Under the Blasphemous W(RAP): Locating the “Spirit” in Hip-Hop

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Biography

Christina Zanfagna is a Ph.D. student in ethnomusicology at UCLA. Her work has appeared in *The Beat*, *fRoots*, *Afropop Quarterly*, and she has a forthcoming article on krump dancing in *The Social and Popular Dance Reader* (University of Illinois Press, 2007). Her proposed doctoral dissertation explores themes of spirituality and commercialism in holy hip-hop music and culture. In addition, Christina has performed with the Gospel Workshop of America (GMWA) mass choir in New Orleans, the UCLA Music of Brazil Ensemble (batUCLAda), and co-organized the first Hip-Hop Film Festival at UCLA.

Abstract

Black popular music has always been a spiritual art form, from its sacred roots in the spirituals and gospel and extending to the blues, jazz, soul, and finally hip-hop. Despite its blasphemous w(rap), mainstream hip-hop percolates with unexpected and multifaceted religious inclinations. While many rap listeners experience a sense of spiritual ecstasy through its words and music, the sacred underbelly of rap music remains elusive to the outsider. As descendents of black music’s sacred-profane ideology, rap artists encode spiritual philosophies in the thorny arenas of sexuality, substance, and suffering. To accept this presupposes that popular culture could be a theological space— an arena in which one may encounter God even in what may be deemed unholy places. This paper examines the contradictory connections between spiritual concerns and rap music as well as the way rap artists juxtapose sacred and profane imagery to articulate their responses to the basic existential questions of life and death. I analyze hip-hop’s unchurched, postmodern brew of spirituality based on fieldwork conducted in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City.

Introduction

Thriving even under slavery, sharecropping, imprisonment, and the urban housing project, the “spirit” finds crafty inlets into daily life, starting with the spirituals and extending to blues, jazz, soul, and finally hip-hop. The presence of spiritually informed behavior is evident in the performance practice of many black popular music forms, right up from the blues men and women to the b-boys and b-girls.1 Mainstream hip-hop percolates with unlikely and multifaceted religious inclinations. Despite its inconsistent relationship to organized religion and its infamous mug of weed smoking, drug pushing, gun slinging, and curse spewing, rap music is not without moral or spiritual content. On the flip side, religious music continues to draw upon popular music idioms – a smart mission strategy to reach today’s listeners. Clearly, religious messages have always been delivered through a vast array of sounds. Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and Stevie Wonder explored popular music as a domain of religious inquiry. On the gospel circuit Thomas Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Andrae Crouch, the Edwin Hawkins singers and a parade of others have dynamically danced along the nebulous border between the sacred and the secular, sometimes stomping it out completely. For in the expressions and experiences of black popular music, good and evil have never been as distinct as the Christian church insists. Body and soul are more integrated than the fathers of Western philosophy claim. And yet the merging of these realms continues today, as it has in the past, to elicit dismissive grumblings and fearsome polemics from religious, musical and cultural purists. Nevertheless, scholars of black music continue to deconstruct the false barricade between popular music and religion.

In this paper, through a lyrical analysis of some of hip-hop’s most seminal MCs, the writings of both scholars of religion and music, and interviews with artist and fans, I will explore the contradictory connections between spiritual concerns and rap music, as well as the way hip-hoppers juxtapose sacred and profane imagery to articulate their responses to the basic existential questions of life and death. My study of hip-hop music suggests a broader definition of spirituality – one that starts in daily experience and rumination, in the wrestling of contrasting yet deeply allied forces. Although I use the terms “spiritual” and “religious” interchangeably in this paper, I am referring to unorthodox thoughts and experiences that exist outside of formal religious organizations – something “unchurched.”

Decoding Hip-Hop’s Spiritual Tradition

The literature on hip-hop and spirituality, although gradually increasing, is minimal. Sustained critical analysis has yet to be done. Scholars who touch upon the topic generally mention it in passing as a peripheral concern. The first sources to embark on this important subject matter are Michael Eric Dyson’s *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1996) and two issues of the *Black Sacred Music* journal (1991, 1994). Dyson’s book title is misleading; he writes about his personal rise from the Detroit ghetto to public intellectual, his existence between God and gangsta rap, the pulpit and streets. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, edited by Anthony Pinn, is the only book solely dedicated to this subject (2003). Robin Sylvan’s *Traces of The Spirit: The Religious Dimension of Popular Music* (2002) and Teresa Reed’s *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (2003) each devote a chapter to religious concerns in rap music. While they offer interesting insights, their studies never move beyond lyrical analysis to the music itself. Pinn’s reader is intended for a scholarly audience and explores rap music’s connection to specific religious traditions: Christianity, Rastafarianism, and Islam. Considering the increasingly documented relationship between hip-hop and these religions,[2] I instead hope to account for a spiritual worldview or belief system that is experimental as opposed to juridical, personal as opposed to institutional, and integrative as opposed to divided. Lack of regular membership in a mainstream denomination may denote a break with previous African American generations, but an alternative is created in its place: a counter-religion with new rituals that provide opportunities for hip-hop’s spiritually restless to bond with multiple religious philosophies (Fuller 2000:126). While my study seeks to redefine the parameters of “spirituality” – that is, what is considered spiritual – it is not my intention to give a hardfast definition of hip-hop’s spirituality or even define what kind of God-figure hip-hop music might point to, for such theological preoccupations would obscure the flexible, adaptive, ecumenical nature of hip-hop’s anatomy of belief and the spiritual experience it produces.

As descendents of black music’s sacred-profane ideology – an ideology of fusion that sees the sacred in the profane – rap artists mold this system to suit their own needs. While sociology’s founding father Émile Durkheim asserts that religions distinguish the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’ and take the ‘sacred’ as their special concern (1915[1912]), hip-hop instead focuses on the ‘profane’ and sacralizes it in an attempt to invert traditional religious dichotomies. Theomusicologist Jon Michael Spencer proposes a trinary construct – the sacred, secular, and profane – where the sacred and the profane both reveal themselves in secular contexts. He believes that the black secular music of the masses, while masquerading as sinful, sexual, sonic evil, is not completely unreligious but rather represents a spirituality of the everyday (1991:9). To accept this presupposes that popular culture could be a sacred place – an arena in which one may encounter God even in the most unholy of places. In their article “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear state:

> Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred … As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths. (1994:219-220)

Performers and listeners of hip-hop claim to undergo ecstatic experiences – proof that spirituality resides in so-called profane expressions as well. Without the luxury of having religion and spirit exist outside of daily life, Michael Eric Dyson appropriately labels hip-hop’s unique brand of spirit-seeking “ghetto spirituality, street religion, urban piety” and “thug theology” (2003:280). The inherent contradiction in these terms reflects the explosive hybridity and “trickster” nature of hip-hop culture, often embodied in African American folklore and literature as the divine trickster, Esu Elegba.[3] Hip-hop’s spirituality – its mystical allusions, contradictory images, and profaned exterior – can be “tricky” and elusive to the average outsider not borne of or “baptized” in the streets. Prodigy of rap duo Mobb Deep talks about the comforting presence of God in what seems to be an “evil” situation on the track “Shook Ones Part Two”:

> If I die I couldn’t choose a better location
> When the slugs penetrate you feel a burning sensation
> Getting closer to God in a tight situation

Similarly, Brooklyn MC, the Notorious B.I.G., who has had an inconsistent relationship to organized religion, hints at the spiritual purification that comes with the blow of his 9mm, in the song, "Long Kiss Goodnight":

> My nine flies, baptize, rap guys
> With the Holy Ghost, I put holes in most

Both of these excerpts resonate with Cheryl Keyes's interpretation of the "crossroads" – one of rap music's most potent Africanisms – which she describes as "recalling the imaginary location where life ends and death begins" or "the place where all spiritual forces or creations are activated" (2002:219, 1996:235). But these spiritual forces are often secreted in the thorny arenas of sexuality, suffering and materialism. Furthermore, the difficulty of revealing the sacred underbelly of rap music is due to its allusive character. Conjuring up the African nexus again, Keyes explains that rap's poetic speech is a continuation of the linguistic practices developed by enslaved Africans in the New World, who "devised ways by which to encode messages about their condition" (1996:22).

Spiritual Sampling: (Re)mixing the Sacred and the Profane

Just as the sacred is ultimately ineffable, hip-hop's postmodern mix of spirituality cannot be known in its totality. MCs and DJs express their views through a collage of digital sound bites: clips of fiery sermons and civil rights speeches sit beside Rastafarian black nationalist rhetoric, "shout outs" to Jesus and the subtle oratory of the Nation of Islam, all frequently interspersed with explicit lyrics (often misinterpreted as demonic, sacrilegious noise). DJ Jeremy Sole exhibits the ecumenical nature of hip-hop's spiritual harvesting and experimentation: "If you were to ask me if I have religion, I would say I have all of them. Everyone I study. It's just like this music" (2004). It follows that rap music embodies the pluralism of current religious energies as well as the spiritual touchstones of hip-hop's exalted predecessors, such as James Brown's wails for black power, the "sexual healing" of Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder's prophetic preaching, the meditative bedroom lamentations of Al Green, and Prince's lyrics of erotic deliverance. Christian rapper Ron T. (a.k.a. Get Wizdom) believes that "entertainers spend more time confusing their audience about their core beliefs than any other people (except possibly some ministers)" (2002). He continues, "Saying a prayer on your CD before you verbally rip your ex-girlfriend to shreds speaks of conflicted spirituality." Compton Virtue, a Christian poet/MC from Compton, CA, made a similar comment regarding mainstream rap star Kanye West's diamond cross in his new video entitled "Jesus Walks" (2004).[4] In an interview from June 2004, she stated, "A cross that costs $190,000 is a contradiction to me." West, and other mainstream rappers like Common and Talib Kweli, have retaliated by saying that contradiction – as an expression of their multidimensionality – is not only an ideal to be strived for but also what makes hip-hop music unapologetically beautiful and human. Hip-hop's spiritual sampling, then, may reflect the desperate need for greater ideological pluralism and recognition of black diversity in the public sphere. Furthermore, in commercial rap, where material wealth supplants the "promised land" as the new locus of freedom, artists struggle to reconcile the almighty dollar with their almighty God and join together who they are with what they buy.

Contradictions also exist when the black church borrows from the so-called streets. New-jack gospel artist and self-titled Christian "church boy" Kirk Franklin uses hip-hop slang in his fresh movings of the Holy Spirit. Traditional hymnal lyrics are replaced by a hybrid language that includes hip-hop wordplay and dictionary-defying spelling games (i.e. Franklin's 1998 release *Nu Nation*, 1996 hit "Whatcha Lookin' 4?" and 2005 album *Hero*). Although the devil may not be at work here, Franklin's increasing use of words like "holla," "24-7," "poppin" and "rockin" has generated controversy among many older church-goers and clergy members,[5] especially when his 1997 gospel-rap hit "Stomp" was played on urban radio stations next to such irreverent selections as Sisquo's "Thong Song," which uses the same slang terms to "holla" at hoes who be "rockin" g-strings. But in the face of current popular culture, where aesthetics often exist for their own sake, Franklin and other holy hip-hop artists are making noble attempts to align popular black aesthetics with relevant spiritual messages.[6] Dyson argues, "It is a central moral contention of Christianity that God may be disguised in the clothing – and maybe even the rap – of society's most despised members" (2001:209).

There is no shortage of attempts to be relevant and prophetic in what many cultural critics have labeled a Godless culture. Christian rap group – The Cross Movement – delivers musical hip-hop sermons: a seemingly contradictory mix of Pentecostal lyrics and Public Enemy Beats. Slews of hip-hop artists continue to make a solemn yet glorified production out of thanking God at award shows. Larger inconsistencies unfold behind the music. Both Rakim and Wu Tang Clan, avid representers of hip-hop's notorious Five Percent Nation (an off-shoot of the Nation of Islam and the only Islamic sect which accepts drinking alcohol), performed in St. Ides commercials. Some Sunni Muslims

claim that the Five Percent Nation has hurt Islam because of its inability to hold on to any theological concept consistently and its prolific references to violence and misogyny (Aidi 2001). The blurred line between religious ideals and life practices is not surprising given the complicated identities of hip-hop's creators and listeners as well as the complex religious architecture of America's major cities.

Sex, Drugs, and Alcohol: Spirituality Through the Flesh

There is another interesting reference behind the irreverent pairing of the culturally pious and profane. Hip-hop wrestles with the ways in which the hedonistic body and the seeking soul can be fed and elevated in dynamic tension. This wrestling is often expressed through a dialectic of pleasure and pain or recreation and suffering. The voracious drives for marijuana and alcohol – commercial rappers' chosen elixirs of ecstasy – dominate hip-hop's mythology. Behind the seemingly 'profane' exterior of hip-hop myth-making, however, may lie the recognition of a deeper truth – that physical and spiritual thirsts are deeply entangled. Jung writes to Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, "[The] craving for alcohol [is] the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness. You see, 'alcohol,' in Latin is *spiritus* and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison" (1974:623-625). Similarly, hip-hop artists explore the sacred/profane duality of sex, linking romantic love and divine rapture. On the album *Voodoo*, D'Angelo – hip-hop inspired neo-soul singer and musician – uses layers of ascending falsetto lines and sacred-exotic symbols, which bespeak ecstasy and eroticism, to create a mood of transcendence. His sexualized soul-searching might also place him among blues men and women such as Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey, who "preached a politics of pleasure that worked to rethink the beauty and value of black bodies" (Pinn 2003:5). As a more extreme version of the Sufi concept of divine love, hip-hop may re-center the body as the site of both romantic and religious experience – two experiences that can happen simultaneously and through one another.

But how are we to discriminate between the ecstasy of spiritual awakening and mundane intoxication or self-indulgence (Fuller 2000:164)? In mainstream hip-hop music, it seems sex and drugs have become the only metaphors for spiritual oneness; bodily pleasure the only conduit of catharsis. AZ the Visualiza tells of his fall from organized religion on Nas's 1994 release *Illmatic*:

> Yeah, we were beginners in the hood as five percenters
> But something must of got in us cause all of us turned to sinners

These may show the extent to which rap artists have bought into the good/evil dichotomy. The chorus follows with an air of chilling detachment:

> Life's a bitch and then you die; that's why we get high
> Cause you never know when you're gonna go

The rising intonation of AZ's voice leaves us unresolved and left to ponder our unexpected fate. For AZ and his fellow "sinners," salvation must be attained here on earth, before an unpredictable death strikes. Unlike Biggie Smalls and Mobb Deep, AZ (and Nas as well) does not necessarily see death as the gateway to spiritual liberation. Rebuking the possibility of an afterlife, he must take his pleasures in the material world and get "high" before he goes below.

Whereas Paul Gilroy, in his article "After the Love Has Gone," notes that the choice of the name "Stairsteps" for the pre-Jackson family quintet "suggested upward momentum... something closer to the heavens if not to God" (1994:54), new hip-hop group names, such as People Under the Stairs, Outkast, and Gravediggaz, may represent a type of decent into an underworld—call it the spiritual underground of mainstream hip-hop or as the album title of Outkast member, Andre, suggests, *The Love Below* (2003). Popular music scholars keep asking, "where has the love gone?" Gilroy explains that the sharpest break between hip-hop and the older genres of Soul and R&B "is evident where love stories mutate into sex stories" (1994:65). Salvation for the flesh lies in the corporeal gratification of sex whereas the soul is saved through its negation. At worst, the confusion of the flesh and the spirit is so drastic that sexual conquest provides the only means of salvation. One does not have to listen to many male MCs to note the scarcity of verses flowered with uplifting narratives of free love and spiritual intimacy. Instead, the majority of songs (or at least those that get mainstream media attention) are cloaked in grim tales of

pornographic conquest, the offensive sizing-up of female bodies, the eye for an eye “kiss me and I’ll kiss you back” sexual bartering, lustful deceit and mistrust between the sexes.[7] But even “after the love has gone,” it would be mistaken to think that these forms of consciousness, because they are centered in and around the body, are doomed to remain forever void of any social value or spiritual sensibility (Gilroy 1994:50).

Is it possible that the seemingly blasphemous pairing of sexual and religious symbols in rap videos, where men don diamond encrusted crosses in Jacuzzis full of eager and thonged women, clinking flutes of champagne, actually speaks to a deep spiritual awareness? As theologian Tom Beaudoin has argued, “offensive images or practices may indicate a familiarity with deep religious truths” (1998:123). One must understand the authority of “official” sacraments to forcefully de-valorize them. Likewise, it takes a true believer in the power of worship to turn curses into praise, the word “nigga” into a nomination of the highest respect. Pieties may be permanent qualities in human life, but the shape they take changes through the years. My point here is not to defend the use of degrading terms, but to acknowledge that such rhetorical devices are making a serious philosophical attempt at grasping a practice of inequality that is very real. Marcyliena Morgan’s application of “semantic inversion” in hip-hop language ideology (2001) and Lucius Outlaw’s concept of “symbolic reversal” – a reversing of symbolic meanings – exemplify the move by hip-hoppers to perform such inversions (1974:403). Just as the blues attempted to dissolve the puritan ethos instilled by white slave masters, hip-hop delivers ironic protest as it turns traditional Christian imagery on its head. Such protest involves a process of reflection and projection that transforms symbols of oppression into symbols of critique and empowerment.

To understand the spiritual tradition within black music, one must be familiar with the African American approach to tapping spiritual energies through media, images and vernaculars that European-American culture tends to regard automatically as profane (Royster 1991:60). Returning to the hot tub scene, it is possible to interpret this context as metaphor of a person in the waters of a spiritual struggle, simultaneously wrestling with and delighting in bodily pleasures and religious beliefs, ultimately resisting the destructive legacy of the Cartesian split. By pushing the limits of excess and hedonism, hip-hoppers hint at the other dimension of their being: their stripped down and naked souls. This scene may also speak to the ubiquitous presence of the sacred in popular culture and places regarded as unholy. For many hip-hoppers, their faith in a higher power is not divorced from their sexuality or the material wealth; they are all “in bed” with each other – in the all-inclusive gumbo of life. Rap music also serves as a public outlet for confession and admission. Outkast raps, “We missed a lot of church so the music is our confessional” (1998). They treat the music as the sacred wooden stall where one confesses their weaknesses and wrongs, and also where one professes their faith, loyalties and love. And what makes the sin a “sin,” the wrong a “wrong?” Outkast continues:

> Sin all depends on what you believing in
> Faith is what you make it, that’s the hardest shit since MC Ren[8]

In other words, morality is fluid, contextual, and self-prescribed. Hip-hop artists apply a sense of playfulness to serious subject matter to reach their own spiritual Truth.

Life In/After Death: Spirituality Through Violence and Suffering

Amiri Baraka has commented that during slavery, black Christians perceived death as a gateway to freedom. Thomas J.J. Altizer comments on Mircea Eliade’s interest in the meaning of death in the modern world: “If every ‘fall’ is a fall into ‘life,’ then a return to the sacred is effected by the reversal of life, by an annihilation of the profane; in short, by an experience of death” (1963:94). Rappers’ lyrical obsession with death is not just an attempt to glorify it. Instead it is a way to familiarize themselves with its horror in order to survive the despondent reality of the everyday and confront the unsettling proximity of death. In the glamorized yet deeply depressing professions of ghetto culture, death often lurks closely behind. Many rap artists revel in their suffering and rehearse death so as to make it less difficult to endure; the awesome poison of death loses its venom if taken daily in non-lethal doses (Gilroy 1994:66). The prevalence of images of suffering in rap music, the sliced-open strain of hip-hop voices such as Mystikal, Lil John, and DMX, and the hyper-masculinity expressed in many lyrics suggest that hip-hop is taking tremendous inventory of its suffering before imagining anything redemptive, anything beyond the crush of the moment (Beaudoin 1998:100). The tendency towards self-destruction often derives from a certain variety of religious emotion. Rapper DMX, while he identifies himself with the Christian church, clearly questions formal religious beliefs in his music. In the song, “Prayer,” DMX raps, “I’m ready to meet him cause where I’m livin ain’t right.” But his conclusion is ultimately inconclusive as he finishes on a selfless and sacrificial note:

> Lord why is it that I go through so much pain
> All I saw was black, all I felt was the rain
> If it takes for me to suffer, for my brother to see the light
> give me pain till I die, but Lord treat him right

Peter J. Paris in *The Spirituality of African Peoples* states “The practical meaning of life in the midst of the actual experience of suffering and the existential threat of death is the subject matter of survival theology” (1995:48). To claim your suffering in the moment, to truly feel it and accept it, is a powerful act of self-attestation. As DMX, 2Pac and others illustrate, suffering is a catalyst for a certain spirituality, a way to come to terms with deep-soul anxiety or alienation, and a possible route to freedom. While hip-hop artists dwell on death, they also resist it, since the very act of making music is a statement of life: “The very assertion of one’s authentic identity is a refusal to accept the conditions and limitations and aesthetic death that opponents seek to impose from outside one’s spiritual and intellectual arc of expression” (Dyson 2003:268). Beats, rhymes, movement and emotion synergize to structure a spiritual reality in all of its immediacy. At the “crossroads” of language and music, human expression and technological manipulation, the sacred and the profane, rap music fuses perceived oppositions and mediates existential dilemmas.

Hip-Hop’s Spiritual Matrix: Locating the “Spirit” in Live and Mediated Contexts

Locating the “spirit” in hip-hop is a game of hide and seek; hip-hop artists and listeners conjure spirit in different places at different times through text and image, aural and visual tactics, with and without the aid of commercial and material media. Historically, the “sacred” moment of most black music genres often happens in performance, in the realm of the collective where individual narrative becomes universal experience. But there is question regarding hip-hop’s effect on listeners – its ability to bring people “on one accord” through performance. Although rap music, in the crucible of the 1980s Bronx, brought diverse people together to party and to purge, live performance is no longer the primary mode of consumption. The ritual event has instead been mediated and privatized – distributed on CDs and over radio airwaves, consumed on televisions, car stereos, and portable electronic equipment. Some fans argue that the poverty of live shows in hip-hop has resulted in a regression of performance, but commodification also affords new kinds of aural and visual experiences – experiences more personal and meditative in nature.

Hip-hop culture is symptomatic of the hyper-visibility of black cultural life, and in particular, the sprawling, cinematic images of black ghetto culture, whose glorified presentation resonates with a vague mystery and anonymity of the urban, street terrain. This visibility is a pre-made visibility created by those not necessarily living the ghetto, from-rags-to-riches narrative (Neal 1998:126). Those once structurally invisible become hyper-visible subjects, many of whom, ironically and sadly, do not enjoy in the benefits of “mainstream” visibility and “mainstream” life.

Although the objectification of bodies in popular music videos suggests that sound and text are bowing their heads to the almighty image – subverting the authority of performance – one’s experience of the music is often extended and enhanced by mainstream media. A faithful hip-hop listener gazes at his or her favorite performers on BET or MTV or lingers over their images on album covers or in magazines. Similarly, despite the dwindling occasions for face-to-face, carnal and cathartic exchange, the packaged, mediated “narrative” increases opportunities for transmitting messages through vocal discourse as it makes content a central concern. (Although, as more MC’s attempt to make overt religious references in their music, record executives are telling them to “tone it down” in favor of the more diluted style of “conscious rap.”) Greg Dimitriadis argues that with the emergence of rap music in commodity form unbounded by the limits of time and place, the hip-hop MC “blurs the line between his words and their invisible and all-penetrating means of transmission” (2004:427). Sonically impressing upon the listener, the invisibility of recorded lyrics adds to the power of the voice as a transcendent medium of communication and a site of spiritual meaning. Many of my informants speak about the intensity of feeling they experience and the intimacy they share with the MC while listening to hip-hop by themselves. This kind of experience is direct contrast to the feeling of “togetherness, “oneness,” and community created at live hip-hop shows, where audience members partake in the rhythmic and coordinated movements of bobbing their heads and jabbing their arms into the air, often while shouting the lyrics of the MC.

The play of visibility and invisibility and the simultaneous “privatization” and increased public circulation of contemporary rap music are at the heart of hip-hop’s ability to conjure spirit. Text and image, aural and visual

performative modes, live and mediated events function together to compose a constellation of varied spiritual (or transcendent) experiences within hip-hop that speaks to the omnipresent, shifting nature of the sacred. Through a holistic understanding of hip-hop's spiritual matrix, one locates the "spirit" in various manifestations and myriad locations. Further studies are needed exploring the kinds of ecstatic experiences listeners and dancers undergo at clubs, concerts, in the company of the streets and in the privacy of their own headphones.

In this paper I have touched upon only a few of the myriad instances in which the hip-hop movement flirts with and reinvents religious symbols. While rap music mediates conflicting forces, it doesn't provide a clear resolution, nor does it espouse a tidy and transparent spirituality. Just as the MC slides into notes and dances around beats, "spirit" is not attacked straight on; it is courageously approached from below, from the margins, from youth, from uncertainty, through the structures of capitalism and mainstream media. Recognizing the great difficulty with which humans express spiritual pronouncements, rap music is worth our time and attention because of what it says about the musically expressed encounter with questions of meaning, those with great existential and ontological weight. My hope is that this paper will take a brick out of the intergenerational wall, and will help reveal, once again, the spiritual worth of black popular music. This revelation is not intended as a spotlight on racial difference, but as a call to acknowledge and honor the spiritual complexity of popular music indelibly labeled as profane. Now, more than ever, global music cultures have the ability to function as quasi-religion for the masses – a musical "nation" of fans and followers – through the extended reach of corporate media and the fetishizing power of the music industry. Rap music, as the most popular and arguably innovative of mainstream music among youth, is in a unique position to develop indispensable and uplifting messages while continuing to disrobe our nefarious nature.

Notes

1. Many scholars have identified the presence of religious and ritual behavior in contemporary musical youth subcultures (Fikentscher 2000; Gray 1980; Greeley 1988; Reed 2003; Sylvan 2002; Taylor 2001).

2. Pertaining specifically to Christian rap, one book and two scholarly articles exist: Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher's "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It" (2003), and Cheryl Renee Gooch's "Rappin For the Lord: The Uses of Gospel Rap and Contemporary Music in Black Religious Communities" (1996). Felicia M. Miyakawa's book *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* gives a comprehensive overview of the relationship between hip-hop and this Islamic sect.

3. Samuel Floyd expands on the concept of the trickster God, Esu, in *The Power of Black Music* (1995:12).

4. "Jesus Walks" is the hit song off Kanye West's 2004 album *College Dropout*, on which he experiments with the integration of hip-hop beats, gospel singing, and rap lyrics that question mainstream moral and religious norms.

5. See Dyson's comments on Bishop T.D. Jakes (2001:208). Similarly, Reverend Calvin O. Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York, has defended accusations that he is against hip-hop: "We aren't against rap music, but we are against those so-called 'thugs.'"

6. Franklin is often associated with the rise of Christian rap or holy hip-hop, which developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s in conjunction with the increasing popularity of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). His 2005 "Looking For You" single spent seventy-four weeks on Billboard's Hot 100.

7. These are famous lyrics from Digital Underground's 1991 hit "Kiss You Back," from the album *Sons of the P*.

8. MC Ren, born in Compton, CA, was an MC along with Ice Cube in the ground-braking gangsta rap group NWA. He wrote a lot of their hit tracks and converted to the Nation of Islam in 1992.

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