

THE AUTHENTICITY OF MARSHALL MATHERS III

HOW EMINEM OBTAINED AUTHENTICITY

Crossing socially acceptable racial lines, violating moral standards, and altering American popular culture, Eminem's influence far surpasses most in his genre. Whenever the rapper is being discussed, it is almost impossible not to raise the issues of race and authenticity. In fact, Liam Grealy argues that Eminem's white skin disadvantaged him as an authentic rapper (Grealy, 2008, pg. 859). On the contrary, Edward Armstrong claims that Eminem's race was unquestionably the reason for his successful career (Armstrong, 2004, p. 347). However, race is not the only factor that allowed Eminem to supposedly achieve the status as an "authentic" rapper. Whether it is his upbringing, class, lyrical talent, look, affiliations, marketing, or race, various studies have examined how Eminem has achieved such triumph while crossing racial barriers. This analysis will establish what authenticity in rap is and explore various scholarly writings about how Eminem achieved authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY

In hip hop, authenticity is crucial. Rappers and hip hop artists are expected to stand by who you are and what you represent. The rap culture emphasizes individuality and self-expression. In addition to this, location identifies who you are as well. This in turn determines your source of rap, which legitimizes you (Fraley, 2009, p. 42). "Hip hop fans expect artists to lyrically express an authentic hip hop identity by revealing personal truths representing a legitimate geographical background linked to lived experiences that reach back to cultural origins of predominantly Black urban neighborhoods" (Fraley, 2009, p. 43). Well known Robert Mathew Van Winkle (aka Vanilla Ice) tried to prove his authenticity through various stories. Later, it was found out that he lied. His "authenticity exam" failed miserably (Fraley, 2009, p. 43). Again, rappers are expected to remain true to themselves yet have an upbringing in a location acceptable to the black culture. This also must coincide with the fact that the rapper must be unaffected by commercialization and time (Armstrong, 2004, p. 336). On the core, Eminem is a white rapper that sells over 75% of his music to younger white people (Armstrong, 2004, p. 339). So how he obtained his authenticity is questioned frequently. Various scholars have tried to understand his technique, and that is what this analysis will try and summarize.

HOW

There is no one reason for Eminem's success. In this section, Eminem's authenticity will be explored. How the rapper managed to portray himself in that light has led to his successful career. To begin, it is important to understand that race defined Eminem's career. As mentioned before, some believe that the color of his skin was an advantage and some believe the contrary. Fraley argues that rappers use the idea of race as a way to "keep things real" (Fraley, 2009, p. 49). However, later Fraley claims that "the hip hop community continues to link authenticity with race but for many, color no longer serves as a determinant of behavior but merely a social construction limiting individual identities" (Fraley, 2009, p. 50). In fact, Gilbert Rodman says Eminem was successful at "violating deliberately, forcefully, repeatedly, and threateningly...the rigid lines between the races" (Rodman, 2006, p. 109). Additionally, it is said that even though Eminem was white, he was socialized black (Rodman, 2006, p. 110).

When looking closely at the movie *8 Mile*, a movie about the life of B-Rabbit (understood to be Eminem, played by Eminem) one feels that Eminem is authentic because he was discriminated against yet at the same time had support from some of the black community. In the movie, B-Rabbit struggled with the fact that he was constantly harassed by African-Americans. In a sense, he gained authenticity from this. "Support for Eminem (as B-Rabbit) comes at the expense of blacks in similar economic circumstances and in this way the narrative acts to reinforce racial assumptions about the attachment of poverty to blackness" (Grealy, 2008, P. 860). This leads to another way Eminem was successful in portraying himself as authentic. Instead of using race to promote authenticity, he used his class. "Authentic blackness until this time had been associated with... black Americans who had benefited from affirmative action and from free-market capitalism" (Grealy, 2008, p. 857). However, Eminem often referred to himself as "white

trash” which allowed him to use his race to his advantage and at the same time bring to light problems with whites. Therefore, he used his songs to point out his socio-economic status and became the representation of the poor white class, which in turn gave him authenticity (Grealy, 2008, p. 860).

Another factor that led to Eminem’s authenticity was how he portrayed himself to white suburban teens. Eminem believes this is due to the fact that he looked like them. He intentionally dyed his hair bleach blonde which could arguably have been a play on race or so that he would identify himself with that demographic (Grealy, 2008, p. 859). However, he still managed to maintain authenticity and sell to the African-American community as well. “His aesthetic, grounded in the consumption of recognizable representations that are both gendered and racialized, establishes an embodied identification with blackness in its dominant hip-hop form” (Grealy, 2008, p. 859). There are, of course, many different ways Eminem obtained the notion of authenticity. No doubt, his upbringing is a large part of his authenticity.

“Eminem spent a considerable portion of his childhood in an almost all-black housing project in Detroit. His mother, a welfare recipient, gave birth to him when she was fifteen years old. Eminem never knew his father. And, if Eminem is telling the truth, his mother used drugs. In school, bullies often assaulted him. He dropped out of school after the ninth grade” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 345).

To reiterate, the movie *8 Mile* showed his authenticity through his rough upbringing. In the movie, B-Rabbit dealt with issues that are typically aligned with his class. B-Rabbit was another way Eminem portrays himself as authentic. Eminem is successful in not separating his real story from the fictitious stories in his songs. These songs are stories about disturbing violence and hardships that people in his class deal with. Rodman stated “Part of Eminem's musical brilliance, then, is his ability to recognize this double standard and to use the tension between the fictional and the autobiographical ‘I’ to fuel his art” (Rodman, 2006, p. 104). Throughout Eminem’s albums, he uses alternative identities that deal with issues which often include extreme violence. In doing this, Eminem attaches himself to these characters and their stories. So he gains authenticity through the violent nature of the characters. Grealy argues that when a black man uses violence he gains racial authenticity (Grealy, 2008, p. 856).

In fact, violence not only establishes one as authentic because of the hardships that violence brings, but is also sells well. “Analysts recognized that the more record producers packaged rappers as violent black criminals, the bigger their white audiences became” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 343). When comparing Eminem’s song content, 63% of his songs are violent compared to others in his genre at 22%. So Eminem gains authenticity by out doing other rappers in regards to violence (Armstrong, 2004, p. 344). This may have been influenced by the works of Eminem’s founder and established rapper Dr. Dre. Dre is another factor that helped Eminem’s authenticity. “A way to accomplish naturalization, for artists to legitimize themselves, is to demonstrate the historic links between the artists and others already acknowledged as prime figures in the field. In this regard, Eminem’s link to Dre gives Eminem unequivocal authenticity” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 338). Dre not only helped produce Eminem’s albums and movie, but influenced the hip hop world to believe in Eminem.

Various other ways, it is argued, that Eminem obtained authenticity is through rebellion, imitation, and marketing. Eminem managed to pose himself as a rebellious figure which aligned himself with other rappers. “His equating blackness with rebellion and transgression, are defended and attributed to the discursive space of hip-hop. In other words, there are black precedents for his behavior” (Grealy, 2008, p. 860). Rebellion, quite often used in marketing, not only allowed Eminem to portray himself with the hip hop community, but also helped him sell records. Arguably his rebellion far surpassed that of what is socially acceptable which in turn, gave him free press. Eminem also used an imitation theme that aligned himself with suburban whites. In the Slim Shady LP, he marketed himself as someone who is overly imitated. This gave him authenticity through the idea that he was a famous and desired icon. Again, this imitation notion allowed him to further connect with a white suburban audience (Grealy, 2008, p. 860). This examination of how Eminem portrayed himself as authentic through various means was also a great marketing. He obtained much free press and media through controversies, race, imitation, rebellion, etc. which may have all been strategic.

CONCLUSION

Marshall Mathers, III (Eminem) went from a lower class, disenfranchised, poverty stricken, and white household in

a black community to being one of the most successful rappers in America. How Mathers achieved this is, is impossible to pin point due to the many factors that are involved. In studying literary works on the subject, Mathers obtained his authenticity from different dynamics that include, race, class, violence, imitation, rebellion, marketing, or maybe just lyrical talent. Mathers is quoted saying he wants to be a judged as a rapper “strictly based on the talent” (Fraley, 2009, p. 38). Whether it is just his talent or the numerous factors explored, it is hard to deny that Mathers has mastered his genre and at the same time crossing racial lines, striking controversies, and obtaining generally accepted authenticity. Yet, with all of this considered, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder.

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