

Border Patrolling and “Passing” in Eminem’s *8 Mile*

Eric King Watts

This essay argues that the semi-biographical film 8 Mile represents Eminem as being both racially distinctive and as possessing universal commercial appeal. 8 Mile accomplishes this paradoxical construction by portraying “Rabbit” as “white trash,” a discursively “dark” (white) object, and as an American mythological white subject. The film makes whiteness hyper-visible by subjecting it to raced and gendered struggles. Through real and symbolic violence, Rabbit battles “dark” villains and grapples with “dark” women, initiating a rite of passage. The film grounds Eminem’s hip hop authenticity in Rabbit’s discursive darkness, but attaches to this image the marketable allure of mythic whiteness. I conclude by contemplating how the film’s conservatism reifies “blackness.”

Keywords: Whiteness; Hip Hop Authenticity; Passing; Consumption; Eminem

When Marshall Mathers III introduced himself to the public in 1999, he announced emphatically in song that “My Name Is” Slim Shady. This self-centered proclamation was the first indication that Mathers is “obsessed with identity” (Tom, 2002, p. 86). The Detroit native is so fixated on his image that he has manufactured a handful of personae, including a “mythicized version” of Marshall Mathers (Denby, 2002, p. 195), subjecting each to a spectacular performance for public derision and adulation. Mathers, a.k.a. Eminem, a.k.a. Slim Shady, recently unveiled another persona in his critically acclaimed film debut, *8 Mile*. The film follows Eminem’s cinematic doppelganger, Jimmy “Bunny Rabbit” Smith, as he navigates Detroit’s rap subculture, vividly dramatizing freestyle “battles” and romanticizing inter-racial friendships. *8 Mile* opened to enthusiastic crowds, bringing to their feet the suddenly shame-faced critics who, until then, had regarded the “real” Slim Shady as “evil”

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(Simpson, 2003, p. 16), a bad seed. Praise for *8 Mile* crystallized in the spring of 2003, when Eminem's "Lose Yourself" won an Academy Award for Best Song. The accolades had been building since the film's premiere in late 2002. At that time, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich (2002) noted that the "most fascinating" aspect of the film was "the ease with which it fits a character as rough and ostensibly subversive as Eminem into a smooth and reassuring show-business fable" (p. 56). Similarly, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Joe Morgenstern (2002) applauded the rapper's "wit, style and heart" as the engine in a "rousing success story" (p. W1). In the *New Yorker*, David Denby (2002) placed Mathers in the company of Hollywood icons of the boy-makes-good story: "In the tradition of *Rocky* and [*Saturday Night*] *Fever*, the movie is a shrewdly engineered piece of proletarian pop—a story of triumph—but, like Eminem's enraged lyrics, *8 Mile* has its own kind of vile candor" (p. 195).

What is notable here is not merely the approbation with which Mathers is received, but the implication that the film functions as a vehicle for re-shaping Mathers' image for consumption. For example, Johann Hari (2003), in the *Independent on Sunday*, commented that Eminem "played the populist card to win the nation's heart" (p. 2). This winning strategy was described as an "intoxicating" (Driver, 2002, p. 42) assertion of class consciousness (Kehr, 2003; McConnell, 2003). As a story about overcoming the odds, *8 Mile* was said by critics to show Eminem as an "archetypal kid" (Owen, 2003, p. 24) and was called "pure Hollywood formula" (McWhorter, 2003, p. 63). Sean O'Hagan (2003), of the *Observer*, claimed that this formula rehabilitated Eminem's image to the point that he represents national aspirations: "In the pale, baby-face of Marshall Mathers III, America sees itself in stark relief" (p. 1). What is also brought into stark relief is how representations of Mathers as the sort of guy with whom mainstream America can (now) readily identify may trouble Eminem's standing as hip hop's reigning shock rapper and weaken his commitment to not "give a fuck [because] God sent me to piss the world off" (Mathers & Dr. Dre, 1999).

Despite, or in part due to, the immense popularity of rap music, rappers' commercial appeal is still anchored by a "core" audience's perception of street credibility or "authenticity" (Moon, 2003, p. K35). In terms of hip hop credibility and marketability, rappers benefit from representing some meaningful aspect of the subaltern, the marginalized "others," or by being associated with what has come to be known as "thug life" or "pimping." As a white artist, Mathers has had to contend with the racial bias associated with performing in a traditionally urban African American musical genre. This racial bias intensified when it was discovered that the white rap artist Vanilla Ice fabricated a "hard core" biography in order to beef up his authenticity.¹ Indeed, from the beginning Eminem has been treated by some fans and industry insiders as a culture thief and imposter, despite being the protégé of Dr. Dre, a hard core hip hop legend (Arango, 2003). Eminem's fixation with his image has been, in part, promoted by the need to bridge this racial credibility gap. According to biographer Nick Hasted (2003), Mathers' invention of the foul mouthed and perversely "dark" Slim Shady can be attributed to the short life of his first album, *Infinite*, and the lack of interest in another white rapper among record executives

beyond Detroit. But Mathers wants to move beyond rap music. Thus, *8 Mile* produces an American love affair with Eminem's "pale, baby-face" and helps Mathers market himself to a broader audience (Friedman, 2003). Having done so, how can he continue authentically to shock and disquiet America? Mathers and the film's producer, Hollywood heavyweight Brian Grazer, seem to have already contemplated such a question: Grazer admitted that they were "worried" about Eminem appearing to be "phony" in the film (Rich, 2002, p. 56). The film's director, Curtis Hanson, therefore recruited key members of his film crew from outside the Hollywood inner circle in order to generate talk of the film's "realism" and to "make the movie feel authentic" (quoted in the DVD production notes). Like Eminem's music, this "realism" is grounded in Mathers' "trailer trash roots" (Farley, 2000, p. 73) and projected through a gritty picture of Detroit as a "burnt-out, graffiti-infested, crime-ridden disaster zone" (Schoenberg, 2002, p. 45). Hence, the film's central conceit is Eminem's on-going obsession with his faces: the pale baby face of America and the dark face that disturbs it.

I argue that the semi-biographical film *8 Mile* is preoccupied with these faces, with Eminem's authenticity and marketability as a white rapper.² The film represents him as both racially distinctive and as possessing universal commercial appeal. *8 Mile* accomplishes this paradoxical construction by portraying Rabbit as a discursively "dark" (white) object, as "white trash," and as an American mythological white subject. Rabbit's journey through the predominantly black world of underground rap is fraught with white anxiety and black hostility. In terms of both class and race, *8 Mile* portrays Rabbit as an oppressed minority. Rather than relying on white invisibility and normativity for its power and prestige, the film makes whiteness hyper-visible by subjecting it to raced and gendered struggles. Through real and symbolic violence, Rabbit undergoes a rite of passage requiring him to battle "dark" villains and grapple with "dark" women. The dramatization of this rite involves the appropriation and deployment of two senses of "passing." First, the film discredits racial "passing" as the projection of an inauthentic face. Second, the film reclaims the transgressive character of "passing" and assigns it to Rabbit's crossing of 8 Mile Road, a mythic and heroic journey toward "whiteness." Thus, "passing" refers both to his authentic darkness and to his "passing" into mythic white masculinity. By self-consciously conflating Rabbit's journey with Mathers' revised biography, the film grounds Eminem's hip hop authenticity in Rabbit's discursive darkness, but attaches to this image the marketable allure of mythic whiteness.

I first provide a framework for understanding the representation of whiteness and its historic capacity for mutability and mobility. A critical reading of the film will then show how the notion of racial passing buttresses the ideology of social conservatism. *8 Mile* dramatizes a world where whiteness is the object of racial injury and where blackness holds the advantage. The film's appropriation of racial passing uncouples it from historical African American survival tactics in a white supremacist world and puts it in the service of white socio-economic mobility in a black one. Whiteness is not only dissociated from systemic privilege in this re-visioning, racism is defined in terms of personal insult and grievance. On the one hand, as white trash

and as a gifted rapper, Rabbit's discursive darkness allows identification with blackness. Since the film discredits racial passing as inauthentic, Rabbit's darkness is "real." On the other hand, Rabbit's mythic journey demands that he cross over into and master this dark world so that he may become "white" and enjoy the mobility attributed to whiteness. *8 Mile*, however, immobilizes blackness by suggesting that black folk risk becoming inauthentic once they leave the inner city. Rabbit's authenticity allows for his passage across 8 Mile Road whereas "real" blackness remains contained within it. I conclude by considering how *8 Mile*'s racial geography and gendered psychodynamics can be understood as constitutive of the marketing phenomenon of Eminem as well as of the angst associated with being a white male in a multiracial America.

The (In)Visible Projection of Whiteness

The study of whiteness has emerged in the humanities as a corollary to the recognition of whiteness as a racially distinct construct requiring interrogation (Lipsitz, 1998; Said, 1993). These studies assert that theories of race and racial representation that overlook whiteness secure for whiteness a position of centrality and "normalcy" from which "deviance," "otherness," and "exoticism" can be deployed as means of containment and control (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Signifying a spatial relation to "others" who are positioned as satellites of a white world, these definitions mark the boundaries of racial geography. The social locations that persons inhabit are inscribed with racial (and gendered and classed) rights, limitations, and privileges. Understanding how whiteness constitutes historically the everydayness of being, occupying the universal subject position, whiteness scholars have proposed that "white people have a peculiar relationship to race, of not being quite contained by their racial categorisation" (Dyer, 1997, p. 18). Whiteness, then, is theorized as being racial, but is typically represented as non-racial. It is invested in a particular subject position (supremacy), but obfuscates that position in the name of universality. To be white is in a sense to be without a race, without a people, able to enjoy a "label-free existence" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 301).

In *White*, Richard Dyer (1997) treats this racial peculiarity in terms of the contradiction that it provokes through a Cartesian duality of spirit and body, where whiteness is the subject of a "compelling cosmology, as well as a vivid imagery" (p. 14), emphasizing purity and the special purity of whiteness, "a theme central to what is implied and mobilised by . . . being called 'white'" (p. 22). Dyer scrutinizes the character of white representation in Western popular culture and surmises that "the ideal of whiteness" functions mythically as a motive sustaining political and cultural hegemony (p. 80). Whiteness is not only about being white.

Black is a privileged term in the construction of white racial imagery. . . . White discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing him/her space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means for knowing the white self. (Dyer, 1997, p. 11)

The white "spirit" is a mythic force that can be made to control the urgings of the body and thus transcend the limitations of the flesh. Dyer contends that white representation often focuses on reconstituting and legitimating this mythic force by telling the tale of white trial and triumph over discursively dark elements in and around the white body. The "purity" of white spirit is threatened by the corrupting influences of dark emotions like fear and dark desires like lust just as surely as white spirit is the source of white people's communion with a trans-historical system of power and privilege (p. 25). Alastair Bonnett (2000) discovers a startling fact in this history of whiteness: "[W]hiteness has often been experienced as something very vulnerable, as an identity under threat. . . . [T]he fragility of whiteness is a direct product of the extraordinary claims of superiority made on its behalf" (p. 38). The "fragility" of whiteness acts also as a catalyst for "heroes" to embark upon a mythic journey toward white "purity." Along this journey, however, a principal terror occupies whiteness: the long-standing fear that the purity of the white race is under assault by an advancing black horde or a "rising tide of color" (Locke, 1925, p. 14). Panic-stricken, master narrators of whiteness depict "a sense of crisis . . . accompanied by the feeling that numerous things are out of control, that life has become chaotic" (Bonnett, 2000, p. 40). This acute anxiety is represented as "naturally" calling for "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin, 1992).

It is in the context of this crisis of white identity that important representations of white masculinity take shape (Katz, 2003). As the Great Protector in this narrative, white masculinity is charged with the moral obligation to confront and conquer dark threats to white purity and innocence. White spirit requires sublimation as dark forces encroach upon it. In particular, white women need protection and control because sexual relations invite "impurities" in the form of dark desires. Thus, white women are conceived paradoxically as "virgin/whores," as both innocent and fallen (Dyer, 1997, p. 28). Interracial sex compounds this problem with white female bodies by disrupting the "legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body" (Dyer, p. 25). And so, master narratives that pursue mythic whiteness often pit white men against feminized dark forces from within and without the white body as tests of immanent manhood.

The tension associated with white sexual reproduction and white mythic purity is a metonymy for a grander racial predicament denoted by a "slippage between white as colour and white as colourlessness . . . a system of thought and affect whereby white people are both particular and nothing in particular, are both something and non-existent" (Dyer, 1997, p. 47). Many scholars have linked the power of such narratives to white invisibility, its colorlessness (Jackson, 1999; Rockler, 2002), and seek to dissipate this power by making whiteness evident. Referring to the invisibility of whiteness as a "paradox of particularity," Robyn Wiegman (1999, p. 150) calls on whiteness studies to appreciate better how making whiteness visible does not necessarily subvert it. "In assigning the power of white racial supremacy to its invisibility and hence universality, Dyer and others underplay the contradictory formation of white racial power that has enabled its historical elasticity and contemporary transformations" (pp. 117–118). In other words, some whiteness

scholars rightly seek to show white people as belonging to a race, but wrongly assume that such an assertion divests whiteness of its power.

Wiegman (1999) contends that the current diversity project makes available a range of white representations that simultaneously exhibit anxiety about racial identity *and* reproduce white power: “[S]eldom has whiteness been so widely attuned to racial equality and justice while so aggressively solidifying its advantage” (p. 121). One way in which this gain is secured is for white folks to embrace and deny whiteness (Moon, 1999). The complex relationship between race and class allows white folks to be represented as “discursively black” and potentially white. Ever since the conscious formation of an American race, poor European immigrants have been considered dark and subject to whitening through socio-economic mobility (Gerstle, 2001). Following this logic, if characterized as poor white trash, whiteness is darkened; it can be whitened by characterizing as heroic its passing over this race/class boundary. Hence, we can appreciate how mutable the category of whiteness can be. Far from depending on racial invisibility as a strategy, Wiegman rightly asserts that whiteness is “now hyper-conscious of itself” (p. 149).

In *8 Mile*, Rabbit’s hyper-consciousness is poignantly expressed at the end of the film, when he finds his voice during a rap battle by embracing his racial “difference.” This hyper-conscious moment signifies Rabbit’s acknowledgment and ownership of the racial injury he has endured and his capacity to move beyond it. The moment also represents a form of psychological closure for Rabbit as he triumphs over his inner and outer demons. Returning to the scene of an earlier devastation, he can be re-born; he can be discursively dark and become white. This moment is the film’s dénouement of Rabbit’s identity crisis, of Eminem’s authentication. But we must begin our exploration of the constitution of mythic white masculinity at the point of Rabbit’s anxiety and injury.

Wounded Whiteness in a Dark World

The film opens with a thick beat and a black screen. Mobb Deep’s “Shook Ones” blares—“scared to death and scared to look/there’s no such thing as half-way crooks.” In the dark we are introduced to the film’s fearful and anxious tone. Popular characteristics associated with rap music—bravado and danger—are interpolated with the darkness. Rabbit’s face flickers in the darkness. Rabbit’s face appears disjointed as a shattered reflection comes into focus. Pieces of a white face in a broken mirror bob and weave to the beat as Rabbit’s feet shuffle right to left; he seems to shadow box with his fragmented image. Huddled in a dank restroom, Rabbit prepares for the “battle.” When he removes his headphones, “Shook Ones” fades to disclose another beat in the distance, echoing on the other side of the bathroom door like a drum in a cavern; this sound editing produces the aural effect of being “underground,” in subaltern space. Our entrance into this world is conditioned by Rabbit’s face acting as “a metaphor for the fragmented consciousness of the modern American white guy” (Tyraingel, 2002, p. 66). Not only does this opening scene introduce the idea that Marshall Mathers has many faces, the film associates his traumatized psyche

with being submerged within blackness. The pressures of being (white) at these dark depths are shown as always already urgent when Rabbit suddenly lunges into a stall to vomit. Rabbit is holed up in a bathroom at the Shelter, a club dedicated to freestyle rap battles. It is populated almost exclusively by black folk who are openly hostile to him, signifying his status as poor white "exotic" underdog (Tom, 2002, p. 86). This characterization of wounded whiteness not only resonates with "zoned-out white kids in the suburbs" (Sanneh, 2002, p. 21), it catalyzes the principal mythic energy of the narrative because it threatens the white body and undermines its spirit, its will to power.

Likened to duels between gladiators, *8 Mile's* rap battles are raw and intense. Unlike the airy grandeur of the classic Roman coliseum, however, the film stages its battles in the belly of the Shelter. Before a raucous and blood-thirsty crowd, rappers jab and stab with witty and vicious insults. This rap audience does not merely watch. First, it critiques and renders final judgment on all performances. Second, its strident applause or its vocal disparagement informs a less savvy film audience about what counts as a great verbal blow. Hanson's use of hand-held cameras captures the frenetic pace and energy of the rap battle (DVD, Production Notes, 2003), collapsing the distance between the film viewer and the rap audience. We sense Rabbit's anxiety rise up in his stomach once again when he nervously watches "Papa Doc" pummel "Shorty Mike" with the sort of focused fury that the battle demands. When Rabbit is introduced, the crowd boos and taunts him. Someone hollers, "Take yo' ass home!" Drawing from Mathers' mythicized history, the film exploits an audience's recognition of the resemblance between Rabbit's reception here and tales of how Eminem, during his formative years, was disrespected by some black audiences (Hasted, 2002). This intertextuality reminds us that it is Eminem's archetypal heroism being produced and that it arises out of darkness. Indeed, as an alienated object of racial insult, Eminem's status as a "white negro" is confirmed (Cobb, 2003, p. 33).

The rap battle is the place in the film where legitimacy and power are exercised. Given its symbolic violence, it is also an arena in which all the conventional attributes of masculinity are on display and tested. In this sense, the rap battle is constitutive of a sexualized (and sexist) performance. To be weak is to become feminized, or "punked." The conflation of sex and violence is well documented in Western popular culture, where weapons of destruction are also phallic and operate as signs of virility and sexual potency (Turner, 2003). Thus, when Rabbit squares off against "Little Tic," the anxiety results not only from the skeptical eyes on his white body and the heckling about being "whack," but by the threat to white masculine reproductive potency. "Future," Rabbit's friend and master of ceremonies, turns to the DJ and commands him, "Spin that shit!" The beat commences. And like soon-to-be road kill, Rabbit is frozen. His eyes widen as if witnessing an on-rushing horror. The advance of an awful thing is written on Rabbit's face. The crowd also sees it and chants "Choke! Choke! Choke!" The battle is lost, for Rabbit cannot speak. He retreats into the darkness off stage. The film has now dramatized the injury to white masculinity as a form of sexual dysfunction. In an arena where symbolic violence is constitutive of

sexual potency, Rabbit has suffered the ultimate masculine embarrassment; he has displayed “performance anxiety.” Indeed, when Rabbit leaves the stage, handing the microphone back to Future, his entire body is slack and limp. Recalling the way in which violence is used to impose order on a chaotic world, to regenerate white mastery, the film threatens the very basis of white “survival” by entertaining the idea of white impotence in a black world.

According to Mathers, 8 Mile Road “was literally a median that separated black from white” (DVD, Bonus Material, 2003). Specifically, 8 Mile Road distinguishes between the municipality of Detroit and its northern suburbs. 8 Mile Road functions as a boundary and a conduit, as a mechanism of inversion and transgression. 8 Mile Road initially confines Rabbit to the margin, to his dark (white) side. In order for Rabbit, a displaced racial other, to fulfill the requirements of mythic white masculinity, he must convert (regenerate) 8 Mile Road into a conduit and pass between these racial spaces. What this also means is that *8 Mile* dramatizes the association of Rabbit’s dark roots with Mathers’ biography, providing Eminem with a dark background. Retreating from the film’s black world, a place that provokes performance anxiety in those who are not really black, Rabbit’s whiteness signifies inauthenticity. As an injured dark white object, Rabbit’s rite of passage into authentic white subjectivity takes him across 8 Mile Road toward confrontations with dark women.

The Uses and Abuses of Dark White Women and Passing

8 Mile offers Rabbit a dark mother and a dark lover as elements to be overcome in his rite of passage. Arriving at 8 Mile Mobile Court, Rabbit walks in on his mother on the sofa having sex with her younger boyfriend. Embarrassed and disgusted, Rabbit quickly pivots out of the door. Our first glimpse of Rabbit’s mother is from the back; her dirty blonde hair is tossed loosely about her shoulders as she mounts her lover and exacerbates Rabbit’s sexual terror. Rabbit’s performance anxiety is juxtaposed with his mother’s sexual confidence. The fact that she is “on top” exemplifies her (mis)appropriation of masculine power and pleasure. Rabbit has lost his ability to perform while his mother displays the kind of sexuality that unsettles expectations of how mothers ought to behave. Indeed, the film reveals that Rabbit’s mother is hardly motherly. She neglects Lily, her daughter; she cannot (or will not) hold a job; and she submits to abuse from Greg, her lover, because she hopes he will take care of her with the insurance check that he is expecting and that dominates her imagination. In nearly every way, she is painted as pathetic.

In *8 Mile*, Eminem’s “matricidal ramblings” (Cobb, 2003, p. 33) translate into a profound disappointment with his mother’s flaws and foster Rabbit’s sense of parental responsibility. Rabbit becomes Lily’s “father” because his mother is drunk, or fretting over being evicted, or whining that Greg won’t perform oral sex on her. Once Greg’s check comes in, he leaves her. She takes it out on Rabbit:

Greg left me. It's your fault that he left me! You ruined it! You fucked it all up for me! Who's gonna want me now? Who's gonna want me! Where are we gonna live? We don't have any money! We don't have anything! What am I gonna do?! What am I gonna do?!

In this mythic narrative Rabbit's mother personifies a miserable virgin/whore (Grundman, 2003). Lying on the bed in a fetal position and sobbing helplessly, she needs Rabbit's strength and heroism. Although she screams at him, "Get the fuck out of here," she does not wish to be alone. Her darkness explains Rabbit's angst regarding his future. It also warrants Eminem's ugly put-downs of his mother on his CDs and elsewhere.³ Her weakness, her miscarriage as a "good mother," provokes in Rabbit both an awful fear that he may end up like her and a desperate quest to succeed. Whether his fruits will be shared with his mother is unclear, but we are certain that he will rescue his "daughter" in this story.⁴ Rabbit's painful expression turns into righteous indignation at the recognition that he must take charge and be the man of the house. He vehemently scolds his mother but takes responsibility for Lily by protecting and caring for her. "What are *you* gonna do?" he yells. "Lily's out there by herself right now. Why you gotta be like this? What did we ever do to you?" His mother's moral downfall allows Rabbit to name and thus identify the source of his own "homelessness." In this way her darkness catalyzes his rite of passage; it clarifies his purpose as "father" and provider. These roles portray Rabbit as capable of possessing the enterprising spirit that has eluded him thus far in the film. They give him direction, propelling his mythic journey.

Importantly, this rite of passage cues us in on how the film appropriates passing and makes it into a characteristic of the mercurial white man. In what may be the most ironic scene in the film, Rabbit's mother is watching Douglas Sirk's film classic *Imitation of Life* when Rabbit comes home at night.⁵ Neither Rabbit nor his mother comment on the film, but its inclusion signals *8 Mile*'s commentary on Rabbit's racial character and Eminem's awareness of the way in which his whiteness has troubled his hip hop authenticity. *8 Mile* excerpts the scene in which Sarah Jane is "outed" when her dark mother visits her classroom. As a very fair-skinned little girl with long brown hair, Sarah Jane had been passing for white at school. Now unmasked as black, she is mortified. She runs out of the classroom crying, "Oh, mother!" The film dramatizes the perils of racial passing; thus it advocates telling the "truth" about oneself. The scene chosen for *8 Mile* is about one such moment of truth. It foreshadows Rabbit's moment of racial reckoning at the film's climax.

The scene's irony becomes acute as we ponder Mathers' relation to darkness. *Imitation* depicts racial passing as a destructive and delusional activity. It is the sort of deception that separates loved ones from one another because it forces the poser to remain a fugitive. Grafted onto *8 Mile*, these connotations produce a peculiar effect: The reference to *Imitation* suggests that Rabbit's discursive darkness and his familiarity with hip hop culture allow him to pass as black. But the reference to passing is made through an *unmasking*. Thus, *8 Mile* hints that Rabbit is *not* imitating black life. Both films deconstruct passing, but while *Imitation* exposes the manner in which internalized racism is self effacing, *8 Mile*'s motive is to consolidate

Eminem's heroic face. Indeed, Gayle Wald (2000) writes that "white' passing narratives center the individual passer as social maverick" (pp. 15–16). It is ironic, therefore, that *Imitation of Life* is made to testify on behalf of the authenticity of a white life dramatized as discursively dark. Rabbit's passage into mythic white masculinity cannot be entirely accomplished by confronting his mother's darkness. The sexual terror that prevents him from regenerating his social space must be transformed into a form of sexual prowess. Rabbit's "manhood" can only be fulfilled by exorcising his demons: he must reclaim his sexual vigor in order to restore his rap voice. To this end, *8 Mile* presents a second adaptation of the virgin/whore, a dark lover as an instrument for exercising his carnal pleasures and for stimulating his voice.

Standing outside his place of employment, Detroit Stamping, Rabbit spies Alex sashaying toward the plant. She's there looking for her brother, but it is her body that is the object of everyone's gaze. Her tight leather skirt and fire-engine red blouse advertise her sexual verve. Rabbit shows something other than sexual terror for the first time in the film when his gaze follows Alex's body as she enters the plant. Alex moves in and out of Detroit's rap subculture as well, but it is her sexual allure that seems to provide her entrance and acceptance. She uses male lust as a masculine weakness to her advantage.⁶ Her sexuality is a source of her power and of her pleasure. *8 Mile* is ambiguous about whether her erotic power satisfies her, but it performs its duty for mythic white masculinity. Alex excites Rabbit. Like lightning, however, she is dangerous and is attracted to the most prominent phallus in the vicinity; her movements are difficult to predict and cannot be trusted. As such, Rabbit's task is not only to control this "freak" of nature, but to master his own desire to touch her, to regulate his weakness in relation to her darkness.

As discussed earlier, rap performance in this film is constitutive of (hetero)sexual display. Alex recognizes rap's provocative nature and responds to it. She is drawn to Rabbit because the word on the street is that he's a "dope rapper." The film's narrative convention forces the two most attractive white people to seek one another. Surrounded by beautiful black women, this discursively dark white man only has eyes for a discursively dark white woman.⁷ The next time Alex drops by Detroit Stamping during a lunch break, she witnesses Rabbit's freestyle performance. Widely discussed by critics as a scene determined by Eminem's desire to rehabilitate his homophobic image, it involves Rabbit coming to the rescue of a gay man who was being "dissed" by a fellow worker (Cobb, 2003; Grundman, 2003). Rabbit interjects with witty rhymes that silence the offender. Noticing Alex, he asks her on a date; aroused by his rap display, Alex breathlessly says to Rabbit, "Take me somewhere now." Rabbit leads her into a space in the plant, where, to the hum of machinery and hidden by crates, they have sex; it is sleazy, steamy, dirty, and, without contraception, dangerous. Following Rabbit's orgasm, Alex gazes at him with bedroom eyes and whispers, "You were so good outside. You're gonna get a deal soon. I feel it." Her sex talk concerns his rap prowess and his future as a rap artist. Thus, their sex act is the climax of his rap performance. The two operations are transfusional. His freestyle constitutes his sex appeal, while her body stimulates the "coming" of his rap voice.

Alex has fulfilled her role as a vehicle for this “manly” expression. It is her failure to be one of the “good white girls” (Moon, 1999, p. 182), however, that propels Rabbit toward the realization of mythic white masculinity.

Seeking support for a photo résumé that she needs in order to get into modeling, Alex has hooked up with Wink, an acquaintance of Rabbit's and a would-be hip hop mogul. Sequestered one late evening in a radio studio, they have sex. Their romp is violently interrupted by Rabbit, who viciously beats Wink. Rabbit halts his assault with a raised fist as Wink slumps. The scene frames Rabbit's fist with Alex's shamed and reddened face. A knowing audience is reminded of Eminem's arrest for pistol whipping a man for allegedly kissing his ex-wife, Kim (O'Hagan, 2003). Unlike Eminem's infamous lyrical “murders” of his ex-wife,⁸ the film merely alludes to her homicide, yet redirects his fury toward black threats to the integrity of white reproduction. Alex's manipulation and enjoyment of her sexual body let blackness encroach upon white space. The film suggests that this is the real danger: women cannot be trusted with their own erotic power. Alex has already instigated Rabbit's sex and now violence; she has behaved as a capacitor for the rejuvenation of the essential characteristics of mythic white masculinity. Rabbit's violent outburst is a sign that he may be endowed with the power to restore his world to its “proper” order. He has confronted his dark birth and has expunged dark desires with violence. He must now pass back across 8 Mile Road to take charge of the dark underworld where he had been humiliated at the film's outset.

Mastering the “Free World”

The film's appropriation of passing importantly structures the tension between Rabbit's friends and their rivals, an all-black squad called the “Free World.” Rabbit is part of an inter-racial crew made up of Future; Sol, a lustful big man; DJ Iz, his politically astute brother; and Cheddar Bob, a lovable and dim-witted white guy. Taking Detroit's area code as their tag, Rabbit's friends call themselves the “313rd” and proudly identify with the heart of the city's rap culture. Rather than being portrayed as thugs, the film accentuates Detroit's gritty landscape with their boyish charm. They pull sophomoric pranks that reflect the escapist imagination of folks who dream of better lives. Importantly, the narrative action of the group accomplishes two functions. First, the group's social dynamics sponsor the film's contemplation of Rabbit's racial predicament, but define the racial problem (and issues of social justice in general) in interpersonal terms so as to dissociate oppression from systems of privilege. Second, by portraying Rabbit's friends as “good” guys, the film provides black villains; the Free World will be shown to be imperialistic and corrupt, implying that the enterprising spirit cannot authentically belong to them. In the end, mastering the Free World reveals the film's paradoxical racial construction: mythic whiteness authentically triumphs in a dark world while corrupt blackness is inauthentic.

Following Rabbit's “choke act” at the Shelter, his friends rally around him. Their affection is palpable as each in turn offers him a warm hand and shoulder. The ease

with which they interact, however, calls attention to the film's awkward racial geography. In order for *8 Mile* to showcase the heroic mobility of whiteness and the decisive value of the white spirit, it must clarify some racial boundaries that are not easily transgressed. The most intriguing example of this predicament occurs when Rabbit is chauffeuring the 313rd. Future, Sol, and DJ Iz are debating about the best rappers. Future exalts Rakim, Sol admires Biggie Smalls, and Iz adds Tupac Shakur to the list. Cheddar Bob boldly asserts that the white rap trio the Beastie Boys should be considered. Future has a fit: "Man, fuck the Beasties! Don't bring the Beastie's shit in the mix, dog!" Cheddar tries to interject, "They bust some serious shit." Future cuts him off: "No, no, no; them white boys are more like bustas on some serious shit." Rather than take sides, DJ Iz comments, "It's always easier for a white man to succeed in a black man's medium, right?" Future concurs, "Word up. That's right."

Thus *8 Mile* again demonstrates its preoccupation with Eminem's identity by reminding us of racial bias in rap music. Even the guys who belong to the 313rd believe that white rappers are overrated. Indeed, in the song "White America" Eminem concedes that if he were black, he would have sold only half as many CDs.⁹ What is special about this scene is not how it illustrates Eminem's awareness of the marketability of whiteness; the scene intimates that while it may be easier for white artists to have commercial success, it is very difficult for them to get *respect*. Moreover, when Cheddar Bob asks the group about the Beasties, Rabbit rolls his eyes and shakes his head. It is tempting to read his body language as disapproving of Cheddar's opinion. But I want to offer an alternative explanation. Rabbit disapproves of Cheddar Bob's ignorance of the fact that the conversation constitutes a forum for black men to judge black performance. As such, Rabbit's deference to their opinions not only signals his race consciousness, it also shows that Rabbit knows his "proper" place in this black world. In the context of the 313rd's acceptance and affection, his understanding of the limits of his authority marks him as a competent player, a cultivated insider. Cheddar Bob misreads the boundaries. The rebuke marks him as an incompetent outsider. The scene is odd precisely because it allows black men to critique the terms of white transgression into a "black man's medium" while it silently testifies on behalf of Eminem's fitness to pass into this same territory. Furthermore, by not questioning the sense of racial essentialism buttressing Iz's comment, the film suggests that some racial boundaries are permanent.

In a sense, *8 Mile*'s racialism also limits the 313rd's aspirations. The group strives simply to win rap battles and get on the radio so as to generate "street credibility." While fantasizing about impending success, Sol and DJ Iz argue about career objectives. Iz asserts that the 313rd ought to be attentive to economic fundamentals. They need a record deal, he argues, so that they can enjoy basic employment benefits. Sol laughs, "I'm talkin' about Bentleys and Benjamins, not Blue Cross and Blue Shield." Future is also parochial in confessing, "I don't give a fuck about none of that. I just wanna hear three and a third on the box." Sol persists in ridiculing his brother's sound advice by looking forward to "fine bitches and fat rides, not no goddamn savings bonds." Indeed, DJ Iz's perspective on black poverty is routinely blocked by

8 Mile's portrayal of the 313rd as interested in local success and meager material possessions.

Late one evening during a party, Iz notes that "on the other side of 8 Mile" buildings are refurbished or bulldozed. But in Detroit they stay as dangerous eyesores; there, the money goes to "gambling casinos" rather than housing the poor. Instead of contemplating the impact of a crumbling economy on urban dwellers, however, the film privatizes the moment by appealing to emotional spectacle. The guys decide to torch an abandoned house where a rape had occurred because, as Cheddar Bob points out to Rabbit, the girl "could've been Lily." Watching the flames lap at the roof, Alex describes the pyre as "almost beautiful." The political is aestheticized here, and we are encouraged to indulge our senses by enjoying the "art." And as the sound of fire engines rises in the distance, the 313rd completes the transfiguration of the political into spectacle by signifying that their act was a kind of party favor; they begin chanting the well-known dance club refrain: "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! We don't need no water, let the motherfucka' burn! Burn, motherfucka', burn!" Hence, the 313rd's actions are characterized as motivated by personal amusement and immediate gratification rather than long-term enterprise. The group, however, enjoys our warm attachment precisely because its joyful spirit bonds folks together. The 313rd is focused on the sensual pleasures of the moment and of the body. The 313rd thus seems harmonious with nature and so is "keeping it real."

At every turn in the film, however, the members of the Free World seek to reign supreme. Anchored by Papa Doc, the reigning battle champ, and his lieutenants Lotto and Lyckety Splyt, the Free World not only sees Rabbit's whiteness as a sign of his inferiority, but is determined to dominate Detroit's rap subculture. Cruising in a shiny black Ford Explorer, the Free World invades the 313rd's social space. Papa Doc captains this pirate ship with a penetrating gaze; his ire is always provoked by Rabbit's insistence on being on the "wrong" side of 8 Mile Road. Associated with Wink, the character determined to build a rap "empire," the Free World is depicted as having imperial aspirations. After Wink is beaten up by Rabbit, he enlists the aid of the Free World to exact revenge. The Free World accosts Rabbit outside his mother's mobile home; outnumbered and alone, Rabbit neither runs nor cowers. In a sense, he takes his beating like a man. Papa Doc puts his pistol in Rabbit's face. "I could end your shit right here," he hisses, "and nobody'd even miss yo' ass." Wink dissuades Papa Doc from committing murder. Before leaving Rabbit broken on the ground, Lyckety Splyt challenges him to "come to the Shelter tomorrow night, hah!"

8 Mile has promoted black villainy to the rank of an archetype. "To make non-whites the greatest threat would accord them qualities of will and skill, of exercising spirit, which would make them the equivalent of white people" (Dyer, 1997, p. 35). The Free World's supreme and imperial motives represent the perils of "progress." Free to exercise its will to power in this dark world, the group illustrates a kind of moral failure. Black power has run amok; it is abusive, hegemonic, and oppressive. These despicable traits bear down on Rabbit, producing his distress: "The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence in such pain. The presence of the dark within the white man also enables him to

assume the position as the universal signifier for humanity” (Dyer, 1997, p. 28). While Rabbit represents everyone’s potential to persevere, the Free World signifies the notion that dark bodies cannot exercise the enterprising spirit without being corrupted and diseased. We come away from this moment in *8 Mile* identifying with Rabbit’s vulnerability and looking forward to the prohibition of the Free World.

Bruised and battered from his beating at the hands of the Free World, Rabbit arrives at the Shelter signifying a “great white hip hop hope” (Kim, 2001, p. 4). He huddles with Future in a dank and dilapidated restroom similar to the one where we first saw him. Future urges him to “flip the script on this shit tonight.” When Future announces the first round battles, Rabbit once again seeks counsel in his own reflection. This time the mirror is not cracked. Thus, he is not a “shook one”; his image is stable and whole. Once on stage, he is met with jeers, but seems unfazed as he faces off with Lykety Splyt. Winning the coin toss, Lykety Splyt goes first and immediately seeks to characterize Rabbit as a white outsider who “ain’t Detroit” and who should “form a group with Vanilla Ice.” Splyt’s later insults link Rabbit to Willie Nelson and Elvis. He concludes by reiterating Detroit’s racial boundary: “I don’t know why they let you out in the dark; you need to take your white ass back across 8 Mile to the trailer park.” The crowd screams its approval of Lykety Splyt’s rhymes. Future calls for order and hands the microphone to Rabbit. The beat begins and we wait for Rabbit; his friends exchange concerned glances as the seconds pass. This dramatic pause also creates sexual tension and finally Rabbit verbally explodes:

This guy raps like his parents jerked him. He sounds like Erick Sermon, the generic version. This whole crowd looks suspicious. It’s all dudes in here except for these bitches! [Gestures to the Free World at the edge of the stage] So I’m a German, eh? That’s ok; you look like a fuckin’ worm with braids. These leaders of the Free World rookies; lookee, how can six dicks be pussies? Talkin’ ’bout shit’s creek, bitch, you could be up piss creek with paddles this deep [uses his fingers to show an inch], you’re still gonna sink. You’re a disgrace. Yeah, they call me Rabbit. This is a turtle race. He can’t get with me spittin’ this shit wickedly, lickedly, shot-the-split-splickety, split-lickety. So, I’m gonna turn around with a great smile and walk my white ass back across 8 Mile [pulls his pants down and shows his “white ass” as he walks away].

Rabbit’s performance delights the Shelter’s audience and Wink glances at Papa Doc with a wry smile that says, “I told you he had skills.” Rabbit’s freestyle illustrates his knowledge of normative hip hop conventions, while signifying its racial boundaries. Rabbit’s reference to Erick Sermon, respected co-founder of EPMD, demonstrates hip hop knowledge, while it asserts his distinction; if Lykety Splyt is a “generic” rapper, then Rabbit must be “special.” In fact, Splyt helps this rationale by playing the race card. Rabbit seizes this racial trope and inverts its value. Rather than apologize for his “white ass,” he celebrates it by showing its “great smile.” Rabbit’s performance receives the loudest roar from the audience, advancing him to the next round to square off against Lotto. Leaving the stage, Rabbit now receives congratulations instead of insults, handshakes rather than headaches. Even a bouncer, who earlier

gripped to Future that Rabbit had an attitude, now offers him the “pound”—a closed fist that Rabbit taps with his own.

Enraged by Rabbit's victory, Lotto begins his assault in round two even more nastily than Lyckety Splyt:

It's time to get rid of this motherfucka' once and for all! I'm sick of this motherfucka'! I'll spit a racial slur, honky. Sue me! This shit is a horror flick, but a black guy doesn't die in this movie. . . . You think these niggas gonna feel the shit you say? Hmmm. I gotta better chance of joining the KKK. . . . Fuck Lotto, call me the leader. I feel bad I gotta murder that dude from Leave It to Beaver. . . . I hate to do this; I would love for this shit to last; so I'll take pictures of my rear end so you won't forget my ass. What's all well that ends ok; so I'll end this shit with a fuck you [gives Rabbit the finger] and have a nice day!

Although Lotto is more venomous with his rhyme, he shares Lyckety Splyt's goal of reifying racial boundaries that exclude whiteness. Lotto's freestyle references racial difference and one's “proper” place. As a “honky” who does not rightfully belong to hip hop, Rabbit's transgression is characterized as grounds for “murder.” Lotto's reference to Hollywood stereotypes and narrative conventions that require that the black guy “die in this movie” delight the crowd and provoke a peculiar insight into this film's racial conventions. Lotto's remark assumes that racial conventions are being undermined at the Shelter, that the black guy will not die in this flick. But *8 Mile's* audience is witnessing no such radical departure from Hollywood narrative convention. In this “battle” and in the film in general, *8 Mile* dramatizes a kind of culture war where black villainy is disclosed as racist and imperial; the Free World's insistence on pushing Rabbit to the fringes because he's white, despite the “truth” of his rap talent, shows the group to be dogmatic and incongruent with hip hop popular opinion. This form of white oppression occurs due to black racial consciousness. The film insinuates that black demagogues who advocate black domination violate the American creed that one should be judged by the content of one's character. Rabbit's passing over 8 Mile Road is heroic because it restores the myth of the American Dream. As such, this passing narrative faithfully adheres to a form of conservatism that valorizes the cult of manhood and the rugged individual (Grundman, 2003; Hari, 2003).

Rabbit dispenses with Lotto, setting the stage for a showdown with Papa Doc, the battle champion. Papa Doc wins the coin toss but tells Future to “let that bitch go first.” The beat begins and Rabbit turns to address the Shelter's crowd directly:

Now everybody from the 313, put your motherfuckin' hands in the air and follow me! [Repeats it.] Look, look. Now while he stands tough, notice that this man did not have his hands up. The Free World's got you gassed up. . . . This guy ain't no motherfuckin' MC; I know everything he's about to say against me. I am white. I am a fuckin' bum. I do live in a trailer with my mom. . . . I did get jumped by all six of you chumps! And Wink did fuck my girl. I'm still standing here sayin' fuck the Free World! Don't never try to judge me, dude. You don't know what the fuck I been through! But I know something about you. You went to Granbrook, that's a private school. What's the matter, dog, you embarrassed? This guy's a gangster? His real name's Clarence! And Clarence lives at home with both parents. And Clarence's

parents have a real good marriage. This guy don't wanna battle, he's shook! 'Cause there ain't no such thing as half-way crooks [crowd joins in this refrain]. He's scared to death, he's scared to look in his fuckin' yearbook. Fuck Granbrook! [With the time up, Future directs the DJ to stop the beat.] Fuck a beat; I'll go acappella. Fuck a Papa Doc, fuck a clock, fuck a trailer; fuck everybody! Fuck y'all if you doubt me! I'm a piece of white trash, I say it proudly! And fuck this battle, I don't wanna win, I'm audi [out of here]. Here, tell these people something they don't know about me [tosses the microphone to Papa Doc]!

Rabbit's final performance begins by calling upon the crowd's filial sentiments, progresses through a series of self-disclosures, and ends by "outing" the other. Dissociating Papa Doc from the community, Rabbit can claim that he "ain't no motherfuckin' MC." By taking would-be slurs right out of Papa Doc's mouth, Rabbit converts his racial wounds into catharsis and provides the grounds for his "outing" of Papa Doc. Rabbit's healing constitutes Papa Doc's impotence as he is left speechless. As a middle class man from a functional home, Clarence has been passing as a thug. Unmasked, he appears to be nothing more than a narrow-minded bully, a fearful refugee from his authentic self. Papa Doc's socio-economic status should relieve him of the burden of passing, but Detroit's rundown landscape offers him a vicarious "real" life. Like white suburbanites drawn to the vitality of black culture, Papa Doc crosses 8 Mile Road for excitement; it is he who engages in tourism. By identifying the middle class with whiteness, the film suggests that middle class black folk have lost an essential "black" characteristic; an attribute that, paradoxically, can only be *virtually* recollected through passing. Stunned and "shook," Papa Doc meekly resigns.

Conversely, Rabbit prepares to go "home" by proclaiming loudly: "I'm a piece of white trash, I say it proudly!" This hyper-conscious racial moment signals the resolution of the film's racial paradox. Whiteness typically gathers its "power value . . . in its instabilities and apparent neutrality," allowing it to be embodied and "universal" (Dyer, 1997, p. 70). But in *8 Mile's* dark world, such ontological slippage provokes fantastic terror as whiteness is denied that universal ground because it is constantly being "colored." Thus, Rabbit's shakiness at the beginning of the film catalyzes his quest and is constitutive of his passing over *8 Mile's* racial divide. Rabbit's journey involves the stabilization of his identity and culminates in his brash and decisive self-naming. Importantly, the film's racial essentialism is also on full display as the Shelter's crowd celebrates racial "purification." The Free World is vanquished as white-like; Clarence's genealogy apparently provides the one drop of middle class blood necessary for his expulsion. But Rabbit preempts the 313rd's celebration so that he can return to the plant. Although now commanding respect at the Shelter, Rabbit walks away in order to fulfill the film's teleology; he must submit to the very same racial imperatives that hold the 313rd in orbit around the Shelter and that evict the Free World. Only the authentically black can reside. This racial essentialism warrants Rabbit's self-imposed "romantic white solitude" (Grundman, 2003, p. 16) at the film's end because the color line must be *maintained* in order for his passing to be heroic.

Conclusions

8 Mile depicts a triumph over internalized and externalized darkness during a rite of passage into mythic white masculinity. I have argued that Rabbit's discursive darkness provides him with the sort of social injury that helps to authenticate Eminem's status as a rap artist. According to *PR Week* ("Media week," 2002), the film constitutes an image makeover. The film dramatizes Detroit's racial geography, where 8 Mile Road acts as a racial border and as a point of passing. *8 Mile* appropriates and deconstructs racial passing by asserting its inauthenticity, and salvaging its power to transform Rabbit into a "neo macho" hero (Goldstein, 2003, p. 16). The film also appropriates and adapts virgin/whores as characters who help cultivate and jettison the sexual terror that accompanies the angst provoked by being a minority in *8 Mile*'s dark world. Faced with metaphorical extinction if unable to regenerate whiteness by imposing order on this world, Rabbit's journey into mythic whiteness is buttressed by confronting his dark mother and by disciplining Alex's erotic body. Rabbit dares to violate America's racial code by crossing into Detroit's dark territory; he vanquishes black villains who, ironically, turn out to be passing as working class. Wiegman (1999) posits that narratives like this one use "class as the transfer point between looking white and believing you are white" (p. 136). Hence, while Rabbit's discursive darkness is shaped by injury and impotence, his victory over the Free World constitutes his confidence in the value and authority of whiteness.

I wish to concentrate on how Rabbit's resemblance to Marshall Mathers allows an analysis of the film as a marketing mechanism for Eminem. Transforming humiliation into hubris, Rabbit's passing reinforces racial essentialism and segregation. 8 Mile Road signifies a source of black cultural vitality and authenticity that must be conserved so as to be annexed by whiteness. By occluding the possibility of legitimate black middle class motives, the film suggests that the only black folk with genuine and ethical strivings are poor urban blacks who strive only to "keep it real." This last point is particularly troubling—indicating how *8 Mile* participates in the reproduction of a highly profitable form of ghetto chic. Hip hop culture provides corporate interests with what Russell Simmons describes as "the greatest branding community" (Hornsey, 2003, p. B3). This exchange relation accelerates the manufacture of corporate rappers (McCormick, 2002). Thus, the black ghetto that is fabricated as a backdrop in *8 Mile* to legitimize Eminem's darkness is itself authenticated as the source of a hip hop essence. Eminem claims that "hip hop is about poverty" (Hornsey, 2003, p. B3) because such poverty is at the heart of his authenticity. This construction of black urban culture is an essential ingredient in the on-going face work of rap wannabes; as a marketed and fetishized product, then, the value of ghetto life is directly (and paradoxically) proportional to its privation. The spectacular consumption of this notion of authenticity revises hip hop history precisely because it magnifies and reifies one facet of black culture (Watts & Orbe, 2002).

My analysis shows how *8 Mile* divorces white privilege from racism while producing a form of racial solidarity and white masculinity that celebrates and

exploits black “primitivism.” Rabbit’s capacity to pass over 8 Mile Road reflects Eminem’s market interests. With the number one movie, single, and soundtrack in November 2002 (Pietroluongo, 2002), Eminem was immensely popular with suburban teens who want to “piss off” (Simpson, 2003, p. 16) their parents. The film likewise impressed conservative journalists like Andrew Sullivan, who was “struck by the ferocious individualism of the movie. . . . The message of the story is that you have to escape from hell by yourself. Any other way is . . . inauthentic” (Hari, 2003, p. 2). I contend that this sort of commendation is also constitutive of the way in which black mobility is tarnished and thwarted by implying that it is a corrupting impulse. What is particularly depressing about the film is that it displays a racial neurosis that seems to be a reaction to an increased presence of non-white persons in the culture industry. Rap music dominates the pop charts and insinuates itself across cultural spheres. Thus, the film’s supreme irony is that it celebrates the capacity for hip hop culture to offer mobility by holding blackness still. The film markets Eminem across cultural boundaries but shapes authentic blackness as not able to pass beyond those same boundaries. This race-conscious venture in whiteness is fabricated through an “anti-racist” hero.

As our media culture commodifies diversity itself, whiteness finds market value in racial distinction. Moreover, white men in particular can find solace in the dramatization of a white “rebel” who, despite being an oppressed minority, can pass through multiple cultural worlds and display masterful power. Drawing from hip hop’s fundamental nature and annexing this mythic whiteness, Eminem crosses over radio play lists and video outlets without being perceived as “selling out.” It is a sign of his authenticity. MTV and BET play his videos; urban contemporary and top 40 radio stations play his songs (McConnell, 2003). *8 Mile* dramatizes whiteness has having a history of racial oppression. Rather than exploring the discrete appearances of this sort of racial imagery, critics should examine the complex *relations* among the culture industries, the meaning of these cultural forms, and the social worlds of consumers. By looking at how these social spheres interpenetrate and modify one another, critics can better assess how this neoconservative backlash in films that romance white power influences how those “dispossessed” (Hari, 2003, p. 2) white youth perceive their relations with multicultural America.

Notes

- [1] Robert Van Winkle, a.k.a. “Vanilla Ice,” fabricated a “ghetto” biography to shore up his credibility when his single, “Ice, Ice, Baby” was perched atop the pop charts in 1992.
- [2] In the DVD’s production notes, Mathers describes the film as an adaptation of his life experiences in Detroit.
- [3] Mathers’ attacks on his mother’s character began with his debut single, “My Name Is,” where he commented that “My mom does more dope than I do” (1999); the macabre imagery in “Cleaning Out My Closet” (2002a) suggests the death and burial of his mother.
- [4] Through Lily we see an interesting conflation of Eminem’s mother and Kim (his ex-wife); Rabbit becomes a father figure and, thus, exhibits the fathering potential that he seeks to cultivate in his real-life relationship with his daughter, Haile.

- [5] *Imitation of Life*, released by Universal Studios in 1959, was the final American film directed by legendary German film maker, Douglas Sirk.
- [6] In "The Uses of the Erotic," Lorde (1984) discusses how patriarchal societies fear and desire erotic potential, but submerge it within women as a source of male pleasure. Resisting this domination, women have learned to utilize and enjoy this erotic power; see also Watts (2002).
- [7] Played by blonde Brittany Murphy, Alex resembles Mathers' ex-wife Kim, strengthening the intertextuality between the film and Mathers' biography.
- [8] For a particularly striking example of a fantasy about murdering Kim see "'97 Bonnie & Clyde" (1999).
- [9] In the song, Mathers lucidly explains how whiteness factors into his race-conscious marketing scheme: "Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby, just like yourself. . . I'm like 'my skin is startin' to work to my benefit now'" *The Eminem Show* (2002b).

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