"That's hip-hop to me!": Race, space, and temporal logics of authenticity in independent cultural production

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A B S T R A C T

In producer-saturated fields such as popular music scenes, claims to and judgments of authenticity are ever salient in contention for limited resources and prestige. By mobilizing meanings attributed to sounds, objects, individuals, and ideas associated with the past, present, or future of a genre, cultural producer groups are distinguished from each other and unified within themselves. Observing the dynamics of these distinctions allows us to ascertain how artistic professionals think of themselves and others, as well as begin to unpack the role that authenticity work may play in the practice and warrants of cultural production. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews from an independent rap scene in the Midwest, I demonstrate how artists draw on collective memory, modern convention, and projected futures to form competing, temporally rooted logics of authenticity by which to advance their positions.

1. Introduction

In an upper middle class suburb 20 min outside of a mid-sized Midwestern city, bass heavy hip-hop instrumentals drown out the sound of Victor's children playing in his back yard. Posters of 1990s rappers line the walls around him. Like most of his neighbors, Victor is a white, mid-to-late 30s father and husband. Unlike those neighbors, he is a rapper and hip-hop producer with his own record label,

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Institute Recordings. Today, he prepares his setlist to perform at an upcoming local festival. Wade, the PR Director for Institute, will arrive soon to help.

Ten miles away, Lex, a prominent member of a hip-hop collective called The Syndicate, sits with his publicist in a city coffee shop. They discuss plans for promoting Lex's new album, as well as the prospect of an appearance on the BET television network. Lex took two buses here this morning from his inner city home. Unlike Victor, he lives in a poverty-stricken neighborhood near childhood friends. Like many of them, he is a single, black man in his late 20s, residing near where he grew up. Some are rappers as well, but he is considered the most successful.

Downtown, eight miles from the coffee shop, Logan locks up his recording studio, clutching his sketchbook and laptop. The late 20s, black rapper, music producer, and designer is leaving for a gentrified strip farther south to meet Hank, a white rapper of the same age, who lives in that area. Logan spends much of his time there, experiencing its transition from impoverished neighborhood to prominent art and music scene. The pair will discuss a concert celebrating the one-year anniversary of their record label, Sword and Shield Records.

Much like these rappers occupy distinct geographic spaces and demographic categories, they approach cultural production in markedly different ways. In a major city, it is not surprising that independent artists – i.e., those peripheral to the mainstream music industry (Oware, 2014) – would segregate along different criteria. Frequently, artists distinguish and affiliate via conceptions of authenticity. Although past work suggests that rappers foreground racial and spatial logics (Forman, 2000), this study advances the concept of *temporal* logics of authenticity. Race and space remain integral, yet temporality often mitigates or circumvents demographic distinctions in competitions for limited resources and prestige in the local field of production. As the rappers described above plan their upcoming performances, promotions, and recording, these logics guide their career strategies, as well as the company they keep.

It has been suggested that when claims to authenticity are salient, artists collectively construct agreed upon ideals (Grazian, 2003; Peterson, 1997); however, I argue that artists mobilize *competing* conceptions of authenticity strategically and ideologically to frame themselves and their music in relation to the history, conventions, or prospects of their field. They do so not to legitimize the genre as a whole (Elafros, 2013; McLeod, 1999), but to vindicate and distinguish their own work within it. Just as entire genres compete for exposure (Mark, 1998), artists within them compete for local and national industry resources. The present research turns towards hip-hop artists (alternately, rappers or MCs) in the Midwestern US. For rappers, the possibility of fame and fortune, as well as the dissemination of cheaper, more efficient technologies, has resulted in persistent competition. In such an environment, claims to authenticity – or "aesthetic legitimacy" (Elafros, 2013) – are quite marketable (Grazian, 2003).

Popular portrayals of rappers suggest that they seek "street credibility" by evoking particular images of struggle founded on black identity and urban experience (Kelley, 1996; Ogbar, 2007). Though this was true for many popular rappers in the 1990s resisting the genre's assimilation into the mainstream (McLeod, 1999), many of today's rappers emphasize forms of authenticity rooted in different characteristics of the music itself. The racial, ethnic, and class-based imageries for which the genre has been recognized still hold power, but the existence and importance of temporal distinctions of authenticity is absent in prevailing theory.

This paper presents a typology of temporal logics of authenticity derived from the conceptions of three groups of cultural producers. The following section will examine current sociological understandings of authenticity useful in understanding these temporal distinctions. Then, following a discussion of methods, I will detail how different groups of artists mobilize temporality in social processes of authentication, or "authenticity work" (Peterson, 2005). Some collectively construct "old-school" authenticity – emphasizing aesthetic styles of 90s and early 2000s hip-hop while shunning current conventions. Others adhere to current trends, legitimizing modern genre conventions which grant them accessibility and greater promotional and distributional outlets (Becker, 1982). Finally, aspirations or "imagined futures" (Frye, 2012) influence others to eschew current conventions while creating what they envision will be conventional in the future. The ways that these three groups distance themselves (or not) from conventional or traditional aesthetics guide their divergent conceptions of authenticity.