# Eminem's "My Name Is": Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race

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## Abstract

*Eminem's emergence as one of the most popular rap stars of 2000 raised numerous questions about the evolving meaning of whiteness in U.S. society. Comparing* The Slim Shady LP *(1999) with his relatively unknown and commercially unsuccessful first album,* Infinite *(1996), reveals that instead of transcending racial boundaries as some critics have suggested, Eminem negotiated them in ways that made sense to his target audiences. In particular, Eminem's influential single "My Name Is," which helped launch his mainstream career, parodied various representations of whiteness to help counter charges that the white rapper lacked authenticity or was simply stealing black culture. This "rearticulation" of whiteness in hip hop paralleled a number of other ideological realignments in the 1990s, many of which pit questions of class against those of race in the service of constructing new political and cultural authenticities. Eminem's performances provide us with a mirror in which numerous questions surrounding whiteness's significance come into focus.*

> Black music centers blackness, yet it does so in continual relation to the category and experience of whiteness in America. If black music supplies a supplementary difference to whiteness, so does it complicate white racial fixity.
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> —Ronald Radano[1]

The last decade of the twentieth century brought the concept of whiteness under increasing pressure. Still grappling with the profound changes wrought by the events of the 1960s, Americans from various walks of life faced questions concerning the future direction of the country and their own place within it. Many of these issues were laced with racial subtext. Writing on the subject in 1998, Cameron McCarthy declared that U.S. society had entered "new racial times, new racial circumstances," and that there existed among the white middle class a "growing anxiety and restlessness."[2] Numerous other scholars agreed, pointing to a number of past developments that had contributed to a "crisis of whiteness," including the Civil Rights movement, global anticolonial struggles, immigration reform,

[1] Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22.

[2] Cameron McCarthy, "Living with Anxiety: Race and the Renarration of Public Life," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America,* ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 329–30.

feminism, and deindustrialization.[3] By the turn of the century, it was clear that the nature and meaning of whiteness was undergoing a historic transformation.

To make a somewhat crude distinction, whiteness in the pre–Civil Rights era operated as a norm, an everywhere-but-nowhere canvas on which social life was painted. Under these circumstances, white identity was defined more by what it was not—a racialized minority identity—than by what it was. White ethnics and other racialized groups who wanted to enjoy the benefits afforded by whiteness worked to shed their difference, hoping to pass into the great majority. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, the presumed invisibility of whiteness was becoming increasingly untenable. Although white privilege, racism, and the legacy of discriminatory practices continued to be defining features of U.S. society, whiteness was also becoming visible in new ways. For example, in post-1960s popular culture, some African American performers openly critiqued the attitudes and behaviors of white people. Comedians used high-pitched nasal voices and stiff posturing of their bodies to poke fun at supposed white mannerisms. At the same time, new forms of black expressivity such as hip hop saturated mainstream culture, redefining for a generation of youth what it meant to be "cool." These trends in popular culture signaled that normative whiteness was becoming dislodged from the center of U.S. life, a presumption strengthened by Barack Obama's ascendancy to the White House. Reflecting on these issues in a recent essay, Hua Hsu asks, "What will it mean to be white after 'whiteness' no longer defines the mainstream?"[4]

One answer can be found by examining the early career of white rapper Eminem (b. 1972), who came of age and launched a successful rap career in the midst of these changes. As a lightning rod for public opinion on issues such as homophobia, misogyny, and violence in popular culture, Eminem provoked much controversy. For many people witnessing his rise to popularity through the historical lens of race and popular culture, his success also raised another issue: once again a white musician was profiting, perhaps disproportionately, by performing black music. For the most part, however, hip hop journalists and other rap musicians refused to condemn him. In fact, most critics who approached the subject defended Eminem against such charges, citing his genuine talent and the respect he had earned from his African American peers.[5] It would not be wise to dispute Eminem's lyrical skills, but we can learn much from historicizing his artistry. Rather than simply transcending racial boundaries, Eminem had to negotiate them in ways that made sense to his audiences. To examine Eminem's performances is to understand something about the dynamic nature of racial categories, to begin mapping how notions of whiteness were evolving in the 1990s. Tracing his artistic evolution, particularly the distance between his first independently produced album *Infinite* (1996) and his mainstream

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[3] Woody Doane, "Rethinking Whiteness Studies," in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

[4] Hua Hsu, "The End of White America?" *The Atlantic* (January/February 2009): 46–55.

[5] Joseph Schloss suggested to me that for many journalists and supporters of hip hop music, defending Eminem was not necessarily about respecting him as a person as much as it was about defending a principle: that respect in hip hop should be conferred based on skill and artistry, rather than extramusical factors such as race or biography.

debut single "My Name Is" (1999), reveals that to become successful in a genre coded as black, Eminem had to resolve his own "crisis of whiteness."[6] In doing so, he came to symbolize some of the key political tensions of the 1990s, as he provided a site where listeners could work out questions regarding whiteness's significance.

## Eminem's Crisis of Whiteness

Eminem's two hit albums, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) and *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), established him as one of the biggest rap stars of the new millennium.[7] Although Eminem seemed to appear on the radio and cable television fully formed, the artistic strategy that proved to be such a potent force took years to develop. The artifice behind Eminem's infamous celebrity did not occur to him immediately; instead it was born from his experiences as a white man struggling to become a successful rapper. In fact, his early attempts to make a name for himself in the music industry largely backfired. As we will soon see, developing a style of music that showcased his virtuosic rapping skills and familiarity with urban street life failed to impress listeners and confirmed that his whiteness could be a dangerous professional liability.

Growing up in the Detroit area on the outskirts of the African American sections of town, Marshall Mathers III spent his teenage years working in the local hip hop scene as the rapper Eminem, a name derived from the spelling of his initials "M&M." As biographer Anthony Bozza explains, while struggling to support himself by working a series of minimum-wage jobs, Mathers borrowed $ 1,500 from music producers Mark and Jeff Bass to press five hundred copies of his first album *Infinite* (1996).[8] The independently produced album showcased Eminem's smooth lyrical flow. Mathers hoped it might gain him some much-needed recognition in the local hip hop scene and eventually land him a recording contract. *Infinite* contains eleven tracks, covering some of the common tropes found in 1990s rap music. In the songs "313" and "Open Mic," Eminem flexes his wit, demonstrating his adeptness at boasting and signifying. Battling an unnamed foe, Eminem lets loose a torrent of lyrical ballistics, using intricate rhymes and violent metaphors to symbolically dominate the opposition. The album also contains more serious and autobiographical musings. In "Never Too Far," which begins by staging an impromptu conversation at a cold Detroit bus stop, Eminem and an African American friend commiserate about their financial difficulties. Following this introduction, Eminem raps about staying inspired and achieving his dreams so that he can do right by his family. Finally, *Infinite* also features two adolescent love songs: "Jealousy Woes" recounts the troubles Eminem is having with an unnamed female who mistreats him despite how hard he tries to impress her; "Searchin'" features Eminem rapping tenderly about "snuggling," "kissing," and "hugging" an unnamed lover.[9] Although the songs

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[6] Eminem, *Infinite*, bootleg, 1996; and Eminem, "My Name Is," Interscope Records 97470, 1999.

[7] Eminem, *The Slim Shady LP*, Interscope Records 90287, 1999; and Eminem, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Interscope Records 490629, 2000.

[8] Anthony Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am: The Life and Times of Marshall Mathers* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), 15–16.

[9] Eminem, *Infinite*.

on *Infinite* exemplify various hip hop archetypes, they differ in an important way from his later commercial releases: Throughout the course of the album, Eminem's racial identity is never once mentioned.

In a chapter about white rappers, Mickey Hess explores various positions that white emcees adopt to deal with the question of racial authenticity. In the mid-1980s through the early-1990s, he argues, groups such as the Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass, and Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch employed a strategy of "immersion" that attempted to communicate their proximity to African Americans and black culture. These rappers rarely, if ever, called attention to their whiteness. Instead, they emphasized their familiarity with hip hop music, their support of antiracist politics, or other characteristics that helped to establish their credibility with fans.[10] In a similar way, Eminem's efforts on *Infinite* avoided calling attention to his racial difference, emphasizing instead his lyrical skills and awareness of prevailing hip hop trends.

In addition to the "immersive" content of Eminem's lyrics, the formal properties of his music—his lyrical flow, rhyme schemes, and beats (backing musical tracks)— also conformed to contemporary trends in rap music, particularly the sound of mid-1990s New York–based rap. To begin, Eminem's imaginative, internal rhyming and complex rhythmic flow were associated with the work of AZ, Jay-Z, Lord Finesse, and Nas. The first two lines of Figure 1 demonstrate these virtuosic rhyme schemes. Eminem rhymes homonyms "beat commence" (referring to the musical track of the song) and "beat the sense" (referring to striking an object). He also rhymes clusters of words (e.g., "meat to mince" and "feet to rinse," "burial of Jesus" and "venereal diseases," etc.). Rather than just rhyming the last syllable or the last word of every measure—the standard practice in much early hip hop—Eminem creates churning internal rhymes that break up the monotony of standard four-measure phrasing. Such rhyme schemes allow his lyrics to spill over the measure lines, creating asymmetrical phrases that anticipate or lag behind the downbeat. Such musical features represented what contemporary critics termed the "faster cadences" and "new rhyme patterns" of certain mid-1990s emcees.[11] Adam Krims coined the term "speech-percussive" to describe such virtuosic flows, arguing that they became emblematic of "reality rap" from New York City in the 1990s.[12]

This style of rhyming was most often paired with a stripped-down, back-to-basics musical aesthetic. In fact, the beats that Detroit producers Mark and Jeff Bass created to underpin Eminem's rapping also drew on the sound of New York City, whose artists emphasized a more "minimalist" and "cerebral" approach than the dense, funk-inspired sound of Los Angeles–based gangsta rap producer Dr. Dre.[13] In general, this sparse New York sound was characterized by beats featuring

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[10] Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead? The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007), 115.

[11] Robert Marriott, "Allah's on Me," *XXL* 1/1 (1997): 64–70.

[12] Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 75.

[13] Mark Anthony Neal, ". . . A Way Out of No Way: Jazz, Hip-Hop, and Black Social Improvisation," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue,* ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 211.

| Verse 2 | Internal and Multiple-Word Rhymes |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| | |
| mm. 1–2 | *beat commence, beat the sense, elite defense, meat to mince, feet to rinse* |
| mm. 3–5 | *spoil loyal fans, foil plans, oil pans, coiled hands* |
| mm. 5–6 | *are lethal, cerebral, jeep full of people, are feeble* |
| mm. 11–12 | *burial of Jesus, venereal diseases* |
| mm. 13–14 | *thesis, pieces, releases, masterpieces, telekinesis* |
| | |
| **Chorus** | |
| | |
| mm.1–2 | *infinite, sent from it, I went to it* |
| m. 2 | *serving a sentence, murdering instruments* |
| mm. 3–4 | *repent from it, attempt at it, infinite* |

**Figure 1.**   Rhyming words and phrases from the first verse and chorus of "Infinite," from Eminem, *Infinite,* Bootleg, 1996.

eight-count hi-hats, interlocking snare and kick-drum breaks, and the layering of samples culled from 1960s jazz and soul recordings. All of the musical tracks on Eminem's *Infinite* are indebted to this aesthetic. Moreover, what gives these tracks an even more distinctive New York flavor is the way that the interlocking snare- and kick-drum beats appear to be set to a swinging scale of sixteenth-note triplets—a common practice for New York hip hop producers of this era, including Ski Beatz, Q-Tip, Premier, and Lord Finesse.[14] Thus, the tracks on *Infinite* share the same groove, the same feel, with numerous New York–based rap albums of the time.

Despite demonstrating great lyrical skill and an awareness of prevailing musical trends in the rap music industry, the impact of *Infinite* was infinitesimal; it was ignored by local radio, music retailers, critics, and talent scouts alike. The problem may have been the album's relatively low production values: The beats created by the Bass brothers sound amateurish next to those of contemporary commercial releases. The album's lack of success may have also stemmed in part from the way in which Mathers positioned himself artistically. Remarking about *Infinite*, Bozza surmised that "[Eminem] was an able rhymer in 1996, but he wasn't angry, fed up, or at wit's end. He was just trying to fit in; just rhyming intricate words because he could."[15] Certainly the album is almost completely devoid of the signature humor and politically incorrect aggression that would make Eminem famous in later years. However, we might understand more about Eminem's lack of success by placing his "immersive" artistic strategy in the context of 1996, only a few years removed from the dramatic rise and fall of another white rapper: Vanilla Ice.

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[14] The practice of setting a consistent, exact subdivision of the beat is what hip hop producers refer to as "quantizing." Joe Schloss discusses how different producers evaluate the decision to quantize or not quantize beats. For example, Wu-Tang Clan producer The RZA is notorious for having un-quantized "sloppy" sounding beats. See Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 141.

[15] Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am*, 5.

Vanilla Ice's mainstream debut *To The Extreme* arrived in record stores on 28 August 1990.[16] The album's first single, "Ice Ice Baby," got heavy radio play, and its video was featured prominently on MTV. With a sleek chorus built around a sample from Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure," the single propelled the album to Number 1 on the pop charts for sixteen weeks. Vanilla Ice's good fortune, however, was short lived. After a group of enterprising high school student reporters from Miami uncovered his real name in school district records and learned that Robert Van Winkle had grown up in a stable, upper-middle-class suburban home, his street credibility was ruined. The tough image he attempted to project in music videos, public appearances, and even a full-length feature film seemed to many a hollow imitation of black hip hop.

The failure of Vanilla Ice's "imitative" strategy had a chilling effect on the prospects facing other white rappers who hoped to broker a major record deal.[17] Eminem's early efforts were evaluated in this context, and his imitation of mid-1990s East Coast style did not ring true to listeners. His critics were quick to point out that the album sounded more like a demo tape from New York than one from Detroit, and this seeming lack of originality resulted in Eminem being labeled an imitator and unfavorably compared to African American rappers. Eminem remembers the way he was dismissed by some of his African American peers: "'You sound like Nas and AZ,' [two prominent rappers from New York] 'You're a white boy, what the fuck are you rapping for? Why don't you go into rock and roll?'"[18]

## Resolving the Crisis, Signifying Whiteness

The irony of condemning Eminem as an imitator and suggesting that he "go into rock and roll" is, of course, that it assumes rock 'n' roll to be a "white" musical genre. In fact, the rock 'n' roll phenomenon began as a way for the music industry to market black rhythm-and-blues to white teenagers.[19] Eventually white performers were able to move to the forefront of the genre, displacing African American musicians and enjoying greater fame and financial rewards. In this way rock became "white," just like swing (Bennie Goodman as "the King of Swing") and early jazz (Paul Whiteman as "the King of Jazz"). As early as 1966, Charles Keil described what he called the "appropriation-revitalization" syndrome, a symbolic practice by which African Americans strove to maintain control over an area of cultural production that served as a source of pride in their struggle for equal rights.[20] Keil argued that each time white performers gained fame and fortune by imitating a black style, African American innovators pushed ahead into new artistic territory to insulate themselves from further exploitation. Once swing music led by white bandleaders had saturated the market, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and other jazz musicians developed bebop. While British rockers Mick Jagger and the Rolling

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[16] Vanilla Ice, *To the Extreme*, SBK Records 95325, 1991.

[17] Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 118–20.

[18] Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am*, 16.

[19] Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 195–96.

[20] Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 43.

Stones were living high off their revision of Chicago blues, James Brown, Otis Redding, and others moved into soul. Eminem's stardom cannot be detached from this long problematic history of white performers profiting from their proximity to blackness.

In the 1980s and 1990s, rap music was at the forefront of African American cultural products needing defense against white incursion. In the wake of the Vanilla Ice controversy, the policing of hip hop's racial boundaries helped African Americans maintain a prominent public outlet for their voices and direct financial profits toward black performers. These dynamics forced Eminem to cultivate a new musical strategy that would be capable of transforming his whiteness from a liability into an asset. By the time of the release of *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), Eminem and his team of producers had found a way to deal with his racial identity in a productive way. Eminem had to do more than simply fit in with and match the talent of his African American peers; he had to change how whiteness mattered in hip hop. To make a place for himself in the rap music industry, he employed an approach that Hess labels "inversion." Parodying common understandings of whiteness, Eminem advanced a white identity both at ease with black culture and humble before it.[21] He also emphasized the contradictions in whiteness, particularly with respect to class, allowing him to recast himself as the ultimate underdog.

The vehicle for this strategy was *The Slim Shady LP's* debut single, "My Name Is." In an interview about the time of the album's release, Eminem announced that "My Name Is" "is like my introduction to the world. ['My Name Is'] is going to be the record that, like, promotes the album before it comes out and, like, gets it up to where it needs to be. You know what I mean? For me to, like, establish my following throughout the world."[22] The song was a huge success, paving the way for Eminem to reach international stardom. "A hummable anthem that trademarked Eminem in just one song," as Bozza put it, "My Name Is" spent eleven weeks on Billboard's rap singles chart, peaking at Number 10.[23] However, the Billboard charts tell only a part of the story. In an age in which music video does as much as, and often more than, radio airplay to introduce new artists to the public, the video for the single received nonstop attention from MTV. As the first song and video to introduce him to the public at large, "My Name Is" was carefully crafted and chosen for this exact purpose by producer Dr. Dre.

Although Dr. Dre became widely known to the public as Eminem's producer, "My Name Is" was just one of three songs out of a total of twenty on *The Slim Shady LP* that he produced.[24] In this song Dr. Dre simply followed the same strategy he used to launch the career of his previous protégé, Snoop Doggy Dogg, whose debut single

[21] Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 124–25.

[22] Eminem quoted in Richard Lowe and Dana Heinz Perry, dir., "Part Five: My Name Is . . .," *And You Don't Stop: 30 Years of Hip-Hop*, VH1, 2004.

[23] Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am*, 25.

[24] Eminem's Detroit associates, Mark and Jeff Bass, were responsible for the majority of the music on *The Slim Shady LP.* Journalists did their part in aiding Eminem's publicity, emphasizing time and again Dr. Dre's role as the white emcee's producer, a stamp of approval that was critical to Eminem's positive reception.

was entitled "Who Am I (What's My Name)?"[25] The remarkable quality of both of these singles is the way in which they serve a utilitarian advertising purpose of introducing the artists' names by repeating them ad nauseum, while also managing to sound as confident as if the artists were already superstars. Dr. Dre also codirected the video to "My Name Is," and its carefully crafted synergy of image, sound, and text reveals a well-conceived strategy for dealing with Eminem's whiteness. As Edward G. Armstrong explains, "[Eminem] accomplishes a self-conscious parody of rap's racially based authenticity."[26] In other words, turning his racial identity into a humorous act, the single preempts possible criticism that he is white.

In her expansive work on art, literature, and music, Linda Hutcheon encourages scholars to cast a wide net in theorizing how parody functions across a variety of contexts. Hutcheon defines parody broadly as "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity."[27] By this definition, one can observe parody at work in numerous rap music contexts. For example, De La Soul's "Ego Trippin' (Part Two)" and the music video for The Roots' "What They Do" both serve as a way for "underground" rappers to satirize the materialistic, misogynistic exploits of more successful "mainstream" ones.[28] In other cases, African American rappers have taken aim at whites, satirizing record executives (e.g., Dr. Dre's brutal send-up of former manager Jerry Heller in the video for "Wit Dre Day") and law enforcement agents (e.g., N.W.A.'s videos for "Straight Outta Compton" and "100 Miles and Running").[29] Perhaps the closest point of comparison to Eminem's use of parody, however, can be found in the crossover success of the first platinum-selling rap album in history: the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986). In the songs "No Sleep till Brooklyn" and "Fight for Your Right (to Party)," the group delivered their raps over a simple rock backbeat and distorted electric guitar, the stereotypical sound of white youth culture in the 1980s.[30] The content of these songs, particularly "Fight for Your Right (to Party)," seemed to take an ironic stab at the apathy and narcissism of privileged white youth. (How many of their young listeners were in on the joke is another question.) In any case, the strategy paid off by attracting young white fans to rap music and helping the group avoid charges that they were simply imitating African American performers. As African American rapper Q-Tip explains, "You know why I could fuck with [the Beastie Boys]? They don't try to be black. They're just themselves."[31]

[25] Snoop Doggy Dogg, *Doggystyle*, Death Row 63002, 1993.

[26] Edward G. Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity," *Popular Music and Society* 27/3 (October 2004): 343. S. Craig Watkins puts it more succinctly, claiming that "the manner in which Eminem makes his race an issue also makes it a non-issue" (S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2005], 107).

[27] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), xii.

[28] De La Soul, *Buhloone Mind State*, Tommy Boy 81063, 1993; The Roots, *Iladelph Halflife*, Geffen 24972, 1996.

[29] Dr. Dre, *The Chronic*, Death Row 63000, 1992; N.W.A., "Straight Outta Compton," *N.W.A. Legacy—The Video Collection*, DVD, EMI Video 77958, 2002.

[30] The Beastie Boys, *Licensed to Ill*, Def Jam 527351, 1986.

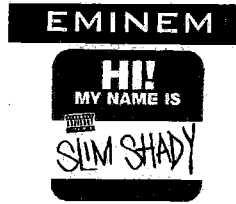[31] As quoted in Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 116.

**Figure 2.**    Eminem, "My Name Is," Interscope Records 97470, 1999, cover. Used by permission of Universal Music Enterprises.

In a somewhat similar fashion, "My Name Is" imitates and comments on numerous faces of whiteness—the suburban white male, the politician, the rock star, etc. As such, it offers a prime example of how the aesthetic strategy of parody can work together in lyrics, images, and sound. Although Eminem never explicitly states his racial identity, the lyrics of the song continuously play with various tropes of whiteness. To begin, the chorus of the song repeats the phrase "Hi, My Name Is," which is about as "square" and "standard" a way as one could imagine to introduce oneself. Eminem's "Hi," enthusiastically shouted on the downbeat, drips with forced sincerity. The album cover of the single drives home the joke, featuring the kind of nametag one would wear at a business event, or another stereotypically "white" engagement; instead of "Bob" or "Dave," however, the tag introduces Eminem's alter ego (Figure 2).

The lyrics of the first verse make ample reference to white popular cultural icons such as the industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails, the pop group The Spice Girls, and television star Pamela Anderson Lee.[32] The way Eminem makes these references, however, distances him from mainstream (read "white") culture. For example, he mocks the band Nine Inch Nails by taking its name literally as a set of objects to be poked through his eyelids. The Spice Girls and Pamela Anderson Lee serve a similar function as easy targets of adolescent male aggression. By claiming to "impregnate" a Spice Girl and "rip Pamela Lee's tits off," Eminem's violent, cartoonish, and misogynistic humor distances him from conventional representations of whiteness, positioning him as a social rebel on par with, but clearly not the same as, his African American counterparts.

Yet above all else, Eminem is rapping. As the title of this article suggests, he demonstrates a white version of signifying, playing with language to emphasize his verbal creativity. In doing so, Eminem creates an unsuspected "call-and-response" with hip hop tradition.[33] He drops in a humorous reference to earlier commercial hip hop fads when he claims he "knocked [Pamela Lee's] clothes backwards like Kriss Kross," a pop rap duo who launched a short-lived fad in 1992 by wearing their clothing backwards. Although his rhythmic and verbal complexity is more restrained and measured than in the songs on the *Infinite* album, his characteristic propensity for internal rhyme remains intact (e.g., he rhymes "dead weight" with "head straight" and "impregnate"; see Figure 3). The key to the success of "My

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[32] The "clean" version of the song opens, "Hi kids! Do you like Primus?" a reference to yet another "white" rock group.

[33] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 151.

| Verse 1 | Internal and Multiple-Word Rhymes |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| mm. 1–2 | *hi kids, violence, eyelids* |
| mm. 5–6 | *dead weight, head straight, impregnate* |
| mm. 7–8 | *basehead, face red, wasted* |
| mm. 10–11 | *pissed off, tits off, Kriss Kross* |
| mm. 14–15 | *come here slut/I don't give a fuck, that's my girl dog/piss the world off* |

**Figure 3.**    Rhyming words and phrases from the first verse of "My Name Is," from Eminem, *Slim Shady LP*, Interscope Records 90287, 1999.

Name Is" lies in the way Eminem masters all of the formal elements of rap music while introducing content that is new and unfamiliar to the genre. For example, he avoids relying on stock images and phrases from the hip hop lexicon: when he mentions marijuana, which by the late 1990s was strongly associated with rap music, he does so by choosing the white, hippie-derived term "grass," rather than the slang "weed" or "chronic" favored by African American rappers.

Reflecting on Eminem's creative vision, rapper Ice-T succinctly described him as "Jerry Springer to music."[34] Like that daytime television talk show, "My Name Is" offers up a feast of dysfunctional behavior for the world to see. Slim Shady reveals to his listeners that his mom does drugs and that he has flunked out of junior high school several times. He even commits self-inflicted violence, shooting and hanging himself. In this fashion, the video, codirected by Dr. Dre, conjures stock images of whiteness to expose and transform them. To construct its visual parody of whiteness, the video for "My Name Is" begins by toying with middle America, crystallized in the image of its most cherished leisure activity: television. Eminem appears on a living room television set and begins performing the song using various costumes that represent white stereotypes. Opening in black and white—perhaps an ironic reference to an older time in American entertainment when racial representation was very different—the video pans slowly across the front lawn of a suburban home. The caption, in smooth, white (!) cursive writing, reads "The Slim Shady Show." The camera comes to a stop on an image of Eminem, dressed in a suit and tie as the father from "Leave It to Beaver," standing rigidly and waving at the camera from his front porch in short jerky motions.[35] He flinches stiffly as a newspaper flies by, nearly hitting him in the head. The television image then shifts in a way that suggests that the reception is going bad, cycling quickly through two new images: Eminem dressed as a nerdy professor with spiky white hair and then as a game show host in plaid pants and a bright red blazer.[36] By focusing the viewers' attention immediately on exaggerated images of normative whiteness, the video implies that Eminem represents the polar opposite of such representations.

[34] Eminem, "Part Five: My Name Is . . . ."

[35] It may be more than mere coincidence that the video invokes *Leave It to Beaver*, given that Jerry *Mathers* played the title character.

[36] Dr. Dre and Philip G. Atwell, dir., *Eminem: E*, DVD (Universal Music and Video Distribution, 2000).

The parade of white images continues: Eminem as a mental patient in a straight-jacket (Dr. Dre as his psychiatrist); Eminem as the entire Brady Bunch; Eminem as a ventriloquist's dummy; Eminem as a flasher in a trench coat; Eminem as "white trash" appearing in boxers and a white t-shirt in front of a mobile home; Eminem as the president of the United States, Bill Clinton; Eminem as shock-rocker Marilyn Manson; Eminem as a drunk driver being arrested on the television show *COPS*. Some of these images are clear references to recent popular culture, while others refer back to the 1950s and 1960s, and at least one—the ventriloquist's dummy—harkens even further back to the age of vaudeville. All told, we witness a kitchen-sink parody that takes aim at white identity. The critical distance between Eminem and these costumed images is reinforced several times as Eminem appears in normal street clothes rapping the lyrics to the song. Dressed in baggy hip hop–styled clothing (loose-fit sagging jeans and an oversized jacket), Eminem's comportment shifts dramatically as he adopts conventional hip hop body language: low to the ground, bending his knees, swaying loosely with the beat, and gesturing rhythmically with an open hand as he delivers his rhymes. Taken together, these various images of Eminem vacillate between sameness and difference, positioning him solidly in the rap genre, while constantly reminding viewers that he is no mere imitation of a black rapper.

Furthermore, the ironic parody of white identity is reinforced by the sound of Eminem's single through its implicit commentary on the musical conventions of hip hop. Produced by Dr. Dre, the musical track is built primarily out of a large looped section, nearly eight measures total, of black, British, openly gay soul singer Labi Siffre's "I Got the . . ." (1975).[37] Looping only the early portion of the groove, Dr. Dre creates a sparse beat that parodies musical whiteness. The idea of attaching concepts such as "parody" and "irony" to hip hop beats has a very specific application here. As ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss has persuasively argued, academic critics overly committed to hearing sampling as primarily about ironic recontexutalization have misapplied the concept of "parody" by assuming that producers intend their samples to be recognized and interpreted as a commentary on their original sources.[38] On the contrary, Schloss contends that producers choose specific samples based on their "general sensibility" or "vibe"; any meanings that might be attached to a given sample or to the cultural context from which it emerged are usually of little importance to producers.[39] One can also presume that the same holds true for most listeners, especially because hip hop producers often go out of their way to sample obscure sources. Although we can imagine scenarios in which most listeners are aware of a sample's origin (e.g., Puff Daddy's tribute to the Notorious B.I.G. based on Sting's "I'll Be Missing You"), it is safest to assume that most listeners enjoy hip

[37] Labi Siffre, *Remember My Song*, Phantom 820427, 2006 [1975].

[38] Schloss offers Prince Paul's sampling of Daryl Hall and John Oates's tune "I Can't Go for That (No Can Do)," which formed the beat for De La Soul's 1989 "Say No Go," as an example. One academic critic wrote that Prince Paul intended to poke fun at the "blue-eyed soul" duo. When Schloss presented Prince Paul with this interpretation, however, Paul was surprised and quick to clarify how much he sincerely enjoyed the original tune.

[39] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 147.

hop without giving much consideration to the origins of the samples from which it is built.

Thus, instead of centering an interpretation of "My Name Is" on the original intent or meaning of Siffre's song—which is actually quite ironic given Eminem's alleged homophobia—it is more appropriate to concentrate on the particular "vibe" that this sample allows Dr. Dre to create. Indeed, as Adam Krims has pointed out, rap music often implicitly or explicitly comments on or evokes itself and its own history.[40] Building on Robert Walser's influential musicological study of heavy metal music, Krims has argued for increased attention to what he calls hip hop's musical poetics, by "delineating carefully what one considers the parameters relevant for consideration ... and specifying ... the culturally salient reason for doing so."[41] Thus, the challenge facing scholars of hip hop music is to ensure that their interpretations make sense from within the cultural frame of hip hop itself.

In the case of Eminem's "My Name Is," the parameters in need of examination involve a set of expectations and conventions to which hip hop producers adhere in constructing the rhythmic foundation for their tracks. In the 1990s platinum-selling West Coast artists such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Tupac Shakur, and East Coast rappers such as The Notorious B.I.G., Nas, and Jay-Z helped to establish representations of inner-city black subjectivity as a crucial marker of authenticity. Murray Forman documents the consolidation of such locality-driven modes of representation in his aptly titled book *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip Hop*.[42] Accompanying the gritty, documentary style of rap lyrics in this period are some specific musical constructions of inner-city space. In general, the majority of hip hop beats in the 1990s drew on the generic conventions of funk music, featuring eight- or sixteen-count hi-hats with syncopated snare/kick-drum patterns, often resembling the grooves of James Brown's band or George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic collective. Even when the hi-hat does not evenly subdivide the beat, syncopated ostinato patterns in other prominently sounding levels of the groove imply a sixteenth-note subdivision.[43] The looped section of Labi Siffre's "I Got the ..." that makes up the beat for "My Name Is" departs from most sample-based hip hop beats in a particularly revealing way: Hip hop producers commonly choose samples that feature an eight- or sixteen-count hi-hat, as in the two well-known examples shown in Figures 4 and 5; the sample Dr. Dre loops to create the beat for "My Name Is," however, has only a four-count hi-hat pattern played evenly in 4/4 time on all main beats (Figure 6).[44] In addition, "My

[40] Krims, *Rap Music*, 43.

[41] Ibid., 18–19.

[42] Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Hip-Hip and Rap Music* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

[43] For more about the generic conventions of funk music, particularly the issue of an implied subdivision of the beat, also referred to as the rhythmic "density gradient," see Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 44, 74–75.

[44] Eminem's "My Name Is" was not the only track from the 1990s that sampled the same Labi Siffre song. In most cases, the producers of these songs took their samples from the first part of "I've Got The ...," which features a funky string and guitar riff and an array of off-beat accents resembling more conventional funk grooves. Jay-Z's "Streets is Watching" (1997) and Def Squad's "Countdown"

| | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shaker | × | × | × | × | | × | × | × | | × | × | × | | × | × | × | 16-count |
| Snare | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick | k | | | | | | k | | | | | | | | k | | |

**Figure 4.** Rhythmic foundation for the musical track of "Nuthin' but a G-Thang," from Dr. Dre, *The Chronic*, Death Row 63000, 1992.

| m. 1 | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hi-hat | | | × | | | | × | | | | × | | | | × | | 8-count |
| Snare | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick | k | | k | | | | | k | k | | k | | | | | k | |

**Figure 5.** Rhythmic foundation for the musical track of "The World Is Yours," from Nas, *Illmatic*, Columbia 57684, 1994.

| | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | | − | + | − | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hi-hat | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 4-count |
| Snare | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Figure 6.** Rhythmic foundation for the musical track of "My Name Is," from Eminem, *Slim Shady LP*, Interscope Records 90287, 1999.

Name Is" contains neither syncopation nor rhythmic tension in the kick drum and snare parts but instead alternates evenly between them to create the obligatory and most rudimentary form of a backbeat. This lack of rhythmic density and absence of syncopation in the hi-hat, kick drum, and snare portion of the beat offer a rhythmic parody of whiteness, toying with the well-known stereotype that white people lack rhythm.

Like the lyrics and music video of "My Name Is," the song's rhythmic backing encodes a palpable distance from conventional representations of blackness. Yet it does so without pushing Eminem beyond the pale of the rap music genre. After all, the point of this strategy is not to make a joke out of Eminem, or hip hop for that matter—he is no rapping Rodney Dangerfield—but rather to help him establish a foothold in a genre coded as black. Just as Eminem's virtuosic lyrical signifying and his hip hop style of dress remind listeners of his true cultural allegiance, the sampled portion of Siffre's song contains one element of syncopation that keeps the backing track of "My Name Is" from spilling over into satire: the bass line that anticipates the first and third beats of every measure by a swung sixteenth-note gives the track a subtle bounce. Eminem's rapping contributes still another layer of rhythmic complexity. He rhymes in asymmetrical phrases, at times accelerating into dramatic slews of syllables, at other times slowing down to smoothly ride the pocket. Put simply, his flow is anything but "square." Consider, for instance, the song's chorus, in which Eminem delivers the words "my name is" in eighth-note triplets

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(1999) both take pieces of this syncopated string and guitar riff from "I've Got the . . ." and interpolate them into an eight-count drum track. See Jay-Z, *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, Def Jam 536392, 1997 and Def Squad, *El Niño*, Def Jam 558383, 1998.

| | 1 | - | + | - | 2 | - | + | - | 3 | - | + | - | 4 | - | + | - |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hi-hat | X | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Snare | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick | K | | | | | | | | K | | | | | | | |
| Bass | b | | | | | | | b | b | | | | | | | b |

Vocals    Hi!      my  name  is      What?      my  name  is
                   ╰──────┬──────╯               ╰──────┬──────╯
                          3                             3

**Figure 7.**   Rhythmic placement of the bass and vocals with respect to the rhythmic foundation for the musical track in the chorus of "My Name Is," from Eminem, *Slim Shady LP,* Interscope Records 90287, 1999. (Note: the words "my" and "is" are intentionally misaligned to emphasize that these words fall between the eighth- and sixteenth- note subdivision, creating a crossrhythmic tension that is anything but square.)

that imply a three-against-two cross-rhythm with the backing track (Figure 7). In sum, although certain rhythmic elements of "My Name Is" play with musical stereotypes of whiteness, the song as a whole stops short of a full-blown satire that would overstate Eminem's racial difference and, more importantly, sound boring.

In an age of digital production and sampling in which producers can engineer and meticulously design every sound, it is timbre that most betrays the marketing strategy behind "My Name Is."[45] This oft-neglected sonic element contributes significantly to the parodic function of the song. Notably, the sounds Dr. Dre layers into the beat of "My Name Is" differ greatly from those he used in the production of his own album, *2001,* released six months after Eminem's debut.[46] As the title of one of the tracks on the album promises, Dr. Dre's production for *2001* is "Xxplosive," and his beats feature a powerful bass and kick drum. Loud gunshots are sampled in as percussive accents ("Xxplosive," "Bang Bang," and "Ackrite"), and the instrumental sounds have a grandiose, almost symphonic quality. Underneath these and other tracks, the sampled sounds of car engines, honking horns, and helicopters evoke the soundscape of South Los Angeles, illustrating Murray Forman's observation that in rap music "the city is an audible presence, explicitly cited and sonically sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment."[47] In direct opposition to this archetypical gangsta sound, Dr. Dre's production on "My Name Is" evokes a light and playful mood, starting with the vocal call-and-response that accompanies Eminem's famously nasal rapping throughout the song.[48]

In the first verse, voices imitating children answer Eminem's questions in a high-pitched, exaggerated tone ("Yeah, yeah, yeah!" and "Uh-uh"). Even the more violent

[45] For an exploration of digital sampling's evolution vis-à-vis hip hop's aesthetics and cultural politics, see Dale Chapman, "That Ill, Tight Sound: Telepresence and Biopolitics in Post-Timbaland Rap Production," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2/2 (May 2008): 155–77.

[46] Dr. Dre, *2001,* Aftermath Records 490486, 1999.

[47] Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First,* xviii.

[48] Although I don't have space to explore Eminem's voice in detail, I want to point out that the nasality of Eminem's delivery is contrived, not an essential attribute of his racial identity. At times, he plays up the "whiteness" of his voice as in "My Name Is" and "The Real Slim Shady." In other songs, such as "Kill You" and "The Way I Am," he uses a raspier, throaty voice.

lyrics of "My Name Is" are given a humorous slant by similar call-and-response vocals. When Eminem talks about assaulting his high school teacher, sound effects straight out of the "Three Stooges" emphasize the cartoonish nature of his lyrics. The instrumental sounds on the track also come across as lighter and less ominous than Dr. Dre's *2001*. Writing around the time of the debut of *The Slim Shady LP*, Detroit-based music critic Hobey Echlin got it just right when he described the sound of "My Name Is" as "catchy with its *game show–funk* hooks."[49] Labi Siffre's electric piano riff heard during the song's chorus has a bright tone; a clipped, tinny-sounding synthesizer melody layered into the track changes pitch only on main beats in quarter- or half-note intervals.

Rather than trying to gain acceptance in hip hop by adopting a familiar gangsta persona, Eminem, with help from Dr. Dre, creates a new vision of hip hop populated by an unlikely cast of characters. Unlike many of his African American male counterparts who use rap music as a vehicle for presenting hyper-masculine displays of bravado, "My Name Is" offers a humorous portrayal of abjection. At times Eminem jokingly played up his insecurities during media interviews. In a 2002 conversation with MTV he confessed, "My insecurities? I'm dumb, I'm stupid, I'm white, I'm ugly, I smell, I'm stupid and I'm white. I have freckles . . . um . . . I'm short, I'm white, I'm not very smart, I wanna kill myself. . . . My nose is crooked. Um . . . my penis is small."[50] In addition to the frequent references to his whiteness, the comment about his genitalia is telling, for (among other things) the way it contrasts with the usual way rappers describe their anatomy and the stereotype of the well-endowed black man. In some ways Eminem's rhetorical strategy parallels that of hard country singers who, as Barbara Ching describes, foster abject personas as a way of voicing working-class frustration.[51] Certainly this "anti-hero" stance is part of Eminem's appeal, and it is probably no coincidence that he hails from Detroit, one of the areas hit hardest by post-1960s deindustrialization. In creating an identity that is far removed from normative whiteness, "My Name Is" exposes a class fissure among white people, making race visible in new ways.

This representation of whiteness has proven key to Eminem's positive reception by hip hop fans, many of them African American. As the case of Vanilla Ice's spectacular rise and fall illustrates, white rappers had to be careful not to appear as if they were out to steal black music. Indeed, even the earlier strategies of authentication adopted by white emcees—"immersion" and "imitation"—attempt to mitigate the appearance of appropriation and exploitation by portraying white rappers as comfortable and familiar with African Americans both personally and culturally. As scholars of whiteness have argued, however, repudiating the privilege associated with white identity is no simple matter. Perhaps sensing this problem and responding to Vanilla Ice's failed commercial strategy, Eminem adopted a different posture.

[49] Hobey Echlin, "Where Hip Hop Lives: Sure, He's a Cute White Kid, but Detroit Rapper Eminem Is Not the Official Candy of the New Millennium," *Detroit Metro Times*, 17 February 1999, http://www.metrotimes.com/archives/story.asp?id=563, accessed 29 June 2008.

[50] Sway Calloway, "Eminem: The Gift and The Curse," MTV.com, http://www.mtv.com/bands/e/eminem/news_feature_052902/index.jhtml, accessed 29 June 2008.

[51] Barbara Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Rather than attempting to shed his whiteness or imitate conventional portrayals of blackness, Eminem emphasized his racial identity in ways that transformed it into something more than a trope of domination. By focusing on his class identity and various unflattering stereotypes of whiteness, Eminem positioned himself as an underdog. His focus on whiteness in songs such as "Who Knew" and "White America" also afforded him the opportunity to acknowledge the extent to which his white skin granted him an advantage, helping him appeal to white consumers and humble himself before critics.[52]

Although close attention to Eminem's debut single reveals much about the artistic strategy behind his push into the mainstream, it is important not to overstate the centrality of this one song and music video. *The Slim Shady LP* presents numerous faces of whiteness, and the remaining songs on the album do not necessarily eschew conventional funk grooves or portray Eminem as a loser. For example, "Just Don't Give a Fuck" counterbalances "My Name Is" by using a more syncopated hip hop beat and positioning Eminem's alter ego Slim Shady as a dangerous and violence-prone character to be feared rather than mocked. Although Eminem's lyrics describe him as "brain dead" from too many drugs, the contrast with "My Name Is" is immediately apparent. In fact, the admission that he has hit bottom only seems to increase his lack of concern for the consequences of his actions. In this song Slim Shady is free to unleash a torrent of anger and frustration, lambasting his critics with lyrical ballistics that not only demonstrate his skills as a rapper, but also his apparent lack of concern for causing offense. One of his rhyming couplets threatens to slit his critics' throats "worse than Ron Goldman."[53]

On his follow-up album, the highly acclaimed *Marshal Mathers LP* (2000), Eminem continued to move between the poles of the humorous prankster and the scary psycho killer. "The Real Slim Shady" opens with familiar signifiers of whiteness as an extremely nasal Eminem intones, "May I have your attention please" (just as "white" a phrase as "Hi, my name is").[54] The song's beat features a looped keyboard riff with a timbre approximating that of a harpsichord, and toward the end of the song a descending melody played on what sounds like a recorder emerges as the final layer of the groove. These timbres, associated, of course, with "white" Western music, are complemented by the video, which playfully features a chorus of Eminem impersonators, highlighting the whiteness of his fans and brand of hip hop identity.

On the other hand, the single "Kill You" plays up the darker side of Eminem's creativity. His rapping voice grows extremely gruff and hoarse as he rhymes about the numerous ways he can inflict pain and death on his victims. The chorus of the song states Eminem's position clearly: "You don't wanna fuck with Shady, 'cause Shady will fuckin' kill you."[55]

Armstrong argues that Eminem employs extreme violence and misogyny to place him in contestation with African American gangsta rappers. In fact, he concludes

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[52] Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 124–25; and Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity," 343.

[53] Eminem, "Just Don't Give a Fuck," *The Slim Shady LP*. Goldman was one of the victims in the O. J. Simpson murder trial.

[54] Eminem, "The Real Slim Shady," *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

[55] Eminem, "Kill You," *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

that Eminem is actually more violent and misogynistic than his black counterparts, "outdoing other gangsta rappers in terms of his violent misogyny."[56] There is undoubtedly some truth to this assertion, but Armstrong's analysis is limited by his assumption that all violent utterances are comparable, overlooking the potential for humor and irony within what Robin Kelley terms rap music's "lyrical ballistics." We miss out on important nuances, including the potential qualitative differences between Eminem and his African American peers. Is Eminem's violence meant to be taken seriously? Are the subjects of the violence raced, classed, or gendered in particular ways? Even a cursory glance at Eminem's first two albums reveals that he avoids portraying himself as an archetypical hip hop gangsta. Instead, he taps into the cultural trope of the cold-blooded psycho killer most often portrayed in American horror films as a white male. In fact, Eminem often appeared live on stage wearing Jason Voorhees's trademark hockey mask from the horror movie series *Friday the 13th*, and "Kill You" invokes the character Norman Bates from the film *Psycho*.[57] Elizabeth Keathley argues that Eminem's murder ballads have roots in "white" cultural forms such as opera, cinema, and bluegrass; I would argue as well that his cartoonish violent signifying has as much, if not more, to do with the genre of horror films than with gangsta rap.[58]

Eminem's work deserves further exploration. Yet it is clear from these brief examples that the strategy of making Eminem's whiteness hyper-visible helped to preempt possible criticism about his racial identity, allowing him to carve out a niche in the music industry for his unique brand of rap music. What is more, his violent, misogynistic humor and self-characterization as "white trash" confirm Ingrid Monson's observation that gender and class continue to mediate racial authenticity across U.S. popular music's color line.[59] To many listeners and casual observers, however, Eminem's humor crossed the line of acceptability, especially because the frequent targets of his lyrical outbursts were women and homosexuals—both long-time victims of discrimination and violence. To other listeners, Eminem's popularity and artistic skill pointed to the various ways hip hop culture provided young black and white Americans with an unprecedented opportunity for overcoming the legacy of racism. In these and other cases, discussions of Eminem's work commented on the changing meanings of whiteness in U.S. society.

## Rearticulating Race

In their work on racial formation, Michael Omi and Howard Winant define "rearticulation" as the realignment of "political interests and identities, through a process

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[56] Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Whiteness," 334–35.

[57] Sean S. Cunningham, dir., *Friday the 13th*, DVD, Paramount Home Entertainment 124902, 2007 [1980]; and Alfred Hitchcock, dir., *Psycho*, DVD, Universal Studios Home Video 61100450, 2008 [1960].

[58] Elizabeth Keathley, "A Context for Eminem's Murder Ballads," *ECHO* 4/2 (Fall 2002), http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume4-Issue2/table-of-contents.html, accessed 29 June 2008.

[59] Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48/3 (Autumn 1995): 416.

of recombination of familiar ideas and values in hitherto unrecognized ways."[60] As we have witnessed in Eminem's musical journey, such transformations of racial meaning are played out not only in politics, but also in popular culture. Unlike the world of electoral politics, however, popular culture does not demand that its practitioners declare their allegiance to specific causes or issues. Whereas some musicians occasionally take a political stand in song lyrics or video imagery, Eminem's first two albums avoided making direct political endorsements. Despite not speaking directly on behalf of specific issues, popular culture can offer its consumers timely metaphors for understanding the world. George Lipsitz, Ray Pratt, and Christopher Small, among others, have suggested that popular music can offer listeners "utopian prefigurations" of the kind of society they want to live in and the kind of relationships they want to experience.[61] It seems only reasonable that the opposite must also be true: certain musics may symbolize a world gone awry. Indeed, listeners came to very different conclusions about the nature of Eminem's success.

Much of the criticism of Eminem's work invoked contemporary politics of race, class, and gender, revealing some of the ways in which whiteness adapts to changing societal conditions. One element of Eminem's artistic strategy that resonated with observers was the relationship between race and class. Indeed, the pitting of class against race continued to be a popular political theme in the 1990s, particularly with respect to debates over affirmative action. In 1996 backers of California's Proposition 209, including University of California Regent Ward Connerly (an African American) and Governor Pete Wilson, campaigned to abolish state-based affirmative action programs.[62] Proponents of the proposition used class to pivot around race; they argued that "under the existing racial-preference system, a wealthy doctor's son may receive preference over a dishwasher's daughter simply because he's from an 'underrepresented' race."[63] After the proposal passed in California, Connerly took his campaign to Michigan, employing many of the same tactics and arguments.

In his review of the motion picture *8 Mile*, which mythologized Eminem's struggle to gain acceptance in Detroit's underground rap music scene, R. J. Smith worries that the film suggests "class trumps race" in contemporary American society.[64] Smith cites the climactic scene of the film in which Eminem wins a rap battle

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[60] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 163.

[61] Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1990), 36. See also George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1997); and Christopher Small, "Why Doesn't the Whole World Love Chamber Music?" *American Music* 19/3 (Autumn 2001): 340–59.

[62] "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting": Proposition 209: Text of Proposed Law, http://vote96.sos.ca.gov/Vote96/html/BP/209text.htm, accessed 29 June 2008.

[63] "Rebuttal to Argument against Proposition 209," Proposition 209 ballot pamphlet, http://vote96.sos.ca.gov/BP/209norbt.htm, accessed 29 June 2008.

[64] R. J. Smith, "Crossover Dreams: Class Trumps Race in Eminem's *8 Mile*," *Village Voice* (5 November 2002), http://www.villagevoice.com/2002–11-05/news/crossover-dream/1, accessed 29 June 2008.

against an African American foe by playing up his own status as "white trash" and revealing to the crowd that his opponent is from a middle-class home. We have already witnessed how important constructions of class identity were in Eminem's early recordings. In the film Eminem uses his status as "white trash" to portray himself as the ultimate victim, flipping the conventional logic of race hierarchy on its head.[65] Although this brand of class authenticity might be an attractive proposition, Smith points out that it tends to overshadow important aspects of Detroit's history, including a legacy of race riots and white flight.[66] Although Smith does not mention affirmative action, his concern that the reassertion of class in popular culture concealed troubling racial realities mirrors the arguments favored by supporters of race-based affirmative action.[67]

The struggle over affirmative action was actually just one front of a much larger political phenomenon of the 1990s: the so-called culture wars. In this regard there are some surprising parallels between Eminem's artistic strategy and the political maneuvering that accompanied the conservative backlash of the 1990s. Thomas Frank describes the backlash as "a theory of how the political world works," which "also provides a ready-made identity" for its white conservative following, offering converts an "attractive and uniquely American understanding of authenticity and victimhood."[68] By casting themselves as the ultimate victims of a vast liberal conspiracy, the Republican Party found a way to mobilize its base around issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and prayer in schools. The politics of the conservative backlash fostered feelings of marginalization and marshaled a righteous indignation against what they termed the "liberal elite." Some journalists even conflated the right-wing backlash with Eminem's popularity. After all, as his numerous critics pointed out, the frequent targets of Eminem's rhymes were women and homosexuals, two groups that were increasingly put on the defensive in the 1980s and 1990s. Although Eminem's assault on "politically correct" values allowed his teenage listeners to enact a rebellion against the world of their parents, some critics worried that it signaled that the conservative backlash had taken over popular culture. In a 2002 editorial for the Village Voice, for example, Richard Goldstein compared Eminem to shock jock Don Imus, characterizing their appeal as follows: "Imus and Eminem make it easier for fans to bear life in a multicultural society. Your boss may be a woman, your sergeant African-American, your teacher gay, but when you put the earphones on, you rule. . . . Eminem and Imus draw from the same well of resentment that has nourished the Angry White Male. These stars are part of the backlash, and their reach into the mainstream shows how far this attitude has advanced."[69]

[65] Curtis Hanson, dir. 8 Mile, Universal Studios Home Video 61021981, 2002.

[66] Smith, "Crossover Dreams."

[67] For a review of the film that makes the connection between Eminem and affirmative action explicit, see Loren Kajikawa, review of "The Motion Picture 8 Mile," ECHO 4/2 (Fall 2002), http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume4-Issue2/reviews/kajikawa.html, accessed 29 June 2008.

[68] Thomas Frank, What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 157–58.

[69] Richard Goldstein, "Celebrity Bigots: John Rocker, Dr. Laura, Eminem, Don Imus . . . Why Is Hate So Hot?" Metro Times: Detroit's Weekly Alternative, 1 August 2000.

At the same time, however, other commentators argued that Eminem's ascendancy marked the advance of progressive political tendencies. Hip hop writer and pundit Bakari Kitwana claimed that Eminem's popularity signaled a radical departure in the way young white Americans view race. Although some critics denounce Eminem's success as a white conspiracy to steal hip hop from blacks and exploit its potential for profit, Kitwana suggests that this line of thinking reflects an outdated view of race relations. Such "old racial politics," he says, are mired in essentialism and debates about cultural ownership. From the perspective of the "new racial politics," however, Eminem's popularity points toward an unprecedented shared space for black, white, Latino, and Asian youth living in a multicultural nation.[70] The ability of a white boy to tell his story, to advance a working-class white identity and earn the respect of his African American peers, demonstrates the progressive nature of hip hop culture.[71] The cross-racial popularity of hip hop music points toward new political coalitions that might unite young voters. One could argue that the historic election of U.S. president Barack Obama, which relied heavily on his ability to mobilize young white voters, justifies some of this optimism.

Others are far less hopeful. Carl Hancock Rux, for example, characterizes Eminem not as heralding a change of direction, but rather as another link in the chain stretching back through Mick Jagger, Elvis Presley, and Benny Goodman. Eminem, he suggests, is the old politics of appropriation repackaged as something new: "The new White Negro—like Eminem—has not *arrived* at black culture. . . . He has *arrived* at white culture with an authentic performance of whiteness, influenced by a historical concept of blackness. And there is a difference . . . ?"[72] In this view, Eminem's emphasis on his difference, his performance of "signifying whiteness," does not free him from the legacy of cultural appropriation.

Regardless of one's opinion about Eminem, his popularity has made whiteness visible in new ways, an important factor to proponents of critical whiteness studies who consider how whiteness confers societal privilege and power. Henry A. Giroux and others call for a renegotiation or "rearticulation" of whiteness along progressive lines, countering whiteness's tendency to function as a background norm. Instead, Giroux argues for a pedagogy of whiteness that considers "the differences in 'whiteness' and the political possibilities that can be opened up through a discourse of 'whiteness' articulated in new forms of identity, new possibilities for democratic practices, and new processes of cultural exchange."[73]

Although Eminem participates in the lineage of Paul Whiteman and others, benefiting from whiteness in terms of market access, he does produce a new construction of white identity that attempts a redistribution of symbolic power with notions of blackness. Appealing to his experiences as a drug user, trailer park resident, and high school dropout, Eminem negotiates a new kind of whiteness that is far from

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[70] Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Civitas Books, 2005), 159–60.

[71] Ibid., 154–60.

[72] Carl Hancock Rux, "Eminem: The New White Negro," in *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture,* ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 37.

[73] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 295.

dominant. In his work whiteness is never the norm, never the invisible universal standard by which all others are judged deviant. His whiteness is of another sort; it is itself marginalized, frustrated, angry, and at times even abject. In the cultural context of hip hop, a genre that has often been subject to attack by those unhappy with its portrayal of what they believe to be damaging forms of black deviance, Eminem's performance of whiteness suggests the possibility of sameness for white rap fans, not simply a voyeuristic adventure in which blackness offers excitement while whiteness remains the safe harbor of privilege and normality.

By parodying his racial identity through an ironic use of hip hop conventions, Eminem rearticulated whiteness in this historically nonwhite genre. For some, this performance was an extension of the right-wing backlash culture, proof that a new social meanness and neoconservatism intent on rolling back liberal policies had infected youth-oriented popular culture. For others, he was a positive symbol of a new era in race relations, signaling a promising shared space between white and black youth that rendered old paradigms of race obsolete. In fact, he even served as an inspiration to some youth facing unfavorable odds, an example of overcoming challenges through hard work and determination. For still others, Eminem was anything but new—simply an updated version of the archetypical white boy performing black culture for profit. What is significant about these opposing views is that they simultaneously occupy a historical moment in U.S. society when whiteness as a social category was undergoing profound change. Eminem's performance of whiteness in hip hop provides a mirror in which numerous tensions and political projects come into focus, a picture of U.S. race relations in which whiteness becomes just another Other.

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