

8 Reasons Eminem's Popularity is a Disaster for Women

By Jackson Katz, Ph.D.

"I loved (8 Mile)...probably one of the best movies I've seen in years. And I'm a farm boy from Upstate New York with a weakness for James Taylor...Was Eminem whitewashed, made to be more likable than his reputation as a homophobe, misogynist, an all-around unlikable performer who spews his offensive lyrics across the airwaves? Probably. (emphasis added) But it's a movie of hope..." -- Craig Wilson, USA Today

"Put Anthrax on a Tampax and slap you till you can't stand." -- Eminem, "Superman"

Love him or loathe him, Eminem is unquestionably an impressive cultural player. He is a multitalented artist: a wildly inventive rap lyricist, a charismatic performer, and now an effective actor (essentially playing a heroicized version of himself).

What is in question is the nature of Eminem's art and image, and its significance. One thing is certain: he has been embraced by the cultural mainstream in a way that is unprecedented for a rapper. Obviously this has much (everything?) to do with his whiteness, and critiques of Eminem have typically centered on the racial politics of his initial rise to notoriety and now to the heights of pop cultural fame. But there are other analyses that have only begun to dim the luster of this 21st century legend-in-the-making. For example, one disturbing way to understand Eminem's popularity is that he has achieved success not *in spite* of his virulent misogyny and homophobic utterances – as many critics allege -- but in part *because* of them. As Richard Goldstein argued in a brilliant piece in the Village Voice, many of Eminem's male (and some female) fans take "guilty pleasure" in identifying with the aggressor. In that sense Eminem's success tells us something about ourselves – something that many progressive, feminist, egalitarian and nonviolent people in this era of white male backlash and militarism find quite disheartening.

Eminem has been the target of protest from gay and lesbian activists who object to his lyrical endorsement of violence against them. Other gays have embraced him in spite of this (most notably, and controversially, Elton John). But Eminem's homophobia is not simply a matter of specific lyrics. Rather, it is central to his constructed tough- white-guy image. For all of his vaunted "honesty" and presumed vulnerability, the misanthropically cartoonish "Slim Shady" persona that Marshall Mathers hides behind requires (at least publicly) a purging of anything that can be associated with femininity. Hence you hear from Eminem (and Dr. Dre) a steady stream of "bitch-slapping" misogyny peppered with anti-gay invective, all in the service of establishing their "hardness." The irony, of course, is that this hypermasculine posturing – so dismissive of women -- produces homoerotic tensions in the inner sanctum of hip hop maleness, which then requires Eminem and Dre (and other gangsta rappers) to verbally demonstrate their heterosexuality by attacking gays. It's an embarrassingly predictable process.

Unfortunately, the Hollywood mythmakers Brian Grazer, Scott Silver, and Curtis Hanson (the producer, screenwriter, and director, respectively, of *8 Mile*) have so distorted the Eminem story in pursuit of box office glory that it will be quite a while before some of his more innocent fans – including many women -- get a better handle on who and what the artist represents. The cultural "meanings" of Eminem are

sure to be the subject of debate for years to come. There is no honest way to predict definitively what course this debate will take.

But so far, the national conversation about Eminem has taken place on the terms of fawning critics, flaks for the record and film industries, and lay prophets of the cultural Zeitgeist, all of whom have been incessantly, and shamelessly, hyping the "hip-hop Elvis" for the past couple of years. Give them credit. They've succeeded wildly -- Eminem is now a full-blown cultural phenomenon and global merchandising cash cow. The open secret, however, is that in order for this to have happened, many people have had to go into denial or be unselfconsciously revisionist -- especially when it comes to Eminem's retrograde and abusive gender and sexual politics.

It's time to expand the terms of debate. It's time to offer some counterbalance to the mythologizing distortions from the PR department of Eminem, Inc. If Eminem is an artist whose work contains multiple layers of meaning, it's time to examine more deeply some of those layers. In particular, it's time to consider with eyes wide open some of the potentially horrific effects of this art in a world already filled with misogynous and violent men.

Toward that end, and in the *Lose Yourself* spirit of taking that one shot *right now*, rather than from historical distance, what follows are 8 arguments offered up as proof that Eminem's mega-popularity is not only troubling, but is in fact a disaster for all women (and those that care about them):

1. Eminem's lyrics help desensitize boys and men to the pain and suffering of girls and women.

Eminem's fans argue that his raps about mistreating, 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 harass, rape and murder women. We know it's just a song." But thoughtful critics of Eminem do not make the argument that the danger of his lyrics (and the lyrics of other artists, including African American rap artists) lies 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 have 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.

Let us not forget that the culture in which Eminem has become a huge star is in the midst of an ongoing *crisis* of men's violence against women. In the U.S., rates of rape, sexual assault, battering, teen relationship violence and stalking have been shockingly high for decades, far exceeding rates in comparable western societies. Sadly, millions of American girls and women have been assaulted by American boys and men. Thousands of gays each year are bashed and harassed by young men. For these victims, this is not an academic debate about the differences between literalist and satirical art. It hits closer to home.

2. Girls are encouraged to be attracted to boys and men who don't respect women.

What began as a tentative dance has become a passionate embrace. After initially airing "misgivings" about featuring the woman-hating rapper, magazines with predominantly young female readership, like *Cosmogirl* and *Teen People*, now regularly feature "Em" on their covers, posed as a sex symbol, as an object of heterosexual female desire. This is not simply the latest example of the star-making machinery of mass media constructing the "bad boy" as dangerously desirable to women. This sends a powerful message to girls that goes something like this: he doesn't really hate and disrespect you. In fact, he loves you. He's just misunderstood. It's the hip hop version of *Beauty and the Beast*. You know, underneath that gruff exterior, between the lines of those nasty lyrics, lies a tender heart that has been hurt, a good man who just needs more love and understanding.

This is a myth that battered women have been fed for centuries! That his violence is *her* responsibility, that if only she loved him more, his abuse would stop. This is one of the most damaging myths about batterers, and one of the most alarming features of Eminem's popularity with girls. Remember, Eminem is the same "lovable" rapper who wrote a chillingly realistic song ("Kim") about murdering his wife (whose real name is Kim), and putting her body in the trunk of his car, interspersed with loving references to their daughter Hallie (their real-life daughter is named Hallie). This is the same "cute" guy who angrily raps about catching diseases from "ho's." ("Drips") This is the same "adorable" man who constantly unleashes torrents of verbal aggression against women, even though he is so sensitive to the potential wounding power of words that he famously refuses to use the "n-word." Why is it not okay for a white rapper to diss "niggers," but it is okay for a man to express contempt for "bitches" and "ho's."

His credulous female fans counter: he doesn't really hate women. How could he? He loves his daughter! For battered women's advocates, this is one of the most frustrating aspects of Eminem's popularity. His defenders – including women – will utter some of the most discredited myths about abusive men as if they have special insight! Newsflash to female Eminem fans: "He loves his daughter" is one of the most predictable excuses that batterers give in pleading for another chance. The fact is, most batterers are not one-dimensional ogres. Abusive men often love the very women they're abusing. And let us not forget that when Eminem verbally abuses his wife/ex-wife through his lyrics, he is verbally abusing his daughter's mother – and by extension his daughter.

3. His popularity *with girls* sends a dangerous message to boys and men.

Boys and young men have long expressed frustration with the fact that girls and young women say they're attracted to nice guys, but that the most popular girls often end up with the disdainful tough guys who treat them like dirt. We all know that heterosexual young guys are forever struggling to figure out what girls want. What are they supposed to conclude when 53% of the *8 Mile* audience on opening weekend was female?

What are men to make of New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd when she writes, uncritically, that a "gaggle" of her female Baby Boomer friends are "surreptitiously smitten" with a 30-year-old rapper whose lyrics literally drip with contempt for women? (If you're in denial or simply refuse to believe that his lyrics are degrading to women, do your homework – download his lyrics.) That girls want to be treated with dignity and respect? Or that the quickest route to popularity with them is to be verbally and emotionally cruel, that "bad boy" posturing is a winning strategy to impress naïve (and self-loathing)

girls? Surely most of Eminem's female fans would not want to be sending that message to their male peers – but they are.

Boys who have listened carefully to Eminem's actual lyrics -- not just the hit songs or the sanitized movie soundtrack -- know that most self-respecting girls who are conscious about the depths of our culture's sexism are repulsed by Eminem's misogyny and depressed by his popularity. Sadly, many of these girls have been silent, fearing they'll be branded as "uncool" because they "don't get" the artist who is supposedly the voice of their generation.

There are women who like Eminem because (they say) he's complex and not easily knowable; they would argue that it is reductionist to characterize his art as sexist. But the burden is on them to demonstrate how -- in a culture where so many men sexually harass, rape, and batter women -- it is possible to reconcile a concern for women's physical, sexual, and emotional well-being with admiration for a male artist whose lyrics consistently portray women in a contemptuous and sexually degrading manner.

Girls and women, even those who have been coopted into Eminem-worship, want to be treated with respect. They certainly don't want to be physically or sexually assaulted by men. They don't want to be sexually degraded by dismissive and arrogant men. But they can't have it both ways. They can't proclaim their attraction to a man who's gotten rich verbally trashing and metaphorically raping women and yet expect that young men will treat them with dignity.

4. The racial storyline around Eminem perpetuates the racist myth that "hip" white guys are those who most closely emulate the sexist beliefs and hypermasculine posturing of some Black males.

Eminem is popular with white audiences in large measure because the African American gangsta rap icon Dr. Dre and other hardcore Black rappers with "street credibility" have conferred on him the mantle of legitimacy. Dre is Eminem's mentor and producer, signaling to Black audiences as well that unlike Vanilla Ice – a useful object of derision from a decade ago -- this white boy is for real. What's missing from this story is that Dr. Dre himself is one of the most misogynous and homophobic figures in the history of rap music. He has produced and performed some of this era's most degrading songs about women. (e.g. "Bitches Ain't Shit")

In other words, Eminem and Dre are modeling a perverse sort of interracial solidarity that comes at the expense of women. It's an old and sordid story: sexism provides men a way to ally across race and class lines. African American people who are happy to see Eminem earning rap even greater legitimacy in white America might want to consider that this era's white artist most identified as a bridge to Black culture has built that bridge on the denigration and undermining of Black women -- and all women.

5. Eminem's personal trajectory – either the so-called "true" story, or the explicitly fictionalized version in *8 Mile* – perpetuates damaging mythology about abusive men.

Eminem's fans like to ascribe to him the sympathetic and classic role of underprivileged underdog. But Marshall Mathers, if he ever was an underdog, has long since crossed over into the role of bully. Unlike most bullies this side of right-wing talk radio, however, he has a very large microphone (and now a screen presence).

You can gain important insight into one key aspect of the Eminem persona by studying both the behavior of men who batter and people's responses to them. The man who is being lionized as one of this era's emblematic artists shares many character traits with men who batter. One glaring similarity is the folklore that Mathers has actively constructed about his famously difficult childhood. Narcissistic batterers frequently paint themselves as the true victims. It's *them* we're supposed to feel sorry for – not their victims (or the victims/targets of their lyrical aggression.).

It is well-known that many of Eminem's fans, male and female, reference his abusive family life to explain and rationalize his rage. But it is not as well-known that batterer intervention counselors hear this excuse every single 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."

6. Eminem's success has unleashed a torrent of mother-blaming.

One element of Eminem's story of which all his fans are aware is that he and his mother don't get along. Many people psychoanalyze him from a distance and argue that his problems with women stem from his stormy relationship with his mother. This may or may not be true, but it is an excuse that abusive men often make for their behavior. As Lundy Bancroft observes in his book [Why Does He Do That: inside the minds of angry and controlling men](#), battered women themselves sometimes like this explanation, since it makes sense out of the man's behavior and gives the woman someone safe to be angry at – since getting angry at him always seems to blow up in her face.

It is hard to say what percentage of the Eminem faithful relate to his oft-articulated rage at his mother. But consider this anecdotal evidence. I attended an Eminem concert in southern California during the "Anger Management" tour a couple of years ago. At one point, Eminem ripped off a string of angry expletives about his mother, (something like "F-you, bitch!") after which a sizable cross-section of the 18,000 person crowd joined in a violent chant repeating the verbal aggression against Ms. Mathers (and no doubt other mothers by extension.)

Why is this aspect of the Eminem phenomenon such a cause for concern? No one begrudges Eminem, or anyone else, the right to have issues – including in some cases being very angry with their mothers. But it is not a great stretch to see that Eminem's anger can easily be generalized to all women – tens of millions of whom are mothers -- and used as yet another rationale for some men's deeply held misogyny.

Considering Eminem's (and his mother's) roots on the economic margins of "white trash" Detroit, class is also a critical factor here. Poor women – especially poor women of color -- are easy scapegoats for many societal problems. Eminem's fans presumably know little about the context within which Debbie Mathers (who is white) tried to raise her kids. Might we have some compassion for her as we are asked to for him? Why was she constantly struggling financially? How did educational inequities and lack of employment opportunities affect *her* life, her family experiences, her education level, her dreams, her ability to be a good parent? As a woman, how did sexism shape her choices? What was her personal history, including her history with men? Was she ever abused? We know a lot of women with substance abuse problems develop them as a form of self-medication against the effects of

trauma. What is the connection between Ms. Mathers' alleged (by her son) substance abuse and any history of victimization she might have?

Further, if Eminem's father deserted him and the family when Marshall was young, why is so much of Eminem's verbal aggression aimed at his mother and at women? If you buy the argument that Eminem's misogyny comes from his issues with his mother, then considering his father's behavior, why doesn't he have a huge problem with men? (Hint: the answer has to do with SEXISM.) It's easy to blame struggling single mothers for their shortcomings; right-wing politicians have been doing this for decades. A more thoughtful approach would seek to understand their plight, and while such an understanding would provide no excuse for abusive behavior (if that is what Eminem actually experienced), it would give it much-needed context. Unfortunately, this context is notably absent from much political discourse – and from *8 Mile*.

7. Eminem has elevated to an art form the practice of verbally bullying and degrading people (especially women and gays) and then claiming "I was just kidding around."

In fact, many of Eminem's fans will claim that his Slim Shady persona – or any of his nasty anti-woman lyrics – are just an act. On a more sophisticated level, 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 likable "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 that non-fans can respond to this is by saying "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 – no matter how clever the lyrics.

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. In recent years there has been growing recognition of the alarming prevalence of abuse in teen relationships; one recent national study found 20 % of teenage girls experience some form of physical or sexual abuse from men or boys. Gay-bashing is a serious problem all over the country. Music lyrics and other art forms can either in some way illuminate these problems, or they can cynically exploit them. Eminem is arguably a major force in the latter category. Sorry if we don't find that funny."

8. Eminem's rebel image obscures the fact that sexism and men's violence against women perpetuates established male power – it is not rebellious.

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 in hip hop culture, 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 started trashing people of color, or Jews, or Catholics, etc...) Isn't it plausible that when "responsible" critics, journalists and other entertainers embrace Eminem as a "rebel," it provides a glimpse into their own repressed anger at women, their own unacknowledged anxieties about homosexuality?

Isn't it also plausible that after Eminem has posed for dozens of magazine layouts dutifully wearing the swoosh logo of the Nike corporation, he finds amusing how easily people buy the outlandish idea of him as a rebel?

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