



Monica Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, Bernard &quot;Bun B&quot; Freeman, eds.. *Religion in Hip-Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. 296 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4725-0907-9.

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On June 1, 2015, *Ebony Magazine* kicked off Black Music Month by publishing its seventieth-anniversary special issue. The editors decided to focus the issue on hip-hop culture and its contemporary resonance as an expression of “black millennial music.” They were particularly interested in how such expressions challenged conventional boundaries between music genres—especially those associated with indie pop, electronic rock, and West Coast rap. The issue’s cover image also said a great deal about how the editors decided to represent “black millennial music” to its readership (and perhaps more importantly, its viewership) as a unique cultural expression of a particular African American subculture within hip-hop culture writ large. These purposes found their paradigmatic expression in the youthful profile of one Kendrick Lamar, whose expertly lit face revealed an individual distant yet acutely determined to leave his mark. Along with the names of fellow artists Terrace Martin, Janelle Monáe, and Vic Mensa, Lamar’s image encapsulated (or perhaps interpellated) an entire subcultural expression of hip-hop by way of a special issue cover of *Ebony* magazine.

This is not to say that the editors were off base or incorrect in their editorial selection. In fact, it is my contention that Lamar perfectly cap-

tures the lyrical and spiritual renaissance currently taking place in hip-hop today by some of its youngest practitioners. For vice president of *Ebony*’s digital content Kierna Mayo, Lamar could not have come along at a better time: “He’s young, he’s fresh, he’s hot ... he’s *Ebony*.”[1] Lamar’s reaction to his landing an *Ebony* cover echoed Mayo’s enthusiasm, but he located the significance of his accomplishment in decidedly different terms: “I’m one of a few rap artists to actually grace the cover ... they have done a whole spectrum of controversial covers with us as a culture and identifying ourselves and the world in general.” For Mayo, Lamar’s “hotness” was conducive to the issue’s wide dissemination, but Lamar saw his cover as anything but “hot.” His presence on the cover signaled something novel about hip-hop and its enduring ability to speak to both the highest and lowest levels of American culture and society—from boardrooms to inner-city streets to prime time NBA playoff basketball commercials. Mayo’s motto-like description signaled the corporate interest in someone like Lamar while his own words conveyed a different trajectory of artistic accomplishment. The gap between corporate hotness and artistic controversy could not be more noticeable when the two are examined in tandem, but what exactly do these descriptions tell us

about hip-hop, black millennial music, and religion? Is there anything to this “black millennial music?” What is at once lost and gained with such a cultural ascendance? And finally, what categorical work is unfolding on the cover of such an esteemed magazine, one that functions as the “curator of the African American experience” for arts and culture editor Miles Marshall Lewis?

For editors Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard “Bun B” Freeman, these questions remain at the forefront of another renaissance currently taking place in the study of religion around the subject of rap and hip-hop, popular culture, and religion. Led largely by Miller and Pinn over the past decade, this renewed interest in the study of religion and hip-hop is a product of discerning methodological reflection, deft application, and finely tuned analysis and research. In addition to relying on some of the foundational texts of the field including Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Pinn’s *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Hip-Hop* and Miller’s recently released *Religion and Hip-Hop* and *The Hip-Hop and Religion Reader*, Miller and Pinn have singlehandedly established an agenda for current and future projects on similar subjects with an academic book series following close behind.[2]

For Pinn and Miller, *Religion in Hip-Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* attempts to “advance a methodological and theoretical housing for the study of hip-hop and religion” in a key of “critical” approaches to the study of religion (p. 4). On top of this, the inclusion of an “insider perspective,” namely Bun B’s, demonstrates that artists possess the ability to “return the gaze” of the academic, thus “rapping back” about religion *in* hip-hop. In short, the edited collection seeks to accomplish three interrelated goals: highlight the critical issues in the field, bring artists and scholars together, and provide scholars with a “critical roadmap” based on the most significant topics

and questions in the field. There is no question that Miller, Pinn, and Freeman accomplish many if not all of these goals, but the manner in which such an accomplishment takes place is up for serious debate. Many of the theoretical and methodological insights in the book benefit the field writ large because they introduce new data to the study of religion and hip-hop and push scholars to re-examine how best to study human life as an amalgamation of innumerable social processes and identity formations. To end the analysis at this juncture, however, may be a necessary step for the advancement of scholarship, but it is ultimately not a sufficient one. This reviewer passionately salutes the work done by Miller and Pinn *in theory*, but *in practice* their suggestions arguably reify categories over characters, function over content, purpose instead of thick (or thin) description. Despite these criticisms, the text is a crucial development in the study of religion and hip-hop and will ground future studies of the subject for years to come.

The text is organized around three thematic foci: Hip-Hop on Religion as/for the Embodied Self, Hip-Hop on Religion and the “Other,” and Approaches to Religion in Hip-Hop on the Margins. Not only does the text embody the last three decades of scholarship on hip-hop and religion, including a preface by philosopher Michael Eric Dyson, but it also introduces its readers to an impressive array of subjects, topics, research questions, and arguments concerning religion and/or in hip-hop that currently draw the attention of scholars of religion, historians, cultural critics, philosophers, and theologians. In the first section, we hear about the rhetorical stylings of Erykah Badu, the life history of Tupac, and God complexes. Each author utilizes his or her own method for examining a variety subjects (or data), including the critical method (as employed by Miller and her methodological counterpart, Russell McCutcheon) and the ethnohistory method of philosopher Daniel White-Hodge. While no doubt eclectic and thought-provoking, many of these

chapters continue to name hip-hop in an exclusively prophetic manner by foregrounding its ability to give voice to the voiceless and recognition to the illegible. “The cultural form, in all its facets,” argues philosopher Julius Bailey, “is the vehicle by which black America moved through and overcame the problems that faced the community in the years following the civil rights movement.” “Hip-hop’s very existence,” continues Bailey, “proves to the artist that God’s interests ‘are clearly in harmony with [his] own’” (p. 52). While largely correct, Bailey’s arguments tell us much about how scholars continue to view hip-hop through the lenses of victimization/uplift and pathology/source of community strength. Despite the reluctance to rely on analytical binaries, they nevertheless encroach upon our collective insights due to their highly politicized character and rhetorical power in the American public square.

In the section “Hip-Hop on Religion and the ‘Other,’” we encounter Tupac’s posthumous presence, hip-hop and religion in cyberspace, the city of Houston, hegemonic US bodies, and Bun B’s biographical reflections. Scholar of religion Elonda Clay foregrounds “play” in order to remind her readers and other scholars that hip-hop resists codification at every turn. In addition, Clay’s chapter also explicitly applies Miller’s critical approach to her own subject of cyberspace religion and hip-hop. For Clay, Miller’s typologies illuminate “how the ‘religious’ within and about hip-hop culture is strategically utilized by various digital content creators in order to enhance their authority, authenticity, or to perform and maintain identities on the internet” (p. 95). This quotation demonstrates both the great benefit and drawback to the critical approach to studying religion and hip-hop. Echoing Miller and Pinn’s theoretical assumption that “rhetorical uses of religion in rap music depict little about confessional claims to belief among artists” (p. 2), Clay’s argument resides on the analytical level of function (or explanation) instead of description (or content). Despite the fact that form and content vary very little within

cultural production, according to fellow author and scholar of religion Joseph Winters, concluding one’s analysis with this *type* of conclusion, one that cares very little for biographical or individual particularity, renders the content of such productions meaningless outside of its social function. This theoretical decision by the editors becomes that much more vexing when one of the chapters in the book features the individual experiences of an artist in order to “speak back” to the scholar. This is an admirable move (despite the framing of his words with critical terminology and turns of phrase such as “Freeman realized” and “Bun B understands”—how do we know?), but one that is indebted to the much-criticized work of scholar of religion Charles Long, whose groundbreaking *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986) described the decolonial process as an act of speaking back to those who possessed the language of civilization and Christianity. While “the Other” of this section is less than clear, what is clear is the rich data and the diverse questions asked of the data as part of larger, self-aware critical study of religion and hip-hop.

The last section of the text, titled “Approaches to Religion and Hip-Hop on the Margins,” takes up an equally stimulating collection of hip-hop artifacts and personalities including conspiracy, humanism, ideational constellations, zombies, and “Black Godz.” Anthropologist John J. Jackson examines how discourses of conspiracy and paranoia work against the humanity of hip-hop artists such as Jay-Z and Kanye West through exclusion. For Jackson, public outcries over the Illuminati in hip-hop function as “windows into folk readings of contemporary life that tell us something about how certain forms of control, authority, and power, are vernacularly conceptualized” (p. 154). Unlike some of his fellow colleagues, Jackson is able to strike a balance between the descriptive and explanatory in his conclusion that rhetorical acts of exclusion involving conspiracy in hip-hop possess their very own aesthetic universe and lin-

guistic context. White-Hodge's chapter on Tupac echoes this sentiment by excavating the most salient moments and events of an individual life in order to better understand change over time. Scholar of religion Anthony Pinn's chapter on "Zombies in the Hood" is also grounded in this type of approach, which pays close attention to how language and ontological certainly assign death to those rendered darkest in the American imagination so that its lightest citizens can avoid such existential angst. "Poetic representation and interrogation ... are what these artists have available to them," argues Pinn. "By these means, culture and cultural production, the artist challenges the making of zombies" (p. 197).

Monica Miller's chapter examines a similar rhetorical resource, namely "aporetic flow," in order to demonstrate how social "nonpassages" become "black authorities of presence" (p. 199). Like many of her fellow critical study of religion colleagues, Miller spends a great deal of time analyzing rhetoric for both its forms and methods of deployment by its human wielders. Drawing from the theology of the richly presented Five Percent Nation, Miller argues that "the twoness so emblematic of black life enables the tactical repurposing of culture as creative strategy for recognition of presence and absence" (p. 203). This emphasis on function does not remain untethered from its social context, however. In fact, we learn from Miller that the Five Percent Nation emphasis on salutations "peace God" and "what up, God" can still be heard today in the language of the black Godz Jay-z and Kanye West. Miller also demonstrates how epistemic demarcations between high and low culture bend under the weight of reappropriation by those seen as lacking culture itself. It is in this sense that Jay-Z can perform his single "Picasso Baby" for six consecutive hours for a music video to critical acclaim.

The most unexpected theoretical agenda found in *Religion in Hip Hop* appears in Joseph Winters's "Constructing Constellations: Frankfurt

School, Lupe Fiasco, and the Promise of Weak Redemption." Despite the less than charitable reputation of the Frankfurt School when it comes to questions of the popular and mass culture(s), Winters contends that there is much to be gained by analyses grounded in the writings of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "Performing a constellational style, Adorno configures and juxtaposes concepts, images, and tropes, in ways that do not always seem to cohere," argues Winters. "These playful tensions undo familiar meanings, reminding us of the flexibility and open-ended quality of language" (p. 169). Yet again, hip-hop is credited for undoing the fixity of social and ideological structures bent on cultivating economic incentive. The difference between this argument and those that emphasize hip-hop's prophetic quality (not unrelated to work on hip-hop that possesses both academic and pastoral concerns) is that it is not the result of politics or personal preference for the liberative. Instead, it emerges from the observation that "the form of an artwork can reflect the fractures and breaks within the social world" itself (p. 273). This means that cultural productions cannot help but possess their own sources of disruption. Like all great works of art, hip-hop is able to present the familiar in a new light, using the familiar to reintroduce the illegible to those willing to look. It is this cultural and historical particularity that ultimately differentiates artists and their stories from the homogenizing forces of industry and capital, where "the freedom to choose what is always the same" reigns supreme. For cultural critic Alex Ross, the most significant contribution of the Frankfurt School is the premise that "any object, no matter how seemingly trivial, was worth a searching glance ... a relentless scouring of mundane surfaces." [3] Despite the glimmer of such surfaces, there is arguably no better theoretical grounding for the study of popular culture in general and religion and hip-hop in particular as demonstrated by Winters, Miller, and others in the edited collection.

The audiences for this book reflect its diverse offerings. Written in academic yet accessible prose, each chapter examines a particular object in the study of hip-hop in order to say something about the artist's or art work's connection to religion. Historians, cultural critics, theologians, philosophers, and scholars of religion will find much to celebrate in the book since each chapter is shaped by a different discipline. The methodological emphases of Pinn and Miller reflect larger trends and debates in the study of religion in regards to scientific "explanation" and anthropological "description." For American religious historians, Miller's text serves as the quintessential introductory text on both data-based and theoretical levels. We learn of new phenomena and modes of conceiving such productions as "data." In their desire to apply critical methods to the study of religion and hip-hop, however, Miller and Pinn end up recapitulating some less helpful conclusions concerning "religion" and its relationship to human (social) actors. There is no question that hip-hop culture "has been utilized as a means of exploring and analyzing the complex and ever-changing configurations of religion within and among today's current landscape" p. 2). In fact, Miller's text can be understood as the latest and most thorough attempt to do this very work of examination and explanation. However, to pair this agenda with another that sees very little "data" in the lyrical dexterity of hip-hop when it comes to "religion" as simply "a 'place holder' of sorts, a way by means of which humans parse out and explore the social world," is to exclude a rich archive of reflection and interpretation in favor of function or purpose-based analyses in the critical study of hip-hop and religion (p. 3).

There has undoubtedly been an overemphasis on rap lyrics as a source of academic analysis in past research, especially those that tended to lean more towards the prophetic (a historiographic tendency not completely unrelated to the confessional claims of academics themselves), but they arguably should not be excluded from our

intellectual purview simply because they seemingly reveal little about confessional claims. As a result of these methodological choices, we encounter sentences such this: "God talk and religious language are but mere rhetorical weapons—no less powerful ones—used in this contestation for/over identity making" (p. 204). Based on this approach, there is little to no content that is worth our collective examination in language having to do with religion, God, or Christianity. In addition to the overly martial character of this typology, it assumes that individuals are already always aware of what they are doing as social actors engaging one another over scarce discursive resources as a form of identity maintenance. This insight is beneficial when thinking about how categories shape our thinking while providing their human speakers with rhetorical leverage for identity construction, yet it arguably empties the content of language itself in favor of its social function or purpose as part of a "critical" study of religion.

Writing on another text that relies on similar theoretical assumptions, American religious historian Emily Johnson argues that the "decision to treat 'religion as a tactic' risks implying that [our] subjects are insincere in their religious beliefs or that they only deploy religious rhetoric cynically, for political gain." As a result, the analysis "ends up characterizing both religion and politics as mainly strategies for gaining power, without making room for considering how religious and political belief function in people's lives." [4] This is not to say that there is something uniquely "religious" about "religion," or that "religion" is something out there just waiting to be found since such demarcations are admittedly products of power relations. To rely simply on function or purpose is to devalue individual context and historical change over time in favor of larger, synchronic renderings of categories and their deployment in American public life. This work is without question essential to the field of hip-hop and religion and should be celebrated as a major accomplishment,

but its theoretical contributions arguably cannot serve as the subfield's sole overarching theoretical framework. To forego the eclectic subject matter and methodological variety in *Religion in Hip-Hop* in favor of a potentially overdetermining critical method belies the diversity inherent in the art form itself and its subsequent study. Scholars of religion, historians, cultural critics, social scientists, and scholars of American religion should welcome this much-needed text for both its admirable execution and its groundbreaking contributions to the study of hip-hop and religion. Miller, Pinn, and Freeman have set the proverbial table for others to explore the rich rhetorical worlds of hip-hop, rap music, and religion. The question is whether those who study such art forms can finally cast off the mantle of victimization in order to better address the multitude of manifestations hip-hop assumes in American public life today on behalf of both the fan and the interests of capital.

#### Notes

[1]. Trent Fitzgerald, "Kendrick Lamar Covers Ebony Magazine's June 2015 Issue," *The Boombox* website, May 24, 2015, <http://theboombox.com/kendrick-lamar-covers-ebony-magazine-june-issue/>.

[2]. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Anthony Pinn, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: NYU Press, 2003); Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip-Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, *The Religion and Hip-Hop Reader* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014). In addition to these salient texts, I would also add the following in order to fill in remaining historiographic gaps: William Eric Perkins, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); L. Benjamin Rolsky, "Bishop Lamont and the Hermeneutics of Play: Hip Hop, Religion, and the Study of American Religious History," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 40, no. 3 (2011): 9-15; Josef Sorett, "'Believe me, this pimp game is very religious': Toward a Religious History of Hip Hop," *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 1 (2009): 11-22; and Josh Sides, "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (Sept 2004): 583-605.

[3]. Alex Ross, "The Naysayers: Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and the Critique of Pop Culture," *The New Yorker*, Sept 15, 2014. For more, see <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/15/naysayers>.

[4]. For more, see Emily Johnson, "Us v. Them: The Pitfalls of Religious Rhetoric," review of *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America* by Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Religion and Politics* website, September 16, 2014, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/09/16/us-v-them-the-pitfalls-of-righteous-rhetoric/#sthash.UcvMB16K.dpuf><http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/09/16/us-v-them-the-pitfalls-of-righteous-rhetoric/>.

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