January, 2014

Review of 'Religion and Hip Hop' by Monica R Miller

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/27/
In a BBC TV documentary entitled *How Does Music Make Us Feel?*, broadcast in November 2012, American opera singer Jessye Norman observed: “My ancestors sung their way through slavery. They did not sing their way out of slavery but in order to endure unimaginable daily events … [they] created this incredible body of music that we call ‘The Spiritual’ and I find incredible strength from knowing I come from a people that were strong enough to endure.” In this stimulating and thought-provoking book exploring the relationship between a body of music called ‘Hip Hop’ and religion, Monica Miller makes a similar claim for a contemporary form of music that reflects a new and challenging life-setting for people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Miller notes from the outset that her project is not an ethnographic study. Instead, “the ontology and demographic of youth is explored, discussed, and signified on from a multiplicity of dimensions. At times, their voices are extrapolated from virtual sources, film to empirical data from social scientific studies” (3-4). She is keen to stress the diversity of Hip-Hop culture and, for the author, an important methodological trope in studying popular
culture is that of ‘border crossing’—particularly what types of inherited
genealogies of religion scholars of religion trace in their research about
popular culture. In this respect, she is at pains to stress throughout her
volume that religion is a socially constructed category of study and therefore
needs to be handled with care when being applied to other forms of cultural
expression, including Hip Hop.

In setting out her case for the socially constructed nature of ‘religion’,
Miller extends the image of boundaries by drawing on Mary Douglas’s
writing about dirt and Howard Becker’s work on deviance before looking at
the controversy over comments made by talk-show host Don Imus in 2007
about ‘nappy-headed hos’ and why these were perceived as racially injurious.
This leads to a discussion about the word ‘nigger’ and how, on the one hand,
some elements of black popular culture live within certain cultural norms and
reject the word, while others seek to reclaim terms that have been used to
label the ‘other’ in society. Miller argues that, in order to connect with Hip-
Hop culture, we have to engage at various levels with this social dichotomy.

Following on from this, she considers three literary expressions of Hip-
Hop culture published in 2009: *The 50th Law* by rapper Curtis ‘50 Cent’
Jackson in collaboration with self-realisation writer Robert Greene; *The Gospel
of Hip Hop* by KRS One, which seeks to bring Hip Hop back to what KRS see
as its more spiritual roots; and *The Tao of Wu* by RZA of Wu-Tang Clan (with
Chris Norris) setting out seven lessons of wisdom in the style of various
religions that have influenced RZA’s life journey. In her analysis of these
texts, Miller rejects a phenomenological approach that searches for an essence of meaning. Instead, she argues that it is important to see how: “religion functions as a means by which to authorize particular social interests” and, therefore, “we must get beyond our modernist lenses of religion as feeling, and get up to speed with religion as effect, strategy, and manufacturing of social, cultural, and political interests” (69–70). The stress on religion as social practice informs the rest of the book, drawing especially on the ideas of Anthony B. Pinn, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Gordon Lynch. Miller examines how Hip-Hop culture interacts with institutional, prophetic, and private forms of religion before turning to a detailed consideration of Pinn’s notion of complex subjectivity (CS). In her view, “CS is one of the few theories of religion that take seriously the historical experience of African Americans and their cultural productions as archaeological artefacts… This inheritance results in relying on interiorized affective feelings as behaviours that give rise to religious activity.” (121) Miller also provides a critique of complex subjectivity, arguing that, instead of focusing on the ‘essence’ of religion, complex subjectivity should begin with human activity and resulting cultural practices.

The final two chapters take the re-definition of complex subjectivity and apply it to two manifestations of contemporary religious expression: studies in youth religiosity in America and the work of Tommy the Hip-Hop Clown as portrayed in the documentary movie RIZE (2005). In addition, these two sections help to ground the preceding theoretical work in the embodied
realities of everyday life and the material world. In her short conclusion, Miller states that “there is nothing in and of itself unique about religion. Of greater interest is the exploration of why certain social processes come to be understood and classified as religious, and furthermore what these classifications accomplish among particular groups across time and space.”

(178) In the same way that her study of Hip Hop has transformed her understanding of religion, Miller argues that for those who share in the various forms of Hip-Hop culture, they also “represent altered ways of knowing the world” (179).

There is a great deal to welcome in this volume, not least Miller’s stress on the importance of affective feelings in the analysis of music and religion. Further, some of her criticism about ‘religion’ as a field of study and the changing nature of ‘religious’ behaviour has significant force behind it, as has her helpful consideration of how notions of scapegoating can apply to Hip-Hop culture. And she is surely right to stress the importance of the body and embodiment in this discussion. However, some questions remain, not least if language is a key constituent of the social construction of various forms of ‘religion’ — can meaning and meaning-making environments be so conveniently separated, as Miller seems to suggest? And despite the problems surrounding the term ‘religion’ and its socially constructed nature (with all its pre- and post-Enlightenment baggage), is ‘religion’ the second-order cultural creation that Miller proposes or is it — along with music — much more fundamental to the evolution of human culture than she allows for in this
study?

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