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Citation for published version

DeHanas, Daniel Nilsson (2013) Keepin'it real: London youth hip hop as an authentic performance of belief. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28 (2). pp. 295-308. ISSN 1353-7903.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2013.783340>

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Document Version

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**Keepin' It Real:
London Youth Hip Hop as an Authentic Performance of Belief**

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Abstract

Hip hop is a global cultural phenomenon that encompasses rap music, dance, graffiti art, and fashion as well as particular ways of being. One subgenre of hip hop is Gospel rap, in which Christian rappers attempt to “represent” the truth of God as a tangible reality, thereby “keepin’ it real.” This study investigates how British Jamaican male young adults in the Brixton area of London appropriate hip hop for their own ends. Based on original raps authored and performed by these young people, the research finds that their representations of spiritual reality are influenced by the conventions and boundaries of professional Gospel rap. The study discerns how youth incorporate religious hip hop into their everyday lives and argues that in some cases hip hop performance becomes a method for pedagogically reshaping the body, giving religious beliefs an “embodied authenticity.”

Citation: DeHanas, Daniel Nilsson. 2013. 'Keepin' It Real: London Youth Hip Hop as an Authentic Performance of Belief.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28(2): 295-308.

*Every season got to keep the faith / till I walk through them pearly gates
I'm going to set the record straight / Jesus – that's who we imitate...
We keep it real, we keep it on the real
That's how we feel, we keep it on the real
– From the Gospel rap song “Keep It Real” by Priesthood*

Hip hop music and religion seem unlikely bedfellows. Compared with many musical genres, hip hop conveys immanence rather than transcendence. Hip hop lyrics often express daily struggles of being black in the inner city or glorify the money, sex, and power promised by gangsta living. Even the musical form of hip hop, as lyrics spoken over rhythmic beats, feels more here-and-now than pious or otherworldly. Yet beyond first appearances, Anthony Pinn (“Making a World”) reminds us that hip hop stands alongside gospel, jazz, the spirituals, and the blues as sonorous heirs of the African American religious experience. Secular hip hop artists

have long played with the tensions between the sacred dimension of collective black experience and a more worldly humanism (Pinn, “Handlin’ My Business”). This can be seen, for example, in KRS-ONE’s song “Take It to God” and in Tupac Shakur’s posthumous self-narrated documentary *Tupac: Resurrection*. Eric Dyson and Cornel West have written persuasively that rap MCs are among today’s clairvoyants, judging the times like prophets and speaking into them as preachers.

The most obvious fusion of hip hop and spirituality is in the Gospel rap subgenre, whose major artists include Lil’ Raskull (now known as RAS) and Cross Movement. For professional Gospel rap musicians, rap is an idiom to “represent” or “testify” to Christian faith. A good example is the Gospel rap group Priesthood and their song “Keep It Real,” quoted above. In hip hop and R&B, the phrase “keepin’ it real” tends to refer to keeping one’s life carefree and living by basic desires. Priesthood plays on this phrase to give it two distinctive meanings. In the lyrics “I’m going to set the record straight / Jesus – that’s who we imitate” Priesthood is being real, or authentic, in representing what they believe. The rap group also uses “keep it real” in a second sense: “Every season got to keep the faith / till I walk through them pearly gates.” These lyrics suggest the importance of keeping one’s religious beliefs tangibly real amidst the vicissitudes of life.

In this article I investigate how young British Jamaicans in London write and perform their own religious hip hop as a way of “keepin’ it real.” While most academic work on hip-hop has been concerned with professional artists’ lyrics and biographies, this article instead focuses down to the everyday cultural and religious lives of ordinary young people. In doing so, I am able to develop the argument that young people use Gospel rap performance to endow their beliefs with an *embodied authenticity*. Performing rap, or even listening to it, is an act of the

body that over time will embed dispositions. Following Charles Taylor, this line of argument is significant for the study of religion because secular and religious beliefs today are espoused not primarily as the result of creedal or rational discourse but because they *feel* right or *seem* authentic. The perceived veracity of a given proposition is to a substantial extent conditioned by one's "sensibilities" as to what can be authentically affirmed (Taylor 14), and this article contributes to our understanding of how such sensibilities can be formed.

The research in this article is based on thirteen interviews I conducted with 18 to 25 year-old second generation Jamaican males in Brixton, South London, as part of a broader project on religion and civic engagement.¹ As we sat in public places like cafes and restaurants, several of these British Jamaican young men told me that they enjoy writing and performing their own hip hop raps. When I asked them for examples, some performed music at that moment on my digital recorder. The rich language of God and religious belief in their lyrics surprised me because in most cases we were in an early point in the interview when I had not yet mentioned religion or spirituality.² In this article I will next provide a brief theoretical overview of scholarship on popular music and religion from which I build the argument on embodied authenticity. I then turn to the young men's original raps to analyse these as embodied performances of authenticity. The article concludes with theoretical reflections and implications.

Religious and Musical Authenticity

Authenticity, both in music and religion, is about performance. Simon Frith in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* defines performative authenticity as a "perceived quality of sincerity and commitment" (71). Frith argues that authentic performances are not restricted to professional musicians – listening to music, debating its merits, and

incorporating it into one's everyday life are all performances by which being authentic is measured and constituted.

Hip hop can be seen as a recent chapter in a long history of African American musical expressions that enable an authentic and performative grappling with religion, meaning, and moral order.³ James Cone (126) explains how, during slavery and segregation, the singing of black spirituals furnished a hope “located in the concept of heaven” whereas the blues provided a more humanistic “unrestricted affirmation of self” with which to face dehumanising absurdities. Anthony Pinn, in the tradition of Cone, has sought to understand hip hop's capacity for engaging with contemporary sufferings and triumphs in American inner cities and elsewhere. Pinn (“Handlin’ My Business” 86) argues that religion is most crucially about “complex subjectivity,” the movement from “life as a corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces, to life as a complex conveyor of cultural meaning with a detailed and creative identity.” Musicians such as Tupac Shakur and underground rapper Sage Francis engage with blasphemy, doubt, and personal refigurings of theology to call into question conventional religious orthodoxies. In Pinn's view, these hip hop artists are more authentic in their engagement with the harsh realities of life than someone who accepts the “easy answers” of more dogmatic or certain forms of faith (100-101).

Authenticity has been a contested and evolving concept within popular music studies. It will tend to be exclusionary – there is usually an “inauthentic” other against which any claim to authenticity can be distinguished. As Grossberg (“Media Economy” 202) writes, in reference to rock music, “fans have always identified some music which... [is] dismissed, not merely as bad or inferior rock but somehow as not really rock at all.” However the boundaries between what is authentic and not have become increasingly malleable.⁴ Indeed, Grossberg (*We Gotta* 225) notes

the more recent emergence of an “authentic inauthenticity” in which music is valued precisely for its ironic transgression of authenticity (e.g., the kitsch of K.I.S.S.). Authenticity is so pliable and contestable because it is not intrinsic to music itself, but is instead the self-referentially performed validation of those who listen to it, what Frith (67) has called the “knowing community.”

Hip hop’s compositional style has allowed for more ironic and radically contingent (perhaps “postmodern”) performances of meaning and authenticity. As Frith (115, emphasis original) explains: “with its cut-ups, its scratches, breaks and samples, rap is best understood as producing not new texts but new ways of performing texts, new ways of performing *the making of meaning*.” Hip hop artists sample from various texts and juxtapose them together in new formations. Performing an unexpected or novel montage is often paramount over the meanings of the source texts themselves. Contributors to a 2011 issue of the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* identify this compositional style as a “hermeneutic of play.” Benjamin Rolsky (10) notes that hip hop provides a space in which conventionally bifurcated understandings of religion can be bypassed because the music is able to bear a “simultaneous certainty and uncertainty, braggadociousness and vulnerability, and especially... sacredness and profanity.” Hip hop’s hybrid and syncretistic mode of production, then, can be a site in which the complex subjectivities described by Anthony Pinn are authentically articulated and performed.

In contrast to mainstream hip hop, however, Gospel rap is a subgenre in which maintaining bifurcations *is* a marker of authenticity. Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher studied a broad spectrum of Gospel rap artists including Easop and Lil’ Raskull, finding them unanimous in taking straightforward evangelical interpretations of Biblical texts (39). These artists performatively reinforce, rather than dispute, sacred and profane binaries in their lyrical contrasts

between a life of following Christ or “the world.” Baker-Fletcher concludes (42): “[W]hile Gospel rappers experience and encourage a certain figurative and metaphorical ‘freedom’ in translating the Gospel for hip hop generation listeners, they find it much more difficult (as a group) to look for such ‘freedom’ in matters concerning Jesus.”

Religious authenticity, then, seems to register differently across hip hop genres, partly due to the different, though overlapping, knowing communities who listen to them. If mainstream hip hop artists employ a hermeneutic of “play,” then Gospel rap artists operate within what we can call “Word-play.” Language, metaphors, and cultural references are sampled and appropriated in clever ways but they cannot deprecate (and usually will bolster) the Word of God (i.e., the Bible). Explicit images and lyrics are off limits and a traditional Christology is a non-negotiable. The Word-play conventions of the Gospel rap subgenre raise a dual challenge for the performance of authenticity, requiring raps to be simultaneously playful and reverent.

Embodying Authenticity

While musical genre boundaries of authenticity have been studied in-depth, Gordon Lynch (485) notes that less is known about how people use music to shape what they believe and regard to be authentic at a concrete and everyday level. Lynch commends the work of sociologist of music Tia DeNora as particularly helpful in this regard (486-7). One benefit of DeNora’s work is that it draws attention to the importance of the body and emotions in everyday musical practices, such as listening to music while commuting to work or exercising in an aerobics class. She emphasises that music is not simply a “decorative overlay for bodily phenomena” but rather a powerful tool by which to “formulate bodily realities” (76). Music can “rouse [people] because of the movement it implies and, more fundamentally... because the

materiality of how notes are attacked and released, sustained and projected partakes of similar movements and gestures” (107). DeNora’s insight into how music can be used to regulate and renovate the body coincides with related developments in the study of religion. Researchers of religious performance are increasingly moving beyond mentalist arguments and towards a more dynamic understanding of the role of the body in religious change (see Day “Propositions”). For instance, Daniel Winchester has studied the formation of a Muslim “moral *habitus*” among converts to Islam in Missouri. He finds that becoming a Muslim is a process of re-forming the body’s habits and tastes through repeated ritual practices that include prayer and fasting. In these cases, embodied practices seem to produce propositional beliefs more often than vice versa.

Although not writing directly about religion or music, Stephen Vaisey provides a dynamic model for explaining how embodied practices can be reshaped, and why this is often difficult. Vaisey begins with Giddens’ well-known distinction between a person’s discursive consciousness (i.e., conscious thoughts and beliefs) and her practical consciousness (i.e., largely unconscious ingrained practices, or *habitus*). He writes that one can think of a person’s discursive and practical consciousness as related to each other like a rider is to an elephant. A rider can plead and cry, but it is only through a sustained and disciplined effort that she can exert real control over the more powerful elephant. Thus there is a “dual process” in human life enacted between one’s conscious desires and agency, on one side, and the slower but more formidable accomplishments of embodied *habitus*. Vaisey’s development of the elephant-rider dual process model builds upon a substantial research consensus on a dual process in human cognition (Chaiken and Trope), and can be extended to consider the importance of embodiment to the maintenance of religion through practice.

Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling provide a sustained treatment of how religion can be incorporated into embodied practices in their work on “religious body pedagogics.” In Islam, such pedagogic practices include acts of submission to God such as prayer, while in Christianity they include rituals of incorporative communion such as baptism and the Eucharist. Mellor and Shilling argue that it is the purposive influence of religions on the body (rather than simply holding different “faiths”) that accounts for much of the divergence in religious outcomes and human spiritual experiences (34). Even evangelical faith, which may appear propositional or even cerebral, involves regular practices such as Bible reading, singing, testifying, and witnessing that imprint discursive beliefs upon one’s embodied life experience (see Strhan in this special issue).

Can rapping be a religious body pedagogic? Rap lyrics are merely a discursive form of expression. It is the performance of these lyrics to rhythm or music that converts them into the embodied practice of rap. Listening to rap at an open mic event or on headphones is also a body-practice. As Andreana Clay found in research at a California youth club, hip hop goes well beyond lyrics to include dance moves, beats, gestures, expressions, and tones of voice that young people can mimic or generate. Thus, while scholars of religion are beginning to observe ways that rappers rap *about* the body (e.g., Simon), rapping is also a performance *of* the body that can cumulatively influence embodied dispositions.

Research on the embodiment of religion provides tools by which to understand not only how religion is authentically performed in hip hop music subgenres, but also the ways in which these bodily performances can redefine what a person feels to be authentic. I conceptualise authenticity as a kind of verisimilitude – a personal sense that something is real or true. Following Vaisey, there is both a discursive level at which authenticity is communicated and

debated, and a habitual embodied level at which it is felt. In the analysis that follows, I will refer to these two levels as *discursive authenticity* and *embodied authenticity*. Seen in this way, religious body pedagogics will be effective to the extent that they gradually recalibrate one's embodied sense of what is credible.

Samuel: “That’s Why I’m in God’s Hands”

Hip hop is a regular feature of the Brixton soundscape, emanating from market stalls, music stores, and car sound systems. Brixton's music scene includes the major venues Brixton Academy and the Fridge, as well as St Matthew's, a church that transforms each weekend into “The Mass” nightclub.⁵ Brixton young people I spoke to listen to hip hop more often than any other genre and youth culture and fashion bear its obvious marks. The role of hip hop in structuring local status hierarchies was evident from the many young people who told me about rapping at open mic nights, performing to friends, and mixing beats in local studios, or who admire their peers for doing these things.

Samuel,⁶ age 25, is one of three young men who sang music he had authored on my interview recorder. He comes from tough circumstances, having grown up an orphan and moved between boys' homes and shelters as a child. In his teenage years he spent his days stealing mobile phones and wallets on the streets of Brixton to survive. He has steadied in his twenties due to encouragement from a middle-aged Christian man who is mentoring him in faith and in life in general.

Samuel values hip hop artistry. He writes songs himself and has produced two CDs that he sells for £3 each. He advertises these at open mic events where he says they have brought a

good response. When I asked him for an example of his music, he performed one of his hip hop “rhymes” for me on tape, at breakneck speed:

Everyday I live this
I move with this
I have to take my chances, flow...
Flow’s never boring
To the skies soaring like a bird that flies
Looking down at the earth my view's bird's eye
And I ain't talking captain, about macky, just mackin'
Engineering the sounds, we make crazy hits man
Studio's so hot, turn on the rotating fan
Play back our vocals, hear that bass line bangin'
Even like my man said, get that freed up. Yeah, yeah.

In the first lines of this rap, Samuel relates that he is rapping from everyday life:

“Everyday I live this / I move with this.” Samuel is levelling with his audience, communicating that this rap will be an authentic slice from the daily life of the rapper. His rap centres on the experience of “flow,” a kind of moving with the moment or situational dexterity. He connects musical “flow” with his ability to react, adapt, and take chances in life. The lyrics have a physical immediacy to them as Samuel conveys the sounds (“bass line bangin’”), heat (“studio’s so hot”), and high feelings (“we make crazy hits man”) of rap music making. Samuel told me that this was a freestyle rap that he created impromptu at an open mic night. The lyrics therefore reflect a broader embodied context of sounds, feelings, and atmosphere at the open mic night itself.

After Samuel and I spoke about this first rhyme, he offered me another. The second rhyme was different in its content and composition:

Life's short
even shorter when you dis-tort
reality, take it for jokes or for rash thoughts
Instead of clowning around like you're a fool
Just check yourself before you wreck yourself for good
I know my date of birth but not by time of death

That's why I'm in God's hands
I'm a part of God's plan
Don't know the word "can't" cause I know that I can
For I'm giving you extra like the Halifax man

This rhyme appears to be a more tightly structured, with its narrative drawing the listener from the existential uncertainties of street life to an acknowledgement that human life is in God's hands. While Samuel's first rhyme was about following the natural "flow" of his body, this one is somewhat different. It contains a warning that if people take life too blithely, "for jokes or for rash thoughts," their physical desires and highs will lead to untimely death.

Samuel's two raps differ in their genres. The first follows the conventions of mainstream "secular" rap, while the second is more specifically structured as a Gospel rap. In his Gospel rap, Samuel is employing "Word-play" by using creative freedom in composition for a constrained and reverent purpose. His adeptness at Word-play can be best seen in how he combines the sobering message on mortality and God's plan with a surprise cameo from the Halifax man, the black spokesperson for Halifax Bank who sings in television commercials about "giving you extra." Samuel's rap, it seems, succeeds through its playful seriousness. As he told me afterwards: "It's got a good punch line, that one. Knock someone out."

Like his first rap, Samuel's second is more than words. When performed, it is an act of the body. As we sat in the crowded café, he did not merely speak the rap lyrics, but instead, with very little self-consciousness, he blitzed them across to me in an assertive cadence and with the authoritative posture of a rapper. His Gospel rap performance was an embodied act of confidence, a kind of "standing up" for what he believes in. Gospel rap performances do more than simply reinforce cognitive religious ideas or expand the religious "imagination." The confident physical demeanour of the rap performance itself emboldens one's beliefs, cultivating within a person dispositions of trust, faith, or even certainty.

We should not forget, however, that Samuel does not confine his artistry to Gospel rap, as his first rhyme made clear. Indeed, when we spoke later in the interview about his favourite musicians, Samuel named Tupac, Biggie, Jay-Z, and 50 Cent, but not one Gospel hip hop artist. Samuel defended his interest in these “gangsta rappers”: “Despite what they talk about – they talk about violence and that, killing – but they’re studio gangsters... they get paid to say those things, and on another level they’re actually very intelligent and very artistic, in their poetry, in their work, in their entertaining.” It seems that Samuel’s notion of discursive authenticity in gangsta rap is more about poetry and skill, while in Gospel rap it is more about speaking up for one’s convictions. Samuel is demonstrating an “aesthetic reflexivity” (DeNora 52): On entering different situations and conversational moments he is able to use a genre-derived discernment to rethink the rules of the game.

Adam: “Making Sure I’m Putting on My War Gear”

Adam is a tall, gaunt young man who wears diamond stud earrings. He was 19 when I first met him at a Jamaican restaurant. Adam and I arranged an interview for a week later at a local café. Much like Samuel, Adam had once been in trouble with the law and found his life change when he took on a Christian faith and attended a local church. His decision to believe in God was initially a selfish one: “I gave my life to God two years ago, and the reason why I gave my life to God was cos I was about to go to jail.... I was at court, and basically [because of God I] got delivery from that.”

In the first few minutes of our conversation, Adam told me that he now makes his own Gospel rap recordings. He says he does this to help youth get “in a positive mindset.... So they can see what I’ve gone through, and see where I got it wrong.” While we sat there recording the

interview, I asked him to demo his music. “What, rap now?” he asked. I said “Sure.” At a brisk pace, Adam performed a Gospel rap from memory:

Don't be wise in your own eyes
The devil is a liar
was my downfall
That's the reason why we backslide,
so be careful
Because he comes your way on a sly
roaming through the world
He'll try to hook you so stay wise
Proverbs in the morning
Psalms in the night
It's warfare
Making sure I'm putting on my war gear
Don't go there, you know there's a hole there
It's a trap
The devil's trying to take you off track
Life
I need to try to get away from this hype
The devil wants me
I see it in my enemy's eyes
Knows I've been fresh born since I got baptised
But he can't touch me cos I'm covered by the blood of Christ....

Adam's full rap that I recorded continued on to about three times this length. It followed the daily trials of struggling with the devil and temptations. For Adam, the devil is not a mythological figure or theological construct. He is an insidious adversary. In the rap Adam speaks of the devil as sly, setting traps, and trying to take him off track. The line “I see it in my enemy's eyes” captures the visceral tension of confronting an opponent face to face in a fight.

Adam's rap is remarkable for the richness of its Word-play, particularly in the allusions and references to Biblical texts. The first line, “Don't be wise in your own eyes,” is a quotation of Proverbs 3:7 and the final line included here refers to Revelation 12:11. In between these, Adam has spliced in images of the devil roaming through the world (Job 1:7), of putting on spiritual “war gear” to face evil (Ephesians 6:10-18), and of baptism being associated with new

birth (John 3:5). These lyrics demonstrate an intimate familiarity with the pages of the Bible that goes well beyond standard clichés. They also show a rapper’s fondness for “play” in their verbal twists and turns.

Adam’s rap, much like the second one from Samuel, is a religious body pedagogic written with the purpose of imbuing his beliefs with a sense of living reality. The rap re-animates his spiritual/physical struggle with the devil. Its rhymed form consolidates his knowledge of a Biblical response to evil and allows him to convey this quickly to others. The line “Making sure I’m putting on my war gear” clarifies that this is not merely a mental exercise but is corporeal because it involves “wearing” the armour of God via particular practices. These include Adam’s preferred regimen of reading the Biblical book of Proverbs in the morning and Psalms at night. “Proverbs because it’s a wisdom book,” he told me, “when you wake up in the morning it’s good to read something that gives you wisdom for the day.” In comparison, “Psalms is more like a warfare book. So what you do there, it’s when you’re sleeping that the devil tries to attack you.”

With visible regret, Adam admitted: “To be honest to this tape, yeah, I have not been doing that recently [reading Psalms and Proverbs].... Recently I have backslided.” The term “backsliding” means regressing from the spiritual path. Adam told me that in the past year he has been smoking cannabis frequently with his friends. “It’s made me paranoid,” he said. During the interview Adam’s mood shifted like a man with multiple personalities, sometimes quoting from the Bible with confident fluency, and at other times careening into guilt and anxiety. He asked me to stop the recorder at one point so he could get himself back together.

Adam experiences a divided self. He finds himself living in tension between the Christian morality preached by his church, which he says he believes (his discursive

authenticity), and regular drug use with his friends in “the world” (his embodied authenticity). This struggle with a divided self reveals the power of embodied authenticity. Through Adam’s habituated practices, smoking with his friends has come to “just feel right.” Yet he later discursively despairs of these actions. Much research has observed the dexterity that some youth have in code-switching to suit different situations (e.g., Anderson 36), like the kind of aesthetic reflexivity that Samuel demonstrated. Adam struggles to do this because his embodied authenticity is not simply a “code” he can switch on or off. Being caught between two senses of authentic self, he feels hypocritical and troubled by conscience.

The Word on the Street

I have argued that rap can be used as a religious body pedagogic to generate an embodied sense of authenticity, but that this is not always effective. The next three brief case studies involve situations in which youth attempt to use rap for these kinds of purposes as part of everyday life.

Mike, age 18, attends a large Neo-Pentecostal church in Brixton. He had become quite committed to his faith a few months before our interview. Mike perceived a serious danger in the language of secular hip hop lyrics:

I listened to a lot of hip hop I guess. No one really mentioned to me, [but] looking back on it there’s a lot of profanity. Even if like sometimes they’re talking about surviving like, struggle, I mean, it’s still, what they’re singing it in is more – I feel like it’s been influenced by the devil. In a way that’s like powering the music. I can feel it.

Mike experiences the devil as a living reality just as vividly as Adam does. The devil’s power, he said, had affected him in the past: “I used to, like, swear a lot, I managed to use profanity.”

He was now taking steps to counteract this influence:

So, basically I stopped listening to all that kind of stuff. I kind of do, I listen to Gospel [rap]. I got like an audio Bible for my mp3. I listen to that. So, yeah, there's a change in that way, definitely.

Mike also told me that he arranges his day to incorporate prayer regularly, and that this had helped him overcome swearing. "Because I understand the power of prayer now," he said, "I use prayer a lot as a tool for my faith." For Mike, prayer had become a religious body pedagogic to restructure his practices. This use of prayer is not surprising. Yet Mike also mentioned some less conventional tools for his religious development: Listening to Gospel rap and to an audio Bible. These build naturally upon his previous life patterns of listening to "a lot of hip hop." For Brixton youth who begin to take Christian faith with greater seriousness or accept it for the first time, various auditory means of religious development such as Gospel rap, audio Bibles, or MP3 sermons can ground faith through familiar listening practices.

The use of rap as a body pedagogic, however, is not limited to religious purposes. Shawn, in his early twenties, has been down on his luck for some time. He told me that he spends most of his time at home doing drugs and playing video games, because he feels too afraid of local youth gangs to go outside often. Shawn no longer considers religious belief appealing:

I don't see no God creating the world for seven days and all that crap. And then he's letting disease happen and letting all these people die, and it doesn't make sense to me. Hurricanes and... it doesn't make sense. Why would you make the world and then have all these things that are destroying, and make everything end?

Shawn is prone to sadness and anger. He told me that he sometimes performs his emotions to himself or to a friend in improvised raps, as a kind of catharsis. "If I'm feeling low or depressed," he said, "I'll just rap out how I feel." In this case rap is a performance of the body that helps Shawn with his emotional management without any attachment to religious meaning.

Johnny, a young man who is training for a career in music, provides a final example of how music-based body pedagogics can influence life at street-level. Johnny is the son of church leader and had been accustomed to hearing and performing music from a young age. Well-versed in various musical styles, Johnny was the third youth to sing a self-authored song on my recorder.⁷ When we spoke about music, Johnny said that he is “very influenced by Gospel rap.” While he thinks of rap in general as “a worldly thing,” he said that “as long as you have it in a Gospel theme, I’ll listen to it.”

Johnny’s life is saturated with music, especially Gospel rap. The influences of religious rap came through at various moments in Johnny’s choice of language. At one point we discussed an episode in his life when he and a friend were confronted by a group of young men on the streets of Brixton (emphasis added):

J: I was coming down from church and like I see boys trying to, you know, trouble me and my friend Jordan. He’s one of the friends that I know that is streetwise. If anything that I could do now, I might as well put all my trust in God, Number 1, because without him I ain’t going to get anywhere.... So I put my trust in God and just dealt with the situation. I came out unscathed, we both came out unscathed.

D: Did that mean you had to fight a little bit? What did you have to do?

J: Had to think logically. I’d say that. You’d have to try to outthink your opponent. Yes, so it was a lot of... I have to do a lot of *wordplay*. So I had to always like, throw their mind to something else, do you get me?

In this situation Johnny’s decision to “put all my trust in God” is an outgrowth of his regular involvement with church and with Christian music. When he says “I have to do a lot of wordplay,” he is referring to regularly making music lyrics which, through practice, has become like second-nature. Johnny’s adeptness in the wordplay of (Gospel) rap seems to have enabled him to have the right words for a tense moment, setting his opponents’ “mind[s] to something else.”

Conclusion: Believing in Hip Hop

More than a decade of writing from Anthony Pinn, Michael Dyson, and others has identified commercial hip hop as a surprisingly rich arena for expressing and questioning belief. This article builds from these literatures and brings the focus down from hip hop professionals to young amateurs. It is a brief foray into the religious side of hip hop among young people, and as such can only hope to be a beginning. Entire worlds of religious practice are awaiting ethnographic exploration (in London and elsewhere) in open mic events, peer performances, self-produced CDs, religious congregation-sponsored concerts, YouTube rapping, and MySpace marketing.

James Cone described the blues and the spirituals as complementary musical genres through which African Americans existentially grappled with historic suffering under white oppression. The context and times of contemporary Brixton are markedly different. Racism persists, often in implicit forms, but British Jamaican young men now face new problems arising from the more amorphous threat of worklessness in a constricting global economy. In Brixton there seems to be a complementarity similar to what Cone observed, between the immanence of mainstream “secular” rap and the transcendence of Gospel rap as two performative modes by which young people can meaningfully interpret their lives. These rap styles differ primarily by genre conventions, with Gospel rap requiring a commitment to the more restrictive hermeneutic of Word-play. This does not necessarily mean that young Gospel rappers settle for “easy answers” or are unable to develop complex subjectivities (c.f., Pinn “Handlin’ My Business”). Indeed, British Jamaican youth who write their own religious raps demonstrate how ordinary people can be active agents of religious interpretation and of sacralisation (DeHanas *Broadcasting Green*). These young men are attempting, through social and individual

performative means, to uphold a belief that God is good even amidst the challenges of the streets. In other words, they are doing theodicy (Day “Doing Theodicy”). Young men such as Mike carefully structure their everyday lives with auditory habits to instill their beliefs with an embodied authenticity. For others, such as Shawn, such beliefs simply do not “ring true” and will ultimately fail to vindicate God in the face of evils like disease and hurricanes.

Authenticity has been an important area of study for researchers of popular music and of religion, especially in the sub-area of youth and religion. My aim in this paper has not been to judge the authenticity of music or beliefs themselves along a pre-defined register such as “less commodified” or “more realistic.” Instead I have investigated the construction of a lived sense of authenticity, arguing that this requires distinguishing between discursive authenticity and embodied authenticity. The example of Adam and his experience of a “divided self” demonstrates the empirical value of such a distinction. Indeed the uneven power relationship between discursive and embodied authenticity could help provide a grammar by which to understand certain aspects of human emotional and religious experience. These might include the inconsistencies of everyday lived religion or times when a person’s sense of authentic self feels riven by guilt, hypocrisy, or temptation.⁸

Finally, this article contributes more broadly to our understanding of “the conditions of belief” in the contemporary world (Taylor 3). It foregrounds Gospel rap as an unconventional means for keeping beliefs “real” amidst the secular cross-pressures of everyday life, through the use of embodied performances that instill dispositions of authenticity and trust. In doing so, the article demonstrates the weight of practice, whether in new forms or old, in shaping the propensity to believe.

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¹ The research in this paper is based on my doctoral thesis (DeHanas *Believing Citizens*) which included sixty in-depth interviews with Jamaican and Bangladeshi second generation young people that I systematically recruited from streets, markets, libraries, religious institutions, and other locations in inner city London. One of the Bangladeshi young men, who is Muslim, shared a hip hop style "poem" he had written before we started the interview. The poem was entitled "Definition of a True Believer" and outlined the essentials of Islamic practice. I do not include his hip hop piece here because it was the only case of a Bangladeshi Muslim youth sharing one with me, and limiting this article to young Jamaican amateur rappers provides focus for the argument.

² The youth in this article that I call Adam and Johnny shared their self-authored music with me before we had discussed any other topics, as did the Bangladeshi Muslim youth whose rap is not included (see previous endnote). Samuel shared his raps further into our interview conversation.

³ While hip hop originates among African Americans, its performers and audiences have grown much wider to encompass a "Black Atlantic" and, indeed, to traverse well beyond these geographical and racial boundaries (e.g., the international success of Eminem). Even so, as Paul Gilroy (131) has noted: "The hybridity that is formally intrinsic to hip hop has not been able to prevent that style from being used as an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity."

⁴ Indeed, research since the mid 1990s suggests that higher status individuals are becoming cultural "omnivores" who consume culture across a wide range from "high-brow" to "low-brow," thus eroding some conventional distinctions between authenticity and inauthenticity. See Chan and Goldthorpe for a succinct review of this debate and results that broadly support the omnivore argument in the case of music consumption in England.

⁵ On the development of Brixton's hip hop scene in the 1980s, particularly the sound system, reggae, and cockney fusion of the group London Posse, see Wood.

⁶ All names of the young people in this article are pseudonyms, used to protect anonymity.

⁷ Johnny sang an R&B song he had written. Although I do not include it here (due to the present focus on rap) it is included in DeHanas (*Believing Citizens*).

⁸ It has been beyond the scope of the present paper to articulate the relationship of the body to emotion. I agree with Tia DeNora that research into everyday life should examine “a more existential level of human being where body, consciousness and feeling intertwine” (76-77). For the purpose of the present analysis I have attempted to delineate a relationship between the body and consciousness, but have largely left their connections with emotions unarticulated. For recent complementary work on religious emotion see monographs by Davies and by Riis and Woodhead.