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## A Religious Hustle

### T.I. and Jay-Z's Lyrical Narratives from "the Trap" to the Spiritual

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#### Abstract

The coexistence of the religious (or "holy") and the secular (the "profane") has been identified and celebrated in the context of hip hop and rap music; references to prayer and spirituality are present, while the "hustler" and "gangster" stereotype is simultaneously referenced and played out in this popular genre. This paper considers T.I. and Jay-Z as two different manifestations of the holy and profane in rap music. While both rappers identify with the concept of divinity in their work, their approach to the coexistence of the holy and profane is different. T.I. promotes worship of a Christian God, while Jay-Z wants to *be* worshipped as a human incarnation of the holy in rap. This analysis offers the first scholarly analysis of T.I.'s contribution to rap and religion, and suggests that Jay-Z's self-appointment as the "God" of rap is an alternative construct of the traditional holy and profane identification in rap music.

#### Introduction

God give new beginnings, you can start right now (T.I., *A Better Day*, 2008).

One of the nuances in hip hop – and also in Motown, blues, and music brought to North America from West Africa – is that the sacred and secular are not mutually exclusive. Reed shows that in rap and hip hop music, and also in other traditionally Black music genres, the "profane" (that is, the secular) can and does coexist with the "holy" (or, references to God or the Divine). Hip hop, for example, fuses religious, spiritual, or sacred messages together with references to criminal activity, objectification of women, or aggression (Utley). In other words, rap music includes references to drugs, street life, violence, and misogyny

(made by the same artists and sometimes even in the same tracks) professing religiosity and spiritual connection. This coexistence is at first blush as surprising as the lion lying down with the lamb. However, references to the holy and profane in hip hop can be found in analyses of Lil' Wayne (Lauricella and Alexander), Tupac Shakur (Reed: 148-60), and even M. C. Hammer (Sorett). Nevertheless, the holy/profane in hip hop music works; while the religious and secular appear paradoxical, the two work together in ways that resonate with both the performer and the audience.

Two hip hop artists, in particular, are meaningful examples of the coexistence and cooperation of the holy and profane in hip hop, though their approaches to the juxtaposition of the holy and profane are markedly different. T.I. (or, T.I.P.), a former drug dealer and prison inmate, openly embraces spirituality and Christianity, especially in his recent recordings. Jay-Z, widely recognized as a forerunner in the rap scene (so recognized, in fact, that he appeared on *Oprah*), shuns humility by dubbing himself "Hova," short for "Jehovah," or the "God" of rap. T.I. embraces the notion of a theistic figure more powerful than himself to whom he prays and worships. By contrast, Jay-Z actually considers *himself* holy, or the embodiment of both the holy and profane in one entity – the rapper. This paper considers T.I. and Jay-Z's music and personal circumstances as concurrent narratives (Clandinin and Connelly). We will argue that the personal experiences of each hip hop artist directly informed their lyrics.

In order to examine the concurrent narratives of life events and lyrical constructs, a timeline of events in each rapper's life was constructed. Sources such as published autobiography (Carter), biography (Greenburg), and web resources (AZ Lyrics; Greaves; Heller et al.; Harper et al.; and MusicAngel89) were consulted. Then, a timeline of albums and tracks was constructed and considered alongside the temporal list of life events. Important milestones were noted, and lyrics from tracks written and released during these times were consulted. Times during which a main event and references to the religious/spiritual in lyrics coexisted were identified and analyzed. This paper offers a narrative of both personal and lyrical events and turning points in two highly successful rap artists' lives, and suggests that while both T.I. and Jay-Z endured and rap about the profane – an upbringing in poverty, years selling drugs, and the struggle to succeed in the music industry – the manner in which the two artists embrace the holy shows remarkable contrast.

### **T.I., T.I.P., or Clifford Joseph Harris**

Clifford Joseph Harris, more popularly recognized by the monikers T.I. or T.I.P., was raised in poverty in Atlanta, Georgia. At age fourteen, Harris took to selling drugs on the streets to make do while pursuing a high school education. Similar to many of his colleagues in hip hop (including 50 Cent, Rick Ross, and Jay-Z), T. I. lived a "hustler" lifestyle of selling drugs and other crime and had a gift for charismatic musical delivery in the form of rap rhymes.

Having gained prominence through the mixtape circuit by 1999, Harris signed with Laface Records at age nineteen. The young man's gift of articulation through the spoken word was not readily accepted in the popular rap scene, which led to T.I.'s subsequent

separation from the label. Over a five year period, however, various recordings such as *Trap Muzik* (2003), *Urban Legend* (2004), and *King* (2006) were released through Grand Hustle Records, a subsidiary of Atlantic Records. The rapper's chronicling of victories with women, drug deals, creating wealth, and raising a family led to praise from industry heavyweights and music listeners alike. Harris was no longer an obscure reference; he had become entrenched in the hearts of ambitious young men, adoring female supporters, and fellow entertainers. *King* was so well received that T.I. was honoured with a Grammy in 2006 for the street anthem, "What You Know."

Lyrics in T.I.'s tracks in the early 2000s indicate his emotional and economic place at the time; *I'm Serious* (2001) showed a vain, arrogant personality that referenced growing up in a disadvantaged, single parent home. "Still Ain't Forgave Myself" offers a glimpse into the rapper's childhood as he states, "My daddy sends me clothes and always tell me come and see him" followed by, "Then I started rebellin' began crack sellin' . . . Now my momma findin' rocks [crack] in my socks, glocks [guns] in my socks." The album to follow, *Trap Muzik* (2003), echoed the same sentiments with the use of catchy hooks to captivate audiences, such as "Rubber band man/ wild as the Taliban." ("Rubber Band Man"). It is notable that the "trap" is a reference to all aspects of the drug trade – the purchase, sale, and subsequent attempt(s) to stop using drugs – thus the nomenclature of this album references his criminal activity. The upcoming arrival of a son along with a reality check from producers motivated T.I.'s change in occupation from drug dealer to full-time rapper. Despite obvious bitterness about his criminal past, glimmers of positivity are found in this album. On "Be Better Than Me," T.I. encourages his listeners to seek paths that are different from his own: "Don't be lookin at me listenin to dope boys and trap n\*\*gas thinkin it's just like that . . . don't be like me be better than me." *Urban Legend*, released a year later in 2004, featured tracks pointing toward a more spiritually oriented approach to T.I.'s life struggles. On "Motivation," T.I. discusses dealing with "haters" (those who are not supportive of his lifestyle and success). After numerous mentions of personal attributes that separate him from the rest, T.I. states, "But back to reality G.O.D. Still carryin' me, n\*\*ga I run this . . . if God with me who could be against me sucka? Can't make me suffer just make me tougher."

The most poignant of T.I.'s tracks which demonstrate the coexistence of the holy and profane is "Prayin for help" (2004). The track begins with an emotional plea by reciting the Christian prayer "Our Father" amidst an ongoing fight in the background. The first 31 seconds of this track are not only a lyrical representation of the manifestation of the holy and profane, but also visual evidence of the holy and profane at once. The "Prayin for help" track includes lyrics and chorus lines which are charged with references to Jesus Christ ("That Ima change my life, get right, start livin like Christ, to tha end of my fight"), the desire to live right ("If it take till I'm a hundred years old/ Bet I'm reaching every one of my goals"), and for the artist's desire to help his community ("The ones that don even pray they got me"). T.I.'s burden of his past, later success, and sense of responsibility can be inferred from the lines, "Hah just so many times I don wished I could change my mind/ Change my life and leave tha game behind/ And it's been so many days I don prayed could find a way/ Find tha heart and tha time to say." Similar to keeping a diary of one's thoughts and activities, T.I.'s lyrics act as a narrative gateway to the narrative of his personal experiences.

T.I.'s sixth studio album, *Paper Trail* (2008), communicated compunction, yet also hope. By this time, T.I. was sentenced to prison (approximately seven months) on a U.S federal weapons conviction. As a keepsake for fans and well wishers as he prepared to enter prison, the album expresses regret and remorse at his prison sentence. In this new direction, T.I. became a mentor of sorts, providing wisdom to his fans on how to approach adversity. The album recounts how the death of his bodyguard and lifelong friend, Philant Johnson, along with the forthcoming loss of personal freedom, changed him. For example, the track "Ready for Whatever" provides a glimpse into the fear, paranoia, and insecurity T.I. was coping with at the time. He explains why he felt the need to purchase guns after Philant's death: "Consider this at least, I got everybody sweating me . . . I'm dealing with the pressure of my partner dying next to me." "On Top of the World" is a celebration of the rise from poverty and drug dealing to fame and wealth. The joy of the rise is revealed when the rapper states, "Now I remember so vivid me and my n\*\*gas was livin/ Sub-standard condition, still handlin business/ I'm rappin not reminiscin, and goddamn it we did it." Finally, the listener is reintroduced to the rapper's spiritual side in "No Matter What," in which he states "God'll take you through hell just to get you to heaven" and "Wonder how I face years and I'm still chillin?/ Easy, let go and let God deal with it." In this album, faith is clearly the backbone for T.I.'s hope for the future.

Religious and spiritual references are observable in nearly every track on *Paper Trail*. First, the hit single "Live your life" featuring pop sensation Rihanna echoes the role of the divine in T.I.'s daily experience. When speaking of those in his neighbourhood he says, "I pray for patience but they make me wanna melt they face away." By this the rapper means the pressures of dealing with those from his immediate surroundings who are not supportive of his success prompts the search for patience from the Divine. Additional spiritual references in this highly successful track – it reached #1 on the Billboard Charts – include T.I.'s comparison of himself to other mainstream rappers by observing, "Your values is a disarray, prioritizin' horribly, unhappy with the riches 'cause you piss poor morally." The album concludes with a more solemn recollection of how life was for the now-famous rapper. Specifically, "Slideshow" exposes a man seeking to justify his path: "But God got a plan, I'll understand one day but one day of life like a snapshot taken just believe you can make it have faith be patient." The therapeutic introspection comes to a close in "Dead and Gone" as T.I. paints a mental picture of violence on the streets leading to fatality and a change of direction. The change is pinpointed when the artist speaks of his newfound responsibility: "Now I get it now I take time to think before just for my family sake." The narrative as told by *Paper Trail* shows a more mature, responsible, hardworking professional entertainer who seeks guidance and inspiration from God.

Scholarship on religion/spirituality clearly shows that the religious/spiritual element in one's life is heightened in times of personal crisis or challenge. Religious/spiritual practices such as prayer are reported to be helpful in coping with a life challenge (Bade and Cook; Carver, Scheier, and Wientraub; Pargament 2007) such as a health crisis (Baesler, Derlega, Winstead, and Barbee) or economic hardship (Clark and Lelkes). Imprisonment on drug charges is quite clearly a life crisis, therefore T.I.'s lyrical narrative shows a clear identification with religion and spirituality. For this rapper, religion and spirituality brought strength and courage, while offering inspiration to fans. Attention to God's ability to give

guidance, strength, and love during times of personal struggle is in keeping with scholarly literature on religious coping (Pargament 1997; Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott). It is, however, notable that references to religiosity and spiritual guidance are clear in hip hop. This analysis of T.I.'s religious/spiritual expressions adds to the understanding of divinity in this genre, for it demonstrates the open embrace of Divinity and Christian values in an otherwise stereotypically "hustler" context.

### Jay-Z, or Shawn Corey Carter

Shawn Carter, more widely recognized as Jay-Z, currently boasts 11 albums having sold over 50 million copies worldwide (Greenburg). Carter, however, had his humble beginning as the youngest of three children in a single parent home in the Brooklyn projects. Carter began rapping in the 1980s as a teenager, writing rhymes and battling other rappers from his area and surrounding high schools. After appearing in his first video with local artist, Jaz, Carter's desire for recognition went into overdrive. When he failed to get signed with a major record label, the hopeful rapper turned to drug dealing as a means of income, foregoing both school and rap. After continual pressure from friends and family members (Carter), he decided to give rap one more try, at which point he became associated with Damon Dash, a well known figure in Harlem rap. In 1996, he and Dash pioneered Rocafella Records, which produced Jay-Z's first major release, *Reasonable Doubt*. The album was a chronicle of the hustler lifestyle (selling drugs, attracting women, and buying expensive items). This work established Jay-Z's audience whose support catapulted him to widespread acclaim and popularity with hits including "Hard Knock Life" (1999) and "Money Ain't a Thang" (1998). At this point, spirituality or references to any sort of divinity were not present in Carter's work.

However, in 1999, Jay-Z dropped *Vol 3: The Life and Times of S. Carter*. There was a sense of finality and pride on this album, particularly in the opening track, "Hova Song." "Hova" is a shortened form of "Jehovah," which is a rendering of the name of God in Abrahamic religions. Jay-Z's new moniker was a bold declaration of his belief that he had risen to the level of "Rap God" in just three years as a signed act. The tracks on this collection revealed Jay-Z's entrenchment in the streets, his reputation as a ladies' man and, ultimately, being dubbed the best artist in rap. The track "S. Carter" features a glimpse into this new image where Jay-Z says of himself, "Hustler, n\*\*ga move weight like Oprah/ Drive wide body, twenty-inch big motor/ No tints, make no mistake y'all it's Hova/ I stay sportin' played Jordan's before Jordan." Here Jay-Z makes reference to his ability to sell music in the same way that Oprah lost weight, followed by a description of his car's make and rims, a declaration of his place as "Hova," and talk of his exclusive shoe collection. The album ends with a "Hova Song" outro where Jay-Z proclaims, "I'm the illest n\*\*ga doin it til y'all prove me wrong/ Do you believe?/ It's Hova the God, uhh, uhh, uhh." This statement demonstrates Jay-Z's unshakable pride in his rap stardom to the point that he considers himself the manifestation of Divinity.

Since Jay-Z self-appointed himself "Hova" in 1999, his sonic creations contain the refrain of the rapper's belief that, beyond being the best in rap, he had ascended into the realm of being revered. The ode, "Izzo (H.O.V.A)" (2001), from *The Blueprint* is saturated with the moniker "Hova," in which the chorus spells out the remarkably catchy, "H to the

izz-O, V to the izz-A.” The reference to Jay-Z as the Jehovah (“Hova”) or God of rap is highly identifiable throughout subsequent material. 2003’s “What More Can I Say” from *The Black Album* is a discussion of Jay-Z’s greatness from the first person point of view. After continual discussion of his various attributes and contributions to the rap game Jay-Z exclaims, “Young Hova the God blast for me.” This line is significant seeing as the rapper calls on the listener to celebrate his presence. Jay-Z continues his proclamations of his status as rap’s God in 2006’s “Kingdom Come” with the following chorus, “Without the boy H.O.V. (I will be, I will be)/ Not only N.Y.C./ I’m hip hop’s savior (Yeah).” Jay-Z therefore declares himself not only the God of hip hop but also its savior. Jay-Z continues the parade of his place as rap deity in 2009’s “Run This Town” featuring Kanye West and Rihanna on *The Blueprint 3*. “Run This Town” features Jay-Z’s declaration of his takeover, “It’s the return of the God Peace God.” While this may not be an explicit reference to the name Jehovah, the implications are just as meaningful; Jay-Z announces his place as “*the* God,” prompting listeners to dismiss any other potential rappers challenging his divine status.

*Watch the Throne*, released in 2011, is a celebratory work in which Jay-Z and producer-turned-rapper Kanye West expound on their rise to elite status. From the beginning of the album, the two celebrated hip hop artists make it clear that they are above tradition and are establishing a new way of life. For example, “No Church in the Wild” is introduced by Frank Ocean rapping, “Human being to the mob/ What’s a mob to a king?/ What’s a king to a god?/ What’s a god to a non-believer/ Who don’t believe in anything?/ Will he make it out alive?/ Alright alright/ No church in the wild.” Jay-Z follows with, “Jesus was a carpenter, Yeezy laid beats/ Hova flow the Holy Ghost/ Get the hell up out your seats/ Preach.” Never before in rap had any artist proclaimed himself to be a deity, much less draw parallels or claim to replace the Christ figure. It is evident that Jay-Z truly holds his self-proclaimed status as rap God to be indisputable. “Hova flow the Holy Ghost” implies that Jay-Z’s “flow” (rap ability) is divine, and he implores his audience to rise from their seats in adoration.

It is also important to consider that the role of Kanye West on the *Watch the Throne* album is to play the messenger, similar to that of Jesus Christ when he came to establish the Kingdom of God in the Christian tradition. Kanye West’s career as a rap artist evolved under the watchful eye of Jay-Z, who served as his mentor throughout his development. West speaks candidly of his connection to Jay-Z on “Last Call” from 2004’s *College Dropout* (West’s debut effort on Jay-Z’s Rocafella Records imprint). Jay-Z’s is the first voice heard on the track, while West follows with a recollection of a moment between the two: “That day I came and I tracked the beat and I got to meet Jay-Z and he said, ‘oh you a real soulful dude.’” 2005’s “Diamonds are Forever Remix” from *Late Registration* features another collaboration between Jay-Z and West, and in 2007, West tributes Jay-Z on the track “Big Brother,” from the aptly titled *Graduation*. West makes mention of Jay-Z’s mentorship by rapping, “On that ‘Diamonds’ remix I swore I spazzed / Then my big brother came through and kicked my ass.” It is clear that West is indebted to Jay-Z, and Jay-Z’s vision of his place as a rap God became even more deeply entrenched with the enlisting of Kanye West as a “disciple.”

### T.I. and Jay-Z in the Context of Hip Hop and Religion

Given its recognized place in popular culture, hip hop provides a framework of realism that allows the uninhibited expression of references to life experiences, including religiosity and spirituality. Hip hop allows religious and spiritual utterances in a framework of authenticity and candor, for there is no singular or *right* way to be religious/spiritual in hip hop. While some scholarship on hip hop and religion/spirituality is Christian in nature (Gooch; Hatch), Pinn and Miller suggest that spiritual analyses of hip hop need not be doctrine specific, and Pinn further suggests that rap music is more about being understood as a “terrain for the articulation of religious struggle and redemption” (106). This narrative analysis of two hip hop artists clearly demonstrates markedly different manifestations of the religious and spiritual in hip hop, and shows how two different artists, when faced with personal struggle, manifest religion and spirituality in different ways.

Struggle and redemption, as suggested by Pinn, is a defining element in hip hop, as in other traditions of black music from the post-Civil war period to Motown (Reed). The notion of struggle is clearly identified in historical (Chang) and political (Kelley) analyses of rap music. In this narrative analysis of two highly successful – and markedly different – rap artists, both T.I. and Jay-Z identify with personal struggle. Such struggle is the “profanity” in hip hop – criminal activity, selling drugs, womanizing, and weapons charges all offer a clear representation of the “hustle,” or the secular struggle so often referenced in hip hop lyrics.

In response to a prison sentence on weapons charges, a realization of personal responsibility, and the desire to make a turn for the positive, T.I. openly embraces Divinity and makes explicit mention of God in his work. His references to God are identifiably Christian, and the aforementioned audio overlay of “The Lord’s Prayer” and a street fight is a poignant representation of T.I.’s spiritual (holy) response to the street life (the profane). This response is a clear articulation of Reed’s suggestion that the holy and profane are inextricably combined in rap music.

By contrast, Jay-Z responded to his hustler past by quickly and unabashedly dubbing himself, “Hova,” an abbreviated form of “Jehovah,” or the Judeo-Christian “God.” This, too, is a “holy” response to his profane, personal struggle. Jay-Z’s own “divinity” puts a new perspective on religion and spirituality in hip hop. Jay-Z does not embrace a dualistic God; rather, he considers himself to be the embodiment or representative of God in the hip hop arena. While other rappers such as Tupac Shakur and Lauryn Hill (Kirk-Duggan) and Lil’ Wayne (Lauricella and Alexander) embrace a Christian representation of Divinity, Jay-Z considers *himself* the manifestation of the Divine. While both rappers identify with the concept of divinity, their approach to the coexistence of the holy and profane is different; T.I. promotes worship of a Christian God; Jay-Z wants to *be* worshipped as a human incarnation of the holy in rap.

### Conclusion

To date, the notion of the holy and profane in hip hop has focused primarily on the coexistence of profane lyrics and sentiments (such as crime, drugs, misogyny) while insinuating religious/spiritual concepts such as Biblical verses, prayer, and the culture of struggle and redemption. Thus, scholarship on hip hop and religion/spirituality has focused

primarily on finding a spiritual solution (regardless of orthodoxy or denomination) to personal challenge. This paper considers the personal history of each rapper, together with lyrics in tracks relative to spirituality, as concurrent narratives illustrating both the holy and the profane in hip hop. The addition of T.I. (Clifford Harris) is a new contribution to the literature on hip hop and religion, and the identification of Jay-Z as a self-appointed deity adds a new dimension to scholarly literature considering religion/spirituality in hip hop.

We identify T.I.'s spirituality as a Christian response to a series of personal struggles. His "profane" experiences in dealing drugs, using weapons and materialism made way for a subsequent "holy" response in embodying Christian values such as honesty, surrender to God, and prayer, particularly in his work from 2003 onward. The embrace of a Christian response to adversity, as T.I.'s work reveals, is not a surprising response to struggle; scholarly literature on coping shows that people often turn to religion during times of personal crisis.

By contrast, Jay-Z's response to the "profane" struggle in his life of drug dealing and hustling revealed a concept of the "holy" in hip hop which focused on *himself* as a God. The rapper's proactive self reliance in overcoming the ills of childhood led to the creation of an inner idol, "Hova," to whom Jay-Z is subject. This proclamation of divinity can be considered part of rap's "braggadocio" – the bragging and boasting about physical prowess, brawn or bling. Or, this not-so-humble profession could be considered blasphemous in itself; the self-appointment of the moniker "Hova," and thus dubbing oneself "God" could be considered an articulation of profanity in hip hop. In the latter case, Jay-Z's consideration of himself as "Hova" would be an expression of both the holy and profane at once. This is, we propose, an embodiment of both the holy and profane in one character, whether considered blasphemous or not. As Reed shows, the holy and profane in hip hop work together to speak to both the artist and the community. Jay-Z is one such artist who simply by means of his self-appointed moniker and rap success is the single embodiment of the holy and profane.

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