

The Reversed Underground Rap World: A Discourse Analysis of 8 Mile

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the film 8 Mile, a semi-autobiographical portrayal of the protagonist Jimmy, a white man navigating the predominantly black rap community in Detroit. Through discourse analysis, it examines how Jimmy faces racial discrimination and cultural exclusion, yet ultimately earns respect within the community. Focusing on the themes of race, class, and environment, the paper explores the reversal of traditional racial hierarchies, as seen in the black community's initial rejection of Jimmy's presence in Hip-Hop, a culture rooted in black resistance and expression. The analysis delves into the film's dialogue and lyrics, highlighting how Jimmy adopts African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and is influenced by black culture. The paper also discusses the concept of cultural appropriation, as Jimmy's success in rap, a traditionally black art form, raises concerns about the commodification of black culture by white individuals. Furthermore, the paper argues that Jimmy's socioeconomic status aligns him more closely with the black community than with the privileged white population, enabling him to resonate with the ethos of Hip-Hop. The final rap battle in the film symbolizes a shift in cultural discourse, as Jimmy, despite his white identity, proves his authenticity and secures his place in the black-dominated rap scene. Ultimately, the paper concludes that 8 Mile presents a nuanced exploration of identity, highlighting the intersections of race, class, and culture, and illustrating how these factors influence social dynamics and power structures within a specific environment.*

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation; Discourse Analysis; Hip-Hop Culture; Identity; Social Status.

1. INTRODUCTION

8 Mile is a Semi-autobiographical film centered around rap music and Hip-Hop culture where common notions of white superiority are challenged. Starting from the perspective of discourse analysis, this paper will analyze how the protagonist Jimmy, as a white man, is discriminated by black group of rap fans in Detroit, and finally wins the respect of the community with different skin colors. This paper will focus on the "R" in the SEARCH acronym, which stands for race, to analyze racial discrimination, cultural appropriation, and other related themes. At the same time, the "C" (Class) and "E" (Environment) shown in the movie will be discussed to explore how power is transferred between different races in a particular environment and then back to the balance.

2. ANALYSIS OF MEDIA TEXT

8 Mile contains the sharp racial contradiction between the blacks and whites in Detroit, which is influenced by class and environment. From the perspective of text analysis, a large number of lines and lyrics in the film are worth analyzing. In terms of the social environment, everything that the protagonist Jimmy encounters due to his white identity reflects specific cultural phenomena and social structure.

As a film centered around rap music, there are numerous popular slang words in 8 Mile, and because of the particularity of rap music, the lyrics in the film contain a lot of metaphors. Especially black satire on white people. The lexical and semantic analysis helps to reflect the main racial contradictions in 8 Mile.

Within the film's dialogue, the interactions between black and white characters often breaks conventional language norms. For example, Jimmy's black friends simply calls him, a white man, "nigga" (Hanson, 2002). When non-black people refer to black people as "nigga" it is undoubtedly a racial slur, but within the black community, it is sometimes used as a funny term for each other. In the rapping community, black friends refer to Jimmy as "nigga" to show that they consider him one of their own. In Widyanto's (2013) linguistic research on 8 Mile, he proposes that the use of this title is "to ease of social intercourse" (p. 10). This set the stage for Jimmy's next step into rap culture.

It is also worth noting that Jimmy's lines in the film are full of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) language habits. For example, in Jimmy's lines, "Did you find the guy you was lookin' for?" "looking" becomes

"lookin"; In his line "What if he ain't for real?" "aren't" becomes "ain't" (Hanson, 2002). It may be that Jimmy is influenced by the black community and subtly changes his language habits, or it may be that he makes changes to be more integrated into the conversation among blacks.

But it is not difficult to find that Jimmy uses more AAVE language to black people and other people at the bottom of society, and the Standard Average European is used more for elders, people with high social status, and employers. Mustika and Damanhuri (2014) say, "It indicates that Jimmy relates himself closely with AAVE, but not as close as other Black Americans do as he only performs a number of AAVE features that he distinguishes based on social variation in his society". The lines, as one of the main ways in which the protagonist Jimmy expresses his character, reflect his underlying ideas.

Unlike other types of music that pay more attention to melody, one of the particularities of rap music is the richness of the lyrics. In 8 Mile, there are a lot of rap battle and freestyle scenes, and the battle competition in rap is mainly to attack the weakness of the opponents, so the lyrics contain many offensive contents, mainly reflected in the black rapper attacking Jimmy's white identity.

In the last quarter of the film, Jimmy takes part in a new battle. In the second round against black rapper Lotto, Lotto directly refers to Jimmy as "Honky". He sings "Yo. I spit a racial slur. Honky, sue me" (Hanson, 2002). "Honky" is a disparaged term for white people and a straightforward form of racism. Lotto then sings "I got a better chance to join the K! K! K!" (Hanson, 2002), implying that Jimmy's whiteness and Hip-Hop culture could not coexist. The lyrics effectively inflame the emotions of the black audience. In a rap battle, words and topics that are normally considered politically sensitive are shouted out. The conflict between the two men also hints at the rivalry between the two communities.

All in all, from the perspective of textual analysis, the lines and lyrics in the film use a very direct way to show the discrimination Jimmy, as a white man, has encounters in the Detroit rap community. He unconsciously adopts the black language and is partly accepted by the black community because of his friendship with some blacks. Socially, there seemed to be no place for white rappers in Detroit in 1995, but Jimmy disrupts that monopoly. The ability of black groups to exclude white people reflects the inversion of racial discrimination and the transfer of power to black people. This phenomenon is determined by the specific cultural environment of Detroit in a particular time frame, and everything that happens to Jimmy can also be analyzed in conjunction with race and class.

In terms of racial issues, Jimmy is excluded by the black community mainly because of the particularity of Hip-Hop culture. Hip-Hop culture originated in black people. When Hip-Hop was born in the Bronx in the early 1970s, the black community was plagued by poverty and violence, and rap was used as a tool for black voices and resistance. Aisyah and Huda (2022) mention that rap music is not only relevant to the culture of African Americans but is also often used to address their experience of slavery (p. 588). Usually, racial violence and discrimination are enforced by white people who practice slavery. Therefore, Jimmy, as a white man, not only has to worry about potential cultural appropriation when using a culture that does not belong to white but also has to deal with the justifiable hostility of blacks. As Watts (2005) says, "Rabbit's journey through the predominantly black world of underground rap is fraught with white anxiety and black hostility" (p. 189). Black hegemony over rap music results in white people not being welcomed when mastering rap music.

Taking a traditional black art form and becoming a star as a white man, Jimmy is like a tourist who ventures into black culture, on the way, mastering their art and developing it as an invader. Under the dominant position of blacks in rap music, Jimmy has become the underdog. The power of discourse and the right to judge in the community is controlled by blacks.

Although in the film's finale, Jimmy wins the battle to gain audience recognition, after Jimmy's original model, rapper Eminem, takes the rap world by storm, he is still accused by black people of stealing their music and should give it back to them. Famous rapper 50 Cent comments "I think part of Eminem's legacy is the growth of our culture", and he calls the film 'a Black story with a White lead' (Yacoubian 2022). It is undeniable that rap music originated from black people, so its development by white people is more like the commodification of a specific ethnic culture. Although Jimmy is excluded as a white man in Detroit, the white people is still very strong in the United States and even the world, so Jimmy's behavior has the potential risk of cultural appropriation.

From an objective point of view, Jimmy, and the black rappers in the community, though from different races, belong to the same class. Similar low-level life experiences enable Jimmy to better understand the connotation of

Hip-Hop music and integrate into the black community. In addition to race, part of Jimmy's dilemma stems from his class. In the north of 8 Mile Road in Detroit, where most people are middle-class white, Jimmy, as a poor white man, has nothing in common with a wealthy white man other than the same skin color. He is impecunious, does not receive a good education, and even has a gambling mother. In these respects, Jimmy also belongs to the disadvantaged party.

Jimmy mentions in one freestyle that his mother gives him a 1928 Delta, and Jimmy sings "This shit won't even get me to The Shelter. And I can't even say I'm from Motown" (Hanson, 2002). The lyrics mention the background of Detroit, the city of cars. Jimmy lives in the city that starts with the automobile industry. However, as a white man, he does not have a car that can shelter the wind and rain, which shows the distress of his life and the decline of the city. Although the car is so dilapidated, it is enough to take his black friends around, showing how friendships within the same class can cross races. Jimmy's class characteristics help him to take root in the soil of rap culture, reflecting the working class and the underclass resonating across skin color.

Although black people are the main body of rap music, people's identities are complex with intersectionality, consisting of a variety of characteristics such as ethnicity, class, family background, and age. In the film's final championship battle, Jimmy is pitted against Papa Doc, the leader of the black rap group Free World. First, at the beginning of Jimmy's freestyle, he leads the audience to swing together and raise their hands, while Papa Doc on stage remains calm and silent. By creating this sense of drop, Jimmy says, "Now while he stands tough. Notice this man did not have his hands up" (Hanson, 2002), suggesting to the audience that Papa Doc is incompatible with this alive stage, foreshadowing the next "debunking" his identity.

Then Jimmy reasserts his identity, "I am a white. I am a fuckin' bum I do live in a trailer with my mom" (Hanson, 2002). Jimmy goes from worrying about his whiteness and class identity to embracing his identity and even using it as a breakthrough in his lyrics. After talking about himself, Jimmy points the finger at Papa Doc. He sings "But I know something about you. You went to Cranbrook. That's a private school" (Hanson, 2022). Cranbrook School is in one of Detroit's wealthiest and whitest suburbs. He continues, "This guy's a gangsta. His real name's Clarence. Clarence lives at home with both parents. Clarence's parents have a real good marriage" (Hanson, 2002). Clarence is a name from Latin meaning bright and clean or famous. The name has good intentions, but it has nothing to do with gangsters or black ethnicity. And, unlike Jimmy and most of the black people at the bottom who have a broken family, Papa Doc has a happy family environment.

People are reflected in their environment. By all indications, Papa Doc is a highly educated rich kid who not only runs counter to Hip-Hop's core ethos of keep-real but also overturns his usual image as the boss of the black community. Other black people use Hip-Hop to express the pain in their lives, and he as a bourgeois black man plays Hip-Hop for fun. Papa Doc's identity shows that Hip-Hop music is not simply racially exclusive of non-black people but is even more unacceptable for the untruthful upper class.

Compared to Papa Doc, Jimmy, despite his white skin, really understands the core of Hip-Hop culture to keep real, which is the main reason why he is able to win in the end. In this case, the discourse power of culture in the hands of black people is being loosened. Whereas someone like Papa Doc is in some ways an outsider to Hip-Hop culture, Jimmy, a white man, manages to secure a place in black heritage. At this point, the balance of discourse power in 8 Mile gradually shifts from favoring blacks to balancing.

3. CONCLUSION

The film 8 Mile shows Jimmy being excluded from Detroit's rap community because he is white. This divide is shaped by race, class, and environment. Drawing from two main perspectives of text analysis and social environment analysis, this paper investigates on the phenomenon of the shift of discourse power in the black rap community in Detroit. The African American Vernacular English language habit shows Jimmy's influence from the community and the changes he makes to integrate into the community. The lyrics in the battle and freestyle contain a lot of metaphorical and offensive content. Jimmy's experience exemplifies the reversal of racial discrimination, which also comes with the risk of cultural appropriation. His class, however, helps him better understand and integrate into Hip-Hop culture. With Jimmy's efforts and continuous integration, he also finds his own place and the power of discourse within the community tends to balance. What Jimmy does breaks down barriers of race and class, and embodies a complex understanding of identity, social status, and cultural heritage.

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