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A review of Monica Miller's *Religion and Hip Hop*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 209 pp. \$44.95. ISBN: 9780415628570

Over the past two decades, hip hop culture has become a lucrative site of scholarship and critical engagement. In response to hasty dismissals of hip hop as nihilistic, inartistic, and faddish, scholars from a variety of disciplines have demonstrated persuasively the complexities, ambiguities, and possibilities attached to hip hop, rap, youth cultures, and so forth. Within the broader field of hip hop studies, there has also been a growing interest in thinking critically and in more nuanced ways about the relationship between hip hop and religion. Authors such as Michael Eric Dyson, Anthony Pinn, and Ebony Utley have investigated the ways in which rap artists use both traditional and non-traditional religious tropes to make sense of and resist various social constraints and injustices that are especially ponderous for working class communities of color. Monica Miller's fascinating text, *Religion and Hip Hop*, is a recent attempt to re-mix, trouble, and advance the important work done in this field.

Miller's book is motivated by two related concerns. For one, Miller contends that while much of the religion and hip hop scholarship foregrounds the complexities of hip hop culture, it tends to take the category of religion for granted. Authors in this field assume that religion is a universal phenomenon. They presuppose that religion is "present" in the world in the form of belief or internal striving "rather than considering religion as something constructed in and by practices for various interests" (12). By making a shift in emphasis from belief and meaning to the language of practice and power, Miller intends to give hip hop studies a post-modern makeover. In addition to the concern about the givenness of religion, Miller rejects the tendency to imagine religious institutions, especially the black church, as a redemptive force for "deviant" practices and behaviors associated with youth and hip hop cultures. According to Miller, "When religion is positioned socially and intellectually as the "sanitizer" of "deviant" cultural productions, this conflation produces (and maintains) dominant power" (6). Drawing from an array of disciplines—religious studies, cultural studies, social theory, and literary theory—Miller's book is a concerted effort to deconstruct these prevailing assumptions within religion/hip hop studies and to re-imagine the relationship between sacred value and popular culture.

Each chapter directly or implicitly challenges the notion that religion is a universal human attribute as well as the hope that religion might sanitize and eliminate the "dirty," unpleasant qualities of hip hop. In chapter one, Miller revisits the Don Imus controversy to examine and think critically about the "civic face" of hip hop. Recall that in April of 2007, radio host Don Imus referred to the Rutgers women's basketball team as a group of "nappy-headed hos." In response to criticisms from the black community, Imus and others blamed rap music for the availability and prevalence of the h-word. For Miller, this ascription of blame reflects the tendency to imagine hip hop as the source of our culture's problems and troubles, to treat hip hop culture as a Girardian scapegoat. But the most

provocative part of this chapter is Miller's analysis of the black community's response to Imus's derogatory speech act. While most people identified Imus's comments as racist, they refused to examine the gendered codes and norms behind these comments, the ways in which the "nappy-headed ho" disturbs our culture's imagination of proper womanhood. For Miller, "the Imus controversy was not just racial, it occurred along the margins of sexed and gendered complexity" (33). Race determined the reaction to Imus and "the lack of critical attention and depth of analysis beyond the idea of race left normative depictions of black womanhood intact, and at best, denied the 'nappy-headed ho'" (34). For Miller, this denial invokes Judith Butler's point about social legibility relying on an outside that cannot be recognized or accepted. The nappy-headed female represents the dirt that threatens the prevailing social order, dirt that needs to be sanitized or held at bay.

In chapter two, Miller examines the use of religious imagery and tropes in recent publications by 50 Cent, KRS-One, and the RZA. What is significant here is that Miller is not interested in discovering religious meaning in or behind these texts. She is more interested in what the language of religion does, what it performs, how it works to authorize certain voices and claims. In KRS-One's *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, for instance, the rapper/author uses religious imagery and tropes to establish the realness and authenticity of hip hop culture (60). By alluding to himself as a prophet and by conflating hip hop and religion, he is able to present himself as the authentic voice of hip hop culture. In *The Tao of Wu*, RZA combines different philosophies and forms of life as strategic ways to navigate and survive in a harsh, cold world. For Miller, these artists remind us that religion is not reducible to a feeling but is better understood as "effect, strategy, and manufacturing of social, cultural, and political interests" (70).

Chapters three and four are dedicated to engaging authors who have cleared space to think creatively about the intersections of religion and hip hop. While Miller acknowledges her debts to authors like Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson, she also shows how these authors flatten the complexities of hip hop culture by privileging the prophetic Christian dimensions of artists like Tupac. Drawing from the work of Althusser and Gramsci, Miller expresses concerns about Christian hegemony as well as the black church's missionary effort to rescue or buffer youth of color from the dangers of the streets. While Anthony Pinn's work on hip hop and religion certainly moves beyond the tendency to privilege Christianity or institutional religions more generally, Miller argues that Pinn remains locked in a conception of religion that is no longer tenable in our post-modern epoch. According to Miller, Pinn's notion of religiosity as the "quest for meaning" assumes that religion is universal and *sui generis*. Indebted to the phenomenological school of religion, which supposedly imagines religion as a unique domain of human existence, Pinn assumes that meaning is just out there waiting to be discovered. In other words, he does not pay enough attention to the historical and cultural arrangements and structures that shape, organize, and produce meaning or that manufacture our understanding of religion. In her engagement with Pinn, the reader sees how the two aforementioned concerns come together. By treating religion as a universal quest for meaning and coherence, religion becomes the imagined site where life's contradictions might

be overcome, where the dirtiness produced by the social order might be cleaned up.

The final two chapters are devoted to thinking about the religious and cultural practices of America's youth. In chapter five, Miller looks at empirical sociological research regarding the declining significance of religion in the lives of young people. She suggests that while this data is valuable, it tends to privilege institutional religions and also falsely assumes that religion is a necessary buffer against transgression and deviance. In the final chapter, Miller examines KRUMP dancing in Los Angeles. Described as a "gritty, raw, and aggressive dance form embodied by marginalized black urban youth," KRUMP has enabled youth communities "to survive and channel social anxieties that come along with life on the underside of capitalism" (150). In response to conceptions of religiosity that underscore meaning and interiority, investigating this dance form enables Miller to shift our emphasis to the body and its constraints/possibilities. It also compels us to think about freedom not as liberation from constraint but as a mode of coping, surviving, and maneuvering within the arrangements that shape and form us. What becomes clear in these last two chapters is just how often scholars deny the richness and complexity of the practices and habits that sustain marginalized communities.

Religion and Hip Hop is a ground-breaking book. Those interested in religious studies, hip hop studies, popular culture, queer theory, and the so-called crisis of generation z will appreciate the rigor, depth, and diligence that Miller performs in her writing. Those who have grown weary of studies in the religion/hip hop field that fail to interrogate the category of religion or that envision hip hop as a potential site of salvation from societies woes will find Miller's text refreshing. Yet those who are not quite convinced by the so-called post-modern turn might question the ways in which Miller takes figures like Derrida, Bourdieu, or McCutcheon as authoritative "givens." In addition, one might quibble with the rigid dichotomy created in the text between phenomenology of religion and post-modern theories of religion. While phenomenologists are attuned to general structures and historical essences, there are certainly strands of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty and even the later Husserl) that underscore corporality, flesh, context, situatedness, and the individual's broader lifeworld.

But these are minor concerns that do not take away from Miller's major achievement. For those interested in a novel, invigorating treatment of hip hop culture and religious studies, Miller's book is a must read.

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