

# The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing: What the Eminence of Eminem Says about Race

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*“Negro speech is vivid largely because it is private. It is a kind of emotional shorthand—or sleight-of-hand—by means of which Negroes express, not only their relationship to each other, but their judgment of the white world. And, as the white world takes over this vocabulary—without the faintest notion of what really means—the vocabulary is forced to change. The same thing is true of Negro music, which has had to become more complex in order to continue to express any of the private or collective experience.”*

—James Baldwin, “Sermons and Blues,” *The New York Times Review of Books*,  
March 29, 1959

*“The White race is the cancer of history. It is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself”*

—Susan Sontag, *Partisan Review*, Winter 1967

In the October 13, 2002, *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Geoff Boucher goes behind the scenes of *8 Mile*, rapper Eminem's movie debut. Titled "But Can He Act?", the piece documents a frank moment with Jimmy Iovine, who is co-chairman of Interscope Records (which distributes both producer Dr. Dre's Aftermath and Eminem's Slim Shady record labels) and an *8 Mile* executive producer.

Blaring Eminem's "Lose Yourself"—the hit lead single from the *8 Mile* soundtrack— from his stereo, Iovine retrieves a copy of *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business & the End of White America*, by African-American writer Leon. E. Wynter. In *American Skin*, Wynter argues that American business and marketing prowess has driven the United States to a "watershed" where, unlike in times past, both white and non-white people consume the same popular culture: one soaking in African-American flavor. "The mainstream, heretofore synonymous with what is considered average for whites, is now equally defined by the preferences, presence and perspectives of people of color." Adds Wynter, "This time whiteness itself is finally being dissolved into a larger identity that includes Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians." The ultimate outcome of this, he says, will be "the end of 'white' America"; that is, of an America that is racially quantized and color-defined.

To Iovine, Wynter has put his finger on exactly what the record executive believes and hopes *8 Mile* proves. "The power of hip-hop is in these race changes," says Iovine, "and you see these changes beginning in the 1990's with the kinds in this movie. It's about class, not race, and hip-hop is one of the reasons."

Too bad that's not true. To the contrary, *8 Mile* is definitely, even definitively, about race.

For starters, consider that, in the above quote, a white label head discusses a movie, ostensibly about a Black art form, in which the lead character is white, the screenwriter is white, the director is white, the producer is white, most of the production's talent, no doubt, white, and, of course, the film itself owned by a company run by, mostly owned by, and deriving the majority of its income from white people. Yet, something or other is “about class, not race.”

What, exactly? Certainly not Marshall Bruce Mathers III's mind-boggling success—*8 Mile's* stupendous \$54.4-million opening take; the soundtrack's rare, simultaneous 750,000 units per week debut in the No.1 spot; the pre-natal Oscar buzz for his performance; *The Eminem Show's* 6.4 million units sold. All of this is about race; about, both in the sense of “with regard to,” and “in a circle around: on every side of”; about the power of hip-hop fused with the power of white supremacy. The fact many people argue—as do Lovine and Wynter—that these triumphs show us to be “moving past” race, is, in fact, part of the proof that we're not; that, like the passenger who sees the train next to him moving and thinks that he is, we, also, are actually sitting still.

Conventional wisdom holds that Eminem's press has changed lately. “Mr. Ambassador,” the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* heralded in November; “America's New Favourite Son,” toasted the British *Observer* that month. As opposed to the outrage his hijinks met a couple of years ago, today he seems to be increasingly welcomed with warm respect; that, or hot lust. “A gaggle of my girlfriends are surreptitiously smitten with Eminem”, in-her-40s Maureen Dowd observes in *The New York Times*. “They buy

his posters on eBay. They play him on their Walkmen at the gym....‘He’s attractive and smart and very, very, macho,’ a friend with teenage boys says.”

In fact, the treatment of Eminem, in the press and in society, generally, has always been different from that accorded non-white artists in the hip-hop genre, in at least two key ways.

First of all, it always seemed that the amount and quality of coverage Eminem received, even before he had done anything significant, was unusually high. The prominent, magazine covers he received, the significant interviews he did, seemed to come unusually early and stay unusually late. (I saw this happen with the arrival of the Beastie Boys over a dozen years earlier.) Compared to Black artists, Eminem, like Vanilla Ice, Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass and a number of white rappers before him, got more by doing less; an almost sure way to mark someone as *white* under the system of race. (Asked by novelist Zadie Smith in VIBE how he’d grown as an artist while making *The Eminem Show*, he replied, “I learned how to ride a beat better.... On the last album, I hadn’t completely mastered it yet, to sink into the beat...I’d listen, and I’d be like, ‘why am I so far behind that beat? The first album was terrible—like, I was playing catch-up with the beat constantly” Oh, my.) As well this charge—that race has greased white people’s way; that they haven’t really earned what they possess—is, in this writer’s experience, the accusation that white people typically find most infuriating.

Secondly, unlike previous controversies around hip-hop artists, the criticism of Eminem seemed to stay focused on him, as opposed to being extended to the entire genre, as it typically has been. It’s almost as though the wider, whiter society was saying “You’re

special. You're different. You're not like the rest of them. We expect more of you." The result is what we see now.

*"What is called 'the news' is primarily the account of exploits of white people. Blacks appear only in the context of white action, usually on the receiving end. Non-whites are not portrayed as agents of history, only as victims of and responders to it. Newscasters who are conservative show good white actions to celebrate Western civilization. Liberal newscasters show bad white actions to scold and/or improve whites."*

—Dr. Charles Jacobs, research director, American Anti-Slavery Group, *The City Sun*,

February 8, 1995

So, while hip-hop was regarded as one huge, undifferentiated Black mass, Eminem was its flaxen-haired, blue-eyed baby—its golden child—born, albeit difficultly, but with greatness in his breast; scolded, because he, unlike, say, Snoop or Tupac, was worth improving. If one considers Dr. Jacobs' analysis, or, even more Washington, D.C.-based psychiatrist Dr. Frances Cress-Welsing analysis (*The Isis Papers*), which holds that, during the existence of racism, all areas of white culture exist primarily to ensure white genetic survival, then the necessary arc of Eminem's favor becomes more understandable, as do headlines like "America's new favourite son."

Watching *8 Mile* at the multiplex, I was struck by a number of facts: the unusual whiteness of the New York City theatre audience for what it is, essentially, a rap movie; that at least one filmgoing couple was, generously, well past retirement age; the flat, cardboard quality of the film's characters; that, with exemption of Eminem, nobody has

any parents, and everyone seems, inexplicably focused on “Rabbit,” as Eminem’s character, Jimmy Smith Jr., is nicknamed. Everyone seems usually concerned with what he’s going to do or not do, what he thinks or feels. Characters orbit him in a way that, especially if you’re Black, feels completely false. Meanwhile, his tense interactions with his nemeses, the Leaders of the Free World—running up on them from across the street while their SUV is parked; display mad heart as he gets beat down—though written to build conflict that is ultimately resolved in the MC battles, are *pure movie*.

Anyway, after nearly an hour-and-a-half of subconsciously processing this, during the lyrical skirmish with Lotto—the muscular rapper in the cornrows and undershirt—a thought popped out of my brain computer.

*Tarzan.*

Eminem has been widely compared to Elvis Presley, due to both men’s so-called “white-trash” roots, controversy-counting careers, and enormous success mining Black music and importing it white audiences. This contrast has been drawn by person as disparate as Sir Paul McCartney, Leiber and Stoller (who wrote Elvis’s hit “Jailhouse Rock”), Public Enemy’s Chuck D...and by Eminem himself. In the video for “Without Me,” Eminem appears briefly as Presley in his bloated, near-death form, self-mockingly rapping, “I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley / To do Black music so selfishly / And use it to get myself wealthy...”

(On-record, and at a crucial point in *8 Mile*, the rapper demonstrates a tremendous flair for silencing critics by raising their objections first—essentially stratagem No.5 from

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's list of 38 techniques for winning an argument. Says manager Paul Rosenberg, "There's nothing you can say about Eminem that he hasn't already said about himself.")

But, in truth, the Tarzan narrative—that of a white infant, abandoned by its mother and father and raised by apes, who rises to dominate the non-white people and environment around him—gets closer to the heart of Eminem as a phenomenon. ("The baiting of Blacks was Tarzan's chief divertissement", wrote his creator, Edgar Rice Burroughs, neatly summarizing *8 Mile's* climax)

As well, the Tarzan myth also neatly sockets into one of white supremacy's most enduring structures; the Black facilitation of white development (BFWD); that is, Black people, often at great cost to themselves, working to, again, improve white people. In *Tarzan*, the monkeys serve this role. But when one really looks, one sees the BFWD relationship repeated in racial narratives almost limitlessly. Between Nigger Jim and Huck Finn in *Huckleberry Finn*; Bill "Bojangles" and Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel*; Louis Gossett Jr. and Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman*; Will Smith and Matt Damon in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*; Michael Clarke Duncan and Tom Hanks in *The Green Mile*; Whoopi Goldberg and Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*; Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton in *Monsters Ball*; and Lawrence Fishburne and Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, to name a mere few.

The notorious Vanilla Ice chant, "Go white boy, Go white boy, go!" is the exhaust note of the racist engine, you see. It directly links, again, that garish rapper to Eminem; it subtitles all of the above films; and clearly, the Black facilitation of white development is

a central theme in *8 Mile*, because, besides being the only character with visible parents, Rabbit's the only one we see advance in any way. When the movie's over, everyone else is pretty much right where they started.

This is the very topology of white supremacy; its un-morphed shape from Day 0; its definition. Black facilitation of white development is why we were brought here to work as slaves, and in *8 Mile*, this relation is refined.

*Refinement*, then, is the "ideal" stage of racial subjugation; the point where the victims of white supremacy—(non-white people)—willfully support being the subjects of the white supremacists, and become accustomed to believing that this is the best possible arrangement between white and non-white people; the moment, so to speak, when the grasped victim calms down, stops struggling, and enjoys it. In such a state, that people are "moving past" race is the kind of statement one typically hears. In such a state, Black people can look at a white rapper dominating their culture, and say, "Isn't this just great? Aren't we all just getting along?" Or, as *The New York Times* reported in October, "Not only is Eminem accepted as supremely skillful practitioner of rap, many say he is the salvation of an art form that they say has been corrupted by a focus on Bentleys, yachts and Cristal champagne."

Or, as Black Entertainment Television's Stephen Hill, vice president for music and talent said in the same article, "Eminem is better than the best. In his own way, he is the best lyricist, alliterator and enunciator out there in hip-hop music. In terms of rapping about the pain that other disenfranchised people feel, there is no one better at their game than Eminem."



This is what James Baldwin meant by the white world taken over the vocabulary of Negro speech and music. This is what Susan Sontag calls the eradication of autonomous civilizations. This is the direction toward which, I believe, we are racing headlong, and the age or which Eminem is a harbinger. What Wynter characterizes in *American Skin* as the disappearance of race, I instead consider the refinement of white supremacy. The proof of this is that, despite what he calls a “mainstream...equally defined by the preference, presence and perspectives of people of color,” we’re still fundamentally talking about white people; *their* interest in those preferences and perspectives.

Black people, then, form a relative aphid class—a subordinate group that the white effective majority keeps around, like ants do, then strokes every now and then in order to obtain the sweet honeydew their “pets” release. In this context, however, hip-hop is valuable for one reason only: Because a lot of white people are into it, just like ants are into aphid excrement. Which, when you think about it, makes our culture truly “the shit.”

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