

Constructions of authenticity in hip-hop music



The question I will address in my paper is authenticity and the various ways in which authenticity is constructed in hip hop. This essay will argue that the role of hip hop beef is to question and form authenticity narratives: emcees form and maintain their own authenticity through competition and displaying their technical prowess over each other. I will demonstrate this by first looking at the origins of hip hop and how competition was integral to the formation of hip hop and the authenticity narrative. Then, I will look at the different ways authenticity is perceived in the hip hop community and the role authenticity plays in an emcee's career. Using the specific examples of Jay Z' Hot 97 summer jam beef with Nas, I will look at how this feud affected their own authenticity narratives and the possible dangers of beef.

Now recognized as an artform and one of the most popular and profitable genres of music, hip hop began in the largely black and latino community of South Bronx in the midst of chaos, murder, building fires, and poverty in the early seventies. The origins of hip hop can be traced back to when the Jamaican born DJ Kool Herc hosted his first party. Using a completely new technique of DJing called the ' Merry Go Round', DJ Kool Herc would isolate instrumental breaks from records and repeat the loop using two of the same records to create a continuous flow of breakbeat for people to dance too (Williams, 2011, p. 5-6). The emergence of many new DJs, emcees, and competing groups of breakdancers called B Boys would fuel multitudes of battles that would test each others skill in an attempt to outdo the other. Katz (2010, p. 49) explains that " Competition...has always been at the core of hip-hop...It motivated them, gave them direction, and structured their daily lives. ... One central vehicle channeled their competitive spirit: the

battle. In battle, reputations were made and unmade, territory gained and lost, equipment tested and bested, techniques introduced and refined". These battles tested the skills of emcees and DJs alike and pushed hip hop to new levels of sonic innovation through the constant challenging of opponents, the constant threat of being bested, and the desire to win. Everything could either be lost or won in a single battle because your ability to rock a crowd was crucial to your reputation and your worth as a performer. Veteran rap artist Jay Z (2010, p. 20) describes this survival of the fittest mentality in battling in hip-hop as "...the very real competitive energies on the street...that desire to compete — and to win — was the engine of everything we did. And we learned how to compete the hard way". The essential desire to win and compete is at the basis of every emcees narrative because just like the battles in the early years of hip hop, an entire person's reputation or authenticity could be questioned in a single battle.

The role of authenticity is central to hip hop because it is the social currency upon which emcees are deemed 'real' or 'fake'. Since the idea of who is real and who is not is hard to define, there is no specific criteria for what makes an emcee authentic (Okine, 2012, p. 19-20). However, a common way emcees form their authenticity is to build their image around coming from the struggle. This struggle narrative is a reflection of the harsh realities of being a minority in inner cities where the war on drugs led to police officers targeting young black men and incarcerating them at a rate four times higher than the world average. Minorities were being locked up at a rate far higher than white people with latinos being twice as likely and black people being six times as likely to be incarcerated usually for similar non-violent

crimes relating to drug possession and distribution (Hartney, 2006, p. 1-8). In a way, the struggle narrative is the story that hip hop was born to tell because as Jay Z (2010, p. 36) states "...it is the ultimate metaphor for the basic human struggles: the struggle to survive and resist, the struggle to win and make sense of it all". The struggle narrative is a narrative that is deeply ingrained in hip hop because hip hop originated as a black art form out of inner cities that were declining from government neglect, violence, and drug addiction. Even from the beginning, hip hop has always had a strong aversion to privilege and whiteness because it goes against the origins of hip hop and struggling to win and overcome. Vanilla Ice's career is a perfect example of how important the idea of coming from the struggle is to an emcee's career. When it came out that the supposedly 'ghetto raised and street smart' one hit wonder behind "Ice Ice Baby" was actually just a privileged white kid from a Dallas suburb, hip hop audiences turned on Vanilla Ice because hip hop fans expect a certain transparency of an emcee's lyrics to match their lived experience and geographic background (Fraley, 2009, p. 43). Vanilla Ice's deliberate falsification of his background further proves the importance of privilege and authenticity in hip hop: Vanilla Ice knew he would not be accepted by the hip hop community because of his whiteness and privilege, so he faked a rags to riches authenticity narrative to try and gain acceptance. In the thesis *Why Do Rappers Lie in 85 Percent of Their Rhymes*, Mueller explains that an emcee's authenticity has to fit the larger narrative of hip-hop in order to appear real as part of the hip hop community and thus authentic within itself (Muller, 2015, p. 4-5). The idea of coming from the struggle is not just an authenticity narrative, it is a connection to the deep racial inequalities black americans face and continue

to face as well as a celebration of black art. Therefore, authenticity in hip hop can best be described as commitment and respect to the origins of hip hop tradition and narrative as well as representing oneself in the truest form.

The competitive energy and battling culture of early hip hop can be seen as a blueprint to every modern rap feud or 'beef'. While early emcees and DJs competed to rock crowds and outshow their competition, the emergence of rap beef would shift the focus from winning battles to outwitting their opponent and shattering their rivals authenticity narrative. This idea of tearing down someone else's sense of self is rooted in the idea that an emcee wins when they totally dominate and humiliate the loser. An emcee proves and elevates their own status through defaming the rival while also backing up his own realness and credibility (Fitzpatrick, 2005, p. 20). An example of this is the famous feud between New York rappers Nas and Jay Z. The culmination of trading subliminal disses over tracks for a few years resulted in Jay Z publically dissing Nas. When he played a portion of his diss track "Takeover" at the Hot 97 Summer Jam concert, he ignited one of the most brutal and publicized beefs in hip hop history. In the song "Takeover", Jay Z asserts his dominance over both rival emcees by questioning his authenticity narrative and image as a thug:

It's only so long fake thugs can pretend Nigga/ you ain't live it, you witnessed it from your folks' pad/ I showed you first Tec on tour with Large Professor ...Four albums in ten years, nigga? I can divide That's one every let's say two/ Two of them shits was doo. One was naaah, the other was Illmatic/ That's a one hot album every ten year average...Don't be the next contestant on that Summer Jam screen Because you know who did you know

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what with you know who/ Let's just keep that between me and you...

(Jay Z, 2001)

Jay Z is effectively trying to humiliate Nas for the audience in order to twist their perception of Nas's authenticity narrative through calling him a supposed fake thug and further cementing his realness by describing how he was the first one to show Nas a gun on tour. This image of Jay Z as a father figure is made to equate him to child, and the final line alluding to Jay Z having sex with Nas's baby momma is a cruel and misogynistic way of further trying to humiliate Nas and his authenticity narrative. The first impression "Takeover" leaves is that Jay Z, a superior rapper and commercially successful emcee, is reinforcing and maintaining his authenticity narrative by displaying his technical prowess over Nas, a weakened opponent declining in success after the height of his influential debut album *Illmatic*. However, Nas, motivated by the desire to compete and win, fires back the diss track "Ether" which aims to refute Jay Z's claims and re-establish himself as the dominant emcee:

In '88, you was gettin' chased through your building/ Callin' my crib and I ain't even give you my numbers/ All I did was give you a style for you to run with/ Smilin' in my face, glad to break bread with the god/ Wearin' Jaz chains, no Tec's, no cash, no cars/ No jail bars, Jigga, no pies, no cakes/ Just Hawaiian shirts hanging with Little Chase/ You a fan, a fake, a pussy, a stan

(Nas, 2001)

Nas uses the imagery of Jay Z running scared through his building calling for help as a way of hijacking his authenticity narrative as a thug presented on "

Takeover". Not only does he turn around the narrative, but he also presents Jay Z as an offspring of his own style alluding that Jay Z idolizes his style and worshiped him like a ' God'. Nas is establishing his own authenticity narrative by reinforcing his own influence on hip hop culture and displaying his dominance over him. In the long term, the beef between the two would not harm either of the emcees careers. However, Nas's diss track " Ether" was considered so brutal that it became a verb in the hip hop community to describe utter domination in a rap battle and helped him re-establish himself from his image as a failing emcee (Hodge, 2019). The desire to win would help to push both emcees to their creative heights because the desire to win is at the basis of every emcees narrative. However, sometimes rap beefs can have tragic consequences. The rap beef between the east coast emcee Biggie Smalls and west coast emcee Tupac Shakur resulted in the tragic death of both emcees. The collective sense of guilt the media and audience felt was rooted in the hand audiences and mass media played by hyping up the rivalry (Sweet, 2005, p. 6). Diss songs would be circulated like wildfire on radio stations while false rumors spread around the hip hop community creating more tension that ended in their murders in what felt like a waste of life and potential for both emcees. The death of both emcees serves as a cautionary tale of the limits of rap beefs for the hip hop community and a lesson that short lived feuds are not worth taking life away from the hip hop community.

This essay explores the argument that the role of hip hop beef is to question and form an authenticity narrative: emcees form and maintain their own authenticity through competition and displaying their technical prowess over

each other. The origins of hip hop and the DJ and B Boy battle culture in the South Bronx shows how integral competition was to hip hop's origins: the desire to compete and battle is at the core of an emcees narrative. A case study of Vanilla Ice's career as a phony 'ghetto raised' rapper shows how hip hop's origins as an art form born out of struggle and oppression create a deeply embedded aversion to privilege and whiteness in a listener's perception of authenticity. This importance of coming from the struggle highlights how authenticity in hip hop is most closely aligned with the respect for hip hop's origins and traditions as well as the ability to represent oneself to the truest form. Just as competition would help sharpen the skills of emcees through pressure and the desire to win, the same would hold true in the case of rap beefs. The rap beef between Jay Z and Nas highlights how emcees break each other's authenticity narratives down to prove their dominance over the other, and how rap beef can actually boost an emcee's status and image because the desire to win pushes them to perform their best in order to win and validate their authenticity over an opponent. On the other hand, beef between east coast and west coast rivals Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur serves as a cautionary tale of how rap beef can quickly become out of control when fans and media overhype the rivalry with tragic consequences. Rap beef serves an important role in hip hop: it is not only a way for emcees to question and form each other's authenticity, but it also serves as a reminder that hip hop remains true to its origins of competition and that rap beef will continue to push emcees to be the top performer.

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