

Roundtable: VH1's (*White*) *Rapper Show*: Intrusions, Sightlines, and Authority

Kyra Gaunt, Cheryl L. Keyes, Timothy R. Mangin, Wayne Marshall, and Joe Schloss

With an Afterword by Miles White

This roundtable was held at the annual meeting of IASPM-US in Boston on April 28, 2007. It was sponsored by the IASPM-US Diversity Committee, and chaired by IASPM-US President Harry Berger. It was organized and edited by Deborah Wong. It addressed *Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show*, a reality show aired on VH1 between January and March of 2007. The roundtable participants included five scholar-activists who have each written extensively about hip-hop and racialization. The proceedings offered here are a set of composite texts: some of the panelists transcribed their spoken contributions to the roundtable, and several opted to publish written versions of their comments or edited versions of their spoken presentations. This published version of the roundtable thus offers the spirit of the live event and more. We are especially pleased that Miles White, who was unable to participate in the roundtable as planned, offered a written afterword included here.

We thank audience member Richard Smith for taping the proceedings. We especially thank former President Harry Berger for chairing the roundtable and for establishing the Diversity Committee for IASPM-US in 2005.

Harry Berger: Hello, I'd like to welcome everyone. My name is Harry Berger and I'm the President of IASPM-US for about another two hours. I would like to welcome everyone to the roundtable titled "VH1's (*White*) *Rapper Show*: Intrusions, Sightlines, and Authority." This panel is sponsored by the IASPM-US Diversity Committee and was organized by committee member Deborah Wong, who unfortunately could not be with us today. I formed this committee in 2005 and charged it with the task of encouraging diversity within the branch and the discipline of popular music studies in general, and also

finding ways to make the field more inclusive and a more welcoming environment. The Diversity Committee organized an excellent roundtable last year, which was recently published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. The committee is currently finalizing a diversity action plan for the branch; hopefully, they'll have it done in the next month and will pass it along to our next President, Cheryl Keyes, and the Executive Committee will hopefully be able to get some good, strong, practical action plans in place so we can work on diversity in this branch.

Today's roundtable addresses *Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show*, a reality series that aired on VH1 between January and March 2007. Six panelists, all scholars whose research focuses on hip-hop, addressed some of the following issues: Why should IASPM-US care about the show? How did the show highlight ideologies of race that inform popular music scholarship more broadly? How did the show enact and sometimes grapple with expropriation, intrusion/extrusion, and respect? How might Whiteness studies open up popular music scholarship? How could we use the show in the undergraduate classroom to activate students' critical engagement with issues of race and authority in popular music? How does hip-hop activism offer a different set of critical tools for thinking about white participation in hip-hop? Finally, how might roundtable discussions of this sort help IASPM-US think about scholarship and difference through the act of popular culture criticism? It is my pleasure today to introduce the panelists, who will each speak for five to ten minutes, if I understand the plans correctly, and then we'll open up the conversation and I hope we'll have some great dialogue.

Our first panelist today is Kyra Gaunt, PhD, ethnomusicologist and professor of music and anthropology at Baruch College, a jazz/R&B recording artist, and an entrepreneur. How do I pronounce the name of your Web site?

Kyra Gaunt: "Kee-ro-city!"

Harry Berger: Gotcha! An NEH and Ford fellow, Kyra lectures nationally and internationally on issues of race and ethnicity, gender, and music and conducts scholarship in the areas of jazz, hip-hop, African-American popular music, and African intradiaspora studies. Her publications have appeared in *Language, Rhythm and Sound* (1997), *Generation of Youth* (1998), and *Musical Quarterly* (2002). Her book, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip-Hop* (2006), distinguishes musical blackness from the social construction of gender as much as race. The book has been featured on BBC radio and NPR, and has been reviewed on *Black Issues*, *Ms. Magazine* book reviews, and *Ethnomusicology*, among others. Her CD, *Be the True Revolution*, will be available in April 2007. So would you like to give the first word?

Kyra Gaunt: First, I want to thank my colleague Deborah Wong and Harry Berger for this opportunity and for pulling this panel together. I thought I would take a little different approach. Since Deborah first asked us to join this forum, I've been watching the episodes of *Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show* available on VH1's Web site. For those people who don't know, VH1 did a reality TV show based on what they consider ten white rappers chosen to win \$100,000 and they compete based on three criteria: musical credibility, knowledge of hip-hop culture, and issues of race.

As my work is primarily about African-American women and gender in hip-hop, I thought I would give a little context about what's been going on around the temporal moment of this show relative to black culture and then I want to talk about ten points regarding what this show says about and to black women.

On January 19, 2007, I was a guest on an online show called *Speak Freely*, a 30-minute broadband ABC-News Now program of headlines from the African-American Community. The show was produced by the recently deceased Eddie Pinder. After a serious discussion entertaining a possible draft, I and another panelist

were asked to address whether R&B was dead in the trash-talk segment. They began with a clip from the *People's Choice Awards* that took place on January 9, 2007 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles which I'd like to replay here.

Host Queen Latifah, Grammy award winning rapper and Academy Award nominated actress, is heard introducing the category: "*Now these are the nominees for favorite R&B song.*" A white female voiceover is heard announcing each nominee followed by a musical cue of the nominated song: "'Ain't no other man' by Christina Aguilera (applause). 'Sexy back' by Justin Timberlake (applause). 'Shake it off' by Mariah Carey (applause). Latifah continues "*and the favorite R&B song, people! (opening the envelope) 'SEXY BACK!' by Justin Timberlake.*"

Three "white" majority (though Mariah Carey is mixed race) artists who perform in the R&B genre are selected by the people, for the people to represent a genre historically associated with brown- and black-skinned folks. The year begins with "the people" identifying white-skinned artists with a black genre with a black rapper hosting the show. I want to give you a context in which *The (White) Rapper Show* appeared earlier this year. Its original run was from January 8, 2007 to February 26, 2007 but all the episodes are available online.

VH1's *(White) Rapper Show* appeared after this event on *The People's Choice Awards* in early January followed by the Don Imus controversy and a cover story featured in *National Geographic* called *Hip-Hop Planet*. This was a highly charged backdrop from a black perspective. The show barely registered in the black public eye. Much larger concerns about race were brewing.

*Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show*¹ was hosted by Jewish-American white rap legend Michael "MC Serch" Berrin of the group 3rd Bass. The VH1 Web site states MC Serch is the "missing link between the Beastie Boys and Eminem." It also states that the show is built around

challenges that will test ten contestants' musical credibility, knowledge of hip-hop culture, and their ideas about race. Along the way, hip-hop pioneers of all hues will be brought in to school and critique our eager rap-pin' competitors. The winner receives \$100,000 and a whole nation of devoted fans.²

Ego Trip is the collective of journalists of color who devised the concept for the show. I want to thank Joe Schloss for first introducing me to Ego Trip's *Book of Rap Lists*. In the vein of that book, I devised my own list for this panel:

What we can learn about being Black women from Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show?

1. Black women do not exist in the social construction of whiteness, maleness, or knowledge of hip-hop (double standard No. 728). Who counts are black male artists like Kurtis Blow, Prince Paul, Grandmaster Caz, Kool Keith, Bushwick Bill, Brand Nubian along with host MC Serch and, curiously, white fashion designer and graffiti art defender Mark Ecko.

2. In the first episode, Persia—one of three female finalists—wields a dildo while calling contestant John Brown a “nigga” several times. She becomes the “whipping boy” for addressing the complicated issues of race (not gender) concerning “wiggers” appropriations of blackness. Her punishment for transgressing racial norms? For twenty-four hours she must wear a large gold chain with the word NIGGER conspicuously dangling from it while playing miniature golf in the South Bronx public sphere. The ambiguity of her whiteness (she's from the borough of Queens and could pass as Italian or Middle Eastern) speaks to the issue of how whiteness and femaleness is misrepresented—broadly without distinction or definition.

3. For once, the common terms for black women are not bitch, video ho, chickenhead, gold digger, pigeons, or tip drill. “Tip drill” was popularized in rap by Grammy-winning artist Nelly. The term actually refers to a practice of several men having sex with women one after

another, also known as runnin' a train on a woman. It comes from basketball where players line up at the free throw line and tip the ball off the backboard consecutively, one after another. In one of the challenges, a faux game show called "Affirmative Reaction" reveals that the top five terms of endearment for black women actually are (i) boo, (ii) wifey, (iii) sista, (iv) queen, and (v) goddess. Most of the contestants did not know the right answers but the audience gets to learn the politically correct answers. But, black women are never present in the context of the show to make this info relevant. Once again, black women are objectified though in the name of some false honor and respect.

4. Ain't no need to explain why black women are missing.

5. Misogyny, not miscegenation. On VH1's Web site it says they are looking at rappers from the context of being "immersed in the culture they claim to love." But that will not include offering any indication that white men who are into hip-hop might also claim to love black women.

6. Black women, such as a Missy Elliot, should not, cannot, or need not school or critique the competitors in the competition musical credibility, knowledge of hip-hop, or ideas of race. Hallelujah Holla Black!

7. Race trumps gender and black women do not have a say in the matter of *Ego Trip's (White) Rapper Show*. But if you want to know more about black women in reality shows you should check out VH1's *Flavor of Love* or the UPN Network's *America's Top Model*.

8. Back to Persia: You can shame a white women in public (for saying nigger while flailing a dildo in John Brown's face) but you never see black men shamed in public for silliness they do while saying bitch or ho, or running a credit through a black woman's ass calling her a tip drill.

9. Jean Grae (a wonderful underground emcee—daughter of jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and jazz vocalist Sathima Bea Benjamin), Missy Elliot, Rah

Digga, Remy Ma, Sha-Rock (The Funky Four Plus One—she was the one), Angie Stone (formerly Angie B of Sequence), DJ Jazzy Joyce, black female DJs, black female emcees, businesswomen in hip-hop like Sylvia Robinson or Monica Lynch), do not “represent” rap (e.g., do not matter).

10. Just another Ghetto Revival: an all-white show, never once considered segregated or segregating like an all-black rapper show would be, continues to maintain the masculine status quo in hip-hop.

I think the show is complex though problematic. It reifies race, whether blackness or whiteness, though it does not challenge gender and it does not transform white privilege on the surface. You can get all the episodes on the web in text form and you can use them in your classroom and you can actually interact with students around it and use it a circumscribed way, but I never had anything like that before. You know I always had to use my students. You really get to problematize a lot of issues about whiteness in particular. It is invaluable and the genius of Ego Trip, their influence in creating this.

So, you can then use this as a text about music and the performance of whiteness. You could say why doesn't he talk about this or that, but that's what we get to do, talk about a lot of rich things around race, the subjugation of gender, or sexual orientation. This is a valuable educational text.

Harry Berger: Our next presenter is Timothy Mangin, who teaches in the Departments of African Studies and Music at St. Lawrence University. His MA thesis, “Giant Steps: Innovation, Technology, and Performance in a Jazz-Inspired Dance Club,” examines the appropriation of jazz ideology in an underground New York hip-hop club. He's currently writing a dissertation titled “Senegalese Urban Popular Music: Jazz, Mbalax, and Rap,” based on fieldwork in Senegal supported by the Ford Foundation. He's also a predoctoral fellow in the Mellon Sawyer Seminar on Globalizing City Cultures at the Center for Comparative Literature and Society.

Timothy Mangin: I just want to recap a little about the show. It was done in eight episodes. Each episode had a challenge, and failure to complete the challenge well resulted in getting booted off. Contestants who did well received a bit of kryptonite called a ghetto pass, which protected them from getting booted off the show. The show took place in the South Bronx. I never saw exactly where it took place in the South Bronx—

Kyra Gaunt: It was a tenement building. . .

Timothy Mangin: The interior is amazing. It is very white with a lot of graffiti inside, sculptures, a lot of props. One prop is a jar called mayo where the contestants receive a message, a challenge, from the producers announced as “You have mayo.”

I used the show as a teaching tool to talk about race and whiteness in a World Music survey class and another class I do on August Wilson and the Blues where we examine whiteness and blackness. The students came to look at it in terms of stereotypes. The stereotypes they came up with were . . . they have one guy, 100 Proof, he was your drinkin,’ mohawk wearing, rock n roller. . . You guys come in and help me clarify these characters.

You have Misfit Dior, the blond bombshell from London, oh! and I’m thinking about G-Child, another symbol of “redneckness” in the show with braids. Her hero is Vanilla Ice, so for 100 Proof and G-Child, their heroes are old school rappers. Then we have a “nerd,” Dasi, who is kicked off early in the show. But he is really a more insecure kind of guy. Then there’s John Brown, the hipster from Williamsburg, and \$hamrock from Atlanta, who’s hard core and thuggish. Sullee is from Boston Irish working class.

Wayne Marshall: His father was actually a well-known mob figure here in Boston.

Timothy Mangin: We also have your Alan Alda type.

Kyra Gaunt: Do not forget Jus Rhymes.

Wayne Marshall: He’s the grad student type—

Joe Schloss: —politicized, he wears the camo. . .

Timothy Mangin: He's down with the struggle, talking about whiteness and wants to consistently create politically conscious raps. He's an ethnic studies major at USC. So the list goes on and on.

So, my students first keyed on the representations of whiteness as stereotypes and then we didn't get past the veneer of the stereotypes. It was basic symbols and how they interacted with basic symbols of black culture, which is very superficially represented in the show. They take these guys out to a barber shop and they introduce them to good ole' ghetto food, and then they take them to a strip joint where they would hear their beats like other rappers. (Yes, CD releases and the introduction of new songs happens not only in strip clubs but also other clubs, restaurants, homes, community centers, and venues for spoken word and hip-hop).

The show does not really portray the complexity of life in the South Bronx. It does not talk about the gentrification that's going on. You know, the loft they're living in looks like a fantasy world but actually there are a lot of artists who are moving up there who are refashioning loft spaces like that, and you have families who have been living there for generations, you have Latinos, you have blacks. . . It is a complex place.

The show does not address in-depth unemployment, education, what it is like when kids get together and cipher after high school, during high school. You see people hanging on the stoop but you do not really "see" people hanging. There's no real introduction to black culture, nothing about family, about black rap culture, about freestyling. Nor anything about white culture in the Bronx.

This problem becomes apparent when they appear on Hot 97, a NYC radio station that has a substantial ear in the black population and among rappers and hip hoppers in general. Callers frequently phone in. The DJs are engaged in their own battles with other DJs at other radio stations. It is pretty hard core. So the white

rappers come on and are asked to rap and freestyle. When they interact with callers and when the callers say they are terrible rappers, they can't seem to come back well. There's a kind of dozens going on and they do not really have good comebacks. So there's a whole sense of competition in rap that seems a little bit lost. The inability of the white rappers to engage in the competitiveness and word play crucial in hip-hop and black culture points to the lack of experience that the white rappers have with the culture and politics of hip-hop as an expression of black culture.

My research deals with a lot of diasporic rap, Senegalese hip-hop in particular, and in the show there's no representation of the international here. In the Bronx, you have a lot of people from the Caribbean, you have a lot of Jamaicans and Latinos—it isn't just some homogenized black culture, it is a complex space that wasn't explored. Thinking about blackness as identity construct where there's difference, in a Stuart Hall sense, where there is a celebration of difference, where articulation conjoins and gives voice to difference. . .

Lastly, what is it with. . . *(he pauses, searching for the words)*

(Laughter from all the panelists)

Timothy Mangin: Everybody knows where I'm going. . . What is it with trying to say "nigga" well, I do not really understand that.

Kyra Gaunt: "Hallelujah Holla Back"! *(She's referencing John Brown's signature phrase.)*

Timothy Mangin: I do not know that's a good phrase, I hate to say that. *(Laughter)*

Timothy Mangin: There's one scene with Persia and John Brown. Persia has a sexual object in her hand and repeatedly screams "nigga" while waving this object at him. So you have this white woman in with an object symbolizing a male organ in front of this white man screaming "nigga" at him in different ways. I thought that would have been a great space to talk about stereotypes and representation of blackness and masculinity.

- Kyra Gaunt: What makes it complicated is that John Brown is a pseudonym for. . . (*to the audience*) Does anybody not know who John Brown is? He's an historical figure.
- Wayne Marshall: Does anyone know why he chose that name?
- Kyra Gaunt: I don't know, but the point is the mediation of that term, to not know who John Brown is. Can you. . .?
- Wayne Marshall: He was an abolitionist, a very militant white abolitionist.
- Timothy Mangin: He was from the North Country (Northern New York). But he also lived in the Midwest and he came back to the North Country and then fought for—
- Wayne Marshall: He led an insurrection. He overran an arsenal.
- Kyra Gaunt: He was a white person.
- Timothy Mangin: He sacrificed his family and died for his beliefs that slavery should be abolished.
- Kyra Gaunt: So that's set against Persia and the dildo . . . so that's set against the dildo and the text and it is complicated.
- Joe Schloss: I think that's the first time those words have ever been uttered together in an academic conference.
(*Laughter*)
- Harry Berger: I hate to break in but let's hold the conversation for later, after all the panelists have had a chance to speak. Wayne Marshall is our next presenter. He's a postdoctoral fellow in ethnomusicology at the University of Chicago, and his dissertation examined the intertwined narratives of hip-hop and reggae. His research interests include race, nation, and the role that digital technologies play in music production, circulation, and reception. He is also a "white rapper," though he wouldn't describe himself that way.
- Wayne Marshall: As, at various points in my life, a quote-unquote "white rapper," I've paid a lot of attention to the strategies of white rappers. So one of the most striking things to me about this show was, as some have already touched on, the remarkable range of strategies employed. The contestants have been described here as stereotypes, and that's true. It seems like they were chosen less because of their skills or their acquaintance with hip-hop culture or their ideas about race than because they could fit this

set of types. Learning that G-Child *modeled* herself on Vanilla Ice—to find yourself in an era where you have people who grew up with Vanilla Ice as their model—says some interesting things about where hip-hop is at today, and perhaps also speaks to the point where we're at such that Justin Timberlake could be the "King of R&B."

I was pretty struck by the tension that that also spoke to—the underlying tension in the show. You've got MC Serch who, certainly when I was coming up, represented something of a beacon for the white rappers out there. He came out in the late 1980s, post-Beastie Boys. The Beastie Boys had already established that white guys could rap, so to speak, and that there were ways of entering into that space, but they did so in a very idiosyncratic and iconoclastic way and a way that drew on their rock side and the general mixed-up-ness of New York culture. 3rd Bass were a significant group because they came out doing more of what seemed like a hardcore, grounded thing; it seemed like more of a community thing, they played at black clubs in New York, they rolled with a multiracial crew, they were very. . . actually, Serch especially—less so than his partner, Prime Minister Pete Nice, who now apparently has a nice career in Cooperstown selling baseball memorabilia—MC Serch put forward the image of the self-knowing, half-guilty white rapper, a self-effacing position: *Look, I understand that I'm implicated in a lot of this white power/white privilege crap and I'm gonna do my best to chant it down in this tongue that I've learned.* And so he would come out with lyrics like: "Black cat is bad luck, bad guys wear black,/Musta been a white guy who started all that." So you hear something like that and, you know, me and my friends growing up, we'd all cringe a little bit, like, yeah, *musta been a white guy.* But you also find a way of negotiating a position there, and that seemed significant.

And something important changed for white rappers not just with Vanilla Ice and the kind of

commercialization of hip-hop where it all seems like a big play and performance, but also with the rise of such groups as House of Pain who adopted a very different position, a kind of self-essentializing, strategic essentializing, ethnification of whiteness—in their case, Irishness. It later morphed into what we see in the show when Detroit is portrayed as the “Mecca of White Hip-hop,” which is a weird way of describing it, but certainly it says that today for a lot of kids, Detroit *is* the Mecca of White Hip-hop. It is where Eminem, Kid Rock, and Insane Clown Posse, who the producers oddly decided also to canonize in this way, are from. And so now we’ve got this white trash essentialism, this class-based position. Fat Joe speaks to this when he appears in a later episode and advises, “Let ’em know that you’re white but not rich.” And I do not think that’s necessarily true (i.e., that they’re not rich). But it is interesting that we get to this point in the white cultural politics of hip-hop that there are these ways of staking out a position that also seem to reify race and seem to make whiteness into something that people claim in a way that is often a little too proud and very different from what Serch used to do with his more self-effacing tack.

And I think part of the tension is that Serch and the Ego Trip guys themselves are upholding this idea of hip-hop that is very much an “old school”/“true school” idea of hip-hop that was really forged in the 1980s and came to a certain apogee in the late 1980s/early 1990s when you not only had strong Afro-centric politics but you also had a playfulness about it, and it seemed like hip-hop was well aligned with a kind of progressive racial politics. Today it is not so easy to make that pronouncement about hip-hop. Hip-hop has embraced the hyper-capitalist, pragmatic, hustler stance: *I’m just gonna do my thing, I’m gonna get mine, I’m gonna get my hustle on*. And that has opened up space for the John Browns of the world who similarly want to position themselves as savvy/idiot-savant hustlers who are just sort of, you know, playing the game.

- Kyra Gaunt: Maybe you should explain for the audience who John Brown is.
- Wayne Marshall: Right, so—John Brown, “King of the Burbs,” “Hallelujah Holla Back.” Those are his big phrases. He represents himself as coming from Santa Cruz, but he lives in Williamsburg. And there’s this great moment later in the show when he’s visited by a friend of his, and his friend is so Williamsburg in a very different way and John Brown’s kind of embarrassed by it. It is totally undercutting his act.
- Harry Berger: Could you explain the distinction between Williamsburg and Brooklyn?
- Wayne Marshall: Williamsburg is identified these days as a hipster enclave, and it is being gentrified in lots of ways, and it is a place where lots of different kinds of whiteness are performed and enacted and a lot of them have to do with signifying on blackness in some pretty weird ways.
- Joe Schloss: It is where those parties were held—those parties that garnered national media attention a couple of years ago.
- Wayne Marshall: The “Kill Whitey” parties—on the one hand they seem to signify a kind of self-awareness, and on the other hand it is a weird kind of celebration.

(Further comments from the panelists about the blackness and Caribbeanness of other parts of Brooklyn and the segregation across the borough.)

- Wayne Marshall: So you end up in this funny situation so that in Williamsburg you can go to clubs that are populated by “hip,” white twenty-somethings who don the various trappings of pop culture blackness and listen to popular music by African Americans, and I’ve heard stories from DJs who are playing at one of these clubs and they put on some reggaeton and the club owner says, “Please take that off, or we’re gonna have all kinds of other people coming in here.” So there’s some really insidious stuff happening there. And that’s partly what John Brown is representing, and yet he’s also very

much representing the Harlem, Dipset, mixtape, savvy self-presentation sort-of-thing. They've opened up this space for him to get in, and he's got these slogans like "King of the Burbs" and "Hallelujah Holla Back" and "Ghetto Revival," which ends up getting him in some very hot water, which I want to get back to in a second. But, I think this gets at this tension in the show where, in some ways, there's a disconnect between the producers' values and, basically, market values with regard to hip-hop, and it raises the question: Has hip-hop become so cynical in its own rush to capitalize that it no longer is grounded in a politics of confronting social inequality and racism?

And so, when we see black women stripping to these guys' "club bangers," that just puts it in your face in a way that's really uncomfortable. And one of the better uncomfortable moments in the series is when Brand Nubian is invited to talk to these guys and offer them advice about recording, to "give them jewels," as Lord Jamar says. So Sadat X starts giving them pretty good advice about mic position and placement and that sort of thing, and Lord Jamar is just looking at them and you can see that he's pissed off. It comes out later that they had set him up and told him about the whole "Ghetto Revival" thing. So he asks the contestants, "Who's this with the Ghetto Revival thing? What's that about?" And John Brown says, "It's a revival." "Of what," says Jamar. "Of the Ghetto."

(Laughter)

Kyra Gaunt: Why would you want to resurrect the ghetto?

Wayne Marshall: That's right! And Jamar says, "The ghetto is poverty and pain, mostly for black people." He just puts it right to him like that, and John Brown just says "Hallelujah Holla Back."

(Laughter)

Wayne Marshall: And he's just a cipher. He just repeats these phrases, and that's his strategy. He plays this kind of idiot savant. And the argument that I want to get to in a minute is, well, I'll get to it in a minute.

But one interesting thing that gets us toward it is that when Serch is introducing Brand Nubian, he says, "This is where the culture is." Right? And, I mean, who are we kidding? Half of the contestants didn't even know who Brand Nubian was. Sure, for people like Serch and Ego Trip and those of us in this room who came up on hip-hop in a certain moment of time, that *is* what it was about, where it was at. It *was* about a certain militant racial politics. And we can see what Serch means by that. But he's totally kidding himself if he's saying that at this point. So again that gets down to this central tension in the show where they're trying to wrest control of the meaning of hip-hop and therefore its critique of race. But it has gotten out of control.

To come to a little conclusion here, this tension can best be encapsulated in the idea of the "game." We hear all the time from rappers that they're playing this "game." *Don't hate the player, hate the game.* And that gets put to the test here. In the final episode, when John Brown is about to go against \$hamrock—who is a genuine-seeming guy from the Atlanta area, grew up in a multiracial environment, and just seems very sincere about being a rapper in a traditional mode, if in a down-South party style, which has its own weird politics—John Brown tells the camera, "I think I'm the best look for the game." That's his statement, and I think it speaks volumes about that tension there. And yet, at a certain point, Chairman Mao, one of the Ego Trip guys, says, "It's all a ruse. There is no correct answer. It's playing with stereotypes." Which also seems to suggest this kind of play, this kind of game. And yet what does MC Serch keep repeating throughout the show? "THIS IS NOT A GAME!" Every time he comes into the house, he says it: "This is not a game, people!" And yet, what is it? It is a game show! They're competing in challenges! Every episode, they're playing a game. It is a game show.

In the end, Elliot Wilson from Ego Trip says, "The good guy wins." And so they did pick the guy they

wanted to win. They picked \$hamrock. They picked the genuine guy who seems to maybe have some tenuous connection to this ideal of hip-hop that they're holding up. But if they were more cynical and if they wanted to talk about where hip-hop *really* is right now, they would have picked John Brown.

Harry Berger: Our next speaker is Joe Schloss, who is the author of *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, winner of the 2005 IASPM book award, and *Foundation B-Boys, B-Girls, and Communities of Style*, which is forthcoming. His writing has appeared in *The Flavor*, *The Seattle Weekly*, *URB*, *Vibe*, and the anthology *Classic Material* and *Total Chaos*. He teaches ethnomusicology at Tufts and lives in Brooklyn, where he studies b-boying.

Joe Schloss: There's so much stuff that people have already said that I want to pick up on. I'm not even sure where to start, but I guess I'm duty bound to start with a reflexivist moment. Which is that I ran into Chairman Mao about two and a half weeks ago and I mentioned that this panel was happening—Chairman Mao is one of the Ego Trip Collective guys—and *they knew about it*. . . and were a little annoyed that they were not included. I promised him that I would mention that. So we should keep in mind when we're talking about culture, particularly contemporary culture, that people are alive and able to speak for themselves and things like that. So there were just a couple of points that I wanted to make, a lot of which tie into things that have already been said. One of the things that really struck me is that the show sets up a false dichotomy between white and black. And I think it is important to remember that there are many, many, *many* people who have been involved in hip-hop over the years that are neither white *nor* black. And a lot of very important people, in fact, some of whom—including Fat Joe and Popmaster Fabel—were featured in the show. And yet, in a kind of strangely unnoted way. The racial category is drawn and they're on one side of that fence in some way, and then we

do not need to talk about it anymore. So I think that's something that's worth just sort of pointing to.

And in fact I was just thinking with regard to Fabel in particular—he was one of the people that they talked to in the b-boy section. Just an experience that was kind of enlightening to me was a couple of years ago. His wife, Christie, puts on these park jams in Crotona Park in the Bronx every summer. . . and he often hosts them. He's the senior vice president of the Rock Steady Crew and one of the senior members of Zulu Nation, so he has a lot of credibility in that scene. And at one point, he was up on stage announcing, and somebody in the crowd made some fairly loud comment about like, "Who's that white boy up on stage?" 'Cause he looks white. He's Puerto Rican, but he's light-skinned. And Grandmaster Caz from the Cold Crush Brothers basically jumped up on stage and started yelling at her. "Do you know who this is? This is Popmaster Fabel, he's not white, he's Puerto Rican. . ." Then Fabel came back up on and he said, "But you know what? It shouldn't matter if I'm white or not. I am who I am and I've done what I've done. . ." So that was interesting to me, and it was also interesting how somebody with that perspective would be placed into this context in the white rapper show and all of these issues be totally occluded at the same time. So I just wanted to note that that's a false dichotomy in hip-hop, particularly when we're talking about Latino contributions.

The other thing I was thinking about, just as kind of a thought experiment, was: why was it the white *rapper* show, as opposed to the white graf writer show, the white producer show, the white b-girl show, or any of the other sort of elements and aspects of hip-hop that we talk about. And the obvious reason is because that's where the money and attention are, and that's what's exciting to people, and that's what VH1 is associated with—is the rhyming aspect. But the other thing is that white people have participated much more thoroughly in every other aspect of hip-hop than in

rhyiming. So I'm kind of trying to think about, "well, what is it about rhyiming that is uniquely problematic, racially?" as opposed to other elements. There are very many important white b-boys and b-girls, Asian b-boys and b-girls, Latino b-boys and b-girls. Producers, there have been historically important white hip-hop producers, like Paul C and Steinski. Arthur Baker. I mean, we can just go down the list. White graf writers, a lot of the really important foundational graf writers were white. So what is it about rapping that is so fraught, racially, as opposed to the other aspects of hip-hop, and why is that used to represent hip-hop as a whole? Particularly when they're acknowledging these other elements, through the people that they're talking to. And then the other thing is: Is there a relationship between that racial problematic on the one hand and the money aspect and the fact that that's what garners all the attention on the other? Maybe those two things didn't just happen to happen, but maybe there's actually a connection there. So that's something that I just hoped to raise and see if people want to pick up on that.

And the other thing is that everybody assumes that Serch was in charge of everything. They kind of did make themselves invisible—the Ego Trip Collective, which are people of color, of a variety of different ethnic backgrounds—and they put Serch out front and they weren't really seen all that much in the show until the final episode. But it is known that it was created by people of color and not by MC Serch, and yet there's still this sense that he was in charge of all the decisions and the way things were presented and so forth.

Kyra Gaunt: There's an episode where it is getting hot racially and he steps and says, "I hand-picked them."

Joe Schloss: So, with that in mind, it is interesting to look at this as "a moment in the continuing history of MC Serch." He's sort of the unmarked white rapper in this whole thing. And that was one of the things that I interacted with my students about. Because this was their introduction

to MC Serch as a character, and he's in this position of authority.

Whereas—as Wayne was talking about—to people of my age, he *himself* is a fairly problematic character, racially. Basically, I agree with everything you said. There was also a little bit of a sense that he was kind of *overly* earnest in certain ways. One of the things that always stands out to me is that he spent a lot of time hanging out with gods—people in the Nation of Gods and Earths, better known as the Five Percenters. And that one of their policies, at least at the time, was not that white people couldn't join, but that they had to go through a thirty-five year probationary period before they could be part of the organization. (*laughter*) And I remember at the time MC Serch making a big deal about how he was going to be the first one to do it. So I think that he may have seen a lot of himself in some of the contestants, and tended to shy away from some of the critiques that could have been made. Especially with Jus Rhymes, who was also so earnest, and always talking about the effects of white supremacy and everything. And I really noticed that Serch was much less critical of him than almost everybody else that I talked to about it. And I think it was because he might have felt compromised by his own history.

So I think that's also another context that we can put it in, as: here's a long history of *a* white rapper. And perhaps maybe one of the final stages of becoming a true white rapper is to present yourself as an authority figure to other aspiring white rappers, and telling them what's what and who's who. . . . Because Serch is actually gaining credibility by taking this position, which is something that I think has largely gone unnoticed.

Timothy Mangin: Was there any other character who had the passion that MC Search had when he was trying to learn the art?

Joe Schloss: Do you mean his purism and stuff like that?

Timothy Mangin: Like trying to understand what the art is about?

Joe Schloss: Do you mean white or black?

Timothy Mangin: Yeah, white or black?

- Joe Schloss: Yeah, I think that is part of his whiteness, that's what motivated his intensity in defining what is and what isn't hip-hop.
- Timothy Mangin: No, I'm saying among the contestants.
- Joe Schloss: Oh. No. I do not think that's part of hip-hop now. Like I always say to my students, I feel like, if I had gotten into hip-hop more recently, I would feel like more of an insider. Because the era that we came up in was very much like, "It's a Black thing, you wouldn't understand." And it was very much marked as, to one degree or another, an exclusively African-American pursuit. Whereas, I do not think that's the case now. But I still carry a lot of that with me, and I think somebody like Serch, who came up in that same era—a little bit before me, actually—probably has a lot of that with him, to this day.
- Harry Berger: That brings us to our last but certainly not least presenter, Cheryl L. Keyes. Cheryl L. Keyes is associate professor of ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles where she teaches courses in the areas of African-American music, gender, and popular music. She is the author of *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* and has published articles on rap music and hip-hop in *Ethnomusicology*, *Folklore Forum*, *Journal of American Folklore*, and *World of Music*, as well as book chapters, encyclopedia articles. She is currently researching female jazz instrumentalists in Los Angeles and piano music indigenous to New Orleans.
- Cheryl L. Keyes: When I was asked to take part of this forum on VH1's *(White) Rapper Show*, I was somewhat intrigued just by its title but queried why it took so long for such a topic to take to the screen considering the emergence of successful white rap acts like Eminem, 3rd Bass, and Bubba Sparxx. *The (White) Rapper Show*, which aired on VH1 in January through March, consists of a team of executive producers, including Ken Mok, the creator of *America's Next Top Model*. Others affiliated with the conception of *The (White) Rapper Show* comprise a culturally diverse team of coexecutive

producers, from the defunct hip-hop magazine *Ego Trip*—Sasha Jenkins and Elliott Wilson (the co-founders) and Gabriel Alvarez, Chairperson Mao, and the magazine's art designer, Brent Rollins. The format for *The (White) Rapper Show* took on what seemingly is unscripted, a growing trend on prime time television known commonly as the reality show. In search of the most real white MC of hip-hop, *The (White) Rapper Show* consisted of eight episodes of knocking out the most wack White MC in discovering the one most exemplary of hip-hop, in its “realness” sense. Main participants are the obvious, white rappers, eleven to be exact, that is, ten contestants who came from various parts of the United States and one from the United Kingdom—seven male participants—Dasit, Jon Boy, John Brown, Jus Rhyme, 100 Proof, Sullee, and \$hamrock—three female participants—G-Child, Misfit, and Persia—and its host MC Serch, a white rapper from the interracial trio 3rd Bass of New York City. To bring about a sense of realness, *The (White) Rapper Show* begins its journey in the (South) Bronx, the acclaimed mecca of hip-hop culture.

Just by the mere title, White Rapper, and an obvious presentation of what it is like to be white while aiming to represent in black (WWARB), the viewer is taken on a culturally simulated voyage into the world of hip-hop. What immediately struck me was how each contestant attempted to “erase” whiteness via an imagined construction of blackness through the prism of a hip-hop aesthetic. For example, common among the ten contestants is the appropriation of black “street” speech in which hip-hop vernacular and its stylized use of vocal inflections, tonal semantics, and the whole nine-yards of signifying locution distinct to Black vernacular speech dominated. Also, in an attempt to erase the physicality of whiteness, I noticed that the majority of the male contestants donned low-cut haircuts, which to my eyes diminished the straight-hair look affiliated with whiteness. One of my friends who happened to

come in the room while I was watching *The . . . Show* thought a few of the male contestants like John Brown and Sullee were perhaps of Latino origins or simply a lighter-complexioned African American. Additionally, there was the body posturing (i.e., the walk, gait, a little B-boy/B-girl attitude) affiliated with Black male “cool” culture. Also among the ten, only one wore “grills.” The audience realized that these grills were temporarily cosmetic when its stylist, \$hamrock and his golden grills shifted out-of-place during a basketball game in the famous courts of Holcombe Rucker of Harlem. While some of the contestants’ hip-hop idols were African American (e.g., Persia admires Roxanne Shanté), G-Child was the only one who proudly extolled that her hip-hop idol and mentor was white, Vanilla Ice. Earlier on, I had a feeling that she would not be among the final contestants and perhaps among the first MCs to “step off.” (Actually G-Child was the third to be disqualified.)

In critically engaging with *The (White) Rapper Show*, it is undoubtedly multivalent, full of various meanings, and, in my opinion, a clear representation of the “expropriation” of black culture albeit masked as hip-hop—as this experience is known exclusive through hip-hop/urban/ghetto tripartite.

If I were to use *The (White) Rapper Show* as a segment in my course on hip-hop, “Cultural History of Rap,” I would approach it from several angles beginning with how white kids release themselves (to borrow from Lawrence Levine in the documentary *Ethnic Notions*) as black. In why *White Kids Love Hip-Hop*, Bakari Kitwana lists and defines the three categories of white engagements of hip-hop construction:

Wanksta: a wannabe gangsta. An expression popularized by Rapper 50 Cent to describe a gangsta wannabe; Wigger: (an inversion of the N-word) a young white who wants desperately to be down with hip-hop, who identifies more strongly with black culture than white; and

Wannabe: someone uncomfortable being himself or herself and fanatically trying to be someone else. (Long used in Black American colloquial/vernacular language to describe an outside aping insider behavior and popularized among the younger generation by the 1988 Spike Lee film *School Daze*).

There are no doubt complex issues of representation or representing blackness via a hip-hop gaze that need further unraveling and interrogation for viewers in general. I have a list of terms that I would pose to my class and asked them to define them in reference to their understanding of hip-hop and assert how each contestant, to some degree or less, exploited the following: "realness," "authenticity," "mimicking," "originality," "commodity" and "culture," hip-hop aesthetic, and the application of the three categories of white engagement of hip-hop construction. In doing so, I would select certain scenes or moments from each episode. Of particular interest to me is the unveiling of the real John Brown in the final or eighth episode versus \$hamrock. I thought it was rather interesting that when the show provided viewers and the audiences into a few stolen moments with the finalists and their closest friend, \$hamrock's friend, Black Josh, was African American. \$hamrock was certainly surprised to see Black Josh, as he greeted him just like brothas (Black males) greet one another. However, John Brown, the dubbed King of the 'Burbs (short for Suburbs) seemed to be a bit cold toward his best friend, Blaise Delacroix II. Was this because Delacroix was a bit too conservative in dress and certainly without swagger, not in keeping with John Brown's Ghetto Revival-holler-back self-proclaimed hip-hop trademark presentation to his audience? I would pose to my class, I wondered why John Brown seemed a bit cold or distant to the friend that we (the audience) thought was his closest friend or association?

There are certain metaphors used in *The (White) Rapper Show* that play on an inauthentic of a wack white

rapper who falters in his/her representation of blackness via the isolation booth known as the Ice Ice Chamber—the place where the losing team members were summoned when his/her rhymes fell short of anything dope. Of course, Ice Ice signifies on Vanilla Ice, the infamous white MC who was proven among hip-hop acts to be the most wack white MC of all time. So you could imagine the immense pressure these MCs were under to come out of the “wack communitas” either more wack or more black.

(Sustained laughter from the panelists and audience)

There are two areas of significance as they relate to *The (White) Rapper Show* which I would like to discuss further. They are themes of inversion and elements of language.

Themes of Inversion: In Episode 3, I was struck by one of the elimination rounds by which each white rapper had to take a slice of bread from a white loaf of bread and build a rhyme around terms like “white trash,” “white guilt,” “whitewash,” and “white power.” In essence, some of the contestants, like \$hamrock, who arbitrarily selected the loaf with “white guilt” and Sullee, “white power,” made political references against white supremacy and privilege toward African Americans, a gesture of turning oneself inward in rendering or ridiculing “whiteness” as a social-political site. In reference to the above, it beg the question why are there parentheses around “White” in the show’s title?

Episode 7 too was of interest. In this episode, “whiteness” intersects with a web of black/white where viewers and the contestants are brought to Detroit, the homeland of one of the most successful white MCs of hip-hop to date, Eminem. Here is where the viewers experience the “trailer park” context in contrast to the contestants’ first abode in the Bronx. Here is an inversion of the “hood” trope—by locating the white underprivileged or marginalized or working-class voice—a sense of

realness as to what it means to be white, authentic, and hip-hop. (A good text for this is David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*—made popular in the lyrics of Eminem and Kid Frost, the latter of whom appeared in the last Episode.)

Elements of language: the power of the word. In the first episode, viewers could not help but note how Serch dealt with the appropriateness and inappropriateness of language in hip-hop culture. In this episode, the female MC Persia from Far Rockaway, Queens, expressed her strong dislike for John Brown, whose origin, as I stated previously, is from a ritzy predominantly white community in California. John Brown, self-proclaimed to be the “King of the Burbs”—a site where the main consumers of hip-hop culture are from, according to many music critics—advanced a concept associated with his exploits of hip-hop called the Ghetto Revival. In Episode 1, it is apparent that Persia, from the East Coast, dislikes what she perceives to be a West Coaster suburban MC trying to be down with hip-hop by erasing what some may see as “soft” (the suburbs/Vanilla Ice and all the suburbs conjures up) with trying to be hard with his notion of “Ghetto Revival.” Persia taunts John Brown and in a rage against him calls him the N-word; should I say Nigga? Of course, Serch, the host, deals with this matter by showing disapproval. Persia is isolated from the rest of the contestants and has to wear a heavy N-word chain. She later apologizes for using the N-word. Speaking of language and usage, in the final episode, Serch reminds the three remaining contestants, Sullee, \$hamrock, and John Brown, about the “rules of engagement” in freestyle. He does tell the three that their challengers are African Americans (and members of Detroit's 8-Mile) and, as such, do not use the N-word or any racial references in their rhymes because they are not in group or members of the African-American community or members of the community in general. Here, is a good lesson in the appropriateness of language in black vernacular speech and its efficacy or power.

What I would remind my students of is the danger of oversimplifying African-American culture by seeing it or experiencing it through hip-hop as though this is the ultimate or only black experience. Be careful with the “reductionist” approach, which can easily happen when watching shows like *The (White) Rapper Show*. Hence, black culture in the case and medium is basically how it is packaged, consumed, and expropriated. Reality shows of this nature are to entertain and are not therefore concerned with history. Hence, the black experience is ahistoricized and simply reduced to being only a “ghetto” experience. As Kitwana notes, Black American culture and hip-hop aren’t always interchangeable.

Afterthought

Frankly, with the final showdown between John Brown and \$hamrock in Episode 8, I personally wanted \$hamrock to win. I thought his flow, style, and overall attitude was without pretentiousness. After awhile the “Ghetto Revival” “hallelujah, holler back” clichés of John Brown and his self-proclaimed “King of the Burbs” got a bit tired for me, too gimmicky.

(At this point, the session was opened up for audience questions and comments)

Miles White, who was unable to participate in the roundtable as planned, offered a written afterword included here.

The (Black) Boy Shuffle: Internalizing, Externalizing, and Naturalizing the Black Male Body Double

I

What *The (White) Rapper Show* finally succeeds in doing is reducing the conjoined-at-birth twin grotesquenesses of hardcore rap and the black male brute to their logical and predictable endgame as racist parody, obscuring the fact that matters of real consequence that we ought to be interrogating with the utmost seriousness (‘cause we don’t know where this shit is headed, y’all) are made the butt of buffoonery by white elites who still see black gold in Dem Dar Hills. If we can look past the

unabashed white-guiltlessness at the heart of this racial farce, it does point to the fact—or perhaps it is this panel that finally points the finger of incredulous exclamation—that white boys at play in the cotton fields of the real nigga has become a cultural phenomenon so contemporarily *naturalized* that it hardly raises a scholarly eyebrow in ethnomusicological circles, the outstanding exception being Ingrid Monson's perceptive essay, "The Problem With White Hipness."³ Studies of music and whiteness are in fact coming largely from outside of our discipline by any number of established and respected scholars.

The phenomenon of "racial cross-dressing"⁴ as *nonphenomenon* makes invisible the historical process of shuffling the black body through endless trap doors in America's house of racial mirrors by white overseers who have always assumed proprietary agency over the black body and all it possesses. This process begins in earnest with minstrelsy practice, a subject on which Eric Lott may have gotten the last word worth getting, but we will begin there anyway and risk rethreading familiar ground. We must begin there to reiterate the point that minstrelsy put the black male body, however grotesquely conceived, on public display (the auction block notwithstanding) as the first objectification of the black body as mass-mediated pop culture commodity for the amusement of whites.

What has been less commented upon in this racial masquerade is what then happens to whiteness, a subject that has scarcely been thrashed out of its hiding place in more than four hundred years of socially constructing, physically segregating, morally suspecting, panoptically eyeballing, intellectually questioning, and finally theoretically deconstructing blackness. In understanding the duplicitous nature of blackface performance one must unmask not only the uproariously gregarious figure of the fully unleashed white Victorian male dancing a drunken jig in the funhouse of blackness, but the ways in which the Janus-faced figure of the black mask both externalizes blackness as *explicit actor* while whiteness remains internalized, literally invisible, as *implicit actor*.

It is the mask that imbues the performance with authenticity while whiteness remains presumably untainted behind the illusion it has created for its own amusement. In this play of the carnivalesque,⁵ the black body is the thing made visible. Tattered clothing, a caricature of black speech patterns, facial gestures, the motioning of the hands, jig dancing, and other performative gestures work in tandem to construct a representation of black male subjectivity as theatrical spectacle encoded at the site of the body. The white performer as provocateur and puppet-master winks from behind his

fool's mask. The performativity of the black body in minstrelsy references then, an array of cultural practices that both erase and (re)present black subjectivity as an externalized phantasm of the white racial imagination. The racial striptease of later unmasking themselves by blackface performers typically took the form of images positioned beside their black alter egos in posters and on sheet music covers, presenting the reconstituted white male aloof and refined in his Victorian sobriety. With this gesture, whiteness reaffirms itself by emphatically rejecting the preposterousness of blackness, an awkwardly embarrassing but pardonable frivolity of a Saturday night.

Minstrelsy as an act of theatrical homoerotic miscegenation and morning-after rejection reaffirms whiteness in the cultural sphere (whiteness had already affirmed itself in the social sphere through slavery and segregation) by assuming another kind of agency over the black body—one metaphorical rather than physical. Putting it on display as public spectacle further problematized the black body “as the sign of a radically different (alien) ontology, which of course threatened (but ultimately did not disrupt) the Eurocentric belief in itself as the defining model of humanity.”⁶ It is with minstrelsy then, that we get the first cultural highjacking of black male subjectivity as deviant actor circulating in a new affective economy of racial codes and signifiers—“one of the very first constitutive discourses of the body in American culture.”⁷

The (White) Rapper Show, framed around culturally embedded notions of the black male as deviant actor and the association of blackness with criminality, is not particularly coincidental; there is much history here worth considering. Messerschmitt,⁸ for instance, has suggested how the human body is implicated in the evolution of criminology as it becomes linked to violence expressed in terms of gender and racial difference. This evolution appears to begin with the work of Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) who began to associate the body with deviance, concluding that there is a “criminal man” who is corporeally distinct from the “average man,” and that society is threatened by the criminal body now “conceived as a sign of social dangerousness and deviation.”⁹ This deviation would later become further racialized by Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), a founder of criminal anthropology, who argued that many bodily characteristics found in “savages and among the colored races are also to be found in habitual delinquents.”¹⁰

These kinds of theories may or may not have buttressed the project of slavery but certainly advanced the demonization of blackness and of the black body as they began to circulate in the cultural sphere as popular entertainment: The brandishing of the black mask associated blackness, if not

with outright criminality, then with lewd and deviant social behavior beyond the pale of Victorian morality and decency as if that were not criminal enough. It is not simply the case, as Monson suggests, that black bebop musicians found themselves subjected to “appropriation by primitivist racial ideologies,”¹¹ but that the black body itself has been prone to such cultural appropriations since T. D. Rice jumped all over Jim Crow. If the transgressive black male body “sold extremely well in the twentieth-century,”¹² as Monson goes on to remind us, then it did as it did in the nineteenth century, and, as *The (White) Rapper Show* makes obvious, blackness and transgression continue to sell well into the new millennium.

II

If we do not mind scurrying across the cultural debris of other incredible racial absurdities since minstrelsy—coon shouters, *The Birth of A Nation*, Norman Mailer’s *White Negro*—to 1950s popular music, we come to what would prove to be the apotheosis of racial masquerade. Elvis Presley, the hillbilly cat from Tupelo by way of Memphis, gave the minstrel performer a duckbill makeover that would forever change the course of American popular culture if not the western world. With Elvis the “explicit” black actor and the “implicit” white actor are inverted in a racial sleight of hand without which the contemporary *wigga* could never have gotten his *nigga* on in the first place.

Elvis, with his famous sneer (the first mean mugging?), dangerous sideburns, and white trash pedigree, allowed “the dominant culture to define itself by what it is not: *not* White Trash.”¹³ Elvis thus became the new and improved racialized Other leading a full-frontal assault on the last vestiges of Victorian decorum once represented by the blackface mask. Elvis was the first *bona fide* white Negro, his emotive sexual power and *hoo-doo-ness* informed by his interpretation of a now implicit black male subjectivity that erased the visible sign of blackness. Authenticity now rested not in the mojo of the blackface mask, but in Elvis’ reworking of the black male body rock, gyrating his famous pelvis in such a publicly vulgar way that it might well be considered the 1950s version of crotch grabbing. In any case, he pointed his compass in the right direction—below the belt, where all the good stuff is.

When Elvis adapted Black music, dress, and style, he also appropriated some of the sexuality and scandalizing power of Black bodies.¹⁴

By emphasizing the legs and the nether regions one must traverse to get down there and back, black male subjectivity as the hypersexualized buck and/or hypermasculine brute was once again transmuted, (re)unauthorized and interjected metaphorically into the field of popular culture as community property—a public space of racial play for the white working-class. Presley and other white men jumping out of the woodpile pick-pocketed black boogie-woogie subjectivity for themselves, keeping *real deal niggas* on the designated/segregated side of the racial divide. Presley was a safety valve, containing the general potential for social mayhem associated with black men while opening the door for the jungle-fevered acting-out of white teenagers rebelling against—well, *what'cha got?*

What has shifted since the 1950s in discussing things like *The (White) Rapper Show* is the ways in which the cultural and political currency of the black body has accrued in value over time so that the racial exchange rate of ho-hum whiteness continues to lose interest. The mainstreaming of hip-hop culture caused the play of implicit and explicit actors to collapse in on itself, making the preference for mere poseurs passé. White hip-hop performers and consumers now aspire to an authenticity that, rather than attempting to obscure racial subtexts and the highjacking of black subjectivity, covets, foregrounds, and celebrates them. The actor and the act have not only become inseparable, but in the hip-hop generation, *performing the black body* whether on the stage or the street has become the litmus test of a new cultural ideal of authenticity, particularly with respect to ideas around masculinity. The rules of the new *keeping it real* game mean that credibility is everything, that credibility depends on authenticity, and that authenticity is bestowed on the mean streets of the black inner city.

Elvis would not cut it in this new jack game, where every white boy since Vanilla Ice knows you cannot just stamp out counterfeit niggas in your basement and put that shit out on the street. This has created an environment in which only a handful of white male rap performers have made the cut to legitimacy as few have been able to convincingly meet the new threshold for blacking up. When LL Cool J ripped off his shirt to reveal the taut black body once prized by slave traders, and Run-DMC mean-mugged *Rolling Stone* in black fedoras and the b-boy stance, they reinvented the buck/brute as the new and definitive representation of hip-hop maleness—young, aggressive, black, and urban—that would become an indelible image in the American racial imagination around rap music. The New School standard-bearers sent a clear message to white males that to get down in this culture they would have to step up.

The “Afro-Americanization of white youth”¹⁵ saw white kids begin to adopt the sartorial style, language, and often the speech patterns of inner city black youth, appropriating the affective gestures of blackness as the performance of the everyday.¹⁶ Unlike many fake wiggaz, however, Eminem’s Elvis-like white trash upbringing gave him an instant line of credibility in the hip-hop candy shop, cosigned by Dr. Dre to avoid any collateral damage, of course. Slim Shady put crazy dope on the street, re-upped two or three times and doubled the interest white kids now paid to everything hip-hop—from *Shady Wear* to *Roc-A-Wear*—while they steady copped new product off the street as long as it was in the mall. Those who wanted into the game but did not have the street credibility to get legit inevitably turned to parody, which brings us back to VH1’s incredible rhapsody in racial hooliganism, where white contestants regaled us with contrived fantasies of life in da ’hood—black-talking, sporting grillz and designer gear, committing *faux-petty* crimes—while fetishizing rappers who came up in the real game.

In an episode where contestants competed to see who was the most “thugged out,” the hardcore rapper Saigon cameo’d in to run down the basics of thugness, rattling off his time spent in prison, rolling with gangs, and committing criminal offenses like they were boy scout merit badges. Saigon reinserted the absent black male deviant presence into the series, reminding all posers that criminality was as critical in the rap game as microphone skills. The rookies then used “stolen” grocery store shopping carts to try and “catch a case” (getting charged with a crime) thrown from an abandoned apartment building, jacked bicycles with chain cutters and talked smack to each other with cameras rolling. The idiotic ideologies of racial acculturation and the frivolous attitude toward inner-city desperation that the show promoted to its supposedly hip audience only served to remind us how the circulation of pejorative representations of blacks in the 1800s brought about real political and social consequences for black folks over the next hundred years and that culminated in the very ghettos they now romanticize as racial playgrounds.

A bigger problem with the new “white negroism” parodied in *The (White) Rapper Show* may have to do with “the seeming intimacy of video culture” that makes this field of play instantly accessible to mass audiences of adolescent males, and where “the problems raised by corporate influences over deciding what is ‘authentic’ are great.”¹⁷ The availability of images of black males who may or may not have slung rock in the hood with bitches in tow allows white consumers of hardcore rap to traffic the same back alleyways as Mailer’s white hipster, reveling “in the worst of perversion,

promiscuity, pimpery, drug addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break, what-have-you. . . looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts."¹⁸

It should hardly come as a surprise however, that adolescent consumers of rap would eventually act out their own racial fantasies of black masculinity. John Seabrook offers a remarkably insightful if insipid update of Mailer's hipster as a middle-class wigga walking the street rocking Big Poppa's *Ready to Die* and "a black nylon convict-style cap, a fashion I picked up from the homeys in the rap videos."¹⁹ Riding the subway, intoxicated by his du-rag and Biggie banging in his headphones, he feels his own black-like-me bad selfness and lets "the gangsta style play down into my whiteboy identity, thinking to myself, 'Man you are the illest, you are sitting here on this subway and none of these people are going to FUCK with you, and if they do FUCK with you, you are going to FUCK them up. What's MY muthafuckin' name?'"²⁰

Seabrook and *The (White) Rapper Show* represent the persistence of America's racial carnivalesque of black and white bodies swirling around and playing off each other. White kids are no longer blackening up their faces, they are blackening up their psyches. Black men are no longer chain-link fenced out in the backyard of white desire—they are walking the streets, running the game. Everybody is getting something. Minstrelsy and its cultural legacy remains—or should remain—the cautionary tale. Performatives of blackness and the fetishization of the black body continue to intersect at dangerous crossroads²¹ that reduce the racial Other to consumer commodities in cultural projects that do not advance progressive or antiracist agendas, but promote "a much more complex, seductive and insidious way of perpetuating racism."²²

Media moguls with deep pockets who pretend to love hip-hop but who have no problems making cheese off of absurdities like *The (White) Rapper Show* might want to think about getting out front on some real issues—gang violence, drug-infested streets, decimated inner city schools, institutional racism, economic disparities—that create the racial nightmares that become playgrounds for white adolescent fantasy. I for one am not optimistic. More than one hundred years of white boys in black drag pimping black culture has not ameliorated racist hostility against most black folk, but merely kept kindling on the fire. Until they are ready to cop to that, *Dem (White) Niggas Sho* need to cut this shit out.

Notes

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7. Lott, 117.
8. Messerschmitt, James W. *Flesh & Blood: Adolescent Gender Diversity and Violence*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.
9. Messerschmitt, 6.
10. Ibid.
11. Monson, 412.
12. Monson, 419.
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20. *Ibid*, pg. 3

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