

TROUBLED ETHNICITIES IN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC FROM ELVIS PRESLEY TO EMINEM

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With the commodification of African American culture, Blackness has become an accessory that can be put on like burnt cork and hog fat: baggy pants, overpriced athletic shoes, corn rows or dread locks, gaudy jewelry, swiveling necks, snapping fingers, absent consonants.¹

Introduction: Blackface, White Negritude, and Ethnic Identity

On July 18, 1953, an 18-year old trucker named Elvis Presley decided to go to the Sun Record Company in Memphis and paid \$3.98 to record a demo – a procedure that he repeated in January of 1954. It took another four months until Sun Records founder Sam Phillips, eager to capitalize upon the popularity of African American songs, accidentally discovered one of the tapes and took Presley under contract. Presley’s music, a combination of Rhythm & Blues, hillbilly, gospel, and boogie-woogie, dominated by an uptempo, backbeat-driven rhythm, was an instant success. Some forty years later, American popular music saw another successful ‘hybrid’ artist in the shape of Missouri-born white rapper Marshall Bruce Mathers III, better known as “Eminem” or “Slim Shady.” Like Elvis before him, Eminem cleverly took advantage of the appeal of a ‘black’ music style, in his case HipHop, integrating it into a mass-compatible crossover product. Eminem’s video clips are masterstrokes of ethnic marketing, deploying elements of ‘white trash’ imagery as well as of ‘black’ language and art.

My essay is interested in those strategies of representation within American popular music that are designed to market what Harry J. Elam, Jr. has termed “portable blackness”.² Following the suggestion of another academic that it would be “instructive to compare Eminem to his legendary predecessor [Elvis Presley]”.³ I will interrogate the marketing of ‘blackness’ in the American music business over this time span, from the Rock ‘n’ Roll Era (epitomized by Elvis) to the Age of Gangsta Rap (personified by Eminem). A comparison of Elvis and Eminem seems especially informative, since both artists have been “accused of co-opting black culture”.⁴ An analysis of the ambivalent methods of hybridization in Elvis and Eminem may result in two different approaches, one underlining the desubjectifying and exploitative

¹ Dicker, Glenda. Katrina: Acting Black / Playing Blackness. *Theatre Journal* 57.4 2005 (Dec.): 614-616

² Elam, Harry J., Jr. Change Clothes and Go: A Postscript to Postblackness. In: *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*. Ed. by Harry Elam, Jr., and Kennell Jackson. The U of Michigan, 2005, p.387.

³ Davis, Kimberly Chabot. Beyond the White Negro: Eminem, Danny Hoch, and Race Treason in Contemporary America. In: *At Home and Abroad: Historicizing Twentieth-Century Whiteness in Literature and Performance*. Ed. La Vinya Delois Jennings. Knoxville: U of Tennessee, 2009, p. 225.

⁴ Idem

dimension of the artists' 'portable blackness,' the other emphasizing the performative and potentially disruptive character of ethnic boundary crossing. In its highly ambivalent structure, the discourse of ethnic shape-shifting associated with Elvis and Eminem may aim simultaneously at a reaffirmation and at a destabilization of America's corporate cultural hegemony.

It has been argued that artistic boundary transgressions from white to black necessarily bear the mark of an illegitimate appropriation, of 'theft' – even of a symbolic obliteration of the exploited minority culture. African American theorist Bell Hooks compares such incorporations of black culture to a cannibalistic act – that of "eating the other".⁵ Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, writing about the construction of blackness in Brazilian culture, uses the same metaphor when she compares the idea of a white "negritude" to "other cannibalistic commemorations, encompassing not only race and ethnicity, but also gender, sexual orientation, religion, species" (2007, 2). The main function that such performances of 'blackness' seem to have is to secure the cultural hegemony of whiteness and to exclude the ethnic Other from language. "White Negritude wants to contain black articulation," Isfahani-Hammond explains, "providing symbolic compensation for genetic whitening through its embodiment of African 'survivals'" (2007, 5). Since the Eighties, white HipHop (represented by artists such as the Beastie Boys and Vanilla Ice) has moved into the spotlight of critics who accused it of "evacuating" the original style "of its cultural specificity" (Davis, 2009, 221; see also Gubar, 1997, 36; Rux, 2003, 15-38). While drawing "much-needed attention to the imperialist dimensions of whiteness," this argument underestimates, in Kimberly Chabot Davis's words, "the potential of some instances of crossover to function as radical acts of 'race treason'" (2009, 222). In Davis's reading, "blanket condemnations of white Negroes" and "celebrations of crossover as inherently subversive" seem equally problematic, since both approaches can only illuminate parts of a complex phenomenon (ibid.).

Following these observations, it seems useful to look at both the marketing strategies that underlie such artistic acts *and* the social implications which may generate or at least encourage new forms of identity blending. Elvis Presley and Eminem, I shall argue, created their stage identities to a large extent as "portable" ethnicities, to use Marilyn Halter's term (2000, 9), thus distinctly commodifying the experience of ethnic identity. At the same time, however, both artists also made bold steps towards a de-essentialization of the concept of *identity* itself, valorizing a *hybrid* form of self-definition that is still vilified in most western societies.

The decisively 'modern' concept of *ethnicity*, first used in the early 1940s by sociologists W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, was meant to define new modes of identity formation based on origin and social background. The "invention of ethnicity," however, writes Werner Sollors, did not automatically lead to a subversion of power relations or virulent forms of racist rhetoric (such as the ideology of "ethnocentrism") (1989, xvi). Yet, the term helped locate and make imaginable previously inaccessible spaces of identification within the social practice.⁶ Sollors rightly points to the

⁵ Hooks, Bell.. Eating the Other. In: *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End, 1992, p. 21-39)

⁶ In sociological theory, an "ethnic group" is defined as "a collectivity within a larger society," with

ambiguous nature of the concept of *ethnicity* in the American cultural imagination: “[I]n America, ethnicity can be conceived as deviation *and* as norm, as characteristic of minorities and as typical of the country”.⁷ A decisive paradigm shift, Sollors notes, occurred in the early 20th century with W. E. B. Du Bois’s groundbreaking study *The Souls of Black Folk*. According to Sollors, the book postulated a “new ethnic peoplehood” which stood “in contradistinction to a general American identity”.⁸ One of Du Bois’s main observations was that African Americans grew up with a kind of “double consciousness” which enabled them to perceive two experiential fields at the same time – that of white mainstream society and that of black culture.⁹ This state of mind is described by Du Bois as a “two-ness, [...] – two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”.¹⁰ When elements of black culture began to permeate the fabric of mainstream American society in the 1920s – curiously enough – many *white* intellectuals as well developed a kind of ‘doubleness’ in the way they looked at their environment and themselves.¹¹

The years after World War II signaled another important step in the development of what has been called a “white double consciousness”.¹² A culmination point was signaled by Norman Mailer’s pamphlet “The White Negro” (1957), in which the “black hipster” – in Mailer’s terminology the musically gifted black hedonist and bohemian – was praised as a non-conformist model for white intellectuals.¹³ The same year, Jack Kerouac’s unconventional beat novel *On the Road*, written in the late Forties, was finally published and became an instant literary sensation. In a particularly captivating

some sort of shared consciousness based upon “kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal feature, or any combination of these” Schermerhorn, Richard Alonzo. *Comparative Ethnic Relations: A Framework for Theory and Research*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1978, p. 12.

⁷ Sollors, Werner. Foreword: Theories of Ethnicity. In: *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: New York UP, 1996, p. xi

⁸ Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986, p. 49

⁹ Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co 1903, p. 3.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co 1903, p. 3

¹¹ Among the first intellectuals who considered themselves as “white negroes” were the Chicago-born saxophonist Milton ‘Mezz’ Mezzrow, who became a lead figure in the jazz movement of the Twenties (see Ross 1989, 79-80), and Carl Van Vechten, a writer and photographer associated with the Harlem Renaissance movement, who crafted works in which he reveled in what seemed to be an aesthetics charged with ethnic connotations see: Lott, Eric. 1993. White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness. In: *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993, p. 474.

¹² Gubar, Susan. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997, p.271

¹³ Mailer, Norman. The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster. 1957. In: *Advertisements for Myself*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons 1959, p. 337-358

passage, the first-person narrator recounts how he walked through Denver's "colored" district one evening, "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night".¹⁴ Eric Lott, in a forceful essay, has traced such fantasies of ethnic boundary crossing back to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy of the 19th century. With its "derisive but transparently obsessive attempts to try on the accents of 'blackness'",¹⁵ blackface acknowledged, but at once also playfully explored, the essentialist boundaries that seemed to distinguish 'black' and 'white' life worlds. "To 'black up'," Lott maintains, "is to express a belief in the complete suturing together of the markers of 'blackness' and the black culture, apparently sundered from the dominant one, to which they refer".¹⁶ Thus conceived, 'performing black' also marks a point of deliberate construction, a moment of re-staging and simultaneously dissolving the symbolic gulf that seems to separate the 'races.' In Lott's reading, blackface "reifies and at the same time trespasses on the boundaries of 'race'" – an act of "doubleness" which seems "highly indicative of the shape of American whiteness".¹⁷

The signifier of blackface haunts images and performances of ethnic boundary crossing to this very day. Blackface evokes the impression of a "voluntary," yet temporary ethnic identity that can be assumed and then again abandoned. The performative aspects of ethnicity, sociologist Herbert J. Gans claims, have become more and more important over the generations: "The third generation has grown up without assigned roles or groups that anchor ethnicity, so that identity can no longer be taken for granted".¹⁸ Gans speaks of a "symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort, which could nevertheless persist for generations".¹⁹ Other scholars have rejected the notion of a clear-cut *ethnic identity* altogether and instead suggested the concept of *ethnic affiliation*. "Affiliation is more performative," writes David A. Hollinger, "while identity suggests something that simply is. To be sure, one can construe the achievement of identity as an action, but 'affiliation' calls attention to the social dynamics of this action".²⁰ Marilyn Halter adds that, in the postmodern era, "hyphenated identity" has become the norm for individual self-definition. By this, she defines "a form of voluntary ethnicity that has made any conflict between identifying oneself as American and affirming one's foreign heritage disappear".²¹ This "portable

¹⁴ Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Signet, 1957, 148

¹⁵ Lott, Eric. *White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness*. In: *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993, 475

¹⁶ *Idem*

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 476

¹⁸ Gans, Herbert J.. *Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America*. 1979. In: *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: New York UP, 1996, p. 435

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 425

²⁰ Hollinger, David A. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1995, p.7

²¹ Halter, Marilyn. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York: Schocken Books, 2000, p.9

ethnicity”,²² can be employed to dramatize facets of the individual’s personality, thus expressing loose identification with a certain ethnic group. In addition, it can assume the shape of a commodity designed to sell – or authenticate – a certain type of performance (for example, a rap song).

Permeable Boundaries: Elvis and the Making of ‘Blackness’

Did Elvis *imitate* or did he *sing* ‘black music’?²³

One anecdote is especially present in the mythology surrounding Elvis Presley: In Memphis of 1954, Winfield ‘Scotty’ Moore, who would later become a guitar legend in American music, listened to a slow take of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” by then 19-year old Presley. After Presley’s performance, Moore exclaimed, still mesmerized and excited about what he had just heard: “Damn, nigger!”²⁴ To be sure, the ‘King’ – as Presley was later respectfully called – was not the only white singer of the Fifties who profited from the commercial wave that catapulted originally ‘black’ or ‘crossover’ music styles to the top of the *Billboard* charts. Tennessee-born Carl Perkins, for example, whom Greil Marcus calls “the boy who stole the blues”,²⁵ had a number 1 hit with his 1955 rockabilly single “Blue Suede Shoes.” Another important figure was Jerry Lee Lewis, “second in the hierarchy of white Southern rockers”,²⁶ who combined components from various ethnic backgrounds, rhythm and blues, country music, and the gospel.²⁷

The limits that Elvis articulated and explored in his music were soon associated with those between the ‘races.’ To merge the traditions of blues, country music, jazz, and the gospel into what was then called “rockabilly” or “rock ‘n’ roll” meant to participate in the creation of a new, rebellious art form. Despite the fact that this new hybrid genre was very popular among the American youth (inspired by the cult of juvenile rebellion in the mold of James Dean and Marlon Brando), its representatives were ostracized as lunatics and outcasts. The comments on Elvis, who was nicknamed

²² Idem, p.101

²³ Ross, Andrew. Hip, and the Long Front of Color. In: *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 67-68

²⁴ Marcus, 1997, 165; cf. Lott, 1993, 484

²⁵ Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music*. 1975. 4th revised edition. New York: Plume, 1997, p.152

²⁶ Idem, p. 168

²⁷ If Lewis connected these stylistic elements in an almost obsessive and ecstatic manner, as demonstrated in his trademark hymn “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” from 1957, Elvis Presley rather blended them in smooth, mainstream-compatible manner. “Elvis’s early music,” writes Marcus, “has drama because as he sang he was escaping limits, testing them, working out their value; unlike Jerry Lee, he at least knew the limits were there” (Idem, p.169).

“Elvis the Pelvis,” were often barely concealed racial slurs, referring to the singer’s ‘illegitimate’ appropriation of an expressive, ‘black body’ language. Just a few months after the tragic death of young Emmett Till in Mississippi, who had allegedly molested a white woman and was brutally lynched by the woman’s husband and his accomplices, Elvis’s physically transgressive appearances shocked large parts of the public – especially in the South. *Time* magazine called the singer a “sexhibitionist,” and his appearance on the popular *Ed Sullivan Show* was heavily censored (by showing the singer only from the waist up). In an interview with *Look* magazine in 1956, Elvis told reporters, in a mixture of Southern drawl and black vernacular: “Ah don’t see anything wrong with it. [...] Ah just act the way Ah feel”.²⁸

Elvis’s performances especially resonated with young consumers looking for models of resistance against mainstream society. His aura, however, remained ambiguous and hard to classify. While his noticeable hair-do (he had colored his hair pitch black as a tribute to his mother Gladys) was seen by some as an homage to his black co-musicians, it connoted to others the opposite: a quizzical mocking of “blacks’ putative imitation of whites” (due to the pomade he used so bounteously in the fashion of many blacks who attempted to straighten their hair with it).²⁹ As a voyager between the ethnic boundaries, Elvis absorbed as much ‘blackness’ as possible to embark on the popular trends of musical hipness and as much ‘whiteness’ as necessary to cater to the consciousness of the majority. Two of Elvis’s most successful tracks, “Don’t Be Cruel” (1956) and “All Shook Up” (1957) (both of them platinum-decorated), were co-works with the black songwriter and pianist Otis Blackwell. When Elvis performed “An American Trilogy” at Madison Square Garden in 1972, he gave tribute to the mixed roots of his music. The medley, consisting of “Dixie” (a blackface minstrel track and unofficial hymn of the Confederate States), “All My Trials” (a folk song associated with African spirituals), and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (the Union Army’s marching song during the Civil War), confirmed Elvis’s reputation as an ‘All-American boy’ reached across the lines of color, political geography, and class.³⁰

If *white negritude* had represented a minority discourse for New York intellectuals in the Twenties, it had now assumed the status of a mainstream phenomenon. Elvis’s flirtations with black culture did not aim at an avant-garde circle of bohemians, but at the very heart of society. The *negritude* of the white rock ‘n’ rollers represented, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s memorable phrase, “the marriage of a limita_tion with an opportu_nity”.³¹ On the one hand, the discourse negotiated and subliminally reaffirmed the social realities of segregated America by privileging the hegemonic white voice. On the other, it also capitalized upon the economic and sociopolitical opportunities arising in the Fifties. The music business, motivated by the

²⁸ Brandt, Stefan L. *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America, 1945-1960*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2007, p.220-221

²⁹ Lott, 1993, p. 484

³⁰ In Greil Marcus’s reading, Elvis’s “An American Trilogy” performance signified that he was capable of containing “any America you might want to conjure up” – including the ingredients of “blues, Las Vegas, gospel music, Hollywood, schmaltz, Mississippi, and rock ‘n’ roll” Marcus, op.cit. p. 124.

³¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Me-Psychoanalysis: An Introduction to the Translation of ‘The Shell and the Kernel’* by Nicolas Abraham. *Diacritics* 9, 1979, p. 6

impulse of profit-maximizing, eagerly employed the ideas of resistance and ethnic boundary crossing, thus, however, also opening the way for a potential side-effect, the symbolic destabilization of racial boundaries. In a biting critique, Paul C. Taylor, describes this commercial agenda as “the Elvis Effect”:

A white person finds his or her way into the practice, becomes proficient, and is ‘discovered’ by the white community. The community embraces the practice, but only in the person of the white ‘pioneer’ who introduced it. It snaps up his records or copies his arrangement [...], all the while oblivious to the fact that the true pioneers are probably still toiling in obscurity and poverty, and that the black community has probably moved on to something else that has yet to be ‘discovered.’³²

The “Elvis Effect,” Taylor elaborates, is facilitated by what seems to be an underlying factor within American cultural practice – “the *historically racist trajectory* of white American appetites for cultural commodities”.³³ From a phenomenological perspective, it makes sense to examine the possible *effects* of these strategies and mechanisms, that is, the implicit messages sent out by such acts of boundary crossing. The main reason Elvis was so vehemently rejected by representatives of the Fifties’ corporate cultural hegemony was that he represented to them the dissolution of racial boundaries. During his successful comeback in 1969, symbolized by the smash hit “In the Ghetto,” Elvis revealed “his reliance even for resurrection upon ‘blackness’,” to use Eric Lott’s phrase.³⁴ “In the Ghetto” is a song about a poor ghetto kid bound to become a gang member and die in a fight with the police. It negotiates, once again, the limitations so typical of the beginning years of Elvis’s career. Yet, it also sends out the message that these boundaries should be overcome. Significantly, the ghetto boy in the song is not marked as having a specific ethnicity. The only information we get about him is based upon class and gender (he is a working-class male).

The inherent claim which emanated from Elvis’s songs, namely that the racial boundaries within American society were actually *permeable*, found evidence in the late Fifties. The era saw the rise of a number of ambitious musicians who explored what Jack Hamilton has called “the aesthetics of crossover”.³⁵ The African American singer Sam Cooke, for example, experimented with various music styles, starting with his hit sensation “You Send Me” (1957), and combined them into an unusual, yet commercially successful *mélange*. In the mid Sixties, the era of “blue-eyed soul”³⁶ began, triggered by the unexpected success of the Righteous Brothers’ ‘groovy’ mixture

³² Taylor, Paul C. Funky White Boys and Honorary Soul Sisters. *The Michigan Quarterly Review* 36.2, 1997. (Spring), p. 328

³³ Idem, p. 329

³⁴ Lott, 1993, p. 485

³⁵ Hamilton, Jack. Darkness at the Break of Noon: Sam Cooke, Bob Dylan, and the Birth of Sixties Music. Unpublished paper presented at the “History of American Civilization Program” at Harvard University, Feb. 22, 2011, p. 20

³⁶ Garofalo, Reebee. Culture versus Commerce. The Marketing of Black Popular Music. *Public Culture* 7, 1994, p. 277

of pop and R & B, “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” (1964).³⁷ The effects of the “blue-eyed soul” wave upon the competitiveness of black musicians in a tightly contested music market were devastating:

Further displacing African American acts, the blue-eyed soul category included not only the expected artists like the Righteous Brothers, whose material was heavily influenced by rhythm and blues, but artists as diverse as Bob Dylan, Tom Jones and Brenda Lee. [...] As a result African American artists showed a sharp decline on the pop singles charts from an all-time high of forty-two percent in 1962 to twenty-two percent in 1966, their lowest point.³⁸

From the Sixties to the post-millennium years, the genre of “blue-eyed soul” has proven quite persistent, producing stars such as Lisa Stansfield, New Kids on the Block, Amy Winehouse, and Duffy. In all these configurations of white performers capitalizing on ‘black’ music styles, the shadows of blackface have never vanished completely. “The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger can today perform in the [blackface] tradition without blackface simply marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into white culture”.³⁹ I will argue in the following that rap artist Eminem as well can be placed in this ambiguous tradition with regard to what I term the ‘liminal aesthetics’ and ‘fake authenticity’ of his appearance.

Liminal Aesthetics and the ‘Portable Ethnicities’ of Eminem

Though I'm not the first king of controversy
I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley,
To do Black Music so selfishly
And use it to get myself wealthy (*Hey*)
There's a concept that works
20 million other white rappers emerge.

Eminem, “Without Me” (from: *The Eminem Show*, 2002)

In Eminem’s songs and videos, Elvis Presley recurs almost as a ghostly presence, a constant reminder of the putative shallowness of white-to-black performance. In “Without Me” (2002), we see a bloated Elvis who ridiculously performs dance steps in front of his toilet. In “We Made You” (2009), a ‘cooler,’ yet entirely artificial Elvis, reminiscent of the “Jailhouse Rock” images of the late Fifties, is revived. One of Eminem’s most recent songs, “Not afraid,” features the ambiguous lines, “You said you

³⁷ The song itself seems an emblem of ethnic hybridity, with performances by artists such as Neil Diamond, Elvis Presley, Dionne Warwick, and Isaac Hayes.

³⁸ Garofalo, 1994, p. 277

³⁹ Szwed, John F. Race and the Embodiment of Culture. *Ethnicity* 2.1 (March), 1975, p. 27

was king, you lied through your teeth” (2010).⁴⁰ The question of authenticity, brought up as a charge against Elvis, has been a recurrent theme in Eminem’s career as well. Eminem’s first major success in the charts, “The Real Slim Shady” (2000) shows a whole bunch of Eminem clones, making fun of boy groups such as ‘N Sync.

In the semi-autobiographical movie *8 Mile* (2002), Eminem plays the deranged white rapper Jimmy “Bunny Rabbit” Smith, who, living in a white trailer park with his alcoholic mom, continually fights against allegations that he is a “tourist” in black culture and “faker than a psychic with caller ID” (*8 Mile*, 07:22-07:31). The parallels to Eminem, who grew up without a father in the ‘black South’ and moved to the outskirts of Detroit as a 12-year old, are more than obvious. In the final ‘battle’ against black rapper “Papa Doc” (played by Anthony Mackie), Rabbit/Eminem blurts out: “I’m a fuckin’ piece of white trash, I say it proudly” (*8 Mile*, 1:43:35-1:43:38). However, Eminem’s affirmations of his authentic ‘self’ are constantly charged with performativity. They remain empty words that we can never fully trust. Always integrated into acts of performance (rapping or ‘playing the dozens’), the artist’s apparent ‘genuineness’ becomes a ‘fake authenticity.’

The malleable nature of identity structures forms an important subtext in *8 Mile*. Bunny Rabbit is literally placeless. He is invited by his black mentor to engage in rap ‘battles’ in a black HipHop club, but at first fails in the face of the booing crowd (*8 Mile*, 08:00-08:20). Despite these hard beginnings, we sense that the foundations for Rabbit’s future as a charismatic rapper are laid. As Marilyn Halter observes, ethnic border crossings have been systematically encouraged by the postmodern market economy. “Such portable ethnicity,” she claims, “[has] manifested itself in recent years through the evolution of cyberspace”.⁴¹ Perhaps more than other performers, Eminem has profited from the expansion of the digital world, becoming the world’s most popular person on Facebook with over 29 million ‘likes’ in 2011.⁴² The World Wide Web has proven the ideal space for boundary crossings of all sorts. Eminem’s demand “Why can’t we just get past the color issue and just deal with the music?” (in: Davis, 2009, 230) fits these surroundings perfectly, pointing to what I call the ‘liminal aesthetics’ of his media persona.

Eminem’s number-one song from *8 Mile*, “Lose Yourself” (2002), notably the first HipHop track ever to win the Academy Award for Best Song, can be seen as a metaphor for the artist’s desire to overcome boundaries. In the song, played during the final minutes of the movie, the hero’s way from failure to success is described in dramatic words. The track echoes the first ‘battle’ in the HipHop club when Rabbit cannot bring out a word in the face of a nasty “Choke! Choke! Choke!” chorus (“He opens his mouth, but the words won’t come out”; *8 Mile*, 1:47:57-1:47:59), then retells how the white rapper finally reaches a turning point in his life (“This opportunity comes

⁴⁰ References to Elvis as a liar have been common in the HipHop genre from the early years on. In Public Enemy’s canonical “Fight the Power” from 1989, the ‘King’ is portrayed as a liar and a racist. In a 2002 NBC documentary, 25 years after Elvis’s death, Public Enemy’s lead singer Chuck D made a radically different statement, now claiming that “Eminem is the new Elvis because [...] he has the respect for black music that Elvis had” (“Elvis Lives”).

⁴¹ Halter, 2000, p. 101

⁴²<<http://webupon.com/social-networks/eminem-becomes-most-popular-person-on-facebook-with-over-29-million-likes>>. Accessed March 11, 2011.

once in a lifetime”; *8 Mile*, 1:48:13-1:48:15). The scene in which Rabbit wages the successful battle against the declared champion is staged in both the song and the movie as a liminal moment in which the protagonist finds his voice and overcomes his speech blockade. When Rabbit ‘loses himself’ in the music, as the song’s title suggests, he blurs the boundaries between his own self and his environment, finally discovering a sense of ‘true,’ yet necessarily fluid and unstable identity.⁴³

8 Mile features an astonishing number of such liminal experiences: While connoted as an average white guy in the beginning – significantly, his last name is “Smith” – Bunny Rabbit develops his own personality in the course of the events and finally becomes a ‘man,’ notably after eliminating one black guy, the now-emasculated “Papa Doc,” in a battle and shaking the hands of another, his friend “Future,” who becomes his true father figure. Despite Rabbit’s announcement in the final seconds of the movie that he has to go “back to work,” we suspect that he will actually cross another line and ‘make it’ as a professional rapper. Next to race and class, the gender line is also challenged in the movie, for example, when Rabbit – as some other male characters, too – is called a “bitch” (1:41:09-1:41:10). The ‘femininity’ of his name, “Bunny Rabbit,” evoking associations with Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* magazine, is provocatively mentioned by one of his enemies during a battle (*8 Mile*, 07:08-07:12). In the movie’s lead song “Lose Yourself,” the narrator describes himself as “caught up between being a father and a prima donna” (*8 Mile*, 1:49:15-1:49:17). What contributes to this aesthetics of symbolic gender bending is the fact that Eminem wears drag in many of his music videos, from his first major hit “The Real Slim Shady” (2000) to “We Made You” (2009), often fluently passing between male and female in the same sequence. Eminem’s decision to call his autobiography, ambiguously, *Angry Blonde* (2000) with a final ‘e’ can be seen as further step in this direction.⁴⁴

In terms of their visual aesthetics, almost all of Eminem’s works emphasize moments of liminality and transition. The artist’s putative appropriation of ‘blackness’ stands in this tradition of intended ambivalence. Eminem’s assertion in the video for “Without Me” (2002), namely that he uses black music only “to get myself wealthy,” must be seen as an unreliable claim, part of the ‘signifying the monkey’ rituals popularized in – and by – the black vernacular. Just as Eminem’s earlier clips capitalize

⁴³ Critics of *8 Mile* have argued that the movie “re-racializes” the credentials of HipHop, “verbal skills and working-class roots” as “white” (Elam, 2005, 384). “Eminem’s reign,” Harry Elam, Jr., writes, “has helped to distance hip-hop from its original history, its colored roots” (2005, 383). Another critic notes that Eminem’s screen persona has been “sanitized” – robbed of the non-conformist labels that had previously been attached to the rapper’s image, including the notorious allegations of homophobia. “Has Eminem finally come home, like the prodigal son?” (Muhammad, 2002). A conference of the Black Music Congress held at City University, London, in January, 2004, ended in a debate entitled “Are white artists like Eminem, Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera appropriating black music?” During the event, one participant complained that “ownership is taken away from us” (Kwaku. Are White Artists Appropriating Black Music? Feb. 3, 2004. Accessed Jan. 22, 2011. <http://www.bbm-on.net/race_report.htm>).

⁴⁴ This has led to speculations that Eminem may have added the ‘e’ intentionally to invite female fans to follow his example as an ‘angry young man’ and vent their anger as well (Lee, 2008, 372). The book’s tagline further underlines the liminal aesthetics of Eminem’s media persona: “This book is made by Slim Shady, from the mind of Marshall Mathers, as seen from Eminem’s point of view. Got it?” As early as 1997, Eminem stated in the “Low Down Dirty” track for the *Slim Shady EP* that his “split personality” was “having an identity crisis.” Back in his teenage years, he purportedly revered black rap groups like Niggaz Wit Attitude and – in his own words – “wanted to be Dr. Dre and Ice Cube” (in: Rux, 2003, 21).

upon white fantasies of 'potent black masculinity',⁴⁵ his later ones (especially "We Made You" from 2009) ridicule the shallow and often bizarre character of masculine performativity *per se*.⁴⁶ If traditional rap performance "uses the black male body as a space for the negotiation of cultural contradictions",⁴⁷ Eminem's videos clarify, through their focus on stylized postures, that ethnicity as well as gender are merely performative acts that lack a deeper texture.⁴⁸ One of the most recent clips, "Not Afraid" (2010), shows us Eminem standing on the roof of a skyscraper in Detroit, moving closer toward what is revealed, from the camera's bird's eye perspective, as an awe-inspiring urban canyon. When the protagonist finally jumps from the building, he immediately turns into a flying superman, reminiscent of Will Smith's bad-guy hero in *Hancock* (2008). The reference to a black, 'bad-ass' urban hero is no coincidence, since it utilizes, once again, the comic aesthetics that previous Eminem videos have employed. "Without Me" (2002), for example, features a persiflage of Robin & Batman with Eminem and his black mentor 'Dr. Dre' playing the couple. Parodies like this cast attention to the performance character of all identity arrangements in Eminem's works. The technique of de-essentialization has been a stylistic device in Gangsta Rap ever since it became an important subgenre of HipHop in the Eighties. "Gangsta Rap," writes Annette J. Saddik, is "about redefining American identity by revealing [the] identity and power relations it generates not as something fixed in essentialist concepts such as race and gender, but as a performance which [...] can be commodified and sold as 'truth'".⁴⁹ What makes Eminem so successful is, in Katja Lee's words, "how he embraces and simultaneously rejects rap's discourses of authenticity and autobiographical identity performance".⁵⁰

Although Eminem does indeed engage in what has been termed "trafficking in

⁴⁵Davis, 2009, p. 227

⁴⁶ As Eric Lott notes, the imitation of "cultural forms of 'blackness'" by white performers functions as an act of "manly mimicry" (1993, p. 479). A good case in point is Norman Podhoretz' influential essay "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" (1958), in which the author criticizes the beats for their 'white negritude,' but also expresses his own 'envy' of the blacks' "superior masculinity" (in: Ross, 1989, p. 69). Fantasies of 'potent black manliness' have also found their way into Eminem's version of Gangsta Rap. "[A] glorification of violent masculinity," Kimberly Chabot Davis maintains, "is a major reason for rap's popularity among white teenage boys, who are attracted to the thug posture of defiance and power. Yet how can one determine whether Eminem's fantasy of 'black macho' is any more disingenuous than the macho posing of black MCs such as 50 Cent?" (p. 227).

⁴⁷ Saddik, 2003, 121-122

⁴⁸ At first glance, his duet with Rihanna, "Love the Way You Lie" (2009), seems to celebrate 'white trash' manliness (we see a white couple quarreling and fighting), but through the subtext of Rihanna's own well-publicized relationship with Chris Brown, the level is immediately transferred to include both ethnicities. The lyrics of "Love the Way You Lie" suggest an ambiguous narrative voice that at once enjoys (*loves*) the performative spectacle of ethnic and gender behavior and looks through it (*lies*).p.

⁴⁹ Saddik, Annette J. Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage. *The Drama Review* 47.4 (Winter), 2003, p.112

⁵⁰ Lee, Katja. Reconsidering Rap's 'I': Eminem's Autobiographical Postures and the Construction of Identity Authenticity. *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38.3, 2008, p. 352

blackness”,⁵¹ he does so in a playfully – maybe thoughtlessly – comic fashion, never insisting on the ‘absoluteness’ of the identities he presents. The discourse of ‘blackness’ that Eminem’s Gangsta Rap offers is recognizably a farce, an artificial assemblage of the well-known accessories, attitudes, and linguistic idioms. Likewise, his ‘whiteness’ (or should we say ‘hyperwhiteness’), underlined by the performer’s unnaturally blond hair color and his “perpetually pale skin”,⁵² is debunked as a construction. By exposing the patterns of the ‘race’ discourse as cultural inventions, Eminem seems to hint “at the artificiality of whiteness itself”.⁵³ Even though *8 Mile*’s Rabbit prides himself in the end on being “fuckin’ white trash,” he has, in fact, already crossed the lines of traditional ‘racial’ designation.

It is this celebration of the non-conformist which places *8 Mile* in a tradition of American narratives about loners and individualists who finally succeed against all odds. Eminem is the postmodern incorporation of the “angry young man” that Elvis has sung about in his 1969 classic “In the Ghetto” – the poor kid who grows up without being given a choice. He is the embodiment of the “Good Bad Boy” that Leslie Fiedler has described as the quintessential hero of U.S. literature, “America’s vision of itself, crude and unruly in his beginnings, but endowed by his creator with an instinctive sense of what is right”.⁵⁴ Fittingly, the novel that Fiedler refers to is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886). His “Good Bad Boy” is a classical liminal figure: Torn between his ‘gut instinct’ that tells him ‘what is right’ and his anger stemming from his violent social background, the Good Bad Boy also swings back and forth between two ethnicities; he is half Huck, half ‘Nigger Jim.’ Likewise, Eminem is constructed as a border figure, encompassing realness and fake, black and white, good and bad, and even, to some extent, male and female.

Conclusion: Are We Postethnic Yet?

As Gloria Anzaldúa has shown in her seminal work *Borderlands / La Frontera*, the postwar years were marked by the rise of a “new consciousness” regarding concepts of ethnicity.⁵⁵ Establishing what Anzaldúa terms a “tolerance for ambiguity,” this new discourse has valorized hybridity and inbetweenness as accepted forms of identificatory practice.⁵⁶ One conspicuous result of this development is, in Anzaldúa’s terminology, the “new mestiza”,⁵⁷ a creature shaped by the liminal experience of living on the Texan-Mexican border. The *new mestiza* is a postmodern shape-shifter, who has learned

⁵¹ Elam, 2005, p. 384

⁵² Lee, 2008, p. 356

⁵³ Davis, 2009, p. 230

⁵⁴ Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1960. New York: Stein and Day, 1982, p.270

⁵⁵ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. [1987]. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books 2007, p. 99

⁵⁶ Idem, p.101

⁵⁷ Idem, p.101

to adapt to her environment, utilizing, much in the creative way of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke's *new negro*, her double consciousness to invent new modes of experience. The old models of nationality and cultural belonging have been challenged, Iain Chambers claims, "by the emergence of a transversal world",⁵⁸ in which the 'in-between' has become a normality. I have argued in my essay that white performers such as Elvis and Eminem stand in the tradition of such transversal mechanisms within the (post-)modern cultural imagination. Far from aligning themselves firmly with the nodal points of the hegemonic consciousness, both artists have become, in a sense, "renegades – race traitors," to pick up a term used by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey.⁵⁹

Apart from its social implications upon the practice of ethnic boundary crossing, this type of shape-shifting has a distinct function in the music business, namely that of making a performer attractive to the largest possible clientele of consumers. What Elvis and Eminem have in common is that they both employ strategies of genre-blending – in Elvis's case R & B, the gospel, and country music, in Eminem's case HipHop and pop music – to "capture the 'center'".⁶⁰ Crossing the traditional lines of ethnic origin, both Elvis and Eminem have offered in their songs 'narratives of consent' which not only touch upon potential conflicts within society, but also which never locate themselves entirely at the periphery. If Elvis attempted to "perform the Union"⁶¹ between North and South, white and black, then Eminem wants to bring together the urban centers and the ghettos by reaching out to consumers from all classes and ethnicities. The 'portable blackness' employed by Elvis and Eminem, while certainly based in commercial grounds, thus also has a potentially destabilizing and de-essentializing effect upon constructions of ethnic identity in social practice.⁶²

⁵⁸ Iain Chambers 1994, 108

⁵⁹ Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey 1996, 5

⁶⁰ Muhammad, 2002

⁶¹ Marcus, 1997, 124

⁶² I would like to thank my colleagues Seth Hulse, Janice Mitchell, and Benjamin Ulonska (University of Siegen) and Jack Hamilton (Harvard University) for their helpful and inspiring remarks on this paper.