

THE BLACK CHURCH  
AND HIP HOP  
CULTURE

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*Toward Bridging  
the Generational Divide*

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Edited by EMMETT G. PRICE III



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The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture  
*Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*

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This work is respectfully dedicated to my personal champions of faith who along with others gave (and prayed) so that I and those in my generation could have access and opportunities.

“Aunt Evelyn” Porché  
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“Uncle Oscar” A. Rollins



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# Acknowledgments

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye Heavenly Host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.  
—Thomas Ken<sup>1</sup>

This book is the result of an intense journey that has taken many detours. From the initial concept in 2005 to its publication, numerous authors joined and departed the project for a host of valiant and legitimate reasons. I am grateful to all the contributors who not only made this project possible but provided thought-provoking, carefully constructed critiques and intellectually stimulating suggestions catalyzing generational healing. The authors could have completed their own manuscripts; instead, we agreed to participate in this dialogue to showcase the power of participation even when there is a difference in approach. I extend my gratitude to the expert and patient staff at Scarecrow Press. From the early interactions with Corinne O. Burton to the culminating conversations with Stephen Ryan, the Scarecrow staff has been diligent, detailed, and determined to move this project to fruition. I must express my most sincere gratitude to my dear friend and colleague Dr. William “Bill” C. Banfield for the initial invitation to publish with Scarecrow and, further, for the placement of this collection within the prestigious African American Cultural Theory and Heritage series.

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To God Be the Glory!

## NOTE

1. Although “Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow” is most often referenced as a doxology in the Protestant church, it actually was introduced to the church by Thomas Ken (1637–1711), an Anglican Bishop who composed the hymns “Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun” and “Glory to thee, my God, this night.” “Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow” served as the final verse of both hymns.

# Introduction

If the Black Church were more vigilant toward the needs, concerns, and desires of its youth and young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s, there probably would be no Hip Hop Culture. Although a strikingly convicting statement, the sentiment is worth pondering. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Church stood as the stronghold of the Black Community, fighting for equality and economic self-sufficiency and challenging its body to be self-determined and self-aware. The Black Church also served to offer large doses of spiritual centering to offset the rather racist aggression by unyielding provocateurs of hatred. From its very emergence during slavery, the Black Church was a response to the systematic and obstructive oppression at the hand of those with political power and economic means. An assemblage of small congregations emerged within the hush harbors under the cloak of invisibility, wherein these gatherings of saints emotionally and physically supported one another while spiritually uniting to petition, with a sense of urgency, for their own survival and the promise of hope for their offspring. The Black Church, as it would later emerge, has always been a collective of diverse clusters of disciples whose unity is based not on one liturgy but in the shared petition that God “would never leave nor forsake” them (Hebrews 13:5). Although it has been perceived as a homogeneous and monolithic institution, the Black Church has never been such. In fact, its early history is a poignant indicator of its present reality in ways that are revealed in this volume. As twenty-first-century scholars, homilecticians, pulpiteers, and even laypersons continue to debate whether the Black Church is alive or dead, the realization should be evident that as long as there is injustice, inequity, and imbalance in the Black Communities of the United States of America, the Black Church has a lifeline, a mission, and an opportunity to rise to the occasion.

From the days of the Free African Society and the first Black Baptist Churches (eighteenth century) through the rise of the African Methodist Episcopal Denomination, the African American Episcopal Zion, the Christian Methodist Episcopal, the National Baptist Convention, Inc. (USA), the National Baptist of America Inc. International, Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., the Church of God in Christ, the United House of

Prayer, the Church of Christ (Holiness), the Pentecostal Assemblies, the Apostolic Assemblies, the United Holy Church, National Black Catholic Congress, and numerous other organized clusters of peoples of faith, including the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, the Black Church, in its various manifestations and segments, has and remains relevant. The Black Church is alive, and, like any living organism, it has (individually and collectively) made some critical errors.

The Black Church has a fascinating, rich, and deep history—a history that has not only championed the survival, liberation, and equality of Black folks (and all folks) but struggled to delve into the internal chasms of generational difference. In many ways, the story of the Black Church is a narrative that puts so much focus on the future that limited time, energy, and resources were allocated to protecting the present. As the Black Church, through the various mantles of local congregations of various denominations, prayed for liberty and justice for all, a schism formed within the belly of the Black Community. Similar to the Black Church, the Black Community is an assemblage of numerous communities across the United States of America that find their common narrative as descendants of the African Diaspora in the United States, connected through the shared cultural characteristics passed down from generation to generation that both codify and code “Blackness.” Although creative artists such as Paul Laurence Dunbar (“We Wear the Mask,” circa 1896), Meta Warrick Fuller (“Ethiopia Awakening,” circa 1910), Zora Neal Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937), Margaret Walker (“For My People,” 1937), Jacob Lawrence (“Migration Series,” 1941), and Duke Ellington (*Black, Brown and Beige*, 1943) captured the sounds, sentiments, and sensations of the Black experience in United States, it was award-winning filmmaker Marlon Riggs (*Black Is, Black Ain't*, 1995) who best pointed out that although we can describe what it is to be Black, it is extremely challenging to define, codify, and capture the holistic experience within a neatly constructed definition. Within the Black Community lie various strands of philosophical thought, theological belief, and very practical differences that have created difficult existences for many. It is clear that one can be a part of the Black Community and have a tremendously different experience than others. This reality is not limited to Black people, as no ethnic or racial enclave of people is as homogeneous or monolithic as stereotypical analysis might pose. Yet, among the diversity of expressions within the Black Community, there is no greater dilemma than that of the generational divide.

## GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

From the days of Bishop Richard Allen and Bishop Absalom Jones, the difference in opinions on liturgy style and approach to worship created segmentation. During the late eighteenth century, both Allen and Jones were members of Philadelphia's interracial St. George's Methodist Church. After an altercation of blatant racism within the congregation, both departed to found the Free African Society. The two were challenged over decisions to associate with the Episcopal denomination or whether to establish a more innovative and progressive mantle of faith for Blacks. Jones founded the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and was later elevated to bishop. Allen would establish the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal and, subsequently, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Although it has not been exaggerated in previous scholarship, Jones and Allen were fourteen years apart, and it is possible that that fourteen-year gap may have aided in the determination of whether assimilation and accommodation were the best course of action, as opposed to creation and segmentation. It is clear that throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and even now into the twenty-first century, the challenge remains as to the question of segmentation and denominationalism within the church.

The Black Church is not the only prevalent ground for age-driven fractionalization. During the early years of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois would engage in a national debate over the best course of progress for the Negro. Washington, an exceptional educator, orator, and political leader, advocated that young people should focus attention on industrial education and the slow and steady accumulation of wealth. DuBois, an esteemed educator, pan-Africanist activist, and exemplary writer, articulated the investment of the community in the "exceptional," the "Talented Tenth." Note that Washington, considered conservative, was twelve years DuBois's senior.

During the 1960s, much attention was placed on polarizing the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (aka Malcolm X) as diametrically opposed to each other. Yet, another reading through the reflective eyes of privilege reveals that there was actually an aged generation of elders who were opposed to both of them, due to their both rocking the boat of steady progress and potentially creating a frenzy that might take things backward instead of forward. It was the elders of the National Baptist Convention that would eventually create enough tension to create an exodus of relatively young pastors to establish the Progressive Baptist Conference. Likewise, it was a rather youthful cohort of former Nation of Islam devotees

who would aid Brother Malcolm in establishing the Organization for African Unity. The generational divide is neither a unique consideration nor is its presence anything new.

From the historic debates on segregation versus integration to the debates over the prestige and power of Historically Black Colleges and Universities over the acceptance of Blacks into previously predominantly White institutions, these debates have continued to be evidence of eras of generational divide. A recent tipping point was captured during the 2007 frenzy launched by Bill Cosby's "Come on People" remark at the NAACP's Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration of the historic *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court case, which infuriated legions of folks on both sides of the generational aisle and ironically impacted the pulpits and pews of Black Churches across the nation as folks decided whether to agree and side with Cosby or join the prolific writer, orator, and philosophico-socio-politico Michael Eric Dyson, who responded loudly with *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* With twenty-two years of life experience separating the two, there was no splitting the fence; the Black Community had to take a side.

No previous generational divide has been as extreme, volatile, and destructive as the present divide between the Civil Rights Generation and the Hip Hop Generation. Hip Hop Culture grew from the soundscape, canvas, and battlegrounds of the concrete jungles of New York's well-known boroughs, inspired as a self-determined response by ostracized, disenfranchised urban youth who felt that they had no support system or resources. With no heroes in plain sight, these youth, passionate with the same urgent desires for survival and hope that their parents and grandparents carried, created their way from the bottom of America's belly one rhyme, piece, and step at a time. It was early Hip Hop Culture that courageously stood against gang warfare, guns, narcotics, and youth-on-youth violence. Rappers (and MCs), DJs (and turntablists), Breakers (and dancers), and Graffiti artists effectively and critically advocated for democracy through freedom of expression, social commentary, political debate, and economic critique. It was the next generation of this arising Hip Hop Community that begged for better schools, better health care, better playgrounds, better opportunities, and equal access for themselves and for their parents and grandparents. Cultural awareness became an early trademark of the multiethnic, multiracial, multifaith community of young people who desired to create the better existence that their parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts, and uncles (whether they were praying people or not) were not able to give them. For many young people during this early period, Hip Hop Culture was the supplement to the weekly dose of Sunday morning faith. Hip Hop Culture was "in addition to," as opposed to "instead of." The Hip Hop Generation proselytized and catechized through their innovative creations,

allowing their intimate spirituality and articulated faith to bleed through their creative expressions. Trinitarian Protestant thought, as well as recitations of Islam, Five Percent Nations of Gods and Earth, Rastafarian, Judaism, Buddhism and beyond, permeated the lyrics, symbolisms, imagery, and fashion. The role of spirituality, faith, and religion in Hip Hop Culture has always been strong, even as we wrestle with the most current status of Gospel Hip Hop, Holy Hip Hop, or any of the other monikers. Rap/Hip Hop expressions have been inclusive of belief statements, faith tenets, and theological frameworks throughout the brief history of Hip Hop Culture, yet many in the Black Church have not felt comfortable with the new methods, modes, and manners of expressions.

On the first page of the opening chapter of *The Truth behind Hip-Hop*, Elder G. Craig Lewis posits that he will reveal “how hip-hop is destroying the lives of many, as they seek to be entertained by a supernatural influence that is beyond their natural control.” Although I value Elder Lewis’s commitment to truth and revelation, I would argue that we should be more concerned with the number of clergy and congregations who are turning their sanctified backs on the volatile youth who need to be loved (whether they are a part of the Hip Hop Community or not). Tirades of accusations of Hip Hop as being demonic, satanic, and essentially evil disregard the simple fact that in all human creative endeavors, there are some things that are widely appreciated and well received and others that are distasteful, not useful, and unpalatable. Yet, the presence of polar opposites does not negate the importance of the overall expression and the acknowledgment that the expressers availed themselves as vulnerable beings to share.

Although Hip Hop Culture in the twenty-first century is different from its infant state in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its urgent cries, moans, groans, and hollers remain consistently focused on the same survival, liberation, and equality that the Black Church has fought for over the generations. In fact, although the Hip Hop modus operandi is dramatically and drastically different, perhaps even polemic, Hip Hop and the Black Church are essentially fighting for the same thing and that is what makes this question of the dilemma of the generational divide and the initial and subsequent disengagement of the Black Church so intellectually perplexing.

This collection of writings from leading thinkers, preachers, scholars, and practitioners from around the country serves to give voice to a growing movement within the Black Church to deal with the dilemma of the generational divide and to consider new approaches to restoring health, vitality, and intergenerational dialogue between the Civil Rights Generation and the Hip Hop Generation and, subsequently, all generations. Conceived as an extension of previous conversations initiated by Anthony Pinn (*Noise and Spirit: The Religious Sensibilities of Rap Music*), Benjamin Stephens III and Ralph C. Watkins (*From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching and Teaching Young*

*Adults in the Black Church*), and Ralph C. Watkins, Jason A. Barr Jr., Jamal-Harrison Bryant, William H. Curtis, and Otis Moss III (*The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation*) and numerous others, the contributors in this volume have surpassed the simple goal of assessment to wrestle with the more challenging duties of providing timely commentary, critical analysis, and, in some cases, practical strategies toward forgiveness, healing, restoration, and reconciliation. This began in 2006 as an attempt to gather a few voices from within the fold to initiate a conversation (with a clear intent to have some of the voices be female); it has now turned into a rally call to challenge the generations to come back to the table to settle differences and move forward together. In many ways, this collection serves a greater community beyond the Black Church. Hip Hop Culture is an international phenomenon, and it has challenged the norms and traditions of numerous institutions beyond those conceived of faith. From the entertainment industry to the United (and Non-United) Nations to international commerce, Hip Hop Culture has had a dynamic influence. It has challenged traditional thought, and through the simultaneous rapid emergence of technology, it has challenged the ways that we communicate with one another, both in the United States and abroad. Many around the world are looking to the Black Church to take note on how we respond, react, and relate to the growing international dominance of Hip Hop Culture. So in many ways, this collection perhaps serves as a case study in acknowledging not only the issue but the prophetic role of the church to offer practical approaches to restoring health, vitality, and intergenerational dialogue where there is such lack.

Divided into three sections, this volume does not propose to be exhaustive; in fact, our sole aim is to be more effective in stimulating, inspiring, and encouraging dialogue. It is our collective goal to use this volume to challenge the Black Church and Hip Hop Culture to realize their shared responsibilities to each other and to the greater society.

Part I, "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop," explores the transition from one generation to another through the transmission of legacy and heritage or lack thereof. Each provocative piece examines the generational passing of the baton in unique fashion only to arise at the same conclusion: the Black Church must reengage in the lives of the youth and young adults who compose the Hip Hop Generation. It is mandatory, it is necessary, and it is urgent! In the opening piece of the section, Alton B. Pollard III offers "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: A Meditation," based on a lecture delivered at Spelman College as part of its 2006 Distinguished Lecture Series. In this poignant diachronical examination of the legacy and heritage of the Black Freedom Struggle, the Howard University School of Divinity dean challenges the reader to position Hip Hop Culture as an extension of the struggle and an opportunity for ostracized communities to come together in the pursuit of a "just and inclusive world." Joshua Hutchinson follows with

“Dissed-Enfranchised: The Black Church under the Steeple,” challenging the church to reclaim its traditional values and teachings, such as the importance of community and family. According to Hutchinson, the impact of the successes of previous generations has led to the demise of current and future generations due to a shift in values and priorities. This dynamic shift is explored in the closing piece, “Chasing a Dream Deferred: From Movement to Culture,” where I use Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* to expose a broader realization of the generational divide while charging the church (and the Hip Hop Community) to reconnect, reconcile, and recommit to the collective pursuit of liberty, justice, and equality for all.

Part II, “Hip Hop Culture and the Black Church in Dialogue,” explores the multitude of ways, shapes, and forms through which the conversation is already going on, with a prophetic gaze toward heightening and intensifying the dialogue. From sermons to theoretical examinations and spiritual ponderings, this part is riveted with stimulating discoveries, inspiring reflections, and empowering commentary. University of Pennsylvania chaplain Charles L. Howard leads the way with “Deep Calls to Deep: Beginning Explorations of the Dialogue between the Black Church and Hip Hop,” by drawing attention to the numerous “contact points, intersections, and integrations” that the two share. Focused on moving the dialogue toward progressive results, Howard challenges both the church and the culture by offering strategies of success grounded in prophetic reflection. Pastor Cynthia B. Belt continues the challenge for fruitful dialogue with “Rap Music as Prophetic Utterance.” Here she mixes practical experience and scriptural mandate to demand more accountability in the dialogue between the Black Church and Hip Hop Culture. Prof. Lerone A. Martin follows with “Binding the Straw Man: Hip Hop, African American Protestant Religion, and the Dilemma of Dialogue,” a piece that offers his profound thinking around the central question “How can African American faith communities address and respond to Hip Hop Music and Culture in a manner that is faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ and correspondingly addresses the realities of African American life?” In the first of two sermons in the volume, Pastor Sherman A. Gordon offers another method and example of the ongoing dialogue that occurs during weekly worship experiences: “Kick Your Delilah to the Curb” reveals one of many ways in which this cross-generational dialogue occurs from the pulpit. Rising cultural critic and ordained minister Shaundra Cunningham penned “Thou Shall Have No Other Gods before Me: Myth, Idols, and Generational Healing,” a piece that spotlights the reality of idol worship in both the Black Church and Hip Hop Culture. She boldly challenges us to relinquish the finger-pointing in exchange for much-needed transparency and confession with the desired goals of reconciliation and unity. With “Hip Hop Children of a Lesser God,” prolific writer and esteemed activist “Truth Minista” Paul Scott offers a

critical commentary of the ongoing dialogue, with the final assessment that both sides of the conversation are in desperate need of more TRUTH. In the second of two sermons, Prof. Stephen C. Finley offers “Bling Bling,” a unique homiletical experience that presents yet another example of the cross-generational dialogue via the pulpit. Transcribed from a Youth Day service, this sermon offers one of many approaches of making biblical text and commentary practical and relevant to a multigenerational congregation. Closing is Prof. Shana Mashego’s innovative exploration of the dialogue occurring within the forgotten Black Churches within predominately non-Black denominations (Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Presbyterian). “Formality Meets Hip Hop: The Influence of Hip Hop Culture on the Afro-European Church” mixes personal reflection and scholarly analysis to reveal yet another layer of the ongoing dialogue.

Part III, “Gospel Rap, Holy Hip Hop, and the Hip Hop Matrix,” introduces to some and emphasizes for others the perspectives and insights of practitioners, scholars, and activists from within the fold who are eager to share, with the hope that clarity would lead to engagement. Readers will explore the multitude of expressions of faith and the diversity of locations where these expressions take place. Prof. Josef Sorett’s captivating “Beats, Rhymes and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip Hop” is the first of two pieces that are previously published. Reprinted from the winter 2006–2007 edition of *The African American Pulpit*, Sorett’s work offers one of the first critical examinations of Gospel Hip Hop; it is a “must read” for all endeavoring to do ministry in the twenty-first century. Likewise, Cassandra Thornton’s “Isn’t Loving God Enough? Debating Holy Hip Hop” offers a provocative look at Holy Hip Hop from the inside out. Also known as DJ Lady Grace, Thornton offers insight into the ongoing debates concerning Holy Hip Hop using personal insight and scriptural backing. In the second of two reprinted contributions, scholar and consultant Kenneth D. Johnson offers “Five Theses on the Globalization of Thug Life and 21st Century Missions.” Previously published in the *Antioch Agenda: Essays on the Restorative Church in Honor of Orlando E. Costas* (2007), this piece is effective in challenging the church to realize the global effect and impact of Hip Hop Culture. Esteemed activist and scholar Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou offers a theological read on Hip Hop Culture through personal reflection and by challenging the lens through which we see our young people. Rev. Patricia Lesesne, an administrator in the Broward County (Florida) Public School System, offers her personal struggle with attempting to empower and influence the next generation in “Confessions of a Hip Hop Generation Minister.” Based on personal reflection and grounded in hope, Lesesne’s prose grants us an eye-opening revelation of the urgency for generational bridging. Expert educational consultant Dr. René Rochester offers “Spiritually Educating and Empowering a Generation: Growing up in a Hip

Hop Matrix.” This is an intriguing response to the central question “What do we do if a young person’s existing knowledge of biblical truth is what they have learned in a song or from imitating the appearance of Holy Hip Hop?” and it is a clever description and examination of the Hip Hop Matrix. Rising African and African American religious thought scholar Onaje X. Offley Woodbine offers an important hypothesis of basketball as religion in “An Invisible Institution: A Functional Approach to Religion in Sports in Wounded African American Communities.” He reveals basketball as a religious project that responds to suffering and can lead toward healing. As the book began with a meditation, it is fitting to close in the tradition with a benediction. “‘To Serve the Present Age’: A Benediction” is my attempt to close the volume with gratitude, in petition, and with the acknowledgment that our collective efforts are futile without the power of prayer.

I am grateful for each contributor to the project. Each has made himself or herself a vessel of ministry in one’s own unique way, and it is our collective prayer that this work be beneficial in all the various ways that it may.



*Part I*

**From Civil Rights to Hip Hop**