

# Wife Murder as Child's Game

– *analytical reflections on Eminem's performative self-dramatization*

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Among the defining characteristics of the vocal art of American rap artist Eminem (born 1972)<sup>1</sup> is his ongoing preoccupation with autobiographical material and its performative dramatization. Dealing with a recording artist who directs himself as performer of his own lyrics in which he himself and his life story are usually the all-important subjects automatically brings the theme of self-representation to the fore. This theme is of course relevant to the understanding of any artist related to the originally African-American performance culture of hip hop. But in the case of Eminem several factors make the exploration of this theme especially relevant and indeed rather fascinating: Textually, autobiographical facts and references pertaining to both his private and public lives are constantly brought into play and mixed indiscriminately with purely fictitious ingredients in lyrics ranging from almost documentary realism inspired by so-called 'reality rap' to stylized tongue-in-cheek cartoon fiction. Sometimes stylistic extremes are even mixed within the same text displaying a constant interplay of various subject positions. This somewhat eclectic strategy spills over into the vocalization of the songs in the recording studio resulting in a rather complex and unpredictable game of self-dramatization.

The aim of this article is to explore and discuss this variety in Eminem's artistic constructions of performative self-dramatization by focusing on five thematically related songs written between 1997 and 2004, in all of which Eminem has cast himself as either father or husband: '97 Bonnie and Clyde', 'Kim', 'My dad's gone crazy', 'Hailie's song' and 'Mockingbird'. As I wish to concentrate primarily on the interplay between Eminem's lyrics and his vocal performances, leaving out 'additional' meaning produced by visual representations like music videos, concert performances and cover art, I have, with one exception, chosen to comment only on studio recordings of non-video songs.<sup>2</sup>

## PRESENTING SLIM SHADY, MARSHALL MATHERS AND/OR EMINEM

As mentioned above the broader cultural and aesthetic context for Eminem's vocal art and its performance conventions is the African-American rap performance culture adopted by the artist. Being a Caucasian rapper Eminem's relationship with

1 For a short introduction to Eminem, see Edward G. Armstrong, 'Eminem's Construction of Authenticity', *Popular Music and Society*, 27/3 (2004), 335. A short updated biography by Jason Ankeny and Bradley Torreano can be found at [www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:oadjvwzua9tk~T1](http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:oadjvwzua9tk~T1).

2 It should be noted that '97 Bonnie and Clyde' did inspire the cover art of *The Slim Shady LP* (Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records 490 287-2, 1999).

this originally predominantly African-American culture is complex, and racial debates alone have been a major issue in the critical reception of his work.<sup>3</sup> However, as an exploration of the cultural rootedness of Eminem's art *per se* is not a goal of this article, only a brief comment on the primary musico-cultural framework that 'grounds' his music is given here, first and foremost to provide a springboard for the analytical reflections that follows.<sup>4</sup>

The performance culture of rap is obviously rooted in the 'talking black' culture of African-American and African-Caribbean communities, in which according to sociolinguist Roger D. Abrahams as paraphrased by Simon Frith, 'there is not (as in European and European-American cultures) a clear distinction between "dramatic-type performance" and "other types of interactional behaviour". Rather, workaday talk and conversation are constantly framed as performance ... as the street itself becomes the site of a "constant self-dramatization"'.<sup>5</sup> Thus talk-as-performance is a cultural given and to the young African-American 'man-talk ... is part of the masculine self-image and is deeply involved in the proclamation of his style-centered "reputation". ... Performing by *styling* is thus one of the means of adapting oneself to the street world, of developing a public persona through which one can begin to establish and maintain one's *rep*'.<sup>6</sup> To the struggling rap artist this cultivation of a public persona through styling is in any case an essential ingredient when pursuing a career as a professional musician.

A key feature in Eminem's art is his ongoing stylistic juggling of no less than three explicit public personae, who manifest themselves both textually and vocally in his songs. The first persona, Slim Shady, was invented and developed in the summer of 1997 when the other members of D12, a collective of Detroit MCs<sup>7</sup> of which Eminem was and is the only white member, did the same. According to Anthony Bozza, MC Proof (born DeShaun Holton) had suggested that 'each rapper in the group create a dark-half alter ego to allow each of them to experiment with hardcore styles unlike their own'.<sup>8</sup> The Slim Shady persona, a purely fictitious cartoonish character not to be taken seriously, is an evil and totally amoral drug-addicted monster, the ultimate dark side, whose cocky and speeded rapping was instrumental in Eminem's breakthrough as a solo artist. On the intro of the early independent *The*

3 For an exploration of this theme, see Armstrong, 'Eminem's Construction', 338–43.

4 Not only further discussion of Eminem's appropriation of black musical culture is needed, but also of the influence on his work of 'his own' white cultural heritage and the culturo-aesthetic hybridization that results. In her contextualization of two of Eminem's 'murder ballads' Elizabeth L. Keathley more than hints at this unexplored issue; see Elizabeth L. Keathley, 'A Context for Eminem's "Murder Ballads"', *ECHO: a music-centered journal*, 4/2 (2002), paragraphs 3 ff. For information on the cultural context of rap music in general a good starting point is Tricia Rose's by now classic study *Black Noise – Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, 1994).

5 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites – On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 210, citing Roger D. Abrahams, *Talking Black* (Rowley, 1976).

6 Abrahams, *Talking Black*, 10 and 43.

7 MC (within hiphop culture originally an abbreviation for 'microphone coordinator') is a commonly used alternative term for rapper.

8 Anthony Bozza, *Whatever You Say I Am: The Life and Times of Eminem* (London, 2003), 28.

*Slim Shady EP* from late 1997 or early 1998,<sup>9</sup> Slim Shady appears as a ghostlike monster voice that returns from the beyond to haunt and taunt a frightened Eminem – a dark side that he cannot leave behind. In the song lyrics collection *Angry Blonde* (2000) Eminem himself suggests that this persona nonetheless became an almost therapeutic instrument:

Thing was, the more I started writing and the more I slipped into this Slim Shady character, the more it just started becoming me. My true feelings were coming out, and I just needed an outlet to dump them in. I needed some type of persona. I needed an excuse to let go of all this rage, this dark humor, the pain, and the happiness. Yet I wanted to tell you to take some mushrooms at the end and don't worry about it.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to Slim Shady, the Marshall Mathers persona, who shares the artist's given name, represents the private person 'behind the artist', a regular guy with plenty of personal and family issues trying to get to terms with his sudden fame, sometimes resigned and reflective, sometimes confused and angry. The final persona is the professional rapper Eminem (originally a pet name made up of his initials). He is a self-conscious, competitive and vengeful word equilibrist, always wrongfully attacked by incompetent and misunderstanding critics, politicians, parents, et cetera. Highlighting the complex interconnections between private and public, between fact and fiction, between star persona and song characters, all three personae are present on each of Eminem's first three major-label solo albums, appropriately named after them, thus *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), and *The Eminem Show* (2002). While some songs are written and performed from within the position of one of these three personae, other songs are less persona-driven and merely hint at their possible presence. Also crowding the artist's albums, on which songs are interspersed with short documentary-like skits, is a large gallery of additional characters and voices based on both real and fictional characters. Most are performed by Eminem himself while the rest are done by guest performers, often appearing as themselves. Drawing on a wide range of vocal gestures, vocal timbres, vocal modes (speaking, rapping, singing) while slipping in and out of characters, role-playing is a key feature in the artist's vocal posing, facilitated and high-lighted by the endless possibilities of technological mediation offered by today's recording studio. Thus Eminem the writer is completed by Eminem the vocal artist and occasional song producer in this artistic project of self-dramatization.

9 Eminem, *The Slim Shady EP* (Web Entertainment, catalogue number unknown, 1997 or 1998). Sources disagree as to when this 37 minute EP was released. However, according to Eminem himself the whole EP was recorded in the winter of 1997–98 in about two weeks; see Eminem, *Angry Blonde* (New York, 2000), 38. In addition to a comprehensive selection of Eminem lyrics *Angry Blonde* contains an introduction plus short comments on most lyrics by Eminem. Most comments are focused on the biographical circumstances of the lyric writing and song recording. However, only as an exception is the exact time frame of these specific biographical occurrences given, which is hardly surprising based as they seem to be on recollection. The accuracy and reliability of these autobiographical comments are of course open to questioning, considering the author's otherwise 'creative' use and performative renderings of his own life story.

10 Eminem, *Angry Blonde*, 3.

## ON LISTENING TO AND ANALYSING (RAP) SONGS

When pursuing the theme of self-dramatization as a key feature in Eminem's songs the characterization above ties in well with Simon Frith's reflections on the complex character of songs as objects of analysis.<sup>11</sup> He approaches various aspects of this key question throughout his book *Performing Rites – On the Value of Popular Music* (1996) but I find theoretical points from three consecutive chapters, 'Songs as Texts', 'The Voice' and 'Performance' of particular relevance in the present context. They are brought together in the following to generate a usefully multi-faceted and dynamic conceptualization of the song as analytical object grounded in everyday musical experience.<sup>12</sup>

To Frith the traditional analytical approach to songs as literary objects, the mere text of the lyric sheet, is not adequate or even appropriate as songs are always experienced as 'words in performance' (unless, of course, one is prone to only reading pop lyrics). Taking song listening for granted he points to the perceptual complexity (though hardly experienced as such) that this everyday activity entails:

In listening to the lyrics of pop songs we actually hear three things at once: *words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves 'meaningful', signs of persons and personality.<sup>13</sup>

This performative 'dynamization' of the analytical object, which also implies the interaction between song and listener as part of the analytical agenda, constitutes the singing or rapping performer as a key element. According to Frith the inevitable performative presentation of a song's textual element lends lyrics an unmistakable narrative character. As he puts it:

Lyrics ... let us into songs as stories. All songs are implied narratives. They have a central character, the singer; a character with an attitude, in a situation, talking to someone (if only to herself).<sup>14</sup>

In short, we experience songs as 'narrative-in-action' voiced by a singing (or rapping) performer. The interpretive approach of the singer to the lyrics may of course vary from 'sincere' identification to parodic dissociation, but whatever the strategy its success will usually depend upon adherence to the stylistic conventions of the musical genre in question.

11 This approach to Eminem's art is not to be viewed as a dismissal or critique of Adam Krims' rich contribution to rap music analysis in *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge, 2001), but simply as an attempt at a different approach directly inspired by my listening to Eminem's music.

12 As my short summary cannot do justice to Frith's detailed discussion, the reader is encouraged to consult Frith's text for inspiring reflections on this subject.

13 Frith, *Performing Rites*, 159.

14 *Ibid.* 169.

From a performance perspective, however, song singing entails more than simply performing the lyrics. Professional song singing is in itself a multi-layered phenomenon, the various facets of which resonate within the performance of the song. Frith again:

Singing, as an organization of vocal gestures, means enacting the protagonist in the song, enacting the part of the star, *and* giving some intimation of a real material being—a physical body producing a physical sound; a physicality that *overflows* the formal constraints of the performance.<sup>15</sup>

When listening, the simultaneous interplay of all of these meaning-producing factors (words, sounds, gestures, etc.) emanates from the performer's sounding voice, engaging us in a complex yet intimate communicative process.<sup>16</sup> No other instrument is as personal as the human voice (in everyday life we often identify individuals by the sound of their voice alone – *per sona*), and to no other instrument are we as sensitive as to the infinite nuances of this built-in sound-machine. This no doubt explains why the question of credibility or authenticity is so important even when we listen to the multi-mediated professionalized voice of the popular singer. The more convincingly a singer comes across—that is the more we believe her and/or her message—the more satisfying the experience. But as already noted this effect is usually accomplished within the framework of 'naturalized' stylistic conventions that characterize every musical genre. I find no reason to assume that rapping, which in today's popular music is as common and varied as singing, is either more or less stylized than various popular singing styles, and thus should present a special case in this respect.

Adam Krims offers an overall rhythmic-stylistic terminology for the various styles of *flow* or rhythmic delivery that is a defining feature in rapping: In contrast to a 'sung' rhythmic style, 'referring to rhythms and rhymes equivalent (or parallel) to those of much sung pop or rock musics', Krims suggests two 'effusive' styles referring to 'a tendency in rap music to spill over the rhythmic boundaries of the meter, the couplet, and, for that matter, of duple and quadruple groupings in general'.<sup>17</sup> One style termed 'percussion-effusive' involves 'a combination of off-beat attacks with a sharply-attacked and crisp delivery that accentuates the counter-metric gestures' resulting in a percussive flow, while the other style termed 'speech-effusive' tends to 'feature enunciation and delivery closer to those of spoken language, with little sense often projected of any underlying metric pulse'.<sup>18</sup> This stylistic differentiation is to be viewed as a continuum rather than as separate groupings, and although some rap artists may cultivate one style in particular, other artists draw from the whole palette even mixing colours within the same song.

15 Ibid. 212.

16 Frith suggests that to capture the multi-faceted meaning-making of the voice we should approach it under four headings: as a musical instrument, as a body, as a person, and as a character. For a detailed discussion of each of these four aspects, see Frith, *Performing Rites*, 187–99.

17 Krims, *Rap Music*, 49–50.

18 Ibid. 50–51.

Although his vocal performance is no doubt the most prominent feature in Eminem's art and the primary focal point in this article, it does not stand alone.<sup>19</sup> In rap music the primary function of the musical track,<sup>20</sup> as indicated above, is to provide a regular metrical and rhythmical anchor and jumping-off-ground in 4/4 time for the usually polyrhythmic intricacies of the flow. When choruses are sung, this basic 'tension' may be temporarily suspended and the song take on an almost on-hold character while the now singing performer 'makes peace with' the track. The different character (and perhaps status) of the chorus is indicated by the fact that often it is performed by backing singers or based on sampling.

The musical track itself may of course also be used and/or heard as an expressive or narrative device, for instance as mood setting. This is often the case with Eminem's songs, where the musical track spiced with sampled sound effects almost takes on the character of a cinematic soundtrack,<sup>21</sup> a quite common feature within the now dominant hip hop subgenre of 'gangsta rap'.<sup>22</sup>

On the basis of the conceptual framing and implied analytical approach outlined above I will now turn to the five thematically related songs, all casting Eminem in the role of father and/or husband, in order to illustrate the variety in Eminem's artistic constructions of performative self-dramatization.

#### SETTING THE SCENE FOR DADDY

Contrary to the scenario of most rap music, the following selection of songs all relate to everyday domesticity. As Elizabeth L. Keathley puts it in relation to the first two songs, but of relevance to all:

[The raps] are not set against an exoticized urban landscape of pimps and hoes and do not speak in the tongue of sexual *braggadocio*; rather, they resemble any other bourgeois melodrama in their presumption of the rightness of the patriarchal, nuclear family.<sup>23</sup>

The melodrama in these songs, whether small or grand, tragic or comical, results from the fact that the dysfunctional family unit portrayed fails to live out the dream of the

19 Yet I do often find that stripped *a cappella* versions of Eminem's songs, usually released for promotional purposes only, provide quite satisfactory listening experiences. Also, 'undisturbed' by the musical track, they expose both the performative and technological aspects of the voice production.

20 In using the term 'musical track' I follow Adam Krims and refer to his discussion of the term and its use; see Krims, *Rap music*, 45. Eminem himself uses both 'track' and 'beat' throughout *Angry Blonde* without making any apparent distinction between them.

21 Although the musical tracks on Eminem's recordings most often are created and produced by various musical collaborators, there is usually some 'editorial' involvement on his part.

22 'Gangsta (slang for 'gangster') rap' began as a 'hardcore' subgenre in the late 1980s (Ice T, N.W.A.) but became mainstream in the late 1990s. The subgenre has stirred much controversy with its realistic or stereotypical (depending on point of view) descriptions of black inner-city ghetto life, being accused of endorsing violence, misogyny, homophobia, promiscuity, materialism, etc.

23 Keathley, 'A Context', paragraph 8.



stereotypical patriarchal, nuclear family held by the traditional head of family through the eyes of whom all songs are seen and told. To the narrator the basic conflict is one between family protector (the first person narrator) and home wrecker (his adulterous wife) with their offspring (a baby daughter) in need of protection.<sup>24</sup>

The first two songs, '97 Bonnie and Clyde' and 'Kim', are companion pieces that constitute one continuous storyline. However, before we begin with the second half of the story, a word of caution as to the extreme language and blatant depictions of violence that follow. At the same time I wish to encourage the reader to seek out and listen to the selected songs to experience the full impact of Eminem's admittedly extreme art.<sup>25</sup>

### GOING FOR A RIDE WITH CLYDE

'97 Bonnie and Clyde', written in the late summer or autumn of 1997, was originally entitled 'Just the two of us' when first released on the early album *The Slim Shady EP*.<sup>26</sup> That Eminem would choose a title identical to that of a song recently released by rapper Will Smith also dealing with a father-child relationship and the fact that both songs draw inspiration from the exact same musical source (Bill Withers' 1980 hit recording) is hardly a coincidence.<sup>27</sup> Smith's song is addressed to his five year old son, reassuring him that his father loves him and will always be there for him, although he has broken up with his mother. Will's son even has a few spoken lines in what amounts to a somewhat sentimental enactment of the 'perhaps not perfect but definitely good' father character.

Thematically Eminem's song treads the same ground being a dialogue between a reassuring father and his baby daughter. However, this song is realized as a short audio drama (what the artist himself refers as a concept song<sup>28</sup>): a car ride in three chronological scenes corresponding to the song's three verses. The narrative structure and flow is simple and classic (see Table 1). In contrast to the story-advancing character of the verses, the recurring chorus simply sums up the theme of the song: Father and daugh-

24 Eminem's basically sympathetic portrayal of this stereotypical husband/father figure forms part of his general depiction of white masculinity, which has met with much criticism, not least because of its often misogynistic character. For explorations and discussions of this key subject in different theoretical contexts, see Keathley, 'A Context', paragraphs 1-41; Lindsay R. Calhoun, "'Will the Real Slim Shady Please Stand Up?': Masking Whiteness, Encoding Hegemonic Masculinity in Eminem's *Marshall Mathers LP*", *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 16 (2005), 267-94; and Vincent Stephens, 'Pop goes the rapper: a close reading of Eminem's genderphobia', *Popular Music*, 24/1 (2005), 21-36.

25 In the US Eminem's albums are available in both 'explicit' and 'clean' versions. However, the 'clean' versions, aimed at 'underage' consumers and mainstream radio, are to be avoided as the rapper's flows are marred by the strict and technically rather crude censoring of swearwords and explicit references to sex and violence.

26 The song was produced by Mark and Jeff Bass.

27 The song appeared on Will Smith's first solo album *Big Willie Style* (Columbia 488 662-2, 1997) released 25 Nov. 1997 in the United States.

28 See Eminem, *Angry Blonde*, 31.

Song form	CHORUS/INTRO	1. VERSE	CHORUS	2. VERSE	CHORUS	3. VERSE	CHORUS	OUTRO
Vocal mode	singing/talking	rapping	singing	rapping	singing	rapping	singing	talking
Narrative structure	FRAME	SCENE 1	SCENE 2	SCENE 3	SCENE 3	SCENE 3	SCENE 3	FRAME
		into car leaving home	in car en route	out of car at destination	out of car at destination	out of car at destination	out of car at destination	out of car at destination

Table 1. Vocal modes and narrative structure in Eminem’s ‘97 Bonnie and Clyde’ (*The Slim Shady EP*, 1997 or 1998).

ter going for a car ride on their own. The drama only contains two parts; the part of father is performed by Eminem while the baby’s part is limited to short samplings of the voice of Eminem’s daughter, Hailie Jade Scott. Thus, as the following extract (verse one) clearly shows, the song is best characterized as a dramatic monologue:

C’mon Hai-Hai, we goin’ to the beach / Grab a couple of toys and let Da-da strap you in the car seat / Oh where’s Mama? She’s takin’ a little nap in the trunk / Oh that smell (whew!) Da-da musta runned over a skunk / Now I know what you’re thinkin’ — it’s kind of late to go swimmin’ / But you know your Mama, she’s one of those type of women / That do crazy things, and if she don’t get her way, she’ll throw a fit / Don’t play with Da-da’s toy knife, honey, let go of it (no!) / And don’t look so upset, why you actin’ bashful? / Don’t you wanna help Da-da build a sand castle? (yeah!) / And Mama said she wants to show how far she can float / And don’t worry about that little boo-boo on her throat / It’s just a little scratch — it don’t hurt / Her was eatin’ dinner while you were sweepin’ and spilled ketchup on her shirt / Mama’s messy, ain’t she? We’ll let her wash off in the water / And me and you can pway by ourselves, can’t we?<sup>29</sup>

Made up of plain everyday conversation Eminem’s speech-effusive rap adheres to the vocal inflections of everyday speaking and is obviously character-driven. The wording is that of a father talking to a very young child, some of the words even with childlike pronunciation (e.g. ‘sweepin’ for ‘sleeping’ and ‘pway’ for ‘play’). Later in the song the father even reverts to incomprehensible baby talk when needed to calm the child. This impression of a patient and responsible father taking his daughter to the beach is reinforced by the rather simple laid back musical track coloured by an almost lounge-like synthesizer background soundscape tinged with soothing harp glissandi.<sup>30</sup> However, it soon becomes clear that being ‘just the two of us’ comes at a terrible price, as several factors belie the perfect family situation enacted by Eminem. Woven into ‘da-da’s’ reassuring remarks is the actual reason for the car ride, namely the disposal of the three dead bodies placed in the trunk of the car following a crime of passion, in which ‘da-da’ has killed ‘mama’, her new boyfriend and his young son. The ‘game’ that the clearly unrepentant father and ignorant daughter are going to play ‘at the beach’ –

29 Ibid. 32–33. As in all quotations from Eminem’s lyrics the author’s idiomatic spelling and punctuation is retained. The sampled baby talk is bracketed.

30 The musical track for ‘97 Bonnie and Clyde’ was created by DJ Head.



and indeed do play – is dumping ‘mummy’ in a lake in the middle of the night and then head for the nearest border. As ‘da-da’ remarks: ‘’97 Bonnie and Clyde, me and my daughter.’<sup>31</sup> In view of this knowledge the collage of documentary sound effects that opens the song depicting the dragging of a heavy object, which is then dumped into the trunk of a car, suddenly makes perfect sense.

The exact same sampled collage of sound effects ends the companion piece ‘Kim’ written in late 1998 and released on Eminem’s *The Marshall Mathers LP* in 2000.<sup>32</sup> Thus plotwise this song constitutes a prequel to ‘’97 Bonnie and Clyde’ centring on the murder of ‘mama’. The narrative structure of this piece of sonic cinema mirrors that of the first song (see Table 2): Another car ride at night in three short scenes though with a different purpose. Again the song is cast as a dialogue between two characters, this time the two adults. But in terms of mood the two songs could hardly be further apart.

Song form	INTRO	1. VERSE	CHORUS	2. VERSE	CHORUS	3. VERSE	CHORUS
Vocal mode	talking	rapping	singing	rapping	singing	rapping	Singing
Narrative structure	SCENE 1		SCENE 2		SCENE 3		
	scene at home	into car leaving home	in car en route		out of car at destination		

Table 2. Vocal modes and narrative structure in Eminem’s ‘Kim’ (*The Marshall Mathers LP*, 2000).

The opening of ‘Kim’ returns us momentarily to the harmonious father–daughter relationship of ‘’97 Bonnie and Clyde’ with ‘daddy’ talking softly to his sleeping baby daughter. The sparse musical underscoring dominated by glockenspiel suggests the fairytale-like innocence of the nursery. Without a beat the father’s attitude changes drastically, from ‘Baby, you’re so precious, Daddy’s so proud of you’ to ‘Sit down bitch, you move again I’ll beat the shit out of you’.<sup>33</sup> However – though this is no doubt the listener’s first impression – this sudden violent aggression is not directed at the daughter but at her mother. And so the rest of the song unfolds as an unrelenting verbal and ultimately physical assault by the crazed, jealous and self-pitying father character on his overwhelmed wife, who is reduced to short scared and pleading utterances. The dramatic climax is reached at the end of the last verse, when having reached their destination the calculated murder is finally committed after the father has outlined a cover-up for all three murders:

31 Eminem, *Angry Blonde*, 34.

32 Eminem, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records 490 629-2, 2000). The song was produced by Mark and Jeff Bass.

33 Eminem, *Angry Blonde*, 80.

You and your husband have a fight. One of you tries to grab a knife / And during the struggle he accidentally gets his Adam's apple sliced / (No!) And while this is goin' on, his son is woke up, and he walks in. She panics and he gets his throat cut / (Oh my God!) So now they both dead and you slash your own throat / So now it's double homicide and suicide with no note / I should have known better when you started to act weird / We could've ... HEY! Where you going? Get back here! / You can't run from me Kim. It's just us, nobody else! / You're only making this harder on yourself / Ha! Ha! Got'cha! (Ahh!) Ha! Go ahead, yell! / Here, I'll scream with you! AH SOMEBODY HELP! / Don't you get it bitch, no one can hear you? / Now shut the fuck up and get what's comin' to you / You were supposed to love me / [Kim choking] / NOW BLEED! BITCH BLEED! / BLEED! BITCH BLEED! / BLEEEED!<sup>34</sup>

The sound effects leave no doubt that the wife has her throat slit while her husband is screaming at the top of his lungs. This frenzied scenario is complemented by a dark and unrelenting musical track dominated by heavy industrial-like percussion and a bas drone adding a claustrophobic nightmarish quality to the drama: There is no escaping this ride or its outcome.

Again a high degree of realism characterizes the simple wording of Eminem's rap. But even more striking is the extreme vocal delivery of this lyric, alternating between shouting, screaming, whining and crying, thus going way beyond what we usually associate with vocal posing in rap music. The very performative projection of the volatile emotional states of the husband seems to border on chaos itself, which coupled with the gruesome plot, may make for quite an overwhelming listening experience. Thus the pronounced formal aspects of the text, like the elaborate rhyming schemes and dialogue structure, are completely overshadowed, although the underlying meter of the musical track and the recurrent melancholy chorus keep a tight rein on the song as a whole. In stark contrast to the chaotic verses, the choruses are carried by a distant heavily processed voice – cold, metallic, mechanical and matter-of-factly – showing neither emotion nor regret:

So long, bitch you did me so wrong / I don't wanna go on / living in this world without you.<sup>35</sup>

This statement is somewhat equivocal but can certainly be read as the husband simply justifying his act by invoking his right to punish an out-of-control wife: 'If I cannot have what rightfully belongs to me, no one can.'<sup>36</sup>

The character combination in the two songs of caring father and cold-blooded wife killer, man and monster rolled into one, and the enactment of his bloody deeds,

34 Ibid. 81. 'Kim's' short utterances are bracketed. Due to its extreme slasher movie nature this song was not simply censured but altogether replaced by the song 'The Kids' on the 'clean' version of the album.

35 Eminem, *Angry Blonde*, 80.

36 Interestingly Elizabeth L. Keathley compares this patriarchal attitude to the transgression-and-punishment paradigm of much nineteenth-century opera and literature, see Keathley, 'A Context', paragraph 10. Bizet's *Carmen* and Strauss' *Salome* come to mind as prime examples.

may in itself be disturbing and provocative to most listeners, though hardly cutting-edge material in today's world of post-Tarantino fiction. However, Eminem has another card up his sleeve: the already indicated use of autobiographical facts and references, the moral implications of which have led to much discussion.<sup>37</sup> In '97 Bonnie and Clyde' this card is played rather cautiously. Only the fact that the father character calls his daughter Hai-Hai, Eminem's actual pet name for Hailie Jade Scott, hints at a possible autobiographical resonance in this vengeful fantasy. At the time of the writing Eminem had temporarily split up with Kim(berly) Scott, Hailie Jade Scott's real-life mother. However, in 'Kim' the main characters refer explicitly to each other as Marshall, Kim, and Hailie throughout the song. Eminem thus situates his own family in this short story of domestic tragedy. His own role is no longer only that of the portrayer, but also that of a song character being portrayed. Some might argue that his intense and physically extreme vocalization has the effect of minimizing or even collapsing the distance between the artist perceived as performer and portrayer and the artist perceived as the actual physical and mental embodiment of the private person apparently portrayed.<sup>38</sup> If so, the extreme vocalization might invite us as listeners to experience this eerie performance as the outcome of an authentic emotional investment drawn from traumas of a private life now on display in an act of self-revelation. And if thus convinced, the song may even beg the question: Does he really mean it?

Although the immediate emotional impact of an extreme, seemingly improvised vocalization may add to a sense of transparency and immediacy on the part of the listener that belies the multi-faceted mediation that preconditions any commercial popular song as a cultural product,<sup>39</sup> several aspects work to implode this illusion of actual intention. Both songs are highly stylized and disciplined examples of sonic cinema adhering to a classic song structure and explicit rhyming schemes, and the use of sound effects evokes only cinema realism. In 'Kim' both 'Marshall the assailant' and 'Kim the victim' are performed by Eminem, which however may be apparent only to listeners familiar with Eminem's many character voices. To this listener the distinction between star persona and song characters remains clearly drawn in these songs. However, their unusual conflation of autobiography and horror fiction does make for uneasy listening probably preventing empathy and identification on the part of most listeners. Primarily demonstrating his skills as dramatist, character actor and skilful provocateur,<sup>40</sup> this theatrical staging of songs as audio mini-dramas are an Eminem

37 For a sampling of the various and often extreme views on Eminem and his art mostly by music critics, see Hilton Als and Darryl A. Turner (eds.), *White Noise: The Eminem Collection* (New York, 2003).

38 Adam Krims points out that 'one of the principal authenticating strategies of early gangsta rap has precisely been the symbolic collapsing of the MC onto the artist – the projection that the MC himself ... is the persona – a voice from the "streets," speaking from authentic experience', Krims, *Rap Music*, 95.

39 For further discussion of this aspect in relation to Eminem, see Petter Dyndahl, *Truly Yours, Your Biggest Fan, This Is Stan: Dramaturgi, remediering og iscenesettelse hos Eminem* (Elverum, 2003), 19 ff.

40 These concept songs can be viewed as audio precursors to the series of animation shorts entitled *The Slim Shady Show* released on DVD (Shady World Productions DV 1116, 2003).

trademark, the best-known example being the song 'Stan' from *The Marshall Mathers LP* about a deranged Eminem fan.<sup>41</sup>

### SCENES OF DOMESTIC BLISS AT THE EMINEM HOUSEHOLD

My third example 'My dad's gone crazy', which ends the 2002 album *The Eminem Show*, begins as another piece of sonic cinema.<sup>42</sup> The scene is the single-parent home of Marshall Mathers, who is flipping TV channels and snorting cocaine. Hailie walks in on her 'dad' just as a well-meaning pedagogue on TV is talking to children about father–daughter relationships, asking: 'Do you have a daddy?'. Hailie answers the question by asking one herself: 'Daddy, what are you doing?'. Indeed, Hailie does have a father! At this point a simple bouncy and cartoonish boom-tchik-a-boom drum-beat coupled with a stylized string pizzicato figure kicks off the song.<sup>43</sup> Together Dad and Hailie ask the listener to listen up, before Dad answers Hailie's question: He is going to hell. As if it's all a game, Hailie mock-pleads: 'Somebody please help him! I think my dad's gone crazy'. The main part of the song can be viewed as that cocaine trip to hell in the form of a typical 'kill-'em-all' Eminem rap laid out in three verses. Still basically anchored in colloquialism this rap is a percussively charged spewing of anger with verbal boasts and attacks almost tripping over each other in a stream of seemingly free association giving the impression of an on the spot improvised rap. In verse two, sexual imagery has a field day:

It's like my mother always told me, rana rana rana rana rana rana rana rana rana and codeine and / goddammit you little muthafucker if you ain't got nuthin' nice to say then don't say nuthin' / ... uh, fuck that shit bitch eat a muthafuckin' dick, chew on a prick and lick / a million muthafuckin' cocks per second, I'd rather put out a muthafuckin' gospel record / I'd rather be a pussy whipped bitch, eat pussy, and have pussy lips glued to my face with a clit ring in my nose than quit bringin' my flows / quit givin' me my ammo. Can't you see why I'm so mean? If y'all leave me alone this wouldn't be my M.O. / I wouldn't have to go, eenee meenee meini, mo, catch a homo by his toe, man I don't know no more / am I the only fuckin' one who's normal any more? / (Dad)<sup>44</sup>

Apart from a few short interjections by Hailie reacting to her father's rap, and her recurrent 'I think my dad's gone crazy' in the choruses, the scene is again dominated completely by Eminem, not however as a fictitious song character 'daddy' addressing his daughter in a self-contained play, but as a star persona, who emerges out of the trip of the father character and addresses a 'you' out there in the real world of the listener.

41 For a detailed analysis of this perhaps Eminem's best known song made up of the fictive correspondence between Eminem and an obsessed fan, who cannot distinguish between Eminem as private person and as artist, see Dyndahl, *Truly Yours*.

42 The song was produced by Andre Young (a.k.a. Dr. Dre).

43 The musical track was created by Andre Young, Ron Feemster, and Mike Elizondo.

44 Quoted from the CD booklet of the Eminem album *The Eminem Show* (Aftermath Records 493 290-2, 2002), no page numbers. Hailie's concluding remark is bracketed. 'M.O.' is an abbreviation for *modus operandi*, here probably with specific reference to the use of the term in connection with crime (the 'signature' of a criminal).

This is the artist Eminem posing as the aggressive and provocative star rapper Eminem almost in dark Slim Shady mode, attacking all his critics whether politicians, parents, homosexuals, or as in the extract above even his own mother. A voice to match the words is required and is accomplished by the technological empowering of the artist's rather small clear voice through multi-tracking, a key characteristic that often distinguished Eminem's vocal posing as almighty rap star. The perhaps most impressive example of this performative strategy is the song 'The way I am' from *The Marshall Mathers LP*, where Eminem's voice takes on an almost monster-like quality.

But what exactly is the purpose of the theatrical father–daughter framing of 'My dad's gone crazy'? For a start it gives the artist the opportunity to caricature the abomination of an irresponsible drug-addicted father that some of his critics make him out to be, thus cheekily adopting and flaunting a character of *their* making as a song character. Towards the end of the rap, after the spewing of a busload of grotesqueries, Eminem the rapper finally calms down and comments on his own role as father. After another intertextual reference to 'Clyde Mathers and Bonnie Jade', he addresses concerned parents posing as a politically correct father stating: 'I don't blame you, I wouldn't let Hailie listen to me neither', which in view of the theatrical framing of the song, with Hailie witnessing a cocaine trip, is pretty hilarious. But the main purpose of the presence of the daughter, performed by five-year-old Hailie Jade Scott herself, becomes clear only at the very end of the song. After the music stops, only one final comment by the laughing Hailie remains: 'You're funny, daddy!' Thus we are made to understand that, unlike his critics, she, just a child, gets the reckless humour in her father's art while seeing through his act.

If Eminem as single-parent father figure is pure caricature in 'My dad's gone crazy', a contrasting strategy is adopted in 'Hailie's song' also from *The Eminem Show*.<sup>45</sup> In what is discursively presented as a straight-out autobiographical song the artist expresses his love for his daughter and how much it means to him that he has been awarded joint custody of her after the divorce from Kimberly Scott in October 2001: Every time Hailie, the light of his life, returns to him the almost unbearable boulder on his shoulder is lifted, and he is released from a state of melancholy.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from the spoken lines at the end of the song, this solo is not addressed at Hailie, but once again at the listener, and Eminem is anxious to give the impression that it is sung not from the point of view of but *by* Marshall Mathers, private person. Textually he makes this quite explicit in the following lines from verse three, while evoking a caricature character like the one portrayed in 'My dad's gone crazy' as a fitting contrast:

45 The song was produced by Eminem.

46 However, the prevailing mood of the song is nonetheless that of melancholy, which fits well with the fact that Eminem planned to use a sampling from George Harrison's 'While my guitar gently weeps' as chorus. According to Eminem as quoted by Chuck Weiner, that plan was nixed by Harrison's widow after Harrison's death in November 2001, and Eminem's musical collaborator Luis Resto had to write a new chorus that clearly draws more than inspiration from the Harrison original; see Chuck Weiner, *Eminem "Talking"* (London, 2002), 73.

Now you probably get this picture from my public persona that I'm a pistol packin' drug addict who bags on his mama / But I wanna to just take this time out to be perfectly honest ...<sup>47</sup>

But what distinguishes this song from all other songs in his entire production is how this unmasking of an artist of many masks is handled performance-wise, how the alleged confessional intimacy and heart-rending honesty is staged. The means are simple: Marshall Mathers turns out to be a would-be singer. He opens the song by stating that he cannot sing, but because he is so happy, he feels like singing as a tribute to his daughter. After two sung verses he reverses to rapping in the third explicitly admitting defeat. But at this point the artist has already demonstrated how far he is willing to go as a father out of love for his daughter, and added another dimension to his strategy of performative self-dramatization. At the beginning of each sung verse we hear an exposed, dull, weak, and insecure voice. It sounds like the voice of a sad blue-eyed amateur not quite in control of his obviously incomplete instrument. Thus the professional performer hands over the stage to the amateur whose voice, thanks to his lack of skills and control, seems to point to or even reveal the man behind the voice. However, this exposure of Marshall Mathers and his vocal and personal insecurities is, of course, staged by Eminem the artist; *that* is the dramatic exercise attempted in this song. But because this staging sounds, at least in my ears, like a caricature, an imitation of an inexperienced boy band singer carrying his first ballad, it fails in its attempt to convince me as listener that when leaving all the masquerading behind an authentic subject position, a true identity if you will, is to be found and trusted. Instead the main impression is that one is witnessing a strategy of self-dramatization that simply does not work.

#### EMINEM SAYS GOODNIGHT

On his fourth solo album *Encore* from 2004 Eminem pursues a similar strategy of authenticity in the song 'Mockingbird',<sup>48</sup> another Hailie-song with extensive autobiographical references – in the video Eminem is sitting all alone watching old home videos of Hailie with certain faces masked, which of course only adds the impression of authenticity at work. Based on the well-known traditional lullaby 'The Mockingbird song' (also known as 'Hush little baby'), the simple piano-dominated beat<sup>49</sup> provides a tranquil backdrop to the intimate confessions of a successful artist/troubled daddy this time addressing his daughter (and her niece) in an almost monotonous voice that appears to forsake dramatic vocal posing altogether (beginning of verse one):

47 Quoted from the CD booklet of *The Eminem Show*, no page numbers.

48 The song was produced by Eminem with additional production by Luis Resto.

49 The musical track was created by Luis Resto as a minor variation on the melody of the original lullaby.



Hailie I know you miss your mom, and I know you miss your dad / when I'm gone but I'm tryin' to give you the life that I never had / I can see you're sad even when you smile even when you laugh / I can see it in your eyes deep inside you wanna cry / cause you're scared. I ain't there, Daddy's with you in your prayers / no more cryin' wipe them tears daddy's here no more nightmares.<sup>50</sup>

In this rather laid-back speech-effusive rap written in a language befitting an intimate father-to-daughter moment Eminem returns to the reassuring monologue heard in '97 *Bonnie and Clyde*, but without the melodramatic setting and dark subtext, although daddy's assurances that 'momma' is going to be alright, she is only gone for the moment do echo the false promises of the early song.

The calm recounting of 'unfortunate' autobiographical events, both past and present, that have clouded Hailie's childhood takes up most of this attempt at a lullaby as 'daddy' tries to explain and even take some of the blame. The mood changes only briefly towards the end of the song, when Eminem unexpectedly invokes the fictitious world of the original lullaby in the last chorus:

And if you ask me to, daddy's gonna buy you a mocking bird / I'ma give you the world, I'ma buy a diamond ring for you, I'ma sing for you / I'll do anything for you to see you smile. / And if that mocking bird don't sing and that ring don't shine / I'ma break that birdies neck, I'll go back to the jeweler who sold it to ya / and make him eat every carat don't fuck with dad.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to the complaisant parent in the original lullaby, who just keeps buying a new present for every 'malfunction' of the previous, this father is less forgiving. A tinge of Slim Shady anger and violence is allowed to surface as he threatens both mocking bird and jeweller, immediately followed by a short disarming laugh. Perhaps he is trying to avoid that the implicit critique levelled at single parent Will Smith's sentimental 'Just the two of us' in his own '97 *Bonnie and Clyde* now comes back to haunt this song, which does come perilously close to repeating Will Smith's act. Playing the game of 'keeping it real' isn't easy.<sup>52</sup>

#### A CONCLUDING REMARK

Let me conclude by offering the suggestion that at least some of the extremely negative reactions to Eminem, before he was embraced by many liberal American critics following his semi-autobiographical and very 'straight' portrayal of a young rapper in Curtis Hanson's mainstream movie *8 Mile* (2002), may have resulted from the

50 Quoted from a text card in the Eminem album *Encore (Shady Collector's Edition)* (Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records 0602498646700, 2004).

51 Ibid.

52 For yet another example of Eminem's ongoing production of father-daughter songs, listen to 'When I'm Gone', one of three new songs on the 2005 greatest hits album *Curtain Call – The Hits* (Aftermath Entertainment/Interscope Records 0602498890844, 2005).

confusing mix of ‘incompatible’ ingredients in these artistic constructions of performative self-dramatization: The artist’s constant blurring of the imagined boundaries between private and public, between autobiography and fantasy, between documentary and satire, and between representation and the notion of authenticity. What comes across as a shameless and slippery blend of reality and fiction in both lyrics and vocalizations is perhaps an unexpected challenge that leaves listeners unsure of how to read this truly unreliable first person narrator and his life story songs. And the spicing of an already explosive cocktail with night-black humour, that to some is incomprehensible and therefore has no disarming effect or is viewed as downright disrespectful, only adds to this sense of discomfort: Do we know for sure at what or whom we are laughing, when we embrace this artist? Will we somehow be supportive of his apparently misogynistic and homophobic outlook? The world may be his stage, but understandably no one wants to be reduced to an unwilling accomplice in the self-mythologization of a piece of white trash.

#### SUMMARY

A key characteristic in the vocal art of American rap artist Eminem is a rather complex and unpredictable game of performative self-dramatization pinpointed in his studio recordings. The songs present the listener with autobiographical material staged in disturbing and yet fascinating audio mini-dramas coupled with a purposefully slippery interplay of various subject positions related to the artist’s three public personae: Marshall Mathers, Eminem and Slim Shady. The aim of the present article is to explore and discuss key elements in these artistic constructions of performative self-dramatization by focusing on five thematically related songs, in which the artist casts himself as father and/or husband: ‘97 Bonnie and Clyde’, ‘Kim’, ‘My dad’s gone crazy’, ‘Hailie’s song’, and ‘Mockingbird’.