

Stephanie Anike
Professor Elizabeth Gardner
Hip Hop's Masked Authenticity

Abstract

Within the confines of hip hop rests the important question of how to properly assess or distinguish whether or not a particular rap artist or group is authentic. Hip hop primarily grew from an oppressed culture. It originated from artists who took the pain, struggles, and conditions that they themselves and others around them faced, and combined them with hard beats and rhythms to form rap. In essence, Hip Hop is then founded upon pain; it represents a culture that finds relief and strength in the commonality of shared suffering and experiences in lived poverty. Taking into consideration the consistent changes of the American culture and the American people, authenticity in hip hop amongst other musical genres is questionable. Barry Shank challenges authenticity in the American culture in his piece, "That Wild Mercury Sound": Bob Dylan and the illusion of American Culture". He writes, "American culture, to the extent that one can define and characterize such a unity, is itself a culture of illusions – of artificial authenticities," (100). One can denote from this that the American culture is comprised of false authenticities that appear to be true and genuine making them indistinguishable. Authenticity in each music genre is different; however it is the most important and most valuable element in hip hop/ rap. The notion of authenticity is one that is intriguing yet unclear, and in hip hop, authenticity is rather complex and obscure making it difficult for the rapper who must work to attain acceptance from their hood/ghetto as well as their fans or the audience. The criteria of authenticity for an artist differs from that of the audience/ fan; nevertheless, for either the artist or the fan, authenticity is greatly and directly affected by race and sex, a rapper's ability to "keep it real", the portrayal of a hard exterior translating to an almost hyper-masculinity, and the rapper's ability to maintain connections to the hood/ ghetto. These many elements of hip hop authenticity make it an unsure concept, one that does not provide a clear-cut answer.

This issue of authenticity has become quite problematic and highly controversial raising many debates about how authenticity in hip hop can be truly defined or witnessed. From these many debates, I believe that the central one upon which all others center, pertains to the trend and belief that past rap artists were indeed far more authentic than the present ones of today. I plan to discuss how the culture and society of our day has affected this issue of authenticity in hip hop and argue that the aforementioned criteria of hip hop authenticity is rather complex and therefore a more appropriate way to describe it is a deep spiritual, emotional, or personal

connection an individual feels towards a specific artist or performance. This emotional or spiritual connection one feels towards an artist or performance of hip hop is generally attributed to pain as this is the fundamental focus and reason for hip hop because as mentioned before, hip hop was constructed around pain.

Before getting into the complex nature of hip hop authenticity, it is important to get a broad definition of the word “authenticity” itself and how it translates to all kinds of music. In Alan Moore’s “Authenticity as Authentication,” he analyzes what he believes to be the three underlying criteria for authenticity. He writes, “...that artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of (absent) others; and that they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others,” (209). This implies that an artist’s authenticity involves a particular honesty and rawness on their part in which they not only stay true to their life situations, but also at the same time represent others in similar situations, and by doing so, ultimately represent a whole culture in its purest form. Consequently, the artist becomes the vessel or instrument in which a particular culture is represented to the rest of the world. This leaves a daunting and heavy task of an artist not only to represent their people or their place of origin, but to also represent them as truthfully and as pure as possible. Thus when an artist fails to accomplish this task, they lose support from their people or the cultures which they represent, ultimately losing their credibility altogether. Moore’s take on authenticity closely relates to hip hop in that a rap artist must work to accomplish all three of Moore’s stated criteria: speaking the truth about themselves, about others, and about their culture or people (their ‘hood’). This task is seemingly simple; however one may find surprising how difficult it becomes for many rap artists to attain success in these three tasks.

A rap artist is typically at war and at odds to maintain connections to their 'hood' or 'ghetto'. In "Represent: race, space, and place in music," author Forman Murray writes, "Successful acts are expected to maintain connections to the 'hood' and 'keep it real' thematically, rapping about situations, scenes and sites that comprise the lived experience of the 'hood'. At issue is the complex question of authenticity as rap poses continually strive to reaffirm their connections to the 'hood'..." (72). In essence, the authenticity of a rapper is greatly weighed by the support of his/her 'hood' or 'ghetto'. If a rapper is backed up by his/her space ('hood') then it gives the credibility needed to appear real and authentic. However for a rap artist to gain the acceptance needed from their 'hood', it is their number one duty to properly represent and display real conditions and real situations in their hood, but this becomes difficult when a rap artist wants to not only 'keep it real', but appeal to their mainstream audience in order to make profits.

This task seems difficult for some artists to do; however, some past rap artists, such as the well-known Tupac and Biggie Smalls, have been able to attain success at both levels: maintaining connections to their 'hood' by 'keeping it real,' and earning commercial success by generating big profits. Tupac and Biggie are commonly and widely believed by society to be authentic and rightly so. Through songs such as "Keep ya head up" (in his album Strictly 4 my N. I.G.G.A.Z.) and "Changes," Tupac represents his people/hood by rapping about economic and social issues, such as rape and the mistreatment of women. He focuses on poverty and problems such as murders and single-moms that plague those living in the 'hoods' and 'ghettos'. With these songs Tupac was fulfilling standards of authenticity by identifying and maintaining his connection with the 'hood' or 'ghetto' and because of this many could relate because he rapped about real situations and problems that plagued his community and culture. Biggie, like

Tupac, did the same thing and with his all-time classic song, “Juicy,” he identifies himself with his location (hood) by addressing and exposing the problems and struggles he faced in his life and the things he had to do that would eventually propel him to the level of success that he attained. He even dedicates the song at the beginning to his ‘hood’ by saying “to all my ni**as in the struggle”. Teens and young adults, especially those living in unfavorable conditions listen to “Juicy” and find hope and encouragement that one day they too can rise out of the slum and reach success, and for them that’s what’s real. Rap artists, like Kanye West, still strive to accomplish what Tupac and Biggie did but at times fail.

This dilemma of maintaining connections to the hood, while appealing to the mainstream audience, relates well to W.E.B. Dubois’ theory of “Double- consciousness.” Mickey Hess’ “Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop’s Persona Artist” states, “A theory of hip hop’s seemingly conflicting concerns of authenticity and marketability may work to reframe W.E.B. Dubois’ concept of double-consciousness in commercial terms as artists work to produce marketable music for mainstream listeners yet at the same time to maintain a necessary level of authenticity to a place of cultural origin,” (298). This theory illustrates the complexity of authenticity in hip hop because it involves a particular kind of people, African Americans warring against themselves internally. Dubois’ theory of “Double- Consciousness” states that African American, during the period of slavery were born with a veil and equipped with a ‘second-sight’ in the American world in which they had no true self-consciousness. In this world, the individual only sees him or herself through the eyes of the American, Westernized world and only measures themselves or their worth by other’s standards. In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois writes, “One ever feels his twoness.—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...” (45). In this

theory, the individual (African-American) is at constant struggle with their inner being trying to accept themselves as who they are while at the same time trying to find their place in a world that looks upon them with humor and contempt.

Dubois' theory can be translated in commercial terms in that rap artists work to produce music that appeals to their mainstream audience while still staying true to their space, their 'hood'. These rap artists possess an inner struggle within themselves in which they try to keep the 'pure' drive of hip hop in that it originated from African-Americans who sought to find relief in past pains brought upon them by the White man, as Mickey Hess writes in his piece "Hip-hop Realness and the White Performer," "hip-hop lyrics are rooted in autobiography and often narrate black artists' struggles against systemic racism," (374). In doing so, the rap artist also seeks to generate commercial success. In Kembrew McLeod's "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation," McLeod weighs in on this struggle within a rap artist as he writes, "By selling millions of albums to White teens and appearing on MTV, hip hop artists (and their fans) have had to struggle to maintain a "pure" identity. They preserved this identity by invoking the concept of authenticity in attempting to draw clearly demarcated boundaries around their culture," (136). As a result of hip hop gaining popularity, especially from White adolescents, rap artists sought to preserve the very foundations of hip hop and to represent them and those of similar backgrounds in the purest form possible. In order for them to do this, while still acquiring commercial success, hip hop constructed its own authenticity that would be centered around their own Black culture, the same authenticity that some rap artists strive to conform to today.

Some rap artists like Kanye West fail to properly conform to hip hop's standards of authenticity while attaining commercial success. West has lost a lot of credibility as an authentic

or ‘real’ rapper since the earlier years of his career. West burst into the scenes of hip hop first as a producer for Jay-Z’s record label, Rockafella, but later in his career earned the praise of many fans with hit albums such as *The College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *Graduation*. However, West can arguably be considered less authentic now than he was in the earlier years of his career. With former hit tracks such as “Through the Wire” (which he recorded with his jaw wired shut due to a car accident that nearly killed him so that “people could feel his pain”) and “Heard ‘em Say,” West rapped about the pain, issues, and hardships he dealt with in his life as well as political and social issues African-Americans in particular face on a daily basis. West was considerably raw in his earlier records by just rapping about struggles that needed overcoming. But with current records such as “Gold Digga” and “Ni**as in Paris,” much of the content of West’s lyrics deal primarily with sex, women, and money, a mere reflection of American society today. When comparing West’s earlier songs like “All Falls Down” to his latest tracks like “Otis,” there’s an apparent shift of West’s values. In “All Falls Down,” West describes the human obsession and need for wealth and material things and the length at which people will go to attain. He says:

It seems we living the American dream
But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem
The prettiest people do the ugliest things
For the road to riches and diamond rings.

West is essentially confronting the problem with our society and how it influences and convinces people that the most important thing they need is wealth and riches. This issue that West confronted in “All Falls Down” is rather opposing and contradictory to West’s latest song “Otis” which he co-produced with Jay- Z, in which a more material-obsessed and rather cocky and arrogant West boasts of all the material wealth and riches he has gained all throughout his career. Some of West’s lyrics to “Otis” include:

Can't you see the private jets flyin over you?
Maybach bumper sticker read "What would Hova do?"
Jay is chillin (uhh) 'Ye is chillin (uhh)
What more can I say? (What more can I say?) We killin 'em

There's a clear difference between West and Tupac or Biggie: Tupac and Biggie were able to balance out authenticity over the span of their careers while at the same time generating huge profits; however, West seems to have lost his authenticity towards the later years of his career.

Among the hip hop's criteria for authenticity, Forman Murray suggests that a rapper's authenticity comes from his/her ability to incorporate real and true conditions and situations about the context of their environment or 'hood' into their lyrics (72). In essence, the success of a rapper is measured by their authenticity and their ability to 'keep it real'. Current mainstream artists strive to do this; however it can be difficult especially after they have risen to success and tasted the good life, no longer identifying with those still living in their old conditions and environment. The artists themselves become commercialized in a sense. It's as if they've reached the top of the ladder or have been placed upon such a high pedestal. However, using West as a case example, since pain is the fundamental reason for hip hop, when tragedy strikes in a hip hop artist's life (like the death of West's mom) that collapses their life and knocks them off their ladder or pedestal, life is put into perspective for them and they tend to be relatable and 'authentic' because the structure of their music is founded upon pain. West's performance of "Hey Mama" at the 2008 Grammy's Awards is a clear illustration of this phenomenon. In the performance, the grieving rapper struggles to keep his composure while he pays tribute to his deceased mother performing his song, "Hey mama" dedicated to her. At the end of his performance, West sings:

This life is just a dream, and my real life starts when I go to sleep.
This life, this here, this Grammy's, all of this is all a dream,
and my real life starts when I go to sleep, my mama, my, my mama.

In West's final words of his performance one can see how the death of his mother put everything in perspective for him in that he was essentially saying that his life, his success, his wealth and fame, and how many awards he won, none of it mattered. What was most important to him was his mom and dealing with her untimely passing. People tend to relate and identify more with pain than anything else. So when an artist is knocked down from their ladder by a tragedy that brings about pain, it makes them relatable because pain is a Universal phenomenon that knows no color, race, or socio-economic levels. The artist is then able to take their pain and produce a track or put out a performance that is generally accepted by society because it tends to be one many can relate to as in the case of hip hop, pain. Despite the more materialized and superficial tone of West's later records, one can view his emotional performance of "Hey mama" and automatically ascribe it as being authentic and real because of the commonality and ability to relate to pain.

Although one of hip hop's criteria for authenticity is having an almost hyper-masculinity, West did not demonstrate this element in his performance of "Hey mama"; however he was still described and labeled authentic by many. This is a contradiction to hip hop's preset standards for authenticity in that the rapper must portray a hyper-masculinity or a hard and tough front that translates to "realness." In his work, "Pop goes the rapper: a close reading of Eminem's genderphobia", Vincent Stephens explores further hip hop's nature of masculinity. Stephens writes, "Hip-hop is a masculinist genre with explicit notions of gender appropriate behavior which several scholars explore in the context of its own self-defined authenticity or 'realness,'" (23). This is significant to the hip hop authenticity debate because it gives wonderful insight and understanding into the deeper nature hip hop as a whole and how it relates or translates to authenticity. Hip hop is a masculine genre which suggests that artists in this genre are expected

to have a 'hard' exterior and anything soft is unacceptable. This translates directly to society's accepted norms of gender behavior that dictates how a male should behave versus how a woman should. The 'hard' characteristic is where the authentic nature of hip hop is defined. An artist that seems 'hard' is essentially being a 'real' and because of this, an artist that hopes to be successful in this genre has to exemplify this characteristic in their music. If they fail to do so, they more than likely will not receive acceptance from the hip hop culture because they fail to represent the masculine nature and this will ultimately be considered inauthentic in the hip hop culture.

Stephens goes on further to explore this masculinity of rap authenticity using Eminem as an example when he writes, "Eminem's need to rebel against pop music is rooted in a reactionary masculine impulse to object to the feminized nature of it. The PBS and Carey challenge his faux rebellion by musically critiquing his constructed masculinity" (28). As realness in hip hop is defined as being 'hard', it becomes a problem because hip hop has already constructed a standard of masculinity leading to authenticity which would make Eminem and other rappers that attack artists who seem 'soft' inauthentic because of the fact that they're conforming to the constructed masculinity in rap to gain acceptance. Since Eminem's attacks against other artists' masculinity gives him the hyper- masculinity needed, he gains the acceptance he needs from the hip hop culture, thus giving off a façade of being authentic, even though in actuality, he's conforming to hip hop's pre-set standards of 'realness'.

Stephens, along with Edward G. Armstrong, author of "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity" both complicate this notion of hip hop authenticity in terms of sex/gender roles by challenging its criteria using Eminem as a case example. Armstrong underscores the contradictions of hip hop's hyper-masculinity in his work when he writes, "The lack of correspondence between words and deeds is fundamental to standard rap discourse; It's

Eminem's affirmation of "being real" that is a normative rap validation code. Eminem's "first person authenticity" is essentially grounded in the rap world, 'a world where keeping it real has become an empty boast' (Raferty)," (Armstrong 337). As mentioned before, part of a rapper's authenticity comes from the ability to "keep it real" while still appearing dominant with a hyper-masculinity or their ability to showcase a rough or 'hard' exterior. Eminem is a strong example of the idea that though a rapper's main objective in constructing authenticity is to "keep it real", for example, many of Eminem's lyrics involve violent scenarios of what he would really like to do to some people. Though Eminem is achieving authenticity in terms of the standards of hip hop in that he's 'keeping it real', the question of "is keeping it real, real?" can be raised up because some successful rap artists, like Eminem, don't in fact do what they say in their lyrics; in other words there is the "lack of correspondence between words and deeds that is fundamental to standard rap discourse." The greater implication of this idea simply means that rap authenticity is conflicted and highly contradictory and the deeper question becomes, "is rap authenticity truly authentic?"

The discourse in hip hop in terms of its authenticity provides the great complex and rather contradictory nature of it. Since hip hop already has preset standards of authenticity that the rap artist must follow, how then can one consider any rap artist or performance that attempts to fit this mold authentic because artists themselves are just conforming to the preset molds of hip hop authenticity? Perhaps a better way to describe any hip hop artist or performance is not through the word "authentic" rather a spiritual, personal, or emotional connection an individual feels from that particular artist or performance. This proposal can be directly attributed to Weisethaunet's and Lindberg's argument in their piece, "Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real," that fans and critics need new words to define how they feel about a

particular artist or performance. They write, “However it might also be that they [performances] are particularly well meditated, in the sense of staged, and that this is what the audience perceives and appreciates. Thus, the frequent use of terms like “authentic,” “genuine,” and “true” may also stem from the fact that fans and critics lack a more diversified vocabulary to describe what they find moving about a performance” (Weisethaunet’s and Lindberg 468). The only particular way for a hip hop artist or performance to achieve hip hop authenticity is by conforming to its preset standards; however it seems almost impossible with our culture today for a rap artist to keep those standards of authenticity while at the same time making profits.

An artist is only the reflection or the mirror in which the culture and society are reflected. With the ever-shifting American culture artists must continue to reinvent themselves to meet the demands of a changing people. Joy Sperling, author of “Reframing the Study of American Visual Culture: From National Studies to Transitional Digital Networks,” writes of the American culture, “But American culture identity is neither singular nor unitary; rather it is a constantly mutating social construct and the result of multiple networks of transcultural connections, transactions...and its borders are permeable and porous; its mutating identity elastic and slippery,” (26). The American culture is one that is constantly changing through influences from other cultures and technological advancements. This culture is not fixed or stationary; rather it is constantly morphing and has long shifted since the days of Tupac and Biggie. Current mainstream artists are commercially successful because they give the audience or the fan what they crave and desire. They reflect the money-driven, greedy, egotistical, and selfish generation of our day and because of this, many rap artists no longer put out tracks that will cause and inspire people to think, rather their tracks which are predominately materialized, attract the

audience who with their superficial nature seek to attain the level of wealth that the particular rap artist has acquired.

Hip hop authenticity can then, no longer be rooted in its preset standards of authenticity but rather it is rooted in its fundamental backbone, pain. Kanye West is a provocative example for this because when viewing his performance of “Hey mama” he was not accomplishing all the standards of authenticity set up by the hip hop culture. At the beginning and end of his performance, West sang a couple of his verses, something rather rare in any hip hop song or performance. West lacked the hyper-masculinity needed in hip hop that translates to realness. In his performance one can clearly see the emotion (pain), that he portrays as he performs for his mom. He’s not putting up a front, rather he’s in his most vulnerable state. This allows the audience to connect with him because the emotion of pain he’s displaying is one that everyone is well acquainted with, whether it be through a break-up or the death of a loved one, all people can identify with pain. Since pain was the drive that hip hop was inspired by and founded upon, it’s only proper that a true “authentic” hip hop artist or performance is one that is able to relay and portray that emotion in their music. Therefore hip hop’s preset standards of authenticity are too complex and too easily challenged that the best way to ascribe any hip hop artist or performance as being authentic is one that well portrays pain, the catalyst of hip hop.

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