

RAPPING OUT THE MONSTERS: EXPLORING
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN RAP MUSIC

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Danni Lopez-Rogina

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Thesis Supervisor:

Rachel Romero, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology

Second Reader:

Nathan Pino, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

Abstract

In our culture, mental illness still exists as a taboo. Although approximately 40,000 people in the United States die from suicide every year, and an even larger number suffer from clinical depression and other mental illness, there is still a stigma attached to discussing these topics despite their prevalence. This thesis observes the ways in which that rap artists engage mental health lyrically, adding to add to the larger conversation of emotional and mood disorders. Because marginalized groups such as adolescents and young adults, the elderly, veterans, and those living in poverty rank as the highest mental illness at-risk population, this study focuses on part of that population; namely, young adults in regards to the average age of rappers, whom additionally account as a marginalized group because of their race and socio-economic status. This thesis uses the unobtrusive method of analysis and qualitative methodology to discuss the ways rappers address mental illness in their music. The findings of this research show that rap artists engage mental illness in three main ways: paranoia; self-hatred, violence, suicide; and through religious allegory.

Keywords: mental health, mental illness, rap, hip-hop, lyrical analysis

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Introduction

Mental illness is all around us whether we choose to believe it or not. “One in four adults... experiences mental illness within a given year. One in 17 people –about 13.6 million total –live with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder” (National Alliance of Mental Illness). Hip-hop is a large and pervasive part of mainstream culture in the United States (George, X). It is played on the radio, reflected in the clothing styles that are in fashion, and seen in the popularity of graffiti and street art. The connection between mental illness and rap/hip-hop is largely overlooked in traditional studies in favor of a focus on more “stereotypical” themes. Generally, these involve the relationships between hip-hop and sex, drugs, violence, gender relations, and like imagery. In contrast to the existing literature, this thesis explores how rap music engages mental health issues in its lyrics. This topic is sociologically significant for several reasons. First, because it examines the ways in which a music genre—one well-known historically for discussing taboo subjects—portrays mental illness. Second, sociological scholarship can benefit from studying creative spaces that serve to express collective sentiments about mental illness. Finally, the qualitative research approach can add insight to deviance studies of both mental illness and hip-hop. By examining the ways rap artists communicate messages about mental illness in their lyrics, there can be a stronger understanding of the ways we utilize different topics to discuss the bigger image that is mental health.

Literature Review

I. Brief History of Rap/Hip-Hop

When discussing rap music as a genre, it is important to note, even if briefly, some of the history of the style. The first recorded rap song was released in 1979 and called “Rapper’s Delight” (McQuillar, 2007, p.1). The genre moved towards dance music, but conscious rappers developed separately. Conscious rap includes “songs that are responsible, thought provoking, and/or inspirational toward positive change or a cry of protest against social injustice” (McQuillar, 2007, p.2). While conscious music has existed for centuries, conscious rap can trace its roots back to spirituals sung by enslaved persons in the Americas (Cheney, 1999, p.15). Rap music evolved from jazz, blues, and many other branches of music used to express ideas, concerns, and discontent towards social issues. The sub-genres of hip-hop have changed over time as well. The previous categories were *party rap*, such as Salt n’ Peppa and LL Cool J., *conscious rap*, such as Public Enemy and Tupac Shakur, and *gangsta rap*, such as Dr. Dre and Warren G. *Pop rap* and *party rap* can be defined in the same way here. They consist of what is often played on the radio and are typically dance friendly with lyrics that do not have a large amount of content. *Conscious Rap* generally contains an artist’s views on a social or political topic. These songs often tell a story about life, share a moral, talk about issues faced by the human experience. The beat is usually smoother than that of *party* or *pop rap* and has a head nodding rhythm. *Gangsta rap* generally sounds more aggressive than other rap genres and presents violent themes throughout the lyrics (Clumps, 2013). This

subgenre is often viewed with a large amount of disdain and can cause listeners to believe that all rap is the same. It should be noted that these categories have changed over time to become pop hip-hop and underground hip-hop. Pop hip-hop includes both parental and non-parental advisory labels, and it includes gangsta rap, such as Missy Elliot and Kanye West's work. Underground hip-hop includes conscious rap, and examples include The Roots, Common, and Mos Def (Smith, 2005, p.4). The latter of these two genres provides an artistic space to explore issues affecting minorities. Marginalized groups need to be represented; this is one of the reasons rap and hip-hop alike grew into such large aspects of popular culture. There remains a gap in many social categories being represented in the American mass media. This includes the LGBTQIA community, racial minorities, people of various physical (dis)abilities, and persons struggling with mental health issues. While many studies discuss these other topics, the amount of information about diction in rap music and what it represents to the listener about mental health remains limited. The conscious genre of music is important for this reason. It expresses collective feelings about social issues, thereby giving a voice to marginalized groups.

Rap has the ability to give a voice to underrepresented groups in the current hip-hop dominated popular music America than other genres. I have found that there is a wide variety of opinions about rap as a genre. It "includes innovation from environments of injustice and oppression as much as environments of unbridled wealth and prosperity" (Travis, 2012, p.140). There is an unrestrained amount of music constantly being created from all walks of life. Wealth gets music spread faster, and people who are experiencing oppression find ways to make their opinions heard. The history of hip-hop has garnered much attention yet its discussion via a sociological lens remains limited.

In this work I use the terms hip-hop and rap interchangeably for two reasons. First, rap is under the umbrella of hip-hop, and there is a blurring in what constitutes a rap song versus a pop song with rap in it. Second, this work mainly is interested with the content of the lyrics in the music; as a result it is less concerned with the musical composition of the genre such as beat, rhythm, tempo, and key.

II. Definitions of Mental Health and Illness

This work employs the terms mental health and mental illness interchangeably, mainly because the mentioning of mental health inherently involves discussions of mental illness. Mental health is simply the scale by which a person's mental, psychological, emotional, and social well-beings are in line (NIMH). Mental illnesses are incredibly complicated to define, as they are experienced in radically subjective ways. For example, depression can become a part of someone's life for different reasons and lengths of time. There are six main forms of depression: major depressive disorder, catatonic depression, seasonal affective disorder, dysthymia, atypical depression, and melancholic depression (NIMH). A sufferer of depression may experience random bouts that can last weeks and simply complicate life, or they can experience such crippling sadness that getting out of bed in the morning feels like the world is ending. Because mental health is so dependent on the individual experience, the degree of severity can range from being in good health to being mentally ill to some degree.

A. Depression- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression "is characterized by a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person's ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities" (2011). Although this

definition describes some of the most common embodiments of depression, defining such a condition is impossible in many regards. The way mental illness such as depression manifests itself differs depending on the experience of the individual. This inability to properly define mental illnesses carries throughout the entire spectrum of disorders. The intensity of the condition ranges according to the type of depression by affecting how individuals think, feel, and behave in different ways. Day-to-day activities can become mentally, emotionally, and physically difficult to accomplish, causing the sufferer to feel that life is not worth living. Clinical depression often requires long-term treatments. Some of these include therapy of various kinds including psycho-therapy, art and music therapy, electroshock treatments, pharmaceuticals, natural medicine, self-talk, exercise, and a long list of others (DHHS). Depression often pairs with anxiety, however this is not always the case.

B. Anxiety- Extreme anxiety disorders differ from the average angst that people face when making simple every day decisions. Anxiety disorders often entail “different symptoms, but all the symptoms cluster around excessive, irrational fear and dread” (United States). Similar to depression and other mood disorders, the inability to fully encompass the nature of a mental illness occurs. Anxiety disorders range from person to person, though all feel a heightened sense of awareness and fight or flight instinctual awareness. These feelings can strike at any time and are triggered by events external to the individual. These events may be perceived as seemingly ordinary to people who do not suffer from anxiety. These ideas have been written about extensively in *Anxiety Disorders in Adults: A Clinical Guide*, in which the author says that “Pathological anxiety pertains to an inaccurate or excessive appraisal of danger; protective measures

taken against this danger are way out of proportion to the real threat” (Starcevic, 2010, p.3). The intensity of the anxiety is out of proportion with the actual events, and makes every-day life more difficult. There are different types of anxiety: this includes but is not limited to social anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and separation anxiety disorder.

C. Bipolar Disorder- According to Miklowitz and Cicchetti, “Bipolar Disorder affects as many as one in 25 adults and between 420,000 and 2,072,000 children in the United States alone” (2010, p. 1). While many people know something about bipolar disorder, most do not realize that those dealing with it experience rather few manic episodes in comparison to the depressive states. The nature of the disorder often creates tension in relationships of all kinds for the person experiencing it, often leading to a weaker support system than required.

D. Other- There are many other forms of mental illness, however these discussions fall out of the scope of the present research. This study focuses on the thematic representations of mental illness in rap/hip-hop lyrics, as a result delving further into definitions and explanations of various mental disorders is unwarranted. The research herein engages mental illness and mental health in its most general expression in order to discuss overarching themes of emotional disturbance.

III. Hip-Hop/Rap Music and Mental Health

While research has been conducted on the use of rap as a tool to work through mental illness, there is still a gap in the literature pertaining to the analysis of existing rap

music and its messages about mental illness. This includes a large amount of research on the uses of rap as a method for recovering substance abusers and as a dialogue for at-risk youths. A few examples of research in reference to the use of rap therapy with youth are “Song to self: Promoting a therapeutic dialogue with high-risk youths through poetry and popular music” (Olson-McBride & Page, 2011) and “The Rise and Call of Group Rap Therapy: A Critical Analysis from its Creator” (Decarlo, 2013). Both of these works discuss the problems faced by rap therapy in regards to the stigma surrounding the genre. In the recent past, popularizing this therapy technique has been studied as a strong tool to teach self-disclosure (Olson-McBride & Page, 2011). Rap music influences a large amount of people and has been used as a story-telling device in popular culture. According to Adam Bradley, author of *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, while other genres of music tell stories as well, rap distinguishes itself by the sheer number of stories it conveys (2009, p. 157). This story-telling process is an imperative component to working through mental health issues. Similar to visiting a therapist, in the process of telling a story, one experiences a cathartic sensation that enables letting go of negative emotions. These characteristics set rap apart from other music genres. The telling of a story, often utilizing profanity, presents the listener with a story that could be reality or a version of reality. Not all rappers talk about their own life experience. For example, in gangsta rap, the portrayal of drugs, sexual promiscuity, and guns as an everyday occurrence is often dramatized for the audience. The main idea involves artists as sharing a narrative of thoughts and fantasy occurring in their mind. This is an important thought process to recognize as it relates to lyrical meaning and intention.

IV. Gap in the Literature

There is a gap in the literature in regards to analyzing how rap artists address mental illness lyrically. While a wide variety of literature exists on other aforementioned topics in regards to hip-hop and rap, an analysis of what those artists are actually saying about mental health has yet to be seen. The stereotype that often inhabits the public view about men involved in rap and hip-hop is a dangerous one. Men engaging in rap are often thought of as cruel thugs, uncaring, absent, and involved in illegal matters. An alternative interpretation of these men, and the interpretation offered in this work, involves these men as engaging in a conversation with their listeners about fears and insecurities. The artists are telling stories that are often unheard, but still no one listens. This dialogue has been taking place since the beginning of rap, however it continues to be largely overlooked. For this reason it is essential to begin filling the gap in the research concerning this topic.

Methods

This research employs the unobtrusive method of analysis to explore the ways in which lyrics of rap music engage ideas about mental illness. This method consists in the employment of data that already exist. The unobtrusive method of analysis, also known as content analysis, allows the researcher to generate analytical categories concerning mental illness in rap music. A quantitative method would not be sufficient to answer the research question of this work, as rhetorical analysis is the main goal of this study.

In the process of selecting an appropriate sample, I chose purposive sampling for this research. I selected rap songs that have lyrics containing some type of reference to mental illness. The process included searching articles, chat rooms, blogs, and other

online sources for songs people accounted as music that engages themes of mental illness (refer to Appendix A for a list of sources). Consequently, I filtered the songs by genre and read through the lyrics to discern which of the song's content dealt with mental illness. In the process of selection I divided music that engaged themes of mental illness, but did not meet the criteria for songs acceptable for analysis. The context of the songs became an imperative component in the process of choosing a sample. For instance, there are many songs that use the word "retarded" or "insane" without referring to mental health. Often, artists use those expressions to indicate that something is "stupid" or bizarre. For this reason, the sample of songs in this study excludes music that use these words as referred above. Due to the fact that words such as "crazy", "mad", "retarded", "insane", and others are popular vernacular for commonplace experiences other than mental health, it is critical to consider context. I sampled a total of thirteen songs in the rap genre, which I located on the Internet and also through word of mouth of acquaintances, friends, and family. All of the songs in this study address mental illness lyrically in some way. Refer to Appendix B for chart of overall song usage data and Appendix C for chart of song usage amongst the three themes.

Employing grounded theory approach, I analyze and discuss three prevalent themes in the music. According to the creators of this approach, "Glaser and Strauss insisted that the researcher must approach the study inductively, with no preconceptions to prove or disprove, in order to uncover (and ultimately conceptualize) the principal concern of participants" (Kenny, 2014). The grounded theory approach is essential in my ability to accurately analyze song lyrics without a preconceived hypothesis of what I will find. I draw from the work of Warren and Karner in *Discovering Qualitative Methods:*

Ethnography, Interviews, Documents, and Image, as well as from the work of various rap and hip-hop scholars to strengthen my understanding of the different ways in which hip-hop affects and is affected by society. For example, in “Toward a Critical Reading of Rap/Poetry”, the work of Pate (2010) brings forth the idea that:

Every rap/poem will not open itself up for you. Every rap/poem will not reward your interest in it with meaning or surprise. Every rap/poem isn't worth your time or energy. And some rap/poems can harm you. So be hopeful and be aware. (p. 38)

This thought provides a sense of understanding regarding the complexity of studying the subject at hand. Learning to analyze lyrics can be tiring and occasionally fruitless in the search for a sample that meets my research needs. In addition, when analyzing lyrics, it is important to keep in mind how rap lyrics often use indirect language to communicate messages. In what follows, I provide an interpretation of lyrics in rap songs regarding their use of expressions that indicate sentiments toward mental illness.

Findings

This thesis observes the ways in which rap artists engage mental health lyrically, adding to the larger conversation of emotional and mood disorders. The three main themes that were recognized throughout the song lyrics include paranoia; self-hatred, violence, and suicide; and the religious allegory.

Paranoia

Twelve out of the thirteen songs I sampled feature themes of paranoia. Merriam-Webster defines paranoia as “a serious mental illness that causes you to falsely believe that other people are trying to harm you or an unreasonable feeling that people are trying to harm you, do not like you, etc.” (Paranoia). Regardless of this definition, paranoia itself is much more than can be defined in a single sentence. These lyrical components constitute messages of mistrust and general skepticism of others including fear of doctors, fear of strangers, and mistrust towards spiritual beings, family and also the self. “Therapy” by Heltah Skeltah shows a deep distrust of doctors through descriptors like “Dr. Killpatient” and dialogue of “I’m not insane or at least I don’t think so/ or am I? You think so Doc, truthfully you don’t know” (Hendricks, 1996). There is a viable tension between the writer and the imagined doctor. Mental health facilities have a long and ugly history, and the attitudes towards psychologists and what many still refer to as “shrinks” remain at an impasse. The frustrated attitude and paranoia that the doctor is incompetent reflect this sentiment. The lyrics in B.o.B’s “Out Of My Mind” and in particular the verse, “So paranoid of espionage/ I’m watching my doors and checking my blinds,” illustrates this fear of strangers further (Simmons, 2012, track 9). Similar to Heltah Skeltah, B.o.B discusses how distrust of his doctor’s abilities fills his mind. He notes, “They telling me/ my brain is on vacation, they telling me/ and I’m bipolar to the severity/ and I need medication, apparently/ and some electro compulsive therapy” (Simmons, 2012, track 9).

In regards to family relations, artists often portray paranoia in stanzas of self-hatred and guilt. Notorious B.I.G. employs this portrayal in the lines “People at the funeral frontin’ like they miss me/ my baby momma kissed me but she glad I’m gone”

(Wallace, 1994, track 17). The meanings of these expressions goes beyond self-deprecating behavior and falls into the category of paranoia due to the artist's disbelief that anyone in his life would care if he were gone. Because of the negative life choices B.I.G. claims to have made, the artist assumes that his family would not feel a sense of loss in his passing. The lyrics "I know my mother wished she got a fuckin' abortion/ she don't even love me like she did when I was younger" further reflect the idea of being hated by his family (Wallace, 1994, track 17). While the song-writer may have committed horrible atrocities such as theft and gang related murder growing up, to assume that his mother wishes she had not conceived him shows his level of distrust of the people around him.

Scarface reflects on similar notions. In "Mind Playin' Tricks On Me," after talking about how hard it is for him to cope and keep a steady mind, he says that "it seems they all want to get me/ So I try to keep my nine-millimeter wit me/ just in case they want to see a homie's head blown" (Scarface, 1994, track 11). He fears that someone wants him dead. His use of the word homie insinuates it would be someone relatively close to him. The thought is isolating that a person who is emotionally and mentally close to him would want him dead. Isolation from loved ones can push a person further into paranoia, often leading to a form of depression from a lack of social support.

In some of the songs the lyrics make a direct reference to paranoia. In Kendrick Lamar's "I" he says that "Everybody's lookin' at you crazy/ What you gon' do?/ Lift up your head and keep moving/ Or let the paranoia haunt you" (Lamar, 2014)? Here the artist sends a more positive message. He is self-aware of the lingering paranoia and understands that it can be battled. This understanding of the situation is also expressed in

Black Eyed Peas' song "Anxiety." Fergie, the female vocalist, asks the "Lord [to] please, please, please/ take away my anxiety/ the sane and the insane rivalry/ Paranoia's brought me to my knees" (Adams, Pineda & Papa Roach, 2004, track 12). This direct reference takes away the listeners' ability to interpret the feelings as anything other than paranoia. That the writer of the song is so sure of what they are dealing with presents a form of hope. Lamar says that he wants to "lift up his head and keep moving" while Fergie turns to God to ease her anxiety. Both of these are proactive approaches in dealing with the situation; often lyrics that make direct reference to mental illness by name have a stronger idea of how to cope with it.

A final expression of the various forms of paranoia can be seen in terms of the personification of weather and spirits. For example, Kid Cudi reflects an attitude of fear that even the elements are turning against him. In his song "Trapped in My Mind" he tells the listener that "the sun seems to shine when I am not looking/ Oh, it seems a trick every time" (Dot da Genius & Kid Cudi, 2010, track 17). This idea is not so far-fetched for many individuals struggling with mental illness. It is a common experience, so much so that there have been thousands of cases of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) recorded. Although the direct causes of SAD are unknown, it has been noted that it occurs in extreme levels during fall and winter, with a few cases occurring in the spring and summer. This has been linked to the lack of sunlight interfering with the body's circadian rhythm, as well as a drop in serotonin levels and a disruption of melatonin levels (Mayo Clinic, 2014). Symptoms include irritability, exhaustion, problems getting along with other people, sensitivity to rejection, "leaden" feelings in the arms and legs, oversleeping, weight gain, and changes in appetite. This is such an extreme phenomenon that it makes

functioning throughout these months almost impossible for individuals suffering from it. The concept that even the stars are plotting against your individual happiness may seem far-fetched but can be an everyday thought for someone who is dealing with such an internal imbalance. Kid Cudi's reference to the sun hiding from him could be connected to SAD.

Finally, distrust of spirits and otherworldly beings is another strong point of focus on the hunt for paranoia in lyrics. "I Hear Voices" by MF Doom is an excellent example of this. The verses read, "...when I doze off spirits hope I die/ whatever/ Angels waste the time, they work together/Scheme and plot on me, 'cause I'm the son of man" (2004, track 12). Artists MF Doom and MF Grimm present a dark inner monologue of being in jail. These lyrics also fall into the categorization of religious and spiritual allegory discussed in a later section of this work.

Self-Hatred, Violence, and Suicide

Of all the topics pertaining to mental illness, suicide is generally the one with which people are the most uncomfortable speaking. Not only is the United States a death denying society (Johnson, 2004, p.435), but the potential that someone could take their own life is unimaginable to many. Yet it happens daily. According to the Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, suicide claims the lives of approximately 40,000 Americans each year (SAVE, 2014). While many genres of music make reference to suicide as a social phenomenon, rap music does so in a unique way. Rap artist Pharoahe Monch presents to his audience an image of himself talking to the Grim Reaper. He says that he had:

Seen death twice, it's ugly motherfucker man/ but you conversate with him when you suffering/ He said, "Let go of the pain...your choice: slug to the brain or 20 Vicodin/ I kinda likened it to Ortho Tri Cyclen/ Disturbing the natural cycles of life and it's trifling (Jamerson, 2014, track 13).

In this context the artist alludes to experience of suicide, suicide attempts even, and not merely hallucinations or near death experiences. This is due to the language that he utilizes further down in the same stanza: "I put the gun to my brain, but first I wrote a note to explain/ Put the Luger in my head, and these are the words that I said" (Jamerson, 2014, track 13). The imagery of holding a gun to his head tells the reader his intention, along with the reference to a suicide note.

"Mind Playin Tricks On Me" by Scarface portrays a conversation with Death as well. In this case, he uses the imagery of the journal to paint the picture in which he says, "Dear diary, I'm havin' a little trouble with my mind state/ How many bullets would it take to change my mind? Wait" (Scarface, 1994, track 11). "Sometimes I want to end it but I don't though" (Scarface, 1994, track 11) reinforces the idea of the confusion that occurs when a mind is battling with itself. The human body is hardwired to survive at any cost (Fitzgerald, 2009). This wiring is tangled when suicidal ideation occurs.

Suicide is also addressed in "Beautiful Lasers" by Lupe Fiasco in which a large amount of self-deprecation is exhibited though the lines "All I see is all my flaws/ All I hear is all my demons... All I see is all my wrongs" (Jaco, Boyd & Manzoor, 2011, track 7). He follows this with the suicidal ideation of "Go on, keep tellin me to fight/ Gun on the table tellin' me to come on/ Tellin' me to put 'em inside my hand/ then put it up right

next to my dome” (Jaco, Boyd & Manzoor, 2011, track 7). In this song, the artist engages in an apostrophe in which the voice of the other person communicates love and affection, which the artist himself denies with his internal voice of self-hatred. Throughout the song, the artist builds up anger against the self by having a conversation to with someone who is portrayed as a lover. This behavior typifies common self-dialogues of people battling mental illness. This conversation is interesting as it pertains to the discussion of mental illness.

Lupe Fiasco tells this person that “My heart been broke for a while/ Yours been the one keepin’ me alive” (Jaco, Boyd & Manzoor, 2011, track 7). This kind of attachment to another illustrates common relational patterns of people with depression (Campos et al., 2014). According to the study “Neediness and Depression in Women,” the “results indicate that neediness correlated significantly with increases in depressive symptoms over the 6 months.” The search for dependence on another is generally a part of depression (Campos et al., 2014). Having a constant in life, usually sought in another person, has a strong impact on the stability of a person dealing with mental illnesses. While this exists as a reoccurring behavior among people suffering from mental illness, this is the only song in this study that explores dependent attachment style. The fact that the artist mentions that someone else is holding him up in his times of need is not seen in many of the other songs. As most of the rappers spoken about here are male, this lack of having support could come from ideas of what it means to be a strong male. Hegemonic masculinity pushes the concept of being a breadwinner and not needing emotional support in times of need.

Boola feat. Jeni Fujita speaks about self-hatred in a very direct way. He says that he “[wished] this pain would go away – like it did back in the day/ before angels in black gowns spoke thoughts of self-doubt and self-hate in my ear” (2014). While these lyrics coincide with the category of the religious allegory, I believe the discussion of self-doubt and hate being pushed into his mind by seemingly outside forces belongs here. For many, mental illness and the variety of moods that come with it feel as though they are being dropped into the brain from an outside source. A person can be fine one minute and then experience crippling self-doubt and dislike the next. His reference to this feeling is important in understanding the experience of not understanding an illness or disorder.

Notorious B.I.G. covers all three topics of this sub-header in his 1994 song “Suicidal Thoughts.” He reflects self-hatred throughout his song, and includes depictions of paranoia as previously detailed. Notorious B.I.G. states “When I die, fuck it I wanna go to hell/ ‘cause I’m a piece of shit, it ain’t hard to fuckin’ tell” (Wallace, 1994, track 17). This type of internalized negativity can be a part of a mental illness or simply a reflection of outside factors. Violence is shown in his reference to guns multiple times, and leading into his suicidal ideation. In reference to an afterlife he says, “fuck that shit, I wanna tote guns and shoot dice.” He then leads straight into suicidal imagery with the words, “I swear to God I just wanna slit my wrists and end this bullshit/ throw the Magnum to my head, threaten to pull shit” (Wallace, 1994, track 17). Although he speaks casually about the topic, Notorious B.I.G. shows the listeners his frustration with the situation when he says “I can’t believe suicides on my fuckin’ mind/ I want to leave, I swear to God I feel like death is fuckin’ callin’ me” (Wallace, 1994, track 17). This statement is a cry for help; Notorious B.I.G. shows his fear and presents it in a manner

that is open for the world to hear. The broadcasting of pain and fear is generally used as a method for seeking help. This is part of the importance of listening to the lyrics in rap music that relate to mental illness. Stories are being told through voices that are often not taken seriously.

This persistence of suicidal language continues into the MF Doom song “I Hear Voices”. After speaking about angels plotting against him, the artist says that “[I] don’t give a damn if the bullets fill me/ I don’t wanna live, I hope they kill me/ Put me out my misery, I live in misery/ I kill all my enemies, cause I love company” (2004, track 12). The suicidal ideation that the artist is entertaining here causes them to experience such anger so as to want to pull their enemies down with them. The fear that comes from having enemies who would wish death on one another is an added stressor.

Continuing with songs from the 1990s, another track that utilizes violence to discuss mental illness is Heltah Skeltah’s “Therapy.” Expressing their fear and distrust of the psychologist/psychiatrist, the artists allude to questions they feel would be asked of them in that setting. These include “have you been touched the wrong way? /involved in gun play?” and “tell me ‘bout your scar, did your momma beat you?”(Hendricks, 1996). I think this is a common thread of thought and anxiety when faced with the unknown of visiting a psych doctor of some sort. The images of what happens in a therapy session on television and other sources of media are sometimes extremely different from what occurs in reality. Heltah Skeltah continues on to explain that “I go to my crew and ask for help/ But they ain’t no help, they go through the same shit they damn self” (Hendricks, 1996). I think this isolation speaks largely of the stress that can invade a person’s mind when they feel they have no one to turn to regarding fears. They say that they “can’t get

out of this cycle” and beseech the doctor to “stop [them]/ before [they] blow [their] mother fuckin’ top G” (Hendricks, 1996).

In “The Monster” by Eminem feat. Rihanna, he speaks about how his music and mental illness combine to hurt him. His ability to write lyrics that tell a story about his own life is painful but cathartic. This ties back into the concept of rap therapy. The artist says that “... I need an interventionist to intervene between me and this monster/ and save me from myself and all this conflict/ cause the very thing that I love is killing me and I can’t conquer it” (Mathers et al., 2013). He makes reference to his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in this song and depression in others and continues to discuss how mental health affects his life.

Religious Allegory

Decisively, religion was the most universally referenced theme in all of the songs in this study. I noted this concept previously in a few lyrics, and its pervasiveness deserves further attention. There is a variety of language used to refer to this topic, but all of it can be traced along a vein of religiosity and spiritualism through reference and statement. For example, a statement in verse 2 of Boola Ft. Jeni Fujita’s song “Shadow River” says, “To ease the pain, so it don’t get worse/At night I pray to God to show me the answers/for which I search”(Boola, 2014). This is a statement in which the artist chooses to turn to a spiritual being in search of help. The artist employs the name God and therefore makes a direct reference to religion as a means to assist the person in pain.

Another positive example lies in the song “Trapped In My Mind” by Kid Cudi. When talking about the proverbial walls built in his mind that are making his life more

difficult, he expresses his frustration and desire for spiritual help through the following lines: “Damn, I wish I knew what went wrong/ I’m sick and I’m ill, my mental got me/ Oh Lord, please help me pull through” (Dot da Genius & Kid Cudi, 2010, track 17). The artist portrays feelings of doubt throughout the song with recurring imagery of being trapped behind mental walls; these emotions negative emotions are balanced out when he seeks help from God in a moment of hope. Religion is often a source of comfort for those going through intense emotional and mental strife.

However positive these last few references were, the tone can go a different way as well. Not all artists refer to religion in a positive tone when noting the mental and emotional pain with which they are dealing. For example, Scarface from Geto Boys refers to the church as a place in which he, “Give[s] [his] money to the most needy/and never put it in the hands of the most greedy” (Scarface, 1994, track 11). He follows this up by saying that men are “Openin’ up these churches for some quick cash” (Scarface, 1994, track 11). Both of these instances, both positive and negative, show the use of statements about religion that are reflective of themes found in the genre. Wax utilizes references in his song “We Can’t All Be Heroes” when he says that, “Most people they got big dreams and big plans/ End up as a big flock of sacrificial lambs” (Wax, 2013). He may not explicitly state anything about God within these lyrics; however a good proportion of the general public knows the reference of the sacrificial lamb in biblical and other religious scripts.

MF Grimm, featuring on the MF Doom track, talks about the mental and emotional turmoil that he dealt with while in prison when he says that, upon being released from prison, “his wings was burned off/ a lesson was learned, communicate with

one/ I was chosen cause I'm God's son" (2004, track 12). The imagery of wings being burned can refer to Lucifer (in some interpretations) or Icarus. Both are stories of falling men unable to reach the heavens. From being in prison he learned a lesson but now feels he cannot reach God. It is inferred that this is said in a negative tone from the previous reference to angels plotting his pain because he is the son of man. He seeks God but believes that he will be turned away due to his past wrongs that cause his paranoia and self-proclaimed schizophrenia.

Notorious B.I.G. also feels that he is not worthy of heaven in his song "Suicidal Thoughts". In the same breath that he uses to tell the audience that he is a piece of shit, he says that "It don't make sense, goin' to heaven wit the goodie-goodies/ Dressed in white, I like black Tims and black hoodies/ God will probably have me on some real strict shit" (Wallace, 1994, track 17). The artist's complete lack of self-worth present throughout the lyrics enforces his attitude about his inability to fit in in heaven. He gives off a false bravado when, after bringing up heaven multiple times, insinuating he worries about it, he says that he would not want to go anyways. This sounds like the comeback from someone who fears rejection. Whether he believes in heaven or not is irrelevant; his paranoia that God will deny him strengthens his vindication to reject before he can be rejected.

Finally, Pharoahe Monch uses pop culture references when talking about his loss of hope due to his PTSD. In "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" he says that "The only faith you have left is a CD from a singer who had a song with Christopher Wallace/ tomorrow is never/ hope is abolished/ mind and soul have little to no unity" (Jamerson, 2014, track 13). Monch makes an indirect reference to Notorious B.I.G.'s song "Suicidal

Thoughts” when he uses B.I.G.’s real name, Christopher Wallace, and speaks about Wallace’s wife Faith Evans. His faith in humanity and God has been destroyed by his PTSD and he paints a picture of no hope with the last three lines of that stanza.

Discussion

This work studied lyrical representations of mental health and mental illness in hip-hop and rap. Using a grounded theory approach, the present research analyzed a group of songs within this genre that engage emotional disturbance as it relates to general feelings of anxiety and depression. This analysis serves to bridge an existing gap in scholarly literature, which discusses mental illness imagery in pop music, specifically hip-hop and rap. The findings of this work deliver alternative readings of hip-hop and rap lyrics by deviating from studies that discuss the over-explored themes of drug trafficking, sex, and violence towards others.

In these songs artists chose to portray their human vulnerabilities in a variety of ways, including emotional and mental struggle through conversations with the personification of death. The Grim Reaper is a constant in imagery, as are god figures and angels. The idea that a higher force can help the person speaking, whether through salvation or death, is an important factor in determining the tone of the song. In addition, artists plead for death to take them but then express hesitancy at the thought of actually dying. Others say that angels and God will cast them out and refuse to accept them. Another overarching theme that is recognized between the songs includes that of not being missed. There is the fear and paranoia that those closest to the speaker will leave them and/or not understand their pain. The cry for help that runs consistently throughout

the imagery of the songs is a passionate one. This is a task that I feel the rap genre is particularly suited towards.

Rap is a strong contender to speak about mental illness moving forward from here. The strength of the words is often unapologetic in nature, and rap as a genre has a history of speaking about ugly truths. This can be a problem as well though. Many listeners are turned off by rap due to its use of expletives and violent imagery. That means the messages about mental illness will be tuned out and dismissed as well. However, the trend away from gangsta rap as popular music and toward conscious rap shows promise. For example, from the songs analyzed there is an increase in songs with a positive view on handling mental illness. Songs that were released in 2014 in particular do not see mental illness as a dead-end road but speak more actively about seeking help and rising back up. I think this reflects a general increase in awareness of mental health in over the past couple of years. Further, the strong stereotypes that surround both mental illness and rap have a long way to go in the public's mind. The assumptions about those who engage in the rap genre are negative and blanket. Famous classical artists, writers, and musicians such as Van Gogh, J.D. Salinger, and Tchaikovsky respectively are treated with reverence and thought of as genius in their disorders. However, when rap artists express their mental and emotional struggles through lyrics they are often dismissed. It is time to reevaluate the ways in which modern artists engage mental illness, and rap in a strong starting point.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF ONLINE SOURCES USED IN LOCATING SONGS

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APPENDIX B

Artist	Song	Year
Notorious B.I.G.	Suicidal Thoughts	1994
Heltah Skeltah	Therapy	1996
MF Doom	I Hear Voices	1999
Black Eyed Peas	Anxiety	2004
Kid Cudi	Trapped In My Mind	2010
Lupe Fiasco	Beautiful Lasers	2011
B.o.B	Out Of My Mind	2012
Scarface	Mind Playin Tricks On Me	2013
Eminem feat. Rihanna	The Monster	2013
Wax	We Can't All Be Heroes	2013
Boola feat. Jeni Fujita	Shadow River	2014
Kendrick Lamar	I	2014
Pharoahe Monch	Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder	2014

APPENDIX C

SONG BY ARTIST	TOPIC		
	Paranoia	Violence	Religion
Boola		X	X
Scarface	X	X	X
Wax			X
Heltah Skeltah	X	X	
MF Doom	X	X	X
Notorious BIG	X	X	X
B.o.B.	X		
Black Eyed Peas	X		
Kid Cudi	X		X
Lupe Fiasco		X	
Kendrick Lamar	X		
Eminem Ft. Rihanna		X	
Pharoahe Monch		X	X