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Just Like Hendrix: Whiteness and the Online Critical and Consumer Reception of Rock Music in the United States, 2003–2013

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Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 385 rock album reviews, this article investigates (i) to what extent ethno-racial boundaries are (re)produced and/or contested in the critical and consumer reception of rock music in the United States between 2003 and 2013 and (ii) to what extent (semi-)professional reviewers and consumer-reviewers differ from each other regarding ethno-racial classifications in their reception of rock music. Albums by nonwhite artists tend to receive lower evaluations than those by white artists, particularly when reviewed by consumer critics. Although both types of reviewers often ignore talking about race—echoing a color-blind ideology—(semi-)professional critics are more explicit and color-conscious regarding nonwhite participation in rock music. Furthermore, five different mechanisms are employed by reviewers as a part of ethno-racial boundary work: (i) ethno-racial comparisons, (ii) inter-genre comparisons, (iii) positive ethno-racial marking, (iv) negative ethno-racial marking, and (v) minimization.

INTRODUCTION

Popular music is a primary location for social differentiation (Fiske, 1998). Music genres such as rock or hip-hop do not only reflect ethno-racial groups, but they are often structured along ethno-racial lines (Roy & Dowd, 2010). Ever since the 1950s and 1960s, rock ‘n’ roll (originally a predominantly black music genre) and subsequently rock music have been steadily appropriated by whites (Taylor, 1997). As such, the rock music genre is shaped by ethno-racial “symbolic boundaries”: conceptual distinctions that social actors attach to other people, objects and, in this case, music, to bring order to social reality (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). These symbolic conceptualizations can result in objectified social boundaries, which are formative for everyday inequality and segregation along ethno-racial lines (Omi & Winant, 1986). Rock music hence is linked with “white” cultural traits: “whiteness.” Although it is evident that whiteness is (re)produced within rock music production and consumption (e.g., Bannister, 2006; Mahon, 2004), it remains unclear how these symbolic boundaries are created and sustained in the reception of rock music.

The rock music genre ties performers, audiences, industries, critics and media together (Lena & Peterson, 2008), who collectively contribute to the formation of rock music’s symbolic

boundaries. Furthermore, since the early 2000s, critical reception of rock music has partly shifted to regular consumers, as the Internet facilitates the possibility for consumers to review cultural products as well (Verboord, 2010). Music criticism is an important source for the canonization of rock music because it distinguishes what is rock and what is not. By doing so, critics make use of ethno-racial classification practices when discussing nonwhite participation in a white genre (Berkers et al., 2013). Interestingly, it remains unclear if and how album evaluations are affected by the artists' ethno-racial background, and whether (semi-)professional critics differ from consumer critics in their evaluations of rock music.

By conducting both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of rock album reviews ($n = 385$) written for American music and consumer websites between 2003 and 2013, this article investigates how US reviewers evaluate and discuss albums by white and nonwhite rock artists. Hence, our central question is two-fold: (i) to what extent are ethno-racial boundaries (re)produced and/or contested in the critical reception of rock music in the United States between 2003 and 2013, and (ii) to what extent do (semi-)professional reviewers and consumer-reviewers differ regarding ethno-racial classifications in their reception of rock music? The analyses focus on social marking: (i) the presence of ethno-racial markers, for example, "black rock singer"; (ii) the extent to which such markers crowd out aesthetic classifications, for example, focusing on ethno-racial similarities and nonability traits instead of aesthetic differences; and (iii) the way in which ethno-racial markers affect the rating of the album, as unmarked artists are arguably rated as superior. The content analyses reveal how both critics and consumers of rock music use ideological discourse and discursive strategies in five distinctive ways to construct (or deconstruct) whiteness in rock music.

ROCK MUSIC AND WHITENESS

Popular music has become a primary source of leisure and identification for audiences young and old (Bennett, 2000). Consumption of music functions as a marker for social status since it grants consumers cultural capital, making it a main site for the formation of symbolic boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984). Symbolic boundaries function as conceptual distinctions to organize and understand social reality (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). The collective recognition of symbolic boundaries leads to social boundaries, which are "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont & Molnár, p. 168). In other words, despite the socially constructed nature of symbolic boundaries, social boundaries result in real and substantial effects in people's lives. Music contains a multifaceted grouping of audio and visual cues, lyrics, physical movements, and social relations (Bryson, 2002; Dowd, 1991), which together establish an important domain where cultural hegemony is negotiated and contested (Fiske, 1998).

Musical preferences are generally constructed by means of genres, which are commonly understood as distinct musical styles. Lena and Peterson (2008) define genres as "systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together an industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music" (p. 698). Among these genre-specific expectations, race and ethnicity operate as the most inflexible and constant aspects for boundary formation (Brekhus et al., 2010). Different musical genres hence contain both aesthetic (e.g., "black sound") and authenticity demarcations (e.g., "real rocker") that are influenced or (partly) determined by ethno-racial boundaries (Roy, 2004).

Popular music can function in the creation of boundaries between groups, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, since these aspects are very visible in the act of music performances. In recognizing these aspects, social and symbolic boundaries in music are created, shaped, and maintained by both producers and consumers of music. Although the foundations of Western popular music consist of white and nonwhite influences, ethno-racial difference is essential in both pop and rock music (Shank, 2001). Notwithstanding music scenes and genres in which ethno-racial integration is explicitly promoted, most genres continue to exhibit both explicit and implicit ethno-racial segregation. While hip-hop is generally perceived to be co-constitutive of black culture (e.g., Harrison, 2009), genres such as country (e.g., Mann, 2008), metal (e.g., Kahn-Harris, 2008), punk (e.g., Hebdige, 1979; Traber, 2001), and rock music in general (e.g., Bannister, 2006) work as carriers of white cultural markers.

Historically, rock music was considered to be a black genre, predominantly played and enjoyed by black people in pre-1950s America. At a time when “the work of black musicians in the blues, jazz, R&B [rhythm and blues], and what later came to be called soul genres was systematically excluded” (Peterson, 1990, p. 99), American record labels acted as key agents in keeping rock music black by abstaining from marketing rock music to white audiences (Dowd, 2003). In search for the attention of post-World War II white listeners, radio stations sought to push the aesthetic boundaries of their audiences by playing new and innovative music (Peterson, 1990). This bending and breaching of musical frontiers was not without regard for race however, as record companies remained reluctant to market (or even sell) black music to white people. Grounded in fears of moral decay, the common assumption was that black music such as jazz and rock ‘n’ roll granted white youngsters “too much pleasure from black expressions and that these primitive, alien expressions were dangerous to young people’s moral development” (Rose, 1991, p. 280). As famously stated by Sun Records founder Sam Philips: “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars” (cited in Marcus, 1999, p. 52).

An assembly of white rock ‘n’ roll musicians such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis prepared white audiences in racially segregated America for rock music since 1955 onwards, systematically excluding blacks from participating in rock music: the “Elvis-effect” (Taylor, 1997). Even though this white appropriation of “black music” was considered to be a form of reverential cultural borrowing (Rodman, 2006), particularly by the artists themselves who were in awe of black rock ‘n’ roll artists such as Chuck Berry, Jimmy Preston, and Bo Diddley, audiences were not receptive to the integration of different ethno-racial groups. Even to date, record labels are reluctant to sign black rock artists, since “black rock won’t sell to whites because it is black, and it won’t sell to blacks because it is rock” (Mahon, 2004, p. 68), revealing how rock music has been institutionalized as white ever since. Furthermore, black music is still often marketed in a stereotypical way based on ethno-racial associations (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013). This “frozen dialectic” (Hebdige, 1978, pp. 69–70) in music between whiteness (rock) and nonwhiteness (soul, R&B, hip-hop) has lasted for over five decades, although recently there have been signs that this is melting. The combination of hip-hop (black) and rock (white) music which was popularized in the 1990s and early 2000s helped to bridge two genres which are marked along ethno-racial lines. Nevertheless, the existence of black rock movements such as *Afropunk* (“the other black experience” (Afropunk, n.d.)) and the *Black Rock Coalition* (“a united front of musically and politically progressive black artists and supporters” (Black Rock Coalition, n.d.)) reveals that nonwhites continue to be marginalized in contemporary rock music.

WHITENESS AND ETHNO-RACIAL IDEOLOGIES

Turning away from Jim Crow-era racism of the pre-1960s, the American Civil Rights Acts of 1964 banned most forms of blatant racism and white supremacy organizations from the United States. While vital in the process toward ending racism, the prohibition did not fully eliminate ethno-racial segregation or institutional discrimination. “White privilege,” the location of structural advantage that whites enjoy in Western societies due to a history of both numerical and symbolical domination (and ignoring the relevance of this), is believed to have disappeared together with the most blatant forms of racism and ideas of white supremacy (Hughey, 2012). Thus, fundamental for the idea of a “post-racial” America is the assumption that American society is beyond racial markers—“color-blind.” This indicates that people of any racial and/or ethnic background are responsible for their individual success in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Tatum, 1999). Color-blind ideology suggests that despite different histories of inequality (e.g., slavery, racism) and lopsided social opportunities, there exists an essential sameness between ethno-racial groups. Paradoxically, rather than actually turning blind toward ethno-racial categorization, color-blind ideology ignores *talking* about race, rather than ignoring race itself. This also ignores the institutional benefits of white over nonwhite people (Hughey, 2012). Color-blind ideology thus establishes a status-quo in which social inequality along ethno-racial lines persists, and where talking about it (“race-talk”) is frowned upon.

Importantly, discrimination due to color-blind ideology is often not deliberately or knowingly caused by whites (Hancock, 2008; Hughey, 2012). Dominant members of society—whites—enjoy status by default and hence are left “unmarked” as opposed to nonwhites (Brekhus, 1998). This effectively makes whiteness a symbolically dominant but “hidden” ethnicity, as members are often unaware of the implications of not being marked (Doane, 1997). Whiteness can therefore be conceived of as a set of (classed and gendered) cultural practices that—as a result of being socially dominant—are less visible in everyday interaction than those of ethno-racial others (Frankenberg, 1993), making it “the unspoken elephant in the room of a racialized society” (Brekhus et al., 2010, p. 71). Whites hence often believe that a racial or ethnic identity is “something that other people have [which is] not salient for them” (Tatum, 1999, p. 94). Only on direct encounters with a nonwhite other—in music, for instance—“a process of racial identity development for whites begins to unfold” (Brekhus et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding the dominance of color-blind ideology in the United States, not all whites are unaware of ethno-racial marking and its effects on social inequality. This ideology of “color-consciousness” acknowledges social difference due to structural ethno-racial marking (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and is fundamental for affirmative action and “positive” discrimination. With such policies, the active recognition of whites’ position of structural advantage is reckoned to be compensated for. When whites turn to a more color-conscious worldview, this does not only imply that they become aware of nonwhite social marking but also take note of their own unmarked status and, subsequently, the structural advantage which accompanies not being socially marked (Brekhus, 1998).

Research has revealed that blacks sometimes draw on color-conscious ideology to reappropriate and re-historicize the black roots of rock music (Maskell, 2009). The question remains whether nonwhite rock artists such as Lenny Kravitz and Apollo Heights gain the (positive) attention of a more reflexive white rock audience when titling their albums inconspicuously as “Negrophilia” (2013) or “White Music for Black People” (2007), respectively.

Color-consciousness in rock reception can also feel constraining for nonwhite artists. In an interview with *Melody Maker* in 1988, Corey Glover, the vocalist of all-black rock band Living Colour remarked that people seemed to have difficulty in going beyond seeing the band as a group of four black guys. Even though people appreciated the band, this focus on non-ability traits rather than individual skills prevented listeners from seeing that “we’re four musicians as well” (cited in Reynolds, 2007, p. 98).

CRITIC AND CONSUMER REFLEXIVITY

The Internet has led to bottom-up practices of cultural classification, granting consumers the opportunity to evaluate music online (Verboord, 2010). However, rock critics differ from consumer critics regarding the nature of their involvement. Music critics have historically been and still remain vital in classification practices of music and assigning symbolic boundaries to these products and their accompanying genres (DiMaggio, 1987; Janssen et al., 2008). Hence, music criticism operates as a “mediator between cultural producers and participants by selecting, describing, labeling and evaluating products” (Verboord, 2010, p. 623). Critics assign particular meanings to musical products which in effect establish aesthetic classifications (Weisethaunet & Lindberg, 2010).

Aesthetic categorizations are often attached to people (e.g., well-known rock stars), objects (e.g., instruments), specific spaces (e.g., cities), and eras (e.g., specific periods in the past). While critics usually maintain that purely aesthetic criteria prevail in their boundary work, the content of their reviews is also affected by race and ethnicity (Berkers et al., 2013). For consumer critics “objective” aesthetic criteria are often replaced for more outspoken personal preferences, echoing fandom without the aesthetic disinterestedness that critics (are assumed to) uphold. Often, reviewers also grant the reader a small background story on the artist or they situate the artist or album in a specific context in which the reviewer thinks the album ought to be understood. In doing so, music critics can canonize rock music and determine what rock exactly is (and again: what it is not), upholding whiteness and edging out nonwhites from participating. This shared understanding of rock music helps the production of rock narratives but is also hard to counter.

Since a greater knowledge of (legitimate) rock music and its history should increase reflexivity on the topic, it can be expected that (semi-)professional critics reveal more reflexivity (i.e., explicit mentions of ethno-racial boundaries) towards nonwhite participation than more unreflexive consumer critics, who are more implicit about their boundary work. (Semi-) professional reviewers in particular might therefore be partly responsible for melting the frozen state of affairs between white and nonwhite participants in rock music. This does not necessarily imply that these reviewers also employ a color-conscious ideology: equally high (or low) evaluations by (semi-)critics of both white and nonwhite artists already reveals openness towards nonwhite participation.

Following Bourdieu (1984) however, greater cultural capital in rock music also increases the chances for critics to have more musical dislikes and protect the borders of what is considered to be legitimate rock music (Bryson, 2002; Weisethaunet & Lindberg, 2010). Rock critics are continually in the process of institutionalizing rock music, which occurs when “actors (e.g., organizations, audiences) widely agree on the superiority of certain works and when they separate those works from mundane entertainment” (Dowd, 2004, p. 237). It can therefore also be assumed

that (semi-)professional critics facilitate the canonization and establishment of the rock genre as symbolically white for upholding a canonized status quo.

DATA AND METHODS

The sample consists of 385 reviews of 66 rock albums that were released between 2003 and 2013. A selection was made based on (i) the number of critical reviews that an album received (at least three on notable online music websites), (ii) whether an artist was classified within the rock genre, and (iii) whether a band could be considered white or nonwhite. White and nonwhite artists were matched according to (sub)genre similarity.

First, of each album, three (semi-)professional critical reviews and three consumer reviews were picked (the oldest one) and included in the analysis. Most websites offer either (semi-)professional or consumer critic reviews, with a few exceptions which offer both. In a few cases (11, leaving 385 reviews for analysis), reviews were excluded from the sample because they were written a long time (more than two years) after the release of an album, which can mean that artists have already released a more recent album which historicizes the album under review. Reviews were taken from: amazon.com (66), rateyourmusic.com (60), allmusic.com (57), sputnikmusic.com (50), pitchfork.com (37), metacritic.com (18), popmatters.com (17), rollingstone.com (14), drownedinsound.com (13), spin.com (9), consequenceofsound.net (7), itunes.com (7), absolutepunk.net (6), punknews.org (6), newyorktimes.com (5), alternativeaddiction.com (3), metal-observer.com (3), altsounds.com (1), hardrockhaven.net (1), metalholic.com (1), metalsucks.net (1), punkmusic.about.com (1), rocksound.tv (1), and theindie-pendent.com (1).

Second, half of the albums were produced by white artists, the other half by nonwhite artists. The distinction between white and nonwhite artists was operationalized by phenotypically distinguishing between white and nonwhite band members. By “placing natural marks (skin pigmentation) onto social marks (culture)” (Brekhus et al., 2010, p. 65), race is a socially constructed classification system based on perceived bodily similarities that are believed to be indicative of a collective origin for specific societal groups (Cornell & Hartmann, 1997). In comparison, ethnicity is established on perceived cultural similarities, as members of a similar ethnic group have a belief in a shared socio-cultural descent without necessarily attaching value to the color of skin (Cornell & Hartmann, 1997). In order to construct a variable of artist categorization along racial lines, a five-point scale (all white, mostly white, half white/nonwhite, mostly nonwhite, all nonwhite) was applied to assess and code artist diversity along ethno-racial lines. This scale was subsequently transformed into a dichotomous variable to create an ideal typical distinction between white and nonwhite artists, the latter category including bands defined as ethno-racially integrated or mixed. Both whites and nonwhites commonly use rather strict differentiations between white *vis-à-vis* nonwhite, failing to see different shades within an ethno-racial continuum (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Harris & Sim, 2002; Khanna, 2010). Hence, although reviewers might explicitly ignore one nonwhite band member or stress that a band is completely nonwhite, ethno-racially integrated bands were labeled as nonwhite since they counter rock music’s whiteness.

Third, the consumer-driven genre labels found on the American website discogs.com and the British website last.fm were utilized to assess whether an artists is commonly considered to fall

within the brackets of the rock genre. Rock subgenres such as indie, punk and metal were also sparsely included to increase musical diversity.

Fourth, for each artist, band composition at the time of recording and each band member's ethno-racial background was assessed using band biographies, pictures, *Wikipedia* entries and information given in reviews. The same was done for the reviewers, whenever this information was accessible. Each review was analyzed quantitatively by assessing the size of the review (number of words), the numerical evaluation given (0–100, the commonly used “five star system” was translated to this numerical system, one star being 20 points), and primary genre classification given (if not given, this was coded as missing). The content of the reviews was analyzed using four variables that recorded whether and in what context reviewers mention ethno-racial, national, gender, and socio-economic markers. For instance, each mention of race (e.g., “black”) was counted as one mention while subsequently assessing the context of the mention. “Black sound” was thus labeled as an “aesthetic” marker. Often reviewers do not attach aesthetic or authenticity labels to these markers however, in which case the mention was only counted and not assessed (e.g., “Afro-American drummer”).

Fifth and last, artists that the reviewed artists were compared to, were also registered and the context of this mention was coded as well (for which reason they are compared: ethno-racial comparison, sound comparison, visual comparison, gender comparison, attitude comparison). Each review was read twice, where open coding was conducted to assess the content qualitatively. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS.

RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Based on the selection criteria, 50.1% (193) of the reviews were written by critics on official music reviewing websites or online magazines, and 49.9% (191) were written by consumer critics on various consumer- and user-reviewing websites (see [Table 1](#)). As was expected, it was difficult to classify reviewers along ethno-racial lines as these were not mentioned on profile pages of reviewers, consumer critics in particular. However, based on researcher-based face-validation of profile pictures, about 35.3% of the reviewers were white compared with 2.9% of nonwhites.

TABLE 1
Critics and Consumer Critics Background Information (n=385)

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

It was not possible to assess the phenotypical ethno-racial characteristics of the remaining 61.8% of reviewers, although previous research suggests music criticism is dominated by white males (Jones, 2002). Most reviews in the sample were written by men (68.3%), compared to a small number of female reviewers (9.4%). The gender of the rest of the reviewers (22.3%) was unknown. On average, (semi-)professional reviewers tended to use more words in their reviews (498 ± 258) than consumer reviewers (360 ± 335). Consumer critics tended to give albums about 10 more points than official reviewers (81.0 versus 72.2, based on a 0-100 point system), but they also disagreed more with fellow reviewers in their evaluation scores than (semi-)professional reviewers did (14.3 versus 18.8 points in deviation from average score).

The sample contained 200 reviews (51.9%) of albums by (partly) nonwhite bands and 185 reviews (48.1%) of albums by all-white bands. Of all the nonwhite bands 51.0% only had one or two nonwhite members whereas 26.5% of the nonwhite bands were fully nonwhite, that is, were furthest removed from the white norm in rock music. The rest of the bands (22.5%) were half or predominantly nonwhite. The bands in the sample were mostly fully comprised of males (70.6%) against 12 all-female bands (3.1%). 101 bands (26.2%) could be described as gender-diverse, containing both male and female musicians (although all were predominantly male as well, in line with previous studies on skewed gender dynamics in rock music participation [Cohen, 1997]). Interestingly, nonwhite artists also tended to show more gender diversity than white artists (30.5% against 28.1%), demonstrating that diversification along ethno-racial lines is also indicative of gender variety.

Turning to the theorized relationship between ethno-racial categorization and rock music, the comparison of mean scores revealed that albums released by nonwhite artists generally received lower evaluation scores than albums by white artists (see Table 2). Whereas white artists enjoyed a mean score of 78.6 points, nonwhite artists were judged with 74.8 points on average, generally receiving significantly ($p = <.05$) lower evaluations. When comparing the artists based on a five-point categorization (white, mostly white, half-white/nonwhite, mostly nonwhite, nonwhite), the mean differences in the evaluation of white artists as compared to ethno-racially integrated and fully nonwhite artists follows a similar, but statistically insignificant pattern.¹ Surprisingly, gender diversity in bands did not influence the mean evaluation in any significant way ($p = .608$). Whether an album was an artist's debut album or not also did not influence the evaluation ($p = .143$).

When observing these results, it becomes clear that the lower evaluation of nonwhite artists is explained ($p = <.01$) by the wider discrepancy that exists between the scores that consumer critics attributed to nonwhite artists. This might suggest that (semi-)professional reviewers are more reflexive about ethno-racial difference than consumer critics (consumers), rather than critics (with greater cultural capital) being fundamental in keeping rock music white due to continually attaching white symbolic boundaries to rock's particular aesthetic traits. The salience of color-blind ideology is illustrated by the fact that race and/or ethnicity were rarely mentioned in reviews (see Table 3), with neither aesthetic nor authenticity classifications being paired with ethno-racial markers (9.1% of reviews contain one or more mentions of race and/or ethnicity). The same

¹An f-test (ANOVA) was conducted using the five groups in the original scale variable. Although the mean differences are substantial, the results fail to go below a p-value of 0.05 because the sample sizes of the nonwhite categories are too small as compared to the much bigger all-white group in the sample (especially when splitting the data file to create a discrepancy between (semi-)professional and consumer critics).

TABLE 2
Evaluation of Rock Albums of White and Nonwhite Artists in the United States, 2003–13 (n=385)

	<i>Critics</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>Consumer critics</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>Combined</i>	<i>sd</i>
Evaluation	72.2	14.3	81.0	18.8	76.6	17.3
White artists	72.6	14.3	84.4**	16.6	78.6*	16.6
Nonwhite artists	71.8	14.4	77.8**	20.2	74.8*	17.8

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

TABLE 3
Rock Album Reviews Containing Mentions of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender by (Semi-)Professional Critics and Consumer Critics in the United States, 2003–13 (n=385)

	<i>Critics</i>	<i>Consumer critics</i>	<i>Combined</i>
Ethno-racial marking	6.0% (23)	3.1% (12)	9.1% (35)
White artists	0.3% (1)	—	0.3% (1)
Nonwhite artists	5.7% (22)	3.1% (12)	8.8% (34)
Gender marking	6.8% (26)	6.2% (24)	13.0% (50)

counts for gender and socio-economic aspects; only nationality was often mentioned as a part of the artists' background (130 mentions in total).

Color-blindness causes reviewers to abstain from commenting on ethno-racial aspects in reviews, even though evaluation scores in reviews revealed a lower appreciation for nonwhite artists. Therefore, as can be expected, not *talking* about race in reviews does not imply that nonwhiteness is not *seen* in the evaluation of artists. As the qualitative analysis demonstrates, however, (semi-)professional critics in particular showed many aspects of a color-conscious ideology, underlining their greater explicitness regarding ethno-racial relations compared to consumer critics.

RESULTS: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis of album reviews revealed five different mechanisms that are utilized by reviewers as a part of boundary work: (i) ethno-racial comparisons, (ii) inter-genre comparisons, (iii) positive ethno-racial marking, (iv) negative ethno-racial marking, and (v) minimization.

Ethno-Racial Comparisons

First, nonwhite artists were regularly compared along ethno-racial lines, favoring the use of group categorization over the assessment of individual skills. For example, nonwhite punk-rock bands were continually associated with black 1970s punk group Bad Brains, and nonwhite indie bands were usually mentioned alongside Bloc Party, Vampire Weekend, and all-black band TV on the Radio in particular. Ignoring aesthetic differences, nonwhite rock guitarist Lenny Kravitz has

commonly been compared with 1960s psychedelic rock star Jimi Hendrix even though, bluntly stating, the only real similarity is that they are both black men playing rock guitar. Discussing a new album by Ben Harper, one consumer critic mentioned that Harper's new album sounded rather commercial, venting the fear that "worried Ben may turn into a latter day Lenny" (sputnikmusic.com). Similarly, one critic found the BLK JKS 2009 album "After Robots" to sound like "Jimi Hendrix at his most experimental" (popmatters.com). It is important to note that these comparisons are commonly made based on perceived aesthetic criteria, but that these compared-with artists are predominantly nonwhite is suggestive of an implicit process of ethno-racial associations as well. More explicitly, one (semi-)professional reviewer on allmusic.com paralleled aesthetic with ethno-racial classifications when remarking that:

Combining various essential elements of black rock history from Sly & the Family Stone, Curtis Mayfield, Jimi Hendrix, Living Colour, Public Enemy, and their similarly minded N.Y.C. cohorts TV on the Radio, their [Dragons of Zynth] debut fell-length, Coronation Thieves, is so full of jarring juxtapositions and startling twists and turns as to have been under the influence of alien spawn, yet deep down inside lurks the greatest soul album of 2007.

Inter-Genre Comparisons

Second, the rock music of nonwhite artists was regularly compared to other genres such as soul, rap and world music. "Soul" or "soulfulness" in particular was often used as an element of classification to discuss albums by nonwhite artists. The Veer Union's black vocalist Earl Crispin's voice was believed to add "the soulful vocal lines" (critic on alternativeaddiction.com) to the music, just as Bloc Party's singer Kele Okereke's "voice is actually quite soulful" (consumer critic on sputnikmusic.com). Earl Greyhound's black bassist and co-vocalist Kamara Thomas was "the group's secret weapon, adding soulful harmonies while holding down the bottom in an outfit that demands a tight-fisted rhythm section" (critic on allmusic.com). Lastly, Sevendust's vocalist Layon Witherspoon "proves himself to be one of the finest vocalists in modern rock," mainly because of his "soul drenched croon" (consumer critic on sputnikmusic.com). Just as with hip-hop, soul and soulfulness are attached to an essentialized idea of blackness. In a review of (all-black) TV on the Radio's 2004 debut album, a allmusic.com critic linked the band's usage of various musical styles to their blackness in a color-conscious way:

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. However, the song does offer a refreshing reminder that hip-hop and urban music – as vital as they've been recently – are not the only kinds of music that can handle this kind of dialogue.

Following research on cultural legitimization practices and cultural omnivores (Van Eijck, 2000), nonwhite musical genres such as reggae and Latin are placed in the "world music" category, which enjoys higher acclaim than hip-hop music, which is associated with a low socio-economic status (Bryson, 2002). The analysis reveals that rock music is commonly perceived in opposition to hip-hop, leading to negative evaluations of albums that incorporate hip-hop or rap. It could also be the case that nonwhite rock incorporates more influences from other genres; an inter-genre

cross-over which is subsequently evaluated positively (e.g., world music) or negatively (e.g., hip-hop).

On the one hand, as with soul music, the world music genre is appreciated in rock music. In a review of BLK JKS, a critic of *popmatters.com* argued that the bands' "worldly elements" have been "sorely missed in today's world of instantly accessible and easily marketable rock/pop music." Discussing the indie band Vampire Weekend's self-titled debut, ethnic elements in the group's album were attached to its nonwhite members: "The first sound on the first song, "Mansard Roof," comes from Rostam Batmanglij's keyboard, set to a perky, almost piping tone—the kind of sunny sound you'd hear in old west-African pop" (critic on *pitchfork.com*). Yeasayer's guitarist Anand Wilder—having Indian ethnic origins—was held responsible for the band's "worldly sound," channeling "both a dystopian science-fiction sensibility and deep appreciation for the natural world, employing a wide, international range of sounds. The result is a unique form of indie rock world music that resists stepping into the essentialist, ethnocentric traps consistently tripped by high-minded hipsters" (critic on *pitchfork.com*).

On the other hand, hip-hop is seen as at odds with rock music. WZRD was questioned by one critic on *sputnikmusic.com* whether they know how rock works:

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. Though the vocals are obviously important in typical Rock music, the instrumentation is given more emphasis.

Positive Ethno-Racial Marking

Third, color-consciousness was often employed to mark artists positively in a normative sense. Often only using a small number of words, reviewers mention that it was "extraordinary" or "interesting" that an album was made by nonwhite artists. One (semi-)professional reviewer mentioned how punk group Bad Brains has "a well-deserved legendary status, built not just on their essential albums like "Rock for Light" and "I Against I" paving the way for years of hardcore to come, but also for being one of the first all-black groups in the predominantly white early punk scene" (*allmusic.com*). Another consumer critic mentioned how Bloc Party's vocalist Kele Okereke portrayed a "verbose subversion of stereotypes galore; A black man who is an open homosexual, radically left in his political leanings, unafraid to cite sources not often quoted as wells of inspiration amongst the black musical populace" (*sputnikmusic.com*). Again, (semi-)professional critics revealed most reflexivity. In a burst of rock-history reflection, one critic from online magazine *spin.com* comments on Black Kids' 2008 album "Partly Traumatic" how:

Morrissey and the Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt, [are] ambi/homosexual songwriters whose mischievous affection for taboo signifiers of whiteness has unfairly gotten them tagged as racist. Reggie and sister Ali, however, are African American; their mixed-gender bandmates are white; and together they're known as Black Kids.

Similarly, vocalist Shingai Shoniwa of The Noisettes was heralded as a breaker of rock music's symbolic boundaries (both along ethno-racial and gender lines), which was applauded by this *pitchfork.com* reviewer:

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], and offers a corrective for a half-century of popular ignorance.

Perhaps most reflexive regarding rock music's historical whiteness was this allmusic.com reviewer who discussed The Veer Union's 2009 album "Against the Grain":

That being said, the band's biracial lineup is a good deal more interesting than the music it creates, as frontman Crispin Earl is one of the few black vocalists to appear on the hard rock landscape in years. Earl's skin is inconsequential to his band's sound, of course, but The Veer Union nevertheless experienced a good deal of difficulty securing a record contract, with many labels allegedly balking at the prospect of promoting a biracial band to a historically white audience.

Lastly, an amazon.com reviewer who exposed his own blackness explained how it means a lot to him that he found a fellow nonwhite rock/metal enthusiast in Straight Line Stitch's vocalist Alexis Brown: "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, (. . .)."

Negative Ethno-Racial Marking

Fourth, recognizing and marking ethno-racial differences does not immediately entail a positive evaluation of nonwhite participation in rock music. This act of self-marking or "playing the race-card" sometimes led to negative evaluations. One (semi-)professional critic appreciated Whole Wheat Bread's effort to minimize the nonwhite tendency to accentuate their blackness: "one of the refreshing things about Minority Rules, aside from the unapologetic poppiness of the songs, is the way that the trio neither ignore their racial background nor overemphasize it" (allmusic.com). Seemingly tired of this experienced overemphasizing of ethno-racial symbolic boundaries, another consumer critic on sputnikmusic.com did not enjoy the Black Kids' effort to racially politicize their music: "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.)" A cover song of AC/DC's "Back in Black" on an album by the all-black rock band Living Colour was found to be uninteresting by one rateyourmusic.com consumer critic: "a cover of "Back In Black (Guys, seriously, pick a less obvious cover next time okay?)." Interestingly, no cases were found where lack of rock talent was explicitly associated with nonwhiteness, echoing the color-blind notion that race is not explicitly discussed in a negative sense, but is rather discussed using (implicit) artist- and or genre-comparisons.

Minimization

Fifth and last, reviewers tended to flag nonwhiteness in an ironic sense to minimize the effect of race talk. The double consciousness of ethno-racial minority groups (ethno-racial group identification vis-à-vis identification with white society) often triggers both self-irony and irony from others. Like discursive minimization strategies—downplaying the impact of racially fuelled remarks—in everyday white race-talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hughey, 2012), (predominantly

white) reviewers were inclined to jokingly mark artists along ethno-racial lines. This happened by inserting a slur which is marked as black: “brother Cole” (critic on metal-observer.com) in God Forbid and the “gangsta rap alter egos” (critic on allmusic.com) of Whole Wheat Bread. After giving a long, positive review of the album “Minority Rules,” a critic closed his appraisal by rhetorically asking “did I mention they *bes* black? [emphasis added]” (critic on absolutepunk.net). The band was also compared with the white punk-rock group Blink 182 by calling them “Black-182” (critic on punknews.org). Anticipating whether Dragons of Zynth are able to produce a follow-up album of similar quality as their debut *Coronation of Thieves*, a white (semi-)professional reviewer reassured that he is sure “the brothers gonna work it out” (allmusic.com). A consumer critic on amazon.com mentioned to definitely see “these brothers” of Fishbone out when the reader is able to, whereas a popmatters.com critic thought that a song on their new record conveys a feeling that would “fill any *hookah bar* in the land [emphasis added].” Ironic interpretations of nonwhite participation might on the one hand “soften the blow” of the initial shock that whites might experience when they see nonwhites make rock music, by doing so they simultaneously run the risk of reducing the chance that nonwhite rockers gain the ever-important rock authenticity.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article has sought to investigate how whiteness is (re)produced in the critical reception of rock music by comparing how nonwhite rock artists are evaluated as opposed to their white counterparts. In addition, a comparison was made between (semi-)professional critics and consumer critics. By conducting a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis of reviews of rock albums released between 2003 and 2013, this article has demonstrated how nonwhite artists receive lower evaluations than white artists, particularly by consumer critics. Performing boundary work by employing ethno-racial ideologies (color-blindness vis-à-vis color-consciousness), reviewers actively mark nonwhiteness as opposed to whiteness and draw symbolic boundaries along ethno-racial lines. Having a more institutionalized understanding of rock music and its cultural canon, (semi-)professional critics are more reflexive than consumer critics regarding ethno-racial dynamics, as their aesthetic evaluation is not influenced by the ethno-racial background of the artist in question.

In five different ways that tie in with color-blind and color-conscious ideologies, reviewers apply discursive strategies to discuss race and ethnicity in rock music. First, nonwhite artists are compared with fellow nonwhite artists as group categorization is preferred over individual categorization based on skills. Second, nonwhite artists are often associated with other ethno-racially marked music such as world music and hip-hop, in which world music brings forth a positive evaluation, and hip-hop a negative evaluation. Third, color-conscious reviewers actively mark nonwhite rock participation in a positive sense. Fourth, some do so in a negative sense, denying the existence of white privilege. Lastly, the importance of race is minimized by employing ironic discursive strategies, downplaying the significance of ethno-racial difference. These mechanisms function as possibilities for reviewers to discuss race and ethnicity implicitly rather than explicitly, keeping symbolic boundaries that differentiate between whites and nonwhites intact. The explicit marking of race and ethnicity by predominantly (semi-)professional critics is important in the bending and (ultimately) breaking of these boundaries, as nonwhite participation in rock music is increasingly normalized.

By using genre and artist comparisons, both consumer and (semi-)professional critics compare nonwhite artists along ethno-racial rather than aesthetic lines, making implicit associations. Nonwhite artists' musical cross-overs are appreciated when these added elements come from world music, R&B, soul and reggae, whereas hip-hop influences are frowned upon. Interestingly, nonwhite artists are commonly associated with these genres and are believed to inherently bring these aspects into rock music—maybe even when they did not do so, or at least knowingly. The artistic line nonwhite bands walk on is narrow however, since actively including these “non-white elements” in rock music—playing the race card—can be negatively perceived by critics. In other words, the elements should be incorporated “naturally” rather than forcefully, as nonwhites are essentialized as naturally possessing these qualities. Since rock music is believed to be ethno-racially unmarked, listeners might look down upon ethno-racial marking, particularly self-marking by nonwhite artists, because it politicizes a genre which is felt not to be political: “everyone can join rock.” Moving away from how nonwhite artists are perceived by white listeners, it is also up for inquiry whether nonwhite artists are aware of these mechanisms and consciously refrain from self-marking along ethno-racial lines for fear of being rejected.

Although this article has revealed how white boundary work determines the evaluation of nonwhite artists participating in rock music, further research needs to reveal how wider reception of rock music by fans and consumers is instrumental in upholding or countering white cultural dominance in rock music. As most rock music is produced and marketed in and for the United States market, another field of research is the scrutiny of how whiteness is decoded within other ethno-racial constellations, particularly in countries that are considered to be in the (semi-)periphery of the cultural world system. Although there have been studies on the international (re)appropriation of American black hip hop culture (e.g., Bennett, 1999; Harrison, 2008; Maxwell, 2003), there has been no research on how understandings of whiteness travel through the international consumption of music. Future research should hence focus on whether and how ethno-racial markers travel outside their original national contexts. Rather than only turning to the nonwhite artists and fans who are increasingly making their mark on rock music, research should particularly focus on what exactly constitutes hegemonic whiteness, this sociological nonminority “residue” (Doane, 1997, p. 376).

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