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In Amateur Rap Videos on YouTube"

Name of Candidate: James Harris
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Thesis and Abstract Approved:



Jennifer Maher
Associate Professor of English
English Department

Date Approved: 7/31/17

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

THE DIGITAL CIRCULATION AND APPROPRIATION OF BLACK CULTURE IN AMATEUR RAP VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE

*JAMES HARRIS, TEXTS, TECHNOLOGIES AND
LITERATURE, 2017*

Directed By:

Associate Professor of English, Jennifer Maher,
English Department

There is a difference in listening to rap and participating in it. Since its creation, rap has been a black medium used to advocate for black rights, criticize political situations, and bring awareness to African American adversity. This paper aims to explore the recent YouTube.com trend of successful white rappers and their deviation from traditional black values. It will look at the history of rap and how its use today differs from the MC's of the past. An analysis of prominent YouTube rappers appears near the end of the paper in order to theorize on the future of the rap genre.

THE DIGITAL CIRCULATION AND APPROPRIATION OF BLACK CULTURE IN AMATEUR RAP VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE

By

James Harris

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University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

James Earl Harris Jr.

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Chapter 1: Black Identity and its Appropriation

Introduction

Since April 4, 2017, 18 million people have watched on YouTube.com alone Kendall Jenner, of the infamous Kardashian clan, hand a can of Pepsi to a non-militarized police officer during a protest march staged for the company's advertisement. Reminiscent of the photo of Ieshia Evans gracefully walking towards police in riot gear taken less than a year ago in Baton Rouge, as well as the famous 1967 picture of a young man placing a flower in the gun barrel of a soldier during a protest to end the Vietnam War, this Pepsi ad appropriates the power and danger of protests that have occurred, most recently in the aftermath of the respective deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, the latter of which led to the Baltimore Uprising. In light of the criticisms leveled at the ad, Pepsi removed it from their website within a couple of hours. But as the Internet has shown us, nothing is completely erased or forgotten. On YouTube, Pepsi's ad continues to be available for anyone to watch with ease to this day.

Yet, the kinds of critiques leveled at Pepsi for this ad, critiques that included charges such as "exploiting the #BlackLivesMatter protests" (Sanghani in *Telegraph Online Magazine*), and "trivialize[ing] the issues" (activist Deray Mckesson), are less common among other videos that enjoy a certain kind of popularity on YouTube.com. For over a decade, YouTube has allowed anyone to go on the website and post videos they create. The idea that one can become famous overnight has never been more possible with the right video for the right audience allowing a person to gain fame. That is the exact reason why so many artists try their hand at becoming YouTube famous. The platform allows many people to view a video in a matter of seconds over a long period of time. But as Tarleton Gillespie argues, platforms also have politics. For example, a niche group of rappers have noticed their gateway into the world of rap music because of YouTube's power of circulation. Much like the Pepsi ad, many of these rappers are appropriating events or activities for the sake of or in the hope of profit. But to do so means that the politics of

rap, which has long been associated with black culture, are neutralized, even erased. And white, amateur YouTube rappers are seldom critiqued for their appropriation, unlike the Pepsi ad. In fact, many are loved and celebrated, with their video views reaching into the billions collectively. And these rappers grow in mainstream popularity, as Macklemore, currently with billions of YouTube views, evidence.

I argue in this thesis that the appropriation of rap by white rappers on YouTube is part of historical and ongoing appropriation of black culture. Black culture is rich and expansive, having influenced America all the way back to its origins. Dontaira Terrell lists just a few contributions of black culture in her *Atlanta Black Star* article, “The Untold Impact of African Culture on American Culture” and points to the appropriation that always threatens them: “The contributions and cultural influences stemming from enslaved Africans have been greatly undermined in the American culture. Africanisms varying from traditional folklore, Southern cuisines to song and dance are not only prevalent in today’s society but have a widespread, deep-rooted impact throughout the United States” (Terrell, 2015). With each of these activities, dominant, white culture has often sought to appropriate those unique characteristics, even at the level of everyday language. In “The Appropriation of Black Culture is Not Just a Fad,” Sherida Kuffour explains, for example, that there has always been and there has been an even more growing popularity of the black vernacular by all Americans. This can be exemplified by the phrase “cool” as taken from the jazz age, to “basic,” commonly used in day-to-day speech to communicate in the popular way. Yet, the taking of vernacular, which is a big part of black identity, is only one facet of appropriation that has occurred to the black community. Kuffour also explains that fashion, in the sense of clothing and hairstyle has also been appropriated. From dreads and cornrows, to clothing and skin tone, the fashion industry has often taken from black culture without acknowledgment. And finally, music has been appropriated over and over again. From rock and roll to rap, both of which were born out of black culture, white artists have both in reputation and economics taken

beats, lyrics, and style of black musicians in order to profit. Richard Rogers, in “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” explains that appropriation is the taking of another’s culture for the use of one’s own (474). And more specifically, white appropriation of black culture is the taking from the “culturally subordinate by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation” (Rogers, 477). Rogers describes this as cultural exploitation that ultimately causes cultural degradation. In short, if the advantaged take from the disadvantaged, the disadvantaged, in the end, will have nothing left that is their own. What is even more troubling about this phenomenon is that the dominant culture, the white population, financially gains from the subordinate culture, the black population, and rarely compensates or pays what it ought.

Although the creation of black culture online might initially have held the promise of escaping these racial inequities (Swiss), the danger of appropriation is only more prevalent and easily facilitated. In her study of the insidious nature of appropriation online, Robin Boylorn explains that appropriation of black language on the Internet is “problematic because it gives dominant groups control over the language. Dominant groups get to decide, for example, when and if certain words are worth appropriation, when and how the words should be used...” Language appropriation, which includes everything from everyday greetings to musical lyrics, is a mode of power dominant groups gets to inhibit, criticize, and influence in the form of widely circulated social media, memes, and music. Consequently, the online medium of platforms such as YouTube, which functions as a “cultural intermediary” (Gillespie) has allowed this appropriation to propagate exponentially.

Take, for instance, the case of the white rapper. Contention has always surrounded the existence of the white rapper. Ian Verstegen explains in his study, “Eminem and the Tragedy of the White Rapper,” that black audiences did not and do not appreciate any radio playtime for white hip-hop artists (2011). Similarly, Paul Olson notes in, “White Rappers and Black

Epistemology,” that black communities felt and feel disrespected when white rappers decided to lie about their upbringing in order to justify their use of rap (2008). But YouTube has allowed for unprecedented appropriation of rap, so much so that rap can appear to be divorced entirely from its roots in black culture. This kind of digital rhetorical circulation has enabled these new waves of rappers to enter a game that was previously incredibly difficult to enter, not only because of artistry but also because of race. In her study, “On Rhetorical Circulation,” Mary Stuckey analyzes different modes of communication and the spread of information. While discussing videos, Stuckey explains, “Rhetorical circulation involves visual as well as linguistic texts” (611). That is to say, how information had been spread in the past, differs from how it is spread now. Written or spoken text is not the only way to communicate to the masses. Video is just as effective, if not more so in many cases. YouTube is the perfect space for white rappers, and other individuals trying to become famous, because of its sharing capability and widespread audience. Consequently, this brand of white rappers often utilize rhetorical circulation by uploading videos of their work and trying to create a viral hit.

Another reason YouTube has created so many new celebrities is because of its potential for immediacy, which is most obviously manifest in its circulatory spread. Jean Burgess delves into the phenomenon of the “viral video” in “All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us? Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture.” He explains that YouTube has allowed for a video to be spread “through rapid, user-led distribution via the Internet” (1). In this way, a video can hit millions of views in a matter of hours. What it means to become viral, according to Burgess, is much like the symptomatic process of becoming ill, the virus spreads from person to person, each sharing the video to someone they know. Through rhetorical circulation in the age of social media and the Internet, white rappers have the perfect medium to spread their music to viewers, even if that rapper doesn’t really belong in what is commonly referred to among rap musicians as “the game.” For instance, such rappers often rely heavily on

catchy hooks, or click-bait titles to gain their audience. One of the most popular examples is white rapper, Watsky, and his “Pale Kid Raps Fast Video.” (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Pale kid raps fast

In hopes of gaining instant viewership, Watsky uses his physically marked privilege to gain an audience who is clicking to see something new and different. As a result, rap has become a new kind of game, where upvotes often seem to be the only thing that matters.

In this thesis, I aim to explore the appropriation of black culture, with an emphasis on rap. By examining a facet of appropriation, specifically rap music and the hip-hop culture surrounding it, I hope to further the discussion of appropriation and its impact on black culture. But to do so, I will first explore the history of black culture in the United States, as well as its appropriation. I then examine how the establishment of black identity has occurred online, as well as the continuing problem of appropriation. I then analyze how the music aspect of black identity has been exploited even further because of the advent of video sharing sites like YouTube. In order to conduct this study, I have asked the following questions:

1. What is the history of black culture and its appropriation in the U.S., including appropriation of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)?
2. How does black culture manifest online and how has appropriation occurred in social media spaces?

3. How has the appropriation of black culture and its musical creativity occurred through YouTube, particularly through the circulation of white rapper videos?

Black Identity throughout American History

For this study, it is important to explain what constitutes blackness and black culture. First, I want to acknowledge the fact that there is not one type of blackness. “Black Culture is not monolith[ic]”, as Robynn T. states in her submission to “The Race Card Project,” an organization created to display the many facets of different races and ethnicities (2014). There are many facets to black culture and I use this thesis to highlight a popular medium in black identity. Not every black person looks at rap for inspiration, but some do, enough to show that rap not only has grown out of black culture but is also a source of perpetuating black culture. Of course, rap has only been around for about 40 years. The history of black culture in the United States started to develop as a mode of survival and resistance with the advent of slavery.

America has a rich cultural history that starts for the black community in the sin of enslavement. During slavery, slaves would rebel against their white masters by forming instruments and playing music from their homeland. Howard Dodson writes about slave culture in “America's Cultural Roots Traced to Enslaved African Ancestors.” Dodson describes the religious festivals and rhythmic rituals slaves would perform in order to defy their masters and remember their origin (2003). In defiance, slaves protected their culture and passed it on to their children, which created a familial tradition that slavery had sought to stamp out. Of course, once the civil war ended and slaves were freed, the black population moved away from the South and The Great Migration occurred. Thousands of newly black citizens traveled to the North and along with them came music, philosophies, and Black oral traditions, such as speech patterns or certain slang/ dialects. Davarian Baldwin, the Raether Distinguished professor for American Studies at Connecticut’s Trinity College spoke about this time period, known as the Harlem Renaissance in his interview with *USA Today*. He says, “the migration brought... new expectations. [Blacks] had

to engage... with whites [and] older, more affluent [blacks] in the North” (Baldwin, 2015). The Harlem Renaissance laid the foundation for black culture in the early 20th century. A lot of the music that originated from African rhythm and instruments was altered with mixing of ideologies from the South fleeing blacks and the North residing blacks. Of course, black identity was not just determined by music and migration, but also with whom that music was popular, David Gordon Nielson writes about the years post slavery in his book, *Black Ethos: Northern Urban Negro Life and Thought, 1890- 1930*. What he describes as black culture in the early 20th century really depended on economic status and skin complexion. But for the most part black identity was fueled through the gaze of white identity (Nielson, 49). During the years of Jim Crow and the civil rights movement, black culture more overtly resisted white culture, especially through expressions of black personal freedom and black empowerment (Berger, 2014). Throughout these periods, black culture formed different rhetorical phrases to verbalize their personal struggles and created music that signified their lives to create what Phillip Lewis describes as the self-identifying black individual (2016).

Language and Black Identity

In Zeba Blay’s “12 Words Black People Invented, And White People Killed.” She offers a list of words that have been appropriated from black culture, words and phrases like “shade, turn up, and ratchet” (2015). What once was deemed as “too ghetto,” now is celebrated and used by young people of all races, on and off the web. In short, there is a fascination with black vernacular, especially when it comes to slang or “hip” talk. African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) or black vernacular has evolved since the days of slavery and could be considered a key part of black identity. It is not just a tradition that is passed down or a different way to speak. According to Geneva Smitherman, vernacular “makes cultural assumptions about what constitutes appropriate discourse, rhetorical strategies, and styles of speaking” and identity within a community (2000). Smitherman discusses her view on black vernacular and its relation to black

culture in, *Talkin that Talk*, where she argues for the legitimization of the black vernacular, as a key part of black culture and verbal tradition. The vernacular helps define blackness and determines part of black identity. If the vernacular is seen as a degraded form of English, then its speakers will be seen as less than and inferior.

Obviously, language plays a huge role in any culture. But, in black culture, it can be said that the language, or rather the vernacular, is a key indicator of blackness. Patrick Oray talks about black language use and expectations in “Another Layer of Blackness: Theorizing Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the U.S. Black Public Sphere.”, Oray writes, “[B]lack people [talk]... in a certain way,” a statement he problematizes through his discussion of his own upbringing and the misconceptions that he himself held (2013). To many people, there is an expectation that being black means you should talk in a certain way, meaning in the black vernacular. So when Oray writes that black people talk in a certain way, what he really means is that black people are expected to talk in a certain way. This is not just a preconceived notion by the white community either. Oray later goes on to argue that if one does not “talk black,” then one is not usually accepted in many black communities. In “Beyond Language: Ebonics, Proper English, and Identity in a Black-American Speech Community,” John Ogbu further shows a connection between “[black] children's dialect beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in school with those of their parents and community” (2013). Black children’s use of the AAVE, at least in this study, shows that it is a common dialect amongst children’s parents and community and consequently part of their culture. Thus, blackness is often closely connected to language or dialect use.

Music and Black Identity

The phenomenon of stealing music from black culture is not one that is new and certainly not limited to rap. In fact one of the first, notable times it occurred was in the 1920s, when Jazz and Swing was booming and the economy was sinking. Because of Jim Crow and the financial disadvantage black citizens faced, Jazz was an escape and cathartic experience. According to

Perry Hall, lots of the music features key aspects of black conversation and talk with its instrument use being likened to hollering and cries (36). Hall writes, in “African- American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation,” that without a doubt, jazz was part of the black experience, that is, until Paul Whiteman entered the scene. In the nascent age of Jazz, Whiteman was a white man trying his hand at what was, in both creation and experience, black music. But, by the end of the 1920s, Whiteman was considered the “King of Jazz” and the best that the genre had to offer. He even made millions from remaking black music into white music (Hall, 39). This appropriation in many ways set a precedent to what was to come for black culture. I use this example not only to give a historical context to the appropriation of rap music that I discuss later, but also because it is a perfect example of how appropriation works in the analog world. A well-established cultural tradition is “borrowed” from a dominant culture and ultimately used to benefit that dominant culture.

Jazz was just the beginning of white’s appropriation of black music. Rock and Roll, inspired by the black medium of blues, welcomes a new “King” to take Paul Whiteman’s place. Ladies and Gentlemen, Elvis Presley has entered building. At this point, it is common knowledge that Elvis Presley was inspired by black artists like ‘Big Boy’ Crudup and ‘Big Mama’ Thornton. The “King of Rock and Roll” did not invent the music genre, but appropriated it from black culture. The appropriation follows the same pattern as the genre before it. In, “Rock, Roll, and Remember?: Addressing the Legacy of Jazz in Popular Music Studies,” Chris McDonald historicizes rock and roll and explains that the 1950s is one of the, “watershed moment[s] in the rise of prominence of African- American sounds in pop mainstream” (2006). Like Jazz, rock and roll was popular amongst the black population and after it was borrowed from a white man, it became hugely popular in white culture as well. Stereo Williams says it best in his article for the *Daily Beast* entitled, “Soul Searching: The Truth About Elvis and the History of Racism in Rock”. He claims, “Rock was a black invention that whites discovered and rebranded” (2016).

This is the second form of appropriation that has occurred in the medium of music. Of course, the next era of music to follow rock and roll was rap. While I will talk more about the history of rap later in this thesis, I next discuss how the digital shapes the appropriation of black culture.

Chapter 2: Digital Black Culture and Its Appropriation

Digital Black Identity

Like analog black culture, digital black culture is very much rooted in language use and black vernacular. The big question is not if there is a black culture that is prevalent online, but rather, how is it similar and/or different from black culture offline? Not surprisingly, the tradition of black language is also prevalent online where digital black vernacular demonstrates an important role in constituting blackness. In her study, “Features of Digital African American Language in a Social Network Site,” Jennifer Cunningham states that a majority of the time, black identity is communicated online the same way it is offline because texts are written to sound like speech (Cunningham, 429). In this way, black culture online is based off of the same speech patterns and vernacular as black culture offline. The jump from analog culture barely shifts, in terms of language, when stitching mediums.

Looking more deeply into the phenomenon of black culture being constituted online, Rayvon Fouche, in “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud: African Americans, America Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity,” explains that the jump from analog black vernacular to online black vernacular allows for creative expression, but also activism in a way that has not always been available for many black individuals (653). As a result, participating online can help fight injustice along with preconceived notions of what it means to be black in America. Fouche explains that for black people, a new power emerges from speaking differently from the white majority, at least online. Online Black empowerment movements such as Black Lives Matter, Hands Up Don’t Shoot, and Black On Campus, are established on social media because of this very thought. Amandha Lopez writes about how the Internet has increased the amount of social movements in her article, “The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: The New Opportunity and Mobilizing Structure.” She claims that,

“social media is a statistically significant predictor of protest activity” (2014). The study explains that because of the widespread access granted by the Internet, people are able to form and connect via social media, this creating larger social movements. Black movements operate the same way and the most popular black movement today, Black Lives Matter, started on social media as well.

Often social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer ways for minority communities to create a space for meaningful participation in politics and social rights issues. It is a place for people who may not always have the means to be heard to have an audience and a community. But who constitutes these communities on social media or different web forums is always a question to ask. Sarah Florini, for example, writes in “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on “Black Twitter” that the use of avatars, pictures, or profile bios does not necessarily establish black identity. Florini suggests that to identify as black online, one must also ““talk the talk”” (224). To this end, the introduction of Digital African American Language (DAAL) begins with the desire to communicate online in a comfortable, familiar way for many who speak in the black vernacular. But writing in DAAL also offers a way for the black community to differentiate itself and constitute black identity online.

The ability to establish personal and collective identity offers a unique opportunity online. In her research, Florini found that many black people would intentionally write differently than their white counterparts online. In doing so, it created a different, empowered voice and allowed them to create different conversations (Florini, 224). The culture that is formed online closely follows the black culture formed offline in the black community, at least in relation to language. But, as in analog culture, there is not one black, collective culture online, but rather many facets that create a black presence in digital spaces. Adam Banks in his work, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, explains that Black America is divided by a generational gap. Whereas older generations emphasize the past and their struggles in the civil rights and Black Power movements, more recent generations of black children are often

perceived as never having had something to fight for (Banks, 86). Yet, young, black people often use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to create a sense of identity that is very much rooted in black resistance movements. These users assert their black identity through the use of DAAL purposefully in order to linguistically differentiate themselves from their white peers. Banks speaks of a study done by Carman Kynard that looks at black student's language use on the online education environment, Blackboard. Kynard claims that Blackboard allowed the students to "claim agency" and write in a way that was different from their peers (Banks, 13). The forums of Blackboard allow students to create a space of their own and express their ideas in a vernacular familiar to them. The idea of a space is important to black culture in that it allows for communication in the black oral tradition that Smitherman explains is pertinent to black identity.

In his work on what he terms "eblack studies," Banks explains that the black individual finds spaces like social media and the Internet to be exciting, new grounds to communicate comfortably. Black students can produce raw material in a safe space where they can express themselves in their preferred speech pattern. Banks explains the way black students talk outside of the web is similar to the way they speak on the web (13). But because of the distributed nature of the Internet, digital space allows those from black culture, regardless of socioeconomic status, to participate in the conversation. It allows for multiple and diverse voices to be heard, documented, and studied, which is the aim of eblack studies. With this opportunity to create black community online, however, comes the danger of appropriation.

Appropriation of Digital Black Identity

In 2016, social media was hit with a catastrophic use of appropriation, so popular and bad that it would stick around and be used to differentiate white and black language online. The 'Cash me outside' girl was featured on an episode of Dr. Phil, a day time television show in the United States, in order to showcase bad teens and their mothers. Danielle Bergoli, a white teenager, appeared on the show and her visit sparked the meme still in use today. During her interview, she

threatened the audience for making fun of her, and in response to their laughter, she retorted with, “Catch me outside, how about that?” Of course, what makes this moment so memorable is the fact that she said it in a dialect that resembled the black vernacular. It is easy to comprehend how Danielle Bergoli appropriated black culture through her language choice and speech pattern, but what is even more compelling is the imitation of the meme that naturalizes this appropriation through those that share it. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Cash Me Ousside Girl

Filling out a job application
“How do you handle a difficult situation with a rude customer?”



Figure 3 Cash Me Ousside Girl Application Meme

Morgan Bubman, a writer for *The Bottom Line News Magazine*, writes, in “The Double Standards of Cultural Appropriation,” that even though Bergoli is the one appropriating, in the analog form, the black vernacular, it is not only Bergoli being ridiculed, but also the black vernacular itself. For example, Bubman notes, “the meme offers many different kinds of spelling of this absurdly confrontational proclamation” (2017). That is to say that the meme is configured and customized in order to fit the needs of the user, which in this case is to make a joke using vernacular that is sometimes appropriative. (Figure 3)

The trivialization of black vernacular is common amongst digital appropriators. “Black culture borrowing” has thrived under platforms like YouTube and Facebook. The appropriation of black vernacular and digital black culture seems to follow the same pattern as appropriation of analog black culture. In the case of appropriators, language is used and taken without any consideration of from where it originated or who it belongs to. For example, in response to Bill Maher, who recently caused controversy by referring, as a comedic retort to himself, a white man, as a “house nigger,” rapper and entrepreneur Ice Cube explained to Maher on his HBO show, “That’s our word. And you can’t have it back.”

But it is not only the controversial n-word that is often appropriated online. A word that grew in popularity, first in a serious manner, than used as a joke, is ‘BAE.’ The acronym stands for “Before Anyone Else” and was commonly used as a term of endearment towards a significant other in the black community. What started as a loving word exclusive to the black vernacular quickly became a term used and then considered a joke by the white population. Robin Boylorn notes, in her *Guardian* article, “Now that white people have declared 'bae' over, black people can use it in peace,” explains, rather than a fun joke, appropriation of black language online is “problematic because it gives dominant groups control over the language. Dominant groups get to decide, for example, when and if certain words are worth appropriation, when and how the words should be used...” (2014). Language appropriation is a mode of power that a privileged group utilizes in various forms, including social media, memes, and music.

With the Internet, one would think that a diverse amount of users would be using YouTube to browse videos and upload content. The truth is, YouTube is predominantly a white space with 87% of its users identifying as white (Nielson, 2007). The Nielsen organization, originally used to calculate user demographics for the television, also projects that 87% of the Internet is white as well. That being said, black Internet users, much like in reality, are in the minority. Because of this, the success of white Internet rappers may be closely related to the fact

that a majority of YouTube videos subscribers and creators share the same skin color, which can often allow white privilege to flourish unchecked.

Not only does YouTube hosts primarily white users and consumers, but it also fails to advocate for the black artists that it does host. For example, in “YouTube rarely promotes black YouTube stars even during Black History Month,” Akilah Hughes writes that throughout the whole month of February, 2015, “YouTube sent out 15 tweets promoting black creators... all but five of the promoted black creators were Grammy award-winning musicians. Basically just a handful of not-already-famous black people got a helping hand. Meanwhile, in the same month, YouTube sent out 167 tweets promoting white creators, many with smaller, more niche followings” (2015). Not surprisingly, white artists have better opportunities to become successful online and the environment created by YouTube allows for and encourages the appropriation that occurs with rap music.

YouTube is a big part of Internet culture, but the meme, another way to perpetuate appropriation, is prevalent on all social media sites. Unfortunately, the meme works against black culture as well. With Twitter being one of the largest social media sites used (a grand total of 317 million users), it was one of the first websites that used hashtags, a meme of sorts, in order to organize and facilitate discussion (Chaffey, 2017). A popular hashtag used today is #blacktwitter. Black twitter allows certain discussion on various black issues, but since there is no way for Twitter to facilitate who uses certain hashtags, black twitter is used by everyone. It has become a meme in recent years and one may find that the conversation the hashtag used to bring for the black community has turned around for the worst. Sanjay Sharma talks about this phenomenon in his article, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks, and Contagion.” He explains that the hashtags and the memes surrounding black identity on social media, “seemingly possess an autonomous agency, with passive human brains as mere vehicles for their propagation” (Sharma, 2013). The memes and hashtags have gained a mind of their own. With the ability to share with

the click of a button, memes on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube spread like the virus Burgess mentioned in his viral hit article. If the creators of memes are statistically white Internet users, the messages that get spread around the most seem to be primarily white in content and popularity. The audience, who is evidenced as being primarily white, receives this message and rap music, I argue, changes because of it.

Memes continue to be the primary mode by which the online circulation of the appropriation of the black vernacular occurs. Lauren McEwen writes in her article from the *Huffington Post*, “The Internet’s Love of Black Slang Makes Some of Us Uncomfortable,” that the Internet has allowed for users, “to enjoy some of the ‘cool’ parts of being black - stereotypical slang, ‘swagger,’ the ability to use the ‘N-word’ - without having to deal with trickier parts like racial profiling, systemic racism, stereotypes, police brutality, and a lack of intergenerational wealth due to the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws and racist hiring practices” (2016). Without that adversity weighing down on white Internet users, some can appropriate the black vernacular in order to make a joke or post a meme all anonymously if desired. A popular example in today’s social media world is the use of the word, “nigga.” On the surface, it seems to be primarily used to exhibit humor and comradery. Even though ‘nigga’ is thought to be exclusive to the black vernacular, a variety of people can be found exclaiming, “Nigga, please” or, “Which nigga did this?” As McEwen exclaims, “there is something uncomfortable with the way white people use black English” (2016). Through the use of the meme, the word “nigga” and black vernacular in general has come into Facebook newsfeeds and Reddit posts daily by white and black users. Keith Shubeck’s analysis on what makes a meme popular explains that memes are pieces of art or references that help shape and create our culture. Memes, which have been ever more popular with the growing number of social media users, have always been a vehicle for pop culture. So, when memes like Denzel Washington’s “mah nigga meme” feature “nigga” in a caption (Figure 4), social media users can see this language dozens of times a day. Social media

outlets allow for users to share, like, or imitate the meme, thus allowing for appropriation to occur across populations with ease and often without thought.

In response to this critique of language appropriation via memes, one could ask, who cares about others borrowing words or vernacular from other cultures on the Internet? How could it be harmful or inconsiderate? Patricia Friedrich and Eduardo H.



Figure 4 Training Day Meme

Diniz de Figueiredo explains what happens to appropriated languages in *The Sociolinguistics of Digital Englishes*. Eventually when words, or vernaculars, become memes, they establish a dichotomy between its dialect and the primary dialect, otherwise known as Standard English. When used in memes and social media, especially in comedy forums or light-hearted conversations, black vernacular can be seen as a joke or inferior to Standard English. Eduardo and Figueiredo further comment that linguistic attitudes on the Internet lead to the perception that minority groups have a less sophisticated vernacular; this leads to a false conclusion that Standard English is the only correct form of the English language (2015). Consequently, the more memes and hashtags that appear with black vernacular being ridiculed, the more likely black culture will lose its legitimization as an acceptable dialect as opposed to white culture being the standard. The ability to go online has allowed minority groups, more specifically the black community, to

establish identity online and share their culture. However, a large number of appropriators have entered the game digitally.

Chapter 3: The Circulation and Appropriation of Rap Online

The origin of rap largely has to do with the fact that black artists from black communities created it. Rap started out as an exclusively black medium used to lighten “hood” street corners and represent black life. In, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” R.A.T Judy writes, “[R]ap is for the African American society... it aims at keeping the African American experience” (105). At its core, hip-hop was created to contextualize and describe black identity. The essence of rap comes from its traditional black history and in its original oral customs; it created a voice for black artists and population alike. Music has allowed the black voice to be heard through lyrics and rhythm, but has also opened opportunities for black artists to send certain messages to the black community. Tricia Rose introduces *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* by explaining, “[R]ap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices” (2). Rap is integral to black identity because of its history and message. Likewise, in “The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power, Bakari Kitwana explains that, “rap helps define what it means to be young and black” (455).

Rap is a method to express a life lived in and from the black community, but like many products of black culture, rap has been appropriated. The aim of this paper is not to call out listeners of these artists, but rather shed light on the industry that has allowed white rappers fame and fortune. A big part of black identity has been compromised and used simply for profit and reputation. Rap did not start off that way. While Rose argues that “rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices,” I argue that through digital mediums like YouTube, that is problematically becoming less and less true. With the advent of the Internet, the rap game circulates in and through anyone with a camera, the time, and the image. In many ways, appropriation of rap has occurred at a greater rate and greater effect throughout social media and video sites like YouTube because of the increased accessibility of black culture and music. We have already seen that black culture has generally been appropriated by the dominant culture, but

I want to look specifically at rap music as it circulates through YouTube. In order to understand the significance of appropriation to this medium, it is important to look at a brief history of rap in order to contextualize the seriousness of its appropriation and explain specifically how the genre is being appropriated.

History of Rap

The history of rap predates YouTube and the Internet. With its roots deep into New York, Hip-hop, the flow and rhythm usually found on a rap track, could be heard on radio stations, dance clubs, and other social gatherings. Hip-Hop and Rap are similar, but there are small differences between the two. Shaka Shaw explains in her *Ebony Magazine* article, “The Difference between Rap and Hip-Hop,” that, “hip-hop is a culture and rapping is one of four elements contained therein” (2013). In this thesis, when using the term, hip-hop, I intend for it to encompass rap as well, unless otherwise noted. When hip-hop was created, the culture and message at first was not political, but after the 70’s the popularity of the genre grew, and the severity of black discrimination was broadcasted to the world via television and news, political insight was added to rap lyrics, from New York, to L.A. The fun, experimental rap that the Bronx invented would soon become a mechanism for black empowerment and self-representation in America. Jeff Chang writes about this transformation in his book, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. More specifically, Chang writes that rap swung more in the direction of Black Nationalism and sought to bring pride and attention to black lives (229). What once started as a party, ended up being a revolution. This attitude would continue into the 80’s and lead some of the biggest rap groups to critical acclaim.

The 1980s brought with it a new attitude towards rap music and its place in the music industry. With RUN D.M.C’s (Figure 5) integration into rock and roll, Public Enemy’s rebellion against the government, and N.W.A’s (Figure 6) revolt against discrimination, rap became

focused on the adversity of black communities and how discrimination had been flourishing, according to David Upshal in *The Hip Hop Years*, a documentary on the origins of rap (1999).



Figure 5 First Album Run-D.M.C



Figure 6 N.W.A "Straight Outta Compton" Album

In the tradition of the 1960s civil rights movement, rap artists used a lot of the same philosophies and rebellious mantras of the time to gain entry into the music industry and start creating music that portrayed a message of equality. Rap music, in short, was an effective method by which, in a continuation of the black oral tradition, to communicate about black experience and, in many ways, establish black identity anew in the 1980s. Yet, what followed in the 1990s would challenge the rap game for generations to come: the white rapper.

In many ways, rap music has been a window for white consumers to peek into the life of black individuals. Robin Kelley describes this phenomenon in "Lookin' for the Real Nigga:

Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto.” She explains that “anthropology has played a key role in marking blackness and defining black culture to the outside world” (Kelley, 2012). For many, rap music has allowed a view of what it may be like to be black. With that comes great opportunity for understanding and empathy, especially because rap music is such an important part of black culture. Unfortunately, not unlike the case of Vanilla Ice, a white rapper I will discuss soon, the spread and popularization of rap music also opened opportunity for false senses of authenticity and caused appropriation by its producers, consumers, and eventually musicians.

Since its creation, artists like Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Dr. Dre have created songs and messages in accordance to black empowerment and the advancement of the black population. The dark side of rap history comes from the economic side as well. Unfortunately, the music industry has been known to exploit rappers and their audience. Becky Blanchard describes the rap industry, in “The Social Significance of Rap & Hip-Hop Culture,” as an

industry controlled by mainly... upper-class white men, [and usually] young, urban minority musicians are... treated as commodities, not as artists. They must balance a need for artistic control and ‘keepin’ it real’ with the limitations and pressures from record companies interested in generating sales and massive appeal. Often the message and artistic integrity of rappers can be lost amidst national marketing campaigns and concern for approval by important commercial allies such as Wal-Mart and MTV. In the growing success of the hip-hop market, musicians have struggled to maintain rap’s potency as a form of resistance and empowerment (1999).

This phenomenon of exploiting black artists, while hardly new, became prevalent in the rap industry in the early 2000s. And it is a problem that seems to be only getting worse. Rap has transformed from an expansive representation of African American oral traditions, to an exploitative, stereotyping perpetuation of blackness. This is not to say that all rap music is just a commercialization in an attempt to gain money from the white consumer, but the general purpose of hip-hop music with the popularization of rap culture has changed from being a tool to fight the power, to a method to gain financially.

Appropriation of Rap Culture

In 1986, the Beastie Boys released their first album to reach the radio waves and introduce white rap to the general public. The three members, Mike D, MCA, and Ad-Rock were white teenagers from the Bronx and entered the rap scene after trying their hand at rock music.

(Figure 7)



Figure 7 Beastie Boys

Although the Beastie Boys dominated the charts in the 1980s for a little while, black audiences started to reject them as authentic rap artists (Verstegen, 2011). The early 1990s brought a new white rapper to the radio waves, one that lacked the supposed authenticity of the Beastie Boys. Vanilla Ice released his single, “Ice Ice Baby,” and it was met with skepticism by black communities and critical acclaim by white communities. Vanilla Ice, (Figure 8) or Robert Matthew Van Winkle, released his single seemingly out of nowhere and displayed one of the first major instances of appropriation of the rap medium.



Figure 8 Vanilla Ice

What really struck a nerve with the black audience was not the fact that Vanilla Ice was white and he was rapping, but rather, he tried to portray himself as a struggling artist who understood what it was like to live in “the hood.” Once it was revealed that Vanilla Ice had actually grown up in a wealthy suburban home, backlash by the black community brought his reputation down (Rose, 1994). The idea that someone would try and capitalize on the black experience without knowing how the black culture lives is a key aspect of appropriation. Vanilla Ice had one single that found its way into the radio waves, but after him, another white rapper would not be that popular until Eminem in the late 90s. Eminem, or Marshall Mathers, also appropriates black culture, but has dodged criticism for doing so. This could possibly be because of his mentor being Dr. Dre, a black rapper from N.W.A (Figure 9), but no specific reason has been formed for his immunity from criticism.



Figure 9 Eminem and Dr. Dre

Many papers have discussed his work, but all come to different conclusions with the same result. Eminem is a white rapper accepted by the black community, thus irrelevant to this thesis.

With rap growing in popularity, so did its appropriation. White rappers, like the Beastie Boys or Vanilla Ice, have been around for a while, and their evolution into the digital world highlights some of their reasoning behind appropriation. A lot of research has been done on analog appropriation of rap, some of it dealing with famous rappers like Eminem, while others focus on indie artists and young, aspiring, white youth. The reasoning and sense of eligibility to

use the language and music from rap seems to be a focus by researchers in hip-hop studies. Rose writes that “young white listeners [try] to perfect the model of correct white hipness, coolness, and style by adopting the latest black style and image” (5). Basically, a reason why white listeners appropriate hip-hop culture is because they deem it cooler than their own. So cool, in fact, that they want to make it their own. As Boylorn explained earlier, the Internet allows white audiences to decide when and how to appropriate the black vernacular, as if it is something of theirs to take.

The idea of ownership is important, especially when it comes to hip-hop. Rappers want authenticity, as many of the researches we have looked at have evidenced in their studies. Jason Rodriguez looks at the phenomenon of authenticity and ownership in white rappers in his study, “Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop,” which focuses on the appropriation of specifically black vernacular through rap music in a city in New York. He explains that young white children and rappers believe they are eligible to use black vernacular and rap because they are colorblind (Rodriguez, 2006). He does not mean that the rappers literally cannot see color so they do not know if rap is done by black artists. Rather, they believe in a colorblind ideology when approaching race. What that means is, they claim that they do not see race, it does not matter what color someone is, everyone is the same. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes about colorblind racism in his article, “The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding ‘Racist.’” In his article, he studies the types of colorblind racisms, but ultimately explains that colorblindness comes from a place of racial insecurity and awkwardness (Silva, 2002). Some white individuals, when viewing race out of the confines of their own racial identity, tend to explain their stances on adversity and the black experience through colorblind eyes. That is to say, most try not to see a difference between black and white. It is not a race issue, as Silva reported many saying. This kind of thinking can be destructive, but for the white rappers in this study, they can ignore the consequences and act as if everyone is the same. In doing so, rap becomes everyone’s medium and less of a black

experience. The reasons why white rappers appropriate may seem unimportant, but it does contextualize the phenomenon of mass appropriation, especially as the Internet has allowed for white rappers to expand their music and achieve larger success. The Internet is a perfect vehicle for the white rapper to distribute their music because white privilege flourishes on the Internet just as it does in the analog world.

Rap and White Audiences

The audience for rap music matters significantly because of the intended message hip-hop brings to the consumers and music industry. With the advent of YouTube and the World Wide Web, and the increasing popularity of rap rhythm and lyrics, the rap game began to change. Nicole Phillips writes about this change in, “Modern Blackface: The Cultural Appropriation of Rap.” After record companies realized the potential of hip-hop, “rap became more about sales and the more white people... began to buy the music, the music inevitably had to change” (Phillips, 2015). That change brought rap music from politically charged and black empowering, to the stereotyping of black culture and degradation of black people’s perceived ethical beliefs. Not only did black music turn in many ways into a white industry, known to appropriate and exploit black artists and issues, but it also brought white rappers, many who had not in many cases known struggle, to the mainstream. Paul Olson and Bennie Shobe likewise explain in “White Rappers and Black Epistemology” that this behavior is not new because “upper classes in the United States have historically appropriated the culture created by the lower class” (2008). Though it is not a new phenomenon, the appropriation of black culture, especially through music, is one still prevalent today and it is only becoming more widespread. White rappers have flooded YouTube.com and the rap game because of the demand from white consumers.

White Rappers: A Closer Look

YouTube has allowed many artists to sidestep the challenges that originally existed with getting a deal with a record label and grants more power to the individual musician. Before, an artist had to somehow get a recording of their music to music executives and get them to actually listen to the music in order to get a contract that might lead to success. Today, all it takes is a few millions views on a video uploaded to Youtube, a process that democratizes how musicians get attention for their work. Yet, because of the racial demographics of and white privilege that circulates on Youtube, this democratization is inherently limited and therefore flawed. Because Youtube has proven to be a white space that privilege white artists and obscures racial difference, often through the justification of “colorblindness,” the white rapper enjoys increased access and benefits that black rappers do not, a condition that only replicates what black cultural artists have long experienced in the analog world. To illustrate how the white rappers play out on Youtube, I offer the examples of Watsky and Mac Lethal.

Watsky

The first example I offer is George Watsky, or, as many on YouTube know him, “white boy [who] can rap fast as hell.” (Figure 10). The iconic video holds over 10 million views and hundreds of reaction videos, imitations, and comments. It was quickly



Figure 10 Watsky's First Video

considered a viral hit and gathered many fans within its first few weeks of being online. In the video, Watsky is seen petting his cat while rapping fast. The video brought him fame because he knew to showcase his skin color and the music he was borrowing from another culture. The appropriation that occurs is most obviously seen through his use of rap music and hip-hop beats to convey his message, but when looking at the lyrics there is more to it than that. In the song, there are many instances of parody of the black vernacular and culture being administered. From slang terms like swag, to commentaries about “screwing” police and “flipping cars” (rioting), Watsky uses his position and skin color to parody parts of the black experience.

But what is most remarkable is Watsky’s self- comparison to black actress, Gabourey Sidibe. Sidibe is a black actress popularly known for her portrayal as Claireece Jones in the movie, *Precious* and her recent cameo on the television show, *Empire*. In the song, he explains that others “do him (treat him) like Gabourey Sidibe,” and he knows what it feels like to be an oddity to the average person (Watsky, 2011). Strictly analyzing this as a commentary on race, Watsky places his adversity in the same realm as a very large, black woman and his appropriation of black music stands out even more so because of his comparison to black struggles. With him being a middle class white male, his likening to the black actress is both insulting and immature. In his rap, he exploits Sidibe’s experience to help advance his career. As stated before, his video has reached millions of viewers and that is on his channel alone. Since his posting, there have been dozens of other YouTubers who have posted the video in an attempt to get more wide spread attention. Illustrating the reach of Watsky’s influence, there have been many variations of this video uploaded to YouTube, all copied from his self-titled video, “pale kid raps fast.” Other examples include, “White Kid Raps Fast,” “White Kid Raps Fast as Hell,” and Pale Kid Raps Too Fast”.

Watsky's particular instance of rap appropriation on YouTube led to numerous record deals and even a television spot with Ellen DeGeneres. Ellen DeGeneres is known for her comedy, sitcom TV show, and most recently her daytime talk show, a television program targeted towards 25- 54 year old women (James, 2013). She has also been known to bring on YouTube stars to her show and give them their 15 seconds of fame in an attempt to increase that time. Not even two weeks after Watsky released his "pale kid raps fast video," Ellen invited him to her show (Figure 11). The daytime program is fond of hosting quirky rappers, or rather, unique rappers to the stage and allowing them a chance to expand their audience. Because of this, millions more got to experience the appropriation of rap music and the support of an icon like Ellen did not help the advancement of the creators of rap. After the show, consequently, Watsky's fan base grew largely because of his quirky, "white boy can rap" lyrics and his distinction between white rap and black rap.



Figure 11 Watsky on Ellen

The purposeful distinction was made evident when Watsky released, via YouTube, "Ninjas in Paris," a parody of "Niggas in Paris," by Jay-Z and Kanye West. Not only does he take the name from the song, but also the message is construed to fit his needs and portray his life style. Jay-Z and West's song lyrics describes black struggle and the awe of being in Paris, a place they never thought they would be: "I'm shocked too/ I'm supposed to be locked up too/ If you escaped what I've escaped/ You'd be in Paris getting fucked up too" (2011). Watsky's vision of

the song differs in that it is not a song about personal struggle, but rather a fun introduction to the white suburban kid who decided to try his hand in rap. Similar to common threads found throughout rap music, Watsky highlights his race (his whiteness), uses slang, and speaks in the black dialect in order to create a hip-hop track. For example, Watsky comically exclaims his socio-economic status with the lyrics, “L-O-L-O-L I’m from the avenue” (2012). Instead of the stereotypical inner-city lifestyle depicted in some rap songs, Watsky mocks the trope of poverty stricken rappers making it out of “the hood.” He again uses *cray* (crazy) and *ratchet* (Ghetto), words borrowed from the black vernacular, in his rap. This is a dialect Watsky only uses in his rap songs and rarely uses it in interviews. What is more evident in the song is the beat taken straight from “Niggas in Paris” without mention of Jay-Z and West, its original creators.

But another striking image from the *Ninjas in Paris* video, one created because of the visual affordances made possible by YouTube, is the use of a nerf gun to simulate a gangsta lifestyle. Because of YouTube’s video sharing capability, images as well as music add to this parody of black culture. Watsky can be seen toting a nerf gun and aiming it at the cameras, as if in the “hood” (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Watsky with Nerf Gun

There is a clear attempt to imitate black fashion and style in the video as well. His crew all wear big silver chains, but the jewelry holds stuffed animals (Figure 13) rather than diamonds or gold. (Figure 14)

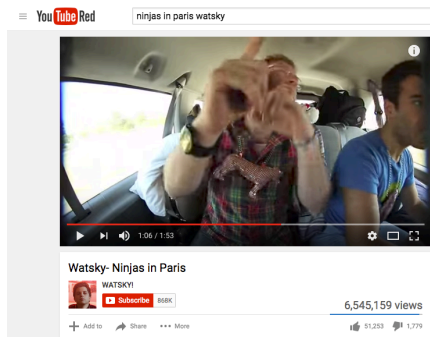


Figure 13 Watsky's Crew with Animal Jewelry



Figure 14 Jay Z and Kanye West

The use of black vernacular is evident several times throughout the music video, but the most apparent is when he uses the words *cray*, as in *crazy*, and *ratchet*, as in “ghetto”. All of these examples showcase the appropriation that occurs from Watsky, and what is important to note is when this video came out. It was after his Internet fame, it was not what started his career. But the tropes of appropriation from black culture are what further it. All of this is to say that the form of appropriation that occurs with this video is not simply a homage done out of appreciation for rap or an innocent borrowing of black culture.

After his appearances on *Ellen*, Watsky went on to create three studio albums and tour the world selling his music and message. One of his most popular songs, “Firework,” talks about his entrance into the rap game and how his skin color helped him through the process. Watsky never grew up in black culture and rarely faced adversity. He explicitly says, “Wait! I’m a pale ass pale, middle-class straight white male... if I ever went to jail,/ Mom would pay my bail/ In a heartbeat/ Mom and Dad have given me a lot more than a pat on the back” (Watsky, 2013). George Watsky is not simply someone who raps well, but embodies white privilege made evidenced in, the ease with which he appropriates not just the genre of rap but beats, lyrics, and

images. What this lyric showcases is his knowledge of his position in society. Meaning he understands that his privilege helped him get in the rap game, and now that he has made a career from hip-hop he can put that information into the spotlight. Many of his songs glorify his privileged lifestyle, especially when he compares it to black culture. But Watsky certainly does not intend to be racist. In fact, a lot of his songs deal with issues of police brutality amongst black males, poverty in inner city communities, and bigotry in the presidential race of 2016. Nonetheless, Watsky appropriates black culture to advance his career. The success of Watsky has encouraged other white, YouTube rappers and, for some, the acclaim that followed would be even bigger than his.

Mac Lethal

Another YouTube rapper that made it big, even appearing on Ellen's daytime show, like Watsky, is a rapper by the name of Mac Lethal. This man has literally created a game from rap music and has used his appropriation of black culture to garner a YouTube cult following that gets him millions of views per video. He strolled into the hip-hop scene after Watsky released his "pale kid raps fast" video. In response to Watsky, Mac Lethal created a video called, "White kid raps fast!" which contains the same beat and similar lyrics (Figure 13). Unlike Watsky, There is not a lot of information on Mac Lethal, especially because he is an independent artist that operates solely on YouTube, but it is clear that he identifies as a white male. His lyrics have less to do with his physical image though, and more so on his impact on the rap game. He fails to acknowledge his borrowed medium though and much like Boylorn explains, he takes from others without consideration. Coincidentally, there is one point in



Figure 13 Mac Lethal White Kid Raps Fast!

his “White Kid Raps Fast” where he claims that he has, “never been a counterfeit of nothing” (Mac Lethal, 2011). Offering a counterargument to that broader belief that he should not be in the game, Mac Lethal aims to make the case that he is authentic and deserving of rap artistry. But it is difficult not to see his argument as a justification for his appropriation and use of rap. He gives no credit to the black artists that came before him. Much like Elvis claimed he was the King of Rock and he did it on his own, Mac Lethal does the same in regards to rap. The most obvious appropriation happens with the beat and rhymes, but the title of the video accomplishes many things other than a blatant nod to appropriation. For one, the title of the video uses his race to entice a viewer to watch, working off the belief that white boys can’t rap any more than they can jump, much in the same way that Watsky did with “white boy [who] can rap fast as hell.” However, an important difference to Watsky is Mac Lethal’s lack of black vernacular when he raps. However, much like Watsky, Mac Lethal uses his whiteness, so much so, that the appropriating black rhythms and mixing them with messages of white privilege is in many ways the key to his viral success.

With his privilege, Mac Lethal can take the serious music form of rap and turn it into a freak show of lyrics. Most of his income does not come from concerts and merchandise, but

rather playtime on YouTube. Each video, which he uploads weekly, gathers hundreds of thousands to millions of views. These are not traditional rap songs though. Instead, he mixes up traditional hip-hop beats and completes a challenge posited by his fan base. For example, he gives a grammar lesson with rhymes, and in another video, he orders pizza while “spitting verses.” But his most popular video, the one that got him a spot on Ellen and CNN, and an article in the *Washington Post* is, “Nerdy White Kid KILLS ‘Look at Me Now’ (Pancake Rap)” (2011). In the video, Mac Lethal raps about making breakfast.



Figure 14 Mac Lethal Pancake Rap

It seems harmless until he explicitly slams black artist Chris Brown who is the original creator of the beat. He challenges Brown to a fight and claims that if given the chance, he’d “kick him in the noggin” (2011). Not only does Mac Lethal decide to use the same beats of a black artist, he then proceeds to insult the musician on his own track in an overtly hostile appropriation. Rap is full of claiming one rapper is better than the other, but in this politically charged, racially tensed America, a white man, or any person for that matter, aggressively overpowering a black man, is done in poor taste and seems to create animosity amongst the rap community.

The appropriation of rap started way before YouTube was even thought of. The digital circulation of these rap artists promote others to appropriate and allows social media users to

view rap as just another silly black culture reference. Once white musicians borrowed rap, it was taken and construed. It is no longer a black art form; it is slowly changing to a joke and even a white man's game.

Conclusion

There is a whole channel on YouTube that uses rap and comedy in order to gain viewers and subscribers. Rap is not part of the joke, but rather, it is the joke.

Around 2010, two YouTubers by the names of Peter Shukoff & Lloyd Ahlquist created a channel that consisted of historical icons rap battling. To battle through rap is to create rhymes on the spot to a predetermined beat. In the tradition of the Dozens, a black oral tradition that mimics a call/response form of communication (Keyes), a rap battle is an exchange of insults, or verbal exchanges (Blair), between rappers, with the intensity of beat and lyrical ability building as the song goes on. But the creators and writers for this YouTube channel are white— and the historical figures, mostly white. Out of the seventy videos released, only nine of them feature a black actor/ historical figure. Each one of the uploaded videos has gathered millions of views. Over half of their videos submitted have 30 millions visitors, and their top spot, a rap battle between President Obama and Mitt Romney, currently a whopping 133,668,015. (Figure 16)



Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney. Epic Rap Battles Of History Season 2.

ERB

4 years ago • 133,668,015 views

Download on iTunes > <http://hyperurl.co/Obama-vs-Romney> < Watch behind the scenes > <http://bit.ly/barackrom> < New ERB ...

Figure 15 Barack Vs. Romney

The content of these videos range from factual commentary on the lives of these iconic people, to insults of minute severity. But what is striking is the lack of diversity in the videos and behind the scenes. The series relies on a medium of black culture in order to convey stories about certain

individuals, but fails to engage with that culture in any meaningful way in terms of the content. White writers use white historical figures, such as Hitler (Figure 17) and Thomas Jefferson to appropriate from modern black culture. The success of this channel shows a couple things. One: White rap is appreciated and even encouraged on the Internet. If one were to look at the comments of each video, there would be hundreds of requests for more rap battles, even for ones containing white individuals. And two: making rap into a joke and marketing it as a white sport can be very profitable on YouTube.



Figure 16 Epic Rap Battles of History Hitler Rapping

What the Epic Rap Battle channel demonstrates is an alternate history to rap music. Realistically, most people know that rap originated from black musicians, but what these videos illustrate is a metaphor for the erasure of black influence on rap music by white musicians. The impact that white rappers have on audiences through the Internet is important to observe and do further study on because of the spreading capability of viral hits. We know through this research that the Internet has made it easier for appropriation to occur and lead to success. We also know that the insurgence of white rappers to the rap game has caused an acceptance of appropriation and a normalcy, so much in fact, white musicians get invited on to television shows and gain mass popularity for appropriating the music of black culture. Eventually, just like rock and roll, rap will become a white medium and the black identity aspect of rap will be marginalized, if not erased. Generations from now, viewers will look back at rap and they will see N.W.A, RUN-

D.M.C, and Public Enemy, but there is equally a possibility that they will find the infamous Adolf Hitler spitting rhymes about the destruction of Jews.

So, why does this all matter? How or why is it relevant? And what can future research do to further evaluate this phenomenon? To answer that question, research can next look at the impact of appropriation by other races and its impact of black youth directly. Surveys and analysis of Internet commentaries, such as comments, can provide further answers to the impact of white rappers on modern day audiences. I did not write this paper to suggest that white rappers are purposely trying to harm the black population. Part of the difficulty writing this thesis comes from the fact that we, as a nation, are divided and I realize that this paper may come off as essentialist, but I want nothing more than to bring people closer together. This thesis is not a call for the elimination of white rappers, but rather a calling for the preservation of the historical significance of rap in black lives. There will always be white rappers, as long as the genre is around and I understand that music is a medium that can be used and interpreted by anyone. So for future research, I will use the terminology Cecelia Cutler uses in “Yorkville Crossing: White Teens, Hip-Hop, African American English,” when referencing the language used in rap. She calls it “Hip-Hop speech style” and what that does is bring hip-hop into modern day globalization (299). There does seem to be an issue in placing this language or rather dialect, as not a part of black identity, but it doesn’t exclude them from the language either. The spread of rap is vast and expanding in this Internet driven world, as Alastair Pennycook explains in, “Refashioning and Performing Identities in Global Hip-Hop.” She goes as far as to say that Hip-Hop is part of something more than black identity now, and more of a place for anyone (328). I have not opened up to this explanation fully myself, but with the evolving world comes evolving language and culture.

Secondly, why does this research matter? The integrity of black culture, a culture that has been constantly and continually disenfranchised and taken advantaged of is losing its music form

for the second time in recent years. I fear that one day, just as rock and roll is forgotten to be a black medium, so will rap tracks. All the good rap has done for the black community could potentially be lost with the growing appropriation of hip-hop. Again, this paper aims not to attack the white community of rappers found on the radio, or on the web, but rather historicize the roots of rap and explain the significance of erasure of their creation of it. In fact, there are many white artists that give respects to the past and use the skill of language to create pieces of art even most black audiences enjoy.

And thirdly, why is this relevant to modern times? Well, in a world run by the Internet and monitored/ influenced by Social media, a new white rapper has recently taken over the American news stations and America itself. In Carvell Wallace's MTV Internet article states, he states, "Donald Trump emerges as the embodiment of everything wrong with white rap. A man born into wealth and power screaming "started from the bottom"; bragging incessantly about money, women, and dick size; spitting battle verses at everyone who looks at him; and dropping too many terrible freestyles to count" (2016). Of course, Donald Trump does not rap during his press conferences, but he does exhibit the common tropes and potential problems of white rap. It is a parody of sorts of black culture and this comedic commentary truthfully shows the harm white rappers could do to the genre. There is one similarity to white rappers that Wallace left out of his evaluation. The Internet, specifically social media, may have led to the victory of POTUS Donald Trump.

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