Demystifying Authenticity in the Sociology of Culture

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The performance of authenticity pervades our popular culture and public arenas. In recent years “reality” television has proliferated not only because it is inexpensive to produce, but for its brazen attempts to capture “ordinary” people in unscripted moments of everyday life, warts and all (Grindstaff 2002). African American hip-hop music artists sell records on the basis of their ability to “keep it real” by remaining “true” to their neighborhood roots, even when they hail from middle-class suburbs (McLeod 1999). In American politics, highly stylized candidates perform authenticity to within an inch of their lives by emphasizing their working-class tastes, however manufactured. For example, during the early 1990s Tennessee Republican Fred Thompson’s senatorial campaign reinvented the wealthy lobbyist “as a good old boy: it leased a used red pickup truck for him to drive, dressed up in jeans and a work shirt, with a can of Red Man chewing tobacco on the front seat” (Krugman 2007). Media elites act no differently, going so far as to downgrade their resumes for fear of seeming inauthentic and out of touch with “common” people. Conservative talk-show host Bill O’Reilly has asserted that “I understand working-class Americans. I’m as lower-middle-class as they come,” even though he hails from the decidedly well-off neighborhood of Westbury, Long Island, and earned advanced degrees from Harvard and Boston University without financial aid (Murphy 2002).

Authenticity can refer to a variety of desirable traits: credibility, originality, sincerity, naturalness, genuineness, innateness, purity, or realness. Since the nineteenth century, the search for authenticity has been a bourgeois reaction to the ravages of industrial society and monopoly capitalism, whether expressed by Marx’s critique of alienated labor, or Walt Whitman’s and Henry David Thoreau’s pastoral retreats. In our postindustrial age of high-tech frivolity—online shopping malls and Botox, email scams and edge cities, Hollywood artifice and boy-band pop, MySpace and virtual reality—citizen-consumers nostalgically seek out the authenticity suggested by symbols of agrarian simplicity (organic beets, folk music), or else the gritty charms of proletarian life (Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, trucker hats).

Like a badge of honor, authenticity connotes legitimacy and social value, but like honor itself, authenticity is also a social construct with moral overtones, rather than an
objective and value-free appraisal. Given its socially constructed and thus elusive nature, authenticity itself can never be authentic, but must always be performed, staged, fabricated, crafted, or otherwise imagined (MacCannell 1976; Peterson 1997; Fine 2003; Grazian 2003). The performance of authenticity always requires a close conformity to the expectations set by the context in which it is situated. For instance, in American politics authenticity is marked by straightforward talk, plain speech, and working-class cultural sensibilities, whereas food writers measure the authenticity of ethnic cuisine by its closeness to national, local, or regional sources of tradition (Lu and Fine 1995; Johnston and Baumann 2007; Gaytan 2008). Audiences may employ a range of ambiguous criteria when evaluating the symbolic efficacy of such authenticity performances, which can lead to controversy. Examples include the ongoing debate among musicians and critics concerning the authenticity of jazz performed in Japan (Atkins 2000) and the contestation surrounding Columbian and Cuban salsa dance styles displayed in London nightclubs (Urquia 2004).

Given the constructed nature of authenticity, sociologists of culture are uniquely positioned to critically demystify its performance in popular culture and public life. The social construction and attribution of authenticity occur among culture-producing organizations, prestige-granting institutions, and other cultural authorities reliant on rhetorical and discursive strategies of classification, genre development, and reputation building (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Negus 1998; Fine 2003; Lena and Peterson 2008). Cultural producers from profit-seeking firms and entrepreneurs to artistic creators manufacture, stage, and promote authenticated artworks and entertainment within more extensive worlds of media and symbolic production (Hirsch 1972; Peterson 1997; Grazian 2003). Lastly, authenticity performances represent elaborate strategies of impression management, social interaction, and emotional control well suited for close dramaturgical analysis (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983).

In what follows I will take each of these strategies in turn—assigning authenticity through the production of discourse, staging authenticity as an integral part of the culture production process, and performing authenticity as an accomplishment of social interaction—in order to illustrate how the theoretical tools of cultural sociology can demystify the aura of authenticity surrounding the most hallowed of sacred cows and social myths. I conclude with a discussion of three emergent aesthetic practices—hybridity, irony, and transgression—that deconstruct or otherwise challenge the performance of authenticity as tradition-bound, pretentious, and essentialist.

Assigning authenticity

As a socially constructed myth, authenticity is produced through discourses that valorize certain qualities and assign or attribute them to cultural objects and symbols as a means of creating distinction, whether of status, prestige, or value; it is therefore ironic that authenticity is so often associated with hardship and disadvantage. Collectors assign legitimacy to the childlike artwork of uneducated, self-taught artists on the basis of its unmediated purity, its expression of the wild but innocent creativity of an unrefined mind (Becker 1982: 258–69; Fine 2003). Music fans and ethnomusicologists romanticize the Delta blues melodies of poor sharecroppers as rural expressions of African American primitivism, and Anglo-Saxon folk ballads for their association with country living and working-class populism (Roy 2002). For similar reasons, international tourists and
consumers delight in their purchases of indigenous crafts handmade in developing countries such as Thailand and Costa Rica (Wherry 2008).

While these examples illustrate how the attribution of authenticity can serve as an exercise in snobbery or condescension, other cases reveal how authenticity claims can establish distinction through a more democratizing discourse. In gourmet food writing, culinary discourses validate ingredients, recipes, and dishes as authentic by associating them with a particular geographic region, whether Tuscan wild boar stew, Vietnamese beef wraps, Maryland crab cakes, or Nashville hot chicken. (The specificity of place serves as a marker of authenticity in discourses surrounding globally popular music as well, whether Punjabi bhangra or Jamaican reggae.) Other rhetorical strategies for legitimating foods as authentic include emphasizing the rustic quality of homegrown or organic produce—heirloom tomatoes, handpicked cilantro, shaved truffles—or else the modesty of handmade dishes such as black beans and rice, or mint cucumber salad (Johnston and Baumann 2007).

Whether generated out of self-interest or aesthetic convention, authenticity arguments are generally made by cultural authorities such as scholars, journalists, and critics, and commercial interests from local business entrepreneurs to city boosters. Given their invented quality, such claims must often be passionately defended, occasionally to ridiculous ends, if they are to masquerade as actual facts. Many locals insist that a truly authentic Philadelphia cheesesteak must be prepared with one of three kinds of cheese—American, provolone, or Cheez Whiz, even though the latter is perhaps the most artificial and synthetic of all foodstuffs, invented in a laboratory in 1952 (two decades after the introduction of the “original” Philly cheesesteak), and in Canada, no less. Food companies liberally draw on ideologies surrounding authenticity to euphemize the use of flavor additives and extracts as “natural flavors” (Schlosser 2002). Meanwhile, national supermarket chains such as Whole Foods market their processed meals, from frozen burritos and pizzas to TV dinners, as “organic,” as if such dishes were grown on small family farms, rather than manufactured in industrial laboratories and packing plants (Pollan 2006).

Staging authenticity

Retail outlets and entertainment venues promote themselves on the basis of their staged authenticity and synthetic atmospherics. The Starbucks chain successfully transformed coffee into an upscale product by offering customers a thoroughly mediated experience steeped in the aesthetics of branded authenticity, as embodied in the wood-paneled décor of its stores, their soundtracks of folk, jazz, and indie rock, and a selection of coffees grown in exotic locales from Kenya to Indonesia. Their marketing materials promote their Burundi Kayanza coffee by emphasizing its authentic origins: “Juicy with herbal blackberry notes and tea-like flavors, this is a coffee unlike any African single-origin offering we’ve ever tasted. The microclimate of Burundi’s rugged Kayanza Ridge is an ideal setting for farmers to grow this amazing coffee. Each farmer tends a small patch of just 50 to 250 coffee trees, making this a truly rare and special bean.”

As Erving Goffman (1959) observes in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, although our social lives are most successfully performed on front stages deliberately designed for the purpose of impressing others, we prepare for those performances in more private
backstage regions. Professors write up their classroom notes in their messy and draughty offices, and deliver their pearls of knowledge in stately looking university lecture halls; young romantic lovers prepare for dates in their clothes-strewn bedrooms, but encounter one another on the whirling dance floors provided by glamorous nightclubs and cocktail lounges. Of course, the privatized nature of backstage areas can make them seem particularly intimate and alluring as regions of authenticity lacking in pretense and superficiality. For this reason, restaurants sometimes offer customers the opportunity to observe their chefs and cooking staffs working in normally concealed backstage zones. Although diners inevitably enjoy the privileged views afforded by coveted seats alongside the counters of sushi bars, exhibition-style kitchens, and even at expensive tables placed inside the kitchen itself, such experiences mask how these “backstage” spaces represent little more than disguised front stages themselves, with all workers in performance mode, and potentially embarrassing eyesores such as flypaper and mousetraps hidden safely out of view (Grazian 2004).

The backstage areas of the city itself—its skid rows, segregated ghettos, corner taverns—offer similar thrills to the voyeuristically minded; this partially explains the fascination with local slaughterhouses, tobacco factories, morgues, and sewers shared among Parisian visitors and tour guides in 1900 (MacCannell 1976: 57–76). A century later, jazz and blues bars in Chicago attract curious tourists and other spectators in search of the authenticity marked both by their simulated ramshackle appearance and by bar menus offering Mississippi and Louisiana favorites like crawfish tails, fried okra, and slabs of pork ribs (Grazian 2003). Other urban entertainment venues are similarly staged, even when designed to appear abandoned and atrophied. Cloaked in the symbolic indicators of authenticity and subcultural credibility, rock clubs are commonly dilapidated affairs with beer-stained floors and graffiti-marred bathrooms in varying states of filth and disrepair, even as their box-office ticket sales bring in wildly enormous revenue sums. The dinginess of greasy-spoon eateries and dive bars located in affluent downtown neighborhoods can seem just as fabricated. According to a New York Times review of La Esquina, a latter-day speakeasy hidden behind an anonymous gray door in a downtown taco stand in Lower Manhattan:

The décor, like the rabbit-hole descent, is so contrived as to feel uncontrived. … The rust on the wrought iron fence used decoratively throughout the restaurant was created by hydrochloric acid, not age. The brick walls were meticulously painted, scraped, and repainted to match the naturally decayed columns.

(Lee 2005)

Along with urban entertainment, the staging of authenticity is particularly pronounced in US politics. National electoral campaigns stage local “town hall” meetings as excessively orchestrated affairs that attempt to recall an idyllic American past, while presidential visits to public schools, factories, poor neighborhoods, and flooded cities often serve as little more than opportunities to be photographed in working-class settings with ordinary citizens. Although a graduate of Phillips Academy, Yale, and Harvard, and a son of a former US president, George W. Bush pursued a political career that benefited from his handlers’ ability to depict the scion as a rough-riding cowboy and all-around “regular guy.” During President Bush’s two terms in office, he customarily took his vacations at his ranch in Crawford, Texas—a more ruggedly populist setting than his family’s oceanfront retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine:
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President Bush has spent the last three Augusts at his ranch in the scorched flatlands of Crawford, Tex., where he has cleared brush, gone for runs in 105-degree heat, and summoned sweaty cabinet members to eat fried jalapeño peppers at the only restaurant in town. No one ever confused the place with that white-wine-swilling island in the Atlantic Ocean, to reprise the president’s put-down of Martha’s Vineyard, and so Mr. Bush has loved it all the more. (Bumiller 2004: A12)

Similarly, after Alaska Governor Sarah Palin’s selection as Arizona Senator John McCain’s vice-presidential running mate in 2008, the campaign and media promoted the conservative Republican’s credentials as an authentic frontierswoman—her small-town sensibilities, longstanding membership in the National Rifle Association, knack for aerial wolf hunting, and expert ability to properly field dress a moose. For a time McCain himself had been packaged as the candidate of authenticity—a self-proclaimed “maverick” who named his campaign bus the Straight Talk Express, and late in the campaign touted the support of a seemingly everyman figure named “Joe the Plumber” (a fellow who, as it turned out, was not actually a licensed plumber, nor named Joe).

Given that American consumers’ valued authentic experiences are inevitably rooted in stereotypical images of reality rather than the messiness (and occasional unpleasantness) of everyday life as it is actually lived, the staging of authenticity can prove a risky balancing act. After all, few contemporary home buyers on the market for a “historically preserved” nineteenth-century Victorian carriage house are likely to desire one lacking indoor toilets. American diners at ethnic restaurants may crave exotic dishes from faraway lands, but not those foods so far removed from their customary palettes as to be deemed inedible—such as Swiss horsemeat, or Malaysian webbed duck feet, or bosintang, a Korean soup prepared with dog meat. In fact, the representation of cultural authenticity in dining and other entertainment settings almost always relies on a somewhat imaginary and aesthetically pleasing simulation of reality. In mainstream Chinese restaurants in the US, dishes like Mongolian Beef are prepared with lots of sugar to appeal to American tastes; soup is served as an appetizer course, rather than at the end of the meal (as it would be in China); and traditional Chinese dishes such as beef tripe, ox’s tail, and pig’s tongue are excluded from most menus (Lu and Fine 1995). Feigning authenticity, Mexican restaurants in the US serve tortilla chips before the meal, and burritos as a main course—not because traditional Mexican folkways demand it (they do not), but because Anglo customers do (Gaytan 2008: 325–26).

Within the culture industries, the production of popular music relies on similarly strategic methods of representation. In the early era of country–western music, record companies portrayed their actual artists as authentic old-timers, hillbillies, and cowboys (Peterson 1997). Contemporary labels rely on racially charged stock characters to market their rap and hip-hop acts as gang-bangers, street thugs, pimps, convicted felons, ex-cons, and drug users. Pop bands take their fashion cues from once-underground punk and skateboarding scenes in order to camouflage themselves in the symbolic authenticity of alienated youth and independent rock. Although blues club owners in Chicago occasionally employ musicians of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, in response to audience demand for the authenticity represented by black culture, they almost exclusively hire African American bandleaders for profitable weekend gigs (Grazian 2003). According to one local guitarist:
It’s because white audiences and owners are ignorant. The owners know that tourists will ask at the door, “Well, is the band playing tonight a black band, or is it a white band?” Because the tourists only want to hear black bands, because they want to see an authentic Chicago blues band, and they think a black band is more real, more authentic. When they come to Chicago, it’s like they want to go to the “Disneyland of the Blues.” You know, it’s like this: people want German cars, French chefs, and well, they want their bluesmen black. It’s a designer label.

(quoted in Grazian 2003: 36)

Performing authenticity

At an interactional level, authenticity performances represent elaborate strategies of impression management and emotional control. During interpersonal encounters, we usually associate authenticity with sincerity and self-transparency. In other words, we assume that people are who they say they are, and that they actually believe what they claim to be true. Although Goffman observes that to a certain extent all social interactions are performed, he also distinguishes between cynical masquerades in which the actor intends to deceive his audience, and more genuine acts in which the performer “can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (1959: 17–18). Italian or Greek housewives who rely on traditional family recipes may sincerely believe in the authenticity of their cooking, just as folk and bluegrass songsters may genuinely embrace the authenticity attributed to Appalachian music. These examples illustrate how authenticity can be earnestly experienced as well as performed, even by the performers themselves. Indeed, comparative international research on prostitution in San Francisco, Stockholm, and Amsterdam reveals how sex workers sometimes perform “bounded authenticity” by providing genuine desire, affection, and erotic pleasure for their clients, at least within the temporal confines of a fleeting commercial sexual transaction (Bernstein 2007: 103).

On the other hand, workers in a range of occupations (including sex work) regularly engage in cynical authenticity performances that rely on tactics of misrepresentation and guile. Police detectives break down their suspects through a variety of deceptive strategies during interrogation proceedings (including performances of good/bad cop). Service workers from flight attendants to cocktail waitresses perform emotional labor by responding with feigned laughter and sympathetic smiles to their customers’ often unsavory come-ons and rude requests (Hochschild 1983). In a turn toward what the public relations industry refers to as “reality marketing,” paid female publicists pose as ordinary customers in urban bars and nightclubs for the purposes of engineering the fun and excitement that paying patrons cannot be relied on to generate for themselves (Grazian 2008: 86–90). More extreme examples of deceptive professionals include confidence artists, pool hustlers, double agents, fortune tellers, and used-car salesmen. Of course, as sociologist Ned Polsky reminds us, “Conning is only a matter of degree, in that all of us are concerned in many ways to manipulate others’ impressions of us, and so one can, if one wishes, take the view that every man is at bottom a con man” (1967: 53).

While the feigning of sincerity represents one kind of authenticity performance, other contexts invite participants to play roles commensurate with dominant stereotypes of authenticity based on gritty images of the urban poor. Black middle-class youth pose as
hoodlums on New York City subways as well as in rap music videos. Affluent white suburban teenagers cloak themselves in street fashion from baggy jeans to torn clothing, even going so far as to beg for change in wealthy neighborhoods of nearby cities. In February 2008, Riverhead Books published *Love and Consequences*, a memoir of a half-white, half-Native American girl from South-Central Los Angeles who grew up in a foster home and eventually sold illegal drugs for the Bloods gang. Later that year the book was revealed to be pure fiction, written by a white woman raised by her biological family in the upscale Sherman Oaks neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley.

These last examples emphasize the conscious elaboration of racial or ethnic authenticity as an accomplishment of cultural performance and social interaction. Tabloid talk shows like Jerry Springer encourage working-class guests to overemphasize the performance of “trashy” stereotypes, and they oblige for the privilege of appearing on television (Grindstaff 2002), just as reality TV actors trade on clichéd stock characters (the effeminate gay man, the angry black woman, the sexy bimbo) for extra airtime. In Chicago blues clubs, African American musicians exaggerate the performance of blackness by appropriating racial caricatures reminiscent of antebellum black minstrelsy and more contemporary “blaxploitation” films—the country bumpkin, the cowboy, the sex machine, the dirty old-timer. In his club performances, one Mississippi blues singer “confesses” his passions for “blues, barbecue, watermelon, and pretty girls.” Meanwhile, before his passing in 1998 James Ramsey, a popular Chicago blues figure dubbed the “Black Lone Ranger,” strolled around local blues bars selling home-recorded tapes featuring his renditions of blues standards such as “I’m a Man,” and invited customers to pay to have their Polaroid photograph taken with him in his minstrel regalia, replete with ten-gallon hat and black mask (Grazian 2003: 54).

The demystification of authenticity as cultural practice

Sociologists have the necessary theoretical and analytical tools to demystify the fabrication of authenticity in everyday life, whether through the examination of discourse and the social construction of knowledge, organizational analysis and case studies of cultural production, or dramaturgy and symbolic interaction. But in addition, as they become more common in popular culture and public life, authenticity performances are increasingly challenged by alternative aesthetic practices that devalue, deconstruct, or otherwise problematize such performances as tradition-bound, pretentious, and essentialist.

First, the social status of authenticity is challenged by the celebration of hybridity, represented by attempts to meld together otherwise disparate cultures in a self-conscious manner in order to generate new possibilities for creative expression. In many ways the history of popular music in the twentieth century is marked by attempts at synthesis and fusion. Blues and jazz developed as a mélange of African and European musical traditions; similarly, early rock ‘n’ roll pioneers developed the genre by blending together urban blues and country music. Such experiments in hybridity are also evident in: Bob Dylan’s development of electric folk-rock (which signaled his supposed lack of authenticity among older folk music followers); Miles Davis’s forays into free jazz, funk, and psychedelic rock on albums like *Bitches Brew* (1969) and *On the Corner* (1972); the appropriation of classical music techniques among 1970s and 1980s progressive rock and heavy metal artists like Rush, Deep Purple, Eddie Van Halen, Randy Rhoads, and Yngwie Malmsteen; and the emergence of rap rock, an amalgam of punk, hard rock,
and hip-hop music exemplified by 1990s acts such as Faith No More, the Beastie Boys, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Rage Against the Machine.

Like authenticity, adventures in cultural hybridity are popular among culinary artists, as evidenced by the pervasiveness of global fusion cooking in fine-dining establishments worldwide. In New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and even smaller cities such as Philadelphia, three- and four-star restaurants prepare fashionable exemplars of hybrid cuisine that combine French cooking with a mixture of ingredients from Japan, Italy, Mexico, and Morocco, among other regions. In local Philadelphia restaurants, fusion dishes include seared Kobe beef carpaccio, truffle-scented edamame ravioli, and spinach risotto with lemongrass sauce (Grazian 2003: 233; 2008: 12). By evading the traditions common to regional cuisines, chefs and diners alike reject the social construction of authenticity in favor of global hybridity and multiculturalism.

If the pursuit of hybridity represents a challenge to tradition, adventures in irony reject authenticity performances for their pretensions, as cultural creators and consumers playfully mock what they regard as the self-importance of such displays. Since the early 1990s it has become fashionable for indie rock bands to rerecord pop hits as ironic jokes, as faithless covers that satirize rather than emulate the typically overwrought tone of their original versions. (Examples include Dinosaur Jr.’s 1990 cover of the Cure’s “Just Like Heaven,” Cake’s 1996 rerecording of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” and Fountains of Wayne’s 1999 remake of Britney Spears’s “… Baby One More Time.”) Similarly, disc jockeys and recording renegades have built a cottage industry out of mash-ups, typically unauthorized remixes that combine the vocals from one recording with the instrumental track from another; the resultant cacophony serves a satirizing function by announcing itself as a kind of anti-authentic performance. (Examples include Destiny’s Child singing “Bootylicious” over Nirvana’s grunge-rock anthem “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” and Christina Aguilera’s “Genie in a Bottle” laid over the rock guitar tracks of the Strokes’s “Hard to Explain.”)

Similarly, the ironic embrace of kitsch in independent cinema (notably in John Waters’s films, such as Pink Flamingos [1972]) and postmodern architecture (Venturi et al. 1972) suggests how camp can be employed as a repudiation of the performance of authenticity. Such moves can also be observed in the otherwise staid world of critical social theory, as illustrated by the strangely celebratory (or else severely sarcastic) writings of the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who proclaims in America:

The US is utopia achieved. … It is the world centre of the inauthentic … it is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America’s reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts—these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture. … Let us grant this country the admiration it deserves and open our eyes to the absurdity of some of our own customs. … You have to have wondered, at least for a brief moment, “How can anyone be European?”

(Baudrillard 1988: 77, 104–05)

Finally, through practices of transgression, participants boldly reject what they take to be the essentialist qualities of authenticity, fabrication, and performance. As a reaction to typecasting in theater and film and normative role assignment in everyday life, since 1993 the Los Angeles Women’s Shakespeare Company has performed plays from Hamlet to Romeo and Juliet to Richard III with all-female casts. (Of course, Shakespeare’s plays were...
originally staged with men performing all roles.) In recent years white actors have similarly been cast in traditionally black roles: Patrick Stewart played the title lead (without the offensive blackface makeup) in a 1997 staging of Othello by Washington, D.C.’s Shakespeare Theater. In I’m Not There, an experimental 2007 biopic of Bob Dylan and his multiple invented selves, the troubadour’s many incarnations—each a riff off a different brand of authenticity and American myth—are performed by a cadre of actors varying in age, race, nationality, and gender, including Heath Ledger, Christian Bale, Marcus Carl Franklin, Richard Gere, and Cate Blanchett.

Conclusion

A central challenge among sociologists of culture remains the demystification of authenticity in entertainment, popular culture, politics, and public settings of everyday life. The construction of authenticity takes place in a context of collective involvement and social interaction, and requires the mobilization of a variety of interested actors, including: reputational authorities, prestige-granting organizations, and mass communications outlets; media-producing firms, art worlds, and cultural entrepreneurs; and public performers, creative personnel, and, naturally, their audiences. Along with the emergent aesthetic pursuits discussed above that deconstruct or otherwise challenge the performance of authenticity as tradition-bound, pretentious, and essentialist, the sociology of culture itself represents yet another critical practice designed to examine and debunk the dominant cultural myths of our time.

References


