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From Camp Meetings to Crusades: African American Religious Songs in Context

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By

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The images found throughout African American religious songs are timeless, yet they reflect the realities of their particular historical and cultural contexts, explaining those circumstances from the view of the African American community. Despite the differences in sound, there is a strong sense of continuity between each era, as compositions from slave songs to rap use certain passages from scripture to emphasize the themes of freedom, hope, and perseverance. From the spiritual to the gospel to contemporary religious rap, both history and hope have been lifted up and transformed in the voices of oppressed and enduring African Americans.

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From Camp Meetings to Crusades:

African American Religious Songs in Context

African American history is rooted in trauma. Beginning in the early 1600s, men, women, and children were kidnapped from their homes in central and west Africa, transported via the Middle Passage, and brought to America to be sold as chattel. They were put to work as an unpaid labor force, and they and their progeny were considered to be owned outright by those who purchased them. Those original transplants, and generations after them, endured the horrors of slavery for hundreds of years until their freedom was obtained through the North's victory in the Civil War in 1862. This victory and its aftermath was a double-edged sword for African Americans. It led to the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which declared these slaves free, made them citizens, and gave them the right to vote. But these *de jure* changes were not uniformly carried out within the body politic, as the postbellum nation had the *de facto* presence of overt racism, lynchings, the Jim Crow laws, and municipal Black Codes. African Americans were given freedom and told that they were equal under the law, but that was not necessarily the case in many areas. There were still many barriers restricting them from being able to truly access the rights they were supposedly afforded. Thus the period of Reconstruction after the war was a time of inconsistency in how newly-freed African Americans were treated within the culture.

As the Reconstruction era came to a close, the idea of the New Negro Renaissance took hold. Bracketed by the Compromise of 1877 and the beginning

of the Harlem Renaissance, this period saw a more outspoken advocacy of the inherent dignity of African Americans and a refusal to submit quietly to the practices and laws of Jim Crow racial segregation. Perhaps the most damning event that can categorize this period was the 1896 Supreme Court decision, Plessy v. Ferguson, which negated many of the gains African Americans had made through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Despite this legal setback, African Americans, led by thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois, found new hope in national political organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded in 1909. The tensions present in this period came to a head during the Red Summer of 1919, where mobs of whites attacked African Americans in over 30 cities and rural areas throughout the country. These race riots were the culmination of many long-simmering social forces: the largest internal population shift in U.S. history, the Great Migration, where more than six million blacks moved from the rural South to northern urban centers; the demobilization of black soldiers returning from WWI, and their effect on the labor force; the use of blacks as scabs and strikebreakers by wealthy white industrialists; and the fear of Communist or Bolshevik influence on the newly-constituted black civil rights movement.

In the 1920s, the new concentration of blacks in New York led to the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, whose influence reached nationwide. This was a time that outwardly looked like a positive step for blacks, but social conditions continued in much the same way as they had previously. African Americans were living in slums, unable to access the necessary resources to get them out of this cycle of poverty, and their culture was being exploited by

white Americans. Following this time was the Civil Rights and Black Arts Era where African Americans pushed back on the segregation, injustice, and inequality that was so prevalent across the nation. This resistance came at the cost of imprisonment, hateful criticism, and for some even death. Following this time is the Contemporary era, the present days where progression has certainly occurred, but the nation is still wrestling with police brutality, poverty, and systemic racism. Throughout the centuries, the African American story has been one of horror, injustice, and tragedy. But black people have consistently pushed back on being victims of their times through joyful expression of their religious beliefs, and they have been fighting against oppression by using their voices through the arts. African American artists have consistently provided empowering music, literature, and artwork that declares the promises of God rooted in scripture.

The most common technique in the artistic expressions of the American black community has been the use of the vernacular language. Named many different things, from dialect to slang to Ebonics, this vernacular refers to oral expressions contained in both common and elevated speech, music, and sermons. While literacy was not common early on in African American history, the influence of words was still powerfully prevalent in the oral tradition, and in the musical manifestation of that tradition, the hymns and spirituals centered on their newly-imposed faith, Christianity.

A common characteristic of vernacular art is that it is created intentionally for the group of which creates it. Negro spirituals were made by and for African Americans. The vernacular is influential in and of itself, but it also has been

influential in many other forms of music and art as well. The vernacular "encompasses vigorous, dynamic processes of expression" where "the values, styles, and character types of black American life are reflected in language that is highly energized and often marvelously eloquent" (Gates, 4). So to study the vernacular means that one is working at two levels, the macro and the micro. The study of the cultural context for the production of a vernacular work is a necessary part of the process, as is a concurrent focus on the individual, at a significantly personal level. Vernacular music is often able to tell a fictional story that is more real than fact. Thus the study of popular African American hymns allows one to consider a wide spectrum of historical and cultural movements and moments, for these hymns reflect not only a timeless spirituality but also the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they were first successful. An analysis of these hymns can offer a lens through which to view both the historical struggles of African Americans and their contextualizing of the contemporary political and social milieu. In many cases, a hymn's response to a particular historical context offers a unique understanding that historical prose cannot.

In 1619, around twenty African slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, a British colony in America. One of the early English settlers of America, John Rolfe, writes that Captain Jope, pilot of the English boat White Lion, "brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w[hich] the Governo[r] and Cape Merchant bought for victuall[s]. The year was 1619, and as an institution slavery did not yet exist in Virginia" (NPS). While this was the first documented act of slavery that took place in America, over 500,000 Africans had already been forced to cross the Atlantic to endure and suffer at the hands of Europeans. The

act of purchasing humans to be classified as property and treated as animals in Jamestown 1619 was new to America, but not to the African community. In 1662, twenty-three years after these twenty African slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia deemed black women to be taxable and decided that those born to enslaved women were to also be slaves. This law began the continuous cycle of slavery that would be prevalent in America for centuries.

The living conditions for slaves varied depending on the master he or she was subject to. Typically sleeping quarters were crammed, having the master fit as many people in one room as possible. Some were given beds typically made out of straw or old rags, while others would sleep on the floor. Their homes often left them vulnerable to bad weather and caused disease to travel easily amongst themselves. Slave-owners rarely provided clothing, but when they did it was coarse and uncomfortable, and it did not fit well. Most slaves were given very little food, and the food they were given lacked any kind of nutrition. Because of their sleeping situations and poor diets, slaves were sick often. When this happened, they were rarely treated, and they were still forced to work. When it came to labor, slaves often worked tirelessly from sunrise to sunset. Jobs varied but included, harvesting, planting, cooking, weaving, and sewing. Most slaves received severe punishments, including grave whippings, torture, being sold to a harsher slave-owner, and even sometimes death. Women were commonly raped by their masters and often separated from their families. Slaves were denied the privilege of reading or writing. Every slave was subject to follow slave codes which stated slaves

> could not testify in court against a white, make contracts, leave the plantation without permission, strike a white (even in self-defense), buy and sell goods, own firearms, gather without a white present, possess any anti-slavery literature, or visit the homes of whites or free blacks. The killing of a slave was almost never regarded as murder, and the rape of slave women was treated as a form of trespassing. (PBS)

Conditions varied depending on location, but no matter what, a slave was considered to be property and was always treated as such.

During this extensive time of hardships, the greatest form of music for the African American culture was the spiritual. Spirituals are the declaration of religious beliefs through the vernacular form. Spirituals were one of the ways African Americans maintained a connection with their original African cultures. While spirituals declare the promises of Christianity, the western religion of the colonialists, they are also heavily influenced by African traditions. For example, spirituals are often structured with a call and response, where one person leads each lyric and a chorus repeats the leader. There is also African influence in the repetitive nature of the lyrics and the heavy usage of drums in the music. The importance of dancing in West African culture led to intricate developments in rhythm, which is important to these songs as well. Peretti explains that “the centrality of dance helped to shape the extraordinary rhythmic qualities of the music,” and goes on to emphasize that, “West African music and dance both display what scholars confidently call the most sophisticated and intricate sense of rhythm in the world” (10-11). Unlike traditional European music, African music lacked “downbeats,” and instead contained polyrhythms that “overload the

ear and create the illusion of an irregular master beat" (11). African American spirituals were powerful both in word and in sound, and they were effective in allowing the African tradition to be passed on despite the impressment of these slaves.

Using this unique musical structure, spirituals expressed African Americans' concerns about embracing the sacred. The need for spiritual strength is a natural consequence to the horrors of slavery. Spirituals developed as the African musical tradition was intertwined with lyrics from Methodist and Baptist hymns. Peretti says slaves, "combined lines and memorable phrases from hymns with their own favorite Biblical parables and folk legends" (28). From here, slaves continued to create new music that differed in rhythm and words, but was consistently designed to produce hope in adversity. Spirituals were not used only during church services; they encompassed the daily lives of slaves. Dixon says that "for slaves the concept of the sacred signified a strong will to incorporate within this world all the elements of the divine" (10). The line between the sacred and secular was invisible, so the spiritual belonged to every aspect of life.

During the time of slavery and Reconstruction, slaves created a multitude of these spirituals. The most common theme in spirituals during this era was by no surprise the promise of freedom. Of all the spirituals that were sung at this time, "Go Down, Moses (Let My People Go)" is perhaps the most popular today. The lyrics of this spiritual tell the Exodus story, where Pharoah and the Egyptians felt the wrath of God through ten horrifying plagues that were designed to liberate the Israelites from slavery. While one might expect a lament bemoaning their current state of servitude, at no point does this slave song use this story to

express sorrow at their circumstance or to preach vengeance against their oppressors. Rather, it is used to joyfully describe the freedom that slaves hoped for. Christa Dixon writes of how "Go Down, Moses," along with other slave songs, de-emphasizes the tribulations of the Israelites, instead focusing on the joyful anticipation of freedom:

> [the hymn] hardly mention[s] the suffering of the Israelite slaves even though the singers had witnessed and experienced slave treatment themselves and could have found in the Israelites' suffering a perfectly acceptable vehicle for complaint and lament about their own suffering… Here was ample material to excite the imagination of any person looking for revenge for injustices… Yet there is nothing of this vengeful desire in the dominant tradition of the spirituals. They are an admirable testimony to a forgiving faith whose human greatness cannot be overestimated. (25)

This slave song reveals the hope in things unseen possessed by those singing it, along with their supernatural extension of love and forgiveness.

"Go Down, Moses," like many spirituals, moves beyond both the Exodus story and the earthly conditions forced upon the slaves to address both the liberation from sin and death that they hoped would come through Heaven, and the liberation from slavery that they hoped would come through God's intervention. The desire for both forms of liberation is not contradictory; they work together to create a more unified idea of freedom. While almost all later hymnals present this song with five verses, its original publication in *Jubilee Songs* (1872) had twenty-four verses. In each, the systematic narration of the story, punctuated by the common response, lacks any literary or artistic subtlety.

It replaces any metaphoric conceit with the hammer-and anvil clang of “Let My people go!” John Lovell, Jr. characterizes it thus:

> It says flatly that Moses freed these Egyptian slaves boldly and justly because slavery is wrong. It clearly projects the principles of this experience to all the world: wherever men are held in bondage, they must and shall be freed. The “Let my people go!” refrain is thunderous. It does not argue economic, sociological, historical, and racial points. . . . It wastes no words and moves relentlessly toward its goal of filling every listener with a pervasive contempt for oppression and a resounding enthusiasm for freedom. (326-27)

This song was essential to many slaves, not just because of its hopeful message for freedom, but also because of how it was used to help slaves actually receive that freedom. This song is famously known for being “coded.” That is, it “not only expressed a yearning for deliverance from Southern slavery but also signaled the moment for action to achieve it” (Dixon 23). Satch Hoyt offers situates “Go Down Moses” firmly within the tradition of coded songs:

> Coded songs made it possible for slaves working on the plantation to sing resistance songs and share the dream of freedom openly with one another. The lyrics appeared to have non-threatening meanings to the slaveholders. “Go Down Moses (Let My People Go)” is another Negro spiritual with visions of liberation and metaphorical ascension, coupled with references to Egypt and the Pharaoh. Harriet Tubman (in 1869) was quoted as saying “Go Down Moses” was one of two code songs used by fugitive slaves to communicate when fleeing captivity in Maryland.

African American spirituals during the time of slavery and reconstruction often referred to scriptural stories, presented themes of freedom and liberation, and offered a sense of optimism, even in the slower, sad songs. While “Go Down Moses” is most commonly classified as a code song, it is also a jubilee. Jubilees, also known as camp meeting songs, are “fast, rhythmic and often syncopated” (Library of Congress), and were a prominent form for spirituals during this time. Taking the revival hymns of Wesley and others and inserting refrains in which all could join, jubilees were “set to folk tunes with pulsating rhythm, emotional repetition, and ejaculatory refrains, whose crude doggerel often would be caught up by the throngs” (Froom).

While this song carried a hidden meaning, it was at the same time very explicit in its message. As a call and response, there is one line that is emphasized consistently throughout the song: “Let my people go!” This line is important because it does not originate in the mouths of the slaves singing it, but rather from the mouth of God. Exodus 9:1 says, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (NIV). This phrase holds power because it is not simply a plea from a slave; it is a command from Yahweh. It contains both an indicative and an imperative. It begins with a statement about what God will do, and ends with what should be done in response. The indicative in this verse is that God’s people, the Hebrew slaves, will be liberated. The imperative is that they will worship him.

Such a promise and a call to action did not affect only slaves. Every time a slave-owner heard this line, he knew he was actively working against Christian

dogma. The slave-owners were acting as a hindrance to God's work, and were preventing God's people from achieving their purpose. In short, the spiritual "clearly projects the principles of this experience to all the world: wherever men are held in bondage, they must and shall be freed. The 'Let my people go!' refrain is thunderous" (*Hymnary*). This song was and still is a constant reminder not only of who God is--the liberator of the lowly--but also of the sinfulness of the slave-owner. While this brings feelings of shame to the slave-owner, more than anything it brings feelings of fear, as those familiar with the Old Testament know, God's plan will come to fruition no matter what, and this victory will come at a great loss for those in power.

The Exodus story, for obvious reasons, was incredibly relevant for the African American slaves. But its biblical origin meant that slave owners could not denounce or ban it. A slave owner would have to be particularly obtuse not to see his or her connection to the "pharoes" of the song, but the widespread use of Christianity--including the bibliomancy of quotations taken out of context--to justify slave-holding would force them to allow, and even privilege, such biblically-based songs because they remained in a biblical context. Many associate this song with Harriet Tubman, one of the leaders of the Underground Railroad who assisted in the liberation of hundreds of slaves. The power of this song derives from the fact that it "does not argue economic, sociological, historical, and racial points. . . . It wastes no words and moves relentlessly toward its goal of filling every listener with a pervasive contempt for oppression and a resounding enthusiasm for freedom" (hymnary). This spiritual is powerful in its

meaning and usage, and has remained a tool for hopefulness throughout some of the darkest struggles.

Stanza 13 of “Go Down, Moses” says, “You’ll not get lost in the wilderness / With a lighted candle in your breast.” Exodus 13:21 explains, “The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.” The Israelites were guided by a light that God continuously provided for direction and sight. Because of this external light that was leading them to physical freedom, they were growing a steadfast internal faith that would lead them to spiritual freedom. The two work in unison. Stephen A. Marini explains that spirituals like “Go Down, Moses” “created a sacred narrative of slave aspirations to overcome their bondage both in this world and in the next” (110). This spiritual is a jubilee, celebrating the long-lasting freedom of Heaven that God promises to all people, while also patiently praying for the earthly freedom they hoped God would provide as he did for the Israelites.

This biblical story reveals a God who is for the oppressed and fights for those who are unable to fight for themselves. This plot is one the powerless can identify with and experience hopefulness from. If God, whose character does not change, was willing to fight for the freedom of the Israelites, African American slaves could hope for the same experience. The hopefulness this story provides would often provoke action.

The slaves who sang songs like “Go Down Moses,” with its lyrics of hopefulness and reliance on the steadfastness of God, did not sing just one tune. Their lives were not spent completely in devotion, watchfulness, supplication,

and thanksgiving. Other, more melancholic, hymns suited times of special tribulation or despair. This accounts for the popularity during this time of another style of spiritual, the "sorrow song." These tunes, characterized as "intense, slow and melancholic" (Liberty of Congress), express the level of despair one might expect from a human who has been treated as chattel. An example of a sorrow song is "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." This song emphasizes the pain of the speaker, by saying "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, / Nobody knows my sorrow" (1-2). But while the pain of the speaker is emphasized, he still finds peace knowing "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, / Nobody knows but Jesus" (5-6). In the same way that many slaves grew comfort from Old Testament figures like Moses and Daniel, many also grew comfort from Jesus.

Biblically, Jesus is not only the powerful Messiah; he is also the suffering servant. Hebrew 4:15 explains, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin" (NIV). Slaves had the ability to feel a sense of comfort knowing that Jesus is not a God that is distant and foreign to human suffering. Like many slaves, Jesus was poor, betrayed, mocked, whipped, and died by hanging. In sharing in his sufferings, they could share in his comfort as well. The *pesach*, the *Agnus Dei*, the Good Shepherd, and almost every biblical image of Christ as one who suffers for humans were all crafted into a musical image of the Chosen One who provides succor for those who are afflicted.

The sorrow songs listed the trials of the slaves; they usually aligned almost exactly with the commands that Jesus gives in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46: "For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you visited Me " (34-36). Many of these songs portrayed their persecutors as the self-righteous people whom Jesus will take to task, those who ask, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?" (37-39). When Jesus answers his smug questioners with, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me," many slaves saw themselves as these least of Christ's relations. But many more saw themselves as the elect in this parable, who are told, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Thus their masters would suffer eternal punishment, while the slaves themselves, troubled and weary on Earth, would see their way clear to an eternity of happiness.

Spirituals are more than just beautiful: they are empowering. Through their optimistic hopefulness in the midst of the worst sufferings, their allusion to Old Testament figures and Jesus, and their practical purposes for coding and unity, spirituals provided strength to slaves for centuries. These are just a two of the thousands of songs that were creatively crafted by slaves, who saw themselves not only as the inheritors of African traditions, but also as the contemporary recipients of these ancient Biblical promises, as they identified with both Jew and Gentile, both Old Testament and New.

As this era came to an end, the emigration of Southern blacks to the North created a great concentration of blacks in cities like Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and especially New York. In all of these cities, blacks were rented lodgings only in particular urban areas, areas recently left by the previous waves of immigrants. These ghettos, when unscrupulous landlords refused to make improvements, could become seriously run down, crowded, and insular. But they were also places of vibrant culture, not more so than the black ghetto in Manhattan: Harlem. The fascination of other New Yorkers with the cultural activity happening in this ghetto in the 1920s led to the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, whose influence reached nationwide. This was a time when white America finally began to recognize the artistic achievements of these children and grandchildren of slaves, making talented men and women like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglass nationally and internationally known. African American clubs were thriving and people nationwide were embracing the powerful work of black artists. But while this time looked outwardly like a positive step for blacks, social conditions continued in much the same way as they had previously. African Americans were living in slums, unable to access the necessary resources to get them out of this cycle of poverty, and their culture was, to a large extent, exploited by white Americans. Jim Crow laws were put into place to enforce racial segregation and restrict African Americans from equal opportunity. Such a state continued in the U.S. until it was interrupted by World War II.

African American soldiers who fought in WWII, like their ancestors who fought in WWI, were amazed at how they were treated in Europe. They were

considered the equals of white soldiers, and they were given duties and responsibilities that were entrusted to them because of their competency, not because of their skin color. So when these soldiers returned from the war, having had a glimpse of several societies where race was not such a social concern, they could not regress in their development, and would settle for no less from America. From their anger, and their refusal to submit yet again to being considered inferior, the modern Civil Rights Movement was born.

Coming out of this time, Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, along with many other prominent men and women, including Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and James Meredith. Although these leaders had different views as to how freedom should be obtained, the primary concern of all of these leaders was to gain equal rights under the law and put an end to racial discrimination. Some large battles were conquered during this era. For example, in 1948 Harry Truman brought forth an executive order to end segregation in the military, in 1954 the famous court case Brown v. Board of Education declared racial segregation was to be ended in public schools, and in 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to end racial discrimination in employment. While this time was one of victory, it came at a great cost. In 1957, nine African American students, known as the "Little Rock Nine," were harassed and physically blocked from entering into their newly integrated high school, in 1963 four young black girls were killed by a bomb set off in a Baptist church in Alabama, and in 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated outside his hotel room in Tennessee (Carson). This time was one of important progressions that came from the sacrificial dedication of many black

men and women. As they did in times before, African Americans responded to these horrible conditions through the declaration of their spiritual beliefs by means of artistic expression.

African Americans continued singing about the same biblical promises of God consistently throughout their music, but it was through a different genre: the gospel. Gospel songs have many similarities to spirituals, as both are sacred church songs derived from the African American tradition, addressing the issues of the African American experience through a spiritual lens. The difference comes in through the style in which the message is produced. Gospel songs synchronize the West African characteristics of the spiritual with the formal structure of the white hymn. While spirituals were often times spontaneous in production and therefore contain many different variations; gospel songs are more consistent in nature. As a result of this difference, most gospel songs differ from spirituals, as the majority are not anonymously written. A lot of this has to do with the setting of the authors. Randye Jones writes, "in contrast to the Black spiritual, whose inception was in the cotton fields and in the rural setting of the camp meeting… the gospel song came about in urban settings" (7). The setting of the writer will have drastic effects on the sound, message, and publication of the song.

One of the greatest distinctions between spirituals and gospels are their sound. Gospel songs derive from the beginning of the twentieth century, a time where blues and jazz music were thriving. While many new forms of secular music were beginning to develop during this time, such as ragtime and zydeco music, none became as important to the African American community as the blues. Burton Peretti writes that "the blues became a powerful new statement of

the mentality of southern African Americans living under Jim Crow" (68). The blues were a new outlet to allow the black community to express itself under the new form of adversity they were walking through. Blues music is an artistic creation that has the unique ability to provide a sense of peace by developing a sense of sympathy with the listener. The musical characteristics of the blues include a slow, stable rhythm, displaced beats, the inventiveness of the singer, and lyrics that express the singer's perspective of the world's delights and hardships. These secular influences became prominent in the music of the church, which led to the development of the gospel.

Along with the secularly influenced music, the religious lyrics were essential to the success of the genre. The gospel songs from this era deal primarily with the issue of justice. These songs reflect the rational anger that the black community was experiencing when the law confirmed equality, but in reality was encouraging slavery disguised under a different name. Religious African American artists during this time were especially interested in biblical stories that highlight the second coming, joyfully singing of a spiritual world where everything will be made right.

Sacred music was essential for Civil Rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. Dr. King led a movement through peaceful protest which was inspired by his religious convictions. Dr. King's movement was not only a source of encouragement for the black community, it was the source of much needed practical change. Dr. King is responsible for the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act for African Americans, as well as creating the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that would bring many

other prominent African Americans to rise up and pursue freedom. The influence of black gospel songs to King was extraordinary, as was King's influence on America. King went all the way to say that freedom songs, these hymns that emphasize liberation, were the soul of his movement. He says of these freedom songs:

> They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang — the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement… We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that 'We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday." (Lincoln 372)

These songs were the source of endurance that allowed people to continue on in protests, to have a voice in the midst of oppression, and to have peace in prison. Few rural black Americans had ever participated in political meetings, so the usage of these spiritual songs was essential in bringing comfort and familiarity. Spiritual songs were the foundation of one of the most important times for African Americans in history.

Because of their powerful sound and unique expression, gospel songs flourished across the nation in both the sacred and secular world. One of the greatest influencers of gospel music was Thomas Dorsey, a man known as the father of gospel music. Before he devoted his career to gospel music, Dorsey was a popular blues pianist and prolific blues and jazz composer known as "Georgia

Tom." "The energetic rhythms and primal growls of secular music heavily influenced Dorsey's sacred composing style" (Library of Congress). Dorsey wrote over two hundred gospel songs, one of the most famous being Dr. King's favorite: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

This gospel song differs from the spiritual "Go Down Moses," as it is not joyfully looking forward to the hope to come, but rather is a lament of trial and hardships; it is a soul's plea for God to come and bring help and hope in the darkness. This song mirrors the lament psalms found in the Hebrew Bible in both its message and structure. Dorsey originally wrote this song as a response to the death of his wife and newborn son. Dorsey explains that against his will he went to St. Louis to sing at a large revival meeting. He wanted to stay home with his wife in the last month of her pregnancy, but he was expected to go. Towards the end of the tiring event, a messenger boy came up to him with a note that informed him that his wife had died. He says of the situation:

> When I got back, I learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. I swung between grief and joy. Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well. (Hawn)

But as heartbroken as he was, he could not give up producing the sacred music that he was so gifted in creating. These songs provided hope and healing in him. In response to this tragedy, Dorsey wrote "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." This

song would provide healing to all of those, specifically in the African American community, who felt the heartbreak of painful situations outside of their control.

In the same way that spiritual slave songs drew heavily from specific biblical passages such as Exodus, hymns written during the Civil Rights Movement also emphasized certain sacred texts, one of which being the Psalms. The Psalms are powerfully similar to many Civil Rights spirituals, as they both demonstrate a sorrowful lament, while paradoxically revealing a supernatural power and ability to continue on. The authors of the Psalms and Dorsey both demonstrate a hopeful faith in the midst of hopeless circumstances. In Psalm 139 the writer, like Dorsey, is assured that God will lead him in the most distant locations, writing: "even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (Psalm 139:10). Dorsey also relates to the writer of Psalm 37, who trusts in God's guidance in the midst of difficulty: "though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand" (Psalm 37:24). The writer of Psalm 6 is similar in lament to Dorsey, pleading with God for help in the hurt: "be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror" (Psalm 6: 2). All three of these Psalms not only carry a similar message to that of "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," but they even use drastically similar language in order to convey this message.

Like many Psalms, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" is a lament, a plea for God's help in the midst of silence; it is a desperate cry for peace when peace is likely impossible, and at the same time it is a declaration of God's faithfulness. It is an expectant, despite the fact that it is unlikely, call for God to come on behalf of his children and lead them to wholeness. Joshua C. Waltman explains,

> the psalms of lament capture the faithful's most extreme moments of vulnerability and their corresponding petitions to God. These raw and emotional cries to the Lord in the midst of true anguish and need often express descriptions of God as one who is sleeping silent, or unaware of the crises which face the psalmists. (209)

And yet it seems that God's silence simply creates a louder call from the Psalmists who continue all the more in a "dynamic, unfiltered prayer relationship marked by a conviction in the attributes of God and God's desire to engage the righteous, even though it sometimes feels as though he is not present" (209). Many writers of hymns during this time period carry that same trait, revealing a faith that extends beyond circumstance or emotion. A powerful statement is being made in the recognition of God's silence: one can only know God is silent in a certain season if he has heard his voice in another. The awareness of God's silence is also an awareness of not just God's existence, but also of his tendency to make himself known to people. Through this lament, Dorsey is showing great faithfulness. "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" is one of the many hymns from this era that not only allude to specific psalm references, but in and of itself holds many of the same characteristics of biblical psalms.

The song begins saying, "Precious Lord, take my hand / Lead me on, let me stand / I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone" (1-3). The song opens up demonstrating the dependence the speaker has on God, while also demonstrating his own strength. The speaker is in a situation that is out of his control, and yet he still demonstrates his own sense of control through his faithful prayer and desire to

stand. Jerma A. Jackson explains how Dorsey intertwines both human and divine agency into his music, and he writes:

> He captured this dual agency in the first line of the song's refrain: "Take my hand, precious Lord." With these words Dorsey did not plead with God to protect him but gently commanded that God come to his assistance. Deploying this command, Dorsey accorded individuals like himself with a certain degree of human agency. Yet even as he uttered this order, Dorsey carefully pointed out that it was a desperate plea to a powerful and indeed precious divine for help and protection. Creating stories in which the divine shared center stage with mortals, Dorsey made God comprehensible on the scale of everyday life. (68)

Although it is God who has the power to change the situation the speaker is in, it is the speaker himself who has the power to remain steadfast in prayer and hope. While the speaker cannot stand on his own, he is asking God to give him the ability to stand, and in that he is demonstrating strength.

The speaker, like the African American community at this time, is tired. But while he is tired, he has not given up. Lines 8-10 write, "Hear my cry, hear my call / Hold my hand lest I fall / Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home." This line alludes to Jesus in Matthew 14: 22-33. Here the disciples are on a boat in a lake and Jesus approaches them walking on water. In this story, the disciples are horrified, but Jesus tells them there is no reason to fear. He calls Peter out to the water, and Peter obeys, but after walking a little while he begins to fall. He cries out for Jesus to save him, and "immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt' (Matthew 14:31).

Those who remained in the comfort of the boat did not sin, but only Peter, stepping out of the safety of the boat, really experienced the faithfulness of God in that moment. Biblically, the only way to stand on water is to do so with faith. This song emphasizes that the same is true in adversity.

Throughout the entire hymn, the speaker laments of a deep pain and exhaustion he is enduring. “I’m tired, I’m weak, I’m lone,” he repeats twice in the hymn. The beauty of this song comes from its raw vulnerability. The speaker does not demonstrate some false sense of happiness. Instead, the healing the song brings comes from its honesty. Marini writes with “‘Take My Hand, Precious Lord,’ Dorsey allowed himself to wail, to get ‘lowdown,’ to purge -- rather than just soothe -- the grief” (117). The speaker does not pretend that everything is okay, and that honesty is what allows him to heal.

This song is filled with sorrow, yet it is at the same time filled with great hope. Like the spirituals written by the African American slaves, the hope the speaker clings onto is directed in part towards this world, and at the same time it is focused on the world to come. In Matthew 5:4, Jesus calls blessed “those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” All throughout scripture, suffering is seen as a way in which one can experience the God of comfort more deeply. The God of the Bible is one who draws near to those who are hurting, and makes himself known to the broken hearted. All throughout Matthew 5 Jesus does not call the wealthy and healthy blessed, but rather he talks highly of those who are poor in spirit and those who are being persecuted. He blesses them, promising them comfort, mercy, and even “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). While these

blessings are things to hope for after death, that hopefulness provides a sense of peace in the midst of life.

One of the most important things about the song is the word the speaker continuously uses to describe God: “precious.” Melva W. Costen writes that “‘Blessed Lord,” [Dorsey’s] initial first words, were replaced with ‘Precious Lord’ in his salutatory acknowledgement that Jesus was precious, dear, and personal” (39). The word “precious” signifies immense value and pricelessness. At no point does the speaker ask God to change his circumstances. Instead, he asks God to strengthen him, and the way in which the speaker would be strengthened is by simply being in God’s presence, the presence of something precious. He asks of God: “take my hand,” “lead me on,” “let me stand,” “lead me home,” “linger near,” “hear my cry,” “hear my call, “hold my hand,” and “guide my feet.” Every cry the speaker lifts up is one that would lead him further into the presence of God. Costen continues to explain how the “‘preciousness’ and nearness of the Lord Jesus allowed Dorsey to stress what was needed from the immanent, divine presence in order to endure his present grief” (39). It is not a miraculous act the speaker seeks, but rather a chance to rest in the presence of a precious God, the one who gave up his life for those who are burdened, because he too sees his children as precious.

While the speaker of the song is tired and weak, he never changes his perspective of God. Like the Psalm writers, Dorsey is able to give God the affectionate title of “precious” consistently from the beginning of the hymn until the end. He does not allow his circumstances to alter his view of God, but instead they allow him to focus on God all the more. Dorsey’s “Precious Lord, Take My

Hand" does not present a theological solution to suffering nor does it provide a sense of happiness in the end. Like Dorsey's hymn, "psalms do not really posit an answer, much less a fully developed theodicy, to the logical problem of divine silence, or hiddenness" (Waltman, 209). Perhaps the greatest hope in this song, and the psalms, come from a similar place. While the speaker may be singing words demonstrating doubt, fear, and hurt, the speaker is still singing, and in that there is hope.

Such melancholic music in a blues register was not the only music in the air. Songs like Mahalia Jackson's "How I Got Over," an upbeat retelling of the triumphs one might expect through a steadfast faith, was the flip side of the coin. Where "Precious Lord" asked for protection, "How I Got Over" celebrated success, as the trials it spells out are now over. This song is more uplifting and gleeful. It still discusses the pains of oppression and the joy of Jesus, but it just does so in a different manner. "How I Got Over" views the trials of life from the perspective of the afterlife. It begins repeating "How I got over / How I got over / You know my soul looks back and wonder / How I got over" (1-4). The entire song is filled with gratitude, not because the present moment is not filled with immense pain, but instead because the afterlife that is sure to come is promised with great joy. This song declares the promise that Paul makes in Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Yes, suffering still exists and many times it is difficult to endure, but the hope of its end and the reward of life in "that New Jerusalem" allows the one who suffers to look beyond the pain, for this too shall pass.

Through the dedication of Dr. King, as well as the many other dedicated men and women fighting throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the African American community received a major victory through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act, proposed by John F. Kennedy and passed under Lyndon B. Johnson, declared the end of public segregation and outlawed discrimination in employment. As a result, no one could be denied service because of one's color, gender, or religious identity, nor could one be denied a job on these grounds either. Schools, restaurants, and all other public places began to slowly enforce desegregation. This act came the year after Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, where he boldly proclaimed that a century after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, "the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination" (King, 1). This new act by no means resolved all of the issues present, but it was a vital step towards progress in truly giving freedom to African Americans.

The following year President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This act strived to remove barriers that were placed to prevent African Americans from voting. These barriers would include poll taxes and literacy tests that were intentionally placed in locations targeting African Americans. Three years later, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 banned discrimnation in the renting and selling of houses.

Many people, particularly in the south, continued to push back on all three of these acts, creating violence and resistance towards equality and unity, attempting to keep the power fully in the hands of the white majority and

continuing on the system of segregation that had long been in place. This can be seen through the deaths of many of the prominent Civil Rights leaders, including both Malcolm X in 1965 and Dr. King in 1968. The deaths of these men by no means slowed down the breakthrough that was taking place for African Americans during this time, but rather they laid down their lives as martyrs, only to fuel the flame that had been sparked within the community. Violence continued, but progression did as well.

The Contemporary period would continue to bring forth both racial injustice and progress. Systematic racism still plays a big role for African Americans, and this can be most heavily seen through relations with the law and police. Police brutality has become a highlighting issue. With the rise of social media, these cases of police brutality, while often remaining untouched legally, do not remain private. One famous case is that of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen year old African American boy, who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a community watchmen. In response to this incident, there were protests across the nation, not only for justice over Martin's death, but to bring awareness to the brutality and injustice that African Americans face daily. In addition to police brutality, white supremacists have continued to hold protests, spark conflict through social media, and commit hateful acts of violence on African Americans. In June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a twenty-one year old white supremacist, shot up a predominantly African-American church in Charleston, killing nine people and seriously injuring one.

While these acts of violence have created much adversity for many African Americans, the community as a whole has walked through great difficulties in

relation to poverty and incarceration. 21.2% of African Americans live under the poverty line in 2017; that is 9 million people (Center of American Progress). African Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites (NAACP). The Contemporary Period has not been an easy time for African Americans; nevertheless, it has certainly been a productive time. People are becoming aware of these difficulties, and they are fighting for change. This period has even been referred to as "The New Civil Rights Movement."

In the midst of these difficulties, there have been some great victories. Perhaps the greatest victory for the African American community during this period came in 2008 when Barack Obama became the first black president of the United States. Obama's campaign slogan was "Change," a thing that many desire, and many have received during this time. The contemporary period has been marked by political and social change, and this is true of the music produced during this time as well.

African American religious music has changed drastically, taking on several different forms, most notably hip-hop and rap. Rap derived in the late 1970s from artists like Kurtis Blow, DJ Grand Wizard Theodore, and Jim Fricke. Its beginnings were in many ways similar to the roots of the slave songs; they both were born organically, out of the need for new forms of expression that the majority culture at the time could not appropriate or, frankly, understand. Disc jockeys (DJs) would play live at parties, and for the purpose of entertainment they "began isolating the percussion breaks of funk, soul, and disco songs and extending them" (NPR). During these instrumental extensions, the Masters of Ceremony (MCs) -- a title that spoken-word vocalists gave themselves -- would

interact with the audience, and would construct seemingly extemporaneous rhymes that coordinated with the beat of these extended musical selections. One of the early techniques in rap music was scratching, where DJs would manipulate the rotation of an LP or EP on a turntable, moving it forward and back with their hands. As the turntable stylus moved through the grooves of the record, it would sound like the record itself was scratched. Other unique facets of the music were a manipulation of the tonal spectrum through the equalizer to place heavy emphasis on the bass notes, and extended free improvisation -- which actually was extemporaneous -- from the MCs.

Hip-hop music has changed drastically from its origins, but the importance of the beat has remained the same. The beat is vital in rap. The beat of most contemporary rap features a heavy bass line, and contains a large amount of synthesized percussion. Rap contains many subcategories now, such as trap, mumble rap, lyrical rap, and gospel. While it might seem strange to have religious singers appropriate a style that was in its infancy considered so anti-institutional, the ease with which DJs and MCs integrated their religious beliefs with a style of music many considered irreligious is a testament to how firmly rooted the recognition of and reliance on a Divine Being (within a number of faith traditions) is in the African American experience. Each subcategory of rap is marked by varying characteristics, such as the tempo, the rhyme schemes, or the speed of the lyrics (the “flow”). But in each category the beat remains vital to the song. In addition to the beat, the flow plays a large role in rap. The flow is marked by the tempo of the song and the cadence of the rapper’s voice.

But even more important than the beat and flow is the content of the lyrics. They are the essential distinguishing marks that break out these subcategories. Though it may be couched in the context of a gang life filled with implicit or explicit violence, this music often talks about things like loyalty, the honoring of one's personal history, background, and the articulation of deeply personal experiences. These issues are valorized, and presented in a manner that is both brutally honest and incredibly vulnerable. Rap has given a voice to many who have felt silenced by the dominant culture; it has become a vehicle not only for self-expression, but for explaining the experienced of an often-disenfranchised minority culture to a majority culture that, for many reasons, has ignored that minority. Many rap songs discuss things like drugs, poverty, relationships, and gangs. Political rap has always been a thread within the genre, and it has become more popular recently with the advent of artists like Kanye West (a former sweater folder at The Gap), J. Cole (a mixed-race child abandoned by his father, and the former first-chair violinist for the Terry Sanford Orchestra) and Kendrick Lamar (who grew up on welfare in Section 8 housing, but whose 2018 album, *DAMN*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Music, making him the first non-jazz or classical artist to win the award).

Becky Blanchard explains that rap is "the product of a set of historical, political, and economic circumstances[;] . . . it has served as a voice for those subjugated by systematic political and economic oppression" ("Social Significance"). Through the beat, flow, and lyrics, rap music tells a story that needs to be heard, and that is certainly what is happening. Nielsen Music's 2017 year-end report concluded that for "the first time ever, R&B/hip-hop has

surpassed rock to become the biggest music genre in the U.S. in terms of total consumption" as "eight of the 10 most listened-to artists of the year came from the R&B/hip-hop genre… four of the five Grammy nominees for album of the year were R&B or hip-hop artists." As a whole, rap "experienced the second-highest growth of any genre, spiking 25% over 2016" (*USAToday*).

Rap music is not just popular in the secular world; it has crossed over to the religious sphere. This transition has caused a lot of pushback due to the stereotypes associated with the genre. Those unfamiliar with the multiple currents within the genre may try to categorize it as a crude genre of music that only discusses things like sex, violence, and drugs. While these topics are heavily present in many rap songs, they are greatly misunderstood. Becky Blanchard contextualizes these subjects as she discusses the genre as a whole:

> If rap music appears to be excessively violent when compared to country-western or popular rock, it is because rap stems from a culture that has been seeped in the fight against political, social, and economic oppression. Despite the theatrics sometimes put on for major-label albums or MTV videos, for many artists, rapping about guns and gang life is a reflection of daily life in racially -- and economically -- stratified inner-city ghettos and housing projects. Violence in rap is not an effective agent that threatens to harm America's youth; rather, it is the outcry of an already-existing problem from youth whose worldviews have been shaped by experiencing deep economic inequalities divided largely along racial lines. ("Social Significance")

The presence of religious feeling, specifically Christianity, in rap music, has not replaced or even diminished these characteristics of violence. Rather, it has used them to present the fundamental Christian message through a set of constructs that reflect the lived experiences of the audience for rap music. In short, Christian rappers have co-opted the traditions of the genre in the name of the Great Commission. Major Christian rappers include Lecrae, KB, and Trip Lee. Many major secular rappers have crossed over into religious rap, the most famous of these being Chance the Rapper (Chancelor Jonathan Bennet). Chance the Rapper's album *Coloring Book*, released in 2016, won three Grammy Awards, including Rap Album of the Year. This highly spiritual album contained samples from popular gospel singers, alludes to many different Bible stories and verses, and remixed the popular hymn "How Great is Our God."

"Blessings," the last track on the album, demonstrates the ways in which rap's raw power of personal testimony has mixed with religious expression in the new form of rap. Chance begins the song with these lyrics:

> I speak of promised lands
> Soil as soft as mama's hands
> Running water, standing still
> Endless fields of daffodils and chamomile
> Rice under black beans

The first line in this song alludes to the book of Exodus. The promised land, Canaan, was the central focus of "Go Down Moses," and many other African American slave songs. Now, centuries later, the African American community is still seeking freedom from forms of enslavement, and they are using similar

language to bring in biblical stories to create a connection between worldly and heavenly freedom. The lines that follow this demonstrate what Chance envisions this promised land to be like. “Soil as soft as mama’s hands” points to the fertility of the promised land that he looks forward to, while it also categorizes his mother, equating her with the soil. This mother’s hands were those that fed, sacrificed, and served in order to grow her son. The land will be one that is fruitful and kind to its citizens.

While the Old Testament presents Canaan as the “land of milk and honey,” Chance updates that image with an array of two specific flowers: daffodils and chamomile. The blooming of daffodils marks the end of winter; they are one of the first flowers to break through the snow, and they continue to flourish throughout spring. They are strongly associated with rebirth, prosperity, and hope. They represent a new beginning, demonstrating that this new land, heaven, will have none of the trials and pain that believers have experienced in this land.

Conjoined to the end of pain is the level of contentment and peace waiting in the promised land. Chamomile is an herb that has long been associated with relaxation and peaceful calm. The weariness of this life is over, and the believer may rest contented, renewed and reflective, but no longer required to endure any hardship. This new land Chance envisions is not just Canaan, and is not just promised to the Israelites. It is also “a new heaven and a new earth,” where there “will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:1-4). Christianity’s eschatological images imbue a number of rap lyrics, just as they did the slave songs and the Civil Rights songs.

Chance continues, rapping “rice under black beans.” Here he brings in the two most prominent foods of most cultures worldwide. In doing so he demonstrates the inclusivity and unity that this land will bring. Revelation 7 presents a vision of an endless amount of people before God, all equal, all rewarded, all content. These people are “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9). This new land will not look anything like the current America. Not only will it not be divided by racism, but the cultural, racial, and linguistic differences we currently experience have disappeared, as people have come together through the strength of a unifying force greater than any perceived divisions between us. Chance is pointing out that diversity and division are drastically different. One does not necessarily lead to the other.

He then raps that he, “Walked into Apple with cracked screens / And told prophetic stories of freedom” (6-7). While this may seem like a deliberate downplaying of the enormity of the salvation history of the Israelites, Chance is not trying to minimize the importance of these events or dismiss the pain and suffering the Israelites experiences during centuries of bondage. The comparison is arresting, and asks his listeners to probe more deeply into the connections between a modern annoyance and a historical period of intense suffering.

In Exodus 32, Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving two tablets from God. Exodus 32:16 explains that the “tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.” Written on these tablets were the covenant of the law. As Moses is receiving them, God informs him that he needs to go back down off the mountain, as his people had created a golden calf and

were worshipping it. Moses, who had just personally encountered God, was furious at the idolatry before him. When he saw what was going on, “his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 32:19).

Moses and God meet again, and God commands Moses to chisel out two tablets like the first ones Moses broke, and to meet him on Mount Sinai again the following morning. God again chooses to make his covenant with Moses and the Hebrew people, and he tells Moses:

> I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you. Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god. (Exodus 34: 10-14)

The two tablets Moses receives contain the covenant law, the necessary instructions to follow in order to experience God’s goodness and forgiveness. The tablets Moses carries were the ways in which the Hebrew people would experience freedom.

Chance is playing on Moses and the tablets when he refers to walking “into Apple with cracked screens.” Like the spirituals dealing with freedom during the time of slavery, this line is working to emphasize both a spiritual freedom and a

physical one. Spiritually, Chance is breaking the tablets in anger at the new golden calf of the twenty-first century: consumerism, especially as it applies to technology. Apple products, with their minimalist industrial design and hefty price tags, together with the Cult of Jobs, confer a degree of social status on those who own them. Couple this with the access to all forms of social media that comes through them, and these products have become an object of worship in American culture. Apple has in a sense become golden calf into which people pour their money, time, and attention. Idolatry of any kind, especially when it's tied to the things of this world, brings forth spiritual enslavement, and Chance is responding in frustration in the same way that Moses did.

But Apple does not stop at only spiritual enslavement, and neither does Chance. Apple's profit margin is largely based on its ability to outsource the manufacturing and assembly of its products to low-wage countries. "The factory in China where Apple products, specifically iPhones, undergo final assembly has approximately 230,000 workers. In the US, there are only 83 cities that have the same population as this factory's number of employees" (Giovanni). In May of 2019, Apple lost its US Supreme Court case, as the Court ruled that Apple "used its monopoly to overcharge consumers" (Supreme Court). This case was in response to Apple's hold over apps and the app store, but Apple's monolithic grip does not stop there. The music industry has become controlled by major streaming services, specifically Apple, Spotify, and YouTube. Willie Howard writes that rap is used "to fight the powers from above" (Rap). Chance demonstrates this as he has labeled himself as an independent artists, refusing both to become enslaved to these corporate superpowers and also refusing to

force others into this enslavement. On the streaming services, artists are woefully underpaid for their songs. Today Apple pays an artist $0.00735, or 7/10ths of a cent per song stream. While this is certainly a small amount, it's actually a significant raise over what Apple used to pay artists per stream. Daniel Sanchez explains that artists "on Apple Music would need around 200,272 plays to earn the US monthly minimum wage amount" ("What Streaming Services Pay"). Although Apple pays artists little for their music, it still pays more than most other streaming services, including both Spotify and YouTube.

Chance the Rapper wants to be free from the monetary constrictions that comes from partnering up with large corporations, and he also wants his fans to be free from corporate greed and monopolization as well. He releases his music on smaller streaming services like Soundcloud, where it can be accessed and downloaded for no cost. He has received a lot of pushback because of his unwillingness to sign with a major corporate label. In response to his characterization as an unrealistic anomaly because he is an independent artist, Chance replied, "it's only unrealistic because of the conditioning all artists are exposed to by different forms of media creating the narrative that you need to be discovered or put on in order to be successful. We wouldn't seek out deals if mfs knew there were other avenues" (Twitter).

While to some Chance's unwillingness to sign with a label seems unnecessary and misleading, his pushback against signing is understandable, especially given his performance genre. Rap derived from the rhyming "signifying" of the African American community, and is almost exclusively influenced by African American culture. Blanchard explains that the idea of

signing to a major label is particularly difficult for minority rappers, because their music is treated as a commodity (and must then be homogenized for the widest possible audience), and the signing itself smacks of some kind of neo-slavery:

> young, urban minority musicians are often treated as commodities, not as artists… Often the message and artistic integrity of rappers can be lost amidst national marketing campaigns and concern for approval by important commercial allies… In the growing success of the hip-hop market, musicians have struggled to maintain rap's potency as a form of resistance and empowerment. In order to preserve rap's cultural function and, simultaneously, to promote artistic and commercial progress, the communities that have traditionally been the ones making the music should be the ones that control its production and distribution. (Edge)

In "Blessings," another song on Chance's album *Coloring Book,* he explains the reasoning behind his refusal to attach himself to a multinational corporation: "I don't make songs for free, I make 'em for freedom." Chance's sub-genre of rap is a means of expression that provides hope and spiritual liberation to so many, and, like many musicians before him, he wants to fight to ensure this freedom is achieved.

Towards the end of "Blessings Reprise" Chance says: "The people's champ must be everything the people can't be." Chance was able to break the cycle of physical poverty through his music, and rise above the cycle of spiritual poverty through his faith. He recognizes that people need someone who can lead them to the same liberation he has found. Willie Howard explains that rap "is an effort to bring the world's attention to the adversity African Americans face in their lives

in a corrupted America." For Chance, rap is not only an effort to bring the world's attention to the adversity African Americans experience, but also a way to show the world where hope can be found in the midst of that adversity. As Moses was for the Israelites, Chance the Rapper is for so many Americans. He is making a way to freedom for those who are in bondage.

Chance writes, "I speak to God in public, I speak to God in public / He keep my rhymes in couplets / He think the new shit jam, I think we mutual fans" (21-23). He is bold in his faith, demonstrating it throughout the entirety of *Coloring Book*. He pushes against the stereotypes associated with rap as he asserts his new, personal, purpose. His personal testimony, striking and unexpected in a soundscape dominated by lyrics glorifying misogyny and violence, offers a new perspective, a boldness that writes back to the dominant paradigms of the entire genre. His courage in speaking out about his faith, and his willingness to glorify God -- a lyrical move more in tune with artists like Kirk Franklin or the Mississippi Mass Choir -- serves as both a solace and a challenge to his listeners. In saying "I think we mutual fans," Chance demonstrates how he feels God is happy with his work, despite its difference from mainstream Christian music. He concludes this song -- the final one on the album -- by repeating the lines, "Are you ready for your blessing? Are you ready for your miracle?" Thus he wraps up his testimony, and his entire project, with a sense of hope. He has presented hardships, and has overcome most of them, but he has faith that the remaining will, with the help of God's grace and blessings, be overcome as well. His God is faithful and good, and Chance has confidence that God is present and is going to move.

While Chance is the perfect example of a mainstream rapper who incorporates religious feeling into his work, there is also a sub-genre of rap that is devoted solely to Christian religious rap. One of the most famous of these rappers is Lecrae, who was the first hip-hop artist to win a Grammy for best gospel album. In 2014 Lecrae's album *Anomaly* was number one on the Billboard 200 and the Gospel charts. "Dirty Water," from the first cut from that album, discusses the tension between the command that Christians love their neighbors, and the reality of American racism. He says, "Champagne, champagne, celebratin' my campaign / I just dug a well in West Africa / But how many of my friends is African?" This song problematizes even the good deeds that one might do through faith, as he owns the fact that he, along with many Americans of good will, are willing to travel across the world to minister to people in another country for a week, and yet they have no relationship with their neighbors in need in America.

He demonstrates the problem of getting so caught up in one's own salvation that it can be easy to forget the commands to know and love one's neighbor: "Ain't tryna get to know you, I'm too busy readin' Daniel / Most segregated time of day is Sunday service / Now what you think that say about the God you worship?" (14-16). Lecrae points out that so many Christians are filled with knowledge about God, or about religion itself, but fail to experience the living God, and fail to live out the very commandments they are reading about. This can be seen by simply observing the population of American churches. So many churches are divided by race and social class. The foundational scriptures that Christians confess specifically forbid these divisions, but those texts seems to

be ignored by both individuals and entire faith communities. The most direct is possibly Paul's directive to the community at Corinth: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Where Chance is unexpected because of his overt expressions of faith, LeCrae is unexpected because he does not valorize the entire Christian community. He acknowledges their humanity, and thus their frailty and failings, but positions these as a testament to the power of the Divine. A vibrant and faithful church exists, and even flourishes, despite its corporate brokenness. And people still struggle toward the light, despite their weaknesses. It does not seem that such a frank and honest appraisal would sell many records, yet LeCrae's popularity continues to grow, because he's not an outsider throwing stones, but a believer seeking to purify both himself and the institution he loves.

The acculturation of Hip-hop music to a religious setting is new, but it has momentum. Hip-hop, like gospel music and spirituals, is a genre that is raw and honest. It presents clearly what is going on in the culture and community of those writing the music. It allows those who have been silenced to share their testimonies, and when combined with religion, to share the story of Jesus. Christian rap has been incredibly effective, and will continue to rise in popularity throughout the years to come.

The spiritual songs of the African American community have persisted through the time of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the contemporary period, and have all possessed immense power. While their message of

faithfulness and the hope of redemption is consistent, it is not the only reason for their prominence. The admission of vulnerability, the sense of being exposed, and the request for protection, is a common transhistorical process within them. This admission of one's weakness, be it corporate as it is in slave songs, or defiant, as it is in Civil Rights songs, or even personal, as it is in Christian rap, creates a bond, or a sense of unity between performers and their audiences.

During the time of slavery, all slaves sang their songs, and they took solace in their shared suffering. They could see their fellow slaves suffer the same indignities, and could feel empathy for them. They could express that empathy, that sense of feeling with someone other than oneself, through their common songs. The slaves were both performers and audience, united in their common suffering and their common hope. Despite their differences, "the non-verbal way that they could communicate and overcome the various barriers was through music that transcended their painful situations" (Dixon, 35). The personal was then subsumed into the communal, and each individual could recognize that he or she was not alone any more.

During the struggle for Civil Rights, marchers and their sympathizers were the inheritors of the slave song tradition. As they marched and sang, all of America was the audience, and the plantation that served as the performance backdrop for the slaves was for them transformed into the national news broadcasts emanating from throughout the country. Their songs not only reinforced their own unity, but extended that sense of belonging to a national and international television audience. Singing within the movement was not primarily for entertainment, but rather to create a strong community. No person

was esteemed as higher or lower than another, and everyone was expected to sing. This created a bond that was greater than any differences between individuals. Bruce Hartford says, for "the Freedom Movement of the 1960s, nothing was more effective in building solidarity across social fault lines, and breaking down individual isolation, than the group singing of shared freedom songs" (4).When a group came together to sing of their freedom through spirituals and gospels, every person was of equal worth and value, and they were reminded not only of what they were fighting for, but also that they were fighting together.

A sense of unity has also derived through rap, as it is a genre that is distinctively African American. Many are able to connect with each other through the personal stories and testimonies within the music. Nany young people see rappers as their role models, as these artists may be the only celebrities they know. The honesty of their lyrics allow religious rappers to expose their own insecurities and failings, demonstrating to their audiences that they are both alike. DJ Kool Herc explains that "hip-hop is the voice of this generation. It has become a powerful force. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together. Hip-hop is a family so everybody has got to pitch in. East, west, north or south - we come from one coast and that coast was Africa" (Morgan and Bennett, 107). Rap gives African Americans a voice in a country where they have long been silenced, and it allows them an opportunity to truly be heard.

African American spiritual music has transformed its shape drastically from the times of the slave song, transitioning into gospel, and now adapting

itself into rap. While the style of the music has changed, its heart has not. The themes of freedom and hope have been consistently present, positioned in a context of injustice and enslavement, yet always rising above it. The music produced has always been empowering yet humbling, encouraging yet honest, and painful yet confident. From the days of slavery in the 1600s to the days of drug abuse and gang violence in 2019, African American history tells a story of suffering, but there is much more to the story than just that; where history highlights hardship, art tells a story of hope.

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