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ELVIS AND EMINEM: THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF AMERICAN MIDDLE-CLASS ASSIMILATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC

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In a spirit almost epitomizing that of the imperial British Empire, middle America has spent the better part of the past century assimilating its pop culture from the very demographics it has at times considered to be backwards or even savage. Rhythm 'n Blues, Rock'n'roll, and ultimately, Hip-Hop and Rap have formed cornerstones of middle-American musical culture, but despite their greatest representations being claimed by the White community, they were fundamentally assimilated from African-American roots.[1] While the exact motives for such a phenomenon leave a great deal of room for broad speculation, the consequences and implications of the middle-American assimilation of African-American music are much more definitive.

This adaptation of Black ethnic musical styles has formed a double-edged sword. On one front, the characteristics and aura of their art has been stripped of its origins and meaning it was originally imbued with, diminishing and retarding its significance. On the other hand, middle-class listeners neither embraced nor rebuked these musical styles on the merit of their art. Rather, proponents sought the music as part of a greater fetishization of Black culture and opponents fought it simply because it was

[1] "Gold and Platinum," The Recording Industry Association of America, November, 2022; "Greatest of All Time – Artists," Billboard, November, 2022; "Greatest of All Time – Hot 100 Artists," Billboard, November, 2022; "Greatest of All Time – Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums," Billboard, November, 2022; "Greatest of All Time – Top R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," Billboard, November, 2022. Even as of the writing of this essay, assimilated ethnic musical renditions by white artists rank higher than the actual ethnic artists that inspired them. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) ranks Elvis Presley and Eminem as numbers three and nineteen amongst the best-selling artists of all time, with both grossly outranking any other artist in their respective genre. Elvis ranks number thirteen in Billboard's "Greatest Artists of All Time," higher than any other R'n'R artist of his era and second only to one other white artist (The Rolling Stones); similarly, Eminem ranks twenty-two, higher than any other pre-twenty-first-century rapper. Amongst "Hot 100" artists, Elvis sits at number four, and Eminem holds four total albums in "Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums," greater than any other artist in the category.

Black.[2] Together, the process ultimately robs the Black community of the significance of the art form and its origins, superimposes a mockery of its cultural roots onto the assimilated White works, and often causes a cultural backlash and panic to contain the art from influencing middle-America and the "negative influence" of the Black community from which it stemmed.[3]

The high-class moral stiffness often associated with the American middle-class community in the mid-twentieth century created a vacuum of cultural oppression. This in turn bred a corresponding tendency for private indiscretions to satiate the nation's suppressed desires. But while "depraved" activities, such as the actual nature of America's sexual promiscuity remained behind closed doors for many, sensual rock'n'roll music became a gateway through which the younger generations could show a glimpse of their true private dispositions to the public eye.[4] Yet, the Black art was simply unpalatable for the white picket-fence communities to which it appealed, at least in its natural form. Elvis Presley and similar artists changed everything. Most certainly an exceptional musician and entertainer, Elvis' greatest asset in his rapid ascension to national fame was not his performing talents, but rather that he offered a White medium by which to enjoy Black music.[5] The comparative sexually explicit nature of his work certainly still drew a great deal of resistance and criticism, but importantly it retained the deviation from norms that gave it its

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[2] Greg Tate, "Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," in *Everything But The Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate, (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 2-4.

[3] D. Marvin Jones, *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 90-92.

[4] Beth Bailey, "Sexual Revolution(s)," *In The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 236-237; Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 156.

[5] Big Mama Thornton, "Hound Dog," by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, recorded August 13, 1952, Single, Radio Recorders Annex, Vinyl; Elvis Presley, Hound Dog, by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, recorded July 13, 1956, single, RCA Victor, Vinyl.

appeal and shirked the racial connotations that plagued its predecessors.[6]

A notable example of the disparity in commercial success and public digestion of rock'n'roll when produced by Black versus White artists can be seen with the different renditions of Hound Dog. Originally written and recorded in 1952 by Big Mama Thornton – notably with sensual lyrics written by White songwriters – Hound Dog proved to be her magnum opus, with substantial sales amongst the Black community.[7] The lyrics and delivery were notably impassioned. Although sexually explicit (by the deliberate design of the writers), her rendition placed a greater emphasis on the emotive nature of the R&B style and the imbued themes of betrayal and resentment.[8] Elvis' rendition delivered in 1956 took a wildly different stylistic approach. With greatly simplified lyrics, exceptionally poor mastering, and an almost unitary focus on the sexual nature and the accompanying pelvic performance rendered by Elvis for live audiences, the original deeper meaning was entirely lost. In short, Elvis had stripped the intended character and core content of the ethnic art form and replaced it with a kitschy idealization of Black culture and sexual freedom to jig out on television.[9] Not only did this process trivialize the Black art form, but it also assimilated the credit for the work itself into the White community and made a belittling mockery of the Black community from which the work ultimately represented. Performance differences aside, unlike Thornton's, his rendition was accepted by White audiences and sold eight times

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[6] Paul Linden, "Riding the Solar Wind: AM Radio, the Skywave Effect, and the Mainstreaming of Rock & Roll," MEIEA Journal 21, no. 1 (2021): 68-69, https://meiea.wildapricot.org/Journal/Vol21/Linden (accessed November 30, 2022).

[7] James M. Salem, *The Late Great Johnny Ace and the Transition from R&B to Rock 'n' Roll* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 82-83.

[8] Big Mama Thornton, "Hound Dog."

[9] Presley, Elvis, "Hound Dog," performed by Elvis Presley on The Ed Sullivan Show (September 9, 1956; Broadway, NY: CBS Productions, 1956), Black-and-white monaural television broadcast, https://youtu.be/Lrn8nTMcv_k (accessed November 30, 2022).

the copies of its prototype (500,000 vs 4 million).[10] America knew what it wanted – it just needed the right deliveryman.

The 1950's were not the only period in which Black music was acclimatized to middle-class ears by a relatable figure. The advent of Hip-Hop – and even more so, rap – in the mid-to-late eighties drew an even more fearful response from middle-class listeners than rock'n'roll had in decades prior; yet the art form had an equally irresistible allure.[11] This time, however, not only would rap be adapted to less open-minded audiences by middle-American artists, but its authentic renditions would be fetishized by a sizable audience.[12] The great majority of early hip-hop took the form of gangsta rap, a lyrical phenomenon that somewhat mirrored the jubilees or sorrows of slave working songs in that they confronted and lamented the harsh conditions imposed by life in the projects.[13] Groups such as N.W.A. and Public Enemy played a definitive role in the construction of the genre and built an artistic backbone on themes of real violence, and the glorification of sex, money, drugs, and credibility – assets that middle-America would have considered morally reprehensible.[14] But to a sizable

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[10] Elvis Presley, Hound Dog; "Hound Dog/Don't Be Cruel," The Recording Industry Association of America, November, 2022, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=hound+dog (accessed November 30, 2022); Salem, The Late Great Johnny Ace and the Transition from R&B to Rock 'n' Roll, 82-83.

[11] D. Marvin Jones, *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 90-92.

[12] Jones, *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet,* 91; Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 161-163, 179-180. Today, about eighty percent of hip-hop listeners are white. While this count is heavily influenced by the population disparity between the Black and White communities in America, it demonstrates that a substantial portion of the population has adopted the ethnic art form.

[13] Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 172-174; Scott Wilson, *Great Satan's Rage: American Negativity and Rap/Metal in the Age of Supercapitalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 68-70.

[14] Jones, *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet*, 173-174; N.W.A., "Fuck tha Police," by Ice Cube, MC Ren, The D.O.C., Dr. Dre, and DJ Yella, recorded 1988, Single,

population of white-collar Americans, vocal threats and disregard for civil authority and the idealization of violence was not a cause for fear, but rather the call of an idyllic fantasy.[15]

Like Elvis, the entrance of the middle-American rapper not only trivialized the art but also carried its moral profanity to a new extreme. Eminem – Marshal Mathers, a poor White from Detroit – found his audience in catering less to the harsh realities of impoverished life like his ethnic counterparts at the time, but to an alter-ego fantasy of morbid crime and a mutated representation of the genre's roots.[16] Raised in a community of ninety-percent ethnic minorities, Mathers was unique at the time for not only being imbued with the authenticity of Blackness, but also the character, relatability, and look of working-class America, a demographic more easily associated with by his generally middle-class White listeners.[17] His relationship with Dr. Dre, an iconic member of N.W.A., played a role of central importance as he extended Eminem a degree of credibility, a ghetto pass of sorts, that lent the budding artist the authenticity he needed to deliver a rendition of hip-hop middle- America wanted to hear.[18]

In his first generally accepted album, the Slim Shady EP, Eminem not only utilized this platform and assumed the role of a

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Ruthless, Vinyl; Public Enemy, 911 Is a Joke, by Flavor Flav, Keith Shocklee, Eri Sadler, recorded 1989, Single, Def Jam, Vinyl.

[15] "Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," 8-10.

[16] EMINEM, "Just the Two of Us," by Marshal Mathers and DJ Head, recorded 1997, track 6 on Slim Shady EP, Web Entertainment, multiple formats. Notable amongst his initial works, Just the Two of Us was written deliberately with the intention of shock value and an aura of complete disregard for moral standards. The work retained the components of violence and anger that defined the genre in its period, but completely eliminated the original justifications for said violence, such as police brutality and socioeconomic inequity.

[17] Carl Hancock Rux, "Eminem: The New White Negro," in *Everything But The Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 20-22.

[18] Todd Boyd, "From Elvis to Eminem," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics*, *Culture, and Society* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 40. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2001.12098160 (accessed December 1, 2022).

"gangsta," but created a middle-class fantasy out of a ghetto reality, consistently "outdoing" the morbidity of content released by his Black counterparts in an almost sardonic fashion. Furthermore, like Elvis, he stripped the original justifications for such vehemence, such as police brutality, instead leaving a void characterized by violence without cause and inhumanity to be superimposed on the ghetto community from which it stemmed.[19] This process effectively achieved the opposite aims of semi-activist groups such as N.W.A. and repainted rap in the public eye not as a message of discontent (albeit a poorly received one at the time) but rather as an art of insanity and indiscriminate crime. For example, instead of monologuing that, "takin' out a cop or two…takin' out a police would make [his] day," Eminem's Slim Shady, "[w]ent to gym in 8th grade, raped the women's swim team," drowned his girlfriend with his toddler daughter, made, "the world suck [his] dick without a condom on," all in addition to, "[leaving] the keys in the van, with a gat in each hand, [going] up in Eastland and [shooting] a policeman."[20] Two years later, with the release of The Slim Shady LP, Eminem doubled down on the immoral extremism of his work, to great commercial success.[21] In the additional tracks, Slim Shady, "[couldn't] figure out which Spice Girl [he wanted] to impregnate," "[g]ot pissed and ripped Pamela Lee's tits off," "[s]tapled [his teacher's] nuts to a stack of papers," encouraged faux listers to drug and rape a minor and kill a cheating partner, and "ripped [Hillary Clinton's] fucking tonsils

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[19] Rux, "Eminem: The New White Negro," 22-24.

[20] EMINEM, "If I Had," by Marshal Mathers and DJ Rec, recorded 1997, track 6 on Slim Shady EP, Web Entertainment, multiple formats; EMINEM, Just Don't Give a Fuck, by Marshal Mathers, Jeff Bass, and Mark Bass, recorded 1997, track 6 on Slim Shady EP, Web Entertainment, multiple formats; EMINEM, Just the Two of Us; EMINEM, Murder, Murder, by Marshal Mathers and DJ Rec, recorded 1997, track 6 on Slim Shady EP, Web Entertainment, multiple formats; N.W.A., Fuck tha Police.

[21] "The Slim Shady LP," The Recording Industry Association of America, November, 2022, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=the+slim+shady+lp (accessed December 1, 2022).

out and fed her sherbet."[22] Yet despite the significant backlash his music did receive from the conservative community – generally based around the principle that "hood music" and "degeneracy" was permeating the middle-American community – the album found commercial success that would not have been possible under a Black artist; within six months of release, the LP made 3x Multi-Platinum and 4x Multi-Platinum a year thereafter.[23]

In such, Eminem had pioneered and normalized a phenomenon even more significant than that of Elvis: gangsta appropriation and the wigga.[24] African-American gangsta culture was still morally backwards and its "manifestations" remained criminal and terrifying to the American public eye; however, to a sizable population, acting gangsta was exciting and "authentic." For some youth, dressing Black and saying the n-word in school would grow to provide a sense of identity and independence similar to the social and sexual freedom that Elvis brought to teenagers in his own time, much to the chagrin of cultural conservatives (and often the Black community itself).[25] However, in doing so, Eminem and his counterparts had made a trend out of

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[22] EMINEM, "Guilty Conscience," by Marshal Mathers, Andre Young, and Dr. Dre, recorded 1998, track 3 on Slim Shady LP, Interscope, Multiple Formats; EMINEM, My Name Is, by Marshal Mathers and DJ Rec, recorded 1998, track 2 on Slim Shady LP, Interscope, Multiple Formats; EMINEM, Role Model, by Marshal Mathers, Andre Young, Melvin Bradford, Mel-Man, and Dr. Dre, recorded 1998, track 9 on Slim Shady LP, Interscope, Multiple Formats.

[23] Jones, Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet, 90-92; "The Slim Shady LP," The Recording Industry Association of America, November, 2022, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default- award&se=the+slim+shady+lp (accessed December 1, 2022).

[24] Tate, "Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," 8, 10.

[25] Rux, "Eminem: The New White Negro," 25, 27-28, 30; Jones, *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet*, 93-94; Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History*, 155-157; Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, 162-163; Scott Wilson, *Great Satan's Rage: American Negativity and Rap/Metal in the Age of Supercapitalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 80-81, 87, 178-180.

a culture and stripped its real, hard truths and origins to supplant with an empty vilified shell.

Appropriation is not a new practice. In fact, every art form, to some degree, is appropriated and erected with the influence of those that preceded it; however, with respect to culture, its impacts are highly researched, but seldom publicly explored and truly embraced. The assimilation and recharacterization – particularly the latter – of African-American musical styles and the aura that surrounds them has done very real damage to the Black community, even today. When Elvis simplified Black music to a mere sexual shell, it portrayed the Black community as sexually brutish, a position not lost on, nor left uncapitalized by opponents of Black equality.[26] For example, when he took to the stage on The Ed Sullivan Show in September 1956, his pelvic motion was so substantial that it was ultimately censored.[27] The image instilled – especially on the older population that was already lukewarm in their appreciation of Elvis and rock'n'roll as a whole – did not do any favors to the Black community that was closely correlated with his work.[28]

Similarly, when Eminem stripped the reason and direction from the violence of rap, he fundamentally changed the public perception of the hip-hop community and the demographic they represented. Simply put, Eminem built a surreal image of the gangsta, one that to the unacquainted suburbanite began to supplant their notion of what the Black community actually looked like.[29] Furthermore, when Eminem sold records and conservatives tried to stop him, the Black community got caught in the crossfire. Eminem himself was hard to stick (the middle-American

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[26] Mike Daley. "'Why Do Whites Sing Black?': The Blues, Whiteness, and Early Histories of Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 2 (June 2003): 165. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/why-do-whites-sing-black-blues-whiteness-early/docview/208069475/se-2 (accessed December 1, 2022).
[27] Beth Bailey, "Sexual Revolution(s)," 235.
[28] TIME Writers, "Radio: The Week in Review," TIME, September 24, 1956, 2, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,867139-1,00.html (accessed December 1, 2022).
[29] Rux, "Eminem: The New White Negro," 22-23.

community identified enough with him that he was not considered a substantial threat), but the anti-rap sentiment surrounding the shock value he brought to the genre was an easy cover for racial prejudice. Studies conducted at the turn of the century showed significant correlation between anti-rap sentiment and racial prejudice for white Americans.[30] Furthermore, research also showed that despite the great deal of fear of the indoctrination of young, middle-class Americans with the hostile, violent values of hip-hop, there was little correlation between the consumption of violent, misogynistic hip-hop and changes in moral values and behavior. This pattern suggests that actions taken against hip-hop and the hip-hop community were truly based upon racial bias, not a legitimate moral crisis.[31] While the exact scope of the repercussions of this sentiment are beyond the scope of this essay, its impact is both probable and significant.

Unfortunately, there is little end in sight for middle-American appropriation of ethnic music; however, acknowledgement of the root cause of appropriation is possible. Elvis – and other appropriating actors of the past – remain frozen in their accreditation for their art. As recently as 2022, a Warner Bros biopic of Elvis' career construed and emphasized a period of cultural integration with an African-American community which gave Elvis the authenticity that made his music special.[32] However, newer artists have become more keen to the circumstances that surround their popularity. In 2000, on The Marshall Mathers LP,

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[30] Mark Brandt, Christine Reyna, and G. Tendayi Viki, "Blame It on Hip-Hop: Anti-Rap Attitudes as a Proxy for Prejudice," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 12, no. 3 (2009): 365-367. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1368430209102848 (accessed December 1, 2022).

[31] William A. Boettcher III and Michael D. Cobb, "Ambivalent Sexism and Misogynistic Rap Music: Does Exposure to Eminem Increase Sexism," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 12 (2007): 3036- 3037, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2007.00292.x (accessed December 1, 2022); Jones, Fear of a Hip- Hop Planet, 90-92.

[32] "Elvis Childhood Flashback," Elvis, directed by Baz Luhrmann (2022; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros Pictures, 2022), Film.

Eminem recognized: “And I am whatever you say I am. If I wasn’t, then why would you say I am? In the paper, the news, every day I am… ‘Cause I am whatever you say I am.”[33]

In prose, he outlined possibly the most important characteristic of American cultural stereotypes. The phenomenon of appropriation is not the fault of the artist; neither Elvis nor Eminem stole an art form, nor did they deliberately degrade the image and standing of the community from where their genre stemmed. Rather, the phenomena of appropriation stems from the American people themselves. Music, stereotypes, and bias are just blank slates. They become whatever we say they are.

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[33] EMINEM, “The Way I Am,” by Marshal Mathers, recorded 2000, track 7 on The Marshall Mathers LP, Interscope, Multiple Formats.