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Billy Woods's Literary Intertexts

ABSTRACT

While—like all artistic forms—it allows for deviation from this standard rule, rap is heavily reliant on building blocks of sixteen bars and a refrain. In addition, rhyme plays a prominent role in structuring rap, which is why the form is also colloquially referred to as “rhyming.” In view of this, Billy Woods’s record *Today, I Wrote Nothing* was a considerable departure from the existing rap norm. On the record, Woods stylistically adapted a collection of works by Russian absurdist writer Daniil Kharms, which was also called *Today, I Wrote Nothing*. Kharms was known for writing short prose without any formal structure. Most of his stories deal with absurd situations and slapstick humour. The structure of the fragmented fiction is adapted into rap on Woods’s record. The long rap verses are replaced by short songs without any specific narrative. The record maintains the non-structure of Kharms’s writing, as well as its absurdity, but it abandons any semblance of traditional rap. The second important stylistic and structural choice made in Woods’s record was the integration of aspects of Flannery O’Connor’s writing, particularly its humour and darkness. The article will focus on how Billy Woods integrates intertextuality into his lyrics to give the songs additional layers of meaning.

Keywords: Billy Woods, Daniil Kharms, Flannery O’Connor, rap structure, the absurd.

INTRODUCTION

Rap has always been a referential art form since its inception: as a sample-based genre, it takes existing recordings and uses them as the basis for the production of new pieces (Schloss 34). In view of this fact, it is important to note that the recordings are integrated mostly for aesthetic reasons, or because they are superficially related to the song on the topical level. Rap is also one of those genres in contemporary music that place the most emphasis on the lyrics. Taking all this into account, one might find it surprising that there are few examples of books of fiction adapted into rap lyrics. Moreover, few such adaptations are successful. One such rarity is *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, a record on which Billy Woods has adapted the structure of Daniil Kharms's writing in the eponymous collection of short stories and various other pieces. Stylistically, Woods has also adapted Flannery O'Connor's writing into the record, and used a variety of references to other writers in the lyrics. This article examines how Billy Woods adapts intertextuality into his lyrics to add additional layers of meaning to the song.

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CURRENT RESEARCH ON RAP WRITING

Rap writing is a fairly common research topic, yet a comprehensive study on rap writing has not yet been made. There are several books that cover different aspects of rap, such as Paul Edwards's *How to Rap* book series. Alexis Pate focused on the poetic elements in rap writing in *In the Heart of the Beat*, while Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois edited *The Anthology of Rap*, in which they compiled the lyrics of important rappers from the genre and presented them chronologically. From the late 2000s, studies analyzing specific writing styles of influential rappers started appearing. One of those is *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's "Illmatic"* edited by Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, which is a study analyzing Nas's album *Illmatic*. Nevertheless, critical literature has not been successful in describing rap writing as a whole, which is why I tackle this problem in my forthcoming monograph *Billy Woods: Virtuoso of Intertextuality*. To be able to do this, I had to pick a specific rapper (in my case Billy Woods) and put his writing and characteristic stylistic devices (in the case of Billy Woods, intertextuality) into the broader context of hip-hop as a genre, and look into how this device has developed within hip-hop. To lay bare the connection, two chapters have been exclusively dedicated to defining intertextuality and the form of rap. In the chapter on intertextuality, the connection between intertextuality and sampling is explained. For the

explanation of why and how sampling is used, the producer and rapper Zilla Rocca was interviewed to help develop the most precise definition possible. The same was done in the chapter on the form of rap—in order to develop a proper definition of it, experts were interviewed. The form was explained by Dart Adams, a hip-hop journalist from Boston, and Blockhead, a music producer who works with Billy Woods and Aesop Rock. For more details, the reader is referred to the forthcoming monograph.

DANIIL KHARMS AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Daniil Kharms was a Russian absurdist writer who, in the 1920s, was part of UBERIU, a collective of avant-garde writers from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Later, the collective disbanded and Kharms went on to write children's literature. Throughout his writing career, he was in conflict with the Soviet authorities and was imprisoned multiple times. He died in prison in 1942. Kharms's fiction is difficult to define stylistically, but it can be said that it is absurd, and without formal structure. In a sense, it is meta-fiction parodying and satirizing the existing forms and structures of the fiction of its time, with added slapstick humour (see Kharms 12–17).

Flannery O'Connor was an American writer from Georgia whose writing career spanned from 1945 to 1964 when she passed away. It ended prematurely as she was diagnosed with lupus erythematosus, a disease forcing her to move to the rural town of Milledgeville. Despite those obstacles, O'Connor had been a prolific writer. She wrote novels and short stories, such as her 1953 story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The feature distinguishing her writing from the others' is the grotesque portrayal of her characters, accompanied by dark humour juxtaposed with strong Catholic beliefs ("Flannery O'Connor"). In her writing she was interested in how different institutions operate with each other and the power structures between the genders. In O'Connor's stories, God plays a sinister role. The religious and moral authority of God is appropriated in different stories by her characters to further their nationalist, racist or xenophobic agenda, which O'Connor then satirizes (Boyagoda 60–61). Lastly, O'Connor also consistently utilizes the narrative gap. The narrative gap is a polysemous concept which Hardy (363–65) delineates as information that the narrator either omits because it is irrelevant, or because characters lack sufficient knowledge to convey it. In Hardy's example from O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother, for example, cannot describe the murdering of her family because she did not witness it. Later it will become clear how the narrative gap can be applied to Billy Woods's writing.

ASPECTS OF THE ABSURD, THE GROTESQUE AND THE FORM OF RAP

The two main stylistic concepts relevant for the present analysis are the absurd and the grotesque. M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines "absurd" as a "[t]erm . . . applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction sharing the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd" (1). The grotesque, on the other hand, is "strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or slightly frightening way" ("Grotesque").

Those are some relevant characteristics of the works of Kharms, O'Connor and Billy Woods. However, before we continue, it is necessary to understand the form of rap to recognize how Billy Woods's *Today, I Wrote Nothing* deviates from it, and why this is significant. Rap, like any other genre of music, has its form. The rhythm is measured with "beats," which are then further divided into bars (Schmidt-Jones 34–38). The most common time measurement in rap is the "four on four" time, which constitutes one bar in a rap song. In order to write a complete rap verse, one needs sixteen bars (Dart Adams in conversation with the author, May 2018; qtd. in Kolarič). Needless to say, this rule is not set in stone and how rigorously it is observed varies from rapper to rapper. However, on *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, it is, remarkably, completely ignored, as we will see in section 2.

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BILLY WOODS—*TODAY, I WROTE NOTHING*

Considering the basic tenets of the rap form, the absurd and the grotesque from the previous chapter, it is possible to see how Billy Woods successfully adopts Kharms and O'Connor into his writing and enhances this with references to other writers and works. In doing so, he disregards the established rap norm. The following sections will offer an analysis of three songs from *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, namely "Zulu Tolstoy," "Dreams Come True" and "Scales."

1. "ZULU TOLSTOY"

Wrote a story about a rapper
writing a story rap about a
shorty tryna rap his way up out
the trap. Plenty hoes, gats,

run-of-the-mill but flow ill,
 voice old cognac. He'd say
 "no homo" if this was his track.
 So I'm writing about him writing
 about him writing about that. . . .

[sample of a person reading *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy] The good book says that he that lives by the sword shall perish by the sword, said the black. What right man would have it any other way? . . . It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him.

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The reference in the title is a statement made by the American author Saul Bellow, who asked himself how African literature will develop in the post-colonial period, and who will be the Tolstoy of the Zulus (see Menand and Bellow). While according to Edwards's *How to Rap* (26), meta-rap is not uncommon, Billy Woods adds an entirely different dimension to the phenomenon by writing a song about a rapper who is writing about a rapper writing about yet another rapper trying to escape from the inner city. The first rapper, the one who is writing the song, is not successful because he is in conflict with his producer. The young rapper from the song is more successful. However, because he is on parole, he cannot leave the state and therefore his career is stalling. The poetic persona can be interpreted as the least successful rapper of all three, and the lyrics he is writing projects his desires of success. The song ends with a sample of a person reading from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The passage takes place in the part of the novel's plot when the judge and the child, both personae from the novel, are resting at a campfire. Sometime before they stopped to rest, they passed a corpse. The judge is explaining what war is to the child. The scene is connected to the concept of the song: the war becomes the recording industry and everything that the musicians have to endure to be able to make their music. In the song, it does not seem to be the case that any of the rappers is particularly successful. This is reminiscent of the idea that in war, there are no true winners. One of the sides does eventually prevail, but the costs of the aftermath exceed the gain of victory, rendering the victor just another loser.

The meta-fictional aspects of the song are those which mirror Kharms the most. In his writing, Kharms was known for his use of references to classical writers and prominent figures, such as Pushkin, whom he put into absurd situations from which they could not escape. Furthermore, Kharms's characters typically end up in the same absurd situation several times from different perspectives, and this situation always ends with

a disaster or the death of the character. As an example, let us consider the excerpts from the short stories "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin" and "Tumbling Old Women":

1

Pushkin was a poet and was always writing something. Once Zhuskovsky caught him at his writing and loudly exclaimed: "Well ain't you a scriber!"

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Pushkin had four sons and all of them idiots. One didn't even know how to sit on [sic] chair and was always falling off. Pushkin himself was not great on sitting on chairs." (Kharms, "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin" 82-83)

Because of her excessive curiosity, one old woman tumbled out of her window, fell and shattered to pieces. Another old woman leaned out to look at the one who'd shattered but, out of excessive curiosity, also tumbled out of her window, fell and shattered to pieces. (Kharms, "Tumbling Old Women" 47)

From those examples, similarities between Kharms's and Woods's meta-writing can be observed. Still, this is not the only possible reading of Woods's song since one could also see it as a jab at the statement made by Saul Bellow that Zulus have not yet produced any writer equivalent to Tolstoy. Bellow made this statement in the 1990s and later claimed it was presented out of context (qtd. in Menand), which is ironic as the 90s were the decade when rap was finally fully embraced in the United States and became one of the most popular genres. Historically, rap is part of the hip-hop culture which was developed in the early 70s in the Bronx by African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Puerto Rican children. It was a youth movement comprising DJing, b-boying (also known as break dancing), graffiti writing and rapping (Chang 72-80, 89-104). By 1979 rapping had come to the forefront of culture and started developing into an industry, but it was only in the 90s that the rap industry would establish itself in the broader culture (Charnas 37-50, 277-85, 402). What escaped Bellow was that rap focused on lyrics more than any other form of music: ever since its inception, its lyrics have been reflecting on societal ills, the social environment (see "The Message #7" by Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five) or racial issues in the United States (see Public Enemy) while being demonized for their language use (see Gore or Coleman 349-60). Nevertheless, rap survived and over the years built an industry enabling the social advancement of a segment of the population that would under different circumstances have had difficulties achieving comparable success. This culminated recently in rapper Kendrick Lamar receiving the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for music (Lamarre). It is for these reasons that the

song can be seen as a jab at Bellow's statement: while there is no single Zulu Tolstoy, there are many "Zulu Tolstoys," not in the traditional sense of writing but in rap writing. The rappers were the giants of the medium through which the broader African diaspora was able to establish their voice, which Bellow was unable to perceive even when it was happening right before him.

2. "DREAMS COME TRUE"

Let us examine the structure of rap more closely so that we can see the deviation from the standard in Billy Woods's song "Dreams Come True." The relevant concepts are a bar, rhyming and sampling. To recapitulate: Hip-hop, like any kind of music, has its form which is measured with beats, which are further divided into bars. The most common time, the four on four time, constitutes a single bar in a rap song. Typically, a song will comprise sixteen bars. Now, rapping is also referred to as "rhyming." The rhyme is the most common stylistic means in rap and it is a very important part of its structure. Early rap used to have simple end rhymes, but as time progressed, the rhymes became more and more complex, ranging from internal to polysyllabic and later also occasionally morphing into assonance and consonance. Finally, "sampling" refers to taking pieces of music, films and TV shows combining them into a sound collage to create a new song (see Kolarič).

The rapper and producer Zilla Rocca explained the reasons why film music was frequently sampled. In films, the music is there to create a mood and evoke emotions. The viewer needs to connect emotionally with the film. Furthermore, the sounds in film are arranged systematically so that instruments mostly follow each other, not overlapping and leave space. This makes them ideal for sampling as the producer can isolate the sounds easily to extract them and create a beat. Those beats are suitable for rapping as they already allow for spacing and the producer does not have to create space artificially. As a result, the rapper has enough space to rap freely over the beat as he/she pleases. On the one hand, the dialogue is typically sampled because it matches the concept of the song or because it has some personal connection to the artists themselves (Zilla Rocca in conversation with the author, October 2018; qtd. in Kolarič).

Taking a look at a traditionally structured rap song like "Live from the Driver's Seat" by Zilla Rocca from *96 Mentality*, we see that the song has two sixteen-bar verses with a refrain after each verse. In comparison, in the song "Dreams Come True" Billy Woods adopts the (lack of) structure of Kharms's short stories, abandons the formal structure of rap and just writes a short non-structured rap song. The sixteen bars of rap verse are

reduced to two bars with no refrain mirroring Kharms's single-sentence story. Compare them: "Today, I wrote nothing. It doesn't matter" (Kharms 120) and "Caught feelings off an old picture, hit her up like, / I still miss ya. Two words: Nigga. Please. Fair enough" (Woods, "Dreams Come True").

3. "SCALES"

The song "Scales" combines the structure of Kharms's stories with the content of those by Flannery O'Connor. It can be seen as a recontextualization of O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." It also utilizes the narrative gap described earlier. In the song, there are four short verses, three of which describe murders and one adultery.

In the first verse, the aftermath of a murder is described by the poetic persona: "No justice, no peace. . . . better have you a piece!" The phrase "No justice, no peace" was popularized by Al Sharpton after the Howard Beach racial incident in 1986 when three African-American men found themselves in a predominately white neighbourhood as their car malfunctioned. They were then attacked by a white mob. As they were escaping, one of them was struck by a car and died (Sharpton). The concept of being killed because of racist motives is reversed in the verse and transformed into an incident of so-called black-on-black crime. In brief, it describes how the police came to a murder scene and people gathered around them. Afterwards the poetic persona reflects how, despite the presence of police investigators, there is still a possibility of confrontation between them and the people. The line "Better have you a piece!" is a double entendre. The word "piece" is used in its slang sense, meaning gun ("Piece"), and simultaneously as a homophone of the word "peace." Therefore, it can be deduced that the poetic persona is advised to have a gun if he wants to also experience peace. The absurd element in the situation is that the people who need protection from the police are the ones who need to protect themselves *from* the police.

The second verse reveals that the poetic persona was the killer:

Better have you a college degree. . .
 Brutus slid the shiv 'tween Julius' ribs
 Two type of people in the world, kid, those who load the guns
 and those who dig
 Rhetorical question: Can I live?

The persona contemplates getting an education or moving somewhere out of reach of the long arm of the law, as he betrayed the person he murdered. The reference to the murder of Julius Caesar (Toynbee) is used. The poetic persona justifies the murder by claiming that he had no other choice—he either had to be the one who kills or the one who

is killed. His conclusion is further legitimized by the rhetorical question “Can I live?” which is also a reference to the Jay-Z song “Can I Live” (from *Reasonable Doubt*) whose main topic is the choice between betrayal and facing repercussions for one’s past actions. The verse concludes with the poetic persona visiting the grave of the person he murdered and celebrating the victory, but also coming to the conclusion that he will have to accept his fate. This verse also features narrative gaps designed to omit the information of whom the persona killed and why. These are necessitated by the fact that providing this information would be tantamount to confessing a crime. Thus, we arrive at the grotesque in the song: the poetic persona does not feel any remorse for betraying and killing his acquaintance, and dances on his grave.

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In the third verse the story continues with the poetic persona still betraying his friends. His next betrayal is indulging in adultery with his friend’s wife: “We all got it coming / smooth her skirt, make sure her shirts buttoned. . . . A good man is hard to find.” The narrative gap is still present as the poetic persona does not disclose the identity of the woman with whom he commits adultery. Nor is the identity of her husband revealed. He justifies this deed by saying “A good man is hard to find,” which is a reference to O’Connor’s short story with the same title. In the story a family is killed by a man, about whom an old lady was having a discussion with Red Sammy, the owner of a diner. “‘A good man is hard to find,’ Red Sammy said. ‘Everything is getting terrible’” (O’Connor 149). The story describes a person named Bailey taking his family for a summer vacation. During the trip the grandmother, who is the aforementioned old lady, tells stories about her childhood to the children. When she realizes that she made a mistake in her narration, she kicks her feet, scaring the cat. This leads to Bailey losing control over the car and causing an accident. As the family are waiting for help, the grandmother hears a vehicle driving down the road and stops it. Three men come out of it and one is recognized by the grandmother. This leads to the whole family being shot by the men. Back in the song, the poetic persona is aware that he is not a good man and that his actions will affect the family negatively, just like the eventual killer in O’Connor’s short story did, but he does not let this fact bother him:

Use untruth to fill that silence
 Kids in they rooms listening to nullified nihilists
 Still stylish, ultraviolence. . . .
 I said “Where’s Wallace?”
 (sample of *The Wire*) “String, where the fuck is Wallace?”
 “Huh? String. String. Look at me. Look at me! Where the fuck is
 Wallace?”

The song concludes with the poetic persona drinking at home, lying about his actions and observing his children listening to violent rap. The word “ultraviolence” is used, which is a reference to the Anthony Burgess novel *A Clockwork Orange*. Later he receives a call from his boss and asks about Wallace, which is a reference to the 12th episode (“Cleaning Up”) from the first season of the show *The Wire* when two characters, DeAngelo and Stringer, are conversing. The exact dialogue is sampled in the song. Stringer (the boss) gives an order to kill Wallace because he is seen as a person who could leak information to the police about a past murder committed by Stringer’s criminal drug enterprise. DeAngelo, under whom Wallace sold drugs, wonders why Wallace disappeared because they used to be friends. From the final stanzas and the dialogue, we can infer that the poetic persona was betraying his fellow drug dealers because he was motivated by vengeance. This also runs parallel to the O’Connor’s short story in which the murderer kills the family because the grandmother recognizes him. In the song, a drug dealer kills his fellow drug dealers, whom he assumes are those involved in the disappearance of Wallace. However, in *The Wire* DeAngelo did not learn who killed Wallace but rather was himself killed as he was seen as a liability by the criminal drug enterprise. The ending is thus left open since it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the poetic persona is able to get his revenge.

CONCLUSION

The three songs discussed here are not the only examples of adaptation of Daniil Kharm’s writing on Billy Woods’s record *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, but are representative of those that demonstrate successful stylistic adaptation of literature into rap. As has been shown, the reason why such adaptation is possible in rap lyrics is because Billy Woods decided to adapt Kharm’s writing style without any specific structure. The question that remains open is whether the only manner of successfully adapting literature into rap is by renouncing the rap structure. To be able to gauge this, a broader analysis of rap records that integrate different literary genres or literary forms with the lyrics of their songs needs to be conducted.

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