

Rapping Politics



A Case Study on Eminem as a Politicized Celebrity

Honors Thesis by Ana Dolorit

Introduction

Research

Conclusion



Abstract

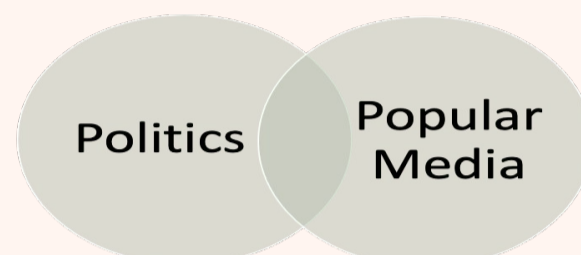
Literature concerning the interconnectedness of politics and popular media has rapidly gained traction over the past few years as popular media scholars like John Street and Regina Lawrence interpret, contextualize, and define the theoretical Venn diagram between politics and media. By employing and nuancing established theory, I examine Eminem as a political actor, not *despite* his celebrity status but *through* it, concluding that Eminem fulfills all the characteristics of a politicized celebrity. Thus, my thesis not only supplements the scholarship on political entertainment but, arguably, provides novel evidence for the affair between politics and popular media.

Theory Background

- **JOHN STREET, 2004**
 - Defines the Politicized Celebrity (CP2) as a celebrity who utilizes their popularity to represent a similarly inclined mass and whose efficacy depends on a bond shared between fan and celebrity—actualized only when the former feels represented by the latter (435).
- **LAWRENCE AND BOYDSTUN, 2017**
 - Depart from the inherent binary of politics and entertainment present in Street’s theory and instead contend that the boundaries between “entertainment” and “news” are porous, seeping into each other and allowing for “a variety of pathways for those from the entertainment field to enter and shape the political field” (57). They concur that politicized celebrities have a “disproportionate ability to shape media coverage precisely because of [their] genesis in the ‘not news’ arena” (40).
- **MARK WHEELER, 2013**
 - Develops Street’s theory with a focus on the “two-way street” that enables a CP2 to “add credence to a campaign while demonstrating their adherence to a party, policy, or political cause” (61). He argues that ideologically driven engagement in politics allows the CP2 to cultivate prolonged partisan expression, assume moral authority for political agendas, and attract attention through provocative means (76, 119).

Methods

To encapsulate Eminem’s status as a politicized celebrity, I concentrate on his engagement—in the form of visual and discursive rhetoric—with gun reform, Republican leadership, and racial inequality. My research method is a historicized textual and rhetorical analysis of Eminem’s involvement in the political landscape through the lens of the existing literature on politicized celebrities, political strategy (James Martin), rhetorical identity (Joel Penny) and hegemony (James Lull). I utilize established standards for political songs, those that are “overtly and consciously political” and advocate a change in the status quo (Cross). Lastly, I distinguish between Eminem’s use of ‘Provocation for Profit’ and “Provocation for Political Purposes”: In the former, he uses provocation to further his success and expand his fanbase; in the latter, he uses it to attract attention toward his politics (Wheeler 119). By considering America’s current cultural context in congruence with Eminem’s craft and its reception, I effectuate his legacy in the political sphere.



Analysis

GUN REFORM
“Nowhere Fast” is a direct call to action, Eminem pleads for gun reform before the next tragedy transpires, exposes the NRA’s hemenogic influence on gun policy, and implicates state legislatures for failing to meet the needs of their communities. *Darkness* is an ode to the victims of the Las Vegas massacre. The music video resituates his audience, enabling them to perceive the gun epidemic from new perspectives. Throughout both songs, Eminem exemplifies a commitment to accuracy and social change—reflecting the interconnectedness of entertainment and news. His ability to reach an undue number of viewers allows him to shape discussions and ultimately facilitate change.

REPUBLICAN LEADERSHIP
Eminem’s first overtly political song and music video, *Mosh*, released a month before the 2004 presidential election, urges the masses to vote George W. Bush out of office. Eminem supplies his following with a goal and a means to get there by promoting activism over anarchy. Eminem’s intentions, therefore, were to “stir people into action”—a superb demonstration of what Cross calls a “political weapon” (para 7)—fulfilling Wheeler’s “engaged activist” standard for CP2s (76). *Mosh* preceded a significant increase in youth voter turnout. A study conducted by The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement concluded that “voter turnout among young people in 2004 has surged to its highest level in a decade” and The Census Bureau likewise determined that “young people exhibited the greatest increase of any age group in voter turnout between 2000 and- 2004” (Lopez). In *The Storm*, he takes a more aggressive approach, not asking but obliging his fans to choose a side. If they chose what would have been, according to Eminem, the wrong side—he extracted them from his fanbase. The reasons why he so fervently refused to have such fans is made clear in “Like Home,” a song dedicated to critiquing Trump and his followers.

RACIAL EQUALITY
“Untouchable” exposes the hyper-nationalism clouding the reality of Kaepernick’s protest, condemns racial profiling, the War on Drugs, police brutality, white privilege, and discriminatory hiring policies. Eminem confessed that he intended “to open people’s eyes... maybe keep the movement going, and the conversation” (Martin M.). Lasting over six minutes, “Untouchable” exemplifies the ambiguous distinction between entertainment and news: The legal cases Eminem elucidates are considered “news” if broadcasted on CNN but are “entertainment” if Eminem is the agent that circulates it.

Representation, Revisited

While I argue that Eminem exemplifies a CP2, I deviate slightly from Street’s reliance on representation. Eminem is a White, cis-gendered man in the United States. In other words, he is in a position of privilege. Further, he operates in a Black space, appropriating Black culture. Even though Eminem’s fans are predominantly Black, and he is committed to issues that disproportionately affect Black communities, Eminem does not represent Black people. Indeed, his protests and political songs are widely discussed because he is *not* Black; he is a White man exposing the systems that White people benefit from.

Eminem depicts a vast awareness for the role his own race has played in upholding systems of oppression; he does not shy away from that in his attempts to represent a different race. In “Untouchable” the chorus repeats: “White boy, White boy, you’re untouchable/ The world’s coming to an end, I don’t even care/Nobody can tell me shit ‘cause I’m a big Rockstar” (Eminem). Careful not to disrespect his fanbase, he does not instigate that his past hardships (like poverty) are equivalent to the systemic racism suffered by Black people. Instead, he uses his position as a White man to raise awareness for racial inequalities. If politicized celebrities assume a responsibility to act on behalf of a similar-minded crowd, then it can be argued that Eminem seeks equality for his Black fans without claiming to represent them. Thus, Eminem’s role is that of the privileged speaking out for the disadvantaged.



Final Testament

In 2020, Eminem did something incredibly unprecedented—he licensed his hit “Lose Yourself” for Biden’s presidential campaign. Prior to the “One Opportunity” ad run by the Biden campaign, Eminem had refused to license this song for any purpose. Eminem allowed his image as a celebrity to embody and reflect a particular political stance, therefore

- satisfying Street’s standard of CP2s endorsing specific partisan policies,
- Wheeler’s amendment of CP2s also adding credence to campaigns,
- and Lawrence and Boydston’s rendering of entertainment media playing a role in society’s political expectations.

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