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"We Made You": The Contrived and Contested Nature of Authenticity in American Folk and Hip Hop Subcultures

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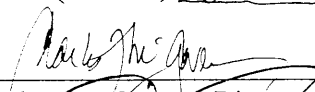
**“We Made You”: The Contrived and Contested Nature of Authenticity in
American Folk and Hip Hop Subcultures**

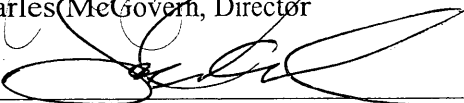
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

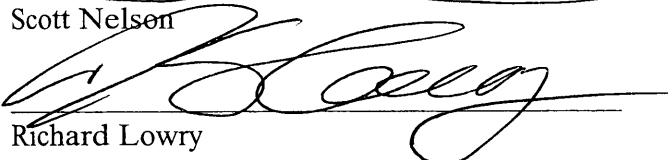
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“Curtains Up”: Introduction

The inspiration for this study comes from an unlikely comparison made by Ed Sheeran:

You might look at Eminem and Bob Dylan and say they're two entirely different acts, but all you have to do with Eminem is put a guitar behind his words and it's a very similar thing....Folk music tells stories and hip hop tells stories....There's just a beat that separates it.¹

Indeed, both genres were a music by and for the people, with roots in strong communities and traditions. Both often used political subject matter, but were simultaneously subjected to commercial pulls. Both had internal divisions as a result. Clearly, Sheeran's observation was correct on more than one level. Folk and hip hop do, in fact, tell stories, but also represent chapters in a greater cultural narrative — one that tells of an age-old cultural process by which authenticities are respectively built up and torn down by subcultures and the marketplace. Prior to discussion of this phenomenon, one must first realize the tricky, transient nature of culture and how it played out in both folk and hip hop.

Culture is a difficult thing to define, and could comprise a full study in its own right due to its abounding subsets. However, this study will consider three primary cultural subsets that pertain to studies of folk and hip hop. One might call the most underground of these subsets 'subculture,' which *Oxford Dictionaries* defines as "a cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture."² With their unique aesthetics and socio-political outlooks, both folk and hip hop in their early stages correspond to this definition. Yet individual subcultures are almost always incorporated by the 'counterculture,'

¹ Rebecca Brayton, "Ed Sheeran Compares Bob Dylan vs. Eminem," YouTube video, 5:12, posted by WatchMojo.com, May 18, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ote7G4qEjfl>, accessed October 18, 2014.

² *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "subculture," accessed March 12, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/subculture.

a coalition of popularized subcultural forms that directly opposes the dominant culture.³ It is this definition to which folk and hip hop better correlate during the times that Dylan and Eminem saw their meteoric rises to fame. While it is debatable whether hip hop remains a quasi-countercultural entity, it is indisputable that folk has passed into ‘dominant culture’ — namely, the culture of the majority and/or those who wield the most most power in society. In the twentieth century United States, this usually meant middle-class, suburban whites.

It is notable that even without other forces at play, time will eventually dull the edges of even the most callous or brazen subcultural groups, primarily because these groups inevitably age and become the dominant culture. Yet commercial forces can play a major role in accelerating this process. After initial periods of rejection by the dominant culture, the broader youth counterculture will absorb and amplify these subcultures. Recognizing their marketability, the dominant culture will partially accept and appropriate these cultural forms, rendering them more accessible for inexperienced consumers. However, a crucial distinction must be made. The dominant culture does in fact control most of the capital (and therefore consumerism to a great extent), but it is subcultures that innovate cultural forms and the broader counterculture that most often determines which of these forms are worthy of consumption. Therefore, use of ‘mainstream’ as a noun or adjective does not necessarily imply the presence of the dominant culture. Rather, it refers to the pinnacle of commercial success — the point at which a cultural entity endures the spotlight for a brief moment before being cast aside. Completely removed from their original contexts and thus devoid of original meanings, time will eventually carry these cast-off cultural forms into the background, where they can be recovered and remade or

³ Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 133.

passively accepted as fixed. This is precisely what happened with folk, and what is arguably still happening with hip hop.

The rise and fall of both folk and hip hop has been well documented in historical accounts.⁴ Narratives that include participant memoirs and/or biography offer personal insight into specific aspects of these movements.⁵ Meanwhile, other works historically assess the effects of various intellectual and political trends on these subcultures.⁶ Others sociologically investigate their connections to American identity politics and its landscape of cultural pluralism.⁷ However, seldom are folk and hip hop analyzed in conjunction, and never through such a linear marxist

⁴ Ronald D. Cohen offers a definitive overview of the American folk revival with *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). Although primarily focusing on Canada, Gillian Mitchell also provides a thorough account of the movement in *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945-1980* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Inc., 2007). In regards to hip hop, Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (New York: Picador Reading Group, 2006) details the cultural landscape of hip hop from its deep-rooted origins in the 1960s to the present day; Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) also offers a poignant analysis of hip hop's development with insight into contributing social, political, and economic factors. All of these broad works were central to my education of folk and hip hop.

⁵ Ronald D. Cohen's collection of participant reflections, *"Wasn't That a Time!": Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 2005) and Richard Weissman's *Which Side Were You On: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2005) both provide biographical and/or autobiographical accounts of the revival and emphasize its cultural legacy. Dan Charnas' *The Big Payback* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010) offers an economically-focused history of hip hop's development from the perspectives of numerous industry insiders. Vibe Magazine also investigates and illustrates hip hop's development up to the new millennium via hundreds of photographs and dozens of personal anecdotes in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999).

⁶ Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Music Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) traces the diverse cultural or intellectual origins of the folk revival, but also links specific cultural developments to contemporary political events. Lawrence J. Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010) examines the long-standing relationship of of American folk music and politics. Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, Charnas' *The Big Payback*, and Tricia Rose's *Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop — and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) also highlight key political and intellectual debates in hip hop, some modern, and some extending back to its precursory forms in the 1960s.

⁷ Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) studies how revivalists shaped popular perceptions of authenticity, and how this factored into the formation of folk and/or American identities. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison provide a sociological perspective of how folk music and derivative genres were used to define and mobilize social and political movements with *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Murray Forman examines how hip hop authenticity and personal and collective identity are so closely linked to socio-geographic and racial origins in *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music and Hip Hop, 1978-1996* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002). While offering a thorough account of the genre in the process, Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar similarly investigates the ambivalent balance between hip hop authenticity and mainstream success in *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

historiographical lens (especially one with such micro-historical focus on particular figures).⁸ Such an approach not only allows for deeper analysis of and more personal insight into these movements, but also reveals a recurrent cultural-commercial process affecting all subcultures throughout the late-modern and postmodern periods, of which folk and hip hop are particularly demonstrative.

Academic interest in folk music was high at the turn of the twentieth century, as folklorists, musicologists, and preservationists alike endeavored to transcribe and define a musical tradition that was “rural in origin, oral in transmission and communal in nature.”⁹ These activities increased in frequency during the next few decades, as President Roosevelt’s New Deal funded numerous programs to sustain declining cultural expressive traditions amid mounting industrialization and urbanization. For example, the Farm Security Administration’s photography project captured and portrayed the crippling poverty of rural communities, and the Federal Writers Project supported John and Alan Lomax’s multiple field recording trips for the Library of Congress.¹⁰ Such projects not only fueled a nostalgic and somewhat condescending interest in folk music among the middle and upper classes, but also coincided and coordinated with a burgeoning movement of populist performers who wrote and sang Leftist songs for migrant, union, and working-class audiences.¹¹ This collaboration was evident in early folk singers such

⁸ By “linear marxist,” I am not referring to the ideology of Marxism or the liberatory intent that usually characterizes this sort of historiography. Rather, I am emphasizing the central role that social class and economics will have in this study, as well as the relatively determinant and dialectical “history from below” approach that this study will take. Micro-historical analysis of Dylan and Eminem will also aid in my greater arguments concerning folk, hip hop, and authenticity in general.

⁹ Jeremy Kearney, “The People’s Music,” review of JP Bean’s *Singing from the Floor: A History of British Folk Clubs*, *Dublin Review of Books*, March 6, 2014, <http://www.drbb.ie/contributors-articles/the-people-s-music>, accessed on January 4, 2015.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

as poet Carl Sandburg, who performed railroad ballads, drinking songs, levee camp hollers, and other songs of the common man to predominantly white, middle-class audiences.¹² Scott Nelson elaborates:

This was role playing as high art: Listeners would be transported back to a time and place that the performer described, and sense the pathos of the common laborers who performed it there. Sandburg stood right on the margin between labor radicalism and nostalgia. Gradually he moved toward nostalgia.

By 1940, Sandburg's somehow progressive yet regressive style came to characterize the entire folk movement, of which New York City's Greenwich Village constituted ground zero.¹³

The subsequent folk revival took place in two distinct parts — the first wave (roughly 1945-1954) and the second wave (approximately 1958-1965). Each of these waves reflected unique socio-political circumstances and sentiments of their times. Heralded by topical protest singers such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, the first wave of the revival was closely linked to activities of the Old Left, which espoused a collectivist philosophy evocative of communism.¹⁴ With their acoustic guitars and Leftist lyrics, these artists consciously objected to mainstream society by offering audiences an antithesis to everything for which they perceived Tin Pan Alley to stand — money, mindlessness, and the market. They also emphasized collectivity, activism, and horizontal organization, as apparent in their topical song selections, blue-collar audiences and performance venues, and formation of broad-based groups such as People's Songs.¹⁵ During the Red Scare in the 1950s, however, the movement halted abruptly

¹² Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 138.

¹³ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 28.

¹⁴ Mitchell, *The North American*, 111; and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2011).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

after the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigated Communism and networks blacklisted multiple folk performers — most famously, Pete Seeger and Lee Hays of the folk quartet The Weavers.¹⁶ Thus, under intense surveillance and scrutiny by the FBI and public eye, many artists and groups lost their contracts and the movement all but disappeared.

However, by the late 1950s, the folk movement had regained momentum as a new generation of folk performers began to blend folk styles with other brands of popular music and demonstrate a greater commercial awareness. For example, by the mid-1960s, Bob Dylan was not only writing highly introspective lyrics, but also incorporating electric guitar in his songs. Meanwhile, the highly marketable Kingston Trio released their own line of men's clothing.¹⁷ These developments clearly contradicted the traditionalist folk canon, which had established the genre as distinctly topical, collective, acoustic, and non-commercial, and folk's Old Guard assertively reemerged to restore their values. Yet much of this musical tension was a reflection of generational conflict between the Old and New Lefts — contrary to collective action as promoted by the Old Left, the New Left called for “participatory democracy,” a more individualistic approach to achieving common goals.¹⁸ In this regard, one could interpret the second wave of the folk revival not only as young folk artists' active rebellion against the restrictive political and performative customs of folk's Old Guard, but also as a manifestation of wider ideological changes in society. Constant experimentation and evolution would completely

¹⁶ Lee Hays. *"Sing out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!": The Writings of Lee Hays*, ed. Robert S. Koppelman (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 116-7.

¹⁷ “"I'm A-Goin' Away, I'm A-Goin' to Stay...." Tenderfoot Tenor for the Kingston Trio," *Show Business Illustrated* (September 5, 1961): <http://www.kingstontrioplace.com/glsbi961.htm>, accessed on January 6, 2015.

¹⁸ Tom Hayden, “Port Huron Statement,” *Students for a Democratic Society* (1962): <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>, accessed on January 6, 2015.

remove the folk genre from its roots, rendering it much more similar to other forms of popular music.

A mere decade later, hip hop burst onto the scene. Similar to folk, hip hop's early appeal lay in its capacity as a medium through which artists could mentally and physically escape their desolate situations, recount violence and hardship, or offer social commentary. Thus, its development can be similarly traced. Like folk music, one could link hip hop to regional or rural traditions dating back to pre-colonialism — for example, the escapist lyrics, simplistic rhythms, and sparse instrumentation of rap recalled earlier blues and slave-era work songs. Stevie Wonder went as far as to call rappers “modern-day griots.”¹⁹ Hip hop's earliest hits, most notably The Sugarhill Gang's lighthearted 1979 hit “Rapper's Delight” and the emergent DJ and MC scene in the South Bronx exemplified these qualities and solidified hip hop's initial role as a “party music.”²⁰ However, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hit “The Message,” demonstrated that hip hop could also be used as an outlet to expose and decry societal problems.²¹ From roughly 1984–1993, hip hop became a legitimate commentative platform as performers increasingly incorporated themes of black power and political militancy in their lyrics. The particular success of New York-based artists or groups such as Rakim and Public Enemy established the region as a hub of hip hop activity.²²

During the period from 1993–1999, hip hop's influence as a musical and socio-political force had spread from East to West and developed distinct, lucrative regional styles — most

¹⁹ Stevie Wonder as quoted by Jeremy K. Brown, *Stevie Wonder: Musician* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 80.

²⁰ Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 20.

²¹ Chang, *Can't Stop*, 178.

²² *Ibid.*, 229; and Becky Blanchard, “The Social Significance of Rap and Hip-Hop Culture,” *EDGE* (July 26, 1999): https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socialsignificance.htm, accessed on January 7, 2015.

notably, East Coast “hardcore hip hop” and West Coast “gangsta rap.”²³ While the former was angry, aggressive, gritty, and politically charged, the latter offered slower and mellower accounts of “gangsta” lifestyle that appealed to suburban audiences. The intense rivalry that emerged between the two coasts and their respective sub-genres evidenced hip hop’s mounting influence, as audiences fiercely defended and endorsed their regional artists.²⁴ However, many lamented the genre’s commercial turn, arguing that record companies’ exploitation of black hip hop artists took away their power. Chuck D of Public Enemy was one such artist to warn of the impending “death and destruction” of African American people.²⁵ His prediction may have been exaggerated, but his concerns were justified — this period also saw the meteoric rise of Vanilla Ice, a white rapper from a middle-class Dallas suburb who admitted to having “bent the truth” about his background on numerous occasions.²⁶ Additionally, Missy Elliot gained notoriety as one of hip hop’s first female artists to garner mainstream attention. Certainly, the poor, urban, black men of hip hop had cause for concern as dissolving barriers to the once-exclusive genre threatened their legitimacy.

Regional styles became nearly indistinguishable as artists pursued a more marketable, mainstream sound. This period of hip hop’s universal appeal, roughly 1999–2010, owed much to the success of artists such as Eminem, tobyMac, Lil’ Kim, and Wyclef Jean, who transcended previously established racial, socio-economic, gendered, or even national barriers of entry to hip

²³ Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, “AZ, Doe or Die, EMI,” *SPIN* 11, no. 9 (December 1995): 123.

²⁴ Forman, *The Hood*, 285.

²⁵ Margena A. Christian, “Is Hip Hop Dead?” *Jet*, April 9, 2007.

²⁶ Vanilla Ice as quoted by Linda Sanders, “Toughing it Out,” *Entertainment Weekly* (June 5, 2008): <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,313618,00.html>, accessed on January 5, 2015.

hop.²⁷ Yet this multidimensional nature of hip hop was not reflected in its one-dimensional portrayal in the marketplace, for reasons to which Tricia Rose refers in the following passage:

What is more important about the shift in hip hop's orientation is not its movement from precommodity to commodity but the shift in control over the scope and direction of the profit making process, out of the hands of local Black and Hispanic entrepreneurs and into the hands of larger white owned multinational businesses.²⁸

Essentially, as these minority entrepreneurs “sold out,” white owned businesses dissected hip hop subculture and extracted only its most potent and marketable qualities, thus promoting narrow perceptions of hip hop culture and contributing to the formation of oft-demeaning stereotypes of its participants. However, though harder to tell with such a close vantage point, it is likely that hip hop, like folk decades earlier, is splintering as artists increasingly blend it with other popular styles.

Clearly, folk and hip hop share abounding developmental parallels. Both had diverse origins, the development of distinct regional styles, a period of standardization, and a period of experimentation. Both had complicated and often contradictory relationships to the marketplace. Both arguably succumbed, or are succumbing, to these contradictions. Yet the most notable similarity between folk and hip hop was their constructions of strict authenticities that were impossible to maintain. Brief discussion of authenticity as a problematic theoretical concept will preface explanation of this process.

As J.L. Austin describes, authenticity is fundamentally a “dimension word” that carries different meanings in different contexts.²⁹ For example, John Christman equates the term with

²⁷ Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*, 247.

²⁸ Rose, *Black Noise*, 40.

²⁹ J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 71-2.

‘autonomy’: “to be autonomous is to be...one’s authentic self.”³⁰ Meanwhile, Augustine’s “inward and upward” model of authenticity might be more synonymous with ‘morality’ or even ‘salvation.’³¹ Additionally, Somogy Varga defines “sincerity” or “honesty” as “being true to one’s own self,” which in his words, “sounds a lot like the contemporary ideal of authenticity.”³² ‘Individuality,’ ‘fidelity,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘originality,’ and a myriad of other terms might also serve as apt synonyms for authenticity depending on the context. In observation of the strong, positive overtones of these meanings, Annette Davison wonders “is authenticity just a synonym for ‘good?’”³³ In music, this is likely the case, for as Regina Bendix states, “The notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic.”³⁴ Such divisive disciplinary thinking highlights numerous paradoxes, as Denis Dutton describes below:

...a Han van Meegeren forgery of a Vermeer is at one and the same time both a fake Vermeer and an authentic van Meegeren, just as a counterfeit bill may be both a fraudulent token of legal tender but at the same time a genuine piece of paper.³⁵

Similarly, if one musical artist is sincere but untraditional, and another is traditional but insincere, they might both consider themselves to be “authentic” and the other to be “inauthentic.” Neither is wrong or right — this is because authenticity is not only multi-faceted, but also subjective. Those that strive to achieve one type of authenticity will inevitably come into

³⁰ John Christman, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral/>, accessed on January 24, 2015.

³¹ Augustine, "Interiority," *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 455; and Eric L. Saak, "Augustine in the Western Middle Ages to the Reformation," *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

³² Somogy Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 15.

³³ Annette Davison, "Critical Musicology Study Day on 'Authenticity,'" *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 264.

³⁴ Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 9.

³⁵ Denis Dutton, "Authenticity in Art," *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 258.

conflict with a contradictory interpretation of the term. In this regard, pure, unadulterated authenticity cannot exist. As Hugh Barker describes, “Authenticity is an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained, a quest.”³⁶ Yet society has repeatedly failed to recognize the self-defeating nature of this pursuit, as demonstrated by the fabrications of fatal authenticity narratives within both folk and hip hop.

As Dutton describes, it is within “two broad categories of sense” that the diverse dimensions of authenticity lie, to which he refers as “nominal authenticity” (denoting historical accuracy) and “expressive authenticity” (implying inherent authority).³⁷ Although certainly distinct from one another, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, folk’s Old Guard primarily valued nominal authenticity while defenders of hip hop cherished authentic expression, but the two forms were actually inextricably linked. In folk, for example, genuine forms of subcultural expression ultimately became mandatory nominal components of “authentic” folk performance. Promotion of a Leftist agenda that once celebrated the common man became a political prerequisite, while use or replication of original folk songs, instruments, arrangements, and styles of dress that once expressed a genuine desire to return to a romanticized past became aesthetically essential. Hip hop authenticity transpired similarly. In a restrictive subcultural mindset, if an artist was nominally “authentic” (i.e. poor, urban, male, and black), it was more likely that he was also expressively (i.e. lyrically) “authentic.” Yet due to the genre’s dependency on the marketplace, it was often difficult to determine to what extent certain artists were nominally or expressively “authentic” — hip hop artists always depended on the

³⁶ Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007), x.

³⁷ Dutton, "Authenticity in Art," 258.

marketplace to catapult them out of desolation to fame and fortune, and thus knew exactly how to sell themselves.

All of this is primarily to demonstrate the flawed, fractured, and fleeting nature of authenticity — in both folk and hip hop, authenticity essentially denoted precedent. As long as an artist successfully replicated or conformed to a packaged set of subcultural practices or qualities around which the genre originally coalesced, audiences of that particular community would consider the artist “authentic.” Yet in both genres, much of this was reactionary. Folk’s Old Guard only began to reassert their strict political and performative values when the inheritors of their genre adopted and adapted it to fit in with their own contemporary ideals. Similarly, issues of authenticity (or “realness”) only came up in hip hop when its influence spread to communities that bore little to no resemblance to the original subculture, encouraging the participation of dissociated artists and audiences in the genre. In folk and hip hop, these reactionaries retroactively transformed what were once unifying sets of shared principles into dogmatic and divisive standards for entry. They were only trying to ensure the (alleged) purity and perpetuation of their subcultures, but ultimately killed creativity and halted innovation in the process. Barred from entry to the now-static subcultures, youthful adherents extracted particular elements of folk and hip hop and used them as they saw fit, perpetuating folk and hip hop-derived genres that may have resembled but certainly did not represent the original subcultures.

Dylan and Eminem evidenced and participated in this process. While neither artist can be held solely responsible for bringing folk and hip hop to the mainstream, they were certainly complicit. Additionally, while neither single-handedly initiated the conservative backlash within their subcultures, both were subjects of reprisal. They also simultaneously exposed and criticized

the increasing standardization of their associated movements as well as the hypocrisy of the dominant culture. These character and career traits ultimately render Dylan and Eminem ideal candidates for a comparative case study of the attainability and sustainability of cultural authenticity. Their stories reveal a recurrent process that occurs in all music subcultures — a gradual disunion of the music and the subculture as market forces pull the aesthetic former further and further from the political roots of the latter.

1. “For the times they are a-changin’”: Bob Dylan and Folk

At the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, Ronnie Gilbert of the Weavers gave a now-ironic introduction to Bob Dylan:

They tell me that every period, every time, has its heroes. Every need has a solution and an answer....This is a young man who grew out of a need. He came here, he came to be as he is, because things needed saying and the young people were the ones who wanted to say them, and they wanted to say them in their own way. He somehow had an ear on his generation....I don't have to tell you — you know him, he's yours: Bob Dylan!³⁸

Her words were flattering enough, but their implications were much more ominous. Reflecting on that day, Dylan recalls an additional command: *Take him*. “What a crazy thing to say!” he writes, “Screw that. As far as I knew, I didn't belong to anybody then or now.”³⁹ Indeed, her words were more than just praise — in a nation rocked by civil rights struggles, the threat of nuclear war, and rising social violence, they assigned Dylan the impossible task of leading both the optimistic folk movement and discontented youth to salvation. However, due to fundamentally differing circumstances and values shaping the worldviews of these groups, it was inevitable that Dylan could not live up to this task. This chapter will discuss major sociopolitical developments of this period and reference Dylan’s responses throughout. Doing so will not only highlight mounting discordance between folkies and youth as well as Dylan’s own disillusionment with the movement, but will also demonstrate the fragile and fleeting nature of folk authenticity.

When Dylan left Hibbing, Minnesota to pursue a career in folk music, the folk movement was already nearing its zenith. Although forced underground in the mid-1950s due to intense

³⁸ Ronnie Gilbert as quoted by Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 51.

³⁹ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 115.

HUAC scrutiny, the movement largely continued on college campuses and in bohemian haunts like Greenwich Village.⁴⁰ The latter in particular thrived under the organization of folk authority figures such as Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax, who endeavored to continue the activist tradition of the late 1930s and 1940s.⁴¹ Methods of preservation predominantly included promotion of a Leftist agenda, replication of adaptation of original folk songs or lyrics, use of traditional instruments, simple arrangements that invited audience participation, and workers' attire.⁴² It was this recently codified version of folk authenticity that greeted Dylan upon his arrival to New York City in January, 1961, and for the most part, he conformed to it.

As Dylan recalls, "I was there to find singers, the ones I'd heard on record....Josh White, The New Lost City Ramblers, and a bunch of others — most of all to find Woody Guthrie."⁴³ Indeed, one of Dylan's primary motivations for traveling to New York was to visit his folk idol, who was dying of Huntington's disease in a psychiatric hospital.⁴⁴ Describing Guthrie's influence, Dylan writes "Through his compositions my view of the world was coming sharply into focus. I said to myself I was going to be Guthrie's greatest disciple."⁴⁵ For a time, this is exactly what he was — he befriended Guthrie's henchman Ramblin' Jack Elliott and other local folk singers including Odetta, the Clancy Brothers, and Tommy Makem, and became well known for his Guthrie covers on the Greenwich Village coffeehouse circuit.⁴⁶ After months of performing and a review in the *New York Times* by Robert Shelton, Dylan gained public

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 28.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14, 28, 70.

⁴³ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 244-246.

⁴⁶ Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 74-78.

recognition and eventually came to the attention of John Hammond, who signed Dylan to Columbia Records in October, 1961.⁴⁷ Dylan released his first album, *Bob Dylan*, in March, 1962, which consisted of familiar folk and blues songs with two original compositions — “Talkin’ New York,” which itself bore thematic and structural similarities to Guthrie’s “Talkin’ Subway,” and “Song to Woody,” which placed Dylan firmly within the folk movement with its reverence of one of its major icons.⁴⁸ While the album was well-received by local folkies, it only sold 5,000 copies in its first year, barely enough to break even.⁴⁹ He continued to perform in coffeeshops and house parties throughout the city trying to make a living and began to develop his own distinctive performing and writing styles.

1962 was a transformative year in Dylan’s career and personal life. Firstly, he legally changed his name to Bob Dylan, symbolically dedicating his life to developing this persona.⁵⁰ Secondly, he signed a management contract with the assertive Albert Grossman, who was committed to the commercial success of his clients.⁵¹ By the time of the release of his second album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, in May 1963, Bob Dylan was a highly respected name in the folk community. Many songs on this album were labeled as protest songs, perfectly blending traditional and topical styles of Guthrie and Pete Seeger along with Dylan’s own rough originality. For example, Dylan wrote “Masters Of War,” “Let Me Die In My Footsteps,” and “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” in response to the Cold War arms build-up.⁵² Despite their innovative

⁴⁷ Robert Shelton, “Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Stylist,” *The New York Times* (September 21, 1961): reproduced on <http://www.bobdylanroots.com/shelton.html>, accessed on April 8, 2015.

⁴⁸ Andy Greene, “50 years ago today: Bob Dylan released his debut album,” *CNN* (March 19, 2012): <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/19/showbiz/music/bob-dylan-album-50-rs/>, accessed on April 8, 2015.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Howard Sounes, *Down The Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵² All songs appear on Bob Dylan’s *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, © 1963 by Columbia.

and imagist lyrics, all of these songs placed Dylan firmly within the revival with their strong allusions to the mounting military-industrial complex and inspiration from previous folk songs — “Hard Rain” was itself a reinterpretation of “Lord Randall,” or Child Ballad No. 12.⁵³ Similarly, “Oxford Town” recounts the tribulations of James Meredith, the first black student to enroll in the University of Mississippi, and affirms Dylan’s place in folk with its narrative of hardship and its context in the American civil rights movement.⁵⁴ Dylan’s performance of “Blowin’ In The Wind” onstage with Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary among others at the 1963 March on Washington once again demonstrated his allegiance to the political mores of folk.⁵⁵

The simultaneous originality and folk authenticity of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* certainly heightened Dylan’s reputation as a folk singer and songwriter. Janis Maslin elaborates in the following passage:

These were the songs that established him as the voice of his generation — someone who implicitly understood how concerned young Americans felt about nuclear disarmament and the growing movement for civil rights: his mixture of moral authority and nonconformity was perhaps the most timely of his attributes.⁵⁶

However, there existed an unsustainability in the folk movement that seemed to manifest in Dylan. Of course, Dylan could not have risen to fame without the folk movement, which in turn owed much to the Old Left. The highly organized nature and radical Leftist platform of the Old

⁵³ Dylan introduces each verse of “Hard Rain” with a variant of the first lines of each verse from “Lord Randall” (e.g. “Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?/Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?” and “Oh where ha’e ye been, Lord Randall my son?/O where ha’e ye been, my handsome young man?”); Ibid.; and Anonymous, “Lord Randall,” www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/lord-randall, accessed on February 10, 2015.

⁵⁴ “Oxford Town,” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*.

⁵⁵ Clinton Heylin, *Bootleg: The Secret History of the Other Recording Industry* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), 49.

⁵⁶ Janet Maslin, “Renaldo Clara (1978),” review of Bob Dylan’s *Rolling Thunder*, *The New York Times* (January 26, 1978): <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A03EFD71330E631A25755C2A9679C946990D6CF>, accessed April 8, 2015.

Left were conducive to the creation and success of collectivity-minded groups of performers that commenced and characterized the first wave of the folk music revival. In many cases, the Old Left and early folk movement interacted directly — for example, veteran folksingers Peter Janovsky and Oscar Brand respectively penned and recorded “The Same Merry Go-Round” for Progressive Party candidate Henry A. Wallace’s 1948 presidential campaign.⁵⁷ Similarly, folk singers often refigured traditional ballads to voice populist opinions, as Woody Guthrie did with “Union Maid,” an adapted version of a older folk tune titled “Red Wing.”⁵⁸ These first wave revivalists expected that younger members of their movement would espouse their same ideals and continue to their specific fight for social justice. Indeed, at their cores, the Old-Leftist folk movement and the broader youth counterculture championed a similar view of the dominant culture — that it was a corrupt, all-powerful apparatus designed to dictate the lives of all who lived within its reach. For this reason, it is unsurprising that discontented youth found both solace and validation of their views in folk music. Yet similarities likely do not extend much further than this — youth did not necessarily endorse folk politics, but rather identified with its rebellious spirit. Dylan demonstrated and possibly even deepened this distinction in his subsequent albums and performances of the 1960s.

As Mike Marqusee writes, Dylan was “sustaining a precarious balance on the crest of a wave,” a feat that quickly elevated him to stardom.⁵⁹ On the back side of the swell was the Old Left, the early revivalists, and all of the traditional and topical songs that they endorsed. Yet

⁵⁷ Peter Janovsky and Oscar Brand, “The Same Merry Go-Round,” *Smithsonian Folkways*, 1948, <http://www.folkways.si.edu/peter-janovsky/the-same-merry-go-round-wallace/historical-song/music/track/smithsonian>, accessed on February 10, 2015.

⁵⁸ It is notable that “Red Wing” was originally a Tin Pan Alley song written by Kerry Mills in 1907, but it was reproduced so frequently that audiences eventually forgot its origins and considered it to part of America’s rich musical legacy; Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1980), 168.

⁵⁹ Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 211.

below was a generation of disenchanted youth looking for more meaningful methods of achieving social justice. Of course, this wave was bound to break at some point, and Dylan would be forced to either fall behind by sticking with folk or ride it out by joining the youth. His decision to do the latter is evident in the way he musically responded to events or trends in the 1960s. Released in January, 1964, Dylan's third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, demonstrates this "precarious balance." For example, in "With God On Our Side," Dylan critiques American fundamentalism and self-righteousness with explicit references to previous conflicts, although (though implied by "the next war" in the final verse) he never directly discusses the contemporary Vietnam War.⁶⁰ Additionally, "Only A Pawn In Their Game" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" offer leftist criticisms of American class rule and racism, but also more individualistic accounts of a flawed system compared to previous songs of the folk movement.⁶¹ At this point in time, Dylan was clearly indebted to the folk movement — "folk songs showed me....that songs can say somethin' human," he wrote in an open letter to his friend Tony Glover in 1963.⁶² It was precisely this "somethin' human" that prompted Dylan to move from topical protest songs towards what he perceived as more authentic supplications of social justice through consideration of individual experiences, something that he begins to do during this period.

⁶⁰ Later versions of "With God On Our Side" include a verse that directly mentions the Vietnam War ("In the nineteen-sixties came the Vietnam War/ Can somebody tell me what we're fightin' for?!/ So many young men died/ So many mothers cried/ Now I ask the question/ Was God on our side?") although he never performed this verse live until the 1980s; Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, © 1964 by Columbia.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bob Dylan as quoted by Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind The Shades Revisited* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 74.

Anthony Scaduto argues that John F. Kennedy's November 1963 assassination was a pivotal moment for Dylan.⁶³ At the summit of his social activism and against a backdrop of emerging youth radicalism, the JFK assassination revealed to Dylan the vapidness of topical protest songs and the futility of his singing them. As Scaduto writes, Dylan thus "came up with something much more effective, dramatically and poetically; he took the specific and made it universal by finding its underlying meaning."⁶⁴ Essentially, Dylan abandoned the self-described "barren political moonscape" and the revival's canon of collectivity by turning towards more introspective and existential lyrics. "Blowin' In The Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'," which both contain thoughtful lyrics and became broadly-endorsed anthems of change, were early indicators of this transition.⁶⁵ However, critics took notice of the more pessimistic nature of *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, which included many of his darkest songs to date. For example, "Ballad of Hollis Brown" tells the tragic tale of an impoverished farmer who, in an act of desperation, kills his family and then himself, and "North Country Blues" relates the bleak realities of a woman who loses everything.⁶⁶ Dylan insists that the assassination never directly inspired any of his songs, although his affectedness was evident in a manuscript from shortly after the assassination, in which he repeatedly wrote "there is no right or left there is only up and down."⁶⁷ Dylan's increasing cynicism and non-partisanship in these songs are certainly indicative of this epiphany and of his mounting frustrations with the limits of politics.

⁶³ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York: Helter Skelter Publishing, 1971), 161.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶⁵ Dylan, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*; and Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*.

⁶⁶ Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*.

⁶⁷ Heylin, *Behind The Shades*, 137.

By the August 1964 release of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan's "precarious balance" on the folk-youth wave became even more so due to the cryptic and poetic lyrics of songs such as "Chimes of Freedom."⁶⁸ Referencing the latter, Clinton Heylin writes that with this sad piece, "...Dylan would pass from topical troubadour to poet of the road," and "from immediate folk sources to a polychrome of literary styles" that included Beat poetry and French symbolism.⁶⁹ Also on the album, one could interpret "My Back Pages," and particularly the refrain "Ah, but I was so much older then/I'm younger than that now," as Dylan's rejection of his previous political idealism and disillusionment with the folk movement, as well as his nascent realignment with youth.⁷⁰ Dylan's March 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home* confirmed his leanings toward youth with its division into acoustic and electric sides and even more personal and abstract tracks such as "Mr. Tambourine Man" or "Subterranean Homesick Blues," a hyperkinetic song rife with up-to-date references of emerging elements of youth culture.⁷¹ Additionally, "It's Alright, Ma," with verses such as "Money doesn't talk, it swears" and "But even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked," expresses Dylan's anger with the commercial and hypocritical nature of contemporary American culture without the optimism of many of his earlier politically commentative songs.⁷² The July release of Dylan's musing, electric-backed single "Like A Rolling Stone" followed shortly after by the August release of the completely electric *Highway 61 Revisited* constituted Dylan's complete abandonment of the folk aesthetic and political ideal, as youth carried him from mere stardom to legendary fame.

⁶⁸ Bob Dylan, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, © 1964 by Columbia.

⁶⁹ Heylin, *Behind The Shades*, 143, 138.

⁷⁰ Dylan, "My Back Pages," *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.

⁷¹ Songs appear on Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home*, © 1965 by Columbia.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Despite Dylan's gradual departure from folk, folk authorities seemed to neither notice nor care. Rather, they seemed to enjoy the involvement of youth and the heightened visibility of their movement, unaware of the implications that expanding and restructuring their subculture would bring. In fact, folkies and youth alike often took to labelling Dylan as some type of divine being and worshipping him as such. For example, a 1965 *Esquire* cover placed Dylan among three martyred student heroes — John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Che Guevara — all God-like men who were crucified on earth.⁷³ An issue of *Melody Maker*, the British weekly, went as far as to headline an article “DYLAN IS THE NEW CHRIST” and caption a photograph “Bob Dylan (and not, as previously reported, Jesus of Nazareth) is the living Messiah to today's young people....You can learn more about life from Dylan than from 10 Jesuses....”⁷⁴ However, Dylan rejected the scrutiny to which these titles subjected him: “Legend, Icon, Enigma (Buddha in European Clothes was my favorite)....These titles were placid and harmless....Prophet, Messiah, Savior — those are tough ones.”⁷⁵ Essentially, as with any faith or religious figure, with followers came zealots, most of whom at some point became disillusioned or disappointed by some aspect of Dylan's music or style. More specifically, many folk-purists rejected Dylan's transformation from fledgling folkie to “Judas” of their movement, as one heckler labelled him at a 1966 concert in Manchester.⁷⁶ They often point to Dylan's performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival as the precise moment of this betrayal.

⁷³ *Melody Maker* as quoted by Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 199.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

⁷⁵ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 124.

⁷⁶ Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 2011), 232.

In the narrative of popular music history, Dylan's electrified performance at Newport has become legendary. The performance not only garnered mixed reactions from the audience, but also seemed to mark a distinct end to the American folk music revival. While the suggestion that the newly electrified Dylan single-handedly destroyed the revival is unlikely (to do so would greatly inflate his influence over the movement), this performance was still significant. It may not have been the mythological event it has been made out to be, but it did represent the culmination of multiple non-cohesive factors contributing to the demise of the folk revival. The conjunction of these factors (broadly including a changing socio-political setting, musical innovations, and contradictions with the revival) ultimately initiated an implosion of the movement, thus rendering Dylan's 1965 Newport performance a decisive moment in popular music history.

Before investigating its specifics, one must be aware of the contentious nature of the performance itself. A day before the performance, folk luminary Alan Lomax complained about the electric Paul Butterfield Blues Band:

[There] used to be a time when a farmer would take a box, glue an axe handle to it, put some strings on it, sit down in the shade of a tree and play some blues.... Now here we've got these guys and they need all this fancy hardware to play the blues.... Lets find out if they can play at all.⁷⁷

Likely provoked by Lomax's tirade, Dylan gathered the Butterfield Band that night for a quick rehearsal before unapologetically ascending the stage with them the next day. Accustomed to the simplicity of his khakis, harmonica, and acoustic guitar, it certainly shocked audiences to see Dylan in a "matador-outlaw orange shirt and black leather," accompanied by guitars that required

⁷⁷ Alan Lomax as quoted by Eric Von Schmidt and Jim Rooney, *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down: The Illustrated Story of the Cambridge Folk Years* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1979), 253.

plugging in.⁷⁸ Initially met with “some reserved applause” during his electric rendition of “Maggie’s Farm,” Dylan left the stage after sixteen minutes amid a “flurry of boos” that increased during “Like a Rolling Stone” and reached a crescendo during his raucous performance of “Phantom Engineer.”⁷⁹ Oscar Brand suggested that the audience was simply affronted by Dylan’s use of electric instruments: “It was the antithesis of what the festival was supposed to be doing.”⁸⁰ Pete Seeger later stated that he infamously threatened to cut the electrical cables with an axe because “the sound was so distorted that you could not understand a word that he was singing.”⁸¹ Meanwhile, Howard Sounes posits that the audience simply felt shortchanged when Dylan — the biggest name at the festival — only performed three songs.⁸² After a long period of disgruntled silence, Dylan returned to the stage to perform palliative acoustic versions of “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” symbolically singing his adieux to Newport and its folk-purist audience.⁸³

In a press conference four months later, Dylan recalled with amusement “Well, I did a very crazy thing....they certainly booed, I’ll tell you that.”⁸⁴ Crazy though it may have been, Dylan’s conscious abandonment of the folk orthodoxy was likely more than just a prank. Lyrical analysis will demonstrate that Dylan’s decision to play these songs was indeed a careful and deliberate one. Punning on Silas McGee’s Farm (where Dylan performed “Only A Pawn In Their Game” at a 1963 civil rights protest), “Maggie’s Farm” recasts Dylan as the pawn and the folk

⁷⁸ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 302.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Oscar Brand as quoted by Howard Sounes, *Down The Highway*, 182.

⁸¹ Amy Goodman, “Interview With Pete Seeger,” *Democracy Now!*, May 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXbf7o8HGv0>, accessed on February 7, 2015.

⁸² Sounes, *Down The Highway*, 182.

⁸³ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 302.

⁸⁴ Marcus, *The Old, Weird America*, 14.

movement as the persecutor.⁸⁵ The first and especially the last stanzas are indicative of this restrictive relationship: “Well, I try my best to be just like I am/But everybody wants you to be just like them/They say sing while you slave and I just get bored/I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more.”⁸⁶ The middle stanzas of the song ridicule the moral righteousness and hypocrisy of revivalists through the characters of “Maggie’s brother” who “fines you every time you slam the door,” “Maggie’s pa” “whose window is bricked over,” and “Maggie’s ma” who is “sixty-eight, but says she’s fifty-four.”⁸⁷ These lyrics seemed especially traitorous considering that fact that “Maggie’s Farm” was actually a reinterpretation of “Down on Penny’s Farm,” a traditional tune from the *Harry Smith Anthology of Folk Music*.⁸⁸ “Maggie’s Farm” fundamentally constitutes a protest song against protest songs and Dylan’s declaration of independence from the folk movement, as emphasized by his consecutive song choices.

“Like A Rolling Stone,” a contemplative and contemptful song born from, as Dylan describes, “a long piece of vomit about twenty pages long,” also stood in marked contrast to the topical songs typical of the folk revival.⁸⁹ In accordance with Robert Shelton’s suggestion that the song “is about the loss of innocence and the harshness of experience,” particular lyrics of “Like A Rolling Stone” when applied to Dylan himself could be interpreted as scorn towards the folk movement, which might be represented by the “diplomat” in the following stanza: “You

⁸⁵ “Keys To The Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia,” *Billboard*, December 14, 2013, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/60958/keys-to-the-rain-the-definitive-bob-dylan-encyclopedia-continued>, accessed on February 8, 2015.

⁸⁶ Bob Dylan, “Maggie’s Farm,” *Bringing It All Back Home*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Harry Everett Smith, “Down on Penny’s Farm,” *Anthology of American Folk Music*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways/Sony Music Special Products, 1997): originally performed by the Bently Boys in 1929 and published in 1952 by Folkways Records (catalogue FP 251, FP 252, and FP 253).

⁸⁹ Bob Dylan as quoted by Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 239.

used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat/Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat/
 Ain't it hard when you discover that/He really wasn't where it's at/After he took from you
 everything he could steal.”⁹⁰ Similarly, “Phantom Engineer” with its world-weary lyrics signified
 Dylan’s official resignation from the revival and from his role as its “boss”: “Well, the
 wintertime is coming, the windows are filled with frost/I tried to tell everybody, but I could not
 get across/Well, I want to be your lover baby, I don’t want to be your boss/Don’t say I never
 warned you, when your train gets lost.”⁹¹ Essentially, Dylan’s 1965 Newport performance
 represented an incisive confrontation with the folk movement by consolidating his changed
 worldview, sound, and image with pointed lyrics expressing his boredom and disillusionment
 with what he perceived as an inherently hypocritical movement. As Robbie Robertson writes,
 “this was the rebel rebelling against the rebellion.”⁹²

Dylan’s performance not only reflected his personal desire to divorce the revival, but also
 seemed to form an immediate, unbridgeable, and immutable chasm between old and new, as
 festival organizer Joe Boyd would recall, “After the interval....every washed-up, boring, old,
 folkie, left-wing fart you could imagine [performed] in a row....It was like an object lesson in
 what was going on here. Like, all you guys are all washed-up. This is all finished.”⁹³ Essentially,
 Dylan, the so-called “prophet of the people,” seemed to sap the life from the revival with his
 blasphemous attack on everything for which it stood. Yet this is not to say that Dylan’s transition
 from folk was either justified or unjustified, or that the revivalists exclusively clung to Dylan or

⁹⁰ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 196; and Bob Dylan, “Like A Rolling Stone,” *Highway 61 Revisited*, © 1965 by Columbia.

⁹¹ Up-tempo version of song, as performed by Dylan at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, was originally known as “Phantom Engineer”; Bob Dylan, “It Takes A Lot To Laugh It Takes A Train To Cry,” *Highway 61 Revisited*.

⁹² Robbie Robertson, “Bob Dylan: 100 Greatest Artists,” *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-artists-of-all-time-19691231/bob-dylan-20110420?print=true>, accessed on February 10, 2015.

⁹³ Heylin, *Behind The Shades*, 213-214.

actively pushed him away. Rather, changing socio-political circumstances shifted the expectations of both groups, creating a rift in their relationship. As previously mentioned, the optimistic folk movement and discontented youth were not one and the same. Alternatively, the two had a symbiotic relationship that was, for a time, mutually beneficial — though perhaps more for the revivalists than for youth. As soon as the benefits of this relationship began to exhaust, they inevitably drifted apart. More specifically, political trends and social upheavals including Vietnam War opposition, the civil rights movement, and others that initially brought them together became points of contention, as folkies and youth began to realize their fundamentally differing worldviews and approaches to achieving social justice. Survey of youth countercultural activity and Dylan's appeal among these groups in the 1960s will demonstrate their increasing individualism and radicalism, which contrasted greatly with the highly-organized, collectivist, and nostalgic nature of the folk movement.

Perhaps Timothy Leary's notorious catchphrase "Turn on, tune in, drop out" provides the most accommodating definition of youth countercultural activity and their goals during this time. Of course, Leary (the infamous Harvard psychologist turned psychedelic guru) was referring to the psychological and social stages of LSD use, but his words had different meaning for different groups. Certainly, Dylan was no exception when it came to drug use in the 1960s — he once even stated that "opium and hash and pot — now, those things aren't drugs; they just bend your mind a little. I think everybody's mind should be bent once in a while."⁹⁴ Drugs may have, in fact, formed a prominent part of 1960s counterculture, but this is only because their effects were conducive to achieving the countercultural goals of society-wide self-awareness and spiritual

⁹⁴ Interview with Nat Hentoff, *Playboy*, March 1966; from Jonathan Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews* (New York: Wenner, 2006), 98.

growth. As Allen Cohen put it, drugs “sped up change by opening a direct pathway to the creative and mystical insights that visionaries, artists, and saints have sought and experienced and communicated throughout the ages.”⁹⁵ These insights created a domino effect of cultural change, impacting and spreading new youthful ideals throughout society in the form of art, fashion, literature, music, and Eastern mysticism.

However, contrary to popular belief, recreational drug use was not mainstream in the 1960s — in fact, a 1969 Gallup poll shows that only 4% of American adults had tried marijuana.⁹⁶ Therefore we cannot assume that all countercultural youth were under the influence of drugs. For those whose primary goal was social change in addition to spiritual growth, ‘tuning in’ was the most important aspect of Leary’s catchphrase, and one did not have to be on drugs to participate. For example, manifestations of hippie ideology, including the burgeoning Haight-Ashbury community or unifying psychedelic cultural events such as the 1967 “Human Be-In,” gathered all kinds of countercultural youth and projected their mutual desires onto society. The goal was that as they began to “turn on” to what was inside of them, they could “tune in” to broader countercultural currents including anti-war and anti-consumerist movements. Yet drugs were only one way of ‘tuning in’ to these frequencies. Songs that encouraged self-reflection also became the anthems of specific countercultural movements. This was not always an accident, as Dylan himself stated in a discussion of “The Times They Are A-Changin’”:

This was definitely a song with a purpose. I wanted to write a big song, some kind of theme song, with short concise verses that piled up on each other in a hypnotic way. The

⁹⁵ Allen Cohen, *Notes on the San Francisco Oracle*, 1999, <http://www.rockument.com/Haight/Webora.html>, accessed on February 4, 2015.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Robison, *Decades of Drug Use: Data From the '60s and '70s*, July 2, 2002, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6331/decades-drug-use-data-from-60s-70s.aspx>, accessed February 7, 2015.

civil rights movement and the folk music movement were pretty close and allied together at that time.⁹⁷

However, sometimes it was — Dylan unwittingly became a pastor to an emerging hippie congregation with the pseudo-psychedelic “Mr. Tambourine Man,” later claiming that he actually “wanted to set fire to these people.”⁹⁸

Dylan was not alone in his annoyance with the hippies — Leary himself lamented their ineffective aimlessness: “Unhappily my explanations of this sequence of personal development were often misinterpreted to mean “Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity.”⁹⁹ New Left activists (‘yippies’) such as Abbie Hoffman similarly regretted the counterculture’s psychedelic turn, arguing that one could not hope to alter existing establishments simply by disengaging with them.¹⁰⁰ Initially, Leary directed those who had ‘turned on’ and ‘tuned in’ to “Quit school. Quit your job. Avoid all politics,” and effectively “drop out” of society.¹⁰¹ However, while Leary encouraged disengagement from society as a means of challenging it, those who identified with Leary’s final summons did not always understand the subtle difference between *boycotting* society and *escaping* it. Yet perhaps this was preferable to the extremists who took many of Dylan’s lyrics to heart. For example, the Weather Underground (or ‘the Weathermen,’ a radical faction of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that ran bombing

⁹⁷ Bob Dylan, Interview with Cameron Crowe, *Biograph*, August-September 1985, <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1plqd/BobDylanEveryMindPol/resources/851.htm>, accessed on February 15, 2015.

⁹⁸ Particular lyrics of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” namely “Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin’ ship/ My senses have been stripped, my hands can’t feel to grip,” have been misinterpreted as drug references; Dylan, *Chronicles*, 117; and Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home*.

⁹⁹ To be clear, hippies were not referred to as ‘hippies’ during this time. This term would not emerge to describe their movement until later in the decade; Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era*, (Los Angeles: Putnam, 1983), 253.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 188.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

campaigns targeting federal buildings) took their name from a lyric in “Subterranean Homesick Blues”: “You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”¹⁰² This refrain also served as the title of an 1969 SDS manifesto that called for a “white fighting force” to be aligned with the “Black Liberation Movement” and other radical groups to achieve “the destruction of U.S. imperialism and achieve a classless world.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Dylan’s “Ballad Of A Thin Man” served as an anthem for the militant Black Panther Party, whose founders understood its lyrics as addressing the black struggle in a white society, and played it repeatedly at rallies and functions.¹⁰⁴ However, more than anything, these instances demonstrate the versatility and vast appeal of Dylan’s songs — as Dylan himself stated of “Ballad Of A Thin Man,” “I could tell you who Mr. Jones is in my life, but, like, everybody has got their Mr. Jones.”¹⁰⁵

Indeed, Dylan’s songs throughout the 1960s reflect a greatly shifting socio-political setting that carried him, and youth as a whole, further and further away from the restrictive folk movement. The changing face of popular music also encouraged this estrangement. The arrival of British rock groups (i.e. the ‘British Invasion’) enabled Dylan to see the possibilities of transcending the boundaries of folk by experimenting with elements of rock, as Louis Menand describes below:

....in February, 1964, the Beatles came to America, and rock and roll rose from the dead....The first time Dylan heard the Beatles, he was in a car somewhere and they came

¹⁰² Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 5; and Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home*.

¹⁰³ “You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” Revolutionary Youth Movement, 1969, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060328145901/http://martinrealm.org/documents/radical/sixties1.html>, accessed on February 10, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Ben Corbett, “Who Is Mr. Jones in Bob Dylan’s “Ballad Of A Thin Man,”” <http://folkmusic.about.com/od/bobdylan/a/Bob-Dylan-Thin-Man-Song.htm>, accessed on February 10, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

on the radio. He almost fell out the window. He loved them, and he must have seen, alert student that he was, what he could do with the electric sound.¹⁰⁶

Strangely enough, Dylan actually had dabbled in rock in the 1950s, but ultimately pursued a career in folk — as he would recall in 1985, “The thing about rock’ n’ roll is that for me anyway it wasn't enough....There were great catch-phrases and driving pulse rhythms....but the songs weren't serious or didn't reflect life in a realistic way.”¹⁰⁷ Yet the Beatles and other British rock groups (including The Who and The Rolling Stones) seemed to capture these more serious and realistic sentiments without conforming to the strict aesthetic requirements of folk music. This new rock genre in turn inspired a generation of young folk singers to record with more “rocking” rhythms and electric instruments, much to the dismay of folk’s traditionalist Old Guard.

It is also notable that by 1965, as Sounes describes, Dylan’s style became “extraordinarily ostentatious....considering that in previous years he wore the washed out cotton uniform of the folk revival.”¹⁰⁸ Irwin Silber articulated the concerns of many regarding Dylan’s apparent transformation in the following passage from his open letter to Dylan in the November 1964 issue of *Sing Out!*:

As with anyone who ventures down uncharted paths, you’ve aroused a growing number of petty critics. Some don’t like the way you wear your hair or clothes. Some don’t like the way you sing. Some don’t like the fact that you’ve chosen your name and recast your past.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Louis Menand, "Bob On Bob," *The New Yorker* (September 4, 2006), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/04/bob-on-bob>, accessed on February 11, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Cameron Crowe, *Biograph*.

¹⁰⁸ Sounes, *Down The Highway*, 181.

¹⁰⁹ Irwin Silber, “An Open Letter to Bob Dylan,” *Sing Out!*, November 1964, http://www.edlis.org/twice/threads/open_letter_to_bob_dylan.html, accessed on February 12, 2015.

However, Dylan took such criticism in stride, pronouncing that “I’m not part of no movement....I can’t sit around and have people make rules for me.”¹¹⁰ In this regard, Dylan’s experimentation with his sound and style in the year preceding his 1965 Newport performance was highly representative of his individuality, dissatisfaction, and desire to branch out from the strict revivalist clique.

Moreover, as Dylan further distanced himself from the folk revival, he became increasingly aware of its contradictions — one of these being his status as an oxymoronic ‘folk music star.’ Dylan would later reflect on this title: “....the press kept promoting me as the mouthpiece, spokesman, or even conscience of a generation. That was funny.”¹¹¹ Such a designation directly contradicted the revival’s ethos of the ‘folk’ over the individual by elevating Dylan, an individual, above his prescribed position as a representative of the ‘folk.’ Dylan therefore became the target of much distrust from his peers, who often criticized him for capitalizing on his commercial success. One such critic was Silber: “I saw at Newport [1964] how you had somehow lost contact with the people. It seemed to me that some of the paraphernalia of fame were getting in your way.”¹¹² To folk-purists, Dylan’s commercialism reached breaking point at Newport in 1965. As Brand declared, “the electric guitar represented capitalism....the people were selling out.”¹¹³ Similarly, Paul Wolfe wrote that the performance represented “the renunciation of topical music by its major prophet.”¹¹⁴ However, Dylan later questioned what people expected him to play, for he had already released *Bringing It All Back*

¹¹⁰ David Dalton, *Who Is That Man?: In Search Of The Real Bob Dylan* (New York: Hyperion, 2012), 56.

¹¹¹ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 115.

¹¹² Silber, “An Open Letter to Bob Dylan.”

¹¹³ Brand as quoted in Sounes, *Down The Highway*, 182.

¹¹⁴ Paul Wolfe as quoted by Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 222.

Home with its electric first side and his latest single “Like A Rolling Stone” had entered the charts a mere four days before the festival.¹¹⁵

Additionally, during his 1965 Newport performance Dylan not only demonstrated that times and trends were indeed “a-changin’” but also transgressed key facets of folk authenticity, thus highlighting its contradictory and restrictive nature. As Georgina Boyes describes, this was caused by folk singers’ and collectors’ “preconceptions and judicious selectivity” combined with consumer’s fetishization of the rural poor.¹¹⁶ As a result, the folk song, now an artifact of sorts, ceased to be part of a continuous, dynamic culture and became part of the cultural past. Singers therefore could not be considered “authentic” unless they strictly adhered to the revival’s ethos (partially described by Greil Marcus) of “country over the city, labor over capital,” collectivity over the individual, and the desire to return to some sort of earlier, simpler, more idyllic past.¹¹⁷ The term “authentic” was no longer an adjective to be applied to what the “folk” were actually singing but a classification with strict criteria that signified a particular sound, style, and image. Therefore, as Marcus describes, Dylan’s loud performance (in both senses of the word) in 1965 at Newport seemed to violate and reject an entire code of ethics, thus representing the triumph of “city over the country....capital over labor....selfishness over compassion....the thrill of the moment over trials of endurance.”¹¹⁸ However, Dylan clearly recognized the contradictory definition of folk authenticity prior to this performance, for he very pointedly burst the authenticity bubble at Newport with his simultaneously introspective, modern, and individual

¹¹⁵ Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 206.

¹¹⁶ Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: No Masters Co-Operative Limited, 1993), 98.

¹¹⁷ Marcus, *The Old, Weird America*, 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

performance of folk-based songs. Essentially, by restoring life into the folk song through demonstration of its dynamism, Dylan ultimately transgressed key facets of folk authenticity and embraced his own definition of the term — an act that left the folk-purist audience angry and upset.

If the revivalists held on to any hopes of Dylan leading their movement after his 1965 Newport performance, these hopes were dashed during his polarizing 1966 World Tour. During this tour, Dylan's split acoustic-electric set received very mixed reactions from his mixed folk and rock audiences. On the one hand, never before had he achieved such massive attendance at his shows.¹¹⁹ However, these huge international audiences contrasted greatly with the small bohemian cafés or political rallies where he got his start. In many venues, the hecklers outnumbered the supporters during these shows, and walkouts became common during the electric half of his set, especially in Europe. A reviewer in Dublin stated that the show was a "big let-down" and that "it was unbelievable to see a hip-swinging Dylan trying to look and sound like Mick Jagger."¹²⁰ Another reviewer in Bristol declared that Dylan was "sacrificing lyric and melody to the God of big beat," while an attendee of the same concert mourned the loss of Dylan, the folk singer, who she claimed had been "buried...in a grave of electric guitars, enormous loudspeakers and deafening drums."¹²¹ Dylan would often respond to his jeering audiences as well. For example, in response to shouts of "rubbish," "shut up," and "We want Dylan" in Glasgow, he said "Dylan got sick backstage and I'm here to take his place."¹²² Yet he

¹¹⁹ Eyewitness accounts from May 2-28, 1966 collected by Mark Blake (ed.), "Dylan's 1966 World Tour," *Dylan: Visions, Portraits, and Back Pages* (London: DK Publishing Inc., 2005), 76-83.

¹²⁰ *Melody Maker* critic as quoted by Nigel Williamson, *The Rough Guide to Bob Dylan* (London: Penguin Group, 2006), 68.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*; and Jenny Leigh as quoted by Blake, *Dylan*, 78.

¹²² Andrew Young (*Scottish Daily Mail*) as quoted by Blake, *Dylan*, 82.

remained unperturbed by his booing (predominantly British) audiences — during a bout of slow-clapping at a show in London, Dylan giggled and remarked “This isn’t English music, this is American music.”¹²³ He made this abundantly clear in Paris when he performed his electric set in front of, as drummer Mickey Jones recalls, “the biggest American flag that I had ever seen....It made me and Bob very proud.”¹²⁴ The French audiences, already jeering during the acoustic set, became inconsolable during this latter part of the show. As they walked out en masse, Dylan told them “Don't worry, I'm just as eager to finish and leave as you are.”¹²⁵

Yet reactions to Dylan’s split set were not all bad — many ardent fans defended him fiercely. For instance, a fan from Leicester declared that she “was absolutely disgusted at the narrow-mindedness displayed by some of the audience....they booed and slow-handclapped a man who was merely proving how amazingly versatile he is.”¹²⁶ Another fan present at the Newcastle show remembers that after the “purists walked out” and “the band warmed up,” “It carried on being a brilliant show and was very well applauded.”¹²⁷ The final two nights of the tour in London saw the biggest walkouts of the tour, but also some intense support. The Beatles were among those shouting down hecklers, whom George Harrison described as “idiots.”¹²⁸ Harrison also lamented the scrutiny to which Dylan was subjected due to his previous involvement in folk:

All these people who’d never heard of folk until Bob Dylan came around, two years later they’re staunch folk fans and they’re walking out on him when he was playing the electric songs. Which is so stupid. He actually played rock ’n’ roll before.... in Bobby

¹²³ Ibid., 83

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Bob Dylan as quoted by Williamson, *Rough Guide*, 72.

¹²⁶ Christine Kynaston as quoted by Blake, *Dylan*, 78.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁸ George Harrison as quoted by Williamson, *Rough Guide*, 72.

Vee's band as the piano player.... And then he became Bob Dylan, The Folk Singer so, for him, it was just returning back.¹²⁹

Indeed, some folk fans went as far as to label Dylan as a “phoney” or “traitor,” but others simply did not like the “apocalyptic roar” of the electric guitars.¹³⁰ For example, one woman at the infamous Manchester Free Trade Hall show was so embarrassed by the crowd's reaction that she passed a note to Dylan stating “Tell the band to go home.”¹³¹ Another fan at Manchester stated that “I wasn't too impressed by the velvet suits, but I was even less impressed by the dickhead sat next to me who started booing and shouting....I told him to fuck off and go home if he didn't like it. Well, that shut him up.”¹³² This was an attitude shared by Dylan — the more they booed, the more he rocked. As Jones recalls, “Frankly, we didn't care. We were playing our music for us and not for the audience. Bob's attitude was: the first half of the show is for them, the second half is for us. And we truly enjoyed ourselves.”¹³³

This is precisely why folk audiences were so enraged by Dylan's apparent transformation — they felt that he had breached a contract with them by violating all of their left-wing principles and traditionalist values. No, he was not *theirs*, as Ronnie Gilbert declared in 1964. “...[I] wasn't vociferating the opinions of anybody...Being true to yourself, that was the thing,” Dylan would later state.¹³⁴ Barry Shank's description of Dylan's tumultuous career is overwhelmingly appropriate:

Dylan's career cycles between two poles of immersing oneself in an authentic social group, with its own history and its dreams of solidarity and progress—that is, of being a

¹²⁹ George Harrison as quoted by Blake, *Dylan*, 83.

¹³⁰ Rick Sanders as quoted by Blake, *Dylan*, 81.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 115.

folksinger—and of autonomy, of standing completely apart from any group — of being a rock star.¹³⁵

Yet being a “rock star” brought its own set of criteria as well, which is why Dylan was and has always been so hesitant to accept any sort of label, as exemplified by the following, defiant dialogue with Klas Burling in 1966:

BD:Rock 'n' roll is white 17-year-old kid music...a fake attempt at sex....

KB: *But what do you call your style, then?*

BD: Well, I never heard anybody that plays and sings like me, so I don't know.

KB: *So there's no name you would try to put on yourself?*

BD: Mathematical music.¹³⁶

In another interview with *Rolling Stone*, Dylan stated that “It’s that wild, mercury sound. It’s metallic and bright gold, with whatever that conjures up. That’s my particular sound.”¹³⁷ It was an alchemic sound, equal parts forethought and fortuity, calculation and condition, and precedent and present, somehow urgent, timeless, immediate, and universal all at once. With such a changeable sound and persona, it is little wonder that Dylan was able to transgress the static political and aesthetic restrictions of folk authenticity. It is also unsurprising that youth eventually departed the movement as its sociopolitical and musical relevance began to wane, leaving it compromised at the mercy of market forces.

¹³⁵ Barry Shank, ““That Wild Mercury Sound”: Bob Dylan and the Illusion of American Culture,” *Boundary 2* 29, No.1 (Spring 2002): 100.

¹³⁶ Bob Dylan, Interview with Klas Burling (April 29, 1966), http://www.bjorner.com/Interviews_60s.pdf, accessed on February 13, 2015.

¹³⁷ Bob Dylan, Interview with Ron Rosenbaum (March 1978), from Cott, *Essential Interviews*, 204.

2. “Will the real Slim Shady please stand up?”: Eminem and Hip Hop

“Listen up: this rapper’s the Dylan of his day.”¹³⁸ Thus reads one article by Damian Young discussing Eminem and his “verbal energy.”¹³⁹ Eminem also makes this comparison in “Shady XV,” released in November 2014, in which he describes himself as a “Godzilla, half dragon and Bob Dylan.”¹⁴⁰ Language aside, these seem like bold comparisons to make in light of Dylan’s divisive outgrowth of folk and the implications of this transition for the folk movement. Yet Eminem reaped similarly mixed reactions as he subverted authenticity constructs within hip hop, ultimately contributing to the destabilization of the original subculture. Therefore, while Eminem might be “the Dylan of his day” in regards to his lyrical genius, he is absolutely a Dylan replicate in terms of wreaking cultural havoc. That being said, Eminem’s attempts to achieve or transcend a codified vision of hip hop authenticity contrasted greatly with Dylan’s gradual abandonment of folk politics and aesthetics. In this regard, the specific controversies surrounding his character and career played out somewhat differently. With extensive reference to Eminem’s lyrics and career milestones, this chapter will demonstrate the artificial and intangible nature of hip hop authenticity — something that Eminem could never fully achieve.

Hip hop was already a strong lucrative force by the time Eminem released *The Slim Shady LP*, and the authenticities of many commercially successful artists were already being called into question. As Mickey Hess writes, criticism was directed primarily at pop crossover artists like MC Hammer and Young MC, but especially at Vanilla Ice, who “outsold any black

¹³⁸ Damon Young, “Listen up: this rapper’s the Dylan of his day,” *The Age* (November 28, 2011): <http://www.theage.com.au/it-pro/listen-up-this-rappers-the-dylan-of-his-day-20111127-1o1is.html>, accessed on April 8, 2015.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Marshall Mathers, “Shady XV,” *Shady XV*, © 2014 by Shady, Interscope.

rapper before him.”¹⁴¹ As hip hop began to enter the mainstream, artists started to distinguish between real hip hop and pop rap in their lyrics as well as call out inauthentic artists who were only in it for the money.¹⁴² Yet Hess notes that hip hop artists also bragged “about how much money they make from their own music....”¹⁴³ Basically, it was okay if a rapper desired commercial success and developed his own style as long as he knew and maintained his nominal connections to hip hop’s origins. By this point, “authentic” hip hop was essentially a balance between old and new. An artist was expressively inauthentic if he solely sought to replicate hip hop during its early stages, and nominally inauthentic if he was not poor, urban, black, and/or male — the motivations of either inauthentic type would have seemed quite dubious. However, this strict recipe for hip hop authenticity was often quite difficult to achieve, for as F.P. Delgado describes (in a 1998 context), “rap music exists in tension between transgressive cultural practice and commercialized cultural form.”¹⁴⁴ This was precisely the reason why Eminem was so successful. As Lindsay Calhoun describes, “His music has the potential to both resist and reify hegemony of the dominant social order and capitalism, consistent with rap music’s legacy.”¹⁴⁵ The ambiguity of Eminem’s authenticity perfectly reflected the state of hip hop at his point of entry in the late 1990s.

However, I will start from the very beginning, as an artist’s origins are so crucial to hip hop authenticity. Eminem describes his grim early days in “Criminal” on *The Marshall Mathers*

¹⁴¹ Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead? The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 3.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁴ F.P. Delgado, “Chicano Ideology Revisited: Rap Music and the (Re)articulation of Chicanismo,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (1998), 97.

¹⁴⁵ Lindsay Calhoun, ““Will the Real Slim Shady Please Stand Up?”: Masking Whiteness, Encoding Hegemonic Masculinity in Eminem’s Marshall Mathers LP,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 4 (2005), 272.

LP: "My mother did drugs - hard-liquor, cigarettes, and speed/The baby came out - disfigured, ligaments indeed/It was a seed who would grow up just as crazy as she/Don't dare make fun of that baby cause that baby was me."¹⁴⁶ Born October 17, 1972 to Deborah Mathers, Marshall Bruce Mathers III (a.k.a. Eminem) never knew his father, who abandoned the family while Eminem was an infant. His mother could not hold a job for more than a few months at a time, and so the family moved frequently between various projects in the Midwest.¹⁴⁷ Eminem discusses his tumultuous upbringing in "Cleanin' Out My Closet" from *The Eminem Show*: "Witnessing your momma popping prescription pills in the kitchen/Bitching that someone's always going through her purse and shit's missing/Going through public housing systems, victim of Munchausen's Syndrome."¹⁴⁸ This itinerant lifestyle and alleged emotional and physical abuse from his mother certainly impacted Eminem's personality. He never had close friends, kept to himself, and was treated as an outcast at every new school — "Beat up in the bathroom, beat up in the hallways, shoved into lockers," he would later recall.¹⁴⁹ Instead, he devoured comic books and even the dictionary — as he remembers, "I always was good at English....I just felt like I wanna be able to have all of these words at my disposal, in my vocabulary at all times whenever I need to pull 'em out."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Marshall Mathers, "Criminal," *The Marshall Mathers LP*, © 2000 by Aftermath, Interscope, and Shady.

¹⁴⁷ Associated Press, "Eminem's mom gives her side of the story," *Today* (November 6, 2008): www.today.com/id/27578186/#.VSbWqxPF8Yc, accessed on April 5, 2015.

¹⁴⁸ Marshall Mathers, "Cleanin' Out My Closet," *The Eminem Show*, © 2002 by Aftermath, Interscope, and Shady.

¹⁴⁹ Anthony Livingston Hall, "Eminem: No Profanity Allowed In My House!," *The IPINIONS Journal: Commentaries on the Major Events of Our Times* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2011), 408.

¹⁵⁰ Eminem, Interview with Anderson Cooper, *60 Minutes*, October 7, 2010; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLtd_G9oZvo&list=PLaGwcUwPdEeBMCJsJG9jWjueOziVyET0R, accessed on April 5, 2015.

The family finally settled in a lower-middle-class enclave of Detroit that was majority black, where Eminem spent the bulk of his formative years.¹⁵¹ This is where he received his introduction to hip hop. In fact, his involvement in the subculture goes as far back as 1986, the year he met DeShaun Holton (a.k.a. Proof).¹⁵² Proof would sneak fourteen-year-old Eminem into the lunchroom at Detroit's Osborn High School "to battle and hustle the fools there."¹⁵³ "We got paid," Eminem recalls, "I'd beat everybody who wanted to battle."¹⁵⁴ He later began doing custom tagging for extra cash and continued his hip hop education by listening to artists like Ice-T, LL Cool J, Rakim, and the Beastie Boys.¹⁵⁵ He ultimately dropped out of Lincoln High School after repeating the ninth grade three times due to truancy and poor grades — "I was a full-time student of hop-hop," he remembers.¹⁵⁶

However, audiences initially jeered when he took the stage at parties or underground clubs, and an early audition with Elektra Records was unsuccessful — "Eminem sounds too young," they said.¹⁵⁷ Yet he continued to record and sell his tapes on consignment at local record stores. Although critics compared these early recordings (most notably, his 1995 album *Infinite*) to those of a white Nas wanna-be, Eminem continued to participate in the underground freestyle scene.¹⁵⁸ After winning two consecutive battles at the local Hip Hop Shop, he began to participate in bigger battles, where he gained notoriety and respect among the hip hop

¹⁵¹ Anthony Bozza, "Eminem Blows Up," *Rolling Stone* (November 5, 2009): www.rollingstone.com/music/news/eminem-blows-up-20091105, accessed April 5, 2015.

¹⁵² Eminem, *The Way I Am* (New York: Plume, 2009), 17.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

community in greater Detroit and throughout the Mid-West.¹⁵⁹ Finally, after losing in the final round of the 1997 Rap Olympics in Los Angeles (though garnering interest from Interscope's Jimmy Iovine in the process), Eminem knew he had to do something bold to achieve recognition and legitimacy in hip hop.¹⁶⁰

As Eminem describes, "I was taking a shit and the name just hit me."¹⁶¹ The persona of Slim Shady would not only be shocking, but also an outlet for expressing his creator's frustrations with the hip hop community and the mainstream for solely viewing him as "trailer-park trash" — "If that's what I'm going to be labeled as, then I might as well represent it to the fullest."¹⁶² With bleach-blonde hair, high-pitched delivery, and a criminally psychopathic mentality, Shady gained the recognition of Dr. Dre, who produced three songs on *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999 and ultimately signed Eminem to his label, Aftermath.¹⁶³ So Eminem was not black — at this point, no one seemed to care. True to the expressive mores of hip hop, he was defiant to the point of pathology. He did not just ask for recognition and respect, he demanded it, and that is precisely what he got. On top of that, he was poor, urban, male, and had been approved into the hip hop (and more specifically, gangsta rap) community by a black insider. For a fleeting moment, Eminem seemed to embody hip hop authenticity, despite obstacles to entry originally posed by his skin color.

However, Eminem's involvement as a white person in a distinctly black aesthetic and political form would remain problematic. From its inception, hip hop was not only an articulation

¹⁵⁹ Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream!* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2009), 250.

¹⁶⁰ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 29.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 31; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 252; and S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 100.

¹⁶³ David Stubbs, *Eminem: The Stories Behind Every Song* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 240.

and visualization of contemporary black culture, but also of black ambitions and socio-political circumstances — neither of which a white person could claim knowledge or experience.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, as Eminem himself states, “Vanilla Ice had made it damn near impossible for a white kid to get respect in rap music,” as Ice's discredited image tended to loom over all white hip hop artists.¹⁶⁵ Yet even prior to the involvement of Eminem or other white artists, seventy-five percent of hip hop music sold to whites, thus complicating hip hop's long-term relationship to blackness.¹⁶⁶ As Queen Latifah states, “All of us black label owners know we'd sign [a white kid] because white kids want their own hero more than they want ours.”¹⁶⁷ In Eminem's case, Dr. Dre handpicked him to both carry on his gangsta legacy and tap into hip hop's largest consumer base — white suburban youth.¹⁶⁸ Clearly, hip hop's foundations in the marketplace often shifted its authenticity construct, allowing for exceptions or overrides as long the cash kept coming in.

Released in February, 1999, *The Slim Shady LP* was one of the year's hottest albums. It went triple platinum by the end of the year, won Outstanding National Album at the 2000 Detroit Music Awards, and won Best Rap Album and Best Rap Solo Performance for “My Name Is” at the 2000 Grammy Awards.¹⁶⁹ Evidently, Eminem had not only gained acceptance in hip hop, but also in the greater entertainment establishment. Even so, reactions to this album and to Eminem at this time were mixed. Fearing that hip hop would “slowly becom[e] bleached,” *Village Voice*

¹⁶⁴ Arthur Pressley, “Rap Music by Black Male Artists: A Psychotheological Interpretation,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 16, no. 2 (1992): 92-97; Cornel West, “On Afro-American Popular Music,” *Speech and Power*, ed. Gerald Early (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1993), 63-72; Salim Muwakkil, “Hip-Hop Racism, or Another Bum Rap?” *In These Times* (February 5, 1992), 18-22; Jeffrey Louis Decker, “The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism,” *Social Text* 34 (1993): 53-84; and Errol A. Henderson, “Black Nationalism and Rap Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 308-338.

¹⁶⁵ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 22.

¹⁶⁶ Maggie Farley, “Hip-Hop Artists Seek to Beat a Bum Rap,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 15, 2001): F1.

¹⁶⁷ Queen Latifah as quoted by Evelyn C. White, “The Poet and the Rapper,” *Essence* (May 1, 1999): 198.

¹⁶⁸ Riggs Morales, “Eminem Psycho 2000,” *Source* (July, 2000): 180-187.

¹⁶⁹ Evan Serpick, “Eminem: Biography,” *Rolling Stone*: www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/eminem/biography, accessed on April 9, 2015.

critic Touré labelled Eminem as a "talentless exploiter....who's using our form and not trying to contribute artistically to the black community."¹⁷⁰ Such a contention seems to defer to Eric Lott's polarizing descriptions of indistinguishable "love and theft" as the primary reasons for white involvement in black cultural practices.¹⁷¹ However, in a 1999 piece from *The New York Times*, Neil Strauss contends that Eminem's crossover appeal speaks the existence of a nation in which "the boundaries are more fluid and blurry than many people would like to believe: white people are listening to and using elements of rap not for theft but because they relate to it, because the music is a legitimate part of their cultural heritage."¹⁷² This sort of alternating vilification as a modern minstrel performer or celebration as a progressive symbol of post-racial harmony would carry on throughout his career, as his continued involvement as a white person in hip hop would spark numerous conversations or debates regarding race and hip hop authenticity.

Bakari Kitwana describes the primary reason for initial suspicions surrounding Eminem and his astounding commercial success in the following passage:

The problem here is not simply that Eminem is white and can rap—but that he's white, can rap so well....and that for thirty years hip-hop has been almost exclusively associated with Black Americans. The contrast is so striking it begs a reaction....It is not unprecedented in America's white supremacist culture for mediocre whites who perform as well as Blacks, in an area dominated by Blacks, to find themselves elevated through the stratosphere.¹⁷³

Undoubtedly, Eminem's whiteness played a major role in his ability to reach mainstream audiences. However, it was also his ability to transcend racially based notions of hip hop

¹⁷⁰ Touré, "32 Questions," *The Village Voice* (March 23, 1999): www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-23/music/32-questions/full/, accessed April 9, 2015.

¹⁷¹ Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (Race and American Culture)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷² Neil Strauss, "MUSIC — The Hip-Hop Nation: Whose Is It?; A Land With Rhythm and Beats for All," *The New York Times* (August 22, 1999): www.nytimes.com/1999/08/22/arts/music-the-hip-hop-nation-whose-is-it-a-land-with-rhythm-and-beats-for-all.html, accessed on April 9, 2015.

¹⁷³ Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 139-40.

authenticity that contributed to his marketability among white suburban youth, especially those with a previous interest in the genre — as he would later state in *The Eminem Show*'s “White America”: “Kids flipped, when they knew I was produced by Dre/That’s all it took, and they were instantly hooked right in/And they connected with me too because I looked like them.”¹⁷⁴ Essentially, he was the best of both worlds — an authentic hip hop artist who also happened to be white. Yet gaining the approval of Dr. Dre and the rest of the hip hop community was something that he was able to do primarily via Slim Shady, and not necessarily as himself. In one sense, Slim Shady was authentic among hip hop audiences because he was not real — as Eminem (channelling Shady) questions in “Role Model” on *The Slim Shady LP*, “How the fuck can I be white? I don't even exist.”¹⁷⁵ He may have originally represented “white trash,” but his fictionality ultimately rendered him invisible and therefore able to transcend visibly racial barriers to hip hop. This universality also appealed to a wide variety of audiences in the mainstream, contributing to his marketability. However, the emergence of Marshall on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, combined with the astronomical commercial success of the album, would again ignite controversy concerning Eminem’s race and involvement in hip hop.

If it was *The Slim Shady LP* that brought Eminem to mainstream audiences, it was *The Marshall Mathers LP* that made him a household name. It sold 1.76 million copies in the first week of its 2000 release, nearly six-and-a-half times as many as *The Slim Shady LP* in its first week — this rate of sale was unprecedented not just in hip hop, but in American music history as

¹⁷⁴ “White America,” *The Eminem Show*.

¹⁷⁵ Marshall Mathers, “Role Model,” *The Slim Shady LP*, © 1999 by Aftermath, Interscope, and Web.

well.¹⁷⁶ The album also won three Grammy Awards in 2001 — Best Rap Album, Best Rap Solo Performance for “The Real Slim Shady,” and Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group for “Forget About Dre” (with Dr. Dre).¹⁷⁷ Suddenly, this historically black genre seemed completely white-washed as its most prominent performer, a white man, collected accolades from the mainstream and ushered in millions of other whites fans and performers that bore little to no relation to original hip hop subculture.

Although Slim Shady continues to dominate on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Eminem acknowledges the real-life person behind the facade several times throughout the album. In discussion of his writing of the song “Marshall Mathers” in his 2000 autobiography, Eminem describes the tone he wished to set for the album:

I felt that what I needed to talk about in the verses was just me and my opinions. So I touched on everything from the newest trends in hip-hop (which I’m not really with), to ICP, to my mother, to my family members who don’t know me and always wanna come around....I think it captures the whole “front porch” feel depicted on the album’s cover. When I recorded this I decided to call the album *The Marshall Mathers LP*.¹⁷⁸

“Marshall Mathers” essentially sums up the whole album: “You see I’m, just Marshall Mathers/ I’m just a regular guy, I don’t know why all the fuss about me/Nobody ever gave a fuck before, all they did was doubt me.”¹⁷⁹ Eminem weaves Marshall (a more serious, introspective persona) into several songs on the album. For example, in “Stan,” Eminem releases Marshall to reply to letters from a fan obsessed with Slim Shady: “But what’s this shit you said about you like to cut

¹⁷⁶ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 49; and Richard Skanse, “Eminem Bounces Britney From Top Spot,” *Rolling Stone* (May 31, 2000): http://web.archive.org/web/20100328062955/http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5923810/eminem_bounces_britney_from_top_spot, accessed on April 9, 2015.

¹⁷⁷ “Complete list of Grammy Award winners,” *cbcnews* (February 22, 2001): www.cbc.ca/news/world/complete-list-of-grammy-award-winners-1.283617, accessed on April 9, 2015.

¹⁷⁸ Eminem, *Angry Blonde* (New York: ReganBooks, 2000), 63.

¹⁷⁹ “Marshall Mathers,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

your wrists too?/I say that shit just clowning dog, c'mon, how fucked up is you?"¹⁸⁰ Similarly, in the intro to "Criminal," Eminem scoffs at fans who take Shady seriously: "A lotta people think that what I say on record/Or what I talk about on a record/That I actually do in real life or that I believe in it...Well shit."¹⁸¹ Basically, by confirming Shady's fictionality and introducing audiences to the man behind the mask, Eminem subtly reminds listeners of his own whiteness, an identification with which he affirms via release of his first autobiography, *Angry Blonde*, in the same year.

Again, the problem among hip hop audiences was not necessarily that Eminem was white. Of course, this was quite obvious, and his association with Dr. Dre seemed to neutralize this fact. The issue was that his involvement in hip hop seemed to fundamentally change the organization of the subculture by allowing the involvement of completely dissimilar and dissociated youth (most notably, those that were white and suburban). His fan base better resembled that of a highly-commercialized pop singer than that of an authentic hip hop artist.

Calhoun articulates long-term anxieties about appropriation in the following passage:

Record company executives and other ambitious rap artists will wish to capitalize on the successful marketing tools that worked for Eminem. However, because of the material and cultural consequences to Eminem's success, the unique cultural aspects that made rap and hip-hop a discourse of resistance may eventually be overly commodified, damaging the potential for unique cultural expression to continually emerge in hip hop music.¹⁸²

Although he was not solely responsible for bringing hip hop to the mainstream, he was absolutely complicit, and highly symbolic of this process due to his immense profitability.

¹⁸⁰ "Stan," *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁸¹ "Criminal," *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁸² Calhoun, "Masking Whiteness," 277.

Defenders of hip hop thus questioned Eminem's authenticity, wondering if he actually had the qualifications to serve as an ambassador of their subculture.

Yet there seemed to be no clear answer to this question, for Eminem was undoubtedly authentic in other, non-racial ways. He was incredibly expressive, conveying everything from intimate details about his upbringing and personal life (as Marshall Mathers) to his most twisted fantasies (as Slim Shady). Additionally, as the former, he confirms his poor, urban background, while he indulges in displays of violent misogyny primarily as the latter, although this was not always the case. For example, in "Marshall Mathers," he demonstrates pride in his urban upbringing as well as his homophobia by calling out the suburban origins of the white hip hop group Insane Clown Posse: "Plus I was put 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 miles away."¹⁸³ However, the hypermasculinity of Eminem and his alter egos (primarily Shady) does not necessarily reinforce this notoriously rough and sexist masculine hip hop ideal — instead, he goes beyond it with his extensive fantasies about assaulting and killing (predominantly white) women and satirizing gay men, perhaps compensating for his lack of blackness.

Calhoun argues that Eminem's ability to simultaneously appeal to mainstream and hip hop audiences stemmed from his ability to "universalize" himself.¹⁸⁴ Essentially, through a series of lyrical acrobats and elaborate costume changes, Eminem was able to navigate issues of difference to market himself as the universal subject.¹⁸⁵ He could thus appeal to a wide variety of

¹⁸³ "Marshall Mathers," *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁸⁴ Calhoun, "Masking Whiteness," 267.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

mainstream or marginalized groups, as they identified with various singular aspects of his character. He addresses this phenomenon in “The Way I Am”: “Ayo, this song is for anyone....fuck it....I am, whatever you say I am.”¹⁸⁶ He also decolorizes himself in “Who Knew”: “I don't do black music/I don't do white music/I make fight music.”¹⁸⁷ Yet Calhoun proffers that Eminem’s universality and malleability are perhaps actually due to his whiteness: “whites are often allowed to choose when they are ethnic and when they are not, as opposed to other marginalized groups....”¹⁸⁸ Ronald L. Jackson similarly argues that whiteness is usually conceptualized as ambiguous or incomplete, allowing whites to construct their identities in often contradictory ways.¹⁸⁹ This is precisely what Eminem was able to do as he achieved fame and fortune both inside and outside of hip hop. He crafted a cultural fiction of the authentic hip hop experience that was palatable to a vast range of consumers. It did not matter that he (as a highly successful commercial artist) was no longer living this experience, but rather that listeners were able to identify its narrative tropes.¹⁹⁰

Eminem achieved this synthetic sort of hip hop authenticity in numerous ways, as Calhoun describes below:

He simultaneously exaggerat[es] his accomplishments while passionately degrading his own experience as a white male. He both emasculates himself through homo-erotic word play and troubling self-effacement and remasculinizes himself through a misogynistic lyrical dance....This word play of both sides against the middle ensures both sympathy and fear from audiences....¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ “The Way I Am,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁸⁷ “Who Knew,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁸⁸ Calhoun, “Masking Whiteness,” 272.

¹⁸⁹ Ronald L. Jackson, “White Space, White Privilege: Mapping discursive inquiry into the self,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 1 (1999): 38-54.

¹⁹⁰ Calhoun, “Masking Whiteness,” 273.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

For example, in “The Real Slim Shady,” Eminem demonstrates his sense of self-importance: “And there's a million of us just like me/Who cuss like me; who just don't give a fuck like me/Who dress like me; walk, talk and act like me/It just might be the next best thing but not quite me!”¹⁹² Yet in “Role Model” he calls out doubters who refuse to give him a chance because he is white: “Some people only see that I'm white, ignoring skill/Cause I stand out like a green hat with a orange bill.”¹⁹³ Meanwhile, in his skit “Ken Kaniff,” he enacts a sexual encounter with other men, in which they repeatedly call out “Eminem.”¹⁹⁴ However, he follows this skit with “Kim,” in which he violently murders his estranged wife.¹⁹⁵ Essentially, audiences could respect his strength, sympathize for his emasculated self, appreciate his self-degrading humor, or fear his scorn. In this regard, Eminem both parodies and reifies imagined notions of white heterosexual masculinity.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, the traditions of boasting or degrading one’s self were not only integral to hip hop, but to all black music throughout American history.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, Eminem complies with the cultural and expressive traditions of hip hop. Such discursive measures allowed him to both fabricate and acknowledge the fabricated nature of his own authenticity, ultimately transcending this construct in the process.

Of course, Eminem’s popularity equated to infamy for many. The dominant culture largely objected to the mainstream successes of hip hop and Eminem in particular for fear of widespread imitation and appropriation of their language and behaviors. Eminem acknowledges the reality of this process in “I’m Back” (“Became a commodity because I'm W-H-I/T-E, cause

¹⁹² “The Real Slim Shady,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁹³ “Role Model,” *The Slim Shady LP*.

¹⁹⁴ “Ken Kaniff,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁹⁵ “Kim,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁹⁶ Calhoun, “Masking Whiteness,” 274.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

MTV was so friendly to me”), but considers this topic extensively in his 2002 album, *The Eminem Show*.¹⁹⁸ However, prior to discussion of this album, one must first realize the significance of its title. As discussed, Eminem introduces audiences to the distinctive, contrasting personalities of the psychopathic Slim Shady and introspective Marshall Mathers in *The Slim Shady LP* and *The Marshall Mathers LP*, respectively. Although audiences at this point were familiar with Eminem as a performer and public personality, *The Eminem Show* essentially constitutes his lyrical debut. In prior albums, Eminem could not necessarily incorporate his public persona into his lyrics because he had not yet garnered the fame required to produce and perfect this character. However, by the release of *The Eminem Show*, Eminem was able to take a full step back from Shady and Marshall in order to reflect on his unprecedented mainstream success, as well as the implications of this success for his own authenticity and for hip hop subculture.

The album opens with “White America,” a tirade of a track that serves as a recap of all the controversies surrounding his career. Firstly, he recognizes his massive appeal among white suburban youth (“I never woulda dreamed in a million years I'd see/So many motherfuckin' people, who feel like me/Who share the same views and the same exact beliefs/It's like a fucking army marching in back of me”), and the privilege that his own whiteness affords him (“Lets do the math, if I was black, I would've sold half”).¹⁹⁹ He finds this rather amusing considering that his skin color once prevented him from being taken seriously in hip hop: “When I was underground, no one gave a fuck I was white/No labels wanted to sign me, almost gave up I was

¹⁹⁸ “I’m Back,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

¹⁹⁹ “White America,” *The Eminem Show*.

like, fuck it” and “Shit, wow, I'm like my skin is just starting to work to my benefit now?”²⁰⁰ In this way, Eminem is able to frame his success as a fluke and displaces responsibility for his mainstream success onto “White America,” thus avoiding charges of exploitation or opportunism by hip hop audiences who remain skeptical of his involvement as a white person in their genre.

Secondly, Eminem never renounces his whiteness, but ironically owns up to it. For example, he admits to “bleaching [his] hair with some peroxide,” a deliberate act to heighten his white rapper image.²⁰¹ As Kimberley Chabot Davis writes, “By drawing attention to the fakeness of his platinum hair in a song about white America, Eminem also hints at the artificiality of whiteness itself, and the whole system of race classification.”²⁰² Crispin Sartwell argues that acts such as these are in fact indicative of his self-conscious dedication “to embodying the repressed strangeness of white-bread American life: its addictions, its obsessions, its violence.”²⁰³ Such intent, as it seems, would begin to blur the lines between black and white and expose the reality of Strauss’ idea of a “Gray Nation” — thus decreasing the use of race as a signifier.²⁰⁴ Eminem more or less confirms this intent in an interview with *Life Story Magazine*: “I look at myself as a white person who raps. Everyone else looks at me like I'm a white rapper....Why can't we just get past the color issue and just deal with the music?”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ “White America,” *The Eminem Show*.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Kimberley Chabot Davis, *Beyond The White Negro* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 34.

²⁰³ Crispin Sartwell, “Ebony and Ivory Come Together in Eminem,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 7, 2002): articles.latimes.com/2002/jun/07/opinion/oe-sartwell07, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²⁰⁴ According to Strauss, the Gray Nation “...is a country no map maker, cultural critic, radio programmer or marketing consultant will ever respect. A place where the language, culture and history are always changing. A place many of my countrymen don't even know they are living in. It is a world beyond racial boundaries and mythologies. It has no name, but for now we can call it Gray, because it is neither black nor white. Map makers and radio programmers are people who need borders, but this world eludes them because it has no clear borders, and we don't want it to; Strauss, “The Hip-Hop Nation.”

²⁰⁵ “Life Story: Eminem — In His Own Words,” *Life Story Magazine* (August 2003).

Additionally in “White America,” Eminem responds to the allegations of parents and politicians that he was corrupting white American youth. The following verse is particularly potent in this regard:

*Hip hop was never a problem in Harlem only in Boston
After it bothered the fathers of daughters starting to blossom
So now I'm catchin' the flak from these activists when they raggin'
Actin' like I'm the first rapper to smack a bitch or say faggot, shit
Just look at me like I'm your closest pal
The posterchild, the motherfuckin' spokesman now, for {White America}*²⁰⁶

He also directly calls out Lynne Cheney and Tipper Gore, who respectively questioned Eminem’s right to freedom of speech and introduced the Parental Advisory sticker in response to the appeal of highly explicit hip hop, punk, and heavy metal albums among white youth.²⁰⁷ Essentially, by criticizing the vanity, hypocrisy, and racism of the dominant culture, Eminem disidentifies with “cocky Caucasians” who cannot understand his connections to black culture, and frames himself as a victim of governmental oppression.²⁰⁸ In this sense, Eminem realigns himself with black audiences and by proxy, original hip hop subculture. He emphasizes this point by comparing censorship to a lynching: “It's like this rope/waitin' to choke, tightening around my throat/ watching me while I write this.”²⁰⁹ However, he ends the song with a laugh, as if his entire commentary were merely in jest: “Hahaha, I'm just playing, America/You know I love you.”²¹⁰ In this regard, he is complying with the dominant culture’s demands for censorship by passing off his diatribe as a joke, but simultaneously subverting their authority to determine what he says.

²⁰⁶ “White America,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

²⁰⁷ Corky Siemaszko “Cheney's Wife Raps Eminem,” *Daily News* (February 21, 2001): www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/cheney-wife-raps-eminem-lyrics-hurt-women-gays-article-1.903919, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²⁰⁸ “The Way I Am,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

²⁰⁹ “White America,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

He is therefore able to maintain his appeal among mainstream or marginalized audiences alike, as they could choose to take his word as either feigned or forthright.

While “White America” sets the stage for *The Eminem Show*, the rest of his songs are more specific. With “Business,” Eminem offers a bold segue to the rest of the album by declaring that “hip-hop is in a state of 911” and only he, its “most honest known artist,” can save the day: “Let’s get down to business/ I don’t got no time to play around, what is this/ must be a circus in town, let’s shut the shit down/ on these clowns, can I get a witness.”²¹¹ It is also notable that Eminem’s three primary alter egos blend to a certain extent in this song. Although Dr. Dre and the background singers refer to Eminem as “Marshall,” one can recognize Shady’s twisted playfulness (“They make it all up, there’s no such thing/Like a female with good looks who cooks and cleans”) as well as Eminem’s bombastic career commentary (You ain’t even impressed no more, you’re used to it/Flows too wet, nobody close to it’).²¹² “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” similarly blends alter egos. The song begins with Eminem revisiting discussion of his own controversial fame as introduced in “White America”: “Have you ever been hated or discriminated against?/I have; I’ve been protested and demonstrated against.”²¹³ He vows to never take “nothing from no one give ‘em hell long as I’m breathing/Keep kicking ass in the morning and taking names in the evening.”²¹⁴ Yet in the next verse, Marshall airs some of “the skeletons in [his] closet” by chastising his father and ex-wife.²¹⁵ In the final verse, the two personalities come together in text that is somehow simultaneously vulnerable and vindictive:

²¹¹ “Business,” *The Eminem Show*.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ “Cleanin’ Out My Closet,” *The Eminem Show*.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

“Now I would never diss my own Mama just to get recognition/Take a second to listen for you think this record is dissin’/But put yourself in my position, just try to envision.”²¹⁶ Basically, by telling the story of his own unstable upbringing, Eminem garners sympathy from his listeners. He is therefore able to remind audiences in the dominant culture of hip hop’s function as an expressive outlet for a marginalized group of people, and thus point out the self-centeredness and hypocrisy of their censorship.

“Square Dance” largely continues this commentary, but at a more political angle: “The boogie monster of rap/Yeah the man's back/With a plan to ambush this Bush administration/Mush the Senate's face in and push this generation/Of kids to stand and fight for the right to say something you might not like.”²¹⁷ However, the song also hints at Eminem’s insecurities about his place in hip hop subculture and his authenticity as an artist. Eminem proves his alliance with hip hop subculture by appropriating and satirizing a white cultural form — he never imitates or mocks hip hop or other black cultural idioms in this manner. Additionally, by claiming that Dr. Dre, Nas, and Busta Rhymes among others “[want] to square dance with [him],” Eminem places himself among the ranks of some of hip hop's most revered artists.²¹⁸ He further stresses his right to be hip hop in “Without Me,” which Kris Ex describes in a *Rolling Stone* review of the album as “a fun-loving, barb-laden romp on which he flits from one topic to the next like a bumblebee with ADD.”²¹⁹ He discusses everything from the popularity of his alter ego to his censorship battles, his feud with his mother, his appropriation of black music, and his own commodification

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ “Square Dance,” *The Eminem Show*.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Kris Ex, “The Eminem Show,” *Rolling Stone* (June 6, 2002): www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/the-eminem-show-20020606, accessed on April 9, 2015.

for a white marketplace. In the accompanying music video, Eminem (or rather Shady, alias “Rap Boy”) emphasizes each lyrical point with an elaborate spoof, whether it be of “reality” shows such as *Real World* and *Survivor*; his mother, Elvis, or CNN.²²⁰ However, the fundamental message is very simple — as he claims, “it’d be so empty without me.”²²¹ His implications are twofold. Essentially, by portraying himself as a source of controversy, as someone who can say what he thinks, he preserves a sort of journalistic integrity that not only fits in with hip hop’s expressive foundations, but also seems necessary in a white, middle-class-dominated society with a long history of hypocrisy and racism.

In “Soldier,” Eminem reflects on the personas that he has created throughout his career-long pursuit for hip hop authenticity: “Never was a thug, just infatuated with guns/never was a gangsta, ’til I graduated to one/and got the rep of a villain, for weapon concealin’/Took the image of a thug, kept shit appealin’.”²²² Eminem is referring to two incidents in June, 2000 for which he was arrested after respectively threatening and assaulting two individuals while in possession of an unloaded gun.²²³ In this way, the song constitutes a meditation on his blending alter egos, and the blurring of his reality and the fiction he created for himself in his lyrics. He points to his fame as the reason for this blending and blurring: “When you’re me, people just want to see/if it’s true, if it’s you, what you say in your raps, what you do/so they feel as part of your obligation to fulfill/when they see you on the streets, face to face, if you for real.”²²⁴ In the final verse, he

²²⁰ Eminem, "Eminem - Without Me," YouTube video, 4:59, posted by EminemVEVO, June 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVkuvmDQ3HY>, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²²¹ “Without Me,” *The Eminem Show*.

²²² “Soldier,” *The Eminem Show*.

²²³ Kara Manning, "Eminem To Face Weapons, Assault Charges," *MTV news* (June 6, 2000): www.mtv.com/news/1428611/eminem-to-face-weapons-assault-charges/, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²²⁴ “Soldier,” *The Eminem Show*.

confirms that “he’ll never be Marshall again,” not because Marshall no longer exists, but because Eminem, Slim Shady, and Marshall have merged into a singular character that is boastful, angry, playful, and sincere.²²⁵ He reiterates this in his 2009 autobiography, in which he states that his characters are “not as extreme anymore, they’re not as far from each other.”²²⁶ “Till I Collapse” also addresses how audiences perceive him as well as the state of hip hop’s authenticity construct. The following verse is especially demonstrative in this regard:

*I'm at the end of my wits with half this shit that gets in.
I got a list here's the order of my list that it's in.
It goes Reggie, Jay-Z, Tupac and Biggie,
Andre from OutKast, Jada, Kurupt, Nas and then me.
But in this industry I'm the cause of a lot of envy,
so when I'm not put on this list the shit does not offend me.
That's why you see me walk around like nothing's bothering me,
even though half you people got a fucking problem with me.
You hate it but you know respect you've got to give me*

By expressing his annoyance with hip hop “posers,” acknowledging his (perceived) inferior position in the genre, defying his doubters, and demanding their respect, Eminem is able to position himself as a hip hop insider, conform to the subculture’s traditions of alternating humility and braggadocio, and affirm his intentions to remain true to the mores of hip hop. He therefore once again proves his authenticity.

Eminem’s semi-autobiographical film *8 Mile* offers another interesting point of analysis. As Eminem describes of its title, “Both sides of 8 Mile Road are poor, but there’s a definite dividing line between the black and white sides. And that’s where the name of the film came from. That barrier we face.”²²⁷ The film would not only track Eminem’s struggle as a white

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 36.

²²⁷ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 36.

person for authenticity in black-dominated hip hop, but would also, as reviewer Richard Schickel writes, “educate [the dominant culture] about a world of scabrous lyrics and occasional murderous violence.”²²⁸ The film’s plot follows Rabbit, an aspiring hip hop artist, and closely echoes Marshall Mathers’ own poverty-stricken upbringing and his immersion in a predominantly black community in Detroit. The film culminates with Rabbit’s victory in a freestyle rap battle in an underground hip hop club, as he exposes his black opponent to be of middle-class origins and thus an inauthentic voice of hip hop subculture.²²⁹ As reviewer T’Cha Dunlevy describes, up to this point “white rappers....have never been believable underdogs.”²³⁰ However, this film establishes Mathers as the ultimate underdog, a voice for the economically and socially marginalized. Even Stephen Hill of Black Entertainment Television (BET) applauds Eminem’s “realness”: “in terms of rapping about the pain that other disenfranchised people feel, there is no one better....”²³¹ Yet it is also notable that the film does not depict Eminem’s life after he became famous, an absence that, as Chabot Davis suggests, speaks to his (and hip hop’s) “ambivalent stance towards capitalism.”²³² While he offers biting class critiques in many of his lyrics, he also clearly recognizes his own acquiescence to commercial forces as the marketplace increasingly commodified his music and the hip hop genre. “I wanted to do something authentic....I didn’t just want to bank on my success,” he would later claim, “[but] it was a weird transition — the success, the explosion after *8 Mile*.”²³³ With fans aged eight to eighty-eight

²²⁸ Richard Schickel, “Eminem’s 8 Mile High,” *TIME* (November 7, 2002): <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,386938,00.html>, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²²⁹ Eminem, *8 Mile*, DVD, directed by Curtis Hanson (Universal City, CA: Imagine Entertainment and Universal Pictures, 2002).

²³⁰ T’Cha Dunlevy, “What A Mouth He Has,” *Montreal Gazette* (May 28, 2002): F1.

²³¹ Stephen Hill as quoted by Lynette Holloway, “The Angry Appeal of Eminem Is Cutting Across Racial Lines,” *New York Times* (October 28, 2002): C1.

²³² Chabot Davis, *Beyond*, 50.

²³³ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 101, 119.

across races and socio-economic distinctions as well as lines of clothes, toys, or other goods named after him, Eminem and the hip hop genre he endorsed had undoubtedly become commodities.²³⁴

Reflecting on his outstanding commercial career in his 2009 autobiography, Eminem insists that he has maintained his authenticity, despite accusations that he “sold out”:

I don't feel like I made music that sold me out. I made pop joints, yes, but my lyrics and flow and command of the beat were always pure hip-hop all the way....The only difference was that a whole lot more people were checking me out and supporting my art. I hope you all understand that I can't control who likes my music or who likes me.²³⁵

However, Eminem's authenticity as a hip hop artist would remain an issue of contention throughout his career and to this day. In *Encore* (2004), *Relapse* (2009), *Recovery* (2010), and *The Marshall Mathers LP 2* (2013), Eminem stresses his sincerity, critiques society and the politics of dominant culture, shares intimate details of his upbringing and personal life, revisits his personas, and boldly demands respect from his peers in order to preserve his authenticity. Yet more than anything, Eminem's need to continuously prove his authenticity speaks to its unattainability. Undoubtedly, despite his whiteness, Eminem was (and is) an authentic hip hop artist in both the nominal and expressive senses of the term. Still, this has never been enough.

Ultimately, commodified and distributed beyond recognition, hip hop has ceased to exist as a dynamic subcultural form. It remains a fixed entity, something to be duplicated rather than developed. Eminem seems to agree — “Nas said hip-hop is dead. I don't think it's dead. It just feels stagnant.”²³⁶ He acknowledges this stagnancy both lyrically and musically in “Rap God”

²³⁴ Ibid., 64-65; and Teri Vanhorn, "Eminem Discussing Movie Role, Releasing Action Figures," *MTV news* (March 14, 2001): www.mtv.com/news/1441674/eminem-discussing-movie-role-releasing-action-figures/, accessed on March 30, 2015.

²³⁵ Ibid., 119.

²³⁶ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 198.

from *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*: “Morphin' into an immortal coming through the portal/You're stuck in a time warp from two thousand four though.”²³⁷ EDM backing and rapid-fire delivery assist in his attempts to stay relevant. Indeed, he has succeeded in this regard — *The Marshall Mathers LP 2* has sold nearly 500 million albums to date and won the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album in 2015.²³⁸ However, the genre is certainly becoming less distinctive as artists such as white Australian female pop crossover artist Iggy Azalea are achieving nominations in the same category.²³⁹ Perhaps it is only a matter of time hip hop dissolves and disappears altogether.

²³⁷ Marshall Mathers, “Rap God,” *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*, © 2013 by Aftermath, Shady, Interscope.

²³⁸ “Grammys 2015: The Marshall Mathers LP 2 by Eminem wins rap album of the year,” *The Guardian* (February 8, 2015): www.theguardian.com/music/2015/feb/08/grammys-2015-the-marshall-mathers-lp2-by-eminem-wins-rap-album-of-the-year, accessed on April 9, 2015.

²³⁹ Erika Ramirez, “Why Iggy Azalea Will Win the Best Rap Album Grammy: Op-Ed,” *Billboard* (December 5, 2014): <http://www.billboard.com/articles/events/grammys-2015/6363746/iggy-azalea-best-rap-album-grammys>, accessed on April 9, 2015.

3. “Bringing It All Back Home”: Aesthetics, Politics, Minstrelsy, and Authenticity

In the introduction to this study, I identified three major phases through which cultural entities normally pass — subculture, counterculture, and dominant culture. This process is not always direct or completed, but it is almost always in this order. Thus was the case with Bob Dylan and folk music, as they became increasingly distant from the folk subculture in which they originated. This was also a major reason why Eminem could never truly gain acceptance in hip hop subculture — at his point of entry, the genre had already become a countercultural entity.

Both folk and hip hop began as inextricably linked soundtracks of distinct subcultures. In both cases, small groups of New York City radicals banded together to create a sound that voiced the interests, desires, or concerns of their particular subculture. They challenged greater society largely because they stood apart from it. By breaking new musical and socio-political ground, these groups laid a foundation for the future development of their movements. Yet over time, continuous reference to these foundations by artists and audiences resulted in the build-up of walls of precedent and regulation. Suddenly, only performers who remained true to the mores of their movement could be considered “authentic” by their original audiences and peers, while those who ventured beyond these confines found themselves ostracized and unsupported. That being said, when original audiences and participants opened the doors of their genre to the counterculture, both groups briefly benefitted from heightened visibility of their movements. That was until market forces of the dominant culture bulldozed these walls and liquidated all aspects of these cultures to a wider consumer base. It would be a mistake to say that these genres completely dissolved during this process — in fact, they only gained in popularity due to their

mass dispersal. Rather, the foundations upon which they were built faltered, thus destroying the movements and leaving the genres adrift.

The similar developmental trajectories of folk and hip hop are indeed remarkable, despite contextual, motivational, and stylistic differences. Firstly, it is key that both movements originated among marginalized groups of people. In folk, these people were predominantly Leftist, union, migrant, and/or working-class, while the early hip hop scene primarily involved poor, urban, black men. Secondly, artists and audiences within both genres gradually constructed strict aesthetic and political criteria for determining authenticity. In folk, this construct took the form of nominal authenticity — basically, the artist sacrificed his or herself in order to adhere to tradition, which in this context meant intimacy, historical accuracy, and use of acoustics. In hip hop, this meant that artists typically sought expressive authenticity, which meant ‘keepin’ it real’ lyrically and stylistically via braggadocio and autobiography. Additionally, within both genres, authenticity was never inherent — rather, the audience conferred authenticity on the designated artist or work if he/she/it perpetuated or promoted ideals of that particular community. In folk, this meant integrating ideologically with the Old Left, while in hip hop artists placed more emphasis on socio-economic origins, gender, and race.

The characters and careers of Dylan and Eminem are worthy of comparison, for they similarly showcase many of the specific controversies that led to the gradual demises of the folk and hip hop subcultures. Most obviously, they shared in their ability to create clever verses and demonstrate the potency of the English language. For Dylan, folk offered a means of escaping his bourgeois roots so that he could “say somethin’ human.”²⁴⁰ For Eminem, hip hop offered a

²⁴⁰ Bob Dylan as quoted by Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 74.

viable and venerated method for “snapping on people.”²⁴¹ Yet both were able to reach and impact entire generations of discontented youth, and thus saw unprecedented notoriety and commercial success. For both artists, however, widespread moral panic accompanied this success — while the dominant cultures feared the degeneration of youths due to their appropriation of lowly subcultural forms, the subcultures at hand feared a loss of control of their movements as their genres slipped into the hands of dissociated youths. In Dylan’s case, folkies accused him of renouncing and therefore cheapening an entire tradition, community, movement, and way of life by transitioning to rock. In regards to Eminem, his participation as a white person in a black cultural idiom seemed to violate and thus nullify an entire code of hip hop ethics and aesthetics that were in fact part of an oral heritage dating back to the importation of West African slaves. Indeed, both Dylan and Eminem rode the coattails of countercultural and market forces in order to respectively exit folk or gain access to hip hop, but more importantly, both transcended authenticity constructs of their associated movements in the process. Certainly, neither artist intended to destroy these movements, and to say they single-handedly did so would greatly inflate their importance. Yet their (unwanted) designations as role models for youth bestowed upon them the authority to identify and activate inconsistencies within both subcultures that ultimately contributed to their dissolutions.

Both folk and hip hop harbored a basic paradox — the contradictory desires to remain authentic, but also to be heard. In folk, authenticity was entirely retrospective. It was an ideal that lay in the past and could only be achieved through return to or replication of specific subcultural practices around which the genre had originally converged. These practices broadly included

²⁴¹ Eminem, *The Way I Am*, 77.

simple song structures conducive to audience participation, sparse instrumentation, the donning of workers' attire, and most importantly, espousal of Old Leftist (or Communist) ideals. Yet for younger generations with no connection to these traditions, the mystique of folk primarily lay in its oppositional spirit. These youth did not care about labor rights, hootenannies, or traditional ballads, but rather enjoyed the opportunity to voice their general discontent with the dominant culture. Unable to detect this distinction, folkies celebrated youthful involvement, to whom they gladly (and damningly) opened the doors of their movement. However, the party would not last long, and one might consider Dylan to have been the final act. One could equate his eventual abandonment of "authentic" folk style, sound, and song substance as his and youth's exit from folk, looting it in the process. The folk genre did, in fact, live on in spirit — the emergence of folk-rock and the mixed acoustic-electric song sets of Dylan's 1966 World Tour are a testament to this. In this sense, folkies finally achieved their goal of being heard. However, this was ultimately at the expense of their version of authenticity — left as a shell of what it once was, the folk movement was condemned to demolition, eventually becoming a part of the past it had tried so hard to recover.

In hip hop, authenticity was also retrospective, but not in the same way as folk. Indeed like folk, authenticity could only be achieved if artists met certain sets of criteria. Yet unlike folk, these criteria were mostly comprised of subcultural qualities, rather than practices, around which the genre originally coalesced. These qualities included bold expressivity, a low income, an urban upbringing, masculinity, and most notably, blackness. However, hip hop's authenticity construct has always been somewhat shaky due to its foundations in a highly changeable marketplace. From its very inception, hip hop not only served simultaneously as a party and

protest music, but also as an avenue for escape from poverty. In this regard, doors to the genre have always been open, but guarded by gate-keepers enforcing regulations of authenticity as prescribed by the marketplace. Therefore, when Dr. Dre granted Eminem entry to hip hop, he seemed to bring the walls down with him, for he subsequently became an instant sell-out to youthful consumers across socio-economic, gender, and racial backgrounds (and particularly among middle-class, suburban white youth). Suddenly, hip hop seemed less potent as the marketplace that originally fostered their subcultural development increasingly commodified their genre. Like folk, hip hop finally became a widely recognized genre, incorporated into defiant pop songs or varying forms of electronica — yet removed from its original context, the subculture has arguably lost hold of its prefix.

All of these uncanny similarities point to the possibility that the individual stories of folk, hip hop, Dylan, and Eminem are perhaps not so unique. Perhaps they are actually a product of something much greater, as Shank suggests below:

...the history of American popular music is, in large part, a history of illusions and masks, of whites pretending to be black, of women pretending to be men...of more or less successful attempts at self-recreation...It does not work as a trick that fools its audience but as an artfully constructed connection to a past and a tradition that can only be accessed through, because it is wholly made out of, commercially structured experiences....²⁴²

Although Shank's observations relate to the 1960s, folk music, and Bob Dylan in particular, they are universal and timelessly applicable. One can recognize the role of consumer-subcultural alliances in forging an artificial sort of authenticity across all previous and recent genres of popular music, and especially in folk and hip hop. This is not to discredit this type of authenticity — it is, in fact, responsible for perpetuating traditions, ascribing meaning to history, and forging

²⁴² Shank, "That Wild Mercury Sound," 98-99.

collective identities. However, true authenticity remains unattainable because it is transient, intangible, and ultimately, an illusion — as Bendix states, it is “an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity.”²⁴³ Shank elaborates on the artificiality and commerce at the root of American popular music through discussion of blackface minstrelsy.

In regards to Dylan and the folk movement, it is easy to identify several occasions on which they appropriated black culture in a fashion resembling blackface minstrelsy. Most obviously, as Shank describes, Dylan’s “personal transformation whereby a young white male attempts to remake himself through the performing black music, is the classic trope of the great American tradition of blackface minstrelsy.”²⁴⁴ Additionally, both clearly drew inspiration from traditions that grew out of an African-American past — while Dylan emulated the energy and vigor of black artists like Little Richard even before his entry into folk music, folk had a long history of objectifying black artists and imitating or modifying their music (case in point, Leadbelly).²⁴⁵ However, these aesthetic or superficial connections hardly compare to their loftier political links to minstrelsy. As Shank writes, Dylan shared an orientation toward life with other contemporary youth that was “shaped by the currency of the struggle for racial equality” and “based on the structuring effects of minstrelsy.”²⁴⁶ Due to its Leftist orientation and close relationship with youth during this time, the same applies to the folk movement. By fostering an

²⁴³ Bendix, *In Search*, 8.

²⁴⁴ Shank, ““That Wild Mercury Sound,”” 104.

²⁴⁵ Leadbelly was a convict-turned-folksinger, discovered by John and Alan Lomax during one of their field recording trips in 1934. Although Leadbelly preferred to dress professionally, John Lomax forced him to wear workers’ clothes in accordance to stereotypes held by white people. He also withheld two-thirds of the profits made by Leadbelly via recordings and performances, and continued to parade him around the country as an exhibition of the “authentic” folk singer. Eventually, Leadbelly contested their arrangement and severed all ties with the elder Lomax; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music (Cultural Studies of the United States)* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 47-75.

²⁴⁶ Shank, ““That Wild Mercury Sound,”” 102.

imaginary identification with black culture, youth and the folk movement were able to achieve a temporary linkage of nominal and expressive authenticity that seemed to enable the individualist yet political voluntarism of the time.²⁴⁷ Dylan was highly symbolic of this union, with his traditionalist homages to idiosyncratic black styles (e.g. blues, in which “the singer matters more than the song”) and his use of harmonica, a “primitive country instrument,” to create a distinctive new sound.²⁴⁸ Yet this cross-racial and cross-cultural union was artificial and fleeting. In reality, blacks were in folk to serve its present occupants, just as youth were merely visiting for the party.

Eminem’s and hip hop’s ties to blackface minstrelsy are even more apparent and academically examined, as Eminem is a white man performing in a distinctly black genre of music. As Russell White points out, Eminem is only the most recent of numerous “white actors who adopted blackface....to....parody mainstream values and ideology.”²⁴⁹ Eminem himself acknowledges this fact in “Without Me,” from *The Eminem Show*: “Though I’m not the first king of controversy/I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley/To do black music so selfishly and use it to get myself wealthy.”²⁵⁰ Gary Taylor goes as far as to explicitly state that this entire album is a minstrel show.²⁵¹ However, as Edward Armstrong notes, because Eminem recognizes his whiteness and the privilege that it affords him in several songs throughout his discography, “he’s simply affirming something that everyone already knows....It’s pointless to impugn Eminem’s

²⁴⁷ Shank, “‘That Wild Mercury Sound,’” 102-3.

²⁴⁸ Wilfrid Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 138.

²⁴⁹ Russell White “‘Behind the Mask’: Eminem and Postindustrial Minstrelsy,” *European Journal of American Culture* 25.1 (2006): 66.

²⁵⁰ Mathers, “Without Me,” *The Eminem Show*.

²⁵¹ Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 344.

motivations as a rapper because Eminem wittily exults in his own selfish and lucrative expropriation of black music.”²⁵² Loren Kajikawa’s analysis of the music video for “My Name Is” from *The Slim Shady LP* furthers Armstrong’s argument. In this video, Eminem lampoons white culture by dressing up as various white stereotypes, including the father from *Leave It To Beaver* and a nerdy professor, thus aligning himself with the black community.²⁵³ Therefore, Eminem is “keepin’ it real” personally and stylistically, thus maintaining hip hop authenticity. However, this authenticity is also artificial because it is subversive. Ryan Ford contends that Eminem’s whiteness has “permitted legions of white fans to appropriate selected aspects of the culture of hip-hop” and that “an exploitative relationship occurs when the music itself becomes a commodity stripped of other characteristics that are culturally significant in the formation of the art form.”²⁵⁴ Essentially, because Eminem does not share in black history, he could never fully understand or represent black culture. His entry into hip hop thus obliterated much of its historical and cultural significance, leaving listeners without any concept of its origins or symbolism. While Eminem was not alone in this process, he has consistently been emblematic of it due to his astounding commercial success.

Also suggestive of minstrelsy is both artists’ use of pseudonyms. The personalities of the happy-go-lucky Jim Crow, the unjustifiably arrogant Zip Coon, wise and earthy Mammy, and other stock minstrel characters are well known. Dylan also had a series of identities, although they were often cursory and therefore not well known. Before his entry into folk, he worked as a

²⁵² Edward Armstrong, “Eminem's Construction of Authenticity,” *Popular Music and Society* 27 (2004): 343.

²⁵³ Loren Kajikawa, “Eminem's "My Name Is": Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3.03 (2009): 350.

²⁵⁴ Ryan Ford, “Hip-hop White Wash: The impact of Eminem on rap music and music industry economics,” *Socialism and Democracy* 18.2 (2004): 130.

pianist for pop singer Bobby Vee under the pseudonym Elston Gunn.²⁵⁵ In reverence to Blind Boy Fuller and countless other blind bluesmen, he recorded for Columbia as Blind Boy Grunt.²⁵⁶ He also went by Bob Landy while recording as a pianist for Elektra Records in 1964 and as Tedham Porterhouse, the harmonica player, on Ramblin' Jack Elliott's self-titled album in 1964.²⁵⁷ Even Bob Dylan, a name inspired by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, was an identity that he fabricated upon his entry into folk music — his name at birth was Robert Allen Zimmerman.²⁵⁸ Yet what is most notable about these pseudonyms were not the specific identities they housed — rather, they pointed to Dylan's single, inclusive, yet splintered persona and his ability to compartmentalize his interests and talents. Nobody cared that young Bobby Zimmerman once idolized Little Richard or that Bob Landy played rambunctious blues piano — they only cared that Bob Dylan played folk. Therefore, when Dylan began to incorporate rock sounds and styles into his music, audiences felt confused, upset, and betrayed, just as minstrel show spectators would have one hundred years earlier if suddenly Jim Crow were sad or Zip Coon became intelligent. However, as his 1964 album suggested, Dylan was merely showing audiences "Another Side of Bob Dylan" — a synthetic, quicksilver personality that somehow seemed to body forth Billy the Kid, Woody Guthrie, Arthur Rimbaud, James Dean, and something new all at once.²⁵⁹

Eminem's pseudonyms (or more aptly, alter-egos) have much more in common with stock minstrel characters because they are unidimensional and reoccurring. However, because he

²⁵⁵ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 41.

²⁵⁶ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 118.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵⁹ Billy the Kid was a notorious teenage outlaw during the 19th century; Arthur Rimbaud was a French symbolist poet; James Dean was an actor and cultural icon of teenage disillusionment and rebellion.

adeptly switches back and forth between varying selves and characters on single albums or even songs, it is often difficult to tell what is truth and what is fiction. Eminem is essentially three people in one. He is Eminem, the hip hop mastermind and self-congratulatory cultural icon. He is also Marshall Mathers, which is, of course, his real name, but also an emotional and introspective persona with a tortured soul. Yet most notoriously, he is Slim Shady, an evil, sadistic psychopath with a twisted sense of humor, whom he uses to channel his rage, resentment, and darkest fantasies. As Eminem explains of his tri-fold identity, “‘Just Don’t Give a Fuck’ is Slim Shady. Eminem is ‘Lose Yourself,’ and ‘Mockingbird’ is Marshall. I think those are the most blatant, extreme examples.”²⁶⁰ He also plays extensively with a wide cast of supporting characters. For example, Ken Kaniff, a homosexual rapist with pedophilic inclinations who pokes fun at Eminem and his music, appears on almost every one of Eminem’s studio albums. He also embodies Stanley Mitchell, a Slim-obsessed fan who kills himself, his wife, and his unborn child in *The Marshall Mathers LP*’s “Stan” because Eminem will not respond to his letters, and Stan’s vengeful little brother Matthew, who eventually kills Eminem and himself in *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*’s “Bad Guy.”²⁶¹ Additionally, he repeatedly references or impersonates his daughter, wife, and mother, real people who take on caricature-like qualities in his music — Hailie as a sweet and overprotected child who can do no wrong, Kim as a promiscuous and vindictive drug addict, and Debbie as paranoid and attention-seeking. Yet Eminem’s serial, multilayered hoaxes are self-referential, thus beating critics to the punch. Once again, it would be useless to call him or his music inauthentic, just as it would be useless to

²⁶⁰ Eminem, *They Way I Am*, 36.

²⁶¹ “Stan,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*; and “Bad Guy,” *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*.

refer to a minstrel show as an authentic display of blackness. Of course it was not authentic — he never intended it to be.

By examining these subcultures/genres and artists through the lens of blackface minstrelsy, one can of course discern the legacy of American racism, but also of class consciousness and sexism. The former largely lives on as the enduringly potent American Dream. Artists in folk, hip hop, and indeed all American-grown music genres framed or continue to frame themselves within a narrative of social struggle and upward mobility, albeit differently. The folk movement ostracized Dylan because he did not represent or properly execute their particular vision of this dream. While folkies sought to achieve the promise of “liberty and justice for all” by appropriating diverse aspects of Americana and aligning themselves with progressive social movements, Dylan’s nonconformist lyrics and humanitarian pleas appealed to a more influential yet somewhat invisible counterculture that craved recognition. Yet with a career that began in a tiny Minnesota town and led to international superstardom, perhaps Dylan’s story better actualizes a hip hop interpretation of the American Dream, in which artists overcome social obstacles (namely, class and race) on the road to commercial success. To fulfill this narrative, Eminem not only emphasizes his impoverished “white trash” origins, but also frames his participation in hip hop as a constant struggle for acceptance due to his skin color. Furthermore, once commercially successful, both Dylan and Eminem continued to criticize or subvert the dominant culture outrightly or via character, thus maintaining some level of authenticity among original subcultural and countercultural audiences.

Dylan and Eminem also highlighted or showcased standards of gender in their respective genres, as well as enduring sexism in greater society. Initially, Dylan complied with the

masculine folk ideal by emulating hard working, hard travelin' men like Woody Guthrie. Even when the French symbolists took over as his primary lyrical inspirations, he maintained folk authenticity by detailing violence and systematic injustice against black men in songs such as "Hattie Carroll" and "Only A Pawn In Their Game." However, Dylan's numerous infidelities and flamboyant post-Newport 1965 attitude and style clearly did not fit in with folk's "honest" vision of masculine authenticity. The analytical lens of blackface minstrelsy not only enables one to see this particular vision, but also to recognize these other masks of masculinity that Dylan donned as he developed from boy to man.²⁶² Eminem similarly adopted or embodied differing interpretations of manhood as he sought to achieve the masculine hip hop ideal, which had evolved from poor, urban, black male to stereotyped violent black criminal.²⁶³ Eminem achieves this ideal primarily as Slim Shady, the culprit of countless verbal or physical assaults and murders of women throughout Eminem's discography (though concentrated in *The Slim Shady LP* and *The Marshall Mathers LP*). Such "viloporn" (as Chris Norris labelled it) solicited numerous complaints and legal suits, from The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation to Lynne Cheney to The National Congress of Black Women.²⁶⁴ Essentially, as Armstrong writes, "Eminem... authenticates his self-presentations by outdoing other gangsta rappers in terms of his violent misogyny."²⁶⁵ Additionally, he repeatedly ridicules other white men by portraying them

²⁶² My understanding of Dylan's evolving masculinity owes much to Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*, a biographical musical "Inspired by the music and the many lives of Bob Dylan," in six actors perform different aspects of his persona; *I'm Not There*, DVD, directed by Todd Haynes (New York: Celluloid Dreams and The Weinstein Company, 2007).

²⁶³ David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap," *The New Republic* (November 11, 1991): 24-29.

²⁶⁴ Chris Norris, "Artist of the Year," *SPIN* (January 2001): <http://www.spin.com/new/magazine/jan2001eminem2/html>, accessed on March 10, 2015.

²⁶⁵ Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity," 344.

as feeble, stupid, or perverted caricatures (as discussed) in his lyrics and videos, once again aligning and authenticating himself with hip hop audiences.

Clearly, blackface minstrelsy has also done much to influence the way by which modern artists perform and how audiences perceive these performances. Though in less overt forms, the tradition of promoting stereotypes or caricatures largely continues, and these representations ultimately become fixed in the public imagination. Thus is the formation of strict authenticities. In folk, this meant that particular images, sounds, and messages (namely, those of downtrodden workers, immigrants, or populists) over time became symbolic and therefore static representations of the folk, despite changing constituencies and socio-political contexts. The authentic folk singer thus became a unidimensional caricature, like a minstrel character, an interpretation rather than representation of something existing in reality. In hip hop, something similar occurred. As a white marketplace continuously commodified this black genre, they recognized particular qualities or characteristics that sold (most notably, materialism, violence, and misogyny), therefore packaging a wide variety of black urban experiences into narrow, easily replicated caricatures of pimps, hoes, or thugs.²⁶⁶ Indeed, while many folk singers and hip hop artists embraced these stereotypes as empowering tokens of their causes, they remained undeniably restrictive and denied the diversity of participants in both subcultures. In both cases, this is because the marketplace was not trying to appeal to a particular subculture, but to a broader base of white, middle-class consumers. It did not care about the politics or origins of the genre, it only cared about an image and sound that could sell.

²⁶⁶ Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*, 139.

This is precisely what led to the demises of both folk and hip hop — a separation of their aesthetic and political sensibilities. At first, the genres and the subcultures were inextricable from one another. In folk, traditional ballads and simple instrumentation greatly complemented a Leftist political program that aimed to celebrate working-class descendants of the very people who would have sang these songs. In hip hop, despite a less-developed political platform, autobiographical anthems of escape, defiance, perseverance, or provocation informed and motivated a movement of marginalized, black urban youth whose primary goal was to be heard. Additionally, in both cases, it was only natural that a sidelined subculture would produce and promote a similarly peripheral style of music. However, it was inevitable that time and market forces would carry these aesthetic forms further and further from their political roots. For the most part, countercultural youth in the 1960s who embraced the aesthetics of folk had no historical, geographical, or personal connection to Old Leftist ideology, just as discontented, white middle-class youth who bought hip hop albums in the late 1990s and early 2000s had no concept of what it meant to grow up in the ghetto. Rather, they enjoyed the rebellion, and used the music to suit their own (albeit occasionally echoing) political needs.

Essentially, authenticity ceases to exist as soon as one recognizes it. The brief union of aesthetics and politics within both folk and hip hop dissolved as soon as audiences were able to distinguish the two. While reactionary groups tried to preserve these unions, it was far too late. Dissociated youths grabbed hold of their respective genres long beforehand, leaving them open to marketplace seizure — Dylan and Eminem evidenced and possibly even enabled this process. In this regard, everything deemed authentic either lies in the past or is actually simulacra. The latter is not to discredit contemporary music forms, but instead to emphasize the synthetic nature

of authenticity. It is unchanging, inflexible, and ultimately, fallible. In both folk and hip hop, time and marketplace elements were enough to bring these makeshift constructs down.

“Curtains Down”: Conclusion

Bob Dylan and Eminem are quite an unlikely pairing. One wore flannels while the other wore ‘wife-beater’ tanks. One strummed a guitar and blew his harmonica while the other shouted profanities into a microphone. One outgrew his subculture while the other has never been fully accepted into his. Additionally, their movements began decades apart among incredibly disparate groups of people. These dissimilarities abound, yet both artists somehow found themselves in similar predicaments regarding authenticity.

The objective of this study has been to take a step back from visual, sonic, and political specificities so that comparisons can be drawn between these artists and between their subcultures. Of course, microcosmic examination of Dylan, Eminem, and their careers has aided macroexplanation of a greater cultural process that came to characterize folk, hip hop, and indeed all movements that interact with the marketplace. Both of these subcultures created organic aesthetic forms that promoted their political values and captivated audiences. Yet their belief that these forms could remain unmodified amid mounting commodification by the marketplace was simply naïve.

Especially in music subcultures, it is almost inevitable that commercial success comes at the cost of authenticity. As the music industry modifies particular styles and markets them to a mass consumer culture, the artist becomes less a voice for a particular subculture and more of a malleable entity ready for mainstream consumption. In subcultural communities that take pride in their variance with the dominant culture, the watering-down of their previously oppositional musical forms by commercial forces would certainly be problematic. In folk and hip hop, despite their desires and dogged attempts to preserve their aesthetic and political ideals and perhaps pass

them on to wider society, all that was passed on was control of their genre. Subsequent breakdown of the subcultures was inescapable, as the movements' foundations were forever compromised.

Authenticators within folk and hip hop failed to realize, or simply ignored, the futile and regressive nature of their sanctimony. Their specific versions of authenticity served as viable aesthetic and political alternatives to the conformity and complacency of contemporary music forms and social actors. However, as sociopolitical and commercial climates changed, authenticity less reflected actual experiences or expectations of these subcultures and more prescribed or restricted particular behaviors. Therefore, when artists would not or could not conform to these rules, there was controversy and confusion, as devotees were reminded of the contrived nature of everything they believed to be right and true. Perhaps cultural flexibility could have saved these subcultures, although this is unlikely. Elasticity only goes so far before something must give.

Folk is arguably the first music subculture to have gone through this modern cultural-commercial process, while hip hop is the most recent. There will be more, just as there have been many in between. Yet this ephemerality is not something to bemoan. Cultural forms come and go with the times, perpetuating or producing traditions, forming individual and collective identities, shaping our understanding of history, and perhaps even changing the course of it. Folk and hip hop are particularly notable for the immense influence they wielded over their supporters and greater society throughout this process, and for their legacies of rebellious integrity. Their conscientious, unyielding commitment to their aesthetic and political ideals is not only memorable, it is admirable. In this regard, their condemnation of and cautiousness toward Bob

Dylan and Eminem was certainly justified. Folk and hip hop authorities had, after all, made the genres from which these artists emerged. Yet it was the marketplace that made them immortal in the public imagination. The original subcultures may be gone, but no one will soon forget their stories. They endure as gems in the veritable treasure chest of Americana, ready for perusal by younger generations of artists and audiences, and for that, folk and hip hop will live on.

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