

# Sample Essay 3

This research essay, entitled “Eminem’s Bridge,” was written by Hayley Tkatschow, a student in a first-year Interdisciplinary Studies course on popular culture.

## ***Eminem’s Bridge***

**Abstract:** This essay explores how the gap between different social classes and ethnicities has been bridged by Eminem’s rap music. The separation between white America and American minorities is prominent in many different aspects of American culture, but this essay explores the gap in terms of popular media, primarily music. To do this, this research investigation will define racism and the importance that is put into skin colour. It will then describe racism in terms of Hegemony, and place Eminem into Gramsci’s theory. By analyzing why Eminem’s music has become so popular, this investigation will explore how white rappers have changed hip-hop by bringing in a largely white audience. Eminem has changed rap forever by connecting people through his music who would have never otherwise been connected.

Rap is a genre that many people can enjoy, even though it was birthed in the bowels of the so called ‘ghetto’. Rich ‘white kids’ are

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able to relate to music made by troubled gang members from the roughest toughest parts of town. The music was originally made for the underprivileged African-American community by the underprivileged African-American community. Even so, white rappers such as Eminem have been experiencing greater success than the majority of African-American rappers. White consumers have been given a gateway into authentic hip-hop, thus exponentially increasing the popularity of white rappers. I contend that Eminem's controversial rap music has bridged the gap between its consumers from different ethnicities and social classes in North America.

Before I begin discussing how rap has affected ethnical divides in popular culture, I want to get into the very concept of racism. It is important to note, as John Storey makes clear in his section on 'Race and Racism', that the concept of separate 'races' within humankind is complete fabrication (179). All humans are of the same race, and the idea of separating people into different racial categories is ridiculous. Paul Gilroy emphasizes that there are no biological differences between 'races'; the only significance that skin colour has is that which we put into it. The concept of racism wouldn't exist if people didn't feel the need to separate themselves into different 'races' (qtd in Storey 167-168). Storey points out that "'race' and racism are not natural or

inevitable”, rather they are caused by social and economic factors (168). He goes on to say that the ideology of racism was first created as a way to rationalize the profitability of the slave trade (169). Though the slave trade was abolished in America in 1865, unfortunately ‘race’ is still a major social signifier today. The ideologies that come along with ‘race’ still hold meaning for people; as a result, racial stereotypes often come into play when people assess others.

As a result of racist ideologies, certain ‘races’ see themselves as superior to others, the classic example being ‘white’ people versus ‘black’ people. Though the slave trade no longer exists in North America, there is still a sense of superiority present in the white collective. Indeed, in America, it is no secret that African-Americans are viewed by many as ‘low-class’ people in comparison to white people (Sears et al. 2). In essence, the lower class in North America is widely associated with certain ethnicities (not just African-Americans), excluding most white people. Antonio Gramsci’s theory of Hegemony explains how the white ‘elite’ are able to maintain their power over minorities. Gramsci suggests that the upper class conceals their ideals and beliefs behind a mask of negotiations with, and concessions to, the lower class (Storey 80). The elite don’t “merely *rule* a society, [they] *lead* it through the exercise of ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ (Gramsci

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75)” (79-80). The dominant class projects their own ideals and wishes as the ideals and wishes of the subordinate class through a limited amount of concessions and negotiations (80). This process is “marked by both ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’” (81). By applying this to the social segregation in North America, it can explain the lack of a minority uprising against the proverbial ‘dominant white male’. Not all conflict, however, is resolved by Hegemony. Rather, it is “contained and channelled into ideologically safe harbours” (80). I would like to suggest that hip-hop could be one of these harbours. Many minority hip-hop artists use their music or dance as a way to express their rage and derision concerning the dominant class, and the discrimination against them. Though some hip-hop (predominantly rap) artists have garnered enough recognition to be widely heard, their intent isn’t really to start a revolution. Their intent is to express their feelings and gain respect in the hip-hop industry. This is because hip-hop is parked in an ideologically safe harbour, where discontent is talked about but never acted upon.

Gramsci also suggests that classes are organized by ‘organic intellectuals’; people who emerge organically from each separate class and negotiate the relationship between them (Storey 81). ‘Organic intellectuals’ function as a sort of leader when it comes to their

individual classes, and “it is their task to shape and to organize the reform of moral and intellectual life” (81). I argue that Eminem is an ‘organic intellectual’ in hip-hop culture because the way he has changed hip-hop through his music and his authenticity has helped to establish the relationship between two separate social classes. Edward Armstrong describes how Eminem authenticated himself through his violent lyrics and his repeated references to the fact that he is white. Armstrong claims that “Eminem cannot be inauthentic because he acknowledges the truth about himself. He accomplishes a self-conscious parody of rap’s racially based authenticity” (343). Alongside Dr. Dre and Tupac, Eminem is looked upon as an irrefutable rap icon. In his new song “Rap God” from *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*, he demonstrates his abilities by rapping a verse of 100 words in just 16 seconds. Eminem’s music establishes the relationship between the upper and the lower classes (Storey 80) by bringing attention to the fact that white people can gain more success than African-American people can in a primarily African-American industry. For example, the white Beastie Boys were the first group to get a platinum record in rap history (Ford 132). This is due to the fact, as Ryan Ford suggests, that being white can afford one opportunities that are usually not readily provided for African-Americans (130).

Eminem's music is more agreeable to white listeners because his music "allows white, middle class America to look at hip-hop as something closer to home instead of novelty entertainment" (Ford 130). Wealthy and moderately well off 'white kids' are able to relate to Eminem's music because he is also white, and this leads them to believe that they are integrated into the realm of hip-hop (131). In his song "White America", Eminem directly acknowledges the fact that his skin colour is the main reason behind his success:

Baby, {ooh baby}, look at my sales, let's do the math, if I was black, I would've sold half ... when I was/Underground, no one gave a fuck I was white, no labels wanted to sign me, almost gave up, I was/Like, fuck it, until I met Dre, the only one to look past, gave me a chance, and I lit a fire up/Under his ass... Shit, wow, I'm like my skin is it starting to work to my benefit now. ("White America")

Rap also addresses many issues about society, such as racism and the bent morals of the media. This attracts a white audience, many of whom feel discontented with the ethics of society. The fact that he's white leads many people to believe that Eminem has led a more privileged life than African-American rappers, and therefore doesn't have any 'street-cred'. This is not the case. Eminem grew up

in Detroit, and never had much money during his troubled youth. Coupled with his inspired talent and his association with Dr. Dre, Eminem has gained both “industry respect and street credibility” (130). Following his great success, Eminem started being referred to as “music’s next ‘great white hope’” (128). Though he often rags on the pristine American suburbia (i.e. the songs “Criminal”, “White America”, “The Way I Am”), Eminem’s largest fan base originates from the suburbs (339). The term ‘street-cred’ is defined by the Cambridge online dictionary as “a quality that makes you likely to be accepted by ordinary young people who live in towns and cities because you have the same fashions, styles, interests, culture, or opinions”. ‘Street-cred’ is normally associated with someone who has experience with life on the street (i.e. gangs, poverty, drugs, knowing ‘certain’ kinds of people). Street credibility is directly related to rap culture because “rap is from the streets, the music of the underclass essentially opposed to those enjoying a bourgeois suburban life” (Armstrong 338). Having ‘street-cred’ makes rappers more widely respected in certain circles, and lends authenticity to their music.

There has been a large amount of controversy surrounding some of Eminem’s offensive lyrics, which are, as Ford suggests, “best understood if they are analyzed as biting commentary on popular

culture and societal contradictions” (130). Eminem addresses this in his song “Criminal”, stating that it is absurd to think that he actually does what he says in his songs. Indeed, it would be disturbing to take all of his lyrics seriously, especially in the song “Role Model” where he sarcastically encourages young listeners to take drugs and break the law. Emmett George Price writes that hip-hop’s best quality is its ability to start important conversations about new types of cultural art and new ways to create that art (17). That is indeed what Eminem along with many other rappers have been doing with their thought provoking lyrics; this new form of art is a dialogue about social issues and the general unrest that people feel in society. Even the many rap songs about sex and drugs can be seen as an act of defiance; “I can say what I want and no one can stop me”. Kool Herc, one of hip-hop’s pioneers is described by Price as understanding “the role that music played in healing the lives of the oppressed youths who made up his audience, even if only for a brief moment” (11). Price is referring to the people that rap was meant for—the underclass African-American communities in North America who have more reason than white people to resist the system. According to Armstrong, rap is usually viewed as a style of music that is predominantly black, and “as part of an oral heritage . . . that preserves the cultural past of West African slaves” (338). This affects



Eminem's authenticity and brings to light an important issue in relation to how his music is affecting the rap industry.

Some may say that instead of building an understanding between white people and African-American people, Eminem's music has contributed to the marginalization of 'black' artists (Ford 132). This can be seen as widening the divide between upper class white people and lower class African-American people. Ford claims that one of the main reasons for this is profitability. The result is a dilution of the core essence of hip-hop culture; "[l]ost are many of the characteristics that are vital to the survival of the culture and therefore a voice of the people within. The only thing gained is a mainstream myth or ghost of a culture that in turn gives a warped understanding of a people" (133). Armstrong points out that Eminem is copying Elvis Presley in that respect—catering 'black' music to a white audience in order to turn a profit (343). The fact that many white artists are experiencing more success than African-American artists can be seen as distancing the creators of rap from the music itself. It is true that there is a disconnect between the mean streets of Detroit and the sparkly clean suburbs of white America. There are certain mutual understandings between rap's underprivileged creators that the music itself is unable to transmit to its more well-off audience. Rap is instead seen as "false imagery of the


culture that is used to gain profits from white America”, reducing it to “little more than stereotypical representations” (Ford 130). However, I want to point out that hip-hop’s separation from its roots can instead be seen as a global expansion, incorporating a wider diversity of audiences. ‘Black’ and white, lower class and upper class people are now able to share interests and relate to the same music, causing hip-hop to expand its influence exponentially. This breaks down some of the stereotypical barriers between different classes and ethnicities by providing a common ground, allowing separate classes to enjoy the same things in a socially acceptable way. The Frankfurt School’s theory about high culture versus popular culture loses its validity in this area because hip-hop is no longer absolutely categorized as either.

Though the concept of ‘race’ has no biological basis, it does hold much significance in the world of rap. Eminem’s skin colour has been a constant source of controversy in his career, but he has managed to maintain his authenticity through his ‘street-cred’. Gramsci’s theory of Hegemony suggests that hip-hop is an ideologically safe harbour for the underprivileged African-American community to express their discontent without causing an all-out revolution. Eminem’s music brings North American lower classes (minorities) and upper classes together by keeping a foothold in both realms. As an ‘organic

intellectual', Eminem appeals to his white consumers because he gives them something that connects them to hip-hop, and he appeals to his African-American consumers because his music is authentic. Eminem is an 'organic intellectual' because he has negotiated the relationship between white America and the rest of America; his controversial rap music has bridged the gap between the two social classes. Though white rappers could be seen as marginalizing black rappers, their music ultimately brings minorities closer to white America through shared interests, and a mutual derision towards the contradictions of society. Hip-hop is the kind of music that everyone can enjoy, and rap is becoming more and more widely accepted thanks to artists like Eminem. The question remains as to how much of an impact Eminem will have on the hip-hop industry altogether?



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