

[The Sundae](#) presents

**God Sent  
Me To Piss  
The World  
Off**

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Eminem is an underground horrorcore rapper who, through some mix-up in the cosmic order, instead became the best-selling artist of the 2000s. To remember how incredibly big Eminem became in the late 1990s and early 2000s while rapping about killing himself, raping his mother, and murdering his wife seems like peering into some long-distant era: much further away than twenty years should be, more like a time memorialised only in photographs and letters. But that's not quite right, either. It's less like a far away past than a hole torn in the fabric of the universe, just wide enough to let a single impossible thing leak through. Eminem managed to feel dangerous even as he became ubiquitous, at once a fact of life and a radical notion that must be suppressed at all costs. That tension is one of the defining features of Eminem's discography: both boundary-pushing and mainstream, both snotty, scrappy underdog and superstar.

Listening to his early albums, it seems at times like he's trying to [Tom Green himself](#) and see what he has to say to get kicked out of the music industry. ("I'm so sick and tired of being admired / That I wish that I would just die or get fired / And dropped from my label," he raps on '[The Way I Am](#)'). He pushes at the extremes in a way that is frequently grotesque, and right when you expect him to pull back, he doubles down.

We're living in a time that has no patience for shock humour, that dismisses it as crass and offensive. Quite apart from the politics of it, I think a big reason is that we are still coming off a bit of a saturation point for shock humour in the 2000s, which necessarily meant a lot of people doing it who were quite bad at it. I mean, we lived through a time when *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* and *The Cleveland Show* were all on the air at the same time, we're worn out on it, I get it. It's the same fall from grace that [has afflicted slapstick](#). But good slapstick is hilarious and delightful, and the same goes for good shock humour. Quality shock humour pokes and prods at the inherent arbitrariness of taboos and takes glee in smashing them. Eminem was, in his younger years, as skilled a shock humourist as you'll find. Much of that is his wit, his self-awareness, his [multisyllabic and internal rhymes](#), and his [mesmerizingly slick flows](#), but a big part is that the guts of two decades has not diluted his early work's effect. A lot of art that is primarily shocking loses its power with age – the original *Frankenstein* is a brilliant film, but it sure as shit isn't scary – but I can't imagine a time where people don't gasp and giggle the first time they hear '[I'm Shady](#)'.

Eminem's detractors at the time loved to use that against him: to argue that he was just saying stuff for shock value, a meaningless spray of diarrhoea for which he refused to be held to account. But what makes Eminem's first three major releases – *The Slim Shady LP*, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, and *The Eminem Show*, what you might dub his original trilogy – so special is that they go so far beyond that.

# 1

## I'm just relaying what the voice in my head's saying. Don't shoot the messenger.

The quickest shorthand to explain what Eminem was doing is to say that he isn't Slim Shady. Slim – the perspective from which his most outrageous songs are written – isn't “real”. He's an alter-ego: a serial killer, rapist, and all-around slasher villain. He's Jason Voorhees, he's Michael Myers, he's Norman Bates. '[My Name Is](#)' was Eminem's first single, and it's still a perfect introduction to Slim:

Hi kids! Do you like violence?  
Wanna see me stick nine-inch nails through each one of my eyelids?  
Wanna copy me and do exactly like I did?  
Try 'cid and get fucked up worse than my life is?

It's a song where he rips off Pamela Anderson's breasts, staples a guy's balls, and kills himself twice. “God sent me to piss the world off,” he raps, and it sounds like a genuine calling.

Slim isn't some after-the-fact justification, he's wholly distinct and recognisable. The bleach blonde hair, the uniform of white t-shirts, the hockey masks and chainsaws that came out at concerts: all pure Shady. He is such a discrete alter-ego that Eminem doesn't even have to signpost it [when he switches personas mid-song](#). This seems blindingly obvious if you've listened to pretty much any Eminem, as he alternates between warning the listener of the dangers of literalism and going as far over the top as he can to drive the point home, but considering how often contextless lyrics are trotted out as proof of literally anything, considering how often entertainment journalists will refer to Eminem as Slim Shady like it's a synonym, it's worth stating the obvious. Slim Shady's the bad guy, and everyone knows it. He's [told us so](#) himself.

You can't miss me: I'm white, blonde-haired, and my nose is pointy  
I'm the bad guy who makes fun of people that die  
In plane crashes and laughs as long as it ain't happenin' to him

Slim is frequently a vehicle for horror and shock humour, but he's also a vehicle for satire. As well as being worn out on shock humour, I think we're living in an era that has trouble appreciating satire. The shock humour boom in the 2000s for some reason created a legion of dipshits using “it's satire!” to justify their shittiest jokes, whether it's CinemaSins saying their bullshit nit-picking is “satire” to absolve them of being accurate or insightful about the films they cover, or those “[homophobic Millie Bobby Brown](#)” memes being called satire because the people who started them were LGBT.

Somewhere along the way someone came up with the term “hipster racism” to describe a specific version of this phenomenon – where somebody does something racist and then says they were being ironic – which, like seemingly every left-of-centre concept coined in the Internet age, some treated as a contextless, always-applicable rule: sometimes people do something racist or misogynistic or homophobic and try to justify it after the fact as irony or satire, so therefore anyone who claims they are being ironic or satirical is just trying to cover their ass after they did something

racist or misogynistic or homophobic. This is where you get feminists arguing that there cannot ever be a good rape joke, even though there are lots of rape jokes that are both very funny and [at the expense of rapists and rape culture](#) (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's* "[the implication](#)" is the gold standard, but Sarah Silverman has done plenty). Context is declared not to matter. For me, it seemed like the argument [peaked with #CancelColbert](#): Stephen Colbert, back when he was in-character on *The Colbert Report*, satirised the racism of the Washington Redskins' owner, Daniel Snyder, starting a foundation for Native Americans that had the word "redskin" in the name by replacing the Native American slur with an Asian one; the corporate Twitter account associated with the show posted the punchline without context; online activist Suey Park started the hashtag #CancelColbert to highlight Colbert's anti-Asian racism; when people pointed out that Colbert's joke was at the expense of Snyder's racism, Park claimed that her hashtag was satirical, like a snake eating its own tail. And now it's 2020 and Donald Trump is president and satire is dead.

So when I say that Slim Shady is a frequent vehicle for satire, I get that can sound sort of meaningless, especially when he isn't always in satirical mode. But Eminem uses Slim to satirise huge swathes of American culture, exposing the darkness lurking beneath the surface. Slim Shady recreates the Columbine Massacre, takes credit for the OJ murders and correlates his moral rot with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. There is something deeply fucked up at the heart of American society, and Slim viciously prods at the bruise. He's the bugs in the dirt under the manicured suburban lawn at [the start of Blue Velvet](#). While middle-class white audiences frequently perceived black rappers as threatening, Eminem's white skin and blonde hair mimics the image of the all-American boy – an image that he fills his mouth with heinous filth to tear apart.

In reaction to the establishment's vilification of gangsta rap – blaming young black men for society's violence, because they happened to write songs that reflected it – Slim Shady openly declares himself to be everything that its detractors claimed gangsta rap was. He takes all of the things that both the left and the right criticised in gangsta rap – aggression, violence, misogyny, homophobia – and turns them up to eleven. It becomes something grotesque and unpalatable, a snarl of *You thought that shit was bad? Watch this*. He loudly proclaims that he's trying to influence children. ("Children should not partake in the listening of this album – with laces in their shoes," goes the '[Public Service Announcement](#)' at the start of *The Slim Shady LP*.) "I invented violence," he raps on '[Kill You](#)', and instantly makes anyone claiming listening to Eminem records causes violent behaviour sound like an idiot. Eminem didn't invent violence, and by implication, neither did Ice-T or NWA.

"Do you know why Dre's record was so successful?" a record label executive says [in a skit on The Marshall Mathers LP](#), "He's rapping about big-screen TVs, blunts, 40s and bitches. You're rapping about homosexuals and Vicodin. I can't sell this shit!"

Like Dylan Clark wrote [about the early punks](#), Eminem's "anger, pleasures, and ugliness were to go beyond what capitalism and bourgeois society could swallow. It would be untouchable, undesirable, unmanageable... a proclamation and an embrace of discord."

Slim is most sharply a satire of society's obsession and valorisation of celebrity. He attacks celebrities to attack the institution of celebrity: after a laundry list of celebrity disses in '[The Real Slim Shady](#)', he raps, "I have been sent here to destroy you." But his most incisive attacks on celebrity are more inward-looking, aimed, if not quite towards himself, then through himself. '[Role Model](#)', one of the funniest songs Eminem has ever written, mocks the idea that celebrities should be idolised or imitated: "Follow me and do exactly what the song says / Smoke weed, take pills, drop out of school, kill people." He describes increasingly violent and absurd situations – throwing your grandmother's

corpse on your porch, beating the shit out of Foghorn Leghorn, cutting himself open with a chainsaw – always juxtaposed with the idea that he is a role model and the listener should admire him:

I get a clean shave, bathe, go to a rave  
Die from an overdose and dig myself up out of my grave  
My middle finger won't go down, how do I wave?  
And this is how I'm supposed to teach kids how to behave?

Eminem returns again and again to the idea that celebrity is so valorised, fame so treated as synonymous with virtue, that parents abdicate their responsibility in favour of strangers who happen to work in the entertainment industry. A faith in the famous that the OJ Simpson trial should have destroyed instead just became pricklier and more defensive: rather than rejecting the exaltation of celebrities as role models for children and society, we decided famous individuals must live up to the responsibility that we have arbitrarily given them. Perhaps celebrities are not moral titans, but they *should* be, and anything less is their failure, not ours. The lives of public figures are treated as being for public consumption, and so must conform to public tastes – to have the appearance of [authenticity](#) and the attraction of fantasy and the exemplary morals of a saint. This is in spite of how, as Bo Burnham points out in [Make Happy](#), entertainers are in the service industry, they're just overpaid.

But Slim Shady isn't just a satire. When I say that Slim isn't "real", it implicitly sets up a dichotomy: Slim Shady, a fictional character, and Eminem, a real person. But Slim isn't a character the way that *Colbert Report* Stephen Colbert was a character. He doesn't have that kind of distance. Slim has lived the same life as Marshall Mathers: the same Stephen King childhood – beaten into a coma by his bullies, a pill-addicted mother with Munchausen syndrome by proxy – the same daughters and on-and-off wife, the same successful rap career. He's not a character, he's a persona: one of three, each of them both real and unreal. There's Slim Shady, Eminem, and Marshall Mathers, three persons in one [rap god](#). And each corresponds to one of the three aspects of the human psyche as theorised by Freud: the id, the ego, and the superego.

I do not generally care for psychoanalytical criticism. If you've studied English or film or any kind of cultural studies, you've probably come across some psychoanalytical theory, but if not, my kneejerk explanation is to say that it's complete bullshit and boring to boot. I go back and forth on whether I can't really understand it or it's actually just nonsense. Even more so than other areas of academia, psychoanalytical theory consists more or less entirely of impenetrable jargon that's designed to alienate a general readership, and – worse, somehow – endlessly circling arguments about the jargon itself.

"Is the camera eye a reflection of reality or is reality a reflection of the camera eye or is the camera merely a phallus?" a character asks in *The Other Side of the Wind*, and that's about as perfect a summary of psychoanalytical cultural criticism as you'll get.

But at the end of 'My Name Is', that perfect introduction to Shady, Eminem raps, "And by the way, when you see my dad? / Tell him that I slit his throat, in this dream I had." Most of the time when people describe things as Freudian, I don't see it – because I mean, the Oedipus complex is crazy, and almost no art is legitimately about wanting to murder your father and have sex with your mother, not even *Hamlet*. Not even *Oedipus Rex*, really. But Eminem's first single has him talk about *killing his dad* in a *dream*, like a loudspeaker announcement that psychoanalytical theory finally might generate a worthwhile reading of something.

Freud theorised the id as the unknown dark side of the personality, instinctive and irrational, that part of the self that the conscious mind refuses to identify with. It's "a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations". It is where sexual and aggressive drives live, and it seeks instant gratification of all wants. Jung called it the shadow, and that's what Slim Shady is. He gives expression to the shadow that shares his name, to the dark unknown self. On the song '[Guilty Conscience](#)', Slim is literally the devil on your shoulder.

"Everyone has thoughts that they know are not representative of their personality or character. These intrusive thoughts — of violence, self-harm, the violating of social expectations and rules — are normal in every individual, and are impossible to block out," [Aristo Orginos writes](#), "The discography of Eminem revels in the embrace of these intrusive thoughts, and in so doing, allows for catharsis in the listener."

Our society does not regard negative feelings – fear, anger, sadness – well, or even neutrally. The positive thinking movement – which has almost swallowed self-help and popular psychology whole – teaches that negative emotions are "bad" and must be rooted out and destroyed. Barbara Ehrenreich writes about the damaging effects of this in her book *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and The World*. After Ehrenreich was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was disturbed by the enforced positivity she encountered, where patients were discouraged from expressing anger or sadness and told a positive attitude was needed to beat cancer. "In the most extreme characterisation," Ehrenreich writes, "breast cancer is not a problem at all, not even an annoyance – it is a 'gift', deserving of the most heartfelt gratitude." This pressure to be positive acted as a wholly unnecessary additional burden, encouraging the patient to blame themselves if their condition did not improve.

While the cancer example is an extreme circumstance, Ehrenreich finds a similar enforced positivity in corporations, churches and unemployment lines. But here's the thing: negative feelings are a normal part of everyday life that everyone will experience. Like all feelings, they demand to be felt, nothing more or less. Avoiding or trying to destroy negative feelings can't make them go away permanently: it ultimately makes them worse, as they inevitably bubble over, but now compounded by feelings of shame and frustration.

Arlie Russell Hochschild explains in *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* that we all engage in some degree of "emotional management" – trying to coach the appropriate emotional reaction in yourself, like tamping down anger against a loved one, or generating feelings of sadness at a funeral, or showing polite friendliness when we meet a new person. We obviously can't all just express all of our spontaneous emotions on full blast all of the time, or society would collapse. But, according to Hochschild, modern workplaces institutionalise emotional management, and this daily grind alienates the worker from their own feelings. She writes about flight attendants who struggle to come down to a normal emotional state when they go home, their faces frozen in a smile. Emotions' "signal function", the information they provide about yourself and your situation, is deadened. There's a shadow of this in positive thinking: the requirement to have the "right attitude" at all times or be a failure, the institutionalisation of emotional management across every facet of our lives as we watch TED Talks and read self-help books about how anger or sadness aren't just normal parts of the emotional cycle, they're *toxic*, and you must root out and destroy them or it's *your own fault*.

This demonisation of negative emotions plays into the moral panics that often develop around teenagers listening to music with dark themes. The story – as peddled by tabloid newspapers about each new generation for decades – goes that music about depression, death and mental illness

encourages teenagers to feel sad, angry and self-loathing, or even kill themselves. For me, it was, My Chemical Romance and the emo subculture, accused by major media outlets of glamorising self-harm and encouraging suicide. But the same thing happened with [teenage tragedy songs](#), with goth rock and heavy metal, with Nirvana, Marilyn Manson, and yes, Eminem.

The demonisation of negative emotions positions them as unnatural, and so when confronted with teenagers dealing with those feelings – with that particular intensity with which teenagers feel everything – adult society clutches for an external cause, like the music they listen to. It's a story that adults tell themselves when they have forgotten what being a teenager feels like. In reality, the music offers solace and catharsis, and becomes popular in the first place precisely because it taps into what's already going on inside teenagers. "I make fight music / for high school kids," Eminem raps on '[Who Knew](#)', and even though I didn't listen to Eminem at that age I know exactly what he means: the armour to get through the day intact, headphones blaring and copy books scribbled with lyrics, an exorcism for your demons and a reassurance that it's okay that you're fucked up right now and a fantasy of power when you have almost no autonomy.

The ethos of self-care – which has come to rival positive thinking in its domination of online mental health discourse, often in the form of "inspirational" Facebook memes or viral tweets about how you should drink enough water or whatever – seems in a way like an antidote to this vilification of uncomfortable emotions. The rhetoric of self-care is all about how it's okay to feel your feelings, and you should, like, lie in bed watching Netflix if that's all you feel like doing. Aisling McCrea sums it up nicely in [an excellent article for Current Affairs](#):

Though the term has a medical tinge to it, the language used in the world of self-care is more aligned with the world of self-help, and much of the advice commonly given in the guise of self-care will be familiar to anyone who has browsed the pop-psychology shelves of a bookstore or listened to the counsel of a kindly coworker—take breaks from work and step outside for fresh air, take walks in the countryside, call a friend for a chat, have a lavender bath, get a good night's sleep. Light a candle. Stop being so hard on yourself. Take time off if you're not feeling so well and snuggle under the comforter with a DVD set and a herbal tea.

McCrea criticises self-care's singular focus on the individual to the neglect of social forces, but there's something terribly insufficient about self-care even at the level of the individual. Its rhetoric is intensely, suffocatingly passive, slotting into an overwhelmingly traditional kind of femininity – pastels and lavender and baths and *candles* and herbal tea, and *it's okay if all you want to do today is just stay in bed and watch Netflix*. Sadness becomes something soft and delicate; anger and panic become impossibilities. If you, like me, do not experience negative emotions in this soft, passive way, but as something insistent and writhing and painful, if you are not soothed by candles and herbal tea and your own motionlessness, self-care rhetoric has no real advice. It offers, ultimately, less a way to process your feelings than a ritualisation of avoidance.

Emotions are visceral and immediate, so in the immediate term, it is vitally important to find a way to deal with your feelings, not just try to push them away. In the immediate term, it is important to find vehicles for expression and catharsis: to feel the feelings, and release them.

Music is [an invaluable source](#) for cathartic release of negative emotions in a way that isn't destructive or harmful. I don't know how I would have gotten through my teens without Gerard Way howling "[a thousand bodies piled up I never thought would be enough to show you just what I've been thinking](#)" in my ear. Finding music that helps you express these feelings allows you to process

them in a way constant avoidance makes impossible. And Slim Shady gives expression to the worst feelings you bury the deepest inside.

Eminem says the unsayable. Some of that is as he explains on [‘The Real Slim Shady’](#):

I’m like a head trip to listen to, ‘cause I’m only givin’ you  
Things you joke about with your friends inside your livin’ room  
The only difference is I got the balls to say it in front of y’all  
And I don’t gotta be false or sugarcoat it at all

And yep, that checks out – I often think of Eminem when I make a particularly dark joke among friends and have an immediate irrational jolt of *I’m glad no-one heard that who would use it to get me fired*. (It is worth noting that this thought has never been discouraged by unemployment.) Partially it’s a bizarrely narcissistic fear (who would give that much of a shit about what I think?); partially it’s because people just [love trying to get people fired now](#), I guess; partially it’s that, in the age of social media, telecommuting and neoliberalism, the masks we wear professionally are now expected to be worn everywhere, the concept of “free time” retreating in the rear-view mirror. (“There is no ‘off the clock’ when at all hours you could be documenting your on-brand experiences or tweeting your on-brand observations,” [Anne Helen Petersen writes for BuzzFeed](#).) But mostly it’s a way to make concrete a much more generalised, abstract fear: that to present the truest, most authentic version of myself – my sense of humour, my thought processes, my tastes – will invite punishment. A certain degree of contextual self-censorship is obviously normal and fairly necessary: you wouldn’t talk the same way to your grandmother as on Twitter, or to your friends as in a meeting with your boss. But the social media age has fuelled an explosion in [ritualised public shaming](#) and with it (for me, at least) a kind of paranoid vigilance. The responsibility to publicly model good morals that was once limited to celebrities is now extended to ordinary people. Everyone is a public figure, and so everyone’s life is for public consumption and must conform to public tastes. It’s the moralising aspect of the online imperative towards curating the self, and I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. It’s misery. It’s prison.

And then there’s Eminem, all wicked grins and middle fingers, declaring [“I’d yank my fucking teeth before I’d ever bite my tongue.”](#) It’s exhilarating: recklessly brave, and somehow both hilariously shocking and warmly reassuring. It reminds me of *Pink Flamingos* and punk rock, of Troma movies and secretly sneaking episodes of *South Park* and *Jackass* as a kid. A reminder – one I always seem to need – that just because something’s in bad taste doesn’t mean it tastes bad. I can’t help but admire it.

But Eminem also goes so much further than the thing you joke about with your friends inside your living room. Slim Shady gives expression to the thoughts and feelings you keep buried, that you wouldn’t joke about among friends or even articulate inside your own head: *I wanna crush your skull til your brains leaks out of your veins* and *I lay awake and strap myself in the bed with a bulletproof vest on and shoot myself in the head and bleed, bitch, bleed*. Jung wrote about the importance of encountering the shadow – the id – without being submerged into it, to understand it and reincorporate it into the conscious self to produce a stronger, wider consciousness. Listening to Slim provides just such an opportunity.

“Slim Shady is an ironic character, a boogeyman, Satan himself with the spotlight shone on him,” Orginos concludes, “and Eminem makes him dance in front of an audience to show that perhaps not all shadows in the soul are to be feared.”

“I guess there’s a Slim Shady in all of us,” Eminem concedes at the end of ‘The Real Slim Shady’, “Fuck it, let’s all stand up.”

If Slim represents the id, Marshall Mathers is the superego. The Marshall Mathers persona is the one that seems the most “real” – less exaggerated and more authentic. He’s less the good to Slim’s evil than the Jekyll to his Hyde: Marshall, too, is frequently angry and cruel, even as he seems more grounded in reality. You’ll find him on ‘[Cleaning Out My Closet](#)’, ‘[The Way I Am](#)’ or ‘[Rock Bottom](#)’: moments of absolute clarity, dealing honestly and seriously with deeply personal problems. Marshall does songs about how much [he loves his daughters](#) (where he doesn’t even [kill anybody](#)) and his grief over [the murder of his best friend](#), the rapper Proof. Where Slim is Mr. Don’t Give a Fuck, Marshall is sensitive, insecure and sometimes self-flagellating.

Freud’s concept of the superego is that part of the psyche concerned with morality. It includes the person’s ideal image of themselves towards which they aspire, and the conscience, which criticises the id’s drives, fantasies and desires. The superego generates feelings of guilt, shame and weakness, and feels compelled to do what it deems to be right.

Marshall Mathers is this moral impulse, this self-critique, this guilt and shame and weakness, and it’s pretty much core to Eminem’s whole deal.

“What often gets lost about [*The Marshall Mathers LP*], is that it knows morality. It knows when it’s being bad, of course, but also how to be good,” [Dan Weiss writes in his ranking of Eminem’s albums for Billboard](#), “[Eminem] is constantly questioning the war between art and life. He never stops fighting for art, but he knows a bit about life, too.”

My favourite example of the Marshall Mathers persona is a song in which he’s a minor character. ‘[Stan](#)’ might be the best song Eminem has written, managing to tell its story with levels of immersion and depth where most story-songs just sketch the broad outlines. Stan, from whose point of view most of the song is written, is a character in five minutes of a song who feels as fully formed as the protagonist of a two-hour film. He’s an obsessed, unstable fan writing letters to Eminem. Initially the clues that Stan’s obsession with Eminem is unhealthy are fairly subtle (he writes that he is going to name his daughter Bonnie in tribute, and it is for the listener to register that he’s referencing ‘[97 Bonnie and Clyde](#)’, a song about bringing your child to help dispose of her mother’s body) but as the song goes on and Stan receives no reply, he becomes more desperate, angrier and more unhinged. I think all the time about the end of the second verse:

See everything you say is real, and I respect you ‘cause you tell it  
My girlfriend’s jealous ‘cause I talk about you 24/7  
But she don’t know you like I know you Slim, no one does  
She don’t know what it was like for people like us growing up  
You gotta call me man, I’ll be the biggest fan you’ll ever lose  
Sincerely yours, Stan  
P.S. We should be together, too

There’s so much character detail worked into these lines. It’s always the point in the song when my throat catches. There’s Stan’s inability to differentiate between Slim Shady and Eminem or recognise Slim as an ironic persona: how the solace he finds in Slim is misguided and wrong, but it’s still the only solace he can get. There’s the uncomfortably familiar pain of connecting so intensely and personally to a piece of art that you imagine that you have a special insight into it and its creator that no-one else could understand: like Alfie Coates wrote about *The Squid and The Whale*, “[we’ve all believed in art so utterly it felt like it could only be yours, because we’ve all been... alone and](#)

[heard the song that only you – only you – can understand, can have, can own.](#)” How Stan is both furious with Eminem and still desperately clinging to him, to the fantasy of him; how he is still trapped in the working-class poverty that rap allowed Eminem to escape; how he mistreats his girlfriend as his obsession with Eminem consumes everything in its path. There’s the jagged nuances of his sexuality: it’s easy to chalk “we should be together too” up to Eminem’s alleged homophobia – *oh, wow, creepy gay guys sure are scary!* – but there’s something so much more specific and tragic and odd there. For my part, I think Stan, [like Christian Slater’s character in \*True Romance\*](#), “ain’t no f\*g,” but he’d fuck Eminem.

Stan’s story culminates in tying his pregnant girlfriend up and locking her in the boot of his car. He gets drunk and takes downers, then drives off a bridge, killing them both. Eminem’s delivery is extraordinary: how he manages to depict the powerful, unvarnished horror of it without ever letting Stan become a bogeyman. Even as Stan claims to be rejecting Eminem (“See, I ain’t like you”), he sounds more desperate than ever for Eminem to love him back. The chorus – sampled from a verse of Dido’s [‘Thank You’](#) – loops again, and it might be my favourite sample anywhere ever, my go-to defense of sampling as an art: how what is, in Dido’s original, a fairly bland love song, becomes something so deeply unsettling, even haunting.

Then there’s the last verse: it’s Eminem belatedly writing back to Stan, and it’s pure Marshall Mathers. In the [music video](#), Eminem wears his glasses for the last verse, a visual signifier differentiating Marshall from Slim Shady. But just listening to the song itself, the difference is crystal clear. He responds to Stan’s queries, even ones that were described in disconcerting terms, and the dramatic irony – that we know that Stan has killed himself and his girlfriend, but the character of Eminem in the song doesn’t – makes the sheer politeness of it heart-breaking:

You said your girlfriend’s pregnant now, how far along is she?  
Look, I’m really flattered you would call your daughter that  
And here’s an autograph for your brother,  
I wrote it on a starter cap

A sincere concern for Stan’s wellbeing wrestles with an anxiety about Eminem’s responsibility. It’s something that comes up frequently through the Marshall Mathers persona: a reflection of the moral and social implications of Slim Shady, and how listeners – particularly young listeners – relate to him. Stan references two separate songs from Eminem’s previous album, *The Slim Shady LP*, to describe his in-progress murder/suicide: ‘My Name Is’, when he says “I just drank a fifth of vodka / Dare me to drive?”, and ‘97 Bonnie and Clyde’, as his girlfriend is locked inside his car boot. For Marshall, Slim’s a form of therapy – even a form of exorcism – but he has no control over how fans react, whether it be the stark, misguided literalism of Stan or something more subtly insidious, like laughing for the wrong reasons, what Sarah Silverman once called the [“mouthful of blood laugh.”](#)

A big part of the superego’s job is to criticise the id, and so the last verse of ‘Stan’ is both pure Marshall Mathers and in large part a criticism of Slim Shady – or, at the very least, a refutation of Slim Shady, a lesson in how to read him and a warning against doing it wrong. Marshall offers genuinely decent mental health advice:

You got some issues, Stan, I think you need some counselling  
To help your ass from bouncing off the walls when you get down some

and in particular opposition to the Slim Shady persona, tells him to stop treating his girlfriend like shit:

I really think you and your girlfriend need each other  
Or maybe you just need to treat her better

But underneath the whole verse is an intractable guilt, suffocating in the knowledge that the warning will never be enough, that the pain of making art is having no control over how people respond to it once it's out in the world and having to live with – and shoulder the responsibility for – whatever that response may be. At the very end, Marshall realises what the listener already knows, and it's fucking harrowing:

I just don't want you to do some crazy shit  
I seen this one shit on the news a couple weeks ago that made me sick  
Some dude was drunk and drove his car over a bridge  
And had his girlfriend in the trunk, and she was pregnant with his kid  
And in the car they found a tape, but they didn't say who it was to  
Come to think about it, his name was... it was you.  
Damn.

The final part of the psyche as theorised by Freud is the ego, concerned with judgement, control, planning, defense, and intellectual functioning. The ego mediates between the id and the superego, trying to satisfy both the id's desires and the superego's ethics even as it reconciles them with reality and its concern for its own safety. "It serves three severe masters," Freud writes, "the external world, the superego and the id." And that's Eminem, the persona that shares Em's stage name: the thinking self pulled between Slim's drives and Marshall's guilt, trying to figure out how to explain himself to the world.

A lot of what the Eminem persona does is bragging, mostly about how good he is at rapping. "People steppin' over people just to rush to the set / Just to get to see an MC who breathes so freely / Ease over these beats and be so breezy / Jesus, how can shit be so easy?" he raps on '[Business](#)', in what Dan Weiss calls a showcase for his "[purely original Mobius strip of a flow](#)". There's '[Rap God](#)', where he calls himself a rap god, then raps 101 words in less than 17 seconds to prove it.

But the Eminem persona is also the one who wades into politics: the judging intellectual self, channelling his rage towards justice. On '[Square Dance](#)', he warns his teenage fans to take George Bush's warmongering seriously, because they'll be the ones shipped off to die:

Yeah you laugh 'til your motherfuckin' ass gets drafted  
While you're at band camp thinkin' that crap can't happen...  
You just a baby, gettin' recruited at eighteen  
You're on a plane now  
Eating their food and their baked beans  
I'm 28, they gonna take you 'fore they take me

I always have to remind myself that this was released in May 2002, after the invasion of Afghanistan but before the invasion of Iraq: how Eminem's stance here was both bolder than it might seem today – the Afghanistan War was broadly popular, supported by as much as [eighty-eight percent of Americans in October 2001](#) – and uncomfortably prescient.

Then there's '[White America](#)', Eminem's best primarily political track. Despite minor efforts to [crudely reinterpret it for This Age of Trump](#) – largely based on the title alone – its commentary on race, art and freedom of expression remain as relevant as ever even as they seem like a crystallisation of the early years of the Bush administration. 'White America' resolves the

contradiction at the heart of Eminem's career – how he could be both ubiquitous and dangerous – by attributing both to his whiteness within a white supremacist society. That he became so incredibly popular thanks in no small part to being white is obvious – “let's do the math / if I were black, I would have sold half” – but he also attributes the hostility and censorship he faced to his whiteness. He seems so dangerous precisely because he's *not* “other” in the way that black gangsta rappers were: “White America / I could be one of your kids,” he bellows in the hook, and everything suddenly clicks. When the moralisers complained about misogyny and violence in gangsta rap, it was easy to, implicitly or explicitly, fence young black artists off as an aberration from American culture, threatening to corrupt the innocent (and implicitly or explicitly) white children. But Eminem is white, and that makes him terrifying, almost uncanny. He's less an external corruptor than a revelation of what was there all along, just beneath the skin. He declares himself “the posterchild / the motherfucking spokesman now / for white America”, and he's absolutely right.

But mostly, it's a searing argument for free speech, forcing free speech to the centre of the debate when censors hid behind protecting the children or whatever. It's about how America's supposed values – free speech chief among them – are beautiful and important, but they will always be tossed to the side while its true values, like racism, always endure. Although Eminem mentions activists, the finger is pointed most firmly at the government and America's white suburban middle class. At the end of the song, he shouts “FUCK YOU, MISS CHENEY! FUCK YOU, TIPPER GORE!” at the top of his lungs, “FUCK YOU WITH THE FREEST OF SPEECH THIS DIVIDED STATES OF EMBARRASSMENT WILL ALLOW ME TO HAVE. FUCK YOU!”

Where Slim Shady frequently wracks the Marshall Mathers persona with guilt, the Eminem persona will always stick up for Shady, attempting to explain him to a world eager to misinterpret and mischaracterise. ‘[I'm Shady](#)’ starts off as a typical Slim Shady song – “I try to keep it positive and play it cool / shoot up the playground and tell the kids to stay in school” – but partway through the last verse he switches personas:

Well, I do take pills, don't do speed  
Don't do crack, don't do coke, I do smoke weed  
Don't do smack, I do do 'shrooms, I do drink beer  
I just wanna make a few things clear  
My baby mama's not dead, she's still alive and bitching  
And I don't have herpes, my dick's just itching

Where the Marshall Mathers persona talks about misunderstandings of Shady like they're painful and shame-inducing, for the Eminem persona, it's an opportunity to laugh at the squares who don't get the joke. And I mean, I love ‘Stan’ and ‘[Bad Guy](#)’, but songs like ‘I'm Shady’ are their comic inverse: because sometimes “my baby mama's not dead, she's still alive and bitching / and I don't have herpes, my dick's just itching” says all that needs to be said, and then it sticks its tongue out and tells you to fuck off.

He pulls the same trick on ‘[My Dad's Gone Crazy](#)’ – switching from chainsawing his balls off to explaining himself sincerely – but his defense of Slim Shady in the final verse is more full-throated, embattled by years of hostility and censorship:

'Cause when I speak, it's tongue in cheek  
I'd yank my fucking teeth before I'd ever bite my tongue  
I'd slice my gums, get struck by fuckin' lightning twice at once  
And die and come back as Vanilla Ice's son...

And that's pretty much the gist of it  
Parents are pissed, but the kids love it  
Nine-millimetre heater stashed in two-seaters with meat cleavers  
I don't blame you, I wouldn't let Hailie listen to me neither

It's a justification of himself and of Slim Shady, but also of all art, and the rights of artists. It's political advocacy and a moral crusade. The Eminem persona is pulled between Slim Shady's id, Marshall Mathers's superego and the external world. And where they intersect it finds the most important work Eminem's ego – the judging, thinking self – can do: to scream at the top of his lungs that he and everyone else has a right to say whatever they want, when that right is constantly, constantly under siege.

## 2

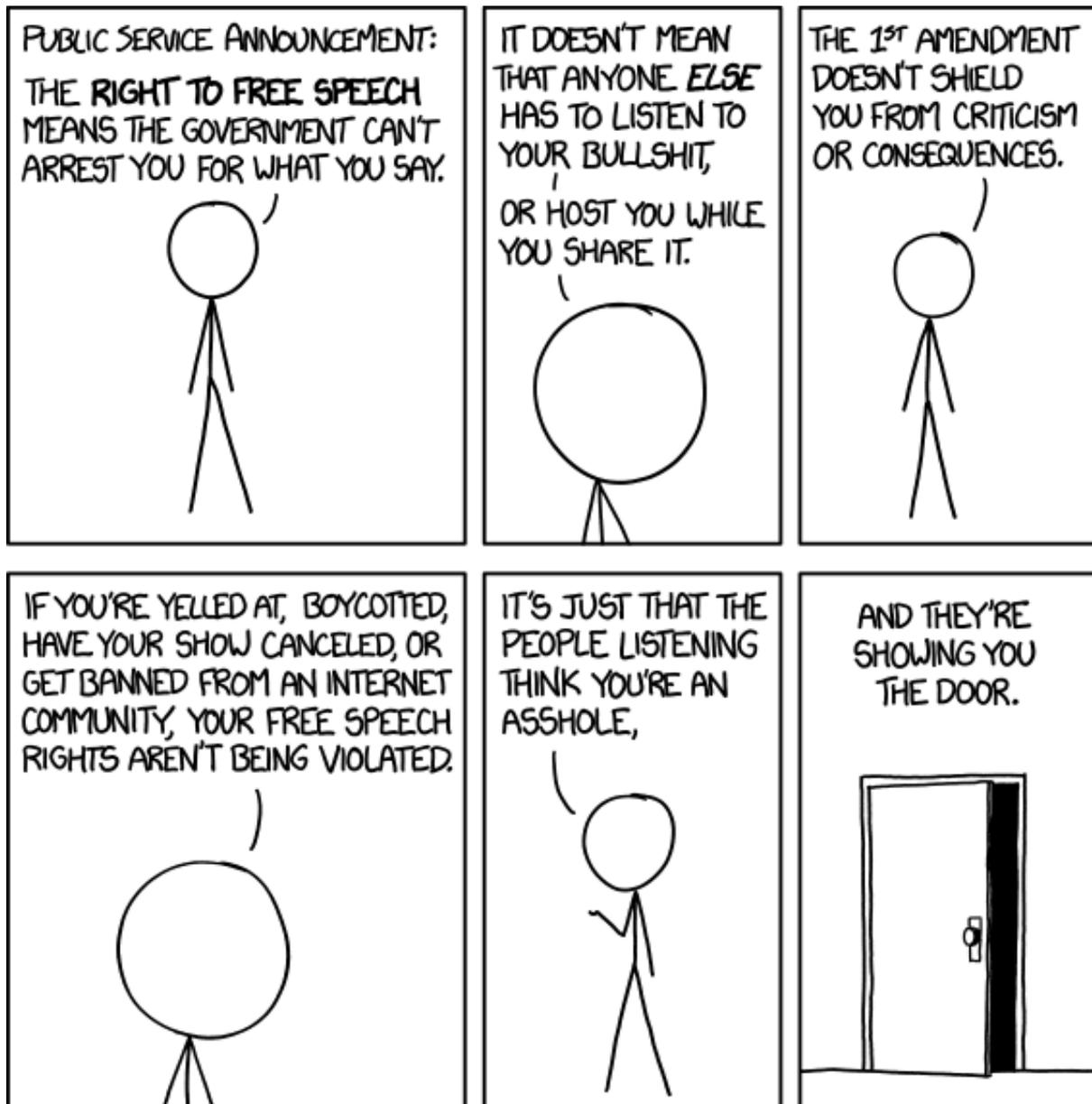
# How many records you expecting to sell after your second LP sends you directly to jail?

Discourse around freedom of speech is so terrible that it's difficult to read the words "free speech" without rolling your eyes. Free speech is a joke: at best it's an embarrassing forum post by a guy who is absolutely furious that the moderator keeps deleting his *My Little Pony* memes, at worst it's a far-right dogwhistle. [As outlined by William Davies](#), the right has diligently spent the last few years manufacturing a "crisis" in free speech that is supposedly infecting everywhere from college campuses to major media outlets. This tactic began in the United States, where freedom of speech is more of a hot button issue in general, and – if cable news is to be believed – college-aged liberal activists have a more developed apparatus for no-platforming speakers or demanding trigger warnings for assigned reading. (I am generally sceptical of the truth of this, because I was immersed in liberal-left university circles here in Ireland for several years at the height of this whole thing and never once encountered a "safe space", even as middle-aged media personalities went on the radio to complain about safe spaces. I would not be in the least surprised if there are plenty of Americans for whom the same is true.)

Most of the stuff this debate is about is either not censorship or not even really happening, at least at any scale. It is not censorship that some college kids don't find your gay jokes very funny or that someone put "trigger warning: rape" on their blog post or that *The Guardian* publishes an article disagreeing with your argument. The fakeness of this whole debate is something everyone left-of-centre is intensely aware of: there might be good-faith arguments to be had about the legitimacy of, say, no-platforming, but free speech warriors – from Fox News hosts down to the lowliest Twitter troll – are not approaching the issue in good faith. When they talk about threats to their free speech, they usually mean threats to the legitimacy of their authority. They say, "why am I not permitted to speak?" because "why are people disagreeing with me? I'm right!" would give too much of the game away.

But this has created a problem on the left. Not that the left "hates free speech", as the right claims, but in liberals and leftists allowing the right to define the parameters of the debate. The right has made such a habit of calling the dumbest shit censorship – where most of the supposedly silenced end up regularly appearing on *Question Time* – that the left-of-centre has defensively embraced a minimalist approach to free speech.

In an effort to delegitimise right-wing freedom-of-speech concern trolling, many liberals' and leftists' definition of free speech is becoming narrower and narrower. Very little encapsulates this approach quite like a comic published by *xkcd* in 2014:



You've probably seen this comic before. I've seen this comic dozens of times, easy. I have liked and shared it on multiple social media sites. I used to love it, used to think of it as an almost perfect rebuttal to the frivolous free speech arguments of the right (or of random guys online). I'm not sure if it was a massive influence on online left and liberal discourse, or it's just the distillation of ideas that had already taken root – a little of both, most likely. But it ticks all the boxes: ideas so engrained in those circles that I parroted them back for a really long time without ever really thinking about what they mean.

“Freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from consequences” is something I used to say all the time, that I still see people say all the time, even though if you think about it for ten seconds it doesn't make any sense. I think this started as a response to people invoking free speech because they didn't like being criticised, something which *xkcd* mentions specifically. There are indeed consequences to your speech that have nothing to do with your rights being violated: if you say bigoted things and then people think you're a jerk, that's the just the risk you take. Someone else using *their* freedom of speech to criticise you is not only not censorship, it's kind of the point of the whole thing. But “freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from consequences” is so broad in

scope and diminishing in what it deems a violation that we get to the point where *xkcd* and millions of people think the only way for your free speech to be violated is for the government to put you in prison.

Freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from all consequences, but it necessarily means freedom from artificial consequences put in place to discourage or outright prevent certain types of speech. People thinking you suck or arguing with you or not wanting to hang out with you are natural consequences, but being arrested or fined, losing your job, or being targeted with harassment or violence are artificial consequences designed to punish the speaker and prevent others expressing similar ideas. Arrest is a "consequence" of speech, but it's one that *xkcd* recognises as a violation: because everyone in practice believes that free speech means being protected from at least some consequences. Otherwise it wouldn't mean anything.

The idea that the government sending you to prison is the only violation of your right to free speech is about the most minimalist approach to free speech you can get without throwing away the concept altogether. It ignores the broad range of muscles the state can flex to get you to shut your mouth: directly through the justice system with bans, fines and injunctions, or more sneakily, through deportations, harassment, or arbitrarily denying permits for events. It dismisses how many non-state actors can in practice be arbiters of speech in a society where corporations hold more and more concentrated power and your employer is all that stands between you and starving to death. *xkcd* equates freedom of speech with the First Amendment to the US Constitution, but freedom of speech is an idea much bigger than any document that enshrines it.

This whole framing is a total 180 from the time in which Eminem first blew up, the tail-end of the won't-somebody-think-of-the-children culture-wars era that began in the 1980s. *South Park* and Attitude Era wrestling lit up our TV screens, Marilyn Manson was getting blamed for the Columbine Massacre, and video games were supposedly turning teenagers into sociopaths who couldn't distinguish fiction from reality. "The moralizers tended to be white people from politics and the church," Wesley Morris writes in [an excellent article analysing this shift](#), "Their concern was that television, movies, books, museums and music were exposing people — young people — to unsavory concepts like abortion and lust." Artists, meanwhile, seemed set on seeing how far they could push this thing. Morris writes, "the prevailing mood was mockery and more boundary expansion."

Eminem's early music feels like a vital window into this radically different free speech debate of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It's a reminder of the falseness of the present free speech divide, but more importantly, shows how the left-of-centre's new defensive minimalist approach is self-sabotage. The shift didn't occur because the right came to care about free speech, but because they came to recognise its rhetorical usefulness. It's not a value; it's a shield, a debate-killer, a tool to bluntly mould the world in your own image. How else could [preventing corporations from funnelling unlimited funds into political campaigns be a violation of free speech](#) but [making it illegal to boycott Israel](#) not be?

The other main plank of liberal/left free speech minimalism is touched on by *xkcd*: "[free speech] doesn't mean anyone else has to listen to your bullshit, or host you while you share it," or, as rendered in eleven million tweets and Facebook posts, you are entitled to free speech, but you are not entitled to a platform. Like the freedom from consequences argument, this gets at something true and extrapolates wildly from there. It is correct that no-one is entitled to be published in *The New York Times* or be interviewed on TV. It is true that the moderator on a forum is not violating anyone's free speech by enforcing community guidelines (although some of course go mad with

power). But if you are not entitled to a platform, to any platform, do you really have free speech? The natural endpoint of “you are not entitled to a platform” is freedom of speech meaning you’re allowed to say whatever you want while muttering to yourself in your bedroom, as long as it isn’t loud enough for anyone else to hear.

That’s an uncharitable interpretation, I know, especially because this argument generally comes up in relation to access to major, mainstream platforms – TV, newspapers and Twitter, mostly – rather than as a broad theoretical statement. The same goes for the freedom from consequences thing. Hardly anyone believes those things in their baldest, simplest rendering, likewise the idea that the only genuine form of censorship is arrest. The left-of-centre feel safe to say these things which, in their direct application, legitimise so many forms of censorship because we take free speech for granted. A false history has been created in so many minds, almost as a defense mechanism: a history where free speech is uncontested, perhaps has even gone too far, where the only kind of speech that is ever subject to repression is bigotry. It’s a history where free speech is a right-wing value. Not because the right gives or has ever given a fuck about freedom of speech, but because as they’ve appropriated its rhetoric for their own ends, we’ve barely put up a fight — haven’t even had the presence of mind to recognise we were conceding something.

It’s a false history that – like the right’s bogus free speech campaign – is extremely American. That’s not a bad thing as far as it goes, but it’s pretty alarming to hear Irish liberals and leftists parroting it when we live in a country that banned a Marx Brothers film for encouraging anarchic tendencies, banned *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Brave New World* for being sexually explicit, and cut the Paris flashbacks from *Casablanca* to remove Ilsa’s affair with Rick and render the film incomprehensible. In my lifetime, the Irish Film Censorship/Classification Office banned [Natural Born Killers](#) (upheld until 2001), [From Dusk till Dawn](#) (upheld until 2004), [Showgirls](#) (passed uncut in [20-fucking-17](#)), and, of all things, [WrestleMania 2000](#) (currently rated TV-14 on the WWE Network). Blasphemy was unconstitutional in Ireland until a 2018 referendum. Ireland has never had real protections for free speech, and it freaks me out to see some Irish people borrowing the has-free-speech-gone-too-far pose of Americans liberals and leftists.

But let’s be clear: it’s also a false history in countries that don’t have the bananas censorship history that we have. In 2011, [the UK banned The Human Centipede II](#) for some reason. They spent the 1980s banning so-called “[video nasties](#)” including *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Not to mention the UK’s over-reaching anti-terror legislation: [students at the University of Reading were warned](#) not to access a mainstream academic essay on the ethics of socialist revolution on their personal devices, to only read it “in a secure setting”, and not to leave it where might be seen “inadvertently or otherwise, by those who are not prepared to view it” for fear of falling foul of Prevent. The rapper Tyler, the Creator has been [banned from entering the UK since 2015](#). Likewise [entering New Zealand since 2014](#), because his violent lyrics make him a “threat to public order”. (Earlier in his career, Tyler, the Creator, like Eminem, frequently rapped from the perspective of an evil alter-ego; unlike Eminem, he is black.)

It’s even a false version of history in America, the country that is proudly supposed to be the most free speech absolutist place on the planet.

The old adage about how the most stringent protection of free speech wouldn’t protect you in falsely shouting fire in a crowded theatre [originated in 1919 with US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. arguing that the First Amendment did not protect members of the Socialist Party in Philadelphia distributing fliers urging conscripted men to resist the draft](#). That same year, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of famed labour leader and five-time presidential candidate

Eugene V. Debs for delivering a speech protesting US involvement in World War I. The prosecutors argued that Debs was trying to arouse mutiny and treason by preventing the drafting of soldiers. The only reasonable reaction to these convictions is a deep, almost suffocating shame. It's galling that anyone could reference them positively in any context, including quoting the "fire in a crowded theatre" line, yet they do.

In the century since, the United States has violated the principle of free speech in a thousand different ways. You could write a depressingly thorough history of twentieth-century America purely through the lens of free speech violations. The easy thing is to pretend that it's been a hundred years of smooth, uninterrupted ascent into ever greater liberty and justice. But that's a lie. It's a constant battle.

A lot of that is the straight-up arrests that *xkcd* acknowledges as first amendment violations, although the US Supreme Court didn't always agree. [The black civil rights protestors in the 1960s are the most obvious example](#): the sheriff of Birmingham, Alabama obtained an injunction on 133 specific people, including many of the civil rights movement's leaders, forbidding them from parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing, picketing or holding kneel-ins in churches. Martin Luther King's violating this injunction got him sent to prison, from where he wrote the [Letter From Birmingham Jail](#), still one of the best pieces of writing on the fight against racism ever put to paper. Injunctions against protesting meant black citizens got arrested for praying outside of city hall in Albany, Georgia; Robert Moses was arrested in Sunflower, Mississippi when handing out leaflets about a voter registration drive for "distributing literature without a permit"; John Lewis was arrested in Selma, Alabama for carrying a "one man one vote" sign outside the courthouse.

Artistic expression could get you thrown in jail as well. Legendary stand-up Lenny Bruce was [arrested for obscenity](#) four times between 1961 and 1964 for telling jokes about coming and cocksuckers, one of which was mid-performance on stage. (He was also barred from entering the UK as an "undesirable alien".) 25 years later, NWA were [arrested for playing 'Fuck tha Police' in concert](#), supposedly because they were inciting violence.

But lots of censorship in twentieth-century America came in sneakier forms. The distinction, upheld by just about everybody, between censorship by the state (which is a violation of free speech) and censorship by private actors (which is fine) begins to fall apart when you look at it closely: the state and private actors are always so deeply entangled, working in tandem to shut you up. Threats of state censorship frequently led to self-censorship – well, censorship by the corporations that own production companies and publishing houses, controlling what art would get released to the public. All the major film studios signed up to the [Motion Picture Production Code](#) – commonly called the Hays Code – which forbade depictions of "suggestive" nudity ("in fact or in silhouette"), "sexual perversion" (i.e. gay people), "miscegenation" (i.e. interracial relationships), and ridicule of the clergy. Also cursing, obviously. The Hays Code was rigidly enforced from 1934 into the 1950s, before being abolished and replaced with the rating system in 1968.

While obviously much freer than the Code, the rating system, too, can have a censoring effect: NC-17 films – the equivalent to an 18s rating in Ireland or the UK – are [not shown by multiple major cinema chains](#) and are not given wide advertisement. Films will almost always [be cut to get to an R rating](#) rather than take the massive commercial risk of releasing under the NC-17 rating. On top of that, which films garner an NC-17 and what feedback they receive from the MPAA are the product of institutional biases: in favour of Hollywood over independent films, in favour of straight over gay sex, in favour of male over female sexual pleasure. [In the documentary \*This Film Is Not Yet Rated\*](#), Matt Stone says that when he and Trey Parker made the independent film *Orgazmo*, the MPAA would not

give notes on what to cut to get an R rating, but when they made *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* at Paramount, the MPAA gave them “extremely specific” feedback on what to change to get an R. “[They say] ‘We serve the public, we serve the parents’... It’s crap,” Stone says, “They serve the studios. That’s who pays their bills.”

Much like how the possibility of state censorship enabled the Hays Code and, to a lesser degree, the rating system, the spectre of state censorship of comic books enabled the major comics publishers to execute a massive, censoring power grab. The [Comics Code](#), formed in 1954, worked similarly to the Hays Code but for comic books. Created by the major comics publishers to preempt government regulation by self-censoring first, the Code banned depictions of policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions “in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority”, mandated that good must always triumph over evil, and forbade profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, nudity and gore.

Also forbidden were “walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism”, which sounds funny until you realise this was specifically to exclude publisher William Gaines of EC Comics. Gaines had made enemies of industry heads both for his testimony at the Kefauver comic book delinquency hearings and for including socially progressive messages in EC Comics’ titles. Since the publishers who signed up to the Code refused to sell to retailers that also sold non-Code titles, EC Comics ended up folding. Its only property which survived became a magazine: *Mad*. So the Comics Code not only censored the entire art form, just as the Hays Code did with films, but was designed to personally punish Gaines and EC Comics for their speech, artistic and otherwise.

But nothing encapsulates the sheer breadth of free speech violations the US has been willing to justify like the Red Scare. The Red Scare was a veritable smorgasbord of free speech clampdowns, with the government and non-state actors using all the tools in their toolbelt to conduct a witch hunt against communists and alleged communists. Hundreds of communists were imprisoned, including a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union, often on the basis of testimony later admitted to be false. “Loyalty reviews” were implemented for government workers, failing which not only meant thousands of employees lost their jobs, but became basically un-hireable. The FBI also distributed anonymous documents with evidence from FBI files of communist affiliations of teachers, lawyers, and others, usually resulting in their being fired. The loyalty reviews were supposed to be confidential, but J. Edgar Hoover routinely gave evidence from them to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

The HUAC famously subpoenaed people from the film industry to interrogate them about their membership of the Communist Party, real or suspected. The Hollywood Ten refused to cooperate, citing their First Amendment rights, and were imprisoned for contempt of Congress. Immediately after, the major studios began blacklisting any suspected communists, stating they would “not knowingly employ a communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States.” The moralisers behind the Hays Code became the authoritarians behind the blacklist: Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper ruined the careers of anyone she suspected of being a communist, having communist sympathies, being gay, or anyone else she deemed insufficiently moral.

Senator Joseph McCarthy strong-armed the State Department’s overseas library programme into removing “material by any controversial persons, communists, fellow travelers, etc.” from their shelves. Charlie Chaplin was banned from re-entering the United States in 1952, and his subsequent film – *Limelight* – was so widely boycotted that it was de facto banned. That same year, a law was

passed allowing the government to deport both immigrants and naturalised citizens engaged in “subversive activities”. And that’s just stuff done at a national level: plenty of states banned communists from employment in the public service or receiving public aid. The punishment for subversive propaganda in Michigan was life imprisonment; the punishment for advocating the violent overthrow of the government in Tennessee was the death penalty.

It’s easy to imagine the Red Scare as a faraway thing that has nothing to do with the present. But then there’s the Nixon administration bringing an injunction against *The New York Times* for publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971. There’s the US Supreme Court finding George Carlin’s seven dirty words routine indecent in 1978. There’s the District Court for the Southern District of Florida ruling 2 Live Crew’s album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* obscene, making it illegal in those counties, in 1990. There’s Blockbuster Video refusing to stock *The Last Temptation of Christ* while having an effective monopoly on the home video market in the 1990s – not to mention [all NC-17 films](#). There’s the [shit-ton of songs that got blacklisted](#) by the US’s biggest owner of radio stations after 9/11. There’s Ralph Nader’s 2004 presidential campaign, where Democrats had great success in filing bad-faith complaints – like a signatory being down as Bill instead of William – to get him taken off the ballot, resulting in Nader being charged with the Democratic Party’s legal bills for their troubles. (In Pennsylvania, he was ordered to pay \$81,102.19, becoming “[the first candidate in American history to be penalized financially by a state for attempting to run for public office](#),” writes Oliver Hall.) There’s the boycotting and harassment and general fucking-with the Dixie Chicks endured for speaking out against the Iraq War, in response to which George Bush said “they shouldn’t have their feelings hurt just because some people don’t want to buy their records when they speak out”, because freedom of speech doesn’t mean freedom from consequences, I guess. There’s the imprisonment of Chelsea Manning and the exile of Edward Snowden. There’s [copyright creep](#), *Piss Christ*, and Charlie Hebdo.

There’s Eminem.

At his peak, Eminem was both an avatar for the silenced and a successor to the censored. He is self-consciously a test for people who claim to love freedom of speech, who pat themselves on the back as they condemn long-past violations and reassure themselves nothing like that could happen again. We all like to imagine that, dropped into a long-ago era, we would be on what looks from the present like the right side of history. Eminem is there to see what side of history you would really be on. “How much damage can you do with a pen?” he asks on ‘[Who Knew](#)’, and suddenly he’s DH Lawrence, he’s Allen Ginsberg, he’s Vladimir Nabokov.

“What in the world gives me the right to say what I like?” he raps in ‘[Bitch Please II](#)’. He doesn’t need to answer the question, because the listener does that work for him: your mind supplies the answer automatically, and it quiets your objections more than his protestations ever could. It forces you to consider your objections in free speech terms, even though we naturally resist framing our own objections that way. Nobody ever says they love censorship; they say they hate sedition and perversion and violence, that they want to protect their country and their children. Censorship is just the result.

Eminem seemed, somehow, both suppressed and irrepressible: that the only reason the powers that be couldn’t shut him up is because he was such a force of nature that nothing could contain him. Eminem was the Road Runner, and no matter how many traps the Coyotes laid, they could never catch him. But his early career is still defined in no small part by those attempts to shut him up, and his attempts to transgress the boundaries his would-be censors set out.

When a radio station in Colorado played the radio edit of 'The Real Slim Shady' in July 2000, [the Federal Communications Commission ruled that the edited version of the song was still indecent](#), fining the radio station 7,000 dollars. They later reversed their decision – in no small part, I assume, because they'd have to fine almost every radio station in America – much to the chagrin of FCC Commissioner Michael Copps. Copps released a statement saying, "In a matter of this importance, I believe the Commissioners themselves, rather than the Bureau, should be making the decision about whether to reverse the initial finding."

(The "a matter of this importance" bit cracks me up, because it's 2002, and it's a radio station in Colorado playing an edited version of 'The Real Slim Shady' two years earlier. Did Copps miss that his country just went to war?)

Since the original FCC ruling was overturned, it is ultimately a trivial quirk of history, like how Oscar the Grouch used to be orange or Monkee Michael Nesmith's mother invented Tipp-Ex/Liquid Paper. But it demonstrates the kind of atmosphere Eminem became popular in, how suppression of his art was normalised and mainstream. It's often said that everyone believes there are some kinds of speech that should be curtailed. Today, this is usually in reference to hate speech, but where that line sits is contingent, not absolute. One generation's shocking controversy becomes the next generation's normal. Once the speech not deemed worthy of protection was obscenity that many of us wouldn't bat an eyelid at now; once it was protesting against conscription; once it was rock and roll. We collectively decide to push "the line" further out. And in the early 2000s, Eminem lived right on that line: he was such a lightning rod for controversy that the radio edits of his songs could still get you into trouble.

Obviously a part of this was deliberate branding – the skits on Eminem's early albums are almost exclusively about conflicts with authority figures who want him to tone it down, a self-conscious declaration of his own edginess – but it's a mistake to think of him as a forerunner of the right's bogus free speech campaign. Eminem is a transgressive artist knowingly part of a tradition of transgressive art, cracking open taboos, baiting the listenership with his grotesquery. The contemporary right complain about being censored because they can't deal with people not caring what they have to say; Eminem complained about being censored because people kept *threatening to censor him*. Sometimes, they even got away with it.

On '[I'm Back](#)', Eminem references the Columbine Massacre:

I take seven kids from Columbine  
Stand 'em all in line, add an AK-47, a revolver, a nine  
A MAC-11 and it oughta solve the problem of mine  
And that's a whole school of bullies shot up all at one time

Only we don't hear him rap those words. On the "uncensored" version of *The Marshall Mathers LP*, the words "kids" and "Columbine" are censored.

It was 2000, just a year since the massacre. There have been so many school shootings since then – to the point where it seems like there's one every few weeks, wave after wave of tragedy leaving you almost numb – that the post-Columbine atmosphere seems distant and alien. Columbine signified, Stanley Cohen writes in the introduction to the 2002 edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, a "cognitive shift from 'how could it happen in a place like this?' to 'it could happen anywhere'." The media invented the shooters' motivations more or less from whole cloth, claiming that they were bullied, loner outcasts from the Trench Coat Mafia, taking revenge on the jocks and the cool kids, their minds distorted by rock music and video games. "It's a powerful story, but

entirely fictional,” [Dave Cullen, author of \*Columbine\*, writes](#), “Every element of that narrative would turn out to be false.”

The shooters didn’t target anyone, much less jocks: they had planted massive bombs at the school, planning to kill 600 students, but they failed to go off. They weren’t part of the Trench Coat Mafia, and they weren’t outcasts or goths. They didn’t even like Marilyn Manson. But it didn’t matter: once that story was told, it became the only version of events in the public consciousness. Manson captures the atmosphere the media fostered after the massacre in [his interview with Michael Moore in \*Bowling for Columbine\*](#):

I can definitely see why they would pick me, because I think it’s easy to throw my face on a TV because I’m, in the end, sort of a poster boy for fear...

The president was shooting bombs overseas, yet I’m a bad guy because I sang some rock and roll songs... Nobody said, well, maybe the president had an influence on this violent behaviour. No, because that’s not the way the media wants to take it and spin it and turn it into fear. Because then you’re watching television, you’re watching the news, you’re being pumped full of fear, there’s floods, there’s AIDS, there’s murder, cut to commercial – buy the Acura, buy the Colgate, if you have bad breath they’re not going to talk to you, if you have pimples the girl’s not going to fuck you, and it’s just this, it’s a campaign of fear and consumption. And that’s what I think that it’s all based on, is the whole idea that, keep everyone afraid, and they’ll consume.

Soon George Bush would come to power, and after 9/11, a bipartisan consensus began shredding civil liberties everywhere you looked: the Patriot Act, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, a huge Orwellian surveillance apparatus that spies on literally a billion people. Bush said the terrorists hated Americans for their freedom, so in his War on Terror he took away their freedoms, and all the while the public were pumped full of fear by a news media so deferential to power that it cheerled the Iraq War. This was all for your own protection, we were (are) told over and over. They only spy on you, silence you, infiltrate peace groups and torture whistle-blowers to keep you safe.

The political discourse around the Columbine Massacre – which focused so much less on the urgent, actionable policy issue of gun control than the fearmongering moral panic about music and video games, the existential threat of your kid being a secret monster over the physical threat of killing machines you could buy at Walmart – seems, in hindsight, like a miniature dry run. Keep everyone afraid, and they’ll consume.

*The Marshall Mathers LP* makes several references to the Columbine Massacre. The false narrative of the bullied outcast brainwashed by entertainment, exacting violent revenge, adheres so closely to the Slim Shady persona as used on Eminem’s previous album that it seems kind of inevitable that he’d end up rapping about it. On ‘The Way I Am’, in Marshall Mathers mode, he blasts the media for feeding the violence-in-entertainment story of Columbine – “Cause they full of shit too / When a dude’s getting bullied and shoots up his school / And they blame it on Marilyn” – and criticises the implicit class and racial hierarchy in which violence is considered tragic: “Middle America, now it’s a tragedy / Now it’s so sad to see, an upper class city.”

But on ‘I’m Back’, he’s Slim Shady. I could make a case for the artistic value of how he references to the Columbine Massacre here – how he subverts the “Marilyn Manson told teenagers to shoot up a school” narrative by *literally* telling teenagers to shoot up their schools, exposing the lie by

embracing it – but honestly, he’s just baiting. He says it to see who he can piss off, to see what he can get away with.

And he doesn’t get away with it. If you think it’s only censorship if the government does it, then this is fine. But – in an era before the internet really exploded, before teenage rappers could upload stuff they recorded in their bedrooms to SoundCloud and become a phenomenon – record companies had outsized control on what music artists could say, at least if they wanted to reach a mainstream audience. They were, in effect, arbiters of speech. This is exactly the kind of censorship that it’s easy to dismiss: does the world really *need* to hear Eminem’s Columbine joke? Does it have any artistic or social value? Does any value it has outweigh the harm it would cause? And since we know what he says anyway, does it even matter?

With civil rights protestors or the Pentagon Papers or Lenny Bruce, the violation is self-evidently wrong because the censored speech is self-evidently worthy of protection. But drawing lines of worthiness and deserving is looking at free speech from the wrong angle. Rights are, by definition, entitled to by all. Efforts to morality-test who may access a right goes against the idea that it is, in fact, a right. Rejecting the universality of a right postures as nuance, but embraces another, darker absolutism: establishing moral standards that dictate who may access the human dignity that forms [“the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”](#). Morality-testing of civil liberties is a refutation of those liberties, just like means-testing of economic rights like healthcare, housing and financial security is a denial of their status as rights.

Of course, morality-testing also means empowering someone to determine the moral standards one must reach to have rights. In a world of extreme inequality, that would fall to those who already hold almost all the power in society – the wealthy ruling class – but honestly, it’s not a power I would trust in the hands of anyone. “People often fail to appreciate why a kind of ‘absolutism’ can be very valuable in protecting liberties,” [Nathan Robinson writes](#),

...Instead of having to empower someone to determine who the acceptable speakers and the unacceptable speakers are, *even if we agree that there are some unacceptable speakers*, allowing all speakers divorces the question of how bad the content is from the question of whether the person can speak... Of course, it’s usually impossible to fully ‘decouple’ these questions, and nobody who has an easy answer to free speech issues has thought about them enough, but there is a reason why leaning toward ‘absolutes’ and ‘universals’ is valuable. If line-drawing is tricky and likely to lead to abuse, then it’s better to simply avoid having to draw any line at all.

I’m not sure true free speech absolutism is possible or even desirable in reality: I can think of several reasonable exceptions, including limited copyright provisions, the regulation of commercial advertising to protect consumers, and prohibitions on harassment and incitement to violence, as long as those things are defined in a narrow, appropriate way. But I believe we should strive for free speech *maximalism* as much as possible, for exactly the kind of reasons Robinson outlines. Freedom of speech is a right, a foundational freedom inseparable from the full constellation of human rights. Drawing lines – of *deserving* and *worthy* and *permissible* – is so fraught that I really, really want to avoid doing it.

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel about a totalitarian Christian theocracy, as well as its recent TV adaptation, has become a kind of rallying cry for left-of-centre women in Trump’s America, with feminists [dressing up in handmaid outfits](#) at protests all over the US and the world. As often happens when a piece of art becomes primarily a political tool, the nuances and

complications in the novel seem to have been flattened out. But the book was formative to my belief in free speech maximalism: in the past sequences, Offred's second-wave feminist mother burns pornographic magazines, and in the present sequences, it's illegal for women to read. The connection is clear – burn the words and images you think are harmful and you set the stage for the words and images that your enemies deem harmful to be burned. It doesn't frame it simplistically, doesn't lapse into blaming the rise of the religious right on feminism "going too far". Instead, it's a warning, a call to vigilance: if the left forfeits free speech, the right will destroy it, often in taking the left's premises and twisting them for their own ends.

In 2018, [Walmart pulled \*Cosmopolitan\* magazine from its checkout aisles](#) after pressure from the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, who in a statement praising the decision said, "This is what real change looks like in our #MeToo culture". It would be easy to mistake NCOSE for a women's rights organisation, but in reality, they were originally founded as Morality in Media, created by an interfaith group of clergy to combat "children's access to adult material". (Would-be censors love to "protect children", but only some imagined child, an always happy and innocent rosy-cheeked cherub who doesn't know any swear words.) NCOSE have put both the academic database EBSCO Information Services and the American Library Association on their list of "pornography facilitators". Their statement continues, "Walmart's removal of *Cosmo* from checkout lines is an incremental but significant step toward creating a culture where women and girls are valued as whole persons, rather than as sexual objects."

"Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles," the narrator says in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in one of the book's most unexpectedly chilling moments, "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it."

This is partly why I value transgressive art so much: it pushes towards maximalist freedom of expression, finding the outer edges and pushing at them in a way that makes the edges visible and forces us to confront them. Pure, unadulterated *freedom to*. Sometimes, like in the case of Andres Serrano's [Piss Christ](#) or Yoko Ono's [Cut Piece](#), transgressive art is beautiful, important and revelatory, great art by any definition. But sometimes the act of transgression is value enough in itself. Sometimes it's John Waters filming some dude's gaping asshole in *Pink Flamingos*, sometimes it's a [tits-and-gore adaptation of Shakespeare](#) where Romeo and Juliet are brother and sister, sometimes it's an [upside-down porcelain urinal signed "R. Mutt"](#) that becomes one of the most important pieces of art of the twentieth century. Sometimes it's Eminem rapping a recreation of the Columbine Massacre, and the words he wrote getting censored out of his own art.

In 2000, the US Senate held hearings about an FTC report on the marketing of violent entertainment to children. "Parents... feel locked in a losing competition with the culture to raise their children – our children," Senator Joe Lieberman said in his testimony, "Then came Columbine... It was a warning that the culture of carnage surrounding our children may have gone too far, and that the romanticised and sanitised visions of violence that our children are being... bombarded with by the media has become part of a toxic mix that is actually now turning some of them into killers."

Lieberman, then Al Gore's running mate on the Democratic Party's presidential ticket, had announced earlier that week that "[he would support additional regulations on the entertainment industry if it does not reform its marketing practices within six months.](#)" It's a cause Gore's wife, Tipper, had pioneered with the Parents Music Resource Center in the 1980s, the organisation responsible for the Parental Advisory sticker (a compromise between PMRC, who wanted greater

restrictions, and the record companies). Outside of a vanishingly small number of industry representatives, most of those who spoke at the hearing towed the same line, from both parties: if they disagreed, it was on the nature of what should be done to halt the spread of heinous filth, not on the merits of the supposed filth itself. From either side of aisle, politicians spoke about protecting their children from music and movies and video games, from Limp Bizkit and shooter games and Larry Clark's *Kids*; [a similar hearing the year before](#) spoke about protecting children from Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails and *The Matrix*.

"Children", here, are a rhetorical device, a pawn, wiring a shortcut to the emotional parts of our brains. These are not real children, but what we imagine children to be, the protection of whom can justify almost anything, as long as it is politically expedient. Lynne Cheney, former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and future Second Lady, made this rhetorical trick more explicit than most. She warned that while we all may be shocked that this entertainment is marketed to children, we should not lose shock at the works themselves: "there is a problem with the products they market no matter how they market them." She quoted extensively from Peggy Noonan – a columnist in *The Wall Street Journal* and a former speechwriter for Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush – about how children born into the "culture of crime" that began in the 1960s have never had a "normal culture against which to balance the newer, sicker one".

(None of the senators question this dichotomy between the old normal culture and the new, sick one, with the 1960s as the turning point. I can't help but feel that the reason no-one questions it is that to drill down into that dichotomy means admitting that the "normal culture" was defined by racial segregation, female subjugation, and censorship.)

For Lynne Cheney, the problem is not just that entertainment works may fall into the hands of those too young to be equipped for them, but that these works are, in some basic way, "sick", debasing our culture and, by extension, harming our children. The implication isn't just that the works she objects to are unfit for child consumption, but unfit for *human* consumption. When she critiques the movie *Kids* – in which young teenagers have sex and do drugs – she leads with the harm seeing it could do to children, but cycles back around to its inherent depravity: "I have no doubt that many kids saw this film and got the idea that, well, this is the way kids behave. Even though it did have an NC-17 rating, because it's very easy for kids to see a film like this. *But even if they didn't*, what is the entertainment industry doing to our children when they create a culture in which children are viewed this way?"

But Cheney's real bugbear was Eminem. Eminem's lyrics "could not be more despicable, could not be more hateful, in their attitudes to women in particular," she said, "There are many groups that Eminem is quite despicable towards. He is a violent misogynist. He advocates raping and murdering his mother in one of his songs. He glories in the same song in the idea that he might murder any woman he comes across. He talks about how he will choke the women he murders slowly so their screams will last for a long time... It is despicable, it is awful –"

Senator John McCain then interrupts to ask the leading non-question, "You put yourself through the torture of listening to this?"

Cheney uncharitably mischaracterises the Eminem lyrics she cites: 'Kill You', from which these lyrics are exclusively drawn, is the peak of Slim Shady's slasher villain aesthetic – all blood and guts and chainsaws – and a self-aware satire of the criticisms against him, taking credit for all for which he's been blamed. "You're goddamn right, bitch, and now it's too late," he raps, "I'm triple platinum and tragedies happened in two states." When Cheney says Eminem "advocates raping and murdering his

mother”, the word “advocates” is doing a lot of work. “Just bend over and take it like a slut / Okay, Ma?” he raps, and just as you recoil in horror, just as it feels like it’s too much to bear, he flips it: “Oh, now he’s raping his own mother! / Abusing a whore, snorting coke / And we gave him the Rolling Stone cover?” You can argue about the artistic worth of Eminem’s approach here – just as arguing about whether slasher movies are sexist has lit up feminist film studies for forty years – but Cheney drains his words of any duality of meaning, taking them completely at face value. It’s an approach to Eminem that *The Marshall Mathers LP* actively discourages: ‘Kill You’ is immediately followed by ‘Stan’, a parable on the dangers of literalism.

But even if Cheney described Eminem’s music perfectly accurately, she’d still be wrong. In her testimony, she calls herself a staunch advocate for the first amendment, warning against legislative solutions to the problem. Rather, she encourages both the public and policymakers to shame corporations into not distributing art she finds offensive. She doesn’t frame it this way, but what she’s advocating is corporate self-censorship based on the threat of state censorship. It’s the Hays Code, it’s the Comics Code, it’s the blacklist. It’s not about the protecting the children, it’s about scrubbing all of culture clean, because it is sick.

In the free speech minimalist approach, this is fine, even when it’s happening in Congress. But with the maximalist approach, this is a threat to freedom of expression. It matters.

Free speech maximalism means understanding that as long as private industry rules our lives as much or sometimes even more than the state – landlords and banks controlling where we can live, our bosses controlling how we spend our time and whether we have enough money to live on, corporations controlling what we can read and hear and say and buy and do, overtly or covertly, all without even the veneer of public accountability of a democratic state – censorship by the private sector is a violation. It means recognising harassment campaigns and threats of violence as threats to free speech. It means recognising that censorship disguises itself in appealing costumes, like the safety of you and your children, whether that be protection from terrorists, pornography, or irreverent cartoons. It means only considering curbs on free speech as a last resort, not a kneejerk reaction.

In 2000, Eminem was scheduled to perform in Toronto when Ontario’s attorney general sought to prevent him entering Canada to “advocate violence against women”. A decade-and-change later, Tyler, the Creator was banned from entering New Zealand and the UK for the same kind of shock rap that made people want to bar Eminem from Canada. In 2003, the [US Secret Service reported](#) that it was “looking into” allegations that Eminem had threatened President Bush. (“Fuck money / I don’t rap for dead presidents,” he raps on ‘[We As Americans](#)’, then an unreleased bootleg leaked online, “I’d rather see the president dead / it’s never been said but I set precedents.”) A decade-and-change later, the secret service forced rapper YG to change the lyrics to his song ‘Fuck Donald Trump’. “The Secret Service was calling my label [Universal] to get the lyrics to my album so they could try to pull it off the shelves,” [he told Vulture](#).

‘White America’, the first song on *The Eminem Show*, sets the tone for the album, marking it apart from its predecessors. He’s not Slim Shady here; he’s Eminem, and he wants you to take what he’s saying seriously. Today, free speech is the right’s security blanket, a finger always pointing leftwards. But on ‘White America’, the threat is corporations – “sponsors working round the clock to try to stop my concerts early” – and the government – “I must’ve struck a chord with somebody up in the office / ‘cause Congress keep tellin’ me I ain’t causin’ nothin’ but problems”. He mentions activists, but “actin’ like I’m the first rapper to smack a bitch or say f\*\*\*\*t” applies as much to Lynne Cheney as GLAAD. It’s easy to think of Eminem as the forerunner to the edgy alt-right boys that followed, but

he makes it clear who is the threat to his freedom of expression. It's the same people as always: the right, wanting to scrub the culture clean, moulding it in their own image. The right haven't switched sides on the free speech issue; they just found a new way to do the same things.

It seemed that the only reason the powers that be couldn't shut Eminem up was because he was such a force of nature that nothing could contain him. But most people are not forces of nature, just human beings, and so those same powers can succeed in shutting their mouths. And the only bulwark we have is our vigilance.

"Burn the flag and replace it with a Parental Advisory sticker," Eminem roars. The word "flag" is censored.

### 3

## Though I'm not the first king of controversy, I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley.

In my late teens, I was immersed in a certain kind of politics that I find very difficult to put words on. So many of the words I have belong to the right, are loaded with implications I wish I could wash away: *social justice warrior*, *virtue-signalling*, *identity politics*. I spent a lot of time on Tumblr – a site I joined to reblog *Glee* gifs that became a source for my political worldview – which checks out, because it's politics that can only really exist online. Centred myopically on privilege/oppression dynamics, even where none are obvious; wielding the word “intersectionality” like both a weapon and a shield; pushing down my doubts because I was told I needed to “unlearn” all the oppressive, toxic shit I'd absorbed from society at large. I was drained of all my self-esteem – wracked with guilt for my whiteness and my cisness, panicking over mistakes I might make, terrified of men who I felt sure would hurt me – and was provided only self-righteousness in its place. I thought of politics as a collection of rules, most of which demand my passivity.

I'm twenty-five now. I'm a democratic socialist, and I think of politics as a coalition of like-minded people fighting for a better world. I find it hard to talk about the politics I held in my late teens and how it affected me, still affects me, because it plays right into the right's narrative: the leftist hivemind, the shame people from privileged groups are allegedly made to feel, the disinterest in dissenting voices. I don't want to sound like someone who believes trans bullies beat up kids while shouting “Die, cis scum!” or whatever. But I did feel suffocating anxiety, and that was real, and I think it's worth talking about. Not just for personal catharsis, but because it's a story I've only ever heard with a different ending to mine, where that kind of politics is rejected to move to the centre, or even the right. (If you think of political alignments as a straight line, that makes sense. But political alignment isn't a straight line, or a [horseshoe](#), or even an [x-y axis](#).)

It's a type of politics that in 2013 Mark Fisher, writing about left-wing Twitter, [dubbed the “Vampire's Castle”](#). Fisher describes how the Vampire's Castle “feeds on the energy and anxieties and vulnerabilities of young students”. It claims to be leftist but actively obscures class – “the sheer mention of class is now automatically treated as if that means one is trying to downgrade the importance of race and gender” – and is ultimately disinterested in structural critique. Rather, it is focused on individual behaviour, on propagating guilt, and on essentialising perceived enemies. “Notice the tactics. X has made a remark/ has behaved in a particular way – these remarks/ this behaviour might be construed as transphobic/ sexist etc. So far, OK,” Fisher writes, “But it's the next move which is the kicker. X then becomes defined as a transphobe/ sexist etc. Their whole identity becomes defined by one ill-judged remark or behavioural slip.” The Castle's members are held together not by solidarity, but by “mutual fear – the fear that they will be the next one to be outed, exposed, condemned.”

Fisher was writing at the same time that I was neck-deep in the Vampire's Castle, but it's not a phenomenon unique to the early 2010s. Jo Freeman wrote about [“trashing” in the women's movement](#) in 1976; Wendy Brown writes about a form of it in her 1995 book *States of Injury*; Natalie

Wynn of ContraPoints made a [feature-length video about cancelling](#) earlier this year. It's a recurring problem in leftist spaces, massively exacerbated by the social media-fuelled explosion in public shaming. But what I find so troubling is that just as I found my way out of that mindset, it seemed to become mainstream.

I see it everywhere – the callous lack of empathy for the political enemy, the almost fetishization of identity as ideology in and of itself – not just in obscure corners of social media and not just on feminist and liberal/leftist publications, but all the way up into the mainstream mass media. [Cheerleading coal miners losing their health insurance](#) because they're demographically more likely to have voted for Donald Trump. Gender essentialism [given a woke gloss](#), on matters [as trivial as movie reboots](#) and as serious as who should have the power to drop a nuke. The routine fact of lots of white women voting Republican – treated as a shock every time – causes other white women to apologise on Twitter [because women they don't know \(and don't know anyone like\) voted Republican](#). It's easy to imagine this as a worldview of the very young and the very online, but I mean, this is a real published critique of the fucking Beach Boys [in \*The New York Review of Books\*](#): “Their best-known hits... are poems of unenlightened straight-male privilege, white privilege, beach privilege. It is hard to imagine that they helped anyone toward self-determination or achieving their social rights.” This whole outlook is so baked in to how people talk about social justice that it's not at all strange for soft-feminist beauty and fashion websites to publish earnest-sounding listicles about [“Things You Might Not Realize Are Cultural Appropriation That Are”](#).

If this kind of politics is defined by being primarily a set of rules for behaviour – mostly along identity lines – cultural appropriation is the king of these rules; the place where the division between privileged and marginalised is rendered sharpest, where their roles are the most distinct.

“Cultural appropriation is when somebody adopts aspects of a culture that's not their own,” [according to \*Everyday Feminism\*](#). It's “a particular *power dynamic* in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed *by that dominant group*.” It's an imprecise term, imported from academia – where its meaning was already contested – and disseminated online in a game of telephone. But the idea – in its contemporary form, as popularised in largely online social justice communities – is basically about who is or is not allowed engage in particular behaviours, on the basis of their identity: usually racial identity, but sometimes national identity, sexuality or disability, too.

[As Natalie Wynn once pointed out](#), some of the most oft-cited examples of cultural appropriation are just the classic old-fashioned racism of caricature and stereotyping. Dressing up as a Native American or Arab or just straight-up doing [blackface](#) for Halloween, the Washington Redskins' half-assed defense that they're honouring Native Americans by having a racial slur in their team name: these are so obviously racist that calling them cultural appropriation obscures more than it illuminates. (There's an apparent conviction in a lot of social justice circles that the best way to explain something is to apply a bunch of jargon to it, when, obviously, the opposite is true.)

What the idea of cultural appropriation gestures – however clumsily – towards is, you know, white people with dreadlocks. *Victoria's Secret* models and people at Coachella wearing Native American headdresses. Getting tattoos in Asian languages you don't understand. Miley Cyrus twerking or Selena Gomez wearing a bindi. It's about dominant groups (usually white people) taking cultural stuff from marginalised groups (usually people of colour) and stripping them of the context that birthed them. It is usually placed in a tradition rooted in colonialism: the imperialist westerner stole land and resources centuries ago, and now they steal culture instead. What might get a person of colour profiled or persecuted is, for a white person, reduced to a quirky fashion accessory.

It's a framing that I feel somewhat alienated from inherently. I'm Irish: both white westerner and the daughter of a colonised nation. The Venn diagram of "white", "western" and "from a historical colonial power" is three imperfectly overlapping circles – Malta was a colony, Japan was an imperial power – and cultural appropriation rhetoric collapses them together. It has to, because the power dynamics of cultural relations are so much more complex than any easily applied rule could ever account for.

The white rapper has been a contentious cultural figure for decades, shapeshifting and ominous. Both inextricable from the long lineage of white artists ripping off and taking credit for black music – from jazz to rock and roll – and a portent of hip hop's whitewashed future. "Ever since the Beastie Boys went multiplatinum, so many commentators have been warily waiting for a racial hijacking of hip-hop," [Stereo Williams writes for \*The Daily Beast\*](#), "an Elvis Presley to emerge and suddenly wrest the music's image away from black artists and fans."

There's probably never been a better time to be a white rapper than now – the last five years is probably the first time in my life where a white rapper having a hit could be accurately described as "not notable" – but the white takeover of hip hop hasn't really happened. Not the way it happened to rock and roll, at least. As *The Fader* [put it](#), "you can rattle off a dozen [white rappers] if you really try". There has been a sufficient ascendancy of white rappers that Macklemore could win a Grammy over Kendrick Lamar, and there's sufficient wariness of the interloping white rapper that Macklemore had to spend like a year apologising for winning a Grammy over Kendrick Lamar. (I will go to my grave remembering Macklemore posting a screenshot on Instagram of [an apology text he sent to Kendrick – who he saved in his contacts as "Kendrick Real" – to which Kendrick had not replied](#), and it will make me laugh every time.)

Nobody embodies the white rapper in popular imagination quite like Eminem. There were white rappers before and since, but none – except maybe Vanilla Ice – that quite represented the potential for hip hop's whitewashing. Like Vanilla Ice, he has been extremely commercially successful. (It's easy to retroactively imagine Vanilla Ice as a one hit wonder, but *To The Extreme* was the best-selling hip hop album up until that time.) But while Vanilla Ice was basically intrinsically embarrassing – and so easily dismissed as a novelty act – Eminem is technically proficient, becoming, as Carvell Wallace [wrote for MTV](#), "the lone white representative in the greatest-rapper-of-all-time discussion." Elvis was crowned the King of Rock and Roll over the black artists who invented the genre, and in 2011, *Rolling Stone* named Eminem the [King of Hip Hop](#). (Much to Eminem's [chagrin](#).)

He's both the ultimate example of a white takeover of hip hop and the baseline to which all white rappers are compared. He's the name Macklemore invokes on 'White Privilege': "The face of hip-hop has changed a lot since Eminem / And if he's taking away black artists' profits, I look just like him." When Asher Roth released '[I Love College](#)', he was constantly compared to Eminem, even though the frat-party naval-gazing of Roth's early work couldn't be further from Eminem's gory trailer-park horrorcore.

But if cultural appropriation is about power dynamics between the dominant and marginalised, are Macklemore and Eminem in the same power position? Macklemore spends 'White Privilege' rapping about how he "wasn't forced into the projects" and was "blessed with the privilege that [his] parents could send [him] to college". Eminem spent his childhood rarely living in one place for more than a year or two. He failed the ninth grade three times before dropping out of high school. ("Okay, so while Macklemore was keeping his room nice and neat," [Eminem raps](#), "I was getting my ass beat twice a week.") For the cultural appropriation rubric to work, it has to collapse these class differences.

In [his essay about the “white rapper’s burden”](#), Hanif Abdurraqib says that Eminem rapped like white boys who could smack their dad’s face without consequences – a danger that his whiteness made thrilling from afar, meant he could emerge unscathed – and it’s like he’s talking about someone totally different. It’s true that Eminem can’t experience the dangers of blackness, but Abdurraqib applies this too broadly, like his whiteness is an impenetrable protective coating. It sounds not just ignorant of the facts of Eminem’s life, but a total inside-out interpretation of his work: hearing a fantasy of danger instead of fantasy of revenge. On [‘Brain Damage’](#), Eminem takes the story of a real-life attack that left him with a serious head injury – jumped by his bully in the school toilets – and twists it through his Slim Shady persona. He beats the shit out of, and maybe kills, the bully, cathartically flipping around genuine experience of danger.

It’s easy to point to Eminem’s experiences of poverty, abuse and mental illness to try and bolster his authenticity – to position him as a rightful contributor to hip hop instead of an interloper – but it’s ultimately wrongheaded. Approaching white rappers by putting them each individually on trial for privilege sounds both futile and fucking boring: trying to prove that they’re one of the “good ones”, heroically transcending their own whiteness by piling up identities. But that’s all that the cultural appropriation rubric is really capable of doing.

The other forms of cultural relations that appropriation is usually contrasted with don’t get closer to capturing the complexity of reality. “Cultural appreciation” is supposed to be a less oppressive way to engage with other cultures, but it can easily take on a creepy, voyeuristic quality: treating people of colour as a spectacle there for your entertainment. In the *Atlanta* episode ‘Juneteenth’, Earn and Van – our working-class black protagonists – go to a bougie party celebrating the eponymous traditional African-American celebration of emancipation from slavery; the white half of the hosting couple insists on showing off his extensive collection of African cultural artifacts and his knowledge of black history, despite Earn’s obvious disinterest and discomfort. “Cultural assimilation” accurately describes some of when marginalised people take on cultural elements from the dominant group, but obscures marginalised people engaging with parts of the dominant culture for reasons other than survival, and so deprives them of agency. I find it hard to listen to Spike Lee [talk about the impact \*Mean Streets\* made on him](#), how it depicted life as it was where he grew up, and attribute it to assimilation because he’s black and *Mean Streets* is about Italian-Americans. “Cultural exchange” between two equal cultures occurs in a fantasy world where all cultures are both monolithic and can be ranked in terms of their relative power in relation to one another. What does it mean if Paul Simon, the son of first-generation American Jews, [“gravitated to black music”](#) as a form of assimilation into US culture? Where does that fit?

The cultural appropriation rubric runs the risk of merely reflecting the oppressive dynamics it seeks to critique, rather than seeking to dismantle them. The dividing lines created by centuries of imperialism and white supremacy remain intact. A worrying fusion of race and culture is endorsed – one that, if it doesn’t actively argue for segregation, is incapable of arguing *against* segregation. I think often of Linda Lyndell, the white soul singer who recorded [‘What a Man’](#) in 1968. She quit music because the Ku Klux Klan sent her death threats for being a white woman singing black music and associating with black musicians. She didn’t perform again until 1993, after Salt-N-Pepa sampled her on their hit single [‘Whatta Man’](#). Cultural appropriation rhetoric leaves the underlying assumptions of those who attacked Lyndell unquestioned. “It should go without saying that left-liberal identity politics and alt-right white nationalism are not comparable,” Shuja Haider writes in his brilliant essay [‘Safety Pins and Swastikas’](#), “The problem is that they are compatible.”

The sharp distinction made between the privileged and oppressed – not just in how they experience the world, but in what each is expected, or permitted, to do – is ultimately a barrier to solidarity.

Macklemore spends the first verse of '[White Privilege II](#)' worrying about whether he's allowed participate in a Black Lives Matter protest: "They're chanting out, 'Black Lives Matter,' but I don't say it back / Is it okay for me to say? I don't know, so I watch and stand / In front of a line of police that look the same as me." But of course Macklemore should march for Black Lives Matter! That is exactly what anti-racist activism looks like. This points to the difference between allyship and solidarity, between politics as a collection of rules and politics as a fight for a better world: Macklemore is worried about appropriating black activism, instead of realising that this fight should be his fight, too. The fight against police violence, the prison-industrial complex and deportations, the fight for fair wages and free healthcare and climate justice, these are all the same fight: the fight for a better, more just world. This is what Bernie Sanders meant by being [willing to fight for someone you don't know](#). 'White Privilege II' views the Black Lives Matter protest through a lens where Macklemore's privilege calls for passivity, not participation. Haider writes, "Categorically identifying white men with powerful, corrupt figures... isn't just an accusation – it's also an exemption."

It's not that there isn't any problem with a lot of the things that get accused of cultural appropriation. It's that the problem is commodification.

The cultural appropriation rubric is about individual faux pas. It's about how the discerning consumer can have an ethical relationship with capitalism. It amounts to, [as Tin Hinson writes for Novara Media](#), "the agonising process of wondering which parts of our culture it is OK to sell to capitalism for profit, and who should get the money." Capitalism, by its nature, extracts and privatises common resources, including culture, to enrich a wealthy elite. These cultural works are easily robbed of context or a multiplicity of meanings, because capitalism subordinates all other values to exchange value. It comes down to what sells. And because of centuries of imperialism and white supremacy, things sell best with a white face. The easiest way to commodify rock and roll was through someone like Elvis: talented, sure, and handsome, and white. Instead of policing the behaviour of individuals, Hinson argues, we should "fight to stop sacred things being commodified, as the first step towards liberating the rest of our culture", to create "a world where we start from the presumption that we are all due a share of the fruits of 100,000 years of human language, culture and technology."

That's not to collapse cultural appropriation into commodification – it would be weird and wrong for a white person to wear a Native American headdress even if no-one made money off it, because it's disrespectful to misuse an item of such spiritual significance – but commodification often clarifies things that cultural appropriation leaves muddy. Take the case of *RuPaul's Drag Race*: the show is routinely accused of [appropriating ball culture](#), the LGBT subculture created by black and brown people in New York. But can RuPaul, a black drag queen, really "appropriate" ballroom, because he came up in the Atlanta and New York club scenes in the 1980s instead of balls? What power dynamic is at play there, other than wealth? Even if it is appropriation, the heart of the issue is commodification. The best way to express the harm done to ballroom is that people from outside the subculture are making money off their work – but they can only make that money *because* they turned it into a commodity. Emphasising cultural appropriation obscures the actual problem.

Eminem is a foremost – maybe *the* foremost – example of rap's commodification, even as his work is aware of and resists that commodification. He was easier to sell because he's white: "Became a commodity 'cause I'm W-H-I-T-E," he raps on '[I'm Back](#)', "'cause MTV was so friendly to me." His whiteness made him marketable even as his music's violent rage, sick sense of humour and embrace of ugliness couldn't be further from the first wave of rap's commodification – Vanilla Ice, MC Hammer and pop rap that Abdurraqib writes was designed so "white mothers in the suburbs might

think of them as ‘fun, wholesome rap music’.” Like the first punks, Eminem’s purposefully discomfiting provocations proved profitable.

Eminem’s work is inextricable from his whiteness. His reception is inseparable from his whiteness, obviously – “[Let’s do the math: if I was black, I would’ve sold half](#)” – and his early work sometimes riffs on being prejudged as a rapper [because of his race](#):

Some people only see that I’m white, ignorin’ skill  
‘Cause I stand out like a green hat with an orange bill  
But I don’t get pissed, y’all don’t even see through the mist  
How the fuck can I be white? I don’t even exist.

But it’s more than that. Abdurraqib calls Macklemore the first white rapper to meet the conflict of being both white and the most talked about rapper in the world head-on, but when Eminem blew up, he criticised whiteness through himself, twisted and played with it. The violence in his work isn’t a whitewashed version of gangsta rap, it’s the kind of violence that’s coded as white: Slim Shady is a serial killer, a school shooter. Of all the slasher villains Eminem evokes, Michael Myers feels the most instructive: *Halloween* is about the horror that’s native to the white suburbs, not coming from outside.

When he rapped about his whiteness directly, it was integrated into the whole, not the nine-minute apologies-cum-sermons Macklemore is prone to. (I would much prefer if Macklemore only made [fun, silly songs about buying mopeds](#), for the record.) ‘[Without Me](#)’ is not a song I would describe as being “about” literally anything – it is the zenith of what [Todd in the Shadows calls the “I’m back, bitch” single](#) – yet it squeezes in self-aware commentary on the lineage of white artists profiting from black music, in between disses on Moby and Limp Bizkit. “Though I’m not the first king of controversy / I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley,” he raps, “To do black music so selfishly / And use it to get myself wealthy.” It’s a funny, tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of the parallels between himself and Elvis even as it credits black people with inventing hip hop. He constantly credits the black people who helped him get where he is, particularly Dr. Dre, and uses his position to bolster black artists: his whole career he’s featured less famous rappers on his tracks and made attempts – often failed, admittedly – to mentor and launch the careers of black rappers whose skill he admired. He can spend [an entire hour-long interview](#) shouting out other rappers, easily. When he says on ‘White America’ that if he was black, he would have sold half, it’s not an apology or self-deprecation, it’s stated as fact: actively precluding the argument that he succeeded due to skill alone even as he claims to be one of the best rappers in the world. “He exploited the structural racism that allowed him to become the world’s biggest rapper,” [Jeff Weiss writes for Vice](#), “then immediately flipped the barrel on those same forces that allowed him to flourish.”

Critics of white rappers’ cultural appropriation frequently say that they use blackness as a costume that can easily be discarded: Iggy Azalea is a white Australian who moved to the US aged sixteen, and she raps with an African-American accent that disappears when she speaks. But nothing about Eminem’s relationship to hip hop feels like a costume, other than [the ones he fashions himself](#). On ‘[The Way I Am](#)’, he blasts critics who assume he’s wearing a costume, who treat his race as a “gotcha” and the outward signs of his working-class Detroit upbringing as affectation:

And I just do not got the patience  
To deal with these cocky Caucasians  
Who think I’m some wigger who just tries to be black ‘cause I talk  
With an accent and grab on my balls so they always

Keep askin' the same fuckin' questions  
What school did I go to, what hood I grew up in  
The why, the who, what, when, the where and the how  
'Til I'm grabbin' my hair and I'm tearin' it out

"If the Beastie Boys stormed in as the archetypal wild hip-hop white boys, they always existed in both worlds. They were NYC art kids with a hardcore past... 3rd Bass couldn't help but leave you with the feeling that they were desperately trying to come off as the rare 'good ones'," Weiss writes, "With Eminem, it was natural: no other artistic medium possessed the soul or capacity to articulate his caustic wit and unalloyed rage. He was hip-hop because he couldn't be anything else."

And a big reason for that is that Eminem is working-class. Hip hop is a black artform, but also a predominantly working-class one. Race and class are so deeply intertwined in the US that they are sometimes (wrongly) treated as interchangeable. Nicole Phillips writes about white hip hop audiences as "[white, suburban youth... grateful to live in suburbia where life is not 'rough,'](#)" effectively dismissing the possibility that white working-class people could identify with art made by working-class people of colour because of their common experiences. But so much black art articulates working-class experiences and feelings. The longing to escape and the lack of means to do it in Tracy Chapman's '[Fast Car](#)'. Trying to piece together an image of the late father from gossip about his misbehaviour on '[Papa Was a Rollin' Stone](#)': "And when he died / all he left us was alone." The dedication at the start of The Notorious B.I.G.'s '[Juicy](#)':

To all the teachers that told me I'd never amount to nothin'  
To all the people that lived above the buildings that I was hustlin' in front of  
Called the police on me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my  
daughter (it's all good)  
And all the n\*\*\*as in the struggle  
You know what I'm sayin'? It's all good, baby baby

Eminem's work and popularity are inseparable from his whiteness, but it's a mistake to assume that his audience relates to him primarily on a racial level: comparing Eminem to the rise of the alt-right because he "[tapp\[ed\] into the same disaffected white rage](#)" seems too neat and tidy, to me, as if the meaning of disaffected rage is defined by the race of the person experiencing it. I even think it's a mistake to assume his audience primarily relates to his misogynistic and homophobic lyrics. I'm sure there are fans who do relate primarily to those things – although if you threw on an Eminem album because you were really excited about being white, you'd be in for a pretty rude awakening – but the heart of his work, that sun around which everything else rotates, is his articulation of being working-class, being mentally ill, surviving bullying and abuse.

*The Slim Shady LP*, in particular, frequently chronicles his then-present frustrations trying to raise a child on minimum wage:

[I'm tired of jobs startin' off](#)

At \$5.50 an hour, then this boss wonders why I'm smartin' off  
I'm tired of bein' fired every time I fart and cough  
Tired of havin' to work as a gas station clerk  
For this jerk, breathin' down my neck, drivin' me berserk  
I'm tired of usin' plastic silverware  
Tired of workin' at Builder's Square  
Tired of not bein' a millionaire

On [‘Rock Bottom’](#), poverty is a pressure cooker: “Minimum wage got my adrenaline caged / Full of venom and rage, ‘specially when I’m engaged / And my daughter’s down to her last diaper.” These songs sit alongside ones that re-enact and reinterpret the traumas of his childhood using the Slim Shady persona, mixing “[confession, melodrama, comedy, horror, media baiting, craftsmanship and tabloid-scale hyperbole](#)”. So much art that is “protective” of children the way Eminem is casts childhood as a happy, innocent time, but childhood in Eminem’s work is full of horror: the horror of poverty and bullying and violence, exacerbated by a complete lack of autonomy. When the teacher in ‘Brain Damage’ says she won’t give him after-school detention because “that bully wants to beat your ass and I’m a let him”, she represents all the adults who fail to protect children.

“He was rapping about a lot of really terrible and hateful things, but the visions of poverty he offered were terrifyingly, oppressively real,” [Yannick LeJacq writes](#), “He might have been embellishing the specifics, but just because Eminem might not have actually gotten locked in the basement by one of his parents doesn’t mean my brother and I weren’t.”

Success naturally changed how Eminem rapped about class. (“They said I can’t rap about being broke no more,” he says on the first song on *The Marshall Mathers LP*.) On *The Slim Shady LP*, he raps, “I’m tired of bein’ white trash, broke and always poor,” but in his later work, he calls himself white trash as a point of pride. ‘Without Me’ opens with “two trailer park girls go ‘round the outside / ‘round the outside” and *Recovery* literally has a song called [‘White Trash Party’](#). But it really comes to the forefront on *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*, the most worthwhile album of his late career. He’s released plenty of music since, but there’s something definitive about *MMLP2*: closing the loop, pulsing to the beat of *it ain’t over ‘til I say it’s over* even as it feels unmistakably like an ending. It’s the album where he mines his past most fruitfully, full of self-aware reflection on his own mythos; it’s the album where, after all these years, he [forgives and apologises to his mother](#); it’s the album that opens with [‘Bad Guy’](#), which starts out like a classical Eminem killing-your-wife song before revealing itself to be a sequel to his most iconic song and finally reaching a power comparable to the original when he [spends the last verse eviscerating himself](#) more thoroughly than even his most eloquent haters:

I’m your time that’s almost up that you haven’t acknowledged  
Grab for some water  
But I’m that pill that’s too jagged to swallow  
I’m the bullies you hate that you became  
With every f\*ggot you slaughtered  
Coming back on you, every woman you insult  
Batter, but the double-standards you have  
When it comes to your daughters

Part of the loop-closing, that mining of his past and his mythos, is a proud embrace of being white trash and an effort to reconcile that with his present wealth. On [‘Rap God’](#), he calls himself “Dale Earnhardt of the trailer park, the white trash god”, but I always return to [‘So Far...’](#):

They say this spray butter is bad for my health, but  
I think this poor white trash from the trailer  
Jed Clampett, Fred Sanford, and welfare  
Mentality helps to keep me grounded  
That’s why I never take full advantage of wealth, I  
Managed to dwell within these parameters  
Still crammin’ the shelves full of Hamburger Helper

I can't even help it, this is the hand I was dealt

It's about how you can take the boy out of the trailer park but you can't take the trailer park out of boy, but I'm always struck by the inclusion of both Jed Clampett (from *The Beverly Hillbillies*) and Fred Sanford (from *Sanford and Son*). So much political rhetoric positions the rural white working class and the black working class as enemies, but in 'So Far...', they are connected to each other, and to Eminem, through their class. Black or white, it's all part of the same fight.

Cultural appropriation rhetoric ultimately discourages solidarity among people who should be natural allies – all the different kinds of people who [have been denied](#) the fullness of human flourishing. Allies in the true sense: the comrades you stand alongside in the fight for justice. Instead of uniting us, it tries to neatly segregate culture along increasingly baroque racial and ethnic lines. But cultures both are never monolithic within any group and inevitably mix together organically. Country music was invented in the American South but has roots in both Africa – where the banjo was created – and the traditional music of Ireland and Scotland. Westerns and samurai films exist in intimate conversation with each other, from the US to Japan to Italy and back to the US, remixing each other's tropes and genre conventions in ways both distinctly of their country of origin and inherently international. Caribbean food bears hallmarks of dozens of cultures who've lived in the islands at various times, from the indigenous tribes to European indentured servants to enslaved Africans to South Asian and Chinese immigrants. As [Ash Sarkar put it](#), "The appropriation debate peddles a comforting lie that there's such thing as a stable and authentic connection to culture that can remain intact after the seismic interruptions of colonialism and migration."

This unwittingly hides the real enemy: the wealthy ruling class. The cultural appropriation rubric obscures the problems at the heart of the very issues it claims to illuminate. As long as corporations dominate culture, it will be sold off piece by piece in order to generate profits for the already rich. There's something vaguely absurd about focusing on appropriation – a theory of exploitation that's largely symbolic – when the music industry is built on the very real, urgent and personal exploitation of artists: where sexual abuse is rife, where artists rarely retain the rights to their work, where young people, often from impoverished backgrounds, are locked into contracts that don't reflect the value of their labour. Handwringing over the relative pennies made by white artists, instead of the mountains of cash raked in by the record labels, is missing the forest for the trees.

## 4

# I'm a piece of fucking white trash, I say it proudly.

[‘Lose Yourself’](#) is one of the best songs of Eminem’s career. It’s an incredible showcase for his virtuosic rhyming and his mesmerising early-2000s flow, but there’s also the urgent intensity of his delivery, the tense, relentless guitar lick, the instantly recognisable piano intro and how the piano gets layered into the rest of the song. “Mom’s spaghetti” has been memed into oblivion, but the whole song is full of rich, striking imagery of poverty and desperation, from the evocative and metaphorical – “I cannot grow old in Salem’s Lot” – to the horrifically mundane: “These goddamn food stamps don’t buy diapers.” It’s one of the only “inspirational” songs that it’s possible to imagine actually inspiring someone. It’s full of an aggressive kind of hope: a hope born of hopelessness, a hope that you cling to because otherwise you’ll die. I knew every word many years before I would listen to any of Eminem’s albums.

‘Lose Yourself’ has largely eclipsed the film it was written for in the cultural consciousness: *8 Mile* is remembered as the film that ‘Lose Yourself’ is from, not the other way around. Like *Purple Rain*, *8 Mile* is still well-remembered and -regarded, but more like an appendage to its star’s music career than a film in its own right.

But *8 Mile* is a great film: a working-class sports drama in the tradition of *Rocky*, with rap battles in place of boxing matches. Eminem plays Jimmy Smith, Jr., nicknamed Rabbit, an aspiring rapper in mid-1990s Detroit. It’s an extraordinary performance, underrated on the assumption that he’s just playing himself. Many people who come to acting from another kind of performance just sort of coast on charisma and presence – The Rock has made a career out of it – but Eminem never coasts. He’s electric. He has extraordinarily expressive eyes: as Ryan Gibney writes for *Sight and Sound*, he conveys “vulnerability with a simple well-timed blink or wince.”

There’s a long tradition of musicians playing fictionalised versions of themselves in movies. It’s the ultimate form of cross-promotion: music fans will go see the film, and the film will attract new fans to the music. That was the basic premise of The Monkees. Occasionally these films are great – okay, mostly just *A Hard Day’s Night* – but more often, they’re slapdash affairs thrown together to make a quick buck off their stars’ popularity. In 2002, Eminem was the most famous person on earth, and so of course the bigwigs at Universal would want to capitalise on that. It’s hard to not be cynical, especially when slotting Eminem into an inspirational drama seems on its face like the definition of square peg and round hole. (Reportedly, screenwriter Scott Silver [originally pitched](#) “something that reflected [the] outrageous humor and cartoonish violence of his records” and the studio “went ‘Uh, no.’”)

Many of the contemporary reviews of *8 Mile* bring that scepticism. They speculate that the film’s purpose is a branding exercise – to present Eminem as kinder and gentler than his music or arrest record would have you believe – or to set Eminem up to transition into acting. Nearly twenty years later, the latter was just incorrect (outside of a [handful of cameo roles](#), he hasn’t acted since), but the former is at least worth considering.

It is easy to watch *8 Mile* as being designed, at least in part, to broaden Eminem's commercial appeal by softening his edges. There are Eminem songs [I wouldn't listen to on public transport](#) in case someone overheard them through my headphones, yet I'd happily recommend *8 Mile* to just about anybody's mother. His character is called Rabbit, literally making him something cuddly. Eminem lost weight for the role – accentuating his cleft chin – and it makes him look more vulnerable, almost delicate. In one scene, Rabbit criticises another rapper, played by Xzibit, for his homophobic punchlines. “Eminem really has cleaned up his act; the provocative gay-baiting has gone,” Peter Bradshaw wrote in [his review for The Guardian](#), sarcastically calling it “Quite a turnaround.” The cynical view is that it's a rebranding after Eminem was accused of homophobia; the idealistic view is that it's meant as a sincere repentance for past sins. I don't find either view terribly convincing, because they both seem to rely on only half-watching the film: surely it matters that Rabbit is also homophobic to rebut Xzibit, rapping, “Paul's gay, you're a f\*ggot.” It requires understanding the scene purely through how it comports with Eminem, the person and the brand, rather than taking the film as a piece of art on its own terms.

*8 Mile* both is and isn't about Eminem. On ‘Lose Yourself’, he both distinguishes himself from Rabbit and slides between the two. Where the other tracks he wrote for the soundtrack – ‘[8 Mile](#)’ and ‘[Run Rabbit Run](#)’ – are from Rabbit's perspective, ‘Lose Yourself’ describes the events of the film in the third person:

His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy  
There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti

“The first verse is all about Jimmy Smith Jr. It's me talking about Jimmy Smith Jr.—like, I'm not saying *my* sweater, I'm saying *his*,” [Eminem says](#), “I'm trying to show you what his life is about.” But the second verse is more ambiguous – it's in the third person but seems to be describing Eminem's later life, post-success:

He's known as the globetrotter, lonely roads  
God only knows, he's grown farther from home, he's no father  
He goes home and barely knows his own daughter

And the final verse describes Eminem's earlier, related real-life struggles in the first person:

All the pain inside amplified by the  
Fact that I can't get by with my nine-to-  
Five and I can't provide the right type of life for my family  
'Cause man, these goddamn food stamps don't buy diapers  
And there's no movie, there's no Mekhi Phifer, this is my life

Eminem has always created different personas, synthesising fiction and autobiography to create new selves. “No performer since David Bowie in the 1970s has better exploited the actorly impulses at the heart of pop music,” Gibney writes, “Shuffling a deck of alter egos... he plays out in musical form audacious multi-character dramas.” There's more distance between Eminem and Rabbit than there is between him and his rap personas – Eminem, after all, didn't write or direct *8 Mile* – yet hardly an infinite distance. Rabbit isn't him, but enough autobiographical elements are incorporated that it would be easy to tell that Rabbit was based on Eminem even if he was played by someone else. This is a version of a story that Eminem has always told and had told about him.

So much of Eminem's early work is a self-conscious exercise in myth-making, and the best of his later work reflects on and interrogates his own mythos. *8 Mile* mirrors and even creates a part of that mythos – the angry white boy from the trailer park, battle-rapping in front of hostile crowds – and yet also stands apart from it. Watched in the context of his discography, *8 Mile* feels less like a film about Eminem, the person, than about the environment that birthed him, that permeates his music.

We first see Rabbit in a cracked mirror in the bathroom of The Shelter, the hip hop club where his friend Future (Mekhi Phifer) hosts the rap battles. He's miming to Mobb Deep's '[Shook Ones, Pt. II](#)' to psych himself up for the upcoming rap battle. He's "hooded in about five different ways at once: There's a Nike knit cap on his head and, above that, the top of a maroon sweatshirt. His eyelids are partly lowered, his ears are covered with headphones, his body is sheathed in loose-fitting sweats," [David Denby writes](#), "You can't see much of him, and what's visible is guarded and hostile—his upper lip has a mean double curl, a natural snarl." Someone keeps knocking at the door to get him to hurry up; Rabbit shouts to give him a minute. He pulls his headphones off and 'Shook Ones, Pt. II' cuts out, replaced by the music playing distantly in the Shelter. Then he runs to the toilet and pukes his guts out.

When Rabbit goes back into the club proper, he's briefly hassled by the bouncer – played by *Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton! – who doesn't think he should be backstage, but Future vouches for him. He got vomit on his hoodie, so he goes outside to change: his clothes are in a black bin bag, stashed behind a dumpster in the alleyway. His friends – Sol (Omar Benson Miller), DJ Iz (De'Angelo Wilson) and Cheddar Bob (Evan Jones) – are initially jovial, excited for the rap battle, but they quieten when they see Rabbit's bin bag full of clothes. There's an awkward pause, and Rabbit explains that he just broke up with his girlfriend, Janeane.

He's homeless, essentially. He says he left Janeane the car – she says she's pregnant, but Future and Sol exchange sceptical glances – and it's pretty clear that he would otherwise be living out of it.

"I'm gonna need a place to crash," Rabbit says, and everyone laughs when Cheddar Bob asks if he's going to "stay at [his] mom's". "Yo, can I get some fucking privacy here, man?" Rabbit snaps. He pulls on a clean jumper – even after discarding the hoodie, he seems to be wearing half a dozen layers – and tells Future that if something's going to happen for him with rap, "it needs to happen now."

But when it comes time for the rap battle, he chokes. He can't get a word out, and he's jeered off stage.

Everyone laughed when Cheddar Bob asked if Rabbit was going to stay at his mom's, but of course he ends up staying at his mom's. Back to the trailer park. It's not like he has anywhere else to go. "Just for a couple of weeks," he tells her, "Until I save up enough to get my own place."

Kim Basinger is great as Rabbit's mother, Stephanie, striking just the right mixture of maternal kindness, exasperation, and thoughtless cruelty. She drinks too much, and seems more concerned with her shitty boyfriend, Greg (Michael Shannon), than with Rabbit or his little sister, Lily, but is prone to occasional fits of affection. In a perfect encapsulation, she gives Rabbit her car as an early birthday present and it doesn't run.

*8 Mile* does as good a job as anything I've seen of capturing how it feels to move back home as an adult. There's a feeling of failure, of sliding backwards, to living with your parents significantly into adulthood, especially after a period of independence. When I moved back home, although I was extremely grateful to have my parents' support, I couldn't help but get sucked into a cycle of frustration, disappointment and despair. You have failed at the bare minimum expectation for being

an adult, consigned yourself to an infantilisation from which you cannot escape. (Young people who move back home are [more likely to experience depression](#).) And even though more young adults [are living with their parents than ever](#), locked out of the private rental sector and the property market by costs way out of step with wages, adults who live at home are still a punchline. “You live in your mom’s basement” is a way to dismiss someone entirely out of hand. The shame Rabbit feels radiates off the screen – in the sullen intensity of his stare, in his guarded vulnerability – compounded a dozen times over by the particular home he’s moved back to: he’s “trailer trash”. He sharply warns people not to tell anyone that he’s living here.

*8 Mile*’s camera lingers on derelict buildings – as Rabbit and his friends drive around shooting at stuff with a paintball gun, or the tracking shots out of the bus window on Rabbit’s way to work, evoking the [‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice?’ montage](#) of derelict and boarded-up buildings in Flint, Michigan from *Roger & Me*. Even The Shelter is an abandoned building: a former church, now, as director Curtis Hanson once said, [“a different kind of church”](#). Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto works from a palette of what Gibney calls “industrial and jaundiced colours”: “factory greys, cadaver blues, bile yellows”. The overall effect evokes a kind of post-industrial wasteland, without ever sacrificing the film’s deep empathy for Detroit and its people. Detroit, Hanson said, is “like a flower struggling through a crack in the cement.”

There’s a scene at a house party where DJ Iz – the most politically conscious member of Rabbit’s crew – talks about an abandoned house where a young girl was raped: it’s the definition of an “attractive nuisance”, he says, and if it was on the other side of 8 Mile Road – the dividing line between Detroit’s black inner city and white suburbs – it would have long since been demolished. So they decide to take matters into their own hands and burn the abandoned house down. It’s a political action, but it’s mostly just a lark: they sing “the roof, the roof, the roof is on fire” while it goes up in flames. Rabbit watches with Alex (Brittany Murphy), a sexy and aloof aspiring model who’s desperate to get out of Detroit.

“You know, when I was little, I used to want to live in a house like this. You know, how it used to be,” Rabbit says. The “when I was little” and the “used to want” break my heart. It’s hard to know if Rabbit is pretending to have let go of that want – protecting himself from judgement – or if his dreams have gotten that much smaller. Too small to imagine a house to live in even as he lives in a city where houses are left abandoned.

He asks Alex if she lives with her family. “I got out of there as quick as I could. Left home when I was seventeen,” she answers. “What about you?”

Rabbit pauses for a beat, not breaking eye contact. “Sorta the same.”

Plenty of critics noted *Rocky*’s influence on *8 Mile* – it’s hard not to – but in a way that misremembers *Rocky*: that boils it down to the triumphant happy ending. [For Peter Travers](#), in an otherwise positive review, “the *Rocky* stuff” softens *8 Mile*’s edges. But *Rocky* is bleak – its happy ending is only so triumphant because of the bleakness that surrounds it. Rocky lives in a small apartment with an overhead train line, boxing in small gyms and working as a heavy for a loan shark. He’s not past his prime; he had no prime. There’s only one real bright spot in his life: Adrian, the shy girl from the pet shop where he buys food for his turtles. It’s a film about [“working-class lives with small horizons, harsh words and dead-end jobs at the meatpacking factory.”](#) The heavyweight champion wants to fight a local Philadelphia boxer – a gimmick fight for the US Bicentennial – and there’s no way on earth that Rocky could win. All he wants to do is go the distance.

When Rabbit enters the battle rap competition at the end of *8 Mile*, it's not for riches or a record deal, just respect. He spends all his spare time in training, a beat pumping from his Walkman and a dirty scrap of paper in his hand. A big part of the film is the possible opportunity for studio time to record his demo – Wink (Eugene Byrd) keeps promising to hook him up with a promo guy – because rap represents Rabbit's only means of escape. Alex says that he's going to get a record deal soon whenever she flirts with him, and even right after sex, as if her attraction to him is inseparable not just from his rap skill, but his ability to monetise it. But there's something much more primal to Rabbit's rapping, something even more urgent than escape. And when Wink's promises fall away, it's all that's left. "Like the fighting in *Rocky* and the dancing in *Saturday Night Fever*, the rap songs in *8 Mile* possess a redemptive power," Denby notes, "They release intolerable feelings of disgust, the fear of remaining a loser forever." Like Rocky, Rabbit just wants to go the distance.

The *Rocky* formula has been applied again and again, basically launching the genre of "sports movie". But the formula is usually *Rocky* as it has been assimilated into the cultural consciousness – a hazy memory of a highlight reel and a happy ending, blurry from forty years and half a dozen sequels – not the film itself. *8 Mile* feels like it goes back to the source. It puts the bleakness of the urban decay and an unblinking focus on working-class existence back into the story.

*8 Mile* also mirrors *Rocky's* portrayal of race relations, but with a self-awareness that *Rocky* lacks. In *Rocky*, the heavyweight champion, Apollo Creed, is black – a barely concealed Muhammad Ali analogue – while Rocky, our plucky underdog hero, is white. Apollo is arrogant and complacent; Rocky is so hardworking that the [training montage](#) had to be invented just to contain him. It's not hard to see how the film would be [thrilling to a resentful white audience](#): getting to see a white boxer humble the black champion. "For the black man to come out superior," [Ali told Roger Ebert](#), "would be against America's teachings. I have been so great in boxing they had to create an image like Rocky, a white image on the screen, to counteract my image in the ring. America has to have its white images, no matter where it gets them. Jesus, Wonder Woman, Tarzan and Rocky."

I genuinely think this racial dynamic is largely an unfortunate accident: Apollo Creed is black because the real-life heavyweight champion was black; Rocky is white because Sylvester Stallone wrote the part for himself. *Rocky* almost has a moment of self-reflexivity about it in a scene where a bartender complains about Creed, calling him a "jig clown" and asking where the "real fighters" have gone. This guy's animosity towards Creed has an obvious racial dimension. Rocky scolds him for disrespecting the champ, but doesn't articulate the underlying racism. It's a scene that clearly establishes Rocky's respect for his opponent: that he's not, consciously at least, an avatar for white resentment of black success. But during the final fight, it cuts to the bartender watching on the TV in the bar. He is, of course, rooting for Rocky.

*8 Mile*, too, is about a white underdog in a black-dominated arena: hip hop. But where whiteness is so often treated as neutral, as default, Rabbit's whiteness is made hypervisible. In the opening rap battle where Rabbit chokes, his opponent's disses focus on Rabbit being white: he compares him to Everlast, calls him a tourist, and says "they laugh 'cause you white with a mic". Rabbit's race is overtly made part of the story, instead of something invisible that's assumed to be universal. At one point, Rabbit's friends talk about who is the greatest rapper of all time – Future argues for Rakim, Sol for Biggie, Iz for Tupac – when Cheddar Bob, the only other white guy in the crew, pipes up to make the case for the Beastie Boys. (Rabbit rolls his eyes.) "Man, fuck the Beasties!" Future says, "Don't bring the Beasties' shit in the mix, dog!" Then Iz says, "It's always easier for a white man to succeed in a black man's medium." The camera lingers for a moment on Rabbit's face, giving us time to register how Iz's words apply to Eminem.

Race is a palpable force, underpinning the whole film. Stephanie watches Douglas Sirk's 1959 melodrama *Imitation of Life* on TV. None of the characters comment on it, but we watch a scene play out on the screen within our own screen: a black woman visits her daughter's class at school to drop something off. Her daughter's light skin meant she had been passing as white at school, and her mother's visit reveals her own blackness to her teacher and classmates. It's possibly the most painful scene in *Imitation of Life*, a film full of them. I think [Eric King Watts' interpretation](#) of this interpolation of the Sirk film – that Rabbit is “passing” as black – is simplistic. There's something much more going on there, an anxious ambivalence about race, class, and generational relations, about the nature of identity.

Where *Rocky* explicitly tells a story about being working-class and implicitly tells a story about race, *8 Mile* makes both explicit: makes navigating the relationship between the race and class its central thematic concern.

Critics tended to be observant regarding *8 Mile's* racial politics, but at best offer only a brief, superficial nod to its class politics – acknowledging Rabbit's poverty, mostly. But *8 Mile's* class and racial politics are inextricable. If you divorce *8 Mile's* racial politics from its class politics, or, worse, erase class from the film altogether, you will misunderstand it.

Rabbit carries around the searing humiliation of choking for the whole film, like an open wound in his chest. The glimmer of hope that Wink offers – connecting him with a promo guy, getting him studio time to record his demo – is abruptly snuffed out when he walks in on Wink having sex with Alex. Rabbit flies into a rage, beating Wink up, and later, Wink gets the Leaders of the Free World (a rival hip hop crew) to beat the shit out of him.

He shows up to the rap battle competition with a black eye. Future had signed him without his permission, and when the night of the battle comes, he's working overtime at the factory. Alex comes by – they haven't spoken since Rabbit walked in on her and Wink – to tell him she's leaving for New York and she hopes she'll see him at The Shelter later. Rabbit asks a co-worker (the gay guy he defended earlier) to cover for him for a couple of hours, and he heads off.

Rabbit draws Lyckety Splyt in the first round. He's part of the Free World crew that beat Rabbit up. The battles are shot with handheld cameras, capturing the energy and pace of a packed-out live event. The space between the film's audience and the rap battle's audiences collapses, and the on-screen audience both mirror and guide our responses.

Lyckety goes first. He hits Rabbit on being a “choke artist” and on Cheddar Bob shooting himself in the leg when Rabbit's crew fought the Free World. But he mostly raps about Rabbit being white, but with his being poor as a twist of flavour:

You ain't Detroit, I'm the D, you're the new kid on the block  
'Bout to get smacked back to the boondocks  
Fucking Nazi, this crowd ain't your type  
Take some real advice and form a group with Vanilla Ice  
And what I tell you, you better use it  
This guy's a hillbilly, this ain't Willie Nelson music  
Trailer trash, I'll choke you to your last breath

The focus is on Rabbit's race – he's New Kids on the Block, he's Vanilla Ice, he's a Nazi – but it's a particular form of whiteness: Rabbit is trailer trash and a hillbilly. Lyckety's final line captures it perfectly: “You need to take your white ass back across 8 Mile to the trailer park.”

Rabbit responds with bars like “These Leaders of the Free World rookies / Lookie, how can six dicks be pussies?” and “Yeah, they call me Rabbit, this is a turtle race.” He comes to life in the performance, Eminem’s carefully crafted naturalism giving way to his superstar charisma at just the right moment. We’ve seen Rabbit rap before, but with a guardedness that finally falls away on the battle stage. He’s wearing a wool hat and a baggy white jumper, but without a hoodie and headphones, it’s still about as few layers as we’ve ever seen him wear. (He was fully clothed when he had unprotected sex with Alex.)

“So I’m a turn around with a great smile,” he raps, dropping his pants to show his ass, “And walk my white ass back across 8 Mile.” He wins.

He draws Lotto, another Free World rapper, in the second round. He opens by calling Rabbit a honkey. “You think these n\*\*\*as gon’ feel the shit you say?” he raps, “I got a better chance joinin’ the KKK.” Lotto, like most of the crowd, is black, so – like Lyckety, like the rapper Rabbit choked against in his first battle – he positions Rabbit as inherently an outsider. His funniest line is “I feel bad that I gotta murder that dude from *Leave It to Beaver*.”

There’s a steely determination in Rabbit’s eyes when he takes the mic. His calm, reproachful delivery of his opening line – “Ward, I think you were a little hard on the Beaver” – makes me laugh every time. He’s got a lot of punchlines at the expense of Lotto’s muscles and clothes (“Is that a tank-top or a new bra? / Look! Snoop Dogg just got a fuckin’ boob job!”), but nothing lands quite as hard as when he turns Lotto’s white jokes around:

Didn’t you listen to the last round, meathead?  
Pay attention, you’re sayin’ the same shit that he said  
Matter of fact, dawg, here’s a pencil  
Go home, write some shit, make it suspenseful  
And don’t come back until somethin’ dope hits you  
Fuck it, you can take the mic home with you

Rabbit holds the mic out, as if he’s actually offering it to Lotto, but the movement is timed to the beat, like his whole body is part of the rap. He doesn’t frame the white jokes as terrible anti-white racism; they’re just uncreative and boring. He wins, and has to face Papa Doc (Anthony Mackie), the leader of the Free World, for the championship.

Future, Sol and Iz are telling Rabbit how he needs to “whoop Papa Doc’s ass” in the final round, when Cheddar Bob asks if he’s worried about what Papa Doc will say. “You know, about Wink and that Alex bitch getting it on,” he explains, “And them beating you up, and giving you a black eye and shit.” Any elation drains out of Rabbit, and you can see the gears turning in his head.

In the final round, Rabbit has taken off his hat and jumper: he’s down to a grey tank top. There’s nothing covering his short-cropped dark hair.

Papa Doc wins the coin toss, so Rabbit has to go first. The DJ spins the beat to ‘Shook Ones, Pt. II’. Rabbit and Papa Doc hold each other’s gaze for a few moments, each unwavering. Then Rabbit smiles – the tiniest quirk of his lips, the glint of something in his eye – and turns to the crowd.

Everything in *8 Mile* leads to this battle. It’s the culmination of Rabbit’s arc. And it’s the moment where the film’s anxiety and ambivalence about race and class is resolved. Where it takes a definitive stand.

Cheddar Bob asked if Rabbit was worried about what Papa Doc would say about him. So Rabbit disses himself before Papa Doc gets the chance. “This guy ain’t no motherfucking MC,” he raps, “I know everything he’s ’bout to say against me.”

I am white, I am a fucking bum  
I do live in a trailer with my mom  
My boy Future is an Uncle Tom  
I do got a dumb friend named Cheddar Bob  
Who shoots himself in his leg with his own gun  
I did get jumped by all six of you chumps  
And Wink did fuck my girl  
I’m still standing here screaming, “Fuck the Free World!”

He gives the Free World crew the finger. His delivery is aggressive and magnetic. He’s flushed, the veins in his arms and neck distended. Then he gets close to Papa Doc’s face, and raps in a sing-song voice, “But I know something about you.”

You went to Cranbrook, that’s a private school  
What’s the matter, dawg? You embarrassed?  
This guy’s a gangster? His real name’s Clarence  
And Clarence lives at home with both parents  
And Clarence’ parents have a real good marriage

“This guy don’t wanna battle, he’s shook,” he raps, referencing ‘Shook Ones, Pt. II’, and the crowd shouts the next line back: “Cause ain’t no such things as halfway crooks!”

Rabbit reframes the whole battle. Lotto had said that there was no chance of the black crowd at The Shelter “feeling the shit” he says, but in the final battle, Rabbit reveals Papa Doc’s upper-class background and exposes the underlying class war. Rabbit is white, but like the crowd, he is poor; Papa Doc, although he is black, is rich. Papa Doc is the real tourist: he crosses 8 Mile Road for excitement, to play at being a gangster. Rabbit appeals to the crowd by verbally weaponizing their common class struggle. Rabbit might live in a trailer park instead of the inner city, but their lives are fundamentally similar in ways that transcend race – in ways that a private school kid’s life can never be. Yannick LeJacq is correct to say that were *8 Mile* released today, “[people would undoubtedly praise it as an impassioned and singularly Marxist work.](#)”

Instead, the point was frequently missed entirely. “*8 Mile* could do without an unnecessary class swipe,” Elvis Mitchell concluded [in \*The New York Times\*](#), calling Cranbrook “one of the finest private schools in the country” without a hint of self-awareness. Eric King Watts argues at length that *8 Mile* troublingly positions middle- and upper-class black people as “hav[ing] lost an essential ‘black’ characteristic”, but Rabbit’s final rap never invokes the idea that Papa Doc isn’t “really” black, or that Rabbit’s working-classness makes him less white. Quite the opposite. Class and race in the US are so often treated as interchangeable – that to be black is to be working-class, and to be white is to be wealthy – that middle- and upper-class black people are frequently described as somehow “less black”. But Rabbit’s final rap rejects this equating of class and race. It creates a space for Rabbit to articulate his working-class identity, and embrace the possibility of class solidarity across racial lines.

When the beat cuts out at the end of Rabbit’s allotted time, he keeps rapping:

Fuck a beat, I’ll go a cappella  
Fuck a Papa Doc, fuck a clock, fuck a trailer

Fuck everybody! Fuck y'all if you doubt me!  
I'm a piece of fucking white trash, I say it proudly  
And fuck this battle, I don't wanna win, I'm outtie  
Here, tell these people something they don't know about me.

Rabbit spends the whole film trying to deny and cover up the markers of his “white trash” status. Wink brings Alex to his trailer, and Rabbit runs off, punches a wall in frustration. Alex follows him and asks why he ran off, and he pathetically, nonsensically repeats that he doesn't live here, so insistent that it's almost like he believes it. But in the final battle, he calls himself white trash in front of a packed crowd, without apology or hesitation.

Of course, lots of critics thought this was a declaration of *white* pride. “It's the ultimate suburban boy's fantasy: a crowd of cool black people cheering him on, and he even gets to look like the underdog,” according to Peter Bradshaw. It pretends that Rabbit “triumphed over race prejudice”, [according to Pop Matters](#). Eric King Watts calls it “Rabbit's acknowledgment and ownership of the racial injury he has endured” as well as a declaration of “his confidence in the value and authority of whiteness”.

But “white trash” is first and foremost a class slur. White trash are “[poor, lazy, uneducated, violent, dirty, immoral, racist](#)”, living “in trailer parks and ramshackle cabins in the woods.” Calling poor whites “white trash” is a way for wealthy white people to distance themselves from poor white people. It is itself part of the ideology of white supremacy – the need to modify the word “white” with “trash” signifies that, [as Daniel Denvir put it](#), “normal whiteness is a treasure; not trash but amazing.” Many of the stereotypes about white trash mirror the racist stereotypes about black and brown people, but because white supremacist ideology has to maintain whiteness as something pure and good, it has to shunt poor whites off into a whole other category of defective, degenerate or “failed” white people.

But it also holds out the promise that they can become *white*, without modifiers. Poor whites, like people of colour, have been [disenfranchised](#), [experimented on](#), [institutionalised](#), and [forcibly sterilised](#). Poor whites, like people of colour, are denied their fair share by society. White supremacy and capitalism are so deeply intertwined, and the primacy of white racial identity among the white poor, over class identity, is necessary to maintain the system. It's a strategy of divide and conquer: a wedge has to be driven between poor white people and poor people of colour to prevent them uniting against the ruling class. The term “white trash” buries inside it the whole history of how poor whites “[got behind a regime that primarily enriched and empowered people who regarded them as inferior scum and celebrated their subjugation.](#)”

When Rabbit calls himself white trash and proud, it's a declaration of class pride. It's a rejection of the aspiration to white-without-modifiers that forms the heart of the position of poor whites under white supremacy and capitalism. It's an articulation of class solidarity with the working-class black audience, without seeking to erase their differences.

Papa Doc chokes. The only word he gets out is “yo”. Rabbit sat down after he threw Papa Doc the mic, like it's over, like he really meant it when he said he didn't care about winning. He realises a second before everyone else that Papa Doc has nothing to say, and this small, genuine look of elated shock passes over his face. When Future declares him the winner, the whole crowd erupts. “313!” they chant (the area code for Detroit), “Fuck Free World!”

It's a cathartic moment of pure joy. And afterwards, Rabbit goes back to work. He says goodbye to his friends – who are full of talk of getting a deal and finally making it – and as he walks off, we hear the piano intro to 'Lose Yourself'. Cut to credits.

All we know about Rabbit's future is he's decided to save up to pay for his own demo. It's an explicit rejection of the power brokers. A rejection of trying to impress people with industry connections only to be strung along, when he should be focusing his energy on his art. Yet the [Pop Matters review](#) uses this as evidence that *8 Mile* is "about making it, about beating back the meanies, about individual gumption": "when Rabbit assures his mom that he's going to 'do it on my own,' she nods sagely, 'You know Rabbit, I think that's the best way.' Hooray team." But this is the same conversation where Stephanie tells Rabbit that they're not going to be evicted from their trailer after all, because she won at bingo. That's good news, obviously, but it only underlines the precarity of their position: how they avoid homelessness this time round on pure luck, how much easier it'll be to repeat falling behind on their rent than to repeat a cash windfall.

So many critics have written about *8 Mile* through the lens of "making it" and the American Dream that it makes me wonder if there's a whole final act that I somehow missed. [Roger Ebert wrote](#) that he "would love to see a sequel (maybe *8 ½ Mile*) in which Rabbit makes millions and becomes world famous, and we learn at last if it is possible for him to be happy", and that's one of the more understandable takes, because at least Ebert didn't just imagine that that was already part of the film. There's a lot of reasons I could come up with for this tendency – watching the film excessively through the lens of Eminem's autobiography is a big one – but I can't shake the idea that they assume proving his skill is all it takes. Rabbit isn't Eminem, but he can *rap* like Eminem, and so Eminem's success inevitably follows.

But the world is full of Rabbits, exceptionally talented and stuck in work that does reflect the best use of their abilities. (When Rabbit moves back home, Stephanie asks if he still works at Little Caesars. When he says that he works at New Detroit Stamping – pressing car bumpers – Greg laughs in his face: "He got fired from a pizza place!" According to Greg, only "ex-cons and welfare moms" work at that plant.) It's always been easier to "make it" if you already have all the advantages, but [the last few decades have seemed to go out of their way to force the working class out of the arts](#): wage stagnation and ever-elongating hours in your "day job" on one hand, and the gatekeepers' tightening their field of vision and their coin purse on the other. It's astonishingly difficult to win a merit race when your starting place is a hundred metres back.

*Workers' Liberty* describe Rabbit as "[an archetype for the collective talent and ability of the working class](#)". We hear snatches of the songs Eminem wrote for the film throughout – the demo version of the instrumental for 'Lose Yourself' while he rides the bus, or the beat and fragmented lyrics for '8 Mile' while he writes and babysits his sister – which Ryan Gibney correctly describes as a projection of Rabbit's ambition. For Gibney, this is overly reassuring: "Of course Jimmy will be fine in the end, the music tells you. He'll be more than fine – he'll be Eminem." The problem with this is that Rabbit isn't Eminem. And the film very deliberately does not end with Rabbit finding Eminem's good fortune. Nothing in Rabbit's material circumstances changes over the course of the film. He's still living in a trailer with his mother – having narrowly avoided eviction – and still working the same minimum wage job. He hasn't gotten a record deal. He's going to try to save up enough money to pay for a demo. He doesn't even definitively get the girl: he and Alex reconnect, but there's no big kiss or declaration of love. She's still getting out of Detroit. *8 Mile's* happy ending takes the shape of *Rocky's* – going the distance, just to prove you can, just to stave off the intolerable fear of your own worthlessness – but makes it even smaller. Rocky might have lost, but he fought the

heavyweight champion: his life is going to be changed utterly. Rabbit's happy ending comes in the form of a local rap battle in an abandoned building.

If you watch *8 Mile* exclusively through the lens of Eminem's autobiography, you miss that it's a film about all the people like him, in trailer parks and hip hop clubs and on factory floors, who didn't make it. Not because they weren't talented, but because Eminem's success is essentially a million-to-one lucky break in a society where people born on the bottom rung are supposed to stay there. Even if Rabbit made it, the rappers in the lunch line at the auto plant won't. Lyckety Splyt and Lotto won't. The other guys in Rabbit's crew won't.

'Lose Yourself' is about having "one shot, one opportunity". This is what gives its explosive urgency: this is *it*, and if he can't make this work, he'll "end up in jail or shot". Rich people have infinite chances, because their wealth is a safety net. But poor people are lucky to get one shot. Most inspirational songs are about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, but 'Lose Yourself' knows better. Eminem made it, and Rabbit might, too. But it's still true that these goddamn food stamps don't buy diapers.