

Yeezus Is Jezuz: Examining the Socio-Hermeneutical-Transmediated Images of Jesus Employed by Kanye West

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ABSTRACT

Kanye West represents a myriad complex trope of issues for not just Black Theological praxis, but also for the broader study of Black people. In this post-civil rights era we, as Black people, find ourselves in a locality that is neither post-racial nor public Jim/ Jane Crowism; neither fully equal nor fully separate; not fully human yet celebrated in full, for culture and entertainment; it is an era that contains all the elements of hope and forward momentum in the symbol of what is the President of the United States and the nefarious nature of racism poignantly symbolized in Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and countless other Black lives, both male and female, lost at the hands of racism and profiling. West's symbolism rises as a figure and presents an anomaly of sorts on a post-civil rights era. Located in Kanye is a mixture of voices; the narcissist, the pain, the disillusioned, the proud, the critical interrogator, the double standard, and even the push for a contextual pursuit and understanding of God. Kanye West. Kanye is important for three reasons: 1) in my 2011 research among Hip Hoppers and urban emerging adults, he was ranked above Tupac as a spiritual and religious figure in Hip Hop,¹ 2) White emerging adults have come to appreciate and love him and, have grown up on his music, and 3) Kanye is a symbol for a post-civil rights context and represents the sacred, the secular, and profane exceptionally well. This is where we must begin, at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular.

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- Heaven Has A Ghetto: The Missiological Gospel & Theology of Tupac Amaru Shakur (VDM 2009),
- The Soul Of Hip Hop: Rimbs, Timbs, & A Cultural Theology (IVP 2010),
- Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post Soul Theological Exploration (Brill Academic 2017),
- Homeland Insecurity: A Hip Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context (IVP Academic 2018).

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INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Kanye West represents a myriad complex trope of issues for not just Black Theological praxis, but also for the broader study of Black people. In this post-civil rights era we, as Black people, find ourselves in a locality that is neither post-racial nor public Jim/ Jane Crowism; neither fully equal nor fully separate; not fully human yet celebrated in full, for culture and entertainment; it is an era that contains all the elements of hope and forward momentum in the symbol of what is the President of the United States and the nefarious nature of racism poignantly symbolized in Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and countless other Black lives, both male and female, lost at the hands of racism and profiling. West's symbolism rises as a figure and presents an anomaly of sorts on a post-civil rights era. Located in Kanye is a mixture of voices; the narcissist, the pain, the disillusioned, the proud, the critical interrogator, the double standard, and even the push for a contextual pursuit and understanding of God. Kanye West. Kanye is important for three reasons: 1) in my 2011 research among Hip Hoppers and urban emerging adults, he was ranked above Tupac as a spiritual and religious figure in Hip Hop¹, 2) White emerging adults have come to appreciate and love him and, have grown up on his music, and 3) Kanye is a symbol for a post-civil rights context and represents the sacred, the secular, and profane exceptionally well. This is where we must begin, at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular.

Employing a mixed. methods approach semi-structured interviews were used along with primary data from previous research to explore Kanye's overall connection to Black theology. The *second* of the mixed methods approach is that this study is a theomusicological study using the methodological approaches established by Jon Michael Spencer (1991b, 1992b, 1995, 1997).² Theomusicology is defined as, "...a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy" (Spencer 1991b, 3). It is, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall state, "Music as spiritual practice...[to] hear the challenges and evils in the church and the world as the music reveals" (2011, 77). What distinguishes theomusicology from other methods and disciplines such as ethnomusicology is:

Its analysis stands on the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist's authoritative/ normative sources. For instance, while the Western music therapist would interpret the healing of the biblical patriarch Saul under the assuagement of David's lyre as a psychophysiological phenomena, the theomusicologist would *first* take into account the religious belief of the culture for whom the event had meaning. The theomusicological method is therefore one that allows for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied (Spencer 1991b, 3-4).

Therefore the theomusicologist is concerned with multi-level data within the context of the people they study, and subsequently analyze the material within the proper time, culture, and context in which it was created. The trinary approaches of theomusicology are:

1. The Sacred: not only those elements within a society that are set apart and forbidden for ritual, but those elements within the given society and culture that are aspiring toward both a pious stance and search for deity.
2. The Secular: Those items which are designated by a given society and culture who have little to know connection with a form of deity.
3. The Profane: Those areas in a society labeled or given the designation of being outside the given morals, codes, ethics, and values established as "good" and/

or “right” by the society and culture being studied.

This trinary approach best discloses what the religion within the Hip Hop community is. Theomusicology rises above simple lyrical analysis and the imagining of what the artists might be attempting to say, and goes into the complex arena of where the sacred, secular, and profane intersect. This means that songs which express an explicit sexuality might, in fact, be connecting to a spiritual realm. Theomusicology broadens the discussion of religion within not just Hip Hop contexts but also for Black Theology, it asks the question “What is the Hip Hop community saying in the context in which the music, art, album, and artist were created in?” The following is also used in this study in order to provide a clearer picture of Hip Hop’s theological construction³:

- Cultural context
- Political climate
- Artists upbringing and background
- Album cover and art
- Cultural era
- Religious landscape
- Geographic location

In their article, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear state:

Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred...As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths (Trulear and Westfield 1994, 219-220).

Similarly, this particular study, examines theology and spiritual pursuits beyond moralism established by White dominant structures and asks complex questions about God (or Gods) and the performativity within religious domains for focus on a post-civil rights Black theology.

Within theomusicology there are three analytical approaches that this project will utilize: descriptive, normative, and predictive (Spencer 1990, 1991b). *Descriptive theomusicology*, is a non-judgmental approach to the culture, music, and people being studied and allows the space for the researcher to take in the bulk of data for what it is rather than placing a judgment label on it (e.g. perceived sexual behaviors, ‘bad language’). It also examines the creators of the music and the consumers within the context of it; in this project chapters one and two will be part of the descriptive analysis.

Normative theomusicology, continues the analysis previously listed while comparing the tenets of canonical authority that the culture being studied describes as a norm and the broader standardized canon. In other words, normative theomusicology examines the sacred texts that a culture—in this case being Hip Hop—determines as canonical and compares that with what, say, the “Bible” is discussing. Normative theomusicology allows this project to delve into a canonical space that Hip Hop may or may not be espousing; chapters three, four, and five will be a part of this analysis.

Lastly, *predictive theomusicology*, is an analysis of the future state of affairs to which music speaks or directs a society and / or culture (Spencer 1991b, 4). Attempting to avoid condemnatory

polemical statements, this book will offer this analysis in chapter six, the conclusion, and begin to assert what a Hip Hop theology might in fact look like. Predictive theomusicology is important as it establishes what the culture may actually be saying about God; or the lack of a God. As Spencer states

Analogously, the theomusicologist recognizes that human beings not only exist *in time*—in the present that is shaped by the past and perceptions of the future—but that during ritual they are caught in another, numinous time: in black religious ritual, because time stands still, and in African religious ritual, because time progresses counterclockwise to the time of the ancestors. Hence, while musicology historically examines music created *at one time*, and ethnomusicology anthropologically investigates music contemporary ethnic cultures produce in *present time*, theomusicology theologically studies music produced in the *diety's time*—the ‘wholly informed, the pure mood’ (1991b, 6).

Here, Spencer discusses the prominence of such a study and within a space such as Hip Hop—that is constantly changing—the predictive analysis is vital. Spencer is also correct in asserting that theomusicology provides a more balanced approach to understanding the theological messages within music. As a culture and society such as Hip Hop grows, it is important to engage in a predictive nature and allow its members to speak of the direction in which it may possibly be headed in.

Contrariwise, lyrical analysis limits the scope of a study on, say, a contemporary artist such as Kanye and does not produce an accurate picture of what Hip Hop, as a full cultural continuum, is communicating theologically. I must interject here that from a rhetoricians perspective, word/lyric/ hermeneutic is imperative and needed for study. It is clear that those are still used to study and for study of not just Hip Hop Culture, but Black theology. However, to place meaning on a lyric that the song never intended to say, is problematic on many levels. On a much more comprehensive level, I seek to establish the “why” an artist would construct an album like Nas’ “God’s Son,” or Remy Ma’s articulation of a female version of Jesus and the social conditions which helped created—rhetoricians, I would imagine, are interested in this too. Moreover, lyrical analysis requires an ethnographic dimension to it in order to clearly grasp what the artist was trying to implement in that song. And while some of Kanye’s lyrics will be examined in this project, the analysis uses theomusicology and its trinary approach, while taking into account the context and environment the song/ album was created in.⁴

This study, therefore, investigates, Kanye West from a theological and spiritual standpoint to provide insights from his theological aesthetics. While the ever growing field of Hip Hop studies begins to explore religion in Hip Hop, the present work seeks to address this and develop new theologies/theories that fit both a Hip Hop and Black theology context. While the formal discipline of theology in the United States focuses on Christianity⁵ and a good scope of this project takes a Judeo Christian approach, it is noted that Black theology is much larger and complex than Judeo Christianity. This project seeks to add to the study of Black theology.

YEEZUS CONSTRUCTS

Kanye West has risen to a socio-theological status within Hip Hop that few other rappers have attained. “John,” in my interviews, stated that Kanye was indeed the “new Tupac.” While “Lady J” told me that Kanye represented a newer more practical approach to the Christian God. In Ebony Utley’s (2012) work, Kanye’s name was the highest on the list of “spiritual rappers” beating out

Tupac.⁶ Kanye, who worked as a producer and musical arranger for artists such as Jay Z and John Legend, was raised in a Christian home. His music is a reflection of the influence of artists from the Funk era, such as The Commodores, Kool And The Gang, Marvin Gaye, and myriad of 80's popular culture artists such as Tears For Fears, Cyndi Lauper, Pet Shop Boys, and Peter Cetera. He is a musician at heart and combines samples, live drums, electronic rhythms, and musicianship to all of his music. His first mainstream album, *The College Dropout* (2004),⁷ made headlines as he addressed the issues of salvation, Jesus, Jesus' love, sin, and the profane with his song "Jesus Walks." Here, Kanye continued the conversation which Tupac had started in regards to heaven, final destinations, and Christological manifestations in indigenous settings.

"Jesus Walks" is a song about contextualizing a "good news" message that, for too long, had been a White, Western, perfected image of deity in which many from urban centers could not aspire nor connect to (we will discuss this further in chapter five). Rappers have had a keen feeling toward the historical Jesus because of persecution he endured and narrative of suffering Jesus' story has. Kanye's song acknowledges the secular and the profane within the sacred.⁸ The song begins with an opening designed to seek a higher personal consciousness:

Yo, We at war
We at war with terrorism, racism but most of all we at war with ourselves
(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me) with me with me with me (fades) (West 2004)

The beginning of the song sets the tone and demarcates a search for a Jesus who can "walk with him" and help in the war.

In the second verse, Kanye begins to uncover that contextualized "good news" and offers up an image of Jesus that detours from the standard Evangelical one. It is the Jesus that Hip Hoppers appear to identify with

(Jesus Walks)
God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
(Jesus Walks with me)
The only thing that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now
(Jesus Walks)
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs
(Jesus Walks with me)
I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long
To the hustlas, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers
To the victims of Welfare for we living in hell here hell yeah
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly
I know he hear me when my feet get weary
Cuz we're the almost nearly extinct
We rappers are role models we rap we don't think
I ain't here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers

I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way yall need Jesus
So here go my single dog radio needs this
They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus
That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes
But if I talk about God my record won't get played Huh?
Well let this take away from my spins
Which will probably take away from my ends
Then I hope this take away from my sins
And bring the day that I'm dreaming about
Next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out (West 2004)

Note the implications that Kanye makes in this verse: a call to secularized individuals (hustlers, drug dealers, strippers), a space for those who are labeled as profane (killers, murders), and the beginnings of journey toward a Jesus that can relate to them. Kanye also skirts the issue of race and reminds us that “skin color” does not matter to him; he is in pursuit of the actual relationship and the “need” for a higher power; a God; a deity that is relatable and reachable (Hodge 2009, Utley 2012, Zanfagna 2006).

Still, even within this veneer of perceived genuine spiritual pursuits, Kanye struggles with some of the same issues other rappers have regarding misogyny, nihilism, and a hyper braggadocio. In a 2013 interview with Hip Hop DX, Kanye stated that, “I ain’t your fucking role model. Don’t label me that. I’m an artist. Period. That’s what I do. Don’t expect anything else from me.” Hip Hop DX columnist Omar Burgess describes Kanye as a “walking contradiction” yet also asserts, “I think the fact that he generally embraces the inconsistencies in his ideology makes for some interesting tension within his music” (Burgess 2013). That “tension” is precisely what makes Kanye a strong secular and profane articulation of theological matters.⁹

In his 2013 New York Times interview with journalist Jon Caramanica, Kanye deals with this tension himself:

I don’t have some type of romantic relationship with the public. I’m like, the anti-celebrity, and my music comes from a place of being anti. That was the album where I gave people what they wanted. I don’t think that at that point, with my relationship with the public and with skeptical buyers, that I could’ve done “Black Skinhead” [from “Yeezus”] (Cited in Caramanica 2013 interview with Kanye West).

Kanye sees himself as this model for this tension and, conversely, also views himself as a sort of Hip Hop hero. He continues:

I am so credible and so influential and so relevant that I will change things. So when the next little girl that wants to be, you know, a musician and give up her anonymity and her voice to express her talent and bring something special to the world, and it’s time for us to roll out and say, “Did this person have the biggest thing of the year?” — that thing is more fair because I was there.

Some bloggers and scholars view Kanye’s confidence as arrogance and pride, while almost all

of the interviewees saw Kanye as a visionary and modern day prophet.¹⁰ Kanye does, however, present a contradictory stance on some issues; especially regarding gender.

In his 2013 album, *Yeezus*, Kanye drew critics when he called himself “God.” While a lot of the album deals with a strong involvement with indigenous forms of theological inquiry, much of the hyper male posturing is done on the backs of women. Kanye describes oral copulation and ejaculation on women as normative for sexual exploration and dances in the controversial space of religion and sexuality—a good space, but women are not in power within this space. Does that still make him a Jesus figure? In an online article Ebony Utley tells us that:

Throughout the album, West asks audiences to embrace a similar “and without contradiction” acceptance especially of his social commentary about race. and his social disdain for women.

West’s album is filled with typical rap posturing. No successful rapper has ever spent an entire album rapping about how he can’t read, can’t get a job, and can’t keep a girl. Rap is a fantasy world, where men’s success is premised on making their wildest dreams seem true. The catch comes if you’re a black man without any real power. How do you convince an audience that you do have power when the fashion world won’t take you seriously, detractors upbraid you for having a baby with Kim Kardashian, and people publicly make you apologize for words and deeds you’re not sorry for. Well, apparently, West came up with an answer in the 48 hours he spent finishing lyrics for the album. You accrue power by taking it from someone else. Thus, women take the brunt of West’s anger usually via some (oral) sex exchange (Utley 2013).

These do present some contradicting posits for Kanye. Still, the Christian Jesus was not without controversy either. The relationship to Martha, the adulterous woman at the well, the strong words toward the Syrophoenician woman, the absent teen years of Jesus all leave an open gap for ideas surrounding the historical Jesus.

Still, Kanye continues to push forward and his 2013 album makes numerous references to God and the connections that Kanye has to God. This, once again, is a continual tension with the sacred, profane, and secular (Spencer 1990, 1991a) and allows a more comprehensive view of the complexity surrounding religion in Hip Hop contexts. Utley again, reminds us:

Does this type of misogyny, which, let us be fair, is common in rap, undermine West’s religious allusions? No. Both religion and rap are notorious for perpetuating patriarchy and heterosexism. Any system designed to empower must do so at the expense of someone else. Whether it’s a believer over a nonbeliever, whites over blacks, men over women. How does a new slave get his power back? He becomes “a dick instead of a swallower” and “fucks a Hampton spouse.” Does that excuse West from his cavalierly sexist commentary? No. But a man obsessed with Jesus does so because he wants to imitate the power of Jesus. When rap and religion turn to power, there will be hierarchy, and the person controlling the story will always come out on top (2013).

Thus, Kanye’s religious dance continues and in that dance the search for power is critical—albeit at the expense of misogyny. Yet, what makes Kanye West such an appealing figure, not just for Hip Hoppers but for American popular culture in general, is that he is, in his public persona,

transparent and hostile towards dominant forms of norms—especially as it relates to religion and spirituality. While at the same time, Kanye represents the human experience and is contradictory, proud, hypocritical, and arrogant—this is true though, of many well-known pastors, priests, rabbi's, and religious leaders; no one gets a pass and is all perfect.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While Kanye is not a savior for “all of Black Theology” nor is he the prime example of “what to do,” he does provide some broader symbolic transmediated imagery which gives us a premise in which to begin dialogue. Five reoccurring typologies arose within this analysis which should be given heed too as we dialog about the future outlook of Black theology:

1. Hip Hoppers create their own view of God, Jesus, and church in association to suffering, pain, and inequality.
2. The post-soul context helps to create a climate to question authority, rebel from current religious standards and worldviews, and to create a new path to God and church.
3. The felt need from the Hip Hop community aides in creating a spiritual avenue in order to make meaning of the suffering, pain, and inequality.
4. Human action is directed toward problem solving. In this case, Hip Hoppers create a way to problem solve through their music, poetry, and lyrics.
5. Distrust of current systems, institutions, and social structures is a part of the worldview of Hip Hoppers within a Post-soul context.

Jesus was, and still is in many ways, a controversial persona. He was not one to neither mince words nor miss an opportunity to connect with the disinherited. Utley discusses that,

Jesus fraternized with sexually licentious women, cavorted with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, had a temper, used profane language with religious people, praised faithfulness over stilted forms of religious piety, and honored God more than the government. Gangstas respect Jesus because they see the parallels between his life and theirs (2012, 49).

However, most of the critical, radical, and post soul images of Jesus have been lost and too often domesticated for either political or racial reasons. For Black theologians, we must reclaim this historical Jesus; a contextual Jesus that many Hip Hoppers like Kanye employ. Is it possible that seemingly blasphemous images of the sacred Christ create spiritual awareness? Theologian Tom Beaudoin has told us that, “Offensive images or practices may indicate a familiarity with deep religious truths” (1998, 123). One must understand the authority of “official” sacraments to forcefully de-value them. Likewise, it takes a true believer in the power of worship to turn curses into praise, the word “nigga” into a nomination of the highest respect. The point here is not to allow degrading terms, but to acknowledge that such rhetorical devices are making a serious theological attempt at grasping a practice of inequality that is *very* real (Cupitt 1998).

Tupac and The Outlawz present a Jesus that is not only relatable, but one who is able to connect with the inequalities of life. While most of the song is questioning if a Jesus is able to connect, the sub text of the song is about a Jesus who can. Moreover, a Jesus who can relieve the burden of ghetto life. A Jesus, who in the Psalmist's terms, is a shepherd and causes those in dire straits to lie down in green pastures; a Jesus is who able to blow through the blunt smoking persona and redeem those who hurt, back to him.

These sensationalized images of Jesus are needed. More importantly, they are needed in the discourse of Black Christian theology as many of these personas of Jesus get lost within the dominant Western Eurocentric Roman Catholic model of Christianity (e.g. George *Post-Soul Nation : The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and before That Negroes)*; Taylor; West; Yinger; Zizek). Suffering in context is nothing new. The search for meaning within that suffering is nothing new. Neither is the rejection of dominate models of deity.

Sensationalized images of Jesus such as Aaron McGruders Black Jesus, Lil Wayne’s Trap Jesus, Tupac’s Black Jesus, and Kanye’s transmediated Jesus represent a fundamental attempt to make deity, the divine, and the sacred more accessible to those who typically do not grace the sanctuaries of Christian Churches. They represent the fusing of the sacred and profane—a space that Spencer argues is vastly misunderstood. They use culture to help interpret the sacred scriptures while utilizing humor to break away some of the seriousness characteristically associated with Jesus.

Finally, they are more relevant and applicable to those seeking Jesus from the post soul, Hip Hop, and urban generation. This generation is not interested in a God that sits in multi-million dollar churches. They reject pastors who net more than their congregations make in a year combined. They despise the double standards of the Church. And they do not want a Jesus “too perfect.” What Tupac and The Outlawz do well is present a Jesus in human form for this current time and generation. I hope we can listen to this message and move beyond the shallow analysis of pop culture so many Christian churches have fallen prey to. It’s time for Black Jesus!

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¹ (Hodge 2015)

² Created initially as a discipline, theomusicology is a methodological inquiry as it seeks to understand the theological inferences within the studied cultures music. This method has been used by scholars to examine other areas of music and popular culture such as issues of sexuality and promiscuity (McRobbie 1995, Epstein 2001), understanding poetry in context (Faulkner 2007), understanding the basic elements of Hip Hop spirituality (Spencer 1992a), to examine the sacred and profane within Black music (Costen 1991), and examined as a methodology in practice (Reed 1991).

³ Spencer asserts that these areas are crucial in the understanding of the theological message (1990, 1991b) at the time the song was created.

⁴ It must be noted that this methodology, while robust and will provide greater insight, will not fully produce a shift in what we understand theology to be.

⁵ Arguably, within the U.S. the study of God, theology has been mostly relegated to the study of the Christian God (e.g. Miller 2013, Pinn 2002, Reed 2003). Most universities offering degree programs in Theology go to great Hip Hop artists found their first critique of the God language as a critique of the Christian religious expression of God talk. Others have used the medium of Hip Hop to further explain misinformation and other reflections of theology (Nation of Islam, Five Percenters, etc.).

⁶ This could signify a shift in the way newer generations espouse and respect deity within Hip Hop moguls. For the last two decades Tupac has been the primary rapper who represents a “God Connection” but as of recent, Kanye, Kendrick Lamar, and in some circles even Jay Z, are beginning to represent the broadening of this title. Time will tell how newer generations view Tupac and endear him to theological and spiritual pursuits.

⁷ Kanye did release a less known album called I’m Good in 2003, but this was a “mix-tape” and did not receive much radio air time.

⁸ It is not just this particular song which Hip Hoppers are able to relate to. Kanye’s constant comparisons to Jesus, suffering, martyrdom, and being crucified is yet another pathway Hip Hoppers connect with his “Christ like” image.

⁹ This also connects with Kanye’s 2005 statement during a Hurricane Katrina live telethon regarding George Bush’s response to the victims of the hurricane. It was a sign that Kanye was not going to “play nice” in regards to social issues. Moreover, his live interruption of Taylor Swift during the MTV 2009 Music Awards, racially speaking, Kanye—a Black man—“rudely” interrupted a “White woman” at her moment of glory. This controversy has also created a Christological brand for Kanye as many in the Black and Latino community felt that this “interruption”

was exactly what Whites have done for decades to Blacks and the fact that he had the nerve to do this and speak up for another Black woman who did not win (Beyoncé), gave him not only social credit, but also a messianic one for the “voice” of the voiceless.

¹⁰ A term typically held for artists such as Tupac who were able to future cast events.

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