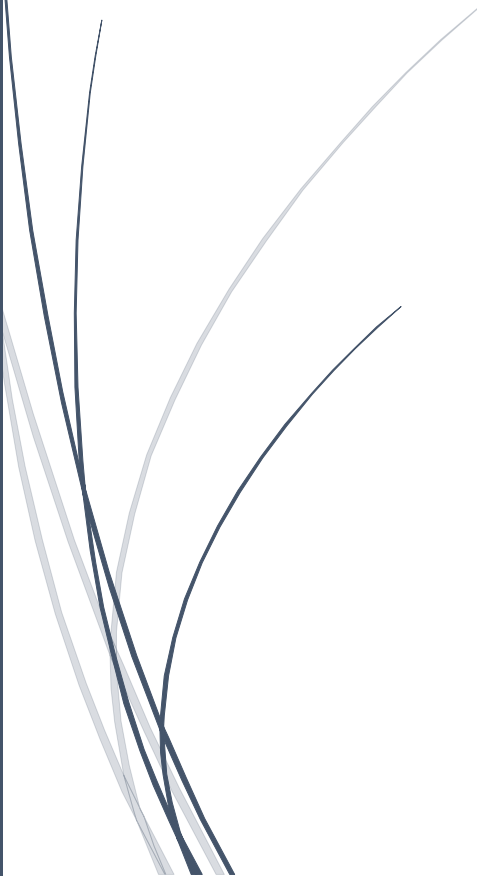


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10/16/2017

Popularity and Race in Hip-Hop

An analysis of white artistry in
black culture

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Race is a societal issue that is prevalent through various types of media and art with music being of no exception. The subject of race in regard to skin color, heritage, or ethnicity, is a theme in many genres of music. Hip-hop is a predominant racially charged music genre with a long history rooted in African-American culture. The evolution of hip-hop has created a cultural expansion throughout many countries, languages, and races. From its earliest roots in black neighborhoods to its rise in modern culture including white publications and radio plays, hip-hop has moved into new racial territory while holding its African-American roots. Although still grounded in these African-American roots, the modern face of hip-hop is being replaced with a white countenance. Hip-hop's popularity is being usurped by white artists and audiences. Media attention is centered more highly on non-black hip-hop artists than those with a longer history and skill in the genre. Examining this phenomenon requires an evaluation of many aspects of the music. The roots of hip-hop, the induction of white rappers, cultural appropriation, the separation between white and black forms of the genre, and white hip-hop's popularity in mainstream media are all areas to be discussed.

Stating that hip-hop is being taken over by a white entity requires proof of its African-American beginning. At its core hip-hop is considered more than just music; a style or culture is present in hip-hop that unites music, clothing, dance, and art. Like many cultural artifacts, hip-hop can be traced back to immigration to the East Coast United States, specifically New York City. The 60s and 70s saw a rise in predominantly black neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx founded by descendants of Caribbean and African countries. The cohabitation of these cultures led to an interweaving of cultural styles, including music and dance.

Philippe Fragione is artistic director of a Parisian installation that traces the roots of hip-hop. The New York Times' Laure Fourquet reported on this installation which found that the

origins can be linked to a block party in the West Bronx in 1973. It was at this party that a Jamaican immigrant named Clive Campbell showcased his new approach to disk jockeying that “extended the “breakbeat” of a song by playing copies of the same record on two turntables.” (Fourquet 2015) The new style of playing led to a new style of dance connected with it at these urban gatherings- break dance. A curator of this art exhibit, Elodie Bouffard, notes the importance of hip-hop’s early festivity that eventually led to a more, “politically engaged movement...the idea [of which] was to overcome violence by producing music, dancing or drawing graffiti.” (Fourquet 2015) The violence that was prevalent in these urban neighborhoods had the effect of politicizing and creating more conscious lyrical content to be played over these new beats. It was here that African-Americans became the voice of hip-hop and it remained this way for nearly twenty years.

The incorporation of hip-hop into mainstream, white America began in the 80s, but did not fully develop until the 90s. Music publication *Vulture* charted the history of white people in rap with a 2009 article. Debbie Harry of Blondie is credited as the first pop artist to include rapping in a verse, but it was the New York trio Beastie Boys who first truly broke into the industry. Although starting as a hardcore punk band, The Beastie Boys would later emerge as a trio of Jewish white men from New York with a talent for rhyme. The popularity they received did not translate into recognition within the African-American community until later in their career. In fact, early tours saw them in support of artists like Madonna, yet their 1987 album “*Licensed to Ill*” marked the first number one rap album on the Billboard 200 chart. (Caulfield 2012) Even here, as early as 1987, white usurpers were seen taking a style created and popularized by African-Americans, but making it a part of consumer culture targeting white

audiences. The ability to relate to hip-hop fans and white Americans was a contributing factor in its meteoric success.

Although successful during their time and later regarded as one of the best groups in hip-hop, The Beastie Boys did not control the genre in the same way as Eminem. The late 1990s saw the emergence of a skinny white man named Marshall Mathers burst onto the scene. Introduced to the world by way of music legend Dr. Dre from California's West Coast hip-hop scene, Marshall (stage name Eminem) began a career through a darker take on hip-hop. His notoriously violent, sexist, controversial lyricism kept him in headlines in the earliest days of his career. Although backed by some of the industries biggest names, his style was credited to other underground rap names. It was not until his third album, "The Marshall Mathers LP," that Eminem truly solidified his name as one of the greatest rappers of all time. His unique lyricism paired with his vulgarity was able to win over both white and black audiences. Although still considered one of the greatest, his debut in the hip-hop world would have been nearly impossible without Dr. Dre. As The New York Times' Jon Caramanica states of white rappers, "they were allowed entry to hip-hop's mainstream, but only when shepherded by a black mentor or when paying close attention and fealty to the genre's history." (Caramanica 2016) While Eminem followed the first rule and The Beastie Boys adhered to the second (remaining within the perimeters of the genre's history) later white rappers would not follow suit.

As white rappers continue to populate the hip-hop industry, the American music scene has witnessed a usurping of the culture by these artists. Post Malone, G-Eazy, Iggy Azalea, and more have become some of the biggest names in music by way of cultural appropriation. The appropriation of certain aspects of hip-hop combined with their own cultural tendencies has allowed their crossover success between the hip-hop and American mainstreams. The Australian

born Iggy Azalea is a prime example- her 2014 breakout single “Fancy” gave way to her rise in the recording industry. The song utilizes simplistic rhymes spewed through a faux accent by the artist. Her accentuated Southern dialect used in parts of the song are adopted from Southern hip-hop’s biggest names like OutKast and Killer Mike. Odyssey’s Nicole Phillips writes of this style, “by taking on this persona without any real attempt to tackle issues relevant to the community she is “paying homage to,” Azalea [sic] enforces an acceptance of already existing black stereotypes.” (Phillips 2015) The damaging affect of these stereotypical reinforcements is lost on the artists who see the appropriation as their ticket to stardom. Post Malone’s grill-wearing, chain dangling persona on stage further implies the materialism associated with hip-hop and black artists, but just accentuates his own wealthy visage.

Beyond reinforcing stereotypes, the inauthentic nature of these personas is an insult to the genre. The criticism that follows these kinds of stunts in music is usually met with shock by the artists performing them. The general arguments are that they are paying homage to the culture they are appropriating and, furthermore, that it has been done before them. Eminem received this kind of speculation that he was being inauthentic and putting on an act during his performances. For the last twenty years, however, Eminem has remained true to his image and personality. Artists like Iggy Azalea and Post Malone put on charades that they feel elevate them in an admirable way to youth. Speaking with a drawl, wearing gold, and flaunting sexuality is a facade for them to be “cool” rappers. Comedian Aamer Rahman succinctly describes this tendency “as a costume that they can put on and discard at will. It’s a cheap circus act.” (Rahman 2013) The adopting of cultural stereotypes is a tool that makes them the new faces of hip-hop, even though it is not their own true face. The destruction of a cultural tool like hip-hop is offensive itself, but their eradication of the true faces and nature of the genre is the heart of the issue.

By engaging in cultural appropriation to become stars in the music industry, these white artists are often blocking black artists with a deeper connection to the genre. The 2016 headlining tour by white rapper G-Eazy is discussed in the New York Times article “White Rappers, Clear of a Black Planet” by Jon Caramanica. The title is a clever play on political hip-hop pioneers Public Enemy’s album “Fear of a Black Planet.” The transformation from fear to clear represents the vanishing face of black musicians in the industry. The G-Eazy tour is of note in this discussion because of its promotional materials. G-Eazy and Logic, a half-white/half-black rapper, were headliners while YG and Yo Gotti, two black rappers, were openers. As noted in the article, the flyers for the event were an image of the two white rappers centered with the two black rappers on either side. Two hip-hop artists with more notoriety and history in the genre (YG and Yo Gotti) are cast off as side-kicks to the headliners.

Furthermore, the hue of the image was transformed creating a similar skin tone for all of the artists. The goal of this kind of marketing is to remove the racial identities of the artists in an attempt to avoid criticism. As Caramanica states, “it was an inducement to overlook the show’s discomfiting racial dynamic, suggesting that the issues brought up by its lineup...have little to do with race.” (Caramanica 2016) The image of two veteran black rappers being overshadowed by two novice white musicians is indicative of the white-washing of hip-hop. Artists are now using the music and culture surrounding hip-hop to forge paths for themselves in the genre. Once they reach the top of their performance, they are able to put the African-Americans who created and promoted the genre in the back of audiences’ minds. The evidence of this techniques effectiveness is seen in the industries awards and media publications.

Indicators of white America’s appreciation of white artistry in hip-hop are evident. Macklemore’s 2014 Grammy wins along with the ongoing domination of white artists over black

artists in radio and streaming are among these indicators. The 2014 Grammy Awards Show was shocking proof of the looming issue of white privilege in hip-hop and music in general.

Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, two white artists, took home awards for best rap performance, best rap song, best rap album, and best new artist. 2014 saw the release of Eminem's highly anticipated "The Marshall Mathers LP II," the ground-breaking Kanye West album "Yeezus," and Kendrick Lamar's major label debut "Good Kid, M.A.A.D City." Each of these releases was met with more critical appraisal than Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' efforts, yet repeatedly lost to the duo. By his own admission Macklemore texted Kendrick Lamar, "'You got robbed. I wanted you to win.'" (Pelly 2014) The root of this kind of continual overlooking of black artists is simple: white privilege.

The Grammys, like most Hollywood awards shows, are a notoriously white-washed affair. Black artists with larger followings, better sales, and more influence are continually overshadowed by white artists (Adele's win over Beyonce's innovative "Lemonade" being the newest example). The issue with white privilege is that it is so unrecognizable to many white people, just like in these kinds of award shows. Macklemore is a notable exception in this regard because he acknowledges his privilege, the platform he received through hip-hop, and the ongoing dichotomy of racial injustices in the country. His 2016 single "White Privilege II" addresses many of these issues and the ideas that promote white musicians over black musicians. One verse from the perspective of a presumably white mother claims the following about Macklemore's music:

That's so cool, look what you're accomplishing

Even the old mom like me likes it, cause it's positive

You're the only hip-hop that I let my kids listen to

Cause you get it, all that negative stuff it isn't cool"

Yeah?

"Yeah, like, all the guns and the drugs

The b***** and the h*** and the gangs and the thugs

Even the protest outside, so sad, and so dumb

If a cop pulls you over, it's your fault if you run"

Huh? (Genius 2016)

Macklemore showcases an example of the feedback that he receives from white audiences regularly. Although he uses a black artform like hip-hop to discuss issues of all varieties, his appearance and songs focusing on non-ethnic issues are seen as deserving of high praise. He continually raps about his past drug addiction, his early graffiti work, and more transgressions from his youth (a staple of the genre), but here it is viewed as honest artistry.

The ever-changing scape of hip-hop is one that boasts huge rises in popularity for the genre for newer musicians, while traditional artists are more regularly being left behind. Despite a strong attention to the history, style, tradition, and power of the genre, skilled rappers are often overlooked simply because of their skin color and story. White rappers have the privilege of engaging in cultural appropriation to reach stardom with little or no penalty. The use of these privileges leads to a furthering of stereotypes that are being fought in much of hip-hop while white artists are seen as innovators. Recognizing the history, culture, and rise of hip-hop is essential to understanding the changes that are seen daily for the genre. The continual usurping of white artists in the world of black artistry is an issue that needs to be recognized in mainstream media.

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