

Fire from Heaven – African American Religious and Musical Trends and Traditions – A Book Review Essay

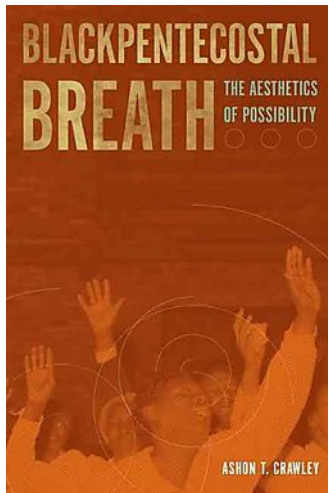
by

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Crawley, Ashon T. *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 320 pp., notes and index; ISBN: 978-0-8232-7455-0.

Miller, Monica R. and Anthony B. Pinn (eds). *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 454 pp., index; ISBN: 978-0-415-74101-9.

The two books under review here provide readers with a fascinating look at African American religion and hip hop from a historical, contemporary, and global perspective. Written by well-known scholars of African American religion and culture studies, these volumes are embedded in two very important major fields of inquiry in the area of Black/Africana Studies— religion and music. Until now, the fields of African American religion and African American music have lacked the creation of coherent and relevant books that highlight and examine the intersections of hip hop, religion, and theology. Moving beyond traditional and institutional notions of religion, these books grapple with an assortment of ideas and concepts that most scholars within these fields regularly discard. But, the scholars of these volumes traverse a variety of subjects that helps us understand the intertwining of African American religion and music today with much more precision and clarity.



In *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Ashon T. Crawley, an Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside, presents an intriguing, sophisticated, and somewhat controversial study on the history, development, cultural activities, and spiritual manifestations of the strand of modern Black Pentecostalism that emerged in 1906 from Los Angeles, California. Specifically, Crawley examines the concept of “blackness” as well as the “fleshly practices and performances” of Black Pentecostalism that has a creative space and a very flexible aesthetic for individuals to become highly imaginative in their expression of faith and survival (p. 26). Also crucial is the author’s claim that the religious practices of Black Pentecostalism, such as “whooping, shouting, noisemaking, and tongues speech” are so distinctive in this denomination of African American religion that it allows for nontraditional and unorthodoxy activities to exist and thrive for persons of African descent in the United States who are under consistent assault by the larger society (p. 30).

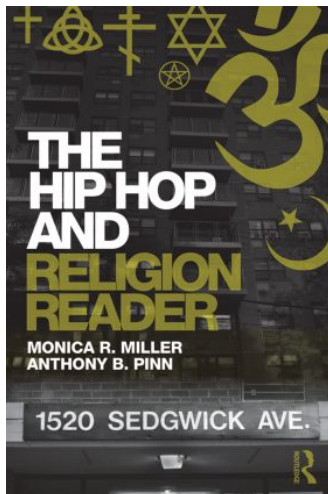
In comparison, Monica R. Miller, an Assistant Professor of Religion and Africana Studies, as well as the Director of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Lehigh University, and Anthony B. Pinn, the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, explores the interconnectedness of religion and hip hop based upon a cadre of religious topics and geographic locations during the past thirty-five years. In general, the editors’ volume rests on the notion that religion and hip hop studies has “reached a point where reflection on its content, attentions, and scope is necessary” (p. 5). Furthermore, Miller and Pinn concludes that their volume examines two powerful and distinctive disciplines that foster “an alternative form of religiosity” (p. 5).

In his somewhat jargon-laced book *Black Pentecostal Breath*, Crawley employs a rather complex methodology and writing-style to examine the resistance and empowerment of the Black American experience in the United States, especially during the time of enslavement. Specifically, in chapter one, the author uses the act of heavy and short breathing (or whooping) within the Black Pentecostal church movement, through the sermons of three little-known African American women preachers, as a metaphor to demonstrate the power and spirit of resistance and perseverance that persons of African descent used almost daily against the racially-charged and harshly violent world around them. In the next chapter, the author turns to the practice of “shouting” within the Black Pentecostal church movement (p. 86). Within these pages, Crawley uses the activity of shouting in the Black Pentecostal church movement to demonstrate the uniqueness of the African American spirit, through various cultural traits, especially in the usage of the imagery and reality of the Black American body as a commodity both inside and outside of the boundaries of the religious world. Furthermore, the author concludes that “shouters continually draw from breath – in their flesh – as a resource from which to continue” to survive and thrive (p. 136).

In the next two chapters, Crawley explores a variety of songs and performance activities within the Black Pentecostal church movement, rooted in the concepts of “noise” and the “tongues,” to claim that these activities created spaces for thousands of African Americans to empower themselves and their communities. In addition, the author concludes that these types of actions also have led to the creation of “a critical practice of pedagogy” that African Americans have used to halt the attack on them in their minds, souls, and hearts from the larger society (p. 250).

The book ends with a short but potent chapter on the origins and meaning of the type of music that usually comes from Black Pentecostal churches. Written as type of personal journey into several Black Pentecostal churches, Crawley contends that the “Hammond B-3 organ” is the dominate instrument in the creation of Black Pentecostal music and that the music itself is “found in churches across the United States, in various countries in Africa, [and] in England (p. 253). Furthermore, the author concludes that the sound that this instrument makes as well as the overall music that is produced, “is an instance of blackqueer sonic presencing and enacts the politics of avoidance” (p. 253).

Without question, Crawley’s *Black Pentecostal Breath* is a unique volume on the history, development, and impact of the Black Pentecostal church movement and African American life in the United States. More specifically, the author illustrates how activities such as whooping, shouting, noise-making, and speaking in tongues within the Black Pentecostal church movement emerged as an alternative to the more traditional African American church movement (such as the Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationists). For these points alone, the author should be commended. However, many scholars will take issue with the various jargon-layered claim that the author periodically articulates at key points in his book. Also the author interjection of queer theory and sound studies rhetoric seems, at times, out of place and is frequently unsupported with any solid evidence.



Conversely, Miller and Pinn’s *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* takes a more historical, geographical, topical, and traditional approach. Specifically, this book focus is on the intersection of hip hop and religion as a cultural empowerment agency for young African Americans as well as listeners of hip hop globally. Furthermore, Miller and Pinn contend that the central point of their volume is to “offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary take on the relationship between two powerful cultural developments – religion and hip hop” (p. 5). Finally, the editors conclude that this volume is “a source book that provides a conceptual roadmap for where we’ve been and the places we’re headed as religion and hip hop scholarship continues to grow” (p. 5).

This volume is divided into five thematic sections titled “Settings the Context, Framing the Discussion,” “What’s the Religion in Hip Hop?,” “The Religious Aesthetics of Hip Hop Culture,” “Hip Hop and/in Religious Traditions,” and “Hip Hop as Religion” respectively. Each section examines some aspect of the nexus between religion and hip hop from a cultural heritage or a contemporary local, regional, and international perspectives. Also included in this volume is a masterful balance of gender-focused essays that helps to set this volume apart from any other in this area of study. Finally, this book contains several essays that examines a wide-range of religious traditions from inside and outside of the United States.

Although *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* contains twenty-eight meticulously researched essays, there are thirty-one contributors because some of the articles are authored by multiple scholars. Nevertheless, this volume is a unified and potent collection of rich and detailed scholarship that flows well across numerous topics and subjects that link African American religion and hip hop flawlessly. The first section of the volume contains essays by Michael Eric Dyson, Anthony B. Pinn (one of the editors of the volume), Greg Dimitriadis, and H. Samy Alim, which lay the foundation for the entire book with various discussions on the history, musical expression and the impact of African American religion and hip hop music globally. At the heart of these essays is the notion that both African American religion and hip hop music has been used by millions of persons of color to construct “historical continuity and cultural progression for survival and expression” for decades (p. 8).

This next section of the volume seeks to answer the question – “What’s the religion in Hip Hop?” In the three essays located here, titled “Don’t Judge a Book By Its Cover,” “Unstrange Bedfellows: Hip Hop and Religion,” and “Peter Piper Picked Peppers, but Humpty Dumpty Got Pushed; The Productively Paranoid Styling of Hip Hop’s Spirituality,” the authors contend that hip hop music is a “legitimate” religion that has to be studied (p. 63). But, more importantly, the authors of these essays conclude that “hip hop and religion are not irreconcilable and that, it is time to develop thick and robust systems of analysis that speak to such fluidity” (p. 64).

The rest of the volume contains sections on the religious aesthetics of hip hop music and culture as well as the impact of hip hop on religious faith global such as Islamic, Judaic, and East Asian. In general, these essays conclude that more scholarly work is needed in these areas because “the religious traditions and sensibilities represented” here are often overlooked by most scholars (p. 165).

In general, Miller and Pinn’s *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* offer scholars and students alike an outstanding volume of material that will inform and transform all those individuals who are greatly interested in this important subject. The impressive range of essays demonstrates the high level of accomplishments that the field of hip hop studies has achieved over a relatively short period of time. Showing hip hop’s international appeal and religious construct is perhaps the most valuable aspect of this volume.

More importantly, taken together with the Crawley's *Black Pentecostal Breath*, these three scholars involved with spearheading this relatively new field of study on the intersection of religion and music will be the definitive books in the area of analyses for students and scholars for many years to come. Thus, these scholars should be greatly congratulated and celebrated.