“Cultural Smudging:” Appreciation and Appropriation of Black Culture through Music

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation is hotbed topic of debate as of late. This essay seeks to explore the relationship between appreciation and appropriation of black culture through music, and what the implications are surrounding the apparent valuation of black culture and simultaneous devaluation of black people. The essay first delves into the terms “appreciation” and “appropriation,” and how the two are not mutually exclusive in terms of white performance of black music. I then discuss this relationship in tandem with a brief history of both blackface minstrelsy and rock ‘n’ roll, with the final discussion revolving around the topic of rap music, particularly focused on the white, female rapper Iggy Azalea, and her controversial music and success. The phrase “cultural smudging” comes courtesy of a critic of Azalea, black female rapper Azealia Banks, and this essay discusses the phrase in relation to appreciation and appropriation. The essay concludes with implications of appropriation and consumption of black culture.

"Cultural Smudging:" Appreciation and Appropriation of Black Culture through Music

Introduction

Cultural appropriation has been a topic of much debate and discussion, particularly with the rise of social media. Sororities and fraternities at universities across the country have been the topic of media coverage for hosting "ghetto" (aka blackface) parties. White runway models and celebrities have been scrutinized for wearing their hair in afros or in dreadlocks. Where does this desire to imitate and consume black culture come from? How do we go about discussing the greater implications of this consumption via appropriation? I've found myself fascinated with some of the inconsistencies and nuances that go along with this consumption of black culture through music by white audiences. Allow me to illustrate with a few brief examples.

I grew up in a fairly small, somewhat rural town in central Minnesota. The demographic makeup of my school was overwhelmingly white. That being said, there was not always a lot of cultural sensitivity towards "others," such as black Americans. But something always struck me, particularly in instances such as getting ready for a basketball game in the girls' locker room: when the "pump-up" CDs were on shuffle, mixed right in with Ke$ha and Britney Spears were Lil Wayne and DMX. How does one reconcile lack of understanding, or even contempt for black bodies on the whole with an apparent appreciation for their culture? What does this say about the consumption of black culture (namely music) by white audiences?

Another example that has stuck with me over the past few years has to do with both black music and the appropriation of aspects of black culture. When I was a freshman at a university in northern Minnesota, the school held a concert for its students, and the main act was the rapper Ludacris; the opening act was a little-known rap group from Atlanta. When I arrived with a small group of friends at the concert venue, I remember being shocked at the number of girls wearing

their hair in "cornrows"— a traditionally African American style of braiding the hair in small braids close to the scalp. It was as if by virtue of attending this rap concert, these (mainly white) girls felt they were given license to take this symbol of black culture and use it for their superficial desire to "look the part." At the time, I wasn't sure why I was so unsettled by this aesthetic choice. After all, they're just braids, aren't they? What's the harm in a hairstyle? Now, when I reflect back on the occasion, I understand why it has remained so fresh in my memory: Where do we draw the line between appreciation (in this case, enjoying the music of Ludacris, a black rapper) and cultural appropriation (also in this case, using the premise of attending the rap concert to appropriate a style that is associated with certain members of the African American community for a purely aesthetic purpose)?

These two stories may seem not to be explicitly connected, but I think they both, in slightly different ways, express a similar issue surrounding the blurry line between appreciation and appropriation of black culture, particularly black music, in America. And, stemming from this issue, how do we reconcile this desire to emulate and/or consume black culture with the devaluation of black Americans as a whole? This essay will not attempt to come to a concise answer, neatly wrapped up in a bow. Rather, it will serve as an exploration of the fraught and complicated relationship between appreciation and appropriation, in a big-picture scope. For the sake of narrowing down such a broad issue, I will be focusing how this has been illustrated over time through blackface minstrelsy and rock 'n' roll, and finally its prevalence in modern rap and hip-hop culture (for the purposes of this essay, I will be using "rap" and "hip-hop" interchangeably). As a sort of case study, I will be looking closely at a contemporary, controversial example in the rap artist Iggy Azalea. It is my hope that by the end of the essay, we will have come to a better understanding the long history of appreciation and appropriation of

black music by whites, and how this complicated relationship currently impacts not only hip-hop culture, but a broader mainstream American culture, as well, in terms of the commercialization and commodification of aspects of a culture by divorcing them from the culture itself and its people.

When I began my research into this issue of white appropriation of black music, I was struck by the complexity and nuance that accompanies it. The first article I read, published in the magazine Ebony, which bills itself as “the No. 1 source for an authoritative perspective on the Black community,” addressed this issue in relation to a feud between two hip-hop artists, Azealia Banks (a black artist) and Iggy Azalea (a white artist). Banks asserts that Iggy and other white artists are appropriating the work of black artists and are receiving all the credit for it, citing the success of white artist Macklemore’s Grammy-winning album, for example. The article calls attention to the complexity by which this issue of appropriation is surrounded. Juan Thompson, the author of this article titled “Fade to White: Black Music, White Artists= Big Money,” seems to take no issue with white musicians who emulate black styles and sounds, as long as they give credit to the black artists who have influenced them (he cites specifically artists like The Beatles and Eminem). Thompson does, however, call out “other music artists, such as Elvis Presley, who hijacked rock 'n' roll… [and] Miley Cyrus, who exploited the use of black signifiers” for doing something different: appropriating black music.

Why does this matter? This complicated relationship between appropriation and appreciation has been around for over a century, and it doesn’t seem likely that it will end anytime soon. It matters because appreciation and appropriation of black culture, including black music, by those in a place of institutional and political privilege (aka middle and upper class white people) does nothing to change the problematic tension between the simultaneous

fascination with black culture and the devaluation of black bodies. That black Americans are, on the whole, treated as less valuable than white Americans is obvious. One need only look at the rates of incarceration and sentencing differences of black men compared to their white counterparts, for example, to see this. Over time, the relationship between appropriation and appreciation of black culture through music has become increasingly complex, from blackface minstrelsy to rock 'n' roll, and culminating in the present in the world of rap music and the greater American consumer culture.

Appreciation and Appropriation: Mutually Exclusive?

What, exactly, is appropriation? And what is its relationship to appreciation? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, appreciation is defined as "a feeling of being grateful for something" or "an ability to understand the worth, quality, or importance of something." To appropriate, on the other hand, is to "take or use [something] especially in a way that is illegal, unfair, etc." These terms clearly stand for very different actions, yet there seems to be a gray area between them, even a relationship between them, especially when it comes to this issue of black culture and music. The act of appropriation itself inherently implies some level of appreciation. Everyone knows the saying "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." This holds a particular amount of weight in reference to white appropriation of black culture through music. In order for appropriation of something such as music to occur, the party appropriating that artifact must have some reason for doing so. I don't have a clear answer for why white Americans have continuously appropriated black culture. I do argue, however, that they have appropriated the culture, particularly the music, because they find some value in it. This value can be capitalized on, for monetary profit, which I do believe has been and is a driving force for some individuals. Others do not realize the implications that accompany the appropriation of another culture that

isn't their own, and simply imitate that culture because they like the way it looks and sounds. Regardless, there is an undeniable relationship between appreciation for and appropriation of an artifact, culture, style, etc. To help frame the current climate surrounding the appropriation of black music, we must first understand the history of black music and white fascination and consumption of said music.

Blackface: Is Minstrelsy Merely Mimicry?

This issue of appropriation is laden with history going back to the very beginnings of the United States. It would be remiss to ignore the historical foundations for the contemporary issues surrounding appropriation of black culture through music, and the place to start this exploration is the practice of blackface minstrelsy. According to Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*, blackface is "the first, formative public or institutional acknowledgement by whites of black culture" (23). The tradition of blackface minstrelsy originated in the United States around 1830, and "according to legend, the earliest white man to perform in blackface was Thomas D. ("Daddy") Rice" (Brown, 92). Lott, quoting *Atlantic* writer Robert P. Nevin, tells the tale of Rice's performance. According to the tale, Rice was dazzled by the songs of African Americans. One day, he encounters a black man called Cuff, whom he persuades to join him to his theater. Once there, "Rice blacks his face, orders Cuff to disrobe," and puts on the black man's clothing (24). This allowed him to perform song and dance (particularly one that was dubbed "Jump Jim Crow") that he attributed to African Americans, and this performance was exceedingly popular.

Blackface performances involved white actors "blacking up" by applying materials like burnt cork to their skin in order to create an exaggerated caricature of African Americans; the actors would then perform "music, dance and theatrical skits", which included "stylizations or parodies of black music" (Brown, 92). It would be easy to simply classify blackface

performances as racist caricatures of black Americans, an embarrassing moment in U.S. history, and leave it at that. However, I believe that blackface minstrelsy raises some important considerations in terms of appropriation by whites of black culture, particularly through music, around which the performances were mainly centered.

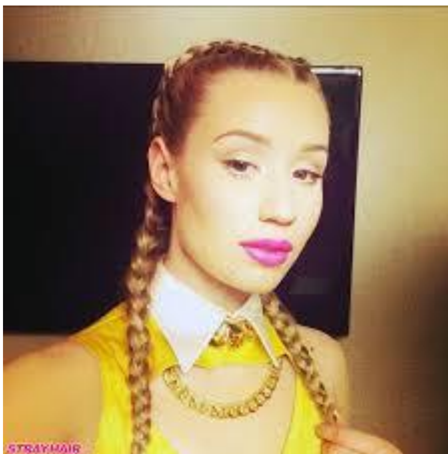
Why were blackface minstrel shows so popular, particularly in the urban "abolitionist" north of the United States? Blackface performances "provided the inspiration as well as the occasion for preposterously violent, sexual, or otherwise prohibited theatrical material" (Lott, 28). In other words, "blacking up" gave white performers license to act, sing, and dance in ways that would not be socially acceptable if they were to perform them with the absence of the black mask. This implies that African Americans as a collective black body are held to lower standards than white Americans, and thus expected to act in more vulgar manners. So, by adopting an exaggerated caricature of black aesthetic, white performers, and also white audiences, could indulge in their desires to explore this taboo style of performance. According to Lott, white performers in blackface were "screens on which audience fantasy could rest, securing white spectators' position as superior, controlling, not to say owning, figures" (28). This speaks to an important aspect of what this essay is attempting to explore. By adopting blackface in order to portray and perform blacks and black culture through musical and theatrical media, white performers and audiences had to acknowledge the existence of a black musical tradition, as well as a level of appreciation for it. Was blackface a means of merely parodying this musical tradition? I think it goes deeper than that, into the realm of cultural appropriation, which continues to be perpetuated to this day, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

In his essay "Can American Popular Vocal Music Escape the Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy?", Lee B. Brown discusses what he calls the "minstrel hypothesis." This hypothesis

asserts, in summary, that the history of blackface minstrelsy has permeated all forms of American popular music, that American popular music today would not be what it is without blackface minstrelsy (93). This hypothesis overtly argues that the blackface minstrel tradition has had a tremendous impact on the American music industry to this day, and I agree with that argument. This does not mean that white singers are parading around in actual blackface, singing stolen or parodied songs taken from African Americans. However, many musicians, particularly white musicians in the rap and hip-hop genres, are imitating the sounds and styles of black musicians. The question that begs attention here is what constitutes appreciation, and when does it cross the line and become appropriation—or does a distinct "line" even exist?

To explore this, we must consider the forms of music that were attributed to black Americans by white Americans, and then appropriated. In his essay "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm", Ronald Radano asserts that "with the emergence of ragtime and ragtime song, moreover, popular cross-racial genres, public enthusiasm for the new "black" sound heightened concerns that a dark terror, figured in terms of a metric difference ("syncopated rhythm"), was seducing an unsuspecting white populace" (461). While Radano specifically cites ragtime, this idea can be projected onto the blackface minstrel tradition, as well as more contemporary examples (namely rock 'n' roll and hip-hop). The existence of a "black" sound that differed from music with a "white" sound naturally took on the fears and beliefs that white Americans held about black Americans: like the music, these people were seen as excessively indulgent, frenzied, and sexually promiscuous (Radano, 463). Why, then, would the white population seek out performances done by white actors in a black mask, if such seemingly negative opinions were held about this black style of music? This speaks to a fascination on the part of white Americans when it comes to black music and culture. White audiences "loved the

aesthetic premise but detested its embodied black precedent" (Dixon Gottschild, 151). This simultaneous fascination-contempt is pivotal to the complex relationship between appreciation and appropriation of black culture, and can be seen being perpetuated by artists today. The artist I will be focusing on in particular, rapper Iggy Azalea, illustrates this, expressly in terms of her popularity and pop culture status. She imitates blackness through her speech (her affected Southern accent, though she is from Australia), her personal appearance, and most importantly, her style of music. Without painting her face with burnt cork, Azalea is, in essence, performing a modern blackface through her musical performance, which relies largely on appropriation of black culture. In the pictures of Azalea included below, she is wearing her hair in a variation of the cornrow style. This, paired with her musical style, screams appropriation, and she has been the source of much debate because of it (which I will go into detail about later). She is a win-win for the white American consumer. Why? Because she is "black" without actually being black. This appeal to the consumer leads me to my next topic of discussion—rock 'n' roll.



(Azalea in cornrow-esque braids during a performance)

Rock 'n' Roll: Black Music Commodified

Another pivotal period in American cultural history in terms of this issue of appreciation and appropriation is the birth and rise of rock 'n' roll. Many know Elvis as the King of Rock 'n'

Roll, and this may very well be the case. However, the controversy surrounding this claim is that of origination. Individuals may also claim that he is the father or the creator of the genre. This is terribly problematic for a number of reasons, the most glaring being the complete erasure of the artists who helped to lay the groundwork for the genre and its booming success. Many of those who have been looked over as fundamental figures in early rock ‘n’ roll were African Americans. According to Christopher John Farley in his *Time* article “Elvis Rocks. But He’s Not the First,” a lot of this hinges on the issue of commercial success. He states, “It's not news that some white blues, jazz, rock and hip-hop musicians have been more readily embraced by mainstream audiences and the popular press than their black counterparts.” We see this in the case of Iggy Azalea, who, according to the original title of an article in *Forbes* in May 2014, is the “White, Blonde Australian Woman” who “Runs Hip-Hop” (note: the article has since been renamed due to the backlash surrounding the controversial original title of “Hip-Hop is Run by a White, Blonde, Australian Woman”). This provides telling insight into the permeation of cultural appropriation in hip-hop.

While this may not seem related to blackface minstrelsy directly, it revolves around the same locus of white appropriation of black culture through music. Elvis Presley was able to capitalize (which large success) on the sounds and styles of black artists. In fact, before signing Presley, his agent Sam Phillips once said, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars” (Farley, n.p.). Clearly, this attitude is rooted in a long history of appropriation of “Negro” musical culture, starting with blackface performances. This quote from Phillips also accurately illustrates the appreciation by white Americans of black culture, particularly black sound. Without the existence of this appreciation, there would be no desire on the part of white artists to adopt and imitate the styles of their black counterparts. This

process of taking a part of black culture and folding it into the mainstream white culture is best described, I believe, by what Brenda Dixon Gottschild, in her essay "The Black Dancing Body," calls "the 'appropriation-approximation-assimilation' syndrome" (151). When white artists encountered the black sounds and styles and decided to emulate them in their own music, this is effectively appropriation. There is some ambiguity about the nature of appropriation in music, since so many artists of differing races and genres imitate and incorporate the sounds of others into their music. However, it should be labeled appropriation in this instance because the artists mimicking the sounds of black musicians were the ones to benefit from the "transaction," while the black artists were not. The next step Dixon Gottschild outlines is "approximation." Again, in terms of Elvis, while his sounds were certainly those of black musicians, he was still viewed as undoubtedly white. His music could mimic that of black artists', but it was in reality only an approximation, as imitation is a recreation, and therefore cannot, by nature, be the same thing as the original being imitated. Finally, his music reached the "assimilation" stage, becoming a large part of the white mainstream American culture and musical canon. What started as an artifact of black American culture—music— effectively "became white" through a process of appreciation and appropriation.

While white artists were not donning blackface during their performances, they were participating in something just as insidious. The recognition by Sam Phillips of the existence of a "Negro" style of music and performance as something that could be capitalized on is a great example of this. Phillips saw that there was value in this aspect of black culture. However, that value could only be accessed if the cultural artifact (music) was completely divorced from the black body it is associated with. Otherwise, what would be the need to find a white man to imitate the "Negro" style of sound and performance? Why couldn't a black performer

accomplish the same things, achieve the same success? It is because, while black culture is appreciated, black bodies are not valued in the same way as white ones. The music needs a white mouthpiece in order to be considered fit for mainstream white American consumption, which is the most important thing in our capitalist society. This has continued into the present, and can be observed in rap today. The following discussion will be focused on one particular "white mouthpiece:" Iggy Azalea.

Iggy Azalea: An Artifact of Appropriation

The genre of rap has undergone huge changes and transformations as the decades have passed, from a politically-charged form of music used by primarily black American artists expressing their struggles through a unique style (think Public Enemy) to a largely profitable, mainstream genre enjoyed worldwide (such as in a high school girls' locker room in suburban Minnesota). However, with this exponential growth and change, issues of appropriation versus appreciation—and their complicated relationship—have become increasingly nuanced. As a sort of case study within this essay, I will explore the career of white female rapper, Iggy Azalea, and the controversy and conversation surrounding her perceived dominance in the hip-hop community.

Iggy Azalea, born Amethyst Amelia Kelly, is an Australian-born rap artist who has received a lot of attention and recognition for her popularity in the rap genre, and is probably best known for her hit song "Fancy." Azalea has credited artists such as Tupac, Beyoncé, and Missy Elliot as sources of inspiration for her own music (Wikipedia). She has also made an impression in terms of awards and nominations for her music. "Azalea received four nominations at the 57th Annual Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist, Record of the Year and Best

Pop Duo/Group Performance for "Fancy" and Best Rap Album for *The New Classic*” (Wikipedia).

However, she has been the center of much heated debate and controversy within the rap community, and at the heart of this debate is the issue of appropriation. It seems that nearly everyone in and around the hip-hop community has an opinion about Iggy Azalea—you cannot Google her name without coming across articles and blogs discussing this question of cultural appropriation. One blogger, in a critical piece on the rapper, writes, “Iggy takes a piece of “land” (rap) that doesn’t belong to her and digging in her white flag of privilege. In the context of history, this is colonization. As she adopts a southern twang native to parts of Georgia, like Atlanta, she both stereotypes rap and appropriates it” (Philips, n.p.). While I understand this assertion that Azalea is “colonizing” rap music, I don’t know if I would use that metaphor. Instead, I would call her appropriation something closer to “cultural tourism,” in which she can comfortably leave her place of privilege as a white woman and try on this alternate cultural identity by adopting a southern accent and imitating the sounds and styles of black Americans. I think that by calling it cultural colonialism, we are missing a large part of the picture—cultural colonialism implies appropriation as a concept that is completely divorced from appreciation, which I argue is not the case with Iggy Azalea. She <u>does</u> appreciate black culture and music—she claims that artists like Tupac greatly influenced her love of hip-hop and her desire to pursue a music career. Thus, Azalea, because of her privilege as a white woman, can style her hair in cornrow-like braids, adopt a Southern accent, and perform as “black,” using her white skin as a “passport,” to borrow the term from Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American.* This illustrates the ever-complicated relationship between appropriation and appreciation, and that the two are not mutually exclusive by any means.

Issues with Iggy Azalea run deep, particularly for one other female rap artist. Azalea's hip-hop "arch nemesis" (and, some argue, her namesake), Azealia Banks, has uttered particularly scathing critical remarks about Azalea. Some of the most memorable of these were said during a radio interview Banks gave back in 2014. Banks accused Azalea of appropriating black culture through her music, taking what didn't belong to her (in Banks' eyes), perpetuating what Banks called "cultural smudging." A little context: Banks had been having issues with Azalea for a number of years before this interview was given, particularly over some lyrics in her song "D.R.U.G.S." in which Azalea refers to herself as a runaway slave master: "When it really starts I'm a runaway slave-master/ Shittin' on the past gotta spit it like a pastor." These lyrics are obviously problematic and illustrate a level of irreverence for the racially charged history of American and rap as a genre, and explains why Azalea has been the target of criticism from others within the hip-hop community. However, in the 2014 interview, Banks was incredibly frustrated with how much acclaim Azalea was receiving, which Banks felt was undeserved and, furthermore, indicative of a system in which white Americans can lay claim to something belonging to black Americans. According to Banks, this sends a message to white kids, and that message is "'You're great. You're amazing. You can do whatever you put your mind to.' And it says to black kids, 'You don't have shit. You don't own shit, not even the shit you created yourself.'" However, the most interesting concept to come out of this interview is how Banks nuances this issue of appropriation by not labeling it blatant "appropriation," but instead calling it "cultural smudging."

Cultural Smudging

This concept of "cultural smudging" discussed by Banks is an incredibly apt way to describe the confusing, ambiguous territory of appreciation and appropriation of black culture

going on in rap in the current climate. "Smudging" implies an absence of a clean erasure, creating a gray area, a mess, difficult to decipher clearly. When appreciation for and appropriation of black music and culture meet, "cultural smudging" is what takes place. According to Jeff Chang's account of the interview given by Banks, "Banks said that the history of American capitalism began with slave labor. And if there wasn't going to be any discussion about reparations, Banks said, before beginning to cry, "at the very least y'all owe me the right to my fucking identity and to not exploit that shit. That's *all* we're holding on to with hip-hop and rap."" The question of exploitation of black and black culture, in Banks' opinion, cannot be divorced from rap, and she will not stand idly by while it happens. This begs the question of whether rap has in fact been separated from its racially charged political roots. This is where much of the ambiguity springs from, I believe, in terms of how people feel about white rappers getting awarded for their music over black artists. Iggy Azalea, it seems, is of the opinion that rap music has left the realm of race politics. In response to the statements made about her by Banks in the interview, Azalea tweeted:

> "Special msg for banks: There are many black artists succeeding in all genres. The reason you haven't is because of your piss poor attitude… Now! rant, Make it racial! make it political! Make it whatever but I guarantee it won't make you likable & THATS why ur crying on the radio."

This response, besides being reactionary, is problematic, and it deserves dissection. First, by claiming that there are "many black artists succeeding in all genres" of music, Azalea is playing into the rhetorical strategy used by many to divert the blame from systematic racism onto individuals. It's the same logic used when people claim that racism isn't a problem anymore since we've elected a black man as President of the United States. To single out "exceptions" and generalize them to cover an entire demographic of the population is a suspect strategy, to say the least. Another aspect of this reaction from Azalea that I take issue with is its dismissiveness

of the important points that Banks brought to light. By saying "rant, Make it racial! make it political! Make it whatever," Azalea is completely failing to address the heart of the argument brought forth by Banks, and is diminishing Banks, particularly her emotions. By "challenging" Banks to try and discuss the racial and political issues surrounding white artists in the rap genre, Azalea is drawing a hard line between rap of the past, with its political and racial background, and rap of the present/future, which (to her, it seems) is completely divorced from any political and racial struggle.

The very existence of this extended feud between Banks, Azalea, and the artists and celebrities who take their respective sides points out the ambiguity that is presently surrounding race in rap music. Music, like any other art form, cannot ever be completely distanced or removed from its tangled and rife history, and I believe that the concept of cultural smudging and appropriation goes further than just rap music. What lies at the heart of this cultural smudging, this constant tension and interplay between appreciation and appropriation, is more complex. It has to do with white America's simultaneous desire to consume and/or emulate black culture and its devaluation of black bodies.

This simultaneous fascination and devaluation is apparent when we look at the history of white Americans and black culture. Blackface minstrelsy is illustrative of this tension. It allowed white actors to play with and explore aspects of black culture, particularly through music, giving them license to perform in ways they couldn't do in their own skin, so to speak. It was not merely a mockery of black Americans, not a mere parody of this portion of the population. There is an aspect of cultural appreciation involved in a white actor donning a burnt cork mask and pretending to be black in order to perform a certain way. While this is undeniably perverse, it points to the complexity of white appreciation and appropriation of black music. This complexity

has not gone away—I'd argue that it has only gotten more nuanced and difficult to explain clearly. With the passage of time and things like the civil rights movement and affirmative action, many feel that we are in a "post-racial" society, one where the notion of "colorblindness" is thought of as the ideal in public and private life. This certainly bleeds into rap as a genre, and it at least partially explains the defensiveness of certain individuals when it comes to white rap artists getting more recognition than their black counterparts. To follow the colorblind logic, all artists, black and white, are equal, on a level playing field, given the same opportunities to succeed and fail. Thus, when white rappers are awarded over black ones, such as the Grammys awarding white rapper Macklemore for the rap record of the year in 2014, it has nothing to do with race. This thought process completely denies the existence of a legacy of a racially and politically charged history behind rap.

However, we do not live in a "post-racial" society. Race still plays an enormous part in how individuals are perceived and treated, and how resources are allocated, and in terms of who has access to the most institutional power. At its inception, rap was used by black Americans as a means of voicing their struggles dealing with exactly the aforementioned problems. I am not arguing that rap has only served as a political tool and nothing else. I am also not claiming that rap hasn't undergone changes over the years—it most certainly has. According to Gottschild, "by the year 2000 the political thrust that characterized much of rap music in the 1980s and early 1990s had all been abandoned… sex became the name of the game, along with the 'gangsta' ethos of drugs, guns, [and] violence" (172). Artists must naturally adapt their music and message to the changing tastes of the consumer in order to stay relevant. I am claiming, however, that rap, no matter what forms it takes now or in the future, cannot be divorced from its past.

For artists such as Iggy Azalea to choose to ignore the racial history and adopt a "colorblind" stance is to—likely unknowingly—place themselves in the same shoes as the white performers in the days of blackface minstrelsy, or the white musicians capitalizing on black sounds during the early days of rock 'n' roll. It is to take what you want from a culture that isn't your own, because you like the sound, or appreciate the aesthetic, or think it will help you sell records, and by labelling it as your own, it is to spit in the face of those musicians who came before you, the history and the culture. That is appropriation, and that is why Azealia Banks brought the issue to light and got emotional while discussing it. That is the reason for the existence of this essay.

Conclusion

From the blackface minstrel performances in the 1800s to the present, white appropriation of black music and culture has been an ongoing occurrence, and it is unlikely to go away anytime soon. Why? Because as long as the white consumer populous finds something of value (or something to appreciate) in black culture in the form of black music, and as long as white Americans retain socioeconomic and political privilege over black Americans, this will continue. However, this is not a black and white issue—there is no clear line between what is appreciation and what is appropriation, especially when it comes to something as nebulous and ever-changing as music. Instead, what we have is "cultural smudging," which happens when artists like Iggy Azalea take the bits and pieces of black culture that they like, such as the style of music or the hair, and completely divorce them from their larger cultural contexts, laden with racial and political history.

What does this mean, particularly for white audiences who listen to rap music? It means that we need to recognize that we don't live in a post-racial society: white is still valued greatly

over black, and racism is still alive and well. We have a responsibility to understand the history behind white musicians performing black music, and how it illustrates a complicated relationship between appreciation and appropriation. When white artists take something from black culture and appropriate it, without giving credit where it is due, it divorces that artifact from the culture and its people. This perpetuates a fascination of black culture by white consumers which simultaneously devalues black people (hence article titles such as "Hip-Hop is Run by a White, Blonde, Australian Woman"). In all, it means we need to be conscious consumers, for cultures are meant to be appreciated, not appropriated for commercial consumption.

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