

6 Hip-hop and religion: from the mosque to the church

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On September 5, 2001, *The Onion* published an article entitled, “God Finally Gives Shout-Out Back to All His Niggaz.” The piece reported satirically that the Lord Almighty had finally reciprocated his gratitude for the many proclamations of “praise” and “props” he had received from hip-hop artists in their liner notes and acceptance speeches at award ceremonies. Based on the sheer amount of hip-hop “thank yous” aimed at God over the past few decades, *The Onion* estimated that “the historic shout-out” was likely to last an entire week. While the article subtly mocked the commonplace (almost mandatory) practice of rappers thanking God, it did point toward a significant element within hip-hop history and culture: hip-hop has and continues to exhibit powerful and diverse religious phenomena, from Islam to Christianity, Judaism to the Rastafarian movement, and Hinduism to Buddhism.

In spite of the music industry’s ostensibly homogenizing, dehumanizing force, both hip-hop artists and mainstream media often turn consumer culture into a space of religious exploration and rumination. From MC names such as U-God and Killapriest, to religious iconography on album covers, explicit references to religious concepts such as sin, suffering, and salvation, or the incorporation of sacred music genres, hip-hop artists have developed provocative, and at times controversial, expressions that intertwine profane realities with pious ideas.¹ These contradictory expressions are not surprising given the complicated identities of hip-hop’s creators and listeners as well as the complex religious architecture of America’s major cities. How do rap artists engage with religious and spiritual beliefs? How are religious concerns worked out, thought through, and ultimately performed through hip-hop music? How does hip-hop extend or change the legacy of spirit-seeking in African American music and culture? In attempting to answer these questions, it becomes apparent that hip-hop’s postmodern mix of spirituality cannot be known in its totality. While Islam has historically been the prevailing religious inclination in hip-hop culture, this chapter deals predominantly with hip-hop’s relationship to Christianity – a religion that has become increasingly

popular in mainstream hip-hop in part due to the rise of Prosperity Theology and holy hip-hop (aka Christian rap).² I will briefly outline hip-hop's *mélange* of spiritual forces, highlight mainstream rap artists who espouse religious beliefs, and present an overview of the subgenre of holy hip-hop.

Spiritual sampling: religious sensibilities in mainstream hip-hop

While pop culture industries and religious authorities have tried to establish discursive and aesthetic borders as well as divisive market labels, between “secular” and “religious” hip-hop, hip-hop culture has been in syncopated lock-step with religion from the beginning – an infrequently examined relationship that complicates reductionist notions of Islam, Christianity, and the Rastafarian Movement as completely coherent, distinct, and separate entities.³ As a scholar of religion, Josef Sorett has noted that hip-hop has never aligned itself with one particular religious orthodoxy, but instead has been a vessel for “heterodox spiritual musings.”⁴ Drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, Sorett claims that these multifarious religious significations are bound together by the “cultural repertoires of the African Diaspora.”⁵ With a long vision of the historical trajectory of Black religions, he notes that looking at hip-hop's spiritual matrix affirms that religion is always historically contingent and connects to what's happening “on the ground” not only in Black communities but also around the world.⁶ What constitutes “Black religion” in Black popular music has always been something very hybrid, creatively mixed, and profoundly relevant to the lived realities and geographies and Black and Brown peoples.

Furthermore, hip-hop's spiritual sampling may reflect a need for greater ideological pluralism and recognition of Black diversity in the public sphere. Like the sampled music they rap over, MCs and DJs express their religious views through a Sonic collage: clips of fiery sermons and civil rights speeches sit beside Jamaican-styled Black Nationalist rhetoric, shout-outs to Jesus, and the subtle oratory of the Nation of Islam, all frequently interspersed with explicit lyrics.⁷ It follows that rap music embodies the pluralism of current religious energies as well as the spiritual touchstones of hip-hop's exalted predecessors – the sweet testifyings of Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder's politicized preaching, the extraterrestrial transcendence of George Clinton's P-Funk, the meditative bedroom lamentations of Al Green, and Prince's performances of erotic deliverance. But it was James Brown's shrieks for

Black Power and hard-hitting funk grooves that would become the musical bedrock for early hip-hop in the late 1970s and early 1980s, bringing with it a strong Black Nationalist current informed by Nation of Islam doctrines and rhetorical practices.

Hip-hop, Islam, and the Five Percent Nation

Hip-hop culture's early penchant for both funk music and the iconography of Malcolm X reveals the way in which hip-hop practitioners in post-Civil Rights America identified with and nurtured a militant separatist politics as well as an alignment with the Islamic faith. In addition to hip-hop's nostalgia for generations past and obsession with posthumous leaders, Malcolm's articulation of a Black racial identity and concern for Black consciousness resonated with a generation of Black and Brown youth suffering through the postindustrial transformations of urban renewal in the Bronx and other boroughs. From Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation to the Native Tongues collective to Public Enemy's Black Nationalist rhetoric, Islam – in its various forms and guises – provided a means of self-definition while Malcolm X offered an example of talking back and talking Black to white America. Tracing the sonic and political lineages of some of hip-hop's most commercially successful acts unveils how Islam has been a potent yet less explicit thread in the development of Black cultural expression in the late twentieth century, from Black Power to Black Arts to *Black Noise* – a moniker Tricia Rose bestowed on rap music in her seminal 1994 monograph.⁸ Like jazz and the Black Arts Movement, Sohail Daulatzai states that hip-hop culture also “became a space in which Black radicalism, Islam, and the politics of the Muslim Third World had a powerful impact on the lyrical imaginations, sonic landscapes, and political visions” expressed by artists.⁹ New York in particular was an important site of incubation for Muslim MCs in the 1980s and was “re-christened via Islam's holiest sites, with Harlem becoming Mecca and Brooklyn becoming Medina.”¹⁰ This new spiritual geography of New York would set the stage for the continued coevolution of Black Islam and hip-hop culture.

The brand of Islam that became the most widespread among early hip-hop MCs was the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam founded by Clarence 13X.¹¹ Hip-hop icons such as Rakim (the first to openly claim membership in the Five Percent Nation in 1987), Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, AZ, Guru, Queen Latifah, and members of the Wu-Tang Clan were among the early adherents, lacing their lyrics

with both subtle and blatant references to their Five Percenter beliefs and practices, and immortalizing common idioms such as “Droppin Science,” “Word,” and “What up, G?” within the hip-hop lexicon. These Five Percenter MCs saw themselves (namely Black men) as “Gods” – teachers, leaders, and bearers of a unique and critical self-knowledge.¹² Felicia Miyakawa states:

The Five Percent Nation may be unknown to most Americans, yet within hip-hop culture, Five Percenters have long been an active presence. Any “old-school hip-hop head” (long-time fan of hip-hop music and culture) will speak knowingly of the “God” and may even have passing familiarity with basic Five Percenter doctrines, yet the details of Five Percenter theology – an idiosyncratic mix of black nationalist rhetoric, Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) symbolism, Gnosticism, Masonic mysticism, and esoteric numerology – are not widely understood.¹³

For many young Black men, Clarence 13X’s teachings provided structure in the midst of the chaos associated with everyday life on the streets. Furthermore, young Five Percenters are renowned for their tremendous oral skills, gained through intensive drilling in the lessons and through street preaching. This skill set meshed well with the verbal dexterity and performative charisma required in hip-hop MCing.

Despite these areas of mutual aesthetic enhancement as well as the positive messages of self-determination often expressed through Five Percenter lyrics, the Five Percent Nation has been criticized for its patriarchal and homophobic beliefs. Some Sunni Muslims claim that the Five Percent Nation has hurt Islam because of its inability to hold on to any theological concept consistently and its prolific references to violence, drugs, and misogyny.¹⁴ AZ the Visualiza speaks of his inconsistent relationship to religion on Nas’s 1994 release *Illmatic*:

Yeah, we were beginners in the hood as five percenters

But something must of got in us cause all of us turned to sinners

The chorus follows with an air of chilling detachment:

Life’s a bitch and then you die; that’s why we get high

Cause you never know when you’re gonna go

The rising intonation of AZ’s voice leaves something unresolved. For AZ and his fellow “sinners,” salvation must be attained here on earth, before an unpredictable death strikes. Rebuking the possibility of an afterlife, he must take his pleasures in the material world and get “high” before he goes below.¹⁵ Some may view the lives and lyrics of Five Percenter rappers as hypocritical. On the other hand, these hip-hop artists embody a desire to

make music that accurately expresses the contradictions and complexities of African American experiences in America.

From Islam to Christianity

Thus, for most of hip-hop's life span, Islam and its various sects and offshoots (e.g. Five Percent Nation, Nation of Islam, Sunni, etc.) have comprised the main religious currents within hip-hop. Despite the huge popularity of Five Percenters within hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s, some MCs managed to integrate Christian ideas and concepts into their lyrics as well. Sorett states, "Alongside Islam, Christianity was a fixture in hip-hop as far back as 1987 when MC Hammer's first record included 'Son of the King', a track that showed up again on his second and more popular album, *Let's Get it Started*."¹⁶ Just as Islam within hip-hop has taken on many different faces, so rap artists have explored aspects of Christianity in a variety of ways, be it through lyrics, digital sampling, album art and iconography, music videos, or hip-hop apparel. Oftentimes, Christian imagery and concepts are irreverently paired with deeply profane lyrics and narratives. Christian rapper Ron T. (aka Get Wizdom) believes that "entertainers spend more time confusing their audience about their core beliefs than any other people (except possibly some ministers)."¹⁷ He continues, "Saying a prayer on your CD before you verbally rip your ex-girlfriend to shreds speaks of conflicted spirituality."¹⁸ Compton Virtue, a Christian poet/MC from Compton, California, made a similar comment regarding mainstream rap star Kanye West's diamond cross in his video entitled "Jesus Walks" (2004). In an interview from June 2004, she stated, "A cross that costs \$190,000 is a contradiction to me."¹⁹ Furthermore, in commercial rap (or rap that is specifically made with the intent of financial profit), where material wealth supplants the "promised land" as the new locus of freedom, artists struggle to reconcile the almighty dollar with their almighty God and join together who they are with what they buy.

Other rappers, such as 2Pac and DMX, utilize hip-hop as a space to question and wrestle with religious ideas. In the song "Prayer," DMX raps, "I'm ready to meet him cause where I'm livin' ain't right." But his conclusion is ultimately inconclusive as he finishes on a selfless and sacrificial note:

Lord why is it that I go through so much pain
 All I saw was black, all I felt was the rain
 If it takes for me to suffer, for my brother to see the light
 Give me pain till I die, but Lord treat him right

As DMX illustrates, suffering is a catalyst for spiritual questioning, a way to come to terms with deep-soul anxiety or alienation, and a possible

route to freedom. In his 2006 release, DMX asks, “Lord Give Me a Sign,” as the song becomes a prayer and testimonial offering to the Lord. While he doesn’t identify as a Christian rapper or holy hip-hop artist, DMX clearly articulates his belief in Jesus.

Other rap artists, such as Mase, Reverend Run (of Run-D.M.C.), and Kurtis Blow have publicly spoken about their conversion to Christianity. This may be part of what Sorett calls a gradual shift from Islam to Christianity in terms of hip-hop’s central religious consciousness, especially as Creflo Dollar (perhaps the most popular Black Prosperity preacher of the day) has become a fixture in certain commercial hip-hop circles.²⁰ Sorett argues that for rap artists, “To invoke Christianity, whether or not one expresses an exclusive allegiance to its theological tenets, has been to avail oneself of rhetorical, cultural and financial capital,”²¹ revealing the ways in which popular culture and religion are enmeshed in broader fields of power. Beyond the various forms of capital that come with Christianity (e.g. religious and commercial networks, resources, social acceptance, etc.), Islam within hip-hop has not disappeared or diminished. Daulatzai argues that “Mos Def uses hip-hop culture to explore the overlapping influences of Islam, Black internationalism, and Pan-Africanism within the realms of arts and politics.”²² Islam continues to be a critical component of global hip-hop cultures and soundscapes, but the Five Percent Nation does not have the stronghold it once had within commercially successful hip-hop. This is in part due to the rise of hip-hop cultures and markets located outside the New York City and East Coast milieu – namely the West Coast and Southern hip-hop scenes, which include more Christian members. Further, Miyakawa points toward September 11 and the articulation of “Islam as terror” as precipitating a major shift in the *visibility* of Islam within hip-hop. Muslim artists have found new ways to encode and submerge their religious commitments in an environment that is often skeptical of and hostile toward Islam, whereas explicit references to Christianity have found a home in the steadily growing culture of holy hip-hop.

Hip-hop and the Church

Through the 1970s, the Black Christian Church, in its various denominations, maintained a central and influential role in African American communities, even among those who did not attend services on Sundays. During the 1980s, however, postindustrial formations under the Reagan and Bush administrations adversely impacted American inner cities. The African American urban community was acutely affected by these geopolitical and economic shifts. Weakened by the Black middle-class flight from

urban “ghettos” to the suburbs²³ and the loss of Black youth to the crack cocaine epidemic, gang violence, and prison, the Black urban church – the bedrock of the African American community – suffered significantly as its membership waned. Furthermore, as unemployment and high school drop-out rates soared and poverty increased, African American inner city youth became more vulnerable to a variety of social ills, including a “generalized demoralization” and nonconformist behaviors associated with the “culture of poverty.”²⁴ Domestic violence, increased and unchecked police brutality and corruption, and homicides involving innocent bystanders or victims of mistaken identity, all led to increased generational poverty and urban decay. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was also silently yet insidiously moving into African American communities via intravenous drug use and prostitution during the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, communities of African American Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Scientologists, and those practicing other Eastern and African-derived spiritualities, offered viable alternatives for those seeking God and religion yet dissatisfied with the church.

Some Black Churches have evolved to address the myriad social issues affecting African American communities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including issues of gentrification, intergenerational disconnection, incarceration rates among Black males, economic instability, physical and sexual abuse, and concerns regarding classism. Those churches that have not been able to address these issues have often waned in membership, especially among youth and young adults. Bakari Kitwana writes, “according to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, attendance for eighteen to thirty-five year olds dropped 5.6% from 1995 to 2000.”²⁵ In an effort to steer its young members from these vices of street culture, some church elders and clergy vilified their own offspring as “criminals.” When the renowned Reverend Calvin O. Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York, defended, “We’re not against rap. We’re not against rappers, but we are against those ‘thugs,’”²⁶ he failed to recognize that he was denouncing the very people who created the music he supposedly accepted. Furthermore, he was turning a blind eye to the real issue affecting Black inner-city communities – that the violent and criminal behaviors of “thugs” was in part due to the lack of moral and spiritual guidance that young people were receiving from their elders and the culture at large.

As Christian MC and poet Compton Virtue states,

The church is dying. The congregation is forty and above. Where is the church of tomorrow? Where are the young people? It’s not tangible for

young people. Don't talk over them; talk to them. How do you talk to them?
You have to speak their language.²⁷

Or as Tupac Shakur (who recorded under the name 2Pac), a Los Angeles-based MC who was known for exploring Christian themes in his unique brand of gangsta rap, states on "Black Jezuz" (1999): "Went to church but don't understand it, they underhanded." Both quotes elucidate how some African American youth felt alienated from the church for its inability to preach uplifting messages that addressed the harsh realities of street life in vernaculars and musical styles that they understood.

While some hip-hop heads sought guidance and insight from a variety of religious teachings, most notably with the Nation of Islam and an Islamic sect known as the Five Percenters, a number of hip-hoppers ultimately decided to convert to Christianity. These newly converted hip-hoppers sought to merge their musical tastes with their faith in Jesus, creating a new brand of religious hip-hop.

Hip-hop and Christianity

Emerging in the mid 1980s and 1990s, holy hip-hop is a unique response to a specific current social conjuncture. It celebrates the worldview of many young people who grew up during the post-Civil Rights years and who comprise what Bakari Kitwana calls the "Hip-Hop Generation."²⁸ Members who profess a holy hip-hop identity define a diverse subculture of youth that self-identify as both Christian and hip-hop. As they explore Christianity, they in turn bring hip-hop worldviews and aesthetics to their worship practices. Holy hip-hop, sometimes called Christian rap, Christ hop, Gospel rap, or hip-hope, broadly defines a musical genre, culture, and ministry opportunity that glorifies Jesus Christ to those who are living in and influenced by hip-hop culture.²⁹ Moreover, holy hip-hop is enmeshed in a genealogy of the lived struggles and victories of African American artists who have blurred the lines between the "sacred" and the "secular" (usually expressed in terms of binaries such as spirituals/blues, gospel/soul, urban gospel/hip-hop) within the polyvalent power relations of the church, the nightclub, and the music industry.³⁰ Every time holy hip-hoppers *perform* religion through hip-hop and *represent* hip-hop through Christ, they engage in processes that rearticulate and transform transgenerational histories and discourses.

As a cultural practice used to articulate both a spiritual and social conception of self, holy hip-hop music enables multiple fields of identification using biblically informed, Christ-centered, and morally instructive lyrics over gospel singing, DJ scratching, and hip-hop beats of all flavors.

Ironically, while the lyrics often rebuke the “worldly” and demonize “secular” hip-hop and its indulgent displays of material wealth, Christian rap has been known to sample commercially successful hip-hop tracks.³¹ If one did not listen closely to the rhymed lyrics, there would be no way to distinguish holy hip-hop from so-called “secular” hip-hop. And yet, despite all this musical, cultural, and ideological overlap, holy hip-hop continues to be forged in opposition to mainstream hip-hop.

Some members of an older generation as well as more traditional adherents of Black Christian worship, expressing an aesthetic aversion to the “noise” and iconography of hip-hop, see hip-hop as an unorthodox presence in the church. For them, holy hip-hop literally brings a street sensibility of the block parties and schoolyard battles associated with early hip-hop into the sanctuary. Craig Lewis, holy hip-hop’s number one public enemy, preaches his anti-hip-hop gospel to congregations of one to two thousand people every weekend. When Lewis finishes his sermons, he calls those in the audience who have purchased hip-hop CDs to pile them on the altar, where they will be smashed to pieces, sometimes with sledgehammers. Those with tattoos – what Lewis calls “marks of Cain” and “emblems of the occult religion of hip-hop” – are called to kneel before the altar so that Lewis can pray for God to save their souls before it is too late. Duce, a Christian rapper with one of the more commercially successful holy hip-hop acts, the Cross Movement, said that an owner of a Christian bookstore in Detroit told him that Lewis’s DVDs outsell gospel rap titles combined at a rate of three to one, while churches boasting congregations of ten thousand have canceled Christian rap shows after listening to Lewis speak.

One assumes, given the cyclical return to debates about the use of popular music in worship, that holy hip-hop will some day be perceived as completely acceptable church music. Already, certain open-minded pastors and churchgoing parents have recognized the power of hip-hop to initiate conversations about God with the youth of their communities and see rap music as an invigorating presence in Black churches – a presence which is calling traditional churches into a more meaningful and relevant relationship with the realities and challenges of coming of age in urban America.

From gospel rap to holy hip-hop

Stephen Wiley is recognized as the first artist to record commercially and distribute a gospel rap cassette with his 1985 release *Bible Break*, a fact which was acknowledged by Christian rapper T-Bone in his song “Our History” on his own album, entitled *GospelAlphaMegaFunkyBoogieDiscoMusic* (2002). Hailing from Oklahoma, he is often referred to as the “Godfather of Gospel

Rap.” While the title track of Wiley’s album reached the no. 14 spot on Christian radio in 1986, many gospel rappers have called his style “soft” or “homogenous.” New York’s Michael Peace followed in 1987 with *Rock it Right* as well as the late Danny D-Boy Rodriguez with his 1989 album, *Plantin’ A Seed*. He was murdered a year later in Dallas, Texas, for unknown reasons. Rodriguez saw rap music as a vehicle to reach inner-city youth in Dallas, Texas through the Street Church Academy, a ministry founded in the Buckner Terrace area in 1983 by his parents, former drug addicts Demi and Irma “Cookie” Rodriguez. The ministry focused on anti-gang activities as well as fighting drug addiction. Danny had been the Academy’s first graduate and was one of the first Christian rappers to make extensive use of sampling.

While mainstream media and press generally focused on these few artists as the forerunners of holy hip-hop, artists in Los Angeles were also producing gospel rap as early as 1986. Despite Los Angeles’s key role in the emergence of Christian hip-hop, producing some of the early well-known artists such as Gospel Gangstaz, L.A. Symphony, and the Dynamic Twins, Sup the Chemist (originally known as Super C when he was a secular rapper) has generally not been acknowledged among the likes of Wiley, Peace, and Rodriguez. In 1987, he produced his first gospel rap cassette, *Fully Armed*. As Sup began gaining local notoriety among churches throughout Los Angeles, he and his DJ, DJ Dove, struggled to find a suitable name for the kind of music they were making. Sup recalled that DJ Dove came up with the name holy hip-hop in 1990. “We started it right there in West Covina. Victory Outreach presents Friday Night Holy Hip Hop.”³² Sup and other gospel rap acts in Los Angeles would go on to perform alongside the likes of Ice Cube.

Christian rap acts like DC Talk, I.D.O.L. King, S.F.C. (Soldiers For Christ), and P.I.D. (Preachas in Disguise), and eventually Cross Movement, led the way in the early days of gospel rap. While many of these holy hip-hoppers tell a gangbanger-turned-churchgoer narrative, other young people have grown up simultaneously in the Church *and* hip-hop – attending hip-hop events and parties with their friends and attending church with their parents on Sunday. In some cases, parents themselves are fans of hip-hop, having grown up around the sounds of early rap music.³³

Other industry developments have also paved the way for the growing presence and popularity of holy hip-hop. The increasing number of FM, Internet, and satellite gospel radio stations have been critical in exposing gospel music audiences to holy hip-hop. Many gospel rap artists remember first hearing Christian rap during these radio programs. Affordable computer software has also made it easier for amateur rappers and holy hip-hop artists to produce their own music. Categories for gospel music

have been expanded to include Christian rap by the National Academy of the Recording Arts and Sciences (the Grammy Awards), the Stellar Awards, and the Gospel Music Awards.

Chicago, Harlem, the Bronx, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Tampa, and Minneapolis, among other cities, all boast their own hip-hop ministries. Christian rap is performed throughout these services, utilizing turntables, pre-recorded beats, and rapping (sometimes with the addition of piano, organ, drums, and a gospel choir). Many Christian rappers conceive of hip-hop as a tool, instrument, or medium of reaching the masses – the unsaved hip-hop youth. For many of them, hip-hop acts as the *outer* mouthpiece, Christianity as the *inner* message. The Tonic, another member of the Cross Movement, speaks of this inner/outer dichotomy (a dichotomy that needs to be complicated to really understand how the sacred works in Christian rap):

We were in the church and they were like “why you dressed like that?” Then we were in the streets and they were like “why you carrying a bible?” So it was hard to find somebody to identify with both our outer and our new inner that we were all attached to in Jesus.³⁴

The Cross Movement struggles to negotiate and find “breathing room” within these projected scripts based on appearance. This is the double pressure of holy hip-hop culture: the push and pull to “keep it real” with the streets and “keep it clean” with the Church. Holy hip-hop occupies a delimited grey area both in and out of the Church, walking a narrowly policed, tightly scripted line between expectations of “hardness” and “realness” in hip-hop and norms of devotional behavior and worship in Christianity. Holy hip-hoppers’ relationship to the Church continues to be inconsistent and contested despite significant efforts by some pastors and Church leaders to incorporate both hip-hop youth and hip-hop music, language, street codes, and aesthetics into worship services and events. In light of this, many holy hip-hop practitioners have created alternative sites to perform Christian rap, such as community centers, open-mics, parks, and street corners. This impulse to practice hip-hop in open urban spaces is of course a part of hip-hop’s original ethos, when Bronx-bred Black and Brown youth in the 1970s and 1980s hooked up turntables, speakers, and microphones to street lampposts to party and purge on public grounds.³⁵ Years later, young Five Percenters would also form cyphers on corners to drill their lessons and rhyme about the realities of Black urban existence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have touched upon a few of the myriad instances in which hip-hop artists interact with religious ideas and practices, but many

questions remain. What happens when spiritual practice meets the politics of the entertainment industry? In what ways can the celebrity power of hip-hop music and religious institutions positively influence each other while maintaining the integrity of both enterprises? What does hip-hop's polycultural,³⁶ polyvocal, polyrhythmic nature have to offer modern religious practices? How are hip-hop religious identities marked by both fixity and flow?

How do hip-hop artists reconcile the search for pleasure and the divine? How do material success and the promise of comfort pose challenges to utilizing hip-hop as a mode of religious expression? For fans and listeners, how do musical consumption practices function as an articulation of religious identity? What kinds of religious experiences are fans undergoing as they listen to hip-hop in cars, on earphones, or at concerts? Addressing these questions will require rigorous ethnographic studies of local hip-hop cultures and scenes – studies that focus on how hip-hop and religion intersect in the everyday lives of hip-hop artists, professionals, and fans.

From Muslim-inspired hip-hop to Christian rap, hip-hop artists continue to illuminate the synergistic ties between popular music, religion, race, and place in dynamic and varied ways. Notably, the hip-hop nation readily absorbs many different kinds of religious identities, affiliations, and practices, allowing diverse spiritual communities to live in contiguous relations with one another. On the level of the nation state, however, such relations are often antagonistic and religious identities are understood as separate and fundamentalist. To talk about hip-hop's religious mixture is to talk about sampling not only an aesthetic but also an ethic – a digital technology and a cultural mythology that rethinks power in terms of a merging of discourses/horizons as opposed to common vision of power over and against. Furthermore, hip-hop expressions of Islam and Christianity also articulate the transnational nature of these religious practices. When a Christian rapper invokes the common hip-hop colloquialism “Word” (a term from Five Percenter rhetoric, which also has resonances in Christianity) as they rap over a Rastafarian-inspired dancehall beat, we are reminded of an important truth: that Black religion has always been diasporic in nature, characterized by mixture and heterogeneity.

On a final note, music provides people a way to creatively pose questions of meaning, offering an expressive locus in which to live and wrestle with the difficult and sometimes unanswerable questions themselves – questions with great existential and ontological weight. Hip-hop, despite its blasphemous wrap, continues to provide such a locus for those seeking spirit and liberation, be it in churches or mosques, studios or the streets.

Notes

1 For further examination of the sacred and profane in African American music and culture, see Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972); Anthony Pinn, "Making a World With a Beat: Musical Expression's Relationship to Religious Identity and Experience," in Anthony Pinn (ed.), *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: University Press, 2003), pp. 1–26; Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Jon Michael Spencer, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002).

2 See Josef Sorett, "'Believe Me, This Pimp Game is Very Religious': Toward a Religious History of Hip Hop," *Culture and Religion* 10/1 (2009): 11–22 for a discussion on Prosperity Theology preacher Creflo Dollar and his relationship to hip-hop artists.

3 For discussions on hip-hop and spirituality see Michael Eric Dyson, "Rap Culture, the Church, and American Society," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 6/1 (1992): 268–273; Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2001); Michael Eric Dyson, *Open Mic: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2003); Cheryl L. Keyes, "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus," *Ethnomusicology* 40/2 (1996): 223–248; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Pinn, *Noise and Spirit*, 2003; Philip M. Royster, "The Rapper as Shaman for a Band of Dancers of the Spirit: 'U Can't Touch This,'" *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5/1 (1991): 61–67;

James Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip-Hop Vision* (PC International Press, 1991). Other scholars have examined the complicated connections between discourses on hip-hop and Islam; see H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip-Hop Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); as well as hip-hop and Christianity, see Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It," in Pinn (ed.), *Noise and Spirit*, pp. 29–48; Cheryl R. Gooch, "Rappin' for the Lord: The Uses of Gospel Rap and Contemporary Music in Black Religious Communities," in D. A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (eds.), *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996); Deborah Smith Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party: Contemporary Gospel Music* (Wayne State University Press, 2008); Smith and Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church*; Sorett, "Believe Me," 2009; Ralph C. Watkins, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007).

4 Sorett, "Believe Me," p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

7 For hip-hop songs that contain these juxtapositions and mixtures, see Nas and Damian Marley's "Road to Zion," Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," Lupe Fiasco's "BMF (Building Minds Faster)," will.i.am and Common's "A Dream."

8 See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

9 Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim Internation and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 91.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

11 See Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*, 2005.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14 Hisham Aidi, "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror," *MERIP* 223 (2002): 36–43.

15 Christina Zanfagna, "Under the Blasphemous W(RAP): Locating the 'Spirit' in Hip-Hop," *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006): 1–12.

16 Sorett, "Believe Me," p. 12.

- 17 Ron T. (aka Get Wizdom), "Even Rappers Know His Name!" Available at www.crossmovement.com (accessed May 1, 2002).
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Compton Virtue, interview with the author, June 2004.
- 20 See Ludacris and Jermaine Dupri's track, "Welcome to Atlanta."
- 21 Sorett, "Believe Me," p. 16.
- 22 Daulatzai, *Black Star*, p. 135.
- 23 Black professionals and families who could afford to buy houses elsewhere began leaving south Los Angeles. Some moved into racially integrated neighborhoods in Leimert Park, West Adams, Baldwin Hills, and Hyde Park, among others.
- 24 Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 4. For further discussion see Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 1987); and William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
- 25 Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002), p. 22.
- 26 Bone Thugs n Harmony feature a clip of Reverend Butts delivering this exact quote on their 1998 track "Thuggish Ruggish Bone."
- 27 Compton Virtue, interview with the author, Los Angeles, June 2004.
- 28 Bakari Kitwana narrowly defines the hip-hop generation as African Americans born between 1965 and 1984, whereas Jeff Chang says the generation begins with DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, includes "anyone who is down" and ends "when the next generation tells us it's over." Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation*; Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005), p. 2.
- 29 Smith and Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church*, p. 131.
- 30 For example, Thomas Dorsey, Andrae Crouch, the Edwin Hawkins' Singers, and Kirk Franklin have all incorporated "secular" forms into "sacred" worship, whereas Sister Rosetta Tharp and Ray Charles took church music to the nightclub. Sam Cooke, Al Green, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Donny Hathaway, and the Staple Singers, among others, have also blurred these boundaries in their music.
- 31 Christian MC and poet Compton Virtue explained to me in an interview in Los Angeles: "I realized that if you're going to be a fisher, you gotta have some bait. So, I would take urban hip-hop beats that are popular on the radio that young people are listening to, because that is what is infectious." Interview with the author, 2004.
- 32 From there, other holy hip-hop groups formed in the Los Angeles area, some under the guidance and mentorship of Sup and DJ Dove. These early groups, such as JC and the Boys, the Dynamic Twins, Freedom of Soul, Gospel Gangsterz, and I.D.O.L. King, often performed together, shared resources, and supported each other on the road of faith and in the midst of external temptations.
- 33 It is important to note that holy hip-hop thrives in cities such as Inglewood, California, Harlem, and Atlanta, where there is a strong black middle class.
- 34 Tonic, quotes in the documentary *Holy Hip Hop* (Amen Films, 2006).
- 35 See Christina Zanfagna, "Building 'Zyon' in Babylon: Holy Hip Hop and Geographies of Conversion," *Black Music Research Journal* 31/2 (2010): 145–162.
- 36 Robin Kelley talks about the concept of "polyculturalism" in, among other places, "Polycultural Me," *ColorLines*, September–October 1999, in the *Utne Reader*. Available at www.utne.com/politics/the-people-in-me.aspx#axzz33n7BXYak (accessed June 1, 2014).