

# Religion & Hip-Hop Teaching Resources & Major Questions

Religion & Hip Hop – released December 2023

[YouTube Video](#)

## Overview

Popular culture productions often reflect the deepest concerns of a society. It is in these movies, literature, and music that a culture and its artists do the work of unpacking the fears and aspirations of a generation and even a nation. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop, America as well as the wider globe has reflected upon Hip Hop's origins in Black expressive cultures, its unique contributions, and its evolving shape and reach. This panel seeks to address the ways in which Hip Hop has and continues to function as a type of script or scripture for narrating Black life, belonging and the afterlives of transatlantic enslavement. Furthermore, this panel will address the deep relationship between hip hop, spirituality, and alternative Black religions. How has Hip Hop shaped and nurtured discourses on Black religious diversity? What role has Hip Hop played in creating the narrative capacity for varied groups to imagine worlds otherwise, culturally, theologically, and politically? How might the study and teaching of religion more fully engage the contributions and insights of Hip Hop and its far-reaching impact on our culture? Join us as we explore these and other critical questions at the intersection of Hip Hop, the study of religion, and cultural production.

## Panelists

**Erika D Gault** Director of the Center for the Study of African American Religious Life at the Smithsonian, Associate Professor of Africana Studies at The University of Arizona. Ph.D. in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Erika Gault's scholarly work focuses on the intersection of religious history, technology, and urban black life in post-industrial America. On hip-hop, religion, and digital ethnography, she has delivered and published several papers regionally, nationally, and internationally. She is an ordained elder at Elim Christian Fellowship and an award-winning slam poet. She is currently working on her first book project titled *No Matter What They Think of Me: Black Millennials, Hip Hop and the New Black Church* and a co-edited volume entitled *You Gon' Learn Today: The Aesthetics of Christians in Hip Hop*.

**Darrius Hills** Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Grinnell College. He received his M.Div. from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and his M.A. and Ph.D in Religion (concentration in African American Religion) from Rice University. His research interests privilege African American religious thought, liberation theologies, womanist religious thought, Black male studies, and religion and culture. Dr. Hills' course offerings will address the intersections of religion, race, and gender in American culture. Currently, Dr. Hills is completing his first book, tentatively titled: *Religion, Race, and Manhood: Black Religious Thought and Black Male Identity*, which is under contract with New York University Press. Dr. Hills' essays, reviews, and other writings can be found in journals such as *American Religion*, *the Journal of Africana Religions*, and *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. Most recently, Dr. Hills was selected one of ten junior religion scholars nation-wide as part of the 2020-2022 cohort of the prestigious Young Scholars in American Religion program.

**Andre Johnson** is Professor of Rhetoric and Media Studies in the Department of Communication and Film and holds a University Research Professorship at the University of Memphis. He is also the Andrew Mellon Just Transformation Fellow at the Center for Black Digital Research at Penn State University, National Research Fellow for the Center for the Study of Religion & American Culture, and Visiting Scholar at

Memphis Theological Seminary. Grounded in an interdisciplinary understanding of scholarship, Dr. Johnson studies the intersection of rhetoric, race, and religion. He teaches classes in African American public address, rhetorical criticism, religious communication, prophetic rhetoric, homiletics, and the rhetoric of social movements. Dr. Johnson is the author of three national award-winning books, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (2012), *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter* (with Amanda Nell Edgar, Ph.D., 2018), and *No Future in this Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner* (2020). He is also the editor of the forthcoming *The Speeches of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner: The Press, the Platform, and the Pulpit* (2023) and *Preaching During a Pandemic: The Rhetoric of the Black Preaching Tradition* (with Kimberly P. Johnson, Ph.D. and Wallis C. Baxter IV, Ph.D., 2023)

## Sources mentioned in webinar:

### People:

James H Cone (1938-2018)

- [\*Spirituals and The Blues\*](#)
  - o Cone explores two classic aspects of African American culture--the spirituals and the blues--and tells the captivating story of how slaves and the children of slaves used this music to affirm their essential humanity in the face of oppression.
- [\*Black Theology and Black Power\*](#)
- [\*The Cross and the Lynching Tree\*](#)

Silvia Robinson

- “The mother of hip hop”

Tricia Rose

- “Tricia Rose is an American sociologist and author who pioneered scholarship on hip hop. Her studies mainly probe the intersectionality of pop music and gender. Now at Brown University, she is a professor of Africana Studies and is the director of the Center for Study of Race and Ethnicity in America.”
  - o <https://www.triciarose.com/>
- [\*The Hip Hop Wars\*](#)
- [\*Black Noise\*](#)
- Definition of Hip Hop

### Books/Texts

- [\*That’s the Joint: Hip Hop Reader\*](#)
- [\*In and Out of This World: Material and Extraterrestrial Bodies in the Nation of Islam\*](#) by Stephen C. Finley
- *No Matter What They Think of Me: Black Millennials, Hip Hop and the New Black Church* by Erika D Gault (forthcoming)
- [\*New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration\*](#) by Judith Weisenfeld
- [\*Networking the Black Church\*](#) by Erika D. Gault

### Major Questions

**Question 1:** We titled this panel “Religion and Hip Hop”, and we want to start with a definitional question - Is Hip Hop a broad enough term to describe this art form and the 50 years

that are being celebrated? Is there a better or more encompassing term? What does the term Hip Hop reveal or occlude?

- Erika D. Gualt: There is all this trouble around definitions. This is interesting to think about definitions and how we define or redefine them in the time we are living in. Since I have been a fan and a researcher of Hip Hop this question is something we return to, what is hip hop. I would say the definitions around too much to change it, hip hop at locally inspired, political energy as an idea of rehabilitating communities.
- Andre: With any good scholarship we are going to push, change, and challenge definitions. Things do not stay right there. Hip hop is contextual, malleable and it does not stay right there. Be open, be ready to be moved. I think we could talk about the spirit of hip hop, how it has shaped and reshaped culture. It is also now part of American culture. Hip hop never stays right where we want it to, which could be problematic. We should discern new ways of understanding, teaching, and writing about this phenomenon.
- Darrius: Thinking about the passage of time. Ways in which hip hop culture, if it's possible to hold intention of hip hop with growth and transition. If hip hop artists can do that. Necessary for cultural production. As it has grown and evolved, those who found value in it have taken it to new levels. Technology advances to have new sound capabilities and its growth.

**Question 2:** The Black public sphere is usually accompanied by a soundtrack and often that soundtrack has been anchored or at least shaped by religious institutions. What is the relationship between Hip Hop and the sacred? Is it useful to call Hip Hop sacred music?

- Darrius: Hip-hop changes how we think about notions of the sacred. What is it about hip hop that speaks to human ultimate concern? Hip hop is on par with sacred as it gives identity, creativity and communities are given space to reimagine their place and space in a society that alienates one.
  - o Hip hop as a sacred practice.
- Andre: Spirituality is connected to life, and hip hop. There is a spiritual significance to hip hop.
- Erika: Thinking about hip hop as this African diaspora phenomena, these are practices that formed in American empire as it developed and return to binaries (secular v spirit). But it's not secular.

**Question 3:** When I think about Hip Hop, I also think about the ways in which Hip Hop has been a vehicle for talking about new religious formations and new ways of belonging for certain groups. I think about Hip Hop artists talking about Nation, the 5 Percenters, the Hebrew Israelites. What is the role of Hip Hop in narrating the diversity of Black and urban spiritualities?

- Erika: Hip hop as a spiritual technology. It allows one to be their true spiritual self but also *is* spiritual.

- Darius: Hip hop has provided a voice for a lot of dismissed communities. It has provided for a new meaning of black self-knowledge. Both articulate a different scope for black and brown meaning making.
- Andre: Thinking about BLM, what we see on the ground, what is happening is a new understanding of religion that has not been part of black church or religion. Death makes people think.

### **Assignment or Discussion Prompt Ideas**

1. How do the panelists describe Hip Hop as sacred? How does this change your view of Hip Hop?
2. When we are thinking about global current framing, how might we lose history?
3. How can we talk about spirituality and hip hop?