

## Religion and Hip Hop

By Miller, Monica. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2013. Pp. vii, 223. Paperback \$39.95

In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller examines the ways in which scholars of religion theorize socially, contextually and historically the category of “religion” and how this understanding of religion is discussed by Hip Hop. Miller contends that this discourse provides new conceptions of Hip Hop. She does not ask what is religious about Hip Hop, rather, how Hip Hop utilizes religion. Miller argues that religion is socially constructed; therefore the “dirtiness” that religion ascribes to Hip Hop must be reconsidered. Moreover, a scholarly understanding of Hip Hop’s usage of religion challenges the very identification of what should be considered “religious.” Miller asks: “How does popular culture ‘do’ or perform religion-or thought another way, how does popular culture, such as Hip Hop, turn out, disrupt, or call into question the very category the scholar seeks to investigate” (72)?

Miller’s postmodern text, *Religion and Hip Hop*, utilizes several theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. She invokes theorist Mary Douglas, uses queer theory, and engages with theories of religion by Anthony Pinn, Russell McCutcheon and Talal Asad. Methodologically, Miller is not constrained by lyrical analysis; she uses methods across disciplines in order to present a more holistic understanding of Hip Hop. She states: “But not only are new approaches warranted, we also should be looking towards an expansion of new sources—film, dance, virtual spaces. Otherwise, the voices (and life-worlds) of people being signified on remain in a subaltern position, voices that ‘cannot speak’” (7). She examines books written by Hip Hop emcees, analyzes empirical data on youth participation in institutional churches and conducts a “visual ethnography” of Krump culture by reviewing the documentary film *RIZE*.

In addition to Miller furthering methodological approaches to the study of Hip Hop, her examination of “religion” and Hip Hop challenges scholars’ conceptions of the two subjects. She argues against studying in an *a priori* manner and for empowering the subjects to present their own world view. Furthermore, scholars should focus on religious “influences” which “draws attention towards practices as well as offering a window by which to understand human interests in uses of religion” (74). To build her argument of focusing on the ways in which Hip Hop utilize religion, Miller first explains Anthony Pinn’s complex subjectivity which enables “increased agency and liberation of one’s own subjectivity” (102). She then reveals the intellectual lineage of complex subjectivity which includes William James, Charles Long and Paul Tillich. Miller invokes postmodernism by the way of Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and Russell McCutcheon to illustrate the shortcomings of complex subjectivity in particular and religionists study of Hip Hop in general which seeks a “quest for meaning.” Therefore the significant work *Religion and Hip Hop* contributes to the study of Hip Hop is to examine Hip Hop emically because the very categories that scholars used are

tainted and will not render the most accurate results. The publication of *Religion and Hip Hop* marks a scholarly moment in which Hip Hop scholars and religionists can no longer research Hip Hop without giving a “nod” to this text.

*Travis Harris is a PhD student at the College of William and Mary. His research interests include race, religion, Hip Hop, media, performance and 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history.*