

Can Hip Hop be the Same With White People in the Game?

Hip hop is widely considered to be an expression of black culture. Many of the hip hop performers in the business are black, the audience that is generally thought of as hip-hop enthusiasts is mostly black, and many of the lyrics discuss black problems. There are some white MCs and there is always a token white person or two in the audience, but this does not change the overall perception of hip hop in the mainstream. These white people in hip hop are often written off as wannabes, pretending to be black; they are often considered a minority and not taken seriously. Hip hop, as a whole, is still considered to be a black art and music form that only black people can understand.¹ I, too, bought into this portrayal of hip hop until I attended my first underground show. The artist that I went to see was a black, New York native, so if anything, I was expecting a crowd that was far more “ghetto” than me. However, when I arrived at the venue, the place was full of white guys milling around and greeting each other with pounds and daps. They could no longer fit into the genre of token ‘white guys’ because they made up the majority of the crowd. As time elapsed, I noticed that I remained the only black person in the venue. I kept waiting for more black people to show up, fearing that I had accidentally walked into the wrong show or gotten the wrong impression of the MC that was performing. After a few hours of lingering, I had yet to see more black audience members arrive. Overwhelmed, I left the venue, disturbed and confused. When did hip hop become so white? I thought. Why did all those ‘white boys’ think they had any right to hip-hop? Ultimately, I arrived at the question that framed all of my discomfort with the situation that I had just witnessed: why did I care? This question motivated me to further explore why hip-hop is so concerned with whiteness and how those who are white gain access to and navigate this racialized space with legitimacy. Through analyzing the rise of three white MCs, Eminem, Lady Sovereign, and Aesop Rock, I argue that the tactics and approach that these MCs use to navigate the

¹ Taylor 80.

racialized space of hip hop greatly influences their level of success and reputation as legitimate white artists.

Why does whiteness matter?

To understand the dilemma of whiteness in hip-hop, it is necessary to understand the roots of hip-hop. The origins of hip hop paint a contradictory picture to the race attitudes that are observed in hip hop today. Hip hop began in the South Bronx in the 1970's as an outlet for the youth in this community.² The city of New York had just completed an urban renewal program that ended up isolating this already impoverished community. Faced with high crime rates and gang violence, these youth needed a positive outlet³ for the frustration that they experienced in this socially neglected community that the power structure considered to be, "the pathological reflection of 'normal' society."⁴ Hip hop was this outlet. It was a culture created by these youth to channel their frustration into a creative release through rapping, DJing, break dancing, and graffiti.⁵ Because the culture was founded as a response to a feeling of alienation from society, community was a strong theme woven throughout hip hop. Community provided a unified space where these youth who were excluded from 'mainstream' society could find a way to be included and involved in something positive. Even though these neglected communities were predominantly communities of color, the premise of inclusion in hip hop culture was geared more toward poverty and oppression due to being impoverished rather than race. Early in this movement, there were a number of white people involved, and as we saw in Style Wars, by Tony Silver and Harry Chalfant, (1983) they played active roles in the culture, in some cases, even using their skin color in their favor to steal the supplies needed for other graffiti artists to paint their tags and throw-ups. These white kids in the Bronx, and other poor neighborhoods, understood the oppressive and nihilistic nature of their environment, and this gave them access to hip hop culture. At the time of its origin, hip hop culture was constructed as a way of life that rebelled against the oppressive social norms that excluded the youth involved in this culture.

² Watkins 9.

³ Watkins 22.

⁴ Taylor 81.

⁵ DeFrantz "Introduction to Hip Hop."

Because these impoverished communities were often communities of color, race was always an issue that hip-hop culture dealt with.⁶ But race was not the main defining characteristic; hip hop culture sought to bring together those who were committed to the life of rebellion and expression through creative channels. While all four aspects of hip hop culture were based in traditions from black music and culture, they were more concerned with creative ability and authenticity rather than racial qualifications.⁷ All who proved themselves as talented and dedicated to hip-hop culture were accepted within the community. So, why does race matter in hip-hop today? If hip hop considers itself a culture as defined by Paul Taylor, “a way of life... denot[ing an]entire ensemble of attitudes, institutions and practices that define a coherent way of living,”⁸ then it should not have any issues with race as long as its participants are genuinely living the life and principles of hip hop. As Taylor argues, allowing ourselves to think of hip hop in a racialized way requires that we appeal to antiquated ideas of how race solely binds a person to culture which is the type of thinking that the hip hop culture was made to rebel against.⁹ This mentality is also inconsistent with the positive response that is observed with regards to the spread of hip hop internationally. Hip hop enthusiasts are usually thrilled to see the spread of hip hop to other races in other countries. This is reflected by hip hop’s almost viral spread to countries as far away as Palestine.¹⁰ If hip-hop has space for international dispersion, which requires the inclusion of many different races, then why is there such a problem with American whiteness in hip-hop? What is it about this type of whiteness that causes friction within the hip-hop community?

While hip hop remained a culture of poor and oppressed communities for its early years, as it became more popular, it became a more racialized space.¹¹ As previously mentioned, hip hop has always dealt with black issues because black people were the main people who populated the impoverished neighborhoods of its origins; it was black people who needed a voice to rebel with and hip hop was this voice. As hip hop spread, more people identified with the realness of its message and rebellious nature of

⁶ DeFrantz “Introduction to Hip Hop.”

⁷ Dyson 5-7

⁸ Taylor 81.

⁹ Taylor 85.

¹⁰ Osumare 61.

¹¹ Baldwin 160.

the culture. The mainstream market eventually realized how popular, and marketable, this culture was, but in order to package and distribute it to consumers, the market bound it to the idea of race.¹² They marketed it as the voice of misunderstood black youth from the ghettos of America and suggested that those who bought it could ‘experience’ black identity. This binding of hip-hop so closely and almost solely to blackness produced the concept of hip-hop as a racialized space. The market left little room for complexity in order to increase marketability, so if hip hop was a black thing, as the market said it was, then it could not have space for whiteness.

This incorporation of hip hop into black identity made it an expression of black culture. As a product of black culture, it became seen as an imperative of the black community to preserve hip hop culture.¹³ White people in American society have had a history of stealing black music and black culture. From jazz to rhythm and blues, white artists have routinely imitated and stolen black art forms, which has made black people protective of their culture. Allowing white people to navigate hip hop culture without questioning their motives increases the likelihood that they might have the chance to learn the principles of the culture and take it for themselves.¹⁴ The marketing of hip hop in the past few decades has greatly increased the number of white consumers that listen to it,¹⁵ making this fear of culture kidnapping more relevant.

The French cultural philosopher Jean Baudrillard introduced in his literature a space created by the capitalist market, which he terms the hyperreal, through which we can understand how white consumers can ‘steal’ black culture¹⁶. This space is created because, in its efforts to sell to the consumer, the market allows the representations of its products to become the reality of its consumers. This means that the exaggerated representations used to sell products are so heavily marketed that the fiction in these representation becomes irrelevant, and they become the reality of the product. So, as hip hop became part of this market the ways that it was packaged, a certain look, a certain way of speaking, a certain way of moving, became the reality of what hip hop was. If you behaved in the ways that the market said that hip

¹² Watkins 97.

¹³ Taylor 88-89.

¹⁴ Ross 68.

¹⁵ Baldwin 159

¹⁶ Boyd 70-72.

hop was, then you could be hip hop.¹⁷ Because the market also closely tied hip hop to blackness, by association, you could also “be” black. This opened the door to anyone, regardless of race, to be black through mainstream hip hop. Thus increasing numbers of white suburban consumers could access black culture by “walking the walk and talking the talk,” so to speak, that the market told them was hip hop. However, these market representations are not the reality of hip hop, so those who experience hip hop through this space of the hyperreal cannot truly represent hip hop. Because it is white consumers who are overwhelmingly exposed to hip hop through the market,¹⁸ it is white people who are more likely to be “posers” and steal hip-hop culture without knowing or understanding what it is. This exacerbates the problem of being white in hip hop for those who truly want to be involved in the culture, and it is now one of the main reasons why tension arises around white people in hip hop despite the fact that hip-hop was originally created as a space for oppressed voices regardless of race.

In light of these dynamics surrounding race created by the tension between hip-hop culture and market tendencies, hip hop must decide if it wants to adopt the market definition and become solely a black music and culture, or if it wants to return to its foundations and be a culture of rebellion and outlet for those who are oppressed. The former suggests that whiteness will always be an issue by necessity, and the latter implies that race should not matter as long as the essence of hip-hop culture is captured. However, while hip hop ponders this decision, white hip-hop artists must be aware of this dilemma in order to successfully navigate the currently racialized space of hip hop. By looking into three case studies of white artists in the hip hop now, we can explore how they are able to gain legitimacy and access to hip hop in spite of their whiteness.

The Prototype: Eminem

Eminem is often discussed in the hip hop world as the prototype for white success in hip hop. He rose to high levels of acclaim in the late nineties with *The Slim Shady LP* and his hit single “My name is.”¹⁹ He is often held responsible for bringing hip hop to the top of the charts with the numerous hit

¹⁷ DeFrantz “Realness.”

¹⁸ Watkins 93.

¹⁹ Watkins 89.

releases from his subsequent albums, *The Marshall Mathers LP* and *The Eminem Show*. But his success was not without controversy concerning his race.

As with many white rappers in mainstream music, Eminem was questioned about his motives and tested about his right to belong in hip hop.²⁰ How he dealt with these accusations in his music and with his public image in some ways set the standard for how white MCs should act to gain and maintain legitimacy within mainstream hip hop. Eminem began with the background to build his reputation as a ‘real’ MC. As we have discussed in class and in the readings, realness is an integral factor in hip hop culture and a general point of access for MCs of all races.²¹ In order to be ‘real,’ MCs must show that they have experienced oppression, racial, economically, or both, and that they understand the plight of this sort of life. Eminem had these qualifications.²² He grew up on the wrong side of Detroit, the son of a single, teenage mother and the product of an impoverished childhood. He also had the history with hip hop, discovering it when he was teenager looking for a place to belong and an escape from his life of poverty and instability. Hip hop suited Eminem well as an outlet for his rebellious nature, but his whiteness stood in the way of his success for years.

Eminem reacted to this dilemma of whiteness with persistence, awareness, and a sense of humor. He stuck to circulating the underground and gaining prestige and legitimacy in the underground hip hop scene with his talent.²³ For years he circulated his mixtapes, which is a popular way of getting your music heard by those inside the underground, in hopes of stumbling upon a big record contract. As time went on, his rhymes increasingly were centered around his awareness of how his own whiteness limited his success as a hip hop artist and also displayed an awareness about the racialized environment of our society as a whole. He conveyed his understanding of this societal issue in songs like “White America,” where he blatantly rhymes, “...Baby, {ooh baby}, look at my sales, let’s do the math, if I was black I/ would’ve sold half...”²⁴ He delivered these types of witty and aware rhymes with a comical edge, which

²⁰ Watkins 86-87.

²¹ Dyson 6-7.

²² Watkins 90-92.

²³ Watkins 98-99.

²⁴ “White America Lyrics”

worked to ease questions about his motives with hip hop by portraying him as an MC who was in it for fun and had no malicious intent of stealing or inappropriately imitating this black art form.

Dr. Dre, from the popular gangster rap group N.W.A., finally discovered Eminem and agreed to sign him.²⁵ This alignment with a veteran black hip hop artist whose legitimacy could not be questioned because he created the basis on which to measure legitimacy, finally gave Eminem the approval that he needed to gain wide spread acceptance in the hip hop community. After gaining this acceptance, Eminem maintained his status and legitimacy by actively constructing his public persona as a respectful and racially conscious white boy.²⁶ In his public statements and interviews he always made it clear that it was an honor for him to be big in the hip hop scene and paid homage to the black hip hop legends that created the culture. By being aware and open about his whiteness and understanding of the dilemma that it caused for mainstream hip hop he was able to maintain his success and become a hip hop legend of sorts. However, while these tactics and image worked for Eminem and is often held as a ‘gold standard’ for how white MCs should structure themselves in the hip hop community, it is far from being the only way that white MCs can interact with the dilemma of whiteness in hip hop culture.

The Newbie: Lady Sovereign

Lady Sovereign debuted on the hip hop scene in 2006 with her album *Public Warning*.²⁷ She had the witty rhymes and smart-aleck vibes of Eminem, but she took a different approach to the dilemma of whiteness in hip hop. Like many artists in the community, Lady Sovereign had the upbringing that gave her real legitimacy in hip hop.²⁸ She was born in London’s notorious Chalkhill Estate public housing project. This rough project gave her the experience of the social oppression associated with poverty. She started listening to hip hop a young age and graduated to crafting her own rhymes at the age of 14. She had been circulating the London underground for years when she was discovered by the mainstream, but her American debut on the Def Jam label was met with moderate success. Her first album sold about

²⁵ Watkins 101.

²⁶ Watkins 87.

²⁷ “Lady Sovereign Biography.”

²⁸ “Lady Sovereign Biography.”

300,000 copies in the US.²⁹ So why did this artist who had established success and acclaim in the underground have such an anticlimactic mainstream debut? The answer to this question lies in the way in which she addressed, or failed to address, this dilemma of whiteness in hip hop.

As previously mentioned, Lady Sovereign gained her success and acclaim in the hip hop underground. The underground, however, is much less concerned with race and much more concerned with ability.³⁰ As previously mentioned, the mainstream's concern with marketability has made race a main dimension of market appeal and acceptance. The underground, however, is not concerned with marketability, so race is almost never a limiting factor. Because this was the world that Lady Sovereign was familiar with, her rhymes could, and did, talk about her whiteness, but it was not an imperative. She had space in the underground to avoid having to be constantly aware of race and whiteness, as Eminem was, because it was not preventing her success. Also, because she hails from England, she is not as familiar with the race dynamics that intertwine themselves into the American market place.

When she debuted, with much hype, on the Def Jam label in 2006 her³¹ "pop" lyrics did not satisfy American audiences. She did not often balance her "party-rapper" demeanor with the racial awareness that consumers were used to seeing in Eminem's work.³² So even though she came off as real in interviews, citing years where she worked odd jobs so that she could spend her free time making rhymes and mixtapes and promoting them on the internet,³³ she was not able to overcome her difficulty relating to the race dilemma that pervades American mainstream hip hop.

Even though the fact that she could not relate to the dilemma of whiteness in American hip hop caused her to not succeed as well as she hoped on American hip hop charts, her style continues to work well for her in the underground scene. She is currently in the process of making her second album and by the indications of the information on her website, she has learned a lot about how to craft her sound and image with regards to her whiteness in order to shape her own success.³⁴ She is no longer releasing

²⁹ "News." Lady Sovereign.

³⁰ DeFrantz, "Underground."

³¹ "Lady Sovereign Biography."

³² "Lady Sovereign Lyrics."

³³ "Lady Sovereign Interview."

³⁴ "News." Lady Sovereign.

through Def Jams and hints at the “careful planning of her next album,” which suggests that her debut on mainstream charts most likely taught her a lot about the dilemma of whiteness in American hip hop.

Rebel amongst rebels: Aesop Rock

Aesop Rock has been on the hip hop radar for almost a decade and has released 5 albums, which have been met with wide popularity.³⁵ But he addresses the dilemma of whiteness in hip hop in a drastically different way than Lady Sovereign or Eminem. The way that he interacts with this dilemma has actively shaped the decisions that he has made and the success that he has achieved.

Aesop Rock self released his first album, *Music for Earthworms*, in 1997 and since then he has been a popular artist in the underground scene.³⁶ He is known for his vivid and complex lyrics and involvement in hip hop culture beyond just MCing. He is a New York native who has shown his dedication to hip hop culture by not only being an MC but also a graffiti artist. Aesop Rock also has a long list of hip hop credits beyond his albums, including guest appearances and production accomplishments. Aesop Rock has established his legitimacy in hip hop not only through his lyrical abilities but also by his dedication to the culture as a whole.

Aesop Rock has developed a fan base in his years in the underground circuit, but he has never tried to expand his success to the mainstream market. This was a conscious choice by Aesop Rock, especially after the pressure that he received to switch over to the mainstream after his 2001 album *Labor Days*.³⁷ He has not stated his exact motives for this choice, but the mainstream’s issues with race most likely played a significant role.

As an underground artist, Aesop Rock is used to a scene that accepts and respects him for his talent and does not focus on race as a dimension of legitimacy. Aesop has structured his sound and his image around this aspect of the underground.³⁸ He does not necessarily have the look of a hip hop artists and he certainly does not have the background that often mediates legitimacy in the mainstream market.

³⁵ “Aesop Rock.”

³⁶ “Aesop Rock.”

³⁷ “Aesop Rock.”

³⁸ “Aesop Rock.”

Aesop earned a college degree at Boston University.³⁹ Aesop is most likely aware that if he were to try to switch over to mainstream hip hop he would be pressured to change his image and his sound to something more marketable. It is not uncommon for the mainstream to encourage artists to lie about their backgrounds in order to boost their image.⁴⁰ As previously mentioned, Aesop has proven his dedication to hip hop in his involvement and understanding of the culture as an MC and a graffiti artist. Changing his formula would seem like a superficial move that runs counter to the concept of realness that the hip hop community reveres.

By actively choosing to avoid the mainstream, Aesop is choosing to separate original hip hop culture, and the dimensions that define it, from the highly racialized characteristics that tend to define hip hop in the mainstream market. This speaks volumes with regards to how Aesop views the dimension of race within hip hop. To him hip hop should remain a culture of rebellion, oppression, and expression rather than solely an expression of black identity. His rejection of the mainstream can be interpreted as an active rebellion against the dilemma of race that is pervasive in hip hop culture

Will Whiteness and Hip Hop Ever be Friends?

Through these three case studies, we can see that the dilemma of race, and specifically whiteness, is an important aspect of hip hop culture because it shapes white artists' success and audiences appeal. However, these case studies do highlight the point that whiteness is only an issue in hip hop because the market has structured it that way. As we can see from Aesop Rock's story, white artists can gain respect and success in the underground, where preserving hip hop culture matters more than portraying it as a black cultural possession. This emphasizes the growing tension between the mainstream and the underground. The mainstream's desire to market hip hop as a form of blackness is greatly undermined by the underground's undisturbed acceptance of white hip hop artists. This tension not only characterizes the uneasiness that I experienced with the predominantly white underground audience, but it also alludes to a realization that mainstream hip hop may be trying to avoid: maybe hip hop can be just the same with white MCs in the game.

³⁹ "Aesop Rock."

⁴⁰ Watkins 91.

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