

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Miles White. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 163 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03662-0; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07832-3.

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Miles White's *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z* drops squarely into the Bermuda Triangle of critical race studies, gender and sexuality studies, and performance studies with useful new approaches to studying rappers as ambivalent cultural exemplars of black masculine performance. White contends that rappers in particular (as opposed to b-boys, producers, DJs, or graffiti writers who remain less visible and infrequently critiqued in scholarly work on hip hop) continue to work from, and self-consciously extend, nineteenth-century minstrel tropes predicated on reductive, decontextualized notions of black masculinity even as they resist racist cultural ghettoization and white supremacy.

Building off Eric Lott's psychoanalytic critique of white audiences in his seminal *Love and Theft: Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995) and W. T. Lhamon Jr.'s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (2000), in which the author connects Jim Crow representations to hip hop, White makes an argument about the specific and ambivalent ways that negative affects coalesce around the racially reductive zip coonery of rappers at the turn of the twenty-first century. Critiquing inattention to race and embodiment in the study of masculinity, he shows that interracial consumption of hip hop masculinities shapes contemporary post-racial ideological regimes while fueling ambivalent hypervisibility of black men in global popular cultures.

White elegantly condenses descriptive terms that help make sense of the ways that the affective labors of hardcore rappers are shaped by structural context even as they continually riff on and revise black cultural norms. Understanding the majority of hip hop consumption as

involving the circulation of a "commodity without context" and "narrative content constructed in the register of the real" can help scholars to show students that hip hop's commercial mediascape has serious material and psychological consequences (pp. 20, 59). While White's critique will be familiar to scholars following the recent work of E. Patrick Johnson in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar in *Hip Hop Revolutionaries: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (2004), its utility lies more in its focus and evenhanded analytical style than in a paradigm-shifting methodological approach or subject matter.

White's introductory chapters on technology and disembodiment, the political dimensions of racial performance, and the affective and gestural vocabularies of rappers anchor a series of close readings of performances/personas in his concluding ones. He does an excellent job of reading back through the representational regimes of jazz, rock 'n' roll, and the black power movements. This enables him to evaluate highly contingent performances by and public reactions to artists like N. W. A., Jay-Z, Elvis, and Eminem. For example, his attention to genealogies of black masculinity enables him to make a useful distinction between the rebellious, yet ultimately community-minded, "bad man," typified by Muhammad Ali, and the socially destructive "bad nigger," typified by Jack Johnson, whose behavior remained outside the accepted cultural norms of blacks as well as whites (pp. 66-67). By providing competent and grounded connections between hip hop masculinities and culturally specific "badman" and "trickster" tropes, *From Jim Crow to*

*Jay-Z* adds nuance to arguments about hip hop's resistive potential that do not fail to recognize its participation in the reification of the black male body as an object of white fascination and resentment.

White's penultimate chapter on white rappers is his most deftly executed. By acknowledging the possibility for authenticity in performances by progressive white rappers, like Brother Ali, he leaves the door open for white performers to participate productively in black cultural practices while holding them accountable for the ways they play off of and into ambivalent black masculine representational regimes. His readings of The Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and Eminem as variously problematic vis-a-vis these regimes helps White position white cultural borrowing of black masculine tropes alongside variously problematic black performances. White distinguishes between performances that further cross-racial understanding and those that merely recirculate images of black cultural dysfunction. Even

though he is phenotypically white (and albino), Ali's performance of empathy and identification with black life, his deep knowledge of black cultural history, and his embodied political commitment to racial justice align him with what White calls a productive "radical Black subjectivity" (p. 115).

Texts like *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z* that deal thoughtfully with masculinity and embodiment, as well as with the white artists and consumers overrepresented in the hip hop marketplace, are useful tools for scholars of contemporary black popular culture who teach racially mixed groups of undergraduates. Unfortunately, cross-racial consumption and performance remain oft-unremarked elephants in hip hop classrooms, despite the pained exhortations of luminaries in the field. As Tricia Rose says in her recent book *The Hip Hop Wars* (2010), hip hop studies needs to move past the uncritical celebratory pose—we must, as White shows us, critique the players while embracing the hip hop game.

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