

Review:

## Religion and Hip Hop

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*study of religion, art, religious authority, cultural studies, identity, music*

*Religion and Hip Hop. Monica R. Miller. Routledge 2012, ISBN 0415628571, 220 pages.*

As a hip hop researcher based in northern Europe, my initial reaction to the title of Monica R. Miller's interesting book *Religion and Hip Hop* is that it is too general. Although the first sentence of the book speaks of the "global and transnational ascendance of hip hop" (p.1), the study remains limited to the US context only. It turns out, however, that Miller has a more general and ambitious purpose with this book: to rethink the relation between religion and hip hop, with the hope that "religious studies of Hip-Hop culture can begin again" (p.179).

Miller's original impetus for studying religion in hip hop comes from the public scapegoating discourses which construct hip hop as dirt, risky and a societal threat. Such discourses often cast religion in the role of sanitizer, as an "agent of moral maintenance and deviance management" (p. 6). In contrast, Miller first set out to document and analyze the religious meaning-making within hip hop culture. This proves to be easier said than done, since popular culture, and hip hop in particular, is complex, contradictory and has a somewhat anti-proper quality, twisting and turning religiosity in unpredictable ways. This "failure" to simply locate the religious within hip hop is what prompts Miller's interesting re-thinking of the religious, the book's most central contribution.

About half of the book is devoted to critique of approaches found in previous research on religion and hip hop. Chapters 3 and 4 offer a detailed

critique of authors such as Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West and Anthony B. Pinn, as well as approaches that make use of hip hop culture as a bait for strengthening church activity. In one way or another, according to Miller, these perspectives fail to interrogate critically the notion of “the religious.” In so doing, they often remain explicitly or implicitly stuck with a predefined notion of the religious as “a confessional, coherent, decipherable inward essence that is self-evident” (p. 179). Drawing instead on a wide range of cultural theorists, philosophers and religious scholars, she argues for a constructivist approach that calls into question the religious as a proper object. This approach thus enables “the exploration of why certain social processes come to be understood and classified as religious, and furthermore what these classifications accomplish among particular groups across time and space” (p. 178).

Chapter 5 offers a critique of empirical, quantitative research on youth religiosity in America: “How is religion measured in such studies? What counts as religious when doing the work of social science, and what is left unexamined?” (p. 124) Similar to the critique of theoretical approaches, here Miller argues that this empirical research suffers from a lack of inquiry into its central concepts. Particularly there are often taken for granted assumptions that conflate religiosity with either moral efficacy or institutional participation. The critique of theoretical and empirical ways of studying religion and hip hop is both theoretically informed and concrete and detailed, which makes it likely to be a point of reference for future work on religion and hip hop. One of the strengths of Miller’s critique is the way it makes creative use of insights and concepts from authors ranging from constructivist religious scholar Russell T. McCutcheon, via critical theorists such as Althusser, Gramsci, Bourdieu and Derrida, to the queer theories of Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar. However, there are also many well-known tensions between these theoretical approaches, and Miller’s book could have profited from a clearer recognition of some of them. This could have strengthened Miller’s own perspective and avoided the book’s quite eclectic impression.

In the other half of the book, Miller sets her own approach to work. Going beyond rap lyrics as data, she analyzes the public debate on hip hop in the 2007 “Don Imus controversy” in chapter 1, the use of religious tropes in books by hip hop artists in chapter 2, and dance practices in David LaChapelle’s 2005 documentary film *Rize* in chapter 6. These chapters are thus spread out over the book, and could perhaps have formed a more distinct “second part” of *Religion and Hip Hop*. The analysis of the Don Imus controversy challenges a race-only paradigm, advocating instead a queer intersectional approach that is able to pay appropriate attention to gender and sexuality. While this analysis is thoroughly convincing, it could have been more contextualized. I feel that the chapter is a bit apart from the rest of the book, since it focuses on race, gender and sexuality more than religion. In the rest of the book it is the other way around, and the promising queer intersectional approach of this chapter unfortunately disappears after this analysis. The reader is also left wondering how similar or different this 2007 public debate on hip hop is, compared with, for instance Kimberlé Crenshaw’s classic intersectional analysis of the public debate on the obscenity charges against 2 Live Crew.

The chapter which is most likely to appeal to a broad hip hop scholarly audience is the analysis of the recent books by 50 Cent, KRS One and RZA of Wu-Tang Clan. It is in this chapter that we can best understand the benefits of Miller’s constructivist approach. Rather than asking the conventional question “what is religious in hip hop,” Miller asks what that which is seen as religious accomplishes within the context of hip hop. This allows her to track the uses of religious tropes in books that cannot straightforwardly be described as religious. While 50 Cent’s book *The 50th Law* is fashioned after a King James Version of the Bible, RZA’s book is called *The Tao of Wu*. KRS One’s book is called *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, and proclaims, among other things, that hip hop is proof of God’s existence. The constructivist approach thus allows Miller to investigate into how “KRS makes use of the already established power of traditional theology, specifically Christian thought, to make a case for the grandiosity and significance of Hip-Hop culture.” (p. 58) In this way, an analysis of religion and hip hop can go far

beyond that which is religious according to researcher's predefined ideas, and instead investigate into what religious signs do.

Despite some minor reservations, *Religion and Hip Hop* is a book that offers a theoretically informed and detailed critique of approaches hitherto found in the small but emerging body of work on hip hop and religion. In this respect, the book makes a significant contribution by incorporating some critical tools of constructivist social and cultural theory. It is likely to become a point of reference for subsequent analysis of the interface between religion and popular culture, particularly hip hop. Furthermore, it sets Miller's constructivist approach to work on a range of data from hip hop culture, opening up interesting ways of researching religion and hip hop that should merit attention beyond the U.S. context.