

Thy Kingdom Come: Racial-Ethnic Oneness in African American Gospel Music
Cory Hunter (Eastman School of Music; University of Rochester)

African American gospel music has historically articulated an African American identity, with emphasis on themes such as suffering, resistance, perseverance, and survival. Though scholars have analyzed how gospel music expresses the concerns of black existence (Burnim, 1985; Maultsby, 2010), scholars have not discussed how gospel artists are expanding beyond conventional thematic tropes by attempting to dismantle racial and ethnic barriers through their music. I argue that a theology of racial-ethnic oneness has infiltrated the music of several gospel artists who proclaim that racial and ethnic inclusion reflects God's divine mandate. Oneness denotes the aspiration to achieve an ideal of human unity that is devoid of discrimination and rooted in Christian biblical principles. Gospel artists utilize multiple musical techniques to construct racial-ethnic oneness, including the incorporation of foreign instruments, the conflation of musical styles from diverse genres and cultures, and multilingualism. To legitimize their theology, I also argue that gospel artists engage in an eschatological discourse — a discourse that emphasizes the heavenly kingdom as an imagined future egalitarian community (Ingalls, 2011). By emphasizing that there will be no racial divides in heaven, gospel artists imagine an ideal system of social relations on earth. While their musical and discursive practices denounce racial distinctives, such practices, I argue, are inseparable from African American musical and stylistic conventions. Drawing upon musical and lyrical analyses, data from feedback interviews, and participant observation, I analyze the gospel albums of Israel Houghton and Donnie McClurkin. These artists are attempting to prove the global relevance of the gospel message and expand the commercial marketability of gospel music while also challenging how their followers understand racial and ethnic difference.