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Droppin' Knowledge on Race

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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Droppin' Knowledge on Race: Hip-Hop, White Adolescents, and Anti-Racism Education

By Steven Netcoh



"SPREAD LOVE: COMMANDANTE BIGGIE" ARTISTS: JOHN GARCIA, CERN ONE, SEAN MEENAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS TINSON

## 1. White Kids and Hip Hop

Though white adolescents comprise a large percentage of Hip Hop's audience, relatively few academic studies examine why they readily gravitate toward the music and how they engage with the culture. The majority of scholarship on white adolescents and Hip Hop focuses on how these individuals adapt the music and culture to their local settings. Rodriguez (2006) investigates the racial ideologies of politically conscious Hip-Hop fans primarily in Northampton, Massachusetts. Hayes (2004) examines how white Canadian youth in rural Ontario identified with Hip Hop to distinguish themselves from their racially and culturally homogenous home community. Cutler (1999) explores how a white teenager from one of New York City's wealthiest neighborhoods aligned with Hip-Hop by adopting African American vernacular English and stereotypical features of urban street culture such as gang membership and drug use. Each of these studies illustrates the unique ways that white adolescents have incorporated Hip Hop into their lives in disparate local settings.

One text that provides a more overarching view of white adolescents' engagement with Hip Hop is Kitwana's (2005) *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*. In the book, Kitwana argues Hip Hop has a critical role to play in moving America beyond its old racial politics, which he defines as being "characterized by adherence to stark differences—cultural, personal and political—between Black and white . . . cultural territorialism on both sides, and . . . uncritical acceptance of stereotypes, also on both sides." He believes Hip Hop will bring America toward a new racial politics, which is "marked by nuance, complexity . . . and a sort of fluidity between cultures" (pp. xiv-xv). According to Kitwana, Hip Hop creates grounds for youth of diverse racial backgrounds to converge and share their common interest in the music and culture (p. xiv). Within these spaces, youth can collectively "explore" new conceptions of race that transcend understandings of racial boundaries as fixed and biological. Kitwana argues Hip Hop is a "vehicle to educate and bring down the walls of ignorance when it comes to American race relations" (p. 132).

While Hip Hop may expose whites to diverse racial representations and create spaces for youth of all races to share a common interest in Hip Hop, the notion that the music alone can facilitate significant transformation in white Americans' racial ideologies is rather idealistic. Hip Hop has become a staple of a media culture that promotes consumerism and self-gratification while "devaluing citizenship" (Yousman, 2003, p. 370). Mainstream Hip Hop serves primarily as a spectacle for its audiences and rarely invites critical social or political dialogue (Watts, 1997). Most consumers perceive Hip Hop strictly as a form of entertainment and fail to comprehend or ignore its capacity as an agent for critical discourse on race. Provided the media culture in which Hip Hop is produced and consumed, it is unrealistic to assume the music can independently affect any comprehensive change in white adolescents' racial ideologies and politics.

The minimal scholarship on Hip Hop and its white audience supports the notion that rap music has been

limited in its capacity to mobilize racially just ideologies and politics in white youth (Hayes, 2004; Rodriguez, 2006). One study indicates Hip Hop may in fact hinder racial progress as many whites use stereotypical representations of black males and females in Hip Hop to legitimize discrimination against black Americans in both "personal" and "political behaviors" (Reyna, Brandt, & Viki, 2009, p. 374). Additionally, Hip Hop has been a prominent cultural force for over twenty years, yet there has been little change in white Americans' racial discourse, ideologies, or politics. Since Hip Hop entered the mainstream, color-blindness has been solidified as the dominant racial ideology, and the belief that the United States is a "post-racial" society has been accepted as "common sense" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Winant, 2002, p. 33). Hip-Hop has been unable to destabilize these prevalent notions that mask the degree to which racism is institutionalized in American society and prevent the United States from realizing true racial equality.

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Given Hip Hop's limits in mobilizing racially just ideologies and politics in its white listener population, I draw on critical media studies scholarship to argue that secondary and post-secondary schools provide useful spaces for white adolescents to deconstruct Hip Hop's representations of and discourses on race and participate in meaningful dialogue about race as an embedded feature of America's social institutions. Though most Hip Hop is produced for a media culture that is market and consumption driven, it can serve as an arena to challenge the foundations of America's racial order when its representations, discourses, and ideologies of race are made subjects of explicit and critical investigation. Secondary and post-secondary classrooms provide spaces to maximize Hip Hop's democratic potential by examining, among other subjects, Rick Ross's constructions of authenticity, Lupe Fiasco's anti-racism discourse, Nas's challenges of color-blindness, and Eminem's rearticulation of whiteness.

## 2. Race, Racial Ideology, and Whiteness

Before examining Hip Hop's racial representations, discourses, and ideologies, it is instructive to outline the theories of race from which this study works. Although race is commonly understood as a biological characteristic, there is little dispute among social scientists that it is a socially constructed entity. Humans created race as a means to organize and structure the social world, and thus it has no grounding in nature or biology. As Bonilla-Silva (2006) contends, "notions of racial difference are human creations rather than eternal, essential categories" (p. 8).

All racial classifications are flawed as they incorrectly assume homogeneity across a range of “nationalities, geographical origins, languages, dialects, and cultural traditions” (Keating, 1995, p. 911). Broad racial categories cannot possibly account for the diversity contained within them, which thus highlights their arbitrary nature.

Because race is socially constructed, it is impermanent, unfixed, and subject to change. Omi and Winant (1993) assert the meaning of race is “defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed” (p. 61). Racial categories have been updated and revised throughout history to encompass different groups of people. For much of the nineteenth century, “White,” “Negro,” and “Indian” were the only recognized racial categories in the United States (Keating, 1995, p. 911). In California, Mexican immigrants were classified as “white,” which afforded them all the rights and privileges of white Americans while Chinese immigrants were labeled “Indian” and thus “denied the political rights accorded to whites” (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 82). Since their categorization as “white” and “Indian,” both Chinese and Mexican Americans have been reclassified into various racial groups such as “Orientals,” “Asians,” “Persons of Spanish Mother Tongue,” and “Hispanics” (Keating, 1995, p. 911). This process of continual racial reclassification underscores the subjective nature of race.

Though race is fluid and unfixed, it produces real effects in the social world. Bonilla-Silva (2006) uses the term “racial structure” to describe how race has historically provided privileges to those with white skin and restricted the distribution of economic, political, and social capital to those with darker skin (p. 9). This inequality persists today as a variety of statistics suggest some racial groups face institutional disadvantages in America’s racialized social structure. A report released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that as of December 2010, black males were imprisoned at a rate “nearly 7 times higher than white non-Hispanic males” (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the unemployment rate for black Americans has consistently remained around double the jobless rate for white Americans during the past thirty years (“Unemployment Rates,” 2010). Cited are just a few statistics that suggest racial inequality is embedded in America’s social structure and that race functions as a mechanism to order the social world.

***Because race is socially constructed, it is impermanent, unfixed, and subject to change.***

While race is an integral feature of social structures, it is also experienced at the micro social level. As Omi and Winant (2008) note, “Race always operates at the crossroads of identity and social structure” (p. 1565). All representations of race inevitably “invoke social structures, power relations, lived experiences of identity and difference” (Omi & Winant, 2008, p. 1570). Racial

signification is thus inseparable from the larger racialized structure that shapes individuals’ social experiences. When people interpret representations of race, they immediately draw on “preconceived notions” created within and perpetuated by the racialized social structure. White people who signify “blackness” in their speech, dress, or body movements are understood to be acting “against their race.” These individuals might face discrimination or social stigmatization because they do not conform to their racial scripts. As such, all racial representation is understood and experienced within an established racial order (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 59).

Individuals and groups develop racial ideologies to interpret and explain their varied experiences with race. Bonilla-Silva (2006) defines racial ideology as “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (p. 9). A variety of racial ideologies exist within racial structures and engage in a perpetual struggle for dominance. Color-blindness is arguably the dominant racial ideology in America, and it “disconnect[s] race from the power relations in which inequality and racial discourses are embedded” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Rodriguez, 2006, p. 646). Color-blindness presumes race inconsequential in individuals’ social experiences and opportunities. People who employ color-blind ideologies claim they “don’t see any color, just people” and tend to believe racism no longer affects society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 1). Conversely, those who adopt more progressive racial ideologies recognize race as an organizing feature of social structures and thus advocate policies that directly redress institutionalized racism and past racial oppression (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 57).

Whiteness is implicated in the maintenance of structural racism, and it serves as a “site of racial, economic, and political privilege” (Giroux, 1997, p. 290). Lipsitz (1998) uses the term “possessive investment in whiteness” to describe white America’s collective interest in protecting white supremacy and dedicates a book-length study to examining how white privilege has been created and sustained in the United States. He illustrates how discrimination in housing markets, inequality in the education system, and “intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations” has provided whiteness a “cash value” and contributed to “the racialized hierarchies of our society” (p. vii). In a similar investigation of white privilege, Harris (1995) examines how whiteness has been afforded property value in American society and provides “a host of public, private and psychological benefits” (p. 286). Harris deconstructs the legal implications of “whiteness as property” to demonstrate how the “judicial definition of racial identity based on white supremacy reproduced . . . racial subordination at the institutional level” (p. 284).

Lipsitz and Harris’s analyses are examples of “Whiteness Studies,” which is a field of scholarship that emerged to unveil the institutionalized advantages and privileges of whiteness. Dyer (1988) argues it is imperative to unmask the privileges of whiteness because “[W]hite power secures its dominance by seeming not to

be anything in particular" (p. 44). As a result of its "invisibility," "whiteness" operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called 'minorities' are measured" (Keating, 1995, p. 905). Academics who study whiteness attempt to destabilize its normalcy and call attention to its role in racial oppression and exclusion. Such a focus on the insidious nature of whiteness and the social effects of institutionalized white supremacy provides grounds for whites to become aware of their "dysconscious racism" and recognize their collective involvement in racial inequality (King, 1991).

### 3. Hip Hop, Color-Blindness, and Racial Stereotyping

Provided Kitwana's argument about Hip Hop as a "vehicle to educate" about race and transform America's racial ideologies and politics, one might expect white adolescents at Hip Hop concerts where artists critique "racist hypocrisies" and "rap about black nationalism" to recognize white privilege and display some semblance of understanding racism as an institutionalized feature of American society (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 653). To the contrary, Jason Rodriguez demonstrates in "Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop" that the majority of participants in his study displayed color-blind ideologies in their discourse on race and Hip Hop. Rodriguez conducted participant observation research at twenty Hip-Hop concerts, primarily in Northampton, Massachusetts, to examine how white Hip Hop fans understand their participation in an "unmistakably African American art form" (p. 648). Rodriguez found that the majority of those he interviewed recognized race as a "salient" feature of others' lives while simultaneously denying its significance in their own (p. 657).

Most participants claimed they were attracted to "conscious" Hip Hop's "radical politics," but they refrained from associating with its racialized politics. Rodriguez attributes his participants' reluctance to adopt Hip Hop's racial politics to their color-blind ideologies, which are defined by race neutral social and political outlooks (p. 654). Such color-blindness was reflected in a number of the interviewees' comments about Hip Hop and race. One participant asserted, "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 . . . a bridge between the race differences, and you have to realize that it's all just people no matter what the color of your skin" (p. 661). The majority of participants in the study made similar "rhetorical maneuvers" to downplay the significance of race in American life. Rodriguez argues that these white adolescents' color-blind ideologies allowed them to justify their participation in Hip Hop by "taking a racially-coded art form and turning it into a color-blind one" (p. 663).

Rodriguez's research illustrates, at least in one locale, Hip Hop's limits in independently mobilizing progressive racial ideologies in its white audience. Although the white adolescents in his study attended concerts where race was a focus of the artists' lyrical and performative content, they remained ignorant, at least in their discourse, of white privilege and structural racism. The participants' engagement with racially progressive and sometimes radical Hip Hop did not destabilize their color-blind

ideologies nor did it prompt them to adopt more progressive racial politics. Rodriguez suggests the overtly racialized nature of the music may have exacerbated the interviewees' color-blindness as they worked to justify their presence in the scene by asserting the irrelevance of race in their lives and ignoring the privileges of their white identities.

In a similar attempt to investigate white youths' participation in Hip Hop, Hayes (2004) studied how white Canadian youth in rural Ontario interpreted Hip Hop music and adopted aspects of the culture to distinguish themselves from their racially and culturally homogenous community. Hayes found that the majority of participants in his study had little to no interaction with black people and thus displayed "limited understandings of the complexity and diversity of blackness." He argues the youth came to understand "all black people as the embodiments of rap culture" as they "distill[ed] the heterogeneity of black identity to a handful of racial stereotypes" (p. 67). For these youth, Hip Hop artists such as Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. represented authentic black culture because they rapped about life on the streets of America's inner cities and the struggles they faced as young black males. Consequently, these youths' performances of Hip Hop culture reinforced their predominantly white town's understanding of the black male experience as characterized by "violence, crime, and poverty" (p. 65).

While Hayes believes in Hip Hop's potential to facilitate meaningful dialogue about race in urban spaces that are culturally diverse, he is pessimistic about its capacity to mobilize progressive racial ideologies and politics in racially homogenous communities. He argues that the youth in his study were unable to move beyond their stereotypical understandings of race to investigate the heterogeneity of blackness and race in general. Further, he asserts their inability to "overcome local perceptions of race" prevented them from taking any significant steps toward "progressive race relations" and "displac[ing] their town's unspoken yet pervasive whiteness" (p. 80). While the youths' adoption of Hip Hop presented opportunities to destabilize the normalcy of whiteness in their town, they ultimately reinforced its power with their fixed representations of and discourses on race. Hayes's research suggests that Hip Hop may negatively impact racial progress in predominantly white communities as many white youth uncritically accept detrimental stereotypes presented in Hip Hop as authentic representations of "blackness."

Reyna et. al.'s (2009) "Blame It on Hip-Hop: Anti-Rap Attitudes as a Proxy for Prejudice" also demonstrates the potential dangers of Hip Hop's representations of race. The authors conducted three different studies, two of which are instructive for the current analysis, to determine if and how "non-Blacks [could] use their stereotypes of rap to justify prejudice and discrimination against Blacks—especially the Black urban poor" (p. 364). In the first study, they found white participants' negative attitudes toward Hip Hop music were associated with negative beliefs about black Americans and anti-black policy stances. The authors attribute the relationship between distaste for rap music and anti-black policy positions to what they term



"responsibility stereotypes" associated with Hip Hop music such as the notion that all rappers advocate "get rich quick through crime and violence" lifestyles (p. 364). These stereotypes suggest rappers violate "important societal values," are responsible for their impoverished and violent living conditions, and thus do not deserve the benefits of favorable social policies (p. 364).

To obtain more current data and improve the methodology of their first investigation, Reyna et. al. conducted a second study in which they surveyed 98 participants about their attitudes toward Hip Hop, the black community, and race relations in America. The second study corroborated their analysis of the 1993 GSS data as the results indicated that, once again, white respondents' anti-rap attitudes were associated with both negative feelings toward black Americans and anti-black policy positions. The authors found that the responsibility stereotype was a primary factor in whites' discriminatory attitudes. According to Reyna et. al., "responsibility stereotypes fully accounted for the relationship between anti-rap attitudes and street crime policies, as well as anti-rap attitudes and opposition to policies designed to help Blacks that do not fit the stereotype portrayed by rap (affirmative action for qualified Blacks)" (p. 371). These results suggest that whites' discriminatory attitudes and politics toward black people extended beyond just those who fit rap's stereotypical representations of "blackness" to black Americans in general.

***During approximately the past twenty-five years, movements have emerged within the fields of cultural studies, communication, and education, among others, to demonstrate the necessity for media education and literacy programs that equip youth with the skills to deconstruct and critically interrogate the media they consume.***

The aforementioned studies indicate that Hip Hop may encourage color-blindness in certain locales and a general acceptance of injurious racial stereotypes by its white audience. With little formal knowledge of how race functions in society, many whites adopt the dominant racial ideology of color-blindness, and Hip Hop becomes one channel through which their color-blindness is deployed. Additionally, Hip Hop is wrought with stereotypical representations of black males and females that many white listeners internalize and mobilize in their racial politics and attitudes toward black people. Such acceptance of deleterious stereotypes is evident in the research of Hayes (2004) and Reyna et. al. (2009) who found that many white participants used representations of black males and females in Hip Hop as a "proxy" for discriminatory personal and political attitudes toward all black people (p. 361).

This scholarship on Hip Hop and its white audience underscores the importance of mediating Hip Hop's racial representations and discourses. While Hip Hop has potential to mobilize racially just ideologies and politics in its white audience, many white listeners internalize rap music's stereotypical portrayals of race while they remain ignorant of its more progressive racial discourses. The existing research on Hip Hop and white listeners suggests further measures must be taken to minimize rap music's negative influence on the struggle for racial justice and maximize its democratic potential. In the rest of this essay, I build on critical media studies scholarship to illustrate how secondary and post-secondary schools provide useful spaces for white adolescents to deconstruct Hip Hop's stereotypical representations of race, develop anti-racism voices, destabilize color-blindness, and rearticulate their whiteness.

#### **4. Hip Hop, Race, and Education**

During approximately the past twenty-five years, movements have emerged within the fields of cultural studies, communication, and education, among others, to demonstrate the necessity for media education and literacy programs that equip youth with the skills to deconstruct and critically interrogate the media they consume (Kubey, 2003). Advancements in technology have led to an inundation of media in individuals' daily lives, which necessitates "critical approaches that make us aware of how media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4). Advocates of critical media education argue schools are prime spaces to deconstruct the media's representations of the social world and empower youth to both critically read and produce their own media texts. Many theorists assert critical media education will help students situate the media in their social and historical contexts and investigate the intersections of "media and society, information and power" (Ferguson, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 6). Media education as a whole is more a theoretical framework than a concrete set of practices, but the ultimate goal of the movement is for students to become independently critical of media so they can effectively navigate the ideologies, discourses, and representations they encounter in the media landscape (Buckingham, 2003).

Within the critical media education movement, scholarship has emerged to examine how Hip Hop can be mobilized in schools to empower youth and facilitate students' development into socially and politically active citizens (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Scherpf, 2001; Daspit, 1999). This research locates Hip Hop as a site of resistance to oppressive power relationships and argues its energy can be channeled into transformative pedagogies in the classroom. Because Hip Hop "invokes counterhegemonic voices from the margins," some academics argue it is a prime location to challenge America's dominant politics and forge multicultural coalitions (Scherpf, 2001, p. 107). The following analysis builds on this research by specifically examining how Hip

Hop can be deployed in secondary and post-secondary classrooms to help white adolescents interrogate the genre's representations of and discourses on race and develop racially just ideologies and politics in their personal lives<sup>1</sup>.

To begin, I will focus on the controversy surrounding Rick Ross and his disputed employment as a corrections officer. Ross, who is one of contemporary Hip Hop's biggest stars, has fashioned an image of himself as a hustler and ruthless drug dealer. Hit songs such as "Hustlin'" and "Aston Martin Music" characterize Ross as a feared drug pusher who has amassed tremendous wealth from his involvement in trafficking narcotics. Ross had his authenticity called into question in 2008, however, when a photograph surfaced of him graduating from the Florida Department of Corrections's training academy for corrections officers (Eells, 2012). When the photograph was exposed to the public, Ross first denied its legitimacy claiming he had been digitally added to the picture. As further evidence surfaced to support the validity of the photograph, Ross fabricated a story claiming he had taken the job to start selling drugs to inmates in prison (Eells, 2012). Knowing his reputation and authenticity could be damaged by revelations of his employment as a corrections officer, Ross resorted to lying and distorting the truth to protect the public self-image he had so carefully crafted.

While many rappers like Rick Ross claim their lyrics about drug dealing and violence are reflections of their life experiences as young black men in America, their narratives are often hyperbolic spectacles that gloss over the details of their lives that do not conform to their constructed images. Rick Ross's biography reveals that he became a corrections officer to escape the life of crime in which many of his friends were entrenched. When his best friend was incarcerated on felony drug charges, Ross decided it was time to distance himself from the "street life," and he subsequently sought employment with the Florida Department of Corrections (Eells, 2012). While Ross publicly touts his successes as a drug kingpin, his biography exposes a more complex image of a man looking to remove himself from the drug game.

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Secondary and post-secondary schools can serve as arenas to debate and deconstruct the controversy surrounding Rick Ross's employment as a corrections officer. By critically examining Ross's self-representation, claims to authenticity, and biography, white adolescents can explore how stereotypical portrayals of black males in Hip Hop are often hyperbolic representations of rappers' lived experiences.<sup>2</sup> After studying the discrepancies between Rick Ross's biography and his public persona,

white students could delve further into the realm of identity construction in Hip Hop by performing research on artists to explore how their life stories compare with the images they have created for themselves in the recording industry. While some rappers write rhymes from their true life experiences, many embellish their backgrounds to appear "hard" and earn "street cred" in the Hip Hop industry. Regardless of the truth in each rapper's public image, an examination of Hip Hop artists' biographies can help white youth see through, if only to a minor degree, the glamorization of real life hardships and tragedies in Hip-Hop and recognize the devastating effects of institutionalized racism. This research could lead to presentations or campaigns in which students educate their peers and communities at large about the pressure Hip Hop artists face to conform to injurious stereotypes in order to succeed in the music industry. If Rick Ross did not create "The Boss," would he still be one of the most popular rappers in the industry today? What role do fans play in the popularization and perpetuation of these media stereotypes? These are questions white adolescents could ask within the context of their projects to help those in their communities interrogate representations of black males in popular culture that are often passively accepted as true to life depictions.

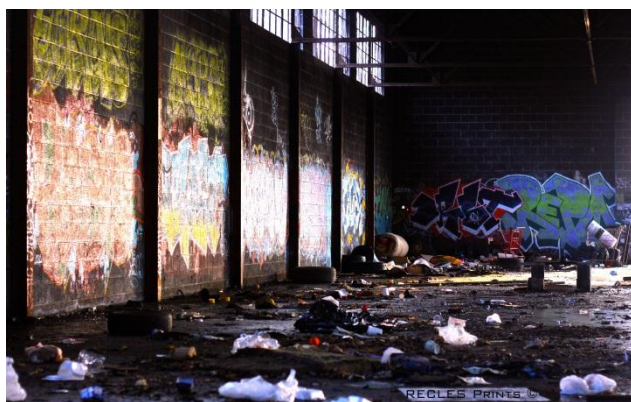
While many mainstream rappers like Rick Ross promulgate stereotypical portrayals of black males, some Hip Hop artists expose and rail against racist power structures that function to provide privilege to certain groups while limiting opportunities and freedoms for others. Though racism is not the predominant subject of Lupe Fiasco's lyrical content, his commentary on race and its implication in institutionalized inequality is present in many of his recent compositions. Lupe's discourse extends beyond the common conception of racism as a "black/white" issue to demonstrate how many racial groups have been oppressed by white power and privilege. In one of his most recent radio standards, "Around My Way," Lupe begins by referencing Pine Ridge, the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre and the American Indian Movement's standoff with the federal government, and other violence against American Indians to call attention to Native Americans' struggle against white racism throughout the history of the United States. Within the same verse, he addresses the U.S. government's sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina and corporate benefits of the American occupation of Iraq to illustrate more contemporary examples of racism perpetrated by the predominantly white American government. Together, these lines help interrogate, as Lupe puts it, why "poverty is chocolate and privilege vanilla" (Fiasco, 2012).

Another Lupe Fiasco song, "All Black Everything," demonstrates the prominent role that race has played in American society throughout the country's history and imagines life without race as a defining feature of social life. The song begs the questions, what would America look like if slavery had not existed, and how would America be different if segregation was not a part of the country's history? Without race as an organizing aspect of social relationships, Lupe imagines America as a more peaceful society in which "racism has no context," black Americans

have equal opportunities for upward social mobility, and the social ills that stem from institutionalized racism have all disappeared (Fiasco, 2011). In the final verse of the song, he acknowledges that his vision is idealistic and that nothing can be done to erase the racial atrocities of the past, but he encourages all Americans to work together to create a better future by turning inward, reflecting on how race and racism affect people's lives, and taking action to end racial oppression.

Lupe Fiasco's songs provide openings for white adolescents to reflect on how race is implicated in power dynamics that structure the social world and voice their opposition to racial oppression. By critically dissecting "Around My Way" in secondary and post-secondary classrooms, white adolescents can examine how white racism has afflicted a multitude of racial groups and served to advance white power and privilege around the world. It is important for white youth to see specific ways that racism is more than a "black/white" issue and continues to affect people both in the United States and across the globe. Lupe's commentary in "Around My Way" is just one example of the rapper speaking out against racism in both his music and public discourse. He can serve as a model for white adolescents to identify racism in the United States or internationally and voice their opposition to it in a rap song, video, public service announcement or community-wide anti-racism campaign. These students can join Lupe Fiasco in his efforts to expose and oppose institutionalized racism by carving out spaces for their anti-racism voices in their local communities.

White adolescents should also be encouraged to consider the questions that "All Black Everything" inherently asks, which make the song an ideal site for reflection on the implications of race in secondary and post-secondary classrooms. What would America look like if slavery had not existed? How would America be different if segregation was not a part of the country's history? These questions can help white adolescents examine contemporary social dynamics and structures through an historical lens to better understand how past racism has shaped present social realities. Lupe's call for reflection and action on racial oppression at the end of the song could also serve as a starting point for white adolescents to develop action plans to combat racism and create a more racially just society. What concrete steps can individuals take to realize Lupe's vision for a more racially equitable society? What steps can groups and organizations take? The last verse of "All Black Everything" calls on youth to take agency in shaping a more racially just future. Secondary and post-secondary classrooms serve as prime sites for white adolescents to heed Lupe's call and determine what they and others can



URBAN ART GALLERY PHOTO BY CARLOS MCBRIDE

do to ensure the world is more racially equal in the future.

Nas is another rapper whose music and public discourse can help white adolescents disrupt America's dominant ideology of race. Nas has specifically used his music as a platform to challenge color-blindness and America's racial politics. In 2007, Nas propelled race into the national conversation with the announcement that his upcoming studio album would be titled *Nigger*. The title prompted debates in both black and white communities about "the N-word" and its place in contemporary American discourse (Reyna et. al., 2009). The album title forced race into the public's consciousness, at least for a short time, and invited critical dialogue on both the historical and contemporary implications of race in American society. In addition to the title, a number of songs on the album such as "America," "N.I.G.G.E.R. (The Slave and the Master)," and "Black President" critique dominant racial politics in the United States and invite critical reflection on how race continues to work to the advantage of some and to the detriment of others in American society.

"America" in particular challenges color-blindness and interrogates contemporary manifestations of structural racism. In the first verse of the song, Nas describes his ascent from a poor youth in the projects to a rich and famous international Hip Hop star. Within the context of this narrative, he describes an encounter with an "old German" who calls Nas a thug and looks at the rapper's Mercedes Benz suspiciously as if to wonder where he earned the money to drive such an expensive car (Nas, 2008). The underlying commentary of these lines is that America is far from a color-blind society as black men with money are shrouded in clouds of suspicion, skepticism, and

doubt. The second verse of "America" addresses the degree to which racism is embedded in America's social fabric and provides examples of racial injustice in America's legal and education systems. Nas asserts white police officers are more frequently acquitted of crimes than black officers and that the education system inadequately serves black youth as they are underrepresented in prestigious career fields such as aeronautics. He also calls for a critical examination of America's "law books" to expose the racism embedded within the criminal justice system (Nas, 2008). "America" effectively undermines claims to color-blindness by highlighting the ways race continues to influence and shape individuals' social experiences and life opportunities.

Nas's commentary on his now untitled album can be mobilized in secondary and post-secondary classrooms to invite white adolescents to interrogate race's role in American society and expose them to an alternative racial discourse that undermines claims to color-blindness.



Within the context of studying “America,” teachers can instruct their students to venture into their local or nearby communities, observe social interactions, and draw conclusions about the validity of Nas’s challenges to color-blindness. Are black males more frequently surveilled in retail stores than white males? Are black males treated differently in public spaces than white males? Students might also perform research to investigate Nas’s assertions about racism in the criminal justice system. Are black police officers more frequently convicted of crimes than white officers? Are black Americans unfairly targeted by the criminal justice system? Such assignments, paired with critical examinations of Nas’s lyrics, could help white adolescents see through claims to color-blindness in America by identifying actual instances of racial discrimination in their local communities and the country at large. Though not all white adolescents will necessarily subscribe to Nas’s ideology of race and might seek out ways to discredit his claims, challenging their color-blindness is an important first step to helping them understand the ways race continues to structure the social world and impact individuals’ life experiences.

Eminem’s music also undermines color-blindness, but his racial discourse aims primarily to expose white privilege. Like Nas, Eminem has been a prominent figure in Hip Hop for over a decade, and he continues to hold the spotlight as one of America’s most popular rappers. Rather than downplay the significance of his white identity, Eminem often highlights the privileges he receives from his whiteness. For example, in “White America” he raps:

*Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like*

*yourself*

*If they were brown, Shady lose...*

*Look at my sales, let's do the math*

*If I was black, I would've sold half*

While many white Americans assert the United States is a color-blind country in which race has no bearing on individuals’ opportunities and social experiences, Eminem acknowledges that his whiteness has, more likely than not, played a critical role in his success as a rapper. Rather than adopt color-blindness to justify his participation in Hip Hop, he undermines such an ideology by unmasking his white privilege. Eminem’s racial discourse renders whiteness visible as a site of power and privilege and exposes its inconspicuous and often uncontested nature.

Along with his exposition of white privilege, Eminem challenges fixed and discrete understandings of race in his self-representation. According to Rodman (2006), Eminem “manages to perform ‘Blackness’ and ‘Whiteness’ simultaneously, blending the two in ways that erase precisely the same racial boundaries that White America has worked the hardest to maintain over the past several centuries” (p. 109). Eminem’s self-representation demonstrates race’s fluidity and destabilizes the notion that there are inherently “black” or “white” ways of acting.

As a white man who was raised in a “predominantly Black Detroit neighborhood” and who often signifies “blackness” in his speech, dress, and body movements, Eminem blurs the lines between “black” and “white” to illustrate that race is socially constructed and maintained (Fralely, 2009, p. 48). His presence in Hip Hop undermines the dominant notion that there are natural distinctions among racial groups and illustrates that human differences often attributed to race are in fact products of socialization.

Eminem’s discourse on and representation of race serve as sites where white adolescents can reflect on their racial identities and reconceptualize their own whiteness. Giroux (1997) argues that pedagogies of whiteness begin with “a critical engagement rather than a denial of ‘Whiteness’” (p. 299). Eminem’s racial discourse provides a model for white adolescents to critically engage their whiteness as he frequently acknowledges and exposes his own white privilege. White youth should be invited to follow Eminem’s lead by interrogating their whiteness and investigating its role both in their own social experiences and larger systems of domination. White students might ask themselves, what privileges do I receive from my whiteness? How would my life be different if I was not white? How can I minimize the negative effects of my whiteness? As Chaisson (2004) notes, “Whites becoming conscious of their participation in whiteness is the first step to achieving racial justice and equity” (p. 348). Even if they cannot or refuse to identify white privilege in their own lives, Eminem’s racial discourse exposes youth to alternative conceptions of whiteness and encourages critical reflection on race.

***While discussions of race and racism are often discouraged in schools, it is imperative that adolescents are provided spaces to participate in open conversations about race and encouraged to develop new understandings of how it functions in society.***

While examinations of whiteness can provoke a range of emotions from guilt to anger in white adolescents, both Giroux’s pedagogy of whiteness and Eminem’s representation of race offer frameworks for whites to transcend the oppressive aspects of their racial identities (Chaisson, 2004; Keating, 1995). Giroux’s pedagogy of whiteness defines “racial identities as multiple, porous, complex, and shifting,” which he argues “provide[s] theoretical openings for educators and students to move beyond framing Whiteness as either good or bad, racially innocent or intractably racist” (p. 299). Eminem’s representation of whiteness provides the ground for white adolescents to recognize the socially constructed and fluid nature of race as he undermines dominant perceptions of racial boundaries as fixed and discrete. Reconceptualizing racial identities as fluid and multifaceted allows white adolescents to view their whiteness through lenses of possibility and optimism. Rather than frame all whites as oppressive, Giroux’s pedagogy and Eminem’s

representation of whiteness afford space for white youth to rearticulate their racial identities in ways that resist domination and work for the cause of racial justice. Within the context of examining Eminem's fluid racial identity, students could be asked to develop action plans that outline specific steps they can take to build upon on the liberatory aspects of their white identities and minimize the more oppressive features of their whiteness. Performing such an activity would help white adolescents view their whiteness in a more positive light while identifying specific ways they can become more active in the struggle for racial justice.

## 5. Conclusion

The present analysis merely scratches the surface of Hip Hop's potential to mobilize racially just ideologies and politics in white adolescents, and it should serve as a preliminary investigation of Hip Hop pedagogies of race and whiteness. The dearth of literature documenting Hip Hop's employment in anti-racism curricula necessitates an initial examination of the possibilities for how the music and culture can be used to teach white adolescents about race and racism. With its diverse racial representations and discourses, Hip Hop is a prime location for white adolescents to explore new conceptions of race and interrogate their own whiteness and larger systems of racial oppression, and it must be recognized as such<sup>3</sup>. The existing research on Hip Hop and white youth suggests, however, that it is necessary to explicitly examine rap music's discourses on and representations of race to mine its democratic and liberatory potential. Independently, Hip Hop has been unable to communicate the intricacies of race to its white audience, and it may encourage color-blindness and acceptance of injurious racial stereotypes in certain settings. With direct and critical inquiry in secondary and post-secondary classrooms, however, Hip Hop has the capacity to expose white adolescents to diverse racial representations and discourses that undermine dominant paradigms of race and invite youth to reflect on how race operates in their own lives and society at large.

While discussions of race and racism are often discouraged in schools, it is imperative that adolescents are provided spaces to participate in open conversations about race and encouraged to develop new understandings of how it functions in society (Lewis, 2001; Castagno, 2008). Hip Hop can serve as a vehicle for such dialogue in secondary and post-secondary schools as it affords counternarratives to America's dominant racial discourse and stereotypical racial representations that are ripe for critical deconstruction. As one of today's most popular youth cultures, Hip Hop is an invaluable pedagogical resource that can be utilized to bridge adolescents' out-of-school literacies with educational investigations of race (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Partially removing Hip-Hop from its consumerist context and inserting it in a more civically oriented arena provides a greater possibility for the music and culture to facilitate meaningful transformation in white adolescents' racial ideologies and politics.

Future scholarship within the present line of inquiry might employ qualitative research to investigate how white

adolescents respond to critical examinations of Hip Hop's racial representations and discourses. Some potential questions for future research are: how do white adolescents interpret Hip Hop's challenges of color-blindness? What are the implications of using Hip Hop as a lens to examine white privilege? How do adolescents' ideologies of race change after sustained inquiry of Hip Hop's racial representations and discourses? Investigating these questions would identify some pragmatic implications of mobilizing Hip Hop in schools to teach about race and afford deeper insight into how white adolescents perceive Hip Hop's racial commentary. Though existing scholarship suggests a negative correlation between white youths' engagement with Hip Hop and their understanding of race, the present analysis maintains a positive outlook on the convergence of white adolescents, Hip Hop, and race and calls for further analysis of Hip Hop pedagogies of race and whiteness.

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## Notes

1. While some middle grades teachers could choose to implement the following approaches in their classrooms, the explicit content of some songs and advanced level of the Hip-Hop texts locate secondary and post-secondary classrooms as more suitable sites for these methods.
2. The more recent controversy surrounding Ross's line from Rocko's "UOENO" that seemingly condones rape also presents an opportunity for educators to deconstruct Ross's song lyrics and examine the inconsistencies between his music, his public assertions, and his actual history with the subjects of his lyrics.
3. It is important to note here that Hip Hop's relevance in the classroom extends far beyond its use as a pedagogical tool to educate white adolescents about race and racism in the United States and should not be its sole or primary function. It is well documented that Hip-Hop can and has been utilized as a culturally relevant, liberatory, and empowering core of classroom instruction for marginalized youth of color (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Emdin, 2010; Hill, 2009; Seidel, 2011). The present analysis is meant to serve as a supplement to the extensive body of research that demonstrates Hip-Hop's relevance in social justice-oriented educational initiatives.



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