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Identity, Obeisance and the Image of God in Selected Rap Songs

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Abstract

The exploration of identity, obeisance, and the image of God within rap songs reveals a fascinating intersection of personal narrative, cultural homage, and spiritual inquiry. Drawing on a range of rap songs spanning different eras and sub-genres, it examines how artistes navigate questions of selfhood, reverence and spirituality within the framework of hip-hop culture. Through the instrumentation of lyrical analysis and thematic exploration, the paper examines how rap music serves as a platform for artistes to assert their individuality, pay homage to cultural influences, and grapple with existential questions. It probes into how the image of God is depicted and interpreted within the concept of rap, considering both traditional religious themes and secular interpretations. It concludes that the multifaceted representations of identity and spirituality in rap lyrics offers insights into the broader cultural and social dynamics at play within the genre.

Keywords: Cultural studies, Identity, Image of God, Obeisance, Rap songs.

Introduction

This study attempts an inquiry into identity, obeisance and the image of God in rap songs. In more recent times, the thought of rap as a genre of music, used in expressing religious beliefs, may sound plausible to listeners of music and music enthusiasts, scholars, social scientists, people with religious inclination, and others generally. If it does not, it, at the very least, arouses curiosity. This may not have been the case three decades ago as the idea may come off as absurd to many. However, that it is gaining currency now does not in any way translate to mean the absence of religious imports prior to this time. Religion and its incorporation or appropriation is not new to rap

music. Thinking of rap music as a conduit for expressing religious beliefs and a canvas through which the idea of 'God' can be represented will be less absurd to people today. In her analysis of rap music in African-American churches, Barnes (2008) notes that, "Gospel Rap is becoming an increasingly popular musical form and a method of evangelising to younger audiences" (p.319).

Although, from her analysis, it is evident that a good number of churches incorporate rap music as a vital part of their programmes but, to some, the idea of rap music in a religious and holy place of worship is not one to be encouraged even if it exists. Barnes buttresses this when she avers that, "its secular roots make (its) expression inappropriate for Christian arena" (p.319). Although, what may be termed 'Christian Hip-Hop', in the words of Barnes, gathers a reasonable level of popularity especially among younger audiences, it still has limited appeal even among Christians who see rap music as mostly associated with themes of violence, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, and crime. For such persons, it is a profane art form that cannot be conceived side by side with the idea of the sacred; the idea of God. This distorted and negative image that is associated with rap music presents the need to separate it from the idea of religion and God. However, Lauricella and Kyereme (2012) opine that both the sacred and secular can exist in the same space. They aver that, "one of the nuances in hip hop – and also in Motown, blues, and music brought to North America from West Africa – is that the sacred and secular are not mutually exclusive." For them, the important point is that one (the sacred) can be expressed in the other (the secular).

The foregoing stems from the popular opinion that rap music as a form of popular culture has not gained much ground in the academia as it is now. On the few occasions when any book or essay is written on rap the focus is usually on issues bordering on sexism, misogyny, the promotion and romanticism of violence and life of crime and sometimes rap as a tool for socio-political commentary. It is, however, important here to mention that rap is an art form whose range of thematic preoccupation should not be talked about in isolation. The popular (mis)conception is that rap music is a secular art form that is incapable of thematising topics that are considered to be sacred, and as a result, conceptualising rap music as an art form that expresses religious ideas is to be sacrilegious. It suffices to say that this is a rather false construct as rap artists through their music thematise the sacred. It is this gap in scholarship that this paper seeks to address by interrogating how religion and God are represented and thematised in Nigerian and American rap music.

The choice of the regional genres is to show that irrespective of region or social and the cultural climate, the thematisation of God and religious beliefs is one that is existent in rap. For this study, songs by the Nigerian rap artist, M.I, and songs by American rap artists, 2Pac, Nas, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, are engaged for analysis through the lens of cultural studies. Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the production, materialisation and consumption of culture. It resists the elevation of canonical text over none canonical texts across disciplines (Ihidero 2018). This approach to the engagement of texts gives birth to the challenge of traditional status quo in the area of interest of "what is worthy of study" in the academia (Ihidero, 2015). It also has opened a floodgate in areas of research, making it possible for scholars and students alike to interrogate cultural products like music, art, music, fashion etc., etc., or what is termed popular culture.

Rap, Religion and Social Commentary

Rap music has had a long history of engaging salient issues affecting the black community, making commentary about these topics and being confrontational about the topics, no matter the sensitivity of it. Jay-Z in his book *Decoded* (2010) gives an insight into Rap's long history of using its platform to speak about topics bothering society, most especially, black society. Rap's first great subjects were ego-tripping and partying, but before long it turned into a tool for social commentary. It was kind of a natural move. The 1970s were a time when black arts in general was being used as a tool for social change, whether it was in the poetry of people like the Last Poets or in the R&B of Marvin Gaye or Donny Hathaway or movies like *Shaft*. Politics had a real cultural angle too. Art, politics and culture were all mixed up together. Hence, being culturally a black verbal art, with content that bears socio-economic and political significance, it was almost obligatory that any popular art include some kind of political message.

The earliest criticism rap music faced were sustained on the argument that rap music is misogynistic, sexist, extremely vulgar, gang-related and promotes a crime culture, with rappers often profiled as thugs, drug dealers and gangsters, with the media being the tool used in creating these images. Becky Blanchard (1999) reports that "in recent years, the controversy surrounding rap music has been in the forefront of the American media… it seems that political and media groups have been quick to place blame on rap for a seeming trend in youth violence" (p.1). This one sided examination of rap also undermines the cultural and political significance of not just the songs, but the situation that birthed this genre. However, despite these allegations, it is certain that rap has been a tool for social commentary. In "Anything", Jay-Z raps, "product of my environment/ nothing can save me", the idea expressed by those words is similar to Blanchard's when she says "If rap music appears to be excessively violent when compared to country, western or popular rock, it is because rap stems from a culture that has been seeped in the fight against political, social, and economic oppression" (p.4).

Before we examine rap music as a tool for the advocacy of social change and a means of making social commentary, it is of great significance to take cognizance of the reason behind rap's use of explicit content. Maurice (2011) gives a compelling insight that is worth visiting. Rap artists are signed by record companies whose primary focus is to make a profit. He explains the logic behind record companies promoting records that thematise the street life, saying that with the advent of sound scan, record executives soon discovered that most listeners of these types of rap songs are white Americans, and to break into that market demography, they had to promote songs that suit the taste of the target market. In "Jesus Walks", Kanye West raps about the kind of lyrics that these record companies favour, thus: so here go my single, dawg, radio needs this/They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus/That means guns, sex, lies, videotape/But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh? (2:58-3:06)

These lines show the attitude of record companies and media houses towards rap songs that do not typify gang life. In the mix of the aforementioned, religion and the idea of God is made manifest in rap music. To affirm this and to engage in this discourse and the argument that ensues from it, is to answer the question of how and

in what manner a representation thereof is achieved. Watkins (2003) opines that "rap music is experiencing an emerging religious discourse founded on the rhymes of artists…" (p.184). Through raps lyricism, theological sensibility is thematised as rap music artists (rappers) show religious affinity, express religious ideas and beliefs, perception on religion etc. Barnes (2008) expresses this when she notes that "gospel rap songwriters and singers are from varied backgrounds and use diverse musical instrumentation, but they generally develop music to express their beliefs and to evangelise" (p.322).

Although Barnes' use of the nominal "gospel" is suggestive of Christianity, the function of rap as a medium to express (religious) beliefs and to evangelise is not an exclusivity of rappers who identify as Christians but extends also, to those who identify as Muslims, as well as Rastafarians and other religious groups. Although, the inclusivity of Islam in this mould engenders some controversies among some Muslim faithful, there is the notion that both are at parallels. Islamic scholars have debated on music's permissibility, but the issue is multifaceted. For Rashid (2022), even though Quranic recitations are considered acceptable and even encouraged to be recited beautifully, it is distinguished from music in Islamic law. However, he opines that the debate among Muslims regarding music focuses on what types are permissible, not whether music is allowed altogether. He then aligns with the general consensus that music (audio arts) falls within three categories – the legitimate (Quranic recitation, call to prayer, religious chants, etc.), the controversial (most music types), and the illegitimate (music promoting sinful behaviour).

In recent times, several rap artistes such as Nigeria's Asake have faced criticism by Muslim Ummah for incorporating Islamic motifs in their music (Adekunle, 2024). In a social media engagement, a Muslim social media influencer named Brother Kareem took to TikTok to express disapproval of Asaka's use of a full Quranic verse in his song "I Swear". For Kareem, such an action would be considered disrespectful and potentially undermine the reverence due to the Quran, possibly inspiring non-Muslims to follow suit. Despite criticism of this nature, the consensus holds that anything not explicitly prohibited by the Quran or the Prophet, aligns with Islamic values, and do not promote disobedience is permissible. Through the rhetoric of Jay Electronica in "Universal Soldier", one observes Islamic ideals reflected in "the teachings of the Honourable Elijah Muhammad" which the rapper sees as his backbone. The introduction of the song is a recital of Islamic prayers "Bismillah (Bismillah)/ Bismillah (Bismillah)/(A'oodhu Billaahi) A'oodhu Billaahi min al-Shaytaan ir-rajeem/Bismillah (Bismillah)/Ashadu lâ ilâha illa-llâhWa/Ashadu anna Muhammad rasûl allâh" (0:35-0:59).

In a way, rappers intimately exhibit a strong sense of religiosity, which at a glance appears to be in antithesis to the persona, created for themselves or created by the media. The appropriation of religion by rap does not only manifest in its lyrics. It is sometimes done through pictorial representation in album covers, through the use of ecclesiastical items that carry religious motifs as props for music videos etc. As aforesaid, rappers are lyricists, who through their lyrics evoke in their listeners, ideas that reflect the religious and God. How does rap portray God? How do rappers thematise God? One way God is figured in rap music is through a reimaging of self, a situation where rappers create a God persona. This God complex is achieved mostly

through the lyrics of their songs, or, at the extreme, through custom effect. The rapper Jesse Jagz characterises himself in the God realm in his song "God on the Mic", Jay-Z sees himself as God, one of his many famous aliases is 'Jay Hova' a contraption of his stage name Jay-Z and the name of the Judeo-Christian God, Jehovah. Rappers such as Lil Nas X take it to the extreme in the video of his "Montero", where he goes to hell to dethrone the devil.

Similarly, West creates an alter ego for himself from what appears to some to be an urban blasphemy of Jesus by calling himself "Yeezus". Consequently, this representation/image of God holds significant socio-cultural and socio-political implications. However, the figuration does not only manifest in the stance of rappers creating an alter-ego for them. Sometimes when God is thematised, it usually involves the artist acknowledging the presence or role of the Divine in their lives and at other times, it involves the artist questioning the existence of God or asking existential questions. Perhaps, the most interesting ways God is figured in rap are instances where God is held as an accomplice to the actions of these rappers. Through religious conscious themed rap songs, rappers espouse ideas that reflect a beckon on God to protect them as they journey through life. As a result of the derelict state of the society these rappers grew up in, they sometimes feel a pathological need for help to successfully go through the day to day activities of normal life and return home safely at the end of the day.

West recognises this relationship between God and the gangster. He is aware of God's role as a protector who is charged with the responsibility of guiding the gangster as he goes through life. In Jesus Walks" West epitomises this impression found in rap's religious talk. The chorus of the song is a plea for Jesus Christ to walk with him and guide him through life, as he is aware that the devil lurking in the shadows, ready to destroy his soul. The intro to the song is very important in our present discussion as it exposes the social malaise of the society he finds himself. The condition of his society forces him to seek God's protection. In the intro, he says, "We at war/We at war with terrorism, racism/But most of all, we at war with ourselves (0:23-0:34)". The intro explains the reason he needs Jesus Christ to walk with him. He makes this plea in the chorus, saying "(Jesus, walk) God show me the way because the Devil's tryna break me down (Jesus, walk with me)" (0:34-0:42).

Here, the devil represents obstacles that are both social and economic. These obstacles come in the form of gang violence, racism, police brutality, difficulty in getting jobs as blacks etc. In Christian theology, we often find situations where a binary is created. On one hand, we find ideals and interests of the religion presented positively and sometimes inflated, while on the other hand, we find obstacles to the attainment of such goals being presented in a negative or demonised sense. The obstacles are presented in this song in the form of the devil, racism, war. 50 Cent also comments on the rough nature of the environment people are made to grow up in; an environment wherein the possibility of dying prematurely is high. This fear makes them seek God's protection, and at other times, forces them to protect themselves when God seems to be taking too long. This idea informs these lines from 50 Cent's "Many Men" where he raps that "Every night I talk to God but he don't say nothing back/I know he protecting me, but I still stay with my gat/In my nightmares, niggas

keep pulling Tecs on me" (3:28-3:37). Commenting on the rough nature of their neighbourhood, West raps in Jesus Walks",

> You know what the Midwest is? Young and restless/Where restless (Niggas) might snatch your necklace and next these (Niggas) might jack your Lexus/Somebody tell these (Niggas) who Kanye West is/I walk through the valley of the Chi where death is. (0:47-0:59)

In verse two of the song, West raps about what most Christians would see as improbable, even see as blasphemy. However, what becomes clear from the verse is the mind and thought process of the rapper about God and his relationship with them. Two major things are exposed in the process; (i) the belief that God loves and works with sinners, despite the gravity of their crime, and (ii) that rappers feel a pathological need for God's protection. Rapping further in the second verse, West says to the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the strippers (Jesus walks for them)/to the victims of welfare feel we livin' in Hell here, hell yeah (Jesus walks for them)/Now, hear ye, hear ye, want to see Thee more clearly I know He hear me when my feet get weary 'Cause we're the almost nearly extinct/We rappers is role models: we rap, we don't think/I ain't here to argue about His facial features or here to convert atheists into believers/I'm just tryna say the way school need teachers/the way Kathie Lee needed Regis, that's the way I need Jesus (2:24-2:57).

The opening lines of the song above presents to listeners, ideas that many religious people may not agree with. Nevertheless, whether right or wrong, the rapper believes God is with them, no matter what they do. Nas in "God Love Us" does something similar to what West does in "Jesus Walks". The chorus of Nas' "God Love Us" and the opening lines of the second verse of West's "Jesus Walks", share a similarity in idea: no matter the gravity of your crime or perceived immorality, God is with you. In the song, Nas raps,

> God love us hood niggaz (I know) Cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas (I know) And the killers, God love us good niggas (I know) Cause on the streets is the hood niggas, uh And I know he feel us, uh, God love us hood niggas (I know) Cause he be with us in the prisons And he takes time to listen, uh God love us hood niggas (I know) Cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas, uh But he forgive us. (0:20-0:42)

Central to songs of this nature is the idea of forgiveness. God understands the rapper, his life choices and decisions, and he justify his actions. The chorus itself is an audacious proclamation that shows a relationship between God and the rapper. While Kanye asks God for guidance and asserts God's love for sinners of any kind, Nas on the other hand, affirms God's love for them and proceeds to give reasons for making such a bold claim. The verse ends with the phrase "but God love us hood niggas." Nas raps further: He who has ears, let him hear and he who has sight, let him see. He who

has life, let him be. See! Everything goes through change. Those who know don't talk and those who talk don't know a thing. Men are born soft and turn tough. Dead lay a stiffened heart, I've been kissed by God, I've been hurt, I've been marked for death, almost ripped apart by the beast but he missed his mark. Alone in the dark my thoughts had sparked up when I saw my body on the floor. From above I watch it all. Yo, it came to me, the pain in me. Many slain empty skulls where a brain should be. It strangely seemed like it was a dream but the sirens had never woke me. Only reason I'm here now is cause God chose me and to me, I'm only just a crook nigga but God love us hood niggas (0:43-1.24).

It cannot be denied that there seems to be an oddity when rappers compare themselves to God, and more so when they indict God as an accomplice. No matter the aberration this claim by the rapper may be, it exists nonetheless. In comparing the life of the rapper with that of Christ, Utley (2012) makes a bold statement that Jesus was gangsta. She avers that "Jesus fraternised with sexually licentious women, cavorted with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, had a temper, used profance language with religious people, praised faithfulness over stilted forms of religious piety, and honoured God more than the government" (p.49). Gangstas respect Jesus because they see the parallels between his life and theirs. One is lured into considering the family and social background of Jesus, wherein his mother was homeless at the time of his birth, he was nurtured by a stepfather whose family tree was filled with some unscrupulous characters guilty of murder, incest, and rape. He grew up as a poor minority terrorised by state-sanctioned oppression. The semblance in the lives of both Jesus Christ and the rapper when a parallel is drawn is of great significance to the assertion that Christ is a gangster, and as a consequence, Christ partakes in their crime. This also gives the rapper a sense of entitlement to God; the only way it makes sense that God exist and looks out for them is that he is one of them and a part of them, a part of whatever they do.

Early rappers grew up in dangerous, hostile and poverty-stricken environments, which may have forced them into a life of crime. 2pac raps in his famous 1995 smash hit "Dear Mama", "I ain't guilty even though I sell rocks/It feels good putting money in your mailbox" (2:05-2:10), and so, to them, the life of crime is a survival instinct which they as humans naturally have. Jay-Z captures this feeling of the inevitability of people like him living a life of crime when he raps in Rick Rose's "Free Mason" as a guest artist that "It's amazing that I made it through the maze that I was in/Lord, forgive me; I never would've made it without sin/Holy water my face in the basin Diamonds in my Rosary shows He forgave him" (2:19-2:29). Therefore, it goes for one of two ways: God understands or God is an accomplice. He partakes passively (He understands). He partakes actively (He is an accomplice).

From the foregoing, what we find is a new narrative in the interpretation of God-rapper relationship. The rapper (gangsta) presents ideas that are counter-discursive in the conception of God's relationship with him. These ideas may be termed as blasphemous and sacrilegious by some mainstream religious practitioners. Nonetheless, two things should be noted; (i) the rapper does not consider their conception of God's relationship with them to be blasphemous, rather, they lay claims to being His children in their own right, and (ii) this idea is conceived as a result of the

rapper drawing a parallel between his life and the life of Jesus Christ as told in the Bible.

Identity, Obeisance and the Image of God in the Selected Rap Songs

When we deconstruct rap music's religious discourse, what we find extant in it is a rhetoric that asserts the idea of identity and reverence to God. In an attempt to explicate the identity of God in other to aid the understanding of God and how he is represented in rap music, Utley (2012) in her theory of God's personality constructs a binary identity of God which she termed as "God out there" and "God down here". She creates a bifocal interpretation of the manifestation of the same being. Understanding her construct of the image of God is essential to helping us understand why the rapper creates a God persona. To her, "God out there" represents the celestial supreme deity, who may or may not interfere in the affairs of mortals. On the other hand, "God down here" represents the rapper, who reinvents himself as God. The reimaging of self by claiming a God identity is important not only to the rapper but also to his listeners. The import of this is in how it helps to deconstruct the stereotypical image of young black male, and by extension, black people in general. In rap songs, "God narrative" is exploited by rappers to shape and re-define their identity. Scholars have undertaken the task of defining the term identity. Fearon (1999) undertakes an analysis of the meanings associated with the term identity and contends that "identity" is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed "social" and "personal".

In the former sense, an "identity" refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable (p.2). So, to him, the term identity in its present incarnation has a double sense. It refers at the same time to (i) social categories (social identity) and (ii) the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity (personal identity). Vignoles (2017) gives support to this idea of social and personal identity when she says the question "Who are you?" is one of the most important questions that most people will ever face. We ask it of ourselves and others. We also face it as individuals and as members of social groups. Discussing the history of the appropriation of the God identity as a way of fostering positive self-esteem, Utley (2012) writes that in the 1920s and 1930s African American leaders began to emphasise pigmentation. Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen among others argued for the literal and symbolic blackness of Jesus in an attempt to buffer the self-esteem of African Americans who were finally considered fully human but were far from being considered fully equal to their white counterparts. Black Jesus embodied the beauty of blackness, challenged the seemingly naturalised privileges of whiteness, destabilised Eurocentric Christian norms, and affirmed black people's struggle against racism.

Hip-Hop artists and more specifically, rappers appropriate themselves the status of sons of God, God himself, or accomplices of God. This can be viewed as an appropriation of the sacred trinity in Christian theology. The rapper can be the father, the son, or the Holy Spirit, whichever divine character he feels most appropriate in

any giving situation or context. Rappers in their songs make use of this trope – covertly or overtly – either as song title as in Jesse Jagz' "God on the Mic", Eminem's "Rap God", or as the rapper referring to himself as God, giving God-like attribute to himself. The Nigerian rap artist, Laycon, in his song "God Body" re-images himself by likening himself to God. Laycon raps, "Listen good, this is god talking/Talk about designers, I'm the god model/God speed so the movement everlasting/God seed so every girl around me here will stay fertile" (0:11-0:20). He not only calls himself but goes on to give himself a God attribute – the ability to create. Being God therefore gives the rapper and his listeners a sense of self-worth and the self-esteem needed for operating comfortably in whatever social space they find themselves. Maintaining a similar stance, West takes the God identity in his song, "I Am God", an even bolder statement than Laycon's "God Body". Kanye West has never shied away from his Christian roots, from his first album, *College Dropout* (2004) to *Donda* (2021).

Despite the above claims, it is pertinent to also mention that while some rappers claim to be God, there are others who acknowledge and pay deep reverence to God, appreciating Him for life, blessing, talent and His benevolence in their life. Utley (2012) highlights two ways rappers do this; at award shows and in the lines of their song. A vivid example is Jay Electronica in "Universal Soldier" who acknowledges God as the source of his talent and pays reverence to him. He says, "My poetry's livin' like the God that I fall back on/And all praises due to Allah for such a lustrous platform" (1:26-1:33). Likewise, M.I. expresses his gratitude to God in "The End/The Chairman", thanking Him for His blessings on his life. In the four verse song, he credits God for everything he has achieved in life. In the fourth verse, Frank Edward, a featured artist in the song praises God:

> You bless me na you be chairman Baba mi mo o se I bless your name I dey hail you Hands in the air oshe If e no be for your love baba mi loke Tell me wetin I for do I go dobale I prostrate for you the highest Ko mo le I go dance for you baba" (4:43-5:00).

Through rap, rappers also communicate the idea of submission to the will of God. This may be as a result of a tumultuous phase in life that the rapper experiences, where he/she feels lost, or as a result of him/her coming out of a tempestuous situation. In these types of rap, the listeners find motifs that espouse ideas like submission and deference. Such ideas power rap such as DMX's "Lord Give Me a Sign" and Kanye West's "Lord I Need You". West's lyrics are reflective of his relationship with his estranged wife, Kim Kardashian and about reports of his divorce from her. In the song, he appears to acknowledge their separation and recounts all the good things that she brought into his life, such as his children. In the chorus of the song, he invites God to guide him as he navigates through life. He avers "Well, Lord, I need You to wrap Your arms around me/Wrap Your arms around with Your mercy Lord, I need You to wrap Your arms around me I give up on doin' things my way/And tell me everything's gonna be alright (0.01-0.22). The above is a personal prayer expressing surrender and conveying a desire for comfort, protection, reassurance, and peace. The rapper's emotional state is thus conveyed through the use of words like 'need', 'give up', and 'alright', which indicate willingness to allow a higher power (God) to guide him.

Conclusion

The foregoing is evidence of the fact that rap music is an African-American cultural art form which stands as a cultural product that speaks to the realities of the culture from which it emanates by being a medium through which the voice of the people at the margin is heard and expressed. This paper, by extension, portrays the fact that religion is a key motif in rap songs as it manifests itself in a plethora of ways in the lyrics and lives of the rap artistes, whether they question religious doctrines, make vivid allusions to Biblical stories, or the artistes re-image themselves with the God identity. Most importantly, the study has examined how God is represented in rap music. It is important to note that, when rappers rap about being God, they use it to engage a power discourse in an attempt to deconstruct and shift the popular image of Blacks as represented by the media and government propaganda. Hence, by examining the image and representation of God and other religious sensibilities in rap music, the study provides the prospect of broadening scholarship beyond traditional notions of what the content of rap music is.

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