

The New Real: Iggy Azalea and the Reality Performance

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I'm the first of my kind, / You ain't seen any?
Iggy Azalea, 'Murda Bizness.'

Hip-hop—as rap music, as music video, as style and aesthetic, and as cultural meme—is a site of simultaneous representation and creation, reflection and revision. The well-worn hip-hop mantra of 'keeping it real' simultaneously points to retention ('keeping,' maintaining) and the elusive 'real' in which the culture has remained invested since its inception in the 1970s. Hip-hop realness should not, however, be confused with realism, but rather understood as a performative gesture. Likewise, the twenty-first century proliferation of the reality television genre celebrates the performance of the hyper-real in a way that deliberately complicates traditional distinctions between fiction and reality. In his manifesto on our contemporary infatuation with 'reality,' David Shields argues that 'realness is not reality, something that can be defined or identified. Reality is what is imposed on you; realness is what you impose back' (2011: 98). Australian rapper Iggy Azalea, whose positionality as a white female in hip-hop's problematically black male-centric space immediately troubles her bid for hip-hop authenticity, presents a particularly interesting case for the ways in which twenty-first century performances of the hyper-real in both hip-hop and reality television converge.

Although the particularities of what constitutes real-ness or authenticity in the hip-hop context have in the years since the culture's documented beginnings been subject to a continuous process of revision and redefinition, the ethos of *being* real and representing

oneself authentically remains an important part of hip-hop's politics of performance. The advent of reality television, another pop cultural form transfixed by the space between performance and reality, has, in turn, contributed to the proliferation of the 'real' as a contested cultural space. The phenomenon designated by Geoff King as 'the spectacle of the real' particular to reality television thus provides, I argue, a contemporary framework through which to revise and re-envision realness and performance in twenty-first century hip-hop (2005: 13). Hip-hop culture's persistent preoccupation with the real, and what Misha Kavka (2008) describes as the distinctly queered instantiation of the real upon which reality television is hinged, converge in the unlikely emergence of incredibly popular (albeit polarizing) hip-hop reality shows such as *Run's House*, *Basketball Wives*, *Flavor of Love*, *Love and Hip-Hop*, *Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle*, and *The Kandi Factory*, amongst others.¹ The correlation between these seemingly distinct genres may then, as Kevin Young suggests, aid in understanding what hip-hop actually means when it invokes the real:

Is it any accident that the rise of hip-hop realness precedes and parallels that of 'reality television'? ... The very term 'reality show' is a paradox of the highest order, but does describe the mix of mask, role-playing, and personae found on these forms of television—complete with literal and societal scripts—and in far more subtle form in hip-hop. (2012: 366)

Notwithstanding Young's insightful (and, as such, regrettably fleeting) contemplation of the concomitant explorations of real-ness in reality television and hip-hop, however, the relationship remains unexplored by scholarship from either discipline. Hip-hop, a popularly masculinised space in which female performers must negotiate and legitimise their presence, and the disparagingly feminised realm of 'trash' television and, by extension, its 'trashy' viewers, merge in this account in a way that highlights the necessary constructedness of the real in both genres.

Throughout the 1990s—rap's 'gangsta' moment—realness was predicated primarily on conformity to a certain class-based (ghettocentric), racial (black, despite the formative contributions of US Latina/os to the culture), and autobiographical (lived experience of

¹ That many of these and other reality shows (such as *Married to Medicine*, *The New Atlanta*, and *Chicagolicious*) are explicitly focused on the interactions between black American women and tend to depict heightened drama, deception, and self-delusion, also suggests a devaluing of black womanhood that has rendered such shows particularly controversial. Another show, *All My Babies' Mamas*, starring rapper Shawty Lo and the various women with whom he shares children, was cancelled before it ever aired due to popular outcry about its depiction of black American communities.

gangsta/pimp/hustler) authenticity.² Although these factors still contribute in a superficial way to the aesthetic of hip-hop and its ‘cool’ marketability, contemporary hip-hop culture evidences a more self-conscious approach to realness and its paradoxical limitations, of which scholarship on black music has long been aware. ‘The fragmentation and subdivision of black music into an ever-increasing proliferation of styles and genres has also contributed to a situation in which authenticity emerges as a highly charged and bitterly contested issue’ (Gilroy 1991: 122). The problem of authenticity in pop cultural performance is an intrinsically racialised one, whereby, as Gilbert Rodman expounds,

mainstream rock, folk, and country musicians have much more liberty to use the first person to utter violently aggressive, sexually provocative, and/or politically strident words than do artists working in genres like dance or rap. Which means—not coincidentally—that the artists most frequently denied the right to use the fictional ‘I’ tend to be women and/or people of colour. (Rodman 2009: 102)

In an analysis of rap and ‘bling’ that posits the invisibility afforded the subject through accumulation of capital as central to rap’s narrative of self-actualization, Michael Clune also gestures to the inherent paradox at work in hip-hop’s ethos of authenticity, namely that ‘the ascendant performance conceit is that there is no performance going on’ (2010: 141). Hip-hop authenticity is therefore always already destined for failure, wherein ‘the attempt to resolve the tension between the formal “you” of the rap lyric and the “you” of the audience thus has the unexpected effect of turning the once-celebrated figure of the rapper into rap’s ritualised object of scorn’ (142). In this way authenticity becomes the open secret of hip-hop discourse, an acknowledged implausibility but an omnipresent factor in the hip-hop performance. Young, too, understands this performed real as part of a black American tradition of counterfeit—the difference between ‘truthfulness’ and ‘troofiness’ that has proven to be a worthy tool for both the literal and the figurative survival of black America. ‘Since previously conceived notions of truth have often oppressed black people,’ Young writes, ‘the counterfeit is a literary tool that

² The term ‘ghettocentric’ was coined by pioneer hip-hop journalist Nelson George (1993). It refers to the cultural capital of the stylised ‘ghetto’ space popularised by hip-hop (especially rap music) and the films of Spike Lee. More generally, it is used to describe the phenomenon of self-identification with the ghetto and a particular class-based aesthetic of blackness and ‘realness’ in hip-hop. The strength of gangsta’s ghettocentric narrative of realness is evident in the final rap battle scene of white rapper Eminem’s semi-autobiographical feature film, *8 Mile* (2002). The film’s protagonist, Rabbit (portrayed by Eminem), finally wins over his sceptical black audience by exposing his opponent’s upper-middle class background and thus silencing (both literally and figuratively) his claims to hip-hop authenticity. Although hip-hop is overwhelmingly understood (both popularly and in scholarly discourse) as a black American culture, several scholars have argued emphatically for recognition of the role of Latina/o American artists and cultures in the creation of hip-hop (See Flores 2000; Rivera 2003).

fictionalizes a black “troof.” Such a black, vernacular-based reality proves quite different from a white-dominated historical, factual, and authenticated one’ (2012: 27).

That rapper Iggy Azalea is not only female and white but Australian renders her not only distant from this cultural background to hip-hop’s investment in the real, but also immediately ineligible for US hip-hop’s traditional neighbourhood-based channels of authentication, or what Murray Forman terms the ‘*extreme local* upon which [rappers] base their constructions of spatial imagery’ (2002: xvii). Based in Atlanta, Georgia, signed to US hip-hop label Grand Hustle Records, and marketed within the ‘Dirty South’ subgenre of hip-hop with which the city is associated, Azalea complicates hip-hop’s crucial investment in place of origin.³ Her disinclination to identify as an ‘Australian hip-hop’ artist not only rejects essentialisms of selfhood and self-representation but also violates one of the mainstays of hip-hop authenticity, the declaration of allegiance to the rapper’s particular ‘hood.’ With the exception of a fleeting image of the Australian flag in the early frames of her first music video, ‘My World’ (2011b), Azalea does not present herself in any way as an Australian rapper, nor does she strive to align her work with the contemporaneously burgeoning genre of Australian hip-hop. Indeed, in her 2013 song ‘Work,’ the refrain of ‘no money/no family/sixteen in the middle of Miami’ firmly establishes the genesis of ‘Iggy Azalea’ the rapper as occurring *after* her relocation to the USA. Solidifying this erasure of Australian influence is the fact that, unlike many other successful white Australian rappers such as The Hilltop Hoods, Bliss n Eso, or 360, Azalea does not rap in an Australian accent. Instead, the US twang of her delivery is most consistent with the Dirty South tradition.

Scholarly representation of non-US or ‘global’ hip-hop remains characterised in large part by its containment of authenticity to a logic of the real contiguous with the fabled ‘old-school.’ The argument that such global hip-hop is truer to the ‘real’ hip-hop culture than the mainstream US subgenres by which it has been largely replaced aligns authenticity (and, concurrently, the conditions of otherness that qualify one for inclusion in the hip-hop nation) with a countercultural attitude. In his study of authentication in

³Riché Richardson explains in her study of black masculinity and the US South that ‘the meanings of the term “Dirty South” may vary. Sometimes the connotations are explicitly sexual ... “Dirty South” has in effect enabled many rappers in the South to assert a collective identity and has helped their effort to resist invisibility and exclusion in the rap industry, giving them legibility and a coherent way of being identified’ (2007: 215).

Arabic-language hip-hop, for example, Usama Kahf asserts the belief that ‘hip-hop only maintains its empowering potential and “authentic” voice of the oppressed margins when it positions itself in opposition to the mainstream *without the goal of becoming mainstream*, or in other words, when it has a reference point in the status quo to which it is responding and against which it is revolting’ (2012: 119, my emphasis). Authenticity is, then, coded in Kahf’s understanding of hip-hop realness as necessarily oppositional and irrevocably incongruous with the mainstream. Such an approach, however, serves not only to belittle the artists involved in mainstream hip-hop culture but also to wholly misread hip-hop as a confessional or political implement of activism entirely divorced from the realm of performance. Hip-hop, as Alexander Weheliye noted in 2001, ‘can no longer be constructed as simply an anti-hegemonic authentic African American art form, as it was often presented by early nineties pundits’ (2001: 292). An approach to hip-hop authentication that accepts Weheliye’s mandate to ‘confront [hip-hop’s] popularity and mainstream acceptance as well as its resistant forces’ (292), such as that of performance studies scholar Ian Maxwell (2003), relieves global hip-hop of the onus of cultural dissidence and proffers an alternative means through which hip-hop can come to be real even as its authentication depends on a certain performance.

Australian hip-hop, especially in its most commercially successful Anglo-Australian incarnation, focuses its process of authentication on an imaginative space in which hip-hop, as freestanding entity, is organically and intuitively more real to the hip-hopper than mainstream Australian cultures. Maxwell’s important work on Australian hip-hop practices presents a thorough and theoretically considered analysis of the phenomenon of, in particular, white Australian men in the outer Western suburbs of Sydney and their engagement with the imaginatively evoked ‘Hip-Hop Nation.’ Given the antipodean absurdity with which the very existence of a flourishing hip-hop community amongst white Australians might be interpreted in the US context, Maxwell’s study focuses on the steadfastness and conviction of the subjects claiming allegiance to a Hip-Hop Nation that is believed to supersede ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and, indeed, nationality. ‘In no way,’ he argues, ‘might these processes [of authentication] be seen as being (merely) culturally promiscuous, as celebrating a postmodern valorisation of the pastiche, a privileging of the playfully eclectic for its own sake. On the contrary, the use of the term “community” precisely bespeaks a concern with “the authentic,” with tradition and the fixing of values’ (2003: 15). Maxwell points to this imagined Hip-Hop

Nation as crucial to the Anglo-Australian hip-hopper's perception of authenticity. In the absence of viable claims to ethnic or experiential kinship in the 'geographically discontinuous, isolated, and multicultural' context of Australian hip-hop, legitimacy of Australian hip-hop 'largely turns on the possibility of ascribing to local performance an authenticity that had to be articulated to a discontinuous, geographically remote narrative of origin' (44).

As in the US context, the mainstream rise of hip-hop in Australia has seen the diversity of its practitioners and enthusiasts downplayed and its appeal to a certain Australian and working-class masculinity emphasized. As Maxwell describes it:

the hip-hop world I encountered was for the *boyz*, a masculinised, even phallogocentric, world in which young men performed, rapped, broke, boasted, *bombed*, leaving their *phat* tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where young men talked about *their* Community, Culture, Nation. (2003: 33)

In the decade since Maxwell published his work on hip-hop, the proliferation of male Australian hip-hop artists on the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) charts and in mainstream radio circulation suggests that little, if anything, has evolved. That being said, the Hip-Hop Nation and its ability to mobilize those who hear its call resonates with a diverse spectrum of Australian society—the recent work of Australian-born rapper, activist and academic Sujatha Fernandes, for example, testifies to hip-hop's multi-ethnic appeal as well as its international mobilization. Further, Maxwell's description of the self-authenticating *process* of hip-hoppers in the Australian context resonates with Azalea's own account of her connection to US hip-hop culture. In the words of Maxwell,

an individual in Sydney, Australia, in 1992, could, they claimed, *get* Hip-Hop Culture from a television video clip, and ... what they understood as being the *essence* of that culture is so pure, so transcendent, that the being-ness of an African American was seen, in effect, as an expression of that transcendent ground, rather than the other way around. (2003: 205)

Azalea in turn describes her induction into hip-hop through a narrative of self-alienation and online access to performance. 'Sometimes I would not go to school at all. I would be at home writing raps, trying to be a rap star. I thought it was so cool. I would see all the rap videos and watch them on YouTube,' and, later, 'Australia doesn't have radio stations that play hip-hop. You had to go on Google or look on Billboard to see what was going on in America. I would go on MySpace to see what other kids were listening to. I was just manning the internet trying to find stuff that was cool' (Ahmed 2011: para.

25). The instinctive gravitation towards Maxwell's Hip-Hop Nation that Azalea describes echoes Fernandes's own narrative of hip-hop discovery while viewing Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'The Message' music video: 'There was something fitting about my close identification with a fabricated product that revealed so many truths' (2011: ix). The Hip-Hop nation forms part of an important fable of hip-hop authenticity, a broader marketing of the real that is mobilized not to enact stringent guidelines as to who or what is real, but rather to incorporate diverse hip-hoppers into a rudimentary shared mythology of sameness.

In an online interview with Australian hip-hop journalist Boss Lady, Azalea can be seen to navigate simultaneously the twin imperatives of Australian hip-hop and broader hip-hop authenticity. In an attempt to justify her involvement in hip-hop and downplay the incongruity of a white Australian woman in a culture dominated by iconography of black masculinity, Azalea insists that although hip-hop is, in her understanding, a black cultural product, it has become, over time, 'more than what it was before and more than the main elements of it, you can have places for other people to fit in' (Iggy Azalea 2011: "Exclusive"). Azalea's attempt to account for the evolution of hip-hop's racial politics and thus validate her claim to legitimacy—her right to hip-hop—reveals two significant assumptions about race and its relationship to hip-hop. First, the aforementioned problematic myth-of-origin that hip-hop 'is black culture' and second, that her ability to speak both *for* and *from* hip-hop is determined by a social performance of deference that underpins her responses to the 'race question' throughout this and other interviews. Indeed, Azalea's evident hesitation and the circumlocution of her response typify awareness, rather than transcendence, of her white positionality. Though her intent is to justify her engagement with hip-hop *despite* her whiteness, her delivery betrays her wavering faith in the 'tanning of America' that purports to settle the racial commentaries at play in hip-hop performance.⁴ Indeed, although Azalea suggests that the importance of race in hip-hop's process of authentication has lessened as hip-hop culture has been diffused around the world, she is, at the same time, eager to align herself with blackness. In particular, Azalea's body becomes the signifier through which she is implicitly marketed as a hip-hop woman.

⁴ Azalea refers here to Steve Stoute's *The Tanning of America: How Hip Hop Created a Culture that Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy* (2011).

In an interview with hip-hop magazine *Complex*, Azalea offers the first of her embodied connections to blackness, and one that is constructed as distinctly Australian. In a section of the interview titled 'Growing Up in Australia' Azalea recounts that 'lots of the small towns in Australia have Aboriginal names,' and that her town, Mullumbimby, 'is one of them' (Ahmed 2011: para. 5). She goes on to make more direct her association with Indigenous Australia, asserting rather problematically that 'if your family's lived in Australia for a long time, everyone has a little bit of [indigenous blood]. I know my family does because we have an eye condition that only Aborigine people have' (Ahmed 2011: para. 6). The seemingly casual reference to possible indigenous ancestry aims to do two important things. First, to indicate blackness, and thus hip-hop authenticity, on a level distinct from yet adjacent to US blackness, and second, to lay claim to an essential *Australianness* that irrevocably undermines accusations that Azalea has rejected her Australian identity or failed to authentically embody it, perhaps most notably through her accent. Under this logic, and through her tentative gestures towards indigenous ancestry, Azalea is more authentically Australian than her counterpart Anglo-Australian rappers who perform with Australian accents and frame their geospatial connection to hip-hop in Australian, rather than US, locales. She is also, importantly, distanced from whiteness as understood in the US context by association with an exoticised image of Australia and connection to non-white indigenesness.

The second, and more apparent means through which Azalea physically aligns herself with blackness is through the *shape* of her body. Boss Lady cites an apparent rumour as to Azalea's modelling career, asking her, 'I read that you were rejected as a model at one point because you were too thick, is that ...?' Azalea responds immediately with 'right, yeah, that's true' before adding that 'it's weird, though, because I *so* don't feel like I'm thick, I really feel like people think I'm, like, bigger than what I am! I'm not that big!' (Azalea 2011a). Focus on Azalea's body shape typifies not only the way in which popular culture emphasises female sexuality and sex appeal in its evaluation of female performance, but also the particular lens through which hip-hop scrutinizes and authenticates its female practitioners.

Boss Lady's nod to the size of Azalea's posterior is, indeed, an authenticating gesture readily interpretable by hip-hop audiences long-accustomed to hip-hop's fixation with 'bootylicious' imagery. In 2011, when the interview was filmed, the most pop culturally visible female hip-hop artist was Nicki Minaj, whose own physical attributes dominated

much of her self-styling and marketing strategy. Like Minaj, and female rap artists such as Lil' Kim and Trina before her, Azalea's videos are dominated by close-ups of her buttocks and showcase a variety of suggestive dances, techniques that unequivocally situate the female hip-hop form within the stripper-sex kitten-seductress paradigm already prevalent in male hip-hop videos. Boss Lady's reference to 'thickness' thus helps to sanction Azalea's participation in hip-hop alongside her black female contemporaries by endowing her with a dormant, interior blackness. Hip-hop's interest in the proverbial 'big butt,' however, also complicates simplistic understandings of realness in that the surgical enhancement of the historically sexualised exotic female buttocks has become an increasingly popularised and culturally recognised phenomenon, in the same way that breast implants have become ever more normalized in the pop cultural landscape. Physical blackness, specifically black femaleness consistent with hip-hop's particular brand of realness can, in this sense, be manufactured, as Imani Perry argues in her critique of hip-hop videos and their unrealistic (fabricated) portrayals of black femininity. 'Color is aligned with class and women are 'created' (i.e. through weaves, pale makeup, and camera filters) and valued by how many fantasy elements have been pieced together in their bodies' (2004: 177). Azalea's self-promotion (via her strategically choreographed music videos and their focus on her backside) as a white woman with the desirable curves of hip-hop's fantasy black woman is thus incredibly loaded.

Reality television, unlike hip-hop, is a genre that is explicitly feminised both in its promotion and in critical and popular evaluations of its worth (or, perhaps more accurately, its lack thereof). Kavka interprets the feminisation of reality television as part of a broader cultural imbrication of televisual pleasure with the domestic sphere, explaining that 'during the nineteenth century the consolidation of domesticity and consumption as ideological patterns occurred specifically in reflexive relation to femininity, with the result that the twentieth-century apparatus of television easily became associated with, and devalued as, feminine practice' (2008: 4). The shame that she identifies as central to the reality television audience is also intricately embedded in the experience of racialisation and stigma; that a particular realm of televisual pleasure is relegated to the demeaning category of *trash* 'suggests that it perverts the host medium by planting "trash" as a literal parasite on "TV"' (2008: 20). The trashiness attributed to reality television therefore renders it a pop cultural medium through which the externally designated and internally cultivated 'trashing' of inferior whiteness is

played out.⁵ ‘The criticism,’ Kavka continues, ‘that reality TV is not in fact “real” because the shows are heavily manipulated (read: nobody actually lives like that) is also dependent on the construct of a dumbed-down viewership that conflates what plays out on one side of the screen—framed as spectacle—with what happens on the other—grounded in the experiential world’ (2008: 22). The scorn with which aficionados of underground or conscious hip-hop interpret audiences of commercial hip-hop is similarly grounded in a logic of intellectual inferiority at best, and gullibility or naivety at worst. What dismissive readings of both reality—trash—television and mainstream hip-hop’s discourse of the real misinterpret, however, is that the un-reality of the real is precisely the point, or, in Kavka’s words, ‘the appeal of reality TV lies precisely in its performance of reality in a way that *matters*’ (23).

Indeed, if the premise of reality television is its distinction from fiction-based television, it is only superficially so. Ardent fans of reality television understand and, in fact, appreciate the manipulation and editorial intervention at work in the production of televised ‘reality’ in the same way that soap audiences fully expect deceased characters to resurrect, passionate affairs to perpetually begin and end, and child characters to rapidly and inexplicably mature. The same suspension of disbelief at work in traditional narrative television remains a constant; what distinguishes the reality genre is less its plot (scripted drama) than its setting (the real world). As Shields elaborates, ‘the success of the genre reflects our lust for emotional meaning. We really do want to feel, even if that means indulging in someone else’s joy or woe. We have a thirst for reality (other people’s reality, edited) even as we suffer a surfeit of reality (our own—boring/painful)’ (2011: 111). The common line of criticism with which reality television is derided, nonetheless, is framed as a kind of ‘outing’ of the manufactured or manipulated aspects of a given show—an exposé of the ostensible deception at play in the use of the ‘reality’ tagline.⁶ In short, and with particular reference to the complicity of the show’s

⁵ I refer here to the idea of ‘white trash’ as a means through which poor whites have historically been sidelined by the white US mainstream. Matt Wray, one of several key scholars concerned with the phenomenon of white trash, explains: ‘*white trash* has been used by Americans of all colors to humiliate and shame, to insult and dishonour, to demean and stigmatize’ (2006: 1).

⁶ This is, for instance, a recurrent criticism of the MTV reality show *Catfish: The TV Show*. Based on the premise of Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman’s original documentary film *Catfish* (2010), the show investigates ‘catfish’—the film’s term for people who pretend to be someone else in online relationships – and exposes their deception in a formulaic ‘big reveal’ in each episode. Critics of the show often question the authenticity of the ‘real people’/characters and their frequently incredible storylines. However, the value of the show to those who enjoy it, I argue, is the suspense created by the ‘moment of truth’ by which the entire narrative is framed, and for which the veracity of the relationship itself is neither here nor there.

participants in the perceived fabrication of reality, the notion that reality or the real can be performed, or can coexist with performance, proves to be the sticking point for reality television's critical acceptance. Kavka's interpretation of the reality TV performance as 'less a matter of "acting" in the sense of simulation than of "acting out," a performance of the self which creates feeling' presents a more workable understanding of the performance of authenticity that correlates, in turn, with Maxwell's description of the freestyle rap practices of Australian male rappers (2008: 26). In both scenarios, an external accusation of inauthenticity—or, if not in so many terms, performance as the antithesis of realness—is seen to destabilise the medium and, in so doing, expose its fraudulence and concurrent ineffectiveness. In Kavka, the scripted dimension and/or mediation of reality television is 'all "television" and no "reality,"' and in Maxwell the illusion of spontaneity in freestyle or battle situations is its own undoing: "But," another informant warns me, "you realise that none of them are really *improvising*" (Kavka 2008: 22; Maxwell 2003: 226).

Iggy Azalea's hip-hop persona deals deliberately and suggestively in what might best be conceptualised as *veneers*, a term that not only evokes superficiality, in its most literal and least loaded sense, but also implies, in the context of cosmetic culture, a certain agency and intent to deceive or disguise through the manipulation of surfaces. The construction of a particularly plasticised white beauty, celebrated anew in contemporaneous cultural phenomena such as the *Real Housewives* franchise, is unashamedly hinged upon veneers both literal and figurative. Surgical cosmetic enhancement and the increasingly commonplace presence of the plastic in the realm of the natural (much, it should be noted, as the previously discussed enhancement of assets in hip-hop) are coterminous in this series with the fabrication and exaggeration of wealth and assets, as well as the framework of gossip and back-stabbing from which much of the dramatic appeal of the series is derived. The real on offer, the audience comes to understand as the franchise expands and the heights of its outlandishness grow exponentially, is a constructed real, mediated not only by the editorial tools of televisual production but also, increasingly, by the housewives themselves. Veneers become the open secret of the series that facilitates our relation to and understanding of the show's participants and, concurrently, provide a space for intimacy between the audience and the participant in the form of the promise of divulgement or confession in the one-on-one cutaway sequences in which the participant reveals her 'real' response to the show's

dramatic events. The openness of the franchise and its participants towards surgical enhancement offers an unapologetically mediated interpretation of the real, the premise being along the lines of, ‘I’m not “real” (I have been physically enhanced by cosmetic surgery/ies) but I’m real *about* it; I have nothing to hide.’ Within this framework the real becomes synonymous with transparency and, as such, is negotiated not between the show’s participants themselves but between the audience and each individual participant. Real, in the culture of the series as a collective, is thus *dependent* upon this reciprocal intimacy. To return this interrogation of the real to hip-hop and, specifically, its relationship via Iggy Azalea to white womanhood, how might the unashamed falseness or veneers be considered as constitutive of, rather than threatening to, the real? What can it mean, in other words, for the frankness of artifice—real-ness—to replace the truthfulness with which authenticity is traditionally configured?⁷

In her music video ‘Murda Bizness ft. T.I.’ (2012), Azalea enacts a performance that interpolates the iconography of hip-hop’s Dirty South with the markers of whiteness made luminous by the explosion of reality television in popular culture. In effect, Azalea incepts the reality television real (plastic whiteness) within the real of ghettocentric hip-hop authenticity and, in so doing, offers a conscious performance of realness that both acknowledges her superficial incongruity in the masculinised black space of US hip-hop and suggests that performance of a hyper-real authenticity of self is germane to hip-hop realness. The video lampoons child beauty pageantry, an American subculture that at the time of the video’s release was enjoying mainstream attention as a result of reality television’s gonzo-style explorations of its participants.⁸ ‘Murda Bizness’ is, further, intimately engaged with the reality television soundscape through its own production. The beat is unmistakably ‘Dirty South’: the highly repetitive

⁷ The *Real Housewives* franchise is not, it must be noted, *exclusively* white, although its original series, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, was and remains characterised by its all-white cast of (predominantly) bottle-blonde ‘Barbie’-like women. The franchise has, furthermore, tended to distinguish the ‘flavour’ of its various locales by the ethnicity of the respective participants: *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* has featured eight African American ‘housewives,’ one Asian/African American ‘housewife,’ and only one white American ‘housewife’; *The Real Housewives of Miami* focuses on the ‘Latin’ character of South Florida, its first season in particular featuring four ‘Latina’ housewives and one white American; *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* draws upon (if not entirely caricatures) the Italian American demographic of the state, dramatizing in particular the connotations of mafia activity that accompany this not-quite-white American ethnicity. The point of this qualification is to emphasise the particularity of whiteness in the *Orange County* and *Beverly Hills* series (a none too natural whitening of a state crucially embroiled in the erasure of Mexican-ness and troubled ‘alien’ presence); the culture both promoted and, in effect, cultivated by these series is not intended to stand in, vis-à-vis normative whiteness, or affluent women in general, but bottle-blonde Californian white womanhood in particular.

⁸ Most notably the reality television series *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

buzzing effect of the synthesised beat (itself synthetic, itself consciously manufactured) evocative of the 'dirty,' grimy, even dangerous, soundscape from which the subgenre derives much of its success.⁹ 'Murda Bizness' was produced by Bei Maejor, a US record producer who has worked extensively with hip hop artists as well as, significantly, writing and producing the soundtrack to yet another popular reality television show invested in the fabricated-real, *Jersey Shore*. As Maejor's trademark sound evokes an auditory conversation between hip-hop and reality television, Azalea's Southern-accented rap, coupled with the video's child pageant thematic, suggests connections between the genres that are distinctly feminised.

Pageantry, itself obviously a performative practice, is rendered ludicrously so in its pre-adolescent form: the aesthetic of the 'high-glitz' pageant, in particular, demands that the participant be appropriately presented in full make-up, fake tan, hairpiece, false eyelashes, acrylic nails, and the flipper, a removable veneer that gives the appearance of adult teeth. The glitz pageant stands in opposition to the lesser 'natural' pageant, a binary that makes perfectly clear the necessary, indeed compulsory, un-naturalness or constructed-ness of the former. A popular foundation for rap lyrics and grounded in the history of rap battles and, as Henry Louis Gates and others have argued, African American dozens, rivalry takes on a particularly powerful significance in female rap, not least because opportunities for women to forge meaningful and viable careers in rap music remain woefully scarce.¹⁰ Lyrics such as 'These other bitches think they' hot?/Not really./She a broke ho'/That's how you know she's not with me,' 'I'm God's honest truth./They decide to lie/They just divide they' legs/I divide the pie' and 'Shit, I'm IMAX big/You're poster size' mark but a few examples of the rivalry by which 'Murda Bizness' is characterised. Teamed with images of glitzy pageant children that recall the dramatic rivalries enacted in *Toddlers and Tiaras* (by the children themselves, but especially by their parents, usually the mothers), the performative nature of Azalea's boast is exposed at the same time as the very real effects of rivalry are nurtured, developed, and deemed necessary to the successful performance of femininity. The

⁹ Richardson notes that 'the success of Southern rap is in part attributable to its major producers, suggesting that the appeal of the genre owes in large part to the *sound* of Southernness that it evokes (2007: 199).

¹⁰ Recent 'beefs' between female hip-hop performers include the 2011-2012 antagonism between Nicki Minaj and Lil Kim, and Iggy Azalea's own ongoing dispute with black American rapper Azealia Banks.

common thread of rivalry throughout hip-hop and reality TV is similarly noted by Young in his argument that the genres share particular interpretations of realness:

Nor is it a coincidence that participants in both rap and reality TV—even when it is seemingly for love—refer to their respective genres as the Game? If for rap it's called that because of the business (as well as its symbolic relationship to the 'drug game' or the 'fight game'), both genres are highly aware of the parameters (which are few) implied by the idea of a game, and refer to realness and gaming in nearly the same breath, without irony (which is otherwise rampant). (2012: 366)

'Murda Bizness' riffs off the thematic of drug culture (Young's 'drug game') ever-implicit, when not entirely *explicit*, in Dirty South and gangsta hip-hop performance. Azalea-as-pageant-mother is seen tipping Pixie Stix, white sherbet-like candy sold in paper tubes, into the open mouth of her impeccably groomed glitz child. This white substance, as well as a concoction of energy drink and fruit juice known as 'go-go juice' (associated directly with pageant participant and reality TV star Alana 'Honey Boo Boo' Thompson), have sparked minor controversy in the US entertainment media. The distribution, albeit legal, of these 'drugs' to children in order to enhance their performance resonates particularly strongly with the song's drug-affiliated soundscape and Azalea's lyrics: 'I keep makin' hits with these coca lines.' The video thus draws uncomfortable parallels between the 'doping' practices of pageant mothers predominantly of white America and the superficially drug-happy culture of Dirty South hip-hop, as well as the broader racialisation of drug use and dealing as a problem particular to the black community. Equally resonant is the song's juxtaposition of 'murda' with child pageantry, a correlation that cannot help but recall the infamous 1996 murder of six year-old beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey, an event that irrevocably haunts the subculture in spite of its recent attempts at light-hearted rebranding via reality television. Rapper T.I., whose own work—in particular his family-oriented reality show *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle*—has chronicled his evolution from drug dealer to platinum-selling rapper and self-professed family man, also appears in the video with his stepdaughter Zonique Pullins. The duo's over-performance of a pageant father and his diva-like daughter is of particular interest in that it serves to distance hip-hop (via T.I.) from the overt performance of pageantry at the same time as it troubles the credibility of T.I.'s gangsta rap persona throughout the remainder of the video.

Indeed, the video presents a palimpsest of 'real' performance: the official performances on the pageant stage; the cutaway interviews characteristic of reality television in which participants 'play up' their personalities in hopes of making an impact on the show's

audience; the performance of Azalea, T.I., Zonique, and the rest of the cast in the pageant roles; and, finally, the hip-hop performance by which the entire work is framed.

Hip-hop's preoccupation with the real is compelling precisely because of its instability, its constant recalibration and, importantly, its awareness of the distinction between (per Young) the 'truth' and the 'troof.' Contemporary fascination with what Shields terms 'the extraordinary drama of lied-about ordinary life,' crystallised in the increasing proliferation of reality television, brings the long-discussed real of hip-hop into a newly valorised position of prominence in popular culture (2011: 13). Kavka's assertion that discussion of the real is ultimately invested in 'value judgements that operate in binary relations' whereby 'inevitably, what is real is good—a judgement that works colloquially in its obverse, what is good is real—while what is mediated is bad, and bad for you,' effectively summarises the devaluation of reality television's performed real (2008: 3). Within its broader analysis of reality television as a feminised and concurrently disparaged cultural space, however, it may also prove useful in shedding light on the ways in which realness is performed by hip-hop's women. Iggy Azalea, a white female rapper now conquering the mainstream US market, is joined by other white women such as Kreayshawn, Lady Sovereign and Chanel West Coast. If, as Mark Anthony Neal suggests, 'ultimately all concerns about authenticity in hip-hop begin and end with the fear of the proverbial white rapper,' the recent emergence of the female white rapper in mainstream US hip-hop surely marks a crucial turning point in hip-hop's ongoing mediation of the real (2012: 71).

Since this article was originally drafted in late 2012, Iggy Azalea's bid for hip-hop superstardom has met with considerable success. In mid-2014, her single 'Fancy,' featuring Charli XCX, achieved international chart success and mainstream attention in both Australia and the USA. Subsequently, her guest verse on pop singer Ariana Grande's 'Problem' (2014) solidified Azalea's seemingly overnight stardom as she became the first artist since The Beatles to have simultaneous number one and number two singles on the Billboard Charts. As a result of the present hype surrounding Azalea, the question of her authenticity has been raised both in Australian media (see, for example, McCann 2014; Boffard 2014) and US hip-hop circles (most significantly, perhaps, her ongoing feud with fellow rapper Azealia Banks). That Azalea opens her hit single 'Fancy' with the confident assertion that "first things first, I'm the realest" (2014), indicates both her keen awareness of the deviations from the US hip-hop norm that

make her special, and her apparent desire to provoke and encourage debate as to her right to perform her Dirty South-accented rap as a white Australian woman. What remains to be seen, of course, is whether Azalea's particular mobilization of contemporary experimentation with 'realness' in its various pop cultural manifestations affords her longevity in a hip-hop scene still sceptical of both white and, arguably, female performance.

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