

“MUSIC IS ALL WE GOT”
AUTHENTICITY AND COMMODIFICATION:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF HIP-HOP LYRICISM

A Thesis presented to:

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of:

The Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts

By

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May 2017

On my honor,
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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March 2017

Abstract

Hip-hop is an American subculture which has seen exceptional popularity and commodification since its conception. The original purpose of hip-hop was to address the conditions which lead to its necessity: poverty, racial inequality, and gang activity. However, hegemonic assimilation and commodification of subcultural practices has accelerated with the rise of internet technology, stripping subcultures of their symbolic value and replacing it with monetary gain. The domination of popular media by sensationalized pop rap is a manifestation of the declining symbolic integrity and authenticity of hip-hop in dominant American culture. I conduct lyrical content analysis of six popular rap artists in order to determine how hegemonic commodification of subcultures such as hip-hop influences the ability of artists to maintain authentic to what hip-hop has stood for historically. This research seeks to compare the symbolic trajectories of these artists in order to distinguish authentic artists from the inauthentic, and furthermore understand the interplay between authenticity and commodification in hip-hop.

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INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop is everywhere. The different components of hip-hop attract a wide variety of artists and audiences alike, even reaching cultures far removed from the United States where hip-hop was born. But what allows this to happen?

The symbolic nature of hip-hop appeals to many listeners, whether they can relate or cannot at all, the traditions of hip-hop have always been charismatic. However, like most forms of subculture that pose a possible threat to dominant culture, hip-hop has been subject to hegemonic manipulation over time. The commodification of these subcultural practices is inherent in growth, but this growth also creates distance from authentic hip-hop. Rap music in particular has fallen victim to pop culture, churning out meaningless sensation rappers who advertise for brand names and promote celebrity lifestyle. While this form of rap is often the most played on the radio and in the media spotlight, there remains select artists who stay true to hip-hop of the past.

Despite the prevailing perception of rappers as wealthy, party-loving and egotistical, a closer look reveals that many rappers have made concerted efforts to return hip-hop to its beginnings, where the community took precedent and awareness was key. Only by carefully analyzing the lyrics of rappers over time can it truly be determined who in the rap game can be considered authentic in their intentions and messages. That is the intention in this research: to compare the artistic trajectory of rappers and find what allows rappers to flourish with or without authentic hip-hop themes.

LIT REVIEW

HISTORY OF HIP-HOP

The birth of hip-hop took place in the 1970's in the South Bronx, New York, a historically black neighborhood (Swanson 2010). All expressions of hip-hop, whether rapping, DJing, b-boying (dancing), or aerosol art (graffiti), attracted individuals because the barriers to entry were neither financially exhaustive nor spatially specific (Keyes 2004). As a result, the urban black community consumed these art forms routinely, as they were practiced almost exclusively in public at little to no cost. Early DJs, like hip-hop pioneers Grandmaster Flash and Cool Herc, served as event organizers. Their performances relied on a live audience and a space to interact with the music. Therefore, DJs hosted block parties, plugging into public electricity and marketing their craft to anyone in the neighborhood who would listen.

As the culture of hip-hop music grew, lyricists and music-makers collaborated to draw larger audiences and record mix-tapes for distribution. However, the motivation of early hip-hop artists was unlike pop artists, in that they focused on cultivating social capital rather than financial capital and were integral to the “oppositional culture” that coincides with hip-hop (Massey and Denton 1993). Here, rap can be distinguished from the other facets of hip-hop as the most vital to the voice of the people, which at first functioned on a local level because of the narratives it brought to light. As successful artist and businessman, Dr. Dre, explained, “...every time we went into the studio we were only trying to make tracks that would rock our neighborhood. Our goal was to be local stars.” (Rap, Race, and Equality 2003). The conditions that tempered the formation of hip-hop shaped its content; rappers narrated their own lives.

Piggy-backing on the disco craze of the 1970's and 1980's, early optimistic hip-hop music was quickly featured on the radio. Groups like the Sugar Hill Gang rose to fame for their

unique sound, one that was heavily influenced by disco and incorporated a new, free-form style of vocalization (Maddex 2004). As rap garnered a larger audience, a variety of businesses took the opportunity to reach new consumers. The overall urban aesthetic that hip-hop promoted was qualified and commodified and “it inspired musical, food, apparel, and alcohol companies to start using this new musical form as a marketing tool.” (Maddex 2004). This grander focus on hip-hop coincided with the emergence of what is known as “conscious rap”, which deliberately uses the cultural capital of hip-hop to address social issues and forward an agenda of justice (Forman 2010). Michael Eric Dyson (2007) describes conscious rap as, “rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique.” With the widespread attention that hip-hop was receiving, some artists took it upon themselves to offer a different, darker account of the urban black experience.

Hip-hop grew into the 1980’s, and with stronger corporate support and a larger audience listening, rappers began breaking down the recently-formed conventions and expanding their message. “Gangster rap” was more tonally and lyrically aggressive, often fictionalizing real experiences with drugs, murder, and the precarious lifestyle of gang members (Forman 2010). This uncensored reporting of the largely unseen dangers of street life was offensive to some, but ultimately contributed to the revised vision of the artists: to make the world aware. Ice Cube, rapper and former member of N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes), said, “You heard what’s going on in the hood, and you’re interested. Now Compton means something to you. Now you pay attention. We were able to shed light on some of the bullshit that was going down.” (Ritz 2015). This understanding of rap as raw form of musical journalism further stimulated the rapid

popularization and commodification of the hip-hop as the 90's began. Rap record sales climbed with each year, media outlets praised and scorned, and other areas of culture began appropriating

hip-hop style (McLeod 1999). The sudden integration of rap into popular culture occurred because it became popular among youth, the most lucrative consumers, across the country and as well as racial distinctions. “White teenage kids are buying rap records.” recalls KRS One, highly acclaimed conscious rapper (Rap, Race, and Equality 2003). Rather than connect personally with the hip-hop narrative, white youth valued rap as gangster rappers had intended: as a look into a chaotic life they could never know themselves. As Dr. Dre put it, “We gave the suburban kids an opportunity to get up close.” (Ritz 2015). At the turn of the century, this mentality began to shift from a frank representation of black struggle to a glamorous depiction of the hip-hop lifestyle.

Since the turn of the century rap and hip-hop as a whole have become an iconic part of urban culture. With the rapidly growing influence of the internet, artists within all hip-hop practices have been able to exchange with audiences and fellow artists far beyond their own neighborhoods and cities without depending on fame or prestige. This boom in outreach kindled a new subject matter for hip-hop artists. Rather than celebrate black unity or report gangster life, it became increasingly valid for rappers to essentially boast their status and the benefits derived from it (Maddex 2004). Now the pimp lifestyle, characterized by an abundance of money, status, and sex, was able to both compete and integrate with the gangster lifestyle (Keyes 2004). The oppositional culture to which Massey and Denton (1993) refer was reinforced by themes of substance use and hedonistic indulgence that some artists began glorifying. As the information age and the prevalence of the internet progressed, the revelry in the hip-hop lifestyle became less attached to the gangster and the pimp specifically and more associated with status, charisma, and the journey to fame.

SPACE AND PLACE

At its core, hip-hop is centered around the ideas of space and place and how communities can overcome hardship by creating subcultures. Space refers to the physical environment inhabited by individuals and the forces that lead to people living where they do, which in the case of hip-hop are modern forms segregation. Place concerns the identification of people with their space and the relationship of communities to the locations where they are situated. Hip-hop was a result of the ramifications of black urban space, namely gang violence, and subsequently strengthened a feeling of place. As Sharon Zukin (1995) puts it, "... culture is also a powerful means of controlling cities. As a source of images and memories, it symbolizes 'who belongs' in specific places." The importance of locality and personal pride in community fill the base of hip-hop and help contextualize the ghetto as not just a tragic result of racial inequality, but as something to find pride and solidarity in.

This idea of place can be observed on different spatial levels of hip-hop culture. Within a local context, hip-hop artists often compete for dominance over specific spatial regions, such as streets and neighborhoods. By making visible claims to space, members of the hip-hop and greater urban community can easily identify who belongs where on a micro level. On a larger scale, rappers commonly and proudly represent their cities, paying homage to the struggles that shape an artist. While Zukin (1995) rightly asserts that culture has a primarily symbolic impact on spaces through architecture, commerce, and institutions, there remains an ethereal quality of space that can be characterized by place and demonstrated by rap culture. Cities may be symbolically linked to certain industries and visual aesthetics, but in hip-hop culture, cities are more often renowned for the artists that rep them. This identification of place creates appeal within hip-hop culture, not necessarily for cultural amenities as Zukin (1995) suggests, but for

iconic cultural figures. Also, this appeal is not explicitly economic as Zukin (1995) emphasizes, but is culturally significant, especially to the hip-hop community.

WHAT IS CULTURE

Culture has come to signify a multitude of aspects ascribed to communities. How culture is defined has evolved over time along side the integration of technological advancements into society. Whereas in the past, culture was selective and specific to different people within separate regions, culture is now communicated and appropriated through a wider variety of avenues and is manipulated by a hegemonic hierarchy (Wade 1999). This means that any culture must be understood in relation to dominant culture, as this relationship dictates the power dynamics and social implications of those within said cultures. As Wade (1999) argues, culture is political because “meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power.”

Beyond basic definitions of culture, our ideas of how culture is employed have also transformed over time. With the domination of internet technology in the contemporary first world, people from all walks of life are exposed to cultures far removed from their own which creates an issue with who can claim what culture. This idea of cultural identity is necessarily linked to space and place, but the increased interconnectedness of the world allows for the commodification and appropriation of cultures from afar.

LANGUAGE

What sets hip-hop apart from many other subcultures is the vital importance of language that has prevailed throughout its existence. Matthew Maddex (2014) explains the roots of hip-hop

extending into African indigenous languages, literally tracing the “hip” in hip-hop to specific African lexicon: “In Wolof, there’s a verb, ‘hipi,’ which means ‘to open one’s eyes and see.’ So hipi is a term of enlightenment.”

Furthermore, Maddex continues by linking language to cultural identification in that the oral tradition of enslaved Africans depended entirely on their unifying relationship with language (2014). As Africans were taken from their homelands and sold into slavery, their identities were stripped from them and only their language remained intact as a concrete representation of their original cultures. Within this diminished cultural frame exists what Maddex describes as three archetypal means of oral tradition: the griot, the djali, and the bard (2014). All three of these archetypes served different purposes, the most hip-hop relevant being the bard, which filled “the role of being an intermediary and interpreter amongst the members of their community and even other poets.” (Maddex 2014) These residual African traditions of storytelling were necessary for the survival of African culture during periods of cultural peril, from The Middle Passage to modern segregation. With the ever-changing racial relationships within the U.S. and the larger international community, these deep-seeded cultural traditions cemented a sense of space, place, and cultural worth despite dominant culture saying otherwise. Here can be seen the importance of African oral tradition within hip-hop: to both unite people with their mother cultures, and unite them amongst themselves in the face of oppression.

SUBCULTURES AS RESISTANCE

Stuart Hall (1993) defines culture as “the ways, the forms, in which groups ‘handle’ the raw material of their social and material existence.” Therefore, when Hall addresses youth cultures as

concrete examples of subculture, they can be understood as ways in which youth have handled social conditions which are out of their own control. In its original historical context, Hall's argument attributed the arrival of youth cultures to socially disruptive events, such as war, along with "the arrival of *mass* communications, *mass* entertainment, *mass* art and *mass* culture." As Dick Hebdige (1979) further explains, "Subcultures represent noise (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in media." Both Hall and Hebdige emphasize that subculture serves as a reaction to social events and that mass media necessarily facilitates subcultures by acting on behalf of dominant culture.

Hall elaborates on what subcultures are by designating them as inseparable from their 'parent culture' and are further framed by dominant culture (1993). Hebdige clarifies that it is this cultural hierarchy which has shaped the ways in which subcultures are handled by parent and dominant cultures. These more powerful cultural forces use mass media in order to contextualize subcultural movements in such a way that either neutralizes or demonizes them (Fanon 1979). This process can be compared to practices of colonialism described by Fanon (1968), which seek to either eliminate or indoctrinate subordinate cultures in the interest of preserving and expanding power. However, the modes whereby cultural control is exercised have transformed from Fanonian notions of colonial violence to modern forms of media like radio, TV, and other means of cultural communication. Subcultures therefore serve as means of resistance to dominant culture by finding subversive meaning in preexisting symbols and images, often manifesting in what Hebdige calls style (1979). These amalgams of resistant culture are what dominant culture seek to control.

DILUTION

Hegemonic assimilation of resistant subculture relies on the integration of subcultural symbols, styles, and aesthetics into dominant culture through commodification (Hassan 2009). In his writing on the recursive mode, Robert Hassan (2009) asserts that new subcultures are often lacking in originality and are therefore easily incorporated into capitalist structures which separate cultural products from their symbolic meanings. Hassan (2009) further argues that even if cultural authenticity can be organically achieved, the overwhelming reliance of cultural producers on “capitalism as a mode of social organization, means that to ‘market it’ is the default position...” thereby forfeiting to the process of commodification. Especially with hip-hop, having grown alongside abundant technological advancements in media, this surrender to commodification is often second-nature.

Theory of cultural consumption also suggests that competitive consumption has changed in the last century, specifically from conformity to individuality (Heath 2001). Whereas in the 1950’s status could be inferred from goods and products of ubiquitous value, Joseph Heath argues that consumers must now strive to stand-out and rebel from the norm (2001). This insight on consumerism, which Heath describes with a multitude of critical perspectives, lends itself to the absorption of subcultures in that it explains from a consumer position what drives mass appeal of commodified culture.

As Wade (1999) writes, cultures are not only commodified in their material forms, but also in their ideological identities. This alternate form of commodification eventually became a cornerstone aspect of hip-hop during its popularization among white youth during the boom of gangster rap. Consumers could not only consume cultural forms of others, but could also assume parts of the cultural identities that were transferred through images of style through fashion,

language and consumerism. This commodification has flourished with the increasing number of avenues through which one can appropriate cultural identities via the internet and the departure of mainstream hip-hop from authentic symbolic meanings.

FIELDS AND TRAJECTORIES

Bourdieu outlines the concept of fields as “a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Swartz 1997). He goes on to explain that positions within a field can only be defined in relation to the rest of the positions in the field (Swartz 1997). Katherine Giuffre (1999) expands upon this concept by likening a field to a sand pile, “in which each actor’s attempts to reach the top change the shape of the climb.” Over time, these shifts and movements of position create a trajectory through which one can trace the social progress of an individual within a field. These concepts of relative field structure and trajectories is applied to a different context in this research. Rather than referring to individuals within a field, the positions now represent symbolic authenticity within an artist’s career timeline and the trajectory represents an artist’s symbolic movement over time rather than their social movement through a field.

METHODOLOGY

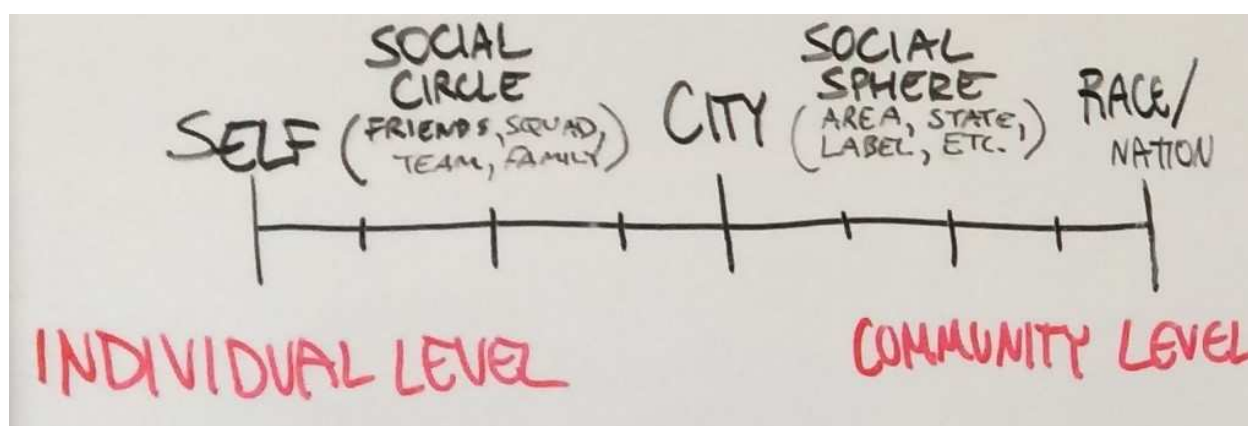
My research is based on content analysis of the lyrics of different rap artists over the course of their musical careers. To qualify this, I created an index of authenticity. Here, authenticity does not refer to consistent individual style or artistic control over the music-making process. I define authenticity within the specific context of hip-hop as reflective of the values and messages of hip-hop at its conception: social justice, solidarity, and community. I then chose various

indicators of this authenticity which could be identified and coded for within song lyrics. These categories are: storytelling, location, inequality, name-drop, classics, and awareness.

Storytelling is marked by referencing specific events, conversations or time periods that may have occurred in the lifetime of an artist. This excludes general hypothetical situations which are commonly used in rap. Location is the reference to specific areas, streets, cities, or local places which an artist may use to relate their home communities. This excludes the mentioning of locations that are removed from an artist's place of origin that may be used symbolically or for hypothetical situations. Inequality is indicated by the allusion to and acknowledgement or criticism of distinctions in race and class which disparage communities. This includes references to police brutality, cyclical poverty, or Civil Rights leaders and any other figures in the history of social justice that may lend themselves to the understanding of oppression. Name-drop is the use of names that listeners may not know because they are from personal relationships, rather than names of celebrities or well-known cultural figures. This excludes hypothetical people and other artists, regardless of their relationship to the lyricist. Classics are references to the oral tradition and history of hip-hop and other genres of music that have contributed to the evolution of hip-hop, such as R&B. This includes the use of artist names, musical samples, and allusions to specific lyrical style or sound. Awareness is the acknowledgement of the positionality of an artist within the larger capitalistic structure which often distorts and manipulates the music industry in search of profit. This includes the negative representation of labels and record companies, the impact the industry has on artists and their ability to be true to themselves, and the changes which artists may experience in their lives due to fame and fortune.

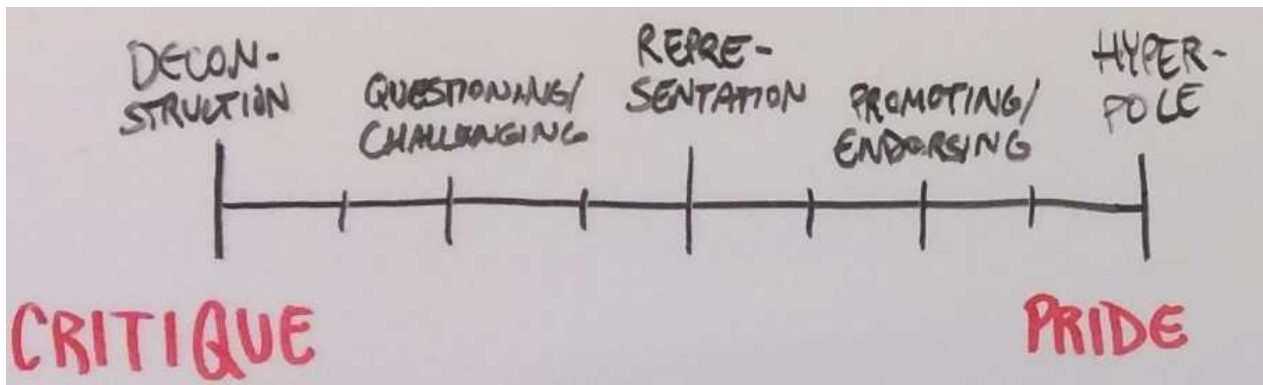
These indicators of authenticity as I have framed it correspond with two spectrums that position rap albums on a two-axis graph for conceptual clarity. The spectrums qualify lyrical content from individual to community and from critique to pride.

The first spectrum determines to whom the lyrics are directed or who they concern. The far left and right represent the individual and the community, respectively. Between them are increasing degrees of social networks, from close social circle (friends, family, etc.), to city, to

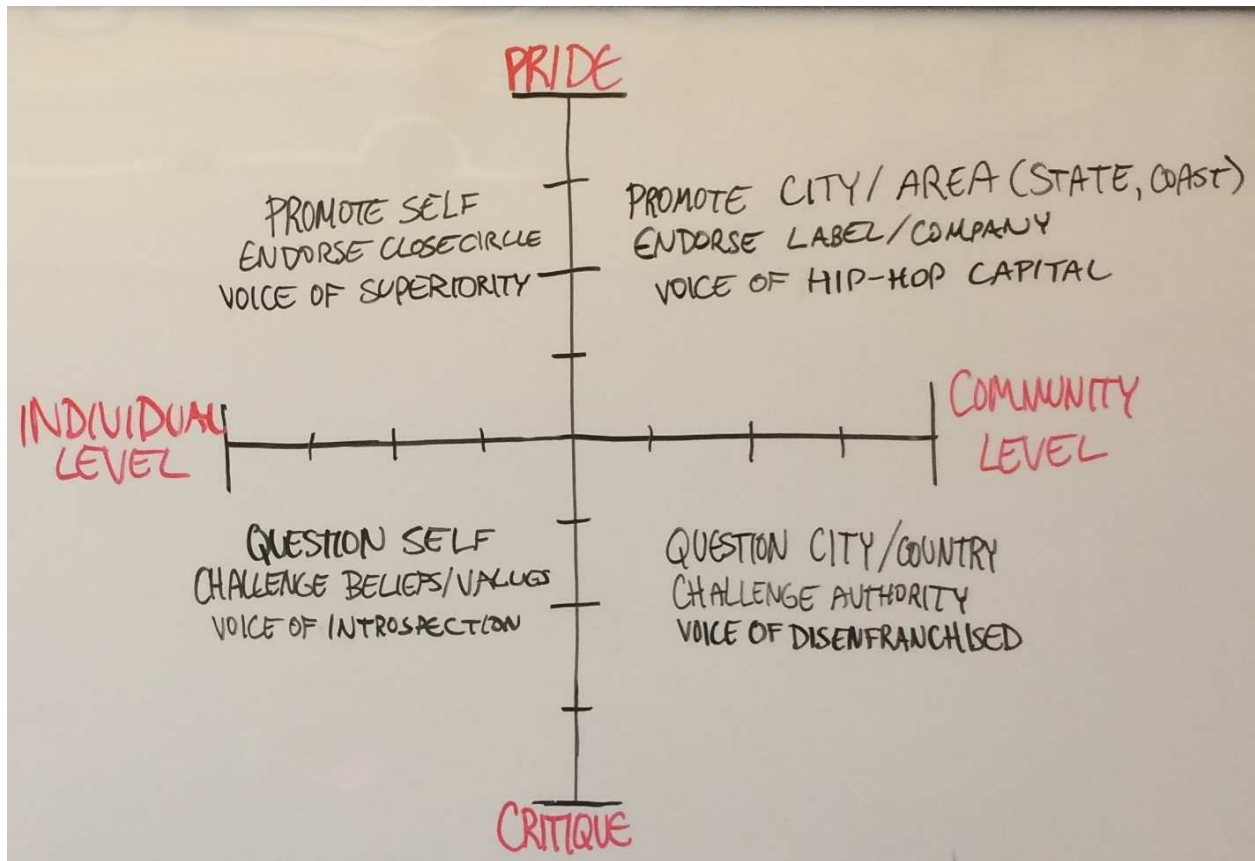


larger social sphere (geographic area, state, record label, etc.).

The second spectrum determines how lyrical content is framed by the artist. The far left and right represent critique and pride, respectively. Between them are questioning/challenging, neutral representation, and promotion/endorsement. (Next page)



These two spectrums create a four quadrant graph which spatially contextualizes the



lyrical content of an artist's albums over time.

Each part of the authenticity index correlates with a general direction in which an album can be placed on the graph. Storytelling can contribute to either pride or criticism of the individual; location, pride in the community; inequality, criticism of community; name-drop, pride in the individual; classics, pride in either individual or community; and awareness, criticism of either

individual or community. These qualifications are slightly different in specific cases but follow the general form. The frequency of each indicator within an album and its proportion to the other indicators gave an idea of where to place each album on the graph. By choosing three releases for each artist analyzed, generally spaced evenly at beginning, middle, and end of their careers, a trajectory can be drawn from point to point, thus creating a concrete representation of the movement of lyrical content over time. These trajectories allowed me to compare artists to one another and identify lyrical trends.

I chose six rappers to look at with my index of authenticity: Earl Sweatshirt, Chance the Rapper, Mac Miller, Kanye West, J.Cole, and Kendrick Lamar. I chose these artists based on their continued relevance to the current hip-hop culture, their similar levels of popularity, and their similar career time frames and ages- Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar are the older generation, having started their careers in the early 2000's.

I conducted my content analysis by reviewing the discography of each artist using the website RapGenius to verify lyrics and obtain subjective interpretations of the lyrics. For releases that were excluded on this website, I streamed the music online and listened carefully for indicators of authenticity.

I also include the peak chart positions of each album analyzed for both the *BillBoard Top Rap Albums* and the *BillBoard 200*. These lists are determined by retail and digital sales of a musical release, and give a numerical sense of how much pop culture success each project saw.

ANALYSIS

Kendrick Lamar was born Kendrick Lamar Duckworth on June 27, 1987 in Compton, California. Growing up in Compton, Kendrick was exposed to the environment which saw the success of many gangster rappers, such as the members of N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude). At 16, Kendrick had launched his career as a rapper the same way many previous hip-hop artists had to: through mixtapes and local fame. Under the moniker K-Dot, Kendrick quickly gained the attention of the West Coast rap scene and after several years of fostering respected connections with prominent rappers like Lil' Wayne and Dr. Dre, Kendrick came to be known as "the King of the West". By 2013, Kendrick had signed with both Interscope and Aftermath record labels and released his widely popular studio album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, further cementing his place at the top of popular contemporary rap. One of his more recent albums, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, is a provocative compilation of lamentations of the black struggle and Kendrick's own internal conflicts.

Coming out of Compton, home of West Coast gangster rap, shaped the lyrical and musical style of Kendrick Lamar. Before being signed to TDE, Kendrick released several mixtapes that aligned thematically with classic notions of gangster rap: gang activity, violence, and lyrical journalism which served to expose what went mostly unseen. As K-Dot, he focused on representing Compton and relaying the lifestyle which many had similarly reported before. However, Kendrick's involvement with TDE marked a shift in his lyrical content. While Kendrick never ceases to pay dues to Compton, his self-titled EP, in contrast to his K-Dot mixtapes, involved more precise storytelling and brought to light the inequality which dictates the lives of many Compton residents. For example, in "Vanity Slaves Part 1", Kendrick bluntly reminds listeners of black oppression in the United States:

The blacker you are, farther you're from the white man's home
 Negro spiritual songs, gave us some type of sanity

Before your vanity, they parted our families
 They put us in hundred degree shade and outside we bathed
 The more we were afraid, the more they made rules
 And trapped our minds in a cage, our freedom was so vague.

His album, *Section 80*, furthered this shift in lyrics for Kendrick, with tracks like “Ronald Reagan Era (His Evils)” referencing the institutionalized racism of the Reagan administration:

Heart racin', racin' past Johnny because he's racist
 1987, the children of Ronald Reagan raked the leaves off

The track, “HiiiiPoWeR”, from the same release expresses Kendrick’s understanding of these embedded racist ideas:

And everything on TV just a figment of imagination
 I don't want plastic nation, dread that like a Haitian
 While you mothafuckas waiting, I be off the slave ship
 Building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs.

good kid, m.A.A.d. city thematically returned Kendrick to Compton and contained many of the rapper’s staple tracks, although it stepped back from addressing inequality. In “m.A.A.d. city”, Kendrick reasserts his iconic representation of Compton:

You know the reasons but still won't ever know my life
 Kendrick, A.K.A. "Compton's human sacrifice”

However, Kendrick’s latest releases, both *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *untitled unmastered*, relied heavily on themes of injustice to provide hard hitting conceptual lyrics. “King Kunta”, referencing Kunta Kinte from the non-fiction book, *Roots*, invokes the image of a slave, but contrasts it with the idea of living like a king,

Bitch, where you when I was walkin’?
 Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin’
 King Kunta
 Everybody wanna cut the legs off him
 (King) Kunta
 Black man taking no losses, oh yeah!

Later on the album, “Blacker the Berry” unapologetically looks at the black condition in

America:

I'm African-American, I'm African
 I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village
 Pardon my residence
 Came from the bottom of mankind
 My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide
 You hate me don't you?
 You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture
 You're fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey
 You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me

These lyrics demonstrate that at this point in Kendrick Lamar’s career, he is done with sugar-coating the injustice which he and his community has had to face historically, and point to a grander mission of hip-hop.

The progress of Kendrick’s lyricism outlines an archetype of hip-hop trajectory: an artist must find the support of their immediate community before rising to fame in the larger, national scene, which allows for massive consumer audiences to be reached; this in turn allows artists to use their social capital to spread messages of social justice and awareness of inequality, especially pertaining to the places which fostered the growth of the artist. As can be seen with the chronology of Kendrick, rappers must first prove themselves to be worthy of representing their home cities, dropping local names, referencing real life events and places to appeal to the audience within the community. Along with rising fame comes the need to fulfill the role as entertainer to a much larger audience, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* being exemplary of the hyper-sensationalized rapper lifestyle that sells record after record. Finally, once an artist has claimed ubiquitous value and prestige, their messages can no longer be questioned and thus is achieved a creative control which may have proven unfruitful earlier in an artist’s career. Kendrick’s trajectory reflects this archetype, starting in the top left, then moving down and to the right over time towards critique of the larger community, as seen in Figure 1.

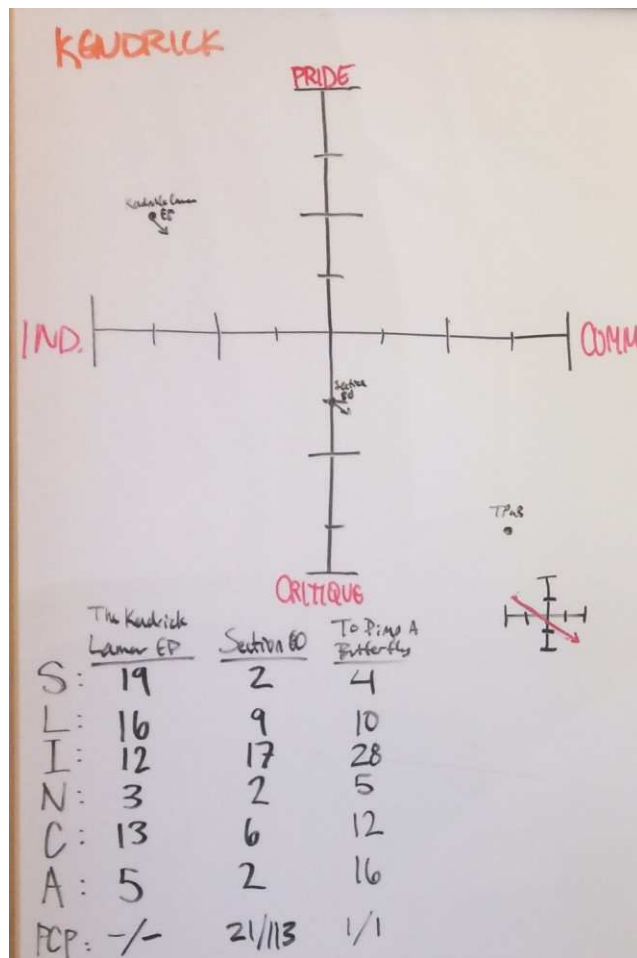


Figure 1:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
Kendrick Lamar

J. Cole was born Jermaine Lamarr Cole on January 28, 1985 in Frankfurt, West Germany, where his father was posted as a member of the U.S. Army. Cole's mother, of German descent, would move him and his brother to Fayetteville, North Carolina, after being abandoned by his father. It is here that Cole would culminate an understanding of being mixed-race in the United States as well as an affinity for hip-hop music and production. After obtaining a college education, Cole would begin producing beats and entire mixtapes for himself. His second mixtape, *The Warm Up*, released in 2009, would gain the attention of the hip-hop community and shower him with praise, including being one of XXL's Freshman Top Ten of 2010. Jay-Z's label, Roc Nation, would eventually be unable to ignore Cole after rejecting him previously. In

2011, Cole released his debut studio album, *Cole World: The Sideline Story*, which marked his true

arrival into the upper echelon of the rap industry, with features from Drake, Jay-Z and Missy Elliot. The success that his first album saw lead Cole to start his own label called Dreamville, which has come to signify the Fayetteville-North Carolina area. Under Dreamville, Cole released *Born Sinner* in 2013, which further cemented Cole as an artist that could consistently produce authentic, radio-quality music. Cole returned to his roots in his subsequent album, *2014 Forest Hills Drive*, which was appropriately released in 2014 as well. Finally, Cole recently released *4 Your Eyez Only* in late 2016, a somber concept album that clearly served an emotional purpose.

Much of J. Cole's early lyrical aesthetic relied on local pride and the classic hip-hop theme of repping one's city. This quite vocal love for "the Ville" allowed Cole and Fayetteville to become near synonymous and also allowed for storytelling opportunities within his mixtapes. "Dollar and a Dream" from *The Come Up*, Cole's first mixtape, exemplifies this early focus on location:

Young J, the rawest shit you niggas ever heard of
 A journalist nigga, call me the Fayetteville Observer
 You know the routine, man
 Fayettevnam
 Real niggas can relate
 And Ville niggas can relate, man

While this local aspect of Cole's character has declined in his most recent albums, his attention to inequality and invocation of classic rap artists has remained consistent throughout his career.

The Warm Up set this base of lyrical content with tracks like "Losing My Balance":

Sometimes I ride around wondering if we in hell
 Or why do cops love to throw a nigga in jail
 I'm bout to lose it I just had another friend killed
 Over some bullshit this cycle's like a windmill
 I had a convo with my soul I asked it "When will, this shit change? "
 It said boy "Just use them pen skills"

Cole tends to reference many renowned rappers to have come before him, namely Nas, to whom Cole dedicated an entire track titled, "Let Nas Down". Furthermore, the entire *Born*

Sinner album is based off of the Notorious B.I.G. and includes several samples of the legend himself. This harkening of hip-hop icons can be traced back to “The Come Up”,

You coming to the 'Ville? You need to get a license from us
City on my back, I feel like I'm holding Big Pun up

all the way to “Fire Squad” of *Forest Hills Drive*:

Keep it true like me, Cole you might be
Like the new Ice Cube, meets the new Ice-T
Meets 2 Live Crew, meets the new Spike Lee
Meets Bruce like Wayne, meets Bruce like Lee
Meets '02 Lil Wayne, in a new white tee
Meets KD, ain't no nigga that can shoot like me!

Cole’s most recent album, *4 Your Eyez Only*, represents a period that some artists go through where the music serves as emotional or spiritual healing for the artist, in the same way that Kanye West created *808’s and Heartbreak*. However, similar to Kendrick’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Cole did not allow his emotional charge to distract from the bigger picture. Beyond the tragic story of the entire album, which describes the life of a drug-dealing father, tracks such as “Neighbors” remind listeners that,

Some things you can't escape: Death, taxes, and a racist society that make
Every nigga feel like a candidate
For a Trayvon kinda fate
Even when your crib sit on a lake
Even when your plaques hang on a wall
Even when the president jam your tape.

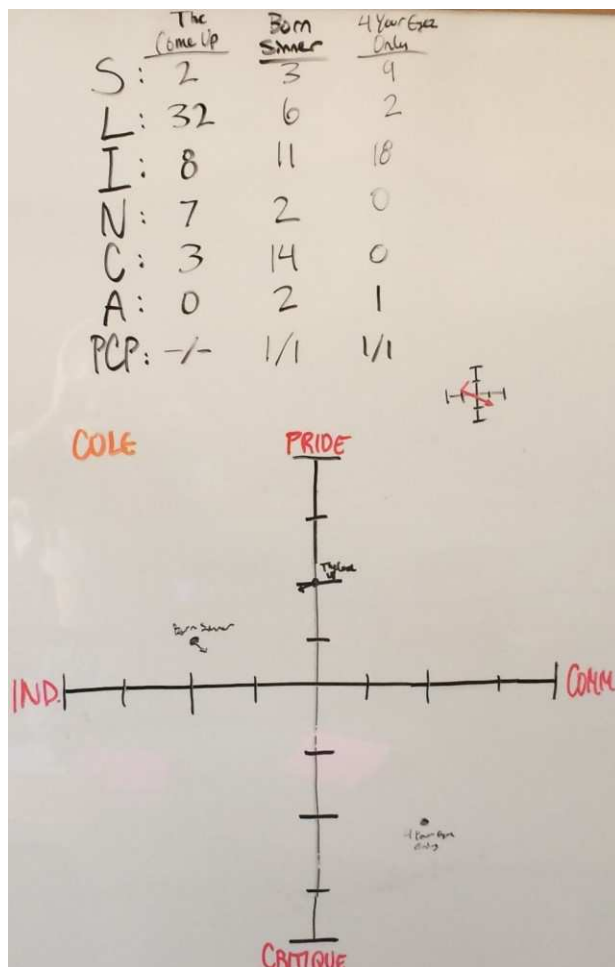
Cole has not forgotten that racial inequality does not pay heed to one’s status or money, as he continues in “4 Your Eyez Only”, which laments the cyclical and intersectional nature of poverty, racial stereotypes, and life in the hood:

At a glance, I'm a failure
Addicted to pushing paraphernalia
But Daddy had dreams once, my eyes had a gleam once
Innocence disappeared by the age of eight years
My Pops shot up, drug-related, mama addicted
So Granny raised me in projects where thugs was hangin

Took me two felonies to see the trap
This crooked-ass system set for me
And now I fear it's too late for me to ever be
The one that set examples that was never set for me

Cole's heavy-hitting hypothetical lyrics assume the identity of what Cole himself easily could've been, if not for his rise to fame as a rapper. This somber retelling of the fate of his friend, and surely many others, sets *4 Your Eyes Only* apart from many other contemporary rap albums that often fall victim to symbolic dilution.

J. Cole shows many similarities to Kendrick in how their lyrical content evolves. Beyond their history of performing and creating together, the two rappers follow similar trajectories in the authenticity index graphs, as seen in Figure 2 (next page). By employing fame as an agent of awareness, Cole proves that even though the music industry may try to control artists and critics may discourage them, there can remain a commitment to authentic hip-hop. In staying faithful to hip-hop classics and the tradition of storytelling, Cole not only adheres to the original themes of hip-hop, but also charismatically addresses the plight of people he could have been. This understanding of larger hegemonic forces and an attention to the grander picture of institutionalized racism marks Cole as an exceptionally authentic contemporary rapper.



Kanye Omari West was born on June 8, 1977 in Atlanta, Georgia. Kanye was raised in Chicago, Illinois by his mother after his parents divorced three years after his birth. Kanye started his career as a producer in the growing Chicago hip-hop scene in the 90's and was eventually picked up by Jay-Z and Roc-A-Fella Records in 2000. However, Kanye's career as a rapper wouldn't start until 2004 when he released *The College Dropout*. Employing his prowess as a producer, Kanye continued to release albums detailing where he came from and his struggles with fame and personal tribulation as he rose to national popularity. In 2007, Kanye lost his mother to surgical complications and split up with his

Figure 2:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
J.Cole

fiancee, Alexis Phifer, both of which would influence *808's and Heartbreak*, released later in 2008. After years of dominating the

popular media, Kanye embraced his fame with albums such as *Yeezus* and *Life of Pablo*, both of which heavily assert the artist's place at the top of the hip-hop hierarchy.

Having strong ties to the hip-hop celebrity empire associated with Jay-Z, Kanye quickly became a public spectacle after emerging as a rapper. His unapologetic and often controversial manner of self-presentation has brought him and his star-studded Kardashian family constant media attention, while his aggressive outspokenness distinguishes him from many other celebrities of the 21st century. Kanye also dabbles in many other popular culture sectors, such as his Yeezy line of clothing and high fashion. This media saturation which Kanye has experienced is reflected in his music, which as of late has moved closer to sensationalized bragging and farther from honest commentary. Regardless, the talent-driven sound that Kanye has accumulated over the course of his music career continues to place him in the spotlight and has created for him a vast network of the rich and famous.

Kanye's first three albums, *The College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *Graduation*, are thematically linked and together represent early Kanye, characterized by an adherence to many authentic hip-hop messages. Tracks such as "We Don't Care" from *The College Dropout* celebrate overcoming poverty and racism:

Drug dealin' just to get by
Stack ya' money 'til it get sky high
(Kids, sing! Kids, sing!)
We wasn't s'posed to make it past 25
Joke's on you, we still alive
Throw your hands up in the sky and say:
"We don't care what people say"

In "Slow Jamz (The College Dropout Version)", Kanye evokes the images of numerous African-American artists as a sign of respect to the legends:

See you is my new chick, so we get our grind on
She be grabbin me, callin me Biggie like Shyne home
Man I swear she fine homes, why she always lyin though?

Tellin me them diamonds, when she know they rhinestones
 She got a light-skinned friend look like Michael Jackson
 Got a dark-skinned friend look like Michael Jackson
 I played Ready For The World, she was ready for some action
 My dog said you ain't no freak , so you bout to prove my man wrong
 I'mma play this Vandross, you gon' take yo pants off
 I'mma play this Gladys Knight, me and you gon get right.

The focus on social justice and the rich musical history which lead to hip-hop continues in *Late*

Registration with “Crack Music”:

How we stop the Black Panthers?
 Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer
 You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearing
 When our heroes or heroines got hooked on heroin
 Crack raised the murder rate in D.C. and Maryland
 We invested in that, it's like we got Merrill lynched
 And we been hangin' from the same tree ever since

The understanding of institutionalized hegemonic racism in the United States that yields a powerful, authentic hip-hop message and came to characterize Kanye’s early sound but began to dwindle by the release of *Graduation*. What remained consistent was Kanye’s heavy use of classic hip-hop references in tracks like “The Glory”:

I hear people compare themselves to big a lot
 You know B.I.G. and Pac, you know to get it hot
 I guess after I live I wanna be compared to B.I.G
 Any one: Big Pun, Big L or Notorious

After *808's and Heartbreak* dragged Kanye away from the hip-hop he initially created, his focus on racial inequality made a return in *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. “Gorgeous” openly reflects on the role of hip-hop in the black struggle for equality:

Is hip hop just a euphemism for a new religion?
 The soul music of the slaves that the youth is missing
 This is more than just my road to redemption
 Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention

At the turn of the decade with the release of *Yeezus*, which implied his self-proclaimed god-like status, Kanye remained relatively true to his roots. Especially with “New Slaves”, Kanye revisits the inequality which plagues African-Americans in the contemporary United States:

My momma was raised in the era when
 Clean water was only served to the fairer skin
 Doin' clothes you would have thought I had help
 But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself
 You see it's broke nigga racism
 That's that "Don't touch anything in the store"
 And it's rich nigga racism
 That's that "Come in, please buy more"
 "What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?
 All you blacks want all the same things"
 Used to only be niggas, now everybody playin'

However, *Yeezus* also marked a movement of Kanye’s lyrics towards sensationalizing his success and promoting his own worth. *Life of Pablo*, released three years after *Yeezus*, was significantly less profound than many of his previous albums. While tracks like “Feedback” still reference hip-hop classics and brush on inequality, the overall aesthetic of Kanye’s latest material reflect his unique artistic style rather than a larger concern for important social issues.

Kanye stands as an anomaly in some regards: his ubiquitous fame and wide-reaching influence in many different avenues of commercialism have allowed him to transcend the traditional notion of a rapper. More importantly, the trajectory of his content seems to be wholesome and true to the messages of hip-hop until his last couple albums, which seem to mirror his media-ridden lifestyle and revert his trajectory mid-career (see Figure 3, next page). While Kanye continues to prove his musical talents in both production and lyricism, the blunt confrontation of larger issues has dissipated in favor of trailblazing the sound of pop rap.

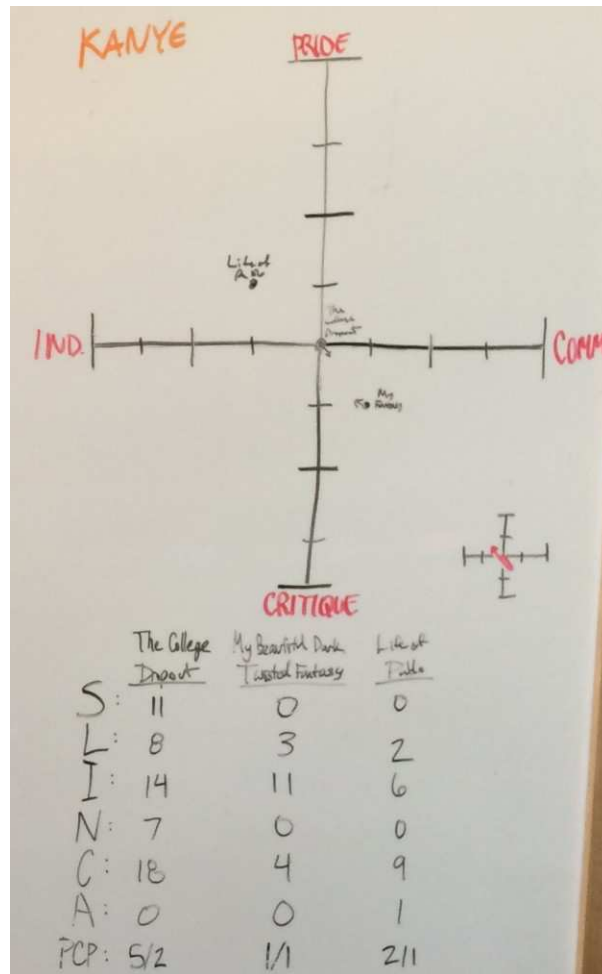


Figure 3:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
Kanye West

Earl Sweatshirt was born Thebe Neruda Kgositsile on February 24, 1994 in Chicago, Illinois but grew up in Los Angeles, California. Earl is the son of African poet, Keorapetse Kgositsile, who left Earl and his mother, Cheryl Harris, when Earl was eight years old. In 2008, under the moniker Sly Tendencies, Earl released *Kitchen Cutlery* on MySpace, which attracted the attention of fellow California rapper, Tyler, the Creator and his group Odd Future (OF). The anarchistic and frankly violent mindset of Tyler and Odd Future influenced the lyrical content of Earl's next tape, *EARL*, which contained bountiful morbid imagery and offensive language. Subsequently, Earl was placed under the care of a rehabilitation institution in Samoa by order of his mother; it was here he would stay until right before his 18th birthday. After returning to the United States, Earl signed with Tan Cressida and Columbia records, which also included other

artists from OF, and released *Doris*, which recounted his personal journal over the recent years. His most recent album, *I Don't Like Shit, I Don't Go Outside*, delves into Earl's emotional journey as he was house-ridden for an extended period of time for medical reasons, as Earl explains on RapGenius.

Although Earl was born in Chicago, his lyrical style reflects his West Coast upbringing much more. However, Earl details the lifestyle of delinquent youth rather than gangsters, which, while the narrative evolves with his own personal growth, remains melancholy and often graphic throughout his career. This theme of troubled youth was heavily associated with Odd Future, as Tyler and other OF artists also relied upon a certain shock value to create a reckless aesthetic for their brand. In one of his first Youtube hits, "EARL", from his self-titled project, Earl describes fictionalized scenes of grotesque crimes which add to his disregard for the normal:

I'm a hot and bothered astronaut
 Crashing while jackin' off
 To buffering vids of Asher Roth eatin' apple sauce.
 Sent to Earth to poke Catholics in the ass with saws
 And knock blunt ashes into their caskets and laugh it off.

The following track, "Couch", features Tyler, the Creator in a back-and-forth recital of offensive fantasies:

I'm back on my sixty six sick shit
 Flowin' like the blood out the competition's slit wrists
 She lick it up, Dracula, then spit it back, back at ya
 She mad as fuck, stuck in the back of a black Acura
 Fed her acid now the duct tape quacks back at her
 Hello Heather yellow feathers now you ain't laughin', huh

Most notably, Earl's lyrical content relies more on hypothetical imagery and wordplay rather than storytelling and concrete references to location and people. Even in his first mixtape, *Kitchen Cutlery*, under the moniker, Sly Tendencies, Earl was flaunting his phonetic prowess in tracks like "Molliwopped":

Him without a win is Clark Kent without a cleft chin
 Superman reference of how high I keep stepping
 Whoa, I go harder than standardized testing
 Bars on lock my development's arrested
 I'm the bestest, on a bad day I spit asbestos
 Yeah, yes, impressive y'all steady coming in second
 Fuck V-necks, I'm the rapper to invest in
 My flow ends recessions, I'm fresh as Crest breath is.

It is this quality of lyricism along with an apparent disregard for social norms that has gained Earl appeal as a skilled lyricist and a voice for mislead youth rather than one of the gangster.

Having only begun his rap career at the turn of the decade, Earl's material was dependent upon social media outlets at first which allowed for a different accumulation of audience than that of classic hip-hop mixtape artists which was more spatially restricted. This distinction in the hip-hop fame trajectory set Earl up to relate to listeners on an emotional level more so than a local one, thus diminishing the necessity of themes of locality which otherwise define many young artists' popularity.

Doris, Earl's first studio album, was released shortly after he returned from rehabilitation in Samoa, implying a stark contrast between before and after his hiatus. Earl uses this album to move away from his former persona and more towards a genuine being of emotion, as manifested in tracks like "Chum" that detail his struggles with being raised mixed-race and without a father.

It's probably been twelve years since my father left, left me fatherless
 And I just used to say I hate him in dishonest jest
 When honestly I miss this nigga, like when I was six
 And every time I got the chance to say it I would swallow it.

Even though Earl attempts to access a previously untapped lyrical ethos, he reminds listeners that he is still indeed associated with Tyler and Odd Future, and intends to continue that aesthetic with tracks like "Sasquatch".

Shit, it's like 6 P.M. and his temple throbbing

Hand in the cabinet by seven, sniff the prescription oxies
 Logo in the boxes, all my niggas hostile
 Cautious of your crosses, scoffing at your doctrines

In his most recent album, *I Don't Like Shit, I Don't Go Outside*, the themes of youthful recklessness lessen and are replaced by emotional questions and reflections. In "Grief", Earl outlines the draining character of the famous rapper lifestyle,

Focused on my chatter, ain't as frantic as my thoughts
 Lately I've been panicking a lot
 Feeling like I'm stranded in a mob, scrambling for Xanax out the canister to pop
 Never getting out of hand
 Steady handling my job, time damaging my ties.

Earl described the track on Twitter as, "a final lament and an epilogue." Based on the troubling youth that Earl experienced and expresses, this later part of his career assumes the role of pseudo-therapy. He goes on to further detail his emotional hardship in the face of fame in "Inside",

Never trying me, I'm diving, falling victim to myself
 Middle finger to the help
 When it's problems, I don't holler, rather fix 'em on myself
 When it's looking like it's quiet for you, this the shit to yell.

Earl Sweatshirt exemplifies a young rapper who engages in the craft at first for his friends and later for himself, rather than for his larger community. While this trajectory is not completely in line with the precedent that Kendrick and Cole set, it does appear that he, along with Mac, may be on their way to a similar conceptual destination, moving from the top left quadrant, down through the bottom left, and eventually towards the bottom right (See Figure 4). Nevertheless, Earl tends to approach larger community issues with a cautious sarcasm, making allusions to injustice but rarely blatantly outlining them.

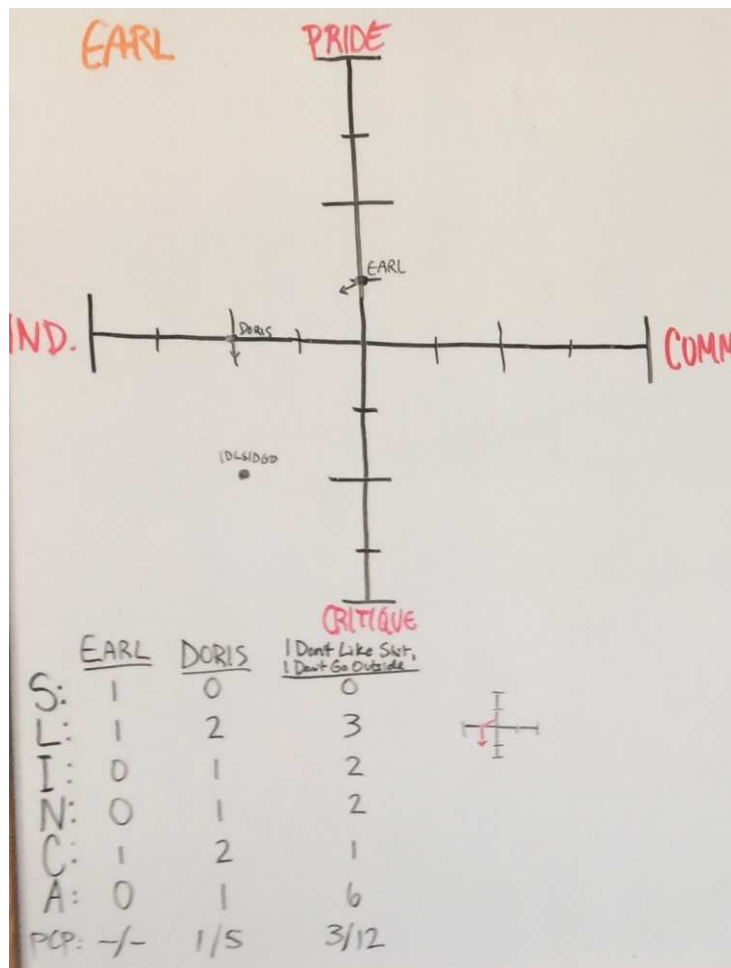


Figure 4:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
Earl Sweatshirt

Mac Miller was born Malcolm James McCormick on January 19, 1992 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Mac was raised Jewish and started his rap career in high school after teaching himself several musical instruments such as guitar and piano. He released a large volume of music before signing to a label, the first being Rostrum Records. Eventually, Mac would go on to release his well-known debut mixtape, *K.I.D.S.*, under Rostrum. At the turn of the decade, Mac would release a couple more studio albums under Rostrum Records, *Blue Slide Park* and *Watching Movies with the Sound Off*, which incorporated more successful artist features and dove into his personal struggles with fame and the rap industry. In the beginning of 2014, Mac would separate from Rostrum Records and release another solo mixtape titled *Faces*, before signing later that year with Warner Bros. Records under his label named REMember Records.

Subsequently, Mac would release his first studio album with Warner Bros. titled *GO:OD AM*. Most recently, Mac released an entire album about love and his intimate relationships in 2016 named *The Divine Feminine*.

In line with his initial association with marijuana enthusiast and fellow Pittsburgh rapper, Wiz Khalifa, Mac's early music often celebrated all aspects of youthful hedonism, with music videos like "Senior Skip Day" and "Knock Knock".

Supposed to be in class but I ain't going
 And lets chill on the couch
 See what's on the telly, girl we won't leave house
 Can ya stay a while, can ya stay a while
 Cause girl I'm feelin' lazy and I'm tryna hang around
 - "Senior Skip Day"

As Mac rose to fame, his love for Pittsburgh remained unchanged as he released his first studio album, *Blue Slide Park*, named after a specific location in his hometown. Littered with references to location and people in Pittsburgh, the album firmly identifies Mac as a voice for his city. "My Team" gives a shoutout to Mac's "team", including many of his friends with whom he started climbing to success:

And if you see me, I'll be with my team
 Got my homie Billy probably in Supreme
 Jimmy or Will be selling shirts to the fans
 While TreeJay, Clock, got you raisin' your hands
 Then you got Q that's my right-hand man
 Shout out Little Dave sittin' shotty in the van

However, the stressful lifestyle of fame becomes evident with Mac, as *Watching Movies* describes many internal struggles Mac faced as he rose to popularity. Throughout his earlier releases, Mac expresses his awareness of the larger forces which revolve around money and dictate the trajectory of signed artists. In "Of the Soul" from *Blue Slide Park*, he acknowledges the role of radio is changing an artist:

Hear me on the radio, shit'll change forever

Now I'm just a pop sensation, fuck your expectations.

Further, Mac asserts in “Red Dot Music” from *Watching Movies* that although he has sold his soul to the industry, he refuses to be entirely consumed by it- “They got my soul, I don’t let them take the rest of me.” This awareness of artist positionality within the music industry, decorated with witty lyricism about youthful hijinks presents Mac Miller as a champion of his own cause rather than a corporate puppet despite being signed to a label.

GO:OD AM continued Mac’s themes of hometown pride and awareness of the industry.

With his signing to Warner Bros. Records, Mac becomes aware of the betrayal many communities feel when artists rise to fame and must leave them behind. In “Brand Name”, Mac admits:

The bro left home, but he came back
 This what raised me, made me rap
 PA's baby, I ain't been to PA lately
 See, I left, they call me shady
 I'm a white rapper, they always call me shady

Furthermore, in “Perfect Circle / God Speed” Mac recognizes his friends who helped him along the way,

So I guess this is a letter, to all my brothers, Most Dope, that’s forever
 I love you more than words could express
 And this the part that Q start crying, if he ain’t already yet
 I did my best to be a leader you respect.

In the same track, Mac also reveals that even though he hasn’t forgotten his roots, the music industry can still change people:

She say “I thought you got sober”
 And I say “I wish you’d stop being a bitch
 And get to minding your business”
 Told me “Money has changed you”
 I get to thinking, how rarely do I visit?
 How’d I get so egotistical?

These consistent qualities of Mac Miller's lyrics, his awareness of musical capitalism as well as his love for Pittsburgh and his day one supporters, set Mac apart from many other comparable artists. While his most recent album, *The Divine Feminine*, was centered around love and relationships, the persistence of the aforementioned qualities of Mac's music creates an aesthetic that has progressed from neighborhood-kid feel-good music to rap-star who never forget his origins. Even his music before his major record deal reflected Mac's desire to make his city proud, a characteristic of music that persevered through his rise to fame.

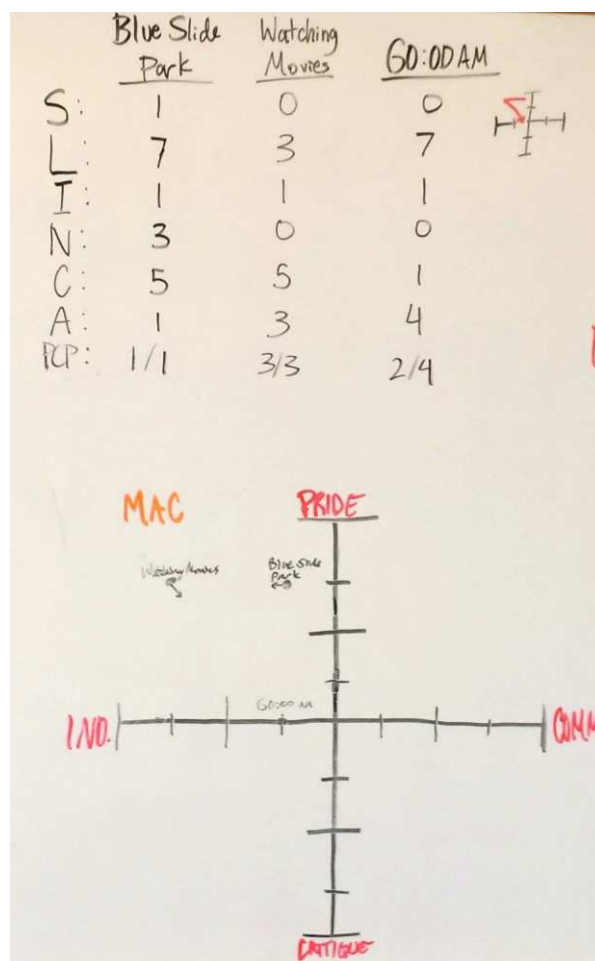


Figure 5:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
Mac Miller

Chance the Rapper was born Chancellor Jonathan Bennett on April 16, 1993 in Chicago, Illinois. Growing up in Chatham, as Chance consistently reminds his listeners, exposed Chance to a variety of experiences, from prep school to street life. Chance made his rap debut in 2012 with the mixtape *10 Day*, aptly named after a 10-day suspension he received during his senior year of high school. This first mixtape put Chance on the map, attracting the attention of Chicago music media as well as other producers and artists in the area, like producer Chuck Inglish. Chance quickly rose to fame within the next two years after touring with Childish Gambino and later releasing his well-known mixtape, *Acid Rap* in 2013. As critics raved about the musical depth and lyrical style of *Acid Rap*, Chance became a celebrity and continued to collect praise for *Acid Rap*, which ranked highly in music media outlets like *Pitchfork* and *Complex*. Chance later released a collaborative project with artist group Donnie Trumpet and the Social Experiment titled *Surf* which enriched Chance's already definitive feel-good sound and positive lyricism. After many more tours, community involvements, and collaborations with various other artists, Chance remains unsigned to any record label and releases all of his content for free. In 2016, Chance released his third mixtape, *Coloring Book*, a heavily gospel influenced release which rocked the world of hip-hop.

Coloring Book, like all of Chance's music, was made available for free online. Despite this, the mixtape not only became the first to place in the Billboard 200 based on streams rather than sales, but also won the first Grammy for Best Rap Album without being released commercially. Throughout *Coloring Book*, Chance references how the music industry should not have absolute power over artists like himself. In the first track, "All We Got", Chance refers to the industry:

They don't give nothing away
You gotta fight for you way

And that don't take nothing away
 'Cause at the end of the day
 (Music is all we got)

In “Angels”, Chance continues by citing the expectation of rappers to cause drama with each other and gives a shout out to fellow Chicago rapper, Chief Keef:

Ooh, I might just share my next one with Keef
 Got the industry in disbelief, they be asking for beef

In his most direct jab at the industry, “Mixtape”, Chance repeatedly asks, “Am I the only nigga still care about mixtapes?” These are just a few examples of Chance’s acknowledgement of the capitalistic powers that make nothing easy, encourage money-making drama, and devalue the principle of music for music’s sake.

Chance the Rapper exemplifies an aspect of authentic hip-hop in his focus on the community which raised him. His first mixtape, *10 Day*, was heavy-laden with shout-outs to Chicago and the people he grew up with there, nearly listing off names in tracks like “Nostalgia” and “Hey Ma”. *Acid Rap* came out a year later and Chance turned his attention towards positivity in the face of hardship. The second track, “Pusha Man/Paranoia” starts as a lively tune about drug-dealing but transfers into a haunting account of neglected urban communities:

They murking kids; they murder kids here
 Why you think they don't talk about it? They deserted us here
 Where the fuck is Matt Lauer at? Somebody get Katie Couric in here
 Probably scared of all the refugees, look like we had a fuckin' hurricane here
 They'll be shooting whether it's dark or not, I mean, the days is pretty dark a lot
 Down here, it's easier to find a gun than it is to find a fucking parking spot
 No love for the opposition, specifically a cop position
 Cause they've never been in our position
 Getting violations for the nation, correlating, you dry snitchin’

Chance later references the rise in murder rate in Chicago during the summer by saying,

Everybody dies in the summer, wanna say goodbyes tell them while its spring
 Everybody’s dying in the summer, so pray to God for a little more spring

Three years later, after an accelerated rise to superstardom, Chance's *Coloring Book* returns to the plight of Chicago. In "Summer Friends" Chance reminds us,

Our summer don't get no shine no more
our summer die, our summer time don't got no time no more.
Summer friends don't stay

and again in "Angels":

Wear your halo like a hat, that's like the latest fashion
I got angels around me, they keep me surrounded

Chance the Rapper is exceptional because of his unwavering morals while navigating the road to fame. Beside his policy of free music, Chance stays true to his home city of Chicago and shows a distinct commitment to the community. Chance has sponsored many open mic nights in Chicago, which is where his career started. He also has campaigned against gun violence in the city with "#SaveChicago" campaign and even met with President Obama and other national icons of color about "My Brother's Keeper Initiative" to combat racial injustice. In recent news, Chance was awarded the Grammy for Best Rap Album with *Coloring Book* and Best Rap Performance for a music video of "No Problems" from the album; Chance is the first unsigned artist to do this. Despite his prestigious accomplishments, Chance also recently took the spotlight by donating one million dollars to Chicago public schools, which has revitalized the conversation about policymakers should be focused on.

Chance follows the authentic trajectory set by Kendrick and Cole, starting top left and moving downward and to the right over time (see Figure 6). However, Chance was able to accomplish this in a much shorter time frame and with much less material than the other rappers in this study. This begs the question of how being unsigned may have helped Chance along the authentic trajectory that manifests itself in his commitment to making Chicago better.

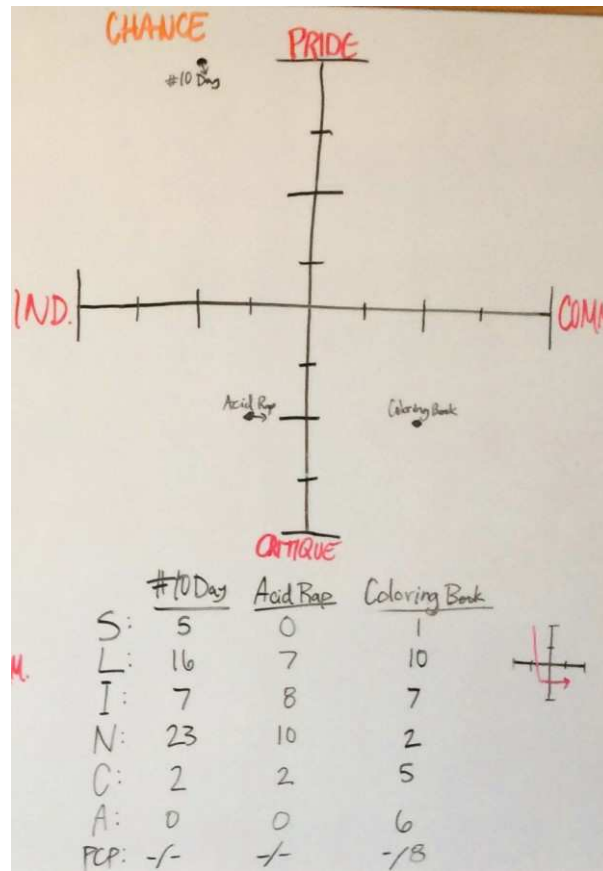


Figure 6:
Authenticity
Trajectory of
Chance the Rapper

CONCLUSION, FINDINGS & SHORTCOMINGS

In conclusion, I found that there is an archetypal trajectory that rappers can move along over time which represents the progression of symbolic content and authenticity in an artist's music. Furthermore, this trajectory can be affected by the degree of commodification with which an artist allows their content integrate, thus accelerating or hindering, and even reversing, the trajectory of authenticity. Also, the trajectory can be accelerated by sheer amount of content which an artist produces, but this is dependent upon the symbolic capital of the material of an artist.

After considering the different authenticity trajectories of the rappers I researched, I can conclude that the archetypal trajectory of an authentic hip-hop artist consists of three basic phases. The first is characterized by a strong sense of local pride and hometown representation, reflecting the spatial restrictions that classic hip-hop artists faced. This phase garners respect and support for an artist within their own community by referencing specific locations, people, and events that individuals that the community can relate to. The second phase is resultant; an artist rises to popularity outside of their own community and must cater to a larger, more diverse, more demanding audience. This also generally marks the entrance of an artist into the corporate side of the music industry, where their content is foremost a means of making money for themselves and their company. In turn, the artist may symbolically distance themselves from their roots in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience. The third phase is a return to the hood, which is only feasible after an artist has proven successful in the industry. By obtaining mainstream and subcultural success, an artist is free to exercise more creative control over their content because they are less likely to be questioned by their audience and their corporate superiors. Therefore, the artist can directly address large-scale issues, such as racism and oppression, because they are widely respected and have a national audience.

In my research, Kendrick Lamar presents this archetype as not only valid but successful. The movement from *The Kendrick Lamar EP*, to *Section 80*, and finally *To Pimp A Butterfly*, along with their respective peak chart positions shows that Kendrick actually increased in national popularity over time, indicating that not only is the third phase of this trajectory more socially profound than the first two, but also that this third phase can be valued the highest out of them all.

The archetypal trajectory that Kendrick presents is mostly attributable to the amount of time he has been in the game. Having started his career in 2003, Kendrick has had more than a decade to solidify his style, audience, and status within the industry. As can be seen with some of the younger artists, Mac Miller and Earl Sweatshirt, this trajectory can start to emerge early on. Both Mac and Earl started in the top left quadrant, as did Kendrick, and have started moving down and to the right, as their content begins to address larger audiences and more self-aware topics. However, there is a large disparity between Mac and Earl in the amount of content which they have produced. While Mac and Earl started their careers within a year of each other, 2007 and 2008, respectively, Mac has released more than four times the number of projects (EPs, albums, mixtapes) than Earl has. This indicates that there is a distinction in the lyrical content between the two, because as we see with J.Cole, the amount of material an artist outputs can accelerate the progression of the archetypal authentic trajectory.

J.Cole, like Mac Miller, started releasing mixtapes in 2007, starting with *The Come Up*. However, J.Cole has clearly followed the precedent set by Kendrick but has done so with nearly 5 years less experience in the rap industry. Here can be seen the distinction in lyrical content between similarly “aged” rappers, namely between Mac and Cole. Whereas Mac’s sense of pride in Pittsburgh has kept him in the top left quadrant of the authenticity graph, J.Cole’s relationship with Fayetteville has propelled him quickly through the archetypal authentic trajectory. Contrastingly, Chance the Rapper presents an inverse situation.

Chance is an exceptionally newer artist, his first tape, *10 Day*, being released in 2012, far after any other rapper whom I have included in my research. Within just three solo releases, Chance has achieved the archetypal trajectory that Kendrick and Cole were only able to achieve with much more time and material released. The main difference is that Chance has remained

unsigned to any label for his career. Contrary to the status quo of using record labels to assist in one's rise to fame, Chance has emerged as one of the most influential young artists of his time without traditional corporate interference. This aspect of commodification that Chance has avoided has interestingly yielded more rewards for Chance than previously thought possible, as he has made history several times exactly because he is unsigned. The anomaly that Chance presents is reinforced by the trajectory of Kanye West, questionably the most signed artist in contemporary hip-hop.

As seen in Kanye's trajectory, he began in a similar to the rest of the rappers in this research, starting in the top left quadrant and moving down and to right over time. However, toward the end of his career, Kanye began involving himself in commercialism on many levels, essentially turning his entire image, name, and style into a marketable brand. From his fashion lines to his marriage to Kim Kardashian, Kanye is symbolically opposite from Chance. Whereas Chance refuses to charge money for his music, Kanye refuses to overlook any opportunity to expand his brand, his connections, and his fame. This indicates that not only are time and amount of content impactful on the archetypal authentic trajectory, but also that signing, and moreover, becoming too involved in commodification of the hip-hop culture, can actually reverse an artist's trajectory.

My research initially looked at generational differences of rappers. I expected that the influence of internet technology would impact the trajectory of artists; in the end, this was not the key finding. In looking at this aspect of hip-hop artists specifically, I was unable to address the sociological distinctions between the artists I chose to analyze, such as racial and ethnic background, socio-economic background, gender, and geographic location. Also, my research was limited by the number of artists I was able to analyze before drawing conclusions.

My research indicates that rappers can follow a general symbolic trajectory throughout their careers that eventually allows them to directly address issues of oppression while simultaneously achieving success in the industry. However, this archetype cannot be definitely applied to all rappers. In future research, my conceptual development of hip-hop trajectory could be referenced in looking at how factors like race and gender may influence an artist's ability to traverse the archetypal trajectory. By setting this trajectory as a basic outline of an authentic rap career, further research can address how authenticity is affected by the specific demographic qualifications of a rapper.

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