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Malorie Marshall

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Malorie Marshall  
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Iggy Azalea: Cultural appropriator or scapegoat for accepted practice?

Mentioning the name Iggy Azalea most often elicits a couple responses: dim awareness that she's some sort of artist or celebrity, or a groan and eye-roll.

If you're not familiar with the seemingly ubiquitous name, Billboard's 2014 [song of the summer](#), "[Fancy](#)," came from the artist. "Fancy" opens with an ear-catching, austere electric guitar-strum. The song's video pays homage to the 1995 movie "[Clueless](#)" starring actress Alicia Silverstone. Azalea is the star, replicating popular scenes from the film. About 12 seconds into the video, she stands in a classroom, dressed in main character Cher Horowitz's iconic yellow plaid skirt set and raps,

["First thing's first, I'm the realest; drop this and let the whole world feel it; and I'm still in the murda bizness; I could hold you down, like I'm givin' lessons in physics; you should want a bad bitch like this; drop it low and pick it up just like this; cup of Ace, cup of Goose, cup of Cris; high heels, somethin' worth a half a ticket on my wrist."](#)

That 20 seconds of braggadocio comes from a rapper who looks less like a bad bitch in the murder business and more like a lithe model.

Azalea isn't the first artist to profit from an entertainment persona that differs from her "real" personality. But the fact that Azalea is a white woman profiting by employing a fake "black" sound by appropriating is what seems to anger people more than the quality of Azalea's music, or anything else about her.

Appropriation is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission," and is generally considered derogatory, as in "the artistic practice or technique of reworking images from well-known paintings, photographs, and the like in one's own work." Cultural appropriation specifically is defined by race relations expert Nadra Kareem Little in an [article](#) for the news section of website About.com as, "typically involv[ing] members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups--often with little understanding of the latter's history, experience and traditions."

Azalea grew up in [Mullumbimby](#), a town in New South Wales, Australia of 3,172 people, according to 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data. New South Wales is in the southeastern part of the country. According to Azalea, she was inspired by rappers such as Tupac, OutKast and Missy Elliott and began writing rhymes around 14 years old. By 16, Azalea had moved to Miami, Fla. in hopes of pursuing a rap career she apparently couldn't have in Mullumbimby.

Azalea spent time living in various Southern cities in the United States--Houston, Texas; Miami, Fla. and Atlanta, Ga. specifically--and credits these geographical experiences with her sound.

“People tend to think I’m American for the first 30 minutes, and then I say something weird and they’ll be like, ‘Wait, are you from here?’,” Azalea said in an April 2014 interview with Entertainment Weekly. “I was down south long enough, so it makes sense that there’s a little of that in [her speech] as well.”

Despite her time spent in the states, the tall, blond-haired Australian rapper still speaks with an Australian accent. Azalea uses Southern black-American speech patterns and black colloquialisms only in her raps.

Hip-hop/rap music has spread far beyond the United States, as evidenced by artists like Azalea growing up idolizing American rappers while living almost 10,000 miles away in Australia, though the artform was started in New York City by artists like [DJ Cool Herc](#), [Afrika Bambaataa](#) and [Grandmaster Flash](#).

“Hip hop itself was literally born in the Bronx and started on the streets of the Bronx, even though you can go to the mountains of Bolivia or Africa and people are listening to it,” said Elena Martínez, a folklorist at City Lore, a New York City-based non-profit that documents grassroots and community-based culture.

The popularity of hip-hop in other countries have led to [international audiences embracing American artists such as Arrested Development, Jay-Z, Drake and Talib Kweli in concert in places such as Sarajevo](#), as well as [artists in countries such as China creating hip-hop music in their native language](#).

Hip-hop may have been founded by a number of black artists, but black people aren’t the only producers of the music. Hip-hop has experienced popular white artists--most notably, Eminem--before, and Iggy Azalea is now often the topic of hip-hop conversation, though not always for her successes.

Azalea’s most mainstream song, “Fancy” was released in February 2014. Its video was published on the rapper’s YouTube channel in March of this year and the song was ubiquitous throughout the summer. “Fancy” peaked on the Billboard Hot 100 chart at number one and has been on the charts for 39 weeks. The “Clueless” inspired video has had over 392 million views since being published on YouTube in March. This September, the digital single was certified four times multi-platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America, or RIAA. The song’s use for [Samsung’s gold Galaxy S5 smartphone commercial](#) likely helped cement its place as “song of the summer,” and Apple also named “Fancy” [song of the year](#) in their December round-up. Azalea recently garnered four [Grammy nominations](#), for Best New Artist, Best Rap Album, Record of the Year and Pop Duo/Performance for “Fancy.” (This fall, the rapper won two [American Music Awards](#) for Favorite Rap/Hip Hop Album for “The New Classic,” and Favorite Rap/Hip-Hop artist.)

Regardless, since mainstream attention surrounding Azalea has kicked up since the rapper began posting [YouTube videos](#) in 2011, people have questioned the rapper’s authenticity.

In a [New Yorker article](#) from September, writer Andrew Marantz asked, “If [Azalea] is ‘the realest,’ what can ‘real’ possibly mean?” A Washington Post style blog entry from this May is titled, “Is Iggy Azalea ‘the realest’ or is her authenticity up for

interpretation?” And though artists such as The Roots drummer [Questlove](#) and rapper [DaBrat](#) have been generally favorable toward Azalea, other contemporary voices such as rappers [Rah Digga](#), [J.Cole](#) and [Azealia Banks](#) have spoken against the rapper’s pop-like persona and her representation of hip-hop.

“Teach me Australian hip-hop culture,” rapper Rah Digga said in a [radio interview](#) from September 2014. “Don’t come to America and try to convince me that you’re ‘Gangsta Boo...’ Personally, I don’t consider [Azalea] hip-hop.”

Critics of Azalea often contend that she and other white entertainers who have embraced hip-hop have been able to profit from it in ways that black artists often have not been able to. Such criticism is reminiscent of years ago when artists such as Elvis Presley were heralded as pioneers of rock and roll, while the contributions of black artists such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard were truly pioneers of the genre.

“The American music industry’s never-ending quest for a white artist who can competently perform a Black musical impersonation: Paul Whiteman, Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, Sting, Britney Spears, ‘N Sync, Pink, Eminem--all of those contrived and promoted to do away with bodily reminders of the Black origins of American pop pleasure,” said author and hip-hop journalist Greg Tate in the introduction to his book of collected essays, “Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture.” “It is with this history in mind that African-American performance artist Roger Guenveur Smith once posed the question: Why does everyone love Black music but nobody loves Black people?”

In interviews Azalea has given to various outlets, she doesn’t seem to view her caricature of Southern black-American culture as any form of appropriation or as being inauthentic.

“We get so caught up, especially in rap, with what’s authentic, and I wish people would think more about what the f- that even means,” Azalea said in a June 2014 [interview](#) with Billboard Magazine. “One critic was like, ‘Why didn’t you talk about more Australian things?’ I don’t understand why I’m supposed to write a song about living in the outback and riding a kangaroo to be authentic.”

In Azalea’s eyes, “authentic” Australian rap music isn’t what Australian audiences are looking for.

“There’s a really small [music] scene, a few Australian artists, but I never liked them,” Azalea said in an April 2014 [interview](#) with Entertainment Weekly. “There’s a reason why they don’t make it off the continent. A lot of the rappers in Australia that I would have heard then were so stereotypically Australianana that even I couldn’t identify with it. I don’t think countries are as cut and dry and stereotypical as you think. Not everyone is ‘Crocodile Dundee.’ In terms of what’s flying up the charts in Australia, it’s American rap music.”

Both American and Australian hip-hop seem popular in the country. Radio stations like the 40-year-old [triple j](#) and websites like [all aussie hip hop](#) are all about promoting Australian acts, though American artists such as Childish Gambino and

Kendrick Lamar are popular as well. The [Sprung Festival](#), touted as the “country’s biggest All Aussie Hip Hop Festival” has been in operation since 2011.

Though Azalea’s proclamations don’t seem to align with reality (such as the rapper telling [Entertainment Weekly](#) that she’d lived in the South long enough to pick up her rapping accent), writer Carl Hancock Rux identifies in his essay “Eminem: The New White Negro” (featured in Greg Tate’s collection “Everything But the Burden”) that, “As with all great rock stars or rock-star hopefuls, it is the image of these icons and their proclamations of themselves that reach beyond them, creating a mass of followers who are inspired by their belief in the performance, not the person.”

Azalea is an entertainer and a performer, and though she may have a lack of authenticity as a rapper or just as an individual, her responsibility is to stay true to her persona as an entertainer.

“[Authenticity is] this abstract term thrown around so much in hip-hop but what the hell does it mean? Everyone’s reality is different. This ‘authentic,’ phony, gangster posturing; you even see artists who have obtained financial success still rapping about a gangsta persona--it’s like, ‘no, man, you’re a millionaire, your reality is tax lawyers,’” said Nicholas Conway, a hip-hop expert who has been lecturing academically since 2003 and is currently in the music department at the University at Albany-SUNY. “It’s the cultural appropriation that bothers people but [Azalea’s] an entertainer and is playing up this image that she knows will sell and that the label is probably pushing on her. She’s a pop star.”

Artists are no longer just artists, but brands and stars as well. Azalea’s “Fancy” helped sell gold Samsung S5 smartphones. Dr. Dre is likely better known for the [sale of his Beats by Dre](#) line of headphones than his [rap career](#). Former Brooklyn Nets partial-owner and husband to singer Beyoncé, Jay-Z, famously said, “[I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!](#)” Kanye West has his [Nike Air Yeezy](#) shoe. Sean “Diddy” Combs is a brand ambassador for the once-fledgling vodka [Cîroc](#).

“Everybody kind of sells out a little bit whether they’re rap stars, musicians, teachers,” Conway said. “You make compromises, but you’re held to this higher platform when you’re in the mainstream.”

“I’m concerned about how people obsess around Iggy Azalea and the anger people feel around her--she’s a commercial artist, she’s appropriating and exploiting commercial forms in a way many other artists do,” said Dr. Nicole Fleetwood, director of the Institute for Research on Women and associate professor at Rutgers University. “Hip-hop has appropriated all kinds of forms; when Black artists are doing that we celebrate that. But I think people get upset because of the ongoing feeling amongst Black people--especially Black women--of not being recognized. I think that fuels a lot of people’s resentment and anger.”

Azalea isn’t the only artist to appropriate to sell records. Rapper Rick Ross lifted his stage name from actual drug trafficker [“Freeway” Rick Ross](#) and created a backstory of drugs and violence when the rapper had an actual history as a corrections officer in Miami-Dade County. Rapper Nicki Minaj has taken on many alter-egos, some

which involve the use of [crisp British accents](#) not native to the rapper, who was born in the country of Trinidad and Tobago and raised in Queens, New York.

Though, as defined earlier, cultural appropriation is very critically judged, due to the involvement of a dominant culture exploiting the culture of a less dominant culture and the racial and ethnic issues that can cause.

“[Azalea’s] kind of taking and using white privilege and borrowing black cool and style because it sells,” lecturer Nicholas Conway said. “She can take all the cool but doesn’t have to deal with the burden of being a black woman.”

Azalea’s cultural appropriation of Southern black vernacular isn’t surprising to North Carolina State University professor and linguist Dr. Erik Thomas, who studies geographical and ethnic variations in speech.

“I suppose it’s just how you write a rap song,” Thomas said. “It’s nothing new for non-Black musicians to appropriate dialectical features in song.”

He says that in listening to an artist like Azalea, she sounds as though she has deliberately altered her speech. The way she pronounces her Rs sounds as though it wouldn’t come naturally to someone from a country like Australia that is considered to have an R-less dialect. (For example, Thomas says words like “third” and “heard” and “first” all have the “er” sound in them; while Americans would take care to pronounce that “er” sound, Australians likely would not.)

“Most of the evidence suggests that if you’re past age 12 it’s not too easy to pick up a new accent, but at the same time some people are better at it than others,” Thomas said.

Azalea has made it abundantly clear that she’s not concerned with the issue of her Australian speaking voice compared to her rapping “blaccent,” nor with people being bothered by her representing new styles of hip-hop.

“For me, as a rapper, I just think whatever classic hip-hop is, the classic image of that? I don’t think that’s what it is anymore,” Azalea said in a June 2014 interview with Billboard Magazine. “And I am a good example of what it could look like now.”

On the one hand, classic hip-hop may no longer exist. While rap is defined as the act of spitting rhymes over a beat, hip-hop is defined by experts like Nicholas Conway as a cultural movement made up of four key components: breakdancing, creating graffiti, rapping (or emceeing) and DJing. Rappers now are entertainers; brands marketing products and trying to find the next revenue flow, not on the block emceeing or breakdancing, or DJing at a party. Yes, times have changed.

But on the other hand, according to people such as hip-hop journalist Greg Tate, though the days of blackface vaudeville shows being an accepted form of entertainment have passed, white artists are still imitating blackness, to the peculiar enjoyment of white audiences and the chagrin of black ones.

“What has always struck Black observers of this phenomenon isn’t just the irony of

white America fiending for Blackness when it once debated whether Africans even had souls,” Tate said in the introduction to his book of essays “Everything But the Burden.” “It’s also the way They [*sic*] have always tried to erase the Black presence from whatever Black thing They [*sic*] took a shine to: jazz, blues, rock and roll, doo-wop, swingdancing, cornrowing... you name it.”