Introduction: What’s this “Religious” in Hip Hop Culture?

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At the 2010 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion held in Atlanta, a group of young scholars organized a wildcard session titled “What’s This ‘Religious’ in Hip Hop Culture?” The central questions under investigation were 1) what about hip hop culture is religious? and 2) how are issues of theory and method within African American religious studies challenged and/or rethought because of the recent turn to hip hop as both subject of study and cultural hermeneutic informing the work of some scholars? Though some panelists challenged this “religious” in hip hop, all agreed that hip hop is of theoretical and methodological import for African American religious studies and religious studies in general. Apparently, so did the AAR as the popularity of the wildcard session has spawned a three-year consultation titled Critical Approaches to Hip Hop and Religion that begins in 2011. In light of this growing interest in hip hop, this collection of essays brings together three of the papers presented during the 2010 wildcard session (Clay, Driscoll, Miller) and two essays written specifically for this collection (Rolsky and Lomax), in an effort to place in print examples of what was overwhelmingly agreed upon at the end of the wildcard session: Hip hop, the late twentieth-century cultural movement emerging from the intersection of black cultural priorities and expression and social and political factors (Rose 1994, 23), is helping to shape some current developments in issues of theory and method for the study of religion through its adoption as a field of study and as a hermeneutical influence from which many emerging scholars now work.

Recently published texts by hip hop artists like KRS-One’s The Gospel of Hip Hop (PowerHouse Books 2009) and Rza’s The Tao of Wu (Riverhead 2009) are suggestive of hip hop as a modality of religious or spiritual expression—or at the least, a starting point for exploring the varied dimensions of the religious within hip hop culture. Through stylistic and aesthetic choices along with the appropriation of traditionally understood religious symbols, these books substantiate from within hip hop what has been of concern to these young scholars: What’s the “religious” in hip hop culture? Though the answers to this question are multi-dimensional and shifting, there appears to be agreement that the religious and hip hop, at least from time to time, make use of each other, and at most, hip hop can be employed as a means of discussing and describing what Anthony Pinn labels the “quest for complex subjectivity...a desired movement from being corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces to becoming a complex conveyer of cultural meaning, with a complex and creative identity” (Pinn 2003, 158). This desire to examine the religious in hip hop necessitates a theoretical self-reflexivity as it foregrounds such perennial concerns as “What is religious?” and “How do scholars label something as religious?” Consequently, a growing number of scholars are now asking how hip hop’s adoption as a subject for study can be deployed to interrogate, challenge, and at times corroborate the theoretical and methodological tools inherited by their intellectual forebears.

One implication of this turn to hip hop as theoretical guidepost is evident here through an adoption of “play” as a trope, heuristic, and even hermeneutic for studies in religion. Many of the essays here make either explicit or implicit use of “play” as a means for rethinking how hip hop and the religious are theorized. And most interestingly, it is the “play” of meanings, experiences, and linguistics emerging from within hip hop that signals a need to adopt “play” as a theoretical trope for exploring the religious. Stated succinctly, what we learn about hip hop can help shape how we learn about religion. For instance, play is central amongst hip hoppers as they fashion and negotiate their identity. Elonda Clay’s essay discussing hip hoppers’ appropriation of technology—in particular “machinima”—articulates this relationship between play and identity formation. Play emerges for hip hoppers as a means of uncovering and reclaiming a subjective identity.
truncated by oppressive circumstances including sexism, racism, poverty, and homophobia. Tamura Lomax, through a womanist assessment of current hip hop sensation Nicki Minaj, suggests play and the “confusion” it affords hip hoppers is an “emancipatory act for both Minaj and her fan base.” Within hip hop, play becomes the means through which certain material circumstances are navigated and rethought.

This turn to play offers a similar strategy to interrogate oppressive forces operating within religious guises and forms. Through a lyrical analysis of Goodie Mob’s “The Day After,” I suggest that concepts of death and material human limitation are responded to through play and rhetorical signification, offering the scholar a means through which to interrogate such enduring oppressive categories as white supremacy. Beyond these possibilities, play offers a more thorough heuristic for making sense of the complexity of religious expressions. This shift in heuristic is offered explicitly by Louis Rolsky in his rethinking of hip hop as integral to the narrative of late twentieth-century American religious history. These essays affirm that hip hop is influencing the way it and other subjects within religious studies are theorized while simultaneously corroborating certain contemporary theoretical vantage points brought about by theorists such as Ricoeur, Derrida, Foucault, Butler, and others. Such is demonstrated by the final essay, Monica Miller’s McCutcheon-informed rethinking of the very term and category of the “religious.”

Coinciding chronologically with the growth and influence of hip hop as a subject for investigation within the AAR is increased awareness that hip hop’s cultural influence has broad reach within higher education generally and religious studies specifically. Across the country, the cultural import of hip hop is being adopted as a means for addressing and responding to the challenges of the twenty-first-century neoliberal academic landscape. For instance, hip hop artist Swizz Beats was recently named “producer in residence” at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, and Brown University lists well-known artist Wyclef Jean as “visiting fellow in the Department of Africana Studies” for the 2010/2011 academic year. Particular to the field of religious studies, Anthony Pinn, one of the earliest scholars to engage hip hop and religion, recently co-taught “Religion and Hip Hop Culture” at Rice University with Bernard “Bun-B” Freeman, one of the most highly regarded hip hop emcees in the world. Understood as a near-pervasive cultural hermeneutic influencing today’s youth and young(er) adults, hip hop is seen by many within higher education as a marketing strategy for moving into the future, as well as a means of breaking down the traditional “ivory tower, top-down” trajectory of knowledge production.

This broad influence on higher education offers some insights for religious studies. First, hip hop as subject of study within religious studies is no longer the singular purview of African American religious studies or black and womanist theology. Second, echoing the reframing of higher education through the appropriation of hip hop, some emerging scholars are noting hip hop as a re-constructing, myth-making cultural artifact, and their theorization of the religious reflects this re-constructing impulse. The last forty years have seen the birth and proliferation of hip hop as a cultural product largely informed by the African American community and informing the global community, and these trends in higher education corroborate such a pattern of origin and influence. Although hip hop and its religious dimensions spring from the black experience in the Americas, like other black cultural products, hip hop has been appropriated (positively and negatively) to such an extent that it is of growing interest to scholars of religion in a variety of disciplines. Simultaneously, this marks the importance of hip hop for African American religious studies, as those specialists must investigate the religious dimensions of hip hop and hip hop’s influence on other modalities of black religious expression. Yet this pattern of appropriation should suggest to all religious studies scholars that many of their fields of investigation and the hermeneutics with which they approach their subjects may be informed by hip hop even if they do not explicitly study hip hop. Hip hop emphasizes the importance of contextually-specific studies precisely because those contexts interweave with and inform each other to such an extent that adequate theorization cannot occur without attention to this interconnect-edness.

Second, in light of hip hop’s influence, some within religious studies seek to reconstruct their theoretical and methodological “realities.” Connected to issues of play and identity, hip hop offers to hip hoppers a way of rethinking and redesigning the worldviews they inherit. Born out of the post-industrial condi-
tions of the South Bronx, New York, where poverty, lack of jobs, urban blight, and violence mark existence (Rose 1994, 30), hip hop’s four principle elements or pillars (the DJ, emcee, graffiti, and breaking) developed and continue to be employed as strategies for recasting and remaking the world anew. Within much of hip hop culture, there is a dismissal of the world as it is and a rethinking and reimagining of the world as it should be. This happens through a host of myth-building frames such as the otherworldly metaphysical systems of Goodie Mob, the virtual realities created through machinima, the rhetorical and aesthetic positionalities of Nicki Minaj, the troping of religious reformation by West Coast artist Bishop Lamont, as well as 50 Cent’s manipulation of the “religious” as a marketing strategy to change his own material circumstances.

Today, this hip hop sensibility of world-making is present in many religious studies treatments of hip hop as some of these scholars are so heavily informed by a hip hop hermeneutic that reconstructions of reality (in this case, theory and method) are part and parcel to their work in the academy. In unique ways, each of the essays included here help to diagnose this world-making sensibility operating within hip hop and within much of the scholarship engaging hip hop. To this extent, this work echoes not only hip hop as a cultural movement, but the historical ethos of the academy, as both emerge and are sustained through constant rethinking and recreating of identity and environment (be it artistic, academic, or both).

Whereas the wildcard session was interested in how hip hop is shaping theory and method within African American religious studies, the findings from that session and the pervasiveness of hip hop’s influence within higher education insist that such concern be extended to religious studies broadly conceived. And beyond this general influence, based on the very nature of hip hop as a cultural artifact keen on rethinking and recasting one’s reality, the interest in hip hop practically necessitates similar reconstructions of theory and method within the discipline.

This grouping of essays is indicative of the breadth and range described in this introduction, as various disciplines such as history, religious studies, anthropology and philosophy of religion (to name a few) are represented alongside such methodologies as ethnography, rhetorical analysis, and comparative work, along with existential perspectives representative of the diversity of scholars and scholarship emerging at this intersection of hip hop and religious studies. Taken together, these essays further the ongoing discussion involving hip hop within the academy, and give attention to how hip hop challenges, furthers, advances, and critiques the theoretical and methodological formulations emerging from and for the study of religion.

References
