

The Fifth Corner: Hip Hop's New Geometry of Adolescent Religiosity

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This ethnography explores the ways in which hip hop culture functions as a secular form of religiosity for adolescent males in the United States. The data is based on the author's experience as an instructor at a private high school where she observed the behaviour here described. 'The Fifth Corner'—a site created by eight teenage boys for enacting hip hop principles—displayed elements of religious life that historians of religion conventionally ascribe to religious behaviour. It was a designated sacred space carved out of a secular realm that provided what the secular environment did not: the opportunity for a community of believers to congregate, to compose scripture, and to generate symbolic and ritual activity that elicited a spiritual feeling which promoted an ethical posture and led to the development of a doctrine of faith.

The characteristics and implicit religiosity of Hip Hop

Take of this what you want. This is the combination of eight individuals who for four years passed through all BS fronts to develop a common love for ourselves and each other. We cultured and laughed through every hard time and continued to do so through all the good. This entire corner represents what we value and who we are. Learn something from it and it has achieved its purpose.

For many adults there is nothing more frightening to encounter than a group of adolescent males of colour who are wearing baggy trousers and listening to rap music. The hip hop culture that shapes their tastes and opinions is judged by many as a corrupting influence that steers them

away from an appreciation of more fundamental values that would profitably shape their development. Yet the above remarks were written by one of 'those' kind of boys. The words were written on the walls of the sacred space that he and his friends created and in which they enacted a social justice drama that also became their own rite of passage. The sentiments expressed demonstrate that in the absence of the influence of traditional religion, adolescents may find in other cultural forms a method by which to acquire the same traits typically ascribed to religious affiliation.¹

In *Traces of the Spirit: the Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*, Robin Sylvan makes a case for including hip hop as a contemporary cultural movement that implicitly expresses dimensions of religiosity. Although customarily described by its most commercial feature—rap music—hip hop is an ethnically diverse, interdisciplinary movement characterized by four elements or 'corners.' Hip hop culture includes DJ-ing (spinning records to create a rhythmic foundation), MC-ing (rapping over the music to provide commentary), Writing (embellishing and communicating through graffiti), and Break Dancing (responding to the stimulation through movement). Moreover, in addition to its aesthetic elements, the origins of hip hop are widely documented by creators and interpreters alike as having an ethical, social justice function, serving as a creative and empowering tool for individual and cultural transformation.

All of these elements were present and served a religious function for a group of eight, third-year high school boys (age 16) when in 1999–2000 they created *The Fifth Corner*, the site to which the student quoted above alludes. Whereas this group of outcasts was attending an affluent and predominantly white independent high school in San Francisco, hip hop emerged out of the Bronx as a subculture in what is among the most economically and culturally marginalized of neighbourhoods. Yet the creators of *The Fifth Corner* were as ethnically diverse as the Bronx natives. Furthermore, they identified with the kinds of alienation that hip hop artists describe, recognizing themselves as outside the mainstream of the student body characteristic of this exclusive school. In response to their recognition of difference, they used elements of hip hop to express their feelings of exclusion and frustration and to bond as a community when they transformed a small, neglected corridor in their school into a sanctuary.

As Tricia Rose observes in her landmark study of hip hop, *Black Noise*, the culture 'emerges as a source for youth of alternative identity

formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished.' The young men who created *The Fifth Corner* did not face a demolished community but they did occupy one that did not reflect their values and sensibilities. Hence, as original hip hoppers had done, they forged 'alternative local identities... in fashions and language, street names, and most important, in establishing neighbourhood crews or posses' (p. 34). Rose goes on to observe that:

Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements. (Rose 1994: 34)

Occupying a condition that had been vacated by traditional religious culture and disillusioned by their school environment, this group of young men did what Rose describes. They forged intercultural and familial bonds that protected them from the insults of their school culture while at the same time initiating a social justice movement that had a huge impact on the very environment that marginalized them. Hip Hop became their gospel. As one ethnographer has observed of other adolescent populations, what the students of *The Fifth Corner* accomplished is a nationwide phenomenon: 'Contemporary youth are increasingly fashioning notions of self and community outside of school in ways that educators have largely ignored' (Dimitriadis 2004: x). In his study *Performing Identity/Performing Culture*, Greg Dimitriadis concludes that currently 'hip hop's phenomenal commercial success speaks to the urgency with which youth from all across the economic, ethnic, and racial spectrum are trying to define and redefine themselves in the face of massive and ever present uncertainties about identity' (Dimitriadis 2004: xii). In creating *The Fifth Corner*, these youth put hip hop—the most available and salient resource of popular culture—to use in implicitly religious ways.

The Fifth Corner alludes to both the elements of hip hop culture these young men appreciated and appropriated to redefine themselves and also to what motivated this desire—their sense of being outside the strict geometry of their school. As one student describes the name's origin:

I remember thinking this [name] is kind of stupid, cliché, but it totally fit. It comes from the elements of hip hop but it also reflected what we felt like, a sense in our group that we are outside of the usual mold and we were outsiders. We never felt bad about it; it was like a badge of honor. *The Fifth Corner* represented what isn't in a typical square, contrary to everyone else, and doing our own thing. So it represented hip hop and that culture we were all into, but also how we felt we were different from everyone else and did our own thing. That is how we understood it.

In so designating their site, the boys instinctively practiced the ancient art of *nommo*—naming as a form of reinvention and self-definition—an Afrocentric feature characteristic of hip hop.

As process and as product, *The Fifth Corner* embodied implicit religion; it revealed an inherently religious element in aspects of ordinary life. Although not expressed in ways that are traditionally recognized as religious, *The Fifth Corner* displayed elements of religious life that historians of religion conventionally ascribe to religious behaviour. It was a designated sacred space carved out of a secular realm that provided what the secular environment did not: the opportunity for a community of believers to congregate, to compose scripture, and to generate symbolic and ritual activity that elicited a spiritual feeling that promoted an ethical posture and led to the development of a doctrine of faith.

A student explains the group's origins and one feature of its implicit religious aspects: its establishment as a sacred place in which a community of like-minded adherents could congregate.

There was a group of friends, eight guys more or less, and we kind of didn't like many other people in our school and our class. Some of us had lockers back in that corner and we gravitated there. It was a sanctuary for us, off and away from everyone else. And we kind of hung out there, were too cool for everyone else pretty much. We really started personalizing it when G. realized he could start drawing on the walls, white wash the walls and start painting murals on them. Another student followed suit drawing his own stuff and the rest dicked around a little bit. We brought in a stereo system and listened to hip hop and it was our place.

Although music was important, the primary feature of *The Fifth Corner* was its embellishment through graffiti art 'that went anywhere from funny cartoons and critiques of pop culture to things that were personal and had symbolic meaning'. The visual elements established the

boundaries of this sacred space and served as symbolic representations of its principles and ideals. Some of the art is highly skilled in its representation of images. There are words written in big, block, graffiti-style lettering but also delicate pencil drawings; there are caricature representations of 'the crew,' a huge dragon, cars, sexy women, athletes, martial arts performers, cartoon figures from pop culture like Bart Simpson and Mr. T., and other objects associated with adolescent male desire. The process of painting, however, mattered as much as the images themselves, because of the ritual purpose it served. As one student related, painting with others 'was so much fun. It felt like such a great collaboration, just brought us together so much'.

Still, the music was an important source of inspiration and motivation. While gathered there, painting, writing, and talking, the boys would also dance and 'listen to a ton of hip hop music.' Another student observed that 'we all had the same musical taste, more underground, socially conscious hip hop, not so much the mainstream music. We were pumping music really loud between classes. People would walk by and just look, and we would be staring like 'what, we know it is loud; we don't give a shit'.

Ultimately, 'we got lost in the music and painting'. Getting lost in the music and painting, however, was also getting found, because of the emotions generated, the sense of unity and purpose the activity created for the boys who purposely sought to elicit such feelings. As one participant expressed: 'I try to do that as much as possible in my life. So it was everything I could ask for'.

Much of what became known as *The Fifth Corner* was 'The Wall', a message board where students recorded their opinions about many issues relevant to their immediate environment but primarily the lack of diversity at the school. In addition to their own words, there was much 'sampling', a hip hop technique that borrows from the past to create a new message. There were quotes on tolerance from Gandhi, social strife from Tupac, love from Martin Luther King, Jr, freedom from Frederick Douglass. No single measure of aesthetic evaluation or editorial standard directed the creation of *The Fifth Corner*; each student found his own form and voice by contributing to it. But their words and images derived from and expressed the influence of graffiti writers and hip hop performers and became their scripture and symbolic icons. The images became the rhythmic foundation typically supplied by the DJ while the text became the MC's commentary. *The Fifth Corner* became their

sacred space because 'It was a sanctuary; it gave us a place to do our own thing. On a friendship level it solidified us'.

In terms of structural organization, *The Fifth Corner* was also like hip hop collectives and religious movements in their cultic origins, in that it provided for both community and individual talent. As one student explained, 'Different aspects had leaders'. One would choose the music, another would direct the painting, and another would compose a narrative or come up with a provocative comment to provoke discussion. In each aspect all the boys would 'represent'—a hip hop expression designating authority and solidarity—themselves as individuals, as members of the particular neighbourhoods from which they came, but ultimately stand together 'solidified' for a shared purpose. The inscription of an original member offered in farewell sums up the balance this collective achieved in their sanctuary: 'This wall is dedicated to all the students and teachers who have survived through all the drama and strived to make this a better place'. He goes on to list individuals and their particular attributes, what they contributed to his life, concluding: 'Thank you for all you have done. I will never be the same'.

Citing his transformation, this student's comments point to another religious characteristic that emerged from this life-changing experience. An ethic developed between the brotherhood that gathered, and directed how they would treat and regard each other in *The Fifth Corner*. This ethic also extended to direct their concerns about issues of social injustice that they perceived as present at their school. By their example and their recorded testimony on The Wall, they challenged their peers and educators to adopt a more inclusive and tolerant ethical posture. The boys offered up a kind of doctrine, a declaration of student rights and responsibilities as they pertain to sustaining the school community. By extension, the art they created on the wall, the music they listened to, and the fashion of hip hop they adopted became symbolic representations of the kind of community they envisioned.

Still, it is also apparent that these boys did not, in many respects, wish to join the mainstream but retained the cultic dimensions of their experience in an exclusive, if not wholly judgmental way. The religious elements of their experience remained diffuse and could not be institutionalized. To exploit hip hop to achieve social acceptance would have been an apostasy to the very culture they so valued. They did not seek to create an institutional body but to challenge their existing institutional body—their school—by creating a marginal cult that could function in

a prophetic way to incite their institution to embody its stated principles. To retain their 'cred' (credibility) and their 'realness' (authenticity)—two dominant measures of value in hip hop culture—the creators of *The Fifth Corner* chose to embody a paradoxical state characteristic of religious affiliation: to remain outside the mainstream while at the same time inhabiting it, to be brought together as a collective but set apart from others.

The subsequent fate of *The Fifth Corner*, after the brotherhood graduated and moved on, further highlights issues pertinent to the religious function of hip hop as expressed in this particular ethnographic site. The graffiti art and messages written in the back alley have survived five years. Yet the creators themselves, as well as later classes of students and faculty who were present during the creation of *The Fifth Corner*, remain divided about the preservation of the space. No longer used as a site to congregate, some wish to retain the art and writing as a kind of museum piece, while others wish to whitewash the walls and begin again, to resurrect the original function of the sacred space and to provide for new classes of students to express themselves ritually as the original creators had done. As one participant stated in devotional reverence upon returning to the site after being away at college for three years: 'I feel great pride in our creation but pray that other students will want to continue what we started, maybe by even painting over some of the mural to add their own voice'.

Throughout the history of the wall the school administration has taken various positions typical of institutional response to cultic challenge. These vary from an initial resistance, to a tacit hands-off approach to its development (once an influential faculty member publicly defended it and the students), to using it for school tours to promote their own self-image as tolerant and diverse, to eventually and subversively redesigning the school campus so the site has become even less accessible and visible during the daily traffic of school commerce.

Nonetheless, in creating *The Fifth Corner* these boys found a socially constructive way to challenge the norms of their environment, to fashion their own identities in response to that hostile environment, and to create a supportive community that sustained them in their adolescent development. They instinctively tapped into the powerful and distinctive religious worldview advanced by hip hop that 'runs directly counter to the religious worldview of the mainstream culture it permeates' (Sylvan 2002: 281). Features of this worldview as identified by Sylvan

include: not taking refuge in the hope of otherworldly rewards; telling the truth about oppression; and transforming the impulse towards anger and violence into empowerment, creative expression, spirituality, and positive change (p. 281).

In its brief but significant history, *The Fifth Corner* serves as an example of how adolescents instinctively use elements of the culture and aesthetic they adopt as most relevant in order to create the kind of structure and meaning typically associated with religious affiliation. Hip hop's discourse was the most salient to them because it has been recorded to have an impressive influence among North American teens of all races and ethnicities (Dimitriadis 2004) and has become a method by which male adolescents form identities in fundamental ways. This includes a religious identity that has migrated from traditional forms of expression to popular culture but which still bear the traces of traditional religiosity, including the desire to create a sacred space, to record a scripture, to advance an ethic, to generate a spiritual experience, to build a community, to join a tradition, and to promote a world view.

The history of *The Fifth Corner*

As explained by the chair of the arts department at the school, the area that became *The Fifth Corner* had recently been designated during a renovation of the building for functions associated with theatrical production. A small space, the creators never extended beyond the confines of the bare concrete hallway. The walls beyond the limits are under the jurisdiction of a policy that requires permission from the Student Council to paint on the walls. So part of the initial genius of the creators was, like the Bronx originators of hip hop, in identifying their own liminal zone, a transient and spontaneous place for expression. As one of the boys notes, 'It was separate from school, not on a main thoroughfare—not a back alley but not a place where a tour guide would take students' parents. It was the road less traveled. That drew us to the site, the fact that we could have this place and it was untouched and a place we could make our own'.

In *The Fifth Corner* the religious impulse, that these boys expressed nowhere else, found a sacred space for engaging in ritual activity that released their spiritual feelings among a congregation of faithful adherents who shared the same beliefs. In their search for the real, the boys created their own version of 'the hood', the hip hop term for intentional

communities that gathered to enact hip hop performances. It obviously did not bear the same characteristics as the South Bronx in terms of poverty and violence, but *The Fifth Corner* did share one important feature of the hood which is identified by Murray Forman as 'a sense of home' (Forman 2002a: xix). In *The Hood Comes First*, Forman observes how in hip hop, 'space is mobilized as various social boundaries are renegotiated and transformed' (p. 5), precisely what the crew of *The Fifth Corner* accomplished when they found an unused and neglected site in their environment that they could exploit as a container for the real. It was localized, intimate, and personal, allowing for active transformation by the attribution of meaning and a sense of common cause (Forman 2002a: 29-30).

The Fifth Corner crew came from a variety of backgrounds—racially, economically, and geographically. They represented every ethnic category that the school lists, including Latino, African-American, Chinese-American, Jewish-American, and European-American. Their inclusivity in terms of race, class, and ethnicity was generated in part by their being connected to hip hop culture. This culture pulled them together and eventually extended their reason for gathering so that the motive became to inspire a social and spiritual awakening: a force to bring about change, precisely the motive Sylvan ascribes to hip hop (p. 293). They exhibited the same non-traditional religiosity that emerges out of hip hop culture, which Sylvan describes as an 'ideal grounded in conditions and contradictions of the real world' (2002: 293).

Just as conditions and proximity helped nurture the emergence of hip hop in the Bronx, but did not create the collective itself, so too, as one participant observes, did *The Fifth Corner* start 'before we had the actual place, as a result of a group of friends getting together and bringing together art work and issues that needed to be brought up at the school. It originated in friendship and people wanting to hang out with each other and wanting a place to belong, a place where they could be themselves that was away from all the madness and cliques in school'. Initially the boys would hang out there between and after classes and play games and listen to music, even study. But then one day a poster went up. One of the boys put up a poster that featured a barely clothed and sexy model. The poster caused a stir and generated lively and humorous discussion, even among the students taking and the faculty teaching Western Civilization. They questioned: 'how did this poster compare with the naked figures they were studying in Civ?' Before long

a faculty member who was openly gay removed the poster and in its place put up one of 'a really buff dude'. The mere hanging of the posters was 'a dialogue' that then led to a heated debate ranging from the value of art to the issue of free speech and what was appropriate for the school.

The solution, or rather re-direction, of the controversy, came from one of the school's most gifted students in visual arts. He asked if he could paint on the walls. As this student remembers: 'Some kids had done a little tagging and graffiti and we started wanting to do that but on a larger scale'. Arts faculty gave their consent. This is when the sacred space began to elicit a strong spiritual experience. In explaining the visual elements of the site, the student also describes how the ritual activity of creating and embellishing this sacred space served him at a particularly intense time of his life by providing him a means of release and expression and the support of a community.

That time was intense. I had personal issues at home, my mom was dying, and school was part of the perspective for me in terms of realizing that school was a place for learning but also to go beyond all the superficial bullshit that goes along with getting good grades and all that kind of thing. [*The Fifth Corner*] was more about trying to find myself while dealing with some hard issues. So it felt so good to just go there and be with my friends and then start to paint and explore my art. Most of all it was fun and we would listen to music and hang out. I could not have asked for anything more in those tough emotional times for me.

For this particular student, the experiential dimensions of hip hop religiosity were 'cathartic,' in that the site and the community that populated it helped him channel his grief in productive and meaningful ways. For another student, the intensity of the experience was not as profound, but it was still important to an adolescent struggling to adapt. The place and the people 'brought smiles to my face', and he was grateful for 'those who continued to share the universal language of laughter with the rest of the world, who have offered an understanding and open ear during times of uncertainty'. To this brotherhood the student offers a classic hip hop compliment: 'much props' (short for 'proppers', or proper recognition). Finally, one student offered: 'It was more the students of colour who got the ball rolling. But it became a community thing. People took it up and started talking about it and it became organic'. In each instance, as with hip hop, 'the language and meanings of community exist as resources to which people turn when

community, with all of its attendant comforts, is most needed' (Forman 2002a: 29-30).

Although *The Fifth Corner* began as a site for graffiti art and mural painting, words soon took over the space and the message board dominated the site. This became their recorded scripture which, when it took a prophetic turn, led to the development of a coherent doctrine on free speech, diversity, and tolerance. Contributing and responding to The Wall also intensified the spiritual feelings the experience elicited. One day there appeared a simple drawing of an outline of a tree with a bold question: 'Why [school's name] is NOT diverse'. Hanging from a nail from the branch of the tree was a string with a pen tied to it. In fashioning this provocative query, the creators enacted 'hip hop culture's paradoxical valuing of morality and spirituality at the same time'. They expressed angry impulses but alleviated the anger 'by providing a positive alternative direction to channel that energy' (Sylvan 2002: 291), when they posed the question and hung the pen to invite dialogue.

The head of the school, however, was upset by the drawing, in part because of her own experience teaching in the South and the subsequent association of the image with lynching which she had seen used as a form of intimidation against black students. After protracted discussions with involved parties and concerned faculty, the rope was willingly taken off the tree by the crew. But they acquired a renewed sense of purpose and desire to continue the free expression of their ideas. *The Fifth Corner*, which began as a private and personal expression of the need for spiritual solace and comfort, soon took on a larger and more significant purpose when the creators saw its value as an agent of transformation.

Finding a place for public expression was important to the boys because of the school's history concerning free speech. Years earlier there had been several attempts to establish a school newsletter to support and enhance free speech. Although opinions were signed by the authors, when the opinions became personal, controversy ensued and the community reconsidered the limits of free speech in the context of a school environment. Eventually guidelines were established that prevented maligning any individual by name or inference. All opinions came under editorial scrutiny and some submissions were rejected by a faculty committee that reviewed all submissions. Students were urged to resolve their problems and differences privately.

Not until The Wall was created did the issue of free speech come back to life and in an especially visible way. The Wall quickly filled

with words; even the creators were astonished at how much people had to say about race, class, gender, and the place these issues have at their school. Eventually the notion of free speech promotion presented the classic conundrum that had plagued earlier forms of expression. One day an unsigned statement was sketched on The Wall in response to the initial query about why the school did not want diversity—'1. Blacks 2. Yellows 3. Beaners'.

The creators, who represented all these maligned ethnicities, were stunned and anguished. Yet rather than paint over the derogatory remarks, they spoke up at an all-school assembly and asked students to draw or write what they wished but to sign their work, to own up to their ideas. This episode became emblematic of patterns of religious reformation that also is characteristic of an important feature of hip hop that Tricia Rose identifies as 'rupture'. As a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation, hip hop works on a pattern of creating sustaining narratives that accumulate in a 'flow' and 'layering' of ideas—just as the boys had done in painting *The Fifth Corner* walls—that eventually lead to a 'rupture'—like the derogatory comment—which can be used in creative ways that will prepare one for a future in which change in circumstances will require adapting one's method and message (Rose 1994: 38-39).

Students did adapt to the rupture and soon the walls were full of conversation; ideas and opinions flowed freely. For example, among the replies to the initial query, after the derogatory comment, were: 'ignorance', 'superiority complex', 'blame', 'pride', 'guilt', 'lack of understanding'. Others were more elaborate. One student offered 'Minorities are those who secretly want to be mainstream but are viewed as different based on their thoughts or physical appearance'. And another was a reminder from a female of colour: 'Some say the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice. While I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots'. Few offered explanation or actual solutions but rather voiced imperatives: 'Tell the truth', 'Speak, write, sing, play', 'We need more solutions', and, 'What we say isn't important, it's what we do that matters'.

One image of a moon face begged: 'Let your words stand out'. Nearby a student challenged others: 'Ask yourself: what do we want to change?' And some comments expressed a cynical reality and futility: 'When you're presented with a school populated with a majority of affluent Caucasian people, change takes a great deal (of effort and time). Understanding will take more years, if it ever happens'. Despite the

various tones and moods of the comments what they all share is an assumption explained by speech-act theory: words do things and actions say things. *The Fifth Corner* demonstrated both sides of this equation.

Other comments that appeared, that were pertinent to the hip hop religiosity of *The Fifth Corner*, supplied a prophetic critique, an internal assessment standard that was entirely conscious of the kind of commodification that occurs in hip hop culture and religious organizations. Among the comments students contributed that reflect this awareness are: 'Welcome to Stagnation' [sign, with arrow pointing to wall saying]: 'This wall wants to be painted white. Just like everything else. People who wrote on this wall went here a long time ago. Screw that. Their words are just as important as ours'. Or from a female sympathizer: 'Who wants to be mainstream nowadays? Take a look at what rap has become. You should rather be who you are than what others want you to be. Don't talk about what you don't know'.

Unlike the tradition of graffiti art as it emerged out of hip hop culture in the Bronx, anonymity was not a goal of the writers. Early 'bombers' who wrote on New York City subway cars wanted recognition as authors of their work, but not identification as the perpetrators of what was a criminal activity. They wished to be incognito to the dominant culture they disdained, but known among their own small group of fellow writers and hip hop artists (*Style Wars*). But one trait of graffiti artists that the creators of *The Fifth Corner* did share was what hip hoppers describe as 'uprock'—a blatant challenge to authority. They also valued the two-fold sense of possession this kind of activity evokes. They felt possession as in ownership of a space or site and also as a religious feeling, as being intoxicated or infused with spirit and purpose, feelings that motivated New York graffiti writers. And just as early graffiti writers developed their own ethical code, which included a reverence for others' work that prohibited painting over existing writing, an emphasis on originality and not 'biting off' or appropriating another's idea or style, and a belief that aesthetic criteria should not be dominated by size but style, so too did the creators of *The Fifth Corner* adopt an aesthetic and ethical code that was respectful and inclusive (*Style Wars*).

As one student explains the sense of possession, it was a combination of several feelings often evoked by religious ritual gatherings, including an elevation of spirits and a shared sense of belonging, but also the inspiration to participate in something larger and more meaningful that extended beyond the initial impulse:

A lot of it was us having fun. We brought energy and life into this abandoned area of the school. We wanted to make [the space] ours but also make it something for people to participate in, to bring people together. It brought our group of friends together and we thought it could bring more of the school community together to explore issues that were important. We wanted to critique the school and have our say, express some frustration, and create some sort of constructive forum.

He continues to elaborate the elements that extended the feeling of possession which generated the spiritual feeling: ‘So this is just in your face but very well thought out at the same time. It brought people to that area of school and let them write what they wanted and take responsibility for what they said. And say anything they wanted to say about many different issues or even just let people express themselves through their art’. In his assessment, this student describes the dual feature of hip hop spiritual possession that Robert Ferris Thompson calls ‘sainted sassiness’ (Thompson 1996: 211)—to challenge authority and achieve recognition but with a serious purpose in mind. Furthermore, at one point or another, all the participating students describe *The Fifth Corner* using the term ‘cool’, which has relevance in terms of hip hop religiosity but also a more expansive, Afrocentric religiosity. Coolness, as identified by Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit*, is the highest form of morality and being, a balance of beauty and character.

Having created beauty and demonstrated their character, at the end of the school year the boys said farewell to their project, assuming that in the completion of the renovation The Wall would be covered up. Yet to their surprise the administrator in charge of the reconstruction urged workers to work around *The Fifth Corner* and it remained intact. The creators were proud of the ‘awesome legacy that we left’. Still, already changed and now transitioning to new lives, applying for and preparing for college, *The Fifth Corner* did not see much activity from its creators until the end of the year when there appeared a poignant and powerful statement, a long farewell inscribed by one of the Latino creators that encompasses, in its range of expression, the religious elements of the experience. This inscription has become the crew’s creed, its doctrine, its ethics, and among the most sacred texts that was put up on The Wall. It continues the quotation that began this essay and is presented in a footnote in its entirety.²

The statement begins in an epistolary invocation that is typical of sacred scripture, 'To all my people,' and continues to identify by characteristics of disadvantaged lifestyle and ethnicity those students of colour whom he wishes to address. He continues by offering hope, counsel, and consolation: 'Stay true to yourself and never forget where you come from. Don't ever think that someone is better than you at anything'. He also critiques his environment and urges others to avoid the potential for corruption while reminding them of the opportunity they have to benefit from their situation and to accept the responsibility that goes with this privilege. '[The school] has caused a lot of people to lose their identities and change them into people with no unique qualities because the qualities that made them unique are looked down upon. Don't let this happen. Be you. Be who you are. And be it for yourself. You are lucky to go to [here]. You have been given a chance that probably all your old friends were never offered. True, you have to put up with a lot and that can take its toll. But make this place yours. It is the key to many doors. But you must open them for yourself'.

In addition to practical advice related to achievement, the author provides spiritual solace, encouraging others to find people who 'will help you through the tough times...a crew that is cool, and is funny and that you can chill and become tight with without having to change'. He concludes with a kind of blessing, hoping his readers will 'take my advice to heart and lead long successful lives', and expresses gratitude for the experience he has been a part of and a belief in the future of what he and his friends created: 'To all of you here right now and those who come as long as this wall stands, stay strong. To all the people who have supported me and whose conversations have gone beyond wassup, thank you'. Finally, he asserts his own transformation and ongoing commitment to the ethical imperatives of what he has said when he offers, 'To those of you who read this and understand and sadly there is still no one to talk to, call me: [number]. Stay up'.

The poignancy of his social critique, describing the circumstances students of colour faced in their neighbourhood and their school, establishes the mythic proportions of this hip hop scripture. But as he continues this spiritual narrative, he moves to recommend an ethical way of proceeding, based on his accumulated wisdom and the experience derived from *The Fifth Corner*. He reminds his peers of what should be the foundation of their beliefs and demonstrates a ritual way by which to enact the doctrine of tolerance and appreciation of uniqueness and

diversity that emerged from his experience. He offers up a world view that is both realistic and hopeful.

In assessing the function and purpose of *The Fifth Corner*, one white student who was an original participant extends the world view with the following observation of the site's social justice efficacy and the irony that surrounded the creation and function of *The Fifth Corner* as a multi-cultural, spiritual collective. His observations show how even the most successful endeavors still bear the influence of the dominant culture from which they emerge and serve as a reminder that liminal places and times like *The Fifth Corner* are transitory. From here the boys had to move on, back to the real world, yet now better equipped:

I had my views but when it started the only people writing were people from minority backgrounds and I was hesitant to write. Some people whined on the wall and they were white, near-sighted ignorant views. I remember reading that and not wanting to say anything like that. I felt that if minority kids wrote about their experiences of being a minority, they should; if white kids wrote it was a challenge: 'why is your experience different from mine, we are all Americans', which I think misses the point. You can't ignore race. It was such a big issue, the elephant in the room. So from that I felt like there wasn't a place for me to write as a white kid who had views similar to minorities because I couldn't say it out of personal experience. And I feel kind of weird trying to say, 'Hey, I'm white, and I can't know what you have been going through but I kind of understand and I am sympathetic'. I wasn't confident in my abilities about expressing those views.

Despite his hesitancy, this student reveals something important about the power of hip hop to transcend previously established cultural boundaries. He joined the collective in friendship and with a sense of difference, not for being a student of colour but for not being like the other whites at his school. Yet rather than trying to appropriate the experience of his peers of colour, he developed recognition of his own entitlement and as a result was able to enter into the experience in a more meaningful way. As a result, the white student's experience ends up sounding not unlike what a student of colour describes about what he took from the experience: 'When the mural and message stuff came out, that was awesome because there was a level of respect we got for what we had done. It got conversation going. It made us think more'.

The future of *The Fifth Corner*

In the ensuing years little has been added to The Wall. Yet now admissions guides bring prospective students to *The Fifth Corner* and discuss it with reverence, as if it were an ongoing reflection of student activism and free expression. The arts instructor who originally championed the boys' work has assumed the self-appointed role as the 'griot' of *The Fifth Corner*. In keeping with the Afrocentric nature of hip hop religiosity, she acts as griots do in West African societies; she is the oral folk historian, the praise-singer of this tribe who recites their stories. In so doing, she has provided for the future of the site as a sacred, inspirational space that can still perform its evocative function, insisting that it 'is important that we don't lose sight of' the history of the phenomenon. 'People are out of touch. And since the people who were involved in it are no longer here', she wondered 'if I don't write [the history], who will? I was getting nervous with revisionist history happening'. Eventually she provided a written narrative and continuously supplies an oral history whenever she has the occasion. 'I would take students on a tour and tell them about you guys and they loved it!'

Furthermore, to preserve the site, not as a museum but as a living entity, this instructor has provided materials and guidelines should anyone wish to contribute, asking only for courtesy, respect, and ownership. 'Sign your work. It is a mark of having the courage of your convictions'.³ Although the instructor 'egged on' current students, reminding them that 'it wouldn't take much to paint it over', most students demurred even after she challenged them. 'I said, "Why not?" I just told you the story of how this happened so maybe there are some new things to write, some new things to paint. Their compromise was to paint the floor'.

In assuming the role of griot, the instructor believes she is supporting the original creators of the cult, not supplanting them. They remain the prophets while she is their evangelist. As she told them: 'When you guys were here it was easy because we were all on the same page and there was education happening around it, there were a lot of people talking. I was just a witness. You guys were doing the talking, spreading the word'. But because no structure provided for the ongoing preservation of the site and the current classes of students were treating *The Fifth Corner* 'like a museum', she felt compelled to remind them that in its original inspiration it was a 'legacy to pass on to people'.

After re-visiting the site three years later, the creators expressed a range of opinions on the future of *The Fifth Corner*. One student affirmed

its functional, religious value as a creator of community and identity and as a sacred site where ethical ideals could be promoted:

Ideally, I would like for people to experience what I experienced and become closer with friends and feel like you can have an effect in such a personal way, an original way, and if that is still possible in *The Fifth Corner*, it would be great to see kids go back there and embrace that area and do to it what they want. Make it their own in some way, utilize it as a way that they can be themselves and explore art and ideas; and if it still can be used as a forum, it definitely has an importance.

Yet when challenged with the possibility that *The Fifth Corner* might get painted over or destroyed, the most artistic of the bunch recognized that such an end is 'typical of genre; it's not an eternal thing. I think things like that have to happen. It is inevitable'. Although he understands the liminal limits of *The Fifth Corner* experience, what he fundamentally appreciates is the transformative role that the site and his participation in it have played in his life. 'Whether or not *The Fifth Corner* that we created will last forever, those ideas will always be in my mind, and those friendships will last (as they have)'.

This student also understands that for all that he and his peers accomplished in terms of trying to effect change in the school environment, it is up to each succeeding generation to make its own mark. He sees the phenomenon in broader culture terms, like hip hop and religious institutions, as an expanding and evolving conversation. 'I think problems will continue to exist and be addressed. And if that is true, a *Fifth Corner* should exist and will come to exist in a new forum, new students finding themselves. I think it is something that will last forever in some way, shape, or form'.

Thus, although their world view was forever changed when they realized the power they could have to motivate change, the students also cynically understand that as it goes in hip hop, so it goes here. They accept the exploitation and commodification of their creation by the very administrative powers they had challenged. On learning that *The Fifth Corner* is a site for recruiting tours, one student recalls:

It is obvious that the administration didn't like it at first. They wanted to whitewash it, but when the arts instructor stood up for us, they realized they couldn't, so they co-opted it as an example of how enlightened and progressive our students are. I remember the head of

admissions coming back there. She never gave personal tours except VIP tours—upper class white families—but she would come back there and show what the students have done. She didn't talk to us, or have them talk to us; she just pointed us out. It was like it was almost a zoo and we were caged animals. And she would show them this wall and say 'look how smart these students are, how enlightened we are, this discussion is going on. It is really great.' And we were thinking how stupid and two-faced this was because a month before they were thinking about how to whitewash this and get rid of it.

Yet on another, less cynical level, the creators, informed by several years of college experience, also appreciated that they were participating in a larger cultural tradition of hip hop and its evolution. The trajectory from guerilla art to brochure art, from religious cult to institution, is simply 'Gentrification. That is the way it goes. If anything, it just allows people to see the potential of high school juniors. Ideally I hope it inspires people and helps them overcome their fears of pushing some buttons and helps them find themselves and find voice'.

Reluctant to offer a normative evaluation of the process that most hip hop expression undergoes, from underground to mainstream, a participant observed the following about *The Fifth Corner*:

It becomes less your own but at the same time that seemed to be the trajectory it was taking. Our group of friends had what is lasting and we have that experience. It is a piece of public forum and art work. We all understand that. It is for everyone. When you take a public space and transform it into something like that other people have as much of a right to go down and see that and learn and have the opportunity to make it part of themselves, too. It changes but I don't think it is necessarily good or bad. It is just the way it works.

Just as private religiosity is adapted to institutional forms of expression, so the creators understand that the same fate awaits *The Fifth Corner*. Now that their cult has become sanctioned by the very institution it challenged, its original inspiration 'risks getting lost and forgotten about'. They appreciate the efforts of the arts instructor who presides as the unofficial griot because they know that 'all it takes is for a few classes to not know about it and pass it on to the classes below them and it will disappear'. Still, because they are adolescents who are not quite prepared to move into adulthood and need the props of their glory days to give them direction, many 'would like it to keep going', even though they recognize that on some level, despite its hip hop origins and

multicultural crew, it engendered a movement with ‘an element [that] was futile’. The futility arose, not from their original inspiration and participation, but when they opened up their sacred space to others. ‘When I first started it was the few kids in our school that were from minority backgrounds that posed the questions; and as long as it stayed small and independent and from that minority it had a sense of authenticity’. Now, however, ‘as it gets more mainstream it loses that’ and becomes ‘a bunch of white kids talking about white kids’.⁴

Despite the adult perspective at which they have arrived, the creators of the Fifth Corner recognize the ways in which they have been forever transformed by their experience. By providing a liminal space for their transition to adulthood—their rite of passage—*The Fifth Corner* served a religious function for these ostensibly secular hip hop aficionados. Playing an important role in the reinvention of their sense of self at a crucial juncture in their lives (Forman 2002b: 89), hip hop substituted for more traditional structures and rituals to guide their maturation. As religion does for many, it gave them a way of life and a reason to live. The creators instinctively fashioned a bottom-up religious response so characteristic of imaginative forms of religiosity in America. The texts of hip hop helped them to construct locally validated selves and senses of community that were simultaneously linked to shared notions of identity on a broader cultural scale.

As one student who was a participant recently remarked on returning to *The Fifth Corner*: ‘As I stared at the paintings and words that were meant to express the feelings of a few students who felt their voices were not heard, I realized how well everything I stand for was expressed on the walls and how well the mural also tells my own story’. In the (African) American religious tradition, the boys called and got a response. They found their voice when they gave others a voice. And they found their place when they changed the rules of geometry and added a fifth corner.

Notes

1. This ethnography is based on the experience of the author who taught at the site during the period in which this activity occurred. Although she no longer teaches at the school, she has remained in contact with many from the original group; several assisted her in conducting interviews with participants and gathering data for this study.

2. ‘To all my people who can’t walk home or take the Golden Gate Bridge, to all the MUNI and BART [public transportation] riders [these are references to modes of transportation and neighbourhoods that the students of colour could not afford], those with

gangs outside their houses, those who can't do their homework until everyone in their house is asleep and do it on the kitchen table. To all those who share a room who have ever tagged [painted graffiti] on a stop sign; who have listened to KMEL [a hip hop radio station], who hear Tupac's [Shakur, a murdered rap artist] lyrics, understand, who know which colours not to wear in certain neighbourhoods [a reference to gang affiliation], to all those who came here and wanted out and said to themselves "is it worth it?" who couldn't find one person in a class of 100 who understood them, who were afraid, afraid of the future. To those whose skin is darker than the 'average' student, who get confused with the one other person of your race...to You...I wish you the best. I mean this. Stay true to yourself and never forget where you come from. Don't ever think that someone is better than you at anything. [The school] has caused a lot of people to lose their identities and change them into people with no unique qualities because the qualities that made them unique are looked down upon. Don't let this happen. Be you. Be who you are. And be it for yourself. You are lucky to go to [here]. You have been given a chance that probably all your old friends were never offered. True, you have to put up with a lot and that can take its toll. But make this place yours. It is the key to many doors. But you must open them for yourself. So keep your grades up, learn something, and you will succeed. So much I have to say but not enough space on this wall to put it down. If when you find yourself struggling in this place, make sure you have your support network of friends, people who make you laugh, no matter how down you are. They will help you through the tough times. You are not going to find anybody like you here. Just find a crew that is cool, and is funny and that you can chill and become tight with without having to change. I hope you take my advice to heart and lead long successful lives. To the brown skinned ladies much love. I am not lying when I say that this place is going to be the toughest on you. I've seen more girls get broken by this place and leave than I have seen graduate. I've seen the stresses caused bring you to tears and I've seen the few who make it through become totally different from the people that they were when they came here. Stay strong. I am not going to front [pretend] like I even understand what you are going through. To all of you here right now and those come as long as this wall stands. Stay strong. There are people who will listen. But be careful (more so than anyone else) of the things that can turn you. Be wary of the party scene, sports teams, school productions, even your own close friends. Don't avoid, just be wary. Once again, much respect and much love. To all the people who have supported me and whose conversations have gone beyond wassup [what is up], thank you. To those of you who read this and understand and sadly there is still no one to talk to, call me: [number]. Stay up.'

3. The arts instructor who was The Fifth Corner's most ardent defender cites one tangible outcome of *The Fifth Corner* that sustains its original function. From this movement came what the school calls 'forums', an online bulletin board. 'You can have a forum about different things with a moderator, people who are responsible for monitoring things. About classes, clubs, which is good because it is a way for students to have a chance to express themselves. Huge numbers of students participate. This is what *The Fifth Corner* message board had turned into. This is the new open mic'. Although this forum inspired by The Wall is, as one student noted, a user-friendly and private form of communication with enough categories that anyone can find a subject, it is also several steps removed from the hip hop culture that inspired and permeated *The Fifth Corner*. The online environment lacks any spatial designation of sacrality and does not provide for individual creative impulse and collective spiritual experience in the same way. As the arts instructor observes: 'Art-wise [the forum] doesn't serve. No one is writing poetry. No artistry. This is the new way of doing free speech'. Furthermore, 'the computer is so easy to go to that it doesn't let people think about things like they had to with The

Wall. It wasn't just verbal garbage. You had to put yourself out there. But the good thing about the forum is that they are all signed. There is no way to run away from it.'

4. Indeed, the school's official website now features a section on *The Fifth Corner* (albeit hard to find by simple navigation) and claims that the site moved the school in the direction urged by one of its founders: 'Respect individuality. Respect Diversity.'

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