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“Dropping Jewels” on the Use of Song Lyrics Against Young Thug

The first lyric that Jeffery Williams, who performs under the name Young Thug, sings on his 2021 album *Punk* tells a story about a legal battle that his brother is in and how he promises that his kin will not “[go] back to prison.” A year later Jeffery Williams would find *himself* in the exact situation he described, being arrested alongside 27 other individuals on a total of 56 gang-related charges, in the form of a RICO. Williams’ fame would propel the trial into the mainstream, having the potential to set a major precedent for how alleged gang activity is tolerated by courts. However, the impact of the trial goes beyond Williams and the other co-defendants, as among the 88-page grand jury indictment, The State of Georgia, the prosecution, has numerous attempts to use song lyrics as evidence of Williams committing the alleged crimes. The implications of admitting and possibly convicting a person partially based on their art are severe, and can serve as a means of stifling creative freedom of expression not just within rap, but within the realm of art as a whole. One such instance of songs being played in court arose on the 21st day of the trial, when the song “Droppin Jewels” off the aforementioned *Punk*, was used as evidence. Poetically, the song now used against Williams provides insight on why it, among other songs, should not be used in court at all.

*Tell me why I'm livin'
Why am I remaining here?*

The song opens with these lines, which witness Trontavious Stephens, known as “Slug” or “Tick”, identified as an example of Williams being “truly humble under god”, an acronym that, in the early stages of the trial, Brian Steel, Williams’ lawyer, argued that the stage name “Thug” stood for¹. Steel claimed that when Williams was attempting to make a living as an artist, he made a “pact” that if he was able to provide for his family, he would be “truly humble under god.” While this defense quickly became infamous for its irregularity, its importance in the larger context of the trial is undeniable. There is an inherent bias against rap artists as being violent, a hypothesis that was proven by a 2016 study that concluded that “the mere label of rap” was “sufficient to produce negative evaluations [of songs]”, even when lyrics were “held constant” against another genre². The mere inclination of a predetermined jury suggests that lyrics, especially rap, should be disallowed from being presented as evidence, and with the admission of rap lyrics being included in this trial, Steel understands that the aesthetic that he creates for Young Thug is extremely important, to create as little of a negative bias as possible. The stage name Young Thug can certainly paint a negative image of Williams (despite the fact that Williams and Thug are two separate entities³), and as such, though somewhat comical to the unaware, the defense is telling for the sources of biases present within the trial, stemming from the use of art in court.

*I was smokin' 'Scotti, but not Pippen
I taught my son how to stack that shit to the ceiling*

¹ Stephens also testified that “Thug” stood for “truly humble under god.”

² See *The threatening nature of “rap” music*, (Dunbar 2016).

³ “Thug” refers to a persona, whereas Williams refers to an actual person. This separation will continue through the rest of this paper.

When questioning Stephens, the prosecution read out these lyrics, among others, in an attempt to communicate to the jurors that Stephens' mention of lyrics that show Williams being "truly humble under god" was a one-off occurrence, as the rest of the song in which Stephens' example came from has nothing to do with god. The importance of these lyrics comes from the way in which they were presented in the trial. While lyrics can be translated to words, the inflections that musicians use to sing the words can drastically change their meaning, and this is especially true for Williams. As an artist, Williams is known for his atypical approach to lyricism, built upon his use of incoherent words and multiple voices in his songs. To try and transcribe his songs to meaningful lyrics is extremely difficult, as so much of the substance of the words is derived from his unique delivery. In this trial, however, this meaning is stripped from the lyrics, as the prosecution reads the words Williams pronounces in a monotone, sentence-like fashion, diluting the messaging of each word. In its current form, the use of written lyrics is unethical, as it essentially twists the artist's words into a different connotation, misleading a jury that is meant to be impartial.

If lyrics are to be included in court at all, they should certainly be allowed to be placed in their proper context, by being brought into question in their original form. However, Steel was disallowed from playing a video of Williams performing the song in an NPR Tiny Desk concert, to better communicate to the jury that Williams' lyrics were about his pact with god and his past struggles. Indeed, the soothing piano which Williams overlays his sung vocals is certainly different from the matter-of-fact manner in which they were initially presented to the court, and would have allowed for a more thorough understanding of what Williams' messaging on the song truly was.

*She like, "How the fuck you ain't never wrote a song?"
Same reason your fine ass ain't never wore a thong*

While not directly stated at any point within the trial so far, the meaning of these lyrics provides insight on the correlation between Williams' art and his personal life. In regards to the lyric, Williams communicates that he never writes his songs for the same reason that a woman does not need to wear certain clothing to prove her beauty: the woman that Williams refers to is naturally beautiful, just as Williams is naturally talented at creating music. His assertion about freestyling his music was confirmed when Williams was asked about his favorite lyric he's ever written in an interview with i-D in 2021, where he revealed he's "never written a lyric", and that he prefers to "kind of just freestyle" and "just go with it as it comes." His revelation further diminishes the use of lyrics against him, as the state's notion of Williams' songs being written confessions is vehemently false, rather, the songs are more so streams of consciousness, with Williams likely focused on finding words or sounds that coincide with each other rather than deliberately revealing crimes he has committed.

The stream of consciousness is not personal, either. In July of 2015, in an interrogation surrounding an incident in which Williams was involved (though not guilty), he was questioned by a detective about admitting to being a gang member "on the song", to which he replied that his songs were all "entertainment." The fact that Williams' music is entertainment has been made a key point of contention by Steel, who, when cross-examining the aforementioned witness Stephens, brought up a video of rapper Snoop Dogg "crip walking", as identified by Stephens, during his 2022 Super Bowl halftime show to show that "gang activity" in relation to music is often a performance. Viewing Williams' music as entertainment, in conjunction with his

stream-of-consciousness style of song-making, implies that using Williams' lyrics against him is like him being on trial for "using his imagination."⁴

Even if Williams had pre-written each of his songs, they should still be disallowed from trial. The Young Thug name that Williams raps under is a fictitious persona, which is built upon exaggeration if not pure fantasy. Take "Just How It Is", a song with lyrics that the state is using against him. One of the lines of this song relates to his personal life in regards to his donning of a dress on the cover of his album *JEFFERY*, released in 2016. He states that he "had to wear a dress 'cause [he] had a stick", or a gun, an undeniable exaggeration for a dress that was not at all designed to hold a weapon, all in an attempt to create a fictitious "gangster" persona separate from his own self. Williams would directly reference the creation of this persona and the message it carries in an interview with Calvin Klien that same year, where he claimed that "you can be a gangster with a dress", referencing the persona he embodied on *JEFFERY*'s cover and its message of gender fluidity⁵. It is unfair to consider a braggadocious, fictional persona meant to imply an artistic message to be identical to the artist that performs under it, especially when the inflation and manipulation of the truth is visible within the same song that contains apparent "evidence".

*I was locked inside the trap, didn't think about it, but I got out it
Now my cars and clothes exotic*

The above lyric was once again not featured within the trial up to this point. However, it represents the notion that race is undoubtedly a factor in this case. Here, Williams explains that his upbringing in the Jonesboro South projects in Atlanta, Georgia was similar to being "locked

⁴ This phrase was used in the article *Is Young Thug on Trial for Using His Imagination?* by Chris Richards (2024).

⁵ The dress was also featured in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, under the grouping of "Gender Bending Fashion."

inside [a] trap”, a reference to institutional racism and its correlation with the cyclical nature of poverty. The latter half of the above lyric is also representative of racism. Moving away from “Droppin Jewels”, Young Thug holds a substantial feature on Childish Gambino’s Grammy-winning record “This Is America”, which carries a message that highlights the discrimination that Black individuals face within America. His verse serves as the outro for the track, where he sings that despite “drivin’ expensive foreign [cars]”, he is still “just a Black man in this world”, subject to racism regardless of the power or material possessions he owns. His lyrics in “This Is America” serve as an extension of institutionalized racism described in “Droppin Jewels”: even though his “cars and clothes” might be “exotic”, he is still subject to mistreatment.

His present experience within this trial shows this systemic mistreatment (within the court system), at least regarding the use of his songs to generate criminal charges. Rap, a domain dominated by Black creators, has been used at a staggeringly high rate in court cases as compared with other written pieces or genres⁶, even when other art might also contain “criminal” claims. While implicit, the use of Black art in court implies that Black artists are limited in their creativity: if they speak about it in a song, then it must be true, because they cannot be creative⁷. The racial undertones of admitting rap lyrics as evidence are enough to ban their use in court altogether, and Williams has pushed for this notion, promoting the Protect Black Art petition while in prison, which advocated for furthering First Amendment rights for minority artists⁸.

⁶See *This Rap Song Helped Sentence a 17-Year-Old to Prison* (Lee 2023)

⁷ This statement is based on a quote by Andrea Dennis, a University of Georgia law professor: “[A] young Black man, if they’re rapping, [must] only be saying what’s autobiographical and true, because they can’t possibly be creative.”

⁸ The foreshadowing on *Punk* continues here, as Thug’s label-mate and co-defendant Gunna explains his issues with the court system on the song “Recognize Real”, stating how the “judge and the police” are “takin’ [his] people’s lives.”

I done got big, they record my life through a drone

With the name Young Thug being so well known in mainstream rap and general music culture, this trial has the potential to set a major precedent for musicians. It is important to note that lyrics are seldom the *only* piece of evidence provided by the prosecution, however, in many cases, including the case of Williams, they play an undeservingly important role. Lyrics being used as a part of this indictment make the case bigger than itself, especially given the specific lyrics that the prosecution is using. For instance, one of the lyrics brought up against Williams is him stating that he “[gets] all type of cash” and that he is “a general.” The imprecision of such a lyric and its importance in the trial has critical consequences for other artists attempting to use even slightly provocative or boastful lyrics, as they too might be subject to criminal charges from their music.

The state does propose other evidence of Williams committing the alleged crimes, but their use of lyrics taints their overall argument. Had lyrics been excluded from the trial, a more fair argument could be made for Williams’ innocence or guilt. However, in the trial’s current state, the case represents more than just whether or not Williams is actually guilty: music is on trial as well⁹. Now solely decided upon by the jurors, it is up to them to consider the larger implications of their decision, independent of Williams’ true innocence, and how a verdict could impact not just him, but a generation of artists.

⁹ Phrase based on the book *Rap on Trial: Race, Lyrics, and Guilt in America* by Erik Nielson (2019).

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