SOUNDS LIKE BAD BRAINS

Whiteness and the critical reception of rock music in the United States

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Two-fold research question

1. To what extent are ethno-racial boundaries (re)produced or contested in the critical reception of rock music in the United States between 2003 and 2013,

2. And to what extent do (semi-)professional reviewers and consumer-reviewers differ from each other regarding ethno-racial classifications in their reception of rock music?
Ethno-racial boundary formation

- **Color-blind ideology** (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hughey, 2012)
  - Post-racial America?
  - Neoliberal ideology
  - Essential sameness between ethno-racial groups, despite histories of inequality and lopsided social opportunities

- Not *talking* about race rather than *ignoring* race
  - Ignoring white privilege
  - Status-quo of social inequality

- Nevertheless: *Race talk*
  - Implicit & unconscious racism

- **Color-conscious ideology**
  - Ethno-racial awareness
  - Marked/unmarked statuses (Brekhus, 1998) → whiteness
  - Recognizing ethno-racial boundaries
  - Affirmative action & PC
Whiteness and rock music (I)

- **Popular music** primary location for boundary formation (Fiske, 1998)

- **Music genres** often are co-constitutive of ethno-racial groups and are structured as such (Roy, 2004; Roy & Dowd, 2010)
Whiteness and rock music (II)

- Rock music = black music?
  > 1950s recording industries (Dowd, 2003; Garofalo, 1994)
  > Whitewashing of rock: “Elvis effect” (Taylor, 1997)

- Rock music genre
  > Performers, audiences, industries, media and critics (Lena & Peterson, 2008)
  > Collective formation of symbolic boundaries
  > White cultural markers?

- Change?
  > Non-white music movements
Whiteness & rock music (III)

- Rock music criticism
  > Consumer versus (semi-)professional reviewers
  > Online (webzines) and offline (magazines, newspapers)

- Ethno-racial reflexivity: color-blind or color-conscious?
Data & methods

- Quantitative & qualitative content analysis
  - > 385 reviews
  - > 66 rock albums
  - > released between 2003-2013
  - > 191 consumer reviews
  - > 193 (semi-)professional reviews
  - > 185 all-white
  - > 200 (partly) non-white (ANOVA)

- Characteristics reviewer
- Evaluation scores
- Review size (word count)
- Debut album (yes/no)
- Ethno-racial markers
  - > ‘black sound’
- Artist comparisons
  - > ‘just like Bad Brains’
Results: Quantitative analysis (I)

Table 1: Critics and consumer critics background information (N=385).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Critics</th>
<th>Consumer critics</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethno-racial categories</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>58.5% (113)</td>
<td>12.0% (23)</td>
<td>35.3% (136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-white</td>
<td>3.1% (6)</td>
<td>2.6% (5)</td>
<td>2.9% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>38.3% (74)</td>
<td>85.4% (164)</td>
<td>61.8% (238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>82.4% (159)</td>
<td>54.2% (104)</td>
<td>68.3% (263)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>13.0% (25)</td>
<td>5.7% (11)</td>
<td>9.4% 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>4.7% (9)</td>
<td>40.1% (77)</td>
<td>22.3% (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average review size</strong></td>
<td><strong>498</strong> (sd 258)</td>
<td><strong>360</strong> (sd 335)</td>
<td>430 (sd 306)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average evaluation</strong></td>
<td><strong>72.2</strong> (sd 14.3)</td>
<td><strong>81.0</strong> (sd 18.8)</td>
<td>76.6 (sd 17.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Quantitative analysis (II)

Table 2: Evaluation of rock albums of white and non-white artists in the United States, 2003-2013 (N=385).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Critics</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>Consumer critics</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>Combined</th>
<th>sd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White artists</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td><strong>84.4</strong></td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td><em>78.6</em></td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white artists</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td><strong>77.8</strong></td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td><em>74.8</em></td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001

- Non-white? Lower score...
- Why?
  > Consumer critics
- (Semi-)professional critics
  > More ethno-racial reflexivity?
- Little ethno-racial marking (35 mentions)
  > Color-blind ideology?
Results: Qualitative analysis (I)

- Five mechanisms
  1. Ethno-racial comparisons
  2. Inter-genre comparisons
  3. Positive ethno-racial marking
  4. Negative ethno-racial marking
  5. Minimization
Results: Qualitative analysis (II)

1. Ethno-racial comparisons

> Comparing along ethno-racial lines rather than aesthetic criteria
> Experienced aesthetic criteria reveal implicit ethno-racial associations

> Non-white punk? “Sounds like Bad Brains”
> Non-white indie? Bloc Party, TV on the Radio
> Non-white guitarist? Jimi Hendrix, Lenny Kravitz

Critic on Ben Harper:
“Worried Ben may turn into a latter day Lenny”

Critic on BLK JKS:
“Sounds like Jimi Hendrix at his most experimental.”
Results: Qualitative analysis (III)

2. Inter-genre comparisons

> Comparing with other “non-white” genres
> Soul, hip hop, rap, blues, world music
> Essentialized idea of blackness

Critic on TV on the Radio:
“That TV on the Radio can handle an issue like race so creatively and eloquently shouldn't come as a surprise, considering how organically the group incorporates elements of soul, jazz, spirituals, and doo wop into the mostly lily-white world of indie/experimental rock.”

> Hip hop / rap = negative association (low brow)
> Soul, blues, world music = positive association (middle brow/high brow)

Critic on WZRD:
“Most of the music is orchestrated in a "Hip-Hop fashion", and what I mean by that is that in Hip-Hop, the instruments are secondary because the music is used to decorate the lyrics since the vocals are the center of attention. But in Rock music, it's the exact opposite.”
Results: Qualitative analysis (IV)

3. Positive ethno-racial marking

> Color-consciousness
> Ethno-racial reflexivity
> Appreciation/celebration of difference

Critic on The Noisettes:
“Shoniwa is a walking panoply of cultural signifiers; an axe-wielding black frontwoman of a rock group. And like so many of her white male forerunners have done, Shoniwa pays tribute to her unrecognized hero [gospel singer Rosetta Tharpe, JS/PB], and offers a corrective for a half-century of popular ignorance.”

Consumer on Straight Line Stitch:
“I think it's wonderful an African American woman has stepped up to this kind of music. Being an African American male, we are rare to be found in this type of music”
Results: Qualitative analysis (V)

4. Negative ethno-racial marking

> Color-consciousness?
> Reversed racism
> Post-racial America

Critic on Black Kids:
“Maybe this is largely due to the fact American Society can still be shocked by the racial exploitation in naming one’s band Black Kids, something frontman Reggie Youngblood took into account when baptizing the group (curiously, he didn’t take into account that the majority of his band was white.)”

Consumer on Living Colour:
“a cover of "Back In Black (Guys, seriously, pick a less obvious cover next time okay?).””
Results: Qualitative analysis (VI)

5. Minimization

> Race talk
> Ethno-racial stereotypes
> Ironic distance
> Down-playing racially fuelled remarks
> Softening the blow

- Essentialized non-white discourse:
  > ‘Brother’, ‘gangster’, ‘hombre’

- Jokes
  > ‘Black-182’

- Reducing the chances of non-whites to gain rock authenticity
Concluding remarks

- (Re)production of whiteness in the (semi-)critical and consumer reception of rock music in the United States
- Lower evaluation non-whites
  > Consumer critics
  > (Semi-)professional critics reflexive
- Boundary work: ethno-racial ideologies
  > marking non-whiteness
- Five mechanisms
  1. Ethno-racial comparisons
  2. Inter-genre comparisons
  3. Positive ethno-racial marking
  4. Negative ethno-racial marking
  5. Minimization
- Countered or reproduced?
  > International differences, production & reception?
Thank you for your attention!

Questions? Comments? Remarks?

Five-year project:

Elvis has finally left the building? Boundary work, whiteness and the reception of rock music in comparative perspective.

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