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Hip-hop Realness and the White Performer

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Hip-hop's imperatives of authenticity are tied to its representations of African-American identity, and white rap artists negotiate their place within hip-hop culture by responding to this African-American model of the authentic. This article examines the strategies used by white artists such as Vanilla Ice, Eminem, and the Beastie Boys to establish their hip-hop legitimacy and to confront rap music's representations of whites as socially privileged and therefore not credible within a music form where credibility is often negotiated through an artist's experiences of social struggle. The authenticating strategies of white artists involve cultural immersion, imitation, and inversion of the rags-to-riches success stories of black rap stars.

Keywords: Hip-hop; Rap; Whiteness; Racial Identity; Authenticity; Eminem

Although hip-hop music has become a global force, fans and artists continue to frame hip-hop as part of African-American culture. In his discussion of Canadian, Dutch, and French rap Adam Krims (2000) noted the prevailing image of African-American hip-hop as "real" hip-hop.[1] African-American artists often extend this image of the authentic to frame hip-hop as a black expressive culture facing appropriation by a white-controlled record industry. This concept of white–black interaction has led white artists either to imitate the rags-to-riches narratives of black artists, as Vanilla Ice did in the fabricated biography he released to the press in 1990, or to invert these narratives, as Eminem does to frame his whiteness as part of his struggle to succeed as a hip-hop artist. Because hip-hop's representations of racial identity are so tied to class, each of these white artists tells stories of his class struggle to counter hip-hop's representations of white privilege. Only Eminem, however, succeeds in attending also to the privilege his whiteness affords him with listeners. I argue that the reaction against Vanilla Ice changed the way white rap artists confront their whiteness, such that newer artists have developed a more critical awareness of the problem of

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constructing white hip-hop as "real," even as the success of white artists would indicate hip-hop's assimilation. Specifically, Eminem frames his performance in response to Ice's discrediting. Rather than imitate a model of hip-hop blackness, Eminem emphasizes the autobiographical basis of his lyrics and his struggle to succeed as a rap artist; he presents a new model of white hip-hop authenticity in which being true to yourself and to your lived experiences can eclipse notions of hip-hop as explicitly black-owned.

In making the case for this thesis, I interrogate concepts of authenticity within popular music and theorize hip-hop as black American music; I frame its representations of white privilege and white appropriation within the critical discussion about the visibility versus invisibility of whiteness. I then historicize constructions of white hip-hop authenticity, and examine current constructions as they respond to the 1990–1992 scandal which reduced Vanilla Ice from rap's top-selling artist to rap's most discredited. An examination of print journalists' treatment of Vanilla Ice illustrates that Ice became scapegoat for a history of appropriation of black music forms by whites. His discrediting created a discursive shift in the ways in which rap artists address their whiteness in lyrics. While earlier white artists relied on narratives of cultural immersion, white artists after Vanilla Ice have shown a more critical awareness of both their whiteness as a minority position within the music and of rap history. Finally, I extend my examination to rap's representations of white listeners, and the ways in which black artists and executives sponsor white artists and market their music to a white audience—even as hip-hop remains African-American music.

The relationship of white identity to hip-hop became complicated when SBK Records marketed Vanilla Ice as a white artist who maintained credibility in the black community. While Ice was not the first white artist to achieve crossover success with hip-hop, his performance marked the first time a rap artist had so deliberately articulated his own whiteness in marketing, beginning with his name and the title of his first single, "Play That Funky Music (White Boy)." Vanilla Ice turned his minority position as a white rapper into a point of pop marketability. Yet at the same time, his lyrics and the official SBK artist biography appealed to a "real" hip-hop image through his claims to an urban upbringing, criminal involvement, and gang affiliation. His official bio claimed he had been stabbed in a gang fight. Ice's biography seemed to fit with the stories of many black rap artists who were his contemporaries. Nonetheless, his background became a point of investigation for Ken Parish Perkins of *The Dallas Morning News*, whose November 18, 1990 story disproved much of what SBK had claimed about Ice. According to Perkins (1990, p. 1A), SBK press materials "portray a colorful teen-age background full of gangs, motorcycles and rough-and-tumble street life in lower-class Miami neighborhoods, culminating with his success in a genre dominated by young black males." In reality, Rob Van Winkle, who performed as Vanilla Ice, spent his teen years primarily in the Dallas suburbs, and was both wealthier and less involved with crime than his bio had claimed. For example, Perkins revealed that Van Winkle attended R.L Turner High School in Carrollton, Texas, rather than Miami's Palmetto High. When Perkins

contacted Vanilla Ice's manager, Tommy Quon, to question this contradiction, Quon acknowledged that Ice's upbringing "could have been well-off, but maybe he chose to go to the street and learn his trade. When he said he's from the ghetto, it may not be true that he grew up in the ghetto—but maybe he spent a lot of time there" (quoted in Perkins, 1990. p. 1A).

Because hip-hop lyrics are rooted in autobiography and often narrate black artists' struggles against systemic racism, Vanilla Ice's false claims to a background prominently including ghetto poverty and crime breached the norms of rap rhetoric. Vanilla Ice asked listeners to look past his whiteness to see a kind of social blackness that would authenticate him in the context of a rise to stardom that fit with black rappers' success stories. He failed, however, because his lies and his translation of hip-hop to the pop charts made his performance look like he was merely imitating black artists to make himself rich.

Although Vanilla Ice broke hip-hop sales records with his 1990 hit single "Ice Ice Baby" and his album *To the Extreme*, Perkins' article initiated a backlash. By 1992, newspapers described Vanilla Ice's career as "a travesty" (Saw, 1992, p. 52), and Ice himself as "questionable" (Popkin, 1992, p. 33) and "a bad memory, a one-man joke" (Mills, 1992, p. G10). Over the course of two years, such responses to Vanilla Ice signaled a shift in the public perception of Ice himself, and heightened attention to the importance of racial identity to constructing hip-hop authenticity.

Within popular music studies, the concept of authenticity often centers on the performance's proximity to notions of an original culture which at one time existed outside the record industry. Concepts of "real" hip-hop, as this term is used in lyrics (e.g., KRS-ONE's "Represent the Real Hip-hop" or Del the Funky Homosapien's "Phoney Phranchise") frame hip-hop as a black-created culture threatened with assimilation into a white mainstream. Kembrew McLeod (1999) identified the semantic dimensions of hip-hop realness as it is constructed to resist assimilation. He presented a model of urban black masculinity, which emphasizes, in part, "staying true to yourself vs. following trends" (p. 139). Edward Armstrong (2004), who theorized the authenticating strategies of Eminem, updated McLeod's model and identified three forms of hip-hop authenticity that were "initially evident": being true to oneself, claiming "local allegiances and territorial identities," and establishing a connection to "an original source of rap" through locale, style, or links to an established artist (p. 7–8). Hip-hop realness, then, is conveyed when an artist performs as a unique individual while maintaining a connection with the original culture of hip-hop. This construction of the authentic reflects Richard Peterson's (1997) definition of country music authenticity as "being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model. Thus, what is taken to be authentic does not remain static but is renewed over the years" (p. 220). For white artists, authenticity is constructed in response to black artists' performances. However, constructions of white authenticity have changed most distinctly with the success of key white artists, first with Vanilla Ice, and later with Eminem, currently the music's "biggest star" (Armstrong, 2004, p. 335).

White authenticity became more difficult to negotiate in the nine years between Vanilla Ice's discrediting and Eminem's debut. The scandal over Ice's bio effectively excluded white artists from mainstream rap until 1999, when Eminem released *The Slim Shady LP*. In fact, white artists' involvement in hip-hop can be divided into three distinct eras, each with its own authenticating strategies: pre-Vanilla Ice (1973–1990), Vanilla Ice (1990–1999), and Eminem (1999–present). I use the terms immersion, imitation, and inversion to describe the ways in which white artists in each era have worked to frame their whiteness as part of "real" hip-hop. As notions of hip-hop authenticity have changed, white artists have moved from immersing themselves in a nascent music culture to imitating an explicit model of the black authentic, to inverting the narratives of black artists to frame their whiteness as a career disadvantage in a form that remains dominated by black artists.

Hip-hop as Black American Music

Hip-hop music is a black form, given the involvement of African Americans in its creation, and because its concepts of authenticity are so tied to the roots of its culture. Hip-hop authenticity is rooted in African-American rhetoric; its emphasis on the performer's staying true to himself grows out of black rhetorical traditions such as testifying and bearing witness, in which the authority to speak is negotiated through claims to knowledge gained through lived experience. While white artists are regaining a foothold lost by Vanilla Ice, who breached this tradition of truth, their performances remain accountable to the music's black traditions. Even in the Eminem era, Imani Perry (2004) argues that "hip-hop music is black American music" (p. 10). Perry acknowledges that her position is unpopular among critics who privilege hip-hop's hybridity and who want to recover the histories of multicultural involvement in the culture's creation. Valuable counter-histories by Juan Flores (1996) and Nancy Guevara (1996), for example, argue for Puerto Ricans' and women's creative roles in the development of hip-hop, which has been attributed most widely to African-American males.

Even as I present a counter-history of the white artist, though, I agree with Perry's argument that central characteristics of hip-hop's language, musical traditions, oral culture, and political location make it a black American form. In fact, the history of white artists is a history of their speaking to the black Americans who remain the majority of hip-hop artists.

I break with Flores and Guevara on two key points. First, the Puerto Rican and female pioneers they identify are primarily graffiti artists and breakdancers, rather than the MCs, or rappers, who are the focal element of commercial hip-hop and whom I study here. Second, Latino MCs like Kid Frost, Big Pun, and Fat Joe have had less trouble than white artists in establishing their legitimacy. Because hip-hop remains a resistant culture, and because the dominant culture is white, whiteness stands outside hip-hop as a force that threatens to appropriate its culture. Hip-hop has been, and remains, very conscious of the long-standing threat of appropriation, and of the loss of black control of the music and culture to a white record industry.

This tension between African-American artists and white record executives fosters representations of whites as trying to appropriate black music. Historicizing this tension, Deena Weinstein (1998) described white artists' covers of black R&B groups in the 1950s in terms of record labels' efforts to modify the original songs to reach a "wider and whiter" (p. 139) audience. Her pairing of the terms "wider" and "whiter" speaks for popular music's concept of a white mainstream. Inevitably, record labels try to co-opt new forms invented in black communities. There is a history of white artists topping the charts with black music they have adapted for a white mainstream, and making more money than the African Americans who invented the form. This tension grew within hip-hop culture with the success of Vanilla Ice, who made his whiteness a selling point even as he obscured his upbringing in white suburbs.

While other, earlier, white rap artists had met with general acceptance from their black peers, Vanilla Ice made whiteness, as difference, fully visible within hip-hop. The question of whiteness's visibility has sparked scholarly debate. Richard Dyer (1997) noted the "invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse" (p. 3). For Dyer, "whiteness" refers both to an identity and to a system of advantage based on racial identities. White identity gets erased in white discourse as it becomes the default racial position; likewise, the social privilege that whiteness accords remains unspoken among whites.

Peggy McIntosh (1989) investigated the invisibility of white privilege and argued that white people don't see the privilege they carry with them into job interviews, loan applications, etc. Ruth Frankenberg (2001), however, has revised her own position now to see whiteness as very visible, and to see its invisibility as a "white delusion" (p. 73) under which scholars such as herself have operated. Frankenberg now sees whiteness in a continuing state of "marking and cloaking" (p. 74). Frankenberg's current position fits closest with my own, and her idea of marking and cloaking complicates whiteness as a racial position in hip-hop, where artists have obscured their white privilege, made white identity a selling point, and even argued that underneath their white skin they are essentially black. Most importantly, Vanilla Ice's failure to cloak his "white" background brought the question of white authenticity to the surface.

During the 1980s, white artists asserted their immersion in hip-hop culture without imitating a model of black authenticity. Although most commercial rap was recorded by black artists, white artists such as the Beastie Boys met with acceptance from their peers. Nelson George (1999) credits the Beastie Boys' 1986 debut *Licensed to Ill* with creating a "racial chauvinism . . . making the Beasties the first whites (but hardly the last) to be accused of treading on 100 percent black turf" (p. 66). At the same time George contends that rap culture never was exclusively black culture, that it was never "solely African-American created, owned, controlled, and consumed" (p. 57). Mike Rubin (1999) describes rap's reception of the Beastie Boys: "Back in the early '80s the Beasties were just New York City kids taking advantage of the nascent hip-hop scene's any-and-all-welcome attitude to enroll as the first minority students in the old school" (p. 126). The group's acceptance among black artists would seem to support this claim. Black rap artists like Run DMC and Public Enemy shared the

stage with the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J credits them for discovering him. The group was black-managed, by Russell Simmons, and in a reversal of a typical race narrative, the Beasties claim Simmons signed them to an unfair contract.

Black MC Q-Tip, who recorded and toured with the Beastie Boys, says: "You know why I could fuck with [the Beastie Boys]? They don't try to be black. They're just themselves" (Diehl, 1999, p. 124). Critics such as Matt Diehl (1999) and Crispin Sartwell (1998) shared Q-Tip's view that the Beasties made no attempt at blackness. Both critics suggested, however, that the Beasties adopted vocal styles to emphasize their whiteness. Diehl cited their "'white' accents" (p. 123). Sartwell argued that "they *try* to sound *extremely* white" as opposed to Vanilla Ice, who attempted to mimic black vocal styles (p. 171).

I argue that while newer white rap groups like Lordz of Brooklyn and Insane Clown Posse have adopted Beastie Boys vocal styles, in particular Adrock's nasal delivery, the Beasties attempted to sound white less than they established a performative frame of reference for white artists to come. In fact, Q-Tip and the Latino rapper B-Real planned to record with Adrock in a group called The Nasal Poets (Mike D, 1993); and on MC Milk's "Spam" (released in 1994), Adrock refers to himself and Milk as "the high-pitched brothers from the East Coast." These collaborations with black artists complicate readings of the Beastie Boys' "white" vocal styles as a way to foreground their racial identity. "Spam" is notable also because it contains more explicit references to race than do Beastie Boys lyrics; Milk refers to Adrock as "white boy" and Adrock refers to Milk as "black guy." The Beastie Boys never directly confronted their whiteness in lyrics, although they did speak in 1989 against racism on *Paul's Boutique*.[2]

By not calling attention to their whiteness, the Beasties did not make their minority status a gimmick. Yet they encountered resistance when they treated their whiteness as invisible to a black audience. In one incident in the 1980s, the Boys themselves seemed almost ignorant of their minority status. Former Beastie DJ Dr. Dre (from *Yo! MTV Raps*, rather than Dr. Dre from NWA) told *Spin* magazine about a Beastie Boys performance at New York's Apollo Theater, during which Adrock yelled to the crowd, "All you niggers wave your hands in the air!" (Light, 1998, p. 153). Although this type of crowd incitement is common for hip-hop artists, Dr. Dre claims he could feel an immediate shift away from the audience's warm reception of the Beasties, who were so much a part of hip-hop culture that in the excitement of performing they forgot they were still outsiders. Dre says that the Beasties used the term "not maliciously, but out of warmth for their audience." While he claims the incident is recorded on videotape, the Beasties wrote to *Spin* alleging that Dre fabricated the story (Beastie Boys, 2004). True or not, the incident became a footnote to the Beastie Boys' long history of acceptance in hip-hop.

The Beastie Boys' interaction with black artists has been key to their career. The white MCs of 3rd Bass also promoted their acceptance by black rappers in their debut single, "The Gas Face" (1989). The song was produced by black producer Prince Paul. Zev Love X, a black MC, appears on the song, and the video features prominent black artists like Erick Sermon of EPMD. Aligning themselves with established hip-hop

artists, 3rd Bass used the song to criticize MC Hammer for selling out the form as a pop crossover.[3] Through their connections to black artists and black topics, 3rd Bass asserted that they belonged to hip-hop culture. They confronted issues of racial identity in "The Gas Face," when MC Serch rhymes, "Black cat is bad luck, bad guys wear black/Must have been a white guy who thought of all that." He then urges black listeners to embrace their racial identity and avoid hair-straightening products and blue-colored contact lenses. In 1990, *The Village Voice* ran Playthell Benjamin's story "Two Funky White Boys." As the title indicates, the story's tone was positive, and it established 3rd Bass's hip-hop legitimacy. One year later, an article celebrating hip-hop whiteness would be difficult to find.

Vanilla Ice: The Elvis of Rap

Two months after Perkins exposed lies in the Vanilla Ice bio, *Washington Post* writer Joe Brown assessed the change in Ice's reception from the press:

> Now, making the Ice slip on his own stories is getting to be a favorite pastime of pop journalists, who have so far seen him contradict himself on where he grew up, his economic background, his love life, his motocross career, where his songs come from, and how and why and where he was stabbed. (Brown, 1991, p. N11)

Brown identified a trend among journalists to react not only against Ice's ethnic border crossing, but also against simulated performance in popular music. Vanilla Ice debuted in 1990, when rap singles had begun to cross over regularly to the pop charts. The year was rife with debates over authenticity in popular music. Rap's mainstream market was increasing, which raised fears of losing its original culture. The pop group Milli Vanilli was stripped of its 1989 Grammy award for Best New Artist after the group's manager made public that Fab and Rob, who performed onstage and in video as Milli Vanilli, did not sing a single note on their recorded album, and lip-synched in their concerts. Phillip Auslander (1999) cites Paul Theberge's (1997) theory that this was scandalous for listeners because music was becoming increasingly digitized and because music's performance culture was giving way to the recorded to such an extent that even live concerts were delivered via recording. The context of Milli Vanilli is important to understanding the Vanilla Ice scandal. Ice himself told the *San Francisco Chronicle,* "I ain't no Milli Vanilli" (Kennedy, 1990, p. E1). The crucial distinction between the two scandals is that Vanilla Ice did record his own vocals. But his critics were concerned with a different kind of musical authenticity, one that focused on how the performer's biography was reflected in his music.

Tricia Rose (1994) argues that Vanilla Ice's simulation made the ghetto "a source of fabricated white authenticity" and that his controversy "highlights the significance of 'ghetto blackness' as a model of 'authenticity' and hipness in rap music" (p. 11). Illuminating the importance of the social and geographic location for hip-hop artists, Murray Forman (2002) saw the ghetto for Vanilla Ice, however, as a marketing tool for an outside artist; this breach spawned a crisis of authenticity for the white rapper. Forman explained: "MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice were more frequently cast as the

scapegoats for rap's slide into a commercial morass. In one of the worst imaginable accusations in hip-hop, both were regularly accused of selling out the culture and the art form" (p. 216). Vanilla Ice's false claims to ghetto credibility made him more of a scapegoat than Hammer because while Hammer marketed a culture from which he came, Ice was selling a culture in which his own experience was not rooted.

Linking Vanilla Ice to a history of white appropriation of black music, print journalists compared him to Elvis Presley (Coady, 1992; Mills, 1991) and called him "the Elvis of rap" (Brown, 1991, p. N11). In comparing Ice to Elvis, journalists connected him to rock 'n' roll's history of white performers who achieved success by adopting black sounds. Print journalists or the scholars they interviewed mentioned that Ice "gets criticized for imitating blacks" (Coady, 1992, p. D1). They raised issues of white mimicry and appropriation, and assessed the Vanilla Ice phenomenon as history repeating itself:

> Vanilla Ice is merely the latest chapter in a recurring American dream, in which a good-looking white kid borrows a black sound and style (even his name is nicked from the other black Ices: Ice-T, Ice Cube and Just-Ice) and walks off with the prize. (Brown, 1991, p. N11)

These journalists criticized whites' poaching of black culture. Moreover, by reacting against Ice's circulation of a fake biography, their inquiry extended to Ice's credibility in several aspects of his performance, from his name to his fashion style. In this way, Vanilla Ice became scapegoat for a history of white exploitation of black sounds in American music.[4]

Several newspaper stories published 1991–1992 covered the difficulties of emerging white rappers trying to establish their credibility in the Vanilla Ice era.[5] For example, David Mills' (1992) article "Another Round of White Rappers in Search of 'Black Authenticity'" opens:

> Remember that flash flood of white rappers last year? When record companies (and a few black producers), covetous of Vanilla Ice's multi-platinum success, foisted upon the pop market such wannabe mike-wreckers as Jesse Jaymes, Icy Blu, J.T. and Young Black Teenagers? The only one to hit was Marky Mark, whose rhyming skills would've gotten a black man nowhere. (Mills, 1992, p. G10)

Journalists framed new acts in negative comparison with Vanilla Ice: "Unlike Vanilla Ice (aka Robert Van Winkle), Marky Mark doesn't feel the need to pad his biography with street-wise fibs to prove to the world he's got the right to rap" (Popkin, 1992, p. 33). New white artists themselves expressed uncertainty about their prospects for success. Icy Blu, a rare example of a white woman rapper, told the *Miami Herald Sun*:

> Sometimes I get nervous when I'm playing at a club and the crowd is all black people. I get the feeling they are not going to like me because I'm white**.** It's like I'm going to get this horrid backlash. I get scared. (Kohan, 1991, p. 38)

J. T. similarly reported feeling "a strong need to be accepted by the black audience, because it is a black industry" (Harrison, 1991, p. 13). The schism created by Vanilla Ice is most obvious in examining the careers of white artists who debuted between Vanilla Ice's 1990 debut and the release of Eminem's *Slim Shady LP* in 1999.

Examining the authenticating strategies of these groups during the Vanilla Ice era is thus to study the effects of Ice's discrediting on the sales of subsequent white artists.

In the nine years between the debuts of Vanilla Ice and Eminem, 119 singles from 64 black hip-hop artists made the *Billboard* Hot 100 Chart. For white artists, six singles charted, from Vanilla Ice (1990, 1991), Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch (two singles in 1991), House of Pain (1992), and the Beastie Boys (1998) (Bronson, 2003).[6] Most revealing are the authenticating strategies of Marky Mark and House of Pain, the two white artists who made their chart debut after Vanilla Ice, and a fourth white group, Young Black Teenagers, who saw MTV airplay with "Nobody Knows (Kelli)" in 1991. Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's pop rap debut, *Music for the People* (1991), sold more units than any other white rap album between Vanilla Ice's *To the Extreme* and Eminem's *The Slim Shady LP*. Marky Mark's album cover features Mark Wahlberg surrounded by his posse of black and white friends. The album's title even has a note of harmony to it. Designed for pop crossover success, and marketed in connection to Mark's brother, Donnie Wahlberg, from New Kids on the Block, *Music for the People* sold over one million copies. Although his group toured with New Kids, a bubblegum pop group and one of the world's biggest-selling artists, Marky Mark framed his hip-hop authenticity within his history of criminal involvement as a youth in Boston. This move turned against him when it was revealed that his background included two racial incidents. In 1993, Marky Mark issued this statement to the press:

> In 1986, I harassed a group of school kids on a field trip, many of them were African American. In 1988, I assaulted two Vietnamese men over a case of beer. I used racist language during these encounters and people were seriously hurt by what I did. I am truly sorry. I was a teen-ager and intoxicated when I did these things. But that's no excuse. (Kelly, 1993, p. 2D)

While he went on to enjoy success in film (most recently, as executive producer of HBO's *Entourage*), Mark Wahlberg's rap career was short-lived. Sales of his second album, *You Gotta Believe*, were low enough to make it his final release.

Young Black Teenagers, a group of five white kids, released their first album only six months after Vanilla Ice's *To the Extreme*, and asserted their cultural immersion more directly than any white artist before them. YBT's track listing included "Proud to Be Black" and "Daddy Kalled Me Niga Cause I Likeded to Rhyme." Their album was recorded, although not released, before Vanilla Ice's stardom. YBT used similar strategies to claimed realness through immersion in black culture. YBT argued that their love for hip-hop culture was so strong that they could consider themselves black. Like 3rd Bass two years earlier, YBT claimed to be white performers who were *down* with black listeners, so much that whites criticized them for their interest in black culture.

Claiming authenticity through immersion became more difficult after the reaction against Vanilla Ice, when white artists began to employ authenticating strategies which redefined their whiteness outside privilege. This discursive shift is best evidenced by House of Pain, whose self-titled debut album emphasized the ethnic

character of their whiteness; they promoted their Irish heritage as distinct from a generic "white" identity. The album's cover featured a picture of the three white group members along with a shamrock, the group's logo. They had shamrock tattoos and wore green Celtics jerseys. The album included tracks like "Shamrocks and Shenanigans," "Top O' the Mornin' to Ya," and "Danny Boy, Danny Boy." The video for their first single, "Jump Around," was set at the Boston St. Patrick's Day Parade, although no member of the group was from Boston.[7] To avoid all accusations of attempting a performance of blackness, House of Pain focused on another racial position: not white, but Irish. This performance recalls Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1996), which traces the history of Irish as a U.S. racial identity.

After Vanilla Ice, white artists turned to different constructions of white identity. The Young Black Teenagers rejected their whiteness in their name and claimed that their love for hip-hop culture made them black, while House of Pain emphasized their Irish heritage. Researchers in critical whiteness studies have struggled with defining "white" in the first place. Duster (2001) historicized the debate between scholars who argue that racial classification is biologically arbitrary versus those who argue that, even if race is a biological fiction, racial identity remains a deep structure that guides our social experiences. In the face of shifting definitions of what makes a person "white," there still exist social constructs of whiteness, as with all racial classifications, that individuals carry with them. Hip-hop's representations of whites' privilege leads to mistrust of any white artist who performs within a music culture created in underprivileged minority communities, a culture where authenticity remains tied to the performer's biography of social disadvantage. Critics disagree regarding whether whites confront this system of privilege. George Lipsitz (1998) argued, "White Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity" (p. vii). Duster (2001), on the other hand, sees white privilege as involuntary. Duster asserts "[W]hites who have come to a point where they acknowledge their racial privilege are in a difficult circumstance morally because they cannot just shed that privilege with a simple assertion of denial" (p. 114). In early 1990s hip-hop, Vanilla Ice lied to conceal his white privilege and Young Black Teenagers claimed a cultural blackness which set them at a disadvantage among whites. Since the late 1990s, emerging white artists, Eminem in particular, have confronted and redefined their whiteness.

Eminem's Move Toward Reintegration

The Vanilla Ice era is marked by its separation of whiteness from hip-hop authenticity; after House of Pain in 1992, no new white artist made *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart until Eminem's 1999 debut. Eminem put forth a very different rhetoric of whiteness. Eminem inverts the narratives of black artists to show whiteness hindering his acceptance as a rapper. At the same time he addresses the marketability of his whiteness as a privilege he would not enjoy if he were black. In the fullest study of Eminem's authenticating strategies, Armstrong (2004) showed that music journalists focus heavily on Eminem's whiteness; while Eminem's lyrics often ask

his listeners to look past his whiteness, these lines actually serve to reinforce his consciousness of his position as a hip-hop minority. Armstrong contended that Eminem writes lyrics to make himself "conspicuously white" (p. 342). I would extend this reading to argue that Eminem not only makes himself conspicuously white, but also shows a critical attention to hip-hop's representations of white privilege. Eminem's lower-class background is key to his authentication, and to his complication of hip-hop's representations of wealthy whites rushing to profit from rap. First, he emphasizes his genuine love of hip-hop and the adversity he faced on his path to a rap career. His lyrics reflect his actual biography within a poor, urban location; at the same time he emphasizes his whiteness to persuade listeners that he does not attempt an imitation of blackness. Then, as the first major white artist to emerge since Vanilla Ice, he writes lyrics in response to Ice's discrediting. He specifically criticizes Vanilla Ice on three songs (Armstrong, 2004). He works to diffuse his listeners' rejection of a white artist by anticipating their arguments, for example in his song "Without Me":

> I'm the worst thing since Elvis Presley
> To do black music so selfishly
> And use it to get myself wealthy
> There's a concept that works
> Twenty million other white rappers emerge

In these lyrics, Eminem is critical of the broader racial landscape that frames hip-hop, and the structures of racial advantage which have historically seen whites profit from black-created forms of music. Eminem's marketing concept includes his understanding of the history of whiteness in hip-hop, and his lyrical attention to the reception of his whiteness. On "The Way I Am," he complains about interviewers who think he's "some wigger who just tries to be black," and who test the veracity of the biography he reports:

> They always keep askin
> The same fuckin questions
> What school did I go to, what hood I grew up in
> The why, the who what when, the where, and the how
> til I'm grabbin my hair and I'm tearin it out

The questions Eminem claims interviewers ask match two central contentions of Perkins' exposure of Vanilla Ice's lies about his high school and neighborhood. Similarly, Eminem's comparison of himself to Elvis in "Without Me" recalls specific criticisms of Vanilla Ice.

Ultimately, the marketing and reception of Vanilla Ice made Eminem a more marketing-conscious performer. The content of Eminem's authenticating claims has not been significantly different from that of Vanilla Ice. Both claim to have grown up in predominantly black neighborhoods. Both claim to have earned prestige from their black peers through vocal and lyrical skill. A crucial distinction, however, lies in the press's reception of these claims, and in the fact that Eminem anticipates a hostile reception in his lyrics. Armstrong credits much of Eminem's widespread acceptance to the guidance of Dr. Dre, the black hip-hop legend who discovered Eminem. Dr.

Dre produces his music and performs with him both onstage and in recordings. According to Armstrong, Dr. Dre maintains some level of control over representations of Eminem, from Eminem's own lyrics to the script of the partly autobiographical film *8 Mile*, in which Eminem stars. With Dre's guidance, Eminem has so carefully established his right to perform hip-hop despite his whiteness that his career has survived numerous attacks, particularly from *The Source* magazine, which in 2003 made public an unreleased Eminem recording and accused the rapper of using racist language and promoting racial stereotypes.

The Source won a court decision allowing it to print lyrics from a freestyle vocal session Eminem recorded when he was 21, five years before he released *The Slim Shady LP*. Most importantly, the tape contains the only recording of Eminem's use of the word "nigger," which, Armstrong shows, he consistently avoids in his music. Eminem's taped vocals also criticize black women as gold diggers. While this story generated a few weeks of discussion, it was in no way as extensive or far-reaching as the scandal that surrounded Vanilla Ice's false claims of ghetto credibility. *The Source* was unable to initiate a backlash against Eminem. In fact, journalists defended him as performing staunchly within the genre:

> And under what hip-hop standard is it appropriate for black rappers to liberally use the N-word and refer to and portray black women in unflattering terms, but the same is off limits to white rappers? The N-word is no more affectionate coming from a black rapper than it is coming from a white one. (Campbell, 2004, p. B9)

> Considering that Eminem has said little out of the ordinary in a genre in which, to a considerable degree, black women are subject to daily insults, [*The Source*'s] indignant stance is confusing. Of course, since he is white and at pains to placate African-Americans, Eminem has had to apologise for his lyrics, saying they were "foolishness" written when he was a "stupid kid." His black contemporaries show no such repentance. (Kolawole, 2003, para. 7)

Eminem has established himself so firmly within hip-hop culture that these lyrics are defended as part of it.

Eminem's lyrics mark a return to earlier narratives of white artist immersion in hip-hop culture, but it is a return that remains particularly informed by reactions to Vanilla Ice, and one which often is framed in response to, or in anticipation of, those reactions. Using the rhetorical strategy of anticipation, Eminem calls attention to his own whiteness in the context of complaining about critics' focus on it. Eminem extends this strategy in *8 Mile*, where he counters attacks on his whiteness by beating his opponents to the punch. In a pivotal scene, Eminem's character B. Rabbit wins an MC battle against a black opponent, Papa Doc; he first anticipates attacks on his whiteness, then turns the crowd's attention from race to class as he reveals that Doc attended private school and has well-off parents and a supportive home. In effect, B. Rabbit silences his critic's attacks on his credibility by acknowledging his own whiteness, then challenging Doc's own performance of a ghetto blackness which does not fit with his biography. In anticipating criticisms of his whiteness, B. Rabbit embraces his trailer park upbringing as part of his credibility and in the same verse

discredits Papa Doc's private school education. Eric K. Watts (2005) argues that "in terms of both class and race, *8 Mile* portrays Rabbit as an 'oppressed minority'" (p. 5). Watts identifies the film's message as, "[W]hile it may be 'easier' for white rappers to have commercial success, it is very difficult for them to get *respect*" (p. 20); this statement confirms Eminem's lyrical commentary about the larger racial structures at work in hip-hop. On "White America," Eminem rhymes, "Look at my sales, let's do the math, if I was black, I would've sold half." He acknowledges his marketability to white listeners even as he credits Dre with authenticating him: "Kids flipped when they knew I was produced by Dre, that's all it took, and they were instantly hooked right in, and they connected with me too because I looked like them." Eminem attributes his hip-hop credibility to Dre's sponsorship, and his commercial appeal to his white identity, but if whiteness produces sales, how does hip-hop remain an African-American form?

African-American rappers and critics feared Vanilla Ice's commercial success would compromise hip-hop. In a 1991 interview, Havelock Nelson compared Ice to Elvis: "Rock-and-roll was black back in the days when it began. . . . I don't know if rap in the year 2050 will be seen as white. But it damn sure could be" (Mills, 1991, p. G1). The success of Eminem again raised these fears of rap's co-optation by whites. Yet, six years after his debut, white artists remain a minority in hip-hop, even as the music continues to grow in commercial dominance.

Eminem claims on "Without Me" to have opened the floodgates for white rappers, yet no subsequent white artist has reached Eminem's level of success. White artists such as Bubba Sparxx, Paul Wall, or Alchemist have seen mainstream airplay since Eminem's debut, yet more white artists record "underground" hip-hop, and much of it is released by independent labels. Outside of mainstream radio and corporate record labels, white artists like Sage Francis, Edan, and Eyedea and Abilities have established themselves as lyrical innovators, and certain underground artists have returned to narratives of cultural immersion, asserting their authenticity through rhyme skill rather than confronting the issue of their race in lyrics. As underground hip-hop defines itself as a purer form of hip-hop, in opposition to the record industry's pop rap, underground artists emphasize the authenticity of their music more than they market the realness of performer identity. This structure has extended to white artists in the underground. Hip-hop's current era does include mainstream crossovers, including two artists, Haystak and Bubba Sparxx, who adapt Eminem's strategy of inversion to play on a white stereotype of the southern redneck. While some of the rappers listed here (particularly Paul Wall and Bubba Sparxx) have seen heavy rotation on MTV, none of these white artists has achieved Eminem's level of sales or his staying power across multiple releases.

The Beastie Boys, then Vanilla Ice, then Eminem each broke rap sales records with their debut albums. Even their combined sales, though, are no match for the magnitude of the sales of black artists. These three white breakout artists emerged in 1986, 1990, and 1999. Before, between, and after them, sales records were set or broken by black artists. Run DMC's *Raising Hell* (1986) sold three million copies, and was the first rap album to go multiplatinum. Their sales were topped by the Beastie

Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986), which sold five million. Then in 1990, MC Hammer more than doubled the Beasties' sales with *Please Hammer Don't Hurt Em*, and Ice knocked Hammer out of the top spot, selling 17 million. More telling, though, is the consistency of album sales over time. The Beastie Boys have seen none of their subsequent five albums outsell *Licensed to Ill*. Vanilla Ice has not produced another album that broke into the top 40. After *To the Extreme*, he released a live album, 1991's *Extremely Live*, and then four studio albums, including 1994's *Mind Blowin'*, which was funk-influenced, and 1998's *Hard to Swallow*, which fit with the rap/metal sound of groups like Limp Bizkit and Korn. Even as he changed his sound, Ice has been unable to live down his earlier image. He most recently resurfaced as a reality television star, appearing on the WB's *The Surreal Life*, a show which groups former celebrities as roommates, and on NBC's *Hit Me Baby One More Time*, on which one-hit wonders compete in performing their old songs. Of these three key white artists, only Eminem has enjoyed continued success across multiple albums. *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) sold over four million copies. *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) and *The Eminem Show* (2002) each sold eight million copies and reached number one on the *Billboard* album charts. Eminem is an exception to hip-hop marketing patterns that see white rappers' sales decrease after their first releases. Even with the consistency of Eminem's sales, however, Tupac remains the world's biggest selling rap artist, with sales of his 13 different albums totaling 36 million copies.

Conclusion: (In)visibility of Whiteness in Hip-hop

The autobiographical basis of Eminem's lyrics and his attention to his own whiteness have helped him negotiate a new form of white authenticity through his position as a white outsider. Rather than try to hide his whiteness, Eminem inverts black narratives to show how his race held him back in the early stages of his career. He describes his whiteness, like his poverty, as an obstacle to overcome on his path to acceptance in hip-hop. Yet he avoids a reverse discrimination argument by being careful to acknowledge the privilege of his accessibility to white listeners. In addressing his reception as a white rapper from white listeners and black rap stars, Eminem marks not only his whiteness, but also the history of white–black interactions within which he performs.

His attention to white listeners is crucial; the multi-platinum sales of Vanilla Ice's *To the Extreme* prompted black rappers to address the position of whites who buy and listen to African-American music. In 1992, Ice-T speculated that more than 50% of his sales were from white consumers: "Black kids buy the records, but the white kids buy the cassette, the CD, the album, the tour jacket, the hats, everything" (Light, 1992, p. 31). Ice-T acknowledged, as did Rose (1994), that sales do not represent the full spectrum of rap's circulation via bootlegs and DJ mixtapes. Rose also noted the high "pass-along rate" among young black consumers (p. 8). As Vanilla Ice made whites' involvement with hip-hop more visible, black artists began to address the role of white listeners in rap's consumption. Thus, the discussion about the visibility of whiteness as a racial identity introduced above is reflected in rap artists' tension

between preserving hip-hop culture and making money via the record industry, which has led prominent black artists to confront the existence of their white audience. In an interview, Ice Cube told bell hooks (1994) that his messages are directed at a Black audience, and that he prefers to think of White listeners as "eavesdropping".[8]

If whites eavesdrop on hip-hop, they hear messages which are not intended for them. However, several rap artists make white listeners visible by explicitly addressing this audience. Ice Cube told hooks (1994) that "even though they're eavesdropping on our records, they need to hear it" (p. 129). Lyrics addressed to white listeners recognize whites' consumption of hip-hop even as they often criticize whites. On De La Soul's "Patti Dooke" (1993), Posdnous rhymes: "White boy Roy cannot feel it, but he's first to try and steal it, dilute it, pollute it, kill it. I see him infiltratin to the masses, and when they leech in, imma shoot em all in they asses." The same song features an interlude in which a record label executive says: "We decided to change the cover a little bit because we see the big picture. Negroes and white folks are buyin this album." De La Soul's attention to producing crossover hits for white listeners, and the ways in which that corporate process can often dictate changes in both marketing and content, complicate Ice Cube's eavesdropping analogy: The artist is often involved in marketing rap to whites.

While the white listener is criticized for diluting hip-hop's culture, white consumption becomes more visible to artists who run their own labels, and who see the marketing potential of white MCs. Armstrong (2004) cites Dr. Dre's specific intent to sign a white artist, Eminem, in order to sell more records through his own fledging label Aftermath Records. Like Dre, several other black artists have tried to market white MCs. Ice-T discovered Everlast, who went on to form House of Pain. Eazy-E released albums from a white Jewish group, Blood of Abraham (1994), and a white woman, Tarrie B (1993). Queen Latifah claims she would sign a white artist because "white kids want their own hero more than they want ours" (White, 1999, p. 198).

Speaking about Vanilla Ice in 1991, Nelson voiced his fear that blacks would cede rap to whites; he noted black artists' complicity in hip-hop's assimilation into white culture (Mills, 1991). In opposition to such a reading of black–white interaction, black artist-executives assert their control even as they market white artists to white listeners. As black artists become record label executives, they extend the concept of authenticity through blackness to the business of selling rap. Hip-hop music's attention to its own material production complicates the concept of hip-hop as a black expressive culture resisting co-optation by a white industry. Throughout hip-hop's development, both black and white artists have alternately disguised or exposed the large degree to which whites have been involved in the making of hip-hop, and the great extent to which blacks have been involved in its selling. Hip-hop's current construction of whiteness is tied closely to this industry structure, and necessitates both visibility (Dr. Dre's marketing of his protégé Eminem to a white audience) and invisibility (Dre's earlier obscuring of his relationship with Jerry Heller, the white man who managed his group Niggaz Wit Attitude).[9] The central difference in Dre's

making white–black interaction visible with Eminem, versus invisible with Heller, is the question of artist control. Heller is notorious for having signed NWA to an unfair contract which ultimately broke up the group. On the other hand, Dre has played a crucial role in managing and marketing Eminem. Dre boasts of his role in Eminem's sales on "Still D.R.E," a song that persuades the listener that even with all his industry success, particularly as a record label executive, Dre remains true to the same identity he put forth on his early recordings with NWA, where he used the group's racially-marked name to challenge radio stations to play his music. With Dre's guidance, Eminem has established a new form of white authenticity by dramatizing his struggle as a white rapper in a black hip-hop world.

Notes

[1] Referring to the music, I use hip-hop and rap as synonyms, the way they have been used most consistently across the history of the music's lyrics.

[2] On "B-Boy Bouillabaisse" and "Lookin Down the Barrel of a Gun."

[3] Like the Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass included a black DJ, but Vanilla Ice did as well, so a group's integration alone cannot establish its authenticity.

[4] Echoing the criticism of Vanilla Ice, 3rd Bass saw its biggest chart success with "Pop Goes the Weasel," a single dedicated to lampooning Vanilla Ice's performance of hip-hop realness. The song compares Ice to Elvis and accuses him of stealing his hit song's chorus from a black fraternity. The video depicts 3rd Bass beating Vanilla Ice (as played by punk rock icon Henry Rollins) with baseball bats.

[5] I studied 13 newspaper articles published between November 19, 1990 (the day after Perkins' article ran) and August 30, 1992. Six make direct, negative assessments of Vanilla Ice. Six raise questions of Ice's authenticity but remain neutral in their assessment. Only one, from *The Times* (UK), defends his performance. Of six newspaper articles to cover new white rap artists in 1991–1992, all mention Vanilla Ice. Of these six, four articles make negative comments about Ice, and two are neutral; two present a positive view of 3rd Bass and the Beastie Boys.

[6] I exclude Snow, a white pop-reggae artist who I do not categorize as hip-hop because of the style of his music (he sings rather than raps); I also exclude Shaggy, a black pop-reggae artist, for this same reason.

[7] Like the Beastie Boys and the Latino group Cypress Hill during this same era, House of Pain marketed themselves to alternative rock listeners via their fashion (nose rings, tattoos, and green flannel) and their music, most notably in the guitar-heavy version of "Shamrocks and Shenanigans," remixed by Nirvana producer Butch Vig. House of Pain released Vig's remix as a single, rather than the original album's more distinctly hip-hop version. With the 1992 release of *Check Your Head*, the Beasties made live rock instrumentation a key component of their performance and moved away from the strictly hip-hop styles of their first two albums. The Beasties did not release another complete album of hip-hop until 2004's *To the 5 Boroughs*.

[8] Ice Cube's cousin Del tha Funky Homosapien revised this statement on his song "Catch a Bad One," where he urges, "Please listen to my album, even if you're white like talcum."

[9] Dre's music didn't acknowledge Heller until after NWA's breakup and the release of Dre's solo album *The Chronic* (1992), where Dre parodied Heller on "Dre Day."

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