

The Affectivity of Popular Music on Youth Identity in Non-Urban Communities

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This paper represents a partial analysis of themes that emerged during recent field research conducted as part of my dissertation on the affectivity of popular music on youth identity. During my research, I interviewed 30 youth music fans, residents of either a small Ontario city less than a two-hour drive from the perimeter of the GTA or smaller towns and villages located nearby. Like many researchers, I was drawn to this topic largely because of my own experiences as a youth growing up in a similar environment - a small city where, like so many others, the dominant cultural capital was based on athletic prowess or at least detailed knowledge of the sports world. I wasn't a particularly athletic youth, and so when punk finally made its way to our city's record stores by the late '70s, I felt that I finally had found a site upon I could construct a social identity that mediated my desires, frustrations and abilities. A not-inconsequential part of this role involved the valorization of my outsider status - never mind that the hockey players, cheerleaders, student council and other groups that I had secretly envied weren't very interested in my participation in the first place.

This back-story has led me to question how today's youth use music in the development of their own understandings of the world - specifically, youth in smaller communities, like my home town, that lack the heterogeneous culture of urban areas. As my own experiences indicated, there is more to music's affectivity than simply relocating texts produced by and for urban consumption to suburban audiences and beyond. According to postmodernist thought, an individual's subjectivity is ultimately responsible for the decoding of a cultural text, overriding any claims of meaning that its authors may make. My field research reveals that this tenet is particularly relevant in the case of non-urban youth that use popular music to anchor their understandings of race, ethnicity and other social issues involving people marginally represented in - or absent from - their communities. Relying heavily on the (mis)representations of complex social issues communicated in music videos and song lyrics, these youth construct identities that mediate the specific demands of their locality

and (what they perceive to be) its interrelation with the rest of the world. As they try on these emerging identities, they examine their own frustrations, desires and other concerns within the cultural spaces opened up by their musical heroes. Through these explorations of self, the rural and small town youth of my study also attempt to address the geographic and cultural distances that separate them from the urban centres of production and consumption that drive the music industry. In their narratives they still acknowledge these divisions, but it is clear that their active involvement in the interpretation and relocation of the themes and images of their preferred musics also provides them with opportunities to explore their own developing identities in a wider context. In other words, this practice allows listeners to insert themselves into a world that exists outside of their own immediate environments - a world that many have never physically traveled to.

I would like to firstly describe the major groups of music listeners that I encountered during my field research. I will then explore some of the tensions that exist between these groups, focussing specifically on how perceptions of race and ethnicity are constructed from the dominant images communicated in rap and hip-hop songs and videos by those who identify themselves as fans and non-fans of these genera. The handout that has been distributed contains brief descriptions of the seven distinct groups of music fans that participated in my study (see fig. 1). There should be few surprises with these classifications; the music industry thrives on the development of genres and artists aimed at specific demographics - namely, the lucrative 15 to 19 year-old market that comprised approximately 14% of the Canadian consumers responsible for CD sales of almost \$650 million last year. Generally speaking, these seven groups are mutually exclusive in their tastes, and define themselves as much by what they don't listen to as what they do. The likes and dislikes included on the hand-out are artists specifically identified by the subjects of my research; as you can see, there are no cross-over artists listed in the Like column. The sole exceptions are Tupac and Eminem, both of whom elicit begrudging admiration from the Alternative and Pop audiences,

primarily because of (what was referred to as) their 'authenticity' and 'genius', despite their attachment to a genre otherwise disdained by both groups of listeners.

While the Likes are overwhelmingly distinct, the Dislikes reveal many shared feelings. Fans of Classic Rock, Alternative and Punk all express their disdain for Pop or Top 40 music. The main criticism is that many of the acts associated with this genre - particularly, the unholy trinity of Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake - are manufactured by the music industry and therefor aren't 'real' musicians. For example, Hank - an 18 year old fan of alternative rock - stated, "If they're put together by a record company, they're not authentic. If they actually went out and toured around on their own and weren't really successful for a while and sort of got together, then you have a little more authenticity to it." Alex, a 14-year-old fan of classic rock who attended the SARS benefit concert, commented that the multigenerational audience ridiculed Timberlake because "he's not a very good musician. He doesn't have the greatest singing voice, and his lyrics aren't that good. He doesn't even write them. He's not a very good stage performer either. He made a speech that seemed really stupid. It was like (assuming Timberlake's voice) *'It's really good when people in this world get together and do this.'* (Sarcastically) *'O.K., that's a good speech.'*"

The continually evolving personas of these artists are also viewed as evidence of their artificiality - that they aren't speaking 'from the heart', a quality often ascribed to artists as diverse as Eminem, Bruce Springsteen and Avril Lavigne. Tony, an 18-year-old punk fan, complained that Aguilera's song "Beautiful" is "really hypocritical. I don't know how twelve year old girls think or anything, but if I was one, I would sit there and go, 'Christina Aguilera, who's this beautiful pop star, is singing about me, this twelve year old, fat little girl (but) (s)he has no idea what she's talking about. She's rich, successful and even if she did have hardships and trials in her life, no one knows about it, and the twelve year old girl isn't going to care.'" Similarly, Franny - an 18-year-old fan of alternative music - focused on (what she perceived to be) Jennifer Lopez's schizophrenic attitude

toward class: "It's like Jenny from the block. She's still got to be the girl from the projects or whatever. She can't be Jennifer Lopez, all rich and stuff. These rich people are singing about not having the basic necessities."

These comments illustrate what Simon Frith refers to as the analytic errors of subcultural theory. Sociologists have traditionally equated 'authentic' music with being 'from the street', a position that ignores (as Frith describes it) "the continuous cultural exchange... between different social fantasies (and) differently mobile dreams of 'making it'" (Music for Pleasure 4). The youth that I have quoted have all focussed on discrepancies between the artists' actual social positions and the experiences that their songs communicate. Because Aguilera, Lopez and Timberlake sing pop music, they are not regarded as serious artists, and therefore are ridiculed by these listeners for attempting to address teen insecurity, class struggle and other issues that are 'off limits' to them because of their wealth, fame and beauty. They are associated with a portrayal of glamour that is perceived to exist apart from the often-mundane realities of these youth's localities. Interestingly, the music fans most attracted to these performers are also those who express the least interest in the life stories of their favourite artists. For the self-declared fans of Pop and Top 40, authenticity is seldom mentioned, and conversations tend to focus on the beat and dance-ability of the music - themes generally ignored by the six other categories of listeners.

Competing views on authenticity also form much of the discussion around the genres of music that generate the most extreme responses among youth music fans: rap and hip-hop. As the hand-out shows, fans of Classic Rock, Alternative Music, Pop, Punk and Metal are united in their dislike of these musical styles. Interview subjects regularly express their disgust over the violence and misogyny that marks the songs of Eminem, Tupac and Fifty Cent, the three rap artists who are cited most often. Conversely, rap and hip-hop fans speak passionately about the appeal of their preferred music, and defend the controversial lyrical content as an accurate portrayal of the

experiences that these artists endured. Central to both sides' responses, though, are perceptions and misperceptions of race - particularly, the African American experience that underpins almost all of rap and hip-hop's images, attitudes and related practices. It is important to remember that my research site is a community comprised almost entirely of Caucasian residents, with three minor exceptions. The city has a college and a university, both of which attract students from around the world. There is also a small but thriving Vietnamese community, as well as a sizable First Nations reserve nearby, but these populations are seldom visible in the city's shopping malls, restaurants, stores and other businesses that reflect the racially and ethnically homogeneous nature of the city and its neighbouring towns.

Because of this lack of diversity, the youth of my study rely almost exclusively on the media to inform their understandings of issues surrounding race and ethnicity. As I have stated, rap and hip-hop texts play an important role in constructing these attitudes, which leads to many problematic interpretations considering the sensational nature of much of the material promoted by the music industry. The identified fans of these genres cite Tupac Shakur as rap's gateway artist - in other words, the first rapper whose music engendered a degree of affectivity and prompted them to seek out other material. When asked what initially drew them to Tupac, all of the subjects cite (what they perceived to be) the authenticity of the experiences that the rapper details in most of his songs. Doug - a recent convert to rap - explained that Tupac "was always singing about how hard life was on the streets, and most of them are rapping about true stories and stuff they had to do through to get where they are." Mike, a seventeen-year-old rap fan, referred to "all the troubles that Tupac went through when he was younger, like gang-banging and trying to get out of gangs." His friend Jim added, "Tupac's mom was a Black Panther, so there's that kind of stuff in the songs." Jeremiah, another self-declared fan, opined, "If he wasn't passed away, he'd still be on the streets or doing whatever, just making his music and enjoying himself. The main part of his life was the music."

By comparison, the rapper Snoop Dog - like Jennifer Lopez, previously - is uniformly criticized for focussing too much on the wealth and fame that he has achieved instead of describing past hardships endured on his way up the social ladder. Mike complained that Snoop's latest material is "not hard or gangster at all. It's just like, mainstream rap. He's just doing it for other people." Jim explained that "the whole reason Snoop started rapping was to get himself out of the hard life or the ghetto or whatever, so that's what he's singing about. He's still singing about gang-banging... and being hard and all this 'cause all he does is sit around and spend money."

Together, these perspectives on Tupac and Snoop reveal much about the way that these listeners interpret the music of their heroes. Firstly, as Frith argues, they equate the authenticity of these rap artists' songs with the degree of hardship that they endured during their formative years. That Tupac continues to personify the gangsta lifestyle - even after his death - is an important quality for these listeners. To them, he is a symbol of defiance, refusing to capitulate to the demands of fame - unlike Snoop, who is criticized for discrepancies between the upper class status that he flaunts in current videos and the hardscrabble lifestyle portrayed in his earlier songs. Even though both artists have amassed considerable wealth, Tupac continues to articulate what these rap listeners perceived to be a realistic portrayal of inner-city life - specifically, a depiction of the daily experiences of young, black, inner-city males. The rap fans of my study are drawn to these images for many reasons, revolving around their own fixations on sex and violence, dreams of social mobility, and fascination with what Stuart Hall referred to as "the spectacle of the 'Other'". They understand their musical heroes in a manner that recalls the structures of racialization practiced by the British Empire to reduce the subjugated peoples of Africa and the Caribbean to uncivilized objects. But instead of engaging in fantasies of colonization through Christianity and Western culture, white youth audiences daydream about the savage landscapes that their favourite artists have transformed Compton, Inglewood, Harlem and other communities associated with hip-hop

culture into. These youth jump at the opportunity to recount the Byzantine twists of the blood-feud between Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records - a struggle allegedly responsible for the deaths of Tupac and fellow rapper Biggie Smalls. They roll up the left pant-legs of their baggy jeans, emulating the discreet code of the drug-dealer. They jokingly flash the hand signs of the Crips and the Bloods to demonstrate their knowledge of the gangs that have crippled many US communities. But the youth of my study relocate these subcultural signifiers from their sites of construction to the subjects' own localities with a very limited understanding of the complex social issues that directly impact the black urban youth they emulate. When I asked Mike to describe some of the problems that these youth face, his response was limited to "the problems that black people endured as slaves... all the racism and stuff like that." Jeremiah opined that racism had been eliminated in the United States and Canada: "I'm happy that equality of rights is in big time. It's illegal to be racist. That's great, but for (the black community) to still be angry and still racist with white people sort of defeats the purpose."

These youth have constructed identities that attempt to straddle two incongruent positions. They play out roles that echo colonialism's racist depiction of the uncivilized, violent black man, but retreat to the security of their own white skin when confronted with the realities of contemporary race relations. (I haven't the time to discuss their perceptions on race and sexuality, which would take another paper in itself.) In a sense, they attempt to become what they secretly fear - a population of people absent from their own localities. While performing these identities, they enter a space in which they intentionally distance themselves from their white peers who scorn hip-hop and its listeners, but retain - as rap group Public Enemy succinctly put it - their fear of a black planet.

This position was articulated during an interview with Jeremiah, who expressed his uneasiness about attending a Snoop Dog concert in Toronto where, for the first time in his life, he

was surrounded by black youth. He said, "(I) stuck out like a sore thumb. I'd watch what I said while I was talking to my buddy 'cause I didn't want to offend anyone and I made sure I didn't say no racist comments. It kind of makes you a bit nervous, because everyone's black, and I felt out of place." When I asked him why he was nervous about the black audience member in the seat next to his, he replied, "I felt kind of stupid because I was kind of using the stereotype at the same time, because I was thinking, 'Big black guy, all mean looking, better look out!'" Despite this recognition of his own misunderstanding of race, he admitted to straightening his baseball cap and pulling up his baggy pants during a subsequent visit to Scarborough - a site that he regarded as potentially dangerous because of its heterogeneous mix of race - in an attempt to avoid transgressing unwritten laws about cultural misappropriation. When faced with the reality of the suburbs, Jeremiah felt compelled to retreat from an identity that he otherwise enjoyed occupying in what he perceived to be the safety of a more rural environment.

Conversely, Jeremiah and his friends are scorned by the anti-rap subjects of my study precisely because of their attempts to adopt attitudes and practices associated with their own limited understanding of black identity. Complaints generally fall into two camps. The first argument reasons that because rap music is heavily promoted by the music industry, it therefore lacks artist credibility - as inauthentic as they perceive the music of Justin Timberlake or Britney Spears to be. Subjects who favour this viewpoint tend to view most rap fans as passive consumers, arguing that their peers hadn't developed the critical capacity to resist whatever music trend the industry and its media promote. (As seventeen-year-old Noel stated, ten years ago they'd be listening to heavy metal, the dominant music genre of the late '80s and early '90s.)

The second complaint voiced by the anti-rap contingent is much more problematic, and reveals a great deal about how issues involving race are decoded by these youth. White rural rap fans are labeled as 'whiggers' - an abbreviation of 'white nigger' - by members of every other music

classification. Subjects who use this offensive term are quick to explain that their insult isn't meant to reflect any racist attitudes toward 'real' black people. Instead, they stress that they are referring to white youth who attempt to mimic the actions of black, inner-city youth. Kyle, a sixteen-year-old punk fan, described a whigger as "a white guy who says, 'Yeah, that's all right. (Rappers) swear a lot.' So he'll dress black and he'll act black, but he won't actually hear the music." Kyle also associated this identity with rap fans who attended either of the city's two predominantly working-class high schools, surmising that "if you're kind of brought up in the poverty range... you kind of adopt that lifestyle." When asked why rap culture would appeal strongly to these fans, Tony replied, "Maybe some of them are feeling oppressed in society. You know, that whole teenage depression thing. Maybe they're relating to (the music) on a different level - not necessarily the racial oppression or that they know about the ghetto but maybe, to themselves, ... their house is their own ghetto."

As these comments illustrate, the white rural youth of my study inextricably link rap music with the inner city and its systemic social problems. Many of these subjects have had limited exposure to any other representations of race, and base many of their opinions on both the dominant images of rap culture and its relocation by peers routinely referred to as 'whiggers'. They are aware of the term's etymology and are reluctant to say it in my presence, but hurl it at those youth performing a hybridity of race that alternately intimidates and offends them. Because the objects of their scorn are white, they rationalize the use of an epithet whose derivation is unutterable for most. Within a racially homogeneous community, these two groups eye one another with suspicion and contempt, separated by a cultural space in which meaningful, progressive dialogue on race relations could be pursued.

To engage this process, educators must provide classroom opportunities to critically examine the images and attitudes promoted in popular music. Those involved in the development

of anti-racism programs are already doing much to encourage the critiquing of rap and hip-hop's racial representations in urban schools, but for youth residing in racially homogeneous communities like the site of my research, there are few opportunities. Because of the lack of cultural diversity in these areas, it is assumed that there are no problems involving race relations, and therefore no need to introduce youth to the realities of Canada and the world's diverse populations. As the narratives of my research subjects illustrate, the absence of such programs only enables a virulent strain of racism to spread unchallenged.

Table 1: Classification of Music Listeners

Category of Fan:	Description	Likes	Dislikes
Classic Rock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners regard their music as 'timeless', beyond reproach - generally feel that modern music is industry-driven, artificial - vinyl is generally the preferred medium (scour used record stores, raid parents' collections) - generally uninvolved with downloading and CD burning - predominantly leftist perspective re. war, Americanism - conservative attitude toward rap lyrics (misogyny, violence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - '60s pop/rock 'n' roll (The Beatles, Beach Boys, Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Doors) - folk-rock artists (Dylan, Neil Young) - prog-rock bands (Pink Floyd, Yes, ELP) - reggae (Bob Marley, Peter Tosh) - 'classic' punk (The Clash) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rap and hip-hop (Fifty Cent, Nelly, P-Diddy) - 'boy bands' (N'Sync, Backstreet Boys) - pop singers (Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera) - pop/punk (Sum 41, Blink 182)
Alternative or 'College' Rock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners are attracted to (generally) rock-based music - lyrically, music may address geo-political issues, but is overwhelming concerned with personal events - artists are predominantly white - high level of downloading, CD burning, Internet research - fans may also be inclined to purchase new vinyl 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - progressive art-rock (Radiohead) - artists renowned for introspective lyrics (Elliot Smith, Coldplay) - garage/punk revival (White Stripes, Strokes, the Hives) - recognizes talent of Eminem and Tupac 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Top 40 pop music (Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake) - 'jock rap' (Nelly, Jay-Z) - most gangsta rap (Snoop Dog, Fifty Cent)
Pop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners are attracted to artists with a high degree of melody and rhythm (dancing is important) - tend to focus on songs, not performers (little research) - attracted to lyrics that address personal relations - low degree of downloading, CD burning, CD purchasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pop-punk (Blink 182, Sum 41, Good Charlotte) - dance artists [Madonna, Shakira, Christina Aguilera (split)] - acknowledges Eminem's talent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hard rock (Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Nickleback) - gangsta rap (Fifty Cent, Tupac) - grunge (Nirvana)
Punk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners are drawn to artists and songs with predominantly political messages (leftist views on war, class, environment) - low degree of downloading, CD burning - generally purchase CDs, some used vinyl - visible allegiance to music is important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - '77 punk (Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Ramones) - alterna-punk (Social Distortion, Bad Religion, NOFX) - political punk (Propagandi, Anti-Flag) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pop music (generally seen as lifeless, manufactured) - some dislike of rap - tend to ignore other subgenera of popular music
Rap and Hip-Hop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners generally comment on the rhythm of the music ('bounce', 'thump' is important) - fans are generally unaware of the political issues addressed in some songs (black consciousness, classism) - downplay criticism of rap's misogyny and violence - downloading, CD burning, Internet research is common - tend to 'collect' CDs by favourite artists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - West Coast gangsta rap (Dr. Dre, Nas, NWA, Kuruapt, Tha Dogg Pound) - East Coast gangsta rap (Tupac, Biggie Smalls) - Tupac was overwhelmingly cited as the 'gateway artist' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'jock' rap (Nelly) - tend to ignore all other subgenera of popular music
Metal: Commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listeners use music to relieve tension - are attracted to lyrics that express angst of teen suburban life - critical of rap's misogyny and violence - downloading, CD burning, Internet research is common - tend to 'collect' CDs by favourite artists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Classic' metal (Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne) - Nu-metal (Slipknot, Korn, Insane Clown Posse) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gangsta rap (Fifty Cent, Eminem, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dog)

<p>Metal: Underground</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - least common classification of listener - attracted to the complexity of performance (generally musically proficient) - previous fans of commercial metal, punk (occasionally rap) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - black metal (Cradle of Filth, Dimmu Borgir, Woods of Ypres) - tolerance of gangsta rap 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tend to ignore all other subgenera of popular music
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