(De)constructing a white space
Boundary work, whiteness and the reception of rock music in Rotterdam

Julian Schaap
Presentation at ESA 2015 Prague

Erasmus University Rotterdam
ERMeCC ERASMUS RESEARCH CENTRE FOR MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE
Research question

How are ethno-racial boundaries (re)produced and/or contested in the reception of rock music in Rotterdam, the Netherlands?
BEFORE ELVIS
THERE WAS NOTHING
- JOHN LENNON
Sociology of race & ethnicity (I)

- **Race & ethnicity** important in **boundary formation**
  - First thing one (thinks to) see
  - Followed by other markers

  ‘a system for classifying people who are believed to share common descent, based on perceived innate physical similarities’ (Morning et al, 2013: 265)

- **Ethno-racial boundary formation**
  - Classifying people: social marking (Waugh, 1982)
  - ‘Out of ordinary’? = marked
  - Jimi Hendrix = black guitar player

  …focus on the unmarked i.e. whiteness (Brekhus, 1998)
Sociology of race & ethnicity (II)

- **Whiteness**
  - Unmarked (Brekhus, 1998) or ‘invisible’ (Frankenberg, 1993)
  - Unawareness of ethno-racial boundaries for the in-group (but high awareness of reference groups)
  - Position of structural advantage: white privilege

- “White space” (Anderson, 2015)
Sociology of race & ethnicity (III)

- **Color-blind racism** (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
Sociology of race & ethnicity (IV)

- **Color-conscious ideology**
  - Ethno-racial awareness
  - Marked/unmarked statuses (Brekhus, 1998)
  - Recognizing ethno-racial differences
  - Affirmative action & PC

- “Cosmopolitan space” (Anderson, 2011)
Whiteness and rock music

• 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)
Data & Methods (in progress)

- Q-methodology + post-sorting interview
- Qualitative factor analysis
- Visual set of 40 images of rock artists (next slide)
- 10x Male, 10x female, 10x white, 10x non-white
- Genres, periods, degree of fame taken into account
- Sorting assignment: “How ‘rock’ do you rate this image?”
  a. Make three piles (positive-neutral-negative)
  b. Sort in grid
  c. Subsequent question: “Who do you recognize?”
Data & Methods (III)
Preliminary results (I)

• White/non-white visual comparison
Preliminary results (II)

• On what basis is rock authenticity found or denied?
  • Recognizing artist/genre (or thinking to do so)
  • Clothing and apparel
  • Posture and (imagined) movement
  • Gender: male is physically more ‘rough’

• Blackness is appreciated when ‘roots’: Chuck Berry/Jimi Hendrix
• Difficulty to discuss race: “can I say that?”
Preliminary results (III)

Color-consciousness in the rock scene

• “You think like: ‘hey, a black!’ haha! But not positive or negative, just neutral. But it does grab my attention” (resp 1 white/fem)
• “I think it’s cool, it’s something different when you see a black guy making this music” (resp 3 white/male)
• “A female negro drummer? She goes all the way to the front, of course!” (resp 4 white/male)
• “When I see an afro in the crowd I think: ‘hey, look at that, nice!’” (resp 2 white/fem)
Nevertheless, essentialization of non-whiteness:

• “They (blacks) just have another way (of) musical expression that whites don’t have. Exceptions noted of course” (resp 1 white/fem)

• “There is almost no diversity there. And if it’s there, then it’s… Yeah, then they are coincidentally people I know and I also coincidentally know they were adopted, haha. (…) So probably it is because I know them or because they grew up here. And then I think: ‘yeah, that’s so much ‘you’, that’s not black.” (resp 2 white/fem)

• “It all depends on your friends, and they’re white and listen to rock. If you’re not white, you have different cultural baggage” (resp 4 white/male)
Preliminary conclusions

Work in progress but...

• Rock authenticity is found in looks, apparel and posture
• Gender and race-ethnicity mentioned last and race-ethnicity does not seem to matter for our first respondents
  → color/gender-blindness
• Respondents enjoy inclusiveness and diversity
  → cosmopolitan attitude
• Nevertheless:
  → essentialization of non-whiteness
  → little awareness of ‘own’ whiteness or role in the construction of a white space
Thank you!
Questions, tips, comments, remarks?

Interested? Follow us!
@elvishasfinally
facebook.com/elvishasfinallyleft
www.elvishasfinallyleft.com

Contact: j.schaap@eshcc.eur.nl
Erasmus University Rotterdam
ERMeCC ERASMUS RESEARCH CENTRE FOR MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE