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## Hip-Hop and Black Queer Defiance

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Hip-Hop and Black Queer Defiance

Elyssa Durham

A Project Submitted to

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Social Innovation

Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies (IRIS) Department

April 2022



The signatures of the individuals below indicate that they have read and approved the project of Elyssa Durham in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Innovation.

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# SI 693 Master's Project Approval Form

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Hip-Hop and Black Queer Defiance

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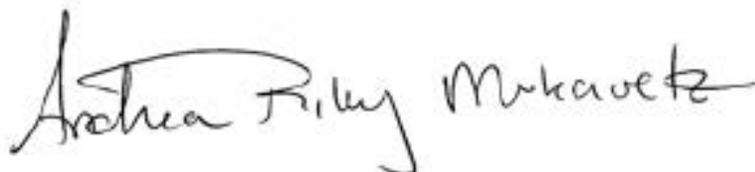
The signatures of the individuals below indicate that they have read and approved the project of Elyssa Durham in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Innovation.

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## Abstract

This project explores the ways in which critical race theory, the Black, queer experience, and Black masculinity impact hypermasculine and homophobic expression through hip-hop and how Lil Nas X defies gender expectations. Critical race theory, Black, queer experiences, and Black masculinity work cohesively to provide context to societal expectations of Black gender and the ways in which Black people have historically been oppressed. Queen Latifah and Da Brat signal their queerness through fashion and masculine rap and flow through their projects during the 90's, despite a feminine, light-hearted expectation of female rappers at the time. They would influence queer boundaries within mainstream hip-hop, allowing for Lil Nas X to move even farther with what they created. Through historical and image analysis of music videos, this project finds that identity politics through mainstream hip-hop are defied by Lil Nas X and Da Brat and Queen Latifah before him. This defiance offers contributions to social innovations in the ways that the three rappers are influencing and molding the next wave of hip-hop.

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## **Hip Hop and the Perseverance of the Black, Defiance**

### **Introduction**

Hip Hop is known for its telling of life stories and fantasies primarily from the Black community facing struggles. Created as a way to both escape and explain the harshness of their realities, hip hop is an expression for many lacking an outlet. However, hypermasculinity interwoven in the genre has allowed for misogynistic and homophobic tropes to create a hostile culture that is historically both anti women and anti LGBTQ. But with both women, queer and heterosexual, and LGBTQ artists reaching mainstream success, arguably attributed to continued human rights activism, many are seen as trailblazers and innovators. The reality is LGBTQ artists are not creating anything outside of what we know as hip-hop tropes. Like heterosexual artists, their music details their life experiences as well as exploring their sexuality through music. The biggest difference is that as time progresses, artists are no longer willing to hide their homosexuality for the sake of a successful career. LGBTQ artists like Lil Nas X are kicking down commercial, heteronormative doors to force space for queer representation that was not granted to those before him like Queen Latifah and Da Brat (neither acknowledging publicly that they have same sex partners until 2021). The industry must now acknowledge why commercial, mainstream space, including mass marketing and radio play on popular stations, was not granted initially and what needs to happen in order to ensure queer success for the culture.

Before 2019, most people would not associate queer hip hop with massive commercial success. With the exception of a few, many hip-hop artists have concealed their sexualities and place other identities before their queer one. Integrating critical race theory and hip hop feminism, this research seeks to understand why Black LGBTQ artists have had a harder time reaching commercial success. What arises from this research is an analysis of toxic masculinity

and Black LGBTQ experiences within 90s and current hip hop. I argue that human rights activism could be the key to opening more doors for Black queer artists.

### **Critical Race Theory**

The Black community has continuously felt the impact of various social and political policies stemming more than 400 years ago during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution would end slavery and grant freedom to former slaves, however, those convicted of crimes would not be granted those freedoms. The 2016 film *13<sup>th</sup>*, director Ava DuVernay focuses on how that amendment creates a direct impact on the prison industrial complex and the mass incarceration of Black people. Fresh off the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and activism of other marginalized groups, the War on Crime and Drugs originating in the 1970s gave further reason for white people to associate the two with Black people. It is during this time that political focus on those considered to be criminals would manipulate white voters and feed into racist rhetoric. Drug use was not exclusive to certain races yet criminal consequences targeted Black and Brown communities, further separating people of color from attaining social, political, and economic opportunities. Critical race theory centers the point at which race and law meet. Because people whites were no longer able to enslave people, they used law to their advantage to prolong the white agenda. Critical race theory seeks to address inconsistencies within laws that disproportionately affect communities of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Because opportunities were limited for people of color, we see neighborhoods that reflect the reality of what they are missing. The unfortunate reality of living without is that at times it causes people to turn on each other in order to further themselves. The war on drugs not only created a picture of what a criminal was for the white person, it played into the stereotypes of

what the United States had deemed black people since forcefully arriving to this land. D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) depicts black people as animalistic and immoral beings that terrorize white people. It is the Klansmen that are portrayed as the heroes by saving the "Aryan birthright." This film is played out in real life by the various presidential administrations' efforts the crack down on criminal actions, widely alluded to the actions of Black people in poor communities. Black people are dangerous and deserve to be locked away, rather than people who were methodically placed in overcrowded spaces suffering from a health crisis started by the very people that call them criminals.

Language is one of the tools proven to be most powerful in preventing racial equality and equity. Language is used to justify discrimination and has evolved in order to mold itself around current day issues. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* (Ore, 2019) compares modern day language used to justify criminalizing and killing black people to the language used during the time of lynching. White people rarely faced consequences for the public murdering of black bodies, largely based on the verbal justification. Lynching was framed as a patriotic service for the good of the people (Ore, 2019). Black lives were already deemed a burden and had been described as dangerous. We cannot expect justice for lives that are declared not valuable. Pair this view of black life with the duty to protect the "pure" white American people, killings tend to be overlooked. The same language is used with current issues. Black lives are still a threat to society. It is the reason that unarmed Black teenage boys like Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown are killed by neighborhood watchmen and police, it is why three white men felt justified in hunting and killing Ahmaud Arbery, and why black people have to remind the country that Black Lives Matter. Language is also a tool used for the continued oppression of the LGBTQ

community and when faced with both issues, people belonging to more than one marginalized group find that the deeper seeded issues they face most likely go unaddressed.

## **Black, Queer Experience**

As critical race theory and the ways in which the society and the law worked together to continue to place people of color at a disadvantage, the issue of intersectionality became one to consider for those that identify with multiple groups of oppressed people. Often times, activism is focused on issues pertaining to one group; race, gender, sexuality, etc., and the progress made for those marginalized groups benefits the dominant subsection. They are typically cisgender, male, or white, or the combination of those descriptions. Those that meet at the intersection may have other issues on their agendas that the activist movement may never get to, sometimes creating a divide. This is an issue that the Black LGBTQ community members face when trying to advocate for Black liberation, in addition to queer liberation as well. If Black equality, and additional problems that impact Black queer members as a result of race, are not paramount to white queer issues, the dominant, white, subsection of the LGBTQ community will not expend their focus on them.

LGBTQ activism and progress would not be possible without the contributions of Black and brown queer and transgender folks, yet they are some of the last people to benefit from human rights progress. Yoruba Richen (2014) would argue that part of that reason for Black and brown leadership through activism is because the movement for LGBTQ liberation is largely inspired by the Civil Rights movement. Moments like the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the March on Washington, and the Loving court case would propel moments like the Stonewall Riots, the March on Washington for Gay Rights, and the push for same sex marriage (Richen, 2014). Additionally, we also see more violence toward LGBTQ people of color with little to no

repercussions. BIPOC queer and transgender folks must balance the weight of being part of multiple marginalized groups. Within these marginalized groups, advocacy for issues impacting those that meet at an intersection are an afterthought, if that at all. LGBTQ activism first benefits white, gay men, followed by white, lesbian women. We can measure this by the representation.

Throughout pop culture and media, we have been able to see white LGBTQ representation sprinkled through the decades and even less of people of color. This is followed by a gradual increase in queer representation and storytelling by the mid to late 2000s until now. We are able to pinpoint successful white gay and lesbian musicians, actors, politicians, but it is harder to do the same for Black and brown gay and lesbian people. Black, queer love is not expressed to mass audiences, despite extraordinary writing contributions of activism of people like James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and many more. For white gay and lesbian people, their human rights needs are being addressed, therefore, there is no need for their activism to be inclusive and intersectional. Queer activism is content within its white privilege boundaries, safe from issues that greatly impact the BIPOC community, racism, housing, education, and poverty.

The Black LGBTQ community has found that one part of their marginalized identity can be an oppressor of the other. There are racists LGBTQ folks that are not in support of advancing Black equity, and there are homophobic Black people that are not in favor of including LGBTQ people in their quest for equal human rights. The Black community is largely homophobic and transphobic. Rooted in religious values, beliefs of the black community are typically traditional, stemming from forced ideologies of white slave owners. These beliefs have developed into thinking that Black LGBTQ people are a hindrance to the advancement of the Black community. One of the biggest arguments from heterosexual Black people is queer people are not able to

produce children, therefore, gayness is a tool used by the “white man” to halt the reproduction of black children and Black lives. Yet, when Black queer and trans lives are lost and those people subjected to higher amounts of violence, concern over Black lives vanishes. Concern over Black lives cannot only matter is that person is heterosexual, concern must be intersectional. In addition to religious beliefs, much of LGBTQ oppression within the Black community is also rooted in the gendered role beliefs. Any expression of feelings by men is seen as feminine and weak. The societal patriarchal system expects overly tough and emotionless expression from men. The Black community took what was learned from the only model of masculinity they had and applied it to themselves.

### **Black Masculinity**

At the core of Black masculinity that we have come to understand in present day is the result of more than 400 years of trauma. Black men have had to build their own form of masculinity after having it stripped from them through slavery. Over time, masculinity was learned from the previous generation, each passing on its own bits of trauma while continuing to function in a world that deems them dangerous. Modeled after a white, patriarchal system, Black men have strived to attain what their white counterparts have had. This has led to the desire of more material possessions and power, while also contributing to misogyny towards Black women.

When slaves were brought to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic trade, black men were stripped of their identity. They were nothing more than a physical worker. “In a world where generally men are supposed to be the most powerful and most respected members of society, the African American slave man was stripped of this right,” (Greene, 2008). Black men were just inferior beings to the colonized world. So once freedom was granted to all slaves,

Black men needed to model their identity and masculinity after someone. Their only model was white men. This model would be one of patriarchy, where men were meant to lead and own things. This included leading and/or owning women, as well as land, and other material things. But, because Black men had a harder time obtaining ownership and were still expected to be subordinate to the white man, Jasmine S. Greene argues that this fuels and intensifies the Black man's quest of masculine identity:

“Black men saw their masters with an abundance of materialistic goods, and able to be with any woman they wanted. To black slaves white males were in charge of what seemed like everything and to the observing male slave these things were equated with freedom and manhood. So when emancipated, newly freed ex-slaves sought to be like their masters in that respect only more intensified,” (Greene, 2008).

Today this quest to find themselves within masculinity has manifested into what we understand of Black masculinity today. Similar to what has been modeled from white men, Black masculinity has been rooted in a sense of toughness, and leadership over women, resulting in misogyny that has crippled the Black community and Black women.

While Black male slaves were just classified as workers, Black women were meant to be producers. The Black female slave was valuable because she could birth another slave if she married or if she was raped by the slave owner. Yet through propaganda and language discussed previously, the narrative was changed that Black women were promiscuous jezebels. Much like Black masculinity, perception of Black femininity and women in general centered itself on the notion that Black women were inferior and not worthy of love. They are sexual and angry beings and should be treated as such. Growing up I saw images of “Video Vixens,” typically Black women draped around music artists in their music videos while the artists only talked about sex with these women. Very rarely, did I hear or see music that celebrated love with a Black woman. In connection to white, normative masculinity, some Black men also saw from their model how

to treat Black women. Women and femininity are connected to subordination, and when a woman is not subordinate, she is difficult and not feminine. Black women's survival of slavery and continued generational trauma has resulted in independence and self-reliance. As a result, Black women are considered as a whole to be "difficult."

In addition to their "difficulty," it has been claimed that Black women contribute to the continued oppression of Black men. In Henry Bibb's arguments to show why Black men deserve the same rights as white men, he places the burden over on Black women. Symbolically and historically, he claims that by staying with a Black woman the Black man is held back from achieving higher goals and the same rights as white men in the racist, patriarchal American society, as Black women trap them in the condition of the subhuman slave, (Henry Anthony, 2013). In a position where women are oppressed by the patriarchal system and Black people are oppressed by racism, somehow the mere existence of Black women hinders Black men from achieving the same equality as white men.

Despite aspects of Black masculinity that can be addressed and improved, Black men have survived generations of trauma and oppression displayed by the United States and beyond. Black men have overcome not having an identity outside of being workers, to persevere and become community leaders today. There is a stereotype of black men not having fathers, but we must acknowledge where lacking a father comes from. Black men were consistently stripped away from their families during slavery and sold to other owners. Young black boys, as a result, were not given the opportunity to create a bond with their fathers. Moving to later years, there has been a movement of mass incarceration of Black men. This has become another way to strip Black men from their families and raising their children. Black men have found a way to survive and contribute great work through all fields, in spite of the oppression set to knock them down.

While it is important to address systemic oppression and racism, this is not the only story that is told through hip-hop. Hip-Hop artists also make visible the harm and violence we experience but also tell stories of resistance, survival, accountability, sex, desire, and love.

## **Hip-Hop**

Beginning in the 1970s in New York, hip-hop was created as a sense of self-expression for those in the Black community that needed an outlet. Taking influences from other styles of music centered in Blackness, hip-hop looked to rework those tracks to create new sounds. At the time, hip-hop was a means to convey everyday life and frustrations. Crippled by gang violence, drugs, poor housing, and racial injustice, hip-hop block parties, thrown by DJs, were a safe place for young people to blow off steam and foster creativity (Llanas, 2017). As hip-hop continued to evolve, the contents of which people rapped about started to change. It was about who looked and sounded the best while rapping. This would spark competition and lead to diss tracks or battles where rappers would directly beef with or insult other rappers through song. However, rappers were also showing that they were socially aware of the injustices happening around them as well. As hip-hop moved into the 1990s, the emergence of gansta rap and misogyny became more prevalent. Tricia Rose defines three tropes in hip-hop that covers what hip-hop would become at this time and has remained: keepin' it real, ganstas, and bitches and hoes/pimp (Rose, 2008).

The keepin' it real trope tells the stories of everyday experiences. It is the reality of what life is like living in America as a Black person, living in the ghetto, the effect that violence has had on people, and who rappers are as people in general. The keepin' it real trope has the ability to spill over into the other tropes as gangs and violence or pimping are realities for some people.

The keepin' it real trope is real life storytelling. The gangsta trope includes the gang life and violence in general. This includes rappers that directly tell the listeners that they represent a gang or threaten to use a gun. We often see this trope used when referring to drugs and life in the hood. Because many heavily Black concentrated neighborhoods have high poverty levels due to housing and job inequality, exposure to violence in this way is familiar not only to those contributing to the genre, but those consuming the content as well. The bitches and hoes/pimp trope directly stems from misogyny and mistreatment of Black women. The trope consists typically of men bragging about their ability to sexually exploit women for their own pleasure. This is often paired with bragging about having a lot of money in order to live this lifestyle and obtain material things that intrigue the "bitches and hoes." The audience also sees this trope played out through music videos as well as male rappers find themselves surrounded by "video girls" or women dressed in little to no clothing dancing around the rapper. The latter two tropes are both the result and contributed contribution to black masculinity, while the bitches and hoes trope/pimping trope directly correlates to treatment and disrespect of black women.

Hip-hop has also played into the expected gender roles created in the Black community. Black men were expected to be "hard" or emotionless. Rappers take pride in their ability to not show emotion or be "soft", a trait seen as feminine or gay for a man to have. In *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Hurt, 2006), the film discusses the culture around hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia within hip-hop. Hip-hop did not create the toxicity within certain aspects of masculinity that we see performed, yet they further perpetuate them. In that way hip-hop was born out of what the patriarchy had already created, but a challenge in gender expectations would push the boundaries of what the genre could achieve.

Black female rappers in the 70s and 80s, for the most part were expected to be lighthearted and mostly produce dance tracks about love. It wasn't until the late 1980s, heading into a new decade, that a new emerging female rapper would push the boundaries of what was expected of women in hip-hop at the time and further impacting how women would be presented. The 1990s brought a new wave of women rappers who seemingly soft-spoken than their counterparts in the 1980s. Salt n Peppa and Monie Love reflect a normative rapper during the 80s and 90s: soft-spoken, feminine, and their content dedicated to heterosexual relationships. With the release of Queen Latifah's first album *All Hail the Queen*, in 1989, intervened in the expectations of what a woman rapper looked like and her music styling. Using a more aggressive approach and content focused on the issues Black women faces and addressing the violence with Black communities including domestic violence and misogynoir, Latifah didn't present herself as feminine or timid. She presents herself as androgynous through her fashion choice. For example, unlike Salt n Peppa who wore mid rift clothes or feminine-marked clothing. Latifah would wear a suit and then pair it with large gold hoops typical of Black and Brown women from this time period.

Queen Latifah's *Black Reign* album revolved around themes of blackness, representing a community, love, domestic violence, and trials that black women face. Consistently challenging the mistreatment of Black women within hip hop culture and the Black community in general, Queen Latifah showed that she would be outspoken and confident regardless of opinions. Throughout the album Latifah is able to show versatility by changing the tone in her flow and even singing at certain points. She gives off a softer tone when speaking on topics of love and her community and a more aggressive tone when speaking on violence and problems regarding black women.

*U.N.I.T.Y.* starts with a mellow saxophone while Latifah spells out the word unity and the mellow feeling is abruptly juxtaposed with the question, “Who you callin’ a bitch?” Queen Latifah shows off her more aggressive flow while addressing sexism and domestic violence towards women. The song challenges the bitches and hoes trope head on, using her experience as a black woman to keep it real. “Instincts leads me to another flow, everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a hoe. Tryna make a sister feel low, you know all of that gots to go.” Latifah capitalizes on the “keepin it real” trope in hip hop throughout the album. She not only speaks on issues regarding black women, but issues regarding living in the hood and the violence it brings.

*Just Another Day* describes what life is like living in New Jersey. She becomes so used to the violence around her that it does not bother her; the hood is home. “Just another day living in the hood, just another day around the way. Feeling good today. I hear the [gunshot] but I’m here to stay.” As the song goes on, the gunshots become part of the beat. We hear it often enough that we also become use to it. She stays strapped for protection from potential threats but there is a sense of pride in where she comes from. The beat gives a sense of easiness despite the occasional gunshot sound. The gun shot is not only her reality, but the reality of other Black communities that are typically part of the lower class. It is not out of the ordinary to hear gunshots throughout the day. One must simply check their surroundings and continue on with what they set out to do.

Born on the West side of Chicago, Da Brat would make a mark on the expectations of female hip-hop in the mid 90s. Her debut album, *Funkdafied*, was the first female hip hop album to go platinum (Herman, 2020), notably pair with images of a masculine female rapper. Da Brat was hard hitting and outspoken when it came to her rapping and flow. Her rap and appear like another one of the guys, led to years of speculation regarding her sexuality. Despite what was seemingly obvious for a lot of fans, the time would prove to be hostile for queer folks.

Regardless, Da Brat contributed greatly for Black queer women that would enter the music industry after her, jump starting with her success with *Funkdafied*.

In Da Brat's album, *Funkdafied*, the rapper includes themes of Blackness, community, marijuana, and violence. Beginning with the album title, Da Brat makes multiple references throughout the project about bringing the funk. Funk is heavily intertwined within black music and culture. Heavily dependent on drums and baseline, funk is dance music derived from the 60s and 70s. Throughout the album Da Brat raps over beats stylized by the 90s that pay homage to funk music from earlier decades. In this, Da Brat is setting precedence in her Blackness as well as looking to elders before her to influence her work. Like funk music, certain songs are meant to make the listener want to dance. The song *Funkdafied* samples The Isley Brother's *In Between the Sheets*, who were known for funk, soul, and R&B. The song is solely meant to make people dance. However, other themes in the album show that while Da Brat focuses on dance and community, she also displays hip hop tropes of violence and drug use. *Ain't No Thang* showcases Da Brat's willingness to use violence when pushed, "Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge. Motherf\*ckers wanna test me, cops wanna arrest me but f\*ck that, ya get a hole in ya f\*ckin' head." In hip hop lyrics like this typically come from male rappers. But Da Brat operates in her raps as if those gender expectations in hip hop do not exist.

On Da Brat's album cover for *Funkdafied* and throughout her music videos, the rapper dresses and presents herself in a masculine form. She wears baggy jeans, paired with an oversized shirt and jacket, accompanied by braids and at times a bandana wrapped around her head. Her clothes are identical to other male rappers at the time including Jermaine Dupree, who's label she has worked on and who was also featured on her album. Her flow and cadence are aggressive when speaking on violence that she is not afraid to inflict. Many female rappers

during the 90s tend to have a softer tone to their voice or use their aggressiveness in conjunction with their sex appeal. Rappers like Lil Kim and Foxy Brown personify sex throughout the mid to late 90s, leaving Da Brat's *Funkdafied* in a league of its own. It also feels as though when warning about her violence she is sending a message to all genders that she is not to be challenged. Da Brat's expression through her art form and fashion transcends gender norms in the hip hop community.

Both Queen Latifah and Da Brat are trailblazing women in hip hop. Both transcend set expectations for women in hip hop established by the early to mid 90s. Queen Latifah had more of an androgenous feel, pair masculine clothing with big earring hoops and long hair worn down. Her fashion matches with her ability to change her flow and tone, soft like other female MCs at the time and aggressive like her male counterparts as well. Da Brat gave off a more masculine feel both in her fashion expression and rapping style. And while Latifah mentions heterosexual love and sex in her project, Da Brat does not mention love at all in hers. Now knowing that in 2022 Da Brat has confirmed her lesbian sexuality, it seems as though not mentioning love in her album was a conscious choice in order to avoid speculation. While neither women were out about their sexuality during the prime of their hip hop careers, they have helped pave the way for hip hop artists like Lil Nas X to be able to be successful in mainstream hip hop while embracing his sexuality.

## My Experience

From a very young age I knew that I was queer, before knowing what queer was. Without knowing, I was signaling in the ways that Queen Latifah and Da Brat were. As a kid I connected to the fashion that they were displaying and the ways in which they also displayed bits of masculinity. I would cry as a kid when my family would tell me that I looked pretty. Instead, I

was instantly cured of my crying fit if they told me I looked cool. I was mostly considered a “tom boy” while enjoying small bits of things that were considered “girlie.” In my heart I knew that I was queer, but like a lot of other queer people I struggle to accept myself based on the societal norms that were set. I had finally come to terms with who I was by the end of my freshmen year of college. Still afraid to outright be who I was, I decided that I would put more pressure on signaling. Suddenly, I had a lot of “girl crushes” and I started to dress a slight bit more masculine. I wore a lot of hoodies, paired with a matching baseball cap or beanie and Timberland boots. By the time I gained the courage to start coming out, I noticed that those who were queer had already picked up on my signaling. In embracing who I was for the first time, I also started to realize that my experience as a Black, queer person would implicate more struggle.

I had slowly started to see more Black, queer representation within the media I paid attention to: Frank Ocean, Tyler the Creator, Kehlani, Young MA, and iLoveMakonnen. It seemed like with the exception of Young MA and Kehlani, who took what Latifah and Brat granted queer women and pushed the boundaries further, there was still some ambiguity in regards to Black, queer men’s sexuality in mainstream hip-hop. I had come to understand that there was more acceptance for Black, queer women in the music industry because there was a curiosity and fetishization in regard to women’s sexuality in general. Heterosexual men enjoyed seeing, knowing that women enjoyed each other (also displayed in many hip hop lyrics). That same acceptance and curiosity was not granted to Black men in the mainstream music industry. So when Lil Nas X was able to continue a historic Billboard run at the top of the charts, after confirming that he was a queer man, I knew the music industry had reached a place where finally, Black queer men were able to be themselves unapologetically.

Raised in a suburb of Atlanta with his gospel singing father, Lil Nas X used the internet and his love for Nicki Minaj (Aswad, Setoodeh, 2021). It was his understanding of stan Twitter (extremely dedicated fans of various celebrities on Twitter) that gave him an understanding of what artists go through when dealing with fans and criticism. In 2019, Lil Nas X would release his first single, *Old Town Road*, and spend 19 weeks on top of the Billboard music charts. It was in the midst of this historic run, that Lil Nas X would come out as gay. From then on, his music would encompass the joys and trials of the Black queer experience, love, sex, and desire.

Lil Nas X's *Montero* album shows themes of Black queer love and the trials, success, family problems, and mental health. Beginning with *Montero (Call me By Your Name)*, the song title references the novel, turned movie about a secret queer love. In the film, after acknowledging their love for each other, Oliver tells Elio to call each other by their names; "Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine. This line signifies that the two are part of each other and that they belong together. The film gained international acclaim and criticism regarding the age difference and power dynamic of the two lovers. However, it is a film well known within the queer community and film/media fans. *Montero* is Lil Nas X's first name and he wants to be part of his lover. In the song, Lil Nas X discusses a love interest that involves themselves with the temptation of drugs and alcohol. He also hints that the love interest may still be in the closet. "Cocaine and drinking with your friends, you live in the dark boy I cannot pretend...if Eve ain't in your garden you know that you can call me when you want..." Instead of the temptation of drugs and alcohol, Lil Nas X wants to be his lover's temptation, "I wanna sell what you're buying." Instead of buying drugs and focusing on them, Lil Nas X is pleading to be what his lover wants all the time. He wants to be the constant temptation. This is plea is also accompanied

by visual representations of temptation and condemnation through the Christian and historical lens.

The music video accompanies the themes of temptation, beginning with a Garden of Eden-esque setting. Lil Nas X is seduced by a snake. It accompanies a feeling of forbidden love that the song and title references have. The love between a 17-year-old boy and 24-year-old man is secretive and forbidden. The love between Lil Nas X and his closeted lover is forbidden. And the fruit in the garden of Eden is forbidden. But all are pursued based on the seduction of someone or something (Oliver, Lil Nas X, and the snake). The video then shows Lil Nas X chained and walking before monarch-type figures. The audience members cast stones at him, one hitting and seemingly sending his soul towards heaven. This audience could represent the disapproval of Lil Nas X's love or queer love in general. I see this also as a critique of those that critique queer love. There is a verse in the bible that says, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." This is said after Pharisees brought unto Jesus a woman that committed adultery, a crime punishable by stoning to death. In the music video, the audience throwing stones at Lil Nas X are made of stone. This audience could be projecting their sins onto the rapper, lacking to acknowledge that they are made up of the same "sin" that Lil Nas X is. He is not made up of stone because he lives his life outside of the social norms created around sexuality. Nas then descends to hell on a stripper pole into hell, where he seduces and kills the devil. Aside from the matching themes of temptation, the music video comments on the overall Christian perception of homosexuality. Homosexuality is often referred to as an abomination but many in the Black and Christian communities many Christians believe that "gay people do not make it to heaven." An audience of sinners are able to cast stones at someone else for being gay and send

him to hell. Killing the devil and placing the horns on himself seems to be a sarcastic remark on the fears of homophobes.

Throughout his career, the rapper has used critiques against himself and the LGBTQ community in a way that intentionally twists the tone of the original statement. One of the fears of homophobes is the gay agenda.” The gay agenda is evil workings, forcing the homosexual lifestyle onto people. Lil Nas X plays on statements like that by dancing for and seducing the devil, and then becoming the devil himself. We him doing this again at the MTV VMA’s after winning Video of the Year for the song, “I first would like to thank the gay agenda. Let’s go gay agenda!”

*Industry Baby* closely follows tropes that are seen throughout hip-hop history. He speaks on his success despite critics assuming that he would be a one-hit wonder after *Old Town Road*. He raps about having sex with men, while displaying their almost-naked and greased up bodies in the music video, and the music video is set within a prison where his own body is put on display. And violence is shown in order to break out of the prison. *Industry Baby* was released after *Montero (Call Me by Your Name)* and plays on real-life tribulations (Nike shoe lawsuit). This song further proves his longevity within the industry. The music video follows Lil Nas X, after being given a tool to break out of the prison by Jack Harlow (featured on the song). Lil Nas X then creates a hole that allows him to access other parts of the prison that allow for a prison riot and breaking everyone free. Both artists on the song talk about how it was not expected for them to achieve the success that they have and that it’s not over for them. Interpret the title of the song in two ways: there have been many debates on social media claiming that Lil Nas X is an industry plant, meaning he is someone that the music industry is trying to push onto the audience. Lil Nas X has made sarcastic comments and references before, so he could be using

the song to drive those feelings. Another way to look at it is that he is the industry itself. At the end of the song he says, "I'm the industry baby." He is the future of the music industry and black queer artists are going to take over.

As time has progressed, we have seen more queer artists be able to express themselves and still be successful, however, those artists are typically white queer artists. Black queer artists are fighting an intersectional battle: homophobic criticism from the black community and racism from the LGBTQ community. Not all that belong to those communities are homophobic or racists, however, including queer and trans folks into black issues and including black people into queer issues is not focused on enough with the two. Lil Nas X is here to bring both issues to the forefront, discussing both what it means to be black and queer while succeeding in this music/entertainment industry.

*That's What I Want* is Lil Nas X's plea for love. In this song he talks about his desire for black, queer love and his struggles with finding it both because of himself and his schedule and with how hard it is to date in these times in general. Finding a love while he's "in his prime," in order to hold him down when things get stressful is important to him. The music video showcases black queer love and sex as two teammates on a football team fall in love with each other. The video makes references to the movie *Brokeback Mountain* as it follows the two lovers on a camping trip before Lil Nas X later finds out that his love interest is married with a child. Lil Nas X ends the video coming down the aisle in a wedding dress, where fellow black, queer icon, Billy Porter, portrays the minister. There is no "groom" at the end of the aisle and the rapper cries in the empty church. This music video uses a common theme of being closeted or Lil Nas X having relations with someone who is still in the closet. This may suggest his longing for

having a partner that is open about who they are, but also having empathy if they are not ready to fully be who they are.

Throughout the album, Lil Nas X mentions family troubles, specifically with his parents' separation and his mother's drug use. In the song *Dead Right Now*, Lil Nas X speaks about how now that he is successful, people that didn't believe in him before are suddenly on his side. However, his mother calls him in order to help her financially, despite breaking her promise to get sober. When Lil Nas X does not help her, she degrades him. Other troubles for the rapper come from thoughts of wanting to unalive himself because he is black and gay in his song *Sun Goes Down*.

*I wanna run away*

*Don't wanna lie, I don't want a life*

*Send me a gun and I'll see the sun*

The song seems to be referencing an earlier time as the music video takes place in a high school setting and he mentions back when he created a Nicki Minaj stan page on twitter. There seems to be parts of the song where he is talking to his younger self, however.

*You need an instant ease*

*From your life where you got plenty*

*Of every hurt and heartbreak (Oh)*

*You just take it all to the face*

*I know that you want to cry*

*But there's much more to life than dying*

*Over your past mistakes (Oh)*

*And people who threw dirt on your name*

The song speaks to the struggles of intersectionality as a Black, queer youth, especially when trying to understand both identities. Lil Nas X, as well as queer rappers before him offer implications to social innovation through visibility in music.

## Social Innovation

Being a Black, queer person in the music industry is not innovative, despite the inability of some white folks to refrain from tokenizing Black, queer folks as unique and exemplary. In fact, there are many Black queer artists in the industry. What is different for Lil Nas X is that he challenges and defies identity politics established in the Black community and hip-hop and showcases it on a mainstream platform. Lil Nas X, Da Brat, and Queen Latifah offer visibility within a historically heteronormative genre, as their form of activism and advocacy for the LGBTQ community. Social innovation acknowledges ongoing systemic challenges while providing solutions and further discussions to the topic. I would argue that defying an inherently defiant music genre through gender expression is social innovation. It was only after releasing one song that Lil Nas X was able to confirm to the world that he was gay and spend the rest of his career being who he truly is. While his career has really just begun, he has already highlighted Black queer struggle and experience openly through mainstream media.

Before Lil Nas X, I had never heard a Black queer man rap about queer love and sex openly in the way that he has on a mainstream forum. Rapper Cakes Da Killa offers further insight as to why this may be. "Society hates anything feminine. A very masculine female rapper can still receive marketability or credibility, but as soon as a man shows any signs of femininity, he's looked down upon," (Glass, 2017). While other Black queer male artists have come out, there is still a feeling of ambiguity with their lyrics. There is no guessing with Lil Nas X. He has planted himself firmly within hip hop, followed tropes discussed by Tricia Rose, and flipped

them to fit queer love and sex, as well as exploiting the male body in ways that traditionally female bodies have been exploited. Lil Nas X has taken the reversed tropes of hip hop, often displayed in the underground “queer hop” scene and brought it to the mainstream.

For Lil Nas X, the successful trajectory of his career has been based on the framing and disruption. First, taking off with his song *Old Town Road*, a black man fused hip-hop and country and climbed his way up the Billboard Country Charts. His defiance in kicking down the country door led to push back from country music fans, ultimately resulting in his removal of the country charts. His response was to feature on of country music’s biggest stars on his remix. This framing merged fans from both genres to propel *Old Town Road* to the top of the Billboard charts in record breaking fashion. Next, he decided to publicly come out as gay on the last day of Pride month in 2019. This was defiant because in the middle of his historic, chart-topping run, and when heterosexual people thought that they would no longer have to acknowledge LGBTQ people, he made everyone come to terms that queer people can also make music liked by everyone. This sparked conversations about queer people for longer than the intended month. With the community behind him, Lil Nas X would continue to be at the top of the charts as an openly gay man and create music as such.

Queer hop has offered LGBTQ artists and hip-hop lovers a space to indulge in the genre. While carving a safe space for themselves, within the heteronormative, homophobic genre, not many artists have been able to take their overtly queer work into the mainstream, commercialized music industry. Lil Nas X has simply followed the framework of queer hop and brought it to a mass audience, using their critiques and disdain towards him in order to keep his buzz and relevance. He also unapologetically expresses his femininity, at the disdain of some of his peers. He takes the phrase “any press is good press” and uses that to fuel his work. Using his

background and a preacher's kid and ridicule from a large Christian community, he created *Montero (Call me By Your Name)*. Further, he used the devil Nike shoes lawsuit, related to the *Montero* song, to introduce *Industry Baby*. Lil Nas X's music would seamlessly flow and transition between hip-hop and pop music and his transitions between the genres were also accompanied by his fluidity in gender expression.

In a genre that is undeniably rooted in a certain expression of masculinity. Lil Nas X has shown other Black, queer people that varying expression is okay to explore and can also bring a freshness to mainstream hip-hop music. As a whole, Lil Nas X has not created new social innovations as it pertains to being Black, queer, and defiant. However, he has taken fluidity and ideals of freedom in expression, as well as loud queerness from the LGBTQ community and combined that with the overt Blackness and defiance of the Black community. Together we are witnessing a free, Black, defiant, queer man moving through barriers of mainstream music. Social Innovation is reliant on confrontational change from people like Lil Nas X, in order to see progression in systems that are oppressive.

## A Letter of Hope

For too long, we as a people have been focused on oppressing others in the name of power. We have generated hate in our hearts, closed our minds to others that were not like us and prevented growth and healing passed down through each generation. We have reached a point in the music industry where change has become necessary. Our society is starting to see a regress in progress on the quest for equal human rights for the LGBTQ community. It is the responsibility of the music industry to ensure that queer people have a voice that brings hope and

representation. Along with representation, it is also essential for non-queer folks to display understanding and a willingness to embrace those that are different from themselves.

When I came out to my family, I was fortunate to receive love and a willingness to understand who I was. I come from a religious Christian family, and my parents were heavily involved with the church. I came out to my mother at 19 years old. She had no idea that I was not straight, and I could see visually she was concerned about what my sexuality would bring in terms of acceptance and the work she now had to do to better understand her daughter. I had a long conversation with her sometime later about who I was, and the condition of our country based on the person in leadership at the time. I told her, “ma, I am Black, I’m a woman, and I’m queer. Society thrives on hating people like me.” Without hesitation she told me that all of those aspects of me was just more reason for her to love me harder in a world I felt hated me. Sometime later, I told my aunt that I was queer. She said “you don’t think I know that? I’ve watched you your whole life, and I know what it looks like to see a person carry a burden. I’ve known since you were young. Now hold your head high and be free.” I hadn’t told my father about my sexuality until after I was in my first relationship with a woman. Over the years, I had sent him signal after signal, preparing him for the day that I would finally tell him. He was hurt to be one of the last to know but admitted that his reaction would have been different had I told him some time earlier. He told me that he loved me and is trying his best to understand that part of who I am.

For straight people, I implore you to take note and apply the ways in which my family loved and supported me through understanding my sexuality. Be the reason someone feels they are loved when the world feels like it hates queer people. Be the reminder that like anyone else, queer people can be free and try to understand who they are, but please note the love and

acceptance is not enough. Some of you reading this may understand the implications of what it means to be part of an oppressed group. I implore you to reach back and fight for queer people the same way you would fight for your own minority group(s). If you have had the privilege of not being part of an oppressed group, I urge you to reflect and understand that each person has the right to be treated with love, respect, and dignity. Queer people have an immeasurable amount of work and creativity to offer to the music industry. We need to uplift LGBTQ folks and encourage them to share their work with all audiences. With Lil Nas X kicking the door open further for queer artists, it is my hope that we continue to see more BIPOC queer representation. When we do, the possibilities for where music will go is limitless.

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