



Reading Eminem

A Critical, Lyrical Analysis

Glenn Fosbraey



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Glenn Fosbraey
Faculty of Arts
University of Winchester
Winchester, UK

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Introduction

This book is divided into three sections: ‘Story’, ‘Voice’, and ‘Language’ in order to separate the fundamental lyrical techniques Eminem uses in his lyrics. In the ‘Story’ section, we will look at how the narrative form in song lyrics needs to be condensed more than in other media, and how Eminem works within this restrictive format to create memorable and engaging stories. This section will examine Eminem’s storytelling technique in a variety of different ways, drawing upon film and literary theory to demonstrate how his lyrics can be analysed in terms of literary and film narrative theory, and how his storytelling can work within a single song, prequels and sequels, album pairs, within his music videos, and how his entire career’s output can also be seen as one large, overarching story. In ‘Voice’, we will explore the use of character within Eminem’s songs, dissecting the question of ‘where do Marshall, Eminem, and Slim Shady begin and end’, and analysing Eminem’s lyrics under the microscope of psychoanalytic theory, with discussion of memory, truth, the second self, and the distance between character and author, as well as an examination of his use of first, second, and third person perspective in his lyrics. Finally, in ‘Language’ we will look at how Eminem uses a variety of rhetorical modes and devices to get a reaction from his audience, then conduct a close reading of ‘Lose Yourself’, analysing its literary devices (metaphor, allegory, simile, metonymy, idioms, poetic symbols, apostrophe, and slang) as well as its use of rhyme, character, tenses, and perspective to build a close examination of Eminem’s manipulation of language.

Firstly, though, via this Introduction, we will look at Eminem in terms of his place within the wider hip-hop genre, and discuss the controversies that have followed him throughout his career and continue to follow him at the time of writing.

* * *

Marshall Bruce Mathers III, recording under the moniker Eminem but also performing under the alias Slim Shady, is one of the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful artists of all time. In 2020, with the release of his album *Music to be Murdered by*, Eminem was entered into The Guinness Book of Records as having the most consecutive No.1 debuts on the US albums chart (also the most consecutive No.1s period), adding to his previous records of top selling album act of the first decade of the 21st Century, fastest selling rap artist, most successful rap artist in the UK for singles. Critically, Eminem has been awarded one Academy Award (for best original song), eight American Music Awards, one BET Hip Hop Award, 10 Billboard Music Awards, four Brit Awards, 15 Grammy Awards, 16 MTV Europe Music Awards, five MTV Video Music Awards, seven People's Choice Awards, nine World Music Awards, and dozens of other awards and nominations. With an estimated 227 million units sold, Eminem is the best-selling rapper in history and also the 6th best-selling solo music artist of all time (All Top Everything 2021). 'Known for his shocking lyrics and satirising of pop culture, Eminem's presence in hip hop expanded what success could look like' (McDuffie 2020: 84).

In his introduction to the 2000 book *Angry Blonde*, Eminem bemoans the fact that critics overanalysed the lyrics to his first two major label albums, but if anything, I think the opposite is true. Critics may have read a lot *into* the lyrics, but there wasn't a great deal of actual analysis going on. Gavin Hopps suggests that many critics 'read the lyrics literally, as transparent disclosures of the singer's biography, which is to say they have a tendency to look *through* [...] rather than *at*' lyrics (Hopps 2009: 9) and that has certainly been the case for much of the 'analysis' of Eminem's work in the past. As Hopps goes on to say:

It is naïve to think that we can treat art as a sort of stethoscope, which collapses the intervening boundaries, and read unproblematically backwards from text to the 'heart and soul'

of the author, as though there were no intervals or medium in between—however much texts themselves may tempt us to do so.
(Hopps 2009: 85)

This book, the first full-length academic text about Eminem's lyrics, will analyse his body of work as we might analyse the work of any important figure in the Arts, be it poetry, literature, film, or theatre. In so doing, we look at the texts not merely as windows into the 'heart and soul' of their authors as so many critics and writers do, but analyse them in terms of their narrative structures; their use of character, voice, and intertextuality; their use of rhetorical devices to shock, rally, inspire, and 'speak' to us, their use of literary, their use of cultural references and cues as shortcuts to establishing time period, economic background, status, and political messages; and yes, some investigation of biography and discussion of just how much of the author is present in the lyrics.

Many words have been written in the past dismissing the pop song lyric as 'disposable—or worse, as spiritually bankrupt' (Frisicks-Warren 2006: 2). 'Literature, theatre, opera, and film are deemed to be capable of tackling the really heavyweight subjects with the requisite degree of chin-stroking gravitas [but] the leftovers—the gently crooned "babies", the screamed "oh yeahs", the sundry other trifles and fripperies ... go to pop. At least that seems to be the critical and cultural consensus' (Thomson 2008: viii). But lyrics are so important to so many of us that they transcend art and become philosophical, spiritual, and/or life-affirming. Enter 'song lyric tattoos' into Google images and it's immediately evident that some lyrics have been so important that people have had them permanently etched upon their skin (the most popular Eminem lyric tattoo seems to be the spoken introduction from 'Lose Yourself' incidentally). Songs with meaningful lyrics are played at weddings (I even had lyrics read out at my wedding instead of poetry, much to the consternation of my poor cousin, who had to read the lyrics to Pink Floyd's 'Time' instead of the Shakespeare sonnet he'd brought with him just in case I changed my mind and saw sense); a song can be dubbed as 'our song' in a relationship, or can soundtrack a period in our lives when we were joyful, sorrowful, heartbroken, etc. etc. Lyrics from Marilyn Manson, The Beatles, Slipknot, Ozzy Osbourne, Judas Priest and many more have been cited in murder and suicide court cases. Kurt Cobain included a lyrical snippet from Neil Young's 'Rust Never Sleeps' in his suicide note, and some lyrics have been deemed so destructive or dangerous that they have gained the attentions

of governments. The rapper Tyler the Creator was even rejected entry to the UK ‘under the terms of Home Office policy on “behaviours unacceptable in the UK”’ in 2015 (Shepherd 2015). ‘For many people, popular music is central to the construction of their identities, central to their sense of self, central to their well-being [...] it has become central to the everyday personal lives of most people.’ (Partridge 2015: 4) I wrote in a previous book that the paradox between the impact song lyrics have on society and its lack of serious discussion in academic circles needs to be addressed, and my exploration of Eminem’s lyrics within this book will seek to demonstrate that a popular artist can produce songs that ‘have all the depth and texture of the greatest examples of English verse.’ (Foden 2001).

Before going much further, I do need to determine how I’m going to refer to our subject on these pages. I started my first draft referring to him as ‘Mathers’ (i.e. ‘in this song, Mathers wrote a series of rhymes about D12’ etc.), but it dawned on me after a while that to do so would be disrespectful to the old art of the stage name, alias, or nom de plume (however you want to phrase it). I wouldn’t refer to Elton John as ‘Dwight’ if writing about him, nor Lemmy as ‘Kilmister’, not Jay Z as ‘Carter’, nor Dr. Dre as ‘Young’ and so on and so forth. Eminem is the name that appears on the album covers, after all, so it’s the name that the music is appearing under, irrespective of the fact the copyright info. credits Marshall Mathers. So, in respect to the alias, I will refer to him as Eminem when discussing anything to do with the songs recorded under that moniker, but Mathers when talking about the biography of the man behind the alias.

LYRICS VS POETRY

In *The Anthology of Rap*, editors Bradley & DuBois bemoan the fact that ‘rap has yet to attain adequate recognition as poetry’ and refer to rap as ‘a body of lyrics that responds to transcription, explication, and analysis as poetry’ (Bradley and DuBois 2010: xxx). To ‘read rap lyrics in print’, they argue, ‘is most often to restore them to their original form’, seeing as ‘Rap songs almost always begin the same way: as lyrics written in an MC’s book of rhymes.’ (Bradley and DuBois 2010: xxx) Although I have been quite vocal in previous publications about the difference between lyrics and poetry (the main argument being that once recorded and released, the lyrics and the music of a song are forever bonded), but the similarities between hip hop lyrics and poetry shouldn’t be ignored and rhythm and rhyme, use of simile and metaphor, and use of storytelling are certainly

vital to both forms. But in the case of Eminem, to focus *only* on his lyrics as Bradley & DuBois suggest we do, glosses over the importance of the melodic hook in his songs, or the use of sampling, and production. His fusion of hip hop and pop (something Eminem is sensitive about—see the lyrics of ‘Rap God’ as an example), including highly melodic choruses, has potentially been one of the reasons Eminem has enjoyed such popularity. This isn’t to ignore his skill as an MC or lyric writer, but rather to see his songs as the lyrical and musical products that they are. As Eckstein says: ‘lyrics are not poetry, and their study therefore requires a different set of analytical tools from that which is conventionally applied to poetry’ (Eckstein 2010: 23) Song lyrics will always be linked with poetry due to their structure, rhyme, and meter, but there are significant differences, of course. In his book *Tunesmith*, songwriter Jimmy Webb says that ‘the content of a lyric differs from that of a poem in that storytelling or development must be accomplished more expeditiously within the confines of the song. There are a finite number of “slots” available for syllables of any kind in the format of the popular song.’ (Webb 1998: 68) Eminem does, of course, use techniques that align themselves with what we’d look for in poetic analysis. He uses enjambement and caesura, masculine and feminine rhymes, rhyming couplets, multi-syllable rhymes, flirts on occasion with Iambic Pentameter (see first chorus of ‘Just Don’t Give a Fuck’), and draws upon a wide range of rhyme schemes and types, including numerous internal rhymes. But... Eminem is a *lyricist*, and therefore when analysing his lyrics, to isolate them from their music (and, perhaps, as we’ll discuss later, their music video and artwork) is to analyse only ‘one half of a work’ (Gottlieb and Kimbal 2000: xxiv). Arguably, like folk music where ‘there can be no doubt that the words of the song are all-important [...and] the tune takes second place’ (Zuckermand 1973: 114), lyrics in Hip Hop comprise more than half of the importance of a song, and we can see successful hip hop tracks whose backing tracks can sometimes be as basic as a beat and nothing else. Producers can capitalise on this by drawing the attention to certain aspects, and in Eminem’s case, the vocals are always very high up in the mix, panned centrally, and presented with little in the way of effects. Just because lyrics are deemed important, however, some don’t deem them more important than any other song component, including Eminem mentor and producer Dr. Dre, who has said in interviews that ‘he sees rapping as just another part of a song’s sound, not necessarily more or less important than, say, the percussion.’ (Westhoff 2017: 103). Indeed, one of the fastest ways for a song to ‘get a reaction’

from a listener, is through its sound. ‘Just as there are well-proven ways to structure a story, there are certain song forms that pop composers use again and again [...] with] the most common [...] being the] verse-chorus form.’ (Sloan and Harding 2020: 47) Eminem uses this format almost exclusively throughout his career, with a few exceptions (e.g. a brief ‘bridge’ section in ‘Rap God’, the ‘B section’ of Bad Guy’ and the post-chorus sections which precede the verses in ‘Rhyme or Reason’ standing out. For the most part, though, from a structural perspective, Eminem’s songs—like a lot of hip hop songs—are simplistic. If a song is to be memorable, the mixture of melodic/ instrumental hook is key to making it so. As an example, Billie Eilish’s 2021 album *Happier Than Ever* contains the song ‘Not My Responsibility’ whose lyrics explore important discussions on body image, body shaming, and the male gaze but appear as a semi-whispered spoken word recital over a forgettable and banal backing track that contains no melodic hook. Compare this to Nicki Minaj’s ‘Anaconda’, for example, or Meghan Trainor’s ‘All About the Bass’, both of which contain examples of body shaming (‘Fuck those skinny bitches’, (2014) and ‘I’m bringing booty back/ go ahead and tell them skinny bitches that (2014) respectively) but are found within songs filled with melodic hooks that stick in the brain. The messages that are more memorable in these examples, therefore, are (sadly) the ones which body shame (Minaj and Trainor), rather than the one that speaks out against body shaming (Eilish). Eminem himself is an expert in combining ‘hummmable hooks and blunt lyrics, enticing his now very diverse fan base into off-colour sing-alongs [...] that are] tough to purge once heard.’ (Bozza 2004: 79-80) Levitin says ‘music that involves too many chord changes, or unfamiliar structure, can lead many listeners straight to the nearest exit, or to the ‘skip’ button on their music players. (Levitin 2008: 237) As such, much popular music utilises identifiable and familiar structures so as not to alienate existing and potential fans. Eminem is no exception to this, with the vast majority of his songs containing identifiable verses (rapped) and choruses (sung), melodic and vocal hooks, with very little deviation from basic bass drum, snare, and hi-hat beats in common time with no tempo changes, and basic chord sequences. Eminem’s top 3 biggest selling songs on the UK charts are ‘Lose Yourself’, ‘Love the Way you Lie, and ‘Stan’, and all involve inversions of the ‘cliché’ chord progression I-IV-V-vi: ‘Lose Yourself’ (vi-IV-V) ‘Love the Way you Lie (vi-IV-V-I), and ‘Stan’ (vi-IV-V-I). Many more of the more melodic songs in Eminem’s catalogue also contain the ‘cliché’ chord progression, or variations thereof, including

‘Like Toy Soldiers’, ‘In your head’, ‘Nowhere Fast’, ‘Hailie’s Song’, ‘Stan’, ‘Mockingbird’, ‘Love the way you lie’, and ‘Headlights’ itself, whose final ‘outro’ section uses the I–vi–IV–V sequence, ‘a chord progression commonly associated in pedagogical materials with the doo-wop style, whose peak of popularity was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and that is still used relatively often today’ (Jimenez et al. 2020: 6) and is linked with feelings of sadness and nostalgia, which, combined with the regret and nostalgia of the lyrics makes for a very potent and effective mix. In *Switched on Pop*, Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding suggest the ‘50s Progression’, or ‘ice cream changes’ as they call it, to go through the following ‘journey’: The I chord is ‘the safety of home’; the vi chord ‘a dark turn in the woods’; The IV chord ‘a signal for hope’, and the V chord ‘the joyous rescue’ (Sloan and Harding 2020: 42). ‘The types of sounds, rhythms, and musical textures we find pleasing are generally extensions of previous positive experiences we’ve had with music in our lives’ (Levitin 2008: 242) and in Eminem’s case, he is likely to appeal to hip-hop fans because in his songs they find the beats, production sounds, and raps they’re familiar with from other artists in the genre, but he is also likely to appeal to pop fans because of his melodic hooks, many of which draw upon the extremely familiar four chord ‘cliché’ sequence.

Hip-hop can also feel familiar to us due to its consistent time signature. As Edwards says, ‘very few hip-hop tracks use time signatures other than 4/4 time...’ (Edwards 2013: n.p.m.) and Eminem’s catalogue is no exception, with almost the entirety of his tracks in standard 4/4, with only a few outliers: ‘Won’t Back Down’, for example, which is in 3/4, and ‘Underground’, which although technically in 4/4 is so syncopated that it feels almost like 5/8 (thanks to my colleague Neil Valentine at The University of Winchester for figuring that out!)

The sound of Eminem’s voice is also essential in making us feel a connection with his music. As someone able to perform as any talented actor might, he shows a great range in his styles, being able to shift from one mood to another (sometimes even within the same song). In ‘Kim’, for example, he starts the song by speaking to Hailie, delicately, soothingly, and lovingly, then within the space of a few seconds exploding with startling rage as he addresses Kim. Throughout the rest of the song here he alternates between anger, desperation, and outright sorrow. Over the rest of his career, we see similar range: the softness of his delivery on the verses of ‘Mockingbird’ or the way he sings on ‘Hailie’s Song’ on one side, and ‘The Way I am’ which is ‘spit through clenched teeth and vocal chords’

(Bozza 2004: 90), and expelling of pent-up aggression on ‘Cleanin’ out my Closet’ on the other. In between this, we have the openness and sincerity of ‘If I had’, the tongue-in-cheek levity of ‘My Dad’s Gone Crazy’, the world-weariness of ‘Soldier’, or ‘Like Toy Soldiers’, the mockery of ‘Big Weenie’, the confusion and resignation of ‘3 am’, the creepy pitiless threat of ‘Same Song and Dance’, the bravado of ‘Crack and Bottle’, the determination of ‘Cold Wind Blows’ or ‘Kamikaze’, the sadness of (the second part of) ‘Bad Guy’: the impact of each of these songs would be totally different had Eminem adopted a different style of delivery when recording them.

RECEIVING EMINEM

I am writing this in the summer of 2021, twenty-two years after Eminem released his mainstream debut album *The Slim Shady LP*. To say that the way we physically receive Eminem’s music now is different to how we received it in 1999 is an understatement of epic proportions. In 1999, no social media existed, text messaging was still a novelty, smartphones were still over a decade away, Amazon was only a modest online bookstore, and MTV had only one channel and still played music videos. To buy *The Slim Shady LP* wasn’t massively different to buying albums from the 20 years preceding it—you needed to walk into a shop and buy a physical copy, and then—those of us without a personal CD player, anyway—take it home and listen to it on a stereo. No streaming on Spotify, no 30 second previews on i-Tunes, and certainly no giving it the briefest of listens before going in search of something else. In 1999, if you went and bought a CD, you *committed* to it, listening to it over and over, forming a relationship with it not just out of choice, but out of necessity, for if you wanted to listen to something else, you had to either return it (always embarrassing), or buy something else (not economically viable for many of us). I have remained—stubbornly and old-fashionably, perhaps—attached to CDs, making sure to always buy a hard copy of the latest releases from my favourite artists as and when they are released, and Eminem is no exception. As I sit here, laptop open on a fresh(ish) Word document, I have in front of me a pile of Eminem CDs, stacked from top to bottom in chronological order, beginning with the aforementioned *The Slim Shady LP*, and topped with most recent studio album *Music to be Murdered by*. Twenty one years of Eminem music in a neat pile: the first released with Bill Clinton as president, pre 9/11, in a world yet to know TikTok, Smashed

Avocado, or Crocs, and the last released under the presidency of Donald Trump just as the world was about to change forever under the relentless spread of Covid 19. And our ability to be able to listen to an album in its entirety seems to have disappeared too, perhaps explaining why The 77 minute-long *Revival*, which would have been welcomed as value for money back in 1999 (even if it *was* able to squeeze itself onto a single compact disc) seems a chore to get through in one sitting now, and is even described as ‘an exhausting listen’ by Pitchfork (Ruiz 2017) among many other negative reviews. It’s no surprise, therefore, that *Kamikaze*, Eminem’s shortest album at just shy of 46 minutes has garnered the most positive critical reception in recent years. So what about looking back at those early Eminem albums; the ones that shocked and delighted in equal measure and made Eminem a worldwide star? What’s it like to look back at those with 2021 eyes? For one, it’s apparent how much of a zeitgeist artist Eminem is, and how many pop culture references are jammed into his songs. It’s a risk for an artist to do such a thing, as it ages their work and makes them seem less relevant when looking back. That’s why so many artists, in popular music as well as hip-hop tend towards the generic and oft-cliché themes: love, lust, breakups, money, dancing—things that don’t age and can therefore be relied on to stay fresher for longer. With such tracks, it’s only the production that ages. It’s remarkable, then, that Eminem’s back catalogue, full of late 90s/ early 2000s celeb references (Kris Kirkpatrick, Nick Lachey, and Tom Green, anyone?) remain so popular. At the time of writing, Eminem’s 2006 greatest hits collection *Curtain Call* ‘has become the first hip-hop record to sit a full 10 years in the Billboard 200’ (Skinner 2021) after re-entering the charts yet again in October 2020 despite being filled with namechecks like Carson Daley, Marcus Allen, Ron Goldman, Canibus, Steve Stoute, and Pamela Lee.

My CD stack, and my penchant for keeping stickers on the front of them, also allows me a snapshot back into what the record-buying public saw when they picked up a CD in HMV (other music stores are available: in fact, back in the early 2000s the high street of my hometown of Southampton was home to Our Price, Virgin, Tower Records, independent shops Essential Music and Falcon Records as well as CDs being on sale in WH Smiths and Woolworths, of course). Stuck onto the cover of *The Marshall Mathers LP*, released in 2000 when it was common for record labels to affix review snippets along with information like ‘Featuring the No.1 single The Real Slim Shady’ we find two reviews, the first from *Select*, which praises Eminem for his ‘verbal dexterity, wild imagination and

quickfire delivery beyond most of his rapping contemporaries' and the second from *The Independent* which says 'Eminem has a gift for comic timing & impersonations' and describes him as 'wilfully offensive, articulate, witty, passionate [and] very skilfully produced (by Dr. Dre) and performed.' Ringing endorsements indeed, during a three-year period between 1999 and 2002 when Eminem was the critics' darling as well as multi-million-selling chart-topper.

And what about now? In Southampton, the only place to buy CDs is from a tiny selection in ASDA, so my purchases are now invariably online. Instead of seeing snippet reviews on CD covers, therefore, I now have the opportunity to look at the websites' own 'product descriptions' or ratings. Amazon, for example, include a star rating just under the album's title, with (on the UK site) thousands of buyer ratings and reviews for the potential purchaser to wade through at leisure. Spotify have an artist rating (Eminem is currently at #28), the amount of monthly listens (nearing 41 million), links to all his other albums, numerous playlists, 'Eminem radio', a 'fans also like' section (with D12, Bad Meets Evil, The Game, and Hopsin featuring), and a playlist of 'popular songs'. On Apple Music, *Music to be Murdered by* is topped by a 360 word review from an unnamed writer, much of which passes judgement on the album's more controversial content with observations such as 'The divide between Eminem, lyrical savant and god of rap, and Slim Shady, a trigger-happy psychopath, has always been difficult to bridge. It's harder to hear shock-value sucker punches about domestic violence and disability—least of all because they risk discrediting the genuinely powerful moments that Eminem is so uniquely capable of' (Apple Music).

All of this is a roundabout way of saying that the way we buy and digest music today invariably leads to us forming judgments based on the opinions of others before we've heard a note of the music. We had a variation of this back in 1999, of course, via album reviews in the music magazines and newspapers, but such reviews were (hopefully) all conducted having given the album a fair run and (hopefully) a considered and fair assessment. In 2021, a google search for 'Eminem Revival album review' yields 159 results before descending into tenuous links to the search term. Over 150 opinions at click of mouse. Go on to Amazon and we are faced with 5,649 ratings (and comments) including reviews such as this (from a 'Mr MooMoo'): 'There is no humour to the lyrics anymore, there is no "musicality" to the music anymore. it's just duh duh duh duhdy duh duh duh. This is not music anymore.' Or this, from 'denise': 'Fantastic item Very

quick delivery'. Our chances of making our own minds up about an album are getting slimmer and slimmer. We could ignore all the reviews and comments, of course, but that's almost impossibly hard to resist for the curious mind. Such a flood of opinions isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's good for everyone to be able to pass comment (or judgement), not just the select few, but such advances have also taken away the element of surprise. *The Slim Shady LP* was so shocking back in 1999 because a lot of us didn't really see it coming. My own exposure to it before buying came solely from the video to 'My Name Is', which, seeing as it was broadcast on MTV was the censored version, and although a bit edgy, certainly didn't prepare me for getting home, putting on the CD and hearing '97 Bonnie and Clyde' (getting his toddler daughter to help him dump her murdered mother in a lake), 'Role Model' (ripping out Hilary Clinton's tonsils) or 'Just Don't Give a fuck' (raping a swim team). Even hearing the uncensored version of 'My Name Is' was a shock. There's quite a difference, for example between Eminem asking if his dad had seen him in a 'porno mag' to him dreaming about slitting his throat, after all. I also wondered why it was a problem drinking a 'fifth' of Kool-Aid before driving...

THE REAL MARSHALL MATHERS?

This isn't the kind of book that is going to try to figure out what the 'real' Marshall Mathers is like (many of these are available of that's your thing), but it's worth spending a bit of time at this early point to at least take a look at how Mathers *wants* to be seen. We'll cover this in more detail in part three when analysing his lyrics in terms of rhetoric, but for now, let's turn away from the lyrics to the two books Eminem has attached his name to: *Angry Blonde* (2000) and *The Way I am* (with Sasha Jenkins, 2009). It's a bit of a stretch to call these autobiographies per se, as *Angry Blonde* is essentially a lyric book with some comments added (essentially Genius Lyrics before it was invented), and *The Way I am* contains more photographs than it does text. But both at least give us a glimpse into the information he deems important enough to commit to the page. The two-page introduction to *Angry Blonde* alternates between humorous: 'Hi Kids. Do you like lyrics? Do you like reading weird shit that'll make your eyes bulge out of their sockets?' (Eminem, 2000: 3), playful: 'This book is made by Slim Shady, from the mind of Marshall Mathers as seen from Eminem's point of view. Got it?' (2000: 3), defensive, e.g. 'I don't hate gay people,

I just don't stray that way' (2000: 4), sincere: 'I take [emceeing] extremely seriously', and self-critical: 'I always listen to my shit with the mentality that I could have done it better.' (2000: 4) He may not have meant it this way, but this introduction pretty well mirrors much of his output to this point, and we often see all of the adjectives above contained within single songs (see 'Just Don't Give a Fuck', 'Rock Bottom', 'Role Model', 'I'm Back', 'Marshall Mathers' etc.) It's also worth noting that this introduction is flanked by a full-page childhood photograph of Mathers, wide-eyed, smiling, dressed in a smart buttoned shirt... the picture of innocence in other words. Talking as he does about how his lyrics have been over-analysed, misinterpreted, misunderstood, and that he's 'just using the pen to express' (2000: 3) himself, the link between Mathers the innocent child and Mathers the innocent artist who's been unfairly criticised is very apparent.

In among dozens of other photographs in *The Way I am* book, we are afforded an intriguing insight into Eminem's inner sanctum via a photograph (and series of close-ups of specific areas from the same image) of his home office. We see a desk, a chair behind it, a bookcase, and a wall decorated with a number of framed images. Upon the desk that stands in the foreground sit five framed photographs, backs to the camera so we can only guess at the images they show, but on the wall behind it we see a concert poster for *The Marshall Mathers LP* tour, the image a close-up of Eminem's huddled form from the alternative LP cover, advertising three dates at London Arena on February 9th and 10th 2001, both dates with 'sold out' stamped across them; a poster advertising the release of *The Eminem Show* album, the image a spotlight 'E' projected onto a night sky a la the Bat signal; A poster advertising a 'Showtime: Live from New York City' show, the image 'Eminem' written in a smashed glass graphic; an Eminem and 50 cent tour poster; an image of Eminem from 8 Mile; an image of Eminem in mid-shot saluting; a large image of 50 Cent pointing a gun at the camera; an image of Dr. Dre at the mixing desk; an image of D12 (and others) in a group shot. On the bookcase is the further framed image of Dr. Dre (signed, and with a message which is indecipherable). Also in the bookcase we find: Rocky Balboa from each of the five original *Rocky* films (all boxed); 3 figures of players from NBA's Detroit Pistons's Chris Webber (playing for Pistons 2006-2007), Rasheed Wallace (2004-2009), and Rip Hamilton (2002-2010); a 'Slim Shady' bobble-head; an Eminem action figure complete with dungarees and chainsaw (and optional Jason Vorhees mask) (boxed); Nike 'Shady' branded

trainers; a model of Ben Grimm (The Thing) from Marvel's Fantastic Four; a devil figure clad in dungarees and Jason Vorhees mask, holding a trident and chainsaw; 2 bottles of wine, both with images of Eminem on; a box of 'The Rap Pack' trading card packets (unopened). We also see a series of magazines (titles visible are Spin, The Face, Vibe), CDs (including his own and D12's, Redman, Snoop Dogg, and a number of CR-Rs, but, quite surprisingly, Mariah Carey, Madonna, Roy Orbison, and sworn enemy Ja Rule!), and books (*The Detroit Almanac*, *1990 Guinness World Records*, *Black in America*, *The Lost Swords: The first triad*; *Tupac: Resurrection 1971-1996*; *Muhammed Ali* biography, *Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems* by James Baldwin, and *Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chair Paintings*. There is also a selection of VHS tapes, and the among the visible titles are: four Muhammed Ali videos; *The Life of Python* DVD set (still in cellophane wrapping); 'Welcome to Death Row'; D12 Fight Music 'Rough 2'; 'MTV TRL Fred Durst news piece'; 'Kindergarten Celebration' (the rest of the title cut off).

It is, of course, impossible to determine to what extent the objects on show are authentic to the room, or are placed there for the purposes of the photograph. One would imagine that the inclusion of Ja Rule and Mariah Carey albums at least are very much tongue-in-cheek. But if we take the photograph at face value and assume that the objects there are authentic to the space and haven't been planted there simply as *mise en scene* in a mocked-up PR stunt, we can see various elements of Eminem's personality that also come across in his lyrics. We have his obsession with his home town (*The Detroit Almanac*), his love of hip-hop (seen through his CD collection and Tu-Pac book), his fascination with violence and the macabre (*Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chair Paintings*), his vanity and pride (poster, CDs, action figures, and a bobble-head of himself), his respect for Black culture (*Black in America* book), his loyalty to friends and colleagues (posters and CDs of 50-Cent and D12), his love of comic book culture ('The Thing' figurine and the bat-signal-esque 'E' on The Eminem Show poster), and sense of humour (the Ja Rule and Mariah Carey CDs). With no photographs of his children on display, it might be fair to assume that the frames on his desk contain them, and as they are what he is looking at when seated at his desk, are considered the most important thing in his life (based purely on my own opinion, seeing as, while writing this, seated at my own desk, it's photographs of my own daughter that are in my direct eyeline).

EMINEM AND HIP-HOP

‘[hip hop] spoke to me more than any music I had ever heard before.’

—Eminem on Hotboxin’ with Mike Tyson podcast.

The aforementioned photographs show Eminem’s love of Tupac, but he has cited a number of other influences through interviews and within his lyrics. In the song ‘Yah yah’, Eminem gives ‘shout-outs’ to a number of hip-hop artists, saluting Big L, K-Solo, Treach, Kool G Rap, Tony D, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Kool Moe Dee, Run-DMC, Ed O.G, EPMD, The D.O.C., Ice-T, Evil Dee, King Tee, UTFO, Public Enemy, Schoolly D, and Boogie Down Productions, citing YZ, Chi-Ali, Rakim, and Eric B as like his ‘therapy’, and Dr. Dre as like his ‘GPS’. Worthy of note here is the fact that although many of these artists became Eminem’s contemporaries by releasing new music at the same time as he was, they all preceded his own output and can therefore be seen as inspirations to him, and not just artists that he singles out as exemplars of the genre. Perhaps more indicative of where Eminem puts himself in the pantheon of great rappers, on the song ‘Till I collapse’, he identifies a ‘list’ that counts Reggie, Jay-Z, Tupac and Biggie, Andre from OutKast, Jada, Kurupt, Nas’ and then himself. Despite this pretty extensive list of influences, it is LL Cool J that Eminem singles out as the artist who inspired him to write his own lyrics, so it’s worth spending a little time looking at the output Eminem would have heard during his formative years. LL Cool J released four albums between 1985 and 1990, the years when Eminem ranged between 13 and 18. Hodges and Sebald stress the importance of music during these years, saying that it is ‘part of the socializing force that influences how teenagers talk, dress, and act, how they feel, and what they think’ (2011: 316). They also point to music having the power to help teenagers deal with self and group identity, where ‘a shy, awkward, lonely youngster’ like Mathers suggests he was at that age, ‘can find solace in music’ (2011: 316). But as anyone who’s bought an edition of Mojo magazine and listened to the CD of ‘influential’ tracks chosen by a guest artist can testify, just because you like/respect/worship an artist doesn’t mean your music in any way mirrors theirs. Take LL Cool J. The lyrics on his first album are pretty inoffensive narratives about what a good rapper he is, how important he is to the genre (he refers to himself in the third person

97 times in his first 4 albums on 33 out of 45 songs), and, to be honest, some pretty shmaltzy songs about love (e.g. ‘Your high-school year book under my pillow/ You walk by my window, I see your silhouette/ Candle light is what I desire’ from ‘I want you’ (LL Cool J 1985)). In these 54 songs he uses the words ‘fuck’ and ‘motherfucker’ twice, uses thirteen misogynistic terms (‘ho’ etc. 10 times, ‘bitch’ twice, and ‘slutty’ once), no homophobic terms, and 40 sexual references to female body parts (mainly ‘butt’). Compare this to Eminem’s first four major label albums releases where he uses ‘fuck’ 254 times, ‘motherfucker’ 54 times, uses 136 misogynistic terms, 26 homophobic terms, but only 4 sexual references to female body parts. And all of this before we even listen to the *sound* of either one of them rapping, which is like comparing apples with oranges. In terms of content, the lyrics on Eminem’s first two albums have more in common with the swearing and violence-heavy work of NWA (and, indeed the subsequent solo work of Easy-E and Dr. Dre), but with a couple of significant twists. As Steve Berman points out his eponymous skit on *The Marshall Mathers LP*,

‘[Dr. Dre was] rapping about big-screen TV’s, blunts, 40’s and bitches; You’re rapping about homosexuals and Vicodin’. (Eminem 2000d)

‘Eminem is the only rapper widely recognized by black audiences as a bona fide hip-hop artist...’ Pang (2021: 73). In the 3rd round of 2000 HBO Blaze Battle, E-Dub (a Black MC from Detroit) faces off against Eyedea (a white MC from Minnesota) (Alim et al. (eds.) 2009: 82) with E-Dub frequently framing Eyedea as a ‘White, middle-class suburban skater kid who shouldn’t be rapping because he lacks the credentials.’ (Alim et al. (eds.) 2009: 86). During his ‘spit’, however, ‘E-Dub’s allegation that Eyedea is a “light skinned Eminem” [...] points up Eminem’s status within the Hip Hop community. Eminem is actually quite pale and blond so this latter comparison appears to confer on him an honorary Black status within Hip Hop.’ (Alim et al. (eds.) 2009: 87)

Eminem’s arrival into the mainstream came during a ‘tremendous rise in popularity for rap music’, with Time magazine ‘announcing in 1999 that America had become a ‘hip-hop nation’: rap was now outselling all other genres, and hip-hop penetrated the mainstream in ways that other music cultures never had, influencing pop, Hollywood film, high-street fashion, advertising and even styles of business.’ (Harrison 2010: 81-82)