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Race ... and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity

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Rap superstar Eminem has become the new poster child for everything that's dangerous about contemporary popular culture. He's crude, juvenile, and foul-mouthed. His lyrics are violent, misogynistic, and homophobic. He's corrupting our youth, poisoning our culture, and laughing about it all the way to the bank. Or so the story goes. This essay argues that much of what underpins the moral panic surrounding Eminem is a set of largely unspoken questions about race, identity, authenticity, and performance. In particular, this paper examines the ways that Eminem's status as a White man who has achieved both critical and commercial success within a predominantly Black cultural idiom serves to challenge dominant social constructions of race in the United States by de- and reconstructing popular understandings of both Whiteness and Blackness.

End of the world: best rapper's white, best golfer's black.
                                                            —comedian Chris Rock

GAPS

Describing the work on race and racism done at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, Hall (1992) wrote

> We had to develop a methodology that taught us to attend, not only to what people said about race but ... to what people could not say about race. It was the silences that

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told us something; it was what wasn't there. It was what was invisible, what couldn't be put into frame, what was apparently unsayable that we needed to attend to. (p. 15)

As Hall (1992) explained it, those at the Birmingham School took this particular turn because they came to recognize that analyzing media texts to identify and critique the ways that people of color were routinely misrepresented, stereotyped, and demonized was simply not an effective way to struggle against racism. The problem here was *not* that media representations didn't matter in the United Kingdom then—or that they don't matter in the United States today. On the contrary, people of color continue to be regularly depicted as dangerous criminals who threaten to destroy the existing social order; as exotic primitives to be feared, despised, and controlled; as helpless children dependent on charity from the technologically superior West; and as fetishized objects readily available for White appropriation—and as long as images like these remain in heavy circulation, it's vital that cultural critics continue to identify and critique them.

But it's also not enough. Implicit in the focus on "bad" representations, after all, is the notion that enough "good" representations will solve the problem. Perhaps the clearest example of the fundamental flaw in this philosophy can be found in *The Cosby Show*. Although *Cosby* presented a far more uplifting public image of Black people than had previously been the norm on U.S. television, those "kinder, gentler" fictions didn't translate very well into better living conditions for *real* Black people. In fact, the widespread popularity of *Cosby* may actually have made it easier for large segments of White America to believe that the Huxtables' upscale lifestyle was more representative of Black America than was really the case, which, in turn, suggested that there was no longer a socioeconomic gap of any real significance between White and Black America—or, more perniciously, that if such disparities *did* exist, it was because poor Blacks had "failed" to live up to the impossibly picturesque example of Cliff and Claire and their designer-sweater-wearing children. What's ultimately at issue here is not the (in)accuracy of *Cosby*'s representations of Black America—after all, it's not as if sitcoms about White families provide us with consistently faithful reflections of White America either—but rather what is *not* represented. In the absence of a range of images of Black people at least as broad and varied as the standard prime-time depictions of Whites, *any* single program, no matter how positive or enlightened or uplifting, carries a representational burden that it can't possibly bear in full.[1]

Following Hall, then, I want to suggest that racism, as it currently lives and breathes in the United States, depends at least as much on the gaps in contemporary public discourse on race as it does on flawed media representations of people of color. There are, of course, more of these silences than I can do justice to in this essay, and so I won't say as much here as I might about how the "national conversation" on race (such as it is) frequently uses racially coded language (*crime, welfare, the inner city,* etc.) that studiously avoids explicit references to *race*; or how diligently that discourse steers clear of addressing the actual question of *racism*; or how, when racism *is* actually acknowledged, it's too often reduced to a matter of individual prejudice and bigotry, rather than recognized as a set of systematic and institutional discriminatory practices.[2] As important as these silences are, my concern here is a different sort of gap in mainstream U.S. discourses on race: the one that transforms the common, pervasive, and age-old phenomenon of racial blending (in its multiple and various forms) into something invisible, aberrant, and novel.

For instance, the notion that race is a historical invention (rather than a biological fact)—and the corollary notion that racial categories are fluid and variable—is neither recent news nor an especially controversial idea among scientists and scholars who study race.[3] Nonetheless, even in reputable mainstream media discourse, this well-established fact can be treated as if it were a still untested theory—or, at best, an unresolved question.[4] Similarly, men and women from "different" racial groups have come together (even if such unions have not always been characterized by mutual consent) to produce "mixed race" babies for centuries. Yet it wasn't until the 2000 census that the U.S. government officially recognized that "check one box only" is an awkward instruction for many people to follow when asked to identify their race.

The phenomenon of cultural exchange between "different" racial populations also has a long and tangled history, but such exchanges are still often treated as if they were a dangerous new phenomenon. This is especially true in cases where the borrowing that takes place is recognizably more about love than theft[5]: where Whites take up Black styles, forms, and/or genres, not to claim them as their own nor to transform them into something "universal" (and thus something dehistoricized, decontextualized, and deracinated), but in ways that suggest genuine respect for—and even deference toward—Black culture. Jafa (2003) mapped out a historical trajectory of such reverent borrowing that encompasses the influence of African sculpture and photography on Pablo Picasso's invention of cubism

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[1]For more on the racial politics of *The Cosby Show*, see Dyson (1993, pp. 78–87), Gray (1995, pp. 79–84), Jhally and Lewis (1992).

[2]There are many sources for more detailed arguments about these particular discursive silences and evasions, but some of the best are hooks (2000), McIntosh (1988/1998), Tatum (1999), and Williams (1997).

[3]A small portion of this literature includes Berger (1999), Dyer (1997), Frankenberg (1993), Gilroy (2000), Ignatiev (1995), Ignatiev and Garvey (1996), Lipsitz (1998), Omi and Winant (1986), Roediger (1994), Tatum (1999), and Williams (1997).

[4]For example, see Begley (1995), Henig (2004), and Wade (2004).

[5]And, of course, here I'm borrowing (with love) the phrase *Love and Theft* that Eric Lott (1995) used as the title of his groundbreaking book on blackface minstrelsy.

ism, improvisational jazz on Jackson Pollock's abstract painting, and rhythm and blues (R&B) on Elvis Presley's early brand of rockabilly:

> In each of these instances, and despite the seemingly inevitable denial that occurred once influence became an issue, the breakthrough nature of the work achieved was made possible by an initially humble, and thus by definition nonsupremacist, relationship to the catalytic artifact at hand. Just as Beethoven was humble in the face of the body of work that had preceded him, these artists were each students of the work under whose influence they had fallen, students in a fashion which white supremacy would typically make unlikely. (p. 250)

The "seemingly inevitable denial" that Jafa mentioned is the discursive move that tries to reclaim the art in question as a fundamentally White phenomenon that can be embraced by the dominant culture without any acknowledgment of the aesthetic and cultural miscegenation that originally gave rise to it.[6]

This article focuses on a contemporary example of reverential cultural borrowing: hip-hop superstar Eminem and the public controversies that swirl around him. As a White man working in a musical idiom dominated by Black aesthetic sensibilities—and who does so without trying to evade or denigrate the Black gatekeepers who are the genre's primary critical arbiters—Eminem poses a significant threat to the culture's broader fiction that this *thing* we call "race" is a fixed set of natural, discrete, and nonoverlapping categories. And it's *this* facet of Eminem's stardom—his public performances of cultural miscegenation—that is the unacknowledged issue hidden at the core of the various moral panics around him.

NORM

Why is it that the only forms of popular culture that apparently have some sort of direct effect on audiences are the *dangerous* ones? No one seems to believe that more Meg Ryan movies will transform the United States into a land of sweetly perky romantics, yet the sort of virtual violence depicted in *The Matrix* could be cited as an "obvious" inspiration for the very real violence that took place at Columbine in 1999. Few people seem willing to claim that popular computer games like *The Sims* will produce a world of brilliant and creative social planners, but it's almost a given that graphically violent games like *Mortal Kombat* will generate armies of murderous superpredator teens bent on terror and mayhem. *The Cosby Show* (as noted earlier) was unable to usher in an era of racial harmony and tolerance, but edgy cartoons such as *South Park* will supposedly turn otherwise angelic,

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[6]Also see Boyd (2003, pp.122–127) for a nuanced discussion of the differences between *imitation* and *influence* with respect to White artists working in Black idioms.

well-adjusted children into foul-mouthed, misbehaving delinquents. And in spite of several decades of pop songs extolling the virtues of peace, love, and understanding, we're not a visibly kinder, gentler, more tolerant people ... but we can safely blame Eminem's brutal, homophobic, misogynist raps for corrupting our youth, poisoning our culture, and unraveling the moral fabric of the nation.

Or so the story goes. I make these comparisons not to argue that we should be unconcerned with the content of our mass media fare nor to suggest that Eminem's music plays an entirely benign role in contemporary U.S. culture. It would be going too far, after all, to claim that popular music has no recognizable impact on social values, or to suggest that, behind his foul-mouthed, criminally psychotic facade, Eminem is really just a misunderstood, lovable little ragamuffin. Rather, I raise the question of Eminem's allegedly harmful influence precisely because the broader discourse around him is far too saturated with overtones of controversy for me to safely ignore the issue. In this climate, any public statement about Eminem is implicitly obligated to focus on his multiple offenses against good taste, common decency, and fundamental moral values.[7] Commentators who "fail" to emphasize such issues—especially those that dare to suggest that Eminem might actually have talent worthy of praise—are themselves subject to stringent critique for ignoring the "real" (and, apparently, the only) story.[8] I don't want to dismiss the moral concerns of Eminem's detractors out of hand, but I also think that, too often, they manage to ignore what's genuinely novel (and important) about Eminem. In the midst of the moral panic that surrounds Eminem, however, it's rhetorically difficult to get to those other questions without first addressing the agendas set by the dominant discourse.

Most of the public debate about Eminem over the past several years has focused on the offensive, antisocial, irresponsible, dangerous, violent, misogynistic, and/or homophobic nature of his lyrics—and there's plenty of grist to be found for this particular mill. Listen to Eminem's first three major label releases and—among other things—you'll hear him insult his fans, drive with a fifth of vodka in his belly, assault his high school English teacher, encourage children to mutilate themselves, kidnap and kill his producer, shoot cashiers during armed robberies, rape his mother, and (at least twice) murder his wife with sadistic brutality. In the hyper-masculine world of Eminem's music, women are invariably "sluts" and "bitches" and "hos," and men he disapproves of are routinely derided

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[7]As Smith (2002) sardonically noted, "Every article ever published on Eminem can be paraphrased thus: Mother, Libel, Guns, Homosexuals, Drugs, Own Daughter, Wife, Rape, Trunk of Car, Youth of America, Tattoos, Prison, Gangsta, White Trash" (p. 96).

[8]For instance, both Boehlert (2000/2001) and Hoyt (2000) complained that critics simply have routinely dismissed and/or glossed over Eminem's most offensive lyrics, even as the public controversy raging around Eminem remains the perennial focus of much of what's been written about him in the mainstream press over the past several years.

as "pussies" and "faggots." It's not surprising, then, that Eminem has been roundly condemned from the right as a despoiler of common decency and morality, and from the left as an obnoxious promoter of a culture of violence that terrorizes women and gays.[9]

Nonetheless, I want to suggest that what matters about the controversy surrounding Eminem is not what it reveals, but what it conceals. To be sure, there are real and important issues at stake in the public furor over Eminem, especially around the questions of misogyny and homophobia. Cultural criticism, however, is not—or at least shouldn't be—an all-or-nothing game, where *any* aesthetic or political flaw necessarily renders a particular work wholly irredeemable, in spite of what laudable qualities it might possess (and, of course, the reverse is equally true). Eminem's music contains more than its fair share of misogynistic and homophobic lyrics, but simply to reduce it to these (as many critics do) doesn't help to explain Eminem. It merely invokes a platitude or a soundbite to explain him *away*.

Much of the moral panic here involves a disturbing sort of scapegoating, where Eminem is made into a bogeyman for social ills that are far larger and far older than any damage that he might have been able to do in a mere 5 years or so of musical stardom. Reading Eminem's critics (from both the left and the right), one gets the impression that he has single-handedly opened up a previously untapped well of bigotry and violence, and that the very novelty and uniqueness of his brand of poison has somehow overwhelmed the aura of peace-loving tolerance that otherwise characterizes the day-to-day life of U.S. culture.

The major complaints lodged against Eminem are the latest in a long history of complaints about the excesses of the mass media. And it would be easy to respond to this very traditional sort of condemnation of the dangers of popular culture with the very traditional litany of rebuttals: that is, to note that mass media effects are rarely as direct or powerful as the "violent lyrics produce violent crime" equation implies, or that the social ills in question arise from an impossibly tangled knot of multiple causes, or that audiences may be using all this "dangerous" media fare to channel their *pre*-existing antisocial attitudes into relatively harmless fantasies. Whatever merits there might be in such rhetorical strategies (all of which can be found in popular defenses of Eminem's music),[10] they ultimately don't do much to change the basic question at hand ("Does Eminem's music pose a threat to public health and safety?"). They merely answer that question in the negative, while leaving the original "moral panic" frame intact.

And that frame desperately needs to be broken. Part of the nature of a moral panic, after all, is that it presents an exaggerated threat to the social order as a way

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[9]For example, see Boehlert (2000/2001), Brown (2000), DeCurtis (2000), Farley (2000), Frere-Jones (2001/2002), and Hoyt (2000).

[10]For example, see Carson (2002), Croal (2000), Doherty (2000), Kim (2001), Morgan (1999), Rux (2003), Smith (2002), and Tyrangiel (2002).

to draw attention away from genuine cracks and flaws in that order.[11] In the case at hand, it's worth noting that mainstream U.S. culture is already rife with misogyny and homophobia, and was so long before Eminem was born: enough so that his hyper-masculine lyrical excesses may actually be the *least* transgressive, *most* normative thing about him. This doesn't get Eminem off the hook when it comes to his particular renditions of these problematic cultural norms—not at all—but it does suggest that the real stakes in this particular discursive struggle are not those visible on the surface: that Eminem is being taken to task for transgressions that are too disturbing, too unsettling, and too threatening to mainstream U.S. culture to be openly acknowledged. And so what I want to do for the rest of this essay is to tease out some of *those* silences in the public debates about Eminem: silences that, to my ears anyway, scream out for attention quite loudly.

ROLE

A significant portion of the case against Eminem revolves around the question of his status as a role model for his (supposedly) youthful audience.[12] He doesn't just

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[11]Sociologist Stan Cohen described a moral panic as

a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereo-typical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned [sic] by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (quoted in Hall, Crichter, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, pp. 16–17).

In extending and updating the notion of the "moral panic" as a category of social analysis, McRobbie (1994) noted

that at root the moral panic is about instilling fear in people and, in so doing, encouraging them to try and turn away from the complexity and the visible social problems of everyday life and either to retreat into a 'fortress mentality'—a feeling of hopelessness, political powerlessness and paralysis—or to adopt a gung-ho 'something must be done about it' attitude. The moral panic is also frequently a means of attempting to discipline the young through terrifying their parents. This remains a powerful emotional strategy. (p. 199)

[12]As far as I can tell, Eminem's detractors have simply assumed that his primary audience consists of minors, but I've yet to see any hard data offered in support of this claim. This is a time-honored, if not

depict antisocial violence in his music, the argument goes, he personifies it in compelling fashion through the use of first-person narratives. News stories about domestic violence, for instance, are safe (in part) because they're presented with a sufficiently distanced tone so as not to glorify the brutality involved. Eminem, on the other hand, gives us the story from the batterer's point of view—and does so with a wildly manic glee—that sends the message that it's perfectly okay for men to beat, torture, and kill their wives. Such, at least, is the major rap against Eminem: that his music is simply far too real in its violence and hatred to actually work as safe entertainment.

Buried not very far beneath the surface of this critique, however, is a dicey set of assumptions about the relationship between art and reality. When it comes to the aesthetics and politics of popular music, one of the trickiest words that a songwriter/vocalist can utter is "I". In some cases, the use of first-person address is a straightforward form of autobiographical witnessing, whereas in other cases, it's clearly a temporary adoption and performance of a fictional persona. Taken as an abstract question of form and style, it's relatively easy to recognize that the lines between the autobiographical and the fictional "I" are often hopelessly blurred. True stories, after all, must still be dramatized and performed in their telling, and purely fictional tales often involve honest expressions of their interpreters' experiences and personalities.

When one gets down to specific cases, however, many of those nuances wither away. Tellingly, they often do so in ways that afford already-valorized forms of musical expression more artistic license than other, "lesser" musical genres enjoy. In this respect, mainstream rock, folk, and country musicians have much more liberty to use the first person to utter violently aggressive, sexually provocative, and/or politically strident words than do artists working in genres like dance or rap. Which means—not coincidentally—that the artists most frequently denied the right to use the fictional "I" tend to be women and/or people of color.

For example, John Lennon—while still a lovable mop-top, no less—could sing "I'd rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man" ("Run for Your Life").[13] Johnny Cash could boast that he'd "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die" ("Folsom Prison Blues"). Bob Shane (of the Kingston Trio) could stab a woman to death for unspecified reasons and regret nothing other than that he was

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exactly honest, rhetorical device when it comes to moralistic condemnations of popular culture. Framing the issue as one of "protecting children" not only carries more affective weight than "protecting young adults," but it also implicitly absolves the critics invoking such rhetoric from the need to actually pay attention to what real audiences have to say about their media choices. I don't doubt that Eminem's fan base includes a significant number of minors, but the claim that Eminem's audience is mostly children needs to be backed up with something more than the knee-jerk assumption that popular culture (or, more narrowly, hip-hop) is "just for kids."

[13]Lennon quite possibly borrowed this line from Elvis Presley's version of "Baby, Let's Play House."

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caught before he could escape to Tennessee ("Tom Dooley"). Eric Clapton could gun down a sheriff in the street without audible remorse or regret ("I Shot the Sheriff"). And Bruce Springsteen could undertake a murderous rampage across Nebraska in which he killed "ten innocent people" with a sawed-off shotgun ("Nebraska").

All of these musical crimes were generally understood to be acceptable forms of dramatic musical fiction—or, at least, none of them sparked any significant wave of moral outrage from the public at large—and all demonstrate quite clearly what Foucault (1969/1999) called "the author function":

> Everyone knows that, in a novel offered as a narrator's account, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly to the writer or to the moment in which he [sic] writes but, rather, to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him [sic] with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance. (p. 215)

The musicians cited above are all understood to be "authors" in Foucault's sense of the term (even when, as in Clapton's case, they're singing other people's songs), and so their most violent musical narratives are readily interpreted as artistic fictions.

Musicians who "fail" to be White, straight, economically privileged, and/or male, however, are frequently and forcefully denied comparable artistic license, even when (or perhaps *especially* when) they're working within artistically valorized musical genres such as rock. For instance, when Madonna or Prince sing about sexual escapades in the first person, they're made into poster children for why compact discs (CDs) need parental warning labels—with "critics" such as Tipper Gore leading the charge to police the musical soundscape.[14] When Alanis Morissette hurls bitter musical invective at a duplicitous ex-lover ("You Oughta Know"), rock critics are quick to accuse her of being an "angry woman" and a "man hater"—whereas male rock stars who offer venomous musical kiss-offs to former girlfriends (e.g., Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello) are lauded as visionary poets. When Ice-T or NWA use music to narrate revenge fantasies about firing back at criminally violent police officers, they're met with public outrage forceful enough to cancel national concert tours and expunge the offending songs from already released albums—and in Ice-T's case, the backlash's racism is underscored by the public framing of his offending song ("Cop Killer") as an example of (everything

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[14]Gore's self-proclaimed fandom for artists such as the Rolling Stones—who didn't exactly make sexually prim music in their heyday—only serves to underscore the fact that there was something more than just sexually provocative lyrics at stake in her attacks on what she called "porn rock."

that's wrong with) gangsta rap, even though it came from an album released by his speed metal band, Body Count. In cases like these, the possibility that these musicians are invoking the fictional "I" is one that the dominant public discourse largely refuses to recognize or accept. "Common sense," it seems, tells us that John Lennon didn't *really* want to kill his first wife when he wrote "Run For Your Life," but that "Cop Killer" *must* be taken as a literal expression of the truth about Ice-T's felonious desires.

Part of Eminem's musical brilliance, then, is his ability to recognize this double standard and to use the tension between the fictional and the autobiographical "I" to fuel his art. His first three nationally released albums—1999's *The Slim Shady LP*, 2000's *The Marshall Mathers LP*, and 2002's *The Eminem Show*—find him self-consciously sliding back and forth between (a) his "real life" identity as Marshall Mathers (who describes as "just a regular guy"); (b) his professional alter ego, Eminem (the self-assured, swaggering rap star); and (c) the fictional character, Slim Shady (the evil trickster persona that *Eminem* [rather than Marshall] sometimes adopts). For example, in "Role Model" (from *Slim*), Eminem complains that his critics can't see through the fictions he's constructed and that the villainous demon they're railing against (Shady) doesn't really exist. In "Stan" (from *Marshall*), Shady explains—with great sensitivity, no less—to an overzealous fan that the violence and venom found in Eminem's music is "just clowning." And in "Without Me" (from *Eminem*), Marshall notes that his fans (and perhaps even his critics) clearly prefer Shady to him. As Carson (2002) described it

> so obsessed with identity that he's got three of them, he uses his alter egos' turf fights to create an arresting conundrum: perspective without distance. Juggling scenarios to flash on not only his reactions but his perceptions about his reaction, even as he baits you about *your* reactions, he analyzes himself by dramatizing himself, and the effect is prismatic because nothing is ever resolved. At one level, a line like "How the fuck can I be white? I don't even exist" ["Role Model"] ... is just another deft reminder that "Eminem" is a persona. But when it comes sideswiping out of the racket, it can sound downright, um, existential—an inversion of the central conceit of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. (p. 88)

Given the frequency with which Eminem's music involves first-person narratives, cynical observers have wondered whether Eminem is simply too egotistical to rap about anything other than himself. But this fairly common reading of Eminem's art—and of rap in general—points to a fundamental failure to recognize the historical connection between the deliberately over-the-top lyrical posturing of hip-hop and the longstanding oral traditions of boasting, toasting, and playing the dozens found in African American culture: oral traditions that themselves weave together authentic self-expression and performative hyperbole in ways sophisticated enough to make the "I" being invoked by the speaker impossible to parse neatly.

When push comes to shove, then, whether Eminem really means what he says in his songs is, quite literally, an example of the canonical loaded question: "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" Without wanting to dismiss Eminem's real-life outbursts of physical violence (which are a separate issue altogether), I think that a better question to ask is this: Why do so many people find it so extraordinarily difficult to envision Eminem (and other rappers) as someone who might have enough creativity, intelligence, and artistry to fashion and perform a convincing fictional persona? To be sure, such a rethinking of Eminem's art doesn't have to result in either respect or approval: One can, after all, still be disturbed and offended by fiction. For that matter, many critics are simply unable to recognize what Eminem does as *art* in the first place, apparently assuming that *art* and *abrasiveness* are mutually exclusive categories.[15]

Nonetheless, at the root of the widespread, collective inability to see Eminem as an *author*, as an *artist*, as a *performer*, we find a cultural bias at least as disturbing as the goriest of his musical fantasies: a bias that rests on the prejudicial notion that "some people" are wholly incapable of higher thinking and artistic creativity—and that their ability to create "fiction" is limited to making minor modifications to their otherwise unvarnished personal experiences. In this case, those "some people" are rappers—which is, in turn, a thinly disguised code for "African Americans" in general. Here, then, is another one of those problematic discursive silences, where criticizing rap or hip-hop becomes a way to utter sweeping condemnations of Black people and Black culture without ever having to explicitly frame such commentary in racial terms.

To be sure, this particular slippage is partially enabled by the discourses of authenticity that play a crucial role in rap aesthetics and hip-hop culture. Critically successful rappers, after all, typically have to establish that they have an "authentic" connection to "street life" and/or "the hood," and they will often justify the violent themes, drug references, and profane language in their music as honest reflections of the real-life environments from whence they came. At the same time, however, the dominant aesthetics of rock, folk, and country *also* depend heavily on questions of "authenticity," but they manage to do so without any serious expectations that the "authenticity" of the musicians in question must be read as "autobiography."

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[15]Novelist Zadie Smith (2002) rebutted this attitude by noting that

Salvador Dali was an asshole. So was John Milton. Eminem's life and opinions are not his art. His art is his art. Sometimes people with bad problems make good art. The interesting question is this: When the problems go, does the art go, too? Oh, and if that word "art" is still bothering you in the context of a white-trash rapper from Detroit, here's a quick useful definition of an artist: someone with an expressive talent most of us do not have. (p. 98)

Quite the contrary, as a rock star like Bruce Springsteen can use his small-town, working-class upbringing as a license to compose authentic *fictions* about that culture. The authenticity of a song like "The River" (to take but one example) clearly doesn't depend on the lyrics' faithfulness to Springsteen's personal experience. We know full well that the rock star who we hear on the radio and see on MTV didn't get his high school girlfriend pregnant and wind up trapped in a life of chronic unemployment, melancholic depression, and shattered dreams. In cases like Springsteen's—that is, those typically found in rock, folk, and country contexts—even when one's authenticity is unmistakably connected to biographical facts, that connection actually authorizes musicians to adopt dramatic personae and invent *fictional* scenarios, and the "truth" of those fictions is rarely measured by their proximity to real events.

Perhaps more crucially, we need to remember that authenticity must always be *performed* to be recognized and accepted as such. It's not enough for Springsteen's fans and critics simply to know that he comes from a working-class background. In order to maintain his status as an "authentic" working-class icon, he must continue to dress and talk and perform in ways consistent with mythical standards of "working-class-ness" long after his own daily life has ceased to resemble the lives he sings about. There's a pernicious double standard at work here that affords White musicians the freedom to separate their authenticity from their real lives, a freedom that Black artists rarely enjoy. Of course, as a White man, Eminem seems an odd person to fall victim to such a bias … but that actually leads directly into the next part of my argument.

RACE

Is Eminem the Elvis of rap: a White man who makes Black music credibly, creatively, and compellingly? Or—alternately—is Eminem … the Elvis of rap: a White man who's unfairly achieved fame and fortune by making Black music, while Black artists with equal (if not greater) talent languish in poverty and obscurity?[16]

Obviously, I've rigged the question so that the answer is inescapable—Eminem *is* the Elvis of rap—but then the question of racial identity as it relates to Eminem's music (which has dogged his career from the start) has been a rigged one all along. After all, no matter what answer one decides upon, to take the question's basic premise at face value is to start from an essentialist (and highly problematic) assumption: namely, that the musical terrain can be neatly divided up into nonoverlapping territories that match up perfectly with the "natural" racial and

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[16]For a more extended discussion of the racial politics of Elvis's stardom, see Rodman (1994).

ethnic categories used to identify people. Black people make Black music, White people make White music—and one dare not cross these lines lightly.

Lest there be any confusion, let me make it clear that my critique of these assumptions is not simply an argument for music as some sort of "color-blind" sphere of cultural activity. On the contrary, questions of race and racial politics are absolutely crucial to understanding *any and every* major form of U.S. popular music since the rise of minstrelsy. Where essentialist models of musical culture run aground is in failing to recognize that the history of U.S. popular music involves an extended series of intermingled and creolized styles that have nonetheless been mythologized as if they were racially pure forms. Jazz, for instance, commonly gets pegged as "Black music" despite the fact that early jazz drew heavily on the instrumental structures of European military marching bands. Similarly, rock has come to be widely understood as "White music" despite the central roles that the blues, R&B, and Black gospel all played in its birth.

Insofar as they help to shape the musical terrain in significant fashion, these racialized ways of categorizing music are very real—and very powerful—but they are not simply natural facts. Rather, they are culturally constructed *articulations*: processes by which otherwise unrelated cultural phenomena—practices, beliefs, texts, social groups, and so on—come to be linked together in a meaningful and *seemingly* natural way.[17] Although it may still make sense to talk about rap as "Black music," it does so only if we acknowledge that such a label bespeaks not some sort of essential blackness at the music's core, but broad and tangled patterns of musical performance, distribution, and consumption that *historically* have been *associated with* African Americans.

Given this, there's no inherent reason why a White man like Eminem can't still be a critically acclaimed rapper, but we can still ask meaningful questions about the relationship of Eminem's music to the broader terrain of U.S. racial politics. In the end, however, the actual questions that critics have asked about Eminem's racial authenticity tell us more about the racism of the culture in which Eminem operates than they do about Eminem himself. As was the case with Elvis before him, questions about Eminem's racial authenticity perpetuate the larger culture's tendency to reduce all racial politics to the level of the (stable, coherent, essentialized) individual. Framing the issue as one of "what's a White man doing making Black music?" helps to deflect attention away from the racism of the culture industry and allows us to duck difficult—yet significant—questions about institutionalized racism and popular music that deserve to be addressed more openly and directly. For instance:

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[17]For an extended definition of *articulation* as the term is most commonly used in cultural studies, see Hall (1986).

- Why *does Billboard* still segregate its charts along racial and ethnic lines, carving out separate categories for "R&B/Hip-Hop" and "Latin" music in ways that implicitly proclaim the "Hot 100/200" charts to be the province of White America?
- Why *do* rap acts have to pay higher insurance premiums for their concert tours—often high enough to prevent many rappers from touring at all—even when actual incidents of violence and property damage at hip-hop shows are no more common or severe than those at rock or country concerts?[18]
- Why *can't* a genre with as large a fan base as rap—according to the Recording Industry Association of American (RIAA), it's been the second best-selling music in the United States (behind rock) every year since 1999[19]—manage to get radio airplay in proportion to its popularity, even in major urban markets?

If we're going to treat racism in the music industry with the seriousness that we should, *these* structural and institutional issues are the sorts of questions we should focus on first. After all, if the musical terrain is racially segregated to such an extent that a White rapper (or a Black rocker) constitutes a noteworthy transgression—and it is—it's only because the larger institutional forces in play actively work to maintain the tight articulations between specific racial communities and musical genres.

Questions about Eminem's racial authenticity also make it easier for critics to simply ignore *what* he says entirely—from his most violent and disturbing narratives to his most trenchant and insightful sociopolitical commentaries—by simply denying him the moral right to speak at all (at least in his chosen genre/idiom). Focusing on whether Eminem should make "Black music" does little to address questions of racial politics and racism meaningfully. Instead, depending on how one answers the "should he or shouldn't he?" question, such a focus underscores one of two problematic ideas: (a) the essentialist/segregationist notion that Black and White music, Black and White culture, Black and White people should each keep to their own kind, or (b) the naive, "color-blind" myth that race is simply irrelevant to popular music and is thus something that we can ignore completely. Either way, such arguments amount to a form of magical thinking: that is, they attempt to deal with very real—and very complicated—questions of the relationship between race and culture by reducing them to pithy soundbites that transform race into a nonissue.[20]

Perhaps most crucially, though, questions about Eminem's racial authenticity mask a more subtle, but no less disturbing, agenda—one that's about maintaining

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[18]For a more extended discussion of this practice, see Rose (1991).
[19]See RIAA (2003b).
[20]See Garon (1996) for an especially cogent version of this argument with respect to the blues.

rigid lines between the races when it comes to behaviors, attitudes, and politics: lines that Eminem violates deliberately, forcefully, repeatedly, and threateningly. And *these* are forceful threats that Eminem *should* follow through on more fully.

BÊTE

Race *is* at the heart of the Eminem uproar—but not in the way that it's typically framed. The problem with Eminem isn't that he's just another White man ripping off Black culture—he's not the new Vanilla Ice—it's that he manages to perform "Blackness" and "Whiteness" *simultaneously*, blending the two in ways that erase precisely the same racial boundaries that White America has worked the hardest to maintain over the past several centuries.

Perhaps the easiest road into this piece of my argument goes through Miami and draws on another controversial rap act: 2 Live Crew. When their 1989 album, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, first went gold (i.e., sold 500,000 copies), there was no public outcry, no lawsuits, no obscenity trials, no moralistic hand-wringing over what havoc this "dangerous" music was wreaking upon its audiences, because the bulk of those sales were in predominantly Black and Latin inner city markets. Where 2 Live Crew ran into a buzzsaw of controversy was when they started to "cross over" to White audiences in significant ways. It's no coincidence that their infamous obscenity trial took place not in Dade County (i.e., Miami, the urban market that the band called home and the site of their strongest fan base), but in Broward County (i.e., the much Whiter, much richer, much more suburban county just north of Miami). As has long been the case, White America has only really cared about the allegedly dangerous effects of popular culture when its own children were the ones purportedly in harm's way. "Hip hop," as Eminem sagely reminds us, "was never a problem in Harlem, only in Boston, after it bothered the fathers of daughters starting to blossom" ("White America").

The moral panic over Eminem and his music is much the same phenomenon, only on a larger and more threatening scale. Eminem, after all, has reached a loftier level of stardom than 2 Live Crew ever dreamed of, and so his cultural and political impact (real or imagined) is of a much higher magnitude. 2 Live Crew faded back into the woodwork pretty quickly after the flap over *Nasty* died down. Eminem, on the other hand, is already one of the top-100-selling artists of all time, with more than 27 million units sold as of March 2006.[21] More important than sheer sales figures, however, is the perceived source of Eminem's threat. His music hasn't "crossed over" from Black to White: It's come *from within* White America, publicly giving the lie to the conceit that there's a neat and immutable line that sepa-

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[21]See RIAA (2006).

rates White from Black—with all the dark, dirty, dangerous stuff allegedly living on the "other" side of that line.

Put another way, the vision of itself that mainstream White America works overtime to perpetuate is a vision largely devoid of hate, violence, and prejudice.[22] White America generally ignores or dismisses such attitudes, behaviors, and practices when they manifest themselves in its own ranks, while actively projecting them onto a broad range of marginalized Others: Black bodies, brown bodies, lower class bodies, foreign bodies, and so on. At best (if you can call it that), when White America has to face its own warts and blemishes, it tries to find ways to explain them away as exceptions, as aberrations, as deviations ... *anything* but as a common and pervasive aspect of White America's normal condition.

And Eminem clearly knows all this. For instance, he begins "The Real Slim Shady" with a sneering line—"Y'all act like you never seen a white person before"—that calls his race-baiting critics to task for their inability to understand that someone could walk and talk and rap and act the way that he does and still be White. Even more bluntly, on "The Way I Am," he rails against White folks intent on trying to fix his racial identity in ways that allow *them* to maintain *their* illusions about the stability of race:

> I'm so sick and tired/ of being admired/ that I wish that I/ would just die or get fired/ and dropped from my label/ let's stop with the fables/ I'm not gonna be able/ to top on "My Name Is"/ and pigeonholed into some poppy sensation/ to cop me rotation/ at rock and roll stations/ and I just do not got the patience/ to deal with these cocky Caucasians/ who think I'm some wigger who just tries to be black/ 'cause I talk with an ac/ cent and grab on my balls/ so they al/ ways keep asking the same fuckin' questions./ What school did I go to?/ What 'hood I grew up in?/ The why, the who what, when, the where and the how/ till I'm grabbing my hair and I'm tearing it out.

To be sure, Eminem is not the first artist to blur these lines—not by a long shot—but the manner in which he does so is rare for someone at his level of public visibility. Unlike Vanilla Ice, for instance, Eminem's investment in hip-hop comes across as the sort of genuine passion of a lifelong fan, rather than as a temporary mask that can be (and, in Ice's case, was) removed at the end of the show. Unlike the Beastie Boys, Eminem comes across as someone who cares as much (if not more) about maintaining the overall integrity of hip-hop culture as he does about his commercial success. As Rux (2003) put it, "Eminem may have been born *white* but he was socialized as *black*, in the proverbial hood—and the music of the proverbial hood in America for the last twenty-five years has been hip-hop music" (p. 21).[23]

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[22]For more extended versions of this argument, see Goad (1997), hooks (1994, 2000), Lott (1995), and Williams (1997).

[23]Also see Boyd (2003, pp. 127–129).

Historically speaking, this sort of deviance from the heart of Whiteness has been met in three different ways. The race traitor in question has been reassimilated, rendered invisible, and/or excommunicated. And so Eminem's *real* crime may simply be that he's too popular to be ignored, too brash to be pulled back into the bosom of unthreatening Whiteness, and so he must be branded as a demon, a deviant, a monster, a *bête noire*—who's all the more *bête* for "failing" to be *noire*—and then the demon must be cast out, lest his racially blurred performance come to be accepted as a viable option for other members of the White club.

A crucial aspect of this threat to hegemonic Whiteness is the way that Eminem's unwavering self-presentation as "White trash" works to unsettle the dominant cultural mythology that equates Whiteness with middle-class prosperity. If Rux (2003) was right to claim that Eminem was "socialized as Black," to a large extent, it's because of the strong correlation between race and class in U.S. culture. The Blackness in Eminem's background that Rux pointed to is rooted in the fact that Eminem's childhood poverty placed him in the disproportionately Black "'hood" of inner city Detroit. And so it's significant that a number of Eminem's detractors play "the race card" to steer the broader conversation away from the sort of cross-racial, *class-based* alliances that Eminem's popularity suggests might be possible.

This practice was especially pronounced with respect to *8 Mile* (Grazer, Hanson, & Iovine, 2002), Eminem's first foray into Hollywood acting, where a number of critics complained that the film took unfair swipes at the Black bourgeoisie. For example, writing about the film in *The New Republic*, Driver (2002) complained that

> far from untethering hip-hop from race, Eminem's class bait-and-switch simply replaces the fact of blackness—i.e., skin color—with an idea of blackness that equates being black with being poor, angry, and uneducated. Eminem is perpetuating precisely the idea that animated Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro." ... Eminem would likely object to Mailer's racist posturing, particularly in light of his steadfast refusal to utter the word "nigger" in any context. "That word," he says, "is not even in my vocabulary." Unfortunately, judging from the evidence, neither is the term "black middle class." (p. 42)

Somewhat more gracefully—at least insofar as he doesn't repeat Driver's curious error of implicitly treating Eminem as the film's author—but still problematically, Grundmann (2003) wrote that

> despite its honorable intentions, the film ends up exploiting the social reality of the inner city black people it portrays. It turns them into profitable spectacle, while remaining silent on the causes of their oppression. At the same time, the film is openly hostile toward the *Ebony* magazine set, which it juxtaposes with Rabbit's white working-class identity. (p. 35)

Insofar as (a) the film's principal villains *are* Black and middle class, (b) their class position *is* the pivotal distinction that marks them as threats to the community, and (c) the *real* Black middle class is hardly the principal force working to keep the *real* working class down, there's some merit to these critiques ... and yet it's a perversely narrow-minded and—to be blunt about it—suburban way to read a film that (a) defies Hollywood convention by centering its story on working-class people, (b) refuses to cater to the still far too common stereotypes that portray poor people as thugs and criminals, (c) avoids the trap of representing the middle class as primarily White and/or idyllically benign, and (d) depicts strong examples of working-class solidarity across racial lines. In the eyes of critics worried about the film's open hostility "towards the *Ebony* magazine set," cross-racial alliances are apparently a laudable and welcome goal when it comes to the middle class, but undesirable, disturbing, and threatening when it happens amongst the lumpen proletariat. The sort of critiques that Driver (2003) and Grundmann (2003) offered might be more compelling if the film's narrative presented an unambiguous vision of class mobility for Whites at the expense of cross-racial friendships. Tellingly, however, *8 Mile* ends on a much more subtle note. Rabbit (Eminem) wins the big rap battle against the middle-class Black poser, but he doesn't ride off into the sunset with a new recording contract in his pocket and guaranteed stardom before him while his Black posse remains stuck in the ghetto. Instead, he leaves the club where he's just scored his big triumph so that he can go back to *finish his shift* at the factory where he makes his living. This isn't the triumph of White exceptionalism over the Black bourgeoisie: it's a surprisingly honest (for Hollywood, anyway) acknowledgment that having aesthetic talent doesn't guarantee that one will have financial success. More important, it's an ending that leaves Eminem's character firmly embedded in the same community where he grew up.

RAGE

Part of what makes *8 Mile* such an interesting film is the way it negotiates a relatively nuanced understanding of the intersections of race and class in U.S. culture. In moving toward my conclusion, though, I want to focus on a slightly different class-related question—one that turns the harsh glare of the spotlight (or is that a *search*light?) back on *us* as cultural critics: namely, the perceived impropriety of what are popularly (if not entirely properly) understood to be lower class forms of expression, and the concurrent inability of much of the professional managerial class (including us academics) to accept that smart, insightful, and valuable thoughts can come out of "coarse," "inarticulate," and "obscenity-laced mouths.

And Eminem's is an unabashedly coarse mouth. *Fuck, shit, piss, cum, tits, cock, dick, balls, asshole, cunt, pussy, ho, bitch, slut, faggot, jack-off, cocksucker, motherfucker.* All these—and much, much more—are mainstays in Eminem's lyrical lexicon. Significantly, the one time-honored example of linguistic crudity that Eminem emphatically and self-consciously *won't* use is "nigger," but that isolated gesture of political sensitivity, no matter how sincere it is, doesn't manage to save Eminem from being roundly castigated—and dismissed out of hand—for the unrepentant crudeness with which he expresses himself otherwise.

I'm not the first critic (by any means) to point to the role that class prejudices play with respect to whose speech we value and whose we don't. hooks has written on multiple occasions (1994, 2000) about her undergraduate years at Stanford, and how her "failure" to conform to bourgeois standards of classroom decorum—standards that she'd never encountered growing up in rural Kentucky—marked her as a "bad" student, in spite of her articulateness and intelligence. Kipnis's (1992, 1999) work on *Hustler* pointed to the ways in which politically progressive critics who would otherwise applaud the magazine's stinging jabs at big business and big government nonetheless manage to dismiss *Hustler*'s political commentary because of the "low class" nature of the magazine's satire. And Berlant (1996) argued that dominant U.S. media representations of political protest promote a nefarious double standard in which "political emotions like anxiety, rage, and aggression turn out to be feelings only privileged people are justified in having" (p. 408). Poor folks and women and people of color, she argued, must play the role of "the well-behaved oppressed" (p. 408) if they have any hopes of having their political voices heard (much less taken seriously).

Eminem, of course, may never have read hooks or Kipnis or Berlant (or the like)—but that's actually part of my point. His intelligence and wit and keen sense of the political terrain may not derive from the sort of "book learning" that we tend to value in academic settings, but his intellect is no less real for that. Nor is it less insightful simply because it comes in a package that includes four-letter words and unchecked rage. I don't think it's a coincidence, though, that so many critiques of Eminem's music focus on the foulness of his language—and I suspect that at least some of the controversy around him would go away if only he could make his points in more polite and genteel fashion.

But why should he? Especially when many of his sociopolitical critiques *are* angry ones—and often justifiably so. I don't want to simply romanticize Eminem as some sort of organic intellectual or working-class hero—that would be precisely the sort of patronizing elitism that I'm trying to guard against here—but I *do* want to suggest that, as cultural critics, *we* could stand to be more self-reflective about our own class position and biases, and about how readily we dismiss potentially valuable cultural criticism simply because it comes from someone who says "motherfucker" in public without flinching.

And there *is* thoughtful—and even progressive—cultural commentary to be found in Eminem's music: from pointed quips about a litigation-happy culture[24] to extended rants against President Bush's war on terror,[25] from biting critiques of racism in the music industry[26] to scathing indictments of the classism that made Columbine a "national tragedy" when daily violence in inner city schools can't make the news at all.[27] Although no one's likely to confuse Eminem with Public Enemy anytime soon—political statements remain a sidebar for him, rather than his primary agenda—he's also a more multifaceted and politically engaged artist than his detractors seem able or willing to recognize.

None of this is meant to draw some sort of magical shield around Eminem and his music, nor do I want to suggest that he's not fair game for criticism himself. He clearly understands that language is a powerful tool—and a powerful weapon: "I guess words are a motherfucker./ They can be great./ Or they can degrade./ Or, even worse,/ they can teach hate" ("Sing for the Moment"). And so the sensitivity that he shows when it comes to avoiding "the N-word" is something he could conceivably apply to his unabashed use of the word "faggot" as a general term of insult. And one might hope that someone who displays the sort of intelligence that Eminem does in his rhymes could also recognize that if he *really* wants to provide a better life for his daughter, as he so frequently claims, he might want to reconsider his tendency to portray women as bitches and sluts who (at best) are nothing more than "good fucks."[28]

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[24]"They say music can alter moods and talk to you/ but can it load a gun up for you and cock it too?/ Well, if it can, then the next time you assault a dude/ just tell the judge that it was my fault/ and I'll get sued." ("Sing for the Moment")

[25]"The bogey monster of rap,/ yeah, the man's back/ with a plan to am/ bush this Bush administration,/ mush the Senate's face in,/ push this generation/ of kids to stand and fight/ for the right to say something you might not like/ … All this terror—America demands action./ Next thing you know you got Uncle Sam's ass askin'/ to join their army or what you'll do for their navy./ You're just a baby gettin' recruited at eighteen./ You're on a plane now eatin' their food and their baked beans./ I'm twenty-eight—they gonna take you 'fore they take me." ("Square Dance")

[26]"Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself,/ if they were brown, Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf./ But Shady's cute, Shady knew Shady's dimples would help/ make ladies swoon baby, ooh baby! Look at my sales./ Let's do the math: if I was black I would've sold half./ I ain't have to graduate from Lincoln High School to know that." ("White America")

[27]"And all of this controversy circles me/ and it seems like the media immediately/ points a finger at me./ So I point one back at 'em/ but not the index or pinky/ or the ring or the thumb/ it's the one you put up/ when you don't give a fuck/ when you won't just put up/ with the bullshit they pull/ 'cause they full of shit too./ When a dude's gettin' bullied/ and shoots up his school/ and they blame it on Marilyn/ and the heroin./ Where were the parents at?/ And look where it's at:/ middle America./ *Now* it's a tragedy./ *Now* it's so sad to see./ An upper class city/ havin' this happen./ Then attack Eminem 'cause I rap this way." ("The Way I Am")

[28]For example, one of the anonymous reviewers of this essay seemed willing to accept my general argument concerning the racial politics underlying the moral panic around Eminem but still expressed

That being said, I don't want to argue for some sort of simple trade-off here, where we'll agree to forgive Eminem for the violent misogyny of, say, "Kill You" or "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" because the penetrating and insightful sociopolitical critique found in, say, "What I Am" or "Square Dance" makes up for his more disturbing narratives. But I'm even more leery of the reverse trade-off that it seems we may be too eager to make: the one where we let our distaste for Eminem's most disturbing messages simply trump the valuable contributions he *does* have to make to a broader set of conversations about race, class, media, and politics.

Arguably, a large part of what scares many people about Eminem is that they look at him and see bits of themselves that they'd prefer not to acknowledge. After all, it's not as if he single-handedly invented misogyny or homophobia or violent fantasies out of thin air. Those were all present in U.S. culture in significant ways long before Eminem was born, and it's the rare person raised in such a culture who can legitimately claim to be completely free of all such failings. But part of what I think that we—as cultural critics—should value about Eminem is precisely that we can look at him and see bits of ourselves that we *should* acknowledge. And if we happen *not* to be particularly proud of some of those facets of ourselves, that's fine. But, in such a scenario, we should go about the difficult task of working to change those unsavory aspects of our personalities and lifestyles, rather than simply pretending they're not there and/or projecting them onto Other, more marginalized people.

Put another way, when it comes to current public discourses around both race (in general) and Eminem (more specifically), too many scholars and critics (i.e., people like us) fail to adequately acknowledge their own roles—however passive or implicit those might be—in shaping and maintaining some of the more disturbing forms of racial hierarchy and disenfranchisement. I think it's perfectly fine for

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discomfort at the lack of an unequivocal condemnation of Eminem's sexism and homophobia. Given that the version of this essay read by reviewers already refused to whitewash (pun fully intended) Eminem's more unsavory lyrics, it's hard not to read such a critique as an example of what Williams (1997) called "battling biases": a form of analytical paralysis in which progressive outrage at one form of political injustice is blindly used to reinforce the less-than-progressive status quo along a different axis. "Upon occasion," Williams noted, "the ploughshare of feminism can be beaten into a sword of class prejudice" (p. 32). The recognition that Eminem's music is more complicated than a straightforward expression of patriarchal privilege doesn't require us to erase Eminem's sexism and homophobia from critical discussions of his public personae. At most, it might require us to inject a bit of productive nuance to our understanding of Eminem's sexual politics. Kipnis's (1999) commentary on the tangled class–gender politics of *Hustler*, for instance, could just as easily be used to describe the misogynistic aspects of Eminem's music: "Doesn't this reek of disenfranchisement rather than any certainty of male power over women? The fantasy life here is animated by a cultural disempowerment in relation to a sexual caste system and a social class system" (p. 151). Such an analysis doesn't let Eminem's violent sexism off the hook—any more than Kipnis simply ignored *Hustler*'s objectification of women—but it also refuses to pretend that our analysis of Eminem's music and stardom can safely be reduced to a single strand of identity politics.

cultural critics to hold Eminem's feet to the fire for his more egregious lyrical excesses but only if they—*we*—are also self-reflexive enough to do so in ways that aren't ultimately about trying to protect *our* positions of privilege at the expense of others.

A good example of what this sort of nuanced criticism looks like comes from *Ms.*, in which Morgan (1999) carefully registered her concerns with the misogynist aspects of Eminem's music, but then, in terms that resonate strongly with Hall's (1992) admonition to attend to "the silences" in the discourse, she deliberately refused to join the chorus of voices demanding Eminem's censure. "At best," she wrote, "hip-hop is a mirror that unflinchingly reflects truths we would all much rather ignore. ... A knee-jerk reaction to violent hip-hop is often a case of kill the messenger. In the end, it's silence—not lyrics—that poses the most danger" (p. 96). When it comes to Eminem, there are many such silences that deserve to be filled with productive noise, but let me point to three of the biggest.

With respect to gender and sexuality, the silence we most need to shatter is the one that pretends that Eminem's degradation of gays and women is abnormal. After all, the "clean" versions of Eminem's albums that Kmart and Wal-mart (those stalwart retail institutions of middle America) were willing to sell didn't delete the misogyny and homophobia: just the drug references and profanities. Mainstream U.S. culture has a *long* way to go before it can hold Eminem's feet to the fire on this front without hypocrisy.

With respect to class, the silence that Eminem's highly visible "White trash" pride should help dispel is the one around White poverty. Although people of color still remain far more likely to be poor than Whites are, the vast majority (68%) of the people living below the poverty line are White. That's certainly not the face of poverty one is typically shown by the mainstream media, however, which prefers to pretend that Whiteness and affluence go hand in hand.

With respect to race, the silence that Eminem is best positioned to help us break is the powerful taboo against miscegenation: cultural, metaphorical, or otherwise. Given the ongoing apoplexy and fear that have dominated the mainstream discourse on "the browning of America," there's a lot of value to be learned from a figure who manages to blur the lines between Black and White music, Black and White culture, Black and White performance with ease, with talent, and—perhaps most important—with a large dose of humility about his Whiteness.

And if, as a culture, we can't break those silences, then we're in very deep trouble indeed.

CODA

In an earlier draft of this essay, that last sentence served as my closing thought. But then, suddenly, the ground on which I was working shifted beneath me: not quite

so dramatically that I needed to start over from scratch, but enough so that I couldn't just pretend that the changes in the terrain hadn't happened. This is one of the occupational hazards of studying contemporary culture (popular or otherwise). It's a constantly moving target, which makes it difficult (if not impossible) to pin one's objects of study down with any descriptive or critical finality. In the case at hand, the shift in the terrain resulted from the fall 2004 release of Eminem's fourth major-label album, *Encore*, and the unprecedented lack of controversy that it inspired.[29] In the face of apparent public indifference to Eminem's latest efforts to push middle America's moral panic buttons, I had to wonder what had happened to hip-hop's most controversial superstar. Was the moral panic over? Had Eminem finally won over his former detractors? Or had he simply lost his edge?

Encore was clearly a commercial success—it sold more than 4 million copies and, even though it wasn't officially released until November, it was still one of the 100 best-selling albums of 2004—but as both an aesthetic endeavor and a public provocation, it failed. Badly. The most generous critics routinely described the album using adjectives like "spotty," "uneven," and "inconsistent," and the only public controversy involving Eminem since its release—the presence of his phone number in Paris Hilton's hacked cell-phone address book—found him playing an incidental and supporting role in someone else's drama, rather than his more accustomed role as an instigator and gadfly.

In many ways, though, *Encore*'s failure is potentially more interesting than any of Eminem's previous successes, as it helps to demonstrate the extent to which his career actually *is* fueled by a considerable artistic talent. Although his detractors often prefer to understand Eminem as completely talentless—or, perhaps more generously, as someone who wastes his talent on unworthy, amoral endeavors—the double-edged failure of *Encore* underscores how tightly his skills as an auteur and a provocateur are intertwined with one another. Horror stories such as "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" and "Kim" bothered people as viscerally as they did not simply because of the violent misogyny visible on their surfaces, but because they are compelling and powerful works of art.[30] *Encore*, on the other hand, fails as art largely because it doesn't try very hard to get under its listeners' skin—and where it does make an effort to provoke, it largely fails because Eminem sounds like he's just going through the motions.

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[29]Michael Jackson complained that the video for the album's first single, "Just Lose It," was defamatory insofar as it included a satirical swipe at Jackson with respect to the still-pending child molestation charges against him. This "controversy," however, died down almost as quickly as it surfaced.

[30]Tori Amos's cover of "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" may be the clearest illustration of the artistry inherent in Eminem's song. In the context of an album (*Strange Little Girls*) where she covers a dozen songs written by men that explicitly construct powerful visions of masculinity, Amos's performance of Eminem's musical fantasy is simultaneously a critical (feminist?) appropriation of the narrative and an absolutely eery embodiment of it.

More crucially for my purposes, though, *Encore*'s shortcomings demonstrate how much his artistry depends on the race-blurring aspects of his musical performance. Explaining what distinguishes Eminem from most other White rappers, Carson (2002) wrote that those other artists "deracinate" the music by

> keeping the beats but redefining the attitude as frat-boy acting out. What makes Eminem more challenging is that he's audibly assimilated hip-hop as *culture*. His nasal pugnacity is unmistakably the sound of a White kid for whom this music was so formative that he never heard it as someone else's property. (p. 88)

Encore ultimately falls apart because Eminem seems to have drifted away from his culturally miscegenated roots and toward a sort of frat-boy prankster aesthetic that was largely absent in his earlier work. Where once he had used music to feud with worthy public targets like censorious politicians and corporate bigwigs (or even compellingly dramatic private targets like his mother and his ex-wife), now he's picking on the likes of Michael Jackson and Triumph the Insult Comic Dog. And where once he wielded his profanity-filled pen like a keenly honed sword, now he's building entire tracks around the slap-happy adolescent joys of farts, belches, and retching.

The major exception to this downslide—and the song that critics commonly cited as one of the few tracks that helped to elevate the album from "muddled" to "uneven"—is "Mosh." Released as the album's second single, just prior to Election Day in the United States, the song is interesting enough musically, even if it doesn't quite live up to the best of Eminem's previous efforts. It lacks the playfulness and catchy beats of "The Real Slim Shady"; it doesn't flow as smoothly or effortlessly as "The Way I Am"; it doesn't have the same thrilling, in-your-face edginess that characterizes "White America," but it's also something Eminem has never given us before: a full-fledged protest song. "Fuck Bush," Eminem proclaims, "until they bring our troops home," with the rest of the song—and the video that accompanies it—explicitly beckoning the nation to come together and vote "this monster, this coward that we have empowered" out of office. As noted earlier, Eminem's music has never been completely apolitical, but it has also never made politics its central theme as directly or insistently as "Mosh" does.

"Mosh" doesn't manage to save *Encore* (any more than it managed to help defeat Bush), but as a rhetorical gambit, it's pointed enough to suggest that Eminem might, in his own way, be the Madonna of his generation: a controversial—and seemingly dismissible—pop star who turns out to be a much more outspoken figure when it comes to political issues than most observers (fans included) would have imagined possible. One early believer in Eminem's potential for politically progressive musical agitation was Carson (2002):

> Right now, dissing his would-be censors aside, our hero's political acumen is roughly on a par with Daffy Duck's. But with his flair for topicality, a few more skids in the Dow could turn him as belligerent as Public Enemy's Chuck D, and wouldn't *that* be interesting? (p. 90)

And though most of *Encore* sounds more like "Daffy Duck" than anything Eminem had ever released before, the forceful pugnacity of "Mosh" provides reason to believe—or at least hope—that Eminem might someday really turn out to be "our hero" after all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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