

Resurrection Power: Rapper Appropriation of the Crucified Jesus  
By Ebony A. Utley<sup>1</sup>

Hip hop heads are drawn to the crucified Jesus not because they want to die, but because staring down death makes them feel most alive. According to cultural critic and theologian, Michael Eric Dyson, crucified Jesus is “the God who literally got beat down and hung up, the God who died a painful, shameful death, subject to capital punishment under political authority and attack, but who came back, and keeps coming back, in the form and flesh we least expect” (286). Crucified Jesus is the prototype for rappers’ visual depictions of resisting death via resurrection.

Remy Ma is the first female rapper to position herself on a cross on the mixtape *Shesus Khryst* (2007). The cover depicts a topless Remy on a cross. Long hair conveniently covers her nipples. She wears cloth panties, but the contours of her breasts, stomach, and hips reveal a curvaceous body. Her arms are bound with ropes and blood streams from the nails in each hand. There is graffiti on the cross; a skull is etched above her head. To her right is a cemetery, to her left a cityscape. Bright sunlight streams from the heavens giving the dark cover a sepia-toned glow. Remy further emphasizes her femininity in the “Shesus Khryst” video. It opens with Remy on her back. The camera pans her body; her arms are raised above her head and bound to a horizontal cross resting on the ground. Occasionally, there are shots of Remy standing without the cross. She wears a crown of thorns, a white cloth covers her breasts like a halter top and a similar cloth is wound around her waist as a skirt.

Remy extends the traditional spectacle of crucifixion to include sexualizing death.

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She encourages audiences to enjoy looking at an attractive, partially clothed, bound, and vulnerable woman. However, Remy also resists these patriarchal expectations for femininity by refusing to remain on the cross. The crucifixion is merely a temporary setback that inspires her determination and increases her resurrection potential. Audiences are encouraged to read her crucifixion on the cover art as a transition from the death in the cemetery to life in the cityscape. The video appropriately concludes with a shot of an empty cross visually to imply that Remy has been resurrected. Remy may have been the first female rapper to self-crucify, but she was not the first rapper depicted on a cross. Her representation's significance lies in the affirmation that a woman can feminize and sexualize Jesus' death and resurrection in order to draw attention to the power of a living woman savior. The male rappers who paved the way for Shesus Khryst, however, are Nas and Tupac Shakur.

Queensbridge rapper Nas draws controversy when he portrays himself crucified on a cross in "Hate Me Now" (1999). Nas elicits strength from the resurrection of Jesus. He and featured artist Sean "Diddy" Combs' recurrent adlibs of "I won't stop, I can't stop, It ain't never gonna stop" suggest that acquiescing to death is merely the first step to overcoming death and living in perpetuity. Nas becomes more alive with every attempt to eliminate him.

Nas is certainly inspired by Jesus, but his appropriation of resurrection power emboldens "Hate Me Now" to diverge from the biblical narrative. "Hate Me Now" impugns the haters. Diddy declares that he wants the "weak, jealous motherfuckers" to die. Nas draws hatred for his material possessions—money, clothes, cars, jewelry, and women. The platinum cross that he wears around his neck is a constant reminder of how Nas differs from Jesus. Nas' encouragement of hatred, displays of crass materialism, hedonism, and arrogance directly contrast Jesus' life on earth. At the exact moment that we first see Nas hanging from a cross,

we hear Diddy say, “I like this... I like the way this feels.” Whereas Jesus prayed in Matthew 27:46 “My God why have you forsaken me,” Nas says, “Do it now! Get this shit over with.” There seems to be little biblical similarity here, and yet Nas is eager to be crucified because being persecuted is a badge of honor. It means God has shown the person under attack so much favor that his detractors want to kill him. Nas is grateful that God has given him enough material possessions to incite envy. Now that he knows how Jesus’ story ends, Nas anticipates an attack as much as he anticipates being resurrected by the same power that brought Jesus, the ultimate conqueror, back to life.

Before there was Remy or Nas, Tupac Shakur aka Makaveli crucified himself on a cross on the 1996 cover art for *The Don Killuminati: The Seven Day Theory*. The cover depicts a black man who resembles Tupac, including a head wrap and a THUG LIFE tattoo across his abdomen, which is an acronym for The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone. The cross is imposed over a worn Bible. Blood streams down his body past the THUG LIFE. There are nails in his hands and feet, barbed wire around his wrists and ankles. A larger crown of thorns is weaved into his head wrap. The cross is an urban map including: Hollywood, South Central, Los Angeles, Watts, Compton, Long Beach, Detroit, Chicago, Manhattan, Queens, Bronx, East Orange, Brooklyn, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Houston. The cities are labeled in their approximate geographical regions. A compass rests on top of the cross and West, which represents Makeveli’s home in California, is visibly marked with a W. The caption reads, “In no way is this portrait an expression of disrespect for Jesus Christ.—Makaveli.”

Many fans interpreted this cover as evidence that Tupac faked his own death. The album was released two months after the 1996 Las Vegas drive by shooting which ultimately led to Tupac’s untimely murder. Two years earlier, Tupac survived a near-death experience after

someone shot him five times, in what appeared to be a robbery in New York. Fans believed that if Tupac could cheat death once, he certainly could do it again. Besides, Tupac lived death. His artistic corpus is filled with narratives about his experiences with death from the murder of comrades to descriptions of prison as a confinement like death to visions of death and the afterlife in his videos. Alive theories highlight the facts that Tupac was shot on September 7<sup>th</sup> at 4:03am ( $4+0+3=7$ ) at the age of 25 ( $2+5=7$ ) and died seven days later on the 13<sup>th</sup> and are further fueled by Tupac's Makaveli moniker. Tupac was an avid reader of Italian political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli who was infamous for his work, *The Prince*, which advises political leaders to undertake innovative and unscrupulous actions to usurp and sustain power. Machiavelli is said to have faked his own death to fool his enemies. Tupac adopted Makaveli as his alias just before he died. In this context ardent fans sometimes read Makaveli as mak-alive, make alive, mock-a-veli, which suggests he is mocking those who believe him to be dead, or mack-a-veli because he pimped not only death but also the music industry into succumbing to the belief that he is dead while maintaining multi-platinum album sales.

The "alive" theories combined with the Makaveli moniker communicate an important message to urban America (especially for the thugs living in those cities noted on the cross) about the necessity of resisting death. Dyson explains that if facing death is normal for "the nobodies of American life—poor, black, desperate, hopeless, urban citizens," then resurrection is the ultimate act of resistance and the ultimate manifestation of power (263). Although Tupac may be physically dead, the resurrection of his life through his art is psychologically empowering because it conveys invincibility.

Other rappers have appropriated resurrection themes. The Notorious B.I.G.'s debut was titled *Ready to Die* in 1994. *Life After Death* was released only sixteen days after his

untimely murder in March 1997. The posthumous album *Born Again* (1999) perpetuates the theme in its title. 50 Cent resurrected Tupac and B.I.G.'s gangsta ethos in 2003 not with his album title *Get Rich or Die Tryin,*' but with a promotional campaign about surviving multiple gunshot wounds. Resurrection is a theme that can mark the end, the beginning, or the middle of one's career. Album titles with key words like return and rebirth as well as music videos with death and resurrection scenarios are a staple for rappers reinventing themselves mid-career.

Tupac was the first to take the place of the crucified Jesus in mainstream hip hop, not to celebrate death but to encourage resurrection as a form of resistance. Although it may appear blasphemous, Remy Ma, Nas, and Tupac push the boundaries of religion until they arrive at Jesus—an accessible model—for surviving patriarchal expectations for women, jealousy, and death. Jesus is a cultural icon for resisting the rules especially those for life and death. By imitating a Jesus who suffered unjustly and yet emerged victorious over death, rappers boldly appropriate Jesus' resurrection as their own.

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