

## Prism

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Rapper/hip-hop artist Eminem grew up in the ghettos of Detroit living in two different cultures by being a white man in a predominately black community. There he was able to compare and experience both cultures which gave him the unique characteristic of being a cultural hybrid. Eminem picked up his skill as a hip-hop artist by listening to rap, the mainstream type of music in that community, and later wrote some of his own lyrics in which he expressed the confusion and emotion he felt of being a cultural hybrid. He found breaking into the rap industry especially difficult due to pre-existing intercultural and unspoken rules that discouraged a white man from succeeding in a predominately black market. Eminem's success finally came after record producer, Dr. Dre, signed him to his production company. Eminem's current success has earned him 5 albums, 5 Grammys, a movie, an Oscar, and millions of fans. Eminem has become the cultural symbol of a man blending two cultures and by doing so he is changing both cultures.

One of Eminem's selling points is his oppositional narrative to the dominant narrative of the "American dream" and "all men created equal". In other words, he is popular because he brings attention to certain problems in societies, problems not mentioned in mainstream media. In one of his songs, "White America," he calls America "this hypocrisy of democracy" and reveals many contradictory political and social functions that lead to an ethnic hegemony. This essay will focus on how representation of the oppositional narrative becomes problematic in itself when the narrative no longer represents fragmented perspectives and instead represents one single opposition, the tensions between

black and whites, thereby making the oppositional narrative single dimensioned. Eminem's definition of two cultures reinforces Lisa Lowe's definition of multiculturalism in which a system "levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups" and implicitly brings simultaneous attention to the "cultural hegemony" that exists among the black and white culture but at the same time ignoring the cultures outside that convergence of conflict (529).

"White America" is a song in which Eminem creates many contradictions to show inconsistencies in the American social structure. These contradictions are important because they reveal a critical flaw in the American society that disillusion both immigrants and natives into thinking America is a leveled playing field for capitalistic ventures. In his introduction, Eminem makes a contradictory comparison that later becomes apparent in the second part of the verse, describing America as "the stripes and the stars for the rights men have died for to protect/ The women and men who have broke their necks for the freedom of speech the United States government has sworn to uphold." The first line is written closely in anapestic pentameter, meaning two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable in a 5 foot line (Annis, par. 8-11), with stress put on "stripes" and "stars" which creates an image of patriotism. Whizzing sounds can be heard in the background of the song, reminiscent of the "rocket's red glare" in the national anthem or the sound of the Blue Angels F-16s fighter jets, a military symbol of America. The next three stressed words "rights," "died," and "protect" reminds Americans of the sacrifices the country had to make to receive such rights as "the freedom of speech the United States government has sworn to uphold"; to appreciate these rights since they are here due to the sacrifices of many "women and men". Eminem addresses the dominant narrative in the United States that all Americans possess these natural rights—notice that the government's job is to "protect" 'and "uphold" these rights meaning they were pre-existent and not

“given,” which would mean that they were nonexistent before. So being an American automatically means equitable treatment as other Americans. Eminem uses this fact to begin to show the “hypocrisy of democracy” or what Lisa Lowe calls the “existence of exclusions . . . by the promise of inclusion” (529). “Or so it’s told . . .” Eminem starts as he tells a fragment of the opposition narrative “White America” is a very important song because Eminem is one of the few artists today willing to address an oppositional narrative. A sample of 5 songs in the December 13<sup>th</sup> Billboard Top 100 songs all contain clichéd topics such as finding love and boasts about fame (Billboard). Because of the rarity of such an address, Eminem’s song becomes critical in properly representing a narrative that affects so many people. The title “White America” is interesting since all Americans are not white, and not all white people are Americans. This causes the listener, who can be of any ethnicity, to ask: “What is White America?” Is it addressing the fact that America is demographically white dominated? Or is it that sources of power are held by white people? Eminem’s implication becomes apparent as the latter after verse two in which he states “look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself, if they were brown Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf.” Commercial power, the lyrics imply, is held by the “blue” eyed people and are in control of the capital. Meanwhile, the “brown” eyed are certain to “lose” and “sits on the shelf”. Eminem goes on to illustrate this point in the same verse by saying, “if I was black I would’ve sold half,” further implying the lack of capitalistic power of the black ethnic group. Eminem exposes the cultural hegemony present in the United States and by doing so he exposes a contradiction in the American society. The capitalist system is defined by the *Fourth Edition American Heritage Dictionary* as: “an economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market.” According to the dominant narrative

capitalism advocates equal distribution of rights with “proportional” business development in a “free market.” The system, however, does not offer an explanation for the racism and unequal capitalistic representation experienced by the black community. In Lowe’s essay, the Korean women in *Sa-I-Gu* experience a similar situation where they fail to find an explanation for what happens to them in the capitalist dominant narration and are force to derive an alternate explanation, an oppositional narrative.

Juxtaposed with Eminem’s song is a radically different perspective on racism, Michael Jackson’s 1995 release of the song “Black or White.” This song makes a unique comparison with Eminem because Michael Jackson is also a cultural hybrid. Born an African American, Michael Jackson changed the color of his skin through cosmetic surgery and became white. Because of this similar social history between the two artists it is interesting to use Jackson to articulate the dominant narrative to show a fragmentation of narrations within the “cultural hybrid” social realm. This song is about a couple, one white person and one black person, who receives stares for being in a multicultural relationship. Jackson states that equality is what the society should achieve and that “it don’t matter if you’re black or white.” This type of interpretation is what Lowe described as “erase[ing] the history . . . by leveling the nonequivalent statuses”(531); by making the black and white race equal Jackson essentially erases the histories and cultural perspectives from both cultures. Jackson’s song represents the dominant narrative echoed by the “White America” introduction. A society where differences are ignored in favor of a “narrative that suppress[es] tension and opposition” (537). It is this type of narrative that causes disillusionment in populations. These narratives are particularly dangerous because they ignore the interlocking functions within a social structure, especially those in conflict with each other. Also, the fragmentation of these functions ultimately leads to violent

action, such as the L.A. riots, and grants constant power of the group on the very top of the “structure-in-dominance” (534-535), a cultural hegemony in which the dominant group erases the existence of a hegemony in order to hold power over the non-dominant group. The “turf war” and “protection for gangs, clubs, and nations” in Jackson’s song represents the friction between two cultures. By saying it “does not matter,” the narrative ignores the importance of these frictions and exacerbates the problem, further swelling the friction. When frictions are clouded by ethnic homogeneity one ignores inequalities and fails to see reasons to change. “[I]t may be . . . through conflict that we call attention to the process” explains Lowe, “through which these inequalities are obscured by pluralist multiculturalism” (538).

However, there is one aspect both songs fail to mention. It is the fact that the world is not black and white. Both songs fail to address the conflicts happening outside the black and white culture. Although this is not as critical in Michael Jackson’s song since it has been identified as a fundamentally flawed dominant narrative, this drastically impacts the validity and accuracy of Eminem’s representation of the oppositional narrative. Even though Eminem participates in an oppositional narrative on the status of black and white relations, he fails to mention or even acknowledge the existence of ethnic groups beyond those two. For example, how would a Chinese female feel when she hears that “blue” eyes sell the most records? While she might feel included when Eminem mentions “brown” eyes, Eminem’s implication becomes clear that she is not included when he states that “if I was black I would’ve sold half.” So where would the Chinese female participate? Michael Jackson’s song suffers from a similar problem. It may not “matter if you’re black or white,” but there is an implication that it might matter if you were not black or white. Even Jackson’s historical examples, “I ain’t scared of no sheets” alluding to the Klu Klux Klan, ignore the existence of conflicts outside to the black and white resistance. Furthermore, Jackson

defines the conflict as two-sided. “I’d rather hear both sides” he states, implying a single perspective to the problem. The L.A. riots mentioned in Lowe’s paper, however, show that the conflict arises from a series of convergences including but not limited to economic differences, social exclusion, cultural hegemony, and the oppression of certain races.

So why is this failure to mention other ethnic groups so important? By ignoring the existence of cultures outside the black and white ethnic groups two problems occur. First of all, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, failure to see these inequalities leads to a fragmentation of structures or isolations of cultures which leads to tensions; although at low levels the tension is harmless and even expected since millions of people can rarely have identical goals and beliefs. However, when these tensions buildup dangerously because they go unaddressed, it ultimately leads to violent conflict, manifesting itself in forms such as riots and hate crimes. The buildup also further exacerbates a cultural hegemony, which might be structured as white on the top, black in the middle, and “others” on the bottom. With the existence of such a hegemony, cultures on the bottom find themselves the victims of an inequitable capitalist system. Eminem participates in an oppositional narrative for the black and white structure but at the same time participates in the dominant narrative by ignoring the “systematic inequalities” (538) between cultures other than black or white versus the black or white community. Secondly, this lumping of cultures as “other” reduces each culture to the “same relative importance” (531). Korean communities are combined with Japanese communities, then with Chinese and Vietnamese communities, and these communities are constantly combined by social and cultural forces until they are orientalized and seen as one entity instead of separate cultures. This type of “lumping” threatens to erase the histories of not just one culture but of all cultures involved. Cultural artifacts lose their

meaning and become commodified, merely items of interest for the bourgeois.

Critiques of specialized racial tensions that do not address other cultural groups and their conflicts run the risk of creating more fragmentation and masking even more cultural differences. In other words, mediating racial tensions within one group without addressing other groups could actually worsen the situation rather than improve it. Messages for ethnic peace are certainly welcomed and encouraged in all literary and art forms. However, the artist must be careful not to ignore the difference that exists between ethnic backgrounds. Like a prism, the critique must not only show black and white, but the entire spectrum in between. By acknowledging the inequalities and frictions between cultures, one can continue to preserve the history of the culture and still safely paving the road to new methods of peaceful co-existence.

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