

**THE
DISTURBING
PROFANE**

**HIP HOP,
BLACKNESS,
AND THE
SACRED**

Joseph R. Winters

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BUY

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Acknowledgments

This book brings together (into a kind of cypher) hip hop, blackness, and the unruly side of the sacred. In the process, I aim to contribute to conversations about hip hop's errant and profane religiosity, which directs attention to moments when sounds, images, and cuts unsettle and interrupt desires for purity and coherence, desires that tend to diminish our sense of the violence that these very aspirations facilitate. At the same time, *The Disturbing Profane* aligns itself with efforts to show how black study has, and should be, invested in interrogating the religious grammars that underpin and propel antiblackness, racialized sex/gender mechanisms of power, Western imperialism, and so forth. If the left-hand sacred has been associated with the accursed, then there is some resemblance with blackness, which has been similarly situated as wretched within white supremacist constructions of the human being.

In many ways, this book is my endeavor to come to terms with how I have been formed, unformed, and touched by hip hop, the politics of the sacred, and black study. With regard to hip hop, which involves practices, discourses, and visual and sonic economies, I am thinking about a series of experiences and encounters: the wonder and awe that I felt when my father took me to see groups like Public Enemy, Rakim, or Whodini as a child; the competitive anxiety that arises during cyphers and freestyle sessions at the lunch table, in the parking lot, or during a pregame gathering; the contentious debates and arguments over the quality of various albums, artists, lyrics, and videos; the melancholy and ecstasy that mark habits of solitude when I am listening to rap music, contemplating loss and absence, and sipping on whiskey; the tension and guilt that I have felt when (black) women friends tell me they cannot listen to rap music because it too often feels like an assault on their body/flesh (and I wonder

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why it shouldn't feel the same way to me); the anxiety I experience when I am about to teach Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y." or Lil' Kim's verse on "Get Money," knowing that these songs provide a glimpse into how hip hop's prevailing masculinist formations are predicated on verbal and physical animosity against black women; the difficulty of trying to write about tendencies within hip hop to strain against normalization, even as so many rap lyrics are queerphobic and even as the ruling logics, desires, and aspirations prevalent within hip hop bear the traces of inexorable subjection to the order of things. Consequently, hip hop's religiosity involves forms of discursive, visual, and physical sacrifice that both preserve and destabilize the celebratory and affirmative tendencies within the genre. As I hope to show in this book, hip hop refracts the violence and death that enables social life. As an assemblage of practices and discourses that are inseparable from the culture industry and the commodity form, hip hop both aligns with ruling paradigms (that profit from the fascination and aversion to blackness and black sexuality) and testifies to an intractable disturbance that is part of its volatile sacrality.

This book would not have been possible without the brilliance, generosity, and care of colleagues, mentors, friends, and family. First and foremost, I want to shout out Duke University Press, especially my editor Miriam Angress. Alongside my doubts and hesitations about this book (and experiences of writer's block during the early stages of the pandemic), Miriam has been a steadfast and patient supporter of the project. I am more than grateful. I also want to thank Lisa Lawley and Nicholas Taylor for all their hard work in making this project come to fruition.

I would not have written a book on religion and hip hop if it were not for the kindness and generosity of Anthony Pinn, Monica Miller, and Christopher Driscoll. Over the past decade, these prolific scholars have invited me to contribute to edited volumes and participate on conference panels dealing with the complex relationships between hip hop and religion. Without these spaces to develop my thoughts and reflections, this book would not be possible. I also want to recognize Sean McCloud and Candice Jenkins, who, in two different contexts, invited me to write about hip hop in the early stages of my career. Much respect.

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When I started teaching at UNC Charlotte, my interests in religion and hip hop formed in conversation with colleagues and students. My ongoing conversations with Kent Brintnall on gender, sexuality, blackness, and Georges Bataille have been indispensable. My discussions with David Mozina on ritual and language have made me rethink my relationship to religious studies. I also want to shout out Julia Robinson Harmon, whose insights on Charles Long (and black religion more generally) were timely and prescient. In addition, I want to thank the graduate students who pushed me to think about the sacred and its relationship to cultural and political formations—Ilya Merlin, Carrie Jones, Julie Hawks, Shontea Smith, and Travis Jones.

Since I arrived at Duke in 2015, my discussions with colleagues, friends, and students around religious thought, black religion, black studies, and critical theory have pushed me into unexpected directions. I want to thank my colleagues in religious studies, especially Mel Peters, David Morgan, Leela Prasad, Valerie Cooper, and Mona Hassan. I am also deeply indebted to interactions with colleagues in the African and African American Studies and English departments, most notably Karla FC Holloway, Mark Anthony Neal, Jasmine Cobb, Tsitsi Jaji, Jarvis McInnis, Anne-Maria Makhulu, Michaeline Crichlow, Khwezi Mkhize, 9th Wonder/Patrick Douthit, and Wahneema Lubiano. In addition, I want to send my gratitude to Jennifer Nash, Nikki Lane, Deonte Harris, Henry Pickford, Patrice Douglass, Priscilla Wald, and Ranji Khanna. I also want to acknowledge the tireless work of Marissa Lane, Holly Rich, Wilhelmina Green, and Carol Rush. Thank you for all that you do.

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Corey Walker, Antonia Randolph, Sarah Cervenak, Jon Gill, Sasha Panaram, I. Augustus Durham, Amanda Bennett, Luke Powery, Courtney Bryant, Lisa Yebuah, Karen Rucks-Walker, Michael Fisher, Brandon McCormick, Daniel Barber, Patrick Smith, Xavier Pickett, Youssef Carter, and Angie Hong. Thanks for everything.

Since my last book, I have been able to share my work on hip hop, blackness, and the sacred at various venues. In the fall of 2016, Gail Hamner graciously invited me to Syracuse University to discuss the figure of the monster in hip hop. I received very helpful comments, especially from Megan Ewing and Meina Yates-Richard. In the spring of 2017, Anthony Pinn invited me to Rice University to discuss my work on hip hop and the sacred. The following year, Jeremy Schott and the religious studies graduate students at Indiana University read and critically engaged an early version of the introduction to the book. In the fall of 2020, Jessica Boon invited me to give the McLester lecture at UNC Chapel Hill, where I developed my reflections on these topics. And in the spring of 2021, Harvey Stark facilitated a virtual conversation between me and Vaughn Booker, a discussion that included connections between jazz, hip hop, and the religious. Ahmad Green-Hayes invited me to the Black Religion and Critical Theory Colloquium at Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 2023 to talk about connections between blackness and the unruly sacred. And in the spring of 2024, Ashon Crawley and Michelle Bostic graciously asked me to participate in the Blackness Beyond Protestantism Conference at the University of Virginia, which permitted me to speak about W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of sorrow as a precursor to recurring themes and sounds within hip hop and rap music. These opportunities have been pivotal to sharpening my arguments and ideas.

The chapters in this book sample and elaborate on articles that have been published in other places. Chapter one contains material from "Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop," *African-American Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 9–20. Chapter two includes a fragment from "Constructing Constellations: Frankfurt School, Lupe Fiasco, and the Promise of Weak Redemption," in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). And chapter three includes part of the article "The Horrifying Sacred: Hip Hop, Blackness, and the Figure of the Monster," *Journal of Africana Religions* 5, no. 2 (2017): 291–99.

In 2019, I organized an American Academy of Religion panel on Georges Bataille and blackness that included Amy Hollywood, Danube Johnson, Jeremy Biles, Kent Brintnall, and J. Kameron Carter. While COVID-19 interrupted our

plans to develop this Bataille and blackness project beyond AAR, I am grateful for this evanescent moment.

During the early stage of the pandemic, I participated in a series of virtual gatherings organized by Kathryn Lum and Vincent Lloyd which included scholars interested in crossing the line and refusing the binary between history and theory. I learned a great deal from these conversations.

I also want to shout out those of us on the steering committee for a Henry Luce Foundation grant that focused on religion as the unthought dimension of black studies. Much respect to Josef Sorett, Tiffany Hale, Monique Bedasse, Alex Alston, and the scholars who participated in the virtual discussions and the culminating conference. In many ways, I hope that hip hop can become one way to make the religious, or a certain genre and subset of the religious, within black studies more explicit and provocative.

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Introduction

Specters and Evanescent Intimacies

When I lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, my friends and I would regularly attend a hip hop club called Republic, a name that invokes community, shared power, and a sense of equality. The latter attribute is complicated in light of the ways that some people clamor to reach the VIP section, to be *set apart* from and above the ordinary masses. On Wednesday nights, the DJ would play a blend of hip hop classics and contemporary rap music—songs by A Tribe Called Quest, Lil’ Kim, and DMX to more recent tracks by Nicki Minaj, Future, and Kendrick Lamar—for an assembly of predominately black congregants. Over time, my friends and I made these Wednesday nights a kind of ritual, one in which the combination of song, dance, spectatorship, erotic desire, nostalgia, and alcohol consumption occasioned moments of ecstasy, glimmers of transcendence, where we felt beside and outside ourselves. If ecstasy names a transition from the inside to the outside, then perhaps sweat is one physical mark of this exteriority, of an excess that cannot be contained within the walls of the body. OutKast member André 3000 suggests this dynamic when he alludes to the DJ as one who “sweats out all the problems and troubles of the day.”¹ We might think of the body’s excretion of sweat as a substitute for tears since, as André 3000 suggests, the DJ’s selection of songs enables trouble, concern, and pain to be released. But this release is more like a reexpression of anguish, a reexpression through dance, pageantry, flamboyance, and the collective reciting of music lyrics. There is something about music that prompts the externalization of trouble, even if that trouble is disguised, rearticulated, and embodied in a manner that we must strain to notice. In other words, even if the pleasure in hearing a favorite song or the enjoyment of seeing and being seen by others can give club participants a fleeting sense of release or escape, one can detect the problems that club attendees desire to “sweat out.” One notices pain in a

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glance, a brooding scowl, the intensity of the body's dancing motions, or the efforts to be hypervisible in a social world that relegates certain people to the fringes of human recognition. Moreover, the fraught energy generated and experienced in a club like Republic can take a belligerent turn when the intimacy associated with dance and greeting another becomes a physical collision, an invasion of personal space, or an undesired sexual advance. Consequently, the DJ presides over a terrain, a dance floor, that exists somewhere between worry and enjoyment, violence and pleasure, alienation and connectedness to others.

This interplay between agony and excitement in a hip hop setting like Republic resembles James Baldwin's description of black church worship practices in *The Fire Next Time*. While celebrating the uncanny power and liberation associated with church music, even after being estranged from the institutional church, Baldwin writes, "The church was very exciting . . . on the blindest, most visceral level. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning . . . and all the voices coming together crying holy unto the Lord. . . . Their pain and joy were mine and mine were theirs. . . . [We] all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing at the foot of the altar."² For Baldwin, this black church assembly is organized by a set of tension-filled relationships—sinner and saint, rejoicing and moaning, crying and dancing, possession and dispossession (mine and theirs). During these gatherings, there is an excitement that reverberates through anguish. It is a space where equality, or intimacy, happens momentarily at the intersection of the laugh and the cry, as bodies tremble, dance, and sweat, before God and in response to the shared condition of mortality. As Baldwin's description suggests, this is not a pure domain; in fact, Baldwin speaks about the black church as an institution that contains pernicious hierarchies and other "monstrous things."³ More specifically, Baldwin connects Christianity's redemptive logic, its evangelical onus vis-à-vis the pagan, to the formation of racial hierarchies and the yearning for purity that undergirds whiteness, coloniality and its afterlife, American innocence, and general aversions to the erotic (and those bodies unduly associated with the erotic). For Baldwin, there is a violent side of Christianity and perhaps religion more generally. One cannot easily disentangle the anguished liberation experienced in a Pentecostal service from this troubling legacy (especially since the former both contests and participates in the latter).⁴ By broaching Baldwin's description of black church worship, my intention is not to ignore the differences between a church and a hip hop club. I simply want to highlight, and anticipate, continuities and affinities regarding affective experience and the

haunting presence of violence in a manner that forecloses any stable demarcation between the sacred and the profane.⁵

On one particular Wednesday, the strange religious quality internal to hip hop gatherings became especially palpable. At some point during the night, the DJ announced that one person in the crowd, a black male who looked to be in his early to mid-fifties, had just been released from a twenty-year prison sentence. As part of the celebration of his “coming home,” he requested to hear 2Pac’s classic song “Dear Mama.” As I witnessed him walk from the DJ booth to the crowd, I saw people—some of his friends and family perhaps, but mostly strangers—walk up to him and give him a hug or a handshake while we collectively rehearsed the lyrics to Tupac Shakur’s song. I could not help but notice the analogy here between the practice of welcoming a visitor or a new member to a church service and the crowd’s embrace of this black male just returning to social life. As I looked around and joined in the celebration, I was pleasantly surprised at how many people were visibly moved, touched, and impressed by his presence, a response that was intensified by the enrapturing quality of “Dear Mama.” At a moment when many hip hop club participants expected to hear songs with catchy lyrics and beats that incite a “turning up,” hearing Tupac’s tribute and letter to his mother was a kind of detour. The slowness of the beat, the decelerated tempo, the gentleness of the vocals, and the combination of yearning, gratitude, and pain in this track occasioned a slightly different set of corporal movements, facial expressions, and interactions among the club participants. One noticed an atmosphere of what Kevin Quashie calls “quiet” in his study of black culture and literature. As Quashie points out, quiet is not necessarily silence or stillness; rather, it signifies those desires, emotions, and vulnerabilities associated with intimacy and interiority.⁶ For Quashie, the notion of quiet speaks to the introspective qualities of black life and refuses tendencies to exclusively associate blackness with public expressiveness. Since we do not have to accept a simple binary relationship between quiet and expressiveness, we might say that Tupac’s “Dear Mama” induced displays of vulnerability and reflection in addition to joy, care, and affection. While I can only speculate about what others were contemplating, my thoughts were dispersed and included things like the state surveillance and containment of blackness (what Tupac called being “trapped”),⁷ the difficult position of black motherhood, and the magnetic power and grip that music has on our flesh.

It makes sense that Tupac’s voice and music facilitated this homecoming and welcoming-back moment. In his afterlife, Tupac has become somewhat of a sacred figure in hip hop culture.⁸ In addition to holographic technologies

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that enable Tupac performances three decades after his murder,⁹ a predicament that contributes to the fantasy of his immortality, the late rapper continues to be one of the most cited and venerated by contemporary artists and fans. This veneration is exemplified in Meek Mill and Rick Ross's 2011 song "Tupac Back." On this track, Mill and Ross do not simply assemble a collection of quotes and passages from Tupac's corpus; they also show how music conjures, reincarnates, and inhabits the boundary between life and death. Tupac returns, or remains alive, through remembrance, mourning, mimesis, and homage.¹⁰ His afterlife is also made possible by hip hop's ongoing investment in authenticity, a kind of self-grounding realness that betrays itself by soliciting recognition and certification from others. Artists and participants often secure a kind of authority within hip hop culture by citing Tupac or claiming to be the sole inheritor of his legacy. According to Michael Eric Dyson, part of Tupac's allure derives from his capacity to embody and take on the paradoxes and contradictions of black life, the United States, and late modern existence: "Tupac is perhaps the representative figure of his generation. In his haunting voice can be heard the buoyant hopefulness and desperate hopelessness that mark the outer perimeters of the hip hop culture he eagerly embraced."¹¹ For Dyson, Tupac has become iconic not only because he referred to the blackness of Jesus or because he encouraged black women to remain resilient in the face of poverty and disregard. His iconic status also derives from his strong identification with, and occasional glorification of, practices and behaviors associated with the thug and outlaw, the figure who does not simply transgress the law but exposes the violent quality of the legal order. Here one is reminded of Walter Benjamin's claim that the figure of the criminal, "however repellent his ends . . . has aroused the secret admiration of the public . . . not from his deed but from the violence to which it bears witness."¹² Along this line, while Tupac's music urges positive change and transformation, he also prompts listeners to linger in, and be cut by, painful stories and hyperbolic expressions of violence—hyperbole that ingests, rearticulates, and amplifies the systemic violence endured by "undesirable" black masculine subjects. Similarly, Tupac's musical corpus blends aggressive rhetoric with moments of quiet and vulnerability; claims to being invincible and triumphant are contravened by a gentler contemplation of suffering, loss, intimacy, and tears. While it is tempting, and understandable, to separate and minimize the more troublesome aspects of Tupac's music and life ("I live thug life, baby, I'm hopeless"¹³), Dyson suggests that the late rapper's iconicity derives from the split character of his persona and legacy. Consequently, there might be something about Tupac's incoherence and tornness that shifts how we think about religiosity and the sacred.

For James Perkinson, these qualities in Tupac resemble those of West African orishas and trickster figures such as Ogou Acade that tend to encompass both good and evil, beauty and terror, in a manner that refuses clear distinctions among these attributes.¹⁴

Tupac's noncoherence can be heard in the treatment and depiction of women in his music and life.¹⁵ As Dyson points out, "Although Tupac remained steadfast in his love of women, a troubling sexism seized his microphone and throbbed in hateful lyrics."¹⁶ For Dyson, these hateful lyrics betray "femiphobia," or fear and hatred of women, that according to him is pervasive in hip hop and the broader social world. Among other things, this phobia is directed toward the female body as an imagined site and source of a perilous excess that needs to be contained and surveilled in accordance with masculinist fantasies of dominance and order.¹⁷ One strategy of containment is the proverbial Madonna/whore binary—women are cast as innocent and pure or promiscuous and dangerous—which has been rearticulated in hip hop and black culture as the distinction between queens and bitches (a distinction that an artist like Lil' Kim, the Queen Bee, complicates). According to the latter opposition, black women are either adored as nurturing mothers and faithful companions or scapegoated as the source of black people's troubles, including the errant habits of children.¹⁸ In this schema, the complexities of black feminine desire and experience are obscured along with the conditions that enable and constrain black motherhood—including entrenched heteropatriarchal assumptions that a (black) woman's life is fulfilled through children. In "Dear Mama," one hears traces of the queen/bitch binary even as Tupac simultaneously troubles it. When he croons that his mother was a queen even though she was a crack addict, a complicated juxtaposition occurs. While the queen and the addict couldn't seem more incompatible, both positions are set apart from the ordinary and mundane.¹⁹ The queen stands apart in her elevation above the normal, while the addict is typically viewed as below/beneath the ordinary order of things. Therefore, both figures represent a kind of excess or outside with respect to this order, even if they evoke different affective responses and dispositions. In the juxtaposition of queen and addict, we might read the former position as redeeming the repugnance and opprobrium associated with the latter. At the same time, we can eschew a redemptive logic and think about what it means to painfully contemplate the "and" between royalty and crack addiction, sovereignty and abjection. As Tupac struggles to affirm this conjunction, to embrace his mother, I am mindful of Hortense Spillers's insistence that the claims and rights attributed to motherhood have traditionally been withheld from black women. And as Tupac expresses a vexed relationship to his mother (both

estrangement and intimacy) and black women more generally, “Dear Mama” confirms Spillers’s claim that “the African-American male has been touched . . . by the mother, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape.”²⁰

And yet this touch, this hand(ing), is fraught in a genre where prevailing performances of black masculinity rely on endeavors to escape the “feminine within,” even as masculine power within hip hop is regularly visualized as possession and containment of women. This sense of being the recipient of the touch is complicated by the fact that black masculine vulnerability to various forms of exploitation and violence can be simultaneously exposed and deflected within this genre, a deflection that redirects violation and injury for the sake of appearing like an untouchable and invincible subject. Or to put it differently, black (cis) masculine precarity is often dealt with or handled by assuming modes of verbal, symbolic, and physical control over other black men, black women, femininity, the queer, the sissy, and those who have been positioned to bear the burden of death, lack, and permeability. The vulnerability involved in touching and being touched can easily slide into a desire to possess and handle (for artists as well as listeners and spectators invested in maintaining a certain legacy). For some Tupac fans, this desire for self-possession, which involves remembering, identifying with, and lauding Tupac in an unequivocal manner, requires them to keep silent about elements of his life that jeopardize habits of veneration—including Ayanna Jackson’s confessions that the late artist facilitated her collective rape and assault. How does the veneration of Tupac implicitly rely on the demonization and silencing of the assaulted black female? What forms of unrecognized sacrifice and erasure enable an instantiation of black masculinity to be elevated to the status of saint, martyr, and prophet?

Republic, the place that occasioned these reflections on Tupac, blackness, motherhood, gender, imprisonment, and the sacred, is no longer there; it has been replaced by a series of establishments that cater to different kinds of audiences and crowds. This replacement is part of a broader set of maneuvers and strategies in Charlotte and other US cities to change the look and appearance of downtown topographies, a conversion that precipitates the removal and displacement of black people and their gathering spaces. (To be sure, the ephemeral presence of Republic and my inhabitation of various spaces in downtown Charlotte was itself derivative of previous iterations of displacing working-class black communities in the process of securing the interests of capital.) While I cannot get into the complexities of gentrification, I simply underscore how this process often entails the language of revitalization. To revitalize is to renew, to bring life and value, or to resuscitate some object that is perceived

as defunct, unproductive, dying, et cetera. This rhetoric conjures a legacy of justifying the dislocation of “darker peoples” and the appropriation of indigenous land in the name of redemption, generosity, and new life, a legacy that demonstrates the relationship between religion, race, capital, and settler colonial paradigms. (Here one might think of how the very name Tupac, which derives from the eighteenth-century indigenous figure Túpac Amaru, who organized a rebellion against Spanish colonial rule, inscribes this history of colonial terror.) Similarly, the process of gentrification and the grammar of revitalization show how race and class inform the imagination of social landscapes, how antiblackness and the schemes of capital contribute to the organization of space in terms of life and death, safety and danger, being and nonbeing, or sacred and profane.²¹

The Disturbing Profane is my endeavor to make sense of the kinds of friction-filled thoughts, desires, and affects that the world of hip hop elicits. More specifically, *The Disturbing Profane* is my attempt to flesh out how and why I encounter, and experience, the sacred within hip hop culture, often more intensely than in a church service or a gospel song. This study is my elaboration on the fact that my nights at Republic became analogous to Charles Mingus’s Wednesday night prayer meeting. The sacred I have in mind does not connote purity, protection, wholeness, and security; rather, it involves interruption, diremption, exorbitance, and contamination—even as we cannot eliminate yearnings for the more comforting qualities associated with religion and the sacred. In this book, I examine the volatile dimensions of hip hop’s sonic and visual components, its fascination with death, violence, anguish, and redemption as well as enjoyment, laughter, and extravagance, contending that within these qualities lies hip hop’s strange religiosity. Even, or especially, at its most monstrous and horrifying, hip hop registers and makes audible a general complicity and involvement in pernicious predicaments and arrangements that subjects, for the sake of intelligibility, deny or yearn to be separate from. Despite various forms of containment and through its increasing popularity, hip hop *remains* a disturbing presence in part because it compels us to hear, see, and contemplate the (antiblack and black gendered) violence that structures the world.²² Consequently, this investigation engages hip hop at the intersection of black studies and religious thought.²³

Call and Response

This book participates in the rich, generative discussions around hip hop and religion that have emerged in the last three decades. In opposition to those who initially dismissed hip hop culture and rap music as nihilistic and empty,²⁴ a

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collection of authors draw attention to the complexities (limitations, possibilities, and contradictions) within these practices regarding social critique, the creative articulation of frustration and pleasure in the face of power and domination, the poetics of rap and rhyming, the relationship between authenticity and commodification, and the reinterpretation of black religiosity. As one of the early proponents of this complexity, Michael Eric Dyson has been steadfast in challenging hip hop's detractors, exemplified in his response to politicians and religious leaders in the 1990s who demanded the censorship of gangsta rap, a genre that included Tupac.²⁵ In *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, Dyson expresses sympathy with critics, like C Dolores Tucker and Bob Dole, who voiced concerns about the "misogyny, violence, materialism, and sexual transgression" within the more obscene forms of rap music. There is much in gangsta rap's cruel treatment of women and attraction to "gratuitous violence" that Dyson finds alarming. Yet unlike these critics, Dyson also hears in this genre "the complex dimensions of ghetto life ignored by many Americans . . . [and] the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears of poor black urban youth."²⁶ Furthermore, Dyson refuses the assumption, often betrayed in the notion that gangsta rap undermines American values, that American values are pristine and benign. As Dyson suggests, violence and theft have been internal to the idea, and actualization, of America as a perpetually expansive frontier. In addition, as he points out, many of America's religious institutions, including the black church, are breeding grounds for misogyny and sexism. According to Tamura Lomax, "The discourse on black womanhood [as Jezebelian, dangerous, and the opposite of proper womanhood] circulating between religion and culture was reappropriated and reproduced by the Black Church *and* black popular culture."²⁷ For Lomax, black church and popular culture are two sides of the same coin regarding the production of pernicious images of black women and girls. Consequently, one must interrogate instances when religious leaders like the late Calvin Butts or T. D. Jakes excoriate rappers for pernicious attitudes and dispositions that have a long history in the black church and Christian discursive practices more broadly. Consequently, if gangsta rap contains horrifying features, this is because it tends to mimic, reexpress, and magnify the monstrous qualities and contours of the wider, structuring world that people are trained to diminish, explain away, and deflect elsewhere. Gangsta rap is a distorted mirror of the broader national body and world, a world that, according to Tupac, "eats its babies."²⁸

By highlighting the sexism in even the most venerable black church legacies, such as the civil rights movement, one can begin to disassemble the kinds of inflexible distinctions imagined between the church and world, or religion and

culture. This not only allows an author like Dyson to underscore the violence that is internal to the religious (and not merely attributable to profane activities), but also prompts him to identify religious desire and practice in domains, like hip hop, that are often associated with the secular and ostensibly nonreligious. Consistent with Dyson's concerns, Ebony Utley shows how gangsta rap is replete with religious sensibilities and commitments even when artists forgo institutional affiliations. Within rap music and hip hop culture, artists regularly exhibit various forms of piety, such as praying on a song or at a concert, acknowledging god at an awards show, or engaging in imaginary conversations with the devil. In addition, as Utley indicates, album covers and videos contain religious iconography, exemplified by the image of a black Jesus riding in the backseat of a car on the Clipse's *Lord Willin'* cover or the related image of a black Jesus, with a red bandana concealing his face, on the cover of The Game's *Jesus Piece*.²⁹ At other moments, especially in rap music influenced by the Nation of Gods and Earths, rappers actually collapse the distinction between god and human, affirming the divine quality of blackness.³⁰ In Utley's reading of these kinds of examples, religion functions for gangsta rappers as a "quest for meaning and power"³¹ in the face of antiblackness and socioeconomic disparity. As she points out, occasionally god is invoked to make sense of oppressive conditions and experiences, while at other times, god is used to "empower [rappers] to be respectable murderers, misogynists, and agents of mayhem in the hyperbolic rap worlds of their lyrics and videos."³² In other words, identifying with god and channeling divine power might enable a form of destructive agency, but this agency usually involves "re-establishing hierarchies" and securing authority and control over others, especially women. Echoing Dyson, Utley suggests that if religion and god-talk operate ambivalently in hip hop, then this ambivalence is also internal to the traditions that have formed rap artists and that these artists draw from and reimagine.³³

Utley provides resources to think about rap and religion as unstrange bedfellows, as interconnected in ways that undercut ordinary demarcations between these categories. Yet Utley's understanding of religion remains somewhat underdeveloped. While she underscores how rap artists invoke and identify with god to "fulfill requests for meaning, power, and respect," it is not clear if the expedient use of divine figures and images primarily makes rap religious, or if the search for meaning, authority, and recognition has its own, stand-alone religious quality. In addition, if rappers seek and identify with divine figures in response to "senseless death" and "mayhem," we might want to push further than Utley does on the relationship between meaning and nonsense or control and disorder. Anthony Pinn indirectly speaks to these lingering concerns

in his writings on hip hop and religion. Even though Pinn acknowledges the influence of theistic traditions within rap music, particularly Islam, Christianity, and Rastafarianism, his definition of religion extends beyond particular religions or belief in gods and supernatural beings. According to Pinn, “religion’s basic structure, embedded in history, is a general quest for complex subjectivity in the face of the terror and dread associated with life within a historical context marked by dehumanization, objectification, abuse, intolerance, and captured most forcefully in the sign/symbol of the ‘ghetto.’”³⁴ With this definition, Pinn is able to hear in artists like Tupac or Scarface a kind of spirituality defined not by fidelity to a god but by the self’s confrontation with terror and absurdity. For Pinn, religion names a perpetual transformation from a dehumanized object to a creative subject and a concomitant “struggle to obtain meaning through a process of becoming.”³⁵ Even though this struggle to find meaning and identity amid systemic violence and injury may include interactions with gods, Pinn contends that humans are ultimately responsible for making something out of nothing, for changing and transforming their circumstances. By reading hip hop through terror, dread, human agency, and the search for meaning, Pinn connects hip hop to antecedent musical traditions, like the spirituals and the blues, that have enabled black people to make sense of senseless conditions, to creatively respond to antiblackness, colonial terror, and slavery and its afterlife.³⁶ In chapter 1, I also look at the connections between the spirituals and hip hop through the trope of sorrow, especially as this motif is articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois in his tribute to the “rhythmic cries” of the slave.

Like Utley, Pinn focuses on religion as a meaning-making mechanism in the face of senseless violence, even as he provides a more determinate description of what makes rap religious. At the same time, Utley seems more attuned to the dangers and harms of this search for identity and agency, insofar as the empowerment of self and effacement of the (female) other are frequently intertwined in her diagnosis of rap music. (This is a result of power being modeled after the sovereign agent, the subject defined by its ability to control, possess, and impose form on signifiers of the chaotic.) However, the insistence on religion as a meaning-making structure has its limitations.³⁷ This way of thinking about religion often privileges the self’s various strivings and experiences instead of the social conditions that enable and limit these strivings. Similarly, the religion-meaning nexus is connected to an enduring assumption that religion is a universal human quality, which diminishes the ways religious meanings and definitions are historically formed, altered, and authorized within discourses and power relationships. Monica Miller exposes the difficulties in

this universalist definition of religion, especially as it pertains to Pinn's earlier work. According to Miller, Pinn's writings on rap and religion reflect a tendency to imagine religion as a perennial phenomenon, expressed primarily in the form of belief and internal striving.³⁸ Among other problems, this position does not "consider religion as something constructed in and by practices for various interests."³⁹ By shifting the emphasis from striving, belief, and meaning to practice and power, Miller directs attention to underanalyzed aspects of hip hop's religiosity. Instead of prioritizing the meaning behind lyrics and sonic texts, Miller examines how religious language and imagery authorize certain claims to authenticity, exemplified in KRS-One's *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, or how religion functions as a survival strategy, demonstrated powerfully in RZA's *The Tao of Wu*.⁴⁰ For Miller, religion in these examples is not so much a search for meaning but rather an "effect, strategy, and manufacturing of social, cultural, and political interests."⁴¹ The point is not that authors like Pinn or Utley deny how religion functions as a strategy in hip hop. Rather, the point is to shift emphasis away from the quest for meaning, toward other kinds of effects and maneuvers that religious language and ideas enable. Instead of asking what religion *means*, we should be looking at what religion *does*, including, but not limited to, the fabrication of meaning.⁴²

From Miller's vantage point, the religion as meaning framework dovetails with prevailing assumptions and fantasies that designate religion as the ultimate source of protecting or rescuing people from the threat of nihilism. Miller identifies in the quest for meaning and identity, even a complex identity, a sanitizing strategy, a desire to regulate youth deviance and resolve social contradictions in a manner that leaves regimes of normalization and propriety intact. This is where and when I enter. *The Disturbing Profane* seizes, and runs with, an insight that reverberates throughout these hip hop / religion conversations and that Miller underscores. For many of these authors, there is much in hip hop that burdens stable distinctions between religion and culture and the sacred and the profane. More important, through this agitation, ideas, figures, personas, and objects of desire, often imagined as pristine and unscathed by life's unsettling features, become susceptible to a wounding. As Imani Perry describes it, hip hop resists conventional divisions between the sacred and the profane, or cleanliness and funk, a separation made popular within civil rights legacies and black respectability politics. In fact, "in the world of hip hop, holy and well-behaved gestures sit next to the rough and funky."⁴³ Consequently, lines of demarcation that separate the divine from dirt, or the holy from a kind of wildness, are perpetually transgressed, crossed, and redrawn and re-established within hip hop. This trespass happens, for instance, on André

3000's OutKast track "God," as the rapper talks vividly about oral sex during his prayer in a manner that violates the conventional separation between piety and erotic desire.⁴⁴ One may experience this trespass while looking at the album cover for Remy Ma's *Shesus Khryst* mixtape, as we see black female flesh on a cross, imitating the execution of Jesus, an emulation that accentuates Remy Ma's voluptuous body. For some, especially within a Western Protestant culture, the very association of blackness and the feminine with the divine is a sort of tear in the prevailing image of god as white and masculine.⁴⁵ As my study extends this insistence on hip hop's unsettling presence, I contend that more attention to the complexity and ambivalence internal to the category of the sacred helps illumine this haunting quality. In the same way that Miller criticizes hip hop scholars for taking the availability and meaning of religion for granted, I maintain that we tend to assume that the signifier "sacred" is relatively clear and stable. The sacred-profane distinction, for instance, is often conflated with the religious-secular contrast, a misleading analogy since secular entities and arrangements, like the nation-state, hold certain figures, objects, and spaces as sacred and sovereign.⁴⁶ In what follows, I take seriously the volatility internal to the sacred, namely its capacity to stand in for yearnings for purity and safety and, alternatively, its power to indicate trespass, disorder, and opacity.

The Volatile Sacred

The language of the sacred-profane is complicated and multivalent, and requires renewed study and examination. As there are many ways to define and conceive of the sacred, this study draws attention to emphases and ambiguities within the grammar of the sacred and profane that are pertinent to hip hop, blackness, and related matters. Within religious studies, for instance, the relationship between sacred and profane spaces and objects has been elaborated on by many authors, most notably Mircea Eliade and Émile Durkheim. Even though their respective accounts of religion contain salient limitations and problems, I revisit their ideas to highlight a set of tensions, or unstable qualities, within the category of the sacred. I am particularly interested in how both authors gesture toward the interruptive dimension of the sacred, only to diminish this feature for the sake of coherence and solidity.⁴⁷

In Eliade's account of these matters, he contends that religious people treat and experience sacred space as fundamentally different from profane space. Whereas the former is "strong and significant," the latter is experienced as "without structure or consistency, amorphous."⁴⁸ The break between "real

and really existing space and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it,"⁴⁹ is made possible, according to Eliade, by a hierophany, or the manifestation of the divine. This manifestation of the sacred creates a world, a home for religious subjects. It provides a well-defined, meaningful foundation, a fixed center, amid chaos and undifferentiated space. Although Eliade seems to imagine a qualitative difference between the sacred (as structure, form, foundation) and the profane (as lack, chaos, formlessness), he does claim that even secular, nonreligious people treat certain spaces or times as if they were sacred—birthplaces, holidays, first romantic experiences. These stand apart as a break from the ordinary, as places and events that give meaning to mundane, everyday activities that would otherwise lack any sense of form or structure. Furthermore, Eliade describes how "thresholds" like a door to a temple or a religious rite of passage indicate some kind of communication between the gods and earthly beings, or a passage from the profane to the sacred domain. A threshold signifies a place where the difference between two entities is both accentuated and elided. The sacred-profane boundary is perhaps more fluid, on Eliade's own terms, than he initially describes.⁵⁰

The manifestation of the sacred, according to Eliade, is first and foremost an interruption into the ordinary, a "revelation of a reality *other* than that which [man] participates through his ordinary life."⁵¹ This interruption is epitomized by the divine creation of the world, an original event that is re-enacted by religious communities through ritual and myth. There is a tension in Eliade between the sacred as a kind of alterity with respect to mundane life and the sacred as world foundation.⁵² On the one hand, Eliade riffs on Rudolf Otto's notion of the divine as mysterious, terrifying, and alluring.⁵³ On this reading, the sacred has an unmanageable quality about it, insofar as it both attracts and repels, simultaneously evokes awe and terror. There is something about sacredness that is initially overwhelming and impossible to grasp or pin down. On the other hand, this interruption of the Other, especially when it is identified as a center or foundation, quickly becomes a fixed source of meaning, order, and legibility in the world. Sacred spaces, objects, and rituals enable humans to overcome the chaos and nonsense associated with the profane world. As Eliade points out, this overcoming is demonstrated in religious/colonial projects that seize and occupy lands in the name of bringing life and structure, a process I mentioned above. As Eliade describes, "An unknown, foreign, and unoccupied territory (which often means unoccupied by 'our people') still shares in the fluid and larval modality of chaos. By occupying it, and above all, by settling in it, man symbolically transforms it into a cosmos."⁵⁴ This contrast between legible world and uncultivated, chaotic

territory maps onto the distinction between civilization and “the chaos, the disorder, the darkness that will threaten our world.”⁵⁵ While it is not clear whether Eliade endorses the violence that these distinctions work to justify and deny—especially with regard to blackness—it is clear that the sacred for him is ultimately defined over and against that which is fluid, unstable, larval, volatile, and opaque. In fact, humans imitate the gods by creating legible worlds, a creation that requires eliminating figurative “monsters” and other “dark forces” that imperil form, structure, and order. This need to overcome disorder and tumult is animated by a will to purity, or what Eliade calls religious nostalgia. This is a desire to “inhabit a divine world,” a yearning to “live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator’s hands.”⁵⁶ The sacred, under this nostalgic description, is associated with purity, origins, and untainted power. These motifs are familiar in the world of hip hop, where some participants associate authentic and bona fide hip hop with its roots in New York City, a place that is considered sacrosanct within cultural imaginaries. In chapter 1, I discuss how Nas’s infamous “Hip Hop Is Dead” announcement can be read as a nostalgic attachment to hip hop before it became corrupted, and taken over, by corporate interests. I also show how Nas’s mournful claim can be read against the grain of uncontaminated yearnings and heard as a way of refusing the very notion of purity.

Not unlike Eliade, Durkheim (who influenced the former) also develops a conception of religion that contains a moment of disturbance, even though this moment becomes subordinate to religion’s unifying function. For the French sociologist, religion does not necessarily involve gods or supernatural beings.⁵⁷ And even when these beings are involved, they are not essential to religion. According to Durkheim, religion refers to the ways communities are formed by beliefs and practices that pertain to sacred things, or things set apart by taboos and prohibitions.⁵⁸ Religion, he claims, is “an eminently collective thing”;⁵⁹ in fact, the very distinction between sacred and profane does not derive from divine revelation, but from the social world. Religion functions as a kind of social glue; it is a cohesive force. By conflating religion and the social world, Durkheim does not deny that religious adherents experience transcendence at a temple or during a holy ritual. It simply means that when these practitioners attribute this experience to a deity, they mistake the true source of exaltation—which is communion with others. As Durkheim puts it, “It is true with a truth that is eternal that there exists outside us something greater than we and with which we commune. . . . That power exists, and it is society.”⁶⁰ Because Durkheim locates religious desire and emotion in social gatherings and communal rituals, he suggests some continuity between a Candomblé

dance ritual and a hip hop club, or between a political rally and a church revival. Similarly, because society creates sacred objects, Durkheim identifies affinities between, for instance, a cross and a flag, insofar as these objects are “rallying points” for church communities and nation-states, respectively.

Like Eliade, Durkheim initially associates the sacred with the extraordinary, some interruption into the normal course of things. For Durkheim, a communal gathering like a festival or a concert marks a break with respect to profane time and space. Whereas profane experience refers to individuals engaging the world and performing tasks in a disconnected, humdrum manner, these communal gatherings are occasions for intimacy, connection, being taken outside oneself, et cetera. These sacred experiences are different from routine life at an affective level—connecting with others entails excitement, exaltation, stimulation, and a heightened sense of power and energy. The transcendence of profane life, through communion with others, is an electric experience. In fact, this effervescence (which for Durkheim is the source of religion) is described by the sociologist with terms like loss of self-control, chaotic movements, wild frenzy, and the feeling of being possessed by an outside force.⁶¹ While this energy is initially tumultuous, Durkheim suggests that it must find a stable object, like a flag or a Tupac hologram, for the collective intimacy to endure. As Durkheim puts it, “Without symbols . . . social feelings could have only an unstable existence. . . . But if the movements by which these feelings have been expressed become inscribed on things that are durable, then they too become durable.”⁶² Because the energies and affects associated with the sacred are volatile, Durkheim indicates that they must be regulated and harnessed for the sake of stability and community. Consequently, once the flag is imagined as a reliable rallying point and source of cohesion, acts of dissent and protest during flag-related rituals—as in the case of Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem portion of football games in remembrance of black death—are denounced by some as horrifying, terrible, and dangerous.⁶³

The play between rupture and stability within Durkheim’s understanding of religious life is most noticeable in his distinction between two kinds of sacred realities. Alluding to the “ambiguity of the idea of the sacred,” he distinguishes between religious forces associated with life, health, order, and protection, and those associated with impurity, disorder, and death.⁶⁴ In other words, if sacredness signifies that which is set apart, this separation includes those life-conferring phenomena that require protection and those objects and forces that represent danger and need to be cordoned off from social life. For Durkheim, the pristine sacred and dark sacred exist in a fluid relationship since, for instance, objects and energies associated with disorder can

be incorporated into a ritual and become sources of security and protection. The cadaver is both holy and defiling; ancestors can protect people and harm them, especially when the living are not being properly reverent to the dead. In line with this ambivalence at the heart of sacredness, this book aims to think at the edge of these two forces, at the point where images and sounds of impurity and disorder undermine desires for coherence and protection, especially since these desires are the main source of acceptable forms of violence, and disorder, against communities that bear the onus of embodying death and contingency. This contrast between the secure and volatile senses of the sacred brings to mind Mary Douglas's well-known distinction between purity and dirt. Whereas the former alludes to unavoidable attachments to meaning and coherence (which involves clear concepts and rigid distinctions), the latter connotes matter out of place or that which cannot be captured by structure and form, even as the matter out of place gets incorporated into social practices and rituals.⁶⁵ The "quest for purity" and the attachment to the secure form of the sacred line up with Eliade's understanding of sacredness as fixed foundation and nostalgia for pristine origins; the volatile, dirt-bound sacred resembles the dark, unsettling qualities that Eliade defines religious life over and against. It should not be surprising that an array of hip hop artists, including Ol' Dirty Bastard, Goodie Mob, and Snootie Wild, identify with dirt,⁶⁶ a signifier for the formlessness from which we originate and an allusion to a history of marking black people as an enduring threat to what Nahum Chandler calls "projects of purity."⁶⁷

Another author who is important for my project and who explicitly embraces the darker sacred is Georges Bataille.⁶⁸ As a critical reader of Durkheim, Bataille equates the profane with practices and habits of self-preservation and the sacred with experiences—mystical, erotic, and aesthetic—that cut against and unravel our sense of coherence and presence in the world. If the energy and excitement associated with religion in Durkheim's analysis must find a stable object, Bataille suggests that religious experience is located in the fleeting moment of being overwhelmed and losing a sense of self-possession. For Bataille, religion at its heart is "the search for lost intimacy,"⁶⁹ an intimacy that is blocked by the need to set limits and boundaries, but that is available through moments of transgression and the dissolution of form. Religion, according to this definition, is ecstatic and excessive; it transgresses boundaries and constraints, even as it recalibrates. The sacred involves rituals and practices that cut against the idea of an autonomous, separable self. In addition to filth, dirt, blood, tears, and laughter, all of which are markers of excess, the image of the monster is crucial for Bataille. Because of our everyday attachment

to form and coherence, religious encounters for Bataille are experienced as monstrous, both horrifying and alluring. In chapter 3, I use Bataille's ideas, in conversation with black studies, to interrogate the figure of the monster in hip hop, especially as performed by artists like Kanye West and Nicki Minaj. Because of its monstrous features, religious experience for Bataille (and hip hop for my project) undermines a general and inescapable investment in transparency, an investment that is intertwined with all too human endeavors to grasp, control, and contain—particularly entities, desires, and encounters that appear volatile and out of line. For Bataille, the sacred encompasses forms of intimate contact and modes of contemplation that “imply a beclouded consciousness” or a drift toward the opaque.⁷⁰

Perhaps what is most crucial in Bataille's thought is his attention to a paradox in the exposure to the exorbitant energies that circulate through phenomena. For Bataille, life consists of an “excess that cannot be absorbed in growth [or productivity],” and yet human subjects are condemned, to some extent, to converting that excess into something useful through production, the construction of meaning, and boundary-making.⁷¹ Consequently, Bataille locates his ethical enterprise in projects (which involve intentions, goals, the desire for fulfillment) that interrupt the very logic of project, that shatter aspirations for fulfillment and coherence. These are projects—aesthetic, mystical, erotic—that expose participants to death, loss, and negation as well as the ecstatic (enjoyment, pleasure, and anguish) and self-dissolving exuberance. As Bataille puts it, in his description of inner experience, “But project is no longer in this case, that positive of salvation, but that negative of abolishing the power of words, hence of project.”⁷² On some level, this statement by Bataille does not seem to accord with the power and intensity of verbal expression within rap music, or the ways that words, images, and vocal intensities display modes of power and mastery. And yet there are other moments when the power of the word lies precisely in the break or breaking down of meaning, resonating with Bataille's claim that “the poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange, and ourselves with it.”⁷³ Similarly, there are moments when the musical *production* engenders layers, contradictions, and dissonance that undermine the notion of a coherent, unified product or sound. What is crucial here is that Bataille thinks about the sacred as a kind of profanation, in light of human impulses to preserve self and community at the expense of that which is deemed threatening and unproductive according to this will to coherence. At the same time, I remain mindful of how Bataille works within a tradition that prioritizes the European self that is assumed to have access to the fantasy of being whole and fulfillable. Black studies and the world of hip hop takes us into a domain of

racialized and blackened subject-objects that have been positioned as the ex-orbitance, and lack, that the ideal Western subject defines itself against and through.

Opacity and the Rites of Black Noise

As suggested above, there is a curious relationship between the volatile sacred and the concomitant notions of opacity and blackness articulated in black studies.⁷⁴ This resonance is exemplified in the work of Charles Long, an author who informs Pinn's understanding of religion, and who explicitly brings together, and thinks at the intersection, of black studies and religious thought in a manner that contributes to an engagement with hip hop and rap music.⁷⁵ In conversation with Eliade, Long famously makes a distinction between modern theologies and modes of thought animated by a will to transparency and what he calls "opaque theologies." The former encompasses legacies of the Enlightenment and Euro-American Christianity that have justified violence and erasure of the world's darker peoples in the name of bestowing light, reason, democracy, et cetera. The latter, even as they replicate the imperial tendencies within Christian theology, entails an intervention by those darker subjects who have historically been positioned as indices of chaos in need of the imposition of law. On these matters, Long contends:

Theologies are about power, the power of God, but equally about the power of specific forms of discourse about power. These discourses are about the hegemony of power—the distribution and economy of this power in heaven and on earth—whether in the ecclesiastical locus of a pope, or more generally since the modern period, the center of the power in the modern Western world. It is this kind of power which is attacked in the opaque theologies, for this power has justified and sanctified the oppression rendering vast numbers of persons and several cultures subject to economic-military oppression and transparent to the knowledge of the West.⁷⁶

In this passage, Long maintains that modern colonial arrangements and orderings rearticulate theological ways of dividing the earth and configuring space—the heaven/earth hierarchy becomes the division between the Euro-American center and its dark periphery.⁷⁷ These kinds of divisions carry implications for how those on the periphery are positioned, studied, and subjected to military power. The containment of black and indigenous peoples requires

a hermeneutic of transparency, a way of rendering the complexities and alterity of these cultures visible, clear, and governable. As Long suggests, the trope of the opaque does not simply valorize the practices and refusals of oppressed peoples; rather, the language of opacity troubles and inundates the kinds of clear, stable distinctions and binaries associated with yearnings for transparency. Within this alternative logic, for instance, the very distinction between transparency and darkness collapses. This unraveling happens as Long examines how Enlightenment legacies, animated by a will to legibility, harbor a dark, violent underside. Similarly, modern projects defined by *freedom* and *progress* rely on *enslavement* and *domination*; the *civilizing* burden emboldens and authorizes the West to treat its others with *barbaric* tactics. The types of distinctions made between the illuminating progress of civilization and the dark backwardness of the noncivilized (distinctions that are constantly revised and rearticulated) break down in the context of colonial terror and in the face of blackness. As I show in chapter 2, an artist like Lupe Fiasco indirectly expresses this opaque hermeneutic in his refusal of the America-terror binary or, to put it differently, in his analysis of the terror that accompanies the idea of America and its redemptive thrust.

For Long, the opaque communities that subsist on the underside of modernity are not simply figures of lack and deprivation. As he insists, “These bodies of opacity, these loci of meaninglessness . . . were paradoxically loci of a surplus of meaning.”⁷⁸ In other words, we do not have to think of opacity as the absence or lack of something that is abundant at the center of modern life; the darker regions of the earth have produced “new rhythms,” practices, and modes of becoming that contain their own fecundity and complexity. And for Long, these practices and forms of resignification (in response to colonial/racial discourses and frameworks of meaning) encompass a religious quality insofar as they produce certain orientations toward the world, ways of coming to terms with one’s place in the temporal and spatial order of things.⁷⁹ For black people forced into the contact zone of the Americas, a zone inaugurated by settler colonial genocide and slavery, this religiosity does not only allude to institutions and recognizable traditions. It also includes “folklore, music, style of life” in addition to “experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms.”⁸⁰ This is what Long alludes to as the extra-church,⁸¹ a kind of surplus or exorbitance to not only Christianity but to recognizable institutions, traditions, and doctrines. With this extra-churchly attention to black experience and aesthetics, Long is offering a notion of religion that highlights a comportment toward the opaque, the untransparent, and those movements

and vibrations that muddy stable forms and demarcations. In black aesthetics and music, among other places, we can hear what Édouard Glissant calls a “right [and rite] to opacity.”⁸²

Saidiya Hartman suggests this in her reading of slave songs and black spirituals as expressions of opacity. According to Hartman, the cries and shrieks of the enslaved subject—in response to torture, forced labor, sexual violence, and dispossession—register an excess of meaning and affect that cannot be easily classified or rendered intelligible. She writes, “Rather than consider black song as an index or mirror of the slave condition, this examination emphasizes the significance of opacity as precisely that which enables something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow and toil and leisure.”⁸³ Not unlike Long, Hartman examines the entangled relationship between freedom and domination or entertainment and anguish, particularly within the matrix of slavery and its afterlife. This entanglement played itself out on auction blocks and in coffles as captive bodies were disciplined to appear jovial and content, to entertain slave traders and flesh-mongers. The trope of the opaque beckons Hartman to hear the “subterranean and veiled character of slave songs” and the “accumulated hurt, . . . the wild notes, and the screams lodged deep within [that] confound simple expression and, likewise, withstand the prevailing ascriptions of black enjoyment.”⁸⁴ Crucial here is how the slave song overflows certain affective distinctions—pleasure and pain, anguish and exaltation—a quality I discuss in chapter 1 as I trace the work of sorrow in hip hop. In addition, Hartman’s understanding of the opaque upends reliable divisions between the present and past, emancipation and slavery, moving forward and reaching backward, since black subjects continue to be haunted by painful contradictions experienced by enslaved black people. Throughout the book, I note how artists tacitly perform and visualize the aftereffects of slavery in a manner that introduces a sense of the opaque into conventional understandings of time, progress, and redemption.

While Hartman describes the opacity of slave songs, Tricia Rose makes a case for the sonic complexity of hip hop and rap music. In her foundational text *Black Noise*, Rose examines the postindustrial social and historical conditions that bring hip hop into being, while remaining mindful of hip hop’s continuity with jazz, blues, and other musical traditions. In her analysis of the elements of hip hop, such as graffiti, rap, and breakdancing, Rose borrows from Arthur Jafa’s claim that three tropes connect hip hop practices: flow, rupture, and layering. With particular reference to rap music, she writes, “Rappers speak of flow explicitly in lyrics, referring to an ability to move easily and powerfully through complex lyrics as well as of the flow in the music. The

flow and motion of the initial base or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching, or the rhythmic flow is interrupted by other musical passages. . . . Rappers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects. DJs layer sounds literally one on top of the other, creating a dialogue between sampled sounds and words.”⁸⁵ Here we might read the assemblage of layering, flow, and rupture as another way of naming hip hop’s opacity. The layering motif resists all too familiar assumptions about the simplicity of black culture; it refuses reductive readings of rap music that render its sounds, images, and meanings instantly graspable, one-dimensional, and easy to dismiss. The layering in hip hop indicates a kind of multiplicity within what might seem like a straightforward, unified composition. We should think of flow as a trope that indicates the excessive, fluid, and unstable qualities of rap, rhyme, and hip hop aesthetics. And at times, this motion of words, beats, sounds, and visual fragments can interrupt something (and undergo an interruption); this tumultuous movement can alter how we see, hear, relate to the world, or imagine progression and linear temporality.

In line with these qualities of hip hop, the title of Rose’s text sounds appropriate. *Noise* is associated with the emanation of loud sounds, with vibrations that are unpleasant and discordant to hear. To some extent, noise is the aural counterpoint to opacity, insofar as both register a level of incoherence with respect to the senses and their capacity to receive from, and incorporate, the external world. Of course, the transition from noise to digestible sound depends on familiarity and acclimation. (A longtime listener of hip hop music might not find the beats, lyrics, and vocal tones as discomfiting as a novice to the genre.) Yet I take it that Rose’s title, and her concomitant analysis of hip hop as youth rebellion, prompts the reader to think about the general relationship between blackness and noise, or blackness as a kind of noise. As Jennifer Stover points out, black peoples and cultures are often associated with loudness, harsh voices, and disturbing sounds, suggesting that the color line is as sonic as it is visual.⁸⁶ This conflation of blackness with noise, especially within white supremacist imaginaries and paradigms, tends to ignore the continuity between noise and Quashie’s notion of quiet. Quiet, as described above, is not necessarily incompatible with the discord and incoherence that accompanies noise; it simply locates that discordance in moments of vulnerability, intimacy, contemplation, and the internal life of black selves. Jordan Davis experienced this general inability to acknowledge the overlap between black noise and quiet in the final moments of his life as he was attacked and killed for playing his music too loud, for performing and sounding blackness in a manner that “interrupted the peace” while immediately precipitating his death.⁸⁷

Consequently, there are a series of life and death matters that arise when discussing the conjunction between blackness and sound. Rose's early text on rap and hip hop draws a connection between blackness and noise, or those vibrations that are loud and discordant. And yet the technical term "black noise" refers to the absence of frequencies and sounds, to a kind of silence. At the same time, black noise is associated with sounds that need to be contained below the surface or held at bay in order to prevent a crack (in glass, for instance) or some kind of rupture.⁸⁸ Perhaps the very bringing together of blackness and noise compels us to further think about interplay between silence, noise, and sound. Silence, for instance, can be glaring. On the other hand, certain ways of producing sound rely on patterned forms of silencing, muting, and erasing. Silence can also be the occasion or precondition for the emergence and emanation of certain audible vibrations. In this project, I want to think about blackness as a kind of noise, where the sense of discordance does not exclude the ways that blackness can slip out of discourse and be experienced through unsettling silences, pauses, withdrawals, and what David Marriott refers to as effacement.⁸⁹

One also has to tread lightly when making claims about the qualities and features of blackness. By associating black culture and music with opacity and discordant sound, it would seem I run the risk of promoting racial essentialism. Racial essentialism attaches certain traits to black people as a whole, thereby downplaying the significance of differentiation, historical change, and internal conflict. By downplaying difference and conflict, racial essentialism fails to consider how race is articulated through, and mediated by, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, region, and other sociopolitical factors. Furthermore, by privileging the blackness of hip hop, one might argue that we underappreciate the ways hip hop has always included nonblack participants, consumers, performers, and executives.⁹⁰ In this study, I respond to these concerns by making a slight, but crucial, distinction between blackness and black people, a distinction indebted to the work of Fred Moten. As Moten suggests, blackness can be thought of as an unstable movement, a tumult, and a rupture. It names a fugitive drive that antecedes strategies of containment and capture; yet this drive also "brings the law online,"⁹¹ or incites the urge toward order into existence. Blackness names those larval, fluid, and chaotic dimensions of existence and becoming that according to Eliade need to be converted into a well-defined world or cosmos. It marks a tear or wound in world-making endeavors. With Long, blackness is a stand-in for the opaque, for those aspects of being and existence that elude reliable divisions and demarcations, upset general inclinations toward transparency, and fracture what we imagine and insist on as coherent.

To put this another way, blackness is the tumult that has to be managed and contained (and sometimes eliminated) for the order of things to hold sway. Blackness is what the proper human subject—Western, male, white, propertied—depends on for life and vitality, but also contrasts itself against in a manner that justifies the subordination of peoples and regions that depart from the idealized human. According to the machinations and aspirations of the proper and upright subject, blackness appears as wretched, accursed, and monstrous. Following Moten, this study acknowledges a distinction between blackness and black people while affirming a vital, and mortal, relationship between the two.⁹² Therefore, black people cannot own blackness even as they have been called, and conscripted, to give form to blackness. In addition, blackness cannot be confined to race. Rather, racial taxonomies have been constructed in ways that regulate and sanction desires, forms of confinement, and hierarchies that comprise the violent relationship between the ideal human, or what Sylvia Wynter calls Man,⁹³ and blackened subjects. If blackness has generally been associated with a kind of wildness that catalyzes law and order, one must bear in mind that this wild quality has been affixed to blackness through projections, anxieties, and fantasies concerning black sexuality and gender (black people are oversexual; black women are not feminine enough; the Negro race, according to sociologist Robert Parks, is the “lady” of the races⁹⁴). Blackness within modern discourses is often figured as both excess and lack with respect to appropriate expressions of gender, sexual desire, and religious practice. Here I think of Frantz Fanon’s description of how a particular white woman’s yearning for black men accompanied a desire to “break with her being and to volatilize at a sexual level.”⁹⁵ This particular woman, as Fanon diagnoses, wants to lose herself in black masculinity, always already reduced to the biological and sexual. Drawing from an author like Fanon, I acknowledge that while the language of blackness or antiblackness risks being totalizing and endorsing a “race-first” approach, blackness talk in this study traverses and unsettles gender, sexuality, the logic of property, and so forth. On the flip side, blackness undergoes what Cathy Cohen calls a crosscut, a wound, a splitting that indicates the different positions (gender, class, sexuality, citizenship) that black people inhabit and the disparate modes of vulnerability to violence that these positions give rise to.⁹⁶ Blackness cannot be approached without something like an intersectional analysis, and hip hop’s visual and sonic expressions demonstrate this point. To recapitulate, blackness, which is not tantamount to black people, is analogous to the opaque; it subsists as a haunting excess that cannot be readily controlled, explained away, or assimilated into prevailing discourses and imaginaries. And while blackness cannot become black people’s exclusive

property, black people, under the regimes of slavery and racial capitalism, have been called to give form to the terror, fascination, and (antiblack) violence that blackness elicits.⁹⁷

In *The Disturbing Profane*, I examine hip hop culture at the intersection of two organizing frameworks—the volatile, left-hand sacred and blackness. By drawing from religious theory and black studies, this investigation aims to draw out and critically engage those elements of hip hop that disturb, haunt, and disarticulate prevailing logics and fantasies even in moments when these logics are being replicated and mimicked. In the process, I hope to show how rap music generates lines of thought and affect in unexpected directions. This book endeavors to hear and experience hip hop's layered qualities, its complexity, particularly around themes like death, sorrow, anguish, redemption, the wound, ecstasy, monstrosity, and the relationship between creativity and destruction. Inseparable from the thematic concerns is an appreciation for hip hop's formal and aesthetic qualities—wordplay, flow, sampling, layering, cuts and breaks, exaggeration, flamboyance, and masking. The volatile sacred heard in hip hop, the sacred that unsettles and interrupts, is articulated through hip hop's opacity and its vital relationship to blackness, black sexuality, performance, and so forth. Among other instances, the strange religiosity of hip hop is located in its reenactment and reexpression of the (anti-black) violence and terror that structures and organizes the modern world. In this reexpression, an opening emerges that makes available alternative ways of hearing, relating to, and contemplating this violence. Hip hop is a soundtrack for the dark underside of late modern projects; its ethical promise partly lies in its ability to bring to sound (and silence) and figuratively cut against regimes that have made violence against black people normal, acceptable, and even desirable. In the process, hip hop music similarly exposes and halts ingrained desires to be/come whole, coherent, and settled.

Capital, Aesthetics, and the Dissonant Cry That Remains

It might seem that my argument is late and outdated. Hip hop is no longer a marginal cultural phenomenon, as it was when Tricia Rose wrote *Black Noise* in the early 1990s. As early as the thirtieth birthday of hip hop (people typically locate its beginnings in 1973), Greg Tate acknowledged that “what we call hip hop is now inseparable from what we call the hip hop industry, in which the nouveau rich and the superrich employers get richer.”⁹⁸ In fact, rap music—the most lucrative element of hip hop culture—is ubiquitous. It can be heard

frequently at coffee shops, at major athletic events, on soundtracks to films, in video games, or as the musical backdrop to popular television series. Furthermore, rap music produced in the United States is a useful medium to sell and distribute commodities across the globe, promote a presidential candidate like Barack Obama, and advance the notion of a multicultural and even post-racial America.⁹⁹ Consequently, a suspicious reader might argue that while hip hop at one point exhibited a rich complexity, contemporary hip hop culture and rap music have become increasingly predictable and monotonous. In other words, hip hop is no longer volatile or opaque and has become an integrated part of the commodified culture industry. Hip hop seems all too transparent and predictable. It is very comfortably situated within the precincts of capital, wealth accumulation, misogynoir, and neoliberal sensibilities. Consider how Donald Trump, prior to and during his run for president, and Bill Gates have been icons of success, figures that rap artists have pictured as models to aspire to and emulate.¹⁰⁰ Think of how the mantra “if it doesn’t make dollars then it doesn’t make sense/cents” circulates in hip hop discourses, as if meaning and sense-making are determined by capital and the ability to generate surplus monetary value. Think of how artists are preoccupied with creating and maintaining their brand, their ability to continue being a self-generating lucrative product within the music and culture industry.

In line with these concerns, Lester Spence argues that recent trends in hip hop reflect a neoliberal shift in black culture and politics.¹⁰¹ Alluding to Jay-Z’s line, “I’m not a Business man; I’m a business, man,”¹⁰² Spence draws attention to the ways rap artists are disciplined to think of their pursuits exclusively in terms of capital, profit accumulation, the hustle (work ethic without leisure), and entrepreneurship. For Spence, this exemplifies a broader trend in which institutions and social practices are increasingly compelled to imitate business and corporate paradigms in order to survive. This neoliberal framework, among other problems, exacerbates race and class inequalities and weakens democratic energies and collective efforts to empower marginalized communities. Even realist rap, or rap that claims to be an authentic depiction of black urban communities, tends to reproduce these neoliberal sensibilities through what Spence calls “crack governmentality.” This term captures how “realist MCs deploy [narrow constructions] of realness and authenticity as vehicles of urban and human capital and as a technology of subjectivity within subjugated places and populations.”¹⁰³ In the process, emcees are placed in the position of being experts and representatives of urban spaces, the ghetto, and so forth. This presumed expertise proves to be lucrative for record companies at the same time that the first-person perspective in realist rap creates a distance

between “the subject and the subjected.”¹⁰⁴ Here we might pause and think about the different ways that “the real” or “keeping it real” circulates in hip hop. When rappers make claims, for instance, about the real corresponding to those who are dead or in prison, there is a way that reality as authenticity, or the real as the most genuine and untainted representation of life, hardship, and the proverbial streets, slides into the Real, or that which cannot be easily assimilated into the production of life, meaning, and value.¹⁰⁵

This study takes Spence’s arguments seriously, especially at a moment when the hip hop billionaire has become another “first” to laud and treat as iconic. As Spence suggests, the corporatization of hip hop is not new, even if the mainstreaming of rap music and the inescapability of late capitalist logics and rationalities intensifies the process. The continuity between the recent past and the present regarding hip hop’s dance with capital is demonstrated in Eithne Quinn’s study of late 1980s and early 1990s gangsta rap. According to Quinn, even as artists like Ice Cube and Ice-T put forth criticisms of state violence against poor black and brown people and the devastating economic conditions that produce the gangsta persona, many of these artists promoted a kind of rugged individualism and street entrepreneurship as the only way to escape the ghetto. Consequently, for Quinn the gangsta genre is equivocal. Agreeing for a moment with an author like Dyson, Quinn acknowledges that the genre gives an expression to “the social ills that resulted from deindustrialization and destructive government policies—poverty, chronic unemployment, political disaffection, and (particularly in the LA area) police repression, the drug trade, and gang activity.”¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, gangsta rap “gave rise to captivating stories which could be exploited for commercial gain.”¹⁰⁷ Alluding to documentary-style rap videos and St. Ides beer commercials that fabricated a sense of ghetto authenticity (Spence’s crack governmentality) while relying on the links between blackness and (sexual) vitality, Quinn suggests that what captivates and fascinates audiences is always fodder for the accumulation of capital. In other words, there is a connection that we have to interrogate between capital, the captivating, the captive, and what holds audiences and performers enthralled to particular images and representations. What is the relationship between surplus value and the surplus desires and expectations that circle around certain performances of black gender? How does the gangsta persona and its offshoots require the subordination of women, queerphobia, and the simultaneous dismissal and adoption of deviant expressions of black masculinity? How does the music and culture industry capitalize on black performance by delimiting the kinds of responses to antiblackness and capitalist exploitation and predetermining the form and articulation of the

response? More generally, why are certain ways of narrating and imaging black life and death so exciting, enticing, and prone to routinization? What kinds of affective regimes does the culture industry rely on and reproduce and what kinds of dissonant affects imperil its ability to remain intact? How does gangsta rap both expose and recapitulate the conditions, logics, and fantasies that have been pernicious to black people? It is this both/and that Quinn wants the reader to hear and be attuned to, a kind of doubleness that for her signals “an increasingly non-politicized generation, which has seen traditional forms of protest lose much of their resonance.”¹⁰⁸ For my project, this ambivalence in gangsta rap and hip hop more generally points to a constitutive tear or wound that has indirect implications for how we think about the political and its relationship to aesthetics.

Among other things, what is instructive about the sorts of criticisms put forth by Spence and Quinn is that they prompt us to elaborate more generally on the relationship between aesthetics, the logic of capital, and popular culture. One author who infamously addresses this nexus is Theodor Adorno. While Adorno is often associated with the rejection of popular culture—including a critique of jazz that resembles hoary attacks against hip hop—his understanding of art and culture is much more subtle and interesting than this dominant perception permits. Influenced by Karl Marx, Adorno claims that the culture industry—a term that depicts culture (particularly radio, film, television, and advertising) as a factory that generates standardized products—“infects everything with sameness.”¹⁰⁹ One of the consequences of this infection is that cultural producers and consumers get attached to images and sounds that are familiar and comforting; inversely, they are disciplined to ignore, or not detect, that which is dissonant and unsettling. The culture industry acts like a Kantian schema, insofar as it determines the relationship between thought and affect; it structures our perceptions and regulates how we experience the world. What troubles Adorno is how cultural media converts antagonism into harmony, suffering into simple enjoyment, in a manner that subordinates consumers to the triumph of capital and the general status quo. Thinking about the enjoyment that is derived from conventional formulas and genres, he writes, “To be entertained is to be in agreement. . . . Amusement means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display.”¹¹⁰ (This would seem to provide an appropriate critique of hip hop, insofar as popular culture seem to desensitize us to the sounds and depictions of violence, misogyny, and vulnerability to death within these songs.)

For Adorno, certain works of art refuse the general thrust toward harmony and prompt us to experience the violent antagonisms that structure the world.

According to Adorno, art incorporates the world's fractured quality, a process that is expressed in the form and style of an artwork.¹¹¹ Here we might think about how dissonance, cutting, layering, and sampling in hip hop's visual and sonic practices act as stylistic counterparts to the tensions and fragments of the social world, one that mutilates certain kinds of subjects/objects and (non) beings. As Rose points out, we might think of the DJ's *cut*, the emcee's vocal *rupture*, the dancer's *break*, or the graffiti artist's *bombing* of a train as a reexpression of the violent conditions that brought hip hop into existence. Thinking with Adorno and Rose, the important point is that music is not a simple reflection of the social world. It is more like a refraction, since it places existing relationships and conditions into modified configurations, interactions, and sounds in a manner that enables us to experience differently the world's cuts, wounds, and alternative possibilities. If the "non-existing in artworks is a constellation of the existing,"¹¹² then art is both a product of the social world and an indication of an excess with respect to the protocols and rules of this world. While this excess or "More" is a signal that things might be otherwise, this lambent possibility is tethered to art's capacity to figuratively wound and interrupt the listening and viewing subject. As Adorno puts it, "The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light."¹¹³ This sense of hurt and dissonance is for Adorno intertwined with other affects and responses—shuddering, trembling, energy, excitement, and wounded pleasure. The artwork for Adorno can provide the experience of being overwhelmed by the Other, irrupted by the "touch of the Other."¹¹⁴ For Adorno, art moves within the logistics of capital and power to occasionally disappoint our inclinations toward control, self-possession, and indifference in the face of suffering, death, and ephemeral prospects for something different. Art can be an expression of the opaque sacred that, as a substitute for the traditional god, can make us shake, tremble, and become more open to the imperceptible.

What is crucial for my study is Adorno's insistence that art and music are both determined by the logic of capital (commodification, exchange, profit) and reminders of something more that cannot be completely regulated by this logic. Art simultaneously reflects and exceeds the grips of capital (how this interaction between reflection and excess plays out depends on a variety of factors). As Adorno writes, "There is no system without its residue."¹¹⁵ Adorno's formulations resonate with Fred Moten's claim, in the context of black aesthetics, that objects cry and protest against the conditions of objectification. Or as Moten puts it, "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and

do resist.”¹¹⁶ Alluding to Frederick Douglass’s description of his Aunt Hester’s terrifying beating and his related homage to slave spirituals, Moten takes seriously qualities and expressions of the commodified body that cannot be reduced to the structures of exchange—the sound of the cry, the intensity of the scream, the unsettling character of the shriek, the materiality of the voice. As he describes, there is something internal to the cry of the enslaved body that “disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form.”¹¹⁷ Because the cry of the enslaved body—in response to everyday torture and sexual violence—cannot be reduced to musical form, it cannot be exhausted by the “protocols of [capitalist] exchange.”¹¹⁸ While Moten’s understanding, or hearing, of the residue that eludes the system of exchange focuses on jazz and blues, this study extends Moten’s insightful analysis into the realm of hip hop. Such an extension enables us to acknowledge that hip hop has increasingly become a lucrative commodity (but what isn’t infected by capital?), without preventing us from hearing and being touched by the cries, refusals, and cuts made by black subjects responding to, and reenacting, deeply entrenched racial and gendered antagonisms. The question isn’t so much if there is a cry that remains; the issue is whether we are able to hear, feel, contemplate, and be moved by the cry and other dissonant moments. This would involve, for instance, hearing pain, vulnerability, and anguish in lyrics that appear to be expressions of mastery and invincibility. Inversely, this might require hearing joy and laughter in moments that seem to be exclusively an articulation of agony. This could entail being more attentive to the sound and grain of an artist’s voice; to the divergences between the sound and affective mood of a song’s production and the taken-for-granted meanings in the lyrics of a composition. It might mean paying more attention to how the female and femme body is positioned within hip hop culture, looking for signs of irony, sarcasm, and refusal as she is ordered to “work” for the sake of heterosexual male fantasies. It could entail detecting how hip hop’s heteronormative order is undercut by homosocial intimacy, cross-dressing, and anxieties about sounding queer—when rappers say “no homo” or “pause” after uttering something that sounds suspicious, there is an implicit acknowledgment, and immediate denial, of a moment of identity with queerness and the queer Other. Or as Moya Bailey puts it, “The repetitive use of the phrase ‘no homo’ signals an anxiety around the fragility of straightness.”¹¹⁹ As consumers and critical readers of hip hop, we participate in revealing the excess, or residue, that haunts the regulations of capital and concomitant modes of power and normalization.

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This residue is often experienced in the contradictions, incongruities, and misfirings of hip hop projects, in addition to the pauses and hesitations.

And yet the language of misfiring, or the divergence between intention and effect, must be held in tension with Frank Wilderson's claim that black people are those that magnetize bullets.¹²⁰ To put it differently, if listening to hip hop as an expression of the black sacred gets at an unassimilable exorbitance, then it also registers the excessive violence (physical, symbolic, visual, discursive) directed at blackened subjects. It similarly gets at the excitement toward and fascination with black flesh, desire, sexuality, and drama, a libidinal attachment that is never separable from fear and repulsion, as well as indifference to suffering. If the left-hand sacred is an indication of what cannot be instrumentalized into an object, then it is also a reminder of the relentless energy exerted to contain, suppress, and objectify those that have the burden of giving a corporal form to blackness, the void, and so forth. The magnetic power of blackness, its tendency to attract forces of obliteration, is often rearticulated in hip hop as an intramural hostility, to riff on Spillers. This hostility is felt the most intensely in rap music when directed toward black women, the figure of the black queer, and gang adversaries or opps/opposition. To broach this intramural violence is risky in light of the tendency to pathologize black-on-black violence or to separate what Spillers calls the intramural, or that which resides within the walls of black sociality, from exterior modalities of power and regulation to which black people are subjected. But alongside pathology and omission lies what Christina Sharpe calls wake work or care for the dead, the living dead, or those that have been positioned to secure the boundary between life and death.¹²¹ While the wake includes a celebratory moment, it is a celebration that is always attached to, and occasioned by, death, mourning, anguish, sorrow, and disturbing flows (precipitated by the ship's movement across water). In what follows, I do my best to practice this wake-inflected care.

Itinerary

The Disturbing Profane examines hip hop at the intersection of black studies and critical religious thought in the attempt to trace the volatile sounds, images, and energies of hip hop rituals and practices. Focusing on hip hop's poetic, sonic, and visual dimensions, this study contends that hip hop's sacred quality lies in its enduring capacity to interrupt, disturb, haunt, and thwart yearnings for purity and coherence. The volatile sacred in hip hop forms an intimate connection with blackness, which Moten defines as those drives and energies that confound strategies of containment and the general insistence on

transparency—an insistence that results in a refusal to experience and encounter the complexities and densities of hip hop. As described above, blackness is not reducible to black people or racial identity, even if black persons exhibit a vital relationship to blackness. Blackness, on this reading, necessarily takes shape through gender, class, and sexuality and the nonnormative, dangerous (yet attractive) subjects/objects subordinated by these categories and positionings. To study the volatile and opaque features of hip hop, *The Disturbing Profane* foregrounds themes like sorrow, opacity, (social) death, rupture, excess, monstrosity, contradiction, laughter, and intimacy through cuts and wounds. At the same time, this study explores the interplay between scenes of exuberance and moments of quiet, subtlety, and absence within black expression, performance, and writing. My reading does not involve denying or downplaying how hip hop participates in and rearticulates prevailing social conventions and power relationships. In addition, my reading does not assume that hip hop exclusively or even most of the time enacts a dark, left-hand religiosity. Rather, it entails an investigation of a certain tendency—how the flows, images, and wordplay of rap music operate within the ordering of things while simultaneously disappointing general attachments to order, coherence, and stability. Hip hop’s troubling presence can be felt in moments when artists refuse tendencies to locate causes of violence and death outside the United States; moments when artists demonstrate how redemptive narratives of wealth and success acquisition founder and break down; instances when black female artists reveal how hip hop’s self-preservation, like that of the broader social world, relies on the sacrifice of black feminine flesh; occasions when the contradictions in hip hop cannot easily be managed and harnessed for conventional political projects and aspirations. In this study, I contend that hip hop’s dark sacred quality is inseparable from how it performs, reenacts, and depicts the (anti-black and racially gendered) violence that organizes the world; in this reexpression, hip hop opens up space for us to experience, contemplate, and relate to this violence in alternative and yet-to-be-discovered ways.

Each chapter in *The Disturbing Profane* explores themes in hip hop culture that invite us to listen to and interact with hip hop’s volatile religiosity. Each meditation relies on an understanding of hip hop as “more than bars and hooks,” a phrase I sample from Mark Anthony Neal. Part of this “more” includes the conversations and discussions that have emerged about hip hop and religion discussed above; this “more” also encompasses literary, aesthetic, and religious traditions that rap culture draws from and remixes—signifying, poetry, call and response, spirituals, jazz, blues, funk, disco, cinema, and so forth.¹²² As I take it, Neal’s pithy phrase is a reminder that hip hop generates

aesthetic styles and modes of being in the world that exceed the more demonstrable elements of rap music. One of these aesthetic styles, one way that hip hop relates to the world, is through what Rose calls layering and what Adorno and Benjamin call a constellation. A constellation is a construction, or arrangement, of disparate images, concepts, sounds, and elements; in the construction, the sense of coherence does not diminish the dissonance and tension-filled quality of the interactions among the elements that make up the configuration. In what follows, I mimic hip hop aesthetics by creating constellations in my endeavor to flesh out the unsettling sacred. Each chapter juxtaposes artists, songs, and images with authors and discourses that may not seem to be immediately relevant to hip hop culture. In addition, this layered approach pairs “old school” tracks with more contemporary songs in a manner that reveals both discontinuity and continuity across time. Yet this pairing also unravels linear, straightforward notions of time and experience and reminds us that reaching back is an occasion to listen to and experience the obsolete in unanticipated ways. Finally, this constellational approach thinks at the intersection of sound and image, which enables us to see and hear the occasional discrepancies and gaps between the acoustic aspects of a song and its visual/video counterpart.

My hope is that this approach of going back and forth and from side to side, which entails gathering fragments and repeating the cuts and breaks, will reach and contact readers with different levels of familiarity with hip hop, in addition to black studies and religious theory. Similarly, I hope to persuade those who continue to maintain a division, and prohibition, between *high* theory and *low* popular culture that the crossing and blurring of that enduring line of demarcation has always been in effect. Furthermore, this study finds resonance with recent scholarship by colleagues, such as J. Kameron Carter, Biko Gray, Josef Sorett, An Yountae, Cecilio Cooper, and Amaryah Armstrong, who are thinking with black studies to reconceive the sacred, profanation, and black religious practice and thought. Or to put it differently, I am galvanized by the recent endeavors to show how black studies exposes the theological and religious underpinnings of antiblackness while offering alternative, heretical, and unruly conceptions of sacrality, profanation, and the religious. I elaborate on these possibilities in the conclusion, but for now I invite the reader to think of the conjunction of hip hop and religion, or hip hop, black studies, and the dark, volatile sacred, as another way to examine the religiosity of blackness, as well as black thought and aesthetics. Following Long’s notion of the extra-church, or that which exceeds established religious institutions and doctrines, this religiosity, which entails an expression of the sacred as a kind of opening

toward death, anguish, opacity, and dissolution of our attachments to coherence, is found in desires, cries, echoes, rhythms, and moments of silence that defy capture but can still be felt, encountered, and contemplated.

Chapter 1, “Sorrow/Death,” takes seriously themes of death, loss, and anguish as they circulate in hip hop and rap music. To track these themes, I broach Du Bois’s reading of sorrow songs in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Reflecting on the significance of the spirituals for captive, enslaved communities, Du Bois links sorrow to unacknowledged black death and disappointment as well as exaltation, joy, and striving. While desire for liberation in these rhythmic cries frequently includes commitment to a traditional deity, Du Bois also suggests that there is a kind of liberation in the event of death, in escaping the terror of social death. Underscoring the opacity of sorrow—how it collapses but retains a dissonance between certain affective contrasts such as anguish and enjoyment—I offer a reading and hearing of a series of rap songs, including compositions by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Arrested Development, and Lauryn Hill. Through this reading, I compare tracks that appeal to a divine power that identifies with suffering, but often remains silent, to works by artists like Biggie Smalls that locate a form of liberation in death, but a death that is not opposed to a different way of inhabiting a violent world. Part of my analysis will examine the connections between the readiness to die heard in Biggie’s first album and the dynamics of black masculinity, especially as expressed and consumed within the precincts of the rap industry. In the conclusion of the chapter, I revisit Nas’s “Hip Hop Is Dead,” a pronouncement that invokes Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman, a figure who proclaimed that “God is dead.” By comparing Nas and Nietzsche, I suggest that we can read Nas’s controversial utterance as an Eliade-like yearning for pure beginnings or as an implicit rejection, or dissolution, of the very pursuit of purity.

Chapter 2, “Redemption/Rupture,” interrogates the theme of redemption, including the idea of hip hop being a salvific power, one that can rescue black subjects from a life of social death, impoverishment, and terror. While there is a strong tendency within hip hop (and the broader Christian-structured world) to conceive of redemption as being rescued from an undesirable predicament and recovering a sense of wholeness or fulfillment, I listen for other possibilities alongside this familiar rehearsal of the concept. Drawing on the work of black studies (especially Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson) and critical theory (Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno), I trace a shared notion of weak or blackened redemption where the term looks less like fulfillment and more like a rupture into narratives and grammars of fulfillment and arrival. Similarly, through these authors, I think of redemption as the retrieval of the

ruin more than the recovery of plenitude or wholeness. In this chapter, I offer a reading of Lupe Fiasco's 2006 song "American Terrorist," in which I focus on the pairing of America and terror. This conjunction, I argue, exposes how US exceptionalism is predicated on a denial of the terror that is internal to settler colonial formations, Western imperial sovereignty, and antiblack racism. To put it differently, Lupe compels the listener to hear the violence, through a cut into ascendant narratives and temporalities, that is necessary for the protection of an idealized image of America, one that relies on attaching gratuitous violence and fear elsewhere, including Muslim countries and regions. To accomplish this, Lupe rescues images of terror and anguish, including slavery, the Middle Passage, and native genocide, to cut against the self-redeeming logic of US exceptionalism. I conclude the chapter by engaging Kendrick Lamar's first studio album, *Section.80*, showing how it strains against the compulsion to look backward for a time of plenitude, exemplified by the rehabilitation of the Ronald Reagan era, sovereign time, et cetera. By refusing to separate the sovereign, the president, or the Reagan era from conditions and qualities that get affixed to pathologized black places, Kendrick draws attention to desires to restore and make whole through a disavowal of structuring forms of violence. I end the chapter by examining how Kendrick's own attempts to make and be made complete, by folding black female characters into his narratives, founders and breaks down.

Chapter 3, "Monster/Monstrous," ventures into the realm of the monstrous. In this chapter, I show how the figure of the monster that circulates within hip hop draws together, and introduces tensions, between two strands of thought. One strand is exemplified by the work of Georges Bataille, whose understanding of the left-hand sacred arrives at the monstrous or those experiences and facets of being that ruin an attachment to form and coherence. The other strand includes black studies and black feminism, authors such as Hortense Spillers, Frantz Fanon, Christina Sharpe, and Zakiyyah Jackson, who describe in different ways how blackness has been configured as monstrous, between the animal and human, within the paradigm of Western imperial Man. Thinking between the volatile sacred and black (gender), I offer a reading of "Monster" performed by Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, Jay-Z, and Rick Ross. I underscore how the enactment of the monstrous can be an occasion to parody imperial modes of sovereignty and power and a way to visualize racial/gendered/sexual contradictions, wounds, and fantasies that are part of a monstrous formation, a horrifying visual and libidinal economy, that gets unduly affixed to and located in black flesh. I end the chapter by reading Minaj's "Anaconda" alongside Spillers's call for

black women to reclaim, and rework, the monstrosity that has been imposed on them by a racist/sexist world.

In the conclusion, I situate my project within the broader discourse on black religion and black studies, particularly on the ambiguity of the sacred. I underscore my claim about hip hop being a disturbing presence that exposes us, in particular ways, to a constitutive wound and a terrestrial anguish that cannot be wished away.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 OutKast, “SpottieOttieDopaliscious,” on *Aquemini*. For a brilliant study of OutKast, see Bradley, *Chronicling “Stankonia.”*
- 2 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 33.
- 3 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 39.
- 4 Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*.
- 5 Jon Michael Spencer anticipates my argument when he suggests (following Albert Murray) that the early juke/blues joints were sacred spaces, liturgical practices that prompted black bodies to confront musically the harsh realities of their existence. See Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 113.
- 6 Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, 6.
- 7 2Pac, “Trapped,” on *2Pacalypse Now*.
- 8 On Tupac as martyr and saint, see Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 247–68. On Tupac as a kind of prophet, see Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, 141–56.
- 9 For an insightful essay on the virtual and spiritual afterlife of Tupac, see Peterson, “PARTICULAR PAC.”
- 10 On how Tupac can be perceived as saint who watches over and protects his constituency from death (placing him within traditions like Santería and Palo Monte), see Ralph et al., “Saint Tupac.”
- 11 Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 13.
- 12 Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 239.
- 13 MC Breed and 2Pac, “Gotta Get Mine,” on *The New Breed*.
- 14 James Perkinson makes this argument to show the limitations of Western notions of the divine that often imagine good and evil as strongly opposed to each other. See Perkinson, “Tupac Shakur as Ogou Achade.”
- 15 In contrast to “Dear Mama,” listen for instance to “Wonda Why They Call U Bitch,” on *All Eyez on Me*. For some commentators, the more “positive” depictions of women in Tupac’s music can be just as confining as songs that allude to women in a derogatory manner. In fact, the more positive depictions often limit black women’s roles

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- and responsibilities to being maternal reproducers of the black community. On these concerns, see Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense."
- 16 Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 177.
 - 17 According to Luce Irigaray, this is because women have historically provided a container for male desire without having a place of their own. As container, female desire is contained and regulated. See Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*.
 - 18 Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 21–45.
 - 19 Georges Bataille uses the language of heterogeneity to describe this position of being set apart from the ordinary. See, for instance, Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess*. I discuss Bataille's work in detail later.
 - 20 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
 - 21 On a powerful articulation of the relationship between religion, race, and modern spatial imaginaries, see Jennings, "Building Landscapes."
 - 22 For a description of the notion of black gender, see Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," 106–11.
 - 23 To some extent, I am picking up on P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods's concerns that hip hop studies has increasingly been disconnected from its roots in black studies and struggles against antiblackness. See Saucier and Woods, "Hip Hop Studies in Black." While this is a provocative article, my sense is that the authors downplay scholarship that already makes explicit links between hip hop and radical black traditions. For a response to Saucier and Woods that echoes this sentiment, see Forster, "What Is This Thing Called Hip Hop Studies?"
 - 24 Throughout this book, I use hip hop and rap interchangeably because much of my focus is on rap music. Yet I recognize that rap is only one part of a hip hop culture that includes DJing, dance, graffiti, literature, sartorial styles, and other practices.
 - 25 Here I am thinking of critics like C. Delores Tucker, Bob Dole, William Bennett, and the Reverend Calvin Butts. For an engagement with early concerns about the obscenities of gangsta rap, see Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 176–86.
 - 26 Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 184–85.
 - 27 Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 10.
 - 28 Smooth featuring 2Pac, "P.Y.T. (Playa Young Thugs)."
 - 29 For a reading of the image of Jesus in rap music and culture, see Uteley, *Rap and Religion*, 49–68.
 - 30 For insightful scholarship on the Five-Percenter influence on hip hop, see McKnight, *Five Percenters*; and Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*.
 - 31 Uteley, *Rap and Religion*, 7.
 - 32 Uteley, *Rap and Religion*, 7.
 - 33 I engage Uteley's particular concern about how hip hop reproduces Christianity's patriarchal sensibilities in chapter 1.
 - 34 Pinn, "Handlin' My Business," 86.
 - 35 Pinn, "Handlin' My Business," 86.
 - 36 On the connections between hip hop and its musical precursors, see Pinn, "Introduction."

- 37 Talal Asad's famous critique of Clifford Geertz's description of religion, a description that supposedly reduces religion to the establishment of meaning and order, is fitting here. See Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 27–54.
- 38 Pinn has shifted his understanding of religion in his recent work. Instead of thinking of religion as a search for complex subjectivity, he describes religion as a technology for understanding the porous nature of the human and its interaction with other things. See, for instance, Pinn, *Interplay of Things*.
- 39 Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop*, 12.
- 40 Miller offers insightful readings of how religion operates in these texts in chapter 2 of her book. See Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop*.
- 41 Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop*, 70. Here and throughout the text, one notices the heavy influence of Russell McCutcheon, particularly his *Manufacturing Religion*. For McCutcheon, scholars of religion that emphasize its universal quality or its autonomy with respect to other domains conceal their own political interests and investments.
- 42 On this distinction between religious meaning and religious doing, see Jones, "What the Doing Does."
- 43 Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 6.
- 44 On this separation of religion and erotic desire, see Bataille, *Tears of Eros*. For how this plays out in the black church, see Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.
- 45 I have shown and taught the video for "Shesus Khryst" in my hip hop and religion class. At times, the response is fascinating—people are visibly repelled and shocked by the image of Remy Ma on the cross.
- 46 Part of the problem is that secularism is not necessarily antireligious, but names a particular way of managing and regulating religion. On this, see Lloyd, "Introduction."
- 47 One author who has thought about this dissonance between the stabilizing and disruptive aspects of religion is Tyler Roberts. Borrowing from the work of J. Z. Smith, Roberts highlights a distinction in the former's work between the locative and utopian, where the locative registers the order-preserving function of religion while the utopian gestures toward excess and incongruity. Roberts wants to maintain the both/and of the locative and the excessive. See Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 23–47. See also Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 9–10.
- 48 Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 20.
- 49 Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 20.
- 50 For a discussion of these passages between the two domains, see Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 25.
- 51 Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 24.
- 52 Jeremy Biles shows how Eliade's understanding of sacred value is more complicated than his detractors assume. See Biles, "Sacrifice of Domestication."
- 53 Here I am alluding to Otto's famous notion of the God as *mysterium tremendum*. See Otto, *Idea of the Holy*. Eliade pays tribute to Otto in the introduction of *The Sacred and the Profane*.
- 54 Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 31.
- 55 Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 49.

- 56 Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 65. This becomes complicated in light of the fact that creation and destruction (bringing form to chaos or eliminating the chaotic) are intertwined in Eliade's reading of myths and creation stories. In other words, the original moment of creation entails a violence that undermines any notion of sacred purity.
- 57 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 21–44.
- 58 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 44.
- 59 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 44.
- 60 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 227.
- 61 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 216–21.
- 62 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 232.
- 63 For a reading of the athletic protests that includes a Durkheimian interpretation of the flag's sacredness, see Zeller, "Why Kaepernick's Refusal to Stand." For my response, a reading of these matters that underscores more than Zeller's the connections between religion and race, see Winters, "How Protesting Black Bodies Are Imagined as a Threat to National Pride."
- 64 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 412–13.
- 65 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 196–220.
- 66 See, for instance, Goodie Mob, "Dirty South," on *Soul Food*; and Snootie Wild, "Made Me," on *Go Mode*.
- 67 Chandler, X, 16–30.
- 68 Here I am indebted to Jeremy Biles's reading and description of Bataille's work. See Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, 3.
- 69 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 57.
- 70 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 45.
- 71 Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 21.
- 72 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 22.
- 73 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 5.
- 74 For an insightful essay on the connections between Bataille's understanding of the sacred and black poetics, see Carter, "Black Malpractice."
- 75 For an interesting use of Long's ideas to examine the particular genre of Christian rap, see Baker-Fletcher, "African-American Christian Rap."
- 76 Long, *Significations*, 209.
- 77 For a protracted account of how this theological imaginary serves as a precursor to modern colonial regimes and world ordering frameworks, see Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."
- 78 Long, *Significations*, 211.
- 79 Long, *Significations*, 7. See also Long, *Ellipsis*, 14.
- 80 Long, *Significations*, 7.
- 81 Long, *Significations*, 7. For a critical reading of this notion of extra-church that highlights the vagueness of the concept and the way Long locates the authenticity of black religion in what is outside the church, see Sorett, *Black Is a Church*, 9–10.
- 82 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.
- 83 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36. Here Hartman is indebted to Glissant's reflections on opacity in *Poetics of Relation*.

- 84 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36.
- 85 Rose, *Black Noise*, 39.
- 86 Stoeber, *Sonic Color Line*, 1–28.
- 87 Love, “Good Kids, Mad Cities.”
- 88 Damage, “Infrasonic Sound.”
- 89 Marriott, *Of Effacement*, 9–19.
- 90 Some have suggested that hip hop introduces a new racial politics, particularly between black and white populations in the United States. See, for instance, Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*.
- 91 Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*, 47.
- 92 Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*, 47.
- 93 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being /Power/Truth/Freedom.”
- 94 Park, *Race and Culture*, 280.
- 95 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 118.
- 96 Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 13–16.
- 97 Here I am indebted to the arguments made by Calvin Warren in his provocative text *Ontological Terror*.
- 98 Tate, *Flyboy 2*, 246.
- 99 For concerns about this last use of hip hop, see Saucier and Woods, “Hip Hop Studies in Black.”
- 100 I think here of the “black Trump” refrain from artists like Raekwon The Chef, Cocoa Brovaz, and Yung Joc.
- 101 Spence, *Knocking the Hustle*.
- 102 Kanye West featuring Jay-Z, “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix),” on *Late Registration*.
- 103 Spence, *Staring in the Darkness*, 27.
- 104 Spence, *Staring in the Darkness*, 28.
- 105 Here I am thinking of how Jacques Lacan associates the real with trauma, the unas-similable, and missed encounters. See Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, 51–55.
- 106 Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 11.
- 107 Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 11.
- 108 Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 15.
- 109 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.
- 110 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 115–16.
- 111 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.
- 112 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 135.
- 113 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 237.
- 114 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 245, 331.
- 115 Adorno, *Prisms*, 257.
- 116 Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
- 117 Moten, *In the Break*, 6.
- 118 Moten, *In the Break*, 10.
- 119 Bailey, “Homolateral Masculinity and Hip Hop Culture,” 190.

- 120 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 82.
- 121 See, for instance, Sharpe, "Black Studies," 60.
- 122 Reiland Rabaka's work traces the traditions and legacies that hip hop participates in, carries on, and excludes. See, for instance, Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, 1-47.

CHAPTER 1. SORROW/DEATH

Material in this chapter first appeared in "Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop," *African-American Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 9-20.

- 1 Ghostface Killah featuring Raekwon, "Motherless Child," on *Ironman*.
- 2 Baldwin, *Price of the Ticket*, 65.
- 3 Rose, *Black Noise*, 25.
- 4 Rose, *Black Noise*, 25.
- 5 Other authors have noticed this link between Du Bois and hip hop. See, for instance, Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, ix-xiv. See also McCarthy, *Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?*, 109-32. In addition, see Bradley and Vaught, "Of the Wings of Traplanta."
- 6 I have previously written on the work of sorrow in Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* as an affective strategy that resists the complacencies and comforts of progress narratives. In this section, I provide a remix of sorts and cling more to the idea of sorrow than melancholy or melancholia. See Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 31-84.
- 7 Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 19.
- 8 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 9.
- 9 Here I am thinking of Adolph Reed's concern that contemporary black intellectuals have taken Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness out of its historical context and inflated its importance. See Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 93-125. For Reed, the increasing interest in this concept of twoness within African American studies and the decreasing interest in his political disagreements with Booker T. Washington betrays the conservative bent of contemporary black intellectuals. Although I take Reed's critique seriously, I think he too easily separates Du Bois's notion of twoness from the latter's political commitments.
- 10 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 8.
- 11 On this relationship between the self and non-Other, an encounter that vexes Hegel's logic of recognition, see Gordon, *Existential Africana*, 85.
- 12 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89-95.
- 13 Chandler, *X*, 11-67.
- 14 Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 3-7.
- 15 Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 20.
- 16 For I. August Durham, there is a black aesthetic and literary tradition that links melancholy and genius, even as the expression of genius (usually tied to masculinist notions of autcreation) is connected to the maternal. See Durham, *Stay Black and Die*.
- 17 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19-20.
- 18 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 167.
- 19 Eric B. and Rakim, "Eric B. Is President," on *Paid in Full*.