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Gag Order: Muting, Mortification, and Motherhood in Eminem's "Cleaning Out My Closet"

Most children, it seems safe to say, will at some point in life be embarrassed by their parents, whether with baby pictures, unflattering anecdotes, or merely their well-intended presence at a social function. Few, however, strike back with a virulence like that of the rapper in Marshall "Eminem" Mathers's apostrophic song "Cleaning Out My Closet" (*The Eminem Show*, 2002). In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler writes of apostrophes—direct second-person address—in lyric poetry that "above all they are embarrassing: embarrassing to me and to you" as "images of invested passion" (135-138) and may be employed by a poet "to give the dead or inanimate a voice and make them speak" (153). In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," Barbara Johnson writes that as the "direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker," apostrophe ventriloquistically "throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee." She reads apostrophic poems by Baudelaire and Shelley as self-reflexive contemplations on the possibility of animation through rhetoric; in them, apostrophe becomes "not just the poem's mode but also the poem's theme." Following this notion of the literalization of "language's capacity to give life" into poems about abortion, in which speakers use direct address to animate and give voice to aborted children, Johnson asserts that the life-giving act of address creates a state of suspended animation in which the children can stay "alive" indefinitely. In a rather more vitriolic—though no less passionate—tone than most of the poems Culler and Johnson examine, "Cleaning Out My Closet" takes their ideas about apostrophe in alternate affective directions; namely, through its angry, forestalling mode of address, it humiliates instead of embarrassing, it silences while purporting to give voice, and it turns animation into a cadaverous stasis. Instead of hyperbolically ventriloquizing dead or inanimate objects, this malevolent incarnation of apostrophe humiliates by taking away the voice of the living.

The title "Cleaning Out My Closet" both privileges the rapper's own voice over anyone else's and implies some kind of revelation, some exposure and exposition of sordid secrets and sins, and the rapper's diction reveals his desire to make that display as loudly public as possible. He repeatedly positions himself at the forefront of crowd scenes, being "protested and demonstrated against," causing "all this commotion," and describing his life as "the Eminem Show." And if it is a show, he makes it a spectacular courtroom drama in which little order is to be found. Indeed, this drama is hardly fictional; Deborah Mathers filed a lawsuit against her son in 1999, seeking ten million dollars in damages for slander (the suit was settled for \$25,000, of which all but \$1,600 went to her lawyers) (Moss 2001).

Through another fraught maternal figure—the speaker in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother”—Johnson demonstrates that apostrophe is vitalizing, vocative, and vocalizing for the addressee; however, “Cleaning Out My Closet” shows that apostrophic address can just as easily render its object suffocated and silenced. If the rapper’s¹ mother can be conceived of as one of the women to whom Johnson alludes, one for whom “the choice [to abort or not] is not between violence and non-violence, but between simple violence to a fetus and complex, less determinate violence to an involuntary mother and/or an unwanted child,” then the song constitutes the discontented wail of the born infant instead of the aborted embryo’s “mute responsiveness” (191). Interestingly, Johnson cites *The Silent Scream*, a pro-life propaganda film Johnson mentions as a counterargument.

Having given birth to the child, the rapper’s mother also gave voice to him, and the grown infant is now using that voice to take away his mother’s—effectively, to abort her. Significantly, the rapper does not actually lodge any specific complaints against her until the third and final verse, after he has already excoriated his father, his ex-wife (the object of Eminem’s verbal violence in multiple songs), and her lover. However, the overriding goal of the rapper, as he proclaims in the first verse, is to make his mother “look so ridiculous now,” and her repeated address in the chorus builds toward that end. Although he catalogs a whole range of her sins, from “popping prescription pills” to “Münchhausen syndrome,” the tone only shifts from descriptive to overtly accusatory when he confronts the issue of her voice and “that CD [she] made” for him.

The CD in question presumably refers to the short album “Set the Record Straight” (2000), for which Deborah Mathers, performed two songs with rap group ID-X as a reaction to his lyrical attacks on her character² (*Market Wire*, 2000). As Brooks’s “voices in the wind . . . initiate the need” for apostrophe, so too does the rapper’s mother performing her song, “telling [her]self that [she] was a mom.” (in Eminem’s words) The rapper is insolently talking back to his mother after she has talked back to him. In contrast to the rapper’s father and wife, who have angered him by their flight and adultery respectively, his mother’s greatest crime seems to have been committed in self-defense—in fact, her crime is the very act of her self-defense. The rapper sets the scene in the first half of the third verse, citing his mother’s mental health issues, including the aforementioned “prescription pills” and “Münchhausen syndrome” and the extreme poverty that necessitated “Going through public housing systems,” both of which are apparently evidence of her unfitness for motherhood. Again, at the risk of reading too much into Marshall Mathers’s biographical background, it seems worth noting that Deborah Mathers was born in 1957 and would have been only fourteen or fifteen years old when she had Marshall—likely an unintended pregnancy (*Eminem born ’72*). The implicit, morbid suggestion is that she should not have given birth to him. If, in Johnson’s terms, the rapper’s mother carried through the anthropomorphization of her

embryo by giving birth, then that act was no less an act of violence than abortion would have been, and her plight exemplifies the flipside of the dilemma Johnson elucidates in “The Mother”—where Brooks’s speaker and “sweets” suffer as a result of her decision to abort, this rapper’s mother and child suffer as a result of the decision *not* to abort. While the rapper’s mother would have been condemned by evangelical pro-life groups for what they hold to be the mortal sin of infanticide, the baby she kept is now telling her “I hope you fuckin’ burn in hell for this shit.” She is damned if she did and damned because she didn’t.

This doubly-binding dichotomy is representative of the gross oversimplification of the rhetoric surrounding abortion, and the ambiguity of the song’s pronouns attest to the complications it brings to the subject-object relationship. It is, as Johnson explains of similar ambiguity in “The Mother,” “clear that something has happened to the possibility of establishing a clear-cut distinction . . . between subject and object, agent and victim.” To return to the figurative courtroom drama the song constructs, the rapper is at once accuser and confessor—the eponymous lyric implies the latter, while the slurs he hurls at his mother construct him as the case’s plaintiff. The mother is called to the stand to defend herself by the apostrophic address, yet the song denies her any opportunity to do so. His repetition of “I’m sorry mama” preemptively negates anything she can say; he will have already apologized for whatever claims her speech might launch against him. This act of silencing is a part of the punishment the rapper is inflicting upon his mother, employing the “embarrassment” of apostrophe as a weapon against her and striking her dumb in front of an audience, though he clearly hopes to provoke more than mere “titters” (in Culler’s words). As previously suggested, he twists embarrassment and suspends temporality in a more sinister direction than either Culler’s or Johnson’s, combining the two into *mortification*, a hybrid effect of apostrophe that at once humiliates and de-animates.

Indeed, the etymological presence of “to kill” in the Latin root of “mortification” indicates that the rapper is more concerned with *habeas* corpse than *corpus*. The song’s judicial undercurrents intersect tellingly with its condemnation of motherhood when the rapper establishes 1973 as a chronological reference point, aligning his infancy with the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that the right to privacy should encompass the right to abortion. Intriguingly, the first verse of the song has already set the rapper up as the object of civil demonstrations, and the “picket signs” evoke iconic images of placard-wielding protesters outside of abortion clinics. Addressed alternately to the listener and to the rapper’s mother, the song expresses a child’s rancor toward a mother he believes has failed him. He infantilizes himself throughout, referring to himself as a “kid,” recalling his childhood, and calling his mother “mama” or simply squalling “ma!” as an upset baby might do. Additionally, when taken in a literal sense, cleaning out one’s closet is a chore, something a mother might demand of her child, and considered as such it provides the rapper an opportunity to subvert his mother’s voice and

turn her mandate against her; just as his apologies give him invective license, the implied domestic framework allows him to maintain the appearance of obedience even as he undermines her maternal authority. This outraged infant's attitude toward his mother for what seems to be best (if simplistically) described as life, raises the question of capital-L Life as a maternal gift and/or curse, and from this perspective, the "skeletons in [the rapper's] closet" become an image morbidly reminiscent of aborted fetuses and the haunting shame their memory might evoke.

The disruption of the "I-thou" pronoun structure of "Cleaning Out My Closet" and the shifting roles of its referents resonate with the rhetorical complications of the abortion debate, which include the impossibility of "symmetrical oppositions" and "logical binary model[s] for ethical choices." The various manifestations of the poetic "I" and "you" in the song run the gamut of roles in the judicial process. The rapper is at first a testifying plaintiff who sets out to "expose" the "skeletons in [his] closet," but he becomes a confessor as well. In addition to setting up the confessional framework with the song's title and chorus, he acknowledges having "maybe made some mistakes" before returning to an accusatory mode in the third verse. During these shifts, the listener starts out simply as the rapper's audience—the prefatory "Yo, yo" stands in for the traditional apostrophic "O"—and then is forced into identification with the rapper's mother through the lines "Look at me now, I bet you're probably sick of me now/ Ain't you mama? I'ma make you look so ridiculous now," which reveal the mother as a second object of address. The conflation of these roles establishes the listener as both silent witness and defendant, making him or her complicit with the mother's past actions. However, the rapper later enjoins the reader to identify with him, to "put yourself in [his] position, just try to envision / Witnessing your mama popping prescription pills in the kitchen," a move that translates roughly to the classic "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury" appeal and distances the listener from the maligned mother. Yet suddenly again, the rapper slides into invective against the maternal, rapping, "it makes you sick to your stomach, doesn't it? / Wasn't it the reason you made that CD for me MA?" The remainder of the "you"s in the song address his mother, and after having identified with the rapper at his behest, the verbal attack he launches feels all the more caustic to the listener.

At the end of this final verse, the rapper acts as judge, jury, and executioner, as it were, damning his mother (and, implicitly through second-person address, the listener as well) to hell before carrying out his own death sentence as her ultimate punishment: "I am dead, dead to you as can be!" Of course, this self-annihilation is a necessarily failed venture; by the very act of addressing his mother, the rapper animates himself to her. Nevertheless, it creates a violent and precarious moment that disrupts the oneness of the mother and fetus *in utero*—where in Brooks's poem the speaker addresses the baby to preserve it and suspend the moment of its death, here the baby addresses the mother to immobilize itself and suspend the moment of its birth. If, as Johnson

explains, male writing is considered (not unproblematically) to be “by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal,” then Eminem’s song performs a male version of abortion on himself and his mother through his artistic voice and against hers. As long as the rapper keeps rapping, as long as he apologizes, as long as he preempts her speech, he prevents her from apostrophizing and animating him. By verbally killing himself, he takes away her reproductive rights, rhetorically undoing his birth, negating her decision to keep her baby, and revoking the freedom of choice given her by *Roe v. Wade*. And, in conclusion—or, I hope, as a point of genesis for further discussion—we thus see how one of the most controversial and antagonistic figures in popular culture manages to construct, however objectionably, through his rap an intersection of canonical poetics, questions of intentionality and free speech, the acute political issue of abortion.

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Notes

¹ While I am leery of plunging too deeply into biographical criticism, and I certainly have no wish to psychoanalyze Marshall Mathers, Eminem’s frequent allusions to real people and events (or at least his “creation” of poetic characters who share names and traits of actual figures in his life, e.g. his estranged wife, Kim, and his daughter, Hailie) seem to validate and even invite a biographical approach to some degree, and in fact his brand of poetic verisimilitude serves to make his rap all the more potent by playing on the listener’s uncertainty. Morally questionable though it may be, this blurring of the distinction between art and reality is a powerfully effective technique for painting a vivid image that involves and discomfits the listener. Throughout this essay, I refer to “the rapper” as I would “the speaker” of a poem—an entity distinct from Eminem the person.

² On *The Slim Shady LP*, Eminem’s 1999 major-label debut album, the songs “Brain Damage” and “My Name Is” both refer to the rapper’s mother in a derogatory manner, imputing drug use and child abuse to her.

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