

“Cultural appropriation,” “white privilege” and the attacks on rapper Iggy Azalea

By Nick Barrickman and David Walsh
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In recent months, the hip hop music industry has witnessed a controversy surrounding the musical success of Australian-born rapper Iggy Azalea (born Amethyst Amelia Kelly in 1990, Sydney, Australia).

Azalea, a white rapper affecting a cadence and drawl similar to artists associated with the southern American hip hop scene, received four Grammy nominations this year (among them, best rap album, record of the year and best new artist), including for her work on 2014’s “The New Classic.” As it turned out, she did not take home any of the awards at the recent Grammy ceremony. Her single “Fancy” has been a huge hit, with seven million copies sold worldwide.

Iggy Azalea’s growing fame in a musical genre largely associated with African Americans has led to verbal assaults on the Australian rapper by a number of well-known figures, including Snoop Dogg, Nicki Minaj and, most notably, the Harlem-born singer-songwriter Azealia Banks.

Banks, who has something of a penchant for conflicts with fellow performers, first took exception to an Azalea lyric on the 2012 song “D.R.U.G.S.,” in which the Australian raps: “Tire marks, tire marks, finish line with the fire marks/ When the relay starts I’m a runaway slave-master.” Banks responded on Twitter to the effect that she had issues with anyone “outside of my culture trying to trivialize very serious aspects of it.” Azalea later apologized for the tasteless lyric, admitting that it was “careless.”

Matters escalated after news surfaced late last year that Azalea was nominated for several 2015 Grammy awards. Banks appeared in mid-December on New York City’s Hot 97 radio talk show, accusing the Australian rapper in a lengthy interview of appropriating “black music” for her own ends.

“At the very least y’all owe me the right to my f***ing identity and to not exploit that sh*t,” said Banks in a clearly emotional state, adding, “That’s all we’re holding on to with hip-hop and rap ... I feel like it’s being snatched away from me or something ... The blackness is gone.” Banks was later more explicit, demanding on social media that “We [African Americans] are the children of the people who perished in the name of modern capitalism and we deserve a piece of that f***ing pie.”

On cue, media commentators, fellow performers and other

entertainment industry personalities began weighing in on “Azalea-Gate,” chastising Azalea for her perceived lack of humility and contrition. “She [Azalea] seems clueless as to why hip-hop is black dominated, but she’s absolutely sure that she deserves a place in it,” remarked Reni Eddo-Lodge, a commentator on “race and gender issues” for the British *Telegraph*. “She’s succeeding in a genre with no idea of its social and historical significance,” Eddo-Lodge added.

Sorting through the confusion and social backwardness that the “Azalea-gate” controversy has generated would take more than one comment, but we can offer a few points.

First of all, the effort to examine music and popular culture through the prism of race is a hopeless and reactionary one. There is no such thing as “black music” or “white music.” The musical cross-fertilization between the various national populations in the US goes back to the earliest days of the country. Obviously, that process took place, in the first place, under conditions of the savage oppression of the African population brought to America as slaves. Nonetheless, it took place. In the modern era, one of the glories of American popular music has been the enormous variety of influences and traditions.

Distinct music genres have specific (sometimes specific ethnic) roots, but that has never stopped the mixing and evolution of styles and trends, which is an entirely healthy and often quite spectacular feature of pop music in particular. In fact, that speaks to the essentially democratic character of popular thinking and feeling, when it has a chance to develop organically. To call this virtually unstoppable process “appropriation” is fraudulent and regressive. It should be celebrated rather than denounced.

Rejecting the racist attacks against Iggy Azalea should not be taken for an instant as a denial of the long history of discrimination against and exclusion of black artists, performers and athletes. The persecutions of boxer Jack Johnson and Chuck Berry are well known. Black jazz and pop musicians were subjected to humiliating conditions for decades, not being allowed to eat or stay in the same restaurants or hotels as their white counterparts. The former were often cheated out of their rightful careers or earnings.

However, the apartheid-like conditions engendered political

opposition to the entire existing order among the most perceptive and insightful black artists and musicians. The great singer Paul Robeson, of course, but also blues and folk artists Leadbelly, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Josh White and others, turned toward the Communist Party (along with many African American writers and poets.). Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and The Temptations performed openly anti-Vietnam War songs. Stevie Wonder was identified with opposition to Richard Nixon in the early 1970s. (In another field, of course, there was Muhammad Ali, who gained an enormous following because of his opposition to US intervention in Vietnam.)

The American ruling elite was frightened by the inner city rebellions of the 1960s, and the level of black popular disaffection. It set out consciously to cultivate a layer of African American politicians, entertainers and performers who identified with and were committed to capitalism. And this policy has had some success. Hip hop, which emerged in the mid-1970s, was born within that general atmosphere, although there have been and continue to be oppositional voices within it.

However, the general climate of the last several decades has been dominated by individualism, worship of money and status, and political conformism. Much of the noise, posturing and bravado in hip hop, in reality, is an effort to conceal the fact that, on all important matters, the leading artists, often aspiring or successful businessmen and women, align themselves with official public opinion.

So, to suggest that the “radicalism” and “anti-authoritarian sneer” of African American-dominated rap music, which supposedly “valorizes outsiders and underdogs,” is threatened by Iggy Azalea’s “empty white echo,” in the manner of *Washington Post* pop music critic Chris Richards, is a fantasy. The anti-establishment image of hip hop, in fact, has been largely a marketing and public relations gimmick, which has helped build up careers and bank accounts for a host of performers, producers and record company executives.

Azealia Banks’ comment is revealing. She is not a political figure, and her remarks reflect more widespread attitudes, but they are still a self-indictment. On the one hand, she points out that slavery was bound up with the birth of “modern capitalism,” but then, far from calling for opposition to such a brutal economic system, she pathetically asks for “a piece of the ... pie”! This is the outlook of an entire stratum of African American performers, academics, politicians, union officials, “activists” and such—they simply want in, or, in many cases, further in.

Hip hop is a multi-billion dollar industry. Nervousness about the economics of the record industry no doubt lies behind some of the shrill cries about “white privilege” and “cultural appropriation” and the attacks on performers like Iggy Azalea. Total profit from US music sales and licensing was \$6.3 billion in 2009, less than *half* the industry’s \$14.6 billion in profits ten

years earlier, according to CNN Money. Major label rap music, which makes up a significant portion of the industry’s proceeds, has itself seen a decline in profits as it has been exposed to the proliferation of downloading software and other such technology.

As for the trivializing of “very serious aspects” of history and culture, one doesn’t have to look very far, or search out someone of Azalea’s nationality and skin color. Just one example: Kanye West’s 2013 album *Yeezus* (nominated for two Grammy awards in 2014), on which the rapper absurdly likened his difficulties with the opposite sex at public venues to South African apartheid and his troubles buying satisfactory luxury goods to chattel slavery in the American South!

If Iggy Azalea’s music is neither challenging nor innovative but immensely popular, that’s part of the general cultural situation under capitalism and the specific impact of the entertainment industry’s immensely powerful marketing apparatus. No serious singer or musician takes to heart such success or lives and dies on sales figures or largely meaningless awards. As the *Post*’s Richards says himself, speaking of awards ceremonies like the Grammys: “These are private business parties designed to radiate an aura of prestige and pad television ratings.”

Big social and artistic questions face every musician and performer. To do important work in our day means, first of all, rejecting self-absorption and selfishness and struggling with all one’s might to express the broadest social realities and truths. It is absolutely certain that music like that will find a wide and receptive audience.

The author also recommends :

Kanye West’s *Yeezus*: Blocking out the rest of the world
[19 July 2013]

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