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“Is The ‘Man in Black’ White?”

Sarah Imhoff’s article aptly explains why Matisyahu has received so much attention from concertgoers and critics alike. With his traditional Hasidic dress and his reggae rhymes, he crosses religious and cultural boundaries in surprising ways. Imhoff situates her discussion of audience-performer-critic relationships within the context of racial discourse. Specifically, the main issue that she addresses is how the critics adjudicate Matisyahu’s authenticity in regard to both his reggae music and his religiosity.

I develop three points in which I focus on the disjuncture between critics’ opinions of Matisyahu’s religious and musical authenticity and Matisyahu’s own apparent attempts to negotiate an identity in which he asserts Jewish difference while maintaining lyrics and a self-image that are inclusive and equalizing. The three points include an analysis of: 1) the tension between standards of authenticity and social requirements of assimilation, 2) Matisyahu’s negotiation of race and religion as performed identities via the claim to Jewish difference, and 3) the issues related to Matisyahu’s adoption of reggae music, but with Jewish narratives, and the critics’ charges of cultural appropriation. In my response to Imhoff’s wonderful article, I posit several questions that space limitations prevent me from answering but that hopefully will be of use for further consideration of the ideas that she presents.

The central issue at stake in Imhoff’s argument, authenticity, is also tied to another important issue connected to race, religion and American “multiculturalism”: assimilation. I return to the age-old issue of assimilation with two sets of questions that closely dovetail with Imhoff’s analysis of the discourses that comment on Matisyahu’s authenticity: What degree of assimilation is expected of (white and non-white) Americans these days and how is that requirement enforced? Likewise, how does this requirement apply to performers and how do

expectations of them differ? I ask these questions because I suspect that the critics' skepticism regarding the authenticity of Matisyahu's religious status as a *baal teshuva* correlates with uneasy American ambivalence about Jewish whiteness, as Imhoff also indicates. The external markings of his Jewish identity and his lyrics, which often refer to themes of Jewish difference or even marginalization, highlight the problem with deeming Jews unproblematically "white."

Matisyahu *performs* a particular identity, an identity in which both religion and race play salient roles. Critical race theorist John Tehranian argues that whiteness can be "performed," such that a non-white person can perform qualities associated with whiteness, including dress, speech and behavior, and hence can be accorded *some* of the privileges that whiteness entails, such as white legal status.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, one could act in ways or adopt behavior that rejects the expectations of whiteness. The latter type of behavior could entail a conscious denunciation of the contemporary U.S. hegemonic insistence on assimilation and on "colorblindness." Or, as is arguably Matisyahu's approach, distancing oneself from the trappings of whiteness could involve the decision to assert Jewish *difference*.<sup>2</sup> In Matisyahu's case, the Jewish difference he claims could refer to the American categories of religion, race, or ethnicity, but the identity that he performs does not fit neatly into any salient social category. Despite the lack of categorical "fit," his dress, his high level of Jewish observance, and his musical message represent a clear deviance from the performativity of whiteness. As Imhoff notes, however, the critics identify him as white, and it is for this reason that they doubt his authenticity as both Hasid and reggae

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<sup>1</sup> Tehranian refers specifically to the racial-prerequisite legal cases that determined access to American citizenship, but his argument applies to other situations as well. See John Tehranian, "Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America," *Yale Law Journal* 109, no. 4, (January 2000): 817-848.

<sup>2</sup> The term "colorblindness" refers to the current trend espoused by thinkers such as Dinesh D'Souza and insists that racial prejudice is all in people's minds and not an institutional phenomenon.

musician. For the critics that Imhoff cites, Matisyahu is “really” white, and therefore his performance of Jewish difference appears inauthentic to them.

Examples of Matisyahu’s assertion of Jewish difference pervade his lyrics. For instance, the second verse of Matisyahu’s song “Jerusalem” on his album *Youth* contains intense imagery that references the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the founding of the state of Israel, the Nazi murder of Jews in the Shoah, and the trials of immigration and assimilation:

Rebuild the temple and the crown of glory, years gone by about sixty. Burn in the oven in this century. And the gas tried to choke, but it couldn’t choke me. I will not lie down, I will not fall asleep. They come overseas, yes they’re trying to be free. Erase the demons out of our memory. Change your name and your identity. Afraid of the truth and our dark history. Why is everybody always chasing we. Cut off the roots of your family tree. Don’t you know that’s not the way to be.

These lyrics highlight, phrase after phrase, the sufferings that have resulted from Jewish marginalization and social constructions of Jewish difference. They also demonstrate both his individual desire to reclaim his roots and his exhortation to others to do the same. Jewish difference relates to race here in that Jews have often been construed as essentially or inherently distinct from the dominant group of people where they have lived. Markers of difference have included names and ancestry or “bloodline,” which Matisyahu refers to in the verse above.

It seems that Matisyahu, in developing his own sense of self within the context of the wider world, rejects the cultural expectation of assimilation on two counts. Instead of continuing in the path set out for him where he grew up as a Reconstructionist, suburban, Jewish boy who could “pass” as any other white American, he found a meaningful and deep relationship with the Hasidic community of Lubavitchers, in which he changed his dress, his lifestyle, and his type of identification as a Jew. Secondly, as a Hasidic Jew he sings about wanting “Moshiach now,” to “rebuild the temple,” and to “get out of the exile.” In so doing, he recalls important mythic tropes

of Jewish tradition in which God's help is sought to free Jews from oppression.<sup>3</sup> Another version of these tropes is significant to traditional Rastafarian reggae music, including the exile in Babylon and resistance against Black slavery, colonialism, and oppression. It would be interesting to know for certain whether his attraction to and decision to perform reggae occurred because he identified with the images of difference and marginalization, but this similarity seems significant.

Perhaps Matisyahu represents the "pluralist" ideal as a performer. Although he claims Jewish difference in his identity and in his music, he nevertheless avoids the assertion of "chosenness" or any explicit separatism. As Imhoff points out, he emphasizes inclusivity in his music, his interviews, and his relationship with his fans. No doubt this emphasis contributes considerably to his popularity. For his non-Jewish and even for some of his Jewish fans, perhaps the combination of his Hasidic identity and his reggae performances evoke a kind of "ethnic" flavor that they find exciting or exotic as well as accessible.

Like Imhoff, I do not wish to make any pronouncements about whether or not his performance of reggae is cultural appropriation, but rather to highlight the issues at stake. Identity cannot be entirely chosen and authorization of access to particular cultural forms remains contested. If Matisyahu has become "less white" in his adoption of a Hasidic identity, he has not simultaneously become Black, Jamaican, or Rastafarian, hence the charges of cultural appropriation by some of his critics. His dubious authenticity, in the eyes of some critics, may stem from his rejection of assimilation and his embrace of Jewish difference at a time when American culture imagines Jews as whites. The problem of cultural appropriation hinges

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<sup>3</sup> Note: By "mythic" here I do not mean false or unreal but rather I refer to Bruce Lincoln's definition of the term, which is a narrative that is "true" and "authoritative" for a particular society. See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

particularly on the issue of social power and the apparent adoption of cultural property from a less socially powerful group by the member of a more socially powerful group. Specifically, whereas Black Americans live with institutional racism on a daily basis, most Jewish Americans—the majority of whom appear “white”—do not. Matisyahu’s use of a traditionally Black cultural form to present narratives of Jewish identity unsurprisingly strikes some critics as an illegitimate adoption. It appears that for Matisyahu, however, the history of Jewish difference and marginalization is not only still relevant to global Jewish experience but is also deeply personal to his own identification with Jewish tradition and is connected to the struggles of people of color.