

**THANK U, NEXT CULTURE: ARIANA GRANDE'S APPROPRIATION
OF HIP HOP AND BLACK CULTURE ON *THANK U, NEXT*.**

— Megan Dams —

As someone who has always listened primarily to hip hop and R&B music, Ariana Grande was certainly never on my radar. I thought of her as a borderline juvenile pop star, still heavily associated with Nickelodeon for *Victorious* and *Sam & Cat*, two well-known kids shows she was on from 2010-2014. However, I remember hearing a particular buzz surrounding her 2019 album *Thank U, Next*. Prominent music-related media outlets such as *Rolling Stone Magazine* and *Billboard* quickly labelled it her best and most commercially successful album to date (Sheffield; Coscarelli). So, I decided to give it a listen — and I loved it. I listened to it constantly for months after its release. However, in a period of introspection, I could not help but ask myself why I was so enthralled by this album. I had never been a huge fan of pop music, and was never a fan of Grande's music in the past, so why now? This was when I realized that *Thank U, Next* is not a pop album. It is a hip hop album. She may not be rapping the entire time, although she does at some points, but from a production perspective it is without a doubt a hip hop album. This got me thinking about the long history of cultural appropriation of racialized musical genres by white artists in the music industry. Through my research into this topic, I uncover the true magnitude of exploitation behind this album that affords Grande the perceived excellence of this piece of work.

Therefore, I argue that the mammoth success of Ariana Grande's *Thank U, Next* album can be wholly credited to her appropriation, exploitation, and domination of Black culture. Not only will I analyse the numerous ways in which Grande appropriates Black music on this album, but I will also explain the many layers that underpin how she is able to get away with it. First, I will provide some context on the history of hip hop and its significance to racial politics, and show specifically how Grande appropriates it through genre, production techniques, lyrics, and themes. Then, I will detail how Grande's whiteness and overall image allow her to get away with this appropriation. Here, I will adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 149), revealing how an emphasis on femininity, prominent themes of sexual liberation, and adopting a colour-blind

approach to race (Rodriquez 646) are all inextricably linked to her whiteness and work together to strengthen her privilege. Finally, I will explore the wider structural factors in society that enable Grande's exploitation, such as the music industry and mainstream media landscape.

The Music Itself

When looking into the album's musical genres, this album heavily incorporates hip hop, modern R&B, and trap, which is a sub-genre of hip hop. First and foremost, it is integral to first understand hip hop's origins and significance as a form of resistance. It goes without saying that hip hop is a heavily racialized genre, meaning that it has inextricable connotations and connections to ideas of race (Barot and Bird 610). Tricia Rose expertly summarizes rap as "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (2). The hip hop genre was created by Black people, has always been performed and popularized by Black people, and was born out of the oppression of Black people. It is one of the few ways Black individuals have been able to assert their identities, voices, and experiences on their own terms against a world structured by white supremacy. To Grande, however, its significance is not bogged down by politics, therefore hip hop is just another musical style that is free for her to take and profit off of. Through a similar analysis of pop singer Adele's appropriation of Black blues and soul performers, Amanda Edgar poignantly coins a name for this process—musical colonization (179). While white artists are able to steal from racialized genres and appeal to much wider audiences due to their racial privilege, Black artists are confined and marginalized within the genres they created themselves. Additionally, mainstream audiences often have no frame of reference for where these styles of music actually come from. In return, they falsely credit white artists for their creativity and talent, ultimately enhancing these appropriators racial privilege.

Before breaking down what exactly constitutes hip hop, I must stress the particular importance of producers within this genre. There has always been a strong and harmonious link, but nonetheless clear division of labour, between producer and MC; the producer being the "beatmaker" and MC being the lyricist and performer. There is also a long history of producers being under appreciated for their work, with the main performer getting recognition in the public eye (Schloss 2). Considering this imbalance of power and visibility, it is extremely telling that

almost all of Grande's producers on this album are Black, including Charles Anderson and Michael Foster of Social House, Tommy Brown, and Pop Wansel (Grande). Clearly, there is a strong demand for Black talent in the music industry—but it must be hidden behind white artists. What exactly defines a hip hop beat is difficult to pin down. What Schloss underlines about hip hop beats are the following: their sample-based nature, meaning snippets are taken from existing music and re-worked, their fragmented and looped, or repeated expression, intricate combination and arrangement of a myriad of different instruments at one time, and an emphasis on rhythmic quality, often called “bounce” by producers (139-144). Trap music is further characterized by prominent and intricate high-hat patterns, which are the highest pitched cymbal sounds in drum kits, along with moody and dark melodies. These key elements of hip hop production are found across every single song on this album. “7 Rings” is the most blatant hip hop song, as Grande raps in it. “Imagine,” “NASA,” “Fake Smile,” “Bad Idea,” “Make Up,” and “In My Head” all embody the core phenomenon that I argue of hip hop beats under pop vocals. “Break Up With Your Girlfriend, I’m Bored” is squarely a trap song made palatable to the white ear and to mainstream audiences. An additional element of hip hop production that Grande also employs on this album are skits, which are non-musical snippets used for comedic or dramatic effect, often at the beginning or end of a song. “NASA,” “Bloodline,” and “In My Head” all feature skits, a unique creative element commonly found on hip hop albums.

Grande's appropriation of Black culture on *Thank U, Next* extends far beyond production techniques. In fact, her lyrics also embody themes and personas created by Black female rappers. On “7 Rings,” Grande raps about being rich and being able to buy whatever she wants including jewelry, shoes, property, and a jet. She also boasts about body confidence and the money she spends on her appearance, most notably through the lines, “They stacked up like my ass” and “You like my hair? Gee, thanks, just bought it” (Grande). Here, she appropriates the Fly Girl persona created by Black female rappers in the 1980s (Keyes 259-262). This fly girl persona was Black women “flipping the script” on traditional gender roles and beauty standards. Fly girls encourage Black women to be confident in themselves, and in particular their curvy bodies, to be independent, and to have control over their sexualities against systemic misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy). On *Thank U, Next*, Grande embodies this persona and is lauded for doing so while not

actually challenging any norms. In fact, as a white, skinny, conventionally attractive, and extremely wealthy woman, she reinforces these norms. She steals a cultural image born out of resistance against racist misogyny and appropriates it to brag about the privileges her whiteness affords her. Ultimately, Grande both ignores and exploits the resistance that is at the heart of hip hop.

How Grande's Image Enables Her

Intersectionality stresses that social identities are the products of various overlapping and interdependent markers of social difference (Crenshaw 149). Ariana Grande's hyperfeminine image feeds into her whiteness and strengthens her privilege as a white woman, helping her get away with cultural appropriation. The album cover for *Thank U, Next* is pinkish-purple and prominently features Grande in a vulnerable looking position with long, thick, sprawling hair and heavy makeup. With her trademark



vocals, she is sure to accentuate her extremely high soprano voice and is often breathy, emotive, and helpless sounding. Outside of this album in particular, the way she presents herself in the public eye is always ultra-feminine, bordering on being childlike. These traits, functioning in tandem with her whiteness, convey an image of utmost innocence, sweetness, and purity. She is perceived as the ultimate victim who would never do anything to harm anybody. This multi-axis positioning on both a racial and gendered scale makes it almost impossible for anyone to direct criticism towards her, especially criticism as serious as racial exploitation.

In addition to her hyperfeminine image, Grande also adopts a colour-blind approach to race to justify her appropriation of hip hop music (Rodriquez 646). Grande has always promoted a liberal and colour-blind agenda in public, which is particularly evident on social media. A quick scroll through her Instagram page, which boasts an astounding 231 million followers as of April

2021, shows numerous posts encouraging her fans to vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in the 2020 U.S. election. There are also several posts demonstrating support for the Black Lives Matter movement. These very public displays of progressive politics function to position her as someone who is not racist and who would never do something in opposition to the Black community. Grande seems to present herself as colour-blind and seeing beyond race. On the surface, this may seem positive, but in reality, this is just a way to remove the racially embedded meanings from hip hop and grant herself permission to steal from it (647). If one refuses to see race, then they do not have to carry the burden of acknowledging or respecting it either.

It would be irresponsible of me if I did not also highlight what Grande is able to get away with on *Thank U, Next* that a Black female artist taking a similar creative approach would not be able to. On top of the hip hop production and lyrics rooted in historical racial politics, this album also contains more sexually explicit lyrics than any of her previous releases. Some prominent examples are in “Bloodline” where she boasts about casual sex saying, “Don’t want you in my bloodline / Just wanna have a good time,” and “Make Up” where she talks about sex in a volatile relationship with “The way you be screamin’ my name make me wanna make love to you” and “I love it when we make up / Go ‘head ruin my makeup” (Grande). Her whiteness enables her to be lauded as sexually liberated and an emblem of women’s empowerment, whereas a Black woman would more quickly be perceived as sexually promiscuous, overly seductive, and immoral—a trope known as the Jezebel. This stereotype originates from white slaveowners who tried to rationalize and shift blame for the sexual abuse they inflicted on Black women (West 294). As a Black woman in the music industry, Rihanna was forced into the Jezebel trope by mainstream media when she was labelled as “risqué” and “provocate” in the media and subsequently blamed for being assaulted by Chris Brown in 2009 (Houlihan and Raynor 326). Once again, Grande’s racial privilege proves vital to the success of this album.

Wider Structural Factors That Enable Grande

What I must make clear is that this phenomenon of musical colonization (Edgar 179) extends far beyond this album and Ariana Grande’s own personal conscious decision making. Grande is just one individual operating within long-standing structures, established practices, and complex discourses that make up both the music industry and our society in general (Hall 90). It

is highly important and beneficial to analyze *Thank U, Next* from a critical race perspective to highlight these factors which are part of our everyday media, but it would also be negligent to focus so much on this particular album while disregarding the institutional factors that surround it. With that being said, both genre categorization along racial lines in the music industry and the wider racist media landscape enable Grande's appropriation from racialized groups.

Music genres have always been categorized along the lines of race, and pop has always been synonymous with whiteness (Edgar 168). Plainly, pop is a classification reserved for white artists. This racial bordering then makes it easy for the music industry to covertly disadvantage certain marginalized groups. This is rooted in the fact that Billboard promoted and distributed pop music much more widely than the racialized genre of R&B even in the 1960s (Brackett 779). Due to this racial division, proper credit and recognition are not given to the original creators and pioneers of the hip hop and R&B genres whenever they are appropriated into pop. The public goes on thinking that Grande is this outstanding, innovative pop artist, with invisibilized "characteristics of blackness associated with being cool" (Rodriquez 649). It is crucial to remember that Black artists are still confined and marginalized within these very genres to this day, regardless of what genre of music they create.

In fact, when discussing the perpetual marginalization of Black artists in the R&B category, Tyler The Creator spoke exactly to this point in an interview after winning the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album in 2020 for *IGOR*, in which he articulated the following:

On one side, I'm very grateful that what I made could just be, you know, acknowledged in a world like this, but also, it sucks that whenever we, and I mean guys that look like me, do anything that's genre-bending or that's anything, they always put it in a rap or urban category. And I don't like that urban word, it's just a politically correct way to say the n-word to me. So, when I hear that, I'm just like, why can't we just be in pop?...Half of me feels like the rap nomination was a backhanded compliment, like oh, my little cousin wants to play the game, let's give him the unplugged controller so he could shut up and feel good about it. (Tyler, The Creator)

Moving beyond the music industry, the wider media landscape also enables Grande's exploitation of Black culture around a norm of whiteness. As Shohat and Stam argue, within all

major media fields, whiteness is positioned as universal. All audiences are expected to identify with and relate to whiteness, and this is why almost all major films and television shows star white lead actors. Not only is whiteness the default, but the authors stress that whiteness is not even perceived as a race, but beyond race (190). Relating this back to Grande, since whiteness is considered universal, this freedom gives her a blank canvas and allows her to pick and choose elements from any musical genre or culture to use as her own, with absolutely no regard for the consequences of racial categorization or politics of representation.

This demonstrates a particular phenomenon present in the music industry today. To reach the highest level of popularity and success, you must be a white artist who appropriates racialized genres. It is the blueprint for success. Thank U, Next would not be the mammoth success it is if Ariana Grande did not heavily incorporate hip hop production, lyrics, and themes behind blinding whiteness. Additionally, none of this would have been possible if the entire music industry and wider media landscape were not structured around the dominance of whiteness. However, Ariana Grande is just one of many examples to analyze in a contemporary context. Adele, Justin Bieber, Billie Eilish, Dua Lipa, and Post Malone all do the same thing. They all make music that heavily incorporates genres pioneered by Black communities such as hip hop, R&B, soul, blues, and funk, among others. However, their racial privilege frees them from the history and necessity that come with these genres. This particular recipe for success is evident beyond the music industry in popular media culture. Think of arguably the most famous family in the world—the Kardashians, a topic for another day. It seems as though we, as a general media audience, deeply enjoy the artifacts and aesthetics created by Black communities, but have an issue consuming them in their organic context. I do not propose a solution to this problem, but my goal is to stress one thing. If you like this album, or any of the artists listed above, or most popular music today, then you are a fan of Black music. Therefore, I encourage you to listen to and empower the Black artists that paved the way for these artists who do not get nearly the credit or recognition they deserve. More broadly, be critical of the media you consume. Educate yourself on where their elements, influences, and ideas originate from. Structures and systems take a long time to change, but awareness, education, and appreciation can be shared in seconds.

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