Gang Signs and Prayer: Reproduction of Christianity in Black British Rap Music

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Abstract

This essay explores how Christian tropes are reproduced in Black British rap music, focusing on the work of contemporary Black British hip-hop artists Stormzy and Dave. Using postmodern pastiche theory, the essay examines how the integration of biblical tropes, Christian themes, and gospel music within their songs, contributes to the simultaneous challenging and reconciliation of traditional Christian values with urban life experiences in a Black British context. Through analysis of Stormzy's and Dave's song lyrics, the essay demonstrates how these artists employ religious symbolism and sampling to navigate their identities as simultaneous Black British Christians and hip-hop artists. Ultimately, this 'collage' of religious and cultural references not only serves to modernize traditional religious expression but also positions these artists within a broader lineage of Black cultural perseverance, resistance, and self-fashioning. As such, this essay contributes to the discourse on cultural identity formation in hip-hop, highlighting how reproduction of Christian elements functions as both homage and self-determination.

"This is what it sounds like when Glastonbury meets God...
this is a God tune. This is everything."
– Stormzy, Glastonbury 2019.

Reproduction is an integral part of hip-hop culture and has been at the core of hip-hop music production since its very creation in mid 1970s New York. Often credited as the founding figure of hip-hop culture, Jamaican-born Clive Campbell created the blueprint for hip-hop as DJ Kool Herc, through his use of sampled music to create what would come to be known as 'break-beats' (Sweet 2018). Building on funk, disco, and other drum-heavy genres, Herc would repeat five second 'breaks' – i.e., "*the part of a song when all other elements would drop out and only percussion and bass could be heard*" (Sweet 2018) – from the same track on a loop by 'scratching' the record; dragging the vinyl back and forth on the turntable. Meanwhile, he encouraged dancers by "*verbally accompanying the music in a syncopated rhyme that served as the foundation for what would later become known as MCing, or rapping*" (Sweet 2018). Herc's legendary block parties contributed to the rise of a prominent hip-hop culture encompassing four main elements – Djing, MCing, breakdancing, and graffiti – which helped drive urban, primarily Black youth away from gang membership and into so-called hip-hop 'crew' formation. As a practice that originated in the margins of urban America (Forman 2002), hip-hop culture is thus by virtue intertwined with questions of heritage, belonging and identity.

In later years, however, media representations of hip-hop and rap – as stated, both cultures dominated by (primarily male) youth of color – shifted the narrative from rap as a *substitute* for felony and gang membership to which its participants were thought prone, to one of hip-hop precisely as "*martial music of a vicious underclass*" (Maxwell 1991, 1), connected to minority illegality and violence. The demonization of the genre was not dissimilar to the demonization of previous Black-dominated genres, similarly stemming from widespread racist tendencies and a fear of the influence of Black culture on White consciousness. What separated early 1990s rappers from earlier movements, however, was their awareness of these mechanics of demonization, and their use of reproduction and postmodern pastiche to alter hip-hop culture's violent image (Maxwell 1991). As Maxwell (1991) argues, young Black artists chose to counter criminal stereotypes "*from the inside out*" (4): through careful employment of pastiche and other post-modern techniques – steering clear of what Maxwell calls "*the pitfalls of empty nostalgia*" – rappers ironized their depiction as dangerous gangsters, as such "*negotiating with the postmodern present without succumbing to*

it" (Marshall 1991, 4). Their use of samples in this negotiation served as an act of self-determination, as artists through the cutting and mixing of selected excerpts reclaimed the right to define themselves, by altering the texts that represented them (Marshall 1991, 6). Moreover, as an originally Black artform, using samples of other Black musical forebears served as a way of reaffirming transhistorical Black communal ties, as it reasserted *"the validity of the black community's claims to artistic originality and ownership*" (Maxwell 1991, 7). Through sampling, thus, rap and hip-hop artists reclaimed the right to their own heritage and self-determination.

Some 50 years later, the landscape of music production has changed considerably; as the late 90s saw both the ascension of hip-hop to global cultural prominence, but with that also the rise of an elaborate copyright infringement lawsuit industry that renders artists all but paralyzed in their creative freedom to build on previously existing material (Marshall 2006, 868-869). Although Marshall (2006) argues that this has contributed to a general decline in the use of sampling practices, hip-hop music is nevertheless still defined by the multifold use of samples, ranging in noticeability from small, manipulated soundbites to full adaptations of past hit songs. Importantly, Marshall notes that in manipulating their sources, these artists "*let the seams show*" (Marshall 2006, 869), by using innovative sampling techniques in order to hide their sources – but not their sampledness. This thus shows that the act, and *art*, of sampling is seen as an essential practice within hip-hop production, allowing artists to inscribe themselves within a larger transhistorical narrative and tradition, both paying homage to the roots of their cultural heritage as well as to the roots of hip-hop culture. The quest for 'realness' or 'authenticity' here thus lies precisely in the act of reproduction.

With the global dissemination of hip-hop via transnational mass media, it's adaptation to various local and national contexts has led scholars to describe hip-hop as a 'glocal' phenomenon (Krims 2000; Forman & Neal 2004), characterized by the continuous exchange between global (especially American) influences and local cultural specificities. The contemporary British rap scene, for instance, sees a particularly high number of artists overtly building on pre-existing material from genres such as R&B and, notably, *gospel music*. Two prominent artists in the scene, Dave[1] and Stormzy, make frequent use of samples from religious songs and speech fragments in their songs, thereby simultaneously showcasing their own cultural and religious identity while adding multiple layers to the narrative of their songs. In this sense, their songs are seen to construct a collage of different cultural artefacts and tropes. This corresponds to the postmodern

concept of pastiche similarly shown to be present in the artistry of 1990s US rappers by Maxwell (1991).

With this essay, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on identity construction through pastiche and sampling practices in hip-hop. Performing a close reading of Dave's songs 'In The Fire' and 'Lazarus', and Stormzy's songs 'Rainfall' and 'Blinded By Your Grace Pt. II', thereby focusing on the multitude of cultural references reproduced in their music through the lens of postmodern pastiche as outlined by Dyer (2007), I argue that reproduction is at play on multiple levels in these songs: in the 'classical' sense of samples, but also on the level of biblical tropes and genre-defying elements employed in their songs. Through their use of sampling practices, Dave and Stormzy not only position themselves in relation to their fate, values and cultural heritage on a religious level; they also connect to hip-hop's origins and essence, inscribing themselves in an extensive transhistorical tradition of meaning-production and reproduction.

Postmodern pastiche

In his canonical work *Pastiche* (2007), Richard Dyer has set out to analyze the postmodern use of what originated as an eighteenth-century Italian opera genre. In Italian opera, the term *pasticcio* – literally meaning 'pastry' – signified a play constructed out of fragments of multiple existing opera's; in its postmodern use, pastiche is used to explain a type of aesthetic imitation of another work of art, "*in such a way as to make consciousness of this fact central to its meaning and affect*" (Dyer 2007, 4). Dyer argues that pastiche, in this sense, is not superficial: rather, it is "*a knowing form of the practice of imitation, which itself always both holds us inexorably within cultural perception of the real and also, and thereby, enables us to make a sense of the real*" (Dyer 2007, 2). Although this might sound slightly vague, understood in combination with Dyer's remark that imitation is "*the foundation of all learning, [...] of behaviour, communication and knowledge*" (Dyer 2007, 1), the relation between reproduction in music and processes of cultural identity formation becomes evident.

Dyer applies a multifaceted understanding of pastiche: an entire work can be a pastiche, but pastiche can also be an aspect contained inside a wider work. Additionally, pastiche can reside in both the imitation of a specific work as well as a kind of work – e.g., a genre, or a period. Consequently, pastiche can appear in multiple forms: the most well-known form in music would be the sample, the sound fragment taken from pre-existing work. However, pastiche can also appear in the implementation of a genre in a different genre – as, for example, in the implementation of gospel elements

in a hip-hop song. Furthermore, Dyer argues that a pastiche needs to be recognized and understood as pastiche, in order to function as such (Dyer 2007, 3); and it is (generally) intentional.[2] The understanding of a work as pastiche "*is a defining part of how the work works, of its meaning and affect*" (Dyer 2007, 3). The fact that it is understood as an imitation thus changes – arguably, establishes and reinforces – the meaning it intends to convey. According to Dyer, being aware of the pastiche employed in a work thus 'strengthens its case', as it adds to the affective experience. As such, "*both the context (the frame) and the inner work itself [...] provide further indications about the assumptions and formal operations of pastiche*" (Dyer 2007, 4). Concretely, in music both the adaptation as well as the sampled origin are thus engaged in a mutually reinforcing interaction, in which the outcome (the narrative told) is greater than the sum of its parts. Against this framework, we can reconsider the use of reproduction in Black British hip-hop through the analysis of pastiche in the music of two of Britain's most popular hip-hop artists, Stormzy and Dave.

Stormzy

Before moving on to the analysis of pastiche in the music of Dave and Stormzy, however, a short biography of both artists is imperative to shed light on the identities they represent through their music. Born in 1993 as Michael Ebenezer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr. to Ghanaian parents, the British rapper known as Stormzy grew up in South London. He gained prominence in the UK underground grime scene through his series of freestyle sessions uploaded onto YouTube. His 2017 debut album *Gang Signs & Prayer* catapulted Stormzy to fame, debuting at number one in the UK Albums Chart as the first grime[3] album in history to do so. The album won the award for British Album of the Year at the 2018 Brit Awards. Since then, Stormzy has continued to take the world by storm, writing history as the first Black solo artist to headline the prestigious Glastonbury festival in 2019. Apart from using his platform to speak out about matters of injustice in the UK, as in his overt critique of Theresa May and the government's handling of the 2017 Grenfell tragedy (Stormzy 2018), Stormzy is also very vocal about his relationship with faith. Stating that his "*greatest desire is to be a great man of God*" (Stormzy qtd. in Mayfield 2023), Stormzy's devotion to Christianity earned him the Sandford St Martin award for his contribution to the public understanding of religion (Mayfield 2023).

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Dave

Equally influential in the astronomic rise of rap music to the forefront of the UK music scene is Dave, born as David Orobosa Michael Omoregie in 1998 to Nigerian parents. Known for his socially conscious lyricism, the South London rapper often addresses topics like racism, mental health, and inequality in his songs; therein not only reflecting wider issues present in British society, but also drawing from highly personal experiences with the British immigration system, homelessness, and gang violence. His debut album *Psychodrama* was met with critical acclaim and debuted at number one on the UK Albums Chart, breaking the record for most first-week streams for a British rap album – thereby surpassing Stormzy's *Gang Signs & Prayer*. *Psychodrama* proceeded to win both the Mercury Prize and the award for Album of the Year at the 2020 Brit Awards. His second album, *We're All Alone in This Together* (2021), similarly addresses topics of migration, inequality, and the struggles of life as a Black youth in British society. Dave often points out how these processes are inextricably linked and boil down to deliberate political policy, as for example in his overt critique of the British government's mistreatment of members of the Windrush generation. It shows, thus, that these artists employ hip-hop to convey very deliberately and very carefully drafted messages about who they are and what context they position themselves in.

The reproduction of religion

The jump from identity politics and political engagement within hip-hop, to the analysis of religious tropes in Black British hip-hop might seem unaccounted for. However, British artists' engagement with both hip-hop and Black Christianity share similar roots as parts of the larger rhizomatic network that Paul Gilroy has called the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993), centered around the premise that Black Britain's identity can only be understood from a transnational and intercultural perspective, shaped by the interrelated forces of slavery, diaspora, and colonialism. For while hip-hop music spread from Jamaica to first the US, and then the rest of the world through people like DJ Kool Herc as a derivative of Jamaican 'reggae toasting' (Maxwell 1991, 4), so too did the adapted versions of Christianity that had grown out of its original imposition on local communities through Western missionary projects. Following the 1948 British Nationality Act, conferring British citizen status on colonial subjects, West Indian as well as African Commonwealth citizens in turn brought their adapted religious customs to the British 'Mother Country' (Reddie). As part of what would come to be known as the Windrush generation, these people characterized

mass migration in Britain – but were met with outright racism and antipathy upon arrival from both local Brits and official government bodies.[4] Having come to mainland Britain "*in the vain and tantalizing hope that this same Christian faith and its concomitant practice would triumph over contextual experience*" (Reddie 2010, 4), West Indian and African migrants came to occupy a simultaneous insider/outsider position within British society as Black Britains. From this position, Black settlers forged a new, vernacular culture out of the disparate African diaspora cultures of America and the Caribbean: encompassing the reaccentuation of *"[e]lements of political sensibility and cultural expression transmitted [from these areas] over a long period of time*" (Gilroy 1993, 145). This is visible in the continuation of traditionally Black religious practices such as Gospel (Reddie 2010, 13); and, importantly, in the culmination of 'Black Atlantic' elements into new, hybridized cultural forms – such as Stormzy and Dave's hip-hop music.

Stormzy - Rainfall

Against this contextual background, we can analyze the reproduction of Christian tropes, verses, phrases, and places, as well as gospel samples and the use of gospel genre conventions, which are both common and explicit in the works of UK rappers Dave and Stormzy.

In his 2019 song 'Rainfall', Stormzy takes a jab at his "*enemies*" or the people that have spoken negatively about him by contrasting their criticism with the success he has lived to see. He proves his superiority over his supposed enemies by contrasting their "*Twitter talk*" (signifying gossip) with testaments to his acquired wealth in arguably stereotypical hip-hop fashion, as he draws attention to his Audemar Piguet watch and "*big fur jacket*" while bragging that he will earn "*another quarter [million] and get another number one [song].*" While the Bible dictates to "*let another praise you, and not your own mouth*" (*The Holy Bible*, Proverbs 27:2), Stormzy complicates easy judgment as he credits the Lord for the riches he has earnt, stating: "*I give you the keys to no stress / First you give God the praise, then see Him work*". The praise Stormzy references here, is elaborated upon in what I argue serves as the first layer of pastiche in this song. The chorus, built up out of the same two lines repeated eight times, sees Stormzy asking the Lord to "*let the rain fall on my enemies / on all of my enemies*". This repetitive plea, and the rhythmic emphasis put on *fall* and *all* in each sentence, mimics the way a preacher delivers a sermon in typical Black Christian worship practices.[5] Moreover, Stormzy's deliberate use of the biblical trope of 'rainfall' is meaningful here: one the one hand, it refers to God's opening of the '*floodgates of the heavens'* (*The Holy Bible,*

Genesis 7:11) to cleanse the earth from sins; on the other hand, the biblical image of 'rainfall' here attests to Stormzy's faith in the Lord, as it can be seen as an answer to Jesus' plea to "*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (*The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5:44), for "*he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*" (*The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5:45). Through the reproduction of the biblical trope of 'rainfall', Stormzy thus connects both his success and subsequent indifference with regards to his "*enemies*", to his Christian faith and the Christian concept of forgiveness.

On a second, more overt level, 'Rainfall' features a bridge (sung by the song's collaborator Tiana Major9), made up of an adaptation of the 00's gospel song 'Shackles (Praise You)' by Mary Mary. The song preaches to praise the Lord and have faith in Him despite His "*trials*"; for "*through the fire and the rain [...] God has broken every chain*". As the song's bridge – a section in a song often used to contrast with, while preparing for, the verse and the chorus – the sample provides an extra layer of meaning to a song that otherwise would amount to mere self-praise. Through use of this sampled fragment, the meaning of 'Rainfall' thus becomes greater than the sum of its parts, as Stormzy on the one hand is able to both capture his reputation of a "*skengman*", or someone with street credibility (*Green's*), as well as his role as devout Christian. On the other hand, with his use of pastiche in this song he positions himself in a transtemporal discourse of Black perseverance and determination fueled by faith, despite other people's mistrust and negativity.

Dave – In The Fire

In a similar way, Dave builds on religious tropes of Black suffering while translating them to a modern urban context. His 2021 song 'In The Fire' (in collaboration with Fredo, Meekz, Ghetts, and Giggz) opens to a sample of The Florida Mass Choir's 1982 gospel song 'Have You Been Tried'. The song employs a typical Black Christian call-and-response technique to preach the importance of persevering through hardship and remaining devoted to your faith, utilizing the biblical verse 1 Peter 1:7: "*the trial of your faith [...] though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ*". While the sampled verse ends with the line: "*That's the way we Christians do*", in Dave's reproduction, each collaborator builds off the song to transform this line's meaning, thus reshaping the song's meaning to reflect modern urban realities of life on the streets as Black British young men. As such, Fredo raps:

> *"Have you been tried in that fire / I heard bullets sing higher than Mariah in choir [...] Yeah, these guns don't bring nothing but prison and death, still / All my n*ggas just admire the fire".*

The hardship reflected by 'fire' is repurposed here to signify the dangers on the street of literal gunfire. In the following verse, Ghetts quotes from the biblical story of Abel and Cain as he questions: "*Am I my brother's keeper?"* followed by *"I'm my brother's leader, I'm the eldest / The one who had to make a name [...] So nobody would trouble my siblings in this whirlwind*". The reproduction of biblical verses here serves to underscore the importance of familial ties in a dangerous urban environment.

Lastly, Dave summarizes the fires that constitute the challenges of contemporary urban life as a Black British person, summing up matters like homelessness and immigration, as he argues: "*Crime's on the rise, hate's on the rise / Feel like everything but my mum's pay's on the rise*." However, Dave seems to subvert the purpose of the sampled fragment in order to reflect an ironic stance, as he poses the question: "'*Did you come through?' That's the question*." By questioning what it means to 'come through', Dave reflects on the inability to directly map traditional Christian values of good and bad onto a situation where – as these rappers proclaim – hardship through crime is a necessary means to arrive at a better situation. As Ghetts puts it: "*I stood in front of the fire and learned to cook*". The artists on this song thus employ biblical references and tropes in order to reconcile different fragments of their identity that seem to be at odds with each other, thereby also redefining what it means to be a young Black Christian youth in urban Britain.

Dave - Lazarus

Dave portrays an equally complex relationship with Christianity and identity politics on his 2021 song 'Lazarus', as he – in a similar manner as Stormzy on 'Rainfall' – relies on Bible quotations to justify his arguably unchristian behaviour. First aligning himself with his Christian faith by proclaiming that "*Any weapon formed against [him] can't prosper*" – a direct quotation from the Bible addressed to the servants of the Lord (*The Holy Bible*, Isaiah 54:17) – Dave then complicates this alliance as he posits biblical quotations and tropes in direct relation to descriptions of him having repeated intercourse with corporeally well-endowed women. Likening himself by means of allegory to the biblical figure of Lazarus, Dave reproduces this biblical story in an arguably immoral context as he describes:

“[B]oth the adaptation as well as the sampled origin are thus engaged in a mutually reinforcing interaction, in which the outcome (the narrative told) is greater than the sum of its parts.”

"*I yell, 'Ayo, how yuh pum pum [your bottom] so fabulous' / First round, I thought I was dead but / It brought [a] man back to life like Lazarus*". Dave's comparison to Lazarus, who was risen from the dead by Jesus four days after his entombment, serves here not only as a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for post-coital resurrection; it also serves as a metaphor for the belief in resurrection and redemption through faith. In the bible, Lazarus' death and subsequent resurrection both serves as a testament to "*the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it"* (*The Holy Bible*, John 11:4); while the second appearance of the name Lazarus in the Bible tells a tale of social equality and divine justice, teaching the importance of earthly compassion and empathy to earn divine blessing in the afterlife. In this light, Dave's promise to "*rise up until there ain't a government left*" in the face of "*political corruption*" that makes that "*most of his people* [in Nigeria]*, they struggle and stress*", acquires new meaning, as it links the biblical trope of resurrection to concepts of social and political equality, justice, and heritage-based identity affiliations. Through the reliance on intertextual references, adapting biblical tropes alongside more stereotypical hip-hop tropes centered on objectifying the female body and bragging about sexual encounters, while also voicing his political concerns, Dave brings together these multiple 'genres' in one work. As such, he seamlessly connects the part of his identity that is concerned with Christian values and stories, to the part of his identity that is bound up with more earthly desires.

Stormzy – Blinded By Your Grace Pt. II

Departing, then, from the criminal and the sexual, one last notable example is Stormzy's song 'Blinded By Your Grace Pt. II', from his debut album *Gang Signs & Prayer* – the title of which essentially voices the entire crux of this essay, namely the complex relationship between religion and urban contemporary life as a Black British youth. As a self-conscious and deliberate imitation of a previous artwork (Dyer 2007, 21), the album's front cover already poses a perfect example of pastiche, as it features Stormzy and his presumed fellow 'gang members' sitting at a table purposefully meant to resemble the 'Last Supper', with Stormzy representing Jesus Christ and his friends representing the Twelve Apostles (Figure 1). Stormzy's portrayal of himself and his friends as Jesus and his disciples works as a multilayered metaphor. On one level, this iconic imagery conveys a sense of 'chosenness', while simultaneously highlighting the deep, 'brotherly' ties within both Jesus' 'gang' and contemporary urban gangs.[6] Just as Jesus chose his Apostles to stand by him and spread his message despite facing great challenges, Stormzy's recreation of this image suggests that despite the trials and trib-

ulations he and his friends have endured, they have remained loyal to both their faith and each other. Additionally, the depiction of Stormzy's fellow 'gang members' as disciples that wear balaclavas serves as a reflection on the seemingly paradoxical notions of Christianity and sinfulness that are ultimately at the core of this essay. In the Bible, Jesus' apostles are represented as 'ordinary' or even sinful people, as Jesus himself explains that: "*it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*" (*The Holy Bible*, Mark 2:17). Stormzy's alliance with the Apostles can thus be seen as his assemblage of these multiple aspects of his identity into one. Like Dave, Stormzy ascribes himself a double identity, as both Savior and follower; as both sinful and chosen. His multilayered depiction of identity, that avoids pretentions of moral superiority, therefore makes his faith relatable and believable; in its complexity, it reflects contemporary urban realities of faithfulness despite sinning.

Serving as a double intermezzo on *Gang Signs and Prayer*, the song 'Blinded By Your Grace' consists of two parts, the second of which I will analyze more closely in this essay. As the song's first part 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 1' offers a calm, piano-led rendition of a gospel track, I would not immediately argue it to be an example of pastiche; for while it is recognized by some as gospel (Petridis 2017), I would not argue that it contains the apparent and intentional use of imitation as denotes pastiche – although this does not take away from the likelihood that the song was inspired by gospel practices. Its counterpart 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt 2' however, is undoubtedly meant to be understood as an imitation of the traditional

Figure 1: *Album cover of Stormzy's Gang Signs & Prayer*: 2019. Photograph by: John Ross. Design and art direction: Mark Farrow.

Black Christian gospel genre. From the use of instruments like the organ, to the choir and the lyrics, the song is a clear appropriation of gospel within the rap music genre; or, inversely, an undertaking of inscribing rap music within the wider discourse of Black Christian religious practices. As such, the pastiche in Stormzy's hip-hop gospel song, or gospel hip-hop song, resides in the fact that the song "*combines things that are generally held apart in such a way as to retain their identities*" (Dyer 2007, 21). Furthermore, I would argue that pastiche in this sense is not confined to a material cultural artefact; for ultimately attesting to the reliance on pastiche in the reproduction of religious tropes in Stormzy's music, is his reconciliation of both these aspects of his identity – Black British Christian and hip-hop artist – on one of Britain's biggest stages during his performance of 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt 2' at Glastonbury in 2019 (figure 2). Accompanied by a three-tier gospel choir, Stormzy introduced the song by stating: "*Glasto, we're gonna go to church right now. We're gonna take this to church and we're gonna give God all the glory right now*". As such, by performing a hip-hop rendition of a song rooted in Black Christian traditions, simultaneously praising and encouraging others to praise the Lord while being praised by a crowd of thousands, Stormzy ultimately embodies the multilayered narrative of identity present in his music.

Figure 2: *Stormzy's performance with a gospel choir during Glastonbury:* 2019.
Photograph by: Jenna Foxton.

“By questioning what it means to ‘come through’, Dave reflects on the inability to directly map traditional Christian values of good and bad onto a situation where – as these rappers proclaim – hardship through crime is a necessary means to arrive at a better situation.”

Conclusion

While Dyer states that pastiche involves the combining of things "*in such a way as to retain their identities*" (Dyer 2007, 21), in this essay I have argued that in doing so, both Dave and Stormzy weave these identities together to give voice to their own complex, multifaceted identities in a contemporary Black British urban context. Through their adaptation, both artists simultaneously defy and thus modernize traditional perceptions of what it means to be religious, and what religious cultural products sound like. Standing on the shoulders of those that came before them, such as Mary Mary and The Florida Mass Choir, these artists position themselves in a long lineage of Black Christianity; and, in a long lineage of Black perseverance and suffrage – all while giving grace to God. As such, Dave and Stormzy voice a modern example of what Anthony Reddie has called 'complex subjectivity', or: "*the attempt by Black people to become more than the simple objectified fixed entity the oppressive forces of slavery and racism have tried to make them become*" (Reddie 2010, 25). In a more general sense, through use of pastiche Dave and Stormzy participate in the shaping of their contemporary cultural identity, "*as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished [...] a form of personal and collective self-fashioning*" (Clifford qtd. in Krims 2000, 94).

While the continuous construction and negotiation of identities is a universal experience, Stormzy and Dave's global success paves the way for first- and second-generation migrants from a Black British context specifically but also a 'Black Atlantic' context in general to see themselves represented in ways that surpass simplified connotations of hip-hop culture with violence and gang membership. In this sense, Stormzy's and Dave's musical representations of their continuous negotiations with faith, contribute to the ongoing process of hip-hop's reevaluation from a genre of "*martial music of a vicious underclass*" (Maxwell 1991, 1) – as is still seen in contemporary tendencies to frame grime and hip-hop in relation to knife crime and violence (Beaumont-Thomas 2018; Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards 2018; Fatsis 2019) – to a genre that is actively engaged with complex representations of politics, religion and identity.

Reproduction – be it in the form of pastiche, sampling or intertextuality – thereby serves not only as a stylistic choice, but also as a means of unifying seemingly contradictory personal and communal values. Through the reproduction of religious and cultural tropes and elements, these artists thus *reinforce* their authenticity rather than detract from it: as they both pay homage to their predecessors in a larger transhistorical and intercultural narrative by building on longstanding cultural and religious

traditions – in this case, both hip-hop's tradition of sampling, and Black Christian traditions such as gospel; while simultaneously recontextualizing these narratives to their own contemporary urban realities. Through cutting and mixing, sampling and adapting, these artists thus employ the art of reproduction as a means of resisting any reductive, unilateral image of hip-hop music and culture. Instead, by construing a collage of cultural artefacts in their music, Black British hip-hop artists shed light on the – at times seemingly paradoxical – process of 'assemblaging' their own complex, multifaceted identities in a contemporary Black British urban context. Both devoted Christians and involved in arguably unlawful or immoral practices; both *gang signs* and *prayer*.

"Standing on the shoulders of those that came before them, such as Mary Mary and The Florida Mass Choir, these artists position themselves in a long lineage of Black Christianity; and, in a long lineage of Black perseverance and suffrage – all while giving grace to God."

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Endnotes

1 Although also known under the nickname Santan Dave, his music is released under the mononym 'Dave'; therefore, I shall comply with that name throughout this essay.

2 Dyer regards pastiche as generally intentional, but makes a sidenote for the odd chance that a work becomes a pastiche through its failure to be "*what it set out to be*" (2); or, for the case when the consumer 'pastiche[s]' the work through their own interpretation – considering the 'Death of the Author' as described by Roland Barthes (1967), this is an interesting notion for further research.

3 Grime, born on the streets of London circa 2000s, is a music genre with influences from UK garage, jungle, drum 'n bass and Jamaican dancehall. Departing from hip-hop, grime "*resignifies hip hop not as the consumerist bling bling soundtrack to upward mobility, but as the cri de coeur of the dispossessed, the narrative form of urban life*" (Melville 2004).

4 In the BBC documentary *The Unwanted: The Secret Windrush Files*, historian David Olusoga shows the deliberate laws and practices put in place to create a hostile environment for West Indian migrants even prior to their arrival. The gradual tightening of immigration laws entered the public eye with the 2018 Windrush scandal, when thousands of Caribbean-born citizens, legally settled in Britain since childhood, found that they had been silently transformed into illegal immigrants and were being threatened with deportation or detainment. The documentary gives a more than telling indication of Britain's attitude towards migration in a postcolonial world to this day. In his song 'Three Rivers', Dave has used sampled fragments of speech from the documentary to supplement his depiction of multiple migratory narratives, emphasizing the processes of racism, violence and injustice caught up with global migration.

5 A similar argument has been made by Ciaran O'Hagan in his article 'Sounds of the London Underground: Gospel Music and Baptist Worship in the UK Garage Scene', in which he traces gospel influences in the genre of UK garage music.

6 Of course, the story of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus is not taken into account in this argument.