

# Close to the Edge: The Representational Tactics of Eminem

MARCIA ALESAN DAWKINS

## Introduction: Walking the Edge with Pedestrian Speech

THE TITLE OF THIS PIECE IS SAMPLED FROM GRAND MASTER FLASH AND the Furious Five's "The Message," a seminal song in the development of hip-hop culture. Flash repeats, "Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge/I'm tryin' not to lose my head/It's like a jungle sometimes that makes me wonder/How I keep from goin' under" ("The Message"). "The Message" is hip-hop in its finest form of social critique and expresses the hip-hop method for survival in a competitive commercial environment. Hip-hop avoids extinction by reinventing itself and challenging convention. Thus, the edge to which Grand Master Flash refers can be considered the border between what Michel de Certeau names the "near and far or *here* and *there*," between the constitution of oneself as a subject and the constitution of an Other in relation to oneself (98). Walking close to the edge becomes a constant motion within "a space of enunciation" and the concept of the "here and there" addressed in hip-hop discourse shows the binary opposition of sameness/otherness at the heart of America's entertainment and transracial politics (de Certeau 98).

The conceptual framework of walking close to the edge between here and there is outlined in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. de Certeau maps the basic conditions of cultural navigation, specifically those cultural moves that allow for creative cultural production by those who are traditionally deemed nonproducers. The first step is to distinguish between "strategy" and "tactics." Strategy is evidenced in places where subjects can be separated from the environment to

achieve an objective critical stance. Tactics are evidenced in places where subjects are nomadic but able to carve out creative spaces with materials in hand, without taking places over completely. When tactics are successful they can become standardized strategies. Although de Certeau writes about the specific cultural practices of the disempowered, his framework implies that an artist does not occupy an objective position from which a work's meaning can be fully comprehended. Thus an artist does not have a strategy, but only fragmentary tactics, which depend on time and the continuous seizure of opportunities.

This article examines the representational tactics of Marshall Bruce Mathers III, known both as Eminem and Slim Shady within the framework of "walking rhetorics" (de Certeau 100). "To walk," de Certeau writes, "is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" (103). In other words, walking is the discursive process through which a subject is constituted by the relationship it creates with the Other. Walking, implying motion and a plane of projection, is "a way of operating" and communicating in everyday cultural life (100). This movement is contextually bound and functions based on the constant manipulation of events and images. de Certeau continues:

Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it "speaks." All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. (98)

With walking as the operational logic, Eminem's representational tactics create the locations in popular culture from which his image is adapted, manipulated, and deployed.

This theoretical analysis will utilize de Certeau's three stages of cultural adaptation to follow the footprints of Eminem's walking rhetoric: (1) appropriation, in which the speaker acquires the language of a given culture to bear the burden of his/her own experience; (2) a "spatial acting-out of the place," through which the speaker creates space by airing his/her position with relation to the language; and (3) allocution, through which the speaker posits the Other as the reference point for the speaker's own subjectivity and negotiates the relationship between the two positions (de Certeau 97–98).

Further, it will be argued that Eminem tactically defines the “two positions” of here and there by walking in the spaces between whiteness, blackness, sameness, and otherness, while refusing to remain fixed in any one position. He uses the black/white racial binary to carve out a niche within the hip-hop market: affiliations with black masculinity provide cultural acceptance and authenticity which fuel his entry into hip-hop culture. White masculinity provides mobility, ambivalence from white audiences, and commercial success (Watts & Orbe 10). In this sense Eminem’s artistry is neither defined by nor separated from his music but consists of the ways in which he is mobilized as a signifier in various social contexts of production and reception. Most prominent are the ways in which his image is manufactured at the edge for commercial success through the creation and manipulation of his mechanical reproduction. In so doing Eminem engages Walter Benjamin’s concepts of the “aura” and “mechanical reproduction,” to become a unique social subject of culture and identification. Eminem seemingly becomes “the only one that matters” through the tactics of mirroring the identity desired by his audiences and by denying a singularity and certainty (Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am* 64). He accomplishes all of this with his personal style, music, and body carefully placed within the boundaries established by black popular culture (Hall 470–71). Next, Eminem’s tactics of representation will be examined in terms of these three stages of “walking between here and there,” in order to understand his operational logic.

### Appropriation: Taking on the Language and Form of Hip-Hop

As applied to Eminem, appropriation concerns the deliberate acquisition of the language and form of hip-hop. From the time hip-hop culture began as an illegal activity fostered by Afrika Bambaataa in the Bronx, through its reproductions as party music, social/political critique, gangsta rap, and global reception as “ghetto sublime,” it has always walked the edge between alienation and acceptance (Dyson 4–10; Smith 84). Today it has replaced country music as the best-selling musical genre after rock with 13.8 percent of the market share in 2002 (*Recording Industry Association of America News* 1). In much the same way, Eminem embodies hip-hop’s trajectory through his fusion of the

best and worst of the culture to chart his path of entry and ultimate success. These include The Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, KRS-One, Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G., Cage, Dr. Dre, Kool G Rap, and LL Cool J, among others. The most commercially and culturally successful white hip-hop act before Eminem was The Beastie Boys, who had African-American management and audience acceptance. With the help of Russell Simmons, they fashioned the formula for white emcees to attain success while remaining authentic innovators and not African-American imitators: African-American production and management, a-political lyrics, and a rock-oriented style (Perkins 36).

Eminem learned as much from the success of The Beastie Boys as he did from the failure of the infamous Vanilla Ice. Eminem comments:

Look at Vanilla Ice. Yo, he got exposed. You can only put up a front for so long before people start coming out of the woodwork . . . Don't talk about growing up in the city if you grew up in the fucking suburbs. White rappers, if they grew up in the suburbs, should play off it like, "Hi! I'm white."  
(Bozza *Whatever You Say I Am* 157)

And that is exactly what Eminem did with his 1998 debut single "My Name Is." He introduced himself to the world as Slim Shady, an outrageous white emcee who is not afraid of self-ridicule. Through de Certeau's paradigm, Eminem's introduction to hip-hop as Slim Shady marks his point of entry into the rap scene by introducing his subjective position. He is introduced as the white Other to hip-hop, a predominantly African-American and Latino medium, and hip-hop represents the racialized Other to Eminem. This reflexive relationship allows him to walk the edge between whiteness as sameness and whiteness as otherness by simultaneously juxtaposing the middle class ethic of *Leave It to Beaver* with white trash stereotypes, and by presenting himself as a self-conscious and apprehensive guest within the predominantly nonwhite culture of hip-hop.

Eminem's introduction to and subsequent explosion within hip-hop culture embodies a dramatic and important opportunity to (re)consider certain key issues in cultural theory: chiefly the tactics of racial identification, aesthetics and representation; production and consumption; and how these issues connect with social and political realities of twenty-first century America. Since his underground debut in 1996 Eminem skyrocketed from low-class midwestern American obscurity into inter-

national fame and fortune, sold over 33 million records, won Grammy Awards and an Academy Award, developed a clothing line called Shady Ltd, founded Shady Records, 8 Mile Style and Serious Satellite radio station Shade 45. However, his unwillingness to sponsor products that do not directly shape his image, such as Apple's I-Pod advertising campaign, reveals his awareness of and control over his commercial representation ("Eminem's Publisher Sues Apple" 1). These "Shady" business enterprises are evidence of Eminem's heightened sense of identity and consciousness of how personal image is constructed and circulated.

Rap scholar Nancy Guevara attributes rap success such as Eminem's to the minstrel-like quality of contemporary hip-hop: a series of ghetto-ized fantasy images useful only for advertising and entertaining white audiences. Guevara writes that "the ahistorical commercial presentation of hip hop is neither accidental nor new. Whenever black or Latino aesthetic innovations have been repackaged and sold to white audiences as entertainment fads, the contextual and traditional meanings of those innovations have been airbrushed out" (49). The appropriation of African-American and Latino styles is commonplace in American popular culture, and hip-hop's absorption by suburban middle-class white youths hankering for "authenticity" is the latest phase of a complicated history of transracial entertainment.

Eminem's meteoric rise to fame supports and complicates Guevara's point. First, Eminem's explosion replaces the umbral roots of hip-hop with the commercialized white rapper. Second, Eminem "repays" the African-American hip-hop community because his sales fuel the success of African-American hip-hop mogul Dr. Dre's label, a subsidiary of Interscope Records named Aftermath Records. Third, Eminem's aura and form of mechanical reproduction are sold to a scopic market of hip-hop consumers. For example, in 2002 Eminem made music history when *The Eminem Show* sold 1.3 million copies in its first week on the shelves and 7.6 million in its first year (Bozza *Whatever You Say I Am* 85). Eminem addresses this directly in his 2002 interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*:

It's obvious to me that I sold double the records because I'm white. In my heart I truly believe I have a talent, but at the same time I'm not stupid. I know, when I first came out especially, being produced by Dre made it cool and acceptable for white kids to like me. In the suburbs, the white kids have to see black people liking you or they

won't like you. You need that foundation of legitimacy. The Beastie Boys—they had respect from the hip-hop community, and that's what made them.

(Bozza "Eminem: The Rolling Stone Interview" 5)

Eminem understands the way that hip-hop works for a white rapper and continued to make music history as his third album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, was certified nine times platinum in March 2004 (*Wireless Hip Hop and Urban Lifestyle Homepage* 2) and his latest album, *Encore*, was poised to reach five times platinum in the United States and sell over 300,000 copies in the United Kingdom before its release (*Eminem.com* 1; *CBBC Newsround* 1). Eminem's "cultural capital" as a white rapper is fueled by his high levels of acceptance among African-American and Latino hip-hop audiences (Bourdieu 171, 190; Hecht, Collier & Ribeau 55). Although African-Americans and Latinos rank lower in America's traditional social hierarchy, they constitute the originators, valuers, authenticators, and figures of acceptance within hip-hop culture (Gandy 51).

He conveys his frustrating need to impress these groups in the song "8 Mile" when he laments over his whiteness as an obstacle to his initial entry into the rap world. He raps, "Why do I put up this fight?/ Sometimes I just wanna get up on stage and just kill mics/And show these people what my level of skill is like/But I'm still white/Sometimes I just hate life/Somethin' ain't right." The audience listens and wonders whether Eminem is suggesting that he should have been born an African-American. Although this discussion argues that the answer is no, only Eminem can answer the question definitively. What is clear is that through the soundtrack and film *8 Mile*, Eminem's representational tactics work to officially mythologize him as the underdog, one who can relate to the experiences of the disenfranchised because of his own impoverished background. Like hip-hop itself, Eminem is a hybrid and fluid icon that explodes conventional conceptions about Otherness and challenges racially based modes of thinking.

Further, Eminem's adept skill as an artist inflames a complex debate about the ideologies of racial aesthetics and representation. Eminem gained acceptance when he introduced whiteness as Otherness to hip-hop by "bringing two of the most infamous white stereotypes to life: He was both a crazyass white boy and a hardworking man" (Sanneh *The Voice of America* 2). In the tradition of The Beastie Boys he was

simultaneously amazing, gross, and innocuous because he did not challenge the antiwhite rhetoric that fills many hip-hop lyrics. Nor did he ever pretend to be anything but a “white boy.” His self-deprecating humor as the persona Slim Shady introduced in “My Name Is,” “Guilty Conscience,” “The Real Slim Shady,” “Without Me,” and “Just Lose It” on four different albums painted less-than-perfect pictures of white America. These songs also allowed him to act out his suppressed passions on four dimensions: (1) as the average, stereotypical American white youth who can be found in any mediated image or family (reflected in his portrayal of the President and the Beaver in “My Name Is,” and in his song “White America”); (2) as an angry misogynist/family man who wants to stab his wife and kidnap his daughter (reflected in his portrayal of the evil conscience in “Guilty Conscience”) or reminisce about them in “Mockingbird”; (3) as the only white emcee in a field dominated by men of color in “The Real Slim Shady” and “The Way I Am”; and (4) as a rapping superhero and celebrity impersonator who saves us all from taking hip-hop too seriously in “Without Me” and “Just Lose It.” These actions are integral to his commercial success. “For white rappers,” he says, “there’s such a fine line between shit you can and can’t do” (Bozza *Whatever You Say I Am* 157). For example, he is not allowed to state that white people are superior in any detectable way. To this end, he refuses to use the “N” word in any of his lyrics, saying “it’s just not a term I choose to fuck with because I do Black music. I always show that respect” (Jenkins 113). He is conscious of his position as the Other in the predominantly African-American and Latino world of American hip-hop.

### Spatial Acting-out of the Place: Slim Shady, Marshall Mathers, and Eminem

Walking the edge between “here and there” makes Eminem’s tactics highly dialectical. As a consequence, his walk manufactures what Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* refers to as his “aura.” “Aura” is the distance between a work of art and its audience. It is what makes uniqueness an essential characteristic (218–19). Benjamin explains how removing the aura levels the playing field:

the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it

substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object produced. (221)

Benjamin celebrates the demise of the aura and the possibility for perceiving the unexpected via the technique of mechanical reproduction.

Benjamin's argument applies to Eminem in a unique manner. First, Eminem's success depends on the mechanical reproduction of a credible and indestructible aura. Eminem primarily uses his alter-ego Slim Shady to manufacture this aura. Slim Shady is someone inaccessible and elusive, someone highly valued but who is also both deceptive and untouchable. He admits that there's a little Slim Shady in all of us, but only he can be the real Slim Shady. The mechanical reproduction of Eminem reflected by Slim Shady distances him further and further away from his audience while preserving his aura. By utilizing this persona, especially on MTV, to bring each of his albums to market, he controls and dispenses his aura as a market value and positions himself as the Other. This both ensures his success and allows little room for the expression or expectation of any authentic identity.

Second, Eminem uses additional alter egos to increase the distance between himself and his art, which is another dimension of his aura. At times that call for serious and contemplative biographical speech aimed at white males he refers to himself by his birth name, Marshall Mathers. At times when he negates or excludes hip-hop Others (e.g., homosexuals, women, himself, and other white men) he invokes humor and horror, often dresses in drag, and always inhabits his alter-ego pop music persona of Slim Shady. In battle raps, hip-hop's traditional rhetorical situations in which he struggles for street credibility and is the Other, he refers to himself as Eminem. These personae link his "acts and footsteps" which open him up to multiple meanings and directions. They carve out liberated and unstable spaces within the aura that Eminem can occupy (de Certeau 117; Mailer 11). Ultimately, they reveal that he must maintain his aura, by controlling his own mechanical reproduction, to capitalize upon the hysteria his indeterminacy creates (see Table 1).

Instead of letting go of his music through the process of mechanical reproduction, he and his publicity team mechanically reproduce the aura, tether it to his personae and market art and artist as one fixed commodity. He lays out this argument in the video for "The Real Slim



TABLE 1  
Spatial Acting out of (Personified) Place

Persona	Slim Shady	Marshall Mathers	Eminem
Message content	Negates or excludes hip-hop Others (e.g., women, homosexuals, himself, white men)	Serious, contemplative biographical speech	Battle rapper who struggles for street credibility and is the Other; "the underdog"
Examples	"My Name Is," "The Real Slim Shady," "Without Me"	"White America," "Square Dance," "Cleaning Out My Closet," "Mosh" (portions)	"8 Mile," "The Way I Am," "Say What You Say," "Mosh" (portions)
Lyrical snippets	"Here's a concept . . . 20 million other white rappers emerge . . . I'm the real Slim Shady"	"Look at these eyes baby blue baby just like yourself"	"I just do not got the patience to deal with these cocky Caucasians . . ."
Target audience	Transracial audience	Predominantly white, mainstream audience	Predominant black/Latino audience

Shady,” when he raps as the authentic artist from within a factory that mass produces Slim Shady clones, from a mental institution which mass produces the psychotic behavior for which Slim Shady is infamous, from within a classroom which mass produces the kind of conformist thinking he battles against, and from a carnivalesque Jerry Springer-like talk show which mass produces strife, allowing him to interface with audiences and modulate his aura. This video suggests that Eminem’s art only emerges when his authenticity is threatened by mechanical reproduction controlled by someone else. This is Eminem’s aura at its most tangible, where he achieves mechanical reproduction without removing the art from its shell. Eminem, artist and his artistry, remains one unique unit.

Eminem reproduces another unit, G-Unit, by introducing 50 Cent in his breakout single, “In Da Club.” In this video Eminem and Dr. Dre design, oversee, regulate, and approve 50 Cent’s aura in three distinct settings: in the laboratory in which he is literally built out of mechanical parts and tested, in a nightclub in which he interacts with a predominantly African-American audience, and in the recording studio where he delivers the lyrics that will become his own mechanical reproduction. 50 Cent is always viewed through the eyes of Eminem and Dr. Dre to ensure his hip-hop legitimacy, thug persona, and “groupie love.” The mechanical reproduction of 50 Cent allows Eminem to remain “the real Slim Shady.” Similarly, D-12’s mainstream hip-hop introduction, titled *My Band*, is another, although somewhat less successful, example of Eminem’s tactical use of the aura. D-12 capitalizes off of an irreverent reproduction of Eminem’s self-ridiculing Slim Shady persona and 50 Cent’s thug persona to establish their credibility. A method of representation surfaces in which Eminem’s aura implies authenticity but must acknowledge that there is no authenticity without its destruction in mechanical reproducibility. Thus, Benjamin’s concept of aura and mechanical reproduction find inimitable hip-hop expression in Eminem.

The implication here is that the label “Eminem” does not refer cleanly to a real individual—it refers to a brand which paints Eminem as “the only one that matters” (Bozza *Whatever You Say I Am* 64). The brand name Eminem is more than a play on his initials M. and M. Like the M&M candy, he is packaged and colored differently on the surface depending on the expectations of his intended audiences. He also takes a message from the candy as an innuendo for his social

identity as black on the inside. His color “melts in your mouth and not in your hand” leaving no material trace other than the satisfying chocolate flavor. He acknowledges this in “Without Me” when he reminds the audience that he will follow the formula for success set forth by Elvis Presley and become successful by making blackness present in popular music only in its absence in the identity of the musician. He raps, “I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley/to do black music so selfishly and use it to get myself wealthy” (Mathers “Without Me”). In light of this, many critics argue that he is nothing more than a kitschy minstrel who devours and performs blackness but cannot ever attain it. Further, adversaries argue that this is the key component to his success (Cobb 32; Osorio 78; Rux 37). Although this may be true to some degree, Eminem’s success is due in larger part to the tactical maneuvering of his own mechanical reproduction and the mechanical reproduction of his hip-hop scions.

In monitoring his own mechanical reproduction he accesses what Erick Watts and Mark P. Orbe refer to as “white ambivalence” (10–11). At first glance Eminem elicits a white fear of blackness, á la the thug. The fear is squelched upon closer scrutiny because he is revealed as a product of white America with enough of a black aura to make him cool. His whiteness provides limited invisibility and unlimited mobility within which he plays on difference and universality. He does, however, fall victim to critiques based on his outrageous lyrical content from detractors such as Tipper Gore, the National Organization of Women, the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League, and *The Source*. Many argue, however, that he only has the platform to make such outrageous statements because of the color of his skin and that his market success and free speech are privileges ascribed to whiteness (Rux 18; Cobb 33) (see Appendix A).

Eminem, a brand consisting of artist and his product, exhibits an aura that cannot be separated from its packaging. The packaging emphasizes Eminem’s uniqueness, that he and his art are one. The aura is commodified and marketed as widely as possible via mechanical reproduction. The tactics of mechanical reproduction are deployed through various conduits—film, music, fashion, entertainment management, and media interviews. His representational strategy also incorporates the support or opposition of other black and white entertainers to expose new audiences to his products (e.g., Dr. Dre, Jay-Z, Elton John, Madonna, Fat Joe, Marilyn Manson, and Michael

Jackson). It could be argued that a strategy seems to emerge. To the effect that Eminem maintains consistent methods of quality control over the mechanical reproduction of his representation, he enjoys mass appeal. He achieves the result of mechanical reproduction, namely that he and his discourse are everywhere, without the perception of the "sense of the universal equality of things" (Benjamin 223). He does not have to share his spoils.

### Allocation: Positing the Other Through Discourse

Eminem speaks from within the free play of his own discourse and is not afraid of self-critique. In his songs, "The Way I Am," "White America," and "My Name Is," he reveals that the relationship to the self and the process of identification can be activities of giving style to one's strengths and weaknesses, rather than trying to reveal an authentic self. As a result, the once secure and dependable set of collective ideologies erodes the marker between the symbiotic same and Other, or "I" and "You." It is now possible for the same and the Other to share a similar vocabulary and worldview as evidenced in his song "Mosh," a symbolically charged political critique of President Bush and the Iraq War aimed at all sectors of the hip-hop audience.

As aforementioned, Eminem's discourse and personae do not paint a picture of Marshall Mathers. Rather, they paint a picture of who Marshall Mathers wants his audience to believe and buy into who he is (Slim Shady, Eminem), based upon how he positions the audience as Other. This is the heart of his representational tactics. In "The Way I Am," his audience, the "You" or the Other, is posited as the subject empowered to define and describe him. To paraphrase Benjamin's observation: "the distinction between author and public . . . lose[s] its base character . . . At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer . . . literary license is now . . . common property" (232). Eminem explains how this affects his career in the video for this song as he raps while plummeting toward his death that he is whatever we (the audience, media) say he is. Once these words are transported to consumers Eminem is no longer the author and has no fixed position. He suffers a metaphorical death and is a guest to the text on display. As a result of the death of himself as an author, Eminem's identity lies in the hands of media, critics, and fans (the Other). "The Way I Am" is Eminem's

manifesto for communication with his audiences. He explains that he and his team control the mechanical reproductions of his personae to meet listeners in their own contexts via media representation. His subjectivity is then ironically reactivated in this process. As an addendum, Eminem murders his audience in his final album *Encore*, which may imply the end of this phase of his representational tactics and the beginning of another in which we refer to him primarily as a brand rather than as a rapper.

Eminem's discourse also defines his subjectivity by positing his family as the Other. For instance, in the singles "Cleaning Out My Closet" and "Mockingbird," Eminem raps about his broken family along with the toll it took on his own self-esteem and relationships with ex-wife (Kim) and daughter (Hailie Jade). Eminem expresses sorrow for the life and family he never experienced and vows to be a better parent to his daughter and niece. His experiences as an outcast in low-income housing, as the child of an absentee father, and as the son of a mother who battled drug addiction bring him closer to mainstream America's stereotypical version of African-American Otherness.

Within de Certeau's paradigm of pedestrian speech, "Cleaning Out My Closet" inaugurates Marshall Mathers as a subject. It is a text in which the author walks between person and persona, or between here and there. He "begins the walk that Freud compares to the trampling underfoot of the mother-land" (de Certeau 110). In the video for this song Eminem digs his (or his mother's) grave and imagines an empty church in which he alone is present to mourn the death. In some sense he not only digs his grave, but his unique niche as he burrows into his past in order to understand the world around him as an adult. He uses his childhood as the place to do away with his mother and/or himself and "be other and to move toward the other" (de Certeau 110). The deeper he digs, the closer he gets to his Otherness. He is forced to "clean out his closet" and address his internalized self-hatred, destructive impulses, and nihilism.

Since Eminem is consciously operating in an African-American dominated medium, the concept of nihilism is important to note. Cornel West defines nihilism as:

The lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a

self-destructive disposition toward the world . . . the self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle. (14–15)

West goes on to explain that nihilism threatens America's existence. Although he introduces this "nihilistic threat" within an African-American context, Eminem is evidence that nihilism persists throughout other racial and ethnic communities. His discourse invites his auditors to view the world as he does, as a solitary environment in which identity, personal meaning, and self-esteem are absent. He engages white ambivalence along with black acceptance by aligning the pains of his experience to the necessary pain of a credible hip-hop persona. Rather than mask his own white nihilism, he marries it to a specific and accessible African-American experience through the intensity of its pain. Consequently, he presents a version of African-American experience that mainstream American audiences can embrace.

Eminem constitutes himself as a rejected Other when he raps about his childhood in a poor single-parent household and finding solace in the angry expressions of rock and rap. The rhetoric of rock and rap taught Eminem the language of Otherness. His childhood experiences in Detroit, a city whose black population exceeds eighty percent according to the U. S. Census Bureau, provided firsthand knowledge of and contact with African-American culture. Together, the music and life experiences showed him how to construct his art and personae and how to address his transracial social identity and audiences. By emphasizing his white identity through the lens of class, he is most likely to gain black acceptance which fuels white ambivalence. From this perspective, he can speak from the spaces here and there, unwilling to position himself in any fixed place.

In addition to social and emotional identification with an African-American perspective of nihilism, Eminem publicly adheres to the hip-hop codes of conduct in order to generate and maintain black acceptance, namely, African-American collaboration, management, humility in the face of black criticism, and recognition of his status as the Other in this medium. He relates to African Americans by relating to the significance of the black "mark of difference *inside* forms of popular culture" (Hall 471). His own white body bears the mark of difference inside a form of black popular culture. Stylistically, he compensates for

this difference through performativity. He dons his hip-hop uniform—baggy pants, tattoos, sneakers, jewelry, beats, and rhymes—to walk the tight rope between Other within the world of hip-hop and same within mainstream popular culture. He is sensitized to the importance of his style, the meaning and primacy of his music as a text, and the use of his body as a “canvas of representation” (470). In effect, Eminem attaches his body to the “intercultural body” of hip-hop in a global context (Osumare 30).

### Negotiating with Otherness: Eminem’s Contract with Blackness and Whiteness

Eminem’s racial and cultural identities can appear fractured and scattered like the broken glass Grandmaster Flash rapped about over 20 years ago. However, they are not. He walks close to the edge, between the shards of identification, in order to negotiate the boundaries of blackness and whiteness in the world of transracial entertainment. On the track “White America,” Eminem addresses his white audience from a position of sameness that allows him to acknowledge white racism and not apologize for using it to his advantage. His skin signifies his access to opportunity, audience, and strong market value. His skin and blue eyes, he writes, make him marketable as the Other precisely because they signify his whiteness and status as a part of the same (see Appendix A).

In his song “The Way I Am,” Eminem reveals an alternative view of mainstream white America when he expresses frustration with being misunderstood by white people as a “wigger,” or white nigger, and goes on to inform African-American hip-hop fans that he identifies closely with them and tries to understand their viewpoints without trying to be perceived as a black person. It is key for Eminem to be perceived as white because whiteness allows for mobility across lines of identification, greater transracial acceptance, a wider platform for social critique and uniqueness within hip-hop popular culture. At the MTV Europe Music Awards in November 2003, for instance, Eminem accepted his fifth consecutive award for best male rap artist and called the mostly white audience a bunch of “racist crackers” while eating crackers. He stated that he appreciates the adulation and recognition but knows that there are other and better African-American and Latino

artists at work in contemporary hip-hop. This is but another example of how Eminem effectively merges sameness and Otherness to address the inherent contradictions of hip-hop as transracial and transnational entertainment.

In addition to his talent, Eminem's whiteness makes him distinct, open to multiple audiences, mobile, and highly marketable. His whiteness is the asset that affords him the privilege of easily straddling the line between sameness and Otherness without appearing inauthentic. However, this kind of mass exposure could have a hip-hop neophyte believing he is the first emcee, rather than one of the first white rappers to be taken seriously. As a result, many African-American and Latino hip-hop journalists, fans, and rappers criticize Eminem for ignoring his role as the Other in the world of hip-hop, even though he continually articulates that he has not (Moody 1; Osorio 72; Sanneh *Voice of America* 2; D 2–3). African-American rapper Ja Rule articulated his politics of resentment when he challenged Eminem to a battle and charged that Eminem could never understand the experiences of blackness (Atkins "The Warning"). Jay-Z also commented on a change within hip-hop since Eminem's emergence when he remarked about the large degree to which whiteness fuels record sales (Carter "What More Can I Say"). Now nonwhite rappers have a higher standard of skills and sales to uphold, especially when they are not directly affiliated with Eminem. A serious implication of this success is that Eminem can take everything from hip-hop except the burdens of Otherness.

In the face of this criticism, Eminem worked to publicly repair his relationship with his African-American constituents and consumers through staged acknowledgments and apologies. In February 2003 he accepted a Grammy for *The Eminem Show* as best rap album and took the stage with an entirely African-American entourage. He humbly accepted the award and paid homage to the emcees that paved the way for and inspired him. These included emcees and groups such as Run DMC, The Beastie Boys, LL Cool J, Kool G Rap, Masta Ace, Rakim, Dr. Dre, NWA, KRS-One, Tretch, Nas, Tupac Shakur, Notorious BIG, and Jay-Z. He concluded by saying, "thanks. I learned from all of you." And, according to Eminem.Com, he produced "Moment of Clarity" for Jay-Z, "Runnin" ("Dying to Live") and other posthumous tribute songs for lyrics written and delivered by TuPac Shakur and Notorious BIG.

Eminem's Otherness was most notoriously highlighted and attacked by hip-hop magazine *The Source* for lyrics written circa 1993 describing



African-American women as insipid gold-digging bitches (Jenkins 113; Sanneh “Unguarded Lyrics Embarrass Eminem” 3). Unlike controversies regarding his homophobia or domestic relationships with white women, this is an example where the discourse of race trumps the discourse of gender. Ironically, insulting black women is a speech act that many black male rappers are authorized to perform, but it is a discursive opportunity not afforded to Eminem (D 2–4). These lyrics are evidence that he has stepped out of the bounds of the “here and there” into a forbidden discursive territory. In a February 2004 C-SPAN interview for *Booknotes* titled “The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni,” African-American poetess Nikki Giovanni commented on this situation. Giovanni remarked, “So Eminem, you know, does not have a right to dis black women when he’s making a living in a black art form and you—you get sick of that” (8). He responded by stating that “I’d just broken up with my girlfriend, who was African American, and I reacted like the angry, stupid kid I was. I hope people will take it for the foolishness that it was, not for what somebody is trying to make it into today” (Moody 1). As for the accusation that he used the N word in another song, Eminem was reluctant to acknowledge the recording as his own until the release of his latest album *Encore*, in which he explained the incident away as a youthful indiscretion. These controversies are evidence that Eminem cannot occupy a comfortable or permanent place in hip-hop. Understanding this, his controversial tactics keep him in the limelight temporarily and create opportunities for rebuttals in which he attempts to pull in a larger audience.

### Discussion: Marshall Matters

The representational tactics of Eminem are important because they reveal the careful work it takes to manipulate an artist’s mechanical reproduction to maintain the necessary aura. Eminem is marketed as a unique expression of artist and artistry as fixed commodity. Precarious implications of this method of representation for transracial entertainment are fourfold: (1) this method highlights the fragility of the difference-based binary of same/Other and of the aesthetic techniques that capitalize upon it; (2) this method reveals that transracial entertainment is not a growth industry with a “sense of the universal equality of things” which pries the aura from its shell (Benjamin 223),

artist and artistry are one in the same, so there can be no other successful white rapper as long as he maintains that space; (3) these representational tactics culminate in the consolidation of "Eminem" as a corporate brand; and optimistically, (4) Eminem's success points toward the potential for intercultural bonding and communicative interaction within popular culture.

First, Eminem's method requires careful maneuvering, subtlety, and constant vigilance to operate effectively. Further, he has to control and saturate many media outlets to combat his vulnerability. In addition, Eminem understands that his presence and popularity necessarily exclude other "hip-hop Others." This is why he marginalizes homosexuals, celebrities, women, and other white men in his lyrics and business practices. His uniqueness is reinforced through the continued mechanical reproduction of his aura and through the tactical deployment of that aura to introduce black hip-hop artists in whom he has a vested interest.

Second, transracial entertainment is not an industry with an ethic in "the universal equality of things." On the macro level of cultural representation, *The Eminem Show* and *Encore* seem to have brought hip-hop and rap from their Latino and African-American urban roots to the pinnacle of mimesis in white suburbia. Will artists of color who are not affiliated with Eminem reach these levels of commercial success? On a micro level, Eminem must maintain a firm grasp on his unique niche within hip-hop in order to facilitate continued popularity. On his track "Without Me," he articulates his nightmare, an industrial attack of the clones as the new marketing strategy. Yet Eminem's imitators have not arrived. We begin to realize that Eminem's greatest skill is in maintaining his uniqueness. He is distinct from Elvis Presley in this regard because Eminem is the only one authorized to parody himself. In fact, he has to be a "meta-Elvis, whose life and work [are] constantly rebounding off each other" (Gabler 1).

As aforementioned, like the M & M candy he reinvents himself with different packaging by surrounding himself with assorted black, white, and brown entertainers via cross-selling through various outlets in the market of popular culture (i.e., Shady Ltd clothing line, ownership of Shady Records, ownership of SIRIUS radio station Shade 45), and by taking on multiple personalities, or flavors, in music videos and lyrics to make audiences forget that there is only one of him. In so doing, he closes the door for other transracial artists and preserves inequality because the entire package, not just the work of art, must be reproduced

in context. After all, “The Real Slim Shady” reminds listeners that there may be a million others who look like him but there is only one real Slim Shady who will stand up to the test of time and rules of hip-hop popular culture. Therefore, it can be concluded that transracial entertainment in America will remain a singular enterprise where art and artist are tied and incapable of spawning duplicates alone. The key to success in transracial entertainment is control of an aura, control over the outlets for mechanical reproduction, and an unbreakable bond between artist and artistry. To Benjamin’s dismay it can be concluded that even in mechanical reproduction the art cannot take on a life of its own.

In 2005, the art does however take on a brand identity of its own. Like “J-Lo,” “Eminem” comes to represent a particular popular music, a popular musician/entrepreneur, a clothing style, music video style, record label, and a radio station. This multifaceted brand delivers Eminem’s “close to the edge” message clearly, confirms his credibility as an artist and businessman, emotionally connects with his audiences, motivates listeners/consumers, and creates customer loyalty. The implication of this representational strategy for Eminem’s business is efficiency, the creation of opportunities for endorsements and cross-selling (i.e., G-Unit attire and footwear, films), the ability to shape future demand for “Eminem” the artist and global expansion. This is where the next phase of Eminem’s representational strategy begins—where popular music becomes the platform upon which other products are launched, sold, and bought.

Finally, Eminem’s representational tactics beg the question of whether transracial entertainment, or walking/crossing over the edge, can lead to enriching forms of cultural bonding and interaction. Echoing legendary old school emcee KRS-One, Eminem’s answer is yes. He asserts that hip-hop is unique because it has this power more than any other musical genre. Like Eminem, hip-hop borrows elements from all other cultural genres. He notes “the fact that hip-hop has so many different people, different types of people coming to hip-hop shows” as incredible, positive, and progressive (Jenkins 121–22). In this regard it creates a common syntax and “intercultural body” through which hip-hop culture is performed and reproduced (Osumare 31–32). In the end, hip-hop’s ultimate message remains the same. Eminem’s representational strategy is proof that as we continue to walk close to the edges of “here and there,” a common ground upon which we will meet remains popular music.

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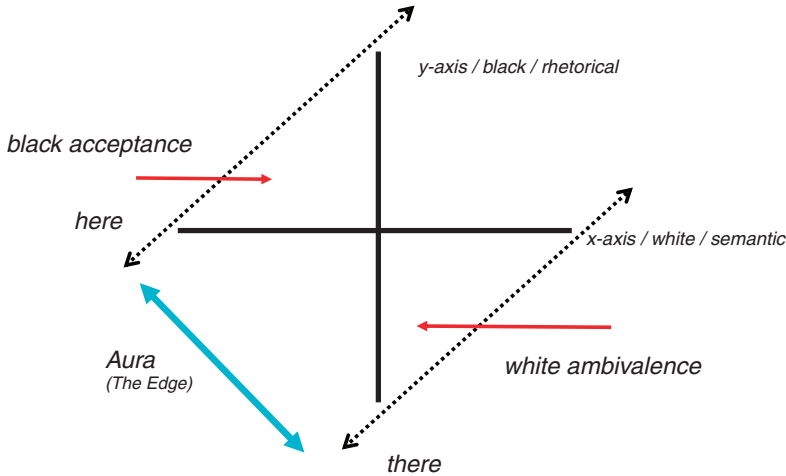
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## Appendix A: Negotiation

### *Tactics of Representation*



This graph represents the Negotiation step of Eminem's representational tactics. These axes are borrowed from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s model of African-American rhetorical practices in *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates, African-Americans communicate along the y-axis of rhetoric, labeled here in my conceptual schema. Whites communicate along the x-axis of semantics, labeled there in my conceptual schema. Successful transracial communication is difficult because of these axes of orientation.

Eminem's success depends upon his negotiation of these axes through the mechanical reproduction of his aura. Eminem's aura is located at the "edge," between here and there. Black acceptance and white ambivalence can shorten/lengthen the distance between here and there. The aura allows Eminem to move across all quadrants while staying on the edge, depending on the places of a particular speech act in time. Audiences reside in all four quadrants and are tactically addressed at key moments in the discourse depending upon which persona is doing the speaking—Eminem, Marshall Mathers, or Slim Shady.

**Marcia Alesan Dawkins** is assistant professor of Human Communication at California State University, Fullerton. She blogs, teaches, and conducts research in the areas of political communication, diversity, rhetoric, and new media. Her forthcoming book, *Things Said in Passing*, is a critical analysis of instances of racial passing in the United States from the late nineteenth through early twenty-first centuries. She writes, lectures and consults on these and other issues related to contemporary communication. Contact: <http://www.marciadawkins.com>.