Black Millennial Encounters with God through the Coloring Book of Chance the Rapper

ABSTRACT
Millennials are creating spaces beyond traditional communities of faith where they can encounter God on their own terms, spaces like the music of their generation. For many Black Millennials, Hip-hop music represents an alternative space where they can experience God. This paper will examine how Coloring Book, the 2016 mixtape of Chance the Rapper, a Grammy award-winning Black Millennial Hip-hop artist from Chicago, serves as an alternative space for Black Millennials to encounter God.

The ancestors must be laughing.
How could we have forgotten so easily that prophets arise in every generation?¹

I. INTRODUCTION
While listening to a national morning news show, I was introduced to Chance the Rapper, a highly acclaimed Black Millennial Hip-hop artist, social activist, and philanthropist from Chicago. He was singing “Summer Friends,” a track from his most recent mixtape entitled Coloring Book. The lyrics reflected an impressive depth of vulnerability and maturity. This young adult lamented that violence and death had claimed his friends during the summer. He spoke of streets and neighborhoods that produced so much summer fun, but also brought violence that targeted Black and brown bodies. The track also included words of divine benediction that called on God’s presence to cover and protect. When I listened later to the entire mixtape, it became clear that Chance was intentionally using Hip-Hop music and his lyrics to say something about God and his God encounters as a Black male Millennial in the United States. Additionally, his mixtape made room for his listeners to encounter God with him.

According to a 2016 report, there are 83.1 million Millennials in the U.S. and 14% or 11.5 million of these Millennials are Black.² It is well-documented that the numbers of Millennials opting out of organized religion is growing. Many are leaving traditional faith communities to create spaces beyond traditional mainline communities of faith where they can


encounter God on their own terms. Predominantly Black Christian churches have not been exempt from this trend. One of the alternative space beyond established mainline churches that Black Millennials are meeting and experiencing God is in Hip-hop music, a genre that emerged in the 70’s as a cultural production of Black and brown young adults in New York city. This paper will examine how Coloring Book, the 2016 Hip-hop mixtape of Chance the Rapper, functions as a site beyond traditional religious congregations for Black Millennial encounters with God.

Chance uses his music to creatively intersect God-talk with the current realities of being a Black young adult in the United States. He, along with some other Black Millennial Hip-hop artists, is generating sounds, rhythms, and language that resonate with many Black Millennials generally and resonate particularly with those seeking to claim space and speech to experience God. Unquestionably, Hip-hop music and God-talk are not strangers. Hip-hop music flows from a larger history of Black music in the U.S. The music of Chance merits treatment in that it points to the possibility that Hip-hop music like his might soon become a more prominent site for Black Millennial encounters with God than mainline churches. Such a shift has present and future implications for religious education.

Black Millennials are being highlighted in this paper because the particularities of their experiences tend to get less attention in larger studies. Current trends of Black and brown young adults in the U.S. not only leaving mainline traditional churches, but ‘disappearing’ through

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3 While acknowledging the trend among Millennials of leaving mainline denominational congregations, I do not assume that their disengagement from congregations means disengagement from God. I assert that increasing numbers of Millennials are encountering God by identifying and designing alternative spaces where this is happening or can happen. cf. Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, How We Gather accessed at https://caspertk.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/how-we-gather.pdf and Something More accessed at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/556cec5be4b0d8dc09b0ba87/t/570e56b32b8dde0beebed7ca/1460557497838/Something+More.pdf.


5 I am not claiming that all Black Millennials listen to Hip-hop music, that all Hip-hop music provides God encounters in the way that the music of Chance the Rapper does, or that all Black Millennials are seeking God encounters. Rather, I want to begin a conversation about how the God encounters in one Black Millennial Hip-hop artist’s music can be instructive for examining God encounters in Hip-hop music for those Black Millennials who listen to Hip-hop music, particularly those who are seeking God beyond traditional religious spaces.

violent deaths, incarceration, suicide, or voluntary withdrawal has immediate and long-term consequences, e.g., removing potential from Black churches and communities temporarily and/or permanently. The urgency of attending to Black Millennials, their spirituality and overall wellness, requires more than a cursory review by ad hoc congregational committees.

I focus on Hip-hop music as a means of privileging Black Millennial voices and experiences given that their voices currently are the most prominent in the genre. By doing this, I position Black Millennials as subjects rather than objects and thus, view them as teachers, cultural guides, and primary informants about their spirituality. Additionally, while Hip-hop music’s listeners and practitioners today extend beyond urban Black young adults, it is the most listened to music of Black Millennials.

II. ENCOUNTERS

In Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved, a community of enslaved Blacks gathered regularly in a space called the Clearing, a space situated beyond their oppressors’ gaze and control. There, Baby Suggs Holy, their elder and religious leader, exhorted them to love their whole selves. They sacralized an open field through their communal presence, their music and dance rituals, and their claim of divine presence with them. They related individually and communally; different and yet bound together through the shared experience of enslavement. In that space, non-traditional and unauthorized, they encountered God and one another.

For the purposes of this paper, I use the concept of encounter in an expansive way to point toward experiences, gatherings, and relating that bear the potential for transformation similar to the Clearing in Morrison’s novel. I frame ‘encounter’ in terms of intentional, purposeful relating that requires authenticity, transparency, and exchange. Encounter can include room for confrontation and is not limited to physical space or face-to-face interactions between persons. Thus, it can happen through technology, written or spoken word, and through music.

Hip-hop music like Coloring Book facilitates encounters with God in the above sense through its lyrics, beats and rhythms, and narratives that resonate with many Black Millennials. Coloring Book models transparency, contextual relevance, and collaboration. Like its Hip-hop ancestors, it is music through which today’s Black young adults communicate their joys, pains, and societal critiques, sometimes with the raw honesty of the biblical psalmists and prophets. Chance’s music draws his listeners into a worldview wherein God-talk has been integrated with real-world talk. He grants listeners permission to experience God without fear of critique.

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Listeners of *Coloring Book* enter a space where they will hear about God through the lens of a Black Millennial who has been/is being shaped by the God encounters of his life.

### III. “AND THE CHICKEN TASTES LIKE WOOD.”

Every generation has defining songs and sounds. When you hear *that* song, it takes you back. For the first generation of Hip-hop listeners, “Rapper’s Delight” is one of those defining songs. The album hit the scene in 1980 and became the first Hip-hop record to enjoy market success. Most date the beginnings of Hip-Hop music almost ten years earlier, but “Rapper’s Delight” transported Hip-hop music from neighborhood parties filled with Black young dancing bodies in New York city to a national stage. In its embryonic stage, Hip-hop music was all about Black young adults having fun, feeling good, partying. As the genre continued to develop, its artists discovered a way to marry their voices, sounds, and concerns with this distinct musical genre. According to cultural critic, Michael Dyson, “Hip-hoppers joined pleasure and rage while turning the details of their difficult lives into craft and capital.” The music provided entertainment and a means of survival. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon F. Hall comment:

… Hip Hop music does what music always does: it provides an aesthetic matrix, a venue in which one can imagine and recreate a reality of beauty and nobility; a world that can make sense amidst the daily tragedy of crime and hard times, transforming the mundane into the sublime even as one comes of age. Music that appeals at such a visceral level provides leverage against annihilation from societal and familial oppression.

Hip-hop music tapped into the heartbeat of a generation of Black young people who had not marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. and had not participated in the sit-ins or freedom rides led by SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee). They had not been jailed, water-hosed, or attacked by dogs in the pursuit of racial equality. It was supposed to be good for them. But instead, their lives were circumscribed by racial discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and police violence. Hip-hop music was their response.

*Broken glass everywhere*

*People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care...*

*I tried to get away but I couldn't get far*

*’Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car*

*It's like a jungle sometimes*

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It make me wonder how I keep from going under\textsuperscript{16}

Hip-hop music was uncensored and unencumbered by fears of transgressing boundaries. Eventually it would spread throughout the country. It would capture the attention of corporations who recognized, then exploited its profitability. Even so, it had already begun a journey toward establishing an enduring music legacy.

**IV. ROOTS AND WINGS**

Hip-hop music did not emerge in a vacuum. It arose from the deep and rich currents of Black music in the U.S. Historically, Black music in the U.S. offered Blacks public and private spaces to vocalize the cares that seeped from auction blocks and plantation fields; juke joints and protest marches; lynching trees and urban streets. It validated Black personhood and “announced that we are here.”\textsuperscript{17}

The creativity of Black music allowed it to serve diverse needs for its listeners. It could be a prayer for freedom, a coded escape itinerary, social and theological commentary, a protest chant, biblical interpretation, praise to God, a balm for wounded spirits, and entertainment to set oppressed bodies in joyful motion. Blacks did not have the luxury of confining God-talk and God encounters to officially authorized spaces during the early centuries of their time in the U.S. Therefore, Black music also gave artists the freedom and permission to claim space to name God and relate to God across musical genres. Hip-hop music walks in this tradition of creative freedom and defying boundaries so that its artists can tell their generation’s narratives of life, death, and survival. Hip-hop artists “have something to say about what gives life meaning, what is inspiring…and what is dangerous and worth taking risks for.”\textsuperscript{18}

Likewise, God-talk and Hip-hop music are not strangers. Many Hip-hop artists use their music to talk about God while talking about other aspects of their reality. Biblical and religious themes like incarnation, the reality of evil, divine judgement and justice,\textsuperscript{19} redemption, and resurrection\textsuperscript{20} appear often in Hip-hop music.\textsuperscript{21} It is not unusual to hear rappers described as prophetic or countercultural.\textsuperscript{22} Some Hip-hop artists employ certain symbolic and performative elements of ‘Black church’ with confidence that their audiences understand them and resonate


\textsuperscript{17} The Songs are Free: Bernice Johnson Reagon and African American Music (1991), \url{http://gailpelletproductions.com/the-songs-are-free-bernice-johnson-reagon-and-african-american-music/#.WblDqsNxjpX}.

\textsuperscript{18} Lance Williams, “Hip Hop as a Site of Public Pedagogy,” in *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling*. Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz, Jake Burdick, eds. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2010), 222.


\textsuperscript{21} Admittedly, Hip-hop music is not a monolithic genre. This means that the presence of religious/biblical themes and God-talk is not ubiquitous in the music.

\textsuperscript{22} Walsh, 232.
with them.\textsuperscript{23} It is also common to hear public expressions of gratitude to God from many Hip-hop artists in their public award acceptance speeches\textsuperscript{24}

When Chance the Rapper hit the music scene in the first quarter of the 21st century, his Black Millennial Hip-hop music was watermarked with inheritances from Black music generally and from previous generations of Hip-hop music. One such inheritance shows up in the God encounters of \textit{Coloring Book}. Chance is not unique in talking about God in his Hip-hop music. However, \textit{Coloring Book} stands out because Chance does more than mention God. He integrates his spirituality into the entire mixtape in such a way that his listeners meet God explicitly and implicitly throughout. His goal is not to convert. Rather, he offers a Black Millennial worldview that has been influenced by God, family and his life experiences.

V. CHANCE THE RAPPER

Chance the Rapper was born Chancellor Johnathan Bennett on April 16, 1993 to Ken Williams-Bennett and Lisa Bennett in Chatham, a south side middle-class neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. He has one younger brother named Taylor Bennett. In 2015, he became a first-time father of a daughter, Kensli Bennett. In an Instagram posted on Dec. 31, 2016, Chance wrote about Kensli: “This is the girl who reintroduced me to God. She’s the woman who reminded me how to be a man, and taught me how to love. She is everything I am but much better. I can’t wait for her to one day help the world the way she has helped me.”

His music resides in the intersections of message or conscious Hip-hop, gangsta rap, and Christian Hip-hop. In April 2016, Chance, at age 23, released \textit{Coloring Book}, the last of his mixtape trilogy (\textit{10 Day} was released in 2012 and \textit{Acid Rap} in 2013). The success of \textit{Coloring Book} catapulted him into the public sphere as an innovative, independent young artist with a countercultural narrative. In 2017, Chance made history with \textit{Coloring Book} by becoming the first streaming-only artist to receive a Grammy. He won a total of three Grammy awards (Best New Artist, Best Rap Album, and Best Rap Performance). \textit{Coloring Book} established Chance as a national music phenomenon in much the same way that “Rapper’s Delight” established Sugar Hill Gang and Hip-hop music in the 80s.

Chancellor/Lil Chano/Chance’s journey not only stands out because of his exceptional talent. It is also the ordinariness of his journey that connects him to numerous Black Millennials. His music captures the nostalgia, the joys, and the burdens of Black urban life. His listeners identify with his relationship stories, family shout-outs, his struggles, his triumphs over the status quo, childhood and adolescent memories, mis-steps with drugs and the violence of the streets.\textsuperscript{25} He reflects the persona of a generation for whom God-talk and profanity share space. Holy ground is constructed in the midst of life rather than apart from it. Many Christians might see stark contradictions here. However, Chance and other Millennials continue to push the boundaries to suggest that what may be contradictions to some are not deal-breakers to God.

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\textsuperscript{25} cf. Katie Couric, \textit{ABC Nightline} interview with Chance the Rapper, \url{https://youtu.be/C0_Zq8DfyOM}. 

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The influence of family and culture is evident in Chance’s music and public representations. He refers several times to his parents on *Coloring Book* and includes voices of family members on a few tracks. He spoke about his family support in an interview with Zach Baron for *Esquire Magazine*. Chance recalled his grandmother’s intervention during his period of drug abuse. Her uncharacteristically negative prayer to God, “that he fails at everything that is not like You,” helped him to reverse his course.\(^{26}\) Recently, Chance has made headlines for his activism and philanthropy, societal engagements he attributes to familial influence.\(^{27}\)

*Coloring Book* is a creative, public space where Chance talks to/about God as a Black male Millennial. His music is contextual, non-traditional, anti-status quo, relational, and collaborative. By freely expressing his faith publicly and through the lyrics of *Coloring Book*, he models his vision of a young adult life framed by God.

**VI. ENCOUNTERING *COLORING BOOK***

Developmentally, Chance resides in that in-between space of young adulthood wherein he is cultivating a “critical awareness,” a “self-consciousness,” and “a capacity to act” that enables him to reflect on what has been and imagine forward to what will be.\(^{26}\) Additionally, his life, like the lives of many Black and brown young adults in urban areas, has required a measure of resilience that accelerates the need to ‘grow up’ sooner. The repeated nostalgic yearnings expressed in *Coloring Book* are especially relevant in his lived context of attacks against Black and brown bodies in the U.S. His music reflects his familial and Black cultural heritages, his Christian identity, and his Hip-hop inheritances. *Coloring Book* integrates these multiple layers through the improvisation and hybridity of Hip-hop music.

I have categorized the 14 tracks on *Coloring Book* thematically: 1) relationality, 2) passion for music, and 3) hymns.\(^{29}\) These themes also represent the three most important areas of his life while producing *Coloring Book*, i.e., his family and friends, his music, and his relationship with God. This thematic approach helps in analyzing the individual tracks, but the analysis keeps the overall context of *Coloring Book* in view. The entire mixtape reflects Chance’s understanding of God as One who frames his life and One he relates to within the fullness of his young adult life.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{27}\) For example, Chance sponsored a voter registration drive/free concert in Chicago during the 2016 Presidential elections; pledged $1 million to support the underfunded Chicago Public School system in 2017; supported the #SaveChicago initiative, an anti-violence campaign; and donated his Grammy for Best Rap Album to Chicago’s DuSable Museum of African American History.


\(^{29}\) Relationality: “Summer Friends,” “D.R.A.M. Sings Special,” “Same Drugs,” “Juke Jam,” “All Night,” and “Smoke Break”; Centrality of Music: “All We Got,” “Mixtape,” and “No Problem.”

\(^{30}\) I spend more time with the section on the hymns in order to highlight Chance’s Christian identity that I claim informs the entire mixtape.
His claim that “I don’t make Christian rap, but I am a Christian rapper” means that his Christian identity informs all of what we hear on *Coloring Book*, whether the lyrics explicitly praise God or do not mention God at all. Likewise, his choice of Hip-hop music rather than the genres of Gospel music or Christian rap aligns him with a general Millennial resistance to boundaries that confine God to traditional religious spaces.

A. “All We Got”

The majority of the tracks on *Coloring Book* fall into the first two categories of relationality and his passion for his music. Chance lyricizes about adolescent romantic exploits at the roller rink (“Juke Jam”); drinking and dancing with friends (“All Night”); the trauma of losing friends (“Summer Friends” and “Same Drugs”); and the relationship challenges of adulthood (“Smoke Break”).

The opening track, “All We Got,” reveals the sense of purposefulness that he finds in music as well as his fervent commitment to support the creative freedom and independence of his music peers. Here he also connects his music with his relationship with God:

This for the kids of the king of all kings
This is the holiest thing
This is the beat that played under the Word
This is the sheep that ain’t like what it herd

Black Millennials who grew up on the south and west sides of Chicago find connections with specific references to Chicago in Chance’s lyrics. For example, his track, “Summer Friends” mentions frequented Chicago sites. They can also relate to the anguish he describes about those living in neighborhoods marked by the proliferation of violence and the deaths of Black youth and young adults.

JJ, Mikey, Lil Derek and them/ 79th street was America then
Ice cream truck and the beauty supply/ Blockbuster movies and Harold’s again
We still catching lightning bugs/ When the plague hit the backyard
Had to come in at dark cause the big shawtys act hard
Okay now, day camp at Grand Crossing/ First day, n***a’s shooting
Summer school get to losing students/ But the CPD getting new recruitment…
Our summer die, our summer time don’t got no time no more

B. The Hymns of *Coloring Book*

Some might wince at categorizing tracks on a Hip-hop project as hymns, just as those in predominantly Black churches initially resisted the Blues-tinged Gospel music of Thomas A. Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson. However, Black Millennials producing and listening to Hip-hop music today see nothing blasphemous about placing God-talk, profanity, confrontation of racism, relationship challenges, and celebrating family and friends in conversation with one another. One

might say that they take seriously the Psalmist’s declaration that “the earth is the Lord’s and all
that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”

There are three tracks on Coloring Book, “Blessings,” “How Great,” and “Blessings
(Reprise),” that I designate as hymns because they reflect Chance’s Christian identity by
explicitly praising God. They feature recognizable Gospel sounds, Christian symbolism,
scriptural references, and a view of God as a sovereign, omnipresent, gracious protector and
provider. The videos and public performances of these pieces have featured nationally known
Gospel artists like Byron Cage, Tamela Mann and Kirk Franklin, along with choirs and
improvisational testimonies that create church-like worship atmospheres. Chance commented
on television during one performance about his joy in being able to express his personal
Christian faith publicly. In an interview, he stated, “I think the new generation and the forward
is all about freedom and all about the ability to do what we want and we’re not free unless we
can talk about God.”

1. “Blessings”

“Blessings” includes and expands upon lyrics from “Let the Praise Begin,” a popular
song by Gospel artist Fred Hammond & Radical for Christ. The life stance we hear from
Chance on “Blessings” (“They want four minute songs/ You need a four hour praise dance
performed every morn”) reflects the perspective of one who stands in what Hebrew Bible scholar
Walter Brueggemann calls a space of “new orientation” wherein “the speaker and the community
of faith are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is
inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and
goodness of God, that goodness cannot be explained, predicted or programmed.” One reaches a
season of new orientation after living through a season of “disorientation.” Chance shares about
surviving disorientation caused by earlier drug use. He unabashedly expresses his gratitude to
God for all the good that “keeps falling in my lap.” He recognizes “the difference in blessings
and worldly possessions.” Blessings endure. Blessings, like the birth of his daughter Kensli, are

32 Psalm 24:1
35 Zane Lowe, Interview with Chance the Rapper (May 2016), https://youtu.be/UbRbjPp1c4g.
39 Ibid., 25-45.
life-changing versus material goods that vanish quickly. Blessings come from God rather than human effort alone.

With the lyrics, “When the praises go up, the blessings come down,” Chance samples from a popular theological trope among Christians — the idea that God responds favorably to the praise of the faithful by rewarding them. This concept has roots in a biblical theology wherein obedience and right actions are rewarded with blessings or good things. Disobedience is punished with curses or negative consequences.\(^{41}\) This theology informs much of contemporary Christian praise and worship music and Christian God-talk. While many Christians privately wrestle with troubling questions of theodicy and evil, they publicly fall back on a belief that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people.\(^{42}\) Chance has been shaped by this Christian culture he was raised in and that continues to exist.

The first verse of “Blessings” includes a contemporary reference to the Black Lives Matter movement and a statement of identification with a Black Jesus/God: “Jesus’ black life ain’t matter, I know I talked to his daddy”. This reference mirrors the contextuality of Hip-hop and other Black music genres that have roots in the Spirituals of enslaved Blacks whose lives lined their music, telling stories of embodied suffering and hopes for freedom entrusted to an unseen God. Here, Chance makes a claim that speaking about Blackness and Jesus/God belong together.

2. “How Great”

The opening two minutes and a half of this track sound like music from a church worship service. It begins with Nicole Steen, Chance’s cousin, singing “How Great is Our God,” a song by praise and worship artist, Chris Tomlin.\(^{43}\) Her solo voice is soon joined by an ensemble of singers led by a director. Chance and Jay Electronica, a prominent rapper and record producer, follow the song with individual verses that narrate the activity of a praiseworthy God in their lives. The verses are introduced by a spoken declaration of faith: “The first is that God is better than the world’s best day/ God is better than the best day that the world has to offer.” Chance’s verse contains references to Matthew 17:20,\(^{44}\) the praises of the Psalter,\(^{45}\) and the book of Malachi. He also mentions two historical rebellions led by enslaved Blacks: the 1805 Slave Rebellion at Chatham Manor (Stafford County, Virginia) and the 1831 Nat Turner Slave Rebellion.

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\(^{41}\) It reflects the Hebrew Bible’s Deuteronomic Retribution Theology best captured in Deuteroonomy 28, e.g., vv. 1-6, 15-19.


\(^{43}\) This song functions as a contemporary reinterpretation of the Christian hymn, “How Great Thou Art”.

\(^{44}\) Matthew 17:20b: “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Rebellion (Southampton County, Virginia). Additionally, references to family, Chicago, and pop culture appear here as they do throughout the project.

The official video for the song was filmed live from an iPhone in black and white, giving it a vintage or historic feel. Filming an official music video from an iPhone speaks to the Millennial nature of this artist and his audience. On the one hand, the vintage feel of the black and white video is contrasted to the more contemporary method of using an iPhone to capture anything significant. On the other hand, both together represent a model of how the old and the new can work together. This type of intergenerational mix is also an act of translation, taking an ancient sound and expressing it in a way that is relevant for a new generation. Chance masterfully gathers diverse generations, religious expressions, and musical genres (Hip-hop and Gospel) on common ground to speak about faith in God through an undeniable outpouring of praise to God’s goodness and faithfulness.

3. “Blessings (Reprise)”

Chance fills the final minute of Coloring Book by repeating the refrain: “Are you ready for your blessing?/ Are you ready for your miracle?” The reprise takes the form of a sermon-type journey through Chance’s life. It is filled with memories and visions — memories of “momma’s hands,” “rice and beans,” “cracked” iPhone screens, Michael Jackson, Nat King Cole and Daddy Mufasa from the Lion King; visions of “promised lands” and “prophetic stories of freedom” (“You must’ve missed the come up/ I must be all I can be”). Basking in the assurance of God’s appreciation (“He think the new shit jam/ I think we mutual fans”), Chance rejoices in survival and success (“I made it through, made it through, made it through”).

Some might critique the depth of a theology that prominently celebrates divine blessings. I contend that for Black young adults to claim any measure of faith in God or God’s blessings represents an act of resistance given the world they have inherited, the hostile world they currently inhabit, and the ambivalence of religious institutions toward them. Hip-hop music provides many Millennial Hip-hop artists and their listeners a forum to experience non-judgmental transparency about their relationship or lack of relationship with God. As such, the music encourages freedom for young adults to question, praise, express rage and doubt, talk to/about God. It yields unconventional God encounters that can inform and nurture the spirituality of his listeners.

4. Angels and Water

Two additional tracks, “Angels” and “Finish Line/Drown,” deserve mention in this section because their lyrics explicitly employ religious language, imagery, and themes.
“Angels” draws from the primarily Hebrew Bible concept of divine messengers that has been popularized in contemporary culture, in and outside of religious contexts, i.e., angels as divine emissaries who invisibly provide protection for human beings, and angels as the divinely received souls of deceased loved ones, now sanctioned by God to also cover and protect. Some Black faith communities link the concept of angels to the African concept of ancestral spirits who extend the life continuum beyond physical death.

“Finish Line/Drown” is a two-part collaboration with artists from Hip-hop (T-Pain, Noname) and Gospel (Kirk Franklin). Religious themes of prayer and water (baptismal waters) sync Chance’s testimonial verses with T-Pain’s hook on prayer (“All my days I prayed and prayed and now I see the finish line/I’m gonna finish mine”). Noname’s autobiographical verse reflects how her grandmother’s faith influenced her journey toward claiming faith in God. Kirk Franklin’s ending verse immerses the entire track in Christian affirmations —“You wash me new...This water is deep...Jesus rescue me/Take me to your mountain/Hallelujah/So someday Chicago will be free/ Someday we’ll all be free.” This selection is a collaborative praise session of a God who they depict as One whose presence enables the fulfillment of goals.

VII. A MODEL FOR BLACK MILLENNIAL GOD ENCOUNTERS

I speak to God in public, I speak to God in public.
He keep my rhymes in couplet.
He think the new shit jam, I think we mutual fans

Chance the Rapper’s Coloring Book fosters Black Millennial God encounters through its lyrics, Hip-hop and Gospel sounds, diverse collaborations, and contextual relevance that are informed by his spirituality. Like other Black Millennials, he has been formed by the Hip-hop culture of his generation as well as the culture of his parents and grandparents, including their religiosity. These generational influences equipped him to imbue Coloring Book with the feel of Sunday morning Black church worship; real-talk about real life and prophetic utterances of Hip-hop, along with the sensibilities of Black Millennials who care about their world.

In Coloring Book, Black Millennial listeners can find another Black Millennial talking about God and life without trying to convert or judge. He is transparent and authentic, acknowledging mistakes without condemning aspects of young adult culture that raise eyebrows among older adults. Increasingly, traditional religious spaces are ‘othering’ Millennials when they reject Millennial culture or regard Millennials as peripheral to the congregational culture. Coloring Book, in contrast, invites Black Millennials to come as they are, to step into lyrics that honor their culture and respect their personhood, all while enjoying the rhythms of their lives. The music and lyrics make God accessible with familiar language and ideas, thereby facilitating encounter, e.g., dialogue about God and/or with God; consideration of divine presence in Millennials lives and the world; and fostering of relationship with God for those seeking God.


52 Chance the Rapper, “Blessings (Reprise),” Coloring Book (2016).
Theologically, Chance’s lyrics imply that God is One who sanctifies young adult humanity. The God who is celebrated in *Coloring Book* is as available to young adults as God is to older adults. There is no hierarchy of legitimacy based on age. This God does not mind being talked about on a Hip-hop mixtape. Chance demonstrates divine collaboration in his willingness to work with artists from diverse genres and religious faiths. Rather than using religion to draw lines that separate, he uses his faith to open up broad spaces in his music that celebrate the gift of differences. Chance seems unafraid to welcome diverse voices to the table. He presents us with a ‘great’ God who welcomes diverse young adult voices to a table where there is room for tattoos, locs, grillz’, snapbacks, profanity, praise, God and Hip-hop. He does not bifurcate his Christian faith and his music. His lyrics affirm that relationship troubles, escapades with friends, and Black Lives Matter belong within the realm of one’s relationship with God as much as the Bible, prayer, and the celebration of God’s goodness.

**VIII. CONCLUSION**

Black Millennials, as well as the previous two generations of Black young adults, have used Hip-hop music to speak truths about their experiences. For some, Hip-hop music has been a holy womb for gestating imagination, hope, and meaning-making. Hip-hop artists like Chance the Rapper use Hip-hop music as a platform to invite others into their lives, lives they claim have been framed by God. Chance situates God within a music genre where a Young Thug, Lil’ Yachty, Kanye, Ty Dolla $ign, Noname, and Chance all call home. For he and his listeners, this is not problematic. They claim it as normative. In this way, his music sends a message that God can be encountered anywhere because God is everywhere.

Hip-hop music gives Chance an artistic medium through which he expands the understanding of what it looks like to relate to God as a Black male young adult who lives in the U.S. in the 21st century and who foregrounds his Christian identity. Chance, a “Christian rapper,” includes God in the Hip-hop music he produces and in the lyrics he writes because God is not separate from his music. God is in his Hip-hop music because God is in him. Thus, his music serves as an alternative space of encountering God for others as well.

Chance is one example of Black Millennials who claim a religious identity that does not conform to traditional expressions of religiosity like regular worship attendance in brick-and-mortar buildings or membership in mainline denominational faith communities. His music provides a glimpse into one alternative way that faith formation is taking place and God encounters are happening beyond established religious institutions.

*Coloring Book* casts the young adult vision of Chance the Rapper. It has reached and will continue to reach Black Millennials. Because they are listening to his music, they are being formed by it. The good news is that he is evidence that members of his generation who are disengaging from organized religion are not all disengaging from God. They are claiming their own “Clearing” spaces to encounter God, to talk about God, to hear about God, and to experience God. Even those who are not religiously affiliated or call themselves spiritual will meet God in Chance’s music because God is in the DNA of Chance’s lyrics. They, like all his listeners, will determine what they will do with such encounters. The disconcerting news is that many mainline churches are more focused on getting Millennials back to church as it is rather than listening to the Millennial voices that are pointing toward God encounters as they are.
becoming for them. Hopefully, Chance, other Hip-hop artists, and other Millennials will continue casting their visions and leading the way so that when the church as it is has ears to hear, it will have something transformative to listen to.
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