Joyann Jeffrey

Class of 2016

White Appropriation on Black Hip-Hop Culture

Advisor: Kevin Coyne

A rapper called Persia has made a name for herself in hip-hop. Her three mixtapes have won numerous awards. “So That Bitch” was released in 2007, “The Truth” in 2012 and “The Love Tape” in 2013. Shortly after her last tape came out, Persia won Underground Female Rapper of the Year and Female Battle Rapper of the Year at the Underground Music Awards.

Now putting her own music to the side, she has been focusing on “ghostwriting” - anonymously writing songs for popular hip-hop and rhythm and blues artists. In 2007 Interscope Records took an interest in Persia. The record company has recently offered her a music deal. From rapping to songwriting, Persia has accomplished a lot in hip-hop culture.

And she is white.

Gina Morganello used to be better known as a rapper named G-Child. She works in the screen printing and embroidery business now and is also the owner of an urban fashion line, “RatLyfe Underground Official,” which has been featured in magazines such as Urban Ink in 2014.

She is white, too.

Persia and G-Child are two white women who have worked in the predominantly black art form of rap, and who have faced charges of cultural appropriation. That is a subject that seems much in the news lately - what is authentic and what is appropriated?

What determines your race? Your ethnicity? Your ancestry? Or is it a choice, based on based on your admiration of a culture you want to be a part of.

Rachel Dolezal, leader in the NAACP and civil rights activist, thought it was a choice. Dolezal has pretended to be a black woman for years. But her parents say their daughter is indeed white.

An old photo shows young Rachel with pale freckled skin and straight blond hair. Today she wears tightly coiled brown curls claiming she was going for the “natural look,” and a dark tanned skin to match. The world was outraged. Although Dolezal says she identifies as black, she later had to resign from her position in the NAACP. Her admiration for black culture seemed to be crossing the line to appropriation.

“The difference between somebody who practices a culture and someone who appropriates it is the sincerity,” says Jelani Cobb, a history professor at the University of Connecticut and a writer for The New Yorker. “I don’t think that admiring is the problem...assuming becomes the problem.”

Persia says the stereotype of white rappers mimicking hip-hop has worked against her. “That’s been put into the mainstream and hip-hop that if a white person is hood they’re pretending and nine times out of 10 that’s true, but it does make it hard on someone who came up in it and is really just being themselves,” she says.

Before everyone knew her as Persia, she was Destiny Mucerino. Outspoken and kind, she grew up as an only child. Her mother Emma, was on welfare. She recalls the embarrassment she felt when her mom sold hot dogs for a living. “She got the money for a hot dog cart and she would roll down to the corner in the morning. She was a hot dog lady and at that time I was embarrassed,” she says.

Mucerino describes her upbringing as “typical” in the hood of Far Rockaway, Queens. By the time she was 8, her father abandoned the family. “Funny, you think it would have,” she says when asked how his departure affected her growing up. But it didn’t, she says. “I’m pretty good,” she says about growing up without a father.

Mucerino did have a father figure, though. “I kind of realized that Ralph McDaniels, to me was like my father. He’s what brought me home at 3:30 p.m.,” she says. In the early 1980s, McDaniels hosted a hip-hop program known as Video Music Box. Mucerino enjoyed watching the program on WNYC-TV. “I came in on M.C Shan,

Left Me Lonely. That was my introduction to hip-hop." Listening and watching the rap videos every day gave Mucerino an appreciation for the culture.

"I pretty much came up in hip-hop from when I was a little girl. I could remember like recording 'Video Music Box' on the TV and then like pausing the video and writing down the words from when I was like, I want to say like seven years old," she says. Video Music Box was the first TV program ever to feature hip-hop videos. Almost every popular American MC appeared on the show at one time or another. The show started in 1983, and ended in 1996 but still has a Twitter, Web page and Youtube account featuring current hip-hop artists.

By the time Mucerino was 17, she says she was running an illegal brothel, Gillian's on Wall Street. "I never really put too much thought into it. It was kind of just a business," she explains. Mucerino says she managed Gillian's for more than 10 years. She says her mother used to manage the brothel before Mucerino did herself.

By 2006, when she was 23, the Queens native was tired of living in the hood. She wanted to do "something for fun," she says. Searching through Craigslist, she found an ad calling for white rappers with personality. "I really just wanted to get out of the hood," she says. "At that time like I didn't even know I could rap but I got personality and I'm into music," but Mucerino knew she needed a MC name.

One of her close friends looked at her and said, “You look like a Persia.” Mucerino decided to keep the stage name. “For a couple of days I would just tell everyone that was my name until it felt right,” she says.

In 2006, Persia auditioned for a television show about white rappers on VH1. “The audition was funny, to me it was funny. There was a lot of characters, weird white rappers,” she remembers while laughing.

First she met four of the show’s producers. After they heard her rap, Persia was quickly called back for a second audition. “I was shocked. I didnt even know I could rap,” she says while laughing. The second audition however, was a little harder. The judges were MC Serch, who was a former white rapper in 3rd Bass and also a Far Rockaway native, and hip-hop producer Prince Paul. Persia was nervous. “I just remember sitting in the car outside of the studio, practicing trying not to curse,” she says. “That was my main concern.”

After getting her lyrics together, Persia felt confident to set foot inside the studio. Serch and Paul asked her to spit two lines known as a bar. “I didn’t even know what a bar was,” she says. Persia spat more than a bar, and the judges asked, “Is this the first time you ever spit? Why did you rap so much?”

“Yes,” she told them. “I didn't know when to stop,” she recalls while laughing. Confident in her performance, it was not long before Persia was a finalist for “Ego Trips White Rapper Show.”

“Initially we didn't even know the name of the show,” she says. “I looked around and I see the rest of the cast members and I was shocked. I’m trying to get answers out of people like, ‘What’s going on?’” Characters with mohawks and metal wristbands were not what she expected. Now Persia understands why the “characters” were so animated. “For ratings,” she says. “I just didn't expect rocker dudes and punk rappers” to be on a rap show.

“Ego Trip’s White Rapper Show” premiered on VH1 in 2007. The network claimed it was “majorly concerned about rap’s future,” and wanted to find the next great white emcee. Ten contestants including Persia and G-Child were invited to live in “Tha White House,” until they were eliminated from the show. Shot in the South Bronx, the contestants competed for the title of the next famous white rapper and a cash prize of $100,000.

Hip-hop had emerged in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Here DJ’ing techniques were invented, such as “cutting,” by Grandmaster Flash. Cutting is achieved by playing the same record on two turntables at the same time and cutting back and forth between them to repeat a phrase or sound. “B-boying,” known as breakdancing, also originated

in the South Bronx. The contestants were tested on their knowledge of hip-hop culture as well as their rhymes.

The 10 rappers met the show's host, MC Serch. He welcomed the contestants to where they would be living. The house was spray painted in graffiti and the phrase "white trash," was lettered on one of the trash cans. Apparently the home was supposed to emulate the South Bronx lifestyle. VH1 then let the cast know that the challenges endured would not be easy.

In the first episode, Persia was annoyed by one of the other contestants, John Brown. "It felt like he was mocking hip-hop," she says. "You're not a lyricist, you're not a rapper, you ain't none of that," Persia told him. "You put on some hip-hop clothes and think you down. You're the reason why hip-hop gets disrespected." She later called him a "nigga."

"It was kind of just a natural thing," she recalls. Persia admitted to using the word on her friends at home. She saw the city as a melting pot of races and claimed the word was "kind of a colorless thing." As punishment for using the word, Serch gave Persia a heavy chain to wear. The chain read "N-word." Feeling the weight of the chain, Persia regretted saying the word in a malicious manner. She later cried on the show from the embarrassment of using the word.

This word is comfortably used by many African-Americans but seen as offensive if said by another race. The N-word originates from discrimination, hatred and the blood of African-Americans who were enslaved for more than 200 years. Although Persia used what she considered the non-derogatory version, “nigga,” some African-Americans would argue that, as a white woman, she should never use the word at all, in any form.

Today Persia does not use the N-word anymore and says that it never felt right in the past. “I’m older now, I’m not really in the streets and it’s not really a part of my vocabulary now,” she explains. But black rappers still use the word often today. Wrapped into the lyrics and hidden in the beats, the word can be heard by white kids listening.

In fact as rap culture became popular, Ice-T came out in the early 90s and attributed anything above his usual album sales of 750,000 to white kids. In 2004, Mediamark Research Inc. conducted a poll that found 60 percent of gangsta rap listeners were white.

Persia made it into the top four of “Ego Trip’s White Rapper Show.” In episode six she was carried away in an ambulance after a physically demanding challenge, which required her to catch three empty boxes in a shopping cart. She then had to push the cart up hill to a bodega as if she were distributing drugs. At the bodega there was a rat pinata to symbolize an informant or snitch. After she broke the pinata, dimes fell.

When she gathered $2 worth of change, Persia had to exchange it for a tool used to steal a bike. Although VH1 told the audience that thievery is wrong, the message was still sent that this was all a part of black culture.

Persia got the slowest time of any competitor. She was later sent to the hospital for dehydration and then off the show for forgetting her rhymes. “I deserved to win but at the same time, you know I have never spit before. I’ve never been on the stage so when I got on the stage, I got stage fright. Like I literally had my rhyme in my head and I just lost it,” she says now.

Today Persia laughs when people call it a “rap show.” “For the majority I thought that this is what’s wrong with white hip-hop. This is why people don’t think white rappers should be rapping,” she says referring to competitor John Brown. Brown made it to the final two calling himself “King of The Suburbs” and claiming he would “revive the ghetto,” by having soldiers on the streets.

Although the show emphasized the origin and essence of hip-hop, Persia believes that many contestants did not get it. “I feel that there’s a root to the culture that a lot of people don’t get and I understand that mimicking is a form of flattery but there’s an essence to hip-hop that if you don’t possess it, I don’t think that you should be a part of it,” she says.

After the program aired in 2007, Persia says she gained both good and bad publicity. “I got a lot of the bad stigma from ‘The White Rapper Show,’” she says. “I felt like I had something to prove.” Not wanting to be perceived as “some little white girl,” Persia dropped her first mixtape, “So That Bitch,” in 2007. Listeners gained an appreciation for the white rapper. “U got mad skills,” wrote a fan on her YouTube channel in 2008. The 17-track album featured a ‘90s hip hop sound.

After the album, Persia immediately created a Myspace account, which catapulted her career. “I never thought I would be able to open my Myspace and there would just be money in my inbox,” she says, laughing. Persia was hired by booking agencies to perform at shows. She was in hot demand.

Blowing up quickly, Persia opened for Fat Joe and Lil Scrappy for the 420 festival in Miami, Florida. “It was a little nerve-wracking. I mean I had come clear off the show,” she remembers. Persia later decided to close down Gillian’s in 2008 and pursue a rap career. “I felt like God had given me a talent and it was something that I needed to pursue.”

Persia later met her boyfriend and the soon-to-be father of her kids. He was working as her road manager and they quickly made a connection. When asked about their relationship she says, “I’d rather not talk about him.” The couple broke up the day Persia was in labor with her second child in 2009. “I feel like I was a come up for him. I

was Persia and he needed some contacts and somewhere along the lines of him building himself up he managed to get me pregnant."

Although the relationship was rough, Persia gained two beautiful children. Today her daughter, Ariella, is 7 and her son, Jordan, is 5. "My kids are proud, very proud, they are always like, 'My mommy's a rapper,'" she says.

In 2012, Persia dropped "The Truth." "I think I put like a little bit of everything I had into that CD," she says. "It got me a lot of attention as opposed to, 'Oh that's that girl from The White Rapper Show.'" The album was released with 38-tracks. Apparently the rapper had a lot to say about being a white female rapper. "I just want to warn somebody that there's this rap girl out here and she's killing the game," she raps in her track "Warning." Addressing the stereotypes of a white rapper Persia also says she "understood where it was coming from but I also needed to address it."

After her album dropped, Persia felt accomplished, but she did not expect to lose everything in a matter of months. On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City. Many neighborhoods were flooded from Red Hook to Far Rockaway, and Persia was left homeless.

"It just shattered everything. There was water everywhere and a lot of Rockaway was washed away," she remembers. Persia recalls living in a small apartment with no

electricity for a month after the storm. She explains that she “kept the food on the fire escape to keep cold and went to sleep when the sun went down.” Persia also says she spent a lot of time at the park with her kids. “My mom taught me how to survive,” she says, remembering the old hot dog cart.

It was hard for Persia to find a new apartment. “Because of Hurricane Sandy the landlords only wanted Section 8 vouchers,” she says, referring to the rental assistance program for low-income families. “I couldn’t get a landlord to agree to take money.” Persia had no more than $3,000 to her name. She decided to call Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) in the Bronx. PATH moved her family to a Brownsville homeless shelter. “They say that if you stay in the shelter for six months, we’ll get you an apartment and I couldn’t keep my kids there for six months.”

Instead, she only stayed for three weeks. “I was having to get up and take the train all the way to Rockaway just to get my kids to school in the morning. Then by the time I would get on the train and come back, it was time to go and pick them back up,” she says.

Luckily a fan, another single mother, reached out to Persia and offered shelter in Syracuse. “We used to tweet back and forth,” she says. Persia decided to pack her bags and move up-state with her kids.

Feeling defeated from Sandy, Persia released her most recent mixtape in 2013, “The Love Tape.” “I want to thank everyone for all the support. I think sometimes I get so caught up being an MC… that I wanted to give you a different side of me,” she says, beginning with an introduction to her fans. In the 10 songs, she describes a bad relationship, and all the negative experiences of being in love. “Why did you have to do me so wrong. I thought that we were perfect,” she sings in “Persia’s Room.”

Although she has released three mixtapes, Persia never became mainstream. She says no one knew how to market a white girl from the hood. “They don’t know how to package that, I guess. They think you have to be black to be hood,” she says, referring to rap producers.

Hip-hop culture is a response to institutionalized racism, discrimination, gang violence and injustice to black people. Only black people could truly understand, but at times white artists would still sell more rap albums than black people. The Beastie Boys, a former punk rock band of three white men, had the biggest-selling rap album of the 1980s: “Licensed To I’ll,” which outsold legends such as N.W.A and Public Enemy.

In the early ‘90s Vanilla Ice then exploded with his hits, “Ice Ice Baby” and “Play That Funky Music.” The white rapper sold over 7 million albums and for 16 weeks he held the top spot for number one album, “To The Extreme.” After Ice was accused of

appropriating black culture, his albums did not sell well. He later had confrontations with other rap artists such as Suge Knight.

Growing up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, G-Child was influenced by Vanilla Ice. “As an 8-year-old, that’s what was appealing to me. He was like a life-like cartoon character and that’s who I saw that matched my skin tone,” she says in an email interview, but her love for hip-hop did not start there. “Hip-hop was popular in the public schools and was always blasting from the sound systems in cars passing by. It was honestly just something that I had picked up.”

Like Persia, she wrote down the lyrics from her favorite rap artists before she started creating her own. By high school G-Child performed at local clubs before opening for Vanilla Ice at the Crocodile Rock Cafe in 2000. When recalling her admiration for the “Ice Ice Baby” singer, she explains, “I’m not sure what I really admired. It was mainly the fact that I knew that maybe I could have a shot at rap music too.”

Surrounded by hip-hop, it was not long before G-Child auditioned for “Ego Trip’s White Rapper Show,” the same year that Persia did. Assuming the show was going to be a documentary, she was not ready for the embarrassment she suffered on national TV. “I expected it to showcase us as individuals. I was thinking it was a documentary

with a twist. I didn't really know it was a competition type show. It ended up really humiliating us to a degree," she recalls.

She says the show ruined her career. "Looking back I'm grateful for the experience but wonder where I would be today if I hadn't of done it. I feel like I would have continued to pursue a lot more and would have been more respected for who I truly am," she says.

Persia says the show was not humiliating. "I think it showed the good and the bad," she says. "If you were portrayed in a different light it's because you didn't realize who you were until America started telling you." She even adds "just because a person didn't show you as a full person, they did show something that you showed." Persia admits that America saw her as a "mean girl" for yelling at John Brown. "Am I going to be mad at that? No. I know who I am," she says. Now she knows that "everything is for TV time" and "ratings."

As white female rappers, G-Child and Persia faced similar struggles. They both admit that it was difficult to get people to take them seriously and believe in them. "The music industry is hard in general," G-Child says. "Trying to find the right person to listen is hard. Especially when you know what you want and where you want to fit in. People didn't take white rappers seriously when I had my 15 minutes of fame,"

Persia agrees. “Me and the industry weren't getting along so well. It was like a bad relationship,” she says. “Someone told me years ago, ‘If you love hip-hop then don't become an artist,’ and it never really sunk in till the politics started coming to the forefront.” Broken from the politics of selling sex appeal and personality in the music, Persia had to break away from the harsh realities of the music industry.

“I had a meeting where I was told I was too black to be a white rapper,” she says. “I got to a point where I cried so much over music, that I really just had to find some type of happiness outside of music because I felt that it was destroying me,”

The only radio station that supported her was Power 105. “I began to hate my own city,” she says. “Being white and being a female, I really felt blatantly ignored, like there’s definitely not another white female rapper out of NYC that has that place in hip-hop or makes that kind of music so I started to take it personal.”

G-Child also had to find happiness outside of music. “There is a time in every artist’s life when they may feel if they should continue or not. It’s not that I am giving up on rap music, it’s just that I have not found the right people to boost my career yet,” G-Child says. Now focusing on her urban fashion line, “RatLyfe Underground Official,” G-Child has turned her passion for rap music to a career in fashion. “It was inspired by that 15 minutes of fame I once had. Basically being an underground rapper and living a middle class life.”

G-Child has begun to enjoy a life outside of stardom. “Honestly I ended up becoming content and enjoying the simple things that life had to offer. Once you appreciate what you already have what more can you want?” Not knowing where her future will lead in rap and fashion, she explains, “I like to see where it goes because if I plan it out too much, I don’t want to end up disappointed.”

Persia is still contemplating whether she wants to give music a second chance. She sees artists such as Iggy Azalea, who has been accused of appropriating black culture. Azalea has made great strides as a white female rapper. Growing up in rural Australia, she has become the most popular white female rapper. This year she won Top Rap Artist at the Billboard Music Awards, disappointing many rap listeners, including Persia.

“I don’t think Iggy was a hip-hop artist. She’s, you know, a white girl who, somebody taught her how to basically rap. I just don’t think she was who the mainstream perceives her to be. She was not this great white hope or this next female rapper. She never really had anything to say,” Persia says.

Black female rapper Azealia Banks also accuses Azalea of exploiting black culture. Banks ranted on Twitter to Azalea after the white police officer who put Eric Garner in a chokehold on Staten Island was not indicted for the death - a case that

helped inspire the “Black Lives Matter” movement. “It’s funny to see people like Igloo Australia silent when these things happen… Black Culture is cool, but black lives aren’t huh?” Banks tweeted angrily.

Last year, white rapper Macklemore won best rap album at the Grammys. His album “The Heist” beat rap legend Jay Z and popular musicians Kanye West, Drake and Kendrick Lamar. Many fans were disappointed.

“When they give these Grammys out, all it says to white kids is that, ‘Oh you're great, you're amazing, you can do whatever you put your mind to,’ and it says to black kids that, ‘You don't have shit, you don't own shit, not even the shit you created for yourself,’” Azealia Banks said in a Hot 97 interview.

“Ya’ll owe me the right to my identity and to not exploit that.”

Jelani Cobb agrees. “If a black person says something, no one takes note, but if a white person says the same thing or does the same thing all of a sudden it is held as revolutionary and genius,” he says, laughing at the irony. “A white person is better than a black person at anything, even being black.”

Although white privilege has helped a few rappers, G-Child and Persia say that it has never been apart of their lives. “I have honestly never experienced ‘white privilege.’

Every day is a struggle and I've never had any kind of 'power' or 'free passes,'" G-Child says.

Persia explains that life in Far Rockaway never gave her the joy of privilege. "Everybody says that you should get the white privilege and I really don't. I get 'You're too hood, you're too black, you're too hard.' I don't really get the privilege of being white," she says, giggling. Then gets serious when describing white privilege. "They said for me it's always worked against me because I wasn't what they wanted from a white rapper," she says referring to producers in the industry.

In two months Persia will have to decide if she wants to accept Interscope's offer. "I'm considering it," she says when her fans tell her, "Don't give up." But Persia admits that the industry slapped her hard. "It was such a rough road for me...I just don't feel what I used to feel."

Persia and G-Child have had to face similar charges of cultural appropriation. Their life experiences shed light on when appropriation can occur. In fact, appropriation only happens when someone has little understanding of the culture they are admiring. Both Persia and G-Child have been immersed in hip-hop culture from a young age and have gained a strong understanding of the culture. So what exactly determines race and identity? Although someone can be black or white, they can still identify with another culture by truly understanding and admiring it.

I discovered this story by asking questions around New York City. I saw black culture was increasingly adopted by white people. Some seemed to love the culture without knowing a lot about it. I then researched America's fascination with African American culture and came upon a very popular question. What would America be like if we loved black people as much as black culture? I decided to pursue this story but in a different viewpoint. Based on the Rachel Dolezal case, I showed how one can identify with race or culture without appropriating it.

After getting my story idea. I found two of my sources through social media such as Facebook and Twitter. My last source, Jelani Cobb was known for writing in The New Yorker. I adored his piece, "Black Like Her." Further research was conducted online to support my story. I mainly conducted phone interviews with all three of my sources, which I recorded and logged.

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