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R.I.P (Race in Portland)

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Dr. Stephanie Skourtes

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For my thesis I have created a music album in the genre of indie folk songs that is cen-

tered around the concept of race from my own lived experience as a person of color growing up

in Portland, OR. This music is, undoubtedly, politicized due to the nature of the topic as well as the fact that in the United States we are currently in the midst of a changing national debate surrounding the topic of race and race relations (Kitwana, 2002). In this paper I will be discussing the creation of my own album as well as position my work within the context of the relevant history of politicized music.

The majority of the current conversation and research on politicized music exists within the context of the hip hop genre. That is to say, there is little to no current music that exists as a political tool to discuss race which is not hip hop. Thus, one of the hopes I have for my album is that it can address this gap. I'd like to see what kind of a contribution politicized folk music can have to the public conversation around race.

In order to discuss my own work, I will first define what is politicized music. Next, I will provide a brief overview of the history of politicized music wherein I will talk about different points in history where one can see politicized music playing a role in various cultures and events through to the modern day in the United States. The historical overview will conclude with a discussion of the hip hop music genre as a space for resistance and political/social action. The section on hip hop will contain a brief look at the history of hip hop, the relationship between women and hip hop, the critique of sexism and misogyny within the genre, and conclude with a discussion of race in hip hop and the implications of all of these elements on young listeners. I will then move into a discussion about my own music and the relationships I have seen between it and hip hop as politicized art forms.

Brief History of Politicized Music

Politicized music is best described as music that has been created with the intent of political meaning or music that takes on political meaning following it's creation (Saritas, 2010). A

good example of this is in *Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music* (Asai, 2005) which discusses how Americans of Asian descent were inspired by Black American's political and cultural relationships to Jazz (particularly during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's) to create and interpret their own political identity. From this emerged Asian American politicized music created by three key musicians; Glenn Horiuchi, Mark Izu, and Fred Ho. This music served as a method for the Asian American community to "…search for a framework in which to express their newly politicized identity" (p. 89). This had been characterized by their experience with labor discrimination laws, immigration exclusion, restrictions on naturalization, and restrictions on land ownership for Asian American immigrants. This relationship between the Black Arts Movement and the politicized Asian American music that followed is a good display of music created with the intent of political interpretation.

The utilization of music for political purposes has existed in various cultures and across many years of human history. It can be traced back to the writings of Plato discussing the effect of music on the politics of his time (Saritas, 2010). Politicized music can also be found in 15th and 16th century Florence, Italy during its changing political climate as the Medici families power and influence fluctuated (Cummings, 2015). The music and art of this time was utilized as a tool to interpret and discuss shifts in power by citizens of the city.

Another interesting facet in the history of political music is its existence and effect on the Kurdish identity in the 1990's. Musical Kurdish groups (or *koms* in Kurdish) had a great influence and impact on the development of the national Kurdish identity. The politicized music of this time emerged as a reaction against nationalist or assimilation policies. There was an interesting debate that took place between traditional Kurdish groups and nationalist groups during this

time through the language of music with the attempted creation of Turkish national music (Sari-tas, 2010).

Politicized music within American culture has existed through various conflicts and shifts in politics. The folk music of the mid 20th century had a notable impact on the politics of its time. During the Vietnam war, the use of folk music was common in the United States as a political tool to protest both the war and the political climate of the era (James, 1989). David James (1989) in studying the influence of music to the Vietnam era, discusses the validity of the genre of folk specifically as a political tool of the time, "In singing first person lyrics, one identifies with the discursive or narrative voice, and so the characterization of the narrator is the stage for the construction of political positions" (p. 127). This is an interesting thought because much of my own work takes place in the first person. Since the music I am writing comes from personal experience it often exists as a first person narrative, which does in fact make me the stage for the construction of political positions as is stated in James' writing. This was something I had not fully considered but after reading and pondering the notion it became a larger part of my reflection on such lyrics within my own album as well as something to consider while writing and applying political ideas through music. It has helped me to consider the voice I am expressing within my work and what narrative it is displaying.

James (1989) goes on to discuss music as a form or tool of resistance highlighting the relationship that the folk and rock music of the 1960s had with the capitalist society. He quotes various scholars in a back and forth debate on how, while music can be a tool to "…free people on all levels…" (p.117) it can also be adopted by the capitalist structure as a commodity which in turn silences or refuses the impact of the intended messages of freedom within the music. This relationship between capitalist, mainstream society and politicized music can, interestingly

enough, be seen in some aspects as parallel to the more recent politicized music of our time which has shifted to the genre of hip hop and has begun to be utilized to discuss the topic of race. It is to a discussion of hip hop that I move to next.

A Brief History of Hip Hop and Politics

Beginning in the 1970's and 80's in African American neighborhoods in New York City , hip hop music emerged as a powerful tool for personal expression and discussion of the oppressions of the time (Kitwana, 2002). Furthermore, hip hop incorporated elements of graffiti, breakdancing, and fashion, eventually becoming it's own urban lifestyle and culture which has evolved and changed overtime. In the 1980's the genre served as a medium for confronting and calling attention to the Regan era policies surrounding crime which targeted people of color. In particular the rap group N.W.A contributed to this discussion with songs such as "Fuck the Police" which directly engaged with the lack of responsibility and accountability in the police force as the enforcers of systemic racism (McCann, 2012). Their music was met with much resistance from police officers and in fact caused a lot of tension at their shows with attempts from the government to censor what they were rapping about in their music.

The use of hip hop as a tool for conversation in political discourse has continued since this time period. In addition to N.W.A artists such as Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, Tupac and more have all created songs which push the discussion about race further and further. In his second studio album "Good Kid, M.A.A.D City" Kendrick Lamar discusses the various ways in which the system he was born into (particularly in his hometown in Compton, CA) set him up to fail, thus making it irrelevant how much of a "good kid" he is. The album tackles the various narratives and ways in which black youth in the city of Compton maneuver their lives through the experience of Kendrick Lamar (Love, 2016). Since the time of N.W.A, hip hop has become an

increasingly respected art form. Kendrick Lamar became the first hip hop artist to win a Pulitzer prize in 2018 for his most recent album "DAMN." In the album, he discusses the current state of the black community in the U.S as well as alludes to a liberation of the community and a reclamation of their identity (Klatskin, 2018).

While the hip hop genre has played an enormously important role in the public discussion about race in the U.S there have been critiques as well. Some argue that, while hip hop does provide a valuable social critique as well as a medium for empowerment, resistance, and discussion of race and oppression of people of color, these elements can cause listeners to miss other more problematic themes in the music (Armstrong, 2001). One of the more common critiques of hip hop is the prevalence of sexist and misogynistic themes and lyrics in some of the music. Another critique is around race. I will discuss these critiques in some detail below; first, however, I will discuss the place and subjects and performers in the hip hop genre.

The sexualization of the black female body can be traced back to the 18th and 19th centuries when Europeans were first coming into contact with the indigenous people of Africa (Sherman, 2014). Drawings and records of the fetishization of the indigenous body revered as "freakish" in European culture exist from this time period. Paryss A. Sherman (2014) researches the history and relationship between this early fetishization and the misogynist culture of modern day hip hop. She finds that the sexualization started by European settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries has continued to be perpetuated through the years most recently in hip hop by male rappers. Utilizing Nicki Minaj as an example of the continued perpetuation of fetishizing black female bodies she compares Minaj to images of sexualized indigenous bodies from the 18th and 19th centuries. The critique of this continued perpetuation came about during the 1980's from female rappers in the hip hop community who began to find their own voice within the genre

though it was soon co-opted by mainstream media as a form of attack on the genre which was dominated by people of color (Keyes, 2000).

It is important to note that while sexism is an issue in hip hop there are also positive relationships between hip hop and women. One study found a positive correlation between high self confidence, a rejection of the 'thin ideal' body type, and the consumption of hip hop among women with stronger ethnic identities. A negative correlation was observed in women with weaker ethnic identities and the consumption of hip hop (Zhang, Dixon & Conrad, 2009). The three scholars explore the idea that because the 'thin ideal' body is most often portrayed by white women in mainstream culture, black women are more likely to reject it because they question whether or not it truly applies to them. In addition, the authors discuss how in black culture larger body types tend to be appreciated more and are sometimes portrayed more in hip hop music videos as opposed to the thin ideal in mainstream society. For this reason when women had a stronger ethnic identity in connection with being black they were shielded from the 'thin ideal' body. Likewise, as mentioned earlier, those who had a weaker ethnic identity were more susceptible to media exposure and the concept of the 'thin ideal' body since they did not identify as strongly with the appreciation for larger bodies present in black culture and, by extension, hip hop. (Zhang, Dixon &Conrad, 2009).

Another study discusses female rappers and how they fight to empower black women in direct contrast to the submissive portrayal so often set up in hip hop culture (Keyes, 2000). The author examines four categorizations of women in rap during the 1980's and 90's when black female rappers were beginning to find their voice ('queen mother', 'sista with attitude', fly girl, and 'lesbian'). Each category fits into the larger narrative of female empowerment in early hip hop.

The queen mother category was filled with women who held themselves in a position of power giving knowledge to the people who listened to their music. They were also categorized by having a deeper connection to African culture which was expressed by their garments and accessories they would wear. The Sista's with attitude category was comprised of women who utilized their power to subvert the patriarchal system through empowerment and the reclamation of the word "bitch." Some sistas with attitude disagreed with the use of the term and rejected it as opposed to reclaiming it; regardless,women in this category tended to fiercely combat the patriarchy and were known for their strong and clear opinions on the matter.

Fly girls on the other hand tended to focus more on their fashion and style, working with male rappers in order to be seen by the public. This was characterized by short skirts, makeup, sequined fabric, high heels, earrings etc. In the mid 1980's other female rappers began to contest this category because they thought it caused people to focus less on their rapping skills and more on their style which took away from the validity of their work.

Finally the lesbian category, which arose a little later than the others during the 1990's, was the first category of female rappers to share the narrative of lesbian and gay lifestyles of black women. They still discussed issues of race but in addition they rapped about the gender binary, patriarchy, and the struggles of having to combat all three in their daily lives.

The theme and evolution of female empowerment in hip hop/rap can still be seen today with artists such as Beyonce, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Rhianna and more. In Beyonce's most recent album "Lemonade," released in 2016, she provides a tool for navigating the oppression against black women in the United States. While the album has been speculated to be a reference to infidelity in Beyonce's marriage to Jay Z, it is much more complex and nuanced. It was received by the general public as an expression of the struggle black women face every day in America with

its powerful message for equality and female resistance. In this way *Lemonade* serves as a tool for political discussion much like the music of N.W.A (Edgar & Toone, 2017).

The Trinidadian-born American rapper, Nicki Minaj can be seen as a bit of an evolved form of the fly girl category discussed earlier. She maneuvers being a black woman in a male dominated genre by embracing her femininity and focusing on her style and fashion as a method of reclamation of her own sexuality and narrative. In this way she both complies with, and subverts patriarchal views of black female sexuality in hip hop (White, 2013). Despite these positive relationships between women and hip hop the criticisms mentioned earlier are just as valid and should be discussed. The shift, focus, and development of criticism for these aspects of hip hop did not occur until the 1980's, this is an important element to consider when discussing this critique of hip hop.

Race in Hip Hop

During it's origins in the late 70's the genre existed mainly as a response to the "…neglect and isolation experienced by communities of color in a post-industrial society" (Pulido, 2009, p.70) and included both black and Latino communities' voices; specifically Caribbean Latinx voices. But over time, the discourse surrounding hip hop in mainstream culture become increasingly negative with allegations and attention being drawn toward the elements of misogyny previously discussed as well as attention drawn toward the violence that is also present as a theme in many hip hop songs. These, while valid and important critiques to consider when thinking critically about the hip hop genre, have stemmed to some degree from the patriarchal and white supremacist systems that exist in the United States (Adams and Fuller, 2006). These oppressive forces in American culture and have made it possible for the mainstream discourse to place the blame for violence and misogyny on communities of color and hip hop artists. This

blame is misdirected, however, as it directly contradicts the origins of hip hop which are to resist and express these lived oppressions and experiences (Pulido, 2009). This forced blame upon communities of color can then be very damaging for youth growing up watching hip hop artists (who are most often the only artists of color in the music industry) be placed in this larger main-stream discourse.

This damage to young people's identity formation can be seen through conversations with young listeners of hip hop discussing how they utilize hip hop in their daily lives. Isaura Pulido (2009) conducted a series of 20 interviews with youth of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent in the Chicago area. These interviews were conducted to better understand how youth navigate the radicalized landscape of their lives using hip hop as a tool for this navigation. Pulido comes to find that there were many different ways in which youth utilized hip hop in the framework of their lives. In addition to being a tool for critiquing or expressing the racial inequalities felt by Latinx youth, it was also a method for centering how race operates in their own lives as well as their position in the United States racial hierarchy. The title of the article for this study *Music Fit for us Minorities* is a direct quote from one of the interviews with 19 year old college student Raul. During this interview Raul said, in reference to the genre of hip hop, "It was just music fit for us minorities" (p. 73). This quote contains a lot of implication and impact within it, some of which Pulido discusses and some of which she does not. I will attempt to unpack some of what this quote contains.

As Pulido (2009) discusses, the use of the phrase "us minorities" provides a direct link between the Latinx community and the Black community who are more widely known as the founders of hip hop. This idea was later reinforced by other interviewees who would iterate that though they weren't black there were many shared struggles they felt with the black community

having grown up side by side on the same plane of the socioeconomic ladder. For this reason, hip hop was a very relatable genre for the Latinx youth and was seen as a place to express issues such as conflict with law enforcement, invisibility in mainstream media discourse, mistreatment in the judicial and legal systems, etc. In addition, the genre brought to light new issues that some of the interviewees expressed they hadn't thought about before such as gentrification. This created a space for dialogue among the youth about the struggles of "…us minorities".

This use of this phrase is a rather positive one but there is another aspect that Pulino does not discuss in her article. While the genre can be empowering for youth of color and a space for resistance against oppression, its cooptation by the mainstream media can also hurt youth. The mainstream media's portrayal of hip hop as violent and misogynistic gets projected onto poor youth and youth of color who are then viewed this way by society. Further, such youth grow up seeing this portrayal as their place in the socioeconomic ladder.. These criticisms are not invalid but, as mentioned earlier, have a real danger for minority youth by placing these labels and criticisms solely on communities of color and not viewing them in the broader context of American culture which is also heavily misogynistic, violent, patriarchal, and structured around white supremacy (Pulido, 2009).

This placed blame, then, becomes all that is thought of about hip hop in the eyes of the public (Petchauer, 2009) which in turn has the danger of becoming all that communities of color are thought of in the eyes of the public. It is a fascinating facet of the genre wherein it exists as a tool for dismantling and discussing the racial hierarchy and race relations in the United States, yet it can also exist as a negative label for communities of color while at the same time containing problematic references to misogyny and sexism existent in the broader culture of the U.S.

All of this is to say that the genre of hip hop is densely layered with many different connotations both positive and negative that it has accumulated over the years existing in a capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist society while being a tool to resist these elements of the U.S culture. My curiosity with my own album is with what happens if some of the themes in hip hop such as resistance, empowerment, and socioeconomic struggle are moved from that genre into other genres, namely indie folk? I'm curious as to how it would affect public conversations on race and the oppression of poor people and people of color. What new communities could this music speak to? Does politicized indie folk music make the conversation of race easier for white people to be a part of? Finally if it does, how does this music shift the tone of the conversation?

<p style="text-align:center"><u>My Own Work</u></p>

In writing my album, I worked off of my own experience (as most all artists do or at least should) as a person of color raised in Portland, OR. I found an interesting correlation in my research of hip hop with my album which was that many of the themes hip hop discussed were naturally present in my own music. This was not intentional. I initially had set out to merely create an album about race and hadn't thought specifically about what specific themes would be present in the album itself. It was found later as I read more about hip hop and thought about the hip hop songs that I enjoy. This then led to me asking the questions posed in this paper regarding my album. I will describe here a few of the songs and some of the overarching themes that have been carried over from hip hop incidentally into my music as well as how they are different.

Some of the songs more overtly reference my experience and life while others tackle more abstract feelings and emotions that I have gathered from my experiences. For example the song titled *The Old Meth Lab Behind Our House* is specifically about the house and neighborhood my family moved to when I was in 3rd grade and where we still live. Nearly everything in

that song is directly pulled from my experience in the house and interacting with the children in the neighborhood, as well as how it felt when I was a child in that neighborhood. This song is a good example of some of the themes present in hip hop transferring over to my own work. In this particular song, I bring up the themes of poverty and the socioeconomic ladder that are so prevalent in hip hop (Morell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Another song that more directly relates to my experience and retains this theme as well is *Deep East Sun* which is about the bike ride that I always took to go meet with my friends in high school who lived in one of the nicer, wealthier areas of Portland. This song contains a direct observation and analysis of the physical changes in the neighborhoods through the bike ride itself as well as the attitudes that allow these changes to exist and continue to exist. It starts out with more concrete descriptions of the characters in the scenario (what they look like, their shoes, what they are doing, etc.) and moves on to more metaphorical or poetic references and descriptions of the situation. This shift happens in the third verse before moving on to the fourth verse which describes the changes in the neighborhood along the ride.Finally, the song ends with a verse about the dusty golden brown kids returning home after hanging out in such a nice area. The song is meant to reflect the disparity of wealth between communities of color and white communities, it is a description of the physical change one can see in a city if one only travels between these two? different areas.

There is an interesting relationship in this song that I haven't come across in my research on hip hop. That is, the relationship between myself and the white community. In the song I describe how my friends are white, but I develop a critique of them through spending so much time with them. White people make up about 70% of hip hop listeners (Morell, Duncan-Andrade, 2002), which makes sense considering the population of the United States.However, the

relationship that is normally had between the white community and the politicized music of hip hop is that it is presented to them as a message from the other side rather than a discussion to be had among the white community itself (Kitwana, 2002). The critique and relationship between myself and my white friends present in this song (as well as others on the album) is a piece of the puzzle in the question I have as to how the conversation changes when this critique of the disparity of wealth and the impact of socioeconomic status is brought from the genre of music for minorities directly into a genre that is generally considered white dominated.

The song *Clown No More* is also heavily based in this relationship between the higher social class my white friends were often in and the lower social class my friends of color and I were in. With this song, however, the focus is more on the mental impact of such economic disparity. This emphasis, indirectly, provides a critique of the white community. I describe the process of seeing myself as a person and not just a brown comedic side character in a sitcom. Growing up, many of the people of color I saw in the media were side characters and supporting roles to the white action heroes and white awkward but endearing romantic roles. Li-Vollmer (2002), in analyzing the racial representation of advertisements on television marketed specifically for children, found that the roles for minorities were characterized by limited speaking parts, characters that worked labor or minimum wage jobs, and characters that were "passive bystanders." In contrast, the roles for white people were often the focus of the camera and they were portrayed as leaders and those with initiative or "go-getter" types.

These findings, I feel connect to my own reflection of experience with television and the general media growing up. I did not realize it at the time, but this racist depiction of characters in the media was heavily internalized in my own self image and it made it difficult for me to see myself as a "main character" or to respect myself on some levels because I didn't think my place

in the world was worth focusing on. This relates back to the youth of color in Pulino's (2009) study when they shared how hip hop allowed them to express their feeling of invisibility in the mainstream discourse. This is another example of themes being transferred over from hip hop into my own work.

The song, *Clown No More* begins by instructing a "clown" to cover up their skin in makeup, entertain the white kids with jokes, not cry during break ups, and play the "sidekick who cannot win." It them moves on to question why it must be that way and how the loss of some white friends is inevitable. Then the "clown" removes their makeup and finally feels like a person. The entire song is a long process condensed into 3 verses in 2 and a half minutes. This process continues to this day for myself and my guess is for other people of color as well.

Along similar lines of racial representation in the media in the United and it's effect on myself is the song titled *Miles Morales v.s Peter Parker*. Miles Morales is a fictional character in the Marvel comic 'Spiderman' and currently holds the mantle of the Spiderman, he is an Afro-Latino teen from New York. The more well known Spiderman, Peter Parker, is his predecessor in the comic who is white. This song begins as a love story between two people who are not classified as any specific race, though that soon changes after the first verse with a "fun fling" between "someone darker" and someone not as dark. The use of Miles Morales and Peter Parker is a metaphor for racism in the beauty standard of the United States. The idea of beauty in American culture is heavily centered around white or lighter skin, leaving people of color or those with darker skin to interpret their own beauty through this white lens which can negatively affect their identity (Poran, 2002). The song culminates this metaphor and concept in a repetition during the second verse where the speaker continually says "You're Miles Morales but I like Peter Parker" with some small variations in the phrase. Finally, in the last verse the first verse is repeated but

with specific racial classifications given to the characters who are revealed to be white and go on to live a "white life." The song ends with a slow fade of the phrase, "Turns out a nice life, is just a white life" in a melancholy reflection of the implications of this beauty standard on an individual's life.

The final song I'll discuss here is one that contains messages of encouragement for pride in youth of color called *"Colonized Kidz."* This song is meant to be a letter of sorts to those who are descendants of colonized societies with the hope of empowering us to feel like we are just as beautiful, powerful, meaningful etc. as our white counterparts (another theme present in the genre of hip hop though perhaps not specifically with all descendants of colonized societies). In this way the song subverts the narrative that people of color are not as important as white people which is so often fed to children of color through the media growing up. From the very beginning of the song, the lyrics encourage the listener to be proud of themselves and to have pride in their physical features and the actions of their lives. The first verse ends with the phrase, "Fuck were so cool, Colonized Kidz."

The next section of the song expresses an interaction that I have both witnessed as well as been a part of in which a "colonized kid" is questioned by someone at a party about where they are "really from" implying that there is no way they could be from the United States. This documented "identity denial," whether intentional or not, is a rejection or denial of an individual's American status in the U.S (Cheyan & Monin, 2005). Though the article cited discusses its prevalence in the Asian American community specifically, I felt it was a perfect description of the interaction described in this song. The final two verses are comprised of a direct critique of the fragility of the white community as well as a final lament for the languages the colonized kidz learned, "for you" (the colonizers) and how they now wonder "why we're blue."

I won't delve into every song on the album because I could go on forever if I started that train, but these are some examples of the larger themes present within the album (empowerment, disparity of wealth and the socioeconomic ladder, racial identity, racial representation in the media, and the struggle of power). My hope is that the music allows for new conversations to take place among listeners, and perhaps give the white community encouragement to begin discussing race more.

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