

## **Rap and Realism: The Importance of Class-Based Authenticity as Exemplified by Gustave Courbet and Contemporary Rappers**

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### **Abstract**

Over a century and a half since his passing, scholars remember Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) as a French painter who expanded the boundaries of art through his rejection of traditionally imposed artistic conventions and cultivation of a larger-than-life persona. As a master of self-promotion and image creation, Courbet’s unique self-positioning and performance of identity are frequently explored within contemporary scholarship. However, extant literature has yet to consider the similarities between Courbet’s performance of identity and that of influential contemporary rap artists. Looking to artistic themes employed by the painter and his self-presentation, I argue that Courbet tailored his identity performance so that audiences conflated his artistic output with his public image, both of which drew upon his rural background to suggest a disadvantaged socioeconomic status—a background lauded by his supporters as providing Courbet with the authenticity required for artistic legitimacy. Furthermore, I argue that contemporary rap artists perform their identity in much the same manner. Like Courbet, contemporary rap artists continuously enact qualities associated with a low socioeconomic status and reference this social standing in their music to fuse their personal reputation and musical output, which affords these artists the authenticity required for success.

**Keywords:** Gustave Courbet; nineteenth-century Realism; authenticity; hip hop; rap music

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## Introduction

At the 1850 official art exhibition of the esteemed French Fine Arts Academy, known as the Salon, emerging artist Gustave Courbet shocked the public and critics alike with the exhibition of his now critically revered funeral scene, *A Funeral at Ornans* (*Un Enterrement à Ornans*) (1849–1850). Initially, Courbet’s work scandalized viewers, who felt that the “ugly” painting showcased “grotesque” subject matter unworthy of artistic representation, let alone the grand painterly proportions provided by Courbet (Chu, 2007; Riat, 2012). This painted controversy arrived on the heels of the French artist’s first major success, achieved one year prior (1849), with the Salon exhibition of *After Dinner at Ornans* (*L-Après Dînée à Ornans*)—a considerably smaller painting depicting domestic rural life. Despite receiving mixed reviews, *After Dinner at Ornans* earned the artist his first and only Academy-awarded gold medal (Clark, 1973).

While Courbet’s 1849 interior scene seemed to many to be a quaint and wholesome rural image, the painter’s exhibitory predecessor, *A Funeral at Ornans* (see Figure 1) caused absolute outrage (Champfleury, 1851). The audaciously monumental painting, which scholars now point to as one of the first Realist artworks, pictured a bourgeoisie funeral procession in Courbet’s rural hometown of Ornans (Needham, 1988; Schapiro, 1941). While the work is revered today, Salon viewers gawked and jeered at the canvas, which soon became one of the artist’s greatest controversies (Champfleury, 1851; Needham, 1988; Nochlin, 2007). Despite receiving strikingly different receptions, both pieces visually asserted Courbet’s regional identity and class status: in exhibiting these works, the painter publicly declared his socioeconomic origins through depictions of rural bourgeoisie. In exhibiting both paintings, Courbet claimed his membership within France’s underclass—a claim made repeatedly through both his performance of identity and his artwork, which bolstered his reputation as a “true” and legitimate Realist whom contemporary art historians credit with catalyzing Realism in the visual arts (Riat, 2012).

### Figure 1

*A Funeral at Ornans* (*Un Enterrement à Ornans*) by Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet, 1849–1850, [Online image]. [Musee d'Orsay](#).



In the nineteenth century, Realism emerged as an artistic movement that turned away from grand narratives and idealization towards depictions of modern life and the authentic expression of subject matter devoid of artifice (Nochlin, 1971). Over a century after the movement's dawn and the height of Courbet's career, the White rap artist Vanilla Ice evoked behaviour reminiscent of Realism's tenets and indicated that the beliefs that once motivated Courbet continued to impact artists. To prove his artistic credibility, Vanilla Ice fabricated a low socioeconomic origin by proclaiming that he grew up "in the ghetto" as the product of a broken family and was impacted by the gang violence, crime, and extreme poverty that is characteristic of American inner-city communities (Rose, 1994, p. 11). Despite occupying vastly different temporal, geographical, and cultural contexts, Gustave Courbet's authentic (albeit exaggerated) artistic declaration of identity and Vanilla Ice's inauthentic assertion were ultimately motivated by the same belief: that artistic acceptance hinges on individual authenticity acquired through socioeconomic disadvantage.

By combining art historical, sociological, and musical scholarship with a rigorous analysis of nineteenth-century visual art and contemporary rap,<sup>2</sup> I argue that Courbet repeatedly referenced an exaggerated rural socioeconomic origin in his life and work since Realist circles believed artistic legitimacy to depend on an authenticity derived from the qualities associated with lower class origins—an attitude mirrored in contemporary rap music. Assessing the similarities and nuanced differences between nineteenth-century Realist art and contemporary rap reveals a pervasive belief that authenticity is linked to experiences of poverty, which raises questions concerning the potentially exploitative nature of consumer demands for "authentic" art.

Since this article discusses racial and socioeconomic forces, I believe that it is important to acknowledge my social location as a White scholar and rap consumer. As such, when discussing the African American cultural form of rap music, I draw on the work of various African American scholars (see Chideya, 2000; Kelley, 1996; Ogbar, 2007; Rose, 1994) and do not intend to speak over nor on behalf of Black or socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals with this article. Rather, it is my hope that this research contributes to pre-existing scholarship concerning artist identity creation and provokes readers to consider the implications of their consumer demands. Furthermore, it is my hope that this article provides a new perspective through which historical and contemporary artists across modalities can be compared to reveal trends within the greater art historical lineage that continue to have cultural traction today.

### **Gustave Courbet: The Master of Persona Production**

By using self-presentation and artistic themes to emphasize his regional and socioeconomic origins, Courbet created a reputation for himself as a naïve peasant that critics conflated with his artwork—an interrelationship Realist contemporaries credited with providing Courbet the authenticity required for artistic legitimacy (Schapiro, 1941). In 1839, Courbet travelled from Ornans to Paris in the hope of pursuing art professionally (Moran, 2013). Despite hailing from relative wealth, Courbet possessed qualities indicative of rurality, including his provincial manners, accent, and clothing, which urbanites associated with a socioeconomic lack that set the artist apart from the city's artistic milieu (Moran, 2013; Needham, 1988). Actual and aspiring members of Parisian artistic circles typically resembled urban dandies—men concerned with their physical appearance who presented themselves with stylistic care and engaged with "refined" culture (Baudelaire, 1863). Fresh from the French provinces and embodying attributes associated

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<sup>2</sup> Rap is a subset of hip hop: hip hop is a culture whereas rap is a musical genre born from hip hop (Orejuela, 2015).

with the countryside, Courbet was indeed a far departure from his desired contemporaries. However, rather than attempting to assimilate to the expectations of the city’s artistic milieu or eradicate markers of his rurality, the painter exaggerated and made these features the crux of his public persona as well as a recurring motif within his artwork (Cernuschi, 2020).

Courbet made numerous references to his rural roots throughout his oeuvre, notably in what is thought by many to be his most famous piece, *A Funeral at Ornans*. The manner in which Courbet depicts his native region and bourgeoisie compatriots announces the artist’s class identity on a grand scale typically reserved for more prestigious subjects, such as members of the gentry as well as historical or mythologized subjects (Clark, 1973). In addition to referencing his hometown, Courbet repeatedly depicted the rural working class or peasantry performing tedious and tiresome physical labour, as seen in *The Stone Breakers* (*Les Casseurs de Pierres*) (1849) and *The Wheat Sifters* (*Les Cribleuses de Blé*) (1853). *The Stone Breakers* (see Figure 2) displays two men breaking stones at the side of a country road, their bodies bent and stooped, fully engaged with the undertaking of arduous physical labour, while dressed in tattered and ill-fitting clothing. Similarly, *The Wheat Sifters* (see Figure 3) presents the realities of rural

**Figure 2**

*The Stone Breakers* (*Les Casseurs de Pierres*) by Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet, 1849, [Online image; original image destroyed]. (2023, August 2) In [Wikipedia](#).



**Figure 3**

*The Wheat Sifters* (*Les Cribleuses de Blé*) by Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet, 1854, [Online image]. [Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes](#).



labour through its depiction of two women and a young boy in a bleak interior where they are sifting grain—a low-class chore that has taken a toll on the sifters, as evidenced by the figure seen slumped on the floor while continuing her work. Both compositions capture the exhaustion and rigour of rural labour. The physical demeanours of the figures infuse both works with a sense of weariness, thereby creating a realistic image of everyday life for rural workers. As testaments to the harsh realities experienced by those occupying the lower rungs of the nation’s social ladder, both pieces enabled Courbet to assert his provincial ties and allegiance to the “real people” of France (Buchon, 1977). However, Courbet understood that his paintings alone were insufficient

to solidify his desired reputation as an authentic countryperson.

As a result of this deficit, Courbet cultivated his public image so that his performance of identity and artistic themes reiterated each other, Courbet made aspects of his provincial identity a focal point of his public persona by tailoring his behaviour to conform to Parisian understandings of rural citizens. Since the world of fine art was centred in Paris, Courbet's urban audience valued "high art," enjoyed privileged social standing, and generally had limited first-hand experience with the rural world (Clark, 1969). Due to their lack of knowledge concerning the countryside, its inhabitants, and its culture, Parisians subscribed to clichéd notions of rural people. Based on these generalizations, Courbet's urban audience saw rural society as a homogenous class comprised of uneducated, naïve, brutish, rough, and inferior working-poor peasants (Clark, 1969; Schapiro, 1941). The quintessential "countryman" was seen as an embodiment of these qualities; thus, Courbet typically fashioned himself in the clothing of a rural labourer, exaggerated his regional accent, feigned illiteracy, and assumed the primitivity expected of countryfolk, so that he came to epitomize rurality for his urban audience (Cernuschi, 2020; Morgan, 2013). In fact, the painter was described in a 1873 police report as possessing "the air of a jeering peasant" despite having lived in Paris for over thirty years (Clark, 1973).

Interestingly, this performance of identity was not technically fraudulent: Courbet's family did hail from rural France. However, Courbet exaggerated his rurality since he came from a wealthy family of landowners situated at the zenith of the rural social hierarchy (Cernuschi, 2020; Clark, 1969). To the urban individual, though, there was no such social distinction: those from the countryside were seen as an impoverished, simpleminded, and homogenous population (Cernuschi, 2020; Clark, 1969). Courbet leveraged the ignorance of his audience by exaggerating his rurality and cultivating a public image that embodied popular perceptions of the quintessential countryperson (Cernuschi, 2020). This embodiment coloured the painter's reputation with the "primitivist" qualities lauded by those in Courbet's Realist circle (Schapiro, 1941, p. 166).

### **Realism and the Question of Class-Based Authenticity**

Realism was a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement that scholars and art historians largely concur took shape during the 1830s and gained traction in the 1840s–1850s (Needham, 1988). One of the movement's earliest supporters, French writer Champfleury (1855), described the movement as chiefly concerned with the realistic artistic representation of everyday life: "Homer might be a Realist—after all he observed and described with precision the customs of his time" (p. 39). Similarly, in her seminal work on nineteenth-century Realism, art critic Linda Nochlin (1971) explained that the movement aimed to "give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life" (p. 13). In the movement's quest to capture realistic representations of ordinary existence, Realism rejected the artistic conventions and techniques celebrated by the French Academy of Fine Arts (Needham, 1988). In doing so, Realism rebuked the dominant visual art forms of Neoclassicism and Romanticism (Needham, 1988). As the older of the two stylistic modes, Neoclassicism sought to emulate ancient Greco-Roman art and aesthetics, whereas Romanticism was concerned with the representation of human emotion (Janson & Rosenblum, 1984). Both artistic styles glorified their subjects, which resulted in emotionally expressive, dramatic, and grandiose works that typically depicted historical moments or mythologized narratives uninformed by the conditions of everyday experience.

Many champions of Realism praised Courbet's Realist paintings and the artist himself. Writers, including Champfleury and Buchon, were early endorsers of the painter and pointed to his work as paradigmatic of Realism since Courbet's paintings not only showcased lower-class realities but shared with their producer the qualities associated with rural settings (Schapiro, 1941). Champfleury, in particular, conflated artistic authenticity with rurality since he believed that socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals possessed primitive and naïve qualities that, according to Realism, amounted to authenticity (Schapiro, 1941). French philosopher and friend of the painter Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1865) touched on the centrality of Courbet's rural identity to his success by writing that the artist owed "an enormous amount of the good luck he had [as an artist] to liv[ing] in Ornans" for, had he grown up elsewhere or within an urban context, "he would not be himself" nor the Courbet the world came to know (p. 53). Due to Courbet's claimed socioeconomic origins and lived experience as a rural citizen, his Realist contemporaries believed his images of the countryside to be rooted in truth and to reflect rural realities presumably witnessed or experienced first-hand. Writing in 1856, Buchon asserted that "Courbet's works are the natural flowering of his personality, in the midst of his family, in that lovely valley of Ornans" (p. 46). Buchon's remark suggests that Courbet's countryside images were the innate and authentic by-products of the artist's regional and class identities. Positioned as a rural "insider," not only was Courbet's artwork validated as authentic, but the painter himself was verified as genuine and, as such, he was declared a champion of "the people" (Castagnary, 1863).

Within nineteenth-century French Realist literature, the phrases "the people" and "the real people" were repeatedly wielded as descriptors loaded with class-based generalizations about the working and rural classes (Schapiro, 1941). Notably, two of Courbet's foremost Realist supporters wrote that the artist was "a man of the people" (Champfleury, 1855, p. 43) whose artwork represented "the people" (Castagnary, 1863, p. 48) due to its compositional content. Within Realist circles, working and rural classes were deemed the "true" citizens of France and awarded a "realness" not typically extended to elites since the latter were believed to be disassociated from reality and spared from its brutalities (Schapiro, 1941). Since the concept of truth was central to Realism, and its advocates believed that the rural and working classes were an extension of the truth, artistic creations by rural cultural producers were highly regarded within Realist circles as "authentic" artworks (Goldman, 1967).

Furthermore, rural art objects were praised for their detachment from the artistic conventions traditionally imposed by the Academy (Goldman, 1967; Schapiro, 1941). Proponents of Realism perceived the techniques and principles taught by the Academy as producing insincere artwork (Goldman, 1967). As such, the movement largely rejected artwork created by artists who had been trained by the Academy (Goldman, 1967; Needham, 1988). Courbet satisfied the version of Realism to which his earliest supporters subscribed, in which Realist works were verified as authentic if they captured a nonidealized reality that contained a peasant-like lack of sophistication (Bouvier, 1977). This belief, which underlay the production of Courbet's public persona, provides a lens through which to gauge the artist's performance of identity as persisting within various contemporary art forms, particularly among American rap artists who similarly aim to create unidealized representations of reality.

## The Rapper's Quest for "Realness"

The nineteenth-century Realist notion that artistic legitimacy hinges on an authenticity derived from a low socioeconomic standing similarly permeates contemporary hip-hop culture, which dictates rap artists' performance of identity and the content of their music (Armstrong, 2004). To comprehend the role of authenticity within rap music, it must be understood that the genre emerged from predominantly African American and Latino inner-city communities, often referred to as the "ghetto," "projects," or "hood" (Kelley, 1996; Ogbar, 2007; Perry, 2004). These sites have been described by ethnomusicologist Fernando Orejuela (2015) as "plagued by poverty, community decay, and the proliferation of drugs and gang violence" (p. 10). In the late 1960s, members of these communities, primarily young African American men, turned to rap to express the brutal realities foisted upon them by the institutional and systemic racism that undergirds the United States of America (Ogbar, 2007; Orejuela, 2015). Detailing the severe realities of street life, the genre emerged as a form of social realism (Kelley, 1996). Rappers provided first-hand accounts of their lives as socioeconomically disadvantaged citizens and, in doing so, shared not only their own experiences but those of a marginalized collective (Kelley, 1996). Despite rap music's origins in underprivileged African American and Latino inner-city communities in the New York area, dominant discourses in hip-hop culture continue to favour the Black inner-city experience as the locus of authentic rap (Cutler, 2014; Ogbar, 2007). This cultural preference is largely due to the fact that, during the 1980s and 1990s when rap music first entered the mainstream, those who emerged as its central representatives were almost exclusively young, Black, working-class men who grew up in the inner city (Ogbar, 2007).

Rap music thus came to be understood within society at large as an art form pioneered by Black communities to document their experiences in the United States. This understanding became central to rap, with the New York hip-hop group Public Enemy referring to the genre as "black America's CNN" due to rap's fact-filled depictions of life for the nation's underclass (Chideya, 2000, p. 96). One frontman for the benchmark rap group N.W.A. similarly asserted that the genre was a true-to-form representation of reality: Ice Cube remarked that he and his fellow rappers often referred to themselves as "underground street reporters" because "We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less" (as cited in Kelley, 1996, p. 121). Musically documenting their lives as inner-city Black men, the lyrical content of many rappers was characterized by the harsh realities of America's impoverished communities.

The historical origins of rap, coupled with the genre's documentative function, gave rise to two overlapping expectations: first, that rap lyrics would impart a sincere account of the artist's lived experiences; second, that the artist's lived experiences would reflect a low socioeconomic origin (Cutler, 2014; Ogbar, 2007). These two assumptions were not only central to the genre but also functioned as requirements for artistic authenticity (Armstrong, 2004; Cutler, 2014). The authenticity of rap artists is of such paramount importance that an artist's "realness" determines their success, thereby necessitating that rappers continuously verify their authenticity through their music and performed identities (Armstrong, 2004; Ogbar, 2007). Even in the late 1980s and 1990s when rap became a more corporatized and lucrative industry, rap's origins in and connections to disenfranchised communities remained the benchmark of artistic authenticity (Ogbar, 2007; Orejuela, 2015). As such, the genre was dominated by musical assertions of inner-city Black authenticity and the violent, crime-ridden narratives of gangsta rap (Kelley, 1996; Ogbar, 2007).

Within this context, the White American rapper Vanilla Ice emerged and was automatically set apart from his industry peers because of his race (Ogbar, 2007). As a White man participating

in an art form largely regarded as belonging to Black America, Ice's legitimacy as a rapper was questioned, challenged, and criticized (Cutler, 2014). In addition to challenges posed by the artist's race, Ice's lyrics failed to detail socioeconomic misfortune or the explicit content of gangsta rap, which further inspired doubt regarding the rapper's authenticity (Ogbar, 2007). To combat these threats to his persona, Ice performed an identity that appropriated Black vernacular, dance, and style (both on and offstage) to prove his place within the genre (Ogbar, 2007). Ice initially found great commercial success as a rapper and achieved a variety of accolades with his music (Ogbar, 2007; Rose, 1994). In 1990, Ice was the first rap artist to achieve a No. 1 song on the Billboard Hot 100 (Ogbar, 2007). Moreover, Ice sold more albums than any rap predecessor with the release of his studio debut; however, his success was short-lived (Ogbar, 2007; Rose, 1994).

Tellingly, when Ice released his second album in 1994, the album failed to chart and sold fewer than 50,000 copies in the United States (Ogbar, 2007). The once commercial king of rap suffered plummeting popularity because Ice was exposed for lying about his identity in a musical genre that values authenticity above all else (Armstrong, 2004; Rose, 1994). In an interview with *New York Times* reporter Stephen Holden (1990), Ice recounted his upbringing in a Miami ghetto, which included tales of gang activity, violence, poverty, and crime. However, Ice did not grow up in a Floridian ghetto but, in fact, hailed from a predominately White, middle-class suburb in Dallas, Texas, with relatively low crime and poverty rates (Ogbar, 2007; Rose, 1994). A story issued by the *Dallas Morning News* exposed this truth and announced the rapper as a fraud, which cast Ice's fabricated tale as a desperate attempt to prove his place in hip hop (Perkins, 1990; Rose, 1994). This exposure was disastrous for the artist, who became a social pariah whose musical career, commercial success, and artistic reputation have yet to recover (Ogbar, 2007). The story of Vanilla Ice's fabricated identity and the catastrophic effect of its exposure is a cautionary tale that sheds light on the prominence of individual authenticity within rap. As hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994) argued, the story of Ice "hints strongly at the degree to which ghetto-blackness is a critical code" required for the authenticity of rap artists (p. 12). In fabricating this false origin story, Ice attempted to satisfy rap's foundational belief that individual authenticity is accrued by artists with roots in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Cutler, 2014; Ogbar 2007).

Since a sacrosanct code of authenticity contingent upon socioeconomic origins permeates rap, artists assert their "realness" by referencing their regional and class identities through their presentation of self and artistic output (Ogbar, 2007). An authentic rapper is an artist whose public image is consistent with their music, which embodies the qualities and narratives associated with America's impoverished urban communities (Kelley, 1996). These urban areas are social sites equipped with their own distinctive cultural practices, which rap artists are required to epitomize (Kubrin, 2005; Rose, 1994). Thus, to rap about the realities of the "hood," rappers must "be hood," and both enact and embody the behaviours and characteristics associated with disenfranchised communities. The expectation that rappers embody qualities ascribed to Black urban communities is manifested through rappers' self-presentation, behaviour, language, style, and performance of identity. For example, to assert an authentic socioeconomic status through self-presentation, a rapper may fashion themselves in oversized clothing, flashy designer pieces, basketball sneakers, oversized gold chains, or Timberland boots (Cutler, 2014; Perry, 2004). While this self-fashioning may seem contradictory since some of these listed items can be perceived as indicators of wealth, these items have found success amongst American urban youth as products of conspicuous consumption; thus, certain brands or products have become associated with the inner city (Cutler, 2014).



However, an authentic rapper not only dresses the part but also plays it by employing slang common to their neighbourhood of origin, using illicit substances, engaging with firearms, and participating in criminal activities (Allen, 1996; Kubrin, 2005). For example, since the 1990s, numerous mainstream rap artists (such as Snoop Dogg, Lil Wayne, Gucci Mane, and Young Thug) have been incarcerated due to criminal activity undertaken while participating in the “rap game,”<sup>3</sup> which, in return, has bolstered the artists’ perceived authenticity (Aswad, 2010; Gee, 2023; Grow, 2014; Kelley, 1996). Hip-hop scholars typically characterize rap artists as performing a “gangsta aesthetic” or “outlaw image,” which holds that authentic rappers embody characteristics associated with Black urban masculinity (Kelley, 1996, p. 119; Perry, 2004, p. 103). While these socially constructed qualities vary regionally, consumers expect rappers to act tough, engage in criminal activities, employ violence, and habitually consume illicit substances (Allen, 1996; Perry, 2004). In turn, rap artists embody this expectation through lyrical claims and self-presentation. For example, in his career-defining song “Love Sosa” (2012), rapper Chief Keef lyrically evokes the violence expected of contemporary rap artists by declaring “Hit him with that Cobra, now that boy slumped over”—a reference to shooting someone with a “Colt King Cobra” or .357 Magnum revolver.

While boasts of violence are commonplace within the genre, rappers also often reference impoverishment to align themselves with the gangsta aesthetic. For example, in his song “3Hunna” (2012), Chief Keef affiliates himself with the gansta aesthetic by asserting his regional identity and class status through the lyrical mentions of “O’Block” (a nickname for the Chicago neighborhood Keef grew up in) and “I keep this shit 3Hunna” (a reference to the Black Disciples Gang) (Main, 2014; McVeigh, 2012). Through references to his impoverished neighbourhood of origin and the ruthless BD gang, Keef asserts his authenticity by attaching the characteristics associated with this region and gang to his own image (Knox, 2008). The self-identifying statements that align the rapper with the gangsta aesthetic are reenforced by Keef’s self-presentation in the song’s music video, in which the rapper is shown throwing gang signs on the streets of O’Block and inside run-down homes (DJ Kenn, 2012). Since Keef’s self-presentation and lyrics reference characteristics associated with the “hood,” the rapper proves his authenticity as a “real” artist—an image that rappers must maintain throughout their careers.

The commercialization of rap music in the 1990s provided rappers with unprecedented levels of fortune and fame (Basu, 1998). Artists raised in poverty now had access to the financial and social resources required to overcome former disadvantages (Hess, 2007). This cultural shift was celebrated by mainstream artists, including The Notorious B.I.G. and Wu-Tang Clan, who both musically recounted their disenfranchised origins while celebrating their achieved successes, thus giving rise to the rags-to-riches narratives now commonplace in rap (Hess, 2007). Arguably the most famous of these narratives is The Notorious B.I.G.’s multiplatinum track “Juicy” (1994), which contrasts the difficult circumstances of the rapper’s early life with his life post-success:

When I was dead broke, man, I couldn’t picture this, 50-inch screen, money-green leather sofa ... Celebratin’ every day, no more public housin’, thinkin’ back on my one-room shack, now my mom pimps an [Acura] with minks on her back.

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the incarceration of these artists is a part of the larger cultural phenomenon of injustice in America in which Black men are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014; Hinton & Cook, 2021; Rothwell, 2015).

The dramatic shifts detailed by The Notorious B.I.G. were experienced by a growing number of rap artists as consumer appetite for rap increased, providing many rappers with considerable fortunes. As such, similar stories of economic and social improvement proliferated and became a common motif within the genre (Basu, 1998; Hess, 2007). As previously established, by lyrically referencing one's disadvantaged socioeconomic origins, rap artists assert their authenticity; however, the existence and proliferation of the rags-to-riches narrative suggests that rappers must continually prove their legitimacy.

The expectation that a rapper's music reflects an authentic "reality" persists, even as artists achieve levels of success that cause their everyday lives to no longer resemble their former life in the hood. However, connections to impoverished inner-city communities and their presumed norms remain a predominant source of hip-hop authenticity. As such, commercially successful rap artists must continually remind listeners of their impoverished origins to maintain their credibility as authentic rappers (Balaji, 2012; Hess, 2007). As hip-hop scholar Mickey Hess (2007) explained, "Once artists establish [authenticity] through the performance of self in their first releases, they must work to remain true to an artist identity that they have successfully negotiated with the audience" (p. 60). For example, rapper Kodak Black first established his artistic authenticity by drawing listeners' attention to his upbringing in the projects: Kodak entitled his first mixtape *Project Baby* (2015) and referred to himself as such in his debut single "No Flockin'" (2014). Kodak was brought up in Pompano Beach's Golden Acres Housing Projects, considered one of the city's poorest areas and, as such, experienced a life marked by poverty prior to entering the genre (MacAdmas, 2014). Named one of rap's most promising figures in 2016 by American hip-hop magazine *XXL*, Kodak quickly found commercial success and reached No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2017 with the release of his freshman album (Billboard, 2023; *XXL*, 2016). Despite these accolades, the artist continued to recall his poor origins to reassure listeners that he had maintained his connection to the projects. On "Unexplainable" and "Still in the Streets" from the artist's aptly titled *Project Baby 2* (2017), the rapper reasserts his authenticity and assuages his audience by declaring, "I'm rich but I'm ridin' through the projects," adding that he is "still in the streets" despite finding mainstream success. These lyrics are further bolstered by the album's cover art, which depicts the artist in front of a mansion situated in an impoverished community. These rags-to-riches narratives and lyrical mentions enable artists to share their successes while satisfying genre expectations of authenticity sourced from their impoverished backgrounds.

As sociologist Richard A. Peterson (2005) argued in his critical work on the construction of authenticity, the authentication of musical performers is ultimately in the hands of music consumers (p. 1091). Peterson explained that, due to consumers functioning as the authenticators of artists, the assertion of individual authenticity is best understood as a marketing tactic (p. 1088). Through this perspective, it can be argued that rappers' assertions of authenticity reflect the demands of their consumer bases. Thus, the tendency for contemporary rappers to reference their impoverished origins throughout their oeuvre not only suggests that authenticity is an ongoing project for artists; this tendency also hints at a widespread desire to consume experiences of poverty. Rap artists are required to come from poverty, enact poverty, and integrate experiences of poverty in their music, even after attaining socioeconomic success, or run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic and thereby undesirable by their audiences (Hess, 2007). This interrelationship reveals what *is* desirable for rap's consumer base: commodified experiences of poverty and oppression. Ironically, the consumer base rappers find themselves answering to is largely comprised of White, middle-class listeners whose suburban lifestyles bear little resemblance to the Black inner-city narratives that characterize the genre (Armstrong, 2004; Hess,

2007; Yousman, 2003). In eagerly consuming music that reflects the struggles experienced by underprivileged populations, White middle-class consumers vicariously experience oppression from positions of racial privilege. Tellingly, the multiplatinum rapper J. Cole addressed the racial and socioeconomic disparities between the producers and consumers of rap in his song “1985” (2018), in which Cole offers younger rappers this advice:

These white kids love that you don’t give a fuck, ‘cause that’s exactly what’s expected when your skin black ... they wanna see you pop a pill, they wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels, and somewhere deep down ... I gotta keep it real, they wanna be black and think your song is how it feels.

Explaining White America’s fascination with rap as a desire to vicariously experience Blackness and co-opt Black identity through the perspective of a stereotypical Black urban male, Cole touches on broader issues of spectacular consumption and domestic exoticization in relation to hip hop. Spectacular consumption is defined by scholars Watts and Orbe (2002) as “a process through which the relations among cultural forms, the culture industry, and the lived experiences of persons are shaped by public consumption” and turned into spectacle (p. 1). White consumption of contemporary rap music is a manifestation of spectacular consumption in which authentic Black experiences are commodified as spectacular products purchased by White audiences (Watts & Orbe, 2002; Yousman, 2003). As rap becomes increasingly commodified, the genre has transformed into an industry that answers to the calls of consumers by tailoring its products to meet their demands. White consumers, who represent a large portion of the genre’s purchasers, largely prefer songs containing depictions of extreme violence, aggression, misogyny, and life in the “hood” (Yousman, 2003). Media scholar Bob Yousman (2003) argued that White consumption of rap music is not concerned with authenticity per se so much as “the appearance of authenticity:” for White Americans “who [grew] up imagining the Black world as a world of violence and chaos, the more brutal the [evoked] imagery [of rap music], the more true-to-life it seems” (pp. 378–379). Furthermore, since the lyrical content of rap abides by longstanding White perceptions of and presumptions about Black Americans, White consumers come to believe that “they are being offered a peek into ‘real’ Black life” or exclusive access to a reality that is otherwise unavailable (Yousman, 2003, p. 379).

Since success depends upon an authenticity determined by consumers, it can be argued that rap artists who attain mainstream success are likely to fulfill White expectations of Black identity (Armstrong, 2004; Ogbar, 2007; Peterson, 2005; Yousman, 2003). This phenomenon thereby restricts expressions of Black identity to pernicious stereotypes rooted in centuries of racism enshrined by institutionalized oppression and arguably furthers the racial oppression foisted upon Black Americans (Ogbar, 2007; Yousman, 2003). As articulated by Yousman (2003),

[O]ne could make the argument that the cultural industries’ relentless marketing of Black male violence and corruption in television, films, and popular music makes a clear and consistent contribution to a social reality in which Black men are shot by police without provocation, people of colour are jailed at rates far exceeding the incarceration rates of White criminals, and candidates win elections by preaching racially coded law-and-order messages. (p. 382)

Furthermore, in relation to the arts, this process of spectacular consumerism contributes to the continued domination of White perspectives in popular culture, since White expectations of Black identity are rewarded and thereby motivated. However, as argued by historian Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (2007), it would be incorrect to presume that the gangsta themes of contemporary rap are solely the product of an historically rooted “white appetite for self-destructive black violence and exoticism” since “artists also determine their own perspectives, along with larger institutional forces” and, as such, Black creativity and artistry must be acknowledged as well as consumer culpability (p. 69).

## Conclusion

Attempting to gain access to experiences that are more harsh than those typically encountered through the consumption of art is not new nor limited to the White consumption of rap music. Survivalist novels, such as Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Paulsen’s *Hatchet* (1986), and literary tales of inflicted hardship, such as McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* (1996), have long captivated audiences—but what do these trends reveal about consumers? Why do audiences enjoy art detailing the suffering of others? While these questions remain largely unanswered, one thing is certain: what connects the individual reading a survivalist story from the comfort of their home to White middle-class rap consumers listening to Black inner-city narratives from the suburbs is their respective positions of privilege. Neither consumer has personally experienced what is being artistically conveyed and, as such, a disconnect is created on the basis of privilege—a disconnection that similarly existed between Courbet and his audience. Courbet’s viewers were comprised of urban individuals whose lives bore little resemblance to the lives of the working-class rural labourers depicted in Courbet’s paintings (Clark, 1969). The urban audience of Courbet and the White middle-class consumer base of contemporary rap are united by their desire to consume depictions of suffering that they have not experienced due to their positions of privilege. Additionally, both groups project expectations about artistic content that determines the authenticity of the work and its producer (Clark, 1969; Schapiro, 1941; Yousman, 2003).

The artistic embodiment of qualities associated with particular racial and socioeconomic groups has been lauded by nineteenth-century Realist and contemporary rap circles. This personification is a determinative factor for the success of artists within both artistic genres. Courbet exaggerated his rurality by manipulating urban perceptions of rural citizens and, as such, came to exist in the public imagination as an archetypical countryperson, which infused his artistic oeuvre. This conflation provided the painter with a necessary air of authenticity, as noted by Realist supporter Buchon (1856): “This [was] really one of the first times that the ignorance and lack of training characteristic of peasants [was] considered an asset in an artist” (p. 45). While Courbet may have been the one of the first artists for whom ignorance and “primitivity” were assets, he was not the last. These qualities are similarly valued in contemporary rappers as prerequisites for authenticity. Just as Courbet’s audience believed roughness and naïveté to be innate to France’s rural citizens, contemporary audiences may erroneously believe ignorance, violence, and criminality to be innate to the Black men who reside in America’s inner cities (Clark, 1969; Ogbar, 2007; Yousman, 2003). Rap artists are expected to embody the characteristics associated with Black urban masculinity and share lyrics confirming such qualities to prove their authenticity and bolster their reputations. Both Courbet and contemporary rappers perform their identity in such way that they come to exist in the minds of their audiences as quintessential members of an

underclass—a conceptual link that awards each an authenticity that is not only highly valued but necessary.

While nineteenth-century French Realism and contemporary rap music are rarely linked, these two seemingly unrelated artistic modes are united by the underlying belief that the prerequisite for artistic legitimacy is individual authenticity derived from a low socioeconomic origin. Both movements have the foundational aim of creating a non-idealized art reflective of the experiences of disenfranchised groups, and both hold that these representations must be created by members of an underprivileged class to be deemed authentic (Goldman, 1967; Orejuela, 2015). Courbet and rap artists both tailor their performances of identity to highlight qualities ascribed to their disadvantaged socioeconomic origins to reiterate the low-class themes employed in their work (Armstrong, 2004). Referencing their regional and class identities through their self-presentation and artistic output, Courbet and rap artists demonstrate their artistic legitimacy in their respective fields, in which individual authenticity is prioritized as belonging exclusively to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ultimately, the evident parallels between these two artistic genres raise broader questions concerning the demand for a “truthful” and “authentic” art connected to poverty, what these demands reveal about us as privileged consumers, and what potential harms to disadvantaged communities might arise from consumer desires for commodified experiences of poverty and oppression.

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