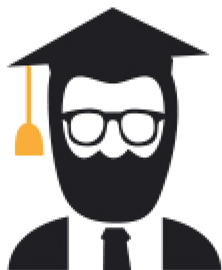
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# True School: Situational Authenticity in Chicago's Hip-Hop Underground

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**Abstract**

How do outsiders negotiate participation within a subculture when they are deemed inauthentic by that subculture's insiders? To explore this question, I examine the underground hip-hop scene in Chicago. The insiders are black and Latino, male rappers from the city's urban core. The outsiders are white, female, and/or suburban rappers, who want to participate in hip-hop culture, but are deemed inauthentic by insiders. I demonstrate how, through cultural practices and a rhetoric of authenticity, the conditions that govern 'realness' and 'fakeness' are continually reshaped, on the basis of context. Exploring how this boundary work is utilized to create, maintain, and occasionally traverse race, gender, and class-based cultural boundaries, I underscore the flexible and varied uses of the authentic, a conceptual framework I label situational authenticity.

**Keywords**

authenticity, boundaries, class, gender, hip-hop, identity, race, rappers, subcultures

## Introduction

The Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago – where blacks and Latinos make up 95.7 percent of the population – is home to one of Chicago's largest Puerto Rican communities. Tonight, I am attending a rap concert in Humboldt Park; the audience and performers are almost exclusively Puerto Rican. An exception is Nexxus, a young, black rapper who resides in one of Chicago's most crime-ridden housing complexes. Nexxus is not a commercial rapper: his lyrics are progressive, militant, and hard-hitting, tackling social issues such as poverty and police brutality. He is a skilled wordsmith and a supremely confident showman. Yet, his performance is met with muttered jeers and a smattering of polite applause. Nexxus' experience underscores the limitations of current theories about authenticity.

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This article examines an underground (non-commercial) hip-hop scene. The scene comprises various people who have few, if any, ties to the corporate infrastructure of the music business, and includes musicians, DJs, dancers, promoters, nightclub proprietors, record company entrepreneurs, music and clothing store owners, CD manufacturers, and more. Here, I highlight one element, the musicians, known as rappers or masters of ceremony (MCs). Early research on rappers primarily focused on rap music as an urban, black, male youth culture (Rose, 1994; Wimsatt, 1994), yet more recent studies find that hip-hop culture is highly diverse (Bennett, 2001; Chang, 2005; Condry, 2006). As hip-hop culture continues to be synonymous with youth culture, rap-music scenes are increasingly heterogeneous, including a rising number of female and non-black rappers. A growing body of research examines hip-hop in these contexts: whites (Kitwana, 2005; Maxwell, 2003; Nayak, 2003), Latinos (Flores, 2000), and females (Keyes, 2000; Pough, 2004). I contribute to this literature by examining the negotiation of authenticity by white, female, and suburban rappers.

One of hip-hop's cradles, Chicago offers a unique perspective not found in previous studies of local hip-hop scenes. Local rap-music scenes in New York and Los Angeles have been thoroughly examined, but few major studies to date explore hip-hop culture in Chicago, the third most populous city in the United States. Chicago is globally recognized for its blues scene (Grazian, 2003), and its rap music has slowly become a cultural force, as denizens such as Kanye West, Twista, Lupe Fiasco, and Common have earned international acclaim. Studies of local rap-music scenes outside the US tend to focus on the global dissemination of hip-hop culture and 'glocal' uses of hip-hop culture within racially homogeneous settings (Bennett, 2004; Maxwell, 2003; Nayak, 2003). This study examines how cultural practices and a rhetoric of authenticity – how rappers describe what is 'real' and 'fake' – are used to navigate cultural boundaries. In doing so, I add to the growing body of literature on authenticity by viewing it as a set of cultural practices and rhetorical devices, used situationally to create, maintain, and occasionally traverse these boundaries.

Chicago's diverse ethnic mix (31.3 percent white, 36.4 percent black, 26 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 4.3 percent Asian, according to the 2000 Census) makes it an ideal setting for this study, a contrast to European and Australian studies of youth subcultures that take place 'in socio-cultural contexts where there is no established black population' (Bennett, 2001: 99). European and Australian audiences consist primarily of white cultural appropriators who borrow from black, male, urban, American culture. Conversely, black Americans often profess a unique relationship to hip-hop culture – black rappers in this study professed to be the culture's direct inheritors, a claim echoed by Latinos as well. In Chicago, where black and Latino concert-goers generally equal or outnumber whites at hip-hop shows, white rappers find themselves appropriating black culture 'in settings where a prominent [non-white] population serves as continual point of reference for such appropriations' (Bennett, 2001: 99). White rappers in this study face the prospect of being judged directly by those who believe themselves to be the true, authentic purveyors of hip-hop culture.

This project was fueled by a single question: How do hip-hop outsiders – whites, females, and suburbanites – create and maintain authentic identities when they are deemed inauthentic by insiders, black and Latino males from the city? The term

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'authenticity' appears frequently in the culture literature, but I unpack the concept and examine the actual social processes at work. The notion of work is important: Outsiders actively strive to create and maintain authenticity, because it cannot – as per the normative conditions of hip-hop culture – be granted without question or scrutiny. When white rapper T Scar tells me, 'Hip hop isn't about race, it's about being skilled', he uses situational authenticity: he downplays a relatively fixed condition of authenticity (race) and emphasizes an interpretive condition (skills). This claim may or may not be accepted by insiders, depending on context. Outsiders employ a variety of strategies designed to surmount cultural boundaries, and in certain contexts these claims are accepted by insiders. When this occurs, there is a boundary shift, whereby the outsider is deemed authentic, however briefly. Over time, these minor boundary shifts can lead to larger cultural changes. Examining authenticity in a contextual manner offers a new perspective not found in previous studies, underscoring the dynamic interplay between rhetoric, cultural practices, and cultural boundaries.

The paper begins with a literature review that includes key studies of youth and authenticity, including explorations in the punk (Hebdige, 1979), blues (Grazian, 2003), dance club (Thornton, 1996), and rap (Bennett, 2004; Maxwell, 2003; McLeod, 1999) music subcultures. What these studies do not account for, however, is that despite the seemingly rigid conditions of authenticity, outsiders find meaningful ways to participate. This is followed by a brief account of my methods. I propose a new conceptual framework for understanding authenticity, situational authenticity, which explains more thoroughly than current models how these socially constructed processes operate. I then demonstrate how situational authenticity is utilized by three groups of outsiders – whites, females, and suburbanites – to create, maintain, and sometimes cross cultural boundaries. I conclude by returning to my original question and considering the implications of this study.

## Literature Review

A boundary is a socially constructed barrier that differentiates various groups of people. Cerulo (1997: 394–5) notes that boundaries 'create distinctions, establish hierarchies, and renegotiate rules of inclusion'. Lamont and Molnar (2002: 168) assert that boundaries 'generate feelings of similarity and group membership. They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources.' Lamont and Molnar add that boundaries are flexible and contextual, and vary across time and space. In hip-hop culture, authenticity is one of the most salient boundaries – who is and is not 'keeping it real' is of central importance. Bourdieu (1984) notes that it is this fundamental struggle between so-called 'authentic' and 'fake' that determines the value of culture. According to Bourdieu (pp. 250–1), those who consider themselves 'real' and label others 'fake' are merely fulfilling a prescribed role that 'by its very existence, helps to keep the cultural game functioning'.

Research on youth cultures has long been concerned with how authenticity is negotiated by various social groups. Hebdige (1979) explored the appropriation of reggae culture by white teenagers from London, and found that children of West Indian immigrants tried to compensate for their outsider status by adopting elements of Jamaican reggae and black American cultures. These changes were reflected in everything from fashion, to

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speaking tone, to the way one walked. In the 1970s black youth in the UK assumed elements of the Rastafarian aesthetic, which 'stressed the importance of resistance and black identity, and which served to position [blacks] outside the dominant white ideology' (Hebdige, 1979: 43). The solution was to appropriate certain aspects of insider culture to gain entry into the culture's core. This finding held true in the present study: whites adopted aspects of black culture, females adopted aspects of male culture, and suburban rappers adopted elements of urban culture. Hebdige, however, overlooked the fact that this process of appropriation has its limits. People can only take cultural appropriation so far before they risk being labeled fake.

This phenomenon was found in Maxwell's (2003) study of Australian rappers, where outsider status and authenticity came into play. Maxwell asserted that hip-hop insiders demarcated outsiders in order to maintain a sense of insider solidarity. Outsiders were given names such as 'perpetrators' and were deemed inauthentic. The outsiders solved this by defining 'authenticity deriving not from color or race, but from a notion of truthfulness to one's self' (Maxwell, 2003: 161). This is an excellent example of situational authenticity, where the normative cluster of conditions that govern authenticity are reordered. This underscores the flexible nature of the authentic, a phenomenon noted by Grazian in his study of the Chicago blues scene.

Grazian (2003: 13) suggested a sliding scale of authenticity where, for example, a white middle-class suburban bluesman was considered less authentic than a black musician from a poor neighborhood, but more authentic than a Japanese American player from the city. Grazian's scale is useful for determining the norms of blues culture, but the scale classifies and ranks the musicians in a manner that offers little room for movement. Are white blues musicians always less authentic than black bluesmen? Do Japanese blues players consider themselves to be inauthentic? This invokes the primary question posed by this study: How do outsiders participate within a subculture that deems them inauthentic? These questions are not answered by Grazian's model, where one, and only one, form of habitus leads to authenticity, with all others a derivative thereof. Grazian's sliding scale does not account for situations where, for example, an unskilled black South Side musician is deemed less authentic than a highly skilled Latino player from the city. A more complex understanding of these social processes is required.

Bennett (2004: 177) came close to offering such a model, noting that 'the definition of hip-hop culture and its attendant notions of authenticity were constantly being "remade" as hip-hop is appropriated by different groups of young people in cities and regions around the world'. Bennett found that it was easier for white rappers to create authentic identities in Newcastle, where the population was largely white, as compared to more ethnically diverse cities such as London. Even within the same region or city there were competing ideas about what constituted authenticity, which generated a multitude of cultural objects (see Griswold, 2008) and attitudes in response. Unfortunately, Bennett offered little insight on how these differences played out in ethnically diverse areas. Bennett was also largely silent on the issue of gender, noting that females who wish to participate in hip-hop culture face indifference and hostility from males, but doing little to explicate how females negotiate participation in light of this.

In her study of UK club culture, Thornton (1996) examined three overlapping areas of interest: authentic versus real, hip versus mainstream, and the media versus the

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underground. Thornton believed that these distinctions were 'a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass' (Thornton, 1996: 10). Thornton noted that distinctions in taste are based in power relations – there is an implied claim to authority and a presumption of inferiority in others. These distinctions form what Thornton, drawing on Bourdieu, called subcultural capital. As with other studies of hip hop in the UK, Thornton documented a racially homogeneous culture consisting almost solely of whites that says little about ethnically diverse music subcultures. Thornton wrote that while black and white youth cultures demonstrated some overlap in attitudes and musical taste, 'race is still a conspicuous divider' (Thornton, 1996: 7). This contrasts greatly with the present study, which took place in settings often dominated by blacks and Latinos, and where the rhetoric of authenticity frequently centered on race. Moreover, Thornton's clubs were social spaces utilized by equal numbers of males and females, who were there primarily in search of prospective sexual partners. Conversely, the underground hip-hop scene in Chicago is a world dominated by a broad network of males, most of whom have some connection to the scene. While women were generally favored in Thornton's clubland, female rappers in Chicago were often treated with derision or indifference by men.

McLeod (1999) explored how authenticity preserved identity in hip-hop culture. His theory was structured via six dimensions used by hip-hoppers to claim authenticity: (1) staying true to yourself vs. following mass trends; (2) black vs. white; (3) underground vs. commercial; (4) hard vs. soft; (5) street vs. suburbs; and (6) old-school vs. mainstream. McLeod noted that these distinctions helped maintain cultural identity, create in-group/out-group boundaries, and thwart mainstream efforts to dilute the 'pure' core of hip-hop. McLeod briefly discussed those who did not live up to one or more of the six dimensions, rappers who challenged or contested claims of authenticity (even unwittingly) and were generally deemed inauthentic: suburban blacks, white rappers, females, and successful rappers who have 'sold out' to achieve greater popularity. McLeod, however, overlooked that a paragon of authenticity (a black male from the streets who refuses to sell out and is strictly old-school and underground) is considered fake in certain contexts. Again, this underscores the fluid, contextually dependent nature of authenticity.

## Methods

This six-year study utilized traditional qualitative methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, as well as methods drawn from visual sociology. The fieldwork consisted of attending more than 500 live performances, observing home-studio recording sessions, listening to radio broadcasts, and attending poetry slams, rap battles, and breakdance competitions. Additionally, 135 in-depth interviews were conducted. Some 49 (36 percent) of participants self-identified as Latino, 46 (34 percent) as black, 29 (22 percent) as white, and 11 (8 percent) as biracial or multiracial. Six of the subjects were women, reflecting a lack of female participation in hip-hop culture. Participants ranged from 18 to 37 years of age, and the average age was 25 years. About half of the sample consisted of insiders (urban, black or Latino males), the other half outsiders

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(white, suburban, and/or female rappers). All interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and coded.

## Situational Authenticity

There is a normative multiplicity of non-correlated boundary conditions that define an archetypal authentic rapper: a black male from the urban core, who is non-commercial, underground, highly skilled, and true to himself. These boundary conditions include relatively fixed categories such as race and gender, and interpretive categories such as skill level and being true to oneself. Within this normative set of conditions, however, there is some room for variation. While a female rapper cannot change her gender, she can emphasize the more mutable aspects of habitus, such as growing up in a poor neighborhood, in a bid for authenticity. Situational authenticity occurs when a person makes a claim to 'realness' that emphasizes certain categories within the normative cluster of conditions that govern authenticity, while downplaying others. This conceptual framework is not predictive – it cannot explain in advance what will happen in a given situation, owing to the high level of contextual variation, and because there are times when the general conditions are reordered in ways that defy a prescribed pattern of logic. Situational authenticity, however, does explain how and why the hierarchy of normative conditions is reordered within these contexts.

In using situational authenticity, outsiders emphasize interpretive categories and de-emphasize those that are fixed. For example, white suburban rappers place great importance on skills and being true to themselves, but downplay the relevance of race and location – they reorder the normative cluster of conditions to suit their own habitus. This does not negate the white suburban rapper's race or suburban-ness – if anything it reaffirms the normative conditions – but it allows him to shift the emphasis to interpretive categories and demonstrate that he is an exception to the status quo. Outsiders also blur distinctions within fixed categories. For example, a female rapper may adopt a masculine persona to downplay her gender; a white rapper may adopt black urban clothing styles and/or speech patterns to de-emphasize his race. A suburban rapper might describe the similarities between the suburbs and the city in a song. Those who fit multiple outsider categories – a white, female rapper from the suburbs, for example – often employ a combination of these techniques.

Insiders also use situational authenticity, emphasizing fixed categories such as race and gender to preserve the normative cluster of conditions regulating authenticity, and thus protect their insider status. Authenticity, however, is negotiated by both the rapper and the audience, all within a given context. At live performances, for example, the setting, type of venue, audience demographic, and other factors contribute to the ordering of the conditions of authenticity that await the rappers who perform there. At a club that hosts an all-female rap night, the value of being male may be negligible; in fact, being a female rapper might be a claim to authenticity in this setting. At a suburban night club featuring suburban rappers, the importance of being from the city may be of less concern to the audience. This explains why the performance by Nexxus in Humboldt Park failed to win over the Puerto Rican audience – in this context, a fixed category (race) took precedence over interpretive categories, such as skill level, in a way that reordered the

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normative cluster of conditions. Race remained salient, but it was Nexxus' blackness that was problematic in this context – an inversion of the governing belief that black rappers are the most authentic. In this context, being black hindered Nexxus' ability to pull off an authentic performance: Nexxus was rendered an outsider.

Nexxus, however, did not leave the performance believing that he was inauthentic. In the following sections, I demonstrate how situational authenticity is used by three groups of outsiders – whites, females, and suburbanites – to construct genuine identities and participate in hip-hop culture.

## Race-Based Cultural Boundaries

Race-based cultural boundaries served as a key element for analysis in this study, as constructions of 'realness' and 'fakeness' often centered on race. These boundaries helped create race-based in-groups and out-groups, and identified and regulated who should or should not participate. This implies that race functioned as a form of subcultural capital. In the usual scheme of things, being black (or perceived to be) has the highest value, white the lowest. Scholars support these notions, showing how blackness has gained currency in popular culture (Johnson, 2003), and how blackness is the core of hip-hip authenticity (McLeod, 1999). Many insiders in Chicago believed that hip-hop and black culture were synonymous. 'Hip-hop is black culture,' proclaimed Doctor Who, a black MC from the city. 'That doesn't mean that whites aren't allowed. But hip-hop culture is definitely black, and it will always be that way.' Insiders linked notions of hip-hip culture to slavery, the Black Power movement, and the general struggle for civil rights in the US, tethering hip-hop to the chain of black history. By doing so, black rappers in this study emphasized a fixed category (race) as the ultimate arbiter of authenticity. This affirmed their insider status and upheld the existing boundary conditions that govern authenticity. Tied to this is Gramsci's (1971) concept of ideological hegemony, which asserts that elites attempt to maintain power over non-elites through cultural domination.

Insiders rarely made overtly racist statements about whites, and most claimed that color had no bearing on a rapper's authenticity. Skills, they insisted, were the true measure of an MC's value. In his study of Newcastle rappers, Bennett's (2004: 189) interview subjects did not make negative statements about female rappers, but instead spoke in a coded language, suggesting that 'they considered hip hop culture to be an essentially male-oriented pursuit'. Similarly, the non-white rappers in this study spoke in a language that coded whites as inauthentic. For example, Kenny Bogus, a black rapper from the city, discussed a white MC who approached him about working together. 'He actually had some flow, he just didn't have no pain,' Bogus recalled, implying that whites have not experienced enough pain to be as authentic as non-whites. Insiders denigrated whites by drawing upon iconic figures from popular culture such as Vanilla Ice, widely panned as a phony with few legitimate ties to hip-hop culture. Insiders stereotyped whites as wannabes who read a book or saw a movie and became overnight rappers. 'They're becoming caricatures of their own self, that's the problem,' said Urban Po, a black rapper from the South Side of Chicago, when describing white MCs. 'None of them is authentic. It's just not real, it doesn't have that quality, it doesn't feel right.'

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Audiences were skeptical as well. ‘You can see people’s reactions as soon as a white person grabs a mic,’ said black rapper Phillip Morris. ‘They’re kind of giggling or shit like that. It’s unfortunate because it makes it that much harder for people. It’s almost like they have to prove themselves.’ Even white rappers who possessed hip-hop’s linguistic and performative subcultural capital were considered to be ‘different’ in some intangible way. ‘There’s a certain mentality amongst the black community that white people shouldn’t do hip-hop at all,’ Morris said.

Even being perceived as white had negative consequences in Chicago. For example, Alo is Latino, but one would not assume that by looking at him. For all intents and purposes, Alo looks like a ‘white guy’. ‘I get that all the time. I’m fully Latino, but everybody thinks I’m this white dude,’ he said. ‘Motherfuckers will think of you one way and then when they know you, another way. You thought I was a [nerd] before ’cause I was white, now it’s like “I share your struggle.”’ The confusion over Alo’s ethnicity underscores the strength of the normative boundary conditions, whose racial hierarchy places whites at the bottom. As a ‘white’ rapper, Alo was viewed as an inauthentic ‘nerd’; as a Latino rapper, Alo was considered an authentic member of a struggling, oppressed class. Alo has not changed, but the context has, underscoring the fluid nature of the authentic.

White rappers experienced – sometimes painfully – race-based boundaries. Prob Cause talked about the assumptions people made about him when he first began rapping in high school. ‘They see a skinny white guy with goofy pants and a goofy shirt, and they’ll be like, “He’s not a fuckin’ rapper. You white, man, what you doing rapping?”’ The boundary conditions are clear: whites should not rap. These criticisms were especially stinging to white rappers who had worked hard to acquire a high degree of skill. ‘There’s a lot of haters, ignorant people that just don’t know any better. They’re on their own high horse, or they say, “Hip-hop was started by black people, he’s stealing it from us,”’ T Scar said. But this did not preclude whites from believing that they were authentic.

‘True school. I guess like that’s the name for people like myself – white people and non-peoples of minority, non-original hip-hoppers,’ said Bobby Lovelock, a white rapper from the city:

> ’Cause hip-hop was largely black and Latino origins from New York City, started in the early seventies. But there are people like myself who grew up with hip-hop, chose to just embrace it and live with it. And I’ll rep hip-hop as hard as any black person and as hard as any Latino person. And they know that.

Lovelock realizes that he’s not black or Latino, the groups he credits with founding hip-hop, but this does not preclude him from authentically ‘representing’ the culture. In fact, he invents a new category for whites, ‘true school’, a label implying that under certain circumstances white rappers can be considered authentic. In doing so, Lovelock reorders the normative cluster of conditions that govern authenticity, placing emphasis on an interpretive category (his ability to ‘represent’ or be true to himself and the culture), while downplaying the importance of a fixed category (race). By using situational authenticity, Lovelock shows why he is an exception to the norm. Lovelock further blurs the distinction of his whiteness by adopting black urban speech patterns and clothing styles, and immersing himself in the Black Power literature of the 1960s and 1970s. In all of this, as he

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readily admits, Lovelock's whiteness does not go away – it is de-emphasized to the point where he can make a legitimate claim to membership in hip-hop culture.

To some degree these claims were taken seriously by insiders. The sheer number of white rappers in Chicago and their presence on the hip-hop scene implied a degree of consent. Most of the rappers in this study argued that Eminem was fundamental in changing the perception of white rappers. Thus, when claims to authenticity are affirmed by audiences, as demonstrated by the widespread respect for Eminem in hip-hop culture, existing cultural boundaries are altered. Over time, this leads to cultural change, as demonstrated by the increasing acceptance and presence of white rappers in Chicago's hip-hop underground.

## Gender-Based Cultural Boundaries

In this study, constructions of 'realness' and 'fakeness' also centered on gender. These boundaries helped create gender-based in-groups and out-groups, and identified and regulated which genders should and should not participate. The rhetoric of authenticity surrounding gender, and the gender-based boundaries that stemmed from them, suggests that gender functions as a form of subcultural capital in hip-hop culture. Being male affords one status that is not granted to females.

European and Australian research on hip hop gives scant attention to gender, partly because there were few women to observe in those studies. This may be due to the fact that, as Bennett (2004: 189) notes, 'women and girls wishing to become involved in music-making activities continue to be confronted by indifference and hostility from their male peers'. Similarly, relative to men, there were very few female rappers or audience members in Chicago. The lack of female participation and the resilience of this boundary underscore the importance placed on gender in the cluster of conditions that shapes normative notions of authenticity. It also implied some level of male hostility and/or indifference towards female rappers. Whereas male white rappers were able to temper their outsider status via competent displays of subcultural capital and by being forthright about their roots, even highly skilled female rappers had a hard time being viewed as credible. Moreover, rap music in Chicago, as elsewhere, is brimming with hyper-masculine themes and derisive gendered terms such as 'bitch', 'ho', and 'fag'.

Reinforcing these gender-based boundaries, rappers in this study – all but six of them male – made a number of observations about gender that are important to understanding the inner workings of cultural boundaries. Some thought that male rappers were more talented than female MCs, and that females did not rap about 'important' topics. Others believed that men were naturally more rebellious and thus drawn to rap's hard-hitting lyrics and boisterous music, whereas women were timid, shy, and afraid. Some believed that female rappers – like child rappers – were novelty acts who used their gender and looks as a gimmick. It was suggested that females did not write their own rhymes (a charge rarely leveled at men), and that they owed their careers not to talent, but to the casting couch. Others postulated that female rappers had an easier time than men standing out in the male-dominated hip-hop scene. Female rappers were critiqued for being hypersexual and also for not being 'girlie' enough. From this perspective, female MCs were to tread a fine line between being neither too masculine nor too feminine. 'Sexy but

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with class' is how one male rapper described it. These assertions were made by men and women, although men were much more likely to employ sexist rhetoric and/or cultural practices. This demonstrates the hegemonic nature of this boundary – unlike race and class-based boundaries, which were fiercely protected, female rappers were treated mostly with indifference, rather than outright hostility.

Women in this study talked about being discounted solely on the basis of gender. 'People don't take females serious,' MC Heather said. 'It's like a sympathy thing. Oh, she's a lady give her the mic, like I'm a kindergarten student or something.' Others decried the limited roles for women and balked at the notion of having to sexualize themselves. 'Why do we have to sell our asses to get on?' Buck 20 asked. 'What about girl power? Why I gotta show my tushie and shit?' Female rappers also recreated these boundaries. For example, Pinqy Ring believed that:

> Females don't wanna sit there and learn how to write raps, and learn how to do hooks, and learn how to record, and do overdubs, and learn how to perform, and work with the dancers, and learn how to get in the ciphers with all of the guys. It's too hard for them to do.

Conversely, many rappers in this study adopted a 'gender blind' ideology, and males made a number of positive statements about female rappers. Some decried the lack of female participation, linking it to the women's rights movement and the hegemonic patriarchy of the music industry and hip-hop culture. Others gave sociobiological arguments, stating that the genetic and socialization differences between men and women manifested themselves in divergent male and female relationships to hip-hop culture. Some blamed the structure of the music industry, noting that females don't sell urban music unless it's R&B. Still others linked the lack of participation to the historical struggle over civil rights and subjugation of women in general, or attributed the lack of female participation to hip-hop's hyper-masculine culture. In Bennett's (2004) study of the Newcastle hip-hop scene, male respondents spoke about hip-hop in a language that coded it as a distinctly male-centric culture. In Chicago many of the rappers who pledged support for female MCs maintained rhetorical and cultural practices that recreated the very boundaries to which they claimed to be opposed.

Viewing gender-based authenticity as a simple male–female dichotomy, however, is an oversimplification. Boundary work occurs between genders, but within them as well. Drawing on the work of Patricia Hill-Collins, Keyes (2000) proposed a typology that placed female rappers into four categories: Queen Mother (Afrocentric, intellectual matriarch), Sista with Attitude (aggressive, defiant 'bad girl'), Fly Girl (fashionable, hypersexual, independent women), and Lesbian. These categories underscore the limited roles for women in hip-hop culture, but they are useful for understanding how authenticity varies within this context. In Chicago these archetypes were present, but the authenticity afforded to each differed. For example, those who fit the Queen Mother archetype were revered as paragons of authenticity, while those who might be classified as Fly Girls were deemed less authentic. Pinqy Ring gained respect by adopting the Sista with Attitude persona, emphasizing lyrical and performative skills, downplaying her sexuality, and aligning herself with male rappers. 'I've pretty much gotten the respect, because I never really hang out with females,' she said. 'I'm pretty much one of the guys to

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everybody. So they always respected me because I never carried myself in any other way than how I feel they would want to see me.' In this response Pinqy Ring affirmed the existing cluster of conditions that place emphasis on masculinity, but sidestepped this by blurring the male–female gender distinction. She is different from most women because she is 'one of the guys' and an exception to the norm.

Similarly, The Diva Alize, a female in an otherwise all-male rap group, used situational authenticity in her lyrics as a means of countering gender-based stereotypes. In the song 'My Swagger' Alize raps:

> I got my shades on and my fitted cap down low
> Nothing but stilettos, walking it like a pro
> Lookin' so fresh and so clean, got diamonds on the jeans
> Cause everybody knows I'm a go getter fiend
> Addicted to the finer things that life has brought me
> I'm a lion, I'm so defiant
> I'm chilling not compliant
> My position is to overcome the competition.

Here, Alize emphasized traits stereotypically associated with masculinity – competition, aggression, defiance – and called herself a lion, the king of the jungle. She employed a complex rhyme structure that foregrounds her subcultural capital, and rapped alongside two men on the track. Alize did not pretend to be male, but largely downplayed her gender in a bid for authenticity.

Pough (2004) found that black female MCs used semantic inversion and a sexist male rhetoric as a means of female empowerment. Similarly, Fly Girls in Chicago professed that their sexuality was an updated form of feminism. This notion of inverting existing definitions of authenticity was a prominent theme in Chicago. For example, Marcy C was not bothered by use of the word 'bitch' in rap songs:

> I know that I don't identify with the women they're objectifying and that I wouldn't put myself down. So I'm perfectly fine hearing 'Bitch, don't hate' or whatever like that in a club. It doesn't bother me because I've never been in a situation where those lyrics would apply to me.

In this response Marcy C acknowledged and accepted the cluster of conditions that aligns masculinity with authenticity, but then found a way around it – she believed the word did not apply to her. She conceded that this term applied to some women, just not her, another example of how gradations of authenticity occur within gender.

Subcultural capital, or skills, paved the path to credibility, as with race, but the lack of female rappers and audience members in Chicago underscored the resilience of this boundary. Yet, there were times when the existing cluster of conditions was reordered. At a party one night, Marcy C took top place in a rap contest, defeating a prominent male rapper and gaining status and prestige from the audience and her opponent. Marcy C had a transformative moment, a dialogic performance (see Johnson, 2003) where she earned a sense of authenticity, internally and externally. She made claims to authenticity that were accepted by the audience. Marcy's experience implies that authenticity, rather than being wholly fixed for female MCs, is mutable. Under certain circumstances, female

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rappers are able to traverse the cultural boundaries and gain respect, to be considered authentic. Marcy C emphasized her skill as a rapper and downplayed her gender and race. The audience accepted the claim, which led to a dialogic performance where the normative cluster of conditions was altered.

## Class-Based Cultural Boundaries

In this study, constructions of 'realness' and 'fakeness' were often linked to various class indicators. Class distinctions were invoked in the creation, maintenance, and traversing of cultural boundaries. These boundaries helped maintain class-based in-groups and out-groups, and identified and regulated who should and should not participate. The emphasis on class also served to affirm the existing cluster of boundary conditions governing authenticity – affording 'realness' to members of the working and lower classes, and 'fakeness' to those from the middle and upper classes. From this perspective, being a member of a lower-class group served as a form of subcultural capital.

Class proved to be relatively mutable in comparison with other conditions that govern authenticity. This may be because fixed categories such as race and gender are afforded higher value in hip-hop culture, but also because class indicators are more interpretive than others. With class there was more room for subjectivity and thus movement across boundaries. Class also proved to be more complex, largely because of the variation in class indicators invoked by the rappers in this study. Some linked education – a reliable class indicator – to inauthenticity, implying that upper-class MCs were book smart, but not streetwise. Others invoked the concept of work in relation to class. These rappers used the term 'grinding', which equated to working hard and toiling on the streets to achieve success in the music business. This revealed a class-based assumption: that those from the upper classes had been somehow handed their success. According to this line of thinking, lower-class rappers had worked harder and were more dedicated, which rendered them more authentic than those from the upper classes.

Social location also served as a proxy for social class, evoking class distinctions embedded within McLeod's (1999) social-locational dimension of (authentic) streets versus (fake) suburbs. Notions of class were often linked to location in this manner, and many participants believed the city to be imbued with realness and the suburbs to be artificial and sterile. The image of the suburban MC rapping in his parents' basement was contrasted with a street-smart counterpart. The perception was widespread that suburban rappers were wealthy and lived carefree lives. This assumption led to the charge that upper-class rappers did not discuss serious issues and could not rap credibly about street life. Insiders also linked the suburbs with leisure pursuits such as skateboarding, and postulated that suburban rappers didn't spend their days and nights working, and thus had more time to hone their skills. By making fun of or discrediting yuppies from the suburbs, rappers who hailed from Chicago's urban core implied or stated outright that city residents were working-class paragons of authenticity. By emphasizing these class indicators, the insiders upheld the boundary conditions that governed authenticity and affirmed their insider status.

However, rather than conclude that they were inauthentic, Chicago rappers from the upper class and/or suburbs used a class-based rhetoric situationally, reordering

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the normative cluster of conditions to align with their own habitus. For example, some suburban rappers skipped hard-hitting street themes and rhymed explicitly about life in the banal 'burbs. Their songs included lyrics about buying bagels at a corporate coffee chain or taking a trip to the local shopping mall. By rapping about their real-life experiences, these outsiders emphasized an interpretive category (being true to oneself) and downplayed the importance of a non-interpretive category (location). DJ Grimmace, a white upper-middle-class hip-hopper from the suburbs, was quick to admit that he grew up with many advantages that poor people from the inner city do not enjoy. However, he asserted:

> Just because you don't come out of a bad economical situation and have bad luck in life and have bad shit around you doesn't mean you're not a real person. You have just as much right to express your emotion, how you feel about things, whatever personal experiences you have as anybody else. Now, there's a difference if you try to rap about being from the ghetto and experiencing all these things and you haven't. That's a completely different story.

Here, Grimmace emphasizes an interpretive category (being true to oneself) and downplays the importance of a less interpretive category (class). He further blurs the class distinction by pointing out that class is 'arbitrary' because, as he tells it, those who reside in Chicago's urban core have it far better than those living in squalor in Africa. Similarly, others blurred the distinction of the city–suburb boundary by claiming that Chicago's suburbs were microcosms of its urban core. 'Elgin ain't nothing but a mini Chicago really,' suburban-based rapper Jae Lee asserted.

This blurring of boundaries has some basis in reality – viewing class as a strictly urban–suburban dichotomy is an oversimplification. Palen (1995) noted that the changing nature of suburbia (for example, the rising number of under- and lower-class residents in the suburbs) meant that there are plenty of non-whites and non-wealthy people living outside of the urban core. Moreover, Chicago has gentrified in recent years, as whites have streamed back into the city and ethnic minorities have increasingly relocated to inner and outer ring suburbs (Dreier et al., 2005). Coming from the western and southern suburbs of Chicago was a claim to authenticity made by the Chicago rappers who resided in these areas. Moreover, there were parts of Chicago proper – middle- and upper-class neighborhoods full of wealthy whites – that were considered far less authentic than some inner- and outer-ring suburbs. In his song 'Walk With Me' Chicago rapper D.A. Smart rattled off a host of Chicago neighborhoods, including inner-ring suburbs such as Calumet City, while pointedly ignoring wealthy white enclaves such as Lincoln Park that exist near the city's center. This suggests that gradations are at play not accounted for in current models of authenticity which bifurcate authenticity into simplistic dichotomies. Rather than view authenticity as a simple urban–suburban distinction, Chicago insiders distinguished between various suburban locations, as well as parts of the city proper that were – and were not – considered authentic.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I return to the question that inspired this study: How do outsiders construct and maintain authenticity within a culture that deems them inauthentic? They do so by

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reordering the hierarchical cluster of conditions used to govern authenticity, and by placing greater emphasis on interpretive categories, rather than those that are relatively fixed. Often this involves upholding the normative cluster of conditions that govern authenticity, while demonstrating how they are an exception. Furthermore, fixed categories such as race and gender are often blurred by outsiders, which further downplays the importance of these distinctions. Outsiders thus reconfigure the norms of hip-hop culture to suit their own habitus. These claims are then accepted or rejected by audiences, which articulate their own weighting of the cluster of categories in their response. When an outsider's claim is rejected it affirms the normative cluster of conditions; when a claim is accepted, there is potential for cultural change.

This suggests a rethinking of authenticity. Rather than viewing authenticity as a fixed set of norms and standards by which people are judged (Grazian, 2003; McLeod, 1999; Thornton, 1996), a 'series of responses to the "black" characteristics of the hip hop style' (Bennett, 2004: 189), a set of linguistic devices (Smitherman, 1997), or a notion of truth to oneself (Maxwell, 2003), authenticity is situational – what is considered authentic under one set of conditions is not considered authentic under others.

McLeod (1999) wanted to understand how a culture facing assimilation sought to maintain its identity. The present study demonstrates how those assimilating into hip-hop culture also seek to preserve the culture, often using the same symbols, but emphasizing different aspects of them. Blending these insights renders a more complete picture of the dynamic interplay between rhetoric and action that takes place within subcultures. Those threatened with assimilation utilize practices that affirm the status quo. Outsiders who wish to assimilate do much the same thing by demonstrating how they can fit into a culture without altering its purity. By employing situational authenticity, outsiders often uphold the very boundaries that hinder outsider participation, while justifying their own traversal of these boundaries.

This demonstrates how boundaries can be both rigid and malleable at the same time: the cluster of conditions that govern authenticity in hip-hop culture is relatively concretized, agreed upon, and stable, yet the more malleable conditions may be emphasized and the more rigid conditions downplayed. This is why many outsiders constructed identities that were counter to the prevailing norms of authenticity. Considering dynamics such as these has implications for understanding cultures far beyond hip-hop.

Debates over authenticity certainly occur outside hip-hop culture. Some people prefer locally brewed gourmet coffee, while others enjoy its mass-produced counterpart. Some claim that locally owned 'mom & pop' shops are more down to earth than corporate chain stores, which certainly have no shortage of business. Urban hipsters move into neighborhoods that resemble war zones, as they are believed to provide a more genuine experience than the 'plastic' suburbs. Thus, it is not uncommon for people to utilize situational authenticity in their everyday interactions with others. For example, a student does poorly on a test. The teacher thinks 'I am not a bad teacher, she is a poor student' to claim authenticity and preserve occupational identity. Meanwhile, the student inverts this notion in doing much the same thing. Over time, these exchanges not only create and maintain a normative set of conditions, but allow for the construction of an alternate set of conditions. Following Bourdieu (1984), the authentic would cease to exist without its counterpart – there would be no black 'realness' without white 'fakeness'.

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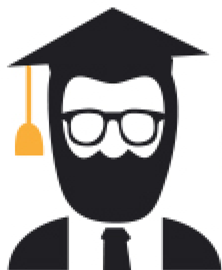
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