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**HIP HOP UNDERGROUND:  
THE INTEGRITY AND ETHICS OF RACIAL IDENTIFICATION**

ANTHONY KWAME HARRISON

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REBECCA BODENHEIMER  
HAMILTON COLLEGE, USA

Anthony Kwame Harrison's book *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* examines the racial dynamics of the San Francisco Bay Area's underground hip hop scene, with the larger goal of exploring processes of racial self-identification among American youth at a time in which the nation is growing more racially diverse and discourses on race increasingly revolve around an ideology of colorblindness. In his view, the Bay Area is a good case study for an elaboration of contemporary American racial dynamics because of its uniquely multiracial demographics, which are currently very similar to the projections of a non-white majority population in the U.S. by 2050.

Harrison's research is strongly informed by the method of "critical ethnography", which views the process of ethnography as intimately connected to the interpretation and representation of the findings. In this vein, he describes his decision to become an active participant in the Bay Area's underground hip hop scene and to assume two identities, anthropologist and emcee (rapper), despite his initial misgivings that he might be received as an interloper. While critical ethnography is by no means a new method of anthropological research, the level of self-reflexivity here is arguably taken to the extreme with relatively large doses of "autoethnographic narrative" (58). Harrison's second chapter provides detailed accounts both about his personal history with hip hop and the ways he inserted himself into and moved through the Bay Area underground hip hop scene; however, his discussion of the hip hop group he helped to form, the Forest Fires Collective, seems at times overindulgent.

Harrison's first chapter details the emergence of underground hip hop in the mid-to-late 1990s, highlighting the movement's preoccupation with notions of authenticity, its goals of reclaiming hip hop from the mass corporatization following its crossover into the mainstream, and its contestation of commercial hip hop's "ghettocentric" representations of blackness.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the alternate representations of blackness offered by underground hip hop are accompanied by a more racially inclusive criteria regarding who can lay claim to the practice. Nevertheless, despite his suggestions that this more inclusive vision is a progressive tendency, he frequently contests the stated ideologies of his fellow hip hoppers<sup>2</sup>—that it is competency, rather than race, that matters in terms of underground hip hop authenticity—by asserting his own view that blackness is still privileged in hip hop and that non-black participants, especially whites, face a more arduous road to establish their legitimacy.

Harrison's third chapter provides a good critical summary of the ways hip hop scholarship has articulated the relationship between race, authenticity and claims of ownership, detailing three principal approaches. The first frames hip hop as a distinctly black practice, despite recognizing that non-black youth, specifically Puerto Ricans, were involved in its emergence and is exemplified by Tricia Rose's 1994 canonic work on hip hop *Black Noise*. As Harrison notes, a host of scholars (Juan Flores, Raquel Rivera) have argued strongly for inserting Puerto Ricans into hip hop origin

narratives. Harrison provocatively asks, if we can recognize the role of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the formation of hip hop culture, should we not do the same with white b-boys who joined the movement only a few years later? The second approach views hip hop as one in a long line of Afro-diasporic traditions in the Americas and tends to draw direct links between hip hop and African and/or Caribbean traditions. The final approach is an orientation toward contemporary manifestations of hip hop, and a recognition of its creative appropriation by youth across all continents. Harrison concludes this review by asserting that the ongoing reification of hip hop as essentially black has obscured a more realistic and dynamic picture of the ways that youth of all colors engage with the practice and that underground hip hop challenges these essentialist notions.

Harrison's principal goal is to examine and unpack the ways that underground hip hoppers articulate claims for their own hip hop legitimacy through racial performances of self. Departing from Sarah Thornton's theorization of subcultural capital and the boundary maintenance that is such an integral part of subcultural scenes, Harrison critiques the hegemony of "authenticity", viewing John L. Jackson's notion of "sincerity" as a better analytic. Jackson's notion "subverts the standard checklist of subcultural capital [markers

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“sophisticated and innovative discussions about the racial politics of authenticity in underground hip hop”

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of authenticity] in favor of a personal code of underground hip hop ethics and integrity... what matters most is the perceived sincerity of these racial performances... for the non-black hip hopper, an overzealous display of urban African American posturing, no matter how authentic, is under most circumstances suspected as insincere” (118). While I agree that the sincerity of a racial performance is an important element in the positive reception of a non-black emcee, I do not perceive a big difference between the notions of authenticity and sincerity. Harrison’s position that a display of black posturing is authentic but not sincere is not entirely convincing—why would it not simply be considered inauthentic?

Chapter four puts the notion of racial sincerity to work, as Harrison provides examples of white emcees who perform “sincere whiteness” (140). His primary example concerns a white emcee who, during a Mos Def<sup>3</sup> show, got on stage to freestyle (improvise rapped lyrics). Although he was initially booed because of the audience’s assumptions about his competency based on his “bummy white guy” look, the emcee ultimately won over the crowd with his lyrical prowess. Harrison astutely states, “Had Top R not been a *sincere* white guy...the entire story might have played out differently: no boos, no surprises, no turning of the crowd; perhaps just a great freestyle, which is hardly the kind of thing that gets talked about to any great extent days after the show” (140). While I find this analysis quite persuasive, Harrison’s criteria for performing “sincere whiteness” is more problematic: in this and in other instances, he bases his characterization of racial sincerity on physical appearance and fashion choices, noting in particular the white emcees’ “dorky looks” and “bummy shirts” (140). He perceptively analyzes this mode of self-representation as a reaction against past white emcees’ “insincere” performances of racial identity, exemplified in the “wigger” persona,<sup>4</sup> that claimed to fully understand the experience of black youth without recognizing their own white privilege. The issue is not only that Harrison’s notion of white racial sincerity is fully based on the emcee’s physical appearance, but also the implication that “bummy clothes” are *essentially* a white fashion and that emcees cannot be racially sincere unless they are dressed in this manner. In his final chapter he provides what I believe is another problematic analysis, when he discusses the sound of an all-white underground hip hop group as “so sincere and self-assured in its whiteness”, precisely because people have described their music as “avant-garde hip hop”, “emo rap”, or “goth-hop” (161). Harrison’s argument here seems to reproduce the same essentialist notions of race and culture that he has previously challenged and the reader is left to assume that he would only deem racially sincere those white emcees who mix rap with “white” musical styles or dress like “dorky white guys”.

Harrison’s final chapter continues elaborating the notion of racial sincerity, although here he offers a rather pessimistic commentary on racial politics in the underground hip hop scene. He recounts a party where the aforementioned white underground hip hop group performed a satire using an exaggerated style of black speech in order to parody the image of the hyper-violent, misogynist “gangsta” rapper that is so often promoted by the mainstream music industry. Noting that the audience was predominantly white, Harrison describes this performance as a form of “contemporary minstrelsy” (158). However, he

then characterizes this analysis as too simplistic, asserting that the group was very aware of a history of white appropriation and racist imitation of black music. He states:

I would contend that Sole and the Pedestrian saw themselves as crafting a tremendously ironic satire of the racial insincerity embodied by... wigger icons of the past. Arguably, if we accept that this group... was engaged in a theatrical performance of past white hip hoppers' exaggerated performances of blackness, this could be viewed as about as profound an expression of white racial sincerity as one might find. However, somewhere within this cauldron of sincerity, satire, and racial symbolism, for me, the circumstantial logic breaks down (160).

The reason he gives for ultimately eschewing his own, quite sophisticated analysis and concluding that the performance was a "racial impersonation" (162), centers around the fact that these white emcees were performing for a mainly white audience. However, another perspective might view the performance as quite racially sincere precisely because, as stated by Harrison, it was a *parody*. Furthermore, it seems that the key to determining whether the performance reinforced stereotypes or not resides largely in its reception: how aware was the audience of the performers' intentions to perform a satire? Although Harrison does not pursue this question, it is likely, following his own discussion of the blurred line between performers and audience in underground hip hop, that the spectators were "in the know" and viewed this performance with a critical perspective.

Ultimately Harrison's book offers some sophisticated and innovative discussions about the racial politics of authenticity in underground hip hop. However, while he presents various compelling analyses, his final conclusions are at times less nuanced and thus lessen the persuasiveness of his theoretical points.

## NOTES

- 1 The subgenre of "gangsta" rap, in which rappers frequently spin tales of violent and sexual pursuits, is most closely associated with a "ghettocentric" mentality.
- 2 Harrison often refers to participants in the local scene as "hip hoppers", which I understand to include anyone who engages with at least one of the four principle elements of hip hop culture—emceeing (rapping), DJ'ing, break-dancing (b-boying), or graffiti art.
- 3 Mos Def is one of the most celebrated and visible emcees in underground hip hop, so much so, that some might not describe him as part of the underground scene anymore. His first album, *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* (Rawkus Records 1998), was a collaboration with the highly respected emcee Talib Kweli and in many ways defined the terms of underground hip hop in its critique of the music industry and mainstream rappers who have "sold out".
- 4 "Wigger" was a derogatory term that emerged in the 1990s referring to white youth who fully adopted the fashion and speech of African American youth for the purposes of gaining subcultural capital, but who were ultimately perceived as having a superficial connection with blackness and not a true investment in the politics of racial equality.