

A Deeper Rap

Examining the Relationship between Hip Hop, Rap and Adolescent Spirituality

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Abstract

As counsellors working with adolescents, and concerned with young people's wellbeing, we cannot discount hip hop and rap as "mere noise"—an annoyance to be turned off and ignored. Despite negative press, these two forms of music have survived and flourished, and can have a huge impact on our youth. This essay argues that taking the time to pause, investigate, and reflect on these two closely related musical genres, and their impact on adolescent lives and development, will lead us to a deeper understanding of the world of adolescents and the forging of stronger empathic working relationships. It addresses questions concerning the ways in which hip hop and rap speak to adolescents' meaning-making and identity formation, and how they contribute to their sense of place and space, both individually and communally. It supports the importance of these two often-misunderstood musical forms in adolescents' lives—in short, it shows the positive impact rap and hip hop can have on adolescent spirituality.

Visit any community in any country where adolescents reside, and the rhythmic beat and unique lyrics mixed with the borrowed sounds of musical phrases that combine to form rap and hip hop will be heard pulsating from private homes, public institutions, and open spaces. The importance of music as a "ubiquitous form of human expression and experience" (Reddick & Beresin, 2002, p. 51) has been highlighted in many studies focusing on adolescents (North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003; Tekman & Hortacsu, 2002). Results have shown how music provides a vehicle through which they can "portray an image to the outside world and ... satisfy their emotional needs" (North et al., 2000, p. 255).

“[C]elebrated, sometimes controversial [but] undeniably influential ... [hip hop is] an attitude borne [sic] out of music” (Chappell, 2005, p. 52). Although regarded at their inception as passing fads (Banfield, 2004; Thompson, 1996), hip hop and rap have risen to become powerful economic forces, and in today’s uncertain world, have become a global phenomenon with far-reaching effects (Banfield, 2004; Chappell, 2005). A pervasive presence within the music world and beyond, not only are they unique forms of commercial entertainment, but also platforms for social commentary and criticism, delivering guidelines for living and inciting a sense of pride in their followers. Acting as an “engine and mirror of ... social movement” (Trapp, 2005, p. 1482), the strength and depth of their influence visibly dominate all facets of life for their followers.

Hip-hop artists draw attention to struggles suffered through oppression and injustice. They speak of religion, migration, and national pride, and give voice to dreams of hope and promise. Alongside this, through what is termed gangsta rap, they describe scenes of violence, misogyny, death, and destruction. Consequently, there are many who believe that these musical genres are detrimental to adolescent mental health (Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Roberts, Dimsdale, East, & Friedman, 1998), a view that is perpetuated via the media, fuelling parental fears. As music plays an extremely important role in adolescence, satisfying certain adolescent social, emotional, and developmental needs (Schwartz & Fouts, 2003), this raises questions about the power, magnetism, and influence of hip hop and rap, their effect on young people’s mental health, and thus on their spirituality.

Neither concrete nor measurable, spirituality is a subjective concept that defies definition. More than religious beliefs, Burke and Miranti (1995) describe it as encompassing the “quality that lies at the very core and essence of the client’s being, a core that transcends the physical and material aspects of existence, which is untouchable and often times undefinable, [but] so necessary for an explanation to one’s existence” (p. 2). As such, it forms part of how adolescents make sense of the world and see themselves within it.

Hip bones

During the 1970s, the United States experienced intense political unrest, including racial disharmony, civil rights, and anti-war protests (Banfield, 2004). It was during this period that homegrown music, known as “black” music, initially surfaced, being performed on the streets by marginalised youth (Dimitriadis, 2001). Theirs was a life

experience full of disillusionment and alienation: of gang wars, death, unemployment, poverty, increasing inequalities between rich and poor, feelings of powerlessness, and bleak futures (Ross & Rose, 1994; Taylor, 2003).

Comprised of rhyming lyrics, known as rap, spoken over pre-existing music borrowed from other sources, hip hop was cheap, easy to produce, and became a means of giving voice to the youth of marginalised black minority communities inhabiting inner-city ghettos of Brooklyn, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (Thompson, 1996; Whiteley, Bennett, & Hawkins, 2004). Drawing attention to the harsh realities of urban life, it provided a vehicle through which frustrations and tensions could be expressed publicly (Chappell, 2005; Mahiri & Conner, 2003). In this way, young people formed protests, made political statements, and “rework[ed their] local identity” (Mitchell, 2001). This in turn mediated their feelings of powerlessness by instilling a sense of hope, aspiration, and solidarity (Tabb Powell, 1991).

The origins of hip hop can be traced to black “rhythm and blues” music; to the early days of black slavery in America and its gospel songs; to reggae and Rastafarian culture, and to West Africa where, centuries ago, ancient traditions and folklore were passed down through generations by a select group of revered members of communities who were known as griots (Banfield, 2004; DJ Dubhead, 2005; Imani & Vera, 1996; Tabb Powell, 1991). These storytellers orally recited both tribal history and real-time events, to the rhythmic accompaniment of the beat of drums. Today’s rap and hip-hop artists, having resurrected these verbal skills, are considered by many to be modern-day prophets (Trapp, 2005), “the new griots ... the wellsprings of true knowledge ... tell[ing] the real story of the ghetto” (Imani & Vera, 1996, p. 170).

Soul search

Muss (1996) draws attention to Erikson’s lifespan model of human development in which adolescence is described as being a period of turmoil, as individuals work through critical developmental tasks that can, if successfully achieved, lead to a stable sense of identity, or conversely a negative one—identity diffusion. Yalom (1980) has drawn attention to the importance that meaning has in human lives, pointing out that “to live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke ... considerable distress” (p. 422). As adolescents progress on their journey of discovery, growth, and identity formation, they also partake in deep soul-searching and inner reflection, pondering questions that focus on meaning, meaninglessness, loneliness, and the surrounding confusion that these concepts create (Reddick & Beresin, 2002). It follows

that they would be drawn to and identify with hip-hop artists who echo these same sentiments in many of their songs. For example, in “Somewhere I Belong”, Linkin Park (2003) rap of getting “lost in the nothingness inside of me ... just stuck hollow and alone.” Similar sentiments are found in their “By Myself” (2000), when they tell of finding it difficult to “hold on,” for although bombarded with questions, they remain stuck in a void; no matter how hard they try they cannot find the answers.

... it's all too much to take in / I can't hold on / to anything watching everything spin / with thoughts of failure sinking in ... / if I'm killed by the questions like a cancer / then I'll be buried in the silence of the answer ... / ... no matter what I do, how hard I try / I can't seem to convince myself why / I'm stuck on the outside.

Recurring thought patterns of confusion, insecurity, and the accompanying overwhelming feelings of being lost, looking for answers, and losing control, reappear in Linkin Park's song “Crawling” (2003), which describes feelings of sinking within oneself, being lost, and not knowing who one really is.

... there's something inside me that pulls beneath the surface / consuming / confusing / this lack of self-control I fear is never ending / controlling / I can't seem to find myself again / my walls are closing in ... / I've felt this way before so insecure ... / discomfort, endlessly has pulled itself upon me / distracting / reacting / against my will I stand beside my own reflection / it's haunting ...

In a similar vein, New Zealand artist Che-Fu also ponders questions surrounding meaning and meaninglessness but turns his thoughts outwards when, in “Hold Tight” (2005), he tells of how his “mind keeps on searching, for a reason why, our world keeps turning, needlessly we die.”

In their journey of self-discovery, adolescents push boundaries, test new ground, experiment with different personae, and find a sense of security by identifying with a larger group. While originally created as music by and for the black community, today's hip hop is a genre that appeals across all cultures and ethnicities internationally. In the words of Dimitriadis (2001), hip hop, “[i]f nothing else ... 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” (p. xii). In this postmodern age, more than ever before, young people are experiencing and struggling with the impact of such issues as poverty, high unemployment, broken families, lack of parental support, and uncertain futures.

Indeed, many "... youth of the hip-hop generation have never known the relative security that some of their parents and even grandparents knew" (Hazzard-Donald, 1996, p. 225).

Walk the walk—talk the talk

As an answer to the struggles and uncertainties of modern life, hip hop has become a "ritual [that has] flowered into a self-contained culture" (Banfield, 2004, p. 130) comprising not only music but also verbal discourse, graffiti art, break-dancing, a dress code, jewellery, and a rich language. These elements combine to form a strong and totally consuming experience for its followers, enabling them to become fully immersed in this alternative culture. In so doing, they forge relationships with others which thus enable them to establish and maintain a sense of community while moving forward in their personal development (Reddick & Beresin, 2002). Theirs is not only an allegiance to a specific musical genre but also "to the individuals who make it, a way to friendship and kinship with others, and a road to personal identity through belonging" (Reddick & Beresin, 2002, p. 58).

It is well recognised that adolescents adopt the mannerisms of their heroes through the process of modelling (Santrock 2003; Wingood et al., 2003). With respect to hip hop, this is visible in adolescents' adoption of the same dress code, values, language, and symbols as the artists use: they walk the walk and talk the talk. It would follow that as they form a strong connection with the rappers, adolescents also take to heart the messages they hear that "affirm the[ir] experiences and identities" (Ross & Rose, 1994, p. 84). Consequently, hip-hop artists and the rap lyrics they compose constitute a "powerful force for identity, solidarity, and emotional reinforcement" (Tabb Powell, 1991, p. 24) by providing a certain education about values and attitudes, and instilling a sense of self-pride and self-improvement (Chappell, 2005; Tabb Powell, 1991). It can therefore be argued that hip-hop artists are leaders and role models (Trapp, 2005).

The "Queen's" message

The widely held values of giving and of making the world a better place for others can be found in the personal beliefs of many hip-hop artists. For example, the songs of American hip-hop artist Queen Latifah provide a positive role model for young women (Mayo, 2001). During her years in the hip-hop scene, Queen Latifah has addressed societal hypocrisy by passing comment on social issues including the non-existence of equal opportunities for women, calling for changes in attitudes. She sees

her task as being not only one of entertainment but also of educating her followers. She always promotes herself as an individual with high self-esteem, showing others that they should treat themselves as royalty. An advocate for women's rights, she promotes feminism and highlights issues such as the social stereotyping of women, sexual promiscuity, and peer pressure (Trapp, 2005).

New Zealand hip-hop artist Ermehn has spoken out concerning his beliefs about the importance of providing positive messages to audiences. Having lived a life of gang membership and crime, for which he spent time in prison, he changed his ways and is telling his story through rap, in the hope that youth will learn from the mistakes he made in his early life (Buchanan, 2005; McLean, 2005).

Fears prevail concerning possible negative influences of various hip-hop raps relating to issues such as sex, violence, crime, and misogyny. A study by Mahiri and Conner (2003) found that in contrast to others' fears, adolescents were fully cognisant of the nature and causes of crimes in their respective communities, and in fact possessed increased desires to avoid such situations in their own lives. In addition, studies have also found that adolescents will most often become co-creators in their listening experience by forming their own meanings about what they are hearing (Reddick & Beresin, 2002). It must also be remembered that not all hip-hop music carries negative messages, and this is the case particularly in the New Zealand scene, where very little gangsta rap is produced.

Resonating culture

When considering local adolescents' search for meaning, New Zealand artists cannot be overlooked, as these artists integrate their own cultural backgrounds and indigenous languages into their raps (Shute, 2004). Focusing more on nationalism, pride in race, cultural heritage, and raising the self-esteem of their listeners, they speak to the cultural spirituality of their audiences. In an article based on the use of native languages in hip hop, Mitchell (2001) draws attention to New Zealand groups, such as Upper Hutt Possee, who integrate traditional Māori instruments along with calls to ancestors, spirits of the forest, and guardians of the sea. In addition they employ both English and te reo Māori in their raps. Mitchell (2001) sees this use of indigenous language as being not only a form of "resistance vernacular" (p. 11) in respect of resisting the use of the accepted language of the dominant culture, but also one of "self-assertion and self-preservation" (p. 11) of these minority groups, that helps connect them musically with the struggles of other marginalised groups on a global scene.

In a rap entitled “Land of Plenty”, Pauly Fuemana (1997), a hip-hop artist of Niuean and Māori heritage performing under the name OMC, instils a sense of pride in heritage by painting a verbal picture of New Zealand:

a long white cloud ancient land ... / bays of plenty, the bluff, the cape, / streaming sands, boiling place....

Then, in the chorus, he reminds the audience that New Zealand is a

land of plenty ... / land of hope ... / land of good times ... / land of love.

Similarly, in “He Kotahi” Che-Fu (2001) raps in both Māori and English of migration, times past, and the strength that can be gained from the knowledge of our ancestors and their experiences.

yes we're moving, across the water, / like our fathers before, we remain steadfast and sure ... / unified together, we will greet the risen sun, / shoulder to shoulder ... / back in the past where our people once did walk, / now we're running in....

Beating the odds

Culbertson (1998) draws attention to Worthington’s themes of religion which can also be applied to spirituality, whereby individuals are provided with “hope ... reassurance ... [and] ... a sense of self-esteem or spiritual worthiness” (p. 27). Despite gangsta rap lyrics conveying such themes as crime and violence, there is a plethora of hip-hop rap conveying the opposite. New Zealand hip-hop artist Scribe believes that artists can use their music as a means of instilling a positive state of mind in their listeners, thus enhancing their self-esteem, for “... you can be poor and still be rich ... you can be rich in thoughts and be rich in spirituality ... and just knowing who you are can make you rich enough to know that material things don’t really matter” (Shute, 2004, p. 166). Scribe is a hip-hop artist whose raps tell his own story of success: how he grew up poor, had a tough life and struggled but held onto a dream, made sacrifices, and succeeded. In his rap “Dreaming” (2003), Scribe tells of how ...

I came a long way since back in the day / ... I sacrificed late nights ... just to stay home alone / had my eyes on the prize, and my mind on my goal ... / I was down and out / struggling / wondered how I'm gonna make it through / I've got a dream / Holding on ...

These and Ermehn's narratives are clear examples of "one person's growth hav[ing] a ripple effect whereby many others ... are benefited" (Yalom, 1980, p. 434). The lyrics are full of hope and promise that it is possible to succeed against all odds, to rise above adversity.

Yet other raps speak of lifestyles, providing guidelines for living a better life. For example, in "The Crossroads" (1998), the group Bone Thugs-n-Harmony incite their audiences to think about what will happen when they die and Judgement Day comes.

... whatcha gonna do (now tell me what) / when there ain't no where to run? / when judgment comes for you, / ... and whatcha gonna do (now tell me what) / when there ain't no where to hide? / when judgment comes for you / cause it's gonna come for you.

The rap continues with advice about how life should be lived: that despite daily temptations surrounding humanity, people should follow the Lord who keeps them safe. They should pray and concentrate on getting to heaven.

God bless you working on a plan to Heaven / follow the Lord all 24/7 days, God is who we praise / even though the devil's all up in my face / but he keeping me safe and in my place, say grace ... / we living our lives to eternal our soul aye-oh aye-oh ... / praaaaay, and we pray and we pray, and we pray, and we pray / everyday, everyday, everyday, everyday.

A different slant on guidelines for living can be seen in Che-Fu's album *Beneath the Radar* (2005). In "Lightwork" he offers criticism concerning big egos when he comments on what happens to "dudes who have the bighead attitudes with the loudest voices" (DJ Sir-Vere, 2005, p. 29):

it's always lonely at the top / you can only rely on yourself / said a great champion only moments before he fell / he cried ... many hands make light work / going solo might turn good to so so ... / in the evening jungle of your life / when the road is nowhere to be found / then one must kneel, and follow family prints on the ground / back to where you once were, you can't always rely on yourself / the singlemindedly strong, find it hardest to reach out for help they don't know ... / many hands make light work.

Myth, poetry, and archetype

Humans create meaning out of their lives through constructing stories. These narratives are continually reconstructed according to life experiences, forming personal myths (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Within these life stories, individuals “construct a coherent view of self” (McAdams, 1993, p. 254) and unconsciously adopt various mythical archetypes that speak to their character and actions. Following this line of theory, hip hop can be described as incorporating a mythopoetical form of spirituality.

Rap lyrics narrate the life experiences of the artists, and it is through stories that individuals come to understand themselves, their place in society and their relationship to others. In a study of adolescents’ constructions of self, history, and identity, Dimitriadis (2001) found that the most influential narratives are provided by popular culture. Most of hip hop’s raps are centred on a small number of what Dimitriadis (2001) refers to as powerful psychologised figures whose stories—their characters, plots, messages, and powerful symbols—are extremely important in respect to adolescent identity. One such example is the life story of Tupac Shakur, an American hip-hop artist who was killed when in his early twenties. When alive, Tupac drew on myths for his lyrics, and myths have since been created around his life and death.

Much of what Tupac spoke of in his raps centred on a violent and criminal lifestyle. He portrayed himself as invulnerable, living a life of crime whereby all problems were settled with violence, promoting himself as being invincible to any form of retribution. He would verbally attack other rappers, show defiance toward any form of law and authority, but at the same time expressed respect and tenderness towards women, in particular his mother. Since his death he has been “resurrected” and become something of an icon to young people, for through his songs he was an inspiration to many who identified with his stories in their everyday lives. Despite his death, it has been suggested that Tupac has come to represent the modern-day archetype of invulnerability, and indeed, because some believe he knew of it in advance, the events surrounding his death have been likened to the crucifixion, and Tupac as a willing participant in his own sacrifice (Dimitriadis, 2001).

In the telling of these specific narratives, hip-hop artists express themselves creatively through a unique form of language that Shute (2005) believes is an artform in itself, one that has strong links to poetry. He draws attention to the artists’ concentration on delivering lyrics against a minimal musical backing, although the rhythmic qualities are built around the rhyme structure of the lines. Each song track has a beat, a base line, and a single melody line, with the lyrics remaining of

fundamental importance at its core. In this way, hip hop links to the history of poetry which exists somewhere between the spoken and singing voice. Shute (2005) points to poetic techniques that hip-hop artists have adopted, such as the use of alliteration, assonance, metaphors, and similes. In addition, words are deliberately misspelled so as to emphasise the language's individuality, and to suggest new meanings. As an example, Shute refers to the New Zealand group Foot Souljahs—noting the misspelling of soldiers—and suggests this refers to a soldier of low rank as well as someone who is full of soul and has links to Rastafarianism.

Spiritual terrain

Not only is hip hop a poetic artform, but it also creates a spiritual geography, in terms of both place and space. In one respect it provides, as has been shown, the “concept of place as a means of human identity [whereby individuals can] ... adapt, create, and re-create their surroundings” (Henderson, 1993). Sheldrake (1996) proposes that landscapes are more than mere physical features; they are the geography of our imagination.

Accordingly, in respect to hip hop, the concept of place as a reference point for human identity pertains to identification with, and a sense of belonging to, a group. Strength is drawn from the cultural heritage of such a group, which could include family of origin, ethnicity, or musical taste. A sense of place may also be felt by way of personal experiences linked to surrounding environments (Forman, 2002). Whether the experiences are related to group or place, their influence on identity formation is particularly important for today's youth.

Exploring these concepts of spiritual geography and the provision of a sense of space, Forman (2002) points out the strong emphasis that hip hop's lyrics place on location in terms of space within urban areas, commenting on how this “highly detailed and consciously defined spatial awareness” (p. 3) is creatively significant, as it is a key factor that distinguishes hip hop from other musical genres. As well as creating physical space, Forman believes that the nature of hip hop's discourse also creates a sense of space, insofar as it affords definitions and understandings of social landscapes that contribute to forming cultural identities in the face of hostility and oppression.

By way of illustration, Rose (1996) has portrayed a scene in which she was involved prior to a hip-hop concert, when all of the concert-goers were searched. She described feelings of fear and hostility as her turn approached, followed by the accusatory stare of the security guard when a nail file was found in her bag. Despite a satisfactory

explanation, Rose's "language of entitlement couldn't erase [her] sense of alienation ... [despite being in a public place she] felt ... unwanted ... [in] hostile, alien territory ..." (p. 239). Accordingly, rap takes the events occurring within the environment, "... symbolically appropriates urban space ... [and in so doing] gives voice to the tensions and contradictions ... [to make them] ... work on behalf of the dispossessed" (Rose, 1994a, pp. 71–72).

Don't turn off the music

Music feeds the soul, affecting its audiences physically, emotionally, and therefore spiritually, and hip hop is no exception. To many, it is mere noise that assaults the senses, but "when it brings noise ... [it] also conjures spirit" (Taylor, 2003, p. 108). In fact, Taylor believes it to be more intense than emotion, a "radical creation ... [with] a conjuring power" (p. 114). According to Taylor, hip hop and rap are full of magic and mystery that affect individuals, both physically through their rhythm, and culturally by way of a combination of sounds, rhythms, beats, and musical intervals. When another important instrument—the voice—is added to the mix, its own unique range of musical tones contributes to the power of hip hop's sense rhythms and percussion sounds (Rose, 1994a).

In order to demonstrate the complexity of this musical genre, Rose (1994b) draws attention to the polyrhythmic layering that is found in hip hop. Despite its apparent simplicity, hip hop is built around the three concepts of flow, layers, and breaks (Ross & Rose, 1994). When creating hip hop, two turntables are used simultaneously, layering musical sounds upon each other, creating backbeats, and adding snatches of other sounds all mixed together to produce a feeling experience for the listener (Imani & Vera, 1996). This is then used as background for the rapper's voice which comes in over the top. Above all, the main ingredients of creativity and flow are of the utmost importance (Forman, 2002; Ross & Rose, 1994). When listening to hip hop, individuals unconsciously become part of an experience that involves an inner transformation: they listen to themselves through the music, and a change occurs within the self, thereby transcending the self on temporal, spatial, physical, and cultural levels (Taylor, 2003).

Describing hip hop as a spiritual practice, Taylor (2003) refers to it as being liminal, liberatory, and integrative. The nature of hip-hop discourse is such that it creates, within its audience, agency of protest, action, social comment, and therefore of liberation. Taylor (2003) views the hip-hop artists' narratives—in relating their

criticisms of society and the challenges and indictments they make against hypocrisy and inequality—as being “a struggle for liberatory experience amid entrapment” (p. 119). He suggests such actions form spiritual practices that are also liminal, as the discourse is placed “on a threshold ... between entrapment and liberation” (p. 122). Perkinson (2003) likens the impact of hip hop and rap to that of shamanism, as he views adolescents as living on a threshold between the death of childhood and the life of adulthood which they are not entitled to join until their late twenties. In this respect, because much of hip hop focuses on death and “echo[es] with transcendent and tragic power” (p. 143), it is liminal, sitting on the threshold between one world and the next.

Rapt with rapping

The nature of spirituality is subjective and extremely difficult to define (Everts & Agee, 1994; Ingersoll, 1995). However, Cornett (1998) has identified what he believes to be the six most relevant elements underlying spirituality, namely “meaning in life, values, mortality, organization of the universe, suffering, and transcendence” (p. 21). It follows, therefore, that hip hop, far from being a mere noise and an irritating presence on our airwaves, provides agency in adolescent spirituality on many levels. It contributes to identity formation and speaks to a spirituality of liberation by giving voice to marginalised youth. It facilitates the formation of bonds, friendships, and relationships (Wubbolding, 2005), and affirms adolescent experiences and identities—all of which are empowering, instilling a sense of freedom within the self. Hip hop provides a spiritual geographical landscape by way of creating both place and space through its use of metaphor, symbol, and conversational discourse, its cultural roots, and its internal experiences. It also fulfils yet another function by encouraging its listeners to dream, to “create visible, viable, and real cultural agency ... [and it] helps [them] find the strength to make a better way” (Banfield, 2004, p. 139), thus enabling them to transcend the self.

Hip hop is more than just music. It is a culture, a way of life that provides not only a unique form of language and dress code but also a value system that raises self-esteem and instils pride in indigenous ethnicity as its rappers call their listeners to unite as a people, take pride in their race, and learn their language. In describing how individuals’ spirituality and soulfulness work together to form the foundations of human life, Moore (1992) has said that the “goal of the soul path [is] to feel existence ... to know life first hand, to exist fully in context. [That] spiritual practice is sometimes described as walking in the footsteps of another ... [and accordingly] [t]he soul becomes greater

and deeper through the living out of the messes and the gaps” (p. 260). Hip hop and rap fulfil this spiritual practice and goal of the soul path as their artists speak of the realities of life in the raw as they are experienced. The artists tell the truth; they “tell it like it is.” They form a creative and powerful voice that calls to the masses globally, and to individual souls at a deep experiential and emotional level, and in so doing they speak into the soulfulness of adolescent spirituality.

Postscript

In the writer’s counselling practice in a secondary school, a 15-year-old boy, grieving for several friends who had died during the year in tragic circumstances, recently presented for counselling. Coming from a family of patched gang members—a path he does not want to follow—he was not only struggling with feelings of distress and loneliness, but also questioning his sense of self, identity, and belonging. During the session he talked of the importance of hip hop and rap in his life. My being able to show some knowledge of the artists and lyrics he was referencing added both strength and depth to our empathic working relationship and a new dimension to the counselling process as he became more animated, disclosing in greater depth the effects these two musical genres have on his inner sense of wellbeing. He described how he receives solace from lyrics that echo his life, his experiences and feelings. With earphones and iPod he can escape from daily reality and transcend to a place where he gains a sense of calm, peace, and hope. This encounter highlighted the importance of exploring these two musical genres, rather than discounting them, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the adolescent world and the impact this music has on the wellbeing of our youth.

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