

Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 5 Numbers 1 & 2

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Received 1 August 2022; Accepted 10 August 2022; Published Online October 2024

DANA HORTON
St. Olaf College

‘The Illuminati want my mind, soul and my body’: Three 6 Mafia, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and occult knowledge in hip hop

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of occult knowledge in rap music, which I define as using supernatural, fantastical and spiritual methods associated with the occult to access hidden information that heightens one’s knowledge of self. In hip hop, the fifth element (knowledge) is usually associated with social justice, liberation, education and self-awareness, and this article asks us to consider how rappers’ usage of occult knowledge challenges familiar conceptions of this element. Through an examination of Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s music, I argue that occult knowledge is crucial to understanding the fifth element for four reasons. First, rappers are utilizing occult methods, such as seances, tarot readings and pacts with the devil, to increase their knowledge of self, and the hidden knowledge they access through these methods increases their self-awareness, which makes it easier for them to achieve their goals. Second, I broaden the connections amongst hip hop, religion and spirituality to include the occult, as hip hop and the occult is an understudied area in academia. Third, I argue that by utilizing a social justice, activist framework to understand knowledge, scholars are ignoring

KEYWORDS

occult knowledge
spirituality
religion
self-awareness
the Illuminati
Satan
Ouija
gangsta rap

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constructions of self-knowledge, such as occult knowledge, that do not fit into the 'conscious' rap category. As Afrika Bambaataa admits, knowledge through liberation and social justice was not hip hop's initial purpose. Finally, I disrupt the hip hop academic canon by studying rappers who do not receive scholarly attention, as conversations about American rap tends to centre around Kanye West, Tupac, Kendrick Lamar and Jay-Z, who are 'safe' rappers that fit into familiar academic paradigms and methodologies. By examining occult knowledge in rap music, it opens up possibilities for what form the 'spiritual consciousness' aspect of the fifth element takes on.

DA INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE DARK SIDE...

On 2 December 2021, Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony performed on *Verzuz*, a show created by Timbaland and Swizz Beatz in 2020 where artists with similar musical styles battle each other. Although the show began as a web series during the COVID-19 pandemic, Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony performed live at the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles, California with Fat Joe as the host (Elibert 2021). It is extremely appropriate that these two artists were paired together, as there are many parallels between their careers. The groups have a frenemy type relationship where one minute, they are collaborating with each other (Layzie Bone appeared on DJ Paul's 'Bitch Move', a song from the 2017 album *Underground Vol. 17 for Da Summa*), and then, the next minute, they are trashing each other in interviews with most of their beef stemming from copycat allegations.

One reason why critics often compare Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony is because of their usage of supernatural and occult lyrics and imagery, as well as their innovative influence on the horrorcore rap genre (Elibert 2021). Mikko Koivisto defines horrorcore as

a genre of rap music often regarded as a sub-genre or a branch of gangsta rap. While gangsta rap draws from the violent aspects of inner city life, and offers critical insights and social commentary – for example by critiquing the structural racism in American law enforcement and criminal justice system – horrorcore is more focused on violence and death in ways that are similar to that of horror cinema and literature, often embracing supernatural elements and other narrative devices that are typical in horror fiction.

(Koivisto 2018)

Although Koivisto argues that we are in a 'post-horrorcore rap' era, when I listen to current rap music, I hear Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's influence. Their sound had a huge impact on 1990s hip hop, mixing gangsta rap with the occult, and we can trace the recent resurgence of horrorcore rap back to them.

During *Verzuz*, Three 6 Mafia brought out Project Pat and Duke Deuce to perform the 2019 hit 'Crunk Ain't Dead', a song that samples Project Pat's 'If You Ain't From My Hood', and this demonstrates the influence they have on current rappers. Mixing gangsta rap with the occult not only helped make them a unique presence in mainstream rap, but it also brings up conversations about how their music fits into hip hop culture, specifically their relationship to knowledge, the fifth element of hip hop. In this article, I will examine the

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concept of occult knowledge in Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's music. I chose to focus on these two groups because they are understudied in academic scholarship, despite being innovative and important presences in 1990s/early 2000s mainstream rap (Utley 2012). Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony challenge the connections between knowledge and gangsta rap, as their horrorcore style of gangsta rap does not work within familiar social justice, education and liberation frameworks associated with the fifth element of hip hop.

Hailing from Memphis, Tennessee, Three 6 Mafia has gone through many line-up and name changes throughout its reign, but the most famous one consists of DJ Paul, Lord Infamous, Juicy J, Koopsta Knicca, Gangsta Boo and Crunchy Black from 1995 to 2001. They are also closely affiliated with Project Pat, La Chat, Frayser Boy, 8Ball and MJG, and Lil Wyte. Their breakout hit was 'Tear Da Club Up 97', which appeared on their third album *Chapter 2: World Domination*. Like many of Three 6 Mafia's music, it is a remixed version of an earlier song. Three 6 Mafia embodies Memphis rap, as this subgenre has a darker, more sinister tone. Three 6 Mafia was the first rap group to win an Oscar with 'It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp' (with Frayser Boy) from the *Hustle & Flow* (2005) soundtrack.

Bone Thugs-N-Harmony are from Cleveland, Ohio and they have not had as many line-up changes as Three 6 Mafia, with Layzie Bone, Wish Bone, Krayzie Bone, Bizzy Bone and Flesh-n-Bone as the core members. Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, as their name suggests, embody the concept of 'rap singers' – the ability to sing raps with melodic harmony, which is a very targeted skill that not many artists do well. In a subtly hilarious moment during their Verzuz battle, Gangsta Boo jokingly asks Bone if they want to be singers or rappers, poking fun at their musical style. They became a mainstream group through their relationship with Eazy-E, as they were signed through Ruthless Records. 'Thuggish Ruggish Bone' featuring Shatasha Williams was their breakout hit, with 'Tha Crossroads', a song dedicated to their deceased loved ones, including Eazy-E, winning the 1997 Grammy for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group. It is a song that successfully showcases their signature rap singing and religious lyrics. They were a highly sought after group in the 1990s, as they worked with prominent artists like Biggie Smalls, Mariah Carey, Big Pun, Tupac and Phil Collins.

The irony is that although Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony are innovators when it comes to the dark possibilities of religion and hip hop, they vehemently deny that they are devil worshippers ('The Southern Lab' 2020). My goal is not to conduct a witch hunt and figure out what rappers worship the devil (that's what conspiracy theory forums are for), as I cannot and will not determine what rappers' personal spiritual practices are. The first person Juicy J thanked in their Oscars acceptance speech for 'It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp' from the film *Hustle and Flow* was Jesus, and in interviews, DJ Paul denies that Three 6 Mafia are devil worshippers, pointing out that his father was a preacher and he believes in God.¹ It is also important to separate a rapper's persona from their actual personality – DJ Paul, the rapper, may utilize occult imagery in his lyrics, but Paul Beauregard may be a devout Christian.² As Perry argues, 'Instead of simply being an individual who presents songs for consumers to buy or listen to, the image of the celebrity becomes conflated with the person. As consumers, we buy that person (or rather that person's image) in its entirety' (2004: 187). Some fans have bought into the idea that Three 6 Mafia worships the devil, in their personal lives, which is why the

1. It is much more socially acceptable for a person to publicly identify as a Christian than admit to worshipping the devil and/or being involved in occult practices. Most mainstream rappers do not admit to worshipping the devil – at least, not publicly.
2. Sometimes, a rapper's persona and their actual personality may intersect, but for the sake of artistic freedom, it is imperative that rappers are allowed the same creative liberties as other artists.

group members are constantly referencing God in their interviews (Burney 2017). I argue that part of this witch hunt is because it is still taboo to admit, in the Black American community, that one does not believe in God, which shows the firm hold that the Black church still has on the community.

METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY

This article is part of a larger project about intersectional spirituality and the occult in hip hop culture. In addition to examining rap lyrics and videos, I incorporate my own spiritual journey into the text, as it influences the way that I approach the materials. Autoethnography in hip hop studies make our practices, schooling and methodologies transparent (Gault 2022; Harrison 2014; Boylorn and Alexander 2016). In the preface to Erica Gault's *Networking the Black Church: Digital Black Christians and Hip Hop*, she demonstrates that 'How we know what we know about our research subjects is just as important as what we know about them. A number of social constructs inform both what we know as ethnographers and what we think we know' (Gault 2022: xxiv, original emphasis). To put Gault's words in the context of this project, how I came to know what I know about the occult and hip hop is just as important as what I learned about the topic. I learned about the occult and hip hop through my upbringing, my personal experiences, and my academic research, and I give all of these categories equal weight in my writing.

My oldest brother is a huge hip hop head, and he played Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's music constantly when I was growing up. It was not until my 20s that I realized the rappers I was drawn to were eccentric, perhaps because I was a little eccentric as well, as I tend to wear multi-coloured hair and do not always feel that I quite fit in anywhere. In addition to Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, my favourite rappers are Missy Elliott, Princess Nokia, DMX, Busta Rhymes, all of whom are eccentric in their own unique ways. I also grew up listening to metal and really enjoyed Korn, Deftones, Soulfly, Dope, Linkin Park, Straight Line Stitch, Candiria, Sevendust and Mushroomhead, so I love rap/metal combinations.

My own relationship to spirituality is quite complicated, as it is an ongoing journey and my views have changed even in the timespan that I've written this article. I grew up in a Baptist household where my mother wanted our family to go to church multiple times a week for Sunday school, Sunday service, Bible study, choir rehearsal and various church events. There are several experiences throughout my life that made me fall out of love with the Baptist church, and the concept of God in particular, which I will discuss in depth in my book project.

I identified as a staunch atheist as a teenager, and it was not until my mid-20s that I was receptive to a spirituality not associated with American Christianity. I became a tarot reader and was interested in new age spirituality, and now that I am in my early 30s, I'm realizing the shortcomings of new age spirituality. My criticisms are similar to the issues I had with Christianity as a teenager. New age spirituality often feels like Christianity with crystals. Perhaps this is another reason why I am drawn to artists who push against traditional understandings of religion, and who are, quite frankly, weird like I am. I am interested in artists who challenge religion and spirituality, even if that challenging sometimes feels rebellious for shock value's sake or like a cheap marketing ploy. The church's role within the Black community has its advantages and disadvantages. From my experiences, it can be welcoming,

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friendly, supportive and cathartic, but it can also be unwelcoming, unfriendly, judgmental and performative.

Due to many professional and personal developments in my life, this *Global Hip Hop Studies* article has seen many transformations. I submitted the first draft of this article prior to becoming an associate editor for *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. Although I have published work on hip hop before (my first book, *Gender, Genre, and Race in Post-Neo-Slave Narratives* [2022] contains a chapter on Missy Elliott and Rah Digga), joining the *JHHS* team and conversing with other hip hop studies scholars made me realize the limitations of my approach to the culture. As a literary scholar primarily trained in English departments (though my BA is in English/African American studies and I always centre Africana methods in my work), I see tensions amongst my schooling, my love of hip hop, and my upbringing. The first draft of this article was primarily lyrical analysis, and although I eliminated some sections, I kept a few in because I still think that my literary approach to Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony has value, as it is the most effective way to highlight the occult knowledge present in their work. Earlier, when I discussed how this project disrupts the academic hip hop canon, I also want to disrupt this attitude that only lyrically complex rappers are allowed space in academia (even the rappers who fall under the gangsta rap category fit into this paradigm).

To conduct this analysis, I studied Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s entire catalogue, including mixtapes and unreleased materials, though I mostly focused on the following materials: *Mystic Stylez* (Three 6 Mafia 1995), *When the Smoke Clears: Sixty 6, Sixty 1* (Three 6 Mafia 2000), *6ix Commandments* (Da Mafia 6ix 2013), *Watch What U Wish...* (Da Mafia 6ix 2015), *Face of Death* (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony 1993), *E 1999 Eternal* (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony 1995), *The Art of War* (1997). Because I was interested in group members’ interpretations of their own lyrics and imagery, I also watched several interviews and documentaries by and about the groups, such as *Hip-Hop Evolution* (Netflix 2016–present), various VladTV interviews, Koopsta Knicca’s *New World Order* documentary, and Bizzy Bone’s interview with Truth Seekah’s podcast.

I did not approach the material with a particular agenda, and rather, let the lyrics, imagery, documentary and interviews dictate how they wanted to be read. As I studied this material, a few common themes emerged, which I will highlight in the upcoming sections. First, the concept of the Illuminati appeared in both groups’ work, which suggests that understanding their usage of the Illuminati is crucial to understanding the occult in rap music. The second theme was the concept of ‘Mr. Ouija’, who is more prominent in Bone Thugs’s work than Three 6 Mafia’s. Third, constructions of the Devil were also important aspects of both groups’ work. At times, the Devil is intertwined with Satan (or even God). It is through analysing their materials that I decided to name this phenomenon ‘occult knowledge’, as their work engages with the supernatural and hidden aspects of the occult, as well as the ability to obtain knowledge that is not readily apparent on Earth and in our sensory experience.

WHAT IS OCCULT KNOWLEDGE?

The definition of occult that I will use in this article is based on both spiritual occultism and hidden occultism. These two things are often intertwined, especially in Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s music. Occult

3. Rapper Mr. Bond is an example of this: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyp7mj/mr-bond-far-right-rapper-on-trial> (accessed 31 July 2022).

knowledge is using supernatural, fantastical and spiritual methods associated with the occult to access hidden information that heightens one's knowledge of self. A foundational characteristic of occult knowledge is that it is not accessible to everyone, nor is it always welcoming or comfortable. My conception of occult knowledge is informed by Travis Gosa's exploration of hip hop as 'counterknowledge', which he defines as 'an alternative knowledge system intended to challenge mainstream knowledge producers such as news media and academia' (Gosa 2011: 187). Although Gosa's study focuses on conspiracy theories and racial paranoia, I am interested in rappers' usage of occult knowledge as a spiritual practice that heightens their self-awareness. Hip hop, as a culture, is a global phenomenon that is no longer limited to the Black American space that it was created in. As the space between hip hop and its foundational roots increases, the possibilities for occult knowledge do as well. White supremacist rappers, for example, appropriate a Black artform to create hateful songs with subliminal disses.³ The fifth element is typically associated with positive, empowering knowledge that helps oppressed people, but as I argued earlier, that is not always how knowledge is construed in hip hop culture. Occult knowledge is unsettling, disturbing and downright scary at times, but uncovering it can lead to a stronger understanding of how knowledge in hip hop works.

The commercialization of occult practices, which Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony participate in, brings up questions of whether using the occult for monetary gain cheapens its spiritual purposes. The 'McDonaldization' of spirituality is a phenomenon where participants use spirituality to further materialistic goals (Purser 2019; Utley 2012). In his analysis of Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan, Gunn argues that LaVey's exaggerated public stunts 'represent the "fetishization" of the occult into a commodity, or the rendering of occultism into a transactable form' (Purser 2019: 175). In May 2022, in honour of Mercury Retrograde, McDonalds held a contest for a free tarot reading with social media spiritual life coach Madam Adam. To enter the contest, McDonalds users had to show proof that they purchased items on the McDonalds app, as well as comment on Madam Adam's Instagram page with their name and zodiac sign (Tyko 2022). Both sides of the fence were outraged – from devout Christians who think tarot readings are devil worship to professional astrologers who felt McDonalds denigrated their spiritual practices (Tyko 2022). Invoking the occult is an easy way to gain attention, which Bizzy Bone admits is why Bone Thugs-N-Harmony used satanic references in their lyrics (Truth Seekah 2021). In a 1990s gangsta rap environment where many rappers were starting to blend in with each other (even MC Hammer hopped on the gangsta rap trend), illuminating and conjuring the occult made Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs stand out. The occult, by definition, is the antithesis to mainstream, but both groups demonstrate that it is possible to be hidden and visible simultaneously (after all, one of Three 6 Mafia's bestselling albums is called *Most Known Unknown*, an apt-description of the group).

KNOWLEDGE IN HIP HOP: LITERATURE REVIEW

Created by Afrika Bambaataa, knowledge is the fifth element of hip hop, and specifically, knowledge of self 'refers to the Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups' (Gosa 2015: 57). Bettina Love defines knowledge of self as 'the study of Hip

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Hop culture, music, and elements, alongside an examination of issues within one's surroundings to create positive change in one's community' (Love 2016: 8). In their study of South African conscious rap, Derilene Marco, influenced by Adam Haupt, defines knowledge of self as 'continual commitment to the Black Consciousness ideals of spiritual and intellectual upliftment' (Marco 2011: 100). Marco emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in constructions of the self:

This self-awareness, and thus agency to act, is foregrounded in knowledge of self: the idea of critically engaging with oneself as an individual as well as engaging with the rest of the world in order to consciously make sense of identity and in particular, self-identification.

(Marco 2011: 102)

Although there are variations, most definitions of hip hop's fifth element focus on knowledge of self through education, liberation and self-empowerment, and there is a positive undertone to that knowledge, as it leads to one becoming a better citizen and community member.

The particular knowledge that I am interested in is one beneath the surface – the type of knowledge that is not readily accessible and is arguably the opposite of how scholars construe hip hop's fifth element. To have a complete understanding of hip hop's fifth element, it is important for scholars to examine what's beneath the surface; although hip hop is, arguably, a global phenomenon,⁴ there are still many aspects of the culture that are not shareable (intentionally or unintentionally). Sometimes, this hiddenness is used as a marketing tactic, which we see in 'hidden features' on rap albums. Before J Cole released *The Off-Season* to the public, he 'unleashed "i n t e r l u d e"' as the lead single, gave fans another documentary of the album's recording process, and a look at the tracklist a day before release' (Ooi 2021: n.pag.). In previous songs, J Cole chastised rappers who feature many artists on their records, as it diminishes their individual skill and leads to a chaotic album. Cole made this part of his rap persona – if he does collaborate with someone, it is because he deems them as worthy of his time and space, and it makes him seem elitist and exclusive. *The Off-Season* featured 21 Savage and Lil Baby, which added to the hype because Cole does not often collaborate with other mainstream artists. As Ooi argues, 'With the use of hidden features, *The Off-Season* went from an album that was simply meant to tide fans over till his next project, to a body of work that startled listeners with Cole's willingness to collaborate with other voices', which demonstrates the huge marketing impact that hidden knowledge that is not accessible to everyone has (Ooi 2021: n.pag.). In addition to rappers using hiddenness as a marketing tactic, it is also used as a way to navigate impenetrable spaces within the community. Terrance Dean's (2008) memoir *Hiding in Hip Hop: On the Down Low in the Entertainment Industry – From Music to Hollywood* and Karrine Steffans's 2005 memoir *Confessions of a Video Vixen* gave those outside of the hip hop industry an exclusive look into a hidden world. They took different approaches to spreading this information (Dean uses anonymous pseudonyms while Steffans names names), but both demonstrate the profitability of spreading knowledge about hidden aspects of hip hop. Although these examples do not focus on the occult specifically, I included them because they show that there are still many aspects and elements of hip hop that are not accessible.

4. Although hip hop is an African diasporic phenomenon, and there were elements of hip hop present around the world before the 1973 Bronx birthplace narrative, I agree with Imani Perry's argument in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (2004) that the sociopolitical, unique space in the Bronx, New York is what led to hip hop's formation.

CHALLENGING KNOWLEDGE AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

In addition to examining the way rappers use occult practices to gain access to hidden knowledge, I am interested in challenging the connections scholars make between the fifth element and gangsta rap. In his exploration of gangsta rap's relationship to 'authenticity', Murray Forman writes 'that while gangsta rap's claim to a rugged and hard-edged authenticity took root and flourished in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it did so within an atmosphere that was also strongly defined by pronounced and explicit Black cultural and political awareness, a new kind of commitment to historical knowledge, and broad national resistance to the ongoing systemic and systematic containment of poor Black and brown citizens in the ghettos or 'hoods of the nation' (Forman 2021: 457). Forman highlights the tension between arguments of gangsta rap as purely fiction versus its construction of a journalistic narrative of poverty, inequality and racism. Rappers within the gangsta rap genre were drawing on Civil Rights leaders and rhetoric to protest against present inequality (Love 2016; McCann 2017; Morgan 2009; Quinn 2005); in doing so, rappers were using historical knowledge to create knowledge (or spreading awareness) about present circumstances. When scholars connect gangsta rap to the fifth element, it is almost always construed in a 'positive' way that is linked to social justice and liberation. Forman cites Tricia Rose and Kelley to demonstrate how

rap's articulation of anger, frustration, fear, and resistance to the racist abuses of authority was deemed both viable and necessary in order to catalyze radicalized thinking and to provide the foundational awareness that can mobilize social justice activism.

(Forman 2021: 457)

Although examining the connections amongst knowledge, social justice, and gangsta rap are important, it can serve as a limiting framework where knowledge is automatically construed as a form of activism. In horrorcore's brand of gangsta rap, knowledge of self is not always used as liberation in a social justice sense, and it is these iterations of knowledge that I will explore in this article.

Knowledge in hip hop is not always used for social justice or change, and it is important to study the aspects of rappers' conception of the fifth element that push against this idea. Knowledge of self is often aligned with conscious rap (Genius's 'Knowledge of Self: Top 10 Conscious Hip Hop Songs' contains music such as Tupac's 'Changes', Queen Latifah's 'U.N.I.T.Y.' and Talib Kweli's 'Get By') (Period 2013), and by exclusively connecting these entities together, it leaves out rappers whose knowledge of self is not used for social conscious purposes. An example of this is Jean Grae's 'Kill Screen' from the 2013 mixtape *Gotham Down Deluxe*. Interestingly, as Shanté Paradigm Smalls (2010) argues in "'The rain comes down": Jean Grae and hip hop heteronormativity', Jean Grae's music defies gender and sexuality constructs, but Grae is still associated with conscious rap. In 'Kill Screen', she utilizes occult methods as a strategy for gaining the necessary knowledge that effectively invoke the kill screen, which is the screen in video games when a character dies. Throughout the video, Jean Grae wears a hat that says 'Obey', while surrounded by small lit candles, which resembles a ritualistic sacrifice. In some scenes, Grae is covered in blood, and the video frame is cut into pieces where the audience can only see her eyes and not the rest of her face. Words such as 'Leave now' flash on the screen and disappear as quickly as they appear, which shows that knowledge can disappear in the blink of an eye. Jean Grae, who directed the music

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video, says that the music video is ‘an Easter egg hunt’, hinting that ‘there are single-frame clues and messages and extra videos hidden within the video’ (Glazer 2012). Grae’s ‘Kill Screen’ is the epitome of occult knowledge, as she expects her audience to rewatch the video multiple times to understand what her underlying message is, and even then, the audience’s interpretation may not align with Grae’s. Though occult knowledge is not limited to horrorcore rap, I have found that this subgenre has the most pronounced forms of occult knowledge due to its alignment with supernatural elements.

In addition to challenging the knowledge as social justice framework, I want to broaden conversations surrounding hip hop, religion and spirituality to highlight the connections between spirituality and the occult. Most hip hop studies articles focus on hip hop’s connection to Judeo-Christianity or African traditional religions, and while this work is extremely useful, I want to illuminate the ‘spiritual consciousness’ aspects of Gosa’s fifth element definition by highlighting rappers whose spiritual consciousness includes occult practices. This spiritual consciousness is not always moral or just in a Judeo-Christian sense. In *The Dreamer and the Dream: Afrofuturism and Black Religious Thought*, Roger Sneed (2021) argues for a decentring of the Black Church in Black postmodern religious thought. He points to Monica Coleman and Michael Brandon McCormack, whose work ‘represent a growing number of Black religious scholars who want to push their work beyond repeated analyses of the Black Church and traditional Black liberation and womanist theologies as the primary frameworks by which we understand Black religious experiences’ (Sneed 2021: 36). It is important to examine how rappers are utilizing aspects of spirituality that pushes against the Black Church as the framework for understanding religion in hip hop. Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony are illuminating imagery associated with the occult, such as seances, supernatural paraphernalia (Ouija boards, tarot) and rituals.

In addition to challenging, and subsequently broadening, academic definitions of knowledge, I am also writing this article to challenge the academic hip hop canon that has formed in the Ivory Tower. Academic scholarship privileges lyrically skilled rappers who academics can enforce literary methodologies onto. As Sara Hakeem Grewal argues, ‘the literary study of hip hop has often marginalized this genre by reifying and/or objectifying it by imposing colonizing methodologies onto these texts’ (2020: 77). This results in scholars choosing to study ‘academically acceptable’ American rappers who fit neatly into academic discourse, leading to the same type of rappers being discussed (Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Tupac, Biggie, Jay-Z, Nas, Snoop Dogg, etc.). This leaves out hip hop that may not focus so much on lyrical complexity and more so on other elements (DJing, graffiti and breaking), as well as rappers who are more interested in providing a sensory experience of their music. While I am not completely opposed to lyrical analysis (I conduct a lyrical analysis later in this article), I do think its overemphasis in scholarship leaves out hip hop that challenges familiar academic methods and paradigms. In ‘Funk what you heard: Hip hop is a field of study’ (2022), Harris, ‘lyfestyle’, Horton, Gooding, Horsley, and McGregor ask for scholars to expand their research ‘beyond lyrical analysis’ (Harris 2022: 11) and put hip hop first, especially in the subfield of hip hop and religion, as ‘Hip hop challenges religionists’ methodologies due to religionists bringing their preconceived notions about Hip Hoppas to their study subjects’ (Harris 2022: 20). I would argue that this may be why there is a lack of academic scholarship about hip hop and the occult, as, going back to Sneed’s critique of Black postmodern religious thought (Sneed 2021: 36), incorporating the occult as an element of Black religious thought

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5. See Big Lurch and Suge Knight, though the lawsuit against Knight was dropped: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-04-14-0304140242-story.html> (accessed 31 July 2022).

decentres conception of the Black Church as the framework for understanding religion. While I utilize my educational training as a literary scholar to interpret these lyrics, I also incorporate interviews from the rappers themselves, as their interpretation of their own lyrics is important.

‘I REALLY DON’T WANNA HURT NOBODY – JUST KILL OFF ILLUMINATI’: THREE 6 MAFIA AND REPRESENTING THE ILLUMINATI

The Illuminati, and its supposed grip on hip hop, is perhaps one of the most infamous examples of occult knowledge. The title of this article is a lyric from Prodigy’s verse in the remix of LL Cool J’s ‘I Shot Ya’, where he describes needing to move in silence because the Illuminati wants complete control of him (mind, soul and body) (UPROXX Video 2017). It is ‘a centuries-old influential, international, elite secret society that advocate for a one-world government and control all aspects of American life including its government, global finance, and mainstream media’ (Utley 2012: 74). According to this folklore, one way to gain entry into the Illuminati is by selling one’s soul and swearing unwavering loyalty to the organization. The Illuminati represents wealth, success and power, but these all come at an unbelievable price. Although I do not necessarily believe that the Illuminati exists, enough rappers mention the organization that it is worth exploring what the organization stands for and why it is such a haunting presence in hip hop culture. Even if the Illuminati is an imaginative organization in the collective minds of rappers, the principles that it stands for acts as a stand in for the negative aspects of the music industry, such as excessive drug use, shady behaviour from associates, money problems, and losing touch with one’s values and morals. It is also possible that knowledge of the Illuminati, and how to join or fight against them, is something that those outside of the music industry, and elite social circles, are purposely not privy to.

On ‘Body Parts IV’ from Da Mafia 6ix’s (an iteration of Three 6 Mafia featuring DJ Paul, Gangsta Boo, Lord Infamous, Crunchy Black, and Koopsta) album *6ix Commandments*, Lord Infamous’s verse speaks to the connection between the commercialization of the occult and the Illuminati (Da Mafia 6ix 2020). During his verse, he describes the various methods he will use to kill people and ends with ‘Shoot you in the porch and leave your kids, need an orphanage/Ghetto went corporate, Illuminati ornament’ (Da Mafia 6ix 2020). This suggests that the violence he inflicts is sponsored by outside groups with economic interests in hood crimes. During the 1990s gangsta rap era, some rappers discussed feeling pressured by record label executives to commit crimes to strengthen the hood image they portrayed in their music.⁵ Being a ‘studio gangster’ was an insult. ‘Illuminati ornament’ treats violence as a form of decoration and aesthetic, solidifying the connection between the occult and corporate interests.

On an even more depressing, sinister level, children abandoned due to gun violence helps corporate interests and to widen the gap between the Illuminati, a group that supposedly represents the elite, and people living in the ghetto. On the same album, Lord Infamous mentions the Illuminati again in ‘Go Hard’:

The Infamous juggernaut give ‘em more slugs from the Glock/And they rot in the ghetto/I’m blasting heavy metal but this here ain’t no Metallica/I buck’ em then embellish ya, the burner in the Challenger/

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Illuminati in Bugatti, do karate with the shotty/Bloody party, very naughty, infrared dot his noggings.

(DJ Paul KOM 2013)

Lord Infamous suggests that the Illuminati funds this lavish lifestyle with fancy cars (Challengers and Bugattis) as long as violence in the ghetto continues.

It is also worth mentioning that Three 6 Mafia's occult references decrease as they became more mainstream. However, Da Mafia 6ix returns back to its horrorcore roots and utilizes lyrics from early Three 6 Mafia mixtapes, which is why the albums *6ix Commandments* (DJ Paul KOM 2013) and *Watch What U Wish...* (DJ Paul KOM 2015) contain more occult references than their more popular albums. Bone Thugs-N-Harmony took a similar path and decreased occult references in their music. In an interview with Hollywood Undground, Bizzy Bone warns to not speak on the Illuminati and that those involved with the occult do not understand the power of Jesus Christ (Jason Espat 2010).

Both groups acknowledge that the occult imagery in their lyrics was for shock value, which is something that occurs in other genres of music, as 'dancing with the devil' is a good way to draw attention to one's music. This connects to Utley's analysis of 'Free Masons' by Rick Ross, featuring Jay-Z, where Jay-Z continues to deny Illuminati rumours while Rick Ross evokes Illuminati symbolism because he 'is trying to get on Jay-Z's level' and 'create buzz about himself by appropriating the claims that Jay-Z is in a position to deny' (Utley 2012: 87).

Evoking the Illuminati, like other occult symbolism, is a method rappers have used to gain press, as there is no such thing as bad publicity, and it seems more favourable to be talked about instead of not mentioned at all, especially for someone like Rick Ross, who 50 Cent and others pejoratively referred to as 'Officer Ricky' due to his background as a corrections officer. This demonstrates that the Illuminati, and the occult in general, is the ultimate form of publicity.

BONE THUGS-N-HARMONY AND THE KNOWLEDGE GAINED THROUGH SUMMONING MR. OUIJA

The Ouija board is, arguably, a tool that one can use to access occult knowledge. Perhaps the most famous iteration of the Ouija board is by Parkers Brothers, which was

a talking board was originally a device whereby one placed his or her hands on a heart-shaped planchette, which was then presumably directed by a spirit to glide across an alphabet painted on a wooden board, spelling out messages of requited love and approaching danger.

(Lundberg 2005: 84)

As Lundberg and Gunn (2005) argue, it is not quite clear who 'talks back' when one is using an Ouija board, or who the Ouija board user is communicating with. Is the user communicating with spirits? God? Satan? Their inner self? Other humans in the room? A combination of all these things?

In the previously mentioned interview with Truth Seekah, Bizzy Bone admits that the group bought the Ouija board from a toy store, and they treated it as a childish, unserious game (Truth Seekah 2021). In Bone's music, however, the Ouija board is a complicated game where they are conjuring

both good and evil through its usage. Bone Thugs personifies the Ouija board by giving it human characteristics, such as a formal title (Mister) while simultaneously treating it as a source for occult knowledge. Calling it 'Mr. Ouija' suggests a form of respect and reverence, and it places masculine characteristics on what is often seen as a passive form of entertainment. Mr. Ouija also brings out hypermasculine and toxic behaviour from its participants, as he helps Bone become savvier killers and encourages their violent endeavours.

In 'Hell Sent', Bone Thugs sold their souls to the devil, regretted the decision, and went to hell to fight for their souls back. Bone utilizes evil methods to get back at the devil, fighting evil with evil. The title 'Hell Sent' could be interpreted in two ways – Bone was sent to hell and/or Bone is sent from hell to earth. The opening lyrics support both interpretations: 'Straight from the burning flames of hell/A place where all assassins dwell/Put back on earth to destroy all worshippers of peace' (BoneThugsMusic 2022). Similar to an angel sent from heaven to earth to look out for humans, Bone are reborn 'from the burning flames of hell' and must complete their mission to 'destroy all worshippers of peace'. Bizzy Bone raps, 'I told Satan that I'm killin' him through the Ouija board' (BoneThugsMusic 2022). The Ouija board and Satan seem separate in this line. Bizzy gets knowledge from the Ouija board to kill Satan, which makes him an unstoppable force that not even Satan can control.

In *E. 1999 Eternal*, 'Mr. Ouija 2' is sandwiched between 'Die Die Die' and 'Mo Murda', and it is a short song where the group seems as if they are performing a séance. Typically, a person asks Ouija a question, and the planchette moves to answer it. The song begins with a storm, a crash, and then the sound of cocking guns. Bone then asks, 'Ouija, are you with me?' (BoneThugsMusic 2016e). This question suggests a need for camaraderie and validation from Mr. Ouija, as Bone needs to know that Mr. Ouija is watching their violence and destruction. The answer to this question is 'Mo murda, mo murda, mo murda me now' (BoneThugsMusic 2016e). 'Mo murda' is a common refrain in Bone's music, which symbolizes ongoing, and never-ending, murders. The 'mo murda me now' seems like a call to end the earth's violence and destruction through suicide, and it foreshadows the questions they ask in the next verse. As chronicled in 'Hell Sent', Bone was put on earth to disturb the peace and cause chaos, and the only way to stop this is to 'murda me now', with 'now' giving it a sense of urgency and immediacy. As McRobbie (2013) notes in 'The strange and mysterious history of the Ouija board' participants often ask Ouija questions about the future, as there is so much uncertainty surrounding it. Bone continues their séance by asking:

Dear Mr. Ouija
 Could you please tell me my future?
 Will I die of murder? Will I die of bloody murder?
 Come, come again
 Dear Mr. Ouija
 Could you please tell me my future?
 Will I die of murder? Will I die of bloody murder?

(BoneThugsMusic 2016e)

Bone adds another layer of formalism and respect to the Ouija board by addressing it as 'Dear Mr. Ouija'. Bone takes Mr. Ouija's answers seriously and corresponds with it as if they are writing a formal letter. They ask nicely to

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hear about their future by adding the word 'please' and not acting rude or forceful. Towards the end of the séance, Mr. Ouija appears to answer Bone by saying 'I'm Here', which leads into the next song, 'Mo Murda', where Krayzie Bone states, 'Dear Mr. Ouija,/Let 'em know who the boss is' (BoneThugsMusic 2016d). Krayzie Bone is telling Mr. Ouija to inform their enemies of who is in charge. Overall, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony have a complicated relationship with Mr. Ouija, but ultimately, they appreciate his wisdom and the occult knowledge they receive from him, which allows them to continue their destructive path.

THREE 6 MAFIA, THE DEVIL AND KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

Knowledge of self is a crucial aspect of hip hop's fifth element, which preaches self-awareness and self-respect. To connect knowledge of self with religion, many gain self-knowledge through a spiritual journey. Finding God, Allah, Buddha or another higher/spiritual power often leads to finding one's self. What happens when finding one's self is not connected to God but rather to the devil? How does knowledge of self become intertwined with knowledge of the devil? Three 6 Mafia explores this devil finding phenomenon in their music with 'the self' and 'the devil' as inseparable. In their lyrics, there is a reoccurring theme of the limitations of human knowledge and the need to access occult knowledge. While Bone Thugs-N-Harmony access this knowledge through Mr. Ouija, Three 6 Mafia obtains this knowledge from the devil and activities associated with devil worshipping. The occult knowledge gained through practising with the devil leads to one becoming a sharper, stronger criminal.

In his analysis of Scarface's 'Make Your Peace', Anthony Pinn describes how Scarface 'frames the demonic in terms of an alternate world invisible to human eyes, but nonetheless real' (Pinn 2009: 69). Throughout his analysis of rappers' conceptions of demonic forces, Pinn insists that '[d]eals with demonic forces do not appear as commonplace in rap'; however, this is challenged by both Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thug-N-Harmony, whose lyrics describe deals they made with the devil (and subsequently tried to take back) (Pinn 2009: 69). The demonic, alternative world that Pinn describes is one that rappers obtain access to through occult knowledge. Similar to how God's image and identity changes based on who is constructing God, Three 6 Mafia describes the devil within through terms like 'devil shit is still within us' ('Mafia N****z').

There are many theories about God and, in a broader sense, how religion works. For some, God is an all-mighty powerful male figure above us who one must surrender to. For others, God is within each person (i.e. I am God and God is me). God may not be one singular figure and is more so a collection of spirits or higher powers. Another theory is that while God exists, he is not worth worshipping or praising because he allows destruction on Earth to happen without intervention. Some place him on equal footing as the Devil and see them as two sides of the same coin.

One reason why Three 6 Mafia is fascinated by the Devil is because the knowledge they get from him is beyond human comprehension. Ebony Utley (2012) argues that '[i]magine oneself as the devil or defeating the devil is one way that rapper trickster/badman can escape from a hellish reality [...] rapper devil discourse is more rebelliously playful than actually dangerous' (Utley 2012: 85). The spiritual consciousness of the fifth element plays out through dark, devilish imagery, rather than the positive imagery typically associated

with knowledge of self. Imagining one's self as the devil is a way to explore the dark night of the soul and the shadowy, sometimes unsavoury aspects of one's self. For Three 6 Mafia, exploring the darkness is just as important as exploring the light, and having knowledge of one's full self, including the dark and devilish, is crucial to having a complete and total understanding of self.

'Fuckin Wit Dis Click', the song hip hop heads cite when they accuse Three 6 Mafia of devil worship, begins with a sample from the movie *Warlock: The Armageddon*: 'How can you have faith in a God/That cannot even control creation/How can he lead you to salvation/There is no hope in chaos – only/Welcome to the other side of reality/And this is your eternity/Eternity...' (Three 6 Mafia 2015).

This quotation focuses on alternatives to God, as well as the world created by God. If God is not the ultimate creator and 'cannot even control creation', then there are multiple creators and multiple ways to create. This passage deconstructs God as the ultimate supreme being of knowledge. Beginning their song with this quotation forces the listener to question their knowledge of God and how the universe works, as there are other realities and other ways to create.

As I mentioned earlier, 'devil shit' is a reoccurring theme in Three 6 Mafia's lyrics, and it appears in Koopsta Knicca's verse:

Man, for a petty crime, I swear I'll die before I do some time/Bitch, the
Koopsta massive when I'm/Buckin' with the mothafuckin' plastic nine/
Corpses that we tortured in the shed/Their voices won't let me rest/
Could this be the end yet/Or a message sent from Satan?/Nigga omens/
They open the gates of horror for them horror Lords/We tortured the
cases who arrested the faces of/Triple 6 Devil Shit sorcerers/Kill that
bitch, chop that bitch/Or you might just call it a crucifix...

(Three 6 Mafia 2015)

Koopsta replaces phrases commonly associated with God with Satanic language, such as 'open the gates of horror' instead of opening the gates of heaven (the pearly gates). This lyric also assumes that everyone goes to hell when they die – the corpses are speaking in the shed, and Koopsta wonders if they are messages from Satan that forecast his demise through omens, similar to how Bone is concerned with how they'll die in their conversations with 'Mr. Ouija'. Hell is an all-encompassing entity, it is on earth, below and above, and it is unescapable.

Koopsta flips the image of a crucifix from its tradition meaning. Instead of associating it with God, it is connected to sorcery and the devil. Koopsta ends his verse with the following: 'Every time I see you slipping I go and go load my Mac-10 (Mac-10)/Victims of my devil's playground, come burn with me until the end...' (Three 6 Mafia 2015).

By classifying earth as 'my devil's playground', Koopsta constructs himself with the devil's identity. His version of the 'devil's playground' is one where he also burns with his victims 'until the end'. There are many dichotomies in these lyrics – Koopsta is both a gatekeeper of violence and a victim of it, devil's playground is both fun (like the fun language associated with the devil, i.e. 'dancing with the devil') and serious, and he is both sacrificing others and being sacrificed, which relates back to his earlier lines about crucifixes and omens.

In Lord Infamous's verse, he tells a story of finding a graveyard to place three dead bodies that he just killed. Towards the middle of his story, he has a crisis of faith: 'No I'm not a Christian/But I'm mentally ill/And I don't understand all the reasons why I think it's killin' season/And neither does my schizophrenic friends/So, therefore, nigga, due to my mental difficulty/Scarecrow is only entertained by helping enemies bleed' (Three 6 Mafia 2015).

Scarecrow is one of Lord Infamous's alter egos. Although Infamous explicitly states that he is not a Christian, he follows it with 'But I'm mentally ill', which suggests that there is a link between being a Christian and mental illness. The line between a spiritual awakening and a mental illness crisis is often blurred. He is hearing voices that tell him to kill and cause destruction, and he connects it to the voices that Christians hear (voices that come from God, Jesus or angels).

This section is reminiscent of Geto Boys's 'Mind Playing Tricks on Me', which helped introduce horrorcore rap into mainstream music (UPROXX Video 2009). A foundational aspect of horrorcore rap, in addition to its horror film features, is mental breakdowns and having trouble distinguishing between what is real and what is fake. In 'Mind Playing Tricks on Me', the narrator feels paranoid that the people around him, including himself, are out to get him, and he describes the people he's harmed and how his paranoia might be justified. He also describes going to Sunday church services and 'praying for forgiveness' because 'The Lord is looking at me'. The Lord seems to be another part of the narrator's mind, who is part of the 'tricks'. Like 'Mind Playing Tricks on Me', Lord Infamous's murderous identity is based on the voices he hears, which he entertains by killing others. Three 6 Mafia takes inspiration from Geto Boys, which is apparent through their exploration of spirituality, the occult and paranoia, and both groups are interested in the dark, violent knowledge they receive from external voices (Aswad 2021).

While Lord Infamous's verse focuses on the connection between religion and paranoia, DJ Paul speaks directly to both Lucifer and the Lord, and his identity is based on the need to antagonize God. He begins his verse as follows:

I'm on a cross, Lucifer please cut me free (cut me free)/I'll draw your portrait if you pull these nails out of my feet/My cross turns upside down and finally I'm loose/I flip the land and released the others who sin/The Scarecrow and the Juice/I look to the sky and all I could say was 'Finally it's on again'/No Lord could stop us now 'cause the demons reborn again...

(Three 6 Mafia 2015)

This furthers the crucifix imagery that Koopsta conjures in his verse. He asks Lucifer to save him in exchange for memorialization ('draw your portrait'). Lucifer answers his call, and he releases the other group members so they can continue their earthly chaos. As a group, their identity is wrapped up in the devilish image they've created. Although Lord Infamous questions this image, and DJ Paul leans into this image the most, the knowledge of self comes from the spiritual guidance they receive from Satan, which leads them astray and directly challenges peace on earth, similar to Bone Thugs. This is the birth of the 'devil shit' that we see throughout the rest of Three 6 Mafia's career. In Mafia N***az, Lord Infamous states on the chorus:

We gotta come like we get down and dirty for our figures/We gotta come like we be quick to pull back on some triggers/We gotta come you know dat Devil shit is still up in us/We Mafia N****s We Mafia N****s...

(Junkyard Kids 2009)

The ‘devil shit is still up in us’ speaks to both Three 6 Mafia’s lyrical trajectory (they are still rapping about the devil shit that made them stand out from other rappers) and the devilish imagery they have used to construct their rap identities.

In the early 2000s, as Three 6 Mafia became more mainstream, they decreased the devilish references in their lyrics. Their four most famous albums, *When the Smoke Clears: Sixty 6, Sixty 1, Da Unbreakables*, *Most Known Unknown* and *Last 2 Walk*, contain mostly traditional trap music, which might also relate to the line-up changes that happened during this time. In *Hip-Hop Evolution* (2020), DJ Paul remembers his love of horror films and how he and brother Lord Infamous would stay up all night and watch scary movies. Gangsta Boo and Koopsta Knicca left before *Da Unbreakables*, and Lord Infamous left before *Most Known Unknown*, and Crunchy Black left before *Last 2 Walk*. By the time *Last 2 Walk* was released, Three 6 Mafia was now a duo, and they moved away from the signature horrorcore sound that made them unique. Horrorcore was also losing favour during this time for mainstream rap, but it would see a resurgence in 2017–20s with the popularity of XXXTentacion and Trippie Redd.

OUTRO: SEE YOU AT ‘THA CROSSROADS’

In this article, I argued for a restructuring of what counts as knowledge in hip hop culture by considering the ways that the occult challenges familiar definitions of knowledge in academic scholarship. Strictly tying knowledge of self to social justice and activism limits the possibilities for what the fifth element can entail. The narrative of hip hop’s formation in 1970s Bronx is largely a ‘romanticized retelling’ with Afrika Bambaataa ‘(re)inventing hip-hop as a coherent social movement’ (Gosa 2015: 59). Knowledge as a social justice, activism practice is part of that romanticized retelling, as hip hop’s initial goal was not to fight the power, per se. Previous studies of gangsta rap and knowledge reify the concept of knowledge as social justice, which ignores rappers who are not using knowledge for that purpose. The horrorcore subgenre of gangsta rap challenges this framework by showcasing how knowledge of self is intertwined with an occult spiritual journey where rappers are getting in touch with the shadowy, dark aspects of their rap personas. Occult knowledge decentres the Black church and Judeo-Christianity as the default paradigms for understanding Black spiritual experiences, as well as considers how the occult connects to the spiritual consciousness aspect of the fifth element.

The trickiness in writing about the occult is that, by definition, it is supposed to be hidden and unseen; however, with the rise of social media and the world becoming more interconnected, the line between hidden and visible is decreasing. This represents a crossroads, especially in mainstream rap music. With Three 6 Mafia, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, and other rappers invoking occult knowledge, it broadens up the possibilities for how the spiritual consciousness aspect of the fifth element of hip hop functions. What are the limitations of spreading knowledge widely, and what should stay behind closed doors? When it comes to spiritual consciousness, how can

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we illuminate our 'light' sides while also acknowledging our 'shadow' sides? Knowledge of self is often aligned with a spiritual journey, which we have seen through Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's music, and that spiritual journey is not always comfortable and savoury.

Towards the end of 'Tha Crossroads', Wish Bone asks, 'Can somebody anybody tell me why/We die, we die?' (BoneThugsMusic 2007a). Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Three 6 Mafia explore this question of death, and when and why it happens, as one of the questions Bone asks Mr. Ouija is if, in the future, they will die of bloody murder. Sometimes, we turn to the occult to answer unanswerable questions. Are human beings supposed to have access to this type of knowledge? Hip hop's relationship with the occult is complicated – it is binding and liberating, fun and serious, challenging and regressive, progressive and limiting, and Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony epitomize these dualities. Examining their relationship to the occult both reinforces and challenges what the fifth element of hip hop means. The knowledge we use to construct ourselves comes from many places, some of which are not always positive, and in order to gain a full understanding of oneself, it is important to examine what is lurking beneath the surface.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Horton, Dana (2024), ‘“The Illuminati want my mind, soul and my body”: Three 6 Mafia, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and occult knowledge in hip hop’, *Global Hip Hop Studies*, Special Issue: ‘Droppin’ Knowledge: The Fifth Element in Hip Hop Culture’, 5:1&2, pp. 43–63, https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00082_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Dana Horton is an associate professor of English and race, ethnic, gender and sexuality studies at St. Olaf College. She was previously an assistant professor of English at Mercy University. Her current research project is an autoethnography that examines the occult and intersectional spirituality in hip hop culture. She recently published *Gender, Genre, and Race in Post-Neo-Slave Narratives* (Lexington Books, 2022), which analyses representations of Black and white women slave-owners in American cultural productions. Her work appears in *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900–Present)*, *Lateral: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, and *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, where she is also an associate editor. Dr Horton’s areas of specialization are African American literature, Black feminist theory, hip hop studies, Black popular culture, slave narratives, Black Atlantic studies and gender and sexuality studies.

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Contact: St. Olaf College, 1520 Saint Olaf Avenue, Tomson Hall 347, Northfield,
MN 55057, USA.
E-mail: horton4@stolaf.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1250-2451>

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