

Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture, and "The Future Religion of the World"

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When rap music and hip-hop culture first emerged from the South Bronx in the late 1970s, critics dismissed them as a superficial fad that would quickly fade and be relegated to the dustbin of history. Over the course of the last three decades, however, this kind of perjorative assessment has been proved wrong time and time again, as rap has consistently dominated the music industry and hip-hop sensibility has become part and parcel of mainstream American popular culture. A case in point is the enormous success of female rapper Lauryn Hill's album The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill (1998), which topped the charts at number one for weeks, sold several million copies, and won numerous Grammys. Or perhaps one might channel surf the television to find rap music and hip-hop styles in commercials for everything from McDonald's hamburgers to Pringles potato chips to Mervyn's department store. This is an extraordinary trajectory for an African-American musical subculture that began in what is arguably the most economically and culturally marginalized neighborhood of the country.

What is even more remarkable about the success of rap and hip-hop is that it still contains a powerful and distinctive African-American religious worldview that runs directly counter to the religious worldview of the mainstream culture it has come to permeate. Faced with the oppressive historical circumstances of African Americans' marginalized status, this religious worldview refuses to take refuge in the hope of otherworldly salvation but, rather, tells the truth about the harsh reality of this oppression and transforms the impulse toward anger and violence into empowerment, creative

expression, spirituality, and positive change. Here I will look at the contradictory dynamics of hip-hop's rise to mainstream success—its historical and cultural development, its West African and African-American roots, and its spiritual dimensions—and explore the important implications for the larger landscape of religion in American popular culture.

"OLD SCHOOL": CULTURAL AND MUSICAL HISTORY

Rap music emerged as one component of hip-hop, a new street culture that included graffiti and break dancing as important forms of expression. The music for rap was put together by DJs mixing stripped-down, bass-heavy, polyrhythmic beats from turntables and samplers, drawing heavily on roots in soul, funk, and disco. This new style of sonic collage quickly became the soundtrack for street parties and "ghetto blasters" (portable tape players) throughout the Bronx. But the term "rap" actually refers to the rhyming poetry that the lead vocalist would improvise on the microphone in rhythm to the beats. Raps were spoken as well as sung, and they featured the rapper's prowess in turning a phrase. This prowess could take the form of innovative rhyming, rhythmic dexterity, boasting, humor, narrative storytelling, or even preaching. The subjects of the raps reflected the grim reality of young African Americans' life in the ghetto: racism, poverty, broken families, substandard housing, unemployment, violence, drugs, gangs, police brutality, arrests, incarceration, and short life expectancy.

Innovative DJs like Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa used their turntable mixing skills to create the first beat-driven sonic collages that form the foundation of rap music.

These were originally dance mixes for neighborhood parties in houses, parks, and community centers. These pioneering hip-hop DJs not only drew heavily on soul and funk recordings, but also used the new technologies of the cross-fade mixer, the sampler, and the drum machine. Songs were segued seamlessly into each other for a continuous dance mix. At the same time, the breaks in each song and between songs—those places where the instrumentation would pull back to highlight the rhythm section—were emphasized and extended in a collage of peak dance beats. These became known as "break beats" or "b-beats," and DJ Kool Herc was their acknowledged master. The wild athletic dancing that accompanied these break beats became known as "break dancing," and the male break dancers became known as "break boys" or "b-boys" for short. Hip-hop DJs also developed new skills on the turntables which strongly contributed to the distinctive rap sound. Foremost among these was "scratching," a technique in which the DJ used his hand to quickly spin the record back and forth under the needle, thus producing a quirky staccato rhythm. Another technique was "backspinning," in which the DJ isolated a short verbal or musical phrase on a record, and repeated it by quickly spinning back to the beginning. One of the early creators and masters of both the scratch and the backspin was Grandmaster Flash. Both of these techniques produced cross-rhythms on one turntable while the other supplied the main groove, a clearly polyrhythmic approach to musical composition. Samplers also allowed DJs to bring a wide assortment of sound sources into their eclectic pastiches.

Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa each had his own group of neighborhood friends, known as their "crew" or "posse," who hung out with them and accompanied them to all their jams. Thus, rap music grew out of specific neighborhoods and local

communities, each developing its own distinctive style. Often, there were competitions between DJs and their crews for territory, both physical and sonic, in which DJs would exhibit their mixing prowess and b-boys would display their dance moves. These competitions closely paralleled the territoriality of street gangs but with one notable difference—there was no violence. Instead, the crews channeled their competitive energies into artistic expression, choosing a creative outlet rather than a destructive one. Afrika Bambaataa was a pioneer in making explicit the connection between these hip-hop crews and a sense of African identity and spiritual pride. Bambaataa, whose name means "affectionate leader" in Zulu, called his crew "Zulu Nation," and created an extended family unified not only by hip-hop expression but also by a positive vision of African-American community.

The raps themselves began with the DJs calling out on microphones over the music to exhort the audience to dance harder, repeating phrases like "rock the house," "get down," or "you don't stop." Because DJ mixing is a demanding task requiring full concentration, however, soon they brought in friends to work the microphone full time. Here again, DJ Kool Herc was an innovator in being among the first to use an MC (microphone controller or master of ceremonies). The MCs not only gave the parties more of a live feel, but they also fulfilled the important task of crowd control, maintaining a positive feeling, and keeping potential violence at bay. Very quickly, the MCs developed their own creative styles, using the latest slang and hippest rhymes to supplant the DJ as the focal point of the music. The competitive aspect shifted over to the rappers as well, as MCs dueled on the microphone trying to show who was the best rhymer.

In these early days of rap, roughly 1974 to 1978, it was still primarily an underground party phenomenon. This changed with the successful release of three seminal rap records—the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" in 1982, and Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" in 1983—which quickly established the commercial viability of rap. In 1986, Run-DMC completed rap's crossover to mainstream popularity when their single "Walk This Way" hit number one on the charts. Articles on rap began to appear in bastions of mainstream journalism like the New York Times and Time magazine. Run-DMC's crossover paved the way for the commercial success of other rap artists like LL Cool J, Eric B. and Rahim, Public Enemy, and Salt 'n Pepa, one of the few prominent women rap groups. At the same time, vibrant local rap subcultures emerged in other urban centers around the country, including Miami, Boston, Houston, Oakland, and Los Angeles, each with its own distinctive sound and style.

Artists like Public Enemy and KRS-One made a strong push toward a more hard-core musical sound and a more militant political message. In combining an unflinching critique of contemporary black oppression with a visionary call to resistance and liberation, Public Enemy and KRS-One continued and updated a long-standing African-American musico-religious tradition of truth telling, an approach hip-hop scholar Angela Spence Nelson has called "combative spirituality" (Nelson 1991, 59).

The hard-core sound was to attain its greatest success, however, with the ascendancy of the Los Angeles area "gangsta" rap subculture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The word "gangsta" is a reference to the centrality of gang activities among African-American and Hispanic youth in Los Angeles, which includes some of the worst

crime and violence in the country and an underground economy largely based on crack cocaine. In areas like South Central Los Angeles, gang violence is commonplace, and the panicked response of white authorities has resulted in the creation of a virtual police state with its own violent excesses. The 1991 brutal beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police, the acquittal of the responsible officers, and the subsequent riots on the streets gave an indication of the high level of hatred and tension in the area. It was out of this tableau of economic despair, gang violence, the crack epidemic, and police repression that gangsta rap emerged. The seminal gangsta group was N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), whose 1988 album Straight Outta Compton, with its in-your-face attitude, funky West Coast sound, and gritty tales of violent gang life, sold more than two million copies. N.W.A.'s stylistic and commercial breakthrough opened the door for a number of other Los Angeles-area gangsta rap artists to attain success, including Ice-T, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and original N.W.A. members Ice Cube and Dr. Dre as solo artists.

The post-gangsta rap era has seen a new generation of rap artists break through to mainstream success as the market share of rap music has more than doubled in the last two decades. In addition to Lauryn Hill, artists like Puff Daddy (Sean Combs), Wu-Tang Clan, DMX, Master P, Jay-Z, Mase, and Eminem, to mention just a few, all had their run at the top of the charts. Far from being a passing fad, rap music has proved its staying power over the course of the last three decades and has steadily grown in influence to become a permanent fixture in the mainstream world of popular culture. The fact that hip-hop is a primarily African-American subculture with strong roots in West African practices and sensibilities makes its penetration of mainstream popular culture an even more significant development from a religious perspective.

**POETRY, POLYRHYTHMS, POSSESSION, AND PROPHETIC TRADITION:
WEST AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN ROOTS**

We've been rapping forever. You know, there's nothing new under the sun. The griots were doing the same, the storytellers, oral tradition people.... And the drum's also the center of it. You can't have it without the drum. And now hip-hop is experimenting, trying new things, but really the beat is what's always. It's the drums, just like drums in any form. That's definitely African. (Malcolm 1997)

In the course of doing research in the San Francisco Bay area in 1997, I had the opportunity to spend some time in the East Bay hip-hop community known as the Oakland Underground, attending musical events and conducting interviews with aficionados. Time and again in these interviews, I was struck by the explicit recognition and conscious acknowledgment of the African roots of rap and hip-hop. These roots can be traced back more specifically to two West African geographical and cultural zones: the coastal forest belt cultures like the Ga, Ewe, Fon, and Yoruba of modern Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria; and the Sahelian cultures of the Manding, Wolof, and Peul of modern Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

One of the primary religious complexes in the coastal forest belt is that of possession dances, sacred ceremonies in which drum ensembles and singers supply beat-driven polyrhythmic music and the initiates dance themselves into ecstatic trance states in which the gods take possession of their bodies, becoming physically present among the

community for the purposes of counseling, healing, divination, and so forth. Many of the distinctive elements of this complex made their way to the Americas through the slave trade and became important components of African-American music and religion, albeit in significantly changed forms. Rap displays strong continuities with a number of these elements. Musically, one finds the centrality of rhythm as an organizing principle, with the elements of harmony and melody stripped down almost completely. The groove is generated from interlocking polyrhythms, and even though the constituent parts are sampled or prerecorded, they operate in the same way as live drumming. As one rapper said: "That is what, to me, makes hip-hop. It's got the rhythmic conversation of the drum and the rhythmic conversation of the bass" (King 1997). Another musician put it this way: "I'm pretty much focusing on the groove.... If it's a great groove, then ... that really is the bottom line" (Williams 1997). And this polyrhythmic groove provides a connection to the ancestors, expressed thus: "Our ancestors are still calling. And the break beats we used in the beginning are still from God, still ally [sic] your soul" (Guerrero 1997).

The interconnection between music and dance is also central, as is evident in the importance of break dancing in the early hip-hop subculture. Many of the hip-hop aficionados I interviewed said that break dancing was their initial entry point into the music: "I was taking the energy of the beat and then just amplifying it through my movement. Like making the music almost seem like it was coming more intensely by seeing what I'm doing, or by me feeling what I'm doing, it seemed like the music became more intense" (Gaines 1997). Some of these intensified states contain strong echoes of the possession experience:

What I felt as a kid was strictly vibration, rhythm, and that music has a rhythm that just called my soul. It would make my soul jump out of my body, literally, and I'd have to move to it.... It really calls me, it really does.... Sometimes my body does things I can't even control and it's like I'm not even here.... It's just a link. Something touches you one day, just sparks your whole consciousness, and shows your body you can. Time and space is all about the rhythm in your body.... It's the ancients. It's definitely the ancients. (Guerrero 1997)

Interestingly, the circular form of break dancing, and even some of its dance moves, shows a striking similarity to African-American musico-religious dances like the ring shout, the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira, and traditional West African dances. The movements can also take the form of call and response, another classic element of African music, with the rapper's calls to "put your hands in the air" evoking an audience response of enthusiastic hand waving. These interactions demonstrate the participatory nature of the medium as well, another important principle of African music.

What is especially distinctive about rap music's continuities with West African and African-American musical principles, however, is the rap itself and its prominent foregrounding of an oral mode of expression, the roots of which are more closely associated with the Sahelian cultures of West Africa. These cultures have a long and distinguished lineage of men's societies of court poets and musicians called jalis, known as griots in the West, who maintained complex oral traditions of praise, lineage, and celebration. Many of the jalis's pieces were extremely long and had to be memorized; others were improvised on the spot for the specific occasion. In either case, a high level

of oral skill was required. In these West African cultures, the spoken word was seen as potent and sacred, having the power to evoke that which was being spoken. This supernatural power of the spoken word was called nommo. This ancient power is something that hip-hop aficionados are able to recognize in today's raps: "Some people I hear, and it sounds like a long time ago.... These are words of power, like certain words, like positive suggestions of just certain frequencies of sounds" (Gaines 1997).

This emphasis on the potency of the spoken word and the oral tradition was to continue after the slave trade brought many of these West Africans to the Americas. During slave times, in the context of plantations especially, the oral tradition manifested itself in more secular forms such as the work song and the plantation tale (e.g., Brer Rabbit or Stagger Lee), as well as in rhyming jokes and singing games. Yet, these secular forms preserved elements of the sacred traditions in a way that allowed them to continue in a transformed way. The Christian church, as the only officially legitimized context for religious expression allowed to the slaves, was also an important repository for the oral tradition. This was particularly evident in the preaching style of African American ministers, who relied heavily on rhythm, rhyme, and the skillful use of other rhetorical techniques to raise energy and to give the message greater potency.

The oral tradition continued to evolve in the postemancipation era, becoming a significant component in both the major forms of African-American secular music—blues and jazz—not so much in the music itself as in the lingo of the subcultures. As African Americans moved from rural southern areas to northern cities, oral expression took the form of urban street talk, which had a more boastful, aggressive quality. Thus, practices like sounding, woofing, jiving, signifying, rapping, and telling toasts were

raised to high levels of prowess on the city streets in a friendly but competitive atmosphere. Some highwater marks of this oral artistry include the Harlem Renaissance and the poet Langston Hughes, black radio DJs in the 1940s and 1950s, and the game of ritual insult called "the dozens." The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. captivated the nation in the 1960s with the visionary fervor of his preaching style. Malcolm X also had a powerful oral style which strongly affected the African-American community in the 1960s. And the flamboyant and controversial boxing champion Muhammad Ali, widely idolized among African Americans, exposed the whole world to his boastful, humorous rhyming.

But perhaps the most important trailblazers for contemporary rap were the poet Gil Scott-Heron and the ensemble the Last Poets. Active during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Last Poets were a group of black militant storytellers and poets who used the rhythms of conga drums to accompany their spoken political raps. Scott-Heron's brilliant work, including famous pieces like The Revolution Will Not Be Televised and This Is Madness, was innovative and influential, not only for its marriage of spoken raps with rhythmic grooves, but also for its unabashedly hard-hitting political message. Scott-Heron and the Last Poets were a source of inspiration for many key figures in the first generation of rappers, so much so that some consider them to be "the godfathers of message rap" (Perkins 1991, 42).

There is one more vitally important African-American influence on rap that must be noted, that of the blues, arguably the most quintessential of African-American musics. While there are certainly musical continuities among African traditions, the blues, and rap, the continuity of concern here is that of worldview or theology, particularly with

respect to the oppressive historical circumstances of Africans in the New World. The Christian theology adopted by many African-American churches sought to escape the hardships of suffering in this world by placing their faith in deliverance in the next. In contrast, the blues refused to look away from the suffering experienced as former slaves in the African diaspora, and sought a measure of whatever this-worldly redemption could be achieved through embodied sexuality and solidarity within the African-American community. As theologian James Cone eloquently writes:

The blues are a lived experience, an encounter with the contradictions of American society, but a refusal to be conquered by it. They are despair only in the sense that there is no attempt to cover up reality. The blues recognize that black people have been hurt and scarred by the brutalities of white society. But there is also hope in what Richard Wright calls the "endemic capacity to live." This hope provided the strength to survive, and also an openness to the intensity of life's pains without being destroyed by them.... That black people could sing the blues, describing their joys and sorrows, meant that they were able to affirm an authentic hope in the essential worth of black humanity. (1992, 96-97)

There is such a strong similarity between this blues theology and that of hip-hop that this quote could well be a description of the worldview of recent rappers, a continuity that has been noted by hip-hop scholars:

Contemporary rappers, like early bluespeople, are responding to the "burden of freedom," in part by relaying portrayals of reality to their audiences through their personal experiences. They also relay positive portrayals of themselves as a means of affirming their personhood (and vicariously the personhood of their people) in a world that is constantly telling them they are nobodies. (Nelson 1991, 56)

Rap music can be a profound extension of the prophetic or blues tradition and the legacy of heroism within the African-American experience. (Craddock-Willis 1989, 37)

In addition to theology, there is a strong continuity in the priestly role of the bluesman and the rapper as well, one which also has important religious implications.

Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil writes:

In spite of the fact that blues singing is ostensibly a secular, even profane, form of expression, the role is intimately related to sacred roles in the Negro community.... As professions, blues singing and preaching seem to be closely linked in both the rural or small-town setting and in the urban ghettos. We have already noted some of the stylistic common denominators that underlie the performance of both roles, and it is clear that the experiences which prepare one for adequately fulfilling either role overlap extensively. (1966)

As I will show in the next section, this priestly function is consciously recognized by rappers and traced back through its African-American articulation to its West African roots. This conscious recognition of the African-American and West African roots of rap and hip-hop is a feature of their considerable religious quality, which demonstrates an extraordinary tenacity and adaptability in not just surviving five centuries of oppressive history but emerging strong in a vibrant new formulation of these traditions.

HIP-HOP SPIRITUALITY

Hip-hop has been represented in mainstream media primarily by the gangsta rap image of dangerous black youth—angry, violent, and destructive. Yet, in my interviews with members of the Oakland Underground, they consistently claimed that hip-hop was exactly the opposite for them—peaceful, loving, inclusive, spiritual, and a force for positive change. This seeming contradiction has been a part of hip-hop culture since its South Bronx origins in the late 1970s, and understanding the dynamics of the dialectical relationship between these two polarities is central to understanding hip-hop's essential nature. To begin with, the situation of young African Americans and Latinos in inner-city ghettos is, as noted at the outset, one of racism, poverty, broken families, substandard housing, unemployment, violence, drugs, gangs, police brutality, arrests, incarceration, and short life expectancy. So, for any form of expression to have credibility, it must address that situation head-on, much as the blues did. In this regard, as Chuck D of Public Enemy has said, rap is black urban youth's CNN, providing information about what's going on in their world. This was a function confirmed in my interviews:

Hip-hop music is always speaking to me, the lyrics. Especially in the late eighties, there were some real conscious things in hip-hop, and that was what was off-setting high school education, mainstream society, with all the information I was getting from KRS One and Public Enemy and X-Clan, all those groups. So, I just needed it at the time. We all needed it. They were speaking to me and educating me. I know they were. And I felt it. I needed it. It came at the right time.

(Malcolm 1997)

In addition to providing information and educating, the raps also serve a crucial function of truth-telling: "It's very important to speak about how you really feel about something.... This is one of the first times in music where you can really say what's going on.... It's very honest. There's a lot of references to whatever's happening right now" (King 1997). There is a deeper spiritual aspect of this truth telling beyond simply educating and informing:

One thing about rapping is always that you've got to come with your heart, who you are. And whatever that be, whether it be L.A. gangster music or New York "righteous" music or anti-government music, whatever. It's all about coming from your heart, saying what you believe in. Whether it was Ice Cube or Chuck D, it was just the spirit there. That's what was attractive, beyond the word itself, because you knew it was coming from the heart, for real. (Malcolm 1997)

In coming from the heart and speaking their truth, rappers are also speaking for their larger community. As one aficionado put it: "There is a culture of people who feel the voices of [rappers] represent them" (King 1997). Represent is a word widely used by rappers to describe their function. Some take the implications of this even further and explicitly make the connection to the role of the priest and the griot:

MCs are like the priests or the pastors of the people right now because a lot of children don't listen to their parents anymore. A lot of kids don't go to church anymore. So, MCs have been elevated to this recognizable status that's easily accessible. It's our duty as MCs to try to bring morals to the community, just like the griots in Africa brought morals and they try to pass down things that were basic... and that's like the role of MCs today. (Gainer 1997)

It is important to remember that the first South Bronx hip-hop crews of innovators like DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa arose as an alternative to gang violence and drugs, channeling the destructive impulse into artistic expression. Awareness of this tradition continues today: "Hip-hop—originally, the dancers, the breaking groups—were this alternative similar to the fighting groups. They were just redirecting that energy. That's what they're still doing right now. You know, the energy's there. It's going to happen, it's going to get out one way or another. Hip-hop culture, to me, is one of the best alternatives that I've seen" (Malcolm 1997). This, then, is the source of hip-hop culture's seemingly paradoxical valuing of morality and spirituality at the same time it expresses

anger and violent impulses—it alleviates the anger by providing a positive alternative direction to channel that energy:

What it does for me is it calms my soul and all the struggle. I have a lot of anger in me from my ancestors and expressing it through music really gives me a venue. It's like God gave me a gift and He said, "I know that if I don't give you this gift, you're going to do a lot of crazy stuff." So I accept this gift, and I'm still struggling with it because there's a lot of bad things I want to do still, you know. But the music keeps me centered on what I'm here for. (Guerrero 1997)

And what is it that they are here for? Not anger and violence and destructiveness, but peace and love and spirituality. "One of the basic premises [of hip-hop culture] being based in peace and love for everyone, that also appealed to me. I just got absorbed into it. So, that's one of the messages that you got from hanging out in the scene" (Mena 1997).

Hip-hop's always been a spiritual culture. To me, it's just the mainstream doesn't let that show.... I went to something called the B-Boy Summit in San Diego... and that was just one of the most spiritual things I've ever been to as far as all young people, all different colors, connected by this culture, hip-hop. All peace and love, you know. I mean, the exact opposite of what they'd have you think.... To me, that's what hip-hop is all about. It always has been, that kind of thread, that spiritual thread running through the culture. (Malcolm 1997)

This peace and love spirituality is not simply superficial sloganeering, but something that must be put into practice amid the difficulties of daily life. As one rapper put it: "It's in my day-to-day everyday.... It's not different from my life. It's what I do. It's just what's in life.... It's just onbeat every day" (Guerrero 1997). In this regard, another rapper was strongly affected by an experience he had listening to the advice of KRS-One:

He said: "These are the practices we need to do. Act like the god that you know. Whatever god you know, act like him. If your god is loving and merciful, be loving and merciful. The things that you want to happen in your life, visualize them in your mind before you go to sleep." And he said something that was profound to me, because after all that attack, he came back with love, saying, "Here's something you can do for yourself regardless of what I'm saying or what you said." I talked to other people afterwards, and they were saying they do something like that every day of their life, and it works. (Games 1997)

This theme of hip-hop as spiritual practice emerged time and again in the interviews: "The people that I know, they're really trying to learn some things about themselves and tap into the rest of the spring that we don't use and these spiritual powers.... I've always taken the spiritual power seriously" (Malcolm 1997). "I have to be true to, not just the music and the musics that I'm bringing in, but now there's this religious thing.... I'm trying to reach another level of enlightenment" (Mena 1997).

What it means to me to be a rapper is like, I look around at everything, and everything I absorb is God and I can express that, literally.... So it's really an expression. It's like praying. It's like being with God, literally, like being with God. Hip-hop culture is a spirituality. And it's everything that I can think of. Anything I am that I can do, that happens in this world, it's like that music, it's the culture.... It just gives you a purpose. It shows you why you're here.... It knows that I know God every day.... All those values have become part of the music and now it's in me every day. (Guerrero 1997)

As this last quote shows, one aspect of hip-hop spirituality that allows aficionados to achieve this type of integration into everyday life is the fact that it is part of a larger hip-hop culture. "Hip-hop is not the music; hip-hop is the culture. The music is rap music.... And those fuller aspects of hip-hop are graffiti, break dancing, MC-ing, and DJ-ing" (King 1997). "On a spiritual level, I think what now I know as hip-hop culture and respect as such [consists of] the graffiti, the dress, the language, the art, the people, the mindset that's the commonality of thought" (Mena 1997). So, immersing oneself in hip-hop culture creates connections and links to many different vital aspects of one's life: "It's just been my link to everything—my own spirituality, my self-knowledge, and music also.... Everywhere I go, everywhere I grow, starts with hip-hop" (Malcolm 1997). "It linked me to everything—my future, my past, my family" (Guerrero 1997). It also creates links among different races, classes, and ethnicities, as one rapper observed earlier how "people" of "all different colors" are "connected by this culture, hip-hop" (Malcolm

1997). This inclusivity of hip-hop culture is expressed beautifully in this description of one rapper's experience at a concert:

Everybody in the place was going back and forth at the same time. I remember looking back and seeing a whole moving wave of people. And it occurred to me how music brings people together. White people, Asian, Latino, black, different ages. And there wasn't any difference being noticed. Everybody was one. The music was pulling everyone together. (Gaines 1997)

This inclusivity, when combined with hip-hop's power to be a source of political and spiritual awakening in people's lives, leads to a sense that it can be a vehicle for change in the larger world:

I see it being one of the major forces in the world bringing about change.... Hip-hop culture is worldwide now. It's big in Japan. I know in Germany. And I hear from people all the time in places I would never expect—South Africa. Being one of the major forces bringing about change, new ways, new types of lifestyles, because the old ones, we just can't use them anymore. For young people, that'll be our political party.... it's the closest thing we have to that. It includes politics. It includes spirituality. It includes music. It includes having a good time. It's inclusive of so much.... So, the hope is there in the spirit again, people are putting their hope in spirit, you know, God. Not God as an abstract form, but God in here and in there, you know. That's what we can use to get out of

this mess. Hip-hop is just one of the manifestations. That's what we call it in the physical world.... To me, music is the future religion of the world. (Malcolm 1997)

This is an extraordinary statement, not only because it describes a significant new hybrid "manifestation" of nontraditional religiosity emerging within popular culture, but also because its hopeful idealism is firmly grounded in the harsh conditions and contradictions of the real world. In concluding this chapter, I will explore the implications for the larger landscape of religion in America.

FUTURE RELIGION OF THE WORLD: HIGH-TECH UNIVERSALIST POSTMODERN BRICOLAGE IN POPULAR CULTURE

The means of musical production has always been central not only to the music itself, but to the symbolism of the musical culture. For example, the drum can be seen as the instrument that symbolizes African music, the saxophone as the symbolic instrument for jazz, and the electric guitar as the symbolic instrument for rock. But, when it comes to rap music, the symbol is not an instrument at all, but the DJ's deck of two turntables and a cross-fade mixer. This simple contrast underlines an important point—that the means of musical production in rap has shifted away from traditional instruments to a new generation of electronic technologies. Moreover, this shift in musical technology has effected a corresponding shift in compositional principles. This innovative transformation in both musical technology and compositional form is a distinctive feature of rap that

allows it to retain its African-American orientation at the same time that it points the way toward an emerging high-tech postmodern universalism in contemporary popular culture.

Many critics of rap music argue that the DJ is not actually creating new compositions, but simply taking already existing compositions via samplers and turntables and combining them through the mixer. However, it is precisely this ability to take music and sound from a variety of sources and combine them into an integrated whole that constitutes the craft and the musicality of the DJ, what one aficionado has called "the art of collage" (King 1997). According to one DJ, this art "is all about recombinant potential.... Each and every source sample is fragmented and bereft of prior meaning ... [and] given meaning only when re-presented in the assemblage of the mix.... A mix, for me, is a way of providing a rare and intimate glimpse into the process of cultural production in the late 20th Century" (Miller 1996). Thus, the DJ mix is a truly postmodern act of creativity, in which the traditional structures have broken down and new forms have been stitched together from the deconstructed bits and pieces in a high-tech bricolage. This postmodern cut-and-paste bricolage illustrates the universalist inclusivity of hip-hop at a musical level: "Every music made in our last millennium... leads up to hip-hop because it uses every aspect of every music completely.... It's a universal way of connecting all these different styles of music into one thing.... Mixing is like the universal language" (Guerrero 1997). The technology used in the creation of the music—drum machines, cross-fade mixers, samplers, sequencers, computers—reflects this postmodern sensibility as well. Originating in the elite, white, corporate world, these technologies were taken by low-income African Americans, used in entirely different ways, and transformed into a new mode of expression.

These new forms of musical technology and composition serve as analogical templates for a distinctively African-American approach to life in postmodern America that can be a useful model for mainstream culture as well. In her insightful musicological analysis of rap music, Tricia Rose identifies three crucial elements in its sonic architecture: flow, layering, and rupture. She goes on to spell out how these musical structures reflect a hip-hop worldview, philosophy, and code for living:

These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the social arena. Let us imagine these hip-hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, plan on social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics. (1994, 39)

As we begin the twenty-first century, "profound social dislocation and rupture" appears to be an accurate description not only of the situation facing African Americans, but the situation facing all of us. Global communication and political economics have put an overwhelming array of diverse cultures, technologies, and information at our fingertips at the same time it is destroying long-standing traditions and paradigms. In this regard, hip-hop culture's ability to combine broken pieces into a new integrated whole can indeed serve as a blueprint for everyone in the new millennium.

Observers of culture and scholars of religion have said many things about the slow decline of institutional religion and the death of God in Western civilization. Yet, for the members of the Oakland Underground I interviewed, and hip-hop culture in general, religion and God are not dead, but very much alive and well and dancing to a hip-hop beat. The religious impulse has simply migrated to another sector of the culture, that of popular music, a sector in which religious sensibilities have flourished and made an enormous impression on a significant number of people. It is clear that hip-hop culture is a powerful religious phenomenon and just one example of many musical subcultures that function as religions in the lives of their adherents. Moreover, as the other chapters of this book show, popular music is just one example of many different arenas of popular culture that also function as religions in the lives of their adherents. From the micro to the macro—the Oakland Underground, rap and hip-hop in general, popular music, and popular culture—these new religious forms have already irrevocably changed the lives of millions of people, not only in terms of the texture of day-to-day living, but also in the way they see the world and the social forms that have sprung from those epistemologies. They signal the emergence of a significant alternative religious choice that bypasses the narrow opposition between traditional religious institutions and secular humanism. These are important changes with large implications that should not be underestimated. Moreover, the dynamic and innovative creativity of these new forms of expression indicates that one can expect them to be a source of religious vitality and evolution for generations into the future. To repeat the words of a DJ: "To me, music is the future religion of the world.... Hip-hop is just one of the manifestations."

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