

Just Keeping It Real

Kanye West raps about being a college dropout, and that's what he knows. I rap about what I know. College kids listen to his music, ghetto kids listen to me.

—T.I., rapper, during BET's *Hip Hop vs. America* forum

There's a bad part because the kids see that and they mimic you. That's the part I haven't figured out yet. . . . To me it's like, when I sing, "I live the thug life baby I'm hopeless," . . . I'm doing it for the kid that really lives a thug life and feels like it's hopeless. So . . . when I say it like that it's like I reach him. You understand? And even if when I reach him it—it—it makes it look glorious to the guy that doesn't live that life. I—I mean, I can't help it, it's a fact, you know. . . . I think I am being responsible, but it's hard.

—Tupac, interviewed in *Tupac: Resurrection*

Rap music is the voice of the underbelly of America. In most cases, America wants to hide the negative that it does to its people. Hip hop is the voice . . . and how dare America not give us the opportunity to be heard.

—David Banner, rapper, quoted at congressional hearing titled "From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotyping and Degradation," September 25, 2007

Although we take our standards and practices role seriously, we also believe that it is not our role to censor the creative expression of artists whose music often reflects the pain they've suffered or seen in their lives and communities.

—Phillippe Dauman, president and CEO of Viacom, Inc., quoted at congressional hearing titled "From Inus to Industry: The Business of Stereotyping and Degradation," September 25, 2007

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON CLAIMS heard among rappers, their corporate managers, and fans of rap music is the idea that hip hop/rap music is "*just keeping it real*." This phrase can mean many things, but generally speaking, it refers to talking openly about undesirable or hard-to-hear truths about black urban street life. This popular phrase has also surfaced as a challenge to "unreal" images of hyper-consumption among rappers and hip hop fans who sport extravagant clothing, cars, and jewelry that emulate and suggest wealth levels light years away from nearly all hip-hop fans, let alone the black inner-city ones. So, sometimes, keeping it real means rejecting all the bling bling.

But more often than not, the claim that hip hop is just keeping it real is usually made in response to criticism that hip hop lyrics are contributing to negative social conditions: encouraging violence, representing the criminal life, supporting sexism and homophobia. So, the primary use of the "keeping it real" defense of hip hop is to prove hip hop's role as a truth teller, especially the truths about poor black urban life that many people want to shove under the rug. Although rappers themselves are the ones most frequently heard making this claim, the head of a major media conglomerate—Robert Morgado, a former executive vice-president of Warner Communications—has also been quoted as identifying their role as reality's troubadours:

Rap music provides a window on our urban culture. Through it we can gauge the realities of life in our inner cities, which would other-

wise be obscured, realities that are deeply troubling. . . . To listen is to hear from a population desperately in need of attention, slipping headlong into despair and destruction. . . . The music can be frightening. It is angry and subverts aspects of order. It is violent and hard to understand, absolutely. Much of modern life is like that. Music and its lyrics reflect a reality that can't be censored. One can work to keep from being reminded of it, but there it is.¹

Among these unpleasant "realities," revealed through rap music's "window on our urban culture," are black community street-based criminal lifestyles: drug dealing, hustling, gang-banging, hoes and pimping.

There is an important core truth to hip hop's "keeping it real" claim, despite its overall mendacity: A good deal of hip hop speaks and has always spoken openly and in depth about aspects of black urban poverty, particularly the grip that street culture has on many young people. Hip hop gives a ground-level view (though not the *only* view, or a *comprehensive* view) of what it might mean to live under what are nearly warlike conditions in communities that face myriad daunting circumstances. Sometimes, rappers' lyrics really do offer gripping tales of loss, sorrow, exploitation, rage, confinement, hopelessness, and despair about conditions that are denied in the larger society. It is important to admit that these powerful stories far too often uncritically reflect attitudes and beliefs that many would consider destructive to achieving a socially just environment. But it is also true that society at large only sporadically pays attention to the extraordinarily despair-producing conditions in which young black poor youth attempt to survive. Americans seem far more interested in being entertained by compelling portraits of horrible conditions than they are in altering them.

Young people who love hip hop understandably want to maintain and defend the spirit of "keeping it real." Hip hop remains one of the most accessible creative forms for those who feel that most if not all other avenues for telling their own life stories have been cut off by limits established in other genres. Beyond this, many fans need to

hold onto the idea that hip hop is a place for such personal portraits, even when this idea might be untrue. Despite its disturbing turn in the commercial realm, hip hop truly is one of the few creative and visible places where in-depth criticisms of society's failures (e.g., social injustice, corporate control of culture and media consolidation, racial inequality, class oppression, normalized sexism, and homophobia) can be expressed. Perhaps many hold onto this role for hip hop because they believe that if hip hop continues to be identified as a place where one can "keep it real," it might encourage more visible social commentary.

The notion of keeping it real is about both representing a particular black ghetto street life and being truthful about one's relationship to that life. So, rappers not only have to tell compelling stories about being in the life but also have to convince listeners that they know that life personally and intimately. Hip hop remains a genre largely valued for its seemingly autobiographical nature. Leading criminal lives seems to enhance artists' credibility, as has been the case for 50 Cent and T.I. Alternatively, some artists, most recently hip hop-inflected crooner Akon, have lost credibility not because they lack talent but because they were discovered to be telling lies about their criminal past or origins in "the 'hood."

Keeping it real has become a genre convention as much as a form of personal storytelling. I am not claiming that there was nothing real being said in 50 Cent's or T.I.'s lyrics, that they were entirely fictional, that none of them contained crucial elements of truth. Even if a rapper himself didn't exactly live the tale being told, it is not unreasonable to imagine that he witnessed many of the elements presented in a given rhyme, thus making it a socially real tale if not a fully truthful autobiographical one.

Comedian David Chapelle's second-season series of skits titled "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong" is a brilliant satire of how keeping it real—defined partly as an exaggerated response to slights and small-scale mistreatments—can lead people to behave in destructive ways that ruin their lives. The skits are not directly about hip hop, but their scope as well as the series title signal that the "keeping it real"

brand of aggression made popular in hip hop has destructive consequences. For example, the first skit involves a black club scene where a man starts a fight with a champion of martial arts in response to a mild comment made to his girlfriend. He ends up with massive hospital bills and has to move in with his grandmother. In another, a black corporate director angrily rants in reply to a white coworker's off-color use of black slang, ending his tirade with "Thug Life! Bark! Bark! Wu-Tang!" In the next scene, he's seen working in a gas station, clearing snow from car windshields for a living.

Chapelle's comic skits make a sharp-witted point. Keeping it real is not just about telling one's truth; it is also about how a "keeping it real" attitude is wedded to a valorization of aggressive and self-destructive actions that have consequences—and how the attitude itself often creates the conditions to which it claims to be responding. The defense that anything rappers rap about is truthful and therefore valuable "ghetto" storytelling has been overused in ways that are destructive not only to hip hop itself but also to black communities and society at large. The claim that a rapper or hip hop in general "keeps it real" has become a catch-all defense of everything that comes out of a rapper's mouth, no matter how manufactured, invented, distorted, or insanely stereotypical it may be. The illusion that commercially manufactured rappers are unvarnished, gritty truth-tellers has gotten completely out of hand. It has been used to silence legitimate criticisms of the narrowing and increasingly parodic images of black urban life that dominate commercial hip hop. Indeed, saying that one is just keeping it real has become a kind of vaccine not only for rappers but for many industry representatives and corporate managers as well: This statement is a way of inoculating them from any and all criticism for their role in reducing and narrowing the stories told by the same young people they claim to represent—thus making commercial rap lyrics less real even while they claim ultimate realness.

Rappers and corporate managers claim they are "just representing" or "mirroring" society. On September 25, 2007, during the congressional hearing titled "From Imus to Industry: The Business of

Stereotypes and Degradation,” Alfred C. Liggins III, CEO of Radio One, claimed that its urban contemporary radio stations played “hip hop music which often reflects the realities that many in the audiences face and observe in everyday life.” His industry colleague, Doug Morris, chairman and CEO of Universal Music Group—which registers 25 percent of all music sales and houses rappers such as Lil’ Wayne, Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, Nelly, 50 Cent, Kanye West, and Busta Rhymes—said that “hip hop has always been one of the most reflective genres in our culture. . . . [Rappers’] words often reflect what they see and experience firsthand in their communities. Rap and hip hop may be the vehicle by which they escape lives of hopelessness, injustice and poverty. Their words reflect their lives, which regrettably, is often an unpleasant picture.”

This logic has been able to mask what has been a reduction of creative space in commercial hip hop brought about by the claim that what we hear there (even when it is fully manufactured, limited, and contained) is the unmediated truth. We must listen, we are told, because it is real; and who wants to look prudish, or worse, who wants to appear to support the silencing of the already marginal and silenced? Who wants to silence or criticize the stories coming from poor young inner-city black men who are finally getting a chance to speak about their environment? Who wants to undermine their chances at relatively legitimate financial success?

However, there are five urgent problems with the “keeping it real” defense in commercial hip hop:

1. It refers to an ever-narrowing slice of black ghetto street life.
2. The constant commercial promotion of thugs, hustlers, pimps, and hoes reflects *and* promotes this aspect of street life.
3. It denies the immense corporate influence on hip hop’s storytelling.
4. It contributes to the idea that black street life is black culture itself.
5. By reflecting images of black people as colorful and violent criminals, drug dealers, and sex fiends, this defense is intended

to protect the profit stream such images have generated; at the same time, however, it crowds out other notions of what it means to be black and reinforces the most powerful racist and sexist images of black people.

Let’s consider each of these problems below.

1. The stories of black street culture—which are at the heart of “keeping it real” rhetoric—do not represent all or even most of black ghetto life. But by letting commercial hip hop become a nearly constant caricature of gangstas, pimps, and hoes, we’ve come to equate black poverty with black street life. This denies and silences a wide range of black urban ghetto experiences and points of view and venerates predatory street culture. The black male street hustler/gangbanger and his friends, across various regions and in different dialects, isn’t the only reality to be told about black ghetto life. If radio- and television-promoted hip hop were really keeping it real—even in its portrayal of this narrow slice of black urban ghetto life—the perspectives on black street culture in commercial hip hop would be far more diverse. So, not only are these commercialized sources of hip hop not keeping it real in general, they’re not even keeping it real about the narrow slice of black ghetto street life they claim to be representing. What might we hear if commercial radio and televised hip hop were really keeping it real?

If black ghetto street life were really being represented, we’d hear far more rhymes about homelessness and the terrible intergenerational effects of drug addiction. There would be much more urban contemporary radio play of songs about fear and loss, and *real* talk about incarceration. Prison is not a rite of passage; it is a devastating and terrorizing place to be. And the loss of potentially life-changing opportunities that define life after prison are rarely exposed in mainstream hip hop lyrics, despite the deep impact that incarceration has on the lives of young black men especially. Where are the conversations about the terrorizing acts of violence against men that are commonplace in prison life? Where are the stories about women

who work two and three jobs to keep their children fed while hundreds of thousands of black fathers languish in American prisons? Where is the outrage about white racism and the anger and frustration about police brutality, economic isolation, and unemployment that define too much of black ghetto life? Is this not keeping it real?

Why are there so few music videos or radio-played songs about the extraordinary sacrifices that neighbors, teachers, coaches, mothers, fathers, friends, ministers, and others make to help keep communities together, to keep kids from falling into life-destroying potholes? Where are the regularly played songs about kids who have made it through the minefield of growing up within conditions of racialized poverty but who *haven't* dealt drugs to their neighbors, *haven't* joined a gang and terrorized kids who are just like them—kids who have graduated from high school and tried to figure out a nondestructive way to survive and maybe even get ahead? Finally, where are the stories about community and romantic love and vulnerability, and the high-rotation songs that promote visions of love for the black community and an investment in trying to make it better? I'm not talking about telling countless tales on CDs about needing to sell drugs to folks who live next door and then using monies generated from those CD sales to "give back" in the form of philanthropy. Nor am I talking about finding a "gangsta bitch" to ride shotgun in one's car as a model for love. Love and intimacy require enormous sacrifice and sustained vulnerability; the models of black manhood promoted in commercial hip hop are allergic to both.

Not all commercialized hip hop finds the need to constantly represent the issues listed here. Indeed, there are exceptional, underground songs and voices in hip hop (tokenized on commercial radio airplay and marginalized on music video rotation) that deal with a wider range of elements of black inner-city poverty and everyday life. Several highly marketable artists have songs on their albums that move beyond the caricatures of the gangsta-pimp-pho trinity, but these songs—despite their lyrical creativity and infectious beats—never see the light of radio play and in no way define the genre or these artists'

careers. For the most part, these songs are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Consider Ludacris's number-one-selling single, "Runaway Love," which tells the story of young girls' particular kind of suffering and vulnerability to domestic violence and sexual abuse. In one verse, he raps about a young girl who runs away because her drug-addicted mother refuses to believe that one of the men she brings over is sexually abusing the daughter. When Ludacris appeared at the 2007 Grammy Awards presentation for winning Best Rap Album and Best Rap Song for "Money Maker" (a song encouraging a woman to shake her body "like somebody's bout to pay ya"), his acceptance speech included a challenge to those who say that rap has no content. Yet powerful songs like "Runaway Love" do not contradict the reality that mainstream representations are clearly dominated by highly seductive portraits of street hustling, sex for money, and gangsta life. It's as if the existence of *any* exception somehow negates the rule. Pointing to exceptions is a shellgame; it keeps the truth of the matter obscured and in constant motion.

The "keeping it real" rhetoric is also a cover for perpetuating gross stereotypes about black people—stereotypes that have deep roots in American culture. Commercialized hip hop's distorted and narrow focus on one aspect of black ghetto street life—under the guise of truth telling—exaggerates and perpetuates negative beliefs about black people and obscures elements of life in poor black neighborhoods that contradict these myths.

From listening to too much commercialized, highly visible hip hop, one could get the impression that life in the ghetto is an ongoing party of violence and self-destruction with "style," that street culture is an all-consuming thing, that poor black folks have chosen to live in the ghetto, and that they have created the conditions under which they live. Who needs conservatives' attacks on poor black people, when we rep their vision ourselves, with corporate sponsorship? The "keeping it real" line is far too often used to justify the way that rappers and corporate executives rely on voyeuristic fantasies

about black people as pimps, hustlers, and gang-bangers to sell records. The fact of the matter is that artists who consistently bring too much complexity or too wide a range of nonstereotypical images of black men and women to commercial hip hop are destined to end up at the margins of commercial success.

2. The commercially promoted depiction of this aspect of street life as stylized, fun, and cool doesn't just reflect the destructive aspect; it energizes, elevates, and promotes it. Much of what gets to count as "keeping it real" storytelling in hip hop isn't just journalistic-style reportage of actual lived experience; it also works as a form of affirmation and glorification. Once black street life takes hold in mainstream commercialized hip hop and becomes a part of widely distributed and promoted popular, celebrity driven culture, it can no longer be understood only as a reflection of some aspect of life. It is also an agent of creation and reproduction. All of this talk about "reflecting" reality in a genre that has garnered so much cachet and media glamour is a deeply dishonest argument. It is ridiculous to claim that video after video and lyric after lyric on black commercial radio and television are not also cultivating street culture.

Tupac Shakur understood this dynamic and worried about how his attempt to tell compelling stories to and for an already existing criminally involved subculture might encourage other kids to join the fold—or at least to emulate the style and attitude associated with it. This is the dilemma he fretted over, as reflected in his statement in the film *Tupac: Resurrection* quoted at the beginning of the chapter. When he said that it might make thug life "look glorious to the guy that doesn't live that life," he acknowledged how his celebrity made thug life "cool." And Tupac's stories of ghetto life were far greater in range and complexity, less glamorous and celebratory, and more expressive of pain and loss than those that populate mainstream commercial hip hop today. He admitted to worrying about his power to negatively influence his fans. Tupac wanted to speak to those kids who were already caught up in the system because he felt they were

herded there and discarded. Their stories and lives were considered unworthy of social recognition, and he wanted to give them social space and value. But he also knew that a compelling recognition of that life—without strong critique and without real-life options—can encourage the very actions and behaviors that get kids involved in crime and violence in the first place.

3. The "keeping it real" argument denies the capacity of corporate power over commercial mainstream hip hop to move this genre away from complex, diverse images of black youth and toward stereotypical ones. The defense of a much less evolved "reflection of reality" argument, as advanced by Russell Simmons and others, glosses over the fact that as more profits are generated from various "takes" on the black gangsta, hustler, and pimp, more artists are encouraged to redefine themselves to fit those molds. When Simmons defended rap's commercial content by saying that "[p]overty creates these conditions and these conditions create these words" or that "the rap community always tells the truth," he used the "keeping it real" argument to hide extensive corporate influence over product content. Together, vast consolidation as well as marketing and sales strategies have compounded the narrowing of what we see and hear, and are then used to prove that hip hop's stories are being entirely self-generated from the black community.²

Corporate record companies, while claiming to be mere middle-men distributors of authentic black ghetto tales, are product makers, and they really do steer public attention toward and away from ideas and images. They want to sell records and thus they promote, tailor, encourage, discourage, sign, and release artists based on two crucial factors: what they think will sell as many copies as possible and what they think won't cause too much negative attention, friction, or resistance from society and government. Such decisions are based not on whether a particular story is true but on what kind of story has been selling. It is also based on what kind of story has not been under profit-threatening scrutiny in larger society.

Previous versions of the “keeping it real” stories found in hip hop in the mid-1990s, about youth rage directed at police and racism, generated a great deal of real social pressure that eventually shut down the commercial promotion of stories that included references to killing cops or contained strong social critique. This public outrage against lyrics expressing anger at what was perceived as unjust authority (which was, by the way, greater than the public outrage about police brutality itself) had the potential to reduce sales since distributors were being pressured not to carry such records in their stores. That sort of truth telling was apparently keeping it too real. So, where was the corporate defense of the need to listen to stories about black rage against police brutality? Why wasn’t this considered something that everyone needed to hear? When this rage and frustration threatened government authority, corporations feared they’d be regulated and would lose money, and thus they backed away, steering artists elsewhere. Apparently, black people shooting and killing themselves and insulting black women are profitable images and don’t threaten society. So, they are defended, and we, as part of our democratic duty, are encouraged not to turn away—not to protest the exploitation they reflect—but, instead, to consume.

Ghetto street culture is the central brand of blackness for sale in American popular culture. As astute hip hop commentator Bakari Kivwana has observed: “[M]any rap artists, regardless of where they fall in the food chain, have succeeded in developing relationships outside the music industry and are cashing in on the image of blackness in the most significant way. Artists like Russell Simmons realize that their own image is a brand.”⁴ And a signature feature of this brand is the caricatured portrayal of the suffering of the bottom 20 percent of black America.

4. The distorted and exaggerated use of “keeping it real” to claim that today’s commercial hip hop represents the truth of black ghetto life betrays the valuable history of black culture’s role as a community-affirming means of expressing a wide variety of perspectives and lived

experiences. There is a long tradition in African-American culture of using music, poetry, dance, religion, literature, and other expressions to spread affirmation to counter a society saturated in racial hatred and to “speak truth to power.” This is a strategy designed to prevent internalization and acceptance of hurtful mainstream ideas and to challenge injustice through speech. Speaking truth to power serves to unify people who feel that their points of view and life experiences are being overlooked, denied, and ignored. Hip hop comes out of this tradition, and despite the current state of commercial hip hop, many young fans, less visible artists, and activists are working to keep it alive. Furthermore, it is important to remember that not all of these wider, more complex portraits of black life are squeaky clean or politically progressive; hip hop has always included graphic and disturbing tales, and should continue to do so.

But the claim that today’s commercial hip hop is the unadulterated reality that naturally comes out of inner-city communities too often amounts to a manipulation of black prophetic histories of speaking truth to power in service of corporate, mainstream agendas. The casual and dishonest use of “keeping it real” dishonors the longer tradition of speaking truth to power. Those who uncritically defend all of hip hop’s commercial trading in ghetto tales tarnish this radical tradition and confuse young people who are less likely to see the difference between the two.

5. Other versions of black lived experience (no matter how broadly representative) don’t satisfy larger society’s stereotypes and fantasies about black youth and ghetto life, so record companies and their radio outlets don’t support them nearly as strongly. Truth notwithstanding, these other images are not as profitable. Although many critics and fans consider Mos Def, Common, and Talib Kweli to be talented hip hop artists, not one of these three has gone platinum; by contrast, Chamillionaire, Trick Daddy, and Three 6 Mafia have all reached this important record sales milestone. Thus, as David Banner pointed out during his testimony at the “From Imus

to Industry" hearings: "The truth is that what we do sells. Often artists try to do different types of music and their music doesn't sell." So, aspiring rappers tell the stories many Americans *want to hear*. Stories that reflect the fullness of black life, humanity, and depth of perspective do not turn a profit the way stories of ghetto street criminality and excess do. And this problem is not limited to hip hop. It reflects a broader and ignored facet of what kind of blackness continually gets created, invented, and then re-created in American society. Keeping it real has gone really, really wrong.

Since hip hop's portraits of street culture reflect a real and legitimate aspect of many poor inner-city communities, their realness can't be completely denied, and rappers and corporate representatives manipulate this fact, denying legitimate challenges to the corporate processing of and profiting from black community destruction. As it stands now, "keeping it real" is a strategy that traps poor black youth in a repetitious celebration of the rotten fruits of community destruction. We can change this by expanding our investments in the principle of telling hard-to-hear undesirable truths that underwrite "keeping it real" to emphasize a full exploration of the historical and contemporary realities of economic, social, and political oppression that have created a definition of realness as equivalent to black criminality and street culture. Knowledge about this history will enable detachment from the street-based ghetto fictions that have become an industry formula. Then, the brand of "realness" being sold should be forcefully challenged as a form of containment that limits youth expression through its unreal emphasis on smaller and smaller aspects of everyday life. It should be rejected on the grounds that it normalizes and reiterates symbols of black community destruction as black experience. "Keeping it real" must also be exposed as a cover for satisfying the titillating temptation of listening in on seemingly "authentic" black life as criminality.

Finally, "keeping it real" has to be forced open to honestly reflect the full range of black youth's realities, experiences, desires, vulnerabilities, sacrifices for common good, demands for justice, longings,

and hopes. These, too, are realities that many refuse to hear; but unlike a repetition of ghetto hustling and criminality, they empower, they propel us toward a future that improves black life. Defined this way, "keeping it real" has the power to envision a new, more affirming world drawn from the lives of black youth. These are the realities worth keeping.