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EMINEM & THE CONVERSION OF MASCULINE IDEALS IN RAP CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Throughout his career, Eminem has offered a deep examination of authenticity and masculinity as lived through the radically heteronormative and hegemonic world of hip-hop music. Hip-hop and rap music in the 90s was overwhelmingly dominated by egregious claims to aggression, sexual dominance, and one's violent capabilities. Eminem's work moves in stark contrast to the mainstream notion of hegemonic masculinity (dominant, intimidating, and stoically detached from emotions) to an expression of subordinate masculinity (empathic, emotionally vulnerable, and open to critical exposure). Not only is Eminem able to stand between these two traditional norms of masculinity in his positioning as a protector of the oppressed, but he can occupy several categories of masculine identity at the same time.

Keywords: hip-hop, Eminem, masculinity, rap

INTRODUCTION

From the first moments of his bizarre entrance into the hip-hop world, Eminem presented an alternative vision for modern masculinity - one that exchanges themes of dominance, self-aggrandizement, and *sexual conquest* for those of *authenticity*, *vulnerability*, and *relational consciousness*. In so doing, he changed the trajectory of the industry and helped reexamine otherwise glib, rigid, and confining ideals of American masculinity. In the last twenty-five years, American hip-hop music has experienced a renaissance in how it presents masculinity through the artist. We will argue that Eminem, as a bizarre outsider, served as an early prophet for initiating momentum around reframing masculinity in rap music and, perhaps, in American culture at large. The unique space of outsiderhood allowed Eminem an opportunity and a willingness to broach the otherwise unspeakable and shatter the all-too-common, stale, hegemonic masculine norms expressed in rap music in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Ultimately, we are arguing in this paper that prior to the arrival of Eminem, much of the mainstream American rap industry centered the genre on themes pertaining to masculinity through a hetero-alpha image. Male rappers boasted about sexual prowess, money, power, no perceivable sensibility to angst, and a capacity to end the life of an enemy with unwavering conscience. Undoubtedly, there were larger calls for systemic justice and the raising of a social conscience throughout hip-hop's young existence. However, only rarely were there commitments to introspection, self-awareness, and personal vulnerability in this quest. In many instances, the public image of the rapper was of primary importance in the music itself, at the expense of meaningful questions about the *self*, *empathy*, *intimacy*, or *vulnerability*. Arguably, mainstream rap music was missing not only a fuller vision of masculinity, but lacked an authentic expression of masculine identity, itself not dissimilar from the 20th-century American culture from which it sprang.

The monumental success of Eminem cannot be pinned simply to his extraordinary talent – though his pure ability in the genre cannot be dismissed. Certainly, there have been other monumentally talented rappers through the years, yet very few have endured the lasting success of Eminem without following his thematic example. Rather, it seems that Eminem's music hit a cultural nerve and filled a gap in the landscape of our own popular ideology. Eminem's music provided a striking example of an *integrated*, *vulnerable*, and *authentic self* in a rap industry starving for that exact thing. He exposed with unflinching ferocity the warts of his own psyche alongside the warts of our age, and, remarkably, this ugliness enthralled us and made ridiculous our preference for facade. The honest, vulnerable self that had seemed so absent in popular culture - particularly in depictions of masculinity and its stoic bravado - was now blasted across our screens and radios, plunging listeners into a new ideological age, one where it was no longer safe to hide behind the macho-façade, one where private vulnerability became the topic for public exploration.



VICIOUS VULNERABILITY

Blessed and cursed with a dichotomy of seemingly unbridgeable traits – viciousness bordering on sociopathology juxtaposed with the vulnerability of neurosis, acute self-awareness, and deep empathy - Eminem's musical career and discography have been lined with unwrapping the messiness of both intrapsychic and interpersonal tension. At the earliest moments of his career, one can literally feel the cognitive and emotional tension of a young man trying to spin tales about the suffering and rage that is ubiquitous in the underbelly of American society. In his early work, these songs and lyrics are by no means the majority of his work, but they stand out vividly and have often received the highest levels of acclaim (*Rock Bottom*; *Stan*). However, in the first half of his career, this straining of neurotic or empathic expression is always juxtaposed with some alpha hetero masculinity bordering a line of sociopathic tendencies. In these lyrics - the majority of Eminem's music in his early work - there is a fundamental emotional chasm almost always walking a line of humor, slander, and viciousness. So much of this music involves an investment by Eminem into the image of a combatant, humiliator, and antagonist. In other words, the extreme logical conclusion of hetero-alpha masculinity in hip-hop culture.

However, as his career develops, the tone of empathy, social consciousness, neurosis, and responsibility grows to take up a much larger space alongside the vicious and sociopathic pieces. Specifically, after Eminem's *Relapse* album and his personal recovery from benzodiazepine addiction, his work becomes more intentionally devoted to reshaping his position as an American rapper and, consequently, as a symbol of a newly founded masculinity to others. In short, Eminem's later work involves a substantive shifting on the spectrum of viciousness and vulnerability. Throughout this shifting, the acerbic tone of a trailblazer for a new trajectory of masculine norms never truly fades. His later material is unequivocally devoted to questions of protecting the vulnerable, voicing his own insecurities, usurping any glib narrative around a man's position in the family, empathizing with the marginalized and taboo, contextualizing success, as well as bitter self-examination and personal critique of his own decency.

As mentioned previously, every one of these themes is present in the very beginning of his career, and much of this article will flesh out this presence in the first half of his career. Nonetheless, there becomes an unequivocal commitment to these themes in his most recent work, and these premises are at the forefront of reshaping the trajectory of masculinity in American culture. Through his efforts to reframe masculine identity, Eminem opens a path forward for men in rap music that has altered the fundamental landscape of the genre. In terms of reshaping masculine identity, we would be cautious in arguing that Eminem is the most influential rapper of the last twenty-five years; the position on that throne is likely reserved for either Kendrick Lamar or Jay-Z. However, if Kendrick Lamar or Jay-Z are the more transformational artists of this period, Eminem serves as a John the Baptist figure, clearing the way for the new expressions of masculinity via his revolutionary and, ultimately, prophetic ability to juxtapose competing trajectories of masculinity in his art.

THEORIES OF MASCULINITY

Raewyn Connell (1987) defines four basic categories of masculinity, all focused on defining and categorizing a range of practices and attitudes directed toward structural and gendered power. According to Connell, masculinity manifests itself in distinct ways, and an individual may incorporate different concepts of masculinity throughout his life. Nonetheless, the most dominant form of masculinity manifests itself as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity traces its roots back to the work of Gramsci (1971) and is defined by its positioning of dominance, consensus, and is underpinned by force. This form of masculinity carries the most cultural capital and emphasizes heterosexual norms, physical strength, and the suppression of emotions. Finally, hegemonic masculinity does not need to be controlled solely by those who have systemic power. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) examine how even working-class men who are otherwise systemically inept at exerting large displays of force on society can still behave in hegemony in their interpersonal and day-to-day encounters. Undoubtedly, 1990s and early 2000s rap music and hip-hop culture absorbed hegemonic norms of masculinity and laid a groundwork for what it was to be a man in that cultural epoch.

For Connell, the breakdown of masculine trajectories continues into categories beyond hegemony. Complicit masculinity is a category fit by men who cannot themselves uphold or do not have the ability to engage in hegemonic masculinity. However, men who fall into the category of complicit masculinity refrain from challenging hegemonic masculinity and often admire men who are able to display hegemonic tendencies. Another category of men who themselves do not have the ability to display hegemonic masculinity or behave in hegemonic tendencies falls into a category of marginalized masculinity. Unique to men who fall under the concept of marginalized masculinity, similar to those defined by complicit masculinity, are likely to admire, albeit from a distance, the strength and power exhibited by men who are hegemonic. However, men who fall under the concept of marginalized masculinity have some specific trait – typically race or disability – that by nature will prevent them from any participation in hegemonic masculinity. Thus, those who fall under the category of complicit masculinity may not themselves have the ability to display hegemony, but they are allowed to participate in the culture of hegemony through supporting hegemonic men. To offer an analogy, complicit men may not have the skills to fight in the coliseum, but they sure as hell are allowed to be in the stadium to cheer on the bloodlust. On the other hand, marginalized masculinity defines men who find themselves in awe of some aspects of hegemony – strength and power, in particular – though they are wholly and unequivocally excluded from participation in or the support of hegemony. In this analogy, these are the men who wear the team jersey, but are not allowed to watch the games, most likely because of their race or some disability.

Finally, Connell offers a category of masculinity that is termed subordinate masculinity. Subordinate masculinity describes a category of men whose qualities, traits, and values stand in stark juxtaposition to those of hegemonic masculinity. These are men who are comfortable exhibiting physical weakness and vulnerability, as well as a tendency to be candid, sensitive, and expressive with their emotions. These men are typically defined as effeminate, neurotic, and open.

These men are poets, not warriors. They fit neither the structure of hegemonic power nor do they long to participate in the aggressive and violent tendencies to dominate one's peers.

Eminem's work is unique because he so clearly dabbles in most of these categories and, thus, serves as a transcendent vehicle to these traditionally accepted categories of masculinity. As mentioned, Connell argues that there is fluidity to these categories throughout a man's lifespan and that at different ages and phases, men may find themselves falling into different categories of masculine identity in relation to these hegemonic tendencies. Thus, if this were all that Eminem's career was – a shift from hegemonic masculinity to subordinate masculinity – it would not be singular. Therefore, what is profound and singular to Eminem's career is the ability to occupy several of these categories of masculine identity *at the same time*.

Undoubtedly, there is some shifting along the spectrum through his music - the sociopathic motifs present in *Kill You* (early career) are a far cry from the neurotic self-awareness portrayed in *Lose Yourself* (early middle career) and the compassionate protector role taken in *I'm Not Afraid* (later middle career). Nonetheless, Eminem's display of masculinity is unique because he can stand in these juxtaposing categories of masculinity within the same album, the same song, and even within the same verse. *The Marshall Mathers LP* has tributes to hegemony followed immediately by the unprecedented displays of empathy and compassion. One of the starkest examples of this is the last note of Eminem's bizarre cackling apology at the end of *Kill You* flowing seamlessly into the angelic ballad of Dido's chorus in *Stan*. This song in particular – *Stan* – is such an outlier in the contemporary history of hip-hop that it is shocking to reflect on just how revolutionary of a hit this became. Nonetheless, *Stan*, though undoubtedly an outlier to rap music, is by no means an outlier in Eminem's discography.

Furthermore, *Stan* is not merely an expression of subordinate masculinity amid hegemonic masculinity. The song itself is an expression of both hegemonic tendencies or frustration and aggression, as well as a sensitivity for the voiceless and downtrodden that is displayed through subordinate masculinity. The song is also, in some ways, an expression of marginalized masculinity, with Eminem standing as the champion and outside observer to a culture – hip-hop music - that he has still not been fully accepted into. Finally, it was the category of complicit masculinity that Eminem was accused of when he was scapegoated for the hegemonic display of violence in the Columbine massacre.

In summation, the singularity of Eminem's contribution to masculine norms is this ability to transcend the traditional normative categories by keeping an investment in multiple trajectories at once. Through this, he is able to advance the narrative of what it means to be a man in rap culture; his ability to push forward a juxtaposition of hegemonic and subordinate tendencies, though initially confounding, was ultimately revolutionary for rap music in the 21st century.

MASCULINITY IN AMERICA - MASCULINITY IN HIP-HOP

Perhaps nothing has changed more drastically – and is subject to continue to change more drastically - in American culture in the last two decades than the concept of masculinity and the



role that traditional masculinity has in influencing society, organizations, and leadership. A more appropriate way to term this shift would be to express the utterly diminishing role those traditional expectations of alpha masculinity have played in leadership and influence in American culture.

Many fields have experienced zeitgeists along the pendulum of acceptance for traditional masculine norms. Although some fields of American culture are still painfully working through this shift, it could be argued that no field has been affected more by the shifting role of masculinity in American culture than rap music. The discography of Jay-Z, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Chance the Rapper, Logic, Childish Gambino, Kid Cudi, YBN Cordae, Joyner Lucas, Run the Jewels, J. Cole, Tyler the Creator, Frank Ocean, and Mac Miller - among what feels like almost countless others - represent just how far the shift in images of masculinity have developed in hip-hop culture and art. Despite the myriad examples of this shift, one epitomizing example is Jay-Z's *4:44*. The album, revolutionary in a series of ways, devotes a track to an overwhelming emotional experience he had when his mother expressed to him that she spent her life as a closeted gay woman and had finally found love later in her life. Put bluntly, to consider this as a track on an album from arguably the most important figure in rap music would have been inconceivable as short as fifteen years ago.

What is most striking in the current analysis of rap and hip-hop is just how vulnerable and neurotic the genre has become. What it is to be a "man" in rap has been fundamentally usurped by this stylistic shift. When comparing the current tone of hip-hop with 1980s-90s rap, such a drastic shift could not be clearer. Frank Ocean is the first openly gay rapper; Chance the Rapper has replaced acid rapping for an existential quest for meaning, the search for God, and a devotion to both fatherhood and social justice in Chicago; Kendrick Lamar openly questions whether or not he is doing enough to serve as a role model and leader in his community; Childish Gambino's art is tender, layered, and anxious; Jay-Z has taken a reflective and accountable tone for his public marital infidelity and the emptiness and emotional trauma that it caused. Then, despite the heated nature of debate he provokes, there is the deep and profound influence of Kanye West's early work, defined by a neurotic style, on contemporary rap culture. Yet, despite the profound efforts in reshaping masculine norms by each of these artists, no rapper has done more than Eminem to initiate this new wave of masculinity as neurotic vulnerability, candid reflection, and self-examination into the genre of hip-hop.

THE FATHER

Apart from a one-off toe-dip in the water with Will Smith's *Just the Two of Us* and Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs' *Be a Father to Your Child*, fatherhood was something that 1990s mainstream hip-hop was largely uncomfortable talking about and exploring with any nuance. Likewise, 1990s American entertainment culture had relegated fatherhood to the useless buffoon archetype (e.g., Homer Simpson; Al Bundy), or the all-knowing Super-dad (e.g., Cliff Huxtable; Eric Camden). Either way, there was little attempt at some authentic examples of what it was like to be a father through the day-to-day challenges of communicating with children, mentoring and protecting them, and struggling to balance the demands of a full-time job with the desires of intimacy with one's children. Al Bundy was just a worker, too tired from his meaningless job and nostalgia for

his youth to mentor his children. Cliff Huxtable was home with his children more than any actual doctor could only dream of. Both of these caricatures were misleading representations and, thus, inauthentic expressions of fatherhood. Furthermore, these were only expressions of fatherhood in pop-culture. In rap culture, there were almost no expressions, let alone authentic expressions, of what it was to wrestle with the demands of fatherhood.

Eminem's depiction of fatherhood filled the vacuum of inauthenticity in both American and rap culture. This was often a messy narrative of fatherhood, one mixed with unabashed expressions of affection (*Hailie's Song*); strong desires of protection (*Mockingbird*); unequivocal solidarity and devotion ('97 *Bonnie & Clyde*); an existential sense of dread and responsibility (*When I'm Gone*; *Mockingbird*; *Castle*); regret over his failings as a father (*When I'm Gone*; *Arose*); and, perhaps most uniquely, unabashed expressions of silliness, playfulness, and humor (*My Dad's Gone Crazy*).

The repositioning of the role of the father through the lens of Connell's masculine norms is worth examination here, too. There is a radical tension of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity in the rapper's examination of fatherhood. He is undoubtedly a protector of his child and will commit violence to defend her or bring justice to her (*Mockingbird*). A biographical example of his hegemonic stance as a father is the rap beef between Eminem and Ja Rule over Ja Rule disrespecting Hailie on a track, referencing her growing up to be a slut like her mother. This beef was not worked out through a rap battle; this became a war, enlisting soldiers from two record labels (*Shady Aftermath* versus *Murder Inc.*), that fanned flames of tension between the two labels and influenced a series of assaults, stabbings, and bullets flying into record buildings. However, despite this traditional and hegemonic stance of the father as the protector, there is likewise a pronounced and unabashed sensitivity, affection, and vulnerability in Eminem's relationship to his daughter – Hailie Jade.

When I'm Gone seems to epitomize the unique shift Eminem contributed to when examining his role as a father. This piece is littered with contradictions and tensions; a constant tug-of-war for a single parent between the demands of a successful career and the unending needs of a child. Eminem lucidly paints a picture of this tension, rapping about his attempt to write a song while at the park with his daughter. This example transcends both the typical images painted around fatherhood at the time. Like the overworked and aloof Bundy-dad, Eminem finds himself distracted and detached while sitting at the park with his child. Like the omniscient and omnipotent super-dad, Eminem is indeed with his child at the park, putting the time in and offering the attention and intimacy the child demands.

However, unlike either of these glib masculine narratives, Eminem does not offer himself or the listener a peaceful resolution to the tension. The tension between ideals and demands is too much for the father to bridge. He cannot be both the powerful corporate worker and the committed father. One of these will always give way and, at this point in his career, the work wins. The song ends with expressions of regret, hopelessness, and suicidal ideology.

Finally, perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of Eminem's expression of fatherhood is the unabashed and shameless exposure of his own vulnerability to demonstrate affection for his daughter. Put simply, *Hailie's Song* was an unprecedented track in rap music. The track is one-part confession – I need my daughter for my own sanity – and one-part homage – Hailie Jade is the most important human being in my life. Beyond the confession of his own weakness to self-actualize without his daughter, the dedication is layered with vulnerability. This is the first song that Eminem sings on, a pattern that covers basically the first two-thirds of the track. His neurotic demeanor is present in his self-awareness that this attempt is a leap of faith and skill (*"I can't sing. I guess I'll fucking sing"*). Lyrically, the prose would be unrecognizable from a Barbara Streisand ballad if read in a blind test. In short, this track is no glib nod to the superficial emotions one might feel around the theoretical concept of fatherhood. *Hailie's Song* is a deep dive into subordinate masculinity as well as the vulnerability of affection a father can feel for a daughter and a father's confession of need for his daughter. Eminem's unprecedented trailblazing here offered a space for rappers to begin to broach these themes and widen the concept of masculinity as it relates to fatherhood in hip-hop culture.

THE SON

Though there is much crossover in rap culture between the examination of the role of father and the son, rap music unequivocally has more to say about being a son than being a father, at least as far as quantity of work goes. Up through 2002, there were a myriad of Mom-songs in hip-hop and R&B, and after 2002, as the role and nature of hegemonic masculinity as dominant began to turn in hip-hop, almost every famous rapper has a song devoted to mom. Prior to Eminem's scathing expose of the mother-son archetype, many of the mom tracks offered in hip-hop and R&B were relatively glib, portraying the ego-ideal mother as an archetype of the steadfast and sacrificing mom – a woman of unwavering compassion and enduring support through turbulent times. Rarely is there a deep introspective investigation of the complexity of this relationship and the nature of such sacrifices save for 2-Pac's *Dear Mama*. Shakur's devotion track is deeply introspective and even revolutionary in the examination of personal culpability for a relationship that was complex, stressful, and, at times, strained. Yet, in his examination of his mother's role in the stress of the relationship, in lockstep with former mom-tracks in the genre, there is reticence to put responsibility at the foot of mom, and much of the track is still devoted to the archetype of the unshakeable matriarch.

However, most of these works stand in stark contrast with the more scandalous, long-suffering, and traumatic portrait Eminem paints about the otherwise sacred bond between mother and son. Eminem's work on his mother seriously counters the typical American mother archetype as the all-suffering and infinitely patient nurturer; the rock who bears the weight of her son's maladies until those failings miraculously give birth to success and peace. Instead, Debbie Mathers is the albatross tied around her son's neck and a weight that must be lifted for him to find peace, self, and sanity.

Ironically, Eminem's birth into the world of rap music is through the canal of his beleaguered and traumatic relationship to his mother. *My Name Is* was Eminem's first major release under the



guidance and promotion of Dr. Dre. Much of this song lyrically exposes his own mental fragility, a lack of psychic homeostasis, and a tendency for sociopathology that can be tied directly back to his mother as a failure. In one of Eminem's deepest dives into sociopathic tendencies and unabashed violence against women – *Kill You* – he opens the track with a quasi-biographical refrain. He addresses how the roots of his violent tendencies are derived from a lie. It was his mother who misled him about his father, and it was his mother who attempted to conceal her own unstable tendencies. It was a story of the mother blaming her son and his estranged father for any of her own personal dysfunction.

Beyond Eminem opening us into the world of an estranged and dysfunctional relationship between mother and son, it is ultimately Eminem's *Cleanin' Out My Closet* that offers a singular examination of both the mother-son relationship. This track fundamentally reexamines the role of the son's masculinity toward his mother and continues with the overarching theme of this essay – that Eminem's uniqueness in shaping the expression of masculinity in rap music is found in his ability to juxtapose masculine norms of hegemony and subordination. It tells a story of a relationship founded on lies, betrayal, abuse, and trauma – a narrative rarely confessed to as the responsibility of the mother in rap music. However, nothing about Eminem's music is either trite or glib. The song expresses a contrast of emotions, contraposing a hegemonic longing for justice and vengeance against his mother with a sense of compassion for her inability to ever really understand the depth of the pain she caused her son. Ultimately, the chorus tells the tale on this track – a son who is sympathetic to the pain he has caused his mother by exposing these wounds versus a young father who is necessarily attempting to exorcise the demons of his childhood so that he can process the wounds and refrain from bringing the same trauma to his child.

THE HUSBAND

There is an utter dearth of music devoted to the exploration of marriage in rap music. Through the 1980's and early 2000's rap music, there are indeed a surplus of songs written about intimacy and love. However, only a few of these tracks directly address the questions tied exclusively to marriage (e.g. fidelity, responsibility, intimacy, trust, and longevity). Even artists who were married were reluctant to rap about it, and many songs about love and fidelity were focused on the sexual aspect of intimacy or homages to physical beauty and, thus, are devoid of many of the emotional or social factors that support intimate relationships.

To be fair, this is no longer the case in the world of hip-hop. A short examination of the last ten years of hip-hop provides a wellspring of lyrics devoted to the more emotional and social aspects of intimacy, the complexity and work tied to fidelity, as well as a more authentic yearning for a committed and monogamous form of intimacy. I argue that this is the case, at least in part, because of Eminem's contribution to broaching the topic of marriage in rap music, as well as his drive to open the nuances and complexities foundational to intimacy.

There is no single individual to whom more of Eminem's music is inspired by or devoted to than Kim Scott. Twice married to Kim, she witnessed the transformation from a Detroit-based laborer named Marshall Mathers to the international superstar Slim Shady. Eminem often alludes



to Kim's struggle with this overnight transcendence into the fame for her husband. Regardless, Kim and Marshall wrestled with stability from the most nascent phases of their love, entering a volatile pact that was almost destined to touch the extremes of intimacy.

'97 *Bonnie & Clyde* and *Kim* both open the listener into this world of volatility; radical pendulum swings from love-to-loathing; from fidelity-to-lies; from ecstasy to trauma. *Kim* is not merely a track about violence. It is, again, a juxtaposition of hegemony and subordination. While Eminem is dragging the tied-up Kim through the woods to slit her throat, he is sobbing, pausing, confessing and expressing the vulnerability of being cheated on. There is no doubt of hegemony in these murderous tendencies; however, they are coupled with the subordinate masculinity of frailty, insecurity, and the pain that comes from losing control of our loved one's choices.

Other tracks in Eminem's discography further the juxtaposition of these masculine norms, bending deeper on the spectrum toward empathy and subordination. *Love the Way You Lie* and *Bad Husband* are confessional apologies to his ex-wife. They are contextual and reflective ballads, upholding a narrative of personal responsibility for his personal flaws and shortcomings as a husband, as well as sensitive to the complex nuances of an abusive and failed relationship. All in all, these expressions of husbandry are not idealized, diminished, nor sexualized. *Love the Way You Lie* is an empathic and confessional examination of self-injurious tendencies that arise in loving relationships. Reflection is offered on the confounding nature of human desire, the primordial and pervasive fear of human rejection, and the tendency to harm those whom we love and trust the most. *Bad Husband* is a candid and vulnerable expression of responsibility for his personal failings in love. After spending, roughly, a whole career scapegoating Kim Scott as a source of his trauma and volatility, Eminem is accountable to his ex-wife and failed marriage. He is fully aware of his own duality – both loving and volatile – and how this likely caused incurable wounds. Ultimately, these tracks stand as a frank expression of the truly difficult labor of marriage. They are far beyond the glib exposition of a father as a savior/protector or the checked-out-dad.

FRIENDSHIP

There has always been a culture of solidarity in rap music, one that from its nascent days centered primarily on shows of violence, devotion, and tribal primacy (e.g., East Coast vs. West Coast; Shady Aftermath vs. Murder Inc., etc.). The most foundational question of one's friendship was typically determined by his propensity to commit violence – even murder – on a perceived enemy of the group. This tendency parallels American popular culture – primarily in all the cop and war dramas – where friendship and masculinity are inherently violently linked.

Eminem is not immune from this hegemonic expression of friendship. Dr. Dre's *Chronic 2000* album was in many ways Eminem's encore to the hip-hop community. The two tracks he appears on – *What's the Difference* and *Forgot About Dre* – are resounding and unequivocal testimonies to the depth of loyalty Eminem has to Dre. Yet, as is often the case with Eminem, this expression of loyalty is layered and cannot be limited to hegemonic and tribal devotion.



His expressions of friendship and loyalty to Dre are nuanced with sentiments of affection, candor, vulnerability, and humor without any necessary link to hegemonic tribalism. He is not the only rapper to endorse a subordinate form of masculinity and express a sense of vulnerability and need for his friend. The most iconic example of this sentiment is probably Puff Daddy's *I'll Be Missing You*; however, other tracks present themselves even from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

Even though Eminem was not the first rapper to muse on the vulnerability and affection of friendship, as always, he ups the ante on these sentiments. I can find no other documented case in any single rap song prior to Eminem of one male rapper saying unequivocally to another male rapper "I love you." This is precisely how Eminem opens his verse on Dr. Dre's *What's the Difference* (*I don't know if I ever told you this, but I love you, dog*). Much of *What's the Difference* is a track about friendship, with Dr. Dre opening the first verse reflecting on regrets and misconceptions about beef he's had with former members of NWA. Dre regrets misconceptions about himself that have grown in the hip-hop world, including how he might be living his life and who he might be close with after NWA. His deepest regrets seem to come over an unnecessary beef formed between he and Eazy-E, culminating with Dre expressing a sense that he would do anything to squash this conflict. Dre's laments and vulnerability are a stark contrast with Xzibit's (second) verse on the track. Xzibit demonstrates his "differences" through a more or less hegemonic display of power and alpha masculinity. In many ways, it's Dre's verse on this track that is the most vivid expression of subordinate masculinity, overall. Yet, despite the fact that the rest of Eminem's verse is devoted to displays of hegemony, sociopathic violence, and sadistic desire, it is his unparalleled and succinct expression that steals the show – *I love you*.

Eminem's other most profound expression of friendship comes in his work on Dr. Dre's track, *I Need a Doctor*. Like most of Eminem's best work, it is impossible to categorize his work on this track as merely an expression of subordinate masculinity. The juxtaposition of his work here is of a caustic honesty and a waning need for the support of his friend and mentor. Eminem's verses on this track are reflective of a time when both rappers' careers were at a crossroads. Eminem's infamous relapse into benzodiazepine addiction is well accounted for (Weisman, 2013). He expresses how he navigated through this period desperate for mentorship, support, and guidance, only to find Dre experiencing his own period of depression, confusion, and uncertainty. Eminem uses the first verse as an acerbic wake-up call to Dre, calling him out for his apathy while Eminem attempted to navigate the murky waters of addiction, recovery, and self-doubt. In short, he is viciously calling out a friend for failing to uphold his end of the bargain. The second verse is generous, compassionate, and empathic. Eminem guides a delicate reflection on the etiology of Dre's own suffering. He also addresses his own myopia and self-centeredness, making note of his own failings to Dre and his own shortcomings in not addressing his friend's suffering. This is a lucid expression of subordinate masculinity. Eminem is unabashed about his need for a friend during a time of insecurity and the exorcising of personal demons. His display of empathy, responsibility, and compassion for his friend's suffering is likewise an expression of subordinate masculinity, as well as his admittance of failing in the effort to support his friend through this time due to his own self-consumption.



SEXUAL PROWESS AND INTIMACY

As alluded to in the section on Eminem's role as *The Husband*, there is undoubtedly a large portion of hip-hop culture and rap music devoted to making explicit one's own sexual conquests, virility, and seductive power toward women. Throughout Eminem's discography, there is a disproportionately small amount of work devoted to a hegemonic stance on sexuality. This is not to cast doubt on the fact that Eminem has both tracks and references on tracks to hegemonic sexuality. However, these references are relatively scarce and, when made, are often presented with a tone of jest or self-deprecation; they are many, and most are homogenous in nature. From 1980 to the early 2000's, almost all expressions of sexuality are unequivocal expressions of hegemonic masculinity. All in all, these themes are glib, myopic, and objectifying of women's roles or places in sexual intimacy.

Though not all, the majority of Eminem's contributions to the topic of sexuality fall much more on the side of self-deprecation, humor, and subordinate masculinity. It takes Eminem until his third studio album to devote a single track to sex. Again, there are references to sex throughout – *My Name Is*; *Cum on Everybody*; *Ken Kaniff (skit)*; *Kill You*; *The Real Slim Shady* – but none of these tracks or references deal with the topic with any seriousness, self-aggrandizement, or hegemonic expressions of power. Most are either humorous, satirical, or exposes around the hypocritical nature of sexual expression in American culture.

Eminem's first track that is explicitly devoted to sex and sexual prowess is *Superman*. On the surface, this looks like a classic rapper homage to his own virility and seductive powers. When examined analytically and contextually, this track is another layered expression of his own fragility as a lover, as well as his nihilism about romantic affairs. It is difficult to tell whether the awkward dialogue that opens this track was intended as such or is simply a reflection of Eminem being uncomfortable representing himself as a sex symbol. Either way, the point stands – Eminem is not fit to play the role of sexual conqueror. The track continues, likely expressing the etiology for his public sexual awkwardness. The rapper has a pervasive distrust and nihilism about whether sustained love and fidelity are possible. Early in his career, as a newly single celebrity rapper, he has opened doors to pervasive opportunities for sex. However, what he has found are a myriad of women who attempt to seduce him with lies that they believe he wants to hear. One group of these women do not know him, do not care about his daughter, and only want to latch onto his fame. Another group of lovers is working through some deep personal trauma and projecting onto Eminem as a savior – Superman – for their lives otherwise gone wrong. Ultimately, Eminem's skepticism and loathing for intimacy is expressed: these women make him want to puke.

Heat is a later track devoted to sexual attraction on Eminem's 2017 *Revival* album. No longer married or remarried to Kim Scott, and with some time and distance to reflect on his role in the failed marriage, Eminem pens this track as a middle-aged man rapping about what he is now looking for in intimacy. The track is humorous, playful, and free, articulating the desires of an individual looking for nothing more than a kindred spirit in intimacy. Eminem's quest for fidelity is over and complete, but his nihilism over these relationships has been replaced by a freedom to temporarily enjoin with another wounded lover.



The juxtaposition of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity is again on display as Eminem takes up sexuality. His contributions open up a space for a more nuanced and layered examination of sexual expression in the hip-hop community.

EMPATHY – REPRESSION & MENTAL ILLNESS

There is arguably no more important phenomenon underscoring the shift in masculine norms in rap culture than the normalization of both empathy and the vulnerability to express one's intrapsychic conflicts that were broached by Eminem's music. Repression, mental instability, and mental health are subjects that are barely touched upon in rap music until Eminem so unabashedly explores the topics. Furthermore, early explorations of intrapsychic conflict in American culture are arguably more feminine than masculine. There are far more depictions of mentally unstable and overly emotional women than men, who, if they are depicted as unstable, are almost uniformly sociopathic.

Arguably, Eminem's most immediate contribution to reforming masculine identity in hip-hop culture has come through his acceptance of the vulnerability that confessing to mental illness betrays. Eminem's contributions to this topic are vast. For Eminem's sake, mental illness, catharsis, and empathy combine throughout his career to demonstrate a compulsion to tell the forgotten stories of outsiders and underdogs (a theme ubiquitous in his career and work).

The discussion of mental health and intrapsychic vulnerability is almost ubiquitous in rap music today. Significant examples are Kanye West's 2018 album exploring bipolar disorder, Kendrick Lamar being incredibly open about suicidal ideation and depression, as well as Jay-Z's now-infamous quote on why he felt compelled to commit adultery despite knowing he deeply loved his wife (*"You can't heal what you can't reveal"*).

What is so unprecedented about Eminem's work is just how comfortable he was expressing his mental instability as soon as he stepped into the hip-hop limelight. As hegemonic as some of his early work is, the unequivocal comfort he takes in this form of subordinate masculinity is quite possibly more jarring than any sadistic lyric he penned. Eminem's ability to straddle the fence between hegemonic and subordinate masculinity when it comes to the expression of mental illness and intrapsychic vulnerability is likely struck by his sincere ease with self-injurious tendencies. Explicit and masochistic expressions of self-harm are ubiquitous in Eminem's discography, yet the most nuanced and tacit form of self-harm is found in his ability to open himself to confessional vulnerability and express empathy for the broken. The confessional tone of his most neurotic work is a public exposing of the psyche; a shattering of ego defenses that was supposed to stay hidden in the therapist's office or, in the case of the American male, be buried deeper through alcoholism, repression, aggression conversion, and further means of self-medication.

Never before in American culture was it seen as empowering for a male to express his intrapsychic conflict, emotional trauma, and willingly open himself to the pain and uncertainty of vulnerability. As mentioned, though, this tendency is now almost ubiquitous in rap music. Furthermore, empathy is self-injurious through the effort of losing oneself in the story of the other.



To be empathic, one must be open to the fundamental dissolution of one's personal ego to transcend into the perspective of the other. Eminem's efforts are to utilize neurotic self-awareness and empathy are to tell the story of psychosis, addiction, anxiety, depression, and insecurity in a way that resists the male tendency to open wounds of personal vulnerability.

THE PROTECTOR/DEFENDER

The final analysis of Eminem's effect on masculine trajectories will center on the way he took up the role of protector and defender of those he perceives as deprived of justice. The role of defender is certainly a complicated position to analyze within the traditional theories and concepts of masculine norms. To some extent, a protector is almost required to take up a hegemonic stance toward those who threaten the flock. On the other hand, the male protector is usually sacrificing his own opportunities to flourish in hegemony in order to stand with and for the rites of the subordinate, voiceless, marginalized, and weak. Eminem undoubtedly navigates both of these streams, often wantonly, throughout his career. Ultimately, Eminem is able to conduct a singular and profound unification of these otherwise juxtaposing themes in his career, in particular, in the later phase of his career.

Early in his career, Eminem takes up this role through a malicious expression of hegemonic ideals; a manner of a wanton and merciless *fuck you* to those whom he perceives as inauthentic. Inauthenticity for Eminem comes in several forms. There are several efforts made to bring proper recognition and accolades for those he believes are the true icons in the world of hip-hop. Furthermore, Eminem is malicious in his attacks of those who question the effect of his music on the fabric of American society.

Secondly, and perhaps the most ubiquitous form of his work as a defender, Eminem attempts to open the listener to the lived experience of a miscast outsider in American culture. He is by no means the first American artist to take this leap; however, he may have been the most commercially successful American artist to give voice to this "basket of deplorables," to steal a phrase from the 2016 election. The Slim Shady LP is full of humorous homages to trashy sitcoms, trailer park life, drug abuse, and rural poverty in America. Yet, beyond the humor, there are likewise heartfelt contributions to the social, economic, and emotional brokenness that is vibrant in the life of poor rural Americans.

Eminem continues this mantra in later albums, chastising those whom he perceives as too ignorant or afraid to listen to the meaning of his work and the effect it has on those who feel broken, outcast, and damaged in American culture. In many ways, these works represent a sort of apogee of the rapper's artistry, displaying his most thoughtful and yet weaponized expressions of frustration toward the culture-wide ego defense of American prosperity and well-being. Any notion that the wealth and social hygiene that came to epitomize the American suburban ideal of life can eradicate the ills of society for a community, a family, or the human psyche is viciously and mercilessly laid bare by the artist. Eminem's initial efforts here are directed clearly and in a uniform effort to shout to anyone who will listen that the broken are amongst you, they are emotionally volatile, and you will soon be hearing from them. He has opened the Pandora's box

of American suffering by standing as both the guardian of and megaphone for the marginalized and those otherwise perceived as deplorable. In the end, he goes further, placing himself before the broken and marginalized and capitalizing on his power and reputation in order to guide, protect, and lead them to a place of emotional acceptance, identity, and solidarity.

It is in this second wave of Eminem as *defender* that we are offered the full complexity of Eminem's stance toward masculine norms. At times, he is undoubtedly on offense, cultivating a merciless viciousness to American fraudulence. In others, he positions himself more as a shepherd to a lost and broken flock. His efforts are directed at identifying with the weak through opening himself to both their and his own vulnerabilities and is, thus, clearly engaging in some form of subordinate masculinity through this process. Yet, once the two streams of masculinity – hegemonic defender and subordinate guardian – are combined, the alchemy gives life to the formation of a new way of being a protector: a new way of being masculine.

CONCLUSION

Eminem's unique position in rap music – an outsider with a radical juxtaposition of masculine qualities – allowed him an opportunity to reframe the narrative of masculinity in rap music and hip-hop culture. Trajectories of masculinity in rap music and hip-hop culture have fundamentally and intractably shifted in the last twenty years, radically in the last ten years. These shifts have been so stark and drastic that it is difficult to imagine a whole host of former rappers finding success in this zeitgeist. Eminem is not the only figure to have contributed to this shift, and we do not want to overstate his contributions by pinning it on one individual. There are even solid grounds to argue that, at this present moment in hip-hop culture, Eminem may not be the single most revolutionary force in the project of shifting masculine norms within the genre. However, it is difficult to overstate just how singular, severe, and revolutionary Eminem's labor was in the seemingly impossible task of initially shifting such entrenched norms of masculinity in rap music and hip-hop culture.

There was always a question when Eminem burst onto the scene of rap music – would this open a path to change the face of rap music and open space for more white rappers? The answer to that question seems to have played out with a flaccid - meh, not really. Nonetheless, it is clear now that pundits were asking the wrong question about how this outsider would change rap music, one that stretched much deeper than race. Hindsight reveals that the inquiry pertaining to Eminem should have centered on whether a man who was comfortable with subordinate expressions of masculinity could change hip-hop and allow for a new expression of male norms within the genre. The answer to this question has been resolved unequivocally and resoundingly in the affirmative.

Most of this paper has focused on how Eminem paved a way for a new rapper and a new expression of masculinity in hip-hop culture. Nonetheless, our final argument here is that though many rappers have begun to embrace aspects of subordinate masculinity in their art, no single rapper has so fully and radically embodied these norms as Eminem. There is certainly an argument to be made here that Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar may have been more influential than Eminem in this embrace. However, even if one were to put, say, Kendrick Lamar or Jay-Z at the head table of



subordinate masculinity in the current age of hip-hop (an ironic image, indeed), he was not the first rapper to sit there, as his embrace of these norms was years behind Eminem's.

Many revolutions involve two types of characters: 1. the initial prophets screaming mad from the wilderness to a small though fervent group of followers; 2. the leaders of the movement who have the endurance and cache to keep a large flock together and shepherd them into the solidified laws of the new paradigm. The birth of Christianity out of fundamentalist Judaism roughly 2,000 years ago took *both* John the Baptist figures and Christ figures. If the shift in masculine norms in hip-hop could be compared to the revolution in early Christianity roughly 2,000 years ago, Eminem has been hip-hop's John the Baptist, burning a revolutionary path while screaming wildly in the wilderness; an outsider prophet who most perceived was insane or, worse, dangerous. Eminem is no king of hip-hop; he never had the adequate level of hegemony to pull his peers into full submission. Despite what he is beginning to feel like, Eminem is no god; his expression of subordinate masculinity is unprecedented, but it is not pure and was never enough to fully remove him from the competition and battle for hip-hop stardom. Instead of a king or a god, Eminem will always be a prophet for rap; an outsider screaming from the wilderness while reshaping the norms of masculine identity for hip-hop in the 21st century. His trailblazing has cleared space for a new way of cultivating masculine norms for a whole generation of rap, a generation that has used this space to make rap into an art form that is nuanced, candid, neurotic, empathic and socially salient.

Eminem's most recent chapter of music is a reaffirmation of his role in hip-hop – that of an outsider and prophet. It is not so much hegemonic violence when he calls out others on the album – it is a warning call. He is not a god (cannot stay out of it) and he is not a king (no despot; not seen on the throne). What Eminem became is what he hoped to be on *Monster* – the Bruce Lee of loose-leaf. Lee's vision in coming to America was to form a higher level of human consciousness by integrating Chinese Taoist philosophy into mainstream American culture. He didn't want Americans to become Taoists. He believed the combination of the American drive for excellence and power could be combined with the detachment of Taoism and, together, they could form a set of transcendent set of consciousness (Little, 1996). Eminem's attempt should be viewed as parallel to Lee's efforts. His work has never been one thing or another. It has always been the unique synergy of two juxtaposing forces that were otherwise presumed to not coexist. Perhaps, like Lee, what Eminem was striving for in this synergy is impossible, but the prophet's job is to call us to transcendence without necessarily embodying such a move.

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