



Book Review

In Search of Soul: Hip-Hop, Literature, and Religion By Nava, Alejandro. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 275. \$29.95.

There are books written for general audiences and those written for academia. *In Search of Soul: Hip Hop, Literature and Religion* clearly aims at pleasing both. It is not an easy task to strike a balance between an imaginative, creative style of writing and the vigorous intellectual depth required of stimulating scholarship. The author skillfully achieves this in an interdisciplinary monograph, which combines theological, philosophical, historical, sociological, aesthetic and stylistic approaches. Alejandro Nava is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Arizona, where he teaches a course titled “Rap, Culture, and God.” His book is the result of many years spent studying the subject. Indeed Professor Michael Eric Dyson first introduced him to the study of Hip Hop and religion in 1995 at Chicago Theological Seminary. Both are committed to proving that, contrary to popular belief, hip-hop can have profound resonances with religious beliefs and thereby possess a form of wisdom and compassion.

Nava’s book divides into two parts and examines two major streams that have shaped Western ideas of soul. The first considers the “sacred” histories of the soul and explores the religious and theological perspectives of the human soul. In the second part, he looks at profane accents of soul and investigates the cultural, musical and literary interpretations of “soul.” He argues in favour of the porousness of these two dimensions of soul, to him that they are distinct but not separate concepts “with dimensions of each leaking into the other” (3-4).

Nava starts by retracing a history of the increasing loss of the concepts of God and soul all the way to the Modern Age. Yet modern movements such as romanticism, modernism, African American and Latin American thought “resuscitated and breathed new life into the concept of soul, making it stronger and richer, infusing it with the magic elixirs of poetry, myth, melody, and cultural style” (15-16). He argues that separations such as *soul-body*, *supernatural-natural*, *sacred-profane* “are products of contingent historical genealogies in modern Western Europe” (20): they should not predetermine our understanding of the meaning of “soul” in Judaism, Christianity or Afro-Latin American traditions. These traditions, Nava insists, are characterised by “the intermingling of the sacred and profane” (21). In the biblical sense, for instance, the soul

defines as “an icon of both divine presence and transcendence” sprawling from “the fundamental assumption that the human soul is made in the image of God” (23). He also draws a map of human nature, considering the intermingling roles of the “heart” and the “soul” in biblical narratives. This leads him to a “crucial biblical insight”: “that knowledge of the heart is accessible to all, educated or illiterate, lowly or highborn” (57).

Nava then explores Erich Auerbach’s characterisation of the Bible’s tongue as “laconic and rough” (59). Its purpose, he argues is “fidelity in recording God’s presence in and through the melees and struggles of time, situating their characters in their natural and social-political contexts” by turning “the themes of exodus and migration, slavery, and famine into parables of the human condition and thus depict[ing] the whole scope of human affairs from the perspective of a conquered and hungry people” (71). The author compares this to the musical treatment of human suffering: “rather than explaining or solving human suffering, biblical poetry rhapsodizes,” it is similar to singers of blues music, “more lyrical than logical, more oracular than speculative, more pragmatic than theoretical” (76). After having “excavated” the ancient roots of this concept, Part II shifts its attention to consider “how ‘soul’ picks up modern nuances and becomes synonymous with the elegance of cultural and artistic achievements, especially in music” (5).

Nava starts by considering the place of religion, music, folklore, and the vernacular in two authors’ portraits of soul: Federico García Lorca and Ralph Ellison. For Lorca, soul was a form of creative grace called *Duende*. Nava defines this as “a storm of emotions that blows and swirls in different directions, cross-pollinating a variety of ideas and experiences, including the spiritual and elemental, the sacred and profane” (116). By comparing Lorca’s work with Ellison’s, he underlines the synergies between Spanish soul and black American traditions. Here Nava “falls in the thick of musical and cultural currents of soul” (143) by bringing in preachers, blues singers and rappers to identify similarities in all of these discourses. By doing so, he demonstrates that the relationship between all of these expressions of soul is not one of influence, but rather it is in the conditions that triggered such expressions. To him they are so strongly rooted in the culture that they constantly reoccur through time.

Chapters 6 and 7 are the ones in which Nava focuses his full attention on rap music, in order to explore the transition from the generation of R&B, soul music, and funk to the Hip Hop one. Here he examines the increasing use of an “apocalyptic mode of utterance – shouts, hollers, screams – as a way of registering the feelings of existential brokenness and urban decay in many of these communities” (9). This tone reflected the deteriorating conditions in the ghettos ruled by violence, suffering, poverty, segregation and injustice throughout the 80s and 90s. However, this situation did not shy rappers away from invoking spiritual and religious themes: “as Hip Hop grappled with the diseases of urban life, it often turned to various religions and spiritualities for

therapeutic relief” (193). It acted as a form of hope against nihilistic and self-destructive thoughts.

Overall, Nava’s monograph is an extremely thorough and thought provoking one. He sets out with an ambitious goal to explore a large variety of phenomena, and goes about it in a convincing manner. Not to mention that the elegance of his writing, abundant with hendiadys, similes and metaphors further highlight his vast knowledge across multiple disciplines. *In Search of Soul* is not only a pleasant and enlightening read; it is undoubtedly a goldmine for anyone interested in Hip Hop Studies.

Waqas Mirza works on the representation of the mind in the arts. His research interests include French and English literature as well as the poetic quality of hip hop artists. He is currently teaching and pursuing a PhD thesis at the University of Oxford.