

# **We Love America, and We Hate Trump: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Eminem in Trump's America**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Gender and Social Justice Studies

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University of Alberta

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## Abstract

In early October 2017, Marshall Mathers, better known by his stage name Eminem, received enormous attention for his freestyle rap music video *The Storm*, which premiered at the BET Music Awards. *The Storm*, both lyrically and visually, is an attack on current US President Donald Trump, and functions as Eminem's public call-out for Trump's racism, xenophobia and general 'un-American-ness.' Themes of race, class, masculinity, nostalgia and nationalism are conveyed through an entirely young and black male chorus, vintage cars and 90s hip hop fashion. During the rap, Mathers explicitly marks himself a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and ally (even saviour) of Black American men, undermines the President's authority through attacks on his masculinity, expresses his support for the American military, industry and working-class, and presents himself as both an artistic and political authority on these issues. Most significantly, he diametrically opposes himself and Trump, framing himself as a self-made, politically-aware, post-race member of the working class against Trump as a silver-spoon racist with no 'real' experiences of hardship required for the development of a true 'American man.'

*The Storm* utilizes concepts of race, class, masculinity and Americanness to portray particular ideas to its audience about the current political climate in America. This thesis conducts a Cultural Studies analysis of Eminem's 'Trump-era' (2016-2020) music as a way of exploring the meanings of these socially constructed concepts following the election of Trump. Specifically, I examine the ways in which Eminem engages with social justice causes, including Black Lives Matter, and the ways in which social concepts are embedded with meaning in these discussions.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Samantha Wesch. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends Kyler Chittick and Aurelia Pantelone for their support and contributions to this work. They were always available to chat and bounce ideas off of and I am very grateful for our conversations and their insights.

I would also like to thank my committee members Dr Michael Litwack, Dr Felice Lifshitz and Dr Susanne Luhmann for their fantastic advice, feedback and questions.

I would also like to thank my fiancé Jared Burton, for his support, patience and love throughout the process of writing this thesis.

Most of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Michelle Meagher for her compassionate understanding and thoughtful advice throughout the entirety of this project. Dr Meagher consistently challenged me and pushed me as an academic and as a person during this process. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without her and am very grateful for all her help and support.

# **We Love America and We Hate Trump: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Eminem in Trump's America**

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## Introduction

In December 2017, rapper Nicki Minaj posted to Instagram a screen shot of the US Top Hip-Hop/Rap song list with the caption “It’s a great time to be a white rapper in America, huh?” The list is primarily white male rappers, including G-Eazy, Machine Gun Kelly (also known as MGK), Macklemore, NF, and Post Malone. In fact, only two of the ten songs included on the list were by Black artists (rap groups Migos and N.E.R.D, both comprised of a trio of Black men, secured spots six and eight, respectively). None of the songs on the list are owned by women artists, though singers Halsey and Rihanna, as well as rappers Cardi B and Minaj herself (all Black women) were featured on listed tracks. The number one spot was claimed by the most famous (and infamous) white rapper of them all, Eminem.

Minaj’s comment speaks to the renewed interest in the commercial dominance of white male artists in mainstream hip-hop — reinvigorating concerns about the appropriation of a historically Black art form by white artists, producers and record label owners.<sup>1</sup> Debates about ‘white rappers’ were fairly popular in mainstream journalism between the late 1990s and early 2000s, during which most popular rap artists were Black and many artists, including Tupac Shakur, Ice Cube and Lauryn Hill (to name just a few), discussed their and their communities’ experiences of systemic poverty and discrimination and anti-Black racism through their music and lyrics.<sup>2</sup> Following the commercial explosion of Eminem in the late 1990s, suddenly, one of

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, Nicole. “Modern Blackface: the Cultural Appropriation of Rap” *theodesseyonline.com* September 2015. URL: <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/satire-as-survival> and Williams, Aaron. “It’s Time to Finally Start Accepting White Rapper’s as a Legitimate Part of Hip-Hop” *uproxx.com* September 2017. URL: <https://uproxx.com/music/white-rappers-hip-hop-appropriation-appreciation-outsiders/>

<sup>2</sup> See: Allen, Harry. “The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing” *The Source*, February 2003. Boyd, Herb. “Rap Under Attack” *TheBlackWorldToday.com* February 2003. Bryan-Poulson, Scott. “Fear of a White Rapper” *The Source*. June 1999. Christgau, Robert. “White American: Eminem Makes His Rock Move” *The Village Voice* June 2002. Farley, John Christopher “A Whiter Shade of Pale” *Time*, May 2000. URL:

the most prominent voices in American hip hop music was a white guy from Detroit. And, unlike white rappers like the Beastie Boys, Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch, and Vanilla Ice, whose albums primarily consisted of party music and stories of their wacky hijinks, Eminem utilized rap to explore his experiences of family violence, intergenerational addiction and poverty in Detroit. With these themes, Eminem demanded to be taken seriously by the hip hop community and recognized as a ‘real’ rapper.

Minaj’s tweet reveals how much the ‘rap game’ has changed since the 1990s and early 2000s — both rap music’s popularity with white middle-class audiences and the identities of the artists who are at the top of the charts. Hip-hop, a genre of music created by Black Americans as a form of political and artistic expression, has transformed from a genre led primarily by Black artists and used to discuss and explore Black experience and highlight white supremacy in America to one which is commercially dominated by white men. Despite the increase of racial and ethnic diversity in popular media and campaigns aimed at bringing awareness to the lack of racial diversity in popular culture (such as #OscarsSoWhite and #HollywoodSoWhite), more and more white hip hop and rap artists have continue to gain commercial popularity while Black artists are crowded off top charts and mainstream radio with little scrutiny. Minaj herself was attacked for her Instagram post pointing out the dominance of white men on the Hip Hop charts by fans, and ultimately deleted the post.

The single referred to in Minaj’s Instagram post was “River” from Eminem’s heavily political and anti-Donald Trump *Revival* album (2017). Still topping the charts nearly two decades after his breakout album the *Slim Shady LP* (1999), the two albums feature radically

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<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,997049,00.html> Steele, Shelby “The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual” *Harper’s Magazine* November 2002. URL: <https://harpers.org/archive/2002/11/the-age-of-white-guilt/>

different ethos. The *Slim Shady LP* contains violent, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics and features on its cover a woman's (presumably dead) body sticking out of the trunk of a car. The album is contradictory; though much of its content is undeniably offensive and damaging, it is also concerned with domestic violence, addiction, the lasting effects of childhood and intergenerational trauma, and the cyclical nature of poverty. *Revival*, on the other hand, is concerned primarily with the current socio-political state of America under Trump and the rapper's relationship to an Alt-Right America. The rapper considers police brutality towards young Black men, reflects on his Christian faith and his role as a father to three young women, and his unfailing patriotism in the face of disappointment at the racism the election of Trump represents. Eminem's career kicked off when rap music was just beginning to gain traction with white audiences (citing the New York-Jewish Beastie Boys as his inspiration<sup>3</sup>), and was likely a contributing factor to increasing rap's number of white listeners;<sup>4</sup> now, rap and hip hop are the most popular genre of music in America with many white rappers as the top-selling artists (Post Malone, a white rapper from Texas, is the most streamed artist ever on Spotify with 6.5 billion global streams in 2019 alone).<sup>5</sup> And now, we have a new, kinder, politically progressive, 'woke' Eminem.

As cultural understandings of whiteness and masculinity have evolved with the changing socio-political climate, Eminem's politics and public persona have adapted and altered to fit into this new world. My focus is on Eminem's cultural meaning and significance from 2016 to 2020,

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<sup>3</sup>Variety Staff. "Eminem's 'Kamikaze' Cover Pays Homage to Beastie Boys Classic 'Licensed to Ill'" *Variety Magazine*. August 2018. URL: <https://variety.com/2018/music/news/eminem-kamikaze-cover-beastie-boys-licensed-to-ill-1202923360/>

<sup>4</sup>Kitwana, Bakari. *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes and the New Reality of Race in America*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005. PP. 67.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90438125/post-malone-is-spotifys-most-streamed-artist-of-the-year-but-the-decade-belongs-to-drake>



or, what I will refer to as the ‘Trump-era.’ This is not to say that I will ignore his previous music and public controversies — in fact, I will deeply consider the ways in which Eminem’s music and public persona have adapted and been re-framed along with the socio-political changes around the ways in which race, class and masculinity are understood in the United States. By considering the trajectory of Eminem’s twenty-year career, I will argue that Eminem’s Trump-era music and performances, specifically the ways in which he aligns himself with Black Lives Matter and portrays Trump supporters as members of the white working poor, can tell us about the ways hegemonic masculinity has transformed in response to the election of Donald Trump and to the emergence of the Alt-Right, the Black Lives Matter movement, among other socially, culturally and politically significant events of the past five years. Against a highly polarized backdrop of challenges to white and male power and oppression and a reconfiguration of white masculinities, Eminem, once a symbol of white male rage,<sup>6</sup> has redefined himself as socially and politically progressive, distinct and antithetical to Trump and white-led Alt-Right movements.

So, what exactly is ‘Trump’s America’? After all, the systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and the neoliberal logics of late-capitalism that allowed Donald Trump’s rhetoric to connect with and mobilize millions of Americans to vote for him were not created by the businessman-turned-politician. The term ‘Trump’s America’ came into the popular lexicon sometime following the 2016 election, and functions as a sort of ‘floating signifier’ for the socio-political reality of the United States the election of Trump symbolizes. As Trump’s campaign slogan (and catchphrase) ‘Make America Great Again’ seems to indicate, Trump’s America means something different than America pre-Trump. Former Speaker of the House Newt

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<sup>6</sup> Petridis, Alexis. “The Woke Slim Shady — Understanding Eminem in the age of Trump” *The Guardian*. December 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/dec/07/the-woke-slim-shady-understanding-eminem-in-the-age-of-trump>

Gingrich's celebratory book on the president is even titled *Trump's America*, and focuses on what he sees as the President's unique vision for the country. Like most major world events, the world was both the same and different following Trump's election. Clearly, the underlying mechanisms of late capitalist logics which made the President's racist, xenophobic and sexist language appeal to and incite Trump supporters shaped America long before his election, and yet, it still felt as though we woke up in a different world the morning after he was elected.

This is not to say that the material conditions of America have not changed since Trump was elected; racial profiling, directed towards both Black folks and Arab immigrants, has increased, undocumented immigrants have been deported and interred in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) camps, funding for social programs has been slashed and women's reproductive rights threatened (to name just a small number of horrific condition changes).<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, I will not use 'Trump's America' to refer to Trump's, or his colleagues and supporter's vision of America. I will use 'Trump's America' to refer to the particular sociopolitical moment which began with Trump's election and which will continue to the end of his presidency. 'Trump's America' is fractured and contradictory. On one hand, the populist and nativist rhetoric, which valorizes a mythicized America of the past (that Trump claims he will resurrect) in which racism and sexism do not exist,<sup>8</sup> in which immigrants are 'stealing' American's jobs and 'fake news' dominates the internet. On the other hand, language and ideas associated with Intersectionality and Feminism have entered into popular culture and the mainstream lexicon; movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and #NotMyPresident, as

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<sup>7</sup> Diamond, Jeremy. "Donald Trump's America" *CNN* November 2016. URL: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/donald-trumps-america/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> The president has said that 'no one' respects women or is less racist than he is; we can assume, by extension that Trump's America also denies the realities of male dominance and white supremacy. See: Black, Eric. "Donald Trump's Breathtaking Self-Admiration" *MINN Post* June 2016. URL: <https://www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2016/06/donald-trump-s-breathtaking-self-admiration/>

well as politicians including congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib and democratic candidate Bernie Sanders have put the complexities of systemic racism and sexism into mainstream discussion. Although there is no single definition of ‘Trump’s America’ or the ‘Trump-era’, we can gain a greater understanding of it through some of its elements. For example, the emergence of the Alt-Right and its accompanying increase in nativism and xenophobia, and the ‘post-truth’ denial of the realities of poverty, climate change, and corruption, which all operate alongside an increasingly popular understanding of systemic oppression, white privilege with masculine domination, and popular outcries accomplished through online campaigns. When I refer to the ‘Trump-era’ in my thesis, I am referring to the collective political polarization, and the two convergent political movements happening in tandem. The rise of the Alt-Right and the popularization of Intersectionality and increased interest in social justice causes do not exist in a vacuum, but, rather, are developing along side one another, affecting, responding and interacting with one another.

Eminem, the hip hop artist who was the greatest-selling music artist of the 2000s and the best-selling rapper of all time, has outspokenly attacked Donald Trump and his supporters. Though Eminem has included political content in his music since Bill Clinton was in office, the release of the single “Campaign Speech” in 2016 (just a few months prior to the election of Donald Trump) marked a distinctive shift in the rapper’s public political involvement and identity as a political voice. In fact, with the exception of the rapper’s criticisms of George W. Bush, opposition to the war in Iraq<sup>9</sup>, and involvement in the debate regarding profanity in music

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<sup>9</sup> Songs “Square Dance” from *The Eminem Show* (2002) and “Mosh” from *Encore* (2004) are explicitly critical of former President Bush. In fact, one line from “We As Americans”, also from *Encore*, was interpreted as a possible threat to the President, and the rapper was investigated by Secret Service. The specific line was later revised. See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/Music/12/05/eminem.lyrics/>

and its connection to violence led by Tipper Gore and Lynne Cheney following the Columbine Massacre, Eminem has previously not been viewed as a political player by the mainstream media nor has he engaged with anti-racist or other socially progressive causes.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the rapper continues to avoid complex conversations about anti-Black racism, misogyny, and homophobia in his music<sup>11</sup> and neglected to engage with, recognize, or consider the role of white privilege in his own success.<sup>12</sup> So, what has changed? How does Eminem fit into Trump's America? Why is Eminem, whose music is rife with misogynist, homophobic and transphobic lyrics and who has routinely denied the existence of white privilege, now invested in topics of social justice? Why is Eminem, who balked at and dismissed feminisms and social rights activism in the past,<sup>13</sup> speaking out against the racism, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia displayed by the Alt-Right?

The answer I give is the major alterations in Eminem's public persona and masculine identity, displayed by his interest in social justice and socially 'Left wing' causes, are in response to the inclusion of 'wokeness' in today's masculinity. Masculinity is dynamic and flexible; as the socio-political framework changes, so do cultural ideals of manhood. My interest in examining the Trump-era work of Eminem is not to determine the rapper's politics but, rather, explore what his work can tell us about the ways in which American ideals of whiteness, class and masculinity function in the Trump era and the ways in which they interact with concepts of 'Blackness,' 'meritocracy' and 'Americanness.' Popular culture influences and is influenced by

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<sup>10</sup> Petridis, Alexis. "The Woke Slim Shady — Understanding Eminem in the Age of Trump" *The Guardian*. December 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/dec/07/the-woke-slim-shady-understanding-eminem-in-the-age-of-trump>

<sup>11</sup> See: Kennedy, John R. "Eminem Addresses Accusations of Homophobia" *I Heart Radio*. December 2017. URL: <https://www.iheartradio.ca/news/eminem-addresses-accusations-of-homophobia-1.3513141>

<sup>12</sup> See: "White America" *The Eminem Show* (2002) "Leaving Heaven" *Music to be Murdered to* (2020)

<sup>13</sup> "The Real Slim Shady" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000)

collective cultural values and attitudes; artifacts of popular culture can reveal collective cultural understandings of what it means to be, for instance, a man, white, and working class, in the moment in time it was produced. My interest is not to decipher the intention or artistic vision of Eminem or his producers when they created his Trump-era work. Instead, I am interested in what the music and performances Eminem produced in between 2016 and 2020 reveals about cultural concepts of masculinity, whiteness, and class in the Trump era. Hamilton Carroll explains:

Popular cultural artifacts are often consumed and dismissed without a full understanding of precisely what they are portraying and how. It is not unsought to dismiss popular culture as lowbrow, irrelevant, or unworthy of consideration. Popular culture is a complex and variegated terrain on which the concerns of society at large can often be mapped.<sup>14</sup>

Like Carroll, I argue examining artefacts of popular culture can provide us with access to society's current values and identities; looking to how Eminem portrays himself, his own narrative and the ways in which he explicitly and intentionally distinguishes himself from President Trump and his supporters tells a story about masculinity, whiteness, and class in the American cultural consciousness today. I argue that Eminem's work functions to conceal the systemic realities of racism and classism in contemporary America while avoiding alignment with Trump and the Alt-Right through providing individual, not systemic, interpretations and solutions to the ongoing racism and classism in America. Eminem's music functions to effectively deny the existence of white supremacy and masculine domination, and thus protect white male political and cultural dominance, while also participating in the current resurgence of social justice movements.

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<sup>14</sup> Carroll, Hamilton. *Affirmative Reactions: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Duke University Press, 2011. PP. 18.

This thesis is written in three chapters. The first chapter of this thesis, title “The Myth of the Rap God: Eminem as a Cultural Artefact” provides a thick description of the rapper’s anti-Trump music video *The Storm* (2017) to explore how the artist defines white masculine hegemony (and, by extension, ‘Americanness’) in opposition to the masculinity of President Trump. The thick description of the music video provides a look into how Eminem represents himself as a personification of white masculinity and ‘Americanness,’ weaponizing culturally entrenched understandings of masculinity and American meritocracy to attack Trump’s manhood and Americanness, rather than his politics or his election as the result of systemic oppression and exploitation of minorities in American.

Chapter one explains what it means to analyze Eminem as a ‘cultural artefact,’ rather than as an artist. Many academics, including Marcia Alesan Dawkins, Anna Hickey-Moody and Scott F. Parker have provided fascinating accounts of the artistic meaning in Eminem’s work. Though this work gives a fruitful discussion on Eminem’s artistic project, the current academic literature on Eminem often fails to consider what examining his work can tell us about the cultural meaning of masculinity, race, and class in this current moment. By taking Eminem as a ‘cultural artefact’ and looking at the ways in which concepts of ‘whiteness,’ ‘Americanness,’ and ‘manhood’ are deployed and arranged to tell a story about social identities, power, and privilege in contemporary America, as opposed to asking what the artist *himself* is saying, we can access one way in which white masculinity is rearranging and recapitulating itself in response to new cultural pressures and social changes.

The second chapter, “White Like Me: Eminem’s Post Race Habitus” examines the way in which the rapper constructs whiteness in relation to the histories of Black oppression which have informed and been explored in much of the history of rap and hip hop music. In our current

cultural moment, when the Black Lives Matter movement and Feminisms have brought considerations of white supremacy and Black oppression and exploitation to the White American cultural consciousness, Eminem utilizes his white working class childhood to affirm the reality of anti-Black racism (and, therefore, be ‘woke’) without admitting to the existence of white privilege. By constructing instances of violence in his childhood as ‘racist,’ the rapper presents a narrative of race relations in America to his audience which I refer to as ‘Post-Race Racism.’

The third and final chapter, “We As Americans: Meritocracy and All-American White Trash” I provide an analysis of the new ‘woke’ Eminem as transformed by changes in white American hegemonic masculinity. With a more complex understanding of how the concepts of race, masculinity, class and Americanness are developed by the rapper, we have a deeper understanding of how he is constructing a new, white masculinity antithetical to the masculinity of Donald Trump. For Eminem’s new ‘woke’, transcended white masculinity, Trump is the ‘condition of possibility’ — Eminem reconfigures white masculinity and Americanness against the racism, inheritance of wealth and disrespect for the American military he creates an association with with Trump. While Eminem himself acts as a stand-in for Americanness (and, by extension, embodies white, hegemonic masculinity), Trump acts as a stand-in for the ‘bad’ white working poor, who are the cause and culprits of racism and homophobia in America (also see the unreleased “What If I Was Gay?” leaked in late 2019). In his final verse, “We love America, but we hate Trump” he speaks on behalf of Americans and eases their fears. The rapper distinguishes his (white, hegemonic) masculinity from that of Trump’s — as Eminem is not like Trump, Trump is not like America.

Though he is the central focus of my research, this thesis is more about engaging with Eminem to gain access and understanding of white American hegemonic masculinity and how it

has changed to continue to protect and perpetuate male privilege and white supremacy in the face of rapid social change and the increasing mainstreaming of Intersectionality and Feminisms.

Studying how Eminem reconstructs his narrative of success in a culturally and historically Black art form, his previous acts of misogyny and violence against women, and his public political role can provide a view into how cultural understandings of masculinity have been impacted by the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the Alt-Right.



# Chapter 1: The Myth of the White Rap God: Eminem as a Cultural Artefact

## Ch. 1.1: America's Great White G.O.A.T: A Close Reading of *The Storm*

On October 10, 2017, nearly a year after controversial businessman Donald Trump won the US presidential election, rapper Marshall Mathers, known by his stage name Eminem, released the Anti-Trump freestyle cypher *The Storm* during the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Hip Hop Music Awards.<sup>15</sup>

*The Storm* begins with a black screen with three lines of white text: “Eminem — 10.06.17 — DETROIT, MI”. The speaker, time and place of the event we are about to witness have been recorded, informing the viewer that this event is important, maybe even historic. Anyone familiar with the artist will also know we're on his turf. Detroit is the artist's home and continues to be a major theme in his music and public persona. Detroit's history of racial tension and its transformation from the home of American automotive factories to one of the poorest cities in America are central to the rapper's music and politics, and plays a fundamental role in the rapper's biography. His music videos and album cover visuals feature industrial architecture, vacant and condemned homes, trailer parks, and the infamous 8 Mile Road, which physically and symbolically divides Detroit's middle-class white and impoverished black communities.<sup>16</sup>

The camera pans down from a concrete ceiling to a wide shot of a mostly empty car parkade. Eminem, a medium-build white man of about middle age (though somehow the casual clothes and scruff make him look ageless), is standing on the outer most edge of a group of

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<sup>15</sup> The music video may be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LunHybOKIjU>

<sup>16</sup> Detroit Historical Society staff. “Eight Mile Road” *Encyclopedia of Detroit*. URL: <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/eight-mile-road>

young black men. The group is flanked by three vintage 1990s black cars, creating nostalgia for Eminem's early work and recalling when he was the biggest music star in the world.

Eminem walks forward, saying "this is the calm before the storm right here." The only sound are his Jordans (the coveted and luxurious sneaker brand from basketball star Michael Jordan) stepping across the car park and towards the camera. Eminem is sporting a new look; though he's still wearing a baggy hoodie and sweatpants combo and gold chain (2000s-hip hop masculinity essentials), a few key aspects of his appearance have changed. He's grown out some scruff (a change from his usual clean-shave face which itself garnered a surprising amount of public attention<sup>17</sup>) and his infamous bleached hair is cut short and left its natural mousey-brown. He's dressed entirely in black, save for the chunky gold chain hung across his neck and clean grey-and-white Jordans. His face is semi-hidden by a black hood pulled over his black baseball cap. He looks mature yet evokes nostalgia; his 90's throwback outfit and more grownup grooming present him as an Original Gangsta (O.G. — a slang term in hip-hop circles to refer to great 'old school' rap artists from the 1980s and 1990s), a seasoned authority and mentor come to guide us in this time of political unrest and uncertainty.

The artist continues to walk forward, until he is approximately twenty feet in front of the line of young black men, all also dressed in black except for one man on the far right in light jeans and a denim jacket. The colour of his and the young men's clothes also signal the seriousness and perhaps formality of their meeting, suggesting even mourning. Eminem stops in the middle of the camera shot, the largest and central figure on screen, and folds his arms across

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<sup>17</sup> Multiple articles have weighted in on Eminem's new facial hair. See: Adams, Char. "Eminem has a Beard Now and the Internet is Freaking Out" *people.com* June 2017. URL: <https://people.com/style/eminem-beard-internet-freaking-out/> and TMZ staff writers. "Slim Shady Quit Shaving" *tmz.com* June 2017. URL: <https://www.tMZ.com/2017/06/23/eminem-beard-facial-hair-dr-dre-kendrick-lamar/>

his chest. He moves one of his hands to underneath his chin, making a mocking pantomime of Rodin's *The Thinker*, with his eyes still masked from the shadow of his cap. He asks: "How do I start this off?", suggesting a spontaneity to the rhymes, as if he was coming up with the words of the cypher as he says them. This gesture presents the video as 'authentic,' or, without overproduced planning and undoctored by editing in post-production. The audience is being made privy to a 'backstage' moment, a personal message from the rapper uncorrupted by overproduction and influences from his music label or producers. This cypher is 'off-the-cuff' and 'real' and, most importantly, its *Eminem's* voice, unedited, not a producer's or music studio's (or, for that matter, corporation or politician).

He begins to rap a cappella and, apparently, 'from the heart,' while the young men watch intently and silently. Eminem needs no beat to help him time his rhyme; nothing is present to distract the listener from the artist's message. This message is coming from Eminem alone, and he freestyles this rap (and leads these young men) right before our eyes:

That's an awfully hot coffee pot/should I drop it on Donald Trump?/Probably not/But  
that's all I got until I come up with a solid plot-

The artist looks to his left and walks backwards, inhaling deeply. The row of young men behind him shift slightly, as if shuddering. The young men looked admirably, and even intimidated, at Eminem's power and authority. They listen intently to what their leader says, they are looking to him in this time of political uncertainty and violence directed towards other young black men like themselves. Eminem begins to rap again, weaving his hands in front of him slowly and fluidly to the beat he raps to:

Got a plan and now I'm going to hatch it/Like an damn Apache with a tomahawk  
[Hollywood tomahawk wielding motions]/Imma walk inside a Mosque on Ramadan/And  
say a prayer [places his hands together in prayer and looks up] that every time Melania  
talks [turns his back for a moment and walks towards the row of men, then turns back  
again]/She gets a mou- Ahh! [he looks away] Imma stop.

During this rhyme, waves a fist above his head, pantomiming the image of a Native American warrior from an old Western film. He invokes imagery of the Old West, placing himself in the role of the ‘noble savage,’ defending a previous way of life from corruption. This puts Eminem within a long history of war and the United States (and, perhaps, the vulnerable against the powerful); invoking the historical battle between colonizers and the Native Americans. In the next line, he throws down a fist, then alters it a finger pointing at the camera. The artist directly implicates the audience; just as he’s speaking to and leading the young men behind him, he is doing the same for us — he is holding us accountable. When tempted to insult the First Lady, the artist exercises restraint, and contrasting himself with Trump’s motor-mouthed misogyny and seeming inability to control his impulses. This show of restraint reminds the audience that, though he has committed acts of domestic violence and produced music steeped in misogynist imagery, he is not like Trump (or, has at least changed). Eminem can control himself, and knows where the ‘line’ regarding misogynist language exists; Trump does not.

The camera zooms into the face of the young black man wearing the jean jacket. He watches the artist intensely and unblinkingly. He seems lost and scared, like the viewer, with the election of Trump and is paralyzed by fear for the political future of the United States. The young man is waiting for Eminem to tell him, the other young men in the group, what to do and how to feel:

But we better give Obama props/‘Cause what we got in office now’s a kamikaze/That’ll probably cause a nuclear holocaust/And while the drama pops/And he waits for shit to quiet down/he’ll just gas his plane up and fly around ’til the bombing stops!

Eminem raises his hand up and flings it down angrily. Again, the rapper distinguishes himself from Trump; he claims the president will use and then abandon Americans. This verse recalls the rapper’s highly controversial criticisms in the late 2000s of President Bush and the War in

Iraq, highlighting both Presidents' removal from the reality of war and wealthy upbringings to destabilize their authenticity and masculinity.<sup>18</sup>

The rapper paces and the camera zooms in closer, cutting off just above his stomach. He looks into the camera, looking up to make eye contact with the viewer for the first time. He looks intensely at the viewer, his blue eyes standing out clearly. Eminem's blue eyes have played a significant role in his previous work exploring his identity as a white man in a black art form<sup>19</sup>. In his music and public persona, his blue eyes operate as a symbol of his whiteness and the racial-otherness that defines him as a 'white rapper.'<sup>20</sup> Now, these blue eyes are revealed from underneath the shadow of his baseball cap to call the viewer to action and engage them in his call against Trump. He begins to rap again, not looking away from the viewer:

Intensities heightened, tensions are risin'/Trump, when it comes to giving a shit, you're stingy as I am/Except when it comes to having the balls to go against me, you hide em' [the camera zooms into Eminem's face again and his face is uncovered by shadow]/'Cause you don't got the nuts like an empty asylum.

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<sup>18</sup> Knowledge of Eminem's previous War on Terror criticism and the role of militarized language and imagery in his work is essential for understanding "The Storm." Beginning around approximately 2001, Eminem became highly publicly critical of the War on Terror, often attacking then-President George W. Bush Jr. and Vice President Dick Cheney directly. In previous criticisms of the Bush Administration he emphasized his lived knowledge of white poverty to give him authority in military issues; this music conflates white working class experience with the American military, simultaneously valorizing both. In many of his songs Eminem voices a kind of authority on the issues of militarism of the white working class, including "We As Americans" (2004), "Mosh" (2004) and "Square Dance" (2002). In other works, including "Mocking Bird" (2002), "Toy Soldiers" (2004) and "Guts Over Fear" (2014). Eminem uses the American military and militarized language as similes or metaphors for white working class experience.

It is further important to note Trump is not the first President who has received pointed and even violent criticism from Eminem. "We as Americans" some of the lyrics of "We As Americans" were so controversial they were required to be changed legally following perceived threats to the president. See: CNN Writing Staff. "Secret Service checks Eminem's 'Dead President' Lyric" *cnn.com* December 2003. URL: <http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/Music/12/05/eminem.lyrics/index.html> and Patel, Josh. "Did Eminem Threaten the President? The Secret Service is Looking Into It" *mtv.com* December 2003. URL: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1480985/did-eminem-threaten-the-president-the-secret-service-is-looking-into-it/>

<sup>19</sup> Even Eminem's *Spin* magazine cover story article, published at the height of his early 2000s fame, was titled "Behind Blue Eyes". See: Light, Alan. "Behind Blue Eyes" *Spin*. December 2002. URL: <https://www.spin.com/featured/behind-blue-eyes-spins-2002-eminem-cover-story/>

<sup>20</sup> See: "White America" *The Eminem Show*. (2002), "Yellow Brick Road" *Encore* (2004)

Eminem paces away, his face again hidden by his cap. He is more energetic now, displaying a controlled anger, his arms and hands moving in larger and rapid motions to the beat of his rhymes:

Racism's the only thing he's fantastic for/'Cause that's how he gets his fucking rocks off and he's fucking orange/Yeah, sick tan/ That's why he wants us disband/ because he cannot withstand/ the fact we're not afraid of Trump/ Fuck walking on eggshells/ I came to stomp!/That's why he keeps screaming/ "Drain the swamp!" / Because he's in quicksand

Still maintaining eye contact, Eminem backs away from the camera. He expresses his disgust with Trump, and his disappointment and frustration with the viewer. He turns his back to the camera, and the camera cuts again to a low angled shot at four of the young black men. They looked troubled and contemplative, one looking down, but their focus remains intense on Eminem and his message. One man has his hand on his chin, deeply considering what the rapper is saying without looking away from him. The shot returns to Eminem, centre of the camera again and facing the audience with his blue eyes visible:

It's like we take a step forwards then backwards/ But this is his form of distraction/ Plus he gets an enormous reaction when he attacks the NFL/ so we focus on that, then/ Instead of talking Puerto Rico or gun reform for Nevada/ All these horrible tragedies and he's bored and would rather/ Cause a Twitter storm with the Packers!

The rapper angrily turns and punches the air. After a deep breath, he raps again:

Then says he wants to lower our taxes/Then who's gonna pay for his extravagant trips/Back and forth with his fam to his golf resorts and his mansions?/ From his endorsement of Bannon/ Support for the Klansmen/ Tiki torches in hand for the soldier that's black/ and comes home from Iraq

Trump is neither a war hero nor created his own wealth — unlike Eminem, Trump inherited most of his wealth, fame and status. These things were given to Trump based on his pedigree, and not rightfully earned as supported by the meritocratic values which underlie contemporary American neoliberalism. Here, Trump is the antithesis of the meritocracy and, therefore,

American-ness. Not only can he not really be *American*, his lack of hard work or real contribution threaten the internal logic of neoliberalism. Unlike Trump, Eminem is loyal to America, the troops and Detroit — Eminem is one of the people, grew up in a trailer park and clawed his way to stardom. Therefore, Eminem *understands* America. Eminem, not Trump, is the worthy wealthy and, therefore, leader.

Fork and dagger in this racist 94-year-old grandpa/ Who keeps ignoring our past historical/deplorable factors/ Now if you're a black athlete you're a spoiled brat for/ Trying to use your platform or your stature/To try to give those a voice who don't have one

Holding eye contact with the viewer, he raps faster and faster every verse.

He says, 'You're spittin' in the face of vets who fought for us, you bastards!'/Unless you're a POW who's tortured and battered/'Cause to him you're zeroes/'Cause he don't like his war hero captured [he stops rapping and sarcastically remarks] That's not disrespecting the military

Invoking Trump's disparaging public remarks regarding Senator John McCain,<sup>21</sup> a previous Republican party presidential nominee and Vietnam war veteran, Eminem again undercuts Trump's masculinity by calling him a 'spoiled brat' and contrasting Trump's ignorance of American history with McCain's military past. Comparisons between Trump and McCain, most famously the *Washington Post* article which contrasted the two men's lives in the late 1960's to mid-1970s, during which time McCain was hostage in a POW camp and Trump, an accused draft dodger, was galavanting around Hollywood.<sup>22</sup> These comparison articles

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<sup>21</sup> Trump's multiple verbal attacks on McCain span months. See: Rappeport, Alan and Jonathan Martin. "Donald Trump Says John McCain is No War Hero, Setting off Another Storm" *The New York Times* July 18, 2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/us/politics/trump-belittles-mccains-war-record.html> and Rhodan, Maya. "Here's a Brief History of Donald Trump's Feud with John McCain" *Time Magazine*. August 27, 2018. URL: <https://time.com/4993304/john-mccain-donald-trump-feud-remarks/>

<sup>22</sup> Miller, Michael E. and Fred Barbash. "What Donald Trump was up to while John McCain was a Prisoner of War" *The Washington Post*. July 20, 2015. URL:

between McCain and Trump work to ‘expose’ Trump as emasculate, cowardly and undeserving of the position in life he inherited, while simultaneously galvanizing a more traditional form of militarized white masculinity through its apparent embodiment of neoliberal ideals of work ethic and meritocracy.<sup>23</sup> Eminem draws a line between men like Trump, cowardly and lazy, and real *American* men like McCain and himself, soldiers who are loyal to their country (or city), have suffered, worked hard and, therefore, are deserving of admiration. The rapper continues:

Fuck that, this is for Colin, ball up a fist!/ And keep that shit balled like Donald the bitch!/[stops rapping, speaking in a mocking southern American accent] ‘He’s gonna get rid of all immigrants!’/‘He’s gonna build that thing up taller than this!’ [jumps into the air]/[returns to rapping] Well, if he does build it, I hope it’s rock solid with bricks/‘Cause like him in politics/I’m using all of his tricks/‘Cause I’m throwing that piece of shit against the wall/until it sticks!

Here, Em addresses Trump’s supporters. Drawing on the stereotype of the uneducated southern conservative ready to hop on Trump’s anti-immigration bandwagon (there is no evidence that low-income or less educated demographics were more likely to vote for Trump as compared to middle-class voters<sup>24</sup>), Eminem frames Trump supporters as unintelligent and failing to distinguish between *real* Americans (like McCain and Em) and the anti-meritocratic symbol of Trump. Em starts the final verse.

And any fan of mine [gestures to himself]/Who’s a supporter of *his* [points off camera, presumably at Trump]/I’m drawing in the sand a line/You’re either for or against/And if you can’t decide who you like more/And you’re split/On who you should stand beside/I’ll do it for you with this:/Fuck you!/The rest of America, stand up!/We love our military/And we love our country/ But we fucking hate Trump!

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/20/what-donald-trump-was-up-to-while-john-mccain-was-suffering-as-a-prisoner-of-war/?noredirect=on>

<sup>23</sup> Also see: D’Antonio, Michael. “Trump vs. McCain: Cowardice vs. Courage” *The Boston Globe*. March 21, 2019. URL: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/03/21/trump-mccain-cowardice-courage/oc4Gw6B2MG4vOKIKpd3iFM/story.html> and Davidson Sorkin, Amy. “Trump and the Art of the War Hero” *The New Yorker* July 20, 2015. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/trump-and-the-art-of-the-war-hero>

<sup>24</sup> See: Silver, Nate. “The Mythology of Trump’s Working Class Support” *FiveThirtyEight.com* May 3, 2016 and Williams, Joan C. *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017. PP. 3-6.



The rap ends with the artist drawing a clear distinction between those who support him and those who support Trump. Eminem sets himself as diametrically opposed to Trump; no one can support Eminem and what he stands for, hard work, loyalty to his country and anti-racism, and Trump. Further, Eminem paints Trump as a threat to the core American values, presumably embodied by himself, McCain and the American military. Through framing Trump as antithetical to America's neoliberal meritocracy, which rewards hard workers like Eminem and brave heroes who risk their lives to protect American values like McCain, *The Storm* presents Trump, as a '94-year-old grandpa' with racist, poor and stupid supporters, cowardly draft-dodging and unearned wealth and status, as the antithesis of, and a credible threat to, *Americanness*.

*The Storm* is a complex conglomeration of symbols of authenticity and masculinity, race and nationalism, wealth and class and war and religion. Cultural meanings and values are woven throughout the video; luxury goods and brand logos comprise the background and characterize the chorus of young black men behind the rapper; Eminem sizes up Trump's 'manhood' against his own (literally and figuratively); and nostalgic imagery of an authentic 'Americanness' personified by brave soldiers, which is masculine, militaristic, hardworking and humble, is idealized. On the surface, *The Storm* presents Eminem as anti-Trump and pro-Black Lives Matter; as a 'progressive' who is bravely criticizing Trump and his supporters and standing up for both vulnerable Black Americans and the ideal of *Americanness*.

When we examine the video more closely, however, we can see *The Storm* communicates and reproduces neoliberal values of meritocracy, the relationship between militarism and masculinity and, importantly, works to create and distinguish two different groups; pro-American and anti-racist Eminem fans and anti-American and anti-Black Trump

voters. This distinction, though rightly critical of Trump, works to advocate for the pre-Trump status quo, rather than to question the power structures which allowed Trump to come to power in the first place. *The Storm* does not consider Trump to be a natural extension of American neoliberalism or the result of super capitalism's incompatibility with democracy. Rather, Trump, and his followers, are framed as the singular, isolated problem which threatens America through undermining the social structures of 'colour-blindness,' the meritocracy and the inherent good of the American military. In short, Eminem argues there is no problem with America, just with individuals who work outside and against the system of neoliberalism.

The form of analysis used above in illustrating *The Storm* video is a method referred to as 'thick description' by cultural theorists. Thick description is used to explore the cultural meaning of a particular object, form of media, or other material, cultural or social product. Put simply, thick description, as a methodology, is a detailed explanation of an artifact or event, aimed at offering a compelling interpretation of object of interest's cultural meaning and significance. That is, a thick description offers an account of an object of interest, using observations on subtle details, emotional, relationships of power and social webs in order to offer an interpretation of the object. Understanding that cultural meaning is layered, complex and dynamic is essential; a 'thick description' is not a 'factual' or 'complete' account of the artifact or event.<sup>25</sup> It, rather, is a recounting of an event, including layers of interpretation and commentary, which produce a particular 'fiction' of said event. This is to say, above is *my* reading of *The Storm*. It is one interpretation of the power structures, values and symbolism of the video which produces a narrative of the video; namely, that *The Storm* works to distinguish traditional neoliberalism from the Trump administration and its followers. My narrative suggests a rejection of systemic

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<sup>25</sup> Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture" *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973. PP. 355.

considerations for the election of Trump and, instead, has an idealized view of American masculinity and casts Trump as its antithesis.

Thick description is, perhaps, most clearly illustrated when compared to its opposite ‘thin description.’ A thin description is a superficial description of events, while a thick description attempts to capture the nuances in which cultural meanings is loaded. A thin description of Eminem’s BET Hip Hop Music Awards would state simply: ‘Eminem, dressed in black and joined by a group of men lays a diss track against President Trump. The rapper decries Trump’s racism and declares himself a supporter of Black Lives Matter. Eminem finishes by telling his audiences they must choose between supporting him and supporting President Trump.’ It explains what happens in the event, but it does not offer commentary or interpretation of the event, nor attempt to capture its cultural meaning or significance. It does not *culturally engage* with the object or event regarding the values, concepts or ideas which underlie its logic or which it communicates to its audience. It is not that a thin description is an incomplete or less-factual version of the story (recall that no thick description itself is ‘complete’ or ‘factual’), but the problem with thin descriptions as a mode of cultural analysis is that they fail to take into account the symbolic value and meaning these artifacts and events have embedded in them. The above reading of *The Storm* does not take into account the thick gold chain around Eminem’s neck (communicating classic hip hop masculinity, wealth, and power), the interplay of race between him and the wall of Black men behind him or the intricacies of his call to action against Trump to his white working class fans. The thin description of *The Storm* does not attempt to grapple with or interpret the meaning of the many images, words, gestures, and facial expression in *The Storm*, and, therefore, overlooks its real cultural significance: “The thing to ask is what their

import is...what...is getting said.”<sup>26</sup> That is to say, *The Storm* is about a lot more than ‘clever’ put-downs of Trump and Eminem expressing his support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Rather, as shown in the thick description above, through employing concepts such as whiteness, Blackness, authenticity, class, masculinity, and Americanness, the ways in which these categories exist and relate to one another becomes intelligible to the audience. Thick description will be one of the primary modes of analysis used throughout this thesis; I will use thick descriptions of works by Eminem and others to argue how they embody particular cultural values in the hope of providing an account of their cultural meaning.

The thick description of *The Storm* above reveals, through detailed description of lyrics and visuals, particular values that are communicated by the artist, intentionally or unintentionally. A thick description analysis of *The Storm* can reveal the cultural meaning of ‘whiteness,’ ‘class,’ and ‘American,’ and provide an account of the cultural values and messages contained in the video. This thesis is a cultural studies analysis of the later work of Eminem; in it, I use thick description and the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to closely analyze Eminem’s post-2015 music, and consider what it can tell us about the meaning of whiteness, class, masculinity and Americanness in the Trump era. This project asks, what is the cultural significance of the rapper Eminem in the Trump era? Specifically, in what ways does Eminem’s Trump-era work function to produce, reproduce and perpetuate (fantasies of) post-race neoliberal masculinities? What does his work tell us about how neoliberal masculinities have reconfigured themselves post-Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the current mainstreaming of ‘progressive politics’ and Pop Feminisms?

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. PP. 342.

To answer these questions, I will not explore the artistic or symbolic meaning in Eminem's lyrics, music videos and public persona or consider what the artist himself is attempting to convey in his works. In exploring Eminem's cultural meaning, I will, instead, discuss the ways in which different social categories, specifically whiteness, white masculinity and white working class masculinity function and are reproduced by his work. In the context of this project, I will address Eminem cultural phenomenon, embedded with meaning, communicating values and identities and is a kind of consumable object. I will avoid discussion of Eminem as a person with individual, feelings thoughts and opinions who can be labeled as 'racist' or 'progressive.' This thesis takes Eminem to be what cultural studies theorists refer to as a 'cultural artefact.' A cultural artefact is less a category of objects or events and more a method of understanding how material objects, people, media and so on are produced by cultural forces. Things in our social world can be imbedded with cultural meaning because "we have constructed for it a little world of meaning; and this bringing of the object *into* meaning is what constitutes it as a *cultural artefact*."<sup>27</sup> Simply, this thesis takes as its object 'Eminem', and applies a cultural studies approach to him to discern what values and meanings his work communicates.

## **Ch. 1.2: Kneel Before the White Trash God: Eminem's Mythology**

There is no shortage of hype around Eminem. His eleven albums were released to commercial and critical acclaim, he holds fifteen Grammy awards (and boasts 44 nominations) and even has an Academy Award for Best Original Song (2003). Eminem is the greatest selling rap and hip-hop artist of all time and was the bestselling artist from 2000 to 2009, selling over 13 million

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<sup>27</sup> du Gay, Paul et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. Sage Publications: London, 1997. PP. 10.

records. *Rolling Stone* magazine named the rapper as the “King of Hip-Hop” and #83 on their list of 100 Greatest Artists of All Time,<sup>28</sup> he was ranked #79 on VH1’s 100 Greatest Artists of All-Time list, and was named Best Rapper Alive by *Vibe* magazine.<sup>29</sup> It is not just popular critics and award shows that applaud the rapper; other rappers love him as well. While discussing the artist in the interview with *Music Choice*, rapper 50 Cent notes:

Hip-hop is Black music, without question. And, unfortunately for some, it’s tough to accept that you have a white artist that does it better than Black artists. It is what it is...You could get who you feel like is the best Black artist and stand him face to face in a room with Em and he’ll eat that [other rapper] alive...Any other competition we would put these artists in, he’ll obviously surpass them.<sup>30</sup>

In an interview, veteran rapper Snoop Dogg described Eminem as the “baddest white rapper that ever lived” and the “great white American hope.”<sup>31</sup> His mentor and member of N.W.A. Dr Dre described hearing Eminem rap as feeling that “you just know something special is happening.”<sup>32</sup> By many people both inside and outside the music industry, Eminem is considered one of the G.O.A.T.s (pronounced ‘goats’ - Greatest of All Time), a hip hop slang term for a select group of rappers considered ‘the best’ and leaders in the field.

Rap and hip-hop is no stranger to the mythologization of its icons. Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, two hip hop artists who were murdered at the height of their careers, have been risen to icon status, with their music and products featuring their likeness continuing to sell.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Rolling Stone Magazine Staff*. “100 Greatest Artists” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. December 2012. URL: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/100-greatest-artists-147446/>

<sup>29</sup> Reid, Shaheem. “Eminem is the Best Rapper Alive, According to *Vibe* Poll” *MTV*. October 2008, URL: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1596451/eminem-is-the-best-rapper-alive-according-to-vibe-poll/>

<sup>30</sup> Spoken by 50 Cent. Interview compilation created by *Hip Hop World*. Interview can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXSTLoHn5dE&t=324s>

<sup>31</sup> Spoken by Snoop Dogg Interview compilation created by *Hip Hop World*. Interview can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXSTLoHn5dE&t=324s>

<sup>32</sup> Spoken by Dr Dre. *The Defiant Ones*. dir. Allen Hughes. Los Angeles: HBO, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Images of these rappers are extremely popular and continue to be used in commercial products, most completely related to their creative work or life. Reality TV and social media celebrities Kylie and

Aligning oneself with an established, and mythologized rapper, is a common trope in hip hop culture, and one which Eminem himself has benefited from. Eminem's own relationships with rapper, producer and N.W.A. alum Dr Dre, in particular their first meeting, has been characterized as an intense 'meeting of the minds,' in which Dre immediately was drawn to Eminem's musical and lyrical genius. Several biopic films about famous rappers have been released in recent years, including *Get Rich or Dye Tryin'* (2005) based on the life, and starring, 50 Cent, *Notorious* (2009) about Biggie Smalls, *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) about rap group N.W.A., *All Eyez on Me* (2017) based on the life of Shakur with several more hip hop biopics scheduled in the coming years.<sup>34</sup>

Many of these films draw on what is referred to by Cultural Studies theorists as the 'Myth of the Artist' in their constructions of hip-hop history and its major players. 'The Myth of the Artist' is a Western cultural narrative which describes 'the artist' as an individual with special 'born' talents, which allows them to produce works of art, including paintings, sculptures, music or works of fiction, that are held to be examples of 'artistic genius.' This artistic genius is framed as a sort of unexplainable and even sublime quality of the artist, unique to them and the few 'gifted' others who also possess this trait. The artist is minimally influenced by education and social forces, and seems to be 'naturally' attracted to art and artistic expression. Further, what the artist produces, according to the Myth, is 'true art,' or, cultural and artistic objects of 'real' aesthetic value. In her essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" Linda Nochlin

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Kendall Jenner recently were criticized for using the likenesses of the rappers on their merchandise without permission. See: Chen, Joyce. "Notorious B.I.G.'s Mom Slams Kendall, Kylie Jenner's 'Disgusting' T-Shirt" *Rolling Stone Magazine*. June 2017. URL: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/notorious-b-i-g-s-mom-slams-kendall-kylie-jenners-disgusting-t-shirts-195635/>

<sup>34</sup> Tardio, Andres. "These Rap Biopics Might Follow 'Straight Outta Compton'" *MTV*. August 2015. URL: <http://www.mtv.com/news/2248278/straight-outta-compton-tupac-dogg-pound/>

illustrates the Myth of the Artist through the cultural narrative associated with the Roman sculpture and painter Michelangelo:

The great Michelangelo himself, according to his biographer and pupil, Vasari, did more drawing than studying as a child. So pronounced was his talent, reports Vasari, that when his master, Ghirlandaio, absented himself momentarily from his work in Santa Maria Novella, and the young art student took the opportunity to draw ‘the scaffolding, trestles, pots of paint, brushes and the apprentices at their tasks’ in this brief absence, he did it so skillfully that upon his return the master exclaimed: ‘This boy knows more than I do.’<sup>35</sup>

In the legend recounted by Nochlin from Vasari’s biography of Michelangelo, she highlights the common tropes which characterize the Myth of the Artistic and, by extension, the ways in which some artists, including Eminem, are discussed in popular culture and literature. These include the artist’s humble beginnings, their display of natural artistic inclination from a young age, superior abilities and knowledge, and the artist’s obsessive commitment to their art and the ‘sublime’ quality of the art produced by the artist.

Eminem, as well as other rap G.O.A.T.s including Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, are framed through cultural narrative informed by the Myth of the Artist and presented (and remembered) as having unmatched talent. Pulling from various cultural theorists, I have identified qualities of the Myth of the Artist:

- (1) The Artist exhibits a particular quality known as ‘Genius’, i.e., musical aptitude, visual artistic abilities, and so on, which is a kind of “atemporal and mysterious power”<sup>36</sup>;
- (2) This ‘Genius’ manifests at a young age with little to no external encouragement or instruction;
- (3) The Artist exhibits what Bourdieu refers to as “disavowal of the economy”<sup>37</sup>, that is, a kind of denial of economic reality and a commitment to devoting oneself to their art or craft despite the real possibility of poverty and financial ruin;
- (4) The Artist produces their works largely alone and without support or input from others;

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<sup>35</sup> Nochlin, Linda. “Why have there been no Great Women Artists?” *ArtNews*. 1971. PP. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. PP. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” *The Field of Cultural Production*. ed. Randal Johnson. 1993. PP. 74-76.



- (5) The works produced by the Artist are uniquely ‘sublime’ and ‘authentic,’ and, therefore, possess ‘true aesthetic value.’<sup>38</sup>

All of these qualities are present in the mythology of Eminem. Looking to the popular literature (primarily magazine articles and biographies) as well as cultural discourse (primarily how his peers, industry leaders and critics have discussed Em), a particular narrative of a great white G.O.A.T., who is both an artistic genius and political renegade, emerge around Eminem. This mythology of a rags-to-riches white boy making it in a Black art is at the heart of the cultural production of Eminem, and is present throughout his political presence and critiques of Trump. We cannot understand the Eminem’s cultural and political authority presented in *The Storm* without examining how the Myth of the Artist informs the ways in which Eminem is produced by and reproduces cultural narratives aesthetic genius and social hierarchy.

French cultural theorist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively on the social construction of aesthetic value and the ways in which ‘taste’, primarily (though not exclusively) defined by the media, culture and objects a person consumes, is used to create hierarchies between the wealthy elite and other social classes.<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu is writing in response to the traditionally dominant view of aesthetic value, often attributed to the nineteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his work *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant is concerned with exploring beauty and taste. In this text, Kant forwards his theory of what he calls “judgements of beauty”, which contends that judgements of beauty are “universally valid,” and

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<sup>38</sup> Røyseng, Sigrid, et al. “Young Artists and the Charismatic Myth” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. Vol. 13. No. 1. February 2007. PP. 2.

<sup>39</sup> McRobbie, Angela. *The Uses of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2005. PP. 136 – 137.

are based in the representational qualities of the object.<sup>40</sup> Put simply, beauty is *not* in the eye of the beholder, and there exists a metaphysically real basis for the artistic value of objects.<sup>41</sup>

Bourdieu observes that, across academic debate about the value and metaphysics of art, there is a dominant narrative to establish a ‘reality’ to the value of high art. He writes:

What is striking about the diversity of responses which philosophers have given to the question of specificity of the work of art is not so much the fact that these divergent answers often concur in emphasizing the absence of function, the disinterestedness, the gratuitousness, etc. of the work of art, but rather that they all (with the exception of Wittgenstein) share the ambition of capturing a transhistoric or ahistoric essence.<sup>42</sup>

Bourdieu notes that, though not all scholars may agree with Kant’s *exact* argument for the reality and universal validity of artistic value, his argument that artistic value is *real* and can be properly judged by human subjects has carried through the field. This is significant: if artistic value is *real*, this means that some objects, be they films, movies, pieces of music or even clothes and home decor, really *are beautiful*, while others are not. And, by extension, individuals can be judged based on both what they produce *and* by what they like and consume.

In his book *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that this dominant view, that some objects really are beautiful while others are not, is foundational to the structure of our culture and, by extension, the modes of cultural production. Notably, objects, and whether or not they are beautiful, are used to *distinguish* classes from one another. He writes:

As Aristotle said, it is because bodies have colour that we observe that some are a different colour from others; different things differentiate themselves through what they have in common. Similarly, the different fractions of the dominant class distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them a member of the class as a whole,

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<sup>40</sup> Ginsborg, Hannah, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/>>.

<sup>41</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. ed. Paul Guyer. trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. PP. 87-89.

<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic" *The Field of Cultural Production*. ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. PP. 255.

namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it.<sup>43</sup>

As Aristotle observes that bodies have colour, Bourdieu observes that people own objects and, importantly, identify themselves with these objects. Classes distinguish themselves by the objects they surround themselves with; they are different from one another, and we can see this based on the objects they own and the media they consume.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, to justify and ground the differences in the classes and maintain and perpetuate the current class structure, it follows that aesthetic value must be *real*, and not an arbitrary social construction. The differences in the classes depend on this; if ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ and aesthetic value is socially constructed or, worse, does not exist at all, there is no foundation or justification for economic, social and political power differences between social classes. Cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie writes:

Bourdieu brings something very specific to the debate; not just the mass empirical and statistical detail which informs *Distinction*, but rather an account of cultural differentiation as a powerful means of actively proliferating divisions and inequalities through modalities of symbolic violence.<sup>45</sup>

This brings us back to the Myth of the Artist. If aesthetic value is ‘real’ and some objects are ‘beautiful’ and signify a particular kind of person, what does this say about creators of the objects and media? We need to look at *which* cultural producers the Myth of the Artist applies to, and what it reveals about dominant Western ideals about taste, class and culture. Artists who are often also described this way, in addition to Michelangelo as discussed above, include Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Ernest Hemmingway, and Wolfgang Amadeus

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<sup>43</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. trans. Richard Nice. London: Routledge, 1984. PP. 256.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. PP. 257.

<sup>45</sup> McRobbie, Angela. *The Uses of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2005. PP. 124.

Mozart, to name a small number. They are recognized as geniuses and renegades, and their work is uniquely deserving of display in museums or to be preserved and consumed for hundreds of years.

Additionally, the names of these artists carry social significance, both for the art and media and for the consumer of these products. Bourdieu observes the ubiquity and banality of these figures in Western culture: “There are in fact very few other areas in which the glorification of ‘great individuals’, unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial.”<sup>46</sup> Presenting Eminem as one of what Bourdieu refers to as a ‘great individual’, a person whose talent is natural and defies explanation, is prevalent across both popular and academic texts discussing the rapper. The mythology of Eminem as a ‘great artist’ is created and reproduced in popular works, most notably popular biographies and artist profiles in magazines, and continues into academic works on the rapper. As Eminem has been widely written about in popular magazines, websites and books, I include some popular, non-academic works on Eminem in this literature review, as some of these pieces, notably music journalist Anthony Bozza’s work, have substantially contributed to popular knowledge of the rapper, examining popular biographies of Eminem both contribute to and are informed by the mythologization of Eminem.

Eminem’s own work functions to perpetuate his own Myth of the Artist; the rapper’s music works to mythologize himself and his rags-to-riches story throughout his music. In the Oscar-winning song “Lose Yourself”, the rapper narrates his difficulty in overcoming his impoverished upbringing, and how his hard work and natural talent allowed him to rise above his

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<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Field of Cultural Production, or: the Economic World Reversed” *The Field of Cultural Production*. ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. PP. 29

circumstances. This song draws on both thematic elements of the Myth of the Artist and spiritualistic imagery to illustrate Eminem's 'otherworldly' talent. He raps:

[Referring to himself in third person] He's dope, he knows that/He's broke/He's so stacked that he knows/When he goes back to his mobile home/that's when it's/back to the lab again...My souls escaping/Through this hole that is gaping/This world is my for the taking/Make me king...A normal life is boring/but super stardom's close to post mortar...Success is my only [sic] option/Failure's not/Mom, I love you but this trailer's got to go/I cannot grow old in Salem's lot...You can do anything you set your mind to, man.<sup>47</sup>

Eminem frequently explores how his hard work facilitated his success and financial upward mobility, especially emphasizing his commitment to rap music, personal sacrifices made for his work and long hours spend on music and lyrics.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, Eminem has connected his past of abuse, addiction and poverty to a kind of supernatural force; he often attributes his talents simultaneously to his troubled childhood and a otherworldly force. Paralleling folk stories and urban legends of musicians with supernatural origins to their talents, most notably the legend of Robert Johnson, a young Black man from Mississippi said to have sold his soul in exchange for a guitar tuned by the devil himself.<sup>49</sup> In the song "My Darling" Eminem tells the story of encountering the devil years after exchanging his soul for fame:

[Speaking as the devil] Remember your mother?/Think of what she did to you and your little brother/All the foster homes...I gave you enough time/Your soul's mine...You sold your soul to me/Need I remind you?/You remember that night you/Prayed to God you'd give anything/to get a record deal when Dre signed you?...I possess your soul, your mind, your heart and your body.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "Lose Yourself" *Eight Mile* (2002)

<sup>48</sup> See: "Our House" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) Cleanin' Out My Closet" *The Eminem Show* (2002) "White America" *The Eminem Show* (2002) "Space Bound" *Recovery* (2010)

<sup>49</sup> Johnson's story is thought to have inspired the '27 Club' legend and informed the connection between American music and the supernatural. See: biography.com staff. "Robert Johnson: Biography" *biography.com*. April 17, 2019. URL: <https://www.biography.com/musician/robert-johnson>

<sup>50</sup> "My Darling" *Relapse* (2009)

Here, the devil reminds the rapper of traumatic childhood experiences before discussing their supernatural contract. In other songs, Eminem claims to be the spawn of Satan<sup>51</sup> as well as in directly in touch with God.<sup>52</sup> In the song “Rap God” the rapper employs metaphysical language and religious symbolism when describing his talents, while still connecting it to his childhood suffering:

I’m masterfully constructing this masterpiece as/I’m beginning to feel like a Rap God/all my people from the front to the back nod...Everybody want the key and the secret to rap immortality/Like I got/Well, to be truthful/the blue print’s simply rage and youthful exuberance...Dale Earnhardt of the trailer park/the White Trash God/Kneel before General Zod...I’m omnipotent...I should not be woken...I’ve morphed into an immortal...Why be a king/when you can be a god?<sup>53</sup>

Eminem blends his autobiography, his growing up in a trailer park with his dysfunctional mother, with a supernatural origin story. This is significant; like the Myth of the Artist, there is some special and unique about Eminem’s genius. However, he blends this ordained talent with concepts of meritocracy, work ethic and upward class mobility. Eminem agrees his talents are god-like, but affirms they come from a history of hard work, pain and sacrifice. Together, this creates a narrative where Eminem is both an independent genius who is capable of producing works of ‘real artistic value’ without giving up the central neoliberal value of hard work directly corresponding to one’s success. In blending the supernatural with the neoliberal, Eminem provides a super-capitalist Myth of the Artist.

This mythology, a blend of supernatural, childhood trauma and poverty and neoliberal logic, appears in media about the rapper as well. Following Eminem’s expanding fan base with the *Eminem Show*, unauthorized biographies of the rapper, including *Eminem: Crossing the Line*

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<sup>51</sup> “Evil Deeds” *Encore* (2004)

<sup>52</sup> “Walk on Water” *Revival* (2017)

<sup>53</sup> “Rap God” *Revival* (2017)

(2000), *Eminem: The Real Fucking Story* (2001), *Blue Banner Biography: Eminem* (2002), *Cleaning Out my Closet: Eminem: the Stories Behind Every Song* (2003) and *Eminem: In My Skin* (2004) to name a few, exploded. Though each biography has slight differences, they overwhelmingly follow a formula of tracing a ‘rags-to-riches’ narrative, in which the young rapper’s hard work and natural talent allow him to rise above the bad behaviour and poverty of his mother and ex-wife, and he is accepted by rap greats as ‘one of their own.’ In *Eminem: Survivor* Michael Heatley and Drew Heatley write:

Eminem started off as an outsider: the kid of welfare who moved from home to home; the victim of bullying who survived a brain haemorrhage; the white rapper trying to make it as a legitimate hip-hop act when there had been no precedent. The odds were wholly stacked against him, and yet he made it through sheer force of will and the power of his unique artistic vision.<sup>54</sup>

Compare Heatley and Heatley’s passage to Nochlin’s above; Eminem’s story of a childhood of poverty and neglect and eventual rise to fame and fortune is framed as the direct outcome of the combination of the artist’s hard work and passion and powerful artistic abilities. These narratives usually begin by highlighting Mathers’ transition from ‘trailer trash’ to rap super star, detailing his humble beginnings of poverty, the abuse he received from his mother and his abandonment by his father. A central point in each of these biographies (and in Eminem’s own narrative of his childhood in his music) is his discovery of rap music and seemingly ‘natural talent’ for rap. In *The Dark Story of Eminem*, Nick Hasted described Eminem’s story as an “utterly American path to self-creation and success”<sup>55</sup>, emphasizing Eminem’s control and independence over his own success and its relationship to a broader American identity and value-system. These biographies insist the combination of inborn talent (perhaps even a preconceived

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<sup>54</sup> Heatley, Michael and Drew Heatley. *Eminem: Survivor*. London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2012. PP. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Hasted, Nick. *The Dark Story of Eminem*. London: Omnibus Press, 2011. PP. 32.

destiny) and work ethic transformed Eminem from a member of the white working-poor to international superstar.

Popular biographies also employ metaphysical and biblical language to describe the rapper's music talent. Many biographers include that, as legend has it, Eminem conceived of the character that would shoot him to stardom Slim Shady, while using the toilet: "The way he told it, he had been possessed by himself. In a period of despair, in the crude process of taking a shit, Slim Shady had appeared to set him free."<sup>56</sup> Additionally important to the popular literature regarding Eminem is its construction of him as a kind of artistic genius, and as a member of a patrilineage (perhaps even as a kind of apex) in the genre of rap music. Comparing him to both Shakespeare<sup>57</sup> and Elvis<sup>58</sup>, Michael Heatley and Drew Heatley describe Eminem as "hyperkinetic"<sup>59</sup> with "a mind constantly ticking at a depth mundane distractions could not touch."<sup>60</sup>

All the media surrounding Eminem, his own music, other rappers, the media, and biographers and journalists, understand and represent Eminem through tropes of the myth go the artist. His mythology is unique in that the popular discourse on Eminem has worked to produce a narrative in which it is his hard work, dedication to rap music and ability to overcome childhood trauma and poverty that has made him god-like. Understanding this cultural narrative of the white working-class man whose determination and dedication makes him otherworldly is central to reading Eminem's music and public persona. Returning to *The Storm*, considering the cultural narrative of Eminem's rise to success and fame reveals the authority he is provided in

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. PP.121.

<sup>57</sup> Heatley, Michael and Drew Heatley. *Eminem: Survivor*. London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2012. PP. 6

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. PP. 153

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. PP. 159

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. PP. 225



this area as well as provides context on his diametrically-opposing himself to Trump. Keeping in mind Eminem's Americanized Myth of the Artist provides a foundation for further considering how concepts of whiteness, masculinity and class are deployed and given meaning in his work.

### **Ch.1.3: Death of the Rapper: Literature Review**

The greatest strength of the academic literature on Eminem is its diversity. Academics from Women's Studies, African Studies, Musicology, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Media Studies and Political Science have all provided insight into the music, performances and public persona of Eminem. The result is an interdisciplinary dialogue between a diversity of scholars and a complex discussion of the significance of the rapper and his music. I have identified three key areas in which most of the scholarly discussion of Eminem has focused; (1) Eminem's misogyny and homophobia, (2) Eminem and whiteness, racial ambiguity and role in 'post-race' America and (3) Eminem, performance of identity and the use of identity in his music and public persona.<sup>61</sup> Identifying these three key themes, and organizing the current literature on Eminem around these themes, provides us with a framework for discussing the current state of research on the rapper, what important claims have been made, and what gaps in the research may currently exist. It can show us what topics have been covered, what the general areas of consensus and debate are and provide insight into how the rapper has been received at different points throughout his career.

The first category of literature I have identified is primarily interested in Eminem's use of violent language and imagery directed towards women in his work, but also frequently includes the rapper's use of derogatory terminology and imagery to the LGBTQ2S+ communities. Many

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<sup>61</sup> These categories are not mutually exclusive, with many scholars touching on some or all of these three topics in their work.

scholars are deeply critical of the ways in which women and the LGBTQ2S+ are represented in Eminem's music, especially the ways in which violent language and threats are used metaphorically to represent another idea (for instance, drug addiction<sup>62</sup>) or cast in a humorous tone.<sup>63</sup> Literature on Eminem's misogyny and homophobia are largely concerned with two interrelated aspects; (1) the ways in which the use of derogatory language and violent imagery work to normalize violence against women and the LGBTQ2S+ community;<sup>64</sup> and (2) how Eminem's music illustrates femme-phobic attitudes through imagery of violence against 'deserving' (read: 'promiscuous,' 'unfaithful,' 'undomestic' and characteristics otherwise used to distinguish 'bad' women) and the LGBTQ2S+ people (especially, but not limited to, queer men and trans women).<sup>65</sup> As an example, Richard Goldstein's article "The Eminem Schtick" discusses in depth the misogyny and homophobia expressed in Eminem's music and lyrics and is sceptical of defences of the rapper based on the 'art' or 'symbolism' of the violence in Eminem's work. Goldstein writes:

The aesthetic defence is one of many Eminem alibis. We've been assured that this is just a pop-art pose, a cry from the working class streets, an act of defiance against the forces of censorship, a reciprocity of feelings we can't express in life, an exorcism of our demons, or a sex charade... The danger isn't the fantasies Eminem generates, but the refusal to see them as anything more than that. There *is* a relationship between Eminem and his time. His bigotry isn't incidental or stupid, as his progressive champions claim. It's central and knowing — and unless it's examined, it's free to operate.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "3 A.M." *Relapse* (2009)

<sup>63</sup> "The Real Slim Shady" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000); "Superman" *The Eminem Show* (2002)

<sup>64</sup> See: Cobb, Michael D. and William A. Boettcher. "Ambivalent Sexism and Misogynistic Rap Music: Does Exposure to Eminem Increase Sexism?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. Vol. 37. No. 10. December, 2007; Goldstein, Richard. "The Eminem Schtick" *The Village Voice*. June 2011. URL: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/06/11/the-eminem-shtick/> ;

<sup>65</sup> See: Enck, Suzanne Marie and Blake M. McDaniel. "Play With Fire: Cycles of Domestic Violence and Rihanna's "Love the Way You Lie" *Communication, Culture and Critique*.; Stephens, Vincent. "Pop Goes the Rapper: A Close Reading of Eminem's Genderphobia" *Popular Music*. Vol 24. No. 1. 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Goldstein, Richard. "The Eminem Schtick" *The Village Voice*. June 2011. URL: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/06/11/the-eminem-shtick/>

Goldstein engages directly with those who claim Eminem's violent misogyny is an artistic expression and argues this dismissal of misogyny and homophobia with what he calls the 'aesthetic defence' allows the bigotry in the rapper's work to go undiscussed. Goldstein, and other scholars who discuss his use of violent misogynist and anti-LGBTQ2S+ language and imagery, consider Eminem's music, and how the 'aesthetic defence' of his work, function to normalize and trivialize violence against women and the queer community.

The second category I have identified academic work on Eminem clusters around is race and post-race America. Some scholars cite Eminem's success and apparently 'blended' Black and white masculinity is the result of post-racial attitudes in contemporary America.<sup>67</sup> These academics use Eminem as a 'case study' for post-racial America, and look to him to consider the ways in which white working class masculinity has come to relate to, subsume and co-opt forms of Black masculinity and the ways in which whites have co-opted and appropriated forms for Black expression for various socio-political reasons.<sup>68</sup> Others have focused more specially on how whiteness has come to function in his work, specifically how it affects and how it impacts the ways in which his music is consumed and understood.<sup>69</sup> One stand-out piece in this genre is Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard's "Eminem 2.0: The Redemptive Subjectivity of Whiteness." Uniquely, Bailey and Leonard discuss what they call "artistic subjectivity," or, the kind of

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<sup>67</sup> See: Laurent, Sylvie. "Neither Black nor White: Poor White Trash" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race; Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014.; Enck, Suzanne Marie and Blake M. McDaniel. "Play With Fire: Cycles of Domestic Violence and Rihanna's "Love the Way You Lie" *Communication, Culture and Critique*; Kajikawa, Loren. "Eminem's "My Name Is": Signifying Whiteness and Articulating Race" *Journal of the Society of American Music*. Vol. 3. No. 3. August 2009.

<sup>68</sup> See: White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. PP. 109-114; and Kitwana, Bakari. *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005. PP. 153-156, 159-162.

<sup>69</sup> See: Rodman, Gilbert B. "Race...and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014.

artistic license to experiment with identity and narrative provided to some (primarily straight, white cis-male) artists. Bailey and Leonard point out that, unlike Black rappers or other artists of colour, Eminem is able to experiment with identities, particularly deviant ones, without it being assumed these are his *actual* views or values. Bailey and Leonard write:

Eminem is celebrated for his competing, contradictory and dynamic identities. Whereas black artists are expected to offer narratives of gangstas, violence, drugs, sex and urban black masculinity, Eminem is able to offer multiple stories and performative identities...By prescribing the black body, white supremacy in America allows white artists like Eminem access to forms of self-creation unavailable to those defined by the colour of their skin.<sup>70</sup>

Bailey and Leonard examine how Eminem's whiteness has shaped the ways in which his art is received. Unlike Black rappers, notably Immortal Technique<sup>71</sup> and Kendrick Lamar,<sup>72</sup> the 'artistic subjectivity' he is perceived to have because of his whiteness makes his exploration of identities and experimentation with (often violent, misogynistic and criminal) narration intelligible to audiences as 'fiction.' Eminem is able to claim he hates women<sup>73</sup> and the LGBTQ+ individuals<sup>74</sup> murdered his ex-wife<sup>75</sup>, and even raped his own mother<sup>76</sup> in his music, without having these beliefs or actions attributed to his actual feelings and, instead, understood as fiction. Bailey and Leonard's central claim is that Eminem is not the one rapper to experiment with identity, but that his whiteness allows the dominant white audience to interpret his work as fiction, rather than autographical as attributed to Black rappers and other artists of colour.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. PP. 137, 139.

<sup>71</sup> See: Immortal Technique "Dance with the Devil" *Revolutionary Vol 1* 2001.

<sup>72</sup> See: Kendrick Lamar. "m.a.a.d city" *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* 2012

<sup>73</sup> "Yellow Brick Road" *Encore* (2004) "Just Don't Give a Fuck" *The Slim Shady LP* (1998)

<sup>74</sup> "Criminal" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) "Elevator" *Relapse* (2009)

<sup>75</sup> "Kim" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) "Bonnie and Clyde '97" *The Slim Shady LP* (1998)

<sup>76</sup> "Kill You" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000)

Scholars have also extensively explored and discussed Eminem's use of identity and persona in his work.<sup>77</sup> In her book *Eminem: The Real Slim Shady*, Marcia Alesan Dawkins provides a complex analysis of Eminem's use of a tripartite identity practice.<sup>78</sup> Alesan Dawkins explores how speaking through three fluid personas, Marshall, Slim Shady and Eminem, the artist is able to explore various facets of American identity and produce complex social commentary on masculinity and race. She explains that "Eminem's personas work as a performance team"<sup>79</sup> and that it is the interaction of these personas which give meaning to Eminem's music. Alesan Dawkins writes:

Eminem admits as much by saying that depending on which persona is rapping, his music could be considered hate-mongering gangsta speech, spiritual nourishment, or sublime political and social commentary. Over and over again he proves that he really can be whoever he says he is. For that reason...the best way to understand Eminem's identity practice — and ongoing cultural significance — is to unpack the multiple personas developed in his work. And, if Eminem has anything to say about it, we will see just how plural, complicated and loud these personas get."<sup>80</sup>

Alesan Dawkins' interest in Eminem lies with his complex exploration of the construction of social identities. Speaking through three competing and contradicting personalities, Alesan Dawkins sees Eminem as providing a critique of identity theory and, by extension, a rejection of hegemonic masculinity. Anna Hickey-Moody takes a different approach from Alesan Dawkins in exploring Eminem's use of a identity practise. In "Eminem's Lyrical Personae: The Everyman, the Needy Man and the Hegemon", Hickey-Moody also recognizes as Eminem engaging three

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<sup>77</sup> See: Rodman, Gilbert B. "Race...and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014; Martin, E. Nolan. "Somewhere Inbetween: Eminem's Ambiguities" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014; and Bailey, Julius and David J. Leonard. "Eminem 2.0: The Redemptive Subjectivity of Whiteness" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Alesan Dawkins, Marcia. *Eminem: The Real Slim Shady*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013. PP. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. PP. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. PP. 5.

primary personas in his music. However, rather than focus on the social commentary which exists internal to Eminem's work like Alesan Dawkins, Hickey-Moody instead specifically explores what these three personas say about masculinity. Hickey-Moody writes:

[Eminem] has developed three personas that he performs when he raps (Marshall Mathers, Slim Shady, Eminem) and he moves between these characters in his songs...Through his different personas, Eminem destabilizes fantasies of the homogenous 'masculine' subject while also performing a convincing iteration of such fantasies through the overarching, hegemonic, and misogynist nature of the Eminem brand.<sup>81</sup>

Hickey-Moody is much more skeptical of Eminem's tripartite identity practise as critical or reflective on hegemonic and toxic masculinity. Hickey-Moody acknowledges the possibility that this critique exists in Eminem's music,<sup>82</sup> but notes this critique does not extend into a legitimate argument against hegemonic masculinity.

There is substantial and fruitful academic work on Eminem, his use of persona and identity in his work, how misogyny and masculinity function in his music and how his work specifically relates to post-racialism and racial fluidity. However, there is a significant gap in the research related to Eminem and cultural production. Scholars have primarily avoiding discussing Eminem as a cultural product of neoliberal forces, and many academics have even leaned into the cultural mythology of Eminem. For instance, in the introduction to *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*, the only collection of academic articles on Eminem, Talib Kweli writes:

There is an elite group of technical rhymers that I look to at as the master class of flow and rhyme. It contains superstars like Jay-Z and Nas, and lesser-known but no less incredible artists like Jean Grae and Pharoahe Monch. Eminem is at the heart of this group of spitters. In order for him to be accepted and respected when he got in the game, he had to be better than damn near everybody. As he grows, his subject matter and interest will undoubtedly change But his dedication to technique will remain the same

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<sup>81</sup> Hickey-Moody, Anna. "Eminem's Lyrical Personae: They Everyman, The Needy Man and the Hegemon" *Culture, Society & Masculinity*. vol.1 no. 2. 2009. PP. 214.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. PP. 213.

regardless of what he raps about. I knew this to be true when I took my daughter to the BET music awards a few years ago. She was eleven at the time and she really knew nothing about Em as an artist. But when he took that stage and rocked “Not Afraid” with a gospel choir, she turned to me and said “Daddy, he rapped better than everybody.” I responded, “Yes, babe. That’s Eminem.”<sup>83</sup>

It is noteworthy that an academic collection of articles opens with an anecdote about Eminem, his relationship to other G.O.A.T.s and the substantial work it required for him to be recognized as part of this group. Kweli emphasizes Eminem’s undeniable talent; even his eleven-year-old daughter recognizes the rapper’s skills. Kweli leans into the mythology of Eminem, touting the artist’s ability to overcome the odds through born talent and hard work. Though Bailey and Leonard touch on how Eminem’s whiteness affords him the perceived artistic subjectivity to experiment with identity and narrative in a way that is tangible for the dominant white audience,<sup>84</sup> I am interested in further analyzing how Eminem is produced by and reproduces the dominant forces of cultural production.

The concept of ‘the death of the author’ was originally introduced by French literary critic Roland Barthes and popularized by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In his original essay, “The Death of the Author,” Barthes rejects the more traditional belief that the meaning of a text is given by the author. That is, Barthes argues that, rather than the author being the single arbiter of the meaning of a text, instead, readers should reject providing the author’s intention with absolute authority. That is, the meaning of a work or text does not lie in the author’s intentions, but, rather, in the ways in which the text can be interpreted and analyzed. Drawing on Barthes, I want to move away from focusing on Eminem’s intent, and instead adopted methods of cultural studies to explore the meaning and significance of Eminem’s music and public

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<sup>83</sup> Kweli, Talib. “Forward” *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014. PP. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Bailey, Julius and David J. Leonard. “Eminem 2.0: The Redemptive Subjectivity of Whiteness” *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2014.

persona. Unlike the biographers and academics who have previously written on Eminem, I will actively attempt to subvert the mythology of Eminem. I will not take Eminem's personal life or the meaning of his work as my subject. Instead of asking what Eminem is trying to say through his music, as does Dawkins, I will instead explore the cultural values which shape the work of Eminem, and the meaning of this work in Trump's America.

You may have noticed I often refer both to Eminem's music and what I call his 'public persona.' Referring to the theory of intertextuality, developed by social theorists Brian Ott and Cameron Walter's, I will consider the ways in which Eminem's music and personal details he has shared combine to create meaning in his music. This may at first seem a contradiction; I am rejecting considering Eminem's intention (and theorizing about what beliefs or character traits he may or may not have) but hold his actions as a 'public persona' to be a fundamental aspect of my reading of his music. I will approach Eminem as a cultural artifact. By this, I mean I will examine Eminem as a product of the socio-cultural forces and who embodies and communicates particular socio-political values. In doing this, I consider the narrative that is constructed surrounding the cultural figure of Eminem. Though previous authors, most notably Alesan Dawkins and Bailey and Leonard, ground their use of the names of the personas (Marshall, Shady and Eminem) in Eminem's *own* use of the names, I will use the names 'Eminem' and 'Mathers' to specifically distinguish 'the product' from 'the man.' What I mean by this is, instead of conflating the cultural artifact of Eminem with the man behind him, Marshall Mathers, I will intentionally use Eminem *only* to refer to the cultural product, and *not* the man. Therefore, this thesis is not about Marshall Mathers, the person and the artist, but about the cultural icon whose biography and music have fused together to create a cultural artefact which is intelligible and meaningful to contemporary Western audiences.



Additionally, this thesis is not about whether or not Eminem is a ‘feminist,’ is ‘woke’ is *really* pro-Black Lives Matter. This thesis is also not about whether or not Eminem is good for women, for Black Americans or for young white men. Rather, this thesis will examine Eminem’s current music on the Trump administration to explore culturally held and understood concepts of whiteness, class and masculinity. I am not interested in judging the instrumental value of Eminem in our culture, but, instead, what he as a cultural artefact communicates about the Trump era and post 9/11 America. For me, Eminem is, quite simply, the artifact we use to gain access to the cultural production of race, class and masculinity in late capitalism. A close examination of Eminem’s Trump era work, specifically *The Storm* (2017) as well as “Untouchable” and “Like Home” from the album *Revival* (2017), “The Ringer” from the album *Kamikaze* (2018) and “Like Heaven” from *Music to be Murdered to* (2020), can provide with a view to how the dominant white middle-class narrative of race and class in neoliberal America has reckoned Black Lives Matter and the election of Donald Trump. Eminem’s Trump era work is critical of the President, specifically his racism, and forwards a narrative in which Trump and his followers are the root cause of racism (not the systemic realities of anti-Black oppression and white supremacy which are foundational to America’s institutions and socio-political function). This narrative provides an ‘out’ for the white middle class from acknowledging the realities of racist and white supremacist America (from which they directly benefit) while being able to identify as allies of Black Lives Matter.

## Chapter 2: White Like Me: Eminem's Post-Race Habitus

### 2.1 - Hip Hop Habitus: Vanilla Ice and the Curse of the White Rapper

Central to the mythology of Eminem is his story as a young white boy, and, later a young white man, growing up and discovering his love of rap music in a predominantly black neighbourhood of Detroit. Most of his biographies begin, or at least include, a description of Eminem's racial minority status at his school and in the Michigan underground rap scene. They also discuss how being a racial minority in his community impacted his childhood and young adulthood. Pre-Eminem white rappers, including Everlast from House of Pain, the Beastie Boys and Vanilla Ice, rarely discussed race in their music or interviews, especially their own whiteness.<sup>85</sup> Rather, they adopted a 'colour-blind' attitude, not acknowledging race or racial differences in their music. Instead, these artists predominantly rapping about partying, girls and alcohol, and mostly avoiding the socio-political topics their Black musical peers discussed, including racial discrimination, gang violence, police brutality and poverty.<sup>86</sup>

Eminem, however, turned a spotlight on his own whiteness, frequently referring to his childhood as a white boy in a predominantly Black neighbourhood,<sup>87</sup> being initially rejected by his Black peers in the Detroit rap community,<sup>88</sup> and identifying himself as "white trash."<sup>89</sup> Rather than ignoring his whiteness, with the hopes of blending seamlessly into the predominantly Black

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<sup>85</sup> Barshad, Amos. "White People in Rap: A History" *Vulture Magazine*. April 2009.

[https://www.vulture.com/2009/04/these\\_are\\_heady\\_times\\_for.html](https://www.vulture.com/2009/04/these_are_heady_times_for.html)

<sup>86</sup> Tupac, Lauryn Hill, Ice Cube, Immortal Technique to name just a small number of black rappers who discussed social issues in their rhymes.

<sup>87</sup> "Our House" *Off the Wall* (2000), "Brain Damage" *The Slim Shady LP* (1998), "Yellow Brick Road" *Encore* (2004)

<sup>88</sup> "Yellow Brick Road" *Encore*. (2004)

<sup>89</sup> "W.T.P." *Recovery* (2010)

rap scene, Eminem's whiteness is his hallmark. Eminem's experience as a white man in a Black neighbourhood and in a Black art form are an essential part of the narrative constructed around his success and reveals particular narratives about post-race beliefs. The social construction of whiteness and its relationship to class is also a frequent theme in Eminem's work, including rhymes and music videos exploring white identity and the media<sup>90</sup> as well as Eminem's own racially complex identity.<sup>91</sup>

This chapter will consider the role of whiteness in the mythology of Eminem. It will examine how Eminem's constructed narrative of whiteness and racism informs the politics of the *The Storm* and Eminem's other anti-Trump work. To do this, I forward two related but distinct social narratives, which I call 'post-race racism' and 'white minority-ism'. I consider how these social narratives function to both depoliticize the genre of rap music and alter narratives around race relations in the United States. In reframing his own personal struggles as experiences of racism akin to the experiences of Black Americans, he constructs a narrative of a white man in a Black man's world. In doing so, Eminem is able to acknowledge that anti-Black racism is a problem in America (and foundational to the history of rap and hip-hop music), while simultaneously denying the existence of systemic white supremacy. Importantly, the creation of this 'white minority-ism' narrative allows Eminem to appear as 'racially-woke' and an ally of the Black community in *The Storm* and his other anti-Trump work,<sup>92</sup> without questioning his own position in the rap genre or the neoliberal meritocratic narrative surrounding his success story.

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<sup>90</sup> In the music video for *My Name Is*, Eminem compares the reality of white Americans in poverty to social constructions of whiteness on television, including the Brady Bunch, a university professor and the President of the United States. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNPnbI1arSE>

<sup>91</sup> See: Eminem "Evil Deeds" *Encore*. (2004)

<sup>92</sup> See: *Campaign Speech* (2017) "Untouchable" *Revival* (2017), "Like Home" *Revival* (2017), "The Ringer" *Kamikaze* (2018)

To understand Eminem's relationship with his own whiteness and how his music and public persona reframe discussions of racism in rap music, we first need to consider the career of the most infamous white rapper, Vanilla Ice. Vanilla Ice, the rap moniker of Robert Van Winkle, is now known for being "a joke"<sup>93</sup>, "an imposter"<sup>94</sup> and generally uncool. However, Vanilla Ice was once considered one of the most successful rappers from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.<sup>95</sup> His second album, *To the Extreme* (1990), was the fastest selling rap album upon its release and Vanilla Ice won both "Favourite New Rock/Pop Artist" and "Favourite New Rap/Hip Hop Artist" at the 1991 American Music Awards. On top of his commercial and popular success, Vanilla Ice legitimized himself as a rapper, opening for N.W.A and Public Enemy, widely recognized as leaders of the rap genre.

If you know anything about Vanilla Ice and his current public reception, you might be wondering: what happened? How did he go from opening for N.W.A. and Public Enemy, to starring in a reality show on the Home and Garden Network?<sup>96</sup> Shortly after the success of *To the Extreme*, the newspaper *The Dallas Morning News* ran a front page article revealing the rapper had fabricated his stories of growing up on the streets of Miami, including his tales of being stabbed several times in street fights, and had actually been raised in a wealthy suburb in Dallas, Texas.<sup>97</sup> Fans were furious that Vanilla Ice, who presented himself as a tough-talking and ghetto-

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<sup>93</sup> Apps, Aaron. "The Fanatic Lyric: Eminem as Poet" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc, 2006. PP. 61.

<sup>94</sup> Laurent, Sylvie. "Neither Black nor White: Poor White Trash" *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc, 2006. PP. 181.

<sup>95</sup> White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. PP. 106.

<sup>96</sup> *The Vanilla Ice Project*, in which Vanilla Ice renovates homes and sells them to earn a profit, began in 2010 and is still on air today.

<sup>97</sup> Bernard, James. "Why the World if After Vanilla Ice" *The New York Times*. February 3, 1991.

raised boy from the mean streets of Miami, turned out to be, in their eyes, “as street tough as a cream puff.”<sup>98</sup>

Following the exposure of his fraudulent autobiography, Vanilla Ice was rejected by rappers and fans. The name ‘Vanilla Ice’ has become synonymous with “cringe”,<sup>99</sup> and “become infamous as an inauthentic imitator”<sup>100</sup> and has ultimately unable to recover his rap career or legitimacy in the hip hop industry.<sup>101</sup> Vanilla Ice’s failure as a “class-passer”,<sup>102</sup> once opening for some of the most influential rappers of the time, became a warning for white rappers attempting to emulate the ‘hardcore’ Black masculinity which dominated rap and hip-hop culture. Though his whiteness had contributed to his mass appeal, particularly in his popularity among white listeners, his exposure as lacking an ‘authentic’ hip-hop backstory made him unpopular even with whites who share his privileged background. Miles White writes:

Vanilla Ice was seen has highly marketable in the suburbs and expanded the audience for hip-hop among white suburban kids — *Ice Ice Baby* was played on radio stations that had ignored black music entirely. Whatever the truth of his private past, as a white male rapper in predominantly black medium at the time when hardcore rap was entering the mainstream, Vanilla Ice perceived and understood the need to place himself within the context of the urban street, black masculinity and socially deviant behaviour in order to lend credibility to his machismo performance of self.<sup>103</sup>

Vanilla Ice’s fall from grace reveals the importance of a kind of ‘hip-hop authenticity,’ in maintaining legitimacy in rap and hip-hop. Additionally, this authenticity requires a both a

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<sup>98</sup> Warner, Marc E. “Lies, Lies Baby” *The Harvard Crimson*. January 7, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> “Vanilla Ice” is currently used a diss toward white rappers.

<sup>100</sup> Alesan Dawkins, Marcia. *Eminem: The Real Slim Shady*” Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013. PP. 35.

<sup>101</sup> White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. PP. 103.

<sup>102</sup> Alesan Dawkins, Marcia. *Eminem: The Real Slim Shady*” Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013. PP. 135.

<sup>103</sup> White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. PP. 102

history of struggle, be it class or race, and a masculinity derived from being ‘self-made’ and living on ‘the streets’ or in ‘the hood.’

Despite their numerous similarities, including their whiteness, blond hair and blue eyes, starring in films loosely based on their lives,<sup>104</sup> commercial popularity and success and association with N.W.A., Eminem has managed to maintain the authenticity Vanilla Ice tried to claim through class-passing. I argue we can understand this hip-hop authenticity through Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, cultural capital, and fields. Habitus refers to, broadly, collections of social dispositions, including lifestyle choices, preferences, beliefs about the world and social competencies. Habitus also includes knowledge that individuals bring with them and apply to social situations. Bourdieu describes habitus as: “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practice.”<sup>105</sup> Habitus as the ability (or inability) to navigate symbolic systems of status and capital is Bourdieu’s central focus and what he finds to reveal both the functioning of complex socio-political systems and individual phenomenological experience. These dispositions can be understood as social knowledge and attitude towards the world; these tastes, behaviours, beliefs, and expectations are determined, informed and reinforced by our unconscious understandings about value and logic of the world. Habitus is the underlying, unconscious knowledge of the social world which gives rise to a framework of social meaning which makes social interaction possible.

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<sup>104</sup> The 1991 *Cool as Ice* is a romantic-musical-comedy film loosely based on Vanilla Ice’s rise to fame in the music industry. Unlike Eminem’s semi-autobiographical movie *8 Mile*, both the film and Vanilla Ice’s performance received largely negative reviews. See: Epstein, Dan. “‘Cool as Ice’: The Story Behind Vanilla Ice’s Career-Killing Movie” *Rolling Stone Magazine* October 2016. URL: <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/cool-as-ice-the-story-behind-vanilla-ices-career-killing-movie-114242/>

<sup>105</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. “Outline of a Theory of Practice” *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. PP. 72.

Bourdieu's understanding of the concept of 'capital' is central to understanding habitus. Capital is leverage; its value individuals possess and use to bargain with and measure themselves against others. Economic capital refers, quite simply, to monetary currency. Social capital refers to personal connections one has —think 'friends in high places.' These social connections create a career, or educational and economic opportunities. Fraternities in the United States operate through this logic; young men who are excluded from Fraternities are at a disadvantage, and the more prestigious the 'frat,' the more prestigious the connections and alumni (and, therefore, the higher the social capital).

Cultural capital is Bourdieu's own invention and refers to knowledge and skills attached to cultural status, including knowledge of art, music and literature, formal education, cultural competencies (such as the ability to play an instrument or dance the waltz) and, importantly, the ability to discern between objects and behaviours of 'good' and 'bad' taste. What we know, what we can do and what we like comprise our social capital. Bourdieu writes:

[T]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.<sup>106</sup>

Therefore, class factions are signalled by an individual's cultural capital (at least in part; other forms of capital contribute as well).

Bourdieu uses 'fields' to refer to the broader social frameworks in which habitus and capital function. Fields are the wider social structures which provide social meaning and significance to cultural capital. It is that which legitimates, grounds and contextualizes cultural capital, and the space in which individuals and groups struggle for domination. It is within fields

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<sup>106</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction*. trans. Richard Nice. London: Routledge, 2010. PP. 97.

which habituses function, allowing individuals to function (or, causing them to fail) within complex symbolic social situations and systems. Fields anchor the relationship between habitus and cultural capital and provide a context in which these symbolic forms of status function and have meaning. Bourdieu himself lists various domains of social life as being fields, including the arts, industry, the law, medicine, and politics. Each area requires individuals to have different competencies, and the habitus of each person allows them to successfully (or, unsuccessfully) navigate that field and achieve status within said field. Fields, for Bourdieu, are like Russian nesting dolls; fields fit within larger fields, building on their logic and symbolism to further create new forms of social power, cultural capital, and logic of domination. Bourdieu understands fields as sites of struggle; between individuals within fields, between subfields, and between the fields themselves there is a struggle for status and dominance. Individuals dispute with one another over the value of themselves and their fields and subfields, attempting to incur the highest amount of cultural capital and secure high status.

Hip-hop is a subfield of American popular culture and music; as such, it has its own particular context in which players measure themselves. A hip-hop habitus, which includes holding the appropriate social and cultural capital, is this thing we have identified as ‘hip-hop authenticity,’ and is what sets the Eminems apart from the Vanilla Ices. In the field of rap and hip hop, being ‘self-made,’ knowledge and experience of street violence and economic hardships, in addition to extensive knowledge of the history of rap music, are all forms of cultural capital. Eminem has utilized his experiences as a white working poor man in a predominantly Black community as a form of cultural capital to legitimize his position in the rap community.



Having both a ‘rags-to-riches’ story along with his experiences as a white boy in a Black community are major aspects of Eminem’s hip hop habitus. The narrative surrounding Eminem’s first meeting with his mentor Dr. Dre (a member of N.W.A) is a key to understanding Eminem’s hip hop habitus, and directly contrasts himself with other white ‘posers’ like Vanilla Ice. The 2011 single “I Need a Doctor”, a collaboration between Eminem and Dr. Dre, discusses the infamous ‘yellow jumpsuit’ incident. Dr. Dre raps:

It literally feels like a lifetime ago/But I still remember the shit like it was just yesterday  
though/You walked in, yellow jump suit/Whole room, cracked jokes/Once you got  
inside the booth/Told you, like smoke<sup>107</sup>

This yellow jumpsuit has been referenced throughout Eminem’s career and become a mythologized narrative in his public autobiography. As the story goes, Eminem showed up to Dr. Dre’s office for the first time in an unflattering yellow jumpsuit, not unlike the 90’s ensembles worn by Vanilla Ice and other ‘wankstas,’ embarrassing himself before shocking Dr. Dre with his undeniable talent. This moment, the unassuming white poser proving himself as a G.O.A.T. of rap, has been retold throughout Eminem’s career. In the HBO documentary *The Defiant Ones*, Dr. Dre recounts seeing Eminem for the first time: “Eminem comes in in this bright yellow fucking sweatsuit — hoody, pants, everything. Bright fucking yellow, you know. And I’m like, ‘wow!’”<sup>108</sup> Despite his bizarre external packaging, adorned in the ‘poser’ ‘inauthentic’ white-y clothes of the likes of Vanilla Ice, Eminem’s talent and class history and, therefore, authenticity as a rapper, cannot even be tarnished by his cringeworthy outfit. This anecdote about Eminem and Dr. Dre’s first meeting, in particular, Dre’s initial doubt about Eminem’s hip hop habitus, works to directly compare Vanilla Ice and Eminem. While they

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<sup>107</sup> Dr Dre (feat.) Eminem and Skylar Grey. *I Need a Doctor*. prod. Alex da Kid. Los Angeles: Aftermath Records, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> Spoken by Dr Dre. *The Defiant Ones*. dir. Allen Hughes. Los Angeles: HBO, 2017.

share many external characteristics in common, they are both white men who dress in flamboyant M.C. Hammer-style hip hop clothes coming up in a time where the majority of mainstream rappers were Black, this comparison works to show how they are ultimately different. Eminem is ‘legit’ and a born talent, unlike the ‘poser’ Vanilla Ice. That is, Eminem poses cultural capital and hip hop habitus that Vanilla Ice does not.

## **2.2: “My Skin is Starting to Work to My Benefit Now?”: Post-Race Racism and White Minority-ism**

Following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s, and the elimination of Jim Crow, many whites assumed that racism was ‘over’ and an equal society had been achieved. While racism in America was *transformed* following the Civil Rights movement, it was not eliminated; systemic anti-Black racism and white supremacy continues to be central to the functioning of American institutions and economic, social and political inequality continues to this day. Sociologists and African Studies scholars, including Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Leslie G. Carr and Robert C. Smith, began writing about what they named the ‘New Racism.’ Unlike the anti-Black explicit violence and hatred directed towards Black Americans during the pre-Civil Rights era, sometimes referred to as ‘Traditional Racism,’ the New Racism operates *implicitly*, without explicit calls for discrimination and violence.<sup>109</sup> Instead, the New Racism upholds racial inequality and White Supremacy through maintaining implicit benefits of white privilege and denials of the existence of systemic racism. White supremacy is self-perpetuating; as the Civil Rights movement successfully achieved legal rights for Black Americans, systemic anti-Black racism continued to operate in the laws, schools and governments of America. Structures of

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<sup>109</sup> Though, this is not to say that anti-Black hatred and violence do not exist under the New Racism — just that these are not explicitly endorsed by the State or the general white population.

privilege and oppression did not disappear with Jim Crow; rather, systemic and structural dynamics adjusted as to continue to concentrate economic, social and political power in white hands. Whitney Hunt explains:

New Racism necessitates subtle, more clandestine strategies that continue to preserve White dominance in society; in other words, undercover forms of racism are replacing traditional and explicit forms...Evolving representations of race are demonstrating new, more subtle forms of racism.<sup>110</sup>

The scholars above observed that systems of anti-Black oppression did not disappear but, rather, *adapted*. Explicit anti-Black policy and legislation was replaced with systems which subtlety, though no less effectively, can continue to disenfranchise Black Americans and benefit whites.

A hallmark of the New Racism is the emphasis that being a ‘racist’ is a quality that individuals possess and that singular ‘bad apples’ are responsible for acts of racism (this logic is deployed against Trump in *The Storm*). Placing emphasis on racism as *individualistic* rather than *systemic* disguises anti-Black discrimination, turns attention away from systems and institutions, and turns focus away from systemic solutions, and towards individuals who perpetuate racist acts or who hold racist beliefs. Bonilla-Silva writes:

If racism is not a part of a society but a characteristic of individuals who are ‘racist’ or ‘prejudice’ — that is, if racism is operating at an individual level — then (1) social institutions cannot be racist and (2) studying racism is simply a matter of surveying people the proportion of people in a society who hold ‘racist’ beliefs.<sup>111</sup>

Perhaps the most dangerous element of the New Racism is its denial that racism is *systemic*, that anti-Black racism is the foundation upon which economic, social and political institutions were established and how they continue to function. The New Racism denies that systems or

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<sup>110</sup> Hunt, Whitney. “Negotiating New Racism: ‘It’s not racist or sexist. It’s just the way it is” *Media, Culture and Society*. vol. 41. no. 3. October 2018. PP. 92.

<sup>111</sup> Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation.” *American Sociological Review*. vol. 62. no. 3. June, 1997. PP. 467.

institutions are race (or, more crudely, that there is a ‘race problem’ in society<sup>112</sup>) and claim that, in the rare occasion of racism, it is solely the fault of a bad individual. In the view, these ‘racist’ individuals do not reflect greater implicit messages or value systems of society or the general white population. That is, there is no ‘societal’ level of racism — just racism perpetuated between individuals at the individual level.<sup>113</sup>

One phenomenon predicted on the logic of the New Racism is what Leslie G. Carr named ‘colorblind racism.’ Colorblind racism refers to the popular denial of noticing racial differences between groups; they deny themselves being aware of the race of others, that there is an ongoing problem of race in America and, when the existence of racism is acknowledged, it is attributed to an individual with poor character, rather than systemic forces directed at benefiting whites at the expense of Black Americans. In her book *Colorblind Racism* (2019) Megan Burke writes:

Colorblind racism asserts that there are no real problems with racism in our society, that challenges stem from individual rather than our institutions and collective thinking and behaviour. In this sense colorblindness is a defence of the status quo. It is also a defence of individuals who may sincerely believe that they operate without bias, or those who believe that no one has any more significant privileges or disadvantages than anything.<sup>114</sup>

As Burke explains, a key feature of colourblind racism is the denial that any racial group experiences advantages or disadvantages to others. Many individuals who engage in colourblind racism think of themselves as racial progressives; they believe that *they* are more racially progressive than those who acknowledge the role of racial difference in media and politics as

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<sup>112</sup> In Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*, two characters, one white and one Black, disagree over whether there is a ‘race problem’ in the United States, illustrating the white middle classes refusal to acknowledge the inequality and system oppression of Blacks that bolsters their privileged position. See: Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013. PP. 238-240.

<sup>113</sup> Burke, Megan. *Colorblind Racism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019. PP. 10.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. PP. 10.

well as our own lives and relationships, because they are not (or, at least deny they are) aware of or behaviourally impacted by racial differences.<sup>115</sup>

An illustrative example of this is the popular ‘all lives matter’ response to the Black Lives Matter. Kentucky Senator Rand Paul may have kicked off this slogan when he suggested the Black Lives Matter movement should change their name to something more inclusive. Paul said:

I think they should change their name maybe — if they were all lives matter, or innocent lives matter...I am about justice, and frankly I think a lot of poor people in our country, and many African Americans, are trapped in this war on drugs and I want to change it. But, commandeering the microphone, and bullying people, and pushing people out of the way — I think that isn’t the way to get their message across.<sup>116</sup>

Many Republican politicians and political figures, including Senator Tim Scott, Ben Carson, and even President Trump, have used the slogan as an explicit criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement. Former Mayor of New York City and now one of President Trump’s personal lawyers, Rudy Giuliani, went as far as to label the Black Lives Matter movement “inherently racist” and “anti-American” because of its explicit focus on Black Americans’ experience of police brutality.<sup>117</sup> Fascinatingly, Paul, Giuliani and other users of the ‘all lives matter’ slogan claim that Black Lives Matter supporters are the racists ones because they emphasize the role of race and racism in the police brutality experienced by Black Americans. These Black Lives Matter critics are able to claim *they* are the racially progressive ones because they deny the

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<sup>115</sup> This is exemplified the sketch “I Don’t See Race” by the comedy troupe College Humour. In the scene, a young white woman remarks: “Call me crazy but I just don’t see race. I guess I’m just the least racist person here!” College Humor. *I Don’t See Race*. April 2017. URL:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qArvBdHkJA>

<sup>116</sup> McCarthy, Tom. “Rand Paul Tells Black Lives Matter: change your name — and your tactics” *The Guardian* August 2015. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/27/rand-paul-black-lives-matter-name-change-all-innocent>

<sup>117</sup> Twohey, Megan. “Rudolph Giuliani Lashes Out at Black Lives Matter” *The New York Times*. July, 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/us/politics/rudy-giuliani-black-lives-matter.html>

existence of racial difference. However, these individuals are attempting to silence the violences of Black Americans through denying the existence of systemic oppression. In fact, Paul and other ‘all lives matter’ supporters co-opt language of the Civil Rights Movement, and use it to frame any discussion of race, particularly any discussion which turns focus to the systemic racism at the heart of American institution, as itself ‘racist.’

In attempting to undermine discussions about systemic anti-Black racism in America, the New Racism operates through a logic in which discussion, or even acknowledgement, of race is ‘racist.’ Central to understanding this co-option of anti-racist rhetoric is Joe R. Feagin’s theory of the white racial frame. Faegin uses the white racial frame to describe how institutions, including government, education and mass media, assume a white perspective. In assuming a white perspective, whiteness is seen as the ‘norm’ and even framed as the ‘objective’ viewpoint. This ‘white-centric’ framing valorizes whites, represents them as complex and dynamic and, although they may have moral failures or character flaws, ultimately redeemable. The white racial frame is complex and dynamic, and, like many elements of the New Racism, is covert in the ways it promotes white supremacy and disenfranchises Black Americans. Faegin and Adia Harvey Wingfield write:

[T]he dominant white racial frame consists of the array of whites’ sincere fictions, stereotypes, images, emotions, narratives, interpretations and discriminatory inclinations that legitimizes systemic racism and inclines or allows whites to participate in the routine exploitation of people of color. In general, this white racial frame portrays whites as inherently more moral, intelligent kind and hard-working than most people of colour. It rationales the dominant racial hierarchy.<sup>118</sup>

Importantly, the white racial frame covertly tells white people *how* they should see the world and themselves. This is not explicit, but implicit in the ways that white characters interact with other

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<sup>118</sup> Faegin, Joe R. and Adia Harvey-Wingfield. *Yes We Can? Racial Framing and the Obama Presidency*. New York: Routledge, 2012. PP. 13.

whites, people of colour are represented and the general arc and themes of mainstream and popular media.

But, what does this all have to do with Eminem and his anti-Trump music? How does colourblind racism and white racial framing help us think about Eminem in the context of the Trump administration and Black Lives Matter? After all, in *The Storm*, as well in the songs “Untouchable” and “Like Home” from the album *Revival*, Eminem explicitly identifies himself as a supporter of the Black Lives Matter Movement. And, further, what does the New Racism have to do with Eminem’s hip-hop habitus?

To answer these questions, let’s look at how white racial framing has structured other narratives about white racial experience. In Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave New World*, a white man and woman in a dystopian future leave the technologically advanced London to visit an isolated “savage reservation,”<sup>119</sup> which is populated by nondescript non-white people who live without the technology of the Londoners. While there, the Londoners meet John, a white man born in the reservation from a Londoner who accidentally became trapped in the reservation. The Londoners had just witnessed a religious ceremony, in which one of the members of the reservation performed a ritual where he walked while being whipped until he collapsed. Talking to the Londoners about the ceremony, John says:

Why wouldn’t they let me be the sacrifice? I’d have gone around ten times — twelve, fifteen. He only got as far as seven...But they wouldn’t let me. They disliked me for my complexion. It’s always been like that. Always.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. London: Flamingo, 1994. PP. 88.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. PP. 105.

There are many reasons independent of his skin that others might exclude John, his mother's odd behaviour and cruelty to the people that inhabit the reservation, his interest in books and reading, but Huxley chooses to make John's race the reason for his exclusion.

A more contemporary example of this is the sports comedy-drama *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) about an unlikely friendship between a former college basketball player Billy (Woody Harrelson) and Sydney, a talented streetballer who eventually becomes Billy's teammate. Sydney, like all the Black streetballers in the film, initially believes Billy will be terrible at basketball because he's white, even saying "Billy, listen to me. White men can't jump."<sup>121</sup>

The idea that straight, white men are told they cannot do something or are excluded *because* of their whiteness might seem laughable — after all, the vast majority of power in America is concentrated in the hands of white men. These works, and all media which features the narrative of a white man disenfranchised by his race, are the product of white racial framing. Both narratives feature a white man in a community of primarily non-whites. Despite physical and mental aptitude, these men are excluded from community activities because of their race. These men then 'prove' themselves to the audience, either by learning to read and write as John does or becoming a successful streetballer like Billy, by accomplishing something the characters of colour in the story do not. By applying Faegin's theory of the white racial frame, I argue, its narrative operates in these stories to valorize their white male protagonists — they function to present their white characters as morally superior to their characters of colour, and suffer because of the 'ignorant discrimination' of these characters against whiteness. Faegin writes:

Where and when whites find it appropriate, they consciously or unconsciously use [the white racial frame] in evaluating and relating to Americans of colour and accenting the

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<sup>121</sup> Spoken by Wesley Snipes. *White Men Can't Jump*. dir. Ron Shelton. writ. Ron Shelton. Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox Productions, 1992.



privileges and virtues of whiteness...the white-framed perspective is mostly unidirectional, with whiteness and whites in the position of mostly being virtuous and the racial 'others' as often unvirtuous. As in the past, moreover, the commonplace white narratives of U.S. historical development still accent whites' superiority and courage over the centuries. Implicitly or explicitly, the contemporary white frame accents continuing aspects of this superiority — that is, that whites are typically more moral, intelligent, rational, attractive, or hardworking than other racial groups, and especially than African Americans and other dark-skinned Americans.<sup>122</sup>

The particular narratives above, on the surface, appear to be about acceptance and tolerance.

When examined with the white racial frame in mind, however, we can see that both John and Billy's stories function to highlight the resilience of the white protagonists, while presenting the characters of colour as close-minded and discriminatory.

This narrative of the racially-disenfranchised white man, shunned and shamed for his skin colour by a group of people of colour, is central to understanding how race is constructed and discussed in Eminem's music and public persona. In fact, a white racial frame, I argue, is the foundation of Eminem's hip hop habitus and rap legitimacy for popular audiences. To develop this theory, I will propose two connected but distinct concepts that I see underlying the logic of the narrative of the racially-disenfranchised white man, 'post-race racism' and 'white minority-ism.' I suggest, in spotlighting his status as a white man in a historically and socially Black art form, Eminem employs the white racial frame and frames his story utilizing both 'post-race racism and white minority-ism.

I use 'post-race racism' to refer to the narrative construction that racism can happen to anyone of any race, and racism should be defined as individual acts of discrimination against a person of any race, not as a system of oppression which operates to disenfranchise people of colour to the benefit of whites. This is to say, 'post-race racism' holds that racism itself is

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<sup>122</sup> Faegin, Joe R. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter Framing*. New York: Routledge, 2010. PP. 93, 96.

essentially ‘colorblind’ - a person of any race can experience racial discrimination. Post-race racism implies that all racism is ‘made equal,’ that is, discrimination towards a white person because they are white operates by the same logic as anti-Black racism. We can see the concept of post-race racism in both *Brave New World* and *White Men Can’t Jump*. Through the lens of white perspective, the exclusion these men experience is framed as ‘racism’ — they are discriminated against because of their race. Racism, therefore, does not have a historical connection to whites wielding institutional power over Black Americans (or white colonialists systemically oppressing Indigenous people). Post-race racism ejects the effects of systemic racism, exclusion from communities and activities specifically, and ignores their socio-political roots. Effectively, post-race racism denies that racism is institutionalized beliefs, values and concepts which actively benefit whites at the expense of Black Americans and other people of colour. Instead, racism becomes merely racial discrimination, which any racial group can use against another.

I use the term ‘white-minority-ism’ to refer to the narrative construction that whites can and do experience racism if they are a minority in a particular group or event. Adopting a white ‘view’ of the world, white minority-ism focuses specifically on white feelings of ‘racial persecution,’ appropriating the rhetoric of Black activists who have lived experience of systemic oppression. We see this at work in the quotations above from *Brave New World* and *White Men Can’t Jump*. It is John and Billy’s whiteness *specifically* which draws negative attention and is the reason for their exclusion. These narratives deny the existence of anti-black racism as systemic oppression of Black Americans not because they fail to acknowledge that racism is a current problem in the Western world, but because they reframe racism as discrimination against a person because of their race. Therefore, racism is not understood as a system of oppression

which privileges whites over people of colour, but something that happens to individuals who are racial minorities in any given community. In this way, both *Brave New World* and *White Men Can't Jump* are able to deny the existence of racism as a system which benefits whites at the expense of people of colour across institutions, and, rather, claim it is something which can affect any individual if they are racially 'outnumbered' in a particular area.

We can see the deployment of 'white minority-ism' when Eminem discusses his childhood in Detroit. Eminem frequently discusses his nomadic childhood; moving from trailer parks to homes in primarily Black neighbourhoods in Detroit, Michigan. While growing up, Eminem describes most of his friends as Black men in his age group.<sup>123</sup> However, he also recounts two experiences of violence; the first from an older teenager who bullied him in junior high school and the second of a group of young men jumped the rapper, threatened him, and stole his clothes and shoes.<sup>124</sup> Of these incidents, Eminem biographer Nick Hasted writes:

Living in a white minority, victimized and twice almost murdered by blacks, Marshall could be excused for starting to feel racist himself. The tribal nature of city hostility works that way everywhere, more so in America, and more so still in Detroit's huddled, severed communities. But, crucially for his future career, he took the opposite view. He had, after all, also seen white bikers point guns at his black friend Proof, taunting him for daring to enter Warren, when Marshall lived there. They had shot at them right outside his mother's door, when Marshall challenged them...He had walked between white and black America so often, his feet had smeared the borderline. He saw both sides with double-vision, from inside and out. He knew too much to be racist. Instead, his Detroit days made him hair-trigger sensitive to racism, from whatever skin colour, from then on.<sup>125</sup>

Hasted frames race, especially discrimination towards whites, as the underlying motivation of these attacks. Hasted continues to compare Eminem's assaults directly to an experience of anti-Black racism the rapper witness against a friend, equating these acts.

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<sup>123</sup> Aaron, Charles. "Eminem Interview: Chocolate on the Inside" *Spin Magazine*. 2000.

<sup>124</sup> Mathers, Marshall (Eminem). *The Way I Am*. Boston: Dutton Adult, 2008. and Nelson, Debbie and Annette Witheridge. *My Son Marshall, My Son Eminem* Beverly Hills: Phoenix Books, Inc. 2008.

<sup>125</sup> Hasted, Nick. *The Dark Story of Eminem*. London: Omnibus Press, 2011. PP. 49-50.

Eminem himself frames his experiences as a white kid in a predominantly Black neighbourhood in terms of racial prejudice. In the song, Eminem describes himself as a “corny-looking white boy”<sup>126</sup> and when he voices the bully, yells “you’re going to die honky!”<sup>127</sup>, emphasizing the racial motivation behind the assault. In the song “Yellow Brick Road” Eminem raps:

I am well aware/That I don’t belong here/You’ve made that perfectly clear/I get my ass kicked damn near everywhere/From Bel-Aire shopping centre just for stopping in there/From the black side all the way to the white side...We don’t fit in/ crackers is out with Cactus albums/ blackness is in/African symbols and medallions/Represent Black Power/And we ain’t know what it meant/Me and my man Howard/and Butter would go to the mall/With them all over our necks like we’re showing them off/Not knowing we was being laughed at/[rapping as someone else] ‘You ain’t even half black!/You ain’t suppose to have that!’/Homie, let me grab that/ And that Flava Flav clock/We gonna have to snatch that!’/All I remember is/Meeting back at Manix’s basement/saying how we hate this/How racist but dope the X Clan’s tape is<sup>128</sup>

Eminem explains being kicked “from the black side all the way to the white side” and made fun of by his Black peers for wearing jewelry associated with the Black Power Movement. Eminem continues to describe rap group X Clan as both “racist and dope,” likely commenting on the group’s Pro-Black activism in the 1990s and involvement with the Blackwatch movement, equating X Clan’s involvement in pro-Black activism with racism against whites. Not unlike supporters of the ‘all lives matter’ response to the Black Lives Matter movement, Eminem describes the popularity of X Clan’s music with his Black peers, along with their teasing about his appropriation of Black Power symbols, as racism. In doing so, Eminem effectively ignores the meaning of X Clan’s music and the symbology of Black Power symbols, as well as the

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<sup>126</sup> Brain Damage” *The Marshall Mathers LP* (1999)

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Yellow Brick Road” *Encore* (2004)

meaning of these things to his peers. Instead, attention to race, specifically Pro-Blackness and discussion of white supremacy, is described as ‘racist’ and exclusionary to whites like Eminem.

This description youthful experiences of racism is significant. Other white rappers have avoided discussing race, and place emphasis on discussing their violence, drug-use and relationships with women, commonly associated with ‘Gangsta Rap’<sup>129</sup> to accrue hip hop social capital and, by extension, authenticity. Eminem, I argue, utilizes his childhood experiences and frames them as racial injustice as a way of obtaining hip hop cultural capital. In fact, focusing on his racial difference from his rap peers, rather than ignoring, is a central piece of his public persona. Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard observe this, writing:

Eminem’s strategy from the beginning was not to mask his whiteness but to spotlight it, to turn it around on black artists and dare them to act hypocritically. Of course, he did so in a way that reimagined whiteness through a particular vision of white masculinity, one shaped by his geographic kinship with black America.<sup>130</sup>

Hip hop greats, including NWA, Ice Cube and Tupac, wrote extensively of the racial discrimination they experienced in their young adulthoods, including police brutality. Rap music undoubtedly was and is shaped by experiences of Black oppression in America. Adopting the white racial frame, Eminem frames his experiences as a white boy growing up in a predominantly Black neighbourhood as experiences of racism, parallel to those of the Black community. This undermines previous discussions of life under anti-Black racism by rappers of colour, and, instead, frames racism as something which can be experienced by any person, including whites. Racism, therefore, is a problem faced by any individual who is a racial minority in a particular space or community. This narrative rejects the reality of racial

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<sup>129</sup> Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan Press. PP. 22.

<sup>130</sup> Bailey, Julius and David J. Leonard. “Eminem 2.0: The Redemptive Subjectivity of Whiteness” *Eminem and Rap, Poetry Race*. ed. Scott F. Parker. PP. 135.

oppression continuing to affect the Black community and extends it to an atemporal and ahistorical phenomenon, which can and does impact white people at the hands of Black people.

This white masculinity formed by his relationship with Blackness is a major factor in the mythology of Eminem discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, it is this ‘ability’ to ‘overcome’ his racial identity and become successful as a white man in a Black art form that informs much of the mythology around him. In the documentary film *The Defiant Ones*, record producer Jimmy Ivane, when considering his first encounter with Eminem, says: “Greatness can come from anywhere”<sup>131</sup>, as if to suggest that Eminem’s rise to fame as a white man in hip hop is shocking. In the documentary *Eminem: Rebirth* music journalist Shirley Halperin says: “[Eminem] made being a white rapper okay...I can’t image that there’s any rapper in the world who hasn’t looked to Eminem and thought, if he can do it, I can do it to.”<sup>132</sup> Taken together, Ivane and Halperin’s comments suggest that whites are excluded from rap music, and that Eminem’s success is surprising, and even inspiring.

The language of Ivane and Halperin directly co-opts the struggle of Black Americans to break into and become successful in career and artistic fields across America. In doing so, it is implied that Eminem’s success in rap music, and the neoliberal ‘wokeness’ his Trump era work embodies, is comparable to the current and historical successes of Black artists and professionals. Eminem himself upholds this narrative in the song “Yellow Brick Road” when he raps about meeting DeShaun Dupree Holton (known by his rap name Proof), who would later become his best friend and bandmate in D12:

That’s about the time I first met Proof/With Goofy Gary with the steps at  
Osborn/Handing out some flyers/We was doing some talent shows at Centre Line High/I  
told him to stop by and check us out sometime/He looked at me like I’m out my

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<sup>131</sup> Spoken by Jimmy Ivane. *The Defiant Ones*. dir. Allen Hughes. Los Angeles: HBO, 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Spoken by Shirley Halperin. *Eminem: Rebirth* dir. Matt Salmon. Los Angeles: Entertain Me Productions, 2019.

mine/Shook his head, like, “White boys don’t know how to rhyme”/I spit out a line/and rhymed ‘birthday’ with ‘first place’/and we both had the same rhymes that sound alike/we was on that same shit/that Big Daddy Kane shit/Where compound syllables sound combined/from that day we was down to ride<sup>133</sup>

Again, the white racial frame operates to present Eminem as resilient and undeniably talented, shocking Proof with his rap skills and changing the young man’s mind about who can and cannot rap. Though it is subtle, this vignette illustrates a more open-minded Eminem changing the minds of the previously racially-ignorant with his rap skills.

### **Ch.2.3: ‘Embarrassing to be a White Boy’: Eminem and Black Lives Matter**

This is not to say that Eminem does not acknowledge anti-Black racism in his music. In fact, it has been a theme in his music even before the Black Lives Matter movement and election of President Trump. In the song “White America” he addresses critics who argue Eminem’s fame and success are a direct result of his whiteness. He raps:

Look at these eyes, baby blue/ baby just like yourself/ If they were brown, Shady’d lose/  
Shady sits on the shelf/...Let’s do the math: If I were black/ I would have sold half/ I  
didn’t have to go to Lincoln high school to know that/...When I was underground/ no  
one gave a fuck I was white/ No labels wanted to sign me? Almost gave up, I was like/  
‘Fuck it!’ until I met Dre/ the only one who looked past/ Gave me a chance/ And I lit a  
fire up under his ass!<sup>134</sup>

Eminem begins the rhyme by recognizing being white has benefited his career in the rap industry. He agrees with his critics, who argue he sells more than Black artists because he’s white. Though he acknowledges that his whiteness benefits him in record sales, he simultaneously points out how his whiteness was a barrier for him entering the rap industry. It was not until Dr. Dre “looked past” his whiteness is acknowledge for his talent as a rap artist,

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<sup>133</sup> “Yellow Brick Road” *Encore* (2004)

<sup>134</sup> “White America” *The Eminem Show* (2002)

and then allowed to thrive. Note that he does not acknowledge the existence of systemic anti-Black racism or white supremacy — he merely acknowledges his record sales as an *instance* of racial difference. He then indicates he himself has previously experienced racial discrimination in the form of rejection from record labels. In this narrative, Eminem presents and compares two kinds of race-based discrimination. First, the racial rejection back rappers and other artists of colour experience from white audiences and, second, the discrimination and rejection Eminem experienced at school and while an up-and-coming rapper in Detroit. By directly comparing his record sales with his previous struggles to find acceptance in the rap community, Eminem creates a narrative in which racial benefits depend on a specific context, even balking at the idea of ‘white privilege’ and claiming he understands how to racially discriminated against ‘feels.’ In “Leaving Heaven” from his most recent album *Music To Be Murdered To* (2020) he raps:

Don’t tell me ‘bout struggle, bitch/I lived it/I was five or six/The first time I got my hind  
end kicked/Malcolm, Isaac and Boogie jumped me/And took my tricycle/And I don’t  
know if I would call that ‘White Privilege’/Yeah/But I get it/How it feels to be judged by  
pigment/Besides getting it from both sides of the tracks/But I’d swore I’d get them  
back<sup>135</sup>

The narrative suggests that, while Eminem *currently* benefits from being white through increased record sales, he previously experienced whiteness as a barrier to breaking into the rap scene, and even experienced racially-motivated violence. Though both may be true, this narrative covers up the reality of white supremacy and allows Eminem to deny the white privilege which is foundational to his commercial success.

The operation of the white racial frame and its role in perpetuating the cultural narrative of Post-Race Racism in Eminem’s Trump-era music is further illustrated in the pro-Black Lives

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<sup>135</sup> “Leaving Heaven” *Music To Be Murdered By* (2020)



Matter song “Untouchable.” (2017) Eminem opens the song by voicing as a racist, white cop targeting young Black men. He raps:

Black boy/Black boy/we don’t like the sight of you/Pull up on the side of you/Window rolled down/‘profilin/Then we wonder why we see this side of you/Probably comin’ from the dope house/We could let you slide/But your tail light’s blew out/We know you’re hidin’ that Heidi Klum [slang for cocaine]/That’s another drug charge homie/It’s back inside for you!...Black boy/Black boy/We don’t get your culture/And we don’t care what our government’s done to fuck you over/Man/Don’t tell us your attitude’s a result of that!...Comply or die, boy/We’re fightin’ a crime war/Here come the swine/Tryna clean up the streets/From all these minorities...<sup>136</sup>

In this short rhyme, Eminem draws attention to the racism and racial-profiling which has caused the systemic police-brutality towards Black Americans, remarked on how anti-Black bias informs racist attitudes of some whites, the disregard many whites have for the lives and wellbeing of Black Americans and the physical danger many young Black Americans are in at the hands of white cops. By using the term ‘we’ throughout the song — rather than ‘I’ or ‘you,’ the rapper gestures towards racism as systemic and institutional — as effecting an ‘us’; a group — rather than individuals. He does not shy away from spotlighting unjust discrimination and suffering at the hands of white cops, and considers their deeply racist feelings towards Black Americans.

The rapper continues:

We’re applying/But McDonald’s seems to be the only franchise that’ll hire/So how can we have higher standards?/As Dallas overshadows the fight for/Black Lives Matter/We fight back with violence/But acts like those are/Black eyes on the movement/Which makes Black lives madder/At cops and cops madder/That’s why its a stalemate/Can’t arrive at a compromise/It’s Black Ops/I wonder if we hire more Black cops...And bad cops fuck it up for the/Good cops/And, man, stop/Sendin’ white cops into Black neighbourhoods/Who ain’t acclimated ‘em/Like that’s the way to do it/Who seen some fuckin’ videos/Of rapper’s waving guns<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> “Untouchable” *Revival* (2017)

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Again, we see the rapper offer a systemic analysis of anti-Black racism in America; he references cyclical poverty and of white supremacist cultural narratives as Black men as ‘dangerous.’ There is a capacity for systemic analysis in “Untouchable” which we do not see in his earlier music on race; previously, he discussions of racism focused on hateful acts perpetuated against *individuals* (usually bullies and members of the rap community against himself). But here, we see a discussion which considers the effects of racism on an entire *community*, specifically Black Americans, and how racial profiling, poverty, mass incarceration, the War on Drugs and police brutality work together to disenfranchise and oppress Black Americans.<sup>138</sup> “Untouchable” and its thoughtful consideration of systemic racism, poverty and incarnation, especially when contrasted with Eminem’s pre-Trump era work, suggests the increasing intelligibility of systemic anti-Black racism to white, middle-class audiences.

Though “Untouchable” is able to discuss systemic anti-Black racism, and even consider how specifically white cops participate in racial profiling, the song still cannot seem to illuminate how white people benefit from anti-Black racism and the existence of white supremacy as behind systemic Black oppression, The power “Untouchable” is that it does not deny the existence of what we know are caused by systemic anti-Black racism, and, therefore, can be ‘woke,’ without discussing white privilege and supremacy underlying or the logic of white supremacy foundational American cultural and politics. Simply, the song can present itself as pro-Black without having to critique (or even acknowledge) white supremacy. Though, Eminem admits that it has been “embarrassing to be a white boy”<sup>139</sup>, he does not consider how all white people benefit from and are complicit in anti-Black racism. He is “embarrassed” by the

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<sup>138</sup> “Untouchable” even goes as far as to consider the history of slavery and segregation and its continuing and intergenerational effects on Black Americans today.

<sup>139</sup> “Untouchable” *Revival* (2017)

actions of *other* white people (specifically “bad cops”), and not from how his whiteness has contributed to his dominance in a culturally and historically Black art form, how he has appropriated elements of Black art and activism in his own work or how he has benefitted from the intergenerational oppression of Black Americans. Though “Untouchable” acknowledges how Black people collectively are systemically effected by anti-Black racism, it does not consider how all white people benefit and are privileged by white supremacy,

The song, perhaps paradoxically, leverages the white allyship and acknowledgement of Black suffering at the hands of whites to effectively conceal the existence of white supremacy. Leaning into Post-Race Racism, the “bad cops” are racists whose racism is rooted in their own bigotry and misunderstanding of Black communities and culture (and not something systemic or foundational to the socio-political structure of America). In fact, the rapper goes as far as to include himself as a voice of the Black community, using ‘we’s’ and ‘our’s’ when referring to the experiences of oppression and police brutality of Black Americans. Eminem’s self inclusion in the Black community itself suggests a Post-Race Racism; by using ‘we,’ he blurs the lines of Black and white, covering up his own privilege. The rapper distinguishes himself from the “bad cops” and “white boys” who hold media-influenced racist caricatures in their minds which causes them to fear and target young Blacks. As “Untouchable” highlights Black suffering at the hands of a racist justice system, it covers up the systemic privilege and opportunity of whites. The rapper does not consider *who* benefits from the system (certainly not himself) or how the system is functioning to benefit some (whites) at the expense of others (Black); rather, for him, the tension is both “bad cops” and a misunderstanding. Though Eminem acknowledges Black suffering at the hands of white cops, he does not admit to the white oppression of Black Americans. Though the white cops are bad and bigoted, race relations can be largely summed up

to a culture clash and misunderstanding, rather than of domination, privilege and systemic oppression.

Additionally, we can observe the ways in which the virtuosity of whiteness operates to provide authority to Eminem's reading of police brutality in America. Eminem can see the problem for what it is, and offers a solution to the police brutality problem which has targeted Black Americans since the end of American slavery. Eminem's white position allows him to understand and judge both sides; he sees some cops are just bad, while others are frightened and corrupted by the media. He identifies the simple solution of hiring more Black cops for jobs based in primarily Black communities. Moreover, he scolds the "violence" of some (presumably Black) Black Lives Matter protestors, implying they are tarnishing "the movement." The white racial frame's values of whiteness' authority, objectivity and paternalism over Blacks is revealed here; Eminem knows what's best for "the movement," he is right to lead the movement and comment on the actions of Black protestors and activists. Despite its acknowledgement of current Black discrimination and suffering caused by white police brutality, the values of the white racial frame still import an understanding of whiteness as objective and authoritative over Blackness.

Eminem is able to appear "racially-woke" in *The Storm* and "Untouchable" and an ally of the Black community, while simultaneously not acknowledging the existence of white supremacy or the systemic benefits of whiteness. Simultaneously, Eminem is able to perform a hip-hop habitus through emulating the rhetoric of the struggles of black rappers like Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube. Through reframing the history of rap music as Black artists discussing and exploring their experiences of oppression within systemic Anti-Black racism to the race-relations discussed in rap music by Black artists to be framed as a more general, universal problem

experienced by anyone who is a minority. This works to depoliticize the genre of rap and cover up previous works focusing on Black and resistance to systemic racism. Through presenting his own experiences of exclusion from the rap and hip hop community as racism akin to the anti-Black racism experienced by people of colour in the United States, Eminem is both able to present himself as a victim of “racism” (and thus claim legitimacy in rap community) without addressing the reality of white supremacy in the West. Rather than attempting to erase the reality of structural and institutional racism through denying anti-Black racism is a problem in contemporary American, Eminem centralizes his own experiences of white racialization in his work. In doing so, Eminem adopts a white racial frame, focusing on his own whiteness and how this has impacted his experiences as a child in a Detroit trailer park, young man attempting to break into the underground rap scene and as a famous hip hop star.

## Chapter 3: We As Americans: Meritocracy, Trump and All-American White Trash

### Ch. 3.1: You Need to Calm Down: The ‘Deserving’ Poor and ‘Woke-Washing’ in Trump-era Music

Eminem’s childhood being markedly ‘white trash’<sup>140</sup> is central to his public persona and cultural narrative. Eminem’s artistic and commercial success is inseparable from the popular narrative surrounding his impoverished childhood, discovery by hip-hop greats and, of course, his achievement of success despite his humble beginnings. His hip-hop habitus and legitimacy in the field is predicated on his early struggles with poverty and the social stigma he experienced as part of the white working poor. Much of Eminem’s music has focused on recounting his earlier struggles, including his abandonment by his father, the abuse and neglect at the hands of his dysfunctional mother, his own addiction issues and his experiences of poverty and social marginalization as a white man in a prominently Black Detroit neighbourhood. Even casual listeners of Eminem’s music are familiar with the myth of the young white boy with a bad mom and a ninth-grade education from Detroit discovered by a hip-hop legend and, in turn, becomes the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time) of rap music.

Despite his social and financial upward mobility, Eminem has continued to identify with the white working class throughout his career and continued to discuss his previous experiences

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<sup>140</sup> ‘White trash’ is a harsh and offensive pejorative often used in white middle-class media and culture to describe impoverished whites and the white working class. Pejorative terms have been used by upper- and middle-class Americans to describe the white working class and distance themselves from this group since (at least) 1670. The term ‘white trash’ appears in popular American vocabulary sometime in the 1970s and, unlike previous pejorative terms, has actually been adopted (and, perhaps reclaimed) by the white working class. In this thesis, I will use this term not to refer to real working-class and impoverished whites, but, instead the particular formation and representation of ‘white working-classness’ as distinct from and inferior to the white middle class. That is to say, I will use ‘white trash’ to refer to the formation of whiteness in which white middle is constructed against. See: Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. New York: Viking Publications, 2016. PP. 269-271.

with poverty, even regularly referring to himself as ‘white trash.’<sup>141</sup> The essentialness of Eminem’s class identity, held onto despite changes in his material and social conditions, is central to his construction is *Americanness* throughout his music and performances. As discussed in previous chapters, his identity as white working class is the reasoning he gives for his past struggles, including being subjected to ‘discrimination’ by Black peers at his school and in the rap community. Further, his white working class identity provides him with an authentic hip-hop habitus, an understanding and authority with issues regarding the American military<sup>142</sup> and, in overcoming his humble beginnings and becoming successful, legitimizes his success (and proves his white masculinity) in contemporary America.

In this chapter, I will examine the connection between Eminem’s masculinity, class identity and the concept of *Americanness* that appears throughout his Trump era work. In Eminem’s music and public narrative, masculinity, class upward mobility and *Americanness* are intimately tied together; Eminem’s work functions to define *Americanness* by the post-race neoliberal masculinity the rapper embodies. Further, I argue, this post-race neoliberal masculinity is constructed and defined in opposition to the masculinity he attributes to Trump and his followers. Eminem’s Trump-era work reveals that anti-working class discrimination and oppression, how classist values are foundational to neoliberal values, are not intelligible to white middle-class audiences. Like the concept of white supremacy and considerations that anti-Black oppression is foundational to the privilege white people are provided in America, the existence

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<sup>141</sup>“W.T.P.” *Recovery* (2010); and “So Far” *The Marshall Mathers LP2* (2014)

<sup>142</sup> The military and the white working class have a complex relationship in the United States; for many members of the white working poor, joining the military is a route out of poverty, Recruitment activities often directly target working poor communities, drawing on neoliberal militaristic fantasies of masculinity to attract recruits. See: Wyant, Carissa. “Who’s Joining the US Military? Poor, Women and Minorities Targeted” *Mint Press News*. December 2012. URL: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/whos-joining-the-us-military-poor-women-and-minorities-targeted/43418/>

of systemic discrimination against poor Americans, and how this discrimination underlies the logic of neoliberal values including meritocracy and the American Dream, are not made traceable through Eminem's music. Rather, I argue, Eminem's Trump era music and performances *rely* on necessarily anti-working class logics, and use the concept of *Americanness* to signify a kind of new white hegemonic masculinity; one that is post-race, nationalist, meritocratic and, above all, 'progressive' (more on this later). Looking to Bourdieu's theory of taste and distinction, I argue Trump's masculinity (or, the image of Trump's masculinity Eminem puts forward in his Trump era work) is the object which Eminem constructs *Americanness* against. Eminem is able to effectively 'redeem' *Americanness* by covering-up what the election of Trump reveals about America — that it is anti-Black, classist, unmeritcratic, and white supremacist — by framing the President of the antithesis of America (despite being elected by the American people). By attacking Trump (and, by extension, the white working class followers Eminem attributes to him) and centring him as what is 'wrong' with America (and even posing a threat to *Americanness*), I argue Eminem is able to avoid confronting the realities of systemic anti-Black racism and white supremacy as foundational to America. Rather, Eminem's work functions to instead present that Trump and his followers are the cause of racism and anti-progressive values in America, not a foundational and systemic social matrix of power and oppression. This allows Eminem to present himself as an 'ally' Black Lives Matter and subsume its message without forwarding a message which would alienate (or, perhaps, 'call out') his white middle class audience.

Class and class identity are major parts of Eminem's work; much of his first two studio albums is focused on being a member of the working poor, on his life living in the trailer park



with his mother and half brother and on difficulties finding and holding down work.<sup>143</sup> Even following his commercial success, his white working-class identity remains a major theme of his work and in his public narrative, despite the change in his material conditions. He even often provides a negative portrayal of the white working poor, especially women, and places himself in opposition to the white working poor after finding mainstream success even before the Trump era<sup>144</sup>, specifically citing the failures of his white working-poor mother and father.<sup>145</sup>

Understanding how class and class identity are currently intelligible in American culture in the Trump era (and represented in Eminem's work) is key to understanding the culture function of *The Storm*. One example of a representation of the white working poor from the Trump era is Taylor Swift's music video *You Need to Calm Down*.

In June 2019, American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift released the music video for *You Need to Calm Down* in celebration of LGBTQ2S+ pride month. The video opens with a shot of Swift sleeping, her blond hair perfectly coiffed and red lipstick applied even in slumber. The singer wears a pink lacy sleep mask reading "Calm Down" across her eyes. She wakes up, revealing a silky robe and bright green-blue eyes shadow from underneath the mask. She recalls the culturally-understood aesthetic of tacky 'white-trash' queens like Anna Nicole Smith, Mimi Bobeck from *The Drew Carey Show*, Rhea Perlman's portrayal of Zinnia Woodworm from *Matilda* and Lucy, Sarah and Linda from *The Trailer Park Boys* with garish makeup, animal prints and rhinestones.<sup>146</sup> Getting out of bed, Swift reveals the contents of her trailer; she is

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<sup>143</sup> "Rock Bottom" *The Slim Shady LP* (1998) "As the World Turns" *The Slim Shady LP* (1998) "Amityville" *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000)

<sup>144</sup> Fascinatingly, Eminem's music has displayed some insight to his popularity with white middle-class audiences, and the white middle-class's identification with his and his earlier struggles with poverty. See: "White America" *The Eminem Show* (2002)

<sup>145</sup> "Cleaning Out My Closet" *The Eminem Show* (2002) "My Mom" *Relapse* (2009)

<sup>146</sup> Brown, Jeffery A. "Class and Feminine Excess: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith" *Feminist Review* 2005. PP. 85-86.

surrounded by trinkets, cans of spaghetti-os, plastic hair curlers and all kinds of all-American kitsch. She puts pink cotton-candy in a blender of mysterious pink something then proceeds to prance around the brightly coloured trailer park in a hot pink fuzzy jacket and a sparkly pink bikini, with a girly pink drink in her hands. Swift accidentally sets fire to her trailer due to carelessness with her appliances, but marches off with her drink unbothered.

We are led to a trailer park is a queer-camp-trash paradise, complete with rainbow trailers, pink flamingos, an outdoor wedding with two grooms, a snow-cone stand with a nearly-topless male server, a Drag Queen Celebrity Look-a-Like contest and a cake fight. Famous members of the LGBTQ2S+ community (including Ellen DeGeneres, Adam Lambert, Laverne Cox, Todrick Hall, RuPaul, all members of the Fab Five from Netflix's *Queer Eye*, as well as 'straight-but-not-narrow' ally stars Ryan Reynolds and Katy Perry) are shown at play in the trailer park, dancing and hanging out with Swift. The inhabitants of the trailer park are represented as happy and carefree and, importantly, not hampered by their (presumably) lower socio-economic status and circumstances.

But it's not all fun and games at the trailer park. A group of 'rednecks,' decked out in unruly hairstyles and American flags with missing teeth and anti-gay protest signs crash the trailer park to protest their LGBTQ2S+ community. Unlike the friendly folks we have seen, this group is *bad*. Anti-gay protesters are represented as dirty, denim- and plaid-wearing 'hillbillies,' with greasy hair and missing teeth. They are dressed in plain, dirty clothes and speckled with American flags. All the protesters are white. Their rejection of tolerance and acceptance of the queer community is an extension of their poor hygiene and taste — their rejection of the fun, campy fashion and lifestyle of Swift and her friends is their choice. They march in a circle while a gay wedding goes on and Swift sings they are "in the dark ages" and should "take several seats

and, try to restore the peace and control your urges to scream about all the people you hate, ‘cause shade never made anybody less gay!” Swift compares the heterosexism of the protesters to the online backlash and bullying she experienced following a recent public feud with celebrity power couple Kim Kardashian West and Kanye West,<sup>147</sup> calling both her online bullies and the protesters “haters” and asking “Why are you mad? When you could be GLAAD?” The video closes on the trailer park paradise with a giant food fight and a girl-on-girl hug between Swift and Perry. The protestors giving up and throwing away their signs in defeat.

There are many parallels between *You Need to Calm Down* and Eminem’s *The Storm*. Like Eminem, Swift did not express socially progressive political views<sup>148</sup> (or any political views for that manner) prior to the election of Trump. In fact, the singer drew ire for not publicly speaking out against the President during the election.<sup>149</sup> Both feature stars announcing and celebrating their commitment as an ally to a community to which they do not belong (Eminem to Black Americans; Taylor Swift to the LGBTQ2S+ community) and offer a call to action (Swift asked fans to donate to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; Eminem is more vague, asking people to ‘join’ him against Trump). Additionally, both music videos are examples for what has become known in popular discourse as ‘woke-washing.’

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<sup>147</sup> Gutowitz, Jill. “Who, Exactly, is Taylor Swift Telling to Calm Down? An Investigation” *vulture.com* June 2019. URL: <https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/taylor-swift-you-need-to-calm-down-lyrics-meaning-and-analysis.html>

<sup>148</sup> To clarify; I mean values specifically associated with the Democratic party. Though Eminem has, since the early-2000s, been outspokenly anti-Republican and anti-War on Terror, he had not previously expressed support for gay marriage, anti-Xenophobia, stricter gun laws, social programs, and so on, that he has in his Trump-era work. It is further of interest though that, despite vehement criticism of Trump prior to his election, the rapper never endorsed Democratic nominee Hilary Clinton (nor any Independent candidate).

<sup>149</sup> Glatky, Genevieve. “The Weird Campaign to Get Taylor Swift to Denounce Donald Trump” *Politico Magazine* December 2017. URL: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/12/06/the-weird-campaign-to-get-taylor-swift-to-denounce-donald-trump-215994>

‘Woke-washing’ refers to a current trend in mainstream media where many brands and celebrities are using political and social justice causes to gain attention and improve their corporate image. As pop feminisms increase in popularity and concepts like ‘Intersectionality’ and ‘toxic masculinity’ entering into public discourse in accompaniment with Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and other internet-based social justice activist campaigns, more and more private corporations have been co-opting the language and imagery of activism to sell products and rebrand.<sup>150</sup> ‘Woke’ is a slang word, originally used among Civil Rights activists and Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>151</sup> and reappearing sometime around 2008, used in the Black American community to describe someone who is aware of the matrixes of power, oppression, and privilege foundational to American institutions and socio-political structure. The word was co-opted by the white middle class sometime around 2014, entering into the mainstream media following its use by Black Lives Matter activists.<sup>152</sup> Following the appropriation of the word by the white middle class, ‘woke’ has more recently been used to describe a new kind of corporate ‘progressive’ image emerging in the last few years.

But, what makes *The Storm*, “Untouchable” and *You Need To Calm Down* instances of ‘woke-washing’? One notable aspect of ‘woke-washing,’ I argue, is the language and imagery of social justice activism, without a systemic or institutional critique. While both Eminem and Swift spotlight acts of oppression and violence currently occurring in America, police brutality towards Black Americans and attacks on LGBTQ2S+ communities, respectively, neither one of

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<sup>150</sup> Mahdawi, Arwa. “Woke-Washing Brands Cash in on Social Justice. It’s Lazy and Hypocritical” *The Guardian*. August 2018. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/10/fellow-kids-woke-washing-cynical-alignment-worthy-causes>

<sup>151</sup> Dictionary.com Staff Writers. “Slang Dictionary Entry: Woke” *dictionary.com* <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/woke/>

<sup>152</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Staff Writers. “Stay Woke: The New Sense of ‘Woke’ is Gaining Popularity” *Merriam-Webster.com* September 2017. URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woke-meaning-origin>

them examine the systems of white supremacy and institutional heterosexism and cisgenderism from which both artists benefit. Rather, both artists conceal the systemic roots of the oppression and discrimination, and instead point the finger at a new enemy: the dangerous white working class. Of course, *The Storm* and *You Need to Calm Down* have very different approaches to protest; while Eminem call-to-action in the incitement of anti-Trump protest. *The Storm* approvingly refers football players who take the knee during the National Anthem and asks the audiences to ‘ball up a fist’ and put it in the air in protest of Trump (the Black Power salute used during the civil rights movement by pro-Black activists). *You Need to Calm Down*, on the other hand, rejects the idea of protests, instead saying that the protestors are “being too loud” and they “need to calm down.”

Both *The Storm* and *You Need to Calm Down* rely on a distinction between kinds of working class whites to make their political point. Though neither artist directly ‘calls out’ the white working class, they utilize culturally intelligible signs to indicate the socio-economic identity of the ‘baddies’ to their audiences. Swift does this visually with her representation of the anti-LGBTQ2S+ protestors as shabby and denim-wearing with messy hair, poor hygiene and bad teeth,<sup>153</sup> while Eminem does this vocally through a crude imitation of a Southern accent with poor grammar who blindly follow Trump.<sup>154</sup> These cues, two extremes of over-the-top tacky kitsch or grotesque shabbiness, are culturally-coded symbols of lower socio-economic status. Recall our discussion of Bourdieu’s theory of taste in Chapter 1; class factions are distinguished and identifiable based on their *cultural capital*. We don’t need a bank statement to know what

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<sup>153</sup> Ortner, Sherry B. “Reading America: Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture” *Anthropology: Working in the Present*. ed. Richard Gabriel Fox. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991.

<sup>154</sup> This parody of a Southern accent is coded as ‘white working class’ and often used less to indicate the person is southern but rather as a veiled reference to class. See: Sweeney, Gael. “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. New York: Routledge. 1996. PP. 251.

Eminem and Swift want us to think about the socio-economic and class statuses of the Trump supporters and protestors referenced in their music; we only needed culturally-loaded symbols of class to quickly tell they are both working class and inferior to the artists. Though these representations in *The Storm* and *You Need to Calm Down* do not embody the lived experiences of white working class people, they continue to exist and operate in media and inform the white middle-class understanding of the white working class.<sup>155</sup> The images of ‘white trash’ Swift provides us, one quaintly tacky and fun-loving and the other disheveled and bigoted, can help us better understand how the white working class provided through mainstream media and are intelligible to white-middle class audiences as well as how concepts of class and class mobility operate in Eminem’s later work.

Eminem and Swift’s points rely on a dichotomy of formations of the white working class common in popular media. I suggest the white working class are often represented as either ‘benign’ (acceptable) and ‘dangerous’ (unacceptable) white trash. *You Need To Calm Down* reveals the current dichotomy of ‘benign’ and “‘dangerous’ American white working class present in contemporary American media and discourse. In addition to leaning into damaging stereotypes about working-class white southerns,<sup>156</sup> Swift also uses less obviously negative cultural symbols of the white working class that nevertheless perpetuate conceptualizations of the white working class as inferior to middle class whites. Swift never offers any clear information about the financial status of the inhabitants of her queer-friendly trailer park or of the protestors, but she does not have to; ‘trailer park’ is an culturally-understood symbol of the

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<sup>155</sup> Dunn, Tasha R. *Talking White Trash: Mediated Representations and Lived Experiences of White Working-Class People*. New York: Routledge. 2008.

<sup>156</sup> Lewis, Rachel Charlene. “Do We Need to Calm Down? A Roundtable about Taylor Swift and Classism in Music Videos” *bitchmedia.org* July 2019. URL: <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/taylor-swift-you-need-to-calm-down-classism>

white working-poor<sup>157</sup> and socio-economic class status of the individuals in the trailer park and the protestors are communicated to us through their clothing, decorating choices and behaviours.

Gael Sweeney explains:

[W]e know White Trash Culture when we see it. Rather than defining a people or a class, although both are implicated, it is an aesthetic of the flashy, the inappropriate, the garish. Unlike camp, which is a product of urban, elite and gay sensibility, White Trash has its roots in the South, the denigrated product of a rural-based under-class of poor whites, a culture in which the politics of identity and race is repressed often politically and ‘culturally’ incorrect.<sup>158</sup>

Here, Sweeney is specifically referring to the aesthetic of Swift’s trailer-park pals. Flashy, out-of-style clothes with bright colours and rhinestones are markers white working class indicators; in Swift’s video, they also function to distinguish *these* working class folks from the bigoted ones, and indicate they are part of a benign white working class. The benign white working class are fun loving, entertaining, and content with their lot in life, if not lazy and absent-minded, as illustrated by Swift setting her trailer ablaze and prancing away with a pink drink in her hands. They are represented as simple and perhaps even innocent, though intellectually and culturally inferior to the middle-class, happy with their lives as it is.<sup>159</sup>

The dangerous and disruptive ‘white trash’ are constructed as bigoted, have poor hygiene and are unintelligent (many of their signs have misspelled words). The trailer park Swift resides in is colourful, tacky, quaint and, above all, the inhabitants are happy. The unhappy people are the ‘bad’ white working class, to whose choice to be bigoted appears to be the root of their

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<sup>157</sup> Escaping the trailer park (and, thus, achieving class mobility) is a common theme through Eminem’s work and a key material artefact throughout Eminem’s mythology. See: “Lose Yourself” *Eight Mile* (2002). “Without Me” *The Eminem Show* (2002)

<sup>158</sup> Sweeney, Gael. “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. New York: Routledge. 1996. PP. 249.

<sup>159</sup> More representation of benign white working class includes *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Roseanne* (1988-1997), *Joe Dirt* (2001) and *The Dukes of Hazard* (1979-1985, 2005 film).

misery. Swift sings: “I ain’t tryna mess with your self-expression/ But I’ve learned a lesson that/stressin’ and obsessin’ ‘bout someone else is no fun”, forwarding a veiled critique of protest and those who challenge existing social and power structures. Of the protestors, Swift assumes their protesting itself is the root cause of their unhappiness, not their material conditions or the cycle of poverty many of the white working poor are trapped in.

Importantly, both sides white working class dichotomy narrative are ‘deserving’ according to the neoliberal logics underlying the representations. Jeffrey A. Brown explains:

For the most part this system of class distinction is completely naturalized and essentially invisible in the USA. The circular logic is that certain people behave in inappropriate ways because they are socially and economically marginalized, and they are marginalized because of the way they behave.<sup>160</sup>

For instance, though Swift and her pals are ‘benign’ (in that they do not pose a threat to the wellbeing of others) and the protestors are ‘dangerous’, both groups are deviant enough from American hegemonic ideals to justify their lower socio-economic status. Additionally, the ‘benign’ white trash do not challenge this in *You Need To Calm Down*; they are happy with frolicking in the trailer park. Swift even goes as far to imply that the ‘dangerous’ white trash merely need to choose to embrace others to “be GLAAD” rather than change their actual material conditions.

As mentioned previously, both *The Storm* and *You Need to Calm Down* avoid a systemic critique in favour of scapegoating (some of ) the white working class as the cause of discrimination in America. Eminem ends *The Storm* not with questioning if the system that resulted in the election Trump is good or if the country that benefits from the oppression of Black Americans requires reform. He simply says “We love our military, we love our country.

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<sup>160</sup> Brown, Jeffery A. “Class and Feminine Excess: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith” *Feminist Review* 2005. PP. 83.



But we hate Trump!” This final image placing the blame squarely on Trump and his supporters, and refraining from further considering the systems of power the led to his election. In *You Need To Calm Down*, Swift and six of her friends sunbath in fancy swim suits and matching high heels and sunglasses while the protestors, dirty, balding and in scruffy plaid and jeans, jeer at them. The juxtaposition between fabulously wealthy and powerful Swift, playing ‘white-trash’, flanked by friends dressed to the trailer-fab nines, ignoring shabby protestors yelling would send a very different message if the protestors weren’t anti-LGBTQ2S+. While she sunbathes, she sings to the protestors, “Can you just stop?/Can you just not?” She and her friends are simply undisturbed by their demonstration. This scene highlights strikingly two of the theses of her video; it is not the socio-economic position of the protesters which makes them unhappy (and tacky), but their bigotry (after all, she and her friends are very happy in their trailer park). Swift refrains from questioning the inequality she grotesquely represents on screen, and does not offer commentary on the clear symbols of poverty the protestors are adorned with. If, as Swift claims, they could “not step on our gowns” and embrace others, they too could join the party. Second, it is the bigotry of the bad white trash which is the root of homophobia, not systemic heterosexism.<sup>161</sup> Swift does not question greater systemic heterosexism and cis-sexism, but, instead points the finger at the white-working class as the source of homophobia. If they could just “calm down,” then the LGBTQ2S+ could freely enjoy their fun lifestyle.

We can see that Swift presents ‘working class’ as an identity — one of either the fun-loving and care-free, though lazy and absent-minded, ‘harmless’ white working class and the other repulsive bigoted ‘dangerous’ white working class — socially produced and, under

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<sup>161</sup> Kornhaber, Spencer. “The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need to Calm Down’” *The Atlantic* June 2019. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/taylor-swift-you-need-calm-down-hijacks-queerness/591829/>

capitalism, necessary socioeconomic category. Swift's work functions to dislodge both groups, harmless and dangerous, from the material realities of the real white working poor. *You Need to Calm Down* reveals that, in the Trump era, class (signalled through dress, hygiene, place of inhabitants and interests — namely, elements of cultural capital) operates as a cultural signifier detached from the material realities of poverty and wealth disparities in America. *You Need to Calm Down* deflects consideration of wealth disparity, socioeconomic inequalities and poverty by presenting one class of the working poor as happy in their position. The benign white working class's content attitude toward the socioeconomic status quo distinguishes them from the discontent 'dangerous' class, she considers neither groups oppression and experiences of poverty. The problem she tells us, is their bigotry and inability to fit into a 'perfectly fine' system, as the benign white working class has. Overall, *You Need to Calm Down* reveals a narrative of a white working class whose problems are caused by themselves — their bigotry and, therefore, choice to be 'unhappy' and socially unacceptable — rather than the reality of systemic poverty they live in.

### **Ch. 3.2: We As Americans: Eminem as Personification of America**

Eminem's representation of the white working class features a dimension that Swift's does not: I call it 'white trash transcendence.' The 'transcendent white trash' differs importantly from the benign because they have experienced class mobility. Unlike the benign white trash, the transcendent white trash is *deserving* of class mobility and would not be content to continue to remain in these "normal" lives.<sup>162</sup> These individuals have overcome their impoverished circumstances by virtue of talent and hard work. In "Lose Yourself," Eminem raps<sup>163</sup>:

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<sup>162</sup> Eminem. "Eight Mile" *Eight Mile: Music from and Inspired by the Motion Picture* (2002)

<sup>163</sup> Eminem sometimes uses 'Rabbit' to refer to himself in the third person, inspired by the character of Rabbit from John Updike's 1960 American novel *Rabbit, Run*. The film semi-autobiographical *8 Mile*

There goes Rabbit/he choked/he's so mad/but he won't give up that easy/no/he won't have it/ he knows his whole back's to these ropes/it don't matter/he's dope/he knows that/ but he's broke/he's so stagnant/he knows when he get back to this mobile home/that's when it's/back to the lab again yo/this old rap shit/he better go capture this moment/and hope it don't pass him/...This world is mine for the taking/Make me King!/...A normal life is boring/...I've been chewed up and spit out and booed off stage...Mom I love you/ but this trailer's got to go/ I cannot grow old in Salem's Lot/So here I go/ It's my shot/ Feet fail me not/ This may be the only opportunity that I got.<sup>164</sup>

In this song, Eminem gives his audience a look at his hard work, passion and determination to achieve upward class mobility. It is his passion, drive and hard work which allows him to escape the working poor status of his mother, and the rapper is deserving of the improvement of his material circumstances.

The key element of the 'transcendent white trash' is they proved themselves and become successful; in fact, the logic of neoliberalism *needs* examples of 'transcendent white trash' (or, at least the *possibility* of 'transcendent white trash') to support the narrative of America as a *meritocracy*. For there to be deserved inequality, there needs to be individuals who have overcome the circumstances of their birth and thus prove the 'fair' and 'meritocratic' status of America. In the song "Elevator," Eminem raps:

Maybe it's because I never had a mother raise me/Fuck around and throw a baby at another baby [presumably referring to the fact his mother became pregnant as a teenager]/You may think it's 'cause of the way that I was brought up/But it's all caught up to me now/Karma's in the waters...Eighty-something million records worldwide later/I'm living in a house with a fucking elevator<sup>165</sup>

The 'karma' Eminem has received is rewards (both material and social for his hard work).

Though he was born into a white working poor home, he worked hard, and was rewarded by the American meritocracy by escaping the material conditions of his mother's poverty. This

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opens with a quote from the novel and thematic influences from Updike's work can be seen throughout the film. See: "Rabbit, Run" *Eight Mile: Music from and Inspired by the Motion Picture* (2002)

<sup>164</sup> Eminem. "Lose Yourself" *Eight Mile: Music from and Inspired by the Motion Picture* (2002)

<sup>165</sup> "Elevator" *Relapse: Refill* (2009)

material ‘karma’ is important; material circumstances sort themselves out to be what we ‘deserve’ based on work ethic and talent; they are both earned and deserved. The ‘transcendent white trash,’ importantly, is able to hold onto the ‘virtues’ of the working class and continue to identify as ‘white trash’ despite their current socio-economic circumstances. It is *because* of his past circumstances, and his ability to overcome them and become independently wealthy and ‘self-made’ that the rapper represents ‘white trash transcendence.’ Country singer from humble beginnings Dolly Parton exemplifies this as well, telling *Rolling Stone* magazine that, despite her wealth and success, she will always be a “white trash person.”<sup>166</sup>

It is significant that the ‘transcendent white trash’ maintain their class identity *despite* changes in their material circumstances. Eminem can own a mansion and Dolly Parton can run a theme park named after herself; their wealth does not change that they remain ‘white trash.’ Eminem’s work and public narrative indicates the United States is currently in what I will call a ‘post-class moment.’ This is not to say that class stratification does not exist or that it is not currently functioning to oppress the working poor and privilege the wealthy and middle classes. Rather, in this current cultural moment, class has rather become an identity ejected from its material associations. Eminem’s continuing identification with being ‘white trash,’ fascinatingly citing his food preferences throughout “So Far” as evidence of this, functions to establish an idea of a class identity as distinct from one’s material conditions or economic or social capital, and, instead, is connected to taste and identity.

He raps:

I own a mansion, but live in a house/A king-size bed, but I sleep on the couch...Kiss my country bumpkin ass!/Missouri Southern roots/What the fuck is ‘upper class’?/Call lunch dinner, call dinner supper/Tupperware in the cupboard/Plasticware up the ass...Maybe that’s why I can’t leave Detroit/It’s the motivation that keeps me goin’...They say the

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<sup>166</sup> Dunn, Jancee. “Interview with Dolly Parton: At 57, the Country Legend Still Brims with Vitality” *Rolling Stone*. October 2003.

spray butter is bad for my health/but I think this poor white trash from the trailer/Jed Clampett/Fred Sanford and welfare/Mentality helps keep me grounded/That's why I never take full advantage of my wealth...Still crammin' the shelves full of hamburger Helper...Kool-Aid stain on the couch/I'll never get it out/But, bitch, I got an elevator in my house!/Ants and a mouse/I'm living the dream!<sup>167</sup>

Eminem refers to particular elements of his 'taste' — liking Jed Clampett and Fred Sanford, preferring to sleep on the couch (which happens to have a Kool-Aid stain on it), eating spray-on butter and Hamburger Helper — which, despite his wealth and social status, still make him 'white trash.' He even sites that these tastes keep him “grounded” and, by extension, it touch with the virtues of the white working poor.

“So Far” offers an explanation of class identity as one determined by our *tastes*. Recall our discussion of Bourdieu's theory of distinction from Chapter 1: as Bourdieu explains in *Distinction*, a person's 'tastes' (what they eat, wear, listen to, watch on tv, and so on) is connected to their class identity. “So Far” emphasizes this; it is not Eminem's actual material circumstances which make him 'white trash,' but, rather, his tastes (literally, despite being able to by any kind of food, he prefers the coded white working poor foods). Considering Bourdieu, cultural theories Angela McRobbie explains:

Focusing on patterns of consumption, Bourdieu shows how social inequalities are actively generated through the classifying taste...Class division in complex modern society are produced and reproduced in the realm of taste, and what appears to be generic for the works themselves and the capacity of persons differentiate, is in fact a non-innocent process by which class-divided society perpetuates itself.<sup>168</sup>

Bourdieu argues class stratification is produced and reproduced by the cultural capital associated with what each class consumes. The examples of typical working-poor food in “So Far” which illustrate Eminem's class identity is intelligible to us because process foods like spray butter,

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<sup>167</sup> “So Far” *The Marshall Mathers LP2*. (2013)

<sup>168</sup> McRobbie, Angela. *The Uses of Culture Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2005. PP. 136.

Hamburger Helper and Kool-Aid are, at least in the cultural consciousness, consumed by the working-poor. We can understand Eminem as ‘white trash’ *because* this is what he chooses to eat.

It is also here where the current post-class moment is revealed; the rapper can, because of his material circumstances, buy any food he chooses; yet, Eminem continues to buy food considered to ‘belong’ to the white working poor. “So Far,” therefore, implied class identity (as determined by what objects are acquired, consumed and enjoyed) is now disconnected from economic and social capital realities. Rather, class becomes detached from the actual economic realities. If class categories are divorced from the material realities, then they become merely floating signifiers of different identity categories; if Eminem can be ‘white trash’ because he eats spray butter and Hamburger Helper in despite of his substantial material wealth (he has an “elevator in [his] house”<sup>169</sup>), then class categories are not defined by the material realities. This is a ‘post-class’ perspective; if classes no longer indicate actual material realities (and, rather, are merely differences in taste), then economic inequality and class stratification is not a relevant social problem. Just as the New Racism conceals the continued prevalence of systemic anti-Black oppression through denial that racism is a problem in contemporary America, transforming class into an identity disconnected from its underlying material reality works to deny the continuing systemic oppression of the working poor and the existence of wealth inequalities. Working in tandem with the myth of America as a meritocracy, class becomes merely an identity category, and materials inequalities, if they are acknowledged, exist to reward the ‘transcendent white trash,’ who rise above their circumstance through hard work.

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<sup>169</sup> “So Far” *The Marshall Mathers LP2*. 2013.

This ‘transcendent white trash’ is based on the culturally understood narrative referred to as ‘the American Dream.’ The cultural concept of ‘the American Dream’ is integral to *Americanness*; the American Dream, that any person who works hard enough can achieve success, fulfilment and material wealth, is at the core of the American identity.<sup>170</sup> Media and popular culture have interpreted and reinterpreted the American Dream throughout time, adjusting and readjusting the mythology to suit the current time and socio-political conditions. Eminem’s narrative is a modern “American epic”<sup>171</sup> where he overcomes contemporary challenges to success; he achieves wealth in post-industrial Detroit; he succeeds in his career with only a ninth-grade education; and, he dominates a field from which he was initially shunned from. As his public narrative is a recapitulation of the American Dream, reinterpreted to suit the contemporary context, I argue the rapper has come to symbolize a kind of proxy for ‘America.’ The concept of ‘Americanness’ is elusive, and has transformed greatly over time with cultural values and formations. Christopher Bigsby writes:

America is a cluster of meanings...But the American is an unfinished story. If its end were implicit in its beginning, it would lose all allure. The idea of America and its reality are not coterminous. The space, indeed, has generated the energy that has driven much of America’s endeavour and a fair portion of its literature. It is only seemingly a single story, a grand narrative. It is, indeed, a fiction, or more truly a series of fictions whose pattern changes with every shake of a hand[.]<sup>172</sup>

I read Bigsby as arguing ‘Americanness’ is used to refer to an ever-changing societal and social ideal; it is not something ‘real’ (or, at least not anything static or definable) but that which exist

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<sup>170</sup> Carroll, Hamilton. *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. PP. 84-85.

<sup>171</sup> Laurent, Sylvie. “Neither Black nor White: Poor White Trash” *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race: Essays*. ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: MacFarland, 2011. PP. 172.

<sup>172</sup> Bigsby, Christopher. “What, then, is the American?” *The Cambridge Companion to Modern America Culture*. ed. Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. PP. 26.

as a cultural signifier of ‘good,’ ‘right’ and politically and socially acceptable. Bigsby remarks that the meaning of ‘Americanness’ “changes with every shake of a hand,”<sup>173</sup> because its meaning changes and reconfigures itself constantly with the evolving social and political world. Here, I am specifically interested in white American masculinity — what formation of masculinity currently exist in the cultural consciousness as ‘ideal’ and embodying the values and virtues of Americanness.

Centrally, ‘American’ is used as a signifier for ‘the best’ and the arbiter of what is ‘right.’ The white racial frame, Feagin explains, views the categories of ‘white’ and ‘American’ as intimately tied. Feagin writes:

Today whites as a group remain at the top of the racial hierarchy, and most view this as still appropriate. Important white views, values, and framing remain normative, the societal standards to be adopted by children of all backgrounds as they grow up and by all new immigrants. Indeed, numerous research studies today offer much evidence that the word ‘American’ is often synonymous with ‘white.’... In important ways, the most intensive U.S. nationalism has become a type of white superiority orientation. White media outlets and politicians often treat the term ‘American’ as meaning ‘White American.’ Moreover, for some whites today even the often noted ‘American Creed’ is a white framed creed with historically white interpretations of its rhetorical ideals of freedom, justice and equality.<sup>174</sup>

Indeed, numerous studies today offer much evidence that the word “American” is often synonymous with “white.”<sup>175</sup> The white racial frame presents the white (male) viewpoint as the objective perspective. As the ‘white male’ experience has historically presented itself as the ‘universal’ experience<sup>176</sup> the stories and lives of white men were, for a long time, considered the

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Feagin, Joe R. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge, 2010. PP.96

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Bailey, Julius and David J. Leonard. “Eminem 2.0: The Redemptive Subjectivity of Whiteness” *Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race:Essays* ed. Scott F. Parker. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. PP. 140-141.



‘default’ American life. Eminem often represents his perspective as the universal ‘American’ point of view.<sup>177</sup>

In Eminem’s music and public persona, his identity as a white working-class man and his essential ‘Americanness’ are intimately connected; Eminem’s obsessive work ethic, role as a father and provider, admiration for the American military are foundational to both his ‘transcendent white trash’ and the ‘Americanness’ he embodies. When looking back on his childhood growing up in North Carolina, essayist David Sedaris remarks:

Every day we're told that we live in the greatest country on earth. And it's always stated as an undeniable fact: Leos are born between July 23 and August 22, fitted queen-size sheets measure sixty by eighty inches, and America is the greatest country on earth. Having grown up with this in our ears, it's startling to realize that other countries have nationalistic slogans of their own, none of which are 'We're number two!'<sup>178</sup>

Sedaris' anecdote reveals how deeply imbedded the superiority of Americanness is in the American cultural consciousness; the white racial frame, in addition to presenting whiteness as the default and universal perspective, also presents America’s superiority as a matter-of-fact. America is seen as the ‘right’ view;<sup>179</sup> the most virtuous, the most advanced, the most free and ‘the best’ nation. Though the qualities associated with ‘Americanness’ constantly change and differ across communities (embodying the hegemonic standard of the time) the one constant is that what is *American* is *good* and *superior* to the non- or anti-American.

Though he has discussed the concept of ‘Americanness’ and performed speaking on behalf of ‘America’ throughout his career,<sup>180</sup> his framing as a personification for America has not been more explicit than in his 2017 album *Revival*. The album cover for *Revival*, the album

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<sup>177</sup> See: “We As Americans” *Encore* (2009) “Mosh” *Encore* (2009) *Campaign Speech* (2016) “Like Home” *Revival*. (2017).

<sup>178</sup> Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. New York: Backbay Books, 2000. PP. 213.

<sup>179</sup> Lakoff, George and Mark Turner. *More Than Cool Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. PP. 208-210.

<sup>180</sup> See: “White America” *The Eminem Show* (2002), “We As Americans” and “Mosh” *Encore* (2009)

released shortly after *The Storm* and featuring anti-Trump songs “Framed,” “Offended,” “Untouchable,” “Like Home”, features an American flag with an image of Eminem transparently superimposed on top. The rapper holds his head in his hand, in shame and sadness in response to Trump’s election. The internal album art follows the same style with a transparent image of the rapper superimposed onto an American flag, one with Eminem bare-chested, leaning against a wall and another with him sitting on a stool with his head in his hands. In the album artwork for *Revival*, Eminem and the American flag are, literally, one; they are blended together, with Eminem’s various expression on which the flag has been superimposed over, disappointment, defiance, hope, are presented as ‘America’s’ (or ‘the American’) reaction to Trump. Eminem and the Star Spangled Banner are inseparable, with each being a material manifestation of *Americanness*. Considering Faegin’s white racial frame and how ‘whiteness’ and ‘Americanness’ are intimately intertwined, Eminem’s role as proxy for American privileges his emotions, opinions and reactions. We can see functioning in *The Storm*, where Eminem confronts the audience about their politics, and calls them to join him against Trump. Eminem’s perceptive is the *American* perspective, thus providing him with an objective understanding of Trump’s America, the knowledge to lead the American people against Trump and the authority to arbitrate what is right and wrong. Eminem *is* America, Eminem *embodies* and *produces* the American ideal in his Trump era work.

### **Ch.3.3: We Love America, But We Hate Trump: Trump as the Spectre of Neoliberalism**

Throughout his anti-Trump work, Eminem presents his relationship with the President as one of opposing rivals. In response to *The Storm*, comedian Andy Lassner tweeted: “Not entirely sure how rap battles work, but I think Eminem is now the President of the United States”

expressing the sentiment, jokingly, that Eminem and Trump are equal political revival fighting over leadership of the country and that Eminem had ‘won’ their rap battle.<sup>181</sup> Though seemingly absurd, this is very much how Eminem represents his relationship to Trump in *The Storm* and anti-Trump songs on both *Revival* (2017) and *Kamikaze* (2018). Eminem frames anti-Trump works like ‘diss-tracks,’ a song genre common in rap music that are meant to attack, degrade and humiliate another person, usually a professional rival.<sup>182</sup> Diss-tracks are passed back and forth between rivals competing to ‘outdo’ insulting the other, and often attack the masculinity and hip hop legitimacy of the other. In the rap genre, diss-tracks are how artists directly compete with one another to establish domination over other artists and of the field itself. Eminem is well known for his diss-tracks, and they are how he has historically publicly interacted with rival rappers and ; therefore, by creating anti-Trump diss-tracks, which employ tactics of insulting the President’s masculinity, appearance and legitimacy (as defined by the field of hip hop) and the performance presented as ‘freestyle’ and off-the-cuff. This situates their (nearly entirely one-sided) rivalry as in the field of hip hop and, therefore, subject to its rules and practices.

Eminem’s framing of his conflict with the President as two equals competing through insults is significant; it is through the medium of the diss-track that Donald Trump and Eminem, and, by extension America in the Trump era, is presented. The election of Trump left many white middle class Americans in a precarious position; if America is post-race, pro-women and

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<sup>181</sup> It is worth noting here that rap battles, a performance in which two rappers trade insults through freestyle rap until the audience declares a winner, hold a significant role in the mythology of Eminem. The film *Eight Mile*, which presents itself as a fictionalized biography of Eminem, ends in the rapper winning a rap battle against a Black peer after being jeered because he is white. This rap battle is the central conflict of the film and, after having won it, Eminem’s character is cheered by the primarily Black audience, and recognized as having more hip hop legitimacy than his defeated Black peer.

<sup>182</sup> McIntyre, Hugh “Eminem or Machine Gun Kelly: Who is Winning the Rap Battle?” *Forbes* September 2018. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2018/09/20/eminem-or-machine-gun-kelly-who-is-winning-in-the-rap-feud-both-of-them/#7ffe2f5148a3>

meritocratic, how did Donald Trump, a racist and sexist child of privilege who has bankrupted himself on more than one occasion, come to hold the highest office in America? How can neoliberal logics which posit America as the ‘land of opportunity,’ and ‘home of the brave’ make sense of electing a draft-dodging reality star and trust fund baby? If Donald Trump, who Eminem tells us is the antithesis of *Americanness* is President, does this mean that the neoliberalism and late capitalism are, essentially, broken?

Trump election poses a challenge to the foundational American ideals of a post-race, post-class meritocratic America. Neoliberalism, and, by extension, the mythology and hip hop habitus of Eminem, *require* the appearance that the system is meritocratic, post-race and post-class. I argue that Eminem provides white middle class America with an answer to this problem through his performance of a ‘rap beef’ with the President. As we discussed, Eminem’s music positions him as a proxy or personification of America; he embodies the American Dream, meritocracy, whiteness, and ‘white trash transcendence.’ By framing himself and Trump as rivals and absolute opposites as he does in *The Storm*, he conceptualizes the President as something ‘other’ to America. In the explicitly anti-Trump “Like Home,” Eminem uses othering language of ‘terrorism’ and the explicitly Nazi ‘Aryan’<sup>183</sup> to distinguish Trump from himself, and align the President with anti-American imagery. Eminem raps:

Someone get this Aryan [Trump] a sheet/Time to bury him/So tell him to prepare to get impeached/This is where terrorism and heroism meet/square off in the street/This chump barely even sleeps/All he does is watch Fox News like a parrot and repeats...[B]and together for Charlottesville/And for Heather/Fallen heroes/Fill this wall with murals/Nevada get up/Hit the damn resetter/Let’s start from zero/This is your renewal/Spray tan/Get rid of it/Get a brand new better America<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Eminem evokes Nazi imagery, including Hitler and the swastika, throughout “Like Home,” drawing an association between the Trump regime and Nazi Germany. Historically and today, the term ‘nazi’ and associated imagery has been used as a ‘floating signifier’ to ‘other’ the thing being described. Painting Trump as in a lineage with Nazi Germany, additionally, evokes American World War II mythology.

<sup>184</sup> “Like Home” *Revival* (2017)

Eminem evokes historical threats to America and its values through drawing on Nazi Germany and War on Terror language and imagery; just as ISIS and Nazism continue to operate as ‘credible threats’ to the ‘American way,’ Eminem points to Trump as an ideological spectre threatening America. Here, “Like Home” presenting Eminem protecting America from Trump’s ‘terrorism,’ couching him in the terminology of the War on Terror; culturally-understood as the ultimate American enemy and threat to neoliberal values of freedom, capitalism and meritocracy. Neoliberalism did not ‘fail’ or, worse, reward Trump when he was elected President; rather, Trump is an external force which threatens neoliberalism, and one which has penetrated and invaded the system to destroy the non-racist, non-sexist, free and meritocratic American way.

In *The Storm* and “Like Home,” I argue, Eminem is able to explain to white middle class audiences how a meritocratic and post-race America can exist even as Donald Trump has been elected. Recall that, in the final moments of *The Storm*, Eminem thrusts his fist into the air and says “The rest of America, stand up! We love our country, we love our military, but we hate Trump!”<sup>185</sup> Here speaks on behalf of Americans, and eases their fears. America is good and can be saved. Trump and his followers. The rapper distinguishes his (white, hegemonic) masculinity from that of Trump’s; as Eminem is not like Trump, Trump is not like America.

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<sup>185</sup> *The Storm* (2016)

## Conclusion

On February 10, 2020, almost twenty years after the rapper was awarded the Oscar for Best Original Song (and neglected to attend the ceremony), Eminem performed that award-winning song, “Lose Yourself,” during the 2020 Academy Awards Ceremony. Prior to the award for Best Original Song, a montage of famous music from iconic movies, including *Rocky*, *The Breakfast Club*, *The Titanic*, *Almost Famous* and *Back to the Future*, played. The montage culminates with clips and music from *Eight Mile*, including a scene where Eminem’s character sits in a broken down and rusted up vehicle, looking sad but defiant. The opening beats of “Lose Yourself” begin to play and Eminem appears on the stage from a rising platform. Members of the crowd cheer, and the rapper performs the song, with images of himself writing and performing, his childhood home, cassette tapes, and handwritten lyrics as a backdrop. Members of the audience are shown smiling, singing along and dancing in their seats, while others appear confused and disinterested. The performance ends with a standing ovation from the celebrities in the crowd.

“Lose Yourself”, a song which embodies the neoliberal values of dedication to one’s craft, gaining success through hard work and talent, and, ultimately, achieving the ‘American dream’ of career success and material wealth, is one of Eminem’s best-selling and most beloved song. “Lose Yourself” lacks Eminem’s usual violence, sexism and profanity (The song could perhaps be described as ‘easy-listening’ Eminem or ‘Eminem lite’) and instead focuses entirely on his journey to success from a trailer park in Detroit. The performance presented Eminem as a part of American history, mythologizing his public persona and narrative by canonizing the semi-autobiographical film (and, by extension, Eminem) with the American classics played in the prior montage. Eminem canonizes the construction of his self and life from *Eight Mile* next

to American icons like Rocky, and Jack and Rose from *The Titanic*, bringing his story, one of hard work, success and the American dream, to a conclusion with his Oscar performance. The imagery played out, a twenty-years-younger Eminem in a broken down car in the rough end of Detroit, to a mature performer rising through the floor before a crowd of celebrities at the Academy Awards, sums up the rapper's neoliberal myth of the transcendent white trash. His story, we are told, is part of American history and the American identity; we should identify with him and celebrate his achievement — this moment when the rightful Oscar winner finally attends the Academy Awards.<sup>186</sup>

Eminem's 2020 Oscar performance solidifies his existence in the American cultural canon. His story, fictionalized in *Eight Mile*, is placed as capturing the American identity in the 2000s in the way *Rocky* did in the 1970s, *The Breakfast Club* did in the 1980s and *Forest Gump* did in the 1990s. By placing *Eight Mile* alongside these and other films which exist in the American cultural consciousness and represent particular ideals about masculinity, class, whiteness and Americanness, Eminem and his public narrative become part of contemporary American mythology.

In this thesis, I have deeply consider the ways in which concepts of whiteness, class and masculinity are made traceable in Eminem, and how Eminem's evolving sense of masculinity and whiteness can provide a framework for understanding the ways in which mainstream white masculinity has reckoned the meaning of the election of Donald Trump. I have argued that, while Eminem's work has begun to consider very basic understandings of anti-Black racism in America, his work continues to avoid engagement with concepts of white privilege, systemic

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<sup>186</sup> Wallis, Adam. "Eminem Explains his 'Lose Yourself' 2020 Oscar Performance" *Global News* February 2020. URL: <https://globalnews.ca/news/6547635/eminem-lose-yourself-oscars-2020/>

classism and the unachievable American Dream. As Black Lives Matter and Feminist movements have entered into mainstream discussion, Eminem's work draws on aspects of these movements, without acknowledging the systemic oppression and false pretence of meritocracy produced by neoliberalism. Eminem's work performs a kind of covert conservatism, in which he engages with some progressive ideas, most notably the existence of systemic anti-Black racism manifesting in police brutality towards Black Americans, while simultaneously denying there exist systemic problems, particularly how whites benefit from Black oppression, the systemic oppression of the working poor and the internal problems with neoliberalism.



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