

HEGEMONY AT PLAY: FOUR CASE STUDIES
IN POPULAR CULTURE

By

Sarah Elizabeth Bergfeld

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of SARAH BERGFELD find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Thomas V. Reed, Ph.D., Chair

Nella Van Dyke, Ph.D.

Robert Eddy, Ph.D.

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Abstract

by Sarah Elizabeth Bergfeld, Ph.D.
Washington State University
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Chair: Thomas V. Reed

Frequently, the events and people appearing in various popular culture media are dismissed because they are assumed to be meaningless or unimportant. This dissertation explores the social and political meanings of several pop culture phenomena, from icons like Superman and hip-hop artist Eminem to the conservative trends in visual media embodied by televised poker and the reality television show *Survivor*. This dissertation deconstructs each figure's placement within and outside of various racist, sexist, class, and heterosexist structures at both the local and national levels in order to illustrate how the national imagination is constrained by these structures and how each character's use in various media serves to further strengthen and naturalize those structures. All of these figures make invisible, reinscribe, and naturalize privileged positionalities like whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, wealth, and American citizenship even as they attempt critiques. Even so, the case studies that comprise this dissertation illustrate that there are

gaps and spaces between intersecting structures of privilege that allow for heterogeneous and potentially liberatory readings, especially at the personal and local levels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. EMINEM: COMPLICATING THE NATIONAL CLASS/RACE DIALECTIC.....	17
3. SUPERMAN: (WHITE) AMERICA’S FAVORITE (WHITE) MAN/ALIEN/IMMIGRANT HERO.....	57
4. WOMEN WITH “THE NUTS”: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN TELEVISED POKER	93
5. <i>SURVIVOR</i> AS REALITY: IMAGES THAT “OTHER”.....	131
6. CONCLUSION.....	161
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	177

Dedication

For Pat,
who always finds
the silver lining.

INTRODUCTION

The seemingly disparate subjects discussed in this dissertation are connected in a multitude of ways not immediately apparent in either the chapter titles or a superficial understanding of the subjects themselves. First, addressing the surface level, Eminem, Superman, televised poker, and the reality television show *Survivor* can all be found in the popular culture arena. While for some this negates the possibility of taking these phenomena seriously, for others “such struggles are significant because it is within the realm of commercial culture and representation that we are constantly being constituted and positioned, as well as reconstituting ourselves collectively and individually” (Gray *Watching Race* 7).

The chapters that follow take seriously Gray’s claim that we are all in conversation with pop culture; however, as powerful and as capable as pop culture may be of defining and shaping us, it is not always and everywhere such a top-down process. On the contrary:

The origins of resistance lie not just in the social experience of subordination, but in the sense people make of it. There are meanings of subordination that serve the interests of the dominant, and there are ones that serve those of the subordinated. But the crucial point is that the separation of material social experience from the meanings given to it is an analytical and theoretical strategy only. In everyday life, there is no such neat distinction: our experience *is* what we make of it. (Fiske 512)

This dissertation attempts to uncover the spaces for alternative readings inherent even in the seemingly cohesive dominant narratives of the contemporary US. The following

chapters demonstrate that, as noted by Patricia Hill Collins, even the dominant narratives expressed in pop culture are not “as cohesive or uniform” as they seem (99). Indeed, their contradictions open up multiple spaces in which resistance might be read. At the same time, the hybridity of systems of power sometimes makes it appear as though real change is taking place when, in fact, those systems are merely adapting to new ideologies in order to become more firmly entrenched in American culture.

Herman Gray notes that, “Thinking about culture as deeply contradictory and about culture’s use by people sharpens our focus on its hegemonic as well as its counterhegemonic potentials. This strategy helps us to attend to the enormously complex and dynamic ways that people take from, identify with, reject, are duped by, and sometimes resist regimes of domination” (Gray *Watching Race* 7). Examples of this kind of work quoted throughout this dissertation include work by David Roediger, John Hartigan Jr., Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Robin D.G. Kelley. The chapters that follow attempt to stand on these theorists’ shoulders by noting and examining specific positionalities and locales in which Eminem, Superman, televised poker, and *Survivor* may be read and resisted by different audiences while still acknowledging their complex histories, contexts, and hybridity.

Thus, although the presence of the word “play” in the title of this dissertation may appear to downplay the presence and power of hegemonic white, heteromascuine narratives in popular culture, the term intends to evoke pop culture itself (often referred to as a form of play), the possibilities inherent in all forms of popular culture, and the very powerful moves made by the dominant and alternate narratives expressed in pop culture. Within popular culture and within the narratives told in that space, hierarchical

binaries like white/black, male/female, straight/gay, dominant/oppressed, natural/unnatural, real/contrived, authentic/fake, and rich/poor are retold and strengthened, but both inconsistencies within those binaries and alternative readings by viewers demonstrate the binaries' fragility, their interdependence, their incoherence, and the simultaneous presence of both halves of each binary within single texts. Along the same lines, Kirby Moss points out that Derrida "is concerned with reconceptualizing this oppositional either/or as a duality or *cohabitation* of terms: the division between them is not a partitioning of the dissimilar but a joining, a mutually supporting pivotal point around which meaning turns. The one term needs the other, a supplementary of both/and" (109). In other words, the sides of a binary can and often do coexist and must do so in order for meaning to be made.

For example, binaries like black/white, male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and rich/poor are defined as opposites linguistically. Most people recognize, however, that there is some "play" between these linguistic opposites when it comes to their application to real people at given places and at given moments. At the same time, these binaries exert pressure because one of the paired terms in each binary is granted power, invisibility, and normativity by both the people and the structures operating in the United States. Furthermore, many Americans are invested in these hierarchical binaries in one way or another, which in turn pushes them to uphold the structures that maintain current power dynamics, including the binaries themselves, by attempting to force people into the boxes the binaries define. This is where the binaries reveal their vulnerability, their slippage, their hybridity, and their "play." Moss writes that, "This subtle relationship of structure/play (or process), rather than play banishing structure, is little

appreciated or utilized in...the general postmodern critique of culture” (109). By analyzing the specifics of particular pop culture texts and figures, this dissertation attempts to balance the intricate play of contemporary ideological forces, both hegemonic and subordinate. Along the way, it also troubles these binaries and demonstrates that even hegemonic narratives of race, class, gender, and sexuality are fragile.

One of the most important hegemonic narratives at play in contemporary American culture is racism. Although many white Americans believe that racism is a thing of the past and subscribe to the neo-liberal ideologies of multiculturalism and color-blindness, repeals of affirmative action policies and the incessant portrayals of people of color as lazy or as the harbingers of falling property values, crime, and destruction indicate that racism lives on, albeit in increasingly complicated and veiled forms. George Lipsitz notes that, “Jurists, journalists, and politicians have generally been more vocal in opposing what they call ‘quotas’ and ‘reverse discrimination’ – by which they usually mean race-specific measures, designed to remedy existing racial discrimination, that inconvenience or offend whites – than in challenging the thousands of well-documented cases every year of routine, systematic, and unyielding discrimination against minorities” (19). Thus, while whiteness is normalized and remains largely invisible, the narrative of the white male victim of affirmative action gains cultural power. Kyle Kusz points out, “one must be particularly attentive to the ways in which constructions of Whiteness as unprivileged, victimized, or otherwise disadvantaged — images that seem to contradict the ideology of Whiteness as privileged — can work in particular contexts as a mechanism to resecure the privileged normativity of Whiteness in American culture” (394). In fact, moments when people with hegemonic/normative identities claim

victimhood or disadvantage require intense analysis, not simply so that we may dismiss such obfuscations, but so we may explore how and why such claims are made and in which spaces such claims become possible.

Thus, the chapters to follow explore the ways and instances in which a white male like Eminem makes whiteness and poverty visible and how these identities are linked to masculinity. In turn, the Superman chapter analyzes the ways in which Superman's immigration to earth is inflected by his white, male appearance and how it is connected to the immigration of other "in-between" peoples who gradually acquired whiteness at the expense of African Americans. The poker chapter explores how people of color and women in particular are discouraged from participating in a predominantly white, male sport by the rhetorical violence of both the game of poker and the men who play it. Finally, the *Survivor* chapter explores how the real/contrived binary informs audience readings and works to other island natives and Americans of color in what Bill Yousman calls "domestic Orientalism" (378). Running through all of the chapters in this dissertation is an analysis of the ways in which dominant and subordinate identity positions intersect and how readers make sense of these pop culture phenomena.

The analysis of race is fundamental to this dissertation, which attempts to account for the ways in which hegemonic racist narratives have changed over time, especially from the civil rights era to the era of George W. Bush. As these narratives adapt, the history of race in the US is not erased or covered over as much as it evolves into something new that is nevertheless connected to the past. Matthew Frye Jacobson puts it best when he writes, "Race is a palimpsest, a tablet whose most recent inscriptions only imperfectly cover those that had come before, and whose inscriptions can never be

regarded as final. Contradictory racial identities come to coexist at the same moment in the same body in unstable combinations, as the specific histories that generated them linger in various cultural forms or in the social and political relationships that are their legacies” (142). This image and its implications govern most of what follows below; race is always and everywhere uncertain, changing, adaptable, and shaded by its history.

The analyses of hegemonic gendered and heterosexist narratives that follow are also influenced by this image of the palimpsest and its connotations. For example, the adaptation of hegemonic white masculinity to narratives of the “sensitive man” arising in the 1980s plays a significant part in the discussions of white heteromascularity below. Demetrakis Demetriou refers to white heteromascularity and its adaptations as a “historic bloc” “characterized... by ‘negotiation rather than negation,’ that is, by an attempt to articulate, appropriate, and incorporate rather than negate, marginalize, and eliminate different or even apparently oppositional elements” (348). Demetriou thus sees newer adaptations of masculinity not as wholly new forms, but as negotiations that enhance heteromascularity’s hybridity, or its ability to incorporate new, progressive elements without losing its power, similar to how Jacobson refers to race as a palimpsest above. At the same time, however, that hybridity allows for readings and positions within heteromascularity that were not possible under traditional masculinity. Thus, for example, the “metrosexual” appears in one adaptation of heteromascularity just when the struggle for equal rights for homosexuals becomes especially contentious after the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996.

Indeed, hegemonic heterosexist narratives are in constant play and are tied to hegemonic white masculinity. “As Rubin’s pioneering work has repeatedly shown,

‘there is a hierarchy based on sexual behavior,’ and this hierarchy does not simply place heterosexuality at the top of the scale and homosexuality at the bottom, but accounts for all kinds of sexual difference from sex work to sadomasochism” (Halberstam 116). On this gender/sexuality continuum, the limited acceptance of identities such as the metrosexual are balanced by the appearance of increasingly heterosexist, misogynist narratives, shows, and figures in popular culture. Thus, “Magazines such as *Maxim* and television shows such as *The Man Show*...make explicit their own celebrations of traditional masculinity. In their objectification of women and their homage to beer, gadgets, sports, and other ‘manly things,’ these and similar sources have suggested that a new traditional masculinity has arrived. Here are images of masculinity, it seems, fed up with all of that new-age nonsense” (Malin 184). The instability of such hegemonic narratives, especially given their dependence on constant and repeated performances, informs and adds nuance to our readings of hegemonic narratives of heteromascularity.

Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender is the basis for modern conceptions of how inherently fragile gendered binaries are formed and reinforced. Butler writes that genders “are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (185). Butler’s foundational work thus offered up the possibility that gender, because it is performative, is fragile, can be performed by differently sexed bodies, and can be dismantled. Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender plays a vital role in the analysis of masculinity in the chapters below. In particular, the chapters to follow

demonstrate how white heteromascularity is performed and invoked in order to shore up support for regressive political policies and the continued policing of powerful identities. In other words, even the performance of masculinity is policed, especially at the poker tables and through the prism of race.

In the end, the intersecting binaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality form a complicated matrix wherein “The same class or element which was dominant in one area...could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances” (Derrida qtd in Spivak 284). At the same time, a general hierarchy is established amidst this interaction between hegemonic and subordinate identities and narratives. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out, “there emerges the top-dog position, whose profile is as follows: white, western, civilized, male, adult, urban, middle-class, heterosexual, and so on. It is this profile that has monopolized the definition of humanity in mainstream western imagery. It is a programme of fear for the rest of the world population” (114). As contradictory and confusing as the interaction between dominant and subordinate ideological narratives may be, in the end it is possible to make out a hierarchical organization like the one Pieterse points to above. However, this hierarchy is also vulnerable to shifts and changes, primarily depending on the context in which the hierarchy is invoked. Thus, while the hierarchy named above seems applicable to the US as a whole, the relative importance of each identity/positionality may shift within specific local or international situations.

Despite this hierarchical organization, or perhaps because of it, there are moments, especially at the local level, when readers and texts work to reverse, dismantle,

or trouble this hierarchy. John Hartigan Jr. writes, “That is, by grasping the instances and situations in which the significance of race spills out of the routinized confines of these absolute figures, we can begin to rethink the institutionalization of racial difference and similarity in this country” (3). In other words, there is much to be gained by studying the spaces and instances in which whiteness is sought, for example, by Roediger’s “in-between peoples” in their attempts to avoid being compared to African Americans. Such instances make it apparent that whiteness is a changing category used for different ends throughout history; there is therefore some hope that it will continue to change or that it can be dismantled at some point. Watching privileges like whiteness change and adapt allows us to see not just how we may dismantle them, but also how power itself tergiversates in order to weave itself more closely into the fabric of our lives.

In addition to race “spilling out” of these normalized and often invisible bodies and structures, so too do gender, class, and sexuality. For example, in regard to class, Sut Jhally points out that everyone on television is “making it” (133) while Kathy LeBesco makes the claim that much of the media is “wealth-washed” (239), a trend which leaves poor Americans without media representation. Meanwhile, at the local level, people identifying as “white trash” or as “hillbillies” talk back to the media about their invisibility by expressing pride in their “white trash” identities and in their ability to “make do” with very little (Hartigan 88). Simultaneously, subordinate groups like those claiming “white trash” identities sometimes choose to identify more with their dominant identities than those they feel are subordinate; thus they may vote Republican or otherwise attempt to avoid being turned away from “the welcome table’ of white society” (Wise *White Like Me* 73) despite their class needs.

While attempting to sort through these intersecting narratives and structures of power, we must be mindful of the fact that, “privileged White scholars must consider that as they are naming centers of power and privilege — to some extent strategically deconstructing themselves — they, too, are being named through different interpretations from their own” (Moss 105). Deconstructing the privileges of whiteness while simultaneously living those privileges encourages white scholars such as myself to overlook their own privileges and focus on subordinated aspects of their identities instead. I believe, like Said, that:

If it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests. (11)

Although I have tried to temper my attachment to my gender with a constant awareness of my racial and heterosexual advantages, the truth is that I very rarely succeeded. I am all of these identities together; like the subjects I study in the chapters below, one aspect cannot be separated from the others because they are always working, against each other, in sync, or some mix of the two, in the same embodied space.

As a white woman, the chapter on Eminem presented particular problems. For example, throughout my work on that chapter I was conscious of the fact that, “Black youth who’ve grown up in and are defined by hip-hop and go on to pursue graduate degrees focused on hip-hop report resistance from Black and white professors alike. White (and honorary white) graduate students doing the same report little or no resistance. This is not a hip-hop conspiracy theory” (Kitwana *Why White Kids* 104). In the six years over which this chapter has evolved, I did not experience any resistance beyond the usual resistance experienced by those who work with popular culture. I would have thought that, at some point, my work on Eminem, especially as a white woman, would have prompted someone to ask me why I chose to pursue that particular topic. Neither my peers nor my mentors ever ventured to ask and although there are a number of possible reasons for this level of acceptance, part of the equation is the color of my skin. My white skin confers upon me the privilege to study a hip-hop in a way that, as Kitwana notes above, not even those who helped build hip-hop have access to.

I have attempted to remain conscious of my privileges throughout this piece and throughout my graduate career. Despite my attempts, however, I am sure that I have failed; the nature of privilege is that those who possess it are taught to be oblivious to it. Those lessons begin at an early age and they persist. Tim Wise writes:

I cannot even count how many times I have had young white people tell me they are paralyzed with fear at the thought of interrupting their parents’ racism, of calling them on their bullshit. It is the fear, as James Baldwin called it, of ‘being turned away from the welcome table’ of white society, and it is palpable, and powerful, and serves as a straightjacket, limiting the

range of motion for whites, even those who want to do the right thing, to speak out, to resist. (*White Like Me* 17)

Wise's description resonates with my experience, both writing this dissertation and studying privilege, but it doesn't quite capture it.

My upbringing was probably like many others; my family, and my father in particular, emphasized honesty, justice, and fairness. Furthermore, my father led by example. Since I can remember and because he did not think tax brackets were fair, my father has voted for Democrats who work to increase progressive taxes and abolish flat taxes. He has never uttered a racist sentiment, or even a statement that could be construed as support for color-blindness or "multiculturalism." He seems to see them for what they are. Such actions persist despite his increasing wealth. His insistence that I never lie made such a mark on me that telling anything short of the absolute truth still sometimes seems tantamount to outright lying. This search for the truth, especially within myself, has taught me several painful but important lessons in my examination of privileges like whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and wealth.

The most important of these lessons is the uselessness of guilt, but the second is that I cannot tell when an analysis of privilege is deep enough or when to stop analyzing. The questioning of unearned privilege that I begin in this dissertation in some ways just scratches the surface. The political is indeed personal and once a scholar begins to consider how her privileges are responsible for her present position, especially under the aegis of honest self-reflection, she may never stop.

This is the price and the privilege embedded in this dissertation. Once one witnesses the awesome power of interconnected matrices of domination and sees how

one is caught in this web, how, potentially, everything one has accomplished was not solely the result of one's efforts, one cannot un-learn it. But it is quite appropriate that there is a price for knowing and accepting unearned privileges. Tim Wise writes:

...if there is one thing I've learned it is that we will (and I'm speaking of white folks here, and white antiracists specifically) screw up, more times than we care to count, more times than we expected, and just as often as people of color already knew we would. It's as regular as rain, and you can set your clock by it in most cases. Saying this does not diminish us, it does not mean we shouldn't try, and it surely doesn't mean we don't have a role to play in the destruction of white supremacy. It just means the privilege carries a cost: in this case, it costs us the clarity of vision sometimes needed to see what you're really doing and how, even in your resistance, you sometimes play the collaborator (*White Like Me* 118).

Furthermore, he writes, "Challenging racism and white supremacy is what we should be doing. Resistance is what we need to do for us. People of color, as always, will pretty much take care of themselves. What we must do is simply our part" (*White Like Me* 98). In these lines, Wise implies that even the privileged pay a price, but he is careful to put a priority on resistance and freedom rather than wallowing in self-pity or reducing a very complex interrelatedness to white victimhood. Instead, he points out that anti-racist work by all of us will not only bring equality that much closer to reality, but it will eventually free even the privileged in ways they cannot imagine.

For me, the self-aware, educated privileged also pay a price and that price is a near constant and often paralyzing uncertainty about their potential, their skills, and their

competence. At any given moment, I am unable to say for certain if I've actually earned anything on my own. The web of intersecting privileges extends into my past and it touches everything. No matter what I achieve, I will always wonder about just how much my privileges eased my way. Indeed, the privileged *should* wonder this. Tim Wise calls whiteness "a trick, but sadly one that has worked for nearly three-and-a-half centuries" (*On White Pride*) but most privileges are "tricks that have worked" because they convince the privileged that they have only their hard work to thank for their advantages and that those who have very little have not worked hard enough. Such simple equations are not only historically inaccurate and patently untrue, but they do a disservice to the complexity of the very powerful systems that deform us all and to those who are shaped by those systems but resist them nonetheless.

For some, like me, this realization is just the beginning. Knowing how gender, race, sexuality, and class are connected opens me up to the possibility that not only are my accomplishments not solely my own, but my privileged identities hold my gender captive. Knowing that whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and the family are so interconnected, how can I not be aware that dismantling my dominant identities is one of the steps to dismantling sexism? And once I come to that realization, how can I not work to do whatever I must to set my gendered self free? Indeed, the connections between and the inseparability of systems of domination outlined in the chapters below demonstrate the truth of Baldwin's claim that, "the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being....The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks – the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns,

before the law, and in the mind” (96) Baldwin’s emphasis on the liberation of whites here is a deliberate reversal which intends to show how closely our fates and our freedom, as complex, differently-empowered individuals and as groups, are connected to the fate and the freedom of everyone. Activist-intellectuals have been telling us for fifty years or more that we must all work together, but certain moments in the chapters below show with a degree of clarity why white women who want to be free must fight racism, why black men who want to be free must fight sexism, why the white poor who want to be free must fight racism, and why gay men who want to be free must fight sexism; if we want to be free, we must fight power in whatever form we find it.

At several points throughout this dissertation, I approach privilege and power as if they work in and through only one identity at a time. The intent at such points was to try to see a single privilege in detail, but there are limits to the knowledge derived from those details because they are disconnected from the web of domination. On the other hand, there are moments when I work to make visible the connections and interactions between three or four privileged identities, mostly in places where, as John Hartigan Jr. calls it, there are “slippages,” where the ideological state apparatuses fail, for a brief moment, to hide their inner workings, the falsity of their binaries, and the arbitrary nature of their hierarchies. This is where the true potential for knowledge about the operation and shifts in matrices of power resides. If we can examine not just Eminem’s race, but also his masculinity, his class status, and his homophobia, his positions and his contradictions can sometimes bear astonishing potential. If Superman can be used to examine whiteness and alienness rather than just masculinity, we can see how whiteness, immigration, and race itself change and for what reasons. Scholars who view poker as a game wherein race,

gender, and the rhetoric of the American West play a significant role can gain insight into not just poker, but sports, cowboy culture, and white heteromascularity. *Survivor* can be viewed through a lens that encompasses race and gender as well as modern incarnations of Orientalism in order to demonstrate the ways in which dominant positionalities and structures of power continue to engage in the process of “othering,” albeit in a different, updated form of Orientalism.

The potential for liberatory readings in the minutiae of each of these phenomena is not only staggering, but necessary. It is important for academics to fight not only the conservatism of some texts, but to find the potential for liberatory readings in all texts, much as the readers and audiences themselves do. This dissertation is an attempt to ferret out those possibilities while keeping a realistic eye on the shifting and adaptable web of domination that lives within and all around us, constraining our efforts to free ourselves.

CHAPTER 2

EMINEM: COMPLICATING THE NATIONAL CLASS/RACE DIALECTIC

“Instead of relying upon composite views of ‘race’ in a national perspective, we need to dwell more attentively on the disparate and unstable interpretations of racial matters that people develop in the course of their daily lives. In order to think differently about race we need to pay attention to the local settings in which racial identities are actually articulated, reproduced, and contested, resisting the urge to draw abstract conclusions about whiteness and blackness” (Hartigan, *Racial Situations* 4)

In February of 2004, *The Source* magazine released a compact disc containing some of rapper Eminem’s racist lyrics. For some, the 20-second track quickly demonstrated what they had suspected for years; Eminem is not the hip-hop advocate he pretends to be. For others, the track seemed to indicate that Eminem is yet another in a string of whites who co-opt black youth culture for personal advancement. Heard in isolation, the track sounds like yet another white kid on a racist rant. However, in order to understand the significance of Eminem (starting with his emergence on the hip-hop scene and extending to the present day), one needs to consider a broad range of issues: changes in Eminem’s hometown of Detroit over the last 50 years, changes in the hip-hop world, shifts in the racial atmosphere of the United States, the history of hip-hop, and the nuanced relationships between poor urban whites and African Americans. In this chapter, Eminem figures as both the banal and the exceptional. His presence in the world of hip-hop cannot be divorced from a long history of minstrelsy and cooptation; nor can it be limited to such an analysis. Eminem is the best selling white rapper in hip-hop history; as a white hip-hop phenomenon in a genre normally dominated by black youth, Eminem’s success must be linked to a number of intersecting forces: national and local dialectics regarding the intersections of race and class, the history of the white cooptation

of black cultures, ongoing arguments about the past and future of hip-hop, the racist imperatives of capitalism, and contemporary debates about the meaning of whiteness in the United States.

Normalized Whiteness on the National Level: Whiteness as a Disadvantage

“What you know about bein’ bullied over half your life? / Oh, that’s right, you should know what that’s like, you’re half white” (Eminem “Nail in this Coffin”)

“Have you ever been hated or discriminated against? / I have. I’ve been protested and demonstrated against. / Picket signs for my wicked rhymes, / look at the times.” (Eminem “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” 2002).

“Sometimes I wanna jump on stage and just kill mics, / And show these people what my level of skill’s like. / But I’m still white, sometimes I just hate life” (Eminem “8 Mile”)

In each of the above lines, Eminem frames whiteness as a disadvantage. What is missing from each of these lines (and many of Eminem’s songs) is the complex context in which such statements are made and the many ways in which they might be interpreted. In many of his songs, Eminem is careful to point out that the white rapper must overcome various obstacles, one of which is proving that he can rhyme in spite of his white skin. However, at other times Eminem agrees with the claim that “... hip-hop prides itself on its multicultural appeal. When it comes to hip-hop, skill comes first” (Kitwana, *Why White Kids* 153). This is what prompts Eminem to rap, “Comin’ up, it never mattered what color you was. / If you could spit then you could spit, that’s it, that’s what it was” (Eminem “The Sauce”). However, Eminem seems unable to decide to what degree race matters in hip-hop; he seems to want to believe in the idea that skill matters more than race in hip-hop, but he also claims that, at least in the beginning of his career, his whiteness was a liability in the hip-hop world. Both are probably true, especially

given changes in racial situations/ideologies over time and the differences between Eminem's experiences on the national stage and his life in Detroit.

Eminem's apparent indecisiveness regarding the place of whiteness in hip-hop may indicate more than is at first apparent, especially when one accounts for the ways Eminem's whiteness may have operated on a local level as a white rapper in Detroit. John Hartigan, Jr. notes that, "These situations of white Detroiters are obviously at a vast remove from what might be posited as the normative experience and existence of whites in the United States, but they do suggest that whites' awareness of racial operations are not only (or even best) raised through critical accountings of ideological structures – that is, 'whiteness.'" (*Racial Situations* 279). In this line, Hartigan posits that local racial situations may form the basis of one's conceptions of racial relations in the United States more so than national dialogues about race, even if both play a role. Thus, understanding Eminem's views on whiteness require an analysis of the interaction between both local and national realities of and dialogues about race. Furthermore, if the Detroit hip-hop scene frames Eminem's racial experiences as a poor white man, his seemingly contradictory claims (that race both does and does *not* matter), take shape not as contradictions but as context-specific differences.

Although it would be difficult to tell how many of Eminem's stories are accurate, especially those dealing with black skepticism regarding his skill as a white rapper, hip-hop scholars seem to agree that although hip-hop is primarily a black art form, it is also appreciated and practiced in cultures throughout the world (See Kitwana, Rose, Kelley).¹ Despite hip-hop's widespread multicultural appeal, in the context of Detroit hip-hop Eminem may have experienced significant skepticism, doubt, and racial mocking both

because of the history of the white cooptation of black art forms and because Eminem was clearly a poor white man practicing a black art form. However, once Eminem became a national phenomenon, what he had previously perceived as the disadvantages of whiteness in hip-hop seemed to suddenly switch to advantage and privilege. Thus, in “White America,” Eminem raps “Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself. / If they were brown, Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf. / But Shady’s cute, Shady knew Shady’s dimples would help, make ladies swoon baby (ooh baby!) Look at my sales/ let’s do the math / If I was black I woulda sold half” (*The Eminem Show*) Eminem clearly acknowledges his race privilege in this line, but later in the same song, he would remark, “Sittin’ back looking at shit, wow, I’m like, ‘my skin is it starting to work to my benefit now?’” with a palpable tinge of resentment (“White America” *The Eminem Show*).

Eminem’s questions about when whiteness works to one’s benefit are important (notwithstanding Eminem’s resentment that his racial privileges *seemed* to have taken effect only recently), because they point out, like many of his rhymes, the difference between local and national interpretations of race and whiteness.

“White Trash:” A National Dialectic

“I’m hoping things look up / but there ain’t no job openings./ I feel discouraged, hungry and malnourished/ Living in this house with no furnace, unfurnished./ And I’m sick of working dead end jobs with lame pay, / tired of being hired and fired the same day” (Eminem “Rock Bottom” *The Slim Shady LP*).

Eminem has claimed the term “white trash” in many of his rhymes and has identified as such in his semi-autobiographical film *8 Mile*. However, he seems to use “white trash” in a wide variety of contexts that imply several different meanings, from self-deprecating to proud. Matt Wray’s and Annalee Newitz’s ambitious collection of

essays, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, is an attempt to navigate the history and meaning of the term “white trash” as it pertains to race and class in the United States. The editors introduce the anthology by defining “white trash” as a “test object” (Wray and Newitz 7). They outline the flexibility and the usefulness of the term when they write:

As a test object, white trash helps to represent a new connection between race and class in the United States. Yet, importantly, it also delineates a separation between race and class, for with white trash we are made aware that class actually cuts across race lines – stereotypically ‘well off’ whites are also poor. White trash is thus one way people living in the United States try to describe class identities. (Wray and Newitz 8)

“White trash” is thus more than just an attempt to describe class, it is also one of the many terms Americans use to describe and define race. Wray and Newitz use “white trash” as a test object in order to point out the peculiarity of the simultaneously advantaged (racially white) and disadvantaged (economically poor) population it describes, a population that Eminem has been part of for most of his life. They call this connection a new one because, as John Hartigan, Jr. notes, “researchers and politicians have constructed a grossly distorted image of poverty in this country. While whites constitute a vast majority of the poor population in the United States, blackness composes the most familiar visage in representations of poverty” (“Name Calling” 152). Thus, “white trash,” as a national term, is in part a response to the proliferation of the distorted but “familiar visage” of poverty, the urban African American. Terms like “white trash”

and “hillbilly” are born when Americans find themselves in need of terms that describe certain maligned, white populations more specifically than the word “poor” allows.

When Eminem uses the term “white trash” to describe himself, he does so in several ways, some of which are in line with its usage on a national level and some of which operate quite differently. For example, in the song “If I Had,” Eminem’s usage of the term is matter-of-fact: “I’m tired of being white trash, broke and always poor” (*The Slim Shady LP*). Here he uses “white trash” almost as if it has no derogatory power when most people in the U.S. would freely admit that “white trash” is generally used as an insult. In the national imagination, “white trash” signifies several very specific images and connotations: lazy, ignorant, unemployed whites, sometimes with southern drawls, who live in trailers and have one or more cars up on blocks in their driveways or yards. The buck-toothed character Cletus Spuckler on The Simpsons is a fairly accurate amalgam of the many stereotypes of white-trashdom. While “white trash” and “hillbilly” retain most of their derogatory power in most settings, there are indications that both terms are being reclaimed by some of the same poor whites the terms were meant to disparage.

In a 2006 MSNBC article entitled “Welcome to the White Trash Nation,” Helen A.S. Popkin implies that “white trash” style is the new hipster chic, but she is unable to completely shake the calumnious intent of the phrase, which suggests that however the term might be reclaimed and refashioned, it retains the power to wound.² Still, the recognition of the trend toward reclaiming “white trash” and “hillbilly” indicates the importance of what some theorists have noticed on the local level, an effort at reclamation that seems important enough to be noticed by the national media and

powerful enough to resist its distilling powers. Thus, in spite of the stubbornness of the largely insulting stereotypes of “white trash” on the national level, Eminem, along with many of his “white trash” peers, claims the term “white trash” almost defensively, as if he is aware of the term’s derogatory power but claims it for himself anyway. In order to unpack the tendency to proudly claim a “white trash” identity, we must analyze the contexts in which this practice is undertaken and what it means to contemporary whiteness.

Claiming “White Trash” in *8 Mile*

In the film *8 Mile*, a roughly biographical film about a white rapper in Detroit and his struggle to make it in the world of hip-hop, Eminem’s character, B. Rabbit, wins the final rap battle against Papa Doc, thus claiming his spot as the best rapper in the neighborhood. In order to win the final rap battle, Rabbit responds to both of the previous rap battles, where the rappers “Lotto” and “Lyckety Splyt” take issue with both his whiteness and his poverty. For example, Lyckety Splyt raps:

Fuckin Nazi, this crowd ain't your type/
Take some real advice and form a
group with Vanilla Ice/
And what I tell you, you better use it./
This guy's a hillbilly,
this ain't Willie Nelson music./
Trailer trash, I'll choke you to
your last breath... You'll get dropped so hard/
Elvis will start turnin' in
his grave/
I don't know why they let you out in the dark/
You need to take
your white ass back across 8 mile/
To the trailer park. (*8 Mile*)

Lyckety Splyt’s rhymes highlight the spatial and racial conflicts present in the film, and in just a few seconds he alludes to Rabbit’s status as “white trash” three times (hillbilly, trailer trash, trailer park). He also compares Rabbit to Nazis, Vanilla Ice, Willie Nelson,

and Elvis, all of whom signify differently in hip-hop culture. Lyckety Splyt also tells Rabbit that he needs to go back across 8 Mile Road, the dividing line between the predominantly black city of Detroit and its white suburbs. Lickety Splyt's (and the Free World's) main argument seems to be that Rabbit and other whites simply don't belong in the hip-hop scene because they lack the requisite authenticity: blackness.³

Although one would normally separate the fictional portrayal from the actual rap star, the identities of Rabbit and Eminem bleed together in ways that make it very difficult to distinguish between them. Both Eminem and Rabbit are from the Detroit area, both are poor, both lived in trailer parks, both have seemingly inadequate mothers and both are white rappers. Furthermore, several critics have noted that in addition to authenticating Rabbit's (white) presence in hip-hop, *8 Mile* also served as a vehicle for Eminem's authenticity (See Watts, Armstrong, Rodman).

Both viewers and critics sometimes assume that the viewer who watches Rabbit's life is actually interpreting the events as if they are part of Eminem's life, so unavoidable are the comparisons between them. The fact that Eminem, who often writes his life into his rhymes, also wrote the soundtrack song "Lose Yourself," contributes to critics' and audiences' erasure of the already thin line separating Rabbit and Eminem. Furthermore, Armstrong implies that Dr. Dre, who has overseen most of Eminem's career, played a careful hand in Eminem/Rabbit's portrayal in *8 Mile* because he knew that viewers would inevitably confuse Rabbit's story with Eminem's. Dr. Dre seemed to know that establishing Rabbit's authenticity would establish Eminem's as well (Armstrong 347). However, for such a transfer of authenticity to work, Rabbit's authenticity had to have

merit in both the semi-fictional world of *8 Mile* and hip-hop culture at large in order for Eminem's authenticity to be more firmly established.

Eminem, who frequently talks down to other artists claiming Detroit as their hometowns, ("Look at y'all runnin' your mouths again/ when you ain't seen a fuckin' Mile Road south of ten," in "Marshall Mathers," *The Marshall Mathers LP*), was never technically a resident of Detroit either. As he insists in the song "Yellow Brick Road," "Let's rewind it back to 89 when I was a boy on the east side of Detroit/Crossin' 8 Mile into Warren, into hick territory" (*Encore*). It's worth noting that Eminem is always "crossing" 8 Mile Road in his songs; he is careful to claim Detroit origins but he never exactly lies about the poor, almost-suburban town where he grew up.

Both Rabbit and Eminem practice this slippage back and forth across 8 Mile Road, from Detroit, which is predominantly black, to Warren, which is predominantly white, and back again (Scott 135). In fact, Eminem insists on this slippage; in "Evil Deeds" he raps, "Predominantly, predominantly, everything's always predominantly/ predominantly white, predominantly black/ Well, what about me, where does that leave me? / Well I guess that I'm between predominantly both of 'em" (*Encore*). His repetition of "predominantly" in these lines serves to make the word meaningless and signifies his refusal to claim either Warren or Detroit (not to mention white or black) as his formative influence. Instead, Eminem repeatedly claims both a Detroit and a white trash history, a strategy that his character, Rabbit, uses to his advantage as well.

A crucial moment in the film, Rabbit's final rap battle is a succinct argument for his authenticity; it addresses Rabbit's race, class, and neighborhood loyalties while dismantling the authenticity of his opponent, Papa Doc. First, Rabbit seizes on the tropes

of whiteness that both Lotto and Lyckety Splyt used against him in earlier battles. He tells the crowd, “I know everything he's got to say against me. / I am white, I am a fuckin’ bum, I do live in a trailer with my mom” (*8 Mile*); Rabbit thus steals Papa Doc’s critiques of his whiteness, his poverty, and the fact that he is white (trailer) trash. Rabbit finishes the battle with “Fuck the beat, I go a capella/ Fuck a papa doc, fuck a clock, fuck a trailer, fuck everybody/ Fuck y'all if you doubt me. /I'm a piece of fucking white trash, I say it proudly./ And fuck this battle, I don't wanna win, I'm outty,/ Here, tell these people something they don’t know about me” (*8 Mile*). When Papa Doc gets his chance to fight back, he’s speechless.

Rabbit becomes the new battle champion, but he walks back to his job at Detroit Stamping anyway, forgoing the 313rd’s celebration. Having decided to press his own demo, Rabbit seems to know that winning rap battles is not enough. His walk back to work is the final step in the rap battle; having “proudly” declared himself “a piece of fucking white trash,” his walk back to work seems to signify a newfound pride in his class status.

However, Eric King Watts interprets this key scene differently. He writes:

The Free World is vanquished as white-like; Clarence’s genealogy apparently provides the one drop of middle class blood necessary for his expulsion. But Rabbit preempts the 313rd’s celebration so that he can return to the plant. Although now commanding respect at the Shelter, Rabbit walks away in order to fulfill the film’s teleology; he must submit to the very same racial imperatives that hold the 313rd in orbit around the Shelter and that evict the Free World. Only the authentically black can

reside. This racial essentialism warrants Rabbit's self-imposed "romantic white solitude" (Grundman, 2003, p. 16) at the film's end because the color line must be maintained in order for his passing to be heroic. (202)

Although it is important to look at how both race and class are framed by Rabbit's battle with Papa Doc, it's also important to recognize when and how both race and class are framed as important within the mythos of both the film and hip-hop culture at large. Just before the final rap battle, Future tells Rabbit that he has to "Flip the script on this shit, tonight," (*8 Mile*) and Rabbit fulfills his end of the bargain by flipping what had been a racial issue (Rabbit's whiteness) into a class issue (Papa Doc's middle-class status).

Of course, flipping the script from concerns about Rabbit's whiteness to concerns about Papa Doc's class has regressive effects. Rabbit's victory implies that class status confers more authenticity in hip-hop than race does, thus establishing an either/or relationship where a both/and would be more appropriate; most hip-hop scholars agree that both race and class play a role in hip-hop authenticity. It also infers that "By occluding the possibility of legitimate black middle class motives, the film suggests that the only black folk with genuine and ethical strivings are poor urban blacks who strive only to 'keep it real.'" (Watts 203). The Free World's goal to rule the Detroit hip-hop scene is continually portrayed as inauthentic in the film via its contrast to Future (Mekhi Phiffer), the 313rd, and the Shelter. The Free World's motives seem illegitimate because as middle-class blacks, they are seen as less deserving/needful of the wealth that hip-hop fame confers than the poor people (white and black) who actually live in the 313rd.

This also indicates a clear preference for poverty as the necessary condition of hip-hop authenticity, rather than race, when this need not be the case. Importantly, the

claim that hip-hop authenticity centers on class rather than race makes it much easier for poor white men to engage in hip-hop culture without understanding its history or its origins in African American youth culture. Those who lose sight of this fact run the risk of appropriating the culture. Although *8 Mile* doesn't dismiss the black cultural origins of hip-hop, its emphasis on class (as opposed to race) could be the first of many steps along that path. As Kitwana suggests, "Hip-hop is a subculture of Black youth culture. Those who suggest it isn't are confused, misled, trying to appropriate Black youth culture or too culturally arrogant to realize that they are appropriating" (*Why White Kids* 126). However, the conflict between the ideas that hip-hop is primarily black or that it is primarily inclusive, is a persistent and unresolved discussion in hip-hop circles. What Kitwana and others seem to argue is that there is no reason hip-hop can't be inclusive of all races and classes *if* its practitioners are all aware and respectful of its origins in black youth culture.

Watts also claims that Rabbit's walk back to the plant at the end of the film signifies the reclamation of whiteness, that this move maintains a color line and reinforces the idea that "Only the authentically black may reside" (202). However, there's little evidence to suggest that Rabbit's return to the plant signifies *only* a return to/reclamation of whiteness, rather than an embrace of "white trash," an identity that signifies both race and class. Although many automakers built new factories in the suburbs just after World War II, leaving the older, city factories emptied and its citizens jobless (Bozza 211), in the film, Detroit Stamping appears to be a predominantly black space; everyone from Rabbit's partner to his boss and his rival at the lunch truck are black. Watt's claim that Rabbit is returning to a white racial space is true, but it's also

based on a specialized knowledge of Detroit history not possessed by most viewers of the film. To them, Rabbit's return to work signifies his acceptance of both the bootstraps/American Dream myth and his "white trash" status, which he loudly and proudly declares in the final rap battle. Rabbit's reclamation of a racial and class status in the term "white trash" is important because it falls in line with one of several ways Eminem deals with what many see as contradictory racial and class statuses. In fact, the proud declaration of his white trash status recalls a local Detroit usage of the term "hillbilly" outlined by John Hartigan, Jr.

"Hillbilly" and "White Trash" in Detroit: Poor Whites' Understandings of Race

John Hartigan Jr.'s epigraph to this chapter asserts that we need to delve into how race is discussed and how it plays out on the local level in order to change how we have come to understand race as it enters into national discourses. Hartigan's study of race in small communities in Detroit is relevant to an accurate picture of how Eminem discusses race because Hartigan studied neighborhoods very near where Eminem grew up. Although Hartigan doesn't specifically discuss Warren, Eminem's hometown, most of his insights still apply because they note local differences in discussions of race specific to the greater Detroit area.

Hartigan's most useful discussions, for the purpose of this chapter, are his sections on the various ways local Detroit residents use the term "hillbilly." Specifically, "'Hillbilly' was the name given to southern whites who either willfully or 'ignorantly' failed to assimilate into northern norms of respectability (that is, whiteness)... 'Hillbilly' labeled problematic white bodies and behaviors that disrupted the implicit color line in Detroit at a time when its informal, behavioral dictates were a primary means for

maintaining racial segregation” (Hartigan *Racial Situations* 28). There is also a class component to the term “hillbilly” that is very similar to “white trash,” as both terms are usually used to differentiate between middle- and upper-class whites and poor whites (*Racial Situations* 88). Hartigan also notes the similarities between “hillbilly” and “white trash” when he writes, “‘Hillbillies’ were glaringly obvious to northern whites because their mores and behaviors confused what had once been fairly stable caricatures of the differences between whites and blacks. Uncomfortably, the ‘hillbilly,’ as with ‘white trash’ in the South, bore the characteristics of laziness, poverty, and potential for violence that, for whites, had previously been exclusively associated with blacks” (*Racial Situations* 33). Like “white trash,” the term “hillbilly” is used by middle- and upper-class whites to identify poor whites who don’t appear to desire upward mobility, who are stereotyped as lazy and violent (as African Americans are frequently portrayed), and from whom the rich and middle-classes wish to differentiate themselves.

Hartigan also points out that poor whites moving up the economic ladder tend to distance themselves from their former poverty by applying the term “hillbilly” to others and shunning it themselves. In his words, “Those who made the choice to assimilate to northern mores then relentlessly used ‘hillbilly’ to accentuate the distance they had achieved from their regional roots. In this regard, ‘hillbilly’ operates as a rhetorical identity used to position individuals, to set them discursively apart from those with whom they share ostensible features” (Hartigan *Racial Situations* 34). In other words, people who considered themselves hillbillies or white trash before they became members of the middle-class then turned those derogatory terms on others, thereby separating themselves from “those people.” In “White Savagery and Humiliation, or A New Racial

Consciousness in the Media,” Annalee Newitz points out that poor whites/white trash are often “othered” by middle-class whites in contemporary horror films to the degree that “their class differences are represented as the difference between civilized folks and primitive ones” (134). The “primitive” images of white trash are then used to assuage middle-class white guilt; white trash figures become the receptacles into which middle-class whites pour anything and everything about whiteness that can be seen as aberrant, from rape and murder in slasher films (Newitz 136) to racism.

This is not unlike the related and widely repeated conception of the southern United States as the birthplace and present-day home of a virulent and violent racism, of which the North (and its white residents) are completely innocent, or at least less guilty. Hartigan notes that these uses of white trash on the national level are also acted out in Detroit. In his treatment of the increasingly gentrified “Corktown” neighborhood, Hartigan points out that the mostly white residents of that locale distanced themselves from both accusations of racism and the poor Maltese Americans in the area by “blaming the Maltese for being racist” (*Racial Situations* 204). Doing so “effectively relieved whites of assessing how their own desire for a certain sense of community might be implicated in reproducing a particular racial order in a neighborhood where only 4 percent of its residents were black” (Hartigan *Racial Situations* 204). Such a use of “white trash” as a racially inflected term is reminiscent of the white nativists of the 19th century who attempted to set themselves apart from poor Eastern European, Jewish, and Irish immigrants by likening them to African Americans and calling them “niggers,” the same trend that urged these groups to practice blackface to reinforce the distance between African Americans and themselves (E. Goldstein 35).

In both cases, rich and middle-class whites attempt to restrict membership in whiteness by labeling poor whites with racist language. As a formerly poor white man, it is difficult to tell to whom Eminem might currently apply the terms “white trash” and “hillbilly,” but he has yet to distance himself from these terms. Up to and including his last album, long after he had achieved upward mobility, Eminem refers to himself alternately as “white trash” and “trailer trash,” and even calls his hometown “hick territory” (“Yellow Brick Road” 2004). This may indicate that he still feels as if he is part of the white trash community, but it may also be another of Eminem and Dr. Dre’s savvy strategies to reinforce Eminem’s hip-hop authenticity.

Eminem’s ties to poor, urban, white communities are also his ties to poor, urban, black communities – the lifeblood of rap – via shared geographic location and economic status.

Thus, even when Eminem discusses his present wealth, he seems unable to resist bringing up his destitute past. For example, in “Evil Deeds” he raps, “Woe is me, there goes poor Marshall again/ whining about his millions and his mansion... Man, I'd hate to have it/ as bad as that Mr. Mather's claims he had it/ I can't imagine it./ That little *rich poor white bastard*/ needs to take some of that cash out the bank and take a bath in it” (*Encore*, emphasis added). Despite what must be his significant wealth, in the last line Eminem uses both rich and poor to describe himself. It is difficult to tell whether this is an honest expression of an identity in flux or a carefully contradictory attempt to keep Eminem grounded in his working-class authenticity while not denying his present circumstances.

However, rather than being either one or the other, it's possible that these lines represent both a carefully crafted if uncertain image of Eminem's identity and his attempt to reconcile his past and present economic circumstances. Eminem still uses "white trash" to describe himself, but "rich" has also joined his list of appellations. In many cases, like Eminem's, the derogatory use of terms like "hillbilly" and "white trash" by middle- and upper-class whites doesn't prevent poor whites from claiming the terms as their own. Thus, "In the clash between the indeterminate flux of sociality and the determinate power of structures of classification that stereotypes represent, self-inscribing this marked identity allows 'hillbillies' to undermine the absolute opposition of self and other that such a category maintains as part of a broadly functioning racial ideology" (Hartigan *Racial Situations* 101). In other words, when poor whites identify with these terms they begin to dismantle, rhetorically anyway, the racial dichotomy that the terms were created to enforce. As terms that are meant to divide (and widen the gap between) black and white, the proud adoption of "hillbilly" and "white trash" sometimes signifies both a dismissal of the intended division between black and white and pride in one's class status and neighborhood allegiances.

Furthermore, this usage of "white trash" seems to match both Eminem's and Rabbit's use of the term in *8 Mile*. Although the terms "white trash" and "trailer trash" are used to emphasize class (as opposed to race) in *8 Mile*, class is a legitimate means of bonding and coalition building between whites and working-class African Americans who engage in hip-hop culture. Where *8 Mile* and Eminem go astray is in relying on class status as sufficient grounds for coalition-building between poor whites and poor African Americans when actual anti-racist work would establish much stronger bonds.

More importantly, anti-racist work would demonstrate that poor whites are no longer willing to invest in white privilege. Unfortunately, Eminem seems rather unmotivated to explore such options, even in light of his professed proximity and sympathy with black youth culture via hip-hop. Indeed, the closest Eminem has come to political mobilization or coalition-building is the kind of jejune colorblindness that appears in the song “Mosh”: “All you can see is a sea of people, some white and some black. / Don't matter what color, all that matters is we gathered together” (2004). “Mosh” is a call to vote and to question the war in Iraq, but Eminem must do more than vaguely allude to coalitions among the poor and surround himself with black rappers from D12 and G-Unit to establish a *modus operandi* that includes antiracism.

Eminem’s level of media exposure means that he has significant voice and power to make positive, public, antiracist moves rather than staying so far out of the spotlight on issues surrounding race. Boldly and publicly affirming that racism still exists and still acts (structurally and individually) on people of color in the U.S. and the world would be one of many steps that Eminem could take towards active antiracism. Even action limited to the local Detroit hip-hop scene, like sponsoring rap battles at local schools, would indicate to Eminem’s fans that merely acknowledging the existence of racism is not enough to bring about its destruction. In hip-hop parlance, returning and contributing to one’s old neighborhood is often referred to as being a “good soldier,” but there are no signs of such soldiering from Eminem.⁴ Instead, Eminem remains focused on the personal level (rather than the structural) in both his definitions of whiteness and racism and his reasons for claiming a “white trash” identity.

In his study of poor white Detroit residents near the area where Eminem grew up, Hartigan points out that poor whites sometimes have difficulties seeing racial situations as such because their class status “mitigates against their seeing social disadvantage as a strictly racial predicament” (*Racial Situations* 62). As members of the dominant racial group, poor white Detroit residents often denied the importance of race, arguing that class determines the levels of one’s disadvantages much more than race does. This raises questions regarding why these whites felt compelled to make the implicit claim that “social disadvantage” is not based *solely* on race by denying that race matters at all. After all, they could have made the claim that class status simply matters *more* than race (which nonetheless presents its own ideological problems) rather than ignoring the role of race altogether. However, as Hartigan points out, the white denial of the presence and power of race and racism is not unusual; it’s a national phenomenon (*Racial Situations* 61).

National media have shown poor whites, since the 1980s, that the predominant image of poverty is that of poor African Americans; white poverty isn’t nearly as visible on the national stage. However, some poor whites resist this skewed perspective by loudly and proudly claiming membership in a race/class status that indicates both whiteness *and* poverty. Poor white Detroit residents are uniquely situated to respond to the predominant image of black poverty, situated as they are in a city where the power-base and the population are predominantly black (Hartigan, *Racial Situations* 16); they can see more clearly what the national media neglects by making poor whites almost invisible. Their own status as poor whites belies the nationally circulated image of poverty as largely a “black problem.” Thus, when they were given the chance to respond

to events that the national media largely saw as a racial, these whites resisted the idea that race played a role in local events because they were disputing the image of poverty as only or predominantly experienced by African Americans. Like Eminem in both *8 Mile* and his rhymes, they denied the role of race in order to emphasize class issues.

“Hillbilly” and “White Trash”: Contrasts Between Local (Detroit) and National Uses

Whites in the US are not, for the most part, accustomed to being identified or labeled according to their race. Whiteness is largely unmarked in the contemporary US; as noted by Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik, “Whiteness is defined by a privilege that goes unseen: an invisibility that in many ways places our oppressor outside the racial sphere, vested with a power and social advantage which they themselves need not consider” (84). However, whiteness seems to be noticed and marked in certain local pockets of the US, a contrast that must seem unfair to whites who suddenly find their whiteness marked and referred to as a negative trait. Many whites respond to having their whiteness questioned, insulted or simply noticed by proudly declaring themselves “white trash” or “hillbillies,” as Eminem does in *8 Mile*.

Still, “Hillbilly” and “white trash” are not without derogatory power, even for those who, like Eminem, use the term to describe themselves; subtle shifts in tone of voice, context, and the attitude of the person using the term often decide whether even self-described white trash “hillbillies” take offense at the terms (Hartigan *Racial Situations* 100). This explains how “white trash” and “trailer trash” serve as insults when Rabbit’s opponents in *8 Mile* call him by these names, but are transformed into class pride when Rabbit turns them around and uses them to describe himself. Hartigan writes, “I found that when whites talk about race they consistently invoke or mobilize class

distinctions between themselves and their white neighbors. They assess when or whether race matters by considering which whites are involved in a situation. Indeed, *intraracial* distinctions are a primary medium through which whites think about race” (*Racial Situations* 17). However, although whites in Detroit speak primarily about class when they discuss race, John Hartigan Jr. is also careful to point out that he is not advocating that one approach race as primarily a component of class dynamics (*Racial Situations* 15). After all, in the case of both “white trash” and “hillbilly,” class *and* race combine to give these terms their rhetorical power.

At the same time, the physical location, the speaker, and the inflection all influence how the person using the terms “white trash” and “hillbilly” is heard. For example, when “white trash” and “hillbilly” are used in national media, they refer to poor whites’ class status, their supposed “laziness,” and their potential for violence. In other words, when middle-class and rich white people call other whites “white trash,” they’re critiquing them for not being white enough, for not being upwardly mobile, for being too similar to the stereotypes normally reserved for black people. In turn, and depending on the person and the circumstances, Detroit African Americans’ and hillbillies’ use of the term could be interpreted as a friendly ribbing or as a call to acknowledge similar life circumstances. As Hartigan writes, “Although all of these ‘hillbillies’ at the bar would use the name as a means of self-identification, they also stood back from it and laughed at its comic aspects and the dubious antics associated with it” (*Racial Situations* 98), a reading of the terms that contrasts starkly with white trash’s use in the national media.

However, when African Americans and/or other people of color in Detroit use “white trash” and “hillbilly” in angry or mean-spirited ways, they may sound like racial

slurs to Eminem and other self-proclaimed hillbillies because of Detroit's racial composition. Regarding whiteness in Detroit, Hartigan writes:

Whatever its status nationally, whiteness is not hegemonic within this city. Blackness is locally dominant: 'black power' shapes the politics; 'black dollars' and 'black fashion' define the landscape of consumption. This is not to make the absurd assertion that whiteness is irrelevant in Detroit; rather, its operations do not possess a generically "unmarked" or "normative" character. White racialness, here, is the subject of frequent marking and is often chastised as being out of place (*Racial Situations* 16).

In contrast to national rhetorics about whiteness, wherein whiteness is largely unmarked and where, as Tim Wise notes, "Whiteness ... is about never being really out of place" (*White Like Me* 44), whiteness is marked in some parts of Detroit, especially those where "blackness is locally dominant" (*Racial Situations* 16). When white Detroit residents like Eminem contrast the national norm of unmarked or invisible whiteness made available to them via the media with the experience of being repeatedly racially marked by the derogatory "white trash" or "hillbilly," such markings may feel unpleasant, unfair, and perhaps racist. As white witnesses to a whiteness that is largely unmarked on the national level, Eminem and his fellow poor white Detroit residents would undoubtedly resent the fact that their whiteness was not only noticed but used to exclude them in their hometown. After all, on the national level, they are repeatedly told that whiteness is invisible and that its possessors are never out of place or unwanted.

The specificity and variability of the meaning of the term "white trash," dependent upon so many contexts, may best account for what one might call Eminem's

troubled racial subjectivity. The constantly shifting racial terrain in Detroit, not to mention the glacial shifts in national rhetorics about race, may be what Eminem is referring to when he expresses a difficulty with finding and synthesizing his place in both national and local hip-hop, race, and class structures. In “Yellow Brick Road,” Eminem writes:

I'd like to share a story. / This is my story, can't nobody tell it for me. /
You have well informed me, / I am well aware, that I don't belong here, /
you've made that perfectly clear. / I get my ass kicked damn near
everywhere, / From Bel-Air shopping center just for stopping in there,
/from the black side all the way to the white side. /Okay there's a bright
side, a day that I might slide./ You may call it a pass,/ I call it haulin' my
ass/ Through that patch of grass over them railroad tracks (*Encore*).

Eminem's assertion that he got beat up on both sides of 8 Mile Road seems to fall in line with John Hartigan, Jr.'s claims regarding the context-specific meanings of “hillbilly;” the whites north of 8 Mile Road may have viewed or referred to Eminem as a hillbilly or as white trash, thus marking him as not white enough, while black Detroit residents (like Lyckety Splyt and Lotto in *8 Mile*) may have referred to him in much the same way with the intent to mark him as poor and racially different from most Detroit residents.

Having his racial and class status marked on both sides of 8 Mile Road may have been what prompted Eminem to constantly pass back and forth over 8 Mile, making it seem as though he practically lived on that border between white and black. Taking into account the various and constantly shifting meanings of those who referred to him as white trash, Eminem must have seemed, even to himself, as too white to be a rapper and

too poor to be white. Like many of his fellow “hillbillies,” Eminem appears to have seized on the term “white trash” and applied it self-consciously to himself: “In applying the term ‘hillbilly’ as either a form of distancing or for self-identification, whites are evaluating who belongs, both in this decaying neighborhood and in the space of whiteness” (*Racial Situations* 90). Thus, poor whites often used “hillbilly” to insist that certain whites, especially those who refused to embrace the mostly white suburbs, belong and prefer to live in the mostly black neighborhoods of Detroit.

As simple as it might be to assume that Eminem fits so neatly into Hartigan’s conclusions about poor, anti-racist white “hillbillies, Eminem actually conforms more closely to white attitudes in the mostly white suburbs of Detroit (like Warren, MI) than he does to the “hillbillies” of Briggs. For example, Hartigan notes that white residents of Corktown maintained that, “Since they did not act out of a fear of otherness, their actions did not appear to be racial in nature; neither did they perceive ethnic or racial categories as relevant to the composition of their own interests and actions. But it is in this ability to maintain a conviction of racelessness, the race of no race, that the significance of white racialness signifies most tellingly” (*Racial Situations* 205). Eminem does not seem to “act out of a fear of otherness,” surrounded, as he always is, by a group of black men. Some (Armstrong 342) would argue that Eminem’s obsession with the way critics, audiences, and other rappers call attention to his whiteness belies the regressive heart of his racial politics; for in criticizing those who note his whiteness, Eminem pushes the doctrine of color-blindness observed by conservatives and thus frames whiteness as victimhood and, perhaps unwittingly, supports white racialness as racelessness, as invisible, and as normative. As Armstrong so carefully notes, it is true that Eminem

refers to whiteness repeatedly and that he calls some people to task for mentioning his whiteness in less than complimentary ways.

However, Eminem calls attention to whiteness as a disadvantage only in very specific circumstances (i.e. when he was first trying to make it as a rapper). At no point does he claim that whiteness is a disadvantage in US culture at large. His question in “White America,” “Sitting back, looking at shit, wow, I’m like, ‘My skin is it starting to work to my benefit now?’” is most telling here because his tone implies that his question is rhetorical. Despite the slow rate of his acceptance by African Americans in the rap world, Eminem seems to know that his skin has always worked to his benefit. Furthermore, given the specificity of his references to whiteness, it seems unlikely that someone who mentions whiteness 24 times in his first three albums is working to further entrench the invisibility of whiteness.

Eminem’s views on race, racism, and whiteness are perhaps most confused by his views on class, gender, and sexuality. Eminem appears to fit in with the reclamation of white masculinity that began in the Reagan 80s and picked up speed after 9/11. Richard Goldstein makes this connection when he notes that:

Those who praised Eminem felt compelled to issue a caveat about his hate. There was a line in liberal culture he couldn’t cross. But that changed with his first starring role in a film...A little cleaning up is all it took to transform this monster from the id into a populist hero, a Rocky for our time. Gone are Eminem’s attacks on women and gays.... In *8 Mile* he never busts a rhyme against a bitch, not even his mom; he adores his little sister and sticks up for a homo. The film firemanizes Eminem by

placing him in the tradition of working-class heroes and blunting his sexism with stirring images of racial harmony. (18)

Goldstein's last line combines a number of images that are, in some cases, thought to be contradictory. Goldstein writes that *8 Mile* erased Eminem's sexism while making him an anti-racist working-class hero. In short, Eminem becomes the "good" working-class hero, as opposed to the "monstrous" (Newitz 138) working-class figure that dominates the American imagination. Both Newitz and Hartigan repeatedly show that the middle- and upper-classes portray and refer to the working-class as the "bad" whites who support and work to further entrench racism and sexism, thus absolving middle- and upper-class whites of any responsibility for the continued power of both racism and sexism. Perhaps it is Eminem's claim to the identity of "white trash" and his performance as an angry white male that makes it so difficult for some critics to see him as anything but another racist working-class white man.

In other words, it could be that the cluster of characteristics that supposedly comprises "white trash" in the American imagination works against Eminem's insistence that we read his identity and his views as much more complicated than our stereotypical views of what "white trash" think and who they are. In this way, Eminem's persona and his performances attempt to do the same unsettling (for some) dismantling of simplistic understandings of working-class whiteness undertaken by David Roediger, John Hartigan, Annalee Newitz, Matt Wray, and others.

Complicating the Invisibility of Whiteness

"How the fuck can I be white? I don't even exist" (Eminem, "Role Model")

The line above fulfills multiple purposes. First, the unspoken context of the song and of Eminem's performances means that this line, like most of Eminem's lines, must be understood in part as a statement about being "white trash." Eminem refers here to the invisibility of the white poor in American culture as well as his initial invisibility in the hip-hop underground. In short, he doesn't exist (i.e. he is invisible) because he's poor and white -- not because he is *either* poor *or* white, but because he is both at once. However, Eminem still points out that he is white here and that he doesn't exist. This can be read in at least two different ways. The first is that whiteness itself does not exist or that he does not exist *because* he is white, an interpretation that could be read as an attempt to reinforce the invisibility of whiteness. But by mentioning whiteness, he makes his whiteness apparent even while implying that he can't be white if he doesn't exist, an interpretation which puts primacy on his status as a poor white male rather than simply a *white male*. Regardless of the interpretation, it is apparent that because Eminem's (former) class status is inseparable from his performances, his utterances are almost always inflected with both race and class. And because Eminem specifically refers to the invisibility of whiteness in both this line and others, some analysis of both Eminem's statements and academics analyses of the invisibility of whiteness are necessary here.

The problem with the invisibility of whiteness is that by definition something that is invisible remains unseen, under the surface and surrounded by silence. Furthermore, "Wildman (1996) points out that 'the invisibility of privilege strengthens the power it creates and maintains. The invisible cannot be combated and as a result it is allowed to perpetuate, re-generate and re-create itself...' If privilege is kept invisible and not considered real, it can't be examined, it can't be diminished or dismantled" (Sefa Dei,

Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik 84).⁵ Eminem's insistence that people judged him by the color of his skin early in his career, his insistence that, "Some people only see that I'm white, ignoring skill, 'cause I stand out like a green hat with an orange bill" ("Role Model" 1999), is a class-inflected statement about the hyper-visibility of "white trash." Eminem's claim that his whiteness was hyper-visible when he lived in Detroit and before he "made it" in hip-hop is a multi-faceted statement. First, as noted by Hartigan earlier in this chapter, Detroit is predominantly black and, as mentioned earlier, hip-hop has a "visible black stamp" that critics like Kitwana note is inseparable from the black youth culture in which it was created. So, in some ways, Eminem really was one of the few white faces in the neighborhood and in local rap battles. He notes here that "some people" only saw his whiteness while in other lines he indicates that others recognized his skill and didn't care that he was white. However, his desire to privilege those who didn't "see" his whiteness falls somewhat in line with conservative uses of the doctrine of "color-blindness."

"Color-blindness," as it is currently used, has come to mean not only that Americans should "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character," but also that skin color should *never* matter, regardless of the context. One objection to this mantra is the fact that refusing to see race does not change (and often works to occlude) the fact that race has a very real impact on everyone in the U.S. As Ditamaso et al. argue, "the focus whites give to color blindness and to equal opportunity and their belief that individuals are responsible for themselves have allowed whites to accept the premises of the Civil Rights movement and yet to maintain white privilege" (191). In short, civil rights rhetoric is currently being used to justify the maintenance of

white power, especially when the doctrine of color-blindness is used to dismantle programs that were designed to bridge gaps in economic and other opportunities. Calls for color-blindness are frequently responses to affirmative action policies and to the oft-told myth of the white applicant who is denied a job or admission to the desired college because a supposedly “less-qualified” person of color was hired or admitted instead. As noted by Charles A. Gallagher in his study of white students’ conceptions of whiteness:

The majority of white students felt that contemporary affirmative action measures were unfair because issues of overt racism, discrimination, and equal opportunity had been addressed by their parents’ generation in the 1960s. A majority of white students argued that the United States is a meritocracy where nonwhites have every advantage whites do (and in some cases more because of affirmative action). Most of my respondents want to believe the United States is an egalitarian, ‘color-blind’ society because to think otherwise would raise the irritating issue of white privilege. (10)

Instead of dealing with white privilege, whites work to maintain white privilege, arguing, ironically, that racial preference is a thing of the past. Such views aren’t just the rants of socially isolated, violent, white-supremacists either; George Lipsitz points out that “Seventy percent of whites in one poll said that African Americans ‘have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites,’ and nearly three-fourths of white respondents to a 1989 poll believed that opportunities for blacks had improved under Reagan” (19). These vague impressions, built on misleading but widespread regressive rhetoric, couldn’t be further from the truth.

According to the United States Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for whites as of January 2008 was 4.4, while the corresponding unemployment rate for African Americans was more than double whites' rate at 9.2. The U.S. Census Bureau notes that, as of the Census of 2006, 10.5% of whites and 25.3% of African Americans live below the poverty line, a significant difference. Images of massive black advancement, misleading as they are, still manage to strengthen the impression that racism, supposedly a thing of the past, requires no further action because we have already entered the age of equal opportunity.

Stanley Fish argues that "color blindness has been twisted politically to maintain white privilege. 'When the goal was to make discrimination illegal,' he argues, color blind meant lifting barriers to full citizenship, but the term now means blind to the effects of prejudice on people because of their color" (qtd. in Gallagher 9). One of the many effects of the power of this perverted use of color-blindness is that the color its proponents want us to be blind to is whiteness. In espousing the doctrine of color-blindness in this way, conservative whites want to make sure that *whites* are not judged by the color of their skin and thus work to maintain whiteness as invisibility, as the norm, and as "the privileged yet unnamed place from which to see and make sense of the world" (Gray *Watching Race* 86). This "allows the dominant perspective to become *perspectivism* by which I mean the elevating of the majority viewpoint to the status of unquestioned and unquestionable truth" (Wise *White Like Me* 59).

This kind of white perspectivism, or seeing the world through whites' eyes, has dire consequences for people of color, most of whom have already witnessed the frequency and vehemence with which whites can ignore their perspectives and

experiences. Furthermore, the support for color-blindness and the dismantling of affirmative action and welfare programs,

was exacerbated by a conservative discourse that constructed the liberal welfare state (and its advocates) as protecting the interests of racial minorities, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, and undocumented immigrants, all of whom were constructed as the recipients of state-protected entitlements that came at the expense of hardworking, responsible (and white male) taxpayers. (Gray *Watching Race* 20)

Entrenched in these regressive calls for color-blindness is the unspoken idea that whites are the sole and the ultimate concern. The concern is never that affirmative action and other programs might actually help people, (or that they might be inadequate to such a Sisyphean task) but that they might hurt white interests.

In his studies of television, Herman Gray notes that although African Americans were not visible on television for much of its history, “given the level of saturation of the media with representations of blackness, the mediascape can no longer be characterized accurately using terms such as *invisibility*. Rather, we might well describe ours as a moment of ‘hyperblackness’” (*Watching Race* 148). Despite the historical struggle for visibility in the media, African Americans now find that a visibility framed by white interests can be used to dismantle many of the advances made since the Civil Rights era. As Gray notes, “despite the visibility and mobility of blacks in television representations and popular culture, racial disparities on a host of social and economic indicators, from prison incarceration to unemployment, remain significant” (*Watching Race* xvi). Thus, the hypervisibility of middle- and upper-class African Americans can exist alongside vast

racial disparities, despite contemporary rhetoric that states that visibility equals actual economic mobility.

Although Eminem's statements hint at color-blindness and the desire for white invisibility, it's not absolutely clear that color-blindness for whites is what he actually supports. All of his comments about whiteness, in context, indicate that the color-blindness to which he refers is a variation of that of the civil rights movement; specifically, he wants everyone in hip-hop to be judged by their skill level rather than their skin color. This bespeaks the kind of idealism that the concept of color-blindness was initially invested with by leaders of the civil rights movement. What flips this on its head and gives it a regressive turn is that Eminem refers to *whites* in this way, at least in his early career. As a white man trying to break into hip-hop, he didn't want *whites* to be judged by the color of their skin. It's important, however, that over time (and especially in "White America") Eminem began to see whiteness, color-blindness, and invisibility in a new way. When he writes, "Look at these eyes/ baby blue/ baby just like yourself. / If they were brown/ Shady lose/ Shady sits on the shelf. / But Shady's cute, / Shady knew Shady's dimples would help/ make ladies swoon, baby (ooh baby)/ look at the sales. / Let's do the math/ If I was black/ I woulda sold half" ("White America" *The Eminem Show*), Eminem makes his whiteness visible, acknowledges that others can see it as well, and points out that his skin color was in some ways the key to his success. Eminem certainly makes sense of his world through his blue eyes, but whiteness, for him, is not a "privileged yet unnamed place"; rather, it is named as privileged.

Distinctions must also be drawn between Eminem's lyrics and his portrayal in *8 Mile*. The film privileges class over race. Rabbit wins his rap battles by pre-empting his

opponents' attempts to draw attention to his whiteness and by pointing out that his opponents are middle-class African Americans rather than the poor African Americans they pretend to be. The final rap battles thus indicate that Rabbit belongs at the Shelter because he is poor whereas the 313 crew does not because they are middle-class. Rabbit's walk back to the stamping plant ties a neat bow on the film by indicating to viewers that, "We can all make it. We just have to work hard to achieve our dreams," a quintessentially class-based moral. It is this privileging of class over race (mirrored in academia by those who claim that racism can "essentially" be broken down to a class issue), that is troubling and regressive.

However, the popularity of the bootstraps myth in this medium, especially in films focusing on white men (the *Rocky* series, *Good Will Hunting*, *Rudy*, *Fight Club* and the hardbody films of the 1980s) indicates that tales like Rabbit's are the rule, not the exception. The presence of *8 Mile* in this genre places Eminem in a distinctly violent, homophobic, conception of masculinity that is so normalized that it is hardly noticed. Furthermore, Katz points out that:

Judging by the number of violent poses struck by Eminem in similar magazine articles and other promotional materials...it is safe to say that violent posturing is central to Eminem's constructed identity as a rebellious White rapper who's 'keepin' it real.' But what exactly is a White rapper like Eminem rebelling *against*? Powerful women who oppress weak and vulnerable men? Omnipotent gays and lesbians who make life a living hell for straight people? Eminem's misogyny and

homophobia, far from being rebellious, are actually extremely traditional and conservative. (353)

In other words, Eminem's conservatism in the fields of gender and sexuality are connected to his liberal views on class and race because these issues are always already connected, especially when they are framed by an angry white man in a cultural climate often dominated by the image of the angry white man.

Richard Goldstein best reveals the connections between the angry white male, the crisis in masculinity, race, homophobia, and misogyny when he writes:

Gay liberation and women's liberation threatened the hierarchy of male dominance. There is a hierarchy that figures like Eminem stand for, which is heterosexual males, with white males at the top. It still really is, for all the ideology of racial harmony, a hierarchy based on race. It is a hierarchy based on maleness, so the person with the least femininity rises to the top. When Eminem says he is indifferent to women and hates them and ejects any sign of femininity from his personality and projects everything he hates about himself onto women, that is a macho value, which makes him an alpha male. They have to be homophobic because any man identified with the feminine must be on the bottom; otherwise, the hierarchy is threatened. (qtd. In Bozza 246)

When homophobia and femiphobia work to establish hierarchies within masculinity (with heterosexual whites on top) and Eminem works to uphold those systems, he upholds racial hierarchies as well. Eminem's performance of masculinity is absolutely vital to the establishment of the hierarchy within masculinity that, ultimately, buttresses white

privilege. As Calhoun writes, “Although Eminem clearly discusses his own marginalization at the hand of authoritarian institutions and his own parents (his mother in particular), he does nothing in his music to explore alternative forms of masculinity that do not reproduce and rearticulate dominating, patriarchal notions of the masculine or to truly interrogate the masculine subject within himself” (289).

Eminem is important for his potential and for his ability to point to white identities that aren’t normally addressed or seen in the media, but his exercise of dominant heteromascularity puts him right back into the matrix of dominance he seems to want to avoid in his racial politics. This is not to say that his racial politics are simple and straightforward or to excuse his performance of hegemonic masculinity for the sake of those racial politics; rather, it is to recognize the very context-specific analyses that Eminem’s lyrics and his very subjectivity insist upon. Rather than lumping Eminem in with our preconceived, nationalized notions of how whiteness, heteromascularity, or a working-class background inform one’s actions and beliefs, we must be open to the possibility that not all whites want to slip comfortably into invisibility, that not all of the people who claim “white trash” are backwards and racist, and that even rappers who seem to hate all forms of femininity can simultaneously treasure their daughters.

The Importance of the Class/Race Balancing Act

Notwithstanding the importance of the analysis of race and class in all of their specificity, there are considerable dangers to emphasizing class over race, a prioritization emphasized in *8 Mile*, by poor white Detroit residents in Hartigan’s study, and in many of the tales of white male victimhood circulating both in American culture and in Hollywood films. When films like *8 Mile* deny the exigency of race in the contemporary

U.S., they prioritize class over race struggles (rather than seeing them as inextricably linked) and fall in line with those who argue that we already live in a post-racist era of colorblindness. Furthermore, faced with the image of the “inherently lazy” “welfare queen” and increasingly visible images of the black middle- and upper-classes, both Eminem and whites in general seem vulnerable to “The racially charged and politically conservative environment of the late 1980s and 1990s [which] has reinterpreted whiteness as a liability” (Gallagher 9). As Gallagher further notes in his study, “The resentment, anger, and frustration white students express because they are excluded provide the foundation for a white identity based on the belief that whites are now under siege” (9). The belief that whiteness has become a disadvantage is based on the belief that, because of affirmative action policies, “undeserving” African Americans are succeeding at the expense of “better-qualified” whites.

Such ideas have led to the dismantling of affirmative action policies in both Michigan and Washington State. As noted by Bakari Kitwana in *The Hip-hop Generation*, “in the era of downsizing, affirmative action rather than a changing economy has been viewed by angry white guys who lost jobs in the early 1990s as the culprit” (42). The prevalence of the idea that whites are victimized by affirmative action isn’t an isolated, local phenomenon, but has caught on nationally. Gallagher notes, “The white students I interviewed believe that the American class system is fair and equitable.... Black television stars, the media’s treatment of the black middle class, and stereotypes of Asians as model minorities have provided young whites with countless nonwhite success stories. For many of them, the ‘leveled playing field’ argument has rendered affirmative action policies a form of reverse discrimination and a source of resentment” (10).

The confluence of a number of popular national rhetorics has led many whites to believe that they are under siege and that they are the new victims of “racism,” an idea whose popularity has pushed the dismantling of affirmative action policies forward.

Of course, as Tim Wise points out, “there are far more white kids bumped from the colleges of their choice to make way for other whites, whose daddies happen to be little better connected than their own, but rarely do the critics of affirmative action seem to mind” (*White Like Me* 45). Both Wise and Gallagher attest to the fact that whites who are opposed to affirmative action for African Americans don’t protest when legacy admissions or admissions based on financial donations are mentioned. These whites thus overlook their own class interests because they are fixated on images of blacks’ social advancement in the media. Wise, again, notes:

Without a full understanding of the way in which whites have been elevated above people of color, and continue to be favored in employment, housing, criminal justice and education, it would make sense for whites to wonder why things like affirmative action or Black History Month were necessary; or why groups that advocate for the interests of persons of color were still needed. If you start from the assumption that the U.S. is a level playing field, then these kinds of things might seem odd, even racially preferential (*On White Pride*).

The belief that the U.S. has achieved color-blindness, that race no longer matters, is thus a precursor for seeing whiteness as a disadvantage rather than seeing it as a privilege.

As a formerly poor white man who can now see the privileges of whiteness at work, Eminem asks “my skin, is it starting to work to my benefit now?” (“White

America” *Eminem Show*) because class and race are working simultaneously to frame his understanding of race relations in the U.S. Like some of Hartigan’s poor white Detroit residents, Eminem may not have understood how racism was working to disadvantage people of color when he felt disadvantaged himself. What he may have failed to see then, and which many whites fail to see, is that, “While marking class boundaries, trailer park communities do not carry the stigma of degradation and deprivation commonly associated with the ‘ghetto’” (hooks 115). Thus, the poverty suffered by his peers of color was most likely made worse by the same institutional racism that prevented their parents and grandparents from escaping the legacy of poverty: decreased access to jobs, racist hiring preferences, restricted union access, etc.

By the same token, although Eminem’s whiteness mitigated somewhat the effects of poverty, he most likely didn’t see whiteness as an advantage until he noticed that his success was the direct result of Dr. Dre’s search for a white rapper, the racist practices of television networks like MTV, and the racial preferences of a rapidly growing white hip-hop fan base, all of which are mentioned in his lyrics. In other words, it may have only been possible for Eminem to become aware of the privileges of whiteness when his status as a poor person was stripped away. In fact, according to Tim Wise, “the very concept of the white race was invented by the wealthy so as to trick poor and working class European Americans into accepting an economic system that exploited them, even as it elevated them in relative terms over persons of color” (“On White Pride”). However, as Robin D. G. Kelly notes in *Race Rebels*, whiteness wasn’t only a top-down concept; poor whites also contributed and shaped the meaning of the concept (30). Furthermore, “For whites to organize on the basis of whiteness is to codify as legitimate a category the

meaning of which was always and forever about domination and privilege relative to those who couldn't qualify for membership in the club” (Wise “On White Pride”).

Thus, poor whites are urged by powerful, white structures of the media and institutional powers generally, to accept racist capitalist patriarchies as valid systems even though it is not in their class interest to do so. Unwittingly or not, whites support these systems when they emphasize class at the expense of race, perhaps not realizing that racism works to maintain the class system that oppresses them because it prevents them from forming powerful coalitions with poor people of color. As noted by Tim Wise, knowledge of the current power of racist structures to maintain the status quo would perhaps illustrate to all but the most stubbornly resistant that race and class systems work together to make the rich richer and the poor poorer:

The more that white working people fight working people who are black and brown, the less they'll be likely to take aim at those who pick their pockets every day they show up for work.... Whiteness is a trick, but sadly one that has worked for nearly three-and-a-half centuries. Only when white folks wise up, and realize that whiteness itself is our problem, will we ever stand a chance of true liberation. Until then, our whiteness will provide us privileges and advantages, but only in relation to those at the bottom of the racial caste structure. It will provide a psychological wage, as W.E.B. Dubois put it, as an alternative to real wages. Not a bad deal, until you're struggling to feed your family and keep a roof over their heads. For in times like that, real currency works a bit better (“On White Pride”)

Eminem's lyrics show some movement in the right direction, but the error in some whites' thinking still comes down to prioritizing class over race when it is to their advantage rather than thinking about the ways in which classism and racism interact as systems of oppression to divide and distract us. Whites' salvation from poverty lays not in blaming African Americans or immigrants for taking their jobs, striking down affirmative action policies, or giving tax breaks to the wealthy, but in forming anti-racist coalitions with other workers and struggling to dismantle the systems of power that oppress us all. There are multiple obstacles to such coalition building, however, not the least of which are the history of white cooptation of black art forms, white racism, and terms like "white trash" and "hillbilly," popular on the national level, that encourage divisions between classes and races

CHAPTER 3

SUPERMAN: (WHITE) AMERICA'S (WHITE) MAN/ALIEN/IMMIGRANT HERO

“In all of the history of literature, there are only five fictional creations known to every man, woman and child on the planet. The urchin in Irkutsk may never have heard of Hamlet; the peon in Pernambuco may not know who Raskolnikov is; the widow in Jakarta may stare blankly at the mention of Don Quixote or Micawber or Jay Gatsby. But every man, woman and child on the planet knows Mickey Mouse, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Robin Hood...and Superman. He is more than the fanciful daydream of two Cleveland schoolboys. He is the 20th century archetype of mankind at its finest.”

-- (Harlan Ellison qtd in Dooley and Engle 11)

Superman may be one of the best-known characters of the contemporary age, so it is only fitting that our stories about the big, blue Boy Scout constantly play in, around, and with hegemonic ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship in the United States. It may be difficult to see past our conceptions of this character as the quintessential American, but in some ways, that is exactly the point. As an illegal alien, Superman has so seamlessly blended into the American psyche and culture that our sense of ownership over this character remains largely unquestioned. Although the DC Universe has expanded to include other aliens (most notably J'onn, the Martian Manhunter), none of them are as well known or as well regarded as Superman. This chapter deconstructs this character's placement and play within and outside of various racist, sexist, and heterosexist structures in order to illustrate both how the national imagination is constrained by these structures and how this character's use serves to further strengthen and naturalize those structures.

Superman wasn't always the pillar of white, heteromascuine American citizenship that we see today. In Superman's first two comics, Action Comics #1 and #2, Siegel and Schuster's Superman is a radical, activist hero rarely seen since. In his first two issues, Superman saves a woman from the electric chair, throws an abusive husband

against a wall, saves Lois Lane (twice), exposes a corrupt U.S. Senator, convinces an arms dealer to stop selling, and ends a war between two nations. According to Bob Hughes, “It was clear from the start that Superman voted for Roosevelt... to the Depression-weary average American, Superman appeared to be what it took to change the world” (2). The pre-World War II Superman also seemed to be above the law. Oblivious to due process, this Superman used his super-hearing and super-speed to free the wrongfully prosecuted. In addition, he was not above using the threat of his fists to draw confessions from the corrupt and he seemed fond of hanging crooks up on telephone poles until they screamed, confessed, or both. Sometimes he carried them down and sometimes he didn’t; words like gentle and diplomatic were not generally used to describe the pre-World War II Superman.

Dennis O’Neil argues that the radical defender of the common person present in the early comics was gone as early as 1942. He notes that by the publication of George Lowther’s Superman novel, “Superman had grown more powerful physically, he had become less flamboyant personally, *safer* somehow — a Scoutmaster in cape and boots” (O’Neil 52). Superman already seemed “safer” in the early nineteen-forties because he became an instrument of US law rather than a raw vigilante like his sometime friend Batman. Superman continued to feel “safer” throughout the tumultuous sixties as his writers ignored virtually all of the social issues and rebellions of the times.

Superman’s complete acquiescence to his role as America’s Boy Scout is cemented by the nineteen-eighties, especially in the Christopher Reeve films. The first two films both end when Superman restores order to the United States. At the end of *Superman: The Movie* he tells the prison warden that “We’re all part of the same team”

when he drops off Lex Luthor, signifying the solidification of Superman's role as a "global boy scout" by 1978. At the end of *Superman II*, Superman returns the American flag to the top of the White House and tells the President, "I won't let you down again." Both of these endings attempt to reassure the viewer that Superman isn't going anywhere, that he'll continue to fight for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way."

As this short history demonstrates, the Superman myth changes and adapts, like most forms of popular culture, as the culture in which it is situated adapts to the hybridity of the various hegemonies at work at that moment. Although it is tempting to come to the conclusion that Superman is an icon only of conservative impulses and ideals, his movement from radical to conservative ideologies speaks to the character's potential to return to radical, leftist grounds. Indeed, both conservative and liberal ideas appear in most of the Superman texts, where they fight one another for the upper hand. The general trend seems to be towards conservatism, but this does not preclude the presence of liberatory or leftist impulses. This chapter will explore the fluctuations of the Superman myth in three main areas and in the connections between them: gender, whiteness, and heterosexuality.

Superman's "Hard-Body" Masculinity

Since his inception, Superman has represented the very epitome of stereotypical white masculinity. Even his name indicates that he is not just a man; he is a *super*-man. Susan Jeffords might call Superman the ultimate "hard body." Writing about the Reagan era films (like *Superman: The Movie* and *Superman II*), Jeffords pinpoints a popular trend wherein male heroes use their strength and/or masculinity to defend America and help secure a strong sense of nationalism for viewers. It is through the deeds of these heroes

that viewers in the 1980s were able to experience the tough-guy patriotism of Reaganism.

Jeffords writes that:

Viewers can experience personal power by identifying with an individual hero's victory over fictional antagonists and national power through the 'pleasurable collective experience' of identifying with one of the key images that came to embody the political economic and social philosophy of the 1980s – the hard body. The substitute mastery offered by Reaganism is never simply personal or national but a combination of both.

(28)

Superman's hard body is, of course, the ultimate hard body. He can't be stabbed, crushed, burned, nuked, shot, cut, or suffocated. Instead, Superman's enemies need to find a rock that fell to Earth twenty or thirty years ago and chain it to him. As the ultimate hard body, Superman signifies the indestructible quality of the eighties masculinity that Reaganism re-imbedded in the American imagination.

Like the other hard bodies of the eighties, the Superman of the late seventies and early eighties was at the forefront of a growing masculinist movement. The "men's movement," a cancerous growth of the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and others (Savran 128), would later mutate into a "crisis of masculinity" that would signify the growth of a white male backlash. Several authors have surmised that the modern white male backlash in the United States was a reaction to several trends and events, from the Vietnam War to affirmative action, the growing visibility of gay communities, and economic trends that would disfranchise middle-and working-class

white males relative to their upper-class brethren (Savran 128, Alexander 538, Brayton 58, Nelson 28, and Ducat 97).

According to David Savran, white masculinity began to turn in on itself starting in the 1970s, employing dual and violent but not quite contradictory impulses in order to claim victim status one minute and unlimited power the next. Using Freud's ideas on sadomasochism, Savran posits that masculinity began to exhibit characteristics of "the reflexive sadomasochist," during the eighties in particular (129). Outlining this theory in more detail, he writes:

It includes an intermediate (or reflexive) stage in which the 'object' of sadistic violence 'is given up and replaced' not by an 'extraneous person,' but 'by the subject's self.' Unlike sadism or masochism proper, reflexive sadomasochism has the effect of splitting the subject's ego between a sadistic half and a masochistic half. So the reflexive sadomasochist, rather than humiliate and master others, turns this impulse back upon him- or herself: 'the desire to torture has turned into self-torture and self-punishment.' (Savran 129)

Savran, Jeffords, and others routinely list Sylvester Stallone's Rambo, a hard-body who has much in common with Superman, as the sine qua non of reflexive sadomasochism and the troubled masculinity of the eighties. Superman's similarly split ego and his reflexive sadomasochism are readily apparent not only in his bifurcated conception of self as Clark Kent *and* Superman, but also in the hard-body Superman films of the late seventies and eighties.

Although a split ego was part of Superman/Clark Kent's genesis, a fight scene in *Superman III* demonstrates multiple principles of the reflexive sadomasochist in particularly telling ways. In this scene, Superman's dual identity becomes visible and physical when he comes into contact with artificial kryptonite. Eventually he must fight his "evil" side when his ego splits into two parts: the good Clark Kent and the evil Superman (represented visually by the racist metaphor of a darker-than-normal suit). Clark Kent and Superman beat on each other for almost eight minutes, exchanging blows that culminate in Clark Kent's strangling of Superman from behind, a violent, sadomasochistic, and homoerotic image (one that punishes the penetrated, here the darkened Superman, with death). Mirroring what is now a cinematic cliché that extends from Westerns to action films centered on men, it seems that even Superman, super-man that he is, must be beaten down before he can rise up again, stronger than he was before.

Rambo undergoes similar beatings. Rambo is inflicted with a wide variety of painful experiences but it is Rambo's stitching of his own skin and cauterizing of his own wounds that are remarkable because they are self-inflicted (Savran 133). Furthermore, Savran points out that, "These ordeals... must be seen as being self-willed, as being the product of his need to prove his masculinity the only way he can, by allowing his sadistic, masculinized half to decimate his masochistic, feminized flesh" (133). By beating themselves up, both Rambo and Superman prove their masculinity. Seen another way, "Like the Russian-roulette-addicted Nick (Christopher Walken) in *The Deer Hunter* (1978), or the suicidal Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), these heroes remonstrate against a culture made uneasy by traditional machismo by proclaiming themselves victims, by turning violence upon themselves and so demonstrating their

implacable toughness, their ability to savor their self-inflicted wounds” (Savran 145). Superman is the exemplar of the split masculine ego and reflexive sadomasochism on nearly every level.

For example, when Clark Kent beats Superman in the fight in *Superman III*, his victory represents the victory of certain sides of several paired binaries that are complicated by the fact that Clark Kent and Superman are two sides of the same person. Clark Kent does not strike the evil Superman even once; instead, Superman beats up Clark Kent. In short, in this fight Clark Kent is the masochist, the feminine side of Superman.

This reading is supported by most of the Superman myth. In nearly every text, Clark Kent wears glasses, is shy, seems unable to interact with women, and is physically awkward, tripping over himself and others on a regular basis. Some of these traits fit fairly neatly into stereotypes about women, while others seem to signify “othered” masculinities or a mix of the two. For example, Kent’s clumsiness can be read as a variation on the “you throw like a girl theme” which, according to prevalent stereotypes, implies that women are not athletic. In turn, Kent’s reticence could signify the stereotype of the meek woman while his glasses signify the nerd stereotype, which is often set in opposition to the athletic, masculine male. Superman, on the other hand, is smooth, assertive, and strong. Although it is thus possible to read Superman’s defeat at the hands of the effeminate Clark Kent as the defeat of the masculine hard-body, several aspects of the scene complicate this reading.

Rather than dying, the evil Superman merely merges with Kent when Kent finishes strangling him. After they have merged back into a single entity, Kent rips opens

his shirt in the usual iconic way to reveal yet another Superman beneath the Clark Kent tie and shirt.⁶ Thus, to understand Kent as the feminine and Superman as the masculine is to oversimplify both the scene and the concept of the reflexive sadomasochist.

Superman and Clark Kent, like the reflexive sadomasochist, are different sides of the same person. Therefore, Superman's masculinity isn't destroyed by Clark Kent so much as Kent/Superman's masculinity is reaffirmed by the simultaneous defeat of the sadist and victory of the masochist, who proves that, as Kent says, "I can give as well as I can take" (*Superman III*).

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear that Superman, who normally occupies the stereotypically masculine realm (whereas Kent does not), is always masculine. When he turns "evil" in *Superman III*, he is not exactly evil; instead, Superman acquires traits that can be read as feminine. For example, he is selfish, he pouts, and he is impetuous and self-absorbed. As I will show later, Lois Lane is often depicted with similar paternalistic undertones, causing Superman to look down on her and summarily dismiss her concerns. Thus, when Kent defeats the "evil" Superman and reveals the "real" Superman beneath his own clumsy veneer, he seems to defeat every feminine characteristic he has demonstrated thus far as either Clark Kent or Superman and becomes the "real" (read masculine) Superman. Ultimately, Superman is always just under the surface of Kent's facade. No matter how clumsy and inept Clark Kent may appear he is still, ultimately, the super-masculine Superman.

In the process of resolving his split ego in this fight scene, Kent/Superman:

Learns to master his frail body, to make it submit absolutely and repeatedly to the cruelty of his will. Not only does reflexive

sadomasochism provide the ideal mechanism to turn this new hero's pain into pleasure, but it also allows him to adjust to the exigencies of living in a (post) feminist and post-*Bakke* culture. It authorizes him to be both wild and domestic, to cultivate a 'feminine' part of the self (or at least to endure his feminized flesh) and at the same time to subjugate it violently, and to take on the roles simultaneously of casualty of feminism and affirmative action and of humanitarian. It allows him to play the part of victim and yet to be a man. (Savran 140)

This ability to be both a victim and a man reinforces claims that white men are the real victims of affirmative action, court decisions, the economy, and feminism, all of which have been implicated in "crisis of masculinity" discourses since the eighties.

According to Brenton Malin, "By challenging the heterosexism, classism, racism, and sexism that have underwritten American manhood, crisis-of-masculinity discourses have indeed challenged masculinity's invisibility and encouraged a 'less traditional masculinity'" (10). However, Malin overemphasizes the potential of both the crisis of masculinity and the power of visibility here, even if the visibility he seeks is that of dominant identities. Visibility alone does not necessitate a dismantling of structures of dominance. Nor does invisibility guarantee power. Masculinity made visible is not necessarily masculinity made vulnerable. Instead, both visibility and invisibility may work to maintain or dismantle power. For example, as Gray (*Cultural Moves 2* and *Watching Race* 148) and Cantor (155) point out, neither the invisibility nor the visibility of African Americans or Jews can be definitively linked to dominance or subjugation.

What matters more than visibility or invisibility is the *way* in which identities and positionalities are made visible and portrayed.

Thus, although crisis-of-masculinity discourses may make masculinity visible and “imply a gender that is performative and constructed, [they] also [recall] an historical gender that was anything but hobbled by its constructed status, and where a history of masculinity as construct may contest the transcendental male, it also returns our critical view to the domain of the unquestionably male” (Traister 299). In other words, while pointing out the constructedness of hegemonic heteromasculinities is a useful early step in the attempt to dismantle gendered hierarchies, it cannot be the last or only step. Showing how masculinities are constructed is useful because it disrupts the “natural” status those masculinities have acquired over time, but beyond that initial step, critics may find that their supposedly straightforward analyses of dominant versus “othered” masculinities cannot account for layers upon layers of contradictions.

For example, as a figure who represents the reflexive sadomasochist and with Clark Kent figuring as the feminine half of Superman’s split ego, Kent’s victory in the fight in *Superman III* would seem to indicate that the feminine defeats the masculine. However, the context of the crisis-of-masculinity and the “sensitive man” of the eighties work against such a reading whether or not Clark Kent reveals the Superman costume under his suit when he wins. Demetrakis Demetriou uses Gramsci’s concept of a hegemonic bloc to explain how hegemonic masculinity could sustain the contradictions between the hard-bodied Superman and the sensitive Clark Kent without crumbling. The most important process in the creation of a hegemonic (masculine) bloc, Demetriou

notes, is the appropriation of certain aspects of othered genders and masculinities in a process he calls hybridization (354).

Via hybridization, contradictory ideologies may make up different components of a constructed hegemonic heteromascularity. Demetriou writes:

We are used to seeing masculine power as a closed, coherent, and unified totality that embraces no otherness, no contradiction. This is an illusion that must be done away with because it is precisely through its hybrid and apparently contradictory content that hegemonic masculinity reproduces itself. To understand hegemonic masculinity as hybridity is therefore to avoid falling into the trap of believing that patriarchy has disappeared simply because heterosexual men have worn earrings or because Sylvester Stallone has worn a new masquerade (355).

The increased presence and acceptance of the “sensitive” man (or even the drag queen) of the late eighties and early nineties is in part an appropriation of other femininities/masculinities for the hybridization and fortification of hegemonic white heteromascularity. Sexism and heterosexism are not dead simply because men seem more sensitive or because they have appropriated aspects of gay male culture. These appropriations, after all, do nothing to dismantle systemic oppression. The cracks, fissures, and contradictions that appear in portrayals of Superman demonstrate the ways in which white heteromascularity changes just enough to maintain hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and even race among different axes of power and within masculinity itself.

Using Heterosexuality to Police Masculinity and Femininity: (Superman Loves Lois Lane)

Although, as Bryce Traister (292) points out, hegemonic heteromascularity is actually possessed by very few males, this does not decrease its power. In fact, as Judith Halberstam points out, it may be that, “Precisely because virtually nobody fits the definitions of male and female, the categories gain power and currency from their impossibility” (27). Nevertheless, hegemonic heterosexuality is for the most part attached to white male bodies in the media. From Rambo to the *Terminator* series and Superman, the men most often portrayed as tough, virile, and dominating are rich or middle-class, white and heterosexual. Halberstam astutely points out that, “Masculinity...becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (2). She continues this line of thought when she points out that black bodies are frequently marked by excessive masculinity while Asian, working class, and gay male bodies are marked by femininity or insufficient masculinity (Halberstam 2).

Throughout her groundbreaking study, Halberstam attempts to divorce hegemonic masculinity from white, heterosexual male bodies by highlighting the ways in which masculinity has historically slipped out of these binds. Pointing out cases in which both tomboys and drag kings are able to highlight masculinities’ constructed natures, Halberstam also notes that in cases where female tomboyism or toughness are allowed in the media, those women are clearly marked as heterosexual, as if their status as heterosexuals serves as a balm for their performances of stereotypically masculine characteristics (28). This explains why butch lesbians rarely appear in the media. She writes, “In other words, when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer

identities, it is far less likely to meet with approval” (Halberstam 28) while also being sure to point out how difficult it is to separate masculinity from white, middle-class, male bodies, in part because of the assumption of heterosexuality.

In other words, heterosexuality is so attached to masculinity, no matter who is masculine at a given moment, that even women with masculine characteristics must be portrayed as heterosexuals. As the ultimate white, masculine male, Superman is always portrayed as a heterosexual; not so much as a hint of homosexuality can be attached to Superman except if, as in the case of Clark Kent, it is hinted at only so that it can be destroyed or mocked. Superman is inseparable from his heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity seem to be soldered together, perhaps because, as Mike Donaldson points out, “Heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity” (645). Stephen J. Ducat supports Donaldson and takes this connection one step further when he writes, “Then, as now, the foundation of homophobia was femiphobia” (82). Although we must be careful not to reduce homophobia completely to femiphobia or misogyny, the two kinds of fear/hate seem to have quite a bit in common.

Gay men in the US are overwhelmingly stereotyped as overly feminine men, often with lisps, voices in higher registers, and feminine, expressive hands. The connections between homophobia and misogyny are so clear that many drag kings mimic “the exact mode in which male masculinity most often appears as performance: sexism and misogyny” (Halberstam 255). As a super-man, Superman is rarely homophobic or misogynistic in the way most people think about these things -- as individualized emotions or violence. Superman doesn’t beat Lois or use hateful language. However,

the absence of violence does not indicate the absence of oppressive systems. Both violence and systemic oppression cultivate fecund atmospheres for the continued growth of each, but this does not mean that they are identical or that either one is the sole augur of the other.

Although Superman's treatment of Lois is not violent, it is controlling, manipulative, and characteristic of a kind of "winking" misogyny (Reed) that avoids direct violence but constrains women's movements or choices, ignores their desires, and assumes that they are weak or stupid. Even the earliest Superman comics (published in Action Comics starting in 1938) contain hints of the scrappy reporter that would soon be Superman's foil, companion and, occasionally, his wife.⁷ Lois Lanes' "scrappiness," however feminist it may appear, is ultimately what gets her into situations where only Superman can save her. Lois Lane is an uneasy amalgam of stereotypes about white women; she is helpless, fixated on marriage, and naïve, but she is also very focused on her career as a journalist.

For example, in one of the first animated Max Fleischer cartoons, "Superman", Lois steals a story from Clark just before she hops into a plane and flies off to get her story. Remarkably, Lois *pilots* the plane. In another cartoon, "Billion Dollar Limited," Lois finds herself on a runaway train with hijackers on board. At one point, Lois picks up a tommy gun and fires at the villains. The images of Lois firing a tommy gun and piloting a plane are striking, especially for cartoons made in 1942, but such images of Lois Lane would cease to exist in the years following World War II. Despite these plucky images, Superman is always the one who does the saving.

At the end of every cartoon Clark Kent compliments Lois on the quality of her story and Lois replies that it wouldn't have been possible without Superman. Clark Kent then winks at the camera as if to say that not only is his secret identity safe, so is his masculinity. Lois may continually beat him to the story, but her naiveté would get her killed if he weren't there to save her. Thus, even Lois's career as a journalist depends on Superman. Lois's devotion to her career was acceptable even in 1942 because of the context of World War II, in which many women were taking on "Rosie the Riveter" roles to help in the war effort. However, as the context changed, so did the writers' views of Lois's career and family life.

For example, in a 1960s Lois Lane comic entitled, "Lois Lane's Super-Daughter" Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane marry and adopt the teenage Kara Zor-el (Supergirl) as a daughter. In order to get the adoption agency's approval, Lois agrees to quit her job (Clark keeps his) in order to take care of Kara and the house. Lois seems very happy in her role as a stay-at-home-mom until she starts to feel left out of Superman and Supergirl's adventures. But when the investigator from the orphanage finds Kara doing the dishes while Lois takes a break on the couch, things sour.

The investigator scolds Lois for allowing Kara to do her work. When Superman and Kara offer to help with the dishes, the vacuuming, and polishing the silver (all of which takes them a fraction of the time it would take Lois), Lois thinks, "Keeping the house clean is *my* job! I wish they wouldn't" (Siegel & Schaffenberg 121). Lois becomes more and more isolated until "Her days and nights become a mixture of unhappy thoughts and secret fears" (Siegel & Schaffenberg 123). Lois eventually

regrets quitting her job and when the investigator takes Kara away, Superman blames Lois and Lois agrees with him.

This comic seems sympathetic to the plight of the housewife; Lois Lane's sadness is constant and palpable, but the final message seems to be that, without constant effort and vigilance, women who work at home may lose their families. When compared to the cartoons and the comics of the forties, the Superman comics in the sixties seem to be increasingly anti-feminist. No longer content to either steal Lois's stories at the Daily Planet, this Superman tells Lois that, "You were swell to give up your career so [Kara] can have a *real* home" (Siegel & Schaffenberg 117, emphasis added). This comic clearly supports the "real" family, the nuclear family with one father, one mother, and one or more children and therefore upholds not only traditional gender roles, but also heterosexuality.

As noted by Demetriou above, the most important aspect of masculinity as a hegemonic bloc is its hybridity. In this case, the acceptance of the workingwoman (like Lois Lane) in the US indicates not widespread or complete gender equality, but a surrender of some ground so that other ground may be protected.⁸ When a little progress is made by the oppressed, whether they are oppressed for their gender, race, sexuality, or economic class, those who are privileged can take solace in the fact that the systems that bestow privilege remain intact and point to the progress oppressed groups have made in order to quiet those who continue to protest. Lois's desire for a career connotes white feminist ideas, but it also serves to obfuscate her more conservative desire for a heterosexual, nuclear family and her dependence on Superman. Neither Lois Lane's careerism nor her dependence on Superman has changed very much, even to the present

day. Ironically, in the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, Lois wins a Pulitzer for her article about how the world does not need Superman. The world may not need Superman, but the film makes clear that Lois needs him very much. Time after time she needs to be saved by Superman. Lois owes her life and her very existence to him.

Lois's reliance on Superman harkens back to the days of chivalry, when women were considered so weak that they could not open doors or step out of carriages without the help of a man. Although it is true that almost everyone is weak when compared to Superman, Lois Lane still seems stuck in pre-feminist days. Only echoes of feminism affect Lois's relationship with Superman, and this only recently. In Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns*, despite Lois's later helplessness, we learn early in the film that Lois is a single mom. Although many conservatives would doubtless criticize Lois for having sex out of wedlock, for many women, Lois's single motherhood is a sign of her toughness. After all, we learn that she has raised a son on her own, a task that is especially difficult with a full time job as a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist.

Even so, Lois's desire to marry acknowledges an awareness of single-parenthood as a less-than-ideal family situation. Her yearnings for a heterosexual marriage and family structure also support a traditional form of femininity, one which expresses this desire for a husband and family as a "normal" or biological, ticking-clock desire for white women. Patricia Hill-Collins points out that the heterosexual, nuclear family, "is actually supported by government policy. It is organized not around a biological core, but a state-sanctioned, heterosexual marriage that confers legitimacy not only on the family structure itself, but on children born in this family" (47). Without a husband, the Lois Lane of *Superman Returns* lives outside of the state-sanctioned familial structure

and thus, in some ways, defies that structure. However, her romance with Superman reminds us that Lois would marry Superman if she could. Those who write Lois Lane may depart from the norm on occasion, but for the most part, the desires for a husband, a home, and a family determine most of Lois's actions. In such a role, Lois Lane serves to bolster and normalize Superman's white heteromascularity.

Making Superman's White Heteromascularity

Halberstam notes that through performance, drag kings are able to split hegemonic masculinity into its components, sexism and homophobia foremost among them, and illustrate that those components need not either constitute or be permanently grafted onto masculinity. Unfortunately, the drag kings also demonstrate just how much hegemonic masculinity is expressed through misogyny and heterosexism. Furthermore, "Researchers have repeatedly found...that males are significantly more homophobic than females, and more prejudiced against gay men than lesbians.... Homophobia has also been correlated with authoritarianism, cognitive rigidity, opposition to gender equality, traditional gender-role orientation, racism, a variety of personal and interpersonal difficulties, and an intolerance of ambiguity" (Ducat 200). The homophobia and misogyny of hegemonic heteromascularity can be read as attempts to police who may or may not have the characteristics and reap the benefits of masculinity. By enforcing the connection between biological males and masculinity, those who support hegemonic masculinity prevent women from accessing any of the benefits that might come with masculinity. In addition, the power of the constantly repeated stereotype of the effeminate gay male indicates that some men are prevented from claiming the privileges of masculinity.

In fact, hegemonic white masculinity was built, like many other identities, in these very same acts of exclusion. Similar to the ways whiteness was defined and conceived of as being ‘not black,’ masculinity is defined by those it excludes; to be masculine is, among other things, to be “not feminine,” “not gay,” “not Asian,” and again “not black.” As Halberstam indicated earlier, (white) hegemonic masculinity becomes visible when we compare it to “othered” masculinities, most notably the “excessive” masculinity of the black man and the lack of masculinity adhering to gay men or Asian men.

In a fascinating chapter about the contrasts between rich white, black, and poor white masculinities in *Hustler* magazine, Gail Dines writes, “The debasement of White masculinity in *Hustler* cartoons is played out on the caricatured flabby, unkempt body of the lower-working-class White man, a class that few Whites see themselves as belonging to, irrespective of their income. Thus, in between the hypermasculinity of the Black man and the undermasculinized White lower-working-class man is the reader inscribed in the text who can feel superior to both types of ‘deviants’” (458). Thus, the middle- and upper-class white male reader’s masculinity is made invisible and normalized; it is the masculinity of the lower classes and of black men that is aberrant and therefore noteworthy. Superman/Clark Kent works in much the same way. As a symbol of the ultimate and unreachable white heteromascularity, many men might find it difficult to identify with Superman while they simultaneously admire his power. But Clark Kent serves as a kind of everyman who is, like the working class figures in *Hustler*, both easy to identify with and easy to denigrate because he appears to be a bumbling oaf. However, the dramatic irony that forms the basis of so many Superman stories is that Clark Kent is

not a klutz; beneath the suit is not just a “real” man, but Superman, an idea that undoubtedly comforts men who realize that they don’t fit American cultural conceptions of the ideal, white, masculine man. Clark Kent opens up the possibility that every white, heterosexual, upper- or middle-class man can rip off his suit and tie to reveal not just any man, but Superman. However, the specificity of Clark Kent/Superman’s identities might make such a possibility difficult for poor men, gay men, or men of color. Indeed, the cultural power of Superman’s white heteromascularity depends on the ways that white heteromascularity has been shaped and formed by othering black and in-between masculinities.

White masculinity has been formed and revised according to prevailing images of black masculinity for some time, much like whiteness itself was and still is very much defined by prevailing images of people of color. Previously cited works by Roediger, especially in the Eminem chapter, indicate numerous ways in which whiteness was built by poor whites who wanted to differentiate themselves from black people and by rich whites who wanted to maintain the color line to bolster their power. Many academics use the examples of the Irish and of Jews to illustrate how ethnic whites escaped “in-betweenness” and embraced the privileges of whiteness through minstrelsy, but other groups also attempted to differentiate themselves from black men and women.

On the West coast, Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes, “virtually the whole repertoire of anti-black prejudice was transferred to the Chinese: projected on to a different ethnic group which did, however, occupy a similar position in the labour market and in society. The profile of the new minority was constructed on the model of the already existing minority” (113). When the “new minority” appeared to be white, like the Irish, Italians,

and Jews of the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries, Americans sought to place them, too, by comparing them to people of color.

Although many whites of the period made comparisons between the physical features of the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, and African Americans, as well as other people of color, most of these comparisons were also specifically gendered. For example:

Heathen, morally inferior, savage, and childlike, the Chinese were also viewed as lustful and sensual. Chinese women were condemned as a 'depraved class' and their depravity was associated with their almost African-like physical appearance. While their complexions approached 'fair,' one writer observed, their whole physiognomy indicated 'but a slight removal from the African race.' Chinese men were denounced as threats to white women, (Pieterse 113)

Thus, both Chinese and African American men were considered threats to white womanhood because of their excessive sexuality. Similarly, both Chinese and African American women were denounced as promiscuous.

Most of the key authors in Whiteness Studies (especially Noel Ignatiev, David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Karen Brodtkin, Eric Goldstein, and Michael Rogin) affirm the connection between the racial classifications of in-between groups like the Irish, the Italians, Slavs, and Jews and their comparisons to African Americans, but some attention is devoted to how Asian Americans have also been racially situated (during various periods) between blackness and whiteness. In an attempt to point out how this in-betweenness was possible, Warren and Twine point out that:

Thus, Blacks, at least at the national level, serve as the anchor for Whiteness. And because of this, ‘a kind of pseudo-homogeneity’ among non-Blacks as Whites is possible. In other words, precisely because Blacks represent the ‘other’ against which Whiteness is constructed, the backdoor to Whiteness is open to non-Blacks. Slipping through that opening is, then, a tactical matter for non-Blacks of conforming to White standards, of distancing themselves from *Blackness*, and of reproducing anti-Black ideas and sentiments.” (208)

Notwithstanding such possibilities, the history of Asian American struggles for citizenship in the courts demonstrates a long and painful history of being “othered” at a level similar (but not identical) to that of African Americans. The experience of Japanese Americans has also been especially troubling; during World War II, Executive Order 9066 authorized the internment of nearly 110,000 Japanese Americans (Daniels 302), one of the few events the US would officially apologize for and which would mark the Asian American experience for years to come.

However, as both Loewen and Hartigan have pointed out, the nexus of class, racial, and gendered formations is most clearly demonstrated in specific moments in time and in specific locations. Superman’s creation was one such moment and the way in which Superman, the alien and immigrant, was racialized therefore deserves attention. Danny Fingeroth points out that Siegel and Schuster created Superman at a time and place (Cleveland, 1938) when they would have been unable to avoid some awareness of Hitler’s increasing power in Europe and the danger he posed to the Jews in Europe (38). As young Jewish men in an area where, as Scott Raab points out, “more than 75 percent

of the students were Jewish [and] in block after block could be found *shul* after *shul*, bakery on top of bakery with the smell of pumpernickel heavy in the air,” (167) Siegel and Schuster could hardly have ignored the coming war. Yet, oddly enough, the Superman comics of the era largely seem to have ignored the war.

For example, the Holocaust is not mentioned in the Superman comics and although this might surprise those who know that his creators were Jewish, “Many Jews raised in the United States in the wake of the Holocaust experienced it like a family secret – hovering, controlling, but barely mentioned except in code or casual reference (Kaye/Kantrowitz qtd. in Brodtkin 141). The experiences and the images were undoubtedly too raw and too vast to comment on in the space of a comic book or a comic strip.⁹ The Superman comics may have largely ignored the war, but their covers did not and neither did the Superman cartoons of 1942. World War II marked Superman as a patriot of the US and after the war Superman would for the most part remain distant from the struggles of the oppressed. This was mainly the result of three factors: the increased economic mobility of white/ethnic immigrants as a result of GI benefits, the (white) economic boom of the 1950s, and Superman’s growing popularity as a patriotic icon.

World War II provided Superman, as an alien, with a unique opportunity to become an accepted part of the white American polity. However, Superman became white in a manner that differed quite a bit from his creators’ Jewish brethren. Eric L. Goldstein points out several trends, all part of the World War II era, which helped to whiten American Jews. First, he notes that Jews were no longer categorized separately as “Hebrew” on immigration documents starting in 1943 (192). Goldstein also references the propaganda posters of the era, which spoke out against race prejudice as a weapon of

the enemy. He writes, “In practice, however, by offering a much greater degree of incorporation to Jews and other European groups than to blacks, the government’s wartime policies had the effect of redrawing American racial boundaries rather than erasing them altogether” (E. Goldstein 192). Once the terms of whiteness were broadened to include Jews (while simultaneously continuing to other African Americans), and race prejudice took on negative connotations in the propaganda of the time, Jews began to define themselves less and less often as a “race,” and thereby increasingly joined the ranks of whiteness (E. Goldstein 204).

Jacobson summarizes these events quite well when he writes, “the racial ideology encompassing Jewishness in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century did set Jews on a social trajectory similar to that traveled by many other probationary ‘white persons.’ The full texture of anti-Semitism in this country thus combined strains of an international phenomenon of Jew-hatred with the mutability of American whiteness” (179). Despite his Jewish “birth,” Superman’s embrace of Whiteness (and white Americans’ embrace of Superman) worked differently; Superman became a white American not in comparison to African Americans, but in comparison to the Japanese “enemy” of World War II.

Although several of the *Superman* and *Action Comics* covers of the early forties show Superman striking Nazi submarines and tanks, those covers where Superman takes the time to punch Japanese planes are striking because of the presence of stereotypes of the Japanese taken straight from the US propaganda posters of the era. Most of the Superman covers featuring the Japanese do not portray the Japanese as harshly as the propaganda posters do, but they recall the stereotyped Japanese men in the national

propaganda posters to the degree that readers of the times would have easily seen the comparison. Specifically, the Japanese men on the Superman covers are drawn with the same over-sized teeth, overbites, and dark skin as those in the propaganda posters. Two of the Fleisher cartoons, “Japoteurs” and “Eleventh Hour” (1942), also mimic the images of the propaganda posters. Meanwhile, besides the occasional portrayal of Hitler and his exaggerated mustache, the Nazis on the covers are drawn like any other whites of the day; the only way to distinguish them from the other white people on the cover is the ever-present swastika. In addition, the Japanese are often portrayed as caricatured pilots, a distinct difference from the Nazis, who were rarely portrayed as such. Exaggerated images of Japanese pilots may have been intended to recall Pearl Harbor and the desperation of kamikaze pilots, both of which were the focus of many US propaganda posters and emphasized the Japanese soldiers’ supposedly inherent treachery.

Despite the prevalence of World War II-oriented covers, very rarely did the content of the issues refer in any way to World War II. Paul Levinson notes, “In comic-book land, as in our reality, the war raged on, and took its course, with no significant impact from Superman” (214). During World War II, Superman stayed in the United States for the most part, jailing petty criminals and caring for the home front. Two of the exceptions are the cartoons entitled “Japoteurs” and “Eleventh Hour.” “Japoteurs” features a particularly striking opening scene, where a Japanese man working at his desk looks up and bows as the photograph of the Statue of Liberty above his desk turns around to reveal a Japanese flag. This speaks directly to American fears of Japanese treachery, the same fears that fueled internment. In the cartoon, the Japanese office worker and a few others hijack a new, gigantic plane, drop a bomb on US soil, and then attempt to

crash the plane into Metropolis. All of these events directly recall Pearl Harbor and the Japanese soldier's apparent disregard for his own life as he steers his plane towards his target. The message seems to be that any Japanese man in America could secretly be looking for an opportunity to sabotage American technology and therefore implies support for the internment of the Japanese that began a mere six months before the cartoon aired.

The 1943 comic "America's Secret Weapon" demonstrates how Superman could win the war by himself, but the unfailing pride and strength of the (white) American man make his involvement unnecessary. As Superman says in his speech to the troops, "I have seen proof that American soldiers cannot be defeated by Superman or anyone else – not even by Mr. Schickelgruber's so-called master race!" (Cameron, Citron, and Sikela 157). Here Superman affirms his belief that American troops do not need a Superman to beat Hitler while also subtly questioning Aryan superiority. At the same time, he reinforces white American masculinity; none of the troops in the Superman comics that deal with World War II are of races other than "white." Thus, when he says that American soldiers can beat the Nazis and the Japanese, he is really saying that America's *white* soldiers will save the United States, the Jews, and perhaps the world.

In another rare example of Superman's involvement in the war, the comic "How Superman Would End the War" (1940), Superman punches his way into Hitler's hideout and tells him, "I'd like to land a strictly non-Aryan sock on your jaw" (Siegel and Schuster 161), a line that calls attention to Superman's alien origins as well as his creators' Jewish origins. Grabbing Hitler by the collar, Superman stops to pick up Stalin and flies them both to Geneva, where they are convicted of "modern History's greatest

crime – unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries” (Siegel & Schuster 161). However, as soon as the US entered the war, Siegel and Schuster felt compelled to explain why Superman would not be joining the soldiers overseas. Hence, they wrote a short strip in which Clark Kent fails his army physical because, using his x-ray vision, he reads the eye chart in the next room, causing the army doctor to exclaim that Clark Kent is practically blind.

This irony does not escape Clark’s attention: “Can you beat it? Here – I’ve got the most powerful body the world has ever known – and thru a sad trick of fate, the Army turns me down as hopeless” (Siegel, Schuster, & Burnley 159). Although this could be read as a ploy devised merely to keep Superman out of the war, it can also be read as yet another instance where Clark Kent doesn’t measure up to popular conceptions of white heteromascularity. This strip also reinforces Halberstam’s point about the impossibility of achieving the supposedly “ideal” status of hegemonic white heteromascularity. Whenever Clark Kent or even Superman falls short of being the “ideal” white, masculine man, he illustrates its impossibility and reassures other white, heterosexual men who are having difficulties achieving this brand of masculinity. This strip illustrates why Clark Kent/Superman never gets a chance to fight the Japanese, except on the covers of Action Comics.

The differences between Superman and the Japanese, sharpened on the World War II era covers and the Fleischer cartoons, made Superman’s status as an immigrant/alien all but invisible. Stuck at home, Superman became the patriotic protector of the home front. The anarchic Superman of the thirties would be replaced by what Mark Waid sees as “more of a super-lawman – a global boy scout, if you will”

(*Superman in the Fifties* 5). In fact, the “American Way” is absent from the cartoons of the early 1940s, even though patriotic symbols still abound in the comic book covers and the cartoons of that era. Those bright, patriotic covers began to tie Superman irreversibly to the United States long before the “American Way” became part of the slogan we are so familiar with now. However, as Superman fell in into his Boy Scout role, the comics grew boring. No longer would Superman play the part of the vigilante. As a result, the boring uniformity of the Boy Scout decades (mostly the fifties and sixties) would prompt Superman writers and artists to look to Lois Lane for stories that would connect to the contemporary reader. Clark Kent became increasingly predictable while Superman explored strange new worlds and other dimensions, as if he were above the petty problems of planet Earth. Meanwhile, Lois Lane would serve as the only connection between Superman and the increasingly tumultuous world of its readers.

A *Lois Lane* comic written in 1970 would be the first of the decade to question the identity not only of Superman, but of Lois Lane as well. In “I am Curious (Black)” Lois takes a taxi in order to “get the inside story of Metropolis’ Little Africa” (Kanigher & Roth 136) but finds that the African American residents will not talk to her. She comes upon one man who, while he is addressing a small group of African Americans, points to Lois and says, “Look at her, Brothers and Sisters! She’s young and sweet and pretty! But never forget ...she’s Whitey! She’ll let us shine her shoes and sweep her floors! And baby-sit for her kids! But she doesn’t want to let our kids into her lily-white schools! It’s okay with her if we leave these rat-infested slums! If we don’t move next door to her!” (Kanigher and Roth 138). This is a fairly radical speech for a Superman comic, but nothing keeps Lois away from a story, not even the color of her skin (here

portrayed as a disadvantage). Lois makes use of Superman's "plastimold", a machine that turns her into a black woman at the press of a button. She changes her clothes, a change that signifies that the differences between white and black are larger than just skin color, and heads back into "Little Africa" where taxis pass her by and white passengers stare at her on the bus.

Then she meets Dave Stevens, the man who called her "whitey" in front of the crowd, just in time to see him shot by drug dealers (one white, one black). Superman flies both Lois and Dave to the hospital where Lois finds out that Dave has the same blood type as she does and that she's the only one who can save him. Superman, on the other hand, is helpless: "I can't help! Even if I were that type...no needle could penetrate my skin" (Kanigher, Roth, and Oksner 145). Although this claim is basically a cliché in Superman comics, it raises some interesting issues. For example, why is this Lois's story and not Superman's? In other words, via Superman's impossibly tough skin, this comic implies that white masculinity is impenetrable. White femininity and black masculinity can be penetrated, wounded, or changed in some way, but white masculinity is untouchable.

After Lois gives blood and Dave is no longer in danger, Lois confronts Superman. She asks, "Suppose I couldn't change back? Would you marry me? Even if I'm black? An outsider in a white man's world?" (Kanigher, Roth, and Oksner 146). Superman's answer is, "You ask that of me...Superman? I don't even have human skin! It's tougher than steel," an interesting dodge on Superman's part (Kanigher, Roth, and Oksner 147). Again the impenetrable skin of the white man appears and again Superman claims that he is basically helpless. Then he shifts the dialogue into a conversation about his outsider

status (as an alien) rather than acknowledging that African Americans face racism in this “white man’s world.” Superman’s helplessness in this situation becomes his victimhood while simultaneously relieving him of any guilt he may bear for the fact that his superpowers won’t be used to eradicate racism. His repetition of the “tougher than steel” cliché even sounds more like gloating than despair or regret. In this example, an exasperated Superman throws up his hands and abdicates any responsibility he and other whites may have for dismantling racism.

The effects of the plastimold wear off and Lois becomes white again just before Dave asks to see her. When Lois expresses her fears about seeing Dave now that she’s white, Superman insists that she must. He tells her that, “If he still hates you... with your blood in his veins... there may never be peace in this world” (Kanigher, Roth, and Oksner 147), thus putting the responsibility for “peace” squarely on a black man’s shoulders, a black man who must forgive a white woman in blackface in order to establish this “peace.” Significantly, their reunion is silent; Dave’s surprise becomes genuine pleasure and he shakes Lois’ hand. Although his silence is difficult to interpret, he doesn’t appear to be shocked by the fact that a white woman saved his life. Instead, he merely seems grateful, despite Lois’s blackface performance.

Although blackface was predominantly practiced by men, Lois’s blackface ultimately serves the same purpose. Using Sandra Gilbert’s characterization of cross-dressing, Michael Rogin explains that blackface “allows the white man to acquire the envied (fantasized) qualities of the other [race] and yet reassure himself of his own identity: I am not really black; underneath the burnt cork is a white skin” (103). Faithful to the historical meaning of blackface, Lois regains her white skin at the end of the comic

and the status quo is retained. It is Dave's responsibility to accept and forgive Lois while Lois does nothing; her antiracism is assumed. In fact, when Lois starts to turn white, she claims that she feels, "as if I were shedding my skin," (Kanigher, Roth and Oksner PAGE NUMBER NEEDED) almost as if the authors were trying to illustrate that, in Lois's case, blackface is entirely positive, that the façade is also the true face of Lois Lane.

In fact, there are two references to skin on this page, one from Lois and one from Superman. Superman talks explicitly about his skin and in what seems like an attempt to one-up Lois' sense of oppression, Superman claims that his skin isn't even human, but Lois rightfully calls him on this, telling him, "But...your skin is the right color" (Kanigher, Roth and Oksner 147). Still, Superman has a point when he mentions his status as "a universal outsider." As an alien, Superman is truly unique; there is no group on the Earth to which he can belong.

During these confrontations, Lois and Superman face one another, highlighting the differences between each of their multiple "identities." When Lois becomes white again, their argument ends and they stand together, facing the same direction, united on the same side of each frame; their differences are suddenly forgotten in the presence of their common whiteness. Superman's alienness disappears once Lois's blackface comes to an end. In short, when there are no more people of color to compare Superman to, his whiteness becomes invisible and normalized. With no point of contrast, his whiteness is simply assumed. Like other scholars, Roediger suggests that when blackface performers stopped applying burnt cork, they "became less identified with Jewishness as well" (*Working Toward* 125) and acquired a generalized whiteness instead. Thus, in this

comic, blackface reinforces Lois' femininity and Superman's whiteness, masculinity, and humanity, just as it did for those who actually practiced blackface.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, we see both Superman and Lois Lane defined by the quintessential "other" of the United States, the African American. Although Superman was largely whitened via comparisons to the Japanese during World War II, the shift to African Americans during the seventies demonstrates the hybridity of whiteness, which is able to construct an "other" from anyone. One of the powers of the conferred dominance of whiteness is the ability to construct one's others and then, as Tim Wise says, "to deny nonwhite reality, and indeed to not even comprehend that there is a nonwhite reality (or several different ones), [which] is as strong as any other evidence of just how pervasive white privilege is in this society" (*White Like Me* 59). The writers and artists in the comics and cartoons described here (as well as Superman/Clark Kent as a character) all exercise this kind of dominance, albeit in ways circumscribed by the specificities of the episode and the structure of feeling at that moment.

Conclusion: Superman's "American Way"

According to Gary Engle, "The myth of *Superman* asserts with total confidence and a childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture" (81) and Engle is not the only one to make the argument that Superman is not just an immigrant, but the ultimate immigrant. Simcha Weinstein points out that even Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has, "called Superman 'the hero from Ellis Island' who personified the 'undocumented alien who had been naturalized by the ultimate American couple'" (29). Superman's familiar origin story starts on the planet Krypton, where his parents, Jor-el and Lara, put their son in a spaceship and send him to Earth just in time to save him from Krypton's complete

destruction. Kal-el (Superman) lands in Smallville, Kansas, where Jonathan and Martha Kent find and adopt him, keeping his secret and raising him with what readers are supposed to see as good, old-fashioned Midwestern values.

As Engle points out, Superman is, “the consummate figure of total cultural assimilation” (85) because he whole-heartedly believes in the moral compass provided by the Kents and he adapts to his new home readily, eagerly, and almost seamlessly. In short, many see him as the perfect immigrant because the “mainstream white Anglo-Saxon protestant ingredient[s]” (Engle 85) added to his upbringing by the Kents make his alienness almost completely invisible, especially when he steps into the suit and glasses that transform him into Clark Kent. Perhaps this invisibility is one of the many reasons Superman’s status as a US citizen is rarely questioned.

Occasionally, Lois or another character will ruminate about Superman’s alien super-strength, noticing out of the blue that a simple slip-up on his part could cause widespread destruction. But for the most part these fears are quashed by Superman’s unwavering honesty and selflessness. As the Crash Test Dummies song, “Superman” notes, Superman “could smash into any bank in the United States. He had the strength but he would not.” John Henry writes that, “Always haunting [Superman] is the knowledge that if he gives in even once to the temptations that fill his world, it would serve to justify the worst fears of typical humans: that Superman not only can break human laws with immunity, but does break them” (131). In some ways, then, only Clark Kent’s upbringing in middle America prevents the “alien” Superman from breaking what must seem to him like arbitrary rules about what he should and should not do. Interestingly, Superman has never broken those rules. Perhaps he understands that the

trust we place in him is as fragile as our sense of his humanity or our trust in Clark Kent. In other words, the “American Way” that Superman fights for does not in any way resemble how the US or its citizens act most of the time. Instead, Superman is the ideal version of who we all wish we could be, from integrity to super-strength. Superman is also the ideal version of the “American Way,” an illusion that has, throughout history, served to obscure the actual “American Way” here and abroad, a “way” that even Superman’s nationalism might not withstand.

An interesting shift in the quality of Superman’s nationalism seems to take place in the Superman comics of the early 1990s. In a comic that reflects the issues surrounding the Gulf War of 1990-91, Superman is commissioned by the government to protect a plane that is transporting a political prisoner. Superman later finds out that the political prisoner (who is from the Middle East) has been paid with arms and cash by one (corrupt) branch of the government while another branch waited six months to catch the traitors. Superman angrily asks “How many innocent people were killed with American money and bombs?” and then tells the general that “I believe in everything this flag stands for...but as Superman, I have to be a citizen of the world. I value all life regardless of political borders” (Ordway and Janke 22). It should be noted that Superman does not protest against the US government or declare that he will no longer work with them. Instead, he lays all of the blame on certain “corrupt” officials, thereby denying the fact that American imperialism (both cultural and economic) is a matter of systemic racism and capitalist domination. Instead, Superman couches the problem in terms of individual pathology. At the same time, however, Superman shifts his alliances slightly. He says that he believes in what the flag “stands for,” rather than for the actions it has

come to represent. He also calls himself a “citizen of the world,” which at least demonstrates some knowledge of the need for someone who will protect *everyone’s* way of life, not just America’s.

The images contradict the text, however. Superman’s patriotism remains intact and boldly declares its presence on the front cover, where Superman salutes while a giant American flag flaps in the background, a throwback to the Superman covers of WWII and the films of the 1980s. The covers, again, seem to pull Superman deeper into American nationalism and his role as the guardian of “the American way” than ever before. Furthermore, even though Superman has proof of his government’s duplicity, he doesn’t react by submitting a critical piece to the Daily Planet or by making an announcement about his new “worldwide” citizenship. In the end his righteous anger serves as a release valve, not an impetus to structural change or personal rebellion. Starting in the 1990s and extending to the present day, Superman shows that he is capable (like many whites) of verbally supporting equality without making any of the sacrifices that might help bring it about.

Patricia Hill-Collins points out that verbally supporting equality while doing nothing to establish it is a popular white strategy. She writes, “Another pattern of suppression lies in paying lip service to the need for diversity but changing little about one’s own practice” (Hill-Collins 6). In the comic summarized above, Superman shows “tolerance” and expresses a desire for a kind of global village, but he does not act in a way that could actually bring about cultural change. The range and power of Superman’s abilities makes this blasé acceptance of the status quo somewhat ironic. Superman, of all

people, could force the US government to change; at the very least, he could use our regard for his principles to argue with Congress and the President.

But for some reason, both the writers and the readers of the Superman texts seem content to see him do very little in terms of real-world change. Patrick Eagan writes that “fans of the Man of Steel will find few, if any, examples of their hero exercising his powers to bring about the real and lasting improvement of the human condition; rather, they will find (as Umberto Eco notes in his essay, ‘The Myth of Superman’) an obsession with preserving the status quo” (91). Superman, a white, heterosexual, American man with unlimited powers has done nothing to eradicate poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, starvation, or war in more than seventy years. What little he has accomplished has mostly worked to revitalize, naturalize, and make invisible the powerful, interlocking systems that make all of those atrocities possible. Superman, like all of our heroes, shows the potential to be something more than he is, but he seems unable to escape the binaries we have created for him. If the one being on Earth who could be anything he wants to be isn’t strong enough to break out of these binaries, how will the rest of us ever believe that we, too, can fly?

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN WITH “THE NUTS”: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN POKER

Worm: I guess the saying's true. In the poker game of life, women are the rake, man. They are the fuckin' rake.

Mike McDermott: What the fuck are you talking about? What saying?

Worm: I don't know... there oughta be one though.”

- Edward Norton and Matt Damon in Rounders

Quick camera pans of players at all of the major televised poker tournaments (the World Series of Poker [WSOP], the World Poker Tour [WPT], the National Heads-Up Championship, the Professional Poker Tour, and the MansionPoker.Net Poker Dome) reveal a predominantly white, male pool of players. Despite the democratic rhetoric of announcers and players, the world of televised poker is policed along gender and race lines. Televised poker is thus a complicated matrix of intersecting privileges. Poker is portrayed on television as a male sport, a masculine arena where the size of your chip stack determines the extent of your (phallic) power and your ability to subdue other players by taking their chips. By continually calling attention to the gender of female poker players and the race of people of color, televised poker draws boundaries between those who have the highly valued characteristics of white masculinity and those who do not, and those who may play and those who are discouraged from invading what is still primarily a white man's domain.

This chapter begins with a thorough exploration of the meaning of poker's Western/cowboy rhetoric and the ways in which this rhetoric reinforces hegemonic white heteromascularity. The importance of the use of Western/cowboy rhetoric flows into a discussion of how announcers typically treat those whom this rhetoric has historically othered. From there, the chapter examines the ways in which the commercials played

during poker programs reinforce the gender marking behaviors of announcers. Finally, this chapter shows how poker as a whole breeds an atmosphere of strict gendered and racial policing, thus creating and reinforcing a racist and misogynist culture.

The Rhetoric and History of Poker

Like most pop culture phenomena, televised poker is enmeshed in history. Poker shapes and is continually shaped by conceptions of the American West. In fact, the American West is inscribed in the very language of poker. Along with Western or frontier rhetoric, the rhetoric of sport is also used on occasion. Below is a list of terms and their “translations” as they presently stand in the world of poker.

Table 1: Important Poker Terms

The “Nuts” (also “stone cold nuts”)	The best possible hand
“four tits”, “ladies”, “double skirts”, (“bitch”)	Pair of queens, (any queen)
“cowboys”	Pair of kings
“bullets”	Pair of aces
“fire at the pot”, “pull the trigger”	To bet
“ammo”, “weapons”, “shells”	Chips
“under the gun”	First position and thus the first person to bet
“To dodge a bullet”	To avoid a situation in which one was already beat
“dominated”	To share cards with another player when you have the lower “kicker” – AK vs. A8, for example
“kicker”	The card that decides the winner when players have the same hand (The K and the 8 in the example above are both “kickers”).
“action”	Betting
“a monster”	A really strong hand
To be “a dog”	Short for underdog – to be behind/have the inferior hand
“battle of the blinds”	When everyone folds around to the blinds, who are left heads-up
“to bleed”, “to milk”	To slow play a strong hand for maximum value
“changing gears”	To change play from loose to tight and back again in order to throw off opponents
“passive play”	Checking rather than raising
“aggressive play”	Betting rather than checking, regardless of hand strength

Fish	Weak player, a rookie
Shark	A professional player
Whale	Someone with a lot of money, but not necessarily a skilled poker player
“tilt”	To be emotionally off-balance in a way that causes one to make bad decisions and lose chips
“hemorrhage”	To lose chips quickly
“short-stacked”	To be low on chips, less than 10 times the big blind is the standard measure
“down to the felt” (also “feltd”)	Having so few chips that all you have left in front of you is the felt on the table
“wearing out the felt”	Pushing all of your chips in so many times that the felt on the table in front of you is worn down
“at war”	When two players compete with each other, often disregarding the other players and trying to eliminate one another from the game
“on the respirator”, “on the ropes”	Extremely short stacked
“up against it”	In trouble regarding one’s odds of winning
“go down swinging”	To lose because of aggression rather than passive play
“outdraw”	To catch one of the cards you need to win when the odds were against you
“dead”	You can’t catch even a single card that will lead to a win, you’ve lost the pot before the last card was drawn
“to play weak”	To check rather than betting
“to play strong”	To bet on the strength of your hand
“slow-play”, “to trap”	Playing weak when your hand is strong with the intention of inciting your opponent to raise with a weaker hand
“to stare down”	To stare at your opponent with the aim of making her uncomfortable and revealing her tells
“dead money”	A weak player
“chasing”	Calling when you know you’re behind in the hopes that you’ll hit a card that will give you the winning hand
“nut straight”, “nut flush”, “nut boat”	To have the best straight, flush, or full house
“a showdown”	When one or both players are “all in,” usually they flip their cards face up and watch the board until all the cards are dealt and one player is declared the winner.

Table 1 (cont.)¹⁰

The rhetoric of poker is derived from poker's complicated history and a reliance on Western tropes. Most critics agree that poker is the cousin of a French game called "poque" that was popular with the French in New Orleans and traveled up the Mississippi and westward to California, with slight adjustments and changes to the rules as time passed (Spanier 57). This may explain why most of poker's variations are named for places near the Mississippi River or to the west of the river (Texas Hold 'Em, Omaha, Chicago, Cincinnati, Mexican Stud, etc.).

The Western images reflected in the language above engage not just our geographic faculties, but also the myths of the American West/frontier, myths that are inseparable from white masculinity and poker. As Susan Johnson notes, "Of all the regions people have imagined within the boundaries of what is now the United States, no place has been so consistently identified with maleness-particularly white maleness-as the region imagined as the American West" (495). Most of the poker terms above refer to the American West in some way and as a whole, they paint the picture of a white cowboy and the violence that is attached to the cowboy, the Western, and hegemonic masculinity, all of which interact and intersect in important ways.

In films about the American West, violence is the main means by which the white cowboy proves his masculinity. Like the hardbody film of the eighties detailed in the chapter on Superman, the cowboy's body is often beaten down or shot so that he can prove his masculinity by getting up again and, ultimately, being victorious in battle. In his study of Western novels and films, Lee Clark Mitchell writes that, "Western heroes are knocked down, made supine, then variously tortured simply so that they can recover in order to rise again. Or rather, the process of beating occurs so that we can *see* men

recover, regaining their strength and resources in the process of once again making themselves into men. The paradox lies in the fact that we watch them become what they already are, as we exult in the culturally encoded confirmation of a man again becoming a biological man” (174). Mitchell’s descriptions of how the cowboy must continually be knocked down in order to stand up again and thereby prove his masculinity are nearly identical to Susan Jeffords’ and David Savran’s descriptions of how the hardbody and the reflexive sadomasochist must be beaten up (or beat themselves up) in order to prove their masculinity.

Such repetition indicates that the beating, torture, and recovery of white male bodies characterizes white American masculinity’s contemporary zeitgeist, at least in part. In addition, the same violence is repeated in poker’s rhetoric. A pair of aces is called “bullets” (and even “atom bombs” and “weapons of mass destruction” by some announcers), while a pair of kings is referred to as “cowboys.” One can “stare down” one’s opponents or “go to war” after “firing at the pot.” Making these connections explicit in his book *Strategy in Poker, Business, and War*, John McDonald writes that, “[No-limit] poker is not a game but a duel executed with money instead of pistols” (27). The rhetoric of poker elicits images of the American West through its reliance on cowboys and the violent potential of the gun belts slung carelessly about their hips.

Mitchell further points out that the cowboy’s beatings, torture, and recovery demonstrate masculinity’s “schizophrenia” (185) and that “The frequency with which the body is celebrated, then physically punished, only to convalesce, suggests something of the paradox involved in making true men out of biological men, taking their male bodies and distorting them beyond any apparent power of self-control, so that in the course of

recuperating, an achieved masculinity that is at once physical and based on performance can be revealed” (155). In other words, although the Western implicitly suggests that masculinity is a performance rather than a biological characteristic, Mitchell concludes that the viewer/reader overlooks this paradox of seeing a cowboy become the man he already is. Like Superman and his beatings, the cowboy is beaten in order to confirm the masculinity the audience already “knew” he had by virtue of his male body. As Mitchell sums up, “The whole dramatic process reveals how the cherished image of masculinity we had dismissed as simply *learned* behavior is in fact a resilient, vital, biological process” (183). Thus, the Western makes clear that masculinity must always and everywhere be tied to male bodies.

Furthermore, in the Western and in poker, as in the other texts discussed in this dissertation, hegemonic identities like whiteness and masculinity are always defined and normalized in relation to others which they then Other. In most cases in the Western, the Other is an American Indian, a woman, or both. In any case, those Others that appear in the Western serve specific purposes. For example, Mitchell notes that white women were often kidnapped by supposedly undesirable Others like Mormons, Indians, and rival gangs (135), but Tania Modleski pushes this analysis to demonstrate how the figure of the white woman was thus used to justify racism (537).

White men in the Western justified their violence against American Indian tribes as their duty to protect “their” women. This is similar to the ways in which the lynching of black males was typically justified as the protection of white women from the rapacious/excessive sexuality of black men. These similarities are important because, as Modleski shows in her analysis of a Western below, they belie the idea that black men

were the only men who were lynched for their perceived threat to white women's sexuality/bodies. In fact, white men used similar justifications to attack men of color throughout the American West, all in the name of preserving their masculinity, a fact that indicates how fragile that masculinity was.

In her analysis of the film *The Ballad of Little Jo*, Modleski reminds us that Chinese men also figured prominently both as victims of white male violence and as workers and settlers in the history of the American West. Both Reginald Horsman and Ronald Takaki point out the importance of both the American Indians and the Chinese in the formation of racial hierarchies in the United States, especially where the law is concerned. Modleski writes that, "Of all the ethnic and racial types of men peopling the landscape of the Western genre, the Chinese man has been the most invisible. This invisibility is ironic considering the centrality of Asia and the Asian man to the construction of the great white myths of the West" (530). She explains this role in detail when she writes:

In the nineteenth century the white establishment had a stake in not recognizing Asians as distinct from other nonwhite groups in America. Limerick discusses the dilemmas of racist legal thinkers and Americans in general who in the nineteenth century were "wrestling with the questions raised by Western diversity" and attempting to maintain a fiction of a "bipolar West composed of 'whites' and 'Indians....'" If, as Marjorie Garber has argued, the transvestite represents a "category crisis" with respect to gender... it might be said that the Asian represented a category crisis with respect to nineteenth-century theories of race. (531)

Here she explains that the Chinese were often left out of the Western in order to preserve a white/Indian binary particular to the American West. Like the black/white binary that was troubled by the arrival of “in-between” groups like the Irish and various Eastern European immigrants, proponents of the Indian/white binary of the west found the Chinese and other Asians difficult to place. The Western, then, reflects this uneasiness with those who do not fit into the West’s Indian/white binary by largely neglecting to include the Chinese.

It is important to point out that the actual American West and the Western were not and are not identical, though they more than likely had significant effects on one another. Michael L. Johnson writes, “The history of that wildness may be read as one in which a seemingly concrete fact has been more and more translated -- by mythification, etherealization, virtualization -- into an abstraction” (4), but he is careful to give neither the land nor the myths of the West primacy over the other. As he points out, today “any experience of the wildness of the West, near or distant, as literal as that of wrestling a grizzly bear or as symbolic as that of watching a John Wayne movie, is, as Stephen Tatum observes, ‘precisely what we make of it as we endure it’” (M. Johnson 7). Thus, both the myths and the actual spaces of the American West are vital to how it is portrayed and how we make meaning from what we see both in US culture as a whole and in televised poker specifically. Both are frequently framed by Western rhetoric.

According to both Modleski and Mitchell, the primary purposes of the Western are to attach white masculinity more firmly to the white male body by othering women and people of color and to provide nostalgic images of a “wild west” where the modern man could go in order to test himself and thereby find his true (white, masculine) self.

Although some would argue that these purposes were mainly achieved via pop culture, it is important to remember that images and tales about the “wild west” motivated much of the violence that western white males aimed at men of color. In other words, racist tales of the raping and kidnapping of white women by Chinese, American Indian, and African American men encouraged white male violence; that same white male violence was then justified on the basis of both racism and these purported kidnappings. Myths of the American west and the violence that actually took place there were thus mutually reinforcing; where one is lacking (actual occurrences of rapes and kidnappings by Chinese, American Indian, and African American men, for example) the other takes up the cause in the name of maintaining white heteromascularity.

The Western, its rhetoric, and through them both, the game of poker, serve much the same purpose today. Although some may suggest that the Western genre and its attending rhetorics have all but disappeared, others would argue that we have seen resurgences in the rhetoric of the West since the Reagan era. West and Carey argue that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney both used old west rhetoric in many of their speeches, especially following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and leading up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They write, “the Bush administration placed itself as heir to the Reagan presidential frontier in a time of war, and used the narration of a defining cultural myth to invite key audiences to join the administration fantasy, and in turn participate in the rhetorical vision of frontier justice” (380). Although this may seem like a fluke or a coincidence, soldiers currently fighting the Iraq war use the same rhetoric, which is an indication of the enduring power of “wild west” rhetoric.

Specifically, the soldiers and commanders in Iraq refer to certain regions as “Indian Country,” a clear reference to the American West (Silliman 237). In “The ‘Old West’ in the Middle East: U.S. Military Metaphors in Real and Imagined Indian Country,” Stephen W. Silliman demonstrates how referring to Iraqis as American Indians sets up a slew of additional comparisons between the terrains, the people the soldiers fight/fought against, the differences in technology and warfare, the fighting between Indians and whites (and Iraqis and Americans), and the inevitability of American victory. Although such comparisons simplify and lump together very different peoples, situations, and histories, Silliman also points out that these comparisons may be unintentionally appropriate because, “the war in Iraq is like the wars in Indian Country of the 19th-century North America: a misguided imperial attempt on the part of the United States to quash (frequently nonwhite) people and nations considered in the way of important resources and to initiate long-term and violent conflicts to tame a proverbial frontier” (244). Given the presence of such rhetoric in American military camps in Iraq, perhaps it should not be surprising that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney also used the rhetoric of the American West to shore up support for that very war.

The most important aspect of the continued use of Western rhetoric in Bush and Cheney’s speeches and in poker is that it conjures very specific images of white American heteromascularity. West and Carey point out that, “What is clear is that the narrative of Bush-as-cowboy and Cheney-as-cowboy traverses a deep meaning for much of the public: spreading beyond individual and family, connecting to a broader American mythology, to powerful cultural and political figures such as John Wayne and Ronald Reagan, and to the historical characters of the Old West whom they represent” (398).

Although it is easy to dismiss the Republican use of “cowboy rhetoric” as simply a side effect of popular culture, Silliman rightly points out that:

Uncritically attributing [cowboy rhetoric with] some entertainment value in combat thanks to the proliferation of ‘cowboy and Indian’ movies in the 20th century does not negate or depoliticize their impact either. Such an apologetic approach, in fact, accentuates the subtlety, pervasiveness, and longevity of those impacts. Linguistic practices and discourses have social, political, and cultural effects, particularly when they comprise the language of colonialism and of power. They are not neutral. (245)

Cowboy rhetoric and rhetorics of the West serve to romanticize the supposedly long-lost white masculinity of the cowboy and to exclude or “other” those whose victimization helped to create and mythologize the white, masculine cowboy in the first place. The fact that poker players and announcers consistently use cowboy/western rhetoric is not neutral either; instead it immerses poker and its players in a language and a milieu of violence and domination.

The presence of Western rhetorics in poker, then, is more than just an interesting side effect or an attempt to entertain players as they wait for hands. Instead, it is a strong indicator of the synergy between poker, the Western, and American popular culture. John McDonald writes, “The public expressed its kinship with the game by absorbing its language. Every American, poker player or not, knows what it is to have an ace in the hole (or up the sleeve) or to be in the chips, to bluff or call a bluff, stand pat, four flush, put his cards on the table, have a showdown, or otherwise get into a situation where the chips are down; and finally to meet the end of life itself by cashing in his chips” (37).

Thus, the violence that is expressed in poker's rhetoric and is arguably a part of poker's history is also built into the structure and the idioms of American English.

Poker's violent rhetoric may have been shaped by its history, but it is also true that contemporary American English was shaped by the same violent Western history. Furthermore, that history continues to inform how many Americans see and respond to contemporary problems, whether that be soldiers who refer to Iraq as "Indian Country" or those who respond to Bush and Cheney's cowboy rhetoric by reelecting them and by supporting their policies abroad. Western rhetoric has been used in the political, popular, and poker arenas to remind Americans that "real" Americans are masculine, heterosexual, white men who defend "their" white women and "their" turf with violence.

Marking Race and Gender: The Role of Poker Announcers

Both race and gender are marked by poker announcers, and although this visibility may lead some to believe that these markings achieve only an othering of these groups with respect to white males, in truth the marking that takes place in poker is much more complex. For example, Herman Gray posits that the contemporary US media is characterized by "hyperblackness" (*Watching Race* 148), but he also notes that sometimes this visibility, especially of middle- and upper-class African Americans, is interpreted as a sign that racism is dead. Similar warring impulses are at work in the struggle over televised representations of women and people of color who play poker.

Because sports networks (ESPN and FSN, for example) typically televise poker programs and poker is often referred to as a sport, it is important to note how the structures of poker programs resemble professional sports broadcasts. Typically, both professional sports and professional poker programs feature interviews with players and

coaches and feature announcers who are sometimes former professional players/athletes themselves. Announcers for poker programs, like those for professional sports, often frame the way the viewers watch and understand both the athletes and the strategies of the games. In a study about gender marking in sports entitled, “Separating the Men from the Girls: The Gendered Language of Televised Sports,” Messner, Duncan, and Jensen note that comments by announcers and sports show hosts can be characterized as “gender marking.”

“Gender marking” describes a behavior wherein the announcers or commentators name a sports event as a “women’s” or “girls” event, thereby setting it apart from the men’s events, which receive no such markings. Thus, men’s sporting events are “normal” and require no gender marking, while women’s events are noteworthy, as if they are somehow unusual or unexpected. In their observation of men’s and women’s college basketball games, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen notice that while three women’s games were gender marked verbally and graphically a total of 77 times, the men’s games were not gender marked at all (126). The result of this biased coverage was that “the men’s games and tournament were presented as the norm, the universal, whereas the women’s were continually marked as the other, derivative, and by implication, inferior to the men’s” (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 127). This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the sports world, but it clearly extends outside of professional sports and also occurs with respect to race, nationality, and sexuality. The marking of “other” races, genders, and sexualities makes them visible in a way that white heteromascularity is rarely marked or made visible.

Gender marking occurs regularly in all of the poker programs on television. For example, professional players Annie Duke, Jennifer Harman, and Cindy Violette are consistently referred to as “the best female poker players in the world” when they appear on camera. By the same token, although all of these women are white and fairly rich, these dominant identities are never marked. The end result is that their biological sex becomes their sole identifying characteristic, which renders their wealth and whiteness invisible and disregards any preferences about how they would prefer to be viewed. White men, on the other hand, are simply called “the best poker players in the world.” The default poker player, in other words (like the default televised person) is white, rich, heterosexual, and male. Of particular note here is the fact that sex and race are marked, in poker and in professional sports, despite the fact that the images on the screen make this practice redundant, as both sex and race are usually apparent.¹¹ In addition, poker is a game of intellect and nerve, characteristics that both men and women possess, so it is difficult to tell why female players would be gender marked at all. In 25 episodes of televised poker from every basic cable network, not once did commentators or announcers refer to male poker players explicitly as “male poker players” regardless of whether women were also playing. When women and/or people of color played alone at tables full of white men, sex and race were constantly invoked. White men, however, were never marked in any way.

Thus, while viewers were constantly forced to confront the gender of the women and the race of people of color, announcers and commentators did not refer to white men as being gendered or raced. In addition to being constantly referred to as “female poker players,” the women at the tables were also referred to in more subtle gendered terms. In

other words, they were not always referred to as “females” or “women;” their biological sex was implied and emphasized in other ways. For example, during the 2003 World Series, Annie Duke’s 10th place finish in the 2000 Main Event was the subject of several conversations between announcers Norman Chad and Lon McEachern.

After a special segment on Jennifer Harman in one episode of the 2003 World Series of Poker, the conversation turns to Annie Duke. McEachern calls Duke “another member of the sorority” and then makes the claim that Duke “in 2000 pulled off what many considered to be the most impressive feat in championship history” (WSOP 2003). Chad answers with, “Yes, she finished tenth while nearly nine months pregnant. Heck, I once called in sick to work when my Prozac prescription ran out. This woman is tough!” McEachern’s response to Chad is, “Annie’s four kids are doing fine at home and Mom is getting the cards just in time” (WSOP 2003). In the few seconds it took to recite this dialogue, Chad and McEachern point out Duke’s gender in six different ways. First, they refer to her as a member of a sorority; then Chad refers to Duke’s pregnancy, which is a state that is only biologically possible for women and which therefore marks her indelibly as a woman. Chad also refers to Duke as a woman explicitly, while McEachern refers to Duke by her first name, mentions that she has children, and calls her “Mom.”

In the case of televised poker, as you can see from this example, it may be necessary to expand Messner, Duncan, and Jensen’s definition of gender marking to include allusions to biological characteristics and social roles. For example, because only women can be “nine months pregnant,” Chad and McEachern’s reference to Duke’s pregnancy can only be seen as gender marking behavior. Thus, even comments that do not appear to gender mark can result in gender marking anyway. For example, certain

activities carry implied genders; mothering, breast-feeding, and giving birth are presently assumed to be female activities.

To be fair, Chad and McEachern's recollection of Duke's pregnancy is not the only instance in which pregnancy is mentioned in reference to women at the poker table. During the WPT's Borgata Poker Open III, Mike Sexton responds to poker pro Kathy Leibert's anxiety by stating that, "She's taking a deep breath like she's going to have a baby here, Vince. What to do?" and Vince Van Patten responds by joking that, "That would be a first on the WPT." It is nearly impossible to imagine announcers making such comments about white men. This example serves not just as another instance of gender marking, but also as a way of pointing out that gender marking is not unusual. These announcers are in some ways simply parroting back the misogyny already built in to American culture.

By highlighting how poker announcers mark gender and race, my intent is not to individualize these acts or to suggest that racism and sexism would disappear if a few individuals changed their behavior. My intent is not to engage in the kind of pathologization and individualization that Herman Gray observes in programs that portray anti-black racism as an individual issue rather than addressing the structural racism built into US institutions (*Watching Race* 86). Instead, the use of race and gender marking by all of the poker announcers marks the banality of racism and sexism, the common-sense understanding that such markings are normal or even necessary when they are not. Although the individual acts of violence that many people consider "racism," do not often occur during poker or sports programs, gender and race marking constitute part of what Stuart Hall calls "inferential racism:" "those apparently naturalised representations of

events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded” (91). The “unquestioned assumption” present in announcers’ gender and race marking is that the default position from which to view the world is white and male. The fact that most announcers (and white viewers) are unaware that such marking is taking place is an indication of the ubiquity of this default position (even in those who are othered by this default white male position).

One of the most striking instances of gender and race marking occurs in the second season of the WPT at the San Jose Bay 101 Shooting Stars of Poker Tournament when Vince Van Patten calls Susan Kim “Susie Homemaker” three times in the span of an hour and ten minutes, despite the fact that Susan has an MBA from Harvard and deserves more respect than the moniker “homemaker” implies.¹² In this case, Van Patten’s nickname for Susan Kim is doubly troubling because Kim is Asian American. The fact that Van Patten refers to her as “the homemaker” recalls centuries of white American prejudice against Asian Americans and reinforces stereotypes which claim that Asian women are desirable brides and wives because they are taught to be subservient. The fact that Van Patten is a white male makes his nickname for Kim and the stereotypes it invokes particularly harmful. Therefore, in this instance, we have a moment where both gender and race are inflected, albeit not explicitly. Race is mentioned much more explicitly in other instances, mostly in reference to black male poker players.

The following racially inflected nicknames were routinely used on poker programs from 2002 to 2007: Spaniard Carlos Mortenson is “the Antonio Banderas of the

poker world,” Senthil Kumar is “Senthil the Calcutta card smith,” Iraq-born Lee Salem is “The Bagdad bluffer,” when Costa Rican Humberto Brenes hits the flop, Van Patten comments that, “The Macarena is going off in his head,” and Vietnamese player Scotty Nguyen plays “kamikaze poker,” a nickname that is not only insulting and culturally ignorant, but also conflates Vietnamese people with Japanese people. Other racially inflected poker nicknames include Phil Ivey, “the Tiger Woods of Poker”, Johnny “the Orient Express” Chan, Men “The Master” Nguyen, Ram “Crazy Horse” Vaswani, and David “the Dragon” Pham. These racially marked nicknames can be contrasted to some of the white players’ nicknames, most of which are innocuous. For example, there’s Daniel “the Kid” Negreanu, Phil “the Poker Brat” Hellmuth, Mike “the Mouth” Matusow, David “Devilfish” Ulliot, Howard “the Professor” Lederer, Paul “dotcom” Phillips, Phil “the Unabomber” Laak, Martin “the knife” de Knijff, Doyle “Texas Dolly” Brunson, Gus “the Great Dane” Hansen, Barry “Robin Hood” Greenstein, Amarillo “Slim” Preston, Chris “Jesus” Ferguson, Paul “Eskimo” Clarke, and “Action” Dan Harrington.

Most of the white men’s poker nicknames refer to former professions, confer status, indicate a player’s aggressiveness or attitude, or, in the case of Barry “Robin Hood” Greenstein, reveal how they spend their money (Greenstein donates a large percentage of his profits from poker to charity). The exceptions to this rule include Chris “Jesus” Ferguson and Paul “Eskimo” Clarke, both of whom appear to be white men with dissonant nicknames. Ferguson’s nickname is based on the fact that, as a white man with long hair, a long beard, and a cowboy hat, he apparently looks like Jesus Christ. Clarke’s nickname, on the other hand, was given to him because he apparently looks like the

Alaskan Airlines logo, which is rumored to be the face of Oliver Amouak of the Inupiat tribe (Rooney). Although the resemblances are debatable, the fact that neither Jesus Christ nor Amouak were white men confirms fears about the appropriation and erasure of men of color. The nicknames given to men of color, on the other hand, are almost always racially marked.

Some of these nicknames doubtless seem innocent at first glance. However, one in particular, Phil Ivey's nickname as "the Tiger Woods of poker" is not only heard more often than most racialized nicknames, but also got special attention on a TwoPlusTwo poker forum begun on May 14, 2008. The forum later made the news on the World Cup of Poker site and then the news blog on Gambling911.com. The forum begins with the question, "What's Phil Ivey doing playing basketball," and beneath this line is a picture of NBA player Sam Cassell (TwoPlusTwo). Cassell is also a black man, of course. The intent of this initial post to the forum is unclear; the post could either be a racist iteration of Ivey's nickname, "The Tiger Woods of Poker," or a critique of that nickname. As the forum proceeds, both possibilities are put to use by the participants. The visual replies include both critiques of the initial image of Sam Cassell and racist images of black cartoon figures sleeping on sidewalks and surrounded by watermelon rinds. The forum also includes an emotional, if relatively limited, discussion of which posts are racist and which are not.

Those who post in hopes that Ivey's nickname as the "Tiger Woods of Poker" will be exposed for its racism post increasingly ridiculous pictures. For example, the statement, "OMG phil ivey got his own tv show!!!" (sic) accompanies a picture of Bill Cosby, and "Hey guys Phil Ivey is running for President! Check it out!" is accompanied

by a picture of President Obama. By posting pictures of black men who do not remotely resemble Phil Ivey, these participants are mocking the racist logic which states that all people of a given racial group look alike. These posts mock those announcers who repeat Ivey's nickname every time he appears on camera and who thus give power to racist stereotypes. Other participants, however, don't see the irony and post blatantly racist pictures. The differences between the posts may seem odd, but they may be explained by the fact that, "while both oppressor and oppressed are constituted through the experience of oppression, they both feel, live, experience and know that reality differently" (Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik 14). Those who do not understand the joke being played back on the announcers simply do not see anything wrong with calling Phil Ivey the "Tiger Woods of poker."

Ivey's case is particularly important because of the attention it has received in the poker world, but all of the racially inflected nicknames above have the potential to do the same work. The nicknames are basically stereotypes that are being applied specifically to professional poker players of color. Some might make the point that Tiger Woods is the best golfer alive and that comparing Ivey to Woods is flattering. However, such a response overlooks the racial context of the US in the early twenty-first century. Ivey receives such attention not just because he is a wonderful poker player, but because he is a black poker player. Explicitly labeling him as such ensures that his blackness is overdetermined, hyper-visible. If Ivey resembles Woods in any way, it would be in the ways that both of them are used as examples of the diversity of their respective sports, a focus which hides the fact that both golf and poker are still predominantly white male

domains. In addition, like other black male athletes, both Ivey and Woods have been the targets of racist comments. Furthermore, as King, Leonard, and Kusz point out:

Related stories of Black male athletic dominance on the playing field of mainstream American sports such as football and basketball leading to the alleged marginalization of young White boys who are turning away en masse from these sports reverberate in new millennium American culture to assert that White (male) power and privilege in American society is eroding. Here, sport is mobilized as a means of activating (and/or reenergizing) the racial anxieties of many Whites fearful of losing ground and the normative position that their interests, worldview, and experience have long held in American culture and society.... (6)

In other words, in addition to the long-held racist stereotype of the superior black male body/athlete, tales of black exceptionalism (especially in certain sports) are sometimes highlighted in order to support the myth that white males are at a disadvantage (in sports in particular and, by extension, in US society as a whole). This is supported by the quotation above from Herman Gray's *Watching Race* (xxii) indicating that high-profile African Americans in both politics and sports are often mentioned when whites want to insist that the US playing field is level, colorblindness is a fact of contemporary life, and there is no more need for affirmative action programs.

Meanwhile, images of high-profile women are rarely used to make these claims. The repetition of the story of a white man who doesn't get a job because a "less qualified" black man gets it has no gendered equivalent despite the fact that women benefit from affirmative action programs.¹³ However, the gender marking that takes

place in televised poker programs may achieve ends similar to those achieved by racial markings. Gender marking serves to highlight the presence of female poker players above and beyond their actual numbers at the tables. This makes poker appear to be a diverse space when in fact it is a very white, male space.

According to Vanessa Russo, a professional poker player, "It's very rare to see women at the poker table, still. We're less than 10 percent of the field in any major event" ("Women Have Yet"). Indeed, in the history of the World Series of Poker, only two women have made it to the final table (top 10) at the Main Event, a Texas Hold 'Em event with a \$10,000 buy-in; Barbara Enright made it to fifth place in 1995 and Annie Duke placed tenth in 2000. In an interview with Maryann Morrison, the chief editor of Women's Poker Magazine, WomenGamers.com reports that, "There is growth overall in the number of women playing, this is especially true in 2005. The 2005 World Series of Poker ladies main event saw a growth of 400% over participants in 2004. Many casinos are experiencing a growth in their live games by the female demographic. Where in 2004 you would see two women in the whole poker room, many report one or two women at each table" (Boinodiris). Despite the massive increase in the number of female poker players at the World Series of Poker, the Ladies No Limit Hold 'Em tournament has never been televised or included on the World Series of Poker DVDs.

Thus, even when the number of women playing poker is increasing, their visibility is limited to the familiar white faces of Annie Duke and Jennifer Tilly. At the same time, the gender of these female poker players is so consistently and continually marked that poker appears to be a diverse space. Meanwhile, the constant gender marking makes it clear that women's presence on the poker circuit is somehow abnormal or aberrant.

These contradictory impulses never seem to be resolved, however. In addition, although this chapter has analyzed the presence of women in televised poker on the level of individual programs and announcer attention, each of these programs is framed by the commercials that accompany them and by the networks upon which they appear. The next section analyzes the ways in which white men and women are portrayed in both the commercials that play between hands and the networks that host poker programs. The commercials and networks support the messages conveyed by the announcers: women and men of color are playing poker, but their presence should not be construed as comfort or approval on the part of the white men who play and largely control televised poker.

Beer and Nuts: Using Commercials to Maintain Poker's White Heteromascularity

One of the most repeated expressions in both televised poker and the commercials that play between hands is the expression, “the nuts.” In one of the World Poker Tour's (WPT) Poker Corners, Susie Isaacs, “Poker Columnist & Author” explains that the term “the nuts” (the best hand) comes from the Old West, like most poker terms. When a player was very confident, he would bet his horse and wagon by removing the nuts from the wheels of his wagon and putting them in the pot. Thus, when the hand ended, the player who won was said to have “the nuts” (WPT Season 2).

The history of the term “the nuts” is relatively mild compared to what it means to a contemporary poker player. Because men's testicles are often called “nuts,” “the nuts” has departed from its colloquial history and now means not only having the best hand, but often, having testicles/balls/nerves as well. For example, when players call big bets, especially on the river in Hold' Em, they often ask their opponents, “Do you have the nuts?” which can be read as both “Do you have the best hand?” and “In this

confrontation, are you the one with the testicles?” where one assumes that having testicles is better than not having them, a rhetorical construction that clearly privileges masculinity and associates biological maleness with nerve and toughness.

In a television commercial with Jennifer Tilly (for the World Series of Poker Tournament of Champions video game), the WSOP demonstrates the connotations of the term “the nuts” when, in the first frame, they show Main Event champion Joseph Hachem look at his cards and put walnuts on the table. Chris Ferguson then puts oversized metal nuts (of nuts and bolts) on the table and, to cap it off, Jennifer Tilly, the only woman at the table, puts two bowling balls on the table. This part of the commercial ends when, “Got what it takes?” flashes on the screen in front of Tilly’s image. The ad seems to indicate that women can have “the nuts” even if they don’t have testicles, a pun that only works because “the nuts” already has a dual meaning.

However, the commercial moves beyond the simplicity of the “nuts” pun and its suggestion that women can possess the power of the phallus to suggest something a bit more misogynistic. When Tilly places the bowling balls in front of her breasts, the commercial accomplishes several things. The first is that the viewer is compelled to notice the size of Tilly’s breasts and, therefore, to objectify her. Furthermore, the placement of the bowling balls just in front of Tilly’s breasts suggests that the two things should be compared. Tilly’s breasts, though of comparable size and shape to the bowling balls, clearly are not “balls” and never will be. This could be taken to mean that no woman will ever really have that indicator of nerve or supposed essence of masculinity that is a man’s balls.

Both Tilly's objectification and the suggestion that women cannot have balls, even in poker, have important implications. First, amusing as the commercial may be, it implies that women are at a disadvantage in poker because they don't have the nerve to play it properly. More important, though, is the commercial's insistence on attaching masculine (and feminine) characteristics to bodies that are biologically male and female (respectively). Tilly may perform in this commercial and in poker as though she has the necessary "balls" to play, but the commercial vitiates this by objectifying Tilly's body. Appropriating the idea that masculinity/balls is perhaps a performance (a la Butler), this commercial, rather than coming to the conclusion that because masculinity is a performance, it is both fragile and can be performed by anyone, instead concludes that because masculinity is a performance, it can never be adequately performed by or adhere permanently to a female body. This commercial indicates that where masculinity is found in females, it is *only* a performance; *real* masculinity belongs to white men.

The World Series of Poker also shows off poker's most regressive advertiser, Milwaukee's Best Light Beer (MBL), during its broadcasts. MBL's series of nine, 15-second 2007 World Series of Poker television spots basically construct a video instruction manual about how to act like a (white) man. The commercials follow a routine script; a group of white men is engaging in what would typically be considered "masculine" tasks: buying beer, digging holes, building a trampoline, eating pizza and watching the game, barbequing, and playing poker. Then one of the white men does something that isn't typically considered masculine (or is considered to be a feminine reaction): one man buys wine coolers instead of beer; another panics and screams when buzzed by a bee; another yells "Woo" and jumps on the trampoline in a stereotypically

feminine way that can also be read as stereotypically “gay;”¹⁴ one removes the grease from his pizza with a napkin; another talks to a dog in a high-pitched voice; yet another shows up at the barbeque with his girlfriend, wearing matching shirts; and finally, one leaves the poker game to call his girlfriend and check in.

As soon as one of the men strays from white masculinity by engaging in activities that are not usually considered “masculine,” he is crushed by a giant can of Milwaukee’s Best Light that falls from the sky. His companions silently note their friend’s fate and go on with what they were doing while the announcer says, “Men should act like men and light beer should taste like beer” (*Milwaukee’s Best Light*). The narrative of these commercials thus sets up a behavior (femininity) that is punished (crushed by a beer can) while the stereotypically “masculine” white men survive. Thus, it could also be said to be setting up a deterrent, a reason for men to stay within the bounds of “masculinity.” The commercials indicate that if men do not conform to these expectations, they will be punished and ostracized by their fellow men.

However, in addition to punishing aberrant men, the commercials also clearly establish what they think white masculinity is. For example, in “Convenience Store,” Milwaukee’s Best Light makes the claim that “men” drink beer, not wine coolers. In “Tent,” all four of the men get squashed by beer (this time it’s a six pack) because they can’t successfully build a tent. In “Catch,” MBL implies that “men” can catch a beer can without fumbling and ultimately dropping it. In “Check In,” one of the men leaves the poker game to call his girlfriend and check in. But he doesn’t simply tell her that he’s still playing poker. He bashfully puts his hand in his pocket and the pitch of his voice rises. In short, he acts like he is subservient to his girlfriend. At the very least, it is clear

that he cares what she thinks or he would not have checked in with her at all. The equation of stereotypically feminine behavior with punishment makes it clear that these MBL commercials are attempting to reinforce traditional ideas of what constitutes white masculinity and white men. None of the men in the commercials are African American, Asian, American Indian, Chicano, or Latino and because of the stereotype that gay men are feminine, the viewer will most likely assume that the men the commercials are heterosexual.

Milwaukee's decision to include only white, heterosexual men in their commercials about how to be a "real man," will likely not raise any flags for white viewers. To them, the overwhelming presence of straight whites (and the relative lack of people of color) in ads and in televised poker is not unusual. As Herman Gray points out, "whites are the subjects of commercial network television.... *'Networks can't afford to alienate whites, who make up the vast majority of potential viewers, and remain the ones advertisers privately concede that they want most'*" (95). Milwaukee may consider the absence of men of color in these ads a financial decision, if they consider it at all, but the inclusion of "othered" masculinities would also complicate their commercials and make it much more difficult to convey the desired messages about whiteness and hegemonic masculinity. Demetrakis Z. Demetriou writes that:

Some masculinities are subordinated not because they lack a particular transhistorical quality or because they are naturally inferior to others but because the configuration of practice they embody is inconsistent with the currently accepted strategy for the subordination of women. Gay masculinities, for example, are subordinated to the hegemonic model

because their object of sexual desire undermines the institution of heterosexuality, which is of primary importance for the reproduction of patriarchy. (344)

Therefore, if the purpose of hegemonic masculinity is the maintenance of patriarchy and none but white men may perform or possess it, subordinating gay masculinities and the masculinities of men of color by leaving them out of televisual representations also facilitates the maintenance of both hegemonic white heteromascularity and white patriarchy.

The Milwaukee's Best Light beer commercials maintain hegemonic white heteromascularity, as well as patriarchy, by policing the boundaries of white heteromascularity and by portraying the same kind of idealized white heteromascularity portrayed by figures like Superman. The "ideal" white, masculine male does not "check in," wipe the grease off his pizza, wear shirts that match his girlfriend's, fumble objects tossed to him, scream, or buy wine coolers. Although all of these events occur in separate commercials, the sum of the parts is a list of the things the "ideal," white, masculine male can and should do: pitch a tent, catch, buy beer, choose his own clothing, stay cool in potentially dangerous situations, eat whatever he wants, and be indifferent to the concerns of women. These traits signify strength, courage, a fierce independence, and a disregard for women.

However, the Milwaukee's Best Light commercials can also be read as ironic by those inclined to read against the grain. For example, eventually the viewer may notice that the same group of three or four men appears in all nine commercials. At some point, a beer can crushes each and every one of the men in the group. In other words, this group

of men violates their own masculine “rules” with startling regularity. Thus, in some ways, these commercials are a farce of masculinity. The very group that pretends to police masculinity is a routine violator of that very same supposedly “sacred” masculinity. There is some space here for a critique of white heteromascularity, but the space is limited. Mike Donaldson points out that, “What most men support is not necessarily what they are. ‘Hegemonic masculinity is naturalised in the form of the hero and presented through forms that revolve around heroes: sagas, ballads, westerns, thrillers,’ in books, films, television, and in sporting events” (646). For every time a man in the MLB commercials breaks with white heteromascularity and gets crushed by a beer can, there are three heroes who uphold it by being “real men.”¹⁵

Despite the irony that none of the men are able to attain the standards of white heteromascularity the commercials ask of them, the message that men should work to attain this idealized form of white heteromascularity remains intact because there are always a few “real men” left standing. Furthermore, those viewers who see themselves in the men who are punished for digressions from hegemonic white heteromascularity may not see that these ads “exploit men’s feelings of not being big, strong, or violent enough by promising to provide them with products that will enhance those qualities” (Katz 352). Instead, they may buy Milwaukee’s Best Light beer and chuckle as they remember the very ads that caused them to feel that a beer would restore their masculinity.

On the other hand, according to Milwaukee’s commercials, women apparently check in, wipe grease off their pizza, scream, and drop whatever is thrown to them. When these traits are coded as “not masculine” they are also coded as negative/feminine traits. The ease with which we recognize these stereotypes as stereotypes of women

speaks to their vitality and power. While the men watching the World Series of Poker and the Milwaukee's Best Commercials are internalizing messages about how to be a "real man," the women who watch may be internalizing the idea that women do not build tents, watch sports on television, dig holes, barbeque, drink beer, or play poker.

The fact that only men are participating in these activities and the fact that they are all stereotypically "male" activities may lead female viewers to believe that these activities are not for them. Indeed, when you combine the commercials with the announcers, the editing, and the rhetoric of poker, the message is very clear; white men play poker, white men watch poker, and white men are the only television audience these networks care to pander to. Although it is possible that ESPN increases the number of men who watch their programs by demonstrating their willingness to police masculinity in such an overt way, Messner, Duncan, and Cooky make the point that, "the lack of coverage of women's sports, along with the often insulting treatment of women in general in these shows leads to a dramatic narrowing of what is otherwise a very diverse audience" (49). But perhaps the primary reason for televised poker's overwhelming masculinity is the idea shared by both Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam; hegemonic white heteromascularity is so fragile that its existence must continually be confirmed and reinforced by repeated performances of what it is and what it is not.

Violence at the Tables: Responses to White Hegemonic Masculinity

The repeated performances of hegemonic white heteromascularity on television, via both commercials and announcer comments, are just one poker forum wherein white heteromascularity is performed. Much more explicit performances of white heteromascularity take place at the tables themselves, though the relatively sanitized

poker shown on TV is completely absent of such incidents.¹⁶ Most serious poker players have, at one time or another, witnessed white male players make explicit racist or sexist comments at the table, whether that table is online or in a casino's poker room.¹⁷

Although explicit racism (and less so sexism) are a bit rarer at live poker tables than online ones, many poker players participate in both live and online poker communities, and have therefore probably witnessed white males policing white heteromascularity at the tables.

The prevalence of racist and sexist comments at poker tables is confirmed by the presence of online discussions about "offensive players" on multiple online poker forums and poker sites. Most poker sites also have the means to discipline players who engage in offensive or racist chatting, including turning off their chat capabilities ("Online Poker Forum"). The fact that both poker sites and poker forums have developed policies and strategies for dealing with racist comments at the poker tables hints at just how common this experience is.

The most popular strategy for dealing with racist comments at the poker table is to report the player to the casino/online poker site manager, but quite a few people also suggest that players deal with this problem on their own. For example, a player named "Paelleon" on Poker-Strategy.org makes the well-received suggestion that the insulted player respond to racism with insults about the other player's mother or his age. Paelleon's second suggestion is, "wait for an opening and put a quick, clean thrust at him. eg. 'you stupid black ****. Go back to Africa!' Respond: 'Sure! Come on with me tho'. Your mountain gorilla tribe in the Congo say they miss you.'" and his final suggestion is to simply laugh at the offensive player. ("Racism at Ladbrokes poker"). Paelleon's

suggestion that the offended black player respond by calling the other player a “mountain gorilla” not only does nothing to dismantle the racism of the offending player, it actually feeds into the racism already rampant at the table.

The advice that people of color, women, and homosexuals merely laugh at the offensive remarks they hear at the poker tables may be a valid temporary strategy for some, but for others and for the long-term goal of reducing this kind of verbalized violence, it accomplishes very little. As Patricia Williams states in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, laughter ultimately cannot disempower those who spread hate (167). Still other players suggest that women and people of color who find themselves at tables populated by sexists and racists have an advantage.

Igamingforums.com contributor “Sgt. Rock” writes, “Racism in poker is an empty and meaningless threat. If your opponent is a racist bigot, how can that hurt you in a poker game? I suggest that it cannot, unless you let it get to you. Actually, you might even be able to use your opponent's racism to your advantage, much like some smart female players we know are able to take advantage of their opponents' sexist or even misogynistic attitudes” (sic). What “Sgt. Rock” refers to here is the fact that many of the best female poker players and poker writers make the claim that women are at an advantage because, for example, according to Cat Hulbert, women can take advantage of male chauvinist pigs in order to win their chips. She writes that although misogynist men are emotionally invested in the pots they play against women, “I don’t have to get all stressed out when a man beats me, because that’s the way he’s always heard it should be. But if I beat a chauvinistic man, for him it’s like a sandstorm in the desert. It’s going to blind him with rage. As long as he believes my win is contrary to nature, I have the

ultimate power even when I lose a hand” (Hulbert 38). Annie Duke has made similar statements about a female advantage in poker based on their abilities to flirt with and generally distract men who are attracted to women. All of the female authors/poker players here assume the heterosexuality of the male players at the tables. Indeed, gay and lesbian players are all but invisible in the poker community. “Gay” is used at the poker tables only as an insult.

Misogynist men are exacting a high price from women when they taunt them with misogynist comments. Annie Duke has repeatedly stated in interviews that she was taunted and called a bitch by men who didn’t want women at the poker table. Both Annie Duke and writer Toby Leah Bochan note how women and men are treated differently at the poker table:

Bochan: In terms of table image, does it bother you that a woman who plays right at the table gets called a bitch while men get to be “studs” or whatever?

Duke: Of course it bothers me. People who know me in person know that I’m not a bitch but when I’m sitting at the table, I’m aggressive and I’m competitive and I’m extremely intense. As I should be. In a man, that’s admired, like, “What a great competitor!” But in a woman, people are like, “Oh my god, what a fucking bitch.” (Bochan 176)

In the next line, Duke points out that the characteristics that prompt men to call her a bitch, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and intensity, are “masculine qualities. Whenever women display a lot of masculine qualities, they’re called bitches” (Bochan 176). In this case, these qualities may be considered stereotypically masculine, but they’re also the

qualities that are necessary to win at poker. When men insult women for displaying these “masculine” characteristics, they are attempting to make sure that masculinity is only performed by men. This is the same kind of policing that takes place in the comments made by announcers (gender-marking) and by the commercials played during televised poker.

Beyond the policing of masculinity performed by male players, the contention that the presence of misogynists and racists is somehow an advantage for women and people of color is problematic. One event in particular, combined with the strategies outlined above, paints a more complete picture of what it is like for women and people of color to play poker.

One of the most startling instances of gender bias in televised poker is Annie Duke’s victory in the Tournament of Champions episode in the 2004 World Series of Poker. The Tournament of Champions is a winner-take-all invitational event worth two million dollars. Early in the game, in a pre-flop race with her brother, Howard Lederer, Annie Duke has a pair of sixes and Lederer has sevens, a situation that all but guarantees Lederer’s victory. Duke needs to hit one of two remaining sixes in the deck to beat her older brother. The flop comes six, queen, queen, giving Duke a full house and reversing the situation. Duke then begins to cry and apologize for putting such a bad beat (winning in a situation in which the odds are decidedly against it) on her brother and for knocking him out of the tournament. Duke goes on to win the event and the two million dollar prize pool.

The events listed above are not abnormal in any obvious way, except that it is unusual to see Annie Duke cry at the poker table. However, the episode shifts into

something entirely new at the end. Although I have discussed this episode with other poker players, none of whom noticed anything out of the ordinary, both the mise-en-scène and the editing of this episode strike me as particularly stark, cold, and distant. In particular, the way in which Annie Duke's victory scene contrasts with almost every other victory scene I've watched, and the fact that women so rarely win such large prize pools, make this episode particularly noteworthy.

The end of this episode is unique for multiple reasons. The first is that the composition of Annie Duke's victory is dark and empty. No spectators cheer in the background and the announcers are completely silent. In all of the seasons and episodes of televised poker I have watched, never have I seen another victory scene like this one. Usually spectators stand and applaud and the announcers toast the winner, congratulate him, interview him, and announce their sympathies for the defeated opponent. But at the end of this episode, Annie Duke stands alone in the dark and alone in the frame, with no one to congratulate her. Her final opponent, Phil Hellmuth, leaves the table the instant he loses and begins his usual sulking monologue in the lobby. The episode cuts back and forth between Hellmuth and Duke, contrasting the desolation of the winner's table with the jaunty casino lights of the loser's pouting rant. Seemingly sensing that something is wrong, Duke calls her brother and says that she can't believe it, but that she's won the tournament and is sorry about the bad beat.

This phone call heightens the impression that the room is completely empty and that, having discovered that Annie Duke has won the tournament, the spectators abruptly left the building. It also heightens the contrast between most winners' victory scenes and Duke's; had anyone been there, she would not have had to resort to calling her brother on

her cell phone. But beyond the *mise-en-scène* and the editing, the most striking aspect of this episode is that even Norman Chad and Lon McEachern are silent. They don't offer congratulations, replay the key hands, or attempt to comment on the events at the table in any way. When the viewer is conditioned to expect this kind of idle chatter, especially from Chad and McEachern, its absence is jarring.

Duke stands alone in the frame until the episode is over. No one interviews her or congratulates her. The money and the bracelet appear as if by magic during the commercial break and Duke celebrates, still alone, tears still streaking her makeup. Given the way Duke is treated by the producers, camera men, and announcers, this episode indicates that a woman can win a major poker event as long as she expects to be alone in the end, even if she acts in stereotypically "feminine" ways by apologizing for her luck and for winning.

Furthermore, as a woman who watches and plays poker and who has seen and read about Annie Duke's experiences of misogyny at the table, I don't want to enter a space where I can expect verbal abuse for my gender¹⁸ — this creates a hostile atmosphere which, in turn, makes the playing field uneven. The argument that women and people of color have an edge over misogynists and racists because the misogynists' and racists' feelings make them vulnerable to being beaten by women and people of color assumes several things. The first is that women and people of color aren't bothered by these statements enough to tilt — this presumes either a lack of self-respect or that these incidents are so mundane that we are able to brush them off. However, as Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik point out, no matter how prepared women and people of color are for racist and misogynist comments at the poker table, this "does not

allow the oppressed to ‘tune out’ the ‘repetitive stimuli....’ Rather, we respond to each repetition as if it were a new and potentially dangerous incursion into our ‘semi-safe space’” (131). Instances of racism, sexism, and homophobia at the poker tables and images of isolation like that of Duke at the Tournament of Champions constitute an environment that is uncomfortable at best and violent at worst.

In addition, women and people of color must devote time to defending themselves at the tables and developing strategies for dealing with prejudice. The people who make these remarks certainly do not have to exert any energy or spend any time coming up with ways to voice their hate; as Tim Wise says, “you ingest [racism], inhale it just as surely as you inhale any other environmental pollutant. Having done so, you are then always at risk of coughing it back up, of vomiting it back into the world whence it came” (“White Like Me” 121). The argument that people of color and women at the poker table benefit from the racism of their opponents breaks down into the contention that, “racism and sexism make people of color and women stronger.” This may be true in some ways,¹⁹ but that is certainly not the intent and it’s not as if our actual powers to shape and change the world are positively affected by hateful remarks.

This also recalls statements like, “You can’t do anything about it, so you might as well get used to it or use it to your advantage,” which are motivated by the same conservative impulse that leads to the vocalization of racism and sexism in the first place. These remarks indicate that rather than working to eradicate racism and sexism, people of color and women should use racism and sexism to our advantage (which is ultimately our *disadvantage*). In feminist parlance, this is a choice that is no choice. What these well-

meaning advisors and experts overlook is that the people who should modify their behavior are the racist misogynists, not the people who bear the brunt of their hate.

The gender marking by the announcers, the policing of white heteromascularity and objectification of women that takes place in poker commercials, the misogyny and the racism at the tables themselves, and the utter desolation of Annie Duke's victory at the Tournament of Champions make it apparent that the atmosphere cultivated in poker rooms and on television is one that cannot but discourage women and people of color from entering these spaces. Like so much of racism and sexism in the contemporary US, very few people or networks state outright that women and people of color are not welcome in poker. To do so would bring a storm of protest down on televised poker and online poker sites. However, the sum of all of the parts analyzed in this chapter demonstrate the ways in which sexism and racism in particular pollute these spaces and push minoritized groups to either adapt ("deal with it") or leave. In short, like much of US popular culture, televised poker and online poker sites cultivate a violent atmosphere in which only white, heterosexual men can be completely at ease.

CHAPTER 5

SURVIVOR AS REALITY: IMAGES THAT “OTHER”

CBS’s *Survivor* is one of the most famous and long-lasting reality shows on television. Its influence extends over nine years of television and can be found in expressions like “voted off the island,” which have found their way into popular parlance. Like the other subjects explored in this dissertation, *Survivor*’s popularity is only one reason why it merits analysis. The other chapters’ emphasis on how hegemonic American identities are reinforced, normalized, and made invisible in popular culture is also appropriate here. However, unlike the other chapters, *Survivor* takes place both within and outside the US, a shifting location that allows ample opportunity to portray difference and to normalize hegemonic white identities, especially via the othering of tribal peoples. In addition, this chapter explores how ideas of what is “real” in the reality TV show *Survivor* affect how viewers see contestants, natives who are othered, and race and gender in the US. Contestants are portrayed in ways that uphold systems of dominance; time and again, some “deserving” contestant seizes the American Dream against a “wild,” “uncivilized” backdrop, an event that both normalizes American capitalism and exposes its contradictions. *Survivor* contestants’ simultaneous presence both outside of and within the US strengthens the power of Orientalism and the process of othering while simultaneously making invisible or normalizing racial, class, and gendered hierarchies.

Selling Contrived Realities

When *Survivor* debuted in the summer of 2000, it was one of the first reality shows on television. Although some would argue that game shows are the true origins of

what we now call reality television, *Survivor*, like *Big Brother*, constituted an entirely new genre. In this new genre, for the first time on American television, the spectacle was that of constant surveillance. The surveillance of the contestants and the purportedly unscripted content and events of each show led to the show's categorization as "reality TV." However, the editing and the revelation that producers often interfered with the content of both *Survivor* and other reality shows led viewers and critics alike to engage in debates about what was "real" or not real about the shows.

Although this debate may seem relatively unimportant, the way that *Survivor* is framed by fans, producers, and critics directly affects both how we interpret the events on the show and how the show might, in turn, comment on American culture. In particular, debates about the "reality" of the show affect how viewers judge the corresponding "realness" of the events, people, and myths of *Survivor*. Specifically, this means that images of tribal peoples, dangerous terrain, and contestants who are women and/or people of color are judged not only according to pre-existing, dominant white American conceptions, but also according to the label "reality." The seemingly contradictory readings of events, people, and locations as real or contrived demonstrate the ways in which hegemonic understandings of race, gender, and class adapt and persist. This section suggests possibilities for how to wade through and make meaning of the debate surrounding the "reality" of reality TV. More important, this section discusses what is at stake when we label edited surveillance as either "real" or "contrived."

In his insightful book on reality television, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Mark Andrejevic explores the ways in which the revolutionary potential of the Internet and of reality television are hemmed in by the logic of the market and late

American capitalism. He notes, for example, that the seemingly sincere use of “Big Brother” as the title of a reality show based on constant surveillance marks a departure from previous portrayals of surveillance as oppressive and limiting (Andrejevic 96). He also demonstrates how participants in shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor* often couch surveillance in positive terms, claiming that surveillance is a means to self-discovery and that those who dislike surveillance must have something to hide. Pointing to larger trends, Andrejevic writes:

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the emergence of relatively inexpensive highly sophisticated technologies for comprehensive consumer monitoring coincides with a trend in popular culture toward the portrayal of surveillance as a means of self-expression and a shortcut to fame and fortune. At a time when being watched is an increasingly productive activity, we are presented with the spectacle of how fun surveillance can be, how it can help us learn about ourselves and provide access to the reality ostensibly occluded by the advent of the forms of homogenization, abstraction, and media manipulation associated with the culture industry. (8)

In other words, the surveillance and corresponding “reality” of reality television are touted as the solutions to the contrived nature of the media as a whole.

Meanwhile, *Survivor* fans prove themselves to others, via the Internet, by pointing out the multitude of ways in which *Survivor* is not real at all, but contrived. To do so is to prove how savvy one is to the operations of the media in general and reality TV in particular. Jackson Katz points out that a popular strategy in the media “involves

praising young consumers for how media-savvy they are, especially in contrast with their parents and other older people.... This process would be laughable were it not for the fact that some of the products (e.g., Eminem) often simply reinforce or legitimate violent masculinity — and other cultural pathologies — as rebellious or ‘cool’” (353). Viewers who work to disprove the reality of *Survivor* are working from this same perspective; because they can see through the artifice of *Survivor*, they see themselves as hip, cool, smart viewers who cannot be duped by television programs.

The savvy viewer, then, sees reality TV as “mere ideology” and therefore dismisses it as mundane, boring, and meaningless. If most viewers know that *Survivor* and other reality TV shows are contrived, that they are essentially fake despite their categorization as “reality TV,” then each episode becomes an exercise in separating the real from the contrived. During that process, “What is crucial to the viewer response is that the naturalization of the...competition, selfishness, greed, and the like, is accompanied by the recognition of the contrived nature of this reality” (Andrejevic 203). Thus, the viewer recognizes that *Survivor* is not real, but this does not prevent the naturalization of its hegemonic narratives. In other words, the myths told in *Survivor* retain some of their rhetorical and social power and are thereby naturalized (viewed as real) while the show itself is dismissed as obviously fake. This is important because these seemingly contradictory impulses can result in a wide variety of readings.

For example, the *Survivor* fan who views the show as “real” and true to life could potentially read the portrayal of events and people in *Survivor* as portrayals which denigrate women and African Americans and “other” the natives who appear on the show. However, such a fan could also view *Survivor*’s portrayals as confirmation of his

own stereotypes and views. In either case, savvy viewers see this fan as a dupe for believing that *Survivor* is real in the first place. Meanwhile, the savvy viewers, who acknowledge that *Survivor* is contrived, may thus summarily dismiss anything the show has to tell them about domination, the process of othering, racism, sexism, and American cultural imperialism. Having dismissed the show as contrived, the savvy viewer also dismisses the potential for readings that question these structures and help dismantle domination and unearned privilege. Andrejevic writes:

The predominant perverse attitude of ‘late’ capitalism is that which concedes the critical point – that, for example, power is increasingly lodged in the hands of a select few who control not just the economy, but politics and the mass media – without becoming the dupe of such critiques and imagining that things could be otherwise. Savvy subjects derive pleasure precisely from not being fooled by either the elite or the social critics: they know just how bad things are and just how futile it is to imagine they could be otherwise (178).

Thus, when viewers recognize that shows like *Survivor* are contrived, the result is not one, but two conservative moves. The first is to proudly point out the multiple ways in which *Survivor* is contrived without realizing that the very systems it recreates (capitalism, racism, sexism, Orientalism) are also contrived (i.e. created by humans and thus not “natural”) and can therefore be dismantled. The second is to cannily declare that because *Survivor* is fake, it means very little and therefore deserves no critical attention. But if *Survivor* is retelling and naturalizing racism, sexism, the process of othering, and other forms of domination, then it clearly deserves critical attention.

The end result of the conflict between the “reality” and the contrivance of *Survivor* is a rather confusing narrative. As Andrejevic puts it, “Why is reality TV pretending that it’s real, so that we may cannily believe its phony, when it accurately portrays the reality of contrivance in contemporary society?” (16). In other words, because it’s sold as real, savvy viewers see that it’s fake and may consequently miss the fact that the same systems of domination in *Survivor* are operating in contemporary American culture and that they are both built and supported by US citizens. Meanwhile, those systems of domination and power are naturalized. Christopher J. Wright notes that, “This naturalization theme is followed up by Tarleton Gillespie, who writes that ‘according to [one] argument, television ‘trains’ the viewing public to observe the world in ways that support dominant interests.’ For if ideological content is presented as natural...the danger is that content in ‘reality’ programming will be seen as more natural still” (11). As noted by Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik in the Eminem chapter above, processes and systems that are seen as “natural” are not only very difficult to make visible, they are also very difficult to dismantle or destroy (84). The sections below will demonstrate how *Survivor*, like the other texts analyzed in this dissertation, helps to normalize and make invisible hegemonic identities like whiteness and masculinity.

The sections of this chapter that follow detail the ways in which this reality/contrivance binary influences interpretations of a few key moments in the history of *Survivor*. Although this chapter may seem reader-response oriented in ways that the others are not, this is intentional. *Survivor* is massively popular and it has the power to shape opinions on a wide variety of topics relating to American culture. Furthermore, the

reality/contrivance binary is played out in fascinating and important ways, especially when it comes to the variety of ways in which people might “read” the events, people, and structures that (dis)appear in the text. Finally, *Survivor* is a popular culture text in which “this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle” (Hall 453). Thus, unpacking and situating possible readings of *Survivor* necessarily also means analyzing how reality television normalizes and naturalizes systems of domination and, in some cases, how viewers and contestants resist dominant narratives.

Normalizing the Process of Othering

Every season of *Survivor* begins with a ship and eighteen to twenty-two Americans swimming or rowing to a distant shore. At some point not long after their arrival, these Americans encounter or are introduced to the “natives,” and the process of “othering” the natives begins. In *Survivor: Vanuatu*, for example, host Jeff Probst introduces the contestants to the “chief” of a local tribe who then separates them by sex. The contestants take part in an “authentic tribal ceremony” but it quickly becomes clear to the female contestants that men and women are not considered equals on the islands of Vanuatu. During the ceremony, the women kneel on the ground and are largely ignored while the men sit on a bench, drink a highly alcoholic “local” drink, and are ceremoniously painted with pig’s blood. In their interviews throughout the episode, the women indicate that they are not pleased with their treatment at the hands of the tribal elders.

Although *Survivor*’s host, Jeff Probst, has separated the contestants into groups based on sex in previous seasons, in the Vanuatu season, the separation of the contestants

into male and female “tribes” is undertaken by indigenous peoples rather than by Probst. The women in this episode view the inferior treatment they receive as an indication of how the indigenous people of Vanuatu view women. Mia, for example, says that the men got more out of the ceremony than the women did. (*Survivor: Vanuatu*). To the female contestants, and to many audience members, this experience of sexism as a characteristic of tribal people is “real.” It rings true to conceptions of tropical and third world nations (and especially tribal peoples) as “backward” and “uncivilized” in comparison to the US. In other words, what both the contestants and the viewers are meant to see as misogyny is applied from the outside, from the tribal “Other” rather than from fellow Americans, thus taking the blame for misogyny off of US culture and bestowing it firmly on the “Other.” In her study of *Survivor*, Jennifer Bowering Delisle writes, “There is continual emphasis placed on the wild, uncivilized aspects of the country; of course, we see no shots of the bustling Marquesean tourism industry or of Westerners in jeeps on safari....As we watch, we are asked to imagine that we have returned to a primitive, untouched world” (47). Part of this return to a “primitive” world, as demonstrated in this episode of *Survivor: Vanuatu*, is portrayed as a return to sexism.

What the *Vanuatu* contestants do not see and what the viewers may forget is that the producers of *Survivor* routinely divide the contestants by sex, both to form “tribes” and to compete in challenges.²⁰ What goes unquestioned when committed by Probst and the American and British producers of the show is made hypervisible when it is viewed through the lens of Orientalism. In this case, as in others, as Edward Said writes, “The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (5). For most contestants and viewers, however, the mirror this event holds up to the US reflects not the

similarities between the sexism of tribal life on Vanuatu and sexism in the US, but simply the “superiority” of the West.

In many cases, viewers watching these events as a reflection of “reality” may presume not only that the indigenous residents of Vanuatu are sexist, but also that such segregation and sexism do not occur in the US. Furthermore, because the Vanuatuan tribe is portrayed as primitive, primal, and untouched by democratic and technological advances, their separation of the genders can thus be read as natural, as stretching back to the very dawn of time, as the norm, and as the natural form of social organization. The concept of the “natural” is often used in the US to indicate the superiority of one item over its opposite: the fake, the unnatural, the unhealthy, and the chemical, for example. Thus, when sexism is naturalized in this episode of *Survivor: Vanuatu*, it is pushed beyond reproach; valuing men over women becomes the way things “have always been.” In turn, this serves to normalize the difference between men’s and women’s wages in the US, their segregation into separate professions and disciplines, and the acceptance of two and only two genders. After all, if these “natives” are in their “natural” state, then hierarchical views of sex and gender, with men and masculinity at the top, must also be “natural” and inevitable.

In fact, this portrayal of the “other” as sexist is ironic, especially when it holds the US up as an example of women’s equality. The claim that women in the US are making huge gains is based on denying the situations of women of color. Lynne Segal writes:

Twenty years of feminism have failed to improve the economic and social position of all women, although they have brought many gains for some. This is the situation in most Western democracies, but nowhere is it quite

so clear, nowhere are the contrasts between the lives of women after twenty years of feminism quite so stark, as in the United States. Despite the existence of the largest and most influential feminist movement in the world, it is U.S. women who have seen the least overall change in the relative disadvantages of their sex, compared to other Western democracies. (631)

In addition, the situation for poor women in the US has been getting steadily worse since the eighties when Reagan began a rhetorical and legislative war against welfare and women's reproductive rights, continued by his Republican successors. Furthermore, in the State of the Union Address following September 11, 2001, George W. Bush suggested that by going to war with Afghanistan, the US would bring freedom to the women living under the Taliban. This move, similar to the ones made throughout *Survivor*, pretends as if the US epitomizes freedom and equality for all of its citizens when neither the economic nor the sociological data bear this out. In the end, these portrayals of the US via the "other" work to naturalize and make invisible systems of domination still at work in the US.

Race also plays a significant part in the portrayal of the Vanuatu tribe as primitive and sexist. The process of othering takes place not only between the US and other countries, but also within the US. Many of the academics quoted throughout this dissertation note the ways in which white Americans have othered minoritized races in the US. Referring specifically to the ways Filipinos were portrayed during the heyday of American imperialism, Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, "Standard narratives of American history had already provided racial roles for the various actors in this drama: 'the

Filipino' stands in for 'the Indian' and 'the Negro,' uncivilized groups who can be *in* the United States but never *of* it; the nation itself, meanwhile, becomes a monolith of civilization which is by implication 'white'" (214).

Thus, events like the one described above, in which the indigenous people of color are portrayed as "uncivilized" and sexist, also portray Americans (assumed to be white) as "civilized" and therefore superior. The "othering" of the tribal peoples of Vanuatu draws not just sexist/not sexist and "civilized"/"uncivilized" binaries, but also people of color/white and "them"/"us" binaries simply because the tribal peoples are visibly and in the American imagination distinctly marked as "not white." The presence of mostly white contestants underlines this contrast. All of the contrasts employed in the sex segregation scene above mark the tribal peoples as "other" in several ways (race, lack of technology, sexism, "strange" clothing, and "primitive" ritual), all of which work to entrench the mostly white contestants in what American viewers simply see as "normal:" technological sophistication, equality, machine-made clothing, Christian ritual, and a whiteness which is un-raced.

Those viewers who read *Survivor* as contrived may interpret the gender segregation enforced by the indigenous "chief" in this episode as similarly contrived. This opens up some space between the portrayals of this "chief," his tribe, and their possible sexism, and the actual practices of the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu. In other words, if *Survivor* is contrived, then this entire incident might also be faked and therefore dismissed as meaningless. Alternately, "savvy" viewers may focus entirely on the difference between the "real" natives and their portrayal on *Survivor*, overlooking the portrayal's role in supporting and normalizing racism. Said writes that, "The things to

look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original” (21). As he points out, the actual Orient and its Western representations are not synonymous, but neither do the disparities necessarily affect how we “see” and act on the Orient based on the power of those representations (Said 20). In other words, viewers may form opinions on tribal or “third world” peoples that are based more on their representations in *Survivor* than on any knowledge viewers may have of the actual tribal peoples of Vanuatu and the other *Survivor* locales. When knowledge of and experience with tribal peoples is non-existent, *Survivor*’s representations may comprise the sum of all the viewers know of indigenous peoples outside of the US. As Said writes, “the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as ‘the Orient’” (21). Even those who see *Survivor* as fake may draw definitive conclusions about tribal peoples based entirely on their representations in *Survivor*.

As the savvy viewer is careful to point out, neither the contestants nor the viewers can ever be sure that the Vanuatan tribe they see is authentic. Nor can they be sure that their “ceremony” or their implied misogyny is authentic. Either way, the producers’ attempts to distance *Survivor*, and by extension the US, from charges of misogyny is questionable at best because the end result is still sex segregation. Moreover, *Survivor*’s imperialism extends beyond its portrayals of indigenous locals to its actual effects on local communities and landscapes.

For example, Jennifer Bowering Delisle notes that, “In the first season, fake boulders were carted onto the island, and though many species of plants grew naturally

on the island, the producers planted tapioca and sugar cane for the contestants to discover. They also ‘rented animals such as tarantulas and lizards from Hollywood-based animal rental facilities to make the island seem more ‘dangerous’ for the filming” (47). While the beaches may appear very dangerous in every season of *Survivor*, these beaches rarely appear in their natural state and are in fact made safer for contestants prior to their arrival. Thus even images of danger and of actual “survival” are contrived.

Beyond making the beaches safer even as they appear more dangerous, the *Survivor* crew also destroys anything within camera range that indicates technological advances or the touch of a human hand. Delisle notes that *Survivor* crews put quite a bit of work “into preparing Nuku Hiva’s Hakatea Bay for *Survivor: [Marquesas]*...the *Survivor* crew tore down the home, dock, and freshwater gathering system [local resident] Daniel built, and sprayed the beach every morning with insecticide” (47). Thus, *Survivor: Marquesas*, Hakatea Bay, a beach that was once inhabited, is made to look more “primitive,” dangerous, and uninhabited while insecticides are sprayed to make the beach more comfortable and “livable” for *Survivor* contestants. In short, the crew destroyed a developed, livable habitat in order to make “nature” more comfortable for contestants. *Survivor* producers desire a locale that looks dangerous and untouched but they also want it to be relatively comfortable and pest-free.

Hakatea Bay thus achieved *Survivor*’s preferred state of contrived reality. In reality, the bay was inhabited and fairly technologically advanced, but *Survivor* producers needed to build the beach that they wanted viewers to see, a safe beach that looked dangerous, a “primitive, untouched” beach that would nonetheless be comfortable for the invading contestants. The cultivation of a “primitive, untouched” look thus further

exaggerates the differences between these “primitive” so-called third-world locales and the American cities and towns of the *Survivor* contestants and fans.

Delisle also points out that Hakatea Bay was not the end of such interference from *Survivor* crews, as they sometimes built houses in local towns or anchored massive yachts nearby (53). According to Theresa Nicholson, CBS claims that the houses they built and the computers they used in the Marquesas would be donated to the people and to the schools. Although these donations are no doubt useful, CBS’s attempt to somehow replace Daniel’s Bay (built by a native over decades) with houses and computers is “similar to nineteenth-century justifications of colonialism; the *Survivor* takeover, we are told, will effectively lift up the primitive toward Western modernity and technology” (Delisle 53). The basis for such behavior seems to be the assumption that American technology and modernity are somehow better than those parts of the islands built and developed by residents.

In other words, “By simulating narratives of nineteenth-century colonialism, *Survivor* effectively makes those narratives a reality for a contemporary American audience. The way in which it ‘others’ and primitivizes eastern cultures erases subaltern agency and justifies America’s dominance in both political and economic spheres” (Delisle 54). Thus, Americans watching *Survivor* and seeing the ways in which tribal peoples and islands are supposedly technologically inferior can become paternalistically attached to their supposed “superiority.” When this process is refracted through the assumed and invisible whiteness of the US, the racist overtones become clearer. Quoting the nineteenth-century physician Dr. Charles Caldwell on the races of America, Reginald Horsman writes, “To the Caucasian race...is the world indebted for all of the great and

important discoveries, inventions, and improvements, that have been made in science and the arts” (120). *Survivor*’s portrayals of tribal peoples and natives and the othering those portrayals enable Caldwell’s brand of racist rationalization to continue well past the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first.

Othered Americans: *Survivor*’s Portrayal of Americans of Color

Connected to the othering of indigenous peoples on *Survivor* are the representations of Americans of color on the show. People of color were actually quite rare on the show until the airing of *Survivor: Cook Islands* in 2006, which included a marked and intentional increase in the number of contestants of color. Some might say that *Survivor* has redeemed itself by diversifying its cast in the seasons since *Cook Islands*. However, viewers should note that *Survivor: Cook Islands* was not only the first season to include a marked increase in the number of people of color participating in the show, it was also the first to separate the contestants into “tribes” by race. It’s almost as if the show’s producers were willing to include several different racial groups, but then felt compelled to separate them, one sign among many that segregation persists not only in “reality,” but in our creation of televised “reality.

According to bbcnews.com, creator Mark Burnett responded to criticism of the racially segregated tribes of *Survivor: Cook Islands* by making the claim that, “By putting people in tribes, they clearly have to get rid of people of their own ethnicity...So it's not racial at all” (“US TV Show”). Burnett’s specious argument turns on the idea that people of one race must vote off people of another race in order for *Survivor* to be “racial” in any way. However, this overlooks several aspects of *Survivor: Cook Island*’s racially segregated cast. The first is the fact that if contestants were chosen in part because of

their race, the producers were engaged in racial thinking since the season's inception. Only in a culture enmeshed in both "color-blindness" and "multiculturalism" could a television producer deliberately choose and recruit a racially diverse cast and then facilely insist that the same show was not "racial" in any way. Speaking on the effects of multiculturalism and color-blindness together, Patricia J. Williams writes, "...it is a dangerous if comprehensible temptation to imagine inclusiveness by imagining away any obstacles. It is in this way that the moral high ground of good intentions knows its limits. We must be careful not to allow our intentions to verge into outright projection by substituting a fantasy of global seamlessness that is blinding rather than just color-blind" (*Seeing* 5). Burnett's attempt to be "color-blind" thus resulted in his inability to see the ways in which *Survivor* had been and always would be "racial" whether Americans of color made up the entire cast or only a small percentage.

Furthermore, the racial "tribes" compete against each other in early challenges, which opens up the possibility that viewers would see one group's triumph as verification of their racial superiority. More important, as bell hooks notes, is the fact that, "White and black people learning lessons from mass media about racial bonding are taught that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges" (*Killing Rage* 113). The *Survivor* producers expressed a desire for diversity and a desire to avoid a ratings drop when they recruited people of color, but when they immediately separated the races, they sent the message that living on a racially diverse island is acceptable as long as the different racial groups do not eat, play, or sleep together. Finally, the contestants saw the season as "racial," even if the producers did not.

For example, Yul Kwon, a Korean American and the future winner, expresses his fears that the *Cook Islands* contestants will be made into caricatures and that they'll be stereotyped. Several members of Hiki, the black "tribe," note from day one that they have the potential to break or confirm stereotypes and they feel that they are being made to represent their race. Nate Gonzalez, a member of the African American tribe, even notes that he is "not the only token brother for once" (*Survivor: Cook Islands*). This is certainly a reference to *Survivor*'s historically white contestant pool, not to mention the difficulties faced by *Survivor*'s "token" African Americans in past seasons.

For example, on *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, Nick Brown, a black man, is barely on camera until the other contestants cast him as the "lazy" black man. Sekou Bunch of *Cook Islands* and Osten Taylor of *Pearl Islands* (the first player to ever voluntarily quit the game) are also portrayed as lazy black men. James Clement of *Survivor: China*, on the other hand, becomes the centerpiece of his tribe's physical strategy because he is the strongest of the tribe, a portrayal that risks confirming white stereotypes about the superiority of African American athletes. In addition to focusing on black bodies in a culture that typically emphasizes that the intellect is the "superior" side of a body/mind binary, the stereotype of black athletic superiority has recently been used to imply that whites are at a disadvantage in the US. Kyle Kusz writes:

This narrative of Black dominance and White male disadvantage in sport enables the U.S. racial hierarchy to be turned on its head so that White males can be positioned as a seemingly legitimate unprivileged subject. But by inverting the social order, this story of White male disadvantage represents an attempt to forget or render inconsequential the long histories

of racial inequalities, institutional racism, and White privilege that have existed in the past and that still persist in the present, both within and without sport. (408)

Thus, when black *Survivor* contestants help their teams win physical challenges, whites' access to myths about black athletic superiority may encourage them to read a black contestant's triumph as both "natural" and as evidence that whites are at a disadvantage in *Survivor* and, by extension, American culture as a whole.

Another possible reading of black athleticism on *Survivor* is that those who feel the show accurately conveys "reality" are in danger of applying the lessons they learn in *Survivor* to other cultural myths, like that of the "unfair advantage" granted to African Americans by affirmative action. Although this possibility may seem like it assumes too much of *Survivor*'s power, fans have compared *Survivor* to their workplaces and offices since the first season. Jennifer Thackaberry argues, "In other words, in addition to the workplace being used as a metaphor to understand this new kind of reality show, *Survivor* was now being used as a metaphor to understand work itself" (158). As such, fans can compare the advance of black *Survivor* contestants to the "unfair" advantage granted to African Americans by affirmative action. These viewers, drawing comparisons between the work world and the world of *Survivor*, may also conclude that whites are at a disadvantage in both, a perspective that neglects the history of structural racism and white privilege in the US.

African American women in *Survivor* must also deal with racist portrayals. For example, in *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, footage of an argument between Alicia Calaway and other contestants is edited down to Calaway's "finger wave," a gesture that

is then shown repeatedly, including twice in the last two episodes alone. Calaway herself claims that the finger wave “was the one really negative thing that happened to me there,” and, “I am famous for that finger wave” (*Survivor: The Australian Outback*). Journalist Teresa Wilts, in a line that summarizes Calaway’s portrayal, notes, “If you’ve ever seen a reality TV show, chances are you’ve seen her: a perpetually perturbed, tooth-sucking, eye-rolling, finger-wagging harpy, creating confrontations in her wake and perceiving racial slights from the flimsiest of provocations ...She’s the Sista With an Attitude” (qtd. in Wright 113). Alicia Calaway is one of the few strong black women who appear on *Survivor* and although it is possible to read strong black women as positive role models, like most stereotypical portrayals, Calaway’s also has negative possibilities. Specifically, Patricia Hill Collins notes that:

...the image of the Black matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and White women of what can go wrong if White patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized — they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men’s understandings of Black masculinity. Many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because we are too assertive. (77).

Such portrayals, especially when they are presented as “reality,” make it clear to black women (and specifically in comparison to white women) that being strong and assertive will lead only to negative consequences.

As demonstrated above, people of color on *Survivor* usually express their discomfort with their portrayals, as Alicia Calaway does, and this indicates that *Survivor* is “racial” whether the “tribes” are divided by race or not. Furthermore, almost all of the contestants on *Survivor: Cook Islands* disagree with Burnett’s claim that the season is “not racial.” The “Hiki” (African American) tribe in particular has multiple discussions about race. When they are shown having significant difficulties getting a canoe out into the water and keeping it upright, one of the contestants says, “We have an excuse. Our people had a really bad experience with boats about five hundred years ago” (*Survivor: Cook Islands*), a complex remark that forces viewers to acknowledge that African Americans were forced onto slave ships and taken against their will to the US. Amidst discussions about how people will view the African American tribe in particular, this remark also seems to speak specifically to those viewers who would see this struggle with the boat as an indication of black ineptitude.

Hoping to prevent that process, contestant Rebecca Borman voices her hopes that people will not take their tribe’s difficulties as indicators of black inferiority. She tells the camera, “Now, because it’s been divided by race, [giving my all] is not enough....we do, on some level, feel like we’re representing our race” (*Survivor: Cook Islands*). Rebecca also struggles to reassure her tribe members that, “If we don’t succeed in something, it has nothing to do with the color of our skin” and repeatedly mentions that race is less a determinant of success on *Survivor* than is the fact that “We’re all city kids,” a cogent analysis (*Survivor: Cook Islands*).

Almost every contestant of color in *Survivor: Cook Islands* says something about race and racial stereotypes or worries about how their tribe and/or racial group will be

viewed by people back home. On the other hand, white “castaways” don’t explicitly talk about race beyond the first episode. The most telling remark from the white “Raro” tribe is a toast, “To the whiteys!” (*Survivor: Cook Islands*), a comment that celebrates the contestants’ enforced segregation in a way that reveals the stark contrast between how whites and contestants of color viewed the formation of the “tribes.” The only white contestant to say more about the division of the contestants into racial groups is Jessica Smith, who admits, “I’ve never been separated because of my skin color before and I don’t really like it,” but never analyzes why she feels this way on camera (*Survivor: Cook Islands*). This is unfortunate because her comment reveals several of the most common tropes of whiteness. For example, Smith’s comment supports the idea that, “Whiteness is a transparent quality when whites interact with whites in the absence of people of color. Whiteness attains opacity, becomes apparent to the white mind, only in relation to, and contrast with, the ‘color’ of nonwhites” (Flagg 220). In other words, whiteness is normalized and all but invisible in American culture; Smith’s comments reveal her discomfort when her own whiteness is suddenly made visible because of its contrast to members of the other “tribes.”

This so-called “new society” of *Survivor* thus mirrors actual racial relations and attitudes in the US. For example, white contestants don’t appear to agree that dividing the tribes by race has any implications for how contestants of color will be viewed. In fact, they seem to have very little to say about segregation at all, with the possible exception of the quote from Jessica Smith above. However, even Smith’s comment about being separated because of her race doesn’t seem to extend to an understanding of the de-facto racial-economic segregation still in place in the US or how her fellow

Survivor contestants might feel about being segregated yet again. However, whites' apparent blindness to the effects or presence of segregation is not unusual. As Tim Wise points out, "Despite the fact that half of all blacks say they have experienced discrimination in the past thirty days, whites persist in believing that we know their realities better than they do, and that black complaints of racism are the rantings of oversensitive racial hypochondriacs" ("See No Evil").

Wise's quote is further supported by the structure of an episode later in the *Survivor: Cook Islands* season. In an episode entitled, "A Closer Look," the editors splice together various deleted scenes from each of the tribes. Most of the scenes from the African American, Asian, and Hispanic tribes are discussions about *Survivor* and race (some of which are mentioned above). Meanwhile, the white tribe's deleted scene is one where two members get stuck out on a sandbar during a storm and are forced to abandon their boat and swim back to camp. When the tribes' scenes are compared, something that is supported by the juxtaposition of the scenes, it becomes clear that while the other tribes are worrying about racial dynamics and how they will be seen by *Survivor* viewers back home, the white tribe is in "real" danger out on the sandbar.

The episode sets up a contrast whereby the white tribe must deal with "real" danger, while the tribes composed of people of color, comparatively, seem to be worrying about "secondary" or "imagined" threats (i.e. racism). Structurally, this episode serves as yet another example of how, "Dismissing hate crimes, police brutality, racial profiling, continued inequality, and individual prejudice, Whites accuse people of color of using race as a 'crutch,' of being overly sensitive when it comes to racism, and of deploying the race card" (Leonard 288). By editing together an episode in which the white contestants

face “real” danger²¹ while the contestants of color “only” or “merely” discuss racism, Burnett and his editors set up a hierarchy in which whites’ concerns are valid and “real” while those of people of color are not.

Naturalizing “The Survival of the Fittest”

The real/contrived binary always in flux in *Survivor* also plays a role in the metaphors viewers and fans use to convey how they see and think about *Survivor*. Prior to this section, this chapter includes an analysis of the ways in which conceptions of *Survivor* as real and/or contrived influence the conclusions viewers draw about the show. Furthermore, both sides of this false binary and the way in which tribal peoples and contestants are portrayed tend to naturalize systems of domination, including Orientalism, sexism, and racism. However, at its most basic level, the game of *Survivor* is a quest for capital. The contestants engage in multiple “challenges” that determine which resources a group will have access to as well as how many workers they will be allowed to keep. In essence, *Survivor* is a game in which contestants compete for resources, whether those resources are fishing hooks, Hawaiian slings, blankets, tarps, food, letters from home, fellow contestants, or the grand prize of one million dollars. Both the aforementioned tendency to compare *Survivor* to American work places and the fact that *Survivor* is essentially a struggle for resources work to normalize capitalism, a system of class domination. However, this is not to preclude the possibility of resistant readings on the part of contestants and viewers. Indeed, with regard to American myths about capitalism, competition, and the survival of the fittest, contestants and viewers negotiate an uneasy truce between dominant ideas of what it takes to “win” the game, and their own priorities and self-definitions.

As noted above, the primary analogy defining *Survivor* on fan sites and around the water cooler is that of the American work place. In such a paradigm, the contestants become workers who struggle against one another, forming and breaking alliances in order to get close to the “top,” signified here by the one million dollar prize. In addition, viewers who subscribe to social Darwinism then read any treachery that takes place on *Survivor* as the behavior necessary for both contestants and workers to reach the top. For such viewers, *Survivor* was created in order to eliminate everything but the profit motive; as such, acting in pursuit of profit is read as smart and rational, no matter what behavior it entails. *Survivor*, then, becomes the ultimate modern experiment in the survival of the fittest and evidence of the rationality of humans given a singular focus.

As an analogy for the American work place, *Survivor* also naturalizes capitalism. *Survivor*'s portrayal of pre-capitalist “nature” and its inscription of a capitalist system onto that natural habitat makes it seem as though capitalism, like nature, is timeless; it thus becomes “natural” for people/contestants to fight over resources. In other words, “the ready interpretation of this juxtaposition of office politics with jungle survival skills is that it simply and straightforwardly naturalizes the condition of contemporary capitalism...The naturalization of the corporate jungle underwrites the claim that capitalism is merely an expression of human ‘nature,’ locked into the competitive, selfish, Darwinian struggle for survival” (Andrejevic 203). Thus, *Survivor* displays the intersecting structures and rhetorics of capitalism, “human nature,” and survival of the fittest in a way that naturalizes all of them.

However, pointing out how uncommon this interpretation is among viewers, Andrejevic writes:

Rather, what *Survivor* enacts for viewers is the specific character of an unnatural, contrived system wherein survival and cooperation have all been subordinated to the profit motive: the \$1 million prize awaiting the victor. The impetus to compete, to participate in instrumental manipulation and deceit in the service of personal gain is read not as the dirty truth of human nature but as a result of the contrived conditions to which the cast members are subjected. (209)

In other words, the rhetoric of “survival” conflicts with the contrivance of the game (physical challenges, puzzles, and quizzes) to highlight the fact that *Survivor* contestants do not participate in the “survival of the fittest” paradigm in its purest form so much as an unadulterated quest for profit. This interpretation is key because it points to the ways in which viewers distinguish between capitalism and social Darwinism and therefore admit that capitalism need not be constantly beholden to profits at the expense of everyone but the very rich. This reading suggests that capitalism’s tendency to destroy the poor can be mitigated by human intervention and that there is no need for the cruelty of social Darwinism because we can subordinate the need for money to concerns like honor, love, and human decency.

Several contestants throughout the history of *Survivor* have read the show as precisely this conflict between their desires to act and to be portrayed as honest, good people (in short, to maintain the integrity of their self-conceptions) and the desire to engage in the less-than-honorable activities that get them closer to the one million dollar prize. These desires constantly conflict, but in two cases in particular contestants made decisions that demonstrated this conflict in particularly telling ways.

Both Colby Donaldson of *Survivor: The Australian Outback* and Lillian Morris of *Survivor: Pearl Islands* face the same decision as they approach the final episodes of their respective seasons. Each wins the final immunity challenge of his or her season and can therefore choose who will accompany him or her to the final episode. During the final episode, former “tribe” members vote between the two (sometimes three) remaining contestants and, with their votes, decide who wins *Survivor* and the grand prize. Both Donaldson and Morris could choose to take either very unpopular contestants (i.e. villains) or contestants who were portrayed as equally “deserving” of the grand prize to the final “tribal council.” Both “juries” have mixed opinions regarding Donaldson and Morris themselves. The logical choice for both Donaldson and Morris is to choose the contestant whom the “jury” dislikes most, the “villains” of their respective seasons.

Instead, struggling between the desire to be millionaires and the desire to maintain their personal dignity, integrity, and self-respect, both Morris and Donaldson choose the contestant who has the best chance of beating them. As a result, both Morris and Donaldson lose and the reunion episodes reveal that they would have been millionaires if they had chosen “villains” to accompany them to the final episode.

The temptation to label Donaldson and Morris as irrational is significant, especially given the supposed rationality of capitalism and *Survivor* as systems that encourage people to seek profit at the expense of everything else. Why, at the end of the game, with the million-dollar prize within reach, did Morris and Donaldson suddenly decide that their personal honor and integrity, as well as the desire to reward others who “deserve” success, mattered more than their financial well being? As Ed Wingenbach points out, “The *Survivor* experiment shows that these less predictable and often non-

rational motives dictate human behavior even under conditions ideally constructed to produce rational actions” (141). *Survivor*, a competition “ideally constructed to produce rational actions” (i.e. the million dollar reward) nevertheless repeatedly fails to do so.

However, the temptation to read the honest and frequently honorable contestants on *Survivor* as irrational for refusing to adopt strategies that would lead to personal gain is a reading that implies that those who are not completely devoted to the pursuit of capital above all else are fools. Such a reading is unfair because it denies that individual contestants of *Survivor* frame, read, and act on the show as they see fit; rather than dupes, these contestants can be read as people who refuse the profit-only logic of capitalism in favor of their own paradigms. John Fiske writes, “The power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities that *differ* from those proposed by the structures of domination is crucial, and the area within which it is exercised is that of representation” (511). All of the contestants seem keenly aware of how they are or might be represented in the show and they want those representations to be as close to conveying their “true” selves as possible; hence, they base many of their decisions on how they see themselves as well as how they want others to see them.

For example, Colby Donaldson chooses to bring Tina Wesson with him to the final because Keith, the other contestant, doesn’t “deserve a final two spot” (*Survivor: The Australian Outback*). Similarly, Lillian Morris refuses to take the villainous Jon with her because she can’t imagine giving him \$100,000, the second place prize. These justifications are not unusual. Conversations about who “deserves” to remain until the end and who “deserves” the grand prize are popular in every season of *Survivor* because the contestants understand that the jury will be considering these aspects when they make

their decision. Although the contestants frequently talk about the most strategic contestant “deserving” to go to the final tribal council, the strategic player often loses his or her spot to someone the other contestants perceive as honest, hardworking, and, on occasion, from a lower socio-economic background. Thus, rather than base their decisions entirely on the profit motive, *Survivor* contestants often decide that the one who “deserves” the grand prize is honest and hardworking even if that decision comes into direct conflict with the profit motive.

Such decisions appear to play into the Horatio Alger myth. The contestants seem to decide that hardworking contestants deserve to get ahead. This is the epitome of the bootstraps myth, but these are bootstraps with a difference; at great personal sacrifice, contestants like Donaldson and Morris ultimately decide that the two best contestants should go to the final tribal council (as opposed to themselves and a “villain” against whom they would almost certainly win). In other words, they subordinate the profit motive to the rhetoric of the “hardworking” American and thus talk back to and disconnect two aspects of capitalism that have historically been fused together. Put yet another way, they recognize that there is a contradiction in capitalism which we are all told is “natural.” They can choose to win the money or they can decide to reward the hard worker by bringing him/her to the final episode. The fact that a supposedly pure capitalistic system has pushed them to decide between two options which are portrayed as if they are never in conflict (i.e. the hardest worker and the winner are supposed to be one and the same), illustrates to them and to viewers the cracks and fissures in American capitalism.

Regarding television, Fiske writes, “Its narrative structure and hierarchization of discourses may attempt to produce a resolution in favor of the dominant, but various moments of reading can reveal this resolution to be much more fragile than traditional textual analysis would suppose it to be” (515). Although the tribal councils above both bring capitalism’s warring rhetorics together in the end by giving the grand prize to the hard worker, for a short moment in each of these seasons, the contestants (and those who read them critically) reveal rifts and contradictions in capitalistic systems.

For viewers, these moments are fleeting and may not shed light on the conflicts inherent in American capitalism indicated above. Instead, viewers may simply wonder why Morris and Donaldson behave so irrationally just when they are so close to victory and then dismiss those contestants as ignorant, naive, or mad from malnutrition. However, these moments, fleeting as they may be, offer up thousands of possible interpretations, some of which work to dismantle hegemonic values and systems of domination. As Lawrence Grossberg insists:

Cultural studies does assume that people live their subordination actively; that means, in one sense, that they are often complicit in their own subordination, that they accede to it.... Be that as it may, cultural studies believes that if one is to challenge the existing structures of power, then one has to understand how that complicity, that participation in power, is constructed and lived, and that means not only looking at what people gain from such practices, but also at the possibilities for rearticulating such practices to escape, resist, or even oppose particular structures of power. (617)

Whether *Survivor* is real or contrived, a perfect capitalist system or a deeply flawed one, moments with the potential to question and dismantle structures of power adhere to it. These moments are themselves deeply flawed and contradictory, but they remain nonetheless.

The obsession with “reality” that marks *Survivor* influences every aspect of the show, from the conclusions viewers draw about the tribal peoples and Americans of color portrayed on the show to how some of them see *Survivor* as an extended metaphor for their own workplaces. Besides the othering of indigenous people undertaken by the show, the stereotypical racist portrayals of men and women of color, and the normalization of capitalism, the debated “reality” of *Survivor* enables fans to either dismiss its importance as a cultural text with potential real-world effects, accept it at face value, or, often, a mixture of the two. The danger lies in the possibility that fans strategically choose between the idea that *Survivor* is real and the idea that it is contrived depending on which interpretation supports their own positions in matrices of power and domination. Therein, too, lies the possibility that viewers will see through *Survivor*’s portrayals and normalization processes to the contradictions and injustices inherent in systems of power. *Survivor* works to normalize and make invisible white, masculine, and American identities in such a way that viewers on both sides of the fragile and manufactured reality/contrivance binary find themselves stuck between accepting the hegemonic structures *Survivor* exposes by hiding them and those it hides by placing them in plain sight.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

All of the figures and events analyzed in this dissertation continue to be the basis of news stories, books, websites, criticism, and retellings. Eminem's forthcoming album, *Relapse* will doubtless spur numerous, wide-ranging responses that will once more embroil hip-hop in debates about authenticity, whiteness, blackness, violence, and masculinity. Rumors about upcoming Superman films ensure Superman's presence on the popular culture stage. The end of *Survivor* may prompt critics to reflect on its importance as a popular culture text and to wonder how "reality tv" can be simultaneously real and contrived and how television can affect how we view work, tribal peoples, tourism, travel, and ourselves. As the number of women playing poker increases, even televised poker may change, adjusting to its increased diversity by demonstrating yet again the flexibility of systems of power and domination.

Indeed, changes in the US itself as the Obama administration takes power are sure to affect our popular culture texts and the way we read and analyze them. Although many critics, including Tim Wise, urge us to see the election of President Obama as a positive step, the conflicting and often contradictory impulses within popular culture require constant vigilance. My hope is that this dissertation ferrets out and analyzes those contradictions in useful and interesting ways, but I have no doubt that the work done here is in some ways incomplete. I have explored and analyzed the ways in which these very different pop culture phenomena interest me, but my interests are by no means exhaustive.

For example, poker tables are rich sociological environs. So far, however, very few people have studied women who play poker either quantitatively or qualitatively. The western tropes that define poker surely affect and inscribe men and women in different ways, ways that mirror or are in conversation with other social environments in the contemporary US. Furthermore, how gay men and women are treated and portrayed on televised poker is worthy of study on its own. How do gay men and women talk back to their portrayals in such conservative environs?

It will also be interesting to see which paths Eminem takes in his upcoming album. Will he embrace the conflicts he experiences as he did in *The Eminem Show*, or will he continue to produce the kinds of juvenile scatology that characterized *Encore*? Eminem has the power of the press and, as a white man, we can almost guarantee that he will be heard. What will he chose to say next and will it push the race/authenticity analyses peeking out of his first three albums into something more explicit, something that will urge his listeners to do more than just listen?

Although *Survivor* continues to push envelopes and buttons, rumors that Jeff Probst may be leaving are enough to make fans wonder if the show will continue. When the opus that is *Survivor* is complete, will my analyses be born out? What do the most recent seasons say about race and gender? How are gay men and lesbians portrayed on the show as a whole? I touch on some of the ways our culture has changed because of *Survivor*, but as the use of surveillance extends beyond the UK and into the US, how will we view the “reality shows” now that we’re all taking part in surveillance?

At this point I think it is important to talk about why I chose the topics for this dissertation. In some ways, the poker chapter is an exception to the general rule. I chose

to write about poker because I had personally experienced or seen firsthand the dominance of white heteromascularity in televised poker. The other chapters essentially came from a deep curiosity about white men, especially with regards to how they defend their privileges not only at my expense, but at their own.

The Eminem chapter was an attempt to see how someone could act on various statuses simultaneously and come out the other end a whole person. What puzzled me about Eminem initially is that he *exists* at all and that he exists as a whole person in a postmodern, fragmented age. Furthermore, despite my attempts to figure him out, he resists simplification in every possible way. I'm sure some critics think they know who Eminem is and what he means to our culture. However, I've read their work, I've studied the words to all of Eminem's songs in detail, and for much of the past 6 years, I've kept up with him when he appears in the news and I still have not encountered anyone who really has Eminem figured out. Most critics simplify him by overlooking big pieces of his oeuvre (whole songs, appearances, etc.), something I tried to avoid.

Eminem may not have it all figured out either, but he's trying. Joseph Piko Ewoodzie, writing about Eminem, quotes Henry Giroux at length in a passage that bears repeating. According to Giroux, hip-hop is:

The only popular culture that takes seriously the relationship between race and democracy in America. This music has had a grip on white kids for fifteen to twenty years, and everybody calls it pathology and that's that. Are all these white kids idiots who are being duped and manipulated by the record? Who is cynical and arrogant and detached enough to believe that? Sure, some kids are just latching onto the moronic gangsta elements,

but the vast majority are caught in some middle space where they're trying to figure themselves out. (qtd in Ewoodzie 23)

Like Giroux, I find it difficult to believe that everyone who listens to Eminem (or that all whites who listen to hip-hop) are simply or only engaging in the commodified blackness they see in much of gangsta rap. I do not believe that devotees of rap, black or white, live on the surface of the music they love nor do I think they limit their purchases to gangsta rap. Rap is much too self-referential for this to be possible for those who wish to understand what they're listening to. And when you're dealing with a form that is quintessentially *literary*, skipping over the surface of the words will yield a shallow understanding of both the song itself and the genre as a whole. It's possible that some rap fans do this, but it is unlikely that all of them have only the simplest or shallowest understanding of the genre. There is certainly space in Eminem's lyrics to posit more or less sophisticated readings; surely there is also space in his lyrics for more and less sophisticated readers and fans of hip-hop.

However, much of the scholarship I've seen has a hopelessly pessimistic tone to it. Perhaps it is a symptom of the George W. Bush years that most of what I read about Eminem basically says, "I know what you think this text says, but ultimately, it's regressive." I find it tempting to mimic these statements because assuming the worst means that no one can tell you you're naive or that you haven't looked at the text closely enough — scholars seem much more likely to accept a dire prognosis than a hopeful one.

This pessimistic philosophical stance, defended by academics in cultural studies and in critical race theory especially, is flawed. In "The Popular Economy," John Fiske mentions a study in which Australian Aboriginals read *Rambo* in ways that made sense to

them and which eased their pain or could be turned into usefully optimistic metaphors for surviving and fighting oppression despite the text's American context and seemingly limited number of interpretations (510). I find hope in studies like this one and I doubt that this is anomalous. I explored all of the complexities surrounding Eminem because I wanted, if possible, to turn modern scholarship about Eminem into something that included rather than precluded the possibilities of his complex positionality. Although hip-hop academics seem to allow for these possibilities in theory, very few of the studies of Eminem in particular gave any credence to the idea that people who listen to hip-hop have their own ways of reading the texts, ways that may not be only or even predominantly dominant or regressive.

The Superman chapter started with fandom and evolved as I contemplated the many ways the Superman logo is used. A recent experience explains best why Superman, possibly the flattest, most predictable superhero ever created deserves both my attention and the attention of pop culture critics. Sitting in a movie theater one day with some friends, my husband told me that he'd seen an interesting bit of trivia on the Internet Movie Database about Superman and wondered if I knew anything about it. The trivia question was, "What is Superman's favorite movie?" I thought about it for about 30 seconds and then answered, "To Kill a Mockingbird." Both my husband and one of my friends stared at me, gaping, and asked how I'd known. I told them that, for me, it was simple: even Superman needs a hero. I immediately thought of the character in all of American literature and film with the most integrity — Atticus Finch. Finch would be Superman's hero because Superman is the epitome of integrity.

As I thought about integrity and my work on Superman over the next few days, it occurred to me that Superman has integrity because he does the right thing even when no one is watching. More than that, he does “the right thing” even though he has unlimited power. Of course, “the right thing” in Superman’s case is often whatever solves the most immediate problem and overlooks core, systemic issues like racism, sexism, class, and the already overwhelming international influence of the US. However, there is something compelling about even superficial action; how many of us can say we help others so quickly and seemingly without considering the cost to ourselves? Furthermore, we’re often told that absolute power corrupts, but Superman belies that cliché. He has ultimate power *and* the integrity of Atticus Finch. Is it any wonder that someone who studies power, racism, sexism, dominance, poverty, and American systems of domination finds a hero in Superman? In a cynical age, absolute power incorruptible is indeed a marvel.

Also speaking back to contemporary cynicism are the prevailing myths at the poker tables: that “anyone can make it” and that the game of poker treats everyone equally. But the day I looked at my first hole cards in a game of Hold ‘Em, I learned that poker is actually an elite space and that I did not belong. The first time I played poker, I heard pocket queens referred to as “four tits,” a term that clearly reduces women (even the mighty queens) to their body parts. As I began to play poker online and watch it on television, my initial impressions were reinforced, especially when I heard Phil Ivey referred to as the “Tiger Woods of Poker” and noticed that I rarely saw women playing poker online or on television. When I did, they were the same women over and over again.

I had trouble studying dominant cultures like the white heteromascularity of poker because, as a woman, I was perceived as attempting to invade a special, masculine space to which I had no “right” and in which I did not belong. Almost every male poker player I talked to regarding the masculinity of poker was initially surprised and then quickly became defensive. Players I talked to defended the language of poker, the way it is portrayed on television, and even the commercials that air on ESPN during the World Series of Poker. I was almost always told that I should “relax,” that I was “making a big deal of nothing,” that I should “laugh it off,” or that I could just stop playing if I didn’t like what I saw. My concerns about how African Americans like Phil Ivey are portrayed on television were also dismissed as meaningless. One player/reader of an early draft remarked that he had never heard one of the poker terms I had listed; the implication was that I should delete the term from my list because I couldn’t possibly know more about poker than he did. Obviously, I found these responses offensive. The more closely I looked at televised poker, the more I was drawn to write about it.

In addition, many online poker players are explicitly violent to anyone with a screen name that sets him or her apart from the white, heteromascularity norm. When I encountered players who referred to being “taken” for all their money as being “raped,” I mentioned my concerns for this trivializing of violent, sexual crimes to some of the players I knew. They told me that it didn’t mean anything, that it was just rhetoric, and that I’d be better off using my gender (both online and at live tables) to any advantage I could find. At that time and even now, several years after I began this project, I’ve never seen a scholarly response to the fact that poker is a space where sexism, violence, and racism are part of the language and are widely accepted. Because poker is mostly a game

of odds and “reads,” many academics may not see or may simply dismiss any role it plays in reinforcing hegemonic identity positions.

Although I know that there are distinct and important differences between masculinist and racist structures of power, when I first read Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik’s point that:

The demand for proof is an imperative that always originates in spaces that are specific to privilege: spaces that deny and/or contest the very reality of racism and oppression. We can no longer afford to focus our efforts on proving the existence and scope of racism. Intrinsic to such strategies is an implicit assertion that our work and our pain can only be validated if they are accepted as real by those with privilege, (8)

I couldn’t help but compare it to how I feel pressured as a teacher, a writer, and a citizen to prove that systemic classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism exist. The power of what are mostly inaccurate representations is so significant that it blinds people to the realities of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and the systems that uphold privilege. One female CEO? Sexism must be dead. All those rich rappers and professional athletes? Racism must be dead. All those rich people on TV? Capitalism must be working because everyone is rich!

Like Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik, I am tired of proving that these very powerful systems still exist and affect people on a daily basis. At the same time, I recognize that even though I might be oppressed in some ways by the violent misogyny of the poker tables, my audience is not and does not want to acknowledge this fact. Therefore, proving that poker is violent, sexist, and racist is the first step to

convincing people that even if we all start with the same number of chips, we don't all fight in the same ways to win them. Some people use not only the aggression that is expected of poker players, but also the right to violence conferred by hegemonic conceptions of white heteromascularity. This tilts the "playing field" in their direction. I acknowledge that in some cases, I can use my gender to my advantage at the poker tables. But I resent having to compensate for the violence at the table with a stereotypical expression of the very reason why I'm the target of said violence. This seems like a pointless, vicious cycle. Furthermore, I don't want to arm a misogynist with the argument that I won because of some "feminine wiles" I supposedly have when I, like the white men at the table, want to be praised for my wits, not my opponent's stupidity or his libido.

In many ways, the *Survivor* chapter came from the same kind of impulse as the Eminem chapter. Bombarded with "savvy" viewers' readings of reality TV as something aimed at the "lowest common denominator," I wanted to prove how complicated and confusing the show became when viewed through the terms of the reality/contrived binary. In fact, my resistance to seeing fans as dupes, a trend that began many years ago with Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, is the current that runs through all of these chapters. Many academics give too much power to cultural apparatuses by not acknowledging the power of the readers/viewers to read texts as they choose.

Furthermore, anticipating the argument that these readers are simply "misreading," I am invested in proving that these figures may be more complex than even the "savvy" viewers can see. In that complexity there are spaces for reading the texts in

ways that some would believe are “against the grain.” Normally a realist, I feel compelled to side with those who can find liberatory moments in seemingly regressive texts. This is not to say that readers should see a text however they wish, regardless of the evidence. Instead, I highlight complexity and find spaces for liberation because of a fundamental belief that everything is more complex than it appears and that every reader is more complex than she or he appears. There are so many possibilities; to close off any of them seems to me a disservice to both the readers and the texts.

What these chapters have in common is a careful attention to detail and a resistance to readings that simplify these phenomena. They also have in common an attention to the changing dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality in this country. In addition, in the end, they all had more to do with white heteromascularity than I initially anticipated. In many ways, this dissertation was an attempt to understand why white men do, say, and feel as they do and why people in general act against some of their interests much of the time. How do people choose which interests to follow at which moments when their identities place them in complex places on the web of dominance and subordination?

Chief among those who prompt me to ask this question are the men in my life, who often seem incomplete and wounded. The struggles the men in my life face when it comes to emotional expression and self-awareness have convinced me that privilege and subordination deform us all. Some of these men, like my father, seem to act without knowing why they do what they do and seemingly without thinking about the consequences of their actions. Others vote against their economic interests because

they're so attached to racial and gendered privileges that they cannot see how these structures harm them.

The masculinity crisis of the eighties and nineties taught many of us that men suffer from hegemonic conceptions of who they should be and how they should act. As Traister points out, the masculinity crisis also put the focus back on white men in a way that erased women, yet again, from fields of study. However, when the tortured white men I know express their pain, they tend to do it by taking it out on the women, people of color, immigrants, and homosexuals around them because the same systems that hurt them as individuals tell them that women, people of color, immigrants, and homosexuals are to blame for their pain. Thus, although I think that the focus should always be on women, people of color, and other oppressed peoples, struggles with dominance on multiple levels will ultimately be more successful. Rather than focusing on oppression alone, this dissertation makes the claim that systems of oppression and privilege are connected, syncretic, inseparable, and simultaneous. The connections between such systems necessitate an approach to resistance that works at exposing those connections and proving, yet again, that none of us are free until all of us are free.

¹ The multicultural nature of hip-hop is an ongoing debate undertaken by Robin D.G. Kelly, Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, Herman Gray, Bakari Kitwana, Mark Anthony Neal, and countless other theorists and hip-hop practitioners. The debate centers on whether hip-hop is a black art form or whether anyone is welcome to practice it, regardless of race. However, as the machinery of multimedia capitalist conglomerates ensures hip-hop's worldwide exposure (and practice), the debate about who can practice hip-hop becomes increasingly moot; whether it may or may not be practiced by certain groups of people doesn't seem to matter to youth in Asia, for example, who would continue to rap, breakdance, and write regardless of ideological restrictions placed on hip-hop from its vanguards in the United States. The solution may be the tactic undertaken by Rose and Kitwana, among others. Recognizing the black origins of hip-hop is increasingly important because hip-hop could become a vehicle of protest and self-expression for so many other youths. Furthermore, as Kitwana notes, "Finally on the list

of hip-hop truths to consider is the hard, cold fact that hip-hop has been so thoroughly associated with young Blacks and the urban ghetto that it is difficult (though not impossible) to divorce it from Black American youth. In today's age of visual images, racial dynamics have dramatically shifted from what they were in previous eras.

Eminem's most outspoken critics raise the alarm of culture banditry, but the possibilities of hip-hop ever duplicating the path taken by rock and roll, or even jazz and blues, must be weighted against hip-hop's visual Black stamp" (*Why White Kids* 156).

² Hartigan notes that reconfigurations of the terms "hillbilly" and "white trash" by those who define themselves as such, though seemingly similar to the ways in which the word "nigger" has been transformed into and refashioned as "nigga" in black youth culture, lack the rhetorical power wielded by those who use "nigger" and "nigga." Addressing poor whites' use of the term "nigger," to mark other whites, Hartigan writes, "Marking whites as 'niggers' quite obviously transposes the stigmatizing and degrading connotations of this racial label – such uses do not dissolve them nor rid them of their histories. In this regard, there seems to be an implicit acknowledgment that 'race' will never be insignificant, that it will never go away, but that its key signifying components can be actively used to disrupt the conceptual segregation that supports beliefs in separate racial communities. Calling whites 'nigger' – especially in the presence of black friends and neighbors...made the term's degradations present and forceful, but importantly reused and reapplied in ways that tacitly assailed the term's polarizing inscriptions" (117).

³ Both the film *8 Mile* and hip-hop culture in general require rappers to claim "authenticity," but the meaning of hip-hop authenticity seems to shift depending on the critic and/or the neighborhood. Jim D'Entremont notes, "The rage and despair of the underclass is the lifeblood of rap" (22), thus implying that poverty is the main component of hip-hop authenticity. Meanwhile, Bakari Kitwana insists that, "it must be stated unequivocally that hip-hop is a subculture of Black American youth culture – period. Yes, it's become en vogue to imagine hip-hop as belonging to everyone. Sure, there have been other cultural influences. But influences are just that, influences," a line that states fairly clearly that one must be black to be an authentic part of the hip-hop world (*Why White Kids* 150). Edward Armstrong notes that rap "prioritizes artists' local allegiances and territorial identities" (336), thus adding a local/neighborhood component to rap authenticity. Robin D.G. Kelley adds a fourth component to hip-hop authenticity when he points out that rap battles are usually won by the rapper who can claim to be "the baddest motherfucker around" ("Kickin Reality" 121).

It should be noted that although 8 Mile Road is a meaningful boundary, it is not absolute. Countless people of multiple racial and cultural groups cross 8 Mile every day; presumably, cultures bleed across the boundary as well, resulting in a structure of feeling unique to the greater Detroit area. In other words, although 8 Mile Road is a meaningful boundary, black, white, and other races and cultures frequently cross that boundary, mixing and blending together. Thus, in some ways, insisting that Eminem and Rabbit claim *either* Detroit *or* Warren is an essentializing move. Although we must remain fully conscious of the differences between Detroit and its mostly white suburbs, this does not mean that we must see meaningful racial boundaries as absolute, as if whites never travel or reside south of 8 Mile and black people never travel or reside north of that border (or

as if only white and black people reside in Detroit). More important than asking whether or not Eminem and Rabbit can claim Detroit or practice a black art form, is exploring when, why, and how they do so. We must ask why, how, and when they assert their authenticity rather than asking if they may do so in the first place.

⁴ Indeed, the fact that Eminem has not given back to his old neighborhood is one of the many reasons that some critics refer to Eminem as the Elvis of hip-hop (See Rodman 106) or claim that he is just another white man in blackface (albeit without the burnt cork). The comparison between Eminem and his predecessors in blackface is an apt one; Eminem has profited immensely from hip-hop, which is predominantly a black art form, something he admits in “Without Me” when he says, “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” (The Eminem Show). Eminem also has much in common with those who practiced blackface; he is a poor white male who lived very near poor black neighborhoods, much like the Irish and Jewish practitioners of blackface in the 19th century (See Lott, Goldstein, Rogin). Unlike those whites who later attempted to appropriate jazz and bebop, and unlike Elvis Presley, Eminem has yet to deny the black roots of his chosen art form and even goes as far as thanking Dr. Dre for discovering him in several of his songs. That said, he never actually acknowledges the fact that hip-hop was created and built by African Americans. Furthermore, the racist raps uncovered by The Source seem to indicate that Eminem, at least at that point in time, shared racist beliefs with his predecessors in blackface and appropriation as well. Anti-racist work would help Eminem dispute these claims, but the association between Eminem and blackface is difficult to dismantle given the history of blackface and white appropriation in the U.S.

⁵ In addition, “the disciplinary power of the White oppressor is exercised through both his invisibility and the compulsory racialized visibility of its subjects” (Sefa Dei et al 92). When whiteness functions as the invisible norm, those who do not fit into the normalized groups must be made visible. Thus, James Baldwin writes, “The white man’s unadmitted – and apparently, to him, unspeakable – private fears and longing are projected onto the Negro” (96). As Baldwin implies here, whiteness is defined by its “Others,” by those whom whites exclude and whose disadvantages are the result of systemic racism and white privilege. Thus, if whiteness is defined by those populations it “others,” it must maintain its invisibility by making others exceedingly visible. White invisibility is predicated on the visibility of blackness. According to Herman Gray and Mark Anthony Neal, this visibility has come primarily in two forms: the poor “welfare queen” and the increasingly visible black middle- and upper-classes. As Herman Gray points out, the increased visibility of the black middle class made it “easy for conservatives to conclude from the presence of blacks in music videos, in sports, on television, and on the big screen that we have arrived at that idealized American landscape of racial equality and color-blindness” (Watching Race xviii).

⁶ This second suit is considerably lighter than the defeated evil Superman’s suit. This suggests a number of additional layers to this scene, the most important being that the white Superman has defeated the feminine, darker Superman by proving that he can recover from the beating meted out by the dark, evil Superman. Thus, the reading of this

scene as the defeat of dark (black/brown) masculinities at the hands of the “true” white masculinity is clearly a valid one.

⁷ Only recently has DC Comics attempted to establish a single timeline and a single universe in which its characters interact. Virtually since its inception, DC has had various writers and artists working on multiple titles, even for a single character. Thus, while one writer might assert that Superman didn’t discover his powers until he was an adult, others were writing Superboy comics. DC’s explanation for these discrepancies was that all of these characters existed, but they did so on “infinite” earths and universes. Thus, for example, Superman and Lois Lane were married in some of these universes, while in others there was a paucity or a dearth of kryptonite. Eventually, their attempt to combine all of these universes into a definitive timeline lead to the events of the “Infinite Crisis” story line and the deaths of several characters.

⁸ The acceptance of women in the workplace is of course also tied to whiteness, as the struggle for voting rights as well as the opportunity to work in the same jobs as men were controlled by white feminists, exemplified by Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir. But work alone is no guarantee of equality. Complete parity would require antiracist work, the restructuring of the education system, teacher training, and the enforcement of equal pay for equal work.

⁹ Spiegelman would disprove this impression with *Maus*.

¹⁰ Most of these terms refer to Texas Hold ‘Em, which is currently the most popular game in poker and the one they play on almost every televised poker program.

¹¹ When these traits are not immediately apparent, regardless of the setting, much time is spent trying to sort people into widely known or accepted sexes, sexualities, or races. This behavior is most helpfully outlined in Halberstam’s discussion of the bathroom dilemma (24-28).

¹² I do not mean to imply any disrespect towards housewives in this passage, but I wonder if this is one of those occasions where vestiges of white feminism have been appropriated by masculinist discourse in such a way that staying at home is now tied to laziness, laziness being one of the many stereotypes whites have attached to people of color. In other words, once white women won the right to work alongside white men, staying at home was considered lazy but, in the circuitous illogic of racism, only when those who stayed at home were women of color.

¹³ One of the exceptions in this case is Hillary Clinton. Stephen J. Ducat outlines the many ways in which the press mocked Hillary Clinton during the Clintons’ stay in the White House and takes special note of how pundits frequently alluded to her power by drawing cartoons which hinted at Hillary Clinton’s possession of the penis/phallus, especially when contrasted with her husband. Ducat writes, “In spite of her many efforts to retraditionalize her image as a woman, nearly all the rhetorical assaults against Ms. Clinton directly or indirectly concerned her failure to be a properly subordinate female” (138). Still, for the most part, these references are rare and women do not figure in anti-affirmative action rhetoric the way black men do. Other minoritized groups are also conspicuously absent from this rhetoric.

¹⁴ My intent here is not to conflate stereotypes of feminine and gay male behavior. Instead, I want to point out the connections between the two that make it easier for a

single instance of stereotyping to other both women and gay men in relation to white heteromascularity.

¹⁵ The only exception is “Tent” because all four of the men are crushed for their inability to pitch a tent (The alternate interpretations of the phrase “pitch a tent” make a few more interpretations of this commercial both possible and valid). This is one of those cases where the hybridity of hegemonic white heteromascularity becomes visible for just a moment. Although the “real man” of generations past may have sneered at modern man’s inability to pitch a tent, modern tents can be difficult to assemble and modern hegemonic masculinity is clearly capable of adapting to the fact that very few men live in areas that necessitate basic survival knowledge like building shelter.

¹⁶ Given the largely white male audience of televised poker and the fact that most major networks are also run by white men, there is little reason to include the incidents I am about to describe in the final, edited episodes. Not only might the networks then be held responsible for individual behaviors, but the inclusion of explicitly racist and misogynist comments (made by white men) on television might actually prompt some questioning by feminists and anti-racists of the kind of atmosphere casting its shadow over both live and online poker rooms nationwide.

¹⁷ This is not to say that people of color don’t make disparaging racist remarks towards other people of color or that men of color don’t voice misogynist thoughts.

¹⁸ I have entered these spaces, however. I have been the only woman at the poker table, and I have had to endure the sexist rants and searing looks of the men at the table, even when that table was my own. I mention this not to garner attention or sympathy for my experiences, but to add another layer of evidence (anecdotal though it may be) to the contentions that follow.

¹⁹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s anecdote about the sprinter (from *Why We Can’t Wait* qtd. in Campbell 227) comes to mind here, as does Baldwin’s (*The Fire Next Time*) and certain feminists’ contentions that black people and women know far more about the systems that oppress them than do those who benefit from those systems. Ultimately, though, my impulse is to reject the claim that the systems that oppress us also make us stronger; this is neither their goal nor their end result. To me, this is somewhat akin to claiming that those who hold your head under water are only helping you learn to hold your breath longer. No, they’re helping you drown.

²⁰ *Survivor*’s use of the term “tribes” to describe the American contestants performs a kind of rhetorical minstrelsy that Brenton Malin describes in regards to the film *Dances with Wolves*. Put into the other’s environment and referred to as “tribes,” *Survivor* contestants, “Like John Dunbar, . . . find themselves, at times, identifying with ‘the other.’” Allying themselves with the others against whom white abstraction has practiced its dominance, they distance themselves from whiteness, holding up its horrific past. At the same time, however, they also work to mend whiteness, to stitch back together some of its universal nonidentity” (Malin 100).

²¹ The “danger” noted here looks “real” for the reason that many of the events on *Survivor* look “real;” the camera is invisible. Because images are so persuasive, the *Survivor* viewer may be convinced that a contestant is actually walking through the forest alone even though the fact that we can see the contestant necessarily means that someone

with a camera is following her/him. The viewer is under the same illusion during the white tribe's sandbar scene.

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