

A White, Jewish, Rap-Infused Desire for Blackness: David Burd's Lil Dicky

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I^N “On Being ‘White’ and Other Lies,” James Baldwin writes that the Jewish community has “paid the highest and most extraordinary price for becoming white” in America (Baldwin, 1984). Baldwin names the loss of a unique Jewish identity, one that transcends whiteness, as a part of that price. Thirty-four years after “On Being ‘White’ and Other Lies” was published in 1984, the loss of identity continues to haunt American Jews. One of the poster-boys for today’s synthesis of Jewishness and Whiteness is David Burd, a rapper and comedian from a Philadelphia suburb who goes by the moniker, ‘Lil Dicky’. His music is full of Jewish symbols and stereotypes, often in combination with racially-charged language in his lyrics. With an oeuvre that includes *White Dude*, a braggadocious ode to White privilege; *All K*, which features a stereotypical rap video that adds a laundry list of Jewish symbols to its visuals; and *Freaky Friday*, where Lil Dicky switches bodies with Chris Brown for a day, the rapper has significant material to suggest a connection between his Jewishness, music, and feelings about race. To unpack Burd’s relationship with race, I will examine his lyrics and music-videos, as well as some secondary writing about him. In this process, I will use strategies from disciplines including visual culture, Jewish studies, and critical race theory. I will argue that David Burd’s position as a privileged, upper-middle class, suburban,

White, Jewish rapper has left him with a desire for a version of Blackness that he imagines in his work. Burd’s position as a White rapper pining for Blackness is a symptom of Jewish assimilation. Since “the Jew [became] an American white man . . . in effect, a Christian’ or ceased to be himself,” Burd is forced to search for a new, non-hegemonic identity (Gordon, 2015). Rap has become a popular genre of music, but still has some counter-cultural elements that preclude Burd from becoming a “hardened” or “hyper-masculine” rapper (Burd, 2013). I also argue that since Burd’s music brings that desire to a wide audience, it has significant implications on his listeners’ own relationships to Blackness, especially through rhetorical symbols like the n-word.

Before I start, I will situate myself as a privileged, upper-middle class, suburban, White, Jewish man. Though I did not grow up in Philadelphia and I do not have a stereotypically Jewish appearance, I do share many characteristics with David Burd. For several years, I identified much of my teenaged self in his music, and I still enjoy some of it, albeit critically. I am writing this essay because I am intrigued about the pull of the American White Jewish man towards rap, and Blackness more generally. I have become interested in the high price that Jews paid to become White, as James Baldwin

sees it. American, and by extension Canadian, Judaism has lost languages, literatures, homelands, and especially its separated culture, which was cultivated by the shtetls of rural Eastern Europe, the ghettos of urban Europe, and the neo-ghettos (for example, the Lower East Side and Kensington Market) of the Americas. What Jews attempt to replace that culture with is important, because it is creating direction for the future of Jewish culture. I recognize that I am focusing on Ashkenazi Jewry, which represents the majority of American and White Jews. I am choosing to do so both because it is expedient and because it represents Burd's Judaism.

DAVID BURD, AND OTHER JEWISH RAPPERS

David Burd grew up in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, to a Jewish family. He attended Cheltenham High School, which has a student population that is mostly non-White (Friedman, 2015). Importantly, he took part in the seminal American Jewish ritual of Bar Mitzvah, where he made enough money in gifts to eventually start his rap career. He also attended summer camp called Camp Kweebec, which was mostly attended by Jewish campers (Hoffman, 2015). After graduating from the University of Richmond, Burd went on to work at an advertising firm, where he realized that he could use rap to make his dream of being a comedian come true. He released his first mixtape, "So Hard" in 2013, and "quit a f***ing job where I was making triple digits then the comma got involved" to pursue rap full-time (Burd, 2015).

Having formative Jewish experiences, being "raised reform," and "believ[ing] in the value of taking part in the religion from a family bonding, cultural perspective," gave Burd enough of a background that themes of Jewishness have been central in his music, unlike other Jewish rappers such as Action Bronson or Mac Miller (Burd, 2014; Bernstein, 2016). While Mac Miller has had these same quintessential American Jewish experiences (and loves his grandmother's kugel), he does not often utilize Jewishness in his music (Bernstein, 2016). On the other hand,

Action Bronson, who was raised as a Muslim, often slides some Jewish content into his raps, though it certainly never becomes central. Bronson is "an original American hybrid" according to Tablet Magazine, a Jewish publication with a strong focus on culture (Bernstein, 2016).

If Bronson's background makes him a hybrid, it begs the question of what Burd's background makes him. In the same Tablet article, Burd is characterized as the most "openly, deliberately Jewish" mainstream rapper of all time (Bernstein, 2016). Burd is not considered a hybrid, but a full-fledged American Jew. However, as James Baldwin notes, that same Jewishness has paid a deep price (Baldwin, 1984). The American Jewish community has turned its back on the non-White history of European Jews (Baldwin, 1984). In the process of becoming White, the community has "divested [itself] of the power to control and define [itself]" (Baldwin, 1984). Burd is part of a dominant Jewish culture, which has assimilated (and been assimilated) into American Whiteness, from its previous, non-White designation in European societies (Gordon, 2015). Though leaning on Jewish symbols and stereotypes in his music, I believe that Burd is not using Judaism to grant him cultural capital in the world of rap: I will argue for this with a close reading of his music. While many of his songs illustrate the ways that his Whiteness gives him privilege, his Jewishness is most often used as a punchline, or an allusion to wealth. In this way, Burd might reflect a larger trend of identifying with Judaism through self-deprecating humour, à la *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, or through shallow and stereotypical tropes.

All K: JEWISH IMAGES AND ACCEPTANCE

In his song, *All K*, Burd's Lil Dicky is showing off his rapping ability while also incorporating a variety of Jewish imagery into his flow. He begins the song with "Aye, this gon' be the shit that when motherf***ers hear it/They gon' be like 'Damn, that dude can rap'" setting the scene for him to prove himself as a rapper (Burd,

2013). He proceeds with lines such as “You know what it is, I’m a maf***n K-I-K-E/You don’t play wanna play D” and “You can find a cracker getting paid like a seder.../Whoa, afikoman in a flow, das a pro” (Burd, 2013). Burd parodies his Jewishness by comparing it to the imagery of Black American rap. Instead of using the n-word and indulging in the accepted excesses of contemporary rap music, Burd carefully reconstructs these tropes with Jewish ones. Some more examples come in the second verse, when he mentions *kabballah* and alludes to money through the image of *challah*. These lines, “Whatchu know about a balla/Born and raised on the *kaballah*/Tryna make a dollar, until I’m cakin and stackin *challah*,” sound like serious rap in context, but when focusing on the lyrics, it is obvious that Burd is leaning into his Jewishness for the sake of a comedic comparison with Black America (Burd, 2013). Burd is able to mine some of the tension between White, suburban Jewish symbols, and the urban, “hardened” and “hyper-masculine” world of Black rap (Burd, 2013). This reflects an ironic distance between White-American Jewish life, and Burd’s representation of Black American culture.

All K’s video is even more explicit, starting with an intro that explains much of Burd’s feelings toward himself and the largely Black world of rap. First he explains that, though “the ‘n’ word is the most commonly uttered noun in hip hop...he cannot say it” (Burd, 2013). Next, he calls himself a “mild mannered Jewish boy” struggling for acceptance “in a rap landscape littered with hardened criminals, hyper-masculinity, and irrational swagger” (Burd, 2013). This opening firmly situates Lil Dicky, and his Jewishness, as somewhat unwelcome intruders into rap. The video feeds off of this theme of intrusion, while slowly showing Lil Dicky moving into the East Oakland neighbourhood he is filming in. Though he is initially chased by a group of Black men, using a typical ‘thug’ stereotype, he works his way into the Black community, even while carrying Manischewitz in his brown bag and handing out “Jewish bread” (matzo) (Burd, 2013). By the end of the

video, Dicky is dancing in front of a synagogue together with the same people who chased him, and exclaiming, “If they can say the n-word/I sure as f*** can say Kike” (Burd, 2013). His use of Jewish symbols, whether as set pieces, props, or lyrics, along with the focus on replacing the n-word with ‘Kike’ show his commitment to using his Judaism as a parodic stand-in for Blackness. *All K* also imagines some of the Blackness that Burd aspires to: entering the stereotypically ‘hood’-looking group that chases him at the beginning is part of that Blackness, another part is the attention of Black women that Burd features prominently in the video. He is parodying common tropes of rap videos, which often feature sexualized Black women. At the same time, he seems to be honestly frustrated that he can only parodistically star in a stereotypical rap video. As Burd says, he can’t say the n-word, so he looks for the next best thing. *All K*’s video is part of the Jewish-Black crossover that Burd is looking for in his music; it is his visual rendering of word ‘Kike’ as a semi-serious rap term (Burd, 2013).

White Dude: PRIVILEGE AND THE OUTSIDER

White Dude (2013) is another important song to understand Burd’s thoughts about race. The song is explicitly an ode to the privileges afforded to White men, but also factors in some of the benefits of being upper-middle class, and by extension, being Jewish. Burd has often conflated the two parts of his identity, such as with the line, “Now we rollin’ in this mothaf***in dough/that’s that Jewish flow” in his song “Jewish Flow” (2013). In *White Dude*, Lil Dicky clarifies that he is not “just disparaging black people,” rather, he is just “happy that I’m white” (Burd, 2013). While he is reveling in not having to “worry where the cops at” or “wear a f***ing bra strap,” Burd is naming the kinds of structural systems that prop up White men (Burd, 2013). From mass incarceration (“I ain’t black or Dominican, not Hispanic or Indian/So imprisonment is not a predicament”), to food deserts (“Where I’m eating when I’m high’s where they eat at to survive/food chains”), racist admissions

policies at universities (“I mean I could under-achieve my way into any college in the country”) and more obvious racism (“I’m white/Which is like, amazing because/Everybody naturally assumes I’m a great person/I get a fair shot at the life I deserve”), Burd explains the ways that the United States of America is built to advantage White men above any other groups, particularly Black men and White women (Burd, 2013). Though I am not certain of Burd’s intentions, he is acknowledging the safety and luxury that have been afforded to him as a White man, even though he is Jewish. In the essay “What should Blacks think when Jews choose Whiteness,” Jane Gordon argues that European Jews have to “recogniz[e] their own whiteness and more generally that the European serf had created another serf in the New World. . . on the basis of color” (Gordon, 2015). Burd, therefore, might be taking a step towards the Jewish communal realization that European Jews are, in America, fully white.

White Dude often seems like it contradicts the idea that Burd desires Blackness. It outlines many hardships of being black in America, and celebrates the privileges that Burd himself enjoys. It suddenly becomes clear during his outro that, no matter how much his Whiteness benefits him, it also lowers his status as a rapper. His prohibition from using the n-word, even while “Fat Joe, and. . . /other [rappers] of Hispanic descent [are] allowed to say the n-word” is frustrating (Burd, 2013). In the song, Dicky’s reasoning for wanting to use the word is because “if I could say the n-word, it would really help my/rhyme scheme out/It’s like the perfect filler word” (Burd, 2013). But it represents more than just his proficiency at rhyming. The n-word is a symbolic barrier to Burd’s becoming a legitimate rapper. It represents his Whiteness holding him back from his dreams of being famous and successful. In this song, which never mentions Burd’s Jewish identity, Burd is writing about himself as a conventional White American. He does not feel like his Jewishness makes him an outsider from Whiteness, but, as in *All K*, he feels like an outsider from rap. Burd is looking for acceptance. In *All K* it is an acceptance

into the East Oakland Black community, and in *White Dude* it is an acceptance into the Black American world of rap. Yet in neither song does Burd think deeply about the ways that his privilege granted him the opportunities, whether time, money, or job stability, that have allowed him to pursue rap professionally.

Freaky Friday: EMBODYING BLACK AND GAINING PERMISSION

Finally, in March of 2018, Burd released a song where Lil Dicky uses the n-word. He has reached a point in his career where he can collaborate with major hip-hop artists, and he does exactly that on *Freaky Friday* (2018). The premise of this song mirrors that of the 2003 film starring Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan, where their two characters switch bodies for a day. After Lil Dicky is accosted by a fan in a Chinese restaurant, the restaurateur switches his body with Chris Brown’s. Waking up in Chris Brown’s body is astounding to Dicky, who is excited about “tattoos on my neck”, connections with Kanye, and his “dream dick” (Burd, 2018). However, what excites him the most is a realization he has about the n-word: Dicky, in Chris Brown’s body and with Brown’s voice, raps “Wonder if I can say the n-word/Wait, can I really say the n-word?/What up, my n****? What up, my n****?. . . /‘Cause I’m that n****, n****, n****, n****” (Burd, 2018). Though Lil Dicky does use the word, Burd has not achieved all of the Blackness and acceptance that he is looking for in *All K* and *White Dude*. *Freaky Friday* contains none of the Jewishness he was using as a substitute in *All K* but does acknowledge some of the privilege of being White, like in *White Dude*. Even though Lil Dicky switches bodies with Chris Brown and receives all of his rap-and-race-related privileges, Burd is stuck as the nebbish, White, Jew.

CONCLUSION

Burd finds ways in his music to circumvent his outsider status as a White person in the world of rap, but can never fully mend the

loss that the entire American Jewish community went through as it gained its Whiteness. While sticking Lil Dicky into Black American situations, like East Oakland, or Chris Brown's body, he attempts to capture some Blackness, but doesn't ever acknowledge the history of American Judaism as a counter-cultural religion/ethnicity that often acted in solidarity with Black movements. When reading Baldwin's "On Being 'White' and Other Lies," I considered what it might mean for the Jewish community to reestablish itself as existing outside of Whiteness, to return to what Baldwin thinks the community has lost. Dave Burd has provided, with the three songs I have dealt with in this essay, poor examples how to go about this process. Burd's music is desirous of the cultural capital of Blackness. Jane Gordon, citing Baldwin, explains that White people need to go through a process of "honest self-reflection" which would "release white people[them] from 'the Negro's tyrannical power over [them]'" (Gordon [quoting Baldwin], 2015). Baldwin sees the power and creativity of Black culture as something that White people can only be jealous of until they reckon with and try to repair the damage done in the name of Whiteness (Gordon, 2015). In *All K*, instead of trying to capture the aspects of Jewishness that could bring him closer to Blackness, Burd uses it as a parodic device, only allowing him to enter East Oakland superficially. In *White Dude*, he celebrates his race, gender, and economic-class, while simultaneously pining (or possibly whining) about being relegated to the edges of rap music. *White Dude* is not "disparaging Black people," but it is not building

bridges, or allowing Burd to move out of his Whiteness. *Freaky Friday* sees Lil Dicky finally able to say the n-word, but the song makes it clear that Burd is looking for acceptance into Blackness because he wants to commodify it. He uses Dicky/Brown's repetition of the n-word as the ultimate racial gag. In the Genius video "Freaky Friday & Lil Dicky's History with the N-Word," Genius calls his switching bodies with Brown a "loophole" (Genius, 2018). The video also ends on a particularly difficult note, with a cell phone video capturing a bus full of white women, all actively singing out Dicky/Brown's line "I'm that n****" (Genius, 2018). The cell phone video shows that Burd is not only overstepping his bounds when he writes the n-word onto Lil Dicky's character, but he is giving an 'Ok' to many white people to sing along with Dicky/Brown.

To conclude, Burd demonstrates through his music, and the videos that accompany it, that he is trying to reconcile his own identity with a Blackness that will allow him to achieve the highest possible level of success in the rap industry. He is unconcerned with the history of Jewish oppression in America, or that of Black-Jewish relations. The use of his songs as 'Ok's by the White world don't bother him either. He desires Blackness because he sees his lack of cultural capital as a barrier to success. He does not seem to realize how deeply his Whiteness, and his Jewishness, have helped him reach his current status as a popular and reasonably successful rapper.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ethan Sabourin is a student in the Department of Knowledge Integration at the University of Waterloo. He is pursuing minors in Jewish studies, cultural studies, and philosophy. This piece about Lil Dicky is a product of his years spent listening to the Jewish rapper. Ethan is passionate about Judaism, having gone to a Jewish school for sixteen years and volunteering on the Hillel Executive board at his university. Ethan also loves music, attending his first festival as a two-month old. Thanks to the magic of Twitter, he has found himself connected to a broad network of Jewish people who are concerned with issues of justice, and who are questioning the function of Jewish Whiteness in their communities. He wanted to bring his interests together for this essay. By analyzing Lil Dicky's work for Professor Shannon Dea's class on the Philosophy of Race, Ethan

was able to synthesize his knowledge from multiple disciplines. He also drew on his own personal history as a Jewish sometimes-fan of Lil Dicky. It is in this combination of the academic and the personal where Ethan finds the motivation to write.

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