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“Your Favorite Rapper’s a Christian Rapper”: Chance the Rapper’s Creation of a New
Community of Christian Hip Hop Through His Use of Religious Discourse on the 2016 Mixtape

Coloring Book

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Religious Studies Department

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Samuel Patrick Glenn

Lewiston, Maine

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Figure 1: Chance 3 Hat. Taken from <https://www.chanceraps.com/shop/chance-3-new-era-cap>.

Introduction

In 2016, Chicago-based artist Chance the Rapper released his third mixtape, *Coloring Book*. In the days prior to the mixtape's release, a leaked song—which ultimately did not make it onto the mixtape because of sampling issues—began circulating the internet. On this song, titled “Grown Ass Kid,” Chance rapped, “Everybody can finally say it out loud, your favorite rapper [is] a Christian rapper.” While this song did not make the mixtape, *Coloring Book* heavily featured Christian evangelical messages as well as religious dialogue by Chance and other guest artists. This led many listeners to wonder what Christian Rap or Christian Hip Hop is. Before *Coloring Book*, the genre of Christian Hip Hop had enjoyed little popularity among secular audiences in the United States and practically none worldwide.¹ So, before introducing this thesis's goals, it is important to understand what constitutes Christian Hip Hop and who—by convention—makes it.

A quick note on terminology: This thesis will use the term “Christian Hip Hop” as the broad, blanket term for the genre. Other scholars use terminology such as “Holy Hip Hop,” “Christian Rap,” or “Holy Rap” while Harris (2019) even differentiates Christian Hip Hop and Christian Rap as two different genres.² For the purposes of this thesis, I will exclusively make use of the term Christian Hip Hop so as not to confuse readers by constantly switching terms. This thesis will take the position that there is no meaningful distinction between “Christian Hip Hop” and “Christian Rap.”

¹ For more information of Christian Hip Hop globally, “The rupture and reconfigurations of identity through Christian Hip Hop in Southern Africa” by Ibrahim Abraham and Tuomas Järvenpää in *Beyond Christian Hip Hop* (2019) for a recent analysis.

² Erika Gault and Travis Harris. *Beyond Christian Hip Hop: a move toward Christians and Hip Hop*. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5.

One of the earliest definitions of Christian Hip Hop comes from a source within the genre. The duo I.D.O.L. King (In Defense of Louis King—a friend of the group), which was founded in 1985, is regarded as one of the first Christian Hip Hop groups—although they did not release an album until 1991 (4 years after the first Christian Hip Hop record *Bible Break* in 1987). On the groups’ website, an (undated) statement proposes criteria for what constitutes Christian Hip Hop.

1. Does each song teach, rebuke, correct, equip, and/or train an individual in righteousness? (2 Timothy 3:16) 2. When a person feels perplexed by the things they face daily, can they find themselves singing one of these songs to be edified, encouraged, and inspired to carry on? 3. When listening to these songs, ask yourself, do they convey the hope of salvation Jesus Christ offers to all men? At the end of each CD, if you can answer yes to any of these questions, Holy Hip-Hop’s mission has been accomplished.³

It is clear from this definition that, according to I.D.O.L. King, Christian Hip Hop’s mission is a ministry. It must provide its audience with a sense of hope, guidelines for a path towards salvation, and strict advice on how to live one’s daily life. As with gospel music, hope and salvation is prioritized in the message of each song.

The next definition comes from DJ Wade-O, a Christian Hip Hop radio DJ, in the introduction to Gault and Harris’s *Beyond Christian Hip Hop* (2019). It reads, “The most accurate statement that would encompass what we’re doing is, hip-hop made by Christians, which has been marketed primarily to Christians... It was definitely a tool for evangelism and encouragement.”⁴ DJ Wade-O makes it clear that the audience of this genre are Christians, i.e., not a secular audience, and the music provides tools of salvation for them. But, in this book, Gault and Harris argue that the scope of Christian Hip Hop is too narrow and that we must view

³ Cassandra Thornton. “Isn’t Loving God Enough: Debating Holy Hip Hop.” *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture*. Edited Emmett G. Price III. (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 110.

⁴ Gault and Harris, *Beyond Christian Hip Hop*, 4.

the genre as “Christians and Hip Hop.”⁵ They argue that by using the terminology “Christians and Hip Hop” it is better able to encompass all types of artists who rap about their Christian faith. While I agree with their argument about the narrowness of “Christian Hip Hop” as a term, for the purposes of this thesis, examining the genre as a unique entity is imperative. Christian Hip Hop is a genre with a specific mission: to evangelize and to provide hope that salvation is possible through Jesus Christ.

Our last definition of Christian Hip Hop comes from Phanatik (a member of the Christian Hip Hop group Cross Movement) in his book *From Hip Hop to Hollywood* (2013) featured in Harris’s chapter of *Beyond Christian Hip Hop*. Phanatik defines Christian Hip Hop and its “four methodological approaches” as follows.

#1 - Produce art that aims to accomplish specifically Christian functions and label it as such, #2 - Produce art that amounts to a Christian effort at the end of the day, but seek to not advertise it or brand it as “Christian”; #3 - produce art that is not specifically Christian in function and also, feel no need to have the Christian label associated with the production; or #4 - produce art that is not necessarily Christian in function and yet, brand and advertise the art as if it is.⁶

Phanatik’s take on Christian Hip Hop casts a wide range of what it could be. What is important, his analysis suggests, is what the art intends to accomplish and how it brands itself. For Chance the Rapper, as this thesis will demonstrate, his approach would fall under the first category, whereas an artist like Lecrae (to be discussed in the second chapter) would fall under the second category.

It is clear that there is not just one definition of Christian Hip Hop, and this definition is constantly changing—redefined often by its own practitioners. For myself (not a Christian Hip

⁵ Gault and Harris, *Beyond Christian Hip Hop*, 5.

⁶ Travis Harris. “A history of Christians and Hip Hop.” *Beyond Christian Hip Hop*. Edited Erika Gault and Travis Harris. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 46.

Hop artist) and the purposes of this thesis, Christian Hip Hop's goal is to evangelize and provide hope to an audience who would not otherwise receive those messages because of their lack of involvement in the church. Christian Hip Hop seeks to reach those who have strayed from the church. In order to do so, it must compete with the worldly pleasures (and righteous social concerns) of secular Hip Hop.

One final note, before delving into what each chapter will accomplish. It is important to note that there is an entire discourse in secular Hip Hop which deals with God. Anthony Pinn (2003)⁷ and Daniel White Hodge (2015)⁸ have both written extensively on the relationship between rappers and God. While artists like Tupac, Kendrick Lamar, and Snoop Dogg discuss—or mention—their relationships with God frequently, I argue that their music does not fit into the definitions provided above. This omission is not intended to question these artists' relationship with God nor cast aspersions on the use of God in their music. It is important, instead, recognize them as artists who are Christians rather than Christian Hip Hop artists. By understanding who is not a part of the genre, the definition of who belongs in Christian Hip Hop becomes clearer—and helps us understand what a unique figure Chance the Rapper is.

The goal of this thesis is to examine how Chance the Rapper created a new community—thus doing more to legitimize and popularize the genre on a national level than any previous artist—of Christian Hip Hop supporters through his formation and use of religious discourse. We will focus on the religious discourse within the song “Finish Line/Drown” from his 2016 mixtape *Coloring Book*. In order to frame the discussion of “Finish Line/Drown,” this thesis will undergo three tasks. Its first chapter will examine previous literature concerning religious discourse in

⁷ Anthony Pinn. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁸ Daniel White Hodge. *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

Christian Hip Hop. While the literature surrounding Christian Hip Hop is still in its early stages, some foundational work has been done by John Michael Spencer, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, Shanesha Brooks-Tatum, Erika Gault, and others. These scholars have taken different approaches to understanding the religious discourse of Christian Hip Hop; by doing a survey of their work, an approach for the song will become clear.

The second chapter will examine the history of Christian Hip Hop and also Chance the Rapper's life story. The survey of the history of Christian Hip Hop will provide Chance's music a placement in the genre. Christian Hip Hop has a history that now spans four decades and this chapter will examine some key artists, record labels, and awards that allowed the genre to develop its religious discourse and build a national audience. The history of Chance the Rapper's life will allow the reader to understand the personal and social context of *Coloring Book* and understand the magnitude of Chance's impact on Christian Hip Hop.

Finally, the third chapter will analyze Chance the Rapper's "Finish Line/Drown"—the penultimate song on *Coloring Book*. It will analyze who participated in making the song, what affects the song's music is intended to have on listeners and lastly, I will interpret the lyrics to explicate themes that Chance is conveying in this song and throughout the album. At the conclusion of this chapter, it will become clear how Chance's use of religious discourse and the way he creates and performs his music developed a new community of Christian Hip Hop listeners. This analysis is important because it not only adds to the existing literature surrounding the religious discourse of Christian Hip Hop, but it is the first study of religious discourse in the music by the most popular Christian Hip Hop artists today - or ever. This study will provide a basis for studying future Christian Hip Hop artists, and provide a point of comparison for how religious discourse in the genre has evolved since its beginnings.

I began this thesis as a listener. Chance the Rapper had been one of my favorite artists prior to the arrival of *Coloring Book*. I remember how excited I was to listen to *Coloring Book* when it first dropped, how excited I was to share the experience with my little brother—a burgeoning Chance fan. *Coloring Book* was so different from anything I had ever heard before. I could not stop listening to Chance’s messages of hope mixed with funny anecdotes about *Space Jam* or Harry Potter. At the beginning of my senior year of college, a full three years after this mixtape dropped, I decided that I wanted to understand why this album spoke to me. I am not African-American. I am not from Chicago. I grew up very privileged. I am not Christian. And yet, Chance spoke to me and millions of others. In this mixtape, I heard things that I related to. This thesis, selfishly, seeks to discover what those things are.

Chapter 1: Survey of Scholarship

There has been much debate in the church over the validity of Christian Hip Hop as a vehicle of evangelical discourse; several pastors and scholars have piped up on either side of the discussion. In Cassandra Thornton's chapter "Isn't Loving God Enough" she uses scripture to question whether what Christian Hip Hop artists were doing was in line with the Bible.⁹ More visibly, Reverend Calvin Butts made national news by purchasing Hip Hop CDs and almost steamrolling them before deciding to have a televised conversation with rapper Ice T in 1993.¹⁰ On the other side of the coin, some ministers, such as Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, have incorporated Christian Hip Hop into their services and discuss its benefits in their book *The Hip Hop Church* (2010).¹¹ Pastor Michael Waters published a book titled *Stakes Is High* (2017) which details his experience with Hip Hop use in the church as well. In addition, Dr. Deborah Pollard Smith discussed the use of Christian Hip Hop in the church, in her book *When the Church Becomes Your Party* (2008), and also traces how the developments in Gospel music were affected by developments in the church. While these scholars have helped to legitimize the genre of Christian Hip Hop as an evangelical tool in churches, there is a lack of scholarly research on the religious discourse and community building of the genre. The third chapter of this thesis will attempt an analysis of a song by a modern Christian Hip Hop artist—Chance the Rapper—employing different approaches that the following scholars have created and used to understand

⁹ Thornton, *Isn't Loving God Enough*, 2012.

¹⁰ Charles Levy. "Harlem Protest of Rap Lyrics Draws Debate and Steamroller." *New York Times*, June 6, 1993. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/06/nyregion/harlem-protest-of-rap-lyrics-draws-debate-and-steamroller.html>.

¹¹ Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson. *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping our Culture*. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005).

religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop. These approaches will be discussed during the remainder of this chapter.

Our survey begins with the renowned scholar John Michael Spencer's theory of "Theomusicology". In his book, *Theological Music* (1991), he explained the basic principles of his theory of Theomusicology. Spencer had been studying Hip Hop music when he realized that he was hearing many different versions of God in music he was listening to. So he applied his musicological background to a theological study of Hip Hop music.¹² What is unique about "theomusicology" is that it is a theory created by and for Black religious music. The result of this is a uniquely powerful lens through which to study Black sacred music and Hip Hop.

Spencer defines theomusicology as "a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane."¹³ The sacred is approached through the study of the performers of rituals and "those elements within the given society and culture that are aspiring toward both a pious stance and a search for a deity."¹⁴ This approach is useful in understanding what the ideal of a pious/sacred person is. The secular approach focuses on those members of society who choose not to be pious or develop a connection with a deity. The profane are those who are viewed as being outside what is considered "good" from the perspective of the sacred. These distinctions are pertinent for the study of Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book* because they encourage us to ask who the song is aimed towards and who belongs in (and who is on the outside of) this song's audience.

¹² John Michael Spencer, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), xi.

¹³ Spencer, *Theological Music*, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Spencer also argues that theomusicological analysis must consider cultural, political, historical, and geographic factors.¹⁵ To do this, he established three analytic approaches to the study of theomusicology; these are descriptive, normative, and predictive approaches.¹⁶ Descriptive theomusicology takes an objective stance toward the study of a musical culture with a focus on “the creators of the music and the consumers within the context of it.”¹⁷ Normative theomusicology builds on the descriptive, while also incorporating a comparison between the music culture’s sacred texts and Biblical messages in order to determine if the cultural sacred texts have canonical value. Lastly, predictive theomusicology analyzes “the future state of affairs to which music speaks or directs a society and/or culture,” and thus is important because it “establishes what the culture may actually be saying about God.”¹⁸ This framework parses out what the God of that culture’s values and how God relates to the members of the culture. Spencer’s theory of theomusicology is useful to the upcoming analysis because it provides an approach to understanding how Christian religious discourse is communicated in Chance the Rapper’s music.

The most significant and relevant work concerning religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop is Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher’s chapter in *Noise and Spirit* titled “African American Christian Rap: Facing ‘Truth’ and Resisting ‘It’.”¹⁹ This chapter examines the religious discourse of early 21st-century Christian Hip Hop artists such as B.B. Jay, Elle R.O.C., Lil’ Raskull, King Cyz, and others. Baker-Fletcher uses Charles Long’s theory of “opacity” and “oppugnancy” in

¹⁵ Spencer, *Theological Music*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 4-5.

¹⁹ Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, “African American Christian Rap: Facing ‘Truth’ and Resisting It.” *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, edited Anthony B. Pinn, 29-48. (New York, New York University Press, 2003).

his analysis. He defines opacity as it relates to the African-American experience as “[facing] the fact of their blackness in a white society that promoted itself as being the most free society in the world. In the face of such ‘truth’ came an amazing capacity to transform the contradiction of freedom in dominant society into life-affirming spiritual health.”²⁰ The religious discourse of Christian Hip Hop, according to this analysis, allows artists to not only address but also subvert the misleading “truth” that they live in a free society. This will become more apparent in Baker-Fletcher’s three truths—discussed later—of Christian Hip Hop.

Long defines “oppugnancy ” in relation to the African-American experience as “creative forms of resistance to the embedded forms of oppression in society,” including “the conversion experience itself.”²¹ Oppugnancy is more readily apparent in Christian Hip Hop because Hip Hop itself is extremely creative and the genre has always been a form of resistance from its earliest days. Baker-Fletcher uses this framework of opacity and oppugnancy to examine religious discourse through “religious symbolism and language.”²²

The three main symbols he discovered were 1) “Homies, ’Da World, ’Da streetz”; 2) “The ‘Devil’ as the personal force of evil”; and 3) “Jesus Christ as a Saving Force.”²³ Through these three symbols, Baker-Fletcher begins to construct the religious discourse of these Christian Hip Hop artists. Briefly, “Homies” represent the community the artist grew up in and around, and on whom they rely for grieving, jubilation, and religiosity.²⁴ “ ’Da World” represents places of mourning, fear, and pain; but those places are also sites of growth for artists as well. Finally, “Da Streetz” are places close to home that are dangerous but have potential for salvation which

²⁰ Baker-Fletcher, *Facing “Truth” and Resisting It*, 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 30.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 31.

is where these artists step in and use their influence and power to spread the word of God. Baker-Fletcher uses the example of B.B. Jay's song "For the Ladies," which urges male-identifying listeners to treat Black women like "Queens" through biblical backing.²⁵ B.B. Jay is entering 'da streetz and showing how following the word of Jesus can lead to salvation for all willing to listen. Nonetheless, Baker-Fletcher also notes how the Bible often undermines this message²⁶

"The Devil," according to Baker-Fletcher, takes on many roles in these songs, but in whatever form, the Devil is responsible for preventing Christian Hip Hop artists from spreading an evangelical, hopeful message. They are "haters," purveyors of "ill" and temptations that cause "homies" to stray away from the Church and from God. As an example, Baker-Fletcher writes, "The devil, for Lil' Raskull, is a hater. His activity continually stirs up malice toward one another in the hearts of homies, leading... to violence."²⁷ The devil's goal, for these rappers, is to tear their communities apart and to create violence and malice.

According to the religious discourse of Holy Hip Hop artists, Jesus Christ is the antidote. All artists prioritize the idea of Jesus as "the only way" to salvation in their music. Through this analysis, Baker-Fletcher derives three "truths" in Christian Hip Hop. The first is that "Gospel messages purge souls of the 'devil' and provide an alternative to 'da streetz." This is why it is so necessary for these Christian artists to spread the message to "homies" on 'da streetz. The second truth is that "Gospel messages are salvific for individuals by opening barriers between ethnicities and cultures." This is important for Christian Hip Hop artists because it creates a message that is not solely for one group of people. This truth enables evangelizing by Christian Hip Hop artists to audience members outside the Christian faith. The last truth is the "individual salvation of

²⁵ Baker-Fletcher, *Facing "Truth" and Resisting It*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 37.

Christ as focus” of their religious discourse. Not only are the artists themselves being saved, but their message is intended to allow individuals to understand Christ’s salvific power.

To conclude, Baker-Fletcher’s analysis of Christian Hip Hop’s religious discourse through the framework of opacity and oppugnancy is important because it provides the mechanics for studying the religious discourse of Christian Hip Hop . It is the first academic writing concerning religious discourse in the genre, and thus it has so far defined the basis of how to examine this topic. However, since this chapter was published in 2003, three of Christian Hip Hop’s most famous practitioners have emerged: Sho Baraka, Lecrae, and Chance the Rapper. Thus, there have been significant growths in the religious discourse of the genre, and the community which these artists are communicating to has grown as well. Because of this it is important to reexamine the religious discourse and messages that today’s artists are sending to their audiences. This thesis will build on Baker-Fletcher’s analysis, in doing so, this article is useful to this thesis’s examination of Chance the Rapper’s song “Finish Line/Drown” because it demonstrates how Christian Hip Hop artists are able to evangelize outside of the Christian community as well as providing a basis for comparison in terms of the development of religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop. This ability to evangelize outside of the Christian community is crucial for Chance, whose audience prior to—and following—the release of *Coloring Book* was secular.

A more modern examination of religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop is Shanesha Brooks-Tatum’s chapter in *Urban God Talk* (2013), which discusses how “Christian hip-hop artists make religion mean something concrete in their lives.”²⁸ Brooks-Tatum examines six Christian spoken word poets and Christian Hip Hop artists’ religious discourse. She discerns two

²⁸ Brooks-Tatum, *In the Church, In the Streets*, 209.

types of discourse: “1) songs and poems that explicitly reference their faith practice and ask others to consider their perspectives on and experiences with religion and spirituality and 2) works that are not explicitly religious but are relatable to wider audiences.”²⁹ Brooks-Tatum concludes that “opening up our definitions of Christian artistic expression... helps move us beyond binary [Christian or not]... into a more realistic and representative picture of the diversity of artistic expression in black urban cultures.”³⁰ This contributes to this thesis’s analysis because it offers a definition of religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop. This definition is vital to understanding how Chance the Rapper is able to create a new community of Christian Hip Hop supporters through this discourse.

More recent studies of Christian Hip Hop have been taken on by Erika D. Gault both in 2013 and in 2015. The 2013 piece is titled “My Soul Knows How to Flow: A Critical Analysis of the History of Urban Black Christian-Themed Rap” which is a chapter in the book *Urban God Talk* (2013) edited by Andre E. Johnson. In this piece, Gault breaks down and analyzes how major movements in the African-American Church and in the secular Hip Hop industry affected the development of the Christian Hip Hop genre. Gault emphasizes where the genre has succeeded and where it has had shortcomings throughout its history. She argues that “Earlier Christian rap albums failed because many felt [Christian Rap] did not embody a sense of place.”³¹ This sense of place, she argues, was central to secular music but because early Christian

²⁹ Shaneshia R.F. Brooks-Tatum, “In the Church, In the Streets: A Spectrum of Religious Expression in Christian Hip Hop and Spoken Word Poetry.” *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality*. Edited by Andre E. Johnson. (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2013), 213.

³⁰ Ibid, 220.

³¹ Erika Gault, “My Soul Knows How to Flow,” *Urban God Talk*. Edited by Andre Johnson. (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books) 2013, 175.

Hip Hop artists focused solely on praising Jesus and not on their spaces or issues surrounding their communities they lacked the support of non-Christian audiences.

Gault also emphasizes the importance of artists outside the rap genre who popularized the “Jesus Movement” such as André Crouch. These artists allowed the public to understand how Christ could be applicable to their lives, which allowed Christian Hip Hop to become more relevant to a secular audience. In addition, a new generation of ministers who had listened to Hip Hop and Christian Rap were becoming leading voices in the Black Church such as Bishop T.D. Jakes, Bishop Eddie Long, and Carlton Pearson. These ministers were more open to the idea of Christian Hip Hop being incorporated in the church and progressing the church towards a more youth-oriented and middle-class message.

The last major evolution—according to Gault—is the conversion of secular artists to ministry in the late 1990s to the early 2000s. MC Hammer had become an ordained minister in the early 1990s and had topped Billboard Charts with his song “Pray.” This was an important step for Christian Hip Hop, but nonetheless it was not until the early 2000s that Christian Hip Hop ministers became famous. The rapper-turned-minister Murda Mase became famous for his incorporation of hip hop into his sermons—which furthered questions of where Christian Hip Hop fit into the church. The emergence of world renowned Kirk Franklin also occurred during this period. Kirk Franklin blends Gospel, Soul, and Rhythm and Blues into his Christian-based music. His popularity both in the church and in secular audiences pushed the church to question what kinds of music belonged in and out of the church. These artists would set the stage for Chance the Rapper, who similarly began his career as a secular artist before recommitting himself to Christianity and beginning to make Christian Hip Hop.

Erika Gault’s analysis of the history of Christian Hip Hop is very useful in three specific ways. First, it provides a history of the Black church’s reaction to Christian Hip Hop and discusses how major movements within the church affected its relationship with Christian Hip Hop. Secondly, it discusses underlying issues surrounding Christian Hip Hop including its lack of a sense of place in its early iterations, and its issues surrounding potentially appropriating white Christian Hip Hop groups like dc Talk and their popularity among white audiences but not black audiences. Lastly, her analysis emphasizes the importance of technologies including television—and televangelists—in the evolution of religious discourse and increase in audience and popularity. Chance has made multiple appearances on television shows like Saturday Night Live and the Tonight Show performing songs from *Coloring Book*. By doing this, Chance is evangelizing to a wide audience.

Gault’s chapter in *The Borders of Subculture* (2015, edited by Dhoest et al) is titled “Why Are All Gospel Rappers Online?”. In it, Gault examines the online community that Christian Hip Hop artists have created in her hometown of Buffalo and why the online platform has enabled them to find success. She uses Facebook posts, Twitter threads, and YouTube videos as texts for understanding why online platforms were so successful for these artists. In addition, she interviewed artists and audiences to determine how this platform can bring together sub/countercultural groups (in this case Christian rappers). She argues for the concept of “power diffusion” through the internet which has broken down “traditional power structures in the Black Church” and replaced traditional leaders such as preachers and bishops with Christian artists who speak to youth in a new way about their faith.³² She argues that because of this and through “affirmation and dialogue, building personal connections and group administration, a new, non-

³² Gault, *Why are All Gospel Rappers Online?* 90.

restricted community of Gospel rappers has developed beyond the purvey of secular and sacred entities.”³³ This certainly applies to Chance the Rapper, whose fan base grew because of his presence online through mixtape sites like Datpiff.com and Soundcloud.com and his presence on Twitter and Instagram.

Gault concludes that online platforms have allowed Christian Rap artists to create communities and thus resist social norms established by secular Hip Hop artists by affirming each other’s messages and by connecting their audience to them. This article is important for understanding how technology has enabled Christian artists to connect and create community. This is important for this thesis because Chance the Rapper relies heavily on internet streaming services for widening his audience and creating his community because those services allow his music to be free to download.

Travis Harris’s article in the first edition of *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* is titled “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop” (2014). In this article, Harris examines “Christians in Hip Hop in order to help combat this limited view of the genre and provide a comprehensive definition of Hip Hop.”³⁴ Harris uses Lecrae—who is known for making Christian-themed music but rejecting the label of Christian Hip Hop—as a paradigmatic example, to attempt to broaden what type of music can fit in the definition of Hip Hop broadly. In addition, Lecrae is the first Christian-themed Hip Hop artist to win a Grammy—which he did in 2013 for his album *Gravity*. An analysis of Lecrae’s personal

³³ Erika Gault, “Why Are All Gospel Rappers Online?: The Role of Social Media Sites in Building Communities in Buffalo, New York.” *In The Borders of Subculture: Resistance and the mainstream*, edited by Alexander Dhoest. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 90.

³⁴ Travis Harris, “*Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop.*” (*Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014)),14-15.

story and his comments on Christian Hip Hop as a genre become the basis for Harris's argument that Christian-themed Hip Hop should be incorporated into secular Hip Hop more broadly.

Lecrae's life story parallels many rappers'. Lecrae grew up impoverished with temptations of gangs and drugs all around him. When he was a teenager he found a group of friends who balanced their faith in Christ with dressing and acting cool. Because of this, his "background is significant in the development of a theology that provides sustenance to those in a needy situation."³⁵ Lecrae's life is relatable to much of his audience and Harris argues that this is one of the reasons his music is so popular. As his fame rose, he had to figure out whether he was going to label himself a Christian rapper and "fall into non-existence" or continue to describe himself as a secular artist and hope that his Christian message would stick because his audience "is looking for someone that relates to them."³⁶ Lecrae found a large audience of both Christian and secular listeners who are looking for a rapper that "understands the issues underprivileged are facing."³⁷ Because of Lecrae's success among secular audiences, Harris suggests that use of the terms "sacred" and "secular" should be discontinued because it would "lead to the recognition of Lecrae and other Christian as a part of Hip Hop and not a distinct group."³⁸ This joins a larger conversation with Cone (1992) and Bartlow (2010), who argue that sacred and secular should not be pitted against each other especially when examining the African-American church and its music.

Harris argues that labeling Lecrae a Christian Hip Hop artist "limited Lecrae's ability to go beyond the church and his immediate surroundings." Instead, by examining him as a secular artist, Harris's analysis "provides fresh ways in understanding the link between music and life.

³⁵ Harris, *Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop*, 24.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 25.

³⁸ Ibid, 28.

[Lecrae] reveals how the growth in his ministry experience affected both his ability to have a wider audience and his music.”³⁹ This is an important step forward in the analysis of Christian Hip Hop because it addresses what it really means to be a Christian Hip Hop artist and how that label changes who the audience is and how the artist is received. Chance the Rapper has complicated this idea by labeling himself as a Christian Hip Hop artist and then finding immense success. In addition, Phanatik’s definition (discussed in the Introduction) would incorporate Lecrae’s music because it still maintains a Christian message even though it is not branded as such. Harris’s article is important to this study because it provides an alternative view on how the “Christian Hip Hop” label changes an artist’s audience, and it also provides literature on one of the current era’s other major Christian-centric Hip Hop artists.

This chapter’s purpose is to understand what scholarship, templates, and approaches different scholars have used to study religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop. This selective review is not exhaustive, yet it nonetheless provides a useful array of approaches. This survey will contextualize Chapter Three’s analysis of Chance the Rapper’s “Finish Line/Drown” within these other analyses. What is clear from these approaches is that there is a lack of discussion on the creation of a new community through religious discourse; this analysis will fill that gap.

³⁹ Harris, *Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop*, 32.

Chapter 2

A History of Christian Hip Hop

This chapter will explore the history of Christian Hip Hop—its artists, its sound, its record labels, and its reception—before Chance the Rapper declared himself a Christian rapper in 2015. It will then provide a history of Chance the Rapper’s career and the events that led up to his mixtape *Coloring Book* and its song “Finish Line/Drown,” which will be examined in the third chapter. This chapter is in conversation with Sorett (2011), Thornton (2011), Gault (2015), and Harris (2019), each of whom adds a different perspective and approach to understanding this genre’s often overlooked history.

What was the first Christian Hip Hop song? This question is debated between the scholars listed above. However, all agree that the earliest full-length album of evangelical messages over a Hip Hop beat is *Bible Break* by Stephen Wiley. Stephen Wiley was a rapper turned minister when he released *Bible Break* in 1986. His goal was to communicate his “reality through the same freeing form after hearing the voice of God” telling him to spread the gospel.⁴⁰ *Bible Break*—which became a hit on Christian radio—opened the door for other rappers to create music about Jesus directed at educating youth about the power of the church. These early artists include Rev. Rhyme and the Rappin’ Reverend as well as MC Debbie D.

This first wave (c.1986-1990) of Christian Hip Hop was not commercially successful in large part because its music is not high quality nor was its lyrical complexity well developed.⁴¹ For example, Rappin’ Reverend’s tune “I Ain’t Into That”⁴² simply lists different activities—

⁴⁰ Justin Sarachik, “Stephen Wiley And The Birth Of Christian Hip-Hop.” Rapzilla.com, November 18, 2016.

<https://rapzilla.com/2016-11-stephen-wiley-and-the-birth-of-christian-hip-hop-interview/>.

⁴¹ Travis Harris, “A history of Christians and Hip Hop.” Beyond Christian Hip Hop. Edited Erika Gault and Travis Harris. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 43.

⁴² “I Ain’t Into That.” The Rappin’ Reverend. *I Ain’t Into That*. Cooltempo, Vinyl. Released in 1987.

many of which were promoted by secular rappers—that the Rappin’ Reverend is not into, including: “No poppin’ pills, no smoking weed, no skipping school, no acting a fool” over a disco-sounding beat. For youth who may be around such activities and also listening to much more popular secular Hip Hop, playing this song would not have made them any friends.

However, these early artists laid the foundations for what Christian Hip Hop was, and what it could be. These artists recounted Christian messages—like being kind to your family and friends, and keeping faith in Jesus Christ—through a platform they thought would reach out to youth and attract them to the church. They placed “God-talk” on Hip Hop beats and delivered the message with a Hip Hop flow. In order to widen Christian Hip Hop’s audience, though, future artists would need to change up the mode of their storytelling, modernize the music, and continue to evolve the religious discourse, while keeping God and the Bible’s message as a priority in their music.

Gault (2013) speculates that another crucial reason early Christian Hip Hop did not take off because “it did not embody a sense of place.”⁴³ Popular artists such as Run DMC embodied their hometowns in their music and fashion, whereas, early Christian Hip Hop artists did not attempt to create a sense of place in their music and instead focused on creating an evangelical message. This hurt Christian Hip Hop because it made it significantly more difficult to create a following as many secular rappers had in their communities. Thus, as Gault’s analysis foreshadows, in order to gain success nationally, Christian Hip Hop would need to incorporate a sense of place into its discourse.

⁴³ Erika Gault, “My Soul Knows How to Flow: A Critical Analysis of the History of Urban Black Christian-Themed Rap.” *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality*. Edited by Andre E. Johnson, (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2013), 175.

Cassandra Thornton defines the second wave (c.1987-2004) of Christian Hip Hop artists as “an organized evangelistic movement to reach those in the Hip Hop Culture.”⁴⁴ She lists groups such as Cross Movement and individuals like Elle R.O.C. as being a part of this generation. The rise of groups like Cross Movement, but also JC & The Boyz and dc Talk, are a significant part of the second wave as well. Christian Hip Hop first began to find a wider audience because these artists’ sound began to emulate other popular rap groups during the late ’80s and early ’90s.

Cross Movement, a Philadelphia based group, considered itself as a group of ministers who wanted to “fuel an authentic movement mainly among those of an urban mindset who desired to see Christ, His people and His perspective represented in the culture.”⁴⁵ The name Cross Movement comes from some word-play; they were a cross-over of ministry and secular Hip Hop while also referencing the Cross in their name.⁴⁶ They created a record label for Christian Hip Hop artists but would also put out collective albums as well. Harris asserts that while Cross Movement was popular and necessary for the development of Christian Hip Hop, their success was questioned by other Christian groups such as Tunnel Rats, who believed that Cross Movement was merely using the Bible in their lyrics but not “embodying theology.”⁴⁷ Harris understands this “embodying theology” as not simply having an evangelical message, but also following up on their actions in the community. The Tunnel Rats were a Los Angeles-based group that believed they were “Christians who became rappers” and often faced racism because of their Latinx heritage.⁴⁸ Cross Movement retorted that Tunnel Rats were not Christian artists

⁴⁴ Thornton, *Isn't Loving God Enough?*, 117.

⁴⁵ Cross Movement Records. “Home.” Accessed March 25, 2020. <http://crossmovement.com/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Harris, *A History of Christians and Hip Hop*, 46.

⁴⁸ Jason Birchmeier. “The Tunnel Rats.” Allmusic.com, accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-tunnel-rats-mn0000919289/biography>.

because they did not reference Christ in their lyrics.⁴⁹ These inside debates are not unique to Christian Hip Hop, and are actually very important for creating the boundaries for what Christian Hip Hop is: who is seen as belonging within the genre, and who is not. The debate between the Tunnel Rats and Cross Movement ultimately settled without conclusion; both groups continued to make music in a way they thought best spread evangelical messages. However, in order for Christian Hip Hop to succeed, as we'll see, the music would have to embody the theology.

Solo artists, such as B.B. Jay, Elle Roc, and Lil' Raskull were also important in modernizing and popularizing the genre. While none maintained huge fame, their efforts to reboot Christian Hip Hop during the second wave—c.1987-2004—changed the course of the genre. (E-Roc is the first female artist to produce Christian Hip Hop music and while little is known about her she is responsible for setting the stage for an entire generation of Christian female MCs.)⁵⁰ These artists began to declare themselves as prophets sent by God, and this has become common practice throughout all Hip Hop artists during the late 1980s through today. By naming themselves prophets, they were proclaiming that they had a divine right to speak their truth to the people.⁵¹

For instance, B.B. Jay raps on his song “His Love” (2000), “One father, one son, one spirit, but many anointed lyrics/Flow from the heart like a stream/It's a beautiful thing to represent Christ the king, kno' mean.”⁵² B.B. Jay is declaring his words as “anointed” (by God) and that he represents Christ in his music. What separates this discourse from secular Hip Hop's is that God and evangelizing is the focal point of the music. The point of all this “prophetizing” was to demonstrate Jesus's salvific power. According to these rappers, “Jesus Christ is the ‘only

⁴⁹ Harris, *A Brief History of Christians and Hip Hop*, 45.

⁵⁰ Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *Facing “Truth” and Resisting It*, 35.

⁵¹ For further reading on African-American prophets, turn to Cornel West's *Prophecy Deliverance* (1982).

⁵² “His Love” BB Jay. *Universal Concussion*, Track 6. Jive Records, Compact Disc. Released in 2000.

way' ... for thugs, homies, and all those whose lives have been affected by the powerful negativity of da streetz."⁵³ By doing this, demonstrating God's salvific power, Christian Hip Hop artists were growing the community of supporters. For these artists, this form of prophetizing was embodying the theology of Christianity in their everyday lives.

The other major aspect of second-wave Christian Hip Hop was the creation of record labels that were Christian Hip-Hop specific. The earliest record label to sign Christian Hip Hop artists was Grapetree records—which was founded in 1993.⁵⁴ One of the major record labels that still exists today is Cross Movement—some of whom, as previously mentioned, also formed a rap group and produced some of this wave's biggest hits. In addition to Cross Movement, Gotee Records (founded 1994) was one of the first to market itself nationally as solely a Christian Hip Hop label.⁵⁵ These record labels provided Christian Hip Hop artists with a way to create the music in a way they wanted to, without feeling like they had to conform to others' ideas about what Hip Hop should sound like and what its message should be. Through these labels, the genre was able to turn into an industry. Harris argues that these record labels are crucially important for the unification of the genre and increasing its popularity.⁵⁶ In addition, these record labels put on tours and festivals, which also helped grow its audience and created a community around these artists.

The implications that this second wave of Christian Hip Hop artists had were numerous. Not only did these artists and record labels bring the genre sonically closer to the popular music at the time but they also widened the genre's audience and created a community of Jesus-worshipping hip hop listeners. The religious discourse of the genre changed as well, from

⁵³ Baker-Fletcher, *Facing "Truth" and Resisting It*, 39.

⁵⁴ Harris, *A Brief History of Christians and Hip Hop*, 52.

⁵⁵ Gotee Records. "About Us." Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.gotee.com/about>.

⁵⁶ Harris, *A Brief History of Christians and Hip Hop*, 48.

previously being simply a simple retelling of Bible stories to a better established description of what it meant to be a Christian and to worship God. This included incorporating secular hip-hop tropes like creating beef and proclaiming holy power. In addition, groups were developing more sophisticated descriptions of God and their beliefs. For example, Cross Movement's song "I Am That I Am" contains the lyrics in the chorus and the bridge, "Forever present; I AM That I AM Forever future; I AM That I AM The Great; I AM That I AM, That I AM/ He's Omnipresent' ('to the'-(Alternates)) Up- down- left- right- broad- day- light- door- way- truth- life- Father- Spirit- Jesus Christ."⁵⁷ For Cross Movement, God is everywhere. By making this statement, they are telling their audience to always act in a Christian way because God is always watching. Theirs is a far more sophisticated way of spreading Biblical messages than, for instance, the Rappin' Reverend's song "I Ain't Into That."

Since the turn of the century, Christian Hip Hop has become well established enough to top the Billboard charts nationally and internationally. It has also continued to expand the complexity of its beats and its religious discourse via a growing internet presence and communities like Rapzilla.com. Harris and Gault both comment on the importance of the Internet to Christian Hip Hop. In Gault's ethnography "Why Are All Gospel Rappers online?", in *The Borders of Subculture* (2015), she argues that online communities have allowed for the Christian Hip Hop artists to create a community of support and sharing of music and videos through what she categorizes as "dialoguing" and "affirming."⁵⁸ Harris (2019) also notes the importance of online sites for the creation of a community of Gospel rappers around the world.⁵⁹ The website Rapzilla.com (established in 2008) became a hub for all Christian Hip Hop fans to

⁵⁷ "I am that I am," Cross Movement. *House of Representatives*, Track 8. Cross Movement Records, Compact Disc. Released in 1999.

⁵⁸ Gault, *My Soul Knows How to Flow*, 93.

⁵⁹ Harris, *A Brief History of Christians and Hip Hop*, 52.

come together and discover new music and listen to older music as well. They provide a platform for new artists to post their music and videos, and a space where new artists know they will be in a community of other artists and fans. (One of the results of this growing online platform is an increase in female Christian Hip Hop artists: a group that was significantly underrepresented in the previous generations. Female artists now include Wande, Kay Sade, and V. Rose who have all made waves in the genre.) Rapzilla.com also provides a platform for Christian Hip Hop artists to produce music videos for their audiences. These videos allow artists to present their message not only musically but also visually.

In the 21st century, Christian Hip Hop has continued to develop its own unique sound and message. The genre's popularity has been driven by two-third wave artists: Sho Baraka and Lecrae. Sho Baraka, whose career started in 2004, is known for being a very socially conscious artist. He often raps about social issues surrounding both African-Americans and Christians in his music; on his tracks he talks about issues ranging from police brutality to corrupt politicians. His music has entered the top 100 Billboard chart nationally. Lecrae, who also got his start in 2004, has won multiple Grammy awards, for his Biblically-inspired and God-conscious music. Even though Lecrae places himself outside of the Christian Hip Hop genre, his national and international success has also pushed the genre forward and expanded its audience.

A further development in Christian Hip Hop is the establishment of the Gospel Music Award Dove Awards—these were started in 1991. The Dove Awards have a category specifically for Christian Hip Hop and Rap albums along with Gospel, Christian Rock, and other religious music awards.⁶⁰ This not only has helped legitimize the genre among other Christian music fans but it also provides recognition for artists in the genre and creates a community

⁶⁰ GMA Dove Awards. "2019 Winners." Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://doveawards.com/awards/2019-winners/>.

among those peers. Lastly, Christian Hip Hop has been minorly successful on music's highest award: the Grammy Awards. The group dc Talk—a Christian Rock and Hip Hop group—won best Christian album in 1994 and Lecrae has won two Grammys and been nominated for 5 ranging from Best Gospel to Best Rap performance. Most recently, Chance the Rapper won the 2017 Best Rap Album for his mixtape *Coloring Book*.

To conclude, Christian Hip Hop has had a long history of playing the second fiddle to secular Hip Hop, during which time it has grown and developed and established the boundaries of which artists belong within the genre and what the message of the music should be. In addition, the community that Christian Hip Hop established during this time was primarily Christian practitioners. We now turn to a history of Chance the Rapper, the artist who took this genre and almost single-handedly made Christian Hip Hop popular with a mainstream audience and created a new community of Christian Hip Hop fans through his use of religious discourse.

Chance the Rapper

Chance the Rapper was born in 1993 as Chancellor Bennett. His father was an aide to the Chicago mayor, and later then-Senator Barack Obama. Chance grew up in a middle-class household on the west side of Chicago. His grandmother was a devout Christian and would bring the adolescent Chance to church and Sunday School every week. Chance grew up constantly surrounded by music but once he heard Kanye West for the first time, he was sold on becoming a rapper.

Chance's only run-in with the law occurred in his senior year of high school when he was suspended for 10 days for being caught with marijuana on campus. He recalls his grandmother praying over him after this incident, saying, 'I don't like what's going on... I can see it in your

eyes. I don't like this... We're gonna pray... Lord, I pray that all things that are not like You, You take away from Chance. Make sure that he fails at everything that is not like You. Take it away. Turn it into dust.”⁶¹ Chance felt that his grandmother was giving a benediction to him to change his life. It took him a few years, but he did return to God.

This suspension would inspire the title of his first mixtape, *10 Day*, which was released in 2012. Mixtapes are free albums that are released by artists, often through an underground source. They are low-budget projects that spread the artist’s music around easily. It is important to emphasize the importance of the mixtape. Mixtapes are free, as stated above, for audiences, but they also represent freedom for the artists. Mixtapes are not controlled by labels, therefore, the artist has the freedom to say what they want, to make their music sound however they want, and to distribute it to whomever they choose. This freedom would remain persistent throughout Chance’s career.

10 Day was greeted with a lot of praise from music critics across the Internet. Chance was fortunate to have access to DatPiff.com, which is a website that allows all artists to put up their mixtapes for free. *10 Day* has been downloaded over 500,000 times and remains one of DatPiff’s most popular mixtapes ever. Following the success of *10 Day*, Chance released the much-anticipated mixtape *Acid Rap* in 2013. This mixtape became even more popular, and featured famous Chicago rappers such as Twista, BJ the Chicago Kid, and Childish Gambino. This mixtape still ranks in the top 15 of DatPiff’s all-time mixtapes with over 1.7 million downloads. This mixtape put Chance into the national eye, and he began to open for superstars such as Justin Bieber and began to play festivals such as Bonnaroo.

⁶¹ Zach Baron, “How Chance the Rapper’s Life Became Perfect.” GQ.com, August 24, 2016. <https://www.gq.com/story/how-chance-the-rappers-life-became-perfect>.

Chance was invited to go on tour with Childish Gambino and later Macklemore—both of which were international tours. These tours continued to increase Chance’s fame and wealth. This led him to the temptations that often follow young artists: drugs. He moved to Los Angeles into English artist James Blake’s house in Los Angeles and there he “Mostly just hung out, did drugs, saw girls.”⁶² It was in Los Angeles that Chance the Rapper became addicted to Xanax and drifted away from his faith in God. Chance was working closely with James Blake on completing another mixtape and was able to release one song but overall his time in Los Angeles proved to be “ungodly, it wasn’t true to who I was born to be or what I was supposed to grow to be.”⁶³ Chance was hardly releasing music and spent most of his days “just fucking tweaking. I was a Xan-zombie, fucking not doing anything productive and just going through relationship after relationship after relationship. Mind you, this is six months.”⁶⁴ Chance realized he needed to return to Chicago.

In Chicago, Chance (as Zach Baron of GQ magazine puts it), “Got demons out of his life. Got back to his God, got back to Chicago in him—all the things that would eventually pump through *Coloring Book* like blood.”⁶⁵ He also got back together with his high school friends who had a group called Social Experiment. He got clean. This return to Chicago harkens to a conversion experience for Chance. He completely changed his life and re-found his faith in God upon his return to Chicago. Then, in 2015, Chance released the song “Sunday Candy” with The Social Experiment. This song demonstrated a new direction for Chance: one towards God. It detailed his relationship with his grandmother who, even through all the low points in his life,

⁶² Baron, “How Chance the Rapper’s Life Became Perfect.”

⁶³ Brian Zisook “Why Chance The Rapper Returned to Chicago After "Ungodly" Experience in LA.” DJ Booth, October 3, 2018. <https://djbooth.net/features/2017-03-03-chance-the-rapper-chicago-to-la>.

⁶⁴ Baron, “How Chance the Rapper’s Life Became Perfect.”

⁶⁵ Ibid.

was still his biggest fan and still was the driving evangelical force in his life. Following this song was the release of the full album *Surf* (2015) which was produced and heavily featured Chance and his friends in Social Experiment. While this album did not become extremely popular it solidified Chance's relationship to the band. Then, in a leaked song by Chance featuring rappers Alex Wiley and Mick Jenkins titled "Grown Ass Kid," Chance rapped "Your favorite rapper's a Christian rapper." Chance declared that he was a Christian Hip Hop artist and by claiming that title he placed himself in the genre as the newest evolution of Christian Hip Hop. In addition, he began posting significantly about his rediscovered faith on social media.

It is important now to understand what was occurring in Chicago around the time of Chance's 2016 mixtape *Coloring Book*. At the time, the most recent musical evolution to come out of Chicago was Drill rap, which was a type of rap that highly promoted violence and gang culture. Artists like Chief Keef, Lil' Durk, and Lil' Reese were topping charts with their Drill rap and they had become the representatives of Chicago Hip Hop in the national consciousness. In addition, gun violence was rising dramatically in the Southside of Chicago, which is historically black. In 2016 there were 762 homicides which was the highest in 20 years.⁶⁶ It was an incredibly bloody summer as well. In addition, two years prior, 17-year-old Laquon McDonald was shot and killed by a Chicago police officer; the following investigation into the Chicago Police Department showed that there was excessive force encouraged in the department. In addition, despite many protests, Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel was re-elected in 2015 to much disapproval from African-American Chicagoans. While Chance does not discuss the Laquon McDonald shooting in his music, he does denounce Rahm Emmanuel and discusses police shootings and brutality on *Coloring Book*. While he does not name it as such, his use of

⁶⁶ Azadeh Ansari, "Chicago's 762 homicides in 2016 is highest in 19 years." CNN.com, January 2, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/01/us/chicago-murders-2016/index.html>.

the Devil throughout the album could resemble BB Jay, Lil' Raskull, and Elle R.O.C.'s use as discussed in Baker-Fletcher's article.

In Chance's personal life, he and his girlfriend Kristen Corley were expecting their first daughter when they discovered their unborn child had atrial flutters.⁶⁷ He and Kristen were very nervous, but this ordeal ultimately brought their relationship closer. Chance also reflected that "it made me pray a whole lot, you know, and need a lot of angels and just see shit in a very, like, direct way. And...you know, God bless everything, it worked out well."⁶⁸ His daughter Kensli was born healthy in 2015. All of these events inspired Chance's third mixtape. He states that the themes for this album were "God, love, Chicago, dance."⁶⁹ He, his girlfriend Kristen, and Kensli spent many nights sleeping in the studio as Chance worked around the clock creating *Coloring Book*.

Coloring Book was released on May 13, 2016 after the single "Angels" was released in late 2015. It received significant critical acclaim. It received a 9.1 (out of 10) from popular music site Pitchfork and a 4 (out of 5) star review from *Rolling Stone*. On Spotify, the song "No Problems" has amassed over 374 million plays.⁷⁰ But most importantly, it won Chance the Grammy award for Best Rap Album. This made him the first artist to win that award while not being signed to any record label, and to win solely based on online streaming services.

Following the popularity of this mixtape, Chance went on multiple international tours—headlining this time. He was featured on many late-night talk shows, was a three-time guest on *Saturday Night Live* and began making music with some of the most popular musicians like Migos, DJ Khaled, Cardi B, and Kanye West. In addition, Chance became very politically active.

⁶⁷ Baron, "How Chance the Rapper's Life Became Perfect."

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Baron, "How Chance the Rapper's Life Became Perfect."

⁷⁰ As of March 2020.

He campaigned for Dr. Amara Enyia's campaign for mayor of Chicago. He also began to start groundwork in Chicago to provide youth with significantly more musical opportunities and outlets. One of the most popular is Open Mike, where all Chicagoans are given a space to demonstrate their art: whether it be poetry, rap, or any other kind of performance. In 2019, he released his first album—although he is still unsigned by any label—*The Big Day*, which details his wedding day with Kristen Bennett.

To conclude, Chance is the most successful artist in the history of Christian Hip Hop and his story is different from many of his contemporaries in the industry. Nonetheless, he joined a well-established—albeit not nationally recognized—genre of music which has developed in terms of its music and its message. The genre's established record labels and online communities focus on putting evangelical Christian messages over Hip Hop beats and with Hip Hop flows to attract more people to God, and to ensure his audiences in the salvific power of Christ. It is important to know this going into the following analysis, because it contextualizes Chance's music within the wider history of Christian Hip Hop and also provides a comparison point for future research. This analysis also provides context for Chance's life and what the environment he was in prior to the creation of *Coloring Book*. The next chapter will analyze Chance the Rapper's music, and demonstrate that its success is due to this the artist's unique ability to overcome Christian Hip Hop's historical shortcomings: low-quality of music, simplistic lyrics, lack of a sense of place, and a lack of embodying the theology in order to create a new community of Christian Hip Hop fans.

Chapter 3

This chapter will analyze “Finish Line/Drown,” the penultimate song on Chance the Rapper’s 2016 mixtape *Coloring Book*. This song features guest artists T-Pain, Noname, Eryn Allen Kane, and Kirk Franklin. It is the longest song in length (6:47) and one of the most diverse musically because of its many voices, instruments, and melodies. This chapter will first examine who is involved in “Finish Line/Drown” and why they are important vehicles for the messages in the song. Second, it will analyze how the song’s beat and music reflect and promote the religious discourse embedded within the lyrics which will be analyzed following the music. Third, I will interpret the musicians, sounds, and lyrics to understand what messages Chance the Rapper is conveying through this song. This analysis will conclude by arguing why this song and Christian Hip Hop is worthy of close attention by those interested in religious discourse. This analysis will take aspects of previous work by Gault (2011 and 2015), Harris (2011), and Baker-Fletcher (2004) all of whom have taken different approaches to studying Christian Hip Hop’s sound and religious discourse. This chapter seeks to demonstrate how Chance the Rapper was able to create a new community of Christian Hip Hop supporters by creating a new religious discourse.

Community

Before analyzing the music, lyrics, and themes of “Finish Line/Drown” it is important to know who contributed to the song. The songwriters are listed as Chancellor Bennett (Chance the Rapper), Nate Fox (Chance’s main producer), Peter Cottontale (Chance’s longtime pianist), Greg Landfair (Chance’s drummer, known as Stix), Faheem Najm (rapper T-Pain), Eryn Allen Kane (Chicago-based Rhythm & Blues artist), and Rajiv Halim (Chance’s saxophonist). In addition, the Chicago Children’s Choir and gospel singer Kirk Franklin’s voices are featured prominently

on the song. It is unclear whether all of these artists are Christian. Most likely, many are not. With that being said, as previously mentioned, Kirk Franklin is a Gospel artist and the Children's Choir is a Christian group as well. In addition, Faheem Najm (T-Pain) grew up Muslim and yet during his Chorus references Jesus Christ. But, whether they are Christian or not does not matter because through these musicians, Chance is creating a community that is supra-religion; a community that has hope and faith regardless of race, class, geographic location, and religion.

The Chicago Children's Choir is a non-profit organization that "inspires and unites youth from diverse backgrounds to become global citizens through music... [through a] vast network of in-school and after-school programs serving 5,200 students across the city of Chicago."⁷¹ In addition, Noname Gypsy—or just Noname—is also featured prominently on the song; her verse opens the song "Drown." Noname is one of Chance's close friends and has had verses on his previous mixtapes as well. She was a secular rapper and poet who would quit music in 2019 because she was frustrated "with her predominantly white audience."⁷² In this song she discusses her personal relationship with God. What is clear is that the significant portion of these artists—excluding T-Pain and Kirk Franklin—are Chicago born and raised and have worked with Chance previously. Throughout the song, there are references to Chicago being saved and this message is further emphasized by having voices that represent Christian Chicagoans repeating those messages.

Chance also includes two non-Chicago based musicians. Faheem Najm, known as T-Pain, is a Florida-based Hip Hop and R & B artist who became internationally famous for his use

⁷¹ Chicago Children's Choir. "About us." Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://ccchoir.org/about/>.

⁷² Graves, Wren. "Noname may quit music, says she won't perform for mostly white audiences." November 30, 2019. <https://consequenceofsound.net/2019/11/noname-may-quit-music-wont-perform-for-mostly-white-audiences/>.

of autotune and his songs “Buy U A Drank” and “Bartender.”⁷³ T-Pain is known as a secular artist who grew up a Muslim but lost his faith as he grew up. Kirk Franklin is a Gospel musician from Fort Worth, Texas who has been described as the “Reigning King of Urban Gospel”.⁷⁴ He has won 14 Grammy Awards in both Gospel and R&B categories and many other awards. Kirk has popularized Gospel music by combining aspects of R&B, Soul, and Hip Hop into his music. His voice is well-known among any Christian music listeners as well as many secular listeners.

The significance of these two artists is that they represent the two audiences’ to whom Chance is reaching out to. His secular audience will of course recognize T-Pain’s autotune and his Christian audience will know Kirk Franklin’s voice immediately. The notoriety of these two artists demonstrates how Chance is able to proselytize to a wide audience through his collaborators. Other prominent artists on this mixtape include Lil’ Wayne, Future, Kanye West, Young Thug, Justin Bieber, and Jay Electronica. Chance is able to bridge the gap between sacred and secular music. Again, while some of these artists are Christian musicians, some are practicing Christians, and others are secular, Chance is creating a new community with his community. His message transcends race, religion, and locality. To be self-reflective, I am a white male from Boston at a private liberal arts college and have few shared experiences with Chance but his message still affects me.

Sound

“Finish Line/Drown” is a hybrid of two songs on one track. This is not uncommon on Chance the Rapper’s mixtapes. (For instance, his 2013 project *Acid Rap* contains the track

⁷³ MusicBrainz. “T-Pain.” Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://musicbrainz.org/artist/ce55e49a-32f4-4757-9849-bf04d06d5fc>

⁷⁴ Gary Jackson. “Hopeville Tour.” Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://variety.com/2003/music/reviews/hopeville-tour-1200543845>

“Pusha Man” which has the hidden track “Paranoia” after a moment of silence.⁷⁵) This song stands out from others on *Coloring Book* because it heavily features a cappella vocalizing. It opens with a choir of male voices—the Chicago Children's Choir humming a melody with one voice, Eryn Allen Kane, humming what is actually a vocal warm-up. Backing up the choir and Kane is an organ, a traditional church instrument which is often heard in traditional Gospel songs. The inclusion of the organ along with the choir sets the scene, creating an auditory aura which evokes church and Gospel music. This scene-setting prepares us for the remainder of the song which features important Gospel elements such as preaching and praising of God—John Michael Spencer highlights these important aspects in *Protest and Praise*.⁷⁶

Just before Chance begins to rap, a bass guitar begins to play its line—which mimics many standard bass progressions and notes such as plucking the octave and filling with the pentatonic scale—and midway through a drum enters playing a complex Gospel beat. Gospel drums often are syncopated and full of triplet fills which this drum line features heavily. These two instruments combine to create a Gospel-sounding beat behind Chance’s rapping. This combination of genres aids Chance in normalizing Christian Hip Hop to audiences who are used to listening to Gospel music and audiences who listen to rap as well as everything in between. After Chance’s first verse ends, Eryn Allen Kane and the Chicago Children’s Choir continue with their melody but this time over the entire instrument section of bass, organ, and drums.

As T-Pain enters for his chorus, his voice, as usual, is altered with autotune. This is the first totally electronic instrument in the song—although the recordings of bass, organ, and drums were likely electronically altered to sound flawless. T-Pain is known for his popularization of autotune and has accrued much fame with secular audiences. Autotune is an instrument that

⁷⁵ Chance the Rapper, *Acid Rap*. Self-released, MP3 audio. Released in 2013

⁷⁶ Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, vii.

secular audiences are used to and thus they feel more connected to this music. Again, this aids into the creation of the new community that Chance is establishing through this song. The complexity and volume behind T-Pain's chorus rises as his voice grows in volume and passion. Chance enters for his second verse backed by the Gospel melodies as does T-Pain and the Choir for the second chorus. As Eryn Allen Kane returns with her bridge, a saxophone accompanies her as well as a trumpet as the song builds and builds before fading abruptly. In the ensuing silence, a voice says "Alright, we got it" which leads the listener to imagine the recording of this song being live with all instruments and singers present.

Then, the choir comes back, but this time in a minor tone with a piano behind it playing the song's chords. A synthesizer provides dissonant, wind-like noises accompanying the track as well. The synthesizer is the second electronic instrument—autotune being the first—to enter the track and add an instrument more often found in Hip Hop than in Gospel music. Then, deep, male voices begin to add a bass line beneath the piano and the commencing rapped verse by Noname. Then an actual bassline enters played by an electric bass. As Noname's verse finishes, a trumpet line enters as well as a larger choir and drums. The beat from the drums harkens more to a classic Hip Hop beat and the trumpets sound like a Soul line. The trumpet is an important instrument Biblically and in African-American music. Biblically, Gabriel's trumpet is representative of the entering of the divine. In addition, the trumpet is a key instrument in Jazz music and some of the most famous African-American musicians have been trumpet players like Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and Dizzy Gillespie. Thus, it is not insignificant that after the trumpet line, Kirk Franklin begins to preach and then sing. The song builds, during Franklin's verse, in complexity and loudness until all instruments drop away and only the a capella choir remains.

This song combines instruments and sounds that would be familiar to audiences who listen to Gospel, Soul, and Hip Hop. It has the feel of a song recorded live; the building sound and complexity between bass, organ, and drums and the continuity of the choir adds to this effect. One is encouraged to envision this as being played in a church during a Sunday service.⁷⁷ The song's music is important to understanding the religious discourse because Chance's music reimagines what Christian Hip Hop can sound like. Chance expands his audience and expands how Christian Hip Hop can be an evangelical tool by having his music sound like it belongs in a church, while also including sounds and instruments that a secular audience would recognize.

Lyrics

Lyrically, "Finish Line/Drown" is complex. The lyrics are full of Biblical references and anecdotes, and each artist with significant song time—not including Eryn Allen Kane or the Chicago Children's Choir—comments on his or her own relationship with God. The lyrics to "Finish Line" are sermon-like, whereas the lyrics to "Drown" offer a critique of the state of Chicago during 2016. Before diving into the lyrics, it is important to note that Chance uses language on this track that would not be acceptable in church. Chance is one of the first Christian Hip Hop artists to curse frequently throughout this mixtape, and I argue that this further adds to the community that Chance created with this mixtape. By using profanity, Chance is providing dialogue that his secular audience would associate with Hip Hop generally.

In "Finish Line," Chance takes on the role of a pastor describing his own relationship to God. Chance's audience is not exclusively church-going Christians; it is instead a much larger audience: Christian, secular, Chicagoan, non-Chicagoan. Thus, his relationship with God is

⁷⁷ Elias Leight, "How Kanye West's Sunday Services Began," *Rolling Stone*. October 31, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/kanye-west-jesus-is-king-jason-white-choir-905199/>.

presented as very complex and he talked at length about his personal history of losing faith his way—this includes his loss of faith in God he experienced in Los Angeles. In addition, Chance advises listeners how to be a good Christian father and husband. In this way, Chance takes on the role of a traditional preacher who often gives life advice through the Bible. Through this role of a pastor, Chance is also establishing his ministry. This ministry is far reaching and diverse, but all are listening to the messages that he has to offer.

Chance also describes his story about losing his way and in a very upfront manner. He raps “Last year got addicted to Xans/Started forgetting my name and started missing my chance.”⁷⁸ Here, Chance recounts his Xanax addiction, which he temporarily acquired while in California.⁷⁹ He uses some word play during the punch-line when describing the severity of his addiction with the line “missing my chance.” But, he describes how he overcame it by only staying in “L.A. for four months, end up leaving right back.”⁸⁰ At this point, it becomes clear that Chance needed salvation from his low state of addiction. Chance moved back to Chicago after his stint in Los Angeles, and this is where he has said he rediscovered his passion and faith for Christ and recorded and released the songs “Sunday Candy”⁸¹ and “Angels,”⁸² both of which involve his conversion story heavily. It is clear through these bars and previous songs that Chance found his way again by returning to his home in Chicago.

Chicago as a place of salvation is another narrative common in “Finish Line/Drown” and in the mixtape as a whole. Gault argues that “earlier Christian rap albums failed to capture in any

⁷⁸ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, *Coloring Book* Track 13. Self-released, MP3 audio. Released in 2016.

⁷⁹ Baron, “How Chance the Rapper’s Life Became Perfect.”

⁸⁰ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

⁸¹ “Sunday Candy,” Chance the Rapper, *Sunday Candy*, 2015.

⁸² “Angels,” Chance the Rapper, *Coloring Book* Track 8. Self-released, MP3 audio. Released in 2016.

large part urban black audiences because many felt they did not embody a sense of place.”⁸³ Chance’s music completely reverses that narrative. He is proud to be a Chicagoan and is very clear about that in “Finish Line/Drown” as well as many other songs. He raps “I’m in love with my city, b****, I sleep in my hat.”⁸⁴ Prior to the release of this mixtape, Chance sold hats with the number “3” on them to get fans excited for his third mixtape. The hat also resembles the Chicago White Sox hats that Chance is often seen wearing.⁸⁵ The White Sox are located in Chicago’s South Side and have gained a strong following with Chicago’s black community. These hats, which can still be seen on individuals' heads today, are also representative of the community that Chance created through this mixtape. They are a visible manifestation of members of the community:



Figure 1: Chance 3 Hat: <https://www.chanceraps.com/shop/chance-3-new-era-cap>

Chance wants to see Chicago succeed, in part because it was the place he was able to kick his addiction, meet his future wife, and have his two daughters. Chance does not merely state

⁸³ Gault, *My Soul Knows How to Flow*, 175.

⁸⁴ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

⁸⁵ The religious symbolism of the Holy Trinity is also apparent, although likely not intended.

that he supports his city for personal reasons, though. Chance is very active in his community, creating programs for underprivileged youth to explore music through his program Social Work which hosts the program Open Mike.⁸⁶ He references one of Social Work’s programs in “Finish Line/Drown” as well: “Get this money, get this budget, K.O.K to day camp.” Kids of the Kingdom—or K.O.K.—is a program started by Social Works, which “is a faith-based choice-based summer day camp focused on performing and literary arts. While at K.O.K. campers build ownership, social and emotional learning, agency, civic engagement, and growth – academically, behaviorally and socially.”⁸⁷ This uplifting program, aided by Chance and friends, combines a new path for kids to take while also giving them spiritual aid. This is just one of many programs Chance has started to help save the city that saved him.

Chance also gives advice on how to be a good husband and father through the lyrics of “Finish Line.” Although he was not married to Kristen Corley at the time of the mixtape’s release, they did have their first child, Kensli. He raps, “Me and my girl plan to stay to the end/Hope there never come a day where we be better as friends/We in a marathon we could build a marriage on/Arguments as parents digging deeper than a baritone.”⁸⁸ Chance lets his audience know that he intends to marry the mother of his child. It is not an easy road either, instead he calls it “a marathon” filled with “Arguments... Digging deeper than a baritone.” The reference to a marathon comes from the Bible’s 1 Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul states, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way as to

⁸⁶ SocialWorks. “OpenMike.” Accessed March 25, 2020.

<https://www.socialworkschi.org/initiatives/openmike/>

⁸⁷ SocialWorks. “Kids of the Kingdom.” Accessed March 25, 2020.

<https://www.socialworkschi.org/initiatives/kids-of-the-kingdom/>

⁸⁸ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

take the prize.”⁸⁹ Paul is asking all Christian to run their race like they are going to win. Chance hopes that his marriage’s race is more of a marathon than a short-lived sprint.

Chance’s history with Kristen is detailed in his song “65th and Ingleside” as an up and down relationship—with Chance often crashing at her house regardless of their relationship status, or Chance’s employment and income.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, he hopes “there never come a day where we be better as friends” and the marathon will end with a marriage. (The two were married in 2019.) Giving family advice is something pastors are known to do on Sunday, and thus this feels like it could be part of a sermon Chance gives. For this song, the audience listening to Chance is much broader than church-going Christians. This preaching is for other men in Chance’s situation who need to get their act together and support families and be good husbands. This is not only specific to Chicagoans but any young man who needs an example of how to be a good husband. He also uses terminology that is accessible to youth when he references the vernacular expression “we be better as friends.” This is a way to break up with someone in a polite way that is popular among a younger group. By including this dialogue in his preaching, he is making the message understandable to a wide, young audience, thus widening his community.

Later in the verse, Chance raps “Queen said, Why we in a queen bed?/I said, It's yours, don't worry, lil' beanhead/I'm just here to catch my breath, I got a world tattoo/She said, Cool, just bring me some food.”⁹¹ Chance is explaining to Kristen, in this hypothetical conversation, that he is giving her their queen bed to herself because he will be working so hard that he will not have time to stay there. His reference to the world tattoo (which he does not actually have) seems

⁸⁹ 1 Cor. 9:24.

⁹⁰ “65th and Ingleside,” Chance the Rapper, *65th and Ingleside*, 2018.

⁹¹ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

to further demonstrate that not only is he concerned about Chicago, but he also worries about the state of the world. Again, this is Chance demonstrating how he is going to help his family by working hard and making sure to bring home food always. Thus, Chance takes on the role of preacher for his audience by instructing them on how to be a good family provider.

The second major lyrical topic occurs on both “Finish Line” and “Drown.” (This will be further inspected during the Interpretation section following this, but is nonetheless important to state.) Chance begins his second verse by exclaiming “Hey! Gimme the water, gimme the water/I need the kind from Space Jam.”⁹² Here, Chance is referencing the 1996 classic sports film starring Michael Jordan, *Space Jam*, in which a group of NBA All-Stars have all their skills taken away by an alien team... but then they and Looney Tunes characters drink “Michael’s Special Stuff” (which is just water) and are able to defeat the aliens. Throughout the mixtape, Chance makes pop culture references like this. He also references *Harry Potter* and *The Jungle Book* frequently. This is another example of Chance expanding his audience by including references that many would understand and relate to. “Drown,” which references water in its title, revolves around water lyrically as well. Eryn Allen Kane begins by singing, “The water may be deeper than it's ever been” and Noname follows with the line, “Lord rain down on me so I can move on water.”⁹³ Moving on water reminds the audience of the Biblical story of Jesus walking on water.^{94 95}

The choir also adds in the chorus “Never, never drown/The water may be deeper than it's ever been/Never drown/The water may be deeper than it's ever been/Never drown.”⁹⁶ This water

⁹² “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Matt. 14:22-33

⁹⁵ It also might remind the audience of myths of Flying Africans who were able to fly back to African after being enslaved and brought to the United States.

⁹⁶ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

is clearly different from the water that is in “Michael’s Secret Stuff.” Instead of demanding it, the choir is warning the audience to stay out of the water since it is deeper than it's ever been.

Finally, in Kirk Franklin’s verse, he sings “This water is deep (Yes, yes and I need You to)/Jesus, rescue me (Come on, save me, I need You to).”⁹⁷ This again is a different sort of water than the water Chance refers to in his verse earlier in the song. So, for Chance, water has multiple meanings. It is purification, it is nourishing, but it is also dangerous. This relationship will be further developed in the following section.

The lyrics in this hybrid song provide much to unpack. The two songs “Finish Line” and “Drown” overlap in narrative and yet have two distinct feelings. It is important to examine these lyrics in order to understand how religious discourse is communicated in this song. These themes are also articulated throughout the album and thus this chapter will reference different songs on the album and singles that came out around the same time which also present these themes. The following section will take a deeper dive into what religious discourse does for listeners and why it is communicated in a particular way.

Interpretation

Before discussing my interpretation of the religious discourse in this song, it is important to recall Brooks-Tatum’s (2013) two types of religious discourse she found from her study. They are “1) songs and poems that explicitly reference their faith practice and ask others to consider their perspectives on and experiences with religion and spirituality and 2) works that are not explicitly religious but are relatable to wider audiences.”⁹⁸ Because of this, some of the references in this chapter’s interpretation will directly refer to Chance’s relationship with God

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Brooks-Tatum, *In the Church, In the Streets*, 213.

while others will be cultural references that Chance and his audience would understand and create a community around. In addition, it is necessary to be reminded of Spencer's theory of Theomusicology. Theomusicology strives to understand not only the individual making the music, but also the context they are making the music within.⁹⁹ Thus, it is important to keep in mind what was happening in Chicago and what was happening in Chance's life during the creation of this mixtape—as detailed in chapter 2. This interpretation will not explicitly use Spencer's descriptive, normative, and predictive theomusicologies but they will aid in understanding the two different themes that this song conveys. By understanding these messages, Chance's new community of Christian Hip Hop supporters and his new religious discourse—which creates the new community—will become clear.

The first metaphorical theme is that Chicago is drowning. I argue that the “water” Chance references symbolizes the challenges that African-Americans were facing in 2016 both in Chicago and in the United States. The introduction of “Drown” begins with Eryn Allen Kane stating: “The water may be deeper than it's ever been.”¹⁰⁰ This is Chance acknowledging that the environment that Chance and other Christians are operating in is becoming harder and more severe, the stakes are rising higher and higher, and the need for saving is becoming greater and greater. Noname begins her verse with the line “Lord rain down on me so I can move on water.” This is a clear Biblical reference to Jesus Christ who is able to walk on water in order to gain faith with his followers¹⁰¹ but it also conjures imagery of Noah's Ark.¹⁰² Noname is escaping the flood that is rising higher and higher by walking on water, and she is granted that power by God for her faith. After this bar, Noname provides a verse where she details her relationship with

⁹⁹ Spencer, *Theological Music*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Matt. 14:22-33.

¹⁰² Gen. 5:11-21.

God and how during her lowest moments all she had to grab onto was God. The choir responds to Noname's verse with a chorus repeating "Never, never drown/The water may be deeper than it's ever been."¹⁰³ This repeats the lyrics that Eryn Allen Kane sang at the beginning of "Drown" but adds a direction for listeners, which is to never drown no matter how high the water is.

Then, Kirk Franklin and the Choir urge the audience to "Never drown". They call out to Jesus saying, "This water is deep/ Jesus rescue me" which reminds the audience of Matthew 14:28-33 where Peter fears drowning but Jesus scolds him saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"¹⁰⁴ I interpret this as Chance telling his fans to never doubt God and their goals of bettering Chicago. Kirk Franklin and the choir then sing, "Take me to your Mountain/ Someday Chicago will be free."¹⁰⁵ This is the defining moment in this song and demonstrates that Chance and company believe that they have been chosen by God to free Chicago from the flood that is—for example—crooked politicians, racist police, and unfair housing and employment. The mountain that Kirk Franklin could be referring to is Mt. Ararat which is where Noah first landed after the flood.¹⁰⁶ Mt. Ararat is in Turkey so obviously, it is not a physical place of salvation but it does represent a place of hope. In addition, this line harkens to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's. 1968 speech where he tells his audience that "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind."¹⁰⁷ While it might not be an explicit reference to this speech, the two tap into the same hope that is so prevalent within African-American church music. It is a hope that even though there is a significant struggle, the individual and the group will persevere and come out on top because of

¹⁰³ "Finish Line/Drown," Chance the Rapper, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Matt. 14:31.

¹⁰⁵ "Finish Line/Drown," Chance the Rapper, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Gen. 8:4.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3rd 1968.

<https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>.

the salvific power of Christ. This hope is prevalent in Chance's music and above all, this theme transcends race, religion, and locality. The theme of hope is central to the new community of Christian Hip Hop listeners that Chance creates through this mixtape.

As previously mentioned, there is a second interpretation of water as well. This interpretation falls under Brooks-Tatum's second type of discourse which is a reference to an aspect of culture that is relatable to a wide audience. Chance pleads for water but wants "the kind from *Space Jam*." Again, this is a reference to "Michael's Special Stuff" in the 1996 film *Space Jam*, which turns out to be just water. It is important to note that Michael Jordan is legendary in Chicago for his major role in winning the city's basketball team, the Chicago Bulls, six NBA championships. This water is enabling Chance to gain the presumed powers that Michael Jordan has—but Chance uses those powers to aid the people of his city. It also could reference Holy Water suggesting that Chance wants to be re-baptized in order to gain fully reaffirm his rediscovered faith in the Lord. What is important is that Chance is able to assist his community and his audience because of God's power and the "Secret Stuff" he was given.

The second theme present in this song is Chance as a prophet of God. This is apparent in this song through Chance's preaching about being a good husband and his telling his audience that Chicago needs saving. This theme is present on the rest of the album as well. For instance, Chance raps on "Blessings" about this relationship, stating "I speak to God in public/He keep my rhymes in couplets/He think the new shit jam, I think we mutual fans."¹⁰⁸ Chance and God have a communicative relationship and their relationship is public. Chance uses his public platform to spread his messages concerning being a good Christian, a good husband, and how to save Chicago. Other examples of God's connection with Chance occur in "How Great"¹⁰⁹ when he

¹⁰⁸ "Blessings," Chance the Rapper, track 14, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ "How Great," Chance the Rapper, track 11, 2016.

states that his audience should “Hear, for I will speak noble things as entrusted me.” Chance has been entrusted with special knowledge by God that he is spreading through his music. Again, in “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance takes on a Noah-like role of telling Chicagoans that they need to be saved because of a “flood.” For reference, Noah was provided information from God that there was going to be a flood that would drown the world and created an Ark in order to save all humans and animals. After the Flood, God made a covenant with Noah that there would never be another flood that would because of Noah’s hard work.¹¹⁰ The association between Chance and Noah is important because it adds to Chance’s authority and also demonstrates the direness of the situation.

One other social issue that Chance is vocal about on this song and throughout the mixtape is his stance against record labels. Chance remains unsigned by any label, and his Grammy win was historic because he was the first artist to win label-less. On “Finish Line/Drown” Chance raps “Labels told me to my face that they own my friends.”¹¹¹ There is a history of record labels taking advantage of young African-American artists. For example, the groups N.W.A. and Crime Mob have both settled court cases against their managers who had set up contracts that unfairly gave more money to management. Chance frequently brings this up throughout the rest of the mixtape as well. In “How Great,” Chance raps, “Don’t believe in signing, I seen dollar signs, color white collar crime”.¹¹² Chance states that record executives are evil. Record labels’ goal, in Chance’s view, is to control his message. In the second song of the mixtape, “No Problem,” on the album, Chance warns executives that, “If one more label try to stop me, there gonna be some dread head n***** in the lobby”.¹¹³ This line is unlike almost all of Chance’s others because it

¹¹⁰ Gen. 5-9.

¹¹¹ “Finish Line/Drown,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

¹¹² “How Great,” Chance the Rapper, 2016.

¹¹³ “No Problem,” Chance the Rapper, track 2 2016.

insinuates that these executives will be subjected to gang violence if they continue to try to control him but it does provide further evidence of who the Devil is in Chance's eyes. According to Baker-Fletcher, the symbol of the Devil can represent any force trying to prevent Christian Hip Hop artists' from spreading their evangelical messages. Thus, by using the Devil, Chance is continuing religious discourse used by previous artists in the genre.

Again, the mixtape for Chance represents freedom. He, unlike some of his close friends, is not controlled by a record label. That includes his music, his sounds, who he includes on the mixtape, and who he can distribute his music—and his message—to. Most importantly, Chance is able to create a new form of religious discourse because of the platform of the mixtape. His religious discourse includes aspects of secular Hip Hop like making pop culture references, using profanity, and including voices of secular artists like T-Pain, but also uses explicit Biblical imagery and recognizable Christian voices and music to get his message across. This plays a large role in the creation of his new community because he is able to create a minimal barrier of entry into that community. Since *Coloring Book* is free, anyone with access to the internet is able to listen to Chance's message.

Chance backs up his claims of being a prophet in a few ways. First, Chance's prophet in his lyrics paint him as one both having secret knowledge given to him by God, and having public discourse with God. Chance is revered in Chicago—there was once a movement to have Chance run for Mayor— and thus it is clear that the Chicago culture places a high value in his prophetic music. Secondly, Chance backs up his cultural texts directly with Biblical references and stories such as Genesis and the story of Noah's Ark; the Apostle Paul's reference to a Christian life as a race, and the story of Matthew regaining faith by seeing Jesus walk on water. This use of Biblical passages aids Chance in demonstrating his prophet-status by supporting his messages.

Thirdly the conceptions of God created by Chance and other artists on his track demonstrate that his followers believe that God values them in a time of need and has provided them a prophet to guide them through these times. To conclude, by Chance taking on the role of prophet, it is clear that Chance is encouraging his followers to believe that a new dawn is coming for them. This message of hope is important for Chance's creation of a new community because his audience would be receiving the salvific message from an authoritative presence. Chance is the leader of this new community

To conclude, this chapter has examined the religious discourse in "Finish Line/Drown" through an analysis of its music, its lyrics, and the themes within the hybrid, two-part song. In addition, it examined artists involved in creating the song—both religious and secular. This is important to study because it demonstrates the future and legitimization of Christian Hip Hop as a genre. Chance represents the newest voice in this genre and has created the most success. Part of this reason is his inclusion of famous secular artists—like T-Pain on "Finish Line"—and famous Christian artists—Kirk Franklin on "Drown"—whom members of his audience would know. In addition, Chance develops a sense of place in his music by drawing the majority of the artists and producers of this song from Chicago, and through his thematic insistence that Chicago needs to be saved. Chance has created a new community through themes of hope and faith. This community is based in Chicago but has grown across race lines, across class lines, across religious lines, and across geographic lines as well. For evidence of this, look no further than the immense success that Chance has received from this album. The positive effect he has been able to have on his new community, as a result, is profound.

Conclusion

Following the previous chapter's analysis, it is clear that Chance the Rapper has created a new community of Christian Hip Hop listeners and supporters through his mixtape *Coloring Book* by creating a new religious discourse through his use of establishing sense of place in his music; by including voices of artists, the sounds, and the language that his secular audience and his Christian audience would recognize; and by spreading evangelical messages of salvation and hope. Chance the Rapper's use of religious discourse in the hybrid-song "Finish Line/Drown" demonstrates how Chance fits into I.D.O.L King, DJ Wade-O, and Phantik's definitions of Christian Hip Hop. But Chance also redefines what it means to be a Christian Hip Hop artist; he has demonstrated that Christian Hip Hop artists can still spread the Christian message beyond a Christian audience. Chance has spread his evangelical message to a large community connected not by race, faith, or location, but by their love for Chance's music.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I reviewed different approaches scholars have taken to understanding religious discourse in Christian Hip Hop. While the genre has not yet been subject to significant study, a handful of pioneers have taken different approaches. Jon Michael Spencer's theory of Theomusicology examines how evangelical conceptions of God and faith are inserted into lyrics of African-American music via descriptive, normative, and predictive approaches. Theomusicology emphasizes understanding the social, historical, and geographic backgrounds of the artist in order to understand the messages in their music as well. Through these approaches, the artist's views on social issues and their message becomes clear. Shaneshia Brooks-Tatum's study established two clear forms of religious discourse in music: actual inclusion of Biblical references, as well as not explicitly religious dialogue that would attract a larger audience to the Christian evangelical message. This article greatly aids in defining what religious discourse looks like in Christian Hip Hop. In addition, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher's

chapter provides a point of comparison from the second wave of Christian Hip Hop artists through his analysis of the religious discourse (by way of Charles Long’s theory of “opacity” and “oppugnancy”). The chapter also included an analysis of two of Erika Gault’s essays, which examine how the development of the Black Church and the invention of the Internet altered the religious discourse and created a community of Christian Hip Hop as well.

The thesis’s second chapter first surveyed the history of Christian Hip Hop from its originators to its current leading artists. Then, it discussed Chance the Rapper’s story from his childhood to the release of his mixtape *Coloring Book* and beyond. Through the examination of the history of Christian Hip Hop, it became clear that while Chance’s Christian Hip Hop became extremely popular nationally and internationally, Christian Hip Hop was already an established genre in its own right. Its creators—such as Stephen Wiley and MC Debbie D—created a musical platform that enabled artists to evangelize a Christian message to a wider audience through Hip Hop music. While they ultimately did not create a presence in the popular music scene, they nonetheless created a template for what the genre could become. The second wave of artists (including BB Jay, Elle R.O.C., and Lil’ Raskull) and groups (including dc Talk, Cross Movement, and the I.D.O.L. King) took on the template and modernized it by incorporating beats and tropes that resembled secular Hip Hop while maintaining an evangelical message. During this time, record labels were also started by groups like Cross Movement, and it was through these that a larger community of artists and fans were created. Lastly, the third wave—which includes artists like Lecrae, Sho Baraka—began to popularize the genre nationally and used the genre to critique social issues as well.

This was the genre that Chance entered when he declared himself a “Christian Rapper” in 2015. Chance’s journey to that point was long. He became famous in 2012 for his first mixtape

10 Day and his subsequent and even more popular mixtape 2013 *Acid Rap*. Following *Acid Rap* and his international tours with artists like Macklemore and Childish Gambino, Chance moved to Los Angeles where he eventually became addicted to Xanax and his music production slowed. He decided to move back to Chicago where he rediscovered his faith in God and met his future wife and, most importantly, had a child. He then released his third mixtape *Coloring Book* which topped Billboard charts and won him three Grammy's—making him the first ever artist to do so without being signed to a record label. By recounting the backstory of Chance, it is clear that his personal story leading up to the *Coloring Book* mixtape aided in his popularizing of Christian Hip Hop.

The third chapter took a deep analysis of Chance the Rapper's song "Finish Line/Drown" which is the penultimate song on *Coloring Book*. This song is important to examine because it is both the longest song on the mixtape and is the richest in religious discourse. It also best exemplifies the new community of Christian Hip Hop artists that Chance is creating through his music. It first examined who was a part of the song; this included Christian artists like Kirk Franklin, the Chicago Children's choir, and Eryn Allen Kane, and secular artists like T-Pain, Noname, and Chance's band The Social Experiment. By using both Christian and secular artists, Chance created a new community and grew that community by including voices that a wide audience would know. Then, the chapter examined the music itself. The music had a Gospel sound to it: the drum, bass, and piano all fit within the genre. But it also employed instruments that are found in secular music, like autotune, as well. Then, it examined what messages Chance and his guest artists were communicating via their lyrics. This included sermon-like preaching from Chance about how to be a good father and husband and also messages about hope from Kirk Franklin and the Chicago Children's Choir. Finally, a thematic analysis of those lyrics

demonstrated that (a) Chance's multiple definitions of water can represent both a warning but also a sign of hope for Chicagoans and his new community. The entire mixtape asks Chicagoans to have faith in God and this analogy of water is one of Chance's clearest methods of asking. And (b), the second theme is Chance as a prophet. Throughout the song, Chance compares himself to a prophet and through this it becomes clear that he believes that God can speak through Christian Hip Hop to a wide audience and to a community that Chance is creating.

What this thesis does is demonstrate how Chance the Rapper created a new community of Christian Hip Hop fans by incorporating new voices into the genre, combining very contemporary lyrics with Bible stories, and above all giving his audience the tools to find hope and faith all through his use of religious discourse. This is important because Christian Hip Hop has not received significant research or critique in academia. This examination of Chance's religious discourse is one of the first to be done and adds a new, contemporary example to the study of the genre. Future research could continue to examine Chance's community that he has created and how that community has grown with his new album, *The Big Day*, which dropped in 2019. This research is important because, following *Coloring Book*, even more world-renowned (and more infamous as well) artist Kanye West had himself baptized and released the album *Jesus is King* in 2019 and also began to host sermons every Sunday where he and a choir would sing songs from the album as well as traditional hymns as well. Themes established in this paper could be used to understand Kanye's community and the religious discourse in his music as well. To conclude, the most significant message in Chance's music is hope. No matter if his listener is Christian, or an African-American, or a Chicagoan, or anyone else, the message of hope will always resonate.

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Lyric Reference

[Part I: "Finish Line"]

[Intro: Eryn Allen Kane & Chance The Rapper]

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do

And we back, and we back, and we back, and we back

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do

And we back, and we back, and we back

[Verse 1: Chance The Rapper]

They ain't teaching taxes in school

It don't even matter, I was acting a fool

But who would think the raps would turn into racks?

Don't matter, matter fact, it could happen to you

Scars on my head, I'm the boy who lived

The boy love playing when the boy too sick

Reclining on a prayer, I'm declining to help

I've been lying to my body can't rely on myself, oh no

Last year got addicted to Xans

Started forgetting my name and started missing my chance

L.A. for four months, end up leaving right back

I'm in love with my city, bitch, I sleep in my hat, uh

I felt hogtied ever since my dog died

He lived to 84, damn, that's a long ride

I know he up there, he just sit and he wait

I'll be racing up the stairs, I'ma get to the gate singing

[Bridge: Eryn Allen Kane]

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do

[Chorus: T-Pain]

Oh, all my days
I prayed and prayed
And now I see the finish line
Oh, I'm gonna finish mine, yeah
All my days
I prayed and prayed
And now I see the finish line
Gonna finish mine, yeah-eah

[Verse 2: Chance The Rapper]

Hey! Gimme the water, gimme the water
I need the kind from Space Jam
Get this money, get this budget, KOK to day camp
Me and my girl plan to stay to the end
Hope there never come a day where we be better as friends
We in a marathon we could build a marriage on
Arguments as parents digging deeper than a baritone
I've been getting blocked just trying to make songs with friends
Labels told me to my face that they own my friends
I got to pray, I got to pray, like Hammer after "2 Legit"
I got the power, I could poke Lucifer with crucifix
I cannot scrape om stupid shit, I stand up like I'm Ludacris
I know some folks that talk so much
You'd think they drive an Uber whip, damn
Queen said, "Why we in a queen bed?"
I said, "It's yours, don't worry, lil' beanhead"
I'm just here to catch my breath, I got a world tattoo
She said, "Cool, just bring me some food"

[Chorus: T-Pain]

Oh, all my days
I prayed and prayed
And now I see the finish line
Oh, I'm gonna finish mine, yeah
All my days
I prayed and prayed

And now I see the finish line
I'm gonna finish mine, yeah-eah

[Bridge: Eryn Allen Kane]

Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do-do-do
Do-do-do-do-do

[Part II: "Drown"]

[Intro: Eryn Allen Kane]

The water may be deeper than it's ever been

[Verse 1: Noname]

Lord rain down on me so I can move on water
Like children at the altar, like God inside my house
I love you, I love you, you looking holy like Mama
You made a church out of feathers, so when she fly to the Father
She know the choir gon' follow and all the offering paid
She gave my name away to your holy house
She like my blessings in disguise
She like her Jesus mountain high
So He can watch her lonely child, I know my God
I know my God seen His breaks and His edges
Are jagged for giving that pain to His city in gold
Like everything is everything
Like all them days He prayed with me
Like emptiness was tamed in me
And all that was left was His love
And all that was left was His love
And all that was left was His love
And all that was left was His love

[Chorus: Choir]

Never, never drown

The water may be deeper than it's ever been
Never drown
The water may be deeper than it's ever been
Never drown

[Verse 2: Choir & Kirk Franklin]

Never, never, never (Chance, let me in, come on)
This thirst in my soul (There's a thirst in my soul, it tell me)
Where else can I go? (Where?) but You? (Come on)
I may cry a river (I may cry a thousand tears, but)
But You take each drop and You wash (You wash me new)
Me new (People sing)
This water is deep (Yes, yes and I need You to)
Jesus, rescue me (Come on, save me, I need You to)
Take me to Your mountain (Hallelujah)
So someday Chicago will be free (Someday, we'll all be free)
Be free (Say)

[Chorus: Choir]

The water may be deeper than it's ever been
Never drown
The water may be deeper than it's ever been
Never drown