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Negotiating cultural authenticity in hip-hop: Mimicry, whiteness and Eminem

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Whether it is condemned for its racial and gender representations or lauded as the voice of a generation, hip-hop has brought black youth culture to the forefront of popular culture. In this paper I consider hip-hop as a black cultural formation constituted largely by its musical media, where community is established around cultural texts, their meanings and the ways these are used by individuals.¹ I examine hip-hop's relationships with historical racial discourses and contemporary whiteness, and the effects of the latter on understandings of contemporary hip-hop community and authenticity. In doing so I attempt to address the ways hip-hop can be differentially mobilized for identification, primarily in relation to Eminem's cultural success. In considering hip-hop's material, political, and discursive underpinnings, I analyse how the dominant identities of the 'gangsta' and the 'politically conscious rapper' are informed by discourses utilized within various black political histories in the United States, investigating how Eminem has negotiated his whiteness in relation to these racialized identities. As the first white solo artist to maintain long-term hip-hop success and cultural credibility, Eminem provides a useful example to explore hip-hop's simultaneous discourses of inclusiveness and cultural authenticity, its relation to historically grounded processes of othering certain identities, and the significance of class within mainstream hip-hop as a cultural community (of consumption, of representations, and of political and material relations).

This paper begins by considering how contemporary hip-hop discourses regarding identity and politics within the United States are informed by a popular version of Afrocentrism, as a dominant influence on twentieth-century African-American politics, focusing specifically on Frantz Fanon's critique of such a form, 'The Fact of Blackness'. I am interested in how these opposing strands of black politics have influenced the hip-hop generation, one which has grown up post-civil rights but has had to deal with new forms of racism, utilizing hip-hop as a response (Rose 1994).² The second section analyses dominant representations within mainstream US hip-hop, considering their relationship with black political discourses. I consider the 'gangsta' and the 'politically conscious rapper' as dominant archetypes of hip-hop masculinity, assessing how these archetypes reinterpret racial histories and the effects of this for black men and women. The final section examines Eminem's performance of a *hybrid* hip-hop, exploring how his success demonstrates an example of 'authenticated' white participation in a racialized culture. Considering the means by which such a performance has been achieved may provide some points of departure for examining appropriations of hip-hop culture outside of the United States,

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for example, within my own Australian context. In this paper, however, my focus is limited to the representations of mainstream US hip-hop. While this is often felt to no longer be the central or most important object of cultural studies' analysis of hip-hop – and valuable work has been produced based on this premise (see Maxwell 2003; Mitchell 2001; Whiteley, Bennett, and Hawkins 2004) – there remains much to be said regarding the shifting configurations of hip-hop's dominant international forms, particularly in regards to the role of, and the investment in, symbolic blackness.

Black politics, black music: Culture as a space of protest

Eminem has negotiated multiple controversies regarding misogyny, homophobia and even anti-black racism, as well as a highly antagonistic relationship with the popular hip-hop publication *The Source* (see Dyson 2007), to become one of the highest selling rappers of the last decade. Establishing himself through producer and hip-hop icon Dr Dre, as well as through relationships with subsequent signings to the labels Aftermath and Shady Records, Eminem possesses cultural, social and material capital to greater degrees than most of his black contemporaries.

In order to examine Eminem's employment of certain elements of dominant hip-hop representation and performance, and to consider how hip-hop has been linked to strategies of protest, it is first necessary to examine the political discourses that have preceded and informed these performances. Frantz Fanon's 'The Fact of Blackness' provides a useful point of entry into twentieth-century black political discourses. His chapter examines negritude – 'as the totality of the civilising values of the African world or the common denominator between all black nations' (Barres, in Macey 2000, 181) – and Afrocentric politics as discursive strategies blacks might utilize to overcome the black–white binary. Fanon underlines their appeal as 'potential' salvation from the effects of racism (1986, 123), describing the emerging movement as a 'bitter brotherhood', in which 'only the Negro has the capacity to convey [the cosmic message]' and where cultural evaluations are made outside of dominant Eurocentric discourses (124).

Examining the discourses of negritude, Fanon considers the possibility of a black existence without the white other, thus undermining hegemonic ideas regarding race and knowledge. In an ironic inversion of stereotypes he sarcastically exclaims: 'Yes we are – we Negroes – backward, simple, free in our behaviour. That is because for us the body is not something opposed to what you call the mind. We are in the world' (Fanon 1986, 128). Fanon's prioritization of the phenomenological and his focus on the everyday experiences of racism lead him to eventually reject this political position. He argues that although this reevaluation of the body and an emphasis on African history might provide a discourse to strengthen collective black identities through symbolic identification with the past, the stratification and discrimination that blacks endure in the everyday present continues, both within their communities and within society more broadly (Fanon, in Macey 2000, 184).

Fanon's opposition to the philosophy of negritude is grounded in his interpretation of the colonial binary, which he conceives as a static relation in which the black subject has no access to ontological resistance ('the inverse hypothesis'). This unequal distribution of power occurs within a colonialist situation where the ontology of the black subject has been removed and replaced by a history constructed by the colonizers. Fanon emphasizes the restrictive character of colonial identity stating that 'Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man' (Fanon 1986, 110). The issues on the political agenda of Bakari Kitwana's 'hip-hop generation' both extend Fanon's subjective and relational themes and adopt statements from Afrocentric discourses (explored below). Despite Fanon's rejection of (Senghorian) negritude, the universality of language and symbolism within such Afrocentric

discourses allowed their transition into Africa's diasporic communities in response to the remnants of historical racism and the development of new forms.

As a political discourse, Afrocentrism as described by Patricia Hill-Collins operates under four guiding principles. These include the concept of the soul, a reclaiming of black identity via a move from 'negro' to 'black', maintaining racial solidarity through black community, and serving a nation founded on essential blackness and defined as the black community or family (2006, 101). Promoters of the discourse employ a selection of cultural norms from the belief systems of various African societies as strategies to reinvent African-American culture through blackness, as opposed to the negation of whiteness. This preoccupation with positive representation has frequently led to the conflation of 'authentic' black art with 'positive' art. Michael Eric Dyson writes that this contributes to a restrictive distinction where 'Either [black] art is seen as redemptive because it uplifts black culture and shatters stereotypical thinking about blacks, or it is seen as bad because it reinforces negative perceptions of black culture' (1996, 181), echoed by Paul Gilroy's critique of 'ethnic absolutisms' (see Gilroy 2000, 6, 270).

The two sides of the academic debate about the political effectiveness of Afrocentrism are aptly summarized by Hill-Collins. On the one hand she describes its potential as a discourse that underpins a love of blackness contrary to dominant white conceptualizations, and on the other she outlines how it romanticizes a rural African past, suppresses contemporary African-American heterogeneity and material realities, and ignores everyday concerns (2006, 95). She further critiques Afrocentrism for its homogenization and silencing of women, an issue which has been similarly disregarded within mainstream hip-hop (see Pough et al. 2007). Afrocentrism has 'uncritically incorporated dominant ideologies about White and Black gender roles into its domain assumption', Hill-Collins argues, relying heavily on traditional concepts of the family and community, to which women are designated responsibility (2006, 107). This has had a number of effects on women including the control of their reproductive capabilities and sexualities, their objectification, and the regulation of performances of masculinity and femininity in line with patriarchal gender roles. These latter two effects underscore mainstream hip-hop's sexist and at times misogynistic treatment of women's bodies, epitomized in many hip-hop videos (see Washington 2007).

Despite these legitimate critiques, Afrocentrism has done more than provide a love ethic for black people. It has revalued the objecthood attributed to blackness historically 'in a climate of institutionalized racism that valorizes whiteness' (Hill-Collins 2006, 119) and has developed with and alongside numerous black political organizations. Nell Irvin Painter provides a list of such organizations, stating that 'All demand Black Power through control of police, schools, health care, and housing. And all denounce police brutality and the wholesale incarceration of black men and women' (see 2006, 329). I support Hill-Collins' affirmation that although Afrocentrism is limited as a critical social theory, the strategically essentialist establishment of an us-them binary can be (and has been) politically effective in the mobilization of individuals and the establishment of collective protest identities based around subordination and oppression. Though it is arguably problematic in regards to its real political potential for material change, Afrocentrism has been (for men in particular) an effective discourse for conceptualizing and living with African-American material subordination, and for defining blackness in positive terms.

Informed by such discourses, hip-hop culture has provided a space for black Americans to protest their material and symbolic realities. Bakari Kitwana and Tricia Rose emphasize that these citizens have matured during globalizing trends which have had detrimental effects on most working-class Americans. Increases in unemployment due to shrinking manufacturing industries within post-industrial cities, and rising incarceration rates that disproportionately affect people of colour, have led to increased crime and fast-tracked the deterioration

of inner-city neighbourhoods (though not necessarily communities), establishing disdain and indifference towards policy makers (Kitwana 2002, 177; Rose 1994). *Stic.man of Dead Prez* rhymes:

Honestly, I'm against this government / I ain't got to cover it up, that's what I meant / I'm sick of paying bills and I'm sick of paying rent / seems like I work all the time, but don't know where the money went. / And the funny shit is we supposed to like this shit / but all your politicians can bite this dick / it's a war going on, the ghetto is a cage / they only give you two choices, be a rebel or a slave. / So what you do? So I rebel ... (2002, 9)

The limited opportunities for post-industrial youth within America's neoliberal political and economic landscape are succinctly articulated here. The rhymes stage the 'choice' (the term should invoke the liberal subject at the heart of American democracy) against the backdrop of America's colonial history and in the context of an economically stratified present. Paul Gilroy writes that 'Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves' (1993, 74), and hip-hop, while combining the linguistic with the musical, frequently functions as a protest against contemporary class relations grounded in America's racist history.

Kitwana argues that the hip-hop generation engages with the contemporary material manifestations of this history with a political agenda centred on seven main issues: education, employment and workers' rights, reparations, economic infrastructure in urban communities, youth poverty and disease, anti-youth legislation, and foreign policy (2002, 178). It is apparent that the majority are not specifically racial, but rather class concerns to which race is closely tied, demonstrating the increasing reality of generalized economic insecurity associated with American neoliberalism, which has affected individuals indiscriminately (albeit in significantly different ways). It is my contention that such material and symbolic subordination generates shared experiences, cultural concerns and struggles for recognition among classes of individuals, which provide entry points for white subjects to access hip-hop's political and identificatory strategies. Furthermore, these shared experiences, as well as widespread recognitions that they exist, have underscored strategies of protest which act to dispel the easy mapping of identificatory categories such as class, race and gender onto one another. Protest practices are not simply about political outcomes but also creating shared identities (Hetherington 1998, 145–6). Individuals' participation in hip-hop is frequently grounded in protests relating to racial and class inequalities and even where this is not the case the result is in part a (policed and hierarchized) entry into collective identifications, one of the characteristics of which is a history of and a capacity for protest.

My point here is to underline the role of shared identifications within hip-hop culture and to situate mainstream US hip-hop culture in a history of practices partially grounded in protest strategies. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that collective representations and identifications of any form necessitate the hierarchization and exclusion of cultural concerns and thus of certain individuals. While forms of identification vary, identifying with and through hip-hop culture, even through consumption, evokes a relation to racial histories of protest so long as this remains one of the culture's defining features. The archetypal identities considered within this paper are grounded in historical relations between race, class, and gender, as they have manifested in the public sphere through both overt oppression and political participation.

Performing hip-hop, stereotypes and mimicry

One of the ways hip-hop functions politically is to subvert the stereotypes of black men. White males, as colonizers, as the producers of dominant ideology and as those who maintain social institutions, have historically held the position of sexual normality. They have attributed

'to black subjectivity...the contents that white consciousness itself feared to contain or confront: bestial sexuality, uncleanness, criminality, all the purported "dark things"' (Johnson 2001, 228). Considering black hypermasculine representations as a response to historically racist stereotypes, bell hooks argues that 'black men are subject to patriarchal objectification through the white male gaze, and therefore become feminised... [They] have fought back by embracing hypermasculinity' (in Perry 2004, 121).

Similarly exploring modes of responding to historically racist discourses, Fanon assesses the potential of negritude as an emancipatory politics, particularly in regards to its employment of the term 'Negro' (Martin 1999, 99). He argues that this term emerged from a racist moment in black and white relations, which established the black as 'a phobogenic and anxiogenic object' (Macey 2000, 193). Where Fanon attempts in the first part of 'The Fact of Blackness' to undermine racist stereotypes through reason (ultimately unsuccessful against racism's insidious and irrational justification), Homi Bhabha considers the colonial relation and the employment of the historically racist stereotype in terms of the politics of subversion.

Bhabha's reading of Fanon reconsiders the colonial relation to argue that power is not fixed and total, but is fluid and dispersed across both positions. Bhabha writes: 'Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the undifferentiated myth of the whole white body' (1994, 92). Rather than an impossible oppression, subversive political potential exists where this displacement of white fears onto the black body indicates the necessity of blackness to exist as Other to maintain dominant notions of whiteness. The privileged relies on the subordinated term in order to accrue identity (139), for example, white sexual normality is secured by its relation to black hyper-sexuality and/or the desexualization of Asian men through Orientalism. He argues that within the relationality of racial identities the white self relies on the black other to assert its whiteness and thus the categories are not as separate as the colonizers would purport. In short, there is ambivalence in the colonial relation.

In relation to stereotypes, Fanon proposes that these involve a double articulation: the first is the recognition of racial realities and the second is the internalization of these 'realities'. In contrast to Fanon's analysis, Bhabha argues that at this second articulation the possibility for protest and subversion exists. In taking up stereotypes, specifically the way 'nigga' has been adopted within hip-hop as a racialized masculine term of reference and identification, '[there] is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority, in the mocking spirit of mask and image' (Bhabha 1994, 62). Thus, although the black man may be overdetermined from without, this determination is not as totalizing as Fanon suggests. On the one hand, the requirement to 'anxiously repeat' stereotypes signals that they are not natural and cannot be proved. On the other hand, the possibility to produce counter-interpretations of identity that negate qualities used to establish the colonized identity not only produce new subjectivities for the colonized but undermine the 'truths' on which colonial privilege rests. Although the colonized's ability to consciously enact this politically subversive mimicry is arguable, I am seduced by this potential, particularly as it is played out in US hip-hop. De La Soul rhyme, 'stay dumb like black folk supposed / see's mostly fakin' it, to make it' (2000, 15), indicating the potential political subversion of stereotypes within hierarchical discourses and structures.

However, within a Western framework that perceives sexuality as largely constitutive of identity, the association between race and sexual stereotypes remains powerful and establishes a specific experience for black Americans wherein their existence is epidermalized, meaning largely imposed onto them by white men through surveillance (Fanon 1986). Though black Americans were/are disadvantaged by the social order, they lived/live day to day within the effects of this hierarchy (hooks 1981, 53). One might suggest, then, that Bhabha's prioritization of deconstruction and text-based analysis shifts the focus away from daily, repetitive

domination, and from the reality that the subjugation of the colonized is compounded by economic powerlessness – that the master does not identify with and through the slave but merely desires his labour.

Post-emancipation, two dominant discursive myths were established regarding black sexuality. For men, the myth of the black rapist was established, while for women – to justify the continuing proliferation of rape – an identity of sexual availability was constructed. Liberated from slavery, America's blacks were for the first time free to engage in non-coercive sexual relationships. Angela Davis suggests that the blues created a discourse that articulated African-Americans' simultaneous continued economic impoverishment and newly liberated sexuality (1999, 4). White society utilized this cultural output as further evidence of black Americans' highly sexualized identities, as has often been the grounds for mainstream media's condemnation of hip-hop. This female identity has carried through into contemporary American society wherein 'the predominant image [of the black female is] that of the fallen woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute' (hooks 1981, 52). We might conclude, as Fanon does, that white dominance has infiltrated black subjectivity – (through the double articulations that construct the inferiority complex) – to the point that black people unconsciously live the existence attributed to them by whites, maintaining a white-desired/required, racial-cultural gulf. On the other hand, histories of counter-discourse, revaluation, and mimicry have characterized black cultural output, demonstrating the differences between institutional and cultural identities; the relation is not necessarily top down in its control of the colonized psyche.

Since its emergence in the 1970s, hip-hop has been performed and organized as a predominantly masculine culture, adopting a traditional heterosexual version of sexual relations and clearly defined gender roles, particularly in relation to rapping (Jamison 1999, 177). The black macho is privileged (often at the expense of femininity) and has become the symbol of racial authenticity (Painter 2006, 335). Male rappers have repeatedly infused the historically racist stereotype of the black super-masculine menial, constituted by his sexuality, with new meanings. This process is played out frequently in hip-hop through the invocation of the term 'nigga' in the context of establishing racialized homosocial relationships. The reinterpretation of a historically racist term generates solidarity based on race, class, and geography, and relies on assumptions of authenticity; who is an 'authentic' nigga? Painter suggests that the term is used 'to designate a particular group of black people... the young, poor, oppressed men of the ghetto', thus limiting the identity to certain figures and excluding certain others (339). Although the boundaries surrounding which black men can – and in fact desire to – be included vary, depending on whether racial, class, or geographical factors are privileged, usually the Others include non-blacks, women, and gay black men. In the same way that Afrocentric discourses subjugate and constrain the identities open to women in the name of black solidarity, women are usually excluded by the invocation of the term, as are economically successful black Americans – 'Niggaz cannot be middle class' (339).

Mainstream hip-hop's rappers thus engage in a form of fraternal friendship that strengthens ties at the expense of the Other. A positive reading of this process, while recognizing that benefiting from its possibility reinforces gender inequality, might consider how participants engage in a form of *mimicry*. Bhabha suggests that such mimicry emerges from the psychic ambivalence and desire to maintain one's position, in this case blackness, while simultaneously seeking access to the subjectivity on the other side of the binary (1994, 90). Bhabha argues that mimicry aims not to re-present the colonizer, but to produce a blurred copy of him. The colonized does not seek to become the colonizer but rather to accentuate the differences between them, while making apparent his ability to perform that role. Mimicry undermines the colonizer's authority, shifting access to power in representation through slippage, which is the difference between that which is re-presented and the representation itself (86). In this instance, rather than

mimicking the colonizer, the colonized instead mimics the colonizer's version of himself. Hip-hop's reinterpretation of historically racist myths and terms do not mimic whiteness directly, however the collective white identity does rely on these myths to maintain itself. Thus to reinterpret such myths and terms constitutes a form of mimicry by colonized blacks. As well as with the invocation of 'nigga', mimicry is evident in hip-hop performances through the identities of the 'politically conscious rapper' and the 'gangsta'.

These identities, as archetypes, emerged in contention with one another as hip-hop's locus shifted from New York during the late 1980s. Davarian Baldwin suggests that the overt politicization of hip-hop in the late 1980s, largely through Public Enemy's success, emerged parallel to the increased upward mobility of many blacks into America's middle class. Authentic blackness until this time had been associated with the inner city, and black Americans who had benefited from affirmative action and from free-market capitalism were required to negotiate choices between racial authenticity and economic success. Political rap informed by Afrocentrism provided discourses which allowed for both.³ Economic circumstances might not correlate to those of urban black communities, but symbolic identification could be experienced through ancestry and a shared skin colour, shifting authenticity from geographical and class determinants into the symbolic realm.

Political rappers established a tradition for hip-hop participants to demonstrate their symbolic identification with political positions through their aesthetic and expressive styles. Such styles were appropriated by 'an African American and white college-age audience who used African and Black Power fashions, hairstyles, and rhetoric to demonstrate political acts of rebellion and resistance' (Baldwin 2004, 163). Collectives such as the Native Tongues Movement, comprising De La Soul,⁴ the Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest and Queen Latifah, employed Afrocentric discourses and styles, disclosing their middle-class positions and referencing the soul and racial histories to form a historically grounded symbolic community, while concurrently promoting discourses of inclusiveness and protest (Baldwin 2004, 163). The similarly oriented Arrested Development took hip-hop out of the urban landscape and into America's rural South (see Boyd 2004). Tracks such as 'Tennessee'⁵ shift hip-hop into America's rural landscape promoting a rediscovery of traditional cultural values from which contemporary African-Americans have descended. Such music is political by promoting the racial history that is the hidden history of American democratic progress.

However, as in the case of deconstructionist analysis, symbolic identification from the emerging middle classes, black and white alike, had limited effects on the lived experiences of poverty and racism for many black Americans. Gangsta rap's dominance in the early 1990s spoke in response to 'politically conscious rap' and its middle-class focus. Baldwin claims that the early '[L.A. gangsta rappers] contend that the nationalist focus on Africa – both past and present – obscures the daily battles poor black folk have to wage in contemporary America' (2004, 165), their contention echoing Fanon's disappointment with negritude as a politically effective discourse. Gangsta rap facilitated roles such as the gangsta, the thug, the hustler and the pimp/player – highly masculine performances through their links with the criminal domain – and married these identities with that of the superstar. Such performances invoke society's denigrated urban lower class and glorify the hardships endured by blacks. This is a necessary movement towards a justification of exaggerated individualism which validates any means necessary to 'move on up [out of the ghetto]', *mimicking* the American dream. Tupac rhymed: 'Never die / be a hustler muthafuckas / and making thugs out you suckas / From the cradle to the grave' (Thug Life 1994, 9), emphasizing the isolating individualization of poverty and the straddling of life and death for blacks contending with the oppressive circumstances of urban America. Imani Perry articulates the gangsta's revaluation of historically racist stereotypes where she writes that he 'uses the female body as an object for his sexual prowess, as a geography

on which to graft the territory of his blackness. He plays on America's fear of the big black dick, he is triumphant rather than the castrated victim' (Perry 2004, 129). Obviously, women remain the collateral victims of black male empowerment within this discourse.

Archetypal gangsta rappers such as Ice Cube and the other members of N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) began a trend of celebrating 'the hood', localized inner-city neighbourhoods beleaguered by crime and unemployment (see Forman 2002). Bringing first-hand analysis to the economic struggles of black Americans, considerations of how capitalism has betrayed them and who has benefited from their exploitation, gangsta rap produces black representation by blacks from within their lived environments (at least in representational terms) (Perry 2004, 129). The agency established within this setting works to disturb dominant discourses of black poverty, criminality and powerlessness by emphasizing – and in doing so politicizing – the collective protest identity of the community that exists within such socio-economic circumstances.

One final point I will make relates to gangsta rap's employment of consumer discourses in order to concurrently assert successful black subjectivities and question the legitimacy of the connection between whiteness and financial accomplishment. Bhabha's suggestion that mimicry is never far from becoming mockery (1994, 139) appears where Baldwin writes that:

In the same way that white supremacy has created the nigga as a repository for its own not-so-laudable activities, 'gangsta/playa' rappers have taken white American commodities as signs of achieving 'the dream'. By performing the roles of Italian-American mobsters and movie characters, they continue to question the idea that gangsta behaviors in hip-hop are inherently an extension of deviant, let alone black, culture. (2004, 168)

Where rappers such as Jay-Z, the Notorious B.I.G. and Foxy Brown appropriate mobster identities – the former central to the expansion of 'bling' culture (see Reeves 2008) – we see two aspects of Bhabha's mimicry at work. Firstly, and contrary to Fanon's belief that the subjugated desires to take the position of the dominant figure – the slave to the master – Bhabha's psychic ambivalence exists where black artists seek to maintain their localised and racialised identities, concurrent to achieving commercial success.⁶ Secondly, the closeness between mimicry and mockery appears through rappers' adoption of racially coded consumption practices in an 'I can do it better' challenge. The competitive individualism of bling culture as an extension of gangsta rap is politically problematic, since it runs counter to political endeavours for collective identifications. However, subversive political power exists in the (frequently conscious) mimicry enacted through the different ways in which black artists have performed commercial success, the slippage or excess of their articulation of the stereotype. Differences such as baggy suits, custom-made sneakers, choice of vehicle and maintaining a hip-hop style through cultural products and argot signify the ability of the colonized to enter what has traditionally been the domain of the colonizers, questioning their claim to this space and its associated privileges. We see, then, through performances of dominant hip-hop identities, mimicry acting in two forms, simultaneously in relation to the black/white dichotomy and the distinction between classes.

Eminem: 'I'm like my skin, is it starting to work to my benefit now?'

If, as I have argued, hip-hop demonstrates a space where historical identities have been both reinforced and undermined through mimicry, then the figure of Eminem opens up another problematic. This is, namely, the ambivalence in Eminem's identification as a white man within hip-hop. This section considers Eminem's employment of mimicry and his utilization of strategies from black political discourses for cultural authenticity. What is it that he has done, that so many white rappers before him have not managed to do, in order to achieve such a high degree of hip-hop authenticity? And, through this achievement, has he revolutionized discursive

notions about who can inhabit authentic hip-hop subject positions, particularly in regards to rapping? I will examine the importance of hip-hop as a space of mimetic identity which facilitates slippages – where on the one hand music is political and on the other is a space of conflicting interpretations – and underscores Eminem’s cultural infiltration.

As a culture established within black communities and centred on black experiences, yet situated within a wider white ideology concerning gender, the black male in mainstream US hip-hop is situated as the dominant (sexual) figure; the authentic player in hip-hop’s hierarchy (at least as it is represented). Analysing Eminem’s involvement in the culture must concurrently consider hip-hop’s internal racial and gender discourses and its existence within a white dominant society. It would be naive to crudely state that Eminem is simply ‘stealing’ black music, since hip-hop is bound up in complex histories of class, gender, and racial relations, and upon even a cursory glance it is by no means a homogeneous, uncontested, black/male/working-class culture.

Considering Eminem provides us with an excellent example of the ambivalence of the colonial relation. Gary Taylor writes that he is ‘Described by those around him as (biologically) white and (culturally) non-white’ (2005, 346). One might consider this as the colonizer’s simultaneous desire to dominate and nurture/cultivate the colonized culture, or conversely, as the subjugated party’s (analysing his position within hip-hop hierarchy as opposed to colonial relations) desire to identify and take the place of the dominant party while maintaining the authenticity of his racial identity. Just as Norman Mailer’s ‘Hipster’, in his essay ‘The White Negro’, identifies with the ‘Negro’s’ perceived ‘sensual superiority’ when the conformity of the white race does not appear to offer any opportunity for expression or individuality (in Medovoi 1997, 154), Eminem identifies with black masculinity in its hegemonic hip-hop form.

Eminem’s style appropriates and informs hip-hop trends, in his fashion – sneakers, hoodies, caps and baggy jeans – in speech and accent, in his objectification of women, and in his embodied actions. His aesthetic, grounded in the consumption of recognizable representations that are both gendered and racialized, establishes an embodied identification (albeit partial and limited) with blackness in its dominant hip-hop form. Kevin Hetherington argues that:

The stylistic use of the body associated with expressive identification is one in which identity is represented as otherness. In many cases this means adopting a style for the body that can be described as other in one of two senses: the ‘authentic’ body; or the ‘grotesque’ body. (1998, 72)

I believe that Eminem’s embodiment is both ‘authentic’ and ‘grotesque’ in his simultaneous adoption of symbolic blackness and his ‘celebration of matter out of place, that which transgresses the boundaries of respectability’, his whiteness (Hetherington 1998, 73). His obviously bleached blonde hair acts to exaggerate the conscious construction of his white racial identity. In opposition to Vanilla Ice’s and Markie Mark’s unsuccessful appropriations of hip-hop, Eminem’s reflexivity about his division of self allows his performance to extend beyond appropriation into conscious mimicry. He does not desire to be the black man, but to signify the differences between their performances, ‘to use black music so selfishly, and use it to get [himself] wealthy’ (Eminem 2003, 10). Bhabha suggests that cultural identity always exists in the ambivalent space between cultural systems. Eminem is an apt example of *hybridity* – though not of the type Bhabha theorized – as a subject informed by both sides of the colonial relation, who straddles two power relations, within and outside of hip-hop. Within historical discourses of race and gender Eminem is able to access the privileges of whiteness and maleness. However, within the culture of hip-hop his default position, due to his whiteness, is lower in the hierarchy of authenticity. Rather than as MC, whiteness in hip-hop is conventionally aligned with spectators, record company executives, and (maybe) DJs. In order to challenge these assumptions he has had to find cultural capital elsewhere.

Eminem's success can in part be attributed to his utilization of class discourse. He inhabits a 'white trash' identity – 'I'm a piece of white trash / I say it proudly' (Eminem, in *8 Mile*, dir. Hanson 2002) – which is one originally invoked by African-Americans (Taylor 2005, 342).⁷ In citing such a phrase Eminem simultaneously aligns himself in respect to class with the contemporary poor in America in which black Americans are largely situated, and racially with black history, which in his apparent understanding is grounded in class struggle. The legitimacy of his claim is grounded in the proliferation of white Americans who have become increasingly disenfranchised by capitalism throughout the past three decades. Eminem can be associated with most of the issues described as central to the politics of Kitwana's 'hip-hop generation'. His privileging class over race in the construction of his claim to cultural authenticity suggests that America's shifting socio-economic structure provides points of identification with political positions originally and explicitly organized around blackness. He constructs his Other as mainstream America, the middle class, and equates his own oppression with that experienced by poor blacks while concurrently establishing his distance from them. Describing himself as 'white trash' allows two simultaneous and contradictory identifications: with whiteness, in terms of skin colour ('trash' that is racially white), and against whiteness, as the discarded poor of mainstream white culture (the 'trash' of whiteness). In his earlier albums, where constructing his hip-hop authenticity was a high priority, Eminem focuses on class over race as the primary determining feature of his marginal identity, utilizing hip-hop as a means to express his frustration with his socio-economic circumstances. Interestingly, his later albums, the product of an individual who has obviously benefited from the wealth of capitalism, take a more outwardly focused political tone.

Eminem's representations where he invokes both his whiteness and his lower-working-class identity, situated within the dominant discourses regarding race and class, implicitly suggest that because of the former he does not belong in the latter. As is evident in the conclusion of the largely autobiographical film *8 Mile* (dir. Hanson 2002) in which he stars, Eminem's audience is encouraged to support the emergence of this individual from Detroit's poverty. Superficially this is satisfactory; however, support for Eminem (as B-Rabbit) comes at the expense of blacks in similar economic circumstances and in this way the narrative acts to reinforce racial assumptions about the attachment of poverty to blackness. Similarly, Eminem's employment of misogyny and homophobia, or less explicitly offensive, his equating blackness with rebellion and transgression, are defended and attributed to the discursive space of hip-hop. In other words, there are black precedents for his behaviour.

In his track 'White America', Eminem rhymes, 'So now I'm catchin' the flack from these activists, when they raggin' / Actin like I'm the first rapper to smack a bitch or say faggot / Shit' (2003, 2). He posits himself as the ambassador for (economically disenfranchised) white America, protesting against (the politically powerful, policy-making) white America. In doing so, blackness becomes invisible; black oppression is hidden behind class oppression. He rhymes 'Helped [his black producer Dr Dre] get back to the top / Every fan black that I got, Was probably his / In exchange for every white fan that he's got / Like damn we just swapped, Sitting back looking at shit, wow. / I'm like my skin, is it starting to work to my benefit now?' (2003, 2). His lyrics articulate the racism he claims to have experienced as a white man within hip-hop, establishing a narrative in which both a black and white man mutually benefit from his (the white man's) emergence through hip-hop. Though he relies on the acknowledgement of his symbolic blackness from an authentic (black) participant in hip-hop, it takes a white man to bring hip-hop to the world, to bring hip-hop 'to suburban kids... and they connected with me too because I looked like them' (Eminem 2003, 2).

In this way, Eminem constructs a performance of cultural hybridity utilizing mimicry, establishing a marginal identity based on his class position and his (white) skin colour.

His rhetorical question, 'I'm like my skin, is it starting to work to my benefit now?', perhaps highlights the complicated reality of contemporary American racism, but more likely demonstrates Eminem's utilization of protest as a hip-hop tradition, in this case against racism, in his quest for cultural authenticity. Likening the discrimination he claims he experienced as a white performer in an industry of mostly black MCs to that experienced by the colonized on a daily basis, he re-colonizes the racial experience of blacks, and the mainstream hip-hop community. This superficial 'whitewashing' of the racial histories inherent in hip-hop performance, privileging class as a path to the marginal, demonstrates one means through which hip-hop has been disseminated beyond black America. This is not to undermine the many original appropriations of hip-hop within the United States and internationally, but rather to pay attention to the fact that the still dominant discourses of US hip-hop can be mobilized in terms of either race *or* class.

Through Eminem's performance we witness the privilege of the white man at play. Taylor notes: 'He can be white when it suits him and not-white when it suits him . . . Only whites have the privilege of temporarily renouncing their generic identity and declaring themselves non-raced' (2005, 354). While Eminem is able to exploit the historical development of racially specific identities for financial gain, he denies responsibility for their development when they are criticized, citing historical precedents for such behaviour. The success of his performance, however, is fundamentally underpinned by his legitimate claim to marginality as a member of an expanding white lower class. As an authentic(ated) rapper, Eminem is a figure enabled by shifting configurations of class and race, where these categories are no longer easily mapped onto one another as an effect of shared advantages and disadvantages relating to late capitalism, but which continue to exist alongside histories and their associated discourses in which lower class and blackness were synonymous.

Conclusion

Hip-hop has emerged as a culture based on the contradictory discourses of racial authenticity and inclusiveness to all respectful participants, with roots in the harsh realities of everyday poverty and in efforts at political coalition building. As a culture structured around its texts, whose meanings and significations are multiple, it is important to recognize that beneath the umbrella of mainstream US hip-hop there are significant tensions. Even where a collective identity is invoked, the flattening of the heterogeneous community represented by privileging certain identities is, of course, constantly contested through the production of texts encoded with alternative meanings. Hip-hop culture's global expansion has relied partly on its white audience's recognition of the heterogeneous elements that structure dominant hip-hop representations, providing possible interventions into hip-hop culture through consumption but also through protest traditions and through class discourses. White participation in hip-hop, in and outside of the United States, should thus not be dismissed as the imitation of black culture, nor as merely part of a larger process of Americanization. To do so reduces both cultural forms to caricature. That being said, I do not believe that through producing and engaging with hip-hop's cultural texts, white participants of whatever class or political leaning necessarily establish a meaningful symbolic identification with black subjectivities. There will always be incommensurable experiential differences. My contention here is that the discursive constructions (and their material consequences) that have been the foundations of Afrocentrism, African-American politics and hip-hop (such as the association between masculinity and class), as well as the shifting configuration of race and class in post-industrial America, have provided entry points for white participants to perform dominant hip-hop identities with greater cultural authenticity.

Bhabha's mimicry and Fanon's conception of the colonial binary and analysis of Afrocentrism allow us to effectively consider the genesis and constant re-articulations of dominant hip-hop identities. They allow us to consider how power has been attributed to them and how they have informed representations at the forefront of Western popular cultures. I argue that mimicry is a useful concept for analysing the strategies used by rappers to extend a culture, out of racist history, into pro-black music, and more recently into whiteness. Most definitely, hip-hop has raised awareness about the difficult socio-economic situations many African-Americans exist within, for both those inside and outside of the communities in focus. Whether this has had positive political effects aside from consciousness-raising and whether the hip-hop texts that hold these messages have been decoded in a desirable way is outside the scope of this paper. Eminem as a phenomenon is one example of hip-hop's dissemination throughout white communities, concurrently engaging with blackness in a struggle based on a shared ethnicity, and continuing the historical processes of colonization by reproducing and maintaining distinct Others. His involvement has meant that other hip-hop performers now have increased access to the benefits of extended financial markets, but must work increasingly hard to police expanding borders and maintain a recognizable culture. The lack of similar white performers following Eminem's success suggests that, for the time being, authenticity in mainstream hip-hop, particularly in the field of rapping, remains strongly associated with traditional representations and identities grounded in blackness.

Notes

1. Bakari Kitwana emphasizes hip-hop culture's relationship with blackness, where he states: 'Hip-hop is a subculture of Black youth culture. Those who suggest it isn't are confused, misled, trying to appropriate Black youth culture or too culturally arrogant to realise that they are appropriating' (2005, 126). While Kitwana's polemic inadequately recognizes hip-hop's expansion, incorporation and redeployment within and by non-black and non-youth cultures, his comments demonstrate an investment in the connection between blackness and cultural authenticity shared by many writers and cultural practitioners alike, wary of hip-hop's commercial exploitation. In this paper I primarily use the term 'black', as opposed to 'African-American' or any other synonym in an attempt to acknowledge US hip-hop's roots within African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures. I am, of course, aware of hip-hop's developments outside of the United States, however my focus here, while recognizing the ethnic diversity of US hip-hop also, is largely limited to dominant representations within mainstream US hip-hop, considering the symbolic capital of blackness.
2. I take the term 'the hip-hop generation' from Bakari Kitwana (2002), which he designates as 'the generation of young Blacks born between 1965 and 1984' (xxii). Kitwana establishes these historical brackets as part of his attempt to provide a basis for strengthening collective political identifications and differentiating the contemporary political milieu from the civil rights and black power eras. His concept is useful as a means to locate the development of hip-hop's cultural representations throughout the late 1980s and 1990s within a particular political milieu, and to suggest a dialectical relationship between political policy and cultural representations (though in mainstream US hip-hop this has rarely been as significant as in, for example, the Black Arts movement). While recognizing that Kitwana's concept (at times) uncritically incorporates a notion of strategically essentialized blackness and thus homogenizes complex racial, political and cultural tensions, both his work regarding political coalition building (see Kitwana 2005) and my considerations regarding 'the hip-hop generation's' multiple political concerns should demonstrate that it is not as fixed a category in reality as he sometimes suggests, and can thus be cautiously employed to signify a cohort of largely black youth within post-industrial America, which is, of course, heterogeneous, especially along class and gender lines.
3. Where I speak of 'political rap informed by Afrocentrism' I have, of course, conflated rappers identified (often contentiously) as 'political rappers', 'conscious rappers', and 'nation-conscious rappers'. Although their interests and styles may differ (consider Public Enemy versus Talib Kweli versus X-Clan), they share multiple concerns, rapping about topics such as ancestry, racial history,

inclusiveness, political participation, contemporary public policy, feminism, mass media, and hip-hop as a movement, as opposed to a means. My conflation is part of an attempt to signify the general differences between this archetypal performance (as outward looking, 'inclusive' and collective) and that of the gangsta (as focused on the everyday and the individual).

4. 'Afro Connections at a Hi 5 (in the eyes of the Hoodlum)' is an excellent example of De La Soul's earlier style and political focus, emphasizing positive representations and undermining the gangsta performance. The opening dialogue states: 'This is dedicated to all those hard-core acts, you know those brothers we used to look up to that fell the fuck off. And now they doin' all that r&b shit. You mean rhythm and blues? No. Rap and bullshit!' The two MCs parody dominant gangsta performances, particularly the focus on drugs, macho posturing, and consumption. They ironically rhyme (in a slow gangsta style), 'So I puff a blunt / I don't front / I get spliff / get a stiff / and I go hump a stunt / like a pimp pro . . . Now I hold my crotch / cause I'm top-notch / I run amok, like sasquatch / and I like to eat la crab / I've got five beepers, ya scab' (De La Soul 1991, 13).
5. In 'Tennessee', Speech rhymes 'Walk the roads my forefathers walked / climbed the trees my forefathers hung from / asked those trees for all their wisdom / they tell me that my ears are so young.' In these rhymes, the political rapper's (somewhat nostalgic) emphasis on history and knowledge is evident. Speech continues: 'Now I see the importance of history / while my people be in the mess that they be / many journeys to freedom made in vain / my brothers on the corner playing ghetto games / I ask you Lord why you enlighten me / without the enlightenment of all my folks / He said cause I set myself on a quest / for truth, and he was there to quench my thirst / but I am still thirsty.' He invokes his position as the learned, enlightened rapper, who quests for knowledge, not at odds with, but on behalf of, his people. Emphasis on history, and the support of God are central to his values; however, it is easy to see how these are not relevant to the lives of those 'brothers on the corner playing ghetto games' (Arrested Development 1992, 13).
6. In his track 'What More Can I Say?' Jay-Z rhymes 'Never been a nigga this good for this long / this hood, or this pop, this hot, or this strong . . . I'm in, new sneakers / deuce seaters, few divas / what more can I tell you . . . Look what I embody / a soul of a hustler, I really ran the street.' These rhymes demonstrate Jay-Z's desire to perform as the successful gangsta, who has moved out of the 'hood but seeks the continuation of his authentic identity through his spatialized history. He plays the white man's game, buying into the individualism and consumption of late capitalism, but still appoints himself 'New-York's ambassador' (Jay-Z 2003, 2).
7. For a detailed investigation into how the term 'white trash' was applied in relation to whites in the United States from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century see Matt Wray's *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (2006).

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