

## When You're Asked about Eminem

By Jackson Katz, Ph.D.

(NOTE: The following are brief discussions about the gender and sexual politics of superstar rap artist Marshall Mathers, aka Eminem. They are intended to provide ideas for sound bites and other responses by battered women's advocates, anti-rape activists, activists against gay and lesbian bashing, and others who are opposed to the Grammys honoring Mathers and allowing him to perform on the February 21st international telecast.)

1. Eminem's fans argue that his raps about raping, torturing, and murdering women are not meant to be taken literally. "Just because we listen to the music doesn't mean we're gonna go out and rape and murder women. We know it's just a song." But thoughtful critics of Eminem do not make the argument that the clear and present danger of his lyrics lie in the possibility that some unstable young man will go out and imitate in real life what the artist is rapping about. (While possible, this is highly unlikely.)

Rather, one of the most damaging aspects of Eminem's violent misogyny and homophobia is how normal and matter-of-fact this violence comes to seem. Rapping and joking about sex crimes has the effect of desensitizing people to the real pain and trauma suffered by victims and their loved ones. The process of desensitization to violence through repeated exposure in the media has been studied for decades. Among the effects: young men who have watched/listened to excessive amounts of fictionalized portrayals of men's violence against women in mainstream media and pornography have been shown to be more callous toward victims, less likely to believe their accounts of victimization, more willing to believe they were "asking for it," and less likely to intervene in instances of "real-life" violence.

2. Marshall Mathers is a bully with a microphone. His public persona - as well as some well-publicized incidents in his "private" life - fit many of the predictable characteristics of men who batter. Especially the folklore about his famously difficult childhood. Narcissistic batterers often paint themselves as the true victims. In fact, many of his young fans, male and female, reference his abusive family life to explain his rage. Batterer intervention counselors hear this excuse every day from men who are in court-mandated programs for beating their girlfriends and wives. "I had a tough childhood. I have a right to be angry," or "She was the real aggressor. She pushed my buttons and I just reacted." The counselors' typical answer: "It is not right or ok that you were abused as a child. You deserve our empathy and support. But you have no right to pass on your pain to other people."

3. Eminem's defenders - including a number of prominent music critics -- like to argue that his ironic wit and dark sense of humor are lost on many of his detractors, who supposedly "don't get it." This is what his predominantly young fans are constantly being told: that some people don't like the likeable "Em" because they don't get him, the personae he's created, his outrageously transgressive humor. In comparison, his fans are said to be much more hip, since they're in on the joke. One way to respond to this is to say "We get it, alright. We understand that lyrics are usually not meant to be taken literally. And we think we have a good sense of humor. We just don't think it's funny for men to be joking aggressively about murdering and raping women, and assaulting gays and lesbians. Just like we don't think that it's funny for white people to be making racist jokes at the expense of people of color. This sort of 'hate humor' is not just harmless fun. Millions of American girls and women are assaulted by men each year. According to the U.S. surgeon general, battering is the leading cause of injury to women. We're seeing a large increase around the country in teen relationship violence. Gay-bashing is a serious problem all over the country. Sorry if we don't find that funny."

4. Eminem has been skillfully marketed as a "rebel" to whom many young people - especially white boys -- can relate. But what exactly is he rebelling against? Powerful women who oppress weak and vulnerable men? Omnipotent gays and lesbians who make life a living hell for straight people? Eminem's misogyny and homophobia, far from being "rebellious," are actually extremely traditional and conservative. As a straight white man, Marshall Mathers would actually be much more of a rebel if he rapped about supporting women's equality and embracing gay and lesbian civil rights. Instead, he is only a rebel in a very narrow sense of that word. Since he offends a lot of parents, kids can "rebel" against their parents' wishes by listening to him, buying his cd's, etc. The irony is that by buying into Eminem's clever "bad boy" act, they are just being obedient, predictable consumers. ("If you want to express your rebellious side, we have just the right product for you! The Marshall Mathers LP! Come get your Slim Shady!) It's rebellion as a purchasable commodity.

But if you focus on the contents of his lyrics, the "rebellion" is empty. Context is everything. If you're a "rebel," it matters who you are and what you're rebelling against. The KKK are rebels, too. They boast about it all the time. They fly the Confederate (rebel) flag. But most cultural commentators wouldn't nod approvingly to the KKK as models of adolescent rebellion for American youth because the \*content\* of what they're advocating is so repugnant. (And Eminem would be dropped from MTV playlists and lose his record contract immediately if he turned his lyrical aggression away from women and gays and onto people of color.) Is it possible that when "responsible" journalists and other entertainers embrace Eminem as a "rebel," it says something about \*them,\* and their gender and sexual politics, including how seriously they regard the problems of rape, wife-murder, and young men's violence against gays and lesbians?

5. Some of Eminem's admirers argue that his detractors don't respond well to the anti-social disdain and nihilism -- found in parts of young, white, working-class culture -- that the now multi-millionaire Eminem captures so skillfully in his raps. There might be some truth to this. But it is also true that the music, television, and movie industries are constantly developing marketing strategies to appeal to the lucrative markets of young consumers of all socioeconomic classes. In recent years, one of the most successful of these strategies involves praising young consumers for how media-savvy they are, especially in contrast with their parents and other older people. Then, as the young consumers absorb the props for their sophistication, they are sold cd's, movies, and myriad other products whose sensibilities supposedly prove how "savvy " their purchasers really are. This process would be laughable were it not for the fact that some of the products (e.g. slasher movies, Eminem) often simply reinforce existing cultural prejudices and animuses.

What this process makes painfully clear is the crying need for more media literacy education in the schools. Young people need to be given analytic tools to understand the ways in which they are being manipulated by a consumer culture that doesn't care about them or their struggles to lead rewarding lives, free from abuse and violence. Wealthy corporations in the consumer culture, including the record companies that have profited handsomely from Eminem, only care about young people's money. To them, it's all about the Benjamins (the money). The rest of us who care about kids need to do a better job of making that clear.

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