

ON THE EXISTENTIAL POLITICS OF HIP-HOP
(OR, THE CONCEPT OF IRONY WITH CONTINUAL REFERENCE TO
EMINEM)

Simon Stow

John Marshall Professor of
Government and American Studies
The College of William and Mary, USA
sastow@wm.edu

Abstract. Hip-hop has long been considered political: as Chuck D. famously observed “rap music is the CNN of the ghetto”. Moving beyond clearly political themes, slogans, and acts of alterity at the heart of Hip-Hop, this essay employs the work of the rap-artist Eminem to draw out and identify a further way in which those of us engaged in political analysis might productively conceive of the genre as being political. Drawing upon the European and American existentialist traditions, this essay suggests that the artist’s irony, hyperbole, and theatricality are constituents of a political worldview that recognizes both the need for self-creation and the pressure, social, political, and artistic, that make this quest for self-creation both an endless struggle and an opportunity for a vivified care of the self. The aim here is not to seek to valorise the rap genre by suggesting that it might offer insight into the political, but rather to point to the ways in which the cultural analysis of politics, and the political analysis of culture, might move beyond the rote by paying attention to the ethical, political, artistic, and philosophical nuances of the object of study.

Keywords: Eminem, hip-hop, rap music, existentialism, irony, theatricality, authenticity, misogyny, homophobia, politics

In 2017, the BET Hip-Hop Awards opened with a freestyle performance by the rap-artist Eminem – a.k.a. Marshall Mathers, a.k.a. Slim Shady – in which he attacked President Donald Trump (Eminem 2017). Liberal commentators cheered his performance, forgetting, perhaps, how, at the beginning of his career, they had scorned him for his perceived homophobia and misogyny. Those critics who felt obligated to explain their apparent hypocrisy suggested that Eminem had grown as an artist, evidence for which

was his supposed agreement with their worldview (Ruiz 2017). Here, however, I argue that the rapper's work has always been informed by a deeply existentialist political and philosophical sensibility. Focusing on the artist's early work, when he was reviled by critics across the political spectrum, I show how, by employing a number of literary tropes and devices strongly associated with the existentialists – including, but not limited to, irony, hyperbole, and theatricality – Eminem sought to cultivate certain responses and values in his audience that parallel the ethical-political objectives of existentialism as a literary-philosophical movement. My aim is to identify the sophistication of the artist's work, and the challenges that it poses to the practices of cultural and political criticism. My analysis cannot, perhaps, help but seem somewhat belated: as Jean Cocteau is said to have observed, "Americans are funny people. First you shock them, then they put you in a museum". It may be, however, that it is only now that Eminem has become a museum-piece that it is possible to curate the exhibit appropriately, identifying how his art worked to expose the cant of much contemporary cultural criticism. Nevertheless, given the (still) controversial nature of the artist's early work, it is perhaps necessary to offer something of a disclaimer about the politics of what follows.

The most common objection to Eminem's work is that it employs vile slurs towards, and depicts violence against, women and homosexuals. For many of Eminem's critics, the use of this language and depicting such violence is akin to endorsing the same. While taking issue with these assumptions about the artist and his work, I do not seek to endorse the worldview these critics believe Eminem to be advocating; nor do I seek to deny that his work *might* have deleterious impact on the marginalized groups about whom these critics are rightly concerned. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted, the social impact of a work of art has just as much to do with the audience as it does with the artist and his or her intent (Gillespie 2012, 53). There is a considerable difference between employing prejudice and prejudiced language to achieve artistic effects and advocating for the positions that are expressed. The artist's responsibility for the effect

of his or her work nevertheless remains an open question: to deny any or all responsibility on the artist's part would be just as vacuous as to draw a direct line between the actions of any one audience member and any one work of art. For this reason, viewing Eminem and the controversy over his work through the lens of existentialism is particularly useful, not least because one of existentialism's concerns is precisely to collapse the trite binaries of such claims about causality by exposing their platitudinous nature

CURTAIN UP

“From the very beginning”, wrote Simone de Beauvoir, “existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity” (de Beauvoir 1976, 9). While Sartre observed, “the word is being so loosely applied to so many things that it has come to mean nothing at all” (Sartre 2007, 20). It begins with the denial of the given – social, political, and philosophical – and with the rejection of abstract principles and supposed insights of formal logic. It turns instead to a Greek ‘care of the self’ politico-philosophical tradition concerned with who one is and how one acts. On this understanding, “the [Platonic] dialogues were written not to ‘inform people’ but to ‘form’ them” (Hadot 2004, 73). In the nineteenth century, this tradition of self-care intersected with a fear of the masses, what Nietzsche, following Emerson, labelled ‘the herd’, and with the perceived dangers of mediocrity and conformism. Although this concern was evident in the work of thinkers as diverse as John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Alexis de Tocqueville, what marked out both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as the forebears of existentialism was the manner in which each sought to overcome that problematic homogeneity. While Mill, Marx, and Tocqueville, looked towards social, political, or historical forces for a solution, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche turned to the literary and the affective. They sought to write themselves out of the herd by creating themselves as individuals in literary form (Nehamas 1985). The

centrality of the literary and the poetic is suggested by their shared goal of originality. Such originality – such creation of the self – did not require starting from scratch. Rather, it demanded that one create out of what already existed, ‘making it new’ in Ezra Pound’s phrase. As de Beauvoir observed, inadvertently capturing the hip-hop method, “[t]he creator leans upon anterior creations in order to create the possibility of new creations” (de Beauvoir 1976, 28). The goal was to avoid being described in the dominant vocabulary of the day and to create one’s self and thus to become an individual: to be, in Emerson’s phrase, a system and not a satellite.

At the heart of this emphasis on self-creation was a dual commitment to authenticity and responsibility. The authentic-self required living in such a way as to ‘become what you are’, in Nietzsche’s phrase. This meant embracing the contingency of one’s own existence while rejecting what Lyotard would later call ‘metanarratives’ about one’s place in the world and about the historical or philosophical necessity of the standards of the society in which one lived (Lyotard 1984). It was a struggle that de Beauvoir identified as the “perpetual tension to keep being at a certain distance, to tear one-self from the world and to assert oneself as a freedom” (de Beauvoir 1976, 23-4). Such authenticity demanded that one refuse to be defined by the gaze of others (Moran 2013, 104). Likewise, the commitment to personal responsibility demanded that the agent embrace his or her choices and their consequences. To do otherwise, Sartre suggested, would be to live in bad faith (Sartre 2007, 37). The existentialists, then, were oppositional in outlook and style. Just as Kierkegaard attacked the press, the Church, and the dominant Hegelian philosophy of the day, Sartre sought to “give the bourgeoisie a guilty conscience” (Flynn 1984, 65): to expose the hypocrisy and dogmatism which underlay even the most liberal of their ideals. By exposing the bad faith underpinning and expressed in those ideals, the existentialists sought to free humanity to construct its own values without delusion. This commitment to self-creation, and the capacity it generated to live in a world of contingent uncertainty – rather than

to hide behind the fictions of metaphysics and objectivity – were deeply connected to the ethical and the political. Values could not just be taken as a given but had to be understood as human creations. Sometimes caricatured as an ‘anything goes’ approach to ethics and politics, it was rather concerned with doing consciously what had hitherto been done unconsciously, embracing the uncertainty of life and saying, with Nietzsche, ‘Thus, I willed it’.

Employing a method that he called ‘indirect communication,’ Kierkegaard offered a polemical, fictional, and poetic engagement with the world that was also highly theatrical. Presenting his work pseudonymously, Kierkegaard hid behind a variety of fictional personas – the word *persona* deriving from the Latin word for an actor’s mask – distancing himself, often disingenuously, from the views of his characters and ostensible mouthpieces. In this he echoed not just Socrates – upon whose ‘habitual irony’ Kierkegaard had discussed in his dissertation – but also that of Plato. Indeed, readings of *Platonic* – as opposed to Socratic – irony suggest the ways in which Kierkegaard sought to generate uncertainty in the reader so as to cultivate a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text, constructing a social, political, and ethical pedagogy in which the (ideal) reader was forced into a rigorous scrutiny of everything he believed in and lived by (Fish 1972, 1). Such an engagement offered an opportunity for the reader to cultivate his or her own self, rather than simply to orbit Kierkegaard’s text.

In his reading of Plato’s *Republic*, John Seery identifies both Socratic and Platonic irony, paying particular attention to the latter. Plato seeks, Seery suggests, to draw our attention to his authorial presence in the text, indicating that there is a distinction between what the text *says* and what it is trying to *convey*. This ironic distinction, Seery argues, “sets up a dialogue between Plato and us (as Plato’s audience) in order to prompt us toward further reflection regarding the nature of political justice” (Seery 1990, 100). Socrates’ criticism of the poets, he argues, along with other blatant textual inconsistencies such as his rejection of mimetic speech – the primary form of dialogue in the *Republic* – casts ironic doubt upon the claims

that are made in the text, generating an ongoing sense of uncertainty in the reader: recreating the frustrations of speaking to the historical Socrates. In existentialist terms, Simone de Beauvoir labelled the individual incapable of his type of ambiguity the “serious man” who “puts nothing in question” (de Beauvoir 1976, 49). Consequently, she suggested, everything was a threat, both to him and to his sense of self. Because the world was beyond his powers, “he will be constantly upset by the uncontrollable course of events” (de Beauvoir 1976, 51). By offering him- or herself as an experiment in authentic living, she suggests, the existentialist seeks to overcome the ‘serious man’ in the interests of an authentic ethical life. The purpose of the literary existentialism was not, then, merely to illustrate the philosophical, but rather a way to cultivate an ethical sensibility towards the world and one’s place in it. Eminem’s critics seemed, then, to be ‘serious men’.

CRIMINAL

The concerns of Eminem’s earliest critics were threefold: his work was offensive and damaging to the subjects of his attack; he was responsible for the actions – or potential actions – of his audience; and he was inauthentic. In January 2001, GLAAD asserted that “his lyrics advocating violence against lesbians and gay men send explicit messages that endorse hatred”; lamented “The refusal of Eminem, Interscope Records and Universal Music Group to take personal/corporate responsibility for the lyrical content of *The Marshall Mathers LP*”; and offered excerpts from his songs to support their claims. Likewise, the National Organization for Women (NOW) declared: “Eminem’s music contains some of the most explicit descriptions of violence ever to make their way into people’s homes. In addition to constantly calling women bitches, sluts and whores, Eminem sings about killing his wife and raping his mother. He strikes out at everyone, including his fans, but has a particular bloodlust for women, lesbians and gays” (Bozza 2003, 98).

They too listed selections from his lyrics to support their claims. In the face of the rapper receiving multiple Grammy nominations, Grammy head Michael Greene called the artist “repugnant”, before asserting, “I don’t think it’s an accurate depiction to say that the message has anything to do with why the recording got a nomination. Again, remember this organization is very cognizant of theatre. Eminem is theatre” (Victoria Advocate 2003). Only Elton John – who performed a duet with Eminem on the 2001 Grammy telecast – seemed willing to defend the rapper on *content* grounds: “As a gay artist, I’m asked by a lot of people, ‘But what about the content of Eminem’s music?’ It appeals to my English black sense of humour. When I put the album on the first time, I was in hysterics from laughing” (John 2001). Many did not find this defence funny. “To treat his words as a joke communicates to a large number of boys and young men that violence against a wife, girlfriend or mother is something to laugh at” observed NOW (Bozza 2003, 98).

THEN WHY WOULD I SAY I AM?

In *Ecce Homo* Friedrich Nietzsche declares: “Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image (...) and whoever had understood nothing of me, denied that I needed to be considered at all” (Nietzsche 1989, 261). It is a provocative challenge to his readers that complicates any attempt at criticism. If the reader thinks he or she has understood his work, he suggests, then he or she has simply projected his or her own needs on to it; if he or she thinks that Nietzsche is not worth considering, then he or she has clearly misunderstood him. Infuriating as it might be to the reader, Nietzsche’s rhetorical strategy seeks not to discourage people from reading his work but rather to cultivate in them the attitude of uncertainty appropriate to read it correctly. It is work, he suggests, that should not be dismissed, turned into a systematic program, or reduced to a few stock phrases, but rather embraced in all its complexity. It is also an

attitude that the reader must adopt to the world in which he or she lives, showing how his writing might serve as a pedagogy appropriate to the worldview of philosophy understood as a commitment to care of the self.

Nevertheless, for those hostile to Eminem's work, the song *Kim* seemed to be clear evidence of his hatefulness. The track starts with the narrator addressing a baby girl in affectionate terms. Suddenly, his tone changes, he is now addressing a woman, threatening her with violence. The song progresses with the narrator's furious tirade in which the woman – Kim – is blamed for all the man's problems. Eventually, against a background of struggles and screams, the listener hears the narrator kill the woman. The song is graphic; the listener is spared no detail. Its overall impact is enhanced by knowledge of the artist's biography: Marshall Mathers, III – Eminem's real name – was once married to a woman named Kim, and they had a young daughter. This led Elizabeth Keathley to deplore "the misogynistic violence of Eminem's rap songs" (Keathley 2002, 3).

There would appear to be similar evidence to support the claims that Eminem is a homophobe: his work is rife with references to 'fags', 'faggots', 'lezzes', and 'dykes'. The artist's attempts to parse his own use of the terms – "the term 'faggot' to me doesn't necessarily mean a gay person" (DeCurtis 2005, 296) – met with little sympathy. Indeed, in response to a scene in Eminem's semi-autobiographical movie *8 Mile* in which Eminem's character defends a gay co-worker, Scott Seomin of GLAAD observed: "I believe that scene was strategically put in there to get media attention as well as to reveal in an artificial way the many layers of this man. But I don't think he's that complicated" (Stephens 2005, 27).

The deflationary impetus behind the desire to expose Eminem for what he 'really is' – to dispense with the notion that he is a complicated artist – is, perhaps, a manifestation of de Beauvoir's 'seriousness': an unwillingness to live with the ambiguity engendered by the artist's work, for Eminem's art is considerably more complicated than many of his critics are prepared to admit. Indeed,

there are a number of occasions when he displays quite different attitudes towards women and homosexuals.

The epistolary track Stan is a case in point. It has two narrators; Eminem plays both roles. The narrators are the eponymous fan and a rapper named 'Slim'. The track, which shares much with Sartre's play *The Condemned of Altona* – not least its ending and its narrative device of a posthumously-played recording from a lead character killed when he drives his car off a bridge – consists of a lopsided correspondence between the fan and singer, with Stan becoming increasingly agitated as he details his problems, including his difficulties with his girlfriend, only to receive no reply. Increasingly furious, Stan puts his pregnant girlfriend in the trunk of his car and drives it off a bridge, killing them both. The final stanza of the song consists of Slim's letter to Stan. Apologizing for not writing sooner, the rapper attempts to address some of Stan's problems, suggesting that he seek counselling. He asserts that Stan and his girlfriend need each other and, moreover, that Stan may need to treat her better. One instance of enlightenment, however, failed to appease Eminem's critics. Nevertheless, given his reputation, it does seem unexpected; as does the appearance of an image of gay tolerance in the song *The Real Slim Shady*, where the narrator declares that he can see no reason why two men cannot elope. Likewise, having previously claimed to hate 'fags', the narrator of the song *Criminal* cautions his listeners to relax because he likes gay men. As with Plato's *Republic*, the juxtaposition of such contradictory viewpoints is a persistent trope in the artist's work. It could be, of course, that the artist is simply confused about his position, or that he is the sort of bourgeois hypocrite despised by the existentialists. More plausible is, however, the suggestion that his persistent contradiction is evidence that he is engaged in a complex literary assault on the values of the society of which he is a part, and thus an attempt to create himself anew.

As John Seery notes, Plato makes much of contradiction as an ironic strategy in the *Republic*; Eminem employs such contradiction to achieve irony about his irony. In the song *Kill You*, for example,

he attacks his critics and suggests that he is being entirely earnest, viciously rejecting any suggestion of artifice. The coda to the song is, however, laughter followed by the assertion that he is just playing – a device he also employs elsewhere. The hollowness of this laughter may simply add to the listener’s unease: the listener is not sure whether the narrator is kidding, or whether his final comment is simply an empty disclaimer. It is an effect that is heightened by the ambiguity of the song’s title. Most literally it suggests murderous intent, and yet it also encompasses the violence inherent in some of the words often used to describe comedy and comedians: ‘she killed,’ and ‘you’re killing me’. Nevertheless, there are instances in which the artist’s narrator appears – paradoxically – to be more earnest about his ironic intent. In the song Stan, for example, hearing that Stan cuts himself, Slim tells his fan that he only says this in jest. Indeed, the suggestion that a fan might seek to emulate his song is said to make the narrator sick. Indeed, the artist has suggested that he wrote the song as “a message to critics, like, ‘Look, this is what happens if somebody takes my lyrics seriously’” (DeCurtis 2005, 295). That the fault is with the fan not with the artist is indicated by Stan’s reference to the urban myth surrounding Phil Collins’s *In the Air Tonight*, suggesting Stan has a propensity for misreading even the most innocuous of lyrics. There are, nevertheless, multiple layers of irony at work here too, for the claim that Eminem is responsible for those who would take his words as a spur to action, provides a fecund resource for the artist’s method.

Much of the invective directed at Eminem concerned his alleged responsibility for his audience’s actions. On *Sing For The Moment*, the narrator responds to suggestions that music can alter moods by asking whether it can also load a gun and cock it too. Likewise, in *Who Knew*, the narrator similarly denies responsibility for the actions of others, noting that he just said what he said without knowing that it would lead his listeners to follow his fictional example. In the same song, he also appears to hide behind a liberal defence of the word opposed to action, asking how much damage he could do with a pen. This position is, however, quickly called into question by

comments that might find favour with many of his more conservative critics. Noting that he saw three young kids at a violent movie, he asks if their parents were the same ones who condemned his work. Indeed, he repeatedly turns such criticism back onto his critics, observing that it is not his fault if children copy him because parents are responsible for their own kids. The viewpoint is reinforced on the track *My Dad's Gone Crazy* featuring the artist's daughter Hallie. In it, the narrator concludes by saying that he would not let his daughter listen to his work. Indeed, the artist's thoroughgoing ambivalence – and/or commitment to ambiguity – is demonstrated by the song *Criminal*. In it, he appears both to shrug-off the criticism of his work, and to embrace it, suggesting that it is not the performer but the critic who must give an account of him- or herself, declaring himself to be whatever that critic declares him to be, before asking why he would say it if it were not true. Echoing Napoleon's answer to any criticism – “That's me!” – Eminem observed in an interview with Antony DeCurtis: “that's why I made that song *Criminal*. And that's why I said, ‘Hate fags? The Answer's yes’. Homophobic? Because people were calling me homophobic. That's why I say, ‘I am whatever you say I am’. Whatever you call me, that's what I'm going to be” (DeCurtis 2005, 295).

Whoever could tell when Socrates was being serious and when he was joking, Goethe observed, would be doing humanity a great service (Nehamas 1998, 7). As Seery suggests, however, the pedagogical value of the *Republic* lies in the uncertainty it cultivates in the reader. The same might be said about Eminem, as is evidenced by both the pervasiveness of deliberate contradiction in his work and by its highly theatrical nature. Indeed, as far as the latter is concerned, his theatricality exposes the positions of both those who would deny his literariness affects the negative impact of his work and those who suggest that such literariness prevents his work from meaningfully affecting his audience. Eminem shows how, in attempting to expose him, his critics end up exposing themselves. Certainly, there is something absurd about the seriousness with which NOW, GLAAD, and others, solemnly

published and recited the very lyrics that they believed damaging to others and that, as such, should be banned: a decidedly self-defeating move, serving only to disseminate still further the very words that they found so offensive. Even more problematic for such critics is the way in which their own recitation of the lyrics undermines any suggestion that the words themselves are inherently offensive, that context – such as the artist’s theatrical presentation of them – does not matter, even as they themselves appeared to consider the context in which they repeat the lyrics as mitigating their presentation. In this way, Eminem posed multiple problems for his critics in ways that echo the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, repeatedly turning their words and positions back onto them. On *Who Knew* – the absence of a question mark furthering the ambiguity surrounding the artist – he tempts his audience to take him literally, then scolds them for doing so, offering a wonderfully petulant image in which, when asked to watch his mouth, he responds literally, asking if they want him to take out his eyeballs and turn them around. Likewise, on *Rain Man*, he declares he finds his critics offensive for finding him offensive, perfectly capturing the shrill incommensurability of much of our contemporary political debate. Similarly, in *Cleanin’ Out My Closet*, the narrator asks his critics if they have ever been discriminated and protested against, before announcing that he has. In turning himself into the victim, the artist seeks to turn the tables on his critics. As such, they now must explain *themselves* – in the sense that they have to explain why his depiction of the situation is inaccurate – rather than having him explain himself. The theatricality of his work poses similar problems to such critics, further suggesting how the artist calls the established and the given into question in a way that echoes the work of the existentialists.

Accepting the award for best rap record of the year at the 43rd annual Grammys in 2001, Eminem observed: “I want to thank everybody who could look past the controversy and see the album for what it was – and also for what it isn’t” (Strauss 2001). Given his generally scathing responses to critics – responses which made

Sartre's assertion that "many of the people who interview me are not qualified to do so" (Sartre 2007, 55) look remarkably mild – it might be that the Eminem accepting the award was not the Eminem who appears on his records. The suggestion that some, or all, of his monikers were personas was not, however, something that the artist chose to reveal at the Grammys. His commitment to irony, theatricality, and Kierkegaardian indirect communication went all the way down. In the first instance, each of the personas he adopts is at least one remove from the artist – even 'Marshall Mathers' became as much of a cover as 'Bob Dylan' is for Robert Zimmerman – creating an ironic distance between the artist and his speech. In many instances – such as Stan – the words and deeds that Eminem's critics find so objectionable belong to other characters, creating a further distance between the artist and the work. That the adoption of such masks is a deliberate strategy on the part of the artist is suggested by the ways in which he constantly played with the concept of his identity, from the opening song of his first CD *My Name Is*, through *The Real Slim Shady* on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, to *Without Me* on *The Eminem Show*. Even here, however, the artist seeks to destabilize our understanding of his work. For just as he places a distance between himself and the performance, he also weaves in elements from his own biography, such as in the song *Kim*, tempting the listener to conflate the artist with the narrator, and thereby to generate further uncertainty in his audience, part of a broader strategy of identifying then blurring the distinction between rap and reality. The song *When The Music Stops* from *The Eminem Show* plays with the conflation of the hyperbolic world of rap with the world in which it is created, suggesting decidedly negative consequences for those who confuse the two. As such, it is never clear whose views – if anybody's – the artist is expressing in his work.

In keeping with the existentialist tradition, moreover, much of this irony is wrapped inside theatrical motifs. His third CD, *The Eminem Show* was followed by a fourth, *Encore*, and by a greatest hits collection called *Curtain Call*. The artwork on each one depicted

curtains and a stage, generating a multi-tiered self-referentiality that draws repeated attention to the artifice in his work. Indeed, he is not just theatrical in outlook, but also meta-theatrical. The artist constantly highlights not only his own artifice but also to that of his performance. What literary critics call ‘baring the device’ – artists drawing attention to the medium in which they are working – is a persistent motif in his work. It is to be observed, for example, on *Role Model* – itself a heavily ironic title – where, after requesting a mic check, he asks if they are recording; in the similar mic check on *Who Knew* and on *Cleanin’ Out My Closet* where he complains about not being able to hear the snare in his headphones. It is telling that these meta-theatrical moments became more prevalent in his work as the controversy surrounding it grew, possibly because so many appeared to have missed his ironic purpose. In this frustration, he once again shares an affinity with Sartre who regularly complained about the ways in which his theatrical works were misunderstood, even as he too sought to destabilize any final reading of his works.

In their desire to ‘expose’ Eminem as inauthentic, it is, then, critics who are exposed as inauthentic. They are ‘serious men’ who exhibit an inability to live in the condition of uncertainty that marks the human condition. Observed de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “the serious man readily takes refuge in disputing the serious, but it is the seriousness of others which he disputes, not his own” (de Beauvoir 1976, 50). In each instance, such seriousness demands a final answer to its own uncertainty. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Keathley acknowledges the artist’s multiple personas but conflates them into one. “Mathers” she notes, “has a large ‘Slim Shady’ tattoo on his upper left arm, and he, like many rappers, has been arrested for gun-related violence in apparent imitation of his own musical fantasies” (Keathley 2002). Her work is redolent of the faintly patronizing tone that many critics adopted towards the artist. Their snobbery is evidenced in the ways in which many of these critics seemed to regard Eminem’s heavily ironic musical performances as literal, but to suggest that his ability to talk intelligently about his work is a kind of disassembling theatre. Both

Keathley and Edward Armstrong, for example, talked disparagingly of Eminem's "handlers," and Armstrong goes out of his way to suggest that Eminem is a puppet of his producer and mentor Dr. Dre (Keathley 2002; Armstrong 2004, 347). That such criticism is itself a racially inverted – and highly ironic – reworking of the criticisms levelled against Phillis Wheatley by, among others, Thomas Jefferson, further suggests the ways in which Eminem's work serves to disrupt and confound the critical response to his work (Slauter 2011). Indeed, the question of race indicates the difficulties Eminem poses to his critics, for he repeatedly seems to beat them to their would-be punches.

In the semi-autobiographical movie, *8 Mile*, Eminem plays an aspiring rapper, Jimmy Smith, Jr. – another persona – involved in a number of rap-battles. In the exchange of insults that marks the film's final battle, Eminem's character renders his opponent literally speechless by acknowledging every potential criticism that could be levelled against him before his opponent could make it. Although a fictionalized account of his life, the scene nevertheless captures the way in which Eminem preempts his critics by acknowledging in advance the criticisms they will make. Indeed, in keeping with the existentialist approach, the artist does not break down his critics' claims into their constituent parts to expose faulty premises and suspect reasoning but renders such criticisms problematic through performance. Thus, when Vincent Stephens claims Eminem is inauthentic because his audience is made up of white suburban teenagers his criticism misses the mark because Eminem, like Nietzsche's Napoleon, repeatedly acknowledges that of which he is accused. In the song *Who Knew* the artist denies that he does black music, suggesting instead, that he does white music for high school kids. Similarly, and even more problematically for Stephens, in the song *White America* Eminem acknowledges precisely that which Stephens believes exposes him, noting that he is so beloved of white America that he is embraced by fans on the MTV youth show TRL. Indeed, the artist's constant references to his own whiteness, and the relationship between this and his commercial success, indicate

that he is more than aware of this source of his appeal. More than once he compares himself to Elvis Presley, the most famous whiteface act in history. It is hard to ‘unmask’ somebody for that which they readily acknowledge.

MY TEA’S GONE COLD

Were Eminem simply a trickster, then the challenge he posed to critics in his early work would still be of interest, if only as a masterclass in misdirection. One of the key reasons why existentialism serves as a “productive hermeneutical lens” for his work is, however, its focus on suffering (Gooding-Williams 2010, 18). The rapper repeatedly references his own tears and misery. Such admissions are hardly part of the alleged traditional machismo of rap. Indeed, the artist plays with and subverts a number of the conventions of hip-hop in such a way as to frustrate almost any criticism of his work. For every image of machismo and violence, there is one of weakness and victimhood. In *The Way I Am*, the narrator declares himself to be the meanest MC on Earth. In the very next song, *The Real Slim Shady*, he appears to make a similar boast, declaring himself to be better than 90 per cent of other rappers. At first hearing, perhaps, the line appears to be more of the same, and yet there is an implicit recognition of his own inferiority to at least ten per cent of his would-be rivals. In the braggadocio of rap, this ten percent is a considerably bigger admission of weakness than it might initially seem, showing how even what appears to be a simple boast in keeping with the conventions of the genre, actually poses considerably more difficulties for his critics than the predictable nature of their responses suggests they are aware. From an existentialist perspective, moreover, the language of authenticity and responsibility that these critics employ further suggests such critics’ inability to interrogate their intellectual prejudices. Many seem, for example, to employ this existentialist language as a stick with which to beat the object of their criticism, but are unwilling to

employ it as a hermeneutic tool for engaging with that which they fear. Employing this language of authenticity and responsibility in a manner more consistent with existentialist thought reveals the complexity that such critics miss.

Richard Goldstein argues that Eminem's appropriation of victim status is "what trial lawyers call 'the abuse excuse'. Under the banner lies a boy betrayed by his wife and mother. We've heard it all before" (Goldstein 2004). If Eminem were indeed offering up the 'abuse excuse', as Goldstein asserts, then any suggestion that the artist might be productively viewed through an existentialist lens would have to be withdrawn. Denying responsibility and offering excuses are an anathema to the existentialist worldview. Eminem's position is, however, considerably more complex than his critics suggest. Although the song *Kim* is violent, scary and deeply unpleasant, Eminem's critics have repeatedly failed to notice the ways in which the artist betrays the narrator in the song, or the ways in which the narrator betrays the artist. Those who would reveal the subtext of his work do not acknowledge that the subtext is actually almost always text, and that it is Eminem as the author of the song, who presents it to us. Throughout the song the narrator draws repeated attention to his own weakness. At times he is pathetic – suggesting that his wife thinks he is ugly. Even as he berates her for all his and her failings, the narrator identifies his own role in their problems through a self-consciously weak justification. Had the artist sincerely been concerned to portray his wife or ex-wife as the cause of his problems, it is unlikely that he would have chosen to include the details of his own infidelities and weakness in the song. In this way, perhaps, the audience is meant to see the narrator as something weak and vile, and certainly not as somebody to be emulated. The abuse that he details is not an excuse; it is rather a compelling account of the cycles of dysfunction that often produce domestic violence. There is no incitement to violence in such songs; rather, there is exactly the opposite. Far from glamorizing such acts, Eminem shows us them in all their violence and horror, sparing his listener none of the details. By drawing attention to the causes of

such violence, the artist is showing us that it emerges from *somewhere* and that tackling it requires more than the condemnation of those who report on it. To accuse him of *promoting* such violence is, perhaps, akin to accusing Jonathan Swift of promoting infanticide and cannibalism in his *Modest Proposal*. While it is perfectly possible that some people reading Swift might become cannibals, there are sufficient indicators in the text to suggest that this is not the aim of the work. Much the same can be said of Eminem, even as his critics repeatedly miss it. Indeed, his work repeatedly serves to expose the hypocrisy of those who would fixate on rap-lyrics as the cause of such violence at the expense of more plausible social determinants.

If Eminem were presenting his victimhood as an excuse for his alleged violence, he might be thought to be seeking to evade the responsibility for the potential actions of his audience in a way that contradicts the existentialist worldview. Such a claim nevertheless confuses the ways in which the artist's critics employ the term 'responsibility' and the way in which the existentialists do. For Sartre and others, individuals were responsible only for themselves. As such, readers or audience members who carried out heinous acts as a result of reading their work would have missed the point of their writing. Such people would have become satellites rather than systems, imitators rather than creators, consumers rather than artists. Those who would suggest that Eminem is employing the 'abuse excuse' might initially seem to be on stronger existentialist ground, and yet, by presenting himself as an unattractive, pathetic individual who seeks to rely on such a defense, Eminem defuses the criticism, not through preemption – as he does elsewhere – but rather by embracing his role in creating the chaos he depicts in his personal life. Even more than this, however, Eminem embraces an existentialist responsibility in his commitment to authentic self-creation.

Between the songs on Eminem's CDs are a series of skits. One features a record company executive and an initially upbeat Eminem becoming increasingly deflated as the executive recounts, in lurid detail, what various retailers thought of the record. Ironically, he

describes in terms more violent than Eminem might use what they would like to do to him for producing such an offensive piece of work. In each such instance, Eminem portrays himself as an outsider butting heads with big business, lawyers and other guardians of morality. The irony here, of course, is that such skits appeared on one of the best-reviewed, best-selling albums of the year. Eminem is, perhaps, portraying himself at his weakest when he is at his strongest. It is precisely because he has such strength that he is able to depict himself in this way. In this, as in much else, the artist has taken the events of his life and employed them as the raw materials for creating himself as a work of art in much the same way that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche sought to write themselves out of the conformity. Eminem, like these forebears, has become a satellite not a system: he takes responsibility for creating himself as an authentic individual out of the anterior creations of others.

CURTAINS CLOSE

By the time of the release of Eminem's fourth solo CD *Encore* in 2004, there was a definite sense that the onetime *bête-noire* (or *bête-blanche*) of American cultural criticism had become far less shocking to the nation's sensibilities. Even *Newsweek* was moved to observe – in a review tellingly entitled “The Fake Slim Shady” – that “judging by most of the album, Eminem – like so many other rappers – still thinks bagging on bitches, homos, or anyone who's not in his camp qualifies as fighting the power (...) [w]ho would ever have thought we'd long for the good old days when Eminem could really p--s us off?” (Ali 2004, 76). Far from the hate-filled, invective spewing danger to America's children that he had been three years earlier, Eminem seemed to have become too safe, too predictable, and too mainstream. Paradoxically, some saw this as evidence of the artist's growth. *The Nation*, who had been among the voices condemning Eminem in 2001, argued that with *Mosh* – a song attacking President George W. Bush that demanded

American troops be brought home from Iraq – the artist had moved “from his usual critique to lyrics reflecting sincere political passion”, leading them to suggest that “Eminem has truly made a leap” (Graham-Felsen 2004). What these critics failed to recognize, however, is that it was not Eminem who had changed, but rather the culture he had affected. Like Harold Bloom’s ‘strong poet,’ Eminem had created the taste by which he was to be judged (Bloom 1997). While, for many of his critics, Eminem had become responsible but inauthentic in a way they could understand, the artist himself had, in an existentialist sense, been responsible and authentic from the very beginning. His work was evidence of the continued relevance of existentialism in the American ethical-political life: the tension between that which embraces, cultivates, and lives with uncertainty and that which denies it in favour of the pre-existing, the given, and the apparently certain. In their refusal to engage meaningfully with an artist who challenged them to do otherwise, Eminem’s critics suggest that Jean Cocteau was only half-right: Americans – and American social scientists and cultural critics in particular – are an unknowingly tragic people too.

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