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Prosody

Thugz Theology: Religious Narratives and the Poetic Tradition in Hip Hop

Jenny Portillo

Chapter 1: The Tradition and the Theology

Hip-hop artists in many instances are the preachers of their generation, preaching a message which, too often, those who have been given the charge to preach prophetic words to the people have not given- Reverend Willie Wilson, Eulogy for Tupac Shakur.

Rap is public art, and rappers are perhaps our greatest public poets, extending a tradition of lyricism that spans continents and stretches back thousands of years.-Adam Bradley, *The Book of Rhymes.*

Though gangsta rappers are hardly considered bards or prophets, they are the poets and preachers of the modern-day that have chosen to leave the confines of their journals and pulpits. Despite its popularity, rap remains associated with the violence, hyper-sexuality and profanity of marginalized urban neighborhoods, or more simply, the ghetto. Rap lyrics and hip hop beats became the main story telling mechanisms for the urban culture that was born in the impoverished boroughs of New York beginning in the 1970s. Like poetry, the themes of rap lyricism can vary greatly, but there is continuity in the themes between these two seemingly distinct art forms. Narratives of the spiritual imagination are among the more interesting thematic elements that have become part of the poetic tradition that is echoed in contemporary rap music. The spiritual imagination manifests itself in the forms of the prophetic, redemptive and incarnational or "God-like" narratives in the works of John Milton, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Walt Whitman, respectively. Interestingly, comparable spiritual narratives are echoed in the works of Tupac Shakur, DMX, and Nas whose lyrics are part of the hip-hop canon. Surprisingly, the poetic tradition continues on in the works of rap artists who, like their poetic predecessors, have used elements of the sacred to give greater insight into their respective realities. Essentially, the self-proclaimed thugz, are a new breed of poets recreating literary theology.

Haunt

Sonnet
Universe

Sonnet:
portion

Mohammed Ali, "I am the Greatest"
James Brown "I want to jump up, and kiss myself"
J2 as

Jova

The Psalms

This analysis will explore the prophetic, redemptive and incarnational narratives in the works of Milton, Hopkins and Whitman and their hip hop counterparts Tupac Shakur, DMX and Nas. Drawing parallels between the words of poets and rappers will demonstrate the continuity of the spiritual narratives in poetic literature from the pre-Romantic period through the present century. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to grant rap a space within the poetic tradition that it is often denied despite its obvious ties to the great poetic lyricism of the past.

The idea of the prophetic and the prophet is rooted in biblical figures that professed the word of God, beginning with Moses in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the New Testament. As detailed in the Book of Exodus, Moses abandons a life of privilege as one of the princes of Egypt to live in the desert and is ultimately persecuted for leading the enslaved Jews out of Egypt. Jesus' prophetic status differs depending on one's faith tradition; specifically, Jesus is considered the fulfillment of messianic prophecies in the Christian tradition, but only a human not divine prophet in the Jewish and Islamic faiths. In the Christian tradition, Jesus role as a prophetic figure is demonstrated in the Gospels which describe Jesus as one who defends outcasts and exposes the hypocrisy of those who are in power within his society. Both Moses and Jesus find themselves as the dissident voices in their respective worlds that speak out against injustice and wrongdoing on behalf of God. These two prophetic figures are ostracized, condemned and even killed in the case of the latter for speaking God's truth. The prophetic tradition is grounded in revealing the reality that all may see, but few acknowledge.

Prophets are not restricted to the biblical world and are often found in the most ordinary places throughout different points in history. Generally, what unites all prophets is that they "are not like us at all, they suffer terribly, live on the outskirts...cause dissention, [and] are intent on making us see the truth about ourselves."[1] Theologian Megan McKenna explains that true prophet will compel one to feel "more compassionate, more just, more truthful, more forgetful of self, and more attentive to others"; and will side "as God does, with the victims, those who know injustice and unnecessary pain."[2] Essentially, the prophet is charged with speaking on behalf of the truth, which can refer to a religious truth or a more general truth. Interestingly, "prophets are universally concerned with politics, economics, violence and the victims of these realities…[their] message declares that justice is in short supply and that injustice is having its way in the world."[3] Placing the prophet in the context of the everyday world allows the prophetic narrative to manifest itself in different forms, for prophets are those who "cry out to God, to the air, to any open heart," and though their "styles are unique and diversified…they all attack with a similar intensity."[4] The prophetic voice highlights the reality that many would prefer to turn away from and urges others to change that reality. The introspective nature of poetry and rap allows the prophetic voice to resonate in the minds of the readers and listeners.

The redemptive narrative entails the human encounter with pain, sin and the search for forgiveness and grace. Furthermore, the redemptive narrative involves recognizing one's own weakness and susceptibility to temptation. Perhaps the most notable redemptive tale is that of Job in the Ketuvim of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament of the Christian Bible, who endures great pains at the hands of God, but is ultimately rescued from his misery by his own reverence to God. Job is a "blameless, upright," and God fearing man who continually turns away from evil."[5] After observing the humankind on earth, Satan suggests that Job's reverence is the product of having received only goodness from God, and would quickly turn to renouncement if Job were to lose the goods God had granted him.[6] Believing Job's faith unshakeable, God allows Satan to test Job in the harshest ways, provided that no direct harm is done to Job's person.[7] Despite losing his wealth, children and eventually his personal health, Job does not speak against God, believing that one cannot "accept good from God and not accept adversity" as well.[8] However, Job does comes to curse the day of his birth and wishes to know why God permits the innocent, like him, to suffer and the evil to go unpunished. Job's friends reassure him that God only punishes those who have sinned and urge Job to confess the sins for which he is being punished. Job ardently, defends his righteousness explaining that he has not committed so great as to warrant such suffering. Ultimately, God answers Job's cries explaining that He is free to do what he desires with his own creation, which includes allowing the righteous to suffer. God's words force Job to recognize that though he is a good man, he is not perfect. Because Job does not denounce God as Satan believed he would, God praises Job's rectitude and blesses him with prosperity once more.

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[1] Megan McKenna, *Prophets: Words of Fire*, (New York: Orbis, 200), p. 1).

[2] Ibid, p. 25.

[3] Ibid.

[4] McKenna, *Prophets*, p. 1.

Unlike the prophet, the narrator seeking redemption is not depicting reality from an omniscient perspective, but from his personal struggles with desolation, vice and desperation. The redemptive voice exposes the narrator's humanity and the manner in which it interacts with the divine in the everyday world. Like the tale of Job, poetry and music told from the redemptive perspective involve the narrator achieving a degree of self-knowledge and an understanding of his faults. Contrary to the detached role Satan plays in the story of Job, poetic and musical redemptive narratives often involve a personal dialogue or interaction with Satan, "the adversary" to grace.[9] Redemption by definition necessitates recognition of one's vices and the continuous search for forgiveness; thus, the redemptive narrative becomes the author's vehicle of expressing frustrations, fears and the desire for deliverance.

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[5] Job,1:1

[6] Jb, 1:11.

[7] Jb, 1: 12.

[8] Jb, 2:10.

Whereas the previous narratives portray the divine and the temporal in separate realms, the incarnational narrative brings God and man onto the same plane, going so far as to elevate man as a deity. By definition, the term incarnation refers to "a body, person or form in which a soul, spirit or deity is embodied," thereby empowering the human with metaphysical qualities.[10] Although the incarnation of God in the form of Jesus Christ is a foundational tenet of Christianity, there are no other instances of incarnation present in the faith tradition. Furthermore, the idea that any other human aside from Christ could be the incarnation of God is rejected by Christianity, while incarnation as a whole is rejected by Judaism and mainstream Islam. However, the Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Five Percent Nation are black-nationalist sects of Islam which elevate humans as incarnations of God.

The NOI, founded by W. Fard Muhammad focused on empowering poor, working class blacks in the United States by encouraging "knowledge of self and the Black man's godhood."[11] Fard's teachings were based "on a belief in the primacy of the Blackman" and emphasized his own status as "God in person" or the "latest incarnation of Allah," of Islam.[12] After the death of Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad became the acting leader of the NOI and appointed Malcolm X as his "national representative."[13] Clarence 13X, a member of Malcolm X's congregation in Harlem left the NOI and went on to create the Five Percent Nation, also known as the Nation of Gods and Earths (men are called Gods and women are called Earths).[14] Despite retaining many practices and beliefs of the NOI, Five Percenters believe Clarence 13X is the incarnation of Allah. The empowering mission of the Five Percent Nation is indicative by its name alone, which is rooted in the idea that "uncivilized people…people who do not know who the living God is or their origin in the world" comprise eighty-five percent of the population, while ten percent are "rich slave-makers of the poor, who teach poor lies to believe: that the Almighty, True and Living God is a spook and cannot be seen by the physical eye."[15] Thus, the remaining five percent are:

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[9] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, "Glossary of Names used in Paradise Lost," (New York: Norton, 2005).

[10] Oxford English Dictionary, "Incarnation."

[11] Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, (Bloomington: Indiana, 2005), p. 13.

> The poor righteous teachers who do not believe in the teachings of the 10 percent and are all-wise and know who the Living God is and teach that the Living God is the Son of Man…the Black Man of Asia and teach Freedom, Justice and Equality to all the human family of planet Earth; otherwise known as civilized people, also as Muslims and Muslim Sons.[16]

Although Five Percenters hold Clarence 13X as Allah, every man and woman or God and Earth is endowed with a great awareness of self and has the mission of enlightening the other ninety-five percent of the population. The incarnational narrative flourished within the context of racial turmoil in the U.S. in the 1960s and allowed Black communities to create their own power where they previously had none.

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[12] Ibid, p. 12, 14.

[13] Ibid, p. 15.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*, p. 28.

[16] Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*, p.28.

The prophetic, redemptive and incarnational narratives are unique in their religious, social and historical contexts, but are similar in that they voice elements of the spiritual imagination. What follows are close readings of poetic and musical texts that employ the narratives that have become part of the poetic literary tradition. This author understands that the intellectual rhetoric of the poets and the *street talk* of the rap artists are a product of their respective times as well as their intended audiences; therefore, this study does not presume to lower the poetic to level of the mundane nor elevate the music out of the realm understanding of the everyday person for whose ears it was written. Although the elevated language of poetry and the idiomatic language of rap are incomparable on the basis of language itself, this analysis seeks to demonstrate the continuity between the overarching narratives these writers employ. The narratives add another dimension to each of the works discussed that allows the authors' words to transcend their specific social and personal reality thereby granting the works an essence of timelessness.

Chapter 2: The Prophet in *Paradise* and the Ghetto

Within the poem, however, Milton turns his knowledge of the past into prophecies of the future, as the angel Michael shows Adam a pageant of human time in which every sort of historically recorded evil-war, genocide, murder theft and rape, as well as the bodily and mental suffering-pass before his eyes. -Helen Vendler, "Milton's Epic Poem"

As a literary prophet, the poet takes on the task of exposing truth or reality to all, including his contemporaries, readers throughout time and himself. Seventeenth century English poet, John Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost" uses a single narrative to reveal truths on a multitude of level. Specifically, the epic approaches the prophetic on a historical, psychological and personal level. The prophetic voice employs biblical language as an allegory to highlight the significance of the sociopolitical and religious turmoil occurring in England throughout the mid 1600s. Socially, "Paradise Lost" functions as a prophetic text in that reading about the sins that lead Adam and Eve to fall from grace, the reader in any time period is forced to acknowledge his or her own vices and faults. Interestingly, despite being endowed with the ability to hear and speak God's truth, the poetic prophet does not share in God's perfection and is therefore subject to learning from the very prophecies he preaches. Such is the case with Milton who, despite writing with the Spirit of God, becomes proud, which leads to his own fall for necessitating his salvation along with the rest of mankind. Essentially, Milton, like Moses, is a "painful, angry truth-teller who knows what is wrong" and makes all people, including himself, "nervous, sick to their stomachs, vicious and self-righteous."[17]

Milton's first prophetic mission involves the universal concern "with politics, economics, violence and the victims of these realties," a concern he presents to his contemporaries in a period of great sociopolitical and religious unrest.[18] Rather than directly narrating the state of affairs in England, Milton opts for a biblical allegory, which poignantly addresses the decay of the English institutions of law and religion. Before moving onto the imagery and allegory Milton employs, the context of his rhetoric must be explained. Born in 1608, in London, into an upper middle-class, deeply religious Puritan family, Milton became familiar with religious texts and dogma at an early age.[19] However, as Milton grew older and became increasingly educated, he also became disillusioned with the "conservatism, worldliness, and increasing authoritarianism of the Church."[20]

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[17] McKenna, *Prophets*, p. 3.

[18] Ibid, p. 25.

[19] Gordon Teskey, "The Life of John Milton," *Paradise Lost*, (New York: Norton, 2005), p. xv.

[20] Ibid, p. xvii.

In 1642, the English Civil War waged by the "Long Parliament," the English Puritans, and Scottish Presbyterians against King Charles I and the Anglican Church began.[21] The poet's "love of liberty, his English patriotism, his hatred of tyranny and especially of political control over spiritual matters, made him the ally of the Presbyterians, who dominated the Long Parliament" during the civil war.[22] Unfortunately, Milton found the Long Parliament "more rigidly authoritarian than what they overthrew" and became disheartened when he observed the revolutionaries give into the same hypocrisy that characterized the previous ruling party.[23] Following the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton became the "secretary for foreign tongues to the Council of State" under the rule of Oliver Cromwell in the newly formed English Commonwealth.[24] Despite the initial success of the English Commonwealth, Cromwell's death and the Restoration of 1660 which returned the throne to Charles II, son of the executed king, ultimately dissolved the revolutionary government Milton championed. Milton draws from the political and religious upheaval that dominates his life and that of his countrymen as inspiration for the images of divine warfare, destruction and human failure in "Paradise Lost."

From its opening, Milton infuses "Paradise Lost" with the spiritual imagination so as to validate his role as a prophet of history. Rather than explicitly describing the failure of rebellion in England, Milton restricts the narration to the biblical tale of humanity's fall from paradise. Each book of the poem's twelve opens with "the argument," a summary of the details addressed throughout each section of the poem. The argument in Book One presents "the whole subject" of the poem, namely "Man's disobedience and the loss thereupon of Paradise wherein he was placed" and the "prime cause of his fall."[25] The narrator tells of "the fruit/Of that forbidden tree" which "brought death into the world and all our woe/With the loss of Eden till one greater Man/Restore us and regain the blissful seat."[26] Apart from alluding to the fall of humankind, Milton's narrator also prophesizes the coming a redeemer, who is later referred to as the Son of God. Although Milton models "Paradise Lost" after the works of Homer and Virgil, Milton's narrator does not call upon one of the nine muses of the Greek and Roman epics, but instead invokes the "Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top/Of Oreb or of Sinai didst inspire/That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed."[27] The narrator calls upon the same Spirit that granted the prophet Moses the Ten Commandments atop Mount Oreb as a means of gaining license to "justify the ways of God to men."[28] Appealing to the Spirit, as prophets before him, places Milton's work within a long tradition of prophetic texts in which the author derives his authority directly from a divine entity.

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[21] Ibid, xix.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Teskey, "the Life of John Milton," p. xxi.

[24] Ibid.

Milton's use of the Christian allegory elucidates the significance of the historical developments of the seventeenth century for the people of England and the repercussions of political turmoil for humanity as a whole. Prior to the fall of man, Satan, the "adversary" and his "crew" are cast out of heaven and trapped in "a place of utter darkness fitliest called chaos."[29] After lamenting his recent defeat at the hands of God, Satan rallies his followers explaining that "since through experience of this great event [of defeat]" they may "with more successful hope resolve/To wage by force or guile eternal war."[30] The omniscient narrator presents a Satan who, despite being cast into a flaming nothingness, continues to "to set himself in glory above his peers" equaling himself to "the Most High."[31] Rather than encouraging repentance for revolting against God, the devastating loss affirms the idea that "to do aught good will never be [the] task" of Satan or his forces.[32] Furthermore, Satan reminds his legions that if God's "providence/ out of [their] evil seek to bring forth good,/ [their] labor must be to pervert that end."[33] Defeat only further fuels the rebellious spirit of Satan and his army who take ownership of Hell where they "may reign secure" for they believe it is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."[34] The rebel angels are punished for going "against the throne and monarchy of God" by "raising impious war"; thus, they turn their sights to the earthly paradise God has created, more importantly His most prized creation, man. Milton's Satan is a charismatic leader who convinces his supporters to begin a new fight against God before than can fully recuperate from their recent loss. The narrator's position as the prophet allows him to see the flaws in Satan's character without being deceived by his alluring rhetoric of glorious warfare, an ability the common person would lack. Similarly, Milton saw the faults of the monarchy of Charles I and the Anglican Church, which in his view, sought to raise an "impious war" against "the throne and monarchy of God" as Satan and his forces do. It becomes clear that Milton sees the monarchs of England, beginning with Henry VIII the founder of the Anglican Church, as wanting to elevate themselves to the level of God as Satan does. Following the Civil War, Charles I is beheaded and the Anglican Church is severely weakened which parallels the world of "chaos" the losing party in "Paradise Lost" is condemned to. The religious allegory emphasizes the manner in which revolt against God can damn an entire people when they become proud and revere other entities over God.

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[25] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book One, (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 3.
[26] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, line 1-5.
[27] Milton, "Paradise Lost," line 6-8.
[28] Ibid, Book One, line 26.
[29] Ibid, Book One, The argument.
[30] Ibid, Book One, line 119-121.

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[31] Ibid, line 39-40.

[32] Ibid, line 159.

[33] Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book One, line 162-164.

[34] Ibid, line 260-262.

Apart from indicting the Church of England and the monarchy, Milton's prophetic narrative also voices discontent with the failure of the English Commonwealth and the subsequent period of Restoration. Satan leaves the realm of chaos to retaliate against God by corrupting His human creation, Adam and Eve. Upon escaping from "chaos" and deceiving the gatekeeper of Heaven, Satan enters the Garden of Eden and perches himself atop the Tree of Life disguised as a bird to observe Adam and Eve.[35] As the pair work beneath the Tree of Life, Adam reflects on the infinite goodness of the Creator:

> He who requires/From us [Adam and Eve] no other service than to keep/This one, this easy charge, of all the trees/In Paradise that bear delicious fruit/So various, not to taste that only Tree of Knowledge planted by the Tree of Life…God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree[36]

Upon hearing Adam, Satan questions why "knowledge [is] forbidden" and if it could truly "be sin to know."[37] However, Satan quickly abandons these inquiries making the following vow:

To excite their [Adam and Eve's] minds/With more desire to know and to reject/Envious commands invented with design/ To keep them low whom knowledge might exalt/Equal with gods."[38] Knowledge may appear to be harmless, even necessary, but the pursuit of knowledge against God's command is a result of human pride that leads to the sin of deifying the self.

Fully aware of Satan's purpose, God "foretells the success of Satan in perverting Mankind" and explains that Man was created "free and able enough to have withstood his tempter," and ultimately falls "not from his own malice as did Satan, but by him seduced."[39] Satan signals Eve as the one to be seduced into eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the belief that Adam's love for her will surely persuade him to eat the fruit as well. In an effort to keep the pair from falling into temptation, God comes to Eve in a dream, warning her to "know to know no more" for knowledge will increase neither her own nor Adam's happiness.[40] Ultimately, both Adam and Eve give in to Satan's urging and are cast out of Paradise, as God foretells. Despite their current state of prosperity, Adam and Eve give into the temptation to be on an equal plane with God in terms of knowledge. Similarly, Milton was disheartened by the English people's willingness to return to an authoritarian political and religious system during the Restoration after having thrown of the yoke of tyranny over the course of several violent years. The narrative is a "radical reflection on the meaning of history itself and the place of human liberty in it" inspired by the "failure of the English people at their supreme moment of opportunity."[41] As a poet, graced by the Spirit of his prophetic predecessors, Milton sees the realities in the world as they unfold and employs the language of the Spirit to emphasize the havoc human pride and irreverence to God create in the secular realm.

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[35] Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book Three, the argument.

[36] Ibid, Book Four, line 419-424.

[37] Ibid, line 515, 517.

[38] Ibid, line 523-526.

[39] Ibid, Book Three, The Argument.

Apart from highlighting specific historical moments, Milton's prophetic voice also forces readers throughout time to recognize their own position as fallen humans. Milton recreates "in the mind of the reader (which is, finally, the poem's scene) the drama of the Fall, to make him [the reader] fall again exactly as Adam did."[42] Because a text comes alive every time it is read, Milton's audience, whether in pre-Romantic England or the present-day, becomes the subject of the narrative. Throughout the narrative, the prophetic voice seeks to "educate the reader to an awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man, and to a sense of the distance which separates him from the innocence once his."[43] The Argument at the start of Book Five notes that God, knowing his creation is faced with temptation, renders "man inexcusable" by sending the angel, Raphael "to admonish [man] of his obedience, of his free state, of his enemy near at hand, who he is, and why his enemy, and whatever else may avail Adam to know."[44] In the same manner in which Raphael warns Adam of his obligation to God, Milton cautions his audience to be wary of temptation and obey God. Furthermore, the idea that all humans are fallen is implied by God himself:

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[40] Ibid, Book Four, line 775.

[41] Teskey, "The Life of John Milton," p. xxiii.

[42] Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, "Not so much a Teaching as an Intangling," (Cambridge: Belknap, 1998).

> Raphael, said He, thou hear'st what stir on Earth/Satan from Hell 'scaped through the darksome gulf/Hath raised in Paradise and how disturbed/This human pair, how he designs/ in them at once to ruin all mankind.[45]

Milton writes with the language of the Spirit as a means of transcending not only the biblical world of "Paradise Lost," but his own world as well. The reader is enraptured by the prophetic narrative that reveals one's faulted nature to oneself just as Adam and Eve come recognize the consequences of their faults.

Though Milton sees and speaks with the eyes and voice of God, his role as a prophet creates a sense of pride which ultimately leads to his own fall from grace. Milton recounts the tale of his own fall in relation to the fall of the English Commonwealth and ends with the realization that he is no mightier than his fellow man. In wanting to "justify the ways of God to men," though not presuming to be God, the prophet assumes an elevated role among humans.[46]Just as God endows Adam and Eve are endowed with freewill, Milton also has the liberty to choose his path:

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book Five, The Argument.

[45] Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book Five, line 224-228.

[46] Ibid, Book One, line 25.

> Milton too had had liberty to act as he thought best: to make common cause with the Puritans, take part in their government and their pamphlet-wars, to serve Cromwell as Cromwell took up arms against his enemies.[47]

Milton fully supports the Commonwealth and the Puritan cause to remove state control from spiritual matters, but sins in "putting his trust in earthly gains and believing himself to be God's appointed messenger."[48] However, the poet is not aware of his error until the Commonwealth dissolves and his personal life crumbles around him. As the secretary for foreign tongues, Milton devoted himself to defending the Commonwealth "against covert royalist attacks from within and open attacks from broad," quickly becoming "famous for his responses to the latter, fulminating across Europe."[49] However, following Cromwell's death, Milton finds himself imprisoned as an enemy of the newly restored monarchy, destitute, divorced and blind. Similarly, Adam and Eve lose their place of privilege as God's most prized creation by their own doing. Once Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden, Adam laments the "end/Of this new glorious world" of which he was "so late/The glory of that glory," and the irreverence to God "whom to behold was then [his] heighth/Of happiness."[50] Adam and Eve only come to appreciate their place in Paradise once they are judged and condemned to know death and sin as mortals. The tone of the narrative changes from self-righteous to repentant as Milton comes to realize that his own fall from a life of privilege to one of obscurity and ridicule mirrors man's fall from Paradise. Milton realizes that though he can hear God, he is not a God among men.

Milton fashions "Paradise Lost" in the style of the classic epics in which the prophets are those who seem to see the least. Interestingly, Milton's progressive blindness allows him to see the world, humanity and his own nature most clearly, much like the sightless soothsayers of the

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[47] Vendler, "Milton's Epic Poem," "Pardise Lost," (New York,: Norton, 2005), p. 526.

[48] Vendler, "Milton's Epic Poem," p. 526.

[49] Teskey, The Life of John Milton, p. xxi.

[50] Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book Ten, line 720-725.

Greek epics. Milton's narrator acts as "the go-between, a relay runner of messages back and forth between the people and God" thereby fulfilling one of the roles of the prophet: to communicate the word of God to the people.[51] In keeping with the prophetic tradition, Milton "interrupts, intervenes, and jolts" his readers "into uncertainty or doubt" regarding the present historical reality.[52] Furthermore, the poem's biblical language has the prophetic quality of stopping the reader "if only momentarily, so that God's word can censure, threaten and call us [the readers] to repentance and transformation. "Paradise Lost" also gives Milton the opportunity to see his own shortcomings thereby allowing himself to "become" or embody "the message" of God.[53] Much like the narrative of the prophet Moses, the prophetic narrative of "Paradise Lost" engages God's will and word with the temporal world.

For most of his core fans and people who knew him, he was a prophet…It's really weird how a person can predict things the way he did. When he passed away, everything he had talked about before he died actually happened. –Actor Larenz Tate on Tupac Shakur

The prophet carries many burdens and bears witness to great suffering all around him; however, the difficulties the prophet experiences only strengthen his resolve and add to the intensity of his message. The realities the prophet encounters become parables that he uses to reveal truths and injustices to those living outside of the prophet's world. Because rap lyrics assault the ear and the mind, they deliver the prophet's parables in a form that cannot be ignored. Among the most iconic rap prophets is the late Tupac Shakur, whose lyricism weaves the sacred and the profane to construct a raw landscape where the truth is inescapable. Despite living in a completely different time and socioeconomic position, Tupac constructs a prophetic narrative throughout many of his songs following in the tradition of Milton's "Paradise Lost."

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[51] McKenna, *Prophets*, p. 35.

[52] Ibid, p. 15.

[53] Ibid, p. 16.

Interestingly, Tupac's narratives also operate as prophetic in the same three-fold manner as the overarching narrative in "Paradise Lost"; Tupac's songs speak to the present historical and social reality, the human condition across time and his personal experiences.

At various points in history, certain social ills are attributed to isolated sectors of society, and labeled as irrelevant for the greater population; however, the prophet serves as the voice of those individual sufferers. Born to devout Black Panther Afeni Shakur on June 16, 1971, Tupac Shakur navigated through life as a revolutionary searching for a fight during a time when the revolutions had seemingly ended. Tupac's rebellious spirit was a result in great part to his mother and absent father's involvement in the Black Panther Party during the Civil Rights era. Activist Huey Newton founded The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which rose to prominence in the mid 1960s with the hope of empowering black Americans politically, socially and economically. However, the Party increasingly spiraled into a state of chaos with members, like Afeni Shakur being arrested for acts of violence and sedition against local and national American institutions. Tupac was born in the midst of this chaos only a month after his mother and other members of the New York 21 branch of the Panthers were released from prison for over one hundred counts of "conspiracy to bomb several New York City buildings."[54] The Shakur family would never know economic or domestic stability in Tupac's lifetime due to the ever present activist spirit that lingered from the preceding period racial revolution.

Though the political turmoil of the 1960s settled following the passing of the Civil Rights of 1964, working-class blacks in the U.S. faced a new degree of poverty and urban decay which increased with the evolution of a national crack epidemic. Living in Harlem, Baltimore and

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[54] Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream*: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power, (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.157.

Marin City, California gave Tupac insight into the social plagues affecting poor minorities across the nation. Yet, Shakur "didn't just rap about the problems of the ghetto or decry the conditions; he took listeners into the lives and souls of people affected by the environment."[55] Released in 1991, *2Pacalyspe Now*, Tupac's critically acclaimed first album, is the artist's most political and socially conscious work. Shakur wanted to sow the world the reality he and other black youths experienced by constructing narratives that assigned names and faces to the problems. For instance, the sorrowful "Brenda's got a Baby" poignantly addresses teen pregnancy, abandonment and prostitution which affected young women at an unprecedented rate within black communities. Similarly, the single "Trapped" depicts the violence, police brutality and imprisonment targeted against urban youth, especially black males. These two songs, as well as others on the album, were successful prophetic narratives in that the put Tupac's "worldview on the street" for all to see.[56]

Though misogyny and male domination are common themes in rap lyricism, Shakur's "Brenda's got a Baby" is a moving precautionary tale meant to highlight the dangers affecting young women in the 1980s and 1990s. In the aftermath of the black power movement, a social upheaval occurred in black communities due to the "economic restructuring, social dislocation, and urban regentrification" of the 1970s.[57] Furthermore, the growing production, sale and use of crack cocaine perpetuated the social devastation among "those on the lower spot on the economic totem pole."[58] Families were torn apart by the crack epidemic as it increasingly "led to mothers and fathers forsaking familial ties and parental responsibilities in deference to crack's uncoordinated but almost total domination of life."[59] Aside from physically harming addicts, the prevalence of crack use also led to increased drug related crime including "the drive-by, the purse snatch, the television steal, the body sale" and child abandonment or neglect.[60]

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[55] Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, p. 160.

[56] Ibid, p. 161.

[57] Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler if you Hear me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*, (New York: Basic Civitas, 2001), p. 34.

[58] Ibid, p. 36.

Tupac's "Brenda" is sadly the young victim and perpetrator of many of the common drug crimes and ultimately dies as alone as she lives as a result of the drug culture of the 1980s. The song told from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator opens with the declaration "Brenda's got a baby, but Brenda's barely got a brain," further explaining that "that girl can hardly spell her name."[61] A chorus presumably of Brenda's acquaintances interject that the young girl's predicament is "not [their] problem, that's up to Brenda's family."[62] However, the narrator strongly objects to this comment telling the crowd that he will show them "how it [Brenda's pregnancy] affects the whole community."[63] We learn that Brenda is only twelve years old, has never known her mother and has been raised her "junkie" father who "puts death into his arm."[64] However, Brenda is unaware of her father's drug addiction and escapes her lonely childhood through her relationship with her boyfriend who is also her cousin and presumably the father of her unborn child. The narrator suggests that this incestuous relationship began as child molestation, explaining that Brenda falls "in love with a molester who's sexing her crazy" and "dreams of a world where the two of them are together."[65] It seems that Brenda grows to love her abuser because she is not shown love by anyone else, a heartbreaking fate for one so young. Though the notion of young Brenda being sexually abused by a member of her own family is unsettling, it is an apologetic testament to the reality the children of drug addicted parents faced.

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[59] Dyson, *Holler if you Hear me*, p. 36.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Tupac Shakur, *2Pacalypse Now*, "Brenda's got a Baby," Universal Music Corp., 1991.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

The problems of one individual often led to negative questions for a whole community as is the case with Tupac's story about young "Brenda." After being abandoned by her child's father, Brenda is left to give birth "solo" on a "bathroom floor" without any medical attention or assistance. Desperate, Brenda wraps "the baby up and [throws] him in a trash heap," running away before she can "hear the cries."[66] There is no further mention of the fate of Brenda's child and her life quickly spirals further out of control when her family refuses to continue housing her. Unable to acquire employment, Brenda tries to "sell crack but end[s] up getting robbed," and eventually realizes "there ain't nothing left to sell" except her body.[67] Prostitution becomes a tolerable occupation for Brenda because "it's paying the rent" and actually becomes the only foreseeable "way of leaving hell" for a girl in her situation.[68] Despite her attempt to maintain hope that she will escape her tragic life, the song culminates with the narrator announcing that a "prostitute [was] found slain and Brenda's her name/ She's got a baby."[69] The audience, like the song's protagonist, hopes against hope that Brenda will be able to escape this "hell," but the prophet refuses to give her a happy ending, emphasizing that very few young people were able to overcome this fate. Furthermore, Tupac also forces the audience to recognize that one person's plight affects all by explaining that Brenda's misfortunes lead her to briefly sell drugs and die as a prostitute; thus, she perpetuates the vicious circle of addiction and exploitation that led to her own demise within her community. Tupac effectively constructs a prophetic parable that vividly portrays the social reality he witnesses firsthand making indifference within and outside the community nearly impossible.

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[66] Tupac, "Brenda's got a baby."

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

Though young women were vulnerable from threats within their communities, young black men were susceptible to violence and brutality from forces outside their world. Because the black power movement was often associated with violence and terrorism, younger generations of black youth who were born out of the activist tradition were perceived as subversive individuals, as well. People living outside of destitute black neighborhoods were overwhelmed by media "coverage of the crack epidemic, mushrooming gang activity, and urban violence" leading to the fear and persecution of black youths, particularly young men.[70] In 1991, the public perception was that crime was on the rise in the U.S. when in reality the opposite trend was occurring. Local and federal police often arrested young black males for any remotely suspicious activities leading to violent confrontations and a distrust of law enforcement among the black communities. The single "Trapped" also from the*2Pacalyspe* album is yet another parable, this time told from the perspective of a young man reacting against an unwarranted arrest and police brutality.

"Trapped" presents the compelling tale of young man who wishes to escape the crime and violence that burdens his community; however, racial profiling and police brutality force trap him in the very cycle he sought to break away from. The song's protagonist tells the audience that he is "trapped in this prison of seclusion" within his own community and that achieving "happiness [while] living on the streets is a delusion."[71] Violence pervades the narrator's life, which he attributes to the fact that no one ever "talks peace in the black community."[72] Additionally, the narrator claims that the negative perception outsiders have of black males only leads to a fulfillment of the expectations; essentially, black men often resort to "getting drunk, throw'n up, [and] cuffed up" because they are expected to, allowing the negative perception to be proven true.[73] Our narrator attempts to break from this vicious cycle because he can no longer tolerate being harassed by the police. Unfortunately, the young man "can barely walk the city streets/Without a cop harassing [him], searching [him], then asking [his] identity" despite not having done anything to warrant the apprehension.[74] During the arrest, the police throw the protagonist on the concrete and are about to beat him when shots are fired "but it's a cop who's shot."[75] It is unclear if the protagonist is the murderer or if someone else on the street fires the shots, but the narrator knows he will be held accountable regardless of what actually occurred and decides to run from the scene with the police in close pursuit. The young man tries to find "somewhere safe to stay," fears using the phone because he is sure "someone is tappin' it."[76]

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[70] Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, p. 164.

[71] Tupac Shakur, *2Pacalypse Now*, "Trapped," Universal Music Corp., 1991.

As the narrator continues to run from the police, he thinks of using his "gat again" against his pursuers recalling an instance in which he shot another man in his neighborhood for "dissin" him.[77] Interestingly, he looks back on that moment regretfully, wishing he had not shot that man who insulted him in the past because it led to his fulfilling the negative expectation of black criminality. Suddenly, he is cornered in an alley that is too "dark" for him to "see the light" which leads him to debate whether it is better to "live [his] life in a prison cell" or to die in that moment.[78] The song concludes with the narrator proclaiming that he would "rather die than be trapped in a living hell."[79] Sonically, the song is reminiscent of the reggae beats of Bob Marley, another dissident voice of the black power era, accompanied by the sounds of police sirens and a chorus that continually repeats, "they can't keep the black man down."[80] The song is a depressing look into the persecution young black males faced due in large part to media inspired paranoia in the early 1990s. Tupac's tale is truly prophetic in that he gives a voice to the persecuted in order to break the circle that traps individuals in the black community in a world of endless violence.

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Tupac, "Trapped."
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

The second facet of the prophetic narrative Tupac constructs speaks to the human condition apart from time or place and calls for individuals to take action against injustice. Released posthumously, the song "Changes" emphasizes the importance of taking personal responsibility for the alleviating problems affecting society at large in any way possible. Tupac, narrating from his own perspective this time, begins with the hopeless statement "I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself/Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?"[81] The rapper then goes on to describe how poverty and hunger force him to commit petty crimes and criticizes the praise police officers receive when they "kill a nigga."[82] Although the first half of the opening verse greatly focuses on describing the world of the urban ghetto s during the 1980s and 90s, the remainder of the verse focuses on universally applicable recommendations for change. For instance, Tupac explains that he has "got love for [his] brothers, but we [as a society] can never go nowhere/ Unless we share with each other."[83] Essentially, "we gotta start makin changes/ Learn to see [the other] as a brother 'stead of two distant strangers" because "that's how it's supposed to be."[84] These recommendations are not only relevant to the racial tensions that persisted throughout the 1980s, but speak to the greater need for empathy and compassion among humankind as a whole. The second verse also addresses the institution of racism as a whole, not just pertaining to blacks and whites in America:

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Tupac, "Trapped."

[81] Tupac Shakur, *Greatest Hits*, "Changes," Interscope Records, 1998.

[82] Ibid.

> I see no changes, all I see is racist faces/ Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races/ We under, I wonder what it takes to make this/ One better place, let's erase the wasted/ Take the evil out the people.[85]

The presence of overwhelming hate between people of different races can be traced beyond race riots and violence in the U.S. The call for camaraderie and peace among races Tupac makes is one the prophets of the world have been making for centuries and continue to make in the present day.

In an effort to encourage positive social change, Tupac, like the prophets before him, also highlights the errors that have led society astray and the need to forgive one another if real change is to be made. During the beat break, Tupac speaks directly to his listeners saying "it's time for us as a people to start makin some changes" and asks that we all "change the way we eat," " the way we live" and "the way we treat each other."[86] The final verse encourages a move towards peace given that there is war everywhere from the "streets" to the "the Middle East," a war on "drugs" when there should be a "war on poverty." [87] There are also words of empowerment encouraging those that are living in moral and material destitution: "don't let 'em jack you up, back you up/ Crack you up and pimp smack you up/ You gotta learn to hold ya own."[88] The song ends with Tupac worrying that "some buck that [he] roughed up way back" will come after him seeking retribution.[89] Though Tupac expresses personal concern that someone will exact revenge for past acts, he does not deny that it is his fault that this "buck" is seeking payback. The prophet recognizes the flawed nature of humankind, but offers the hope that change is possible when one takes positive action.

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Tupac, "Changes."

[85] Tupac, "Changes."

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

Despite the fact that Tupac speaks with wisdom well beyond his age and encourages his society to work towards peace and equality, he is also a contradictory figure that relishes in the profane as much as the sacred. Tupac was an enigmatic figure because despite his revolutionary spirit and hopefulness for social justice, he delved into a hedonistic and often criminal lifestyle. Shakur was deeply spiritual as evidenced by his "impressively catholic" and Catholic taste in literature.[90] An avid reader, Shakur's books were catholic in the "universal" sense of the word in that he was constantly interested in learning about different faiths and branches of spirituality making him an ecumenical pioneer in the urban world. Religiously Catholic works including *The Imitation of Christ, St. John of the Cross,* and Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island* were also among Tupac's most read books.[91] Coming from a Black Nationalist tradition, Shakur also had respect for the Islamic tradition and its offshoots, which included the Nation of Islam (NOI), though unlike many of his contemporaries, he never subscribed to the NOI exclusively. Buddhism, Kabala and Christian Mysticism were also of great interest to Tupac as he sought to carve out a theology and vision of God that was compatible with the reality he encountered.

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Tupac, "Changes."

[90] Dyson, *Holler if you Hear me*, p. 92.

[91] Ibid, p. 98.

Although his great ecumenical spirituality and compassion for his community greatly characterized the young Tupac, his personal experience with imprisonment greatly diminished the hopefulness of his youth. Following allegations of sexual assault, Tupac was sentenced to an eleven-month sentence in a Los Angeles prison during which he released *Me Against the World* in 1995. The album was much darker and introspective, or as Tupac explained "it was like a blues record" meant to express "all [his] fears, all the things [he] just couldn't sleep about," his "innermost, darkest secrets."[92] The song "So Many Tears" from the album opens with a quiet call out to God:

> I shall not fear no man but God. Though I walk through the valley of death I shed so many tears (If I should die before I wake). Please, God, walk with me (Grab a nigga and take me to Heaven.

The prayer is amalgam of a child's prayer and a man's plead for forgiveness in the face of death. The song also prominently features death as a force that has claimed Tupac's friends and he eerily foreshadows will soon claim him as well; Tupac died only two years after releasing this song. Shakur admits that his mind is "full of demons trying to break free" and asks that the "lord forgive [him] for [his] sins" because death is near.[93] The song ends with Tupac wishing he could have a child so he could see a part of himself "that wasn't shady" which shows a desire to return to a previous state of innocence.[94] Tupac's final words as the song fades to an end are desperate: "Dear God, please let me in [heaven]/ Lord, I've lost so many years and shed so many tears/ I lost so many peers and shed so many tears."[95] Much like Milton before him, Tupac admits that he is a sinner, but also repents before God as evidenced by the works produced in the latter part of his career.

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[92] Adam Bradley, *The Anthology of Rap*, "2Pac," (New Haven: Yale, 2010), p.512.

[93] Tupac Shakur, *Me Against the World*, "So many Tears," Interscope Records, 1995.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

The prophets suffer greatly in their own person and in witnessing the pain others endure, but they speak with a spirit of compassion and justice; the spirit of God in one form or another resides in their words.

Chapter 3: Searching for the Light in the Darkness

Not known where Hell is, many say beneath our feet. It is at all events a place of imprisonment, a prison; a place of darkness; and a place of torment and that by the fire- Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. "Meditation on Hell"

The redemptive narrative is often the result of rigorous self-reflection with the purpose of understanding the human encounter with the divine; however, as "redemptive" indicates, the narrative involves the writer's search for redemption despite overwhelming doubt, regret and even anger towards God and the writer himself. Periods of personal struggle serve as the context for some of the most profound and emotional redemptive works of many writers. The texts these melancholic writers pen seem to grant the author a sense of grace and liberation from his grief or wrath. Nineteenth century poet and Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins used his poetry as a means of discerning his vocation and the presence of God in his life. The Sonnets of Desolation, or Terrible Sonnets, written between 1885 and 1886, give readers insight into the desperation and resentment that plagued Hopkins during his time in Ireland during the late 1880s. The Sonnets narrate Hopkins' constant state of isolation and depression, his increasing doubts regarding faith at moments of desperation and his encounter with divine grace through his poetic art.

A poet is most genuine and honest with himself and others when he is most alone; however complete isolation can also lead the poet to doubt that there is a greater purpose to one's life beyond the temporal world. Born to a family of "well-to-do Victorians," young Hopkins's upbringing involved an exceptional appreciation and talent for the arts as well as the religious devotion of "the more pious of moderate High Anglicans."[96] Often, Hopkins and his siblings were taunted for having to read the Bible daily during their childhood, but Hopkins abandoned his religious roots and converted to Catholicism while studying at Oxford.[97] Though, Hopkins' conversion was undoubtedly influenced by the "youthful comradeship and excitement of the [religious] controversies at Oxford," living among a family and nation of Anglicans often ostracized Hopkins from the rest of English society.[98] Hopkins further isolated himself when he chose to enter the Society of Jesus, eventually becoming a Jesuit priest. After his ordination, Hopkins worked as a professor throughout England, but was then sent to Ireland by the Superior General to serve as a professor of Greek at the University College Dublin in 1884. Once in Ireland, the priest found his students apathy for his classes to be as the disheartening as Irish politics that were antagonistic to Hopkins' English nationalist sensibilities.

Hopkins' continually found himself on the periphery of his society at every point in his life and grew to resent his apartness as evidenced by "To seem the Stranger," one of his six Terrible Sonnets. In the first verse, Hopkins' confesses that "to seem the stranger lies my lot" indicating his inability to ever truly integrate into a community despite his efforts and it is this perpetual isolation that causes the poet to resent his faith.[99] The first stanza establishes the isolation from "father and mother dear/ Brothers and sisters [who] are in Christ not near" highlighting the schism that Hopkins' conversion created between him and his family.[100] Interestingly, the first stanza ends with the assertion that Christ is both Hopkins' "peace," "parting," "sword and strife" implying that as a priest, he must always choose between the earthly, in this case his family, and the divine, his conversion to Catholicism. [101] In the second stanza, the reader learns that Hopkins' religious conversion has also effectively separated him from Anglican, English society. In sudden elation, the poet calls out to his beloved England "whose honour O all [his] heart woos," she is "wife/ To [his] creating thought."[102] However, Hopkins also notes that "she," England would not listen "were [he] pleading" perhaps alluding to his unfulfilled hopes of seeing Catholicism restored as the state religion once again.[103] The third stanza interestingly features Hopkins' "at a third/ Remove" or another level of separation from his surrounding community, in this instance his Irish colleagues and students in Dublin.[104] Though the Irish presumably share Hopkins' Catholic sensibilities, he finds their politics incompatible with his English patriotism just as they find his nationalism unacceptable. Once more, Hopkins must settle for living on the margins of the society is loosely a member of.

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[96] Catherine Phillips, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works,* "Introduction," (New York: Oxford, 2002), p. xv.

[97] Ibid, p. xvi.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "To seem the stranger," line 1.

[100] Ibid, line2-3.

Hopkins continually struggled with his poetic craft believing that it was a distracting him from living solely to do God's will, but also feeling that it was his only comfort in his lonely life. As the sonnet approaches its end, Hopkins expresses regret that "only what word/ Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban/ Bars or hell's spell thwarts."[105] The poet-priest subconsciously indicates that there was perhaps a fourth, internal remove that isolated his art from his faith. Often, Hopkins hid or destroyed his poetry, leaving his words "unheard/ Heard unheeded," and leaving him "a lonely began."[106] Hopkins' cannot express his loneliness in the form of poetry because doing so would bring attention to his own person and distract from his position as a servant of God. Despite his tone of resignation, the sonnet concludes with tangible resentment as Hopkins acknowledges that he must continue living in this lonely state so as to fulfill his vocational obligations.

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[101] Hopkins, "To Seem Stranger," line 4.

[102] Ibid, 5.

[103] Ibid, line 6-7.

[104] Ibid, line 9-10.

[105] Ibid, line 12-13.

[106] Ibid, line 14.

The resentment Hopkins' briefly expresses at the conclusion of "To seem stranger" becomes anger in "No worst," another Sonnet of Desolation. The effects of the removal from society at various levels summarized in the previous sonnet are explosive as Hopkins ardently questions why God subjects him to such emotional suffering. The sonnet opens with Hopkins emphatically declaring that there is "no worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief/ More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring."[107] Hopkins, angered by the multitude of emotional and spiritual afflictions affecting him, explains that pain is magnified when it is preceded and followed by more pain. The poet then directly addresses God, the "comforter" asking Him "where [His] comforting is" in the midst of all this pain.[108] More than frustrated, Hopkins finds himself angry with God for allowing pain after pain to afflict him and demands, as Job does, to know why God allows the righteous to suffer. The poet-priest also calls out to "Mary, mother of us," desperate to know where her "relief" is during his time of desperation and doubt.[109] There is a tangible desperations in his remarks toward the divine entities that are supposed to grant relief and inner peace.

The narrative becomes darker as "fury" becomes a "shrieking" creature who continually screams "No lingering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief."[110] Sadly, even "fury" is curtailed in her wrath by Hopkins' religious guilt that keeps him from expressing full human emotions without censorship. The final verses explore the landscape of the human mind when it is subjected to continuous emotional trauma. Under nearly endless duress, the mind becomes a "frightful" place filled with "mountains; cliffs of fall" so "sheer, no-man-fathomed."[111] Hopkins's use of natural imagery presents a vivid scene of dangers unknown within an individual's own mind alluding to a lack of self-awareness or insanity. Each person is equipped with "small/ Durance" which cannot "deal with that steep or deep" mountainous terrain of the mind.[112] Essentially, human beings cannot constantly endure hardships because they will lose themselves in the wilderness of their minds. The sonnet ends with a rather hopeless assertion that "all/ Life death does end and each day dies with sleep" leaving no hope for a resurrection or other divine end after death.[113] Although not quite nihilistic, Hopkins does delve into a much bleaker worldview that features God as the dealer of misfortunes rather than the healer of pain. Furthermore, the mentality espoused in the sonnet's final verse that "each day dies with sleep" is also utterly hopeless because one day may end, but another soon begins and with it, the suffering returns. Like Job, Hopkins is overwhelmed with anguish and grief that God would punish those who attempt to serve him most fully.

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[107] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worst," line 1.

[108] Ibid, line 3.

[109] Ibid, line 4.

[110] Ibid, line 7-8.

Hopkins finds relief from his solitude and anger when he surrenders his mind to the divine through his art. Fear of "provoking any unseemly criticism or mockery of the priesthood" greatly affected Hopkins' "attitude to the publication of his poetry" and kept him from truly rejoicing in his vocation as a priest and a poet.[114] For instance, in letters to his good friend, Robert Bridges, Hopkins describes the Terrible Sonnets as "inspirations" that came to him "unbidden and against [his] will," for the mind of a Jesuit was a "continually jaded and harassed mind" that could not afford to delve in poetry.[115] During his time of greatest emotional agony, Hopkins returned to poetry, understanding that is was God's gift to him and therefore not inhibiting the exercise of his faith.

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[111] Hopkins, "No worst," line 9-10.

[112] Ibid, line 9.

[113] Ibid, line 14.

[114] Phillips, "Introduction," p xxix.

The human encounter with the divine occurs when the individual recognizes God's ever present grace, and forgiveness in spite of his or her doubts and faults. The sonnet "My own heart" marks a point of acceptance and relief for Hopkins in which he comes to understand God's role in his life. The narrator contemplates his "own heart" and asks if he can "have pity on" it and then turn his "sad self hereafter kind,/ Charitable."[116] Hopkins "casts for comfort" he cannot obtain simply by "groping round [his] comfortless than blind/ Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find"[117] The poet-priest realizes that he cannot solely rely on God for the relief of his pains and must open his own eyes to find comfort and relief. There is a cathartic monologue in the third stanza in which Hopkins advises his "soul, self;.... poor Jackself" to "call off thoughts awhile/ Elsewhere; [to] leave comfort root-room" to grow on its own within himself.[118] There is no longer a child-like dependency on God to provide relief, but instead a moment of empowerment in which Hopkins acknowledges that God has given him the gifts of poetry and faith to provide comfort in the face of difficulty. The acknowledgement that "God knows when" and "God knows what" gives hope that there is a divine realm that transcends the temporal; God "lights a lovely mile" for those who recognize his presence.[119] More than resignation, Hopkins finds relief and grace. The poet died a few years after leaving Ireland from severe illness, but is alleged to have died speaking words of happiness. Hopkins' poetic vocation ultimately rescues him from the torment of his isolation and allows him to understand God's role within his own life.

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[115] Hopkins to Bridges, University Collge, Dublin, Sept. 1, 1885.

[116] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "My own heart," line 1-3.

[117] Ibid, line 5-7.

[118] Ibid, line 9-11.

[119] Ibid, 12-14.

Do you know how dark it gets? What it feels like to be in a place out of control with no light at all?-DMX, *E.A.R.L: The Autobiography of DMX.*

Rather than rapping about sex, violence or vice on a superficial level, DMX weaves different depictions of Christ and his relationship with God into his narratives as a means of adding a redemptive value to his stories of sin. Like Hopkins, DMX is plagued with fears, anger and doubts, but finds his own poetic redemption through his lyricism. DMX presents God as just another guy in the hood that can permit suffering, as well as one who can offer forgiveness or redemption.

Although the gangsta rapper became an iconic figure of violence and domination in, the use of religious language creates a repentant figure who recognizes his faults. DMX, born Earl Simmons, lived in Yonkers, a suburb of New York, for the majority of his youth and it was there that his "troubled and abusive childhood turned him violent."[120] However, Simmons found an outlet for his violence and "saving grace in hip-hop," eventually being signed by Def Jam in 1997 at the age of twenty-seven.[121] DMX's first album, "It's Dark and Hell is Hot," released in May 1998, featured unprecedented images of violence and brutality that reflected many of the events that DMX either lived himself or witnessed in the world around him. However, what distinguished the album was DMX's desire to "find meaning in suffering" and his depictions of

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[120] Steve Huey, "DMX," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/dmx-p68246/biography.

[121] *Ibid.*

"the spiritual struggle in a material world." [122] DMX does not allow material gains to make him complacent with his vices, and continually lives out the struggle of wanting to good, but being forced into the bad in his songs.

The song that perhaps best illustrates DMX's personal struggle with following a humble spiritual path and the dominant profane path is "Look Thru my Eyes." Sonically, this song features less of DMX's notorious barking, opting instead for sounds of a whimpering dog that plays in the background of mournful piano music and simple repetitive beats. Lyrically, "Look thru my Eyes" presents a vulnerable DMX not seen in the four tracks that precede the song. The song opens with the spoken statement "judge not and shall be judged first" and proceeds into the chorus "look through my eyes, see what I see/Do as I do, be what I be/Walk in my shoes, hurt your feet/And know why I lurk in the streets."[123] The opening draws from the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament, which demands that we "stop judging, that we may not be judged…for as we judge, so will we be judged."[124] Rather than asking for people to overlook flaws of others, this passage from Matthew calls for people to desist from placing themselves in a position of moral superiority and arrogantly judging the faults of others while ignoring their own.

The Gospel of Matthew, like the Book of Job charge the reader with accepting pain others inflict on oneself with love and strength. DMX invokes a similar Matthew narrative in the chorus, as well as the first verse in which he explains that that he is "burning in hell, but don't deserve to be/ Got niggas I don't even know that wanna murder me."[125] In the third verse, DMX cries out to God asking that He "take away hate," and wondering how he is "supposed to love the one that cursed him/The one that wouldn't give him a cup of water when he was thirsty."[126] Once more, there is an allusion to biblical language of Matthew in which he says to "offer no resistance to one who is evil," and explains that "when someone strikes you on your right cheek," you should "turn the other one to him as well."[127] This introspective song explains that personal wrong doing should not go unrecognized, but that one should not be condemned by those who have no understanding of the reasons for his behavior or are flawed themselves. The use of images and language from Matthew's Gospel emphasize DMX's desire to be humble and not seek revenge on those who judge him, but his frequent inability to push his anger aside and ultimate resort to violence.

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[122] Russell Simmons, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs Money and God,* (New York: Crown, 2001), 201-202.

[123] DMX, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot,* "Look thru my Eyes."

[124] Matt. 7:1-2 (Saint Joseph Edition).

The image of suffering that is allowed by God is also prevalent throughout DMX's first album. Just as God allows Job to face great suffering and hardship so as to test his faith, He allows DMX to experience great pain as described in the song "Let me Fly," also from the 1998 album "It Dark and Hell is Hot." The song offers yet another introspective look at DMX's life, this time from the perspective of his sufferings, rather than his faults. The chorus is a repeated request, seemingly to God, to "let him [DMX] fly, or give him death/ Let his soul rest, take his breath."[128] The song narrates the way DMX "soaks up all the pain and accept it in silence," but then explains that he "sold his soul to the devil, and the prices was cheap."[129] The narrator justifies his deal with the devil by explaining that it "can't be worse that the curse that was given to" him and that "there's a difference between doin' wrong and being wrong."[130] The narrator in this instance has been plagued with many sufferings, not by the devil, but by God much like Job continually suffered at the hands of God. However, Job resists the temptation of seeking relief from suffering by death as Satan would have him do and instead waits for God to "deliver his soul from passing to the pit."[131] Although there is an attempt to accept the suffering with strength, the narrator once again succumbs to his own weakness and takes the devil's offer of relief from constant suffering in exchange for his soul and his life. The reincarnation of Job in voice of DMX's narrator emphasizes the manner in which people who have experienced great suffering are susceptible to evil.

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[125] DMX, "Look thru my Eyes."

[126] Ibid.

[127] Matt. 5:39.

[128] DMX, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot,* "Let me Fly."

[129] Ibid.

Although there is a great focus on the human relationship with God and the want for forgiveness, DMX also explores the human relationship with Satan and ease with which one can fall into a life of sin. As Russell Simmons explains, DMX "talks to the devil on record" just as much as he does with God and "cries all the time because he knows he's done wrong" when he gives into his demons."[132] The song "Damien" features the most intriguing portrayal of the human encounter with sin because it depicts a conversation between DMX and Satan in the form of a hot dog vendor named Damien. The song depicts Damien as a charismatic and friendly member of the same hood as DMX, just as God is a member of this world, so is His counterpart. The narrator has no guardian angel and is enticed by Damien's offers to make DMX "the hottest nigga ever livin" and Damien's ability to give him anything he desires including a "Benz," but soon comes to realize that these favors come with a price.[133] Damien demands that DMX kill "that kid Sean," but the narrator refuses explaining that Sean is "his man…his nigga…his dog."[134] However, Damien reminds the narrator that he is indebted to Damien for giving him what he desired; the narrator feels trapped and knows that there is "trouble ahead." [135]The personification of Satan in the context of DMX's world demonstrates the way sin can seem attractive to someone who feels that they have no other way to acquire a better life or the things he desires. This devil is not intimidating or frightening; rather, Damien is a sly figure who plays to the weaknesses of those he wishes to lure.

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[130] Ibid.

[131] Jb. 33:28.

[132] Simmons, *Life and Def*, 201.

Rather than portraying the person who succumbs to Satan as evil, "Damien" presents the person encountering sin as confused and blinded by circumstances. The song's hook eerily repeats "the Snake, the rat, the cat, the dog/How you gon' see them if you livin in the fog."[136] Just as a serpent tempts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, a Snake tempts the narrator throughout the song.[137] Damien, the snake tempting DMX, is as cunning as the serpent of the Old Testament in luring a person by offering great rewards for what seems like an insignificant price. The fog described by the narrator blinds him from seeing the Snake, as well as other creatures. The hook demonstrates an interesting intersection of the biblical vernacular and the idiomatic language of the streets in listing other animals that have specific meanings in the urban world of the 1990s. Specifically, the "rat" refers to one who "tells"[138] or betrays, the "cat" refers to a woman or a "vagina,"[139] and the "dog" which DMX coined as the term for a friend or one's "boys."[140] The fog created by greed does not just blind the individual from seeing the Snake, or temptation, but also keeps a person from being able to distinguish who he can trust among his friends, lovers and family. The theme of distrust was echoed by many of DMX's contemporaries and predecessors including Notorious B.I.G., who emphasized the need for weariness in his classic "Ten Crack Commandments." The culture of violence and greed that dominated the 1990s during the New York crack epidemic bred this fog that ultimately pushed people into the clutches of a serpent waiting for them to fall.

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[133] DMX, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*, "Damien."

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] DMX, "Damien."

[137] Gn. 3:1-24.

[138] Westbrook, *Hip Hoptionary*, "Rat," 114.

Apart from weaving an intricate narrative that combines the encounter with one's own weakness and temptation, DMX also presents a narrative of hope for redemption and forgiveness. Although everything about DMX was "unremittingly intense, from his muscular, tattooed physique to his gruff, barking delivery," there was a "substance behind his style."[141] "It's Dark and Hell is Hot" established DMX as another great of the hip hop industry, and earned him "numerous comparisons to 2Pac" who also sought to use "prophetic" images to "reveal his pain and suffering."[142] More specifically, DMX, like Tupac, devoted songs to the idea and image of death in both "It's Dark and Hell is Hot" and his second album "Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood" which was released in December 1998. The first album features a spoken word prayer simply entitled "Prayer" which serves as the introduction to "The Convo," one of the final songs on the album. "Prayer" and "The Convo" feature pleas to God for forgiveness in the former and a direct conversation with God in the latter presumably, as narrator approaches death.

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[139] Ibid, "Cat," 24.

[140] Ibid, "Dog," 37.

[141] Huey, "DMX."

[142] Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler if you Hear me: Searching for Tupac Shakur,"* (New York: Basic, 2001), 207.

The narrator in the "Prayer" humbly exclaims that he has come to God "hungry and tired…and weak" with the knowledge that God "gives strength and that's deep."[143] Most interestingly, DMX places himself in the hands of God as a "sheep," acknowledging that only God can "give him [DMX] eyes so he can recognize the serpent."[144] This is the first and only time DMX completely submits himself to God's will without trying to find a way out and reveals a vulnerability that only comes when is one is open to hope. Rather than looking for relief from the pain God sometimes causes him, DMX states that he "has never known love like this before" and it is this love that ultimately allows him to "get away from the pain."[145] The redemptive power of love is rarely presented in DMX's works or that his contemporaries because the reality of urban violence, prostitution and drugs did not leave much room for this hope, but thinking about death offered an escape to God's paradise.

"The Convo" takes the images and message of the "Prayer" one step further by presenting a conversation between God and DMX in which God clarifies His actions mimicking the narrative in the Book of Job. In "The Convo," DMX meets God and angrily asks why He abandoned him in his times of great need. God explains that He "watched [DMX] grow up" and that He was there "even at those times when it was least suspected."[146] God encourages the narrator to "put down the guns and write a new rhyme" and all "will be fine."[147] When the narrator asks why God would disappear when he was in danger of dying, God lovingly states that "those were the times when He carried" the narrator as a "son" and "led him to safety" because it was "not yet his time to face Him."[148] Perhaps no other image is quite so effective at demonstrating human redemption as this conversation with God, which is both honestly painful and beautifully loving. DMX's mastery of religious language and incarnational depiction of God gives a sense of hope as the album approaches its end.

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[143] DMX, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*, "Prayer."

[144] Ibid.

[145] DMX "Prayer.

[146] DMX *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*, "The Convo."

[147] Ibid.

The final invocation of religious language dealing with hope comes in "The Prayer II/Ready to Meet Him" from the album "Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood" which includes another personal prayer. However, this second prayer has a degree of acceptance of fate that is not present in the first album. It seems that DMX has transitioned to viewing himself as "squared away with God" and therefore "ready to meet him" when the time comes.[149] Like Hopkins, DMX makes his peace with God, recognizing that he has the control over much of his suffering. Moreover, DMX uses his music to voice his despair and repentance, giving him hope that he will be allowed to enter a place of peace after death.

The notion of redemption or atonement is grounded in the redemption of humanity through the death of Christ and continually echoed in the works of so called redemptive artists. Both Hopkins and DMX struggle with isolation and a divided sense of self that wishes to indulge in the earthly and reveres the divine. The poet-priest and the criminal turned rapper use their lyricism to navigate through their complicated and often desolate lives and are ultimately redeemed by the virtue of their art.

Chapter 4: Gods on Earth

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,/I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and/ fathomless as myself,/(They do not know how immortal, but I know)-Walt Whitman "Song of Myself"

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[148] Ibid.

[149] DMX, *Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood,* "Prayer II/Ready to Meet Him."

Though incarnational narratives seem to be a phenomenon of contemporary nationalist religious movements, elevating man to the level of God in the material world can be traced to humanist ideology, which places the individual at the center of all things. Often called the quintessential American poet, Walt Whitman espoused a humanist or incarnational worldview that emphasized the importance of reason, ethics and the temporal world. Whitman's most notable work, *Leaves of Grass* contains poems that indulge in the senses and the beauty of the material world. Among the humanist poems, "Song of Myself" is the most incarnational of Whitman's works, effectively raising the narrator above others to a position of transcendence. Throughout the poem, Whitman implies that man is immortal because he represents every person and as such a representative the individual cannot effectively die. The temporal experience, immortality and the divine nature of the human are the elements that comprise the incarnational narrative in "Song of Myself."

Written before and altered during the American Civil War and the time of great national expansionism, "Song of Myself" draws from the American tradition of growth, prosperity and transition and applies these same traits to individual humans. Whitman's celebration of the material world draws its inspiration from "the whole life of his nation," making the growth of the *Leaves* collection as a whole synonymous with "the growth of his [Whitman's] country."[150] Because the poet lived "in fresh lands, inchoate, and in a revolutionary age, future-founding," Whitman felt that had to "identify the points of that age, these lands, in [his] recitatives."[151] "Song of Myself" summarizes the purpose of the entire *Leaves* as well as Whitman's general poetic mission:

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[150] Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, "Introduction," *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Norton, 1973), p.xxix.

[151] Walt Whitman, 1876 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

> To improve and transform life (the poet as maker and reformer), to discern and set forth its miraculousness (the poet as celebrator), and to sing the transcendence of human love, envisioned as divine (the poet as lover).[152]

The collection as a whole and "Song of Myself" more specifically, celebrate the American nation as well as the American person as entities graced with the power of transcendence.

"Song of Myself" is an unapologetic testament of the immortality and divinity of man through a collective existence in which he is both himself and a representative of all humankind at once. The fifty-two section poem, opens with the narrator declaring "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," and explaining that "what [he] assumes, you [the reader] shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to [him] as good belongs to" the reader.[153] Though one cannot not attribute all of the poem's declarations to the historical person of Whitman, the first section is intended to express his opinion as denoted by his declaration that he "now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin [writing],/ Hoping to cease not till death."[154] Whitman was that precise age at the time he completed "Song of Myself"; moreover, the narrator professes Whitman's personal humanist beliefs which places "creeds and schools in abeyance" instead focusing on "nature without check in original elegy."[155] Though Whitman does not subscribe to any organized religion or ideology, he respects the established institutions noting that while they are not considered in his work, these are "never forgotten."[156] The narrator establishes himself as the representative of humankind, but also gives his readers a similar mystical agency.

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[152] Bradley & Blodgett, "Introduction," p. xxxiii.

[153] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Norton, 1973), Sec. 1, line1-3.

[154] Ibid, Section 1, line 8-9.

[155] Ibid, Section 1, line 10, 13.

[156] Ibid, Section 1, Line 1.

Incarnation and humanism characteristic of "Song of Myself" both hold the divine to be immanent or present in the world, not apart from it, and encourage a *carpe diem* mentality. The third section engages the ideas of establish religion which "talk of the beginning/ and the end"; however, the narrator counters this sentiment explaining that "there was never any more inception than there is now,/ Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now."[157] Furthermore, the narrator establishes that "not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and non shall be/ less familiar than the rest."[158] This statement operates in direct opposition to the Christian parable, which teaches that the "first shall be last" by asserting that all creatures have equal access and familiarity to the good or divine.[159] The fifth section echoes the idea of immanence as well by establishing the narrator has intimate knowledge of God and the sacred because these reside in him:

> I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,/ And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,/ And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the/ women my sisters and lovers.[160]

There is an empowering quality to this conception of the human as possessor and executor of the divine that is characteristic of the incarnational narrative. Essentially, all earth's creatures and nature are inherently divine independently of what any establish religion holds to be the standard of divinity.

Following in the tradition of the incarnational narrative, "Song of Myself" encourages the notion of individual and collective immortality as a characteristic of immanence. Section seven discusses the nature of death in light of the incarnational mentality espoused in the previous sections. The narrator explains that he knows with certainty "it is just as lucky to die" as it is "lucky to be born."[161] Incarnation necessarily involves a familiarity with death because it places one who was dead among the living. Essentially, immortality is not the absence of death but the complete knowledge and ability to transcend death. The immortal can "pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe"; the immortal is "the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and/ fathomless as" the narrator though "they do not know how immortal," the narrator knows.[162] Because the narrator knows is "deathless" and that his "orbit cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass," he questions why he "should pray" or "venerate and be ceremonious."[163] If every creature is immortal independently of what religious ideology may proclaim, there is no need to subscribe to an institutional system of faith. Immortality, like incarnation grants humankind the ability to bear witness to and overcome death simply by the virtue of existing.

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[157] Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 3, Line 37-43.

[158] Ibid, Section 3, line 60-61.

[159] Mt. 20:16.

[160] Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 5, line 92-94.

Although Whitman asserts the divinity of every creature that exists in nature, he tends toward elevating the poet, in this case himself, above other creatures. As a poet, Whitman bears witness to the development and changes the earth and its creatures undergo, endowing the poet with a greater degree of power within the world. Whitman is unashamedly egotistical admitting that his work is "mainly autobiographic, and even egotistic after all-which [he] finally accepts and [is] contented so."[164] The elevation of self becomes especially apparent in section twentyone, in which the narrator states that he is "the poet of the Body" and "the poet of the Soul, as well as the "poet of the woman the same as the man"[165] The poet is graced with the "pleasures of heaven" and burdened by the "pains of hell"; furthermore, the poet "walks with the tender and growing night" and "calls to the earth and sea half-held by the night."[166] Whitman accepts and embraces his egotism because he believes that every being has the ability to elevate him or herself, which is demonstrated by the works the being produces. "Song of Myself" is exactly that, an ode or serenade to and from the incarnated poet.

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[161] Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 7, line 131-132.

[162] Ibid, Section 7, line 133-134, 137-138.

[163] Ibid, Section 20, line 406-407, 398.

[164] Walt Whitman on his art, From Memoranda," in *Good-Bye my Fancy*, (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891), p. 45.

I carry the cross, if Virgin Mary had an abortion/I'd still be carried in the chariot by stampeding horses…For you rappers, I carry the cross. -Nas, "The Cross"

The incarnational narrative constructed by members of the Five Percent Nation (or Nation of Gods and Earths) bears resemblance to the humanism of Whitman's work; however, there is an explicit religious conviction in works of Five Percenter artists that the humanists lack. Rap became a tool of Black Nationalist religious movements because it infiltrated every aspect of life in urban neighborhoods and could help indoctrinate people in the incarnational tradition that proclaimed every man a "god" and every woman an "earth." Nasir Jones, better known by his stage name, Nas, is among the more popular hip-hop artists that both embraced and promoted the ideas of the Five Percent Nation in his music. As evidenced by the titles of the artist's sixth and seventh albums, *God's Son* and *Street's Disciple*, "Five Percent-speak" was a prominent feature in Nas' "rhymes."[167] Like Whitman, Nas elevates man to a level of transcendence,; however, Nas lacks Whitman egalitarianism and only elevates members of the black community, most especially those who are Five Percenters. Though he is he draws from different inspirations, Nas admits and rejoices in his egotism, elevating himself as a deity of the rap world just as Whitman elevated himself as a god-poet. Immortality and the conquering of death is also a prominent theme of the incarnational tradition that is echoed in Nas' Five Percenter musical rhetoric. Interestingly, Nas' overt hedonism does not differ greatly from Whitman's tendency to privilege the earthly sensory experience in "Song of Myself." Each artist undoubtedly had very distinct motivations for developing their narratives, inspired by their historical and social context, but they draw from similar elements that are characteristic of incarnationalism.

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[165] Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 21, line 422, 425.

[166] Ibid, Section 21, line 423, 433-434.

[167] Simmons, *Life and Def,* p. 39.

Living in poverty leads to a love of the material world and a hedonistic lifestyle among many Five Percenters, but ultimately the preoccupation with the temporal alludes to the incarnational narrative. Nas' resides in the infamous Queensbridge Houses, the largest housing project complex in New York for most of his childhood where he witnesses the devastating effects of poverty and violence in the black community.[168] His personal experience with urban decay and crime lead Nas to seek refuge among the Nation of Gods and Earths, which sought to empower blacks during and after the American Civil Rights era, particularly young blacks.

Upon acquiring fame, Nas' narratives of poverty and struggle transform into songs of self-aggrandizing and hedonism, which emphasize the primacy of the temporal world in the Five Percent consciousness. The song "Disciple," from the critically acclaimed 2004 *Street's Disciple* album, features an elaborate list of earthly pleasures the rapper can indulge in because he is a "disciple of the streets."[169] Nas describes an earthly paradise or a "thugz mansion, [where] thugs [are] dancin' around the fly shit" including "Pharaoh's garments Prada, Egypian camelbackriders,/ Pyramid architects, Perignon bottles, money and jewelry."[170] The heaven on earth Nas describes is filled with historical treasures as well as modern symbols of wealth illustrating the idea that the human can transcend time while remaining in the temporal realm. Nas' then counts himself among the Biblical disciples "Paul, Michael and Matthew, Peter, James and Andrew/ Phillip, Simon and Judas" as a "disciple of music."[171] Nas effectively bridges the gap between the heavenly and the material world by claiming that he is among the disciples of God by the merit of his musical talent.

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[168] Bradley, The *Anthology of Rap*, "Nas," p. 459.

[169] Nas, "Disciple," *Street's Disciple,* 2004.

The second verse is an arrogant invitation to "haters" by a "righteous" Nas to enter the "life of the greatest"; essentially, Nas humbles himself as an earthly disciple of God, but elevates himself above his peers. There is an inherent contradiction in the lyrics in that Nas places himself considers himself a disciple of God, but sees paradise as a place of complete hedonism. This contradiction is also present in the tenets of the Five Percent Nation that preach that the divine resides in all blacks, but elevates one man as a the *true* God on earth, in this case the founder Clarence 13X is thought the to be Allah incarnate. Nas alludes to the roots of the Five Percent Nation in the final lines of the second verse explaining that he is often accused of thinking "he's Farrakhan preachin' blackness."[172] Farrakhan is the most recent leader of the Nation of Islam which Clarence 13X left to found the Nation of Gods and Earths. Both movements stressed the immanence of God and the divinity of the individual person. Nas stresses his own godliness and the paradise that exists on earth for those worthy of it.

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[170] Nas, "Disciple."

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid.

Immortality is also a prominent incarnational theme featured in Nas' "The Cross" from the 2002 album, *God's Son.* The song opens with Nas ardently proclaiming that he will "carry the cross" alluding to the cross Jesus carried.[173] Nas also states that "if [the] Virgin Mary had an abortion/ [he'd] still be carried in a chariot by stampeding horses" highlighting his ability to transcend death.[174] Nas grants himself agency as the representative for all rappers and calls himself the "new king of the streets," a title he earned through his musical gifts.[175] Nas invokes other biblical images to demonstrate why he is worthy of the title "the last [rap] emperor" by explaining that he "parted the sea" of rappers who have diluted rap into a form of R&B music.[176] However, Nas also takes on a benevolent godlike status when he expresses the desire to have his "niggaz [friends] in houses with pretty maids/ water and flowers in 'em."[177]Additionally, Nas wishes to give coats to the po' and give hope to the broke." [178]As an earthly god, Nas wants to ensure that his followers enjoy the paradise on earth that he perceives as a nice house full of amenities. Yet, he descends into a darker role once more when he accuses women of compromising male divinity despite the fact that they are held up as "earths" in the Five Percent Nation.[179] There is a perversion of the divine on earth when hedonism is allowed free reign, but Nas asserts that he will continue to "carry the cross" for all those who have fallen implying that he grants redemption through his immortality as Jesus did.

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[173] Nas, "The Cross," *God's Son*, 2002.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

Like Whitman, Nas believes his artistic craft elevates him above other creatures and allows him act as a representative for all other would-be artists. "The G.O.D." also from the 2002 *God's Son* album cement Nas' preeminence in the rap world as the "G-O-D S-O-N K-I-N-G O-F N-Y-C."[180] Once more, Nas establishes himself as the rap king who holds the "throne" because the "real shall reign."[181] For Nas, transcendence is only given to those who are authentic or "real" for those are the artists who are truly disciples. The chorus is simply the continuous spelling of Nas' titles of "God's Son" and "King of NYC" and ends with Nas calling all other rappers his "little children" who will presumably lead.[182] While unapologetic egotism was a feature in Whitman's narrative, Nas' level of egotism far surpasses that of his poet predecessor. Nas is a devout follower of the Five Percent Nation, but his overwhelming self-centeredness and hedonism continually perverts the empowering quality of the incarnational narrative.

The incarnational narrative is one of contradiction where there is a rejection of God's apartness from the world and the insistence that the divine power is immanent. Though Whitman and Nas draw from similar thematic elements, the two writers differ greatly in their perceptions of earthly paradise. While Whitman portrays a paradise accessible to all creatures equally, Nas designates specific individuals as being worthy of entering that paradise on earth. Moreover, the two artists differ in the degree of egotism they express; essentially, Whitman sees himself on higher plane in terms of his poetic gift, but Nas sees others as his subordinates because they lack his authenticity. The incarnational narrative contains elements of humanism and hedonism, but is ultimately meant to bring the sacred and the material into the same realm.

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[180] Nas, "The G.O.D," *God's Son*, 2002.

[181] *Ibid.*

[182] Ibid.

Conclusion: The Preacher, the Poet and the Rapper: A Literary Trinity

Upon closely analyzing the texts designated as prophetic, redemptive and incarnational it becomes obvious that there elements these narratives share. Most notably, what unites the three narratives in the context of poetry and music is the desire to carve out a space for the sacred among humanity. Whether it is the word of God, God's grace or a godlike divinity on earth, the narratives all involve the human encounter with the divine. The poets weave elements of the transcendent into their earthly narratives so as to add a deeper level of significance to their art. Similarly, the rap poets employ spiritual language and images to construct a theology that is compatible with the reality they each experience on a daily basis. Though the lives of the poets and rappers are wrought with moral and spiritual contradictions, the deliberate invocation of the spiritual imagination demonstrates a desire to discern a deeper meaning to the events in their lives.

The poetic tradition, the spiritual imagination and the modernity come together and manifest themselves in the person and art of the rapper effectively putting him at the center of literary trinity. The richness and density of meaning in the rapper's songs parallel that of the great poetic works of literary history though the method of expression, language and purpose *differ greatly. The presence of the spiritual narratives in its different manifestations* grants urban hip-hop and rap a degree of poetic legitimacy. Ultimately, one comes to understand that though these spiritual rappers are self-proclaimed thugz, they are also poets that have constructed a kind of theology in literature that attests to their experiences and that of their communities.