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Beyond Western Approaches to Missions

Postindustrial Missions & the Missiology within Hip Hop Culture

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Abstract

There is no argument that the past 50 years have brought societal, economic, religious, and missiological change. Moreover, within the past decade we have witnessed a rise in those categorized as ‘nones’ (those without religious affiliation and/ or atheist gnostic) which represent a growing demographic of young adults (18-30). The changing context of urban as a more cultural term rather than geographical location has also brought with it cultural groups such as Hip Hop into once all White affluent suburban contexts. Also, what once “worked” in missions now needs to be reevaluated and deconstructed to continue a fresh and new approach to the Missio Dei within postindustrial contexts. Thus, the once Western ideal of a White, male, evangelical missionary is quickly fading. In this paper, I will argue that Hip Hop culture, in its spiritual and missional stance, creates a strong missiology for the nones, postindustrial people groups, and young adults. I will briefly historicize the societal change within the last 40 years and how Hip Hop exudes a missiological message, and finally, I will argue that the Missio Dei is fulfilled within Hip Hop’s ethos by looking at artists Tupac, Lauryn Hill, and Lupe Fiasco for and to missions among the nones and young adult populations.

Introduction

For nearly the last four decades, the urban sub-culture of Hip Hop has provided an outlet and a voice for many people in the inner city. Hip Hop culture has become much larger than its initial sight of simply being a musical genre. In fact, Hip Hop is much more complex than just its music, it engrosses the issues of race, gender, politics, class, sexuality/ sexual orientation, and spirituality head on and encourages strong personal consciousness, self-development, and a connection to helping the surrounding community (Dyson 1996; Hodge 2009, 2010b; Kitwana 2003; Pinn 1995). Using rap music as one of its vehicles of communication to send and fund its message (Hodge 2010b; Smith and Jackson 2005), Hip Hop is a voice which speaks for the marginalized, the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed (Chang 2005; Dyson 2001; Hodge 2010b; Kitwana 2003; One 2003). It is a voice which rejects dominant culture, and seeks to increase social consciousness along with racial/ ethnic pride. Its dominant public profile of foul language, lewd sexuality, and lifestyles appearing simply to be “anti-god”¹ make it difficult for many “religious” individuals to relate and engage with Hip Hop culture. And truly, there is a large element of commercialized Hip Hop culture which is primarily concerned about money, sex, and nihilistic worldviews.² But there is something larger at work to which we missiologists must attend: a fundamental attempt to make God and the work of the Holy Spirit more accessible to a people who have been, in large part, ignored by many Christian churches and overlooked by some missiologists.³

In my book, *The Soul Of Hip Hop*, I describe how young people aged 14-21 understood God and Christian sacred scripture with deeper meaning from artists such as Tupac, DMX, Lupe Fiasco, and Lauryn Hill because these individuals spoke from their perspective and language (Hodge 2010b, Interviews). Artists such as Tupac also act as natural theologians who interpret scripture and comment upon it no differently than, say, a T.D. Jakes or a Joel Osteen do for their constituents (Dyson 2001). Hip Hop pushes past the traditionalized White, blonde, blue eyed, evangelical social construct of Jesus and asks for a Jesus that can “reach us,” be “real” with us, “feel” us, and relate to us – a contextualized deity in a relational stance (Hodge 2010b; Watkins 2011). This type of Jesus is one who can relate to youth in urban settings beyond the standard evangelical model of both mission and church. This type of Jesus also questions authority, seeks to increase social consciousness, validates and acknowledges the social isolation

as valid and real to all the ‘hood, and every now and then “puts a foot in someone’s [butt] to tell a [expletive] he real” (Hodge 2009, Interview). As ethnomusicologist Christina Zanfagna exclaims, “Mainstream hip-hop percolates with unlikely and multifaceted religious inclinations. Despite its inconsistent relationship to organized religion and its infamous mug of weed smoking, drug pushing, gun slinging, and curse spewing, rap music is not without moral or spiritual content... religious messages have always been delivered through a vast array of sounds” (2006, 1). Simply put, Hip Hop provides a contextualized and relevant form of religious discourse, meaning, and identity for urban youth and others who are its listeners. As missiologists and youth workers alike, must give attention to what messages and theological concepts are coming from and out of Hip Hop culture.

There is also no real argument that says society has not changed significantly in the last fort to fifty years. But, what this change means and how it will affect the Christian Church is yet to be determined. Scholars have long argued that we have entered a “post” era and that life, society, religion, and consciousness itself are in flux and disarray of sorts (Bell 1973; Habermas 1988; Soja 2000; Taylor 2007; Touraine 1977). Missiologists David Bosch asserts that, “The ‘post-phenomena is not just a fad. We have truly entered into an epoch fundamentally at variance with anything we have experienced to date” (Bosch 1995, 1). This shift and “post”—of sorts—demands that missiologist deconstruct methods of missional engagement. The rise of the “nones” category is reality for the mosaic age group (18-30) ⁴ and traditional modalities of missional approaches—White, male, from the U.S., Western Christendom as normality—must be challenged and revisited in order to not only “engage” this generation, but develop new methods of cultural exegesis for the *Missio Dei* and create a contextualized missiology. As Wilbert Shenk reminds us, “A relevant missiology will be one that helps the church embrace its mission fully through clear discernment of the times, together with a vision of what a dynamic missionary response requires” (Shenk 1993, 30). Thus it is imperative for the field of missiology to engage Hip Hop as it is a new, twenty-first century mission field among both urban and suburban youth.

Hip Hop, in its infamous profile of immorality and perceived secular attitudes, provides context, meaning, and a spiritual modus for young people. Hip Hop culture is a complex urban sub-culture which produces a rich theological discourse in which many youth,

not just Black and Latino, are able to connect with and relate to. And, while parts of Hip Hop do not reflect any part of a Godly message, this should not discourage the missiologist in engaging this relevant and global culture. In this paper, I will argue that Hip Hop culture, in its spiritual and missional stance, creates a strong missiology for the nones, postindustrial people groups, and young adults. I will briefly historicize the societal change⁵ within the last 40 years and how Hip Hop exudes a missiological message, and finally, I will argue that the *Missio Dei* is fulfilled within Hip Hop's ethos by looking at artists Tupac, Lauryn Hill, and Lupe Fiasco for and to missions among the nones and young adult populations.

Shifting Tides of Culture

Tricia Rose, one of the first scholars to write academically about Hip Hop, observes in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* that Hip Hop culture emerged as a source of alternative identity formation and social status for young people within a system that had abandoned them (Rose 1994, 31-33).⁶ As Angela Nelson notes, "The racial oppression of black people in many ways has fueled and shaped black musical forms in America" (Nelson 1991, 51). Hip Hop is one of those musical forms. "Contemporary rappers, like early bluespeople, are responding to the 'burden of freedom,' in part by relaying portrayals of reality to their audiences through their personal experiences" (Nelson 1991, 56). Hip Hop culture used rap music to bring definition, value, understanding, and appreciation to the social isolation, economic hardships, political demoralization, and cultural exploitation endured by most ghetto poor communities. So what happened?

Around the late 1950's⁷ and early 1960's, the beginnings of the first wave of deindustrialization began to occur (George 2004; Murray 1984; Palen 1981; Sides 2003; Wiese 2004). Businesses began to outsource their work, pay less in benefits, and use cheaper labor, generating larger profits for companies but adversely affecting Black communities. The American economy began to shift away from an industrial economy to one more focused on technology and highly skilled labor – which paid a lot more but required specialized training and education. The result was a fragmentation of the middle class and an upsurge in poverty (Sides 2003; Wiese 2004). Because of historic discrimination in college admissions, many Blacks found it difficult to

compete with peers with specialized degrees; jobs in the aerospace industry, for example, did not typically hire Blacks. Moreover, if the applicant did not have the necessary training, there was no point in applying. Todd Boyd notes, “We’re not talking about people who had careers. We’re talking about people who had jobs. If you have a job you are dependent on *that job*. So when that factory closes, you are in essence ‘assed out’” (Peralta 2008, Interview on DVD). By the late 1960’s, most of those thriving factories had disappeared. In the wake of this loss, nothing appeared in its place for the thousands of workers now out of a job.⁸

Urban ethnographer Charles Murray (1984) records that deindustrialization brought financial ruin to large swatches of the urban/ inner city community, particularly the young under the age of twenty (Wiese 2004). By the early 1960’s, what little capital and access to education Blacks had, began to wither away. By 1968 full deindustrialization emerged, with many corporations leaving the U.S. to go to Mexico, India, and China (Paris 1985; Peralta 2008; Sides 2003; Wiese 2004). The once hopeful and almost cheerful Black middle class was dismantled and beginning to crumble, creating a distinct ghetto ripe with anger and disenfranchised from the rest of American society.⁹ The Black generation born during the mid to late 60’s was in worse financial and social shape than the predecessor generations. Moreover, these new generations were growing up without Black leaders and visionaries such as Martin Luther King, Bobby Seal, and Malcolm X. What was worse was that there were very few programs that could handle and deal with the significant rise in jobless¹⁰ Black families.¹¹

For urban youth during this period,¹² a type of “Great Depression” set in, both financially and emotionally.¹³ The new generation of youth was being raised in this ethos of shattered dreams and hopes. They viewed institutions as failed systems and empty promises. In other words, if one system of society has failed and lied to the people such as the government, how much more would a church be at risk for such corruption?¹⁴ They saw that the old way of life was not working for the older generation and this new world they found themselves in was one riddled with double standards, failed promises, destroyed social structures, and a government which seemed almost obtuse and belligerent towards them (Hodge 2010b; Moss 2007; Watkins 2011). Moreover, most affluent churches had left the ghetto for a safer, cleaner, suburban area (Cox 1965, 1984; Rah 2009).¹⁵

A theological void was apparent for the inner city and many churches, which once could afford helping their community, were now financially hurting themselves. To further this, an attitude and worldview which carried over from nineteenth century missions was that, "...the adjective 'poor' was increasingly used to qualify the noun 'heathen'" (Bosch 1991, 290). Bosch notes that this type of attitude persisted and adopted toward younger churches too; in other words, if tradition and the "right way" was not followed, it was easy to become labeled as heretical and/ or even a heathen (1991, 290-292). A no wonder why urban people groups were disgruntled by Christian theology.

In turn, the age old question of "why do bad things happen to good people" took on new meaning for those in the inner city; why did God "leave" me and my family? How come my family, which happens to be Black and/ or Brown, is in dire straits? These types of questions continued to manifest within inner city people; especially the youth, as they saw their heroes such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X gunned down. Churches, in general, were not stepping up. Instead, many found solace and safety in the suburbs while the decline of the city continued (Rah 2009, 64-95).

In the mid to late '70's, an angry generation of Black and Brown youth were now culminating within the ghettos around the U.S and Black and Brown youth's social and cultural expressions shifted. In the womb of this shift Hip Hop was forming within the theological void and vacuum of the 'hood (Rose 1994, 34-40). By the time the 1980's arrived, an entire section of America's cities lay in ruin by the degenerate destruction of the crack era (Hodge 2009; Neal 2002; One 2003; Peralta 2008; Quinn 2005; Ruskin 2009). Black and Brown youth had little to no recourse and faced a society that viewed them as thugs, pimps, and societal rejects (Dyson 1996; George 2004; Hodge 2009; Moss 2007). Hip Hop stood up and artists such as Melle Mel told us "The Message":

Broken glass everywhere
 People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't
 care
 I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
 Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
 Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
 Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat

I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

[CHORUS]

Don't push me 'cuz I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head¹⁶

Run DMC reminded us of "Hard Times":

Hard times can take you on a natural trip
So keep your balance, and don't you slip
Hard times is nothing new on me
I'm gonna use my strong mentality
Like the cream of the crop, like the crop of the cream
B-b-beating hard times, that is my theme
Hard times in life, hard times in death
I'm gonna keep on fighting to my very last breath¹⁷

M.C. Hammer even told us to "Pray Just to Make it Today" in response to social inequality:

Time and time and time and time again
(That's word, we pray)
I kept on knocking, but
These people wouldn't let me in
(That's word, we pray)
I tried and tried and tried and tried to make a way
(That's word, we pray)
But nothing happened till that day I prayed¹⁸

And Tupac prompted us to "Keep Our Heads Up":

When you come around the block brothas clown a lot
But please don't cry, dry your eyes, never let up
Forgive but don't forget, girl keep your head up
And when he tells you you ain't nuttin don't believe
him
And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him
Cause sista you don't need him
And I ain't tryin to gas ya up, I just call em how I see em
You know it makes me unhappy (what's that)

When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother
 to be a pappy
 And since we all came from a woman
 Got our name from a woman and our game from a
 woman
 I wonder why we take from our women
 Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?
 I think it's time to kill for our women
 Time to heal our women, be real to our women
 And if we don't we'll have a race of babies
 That will hate the ladies, that make the babies
 And since a man can't make one
 He has no right to tell a woman when and where to
 create one
 So will the real men get up
 I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up¹⁹

These artists, through their music and vernacular, signify two central themes here 1) giving worth, value, and meaning to the suffering, social isolation, and pain so often glanced over when it is experienced from non-dominant people groups, and 2), a message of hope that someone out there knows their struggle and that the person experiencing such issues is not alone.

Even when missiologists were lacking in the inner city, rap artist and “urban prophet”²⁰ Tupac Amaru Shakur exclaims his own *missio Dei* for urban youth:

So, I feel like I'm doing God's work, you know what I'm saying? Just because I don't have nothing to pass around for people to put in the bucket don't mean I'm not doing God's work; I feel like I'm doing God's work. Because, these ghetto kids ain't God's children? And I don't see no missionaries coming through there. So I'm doing God's work. While Reverend Jackson do his [stuff] up in the middle class and he go to the White house and have dinner and pray over the president, I'm up in the 'hood doing my work with my folks.²¹

In a world which seemed to have lost its sense of “church” God and community, Hip Hop stands in that gap and continues a contextual *missio Dei* for youth in an urban context. These artists are

able to connect with young people in manner that is more engaging than a preacher can. The music of Hip Hop has the ability to push past the nonsense and get into what Anthony Pinn refers to as “nitty-gritty hermeneutics” in which simplistic theological responses are not tolerated and a more mature faith is required (Pinn 1995, 113-138). Rap and Hip Hop capture and esteem the ghetto poor existence as valid and real to all ethnic minorities and poor Whites (Hodge 2010b; Smith and Jackson 2005); there is much “God” at work in this process. Let us begin to see Hip Hop as both a valid mission field and a form of Mission to young people²² in both suburban and urban contexts. Hip Hop is this generations Isaiah and provides a good news message like Jesus Christ (Hodge 2009; Watkins 2011).²³ We cannot ignore this, even if the musical vehicle it is carried in utilizes elements of the profane to make its sacred point (Reed 2003; Spencer 1990; Zanfagna 2006). As the current climate of youth culture continues to evolve, a crucial cultural component of mission will be through Hip Hop. Therefore, we turn to Hip Hop’s central theological components, to better understand its sacred quest for God.²⁴

Hip Hop & the *Mission Dei*

In this section I will examine two Hip Hop artists who have had a significant effect on Hip Hop Culture and whose names have emerged from interviews, rap music, and Hip Hop scholarship as prophets and “ghetto saints” (Hodge 2013b; Smith and Jackson 2005; Utey 2012). Tupac Amaru Shakur and Lauryn Hill, in an indirect and unintentional way, have radiated a missiological ethos through their music and life. Interviewees have extolled that Hill and Shakur, “spoke God into my life at a time when there was darkness,” “created a space for me to learn more about God and his love for me...I was brought into Christianity by folks like Pac and Lauryn Hill.” Thus, it is imperative that we, as missiologists, peer into the music and life themes of these two artists.

Lauryn Hill

Let us begin with the great Lauryn Hill.²⁵ Hill, in one album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), Hill created a space for those struggling in relationships, love, faith, and with God to come and

connect, meditate, cry, love, and doubt in safety. This opened up the door for some to find a deeper meaning as to who God was. As an interviewee stated:

Lauryn was like...man...she was like a damn pastor who preached faith in a time of doubt. That album [The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill] was that for me. I use to listen to that when I was going through my divorce. She was my counselor and therapeutic space. Whew. God used her for sure.²⁶

Hill was part of the rap group Fugee's and described by many Hip Hop artists as "The Mother of Hip Hop Invention."²⁷ What Hill created was a space for those who were hurt, disenfranchised and disinherited to find meaning and, essentially, God. She wrestled with God and the pain she had—and still has—in her life within broken promises, failed relationships, questions regarding faith, and the reality of being a Black woman in the U.S..

In her song, "Ex-Factor," she dances with issues surrounding love within a committed relationship:

It could all be so simple
 But you'd rather make it hard
 Loving you is like a battle
 And we both end up with scars
 Tell me, who I have to be
 To get some reciprocity
 No one loves you more than me
 And no one ever will
 Is this just a silly game
 That forces you to act this way?
 Forces you to scream my name
 Then pretend that you can't stay
 Tell me, who I have to be
 To get some reciprocity
 No one loves you more than me
 And no one ever will²⁸

The song goes on to discuss the failures of relationships and the pain associated with those "loves lost."²⁹ What Hill does to perfection is to dance with the premise of pain, love, and faith. Where is God during

these times? This is powerful to listeners because it does not answer fundamental existentialized questions and allows those who listen to grapple with the ambiguity within. This is an essential mantra for the Mosaics: to grapple with the ambiguity of who God is; moving beyond linear step processes to resolution and into an enlightenment of who God is within that ambiguity and doubt; Hill capitalized on this.

Still, Hill did not simply “leave it there.” She would take part of that ambiguity and mix it with divinity:

Father you saved me and showed me that life
Was much more than being some foolish man’s wife
Showed me that love was respect and devotion
Greater than planets deeper than oceans
My soul was weary but now it’s replenished
Content because that part of my life is finished

I see him sometimes and the look in his eye
Is one of a man who’s lost treasures untold
But my heart is gold I took back my soul
And totally let my creator control
The life which was his to begin with³⁰

Hill is able to fade into that gray theology in which many—especially those within urban enclaves—live and reside spiritually. “I Use To Love Him” is a song that interweaves with these issues.

In the song “Doo Wop (That Thing)” Hill, conversely, challenges “backsliders” and “luke warm” believers alike:

Talking out your neck, saying you’re a Christian
A Muslim, sleeping with the Gin
Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in
Who’re you going to tell when the repercussions spin?
Showing off your ass because your thinking it’s a trend
Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again!³¹

Here, Hill takes a stance to call out the double talk within religious people and the call to live a higher life—if that is in fact what you are saying you are doing. Hill missiologically calls out the neo-pagan lifestyle³² in a manner that people will listen. An interviewee notes:

When I heard that song, I was convicted...cause that was me! I was living that lifestyle. I was saying I was Christian and living a life of sin...ya know what I mean? Shit, Lauryn called me out through that album and helped me to live a better life for God...shoot, better than any preacher could ever do

The interviewee went on to exclaim that Hill was instrumental in his faith formation and development; six others also referred to Hill as being their “pastoral guidance” in a theological journey with God.

David Bosch discusses “God Talk in an age of Reason” in his book *Believing In The Future*. Hill takes this God talk to the streets and creates space for those who follow a Nietzschean worldview and exclaims, “yes! God is still alive, just a bit more complex than Western theology makes him out to be.” In this sense, the *Missio Dei* is in the pain, the suffering, the doubt, and the search for God within all of this. The messier and convoluted it gets with Hill, the greater and more beautiful the Gospel is within that matrix.³³

Tupac Shakur

Tupac Amaru Shakur,³⁴ conversely, was notorious for his connection to God and the spiritual realm most did not dare enter; doubt, fear, questions, and the search for God in the profane. Yet, this is what made him one of the most sought after Hip Hop prophets and whose music still lingers as both relevant and applicable to today’s societal conditions—quite a feat given the average shelf life in rap music is three to four months. Tupac was iconic. Tupac’s life was cut short at the age of twenty five. Recalling Tupac’s accomplishments at such a young age, Quincy Jones recollects Tupac’s death by stating that if Martin Luther King, Jr. had died when he was twenty-five, he would have been a struggling Black Baptist minister; if Malcolm X had died at twenty-five, he would have been a street hustler; and if he himself had died at twenty-five, he would have been a struggling trumpet player; but Tupac died at twenty-five, leaving a legacy of life, love, rage, pain—and theology. “Tupac was touched by God[;] not very many people are touched by the hand of God.”³⁵

Tupac argues the inadequacy of the previous and existing theologies for the present Crisis—poverty, recidivism rates for young urban males, racism, and classism. Tupac never once questioned, blasphemed, or cursed the name of God or Jesus. What Tupac did do was to call out religious officials, traditionalized churches (churches practicing hyper-traditionalism and adherence to the “letter of the law”), conventional forms of religion, irrelevant theologies, and current methods of evangelism.

Tupac was not a trained theologian, pastor, or evangelist³⁶ in the way one would recognize from the rigor of the seminary. Tupac did not have the eloquence of a T.D. Jakes or the prowl of a Baptist preacher. Still, Tupac was able to connect God to the streets and give those who had never heard of God a vision for what their life could be like. Lacking formal training never disqualified anyone from doing “God’s work.” Still, Tupac never really came to any solid conclusions about a theology of the ‘hood. He began the discussion, but because of his early death, never finished the mantra of a ghetto Gospel.

We probably in Hell already, our dumb asses not knowin
 Everybody kissin ass to go to heaven ain’t goin
 Put my soul on it, I’m fightin devil niggaz daily
 Plus the media be crucifying brothers severely...³⁷

This aptly-titled song, “Blasphemy,” was a rejection of a form of Black theology that places the pastor at the center of the church, creates a pious stature for him (and it typically is a him), and discourages honest questions and doubts from emerging within the congregation . Tupac not only challenges but shatters the status quo by placing context and reality into his message within this song. He further states:

The preacher want me buried why? Cause I know he a liar
 Have you ever seen a crackhead, that’s eternal fire
 Why you got these kids minds, thinkin that they evil while the preacher bein richer you say honor God’s people
 Should we cry, when the Pope die, my request
 We should cry if they cried when we buried Malcolm X
 Mama tell me am I wrong, is God just another cop

waitin to beat my ass if I don't go pop?³⁸

Tupac continues his shattering of the status quo of theological “nice answers” by offering up metaphorical comparisons:

They ask us why we mutilate each other like we do
 They wonder why we hold such little worth for human
 life
 Facing all this drama
 To ask us why we turn from bad to worse is to ignore
 from which we came
 You see, you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from
 the concrete had
 damaged petals
 On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity
 We would all love its will to reach the sun
 Well, we are the roses
 This is the concrete
 And these are my damaged petals
 Don't ask me why
 Thank God, nigga
 Ask me how³⁹

In one of his greatest theological songs, “So Many Tears,” Tupac pushes past the “milk” theology, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:2, and into a mature theological stance on life:

Now that I'm strugglin in this business, by any means
 Label me greedy gettin green, but seldom seen
 And fuck the world cause I'm cursed, I'm havin visions
 of leavin here in a hearse, God can you feel me?
 Take me away from all the pressure, and all the pain
 Show me some happiness again, I'm goin blind
 I spend my time in this cell, ain't livin well
 I know my destiny is Hell, where did I fail?
 My life is in denial, and when I die,
 baptized in eternal fire I'll shed so many tears
 Lord, I suffered through the years, and shed so many
 tears.⁴⁰

The post soul context of this generation⁴¹ requires one to disembody and deconstruct current theological mantras which continually hold up tradition. Pain, injustice, and racism force the post soulist to look beyond the “standard” and ask God for more. Simplistic answers are rejected and despised: it gets God off the hook too easily to say “just pray about it,”⁴² and in times of pain and injustice, everything needs to be on the hook, including God. The procedure is quite simple: have a conversation with God, be real, and do not be afraid to use strong language to describe your pain:

Was it my fault papa didn't plan it out
 Broke out left me to be the man of the house
 I couldn't take it, had to make a profit
 Down the block, got a glock, and I clock grip
 Makin G's was my mission
 Movin enough of this shit to get my mama out the
 kitchen and
 why must I sock a fella, just to live large like Rockefeller
 First you didn't give a fuck, but you're learnin now
 If you don't respect the town then we'll burn you down
 God damn it's a motherfuckin riot

I see no changes, all I see is racist faces
 Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races
 We under I wonder what it take to make this
 one better place, let's erase the wait state
 Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right
 Cause both black and white are smokin crack tonight
 And only time we deal is when we kill each other
 It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other

Pull a trigger kill a nigger he's a hero
 Mo' nigga mo' nigga mo' niggaz
 I'd rather be dead than a po' nigga
 Let the Lord judge the criminals
 If I die, I wonder if heaven got a ghetto⁴³

For Tupac, the goal was to create a contextualized way in a world that was forgotten (part of the post soul deconstruction process): the 'hood. In his song “Searching for Black Jesuz,” Tupac and the Outlawz search for a deity that can relate to them, one who “smokes like we smoke, drink like we drink.”⁴⁴ In the song “Picture Me Rolling”

Tupac questions whether or not God can forgive him as he asks, “Will God forgive me for all the dirt a nigga did to feed his kids?”⁴⁵ In this neo-sacred element, Tupac begins to ask the longstanding theological question: what does forgiveness really look like for sinners?

For the post soulist, this process of searching for God in the mystery, the hurt, the pain, and then finding God in that heinous mixture is a welcome breath of fresh air compared to the avoidance and three-point sermons that so much of evangelical theology has become. It is the heart of dialogue and the very place God is experienced. In fact, almost anyone who has experienced deep loss and pain in which God’s hand felt far can relate. For example, “White Man’s World” combines Tupac’s request for heavenly favor and reprisal in a process similar to the Psalms: “God bless me please...Making my enemies bleed.”⁴⁶ Within those statements much more is at work—a fundamental attempt to make God accessible in a social structure which has been forgotten and left for dead.

More of the neo-sacred and post soul theology arises in songs such as “Hail Mary.” The song suggests a liturgical prayer, beseeching listeners to follow God and to “follow me; eat my flesh.”⁴⁷ While it might appear that Tupac is asking his listeners to see him as “God,” in fact Tupac was acting as a type of pastoral go-between. Tupac, in several interviews from the early 1990s, made reference to people in the ’hood not always having a clear path to God, and that in that absence of such a path, if he was the only pathway, then so be it.⁴⁸ Tupac made it clear he was not God or Jesus, but merely a conduit and a beacon to a contextualized Jesuz.⁴⁹

Tupac fills part of the vacancy for those who doubt. In the song “Po Nigga Blues,” Tupac poses a question to God which oozes with spiritual doubt: “...I wonder if the Lord ever heard of me, huh, I need loot, so I’m doin’ what I do.”⁵⁰ In other words, will God really forgive me when I am practicing socially unapproved standards of living? Dyson reminds us that “...Tupac’s religious ideas were complex and unorthodox, perhaps even contradictory, though that would not make him unique among his believers”. Part of that vacancy felt in the ’hood also comes with images of Heaven: streets of gold, mansions, pearly gates, and a God who is “perfect”—these may be too much for the person living on streets riddled with potholes, in project housing, around broken gates, and with White racist images of God. Paulo Freire boldly states that within situations of oppression, the main goal of the

oppressed should be to “...liberate themselves from their oppressors.”⁵¹ Tupac was helping to create that pathway for liberation⁵² and pointing to God; a position we as missiologists cannot ignore.

Conclusion: Hip Hop as Mission

Tupac and Lauryn contextualize a Jesus that youth, the Mosaics, postindustrial people groups, and those estranged from religion can relate to. Not a blonde hair, blue eyed, White embodiment of perfection, but a Christ that both connects and lives among the people; in this case being youth (Cone 1997a, 1997b). For many Hip Hoppers, Jesus is not the “traditional” form of a savior most of us have been taught to believe in (i.e., long wavy hair and hippy garments) Jesus is the multi-racial Jesus. Jesus is the Jesus that can understand the pain and misery of the inner city. Jesus is the one who could relate to the poor, downtrodden, and folks that people set aside (Hodge 2009, 251-256; 2010b, 130-140). Thus, a theology of the Hip Hop Jesus is a contextualized “version” of Jesus (Hence the adding of the letter “z” to the name).⁵³ Further, for Hip Hoppers, life is done in community (Hodge 2010b, 107-124), an aspect to and of missions. Whether those communities are a few people or one hundred, community is still occurring. For example, many of the concerts I have been to reflect Hip Hop’s deep desire to engage in community. More importantly, Church happens in that community and the presence of Christ is experienced, thus it stands to reason why a contextualized Jesus would be appropriate.

The reason Tupac and Hill can evoke such a connection with this generation and provide a missiological connection is simple; they:

1. Evoke truth and light within contextual forms of theological inquiries
2. Are multi-ethnic in approach and cultural worldviews
3. Challenge the norms dominant culture and religion
4. Provide ambiguity yet reveal the mystery of who God is within suffering contexts
5. Look for new modes of “church” in a sacred/ profane context while still pointing to God as the ultimate “an-

swer” for life—an aspect that the mosaic generation are interested in

Youth, the Mosaics, postindustrial people groups, and those estranged from religion contexts are not the cultural contexts of fifty years ago. More importantly, with the advent of media, technology, and the age of information, we have a youth culture that is both savvy and technologically creative. For the pastor that is missionally minded, this can present challenges to their theological framework. Hip Hop, while flawed and still human, creates space for those seeking God in alternate ways, to find God and to value the power of what the Bible says in a more relevant contextual form. Hip Hop artists such as Tupac act as theologians who can interpret the Bible for a people who are hurting, in need, and desperate for God’s love. As Dyson reminds us, Hip Hoppers “...aim to enhance awareness of the divine, of spiritual reality, by means of challenging orthodox beliefs and traditional religious practices” (Dyson 2001, 204). We must give attention to this global culture and the affect it has on our youth – even more so if they are in our youth groups. For example, in my research, some powerful responses came forth when I asked the question “What does Hip Hop make you feel spiritually, if anything?” Here are just a few: “I can feel God smiling on me when I rap,” “I found the bible to be deeper and more real when I listen to Pac,” “Hip Hop is our good news...you feel me? I mean, it’s like a church and place we can go,” and “Hip Hop saved my life. Period. If it wasn’t for God working in the rap, I’d be dead now.” (Hodge 2009, 2010b). Hip Hop helps the church embrace its mission fully by having a message that youth can and do identify with (Smith and Jackson 2005).

Therefore, missions must look different from what we are used to in order to even begin a conversation with the Hip Hop community, and be what Harvey Cox calls the *laos theou* or “the people of God” in creating a Church (Big C) in which a daily relationship with Christ is at the center—even in the midst of chaos and social inequality (1965, 125). Missions must begin to engage Hip Hop culture as if it were a foreign far off island in the Pacific Ocean and realize that God has been doing something within that culture long before we set foot on its shores.

What is *not* needed is the relationally void⁵⁴ style of handing out Christian tracks to complete strangers on the street in hopes that they will “convert” to our belief system. What is *not* needed is this

constant “we” and “them” mentality that causes great chasm’s between religious and non-religious communities. What is *not* needed is more “religion” for people who need something deeper than just a simple sermon, simplistic five step solutions, and patronizing “I’ll be praying for you” statements. What *is* needed is an open mind and an open heart to see where we can be led by those in the Hip Hop community and in turn use the Hip Hop community as a tool for missions in the 21st century and seeing the margins as the center in Christian Mission.

As a concluding comment, missionally engaging Hip Hop is no easy task to be undertaken. Hip Hop is complex and presents not only a Christian theological mantra, but also ones steeped in Fiver Percenters of Nations Gods and Earth, The Nation of Islam, Zulu Nation, and Zionism. Further, as stated prior, there are parts of Hip Hop culture—as there are in any given culture or sub-culture—which do not give homage to God in any way shape or form. However, this should not dismay the mission minded individual; we have a great calling such as Paul did when he was in Athens.⁵⁵

If the Great Commission is truly valued by missiologists – which is so often touted in the literature – then the Hip Hop community is worth the missional pursuit.⁵⁶ Scholars studying young people in this era have noted that they are falling away from religion, see God as a good thing and not a personal God, identify with a pluralistic form of church, and see sin as relative to the context (Dean 2010; Kosmin and Keysar 2009). Hip Hop, while not a utopian “evangelizing tool,” creates space for youth to engage Jesus without the religious mantras present. Hip Hop gives a much purer God and argues for a relationship with God in context and creates a sense of personal consciousness to be spread, once attained, to the community. Hip Hop is a space for young people to find God on their terms and move beyond the four walls of “church” and into a, as I would argue, much stronger and purer relationship with God as Hip Hop goes beyond simplistic answers (Hodge 2009, 289-293; Watkins 2011, 97-103). Thus, it behooves us as missiologists to grasp the *missio Dei* within Hip Hop in order to better understand 1) Hip Hop culture, 2) current youth culture, 3) the possibilities of mission to a global culture at a time when societally, people are open to hearing about God and spirituality – even if it is in pluralistic circles – a genuine unedited Jesus is more satisfying to people rather than more words regarding “hell” and “sin.”⁵⁷ The issues of pain, hurt, oppression, and disenfranchisement are crucial literacies

for any minister of the Gospel. God is at work in Hip Hop and even if the appearance of it is offsetting, God is still doing a great work within the culture, music, artists, and youth who listen to its messages.

Notes

- 1 This “anti-god” element cannot be ignored and is a very real element to the culture. Hip Hop scholars have long argued that while Hip Hop is not “dead” it is in critical condition and in need of a cultural “make over.” The argument I make here about Hip Hop’s spiritual discourse is primarily based upon Hip Hop’s cultural roots, research among the Hip Hop community, and Hip Hop’s rich underground community which continues to argue for personal and social consciousness. I would also argue that even in the commercialized messages of Hip Hop, God is still at work but seeing this requires cultural exegesis which the length of this article does not permit (Hodge 2010a).
- 2 At its core, Hip Hop is defined as such: Hip Hop is an urban sub-culture that seeks to express a life-style, attitude, and/or urban individuality. Hip Hop at its core—not the commercialization and commodity it has become in certain respects— rejects dominant forms of culture and society and seeks to increase a social consciousness along with a racial/ethnic pride. Thus, Hip Hop uses rap music, dance, music production, MCing, and allegory as vehicles to send and fund its message of social, cultural, and political resistance to dominate structures of norms (Hodge 2013a).
- 3 See (Beaudoin 1998; Reed 2003) to see the importance of relevant and contextual messages for people to better understand and come to God.
- 4 See (Kosmin and Keysar 2009; Logo et al. 2012) as they discuss the data with the rise of “nones”—the rising group of young adults who claim no religious affiliation and a growing disdain toward organized religion.
- 5 For a detailed examination of the growth and social significance of Hip Hop culture—which this article does not allow me to explore—see (Asante 2008; Boyd 2002; Chang 2005; Kitwana 2003).
- 6 This includes Christians and missiologists. As was noted in my research (Hodge 2009), respondents who considered themselves Hip Hoppers during the 1970’s and early 1980’s felt abandoned by Christians; anyone who came into the neighborhood wanted them to change toward their ways rather than accepting the people group as they were and validating their culture.

- 7 This is also an era that Douglas John Hall argues that Christianity was undergoing a “metamorphosis” and moving into a decline (Hall 1997, 1-3).
- 8 It is also noted here, however, that during this time period, aptly called the soul era (Neal 2002), that Black churches were still thriving in small communities and the Black church was at the center of the Civil Rights Movement and there for communities in need during this time. Still, the younger generations as noted by (George 1998; Moss 2007; Watkins 2011) were witness to the decline of urban social structure and the fall of many great urban leaders (e.g. King, Malcolm X, Huey Newton). This generation of youth would comprise the first Hip Hop generation (Kitwana 2003) which would give voice to the social isolation felt in many inner cities and the youth which inhabited them (Hodge 2010b). It is also interesting to note that the decline of the Black church as a social entity and power source begins during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).
- 9 Timothy Monsma notes that “children at risk” in cities is an essential element to missionally engaging a people group; particularly when there are notable socio-economic disparities and the unjust use of children as labor (2000, 192-202)
- 10 On Thursday March 10, 1975, eleven years after the Civil Rights Title IV act, an entire section of the Los Angeles Times entitled “A Ghetto is Slow to Die” engaged this very real phenomenon in the Black community. John Kendall researched families and economic structures from 1963-1975, stating “The fearful live behind protective bars and double locks. High schools are graduating functional illiterates.” He also asserted that “Little has changed in the basic conditions of the Black ghetto in 10 years since the Watts riots erupted...” The article was a sobering reality palette which did not give a very promising future for anyone living in ghetto like conditions, but principally for Blacks. Kendall continued, “Some black people have got businesses; some professionals have gotten into significant jobs. But if you talk about the masses or that guy who was in trouble in ’65, it is more difficult now.” The social manifest that so many Black churches fought to create and instill during the civil rights movement was deduced in one word for life: survival (Kendall 1975). This is significant because, religiously speaking, this era noted as a distinct decline in Black and Brown communities (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pinn 2002) which would in turn effect the next generation of youth in which Hip Hop culture was to be formed in (Hodge 2009; Watkins 2011).

- 11 More importantly to make mention is the main thrust in mission during this time period was to “send forth and out” (Shenk 1999, 156-169) rather than a push towards domestic missions within the inner city; the idea here was to “evangelize” the world and make this “Big” movement in missions, yet there was plenty of “evangelizing” to be done at home (Rah 2009, 93-97) and among communities ravished just as bad as India, Sudan, and Asia. This is still an ongoing debate within certain missional conversations.
- 12 It is important to comment that there was a distinct shift in social, theological, philosophical, and even Christological ontology during the late ‘60’s and early ‘70’s; this shift was partly a result from the ensuing economical change for Blacks but also the reality that such societal mantras like “Work hard, and your dreams will come true” were shattered (e.g. Bennett 1993; Boyd 1997, 2002; Cox 1984; Cupitt 1998; George 1992, 2004; Hodge 2010b; Kitwana 2005; Pinn 2002; West 1993); this also would have a significant affect for social institutions such as the church. This article does not have the breadth to cover this issue, but the ensuing effect during this time is still felt according to Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (1990).
- 13 Some have argued that this “shift” in society was the changing from modernity to post modernity. While these terms are applicable in certain ways to the urban, Black, and Latino context, they typically refer to a White, suburban, upper middle class shift and negate and social shifts within the urban, Black, and Latino communities (George 2004; Neal 2002). Therefore, the term post soul is a more relevant term which encompasses social shifts such as The Civil Rights Movement, the messages of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the rise of Black popular culture and its effects on mainstream America, the crack era of the 1980’s, and the Hip Hop generation; see (George 2004; Taylor 2007; West 1993) for a detailed work on this subject.
- 14 This type of worldview is significant in understanding contemporary urban youth. The youth in urban settings were raised to distrust social systems and institutions. Church and religion are at the top of those “do not trust” lists. It is important that the missiologist of today understand that their efforts must begin with building trust in this community among youth. Anything outside of that is only inviting distrust (c.f. Shenk 1999)
- 15 This is also known as “White Flight.”

- 16 (Mel 1980)
- 17 (Run-D.M.C 1984)
- 18 (Hammer 1990)
- 19 (Shakur 1993)
- 20 This term is better explained in (Dyson 2001; Hodge 2009) where Tupac's life, work, message, music, and theology is examined to create this term "prophet." It is noted, that many of the subjects interviewed in (Hodge 2009) defined Tupac as their "prophet" and "ghetto theologian."
- 21 Taken from an interview done on BET by Ed Gordon roughly around the mid 1990's.
- 22 For an examination into this, see (Hodge 2013c) as I discuss the relevance of Hip Hop as a missiological agent.
- 23 Also see (Dyson 2001, 208-210) where he discusses how rap artists connect with the laments and pessimism of prophets such as David and Jeremiah.
- 24 In my book, *The Soul Of Hip Hop*, I argue that Hip Hop has five central theological concepts: A theology of suffering, a theology of community, a theology of social action, a theology of the Hip Hop Jesus, and a theology of the profane (2010b, chapters 3-7)
- 25 While Hill is now facing jail time for allegedly not filing back taxes, this does not in any way negate who she is and what her music gave to people theologically. It merely signifies that she is, in fact, human; part of what made and still makes her spiritually attractive to people is that she is human and fallible.
- 26 Taken from an interview during the research for this paper 2012.
- 27 During the "golden era" of Hip Hop, roughly 1988-1997, the "invention" term was given to those creative, conscious, and socially forward thinking rappers such as Hill.
- 28 Lauryn Hill, "Ex-Factor," *The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill* (1998).

- 29 Within the entire album, Hill has interludes where ethnic minority teens are being interviewed and asked about what they think and believe love is; the answers are both amazing and rich and also continue to give voice to a marginalized group; Hill knew this and wanted to have this on her album to have that “youthful voice.”
- 30 Lauryn Hill, “I Use To Love Him,” *The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill* (1998).
- 31 Lauryn Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing),” *The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill* (1998).
- 32 Very similar to what Wilbert Shenk tells us that Visser ‘t Hooft called for in his five-fold response to neo-paganism in the West (2001, 78-80).
- 33 This is an ongoing theological discussion in regards to doubt, faith, and the search for God. For a real time look into the power of music within this discussion, see Tom Beaudoin,. 2013. *Secular music and sacred theology*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- 34 For an in depth examination into the life of Tupac Shakur see (Dyson 2001; Hodge 2009)
- 35 Interview taken from the DVD documentary *Thug Angel: The Life of An Outlaw* (2002).
- 36 19 of the 20 of the interviews stated that Tupac was their “pastor” and connection to theology. They told me that Tupac was a prophet because of the way he could interpret theological matters and make it “clear” for them, See Hodge, *The Soul Of Hip Hop: Rimbs Timbs & A Cultural Theology*.
- 37 Tupac, “Blasphemy,” *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (1996).
- 38 In this verse we can also see Tupac connecting with mainstream theological thought by asking the serious question of God. In other words, is God just another White, conservative Republican, wanting me to fit in and wear suits and ties like I’ve been told and have seen? Is there a place for the real nigga and thug in Heaven?
- 39 “Mama Just A Little Girl” *Better Dayz* disc one (2002).

- 40 “So Many Tears” Me Against The World (1995).
- 41 The post soul context: this is the era which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s that rejected dominant structures, systems, and meta-narratives which tended to exclude ethnic minorities and particularly the 'hood. The post soul era rejects linear functional mantras and embraces communal approaches to life, love, and God. The post soul context was formed in the cocoon of a social shift which broke open the dam to the questioning of authority, challenging the status quo, asserting one's self identity in the public sphere, and questioning group leaders (George 2004; Hodge 2010b; Neal 2002; Taylor 2007).
- 42 Anthony B Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).describes this type of theological process as nitty gritty hermeneutics, pushing past the basics of theology and into the depths of life to ask God “tougher questions.” Acceptance of pain is put into context and the hermeneutic moves into the “nitty gritty” of life.
- 43 Lyrics taken from throughout the song “I Wonder if Heaven Got A Ghetto” (Original Hip Hop version) R U Still Down disc one (1997).
- 44 2Pac & The Outlawz,“Black Jesus,” Still I Rise, 1999, Interscope Records.
- 45 Tupac interview with Vibe Magazine, approximately 1995.
- 46 Tupac Shakur, “White Man’s World,” Makaveli-Don Killuminati: The 7-Day Theory, 1996, Deathrow Records.
- 47 Tupac Shakur, “Hail Mary,” Makaveli-Don Killuminati: The 7-Day Theory, 1996, Deathrow Records.
- 48 Tupac interview with Vibe Magazine, approximately 1995.
- 49 Note the letter “S” has been dropped to demonstrate the contextualization of the Christ figure for the 'hood. And the letter Z at the end of Jesus’ name was added to give a portrait of a Jesus that could sympathize and connect with a people that were downtrodden and broken. The letter Z is consistent with Hip Hop’s vernacular to change words and phrases to fit the context and annunciate words for a Hip Hop community. The Z also represented a Jesus which was not only “above” in theological discussions, but also “below” in reachable form.

The Z gives new dimensions to the portrait of Christ and validates the struggles, life, narrative, and spirituality for many Hip Hoppers. Hodge, *The Soul Of Hip Hop: Rims Timbs & A Cultural Theology*: chapter 6.

- 50 Tupac, “Po Nigga Blues,” *Loyal To The Game*, 2004, Amaru Interscope Records.
- 51 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Continuum, 1970), 28.
- 52 It is interesting to note that within my interviews, a theme of liberation from traditional church arose from the interviewees. “To move away from,” “get out from under,” and “move out” were all phrases from respondents, when asked “How has Tupac’s music, poetry, and spirituality affected you theologically?” These phrases were part of a larger discussion on how contemporary religion had become corrupted and lost its “edge” in life. Whether or not race was a factor in this response was not analyzed. This would be something for further study, but there is a clear implication here that the interviewees felt they needed to move out from their current theological situation and that Tupac helped them to do just that.
- 53 Note the letter “S” has been dropped to demonstrate the contextualization of the Christ figure for the ‘hood. And the letter Z at the end of Jesus’ name was added to give a portrait of a Jesus that could sympathize and connect with a people that were downtrodden and broken. The letter Z is consistent with Hip Hop’s vernacular to change words and phrases to fit the context and annunciate words for a Hip Hop community. The Z also represented a Jesus which was not only “above” in theological discussions, but also “below” in reachable form. The Z gives new dimensions to the portrait of Christ and validates the struggles, life, narrative, and spirituality for many Hip Hoppers (Hodge 2010b, Chapter 6).
- 54 Shaw and Van Engen also tell us that relationships are over communicating any “special” style message or sermon and the receptors—the people group—will typically always respond better to the Gospel when there is a strong relationship intact (2003, 121-122).
- 55 However this also requires us to be culturally and racially literate in order to breach the spiritual borders and into new “territories.”

- 56 An interesting note here, Daniel Shaw and Charles Van Engen note that to communicate the Gospel message appropriately, one must foster the skill of appropriate communication to the receptors in their context (2003, 114-120). They also follow this with three modes of this communication as well: coupling—which involves connecting a new message with receptors preexisting assumptions, commonality—when message meanings are shared by both the author and the audience alike, and bridging—the authors, or communicators, responsibility to help de-code messages and meanings from the text and or message. Shaw and Van Engen use this in the context of biblical interpretation and communication, yet, the parallels with Hip Hop and Gospel messages also applies (2003, 117-119). Wilbert Shenk asserts that, “...in order to do its work properly, missiology must keep four aspects continually in view: the normative, the historical, the present, and the future” (Shenk 1993, 18). Hence, with this in perspective, the present and the future should be focused—at least in part—to and with Hip Hop and being aware of how one communicates the Gospel is fundamental too. Further, Hip Hop, in its contextual form, embraces John Driver’s Messianic Evangelization in which the forming of disciples of Jesus is fundamental(Driver 1993, 199). This was a critical finding in my work when I performed interviews on those between the ages of 13-19 who considered themselves to be “Hip Hoppers.” They realized a need for a connection with Jesus and cared less about knowing the “rules” and dogma but more about an actual relationship with Christ.
- 57 In Knut Alfsvåg’s work, the continued debate of the “postmodern” continues. Within those debates the issue of sin and morality typically surfaces and sin is often defined as a relative and culturally defined term. This has impact on how we in our churches define this word and what it means to actually “sin”(2011).

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