The Authentication of a Hybrid Identity through Music: We don’t say ‘you know what I’m sayin’/T dot says ‘yuh dun know’

This paper, through textual analysis of songs from Kardinal Offishall’s album, Quest for Fire: Firestarter, Vol. 1, explains how the juxtaposition of West Indian idioms with American slang authenticates his hybrid identity as Canadian. Although Kardinal does not overtly state that America is the binary subject, this meaning can be inferred. For instance, unlike American hip-hop where social-location issues over the community with which a hip-hop artist and fan identifies himself or herself (McLeod, 1999) circulate, that is, one’s sense of ‘not forgetting where you come from’ is based largely on socio-economic terms (i.e. the streets versus the suburbs), the narrative of Kardinal’s songs suggests that social-cultural issues, based on ethnic-cultural terms (i.e. Canada versus the West Indies) inform the mores of his music. Additionally, in “BaKardi Slang,” when Kardinal says, “You think we all Jamaican, when nuff man are Trini’s, Bajans, Grenadians and a hole heap of Haitians,” he is also defining the boundaries of citizenship, and asking the question, who owns Canadian hip-hop?

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, hip-hop has moved from the economically and socially deprived New York neighbourhoods of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx to firmly occupying space within the mainstream. Arguably, it is the most dominant force in popular music today (Armstrong, 2004). In America, since the early 1990s, a plethora of research has been conducted on hip-hop ranging from critical analysis of violence in hip-hop; Afrocentricity theory and rap music; the examination of rap music aesthetics; historical analysis of hip-hop’s many art forms; and the influence of African diasporic traditions on hip-hop music (Aldridge and Garlin, 1993; Cummings and Roy, 2002; Keyes, 2002; Perkins, 1996; Rose, 1994; Woldu, 2001). Importantly, during hip-hop’s dramatic ascendancy, it has been caught in a contradictory situation that other subcultural groups confronted with widespread acceptance previously faced; that is, being inside a mainstream culture artists had, in part, defined themselves as being against (McLeod, 1999).

In response to this contradiction, American scholars argue that artists invoke authenticity claims as a means of demarcating hip-hop’s cultural identity. For example, Keyes (2002) opines that “while rap continues to cross over into wider acceptance, many rap artists strive to remain underground, refusing to identify with a pop market insisting that staying real necessitates … authenticity, and a continued connection with the streets” (p. 122). In his 1999 study, Kembrew McLeod mapped the range of meanings associated with authenticity through the use of semantic dimensions, articulating the strategies
employed by hip-hop artists to preserve the genre’s authentic identity. Out of the six dimensions devised by McLeod, the social-location is most pertinent to this paper. According to his definition, this refers to the “community with which a hip-hop artist … identifies himself or herself” (p. 142). For U.S. rappers, the inner city location commonly referred to as ‘the streets,’ represents an authentic black reality.

Conversely, European scholars have explored how artists have appropriated hip-hop, eventually performing the genre for themselves. In their examination of hip-hop in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Greece, Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2003) found that “virtually no attempt had been made to compare local variants of rap with one another or to examine how this emancipation process is reflected in rap lyrics” (p. 463) and while “rap in Europe follows traditions established by U.S. rap it is not identical to it” (p. 475), because one of the imperatives of European rap discourse is to “express local concerns and to reflect local social realities” (p. 476).

In this paper, I examine the lyrics of Kardinal Offishall’s album *Quest for Fire: Firestarter, Vol. 1*, exploring how his rhetoric and vernacular coincides with, and departs from, hip-hop in the U.S. and appropriated hip-hop in Europe, Africa, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Australia. Since Canada prides itself on being a cultural mosaic wherein people are encouraged to maintain a sense of not forgetting where they come from (based largely on ethnic-cultural terms), my analysis of Kardinal’s lyrics will also show how the ethos of his authenticity discourse differs from McLeod’s American findings. Using Lull’s (2002) definition of globally received rap music as a “cultural hybrid with lyrics that refer to local personalities, conditions, and situations … an amalgam of American black culture” (p. 468) and in this case, Jamaican-Canadian culture, I argue that Kardinal is defining the boundaries of citizenship and asking the question, who owns Canadian hip-hop?

A brief history of hybridity in hip-hop: why “the streets” reign supreme

Arguably hip-hop, most commonly referred to as ‘America’s music,’ has always been a hybrid musical genre. As Keyes (2002) notes, “West Africa is … the place of
origin for the rap music tradition,” (p. 17) additionally, “rap music is a confluence of African American and Caribbean cultural expressions” (p. 17). While the term hip-hop was coined on American soil, in truth, “the rapper is a postmodern African griot … storyteller and cultural historian” (Smitherman cited in Cummings and Roy, 2002, p. 61).

Second, the act of rapping is “predicated on what communication scholars call nommo, “the power of the word, a concept derived from the Dogon of Mali” (Keyes, 2002, p. 22). Third, when Jamaican DJ Kool Herc – along with Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, who also have West Indian affiliation – immigrated to the South Bronx in the early 1970s, he brought “the ‘toast and boast’ tradition of roots reggae … where DJs would bring huge speakers and turntables … and rap over the simple bass lines of the ska and reggae beats to create a style uniquely Jamaican” (Perkins, 1996, p. 6). Thus, although hip-hop as we know it today took root in America, it is heavily reliant on the oral and rhythmic traditions of the African Diaspora, “both borrowing from and expanding this tradition in its creative use of language and rhetorical styles and strategies” (Kopano, 2002, p. 204).

Despite all commonalities with other Afro-diasporic cultural forms, the thing that gives hip-hop its own unique voice is the fact that unlike other genres, it has not developed “outside of capitalist commercial constraints … (e.g., hip-hop is no longer authentically black, if it is for sale)” (Rose (1994, p. 39), but is predicated on finding new ways to combat economic deprivation and “the resulting limited resources to meet … basic needs” (Aldridge and Carlin, 1993, p. 104). When artists talk about the perils of inner-city life, and invoke street rhetoric, it is not merely an act of toughness; it represents an authentic cultural experience that speaks to hip-hop’s roots, and an agreed upon monolithic African-American “experience of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression” (Rose, 1994, p. 21). As Perkins (1975) affirms, it is “an institution as important as the church, school, and family in African American culture” (cited in Keyes, 2002, p. 29). For example, in the song “H.I.P.H.O.P.,” when KRS-ONE raps: “Dead, two in the head before some A&R can tell me/I must give up the street so that the record company can sell me” (cited in McLeod, 1999, p. 143), he is distancing himself from corporate America because “he wouldn’t be caught dead allowing a record label employee telling him to disassociate himself from the urban, largely African
American communities that KRS-ONE identifies with so that a company can sell his music” (p. 143). Ultimately, what separates an authentic rapper from a fake one is the pursuit of wealth versus staying true to ‘the streets.’

**Re-territorialization and Diasporas: foreigners wax hybrid vernaculars**

The first traces of hip-hop in Europe go back to the mid-1980s, but the development of domestic scenes and markets is essentially a phenomenon of the 1990s. Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2002) found that in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece, the catalyst for hip-hop’s reception were popular American groups like Public Enemy, Ice-T, and N.W.A. Similarly, Maxwell (1997) argues that in Australia, “the hip-hop scene is productive of, rather than derivative of, a sense of culture” (p. 53); that is, hip-hop has been “appropriated from a culturally foreign space, and (re)-produced in the local context” (p. 53). In Turkey, hip-hop was received not only directly from U.S. hip-hop, “but also as mediated through Turkish rappers … practicing in Europe who … initially culturally reterritorialized U.S. hip-hop in the process of developing diasporic identities (Kaya cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 4). In his examination of the use of indigenous languages other than English in rap music in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, France, Italy, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, Mitchell (2000) argues that “the assertion of the local in hip-hop cultures outside the United States … represents a form of contestation of the importance of the local and regional dialect as a “resistance vernacular” in opposition to a perceived U.S. cultural imperialism in hip-hop” (p. 41-21). Conversely, in their research, Briggs and Cobley’s (1999) British cohort perceived Americanness as the benchmark of authenticity, and scepticism about mimicking were fused and amplified in what was seen as attempts to ape an American style. For example, respondents are quoted as saying:

I hate rappers who try to rap American – like that stupid girl on the Eurovision Song Context. Just be natural like the Cash Crew and the London Posse.

Like there’s another group called London Posse … and they’re good, but what they do is they rap about things like salt and vinegar, cockney things and Versace in London and it’s good.

They are talking about stuff we can relate to (p. 345).
Canada’s domestic scene can be traced back to 1989, and Maestro ‘Fresh’ Wes’ (Wes Williams) *Symphony in Effect* album. Selling in excess of 200,000 copies in Canada and becoming the first rapper to ever perform at the Juno Awards, winning Rap Recording of The Year, Toronto-born Maestro (the son of Guyanese parents) cites U.S. rappers as persons who influenced his style (“Vernon”).

In the context of hip-hop’s global reception, this paper aims to explore the following questions regarding Kardinal Offishall’s rap: First, how does his cultural ethnicity influence his music, and what similarities can be drawn between his hybridized style and European appropriation of hip-hop? Second, how does his music reflect the process of de-territorialization, which in “Anthony Giddens’ terms means the ‘disembedding’ (lifting out) of people and symbolic forms from the places we expect them to be” (cited in Lull, 1995, p. 239) and “its endpoint … reterritorialization, i.e., the integration of this cultural pattern into a new society” (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003, p. 467)? Third, in what ways does he prioritize the local reality and regional dialect as a “resistance vernacular” against perceived American cultural imperialism? Finally, how does his invocation of authenticity differ from authenticity invocations in American hip-hop?

**Kardinal Offishall authenticates his hybrid identity**

Kardinal Offishall (Jason Harrow), the son of Jamaican parents, hails from Toronto, Ontario. In 2001, he burst onto Canada’s domestic scene with his debut full length album, *Firestarter Vol 1: Quest For Fire*. From the outset, Canadian music critics described him as “one proud Canadian” (Ross, 2001) and an artist “full of JA-style bravado” (Galloway, 2001), while most recently he has been called “Canada’s hip-hop ambassador” (Thompson, 2006). Importantly, Kardinal’s blending of Jamaican culture with U.S. rap is similar to that of French and Italian rappers, whose songs also “refer to major topics and activities of … hip-hop, for example ‘freestyle,’ ‘flow,’ ‘diss,’ ‘funk,’ and ‘skills’ at the same time, drawing on American-derived slang, including terms such as ‘bitch,’ ‘blunt’ (joint), or ‘shit’ in their speech” (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2002, p. 467).
473). For example, on “Ol’ Time Killin,” Kardinal’s speech is an amalgamation of U.S. hip-hop activities and slang, Jamaican patois and local realities:

So hype the Source should give us 5 mics and 2 turntables
We spitting this with beats so ridiculous …
Now for the people who don’t know what a gwaning
They sleeping on the whole city, stretching in your heart
Not knowing that T-dot’s about to shake your ass out your dreams

Given Toronto’s close geographic proximity to the U.S., like Maestro, Kardinal credits African-Americans for showing him their brand of hip-hop before he even imagined developing his own. As he recalls:

Buffalo was not too far away and they had their urban radio state, WBLK. We grew up on BLK, the funk, the Hip-Hop…. When I was a little kid everybody used to come through. LL, PE, Kool G. rap, Shante. They used to have these battles. It was New York vs. Toronto. I remember, before Big Daddy Kane even dropped his first album, he would come up here with Biz Markie and the whole Juice Crew. All these people used to come through (“Kardinal,” 2001).

This anecdotal account coincides with the German hip-hop experience where, as Bennett (1999) found, “local citizens … kept constantly in touch with many aspects of US American popular culture” (p. 81).

Kardinal’s interview comments reflect “a distinctive form of ‘lived’ ethnicity, which demands its own localized and particularized mode of expression” (Gilroy cited in Bennett, p. 81). As Matt Galloway, writer, *Now Magazine* describes, “When Kardinal first appeared, ‘T-dot’ was still a catchphrase among friends” (“Kardinal,” 2001); further Kardinal asserts, “For a while, people weren’t really trying to hear much outside of New York … but, the dope thing about being from T-dot is when people hear the tracks and realize it’s from the T-dot they flip” (“Kardinal,” 2001). His phraseology is illustrative of Lull’s (2002) concept of cultural reterritorialization, where “active cultural selection and synthesis draws from the familiar and the new” (p. 161). For example, in the song “Husslin,” he addresses the same issues of poverty and oppression that African-American rappers – especially those from New York – rap about, while declaring his nationalistic pride: “We husslin’ to stay alive, my peeps don’t wanna live off them government checks … ‘I’m representing for the T-Dot/B-Boys from west to east.”

African-American rappers, as Russell A. Potter argues, “have looked more towards the language and consciousness of the ghetto in search of a more authentically black identity” (cited in Mitchell, 2000, p. 41). But, since “culture is not a fixed and
impermeable feature of social relations; its forms change, develop, and combine and are dispersed in historical processes” (Gilroy, 1986, p. 217), like in other parts of the world, Kardinal employs strategies to distance himself from perpetuating “Afrodiasporic and Afrocentric aspects of African-American rap and hip-hop” (Rose cited in Mitchell, 2000, p. 42). By detaching his own cultural practices from their Jamaican origins, he uses them to find and extend new patterns of communication that give his community substance and a collective sense of identity. For instance, in “BaKardi Slang,” Kardinal overtly attacks African-Americans for assuming that Canadians are just mimics of American hip-hop: “We don’t say you know what I’m sayin, T-dot says ya dun know/We don’t say hey that’s the breaks, we say yo a so it go.” Similarly, in Zimbabwe, groups like The brothers Ndlouvu, openly criticize African-American rappers who assimilate African fashions such as hair beading” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 42). In Italy, rappers experimenting in their native language have “Italianized U.S. hip hop with expressions like ‘rappare,’ and ‘scratchare,’ and ‘slenghare’ (to use slang) and rap in their regional dialects” (p. 46). Likewise, in verse two of “BaKardi Slang,” Kardinal’s use of local (West Indian) expressions ‘Canadianizes’ U.S. hip-hop:

A show is called a ‘crep’
A big party is a ‘fete’
Ya’ll talkin’ about ‘mind where you going’
We talkin’ about ‘mind where you step’…
Y’all say ‘a DJ battle’
We say ‘clash with two sounds’

Finally, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where “the choice of local indigenous ‘resistance vernaculars’ is an act of cultural resistance and preservation of ethnic autonomy” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 53), and “the adoption of an international black identity by New Zealand’s Maori youth … compensates in part for a lack of knowledge of Maori culture” (Lull, 2000, p. 248), when Kardinal invokes U.S. slang, it is similarly an act of “self-assertion and self-preservation which is linked with a global Diaspora of musical expressions of … ethnic minorities’ social struggles” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 50). For instance, in “Man By Choice,” he aligns himself with the struggles of black people around the world, and the global Afrodiasporic identity:

From an African, straight to a nigger, you know what I’m saying…
Then it was on some Afro-American stuff
Afro-Canadian what have you, but guess what
It don’t matter what you call yourself

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It’s what they call you behind your back
Nigga, straight up…
Walkin’ through London a black man (nigga)
Walkin’ through Rexdale a black man (nigga)
Strollin’ through Decatur a black man (nigga)

While in the song “Powerfulll,” his lyrics coincide with the Maori’s use of ‘resistance vernaculars’ to contest “the importance of the local and regional … in opposition to perceived U.S. cultural imperialism” (p. 41-42):

In handcuffs and other shackles (yo) check Mr. Bush
Plant cocaine on me and call it operation push
Our Prime Minister is actually second in command
Bending over to the star spangled-politically strangled

Although U.S. “authenticity is positively defined by affiliating oneself with the street” (McLeod, 1999, p. 143), and “invocations of authenticity resonate deeply, and are widely shared by members of the hip-hop community” (p. 143), Kardinal authenticates his identity in a different way. For instance, in an interview with Manhunt, he affirms such difference:

Me and my whole clique are of West Indian descent, know what I’m saying?
It’s just something that comes out naturally. I look at myself as a hip-hop MC, but I have to represent for my family and my peoples. I t’row da dancehall in there to let people know the beauty of the culture and where I’m coming from (“Kardinal,” 2001).

And, while he talks about his ties to the community by mentioning the name of his neighbourhood (McLeod, 1999), he does this because his authenticity is negatively defined by his ethnicity, not “against symbols of identity that represent suburbia” (p. 143). It would be authentically problematic for Kardinal to perpetuate the inner-city versus the suburbs dichotomy. Instead, he talks about Toronto in its entirety, never shying “away from being Canadian and living in Toronto” (“An Offishall Interview,” 2001). He also juxtaposes the talents of other Canadian rappers (also of West Indian decent) with U.S. hip-hop, an act that denotes their common citizenry irrespective of location. In “MIC T.H.U.G.” he raps: “Like Choclair he’s a Virgin to the wack rhyme/Got a blueprint like Thrust, said he’s notorious/And, watch the hit bust all over the country/Even on BET, ask Tigga about them niggas with that Northern Touch beat.” Ultimately, if Kardinal prioritized the African American contestation over the inner city he could be construed as aping an “American” style.
Out of all the countries reviewed, Kardinal’s music is most reflective of the British dichotomy of difference and equivalence, where difference is manifest in the demand for authentic enunciation rather than a home-grown simulacra and equivalence is seen in “comparable diversities and points of origin engendered diasporic identification” (Gilroy, cited in Briggs and Cobley, 1999, p. 350). First, he demarcates the boundaries of difference in his interview comments about American perception of Canadian hip-hop; paralleling Briggs and Cobley’s (1999) respondents’ feedback previously noted:

A lot of Americans think that Canadians follow and don’t originate their own music. They see us as followers rather than leaders … Maybe in earlier years when we weren’t aware of our identity or our strengths this was the case, but right now a lot of (Canadian) artists are realizing that one of our strengths is in being different (Ross, 2001).

Then, on an equivalent basis, he lyrically employs the N-word with as much virulence and gratuitousness as American rappers. African-American scholars, like Robin D.G. Kelley argue that “rappers commonly use “nigga” to describe “a condition rather than skin color or culture … because it reflects a new identity in which the specific class, race … experiences in late-capitalist urban centers coalesce” (cited in Armstrong, 2004, p. 346), and rappers like Tupac Shakur “proclaimed that for him, nigga stood for ‘Never Ignorant, Gets Goals Accomplished’” (cited in Kennedy, 2002, p. 44). On Quest for Fire, Kardinal uses the N-word 79 times. Since he has never defended his use of the word, comments on the matter are speculative. However, his lyrics coincide with Kennedy’s (2002) contention that “blacks … like to use nigger because it is a shorthand way of reminding themselves and everyone else precisely where they perceive themselves as standing” (p. 48-49), wherein “nigga” is a synonym not only for the oppressed but also for the strong, streetwise men that fight to overcome oppression” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 346). For instance, in “On Wit Da Show,” he uses the word to describe his friends, and people he is familiar with. While in “Quest for Fire,” his lyrics reflect hip-hop’s urban [American] context: “Niggas in the streets with swords like street fencing/For these record labels nuff rap cats is Benson/From these old street cats, I took a lesson.”
Conclusion

In America, scholars place hip-hop within an “urban context, describing it alternatively as the black urban beat, a product of African American urban cultures, or a form that prioritizes black cultural voices from the margins of urban American (Baker, 1993; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994 cited in Keyes, 2002, p. 122), while around the world, indigenous artists have appropriated U.S. hip-hop, creating localized brands of cultural expression. When Kardinal Offishall talks about the ‘T-dot,’ he bears much in common with the African-American tradition of naming, “an act of invocation that captures the essence of one’s being … important in rap and Afrocenric music” (Roberts cited in Armstrong, 2004, p. 347), but when he valorizes his Jamaican-Canadian-ness, he bears much in common with European, African, New Zealand, and Australian rappers where citizenship is not an interchangeable entity, on the contrary, it is “to the knower, inherently multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural” (Ibrahim, 2003, p. 67). So, why is his rap considered a hybrid, when most U.S. rappers – especially those based out of New York – blend Jamaican idioms with U.S. slang? For example, in the song “Steve Biko,” West Indian-born Phife Dawg (Malik Taylor) of A Tribe Called Quest, raps: “Brothers wanna flex, you’re not Mad Cobra/MC short and black, there ain’t no other/Trini-born black like Nia Long’s grandmother.” Ultimately, the difference between Kardinal’s hybridity and U.S. hip-hop’s is that the latter finds its voice “in a dialectic which does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty” (Bhabha cited in Briggs & Cobley, 1999, p. 350), while the former uses his West Indian culture as an explicit strategy to preserve his identity from “the very real threat of erasure via misrepresentation by outsiders” (McLeod, 1999, p. 148), in this case, U.S. hip-hop. While he similarly seeks to protect his “culture by distinguishing authentic and inauthentic expression” (p. 148), when he raps: “You think we all Jamaican, when nuff man are Trini, Bajans, Grenadians and a hole heap of Haitians/Guyanese and all of the West Indies combined to make the T-dot O-dot, one of a kind,” he is first and foremost demarcating the boundaries of ownership over Canadian hip-hop, and declaring its emancipation.
**Discography**

- A Tribe Called Quest, Midnight Marauders (Jive Records, 1993).

**Bibliography**