

**James R. Keller**

## **Whiteness [In]Visible**

### **Eminem and the Politics of White Male Privilege**

This essay examines Eminem's uneasy relationship with race. He has capitalized on a traditionally African-American art form while emphasizing and simultaneously effacing his own racial heritage. Indeed, one must see Eminem as both black and white in order for his public image to be fully coherent. His speech, gestures, friends, colleagues, economic fortunes, and artistic influences are all Hip Hop clichés while his hair and flesh are stark white. He complains about the difficulty of making it as a Rapper because he is white, and thus invokes the traditional complaint of white labor competing with African-Americans in the workforce, and at the same time admits that his whiteness made him an unprecedented success in the Rap music industry. The essay applies the theories of racial construction to Eminem's lyrics as well as to the film *8 Mile*, in which the rapper is impeded in his struggle for success by bias within the African-American Hip Hop apparatus. Thus Eminem is cast in the traditional narrative of the underdog who overcomes doubt and discrimination in order to achieve dazzling success, yet ironically this scenario is played out against a power structure that is the tradition target rather than the perpetrator of discrimination.

In November of 2003, Raymond Scott, a.k.a. "Benzino" and David Mays of the Hip Hop periodical *The Source* released a tape intended to discredit Eminem by revealing his hidden racist sentiments. Recorded by Mathers when he was a teenager and before he had produced his breakthrough *Slim Shady LP*,<sup>1</sup> the track is certainly inflammatory in its denigration of African-American women:

And all the girls that I like to bone  
Have the big butt, no they don't  
Cause I don't like that nigger shit  
I'm just here to make a bigger hit. . .  
Blacks and whites they sometimes mix  
But black girls only want your money cause they're dumb chicks  
So I'mma say it like this

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1. *The Slim Shady LP* (Aftermath/Interscope, 1999), referred to hereafter as *SS LP*.

Don't date a black girl, take it as a diss  
If you want, but if you don't  
I'mma tell you like this, I surely won't  
Never date a black girl cause blacks only want your money  
And that shit ain't funny. . .  
Black girls and White girls just don't mix  
Because black girls are dumb and white girls are good chicks.

The publishers' effort to offer further substantiation for the bigotry that is everywhere apparent in the rapper's lyrics, and for which he has been roundly condemned since his first album, may at first seem redundant. However, the lyric is the first evidence of racial prejudice within Eminem's inventory of intolerances. While the rapper has been willing to speak freely about any offensive topic that inspires him, on the issue of racism and the use of racial slurs, he has actually shown reticence, an omission that resembles respect.

At first, Eminem's response to the humiliating and professionally damaging revelation was to impugn the credibility of those who released the tape. He explained that he has had a longstanding "beef" with Benzino who has repeatedly ridiculed him in his lyrics, referring to him as "2003 Vanilla Ice" and the "rap Hitler," and attributing Eminem's success to his racial heritage. Over the years, Eminem has offered a few of his own criticisms of *The Source*, complaining that he is unable to get a judicious review in the Hip Hop periodical: "Cuz we dope as fuck and only get a two in *The Source*" ("As the World Turns" *SS LP*). In "What You Say" (*The Eminem Show*),<sup>2</sup> Eminem maintains that if he ever received the full "five mics" in the publication's rating system, he would die of incredulity, but he is not holding his breath. In answer to the release of the scandalous recording, Mathers issued a press release explaining the circumstances under which he had made the recording and asking for his audience's understanding:

The tape they played today was something I made out of anger, stupidity, and frustration when I was a teenager. I'd just broken up with my girlfriend who was African-American, and I reacted like the angry stupid kid I was. I hope people will take it for the foolishness that it was, not for what somebody is trying to make it into today.

The rapper's conciliatory tone on the issue of racism is a dramatic reversal from the defiance and exacerbation which have been his routine reactions to previous detractors from other segments of the special interest spectrum. "Mr. Don't Give a Fuck" clearly does care about one subject, and his reticence to offend the African-

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2. *The Eminem Show* (Aftermath Records, 2002), abbreviated hereafter as *ES*.

American community is understandable, considering he is an interloper in a distinctly black art form, and he is the first white rapper to earn sustained respect and credibility in the medium. Even if his audience is largely comprised of white suburban teens, he nevertheless owes his success to the rap establishment which is largely African-American. A credible accusation of racism could expose Eminem as a fraud who exploited a black art form in order to enrich himself, while he felt only contempt for those who assisted him in his ascension to the apogee of Hip Hop stardom. Thus on the track “Yellow Brick Road” from *Encore*,<sup>3</sup> he offers a sustained explanation and an apology for the provocative lyrics, explaining that he had dated an African-American woman in order to make his former girlfriend Kim jealous. He had the intention of dumping the new woman once he had generated the requisite passion in Kim, but he was instead the rejected party. Thus his hateful lyrics were a response to the humiliation of his failed venture. However, in his typically defiant fashion, he reveals that he is only sorry about having singled out a particular race “cuz no matter what color a girl is she is still a [bitch].”

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Eminem’s early recording is his use of the racial epithet “nigger,” a word which, according to his interviews, is “not even in [his] vocabulary.”<sup>4</sup> While Eminem’s use of such a slur is, indeed, reprehensible, his close association with African-Americans over many years makes an accusation of prolonged racism less credible. Despite his resolution in the offensive lyric, he does go on to date at least one more African-American woman, Mariah Carey, although evidently this relationship was less than successful as well. Nevertheless, his entire crew – D12, the Detroit Dozen or the Dirty Dozen – is African-American, as are his producer Dr. Dre and several longtime friends and colleagues. Of course, it is conceivable that he does harbor an occulted acrimony for all of these people, but it seems improbable.

The politics of racial epithets problematizes the rapper’s lyrics. Our culture has so completely abjected the word “nigger” that any white person who would utter it is construed as an incorrigible racist, capable of a multiplicity of villainies, and incapable of reformation. Consider as illustration the predicament of Mark Furhman, investigator in the first O. J. Simpson trial. Furhman under cross-examination stated that he had not used a racial epithet in ten years. When a tape surfaced during the trial that revealed his use of the term seven years before, his veracity was so completely discredited that he was considered capable of having framed an African-American celebrity for murder, an act which would seem improbable had he used a racial slur even the same day of his testimony. The defense lawyers’ insistence on

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3. *Encore* (Aftermath, 2004).

4. Chuck Weiner, *Eminem. . . In His Own Words* (New York: Omnibus, 2001), p. 55.

specifying a time frame in which the witness had not used the “n-word,” particularly a time frame so broad, was an invitation to perjury. It would seem implausible that a person could remember the words s/he had used in any given month – a period of ten years guarantees fabrication even when the word is as divisive as a racial epithet. While the gap between Eminem’s racial slur and his statement that the word is not part of his vocabulary may be much shorter than Fuhrman’s, its usage does not necessarily render him an intransigent racist. However, it does not help his credibility either.

Benzino’s postulate that Eminem’s success is attributable to the color of his skin seems an appropriate catalyst for the body of this discussion. While Eminem’s whiteness has, in many ways, worked to his advantage, to suggest that race is the exclusive basis for his success is reductive and, perhaps, facetious. Race did not sell 19 millions copies of *The Eminem Show* although it might have added the requisite momentum to make him, for a time, the most successful solo rapper in the industry. Eminem is a talented lyricist and satirist, and that must be factored into the equation of his success. Moreover, the idea that whiteness could be the key to success with a fan base that has been extremely reticent in its acceptance of creative contributions from Caucasians seems counterintuitive, particularly following the all too memorable shame of Vanilla Ice. Instead, Eminem’s success is a negotiation between black and white. As with many issues in the rapper’s canon of perfidies, racial tension has been a contributing factor, creating the furor that has kept him in the public eye and compelling more and more people to purchase his albums in order to hear for themselves the words and sounds behind the scandal.

In the past decade, contemporary theorists have turned their attention to the social construction of whiteness as a race, and these theories can assist us in our understanding of the complex relationship to race that defines Eminem’s public persona. In her study entitled *Whiteness Visible*,<sup>5</sup> Valerie Babb seeks to reveal the artificiality of racial categories within American culture and literature, to expose the mechanisms of white privilege that permit Caucasians of European descent to pass for the norm or for generically human. Caucasians are the race that is not one. In contrast, other races and ethnicities are often defined by their failure to conform to the white paradigm and, subsequently, consigned to second class status. Babb observes that the people of diverse national and ethnic ancestry, who have in America been collectively defined as “white,” had little or no sense of racial commonality before their immigration to the North American continent. As the history of warfare in Europe reveals, the multiplicity of regional groups has shown very little sense of

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5. Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York UP, 1998).

shared racial heritage, but instead has fixated on tribal or cultural differences to define unique social identities, i.e. Bosnia/Serbia. However, in America, the same groups have developed a unified identity in their effort to distinguish themselves from African slaves as well as the indigenous people of the western hemisphere. Babb concurs with such other racial theorists as Kwame Anthony Appiah, who maintains that race is a “biological fiction” masquerading as “an objective term of classification,” and Theodore Allen, who argues that such categories are a “political invention” calculated to ensure white privilege.<sup>6</sup>

Both Valerie Babb and Richard Dyer, the author of *White*, suggest that whiteness in America signifies a social system in which special license and freedoms are granted to people of European origin. Dyer defines white privilege as “special provisions, assurances, tools, maps . . . passports, visas” that allow European Caucasians a greater amount of access to power and prosperity.<sup>7</sup> In addition, one of the liberties enjoyed exclusively by whites within American culture is the right to be “considered individuals – diverse, complex, and changing,” the right to be excluded from racial stereotyping. The paradoxical quality of whiteness as a racial construct is that it must remain at once “visible and yet invisible.”<sup>8</sup> The power of white privilege, particularly since the civil rights revolutions of the mid-twentieth century, is commensurate with its capacity to conceal the instruments of domination. White privilege can only be sustained by veiling or sublimating its organizational qualities. Even many of those who are constant recipients of this secret social boon would revolt against its fundamental injustice were they fully cognizant of its existence, particularly since such privilege flies in the face of the American emphasis on self-reliance. White liberals pay lip service to equalities while remaining willfully blind to or guarded in the maintenance of those cultural benefits that attend their own racial heritage. In his poem “Dinner Guest – Me,” Langston Hughes illustrates the not-so-subtle hypocrisy of those who are ostensibly supportive of social equality. The speaker of the poem muses over the social naïveté of the rich white liberals who invite him to dinner to express their regret over the shameful injustices that the white establishment perpetrates against African Americans. At the same time that they repudiate their own whiteness, the hosts sip Champaign and eat fancy desserts in their luxurious Park Ave. apartment, oblivious to the economic inequality that is central to racial injustice, and ignorant of the need to dismantle white economic privilege in order to guarantee true social equality. The speaker of the poem graciously chooses to leave his hosts’ illusions intact, accepting the invitation in the spirit that it was offered for the sake of one night’s comfort.

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6. Babb, pp. 9–11.

7. Babb, p. 9.

8. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 45.

Physical whiteness must also remain visible in the sense that those who are granted admission to the treasury of racial preference must constantly display the appropriate credentials – their light skin, straight hair, and long noses, etc. Whiteness is visible as well in the display of prosperity. To be white is to have greater access to economic resources and to put those resources on display for the purposes of social legitimacy. The binary construction of racial categories in America necessitates that whites be on display in order to define the racial spectrum white/black or even white/racialized other. A recuperative attribute of such binaries is that it also highlights the centrality of the opposing category. If white is defined in contrast to black or non-white, the same process that prioritizes whiteness nevertheless depends upon its opposition in order to give the prior quality meaning. Whiteness is just as dependent upon the attributes of blackness as it is on its own qualities, because it is those antithetical and marginalized attributes that give the center meaning. There could be no advantage in being racially white if there were no minorities whose unenviable social predicaments are repulsed by the Caucasian establishment. Thus white privilege requires the degradation of the racialized other.

The abject nature of blackness has ensured the social cohesiveness of the diverse peoples of European origin who immigrated to America. Indeed, the American dream of freedom, democracy, and “economic security” that compelled so many Europeans to travel to the western hemisphere in order to escape political persecution, draconian class systems, and/or social immobility also ensured that they would defend the racialized system of preferences when they arrived. The alternative was to be reintroduced to limitations like those they had sought to escape. The dream of social mobility necessitates that someone be left behind. Thus, paradoxically, the support of racial inequality that deprived the racialized other of the American dream was advantageous to the immigrant white population, and if possession of the American dream is indeed the defining quality of Americans, then, for at least two centuries, to be an American was to be white, and the American dream was a specifically white bourgeois fantasy. To be prosperous and powerful required that others be poor and disenfranchised.

Binary constructs are socially constituted and easily dismantled, and Eminem’s role in both his lyrics and his public persona problematizes or deconstructs the simplistic divisions that define racial politics in America. He has exploited his whiteness both as a privilege and as an impediment. When it has suited his purpose, he has argued that his connection to the white community is advantageous; and, at other times, he has sought to demonstrate his close alliance with the African-American community, particularly by emphasizing his underprivileged upbringing. Indeed, the effort to reveal his rap credentials seems to be one of the primary ongoing objectives of his lyrics.

The subject of rap music is most often rap music, the players citing the urban credentials that justify their rage, touting the disenfranchisement that has compelled them to speak and, through the severity of their words, to rebel. The rap audience requires a measure of authenticity or at least believability in the anti-social/anti-establishment posturing of the performers. It is certainly no asset for the player to come from a privileged middle-class background, and it can be detrimental to the rapper's career. Thus the desire to be perceived as a danger to order and reason is a fundamental compulsion within a segment of the Hip Hop culture. However, the ideas pivotal to hardcore rap – i.e. violence, misogyny, larceny, etc. – are also equated to “blackness” and not just as a spiritual, but also as a racial attribute; and thus the lyrical art form contributes to negative racial stereotyping. Within this context, it could be construed as politically advantageous for the African-American rap establishment to introduce a white rapper who is perceived to be just as dangerous a presence as his black colleagues, thus breaching the behavioral binaries that often define racial politics in America, putting on display the universality of antisocial behavior within the racial and ethnic spectrums. Eminem's posture as the most dangerous threat to the good order to emerge from rap since Snoop Dog's murder trial brings into focus the wide appeal of rap to all segments of the youth market, and dismantles the assumption that rap is an exclusively African-American problem.

Eminem has spent much of his lyrical and satirical prowess apologizing for his whiteness and distancing himself from the comfortable lives of the white bourgeoisie. In his effort to assert his right to rap, he has had to affirm his right to complain, and he does this by relating the deplorable conditions of his upbringing. He blames his mother for abusing prescription medications and neglecting him, for tending to her own needs rather than his. He fantasizes about killing his deadbeat dad who, he claims, abandoned him when he was an infant (although the father maintains that Debbie Mathers abandoned the marriage, leaving him no means of contacting her). He bewails the financial difficulties of his family that forced them to live in low-rent housing and to move constantly from one residence to another. He reviles the larger boys who bullied him in school and complains of minimum wage jobs that ensured the cycle of poverty. Most importantly to the content of this discussion, he grumbles about the obstacles he faces as a white artist in a largely African-American medium.

Paradoxically, a portion of Eminem's strategy for success has been to arraign the rap establishment and audience for reverse discrimination, to portray himself as marginalized from the margin, forced into the center, a victim of persecution by the persecuted. This constitutes a strategy that both allies him with and alienates him from the African-American community, a contrast that defines his complicated relationship with his audience and his art form. If rap, like the blues, is a vehicle for complaint about social inequities, then Eminem has refocused it to the benefit of the

white under-classes who are also forsaken, estranged from mainstream American prosperity and opportunity. In essence, Eminem invites his audience to consider the parallels between the white underclass and the African American poor. His thesis (were he aware of it) is fundamentally Marxist, arguing that economics is as equally a revealing factor in understanding social inequality as is race. While it may be hyperbolic to suggest that the predicament of the white poor is analogous to that of the working class African-American community who face the twin indignities of racism and destitution, the comparison has some merit. The principal argument that black and white racism are not equal maintains that whites control the instruments of power, perpetuating that power through their hegemony, and thus possess a significant capacity to affect negatively the lives of African-Americans, while the opposite is not true of black racists.<sup>9</sup> This argument, which has a great deal of legitimacy, can also be applied too broadly since it suggests that there is a pan-Caucasian unity within American culture where whites circulate the power and prosperity equally amongst their intra-racial community. A moment of reflection will testify to the willingness of the white upper classes to exploit and degrade the Caucasian poor with almost as much impunity as they debase racial minorities. Of course, as has been argued above, pale skin, straight hair, and long noses can be construed as passports to easier access within the white power structure, but the benefits of that access vary wildly within the white population. Not all whites have access to all the power, and many (perhaps even most) whites have access to very little power and opportunity, and is this not a condition sufficient to produce a musical satirist? Just because a person does not have the most reason to complain does not mean that s/he has none. Poverty and inequality are pan-racial problems, and their greatest concentration within the minority population is a cause for great regret and concern; however, the broader issue of economic disparity as it applies to the American population is an issue that warrants comment as well as organized civil action.

Eminem's satiric barbs are aimed at those institutions that he believes have impeded his efforts at success as he sought to raise himself out of poverty in the same fashion as those African-Americans who have become fabulously wealthy from rap music or other forms of popular entertainment. While he is willing to confess that his white skin has been an occasional "benefit" to him, he also sees himself as the victim of many of the same social constraints as his African-American colleagues: low

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9. Joe L. Kinchloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kinchloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 1998), 3-30, p. 15.



socio-economic expectations and a formative environment fraught with neglect, violence, and poverty. However, he includes the rap establishment within his list of those who have unfairly inhibited his struggle for recognition. Thus he becomes the mouthpiece for a trend among white lower and middle classes to perceive themselves as victims of discrimination within the new “color blind society”:<sup>10</sup>

Some people only see that I’m white, ignorin’ skill  
Cause I stand out like a green hat with an orange bill. . .  
How the fuck can I be white? I don’t even exist.

(“Role Model” *SS LP*)

This lyric echoes the grievances of many white workers within the industrial sector who cite racial quotas for their failure to achieve professional success, whether it be in hiring or promotion; and while there may be occasions in which minority workers are unjustly preferred over whites, the universality of the complaint would suggest that black candidates are always less qualified. No one ever admits that they were justly passed over in favor of a highly qualified minority applicant/candidate. Of course, this may only be a reflection of the complex intersection of disappointment and self-esteem.

In the final line of the above quotation, the rapper co-opts the trope of invisibility developed in such African-American literature as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*<sup>11</sup> and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.<sup>12</sup> The theory of invisibility places African-American’s outside the ken of Western culture’s institutions, save perhaps its judicial apparatus. In effect, minority’s needs are ignored or discounted, only acknowledged when their engagement can serve the objectives of perpetuating power within the white establishment. This is the thesis of Ellison’s novel, in which the nameless invisible man discovers that even the Marxists, who ostensibly advocate social equality, are only interested in harnessing black rage to their advantage. In addition, African-Americans are invisible in the sense that the white establishment refuses to perceive or represent them accurately, the argument of Wright’s *Native Son*, where whites are incapable of seeing Bigger Thomas’ humanity; they only see the savage black predator defined by the newspapers.

While Eminem is, on one level, utilizing the invisibility metaphor in much the same way as Ellison and Wright, his usurpation of the image also has a uniquely white application. The rapper contends that the music industry was blind to his

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10. Michel W. Apple, “Forward,” in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kinchloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), ix–xiii, p. ix.

11. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

12. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987).

talents because he did not conform to the standard racial profile of a successful hip hop artist. The invisibility trope in this instance generates a synesthesia: because his critics can see him, they cannot hear him; thus he is, at this point, not so much invisible as inaudible. The idea is further complicated by the ostensibly contradictory statements that he stands out “like a green hat with an orange bill,” yet in the subsequent line argues that he is invisible or does not exist. These ideas are, nevertheless, reconcilable: he argues that his racial distinction from the Hip Hop collective has placed him beneath the consideration of those who dole out opportunities and positive reviews to promising young rappers. The declaration of his invisibility can have yet another application to his career. The content of the track “Role Model” (from which the quotation is derived) is largely facetious. He offers a catalogue of his perfidies in a parody of parents and detractors, thus lampooning their concerns about his socially reprehensible lyrics. So when he states that he does not exist, he can be referring specifically to his psychotic persona Slim Shady, who is merely a theatrical fabrication created to promote his rap ambitions.

Similarly, in the track “Bad and Evil” from *The Slim Shady LP*, Shady refers to himself as “a ghost trapped in a beat.” Here again, the Shady character only exists as an artistic invention. Since the beats in rap music are frequently generated by a “machine,” the above line may be a play on the philosophical slogan “ghost in the machine,” which captures the mind/body dialectic and instigates the draconian debate over the problematic connection between body and soul, a nexus of seemingly incongruous ontological terrains. In Eminem’s lyric the “ghost trapped in a beat” certainly alludes to the insubstantiality of the characters who speak within his verse, suggesting that their ravings are inspired by rhythm, but more interestingly, the phrase also suggests that he is “trapped” in an industry whose practices, decisions, and policies are as predictable as a drum machine, and within that institution, he is invisible. Finally, Eminem’s claim to invisibility in “Role Model” involves a uniquely white implication. As argued above, “white” is an artificial racial construct imposed upon reality for the maintenance of power. Therefore, the rapper may be suggesting that “white” as a coherent racial category is a fabrication, and consequently distinctions predicated upon the supposed difference between black and white are logically indefensible; thus his detractors should look past his pale skin to his skill. In this context, the verse is potentially controversial, implying reverse discrimination and suggesting that if differences predicated upon race are unacceptable when the skills of African-American are under consideration within traditionally white areas of influence, then the same should be true for whites within the black enclaves.

Lyricaly, Eminem seems mindful that he is an interloper within an African-American art form. However, his commentary on the subject is predictably erratic, moving from complaints about the difficulty of making it as a white rapper to consi-

dering the advantages that he has enjoyed being the first Caucasian Hip Hop star with any street credit or longevity. Predictably, *The Marshall Mathers LP*<sup>13</sup> is the most defensive about his racial heritage. His second CD on a major label is a repository of rebuttals aimed at those who objected to *The Slim Shady LP*. His guardedness against the accusation of white colonization of black art is manifest in the first verse of two tracks. He opens “Who Knew” with a claim that his music is not racially constituted but is directed at anyone (black or white) who enjoys “thug rap”: “I don’t do black music, I don’t do white music / I make fight music for high school kids.” He suggests that the audience for rap music can be characterized more accurately in terms of age (“high-school kids”) than in terms of race. Similarly, the opening verse of “The Real Slim Shady” mocks the incredulity of his audience who are stunned at the audacity of a successful white rapper: “Y’all act like you never seen a white person before. . .” Part of Eminem’s popular appeal involves the disorientation created by the flaunting of his whiteness in a predominantly black background. His mere presence on the stage or television or in the CD player constitutes not only a revolt against the racial uniformity of the Hip Hop performance, but also a menace to the white middle-class establishment who fear that their children will emulate the African-American urban lifestyle popularized in hardcore rap: “they’re talking back / Talkin black, brainwashed from rock and rap” (“Sing for the Moment” *ES*).

On *The Eminem Show*, the rapper becomes more apologetic and less defiant about his racial heritage. Perhaps the wealth that he accumulated between the two albums stirred his white guilt; he could afford to be more modest and generous with his praise. In “White America,” he offers a sustained commentary on the role of whiteness in advancing his career. He does not attribute all of his success to his Nordic heritage, but he is willing to surrender half: “Look at my sales / Let’s do the math, If I were black, I woulda’ sold half. . .” He suggests that his racial background is probably the reason he has become a superstar, but not the sole reason for his impact. After all, half of his current sales would still be millions of units. Developing his math equation further, he speculates that the white fans were drawn to him, while his producer and co-artist Dr. Dre attracted Eminem’s black following; and he concedes that whiteness has begun to “work to . . . [his] benefit now.” The tone of *The Eminem Show* is not entirely conciliatory, however. In “Without Me,” he provokes his detractors, playfully flaunting his supposed threat to the integrity of rap music and boasting of his exploitation of the art form for his own enrichment and glorification: “I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley, / To do black music so selfishly / and use it to get myself wealthy.” He facetiously implies that he is the vanguard of an invasion of whites who will colonize rap music

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13. *The Marshall Mathers LP* (Interscope Records, 2001).

and who will recognize him as their professional catalyst: “20 million other white rappers emerge. . .”

A portion of Eminem’s strategy for negotiating his place within a predominantly black profession is to advertise his own alliance with the African-American rap establishment by repudiating those figures who have previously given white rap a bad reputation. His favorite target is, predictably, Vanilla Ice, who singlehandedly made white rappers ridiculous and indefensible. As revolting as Vanilla Ice was, he actually appeared to be following a trend in Hip Hop music begun by MC Hammer, which was to improve the showmanship in the performances by adopting gaudy costumes and choreography. But Vanilla Ice made the mistake of fabricating his past, and when his true origins as a privileged, middle-class white boy were revealed, he lost credibility. Eminem has repeatedly advertised his slight regard for Vanilla Ice. In the lyrics of “Role Model” (*SS LP*) Shady “grab[s] Vanilla Ice and rip[s] out his blonde dreads,” and in “Marshall Mathers,” Marshall scoffs at his rival’s ineffectual efforts to deride him: “Vanilla Ice don’t like me / He said some shit in *Vibe* just to spite me / Then went and dyed his hair just like me” (*MM LP*). Eminem’s popular momentum is so great that even his enemies wish to emulate him. Mathers does not limit his abjuration of white entertainers to a single target. He is less than supportive of the Beastie Boys, and his hatred of the Insane Clown Posse (ICP) is legendary. Moreover, he offers a long list of insults for the white pop stars who dominated the musical charts in the mid- to late 90’s, i.e. Britney, Christina, N’Sync, Backstreet Boys, etc. One act that is conspicuously absent from the list of targets (save for a single reference) is Kid Rock. In “Cum on Every Body,” Eminem tells two women that he is Mike D from the Beastie Boys and that they should meet him at Kid Rock’s next concert, adding that he would be “standing next to the Loch Ness monster.” Shady’s allusion to the mythical monster clearly lampoons the women’s intelligence, comparing the likelihood that he is a member of the Beastie Boys to the probability that he will be in the company of the elusive serpent. The line could also suggest that there is an equal measure of improbability in his attending a Kid Rock concert, and while such a point would constitute a very clever satire, it seems unlikely that he is deriding his fellow Michigander, as the two of them worked together early in their careers. If Eminem sought to target all white players, he could hardly ignore Kid Rock whose work, in the past, has been taken seriously as a synthesis of rock and Hip Hop, although the universally country strains of his *American Bad Ass* suggest that his emphasis on his musical versatility has taken a pathological and self-destructive turn. If the Kid did not warrant ridicule before, he may now.

Eminem has been much more guarded in his satire of African-American artists. His trepidation is in all likelihood a deliberate effort to avoid alienating his black audience or being perceived as antagonistic toward the Hip Hop mainstream. The

majority of allusions to black rappers involve adulation; he is particularly effusive in his praise of Tupac and has produced collections of previously unreleased Tupac raps, but he extols the virtues of many others, including Jay Z, Nas, and Biggie, etc. In spite of his clear reticence to attack African-American artists, Eminem does reserve a few of his poison darts for Lauryn Hill, reviling her now infamous declaration that she “can’t stand white people”; and there are certainly some choice words for Benzino and Ja Rule on tracks from *Encore*. The latter began his dispute with 50 Cent, and Eminem inherited the dispute, which rages across many tracks on *Encore* as well as Obie Trice’s *Cheers*. Dr. Dre has been the recipient of some of the rapper’s playful jabs, but here the objective of the satire is to flaunt the close relationship between the two artists, a technique that Eminem has exploited to appropriate Dre’s weighty reputation in the industry. Eminem kills Dre twice on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, but the objective is clearly to demonstrate that they are close enough to jest with each other. The murder of Dr. Dre in Mathers’ lyrics also helps to develop the Slim Shady persona, who is crazy enough to kill one of the patriarchs of gangsta rap. A Freudian analyst might find the repetitive imaginary act of killing his mentor (not unlike the imaginary murders of his absentee father) as a sign of a sublimated resentment that the younger rapper harbors for his producer, a form of the Oedipal urge to be liberated from paternal authority and restraints; and this same idea could have a racial dimension. The recurring fanciful murder of a giant in the African-American Hip Hop industry can be understood as a hopeful metaphor for the ascendancy of white rap, or at least a dramatic announcement of its arrival and its determination not to be turned away - a trend that has yet to materialize except in the single instance of Eminem. The stylized argument between the two rappers in “Guilty Conscience” (*SS LP*) reveals, at first, a mellowed, matured, and moralizing Dre who can look back at his own youthful rage with wisdom, skepticism, and, perhaps, some regret. However, the youthful exuberance of the white rapper succeeds in rekindling Dre’s fury. While this, of course, is a metaphor for Eminem’s role in bringing Dre back to the top of the charts, it can also be understood as a broader comment on the necessity of resuscitating Hip Hop or more particularly gangsta rap with a new gimmick, a psychotic white rapper who is perceived as an even greater threat to the white establishment than his African-American predecessors; and while it may be indefensible to suggest that Hip Hop needed or needs the assistance of a white boy, there is little doubt that Eminem has succeeded in bringing a whole new audience to rap.

In the construction of whiteness as a race within America, the dominant Caucasian culture has fashioned the category of black as a repository of most negative attributes, thus the establishment has banished certain behaviors by projecting them onto marginalized social groups. Valerie Babb argues that the symbolism of color within racial difference served the interests of the white population whose

complexions coded them as “romantic, family oriented, socially and personally trustworthy, and desirous of freedom,” while people of color were invested with those negative qualities counter to the interests of white power and hegemony: “barbarism, servility, savageness, and ignorance.”<sup>14</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, in “Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness,” concur with Babb, observing that white has come to signify “orderliness, rationality and self-control” and non-white “chaos, irrationality, violence and the breakdown of self-regulation.”<sup>15</sup>

Hardcore Hip Hop has exploited these negative racial differences to its advantage, marketing the abject to an alienated youth audience not yet ready to adopt the values of the older generations and aligning it with the adolescent hormonal rampage that fuels youthful rebellion. Thus the African-American thug rapper is (in his lyrical persona) proud of his ability to commit violence, perpetuate social chaos, behave irrationally, and live in excess – “all out of compass,” and this formulaic lifestyle proved gold, or more literally platinum, within the music industry. The content of violent rap lyrics is a litany of antisocial behaviors, and yet those African-Americans who are successful in rap become increasingly white, ideologically. If prosperity and privilege are equated with whiteness within American culture, then paradoxically the rappers who have made fortunes perpetuating the white establishment’s negative stereotypes of African-American – barbarism, irrationality, chaos, and violence – have become “whiter” in the process. One of the frequent subjects of rap lyrics and videos is the social mobility of the successful black rap star who can now afford to drive expensive cars, live in Beverly Hills mansions, eat in fancy restaurants, wear tailored clothing, sponsor wild and elaborate parties, and engage in extravagant shopping sprees. The image is one of the invasion of formerly white enclaves by the icons of urban chaos; yet once that transition to excessive wealth has been made, the assumption of the rapper’s dangerous influence diminishes. The rap star may then face a credibility problem with his fan base; he can no longer convincingly complain about many of the subjects that are fundamental to the content of rap lyrics: racism, street life, poverty, and random violence.

Eminem’s rise to preeminence within the most violent, anti-social, and anti-white segment of the Hip Hop genre generates a racial paradox. Eminem’s success has resulted from his being even more anti-social than most of his musical colleagues, by intensifying the violence recounted in hardcore rap lyrics. The Slim Shady persona took the element of danger in rap into the realm of the psychotic; the rapper is not a disgruntled ghetto youth willing to sell drugs to earn a living, to

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14. Babb, p. 170.

15. Kinchloe and Steinberg, p. 5.

murder his rivals for the sake of territory or women, or to impugn white America for its racial inequities; Slim Shady is an escaped lunatic whose violence is not validated by racial injustice. He is driven by impulse, by phantom voices, by perverse tumultuous pleasures; he is the serial or spree killer of rap: Jason, Freddy, and Norman Bates all in one. In his racial politics, he has usurped and intensified the negative black stereotypes associated with rap and turned them white (and not with horror). Figuratively, he has become “blacker” in order to become “whiter,” and this paradox has at least two conflicting resolutions. Like other successful rappers, Eminem has, by commandeering the negative imagery arbitrarily associated with black America, transcended the social limitations that initiated his vexation, the same that motivated him to rap about his unhappiness. To paraphrase John Donne, in order to be “raised up,” he needed to be “thrown down.” Sinking beneath his station within American racial politics, he found the weaponry to mount an assault upon those barricades inhibiting access to prosperity and privilege. He manipulated black in order to emerge at the top of the white social and economic hierarchy. The second resolution to the paradoxical black/white dialectic in Eminem’s career is more progressive in scope. Having exploited negative racial profiles, he has turned them white by revealing, through example, that the qualities unfairly attributed to African-Americans and other people of color are just as common within the white population. He is white and more excessive than his black colleagues. Moreover, he has transformed the urban gangsta’s random violence into serial killing, a predominantly white phenomenon, a negative white stereotype: i.e. mental illness and methodical murder. Whites may be less inclined to ride through Compton, California, firing guns from their car windows, but they will systematically herd people into cattle cars, transport them to a remote location, unload them into specially designed shower rooms, and gas them. American ideology and propaganda code chaotic gangland vendettas as the great threat to social stability while they continue to perpetuate a rationalized and systematic violence against minorities, thus perpetuating the real threat to peace and freedom through its hidden murderous mechanisms, its violent invisibilities.

### **8 Mile and the [White] American Dream**

On that light note, let us turn to a discussion of Eminem’s successful film debut *8 Mile*<sup>16</sup> which comments at length on his relationship with the African-American rap community. The film is quasi-biographical, a vehicle for Eminem to reveal the conditions of his upbringing and the source of his rage. Despite the fact that he is one of the most financially successful rap solo acts and was the biggest name in the music indus-

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16. *8 Mile*, dir. Curtis Hanson (Universal, 2002).

try for a half decade, he evidently felt the need to defend his right to rap, and the \$115 million that *8 Mile* generated indicates that America is interested in hearing Eminem explain himself. The narrative is a classic example of the American dream mythology, the story of a young man who overcomes adversity through raw talent, hard work, and determination. The ironic twist within the narrative is that a traditionally oppressed minority is the social group holding back the young American hero. He must triumph over the African-American community's disdain for his creative efforts.

The protagonist of *8 Mile*, Jimmy Smiths, a.k.a. Bunny Rabbit, has reached a pivotal time in his life. The character's name coupled with the song title "Run, Rabbit" seems a probable allusion to John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run*,<sup>17</sup> published in 1960, and indeed the two narratives seem to share a variety of details. Updike's protagonist is a former High School basketball hero who is having difficulty with his transition into responsible adulthood; even his name Harry Angstrom, a.k.a. Rabbit, suggests the torment that he faces in his efforts to negotiate between his high expectations of life and the tedium of his middle-class suburban existence. Consequently Harry tries to dodge all of his duties as a husband and provider. He leaves his wife to cohabit with a prostitute, Ruth, and then returns to his wife when he finds out she is pregnant only to leave her again once the baby is born. His wife's subsequent alcoholism results in her accidentally drowning their child. At the end of the novel, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is still unable to resolve his "angst" driven restlessness and panic. Similarly, the hero of *8 Mile*, Bunny Rabbit, is disappointed with his life, restlessly pursuing his longing to become a rap star. He eschews responsibility for his pregnant girlfriend and embarks upon a series of disappointing efforts. He is humiliated in a rap battle in the first scene of the film. The disappointed white boy is facing additional stress in his life. Having left his girlfriend, he is forced to live with his mother, whose new live-in boyfriend, Greg, an obnoxious and abusive hick who is not much older than Rabbit, ridicules him and his buddies for what he perceives to be their indolent and inconsequential lives. In addition, Rabbit holds a thankless factory job in which his African-American boss is excessively critical of his work. Even his triumph at the conclusion of the film does not rectify the problems the young man is facing. He has vindicated himself at a local Detroit rap battle. The successful event, in spite of its emotional fulfillment, has done little to remove the limitations that poverty imposes on Rabbit's life and expectations. He is still drifting at the conclusion of the film, just like Updike's hero.

The dramatic tension within the film derives from the uncertainty of Rabbit's career choice: Will he become frustrated and quit rapping? Will he ever be able to prove

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17. The parallels between Eminem's *8 Mile* and Updike's novels would warrant a separate full-length paper.



to the Hip Hop audience that he, in spite of his whiteness, is a skilled MC? Will he choose a more conventional career route and concentrate on attaining a decent blue collar job? The film dramatizes the process whereby Rabbit musters the confidence to perform at the next rap battle, and his triumph at the conclusion of the narrative is a consequence of his desperation. By the end of the film, he has discovered that Wink, the acquaintance who promised to introduce him to talent scouts, is a fraud; his new girlfriend Alex (played by Brittany Murphy) has cheated on him and is leaving town; his best friend, Cheddar Bob, has accidentally shot himself; Rabbit has alienated most of his other friends through his hostile and combative disposition, including Future (Mekhi Phifer) who has been his biggest advocate; his mother is being evicted from her trailer because Rabbit drove away her boyfriend who was set to receive a large lawsuit settlement; and he has been beaten mercilessly by The Leaders of the Free World, a rival rap crew. The only portions of his life that have improved by the end of the film are his performance at his dead end job and his relationship with his mother.

In short, Rabbit is so desperate when he enters the final rap battle that he has nothing to lose, and he raps with a withering rage that stuns his opponents. His success results from his willingness to ridicule himself. When he battles Papa Doc for the championship, he steals his adversary's thunder by turning the satire upon himself, reciting all of the criticisms that could be leveled against him before turning to the other combatant and exposing him as a pretender. Papa Doc is left with nothing to say and must concede defeat without dispute, a reversal of Rabbit's humiliation at the beginning of the film. With this technique, Rabbit wins by exploiting his own vulnerabilities, exposing himself as a truly disaffected individual, one who has much about which to complain. The same qualities that make him the object of scorn are also those that legitimize his rap. The Free World finds it amusing that he lives with his mother in a trailer, but it is that same wretchedness, degradation, alienation, and rage that has long inspired hardcore rap.

*8 Mile* allegorizes its message in the rap personas of its principal characters, revealing a black rap hegemony that is determined to maintain its domination as well as the racial purity of its performers. The designation "Leaders of the Free World" for the rival crew suggests equal opportunity, a free world for everyone to fulfill their personal ambitions; however, the crew acts in a fashion contrary to the touted inclusiveness of their name by actually limiting access. (The appellation is also potentially a satiric swipe against American bourgeois ideology that markets America as the land of freedom and opportunity.) The leader of The Leaders is aptly named Papa Doc after the despotic ruler of Haiti who embodied black privilege, not over whites, but over a nation populated by the descendants of former slaves and who ruled with savagery, keeping his people in fear and degraded poverty. *8 Mile's* Papa Doc exhibits similarly repressive tendencies, obviously within a much more limited

scope; he sits arrogantly at the top of the rap hierarchy in Detroit surrounded by his crew of fashionable thugs – Tupac “wannabes.” He and his crew are clearly well-financed, driving a brand new SUV and suited in expensive matching apparel. The Leaders’ dominion is displayed not only in their repeated success in rap battles, but also in their violence and seeming ubiquity. They intrude into every rap venue in which Rabbit tries to excel, except the lunch line at his job. The leaders become the embodiment, both literal and figural, of what Rabbit must overcome in order to achieve success as a rapper. The fascist imagery associated with Papa Doc comments on the rigorous uniformity that had been imposed upon rap prior to the emergence of Eminem in the late 90’s. The rapper image had evolved from the gangsta outsider to the affluent, excessive Hip Hop mogul or mafia don, flaunting his wealth, skill, and influence. With the introduction of Eminem, the anger of disenfranchisement was reintroduced to rap.<sup>18</sup> The Leaders of the Free World must be overthrown, and, with them, their style of rap, which has become tedious.

The Leaders are a visual contrast to the rag tag collection of losers and intellectuals represented by Rabbit’s crew. When The Free World encounters Rabbit and his friends preparing for the final rap battle, the Leaders quip that the upstarts look like a “handicap convention.” This arrogance increases The Leader’s humiliation when they lose the climactic confrontation. In contrast to The Free World’s opulent vehicle, Rabbit’s unnamed crew drive a broken down wreck that seldom starts. The Free World’s obvious wealth (for which the film offers no explanation) is juxtaposed with the honest poverty of their rivals who wear very modest clothing, but also clothing that signifies their individuality. Rabbit and Cheddar Bob dress like white trash while DJ IZ, the traditional Black Power intellectual, wears an army jacket, suggesting an old school pre-gansta militancy, and Future’s dread locks allude to the tranquil disposition of Caribbean islanders, a quality which suits him for the role of MC and peacemaker at the rap battles; he is the film’s politician.

Future’s name, of course, signifies his ability to recognize the next wave of rap incarnations, the next transmogrification of the culture. The film gives Future the role of MC at the rap combats, asserting the primacy of his taste over that of the Hip Hop club crowd. He is MC because his skills at discerning quality rap are impeccable. Moreover, he sees Jimmy Smiths as a “genius” and dedicates all of his energies to Jimmy’s promotion, trying to compel the rap community to see past Rabbit’s whiteness to the raw skill that the upstart wields. The film does not seem to imply that the future of rap is white, but that the art form must be willing to introduce radical innovation to recognize talent wherever it lies in order to remain vibrant and

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18. Anthony Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am: The Life and Times of Eminem* (New York: Crown, 2003), pp. 142–143.

relevant. Based on the role that Proof (Eminem's friend and colleague from his crew D12) played in promoting Eminem's early efforts, Future may recognize that his own success depends partially upon the accomplishments of his protégé. He continues to encourage and champion Rabbit even after the latter lashes out at him, complaining that he is the "future of nothing," a hateful barb intended to express doubts about his own perceived foolishness in pursuing a rap career. After his success in the final combat, Rabbit is offered an opportunity to co-host the rap battles with Future, but instead chooses to do his "own thing." Future, in this cinematic moment, embodies an avenue that Rabbit is rejecting, not so much, in this case, a career in rap, but a more limited success as an MC in a local challenge.

Rabbit's name retains several potential significations. The name evolves from a disparaging allusion to his failure in the initial rap combat to a designation that identifies one of the principal qualities that will contribute to his future success. Initially, the name "Rabbit" suggests his diminutive stature; he is small, timid, and vulnerable, and gets no respect within the musical venue where he is trying to prove himself. The name suggests that he is a frightened but nimble creature facing a pack of wolves who will tear him apart at the first sign of weakness or ineptitude. He has stage fright and is reluctant to leave the bathroom for his first rap battle. The negative significations of his stage name become even more pronounced when he is unable to refute the lyrical taunts of his competitor and leaves the stage without competing. This moment involves a [mis]recognition by the club audience, who believe that Rabbit has nothing to say in response to his opponent's satiric jabs. Instead he is frightened into silence by the audience who are expecting to preside over his failure. By the end of the film, his name has shifted in signification to reveal his greatest attributes: he is vigorous and enterprising; he employs his rabbit-like skills – his ability to listen carefully, critically, and productively to the denunciations by his opponents and frame his rebuttals to the rhythms of the DJ and the world around him; his capacity to dodge and weave in the face of a frontal assault; and his ability demoralize his opponents with the rapidity of his wit. He will work hard and hustle to attain success, and when he starts to run, his speed and evasiveness will make it very difficult for others to catch him. The final lines of the *8 Mile* soundtrack capture the latter meaning of his name:

I'ma win this race  
 And I'ma come back and rub my shit in your face, bitch  
 I found my niche, you gon' hear my voice  
 Til you sick of it, you ain't gonna have a choice  
 If I gotta scream til I have half a lung  
 If I had half a chance I'd grab it – Rabbit, run.                    ("Run Rabbit")

The appellation suggests that he will compensate for the disadvantages of being white in a black art form by being more determined and quicker than his competitors. The name "Rabbit" may carry several other significations based upon potential cognates, including 'rap it.' Interpreted as an imperative, "rap it" seems to motivate the protagonist in his professional ambitions, urging him to keep rapping; however, the name may also allude to the expression "wrap it," perhaps an abbreviation of "wrap it up," which could carry contradictory meanings. It simultaneously urges the rapper to give up and/or to finish off his opponents with speed and move on with his career. The emphasis is on the necessity of making a decision quickly because his life has become unmanageable and he must embrace meaningful change. This contradiction captures the central tension of the narrative. The protagonist can either get serious or stop trying. The name may also allude to "rapid" or "rabid," both of which capture the rapper's style, the former once again suggesting his speed (quick wit and devastatingly rapid delivery) and the latter his rage. The allusion to "rabid" certainly accords with the anger and desperation that characterizes Rabbit's disposition when he enters that final battle.

The allegorizing of the characters within the narrative produces some unexpected troublesome racial implications. Since Rabbit's efforts are the central focus of the film and the allegory, the other characters are in a sense dehumanized, reduced to objective embodiments of Rabbit's inner struggles. From this perspective, Future's role is diminished until he is no longer the future of Hip Hop, but instead the personification of Rabbit's career options, and ones that the rapper seems to reject at the completion of the film. Wink plays a similar role in the narrative. He is a dreamer and a con man with big plans, who raises Rabbit's expectations of imminent opportunity and success, but who is eventually revealed to be an imposter. His name, "Wink," which suggests conspiracy and complicity, also captures Rabbit's self-deception. He is so desperate for success that for a time he is blind to the evidence that Wink is deceiving him, a fact that is clear to Future from the beginning of the film. Moreover, the authoritative and forbidding presence of Papa Doc is the obstacle that Rabbit must overcome, the racial uniformity of rap culture. The allusion in the name "Papa Doc" to the political paradigm of the Latin American strong man ruler suggests that Rabbit is going to have to be very determined and well-supplied to mount his revolution in the interests of freedom and opportunity.

Perhaps the most racially provocative attribute of the film is the theme of reverse discrimination. All of the obstacles (outside of his own family) that hinder Rabbit's success are African-American, embodied in the recurring images of the intimidating all-black crowd at the club where he performs. Rabbit's act of overcoming is to triumph over the skepticism of the black audience. His story is one of the more recent iterations of the self-affirming mythology of the American dream; but

the unsettling twist on the thematic is the representation of a traditionally oppressed minority as the power structure that is inhibiting the young, white, American hero's apotheosis. The black audience is portrayed as rigid and unreasonable, although they do eventually embrace Rabbit because his skills and charisma are so incontestable that they can no longer deny him. In addition, the film subtly subverts the authority of the black audience even in the area of expertise which white America deems undeniably African-American – Hip Hop music. While the audience in the film is ostensibly expert in the determination of rap talent, the audience watching the film (which can be assumed to be mostly white if it is filled with Eminem fans) is implicitly more knowledgeable of the protagonist's skill. The tension within the film revolves around the uncertainty of whether the club crowd will ever recognize Rabbit's talent. The film crowd – already aware of it – are pulling for the young hero, hoping the African-American audience will be able to overcome its racial preconceptions and admit a white boy to the Hip Hop pantheon. The trope both within and without the film becomes not only socially irresponsible, but absurd: Caucasians trying to help African-American understand their own culture and overcome their racial biases.

In fairness, *8 Mile* does dramatize a variety of encounters between Rabbit and encouraging African-American friends, including Future, Sal George (Omar Benson Miller), and DJ IZ (De'Angelo Wilson), yet they are portrayed as the enlightened exceptions to the rule of black racism, perhaps because they too are outsiders or individuals, rebelling against the obligatory conformity of the Hip Hop community in Detroit. Despite the confidence and support of his African-American friends, Rabbit's deepest intimacies develop between himself and the other white characters, Cheddar Bob (Evan Jones) and Alex (Brittany Murphy). Cheddar Bob is the character who retains a simple-minded devotion to Rabbit and derives personal affirmation from his success. When Jimmy Smiths wins the rap battle at the conclusion of the film, the camera, mimicking Rabbit's perspective, turns to Cheddar and Alex to evaluate their personal exultation in his success. Alex in particular displays a combination of elation and smugness, suggesting that she knew all along what the black crowd had only recently discovered: the measure of Rabbit's talent.

The volley of knowing glances bandied between the white characters in the film's conclusion suggest a complicity that also has an application to the role of *8 Mile* in our culture. In reaffirming the validity of the American dream, the film re-legitimizes, or even re-invents, a uniquely white bourgeois narrative. When cinema stages a dramatization of the values of hard work and determination which contribute to the protagonist's triumph over poverty, that protagonist is typically Caucasian. The tradition of the American Dream did not encompass people of color until long after the narrative was a staple of American mythology, and even to this day,

the tradition seems fixated on the struggles of white Americans for fame and financial success. Hollywood frequently depicts African-Americans who are wealthy, successful, and powerful, but that is only the American Dream implied. The inspirational narrative focuses on the battle for success, emphasizing the process as much as or more than the exultation and achievement. Seldom does the narrative of overcoming apply to African-Americans except when the obstacle to surmount is racism; then the apotheosis is usually freedom and survival, not as often wealth and power.<sup>19</sup> *8 Mile* is one of the first major Hip Hop films that dramatizes the urban poor kid overcoming obstacles interior and exterior to win adulation and respect; and ironically the protagonist is white, struggling for a place in a black world. To make the racial politics of the film even more problematic, *8 Mile* has adopted the single manifestation of the American dream narrative that is uniquely related to the predicament of minorities: the process of overcoming prejudice to create a place for people of color in an oppressive white hegemony. Rabbit does not get rich in the film. It is questionable whether he even plans to pursue his rap ambitions following the film's conclusion. In the final shot, he leaves his friends and the scene of his triumph to go back to work. The film then becomes a white man's success in a black man's American dream. The co-opting of black culture that has been a part of the criticism of Eminem since his emergence on the public stage has been valorized in his film debut.

Yet another compelling attribute of *8 Mile* is the way in which the narrative winks at the presence of Eminem on screen. Just as the rapper invites his audience to perceive him simultaneously as both black and white, the film necessitates that the protagonist be viewed as both Eminem and Jimmy Smiths. To cast Eminem playing himself and dramatizing the auto-biographical details that are a staple within his lyrical content is to urge a recognition of him on screen; and the narrative requires that his presence be acknowledged in order to generate a sufficient amount of anticipation for his climactic triumph. The film offers little to verify the protagonist's so-called genius before the end of the film, save for the encouragement and praise of his friend and a few brief and unimpressive freestyles. The expectations of his success that keep the film audience interested are generated mostly by the recognition of Eminem on screen and the supplemental knowledge that he is a proficient MC. Moreover, the film script is calculated to continue the process of defending Eminem's right to rap by enacting the details of his difficult upbringing and explaining his true sentiment toward minorities, both racial and gendered. No doubt the names have been changed, so that any cinematic details that are not accurate will not be assumed so, thus creating still more

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19. Some notable exceptions include *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993).

misunderstanding about the rapper's intentions, or inspiring any further accusations that he is fabricating his difficult past.

The conclusion of the story also urges the audience to recognize the rap icon in the part of Jimmy Smiths. The characters' celebration following the final battle implies that Rabbit has done more than win a local contest and the support of a skeptical black audience. He has become a star. Even though Rabbit returns to his factory job after his success and rejects the invitation to host the rap combats with Future, the narrative urges its audience to assume that he will go on to fortune and fame because that is story of Marshall Mathers, who triumphed over low expectations. Even the lyrics of the Oscar winning song "Lose Yourself" invite assumptions that the climactic battle in the film has a great deal of significance: "You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow / This opportunity comes once in a lifetime." The film implies that the final contest is his one shot that he does not waste. Yet ostensibly there are no talent scouts, label representatives, or even any agents at the event; so logically the audience is supposed to assume that Rabbit is Eminem, and that he will have many additional opportunities to "blow." The film can also be understood as a metaphor for the rapper's Hollywood debut. His stage fright at the beginning of the film and his growing confidence and determination record Eminem's gradual adaptation to the medium, until he becomes a full-fledged actor/movie star in the film's culmination, so that Rabbit's recognition as a rapper parallels, for movie goers, Eminem's exultation as an actor.

### **Recuperating Eminem's Racial Politics**

In his lyrics, Eminem often slips imperceptibly between one of his personas and another, thus problematizing authority and veracity, allowing him to gambol away from responsibility for the hateful, abusive, and/or socially reckless content of his lyrics. Even the example cited in the opening anecdote of this chapter relies upon the audience's inability to determine the true nature of Marshall Mathers' sentiments. He wants his fans to recognize that an entirely different character was speaking when he recorded the mean-spirited, racist freestyle about black women; this time it was the specter of youthful rage, disappointment, and stupidity speaking. Eminem plays a game of peek-a-boo with his racial background, or rather the parlor trick – "Now you see it; now you don't." His racial heritage is calculated to be simultaneously visible and invisible. He expects to be appreciated for his skill, not dismissed for his race (as is the theme of *8 Mile*); but he also capitalizes on the advantages of his whiteness in a variety of ways, some subtle, some not so, and paradoxically, even his acknowledgments that his whiteness has been an advantage perpetuates his racial elusiveness. When he admits in "White America" that his race has helped him to sell

twice as many records as he would have if he were black, he also creates a scenario in which he can defend his skills and his right to rap. Half of the millions of albums sold world wide still constitute phenomenal success, and those remaining sales are attributed entirely to skill. The admission is made at the height of his fame when he can afford to be magnanimous, when the question of a white man's right to rap is moot; he is already rich and famous. The song in which he acknowledges the advantages of his racial heritage is the same in which he portrays himself as the worst fear of the white establishment, thereby aligning himself with the racialized outsider in spite of his affirmation of whiteness; he occupies the center and the periphery of American culture simultaneously.

Eminem's efforts to combat those aspersions of racism generated by the rogue verses released by Benzino and *The Source* include the most clichéd solution – to protest that some of his best friends are black – and his unique way of expressing that is to release an album with his African-American crew, *D12 World*.<sup>20</sup> While the effort is very politic, it is also quite transparent and constitutes yet another manifestation of privilege. Few people have the opportunity to refute accusations against them by releasing a CD and having it produced and promoted with all of the resources of Interscope, Shady, and Aftermath records. The videos released for *D12 World* simultaneously refute, affirm, and burlesque the charges leveled by Ray Benzino. *The Source* alleges that Eminem has exploited his African-American colleagues for his own financial advantage, refusing to give them a fair portion of the royalties, failing to help talented rappers such as Proof and Obie Trice to become “multi-millionaires.”<sup>21</sup> The video for “My Band” both affirms and ridicules this idea, showing Eminem as a privileged and insolent tyrant within the D12 power structure, refusing to share his opulent lifestyle with his crew, and daring them to complain. While he travels on a bus, his crew rides separately in a small van, and while Eminem has lavish accommodations for his dressing room, D12 shares a janitor's closet. The video also suggests that he monopolizes the microphone and the publicity, refusing to let anyone else speak or perform. The audience is supposed to understand the protests of his band as affirmation of their support and friendship. They are willing to ridicule the idea that he is an egomaniac who insists upon his superiority and his privilege. Yet they have an ulterior motive for doing so (even for misrepresenting their predicament), which is to create a successful song and album that will refute the charges of selfishness, financial inequity, and racial prejudice by bringing a greater degree of wealth and fame to his African-American crew. Even if they agreed with the accusation that Eminem is exploitative, they would neverthe-

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20. D12, *D12 World* (Shady Records, 2004).

21. Kim Osorio, “The Real Slim Shady,” *The Source* (February 2004) 70–78, pp. 76–77.



less have a strong financial motivation for cooperation. However, in fairness, Eminem is also lending his high public profile to the project, which virtually guarantees its success and ensures his band mates' financial prospects. The irony of the "My Band" burlesque lies not in its lyrics or its imagery but in the DVD supplements to *D12 World*. Here the imagery of the band during recording sessions for the LP emphasizes the friendliness and easy interaction between Eminem and his African-American colleagues, its objective to show that there is no tension within the organization; however, the result is to confirm some of the accusations made against Shady in the media. In the DVD, he does come across as a camera hog and an egomaniac; he repeatedly usurps the eye of the camera, redirecting it when it strays to other subjects of interest. The DVD also contains the video for the track "40oz." which includes the clichéd Hip Hop imagery of a rap posse's celebrations. Each rapper has an opportunity to address the camera, while he offers his contribution to the rap medley, and Eminem's contribution is not first, last, or longer; its prominence is de-emphasized; he respectfully waits for his opportunity to rap. Interestingly, the two music videos on the DVD contradict each other in the representation of the racial and economic politics of the organization, while the imagery from the recording studio seems to confirm both of the antithetical views of Eminem's behavior. This ambivalent position is one in which he seems very comfortable, simultaneously mocking, affirming, and denying accusations against him through which he can refute his critics and maintain his public image as an unyielding, unapologetic, and insolent ass.

White privilege has produced some unacknowledged advantages in Eminem's career. When critics attribute the rapper's extraordinary success to his whiteness, the conclusion seems counterintuitive, since there is a recognized mistrust of white players in the black medium. Yet there is a more subtle logic to the critique, one that does not necessarily diminish the importance of Eminem's skill. His whiteness has allowed him to stand off brightly on an entirely black background; after all, it is a rule in painting that dark colors recede and light colors move to the foreground. Eminem's lightness might also have focused greater attention on his rhymes, since his very presence on stage or on MTV and BET necessitated that he must have something very important to say and be proficient in his art in order to have been given the chance to rap in a national venue; so his audience listened closely to what he had to say. The controversy over his right to appropriate African-American culture to his advantage was an invitation to explain himself, and generated the compelling subject matter which has become his trademark: his unpleasant childhood experiences.

Eminem's need to explain himself created a media blitz. The press wanted to cash in on the rapper's stardom by featuring articles about the white artist who is out of his element and is infuriating everyone. Foremost among the advantages of

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the racial controversy was the opportunity to star in a film based on his life, and one that dramatized the circumstances that made him angry enough to identify with the socially disaffected and begin to rap about his rage. There are no memorable films about the lives of other successful rappers who have overcome disadvantage to attain Hip Hop stardom, and yet the story is as much or more central to their experiences than to Marshall Mathers'. Eminem was the first given this opportunity because it was not unique to hear of a black man or woman overcoming many daunting racial obstacles; yet when a white man has similar experiences, the story is evidently compelling enough to warrant a major motion picture. One can only hope that the success of *8 Mile* will convince the film industry of the viability of such narratives.