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**What's Love Got to Do with It?
“Lovelessness” within the Sorted-Out City**

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“Love is profoundly political.

Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth.” - bell hooks

Within black liberationist and womanist theologies, structural causes of black poverty continue to be emphasized. However, within these discourses, only a dearth of literature has been produced on how poverty affects the inner psychology of black youth and how a politics of self-love might be fashioned with and for these youth who experience economic dislocation and socio-cultural alienation. Poor blacks, particularly black youth locked in communities of deprivation, often experience psychic breaks and identity crises within the context of inequitable

economic structures. Poor black youth are often living in contexts of “lovelessness,” being structurally produced environments of profound self-doubt and interpersonal disrespect that engender crime and violence. Lovelessness is not merely an interpersonal problem among poor black youth; it is largely an institutional context of inequity and inequality that has deeply affected the inner lives of these young people. The context of lovelessness that so many black youth find themselves situated in is fueled and exacerbated by inequitable cultural and economic institutions in America.

Perpetually defined as a “social problem,” these youth within a hip-hop generation embody a politics of resistance in response to their economic and social alienation, a resistance politics that tends to have both productive and destructive effects. In part, this discussion tends to be subverted as black liberationist and womanist scholars have avoided discussing hopelessness among poor black communities in fear of eclipsing their agency and radical subjectivity (which has historically been and continues to be ignored or dismissed in neoliberal capitalist discourse). The political and social dangers of discussing hopelessness among poor blacks have been well documented by both black theologians and womanist scholars. They are right. However, helplessness and despair within such communities are palpable and real. Consequently, critical discussion about how poverty adversely affects the cultural and psychological spaces of poor black youth is just as important as discourse on agency among these youth.

This essay takes up the problem of “lovelessness” that so many poor black youth face and the ways in which they respond to their contexts. I suggest that lovelessness is not just a social problem; it is a profoundly theological problem that must be addressed within the diabolic context of American political economy. Lovelessness is a deep crisis of spirit, a crisis of spirit in

which many young black youth are unsettled in relation to their own humanity. Disadvantaged black youth feel left behind and disowned by a society that does not acknowledge their basic human dignity and worth due to the persistence of economic and social inequities. Yet, they still make meaning, particularly through hip hop culture, and even use religious imagery as a way to do so. However, black religious institutions are related to hip hop culture in complex and often contradictory ways. Deeply critical of black traditional religions, hip-hop artists employ black religious imagery but not traditional orthodoxies rooted in traditional black religious institutions such as black Christianity or the Nation of Islam. Instead, hip-hop artists employ non-traditional black religious leanings, which are simultaneously liberative (sponsoring spiritual freedom in young blacks) and repressive (reinforcing heteronormativity and repressive forms of black masculinity).

This essay argues then that lovelessness is both a socio-political and theological problem among poor black youth who are overwhelmed by contexts of institutional inequity and inequality. In my estimation, black religious institutions might better assess the complexities poor black youth endure within a hip hop generation and provide innovative contexts out of which to address such problems of lovelessness. In order to argue this claim, I first turn to the under-articulation of self-love within black liberation and womanist theological thought. My argument is not that self-love is negated or dismissed altogether within such literature. Rather, my contention is that womanist and black theologies have not provided *sustained* attention on the issue of lovelessness, self love, and love of others. Second, I turn to why love is seen as an unwanted ideal or utopian category among some poor young blacks and why lovelessness has gripped the inner lives of many black youth. Lovelessness is an unfortunate response to the “sorted out city,” being structurally produced inequities and inequalities that segregate and “sort

out” cities by race, gender, age, and much more. Finally, I turn to the complex, contradictory ways in which poor black youth resist such inequalities, even through religious imagery, which sometimes clashes with traditional black religious leanings. Because lovelessness is a social and theological problem, these institutions may be able to provide leadership to the crisis of spirit that has gripped these youth in response to structural and systemic injustices.

Black Liberation and Love

Around this nation, poor black youth struggle within contexts of extreme poverty and deprivation. The economic crisis over the last few years has pushed black children and youth deeper and deeper into an abyss of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and despair. Black children are three times more likely to be poor than white children.¹ There is a plethora of documentation on the educational disadvantages and injustices that poor black children and youth face, which inhibits their ability to climb out of cycles of poverty. However, poor black youth are often articulated by society as the “social problem,” as if they produce and are responsible for such contexts of deprivation. Because these youth are situated within socio-economic institutions that produce and sustain practices that lead to material and educational deprivation, they often turn to alternate, “subversive” communities of identity, meaning, and belonging that may simultaneously be life-giving and death-dealing (i.e. street gangs). These youth often craft complex and contradictory contexts of hope and community in response to the economic deprivation and social alienation they experience. Institutionally generated, poverty has an affect

¹ Children’s Defense Fund, *Portrait of Inequality 2011: Black Children in America* (Washington DC, 2011), 1.

on human personality and the development of young people. For poor black children, contexts of extreme deprivation affect how they see and interpret the world, themselves, and others. And they often interpret the world as hostile against a societal backdrop that blames them for their impoverishment and conceals the ways in which poverty is exacerbated by under-regulated free-market practices. Consequently, social frustration and despair can be seen within the lives of some poor black youth.

Given this context of deprivation, some of these youth often do not feel accepted nor do they feel they belong. They do not feel loved. I am always dumbfounded when I speak with black youth who grapple with multiple economic and cultural disadvantages. They often say apathetically and without pause that love does not exist. They feel that there is no such thing as love. I feel heartbroken when these youth express such sentiments about love. If love is not present in the imaginations of our own youth, it surely will not be in our future lives as a nation. I define love as an act that has personal and social dimensions. Love then not only includes care and respect but also entails social responsibility, social trust, and social empathy. These youth do not believe in these possibilities within the social contexts they inhabit. These sentiments reflect what feminist cultural theorist and critic bell hooks refers to as the crisis of “lovelessness,” which is an institutional context of inequity and inequality that deeply affects the inner lives of disadvantaged black youth.

Yet, the discourse on love in relation to black cultural life was already under assault by the racist attitudes of early America. Early within our nation’s history, white settlers justified their racial logic and practices by arguing that black people were not fully human. White colonizers employed scientific literature, religious beliefs, and cultural studies to support the inferiority of blacks. The image of black people in the “white mind” focused on outrageous

depictions of individual blacks and their assumed “primitive” cultural practices. Everywhere one turned were “brightly colored and skillfully drawn images of big-eyed and thick-lipped blacks eating corn, sporting fanciful attire and riding a wild pig or some other farm animal, aping white elites to comic effect, trying to ice skate, clumsily walking along a high fashion boulevard, haplessly trying to ride horses in the manner of an English gentleman, and strutting proudly in exaggerated dress at parties and ‘darkey’ balls.”² Hollywood films also depicted blacks within the context of “images from the minstrel shows and vaudeville.”³ Usually, blacks were presented as “hapless servants, resolute and devoted Mammy-type characters, and often stupid and silly chicken-stealing blacks.”⁴ Blacks were culturally represented as dull, stupid and unable to develop their own human capacities.⁵

In relation to notions of care and love, whites argued that only civilized (or white) people had certain affective capacities such as love. In the mind of the white racist, Africans were “incapable” of cultivating and feeling this sentiment. In others words, blacks did not have the capacity or ability to love within the racial logic of early colonial America. This question of whether black people were capable or incapable of love even persisted after slavery ended. However, this question of black people’s capacity to love was revisited in a somewhat different way. In the early twentieth century, black scholars debated over whether the dehumanizing legacy of slavery had vitiated black people’s capacity for self-love and love of others. Black

² bell hooks, *Salvation: Black people and Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xix.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

scholars were concerned that the internalization of inferiority among black communities had diminished their own sense of humanity. Some scholars pondered whether America's racial genocide had left blacks so damaged and wounded that they inhabited psychological spaces where they could never know love.⁶

However, this scholarly preoccupation with blacks' ability to love is driven by a couple of faulty assumptions. First, this preoccupation assumes that blacks were not experiencing love within the contexts of racial apartheid in early America. Despite the hypocrisy of white slave masters, slave communities disclosed a profound ability to conceptualize and embody notions of compassion, care and love as seen through their spiritual songs, oral stories, and religious testimonies. These slave communities were able to embody such notions of justice and love despite the contradictions they saw in white racist America. For instance, slave masters preached the Christian message of love yet hypocritically undermined this message in their inhumane treatment of slaves. Slave communities were able to discern such hypocrisies and embody more humane visions of care and justice. Second, this preoccupation also does not acknowledge the ways in which blacks within the context of American racism have dared to courageously create communities of love and justice in response to the hatred and injustice white America often perpetuated. While black scholars were interested in the psychological effects of slavery and white racism upon black people, one can see that the choice to love was already an important and necessary dimension of black liberation for black communities.

⁶ Ibid., 22. A number of scholars have pondered the effects of slavery and Jim Crow on black people's ability to trust and love. See Leon Litwack, *Trouble in the Mind* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage, 1999), which argued that because black people had to adjust to white racist values and social norms to survive, it often affected their capacity to be loving. His book is full of testimonies about the confusion black children faced in Jim Crow South as they attempted to live within a world that had two codes of behavior (white racist codes and black cultural codes).

This choice to love as a necessary and critical dimension of black liberation can be seen in earlier writers and thinkers from the 1920s to 1960s such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Lorraine Hansberry. These writers provide sustained discussions of black love within fiction and nonfiction. For instance, Lorraine Hansberry emphasized love as central to black identity. In fact, Hansberry saw blacks loving themselves fully and completely as the ultimate act of resistance to the racist forces of dehumanization. For her, it was the triumph of love over dehumanizing forces, the celebration of self-respect over hatred.⁷ Similar to Hansberry, Baldwin articulates the American Negro as one who has loved the most in America despite the hatred and hostility that fueled white racism and practices of dehumanization.⁸ Baldwin challenged the narrative of blacks being so wounded from slavery's legacy that they had no capacity to love. Baldwin interpreted blacks as resilient in the face of hatred, experiencing joy, desire, and love in ways that confirm moments of transcendence. These thinkers saw love as integral to projects of black self-determination.

Into the 1970s when so many black power movements felt the failures of the Civil Rights Movement, the value of love for self-determination and liberation was under-articulated or

⁷ See Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books 7th Print Edition, 2004). This play is set on Chicago's South Side, and the plot revolves around the divergent dreams and conflicts within three generations of the Younger family: son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth, his sister Beneatha, his son Travis and matriarch Lena, called Mama. When her deceased husband's insurance money comes through, Mama dreams of moving to a new home and a better neighborhood in Chicago. Walter Lee, a chauffeur, has other plans, however: buying a liquor store and being his own man. Beneatha dreamed of medical school. This play seems to argue a particular point: that the forces of dehumanization that the younger family experience can only be fought and sustained with love and care. Love is the foundation upon which they are even able to envision social change for themselves and the broader black community.

⁸ See James Baldwin's *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (New York, N.Y.: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2000) as well as some of his non-fiction essays such as *Notes of our Native Son* (New York: Library of America 5th Printing Edition, 1998) attempt to uncover the racist forces that dehumanized blacks as well as centralize the quest for self-love and self-respect as conditions towards freedom and self-actualization.

dismissed altogether. Even though the prophets of the Civil Rights movement had always emphasized a liberation theology that upheld love as essential not only to the creation of healthy self-esteem for blacks but also to humanizing the hard hearts of white people, the “love-your-enemies” message of this nonviolent revolution spearheaded by Martin Luther King was deeply resisted by many within blacks communities, particularly black power groups who had mourned the absence of justice in their communities despite Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s. Because of the deep inequities and inequalities that so many impoverished blacks continued to experience despite civil right gains, the quest for power supplanted the quest for liberation with little to no discussion of the purpose and meaning of love in the liberation struggle itself.

While womanist and black liberation theologies have implicitly seen self-love as inextricably linked to concepts of black liberation and justice more broadly, an explicit and sustained articulation of love as a personal and political goal has remained elusive. For instance, In *Deeper shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, womanist scholar Stacey Floyd-Thomas rightly affirms that the tenet of redemptive self-love has always been central to womanist discourse on black women’s forms of meaning-making and creative resistance. Womanist scholar Cheryl Kirk-Duggan also affirms that black women have had to quilt “together the emotional and spiritual wounds and scars of their families, so that [they] might continue to live.”⁹ Black women’s ability to “quilt” or be creative within the context of oppression emerges out of an ethics of love that many of them embody. Moreover, womanist theologians and ethicists such as Katie Canon, Marcia Riggs, and Kelly Brown Douglas do a wonderful job in implicitly invoking an ethics of love through their theological works on

⁹ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Quilting Relations with Creation: Overcoming, Going Through, and Not Being Stuck,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 182.

sexuality and spiritual activism. However, this literature does not substantively take up the *problematic* of love and lovelessness within the context of American political economy in relation to poor black youth.

Likewise, black theologians such as James Cone and Dwight Hopkins have certainly mentioned black self-love as a prerequisite to liberation but have not offered sustained analysis on the problem of lovelessness and the need for revolutionary, radical self-love among black people, particularly black youth.¹⁰ This under-articulation of a robust discourse on love ethics in relation to structural justice (particularly in developing strategies that can create a foundation of self-esteem and self-worth for young black communities) has led to a lack of motivation over several decades in discussing the importance of love within young, poor black communities. In short, the revolution to build self-love and love of others has not taken place among disadvantaged black youth, which is proving to be disastrous.

The Dilemma of the Sorted-Out City

In particular, some black youth's ambivalence to see love as transformative is inextricably linked to their chronic experiences within the context of the "sorted-out city." Mindy Thompson Fullilove describes the problem of the sorted-out city:

¹⁰ James Cone's texts such as a *Black Theology of Liberation* does stress the powerful move that Malcolm X makes in emphasizing the need for black self-love within the project of black liberation. Similarly, in "A New Black Heterosexual Male," Dwight Hopkins writes that a "new black heterosexual male" is only possible through the fostering of self-love in large part. While these theologians do well in making these connections, sustained attention is not given to the problem of lovelessness or to the category of self-love as a personal and political dimension of black liberation itself. Similarly within womanist discourse, while self-love is a tenet of the descriptor "womanist," projects focusing on the category of self-love at length have remained absent.

One of the central resource-distribution systems in the United States is the system of neighborhoods. Neighborhoods have been “sorted” by race, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, lifestyle, and numerous other factors. These separate neighborhoods are inherently unequal in their ability to garner resources. Living in a neighborhood determines one’s level of access to many resources and of exposure to many risks. Wealthy neighborhoods have better schools, better fire service, better garbage collection, better hospitals, better housing, better food shopping choices, cleaner air and water, and more diverse services. Some of the U.S. population is slated to have more disease than others as a result of this system of neighborhood allocation. ¹¹

The sorted-out city discloses systemic patterns of inequality that impede poorer groups from flourishing. In fact, the idea of sorted-out city acknowledges that some people are placed in a position of distinct disadvantage by the zip code they live in. Such resource allocation according to neighborhoods has had disastrous effects on poorer populations such as inner-city poor black youth.

It is important to note that although inner cities began to take a definitive turn for the worst in the 1970s onward, the 1930s held precursors to the type of discrimination and inequity inner cities would experience due to such “sorting out.” Beginning in the 1930s through the practices of redlining, the inner city population was “sorted out” by race, class, age, gender, and much more, creating highly segregated cities. In 1937 (with the help of Jim Crow laws in the South), redlining was codified by the Home Owners Loan Corporation. It was the task of this

¹¹ Mindy Thompson Fullilove, “Unsorting Our Cities,” *Shelterforce* (Spring 2012), posted July 24, 2012, http://www.shelterforce.org/article/2770/unsorting_our_cities/, 1.

corporation to protect investments of banks and the federal government by indicating which areas had the best potential for financial return. According to the HOLC algorithm, new buildings with white inhabitants merited an “A,” while old buildings with non-white inhabitants received a “D.”¹² Despite the number of good credit ratings that non-white residents had in their residential areas, these areas were still given a failing grade.

Redlining imposed serious hardships on inner cities because it created difficulties in getting money for investments in infrastructure, neighborhood restoration, and so much more. Even in 2004, redlining made it difficult for inner city neighborhoods such as the Central Ward of Newark, NJ to get insurance or to borrow for repairs and remodeling.¹³ Because of this redlining practice, the inner city’s physical environment deteriorated more quickly than it might have if it were given adequate and continuous maintenance. Such redlining causes resources to be distributed unevenly, in which the inner city is constantly denied the needed funds to perform upkeep and maintenance. In addition to physical environment, the sorted-out city has serious implication in terms of declining health and disease, poor educational opportunities, a dearth of employment options, and so much more. Such practices led to inner cities being dilapidated and run-down, often looked upon as a decaying relic of sorts. The early decisions of redlining in inner-city neighborhoods would intensify the type of urban blight that would follow in the 1970s onward. In the face of extreme discrimination and deprivation in the early part of the twentieth

¹² Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* (New York, N.Y.: One World Books, 2005), 18.

¹³ Ibid., 20.

century, poor blacks would be unprepared in responding to the economic shifts in American political economy that began in the 1970s.

The economic experiences of black youth within the context of the sorted-out city was exacerbated by shifts in American economy during the 1970s, intensifying the economic and social disenfranchisement they were already enduring. In *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, black sociologist William Julius Wilson discloses the chronic poverty blacks experienced and continue to endure, particularly within urban areas. From a historical perspective, the socio-economic dislocation experienced among urban blacks must be seen as having complex sociological antecedents that range from demographic problems to problems of economic organization. Wilson discusses the structural constraints that spurred widespread black unemployment and therefore economic deprivation and social isolation within these communities. He also discloses the emergence of a post-industrial economy in which there were substantial job losses in the very industries in which urban minorities had greatest access and substantial employment gains. Into the 1970s, higher-education-requisite industries that were beyond the reach of most minority workers were gaining ground. Inner city blacks were poorly matched for these unemployment trends.¹⁴ Wilson describes this economic re-organization as shift from an industrial economy to a post-industrial economy, which left most impoverished black urban dwellers behind. In fact, this economic re-structuring led to urban areas as bastions of in-opportunity, disclosing poor black communities as vulnerable communities. Impoverished black communities began experiencing deeper, intergenerational cycles of deprivation and poverty not because of deficiencies within black culture but due to an American post-industrial

¹⁴ William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2009), 20.

political economy that was leaving the value of urban black's labor behind, which led to greater economic and social vulnerability among these communities.

Along with these shifts in economy, poor blacks also experienced the decline of federal and state support for central cities. The policies of the Reagan administration in the 1980s involved sharp spending cuts on direct aid to cities, dramatically reducing budgets for general revenue sharing such as urban mass transit, urban development action grants, economic development assistance, compensatory education, job training, and more.¹⁵ In fact, “the federal contribution was 17.5 percent of the total city budgets in 1977, but only 5.4 percent by 2000.”¹⁶ Such cuts led to financial crises that many cities were unable to handle such as devastating public health problems that disproportionately affected blacks. These public health problems included “1) the prevalence of drug trafficking and associated violent crimes; 2) the AIDS epidemic and its escalating public health costs; and 3) the rise in the homeless population not only of individuals, but of whole families as well.”¹⁷ Many cities have fewer resources to combat such social ills, which are connected to the policymakers' abandonment and neglect of cities. The dilemma of the sorted out city continues today through these kinds of policy decisions. “Urban renewal” programs are just one current example of how the sorted-out city continues as whites are now repopulating restored inner cities while poor blacks are being pushed out of these areas (or to other parts of the city) that they have occupied for decades.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For more on the complicated ways in which race and class converge in relation to urban renewal programs across cities, see Derek Hyra, *The New Urban Renewal: The Economic Transformation of Harlem and*

In addition to the absence of support for poor blacks in cities, impoverished black youth were also met with social stigmatization and cultural blaming which can be readily seen in the “War on Drugs” campaign beginning with the Reagan administration in the 1990s. Going back to the “War on Drugs” under the Reagan administration, young impoverished black men within urban areas were deliberately targeted as those who the government needed to “get tough on” for drug and crime offenses. Poor black men in inner cities were given extremely harsh prison sentences for peddling crack cocaine although many sociological and legal scholars have documented that white middle-class men not only used powder cocaine at equal or greater rates than black men’s usage of crack cocaine but also did not receive commensurate prison sentences that poor black men faced. Because these black men were primarily young, poor, and first time offenders, they often did not have the type of legal counsel to protect them from certain plea bargains that ended up labeling them felons for life.

Consequently, a large majority of African American men in urban areas, like Chicago, have been labeled felons for life. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that these men are part of a growing caste (not underclass), which is a group of people who are permanently relegated, by law, to an inferior second-class status. They can be denied the right to vote, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, and public benefits -- much as their grandparents and great-grandparents once were during the Jim Crow era.¹⁹ Hence, racial injustice through the prison system is being legitimated and codified by our laws. The mass incarceration of black men is part of a larger

Bronzville (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008) and E. Michael Jones, *The Slaughter of Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 10.

prison industrial complex, which is a term used to attribute the rapid expansion of the US inmate population to the political influence of private prison companies and businesses that supply goods and services to government prison agencies. Termed in 1997 by Angela Davis, the prison industrial complex is a term that often implies a network of actors who are motivated by making profit rather than solely by punishing or rehabilitating criminals or reducing crime rates.

Proponents of this view believe that the desire for monetary gain has led to the growth of the prison industry and the number of incarcerated individuals. While we are told of America's triumph over its ugly history of discrimination, exclusion, and racial caste, impoverished black youth have experienced a different reality, a reality of racial profiling and overt exclusion.

It is against this socio-economic and cultural backdrop of exclusion, the dilemma of the sorted-out city, that the theme of love as a goal of black liberation has receded. Impoverished black youth, in particular, focus on issues of survival in the face of a masochistic system that pretends to offer hope and opportunity for them. These youth feel the cultural stigmatization that follows them for being economically disadvantaged, which has led to complex and often contradictory responses of creative resistance among such youth. In fact, there are often two serious consequences of the sorted-out city: violence (both individual and structural) increases and this violence engenders a psychosocial downward spiral that is self-propagating. While these consequences have been present, poor black youth have also found ways to transcend by employing forms of creative resistance within hip-hop culture.

“Ghettocentricity”: Creative Resistance Among Black Youth

Impoverished black youth have certainly responded to chronic conditions of in-opportunity, widespread unemployment, and poor education. Their responses can primarily be seen with the creative emergence of hip-hop and eventually rap music beginning in the 1970s. Hip-Hop music has a rich history of youth empowerment and social justice awareness within poor black communities. Hip-Hop music (and culture) first came to national recognition through the artistic expressions of dee-jaying, break-dancing, and graffiti. Starting in the New York Bronx, musical and social awareness groups such as Afrikka Bambata and the Zulu nation used these three artistic expressions to rehabilitate male ex-gang and drug offenders. These teenage boys and young adults became part of a hip-hop movement in order to improve themselves as viable citizens and as productive, contributing members of their communities. Social awareness of issues was of utmost importance. In fact, Afrikka Bamabata and the Zulu nation would hold benefit concerts and rallies speaking out against apartheid in South Africa as well as racism and poverty here in America. Consequently, the role of hip-hop culture was nurturing for black teenagers who often became victims to a system of violence, racism, and poverty.

However, as discussed, in the 1970s poverty worsened in urban areas, creating what people have termed “ghettos.” A sense of hopelessness and despair became a daily experience for some urban residents because of this growing economic alienation. Schools started to decline in offering a quality education to urban residents and businesses started moving out of these areas as well. Because of the growing despair induced by such poverty, rap music emerged as a way to express the anger and frustration experienced by many young black males locked in cycles of fatherlessness, crime, drugs, and minimal educational opportunities.

As a genre of hip-hop, rap music responded by talking about these troubling realities in the inner cities. Tupac, “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” is a wonderful example of how rap served as a form of explanation of the poverty, crime, and out-of-wedlock births that were features of these urban areas. In addition, this rap song was an example of the type of political protest needed in telling the truth about how poor black youth, such as Brenda, become locked in cycles of despair and death due to social conditions. However, other forms of rap music (ironically even Shakur’s later music) began to glorify the crime, violence, and delinquency within these urban areas. Sensationalizing and promoting such destructive behavior became the norm. Moreover, hip-hop came to be solely associated with the negative messages and aspects of rap music, which spoke about greed, individualism, sexism, and “bling-bling.”

Despite its more self-destructive aspects, hip-hop music reflects the fight for human dignity and self-respect among impoverished black youth. In particular, gangsta rap is a genre of hip-hop music that reflects worsening conditions among black youth within inner cities and their struggle to fashion a sense of identity and self-worth. Gangsta rap has been a deeply contentious topic for mainstream America because of its glorification of violence, misogyny, crime, and sense of nihilism. However, rap music, particularly gangsta rap, possesses a certain complexity as it paradoxically provides ways for poor black youth to tell their stories of deprivation, injustice, and transcendence while, at times, glorifying certain death-dealing forms of resistance to such injustices (i.e. crime, violence, sexism, etc.). While gangsta rap is seen as producing violence, research suggests that rap does not directly cause violence. Rather, one must examine

the more subtle discursive processes through which rap helps organize and construct violent identities and the ways in which it accounts for violent behavior as well.²⁰

Arguments that rap causes violence bracket the ways in which broader causes of violence in poor communities are both socio-structural and situational. This argument does not consider the relationship between structural disadvantage and cultural/situational responses to such disadvantage. The combined effects of unemployment, poverty, family disruption, and social isolation from mainstream America define the contexts out of which urban black youth socially act and make decisions. These combined effects contribute to the social disorganization that these youth experience growing up. Moreover, the punitive criminal justice policy that poor black young men experience further affects how they navigate the social worlds they inhabit.

For disadvantaged communities, the “opportunity structure” available to residents is weak. The inner city affords limited resources and avenues for adolescents to obtain the types of social status and social roles available to youth in more privileged environments. Street-oriented peer groups dominate social roles and few opportunities exist for broader participation in community life. For instance, one major disadvantage in relation to urban black youth’s opportunity structure is poor education. In *Unfinished Business: Black Women, The Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, I discuss the educational disparity that exists between poor, inner city communities and more wealthy suburban communities. For instance, sociologist Annette Lareau offers an example of how poverty affects black children within the educational system. At Lower Richmond School in the inner city of Richmond, Virginia, black students from kindergarten through fifth grade are served. To begin, the school looks forbidding.

²⁰ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 109.

The building is “three stories tall and is surrounded by a high, gray chain linked fence.”²¹ She describes the building as “old, with a dirt beige exterior and few windows “as well as “patches of paint blotched on the walls “to cover up regular graffiti.”²² There is an asphalt playground with trees and patches of grass. Lareau remarks that Lower Richmond School’s physical landscape is more appealing than other inner-city schools in the Richmond area where “beer bottles and broken glass litter the school yard.”²³ In addition, the classrooms are often overcrowded and the teachers overworked. Simply put, impoverished black children and youth suffer from the quality of education that is needed for greater opportunities. This lack of quality education is due to structural inequalities wherein inner-city schools continue to be underfunded, ill equipped, and poorly staffed than suburban schools. As a result, the opportunity structure of impoverished black youth in relation to education is inequitable.

Moreover, the opportunity structure of these urban youth is also frustrated by a radical distrust for police, which is often warranted. Because young black men are aware of many cases in which innocent inner-city black men were wrongly accused and detained, they develop a distrustful attitude towards the police.²⁴ In fact, many young black men become concerned when police are present in the community. These men feel that the police do not always have the best interests of the black community at heart.²⁵ They also feel that the police hold the black

²¹ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 15.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, 109.

²⁵ Ibid., 320.

community in low repute and therefore, feel justified in unjustly abusing some of its members. The young black man knows that he “stands in a legally precarious state.”²⁶ As a result, urban black men are motivated to avoid the police and his public life becomes severely circumscribed. In fact, for many poor and working-class blacks, police and brutality are synonymous.

The extreme disadvantage and isolation of these youth coupled with the quantity and potency of drugs as well as the availability of guns have engendered a situation unparalleled in American history.²⁷ These conditions even represent previously unseen challenges in black life. These are the social-structural community characteristics from which a “code of the street” has emerged. A street code “provides the principles governing much interpersonal public behavior.”²⁸ Given the bleak conditions black youth face, they create “a local social order complete with its own code and rituals of authenticity.”²⁹ It articulates powerful norms and characterizes public social relations among residents, particularly with respect to violence. These street codes reflect adaptations to structural inequality among such youth. In particular, the code of the street has four main elements: 1) willingness to fight or use violence in order to gain respect and credibility, 2) material wealth, 3) objectification of women, and 4) nihilism.

What is important to the street code is that social identity and respect are the most important features of this code. Respect is understood as being granted the deference one deserves. However, within street culture, violence becomes deeply intertwined with respect. In order to build respect within street culture, one must project a reputation as possessing a “crazy”

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁹ Ibid.

or “wild” side.³⁰ If one should be disrespected, he/she will respond with violence. Consequently, violence not only constitutes one’s social identity on the street but also becomes necessary to upgrading social status on the street. One cultivates respect among peers in street culture by his/her willingness to exhibit and even embody violence. For instance, within New York communities, many youth will create altercations with the sole purpose of building respect. Violence becomes a critical resource in achieving social status and identity within street culture.³¹

Because violence is foregrounded as an important resource in developing social identity and respect, the gun becomes a symbol of power and a remedy for disputes. Within street culture, the usage of guns to harm one’s opponent is the best way to adjudicate problems and what individuals must do to maintain a respected identity.³² Building a violent reputation not only commands respect but also serves to deter future assaults. For instance, for survival, one must develop a reputation against which no one is willing to “test.”³³ If one “tests” or challenges your violent reputation, then violence becomes obligatory to maintain your status. Violent retaliation becomes a necessity because to walk away is to invite victimization. In others words, it is “literally bad for one’s health” and physically dangerous if one builds a violent reputation and fails to deliver in street culture.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 92.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

In addition to violence, the pursuit of material wealth and women are seen as further improving one's social status in the streets. Purchasing expensive cars, clothes, and shoes reaffirms one's value and sense of respect. The more women a young man has sex with, the more esteem accrues to him in his community, which inevitably leads to the objectification of women.³⁵ Moreover, because of harsh socio-economic conditions in which they reside, black youth often experience a growing sense of nihilism and dread about the future, an outgrowth of living in an environment filled with violence and limited opportunities.

The street code and rap lyrics are constitutive elements of contemporary black urban culture or hip-hop culture. The listeners of rap music are actively involved in the construction of meaning, which implies a complex reflexive culture-music-identity relationship.³⁶ Music lyrics in this view not only reflect pre-existing urban (violent) identities but also help organize and construct identity. The issue is not how a particular piece of music reflects this group of people but how it produces them and how it creates and constructs an experience. Hence, rap lyrics are discursive actions and artifacts that help construct an interpretive environment where violence is appropriate and acceptable. Rappers then articulate "vocabularies of motive" and "grammars of motive" to explain and account for street reality.³⁷ Yet, this accounting of street reality simultaneously constitutes the shaping of new experiences out of which violence is justified and normalized in street culture. Hence, in rap, through the telling of the code, both in the streets and in the music, residents and rappers actively construct identities and justify the use of violence.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 143.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 316.

³⁸ Ibid.

Lyrics provide “both a formula of existing street reality and a justification for violent street identities.”³⁹

Many critics castigate such street codes and rap music that reinforce such violence without connecting such violence to a wider violent culture in America that is normalized and glorified. Rap music does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Rather, it expresses the “cultural crossing, mixing, and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of a wider American culture of violence.”⁴⁰ Many of the violent patriarchal and materialistic ways of acting that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing norms created, sustained, and rendered accountable in larger society, in America’s cultural production (film, music, food, etc.) Gangsta rap is just one manifestation of the culture of violence that saturates American society as a whole – in movies, video games, sports, pro-wrestling, and other venues. The values of rap music are indeed by-products of broader American culture.

Rap Music as Radical Critique: The Complexity of Tupac Shakur

Hip-Hop and rap music have functioned as radical social critique despite its complexities. For example, the contemporary cultural image of the “thug” and “hustler” within political economy have been seen as “deviant” within a hip-hop subculture that is perceived as solely fostering violence, crime, gang activity, misogyny, teenage pregnancy, and lawlessness. By the American media and white (and black) institutions of respectability, the hustler and thug have been criticized for their overt disregard of laws, opting to participate in an underground economy

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 323.

that engenders exploitation of inner-city children and women. However, rap artists and cultural critics critically redeem the emancipatory desires and subjective needs under-girding the “hustler” and “thug” for alienated black men, protesting the dominant meanings of these identities.

Tupac Shakur perhaps remains one of the best expressions when turning to the complexities associated with rap. In the 1994 album *Thug Life: Thug Life Vol. 1*, Tupac Shakur speaks about thug life as the way many inner, city black men gain respect and recognition in a nation that has “no pity” for them. Crooning in a song entitled “Street Fame,” Shakur describes thug life as black men who are so radically alienated from the wealth-producing structures and institutions of society that they become capitalistic entrepreneurs on the inner-city streets to gain success and belonging (to attain the American Dream). Similar to “Street Fame,” in the rap song entitled, “I’m Getting Money,” Shakur says that he dedicates the song to “all the hustlers that get up every motherfuckin mornin and put they work in...I see you - I see you boy.”⁴¹ Shakur reminds his black male listeners (fellow thugs) that he “sees” them; he recognizes their desire to succeed and belong to a nation of abundance despite this same nation’s oppression of such men.

While contradictory as to whether it can be “emancipatory” for alienated black men, Tupac’s subversive, oppositional reading of the “thug” and “hustler” attempts to critically reclaim unfulfilled desires of “belonging in a land of opportunity.” His oppositional reading of these terms exposes hegemonic power relations that exclude poor black men. It offers meaningful recognition that is life-sustaining for many black men locked out of the economic and cultural benefits of political economy although it is simultaneously death-dealing as violence, crime, and misogyny are deeply connected to this way of life. Although the effects and

⁴¹ Tupac Shakur, “I’m Gettin money,” *Thug Life: Thug Life Vol. 1* (1994).

social actions of the thug may not be so favorable (expressions of crime, violence, and nihilism), the democratic desires and aspirations of success and belonging for alienated black men that underlie the thug and hustler within American political economy may illuminate the forms of “resistance” that poor black men want to embody. Moreover, the values of success and belonging that ground the hustler and thug may contribute to the democratic reconfiguration of socio-economic arrangements that are just and inclusive of black men in America.

Hip-hop culture reflects the street code and the longing and yearnings of young poor blacks to experience belonging and success. *They are simultaneously seduced by the promise of free-markets yet constrained by such inequitable institutions that deny them this promise.* Hip-hop culture offers a critique of the powerlessness that so many young black men face and endure. Consequently, as we categorize hip-hop artists as good or bad, prophets or villains, we should pause and reconsider our strategies and interpretations. Instead of putting artists into the “either/or” aforementioned categories defined by our perceptions of the artists’ morality, politics, or even musical quality (and ending our assessment there), we should be reading their presences in the multiple layers on which they exist.

Lovelessness as Crisis of Spirit: Black Religious Institutions

Such diabolic economic and social conditions have created a profound crisis of spirit for these youth. These youth do not feel that mutual care, social trust, compassion, and wellbeing are actual possibilities within their communities and broader society. Cornel West writes about the crisis of spirit, which plagues our broader society and is exacerbated within poor communities where economic isolation and social alienation can be most strongly felt.

West contends that many conversations that surround the black poor do not come close to understanding the problem, that the real problem is the threat of nihilism. Nihilism, according to West, is the “lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.”⁴² West expresses nihilism as “the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair widespread in Black America. Nihilism exists in black communities and causes a loss of love and hope which can be the destruction of individuals.”⁴³ Historically, blacks were armored against this threat through culture and community, but something happened along the way that changed this.

West argues that nihilism in black communities has always existed since slavery but these communities were able to erect powerful buffers against its effects through cultural structures of meaning and feeling as well as religious and civic institutions that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. Now, the commodification of black life and the crisis of black leadership have resulted in the crumbling of those structures and a relapse of nihilism. His solution to the nihilistic threat in black America is take “collective responsibility” and to play an active role in politics that includes many leaders.⁴⁴ The solution is a politics of conversion, which treats the nihilistic threat as a disease that can be tamed but never cured. For this to happen, leadership needs to be strengthened at the local level. West argues that national leaders are often too charismatic with little programmatic follow-through, which leads black nationalists, with their myopic visions that cause fragmentation, to pick up the slack.⁴⁵

⁴² Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 277.

⁴³ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 34-35.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

This all leads to political cynicism, which hampers the efforts of local activists, on whom progressive effort depends.

West also maintains that the model of one black national leader must be shunned, and that local activists must work in conjunction with state, regional, and national networks to form the collective responsibility that can hold back the nihilistic threat to black America.⁴⁶ West writes:

The crisis in black leadership can be remedied only if we candidly confront its existence. We need national forums to reflect, discuss, and plan how best to respond. It is neither a matter of a new Messiah figure emerging, nor of another organization appearing on the scene. Rather, it is a matter of grasping the structural and institutional processes that have disfigured, deformed, and devastated black America such that the resources for nurturing collective and critical consciousness, moral commitment, and courageous engagement are vastly underdeveloped.⁴⁷

In other words, this crisis of spirit, which is a broader cultural phenomenon but can be acutely felt in poor black communities, must be addressed through progressive black leadership (local and national) who will turn to the institutional and socio-economic (structural) forces out of which lovelessness has been fostered and maintained. West notes that black political, social, cultural, and religious leadership must be in the vanguard. Because I am a black religious

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

scholar, I am interested in how black religious institutions and their modes of leadership might challenge capitalist forces of lovelessness that deeply affects the inner lives of black youth.

Interestingly, black religious institutions are often not cited as contexts of healing and empowerment for poor black youth. In particular, many hip-hop and rap artists do not identify with a particular black church denomination or black religious sect. Rather, these artists embrace forms of spirituality grounded in black political consciousness and self-transcendence. While there is a lot of religious imagery in hip-hop music and culture, much of the religious imagery does not reflect the traditional leanings of mainstream black Christianity or other black religious faiths such as the Nation of Islam.

For instance, the presence of the Five Percent Nation in hip hop and in hip-hop lyrics points to the ways in which rappers employ more non-traditional religious leanings. The Five Percent Nation splintered off from the Nation of Islam under the teachings of Clarence X, believing that 10 percent of the population is evil, 85 percent are deaf, dumb, and blind (meaning unaware), and that the remaining 5 percent have true enlightenment. Numerology and mysticism shape the specific face of this religion. The Five Percenters also believe in the divinity of each man, referring to men as gods, and women as earths (to symbolize their fertility).⁴⁸ The Five Percent ideology in some hip-hop music probably appeals to the audience in the populist identification of divinity with every man, adding a spiritual dimension to the ethos of hip-hop. One might infer that the religion's self-identification as a black form of spirituality perhaps can explain its growing influence within hip-hop music and culture.

⁴⁸ Michael Muhammed Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop, and The Gods of New York* (London: Oneworld, 2008), 45.

Yet, one can see that rappers use of the Five Percent Nation ideology propagates a religion in which black masculinity is regarded as divine and even godly. This ideology in hip-hop music signals the spiritual fixation on masculine identity itself, which directly ties spirituality to glorifications of masculinity. Hip Hop artists such as Nas and Rakim are associated with five percenter ideology. Through lyrics, Five Percenters hope to enlighten their listeners with the truth of their message and to encourage self-knowledge. The music as put forth in Five Percent terms transforms the black “invisible man” into a powerful personage in society.⁴⁹ Clearly, through a non-traditional appropriation of Islam, hip-hop artists that employ Five Percenter ideology connect their form of black spirituality to a radical black politics that preaches the self-actualization of young black people. However, its uncritical deification of masculinity remains deeply problematic to the self-actualization of young black women and may even reinforce sexist, misogynistic understandings of women.

Although the political dimension of Christianity in Hip Hop is less apparent, the impact of non-traditional understandings of Christianity has been present within Hip Hop. In 1999, a scandal ensued when Nas created a video of him and P-Diddy crucified.⁵⁰ Apparently, P-Diddy’s minister counseled him that this image was an immoral self-depiction, which led to P-Diddy’s request that his participation in the crucifixion be removed.⁵¹ Here is one instance in which church ideology comes into direct conflict with the performance choice of entertainers.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 150.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

While “Christian-rap” maintains the morality and messages of black Protestant church communities, hip-hop music has a much more sophisticated and complex relationship to traditional black Christianity. References to Christian imagery, to salvation, resurrection, transfiguration, and apocalypse all appear within hip-hop. Emcees even have represented themselves, numerous times, as Christ-like figures. Yet, hip-hop artists “locate the status as savior in the minds and bodies of young black people.”⁵³ It does not promulgate an orthodox view of salvation and redemption in traditional Christological formulations (Jesus saves through cross and resurrection). Rather, like Five Percenter theology, divinity is located in the individual, the young black individual who is “crucified” by racist, capitalist systems everyday, and yet finds a way to resurrect herself/himself, to save one’s own life and the community’s life.

Hip Hop is at once political, intellectual, and spiritual, which guarantees an ideological conflict, particularly with mainstream black religious institutions. Hip Hop artists embrace spirituality that is relevant, and they critique the church for not speaking to the unique needs of black youth locked in postindustrial conditions. For instance, in some of hip-hop rap artists, Common, preaches religious open-mindedness and freedom, and critiques the Christian church for its refusal to engage spiritual questions and challenges in non-dogmatic ways. Common’s celebration of religious tolerance and spiritual exploration is a toast to American democratic ideology. His lyrical pedagogy encourages reflection and inquiry.

Black churches have tended to bolster dogmatic white protestant theology, which causes them to interpret hip-hop artists and culture in a reductive way as negative, not taking account of the ambiguous and complex contexts out of which hip-hop speaks. These institutions tend to fuel and buttress negative stereotypes that surround this genre. When spirituality is static,

⁵³ Ibid.

dogmatic, or oppressive, it cannot meet the needs of people who are often on the margins of society who tend to experience and endure unrelenting forms of oppression. Within many churches, the tragedy is that these churches fail to provide contexts of innovation, inspiration and creativity in response to the inner lives of black youth.

Moreover, a tension seems to be present between the goals of black churches and the goals hip-hop artists. Black churches tend to advocate for the goals from the Civil Rights generation, goals that included a college education, upward mobility, and homes in suburbia. These are noteworthy and honorable goals that black communities should and must engage. However, hip-hop artists promote goals that also intentionally include disclosing the existential conditions of a disenfranchised group of black youth. These artists seek to expose how post-industrial conditions and practices affect aspects of these youth's existence. They seek to show how capitalist forces and racial practices reinforce death, dread, despair, disease, and disappointment among poor black youth. Consequently, these artists depiction of street life tends to be raw, shocking, and vulgar, aspects that black churches have difficulties discussing in and out of the pulpit. Many artists do not have close connections to churches because they choose to define reality and spirituality on a different set of terms.

When turning to poor black youth, their experience of love is impeded because despair and brokenness is present due to the economic alienation, social frustration and cultural neglect they experience. Situated within the commodified processes of capitalism, the forces of lovelessness cause us within America to be torn between two pursuits: a spiritual quality of life and an overly materialistic style of life. Poor black youth are a part of this larger cultural pursuit towards materialism. Consequently, the possibility of loving community is diminished.

Lovelessness is then a theological problem, a spiritual malaise within America that becomes more chronic within the contexts of despair among poor black youth. Due to these forces of lovelessness, people are taught to distrust the moral value and power of love.

There is emotional and cultural fallout when a society turns away from the possibility of love. The forces of lovelessness often distort how impoverished black youth see themselves. They often do not see themselves as lovely in relation to our Divine image. If one feels that one is not lovely, one will not believe that she or he is lovable, which inhibits one's ability to be loving. Poor black youth turn to the distorted discourse and images of themselves that saturate the media and do not feel affirmed as human beings who are lovely, lovable, and loving. This produces a major crisis of spirit, a kind of soul pain that requires profound healing.

Our society must address forces of lovelessness that continue to threaten the psychic and emotional lives of disadvantaged black youth. While this sense of lovelessness is a social and political problem as poor black youth are adversely affected within our present socio-economic institutions, lovelessness is a profound theological problem, a crisis of the spirit that cuts short the building of loving communities with and for these youth. Loving communities redefine love not merely as a sentiment or feeling but as an act of will and choice that is associated with the idea of individual agency towards self-realization and fulfillment. Love fostered by community is a deep need that this hip-hop generation has. The structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal complexities of lovelessness must compel black communities and institutions and society as well to fashion contexts of hope out of which loving communities are possible. And while I do not provide explicit recommendations on how black religious institutions can creatively address lovelessness, this essay invites black religious institutions to grapple with the problem of "lovelessness" within poor young black communities and assess more compassionately the deep

inequitable contexts such youth speak out of, a necessary first step in addressing poor black youth's post-industrial conditions as well as understanding their forms of resistance.