-hop. In fact, many artists that I will examine in the underground sub-culture of hip-hop follow in the tradition of elevating the art to a spiritual plane. Later, I present ways in which hip-hop provides spiritual nourishment for the artist and auditors alike.

DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel, and KRS-one were among the major orchestrators of hip-hop during its early years. They helped define the musical genre and the hip-hop attitude that continues to shape the spirit of the post hip-hop generation. It is important to mention these monumental figures because, too often those unfamiliar with the art form pass it off as violent and sexist music with meaningless lyrics, when in fact the music comes from a rich history and tradition, as seen in its Jamaican griots and its ability to incorporate various musical elements, all the way to its use as edutainment.

The first hip-hop generation, their struggles and the change hip-hop brought for them, in terms of community and consciousness are not directly connected to me. Although I can still appreciate their music for what it is, good hip-hop- politically infused, engendered, racially sensitive, and conveying relevant massages above sparse beats and intricate melodies, its message is not directly related to my struggles. In order to better understand how hip-hop can be liberating, and even transcendent, I need to bring hip-hop closer to home, out of the ghettos, because that’s not where I’m from. This
argument is a personal attempt to make sense of how hip-hop can be transcendent and a
divine experience. Therefore, I must refer to my generation’s hip-hop movement, but in
light of the artists who have shaped the movement and characterized the spirit of hip-hop.

Chapter 4.2

Exodus

And the Post hip-hip Generation

In the early years of hip-hop, the music was exclusively the art form for the poor
black and Latinos that lived in American cities during the time of urban renewal in the
70’s. Tricia Rose defines hip-hop as an “art form with particular emphasis of the black
voice.”(Quoted from Pate 27) During its early years, the grass roots feel of hip-hop gave
the music its vitality. Its locality all changed in 1979, when Sugar Hill Records produced
an eleven minute track titled “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang. The song was
first aired in 1979, on just two stations, “WESL-AM St. Louis and WBLS-FM New York” (Watkins 18). This was the first hip-hop hit single, peaking at number thirty six on the pop charts. Just a year later in New York, a radio dj named Mr. Magic introduced Rap Attack, the first radio station devoted to hip-hop (Asante 89). Hip-hop spread like wildfire across the nations in the early 80’s.

It wasn’t long before the music was featured on television on ABC’s 20/20, back in 1981. It was the first national TV story about hip-hop, titled “Rappin’ to the Beat.”(Asante 90) That same year Tommy Boy Records was found in New York. They would later produce artists like Queen Latifa and De La Soul. In 1985, Warner Bros, Records would buy 50 percent of Tommy Boy Records (Asante 91).

The 80’s were an exciting time for the hip-hop movement. Real rap music, true to the spirit of hip-hop, were setting records on Billboard Charts; for instance in 1982, Melle Mel’s *The Message* was ranked fourth on the pop charts (Watkins 22). As hip-hop expanded, the genre grew to include more components beyond its original four elements (emceeing, deejaying, breaking, graffiti)-beat boxing, street fashion, street language, and hip-hop entrepreneurialism. This last one involved the business of producing records and promoting them. The Sugar Hill, Boogie Down, Interscope, and La Face, represented some of the biggest names in hip-hop. “In 1984, Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin found Def Jam Records with eight hundred dollars and sixteen year old LL Cool J’s ‘I need a Beat’ ” (Asante 94). Hip-hop in the eighties rose to great prominence in the world of popular culture. “In 1985, Run DMC, released 'King of Rock,' the first rap album to go platinum, the following year, their album, 'Raising Hell' would become the first multi-platinum rap album, thus turning hip hop into a mainstream commodity”(Asante 95).
As hip-hop's popularity grew, its influences reached beyond its original borders, outside the ghetto and into white suburbia—an exodus if you will. “In 1987, the Beastie Boyz became the first white rap group” to reach number one on the pop charts (Asante 97). Hip-hop’s exodus from its original localized urban communities became a musical phenomenon that swept the nation. Hip-hop was no longer strictly speaking a black art. In the 90’s, artists like the Beastie Boys, Non-Prophets, Aseop Rock, Eminem, and Slug were redefining the racial boundaries of hip-hop. The music is now a global phenomenon that continues to be the voiced of the oppressed peoples literally all around the world.

There was no going back, once hip-hop left the ghetto, the myriad of styles and lyrical content blossomed. In recent years, hip-hop’s influences grew to be international. “Though created in the United States by African Americans, hip hop culture and music is now global in scope.”(Hip-hop.) There are well established rappers and DJ’s in countries like Canada, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Brazil, Japan, Australia, and Haiti. In an article titled “Hip-Hop” the author writes:

“According to the U.S. Department of State, hip hop is "now the center of a mega music and fashion industry around the world," that crosses social barriers and cuts across racial lines. National Geographic recognizes hip hop as "the world's favorite youth culture" in which "just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene" (Hip-Hop).

Although some non-African American rappers can relate to the struggles of young black Americans, hip hop due to its entrance into mainstream media, now transcends its original culture. In a very real sense, hip-hop’s entrance into the mainstream led to a watering down of the artistry that nearly killed the genre. However, the spirit of hip-hop remains the same especially in more grass roots hip-hop scenes. Hip-hop is still localized,
communal, and politically conscious. Rap continues to provide a voice for the poor and oppressed “people of the world who feel powerless to express their frustrations, hopes, and desires in routine and regular ways” (hip-hop). The lyrical content among the rappers of the post hip-hop generation can range anywhere from an oppositional stance against racism in America, to a critique of religion in the Philippines.

The purpose of the exodus chapter was to highlight the fact that although hip-hop has transcended its original culture, it continues to be the voice of a revolution that a multitude of communities across the world can understand and vibe to. In addition, the pattern of hip-hop, which is first local, then globalized, adopted and once again localized is essential for considering hip-hop as liberation. The music must be something you can connect with. I am not black, therefore noting how hip-hop has expanded but remained local, the argument can be brought closer to home.

I would like to explore the music of hip-hop, particularly the rap/poetry, the process of creating music and its effects on the artist and the listener. But first I must limit my range of study, for hip-hop is far too diverse and expansive. I will be examining some emcees who follows in the spirit of hip-hop, who view their music as community building and as providing a voice to the voiceless while explicitly acknowledge their role as truth seekers, party movers, change makers, street preachers, philosophers and teachers. I find this type of hip-hop most prevalent in a sub-genre of hip-hop, the underground “good medicine music,” with conscientious lyrics that profess gospel like values and who specialize in authentic self-expression (Kingz).

The question, how is it possible for God to be present in hip-hop was answered in the first three chapters, exploring the value in terms of human development of God’s
presence in hip-hop will be explored in the following chapters. I will examine rap/poetry, in light of a theological anthropology, the process of creating music and its effects on the artist and the listener.

Chapter 5
For the Artists

This is it when you spit you exist in that moment and if you’re sick with that gift then you rip it when you perform it then all that shit that you’ve lived begins to lift on your shoulders, and the audience will get to experience where your soul is
...Cuz I’m and MC won’t be the first won’t be the last/ just another B-boy and I ma die in my stance.

_I Said Hey_-Macklemore

Many hip-hop artists consider rapping to be spiritual. Evidence for rap’s spiritual position in hip-hop can be heard in the lyrics of many rappers. Tupac, for instance, once rapped a song titled “My Ghetto Gospel,” with Elton John singing in the background, “those who weep should follow me, I welcome you with hands.” In the last verse Tupac raps, “If I’m upset, you don’t stress. Never forget, that God hasn’t finished with me yet I feel his hand on my brain. When I write rhymes, I go blind, and let the lord do his thang.” Or take “rap/poet Immortal Technique in his internally Bleeding” hit on Revolutionary Vol. II, where he writes: “And this is prophecy, the words that I speak from my lungs The severed head of John the Baptist speaking in tongues Like Che Guevera my soliloquies speak to a gun/paint in slow motion like trees that reach for the sun.”(Pate 15) Or Macklemore where in a track called “The Magic”, he raps, “They say that you can never capture a moment, photograph or record it, but I swear I can when I bump them, as I bear witness to existence, setting in the distance for a sheer instance I become one with it.”

This chapter explores the fundamental reasons, in light of a theological anthropology, why such elevated levels of existence can be reached through rapping. The second move will be to connect these elevated states of being with liberation. The ultimate end is to illustrate that it is reasonable to suppose that God is present in hip-hop in a spiritually efficacious way. To demonstrate this position, I will explore the nature of rap/poetry, which is the lyrical component of hip-hop music.
“In hip-hop’s early days, rapping was a pass-time accessible to anyone. As a verbal skill one could practice rapping and hone his creation into perfection. There were no explicit rules other than, to be original and to rhyme on time to the beat of the music” (DD). This openness that characterizes even today’s hip-hop artistry, signifies the music’s limitless potential to convey a relevant message about society and the self. But back in the early 70s and even among ardent hip-hop communities today, rapping was a way to gain street credibility. When perfected, a rapper’s cut earned him or her “praises and positive affirmations among peers” (DD). Although rapping is a way to climb up the social latter, on a deeper level, as expressed in the lyrics of many underground emcees, rapping can also be spiritual.

To describe a place and a time, an experience or a collection of memories, in such a way that the emotions you first experienced are once again evoked in an audience, is powerful art. An emcee observes his/her surroundings; the images of himself and the outside world around him. When this sensory data enters the mind it arouses emotions on various levels of the human soul and the intellect interprets this data, assigning words, metaphors, and rhythms in an attempt to understand the experience. You breathe in, the air passes from the diaphragm through the voice box, and the words become articulated to create precise pitches and sounds. The sound waves ride the rhythm from the MC, through the chords and speakers, to at last reach the crowd. People respond with a head nod up and their fist in the air. Ideas and thoughts are then passed on. Communicating is a beautiful thing, especially in and through a rap song.

To create rap/poetry is to make sense of the world. It involves observation, interpretation and creative self-expression, and this process results in the actualization of
many dimensions of our humanity, including but not limited to, our ontological and transcendental human conditions. Rahner used the term ‘spirit’ to describe the essential component of humankind. As expressed in his *Spirit in the World*, spirit, according to Rahner, means humankind is open to transcendence. The ability to transcend involves the cultivation of our ontological posture and the transcendental human condition. Rap that provides the creative outlet for such actualization to occur is therefore spiritual in the sense Rahner used the term.

My argument begins with the human person, the hearer of the word, who in an elevated state of grace exists with a predisposition to experience God unthematically through our experiences in creation. According to Boyd Coolman, author of *Attunement*, “for Rahner, it is God who is given as the un-objective, co-intended horizon of being, and who is experienced non-objectively and unthematically as such” (*Attunement*). Grasping the totality of being, through particular entities, functions as a “pre-understanding of God, in as much as God is that being that is implicitly and unthematically sought in all thought and action” (*Attunement*). Put rather simply, God is implicitly reached and unthematically encountered in every act of knowing particular beings in creation. Rahner therefore argues that in the background of our experiences, even without fully acknowledging it, God is present, albeit unthematically. When this unthematized account of God is interpreted, the observer begins to understand his observation in light of his own subjective experience. So, though a rapper may not explicitly reference God as the back ground to his experience, nonetheless the act of naming creation is a sacred task, as it was when given to Adam in the beginning.
The process of creating raps involves an active perceiver, one to interpret the experience based on honest observation, so as to reach understanding. For theologians like Josef Van Beeck understanding the various layers of reality reveals to us for our correction and liberation the limits of our perception, enabling us to move past our own views and prejudices. This act of understanding is a process that makes us more human. As Van Beeck says understanding is “spiritual actualization.” Van Beeck argues that “in being understood, the object of understanding is drawn out of or abstracted from and liberated from the limited conditions of its particularity; it is placed in the broad light of reason and attains the freedom of the idea” (Van Beeck 22). Thus, secondly, in being newly understood, “it comes to inhabit a wider world of ideas; it gains intelligibility” (22). Van Beeck summarizes his point by: in being understood, the object of understanding attains “a new spiritual identity” (22). There is a mutually actualizing encounter between the object that is perceived and the one perceiving it. Therefore, in the process of creating music, an artist actualizes the human capacity to understand, interpret, and to name creation.

Under this view of creation, something as mundane as a bus ride can be transformed into meaningful and elegant rap. Take Geologic’s track, Joe Metro. On the surface, the emcee raps about his morning bus ride to work. The track begins with a brief piano intro, then an instrumental voice chants like the break of dawn, the beat drops and the bass comes in.

I reach beneath the skin of the street with each step,  
Walking closer to my final destination of death,  
when I’m laying to rest I’m only saving my breath  
the northwest fills the lungs/kills the pain on my chest (Geologic).
Without rest, Geo moves immediately into the first verse: “Take six quarters out the pocket drop in the box hop the 48, its stops often I jot my observation, watching citizens walking off of the Joe Metro Politan.” Geo’s rhymes express the world around him through his eyes. The bus ride and the Seattle scenery take on a new, musical light.

Our ontological posture cited in Rahner’s theological anthropology explains how human beings, created in the divine image, possess an orientation toward God. This orientation, according to Rahner, means that even unknowingly God is the being sought after in every act of human knowing. This condition is coupled with our ability to grasp God unthetically. Now to turn an artist’s observation into something beautiful like a rap, is to take an unthematic experience of the divine and describe it musically. On a deeper level, rapping about an observation is to individually thematize an artist’s experience through a creative fashion. By placing the observation in a personal and carefully-written rap, the observation gains a new intelligibility that can be interpreted as providing a closer encounter with God. In other words, placing the observation in rap form brings in greater clarity of God’s presence in that observation, specifically because the observation is expressed in a creative form and accompanied by a musical production that breathes life into the scene. Therefore, in the process of creating music, an artist fulfills his orientation toward the divine, first by seeking to understand the unthematised experience, in which a mutual actualization occurs; secondly, in expressing the experience through music, the desire to encounter God in every object of understanding moves toward fulfillment.

According to the theology of John Zizoula, another ontological posture that characterizes the human person is to exist as beings in community. This idea was
discussed in hip-hop’s early history. A human being can be complete only in becoming “a being-there-with others” (Pe’nounkou). That is, to be human is to be in relation with a multitude of others. As Geologic said, “we hardly know ourselves if we know nobody else, and only in our loneliness can home become a hell” (Sagaba). This ontological posture guides us along the salvation process by providing glimpses of the salvation that is anticipated in an eschatological sense: perfect communion between God and creation.

An underlying motive in all hip-hop is to communicate, which is the first step to building community; this desire is what moves an artist toward observation and self-expression. The images rapped about in Joe Metro portray familiar sights you would see on a bus ride in Seattle: “the colorful faces, the spaces, and places,” “Old Filipino Men speaking in their native tongue,” and “a first nation native catcher chiseled like a totem pole” (Geologic). These images capture the ethnic diversity of Seattle. The emcee draws from images that are recognizable to anyone who rides the No. 48. By drawing from common community experiences, Geo communicates a piece of himself, insofar as his rap is a subjective account of these events; however, the art is essentially relational, thus “people with [his phenotype], follow with a head nod up” (Joe Metro). At this point, his rap becomes relational and people connect with the music. Therefore, on an ontological level of being human, self-actualization occurs in two forms when rap is created. First, an artist observes creation, unthematically grasping God. Next, the artist re-shapes God’s message of salvation which God articulates through creation. The artist then reinterprets this experience through his subjective lenses and turns it into rap/poetry. In the process, the capacity to understand and name creation is actualized. More importantly, in creating
raps, an artist steps toward a more explicit encounter with the divine, each time he/she understands an observation through rap/poetry.

Secondly, insofar as all rap-poetry is created with the initial desire to communicate, the artist creates something that is relational, which fits another ontological posture of being human, to be in community. Therefore, both ontological postures are actualized. In turn, the actualization symbolizes movements toward human wholeness, which are steps toward liberation. Where human liberation is involved God is performing in history. Therefore, God is present in a very fundamental and ontological sense in creating rap-poems.

Creating music can also be liberating in an existential sense. Alexs Pate, author of *In the Heart of the Beat*, a book that explores the nature of rap/poetry, writes:

> What’s more, by speaking in this new rap/poetic form, the speakers could suddenly claim agency. The transformative power of rap/poetry is quite amazing. To be a poet, to strive to tell the truth about one’s life and circumstances, is also to take some responsibility and, consequently, some control over your social condition. This transformation is actually what coalesces into agency and personal power (Pate 27).

Many early rappers were placed in destitute situations that were beyond their control; for instance the first hip-hop generation, beginning with DJs like Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, experienced for themselves the systemic oppression of urban renewal and resegregation that plagued black communities in the 70s. Now to do what Melle Mel did in a track like *The Message* is essentially to take “all that ugly shit inside of you and try to make it beautiful, to use the cement from rock bottom and try to make it musical, so people can relate and understand where your going to”(Vipassana). An artist has just restructured an area of his life, brought it to new life, and has used it to his advantage. To
take apartheid-like conditions, and racism, and turn them into music that can empower not only young blacks, but also young whites to raise awareness of human need is powerful music. This is the transformative power of rap: it is prolific. Take for another example, Immortal Technique’s *You Never Know*, a well crafted rap that depicts the story of a woman Technique once loved, and how she died from HIV before he was released from prison. This story is a beautiful rap poem that masters the art of storytelling. Hip-hop provides a creative outlet for Technique to verbalize his experience and the lessons he has learned about love and loss. He takes such a painful situation and flips it into music that incorporates insightful metaphors, describes vivid scenes, and moves the emotional core of listeners. To create good rap music captures the human ability to restructure an experience, which then helps an artist take control of that hardship. In that sense, the transformative power of hip-hop liberates artists from the burden of their hardships. As Macklemore raps:

This is it when you spit you exist in that moment
and if you’re sick with that gift then you rip it when you perform it
then all that shit that you’ve lived begins to lift on your shoulders (I said Hey).

It does not do away with the problems all together; nonetheless, it sets an artist on the way to recovery. The creative outlet allows one to identify his/her situation and by articulating it musically through a rap, already they have taken steps to improve the situation and not be defined by it.

Hip-hop, in that sense, actualizes an artist’s transcendental human condition. In a track titled “Leaving the Past,” Technique captures the spirit of how music can help promote agency and a will to power. “And since life’s a gamble like the craps tables at
Vegas, I freestyle my life it’s not written in pages” (Leaving the Past). Technique does not entirely blame fate for his situation. He does not let facticity define him. In fact to “freestyle one’s life” is a direct reference to our freedom, the essential component of what it means to be human. Hip-hop then can also function as an audible symbol for one’s future aspirations as well as function as a symbolic acknowledgment of one’s personal freedom to improve her/his situation. Just as NAS rapped “If you believe you can achieve, then say it like this I know I can be what I wanna be if I work hard at it, I’ll be where I wanna be” (I Can). This is human spirit: the abilities to transcend facticity and to transform situations unsuitable into something beautiful. The outcome is liberation in two forms; first an affinity we share with God, transcendence, is actualized and nurtured. The second, as Gutierrez once described true liberation, one takes “control over his or her own destiny” (Gut 23). Rap is the creative outlet that empowers an artist to attain the liberation Gutierrez describes.

Part of the agency process involves the artist criticizing the world around him/her, hoping that will make it better. For instance, protest rappers lampoon government officials, criticize historical events, and bring to light their particular experiences in oppressive situations. Rappers, however, do not only break things down, they replace current systems of thoughts with new ones. It is as Geologic raps, in a track titled “Self-titled”: “Rebel with a pen letting off buck shots in three’s re-writing what it is into what it ought to be. They made a mockery out of the possibility but under constant revision is the poem that I be” (Geologic). Using raps to express what ought to be, is to hope and to dream of a better world. Gutierrez, in his book, a Theology of Liberation argues that to hope, is perhaps the most human act. An artist hopes for a better future which he then
expresses in a verse. To articulate this vision of the future though the medium of rap, the favorite youth culture of the world, is to begin the journey of making these visions a reality. It is the hope for a better future that pulls us toward the eschatological vision. Therefore, in the very expression of the hope for something better, a form of transcendence, a step toward the eschatological vision, is made. Later, I will argue that many rappers in the underground sub-genre of hip-hop articulate a message that is in line with an eschatological vision. But first I will discuss how hip-hop music can be liberating for a listener.

Chapter 6
For the Listeners

In 2009, Japanese-American film director Tad Nakamura created a 30-minute documentary celebrating the life and works of Chris Iijima. Chris was an Asian American “folksinger, educator and legal scholar,” who changed the landscape of the Asian-American movement in the late 60s and early 70s (Iijima). Inspired by the Civil rights movement, other ethnic groups, including Asian Americans, began fighting for equality in American society. In the 70’s, the issue of identity and place in American culture came to
the foreground of the Asian-American movement. Generations of Asian-Americans were
captured in a bi-cultural balancing act, in search of a place where they could truly be an
appropriate synthesis between their two cultural identities. Therefore, on a fundamental
level, to be an Asian-American was to work toward a society that accepted the Asian-
American identity. Chris Iijima, through his politically conscious music, created a place
in popular culture for an oppressed Asian voice, while ushering in wave of acceptance
toward other ethnicities and cultures in America. In an interview, Nakamura was asked,
“What was the most interesting thing you learned from Chris Iijima?” Nakamura
answered, the term Asian-American, as Chris used it meant more than just an ethnic
representation. For Chris, to be an Asian-American meant to be politically conscious and
aware of the changes necessary for a peaceful and just society. Most importantly, to be an
Asian-American was to be an activist (Interview on youtube). “For Chris, along with
Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, and ‘Charlie’ Chin, a new consciousness could be ushered in
through music, one that would inspire activism. Together the three formed a group called
Yellow Pearl (Iijima). In 1973, they produced their first album, A Grain of Sand: Music
for the Struggle by Asians in America (Iijima). Their music was an important part of the
development of Asian-American identity in the early 1970s.

Tad Nakamura’s documentary of Chris Iijima included several Asian American
hip-hop artists that continue the legacy of politically conscious music. Three Filipino
emcees, inspired by Chris Iijima, decided to make an album, titled a Song for Ourselves.
The soundtrack included clips and interviews with Chris Iijima and features his actual
music playing in the background of each verse. On a track titled “Divide and Conquer,”
the song begins with a speech given by a folksinger who performed with Chris, and in the background you hear the slow and righteous strumming of Chris’ guitar.

They (Yellow Pearl) were not a very musically driven group, they were a group driven by this idea that to be an Asian American was to refute what the mainstream was saying, and what the mainstream was saying was this was not your place, and this does not belong to you (Divide and Conquer).

The bass drops, and Geologic, a Filipino emcee from Seattle, begins his verse “you can’t just put a hand up and not stand up, hope with no passion, love with no action”, and ends with the line “A new generation asks questions, Chris and the Bam, and the fam had some answers, yellow brown people stand up, put a hand up.” Chris comes back into the chorus singing, “By yourself, you aren’t just by yourself, together we can all take a stand” (Divide and Conquer).

This for me is the epitome of hip-hop. It incorporates various musical elements, folk music, rapping and the beats of DJ Phatrick. Most importantly, it gives those marginalized by mainstream culture a sense of pride in their identity by giving them a song for themselves. In the end of “Divide and Conquer”, a female folksinger summarizes the overall message she found at Chris’ concerts: “I looked out and it was an audience all of Asians, but it wasn’t just speaking to them, it was making a statement, about this is who we are, and this is our song.” There is something so liberating about music that can make you proud of your ethnicity.

I am a Filipino-American. Growing up, I was never proud of that fact. Looking back, I tried very hard to be white, to speak white, dress white, profess similar values and adhere to a blonde hair and blue eye standard of beauty. I was living in bad faith, untrue to my Filipino heritage. Hip-hop changed all that. It was something new to hear a Filipino
emcee rap about experiences I could relate to; rapping in Tagalog or Illicano, mentioning Filipino dishes, adobo, rice, and kari kari, rapping about the struggles of being a Filipino American, and aspirations of making it so the next generation could be better off. Take Geologic, a Filipino emcee of The Blue Scholars, a Seattle hip-hop duo. On the Blue Scholars LP, there is a song titled “Life and Debt” where he raps “you and I are both Children of Filipino immigrants, from the same Island our ancestors smiling.” This for me is a song of solidarity. Geo also does some work with Bambu and Kiwi, two other Filipino emcees from LA, all of whom are featured on the album, A song for Ourselves, the album dedicated to Chris Iijima’s legacy. On one of Bambu’s album’s I Scream Bars, there is a song titled “Home Cooked.” The song begins with a Filipino love song, where a woman sings in Tagalog, roughly translated as “Even though we must depart from one another, like the sun rises we will be together again.” Geo drops the second verse on the track, a segment of the verse helps illustrate my point that hip-hop provides a significant sense of identity and cultural pride.

They say because I lost my native tongue that I forgot you my heart still pumps the blood of Datu Lapu Lapu and I got you, and truthfully how could I not without you and the children in the belly barely know a thing about you (Geologic).

In school, my teachers always taught us about Magellan, the brave Portuguese soldier who circumnavigated the globe. They never taught me about the tribal leader, a Datu Lapu Lapu who united eight other Datus in the Philippines and how he is still regarded as a great hero (bayani) today for leading the first uprising against the Spanish colonizers. Lapu Lapu captures the spirit of bayani, a word in Tagalog that translates to hero. Hero, however, is based in terms of loyalty to the community. Geologic and Bambu are both
active in instilling Filipino cultural pride in their designated communities through hip-hop music. This is their way of being bayani, which includes building solidarity. Bambu, for instance, is the Secretary General of Kabataang Maka-Bayan, Pro-People Youth in the Los Angeles area. KMB describes their mission statement on their website:

Kabataang maka-Bayan, or Pro-People Youth, is a progressive youth and student organization. Our aim is to raise the social consciousness of the youth to organize and mobilize in response to issues affecting our local communities, the oppressed people of the Philippines and other pro-people issues around the world (KMB mission statement).

Bambu helps this organization especially the youth section through hip-hop music, for it provides another common ground for community building.

When I saw Geo and Bambu live at a concert, I noticed just how many Filipino people were there. The fact that Filipinos were partaking in something like hip-hop, and doing a damn good job at it, made their message of tolerance and Filipino pride all the more powerful. Hip-hop in that sense was liberating because it made me proud of something I was, and it gave me a place to be, and a social movement to be a part of.

Identifying things about yourself, like culture and nationality are significant factors that constitute one’s facticity and identity. Therefore they must be recognized for psychological wholeness and authentic being, both of which are necessary elements of human wholeness.

Hip-hop music is not just a powerful source for community and identity based solely on race or cultural ties. Hip-hop can unite its listeners under a common cause and empower them for social activism. In fact, another reason I believe hip-hop is liberating is due to its ability to promote moral development on two levels; one theoretical and the
other practical. Two artists from Seattle illustrate how hip-hop can lead to such desired affects.

I first saw Gabriel Teodros, at a Mass Line concert in Seattle, where he was the first to perform in the infamous Mass Line Trio, a line-up that consisted of Gabriel Teodros, Common Market and Blue Scholars. Gabe’s music “tackles issues such as sexism, racism and homophobia, with constant references to his engagement towards the Third World issues” (Gabriel Teodros). Gabe’s music represents a progressive trend that follows in the tradition of KRS-One, which is to use hip-hop music as edutainment. The lesson Gabe promotes is one of tolerance and social consciousness.

“Survival of the post hip-hop generation means being deeply engaged in the mistakes of other rappers, confronting, challenging, and correcting the issues that have plagued previous generations.”(Asante101) Hip-hop historian, Craig Watkins argues that the financial success of the rap industry was built on the backsides of women. In the early 90s, rap music videos began appearing on international television. Images of women in scanty animalistic-like fashion highly popularized the music, but at the price of diminishing the role of women in society and hip-hop. The misogynistic overtones of hip-hop are a well established fact; however, in the post generation hip-hop movement, there are underground artists like Gabriel Teodros who confront this issue. In his album, cleverly titled Lovework, there is song titled “Chili Sauce,” where Gabe explores the patriarchal nature of hip-hop and expresses a genuine concern to combat that trend. In a later track, he delivers with passion and utmost sincerity the lyrics: “I want to change what it means to be masculine and see Hip-Hop grow to raise strong women lil girls who rip mics with the best of them”( Warriors). This line provides a “brief but lasting glimpse
into the psyche of a male feminist emcee, making it evident that Teodros values women and the role they play in Hip-Hop” (Jieshrae Washington). On his album Lovework, there is another track called “Warriors,” where Teodros raps:

Cuz what’s really hurting a woman is hurting us all. Women warriors, unheard stories of, mothers, sisters, daughter who rip mics, and spit to survive, keeping hip-hop alive, you hold the force to change the whole world when you rhyme, women warriors some people still only see you on the outside (Warriors).

What makes the message so significant is the audience. Teenagers will listen to his music and hopefully they will treat women with more respect in spite of it. To hear the message of equality and women’s rights expressed and popularized in hip-hop music, is to give a new voice to women which can reach a wide array of listeners, men and women, black and white and brown alike. The most important thing Gabe’s music does is help the mind be more receptive toward things like feminism and equality, and to be aware of the current problems presented by the status quo. Gabriel Teodros’ music creates a fertile ground upon which messages like treating women with dignity can be sown and eventually harvested. Conscientious hip-hop music can help develop the theoretical aspect of mortality. For one it makes doing good the new cool thing, and the music provides concrete images as to what that good looks like.

Common Market is a hip-hop duo from Seattle, who also promote moral development through their raps. Common Market often performed next in the lineup after Teodros. Ra Scion, the emcee, poses “questions about religion, politics and the state of mainstream hip-hop”, in his music (Common Market). “At the core of Common Market’s music is a critical, unapologetic world view that change is not only necessary, it is
inevitable, and can only come about through having love for and serving the people” (Common Market). In a song titled “Connect For”, Ra Scion raps about the intent of a collective effort:

Connect For: The promise to provide for the poor
Connect For: The prosperity of you and yours
Connect For: The simple fact size brings strength
Resources will reinforce our ‘weak links,’ let’s
Connect For: The possibility of Cold War
Connect For: The probability of that law
Connect For: The opportunity to ensure the force
Of our community’s rapport, let’s
Connect Four (Common Market)

Artists like Ra scion, and Gabriel Teodros take their role as MCs in promoting human development very seriously. As Ra Scion says, “MC means Mentor the Child” (Doors). Continuing in the tradition of KRS-one, he uses hip-hop to educate the youth. When I attended a Haiti benefit concert in the fall of 09, featuring Ra Scion as the closing act, the master of ceremonies, Kingz, would speak a message, between sets, roughly paraphrased: “Money helps, but to educate yourself about the events that go on in your world, also leads to substantial change.” Ra Scion professes a similar belief, and he implements the value of education and a critical mind not only in the area of politics but in the realm of religion as well. Ra Scion professes in his music, that when you think for yourself, “you posses the key to freedom,” but ultimately, for the purpose of others, “with an understanding that it’s your responsibility to teach one.” (Connect For)

Gabriel Teodros and Ra Scion label themselves as “conscientious rappers.” Their music operates on two levels, one theoretical and the other practical. Emcees, like Gabe and Ra, and like all good teachers, spark thoughts in the minds of their listeners. Messages contained in their raps reflect a preferential option for the marginalized, women
and the poor for instance, and inculcate a set of values that are easily identifiable with gospel values. An exegesis justifying this preferential option is not necessary. It becomes obvious in the Gospel of Luke, often labeled the “women’s gospel.” Now, to instill this value, by turning it into expressive rap, is to transform the music into a “symbolic force,” an audible symbol for an enduring higher good (Theo Art). Take for example a Common Market track titled, “Every Last one of us,” a song that captures the spirit of hip-hop in communion with Christianity:

We ‘bout to change the mentality
Of old world savagery into a new reality
One where teachers and lawyers will trade salaries
And liquor stores are razed to make way for art galleries
With one common thread we weave a global tapestry
Peace will be your motto when you follow the analogy
Down from the mountains to echo throughout the valley
It’s the shouts of the soldiers in my cavalry

When the system finally falls – who people gon’ call on to show conduct?
Every Last One of Us!
When the new sun rises and we’ve all survived – who knows it’s not just luck?
Every Last One of Us!
It’s a kingdom that we gotta construct – who’s ready to build from the ground up?
Every Last One of Us!
Who’s ready to commit? This is it, y’all – people unite and say what?
Every Last One of Us! (Common Market)

Listening to the music provides for many people their clearest experience of being part of a true cause. What makes it all the more beautiful is that the music is beneficial to society, especially the youth, and it holds the audience un-possessively. Maybe that is the only real difference between the hip-hop movement and organized religion. But nonetheless, the beauty and truth of the message, which are made clearer in light of the gospels, makes hip-hop a source of moral development because it raises awareness. Awareness can be
used in an educational sense. For instance, when I hear rappers like NAS talking about gentrification, Geologic rapping about the Regan presidency, or Immortal Technique rapping about the Honduran contra, I become curious and try to look for a deeper meaning in their lyrics. This inevitably leads to research on the subjects they rap about. This is one form of awareness that is promoted in hip-hop, educational awareness.

Another type of awareness the music fosters resembles a church mentality, which is to be communal. As seen in the music of Gabe and Ra Scion, the lyrics spark an emotional response that inspires one to do good. In addition, it provides images as to what that good might entail. Further, it encourages education on the subject at hand. Lastly, it promotes individual responsibility and the idea that to make real change ultimately it requires community. As Bambu said “change begins especially with yourself, and you’ll see that an individual becomes a group of individuals and that creates the climate for social change, you feel me” (Exact Change). All together these elements compose a necessary mind frame which is conducive for moral development and social change. In addition, the hope for a better society, expressed in politically conscious rap, represents an act of hope. Anticipation for a better tomorrow is what pulls humankind toward the eschatological vision. Rap then that expresses hope, as in the lyrics of Gabriel Teodros and Ra Scion of Common Market, who hope for the proper treatment of women and the change in values in society, ultimately aids in the open dynamism toward perfect communion among God and creation.

The nature of music is of course to move people. And thus we come to the practical level. “You can’t have hope without passion, nor love with no action” (Divide and Conquer). In other words, if you listen to it, you better try to live it out. This is part of
the internalization process, which involves taking an artist’s lyrics to heart. If the hip-hop is just heard on an aesthetic, feel-good level, which is often the case, then living out the values expressed in the lyrics is a moot concern. But many rappers, like Tupac, NAS, Talib Kweli, Common, Geo, Macklemore, Gabriel Teodros, Ra Scion, Bambu, Kiwi, Nam, and Kingz use their music intentionally as symbolic force which inspires listeners to pursue a higher good. To use hip-hop in this fashion is to actualize a great potential in hip-hop, which is to use the music as “good medicine” (Kingz). The affects of hip-hop as symbolic force are efficacious only for listeners who are willing to be receptive toward the message. If they truly internalize the message like, treating women with dignity, the affects will be manifested in situations where a male listener treats women with more respect or in situations where a woman demonstrates self-respect. When listeners are receptive, hip-hop music can move the minds and bodies of youth around the world, and get them to vibe to a set of values that are not too far from kingdom values. In other words, the messages contained in conscientious hip-hop promote moral development, which in turn, represent steps in salvation-history. At the very least, hip-hop will expose listeners to these moral values and popularize certain ethical trends among its listeners.
Chapter 7
Rapping It All Up

How is it that something that has no definitive theological intent, underground hip-hop, provides such a spiritual encounter, and how then can we dare say that it is an encounter with the true God? Hip-hop promotes Kingdom-like values, including community, equality, and a preferential option for the socially marginalized. The music can be used as a tool for social cohesion because of its locality and grassroots-like feel, which in turn can foment a sense of personal identity. Hip-hop promotes agency, and actualizes our transcendental human condition.

All of these "actualizations" and forms of liberation that hip-hop provide should not be regarded as insignificant. As Michael Heim, in an article titled "Living Conversation," stated: anything that promotes authentic human development, humanizes. That which humanizes, divinizes (Himes). This is not to reduce one to the other. Actualizing certain ontological postures, such as our ability to ask questions, to understand and thematize creation and to be in community with others are all necessary components for psychological and spiritual wholeness. This wholeness once again, becomes a colorful thread in the divine tapestry of the eschatological vision. Therefore,
hip-hop that promotes development in these areas are closely connected to a God working in the world to bring humankind toward perfect communion.

The same can be said about other powerful affects of hip-hop, such as agency and moral development. The call to agency is a prevalent message in hip-hop. And the music has been for me, inspiration to move forward in life, and to hopefully progress. In terms of moral development, hip-hop has helped me confront my own views and prejudices. In fact, it wasn’t until I heard a few tracks from Immortal Technique’s Revolutionary Vol. 1 and 2 albums, that I realized I was prejudice against rich-white people. Even more astounding, it was a upper-middle class white emcee named Macklemore, who helped me confront my prejudices. His music continues to challenge my views. The actualization and liberation hip-hop provides is not something mundane, but truly it promotes human development. As such, an essential connection between God and hip-hop can be drawn.

My next point is to make the connection between God’s self-communication and the liberating affects of underground hip-hop. All of creation is part of God’s self-communication. All of creation including the human person is entered into an open dynamism toward salvation. Schillebeeckx describes creation as God’s boundless saving presence through our finitude. Now to take what God has communicated to you through creation and to turn it into a rap/poem is to individually respond back to God’s self communication. Therefore, our ability to hear the word includes an ability to respond to God’s self-communication. Hip-hop, for an artist, can be a powerful way to respond.

Music is a process; therefore, of taking the material that God has chosen to reveal his salvation through, and turning it into something thematized that fits the individual. A rap accurately takes into account the truth of an experience as well as the individual
experiencing, and so a mutual actualization occurs. Hence the artists and the objects
being rapped about take on a new spiritual light. Salvation requires the wholeness of our
humanity, which entails that we actualize our capacity to observe, interpret and creatively
express. Hip-hop is also a response to God’s self-communication, in so far as the
ontological postures that enable us to hear God’s message in creation are cultivated
throughout the creative process of rapping.

In addition, raps promote agency in an artist, by creating rap/poetry, the artist
already acknowledges his facticity and begins the process of moving past it. Therefore,
hip-hop helps actualizes our transcendental human condition. This is another way in
which one can respond to God’s self-communication, saying yes, *I’ll use what you gave
me, even if it’s unsuitable and I’ll turn it into something beautiful*, like art. In addition,
when a rapper spits some honest truth about the self or social justice, he passes on God’s
self-communication in a more explicit form then when he first experienced the
unthematized God working in the background of his experiences. He then draws God’s
message of salvation from obscurity and thematizes it into gospel-like values that are not
explicitly Christian, but nonetheless promote human development. The listeners then
respond by allowing the music to move them on levels where they can be empowered by
the music and join in the fight for a more just society. We see this in politically conscious
rap, in artists like Tupac, Nas, KRS-one, and Geologic. Partaking in the movement then is
the listener’s response not only to the artists’ music or cause, but also to God’s self-
communication as well.

Because hip-hop provides a creative outlet for artists and because fans allow the
music to empower them to join the long march toward kingdom values, hip-hop becomes
a call and response to God’s self-communication. What’s more astounding, human beings can partake in an open dynamism toward the eschatological vision in and through explicitly non-religious activities, like hip-hop. This exploration only raises more questions about the mystery of God’s presence in creation.

Macklemore raps in a track titled “Church”: “To connect with God put my headphones on and let it seep in, got God in my walkman, go ahead and top that” (Church). Hip-hop is beautiful music and in many times in my life, it has provided a visceral and empowering experience that helps me connect with myself, others, and God. As such, these encounters bare the promises of what’s to come. But while we anticipate for a better tomorrow, one shaped by the aspirations of perfect communion, hip-hop keeps the hope alive and the vision creatively in mind.
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