

Abortion and Rap Music: A Literary Study of the Lyrics of Representative Rap Songs

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I WAS FIRST INTRODUCED to rap music by a student at Cleveland State University many years ago. The young man gave me a cassette of a then current controversial rapper. I found that I enjoyed the music immensely.

While I will never surrender my love for Respighi or opera, I came to understand why artists such as Eminem are popular—immensely popular—with our students. The music is often quite catchy, and the lyrics of some songs may be the perfect antidote to the level of political correctness that has gripped American colleges and universities.¹ Contemporary music sings about drugs, life in the ghetto, life in the suburbs, rebellion, and sex—the very topics that people who thought that they were pioneers of a new music in the 1950s sang about were also the topics of the pioneers of the new music of the 1960s and the 1970s, and now of the rappers.

When I thought about what might be suitable to present at a UFL conference, I thought that, instead of the “usual” literary analysis paper, I would investigate how rap music addresses abortion, while keeping two purposes in mind. First, faculty (most of whom are at least two decades beyond the ages of their students) should know something about the contemporary music that our students listen to, if not for a positive evaluation of the music, then at least for the sake of knowledge. Second, and more germane to our purposes, although it may be viewed by consensus as an art form of significant rebellion against social mores, I argue that rap music, when it concerns abortion, espouses traditional pro-life positions. It may be too radical a claim to assert that if today’s young people are much more pro-life than past generations, rap music contributed to this generational growth towards pro-life viewpoints. However, the question that I will research here is interesting: if rap is so

violent, so demeaning, so vulgar, so profane, so unorthodox, so hedonistic, so indicative of a culture's collapse, then why is it that any right-to-lifer would feel comfortable singing its lyrics on abortion?

My initial research showed that abortion, while not a major theme in rap music, is at least a significant topic. Problems in my methodology arose immediately. Locating songs that deal with abortion involved some rather difficult and time-consuming searches of various databases and internet search engines. It helped too to ask those people who knew most about my subject, my students. Class discussion about assigned essays often falters because few students read them, but when I casually mentioned in discussion with some students that I was working on a literary analysis of rap lyrics, suggestions flowed freely. After compiling a list of songs that seemed most important for review, my next step was to obtain library copies of cassettes and CDs as quickly as possible so that I could either purchase the copies myself or be knowledgeable about what I noted in the delivery of the lyrics.

One other matter must be addressed since it helped the methodology of this presentation. This year's paper developed from a workshop that I presented at last year's conference at which I offered preliminary comments on the lyrics. I was fortunate that I had an entire session to present my research. Thus, I had freedom to play certain excerpts from songs so that the audience would hear the dissonant rhythm and the complex rhyme patterns that are constituent features of rap music. I printed out the lyrics for some of the songs from reputable internet sites so that the audience could follow along as the artist performed the segment of the song. Instead of merely reading results of my own research, I thought that I would conduct the workshop as a class, playing certain excerpts and then asking the attendees what they thought about the songs or the lyrics.

There is a good and a bad effect in the way that last year's workshop was conducted. Unfortunately, the participatory style of the workshop prohibited us from discussing all of the songs that I wished to cover. We simply ran out of time. However, what seemed unfortunate was really fortunate, for the conversation among the attendees was so engaged and perceptive that I was reluctant to end the discussion to move on to

another sample lyric. Thus, while I had prepared ten songs for consideration, we were able only to hear and discuss three songs in the hour and fifteen minutes allotted.

One song that we did not have time to consider but that will be evaluated here is “Abortion” by Doug E. Fresh, released in 1986. The first song that we had time to review last year, “Retrospect for Life,” released by Common in 1997, engaged attendees with its style and its message. I was impressed with the intense discussion that followed. The second song that we had time to discuss (even if our conversation had to be truncated) was the 2001 song “Real Killer” by Tech N9ne. These three songs form the basis of the present discussion.

What were the results of our discussion? What literary commentary could I make about the various songs concerning abortion? What conclusions can be reached about rap music and its concern with abortion? In this paper I intend to critique the above-mentioned songs from a more detailed right-to-life perspective. I will proceed chronologically, presuming that the message of one song will construct a composite view of rap’s treatment on abortion.

DEFINITION OF “RAP”

Before discussing the three songs, let me propose a definition of “rap music” for the dual purpose of being able to identify songs that fit into the category and to exclude many other songs that cannot be classified as rap even though they concern abortion. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “rap” as “a style of popular music (developed by New York Blacks in the 1970s) in which words ([usually] improvised) are spoken rhythmically and often in rhyming sentences over an instrumental backing” (“Rap”). Elsewhere, in the online version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, rap is defined as “the competitive use of rhyming lines spoken over an ever-more-challenging rhythmic base” (“What Is Rock?”).

Thus, according to these definitions, several noteworthy songs about abortion have been excluded from this study. “Bodies” by the Sex Pistols, an early abortion song released in 1977, is appropriately tempestuous (to illustrate how wild the mental state can become when

abortion disturbs one's psyche) but should be classified more as hard rock than as rap. In 1989 Nikki D released "Daddy's Little Girl," a song that suggests that the mother who aborted can rely only on her father after her abortion. Even though this song "was the first [by a] female rapper to rhyme about abortion, from a young woman's perspective" (Marable), "Daddy's Little Girl" has a much slower tempo and thus would not qualify as rap. In 1990 DC Talk released "Children Can Live (Without It)," which has a traditional rock structure and beat. The self-evident "Abortion Is Murder," released in 1994 by P.O.D. (an acronym for Payable on Death), can be classified more as metal or punk than as rap. Perhaps the only connection that this song has to rap is the presentation of the lyrics, which are not so much sung as they are shouted. Two songs released in 1997 ("Brick" by Ben Folds Five and "In America" by Creed) are excluded for a couple of reasons. Although it is not as slow in tempo as "Daddy's Little Girl," "Brick" is a traditional rock song whose lyrics are clearly understandable and not as complex as those in rap songs. "In America" must be excluded, even though it criticizes abortion as national policy, since it carries a more traditional rock structure and beat.ⁱⁱ

A final aspect that is prominent in the definition of rap must be clarified. Lexicographers and music critics have much to say about rap as a political tool for powerless groups in society, including this comment:

Rap had a long history in African-American culture; however, it came to musical prominence as part of the hip-hop movement. Public Enemy used new digital technology to sample (use excerpts from other recordings) and recast the urban soundscape from the perspective of African-American youth. This was music that was at once sharply attuned to local political conditions and resonant internationally. By the mid-1990s rap had become an expressive medium for minority social groups around the world. ("What Is Rock?")

Thus, from its beginnings, rap has always been controversial, if only because it is the expression of views opposed to the dominant culture. Since the dominant culture supports abortion, rap would thus be a natural vehicle for the controversy over abortion.

Furthermore, I find it interesting what music critics do not say about rap and its political purpose. In 1991 Michael Eric Dyson summarized rap's approach to women in purely traditional feminist literary critical terms. For Dyson, "[t]he constant references to women as 'skeezers,' 'bitches,' and 'ho's' only reinforces [sic] the perverted expression of male dominance and patriarchy and reasserts the coerced inferiority and objectification of women as sexual 'things' exclusively intended for male pleasure" (21).

As recently as August 2000, an online article in *Billboard* discusses the political activism of the "new hip-hop generation," but the activism that is discussed is not abortion, but other social concerns:

Inspired as much by today's headlines and community issues as by their own philosophies of life, a new wave of artists is taking hip-hop to another level with expressive, message-filled rhymes laced over inventive beats that entertain and inform—without preaching. At the forefront of this new beat generation are Capitol's Dilated Peoples and Interscope's Jurassic 5, who join Mos Def, Common, Black Eyed Peas, dead prez, Channel Live, and Reflection Eternal among the ranks of activist hip-hop Acts.... "I feel I've helped open people's eyes to another brand of music that isn't all about ice, cars, and how many women you've fucked," says Common. "And that brand is about love, being creative, expressing yourself, and individual responsibility." (Mitchell et al.)

Another artist, Speech (from Arrested Development), states that the group sings "about the realities of life from a different perspective: about children without fathers, about 16-year-old single mothers feeling trapped" (Mitchell et al.). A list of organizations at the end of this article identifies the concerns of modern rappers: programs designed "to teach teens how to react if they're detained by the police," efforts to preserve "culture and education," AIDS awareness, and voter registration (Mitchell et al.).

Anne O'Connell's 2003 online article "A Feminist Approach to Female Rap Music" is especially interesting in that it does not say that abortion constitutes part of the feminist agenda. O'Connell does, however, point out what female rappers do accomplish:

Through the use of powerful lyrics, these artists use language and images which

allow women to lessen their sexual insecurities and inhibitions. Following their predecessors of women's blues, female rappers have released their desires instead of repressing them, denying themselves to be victimized. Through the use of lyrics and style, female rap musicians have given all women, especially African-American women, a strong sense of self identity and empowerment.

The article says nothing about abortion as a means of self-identity or empowerment. In fact, it does not even mention the word "abortion" at all.ⁱⁱⁱ

1986: "ABORTION" BY DOUG E. FRESH

Released in 1986 on the album *Oh, My God!*, "Abortion" is a song by Doug E. Fresh, an artist from the older generation of rap artists. In the world of rap, 1986 is ancient history, since many artists and different styles have now contributed to the field. One critical review by Ernest Hardy uses this song as a justification for the hasty claim that "a lot of hip hop's political text is unyieldingly conservative" (quoted in Phipps).

The song begins and ends with a "Rock a Bye, Baby" lullaby as though it were a children's rhyme played on a music box; a crying baby attends the music. The rap element quickly manifests itself, however, as the artist runs through a series of themes that will become more prominent in other rap songs. The persona speaks about abortion as a "distortion" and that the "world's morals are out of proportion."^{iv} Abortion, called "so sad," is specifically identified as "killing newborn babies." A final theme is abortion's effect on population growth; specifically, the persona sings that with abortion the "whole population starts to fall."

1997: "RETROSPECT FOR LIFE" BY COMMON

The performer known as Common released this song on the *One Day It'll All Make Sense* album in 1997. Summarized as "the mental struggle of a male dealing with the possibility of abortion to resolve problems" (Smoke), "Retrospect for Life" includes Lauryn Hill doing refrain and backup vocals. While the refrain is sung in a casual, slower beat, almost ballad style, the intervening stanzas come closer to the ideal of the manner in which lyrics in rap should be performed. More importantly, in

terms of dominant theme, instead of merely singing about the pregnancy of his girlfriend, the persona connects the abortion decision with the wider social background of African-American genocide. The persona is keenly aware that, if the mother of his unborn child has an abortion, she will contribute to the further depopulation of the African-American race.

Before listening to the song, one should be aware of the following points that might involve a pro-life interpretation or perspective on the song. In the opening monologue, which contains the barest of piano accompaniment and which begins with what sounds like the heartbeat of an unborn child, the persona appeals to the listener directly, pleading that “we gotta start respectin life more y’all” and that “we losin too many of ours” (Common).^v This idea of abortion as a means of reducing the population is enhanced here; it is not so much important to note that abortion merely reduces the population as much as to sing that abortion reduces the population of African Americans.

In the first stanza the persona directly addresses the unborn child as “you” and later as “my son.” After the first chorus, in the second stanza the “you” being addressed is no longer the unborn child but the mother herself. Significantly, the child is relegated to the pronoun “it,” even though he is also called “our child” and “this boy.” Towards the end of this second stanza the persona, still addressing the mother, encourages either himself, or her, or the both of them (the language is unclear) to abandon “the beadies and let’s have this boy.”^{vi} This last appeal is particularly striking because it is obvious (or so it seems) that the unborn child has already been aborted. Some verb tenses used throughout the first stanza are definitely past; the persona “wasn’t prepared mentally nor financially” to be a father, and he “wanted” the child “to be raised within a family.” However, some statements in this first stanza are in the present tense: the persona says that “she [the mother] and I agree” that they could not afford a child and that he “don’t wanna go through the drama of havin a baby’s momma” (even though this last clause can be construed as a future statement). It is only in the last stanza, however, that the death of the child is definitive: “though his death was at our greed, with no one else to blame.”

The chorus, sung by Lauryn Hill between the first and second

stanzas, is a refrain repeated twice, and the rhythm of the song is maintained. After the second stanza, however, between the repeated refrains, the beat skips. As a missed beat in the scansion of poetry may suggest that something may be wrong in a poem, so too the missed beat here may indicate that there is something wrong with the idea presented in the song.

The conclusion of the song contains more dialogue, this time not from the persona himself, but apparently from a father whose voice on the “hotel messaging center” indicates that he urgently desires to “kick Jesse Jackson’s ass.” Why this violent act? Is it an act of protest against a representative of African-American leadership, which is dominantly anti-life?

The genocide of the African-American race is a theme that activists in the pro-life movement have been sounding for years. As early as 1972 in her now famous essay “Abortion, Poverty and Genocide: Gifts to the Poor?” (which should be one of the foundation documents of early right-to-life literature), Erma Clardy Craven documented the genocidal intent not only of family planning program but also of abortion programs that target the African-American community. After summarizing the conditions of African Americans at that time, Craven, writing “as a Black, Protestant social worker of thirty-four years’ experience in the rat-infested ghettos of the United States,” affirms that “the deliberate killing of Black babies in abortion is genocide—perhaps the most overt form of all” (233). Two decades later Akua Furlow and Thomas Strahan extensively compiled research data on abortions in the African-American community in their report, “African-Americans and Induced Abortion.”

More current research shows that racial discrimination against African Americans in the form of abortion remains. Dayton Right to Life recently collated research on abortion and the African-American community. Research from the past decade shows that Craven’s original call to stop the genocidal intent of abortion programs in African-American communities has not been heeded. Dayton Right to Life summarizes 1992 research by stating that “abortion services have been deliberately and systematically targeted towards African Americans. A disproportionate number of the nation’s abortion clinics are located in

minority neighborhoods.” Citing the Center for Disease Control’s *Abortion Surveillance Report* for 1999, Dayton Right to Life further shows that “35% of abortions in the United States are performed on African American women while they represent only 12% of the female population of the country” (“The Question,” [p.3]).^{vii} Common’s song reinforces a theme that contemporary research has long documented: abortion should be a primary concern of the African-American community, since it affects the survival of an entire race.

2001: “REAL KILLER” BY TECH N9NE

“Real Killer” was released on the 2001 album *AngHellic* by Tech N9ne, who is billed as “rap’s first anarchist” (“Tech N9ne’s”). According to his website, Tech N9ne wrote the song “Real Killer” for an apparently cathartic purpose. “‘Real Killer’...unflinchingly bares all about his personal experiences with abortion” (“Tech N9ne’s”). The opening verse summarizes the persona’s sexual activity with the mother of his child, who is called “this chick.” Later, in verse two, the persona has another sexual liaison with “this chicklet,” who becomes the mother first of his triplets and then of another child. With both mothers the persona arranges abortions for all five unborn children.

When one follows the printed version of the lyrics, the words cascade over each other, leaving little room for significant pauses. Moreover, if the lyrics are considered as mere free-verse poetry, several terms from standard poetic discussion can be used to evaluate the text. The many instances of feminine rhyme (for example, “I sitted” and “we quit it”) throw the rhyme scheme off considerably, especially as the lines are sung in the manner, as enunciated in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of rap, as “the competitive use of rhyming lines spoken over an ever-more-challenging rhythmic base” (“What Is Rock?”). The song rushes through 621 predominantly monosyllabic words in the space of six and a half minutes. In fact, of the 621 words in the song, only nine are polysyllabic, and even those nine are all trisyllabic. The preponderance of monosyllabic words has two functions: first, the possibilities for numerous spondees abound; second, a corollary of the first, the high number of spondees makes the singing of the lyrics heavy and, in this

case particularly, harsh.

More interesting from the viewpoint of right-to-life criticism are the negative connotations of these nine trisyllabic words. “Abortion,” “murderer,” and “scandalous” are all obviously negative. The other terms (“agreement,” “evidence,” “natural,” “nobody,” “probably,” and “proportion”) are negative when the surrounding terms clarify that they are used to comment on the abortions in the song. The persona indicates that the first abortion should be performed secretly; with “no evidence,” the persona and the mother are “both...in agreement” over having an abortion. The persona affirms “that [there] ain’t nobody iller” than he is for persuading the mothers of his children to abort. The term “proportion” is used only when the persona states that abortion is “blown out of proportion” (an idea that Doug E. Fresh promoted earlier in his 1986 song). The word “probably” is used when the persona reflects on what two other beings, the unborn child and God, are thinking. “Probably” is used first when the persona considers that the unborn child, the “baby,” was “probably thinking we [the mother and he were] scandalous” in going to Kansas for an abortion. It is used again when the persona considers that he knows “God / Probably thinking / I should die.”

The chorus is direct in its conclusion, whose apposition defines the persona. He is a “real killer,” and if there is any confusion about this direct, simple-structured sentence, then the following equation should eliminate any confusion: “that is me.” Moreover, two other appositions reinforce the guilt that the persona feels. After identifying himself as a “real killer,” the persona is called not only a “mass murderer” but also a “natural born killer.” What is interesting is that it is obvious that the persona himself did not perform the abortions, and yet he feels responsible for the killings. Even more important is the slippery slope slide into immorality, progressing from passivity to another’s request to compliance, and then to more direct action, which indicates that a level of force was used on the mother in the last abortion. In the first case the mother telephones the persona to request help in obtaining an abortion. For the second pregnancy (the triplets) the persona calls his abortionist friend again to arrange the abortion. The persona even feebly chastises the abortionist, asking “Homie how could you / Be so raw” to which the

abortionist retorts “How could *you* be so raw” (vocal emphasis in the song). Significantly, for the third pregnancy, the persona not only arranges, but apparently forces the mother to undergo an abortion. “She wanted to have it,” the persona states, “But I made her do / The same shit.”

RACE, THE NEGATIVITY OF ABORTION, AND MUSICAL COURAGE

At least three conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion on abortion as a theme of rap music. First, although there are notable exceptions, it appears that abortion is a concern of minority rappers who tend to give it more full-length treatment than white rappers. Common, Doug E. Fresh, and Tech N9ne are all African-American and have devoted significant attention to abortion in full-length songs. In contrast, white rappers address the issue briefly. For example, Eminem refers to abortion once in the song “Just Don’t Give a Fuck.” Although it is unclear to whom the truncated present participles apply, the song speaks of “extortion, snortin, supporting abortion,” which could apply to Eminem himself or to his alter ego, Slim Shady.

Second, for all its so-called rebelliousness against social norms, when it considers abortion at all, rap music continues to designate it as a negative practice. The rappers discussed here make it clear that the use of the word “abortion” itself is always negative in connotation. For those of us who are more literary-minded, this continuation of the negative connotation of the term corresponds with how literary works (especially major fiction) produced in the United States still consider abortion, even after thirty years of nine-month legalization.

Moreover, the rappers discussed here who may be classified as expressing a pro-life viewpoint use the term with greater freedom than others who sing about abortion. Thus, for example, Doug E. Fresh did not hesitate to title his song “Abortion,” and Tech N9ne clearly enunciates the word in his “Real Killer” song even though he could have muted the enunciation as he did other words. Of course, other artists who have expressed a pro-life viewpoint about abortion but who work in other categories of contemporary music are equally heroic in using the word. For example, P.O.D. makes the pro-life view clear in a song simply titled

“Abortion Is Murder.” Perhaps the exception is Creed’s use of the definition of abortion instead of the word itself. The song “In America” states that “Only in America [do] we kill the unborn/ To make ends meet.”

Evidence can be found for the contrary position also. Artists who express an anti-life viewpoint (that is, these songs seem to present a position of support for the practice) have difficulty using the word, as though the connotative power of the term “abortion” would jeopardize their message (or perhaps their revenue; after all, if today’s youth are increasingly pro-life, why would a young person spend money on a cd to support an artist who personally advocates a violation of the first civil right?). For example, the song “Brick” by Ben Folds Five does not mention abortion, even though it is clear from the narrative that the couple goes to an abortion clinic. The song is a musical justification of research documenting the disastrous effects that an abortion has on the continuance of a couple’s relationship. The word “abortion” is never used. Similarly, Nikki D’s song “Daddy’s Little Girl” concerns the love that a mother feels for her father during her abortion. (Of course, a right-to-lifer would ask: What kind of father would not only damage his own daughter by having her undergo an abortion but also kill his own grandchild?) As in the Ben Folds Five song, the word is never mentioned.

Finally, the third conclusion that can be drawn from the research presented here is that rap music on abortion supports the pro-life viewpoint much more than it does the anti-life one. There is no epideictic for abortion among those who sing about it. Abortion is clearly a negative force affecting not only the composers, but also the communities and ethnic groups that they represent. In the past decade rap has celebrated the killing of promiscuous girlfriends (Eminem’s “Kim” song) and has glorified sexuality (nothing new to the music world, especially since the advent of rock). One would think that this new category of contemporary music would have celebrated abortion as the ultimate freedom for young people—especially young women—who demand the expansion of personal freedoms. This effort to glorify abortion as a reproductive right or as a foundational right of one version

of the feminist movement simply has not occurred. It probably never will, since, thus far, rap has established the precedent that abortion not only kills the unborn child but also harms his or her mother and disenfranchises the father.

In rapspeak, to “dis” means “to discount or show disrespect for a person; to put someone or something down...an expression of disrespect” (Smitherman 108). Clearly, the intent of the rappers discussed here is to attack abortion, which disenfranchises the many entities whom it affects.

Jesse Jackson is dissed; abortionists are dissed; those who collaborate in abortion are dissed, even at the cost of dissing oneself, as the personae who sing about their cooperation in the abortions of their children testify.

If there is one idea that can be learned from this study, it is that right-to-lifers can find a strong contemporary cultural ally in rap music, for rap has dissed abortion.

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NOTES

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- i. One online commentator, Mike Mosher, asserts that rap is youth’s reaction against such political correctness. Mosher notes that “[c]onservative writer John Leo gloated that Eminem’s popularity was evidence of youth’s backlash against tightly monitored school behavior codes, zero-tolerance Hate Speech laws and other manifestations of repressive ‘political correctness’” (“Motor City”). Mosher does not refute Leo’s assertion.
- ii. Sometimes, of course, a song obviously titled “Abortion” may concern abortion only tangentially. This is the case with Kid Rock’s 2000 song “Abortion.” The song contains only the vaguest of references to abortion as a practice; rather, the song uses abortion as a metaphor for the angst of a man tortured by love.
- iii. Similarly, even though social critic Michael Mosher argues that “‘Bodies’ remains the most important song to deal with abortion, a major political issue of the 1970s when it was written,” he expresses his recent frustration in trying to find abortion songs in general (not necessarily rap abortion songs): “There appears to be little progressive, feminist art on this topic in wide currency, perhaps because abortion is necessary rather than celebratory. Many women have spoken of variegated, deep feelings after abortion, its procedures altering a significant biological course, and to articulate these, perhaps cathartic, art forms are best. If two decades after ‘Bodies,’ Liz Phair, Hole, or L7 had abortion songs as powerful as ‘Bodies,’ I simply don’t know about them.” (“Bodies”)
- iv. Unfortunately, no reputable source could be located to provide quotes for this song’s lyrics.
- v. For this and subsequent songs, the lyrics were transcribed by another person and uploaded on one of numerous internet lyrics services, so deviations in

grammar and punctuation may not have been those suggested by the artist. Moreover, unless otherwise indicated, lyrics for the songs have been obtained from the source indicated at the first quotation.

vi. According to a recent online publication from the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, a “beadie” is “Marijuana...used both alone and in combination with a number of other drugs—most commonly alcohol, and in some areas, crack or PCP. In New York, a variety of Indian marijuana laced with PCP (‘beadies’) has gained popularity. Both crack and PCP may be sprinkled on marijuana; a marijuana cigarette or cigar may also be dipped in a liquid solution of PCP, dried and then smoked.”

vii. The reader may also be interested in a summary of research findings from a study conducted by the organization. Titled “Abortion Attitudes in the African American Community: Key Findings of a Study Conducted by Dayton Right to Life in Dayton, Ohio,” two findings mention the influence of Planned Parenthood specifically: “Planned Parenthood is well known and generally regarded very favorably. Interestingly, the only negative mentioned about Planned Parenthood was that they [sic] tended to push women into abortions” (unpaginated).