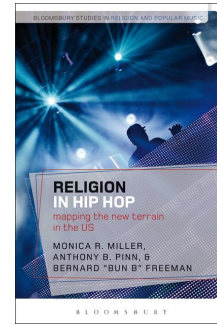
Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US, edited by Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman



Bloomsbury Studies in Religion and Popular Music | London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 | 270 + xix pages | ISBN: 978-1-4725-0907-9 (softcover) $35.99

Consisting of fourteen new studies on primarily contemporary, commercially successful, mainstream American rap, *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* is the most theoretically challenging and engaging study of the relationship between hip hop and what could be broadly conceived of as religion to date. Coming at a time when hip hop is artistically and ideologically more diverse than ever before, however, readers may find the quite narrow methodological approaches of the chapters, and the limited focus on a small number of commercially successful male megastars, to be disappointing. The collection is significant in building upon and moving beyond the well-established view of scholars of the genre that hip hop holds "vital clues regarding changing patterns and configurations of meaning, life, community, politics, and so on" (1). By engaging hip hop in dialogue with, and through the lens of, critical theory and continental philosophy, a convincing cumulative argument is presented for hip hop to be more than merely data; that hip hop is a meaningful partner and resource for scholars developing sophisticated understandings of contemporary culture.

With hip hop reaching the commercial apogee of its four decades of existence, increasingly engaging with the full range of possibilities presented by the culture industry and media technology, several chapters offer a good demonstration of hip hop as a preeminent medium for studying broader issues at the intersection of religion and contemporary culture. James Braxton Peterson's chapter on the "ontological rupture" of the holographic resurrection of Tupac (71–86), is one such example. Anthony B. Pinn's chapter on "Zombies in the Hood" (183–197) is another, interrogating, but extending, the revived popular trope of the zombie to theorize the embodiment of African American disadvantage and marginalization—the zombie as the "un/dead representing meaninglessness rendered external to 'human' life" (188). Similarly, Elonda Clay's chapter on religion and hip hop online (87–95), using the example of Yeezianity.com—nominally based on Kanye

West's 2013 album *Yeezus*, and seemingly owned by an accountancy training company—demonstrates both the ambiguity of virtual religion and the ludic nature of hip hop culture.

This ambiguous approach can also be detected in approaches to the concept of "religion" in the book. The editors wish to approach religion as "a conceptual and taxonomical 'place holder' of sorts" for questions of existential meaning (3). This is common for studies of popular culture emerging from within the discipline of religion studies, from wherein most of the contributors come, and within which critical engagement with the category of religion is increasingly common. The definition is sometimes stretched, and sometimes deconstructed out of existence, with the resulting advantage that the discipline gains secular credibility and broadens its potential field of study. So one must be a scholar very much committed to the old school to expect some kind of engagement with what we might call *actually existing religion*. The editors have almost entirely excluded actually existing religion circulating in contemporary US hip hop from this collection, with the exception of passing allusions to and critiques of African American churches and acknowledgement of the influence of heterodox forms of African-American Islam. The "melancholic kind of hope" (176–177) in Lupe Fiasco's lyrical critique of American foreign policy is more interesting than his publicly identified Sunni Muslim beliefs, therefore. This is despite—or, perhaps, *because*—actually existing religion is more prominent within contemporary American hip hop than ever before. In 2014 the album *Anomaly* by the Evangelical rapper Lecrae debuted at number 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart. Released on his own independent label, no less, one might have thought that such a development would warrant at least some passing comment in a collection on 'the new terrain' of religion in American hip hop.

This conspicuous absence is one of the disappointing aspects of the collection, and it is linked to two other aspects mentioned in this review's introduction: the narrow methodological focus and the narrow range of artists analyzed. The latter is perhaps the most obvious issue: Tupac, Jay Z, and Kanye West dominate the discussion, and aside from this holy trinity, only Erykah Badu and Lupe Fiasco receive sustained treatment. The other foundational elements of hip hop, aside from rapping, are only briefly breached in Maco L. Faniel's chapter on the development of the Houston scene (96–107). To map "the new terrain in the US," as the collection proposes to do, is not the same as to keep up with the Kardashians. It is not only the genre-crossing and multimedia megastardom of a handful of rappers that marks

contemporary American hip hop as quantitatively and qualitatively different from other sites of the global scene and other periods in American popular music history, it is also the radical diversity of the contemporary form, and this is underanalyzed in the collection.

Similarly, with few exceptions the chapters demonstrate the same methodological approach: critical textual analysis of album lyrics and art, combined with publically available interviews. Critical theory and continental philosophy provide the theoretical thrust, in combination with the familiar treatment of hip hop as a subcategory of (African-American) progressive politics. This is, once again, common for studies of popular culture emerging from within the discipline of religion studies; the interest is in nominally secular popular culture, but analyzed in the way one might analyze more conventional religious texts. As mentioned, Maco L. Faniel's chapter on the Houston hip hop scene stands out for its nod towards cultural geography and move beyond the focus on individual megastars. Standing out in a different way is Daniel White-Hodge's chapter "Methods for the Prophetic" on the "ethnolifehistory" of Tupac and, briefly appearing as if an afterthought, unfortunately, Lauryn Hill (24–37). In his longstanding interest in the cultural and religious significance of Tupac, Hodge draws upon numerous interviews with his associates and acquaintances, to move beyond "a sole focus on the lyrical and aesthetic dimensions, to consider the lived realities and geography" of an individual life. At the other end of the methodological spectrum of hip hop studies, absent from this collection, scholars are engaging in similar research—not about celebrity lives, but about the lives of impoverished and otherwise marginalized youth who engage with hip hop as a resource for education and a tool for self-expression.

In the penultimate concluding chapter, Miller and Pinn argue that the "new reality" of the relationship between religion and culture in the United States, emerges through the "complexity and useful incoherence" of hip hop's approach to what might be characterized as "religion" (215). Despite the theoretical sophistication of the study, I cannot help but wonder how "new" this "new reality" or the "new terrain" in the book's title really is. To what extent is the "complexity and useful incoherence" of "religion" in hip hop that emerges through the collection simply a consequence of the exclusion from the study of the more orthodox forms of religion that circulate within the genre? What is left is religion as the creative, individual expression of moral seriousness, familiar in artistic endeavors and self-authorizing individual spiritual journeys from the Romantic era onwards. If the analysis of the

beliefs and practices hinted at in the public utterances of rap's megastars was conducted in a more banal scholarly manner—that is, a more sociological manner—I wonder if we would be less dazzled. Should Jay Z's refusal, as Michael Eric Dyson explains, "to hunker down" in any single religious register or articulate a coherent theological "system" (58, 63) be surprising to scholars of the late capitalist spiritual terrain? How about his periodically self-deifying braggadocio—"Jay Hova" also being the focus on Monica R. Miller's chapter on hip hop's "New Black Godz" (198–213)—or the thoroughly material concerns that saturate his "cosmic consciousness" (67)? These artists are not just heirs to the values of the Romantics, but to the values of Oprah Winfrey and her "divine self," and the rest of Hollywood's spiritual self-help milieu, after all.

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