Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation

By Kembrew McLeod

This essay examines claims of authenticity within hip-hop, African American culture. In the mid- to late 1990s, authenticity claims have been pervasive within hip-hop music communities, which had previously existed on the margins of mainstream U.S. culture. By mapping the range of meanings associated with authenticity as they are invoked discursively, we can gain a better understanding of how a culture in danger of assimilation seeks to preserve its identity. The use of the conceptual apparatus of semantic dimensions highlights how that culture's most central and powerful symbols are organized and given meaning vis-à-vis authenticity within a discursive system.

In this article, I examine claims of authenticity and the contexts under which these claims are made within a form of African American culture: hip-hop. Hip-hop music—popularly known as rap music—grounds, reflects, and is at the center of an African American, youth-oriented culture that originated in the Bronx, New York, during the mid-1970s (Neal, 1999). Rose (1994) described hip-hop music as "a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music" (p. 2). By using a method of understanding authenticity claims as structured, meaningful discourse, I seek to demonstrate how the concept of authenticity lies at the nexus of key cultural symbols in hip-hop.

These reoccurring invocations of authenticity are not isolated to hip-hop culture. They also take place in other cultures that, like hip-hop, are threatened with assimilation by a larger, mainstream culture. By mapping the range of meanings associated with authenticity as the meanings are invoked discursively, we can gain a better understanding of how a culture in danger of assimilation actively

attempts to preserve its identity. Further, using the conceptual apparatus of semantic dimensions used by Seitel (1974), Katriel and Philipsen (1981), and Carbaugh (1989, 1996), I highlight how that culture's most central and powerful symbols are organized and given meaning vis-à-vis authenticity within a discursive system. Whereas I employ semantic dimensions to understand the significance of authenticity discourse in hip-hop culture, Seitel (1974) employed semantic dimensions to understand the use of metaphors in Haya culture. Seitel stated, "Studying metaphors can uncover basic underlying principles that people use to conceive of and evaluate their own speech interactions" (p. 66). Although the specific symbols referenced in authenticity discourse cannot be generalized beyond hip-hop culture, the interpretive framework I use can be applied to other cultures in danger of assimilation in order to understand how authenticity is at the intersection of powerful cultural symbols, and how those symbols are invoked to maintain pure identity.

Although Lull (1985, 1987), Garofalo (1997), Thornton (1996), Duncombe (1997), and others examined the assimilation and commodification of subcultural expression, they did not engage in a systematic examination of how a politics of authenticity functions to maintain a culture's identity. In his study of authenticity discourse in country music, Peterson (1997) paraphrased the observations of Maurice Halbwachs by stating that "authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct" (p. 5). This "socially agreed-upon construct" is a sign, a discursive formation with multiple meanings. It is at the center of not just hip-hop, but many cultures and subcultures threatened with assimilation, such as insurgent forms of rock music, "rave" communities, underground gay discos, jazz scenes, country music, zine-making communities, and African-American culture, generally (Duncombe, 1997; Ennis, 1992; Frith, 1981; Garofalo, 1997; hooks, 1992; Lubiano, 1996; Lull, 1987; Neal, 1999; Peterson, 1997; Thornton, 1996). For instance, Lull (1987) argued that authenticity was valued in punk rock communities because of the "commodification of the punk ethic" (p. 227). I will return to a broader discussion of the ways in which authenticity is signified in cultures threatened with assimilation in the final section.

A Brief History of Hip-Hop Music's Commercial Ascendancy

As a culture that is distinct from the larger African-American culture from which it emerged, hip-hop contains the key elements of Carbaugh's (1988) definition of a culture; there are "patterns of symbolic action and meaning" that are deeply felt, commonly intelligible, and widely accessible to members of the hip-hop community (p. 38). Hip-hop culture, broadly speaking, incorporates four prominent elements: breaking (i.e., break dancing); tagging or bombing (i.e., marking the walls of buildings and subways with graffiti); DJ-ing (i.e., collaging the best fragments of records by using two turntables); and MC-ing (i.e., rapping; Hager, 1984). In the late 1990s, hip-hop music is extremely popular. Despite the fact that hip-hop musical, clothing, and linguistic styles vary from one locale to another, one con-

cept that is commonly invoked is authenticity. In fact, authenticity has been invoked by hip-hop fans and artists throughout the 1990s, spoken in terms of being "true," "real," or "keepin' it real."

After a decade of existing on the margins of mainstream popular culture, hip-hop music began to sell more than before. In 1988, the annual record sales of hip-hop music reached $100 million. This accounted for 2% of the music industry's sales. The next year, *Billboard* added rap charts to its magazine, and music video outlet MTV debuted *Yo! MTV Raps,* which quickly became the network's highest rated show (Samuels, 1995; Silverman, 1989). By 1992, rap generated $400 million annually, roughly 5% of the music industry's annual income (Vaughn, 1992). These estimates climbed to $700 million in annual revenues for rap in 1993 (Rose, 1994). Within only a few years, hip-hop music was transformed from a being an aspect of a small subculture identified with young, city-dwelling African Americans to a genre that had been absorbed into mainstream U.S. popular culture. Everything from soft-drink commercials to "White" pop music appropriated hip-hop music's musical and visual style.

By 1999, exactly 20 years after the first hip-hop record was released, hip-hop music and the culture from which it emerged were firmly entrenched within mainstream U.S. culture. In the course of one month in 1999, *Time* magazine devoted its cover story to hip-hop, Fugees member Lauryn Hill took home the first Album-of-the-Year Grammy awarded to a hip-hop artist, and MTV (which, a dozen years before, had been reluctant to air hip-hop music videos) devoted 7 days of its programming to the music during its much-hyped "Hip-Hop Week" (Farley, 1999). In 1998, hip-hop music sales continued to outpace music industry gains in general (a 31% increase over the previous year, compared to the music industry's 9% increase), and hip-hop outsold the previous top-selling format, country music (Farley, 1999).

During hip-hop music's dramatic ascendancy in the 1990s, hip-hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation that other subcultural groups confronted with widespread acceptance previously faced: being "inside" a mainstream culture they had, in part, defined themselves as being against. 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.

With this in mind, I aim to answer the following questions in my analysis of hip-hop. First, what do authenticity claims mean to people within the hip-hop community, and how does the invocation of authenticity function? Second, does the invocation of authenticity make appeals to solidarity across racial, gender, class, or cultural identity formations? Third, what are the contexts in which authenticity is invoked? Fourth, how and why are authenticity claims—specifically, the term, "keepin' it real"—contested by some members of the hip-hop community? Finally, how do the community members that use these terms resolve the apparent contradiction between being both outside mainstream U.S. culture and very much inside it as well?

Method

As a listener of hip-hop music for many years, a reader of hip-hop magazines, and, later, a music journalist who primarily writes about hip-hop, I noticed that claims of authenticity had become a significant part of the vernacular of hip-hop artists and fans. After hearing "keepin' it real" (or some variation of that phrase) hundreds or thousands of times in the past decade, I began to question why it was used so often.

Because authenticity exists as a discursive construction, a linguistic-oriented method was an appropriate way to analyze how it is used in communities threatened with assimilation. Starting from the concept of authenticity, I employed the conceptual apparatus of semantic dimensions used by Seitel (1974), Katriel and Philipsen (1981), and Carbaugh (1989, 1996). This allowed me to deduce meaning from the data I collected. I drew heavily from the method of analysis and phrasing used by the above-mentioned authors.

Seitel (1974) defined a semantic dimension as "a two-valued set that is used to conceive of and evaluate aspects of language use" (p. 51). He stated that it is described and analyzed through indigenous literal statements. Unlike quantitative research, this qualitative study did not bring an a priori coding scheme to the analysis of data. Rather, like Seitel (1974), Katriel and Philipsen (1981), and Carbaugh (1989, 1996), I derived an indigenous coding scheme from the data. The unit of analysis was not the hip-hop community, broadly, but was any discursive context in which the following two symbols co-occurred: "authenticity" and "hip-hop." Therefore, my data for this study were potentially any place where a discourse of authenticity and hip-hop co-occurred. However, to be systematic, I limited what I examined to discourse primarily intended to be received within the hip-hop community. This included, for the purpose of this study, hip-hop magazines (a 6-month period), Internet discussion groups that focus on hip-hop (a 3-month period), hip-hop song lyrics (a 6-year period), and press releases sent to hip-hop music critics (a 6-month period). Significantly, my corpus of authenticity discourse in hip-hop included more than 800 authenticity claims.

The above-mentioned data were analyzed in the following way. First, I set the criteria for what constituted a symbol of authenticity discourse as being any appearance of the terms "true," "real" (and any derivation of that word, such as "realness"), and "authentic" (or any derivation of that word, such as "authenticity"). The semantic dimensions of authenticity discourse were inductively derived from the data by questioning what the listener needed to know in order to process the term "keepin' it real," or other such invocations of authenticity. This was done by looking at key cultural symbols of authenticity. For instance, when Meen Green stated, "I try to keep it real for the street," he was associating authenticity with "the street," or the urban neighborhoods from which he and many hip-hop artists came (Meen Green, personal communication, November 13, 1997). This constituted a type of distinctive features analysis that Seitel (1974), Katriel and Philipsen (1981), and Carbaugh (1989) employed. After carefully scrutinizing themes that were most prominent in my data, and noting the number of times these themes appeared, I formulated six tentative dimensions (although I was careful to recog-

nize that frequency does not necessarily constitute saliency). I returned to my data several times to check the validity and to obtain speakers' terminology for those dimensions.

Next, to confirm the validity of the semantic dimensions I selected, I conducted 23 individual, tape-recorded, phone interviews with a wide range of hip-hop artists, from multimillion selling artists to underground, cult artists (MC Eiht, Meen Green, DJ Muggs of Cypress Hill, DJ Spooky, Frankie Cutlass, Cee-lo and Big Gipp of Goodie Mob, Killah Priest, Cappadonna and Method Man of Wu-Tang Clan, Rass Kass, Hell Razah of Sunz of Man, Voodoo, Wyclef and Pras of the Fugees, MC Lyte, Kool Keith, Lou Nutt and Flaggs of Land of Da Lost, Guru and DJ Premier of Gang Starr, and Mixmaster Mike and Q-bert of the Beastie Boys and Invisibl Skratch Piklz). I asked five open-ended questions that were followed up with more specific queries that probed the answers given to those questions: What does the phrase "keepin' it real" mean to you? Who, in hip-hop, isn't keepin' it real? What makes someone real in hip-hop? What makes someone fake in hip-hop? How do you feel about the way the phrase "keepin' it real" is used in hip-hop?

The following list specifies the volume of collected data where symbols of authenticity and hip-hop co-occurred at least once: 45 hip-hop magazine articles, totaling 93 pages (from *Rap Pages, Rap Sheet,* and *The Source*[1]); 11 letters to the editor printed in two hip-hop magazines; 187 individual postings to Internet discussion groups that focus on hip-hop (heretofore called "hip-hop newsgroups"), which ranged from 20 words to 500 (averaging around 100 words); 23 interviews that, when transcribed, totaled 47 pages of single-spaced text; 2 interviews with hip-hop fans that, transcribed, totaled 5 typed, single-spaced pages of text; an interview with Dave Paul, president of a hip-hop record company, which totals 3 typed, single-spaced pages; 2 interviews with 2 hip-hop record company executives, totaling 5 pages collectively; 1 interview with Haze, a hip-hop clothing designer and graffiti artist, totaling 2 single-spaced pages; 241 hip-hop songs; and 33 hip-hop record company press releases that announced the release of 33 different hip-hop albums.

Authenticity Claims Within Hip-Hop Discourse

Invocations of authenticity are performed often, resonate deeply, and are widely shared by members of the hip-hop community. By understanding the discourse that centers around authenticity within distinct, but interrelated, semantic dimensions, we can see how the key symbols of a culture threatened with assimilation are drawn upon and organized to maintain that culture's identity. Authenticity is invoked around a range of topics that include hip-hop music, racial identification, the music industry, social location, individualism, and gender and sexual roles. Profanity and slang are used in discourse often to emphasize the claims about authenticity that the speaker or writer is trying to support.

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[1] *The Source* claims in its masthead that it is "Dedicated to True Hip-Hop."

Table 1. Support Claims of Authenticity

Semantic Dimensions	Real	Fake
Social-psychological	staying true to yourself	following mass trends
Racial	Black	White
Political-economic	the underground	commercial
Gender-sexual	hard	soft
Social locational	the street	the suburbs
Cultural	the old school	the mainstream

When I interviewed DJ Muggs, a member of the multiplatinum group Cypress Hill, he dismissed the use of the phrase "keepin' it real" in what to me seemed an irritated manner, claiming it was a trendy, "flavor of the month" term. Nevertheless, Muggs acknowledged that the term was widely used within hip-hop, sighing, "Trust me, I did about 200 interviews last year and in every one was that question, 'What's keepin' it real to you?'" (DJ Muggs, personal communication, October 31, 1997).[2] In a similar illustration of the ubiquity of the term, hip-hop journalist Angela N. (1997) stated in a hip-hop newsgroup posting, "You haven't lived until you've edited a 2-hour interview and heard 'keepin it real' after every other sentence, tried to cut most of them out of the finished product, then have your boss ask you 'could you do *something* about all of these 'keeping it real's?" The fact that claims of authenticity are such a pervasive part of hip-hop discourse is an explicit indication that something is going on. That something can be rendered intelligible by examining the data I collected using the conceptual apparatus of semantic dimensions.

Keepin' it real and various other claims of authenticity do not appear to have a fixed or rigid meaning throughout the hip-hop community. Keepin' it real is a floating signifier in that its meaning changes depending on the context in which it is invoked. I demonstrate here how the identities of hip-hop community members are constituted vis-à-vis authenticity, in both a conscious and unconscious manner. The conceptual framework of semantic dimensions allows me to interpret the range of meanings that are associated with claims of authenticity, meanings that are deeply bound up with this culture's key symbols of identity.

Table 1 outlines six major semantic dimensions of meaning inductively derived from the data that may be active when hip-hop community members (i.e., hip-hop fans, artists, and critics) invoke authenticity. Although each dimension of meaning deploys different and distinct cultural terms, these semantic dimensions are deeply interrelated and can provide a way of comprehending authenticity

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[2] It is significant that Muggs had such a negative reaction when I asked him about "keepin' it real." The contestations over claims of authenticity among hip-hop community members such as Muggs are something I will return to later in this essay because these struggles over authenticity reveal what is at stake within hip-hop culture.

claims as rich, meaningful discourse that draws upon important cultural symbols. The six semantic dimensions are labeled social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social-locational, and cultural. Within each dimension, I have identified two exemplars of oppositionally defined symbols drawn from the speakers' language.

Social-Psychological Dimension (Staying True to Yourself vs. Following Mass Trends)
The discourse placed within the social-psychological dimension highlights the valorization of individualism and the demonization of conformity in the discourse of hip-hop community members. For many, keepin' it real refers to—employing a phrase that is often used—staying true to yourself. Moreover, by "representing who you are in actuality to the best of your ability," as hip-hop newsgroup user Christina Hsu (1997) stated, one is not conforming to the media-generated representations of youth-culture movements. In another example of staying true to yourself, Spice 1 told hip-hop magazine, *The Source,* "Basically, I'mma try to make my art the same thing as my life. In the past, my life was going where my art was going because I try to keep it as real as I can" (Burke, 1997, p. 71). Essentially, he was stating that he wants his music to be an accurate representation of his own life world. That, according to many people within the hip-hop community, is a fundamental component of portraying oneself as authentic.

Wu-Tang Clan member and multiplatinum solo artist, Method Man (personal communication, January 30, 1998), told me, "Basically, I make music that represents me. Who I am. I'm not gonna calculate my music to entertain the masses. I gotta keep it real for me." MC Eiht is a self-identified "underground" hip-hop artist, although, like Method Man, he records for a major record label, and his recordings have gone platinum. Eiht (personal communication, November 20, 1997) told me, "Basically, my format doesn't change. If I sell 2–3 million records on this record it's because of me. It's not because of an image change or because of the record company." Individualism is a key component of the discourse that surrounds claims of authenticity that, within the social-psychological dimension, is played against the negative symbols of "the masses" or "mass trends" and aligned with "staying true to yourself " and "representing who you are."

I believe that one reason DJ Muggs had such a seemingly negative reaction when I brought up the term keepin' it real was because his group, Cypress Hill, had been criticized for selling a large number of records to White suburban kids. When I asked him if he associated this type of criticism with the term keepin' it real, DJ Muggs (personal communication, October 31, 1997) said, "Yeah. Keepin' it real. I hate that fuckin', um, yeah. *I just try to be who I am.* People be too worried about how many records I sold and that I was on fuckin' MTV [emphasis added]."

Racial Dimension (Black vs. White)
To its core community members, hip-hop remains strongly tied to Black cultural expression. For instance, one person stated in a hip-hop newsgroup, "White boys shouldn't rap because rap is black!" (Black36865, 1997). Robert Mashlin (1997) wrote to the White readers of a hip-hop newsgroup, "F@#$ all this sh@# that's happenin' to hip-hop. It's cuz all these crab-ass peckerwood execs and all these

other mainstream, bullsh#@ views are gettin into hip-hop—man, F@#$ that! This music wasn't made fo ya'll—stay da F@$# away from it—listen to house of pain, snow and vanilla" (Mashlin, 1997). House of Pain, Snow, and Vanilla Ice were three successful White artists during the early 1990s who appropriated hip-hop musical styles, and the three were used as symbols of identity to represent an inauthentic whiteness.

It should be noted that explicit anti-White sentiments are rarely made in hip-hop. Instead, pro-Black statements are more typical. For instance, the lyrics of Common's (1994) song, "In My Own World," include: "I love Black thighs, you sisters better realize/The real hair and real eyes get real guys." Here, authenticity is clearly identified with having Black traits (i.e., "real hair and real eyes"), and the "real guys" Common talks about are implicitly Black like him. Ice Cube has occasionally said that, when he speaks, he is not talking to White America. During an interview, Ice Cube explained this statement by saying that he has no problem with White people, but his messages are directed toward a Black audience (hooks, 1994). By disassociating oneself from "blackness," a hip-hop artist opens himself or herself to charges of selling out.

Political-Economic Dimension (Underground vs. Commercial)
There are many different methods of selling out. One significant way falls within the political-economic dimension, which addresses the topic of commercial success versus underground or street credibility. One significant kind of sell-out is going "commercial," that is, the distancing of an artist's music and persona from an independently owned network of distribution (the underground) and repositioning oneself within a music business culture dominated by the big five multinational corporations that control the U.S. music industry. There are other distinctions, such as the radio and MTV (which represent the commercial) versus 12-inch singles and hip-hop clubs (which represent the underground). The latter, 12-inch singles and hip-hop clubs, are media that can be used to disseminate hip-hop music locally by avoiding mainstream mass media channels such as the radio and MTV. In an interview with the Hieroglyphics in *Urb*, group member Casual said a previous group he was in was "never about making hits." Casual continued, "We were about making real underground hip-hop" (Tai, 1997, p. 58). Another hip-hop newsgroup writer drew an overt link between authenticity and independence when he stated, "Newsgroups aren't corporate owned, thus, it's 'keepin' it real'" (Carlton, 1997).

Popular award shows are another mainstream genre that is despised by hip-hop community members. For instance, Tupac (1994) raps in his song, "I Don't Give a Fuck," "The Grammy's and the American Music shows pimp us like hoes/ They got dough but they hate us though/You better keep your mind on the real shit/And fuck trying to get with these crooked ass hypocrites."

Being "true" is another common word used in authenticity claims. The following excerpt from the letters to the editor section of the hip-hop magazine, *The Source,* is an example of this. In one letter, Cronic Jhonez (1997) is angry that *The Source* did a cover story on the commercially successful hip-hop artist Puff Daddy. Chronic Jhonez (1997) wrote, "I can't believe [Puff Daddy] said he loved Hammer.

. . . What true hip-hop fan had any love for Hammer? I guess he should love Hammer, he paved Puffy's way for exploiting hip-hop" (p. 18). My corpus of authenticity discourse is loaded with broadsides against mainstream or commercialized artists whose music is played on television or the radio—those who make "hits." Real, underground hip-hop is defined in opposition to these symbols of identity that represent inauthenticity.

Gender-Sexual Dimension (Hard vs. Soft)

Selling out is also associated with being soft, as opposed to hard. Within the context of hip-hop, these oppositional terms are very clearly gender-specific, with soft representing feminine attributes and hard representing masculine attributes. This type of discourse, which falls within the gender-sexual dimension, directly comments on either one's gender or sexual orientation. An artist who has been repeatedly criticized for selling out is LL Cool J because he has made many love songs that attracted a large female audience, he sells millions of records, and he has incorporated pop styles into his hip-hop music. In the opinion of a hip-hop newsgroup writer, LL Cool J's "soft ass song sucks big time. How 'bout keeping it real?!?" (Driss, 1997). In Canibus's (1997) song, "2nd Round Knockout," he disrespected LL Cool J by claiming, "99% of your fans wear high heels." The group 40 Thevz (1997) began their song, "Mad Doggin" by saying, "I got my real niggaz in the house/Some real motherfuckin' men."

Within hip-hop, being a real man doesn't merely entail having the proper sex organ; it means acting in a masculine manner. Many hip-hop community members have observed that, for various reasons, hip-hop is a male-dominated arena, and it can be overtly homophobic, as a couple writers for *The Source* openly acknowledged (Byers, 1997; Hardy, 1997). To claim one is a real man, one is defining himself not just in terms of gender, but also sexuality, that is, not being a "pussy" or a "faggot." For instance, Tupac (1994) raps in "Heartz of Men," "Now me and Quik gonna show you niggas what it's like on this side/The real side/Now, on this ride there's gonna be some real motherfuckers/and there's gonna be some pussies." In Tupac's lyrics, the Canibus song, and the hip-hop newsgroup writer Driss (1997), there is a clear demarcation between masculinity and femininity, as well as between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Tupac explicitly contrasts being real against those who are "pussies," that is, those whom he labels as feminine.

Social-Locational Dimension (the Street vs. the Suburbs)

Social location refers to the community with which a hip-hop artist and fan identifies himself or herself. Often artists and fans play with the symbols associated with White-dominated U.S. suburbia. They contrast them with a very specific and idealized community that is located in African American-dominated inner cities, a social location that is often referred to within hip-hop as "the street." For many, keepin' it real means not disassociating oneself from the community from which one came—the street. Moreover, it means emphasizing one's ties to the community (which partially explains why so many hip-hop artists mention the name of their neighborhood in their songs). A hip-hop newsgroup posting stated that hip-hop artist Master P is "keepin' it real and not forgetting where he's coming from"

(BTP300, 1997). Rass Kass (personal communication, December 11, 1997) told me, "For me, the most important thing is the street. That's what I make my shit for and to do anything else would be fake." The Wu-Tang Clan, another newsgroup member asserted, "keep it real just like in da streets" (QueenB2986, 1997). The Black Moon (1993) song, "Shit Iz Real," contains multiple invocations of authenticity. In this song, the MCs (i.e., rappers) rail against those "who fake real," that is, feign authenticity when they do not have the right to make that claim. The group claims that "Bucktown," where they come from, "is real."

If hip-hop artists are perceived as distancing themselves from their roots, they are considered a sell-out. Consequently, many successful artists are defensive when the sell-out charge is leveled against them. The charge is tightly wrapped up in claims of authenticity. This partially explains why DJ Muggs became so agitated when I brought up the phrase keepin' it real. In the song, "H.I.P.H.O.P.," KRS-ONE (1997) raps, "Dead, two in the head before some A&R can tell me/I must give up the street so that the record company can sell me." Here, KRS-ONE is saying, essentially, that he wouldn't be caught dead allowing a record label employee telling him to disassociate himself from the urban, largely African American communities that KRS-ONE identifies with so that a company can sell his music.

In the song,, "I Ain't Mad at Cha," Tupac (1996) answered charges that his change in social location diluted his authenticity. "So many questions, and they ask me if I'm still down/I moved up out of the ghetto, so I ain't real now?" (Tupac, 1996). In these lyrics, there is a direct link that Tupac drew between moving away from his community and being real (though, in his case, he denied it is true).

Hip-hop artists are often considered sellouts when they distance themselves from their community and sell records primarily to suburban kids, or "teenie boppers [sic]," as one hip-hop newsgroup writer called them (Wright, 1997). "I don't make music for the teeny-boppers [sic]/the coppers, and proper bourge[oisie]," Del the Funky Homosapien (1997) raps in "Help Me Out." In this song, Del aligns himself against the inauthentic, bourgeois teenyboppers who purchase hip-hop music in the suburbs and, in the next verse, he positions himself within the authentic underground. In the discourse that falls within the semantic dimension of social location, claims of authenticity are often negatively defined against the symbols of identity that represent suburbia. Further, authenticity is positively defined by affiliating oneself with the street.

Cultural Dimension (the Old School vs. the Mainstream)
The cultural dimension encompasses the discourse that addresses hip-hop's status as a culture that has deep and resonating traditions, rather than as a commodity. Often this discourse revolves around discussions of what is pure and polluted culture or, respectively, authentic and inauthentic culture. Busta Rhymes (1996) stated in *The Coming* that hip-hop is "a way to live/It's a culture." The discourse of hip-hop fans, critics, and artists contains multiple references to the early days of hip-hop culture—what is commonly referred to as "the old school" or, occasionally, "back in the day." Back in the day is a somewhat romantic reference to a time before hip-hop music became popular. The old school refers to a more close-knit community of break dancers, DJs, MCs, and graffiti artists who helped nurture and

develop hip-hop as a culture, and who were not necessarily concerned with making money.

Mixmaster Mike, of the Beastie Boys and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, told me that people do not have the right to make claims about what is real hip-hop "unless they were brought up into hip-hop like way back in the day. If they know their history between watching *Wild Style* and all that then they'll know what real hip-hop is. . . . If they just base it upon hip-hop today, what's being played on the radio, then they won't know what real hip-hop is" (Mixmaster Mike, personal communication, November 10, 1997). Invisibl Skratch Piklz member Q-bert made a similar reference to "back in the day," when he blamed the decline of the "experimentalism" that was associated with the old school on commercialism during an interview with me (Q-Bert, personal communication, November 14, 1997). Guru, of the hip-hop group Gang Starr, similarly told me that "you've got to understand hip-hop's past and understand it as a cultural tradition rather than treat it as merely a product. And you have a lot of that happening nowadays, treating hip-hop as a product" (Guru, personal communication, December 1, 1997). On a hip-hop newsgroup post, someone voiced a similar concern: "Young people nowadays think that the REAL hip-hop is what they hear in the radios or what they see on MTV. What they don't know is that it is a culture" (DJ Brian G, 1997). Another newsgroup writer asked, "Who in rap is sticking closest to the roots of hip-hop???" (DJ AMF, 1997). In a discussion about the old school, a newsgroup writer stated that "we just want to keep it real, like it was in the dopest hip-hop movies of back in the day . . . i.e., *Wild Style*" (NeonEPee, 1997).

For one to be able to make a claim of authenticity, one has to know the culture from which hip-hop comes. Thus, by identifying the old school and back in the day as a period when a pure hip-hop culture existed, hip-hop community members invoke an authentic past that stabilizes the present.

Contesting the notion of authenticity within hip-hop culture. Invocations of authenticity are not used by all members of the hip-hop community. Further, the use of keepin' it real and other such authenticity claims are openly contested by some. By looking at who contests or resists the use of authenticity claims, we can get a better understanding of what is at stake in hip-hop culture. DJ Muggs hates the phrase, keepin' it real, at least partially because his multiplatinum group, Cypress Hill, has been criticized for selling out by becoming popular with a largely White suburban audience. Another person accused of selling out is Will Smith, known earlier in his career as "The Fresh Prince." Smith began as a popular rapper. He then became a well-known actor-comedian with his own television show who, by 1997, had become a bonafide movie star (Rodriguez, 1997). He has been lambasted by hip-hop community members because of his success among White audiences, and is, according to one letter writer in *The Source*, a "fake MC" (Zinc-NE, 1997, p. 18).

In 1997, Smith released *Big Willie Style*, his first album since becoming a movie star. It was obvious Smith was conscious of the criticisms that have been leveled against him, because *Big Willie Style* contained satirical skits that involved a fictional reporter named Keith B. Real (from the fictional magazine, *Keepin' It Real*) who follows Smith around, asking him accusatory questions and calling him a

"big-time bourge[oisie] Hollywood sell out." In *Big Willie Style*, Keith B. Real is made to sound like a fool because he asks silly questions that are parodies of types of authenticity claims made within the hip-hop community. In other words, the skits on Smith's album are used to undermine the value of making authenticity claims within hip-hop.

Similarly, a self-identified Black, middle-class, hip-hop newsgroup writer pointed out that many artists are dismissed by people in the hip-hop community because "they're not 'street' enough" (Maverick, 1997). This writer continued, "Why is everyone always defining what elements of culture, particularly Black Culture, are? It seems that we all subconsciously subscribe to the 'keep it real' mentality— some things are Black enough, and others don't seem to measure up to some definition of Blackness" (Maverick, 1997). Those who question or resist the use of authenticity claims tend to be located in opposition to what is deemed authentic by the most vocal hip-hop community members. They are characterized as mainstream, commercial, White suburbs.

Six Semantic Dimensions Summarized

These six dimensions of meaning revolve around different, and relatively specific, cultural terms. However, they are also deeply intertwined. When the identity talk is organized within the six semantic dimensions inductively derived from the discourse studied, it can provide a way of understanding claims of authenticity as drawing upon this culture's most important symbols in ways that attempt to preserve its identity.

Using the native terms I selected to represent the contrastive symbols I identified, a more explicit definition of authenticity in hip-hop can be formed. Being authentic, or keepin' it real, means staying true to yourself (by identifying oneself as both hard and Black), representing the underground and the street, and remembering hip-hop's cultural legacy, which is the old school. To be inauthentic, or fake, means being soft, following mass trends by listening to commercial rap music, and identifying oneself with White, mainstream culture that is geographically located in the suburbs. During a discussion with me about "real" hip-hop, MC Eiht used many of the native terms used within the semantic dimensions I identified.

> *Real, underground* hip-hop is *staying true to what you have always done* and not trying to go *mainstream* or *Top-40* or *Top-20* on *the radio* just to sell records or get your face on *MTV* or be on the Lollapalooza tour. I think being *underground* is just making records that the people on *the street* appeal to. Not to win an award on the *American Music Awards* or a *Grammy* or a *Billboard Music Award*. It's just a fact that you make the music that people on *the street* want to listen to. (Eiht, personal communication, November 20, 1997, emphasis added)

Now I will return to my questions surrounding the nature of authenticity claims I asked earlier in this article. Authenticity may be invoked (in everyday talk, song

lyrics, and during my interviews) consciously and strategically, or it may be incorporated in a seemingly random fashion. Regardless, this does not reduce keepin' it real to "just a saying." Even when authenticity is invoked without context, it works as a continuous reminder that hip-hop culture *is* threatened with assimilation. Just as varying styles of personal address are not always consciously used in conversations to solidify group identity formations, they function to do the same thing nonetheless (Carbaugh, 1996). By invoking authenticity, one implicitly or explicitly makes appeals that highlight the importance of particular conceptions of individualism, race, economic activity, gender and sexuality, politics of place, and cultural heritage. These are key symbols in hip-hop cultural discourse. As I discussed in the method section, these semantic dimensions emerged by looking at what key cultural symbols authenticity claims are played off.

Drawing from my discussions of Will Smith and DJ Muggs, invocations of authenticity are often contested by those whose identities are primarily constituted of elements that authenticity is defined against: suburban Blacks, White fans or artists, feminine women, artists who sold millions of records, and the like. The last question I asked—how do they resolve the contradiction of being both outside the mainstream U.S. and very much inside it?—provides an entry point into the last section, in which I more broadly discuss hip-hop as one of many cultures and subcultures threatened with assimilation.

Hip-Hop Culture and Other Cultures Threatened With Assimilation

The multiple invocations of authenticity made by hip-hop community members are a direct and conscious reaction to the threat of the assimilation and the colonization of this self-identified, resistive subculture. Authenticity claims are a way of establishing in-group/out-group distinctions. Therefore, by invoking authenticity, one is affirming that, even though hip-hop music was the top-selling music format in 1998, hip-hop culture's core remains pure and relatively untouched by mainstream U.S. culture. Hip-hop can balance large sales and mainstream success with a carefully constructed authentic self. By organizing the expressions used in hip-hop authenticity discourse into semantic dimensions, identity talk can be understood as structured, meaningful, and a way of comprehending central elements of hip-hop culture from a native's point of view. When hip-hop community members disparage inauthentic symbols of identity and valorize authentic symbols of identity, they implicate themselves in a larger cultural logic shared by other cultures and subcultures threatened with assimilation.

In a study of another self-consciously rebellious subculture that centers around zine-making, Duncombe (1997) observed that authenticity was invoked by community members to distinguish themselves from the mainstream culture that threatened to absorb them. Duncombe (1997) stated, "the authentic self that zinesters labor to assemble is often reliant upon the inauthentic culture from which they are trying to flee" (p. 42). That inauthentic culture included suburban life, conformity, and corporate capitalism. The British "rave" subcultures that Thornton (1996) studied used authenticity in a similar way. Thornton stated, "The social logic of subcul-

tural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't" (p. 105). A vast majority of rave community members, Thornton claimed, used the notion of authenticity to distinguish themselves against what they consider the "mainstream." Thornton demonstrated that participants in rave scenes defined themselves against an inauthentic, feminized, and classed-down mainstream. These are concepts that were used to police the scene's boundaries.

Country, like hip-hop, was transformed from a relatively unprofitable genre that arose from a subculture that was largely dismissed and derided by the mainstream to become a hugely profitable industry. In both cases, this change brought antagonism between those who had previously been inside and the outsiders who came into the musical genre once it became popular and profitable.

As is the case in this study of hip-hop, authenticity is invoked within country music as a referent to a past that is constructed to fit the needs of the present community. Constructions of authenticity center around, among other things, an acknowledgment of a rich cultural heritage, a close connection to its audience, and a genuine expression of one's inner feelings. Peterson (1997) argued that the construction of "authenticity is not random, but is renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity" (p. 220). Authenticity claims and their contestations are a part of a highly charged dialogic conversation that struggles to renegotiate what it means to be a participant in a culture threatened with assimilation.

Quite a lot has been written on the commodification of rock music. Lull (1985) stated that the commodification of punk and new wave music caused its subcultural status to be "subtly removed" (p. 370). Lull (1987) found, in the punk community he studied, that authenticity was valued in the face of punk's commodification. Garofalo (1997) discussed how the counterculture became commodified through the major record labels' appropriation of 1960s antiestablishment rock. Ennis (1992) similarly wrote about corporate control and rock and roll more generally. Frith (1981) identified three components of an "ideology of rock," all of which implicitly centered around the concept of authenticity: First, a musician's career should evolve organically, not in a prefabricated way; second, rock is an expression of a subcultural identity; third, there must be a real connection between the musician and audience. The ideology of rock emerged during a time when rock was contradictorily both big business and at the epicenter of 1960s rebellion. This ideology further distinguished rock from, and legitimized it against, other forms of popular music.

In a study that focuses on hip-hop, the most obvious place to look for another culture threatened with assimilation is African American culture, more generally. Because hip-hop culture is firmly rooted in African American culture, it comes as no surprise that hip-hop's emphasis on authenticity is similarly emphasized by certain members of the African American community. hooks (1992) emphasized the fact that some of the separatism that occurred in African American communities was not necessarily a "knee-jerk essentialism" (p. 270), and the search for an authentic yet essentialized Black culture was a "concrete response to the fear of erasure" (p. 272). Similarly, Lubiano (1996) stated, "Against the constant distor-

tions of Euro-American ethnocentric dismissal and burial of the African American presence, we respond with an insistence on 'setting the record straight,' 'telling the truth,' 'saying it like it is'" (p. 183). Because these distortions have not ceased, Lubiano (1996) argued, there continues to be a preoccupation among African-Americans with how the dominant culture constructs African American-identified cultural forms.

Conclusion

When faced with the very real threat of erasure via misrepresentation by outsiders like Vanilla Ice, major label executives, and out-of-touch advertising agencies, hip-hop community members attempt to protect their culture by distinguishing authentic and inauthentic expression. The sense that hip-hop culture faces the threat of being erased and transformed into something that is undesirable has led to an increasing number of authenticity claims throughout the 1990s, the period directly connected with hip-hop's commercial ascendancy. Semantic dimensions are used to demonstrate how authenticity claims and their meaningfully structured place within a play of discourse can highlight a culture's key symbols as they are employed to maintain a "pure" identity.

In the final section, I identified similar key cultural symbols that were discussed by Duncombe (1997), Thornton (1996), Peterson (1997), and Frith (1981). These symbols include identifying oneself against suburbia and corporate culture, and a connection to a community and rich cultural heritage. The specific semantic dimensions developed in this paper cannot be generalized beyond hip-hop. However, the method used to derive this information can be used to study other cultures and subcultures threatened with erasure, assimilation, or both, to understand how these cultures similarly employ authenticity to maintain their identity.

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