

Getting Started

This project grows out of a commitment to rethinking interactions between institutions of higher learning and the larger communities in which they find themselves. For the authors of this book, this rethinking centered on Rice University and the larger Houston community, and conversation concerning the challenges and benefits of such interaction took place within an experimental undergraduate course devoted to the topic of religion and hip-hop.

This class involved collaboration between the Religious Studies Department and the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning. CERCL (pronounced “Circle”), as the center is called, has as its core mission the development and enhancement of critical-thinking skills, effective communication strategies, and the promotion of rich information that can be used to transform communities. In short, the center is about the development of new forms of leadership that make use of a full range of resources to effect change. CERCL saw this course as a way of using an extremely important cultural development—hip-hop—to encourage critical thinking on religion and, by extension, moral frameworks and ethics.

While Anthony Pinn had been teaching courses related to religion and popular culture (including hip-hop) for a good number of years, Religion 157/311, Religion and Hip Hop Culture, offered in the

spring of 2011, was the first time the topic had been addressed through a partnership between an academic and a highly regarded artist, Bernard “Bun B” Freeman. To our knowledge, this course led the way. True, hip-hop artists had given lectures and led workshops at other institutions; however, this collaboration was different because it involved Bernard Freeman and Anthony Pinn sharing all responsibilities for the course, from design to assessment tools. It was also unique in that the course, with funding from Rice, occurred off-campus at two sites in Houston, one at a church and the other at a nightclub. Houston citizens played a huge role in the conversations in those two locations, as we wrestled with the ethics of hip-hop and its role in religious life.

The reaction to the course was tremendous. MTV came to campus. There was a great deal of local attention, with people off-campus wanting to take the class. People in and outside the United States inquired about the course via e-mail. All those who expressed support and who touted the importance of the class got Dr. Pinn and the teaching assistants thinking. We wondered if there might be a way to think about and explore, in writing, the implications of the class. Taking up this challenge made perfect sense because of a recent trend: religious communities incorporating hip-hop (particularly rap music) into their ritual activities, ritual language, and general aesthetics of worship. How one might think about this move to incorporate hip-hop, and what might constitute the benefits, drawbacks, and consequences of this move kept coming up in our conversation. But it also became clear such concerns had to be addressed within the context of a general discussion of what hip-hop is for religion and religious communities, and what religion and religious communities are for hip-hop. And in this way, the Writing Collective contributes a bit more perspective and analysis to the growing literature on religion and hip-hop culture.

We decided the best format for this work would be a book, but not just an edited volume. We wanted to write a volume together, blending voices and collaborating on ideas in a way that would model an approach for exchange that might be useful to religious organizations and hip-hop as they continue their engagement in shared cultural worlds. Although each person was responsible for the initial draft of a given chapter, there was a process of conversation and exchange that widened the content beyond the thinking of any one person. Hence, the volume does not highlight one name over others, but instead first notes the CERCL Writing Collective as the author; only at the end of the volume do the contributing authors speak individually through the process of the cipher. Yet they are named only in the list of contributors: Jonathan Chism, Christopher Driscoll, Dr. Paul Easterling (one of Pinn's former students), Biko Mandela Gray, Dr. Margarita Simon Guillory (one of Pinn's former students), Darrius D. Hills, Jason O. Jeffries, Terri Laws, Aundrea Matthews, and Dr. Anthony Pinn.

This process of writing as a group is not meant to suggest that the members of this writing collective agree on the nature and importance of churches or hip-hop culture. Some of the writers are Christians; others hold to versions of humanism. However, all agree on the importance of hip-hop, and all recognize that the current religious-cultural landscape is marked by effort—often clumsy and misinformed—to develop bridges between churches and hip-hop culture. *Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats* is not the last word on black churches and hip-hop. To the contrary, this book is meant as a brief guide, a way of thinking about these two cultural developments as grounding for what is undoubtedly a long history of exchange and overlap between the two.

Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats is meant to offer a bit of food for thought on the topic of religion and hip-hop, in hopes that readers

will then move on to more detailed discussions and readings. It is also important to mention that, while we are interested in hip-hop culture as a general phenomenon, we tend to give most of our attention to a particular dimension of it: rap music. We do not mean to create confusion or conceptual slippage by suggesting that rap music and hip-hop culture are the same. Clearly, rap music is only one component of a larger movement that speaks to dance, art, aesthetics, as well as the spoken rhythm of rap. However, we focus on rap music in particular instances because, of the various elements of hip-hop, it has received the most attention and therefore is the most easily misrepresented and misunderstood expression of hip-hop culture. Our approach, as the title makes clear, involves consideration of context—key themes, issues, and developments that mark out what we mean by churches *and/in* hip-hop.

The volume begins with an effort to unpack and contextualize key historical moments in the development of black churches and hip-hop as public realities. It is meant to give readers a sense of some of the overlapping public concerns that have shaped the language, conversation, and conduct of these two cultural phenomena. In this way, it establishes some of the groundwork for the following chapters. The next chapter gives attention to the ways in which the body—as biochemical reality and as a physical thing that is born, lives, and dies, as well as a discursive construction or a social reality—anchors the thinking and activities of both churches and hip-hop. It offers aesthetics in the form of clothing as a prime example of this shared concern.

Underscoring what physical bodies do in space and time gives way to the social issues that arise from what people “think” about bodies, in both good and bad ways. No discussion of black churches and hip-hop would be complete without consideration of the ways in which race and racism shape these two cultural worlds. We argue

both black churches and hip-hop are formed in part as a response to the challenges of racism—but also as a positive pronouncement of personhood beyond the strictures of racial categories.

From discussion of race as a social marker, we move to an exploration of ways in which black churches and hip-hop culture both reject and reinforce U.S. economic strategies that privilege individualism over and against communal accountability and leave the structures of economic life that promote poverty unchallenged. A chapter addressing the ways in which gender plays out in hip-hop culture, particularly rap music, and black churches follows this discussion. Here we recognize and outline the often troubled and troubling notions of gender within the art form and within Black Church culture. Following this discussion of gender, we turn attention to the manner in which sex and sexuality are described and debated within hip-hop culture and Black Church culture. While both churches and hip-hop often fall short by reinforcing troubled representations of African Americans as hypersexual as well as assuming the correctness of heterosexual normativity, discussion of sex and sexuality within both is a necessary undertaking in that only through this type of discussion can advances be made that entail healthy ways of thinking about sex and sexuality. Attention to ethics within black churches and hip-hop culture is next, and in that discussion, we highlight the various strategies used within both contexts to determine and then apply proper action. Lastly, while most of this book is U.S. based, it is a mistake to believe black churches and hip-hop culture are restricted to North America. And so we include a chapter that outlines—through a case study of French hip-hop and black church missions—the global reach of both.

All the chapters up to this point provide a discussion of a particular theme as it plays out within black churches and then hip-hop (sometimes this is reversed). Readers are left to wrestle with ways

in which synergies between the two might be fostered, and they are encouraged to reflect on the look of those connections within their own context. And while this attention to synergies between the two is important, the next chapter gives attention to barriers and challenges to collaboration between black churches and hip-hop culture. In this way, it seeks to provide a lens through which to view the similarities and differences addressed through the earlier chapters.

The book ends with a cipher, an effort on the part of the authors to contextualize the text. Each chapter concludes with study questions.

Readers will note that there are several blank pages between chapters; these are not a publishing oversight. They are intentional, and they are meant to encourage readers to take a moment to reflect on what they have read—to write notes concerning chapter content as well as information and ideas generated by the reading that might be useful in their own context. Further, readers should look at the appendix of this volume preferably before or while reading this book in order to experience the discography we recommend. The discography in the appendix is broken down by chapter with songs we thought best capture that particular section. What we present is meant to provide an interactive experience, one that allows one to read as well as hear what we are trying to say. In other words, one might gain a much richer experience by reading the text while listening to the songs that accompany each chapter.

The goal of this book is not to provide a complex and thick take on the topic, but rather to provide general ideas and thoughts that might be beneficial to prompt readers to investigate and explore. In other words, this is an introductory volume, meaning that this work is only the first step in what will hopefully be a long and fruitful discussion.

While the CERCL Writing Collective is alone responsible for the content of this volume, we must acknowledge the assistance of those who made this project possible and whose encouragement

and support shaped our efforts. We must thank Bernard “Bun B” Freeman, legendary hip-hop artist, who co-taught with Anthony Pinn the course on religion and hip-hop. A word of gratitude is also owed to the many artists who gave of their time and wisdom by participating in the class. In the Rice classroom as well as the off-campus meetings, they made a contribution to our work that was invaluable. We are indebted to the students in that course, and we are grateful for the thoughtful dialogue and the strides that each student made to understand the relationship between religion and hip-hop. The myriad conversations that took place both during the class sessions via online discussion posts and in the off-campus panel discussions aided in the development of this project. We would also like to thank Rice University’s academic administration for providing financial support and encouragement to think about the course in ways that pushed beyond the university campus and beyond traditional types of pedagogy.

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the steady support and well wishes of Maya Reine, Assistant Director at the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL). We would also like to thank Anzel Jennings, Bun B’s manager and course outreach adviser, who played an important role in helping us think about that course beyond the university campus. Lastly, but certainly not least, we would like to thank Ronda Prince, CFO and COO of Rap-A-Lot Records. Without her guidance and unwavering support, this venture would not have been possible. From the start, Ronda Prince has assisted us in ways too numerous to count. Her love for education, excellence, and success has been invaluable to this project.

We say a heartfelt thank you, thank you all.