

Tha Realness: In Search of Hip-Hop Authenticity

Jonathan Williams

Authenticity has been linked to hip-hop since the genre's inception in the late 1970s. Claims to authenticity are widespread to an unparalleled degree throughout all types of hip-hop music, from "gangsta" rappers N.W.A. to "conscious" MC<sup>1</sup> Murs. Consider that rapper Beanie Sigel titled his debut album "The Truth," and that one of Nas' most renowned songs is "Last Real Nigga Alive." Even hip-hop magazine *The Source* claims to be "dedicated to true hip-hop."<sup>2</sup> Why is hip-hop preoccupied to such a large extent with the notion of authenticity? What attributes or qualities constitute authentic hip-hop? Despite the previous absence of scholarly attention given to hip-hop, there has been a recent growth in hip-hop academia as the genre has consolidated its position as a major market and cultural force within not only the United States, but also the world.

Hip-hop's fascination with authenticity is unique to the genre and is the function of its roots as the cultural expression of socially and economically marginalized African-Americans.<sup>3</sup> A narrow subculture, hip-hop's rise to prominence, as evidenced by the rise of international hip-hop stars, the high percentage of hip-hop CD sales, and the cooption of all things "hip-hop" by large companies to target new consumer demographics, has jeopardized the genre's "realness"

---

<sup>1</sup> An MC, or master of ceremonies, is the rapper in a hip-hop song. This title originated from the early days of hip-hop, when the MC shout simple, rhythmic phrases over a DJ's playing in order to help excite and interest the audience.

<sup>2</sup> Kembrew McLeod, "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation," in *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (1999), 138.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, "The Culture of Hip-Hop," in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 61.

with the threat of assimilation.<sup>4,5</sup> Rapper Murs' song "And This is For..." addresses the perceived perversion of hip-hop as a historical trend of mainstream cooption of black music,

Used to feel I should be silent, I was scared to do this song/But I want everyone aware of what is going on/Yes it is jazz and yes it is the blues/And yes it is the exact same way they did rock/But I refuse to watch the same thing happen to hip-hop/I refuse to watch that bullshit.<sup>6</sup>

Like other genres, including punk, grunge, and American folk music, hip-hop has found itself within the mainstream of a culture it is explicitly opposes. Consequently, MC's have "preserved this identity by invoking the concept of authenticity in attempting to draw clearly demarcated boundaries around their culture."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to defending the genre from the mainstream, claims to authenticity are also inextricably linked with the worth of an MC. For instance, in "Ether," written during his feud with rival Jay-Z, Nas denigrates Jay-Z as a false MC while simultaneously purporting to be "realer" than his rival; "I am the truest, name a rapper that I ain't influenced/Gave y'all chapters but now I keep my eyes on the Judas."<sup>8</sup> Group Home's "Tha Realness" invokes claims of authenticity to similar ends. They write, "When these non-fiction niggas start to rap on the mic/I keep shit to myself and keep it real with the game/Fake niggas hang around but they get no fame."<sup>9</sup> The link between realness and an MC's worth originated from the practice of battle-rapping, in which MCs verbally spar.<sup>10</sup> In this form of hip-hop, an MC attempts to depict himself as authentic while portraying his opponent as fake. "Ether," which for all intents and purposes is a one-sided battle rap, supports this assertion. In it, Nas lambastes Jay-Z as, "a fan, a phony, a

---

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Weheliye, "Keepin' It (Un)Real: Perusing the Boundaries of Hip Hop Culture," in *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2001), 292.

<sup>5</sup> McLeod, 134.

<sup>6</sup> Murs, "And This is For...", *Murs 3:16: The 9<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Definitive Jux, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> McLeod, 136.

<sup>8</sup> Nas, "Ether," *Stillmatic* (Sony, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Group Home, "Tha Realness," *Livin' Proof* (Fontana London, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> "Freestyle Rap Advice/Battle Rap Advice." *The State of Hip Hop*. Available from <http://www.thestateofhiphop.com/freestyle-rap.html>. Internet; accessed 27 November 2007.

fake.”<sup>11</sup> It would be remiss, however, to discuss any aspect of hip-hop authenticity without examining the different interpretations of the term.

Hip-hop’s claims to authenticity take a variety of forms in a multitude of contexts; consequently, it is virtually impossible to clearly and succinctly define what authenticity means in the context of hip-hop. Nevertheless, Kembrew McLeod, an associate professor at the University of Iowa, has categorized the different uses of “authenticity.”<sup>12</sup> Though these definitions are useful in analyzing the relationship between MCs and authenticity, they are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, meaningless.

One definition of hip-hop authenticity is staying true to oneself. This definition is quite popular within the music because, not only does it include rappers of all socio-economic backgrounds, but also because it can be compatible with all other definitions of authenticity. Academics and writers support this definition of authenticity. MC and Yale student Peter Furia writes, “...representing honestly one’s own experience and identity is the most powerful source of authenticity.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Professor R.A.T. Judy postulates that a key aspect in “nigga authenticity,” itself an integral component of hip-hop, is to “know your self.”<sup>14</sup> Hip-hop MC’s, too, link being true to oneself with authenticity. Method Man’s comment, “Basically, I make music that represents me. Who I am. I’m not gonna calculate my music to entertain the masses. I

---

<sup>11</sup> Nas, “Ether.”

<sup>12</sup> McLeod defines authenticity in social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social location, and cultural terms: being true to oneself, being “authentically black,” supporting the underground vs. mainstream, promoting hyper-masculine behavior, identifying with “the street,” and understanding the traditions and history of hip-hop culture.

<sup>13</sup> Peter J. Furia, “What Makes An Emcee Dope: The Art of Emceeing’ and Authenticity in Hip-Hop” (Senior Thesis, Yale University, 2005), 28.

<sup>14</sup> R.A.T. Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” in *Boundary*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (1994), 216.

gotta keep it real for me,”<sup>15</sup> is a testament to this definition. In NWA’s “Express Yourself,” Dr. Dre raps, “Dre is back, newjacks are made hollow/Expressin’ ain’t their subject because they like to follow/the words, the style the trend, the records I spin.” For Dr. Dre, an MC is inauthentic if he pretends to be someone he is not. Clearly, being true to oneself is an important aspect of hip-hop authenticity. However, it is crucial to note that within their commentaries, both Method Man and Dr. Dre combine this definition of authenticity with other definitions. While Method Man focuses on personal “realness,” he also links authenticity with not selling out to the mainstream. Likewise, the remainder of the verse from which the Dr. Dre lyrics originate amalgamates this definition of authenticity with remaining true to the streets and the underground.<sup>16</sup> Evidently, authenticity in terms of personal truth is inadequate as a definition.

As a consequence of the genre’s African-American origins, asserting one’s blackness is another definition of hip-hop authenticity. According to Professor Mark Neal, when something is “deemed more authentically hip-hop” it is, “by extension, more authentically black.”<sup>17</sup> Judy goes so far as to examine hip-hop authenticity only as it relates to blackness and, even when he concedes that an element of authenticity is knowing oneself, this concession is always itself a component of so-called “nigga authenticity.” He writes,

...the predominant thinking about rap is obsessed with the question of its historical and ideological significance for African American society. In turning to the question of significance we are concerned with rap’s significance *for*. Rap is *for* African American society. It is an expression of this society’s utterance.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> McLeod, 140.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Dre’s lyrics, “Ruthless, is the way to go, they know/Others say rhymes which fail to be original/or they kill where the hip-hop starts/Forget about the ghetto, and rap for the pop charts,” invoke these other definitions of authenticity.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “No Time for Fake Niggas: Hip-Hop Culture and the Authenticity Debates,” in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58.

<sup>18</sup> Judy, 216.

Judy also cites gangsta-rapper Ice-T's book, *The Ice-Opinion: Who Gives a Fuck*, in which the rapper claims that rap has a "niggafication" effect on its white consumers.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, blackness is an intrinsic component of hip-hop authenticity. Furthermore, Professor Houston Baker writes, "The black urbanity of the form seems to demand not only a style most readily accessible to black urban youngsters, but also a representational black urban authenticity of performance."<sup>20</sup>

The lyrics of many MCs affirm the importance of blackness to hip-hop authenticity. For instance, Ice Cube connects black pride with authenticity in his song "When Will They Shoot": "Calling me an African-American/like everything is fair again, shit/Devil, you got to get the shit right, I'm black/blacker than a trillion midnights."<sup>21</sup> Ice Cube continues,

I met Farrakhan and had dinner/and you ask if I'm a Five Percenter, well.../No, but I go where the brothers go/down with Compton Mosque, Number 54/Made a little dough, still got a sister on my elbow/Did Ice Cube sell out? You say, "Hell no!"/A black woman is my manager, not in the kitchen/So could you please stop bitchin'?

These lyrics demonstrate the tremendous connection between blackness and authenticity. However, they also manifest this identity in the context of not conforming to the mainstream, a distinct, alternate definition of authenticity. Consequently, black identity is clearly a significant aspect of hip-hop, but is not necessarily the primary factor in determining authenticity.

In fact, many academics and rappers downplay the importance of blackness in hip-hop. London School of Economics Professor Paul Gilroy suggests that, as a genre that "glories in its own malleability as well as its transnational character," hip-hop authenticity cannot be defined in

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>20</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ice Cube, "When Will They Shoot?," *The Predator* (Priority Records, 1992).

terms of blackness.<sup>22</sup> Writer Danny Hoch supports this interpretation of blackness' role in hip-hop authenticity by asserting that hip-hop "crosses all lines of color, race, economics, nationality, and gender."<sup>23</sup> Even Murs' "And This Is For..." which decries the commercialization of hip-hop by white America, acknowledges that Caucasian MCs can be authentic rappers: "Only reason it took so long to take place/was up until now your only choice was 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass/Or others, like Ice, wasn't really that tight/Now you got some white dudes who can truly rock the mic."<sup>24</sup> The last phrase is particularly important because, according to Furia, "...the ability to connect to a collective rhythm or to 'touch' his or her audience"<sup>25</sup> is a crucial component of an MC's authenticity. Evidently, while some academics and artists link blackness to authenticity, others contend that, at its core, hip-hop is a music and culture that cannot be relegated to only one race of people.

The preservation of underground values, essentially not "selling out" to the mainstream, is another important conception of hip-hop authenticity. However, it is also the most ambiguous and complex. The notion of remaining underground and not succumbing to the mainstream has its roots in the notion of street credibility and being true to oneself,<sup>26</sup> both of which are additional definitions of hip-hop authenticity. Jay-Z's "Moment of Clarity" testifies to the complexity of the underground vs. mainstream debate within hip-hop. After making claims to authenticity, including "being one of the realest niggas out" and describing how the listener will "feel [his] truths," Jay-Z admits to selling out to the mainstream:

The music business hates me/cause the industry ain't make me/Hustlers and boosters embrace

---

<sup>22</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Danny Hoch. *Jails, hospitals & Hip-Hop and Some People* (New York: Villard Books, 1998), xvii.

<sup>24</sup> Murs, "And This Is For..."

<sup>25</sup> Furia, 30.

<sup>26</sup> McLeod, 141,

me/and the music I be makin'/I dumb down for my audience/and double my dollars/They criticize me for it/yet they all yell, "Holla!"/If skills sold/truth be told/I'd probably be/Lyricly/Talib Kweli/Truthfully/I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/but I (did five mil) ain't been rhyming like Common since/when your sense got that much in common/and you been hustling since/your inception/fuck perception/go with what makes cents<sup>27</sup>

However, Jay-Z places his apparent defection to the mainstream within the context of street values: hustling and independence. Clearly, Jay-Z does not consider tailoring his rhymes for commercial interests to be incompatible with authenticity and, later in the song, he reinforces his realness in terms of personal authenticity and street credibility, "Y'all record/I recall/cause I really been there before." Though not all mentions of the discrepancy between underground and commercial hip-hop are as complicated as those found in "Moment of Clarity,"<sup>28</sup> this song testifies to the ambiguity of such notions of hip-hop authenticity.

Another prevalent notion of hip-hop authenticity is adherence to "street" values. According to McLeod, many in the hip-hop community, including rappers, fans, and journalists, contrast a "White-dominated U.S. suburbia" with "a very specific and idealized community that is located in African American-dominated inner cities:"<sup>29</sup> the streets. Consequently, representing one's neighborhood and expressing a commitment to street values, often including hustling and any other activity that can be explained by the all-too-common phrase "keepin' it real," is connected to conceptions of authenticity. Rapper Ras Kass seems to support street credibility's equivalence to authenticity, "For me, the most important thing is the street That's what I make

---

<sup>27</sup> Jay-Z, "Moment of Clarity," *The Black Album* (Def Jam, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> A Tribe Called Quest's "Check the Rhime" contains a clear and unambiguous depiction of mainstream hip-hop. Q-Tip raps, "Industry rule number four thousand and eighty:/record company people are shady/So kids watch your back 'cause I think they smoke crack/I don't doubt it. Look at how they act/...Rap is not pop/if you call it that then stop."

<sup>29</sup> McLeod, 142.



my shit for and to do anything else would be fake.”<sup>30</sup> Much of hip-hop music seems to concur with Ras Kass.

Consider Gang Starr’s “Code of the Streets.” In this song, MC Guru depicts street values as a central tenet of authentic hip-hop. He raps,

They might say we're a menace to society/But at the same time I say, "Why is it me?"/Am I the target, for destruction?/What about the system, and total corruption?/I can't work at no fastfood joint/I got some talent, so don't you get my point?/I'll organize some brothers and get some crazy loot/Selling D-R-U-G-S and clocking dollars, troop/Cause the phat dough, yo, that suits me fine/I gotta have it so I can leave behind/The mad poverty, never having, always needing/If a sucker steps up, then I leave him bleeding/I gotta get mine, I can't take no shorts/And while I'm selling, here's a flash report/Organized crime, they get theirs on the down low/Here's the ticket, wanna bet on a horse show?/You gotta be a pro, do what you know/When you're dealing with the code of the streets

Evidently, this “code of the streets” is a direct result of the marginalization of African-Americans in indigent urban areas. Many other songs, including NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton” and Slum Village’s “Conant Gardens” explicitly use their neighborhood as a proxy for street credibility and authenticity while other songs, for instance Common’s “The Corner” and Nas’ “Project Windows,” connect symbolic representations of “the street” to authenticity. This definition is far from complete and features a significant caveat; it is extremely difficult to distinguish whether representing “the street” directly makes an MC authentic, or if this representation is merely a component of personal authenticity. For instance, Ras Kass, along with the rappers in the musical examples mentioned, may have simply been reinforcing the importance of staying true to his personal history and outlook.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, this definition of authenticity often includes others, such as not conforming to the mainstream or promoting hyper-masculinity. Consequently, it, like others, is incomplete at best and, at worst, a dangerous way to discuss hip-hop authenticity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Furia, 22.

Promoting hyper-masculinity or other “hard” values is another definition of authenticity. By being violent, rough, and over-sexualized, some rappers are regarded as authentic and “real,” as opposed to the over-produced, slick, mass-appeal pop-rap that is instantly dismissed as soft and fake. Consider the 40 Thevz song “Mad Doggin’,” “I got my real niggaz in the house/Some real motherfuckin’ men.”<sup>32, 33</sup> Clearly, there is a strong relationship between manliness and authenticity. Filmmaker Marlon Riggs has dubbed this tendency of MCs “black macho:” “a monolithic construction of a strong, unflinching man.”<sup>34</sup> Homophobia is often a component of the black macho persona and any element of gayness is immediately correlated with being effeminate and, by extension, “soft,” the antithesis of hyper-masculinity. However, this definition is severely flawed because hyper-masculinity is a street value. Also, there are a variety of so-called “conscious MCs” who espouse values of social liberals. Consequently, this definition, like the others examined, is inadequate.

Having a thorough knowledge of the culture and history of hip-hop is another means of invoking authenticity within hip-hop. In other words, by proving one’s knowledge of hip-hop, an MC can become part of a lineage of authenticity and, by association, becomes regarded as authentic. This is one of the reasons that an MC will pay homage to his heroes. Jin, an Asian-American rapper noted for his freestyle prowess yet still trying to prove himself authentic in a predominately black musical genre, demonstrates his knowledge of hip-hop history in his song “Top Five (Dead or Alive)”<sup>35</sup>

It started out with the legendary Kool Herc one of/the greats in 1980 Kurtis Blow hit us with “The

---

<sup>32</sup> McLeod, 142.

<sup>33</sup> 40 Thevz, “Mad Doggin’,” *Honor Among Thevz* (Polygram Records, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> Ted Swedenburg, “Homies in The ‘Hood: Rap’s Commodification of Insubordination,” in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 587.

<sup>35</sup> Jin, “Top Five (Dead or Alive),” *The Emcee’s Propaganda* (Draft Records/Crafty Plugz, 2005).

Breaks"/from then it was on/two years later Melle Mel dropped *The Message*/'round the same time I was born/Grandmaster Caz Cold Crushin' it was evident/Rakim campaigning "Eric B. For President"

By demonstrating his knowledge of hip-hop history, Jin hopes to be connected with this undeniably authentic lineage and, by association, be considered an authentic MC. Rapper Jemini The Gifted One's "Born A MC" decries the popularization of fake MCs and equates a thorough knowledge of hip-hop with authenticity,

But nowadays we call everybody emcee's/I don't mean to preach, but emcecin's a level that you gotta reach/Respectin' history, be open to learn, and willing to teach/I mastered each and every lyrical style that you'll ever need/So lyrically, musically, spiritually, guess this album is all you'll ever need

Guru, the MC in Gang Starr, affirms the importance of understanding hip-hop as a culture, "you've got to understand hip-hop's past and understand it as a cultural tradition rather than treat it as merely a product."<sup>36</sup> In fact, this knowledge is such an integral part of hip-hop history that KRS-One's song "9 Elements" explicitly lists the elements of real hip-hop. Even this definition of authenticity, however, is unsatisfactory. It conflicts with the notion of personal authenticity; how can an aspiring MC living in another country be expected to know the intricacies of a culture and music made by marginalized African-Americans in the Bronx since the 1970s? Furthermore, it should be noted that four of KRS-One's nine elements of hip-hop involve "the street" in some manner. Consequently, with this definition of authenticity, there are both contradictions and overlaps with other definitions.

The widespread practice of sampling<sup>37</sup> in hip-hop also raises interesting questions regarding what constitutes authenticity. DJs and producers have always used sampling in hip-hop

---

<sup>36</sup> McLeod, 144.

<sup>37</sup> Sampling refers to the practice of incorporating pre-recorded samples of other music. This practice originated during the beginning of hip-hop when DJ's used two turntables to replay the same portions of a song, thus producing the musical backdrop for an MC.

music and, as a result, it has become synonymous with authentic hip-hop.<sup>38</sup> In fact, many producers, most prominently DJ Premier, scratch the lyrics of hip-hop's early and, thus, authentic MC's to add to their beats. For instance, in the Pitch Black song "It's All Real," Premier scratches the following during the chorus: "Pitch Black, all my real niggas/Underground past the pavement/We be wilin' on the corner freestylin'/We rep the hardest."<sup>39</sup> This example demonstrates the importance of scratching and, by extension, sampling to notions of authenticity. It also reaffirms the widespread credence given to the definitions of authenticity previously discussed. Pitch Black, a relatively recent group whose first single was "It's All Real," portray themselves as authentic because they are underground to an extreme extent, epitomize the "streets," and represent hyper-masculine behavior and they use sampled vocals from previous hip-hop songs in order to position themselves as a recent addition the lineage of hip-hop authenticity.

Though this may seem to prove the importance of sampling to authenticity, it merely supports the notion that many artists believe the two to be related. Roots drummer and leader Questlove gives valuable testimony regarding the role of sampling in hip-hop authenticity. Many hip-hop fans and producers detest the notion of "composing," or making beats with synthesizers or other instruments instead of sampling machines.<sup>40</sup> Even Questlove, whose group is known for using live instrumentation and occasionally employing samples, concedes that sampling is "hip-

---

<sup>38</sup> Wayne Marshall, "Giving Up Hip-Hop's Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling," in *Callaloo*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (2006), 869.

<sup>39</sup> Pitch Black, "It's All Real," *Pitch Black Law* (Umvd Labels, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> As an amateur beat-maker, I can testify to the extent to which producers who sample absolutely detest the notion of composing beats. These producers view sampling as a means of continuing the legacy of hip-hop, despite changing lyrical styles and subject matter. Furthermore, as record companies continue to sue producers for sampling copyrighted music, composing beats has become much more widespread and, consequently, synonymous with the low-quality pop-rap played on radio stations.

hop's firstborn."<sup>41</sup> However, he also points to the role live instrumentation has played throughout hip-hop history. He cites Afrika Bambaataa, Sugar Hill's house band, and Dr. Dre as important hip-hop pioneers who, to varying extents, used live instrumentation.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, uestlove dismisses the notion that sampling is exclusively a hip-hop practice, noting that in 1984, the progressive rock band Yes sampled Funk Inc.'s version of "Kool is Back."<sup>43</sup> Though many still see sampling as an integral component of authentic hip-hop, uestlove proves that, though linked, sampling is not necessary for hip-hop to be authentic.

Authenticity is an issue of paramount importance within hip-hop. However, it is also complex. Clearly, an MC can fulfill one definition of authenticity while contradicting others and, as a result, any analysis is cyclical. Consequently, hip-hop authenticity is best defined as subjective and personal. Perhaps this is the most authentic way of being hip-hop: not caring about what others think, not pandering to "the streets," but truly "doing you." MCs, producers, and fans all too often invoke the phrase "keepin' it real." Instead of "keepin' it real," they should focus on hip-hop as music instead of using it as means to proving their authenticity by myopically focusing on its origins. Such claims to authenticity have become kitsch, self-parodies through their overuse. To paraphrase President Kennedy, hip-hop's history "is like taillights on a boat which illuminate where we have been when we should be focusing on where we should be going."

---

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, 868.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 874.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 876.