

BLACK RHYTHM, WHITE POWER

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Introduction and All that Jazz

The lights went down at the Miller Theater, but not a note was played. Then a voice rose above the muffled sounds of the crowd, followed by another, and then another: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, interlaced with words by Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. The three men's tones resonated with the rhythm of the African djembe beating in the backdrop. Soon, Christian McBride's anticipated bass riff joined the refrain. The great speeches faded along with the drum line, and the jazz took hold, as was permissible since the foundation had been laid: Jazz is a music, a history, a culture. That is, African American culture is intrinsic to jazz.

The music has its roots in post-Reconstruction New Orleans, at a time when Jim Crow laws lumped Creoles and blacks into one marginalized subgroup. Jazz evolved as a synthesis of "African-derived rhythmic, tonal, and improvisational senses" and French-inspired Creole string ensembles (Hall 36). The word "jazz," in fact, derives from the Creole *jass*, a slang term for sex. Granted, Creoles are light-skinned and hardly black in the usual sense of the word. To that Perry Hall, director of African American studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, adds, "Creole participation in jazz came directly as a result of the discovery by Creole musicians of their Blackness" (47). In other words, Creoles began to play jazz after relocation to and degradation in the United States made them party to the black experience. Yet when jazz gained mainstream popularity in 1917, its face was neither black nor Creole. The first jazz record released to the masses was that of the self-proclaimed "Original Dixieland Jazz Band," a group of five white musicians (38). In the years that followed, a white musician by the name of Paul Whiteman enjoyed great success performing "symphonic jazz," a style that tamed the "primitive rhythms" of original jazz and therein became "more acceptable to white audiences" (38). In uprooting jazz from its African American culture, Whiteman grossed one million dollars in a single year in the 1920s and was dubbed the "King of Jazz" (39).

Hail to the Thief¹

Paul Whiteman's success arguably lacked merit, but it was hardly unique. Since Whiteman, white men have perpetually sat atop the thrones of black music. For example, in the 1930s, Benny Goodman, a white man, became the "King of Swing" (Hall 31). Decades later, Elvis Presley was crowned the "King of Rock 'N' Roll." In 2003, *Rolling Stone* declared Justin Timberlake the "King of R&B" (Kitwana 156). And, of course, there's Eminem, who continues to be revered as "the Elvis of hip-hop" (139). How can a white man be the face of black music?

To answer this question, we must examine the long-standing tradition of mainstream absorption of black musical forms (Hall 32). Beginning with jazz and leading up to hip-hop, white America has appropriated black music as its own. When whites cannot stake claims to black music—as in the case of hip-hop—the nature of the relationship between mainstream society and African American culture is simply exploitative. This essay will examine the ethics of cross-cultural musical appropriation in an attempt to discover why the Elvises and Eminems are able to reap the glory of African American cultural innovation.

Gillespie, Gift-Giving, and Genocide

“You can’t steal a gift. Bird gave the world his music, and if you can hear it you can have it,” Dizzy Gillespie declared in defense of Phil Woods, a white saxophonist who had been accused of poaching Charlie “Bird” Parker’s style (Lethem 70). Jonathan Lethem, in his essay “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,” draws inspiration from Gillespie in criticizing copyrights and exploring the concept of a “gift economy” (65). According to Lethem, works of art exist in such an economy, which is rooted in the poignancy of the product (65-66). This gift economy is independent of the market economy in which art and music are commoditized because “a gift conveys an uncommodifiable surplus of inspiration” (Lethem 66). No doubt black musical forms—as is true of all art—function in such an economy both in giving and receiving. To a greater extent, rock ‘n’ roll connoisseur Theodore Gracyk questions whether there was ever an African American musical form “that wasn’t already the result of miscegenation and hybridization” (86). For example, as noted earlier, the first jazz musicians drew inspiration from both “the French tradition of military marching bands” and the European-style string orchestra (Hall 36). As Lethem would argue for any art, the making of music is a continual process of borrowing and sharing. Thus, Gillespie and Gracyk are right to say that black artists cannot claim exclusivity to black music. But what, then, distinguishes the use of black music by white musicians from the continual borrowing and sharing of musical property upon which black music is built?

In truth, the gift analogy is oversimplified. You certainly cannot “steal” a gift if it has been given to you, but you can misuse it. When appropriating black musical forms, white artists such as Paul Whiteman often reshape and redefine the styles to “minimize their association with ‘Blackness’” (Hall 32). This type of cultural appropriation is less an exchange of gifts than “a virtual stripping of Black musical genius and aesthetic innovation” (Hall 33). To Gracyk, the very process of reshaping is what grants “those engaged in appropriation . . . some right to claim ownership of the music they perform” (107). Thus, symphonic jazz can be appreciated independently of the black musical style from which it is derived, and its creation gives whites some cultural ownership of jazz. Yet Gracyk fails to recognize the effect of appropriation on the original musical form, which distinguishes unethical appropriation from the harmless

inspiration that Lethem supports. In the most basic sense, a gift can be considered “misused” when it is damaged through usage. As is often the case when mainstream America whitewashes black cultural property and then claims it as its own, the result is what philosopher Amiri Baraka, one of the greatest voices of “spoken word” jazz, describes as a “cultural genocide” (quoted in Gracyk 110).

Gracyk rejects this notion of cultural genocide. According to Gracyk, “the analogy with genocide hinges on the thesis that, were it not for the nonreciprocal behavior of the cultural imperialist, the ‘dominated’ culture would not have changed” (110). Because African American culture would have evolved independently of white influence, white America’s reshaping of black musical forms, he claims, simply gives rise to a “legitimate transformation” (110). Gracyk depicts this instance of cultural appropriation as natural, yet black musical forms have tended to evolve unwillingly. New forms emerge in hopes of reestablishing “the distinctiveness of Black music in a given sociohistorical context” (Hall 32). What is particularly unnatural is the continual need for African Americans to reassert their cultural autonomy. For example, when rock music became more closely associated with Elvis than Chuck Berry, black musicians such as Ray Charles and Sam Cooke fused rhythm and blues with “gospel-inflected harmonies” to create what became known in the 1960s as “soul” (44). Such innovation is less the result of dynamism than of marginalization. Cultural genocide arises when the art is separated from the people (31). The heavily consumed, appropriated forms are “ineffective as expressions and affirmations of the unique cultural experiences from which they arise” (32). Cultural meanings are thereby often erased (35), as happened when whites appropriated soul music—which spoke to black emotion and struggle during the Civil Rights Movement—and called it “disco” (45). When whites appropriate black music, the art is stripped not only of its cultural identity but also of its ability to function in the gift economy. Although Lethem agrees that one cannot steal a gift, he argues that one can destroy it: “Where there is no gift there is no art, [thus] it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity” (66). When black musical forms are completely dissociated from their emotional foundation—as in the case of soul’s devolution into disco—the result is no longer a work of art but a mere commodity, which Lethem defines by its inability to create a genuine emotional connection (66). However, the mainstream need not appropriate black music in order to commoditize it. We see this in the case of hip-hop. Though rap has been reinterpreted by a myriad of races, including whites, it is nevertheless identified with African American culture—a culture that is now bought and sold.

Back Yard DJs to NWA: Origins of Hip Hop

“Rap in general dates all the way back to the motherland, where tribes would use call-and-response chants. In the 1930s and 1940s you had Cab Calloway

pioneering his style of jazz rhyming. The sixties you had the love style of rapping, with Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and the poetry style of rapping with the Last Poets, the Watts poets and the militant style of rapping with brothers like Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan.”

—Afrika Bambaata, 1993 (quoted in Perkins 2)

Rap is revolutionary as a black musical form because every path traces its lineage back to an element of African American culture. Granted, today there are countless cultural varieties of hip-hop from Asian to Hispanic rap; still, all of these styles are indisputably derived from black music. So far, hip-hop has inspired imitations but it has nevertheless resisted cultural genocide. That is not to say, however, that it has escaped exploitation.

Hip-hop was born in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s as the product of the yard culture of West Kingston brought to New York by Jamaican immigrants in the late 1960s: “Yard DJs brought huge speakers and turntables to the slums, where they rapped over the simple bass lines of the ska and reggae beats. . . . The DJ ruled during hip hop’s early days, and it was the DJ who established the foundations for the lyricist (MC)” (Perkins 6). In the 1980s, black middle-class rappers L.L. Cool J and the group Run DMC, both from suburban Queens, were representative of the first wave of hip hop artists to achieve mainstream success (Perkins 15)—that is, until their minimalist style gave way to controversial “gangsta” rap in the 1990s: “The gangsta was epitomized by the now defunct group NWA (Niggas with Attitude), which consisted of the MCs Dr. Dre, Ezy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren . . . and Ice-T” (Perkins 18). Then came the “message rap” of artists such as Long Island’s Public Enemy, which was followed by the much less political “booty rap” of groups like 2 Live Crew (Perkins 19-20). Rap’s decades-long transformation exemplifies the natural cultural dynamics about which Gracyk theorizes. Its cultural autonomy remained intact at this point. Then, in the late 1990s, a white rapper from Detroit emerged on the scene and started down the path to becoming hip-hop’s Elvis.

The Blue-Eyed Baller

If I have a cup of coffee that is too strong for me because it is too black, I weaken it by pouring cream into it.²

—Malcolm X, 1963

In 2003, a well-established hip-hop magazine, *The Source*, acted on a personal vendetta against the industry’s most successful artist of the time, white rapper Eminem. In an attempt to derail the rapper’s career, *The Source* published lyrics from unreleased tracks by Eminem that featured blatantly racist attacks on black women: “Girls I like have big butts / no they don’t, ’cause I don’t like that nigga shit . . . Black

and whites they sometimes mix / But black girls only want your money / cause they be dumb chicks” (quoted in Kitwana 136). After a public apology in which Eminem attributed his racist remarks to teenage angst and bitter resentment toward an African American ex-girlfriend, Eminem’s success and popularity were unaffected (141). But *The Source*’s crusade against the white rapper did not end there; the magazine’s greatest concern was not that rap’s most successful artist was racist, but that he was white and that hip-hop rightly belonged to a black youth subculture (136). Granted, Eminem was not the first white rapper to enjoy mainstream success. In fact, the first No. 1 hip-hop album was the all-white hip-hop group The Beastie Boys’ 1986 *License to Ill* (White 201). Similarly, the first hip-hop single to top the charts was Vanilla Ice’s “Ice, Ice Baby” in 1991 (Perkins 37). But the most successful white rappers often parodied the genre, which led some listeners to write them off as “wiggers.” Eminem’s music was revered as genuine hip-hop, and *The Source* feared the familiarity of his success. Countless times, owners of *The Source* declared that Eminem was on “the fast track to becoming hip-hop’s Elvis” (Kitwana 136). That is, as had happened with Elvis, yet another black musical form would be more closely identified with an iconic white artist than with black artists.

In the early 1950s, Sam Phillips—the Sun Records executive who helped Elvis rise to stardom—proclaimed, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars” (quoted in Perkins 38). Unlike his wannabe predecessors, Eminem can produce rap with that very “Negro feel.” His lyrics have thematic similarities to some black rap because Eminem grew up in the marginalized class of impoverished white Americans. Hence, his music preserves the emotional aspect of the hip-hop gift. Perhaps Eminem’s music exemplifies hip-hop’s ability to function as a gift economy. After all, whereas Elvis’ stardom catalyzed rock ‘n’ roll to become the predominately white musical form it is today, Eminem’s success has not given hip-hop a white face. Has the music industry evolved beyond racial exploitation, or is the mainstream interested in keeping hip-hop black?

Mr. Ambassador at the Minstrel Show

In late 2002, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story on hip-hop’s cultural bandit, Marshall Mathers, a.k.a. Eminem, and titled it “Mr. Ambassador” (Kitwana 160). The astute title was fitting for the rap superstar who had previously been labeled the “king” of hip-hop, for Eminem is just that: the envoy of white America to the hip-hop nation. Eminem has attracted many mainstream listeners to hip-hop essentially because he looks like they do. Before Eminem, true hip-hop—which excludes the whitewashed works of Vanilla Ice and the Beastie Boys—was exclusively black and therefore incomprehensible to most white audiences. It does not follow, however, that Eminem is the white man’s rapper. Quite the contrary: “although rap is still proportionately more popular among blacks, its primary audience is white and lives in the suburbs” (Samuels, quoted in Kitwana 82). In February 2004, *Forbes* reported that

of an estimated forty-five million hip-hop consumers between the ages of thirteen and thirty-four, eighty percent are white (82). This begs the question: Why do white people love hip-hop, that is, hip-hop in its true form? According to pop journalist Arnold White, “Rap flourished into corporate-sponsored hip hop because of the symbiosis that held whites enthralled to Blacks and kept Blacks indentured” (183). White America’s embrace of hip-hop culture is hardly a move toward racial acceptance and cultural understanding. Rather, it is the product of “white supremacy (i.e., black kids selling black images of black criminality and inferiority and white kids buying them to reinforce their superiority)” (103). Hip-hop perpetuates the American tradition of minstrelsy, except that rather than whites painting their faces black, black artists have succumbed to stereotypes of themselves. In the case of hip-hop, white supremacy is enforced not through imitation but consumption of the “minstrel portrait” of black “dehumanization” (Baraka 328). In the eyes of the mainstream, hip-hop reinforces conventions and stereotypes of blackness that foster white power.

Though Eminem may honor hip-hop as a gift, the mainstream renders it a commodity. A commodity fails to establish an emotional connection between two people (Lethem 66). Though rap music showcases black suffering, mainstream America receives it not with compassion but with mockery—white supremacy prevents an emotional connection. Previous musical generations saw white artists destroying the gift of black music by failing to recreate its poignancy; the hip-hop generation sees poignancy destroyed through direct commoditization. In the case of hip-hop, whites are able to reap the power and profits of black culture not by marginalizing black ingenuity but by exploiting it. Simply put: whites couldn’t do it better themselves.

Why Deny the Obvious, Child?³

Hip-hop may have broken the appropriative trend between mainstream America and black music, but it has done little to end the marginalization of African Americans. It seems that the key issue is not so much the act of appropriation as the driving force behind it. Incidentally, when discussing mainstream absorption of black music, few scholars aside from Theodore Gracyk acknowledge its contributions. We cannot deny that “rock would not exist without appropriation” (Gracyk 97), nor can we blame individual artists for acts of appropriation.

Take, for example, Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, which is often criticized for Simon’s arguably exploitative use of a group of South African folk singers to enhance the tone of the album and, ultimately, his own success. The accusation runs: “Visually and aurally, Simon appears as the white master who exerts a benign rule over his black subjects” (Mitchell, quoted in Gracyk 91). Yet to suggest that Simon’s work with the South African choir had imperialistic motives is excessive. In truth, he was motivated by “a genuine love of South African music” (98); we cannot criticize him for that. Concomitantly, the South African tribal leader Joseph Shabalala praised Simon for

“the opportunity to disclose [their] music all over the world” (quoted in Gracyk 105). Though not Simon’s fault, *Graceland* failed to inspire interest in South African music. Most people I know who own the album admit to skipping the only track that features the South African choir almost exclusively. The only music *Graceland* successfully promoted was that of Paul Simon—just as when Keith Richards and Mick Jagger started the Rolling Stones, in Richards’ words, “to turn other people on to” African American blues artist Muddy Waters (quoted in Gracyk 15), they really only turned people on to the Rolling Stones.

The crime, then, is not the use of black musical gifts but the bigotry that often leads to their commoditization. The success of *Graceland* and the Rolling Stones speaks to whites’ lack of interest in the black experience and their desire not simply to steal black music, but more basically to de-contextualize it—that is, to avoid establishing emotional connections. Appreciation of black music goes hand in hand with appreciation of black people, except in the case of hip-hop through which blacks have allowed themselves to be dehumanized. That is not to say that non-hip-hop black musicians enjoy no mainstream success—we know that to be untrue. Rather, mainstream America tends to depreciate black music, for connecting emotionally with such works of art might bring about an understanding of black suffering that would undermine white supremacy. Moreover, the commoditization of black music continues to foster white power by granting financial success to those who control the music industry: whites. The power disparity between whites and blacks in the music industry suggests that music is another tool the mainstream uses to perpetuate black marginalization. As Amiri Baraka has observed, “The laws once openly stated blacks inferior. Now it is the relationship these laws uphold that maintain the de facto oppression” (329). In the shift from de jure to de facto racism, mainstream America reshaped bigotry in much the same way it did black music—through the simple process of whitewashing.

NOTES

1. An allusion to Radiohead’s 2003 album.
2. From a speech by Malcolm X entitled “God’s Judgment of White America (The Chickens Come Home to Roost),” delivered on December 4, 1963, in New York City.
3. An allusion to the title of a Paul Simon track from 1990’s *Rhythm of the Saints*.

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