Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop

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This article examines how white youths culturally appropriate hip-hop by adhering to the demands of color-blind ideology. Using ethnographic methods and interviews of members in a local hip-hop scene, I argue that color-blind ideology provides whites with the discursive resources to justify their presence in the scene, and more important, to appropriate hip-hop by removing the racially coded meanings embedded in the music and replacing them with color-blind ones. This research contributes to the existing scholarship on racial ideology by analyzing how it is put into action by individuals in a specific local context in which race is salient. Furthermore, it extends our understanding of how color-blind ideology operates in practice, enabling whites with the discursive resources and racial power to culturally appropriate hip-hop, however unintentionally, for their own purposes.

Keywords: *color-blindness; hip-hop; whiteness; cultural appropriation; ideology*

Ideology is essential for reproducing the racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Emerging out of the civil rights movement and its backlash, color-blind ideology—the assertion of essential sameness between racial and ethnic groups despite unequal social locations and distinctive histories—is the dominant racial ideology in America (Frankenberg 1993). Color-blindness works as an ideology by obscuring the institutional arrangements reproducing structural inequalities and does so in a way that justifies and defends the racial status quo. Furthermore, it is a claim about

American society in general as much as it is a personal claim individuals make about themselves. This research builds on existing scholarship on racial ideology by analyzing how white youths practice color-blind ideology in a local hip-hop scene, justifying their participation and unwittingly wielding their racial power to culturally appropriate hip-hop.

Color-blind ideology is a remarkably flexible set of ideas that are used in a variety of ways to deny the reality of inequality. It draws on abstract, liberal notions of equality ("equal opportunity for all") to disconnect race from the power relations in which inequality and racial discourses are embedded. For instance, bell hooks recalls her white students, who believe that emphasizing difference will "subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness,' even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think" (1992, 167). In addition, color-blind ideology provides the discursive foundation upon which whites construct racial identities as "cultureless" (Perry 2001). Indeed, whiteness seems to provide very little substance on which to base an identity, and the appropriation of hip-hop cultural forms suggests not that whites want a black identity; rather, they want characteristics of blackness (Perry 2002, 109). Furthermore, color-blind eyes interpret racialized cultural symbols in ways undermining their racially coded character, reducing race to little more than an "innocuous cultural signifier," allowing whites to use culture to experience a felt similarity with people of color (Gallagher 2003, 5). Indeed it has been firmly established that whites tend to be color-blind to their own racial privilege, but the question of how individuals struggle to manage the demands of color-blindness in the midst of participating in a cultural movement in which race is salient, such as hip-hop, is less well understood. How do individuals simultaneously insist on color-blindness and endorse a cultural form which is unambiguously and explicitly racial? Furthermore, what are the consequences of such rhetorical maneuvers? These are the questions my research seeks to explain.

In the following pages, I argue that by consuming hip-hop, members of the scene position themselves as "cool" or hip by its association with African Americans, presenting themselves as confident, progressive whites smoothly moving through a cultural milieu of blackness. Yet their adherence to color-blind ideology leads them down the curious path of consuming hip-hop precisely to indicate the irrelevance of race in their own lives. Using a rhetorical strategy that recognizes the importance of racial inequality for others, and a denial of the salience of race in their own lives, the strong majority of concertgoers use color-blind ideology to justify their participation in a local

hip-hop scene. Furthermore, color-blind ideology allows individuals to appropriate cultural forms by providing the discursive resources to take the racially coded meanings out of hip-hop, and replace them with color-blind ones. This article contributes to the existing scholarship on racial ideology by analyzing how it is actively deployed by individuals in a local context in which race is prominent. Second, it extends our understanding of how color-blind ideology operates in practice, providing the discursive repertoire whites can utilize to appropriate popular culture for their own purposes.

Whiteness, Color-Blind Ideology, and Hip-Hop Culture

Scholarship analyzing the construction and maintenance of "whiteness" as a racial category has expanded rapidly since the last quarter of the twentieth century, branching out in a variety of directions including, but not limited to, labor process (Roediger 1991), cinema (hooks 1992), literature (Morrison 1993), the law (Haney-Lopez 1996), the classroom (Lewis 2003; Perry 2002), social policy (Lipsitz 1998), and everyday white privileges (McIntosh 1988). With the growing breadth of research about whiteness, Anderson has warned of a tendency toward "reification of whiteness as a concept, as an experience, and as an identity" (2003, 28). As she points out, much of the existing literature conceptualizes whiteness as a static *thing* rather than a dynamic, contested *process*. My research is consistent with the notion that race is fundamentally a social process that is accomplished in everyday practices, taking place within a racialized social system generating inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Mills 1997). Recent scholarship has undermined the assumption of a singular, essential white experience by examining intraracial differences in white identity by social class (Hartigan 1999), gender (Kenny 2000), and contact with communities of color (Perry 2002). Indeed, saying that a person is white does not necessarily predict anything about how he or she will respond to their social positioning (Lewis 2004). Thus, whiteness is not a thing but an accomplishment, and its reification can be avoided through close and sustained examinations of the performances of race (i.e., "doing race") in a variety of circumstances and connecting those performances to a field of power.

Following Young (1994) with regard to women, Lewis (2004) has argued that we can talk meaningfully about whites without essentializing whiteness by using Sartre's (1976) notion of seriality. The white audiences I studied may be considered a passive collectivity, or a series rather than a group

(Lewis 2004). A series is a social collectivity whose members are passively unified through the cultural objects toward which their actions are oriented, such as a concert performance. The goals of a passive collectivity of whites are not explicitly racial, meaning they are not consciously intended to further white supremacy. On the other hand, white groups come together self-consciously as whites for explicitly racial purposes, such as neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups. It is important to note that although many all-white collectivities are not explicitly racial, "their racial composition is not an accident but is a result of whites' status as members of a passive social collectivity whose lives are shaped at least in part by the racialized social system in which they live and operate" (Lewis 2004, 627). I consider the individuals I have studied as a series, for if they went to hip-hop concerts as a white group with explicitly racial motivations it would undermine their project of using hip-hop to indicate the irrelevance of race in their lives.

A kind of passive, white collective-identity is performed by adhering to color-blind ideology, a highly interactive and flexible framework of ideas in which abstract egalitarian values are extended to racial minorities, who are ultimately positioned as culturally rather than biologically inadequate (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 68). The discursive and interpretive frames of color-blind ideology conceal the institutional arrangements perpetuating racism and defend the reproduction of race-based inequality by asserting the progressive goal of color-blindness as the reality (Blauner 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Brown et al. 2003; Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Gallagher 2003; Wellman 1977). The problem with color-blind ideology is that it is highly effective at perpetuating the inequalities it claims not to notice, providing a discursive repertoire to decry the very mention of racial and ethnic membership as inherently racist; race-based initiatives can be opposed under the rubric of "equal opportunity for all" (Blauner 1992). Thus, hegemonic whiteness incorporated the sentiments expressed by the civil rights movement in a way that did not fundamentally threaten white supremacy (Lipsitz 1998).

One of the ironies of the color-blind era is that it has come to dominate racial discourse at the very time that hip-hop, an unmistakably African American art form, has steadily gained popularity in America and around the world (Mitchell 2001). Not surprisingly, color-blind eyes tend to interpret racially marked cultural symbols such as hip-hop in ways that undermine their racial character (Gallagher 2003). Whites do not simply consume African American art forms. They also appropriate those forms for their own purposes (Tate 2003). Gallagher argues, "The new color-blind ideology does not ignore race; it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchies

by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences that whites and racial minorities can purchase and share" (2003, 5). Said differently, the mass marketing of racially coded cultural symbols such as hip-hop allows whites to experience a felt similarity with communities of color. Whites who pick up on African American styles and music do not necessarily want to be black; they seek to acquire the characteristics of blackness associated with being cool (Perry 2002, 109). However, white participation in hip-hop most certainly represents more than the meaningless imitation of blackness. Bennett's (1999) ethnographic account of a hip-hop culture in the nearly all-white town of Newcastle, England, demonstrates how local hip-hoppers repackage its content to reflect the local British and working-class culture. However, the themes of color-blind ideology and cultural appropriation remain implicit and largely undeveloped in the analysis. My research brings these themes to the forefront of the analysis by providing ethnographic evidence gathered from a local hip-hop scene with overwhelmingly white members. Building upon the work of Gallagher (2003) and Perry (2001, 2002), I analyze how color-blind ideology operates in popular culture, demonstrating how these processes play out in situ, supplying well-intentioned white individuals with the interpretive frames and discursive opportunities to appropriate African American cultural forms such as hip-hop.

For the purposes of this article there are several important things to know about hip-hop. First, the origins of hip-hop are contested. Keyes (2002) argues that hip-hop stretches back to the African bardic tradition, in which individuals (Bards) functioned as community oral historians who told stories through song. This tradition survived the slave trade and formed new oral traditions such as "toasting" which eventually led to the emergence of hip-hop. Sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993) agrees that African traditions are important to hip-hop but argues that hip-hop emerged out of the culture of the black Atlantic more generally. Tricia Rose (1994), in contrast, found that the engine of hip-hop was the emergence of the postindustrial political-economy. Finally, the excellent oral history of hip-hop's first decade (Fricke and Ahearn 2002) makes the case that rival gangs throwing block parties in the South Bronx was the early catalyst for hip-hop. It seems to me that each of these cultural forces played a role in forming hip-hop.

By the late 1980s, hip-hop had developed far beyond the playgrounds and house parties of the South Bronx and began reaching a mass audience. How did this occur? Undoubtedly a number of factors came into play, but a few cultural markers are worth noting. First, the show *Yo, MTV Raps!* debuted in 1988 and immediately became the network's highest rated show, exposing

a generation of young people to hip-hop's style and sensibilities. Cultural critic Nelson George (1998, 101) notes in *Hip-Hop America*, "By giving hip-hop music, dances, and gear a regularly scheduled national platform, the broadcast was integral to inculcating hip-hop's distinctly urban culture into the rest of the country." In addition to the wildly successful *Yo, MTV Raps!* a slew of MCs including Run-DMC, The Beastie Boys, Will Smith and DJ Jazzy Jeff, and L.L. Cool J produced catchy, dance-oriented hip-hop with simple choruses that appealed mostly to teenagers (George 1998, 64). Furthermore, quite a few of the most popular MCs in the late 1980s to early 1990s era (sometimes called "the golden age" of hip-hop) used sampled rock guitar riffs in their musical hooks to reach a broader, MTV-centric audience.

While hip-hop has continued to spread in hybrid forms across the globe (Mitchell 2001), this research contributes to the academic literature about hip-hop culture by specifying how it operates in one local setting. The conceptual foundation of hip-hop–oriented scholarship rests on Tricia Rose's (1994) *Black Noise*, the centerpiece of a small wave of research published in the mid-1990s (see Kitwana 1994; Perkins 1996; Potter 1995; Sexton 1995). The early work on hip-hop laid the groundwork, "describing, theorizing and critiquing elements of rap including rap's lyrics, music, culture and style, as well as the social context within which rap music takes place" (Rose 1994, xiii). Arguing that the hip-hop aesthetic represents a critique by urban youth marginalized by declining employment opportunities and racism in the postindustrial economy, *Black Noise* suggested a productive research agenda for hip-hop scholarship which has largely not been taken up by scholars.

Rose (1994) deconstructs the lyrical content of three illustrative songs demonstrating the "hidden politics of rap" (pp. 106-45), but unfortunately there is no analysis of just how the audience interprets its meaning, or if they even care about the lyrics at all. While it is certainly important to analyze how hip-hop expresses racial inequalities, it is equally important to understand how the audience *uses* these expressions. Furthermore, there is no discussion of who the audience is, it is presumed to be African American. Judging by the bulk of scholarship, one would be led to believe that hip-hop is only a significant aspect of African American culture (Kitwana 2002). Yet the data belie that notion: by 1997, Soundscan, an electronic network which tallies weekly sales figures from over 17,000 American music stores, estimated that two-thirds of those who purchased hip-hop were white (Weingarten 1998). My research contributes to the scholarship on hip-hop by analyzing the racial dynamics of a locally specific hip-hop scene, with an eye on inequality and racial power. Studying racial ideology through music, especially hip-hop, takes full advantage of popular music's long history of associations with race, and its equally long history of a complicated racial politics. Throughout

history music has been used to give voice to oppressed cultures, establishing collective memory and abetting solidarity (Gilroy 1993). In its shadows, the aesthetic sensibilities of the black Atlantic have been appropriated, shaped, and molded by dominant cultures for nearly as long, often used as a tool to justify oppression (Bean, Hatch, and McNamara 1996; hooks 1992; Lott 1995; Tate 2003).

Method and Setting

Despite Simon Frith's (1981) recommendation that scholars can better study music by leaving the library and going to concerts, music is often studied apart from its performances. As Frith (1996) notes, "Performance must be treated as central to the aesthetics of popular music" (p. 94), and an analysis of music must examine its social practices, in particular how people talk about music. I do so here for hip-hop using ethnographic methods at concert venues reinforced with both informal and semistructured in-depth interviews.

I conducted participant observation research at twenty conscious hip-hop shows over the fifteen-month period between June 2002 to August 2003. Seventeen concerts were located in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts (approximately ninety miles west of Boston), most of which took place in Northampton, a small, liberal-minded, 90 percent white college town. Two concerts were set in Boston, Massachusetts, and one in Providence, Rhode Island. Nearly all of the concerts were in small, general admission clubs (holding less than five-hundred people) which book a wide variety of musical acts. My role in the field was consistent with the peripheral-member-researcher outlined in Adler and Adler (1987) in that I was present consistently and frequently enough to become recognizable as a member of the scene but did not participate in the activities that stand at the core of group membership (p. 36), such as producing hip-hop as an MC[1] or a DJ.[2] Some scene members knew I was doing research, while others knew me only as a fan of the music. My activities as a participant-observer ranged from simply "hanging out" as a wallflower to being a central member of the audience, dancing and rapping along with the MC. I jotted down field notes on my small notepad during shows and recorded more comprehensive field notes when I got home afterwards.

At the shows, I conducted thirty-two interviews with white audience members. I arrived early and approached audience members either before the show started or in between acts. I tended to approach those who were by themselves or with one other person in part because of practical reasons (I did not want to intrude on a group of friends) but also because the most dedicated

members of the scene were more likely to go alone or with a friend to experience the performance and music rather than go as part of a big social group out for a night on the town. I introduced myself to audience members as "a student at UMass doing a project on hip-hop" before asking them if I could ask a few questions. All but one agreed to talk with me. I would start with the same question: "Is all hip-hop basically the same, or are there differences within hip-hop?" I asked this question to get the audience members' sense of distinction within hip-hop, and to make them feel knowledgeable while I played the role of a naïve researcher. The overwhelming majority of the concertgoers I interviewed did make distinctions, breaking down hip-hop into the "mainstream" and "underground" or "conscious" hip-hop. The rest of these interviews were free flowing and unstructured, lasting between five and thirty minutes each. I recorded field notes of all my conversations with audience members. Seventeen respondents agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. These were formal and semistructured, ranging from sixty to ninety minutes in length. Fourteen men and three women were asked about their interest in and thoughts about hip-hop, their political and cultural aesthetics, perceived connections (or not) between race and production and consumption of hip-hop, and their relationships, if any, with African Americans and Latino/as. All of these conversations followed an interview schedule to make certain that the relevant issues were touched upon by each respondent, and they were all tape recorded and transcribed by the author.

I was particularly interested in talking to core "insiders" of the scene, those who frequently went to concerts and listened to hip-hop everyday but also seemed to incorporate hip-hop into their lifestyle. More than one-third of my interviewees were involved in producing hip-hop as concert promoters, DJs, or MCs. One was a music and concert reviewer for a local newspaper, and another a visual artist who painted in homage to her favorite rappers. Scene insiders were quite knowledgeable about hip-hop and during interviews frequently made references to the statements of MCs in order to make their own points, as in "I think KRS-One said it best when he said 'rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live.'" In addition, concertgoers often went to shows wearing shirts and pins displaying political positions on a variety of issues. I saw many antiwar pins; shirts demanding, "Free Mumia!" "War is not the ANSWER," and "It doesn't matter what your color, creed, race or size, ARISE"; and one shirt that had a picture of Emma Goldman with the phrase, "It's not a revolution if I can't dance to it."

At the start of data collection, the racial composition of the audiences reflected what some long-standing members of the scene characterized as a dramatic shift. While performers, musicians, and their road crews continued

to be composed almost entirely of African American men in their twenties and thirties, audiences had (apparently) shifted from predominantly black to overwhelmingly white. At the shows I observed, audiences were almost exclusively white, young (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four), and male, which was not surprising to many audience members, who defined the area as "very white."[3] However, their characterization is deceptive because it turns a color-blind eye to the neighboring urban centers with considerably greater racial and ethnic diversity. Springfield, the second-largest city in Massachusetts, is within twenty miles of Northampton and has a population of approximately 150,000 that is 27 percent Latino/a and 21 percent African American. Holyoke is even closer and is a small city of approximately 40,000, in which over 41 percent are Latino/a (2000 Census). Despite the considerable minority population (in Springfield's case, a far greater total population), hip-hop performers are not usually booked to play there and nearly always perform at the more affluent and white college town to the north.

For the purposes of this article, conscious hip-hop is defined in accordance with audience members and artists who differentiate it from other genres by pointing to its politically progressive and racially conscious lyrical content. While conscious hip-hop lyrics often include "positive messages" and spiritual lyrics, this was not usually mentioned by audience members as a distinguishing feature of the music. Furthermore, despite critical acclaim most conscious hip-hop artists have not had sustained mainstream success. While it is unclear why that is so, it does help to market the image of "conscious" or "underground" hip-hop to audiences looking for an "authentic" hip-hop experience untainted by the "mainstream." Among the self-identified conscious hip-hop artists whom I observed during the course of this research were Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Blackalicious, and Common. These lyricists in particular, and conscious hip-hop artists more generally, rap about racist hypocrisies (e.g., Michael Franti of Spearhead rhymes, "For just about anything they can bust us / false advertising sayin' 'halls of justice" / You tellin' the youth don't be so violent / then you drop bombs on every single continent"[4]), black nationalism (a Dead Prez song observes, "I'm an African, never was an African American / Blacker than Black I take it back to my origin"[5]), black unity and knowledge of self (the lead MC of Blackalicious rhymes, "So head on Black people got to meet the task / Educate, keep learnin', gotta question, ask! / And let your light keep shinin' and remember the past / By any means necessary, we'll be free at last"[6]).

Beyond the political content of the lyrics, conscious hip-hop artists enact a form of political theater at their shows. During nearly every performance

rappers dramatically stopped the show and took a few moments to engage the audience about a variety of domestic and foreign policy issues such as mandatory minimum sentencing, slavery reparations, and the "war on terrorism." These performances took a variety of forms, from simply asking audience members to silently hold up peace signs, to elaborately staged skits in which rappers mocked President Bush and government surveillance brought on by the "Patriot Act." The crowds responded enthusiastically, loudly applauding and shouting their approval of the MCs' observations.

For instance, shortly after September 11, 2001, I saw Mr. Lif perform at his release party for *Emergency Rations*, an EP themed in opposition to the "war on terrorism." Over the blaring noise of police sirens and flashing lights, Mr. Lif appeared on the stage to the wild applause of the capacity audience. Not long into the performance two black men wearing black suits, sunglasses, and earpieces and looking intense appeared on either side of the stage, arms folded. The MC paused between songs to apologize, and explained that the men were Secret Service agents, sent by "Homeland Security" to monitor the content of the show. The audience played along, booing the "Secret Service" and cheering Mr. Lif as he ridiculed them throughout the show. Minutes later the "agents" grabbed the MC, forcibly taking him from the stage and telling the audience, "We are from the Homeland Security Department and we are here to protect you from hearing anti-American messages. According to the Constitution, I am authorized and will shut down this show. This is in your best interest and is being done only to protect you." The audience continued to play along, booing and heckling the "Homeland Security." Of course, Mr. Lif returned triumphantly only minutes later to perform the song many in the audience were waiting for, "Home of the Brave,"[7] a searing critique of American foreign policy which he believes led to 9/11. The audience cheered and many sang along. During the last verse, Mr. Lif and many in the audience rapped together a cappella, "And you can wave that piece of shit flag if you dare / But they killed us because we've been killing them for years," then paused in unison until the audience erupted into wild applause.

The Costs of Coolness

Nearly everyone I spoke with discussed conscious hip-hop's radical politics as an important reason for their participation in the scene. Yet when accounting for their consumption of hip-hop, they frame their sympathies as part of a generically left-wing politics (or, as one informant put it, "very very left-wing") rather than around a more specifically racialized politics, itself a

product of concertgoers' devotion to color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2003). This is consistent with the majority discursive strategy used to talk about race—acknowledging the salience of race for others while denying it in oneself.

One informant, Ryan, was an exception to the majority. A local college student who characterized his hometown (as most others did) as "really, really white," I saw him at several concerts before asking for an interview, to which he agreed. We met again in a local coffee shop a few days later.

Ryan is proud of his knowledge of less well-known, "underground" hip-hop artists, and like many other members in the scene, he uses hip-hop to establish himself as "cool." Hip-hop culture is at the forefront of popular culture, providing youths concerned about coolness with important information and pointers on the latest slang and fashion styles (Christianson and Roberts 1998, 111). To this effect, Ryan said, "I mean I really like, like listening to Talib Kweli and having people go 'Oh what is this?' Or you play The Roots for them and they're like 'Oh I never knew hip-hop could sound like this.' And I sort of like that they are this undiscovered treasure that people don't really know about, and I like knowing about them."

However, what separates Ryan from other hip-hop enthusiasts is that establishing this part of his identity comes at the cost of taking on guilt. He worries about the nearly all-white concert audiences because hip-hop is "becoming so accepted that it's being whitenized." Like other members in the scene he sees the origins of hip-hop in African American culture, but unlike them, he added, "I guess I'm concerned about, Blues and Rock 'n' Roll and everything sort of started, was started by African Americans, and look at where that is now? Those roots were in Black culture, but that has been totally taken away, and it's white music now. Rock 'n' Roll is white music."

Acknowledging the salience of race in his own life and popular culture made Ryan unique. He continued,

> I don't know in some ways I feel like a hypocrite by talking about how much I love hip-hop because I sort of feel like it doesn't belong to me, you know? . . . In conversations I've had with people about society, people have said that, race just doesn't matter and we should all be color-blind. But I think that's really not possible, and I think it's really not even a good idea. I mean because when you talk about, sorta societally, being white means something very different than being Asian or African American, or being Native American, you know? Even being very clearly Jewish. Being white means something different than anything else, and that comes with privileges and it comes with, you know you get things that other people don't get. And, I mean I think it's sort of interesting to take it and turn it onto hip-hop. . . . I don't

want to see hip-hop taken away from African American culture because I think it's such an important piece. We, I say "we," White culture has already taken so much that used to belong to other people and now we call our own, and I think that becomes much easier when you say you should look beyond race in terms of hip-hop.

Drawing from the long history of cultural appropriation, and applying it to white-dominated hip-hop concert audiences, his feelings of guilt remain unresolved. As a racial progressive (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004), he provides a narrative against the dominant frame of color-blindness but feels like a hypocrite because participating in the hip-hop scene feels an awful lot like appropriating it for whites.

Ryan's rhetorical strategy, though, comes at too high a cost for the other white hip-hop consumers I spoke with. In contrast, most of the audience has hit on a rhetorical strategy that allows them to claim that they are cool people moving in a cultural milieu of blackness while avoiding the white guilt Ryan wrestles with. As another informant told me,

I feel like there's a good amount of like, this white guilt involved [laughs]. . . . I feel like white kids growing up now, feel bad for what happened with slavery in a way that they don't know how to communicate, in a way that they don't know how to express. You know, like "Oh god our fucking forefathers had our friends' forefathers as slaves, like how fucked up is that?" So like one of the ways for them to justify, not justify, but make themselves feel better about that is by like, involving themselves in hip-hop and to start acting in that, in certain fashions, like maybe acting like you're black. But what does that really mean? How does a black person act? So then you just start looking into what they've seen on TV, what the media has portrayed like, you know, certain, certain, certain people to be. That isn't always the best thing so . . . [trails off]. I mean you're really getting into something that's a lot deeper than just hip-hop.

Acknowledging Race

On a rainy night in Northampton the rap group Black Sheep, a longtime duo from Queens, New York, took the stage to a particularly small audience of less than one-hundred members. Black Sheep was part of the Native Tongues Posse, a group of east coast rappers from the late 1980s known for jazzy beats and positive, afro-centric lyrics. Perhaps due to the small audience, the show's intimate feel created space for a lot of talking between the artists and the audience. Midway through the show one of the MCs, Andres

"Dres" Titus described Northampton with a joke: "Ya'll have a really nice town," he said. "We were walking around Northampton earlier today. You probably heard about it over the police scanners," which elicited some laughter from the nearly all-white audience. Taking it further, he then assumed the voice of a policeman over a CB radio and said, "Something's going on downtown," causing even more laughter. The joke, of course, is that they are African American and their "blackness" stands out, especially to police, in this overwhelmingly white, small, New England town. But if the concertgoers that night were truly "color-blind" they would not get the joke. They might even consider it an affront to suggest that police would notice the MCs only because of their skin color. Thus, generalizing the views of audience members as merely "color-blind" would be inaccurate. As Clifford Geertz ([1973] 2000) cautions, "Nothing has done more to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe" (p. 18). Despite the considerable pressure color-blind ideology exerts, those I spoke with generally acknowledge race as an important category for other people, even as they deny it for themselves. In fact, they frequently seemed hyperaware of race, to the point of stuttering and stumbling as they struggled to discuss their interest in hip-hop in ways that seemed knowledgeable without relying on racial stereotypes.

Justin, a hip-hop DJ and producer who recently graduated from college, is illustrative of how the great majority of concertgoers talked about race. After I met him and asked permission for an interview, he enthusiastically agreed, saying he was "really looking forward to it," and "I really really love hip-hop." Justin was knowledgeable about hip-hop's history, and while telling me about it he said,

> If you are a white kid growing up in the suburbs and you want a guitar, mommy and daddy are probably going to buy you a guitar, you want a drum set, they are gonna buy you a drum set. So what happens when you're in the ghetto and your parents don't have money to buy you that stuff? All you have at your house is your mom's record collection and a turntable, so that becomes your only outlet, so you take that, and obviously it doesn't happen overnight, it's not like some kid went and took his mom's records and made hip-hop overnight. But over time it progressed into that, and now obviously, some of the more underprivileged or whatever, low income family, whatever, I don't even know how to say it politically correct so I'll stop [hits the table for emphasis] beating [hits the table again] around the [hits the table again] bush! But umm . . . yeah, and that's another problem, you know people trying to be all politically correct, just say what you mean.

Worried about maintaining racial tact, he quickly added, "Sorry I'm not being too direct with this, I'm just, it's kind of, it's stuff I think about a lot but it's not really stuff that I can put down on paper." Justin's struggle to talk about race and inequality, even as it is connected to popular culture, reflects a desire to appear knowledgeable while distancing himself from racial stereotypes. His hesitation illustrates that color-blindness can result from extreme concern with not appearing to sound prejudiced.

Note the following exchange: over an hour into the interview Justin asked who I was "mainly interviewing." After repeating the question back to him, he asked, "Like what, like, like white kids only, or what?" When I told him of my interest in white youth and hip-hop he said, "Yeah. You're not interested in like, the opposing view?" As I asked, "What would the opposing view be?" he talked loudly over me, saying, "Not, not like the opposing view but like, a black person's view on it." Acknowledging that blacks and whites may have opposing views revealed anxiety expressing it. As soon as he said it, he tried to take it back. His extreme sensitivity to expressing attitudes about race that recognize difference produced a kind of race-talk consistent with color-blind ideology.

Ethan, a concert reviewer for a local newspaper and long-time member of the scene, was one individual who spoke of the old days when he was one of the few whites at local hip-hop shows. I asked him about the changing racial composition of audiences, and his response reflected a keen sensitivity toward race:

> Bothers me. Bothers me and surprises me because . . . [trails off]. It's hard for me to explain this without sounding completely racist. And I want to say a precursor first that I'm not meaning to sound it at all. I don't know why Black kids don't listen to underground hip-hop or anything like that anymore. Anymore, because it used to be, when I would go to a show in Cambridge I would be one of the minorities. Or just like, see, if MCs came around in 95, there would be an overwhelmingly black audience. Ok? They come by now, overwhelmingly white audience. Why is that so?

He could not say, but what he said was revealing nonetheless. His worry about speaking without sounding (or being interpreted) as racist indicates not a knee-jerk color-blindness but a hypersensitivity towards race that seems to consider talking about race as something dangerous. Furthermore, he is forced into acknowledging that racial integration never actually took place; the reality of white appropriation of a cultural scene once dominated by blacks undermines the validity of color-blind ideology.

When concertgoers were asked more specifically about their white peers' consumption of hip-hop, they talked in ways acknowledging the racial subjectivity of others while carefully making it clear they were not talking about themselves. Two main rhetorical strategies were used to justify the participation of other whites that took race into account: the increasing number of white MCs makes hip-hop easier for whites to relate to, and second, hip-hop provides a way to vicariously experience and connect with "blackness."

Mike is a nineteen-year-old who produces hip-hop in his home studio, sporadically DJs at local clubs, and works in retail to "pay the bills." Living in Northampton his whole life, he has been going to local shows for a number of years. Mike thinks hip-hop can be used as a "unifying force" between people and, as such, does not "relate to mainstream hip-hop because I feel hip-hop should be used in a positive way." As I asked him about the racial composition in the audience at shows, he replied, "It's funny that you ask," and expressed surprise that there are "maybe two Black folk." He added,

> It's changed in the sense that there's a lot more white MCs right now that are very well known, and very well-respected and well-received amongst hip-hop fans. I mean El-P, Slug, Aesop Rock, Esoteric, Eyedea all those guys, they're really well known (in the underground hip-hop scene), and they, I mean, I don't, all my friends that I know that like those dudes are white. Now I don't necessarily think there's a connection there, but I think it may have affected how many fans have come up that are white, as opposed to like, black rap, black music, black fans.

Mike is illustrative of those who attribute the popularity of hip-hop among whites to increased visibility of white MCs, particularly Eminem. Notice his rhetorical bookends; he makes personal disclaimers before and after saying that whiteness matters for his white friends to make it clear that he is not talking about himself.

Ethan generalizes Mike's point:

> You see that in life over and over again, that like, people from certain racial backgrounds will gravitate towards similar things, like if you're Asian you might like an Asian MC because he is Asian, you know, because you can relate to him. White kids, some white kids won't like any MC except for Eminem. And they listen to rock music, but they like Eminem. And that it's for all the reasons except that he's white, and they can identify with him where they couldn't identify with Tupac. Eminem is not Tupac by any means, but they are similar, and some people will be like, "Tupac, I can't really identify with him, but Eminem I can because he's white and so am I."

His rhetorical strategy is to acknowledge the racial subjectivity of others while denying one of his own. Using "Asian" as a reference point to avoid a racial dichotomy and speaking in the second and third person strengthens his rhetoric. Although he indicts others for claiming Eminem's whiteness doesn't matter when he believes it does; he ultimately absolves them of responsibility by naturalizing the idea that "over and over again" people relate better to those of their own race.

Ethan also says, "For some people it may be something new, something they don't understand, you know . . . something foreign to them like a viewpoint or a lifestyle." This might be what Tricia Rose (1994) had in mind when she wrote, "Like generations before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on Black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of Black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion" (p. 5). Jennifer, a local painter, echoes this sentiment: "I know some people listen to it, just cause it gives them a connection to a race in a way, you know what I mean, some people really think it's really cool that . . . it makes them feel closer to that."

Denying Race

Dead Prez had been on the stage for nearly an hour when Mutulu Olugbala ("M1"), one-half of the rap duo that describes itself as "MC's and activists," paused the high-energy show. Behind him, a screen flashed images of iconic figures including Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Huey Newton, Bobby Seal, and Mumia Abu-Jamal. As the images flashed behind him, he began speaking to the predominantly white crowd, reminding them of the legacy of Garvey and the Black Panther party, and calling for "revolution-minded brothers." He paused again to peer across the sea of white faces and aloud observed that there were "a lot of white cats in the audience." This was one of the few instances in which the racial dynamic of black performers and white audiences were made explicit in the concert space. In the song that followed, the MC pointed to audience members, engaging them in a call and response routine, and shouted, "You a African? You a African? Do you know what's happenin'?" Following the lead of M1 and the handful of African American fans in attendance, whites in the crowd threw their fists in the air and chanted, "I'm a African, I'm a African, and I know what's happenin'!"

Just prior to their performance I met Jeff, a seventeen-year-old high school senior who was waiting for his friend to arrive. After talking for

about ten or fifteen minutes, Jeff and I agreed to meet for an interview at a coffee shop a few days later. Eager to hear his thoughts on the very provocative performance, I asked what he thought. He responded,

> Well, with Public Enemy or Dead Prez, they say a lot about black people, and you know, it's like black music, but you have to make it, as like a white person, look at me man I'm like the whitest person on earth. You have to make a bridge between the race differences, and you have to realize that it's all just people and no matter what the color of your skin, it just doesn't matter. To me, it's only as important as the color of your eyes, and when black people are talking about freeing black people, I can't imagine that someone who wants to free their people, free people they are close to, would not want to free everyone . . . it's, it's all the same sort of message of freedom, independence.

Color-blindness is a sufficiently flexible and strong ideological framework that it can accommodate such an unambiguous and explicitly racialized concert performance. In this case, it provides Jeff with the discursive repertoire to plausibly replace the message of black emancipation with one of universal emancipation. Indeed, taking the blackness out of hip-hop and replacing it with color-blindness was a recurring pattern in my fieldwork. Furthermore, when I asked him if he thought of hip-hop as black music, he said,

> Well even though hip-hop has its roots with black people, even though the artists are primarily black, even though there is black pretty much everywhere you look, I don't think music is . . . what's regarded as black music or white music, it doesn't really matter because it's still music and it still exists not only for a certain group of people, but also for itself. You know, it's there, and it's waiting to be discovered. And, you know, I think a white person has just as much of a right to discover hip-hop and appreciate it as a black person does.

The philosophical argument that hip-hop exists "not only for a certain group of people" or "those who make the music" but is "waiting to be discovered" and exists "for its own purpose" gives Jeff license to discover it without ever having to question the consequences of his discovery. Consequently, racial power is leveraged for cultural appropriation in the name of color-blindness.

Other individuals I interviewed altogether brushed aside any questions I asked about race, and told me, "I don't know how to answer that, I never think about it," or that it does not matter that white people listen to hip-hop. Justin told me (after I turned the tape recorder off) that "Hip-hop is so *not* a black-white thing."

As I interviewed Justin he spoke at length about his experiences as a local DJ compared to those in his hometown, a large midwestern city. Hometown audiences were a "tough crowd," and he "was the only white person there, period." Getting booed off the stage and called a "white boy" in his first performance, Justin finds it easier to "move the crowd" in Northampton where there are "obviously very few black members in the audience so they're not going to have the same comment." When asked for his thoughts on the nearly all-white audiences at local shows, he said, "It's huge. That is, I mean in your study that is probably, you know, could be the number one factor, and it's such, it's so interesting, it's so interesting I mean . . . umm . . . it's a great music art form and it's for everybody to appreciate and I don't think it matters what color you are, or whatever, when it comes to participation it doesn't matter what ethnicity you are, or anything, all that matters is that you have skills." Justin's suggestion that hip-hop authenticity is not based on race belies his experiences as a DJ but conforms to the demands of color-blind ideology. If he argued differently—that race does matter—it would undermine his own sense of authentic membership in the scene as well as undermining his racial ideology. Of course, saying that "skills" are all that matters, and that race does not, enables the cultural appropriation of hip-hop by whites.

When Ethan discussed why other whites listen to hip-hop music, he told me that it has to do with the ability of whites to relate to white MCs and that this pattern is repeated "over and over again." But later in the interview I asked him about his own consumption, and why he likes hip-hop, and he echoed the color-blind sentiments of most others:

> My approach to hip-hop is more, the music, I just like the sounds, you know and the MCs, and what is going on. I think my approach is not for acceptance. It's hard to explain, my approach to it in the beginning was more towards I liked what I was hearing, it didn't matter who was MC'ing, who was making the beats. I wasn't identifying with it in that level, I was identifying it with . . . [trails off]. I'm addicted to music, myself and I listen to way more music that most of my friends do. Hip-hop to me is unique because it sounds so different. Rap's formula is different than any other formula, you know, it's such a unique formula to me, you know?

While accounting for other whites' consumption in race-conscious terms, his personal account is color-blind. This was a recurrent finding in my fieldwork. For Jeff, hip-hop is about universal emancipation, for Justin all that matters is "skills," and Ethan emphasizes its "unique formula." Each of these color-blind

justifications makes it easier for whites to appropriate hip-hop for themselves, taking a racially coded art form and turning it into a color-blind one.

Discussion

This research has sought to answer two questions. How do individuals manage the demands of color-blind ideology while simultaneously endorsing an unambiguously African American cultural form? Furthermore, what are the consequences of such rhetorical maneuvers? To summarize my findings, the great majority of concertgoers participate in the scene as an indicator of the irrelevance of race in their own lives, even as they recognize the salience of race for others. Color-blind ideology provides the discursive resources for individuals to justify their presence in the scene, but more important, it also provides the opportunity for whites to use their racial power, however unwittingly, to appropriate the culture of hip-hop, taking the racially coded meanings out of the music and replacing them with color-blind ones. This study contributes to the existing scholarship by demonstrating how individuals actively deploy color-blind ideology in a specific, local context in which race is salient. Second, it extends our understanding of how color-blind ideology operates in practice, showing how the reception of racialized cultural forms often neutralizes their racial character (Gallagher 2003).

My findings, then, show how color-blind ideology is deployed locally. My point is not to generalize about color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Gallagher 2003) but to specify. Racial ideology is experienced in distinct locations, even as it is shaped by discourses circulating at a national level and spiraling out of the racialized social system. Specifying the distinctly local manifestations of the dominant racial ideology extends our knowledge of how ideology operates in the everyday lives of individuals. Furthermore, my findings demonstrate the immense flexibility inherent in color-blind ideology's discursive frames. It is an ideology robust enough to incorporate obviously racial cultural markers and dissociate their connections with race. Specifically, I have found that color-blind eyes can see political hip-hop in ways that undermine its association with blackness. As Perry Hall (1997) argues, "The pattern of separating the art from the people leads to an appropriation of aesthetic innovation that not only 'exploits' Black cultural forms, commercially and otherwise, but also nullifies the cultural meaning those forms provide for African Americans" (p. 32). Thus, color-blind ideology is consequential for popular culture because it provides those

with more racial power the discursive resources to decontextualize cultural objects from the histories and experiences from whence they came. At the same time, popular culture provides a venue in which color-blind ideology is itself produced and reproduced.

In addition to color-blind ideology, this research has implications for the study of culture and hip-hop. In contrast to Kubrin's (2005) analysis of the similarities between "gangsta rap" lyrics and the "street code" Anderson (1999) found, my research demonstrates that meaning cannot be taken at face value. Kubrin (2005, 372) argues that "gangsta rap" lyrics normalize violence and are "implicit, interpretive instructions for understanding 'life on the streets'—not just for rappers, but for others as well." Who? The author cannot say because she did not actually talk to anyone to discern how meaning making happens as an emergent cultural process. As my research has shown, interpreting hip-hop lyrics in precisely the opposite way from which they appear can be incorporated into whites' "common sense." Individuals are not simply cultural dupes who unreflectively receive and internalize what they hear, see, and experience in popular culture, despite the elegant claims made by sociologists to the contrary. To reiterate Simon Frith's (1996) point, studying how music matters in everyday life requires sociologists to leave the library and take performance seriously as a site of meaning making.

Furthermore, my research demonstrates how scene members use culture in two distinct ways. First, they use hip-hop to position themselves in relation to their peers as savvy cultural insiders who are smoothly moving through a cultural milieu of blackness. Put more sociologically, scene members use hip-hop as a mode of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). However, in this case Bourdieu's (1984) classic statement about the powerful ways that the dominant taste hierarchy generates inequality is less applicable than Thornton's concept of subcultural taste hierarchies, in which status and authority are ordered through alternative taste hierarchies embedded in youth cultures that stand apart from the dominant (Thornton 1996).

Second, scene members use culturally available discursive repertoires (Swidler 2003) to give meaning to hip-hop. In Swidler's (2003) terminology, the discursive repertoires I have analyzed in this article are cultural tools which individuals use to make sense of the world around them. However, it is not sufficient to leave the analysis there, because to do so would overlook the role of power in meaning-making processes. The discursive repertoires scene members used were not made up out of thin air; rather, they were supplied by the ideological structures of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004) which support and defend racial inequality.

This research does have limits. Because I observed and gathered data about only one aspect of the lives of members in the scene—their taste for hip-hop—I am unable to assess how their experiences outside of this one particular cultural space are shaped by racial ideology. Second, utilizing a comparison group could have sharpened my findings and given the analysis a more clear point of reference. Given the location where I studied, there was no obvious or accessible comparison group on which to base my study design. A third limitation of my findings comes out of the analysis of interview data. As scholars have pointed out (Perry 2002), white people often talk about and experience their racial identities in ambiguous and contradictory ways. The individuals I studied are no different. Accordingly, while I have accurately represented the discursive repertoires they use to frame their experience in the hip-hop scene, there is some overlap between the analytical categories in which my analysis is based.

Future research should take advantage of the localized manifestations of color-blind ideology to better explain how it is actively reproduced in everyday life and mediated by particular social structures generating inequality. Color-blind rhetoric plays out in a variety of contexts, including debates around affirmative action, English-only campaigns, immigration policy, the labor market and, as I have shown, popular culture. Specifying how color-blind ideology operates at the micro-level of interaction, in particular places and settings, will enhance our understanding of color-blind ideology more generally. Future research should specify how racial ideology works in other spheres of experience, as the uses of that ideology are not necessarily the same in labor markets or politics or education as in popular culture. For instance, how do the experiences of whites in the labor market influence their decision making with regard to cultural consumption, and vice versa? How is color-blind ideology mobilized in social movements and political campaigns? Connecting the ways in which color-blind ideology operates in a variety of different contexts is critical to making sense of how ideology reproduces the racialized social system in everyday life.

Notes

1. A hip-hop DJ, or disc jockey, is one who creates, selects, and plays music as a hip-hop artist performer, usually backing up at least one MC.

2. A hip-hop MC, or rapper, is one who creates rhyming lyrics delivered rhythmically over a musical backdrop composed by a DJ.

3. The shows in Boston and Providence did have more African American audience members, but the audiences were still overwhelmingly white.

4. Spearhead. 2001. Oh my God. *Stay human*. Six Degrees.

5. Dead Prez. 2000. I'm an African. *Let's get free.* Relativity.
6. Blackalicious. 2000. Making progress. *Nia.* Quannum Records.
7. Mr. Lif. 2002. Home of the brave. *Emergency rations*. Definitive Jux.

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