

## Ethnologies

***Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission.* By Felicia M. Miyakawa. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005. Pp. 190, black/white photographs, appendix, glossary, notes, bibliography, discography, indexes, music credits, ISBN 0-253-21763-6)**

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Black American Islam pushes many people's buttons. When I told a colleague that I was reviewing a book about hip-hop associated with the Five Percent Nation, a splinter group from the Nation of Islam, he asked if they were "even more extremist" than the Nation of Islam. The latter group, famously associated with its members Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, has long faced criticisms of racism, antisemitism, homophobia, anti-christianity, and sexism. Amidst the US-led "War on Terror," Islam and its supporters are subjects of intense political scrutiny and pressure. An entanglement of politics and ideologies separates critics and defenders of Islam. Alongside allegations of violence that have chronically stigmatized rap music, it was not surprising that my colleague assumed the Five Percent Nation was an extremist black nationalist organization. Felicia Miyakawa's book sets out to interrogate this assumption, and to examine the features of Five Percenter music.

*Five Percenter Rap* is the first and only book devoted to studying the Five Percent Nation. Prior to Miyakawa's text, only a handful of articles about Five Perceners had been published. Many of these were produced in the late 1960s, when the Five Percent Nation was being founded. Because this subject is both timely and rarely reported on, the content is exciting to encounter.

Miyakawa writes in a straightforward style, focusing on facts and events rather than forming dense theoretical interpretations. Her account begins with an overview of Five Perceners' history and theology. When the Nation of Islam began to splinter and destabilize in the early 1960s, one of its key members, Clarence 13X, separated from the group and founded the Five Percent Nation in Harlem ("Mecca," in Five Percenter terminology). The Allah School in Mecca was established soon afterwards, and still remains the Five Perceners' headquarters. Although their founder was killed in 1969, Five Perceners went on to play important roles in hip-hop from the 1970s up to the present. Five Perceners consider their organization a "way of life" rather than a religion, and sense a duty to "civilize the uncivilized." The "uncivilized" are the 85% of the population who are lost and have not yet learned Five Percenter theology. Ten percent of the population is considered blatantly

and irrevocably evil, enslaving the poor. The remaining Five Percent see themselves as “poor righteous teachers.” Five Percenter “Lessons” stress numerology (“Supreme Mathematics”) and a system of attributing meaning to letters (“Supreme Alphabet”). Their doctrine draws on black nationalism, Egyptology, and other systems to formulate a cosmology (wherein each black man is a God and origin of universe), and to emphasize healthy living, self-sufficiency, anti-materialism, family unity, and a binary gender code. Because Five Percenter doctrine prioritizes verbal skills and is generally disseminated orally, rappers are especially suited to communicate its messages.

The second part of Miyakawa’s book examines how these messages are embedded in Five Percenter’s music (“God Hop”). Although some music theory and notation is used (particularly regarding rhythm), the text is generally accessible to readers with no strong musical training. Miyakawa traces an impressive number of song lyrics which allude to Five Percenter theology – typically obscure uses of numerology and acronyms scattered throughout a song. Following this, Miyakawa describes many technical elements of rap music; any Five Percenter content here seems almost secondary to her descriptions of generic hip-hop devices. Chapters are devoted to verbal delivery, and to “groove” (including scratching, verbal flow, and layering). Various charts help to clarify Miyakawa’s observations. A chapter on sampling practices serves as an excellent introduction to this hip-hop aesthetic in general. Rather than discussing legalities, listeners’ responses, or theoretical issues, the author focuses on sampling techniques and creative processes. After presenting six generic hip-hop sampling conventions, Miyakawa explains how and why samples are chosen, where samples of various types are placed in songs, and what purposes they serve. Finally, Miyakawa identifies Five Percenter references and numerology in liner notes, album art, and the ordering of songs on albums. Here, she provides a unique and insightful discussion of “skits” or interludes between songs on some albums – a topic few authors have yet addressed. Five Percenter MCs are ultimately portrayed as the teachers and role models they often strive to be, carrying on African American oral traditions, and negotiating complex contradictions between their secular and theological commitments.

Two merits of this book – its conciseness and its neutrality – are at times its most regrettable features. Excluding appendices and other supplements, the main body of the text is a mere 140 pages. Because of

this succinctness, many areas beg for more elaboration. A Five Percenter anthem is mentioned, yet no details of it are given. Very little discussion of the relationships between the Five Percent Nation and related systems (such as the Nation of Islam and Islamic Orthodox, and vernacular Signifyin' practices) is offered. Perhaps most critically, Miyakawa examines God Hop mostly from a production perspective; she examines the creation and internal workings of the music but gives little attention to the reception and usage of this music. Although Miyakawa provides excellent supplementary material (glossaries, artist lists, etc.), an accompanying CD would be a helpful addition to the text; this is especially enticing since the number of songs and artists cited is inherently limited.

Miyakawa is explicit about her refusal to critique her subjects' ideologies, due in part to her "outsider" position (she is a white person who will likely never be able to join the Nation). This has certain benefits and drawbacks. The lack of critical commentary makes this book well-suited to classroom use, where readers are encouraged to formulate their own responses to the material. However, any interpretation and commentary based on Miyakawa's unique experiences with the Nation is regrettably absent. No consideration is given to the ways that apparent biases (such as heterosexism and misogyny) function for Five Percenters. Many compelling points are neither identified nor examined, such as the contradictions between highly-structured Lessons and an "anti-structure" way of life, the reasons why God Hop is rarely set in a "party rap" style, why numerology is used in lyrics but not in musical composition, and the meanings of recurring futuristic imagery. The lack of interpretation given in this book is at times disappointing. In some ways, Miyakawa's study is very textual, focusing on the "facts" of music and not engaging in hermeneutics or critical readings. Ironically, this is similar in some ways to the "autonomous" style of music theory which New Musicology (from which this study arises) critiques.

If this book creates in the reader the feeling of wanting more and wishing for less impartiality, then its flaws are indeed minimal and benign. *Five Percenter Rap* is indeed a fascinating introduction to a topical cultural and musical movement. Miyakawa succeeds in presenting a complex set of allegiances and artistic practices. Her refusal to reduce her subjects' complexities and to draw simple conclusions about Five Percenters echoes this vital intricacy, and invites creative readings. The sense of

responsibility Miyakawa seems to feel towards her subjects is inspiring, and neatly reflects her subjects' values of peace and knowledge.

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***Women as Unseen Characters: Male Ritual in Papua New Guinea.***  
By Pascale Bonnemère. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.  
Pp. 200, ISBN 0-8122-3789-7)

The societies of Melanesia and their pervasive gender polarizations have occupied a prominent place within anthropological research. *Women as Unseen Characters* is an anthology of nine essays by male and female anthropologists with special interest in the ritual practices of the peoples of Papua New Guinea. This includes analysis and comparison of the initiation rites, ceremonies, secret societies, social life, customs and attitudes of the Gebusi, Duna, Ipili, Enga, Hagen, Sambia, Ankave, Kamea and Ömie peoples. There is particular emphasis on the Eastern Highland Provinces where a history of violent conflict between groups has produced exaggerated gender divisions. The essays were selected for their dual focus on the participation of women and the concern that such participation has been overlooked in previous scholarship.

*Women as Unseen Characters* grew out of "collective reflection" expressed at a special symposium convened by Pascale Bonnemère at the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania's annual meeting in 1998. Scholars came together to discuss the absence of critical discussions of women's roles in ethnographic studies of male-centred ritual in Papua New Guinea. Bonnemère, a fellow at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), was drawn to this particular focus after her experiences in the field among the Ankave in the New Guinea Highlands. There she found that her own observations of male-centred rituals contradicted what she had read concerning practices of the region. Citing Read (1952), Herdt (1987) and Langness (1999), Bonnemère describes how these studies equate the exclusion of women from the ritual *space* to the exclusion of women from the ritual *process*.