

**RELIGION AND
POPULAR CULTURE
IN AMERICA**

Revised Edition

Edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan

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RAP MUSIC AND ITS MESSAGE

*On Interpreting the Contact between
Religion and Popular Culture*

INTRODUCTION

George Clinton and Parliament would be in town doing some of their classic cuts—"Flashlight," etc. My friends were going and part of me wanted to attend, but, as a good "church boy," I was torn. Should a Christian attend such a "worldly" event, listening to songs that did not address themes of spiritual uplift? Granted, I did on occasion listen to these songs, but I always believed this was somehow wrong. Could there be a relationship between these two worlds? Initially I thought not. My friends went to the concert and I stayed home. It would be years before I would see George Clinton live, only after I was able to recognize and appreciate the natural conversation or convergence between popular culture and religiosity.

Media sources tend to highlight the negative and reactionary interaction between religious ideologies and popular culture; one need only think about the friction between Rev. Calvin Butts and several "gangsta" rap artists. The former argues that this form of musical production erodes moral values and religious sensibilities; the artists respond that they are speaking of reality and are misunderstood and disrespected. This, however, is only one form of interaction between religion and popular culture. On another level, Paul Tillich is correct; they work in harmony—revising and rethinking each other, interpreting each other for the benefit of larger communities. As Bruce David Forbes writes in the introduction: "Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume

that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflecting us. If popular culture reflects values we already hold, that reflection also serves to reinforce our values and deepen our commitment to them" (p. 5).

This essay is my attempt to discuss this form of interaction between religion and popular culture. The question is, how do those who are interested in understanding and exploring the connections between these two worldviews interpret the dialogue? My goal is not to outline or rehearse the conversation, but rather to provide a methodology for exploring this conversation, a method growing out of the source material. I have labeled this approach "nitty gritty hermeneutics."

"NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS" DEFINED

The term "nitty gritty" denotes a hard and concrete orientation in which the "raw natural facts" are of tremendous importance, irrespective of their ramifications. While serving to confine vision and orientation to certain parameters of roughness, it also uncompromisingly expands the meaning and possibility of life to its full limits. Thus nitty gritty hermeneutics seeks a clear and unromanticized understanding of a hostile world, and entails "telling it like it is" and taking risks.

Aspects of this hermeneutic include a sense of heuristic rebelliousness as well as raw and uncompromised insight. This hermeneutical approach takes the material of life that goes unspoken and hidden, and expresses it. In Foucault's terms, this hermeneutic ruptures American dialogue by both surfacing "subjugated knowledge," which dismantles false perceptions and harmful practices, and by altering popular perceptions and life values.¹

Defined by its nitty gritty character, nitty gritty hermeneutics exhibits a sense of nonconformity. It ridicules interpretations and interpreters who seek to inhibit or restrict liberative movement and hard inquiries into the problems of life. The nitty gritty "thang," so to speak, forces a confrontation with the "funky stuff" of life, and, oddly enough, finds strength in the challenge posed. These two principles—rootedness in rebelliousness and raw, uncompromising insight—not only give shape to this hermeneutic, but are also found in cultural expressions such as the blues. That is to say, the blues illustrates the nature and function of nitty gritty hermeneutics.² I do not mean to suggest an endorsement of oppressive opinions held within the blues or other forms of musical expression such as rap. However, I am not willing to reject these forms of

expression simply because they contain some of the misguided tendencies of the larger society. Rather, I am suggesting that the positive expressions of this music (i.e., the examples of this music which have a constructive intention) suggest a hermeneutic which is worthy of investigation and implementation by those interested in the connections between religion and popular culture, because it already entails this very conversation between religious realities and cultural production.

NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS IN ACTION: THE BLUES

The historical origin of the blues as a musical form is virtually impossible to pinpoint. It is, however, safe to say that blues songs took form long before their actual recording, and likely developed alongside spirituals and secular work songs. Consequently, existential and musical contexts informing work songs and spirituals determined the content, shape, and sound of the blues. Yet whereas the spirituals—"religious songs"—tell the story of Black life in terms of a collective reality, blues songs connote a shift to an individualized and personal accounting of existence within a hostile society.³

Within these songs, the promises of the spirituals were weighed and tested in light of life's controlling hardships, and utopian ideals were found wanting. Hence the blues as a musical form is concerned with truth as it arises out of experience. That is, for blues artists "truth is experience and experience is the truth."⁴ The blues's commitment to the unpolished expression of Black life made some segments of the Black community uncomfortable. For example, the blues met with the disapproval of Black churches because the lyrical content and "seductive" nature of the music fell outside of the norms, values, and morality advocated by Black church tradition. Raw or "gutbucket" experiences were poetically presented, critiqued, and synthesized, yet unapologetically understood as real and unavoidable. No subject was taboo, although most were shrouded in metaphorical language. The rejection of the blues stems from the "hard living" and hard questioning noted in the lyrics. In this manner, blues performers openly discussed aspects of life that church folk would just as soon keep hidden, and challenged espoused yet unpracticed principles of religion.⁵

Blues artists often found traditionally religious interpretations of life fundamentally flawed and unproductive. The blues critiqued the hypoc-

risy and inactivity of Black churches and used this as fuel for significations and sarcasm. J. T. "Funny Paper" Smith hits upon this point when singing the following lines:

Some of the good Lawd's children, some of them aint no good,
Some of the good Lawd's children, some of them aint no good.
Some of them are the devil, ooh, well, well,
and won't help you if they could.

Some of the good Lawd's children kneel upon their knees and pray,
Some of the good Lawd's children kneel upon their knees and pray.
You serve the devil in the night, ooh, well, well,
and serve the Lawd in the day.⁶

Smith's questioning of banal theological formulations and sarcasm towards hyper-optimistic religiosity, when he sings about the traditional notion of a good God held by Black Christian religion, is also typical of the blues. He sings:

I used to ask God questions, then answer that question my self,
I used to ask God questions, then answer that question my self,
'Bout when I was born, wonder was there any mercy left?

You know it must be the devil I'm servin', I know it can't be Jesus Christ,
You know it must be the devil I'm servin', I know it can't be Jesus Christ,
'Cause I ask him to save me and look like he tryin' to take my life.⁷

Looking over the course of his life, Smith is unable to accept traditional conceptions of God (as compassionate and historically involved), nor is he willing to explain his continual hardship through divine mystery. Taking a hard look at his condition and Christian faith, Smith raises subtle questions concerning the evidence of God's involvement in the world and one's ability to decipher this involvement.

The blues forces a rethinking of what religion is and what it means to be religious. In this way, blues players expanded the narrow perceptions of religiosity beyond the confines of mainstream Black traditional approaches. Hence, with respect to the blues, it is unacceptable to limit religion and religiosity to traditional Black Christian (or theistic) models. Consider the following lines:

Yes I went out on the mountain, looked over in Jerusalem,
Yes I went out on the mountain, looked over in Jerusalem,
Well, I see them hoodoo women, ooh Lord, makin' up in their
low-down tents.

Well I'm going to Newport to see Aunt Caroline Dye,
Well I'm going to Newport to see Aunt Caroline Dye,
She's a fortune-teller, oh Lord, she sure don't tell no lie.⁸

contexts. This new form is rap music. Consequently, the substance of this nascent method of interpretation—nitty gritty hermeneutics—also appears in rap.¹⁰

An accurate history of rap music must understand it in connection to the larger development of hip hop culture. Hip hop first emerges as a cultural and creative response to the matrix of industrial decline, social isolation, and political decay endemic to the Bronx in New York City.¹¹ Faced with declining opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, and the accompanying marginality, young artists made use of their creative resources to establish an alternative "way of being" in the world, complete with a vocabulary, style of dress, visual artistic expression (graffiti art emerges as early as 1971), and dance (break dancing is present as early as 1973) uniquely their own.¹²

In essence, hip hop culture and its musical voice—rap—signal both cultural resistance and, in keeping with this essay's theme, a continued dialogue with religious ideals and institutions. The music behind rap lyrics, with its sampling and strong beats, rethinks traditional understandings of proper musical formation, and finds pleasure in the sounds the music industry labeled undesirable. As Tricia Rose insightfully points out,

Although famous rock musicians have used recognizable samples from other prominent musicians as part of their album material, for the most part, samples were used to "flesh out" or accent. . . . Rap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged.¹³

On another level, rap lyrics—the verbal expression of hip hop's more general affirmation of identity and critique of the larger society—present a "postmodern" articulation of themes, lifestyles, and behaviors found in Black oral traditions. Rap music has roots in African musical techniques and African influenced oral practices, and uses folk heroes such as "Bad Niggers," Brer Rabbit, Signifying Monkey, Stagolee, and Dolemite as models in order to develop ways of outsmarting and temporarily gaining the upper hand over the dominant society while still rehearsing the realities of Black urban life. More recent influences include storytellers such as the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as mid-century radio personalities such as Douglas "Jocko" Henderson.¹⁴

Most rap music aficionados mark the emergence of what became contemporary rap with the arrival of DJ Kool Herc in New York City, from Jamaica, in 1972. DJ Kool Herc used the Jamaican tradition of toasting or speaking over extended beats and, like Afrika Bambaataa and Grand-

Productive religiosity comes to mean a religiosity whose principles have felt consequences for daily life. Doctrinal and theological "purity" pale in comparison to existential need. Usable religion must not place abstraction and neat theological categories above human experience: only that which is proven by experience holds value. Religious expression is here defined by its commitment to human accountability, and responsibility for human occurrences. To a large extent, productive religiosity is fluid, in that its dynamics alter with the existential situation; thus it avoids dilemmas of applicability resulting from the rigid demands and dictates of tradition.

The nitty gritty hermeneutics surfacing in the blues interprets religion based upon complex Black life as a tool, by which humans are encouraged to remove psychologically comforting theological "crutches" and develop themselves as liberators. Ralph Ellison captures this meaning in "Richard Wright's Blues":

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged edge and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy [or religious constructs] but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-cosmic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. . . .

[Blues songs'] attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self.⁹

There is a sense in which blues tones, such as those mentioned above, carve out a space of creativity and ingenuity in the middle of oppressive circumstances, and this space belongs to both those who sing and those who listen. I believe there is much for academics to learn from the contours of this made space.

NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS IN ACTION: RAP

Blues songs make use of the same creative and existential materials as the spirituals, thereby creating a continuum of musical expression. But perpetual hardship, and the need to respond creatively to it, continues into the present, resulting in a new musical exploration that is both continuous with the earlier one, and appropriate to current conditions and

master Flash, began holding open-air parties in the Bronx. In 1979, "Rapper's Delight" was recorded by the Sugar Hill Gang (on Sugar Hill Records), and sold millions of copies.¹⁵ The Sugar Hill Gang, from New Jersey, brought rap to a larger audience by making it available to groups outside select New York circles. Prior to this, MCs and DJs distributed their goods using dubbing devices and cassette players known as "boom boxes," but with the success of "Rapper's Delight," the commercialization of rap music was underway.

In the early 1980s, East Coast hip hop made its way to the West Coast, where Soul Sonic Force and Afrika Bambaataa toured in 1980. Captured by the rap music craze, Los Angeles residents used two skating rinks, "World on Wheels" and "Skateland," as rapper training camps, where contests sponsored by radio station KDAY were held. This style gave way to the creativity of Eazy E, Dr. Dre (formerly of the World Class Wreckin' Crew), Ice Cube, and the other members of NWA (Niggaz With Attitude). NWA firmly established a style of rap based upon the hard facts of L.A. gang and hustler life. Granted, Schooly D and KRS-One (with Scott La Rock) on the East Coast and Ice-T ("Six in the Morning" and "Colors") on the West Coast had already pioneered this hard-life form of rap music, and I do not mean to downplay the national attention they gained. Yet it was not until NWA recorded "Straight Outta Compton" (as a Macola Company/Ruthless record production for sale out of car trunks) and successfully adopted "gangsta" personae that this style gained a large audience. As Brian Cross says: "NWA placed themselves on the hip-hop map with authenticity, capturing the aggression and anger of the streets of South Central in their intonation and timbre. This places the listener in an intimate position relative to their rhymes. Ice-T sounds like a narrator by comparison."¹⁶

The raw aggression and reckless lifestyle portrayed by this form of rap caught the attention of rap fans and defined the West Coast as the center of "realism" rap or gangsta rap.¹⁷ New York's rap was "flavored" by the dynamics of hip hop culture, and so West Coast rap highlighted, in response, its culture's own defining features, most prominently gang culture. Compton was in direct competition with the Bronx.¹⁸ The reputation of West Coast rap has been enhanced, in recent years, by the work of Cypress Hill, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre, Warren G., Ice Cube, and Yo-Yo.

The above history, although brief, presents the social and cultural context, creative dynamics, and scope—East Coast and West Coast—of rap music's development. What is needed at this point is a typology

to clarify the thematic structure of rap's lyrical content. I argue that there are three major (at times overlapping) categories of rap music: "status" rap, "gangsta" rap, and "progressive" rap.

The "status" strand of rap first appears in the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." This cut consists of braggadocio's rhythms and mild signification, which denote a strong concern with "status" and social prowess. At one point in this rap, "Big Bank Hank" outlines his superior skills and sexual attractiveness. He boasts that a

Reporter stopped me for an interview
She said, She's heard stories and She's heard fables
That I'm vicious on the mike and the turntables.
This young reporter I did adore,
So I rocked the mike like I never did before,
She said damn fly-guy I'm in love with you,
the casanova legend must have been true.
I said by the way baby what's your name,
She said I go by the name of Lois Lane.
She said you can be my boyfriend, you surely can,
Just let me quit my boyfriend called Superman.¹⁹

This style of rap music, emerging early, is concerned with distinguishing artists from their competitors. "Status" rap, combined with break-dance movements, served as the major tool within this struggle for artistic dominance. Both cultural expressions highlighted competitor's flaws and shortcomings while emphasizing the rapper's or dancer's own prowess.

The social critique offered in this brand of rap is usually limited to the assertion of self in opposition to a society that is seeking Black nonexistence. This rupture is often expressed sexually and overtly, such as in the lyrics of New York's "Heavy D" (born Dwight Myers). The following lines are from "Mr. Big Stuff" (1990):

I'm a fly girl lover and a woman pleaser
Girls say, "Heavy, let me squeeze you"
An incredible
Overweight, huggable
Prince of poetry
That's why I'm so lovable.²⁰

Groups such as Salt-n-Pepa effectively brought Black women into the rap world beyond roles as sexual objects and targets for male aggression and distrust, highlighting the personal value and strength of Black women. Salt-n-Pepa (the trio of "Salt" [Cheryl James], "Pepa" [Sandy Denton], and "Spinderella" [Dee Dee Roper, the DJ]) argue for self-

appreciation—the creation of strong and assertive individuals—and, in so doing, promote the value of human personality. “It’s About Expression” (1991):

You know life is all about expression
 You only live once, you’re not coming back
 So express yourself . . .
 Express yourself
 You gotta be you and only you, baby
 Express yourself
 Let me be me
 Express yourself
 Don’t tell me what I cannot do, baby
 Express yourself.²¹

More recent artists such as Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown also signify and challenge sexual stereotypes.

Although “status” rap contains an implicit political agenda, it explicitly discusses the social “living of life.” As Michael Dyson recounts, rap of this nature allows rappers, and by extension their listeners, to momentarily move beyond physical demise and enjoy the material benefits of the American Dream.²² Unfortunately, this struggle for individual, ontological, and material “space” often results in counterproductive and oppressive tendencies, which can be seen in the sexism, patriarchal ideals, and problematic consumerism that much “status” rap expresses. On one level, this brand of rap strikes at the dehumanizing tendencies of American society; on another level, it buys into the structures and attitudes fostering such dehumanizing practices.

“Gangsta” rap presents this dual message in even stronger terms, responding to the same dehumanizing effects of life in the United States with much more overt intracommunal and extracommunal aggression. The first major gangsta group, NWA, consciously plays out America’s nightmare—depicting itself as ruthlessly dominating its environment. However, one notices an implied critique of American racism. Take, for example, NWA’s controversial rap “Fuck Tha Police” (1989):

Fuck the police, comin’ straight from the underground
 A young nigger got it bad because I’m brown
 And not the other color. Some police think
 They have the authority to kill a minority
 Fuck that shit ‘cause I ain’t the one
 For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun.²³

The members of this group point out the manner in which “law and order” operates on principles that encourage the victimizing of young people based upon style of dress and skin color. Whereas some acquiesce to this treatment, NWA promotes resistance to such practices, in order to maintain a sense of self-worth and importance.

If NWA is correct in its analysis, the anger and violence expressed in gangsta rap is reflective of American society in general. In other words, violence and crime do not originate with rap music, but are part of the American fabric and merely magnified by musical expression.

We ain’t the problems, we ain’t the villains
 It’s the suckers deprivin’ the truth from our children
 You can’t hide the fact, Jack
 There’s violence in the streets everyday
 Any fool can recognize that
 But you try to lie and lie
 And say America’s some motherfuckin’ apple pie.²⁴

Dr. Dre uses the “Americanness” of gangsta rap’s lyrics to justify the violence of his album, *The Chronic* (1993). In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Dr. Dre says:

People are always telling me my records are violent[,] . . . that they say bad things about women, but those are the topics they bring up themselves. . . . They don’t want to talk about the good shit because that doesn’t interest them, and it’s not going to interest their readers. . . . If I’m promoting violence, they’re doing it just as much as I am by focusing on it in the article. That really bugs me out—you know, if it weren’t going on, I couldn’t talk about it.²⁵

In addition to pointing out the oppressive nature of American society, gangsta rap outlines the practices within the “hood” that allow survival. As with “status” rap, gangsta style often entails using counterproductive tools in order to achieve identity and material comfort. A consequence of this is the sexist and misogynistic attitude glorified in the music. Women are often viewed as the enemy, the ones who destroy Black manhood and thereby bring into question the gangsta’s survival.²⁶ As a result of this assumed threat, women are dealt with harshly; they are stopped at all cost from ending the G’s quest for success. Rappers, without question, must be held responsible for the oppression supported in their music. At the same time, however, critics and fans must recognize that gangsta rap echoes oppressive precepts acknowledged and encouraged by the larger society.²⁷

Even with these flaws, gangsta rap (and to a lesser extent status rap) provides a brief glimpse of the interpretive honesty, roughness, and concern for personal identity inherent in nitty gritty hermeneutics. The appeal to reality at all cost, and despite the possibility of more comfortable agendas, is clear in these two forms of rap. Still, this critical insight is most forcefully presented in the "progressive" strain of rap. Aware of the same existential hardships and contradictions as gangsta rap, progressive rap seeks to address these concerns without intracommunal aggression and in terms of political and cultural education, providing an interpretation of American society and a constructive agenda (e.g., self-respect, knowledge, pride, and unity) for the uplift of Black America. It is also within progressive rap that one encounters a more overt dialogue with and interpretation of Black religiosity.²⁸

Nascent progressive rap gained popular attention with "The Message" (1982), by New York rappers Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five. Using a portrait of life amid industrial decline, social alienation, and political corruption, this rap interprets the cycle of poverty and dehumanization producing limited life options and despair. It speaks to the destructiveness of systemically imposed "ghetto" existence.

You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alleyway.²⁹

Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five's appeal stemmed, in part, from the group's uncompromising attention to the "underbelly" of U.S. economic and sociopolitical structures. Yet implicit within this depiction of daily hardships in urban centers was an understanding that knowledge might produce the struggle necessary for transformation.

Progressive rap seeks, first, to change the system, using Black history and cultural developments as well as a critique of social structures to point out the intrinsic value of Black life, and increase positive Black self-expression. A classic representative of this agenda is the group Public Enemy. Its lead rapper, Chuck D, understands rap music as an arena for the exchange of vital information. Rap deciphers the muddled ideologies of political, economic, and social institutions and makes listeners aware of necessary steps leading to self-determination.³⁰

As the self-proclaimed "prophet of rage," Chuck D sees the meaning of American society as centering around the control and destruction of Black minds and bodies. Through raps such as "Fight the Power," "Bring

the Noise," "Shut 'Em Down," "Party for Your Right to Fight," and "White Heaven / Black Hell," Public Enemy outlines this control and the methods for breaking its grip. Public Enemy's interpretive eye is not focused solely upon the larger society and its flaws, but also chastises African Americans for the role they play in their own destruction.

Of more direct interest here is Chuck D's insight into Black religion. He argues that Black religion should contribute to the liberation of Black people. The meaning of Black religion is found in its support of Black identity and consciousness, and its rejection of status quo politics, economics, and social relations. Chuck D's support of the Nation of Islam suggests that Black churches, as representative of majority Black religious expression, are not in line with religion's ultimate purpose and that the "Nation's" praxis better fulfills the meaning of religion. Public Enemy understands the Nation of Islam as redemptive because it provides the quest for African American progress with a vivifying spiritual base. The 1990 album *Fear of a Black Planet* presents a musical interpretation of the Nation of Islam, inspiring critics to make comments such as this:

[Public Enemy] has become the spokesperson for a new wave of African-American consciousness shaped in the tradition of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan. [It] is not the only rap group influenced by the symbols and rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, they are [sic] by far its most significant and most consistent proponents.³¹

Through its Islam-influenced lyrics and rebellious beats, Public Enemy provided a "jeremiad" calling attention to the hypocrisy of white America. Chuck D also reprimanded African Americans for involvement in their own oppression, while pointing out their potential for liberative action. Such a thick and layered message is the hallmark of progressive rap.

Although Public Enemy is generally the primary example used to define the nature and content of progressive rap, it is my opinion that some of the best progressive rap in this decade has been produced by Arrested Development (from Atlanta), notwithstanding the lack of attention given the group within academic treatments. AD, as the group is commonly called, exhibits a hybridization of Afrocentrism and the 1960s Black aesthetic. In keeping with the interpretation of American society provided by Public Enemy, AD sees the fundamental meaning of U.S. institutions and ideologies as demarcated by the ontological and epistemological demise of Black individuals and communities. Through raps such as "People Everyday" and "Ache'n for Acres," Arrested Development illustrates the self-destructive and community-eroding effects of consumer-

ism and sociopolitical alienation. Seeing through the ideological plat-forms aimed at the extirpation of Black life, Arrested Development offers a regenerative program based upon pan-African cultural nationalism, social cohesion, economic cooperation, and proactive politics.

In stronger terms than the other groups mentioned, AD provides a critique of religiosity which demonstrates the tenacity of nitty gritty her-meneutics. A clear example of this is the rap "Fishin' 4 Religion," from their album *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life of . . .* (Chrysalis Records, 1992). In this rap, AD critiques Black ministers' promotion of passivity as a sign of righteousness, as well as the lack of sustained and direct community involvement by Black churches. In part, this involves an attack upon the symbolic and imagistic grounding of Black religion, by critiquing the inconsistencies between the demands for liberation and the conception of God peddled by Black Christian churches. Using lib-eration as a theological norm, AD determines that many Black churches do not embody the true nature and meaning of Black religion's objective. Black religion must promote ontological and epistemological "black-ness" and thereby encourage the holistic survival of the Black commu-nity. Unfortunately, however, Black churches are "praising a God that watches you weep, and doesn't want you to do a damn thing about it." Thus the activism suggested by Black religion is actually counterpro-ductive, because it does not extend beyond emotional outburst and spir-itual platitudes. Resolutions of this nature have no relationship to tem-poral and proactive plans for social transformation; they are far too spiritualized to be of any worldly good.

When they want change the preacher says shout it,
Does shoutin' bring about the change, I doubt it.
All shoutin' does is make you lose your voice.

In the words of MC Speech (the group's leader), Black churches fail to "nurture" African Americans, and instead enslave them within a web of opiate eschatology and debilitating consternation. In this way, the es-sence or genuine meaning of religion is transmuted into a plea for reli-giously coded banality and "turn-the-other-cheek" benignancy. AD ex-presses this while relaying a particular church scene:

. . . sitting in church hearing legitimate woes.
Pastor tells the lady it'll be alright,
Just pray so you can see the pearly gates so white.
The Lady prays and prays, prays, prays, it's everlasting.
There's nothing wrong with prayin', it's what she's askin'.

According to this critique, many Black churches are unwilling to address the hard issues of life. Therefore, in Marx's phrase, they are the opiate of the people. Individualistic and indolent religiosity promoted by churches is a major factor in the underdevelopment of Black America.

Arrested Development musically outlines a religiosity committed to the hands-on deliverance of Black people from a profusion of existential dilemmas, without respect to traditional theology and doctrine. In this—AD's constructive project—one sees another aspect of nitty gritty her-meneutics: the uncovering and revitalizing of religion outside the con-fines of long-standing but ineffectual theological tradition. It is a project steeped in realism, in the primacy of experience over doctrine.

For example, in keeping with traditional African religions,³² Arrested Development extols the earth and calls union with the earth a "divine" source of power and a chief objective of any vibrant religious system. Such a religious system is constructed from the rudimentary and rather Manichean treatment of certain life principles, for example in the rap "Washed Away." Here, the delusion of righteousness and goodness is metaphorically depicted as the destruction of a seashore by demon-ic tides. AD urges humans to fight the trickster serpent's efforts to destroy the seashore:

Why do we let them wash it away
Why are we allowing them to take what's good
Why won't we teach our children what is real
Why don't we collect & save what is real
Look very hard & swim the ocean
We must find what needs to be found.
Look all around & find a wise man
To feed us the truth & keep us sound.

From this sense of connectedness, to a scene much larger than oneself, comes the inspiration for transformation. That is, the proper working of a religion must involve both collective efforts to identify the sources of oppression, and the storing up (and sharing) of vital, self-affirming cul-tural information. Only a religiosity that participates in and affirms the cultural life of the community, and speaks plainly to pressing issues without paying tribute to unproved theological assertions—no new wine in old skins—is in keeping with the meaning of religion.

The interaction between religious ideals and popular culture is ex-tremely important because it says something about who we are and what is of fundamental importance to us. But how are we to unpack this interaction, this dialogue? The answer rests within the interaction itself,

within the contact; it is present in the depictions of life, the raw facts of existence exposed by the coming together of worldviews represented by religion and popular culture. I have labeled the interpretative process involved in the religion/popular culture dialogue nitty gritty hermeneutics. Hopefully this will help scholars of religious studies recognize, among other things, that there are more than riddles in the rap rhymes.

NOTES

This essay is an altered version of Anthony Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), chapter 5.

1. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

2. I thank one of my students, Abraham Wheeler, for valuable information on certain blues figures.

3. See LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 63-8. For a more detailed history of the blues, see William Barlow, "Looking Up at Down": *The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, 2d ed., foreword by Richard Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues in Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

4. James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 78.

5. Part of this critique involves the sarcastic lampooning of repressive Christian sex codes. The blues responds to this aspect of Black religion by openly celebrating expressed sexuality as a vital component of freedom. Using easily deciphered metaphors such as "jelly rolling," blues artists promoted sexuality as a vital and invaluable aspect of humanity. In this way, blues figures such as Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor, and others moved away from provincial (church inspired) ethical codes and restraining sensibilities, and embraced the full depiction of their being in the world. This implies a hermeneutic or norm of interpretation that examines tradition and rejects religion's allegiance to the nineteenth-century codes of conduct that problematized Black sexuality, thereby denying African Americans a full range of human expression. Nitty gritty hermeneutics, as expressed in the blues, interprets religious conduct codes as properly encouraging the full expression of one's humanity as a symbol of freedom. Religious systems and practices that hamper full human expression are thus inherently hypocritical.

6. James Cone, "The Blues: A Secular Spiritual," in *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap*, ed. Jon Michael Spencer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 68-97, song quoted on 93. This volume is a special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1992).

7. Quoted in Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 118.

8. Quoted in *ibid.*, 128.

9. Quoted in Jerry G. Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 54-5.

10. This blues-rap continuum extends the spiritual-blues impulse discussed by Cornel West in the article "On Afro-American Popular Music: From Bebop to Rap," in his *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 177-88, especially 182-3.

11. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1994), 21-5. For a more detailed and complete history and analysis of rap music than presented in this essay, see, in addition to Rose, Mark Costello and David Foster, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York: Ecco, 1990); Brian Cross, *It's Not about a Salary: Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1993); William Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). Also of interest are magazines such as *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *RapPages*.

12. Break dancing and graffiti art did not remain exclusively within the Black community. Movies such as *Breakdance* and *Wild Style* commercialized these art forms and brought them to a larger audience. Rapper Fab 5 Freddy's graffiti art, for example, was eventually displayed in New York City galleries.

13. Rose, *Black Noise*, 73. An analysis of the musical element of rap is beyond the scope of this essay; for further information, see Thomas Schumacher, "This Is a Sampling Sport: Digital Sampling, Rap Music and the Law in Cultural Production," *Media, Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (April 1995): 253-63; "Rap: Taking It from the Streets," *Keyboard* 14, no. 11 (November 1988): 32-45. See also Tricia Rose, "Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practices in Rap Music," in *Sounding Off: Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution*, ed. Ron Sakolsky and Fred Wei-Han Ho (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995), 97-108, a version of *Black Noise*, chapter 3.

Jon Michael Spencer is aware of the manner in which analysis of the music is often missing from discussions of rap music and other forms of musical expression. In much of his early work, Spencer developed a method for exploring both music and lyrics, as a way of better understanding the religious and theological importance of musical developments. He named this approach theomusicology. Information on his approach might prove helpful for readers: see Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *Theomusicology*, a special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1994).

14. Douglas "Jocko" Henderson was a disk jockey known for his rhythmic sign on. For an example of this, see Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York:

Simon & Schuster - Touchstone, 1994), 297. Staggolee (or Staggerlee) is a major figure in African American folklore. He is a "badman" whose activities carve out a space of independence while also causing destruction within the African American communities he touches. For additional information, see *ibid.*, chapter 11, especially 461-9.

15. It should be noted that other rap songs were recorded during this early period, including "King Tim III" by Fatback. However, this and others like it were small releases that did not make the same impact as "Rapper's Delight."

16. Cross, *It's Not about a Salary*, 37. See chapter 1 for a history of rap music on the West Coast.

17. *Ibid.*, 24. Houston's Geto Boys also present a strong example of gangsta rap. ScarFace, formerly of the Geto Boys, continues this image as a solo artist in, e.g., *Mr. ScarFace Is Back* (1991), *The Diary* (1994), and most recently *The Untouchables* (1997).

18. The distinction between the two schools of rap must not be too strongly stated, since the line between East Coast and West Coast is blurred as a result of rapid growth and blending of styles.

19. Quoted in B. Adler and Janette Beckman, ed., *Rap: Portraits and Lyrics of a Generation of Black Rockers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 41.

20. Quoted in *ibid.*, 59.

21. Quoted in *ibid.*, 55.

22. Michael Eric Dyson, "Rap Culture, the Church, and American Society," in Spencer, *Sacred Music of the Secular City*, 268-73, especially 270.

23. NWA, "Fuck Tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority Records, 1989).

24. Quoted in *ibid.*, 75, from "Freedom of Speech" (1990) by L.A.'s Ice-I.

25. Jonathan Gold, "Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg: One Nation Under a G Thang," *Rolling Stone*, 30 September 1993, 38-43, quotation from 124. There are certainly more recent examples of this "gangsta" attitude, including the recently deceased Tupac and The Notorious B. I. G. However, Dr. Dre and *The Chronic* mark a major turning point in the marketing of gangsta rap and, as a result, continue to serve as a useful example.

26. I continue this line of argument in "'Gettin' Grown': Notes on Gangsta Rap Music and Notions of Manhood," *Journal of African American Men* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 61-73.

27. bell hooks makes this argument in "Gangsta Culture—Sexism and Misogyny: Who Will Take the Rap," in *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 115-23, especially 117.

28. For examples of this sort of explicit critique in gangsta rap, see pieces such as Ice Cube's "When I Get to Heaven" and ScarFace's "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me, 1994."

29. Quoted in Adler and Beckman, *Rap*, 19.

30. See Robert Christgau and Gret Tate, "Chuck D All Over the Map," *Village Voice*, *Rock & Roll Quarterly* (Fall 1991): 12-8. For more in-depth information, see Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight the Power: Rap, Race, and Reality* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1997).

31. William Eric Perkins, "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public En-

emy," in *The Emergence of Black and the Emergence of Rap*, ed. Jon Michael Spencer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 41-50, quotation from 41-2. This volume is a special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1991). Other rap groups such as Poor Righteous Teachers embrace the philosophy of the 5% Nation, a Nation of Islam splinter group formed by Clarence 13X. This group argues that 85 percent of the people are ignorant, 10 percent are capable of initiating liberation but fail to do so, and 5 percent have the truth and are poor righteous teachers.

32. The African basis of AD's religiosity is hinted at in the group's make-up, which includes the Baba (Ojay) figures. This name—Baba—is given to African spiritual advisors.