Poems That Shoot Guns: Eminem, Spittin' Bullets, and the Meta-Rap

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The track "Business" from *The Eminem Show* (*ES*) includes a sideshow caller directing the audience's attention to great feats of strength and skill by the performers. In the second verse, the song welcomes the audience to "Marshall and Andre's carnival," and the chorus identifies a circus in town" and a bunch of "clowns" who need to be "shut … down." The spectacle in the center ring of the big tent, however, is not a trapeze act or a tasseled and lumbering elephant, balancing a ball on his trunk, but a musical duo that is going to dazzle the audience with its verbal dexterity and chase away all of the taunting and pretending clowns whose rap is an affront to Hip Hop. The lyrical narrative of the track constitutes the reintroduction of a too long absent rapper who has come to save the world from bad music and who is going to display a great deal of verbal agility even as he boasts of his eloquence: "You bout to witness Hip Hop in its/Most pourest, most rawest form, flow almost flawless…." He is literally rapping about being an excellent rapper, offering his services to the world and promising to be available "until his dying day."

The preoccupation with the lyrics of "Business in the lyrics of "Business" is an artistic paradox that is common with Eminem's poetic canon and within the rap aesthetic as a whole. The rap show is an exhibition that never stops starting. One of the expressions used to identify a rapper is "MC," which, of course, suggests "master of ceremonies," an individual entrusted to introduce performers or preside over a ceremony or program, initiating each phase of the public spectacle, but the rap MC's preambles are the show, and he may introduce other rappers, but they are also MC's, introducers in their own right. Thus, in a sense, the show seems never to get past introductions. The MC presides over a vast emptiness that lies at the center of his art and of language in general, a void to be filled up with a booming yet meaningless base and verbal hopscotch--chatter about chatterers chattering.

Self-Reflective Lyrics

Eminem's lyrics are obsessed with self-reflection, with constructing an identity out of language, an identity that is not consistent within the canon of his work and has a problematic relationship to any self outside of rap. Multiple recordings begin with the speaker's naming and are followed by a roster of self-defining qualities and activities: 'My name is____, and I think, say and do the following things.' The purpose for the naming is that the speaker of the track is only periodically an effort to represent an autobiographical self. When Eminem says "I," "me," "my," or "mine," he is not necessarily talking about a supposedly autonomous self who has a record contract and cashes industry paychecks. Thus he is engaged in a performance that is more like acting than singing. This divide between performer and performed becomes porous within Hip Hop where

there is usually an expectation of some autobiographical commentary. The referent for "I" becomes slippery. This idea is further complicated by Jacques Lacan's observation that an individual has no identity outside of language. When the speaker says "I," even if he means the autobiographical self, he has nevertheless fictionalized that self by placing it within the preexisting structures of language. The possibilities for defining the self are limited by the possibilities within a language system. When the rapper identifies himself, he is selecting attributes that predate his utterance of "I," identities that retain history and context, that include implications unexpected by the speaker and manufactured by the listener. Even the word "I" suggests a socially and historically constructed concept of the unified self—complete, original, and unconflicted. The reality is a fragmented identity constantly under construction and incapable of fully conveying a self through language. The speaker can only construct those selves that language will allow, and those never fully and accurately represent an independent and stable self.

When Eminem says "I," he may or may not be talking about what he perceives to be an independent self, and even when he or his audience thinks he is talking about an 'actual' self, he is not. He is a slate upon which he has spoken and written a self and upon which fans and detractors alike have added adulatory, interpretive, creative, and vituperative additions. The rapper seems almost conscious of this idea in his track "The Way I Am" from *The Marshall Mathers LP* (hereafter *MMLP*) where he complains that his audience and his detractors have an accurate image of him. The chorus of the track suggests a resignation regarding the maintenance of his public image: "Cause I am whatever you say I am…." He suggests that he is no longer concerned about the false accusations leveled against him for his "wicked rhymes," and he is willing to transform that negative energy into verse. The specious critiques give him much to refute and say that is potentially inflammatory, that will produce still more responses he can discredit, his language merely generating more language. However, in the final line of the chorus, he creates a paradox of self-creation by adding "I don't know that's just the way I am." In the first line, he suggests that the self is public, inclusive, and comprehensive, incorporating the legion of echoes and rebuttals emerging from the public and the media, but the final line of the chorus reveals a private self offering an insight into his character, a completely different self than that uttered in "I am whatever you say I am." The final line seems to know who "I" is while the former implies that "I" is no one and everyone or is (re)created every time the record spins or the audience/critics write or ruminate about him. The juxtaposition of these conflicting comments can be understood as a further articulation of indifference. He is not going to concern himself with the inaccurate portrayals of him because indifference is his nature. However, grammatically, the former does not seem to be a defensible interpretation of the verse.

The syntax of the above verses suggests that "I" is whatever the "you" say(s) it is. This can be true in a very interesting way. The audience does construct Eminem's identity or subjectivity by offering him the fuel that feeds his satiric engine. Those accusations that his detractors offer to discredit him help to define the content of his subsequent verse, and while one might add that he chooses which critiques to rebut, he, nevertheless, has to choose from the predetermined catalog of comments directed at himself and his work. His self then becomes a negotiation between those portions of his image that he cares to defend and those independent observations that others make. However, the rapper's powerful sense of self may actually motivate an unconscious surrender to the defining perceptions of others. He indicated in an interview for the VH1 special "Ultimate Albums" that he perceives the furor unleashed by his work as a contest that he will lose if he does not successfully reply to all insults and vituperation directed at him or punish his detractors with his potentially devastating burlesques. Yet his decisions to continue the argument act as a confirmation of those perceptions which he is attempting to vanquish either through reason or invective—that he is hateful, misogynistic, homophobic, disrespectful, violent, combative, transgressive and socially irresponsible—giving rise to more accusations of the same to which he will once again feel obliged to respond. Thus he is constructed out of his own controversy, one which he simultaneously perpetuates and remains entangled within. His conflict with the gay community is a case in point. He repeatedly suggested that if the gay community would stop accusing him of homophobia, he would stop being homophobic: "If ya'll leave me alone, this wouldn't have to be my M.O./I wouldn't have to go, eenie meenie meini, mo/Catch a homo by the toe." Yet this potentially conciliatory attitude further exacerbates the conflict. He becomes defined by his effort to avoid definition.

The central verses of the recording "The Way I Am," which include a variety of complaints about his treatment by the press and his fans, further frustrate efforts to recognize an autobiographical self, a clear reference for the "I" or the "self" in his verse. Even as he expresses exasperation over the constant controversy that engulfs him, he seems less than truthful. He threatens to abuse any fans that disturb him while he is out "eatin' or feedin' his daughter." I think we can ignore the amusingly weak grammar that suggests that he may eat his daughter and focus instead on the hyperbole of his threats. He says he is going to destroy his overly enthusiastic fans by lifting them "ten feet in the air" and, we must assume, throwing them down. In the third verse, he says that he is "thankful for every fan" that he gets, but that they are driving him "crazy," so crazy that he pulls out his hair in frustration. He also remarks that he wishes he would "die or get fired and dropped from [his] label." While the brooding angry speaker of the verse is ostensibly Marshall, the abuse and self-mutilation in his threats resembles Shady's satiric violence. To complicate matters further, in the second verse, he refers to himself in the third person as Eminem and

immediately follows the appellation with the first person pronoun "I"; thus the track which sought to clarify Marshall's feelings, to isolate the sentiments of an autobiographical "I" or self frustrates its own efforts by invoking all three of the rapper's primary personas. The effect is to make Marshall Mathers' identity just as slippery as the obviously fabricated ones. Moreover, if he were sincere about a desire to leave the industry, certainly that could be arranged without a great deal of difficulty, and if he actually hated all of the controversy that surrounds him, that also could be easily rectified by changing the content of his lyrics. However, in both scenarios, he would no longer have a career, and Eminem is certainly much happier with his career than these particular lyrics would suggest. He complains because rap music complains, because grumbling is expected. The lyrics of "The Way I Am," in spite of their touted "truth," are another example of Eminem's or Marshall's or Shady's theatrical posturing, although they are more representative of the erratic and fluid transformations of the psychotic Shady, than the discrete and calculated performances of the actor--Eminem.

The rapper's unwillingness to draw clear distinctions between his three personas is both the source of much of the controversy and his principal weapon in stomping out the fires that his incendiary words ignite. In the track "Marshall Mathers," the speaker of the poem reviles an unnamed critic who suggested that he has "fabricated [his] past" (probably his mother), yet in order to fend off charges that he is socially irresponsible and perhaps even dangerous, the rapper has repeatedly protested that his work is fictionalized. He defended himself against D'Angelo Bailey's lawsuit by arguing that the actual school room brawl described in "Brain Damaged" (*The Slim Shady LP--SSLP*) was so hyperbolic that no one could take it seriously. Moreover, he dated and later married and divorced a woman named Kim, but he also feigns her murder and the disposal of her body in "97 Bonnie and Clyde" (*SSLP*) and "Kim" (*MMLP*). He does "smoke weed" and probably takes pills (although in an interview with *Rolling Stone* he claims to have given up recreational drug use; Toure' 55), and he did "drop out of school," but he probably does not "kill people" or "die from an overdose and dig [himself] up out of [his] grave," all behaviors attributed to the "I" in "Role Model" (*SSLP*). In fact, the title and content of "Role Model" is intentionally ironic, provoking detractors by creating a catalog of villainies and then inviting children to emulate him. The problem arises from the fact that some of the crimes are, by the rapper's own admission, true, and the listener is left to differentiate between truth and falsity. Eminem's lyrics are a repository of pieces of his history rendered unreliable by the juxtaposition of his fantasies and provocations. When the "I" asserts itself, there can be no final determination of who is speaking. The Marshall Mathers persona confesses to doing "acid, crack, smack, [and] coke" in "Just Don't Give a Fuck." Later, in "I'm Shady," he withdraws all of these admissions, yet there is no ostensible appearance of Marshall in this verse spoken by Slim, the rapper's most notoriously unreliable alter-ego.

If all Eminem's principal speakers are unstable and unreliable, then they can only be certain to exist as speech acts or performances, and the duration of each persona's existence is determined by the length of the utterance. When Shady identifies himself and his army of followers in "The Real Slim Shady" (*MMLP*), he is referring to a self that was spoken into existence, one that only lives in recordings and other utterances, in sound and speech. The idea that he has become lost among his legion of imitators suggests the mass duplication of identities called into existence by similar vocalizations—"I'm Slim Shady" and "Hi, My Name is Slim Shady." The rappers assurance that he is the "real Shady" only contributes to the clamor and crush of Shadys since Shady does not have an independent corporeal existence even for his creator. Shady is only a linguistic construct, so all assertions of his presence are equally (un)believable. One can only say that one prefers a particular Shady performance or utterance of Shady. The only reliable and meaningful connection is between the identity of Shady and someone who raps about vicious, violent, and transgressive subjects. Thus the character is called into existence by each speech act, and the assertions that he makes are only meaningful in the context of other assertions that he makes.

If Slim, Marshall, and Eminem exist only as speech acts, then it would seem appropriate to examine the content of their utterances, and in short, they are preoccupied with themselves and particularly with the experience of being a rap star. Most obviously, Eminem's four solo albums (on a major label) trace the trepidation of his emergence and his subsequent explosive success. *The Slim Shady LP* is the most energetic and hopeful work, full of anticipation of success, but it also documents the disappointments of his early life and his difficulties being taken seriously as a rapper, a white man in a mostly black art scene. He opens his second album with the statement, "They say I can't rap about bein' broke no more" ("Kill You"), a prediction that only turns out to be partially true. He can only rap about being broke in the past tense, and he does. *The Marshall Mathers LP* is much darker that *SSLP* because the rapper has altered his content to rebut the barrage of protests leveled against his first album by critics and activists, and he spends a great deal of time talking back to his critics. *The Eminem Show* (*ES*) opens with a triumphant return to the stage and an elated announcement "It's so good to be back" ("White America"). While the subject matter retains some of the edge of *MMLP*, the speakers have returned to the energetic and enthusiastic personas of *SSLP*. The speaker seems liberated from the necessity of "dissing" his critics and free to talk about other subjects. Of course, there are plenty of insults in *The Eminem Show*, but the work does not seem as preoccupied with hating those who would deprive him of his opportunity for wealth and fame, perhaps because he has settled in the same; he has become confident in and comfortable with his continuing success. *Encore* is an elaboration of Shady's zany and often meaningless meanderings. Not since *SSLP* has the rapper been so liberated from purpose (however problematic) and vendetta. The *Encore* CD is often a venue for the showcasing of the rapper's

wordplay, his verbal dexterity, his free association, his satiric voices, and his puerile antics. At the conclusion of "Rain Man," he admits that he has had nothing to say: in "Big Weenie," he had something very important to say, but he "forgot what it is"; and in "Just Lose It," he anticipates the rap 'breaking down' and confesses that he has no lyric for the final verse: "I don't have any lines to go here so/ Duba, duba, duba…."

Tracing the (re)emergence of Slim Shady through three separate tracks on three separate CD's illustrates the self-referential and self-defining qualities of the rapper's work. The three tracks are also his three biggest hits which include "My Name Is," "The Real Slim Shady," and "Without Me." The first of these literally introduced Eminem, Marshall, and Shady to the world. It was the first track on the first album to be mass marketed and the first to get the rapper wide media attention. While the song as an object introduced all three personas, the lyrics of the song only name Slim. "The Real Slim Shady" (*MMLP*) constitutes a re-emergence of Slim as a remarkable success, so much so that he now has an army of followers, which we will call "Em-ulators," from whom he tries in vain to distinguish himself. He is back, feeling frisky, and causing havoc. However, the effort to identify the real Slim Shady is frustrated not only by the multiple personas of the rapper, but also by the authority of his followers. To find the real Slim Shady, one must recognize a speaker who is impersonating Marshall, who is impersonating Eminem, who is impersonating Slim Shady. The character is three times removed from authority or presence. Moreover, if Slim Shady is only a persona, is only language, then anyone who sings "Hi, My Name Is" (re)creates Slim Shady, and in spite of the rapper's initial effort to clarify his identity, he ultimately has to conclude that "Every single person is a Slim Shady lurkin'." In "Without Me" (*ES*), the persona announces his return and maintains that the popular music scene has been boring without him. He has returned to jazz things up, but has he actually been gone? If Slim Shady is only sound and air, and there is a Slim Shady in all of us, then Slim Shady has been lurking and replicating in the interval, re-emerging each time the CD spins or the audience sings, "I'm the real Shady." The rapper does, however, try to maintain his own sense of purpose, stating that even if "20 million other white rappers emerge," he will still be the most important, the first cause, the declaration of self that echoed twenty million times.

The "meta-rap" is a rap that comments or reflects on rapping—talking about talking--and this attribute of Eminem's lyrical content has a much more mundane manifestation than those which have been discussed thus far. Frequently the lyrics boast about how well the lyricist boasts or about the quality of the rap that the rapper is rapping at that moment. In "The Real Slim Shady" (*MMLP*), he immodestly asserts that he is one of the very best rappers in the industry: "I just shit it better than 90% of you rapper out can." In "What You Say" (*ES*), he simultaneously retracts and reasserts his contention that he is "best in the booth" since "a lot of truth is told in jest." And in "Criminal" (*MMLP*), he boasts

that no one can deter him from "topping these charts." Paradoxically, in the "thug rap" genre that Eminem embraces, achieving "best in the booth" status is equivalent to being "the most meanest MC" in the profession. Quality is determined by the speaker's raunchiness, remorselessness, and roguishness. Eminem adds to these traits self-deprecation and self-destructiveness. In "Role Model," he refers to his rap style as "warped," and in "Just Don't Give a Fuck," he is a "naughty rotten rhymer" who is "ill enough to straight up diss you for no reason" (*SSLP*). He confesses that "nobody is as ill as me" in "If I Had" (*SSLP*), and on *The Eminem Show*, he spits "The illest shit ever" ("Soldier") and is the "boogie monster of rap" ("Square Dance").

Eminem explains the paradox of his success (being worst has made him best or at least the most successful) and his explanations relate to his 'honesty.' He believes he is appreciated because he does not allow himself to be intimidated or dissuaded from pursuing his own vision of rap. He has not allowed his detractors to turn him from his original course to speak his mind whether or not the public is offended, to appeal to the iconoclastic and cynical segment of the youth market, the same segment which repudiates all that is indicative of the establishment and eschews restrictions and prohibitions leveled by parents, teachers, activists, and preachers. In "The Real Slim Shady," he explains that while his lyrics are intended to be humorous, his fans appreciate his courage in speaking his mind freely:

> …I'm only giving you
> Things you joke about with your friends inside your living room
> Only difference is I got the balls to say it in front of ya'll
> And I don't gotta be false or sugar coat it at all (*MMLP*)

In "Business," he describes the fans who rush the stage to "get to see an MC who breathes so freely," suggesting that he speaks without trepidation or regret.

Oddly, the rapper insists upon his integrity and accuracy even as he conversely insists that his lyrics are not reality. He does not commit the crimes described in his raps, yet he repeatedly declaims against those who say his work is fraudulent, so when he defends the veracity of his work, he must have a very narrow perception of truth that he is invoking. After all, in the opening segment of "Still Don't Give a Fuck" (*SSLP*), he actually ridicules those who take him too seriously. Probably, his affirmations of honesty refer to his artistic integrity. He remains true to his vision, not compromising his rap to appease his critics. The true/false binary that is disrupted in his lyrics embodies a problem at the center of American thug or gangsta rap. How do any of the participants gain credibility as "thugs" without going to jail? When they talk about how "ill" they are, how violent and disrespectful they are, why does anybody take them seriously? Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent, and Eminem are not criminals (at least not anymore); instead, they are rich men rapidly approaching or already arrived at middle age.

One way that rappers negotiate the contradiction at the center of their profession is by committing minor offenses that make them appear out of control or on the verge of major offenses. (For example, Eminem's pistol whipping of the bouncer whom he believes kissed his wife.) In this context, high profile lawsuits, though expensive, may be beneficial to rappers' careers. Eminem bleated bitterly about the lawsuits against him, but those suits kept him in the public eye and reinforced his "bad boy" image as well as his lyrical complaints. The formula for street credibility seems to necessitate the invocation of a difficult and criminal past from which the rapper has been reformed but into which he could, in a moment relapse, or from which he still bears physical or mental scars. Thug rapper 50 Cent has a shady gangster past, having been shot nine times, even once since he signed a record contract, an event for which he was dropped from his agreement with Columbia, and picked up by Eminem's Shady Records. The start up money for the original gangsta crew N.W.A. apparently included the proceeds from Eazy-E's drug trade. Of course the most notorious cases of gangsta rappers acting like gangsters are the Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls murders, not to mention the shoot out between Tupac and two off duty Atlanta police officers and the untimely death of Eminem's friend and colleague Proof in a night club parking lot. However, the majority of thug rappers seem content to allude to difficult and quasi-criminal adolescences in order to be taken seriously. The authenticity of gangsta rap is dependent upon an accurate portrayal of a difficult and dangerous urban street life and only those who have actually experienced it are qualified to comment. In the 2004 cover story for *Rolling Stone*, Eminem concedes that he wants to avoid the kind of trouble that he experienced with his two assault charges, but insists that the potential for street brawling is still in him. Thus he repudiates his quasi-criminal past while maintaining the same propensity could re-emerge at any time; he is not completely tame and, therefore, safe and boring, but he is not looking for trouble either (Toure' 56). Perhaps, the explanation for the veracity fault line in thug rap lies in the artist's ability to threaten convincingly. For the most part, rappers merely talk about crime and violence, and that talk is the violence.

Spittin' Bullets

Eminem consistently equates words with violent acts; he is spitting bullets from the mic and the bandstand. Gangsta rap involves an extended metaphor in which harsh words are parallel to violent actions or lethal weapons, but at stake are reputations and lifestyles, not (usually) lives. In the language of rap, "dissing" a rival is equivalent to killing or at least physically injuring him/her. After all, the same rivals who are consistently threatening to kill or do bodily injury to each other seldom resort to bullets and automatic weapons. Pulling a trigger on an individual means letting the vituperation fly and putting the offender in his place verbally. In the track "Just Don't Give a Fuck" (*SSLP*), Slim Shady reminds his colleagues, "It's a lyrical combat, gentlemen; hold your pistols." The image

involves an interesting duel/dual reference. In one fashion, the lyric can be construed as a warning to those rappers who would allow verbal animosity to degenerate into shots fired. He is reminding them to maintain their composure and settle for harsh language rather than bloodshed. The passage may also allude to the genital cupping that is ubiquitous among Hip Hop stars when they perform. The rapper's imagery reveals the dangers of failing to answer all of the charges and criticisms leveled against him. If he hesitates to pull the trigger on defamation, he will become an easy target for anyone who wants to achieve a high public profile by attacking him. The bravado in the passage demonstrates his willingness to take on all challengers in the rap game. In the second stanza of the same track, he describes the incident in which he pistol whipped John Guerra, and he argues that refusing to use deadly force on the violator was "actually better" because he could subsequently add insult to injury, which he does in several tracks on *The Eminem Show*. In the final stanza, he describes himself as a "thug" who delivers invective rather than bullets: "I'm like a thug…/I spew it, and look how I got you bitches rockin' to it."

"Criminal," from *The Marshall Mathers LP,* begins with a correlation between words and stab wounds: "My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge/That'll stab you in the head whether you're a fag or a lez." The head is probably not the most effective place to stab a person, considering the difficulty of penetrating the skull, so the passage probably refers to the psychological effect that his words have on those who are his satirical targets. In "Remember Me" (*MMLP*), the rapper plays upon a criminal cliché: "When I go out, I'ma go out shootin'/I don't mean when I die; I mean when I go out to the club, stupid." Outwardly, the reversal of audience expectations suggests merely a change in location for his rampage—street violence intruding on the more insular world of the night club. However, he also intimates a metaphorical connotation; he is not talking about a literal shoot out with guns, but a battle rap. When he goes out to the club, he is going to shoot insults and expletives randomly, destroying anyone who constrains his rap ambitions. In "Monkey see, Monkey do," lyrics released from the recording sessions for Eminem's fourth solo album (but which did not make it onto the final version), the rapper likens writing his lyrics to "smearing blood with a paint brush," and later he longs to exchange insults with a rapper who is actually his equal lyrically:

> I pray for the day that someone who spits with the caliber that
> Nas or Jay does
> Opens up his jaw to say something or rattle my name off…
> So I can blow the fucking dust off this chainsaw
> And give him the surgery that he came for.

The connection between the word "caliber" and the quality of one's speech equates words to bullets. The subsequent image of the chainsaw is interesting in

the Eminem canon of imagery. It is an allusion to the rapper's interest in serial killer mythology and horror films, particularly the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; however, it also alludes to traditional satiric imagery. In the past, delicate and subtle satire was likened to a rapier while heavy-handed and clumsy satire was represented by the broad sword or ax. Interestingly, Eminem has chosen a metaphor for his satire that is even more vulgar than the latter. His instrument is not delicate, and the "surgery" that he performs is going to be as subtle as dismemberment. The extended metaphor or narrative that unifies the recordings of *Encore* constitutes yet another example of the parallel between satiric words and bullets. The CD cover imagery in which Eminem kills his audience is supplemented in the audio dramas—"Paul," "Em Calls Paul," "Final Thought," "[Curtains]"—punctuating the musical tracks. The audio sketches speculate on whether Eminem has purchased a new gun, the same that is featured in the cover art in which he is depicted murdering his audience. The gun is an analogue for his confrontational and abusive lyrics, words with which the author is going to assault and scatter his recently acquired bourgeois audience, not to mention his creeping respectability. The gun is his mouth and the bullets his murderous invectives.

In most of the tracks that Eminem performs with D12, the medley of competing voices equate the ability to perpetrate acts of violence to skill in rapping, the rapper's aptitude translated into an allegory of violence. The various speakers attempt to reveal their recklessness and lunacy by describing the creative means they use to harm others. However, the practice is actually intended to showcase their skill in rapping rather than their violent behavior. After all, they are spitting bullets not shooting them. The colorful and engaging descriptions of murder, rape, theft, and assault are intended to emphasize their language skills and their creativity, not their criminal dossiers. In the track "Under the Influence" (*ES*), Eminem offers a litany of abuses, including "I'm like a fuckin' wasp in the hospital lost/Stingin' the fuck out of everybody I come across." This vivid image is particularly suitable to the current topic because it invokes the traditional idea that satire "stings" and "bites" its targets. The allusion to the hospital can be a metaphor for an environment that is either sick or crazy (Like Ginsberg's "America who coughs all night and won't let us sleep"), or it can suggest that he is institutionalized, a thematic common to the Slim Shady persona. Eminem's career of evil is followed by the contributions of his crew who echo the descriptions of his erratic behavior. Kuniva creates his own colorful comparison between words of violence and violence itself, "I got a yuk mouth and it's polluted/ I cock it back then shoot it." On the track "In the Morning" form *D12 World*, Eminem concedes the he would rather pick up a pencil than a pistol" and particularly because his satiric barbs are so much more effective than violence; he can destroy his enemies with words, but his detractors' "inoffensive satires never bite": "These words stick to you like crazy glue/ When you diss me cause they just bounce off me like bullets do 50" (a reference to the repeated attempts

on the life of rapper 50 Cent). The track "Get my Gun," also from *D12 World,* offers a variety of scenarios in which the medley of speakers are provoked into violence by the harsh words of another; however, in the penultimate verse, Kon Artist reveals that the violence is an allegory of battle rapping: "Bang, bang, bang, nigga, pow, pow, pow/Everybody bustin' rhymes like they Ra, Ra, Ra." The term rhymes may have been selected because of its tonal similarity to the expression "rounds," meaning, of course, bullets. (It is actually difficult to determine which word is being used in the passage.) The subsequent verse verifies that the "bustin'" is not actually gun fire because the opponents carry their argument into the street where body guards try to forestall the potential violence. However, after Kuniva attempts to settle the dispute with words rather than weapons, he recognizes that his antagonist is determined to "resort to the heater."

Other D12 tracks develop the parallel between guns and tongues. "When the music Stops" (*ES*) addresses those members of the audience who fail to recognize where Hip Hop ends and reality begins, and here D12 is not talking about the critics who refuse to view Hip Hop as a mental and verbal exercise and who remain fixed on its presumed negative social impact. Instead, the recording focuses on rap fans who forget that rap is a verbal game and an entertainment not an instruction manual for murder. Eminem's contribution to the track equates battle raps to gun battles: "see me leap out, fuck shootin', I'm just tryin' to knock his teeth out/Fuck with me now bitch, let's see you freestyle…" (freestyle"—a spontaneous rap). Eminem gloats that his opponent will not be able to speak once his teeth are gone. He concludes by adding, "This is crazy the way we act/When we confuse Hip Hop with real life when the music stops." Another example from the same song includes Proofs subtle equation of bullets to words. He creates a metaphor in which he simultaneously moves the audience and with violence and with diction. His violent rap makes the floor tiles move and roof collapse. The final few lines of his stanza suggest that credibility in rap is derived from one's ability to threaten convincingly:

> It's Hill Street, this is hardcore blues,
> Put a gun to rap checkin' all our dues
> Nigga, or make the news, betcha all move
> When the uzi pops you better drop when the music stops.

With the allusion to *Hill Street Blues*, Proof equates rap to television violence and to the blues tradition, a musical genre that Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* identifies as the sublimated rage of African Americans translated into an artful language of protest rather than violence (104). The image of menace and street violence ends when the music stops. The uzi pops within the meta-song, but the audience is urged to dive for cover "when the music stops," which can suggest that the audience is so

frightened by the lyrics that they are prepared to conceal themselves, but when the sound ends, they are released from fear. Or the passage may suggest the converse: so long as the music continues, the violence will be feigned, but once the distraction of music is removed, real guns will replace lyrical armaments, perhaps an allusion to the idea that violent entertainment actually averts violence by offering a safe and creative outlet for hostilities. The passage, "Put a gun to rap, checkin' all our dues" can be an acknowledgement that rappers include guns and threats in their work because it is expected in their musical medium. Bizarre subsequently offers a parodic account of the effect that music has had on his life. Listening to N.W.A. landed him in jail. His rap concludes with a gunshot that ends the song, implying that violence in rap is entirely lyrical fantasy: "I'm reachin' for the glock when the music stops [Bang!]"

D12's "The Rap Game" from the *8 Mile* soundtrack includes a similar usage of gunshots to signify well executed raps. The lyricist figuratively pulls the trigger on his rap, meaning that he articulates a violent rap well. Eminem's gun blast follows his fantasy about shooting an unnamed person who is probably Lynn Cheney. However, the comment suggests that his gun fight is lyrical. In the first line, he equates silence to death and suggests that to continue to fight is to continue to rap: "I'ma get snuffed, cuz I ain't said enough to pipe down/I pipe down when the [White House] gets wiped out." In the subsequent lyric when he says that he will "go up in the oval office…and flip whatever ain't tied down upside down," he refers metaphorically to the damage he does with his dirty rotten rhymes, not his hands. When Swifty McVay says that he takes "pleasure in layin' a nigga down daily," he is referring to the rivals he devastates with his satire. Kuniva begins his verse with "gunshots and screaming" and adds "I walk in the party and just start bustin'"; he is spraying the crowd with insults and derision and no doubt his actual spittle as he enunciates his verse. "Bustin" probably alluding to the slang phrase "bustin'a freestyle or 'bustin' a rhyme,' both of which indicate words more than guns although the allusion to "bustin a cap" (firing a bullet) is also a possibility. Once again, Proof offers the most explicit articulation of the parallel between rap and gun battles: "So we can battle for raps, we can battle with gats/Matter of fact we can battle for plaques."

The chorus of "The Rap Game," like its title, emphasizes the playful exuberance of thug rap. It invokes Roland Barthes' post-modern/poststructuralist axiom that language is "play" because it cannot signify consistently or accurately (16). The "rap game" suggests that hardcore lyrics should not be taken seriously and that the audience should explore the multitude of layers of meaning for the words that the MC's employ; their words are merely artistic and linguistic sport, a prolonged effort to find new metaphors by equating words with bullets or tongues and guns. Killing rivals in rap lyrics is an analogue for insulting, humiliating, and silencing them. The bullets are not real, the MC's are spittin' bullets. 50 Cent, who performs the chorus, reminds the audience that he is not "digging a hole for this rap game," alluding to the hole in which he would dispose of a real rather

than a metaphorical corpse. The same image also denies a self-destructive agenda. He thus asserts that he will not allow the rap game to destroy him. Instead, he will "make makin' records look easy."

Rapping the Writing Process

Eminem's lyrics frequently document his writing as well as his performance processes. In other words, his lyrics are a chronicle of their own composition. He offers insight into his expectations, intentions, influences, practices, and techniques in writing and rapping, and just as the Romantic poets of the 19th century often wrote their best work while complaining that they were unable to write effectively, some of Eminem's most high profile lyrics reveal an uncertainty and even despondency about becoming and remaining successful. His raps are being written even as they are performed and recorded and not entirely in the sense of revision that takes place at the last minute or extemporaneous additions or deletions in performance. His completed lyrics are frequently about reaching or failing to reach completion.

Eminem makes many cursory allusions to his pen and its activities. In "Who Knew" (*MMLP*), he facetiously quips, "Damn! How much damage can you do with a pen?" "Criminal," from the same CD, reveals the rapper's sincerity in his verse and suggests that he is writing even as he speaks: "Listen to the sound of me spillin' my heart through this pen." In "Soldier" (*ES*), he refers to the perception of his work, "Every time I write a rhyme people think it's a crime." Here again the process of writing is equated to the sound of the words being spoken; he writes and speaks at the same time, perhaps alluding to the spontaneity of the battle rap in which the performer must improvise in order to compete, so the sense of immediacy and presence is conveyed in his recordings. He may be suggesting that he is still a free-styling battle rapper even at the height of his recording fame; thus he relates the necessity of extemporization in that art form: he is "Freestylin' every word that [he] spits" in the track "Cum on Everybody" (*SSLP*).

While rapping, he also evaluates the quality of his speech and immodestly applauds the clever content of his verse. "The Real Slim Shady," "Criminal," "Business" and many other works include references to his ability to produce eloquent and succinct articulations. In "Soldier" (*ES*), he explains that he speaks slowly so the adolescent audience can follow his ideas. In "What You Say," he remembers the performance coaching that he received from Dr. Dre as they began their musical collaboration. His mentor reminded him to keep plowing through the lyrics even if he makes mistakes. In "Still Don't Give a Fuck" (SSLP), Eminem "gets imaginative with a mouthful of adjectives,/A brain full of adverbs, and a box full of laxatives," and in "Till I Collapse," he assures his audience that he is "clever when [he] put[s] together every verse."

The epistolary structure of the track "Stan" from *The Marshall Mathers LP* makes it one of the more self-reflexive works in Eminem's catalog. Here the

rapper imagines the mental deterioration of an obsessed fan who cannot accept the recording artist's indifference to his adulation. The work is self-referential, including pencil scratching sound effects that imply the letters are being written even as the record plays. Stan discusses his writing as he writes, referring to letters sent as well as mailing addresses scribbled sloppily or printed neatly. In the second verse, the fan reviles the rapper for failing to correspond and for refusing to sign an autograph for his little brother Matthew. In the final verse, Slim Shady responds with the desired script, offering his apologies and sending an autographed starter cap. Of course, by now it is too late, Stan has killed himself and his girlfriend in an imitation of Slim Shady. The violence is Stan's final effort to demonstrate the kinship that he shares with his idol.

At a more interesting level, the recording "Stan" is a dialogue with the self; it is a series of letters written to and by the writer/rapper. Since his extraordinary success, Eminem/Slim Shady has become alienated from his former life as a rap fan. In the persona of Stan, he tries to link the past and present. However, the successful recording artist and the desperate fan constitute the irreconcilable extremities or antitheses within Eminem/Marshall's character. Slim does not have time to reflect on his past embodied in the person of Stan, or on the life that he left behind, and when he does respond in the final verse, his commentary is apologetic and polite, but also condescending. He meditates upon a desperate and melancholy life to which he cannot return. Obviously, Stan is just another character that Eminem has created. Stan's solicitous commentary is not even performed let alone written by another rapper. The lyrical paradox evokes the Freudian artistic platitude that all creative manifestations are the self, are just alternate facets of the artist's own character. Here the dialogue is carried on between Slim, the most fictionalized of all Marshall's selves, and Stan, a character who has only appeared once, so far, in the Eminem catalog. They are linked literally and figuratively through writing, in the sense that they are both a product of Eminem/Marshall's pen and in the sense that they are writing letters to each other. Stan writes about the similarities in the lives of the two characters, and when Stan pleads with Slim that they "should be together too," he seems to be evoking a homoerotic or homosocial longing, but, metaphorically, the line urges a union of two parts of the fragmentary subject. Slim needs to remain conscious of his origins in order to remain balanced; he needs to remember the poor and desperate self that he mines for the autobiographical jewels that constitute his oft celebrated raps. The tragic conclusion of the track (in which Slim recognizes that Stan is the same person who drove his car off a bridge with his girlfriend in the trunk) can be understood as an object lesson reminding the rap star of the dangers of losing sight of his past. Since "Stan" is the second track on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, it may also be intended to signal the transition from the maniacal persona of Slim to the darker and more introspective persona of Marshall. Slim is, after all, discredited in the song for having failed to recognize the desperation of his fan.

He begins his missive in a patronizing tone and quickly learns that it is he who is to learn a painful lesson.

The continuity between Slim and Stan is further reinforced by the fact that neither character is actually the controlling consciousness behind the song/poem. It is Eminem or Marshall or perhaps an unnamable subject who writes and performs "Stan." There is a presence behind Slim's which speaks or writes both Slim and Stan into existence. In other words, there is a writer writing or creating the writers, and that writer is the real rapper. There is no stylistic shift in syntax, diction, or tone between Stan's and Slim's letters. The rhythm and rhyme remain uninterrupted, and yet ostensibly Stan is not a rapper and, therefore, would not rhyme his missives to his idol, nor could Slim, who is a rapper, be expected to rhyme his response. The consciousness that is writing the writers rhymes the dialogue between the personas. So the scribbling within the track's sound effects is actually Marshall/Eminem producing the letters. Thus the track is once again being written even as it is performed. In addition, "Stan" seems to be a vehicle whereby Marshall can force Slim to apologize to his audience and offer an insight into his lyrical intentions which are simply to create amusing and lively verse. Thus the overarching presence within the recording is acting as its own chorus, offering an explanation to his fans or an interpretation of the work that he produces: fans should not assume that Slim's antics are a reflection of reality or of Marshall/Eminem, and this creates a dialogue with the self of a completely different kind. Marshall is actually behaving sympathetically and solicitously toward one and disciplining the other self.

Predictably the most prolonged commentary that Eminem offers on the writing process is in the soundtrack for *8 Mile,* a film which dramatizes the rapper's struggles to succeed as well as the development of his confidence and his style. Each of the three solo raps written for the soundtrack capture the movement from doubt and disillusionment to conviction, anger, and determination. "Lose Yourself" opens with the description of the rapper's stage fright as he prepares to battle at a local club. The recording ruminates over the necessity of optimizing his single opportunity for success. He has to be ready to perform with confidence and skill when his fortunes change. In the second verse, he contemplates the drawbacks of stardom, not from the perspective of a character that has made it to the top of his profession and has become disillusioned, but from the point of view of a person who is giving himself permission to fail by considering the drawbacks of success. However, by the third verse, he has rediscovered his desperation and consequent determination: "Success is my only motherfuckin' option, failure's not…/This may be the only opportunity that I got." As with "Lose Yourself," the song entitled "8 Mile" begins with doubt and moves toward resolution. He is ready to give up, "Why do I put up this fight? Why do I still write?" He wonders why he cannot perform under pressure, "…where do my punchlines go?" However, in the final passage, he

experiences a surge of confidence and inspiration—"a new burst of energy"—and he signals his readiness to face any opponent.

While "Lose Yourself" and "8 Mile" follow the emotional process of composition, the track "Rabbit Run" comments on his efforts to put words on a page; it is a narrative of his writer's block, replete with the sound of pages being ripped out a notebook and wadded up. His efforts include false starts, but he recognizes that if he can get the first line of the verse, the rest will flow: "All I need's a line/But sometimes I don't always find the right words to rhyme." He follows his description of bafflement with an example—"Yea sometimes, sometimes, sometimes/It's just sometimes…." The repetition of the unspecified adverb dramatizes the moment of uncertainty, the moment in which the writer does not know how to proceed, and when he does begin writing again, he is dissatisfied with the quality of his work:

> This half-assed rhyme with this half-assed piece a paper [rip]
> I'm desperate at my desk
> I can't get the rest of this shit off my chest again
> Stuck in this slum, can't think of nothin'
> Fuck, I'm stuck, but wait, here comes somethin' [crumpled paper]
> Nope, it's not good enough, scribble it out
> New pad, crinkle it up, and throw the shit out….

The above passage suggests that his compulsion to write will not allow him to rest until he has satisfactorily articulated the ideas troubling him. Here the rapper is creating exceptional lyrics even as he complains about the difficulty of creating acceptable lyrics. The track even documents its own breakthrough. As with the two previous works from the same soundtrack, "Rabbit Run" includes a reversal of fortune and a move toward confidence and success.

The evolution of each of the three raps from *8 Mile* reveals the transitory nature of creativity. Indeed, the very project of the film may be to portray the protagonist's effort to control his artistic flow. The successful battle rapper cannot wait for the spirit to move him; he must perform brilliantly every time he has the opportunity, or he will be eliminated. Even though the film documents the support that Jimmy Smiths received from his close friends, at least two of the solo tracks ("Lose Yourself" and "Rabbit Run") are performed without the usual accompaniment of his crew (namely Proof who usually shouts, speaks, and sings the supporting lyrics), and this singularity may be intended to emphasize the solitary nature of success. He can rely only upon himself when he takes the stage to battle another rapper. Jimmy is repeatedly depicted writing his lyrics while listening to rhythms on his headset. The recurring image captures the character's solitary commitment to his work, even when the storyline suggests that further efforts in that vein may be futile and perhaps even foolish. The determination reveals a compulsion to pursue rap even in the face of failure. The

music that accompanies "Rabbit Run" climbs but never reaches a plateau, creating suspense and urgency that is never interrupted by a chorus. The final line implies both release and continuation. At the conclusion of the statement, "If I had a chance I'd grab it, Rabbit, run," the music ends abruptly. Similarly, the stress in "Lose Yourself" builds throughout the song while the chorus offers no release, but instead quickens the movement toward apotheosis, toward the long awaited opportunity to shine. Just as "Rabbit Run" concludes with Jimmy's commitment to strive for success, "Lose Yourself" closes with the impending transition from solitude to multitude, from doubt to courage, and from failure to triumph.

The Rap Game

Thug rap is a system that generates meaning and sales through the interplay of oppositions. It is an institution and practice with a linguistic structure. The artists create an identity or a reputation at the expense of other rappers, their critics, or their audience. The introduction of a new voice into the rap system creates a shift in meaning of the preexisting voices and defines those to come. Eminem's music in particular requires a rebuttal to which he can respond, thus keeping the commentary lively and encouraging the circulation of meanings; the text of the tracks generates still more text in a perpetual cycle of hit and run. Eminem and his colleagues would have little to say if dissenting voices did not create further occasion for complaint, but the oppositional system of rap has still more significant manifestations.

The battle rap is perhaps the most blatant example of the antithetical organization of rap music. The participants are given a specific amount of time to offer insults to their opponents, all of which will carry an implied repudiation on the part of the speaker. In other words, those insults leveled at the opponent are assumed to be attributes of that individual only, not the speaker. In the target's rebuttal, once again the accusations leveled are a means for the speaker to define the self in opposition to that which he recognizes in or projects onto his challenger. Thus the ubiquitous self-creating quality of rap and Hip Hop is uninterrupted even when the speaker is characterizing others. Those attributes reviled in the denunciation of the opponent are as central to the self-definition of the speaker as they are presumably to the target. Of course, there is an assumption that none of the attributes are accurate portrayals of the combatants, thus the antithetical structure of the rap masks an underlying emptiness. Few of the charges leveled are factual, so none of the words connect with reality. They are only meaningful in the interplay between antithetical voices. The verbal exchange of the battle rap is play, the opponent a canvas upon which the speaker paints his most creative fantasies of dominance, submission, and humiliation and displays his cleverness and eloquence.

The same dual/duel system suggested by the battle rap structure shapes the broader debate taking place between Eminem and his detractors, particularly

hostile members of the Hip Hop community. The exchange of accusations or insults between Eminem and other combatants (Cannabis, JaRule, and Benzino to name a few) revolves around a few standard dualities, many of which are related to the respective masculinities of the participants: male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, clever/dull, success/failure, strong/weak, authentic/fake, violator/victim, veracity/falsehood, young/old, innovative/derivative, original/overdone etc. The combatants define themselves and others by laying claim to the favorable category within the antithetical structures and by assigning their enemies to the debased position. Eminem frequently invokes his masculinity, but it is generally in a context where another's is denigrated. If he is a powerful and virile man, then his adversary is equated to a woman or an effeminate male. When Eminem refers to Moby as a "36 year old bald headed fag" in "Without Me" (*ES*), the rapper defines himself as young, hirsute, powerful, successful, and heterosexual. The accusations that he levels at his detractors define him, not just because they cast aspersions on his good character, but because they reveal those attributes that he has denied in his own character, the attributes that are abhorrent to him—the not self.

Gangsta or thug rap music can be understood as an echo chamber in which one voice generates another which invokes the first or perhaps a third—words begetting words—the reverberations continuing until the public loses interest, and while this contentiousness would seem to be a disruption of the work or a hindrance to the profession, it is, in reality, the work and the profession. Hardcore rap is often composed of a series of highly publicized disputes. Anthony Bozza describes the rap industry as "a neverending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration" (36). Some will attack a successful rapper just to achieve a higher public profile for themselves. This is Eminem's explanation for the presumably unprovoked attacks of Benzino and JaRule. The theory of course is to get the more successful rapper to talk back so that the audience will buy both recordings in order to hear each side of the conversation.

A similar relationship exists between Eminem and his audience who talk back by buying or ignoring his work. The rapper can subsequently modify his response by giving the audience more of what it likes and by avoiding that material to which it was unresponsive. Eminem for example expresses reluctance at resurrecting Slim Shady for the song "Without Me": "I've created a monster, cuz nobody wants to/See Marshall no more they want Shady" (*ES*). The implication is that he must return to Slim in order to satisfy his audience; thus finances are determining the nature and quality of his speech. In this context, the celebrity/fan and rich/poor dichotomies are deconstructed. The wealthy rap celebrity works for his fans, and they collectively manipulate him. Those who have scarcely enough money to purchase a music CD, put the rapper to work, and they want to hear him define himself in opposition to them—to their quiet (sub)urban lives, to their boring jobs, to their modest incomes, to their comfortable and non-violent relationships, to their polite and even sheepish

behavior. They pay to hear the gangster rap about his anti-social high jinks, his sociopathic tendencies, and these extravagant words offer a release from the audience's drudgeries.

The activists and critics also define the nature of the rapper's lyrical content by forcing him to reply to their accusations. Eminem complains about his failure to get reasonable reviews from music critics, reviews that reflect his level of skill and popularity. He has been particularly vociferous in his complaints against *The Source*, which will not give him a good review, so he impugns their fairness, provoking still more bad reviews and subsequently more complaints. The perpetrator/victim, benefit/detriment, and right/wrong structures are dismantled within these debates. While such ongoing disputes would seem to be a detriment to one or the other party in contention, both sides actually benefit. For example, the February 2004 issue of *The Source* contains exceedingly critical articles about Eminem, articles that address the controversy surrounding the release of racist raps recorded by him as a teenager. While ostensibly the issue would seem to be a hindrance to Eminem's career, it actually provides him with a great deal of free publicity. He is featured on the cover and is the subject of three articles in the issue. Paradoxically, *The Source* reviles Eminem, yet capitalizes upon his celebrity in order to sell copies. The subtitle "The Most Explosive Issue Ever" is obviously calculated to generate sales. *The Source* is loving/hating, helping/hindering, promoting/dislodging, praising/denigrating, and marketing/withdrawing simultaneously.

Chatter about Chatterers Chattering

In the track "Without Me," Eminem burlesques the artist formerly known as Prince for turning "himself into a symbol" (*ES*). Although he sees Prince's actions as a cause for ridicule, Eminem inadvertently invokes the post-modern bromide that everything is text, that all the information we process is more language never actually substance. Prince does not turn himself into a symbol, he draws attention to the fact that we are already symbols; he draws attention to the impossibility of manipulating or processing information without language. Even when Prince adopted an image rather than a name to signify the idea of him, he still had to refer to himself first as "The artist Formerly Known as Prince" and later as "The Artist," both of which still call him Prince, the latter invoking the former which invokes the original name.

It seems appropriate that the rapper who has an investment in articulating ideas clearly would have a problem with an unpronounceable symbol, but he does not acknowledge the extent to which he has become a symbol himself, and not just because he dons masks for the world and has come to represent a series of repugnant and/or desirable qualities in youth, but because he is nothing but the language that he uses to describe himself or that which others use to understand him and speak him into existence. Inadvertently, his lyrics capture this idea in that they seldom manage to point beyond the process

by which and the context within which they are being articulated. His words refer to his and other people's words; they never touch an ulterior reality. His words are composed of pronounceable symbols but symbol all the same, and the same symbols that compose him.

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