

Monica R. Miller. *Religion and Hip Hop* (Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture). New York: Routledge, 2013. 208 pages. \$125.

In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica R. Miller has taken a bold step in analyzing engagements with popular culture within the academic study of religion. Her wide-reaching interdisciplinary approach draws upon critical theories of religion and cultural studies, as well as race, gender, and sexuality studies to expand the emerging discourse on the intersections of religion and hip-hop culture. Miller argues that this discourse has not given sufficient attention to issues of theory and method in the study of religion, leaving the category of “religion” largely un-interrogated. For Miller, constructions of “religion” as an academic category of analysis are inadequate to describe the complexities of the everyday experiences and cultural practices of black urban youth in America.

Miller’s opening chapters explore the construction within public discourse of black youth and hip-hop culture as “deviant.” Subsequently, she investigates the ways that those rendered deviant make use of religious languages and images in their own self-representations. Chapter one focuses particular attention on the public outrage following radio host Don Imus’ reference to Rutgers’ women basketball players as “nappy-headed hoes.” Miller argues that defenses of these women as respectable black collegiate athletes, coupled with moralizing denunciations of representations of women in hip-hop, work to “other” those who do not conform to normative constructions of black womanhood. Miller suggests, “the cultural imperialism of black elites failed to embrace its least of these” (44). Moreover, she asks the provocative question, “Can there be emancipation through claiming the ‘nappy-headed ho?’” (43). Chapter two turns to the *written* publications of three prominent hip-hop artists. Miller analyzes their uses of religious “stylings,” exposing how such “uses” serve not so much as confessional claims, but rather, “as a means by which to authorize particular social interests” (69).

Chapters 3 and 4 focus more specifically on issues of theory and method in Religious Studies and their implications for engagements with popular culture. In “And the Word Became Flesh: Hip-Hip Culture and the (In)coherence of Religion,” she traces dominant trends within scholarship on hip-hop and religion. She argues that within these approaches, certain preconceived notions of “religion” are imposed upon hip-hop as an object of analysis. Particularly problematic for Miller are approaches that position religion as a “sanitizing construct” vis-à-vis “deviant” cultural productions or, more ironically, appropriations of hip-hop as a tool of evangelism and thus hegemonic “moral maintenance.” Perhaps Miller is at her most theoretically lucid when she insists there is “no point in searching for the religious dimensions of hip-hop as if religion is a self-evident essence” (10). Rather, Miller argues for an engagement with hip-hop that interrogates the very category of religion. This approach recognizes that “what exactly gets to ‘count’ as religious is never fully agreed upon” (121).

The closing chapters shift to an engagement with empirical studies of youth and religion. Miller’s central critique of such studies is their positioning of institutionalized forms of religion in the role of “buffering transgression” among at-risk or otherwise deviant youth. While contesting taken-for-granted notions of the moral efficacy of institutional religious practices, Miller asks, “Do cultural practices outside of formal faith institutions merit similar buffering weight?” (133). As such, the final chapter turns to the documentary film *RIZE* to analyze “krumping” as a popular practice of black youth beyond the parameters of traditional religious institutions. For Miller, such practices do not necessarily point to quests for either private

religious experience or forms of transcendence, but rather constitute a more worldly “faith in the flesh.” Rather than arguing for the religious significance of krump dancing as a “quest for meaning” Miller’s approach focuses instead on the ways these black youth use their bodies as “the site and mode of human possibility” (151).

With *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller has provided a significant contribution to scholarship on the intersections of religion and popular culture. Throughout the book, she interrogates the category, uses and effects of “religion” as it appears within the cultural productions of hip-hop. At times her reliance on the work of theorists such as Russell McCutcheon leads to exaggerations of perceived dichotomies within the academic study of religion and overstatements of distinctions between institutional religion and those cultural practices seemingly beyond its hegemonic influence. Yet, Miller is at her best when she presses for more critical reflection on the innovative uses of religion in the everyday lives of black youth and its interplay with more traditional religious institutions and discourses. *Religion and Hip Hop* is an important book, which charts a new course in the study of the intersections between two significant cultural spheres. This dynamic book should be required reading for every student and scholar of religion and popular culture.

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