TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS: UPPER WEST SIDE STYLE

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Saturday Night Live is infamous for its humor, which walks the line between social commentary and pure amusement. While its performers and characters have been able to use the show as a platform for future successes in comedy, few have had as great success and notoriety as the Lonely Island. Perhaps better known for their front man, Andy Samberg, the Lonely Island is a group of three friends: Samberg, Akiva Schaffer, and Jorma Taccone. The three produce, direct, and star in a series of digital shorts, or music videos, that appear on the show. In 2009 they released their first album of songs, which has been labeled by providers as comedy.

Their success is likely due to the forward nature of their work. Their songs, delivered as parodies of hip-hop, R&B, and rap, range from love poems to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to tales of premature ejaculation. "Lazy Sunday," the group's breakout video from 2005 featuring Samberg and SNL cast member Chris Parnell, is surprising. The loud, threatening backbeat brings to mind rattling chains. Their words are shouted at the camera, which hides the message at first. No, the two are not rapping about the ills of the South Bronx or Brooklyn, but the leisures of Manhattan life delivered as "gangsta rap." The song has been heralded as "poking fun" or parodying rap music. Parody is more than a humorous rendering of a subject. Seymour Chatman, an American film and literary critic, has defined parody as a form of word play that "imitates an original by substituting as little as possible" (28). He identifies the importance of parody by its ability to imitate the original work's style while using it as a "vehicle for baser, more vulgar, or other inappropriate content" (30).

Applying the term "inappropriate" to "Lazy Sunday" seems unsuitable. "Inappropriate" degrades the new content in comparison to the original. While it is possible to view humorous shorts by the Lonely Island such as "Lazy Sunday" as parodies, the idea that their content is "inappropriate," or of lesser value, than traditional rap songs is problematic. Instead, the shorts should be viewed as using rap for its traditional purpose to expose and critique the creator's environment.

Rap is more than just a musical genre of spoken rhyme over a beat. In order to understand the musical and cultural importance of rap music, it is necessary to visualize its history. William Eric Perkins, editor of *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, describes the evolution of rap in his essay, "The Rap Attack." Some trace its development back to Africa, where oral communication and ritual chanting, such as call-and-response, were important and revered traditions. Others compare it to slave work songs, improvisational jazz and blues from the early twentieth century, and poetry of the Black Arts Movement. All agree that the creation of rap is

inextricably linked to African American culture. It wasn't until the late 1970s, as the technology for deejaying and mixing records developed, that rap exploded as a new genre with artists like Afrika Bambaataa and the Sugar Hill Gang. The constant beat created by those new technologies has remained one of the most important parts of the music.

The lyrics sung over the beat, like the lyrics of many other genres, have overcome the music to represent the work. Rap's lyrics have a strong narrative element that lends itself to storytelling and oratory. Combined with its connection to African tradition and heritage, rap has emerged as the genre used by marginalized African Americans to call attention to their status in society. There has always been a critical aspect of rap, whether in competitions between deejays who use their songs to highlight their accomplishments and their opponents' shortcomings or simple boasting and displays of masculinity. Yet when combined with growing dissatisfaction with second-class citizenship and poor living standards, rap became a form of socio-economic expression. As the raps produced by these circumstances became successful, they were embraced by youth of all races, which caused a mainstream backlash. Today, it is hard to separate the cultural importance of rap from the musical one.

Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, broadly defines the genre as "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (2). Furthermore, she identifies rap's primary thematic concerns as identity and location. Different varieties of rap address these concerns in different ways. "Gangsta" rap, based on experiences with gang violence, police run-ins, and general discontent in urban areas, especially Los Angeles, uses location to determine identity. The tone of these songs is aggressive, and the words are charged. The songs attempt to bring critical attention to the inequality experienced by blacks in urban areas.

According to Chatman, the tension between the original style (what is being copied) and new content (how it appears) determines the sense of inappropriateness necessary for a parody. Such a tension exists in "Lazy Sunday." "Lazy Sunday" is the story of two white men, young and middle class, wasting their Sunday with a quest to see the newly released *Chronicles of Narnia*. The Lonely Island is describing a stereotypical American experience; however, they do so in an atypical style: gangsta rap. This contrast between the content and its description is the most striking part of the song and evident within the portrayal, themes, and word choice of the song.

The video is immediately misleading. It hides its content behind a stereotypical opening for a gangsta rap video: images of city streets, old buildings, and cars, typical views of the neighborhood. It isn't until the camera cuts to Andy Samberg in a clean studio apartment that the video, and the audience's perception of it, veers from a traditional path and becomes a farce. Yet the song continues to keep its focus on the neighborhood with references to notable destinations, such as Magnolia Bakery, and

scenes walking down the street and in an abandoned park. This matches one of the primary themes of gangsta rap previously defined: location. Tricia Rose explains:

> Nothing is more central to rap's music video narrative than situating the rapper in his or her milieu and among one's crew or posse. Unlike heavy metal music videos, for example, which often use dramatic live concert footage and the concert stage as the core location, rap music videos are set on buses, subways, in abandoned buildings, and almost always in black urban inner-city locations (10).

This focus on location in turn emphasizes rap's other thematic concern, identity, as the songs are often ways to validate the home of the rapper: "Rappers' emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated" (11). The Lonely Island is doing the same thing; they are situating themselves in their neighborhood in order to acknowledge and celebrate it. Why, then, is "Lazy Sunday" considered a parody and not a rap song?

The nuances of parody should be considered. Chatman refines his definition of parody to explain that stylistic parody depends on the audience's familiarity with both the original author's style and new subject matter's inappropriateness. "The audience must not only recognize the original, but sense that the style is being used to express a content which the targeted author could or would not contemplate," Chatman explains (36-7). A comparison between the notable gangsta rap group N.W.A. and the Lonely Island illuminates this tension. N.W.A., comprised of MCs Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Ice-T, was one of the most controversial gangsta rap groups as well as one of the groups that gave the genre its direction. Drawing from their experiences in Compton, a city in South Los Angeles County, N.W.A. brutally described the injustices of their community, especially those caused by the police. Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson writes for *Rolling Stone's* series "The Immortals: The 100 Greatest Artists of all Time": "Even if you've never lived through all the gangbanging and police harassment they were talking about, you could tell there was truth there."

While N.W.A. clearly draws upon their neighborhood for inspiration and setting, their work transcends the specific location to rage out against the system at large. In their song, "F*** the Police," they imitate a court trial of "N.W.A. versus the police department." With guns going off in the background, Ice Cube sings, "Just cuz I'm from the CPT, punk police are afraid of me." CPT, an abbreviation for Compton, becomes a charged word; it assumes that the listener will be familiar with its place and its story. In another song, "Straight Outta Compton," the rappers pass the narrative of the song with a call-and-response: the call "Tell 'em where you from!" is answered with the line, "Straight outta Compton!" The video is more explicit in its commentary with its images of cops strapping on guns while looking at maps of Compton paired

with the rappers sitting around burning trashcans and running from the police. Their work created the infamous image of Compton, which is now synonymous with gang-related crime and police violence.

The Upper West Side is the polar opposite of Compton. Yet the Lonely Island uses its reputation in the same way rappers now use Compton: to acknowledge a neighborhood, to establish identity, and to evoke an image. They exhibit their own street knowledge by knowing where to purchase the best cupcakes, "No doubt that bakery's got all da bomb frostins," and sneaking their own food into the movie theater, "The theater's over-priced./You've got the backpack?/Gonna pack it up nice." They recall aspects of New York City that are universally known, such as Magnolia Bakery and *Friends*. The images their "streets" invoke and the way they portray themselves are trivial in comparison to Compton and the attitudes of N.W.A.'s members. Samberg and Parnell need a search engine to find their way to the movie theater, and then end up in the back seat of a taxicab. While they may act tough by having a "snack attack" and sneaking food into a theater, they also consider the risks: "don't want security to get suspicious." Eazy-E, on the other hand, flaunts his actual toughness in "Straight Outta Compton": "I see a motherf***** cop, I don't dodge him." Finally, the gun shots heard in the background as the duo eats their cupcakes adds the coup de grâce. The probability of hearing guns shots on the Upper West Side is next to none. The Lonely Island is trying to transform their neighborhood into a '"hood," but is only making themselves seem like "posers."

While the Lonely Island convincingly copies the musical style of gangsta rap, their word choice and figures of speech accentuate the inappropriateness of their new content. Describing frosting as "da bomb" or the directions to the theater as the "dopest route" may be appropriate speech in rap, but when applied to locations in the stereotypical "intellectual" neighborhood of the Upper West Side, it comes out ridiculous. Even more ridiculous are the references the pair makes. They constantly refer to classic chick-flicks, "I love those cupcakes more than McAdams loves Gosling," and they use the line "Girl actin' like she never see a $10 before/ It's all about the Hamiltons, baby." This is a clear reference to the slang term for hundred-dollar bills, "Benjamins." Songs like Puff Daddy's "It's All About the Benjamins" focus solely on spending money, with lines like "I'm only here/For that green paper with the eagle." Parnell and Samberg take these references to money even further though, with an easy-to-miss historical reference: "You can call us Aaron Burr/From the way we're droppin' Hamiltons." "Gangstas" quoting American history hardly seems appropriate and yet for once the duo does something that isn't out of place for their neighborhood.

Through these dedications to the original form and incongruities consistent with their personal identities and backgrounds, the Lonely Island creates a humorous song that could be considered a parody. However, that interpretation is complicated by Chatman's inclusion of another component of parody: a parody must "utilize the

original writer's diction and style, but follow a train of thought precisely along the lines that he would have pursued from the given premise" (36). It is hard to imagine a group like N.W.A. singing about a lazy Sunday spent in bed followed by neighborhood shenanigans. The comfortable bourgeois lifestyle that allows for a Sunday spent in such a manner is not one that typically can be found in the 'hood or ghetto. In fact, the forced aggressive tone of "Lazy Sunday" violates one of the central attractions of rap for youth, especially middle-class white youth: authenticity. Perkins writes about the appeal of gangsta rap:

> In an age of mass overconsumption and media hype, gangsta rap no doubt represents a religion and ideology of authenticity . . . These abstract slogans of 'bein' and stayin' real' summon up romantic notions of ghetto authenticity . . . Hip hop speaks to youth's desire for identity, for a sense of self-definition and purpose, no matter how lawless or pointless (20).

Perhaps this is what attracted Andy Samberg and his fellow Lonely Island members to rap in the first place. In an interview conducted with Jason Gay from *Rolling Stone* for the release of their album, Samberg speaks to his youth in California where he was surrounded by "standard Bay Area hippie shit" (Gay). As their interest grew, music and musical creation became their dream: "Growing up, we never talked about 'We should all work at Saturday Night Live!' We were like, 'Someday, we should make an album. That would be awesome.'" Jonathan Lethem describes this conversion through imitation as typical in his essay "The Ecstasy of Influence":

> Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. Finding one's voice isn't just an emptying and purifying oneself of the words of others but an adopting and embracing of filiations, communities, and discourses (3).

Chatman would have to agree because he sees parody as "at once ridicule and homage" (33). The Lonely Island's respect for the art seems genuine; the *New York Times* hails another Lonely Island song, "Natalie Raps," which is a blatant copy of Eazy-E's song "No More ?'s," by saying, "It isn't parody; it is a love letter" (Caramancia). Yet the group blatantly ignores the authentic aspect of the genre, and in doing so, questions the authenticity of the original songs. When Akiva Shaffer was asked why they created an album, he answered "Suffice it to say, the streets wanted it," referring to the neighborhood fascination and validation of much of gangsta rap. However, Samberg counters with the question, "Are you talking about the British rapper guy The Streets?" (Gay). Clearly, nothing is serious for the trio, which makes their songs funny, but hard to imagine as "authentic" parodies.

Perhaps the answer lies in the idea that the Lonely Island isn't actually making a parody, but a new form of rap. Rap may have begun as a way to bring the marginalization of black society to public attention, but with "Lazy Sunday," the Lonely Island is reversing the flow, bringing public attention to the sterility of what is considered mainstream. They are able to accomplish this through "enframing," philosopher Martin Heidegger's idea, which encourages people to see the objects in their world "only in terms of how they can serve [them] or be used by [them]" (Lethem 4). This is not foreign to traditional rap's creation, as rap is a musical genre based on appropriations of other genres for the purpose of meeting the rapper's needs. Parody does this, but in order to comment on the original form, not the new content. The Lonely Island combines the two to serve their own purpose that could be construed as a way to safely comment on their own culture while remaining safely behind the humor of the surface-level parody.

Enframing does not apply just to art; it is a part of human nature. In many ways the diffusion of rap and hip hop into all facets of mainstream culture can be attributed to this phenomenon. "White youth are not simply consuming pop culture messages wholesale, any more than Black kids are," writes Bakari Kitwana, a former executive editor of *The Source*, one of the first publications devoted to rap music, and author of *Why White Kids Like Hip-Hop*. According to Kitwana, "Most hip-hop kids . . . are taking from popular culture what they find useful, fashioning it to local needs, claiming it as their own and in the process placing their own stamp on it" (3). "Lazy Sunday" may appear to be a parody in its imitation of rap; however, it is the lifestyle, not the method of expressing it, that is the parody. It is the gangsta bravado that is the inappropriate content, not the song describing it. The Lonely Island is not criticizing the embrace of rap by white audiences. Instead, their depiction seems to be more critical of the adoption of a false behavior due to the sterility of mainstream society.

By sticking too closely to the form of parody, is the Lonely Island at risk of completely hiding their message? Not according to rap, where parody can be worked into the genre and remain a valid component of that genre. 2 Live Crew, a group of "booty rappers" (rap focused on sex and eroticism), spawned controversy in the 1990s for both their explicit content and appropriation. They were sued for copyright violation for their parody of Roy Orbison's 1964 hit, "Oh, Pretty Woman." While a lower court found the group guilty, the Supreme Court found the song to be protected as an original parody under the doctrine of "fair use." Justice David Souter explained that the song provided "social benefit . . . as a comment on the naiveté of the original of an earlier day, as a rejection of its sentiment that ignores the ugliness of street life and the debasement that it signifies" (Chatman 27). Even outside of their parody, the "meaning hiding beneath the surface of the obvious meaning of the lyrics" in 2 Live Crew's work has been considered beneficial social commentary. In a lawsuit over obscenity and pornography, witness Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. concluded, "Well they represent the stereotype over and over again, in such a graphic way, namely

to exploit it. You can have no reaction but to bust out laughing. You realize how ridiculous this all is" (Perkins 25). While it is unlikely that 2 Live Crew originally wrote their works to be funny, or even to exploit stereotypes in a critical way, it is clear that their work is able to provide criticism, parody, and authenticity, thus successfully being rap while remaining humorous.

"I think the goal of most comedy, just like most movies or television, is an escape from the mundane stuff in our life, and I've always found it worthwhile to make something completely stupid just to prove that you can," said Andy Samberg in an online interview with *Esquire* about his work. His words highlight the dualism in his comedy—humor and criticism combined. When viewed within that context and not as parody, "Lazy Sunday" can offer the viewer more than a prescription for an amusing weekend agenda. It can offer a way to laugh at yourself, no matter your race, class, or musical tastes. Isn't that the best way to keep it real?

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