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Fall 2017 Third Prize Essay

M & M: HOW EMINEM ESTABLISHED AUTHENTICITY IN RAP DESPITE HIS RACE

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“Kiss my white ass” is a saying you can often hear Eminem proclaiming. Eminem or Real Slim Shady, whose given name is Marshall Mathers, was born and raised in Detroit with his mother and little brother Nathan, where they struggled for years as a family due to being poor and living in the slums. Drugs constantly played a huge role in Eminem’s life as his mother often left him and Nathan alone at home because she needed to find her next fix. As directed in the autobiographical film *8 Mile*, Eminem was left to raise and guide himself throughout life where he was challenged by people in his primarily black neighborhood and school because of his race. Rap became not only a coping mechanism for Eminem, but eventually a chance for him to live a better life. Except, being white and being a rapper was considered ludicrous because hip-hop and rap was a black people thing. Hip hop and rap has been a way for African Americans to give voice to the injustices and discriminations they face on a daily basis. So, when one white rapper by the name of Vanilla Ice stepped into the rap scene and created a fake rags-to-riches story about himself in a bid to appeal to black people, Eminem’s race became an even bigger target. In order to become a successful rapper and move out of the slums, Eminem learned to embrace his “whiteness” and find ways to legitimize himself within the black genre. I argue that due to the reaction of Vanilla Ice, Eminem had to employ different strategies in handling his race, as his skin color often impeded him from successfully pursuing a career in hip-hop and rap. Ultimately, being white and trying to rap was considered preposterous, but not impossible, and Eminem’s music and film *8 Mile* showcases the demanded respect he is given today in the genre despite his skin color.

Eminem had a hard time breaking into the hip-hop and rap world due to his skin color holding him back. He was often seen as superior and privileged to many and breaking into the scene where the more struggled you are from the start, the greater success you’ll have, Eminem struggled to overcome this stereotype due to being white. In order to cement himself as a rapper, Eminem needed to prove to everybody that he wasn’t just a white person trying to overstep in black territory, but that he has the skills and talent to succeed in the genre. To accomplish this, Eminem had to employ different strategies when breaking into the rap scene to earn his authenticity because a “white man is not supposed to excel at rapping” (Fraleley 38). Authenticity is crucial for an artist in rap as it defines who is credible and legitimate and who is a fraud. Authenticity can be described in three ways: “being true to oneself, local allegiances and territorial identities, and lastly the requisite relation and proximity to an original source of rap” (Armstrong 336). Eminem has constantly stayed true to himself and embraced who he was, where he grew up, and his family drama. He was respected by his inner group of friends and where they stood within their community as illustrated in *8 Mile* where Eminem, from the 313, battles rivals group The Free World. Staying true to your roots and valuing where you came from is crucial in earning respect in hip-hop and rap world.

Eminem also established legitimacy when an original source of rap endorsed and mentored him into success. One well-known and respected rapper by the name of Dr. Dre, “sought a white artist to appeal

to rap's largest consumer base –white middle-class suburban teenagers” (Armstrong 336). Some people were offended when Dr. Dre signed a white rapper because hip-hop and rap has been known to be a black dominated genre where “African American artists often extend this image of the authentic to frame hip-hop as a black expressive culture facing appropriation by a white-controlled record industry” (Hess 374). Rap was generally off limits to white people because it's seen that white people are given an opportunity to everything in the world, and rap was something that belonged exclusively to black culture. The narrative often associated with black culture is a classic story of rags-to-riches, where black struggle is the focal point. Vanilla Ice, a white rapper in 1980's, imitated the black struggle rags-to-riches story to commercially appeal to black people. And because of the backlash Vanilla Ice received from his fabricated story mimicking black struggle and his wishes for people to look past his whiteness, Eminem decided to embrace his whiteness instead and use the insults thrown at him to his advantage. He demonstrates this in the last scene of *8 Mile* where he embraces his skin color and troubled past and mistakes by announcing that he is white trash, that he does live in a trailer house with his mom, and that he is a bum. By staying true to himself, his past, who he is representing, and his race, Eminem established authenticity despite Vanilla Ice discrediting the idea of white rappers.

In *8 Mile*, Eminem's skin color often discredited himself as a rapper and was used negatively to describe him while trying to pursue rap. Growing up in the slums of Detroit surrounded by black people who took ownership of hip-hop and rap often left Eminem with closed doors. Before Eminem, “hip-hop music, with all its distinctive variants and styles, was recognized internationally as an African American contribution to world culture, much as reggae has been always recognized as a specifically Jamaican contribution, and salsa as Cuban and Puerto Rican” (Scott 137). Because of the significant history surrounding hip-hop and rap as a way for black people to demonstrate their injustices, Eminem's skin color constantly held him back and was the reason he was never taken seriously. In *8 Mile*, while driving with his friends and discussing his music Eminem voiced his thoughts on how he is often discredited as a rapper. His black friends reply, “Cause this is hip-hop, you don't belong here” while also saying, “They laugh because you're white with a mic” (*8 Mile*). Eminem “doesn't belong” in rap because of what his skin color represents: white privilege. White privilege is “the taken-for-granted benefits and protections afforded to whites based upon skin color; accentuates white power and domination” (Bonds, Inwood 717). Because of this generalization, throughout the movie Eminem is told to by black rappers to “Take his white ass all the way back to *8 Mile*” (*8 Mile*) because they don't believe that he belongs in rap. Even though Eminem is in the same situation of being poor and sometimes homeless like many of the people around him, the fact that he is white and the history of white people against black people in general, which includes a long backstory of privilege, ultimately paints him as not relatable to black people. And because of this stereotype, Eminem's poor background was crucial for his career as a white rapper in obtaining authenticity.

As a white rapper, Eminem needed to solidify his legitimacy which stems from his upbringing of living in the streets. In order to be considered an authentic rapper one have to prove oneself. Throughout the movie, Rabbit, Eminem's on-screen nickname, was constantly challenged on the streets in rap battles. In one battle Rabbit is referred to as Vanilla Ice when his opponent says, “Fucking Nazi. Why don't you go form a group with Vanilla Ice” (*8 Mile*). Vanilla Ice was a white rapper in the 1980's who soared to the top of the charts for his hit “Ice Ice Baby” and is often referred to as the “Elvis of rap, a white performer who has capitalized on the most influential black music to emerge” (Bernard). In order to appeal to black people, he fabricated certain parts of his upbringing because “Any rapper, but especially a white rapper, needs a ‘street’ credibility that Vanilla Ice's suburban upbringing doesn't automatically confer” (Bernard). The backlash that Vanilla Ice's fake story created made it difficult for Eminem to establish himself as a white rapper. The fact that a previous successful white rapper lied about his life to make money lead

many to believe that Eminem was doing the same. Throughout *8 Mile*, Eminem is constantly compared to Vanilla Ice as “that white guy” or “C’mon Elvis” (8 Mile) in a bid to discredit his upbringing which is crucial in obtaining authenticity in rap. So, to establish himself in the genre, he embraces his whiteness and where and how he grew up instead of pretending to be something he is not like Vanilla Ice did. Even though Eminem is comfortable in his skin and who he is, his skin color often left him as the punch line of a joke in many of the rap battles.

Rival rappers of Eminem found every opportunity to use his race as an insult against him in order to discredit him as a rapper. In order to be considered a legitimate rapper in the streets, one had to be a worthy component in the rap battles. Because “much of hardcore rap is rendered in terms of the pugilistic since it is also an arena where black males perform ritualized aggression and metaphoric violence through language” (White 68), a rapper had to be willing to dish out insults and take them himself. Throughout *8 Mile*, Eminem’s skin color proved to be one of the biggest insults used against him. In several battles, Eminem’s opponents have said vile things about his race saying, “Fuck this white boy” (8 Mile) and “Take your white ass all the way back across to the trailer park” (8 Mile). Because of the history of white people against black people, by using the word “white” against Eminem during the rap battles, his opponents were able to create a barrier between the primarily black audience and the white rapper because they were highlighting the fact that he was different from them. His rivals have also used his skin color against him as a way to symbolize that he is not welcomed here in the industry by saying, “But the black guy doesn’t die in this movie” and that they “have a better choice of joining the KKK” (8 Mile) than of him being a successful rapper. The aggression and force used to deliver these lines against Eminem in the film is a demonstration of the sheer unwelcomedness the genre of hardcore rap had against him. Because Hip-hop and rap originated from black culture, black people were extremely unwilling to allow a white person into the game. White people have always been given access to everything in the past and rarely allowed black people a chance to succeed in anything which was why Eminem had a hard time proving himself in the genre seeing as rap was considered off limits to him. But even as many try to undermine his talent, Eminem proves himself to be different from previous white rappers in the industry when he chooses to respond to the insults about his skin color by taking ownership of who he is and what he represents.

Eminem accomplishes authenticity and respect from his community when he embraces his whiteness instead of trying to hide it like previous white rappers in the past. Eminem decided to take a different route in terms of approaching his race by accepting his skin color and his upbringing and what it all stands for. Throughout *8 Mile*, Eminem is referred to as “white trash” repeatedly because he lives in a trailer park, still lives with his mom, and is very poor. By accepting his upbringing and his social class, Eminem is able to relate himself to his community seeing as many of the people also live poorly and struggle to make ends meet. Grealy states, “Eminem’s success can in part be attributed to his utilization of class discourse. He inhabits a ‘white trash identity which is one originally invoked by African Americans” (860). And that, “In citing such a phrase Eminem simultaneously aligns himself in respect to class with the contemporary poor in America in which black Americans are largely situated, and racially with black history, which in his apparent understanding is grounded in class struggle” (Grealy 860). In the ending scenes of the movie, Eminem delivers a verse that discredits all of his opponents by accepting and acknowledging his whiteness and then using it to his advantage. He raps, “I am white trash. I am a fuckin bum. And I do live in a trailer with my mum. Don’t ever try to judge me dude, because you don’t know what the fuck I’ve been through. Fuck ya’ll if you doubt me, I’m a piece of fucking white trash I say it proudly” (8 Mile). By stating that he is white trash and taking ownership of the struggles he has had to endure to make it this far not only discredits his opponents but leaves them speechless with nothing to

use against him. By taking pride of where he lives, what he does for a living, and who his family is allows people in the audience to relate to his mess of a life and understand his struggle. This is something Vanilla Ice and previous white rappers had failed to achieve because they try to mask their whiteness instead of embracing it. After embracing his whiteness as a rapper and being accepted into the genre, many of Eminem's songs pay tribute to the struggle of trying to obtain authenticity.

After achieving authenticity within his hometown by accepting his skin color, Eminem's next step, with the help of Dr. Dre, was earning respect from the entire rap industry worldwide. Even though Eminem gained respect from his hometown in the last scene of *8 Mile*, in order to be a successful rapper and obtain authenticity legitimately he needed to gain respect as a white rapper from the rap industry itself—which proved to be very difficult. Many producers didn't take a second look at the white rapper either because it would look bad endorsing him or just because he was white and trying to rap. There was one producer however who looked past Eminem's skin color and judged him for his skills and talents instead. Dr. Dre, "a significant figure in rap music who is best known for being one of the early creators of 'gansta rap'" (Calhoun 268), brought Eminem onto his record and mentored him to greatness. Eminem often credits his success to Dr. Dre in many of songs by saying, "Until I met Dre, the only one who looked past. Gave me a chance and I lit a fire up under his ass" (*White America* –Eminem) as well as, "It was you who believed in me, when everyone was telling you don't sign me. You risked your career for me. Nobody wanted to fuck with a white boy" (*I Need a Doctor* –Eminem, Dr. Dre, Skylar Grey). Being endorsed by an original source of rap gave Eminem a popularity amongst black artists and an edge over previous white artists, such as Vanilla Ice, because they were unable to. Knowing the risk Dr. Dre took by taking him under his wing for the reason that he was a black man helping a white man become rich, Eminem cannot thank Dr. Dre enough and even goes on to say, "I owe my life to you" (*I Need a Doctor* –Eminem, Dr. Dre, Skylar Grey). Twenty years later after the initial turmoil of a black rapper endorsing a struggling white rapper, the two are still great friends and applaud each other on both of their worldwide success's. With the help of Dr. Dre and his guidance, Eminem has earned authenticity and is now one of the most successful rappers ever in the industry.

Eminem is considered one of the most successful rappers today because of the struggles he had to endure in order to cement himself in the hip-hop and rap industry. For a rapper to be successful and legitimate he has to not only earn respect for his name, but authenticity for his skill. Eminem was able to be a respected white rapper despite the backlash from Vanilla Ice and other previous white rappers before him because of his different approach to his whiteness. Instead of pretending to be black, faking a rags-to-riches story, and asking people to overlook his skin color, Eminem embraced who he was and the fact that he was white trying to rap in a black dominated industry. He was able to earn authenticity with the help of fellow black rapper Dr. Dre and by accepting where he came from, who he is as a person, and overcoming the hurdles his skin color brought on while trying to make it as a rapper. He learned to embrace whiteness and use the insults thrown at him to his advantage which often left many of his rival rappers in the dust. Eminem's road to success is a great story for people everywhere who have a dream and are told they will never achieve it. And that no matter what people say to bring you down, that you can overcome the hate and criticism and come out on top. Because even now years later, people are still hating on the underdog white rapper from Detroit, but you know what he says back to them? "Kiss my white ass".

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