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# Pop goes the rapper: a close reading of Eminem's genderphobia

VINCENT STEPHENS

## Abstract

*This article argues that controversial hip-hopper Eminem is more properly termed a genderphobe than a homophobe. Eminem consistently uses homophobic language to critique gender behaviour, not sexual orientation. Focusing on genderphobic lyrics more accurately reveals hip-hop culture's emphasis on gender behaviour rather than the emphasis on sexual object-choice that homophobia implies. The focus on genderphobia also highlights a discriminatory practice aimed toward external behaviour that is related to homophobia but operates differently in certain cultural realms. I ground my discussion by focusing on the centrality of authenticity in hip-hop and gender propriety's centrality in comprising hip-hop notions of authenticity. Additionally, I emphasise how all pop stars rely on personae to convey convincing images to the public. I conclude by analysing the Pet Shop Boys and Mariah Carey's 'answer songs', which directly address Eminem's genderphobia and authenticity.*

## Introduction

Hip-hop musician Eminem (real name Marshall Mathers; alter ego 'Slim Shady') is the most provocative and controversial musical performer at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Catchy songs and a shrewdly crafted public image define the popular 'white trash' rapper's 'appeal'. Underlying his pop packaging is a menacing ability to artfully capture latent and explicit levels of cultural misogyny and homophobia in his songs. It is unclear if he is a sophisticated satirist and/or a shameless exploiter revelling in misogyny and homophobia for commercial gain. Both arguments continue to inspire discourse questioning his moral responsibility as a performer and influence on his largely teenage audience.

In this article I argue that Eminem is more properly termed a genderphobe than a homophobe because he explicitly uses homophobic language to critique gender behaviour, not sexual orientation. To begin, I define Eminem's relation to genderphobia and the term's social implications. Next, I discuss the centrality of genderphobia in establishing Eminem as an 'authentic' rapper. Then, I examine the Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation's (GLAAD) accusations that Eminem's lyrics on the 2000 album *The Marshall Mathers LP* are homophobic, and his response. Finally, I analyse the Pet Shop Boys and Mariah Carey's answer songs, which directly address Eminem's genderphobia and authenticity. The tension between celebrities critiquing other celebrities for having contrived images and *all* celebrities' need to

construct a marketable image haunts the Pet Shop Boys and Carey, as well as Eminem. Thus a consideration of persona informs my reading of pop and hip-hop personas.

### **Eminem: genderphobe or homophobe?**

Numerous critics and organisations brand Eminem as a homophobe because of his explicit use of epithets such as ‘faggot’ and ‘lez’ in his lyrics (from 2001’s ‘Criminal’). Such accusations are credible because they highlight Eminem’s blithe exploitation of homophobia (and misogyny) in his music. However, Eminem’s critics fail to expose the complexity of his lyrics. Through a close reading of Eminem’s lyrics and persona, I identify the distinctions between sexual object-choice and gender behaviour that the rapper makes in his lyrics and rhetoric. Too many critics unjustifiably collapse genderphobic aspects of hip-hop rhetoric under the rubric of homophobia. Conflating gender behaviour and sexual object-choice distorts the arguably dominant role of gender as an impetus for discrimination.

### **Defining genderphobia**

Genderphobia must be understood in relation to homophobia and transphobia because they are easy to conflate but quite distinct. The distinctions between homophobia, transphobia and genderphobia are less about semantics than recognising the specific tensions defining subcultural experiences. Flattening out differences among gays, lesbians and transpeople obscures palpable tensions between these groups. Conflation also ignores the way gender discrimination affects the gender behaviour of heterosexually oriented people. The tyranny of gender is that no one is safe from rigid, hegemonic notions of appearance and behaviour.

Homophobia is a common term in the cultural lexicon that essentially refers to discrimination against gay and lesbian people. Transphobia (sometimes defined interchangeably with genderphobia) is a more recent term academics, activists and journalists employ that refers to transgender and transsexual discrimination. Genderphobia is a more obscure term, related to the terms effeminaphobia and sissiphobia (Bergling 2001), that refers to a more covert form of gender discrimination based primarily on behaviour rather than sexual object-choice or appearance.

Many US advocacy organisations, such as the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL), utilise T. Aaron Hans’ ‘Gender Terminology List’. The List formally defines homophobia as ‘The irrational fear of love, affection, and erotic behaviour between people of the same gender’. This definition’s emphasis on sexual object-choice overlooks the conflation of gender and sexual object choice that informs homophobic language and violence in practice (Hans 1998). As Canada’s Trans Accessibility Project notes, ‘... much homophobia name-calling is related to gender roles. Calling a man a ‘pansy’ or a ‘fairy’ is to call him effeminate; in other words, he is not doing his part in upholding the masculine gender standard’ (Trans Accessibility Project). Clearly, the appearance of non-conformist *gender behaviour*, rather than knowledge about *sexual behaviour*, fuels homophobic incidents.

SMYAL defines transphobia/genderphobia as ‘The irrational fear of those who are perceived to break and/or blur cultural/stereotypical gender roles, often assumed to be queer’ (Hans 1998). Though this definition conflates the terms, they are not exactly interchangeable. Transphobia, particularly the marginalisation of transpeople

in lesbian and feminist communities, is an oft-debated topic among feminist, women's studies and gender studies scholars. Transphobia literature focuses on the tensions between those who believe that 'woman' is a biological category and those who believe 'woman' should be based in self-definition.<sup>1</sup> These tensions surface in numerous arenas, most infamously the US Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's 'womyn born womyn' admission policy (Cvetkovich and Wahng 2001, pp. 131–51).

Genderphobia is a more surreptitious form of discrimination than transphobia because it quietly adheres to hegemonic notions of gender behaviour. For example, heterosexual people, wearing gender normative clothing, are sometimes victims of what is termed homophobia. However, because these victims are not homosexual and are not marked as transpeople, they are more *properly* termed victims of genderphobia. Eminem, along with other hip-hop musicians, often espouses homophobic rhetoric, but his most inflammatory attacks are usually directed at male rivals who deviate from gender roles. Thus he is as much a *genderphobe* as he is a homophobe.

Gender conformity is often more central to hip-hop's aesthetic than sexual behaviour. My emphasis on gender does not discount homophobia. Rather, I argue that the gender aspect of sex/gender discrimination is particular to hip-hop and relevant among all sexual orientations. For example, the answer songs I discuss later challenge cultural perceptions of Eminem, and, hip-hop culture as singularly homophobic. The Pet Shop Boys and Carey address Eminem's masculinist gender notions alongside the homophobic subtext. The popular media's more recent exposure of 'homo thug' culture and academic attention to transphobia, illustrate the growing need for scholarship on cultures which discriminate primarily on the basis of gender role behaviour.

The increased integration of 'out' gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-expression, characterises the 1990s (Walters 2001). Increased visibility does not inherently erase discrimination, but heightens cultural awareness of what constitutes homophobia and opens up spaces for addressing it. The presence of queer studies in academe, 'out' personnel in popular media, and prominent national queer political organisations indicate growing public interest in queer cultural and political concerns. The anti-homophobic politics such cultural shifts represent do not, however, directly address or challenge the role of *gender* in shaping cultural attitudes about behavioural propriety. Genderphobic violence is largely aimed toward persons who violate hegemonic codes of masculine and feminine behaviour. From the mid-1980s through the present, hip-hop culture continues to shape and reflect the values of its audience, particularly teenagers and young adults. Hip-hop is a masculinist genre with explicit notions of gender appropriate behaviour which several scholars explore in the context of its own self-defined authenticity or 'realness'.

## Authenticity discourse and Eminem

Gender and sexuality are central to the study of music's cultural and emotional resonance, often referred to as authenticity, in popular music studies. Authenticity is particularly common in studies of rock and pop music genres (Frith 1981, 1983; Gracyk 1996; Dolan and Coyle 1999; Weinstein 1999; Leach 2001; McLeod 2001; Shuker 2001) and country (Lewis 1997; Peterson 1997; Jensen 1998). Several hip-hop scholars (Rose 1992, 1994; Williams 1992; White 1996; Boyd 1997; Watkins 1998) trace authenticity's relevance to the genre and culture. One of the most eloquent, detailed and systematic account of hip-hop authenticity is Kembrew McLeod's 'Authenticity

Table. Semantic dimensions (McLeod 1999, pp. 138–9).

| Semantic dimensions  | Real                     | Fake                  |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Social-psychological | Staying true to yourself | Following mass trends |
| Racial               | Black                    | White                 |
| Political-economic   | The underground          | Commercial            |
| Gender-sexual        | Hard                     | soft                  |
| Social locational    | The street               | The suburbs           |
| Cultural             | The old school           | The mainstream        |

within hip-hop and other cultures threatened with assimilation'. McLeod's article is particularly notable for outlining the centrality of gender conformity to hip-hop culture.

McLeod notes that as hip-hop's commercial profile increases, the culture becomes more self-conscious about preserving its identity from becoming too mainstream (McLeod 1999, p. 136). Through an analysis of hip-hop magazine articles, letters to the editor, Internet postings and interviews with hip-hop fans, artists and related personnel, she constructs six semantic dimensions of meaning hip-hop community members invoke in discussions of authenticity (McLeod 1999, pp. 138–9). The six areas include social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social-locational and cultural. Within these six dimensions are several binaries, which speak to specific genre efforts to preserve hip-hop's distinct identity from pop. I reproduce McLeod's chart to illustrate the binaries invoked in each dimension (see Table).

My analysis focuses on McLeod's analysis of the gender-sexual dimension because gender explicitly informs Eminem's rhetoric, including his disavowal of teen pop, and attempts to mimic black hypermasculinity. McLeod notes, 'Selling out is also associated with being soft, as opposed to hard. Within the context of hip-hop, these oppositional terms are very clearly gender-specific, with soft representing feminine attributes and hard representing masculine attributes' (McLeod 1999, p. 142).

Krims further localises authenticity by addressing conventions characterising various rap genres (party rap, mack rap, jazz/bohemian, reality rap). Eminem best fits the 'reality rap' category, which describes 'any rap that undertakes the project of realism, in the classical sense, which in this context would amount to an epistemological/ontological project to map the realities of (usually black) inner-city life' (Krims 2000, p. 70). One of the central characteristics of the genre are musical elements (pitch, bass) connotating a 'hardness' connected to a mythical 'ghetto-centricity and masculinity' with an implied disdain or even hostility toward elements perceived as soft or weak (Krims 2000, p. 72–3). Eminem sometimes diverts from the 'reality rap' genre, incorporating skits and songs lighter in tone, exemplifying Krims' notion that rappers' often incorporate multiple genres on albums even if they have a predominant style (Krims 2000, p. 87).

Eminem's biographical narrative aims to validate the 'reality' of his raps. His roots as a white rapper, with a *working-class* background raised in *the streets* of Detroit (he was actually born in Missouri) is central to critics' and audiences' perceptions of him as an 'authentic' white rapper performing in an African-American performance

tradition. Further, his often-explicit depictions of genderphobia, violence, misogyny, homophobia and hostility toward pop singers (particularly teen pop singers N'Sync and Christina Aguilera) rhetorically position him as an *enfant terrible*, resistant to mainstream culture.

Though Eminem is white, his poor economic background, affiliation with and acceptance by black producers and performers and hypermasculine behaviour validate his social-locational and racial 'realness'. Indeed Richard Goldstein locates Eminem's acceptance by many liberals and black rappers as the result of his avowed populism. Eminem's status as a working-class hero (elevated by the pseudo-autobiographical 2002 film, *8 Mile*) obscures what Goldstein views as the true bond among rappers, sexism toward women (Goldstein 2002, p. 53).

### Strange bedfellows: Eminem and GLAAD

Hip-hop performer/producer/mogul Dr. Dre discovered Eminem in 1998, and he made his commercial debut in 1999 with the single 'My Name Is' and album *The Slim Shady LP*. The album chronicles Eminem's sometimes macabre, juvenile and violent imagination and tongue-in-cheek 'humour'. The track '97 Bonnie & Clyde', a murder fantasy toward his girlfriend, particularly generated controversy for its violent and misogynist imagery. The album also chronicles his 'white trash' childhood and contempt toward his mother. By the winter of 2000, the album had gone multi-platinum, won two Grammys and earned the ire of critics and women's groups.

His 2000 follow-up, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, topped the album charts and catapulted him into the public consciousness as one of the most notorious performers in contemporary music. Critics often praise Eminem's fluid delivery, fresh beats and deft rhyming. However, his violent images and epithet-filled lyrics divide critics who appreciate his form over his attitudes (George-Warren and Romanowski 2001, p. 304).

GLAAD promptly criticised Eminem's lyrics from the outset of its May 2000 release. According to a GLAAD press release, 'Eminem's lyrics are soaked with violence and full of negative comments about many groups, including lesbians and gay men' (Dansby 2000). The release critiques Eminem and his record label UNI/Interscope that it deems irresponsible for producing and promoting 'such defamatory material that encourages violence and hatred'. The release grounds its concerns in the presumption that 'the market for this music has been shown to be adolescent males, the very group that statistically commits the most hate crimes'. GLAAD's release passionately argues 'such disregard for others can lead to discrimination, physical abuse and even death' (Dansby 2000).

The GLAAD press release clearly defines Eminem's lyrics as homophobic. Tellingly the release does not explicitly reference trans-people discrimination. Nor does it mention the way people of *all* sexualities are potentially vulnerable to discrimination based on their failure to exhibit socially acceptable *gender behaviour*. GLAAD's oversights opened a rhetorical space for Eminem to address homophobia without addressing gender, which is precisely what he did to vindicate himself. In a July 2000 interview in response to GLAAD's accusations, Eminem said, 'The term "faggot" doesn't necessarily mean a gay person. To me, it don't' (DeCurtis 2000, p. 18). Eminem uses the term 'faggot' the way hip-hop performers typically employ the term, as a sign of weakness. In an MTV interview he elaborated: 'Faggot is like taking

away your manhood – you’re a sissy, you’re a coward . . . It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re being a gay person’ (Douglas-Brown 2002, p. 83).

For example, in ‘Remember Me?’ he rants ‘Two faggots can vanish to volcanic ash and re-appear in hell with a can of gas, AND a match’. In the more sombre ‘Marshall Mathers’, he lashes out at teen pop: ‘Boy/girl groups make me sick/And I can’t wait ‘til I catch all you faggots in public’. He also addresses his rivalry with rap group the Insane Clown Posse in the same song, rapping, ‘Plus I was here to put fear in faggots who spray Faygo Root Beer/And call themselves “Clowns” ‘cause they look queer/Faggot2Dope and Silent Gay/Claimin’ Detroit, when y’all live twenty mile away (fuckin’ punks)/And I don’t wrestle, I’ll knock you fuckin’ faggots the fuck out’, and the lyrics, ‘I don’t get fucked in mine you two little flaming faggots!’.

In these excerpts from *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Eminem specifically uses the term ‘faggot’ or ‘fag’ as a battle cry to taunt his rivals by mocking their masculinity and strength. Eminem’s rhetoric is actually two-fold. First, by using a historically loaded term used as an epithet for homosexual men, he exploits the term’s omnipresent stigma, regardless of his stated intentions. As Bruce Vilanch notes in a commentary on Eminem and the term ‘faggot’, ‘Lots of younger straight guys do call each other “fag” when they’re not calling each other “wuss”, “pussy”, or “dweeb”. But most of them know that “fag” has a harsher connotation. They must because they use it when they really want to score, when they really want to get under somebody’s skin – which is exactly the way Eminem uses it’ (Vilanch 2000, p. 39). Second, in the context of hip-hop, Eminem’s usage of ‘faggot’ to embarrass or shame his enemies conforms to hip-hop’s genderphobic, masculinist rhetoric. According to McLeod, ‘Within hip-hop, being a real man doesn’t merely entail having the proper sex organ; it means acting in a masculine manner’ (McLeod 1999, p. 142). Eminem’s lyrics and public persona present him as a jokester and provocateur, but he is aware of the typical masculinist behaviour in the cultural domain of hip-hop.

In one of the first national stories on underground homosexual hip-hop culture or ‘homo thug’ culture, journalist Guy Trebay notes that ‘In the hip-hop hierarchy, the faggot is the un-man: passive, disempowered, he’s down in the gutter with the bitches and ‘hos. By faggot is meant, of course, the girlie man-who vogues in his spare time, worships the anthemic divas, and takes it up the keister when he isn’t giving head in the local park’ (Trebay 2000, p. 46). Indeed, most articles on ‘homo thug’ culture consist mostly of African-American men who do not identify as gay because it signifies effeminate culture (Edwards 2001; Venable 2001, p. 101)

Though Eminem references anal sex in ‘Marshall Mathers’, his lyrics aim for gender through referencing sex acts. Eminem tends to attack the feminine ‘softness’ of boy bands and male rivals like the Insane Clown Posse more than he attacks their actual sexuality. My aim is not to discredit or ignore the latent homophobia of the term faggot or his repugnant use of the term. Rather I hope to place it in the cultural context of hip-hop and note the relationship between homophobia and genderphobia, which the single term homophobia does not adequately capture. Eminem blithely dismisses the homophobic charge because he uses the term the way hip-hoppers often do rendering it benign in his mind. Further, he and his interviewers neglect the unquestioned genderphobia of his lyrics. The latent nature of genderphobia slips past the musician and his critics.

GLAAD followed up its initial anti-Eminem release in January 2001 when The National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (N.A.R.A.S) nominated *The Marshall Mathers LP* for four 2001 Grammy awards, including Album of the Year. In response

GLAAD again issued a press release noting the threat of violence lyrics could pose to 'lesbians and gay men', but overlooking the specific threats to gender outsiders his lyrics actually embody (Dansby 2001). GLAAD also organised a protest against his nominations and televised performance outside the ceremony. In a shocking and ironic move, 'out' gay musician Elton John performed 'Stan', a tale of an obsessed fan where Eminem rejects the fan's obsessive fandom and a homosexual advance, with Eminem at the ceremony.

In 2002 Eminem released the chart-topping album, *The Eminem Show*, and his film debut, the semi-autobiographical film, *8 Mile*. *The Eminem Show* (released 29 May) received generally positive reviews and critics noted a slightly milder, more introspective tone to his songs. Critics positively reviewed *8 Mile* (released 8 November) and the film and soundtrack are commercial hits. Interestingly, in *8 Mile*, during a confrontation, Eminem actually defends a gay co-worker when he raps that 'Paul's gay / But you're a faggot'. In response to this, Scott Seomin, entertainment media director for GLAAD, responds 'I believe that scene was strategically put in there to get media attention as well as reveal in an artificial way the many layers of this man. But I don't think he's all that complicated' (Fierman 2002, p. 28). Once again, contempt for Eminem's suspected homophobia obscures his genderphobic rhetoric.

### Answer songs mock Eminem's authenticity

The Pet Shop Boys (PSB) (singer/instrumentalist/writer Neil Tennant and instrumentalist/writer Chris Lowe) are a British dance-pop band formed in 1981 who garnered international commercial success from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s. Since the mid 1990s, they have fallen out of the commercial mainstream, though they have a large US cult following and maintain their commercial success in the United Kingdom. In 1994 both members officially came out and solidified their status as prominent gay icons by performing at gay political and cultural events.

Critics often praise (and condemn) The Boys for their sly, witty, arch and ironic sensibilities (George-Warren and Romanowski 2001, p. 753). Their pointed, observational style emerges on 2002's *Release*'s boldest track, the cheeky 'The Night I Fell In Love', a song clearly targeted at an Eminem-like rapper. In an MTV.com interview, Tennant discusses the song's genesis. According to Tennant,

Eminem's defence of the homophobic lyrics on his albums has always been that he's not speaking as himself, he's speaking as a character, and he's representing homophobia in America, Tennant explained. I thought it would be interesting to take that method and just to imagine a scene where a boy meets a famous rap star backstage at his concert and is surprised to discover he's gay and ends up sleeping with him. Just to present rap in this homosexual content. I mean there are obviously gay rap stars. (Neil Tennant, cited in Moss 2002)

Tennant elaborates, noting, 'I'm not suggesting he [Eminem] is gay, but he's really fascinated by homoeroticism' (Seymour 2002, p. 1D). Given Tennant's reputation for sly lyrics and statements, it's likely that these statements are somewhat tongue-in-cheek. 'The Night I Fell In Love' does not merely describe a scenario. Intentionally or not, the song questions many elements fundamental to the hip-hop discourse's self-construction, not just Eminem. The fact that Tennant casually declares that there are 'obviously' gay rap stars strongly suggests he exposes hip-hop's often unwelcoming masculinist facade to a wider range of relations. The Pet Shop Boys deconstruct Eminem and hip-hop by shrewdly critiquing the artificiality of hip-hop's hypermasculine rhetoric.



Singer/songwriter/producer Mariah Carey is the most popular female recording artist of the 1990s. Carey's songs have grown increasingly personal and shifted from pop toward a more hip-hop soul sound (George-Warren and Romanowski 2001, p. 149). In the fall of 2001, Carey had a physical and emotional breakdown preceding the release of her oft-delayed film and soundtrack project, *Glitter*. During her breakdown, tabloids and magazines published numerous rumours about her, including one about an alleged affair and break-up with Eminem (Keeps 2001, p. 28).

In December 2002 during promotion for her comeback album *Charmbracelet*, she tersely asserted in TV interviews that she and Eminem met on several occasions but have no romantic involvement.<sup>2</sup> On the track 'Clown', Carey answers Eminem who 'dissed' Carey on *The Eminem Show* track 'Superman'. In the song, Eminem suggests that he rejects Carey because she is demanding and refuses to have sex with him.<sup>3</sup> In 'Clown', Carey bitterly vents frustration with Eminem's conjecture by mocking his macho image and hip-hop authenticity using specifically gendered language.

In the heated musical battle between Eminem, PSB and Mariah Carey, it is important to consider how their personas inform their lyrical approaches. Dyer's *Stars* focuses on film stars but his discussion of image-making media texts and cinematic 'types' relates to popular musicians. Management-generated promotion, press publicity, film images (in the case of musicians, music videos and TV appearances) and criticism and commentary are the chief texts comprising public star images (Dyer 1979, pp. 68–72). One can loosely define pop singers, who rely on media texts for their images and personas, as discernible types. Based on a broad survey of their public images, PSB are post-modern pop stars on the periphery of pop culture with a self-awareness and sense of detachment. Their type is contemporary and unique among pop singers and notably distinct from film actors. Mariah Carey is a more conventional 'ordinary' girl-next-door who achieves the American Dream but struggles to preserve 'ordinary' self from a corrupting industry (*ibid.*, pp. 49–50). Finally, Eminem is the proverbial 'tough guy' and 'rebel' types Dyer adapts from O.E. Klapp. Similar to a heroic 'tough guy', Eminem is embroiled in a battle against something evil (pop) and uses numerous visual and linguistic tools of ambiguous morality in his quest for 'justice', making him an ambivalent but intangibly charismatic hero (*ibid.*, pp. 55–6). Simultaneously he is a 'rebel' with angst rooted in anomie, self-defining as a misfit but with no clear structural target beyond a generalised conformity (*ibid.*, pp. 59–61). Eminem's need to rebel against pop music is rooted in a reactionary masculine impulse to object to the feminised nature of it. The PSB and Carey challenge his faux rebellion by musically critiquing his constructed masculinity.

### Introducing answer songs

The PSB's and Carey's songs are answer songs that use a fictional scenario and a personal reflection to question the 'realness' of Eminem, which has implications for the performance of 'realness' in hip-hop. 'The Night I Fell In Love' and 'Clown's' lyrics are not notable because they reveal contradictions between Eminem's public image and private self, which, according to Dyer are to be expected. However, they highlight an unusual *depth* of contradiction between Eminem's public masculinist rhetoric and his demure private self. Suggestions that one of the most notoriously aggressive 'reality' male rappers so drastically differs in image and self negates the fundamentals of a genre premised on credibility and truth. These

suggestions are especially significant coming from a gay pop duo and a female pop singer, both from the 'soft' pop music spectrum and representing social identities that hypermasculinity, genderphobia and sexism typically affect.

The PSB use a fictional teen character to mock Eminem's hypermasculine 'hardness'. The character illustrates Eminem's safe appeal to the 'soft' suburban teen audience and portrays Eminem as an exaggeratedly docile man in a way that teasingly feminises him. Carey posits Eminem as an emotionally underdeveloped boy, rather than a fully grown man, unable to transcend childhood demons. She continually asserts that Eminem is a purely artificial act, an accusation critics usually level at 'pop', whose true self is deeply buried beneath a controlled 'authenticity' facade. 'The Night I Fell In Love' and 'Clown' ultimately reveal a masculinist performance of gender as the key to Eminem's public persona, a performative dimension which extends to hip-hop culture in general. Eminem espouses and exploits homophobic language in his lyrics, but his chief tactic is a celebration of hypermasculinity rooted in the anxieties informing genderphobia and sexism.

### *'The Night I Fell In Love'*

Unlike most rock stars, PSB are overt about their attempts to control their image and dismiss rock culture's investment in authenticity. In *Pet Shop Boys, Literally*, PSB are very conscious of their public images and open about constructing an aura of mystery and emotional affect that is 'anti-nice' and resistant to the 'jolly fun' ethos characterising 1980s and 1990s pop singers (Heath 1992, pp. 35–6, 51–2, 93–6, 195–6, 284–5). The PSB criticise rock stars' and rock critics' self-conscious claims of rock's spontaneity and authenticity (*ibid.*, pp. 31–3, 133, 218). Further, they question the critical coronation of rock as a 'serious', 'political' genre based on rock singers publicly adopting trendy political causes (*ibid.*, pp. 93, 176–8). The PSB's self-awareness and critique of rock's signifiers for authenticity does not exempt them from being stars. But PSB generally avoid conflating their public image with their personal identity and make very few claims to being 'authentic' or 'real'. They are ideal critics of the antics of self-consciously 'authentic' performers.

The PSB use a narrator as a stand-in for Eminem's teen audience and as commentary on the tension between Eminem the performer and person. A male teenager narrates 'The Night I Fell In Love' in the first person voice. The narrator, an eager fan, begins describing his wait after an Eminem-like rapper's concert to meet him. 'I was backstage/Couldn't believe my luck was in/I saw him approach wearing a most approachable grin'. This establishes the fan as a teenager anxious to meet the pop idol. These lyrics resemble a commonly imagined scenario of teenage girls and groupies waiting to meet their idols. However, the narrator is clearly a male. The rapper asks the fan, 'Hey man!/Your name isn't Stan is it?' a clever ode to Eminem's song title of the same name and clearly indicating the fan as a male.

Further clues indicating the young fan's young, suburban sensibility are the narrator's awkward and diffident language and simple rhymes. For example, the narrator expresses surprise that '. . . he spoke so politely/I said I liked his show/Well he just smiled/I guess it happens nightly/And so/I fell in love'. After the narrator and the rapper go to the rapper's dressing room, the rapper takes out a video camera and the fan notes how 'I was so nervous/I had to try hard not to stammer'. The teen's halting tone suggests someone young, frightened and inexperienced. Tennant also

carefully modulates his tenor voice to indicate a character younger and more naïve than himself.

The narrator is elated when the rapper breaks the tension and says, 'I'm glad you like the show/That crowd was dope out there tonight, alright'. These comforting words grow into an invitation when he says 'You wanna see some more?/Well be my guest/You can have a private performance'. The teenage narrator naively exclaims, 'I'd fallen in love'. As the song ends, the narrator wakes up post-coitus and joins the rapper at breakfast. The fan jovially notes how 'he couldn't have been a nicer bloke' and that 'I was already late for school by then/I'd fallen in love'.

These excerpts illustrate the young, upbeat suburban sensibility characteristic of rap's primary audience, suburban white teenagers. In the 'Social-Locational (the Street vs the Suburbs)' dimension, McLeod notes that 'Hip-hop artists are often considered sellouts when they distance themselves from their community and sell records primarily to suburban kids . . .' (McLeod 1999, p. 143). The PSB deftly hint at the immense presence of suburban adolescents among Eminem's fan base through skilfully using language and tone. The fact that the narrator has a homosexual experience with the rapper is less surprising to the narrator than Eminem's docility. The song acknowledges Eminem's alleged homophobia but primarily mocks his genderphobia. 'The Night I Fell In Love' unmasks Eminem and by association, hip-hop's hypermasculine masquerade, and reveals its importance for the genre's authenticity.

To fend off such associations, Eminem is relentlessly critical of teen pop singers in his lyrics. All of his anti-teen pop lyrics rhetorically function to distance him from pop singers with large white, teenage suburban audiences. For example, in the somewhat light-hearted radio and video single, 'The Real Slim Shady', he declares, 'I'm sick of you little girl and boy groups/All you do is annoy me/So I have been sent here to destroy you'. The popular and more sombre follow-up single, 'The Way I Am', elaborates these sentiments when he says, 'I'm not Mr. N'SYNC/I'm not what your friends think'. In 'Marshall Mathers', the rapper vacillates between rapping as Marshall and as Eminem. To differentiate himself from teen pop, Eminem professes, 'I'm anti-Backstreet and Ricky Martin/With instincts to kill N'SYNC, don't get me started/These fuckin' brats can't sing and Britney's garbage/What's this bitch retarded'. In the same song he notes how 'Boy/girl groups make me sick'.

Eminem doth protest too much however, because his career is largely the result of the teenage fans that request his videos on MTV's Total Request Live (TRL) and relish his rebellious persona. The kids populating TRL's soundstage are predominantly white teenagers, not 'hard', urban street kids whose consumption would confer authenticity on the rapper. Eminem attempts to distance himself from the type of gawking suburban fans 'The Night I Fell In Love' hints at, to maintain his credibility as a rapper with street appeal. Though his records appeal to various audiences, his success is largely attributable to white, suburban teenage audiences.

Eminem avoids alienating these fans by simultaneously chastising teens' taste in pop and glorifying their intelligence. In an interview in which he addresses *The Slim Shady LP* controversy, he says, 'I think kids are smarter than we give them credit for' (DeCurtis 2000). His acknowledgement demonstrates that teens can distinguish between fantasy and fiction in lyrics and protects his interests. The teenage audience is comprised of fragmented taste cultures which seem contradictory but coexist. The notion that suburban teens exclusively buy pop and urban teens buy edgier forms of music is a fallacy feeding hip-hop's self-mythology. The constructed dichotomy

between suburban and urban teen taste cultures is a discursive strategy that maintains hip-hop's authenticity and sells records. Eminem has no investment in what teens purchase, but to ensure that rebellious and wannabe rebellious teens purchase his records, he validates the intelligence of both while slyly skewering teen pop. 'The Night I Fell In Love' captures the contradictions characteristic of Eminem, and hip-hop mythology.

### 'Clown'

Carey's persona is more precarious than PSB because she tends to project a literal-minded notion of music as autobiography, thus the liner notes of *Charmbracelet* read, 'This album is like a charmbracelet I'm passing down to you. Here's my story . . .'. Carey's mockery of Eminem does not absolve her of the image issues defining celebrityhood. Carey, like Eminem, is a celebrity with a constructed persona to project to her audience. Her recent shift toward 'personal' song lyrics presumably aims to present her 'authentic self', much like Eminem defines Marshall Mathers as the 'real' him and Slim Shady as a persona. The obviousness of Carey's self-consciously 'personal' lyrics actually highlights her attempt to restore the ordinary, girl-next-door image she temporarily abandoned for a highly sexualised makeover. In light of her 2001 breakdown, 'Clown' can be understood chiefly as a critique of Eminem *and* an attempt to separate her from Eminem by amplifying her comparative ordinariness and realness.

Ordinariness is a trope of celebrity image-making that can be understood as a construct. As Richard Dyer notes in his discussion of Judy Garland's unique appeal to gay men, 'It is not, in any case, Garland's direct embodiment of ordinariness that is important . . . What is important is rather a special relationship with ordinariness, particularly in the disparity between the image and the imputed real person . . .'. (Dyer 1986, p. 156). Burdette notes explicit parallels between Dyer's Garland argument and film-maker Todd Haynes' characterisation of singer Karen Carpenter in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. Carey, Carpenter and Garland project ordinary images that mask reservoirs of emotional issues (Burdette 1998, pp. 71–2).

In 'Clown' Mariah Carey focuses on the constructed nature of Eminem's persona and the gaps between his public and private personas. Carey's account may be tainted by their supposed relationship, indeed much of 'Clown's' tone is petty and vindictive, but her lyrics are worth describing because they complement some of PSB's assertions. Because Ms Carey does not grant lyric reprint permissions, I will discuss the content of 'Clown' and refer to specific verses and choruses when possible.<sup>4</sup> Carey questions Eminem's masculinity employing *his own terms* rather than espousing a broad notion that men cannot be masculine and emotive. Thus when she applies markers of femininity to Eminem's private behaviour and asserts that his image is acutely artificial, she challenges his masculinity and legitimacy using his definitions.

Carey tends to write in non-sequiturs rather than narrative form. Still, within the song her gendered accusations are clear. In Verse One her language posits the rapper as a child, rather than a man, and reiterates this with the 'accusation' that he is an extremely emotional, sad person who expresses himself via the feminine mode of tears. Both statements are direct blows to Eminem's professed investment in 'manhood'. Instead of playfully suggesting the rapper is docile, she attempts to expose him as self-pitying.

During the Bridge she directly asserts to him that he is in emotional pain and ponders the long-term toll on his life. However, the initial lyrics build from empathy to an assertion that the rapper is deeply wounded and vulnerable in a manner belying his tough image. Carey ends the song in Chorus Four with a lyric capitalising on Eminem's well-publicised legal disputes and emotional resentment toward his mother infantilising the rapper and rhetorically trapping him in a childhood characterised by a domineering mother. Carey's portrait of Eminem as emotionally frail, cuckolded and child-like is interesting because it comes from a female who rejects his narrow definition of masculinity and is one of the few explicit critiques of rap from a pop singer who perceives frailty and insecurity behind the 'hard' façade.

'Clown' mirrors 'The Night I Fell In Love' in noting and mocking the performativity of 'realness'. Structurally, Carey begins each verse expressing regret that she ever shared herself with Eminem and speaks in code about the details of their association. What is key is the chorus, which questions who will care for Eminem once the controversies surrounding him diminish and the audience moves on to the next pop phenomenon. There are two notable elements in the chorus. First, like most hip-hoppers, Eminem surrounds himself with an entourage of rappers. For example, in 2001 he launched the career of protégé rap group D12. Carey implies that much of his industry support will disappear as his popularity and prosperity fade. Second, Carey asserts that Eminem is an ephemeral cultural phenomenon, the proverbial one-hit wonder lacking any enduring appeal beyond his provocative persona. This hints at a deeper implication, that a 'hard' and 'real' genre like rap is as constructed and vulnerable to exploitation as pop. She ends the chorus reiterating that Eminem is a public performer with an unusually wide distance between his image and self, suggested by the imagery of a crying clown. She later continues the puppet show theme likening him to a marionette and coyly asking who is pulling the strings?

Finally, throughout the song, Carey asserts that she had access to a 'real' Eminem obscured from the public. Though all pop celebrities have personas, Carey's references to his 'woeful stories', the 'little boy' inside and 'hidden pain' assert that the rapper's public realness dramatically differs from his private self. In Chorus Four the vague yet boastful lyrics strongly suggest Carey possesses insider knowledge regarding the rapper that gives her some licence to critique the dichotomy. However tainted Carey's 'insider's view' may be, 'Clown' is provocative precisely because it suggests that Eminem is inauthentic. The song also breaches one of hip-hop's realness tenets by illustrating how one of its chief icons extensively fails to sustain hip-hop hardness/realness in everyday life.

### **Hypermasculinity, genderphobia and genre realness**

The construction of gender is predicated on patriarchal, heterosexual biases, which subordinate women and persons who resist gender conformity, such as the transgendered. Judith Butler's discussion of gender as performance challenges unquestioned assumptions about the naturalness of gender behaviour in everyday life (Butler 1990, p. 270–82). Butler argues that gender governs language, clothing, movement, etc., in seemingly invisible ways that disguise the constructed nature of gender. Butler's argument that gender is performative illuminates the hostile tone of Eminem's lyrics toward women, particularly his mother and ex-wife, and sex and gender outsiders. Jody Norton points out that 'The successful performance of masculinity crucially involves the repression or masking of cultural signs of

femininity and, like all repression, it generates anxiety that expresses itself in various kinds of acting out: especially misogynistic and homophobic violence' (Norton 1997, p. 24). Eminem's masculinist performance blends misogyny and homophobia together in ways linked ultimately to genderphobia.

As a white rapper, Eminem must constantly reify his 'realness', and performing 'hardness' is central to this gesture. According to *Vibe*, 'part of the success in marketing the black man involves selling an image of him – forbidding, full of untamed rage. He must look tough and dark and mysterious and sensual. Presentations of black men continue to perpetuate this image, this standard of manliness' (Venable 2001, p. 104). Physically, Eminem will never embody the constructed hardness of black masculinity, but overcompensates through perpetually espousing his masculinity. He may be White, but he is adamant about being the toughest and most vitriolic White rapper. The PSB and Carey's song lyrics mock hip-hop's gender imperative through their acute characterisations of Eminem.

As 'The Night I Fell In Love' progresses, the narrator relays that 'though he seemed like a regular guy/He said we could be secret lovers/Just him and me'. In these passages the narrator reveals the tension between the rapper's constructed 'regular guy' masculine performance and homosexual orientation. The mutually exclusive relationship between gender 'hardness' and homosexuality are at odds with hip-hop's gendered realness. Thus, the narrator recognises the rapper's gendered masquerade. Toward the end of their encounter the narrator notes how 'When I asked why have I heard so much about him being charged with homophobia and stuff/He just shrugged'. Here the rapper passively acknowledges his gender performance as an integral part of participating in the hip-hop community.

The narrator's shocked response to the disparity between the rapper's persona and personal demeanour is a veiled critique of gender realness in hip-hop. Hip-hop 'realness' hinges on public perceptions of rappers as storytellers who convey unfiltered truth about their life experiences. The investment in 'realness' is precisely how hip-hop artists define themselves against pop, which they characterise as contrived. Eminem is adamant that his songs, notably those performed in his 'real' Marshall Mathers persona, are genuine chronicles of his life. If his albums express the real him, even in veiled form, PSB and Carey, to a lesser extent, suggest that such a sizeable disparity exists between the 'realness' of the performer and the real person that he is transparent. These distinctions are important because they suggest that Eminem performs for his audience and for the hip-hop community and only becomes himself privately. McLeod's construction of hip-hop realness, based on a broad survey of texts, leaves little room for gaps between the hip-hop performer and the person. These pop answer records suggest that Eminem violates whatever space for fantasy exists between rappers and their lives, by continually burying himself in a self-conscious performance. If the performer and person are supposed to be one in hip-hop, particularly in the arena of realness, 'The Night I Fell In Love' and 'Clown' posit Eminem as the ultimate fake.

Hypermasculinity, signified via machismo and compulsory heterosexuality, are usually central markers distinguishing hip-hop from pop and other 'softer' genres. However, gender realness is ultimately more essential to the way in which record companies and artists construct and market hip-hop than sexual orientation. Thus 'The Night I Fell In Love' 's boldest assertion that a rapper could be gay, but would mask his orientation beneath a masculinist façade, is more believable than outrageous.<sup>5</sup>

Both 'The Night I Fell In Love' and 'Clown' emerge at a time when the centrality of hypermasculinist behaviour to hip-hop is increasingly being separated from sexuality. If 'The Night I Fell In Love' is a fictional depiction of a scenario and 'Clown' is rooted in a personal vendetta, their critiques are perhaps less isolated than they seem. It is unclear if the notion of a popular and accepted gay rapper contradicts hip-hop's deeply masculinist rhetoric. However, if hip-hop demands hypermasculine performance at all costs, regardless of sexual orientation, then perhaps the genre has opened up a space where a masculine homosexual can pass for real, just as the 'fake' Marshall Mathers passes for the 'Real Slim Shady'. This possible shift does not necessarily represent progress. Hip-hop's genderphobia is a perverse demonstration of how the increased salience of gender shifts the emphasis from homophobia, but does not eliminate the centrality of gender and sexual conformity in defining our cultural consciousness.

Neither 'The Night I Fell In Love' nor 'Clown' proves that Eminem is gay, a homophobe or even a hypocrite, *per se*. The songs deconstruct the multi-layered performativity he enacts and suggests a broader pattern of performed authenticity in hip-hop. The answer songs also reveal the centrality of gendered myths in defining musical genres and their performers. Hip-hop tolerates sexual deviancy as long as gender remains intact and tolerates racial outsiders as long as they perform 'realness'. When pop musicians resist the contrived nature of so-called 'outside' genres, it should inspire scholars and critics to reconsider whom and what such genres symbolically and materially rebel against. Some may applaud the way hip-hop continues for providing many ethnic minorities and financially underprivileged urban youth access to the music industry. However, such seeming race and class gains have yet to be equalled by progressive challenges toward gender and sexual hegemony.

## Copyright acknowledgements

Lyrics from 'Criminal', 'Marshall Mathers', 'Remember Me', 'Superman', and 'The Real Slim Shady' reproduced by kind permission of Famous Music Publishing, all rights reserved.

## Endnotes

1. Janice G. Raymond's 1979 book, *Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston, Beacon Press) posits male-to-female transsexuals (M-t-F) as infiltrators to feminism. Riki Anne Wichins speaks as a genderqueer frustrated with the transphobia of the gay rights movement in 1997's *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Ithaca, Firebrand Books). Other examples of discussions of transphobia include the following: Wyss, Shannon, 'True Spirit Conference: facing lesbian and feminist transphobia', in *GW Feminist Review*, available at (<http://www.gwu.edu/~wstu/newsletter/spring99/page10.htm>) and 'Genderphobia . . . Do you have it, asks Katrina Fox', first published in *Lesbians on the Loose*, April 2002, available at ([www.katrinafox.com/genderlftl.htm](http://www.katrinafox.com/genderlftl.htm))
2. Carey appeared on 3 December 2002 broadcasts on MTV, NBC's *Dateline NBC* and 19 December 2002's *Larry King Live* on CNN.
3. The excerpt of 'Superman' 's lyrics mentioning Carey says, 'Play no games, say no names, ever since I broke up with what's her face/I'm a different man, kiss my ass, kiss my lips, bitch why ask?/Kiss my dick, hit my cash, I'd rather have you whip my ass/Don't put out? I'll put you out/Won't get out, I'll push you out?/Puss blew out, copin' shit/Wouldn't piss on fire to put you out/Am I too nice? buy you ice/Bitch if you died, wouldn't buy you life/What you tryin' to be, my new wife?/What you Mariah? fly through twice'.
4. Full lyrics to 'Clown' can be viewed on ([http://www.monarc.com/mariahcarey/music/M\\_1.las?click=charmbracelet](http://www.monarc.com/mariahcarey/music/M_1.las?click=charmbracelet))

5. As the rapper and the starstruck narrator in PSB's song move from backstage to the rapper's room (most likely a hotel room), they have a sexual encounter. The rapper offers the fan 'a private performance', alluding to genital sex. The narrator says 'he [the rapper] said we could be secret lovers', indicating the rapper's awareness that his homosexuality would have to remain private for the sake of his career. The

rapper further discredits realness when he mocks his own homophobic anxiety from the song 'Stan'. According to the narrator, 'Then he joked/Hey, man!/Your name isn't Stan, is it?/We should be together!/And he was passionate'. The rapper emerges less as a 'closet case' than self-conscious purveyor of homophobic rhetoric in service of his career.

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