Elvis Has Left the Building, or Has He?
By Pauwke Berkers and Julian Schaap

The relationship between ethno-racial groups and music genres plays an important but complex role in popular music. Pop music can function as a bridge between mainstream society and ethnic, or immigrant communities. Music fosters a sense of togetherness; binding individuals who seemingly have little in common with one another, despite a difference in musical taste. Moreover, it can cultivate mutual understanding and repair dominant stereotypes.

Music literally brings people together, but is it really all peace, love and understanding? Unfortunately not. Popular music can also create a boundary between mainstream society and ethnic communities. On top of that, it can be used as a marker of one's ethnic identity. Music genres like Rap and Rock music do not simply reflect ethno-racial groups; they have been actively structured along racial divisions as black and white respectively (Lhamon Jr., 1998; Mutsaers, 1989; Rose, 1994; Wermuth, 2002).

Both genres have complex and highly debated genealogies that fuse the musical traditions of various ethno-racial groups. Yet ever since the predominantly black Rock'n'Roll genre was appropriated by white artists and audiences, known as the "Elvis Effect" (Taylor, 1997), few non-white artists have managed to infiltrate this whitewashed music genre. Furthermore, the threat of a second Elvis Effect – white artists appropriating Rap music – has arguably led to a racial obligation for black artists to participate in Rap instead of 'white' Rock music (Ramírez-Sánchez, 2008). Such boundary work – both by whites and non-whites – is a likely explanation of the whiteness of many Pop and Rock festivals, in terms of both the line up and the audience.

Whiteness and Blackness

So what does whiteness exactly entail within the context of Western societies? Whiteness is defined as a location of structural advantage, which is regularly understood as white privilege, resulting from hundreds of years of colonialism, imperialism and consequently of white economic, political, social and cultural domination. Because white people have never been part of a minority, and accordingly have never found themselves in a position of being discriminated against they're often unaware, or even choose to ignore their own privilege. Furthermore, whiteness offers a set of classed and gendered cultural practices that, as a result of being socially dominant, are less visible in everyday interaction than those of ethno-racial others. As such, whiteness usually remains a 'hidden ethnicity' (Doane, 1997).

Blackness is often considered to be the opposite of whiteness, within Western societies in general and within popular music in particular. While white people are unified by their advantaged structural position in society; black people and other non-white people share a history of being dominated. Moreover, white people are part of a hidden ethno-racial identity; they oftentimes argue they are cultureless. Non-white people are immediately observed as being non-white and as a result attributed as such. This process of marking (or 'flagging') happens both between ethno-racial groups (e.g., white people marking black people) and in ethno-racial groups (e.g., black people marking other black people) (Hughey, 2012). Recently, whiteness scholars have tried to make visible the processes that make whiteness appear natural and unmarked, while being the result of active racialisation.

Why Rock is White and Rap is Black

So how did Rock music become aligned with whiteness? American record companies have been key agents in the racialisation of music genres, by targeting segmented markets rather than the generalmarket (Garofalo, 2002).

In the 1950s, record companies owned by white patrons appropriated Rhythm and Blues music from the black community and sold it as Rock music to a white audience. Sam Phillips - who discovered and subsequently signed Elvis Presley - is famous for saying: "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars." This quote shows the importance of race in the marketing of music since the early days of Rock'n'Roll.

However, little has changed since then. Contemporary record companies are also hesitant to sign black Rock artists, since "black Rock won't sell to whites because it's black, and it won't sell to blacks because it's Rock," (Mahon, 2004: 68).

As record companies apparently perceive black Rock as a commercial risk which they are not willing to take, several African American Rock artists like Vernon Reid (*Living Colour*) have founded the Black Rock Coalition. The purpose of this coalition isn't only to create "an atmosphere conducive to the maximum development, exposure and acceptance of Black alternative music," but also to re-appropriate Rock as black music: "Rock'n'Roll, like practically every form of popular music across the globe, is Black music and we are its heirs," (blackrockcoalition.org).

In contrast to Rock, Rap music is marketed as black music, because white America historically has a fascination and even fetishises black cultural forms. However, Rap music – which arose primarily from poor black communities in urban areas of the United States – is narrowly defined within the music industry. For example, one contemporary rap artists was told by a major record label: "We like what you're doing, but we want you to say more stuff about bitches and hoes. We want you to talk more about being from Watts, and being a gangbanger," (Lee, 2013). As a result, Rap is actively aligned with blackness, but the music industry markets it in terms of the stereotypical urban black male.

Ethno-Racial Communities and Double Marginalisation

Until now we've mainly discussed the role of the music industry in aligning ethno-racial groups with specific music genres. Through decades of socialisation, ethno-racial communities have (un)consciously provided guidelines as to which kind of musical taste establishes 'true' membership of that particular group (Hall, 1993). Eschewing one's 'own' music can make a person 'less' of a member of one's group (Roy, 2010). Ethno-racial boundaries in Rock music are dialectically shaped by the racialised expectations of different ethno-racial groups, both inside and outside of Rock music. In other words, non-white persons might risk double marginalisation when participating in Rock music. While white people want to know why they aren't rapping; fellow non-white people accuse them of being an Uncle Tom for enjoying the wrong kind of music (Pressler, 2007).

In the words of James Spooner, founder of Afro-Punk: "ARGGGGGG!!!!!! Black or Punk, Punk or black. I couldn't get away. It would be years before I found a way to properly answer the damn question," (Duncombe and Tremblay, 2011:XV). Artists will always find themselves between (a) Rock and a hard place.

To avoid marginalisation, authenticity is the key. Authenticity is a claim made by someone about someone or something else, which is either accepted or rejected by relevant others (Peterson, 2005: 1086). Within Rap music, authenticity is almost a given for black people, as it's considered the appropriate music genre for their ethno-racial group (Harrison, 2008). As white rappers do not possess such "colour capital" – physique, voice, talk and so on – their authenticity claims are more likely to be rejected, being evaluated as "acting" instead of "being" black (Hughey, 2012). For a white guy participating in Rap music, this means he has to compensate – yet not overcompensate – his lack of colour capital in different ways. For example, showing his knowledge of Hip Hop culture and stressing his white 'ghetto' background. He might be pretty fly, but he remains a white guy.

Possibly, whiteness – even though being a hidden ethnicity – signals colour capital in Rock music as well. In a review of Jay-Z headlining Glastonbury, the Guardian (MacInnes, 2008) wrote: "And to top it all, he was backed by a great band, who were all black and freaked out in that way that, you know, white rockers usually do."

This suggests that whiteness is indeed the standard within Rock music. On the one hand, blackness might still be associated with coolness and symbolic marginality. The history of Rock music is also a history of white outsiders and their identification with ethno-racial others, ranging from MC5's solidarity with the Black Panthers, to Patti Smith's attempt to reframe the term Nigger into a badge of honour for all societal outcasts (Duncombe and Tremblay, 2011). On the other hand, its contemporary connotation with commercialism ("bling") might contradict Rock authenticity. Rock purists also dismiss Rap music as a digital genre of producers who cannot properly read music (Caramanica, 2004). Finally, non-white artists who are actually successful within Rock music are likely to be type-casted by their ethno-racial background. For example, although Lenny Kravitz probably is flattered when being labelled the 'new

Jimi Hendrix'; parallels between the two artists are possibly primarily based on their shared ethno-racial background, rather than their shared exceptional skills on guitar.

Has the King Left the Building?

In recent years, the alignment of blackness and Rap, as well as whiteness and Rock music, seems to be melting. White Rap artists have become highly successful since the end of the 1990s: Eminem in particular. Within black communities however, this development has resulted in mixed reactions, ranging from outright rejection to suspicion (Harrison, 2008). Another thing to consider is the start of the Afro-Punk movement – "the other Black experience" (www.afropunk.com) – and the rise of black Rock artists in general. This suggests a weakening alignment between whiteness and Rock as well (Fields, 2010). Yet, the apparent need for a separate festival for black Rock performers and fans suggests we need to tear down several more fences before we can cross the bridges which are currently under construction.

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