Art and Hip-Hop in the Age of the Opioid Crisis

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Abstract
Opioids saturate the language of rap music. Names of brand medications appear explicitly and frequently, across subgenres and generations. And a recent spate of Hip-Hop overdoses has further heightened the stakes for a genre already criticized for glamorizing antisocial values like violence and misogyny. This paper asks: How has the Hip-Hop community responded to these accusations? How is the opioid crisis shaping the aesthetics of Hip-hop practice? These questions matter because the art world has increasingly become involved in documenting and memorializing the victims lost to the opioid crisis. As art brings together practices of remembering, responding, and healing, art has also made vivid the struggle over how the opioid crisis will be remembered in the future. There is the palpable concern, even now, that in the construction of memorials, certain perspectives and experiences are being erased. The hostility and neglect towards rap music is perhaps one example of such erasures. With this in mind, it is all the more urgent that art archives of the opioid crisis incorporate rap lyrics, which have extensively documented opioid use for over two decades. This paper is then also a methodological proposition, to take seriously the knowledge, observations, and arguments presented in rap as archives of the history of substance use. Whether we interpret them as fictive fantasies or gritty realism, these texts exert tremendous influence over global pop culture, youth culture, and counterculture today. Attending to the world of imagination can be valuable in times of crisis, when medical visions of resolution, like artistic visions of resolution, may also contain normative prescriptions of health, sobriety, community, and morality.

Biography
Che Yeun is interested in the human body as an object of industry. She is especially interested in sensation, physiology, and product design. Through these projects, Che investigates the global and colonial implications of knowing the human body through medicine and technology. These questions also fuel her work as a fiction writer. She is from Seoul, Korea.

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It is not often that the Department of Justice weighs in on pop culture. But this was the case in October of 2018, when the DEA arrested Michael Jones, aka New Jerzey Devil, a rapper associated with the emo rap genre. Jones had allegedly distributed heroin and fentanyl to a woman, and his supply had led to her overdose. According to the DEA, the two had met at an afterparty for the funeral of another rapper Lil Peep, who had died from an accidental overdose of Xanax and fentanyl a few months before. Upon this arrest, the DEA released a press statement, which was also shared through the DOJ website. Special agent-in-charge James Hunt reiterated the importance of bringing drug dealers to justice. While sending condolences to "the victim," he also noted that the investigation of this particular dealer had "led us into the underbelly of emo rap and its glorification of opioid use."

The anxiety that hip-hop culture glorifies substance use through its rap lyrics and visual imagery is a storied one. The DEA's statement was immediately recognized as a reiteration of this problematic historical pattern, and challenged as such. Critiques argued against its simplistic language of blame, as well as its stereotyping of a complex, heterogeneous artistic culture. Michael Jones, a black man, had been reduced to an exploitative "dealer" while the white woman who overdosed after their transaction was reduced to an innocent "victim." And emo rap, an emerging subgenre with many contested definitions and diverse adherents, had been reduced to a seedy, dangerous economy of opioids.

Unfortunately, beyond the world of music and pop culture commentary, the DEA's press release made little impact. Yet the impact, or lack thereof, ignited this paper's historical

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2 For this paper, I follow the naming conventions used in the Hip-Hop scholarship that have most informed my work. "Rap" signifies the genre of music. "Hip-Hop" signifies the broader culture to which rap belongs, and that includes but is not limited to music, visual art, fashion, and literature.

investigation. The statement as well as its reception speak to the broader cultural space in which particular conversations either gain traction as urgent civic issues or slip by as niche concerns. They indicate the kinds of narratives that take priority, and the kinds of people that are believed to shape these narratives. How we frame the story of an epidemic entails decisions about historical objects and actors, as well as the language itself that will be used to describe people, social relations, ideas, and embodied experiences. The history of substance use must attend to matters of language, for substance use is a historical object that has often defied pat linguistic description.

This paper seeks to shed light on the ways in which the narratives surrounding Hip-Hop today are intertwined with the narratives about the opioid crisis. In the most literal sense, we can observe how the language of opioids has infused the language of rap. Names of brand medications appear explicitly and frequently, across subgenres and generations. At the same time, some subgenres have gravitated towards the imagery of substance use more than others. In particular, emo rap, or Soundcloud rap (though these terms are both adopted and contested in irreducible ways) draws heavily from the objects and performances of substance use, specifically that of opioids and pain medication.

On a more discursive level, a recent spate of Hip-Hop overdoses has further heightened the stakes for a genre already criticized for glamorizing antisocial values like violence and misogyny. The media coverage of these celebrity hospitalizations and deaths often carry moral claims about the nature of Hip-hop culture, the nature of substance use, and the role of the artist in society. These moral claims become most explicit in the language of blame, which identifies a clear perpetrator and a clear victim, as in the opening example of Michael Jones. This language reflects categories of worthiness that determine who is deserving or undeserving of our care and empathy. An examination of the language surrounding Hip-Hop in the age of the opioid crisis
reveal overlapping debates over the worthiness of Hip-Hop in relation to race, gender, art, and addiction.

The first section of the paper outlines the ways in which art has increasingly become integral to narrating the current opioid crisis in the United States. From art-activist movements to the construction of memorials, artistic representations have emerged as political responses to illness, death, and loss. As much as they express or search for beauty, they also serve as documentations of a crisis in real time, and as a practice of archiving for the anticipated audience of the future. Therefore, these projects are simultaneously aesthetic, political, and historical.

However, most of the media coverage and scholarship on these projects have focused on sources derived from high art and literature, or from medical institutions and self-proclaimed patient groups. As a result, the rich archives of Hip-Hop have yet to be explored as expressions of illness and memorials of loss in the time of a crisis unfolding. The second section of the paper seeks to do just that, by tracing the contours of opioid use in rap lyrics. What emerges is a multifaceted relationship with substances that cannot be homogenized or even rationalized. Getting high is expressed as an act of autonomy as well as an act of powerlessness.

The third section of the paper tries to understand how Hip-Hop archives came to be neglected in opioid narratives in the first place. To do so, I consider the figure of the Hip-Hop artist in narratives of worthiness. Celebrity culture and pop culture are often dismissed as unserious, inconsequential, ephemeral fluff. As a result, certain musicians have been marginalized within their own genre and within the broader conversations of American media—despite the pain and loss documented in their music. In exploring, on one hand, the hypervisibility of "the rapper overdose" and, on the other hand, the invisibility of Hip-Hop materials in leading art narratives of the opioid crisis, we are able to see how Hip-Hop cultures and archives have been stigmatized as undeserving of care. We are also able to see how notable figures have, in the past few months
alone, stepped forward to speak out against this stigma. The opioid crisis has and continues to spark internal debates over the nature and future of the genre. How should Hip-Hop artists respond to the long-standing perception that the genre glamorizes substance use? What are the moral obligations for any artist, and are these obligations somehow different for Hip-Hop? Do moral obligations change in times of crisis?

This exploration is then also a methodological one. One that takes seriously the knowledge, observations, and arguments presented in hip-hop lyrics as archives of the history of substance use. Biomedical models of substance use are central to clinical research and therapeutic relationships, which certainly dominate the institutional-level interventions today. But in telling stories of the lived experience of substance use, these biomedical moments are but a part, and maybe not even the most important part. To identify a person who uses substances solely as a "patient" or "user" may, in unforeseen ways, diminish other identities that could speak to the complexity of their personhood. And even if you or I do not identify as an artist or musician or an enthusiast, our daily lives might still be immersed in news reports, TV shows, movies, radio, podcasts, online streaming services, billboards, jingles, academic journals – media that are inseparable from aesthetic concerns of form, color, sound, narrative, truth, authenticity, and audience. Bringing together art-historical and medical-historical questions can contribute towards a more vivid portrait of the informational landscape in which meanings and decisions are made.

**Art as Archives of the Opioid Crisis**

What does it feel like to live with illness? How can we access the pain of others? In the history of medicine, such questions have been asked of the present and the past many times before. These questions become all the more urgent when illness grows to epidemic proportions. Epidemics threaten both the capacity and timeliness of healthcare resources, and invoke deeply private judgments of fear, panic, stigma, and social order.
Histories of medicine have often sought to access these interior worlds of various "epidemics" and their modes of representation. Scholars of plague and pestilence, for example, have synthesized material, cultural, political, and theological sources in Europe, China, and the Ottoman world to grasp not only how plague was documented and accounted for, but also how plague may have been underreported, denied, or simply left out of the archive. And for studies of modern outbreaks of cholera, tuberculosis, cancer, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted infections, historians have examined language and metaphor, as the intimate space in which meanings of wellness, illness, social dissolution, and social order can be found. Anthropologists have also engaged in long-term ethnographic studies in communities affected by substance use, in order to render honest portraits that develop from within. In times of epidemics, public health measures require an exceptional degree of cooperation on the individual level. Perhaps this is why accessing the interiority of private experience becomes all the more alluring for historians and social scientists. As public health crises, by their very nature, generate abundant archives of public information, it must be asked how these public texts are being read, circulated, and interpreted by individual minds.

For glimpses into these interior worlds of illness, art materials have proven to be rewarding archives. Historical studies have, at times, turned to the "applied" dimensions of art in advertisements and posters for public health campaigns, and at times to the "pure" portrayals of

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experience in paintings, film, and literature (Brandt, Gilman, Cooke). These artistic texts can be read as highly practical tools for shaping public perception and opinion. They can also be read as radical fictions that depict alternative worlds. These possibilities of art archives are all the more promising for inquiries into substance use. Because the psychological effects of various substances often defy practical, rational modes of expression, art has been instrumental in helping psychologists access the sensory phenomena of substances like heroin, marijuana, and LSD.

In our contemporary context of the opioid crisis, art has already become integral to the public practices of representation, remembrance, and memorialization. In April of 2018, a memorial for the opioid crisis was announced by the National Security Council. As a century-old non-profit organization with a congressional charter, the NSC was able to find and coordinate resources to support this traveling memorial that would tour across America. The exhibit, "Prescribed to Death: A Memorial to the Victims of the Opioid Crisis," consists of a long wall display in a darkened room. Mounted on the wall are 22,000 white "pills," each engraved with a face; these pill-faces, or face-pills, are meant to represent the 22,000 people lost to the opioid crisis in 2015 (see Fig. 1 and 2).

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8 Although the following book was somewhat more prescriptive and normative in tone than I felt comfortable with, it gave a thorough overview of the themes and questions being explored by addiction psychologists today: Santora, Patricia B. and Dowell, Margaret L. and Henningfield, Jack E. Addiction and Art. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
Fig. 1. National Security Council. *Prescribed to Death: A Memorial to the Victims of the Opioid Crisis*. From: White House, Twitter post, March 27, 2018, 11:51 a.m.

The memorial, initiated in Chicago, was created live, in full view of its audience. Every 24 minutes, a new pill was carved by a 3-D printer to represent that every 24 minutes, another person would fatally overdose from a prescription opioid. This "live" construction of the exhibit can be understood as a reflection of the project's aim to represent the crisis and its spread as a living, breathing experience of the here and now. Statistical figures alone cannot elicit the same tenderness one might feel towards a face, nor convey the rapidity of a life lost every 24 minutes. In portraying a 'real time' loss of life, the exhibit collapses the temporal and geographical distances between observers and victims. It is from this immediacy that the exhibit gains its powerful sense of urgency. Because the 3-D printing machine has been pre-programmed, to watch it engrave each pill is to watch an unstoppable march. At the same time, 24 minutes is not enough time for each person behind each statistical death to be traced and recognized as a unique entity with a unique face. Thus the machine can only carve a generic face, the face of no one, over and over again.

Responses to this exhibit have been visceral and divisive. Critics claim that, in only focusing on prescription pills, it fails to acknowledge the complexity of substance use behaviors that often include street drugs like heroin and fentanyl. In this exhibit's telling of history, overdose deaths that fall outside of iatrogenic narratives are effectively erased—further marginalizing those whose experiences were silenced by their illicit nature. In addition, mourners have pointed out that the exhibit literally reduces and objectifies extremely complex life histories to the anonymity of a pill. The health condition, according to some, is dishonored by "placing that singularly stigma-ridden attachment to their face."

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These debates over the politics of memorialization speak to fundamental questions of representation in historicizing epidemics that sweep across diverse geographies and populations. Whose experiences rise to the surface? Are there ways to recover experiences that have been submerged in the past? Who has the power to be seen, counted, and known as a victim? As an agentic being? Who gets to shape the narrative of the present that will be told in the future?

The art world is already deeply engaged in these heated debates over the politics of remembrance, especially in response to the recent flurry of AIDS memorials constructed around the United States. These same debates have emerged in the opioid crisis as well. Does the process of beautification inherently diminish the histories fear, rage, violence, and victimhood? Can art become complicit in erasing injustice? These questions drive the current work of Nan Goldin, a notable figure in contemporary art for her documentation of LGBT lives and bodies in the 1970s and 1980s. She has recently led protests against the Sackler family and the mainstream art world for mutually cooperating—through art philanthropy—to cleanse the Sackler name and fortune of their troubling role in the rise of the crisis. (NYTimes, Instagram). Much of her contemporary work emerged from her own harrowing experience of prescription opioid dependency that led to heroin use. Her practice has turned away from photography and towards painting, a medium that can be touched; she has also stated in a recent interview that her activism has become her work. In its political and aesthetic dimensions, it can be said that her identity as an artist and as an activist is shifting towards tactile engagement and tangible resolutions that live and breathe with human contact (see Fig. 3 and 4.).

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Fig. 3. Nan Goldin's protest against the art philanthropic connections of the Sackler Family, in the atrium of the Harvard Art Museum. From: Russeth, ArtNews, July 20, 2018.
The NSC exhibit and Nan Goldin's work are but two examples of a growing trend to incorporate art more concretely into the solutions for the opioid crisis. Solo artists are, more and more, using their practice to give shape to their struggles with opioids; collaborations have evolved as well. An installation art piece in the State Museum of Pennsylvania, titled "5577," hangs 5,577 plastic baggies from the ceiling on fishing lines, each with a delicate translucent bead inside. The piece represents the 5,577 lives lost in the state to heroin and opioid overdoses in 2017. Each of the baggies was filled by an enrollee of Hope Works, a local mental health

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advocacy group. Even the most reserved or solitary enrollees were "able to sit there and put the gems in the bag" as a way of saying: "I am out here in the world, I'm getting involved, and I have a sense of community around me."\textsuperscript{14}

And these art-based approaches are expanding in both scope and variety. The Currier Museum in New Hampshire has announced a novel program that works directly with families impacted by the crisis. In conjunction with government agencies and religious organizations, the museum will be offered to these families a "creative and beautiful place for respite, time for reflection around great works of art, opportunities for self-expression through art making, as well as a sense of togetherness."\textsuperscript{15} These developments in the art world also coincide with changes in the medical world, where the therapeutic benefits of artistic experiences is gaining acceptance in new ways. A pilot program in Montreal will follow 2,000 physicians, who have each been permitted to prescribe art museum visits to their patients over the course of the next year, as a complementary practice to existing therapies.\textsuperscript{16}

There is the growing recognition that art brings together practices of remembering, responding, and healing. Yet the ongoing controversies and debates represent the struggle over how these practices will be implemented, by whom, and for which audiences. Art makes sensory the struggle over how the opioid crisis will be remembered in the future. There is the palpable concern, even now, that in the construction of memorials, certain perspectives and experiences are being erased. With this in mind, it is all the more urgent that art archives of the opioid crisis incorporate and learn from the abundant sources of Hip-Hop, which have extensively documented opioid use, and exert tremendous influence over global pop culture and counterculture today.

Rap Music of the Opioid Age

Oxycontin. Percocet. Xanax. Vicodin. These brand names saturate the language and imagery of rap music today, yet it took me a very long time to register the possibility of exploring these musical uses for this paper. The substances were everywhere, yet everywhere in a way that did not speak immediately to my medical-historical assumptions. They appeared, or so I thought, in fragmented and insubstantial ways.

Ecstasy pills, Xanax pills and some Percocet
Ambien, Oxycontin pills, let’s do all that
Let’s get high, let’s get high, let’s get high, let’s get high.  

Panda, panda, panda, panda, panda
I got broads in Atlanta
Twistin dope, lean, and the Fanta.

As in the examples above, drug references in rap are often listed in succession with each other, and often as non-sequiturs. They gave the sense that they are adornments to the verses, added as afterthoughts, rather than necessary components of the song itself.

Writing this now, I still find the use of these brand names to be fragmented, but no longer insubstantial. Though the items do not cohere, they not-cohere in deliberate ways. The repetitive listing of these substances achieves a particular dizzying effect, a dizziness that echoes throughout the aesthetics of the performance, in which words are mumbled and strung along. These references to pain medicine are also often listed alongside luxury fashion labels, suggesting that pharmaceuticals have become, for better or worse, part of the scenery of consumerism and the good life.

Codeine sippin, Versace I’m gripping
them bands in my pocket, you know that I’m living
…This the life that I chose
Bought out the store can’t go back no more

VERSACE MY CLOTHES, WHILE I'M SELLIN THEM BOWS
VERSACE TOOK OVER, IT TOOK OUT MY SOUL.¹⁹

The layering of substances, as a formal technique, mimics and invokes the habitual mixing of medications. The ultimate effect is, at time, neither calm nor despair, but a haziness in between:

Promethazine got me in a dream
Smokin gas, lungs collapse
Xanny bars, take ‘em by the threes
Man, you need to relax
All these drugs, feel like a junkie
It won’t bring her back.²⁰

When rap lyrics do incorporate substance use into a more coherent narrative form, it is the self that fragments and unravels. The speaker may vacillate between satisfaction and lack:

I got damn near 4 drugs all in one cup
Styrofoam cup it cost me like a hundred bucks
500 dollars everytime I’m pourin’ up
300 dollar blunts when I’m rollin’ up
I spent 2500 hundred I ain’t even had my lunch
OG kush for breakfast for a champion my morning junt
Promethazine on everything I’m pouring lean on my Captain Crunch
Last 12 months not sober once
Which one of yall wanna have some fun
Get ya some on ya tongue
Need a liver and lung.²¹

This interstitial haziness is heightened by the characteristic numbness of opioids and pain medicine. The numbness is described as both a lack of feeling and the ultimate euphoria of feeling, often in turns, in the same breath:

She take her meds up her nose
Looking like she smell a rose
It says Hermès on my clothes
20 mg, that’s my dose
…She act like she saw a ghost
Wake up baby, comatose

Wake up baby, vamonos
Sleeping like we on an island somewhere in Galapagos
It's lonely at the top we hold hands, Geronimo
100% cotton oxymoron oxycontin 22

Prescription drugs, show me love
Percocets, Adderall
Xanny bars, get codeine involved
Stuck in this body high, can't shake it off
I'm falling off, I can't hold a thought
...My mommy call, I hit ignore
My daughter calls, I press ignore
My chin press on my chest, my knees press the floor
...Dinner on my shirt, my stomach hurts
I had a ball sellin' 80s but yo, the karma's worse
I cry when nothing's wrong, I'm mad in peace and love 23

From reading closely, a logic and rhythm of representation can be detected. Such fragmented, dizzying, and ambivalent portrayals of substance use resonate with other elements of rap performance. The visual imagery of music videos, album artwork, and social media personas also avoid coherence and clarity in favor of more fleeting, dappled brushstrokes. In music videos, for example, hymnal, brooding vocal tones are often layered with neon club lights, clouds of cigarette smoke, plump overstuffed joints, and foam cups of prescription cough medicine, and the promise of sex—a gathering of many disparate symbols of drug culture. These collagistic personas are often punctuated with psychedelic hair colors and "job stopper" tattoos over the face, hands, and neck; the tattoos are also often placed like patches, each a complete concept rather than a building block for a larger whole.

Visual flourishes of hair and ink are perhaps most prominent in the emo rap subgenre, the main figures of which are overwhelmingly male, underage, and inexperienced in professional music. Most of these acts made a name for themselves on the music-sharing platform Soundcloud,

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which has also become a synonym (or closely-related subgenre, depending on who you ask) for this group of performers. Deemed "nonsensical and unfocused," this new generation offers little in the Hip-Hop tradition of social commentary. At best, this new generation of rappers reflects the societal failures of our time, as a "reflection of our quick brains that jump to different subjects like frogs on lily pads." Even when they become successful touring acts with major record label deals, the term "Soundcloud rap" is used as an insult that reinforces the image of a naïve, amateurish, DIY rapper.

The fragmented aesthetic of opioid lyrics is not limited to the subgenre of emo rap, or soundcloud rap, nor is it simply the product of disorganization, clumsiness, or ineloquence. Rather, perhaps the disjunctions and disorientations are what help to convey what it's like to live with opioid dependency as a musician today. Instead of dismissing the incoherence of the genre as inscrutable, and instead of ridiculing experimentations with tattoos and self-presentation, it is possible to take seriously the purpose—and even the purposelessness—behind these modes of expression. They can serve as indications of how Hip-Hop today defines belonging, conformity, and authenticity.

Indeed, in many ways, this crisis of rap culture—that substance use will destroy the integrity of the genre—is a story that has been lived before. It is so recent, in fact, that it might still be the story that rap is living now, a longer story in which emo rap represents one contemporary chapter. Sociologist CalvinJohn Smiley historicizes the rise of "addict rap" almost two decades ago, in which a proliferation of songs about prescription substances, in particular codeine, dominated airwaves in the early 2000s. What he identifies in this moment is a shift away from "drug

distributer" personas and narratives to "drug consumer" ones. This shift in drug politics can also be understood as a broader reconfiguration of the relations between rap and mainstream; Hip-Hop and conformity; artist and society.

For generations past, resisting mainstream respectability was the mission and the aesthetic; "addict rap" represents a new form of resistance in which staunch anti-respectabilty is now the object of suspicion. For rappers who are tired of the predictable scripts of resisting dominant cultures, embracing material conformity and institutional success can be creative and surprising. In this context, pharmaceutical consumerism can operate (as it did in the lyrics and imagery) as a symbol of the good life. This turn was also, like the drug-hazed rap of today, considered both unserious, overly obsessive, and sailing towards an indeterminate future by critics of its time.26

This story bears striking resemblances to the stories told about rap music today. Although the current opioid crisis has intensified the urgency and visibility of overdoses in rap music, it can also be contextualized within the longer history of Hip-Hop culture's relationship with substance use. As Hip-Hop scholarship has pointed out, many genres of music, in many historical contexts, like jazz, doo-wop, psychedelic rock, punk, and dance, have also been defined in part by a culture of drugs. However, Hip Hop’s relationship with drugs is magnified by the intersections of race, gender, class, and respectability.27 For other genres, drug culture is recognized as part of an experimental sensibility and radical imagination. For Hip-Hop musicians, however, substance use is stigmatized as deviant and criminal.

This history also sheds light on the continuities between then and now; throughout the twenty-first century, the culture and practice of medicine has consistently and profoundly influenced Hip-Hop aesthetics. The rise in pharmaceutical consumerism drives the content and

practice of music-making as much as the structures of internet-based music platforms do. Thus, the aesthetic principles, distribution technologies, and medical culture cannot be disentangled from each other. Nor can genres or subgenres be understood without each other. Even when a subgenre is rejected or ostracized, the acts of dismissal and ridicule reveal much about mainstream taste. As the next section will show, the rise of this new generation of rap has forced mainstream rappers and insiders to respond to its production styles, its politics, and its substance use. In this way, a famous face in a tabloid can connect the diverse range of aesthetic, political, and even medical conditions behind its own making. Even a minor and elusive subgenre of celebrity culture can illuminate universal concerns of its time.

**Authenticity, Morality, and Hip-Hop**

2018 has seen the hip-hop community increasingly prioritizing conversations about the toll of the opioid crisis on its artists and its audience. Kanye West revealed in an April interview that he had been, for significant portions of his recent (and highly scandalized) past, "drugged the fuck out" on prescribed opioids. In May, when Meek Mill was released from prison on bail, he held a press conference alongside the Governor of Pennsylvania, Tom Wolf. At this occasion, he made public his past struggles with opioid dependency, which had also stemmed from a post-operative prescription. In June, the murder of XXXTentacion (though not attributed to substance use) provoked conversations about the artist's well-documented history of substance use and suicidal declarations. In September, Mac Miller's death was ruled an accidental overdose from fentanyl, cocaine, and alcohol. Most recently, one of emo-rap's most beloved (and perhaps most ridiculed

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by the genre's detractors) artists, Lil Xan, publicly sought treatment for opioid addiction. "I just dropped out of SoundCloud Uni to go to rehab," he announced with vulnerable optimism.30

As these personal narratives of artists unfold, a shift in the discourse can also be traced. Emo rap, as a practice, may only refer to a narrow set of historical actors. But as the symbol or scapegoat of an increasingly global crisis, emo rap has captured the attention of mainstream cultural criticism. In the immediate circle of the Hip-Hop community, some of its most prominent figures have released new music that not only reflects the culture of pill-popping, but also seeks to intervene on it.

In April of 2018, J. Cole released an album entitled KOD. The first single broke Spotify's opening day record with 4.2 million streams. The artwork on the album cover is awash with decadent jewel tones. Its title, Cole later revealed, was an acronym for three phrases: Kids on Drugs, King OverDosed, and Kill Our Demons. According to the cover artist's statements, all three interpretations are unified in the image. A king, with blotted-out eyes, stares into the distance with a crown balanced precariously on his head. Under the king's cloak, four children are half-concealed, half-revealed: one displaying a white pill on his tongue, one snorting a white powder, one dazed in a cloud of smoke, and one drinking, through a silly straw, a foam cup of purple lean. Hovering over these vibrant brushstrokes of electric reds and ghostly blues is the somber line in stark, white lettering: "This album is in no way intended to glorify addiction" (see Fig. 5).

As the cover art suggests, KOD is an album with a clear moral stance: in declaring that it does not intend to glorify addiction, it also acknowledges that music has the potential to do so, and that this power to shape moral values must be carefully managed. *Choose wisely*, J. Cole tweeted immediately upon the release of his album. *Choose wisely*, he raps, throughout the album as well. This mantra is invoked in songs that explore what are, in his view, corrupting influences: substance use, sex, money, and fame. Some of these temptations are universal, but

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some are unique to the celebrity classes. Thus, *choose wisely* is not only a call to the lay public, but also to other artists who must take responsibility for the trends they ride and elevate. In the final track, Cole most explicitly articulates his ambivalence towards the new generation of rappers who represent, in his eyes, both racial uplift and racial commodification:

> They wanna see you dab, they wanna see you pop a pill  
> They wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels  
> And somewhere deep down, fuck it, I gotta keep it real  
> They wanna be black and think your song is how it feels.  

In this instance, popping pills is a performance that, along with dance moves and tattoos, constitute a false identity of blackness for white and other non-black audiences to consume.

In another track, *KOD*, the speaker offers a somewhat predictable rap narrative of drug dealing, through which the speaker has ascended from poverty to the good life. Yet this narrative is complicated in moments by images of loss and vulnerability. The speaker questions his own sanity, and turns to drugs to numb his pain. "My life is too crazy/ no actor could play me," he announces in the last verse, reiterating the notion that authentic lives are the ones that cannot be performed.  

Blockbusting sales notwithstanding, how was *KOD* received by critics? Its reception highlights the expectations of hip-hop culture in the throes of an opioid crisis. Opinions in favor characterized the body of work as "rap's moral compass " and a "tough, rewarding meditation on addiction"; however, these compliments were often couched with hints of suspicion, for being too misleadingly simple, naïve, and absolutist. While J. Cole's earnest voice and "social consciousness" was praised as a virtue; exhibiting virtue was also the very reason why the album...

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was held at arm's length. The more vocal detractors condemned Cole's moralizing tone as unconvincing, self-righteous, fogeyist, aggravating, mean, and boring.³⁴

*KOD* and its reception highlights the moral quandary facing hip-hop today. Does art possess the power to shape social values? If so, what is the role of the artist in society? Should the moral identity and expectation of the artist be held apart from the standards for, say, politicians or educators or medical professionals or religious leaders? And in the case of Hip-Hop, do moral obligations censor the genre's countercultural spirit and unflinching realism?

And can something still be counterculture when it goes mainstream? By many measures, Hip-Hop is now resoundingly the mainstream; its aesthetics dominate not only music, but also TV, fashion, and social media.³⁵

However, core figures of Hip-Hop reject this narrative of the genre's ascendency. According to their arguments, what defines Hip-Hop's new "mainstream" status is in fact the new "white face" of its audience, as well as the growing roster of white artists in an industry steered by mostly white power players. From Eminem's prominence in the 00's, and Macklemore's Best New Artist Award at the 2014 Grammys, debates over the relationship between Hip-Hop and whiteness have only intensified. In recent years, Iggy Azalea's career has generated tremendous controversy for her rap persona that, for some, transgresses into minstrelsy.³⁶ As G-Eazy began to headline tours across America, *The New York Times* reflected on his success as an indicator of "the post-accountability era of white rap."³⁷ And most recently, when it was revealed that a white woman

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³⁴ For more sympathetic reviews, see *Rolling Stone, The Guardian,* and *Spin.* For more unflattering ones, see *New York Times, Pitchfork, The Ringer,* and *Stereogum.*


had been appointed as the Hip-hop curator for the National Museum of African American History, white exploitations of Hip-hop culture made headlines once more.\(^{38}\)

In a limited way, Hip-Hop culture has earned recognition; but this acceptance is concomitant with the forces of cultural appropriation and white-washing. When Amy Winehouse sang of rejecting drug treatment in favor of deepening her relationship with alcohol, her music was applauded as "mouthy, funny, sultry"; when artists like Chief Keef express an embrace of substance use, they are disregarded as "thugs" lacking musical talents.\(^{39}\) Precisely in the historic moment when elements of Hip-Hop have been appropriated by mainstream industries, Hip-Hop has also been attacked for promoting irresponsible substance use.

The recent transformations of Meek Mill's rap career further illustrate this predicament experienced by black Hip-Hop artists today. Shortly after his highly publicized trial and controversial imprisonment, Meek Mill's case kindled new fire for criminal justice reform.\(^{40}\) When he was finally released on bail, he held a press conference to offer his voice and his story to furthering social causes, and also to come out with his past struggles with opioid dependency. Before the dust could settle, his new album *Championships* arrived, and its contents have received much attention from those eager to hear more of his personal experiences with police corruption, the criminal justice system, and with substance use.

In stark contrast to J. Cole and his vision for *KOD*, Meek Mill explicitly rejects aphoristic imperatives in *Championships*. His stance towards guns, drugs, and licentiousness runs the entire spectrum from condemnation to jaded cynicism to self-righteous participation. He refuses, again


\(^{39}\) Smiley, 107.

\(^{40}\) Solotaroff, Paul. "#FreeMeekMill: Brutally beaten by rogue cops, the jailed rapper has become a cause and, in an exclusive interview from prison, he speaks out and looks ahead." *Rolling Stone.* March 14, 2018.
and again, to be cornered into a moral message. In his personal interviews as well, he rejects the role of a martyr, or an activist, or a moral leader:

> I always tell people that I’m not on my activist type time. I’m just on some, ‘this is what I’m bringing to the table, this is what I’ve experienced, what I know about it’...I aint here to sacrifice my life for everybody, I’m here to sacrifice my life for my family and my son...I’m a G, I tell you the truth. I ain’t here to spit that political shit that sway the world. If I can save one person out of jail, I’m cool with that. 41

Hip-Hop is not a monolith culture; artists' attitudes towards substance use are complex, shifting, and at times downright ambivalent. This section has explored the moral debates surrounding the figure of "the artist" in the opioid crisis—in particular, the hip-hop artist.

The hypervisibility of the overdosing rapper deserves critical attention, especially when we contrast this image to the media coverage of the opioid crisis which overwhelmingly focuses on communities that are rural, white, and socio-economically vulnerable. In some ways, the overdosing rapper could not be any more different. The rapper is perceived to be urban, black, and wealthy. This image serves to cement stereotypes about substance use in celebrity culture, particularly when the most publicized overdoses have been of hip-hop artists; the overdose is a result of personal choice, hedonistic compulsion, and material excess.

Although celebrity culture can easily be dismissed as ephemeral, as insubstantial, and exceptional outliers to the "normal" set of social relations and expectations, public figures—as shared imaginaries and icons—exert influence over "real life" as well. The politics of celebrity culture is all the more relevant for rappers in the opioid crisis, when their bodies, actions, and moralities become objects of public scrutiny. Figures in Hip-Hop—a genre already under disproportionate scrutiny—have responded this pressure in dramatically different ways. For J. Cole, moral guidance towards respectability has become his mission. For Meek Mill, rejecting any moral

leadership—and even explicitly stating his desire to continue disavowing respectability—is critical for preserving his autonomy. The same racialized ideas of worthiness that have fashioned the opioid crisis with its new "white face" are also the ideas that have placed Hip-Hop culture in this uneasy push and pull between respectability and anti-respectability, between recognition and blame.

**Conclusion: Visions of Resolution**

This paper has explored, within its limited scope, the relationship between art and the opioid crisis. What emerges is not a clear temporal narrative from a beginning point to an end point, but rather a set of themes that lie at the heart of a few prominent debates that are unfolding simultaneously. One such controversy is the matter of remembrance and memorialization. The practices of art pose unique opportunities and challenges for remembrance. On one hand, it opens up new possibilities for recording embodied experiences that might not survive in traditional archives of illness and death. However, such artistic methods of remembering and documenting raise new questions about the politics of representation.

Another controversy this paper has explored is the problem of representation. Despite the abundant records of opioid use in Hip-Hop culture that span a period of two decades or more, and despite the hypervisibility of rap music's ostentatious representations of substance use, the opioid crisis is still largely considered a recent phenomenon that mostly affects rural or suburban white communities. Yet even by looking at a handful of songs, we can see how rap music has been infused with the language and imagery of opioid use.

In analyzing this sample of songs, I was left with challenging methodological questions. Can we interpret these songs as documentations of illness? How different, or similar, are they from the more 'traditional' medical genre of the case history? How 'truthful' are the narratives expressed within? To what extent do musicians live the lives that they depict? Do their songs document
realities or fantasies? In my reading, I have tried to engage with these questions by foregrounding art-historical methods in interpreting artifacts. Here, our musical fantasies, in the form of commodities and artifacts and shared public figures, are real objects that populate our media landscape. And, depending on whether we like this music or not, they also inspire real experiences of pleasure and displeasure, admiration or ridicule, which in turn have real relationships with the decisions we make and the ideas we accept. Finally, as the recorded thoughts of people who witnessed and reflected on their place in the opioid crisis, they are not only real but vivid archives for histories of substance use as lived experience.

In considering the role of imagination in artistic discourse, this paper led me to wonder about the role of the imagination in medical discourse as well. Definitions of illness, in relief, imply a particular definition of health that speaks to a particular vision of personhood. This is especially true in the science and medicine of substance use and addiction—conditions that are largely defined by subjective interpretation. In medical models and strategies for addressing the opioid crisis, how is the healthy person imagined? How is the healthy public imagined? What is the social vision of a resolution to this crisis? Should substance use, in any form, be criminalized? What about their trade? Where is and how do we define the threshold between victim and criminal? Who will have the power to strategize and implement policies that profoundly inform social norms of substance use? Medical visions of society, like artistic visions of society, may contain normative prescriptions of morality, worthiness, and citizenship.


Solotaroff, Paul. "#FreeMeekMill: Brutally beaten by rogue cops, the jailed rapper has become a cause and, in an exclusive interview from prison, he speaks out and looks ahead." Rolling Stone. 2018.


White House, Twitter post, March 27, 2018, 11:51 a.m.