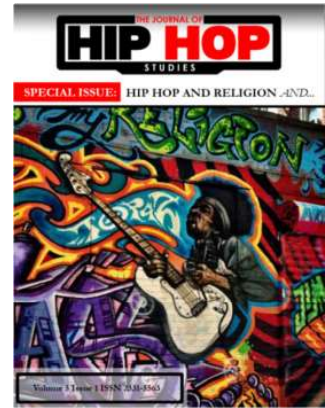


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## Introduction: Ain't It Evil to Live Backwards: A Hip Hop Perspective of Religion

Travis T. Harris and Cassandra D. Chaney

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Historically, Black religion has been the cornerstone of the African experience in America. Due to the “peculiar institution” of slavery,<sup>1</sup> and the ways this institutional residue still affect the lives of slave descendants, Hip Hop provides a forum to simultaneously acknowledge similarities and highlight differences. As Cassandra Chaney notes, “Although religion has the ability to facilitate ‘common thought, purpose and drive,’ the benefits can differ among persons within the same religious organization because of the varied experiences and perspectives of its members.”<sup>2</sup> Chaney goes on to explain: “While this recognition does not minimize the power of religious institutions to influence persons collectively, it does, however, recognize the potential for many perspectives to coexist within a single religious organization.”<sup>3</sup> Chaney reveals how even those within the same religion may differently understand and define religion. There are those from various faith traditions, such as Christians and Muslims, who assert that their worldview, whether it is Christianity or Islam, is not a religion. If scholars view this particular non-religious group as religious because of their faith tradition, then scholars may inaccurately analyze their lives and worldviews. What scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies have revealed are the ways in which the effectiveness and our very understanding of “religion” changes when we bring Hip Hop into the mix.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Enrico Dal Lago, *American Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, and Beyond: The US “Peculiar Institution” in International Perspective*, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Cassandra D. Chaney, “The Benefits of Church Involvement for African-Americans: The Perspectives of Congregants, Church Staff, and the Church Pastor,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 10, (2008): 2. Cassandra D. Chaney, “Religiosity and Spirituality among Members of an African American Church Community: A Qualitative Analysis,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27, no. 3 (2008): 201-234.

<sup>3</sup> Chaney, “The Benefits of Church Involvement for African-Americans,” 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Monica Miller and Pinn, Anthony, *Religion and Hip Hop Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

What do we mean by Hip Hop? We identify Hip Hop as an African diasporic phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Since it is insightful, educational, poetic, socially relevant, and globally significant,<sup>6</sup> solely focusing on Hip Hop as a Black popular culture does not fully capture Hip Hop's essence.<sup>7</sup> Identifying Hip Hop as an African diasporic phenomenon raises additional concepts to consider and provides a more nuanced analysis. The diasporic elements highlight a sense of homelessness, dispossession and a transatlantic connection to Africa and European colonization. An African diasporic perspective ensures that all African diasporic peoples, not just African Americans, are involved in Hip Hop's identity, especially since African diasporic peoples and Africanist aesthetics contributed greatly to Hip Hop's manifestation in the Bronx in the early 1970s.<sup>8</sup> This African diasporic perspective is essential to our argument about Hip Hop's perspective on religion because scholars have argued that African and African diasporic peoples "Africanize" religions.<sup>9</sup> This Africanization does not fit in the boundaries of "sacred" and "secular" nor of institutional religions.

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<sup>5</sup> Brenda Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), Halifa Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), Marc D. Perry's *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Johnson, Imani, *Dark Matter in B-boying Cyphers: Hip Hop in a Global Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> Sam Berkson, "Hip Hop World News: Reporting Back," *Race & Class* 59, no. 2 (2017): 102-114. Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Civitas Books, 2009). Wilson C. Chen, "Rotten Bananas, Hip Hop Heads, and the American Individual: Teaching Eddie Huang's Memoir *Fresh off the Boat* and Its Tropes of Literacy," *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 4. Akasha M. Horton, Erik J. Byker, and Keith Heggart, "Hip-Hop Music as a Pedagogical Tool," in *Culture, Learning, and Technology: Research and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2017): 58. Oliver, Adrienne D. "'Tell Me a Story': Using Critical Hip Hop Narratives to Decolonize College Composition," PhD diss., Mills College, 2017. Duchan, Joshua S. *Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond*, by M.L. Liebler, *Michigan Historical Review* 42, no. 1 (2017): 111-112. Sultanova, Razia and Megan Rancier, eds. *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip-Hop*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Gomez describes how focusing on African Diasporas provide a different theoretical lens than solely focusing on African Americans in *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Juan Flores, "Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the US," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no 3 (1985). William Eric Perkins, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). H. Samy Alim and Alastair Pennycook, "Glocal Linguistic Flows: Hip-Hop Culture(s), Identities, and the Politics of Language Education," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 6, no. 2 (2007): 89-100.

<sup>9</sup> John Mbiti goes into detail explaining the ways in which African religion functions in the daily life of Africans in *African Religions and Philosophy*, especially pages two through three (*African Religions & Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Numerous other scholars discuss this Africanization in sections of their work or as a complete essay such as Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1973), M. Akinyela, "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos" (2003) and J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (2005).

In order to account for the multifaceted essence of this African diasporic phenomenon, we employ Lawrence "Kris" aka "KRS One" Parker's framework of Hip Hop. KRS One describes three ways to conceptualize Hip Hop based on three different spellings: Hiphop - collective consciousness, Hip Hop - culture, and hip hop - products. The latter two of the three are self-explanatory and receive adequate scholarly attention. "Do it for the culture" is a common term that, at times, signifies the Hip Hop culture. What KRS contributes with the first conception, Hiphop, gets at something more than the culture and the products that Hip Hop produce. Hiphop captures the importance of sacrifice and the notion that it is a "shared idea" that exists "outside of time and space."<sup>10</sup> KRS One's depiction of Hiphop aligns with scholars and practitioners notions of a "real Hip Hop" that contains some level of metaphysical reality or unseen elements and goes beyond just making music or money. Hiphop, we contend, also provides the space to discuss the diasporic elements that birthed in Africa and lives on throughout the diasporas.

At the heart of the discussion within religion and Hip Hop is the conversation on race, racism and ethnicity. For many non-Whites, this realization of self connects to sexuality, masculinity and femininity,<sup>11</sup> while for others; it is firmly rooted in various aspects of Black womanhood.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the identity to which they most strongly identify, non-Whites in the United States and abroad experience institutional and systemic inequality.<sup>13</sup> Miller, Hodge, Coleman, and Chaney note, "Through Hip Hop, one was able to discover the shared experiences and crises taking place in various urban cities, and realize that he or she was not alone or singled out."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, race and racism are consciously crafted megaphones by which Hip Hop analyzes their past, their

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence "Kris" Parker, *40 Years Of Hip Hop - KRS 1 Lecture*, YouTube, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYEgYnGVOwo>.

<sup>11</sup> Cassandra Chaney, "The Tears of Black Men: Black Masculinity, Sexuality, and Sensitivity in R&B and Hip Hop," in *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men*, eds Brittany C. Slatton and Kamesha Spates (New York: Routledge, 2016): 103.

<sup>12</sup> Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown, "Representations and Discourses of Black Motherhood in Hip Hop and R&B over time," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 12. Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown, "Is Black Motherhood a Marker of Oppression or Empowerment? Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons about 'Mama'," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 7. Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Travis T. Harris and Daniel White Hodge, "They Got Me Trapped: Structural Inequality and Racism in Space and Place Within Urban School System Design," in *Addressing Environmental and Food Justice toward Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, eds Anthony Nocella, K. Animashaun Ducre, and John Lupinacci (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 15-33. Washington, Ahmad Rashad. "Integrating Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music into Social Justice Counseling with Black Males," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 96, no. 1 (2018): 97-105.

<sup>14</sup> Monica Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney, "The Hip in Hip Hop: Toward a Discipline of Hip Hop Studies," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 6.

present, the connection between past and present and motivates its listeners to activism. To make this point, Hip Hop intellectual Travis Harris writes:

In describing racism and the long history of activism in response to racism by African Americans in general and Hip Hop artists in particular, scholars have given attention to the socio-historical and cultural dimensions that shape Hip Hoppers, the ways in which Hip Hop is a part of and can be used as a tool of activism, and how performances can be used to transmit culture and provide an identity for those who are a part of that culture.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, connecting Blacks,<sup>16</sup> religion, and Hip Hop respects the triadic salience by which the lives of the oppressed, within the United States and abroad, gains meaning and validation. Furthermore, this multifaceted notion of Hip Hop points to those who "live" Hip Hop and those who take part either in some of the culture or the products of Hip Hop. By living Hip Hop, we mean people who identify as Hip Hop. Hip Hop provides a way for these particular individuals and communities to move throughout the world and empower them with a sense of confidence and ability to resist oppression. This differs from someone who enjoys Hip Hop music or dresses a certain way. Therefore, when we are talking about "Hip Hop," we are keeping the range and depth of communities and individuals' involvement and identity in mind.

If practitioners of different "religious" groups conceive of "religion" differently, "Hip Hop" has multiple connotations, and White Supremacy oppresses a Blackness that intertwines with Hip Hop, how then do we understand religion and Hip Hop? Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn help us to begin to answer this question in *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* (2015). They contend that we think about "what religion *does*" and place religion/Hip Hop in an "and/in" relationship where scholars think about religion and Hip Hop and religion in Hip Hop. While we are indebted to their contribution, we actually start from different presuppositions. They position the "Hip Hop generation" after the "Civil Rights generation." We contend for a Black freedom struggle where there is no particular "Civil Rights Movement" and thereby no clear demarcation between these two generations. Further, this concept of the Hip Hop generation is not clear because time is the only parameter for this generation. If Hip Hop has the ability to escape space and time, does the "Hip Hop generation" account for this conception of Hip Hop?

Given that we have provided a thorough identification of Hip Hop and examined religion and Hip Hop together, one may raise the question: What do we mean by "religion"? First, we are cognizant of the academic battles over identifying and

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<sup>15</sup> Travis T. Harris, "Putin' on for Da Lou: Hip Hop's Response to Racism in St. Louis," M.A., The College of William and Mary, 2016, 3.

<sup>16</sup> When we say "Blacks," we are referring to a politicized Blackness not confined to the U.S. racial boundaries of being "Black" and "binds African-descendant individuals and communities in lived historical terms of past and present." Marc D. Perry, "Global Black Self-Fashionings: Hip Hop as Diasporic Space." *Identities* 15, no. 6 (2008): 635-64.



defining religion. We highlight Monica Miller's *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013), where she analyzes Anthony Pinn's notion of complex subjectivity and quest of meaning by tracing his intellectual heritage back to William James and Charles Long.<sup>17</sup> Building on the work of Russel McCutcheon, Robert Beckford and other scholars, she argues that the "academic study of religion should engage social processes and human activity, rather than (unique) religious essence and presence."<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, quoting Talal Asad, she contends: "There is no transhistorical essence to religion."<sup>19</sup> While we agree with Asad's depiction of religion, especially when considering the many ways people theorize religion around the world, we take a different approach on Long than Miller does.

Since Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon, we look to African diasporic scholars to inform our theory of religion and our approach to religion and Hip Hop studies. Additionally, Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo illustrate that African music and dance are also "powerful spiritual grammars and rituals of socialization, languages of interventions in nature and society, contributing to the expression of African religious and cultural beliefs."<sup>20</sup> African and Afro-Atlantic performances involve a continual creation of identity and carry African histories, memories and ways of knowing that are transmitted from generation to generation.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to an extent, African aesthetics of Hip Hop directly intertwines with African "religions." To say it another way, African aesthetics are religious and thereby, Hip Hoppas can perform African religiosity, knowingly or unknowingly. As a result, scholars of African diasporic religion are well suited to guide our understanding of religion.

The scholars we utilize are Charles Long, Vincent Harding, Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, James Noel, Tamara Lomax, Yvonne Chireau, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant and, as we will describe later, Tupac. We start with Long because of his influence on the theory and study of religion. Many of the aforementioned scholars we utilize and scholars of religion and Hip Hop build on Long's work. Whereas Monica Miller focuses solely on Long's contribution to Pinn's development of complex subjectivity, we use Long to bring forth how Europeans racists' views shaped the

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<sup>17</sup> In her critique of Pinn, she uses Jacques Derrida concept of play and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus. She states this about Derrida's idea of play: "Derrida gestures towards the instability and undecidability of signs—hence, why meaning can never be coherent and stable, but rather is theorized as infinite play of signification" (113).

<sup>18</sup> Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 2.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to Diouf and Nwankwo see E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

beginning of the study of religion.<sup>22</sup> Long explains that the "beginnings of the study of religion" must be understood "in light of the beginnings of modern globalization and its origins in the formation of the Atlantic World."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, "religion from this perspective no longer defines an intimacy of meaning but is objectified in time, space, and cultural ideology in various modes of distantiation."<sup>24</sup> This period of colonization, transatlantic slavery and European domination shaped their academic approach to perceive non-Europeans as "empirical others."<sup>25</sup> Long defines empirical others as "a cultural phenomenon in which the extraordinariness and uniqueness of a person or culture is first recognized negatively."<sup>26</sup> In other words, the beginning of the study of religion completely missed the creativity and ingenuity of non-Europeans. They defined their religion for them regardless of non-Europeans' thoughts about what religion is and if they believed "religion" accurately described their belief or actions.

Cognizant of the origins of the study of religion, we connect Long's description of the religion of diasporic Africans to Vincent Harding's metaphor of the river and his perspective of the long Black freedom struggle to lay the foundation of our theory and study of religion. Contrary to European colonizers beliefs, enslaved Africans not only had a worldview but also, according to Long, in the midst of their "bizarre reality," they created "an-other reality" at the "level of their religious consciousness."<sup>27</sup> While many scholars analyze African diasporic experiences from Long's angle of opacity and oppugnancy,<sup>28</sup> we are interested in Long's description of enslaved Africans ability to create a worldview distinctly different from the dehumanizing and traumatic "bizarre reality" they had experienced. Their ability to do this at the "level of their religious

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<sup>22</sup> Miller's discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn's intellectual heritage. Therefore, she may have the same perspective of the rest of Long's work as we do.

<sup>23</sup> Miller's discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn's intellectual heritage. Dianne M. Stewart, Tracey E. Hucks, and James Noel goes into detail about the Atlantic world and the ways in which that should inform our theory and study of religion. See Diane Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," and James Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*.

<sup>24</sup> Miller's discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn's intellectual heritage. Therefore, she may have the same perspective of the rest of Long's work as we do.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, F. Max Müller, who Charles Long identifies as the first historian of religion, had claimed an Aryan nature (which meant he was a member of the supreme race) in his book *Introduction to a Science of Religions (Significations)*, 18).

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 80.

<sup>27</sup> Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of African-American Religion in the United States," in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, eds Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 27.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Baker-Fletcher, Garth Kasimu, "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

consciousness," a place "free of both fantasy and obligation,"<sup>29</sup> is important to our understanding of religion because of the multifaceted boundaries of slavery that do not allow for exploration. We are fascinated and amazed by a people ripped from their homelands and traverse to an unknown place with racial foreigners on an inhumane ship. When reaching this unfamiliar place, these oppressed people, transformed by these same racial foreigners into property, lose everything they own and serve a lifetime sentence of captivity for doing nothing wrong. Despite these horrific assaults to their bodies, emotions, and psyches, they still create spirituals, write poems, tell folktales and imagine freedom. Harding, in *There Is a River* (1981), describes the experience this way: "Indeed, to love freedom so fully in the midst of slavery *was* religion, *was* radical."<sup>30</sup> Our fundamental conception of religion points to holistic freedom in the midst of an oppressive situation; it has power and meaning!

In addition to Harding's statement about religion, key to our theory of religion is his metaphor of a river. Contrary to a myopic view of the Civil Rights Movement identifying the long struggle for Black freedom, Harding's river started flowing in Africa when the first Africans resisted slavery on their homeland and continues to this day. This river of the Black freedom struggle "is people, but it is also the hope, the movement, the transformative power that humans create and that create them, us, and makes them, us, new persons." Harding's river metaphor expresses components of our theory of religion that includes hope and creative power that humans contribute to and it works on them. Furthermore, this metaphor captures the "powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life" freedom struggle that generations of Africans and African diasporic people have been a part of.<sup>31</sup>

Tamura Lomax, Yvonne Chireau and Manigault-Bryant expand our framework of religion and methodological approach to the study of religion. In addition to Lomax and Manigault-Bryant discussing the aforementioned ways in which to understand religion (intersectionally accounting for gender, race, sexuality, class and power), Lomax broadens our perspective of what creates religion. She builds on Toni Cade Bambara's definition of technology: "The study and application of the laws that govern the events in our lives" to describe the multiple ways in which Black folx create and imagine sacred power in order to survive.<sup>32</sup> In many ways, she echoes Chireau. Lomax states: "Black religion has always been inherently plural and Afrofuturistic due to its merging of spirituality, myth, time travel, magic, innovation, and fantasy."<sup>33</sup> Several

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<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Long, "Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic," *History of Religions* 6, no. 3 (1967): 262. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061754>.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Freedom Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 61.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Tamura Lomax, "Technology of Living': Toward a Black Feminist Religious Thought," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 2 (2016): 22.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



years earlier, Chireau, in *Black Magic and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003), argues that "African American 'religion' is not always distinct from what others call 'magic,'" and that there are levels to Black spirituality. Manigault-Bryant brings our theory of religion full circle by connecting with Lomax, bridging back to Harding's river metaphor and providing a theoretical approach to conceptualizing a methodology of religion. Based on Manigault-Bryant's research of seven Gullah/Geechee women from South Carolina *Talking to the Dead* (2014), she concludes:

These factors demonstrate the many ways that cultural influences operate like tides: the ability or inability of the water to reach certain parts of the shore depends on the location of the sun, moon and earth, as well as the time of day and the pull of gravity. ... Rather than occurring in a vacuum, it is a continuous ebb and flow, a dynamic process of give and take that is influenced by- and influences- the people involved, the practices transmitted, the stories shared, the prayers prayed, and the songs sung.<sup>34</sup>

In Harding's explanation of coming up with the river metaphor, he shares how it "took life within me."<sup>35</sup> We contend that the same river came over Manigault-Bryant. Her strikingly similar explanation of the religion of Gullah/Geechee women aligns with Harding because they both are on the same river. We contend that the river flowed from the African shores, to the 1960s in the South, and on into the 2000s in the low country of South Carolina; these are all the points that Harding and Manigault-Bryant had discussed.

Our vibrant, dynamic and powerful theory of religion leads us to argue that when scholars are analyzing religion and Hip Hop, they should let the Hip Hoppa define what "religion" is. In *Black Magic and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, Chireau reveals the ways in which scholars do not fully conceptualize Black religion and thereby misunderstand religion altogether. Scholars had identified "magic" as outside the bounds of "religion." Because of Chireau's contribution and the complexities and nuances of Black religion, it is quite possible for even seasoned scholars to either miss or discount something that is "religious." Look at Manigault-Bryant's identity and work she conducted in order to adequately capture the religious life of the Gullah/Geechee women. She is a Black woman, a "Geechee girl," "reared thirty minutes from the Sea Islands" and spent four years doing life with these women.<sup>36</sup> She "stayed at their homes and attended church and Bible Study with them." She also "went with them to the grocery store, helped them wash vegetables from the gardens and market stands, cooked with them, and spent months driving between their

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<sup>34</sup> LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) ebook, preface.

<sup>35</sup> Vincent Harding, *There Is a River*, xix.

<sup>36</sup> Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead*, ebook chapter 1.

churches residences and jobs.”<sup>37</sup> We have yet to read an ethnography that has gone into such detail into Hip Hoppa’s lives.

Moreover, Manigault-Bryant obtained that level of access because of her identity. White Supremacy still reigns and many of the same problems in the study of religion that Long had described persist today. Scholars are prone to perpetuate a form of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, ableism etc.) which could also lead to scholars distorting Hip Hoppa’s “own creative agency and genius.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, any critiques of our theory of religion actually strengthens our argument because the imprecise nature and conflicting views of “religion” requires the Hip Hoppa to define it in order to get to its closest essence when identifying Hip Hop and religion. Therefore, we contend that a “hiphopography” is the best approach to study religion with a Hip Hoppa or within a Hip Hop community. James Spady first coined this term and methodological approach in *Nation Conscious Rap* (1991). A longtime colleague of Spady, who also co-authored numerous works with him, H. Samy Alim, describes hiphopography like this:

Hiphopography can be described as an approach to the study of Hip Hop culture that combines the methods of ethnography, biography, and social and oral history. Importantly, hiphopography is not traditional ethnography. Hierarchical divisions between the “researcher” and the “researched” are purposely kept to a minimum, even as they are interrogated. This requires the hiphopographer to engage the community on its own terms. Knowledge of the aesthetics, values, and history as well as the use of the language, culture, and means and modes of interaction of the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community are essential to the study of Hip Hop culture.<sup>39</sup>

Based on Alim’s description of hiphopography and in light of the prior problems to the study of religion, it becomes clear why we are pushing this method. The cultural immersion and in-depth research into the lives of Hip Hoppa creates the potential to recognize the elements of their lives that could be “religious.” This immersion involves growing in a knowledge, identity and community of Hip Hop. The inability to fully grasp Hip Hop hinders the scholars’ ability to capture religion and Hip Hop. In addition, the collapsing of hierarchical divisions humbles the scholar and situates them in a position to address their own bias or ways of perpetuating oppression. Most importantly, hiphopography elevates the voice and perspective of the Hip Hoppa. By elevating their voice, the scholar can fight White Supremacy if it is silencing the Hip Hoppa’s voice.

Scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies must elevate Hip Hop’s voice. Numerous Hip Hoppas believe their particular faith tradition is not a religion and are

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Yvonne Chireau, “Theorizing Africana Religions: A Journal of Africana Religions Inaugural Symposium,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 22, no. 1 (2014), 125-160.

<sup>39</sup> H. Samy Alim, “The Natti Ain’t No Punk City’: Emic Views of Hip Hop Cultures,” *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (2006): 969.

utterly opposed to the idea of religion. From their vantage point, not only does religion inaccurately portray their beliefs, it also breaks like-minded people apart and keeps people who believe differently away from what the group believes in. However, if work done by a scholar of religion and Hip Hop fully describes the phenomenon, then we can apply the academic category of "religion" to the analysis. The very discussion of not wanting to be defined as religious can still fall within the religious studies umbrella because they are arguing for what is and what is not religious. Therefore, we have developed these seven broad categories to describe the phenomenon of religion and/in Hip Hop:

1. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition and Hip Hop culture
2. Individual/community who is not a part of a religious tradition, but Hip Hop is their religion
3. Individual/community who is not a part of a religious tradition, they are a part of the Hip Hop culture and/or collective consciousness and have developed their own worldview
4. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition but say they are not religious and say they are a part of the Hip Hop culture
5. Individual/community who takes a religious tradition and Hip Hop and makes a brand new phenomenon—either a new religion or a different metaphysical understanding of Hip Hop
6. Individual/community who is a part of the Hip Hop culture and uses components of a religious tradition
7. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition and listens to Hip Hop music but not a part of the culture or collective consciousness

With these seven categories in place, we argue that in addition to religion and Hip Hop, there is a third entity to consider which we signal by an "and." The "and" represents the additional ways of seeing the world that fall within category 3 and covers the plethora of perspectives ranging from spirituality to being in harmony with nature. Therefore, the three phenomena for religion and Hip Hop studies to interrogate are, Hip Hop, religion and *and*.

### Literature Review

In 2015, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn publish an edited collection, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, which provides the framework and title of the subfield *religion and Hip Hop studies*.<sup>40</sup> The publication of a reader provides a key marker in the subfield of religion and Hip Hop studies; chronologically, theoretically, conceptually and methodologically. In addition to the timestamp, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* is the key text that conceptually shapes religion and Hip Hop studies. It should not be lost

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<sup>40</sup> Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, *Religion and Hip Hop Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

that these twenty-eight chapters existed before the creation of the reader, which points to the amount of scholarly work on religion and Hip Hop studies that had been complete up to 2015. Theoretically, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* posits, “The study of religion and hip hop has reached a point where reflection on its content, attentions, and scope is necessary.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, scholars can theorize about the very intersection of religion and Hip Hop simultaneously without dividing this phenomenon into one particular discipline such as religious studies or Hip Hop studies. Moreover, since scholars have analyzed religion and Hip Hop together, they have researched the subfield from various methodological approaches that goes beyond lyrical analysis. Therefore, we will look back at major contributions leading up to this work and key texts that are paving the way forward.

*The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* provides a historiography up to the point of publication, we will only highlight key points that directly relate to the main themes within the subfield. Miller and Pinn reveal that the first text to discuss religion and Hip Hop studies is John Michael Spencer’s special issue in *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* “The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap” (1991). Following the publication of numerous books, special issues, dissertations, and journal articles, such as “Searching for Black Jesus” in Michael Eric Dyson’s *Open Mike* (2003), the next key text we will highlight is Anthony Pinn’s *Noise and Spirit: The Religious Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003). In this edited collection, Pinn highlights the importance of the “spirit” and “spirituality” and humanism in relationship with Hip Hop. Pinn explains how humanism – “a nontheistic form of life orientation that relies on human ingenuity and creativity to achieve greater life options and a degree of subjectivity”<sup>42</sup> – is intertwined throughout the music and culture. Further, *Noise and Spirit* elucidates how the spirituality present in rap music grows out of the socio-cultural and political aspects of Black life in America.

Whereas Pinn’s edited collection contributes to our understanding of humanism and spirituality which are outside of the confines of “religion” and falls within our notion of “and,” Miller’s *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013) challenges Pinn’s (among others) framework of religious orientation as a quest for meaning. She builds on the work of Russell T. McCutcheon, Talal Asad and other scholars who question whether religion is *sui generis* or not. Miller contends that usually scholars approach Hip Hop and ask what is religious about Hip Hop, coming from “unintended consequences” based on theories of religion that hold to religion being *sui generis*. In doing so, scholars had brought predetermined categories and understanding of religion (quest for meaning) to Hip Hop in their research. This places the scholar in a superior position and limits the possibilities of fully conceptualizing religion, even when considering a phenomenon

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, “Handling my Business’: Exploring Rap’s Humanist Sensibilities” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, (New York: New York University Press), 86.

that should expand those boundaries, Hip Hop. This perspective also allows religion and Hip Hop studies to move away from asking what is religious or not to "uses and functions of religious rhetorics" and "a consideration of what type of social and cultural work(s) are accomplished by such deployments."<sup>43</sup>

The emergence of Miller's 2013 book theoretically segues into the reader, which argues for examining religion "and/in" Hip Hop. They explain that the religion and Hip Hop/religion in Hip Hop conception reveals, "There are clear intersections and commonalities between religion and Hip Hop, but also noteworthy distinctions that speak to methodological and theoretical distinctions in approach to each category." Daniel Hodge's book, *Soul of Hip Hop* hints at Hip Hop as religion, and Miller and Pinn fully develop this conception. This ideology shakes the foundation of the conversations surrounding the "sacred" and the "secular" or "mundane." The reader also provides a framework for scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies to move forward including but not limited to, further interrogating the very nature and meaning of religion and Hip Hop, an examination of the intersection between Hip Hop and religion, new vocabulary and methodological approaches in analyzing religion and Hip Hop. Since this reader, several groundbreaking texts have emerged that align with a specific religious tradition but provide a more thorough analysis of that faith's intersection with Hip Hop and a dimension of religion and Hip Hop studies that have not been examined spatially, theoretically or methodological. These texts are: Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (2016), Kymberly N. Pinder's *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (2016), Mwenda Ntarangwi's *The Street Is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya*, Daniel White Hodge's *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (2017) and Christina Zanfagna's *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels* (2017).

In *Painting the Gospel*, Pinder expands the lineage of Hip Hop by focusing on graffiti/street art and connecting this element of Hip Hop to Black artistic traditions. She states:

"My study teases out art historical and transdisciplinary lineages, such as the centrality of the visual in the formation of Black Liberation Theology and its role alongside gospel music and broadcasted sermons in the black public sphere. It is here that I am rewriting both mural art and church histories."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer, eds. *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Heather Thomson-Bunn, "Empirical Hybridity: A Multimethodological Approach for Studying Religious Rhetorics," in *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* eds. Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer (New York: Routledge, 2014): 125-40.

<sup>44</sup> Kymberly Pinder, *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 5-6.



In Pinder's detailed history of Black public art in Chicago, she draws out the many works of religion, sociology and anthropology that have focused on this city but left out Black public art. By including this lineage and rewriting Black artistic history, Pinder's inclusion of graffiti/street art bolsters our stance on the Black freedom struggle rather than a post-civil rights generation, because this post-civil rights perspective primarily focuses on the music.

Khabeer and Hodge make significant contributions to our discussion of religion and Hip Hop "and." In *Muslim Cool*, Khabeer links conceptions of Blackness with Hip Hop and Islam. She draws out the direct connection between systemic racism, identity formation and religion. Khabeer states:

I argue that by establishing connections to specific notions of Blackness, my teachers configure a sense of U.S. American Muslim identity that stands as a counterpoint to the hegemonic norms of Whiteness as well as to Arab and South Asian U.S. American communities. These connections are critical and contested interventions: critical because they push back against the pervasive phenomenon of anti-Blackness, and contested because questions of race, class, gender, and nationality complicate and trouble *Muslim Cool's* relationship to Black identities and cultures.<sup>45</sup>

In *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, Hodge elucidates how the acknowledgement of God is the conduit through which religiosity and spirituality co-exist. He notes, "A sense of life, meaning, context, and space are key elements to understanding how religion fits into a person's life. Moreover, these areas represent pathways for societies to create a spiritual journey and experience with God."<sup>46</sup> Hodge's intriguing perspective brings together religion and spirituality and highlights the importance of the approach the scholar takes in religion and Hip Hop studies. Hodge reveals how a scholarly understanding of religion can also include spirituality or the "and" for which we argue. *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel* points to the importance of religion and Hip Hop scholars taking an emic or etic approach in their research that can frame the theoretical perspective.

It is within this scholarly discussion that this special issue on religion and Hip Hop enters and raises the pertinent question of why we are arguing for religion and Hip Hop studies to use hiphopography as a methodological approach. The expansiveness and depth of Hip Hop forces scholars to examine a phenomenon that they may not be able to comprehend. The brilliance of Miller's *Hip Hop and Religion* (2013) traces the intellectual heritage of certain scholars who create a particular lens that unintentionally shapes their research. The previous works have made great strides in

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<sup>45</sup> Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2016) 5.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 4.

studying religion and Hip Hop, but we believe that a hiphopography will “unearth dimensions of intellectual importance”<sup>47</sup> not yet revealed.

Pinn and Hodge bring forth spirituality, but still position both of them within the prescribed understandings of religion. Pinn aimed to decenter Christianity and Hodge joins the two. Their works do fall under our third “and,” but more worldviews exist in and with Hip Hop. Race/ethnicity, some suggest, may complete the trinity of religion and Hip Hop and race, but this does not fully capture every occasion in which external forces impacts a Hip Hoppa’s life. Whereas Khabeer’s work highlights the importance of race and the ways in which non-racially Blacks can identify with Blackness, this conception does not fully account for those who do not identify as religious. Another example are Jews who delineate between being ethically Jewish and religiously Jewish.<sup>48</sup> Both of these examples highlight the importance of race and ethnicity to religion and identity. However, they do not adequately account for those who do not center race in their identity nor those outside of the United States who may have a notion of a manufactured Blackness associated with Hip Hop that is distant from the social realities of the ‘hoods across America.

### **Hip Hop and Religion and *And***

The title of this introduction, “Ain’t it Evil to Live Backwards,” is a line by John “Loaded Lux” Lucks in his battle against Toranio “Calicoe” Hightower, during one of the most popular battles put on by the Ultimate Rap League.<sup>49</sup> We chose this title because this “haymaker” combines word play, a metaphor and rapped by someone who exemplifies Hip Hop’s perspective on religion, Loaded Lux. First, Lux,<sup>50</sup> as an African living in America, presents worldviews that seamlessly flow between being gangsta, an activist, a Muslim and a Christian. Right before this metaphor, he raps: “How yall disrespect God?” and then asks if it is evil to live backwards. There are layers to this performance that elucidate how a battle rapper presents his worldview. First,

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<sup>47</sup> Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Numerous scholars discuss this with one example being Art Spiegelman’s, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (London: Penguin Books, Limited, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> The Ultimate Rap League (URL) is the most respected and well-known Battle Rap leagues. This battle is posted on YouTube in several videos, but the video posted by URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1-z2hxXxKg> has more than five millions views and became so popular that those who do not watch battle rap watched this battle when it went viral on Facebook and Twitter. We highly recommend watching the battle. One of the co-editors did not see the battle before we came up with the title and after watching it; they had a firmer grasp on the line.

<sup>50</sup> We are intentionally referring to his stage name as Loaded Lux because performance studies scholars have revealed the difference between a clearly defined staged performance and how one performs in daily life. Since we have not conducted an ethnography and spent time with John Lucks in his personal life, we are not making claims about Lucks, only the way he performs on stage. See Julius Bailey *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* (2014), Harvey Young *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (2013) Thomas DeFrantz *Black Performance Theory* (2014), E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003).

this is a performance during Summer Madness, the premier rap battle of the year. There are two ways of viewing this battle, by attending the event, which is referred to as “in the building” and online, primarily through URL’s YouTube channel, which is “on camera.” Based on this setting, for battle rappers in general and Lux in particular to win this battle, he has to deliver his bars a certain way and have strong lyrical content. The Africanist aesthetics of call and response is present. If the crowd (sold out in this instance) is pleased with the line then they respond in the affirmative by shouting out and clapping and if not, they boo. When Lux delivers these two lines, he is conterminously saying something that the crowd can respond to, rhyming and delivering a message. He set up this haymaker by talking about how Calicoe had claimed that he would beat Lux. Therefore, when he asks about disrespecting God and living backwards, this is where the multiple meanings come in. He is either referring to himself, because he just rapped about Calicoe thinking he could win the battle or God, because in the same way Calicoe is wrong about beating him, those who disrespect God are not living right. In addition to all of these components, evil spelled backwards is live.

Our attempt to portray the complexities of Lux’s performance during Summer Madness raises the following questions. If g(G)od (even the spelling of god is difficult here) is either Lux or “God,” what does it mean to Lux to be a god and how does Lux define God? Does he set up the metaphor this way to solely communicate to the crowd they need to consider whether they are living backwards because the battle between him and Calicoe is the only way for them to grasp it? Meaning, if he outright proclaims that the crowd needs to consider whether they are living backwards or not, they may not listen. Another possibility is that he really believes he is a g(G)od or has reached “g(G)od” status in battle rap. As a result of “g(G)od” status, Calicoe should not have even battled him. A last option is that it could be both or none and Lux was just putting on a show. These “loaded” questions elucidate the difficulty of scholars defining Lux’s “religion,” or how he understands the ways in which the world works.

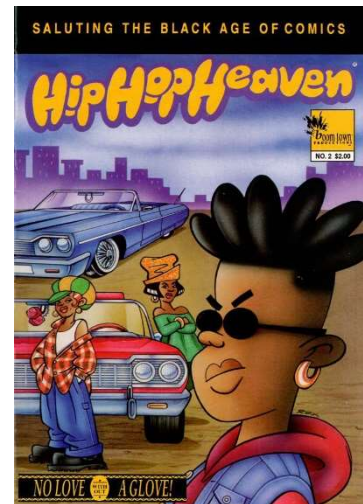
Hip Hop in and of itself bridges the worldly and otherworldly, or the earthly and heavenly.<sup>51</sup> To provide support for this claim, note one artist’s visual



<sup>51</sup> Travis Harris, *Religion and Hip Hop* by Monica Miller, *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 118. Travis Harris, “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop” *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 14. Marsh, Clive and Vaughan S. Roberts, “Religion and Western Popular Music: Reach out and Touch Faith?” *Modern Believing* 58, no. 1 (2017): 17-27. Marsh, Dave. *Heaven was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-hop and Beyond* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

rendering of Hip Hop in heaven. In this image, Black Jesus (center) is surrounded by [left to right], Hip Hop artist The Notorious BIG (Biggie Smalls), R&B Legend Marvin Gaye, Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur, Hip Hop Pioneer Grand Master Flash, Hip Hop Artist Aaliyah, and Reggae-Pioneer Bob Marley. Within this space, these artists associate with a racially homogenous Jesus, maintain the same image as they did on earth, and bond through music. It also allows for transcending time and space in bringing people who are dead and alive together.

Over twenty years ago, Craig Rex Perry produced the Christian-comic book, *Hip Hop Heaven* (Boomtown Productions). This outlet was memorable during its time because it addressed issues that were socially relevant (e.g., safe sex in the post-AIDS era) and through its title, promoted the idea that Hip Hop was in many respects 'paradise on earth.' Although this comic book is no longer in print and is currently a collector's item, Perry said the following regarding this endeavor: "It was indeed a fresh indie venture into 'educating while entertaining' young comic readers at the time."<sup>52</sup> The creator of *Hip Hop Heaven* admits his desire to 'rock the boat' and it is in this spirit that Hip Hop continues to forge new ways of expression.



How does Hip Hop evoke social critique, or essentially "rock the boat?" We assert Hip Hop does this by giving attention to what Robert Hill<sup>53</sup> refers to as one of the hallmarks of The Black Family (religion), creating socially conscious observers, and providing a platform through which Hip Hop messengers critically judge the world and specific entities within it. Significant to this process is the ability to connect the earthly and the spiritual. While promoting his album *Yeezus* during a 2013 Zane Lowe interview, Kanye West proclaims the following, "I just told you who I thought I was. A god. I just told you. That's who I think I am."<sup>54</sup> Although met with a great deal of criticism, West's comment acknowledges that since its inception, Hip Hop frequently discusses God, religion, and spirituality as independent and mutually supportive entities. Given the increasing amount of racial, social and political commentary on marginalized communities,<sup>55</sup> it is vital that scholars offer substantive examinations

<sup>52</sup> Rex Perry, "Comic Blast From the Past: Hip Hop Heaven" *Girls Gone Geek* accessed February 23, 2018, <https://girls-gone-geek.com/2010/06/28/comic-blast-from-the-past-hip-hop-heaven/>

<sup>53</sup> Robert Bernard Hill, *The Strengths of Black families* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> BBC Radio 1, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Full Interview," 2013, *YouTube* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR\\_yTQ0SYVA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR_yTQ0SYVA), Accessed April 1, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Peter McLaren, "Gangsta Pedagogy and Ghetto-centricity: The Hip-Hop Nation as Counterpublic Sphere" in *Revolutionary Multiculturalism* eds. Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 2018) 150-191.



regarding how racial, economic and social inequities have been experienced and challenged via Hip Hop.

What do Hip Hop artists say about religion, and Hip Hop? Two of the most influential Hip Hop artists of all times had very different views. The late Christopher Wallace (commonly referred to as “The Notorious Big” or “Biggie Smalls”) (May 21, 1972 – March 9, 1997), makes the following comment, “When I die fuck it I wanna go to hell. ‘Cuz I’m a piece of shit it ain’t hard to fuckin tell. It don’t make sense to go to heaven with the goodie goodies. Dressed in white, I like black Timbs and black hoodies.”<sup>56</sup> This statement suggests heaven as the ultimate reward for those who embody a superior moral character (i.e. “goodie goodies”), Wallace’s acknowledgement that his earthly activities disqualify him from heaven, and heaven as the embodiment of white purity. Therefore, he challenges religion’s belief that entry to heaven is contingent on certain actions.

Contrastingly, another Hip Hop legend speaks of God and religion in a way that is both personal and global. During an interview with Vibe Magazine, the late Tupac Shakur (June 16, 1971 – September 13, 1996) offers this perspective:

I'm the religion that to me is the realist religion there is. I try to pray to God every night unless I pass out. I learned this in jail, I talked to every God (member of the Five Percent Nation) there was in jail. I think that if you take one of the "O's" out of "Good" it's "God", if you add a "D" to "Evil", it's the "Devil". I think some cool motherfucker sat down a long time ago and said let's figure out a way to control motherfuckers. That's what they came up with-the bible. Cause if God wrote the bible, I'm sure there would have been a revised copy by now. Cause a lot of shit has changed. I've been looking for this revised copy-I still see that same old copy that we had from then. I'm not disrespecting anyone's religion, please forgive me if it comes off that way, I'm just stating my opinion. The bible tells us that all these did this because they suffered so much that's what makes them special people. I got shot five times and I got crucified to the media. And I walked through with the thorns on and I had shit thrown on me and I had the thief at the top; I told that nigga "I'll be back for you. Trust me, is not supposed to be going down, I'll be back. I'm not saying I'm Jesus but I'm saying we go through that type of thing every day. We don't part the Red Sea, but we walk through the hood without getting shot. We don't turn water to wine, but we turn dope fiends and dope heads into productive citizens of society. We turn words into money. What greater gift can there be. So, I believe God blesses us, I believe God blesses those that hustle. Those that use their minds and those that overall are righteous. I believe that everything you do bad comes back to you. So, everything that I do that's bad, I'm going to suffer for it. But in my heart, I believe what I'm doing in my heart is right. So, I feel like I'm going to heaven.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher Wallace, “Suicidal Thoughts” *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy Records, 1994).

<sup>57</sup> VIBE Magazine, “2pac Talking about His Belief in God and Religion,” *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnmLl6Fm1MM>, Accessed March 10, 2018.



Looking at the world through Hip Hop's eyes without any predefined notions enables scholars to conceptualize the fluidity of worldviews and the life of Hip Hoppas. Tupac does not confine "religion" to one particular community, Nation of Islam, Five Percenters or Christians but that which particularly speaks to and address his and others like him struggles. This is a powerful conception of the world because this means that whatever one believes in, it has to bring real life change by freeing the yoke of White Supremacy and transforming the existence of those who experience oppression.

Another perfect example of Hip Hop's fluid worldview is that of Lauryn Hill. In Ralph Watkin's essay "From Black Theology and Black Power to Afrocentric Theology and Hip Hop Power: An Extension and Socio-re-theological Conceptualization of Cone's Theology in Conversation with the Hip Hop Generation" identifies Hill as a socio-theologian within Black theology and presents an Afrocentric/African centered hip hop. His perspective primarily builds from *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). However, Cheryl Lynette Keyes in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002) discusses Hill's "references to the Rastafarian concepts of Zion and Jah."<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that Ralph Watkins, The Peachtree Associate Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary, positions her alongside Black theology and recognizes her as a theologian of sorts. Whereas Cheryl Keyes, Professor of Ethnomusicology at UCLA who specializes in Black and popular music and gender brings forth her connections with Rastafarians. Their intellectual training shapes how they examine and present Hill; this methodological and theoretical approach limits our understanding of Hill and her worldview.

She now identifies as Ms. Lauryn Hill. In an interview posted on YouTube on March 11, 2017 conducted in Africa, Ms. Hill receives a query regarding *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* being cryptic (and in many ways Lauryn Hill herself). She responds by saying that *Unplugged* "was cryptic because I was sharing things with the world that she hadn't understood yet."<sup>59</sup> In the same interview, she shares, "I'm expressing to you what's revealed to me as it's revealed to me."<sup>60</sup> Ms. Hill's statement elucidates the importance of allowing individuals and communities to have fluid worldviews. We are not arguing directly with Watkins or Keyes, rather, we contend that their perspectives highlight a valuable piece of the puzzle. By moving towards a boundary-less notion guided by a specific discipline, scholars of religion and Hip Hop can highlight new perspectives often missed.

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<sup>58</sup> Cheryl Lynette Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 161.

<sup>59</sup> Manufacturing Intellect "Lauryn Hill Interview, 2000," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBogwWhKN8>, Accessed May 5, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

"I lost my religion, but I found God."<sup>61</sup> Lecrae's lyrics represent the views of many Hip Hoppas. Graffiti/street artists and member of the Few and Far graffiti crew, Maria "TooFly" Castillo reveal how Hip Hoppas are against religion and UK rapper Sara Little indicates that "spiritual" and "spirituality" does not adequately account for her worldview. Jessica Pabón-Colón in "Writin', Breakin', Beatboxin': Strategically Performing 'Women' in Hip-Hop" (2017) discusses the Few and Far graffiti crew painting event at Art Basel Miami. In her explanation of TooFly's work she states: "Holding court at the top right section of the wall, TooFly's azure and blue-green Amazonian goddess, adorned in tribal patterning, stares softly into the space before her, looking into the future with determination and grace."<sup>62</sup>

Here is the picture of the work that Pabón-Colón described and TooFly placed on her website.<sup>63</sup> She wrote this statement under this same picture:

BANG! - Done. With all that was going on I felt I needed to dedicate this piece to communities around the world who were protesting against police brutality. These are not peaceful days we are living in, Art Basel is a bubble and we were caught up in it. Unaware of what was on TV, radio, or social media. My state of mind these days is peaceful and in tune with nature, and the flow of life, however everywhere around the world it's chaos. Gotta keep trying to create more love in the world but until then if there's no justice there will be no peace!<sup>64</sup>



A close examination at the bottom of the picture will reveal that she wrote "no justice no peace" on the ground. When Harris asked her about her religious views, she stated: "I don't believe in religion. I prefer to follow spiritual practices that are in harmony with

<sup>61</sup> Lecrae Moore, featuring Breyan Issac, "River of Jordan," *The Shack: Music from and Inspired by the Original Motion Picture* (Atlantic Records, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Jessica Pabón-Colón, "Writin', Breakin', Beatboxin': Strategically Performing 'Women' in Hip-Hop," *Signs* 43, no. 1 (2017): 175.

<sup>63</sup> Maria Castillo granted us permission to publish this picture.

<sup>64</sup> Maria Castillo, "GRAFITERAS," August 18, 2017 Oakland, CA, Accessed April 10, 2018 <http://www.tooflynyc.com/life/category/few-far-women/>.

nature. Nature is my truth and only guide."<sup>65</sup> TooFly expresses her stance against religion while taking a stance to allow nature to guide her. She points to nature on her webpage and in her interview with Harris. From our stance, "spiritual practices" does not mean the same as spirituality. TooFly recognizes her art and the way she lives her life, much like Tupac, as finding peace in the midst of chaos. Her worldview of getting in touch with nature and spreading love provides meaning to her in a world that Black and Brown folks experience state sanctioned trauma.

When Harris interviewed UK rapper Sara Little, he asked her specifically about religion and if she would recognize herself as spiritual. Little has a complicated view of religion. She does not believe in any particular religion, but her partner is a non-practicing Muslim; as a result, she does not bash Islam. At the same time, similar to Tupac, she believes that "there's dope life lessons and skills included in many religious teachings."<sup>66</sup> In reference to specifically being spiritual: "I wouldn't say that word myself. I don't really know why, it just doesn't seem to describe my relationship to a worldview. I find that finding the words to express how I do feel in this respect is difficult."<sup>67</sup> Just like Ms. Hill, Little does not have a nice and neat worldview that she can clearly articulate.

It is precisely the views of TooFly and Little as to the reason why we need an "and" for the third entity. While they both compare to Pac and Ms. Hill, all four of their worldviews are different. TooFly says she follows spiritual practices, but what does that "spiritual mean?" Little explains that "spiritual" does not capture that worldview and, in fact, it would be difficult to find one word that does. Little and Pac recognizes the benefits of religion while Lecrae raps and Ms. Hill mentions in her interview that the particular religion and institutionalization of Christianity actually turns people away from God. Therefore, we provide those seven broad categories and contend for religion and Hip Hop *and*.

### Special Issue Outline

This special issue addresses how religion and Hip Hop highlights the experiences of marginalized Black and Brown folk, within and outside of the United States. Since heaven gives meaning to earthly experiences and creates an ethos that allows individuals to deal with earthly pain, disappointment, and suffering, Cassandra Chaney focuses on heaven. In "Is There a Heaven for a Gangsta?: Hip Hop, Spirituality, and Heaven," Chaney uses phenomenology to conduct a content analysis on the lyrics of twenty-four Hip Hop songs to identify how Black male Hip Hop artists discuss heaven. In particular, this work examines the extent that Black Hip Hop artists create a heaven that reflects their racial experiences, demonstrates their belief in God and/or a Higher Power, as well as their need to communicate with God and/or a Higher Power.

<sup>65</sup> Travis Harris, *Interview of TooFlyNYC*, Mario Castillo, April 8, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Travis Harris, *Interview of Sara Little*, April 9, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, Black male Hip Hop artists' expressions of heaven highlight their need to seek the direction of God and/or a Higher Power, motivates them to create positive change in their communities, and perceive heaven and/or the afterlife in ways that are based on their earthly relationships and experiences.

Dwight Radcliff, in his essay, "Hip Hop Hermeneutics" addresses how the Hip Hop culture shapes and heavily influences Black preachers. Instead of relegating Hip Hop to a tertiary role, particularly regarding the African American experience, a Hip Hop hermeneutic uses this culture as the lens through which one can read and understand scripture as well as the depth to which one truly relates to the multidimensional spirit of the Black experience. Essentially, because they experience similar periods of growth, maturity, change, success, and failure as Hip Hop, Black preachers possess a deep, committed, affinity with this culture. This Hip Hop hermeneutic categorically allows them to interpret scripture in unapologetic ways that make sense to them as well as enthusiastically relay an imagery that is common to the people to whom they communicate.

Since Hip Hop is global<sup>68</sup> and, as Sarah Little reveals, Hip Hoppers outside of the US do not have the same worldview as those in America, we include a manuscript that speaks to the culture in Central and South-Eastern Europe. In "Religion and the Youth of Romania: A Preliminary Study," Oana-Alexandra Chirilă and Cassandra Chaney examine how the young audience of Romania responds to the spiritual and religious-oriented lyrics in Hip Hop music. They question if this genre, apart from an alternative lifestyle, could be a means of education towards religious tolerance.

In "The Messianic Zeal: A Case of Radical Aesthetics in Black Cultural Production," Daniel L. Williams examines work by popular artists D'Angelo, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar and 2pac Shakur to highlight their connection to messianic symbolism, which integrates the discursive ideologies of Nat Turner, W.E.B. Dubois, and multi-layered representations of Hip Hop. Understanding these ideologies allows individuals to understand and appreciate how the historical marginalization of Africans fosters the current narrative conviction of the world's most prolific cultural producers, namely Hip Hoppers, emcees, authors, and athletes.

Consider the paradoxical representations of Compton-based Hip Hop artist Kendrick Lamar and the Chicago-based Hip Hop artist, Kanye West. In "Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity," Matthew Linder

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<sup>68</sup> Angela Selena Williams, "(W)raps of Consciousness: Articulating Women's Rights through Hip Hop in the Middle East and North Africa Region." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2017. James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli, *The Global Ciph: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006). H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim and Alastair Pennycook, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).



situates Lamar's work within two concepts: *imago dei* and sincerity. Fundamentally, these spiritual conceptions highlight the salience of a neo-secular sacred aesthetic, which opts for sincerity over authenticity, making the aforementioned concepts ideal to speak to life in poor Black and Brown urban spaces, and Hip Hop.

In his work, "From Yeezus to Pablo: An Existential Theology between God, Blackness, and Being," Shea Watts highlights how West simultaneously wrestles with his human and divine states, commonly referred to "Yeezus," "black god," "new slave," and "Pablo" (Paul). It is within this delicate balance that Lamar, West, and other Hip Hop artists comment on the world in which they live, realize their own identities, help others come to a realization of self, and impel others to change the world in which they live.

Hip Hop Scholar, Waqas Mirza, provides a critical review of Alejandro Nava's recent tome, "In Search of Soul: Hip-Hop, Literature, and Religion."<sup>69</sup> Nava, Professor of Religious Studies at Arizona State University, received his introduction to Hip Hop through Professor Eric Michael Dyson. Since that time, Nava has distinguished himself as a reputable pupil of this genre and has produced an insightful interdisciplinary book that will appeal to scholarly and lay audiences.

### Conclusion

The common thread that runs throughout many of the worldviews of Hip Hoppas is the desire to encounter something that has meaning in the midst of systemic oppression and suffering. We are very aware of the time we live in; as Black academics, the ivory tower does not exempt us from suffering. As a Black women and men in the diaspora, we long for home. This longing intertwines with a home that we cannot even adequately describe. The combination of systemic oppression and homelessness that we express aligns with the perspective of many Hip Hoppas. This is why Pac asked, "is there a heaven for a G." This is also, why, like Ms. Hill, we do not have a static view of the world. Even between the three editors, we do not all agree on our worldview, but Hip Hop does bring us together. It was Chaney's idea to have this special issue because she recognized that in the midst of that longing, religion and "and" opened the door for us to talk about subjects that Hip Hop had been talking about. Our hope is that this special issue will spur on the discussion and invite scholars of religion and Hip Hop to explore the *ands* that religion does not adequately describe. This special issue is dedicated to all Hip Hop pioneers who are gone too soon, Hip Hop supporters, as well as past, present, and future academicians who unitedly, wholeheartedly, and untiringly commit to advancing the intellectual conversation on religion and Hip Hop.

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<sup>69</sup> Alejandro Nava, *In Search of Soul: Hip-hop, Literature, and Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017).



The publication of a special issue requires a tremendous amount of work. Special issues require additional resources than that used to operate the journal. The editors would like to acknowledge those who contributed their work; without their contributions, this special issue would not have come together in the way that it did. We also highlight their work because of the capitalist nature of academia that exploits academic labor. In this relatively small way, we fight back against this exploitation to provide recognition of this work. In addition to scholars Chaney contacted for reviews, we would like to acknowledge those who copy edited and designed the special issue. Their professionalism, promptness, and attention to detail greatly facilitated the publication of *Religion and Hip Hop And*. The copy editors we acknowledge are: Waqas Mirza, Doctoral Candidate at University of Oxford, Dr. Ashley Payne of Missouri State University, Doctoral Candidates Alex Edelstein of UC San Diego and Tasha Iglesias of California State University Long Beach. We are truly grateful for the design of this special issue created by Darryl A. Armstrong who works with The Threaded Zebra Agency and Alexa Bowe, a digital marketing consultant. Another major component of our journal is our website. We acknowledge the work of Laura B. Johnson - [lbjdigital.com](http://lbjdigital.com) on [jhsonline.org](http://jhsonline.org). Last, but most certainly not least, we express gratitude to Dr. Daniel White Hodge, who wholeheartedly supported our laborious efforts in the publication and marketing of this special issue.

The cover plays a crucial role in this special issue. We were fortunate to find a photo of Topaz's art formerly displayed at 5Pointz. 5Pointz was a legal street art hot spot in Queens. Nic 1 described the purpose of it this way: "The basic principle of this was good versus evil, but it's not what you think."<sup>70</sup> In November of 2013, Jerry Wolkoff, owner of the building that 5Pointz covered, had it whitewashed and surprised many of the artists whose work was displayed. This actual whitewashing was also symbolic of how White Supremacy tried to destroy an African diasporic practice. Several photographers were able to take pictures of this art before its whitewashing. Because of this story, the purpose of 5Pointz and the message of the music, this picture perfectly conveys the message of this special issue. We are truly grateful for Topaz's artistic ability, resiliency and sharing this gift with us.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Sarah Bayliss, "Art/Architecture; Museum with (Only) Walls," *The New York Times*. August 08, 2004. Accessed July 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/08/arts/art-architecture-museum-with-only-walls.html>.

<sup>71</sup> The title of this mural is: Music Is My Religion (Jimi Hendrix Tribute) and the artists of this mural are Topaz and Jerms at 5 Pointz. LIC, Queens. 2012. This piece was a part of the 5 Pointz court case these artists won.

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