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I GOT TWO VERSIONS: FRANK OCEAN, LIL NAS X, AND THE RHETORIC OF
PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY IN RAP MUSIC

EVAN LOBDELL

136 pages

Rap music serves as one of the most popular genres of music worldwide. Despite its popularity and influence, the genre has often been criticized for its inclusion of misogyny and homophobia. Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X, two Black queer male rappers, are introducing a new style of masculinity to the genre that is centered on a blurring of the masculine and feminine. Through a rhetorical analysis of the lyrics, music videos, and live performances of “Nikes” by Frank Ocean and “Industry Baby” by Lil Nas X, this thesis characterizes progressive masculinity, its impact on understandings of masculinity in rap, and how these two men are altering the genre of rap music.

KEYWORDS: Rap; rhetoric; Black masculinity; progressive masculinity; Frank Ocean; Lil Nas

X

I GOT TWO VERSIONS: FRANK OCEAN, LIL NAS X, AND THE RHETORIC OF
PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY IN RAP MUSIC

EVAN LOBDELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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2022

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I GOT TWO VERSIONS: FRANK OCEAN, LIL NAS X, AND THE RHETORIC OF
PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY IN RAP MUSIC

EVAN LOBDELL

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E.L.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As a scholar, I have always found myself drawn to understanding how pieces of pop culture play a role in forming ideologies. While I primarily turned to media for enjoyment, I have always found myself intrigued with the effect that these forms of entertainment may have on viewers. A television program always ends up being more than just a show – it can serve as a comfort in dark times, as a model on how to approach issues, or as a teacher on how to interact with others. As time went on and my studies grew more serious, so did my attachment to music as a medium of study. As such a universal concept, I have found myself curious on the impact that music has on listeners and their approaches to the world. In the following chapter, I introduce my own history with one genre of music, rap music. Following this, I exhibit how rap music serves as more than just entertainment – rather it’s a form of community building and pride. This leads to my general goal for this study. This leads to my overall thesis: In rap music, there has been a recent development of popularized progressive masculinity in rap that encourages a blending of masculinity and femininity, allowing artists to share their authentic sexuality and identities in a public setting (Calton et al., 2014).

Music has played an integral role at every stage of my life. My dad used to drive me around in his grey van from the 1980s playing The Beatles and Journey for me, and he would occasionally break out his guitar and harmonica to play some Bob Dylan. My mom always had a cassette tape of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in her minivan for long family road trips. My first ever concert was Shania Twain with my family when I was a kid. Music became a normal part of my childhood growing up, and that continued on as I moved from CD players to iPods, and I continued to discover more music. Then, I had my first taste of hip-hop.

I grew up in a rural town in Northern Illinois with a population of around 15,000 people. Although I wouldn't realize this until I was much older, my town offered a traditional Midwestern experience – similar groups of people, similar beliefs, and similar experiences. Men were expected to be quiet, tough, emotionless. You went to high school, found your sweetheart, married, and started a family. There would probably be country music playing at parties and other social events. I wasn't even aware of hip-hop until I plugged in *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* into my GameCube and heard "Rapper's Delight" by The Sugarhill Gang for the first time. I used to purposefully go back and play that song while I would virtually skate around as I found myself entranced by the bouncing beat, the infectious energy, and the lines being delivered by the artists. I will forever hear the cadence of "Everybody go: Hotel, motel Holiday Inn" in my head because of the hours I poured into that game (Sugarhill Gang, 1980). In a sense, my first exposure to rap was through a lens of male whiteness. *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* did not feature many characters of color yet utilized rap in its presentation. Although I was exposed, it was not in the most authentic sense.

Apart from my GameCube, I didn't have much experience with hip-hop after that. I began to pursue theatre and musical opportunities in middle school and high school and found that the rural Illinois town had cautions about a traditional man joining these activities. I would receive taunts about how I was like a girl and how I didn't have the talent to perform traditionally masculine activities such as to play sports, be aggressive with others, or appear muscular and masculine. In response, I dove into music. It was a haven, and I loved being able to explore different artists and hear their stories and their experiences. Hip-hop didn't truly enter the picture until I was around 15, and the song "Juice" by Chance the Rapper (2016) randomly shuffled and played on the Shazam app. Again, I was hooked by Chance's delivery and his

wordplay on the track. By that time in my life, I developed a passion for language and how an individual could weave a collection of words together to craft images, messages, and mindsets about the world.

This love of language spurred me to write for the school newspaper, explore famous poetry, and most importantly, begin to explore the world of hip-hop. Chance the Rapper led me to Childish Gambino, who led me to Tyler the Creator, who led me to Frank Ocean. My playlists became populated by Kendrick Lamar, Tyler the Creator, J. Cole, and Kanye West. This was the beginning of a rabbit hole that would have me explore music by A Tribe Called Quest, OutKast, and Nas. These artists opened an entire new world for me. Some of their lyrics were more explicative than others, but they talked about masculinity, relationships, success, failure. Frank Ocean was the first queer artist I can recall listening to and falling in love with his music. These artists were inspirations for a kid who grew up with 15,000 people who promoted a traditional sense of masculinity. As the years went by and rap continued to play in my headphones, I began to understand what really drew me in about the genre: the power of the language and the narratives present in these songs. In this study, I harness the impact that language, as well as visuals, can have by analyzing rapper Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X's songs, music videos, and live performances to note how these men introduce and normalize the concept of progressive masculinity – or a movement away from traditional masculine traits and towards actions that promote equality – in the genre of rap music (Calton et al., 2014).

Impact of Rap

Narratives are a crucial aspect of rap music, drawing influence from early Black traditions. In her book, *Hiphop Literacies*, Elaine Richardson (2006) writes that the “all Afro American narrative” can be traced back to the “economics of slavery” (p. 9). In an environment

of oppression, narratives allowed a connection to communities and cultures, and an escape from reality (Richardson, 2006). Similarly, “hiphop discourse tells us a lot about socioeconomic stratification and the struggle between culture and capital” (Richardson, 2006, p. 9). Further, rap music can serve as a toast to the Black everyday experience (Richardson, 2006). With the combination of dynamic beats, innovative language, and lively storytelling, rap music allowed Black artists to commemorate their lives in a society that has oppressed them (Rose, 1994, p. 63-64). As a lover of writing and words, the combination of metaphor, onomatopoeia, alliteration, imagery, humor, and symbolism on top of music was electric. Further, I was interested in how powerful of a tool rap music could be on society. While addressing serious issues of oppression and injustice, rap artists were able to inspire change in the world.

Scholars have spent time addressing this influence that rap has on society and why it should be studied. Research by Jack Beckwith (2016) found that since 1958, rap music has accounted for a sixth of the number of songs that have reached the Billboard Top 100. Considering scholars such as Tricia Rose (1994) and Imani Perry (2004) who explain that rap music began growing in popularity in the 1980s, rap music has certainly seen an exponential growth in American culture. Beckwith’s (2016) work goes on to explain that beginning in 2016, rap music began trending rapidly as more and more rap artists made premieres on the Billboard Top 100 charts. This trend would continue as Statista (2018) reports that hip-hop was ranked by 37.4% of U.S. consumers as a leading genre in the music industry. In 2021, research by MRC Data and Billboard found that a third of all music streams in 2020 were in the rap genre (Ingham, 2021). Of course, its popularity in America has also gone global, with specific cultural blends from countries around the world into the genre’s emphasis on beats, rhythms, and lyrical expression.

Rap music and its popular artists can influence their mass audiences. Research by Gomes Arrulo et al. (2021) concluded that music has a direct influence on our moods, beliefs, and approaches to life. This concept is even stronger in rap music and the Black community it represents. Palma-Martos et al. (2021) found that rap music has a positive relationship with Black Americans' sense of identity, self-esteem, and pride. Walser (1995) shares that rap music is effective in building Black communities and keeping them glued together. Rose (1994) believes that studying rap music is an effective way to understanding "contemporary Black cultural politics" (p. 312). Rap music can serve as an integral part of the Black community and their expression of identity and pride.

Rap and Social Movements

Rap music's ability to create communal strength and dignity is more important than ever with the growing social movements devoted to eliminating racial injustice. In recent years, these movements have gained higher levels of public understanding and participation through collective public acknowledgement of the issue (Nardini et al., 2020). On top of this, endorsement from a known social figure, such as a musician, can heighten a social movement's popularity (Nardini et al., 2020). For example, we can consider the protests after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri -- Rappers Nas, Lil Durk, Q-Tip, Talib Kweli, and Tef Poe all attended protests and used their platforms to speak out against injustice (Bakare, 2014). The 2014 Brown protests sparked more nationwide recognition of anti-Black violence, although even today innocent lives continue to be claimed, such as George Floyd, Stephon Clark, Elijah McClain, Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Atatiana Jefferson (Gonzaga University, 2021). These are just a few of the names of Black Americans who have been unjustly killed by police officers. And rap music allows communities to come together to

mourn, call for justice, and memorialize these citizens. Scholar Evelyn M. Hammonds (2021) writes that the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 signaled a “racial reckoning” in which the world is consciously addressing racial injustice. Rappers such as YG, LL Cool J, Killer Mike, and Lil B seem to support this, as their music in response to anti-Black violence became anthems of communities dealing with injustice and searching for restoration (Ryan, 2020). These songs can serve as a sort of catharsis for listeners, as their favorite artists emote shared feelings and experiences. It is this potential era of racial reckoning and rap’s role in this reckoning that leads me to hope that this study of how music plays a role in the evolving concept of Black masculinity and Black performance can be beneficial and topical.

Rap and Masculinity

Yet, some argue that rap can have a negative influence on listeners. One of rap’s largest criticisms is the presence of “misogynist and heterosexist discourses” that promote unhealthy and potentially violent behaviors (Perry, 2004, p. 129). Black masculinity is a complex and oppressive experience in which dominant white parties both emasculate and fetishize Black men (Battle, 2014). Constant injustice and embarrassment can lead Black men, especially those in the spotlight, to find ways to reclaim their masculinity. This, unfortunately, can lead to mimicking the same violence and sexism that white men flaunt over these men. Consequently, the fanbase of rap music that is predominantly male can learn from their role models and enact this same violence toward others (Palma-Martos et al., 2021). For this reason, studying rap music and its influence on audiences is crucial. Understanding the messages promoted by artists in lyrics and music videos can reveal more about what these artists are feeling and how their fans are interpreting these messages.

While rap is still embedded with traditional masculine messages of domination and power, there has been a recent trend of a new masculinity emerging. This trend is characterized by Calton et al. (2014) as “progressive masculinity,” or masculinity that strays from traditional masculinity and is centered around “volitional and egalitarian behaviors, values, and beliefs” (p. 41). In this study, I will specifically apply progressive masculinity to understand how rappers like Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X characterize traditional notions of masculinity and femininity in their identities. As scholars such as Xinling Li (2018), Jeffrey McCune Jr. (2015) and Marlon Bailey (2013) reveal, there has been an increasing number of Black queer men who are making names for themselves in the music industry. Their music promotes their sexuality, accepting their identity, and an insertion of feminine qualities and actions into a primarily masculine genre. With rap’s popularity and influence on the country, this could lead to a new understanding of Black masculinity, of rap music, and of queerness in the United States. Again, for this reason, rap music can be deemed a worthy site of scholarly attention and analysis. A genre is potentially evolving in front of millions of listeners, and it is crucial to be on the pulse to understand what this could mean. As such, I will be analyzing a song from Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X. Specifically, I will examine the lyrics, the music video, and a live performance of each song to explore the various meanings that emerge to form a progressive masculinity – or the blending of masculine and feminine characteristics into a single, embodied artist and their work (Calton et al., 2014).

Before exploring this dynamic genre and its artists, I feel it is necessary to provide a few caveats. I possess a certain privilege which makes it difficult for me to fully experience the aspects of Black masculinity and the cultural impact of rap music discussed in this study. It is my goal and my promise to not speak for these artists or for the community they are representing.

Rather, I hope to provide a platform to share these artists' voices, themes that are appearing in their messages and visual presentations, and how these may have an influence on Black masculinity based on the research I have done. I strive to let the words and work of Black scholars lead my work, and to understand that my work will not be the sole analysis or conclusion. Rather, it is my hope that this work spurs discussions in all communities about rap, or different genres, or different iterations of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity in media.

I'm a student from a small town in Illinois who is enamored by the power of language and narrative present in one of my favorite genres of music. The artists I will be discussing helped show me that there's more than one type of masculinity. They have shown me that one can have more traditionally "feminine" qualities, that one can believe what they want to believe, and that you don't have to fit into a planned box. Most importantly, these artists reveal that you don't have to apologize for who you want to be and the way you act. For a guy who did theatre and music and was teased for acting like a girl and not being tough enough, these artists taught me it was okay to pursue what makes me feel like myself. It is my hope to combine this love of rap with the excellent work of scholars who came before me and artists who are currently changing the landscape of the genre to understand how Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity is developing in rap, and what these artists can do for other listeners who may be looking for a similar role model.

Rap is more than entertainment; it is culture, a collective experience, and a direct influence on Black Americans' self-esteem and understanding of themselves. It is because of these reasons that rap music is worthy of study. Clearly, this genre has gained mass popularity in

the United States. More than that, however, rap music can serve as a heartbeat of a large population in the country. As Elaine Richardson (2006) writes:

Hiphop is a rich site of cultural production that has pervaded and been pervaded by almost every American institution and has made an extensive global impact. Hiphop discourse, no matter how commodified or “blaxploited,” offers an interesting view of the human freedom struggle and aspects of the knowledge that people have about the world.

(Richardson, 2006, p. 9)

It is our duties as scholars to provide this cultural phenomenon the attention it deserves and understand the ubiquitous impact it has on our world. With a “hip hop/ Hippie to the hippie/ The hip, hip a hop,” let’s dive into the world of hip-hop, masculinity, and queerness. (Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight”, 1980).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of the following section is to uncover the rhetoric of hip-hop, its lyrics and visuals, as well as the rhetoric of Black masculinity in hip-hop music. Previous studies note the omnipresence of narratives in rap music, and how these narratives serve as conduits to share stories of oppression and racism toward Black Americans. This rhetoric allows the everyday Black experience to be shared, with the potential for Black artists to recover power that has been stripped from them by dominant parties. Following this, the concept of Black masculinity is analyzed, with a discussion on how this attempt to regain power can potentially become harmful. This then leads into a discussion on Black queerness and the growing presence of progressive masculinity in rap music, with more Black queer artists coming out to challenge the traditional notions of masculinity in the genre (Calton et al., 2014).

Racial Formation

Before delving into the history and rhetoric of hip-hop, I believe it is important to establish foundations of the theory of racial formation. Scholars such as McCune Jr. (2008) write that “hip-hop is congruent with Black life,” and an understanding of how “Black life” is formed and understood can be beneficial moving forward when studying notions of Black masculinity and my application of Calton et al.’s (2014) progressive masculinity (McCune Jr., 2008, p. 302). Omi and Winant (2014) have written considerably on this topic and note that ethnic theories of race served as a challenge to “two fundamental features of U.S. racial dynamics: *biologistic understandings of race*, and *Puritanism*” (p. 23). Black Americans were othered both by scientific tests that claimed Black citizens biologically designed to be less intelligent, and the painting of Black Americans as “immigrants” in a country in which they resided before most

white-identifying citizens (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 30). To understand how these false narratives came to be, we can turn to an understanding of how race is formed.

Race is both a social construct and a real social category that has consequences. Although unreliable and full of slippage, race has the power to create groups, influence our own and others' identities, and create repercussions. As Omi and Winant (2014) write, "*race is a master category* – a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (p. 106). Race becomes a "way of 'making up people,'" beginning from the discovery of the United States (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 105). White settlers discovered indigenous people in the United States and claimed they were Others because they did not surrender to Protestant beliefs. Scientists told the public that Black Americans were biologically different and less capable (Omi & Winant, 2014). Today, innocent Muslim citizens fear being perceived as terrorists, while White terrorists are described as troubled and outcasts (Corbin, 2017). Although some may claim they are colorblind or do not treat others differently based on race, it is impossible to say that race has no impact in our society. Notions of class and gender identity are embedded with race, tracing back to slavery and "the repression of women's autonomy" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 107). While the concept of racial formation can certainly be jumbled or contradicting, it undoubtedly continues to play a role in creating our social world.

It is crucial to recognize racial formation as a pervasive part of human performance and presentation, rather than a social illusion that can be debunked. From the conquest of native land in the United States to the appropriation of Black culture and language, racial discourse has dominated human beings' interactions and understandings of life. Racial formation drives politics and movements to redistribute resources, and it serves as an important resource when

understanding the genre of rap, Black masculinity, and how progressive masculinity challenges society to evolve (Calton et al., 2014).

Rhetoric of Hip-Hop

Rap music is influential, enterprising, and ubiquitous. Names like Snoop Dogg, Kanye West, and Ice Cube can be recognized across the world. Influences of the genre can be noted in modern rock, country, and pop music as artists adopt a rhythmic delivery of their lyrics. And the adaption of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be seen through popular online videos, images, and presentations (Richardson, 2006). As a cultural production, rap music can serve as an expressive form, presenting the everyday experience of Black citizens and the struggles they face. Branded as societal outcasts (Atlanta-based rap duo OutKast creating their name from this concept), Black artists can utilize rap music to share their voices, gain a footing in a society that puts them down, and inform audiences so that they will be recognized. Through reinventions of language and stunning visuals, rap music has become a global phenomenon. Consequently, rap music is worthy of in-depth investigations to understand how these expressive forms operate, and how they change the world around them.

Hip-hop is better recognized as a culture than as just a musical genre. Hip-hop culture is constructed in four parts: graffitiing, breakdancing, deejaying, and rapping (Alim, 2006). All four parts come together to help create a shared experience, although rap music is often still regarded as hip-hop. For this thesis, we will be focusing on rapping. As a genre of music, rap serves as an instrument of “Black cultural expression that prioritizes Black voices,” reflecting on “the pleasures and problems of Black urban life in contemporary America” (Rose, 1994, p. 30). Rap music allows these Black artists to address issues such as police violence, poverty, and discrimination in a form that allows the artists to control their narratives (Rose, 1994). Often

associated with the concept of an artist being “real” or “authentic” in the face of struggles, rap can represent a breath of fresh air that allows artists and listeners alike to express themselves, commenting on inequalities and unhappiness with the world while also celebrating Black culture.

This allows rap to have influential power. As rapper Sonny Lewis describes it, hip-hop is a community that “celebrates Me and We, as opposed to You” (Li, 2018, p. 12). As a form of rhetoric, rap music can be utilized as a tool to resist the social issues and to highlight the perspectives of those who are oppressed, consequently opposing dominant ideologies. Kopano (2002) describes rap as a form of guerrilla rhetoric, in which music serves as a form of cultural resistance. This concept of music as a rhetorical weapon can be traced back to the earliest roots of African music, in which rhythmic percussion and chanting represented a social connection. The era of slavery in the United States allowed music to continually in a weapon, as slave songs allowed slaves to form communities and hope for a better future.

Asante (1987) strengthens the claims of African music such as rap as a form of resistance with his discussion of the rhetoric of Black protest and strategies of a revolutionary. He writes that rhetoric of rebellion can utilize notions of vilification, objectification, mythification, and unionization (Asante, 1987). In terms of vilification and objectification, one can “make use of language accessible to them and their audience” to directly point out the abstract “prevailing behaviors” that are harmful to communities (Asante, 1987, 112). These strategies directly draw attention to dangerous actions by those in power (vilification) while utilizing an accessible and impactful approach to objectify these abstract acts of domination.

Moreover, rebellions can draw on the mythification of a leading figure to paint that individual as more powerful and persuasive (Asante, 1987). By drawing on a mythoform, or the mythical presentation of an individual that is built on stories, to strengthen the public’s

perception of an individual, that person has garnered more influence (Asante, 1987). Lastly, Asante (1987) speaks on unionization and the importance of “gatherings of persons who maintain, if only for the duration of the speech occasion, a special relationship with each other, if only the hearing of the speaker” (p. 113). By making the conscious choice to connect with their audience, a rhetor can create a union between them and their listeners, opening the listeners to be influenced. These four strategies serve as beneficial approaches to inciting rebellion and pointing out the shortcomings of dominant powers. These approaches can be utilized well by Black artists. As Asante writes, “a truly Afrocentric rhetoric must oppose the negation in Western culture...wholly committed to the propagation of a more humanistic vision of the world” (Asante, 1987, p. 170). Using music as their platform, rap artists have the power to create rebellious rhetoric that calls for radical change.

And as McCune Jr. (2008) writes, “historically, hip-hop culture and music have gone against the grain of traditional American music and style often critiquing dominant structures and modifying other musical forms” (p. 302). Rap music can possess the power to unite and inspire aspirations of rising above oppression and injustice. For many, “the drawing power of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to Black youth and cultural resistance” (Rose, 1994 p. 65). With the genre’s ability to highlight silenced voices, rap becomes “a tool of resistance; something that can not only subvert but transform the ‘hegemonic utterance’ of the dominant forces” (Caldwell, 2007, p. 1). To understand the complex rhetorical history of rap, we will begin with an overview of the history of hip-hop and how the rhetoric of hip-hop has transformed through the years. Let’s enter Nas’ “N.Y. State of Mind” (1994).

Rap and *Nommo*

If rap music serves as rhetoric of resistance, it is important to recognize the foundations on which it has been built. For this, I draw on Molefi Kete Asante's (1987) description of *nommo*. As Asante (1987) writes, *nommo* can be understood as the word, or the power of the word, on others. The word served an important role in African culture, representing a shared appreciation for language's ability to share stories, connect with others, and hold enormous power over others through its subtleties (Asante, 1987). In this sense alone, rap music could be seen as an evolution of early *nommo*. However, *nommo* is built on more than the spoken word. Asante (1987) writes that *nommo* is equally empowered by vocal inflection and performance. While the content of the spoken word is imperative, the speaker will fail to connect with audiences if it is not delivered properly.

It is this understanding of *nommo* that lends itself to connections to religious and musical communities. A preacher in front of a congregation may use singing or impassioned speech to garner their audiences' attention. Without this aspect of the spoken word, their words may not influence listeners. In music, and specifically rap, the strategic combination of vocal expression and content allows for an impassioned fanbase that hangs onto every word. Statements like "Man, that cat can rap," are often uttered after listening to a rapper deliver their lyrics on a track, rather than after reading the lyrics that a rapper created (Asante, 1987, p. 86). That is not to say that strong writing is not a crucial part of rap, but rather that it is the delivery of those lyrics that transforms the lyrics and enthralls listeners. As Asante (1987) writes, a speaker is not promised an interested audience without a blending of vocal rhythms and powerful themes and refusing to acknowledge the power of vocal expression will harm one's study and appreciation of rhetoric. When considering the rapid growth of rap and the audience the genre commands today,

it is crucial to recall the foundations of *nommo* and how these artists utilize the power of the word to build their rhetoric of resistance.

History of Rap

Rap music saw its beginnings in the Bronx, a borough of New York City in the mid-1970s, and its creation is often credited to a DJ known as Cool Herc (Ford, Jr., 2004, p. 41). At the time, blues and music were commanding boomboxes around the city, all featuring Black voices expressing feelings and thoughts of Black artists (Holman, 2004; hooks, 2003). These genres, characterized by energetic rhythms, inspired connection and choreography across the city (Holman, 2004). Black musical expression took its next step when James Brown introduced soul music, founded on lively instrumentation, intense rhythm, and new dance moves (Holman, 2004). Again, characterized by Black cultural expression, soul music could serve as a foundation for community and expression of joy and pride through freestyle dancing. Black Americans would gather in record stores or parties to dance, connect, and enjoy music (Holman, 2004). However, artists in the Bronx began to wonder if soul music had more heuristic value than initially expected.

Artists like Cool Herc began to scour record stores to explore if soul music could be expanded to a new style of music, focused on rhythm breaks, which on average lasted thirty seconds (George, 2004). These thirty seconds would serve as dynamic musical moments to inspire new dance moves or a freestyle dance routine. Joining Herc were DJs Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, who these days are recognized as the “the founding fathers of hip-hop music” (George, 2004, p. 45). Aided by sonic influences from the Caribbean peoples, Herc combined Caribbean hits with obscure soul records to create new grooves and beats (George, 2004). Bambaataa drew from influences from rock-n-roll in creating his beats, while Flash

developed an intense interest in how music could be manipulated through available audio technology (George, 2004). Often accompanying these DJs were emcees, employed to entertain the crowd and keep them engaged with the DJ's music (Drew, 2019). To do so, emcees would give toasts, recite poetry, or perform the spoken word over the music (Drew, 2019). As time passed, this combination became more and more appealing, leading to the eventual placement of spoken word over the beats created by the aforementioned DJs. Through their work, Cool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash served as stalwarts of rap music that set a standard of curiosity and evolution in the world of rap music (George, 2004). In 1979, Kurtis Blow became the first Black rapper to be signed to a label, noting that the genre could garner commercial success (Kurtis Blow, 2021). As these DJs and rappers popularity grew and other artists began to replicate, rap began to expand from an underground community to a cultural phenomenon.

The appeal for rap music was its ability to bring communities together and provide Black artists a platform to celebrate and, in some cases, brag about their social standing and success. These parties featuring DJs and early rappers would attract large audiences with the desire to celebrate Black excellence. As the genre developed, rap garnered a new appreciation for its ability to allow Black voices to shine and share their experiences. Although blues and soul music offered similar appeals, rap quickly became "Black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel" (Rose, 1994, p. 64). This is partly due to rap's ability to provide a platform for the silenced. As audio technology developed and more began to become familiar with a rap song's ability to gather a crowd, more artists began to utilize the platform to share narratives.

As rap music grew in popularity, so did its audience and its cultural influence. The first commercially successful rap song was Sugarhill Gang's 1979 song, "Rapper's Delight," released

by independent record producer Sylvia Robinson (Rose, 1994, p. 33). The lyrics of the song feature playful braggadocio that Wonder Mike, Big Bank Hank, and Master Gee utilize to impress imaginary women (Sugarhill Gang, 1980). This song was the first rap song to reach the Billboard Top 40 and earn radio play, forever altering the state of rap in American culture (Rose, 1994). Following “Rapper’s Delight” the 1980s would see rap grow into a cultural phenomenon, finding its influence embedded in music, fashion, film, and media industries (Rose, 1994). A large part of this growth was Music Television (MTV), a cable channel that would feature rap artists such as RUN DMC, LL Cool J, and Public Enemy (Rose, 1994). As a result, rap moved from the boroughs of the Bronx to televisions and radios across the country. The 1980s are often seen as “The Golden Age of Hip-Hop,” due to the growth of the genre, but the concept of commercial success led some rap artists to worry that the authenticity embedded into the genre was disappearing (Li, 2018).

Public Appropriation of Rap

Although hip-hop is “100 percent Black,” public exposure led to rap’s rising popularity with white audiences, specifically white male teenagers (Battle, 2014, p. 89; Rose, 1994). The growing cultural fascination with rap struck popular record labels such as CBS, Warner, Capitol-EMI, and more (Rose, 1994). These labels began looking to sign rap artists and capitalize on the quickly developing market, which led to controversy in the hip-hop community. Was hip-hop still going to be centered around authenticity and Black communities, or was the genre abandoning its foundations for commercial success? This question was further complicated by white audiences’ growing fascination with the genre. As Rose (1994) writes, “white America has always had an interest in Black culture” (p. 35). Whether rock-n-roll or rap, white audiences develop an affinity or interest in Black art, which can threaten appropriation of the original art

form (Rose, 1994). Rose writes that while there have been examples of this appropriation in the past, white involvement in rap does not guarantee a disregard for authenticity (1994. p. 37). There are some white rappers whose work reflects the notions of creativity, braggadocio, and community that founded rap music, such as The Beastie Boys, Eminem, and Mac Miller. Nevertheless, the risk of appropriation is crucial to keep in mind, especially as “70-80% of rap sales come from white middle- and upper-class suburbs” (Li, 2018, p. 53). When hip-hop was founded on the narratives of Black America, the forceful interruption by white dominant powers creates uneasiness.

This is where the rhetoric of rap becomes more complex, as the dominant powers begin to influence rap’s success and marketing. Although rap was originally doubted as holding long-term success, record labels and media channels could not ignore its persistent popularity (Rose, 1994). Consequently, rappers like LL Cool J were offered commercial rewards for signing to record labels, while channels like MTV played more rap music videos in hopes of attracting white suburban viewers, both of which saw criticism from other rap artists (Li, 2018; Rose, 1994). Rather than promoting the same realness and community that was founded in the Bronx, artists like Cool J saw accusations of bowing to a capitalist hegemony that attempted to control Black art (Rose, 1994). Suddenly, the fear of dominant powers controlling and transforming rap became a legitimate fear. Hip-hop artists began to be labelled as either conscious of Black injustice or commercialized, with these labels deeming a rapper as either authentic or a sell-out, respectively (Hill, 2009). While these public channels and labels allowed rappers to see more commercial success, this also meant that channels and labels could control an artist’s work, offer approvals and disapprovals, and ultimately change the original product to fit the beliefs and desires of the dominant audience – white, male teenagers.

This concern can be attributed to work on hegemony and domination by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci (1971) believed that subordinate groups were controlled in part to their own consent. Dominant groups find ways to persuade subordinate groups, such as persuasive appeals of success or financial benefits, to continue to maintain control over subordinate groups (Zompetti, 2012). In this sense, a genre founded on Black artists' experience and building communities could be infiltrated by labels looking to capitalize on the genre's popularity for financial gain. This is further problematized when, as Li (2018) describes, "post-industrial capitalism has fallen in love with the idea of difference as the advertising industry becomes obsessed with selling consumers products that allegedly enhance their sense of uniqueness and individuality" (p. 46). A label's support of a popular rap artist could be driven purely by a desire to be seen as more approachable or diverse, rather than a desire to help the artist grow. As a result, "rap's Black cultural address and its focus on marginal identities may appear to be in opposition to its crossover appeal for people from different racial or ethnic groups and social positions" (Rose, 1994, p. 35). This concern continued to play a role in the development in the genre of rap music.

That is not to say that Black-owned independent labels are not present and hold power. The aforementioned Sugar Hill Gang was founded and released their famous "Rapper's Delight" under Sylvia Robinson, a Black singer who eventually opened her own record label and supported various rappers (Charnas, 2019). The genre of rap was catapulted into stardom by a Black woman who created the template to run an independent label. The Orchard, a music entertainment company, has a running list of Black-led independent labels operating today, with the list currently sitting at 63. Frank Ocean, feeling that his contract with record label Def Jam was restricting his creativity and desires for his career, released a side project called *Endless* to

complete his contract and then released *Blonde* under his own independent label, Bloned (Kazi, 2020). Although the appropriation of an artist's work by labels is still a concern, there are examples of Black-owned record labels that are resisting domination.

Another point of concern to consider is that for some Black artists, rap music and commercial success served as an opportunity to escape a dangerous home or background. As Scott Mitchell (2014) references in his thesis on hegemonic resistance in rap music, many rap artists speak about the projects and the difficulty to escape the projects and secure safety and financial success. Tupac Shakur rapped about this often (Mitchell, 2014). Rap was (and still could be) an opportunity for Black artists to provide financial stability for themselves, their older family members, or their communities. This certainly complicates the concept of "selling-out" as some artists need the commercial success to provide shelter, food, and safety.

With the 1980s ending and the 1990s beginning, we also see the phasing out of the "old school of hip-hop" and the fruition of the "new school" (Li, 2018, p. 52). Old school rap, connected to the foundations built in the Bronx, felt a dedication to "maintain the 'Afrocentric feel' through [a] particular beat complex" while the new-school rappers discovered that "non-sophisticated, impersonal, and stereotype-oriented" music was appealing to that dominant white audience (Li, 2018 p. 55). Artists such as Snoop Dogg, Tupac, and Notorious B.I.G. drew on personas of violence, drugs, and general toughness that saw commercial success with audiences (Drew, 2019). Part of this success was because these artists were rapping with white audiences in mind (Rose, 1994). As Li (2018) describes, white teenagers listening to rap are allowed access into a world that they could never experience in suburban homes. Rap music of the 1990s is often described as "gangsta rap," influenced by "music monopoly" that wanted to capitalize on a "white consumer market" to "increase sales" (Li, 2018, 55). As gangsta rap continued to see

commercial success, the rhetoric of rap saw the potential to transform from the old school approach of personal spoken world to a new school approach of capitalizing on stereotypes.

Modern Rhetoric of Hip-Hop Culture

The rhetoric of rap continued to transform with the emergence of “mumble rap” in the 2010s (Drew, 2019, p. 5). Mumble rap is characterized by hard hitting beats that shake sound systems and a delivery that places less emphasis on an articulate delivery of lyrics (Drew, 2019). Artists such as Lil Uzi Vert and Young Thug became staples of mumble rap, rapping about topics such as drug use, sexual acts, and a lifestyle centered around partying (Drew, 2019). Again, creating music with a desire to sell to dominant audiences, mumble rap can be seen as an appeal to younger audience members who purchase rap music and have a desire to experience a lifestyle that they cannot attain. Although the topics and style of mumble rap may seem less influential or complex than Cool Herc’s discography, it does not mean that we should disregard the impact of mumble rap. Cool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, and Grandmaster Flash founded the genre on innovation and curiosity, constantly looking for new ways to create beats or entertain the crowd. The evolution of the rhetoric of hip-hop from an old school spoken word to mumble rap depictions of lavish lifestyles is only more proof the “ever-changing” nature of the genre and calls for further investigation into the rhetoric of rap in the new decade (Drew, 2019 p. 27). One of the best ways we can understand this evolution is through an examination of lyrical content.

Rhetoric of Hip-Hop Lyrics

As the culture of hip-hop continued to evolve, so did the influence of spoken word on rap music (Ford Jr., 2004). As described before, DJs like Cool Herc would create beats to entertain audiences, but the music often was not enough on its own (Ford Jr.). Emcees would often accompany DJs to encourage the audience to participate or to provide spoken word or poetry

over the beats (Ford Jr., 2004). This trend can be seen as the foundation of what is known today as one of the most impactful traits of modern rap music. As Rose (1994) writes, “rap’s cultural politics lies in its lyrical expression” (p. 270). For every era of rap – the golden age, gangsta rap, or mumble rap – the lyrics used by artists serve as rhetorical reconstructions of the climate. Artists can make use of their platform through music to write lyrics that promote certain lifestyles or images, challenge beliefs, or simply to entertain. Much like the emcees accompanying DJs, rap artists can place their authentic experiences over beats to connect with a Black audience. While focusing on the rhetoric of these lyrics, it is crucial to recognize the contextual and public dimensions that dictate what artists can say, reactions they will garner, and the power granted through these lyrics (Rose, 1994, p. 270). To better understand these complexities, we can draw on the concept of Hip Hop Nation Language, created by H. Samy Alim (2006).

Hip-Hop Nation Language

As a genre, rap music has its own approaches and utilizations of language. Alim (2006) highlights this concept by creating ten tenets of what he deems Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL) (p. 71). For the present research, the most impactful tenets are the following: HHNL is a language with a unique communicative style and discursive modes; HHNL is a combination of speech, music, and literature; HHNL is central to a rapper’s identity; and that the fundamental aspect of HHNL is how central it is to the world of rappers and fans (Alim, 2006, p. 71-72). This unique approach to language through rap continues to prove how rap contains its own rhetoric with its own capability to influence. These concepts also reveal why it is crucial to understand the importance of lyrics in rap music. For rappers, language is a major part of their identity. It allows them to relate, create, and contest. Lyrics are “critical to understanding the contemporary

Black cultural politics” (Rose, 1994, p. 312). If one is to study rap, they must be aware of how language is utilized in the genre for unique purposes.

The distinctive nature of HHNL not only reveals the relationship between a rapper’s lyric and their identity, but also the power of language to enact cultural change. As Alim (2006) writes, Black language in itself is a tool used to gain power. Language becomes a tool to build community -- to create a delicacy out of oppression and segregation (Alim, 2006). Rap music can allow these artists and their fans to share this understanding and experience through lyrics that utilize this specific understanding of language. This allows the rhetoric of rap lyrics to serve as “a powerful discourse in and of itself” (Alim, 2006, p. 10). Scholars like Gramsci (1971) believe that words hold tremendous power in society, in the sense that words sell beliefs and dominant ideologies to perpetuate unquestioned cultural assumptions. In this sense, rappers are prioritizing their words to garner power and representation. This, Alim (2006) argues, is why critiques and corrections of Black grammar are so harmful. To disregard a Black American’s attempts to maintain pride and power in their bodies in a desire to create a more standardized white language that perpetuates a dominant group’s control is to disrespect hip-hop culture. However, this is where the issue of authenticity of rap can arise. If an artist is writing for a non-Black audience, their work can be deemed less “real” and receive critiques from members of the hip-hop culture. Nevertheless, the lyrics of a song and the language of the artist allow for rappers to make observations about the world around them and project their voice in resistance to those who attempted to silence them.

Rhetorical Power of HHNL

With these characteristics of HHNL in mind, it is easier to see the rhetorical nature and influence of rap lyrics. To begin, rap lyrics are primarily founded on narratives. Avery et al.

(2017) write that “rap began as a personal narrative-based art form that focused on telling the individual stories of urban lives that were largely ignored by mainstream media” (p. 167). Rap’s earliest days allowed marginalized voices to celebrate their language, attitude, style, and lifestyles (Avery et al., 2017). Rappers like Slick Rick solidified the place of narrative in lyrics in the 1980s, with artists like OutKast stepping into the spotlight and continuing the tradition in the 1990s (Alim, 2006). In modern day rap, artists like Kendrick Lamar or J. Cole can be seen as premier storytellers in rap music. In a genre that can be characterized by a drive to be authentic, these lyrics allowed Black artists to feel pride in their roots and encourage audiences to share that same pride (Li, 2018). This was especially seen in rappers who committed to “nationalist hip-hop” and embedded their lyrics with mentions of deceased Black leaders such as Malcolm X and a hardened Black pride (Li, 2018). This language could project anger or confusion, with the desire to instill these same feelings in listeners and supporters of hip-hop culture (Li, 2018). These messages can persuade listeners to adopt similar mindsets or approaches to their history and their culture.

Indeed, studies have proven just how influential rap lyrics can be on listeners. In 2013, Cundiff found that the most likely age group to consume rap music is between the age of sixteen to thirty years old. This can be a pivotal age range, when identities are being formed and some youth may turn toward popular pieces of media to better understand how to live their lives. The lasting impact that music can have on these listeners can be explored through cultivation theory. Founded by George Gerbner, modern day cultivation theory can be understood as how prolonged exposure to patterns/messages supplied by media can have a lasting impact on a listener’s beliefs (Cundiff, 2013). Cultivation theory was related directly to rap music by Dr. Edgar Tyson (2006) with his invention of the Rap Music Attitude and Perception (RAP) Scale. Tyson’s approach

allowed scholars to understand that listening to rap music can stir up feelings and beliefs of consumers that are consistent with the messages portrayed in the song. As a result, the study of rap lyrics has risen in popularity as scholars hope to understand the influence that musical language can have on large groups of listeners.

With this power of lyrics in mind, it is again important to address how the complex nature of commercialized rap music can impact an artists' writing. As Li (2018) points out, rap music put out for the pure purpose of commercial success often depends on lyrics that portray stereotypes or exaggerated images to entertain white audiences. While many hope that rap artists are still writing from the foundation of authenticity, it is entirely possible that less thought is put into the meanings and impacts of the lyrics and the focus has been placed on finding the best strategy to bring in more listeners.

To see this in action, we can again look at the rhetoric of lyrics from rap in the 1990s. While many consider rap music of the 1980s to be the golden age of the expansion and growth of rap music, Li (2018) points out that the 1990s era of rap music served as the most commercially successful. Part of this success was the way in which record labels portrayed 1990s rap artists as "exotic products" whose lives were drastically different than the white middle-class consumers who bought the products (Li, 2018, p. 8). These songs included lyrics that touched on drug use, "hyper-gangsta-ization," and a lavish sex life (Avery et al., 2017, p. 167). While these lyrics could have been providing accurate narratives of these artists' lives, Li (2018) points out that they were also themes/images that attracted the dominant white audience. These exaggerated stereotypes entertained white listeners, while frustrating old-school rappers and fans who appreciated the poetic use of HHNL (Alim, 2006; Li, 2018). And while an artist's success should be applauded, these lyrics can contribute to "build [hip-hop's] reputation as hyper-masculine,

sexist, and homophobic,” and “enabled audiences to misinterpret rap lyrics and take them out of their original contexts” (Li, 2018, p. 8). If the sixteen- to thirty-year-old consumers of rap music constantly hear these patterns of stereotyped depictions and narratives, it could be easy for them to latch onto these messages as accurate depictions of the everyday Black experience.

In this sense, 1990s rap lyrics play an interesting role in revealing the complexities of the rhetoric of rap lyrics. The use of HHNL in musical narratives can inspire, yet also create and disseminate harmful exaggerations of Black American lifestyles. These words have the power to generate progress and open-mindedness, while simultaneously dismantling that growth. Therefore, rap lyrics should be observed, especially when they relate to highly contested societal concepts such as masculinity.

Rhetoric of Visuals in Hip-Hop

Apart from the lyrical content of rap music, how artists present themselves through images or videos has a large impact on how they are perceived. Black men who have gained notoriety – Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Michael Jackson – present larger-than-life personas that separate them from their peers (Perry, 2004). Whether it be through jewelry, clothing, or even their physical body, these men are presenting themselves as “the Black American dream” (Perry, 204, p. 135). By this, Perry (2004) refers to the aspiration that a Black individual can rise above aspects of discrimination to find financial success, while also presenting a stable and authentic Black identity. Matthew Oware (2011) writes that this fixation on public image and presentation can be traced back to the traumas of slavery, in which Black men were presented as emasculated, controlled beings with no freedom. As Sha’Dawn Battle (2014) explains, “the Black body has always been ambiguously and paradoxically...dehumanized...and fetishized” (p. 85). Black men were forced to undergo years of bondage, silencing, and misrepresentation in

popular culture, and yet the dominant powers were and are obsessed with the Black male body and the power it holds. As a result, how one presents themselves and reclaims identity through images can be deemed one of the most important factors. In rap music, music videos allow for this.

Music videos have played a large role in the growing popularity of hip-hop culture. In a genre centered on narrative and sharing experiences, visuals can provide a new avenue to present these concepts. As Rose (1994) explains, music videos allow for new interpretations, stylistic presentations of messages, and can contribute to an artist's status as an icon. When people think of Michael Jackson, they may remember his dance moves in the "Thriller" music video rather than the controversy that surrounded him later in life. That is the power of visuals in music. Furthermore, music videos allow for commercial success. Music videos are "favorably marketized" by the media and allow for audiences to feel that they are even more connected to the artist and the narratives they are presenting (Li, 2018, p. 8). Viewers may emulate the actions or presentations of their favorite rap artist or feel that they are more connected to the everyday Black experience because they view videos so often. Music videos can catapult a rap artist from recognition to global superstardom, as they build themselves to be recognized as iconic figures and allow audiences to interpret and relate to their messages.

Throughout the history of rap music, artists have presented recurring themes in their music videos. One of these is the "depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew, or support system" (Rose, 1994, p. 46). An artist, celebrating their history and identity, will present the locations in which they grew up. This allows the artist and their fans to feel that their histories can be celebrated and recognized. At the same time, these representations "depict ghetto fantasies of 'thug life' success in which a Black or brown protagonist is shown surrounded by his

‘crew’ on the mean streets...trying to desperately escape” (Dyson & Daulatzai, 2009, p. 54). As Stuart Hall (1997) writes, “representation connects language and meaning to culture” (p. 15). Images are presented to the public, and traditionally accepted language and meaning influence how audiences perceive and understand these images (Hall, 1997). Consequently, the understandings of mediated representations can be applied to everyday cultural interactions. Therefore, this theme of Black thug life can be a double-edged sword. As Rose (1994) explains, popularizing the ghetto means that Black artists and fans can believe that their hometowns and neighborhoods are worthy of attention and are safe havens. However, inserting the ghetto as a “central Black popular narrative” can create miscommunications that communities of color are all dangerous (Rose, 1994, p. 48). Primarily, as Dyson & Daulatzai (2009) describe, these visual messages are supposed to represent “the come-up” or a chance for the rapper to find success in a world that is against them.

Another common theme in rap music videos is sexuality and the Black body. These concepts are often regarded as most present and most controversial in the genre, as critics claim these music videos are “overt displays of sexism and homophobia” (Li, 2018, p. 8). Scholars like Rose (1994) clearly state that this does not mean rap should be characterized as sexist, yet these are crucial visual aspects of the genre that should be recognized. Rap music videos often feature women dancing in scantily clad outfits and men degrading and dominating these women (Avery et al. 2017). While surrounded by these women, rappers may flaunt their jewelry, money, or financial success (Avery et al., 2017). In some sense, this is a necessity for comfort and pride as a Black man. As Imani Perry (2004) explains “the Black male body that finds itself under constant public scrutiny, from police searches to the professional basketball court, is hidden by the broad and vibrant shapes created by loose clothing” (p. 123). Again, these are ways in which

the Black artist can present an image of success or pride in the face of oppression. As McCune Jr (2008) explains, Black men feel pressure to construct an ideal image of Black masculinity, and sexual prowess can appear as a sign that the man is desirable and strong. After years of being emasculated, Black artists can reclaim their masculinity. And yet, this presentation of Black masculinity is manipulated and destroyed by the white gaze. As we will explore, Black masculinity is a complex subject that is omnipresent in the genre and presentation of rap music.

Rhetoric of Black Masculinity in Hip-Hop

Rap lyrics and visuals have the power to alter mindsets and approaches to life, especially in the case of masculinity. To better understand the state of masculinity in rap, we must examine the Black masculine experience. To best engage with and discover the influence of rap music on masculinity and vice-versa, I draw on scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Michael Eric Dyson, and Jeffrey McCune Jr. to explore how Black masculinity operates in society. As explored, rap music can serve as an artist's representation and experience of reality, allowing listeners a glimpse into these men's lives. With an understanding of Black masculinity and how it influences the everyday experience of rap artists, we can better approach the concept of both potentially toxic and potentially healthy masculinity in music.

Black Masculinity

To best understand why an individual may act in the way they do, it is crucial to explore how that individual is treated on an everyday basis. In her book, *We Real Cool* (2004), bell hooks begins to unpack the injustice and pressures that Black men face in life. She writes: "practically every Black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed" (2004, p. ix-x). Black men have been painted by the white dominant powers as

violent, unruly, and uncivilized beings, with no capability for thinking or feeling (hooks, 2004). From the beginning of their lives, Black men can be seen as a danger that needs to be tamed or controlled. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) touches on a similar concept when she writes that most cases of racial profiling are founded on “the *potential* threat caused by African American men’s bodies” (p. 153). In the sense, Black men can undergo an extreme sense of paranoia from the moment they step outside of their homes. As hooks (2004) writes: “Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out...all the Black men that I love see themselves as isolated” (p. ix; p. xiii). Faced with these pressures and this mental isolation, it is possible that Black men could experience extreme stress or decreases in their mental health.

This constant confusion and frustration can lead some Black men to explore strategies to display power. When constantly emasculated and stripped of power, a Black man could feel the desire to prove they are more than that. As a result, these men can begin to believe that “being tough and having street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity” and search for ways to prove this resilience (Collins, 2004, p. 151). Rather than continuing to allow dominant white parties to portray Black men as stupid and helpless, some Black men may feel that displaying power and control are ways in which these myths can be dispelled. In some cases, this is proven through sexual prowess (Collins, 2004). When faced with white obsession with Black bodies and the constant state of emasculation, Black men may believe that sexual domination over a woman can prove that they belong in the patriarchal conversation. This is not a necessarily groundbreaking claim, as “oppressed persons are self-deluded in their belief that they can subvert their impositions and disempowerment through the subjugation and oppression of others” (Battle, 2014, p. 83). Given the constant domination of Black men by white culture, some

Black men may feel that the only way to contest oppression is to display their own control of others.

This could be seen as a strategy to prove that instead of being dominated and seen as powerless, Black men can power over others. As a result, to contest their victimization, Black men can attempt to flip structures and displays of domination (Battle, 2014). At times, this could mean that Black women face unjust treatment. Forced to witness the success of white men, Black men can learn from these dominant groups that it is “acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power” (hooks, 2004, p. 2). While not defending assaults or harassment against women, we can see that a white-dominated patriarchal culture can influence Black men to believe that aggression can create power in the face of oppression. Rap music allowed for this aggression to be displayed and consumed in a public manner.

Masculinity can also be expressed through violence. As Michael Eric Dyson (2007) explains, “too many young Black and brown men view their sense of strength, and industry, and machismo, and manhood through the lens – and sometimes literally through the scope – of a gun” (p. 91-92). White American heroes are often lauded for their violence – revolutionary soldiers who claimed independence against England, cowboys who stopped outlaws, and soldiers ending wars in foreign countries – and this trend can have Black men believing that to be violent means to be American (Dyson, 2007). Some Black men can feel that they must subscribe to hypermasculinity to prove their worth. After being emasculated by white men for decades, Black men feel that they finally can reclaim their identities and power through domination. These concepts can be delivered through rap.

Reclamation Through Rap

Rap music could allow Black men to create and enjoy art that made them feel more powerful. As hooks (2004) writes, rap music utilized an “aggressive presentation of invulnerability” (p. 93). As listeners witness role models talking about violence and resistance to the norm, those listeners could take on these same qualities. Recall that the age group of sixteen- to thirty-year-old listeners consumes the most rap music. (Cundiff, 2013). Additionally, an estimated “81% to 98% of Black youth listen primarily to music oriented toward Black audiences, including rap” (Avery et al., 2017, p. 160). These listeners in this age group may be seeking identity or depend on public figures to understand themselves. Using rap music to reclaim Black masculinity through aggression may appear to allow Black artists and their fans to regain power and social standing in a society that has oppressed them.

At the same time, there are risks associated with this approach to reclaiming one’s masculinity through rap music. hooks (2004) explains: “patriarchal notions of hip-hop ushered in a world where Black males could declare that they were ‘keeping it real’ when what they were really doing...had for the most part no transformative power, no ability to intervene on politics of domination, and turn the real lives of Black men around” (p. 140-141). While these messages may promote aggressive depictions of Black invulnerability, it could be argued that they only perpetuate the unhealthy attempts by Black men to replicate white patriarchy or reinforce negative stereotypes of aggression. This approach can be deemed “hegemonic masculinity -- men most closely related to competitive, risk-taking, violent, antifemininity, sex-focused, focused on material goods” (Avery et al., 2017, p. 178). This subscription to hegemonic masculinity can lessen the potential growth promoted through rap lyrics. Further, the “Black male hip-hop artists who receive the most acclaim are busy pimping violence; peddling the racist/sexist stereotypes

of the Black male as primitive predator” (hooks, 2004, p. 56). This trend can perpetuate the image of Black men as brutes that they are working hard to eliminate.

These representations can “reinforce ideas about Black male immaturity, irresponsibility, and until domesticated, unsuitably for full citizenship rights” and allow white dominant powers to remain unchecked (Collins, 2004, p. 179). As Mitchell (2014) explains, protest in rap can only happen when Black artists harness collective experiences to create an organized movement. If some artists present what could be seen as inauthentic or stereotyped masculinity to garner success, the resistance against white hegemony could fall short (Mitchell, 2014). The fans who subscribe to this approach may be suffering as well. In a study by Watkins (2019), he found that “some men who conform to [norms of aggression and domination] may also experience poor mental health and well-being compared to men who do not” due to the guilt of acting in this way (p. 918). As messages of rap music continue to cultivate in listeners, it is possible that role models are providing messages that hurt their listeners. Black rappers should certainly engage with notions of masculinity and utilize their music to reclaim their voices. Yet the approach of aggression can certainly be questioned for its potential to cause more harm than good.

Black Queerness

Black queerness is a complex concept in the already complex world of Black masculinity. For our purposes, I draw from Marlon Bailey’s (2019) definition of queerness: a way to “destabilize categories” such as social beliefs of domination, sexuality, and success (p. 17). Even with this powerful effect of queerness, Black queer communities face an abundance of social and cultural struggles. As Bailey (2019) references, Black queerness can be seen as cursed on various levels, as Black queer men deal with racism, homophobia, and societal distancing due to stigmas of issues like HIV. Balancing oppression due to both race and sexuality can be draining on these

men, as they navigate a world that seems to disregard their struggles (Bailey, 2019). However, it is not hopeless. Kyra Gaunt (2009) writes that notions of “Black masculinity [have] changed over time” and that “the performance of gender has been constantly shifting” (p. 418).

Understandings of gender identity have transformed in our society, and some individuals can decide that they wish to publicly display their own understanding of a shifting gender identity. This can lead to cross-dressing or identifying as transgender in one’s community.

Cross-dressing or identifying as a transgender allows for an individual to alter their performed gender identity. Central to this understanding is that the social understanding of gender is split into a sharp dichotomy, where individuals can only identify as a man or a woman (Dunbar, 1999). Cross-dressing or identifying as transgender allows for a person to disrupt the gender binary that has been established and create their own identity in which they feel comfortable. Although there are different levels to these decisions (a man wearing a dress compared to a man who undergoes procedures to alter their body), they revolve around blurring gender and the ability to challenge the norm (Dunbar, 1999). There are numerous examples of famous Black men who cross-dressed such as comedian Flip Wilson, singer Little Richard, and NBA superstar Dennis Rodman (Dunbar, 1999). All of these men were in positions of masculine power – Wilson commanded a crowd, Richard had fans hanging on his every word, and Rodman was known for playing an aggressive style of basketball – yet donned clothing that expressed feminine identities.

However, their decisions were not always accepted by the masses. Rodman, especially, faced disrespect from the media and was painted as difficult to handle and deemed ridiculous for his actions (Dunbar, 1999). This is not a huge surprise, as Moore (2020) writes that “within the African American community, cross-dressing, more specifically, Black men portraying Black

women, has often been met with controversy” (p. 85). Although Rodman was a member of the Chicago Bulls teams that won three championships in a row, his reputation was negatively affected by his cross-dressing. When we compare Rodman’s experience with an artist such as Harry Styles, an intriguing contrast arise. In 2021, Styles, a white pop music superstar, donned a dress for his cover shoot on *Vogue* magazine (Deng, 2021). The response was overwhelmingly positive, with fans and critics alike commenting on Styles’ ability to redefine masculinity and place cross-dressing in a national spotlight (Deng, 2021). And yet Rodman was ridiculed. It is fair to say that part of this contrast is because of the time; certainly, the United States is more progressive than in the late 1990s, but other writers such as Deng (2021) comment that it may be because Styles is more palatable to the public. As Brown and Campbell (1986) found, white men are often the center of attention and power in the music industry. With less possibility of being labelled as aggressive, disruptive, or dangerous, men like Styles have more freedom to experiment with their performance and often receive positive feedback. Black men like Rodman are more at risk of being criticized.

Moore (2020) notes that this harsh reaction to cross-dressing can stem from the “emasculatation being associated with Black male identity due to Black men being denied in white male patriarchal privilege” (p. 86). If a Black man willingly subverts his masculinity, other Black men may find that as more harmful to their community in general. As a result, cross-dressing primarily became exaggerated in comedy movies to raise a reaction out of the audience. Moore (2020) comments on Tyler Perry’s Madea character, as well as cross-dressing by Jamie Foxx and Jay Pharoah, and how their cross-dressing have been utilized to create vulgar, humorous scenarios in which a man presenting himself as a woman is deemed ridiculous. As a result, Black male viewers can begin to perceive cross-dressing and queerness as negative and worthy of

criticism. This complex experience can lead Black queer men to find unique ways to experience their desires while maintaining a strong image.

To accomplish this, many Black queer men operate in secrecy. Jeffrey McCune Jr. (2015) describes the concept of “the DL,” or down-low, for Black queer men (p. 299). Operating on the DL can be understood as Black men presenting themselves as heterosexual and abiding by expectations placed on Black men, while covertly meeting and having relationships with men (McCune Jr., 2015). These Black men may publicly be in heterosexual relationships, but they spend nights in dance clubs or specific locations in order to meet other men and engage in sexual acts. McCune Jr. (2015) writes that “the DL extends a historical Black cultural practice of ‘quiet as kept’ ... adages which have encouraged many Black people to safeguard information, not for deceit but survival” (p. 299). They allow their desires to remain invisible, similar to rap artists who write lyrics pertaining to invisibility and strategies to survive (Perry, 2004). For these men, sometimes secrecy is the only way to avoid the many curses placed on queer Black men.

Yet, Black queerness has seen an increase in prideful representation through performance. As Marlon Bailey (2013) explains, Black queer communities have labored intensely to earn recognition and let society know that they are proud to claim their identities. This performance could be through public speaking, images, or through something like rap music which is easily accessible to millions. Performances of queerness can also be seen in a reclaiming of harmful and negative language that means to oppress Black queer men. McCune Jr. (2015) writes of Black queer men who will proudly embrace terms like “fa*****” or participate in homophobic acts in a strategy to embrace forms of heterosexual Black masculinity and “affirm one’s normality” (p. 307). These performances “mak[e] it possible to revise, negotiate, and reconstitute gender and sexual categories and norms” by refusing to let

traditionally masculine norms of homophobia to oppress Black queer men (Bailey, 2013, p. 18). Rather than allow these words and actions to be hurtful, Black queer men reclaim them as prideful performances. Black queerness is a complicated concept of Black masculinity, yet one that is growing and seeing more representation. Scholars like Gaunt (2019) believe that transformations of gender identity and masculinity can occur in the world of rap music. There are modern artists in the genre who are doing just that.

Rhetoric of Progressive Masculinity in Hip-Hop

In recent years, hip-hop culture has begun to see an evolution in how masculinity is framed and performed. As Oware (2011) writes, “Black masculinity should be understood as increasingly complex with layered nuances” (p. 32). Not every Black man will ascribe to aggressive masculinity, nor should they be expected to. For some Black artists, they do not even feel a need to abide by a certain gender role. As Gaunt (2009) writes, “being masculine stereotypically gets its life blood from being completely different from the feminine” (p. 383). But what if artists did not find a need to separate the two? What if an artist comes out of the DL and allows his sexual desires and gratifications to be delivered in the light (McCune Jr., 2015)? This is where I call on Calton’s (2014) notion of “progressive masculinity,” or masculinity that centers around “egalitarian behaviors, values, and beliefs” (p. 41). Several rap artists who have risen to stardom in recent years imply that this evolution and understanding of progressive masculinity may be here to stay.

Queering Hip-Hop

As discussed, the experience of Black gay men in the United States has been a complex journey. Although Black gay men received screen time in the 20th century, “representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that

border on ridicule” (Collins, 2004, p. 171). Additionally, these gay men were mostly used as a foil to make other characters seem more heterosexual or masculine (Collins, 2004). Gay men in rap arguably received even less respect. Li (2018) explains that there are “two rudimentary qualities of hip-hop music: (1) that it is the most masculine of all music genres; (2) that the rapper ought to be distinguished from the singer” (p. 3). Consistent with previous literature on Black masculinity in rap, Black rappers were expected to be unfeeling and harsh. Hip-hop was seen “as the last musical resort for real men, for it possessed all the non-effeminate qualities compared to Western music” (Li, 2018 p. 4). With its hard beats and abrasive lyrics, rap could serve as a space in which Black men could reclaim their masculinity and abandon any feminine qualities that silenced them (Li, 2018). It is this mindset that has complicated the experience of gay Black rappers.

This belief seemed to refuse a space for gay Black rappers in the genre. Scholar Jeff McCune Jr. (2008) writes that “I believed that Black gay men silenced themselves, or made little noise, and never experienced any form of sexual freedom” (p. 300). The lack of representation of out Black men, especially in the world of music, could be discouraging for those who were coming to terms with their sexuality and sought acceptance. As Bailey (2013) writes, one’s connection (or lack of) to power is the foundation of oppression in society. Black queer men were fighting against homophobia, racism, and social stigmas all at once, leaving a disconnect to the powers that may have earned them representation. Yet, through performance, Black queer rappers can begin to place themselves in positions of power in which they can share their authentic selves.

Out rappers who challenged homophobia in rap music laid the foundation for an evolution in the genre. Deep Dickollective (D/DC), a queer rap group formed by Tim’m T West

and Jube Kalamka in 1998, used their music to challenge notions of homophobia and the disregard of gay Black men (Li, 2018). What made the music of D/DC different is that they continued to rap over the hard beats and use an aggressive delivery to spread their message (Li, 2018). As gay Black men, they did not alter their delivery or performance to match what other men may have expected of gay men. Further, these artists do not shy away from the traits or slurs of gay men that may oppress them (Li, 2018). As D/DC rap in the chorus of “Butchqueen”: “So masculine / Don’t believe, then ask your friends / You see we can’t hide / We keep great, big queens inside” (Deep Dickollective, 2007). These rappers proudly reveal their identities without stooping to an exaggerated femininity that invokes laughter. The members of D/DC are able to “boldly masculinis[e]” their queer persona while also “recording feminine” terms (Li, 2018, p. 144). It is this blending of masculinity and femininity founded by D/DC that is the basis of my application of progressive masculinity in rap music (Calton et al., 2014).

A more modern example of this application of progressive masculinity is seen in rapper Big Freedia. Big Freedia is a gender-fluid rapper, whose mission is to help the world “release” and accept what feels comfortable, as opposed to abiding by expected standards (Taylor, 2018). In response to questions about Big Freedia’s gender identity, Freedia responds: “People get confused by if I am he or she. I am more than just Big Freedia...than just Freddie Ross. I am me” (2018). Since Taylor (2018) refers to Freedia as “she” in the essay, I will do the same. Yet Freedia’s response to questions of gender identity echoes the same schema that D/DC delivered in their music. They could not hide, and Freedia is not hiding either. While being out, Freedia draws on the traditional subgenre of rap known as bounce to accompany explicit lyrics describing her sexual appearances with men (Taylor, 2018). Here, Freedia is blending masculinity and femininity. While speaking on subjects that usually remain on the DL, Freedia

draws on the hard-hitting beats of masculine rap. This performance, along with her outfits (anywhere from a full-fledged pirate costume to fishnets) allow Freedia to blur the lines between expected gender identities in rap music.

The same has been seen for rappers who are not queer, such as Kanye West donning a pink polo and skinny jeans, or Drake donning himself “Certified Lover Boy” in his latest album (Battle, 2014; Graham, 2021). Rappers like Tyler the Creator who began his career by rapping about committing acts of violence and blatantly including homophobic messages in his music now raps about his bisexuality and his struggles in a queer, DL relationship. All these images and messages are appearing over the same masculine beats and being delivered in a masculine manner. Yet these visuals and lyrics provide a look into what could traditionally be noted as the feminine side of these artists. Rappers are recoding and reclaiming what could be seen by older rappers as feminine and could be influencing their other fans/peers to consider the same. This should not be entirely surprising, as McCune Jr. (2008) writes that:

Historically, hip-hop culture and music have gone against the grain of traditional American music and style often critiquing dominant structures and modifying other musical forms. Likewise, queerness has also disrupted normative tales of sexuality, restructuring the perceived composition of our society and generally challenging normative socio-sexual rules and regulations. Together, they seem to make a “fabulous” pair. These two world-making apparatuses disrupt norms, interrogate new ground, and encourage exploration outside the domains of normativity. Ultimately, the relationship between hip-hop and Black queer expression is, in a sense, a meeting of two queers. (p. 302)

Although dominated by harsh, sometimes homophobic presentations of masculinity, rap music is inherently queerer than some may expect. Rap's tendency to push curiosity and disrupt norms correlates with a queerness that no other genre of music can match. The two concepts collaborate to encourage dynamic performances of questioning and growth.

Considering Cool Herc's founding commitment to curiosity and evolution, it is not necessarily surprising that rap music could be undergoing an evolution. Rap has always served as a rhetorical approach to comment on the state of the world and the Black experience, and the genre may be due for the next phase in evolution with its approach to prevalent social concepts such as masculinity. Previous work by Conrad et al. (2009), Kresovich et al. (2021), and Weitzer & Kubrin (2009) included performances of content analyses to note lyrics that present harmful gender portrayals, address mental health, or promote misogyny, but there is a lack of academic work that has addressed the application of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity. Moreover, while these studies have addressed the frequency of messages through content analysis and hinted that rap music has the capability to instill both negative and positive change, a rhetorical examination of artists' performances will allow for a more thorough investigation into how these artists influence their listeners and how the popularity of these messages reveals cultural advancements. By adopting a rhetorical approach to an artists' presentation, lyrics, and visual performances, scholars can undergo a more in-depth examination of artifacts such as lyrics, and the influence that these artifacts have on audiences. Rather than just pointing out the prevalence of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity in rap music, a rhetorical criticism allows us to understand what impact these progressive lyrics can have on listeners. I hope to accomplish this task and move the conversation about the relationship between masculinity and rap music forward.

Through a study of perspectives and work done by scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Xinling Li, Imani Perry, Jeff McCune Jr., Marlon Bailey, and more, I believe that the approach to Black masculinity through rap music has shifted. With an examination of the lyrics and music videos of modern artists such as Lil Nas X, Frank Ocean, and Kevin Abstract, I argue that modern rap artists are challenging the traditional approaches of masculinity in hip-hop culture and promoting a new, more fluid understanding of gendered identity in the genre. Despite the continued presence of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary rap music, there has been a recent development of my application of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity in rap that encourages a blending of masculinity and femininity, allowing artists to accept their sexuality and identities in a public setting.

Rap music allows for complex narratives of Black masculinity and Black queerness to be shared. At its most basic level, the rhetoric of hip-hop music is utilized to share the everyday experience of Black Americans and the oppression that is tied with it. This storytelling allows for strong communities to form that promote community and pride. Rap music allows for power to be placed back in the hands of Black artists. Yet, that power carries potential harm toward other subordinate groups who can be victims in these attempts to reclaim power. In a world that both emasculates and fetishizes Black men, Black men can sometimes feel the only action they can take to regain power is developing a hardened exterior of cold domination and violence. White dominant parties have forced these men into this belief, which can result in the oppression of Black women or Black queer men. However, scholars note that there are more examples of proud Black queer men in cultural performances. This trend suggests that rap music may be welcoming a more progressive sense and performance of masculinity. This calls for an

examination of artists who are sharing this application of progressive masculinity, and how their performances can influence audiences (Calton et al., 2014).

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Rap music and Black masculinity have complex histories connected to decades of oppression and struggles. To best approach these concepts, it is important to adopt a methodology that will allow for a thorough examination of not only artists' performances, but how those performances are more broadly connected to cultural practices. Furthermore, this methodology should highlight how artists who operate through the lens of gender blurring and progressive masculinity are wholistically promoting this new blending of the masculine and feminine (Calton et al., 2014). To approach these issues, I adopt a lens of rhetorical criticism driven by a combination of feminist theory and queer theory. The following chapter explores these theories and their connections, as well as influences from Stuart Hall's work on cultural performances and articulation. The chapter concludes with a specific explanation of my method, and the two artists I will be examining: Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X.

Method

To best analyze and understand this development of progressive masculinity in rap music, I draw on a feminist lens of rhetorical criticism, inspired by feminist and queer theory. Rhetorical criticism was chosen as the tool of analysis because this process "enables us to become more sophisticated and discriminating in explaining, investigating, and understanding symbols and our responses to them" (Foss, 2018, p. 6). Inspired by the founding work of Aristotle, rhetorical criticism seeks to uncover hidden persuasive messages in texts, ideally noting the prevalence or impact of said messages (West & Turner, 2018). A text can be anything – from a political speech to pieces of clothing, to popular music. These artifacts can be embedded with schemas and beliefs (positive or negative) to which audiences are susceptible. Rhetorical criticism will help in identifying and uncovering these aspects relating to my

application of gender blurring in progressive masculinity in the genre of rap music (Calton et al., 2014).

While previous scholars have examined the prevalence of notions of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity in rap music, these studies have not executed an in-depth examination of those symbols and what they mean. Instead, these studies are driven by content analyses and proving that notions of progressive masculinity are present. While these studies have laid an excellent groundwork, I hope to utilize a rhetorical criticism of rap artists and their lyrics to better understand the development of progressive masculinity in the genre. As Foss (2018) writes, "critics engage in rhetorical criticism to make a contribution to rhetorical theory" (p. 7). It is my hope that through a rhetorical criticism of rap lyrics, I will be able to advance understandings of the developing presence of gender blurring and progressive masculinity in rap music, as well as what these messages could mean (Calton et al., 2014).

Rhetorical criticisms are centered around an act or artifact (text), with a preference toward the latter (Foss, 2018). While acts can be beneficial to study, they are often recognized as performances that are presented to a present audience (Foss, 2018). This means that acts can be less permanent and potentially forgotten if not recorded. Rather, rhetorical critics often prefer studying artifacts, or "tangible evidence" of an act (Foss, 2018, p. 6). Potential artifacts can be songs, pieces of architecture, clothing, speeches – any instance where persuasive communication is occurring and can be recorded (Foss, 2018). Ideally, rhetorical critics can locate an artifact, study its symbolic meanings and impact, and allow this artifact to advance knowledge about rhetorical theory or the world as a whole. Rhetorical scholars can also consider the audience, how the rhetoric is delivered, the timing and context of the rhetoric (sometimes referred to as *kairos*) and systems of power that influence the rhetoric (West & Turner, 2018). After selecting

the artifact, rhetorical critics “code” said artifact, performing an analysis to locate similar themes or concepts that appear consistently in the artifact (Foss, 2018, p. 21). After locating codes, the rhetorical critic can begin to explain the messages, themes, and impact of their artifact, identifying “new concepts or new relationships among concepts” (Foss, 2018, p. 21). In this sense, the rhetorical critic is advancing rhetorical theory and educating their audiences on a symbolic level and its influence on society.

Feminist Theory and Criticism

Feminism is often centered around understanding the experiences of women, and the hegemonic ideologies that can oppress women (Foss & Griffin, 1992). Feminists believe that various aspects of society “contain a patriarchal bias,” in the sense that white men are often deemed the standard (Foss & Griffin, 1992 p. 331). As a result, a woman’s experience in the workforce, school, and everyday life may be discredited or ignored, resulting in men creating reality (Freedman, 2007). To combat this, feminists fight for values that “disrupt the ideology of domination,” such as “equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (Foss, 2018, p. 142). These values combine to encourage a world where every individual life should be respected, heard, and allowed to make their own decisions (Foss, 2018). Feminist scholars may locate these values, or the lack of these values, in the artifacts they analyze.

While on the surface feminism would seem to focus on the oppression of women, feminist scholars can work to ensure respect and equality for all. As Foss (2018) writes, feminism constitutes a movement that challenges “an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part” and “directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression” (p. 142). While women certainly remain at the forefront of these efforts, many feminists strive to eliminate all oppression that stems from the

patriarchy. Their work strives to “dispel several myths about race and sexuality,” and work to eliminate any form of domination (Freedman, 2007, p. 80). Rather than focusing on a specific issue, feminism can be utilized to transform a world of oppression into one of acceptance and opportunity.

Feminism can accomplish this regarding masculinity by locating hegemonic masculine traditions that restrict and oppress men. Robyn Wiegman (2002) addresses this when she, in the mid-1980s, explained how feminism strived to understand how the male body is produced and discussed by parties in power. Based on patriarchal ideas, the male body was structured as dominating, emotionless, and violent (Wiegman, 2002). These aspects can lead to masculinity as an inherently homophobic, and a vicious concept in which some men, such as queer men, may feel oppressed or threatened. These men can feel forced to enact the traditional aspects of masculinity to fit into society, consequently becoming silenced. Feminism works to address these harmful ideologies with the goal of eliminating them, leading to a world in which queer men feel that their performance of masculinity can be accepted as a norm.

Black Feminism

It would be careless to approach a topic as complex as Black masculinity without drawing from Black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes that Black feminism “aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions of class, race, and gender” (p. 22). As described by Omi and Winant (2014), race and gender are connected to one another, and Black women face unique struggles in finding autonomy inside of a society that strongly oppresses them. Their intersectionality as Black and as women place them in uniquely difficult situations. Black feminism allows for an exploration and understanding of this experience, focusing on “the knowledge gained at

intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender” and strives to share the knowledge to enact social change and encourage other women to speak out (Collins, 2000, p. 8-9). Black feminism is characterized by ensuring black women’s voices and experiences are shared as well as enacting social change for these women through activism (Collins, 2000).

This perspective is important in this research as Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X blur concepts of Black masculinity and Black femininity. These two artists balance the two experiences, and it is important to understand the unique intersectionality of both identity perspectives. Moreover, embedding Black Feminism in this research assists in allowing the concepts of Black women intellectuals to be utilized and appreciated more fully. This work would be woefully insufficient without the works of Collins (2000), Rose (1994), hooks (2004), and other Black women that help comprehend the messages that Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X have created. Collins (2000) strives to counter the “claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression” (Collins, 2000, p. 24-25). I believe that utilizing Black feminism to locate Ocean and X’s disruption to the dominant norms in this study will assist in doing so.

Feminist Theory

With these goals of feminist and Black feminist theory in mind, a lens of feminist criticism can allow for opportunities to locate how rappers are developing notions of progressive masculinity in the genre. Feminist criticism is centered around a resistance to domination. When approaching an artifact through a feminist lens, scholars are focusing on how the artifact and its messages challenge traditional perspectives (Foss, 2018). Feminist critics can play a role destroying present dominant powers by locating “strategies that disrupt established hegemonies and, in turn, create new ways of thinking, acting, and being” in the artifacts they study (Foss,

2018 p. 147). There are two that will be most prevalent in this approach to studying rap lyrics. One of these strategies is reframing, or the process of “shifting perspectives” to approach issues from an alternative angle (Foss, 2018, p. 147). In rap music, this could relate to studying various artists who may be more underground or find success through different platforms, rather than just the most commercially successful artists. A feminist scholar could take the concept of masculinity and explore how multiple rap artists talk about the issue through their lyrics. Another strategy of resistance is enactment, or when “individuals act out or embody an interpretation of a situation that is counter to the one normally accepted” (Foss, 2018, p. 152). This can seem like a simple approach, but it can be extremely effective. By disregarding what the patriarchy attempts to impose, feminists are stating that they refuse to be controlled and will act in ways that ensure the highest quality of life for all. Male rappers who touch on progressive masculinity in their lyrics are performing enactment by simply writing these lyrics or performing actions that could be deemed traditionally feminine. Approaches of reframing and enactment will allow for a strong examination of how these specific rappers have either provided a new perspective of masculinity or have transformed their images and approaches to masculinity.

Feminist criticism will also serve as an effective lens because of the prevalence of gender in media. As van Zoonen (1994) references, gender is a constant in the world of media. Whether watching the news, fictionalized presentations in movies, or popular music and music videos, gender can be represented in differing, potentially harmful ways. Too often, notions of “masculinity try to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal” (van Zoonen, 1996, p. 47). As a result, overly sexualized images of women or a lack of women in media can be deemed as acceptable and expected in media. In response, feminist scholars are interested in “stereotypical images...in the media and the effect of these images on the audience” (van

Zoonen, 1994, p. 16). van Zoonen goes on to suggest that feminist media critiques should center around specific genres, as there are many specific genre codes. Additionally, rhetorical critiques of media should consider the bonded relationship between media and audience. These two considerations allow feminist criticism to successfully analyze and dismantle how media can serve as support or resistance to patriarchal ideals. For this criticism and how gender operates in rap, a feminist lens can reveal how masculinity in rap is developing and the impact that may have on listeners.

Queer Theory

Queer theory allows scholars to observe aspects of gender and sexuality that disturb traditional social and cultural norms. In their work, *Intersections Between Feminist and Queer Theory*, Casey et al. (2006) touch on how both feminist and queer theory are centered around shifting conventional, potentially harmful, beliefs about the world that are put in place by the dominant parties. Queer theory allows scholars to showcase that “which we choose not to speak, or do not speak about” (Allan, 2020, p. 20). This lens allows us to locate the silenced who are a “threat” to society and allow those voices to be heard.

Before exploring queer theory, I feel it is important to clarify that queer theory and queer studies are not designed to label individuals or provide them a specific identity. It is not my intention to claim that those we are labelling as “queer” rappers or those who fall under this theory claim themselves to be queer, or self-identify as queer. Rather, I draw on Marlon Bailey’s (2013) explanation of using queer “as a way to denaturalize and destabilize categories, such as...male/female and man/woman” (p. 17). It is my hope to use aspects of queer theory to understand how signifiers like “man/woman” are socially constructed, and how rappers use their

work to create new cultures and new understandings, without these oppressive labels (Bailey, 2013, p. 17).

Queer theory is also focused on aspects of intersectionality. As Allan (2020) writes, queer theory “recognizes the complexities of an intersection that accounts for gender, sex, and desire. Queer theory plays and embraces the messiness of complexity” (p. 73). This is crucial to acknowledge as we study the complex subject of Black queer masculinity. Queer theory centers itself on embracing concepts outside of the normative that are confusing, yet inspiring. When studying masculinity, queer theory can allow us to embrace and engage with “the unsaid, the non-normative” to understand those who have been excluded from the narrative (Allan, 2020, p. 75). Allowing influences of queer theory in the rhetorical criticism of music will allow for unique and fresh presentations of messages and visuals to be noticed, analyzed, and most importantly, spread. Through a feminist critique utilizing aspects of queer theory, the voices and messages of queer rappers can be as prevalent as the traditionally masculine stalwarts of rap music.

This value is crucial when considering the difficulties that queer Black men face in society. Considering the work by McCune Jr. (2015) and his commentary on the lack of stable places for queer Black men, finding ways to exhibit the non-normative as present and influential can allow for these spaces to be created. Additionally, constructing platforms for queer Black men allows for them to be named and recognized, a concept that scholar Kopano Ratele (2020) stresses greatly. In his work, Ratele (2020) speaks on the influence of colonization and how it leaves white men as the only ones “recognizable” through naming (p. 126). Given the impact of colonial conquest, Black men – regardless of their sexual orientation – are always already inherently queer in society, often dehumanized. Black men are oppressed in gender and

sexuality, with their experiences and desires deemed as unnatural (Ratele, 2020). Queer theory, again, can allow for these men to earn recognition and showcase how said desires are normal – and human. Utilizing aspects of feminist theory and queer theory, we are able to uncover the non-normative, inspiring, and influential messages presented by queer rappers in their lyrics and their visual presentation.

Images and Civic Spectatorship

A crucial aspect of this research that differentiates it from past studies is the inclusion of images. As Rose (1994) references, music videos and visuals play a large role in a rapper's presentation of their identity and their messages. Whether it is the traditional, aggressive image of the past or a presentation of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity, being able to comprehend the impact of such visual presentations will assist in uncovering and discussing the state of masculinity in the genre of rap. To do this, we will draw from works by Ewen (1999), Mulvey (1975), and Hariman and Lucaites (2016).

Ewen's (1999) work on consuming images serves as a foundation for noting the influence that visuals can have on individuals. As he writes, popular imagery of lifestyle "is the most common realm of our society in which the need for a better or different way of life is acknowledged" (p. Ewen, 1999, p. 16). When the public witnesses a certain style of clothing, behavior, or attitude portrayed, they may begin to consider a change in their life to better emulate that style, in what Thorstein Veblen (1992) calls "pecuniary emulation." In this study, the influential power of style will be important when considering the impact that Ocean and X's disruption has. These two men are challenging the accepted style of masculinity that has been accepted for years, yet they are also experiencing success. Using Ewen's understanding of consuming images will assist in noting how Ocean and X present their style in appealing ways.

The subject of appeal and desire is a constant presence in visual consumption. As Ewen (1999) notes, the introduction of the photograph led designers and advertisers to uncover how they can reach a viewer's senses and wants. This pursuit of desire led to what Mulvey (1975) would refer to as the "gaze." Mulvey (1975) explains that images, especially related to the cinema, are centered around "scopophilia...taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (p. 363). Viewers are encouraged to fully observe and judge the person or object placed in front of them. Often in plain view is the active gaze, or male gaze, which paints women as figures to be displayed and looked at in an erotic manner (Mulvey, 1975). Modern scholars such as Burke (2019) note that women can be displayed at a lower angle from a viewer's gaze, leading viewers to feel that they have power over these women. In terms of the gaze on Black bodies, Battle (2014) writes on how Black men are constantly fetishized, while Durham (2012) touches on how Black women's bodies are often presented as curvaceous nourishment for the viewer. Utilizing Ewen's (1999) work on desire in image consumption and Mulvey's (1975) work on the gaze, I am better equipped to analyze and understand how Ocean and X play with camera angles, presentation of the body, and style to disrupt social and cultural expectations.

With focus placed on Ocean and X's ability to challenge social standards, it is crucial to utilize a lens that explores the influential power of visuals. For this, I draw on Hariman and Lucaites (2016) idea of civic spectatorship, or "an extended social relationship that works more like a process of attunement or affective alignment than a logic of direct influence" (p. 15). Hariman and Lucaites (2016) explain that images have a lasting impact on viewers, and they have the capability to influence their mindsets and actions. Most importantly, Hariman and Lucaites (2016) explain that images can "challenge habits of indifference and disregard" by

presenting opportunities for viewers to enter a world that differs from their own (p. 14). In a world that is so tied to media, visuals serve as connections to the most recent news, identities, and norms. Through this extended social relationship to visuals, individual consumers feel more linked to the images they see and may find that these images have a direct influence on their perceptions of the world or their own identity. Utilizing Hariman and Lucaite's (2016) explanation of civic spectatorship, this research will be able to better locate where and explain how Ocean and X use their visuals to encourage progressive masculinity in rap music.

Performance and the Circuit of Culture

To best understand how notions of feminist theory, queer theory, and images can work to influence the present culture, I draw from Stuart Hall's work on cultural studies and specifically his notion of the circuit of culture. As Hall (1997) writes, culture is about "shared meanings," which are created through language and images (p. 1). A culture can develop a collective understanding or lens pertaining to concepts such as gender, race, sexuality, etc., and operate on these shared comprehensions. To challenge a shared meaning means to find a way in which to present that new understanding to a vast audience. This is where the circuit of culture is most relevant. As Padmaja Arvind (2019) explains, the circuit of culture strives to understand how popularized pieces of culture such as music, television, film, etc. can influence culture and shared social understandings. This model "emphasizes... moments of production, representation, consumption, regulation, and identity" in these pieces of popular culture, attempting to understand their power (p. 38).

At the same time, the model accounts for the relationship between these elements. The consumption of a product influences identities, which impacts the regulation of certain pieces of culture in order to support that identity. Regulation has an effect on production, which plays a

role in which pieces of culture are represented. In terms of rap music, the circuit of culture will allow us to locate queer representation and production, how it is consumed and regulated, and how it develops the formation of identities.

By noting the representation of queer Black men in rap music, we can begin to analyze how these performances influence the shared meanings that constitute our culture. Noting how these representations are produced, regulated, and consumed, Hall's circuit provides a lens in which to understand the potential impact that these artists are having on their listeners and our culture. This is especially prevalent when we consider the identity portion of the circuit. Black masculinity can center around performance, or presentation, and the identity that these men are trying to present to others. Presenting a Black queer identity into culture challenges previously established traditions. It is crucial to understand how that identity is regulated and consumed; but, with the rising success of queer artists, we may be witnessing the evolution of shared meanings through rap music. Hall's understanding of culture and the circuit of culture will be beneficial in noting these advancements.

It is also important to consider what Hall (2018) refers to as articulation, or the "moment" of the cultural performance and how that context will influence viewers (p. 332). Part of the effectiveness of cultural performances is the perceptions of the audience who consume them. Hall (2018) writes that noting these aspects is important, as there are parts of cultural performance that are "ascribable within the 'social relations of production.' These include distinctions at the level of culture and values...maintained...by such cultural institutions" (p. 312). When observing texts, it is crucial to consider the social implications behind the creation of that text. Work created by a dominant party can differ greatly from work created a party who is oppressed. Taking time to thoroughly understand the cultural institutions influencing the

effectiveness of the production will help us better comprehend its impact. To address the context in which these shared meanings are challenged and how that audience will accept those meanings is beneficial in noting the impact of these messages. Consider a consumer of rap music who may be exploring their own sexuality and understanding of gender. The music of a Black queer artist could have a greater impact on them. We can also note the aforementioned racial reckoning as a result of George Floyd's murder, and how the emergence of Black voices can play a role in this circuit of culture that promotes Black artists sharing their identity with pride.

Artifacts

With this lens of feminist criticism and the circuit of culture in mind, my artifacts will be the public performances of rap artists that have spent their careers promoting progressive masculinity. I will be analyzing the lyrics, the music videos, and live performances of one song by Frank Ocean and one song by Lil Nas X to locate aspects of progressive masculinity and how both artists work to normalize this understanding of gender identity. I chose to adopt this more wholistic approach of understanding these artists as their status as Black queer men in rap music could be deemed a spectacle. Their performances and language are constantly carving out new advancements and challenges to traditions, and I believe these aspects should be included in any analysis of their art. I will be studying one song by each of these artists to attempt and uncover how their work of progressive masculinity is influencing hip-hop.

I chose Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean as both artists have risen in popularity after coming out as queer. I have also chosen these artists for their regard in online forums and applications. One such application is TikTok, which an artist like Lil Nas X has utilized to gain popularity (Kaufman, 2021). Lil Nas X experienced songs blow up as "trends," in which TikTok users take a video and then place that artist's music over the video (Kaufman, 2021). These trends can be

dances, lyrics are-phrased as humor, or accompany a certain outfit that the user wants to show off. Most of the time, trends can catch on and are recreated by other users, leading to a song's consistent exposure (Kaufman, 2021). As discussed in the literature review, rap music is often most popular with teenagers. According to Brendan Doyle of Wallaroo Media (2021), TikTok has around 80 million monthly users and 60% of TikTok users are between the ages of 16-24.

With these two concepts in mind, I believe it is fair to argue that many of the younger users of TikTok either listen to rap music, or come across rap music while they are scrolling through the app. As a result, rappers who gain popularity on TikTok can find that their songs potentially reach millions of users. Artists such as Lil Nas X can capitalize on the ubiquity of social media to appear more approachable, more influential, and share their lyrics and messages across the world.

While Lil Nas X has turned to social media and trends for success, both Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean's presence in the commercialized music industry has a large impact on their influence. Frank Ocean has only released two albums, yet his debut and sophomore album garnered the second and first spot on Billboard charts at the time of their respective release (Billboard, 2021). His most popular songs have garnered over 400 million streams on Spotify Charts (2021), and despite not releasing an album for five years, he remains a prominent member of the music industry (Blanchon, 2020). In these popular songs, Ocean writes of his bisexuality and the duality of masculinity and femininity in his life while presenting these messages over the hard-hitting beats of traditional rap music.

Similarly, Lil Nas X is seeing an exponential growth in his popularity. His latest musical works debuted at number two on the Billboard charts, and he has received an increasing amount of commercial attention (Billboard, 2021). Lil Nas X is featured on UberEats commercials with

Elton John and eleven of the fifteen songs on his album saw extended time on the Billboard Top 100 (Billboard, 2021; Shelmerdine, 2021). This openly queer artist is earning recognition with commercially popular brands and projects, hinting that queer artists and their messages may be recognized as part of the norm.

There are arguments that can be made about the validity of popular brands collaborating with queer artists. Are these companies doing so because they genuinely support these artists or because they want to be seen as progressive and garner more attention? Some scholars may certainly lean toward questioning the legitimacy of these projects, but I lean toward the former. In a genre and society that still privileges traditional masculinity, I believe that these queer artists are indeed rising into popularity and influence, and these collaborative projects are proof of this trend. Additionally, these projects are allowing queer Black men to be in the spotlight, a concept that McCune Jr. (2015) dreamt of as a child. This is a positive trend. Further, one's opinion on a rapper's authenticity after their commercial success can vary, but I believe it is important to recognize that these mainstream popular rappers can have a great influence on audiences. With such a large platform, these artists can spread messages to a large audience of fans who see them as role models. Their lyrics can matter and can change how someone views the world.

In this thesis, I will be rhetorically analyzing "Nikes" by Frank Ocean and "Industry Baby" by Lil Nas X, studying the lyrics to each song, the music videos for each song, and a live performance of each song. An approach of rhetorical criticism will be utilized to analyze and understand how these artists' performances are promoting notions of progressive masculinity. Rather than just noting that there is the inclusion of lyrics referencing femininity or queerness, a rhetorical criticism can reveal what potential effect these lyrics have, and why they have the ability to resonate with audiences. Rhetorical criticism also allow scholars to study more than

language; this approach allows the analysis of other forms of communication such as visual presentations. Further, an understanding of the effects of these performances can lead to a better understanding of culture. If queer artists are gaining popularity through their promotion of progressive masculinity, is society becoming more accepting of said masculinity? Or is it a commercialized trend that is disregarding the authenticity of rap music? A rhetorical criticism encourages these questions and leads to conclusions that can assist us to understand the power of artifacts and their lasting impacts.

I have chosen to analyze the lyrics, music videos, and live performances presented by the artist to understand the wholistic performance and promotion of progressive masculinity. Similar to the understanding of hip-hop culture, these two artists are more than their music. Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean certainly promote Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity through their music, but they also blend masculinity and femininity through their public presentations and visual performances. Rap music and Black masculinity are characterized by performances. The image of a rapper garnering success in the oppression of their identities serves as a direct challenge to white dominant entities who silence them. Likewise, the visuals of Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean surrounded by men in their music videos challenges traditional notions of masculinity and highlights a typically shunned identity. I would be negligent in my study of rap music if I did not showcase the visual elements of performance that play such a crucial role in their identities and their cultural messaging.

I have chosen to only focus on one song and one music video to uncover the application of progressive masculinity to understand gender blurring that is present in these artists' performances (Calton et al., 2014). Again, it could be simpler to look at multiple songs and note how often Frank Ocean or Lil Nas X reference queerness or feminine qualities. But such an

analysis would only highlight the quantity of these messages, rather than the quality and influence of such characteristics. To perform a worthwhile rhetorical criticism and comprehend how these artists are developing progressive masculinity, I have chosen to focus on one lyrical performance and one visual performance to highlight and emphasize the power of the chosen artifacts and how they could influence audiences. It is my hope that this study encourages further investigation of these artists' discographies and performances, as well as other Black queer men such as Kevin Abstract, Tyler the Creator, and Steve Lacy.

Using this methodology, I will locate themes of Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity and the blurring of gender identities present in the lyrics, music videos, and live performances driven by previous literature on Black masculinity. The presence or absence of codes of traditional masculinity such as aggressiveness, sexual domination, and homophobia will be noted. Themes of progressive masculinity will consist of the abandonment of traditionally masculine traits, such as queer representation and perspectives (Calton et al., 2014). Further, codes that contest codes of traditional masculinity and promote traditional femininity will be noted. After locating these codes, I will continue to utilize a lens of criticism driven by feminist and queer theory to understand how these rappers have developed and exhibited the emergence of progressive masculinity in the genre of rap music.

Rhetorical criticism has been chosen as the methodology for this study as it allows for a thorough, wholistic examination of Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X. As I previously noted, rap music is more than just lyrics. It is a constant balancing of forming and performing an image that can reflect and represent the everyday experience of Black artists. For Black queer men, this delicate challenge serves as an opportunity to provide a model of identity and performance that has lacked. Performing a rhetorical criticism driven by feminist and queer theory will result in an in-

depth analysis of Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X's performances of progressive masculinity through their public presentations, lyrics, and visuals. By studying these aspects, it is my hope that we will develop a better grasp of the growing presence of progressive masculinity in rap music, and why the current cultural context serves as an effective conduit for these messages.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

To best analyze and comprehend how notions of progressive masculinity are introduced and normalized in the world of rap music, I will analyze Frank Ocean's "Nikes" (2016) and Lil Nas X's "Industry Baby" (2021). For each song, I will study the original song with its lyrics and beats, the music video, and a live performance. These three options were chosen to more fully encapsulate the presentation of gender blurring and progressive masculinity that the artists utilize. Much like how hip-hop is built on various cultural practices, presentations in rap music can be built on physical appearance, lyrical content, and video representations. Studying the presentations of these two songs, we will notice recurring themes that blur the masculine and feminine. Both Ocean and Lil Nas X speak and present themselves as bodies inspired by both masculinity and femininity, whether with makeup, clothing, or the way they carry themselves. Further, their music videos and live performances offer visual examples of the blurring of masculinity and femininity through both Ocean and Lil Nas X and the performers around them, driven by notions of progressive masculinity that normalize queerness in rap music. This section allows for an exploration of these aspects, building up to a discussion on how these two artists are playing a role in the evolution of gender identities in rap music.

Frank Ocean

Frank Ocean is an artist who, for a majority of his career, has struggled against constricting labels placed on him by others. Many have attempted to cleanly identify Ocean's work as RnB, or rap, or soul, leading to some confusion on what he should be labelled (Li, 2018). However, as scholar Shana Goldin-Perschbacher (2013) writes, identity politics in music can often result in shifting presentations of self to be misunderstood or ignored. As Simon Frith (1996) discovered, the study of music and understanding of the music genres has often been

misguided by the idea that “sounds must somehow ‘reflect’ or ‘represent’ the people” that are listening to them (p. 108). Attempting to force an artist into one box may result in a clear disregard for what the artist is attempting to discuss or present in their work. Ocean operates outside of these restricting identity politics, going so far as to even place his first album *Nostalgia Ultra*, under the “Bluegrass” genre (Blanchet, 2021). As Ocean himself answered in a 2011 interview: “I move a lot off instinct. I enjoy little details like that. I don’t want to seem like I have a cause against genres, or maybe I do” (Blanchet, 2021). From early on in his career, Ocean had no issue blurring gendered expectations in his lyrics. Further, many journalists attempted to force speculation of Ocean’s sexuality and gender identity when Ocean released songs about love that were directed to an individual with male pronouns, to which Ocean responded “life is dynamic and comes along with dynamic experiences... when you’re talking about romantic love, both sides in all scenarios feel the same shit. As a writer, as a creator, I’m giving you my experiences” (Ocean, 2012). Since the earliest stages of his career, Ocean has expressed a desire to freely navigate through his dynamic experiences and feelings and then present them through his art. He has not felt a desire to fall into a single genre, write a certain style of song, or present messages about one experience. This trend would exponentially develop with the release of his second album and infamous track, “Nikes.”

“Nikes”

“Nikes” was the first single off Frank Ocean’s critically acclaimed 2016 album, *Blonde*. Even the album title, *Blonde*, lends itself to a theme of blurring masculinity and femininity. While the official album title is *Blonde* with the silent “e” at the end, the album title features the word spelled as *Blond*. As linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1986) writes, blond “suggests a single property,” while blonde “suggests...at least two (blond hair + womanhood), and probably more

(sexy, glamorous, etc.)” (p. 362). The word “blond” is derived from French origins, in which the French language draws on gendering nouns (Perlman, 2015). Blond is regarded as a masculine form of the word, while blonde is used as reference to women with lighter hair colors (Meanings of Blond,” n.d.). Further, “Nikes” could refer to both the goddess of victory (feminine) or the clothing company that has amassed great material success (masculine). Ocean’s use of both the feminine and masculine version of the word in the presentation of his album is a representation of how both masculinity and femininity play a role in the way he presents himself. This theme will continue to present itself in “Nikes,” which served as the album opener when it was released. “Nikes” opens with a light synth melody traveling over a hard-hitting percussive beat, a choice that could again represent the blurring of the masculine and feminine. The beat under the melody represents the traditional “boom-bap,” hard expectation of rap music, while the synth melody offers a light reprieve from the striking drums. This juxtaposition of a traditional, hard-sounding beat to the soft synth serves to represent Ocean’s fluid gender identifications even before he introduces the lyrics.

When Ocean’s voice does enter the song, the listener is greeted by two voices that again represent the masculinity and femininity present in Ocean’s life. There is a pitched-up voice singing the main melody and lyrics, while an altered, deep voice occasionally offers sentiments after the high-pitched voice is finished. This is reminiscent of the traditional call and response style of African music that Floyd (1997) mentions. As Floyd (1997) writes, traditional African American music drew on “the musical fruits of their legacy and merged them with European vernacular forms” (p. 227). A leader would sing or speak a line, and the congregation or group would respond, often sharing messages or experiences that only this specific community could understand (Floyd, 1997). Rap music continually draws on this tradition, whether drawing back

on music from an artist's youth or from performances in which an artist calls for audience response or repeated lines (Perry, 2004). Call and response is also effective as it plays on "the realm of the unconsciousness, where the cultural memory functions and from which comes the internalized and remembered cultural perspective" (Floyd, 1997, p. 229). Call and response allows for lasting emotional experiences to be shared and supported. Here, Ocean's two voices can serve to represent the conscious and the unconscious. The voices alternate between Ocean's public presentation and how he wishes to be seen by others (often masculine), and the more internalized thoughts that he wishes to express (often feminine). Ocean constructs a way to pay homage to this foundation, while altering it in a way that can represent his unique sense of applying progressive masculinity in his blurring of gender (Calton et al., 2014).

Ocean even opens the song by stating "I got two versions," again hinting at the concept that he possesses two versions of the same life (2016). While Ocean could certainly be referring to a dichotomy of race, class, etc., I find that the inclusion of a lower pitched (masculine) voice contrasted by a higher pitched (feminine) voice equates to the two gender identities inside of Ocean. The fact the two voices continue to trade off messages throughout the song strengthens this belief, as it seems that his masculine and feminine sides interact with one another. As the song continues, the high-pitched Ocean sings of striving for a partner who is authentic and genuinely cares for him, while the low-pitched Ocean comments, "This is a setup...this bitch tryna' set me up" (2016). Here, we see the two "versions" of Ocean coalescing. While his more feminine side may want more love and affection, his masculine side attempts to correct him onto the path of a traditional rap artist, stating that the person he is attracted to is trying to hurt him, and he must stay emotionless. In his work, Cundiff (2013) touches on the notion that misogyny in rap music can often present itself in "distrust of women" and a general shaming, a masculine

theme that Ocean's lower-pitched voice seems to be presenting (p. 438). And yet at the same time, the high-pitched voice is craving romantic validation and care, which Avery (2017) would label "hegemonic femininity" (p. 162). From the first lines of the song, Ocean is clearly showing these "two versions" of his life and his mindsets, as the listener is introduced to the concept of duality that will persist throughout the song.

This emergence of both the masculine and feminine in Ocean's life and the seamless navigation between the two continues as the song progresses. While still rapping on the subject of a partner, the masculine voice (in parentheses) and feminine voice once again overlap, with a slight twist "(This is heaven on Earth) / But if you need dick I got you / And I yam from the line" (Ocean, 2016). Here, the deep, masculine voice expresses a more feminine expression of emotion through the poetic declaration that the current situation is paradise. Meanwhile, the high-pitched voice confidently offers themselves as a satisfactory sexual partner and speaks of yams. The term "yams" is present in the world of rap, stemming inspiration from African tradition and Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, in which yams represented a symbol of power and domination (Oldfield, 2018). In rap music, a yam can refer to a slam dunk from the free throw line in basketball (an act of domination over another male), the act of sex, or a bag of drugs (Oldfield, 2018). Here again, we see the masculine and feminine versions of Ocean cohabiting, though the masculine voice is now speaking in feminine terms and vice versa. This reveals the fluidity of Ocean's masculinity. He does not feel constricted to one or the other; rather, he is able to navigate between the two whenever he feels.

This trend continues as Ocean sings, "He don't care for me / But he cares for me (We keep it hot) / And that's good enough (I've been working on my bod, I feel hot)" (2016). Oware (2011) writes that in rap music, masculinity means being "invulnerable" and not displaying

emotion (p. 22). Yet, Ocean displays a striking amount of vulnerability when he states that this other man does not truly care about him. This confession is made more complex when considering Avery's (2017) notion that "Black-oriented music has also centered on depictions of men as hypermasculine...sexual...and overly concerned about displaying status" (p. 163). Even in this time of vulnerability from Ocean, the masculine desire to maintain a high status remains. This moment represents Ocean's acceptance of his blurred gender identity and progressive masculinity (Calton et al., 2014); the feminine confession that he feels unloved works with his masculine confidence that his body is sexually attractive, ending with the acceptance that this mixed state is "good enough" for him (Ocean, 2016).

As the song closes, the hard-hitting beat suddenly disappears, leaving Ocean rapping over an ethereal melody in his normal voice. Suddenly, the vocal effects have disappeared, and Ocean begins to speak on his experiences with no percussive noise or distractions to take away from his message. In a way, this could be Ocean's candid presentation of his life and what he wants the viewers to understand. Rap music is characterized not only by lyrics, but also "beats that stor[e] critical fragments in fast-paced electric rhythms" (Rose, 1994, p. 32). Like Asante (1987) speaking on the importance of vocal expression in rebellious rhetoric, the beat in rap music serves as another instrument to connect with listeners and get their attention. At times, the beat could send a message in itself through the use of instruments and sounds influenced by culture, through a more or less aggressive feel, or through samples that draw on social movements (Williams, 2009). A change in the beat, or the removal of the beat altogether, could also be an important signification. As a result, in this moment, Ocean removes any other potential distractions or signifying elements to share his voice and his thoughts through the lyrics themselves.

In a genre focused on authenticity and presenting important messages, Ocean positions himself at the forefront of this song, ensuring that only his identity and his words are acknowledged. There is no masking of the message with beats or sound effects; it is only Ocean. He speaks of living his life in a blur, so “the last night feels like a past life,” and closes out by swooning, “We’re not in love / But I’ll make love to you” (Ocean, 2016). This closing characterizes the vagueness that Ocean experiences in his life. This ambiguity may represent his masculine and feminine identity struggles. Rose (1994) writes that “rap’s stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture,” and Ocean continues to do the same (p. 33). In the face of evolving notions of masculinity and femininity, Ocean presents a candid view into his life and experience of the hybridity of the masculine and feminine. His days and nights blur together, much like his masculine and feminine identities. He outwardly claims he and his partner do not share an emotional connection (masculine) yet expresses a passionate desire to make love to them (feminine). This duality, present in the album title, Frank’s life, and “Nikes,” assists Ocean in promoting notions of progressive masculinity in our culture, in which one can transition from masculine to feminine whenever they please.

Music Video of “Nikes”

The music video for Frank Ocean’s “Nikes,” directed by photographer and filmmaker Tyrone Lebon, continues to touch on these themes of duality and Ocean’s fluid gender identity. In the opening second, Ocean is featured in a white jumpsuit, covered in glitter (Lebon, 2016, :01). Instantly, Ocean is presented as a blurred figure of masculinity and femininity. As Jennifer Stroud Johansson (2017) elaborates, glitter is often seen as an ultra-feminine accessory, or signifier that one is subscribing to traditionally feminine mindsets of expressing passivity. Rather than displaying a subtle presentation of his feminine side, Ocean proudly displays what many

would consider the tell-tale mark of a feminine figure, especially in rap. The addition of glitter on his body and clothes highlights a more feminine image than what male rappers may usually present in a video. Based on studies done by Avery (2017) and Oware (2011), many of rap's music videos feature men in positions of power, often flaunting wealth or sexual domination over women. As Oware (2011) writes, "an element of rap discourse is the invincibility of the rap artist" (p. 23). The visual presentation of these men can be designed to present them as more powerful than any potential men or women that attempt to stand in their way. Male rappers want to flaunt a risk-taking, competitive nature (Avery, 2017). Lebon (2016) offers a different perspective by presenting Ocean as a figure of subtlety and grace.

Apart from the presentation of Ocean, Lebon (2016) also spends time highlighting both masculine and feminine figures. From :03-:15 in the video, there are alternating close-up shots of both men and women, some clothed and some not (Lebon, 2016). The music video continues to promote this duality, as the viewer is quickly thrown from man to woman, to woman, to another man. Many studies have been done to understand the usual images and messages presented in rap music videos (Conrad et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2013), and many, including Battle (2014), find that women are treated as props. Whether it is the domination of these women, the removal of their clothing, or acts of beheading or necrophilia such as in Kanye West's "Monster" music video, feminine figures are often seen as disposable and less important than the men (Battle, 2014, p. 84-85). Designated to be a subject of the male gaze, these female subjects presented as objects of desire with no other purpose (Mulvey, 1975).

Yet, Lebon's (2016) spotlight of the women in "Nikes" presents them as graceful, proud, and authentic. Many of the shots in this section are at eye level with the women, presenting them as equal and powerful. This is a unique approach when considering the constant presence of the

“gaze” in visuals. As Mulvey (1975) notes, images are often created with the idea of consumption in mind. As a result, the active gaze, or male gaze, can display feminine figures as being desirable and deserving of objectification (Mulvey, 1975). Conrad et al. (2009) found that “females are more likely to be dressed in provocative clothing, especially in videos of sexual content” (p. 138). Brianna Burke (2019) noted that when studying visual rhetoric, viewers see women from a high angle, signaling that the viewer holds power over that woman. Lebon (2016) avoids these two aspects of the male gaze, instead presenting his women at eye-level and implying these women hold the same power as the viewer. This shift can play a role in how viewers will consume these images and can influence how they may perceive men and women in future media (Ewen, 1999). When faced with a new style, audiences will consume this radical change and begin to note the more harmful presentations of the feminine body in other videos.

And when approaching the men in this section, Lebon (2016) continues to present them with care. As Battle (2014) points out, all too often the Black male body has been painted as “the brute, the hypermasculine, eroticized symbol of phallic power” (p. 86). In this short section, the men featured are shot at eye level, with normal, blank expressions, with one instance of a man taking his shirt off (Lebon, 2016, :03-:15). Rather than presenting the men at an angle that paints them as more powerful or better than the women, the masculine figures are seen from the same angles as the women. This is a moment in which masculinity and femininity are treated and shared equally. Presented through the same lens with the same care, Lebon (2016) sets the precedent that both the masculine and feminine hold a similar place in this video. As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) suggest, this is a moment when viewers can be influenced by civic spectatorship. By receiving a view into the “vernacular life” of the masculine and feminine, rather than an exaggerated focus on objectification, the audience is encouraged to reconsider how

they discuss and present gendered bodies (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016, p. 12). And much like Ocean, the masculine and feminine quickly transitions from one to another, creating a blurred presentation of identity.

This combination of the masculine and feminine continues starting around the :16 mark, as Ocean sits in front of sports cars while wearing winged eyeliner and blush (Lebon, 2016). Lebon's imagery of Ocean aptly captures the spirit of "Nikes" and *Blonde* in general. He is both masculine and feminine. Ocean is the masculine desire to flaunt material wealth in his music videos reminiscent of Kopano's (2002) studies that show how male rappers feel a need to share their wealth and present their material goods with braggadocio. And yet, he also possesses the feminine desire to alter his appearance with make-up and present the most beautiful version of himself. These two worlds visually interact to produce and reinforce a symbiotic relationship between the feminine and masculine. As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) write, images "can linger in memory, evoke deep stirrings of connection, and challenge habits of indifference and disregard" (p. 14). The visual presentation of the masculine and feminine in cohabitation has the ability to linger in a viewer's mind long after the video, even encouraging them to consider how the two come into play within their own lives. While viewers are presented with this image, they hear Ocean say, "I got two versions, I got two versions" (Lebon, 2016, p. :26). If the presentation of Ocean were not enough, the audience witnesses a message of duality, both in the lyrics and in the image. Ocean is presenting the two versions about which he raps. He possesses the expected masculine version that enjoys flaunting wealth, yet also contains the feminine version that wears makeup and glitter. Further, this setting lasts for 12 seconds in the video, allowing the viewer to absorb the blurring of gender in this moment, and how Ocean serves as the representative for the hybridity of gendered characteristics (Lebon, 2016).

This scene is followed with a body that appears to be feminine lying on a pile of money (Lebon, 2016, :37). The individual is nude, but the money covers the genitalia areas (Lebon, 2016, :38). In this moment, the viewer sees the feminine on top of the masculine pile of material success. The two worlds combine yet again, although some may argue this could be the sexualization of the feminine body. However, Lebon (2016) quickly subverts expectations when that body is replaced by a masculine body with painted nails (:41). It happens quickly; suddenly the black feminine body is replaced with a similar looking masculine body with nails, and the viewer may not realize it at first glance. This is Lebon's representation of the abandoning of traditional masculinity and gender hybridity that can occur with progressive masculinity (Calton et al., 2014).

As these two bodies are presented in alternating frames, Ocean's high-pitched and low-pitched voices trade lines: "Tell 'em it ain't likely / (This bitch tryna' set me up" (Lebon, 2016, :40-:44). While the masculine and feminine voices interchange, the viewers see a physical representation of this trading of gender identities. The masculine and feminine switch in an instant, both flaunting success, beauty, and compatibility with the other. Lebon (2016) adds a further step in showing the theme of duality by placing both bodies lying down in an intertwined pose at the :45 mark of the video. The masculine body rests his head on the feminine body's stomach, while the feminine body rests her hand on his chest. Again, there is no placement of a body in the gaze of sexual desire or appeal to a standard that the man should be dominant over the woman (Mulvey, 1975). Rather, the woman is the support for the man, as they lay in a platonic position of support and compatibility. Lebon (2016) presents the masculine and feminine body at ease and connected to one other, hinting at Ocean's comfort with both the

masculine and feminine identity in his life (:48). Ocean feels no need to keep them separate in his career and his everyday life.

Much like his refusal to fall under one genre, Ocean will continue to share his masculine and feminine identities and will continue to see success because of it. Lebon (2016) directs the viewer's attention to how both of these bodies can exist in one space. As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) write, "photography is not only a medium of representation but also one that operates performatively" (p. 14). More than just showing masculine and feminine bodies, Lebon (2016) desires that the audience go further to understand how present both of these identities can be with human beings. Masculinity and femininity can alter positions in the spotlight, but they co-exist with Ocean and society. This moment can also serve as a representation of Ocean's experience in the music industry. He embraces and portrays masculinity and femininity and still garnered material success. His blurred identity did not hold him back; it led to acclaimed success.

The use of masculine and feminine models to represent this ambiguity of sexuality and gender continues at :58 of the video, with both a man and a woman in angel costumes dancing on a pole (Lebon, 2016). Once again, the masculine and feminine bodies are thrown together, with fast cuts and an equal inclusion of both masculine and feminine figures. As these images are presented, Ocean sings "All you want is Nikes / (It's a real-life angel) / But the real ones" (Lebon, :58-1:02). Ocean again balances the masculine subject of "wealth," which is "pivotal to rap composition" and the "array of emotions and narratives of homoeroticism" (Li, 2018, p. 8, 56). Ocean's painting of his romantic partner as an angel, a mythical being of grace and wonder, seems to contradict how other male rappers may discuss sexual partners in their music. And yet even with this, Ocean's masculine side is wary of being scammed by a sexual partner. Lebon (2016) works to ensure that the viewer experiences both at the same time, which attempts to

demonstrate Ocean's understanding of his gender identity. While these masculine and feminine features are highlighted and blurred together, Ocean's high-pitched and low-pitched vocals participate in a call and response, capturing once again the duality that is present in Ocean's performances.

Further, from 2:28-2:35 in the video, Lebon (2016) features a black man working out, a hand rubbing the man's abdomen muscles, and then someone covering the model's buttocks in glitter and spanked. Unlike other popular rap videos, Lebon allows for both the male and female body to be presented in a sexualized way. However, this presentation comes off as more empowering than demeaning. As scholars such as Just and Muhr (2019) point out, more recent presentations of feminist thought have reframed sexualized representations as empowering. As they write, "when joining in this trend, women learn that they should not be ashamed of their sexuality, but instead perform it actively, embracing, enjoying and reclaiming their right to sexiness" (p. 4). Rather than allowing their sexual acts or presentation to be portrayed as undignified and shameful, these women feel that they can "take control" of their bodies and how they use it, allowing them to feel more powerful (Just & Muhr, 2019, p. 4). Further, there is no remnant of a "chosen people," or class position that allows one party more power over the other (Ewen, 1999, p. 62). Women are not overly sexualized or reprimanded by the men for appearing this way. Rather, both parties' sexualities are celebrated and presented equally.

Lebon (2016) subscribes to this notion throughout the video. At 1:21, a woman opens her nude legs to reveal a bright shining light emitting glitter (Lebon, 2016). Here, the woman proudly presents her body, an opposition to the control that men may have attempted to place on their bodies in the past. Instead of fearing the repercussions, this woman articulates "an active feminine sexuality" in which she wants to present her body (Just & Muhr, 2019, p. 4). The

“Nikes” music video handles sexuality and gender identity as a beautiful, complicated, inspiring concept. Lebon (2016) takes the time to highlight the masculine and feminine bodies yet places them in positions of power and grace. This depiction is characterized in Ocean’s “Nikes” (2016). The music video sexualizes the bodies of these men and women, yet it is not done to belittle these models or shame them. Rather, the presentation of these masculine and feminine bodies represents the control and pride that Ocean holds over his blurred sense of identity.

Live Performance of “Nikes”

Unlike the music video, Frank Ocean’s live performance of “Nikes” presents a more intimate, humble presentation of his message and his acceptance. Ocean was the headliner of the 2017 Panorama Music Festival in Randall Islands, New York (Caramanica, 2017). This performance would be one of Ocean’s few live performances following the release of “Nikes” and *Blonde*. Ocean, an elusive performer, provides few opportunities for fans to witness his live performances, meaning his status as the headlining, final performance of night one of the festival drew a large crowd (Caramanica, 2017). One could expect an elaborate production, with lights, special effects, and perhaps even a large band or backup dancers. And yet, for most of the night, Ocean stands alone (Caramanica, 2017). He is surrounded by a few chairs and speakers, with his own artwork adorning the stage, but that is the extent of the set design (Caramanica, 2017). There is no grand finale in this moment, rather Ocean presents more subtle messaging. As Henry Louis Gates (1988) may reference, Ocean is “signifyin(g)” (p. 50). As Gates explains, signifyin(g) “is the Other of discourse” in which messages are not freely offered, but encoded within complex structures of language, public presentation, and actions (1988, p. 53). Signifyin(g) is especially present in Black vernacular, characterized by a revolving balancing of superior and subaltern rhetoric, rather than a complete “emancipation” (Gates, 1988, p. 50). This

is also why Gates prefers to add on the (g) at the end, as he often thinks of the term as being spoken as “signifyin’” to represent the Black vernacular (Gates, 1988). Rather than a direct presentation, the signifyin(g) is founded on the indirect; a Shakespearean action of “direction through indirection” (Gates, 1988, p. 54). Ocean is not relying on a direct message to end his show and to highlight the themes of “Nikes.” Rather, he crafts a presentation of the signifyin(g).

This act of signifyin(g) can be seen in the sense that Ocean’s performance vastly differs from what one may expect at a live musical concert. When closing one’s eyes and imagining a concert, many will picture a large crowd of fans jumping and dancing to songs, while the artist on stage encourages said movement and interacts with the crowd. Rather, Ocean rarely talks besides to rap his verses and sing the chorus, a moment in which the crowd naturally joins. This is especially unique when compared to usual performances by male rappers of “pumping their chests” and braggadocio (Oware, 2011, p. 23). Ocean’s performance is subtle, as if he wants the audience to decode his presentation and discover a message. He invites his viewers into an area that feels private – a few chairs and Ocean standing alone. An audience member who is walking by the performance or who has just joined may feel confusion as to what Ocean is doing. Yet, Ocean is still sending a message that he is comfortable in his skin. In this performance, he presents himself as a masculine figure in a t-shirt and jeans, yet he still differs from other male rappers. In comparison to those performers, Ocean creates a live presentation that is more “vulnerable and emotional,” notions that traditionally would be considered more feminine (Oware, 2011, p. 31). There are no flashing lights, no background dancers, and not even background visuals. It is an intimate performance, almost like one may experience at a small night club that features smaller artists. Ocean presents himself as a masculine figure in a more feminine setting, encouraging audiences to decode what he could be signifyin(g). In Ocean’s

own way, he is presenting a normalized performance of his progressive masculinity (Calton et al., 2014).

Ocean's live performance of "Nikes" is the closer for his headlining act. As the beat begins, Ocean simply walks around the stage, waiting for the opening line of the song (Dario2jr1, 2017, :10). When Ocean begins his singing, one can hear the familiar high-pitched vocals as supplements behind Ocean's natural singing voice (Dario2jr1, 2017, :21). His natural voice is presented as lower and traditionally more masculine, continuing to cement that Ocean still holds masculine features and identities. Even as Ocean sings about craving a partner who provides authentic love and refers to a sexual partner who may be male, his voice remains masculine. As McCune Jr. (2008) suggests, Ocean presents "the relationship between masculine bravado and Black queer culture" (p. 302). Rather than committing to one of these aspects over the other for a concert, Ocean finds a way to create a hybrid of what would be deemed masculine along with what would also be deemed feminine. Even in his live performances, Ocean maintains a sense of duality and the "two versions" that follow him throughout "Nikes."

As the performance continues, however, Ocean remains simple. He mostly walks around the stage, wearing a large pair of headphones and a shirt that reads "Why be racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic when you could just be quiet?" (Dario2jr1, 2017, 2:00). Aside from donning a message that promotes concepts of feminism, queerness, and Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity as I have applied it, Ocean performs an intimate, simple rendition of the song. Drawing from McCune Jr. (2008) again, Ocean seems to utilize the air of "coolness" that McCune Jr. witnesses in queer spaces that featured rap music (p. 302). As McCune Jr. (2008) explains, "coolness is a performative utterance and action, whereby men define themselves within and against traditional standards" (p. 302). Based on social and cultural expectations, one

may expect a bisexual man such as Frank Ocean to fall into a fully feminine performance that would match expectations placed on queer men (Li, 2018). However, Ocean does not conform to expectations. Instead, he creates a performance space that feels comfortable to him. He utilizes his masculine voice and presents himself in a more masculine fashion, while still drawing on feminine lyrics and themes in “Nikes.”

Anyone who may be walking by and sees Ocean could believe that his performances and lyrics will be reminiscent of the standard for male rappers. The strategy of coolness means “Black queer men re-appropriate these terms, turn them on their heads, and thereby reduce the power of the terms in constructing their identities” (McCune Jr., 2008, p. 309). Ocean looks like a masculine figure; yet, he is not drawing on any of the messages of materialism or braggadocio that male rappers can abide by (Avery, 2017). Rather, his performance falls under a more feminine, intimate style that highlights his progressive masculinity (Calton et al., 2014). In the area of coolness, “performances of gender and sexuality are in flux— men are able to be queer while also acting straight, or even straight while acting queer” (McCune Jr., 2008, 309). Ocean walks around stage in a more masculine style; yet, he sings of love and intimacy. But while singing these lyrics and touching on more feminine themes, Ocean uses a lower, more masculine voice. He is able to present this hybridity of masculinity and femininity in a live performance, without depending on theatrics to do so. He is presenting himself in an authentic style, as many rappers strive to do (Perry, 2004). Closing the concert performance on this song, Ocean allows the lyrics of “Nikes” to highlight the duality and hybridity of his identity to be his closing message of the night. Rather than a show-stopping finale with effects or spectacle to impress the audience, Ocean closes his concert with his vulnerable presentation of his progressive masculinity, showing his comfort and pride with the identity he has constructed.

Ocean's performance can be described as genuine, raw, and comfortable, revealing his self-acceptance and pride of his own masculine and feminine sides. He is able to incorporate a hybrid approach of masculinity and femininity through a strategy of coolness, balancing the worlds of queerness and rap through his fashion, his production designs, and the blurring of his natural voice with the higher-pitched, more feminine voice. While singing and rapping lines that incorporate both concepts of masculinity and femininity, Ocean does not draw on a large theatrical production or spectacle, as other masculine rappers may utilize (Oware, 2011). Rather, the performance is simply Ocean himself (in a more masculine presentation) and his simple set, utilizing a more feminine approach of subtlety and vulnerability than other rappers (Oware, 2011). His blurring of the masculine and feminine is not seen as an event of grandeur, but rather his natural appearance and actions. This trend is strengthened when noting the video screens behind Ocean. Rather than displaying visuals or messages, the large screens are connected to a livestream of Ocean, coming from his cameraman below the stage (Dario2jr1, 2017, 4:06). The only other visuals that the audience sees is an intimate connection to Ocean and his performance.

Rather than display images of women, wealth, or other symbols that may be seen as strongly masculine, Ocean chooses for his audience to be connected to him and his presentation of himself. Ocean asks the crowd to witness his blurring of masculinity and femininity in an act of intimate authenticity. Again, these decisions by Ocean and his production crew lead to a vulnerable, normalized presentation of progressive masculinity. Ocean carries out the performance and the message of "Nikes" on his own terms, leading to a more confident presentation of progressive masculinity. The crowd becomes connected to the concept through him, rather than a set of spectacular events or effects. In this sense, Ocean introduces or strengthens a sense progressive masculinity in his message of comfort and pride.

Final Thoughts on Frank Ocean

Through the lyrics, the visual presentation, and a live performance of “Nikes,” Frank Ocean presents a blurring of the masculine and feminine to his audience that begins to normalize the hybridity of the two. In the song itself, Ocean (2016) uses a “masculine” deep voice and a “feminine” high-pitched voice to present messages that present expected mindsets of both gender identities. Ocean’s (2016) “two versions” present themselves in tandem with one another, flaunting material success and pride in physical appearance, while also searching for a genuine romantic and sexual connection. The song reveals that this blurring is a part of Ocean’s life, and he will not hide one identity to appease music labels or larger audiences. In the music video for “Nikes,” Lebon (2016) presents a comingling of the masculine and feminine body in both Ocean’s presentation and the other performers. Featuring Ocean in masculine scenarios with glitter and makeup (traditionally feminine accessories) spotlights how both identities coexist in his understanding of his identity. Further, the blurring of the masculine and feminine body throughout the music video speaks to how Ocean feels comfort in both identities and encourages the audience to consider the place of both in their own identities. Lastly, Ocean’s live performance of “Nikes” in 2017 characterizes Gates’ concept of signifyin(g) and McCune Jr.’s notion of coolness, as Ocean subtly plays with a masculine presentation in a feminine set, encouraging his audience to think further about the messages he is displaying. Rather than depending on a large production to end his concert, Ocean leaves his audience with the responsibility to consider Ocean’s presentation of progressive masculinity, and the duality present in “Nikes” as a whole (Calton et al., 2014).

Lil Nas X

When Montero Hill, better known by stage name Lil Nas X, dropped “Industry Baby,” the world was very familiar with his name. Lil Nas X (referred to as X in this section) burst onto the scene in 2018 with the release of “Old Town Road,” a musical genre bender that mixed notions of country and rap that ended as number one on the 2019 *Rolling Stone* charts (Blake, 2020). From his release of “Old Town Road,” X was referred to as a “disruptor,” or a clear rejection of the norm that is expected in the genre (Blake, 2020). X was met with an array of backlash, as X did not “talk white,” when compared to popular country artists and many critics in general labelled X’s first song as a fluke (Mann, 2008, p. 73; Katz, 2019). Despite the controversies and critiques, X’s “Old Town Road” took home song-of-the-year honors at the 2019 MTV Video Music Awards, and many wondered what his next step would be (Katz, 2019).

X’s next path appeared to be cementing his place in the music industry. Rather than cower from the critiques and assumptions that he was a one-hit wonder, X continued pushing “Old Town Road” into mainstream discussion with features from established country star Billy Ray Cyrus, internationally renowned DJ Diplo, and famous rappers Young Thug and Lil’ Wayne (Coleman II, 2019). With continued support from artists in various genres, X continued to release music, coming out with his first EP, “7 EP” in 2019.

However, X would garner more public discussion in 2021. with the release of “Montero,” the first single of his first album. The music video for “Montero,” directed by Tanu Muino and X himself (2021), featured lyrics of X speaking on how he wants to connect more deeply with his male sexual partner and a highly discussed scene of X performing a lap dance on an actor dressed as Satan, eventually killing Satan. Many critics (especially those with religious backgrounds) argued that X’s sexuality was too aggressive and made them uncomfortable, with

some even calling him “demonic” for his presentation (Raffetto, 2021). Not only was X committing an act that could be deemed blasphemous, but he did it while presenting himself as an exotic dancer – a traditionally feminine role. While the content and visual performance of “Montero” could warrant its own research project, I mention it to provide background to “Industry Baby.” X was the center of controversy; whether arguments persisted over his place in the genre of country or rap, in the music industry, and his involvement with satanic conspiracies, X was a public figure whose career had been surrounded by criticism and skepticism.

“Industry Baby”

“Industry Baby” served as a response to this backlash and a message to critics that X was here to stay. The song stands as a reply to critiques that a queer rapper who presented symbols of the devil and disrupted normal genres did not have a place in the industry. Even the title itself is a play on the term “industry plant,” which is used to describe an artist who appears to be organically discovered, but who is backed by a large label who provides financial support (Sridhar, 2019). Coincidentally, the term “industry plant” is more often than not forced onto women in the music industry (Moser, 2021). “Industry Baby” plays on this concept to present X as a boisterous, confident image of Calton et al.’s (2014) progressive masculinity who will not apologize for his sexuality and the blurred gender identity he flaunts. This can be seen immediately. The song begins with a triumphant brass section, almost as if announcing the emergence of X in the song (Lil Nas X, 2021). Following this entrance, a heavy beat is introduced under the trumpets, resembling the kind of hard-hitting bass and drums that would accompany a traditional rap song (Lil Nas X, 2021). With X’s first words, he raps:

Baby back, ayy, couple racks ayy

Couple Grammys on him, couple plaques ayy

That's a fact, ayy, throw it back, ayy

Throw it back, ayy. (2021)

From the first moments of the song, the listener encounters the hybridity of the masculine and feminine in X's music. Reminiscent of other male rappers, X opens the song with a masculine persona flaunting of his success and his wealth (Kopano, 2000). In the first moments of the song, X reminds listeners over a traditionally masculine beat that he has garnered more material accomplishments than the audience or even some of their favorite musicians. Further, X's rapping voice is naturally low, presenting himself as a hypermasculine figure.

However, immediately after this, X chants "throw it back" (2021). According to Rap Dictionary, "throwing it back" is defined as "to shake your ass and make it pop." While not a gendered term on the surface, the examples listed with the definition often have "girl" or "bitch" before the term itself, suggesting that "throwing it back" is a command or action inherently connected to the feminine (Rap Dictionary). As Gaunt (2009) explains, this is not a necessarily new revelation, as rap music often sexualizes women and places them under the command of men. However, as Just and Muhr (2019) point out in their research, sexual dancing has become an act of empowerment for women. By taking control of their bodies, those who identify as feminine have developed an active "embracing, enjoying, and reclaiming" of their sexuality and how they express it (Just & Muhr, 2019, p. 4). Further, X's declaration of "throw it back" resembles less of a command and more an act of celebration. As Just and Muhr (2019) argue, women have been reclaiming phrases such as "throw it back" to inspire strength and confidence in their sexuality. In this opening, X is describing himself and his actions. The first lyrics that X presents are "Baby back," referring to himself and his desire to keep accumulating success (Lil Nas X, 2021). When he declares "throw it back," X is recounting his own movements and

reclaiming of his body that has garnered him the confidence and power to make a song such as “Industry Baby.”

X continues to solidify his pride in his identity and his creations as he raps, “And this one is for the champions, / I ain’t lost since I began, yeah / Funny how you said it was the end yeah. / Then I went did it again” (Lil Nas X, 2021). X successfully blurs notions of masculinity (material success, braggadocio) while also responding to critiques that his feminine messages and appearances would not be successful. As Li (2018) writes, hyper-Blackness in masculine rap music is characterized by one’s ability to overcome adversity and find more success than others. Through these lines, X is proving his ability to remain with the masculine figures in the genre as he declares that this song is for the champions who have not lost and see continued success. At the same time, this success occurs from his ability to be a disruption – to speak on his queerness, to openly show himself sexually dancing and connecting with men, and to break expected standards of male musicians. Even with the masculine lyrics, X’s music contains references to his feminine identity and how it spurred comments that “it was the end” and he would not see success because of his behaviors (Lil Nas X, 2021). This ability to blur the pride he holds in his more feminine traits and messages with a masculine delivery is only the beginning of X’s hybridity in “Industry Baby.”

As the chorus of “Industry Baby” begins, X continues to proudly own his identity and actions, as he raps “I told you long ago on the road, / I got what they waiting for / I don’t run from nothing, dog / Get your soldiers, tell ‘em I ain’t laying low” (Lil Nas X, 2021). This exclamation of success and confidence assists in characterizing X’s progressive masculinity as legitimate and resistant to criticism (Calton et al., 2014). X references “Old Town Road,” claiming that he knew from the beginning of his career that he would be successful as a disruptor

in the music industry (Lil Nas X, 2021). The song that placed X as a nontraditional member of the genres of both country and rap continue to be his point of pride, as he is unafraid to express what sets him apart from societal expectations. As Marinucci (2016) writes, queerness and feminism are inherently connected through “avoid[ing] the binary and hierarchical reasoning” (p. 139). X is embracing his queerness (i.e., a more feminine orientation) and his ability to “disrupt norms, interrogate new ground, and encourage exploration outside the domains of normativity” (McCune Jr., 2008, p. 302). Yet while doing so, X is making a masculine announcement that he will not run from conflict, as he challenges those who criticize his work to gather soldiers and prepare for a war. As bell hooks (2004) writes, “patriarchal black males, like males in general, see sexuality as a war zone where they must assert dominance” (p. 68). In this chorus, listeners are witness to X’s balancing of the more feminine queerness and the more masculine desire to prove his dominance in comparison to other rappers. With a more traditionally masculine delivery and attitude, X proudly declares himself as a disruption to what is expected of him as a male rapper.

This clever balancing of the masculine and feminine continues in X’s first verse in the song. After a few opening lines when X (2021) speaks on his desire to receive more plaques for his success, he raps, “Tell a rap n**** I don’t see ya, hah / I’m a pop n**** like Bieber, hah, / I don’t fuck bitches I’m queer...” Again, X is presenting himself as a hybrid figure of masculinity and femininity, along with assuring audiences that it is his unique identity that cements him as one of the most successful rappers in the industry. In the opening line of this section, he shares that he does not see other rappers, a fairly powerful statement when considering the typical desire by rap artists to be authentically seen and respected in the genre of rap. As McLeod (1999) writes, being authentic is remaining true to oneself and not falling into trends that diminish or

soften a rapper's appearance. X challenges other rappers by declaring that he cannot see them at all, a dominantly masculine statement that paints other rappers as weaker figures than X. Yet, following this line, he says that he is similar to international popstar, Justin Bieber. This claim directly contradicts the masculine, dominant rapper image that X just painted as X identifies himself with a white pop singer. Li (2018) explains that there are "two rudimentary qualities of hip-hop music: (1) that it is the most masculine of all music genres; (2) that the rapper ought to be distinguished from the singer" (p. 3). When compared to rappers, singers can be noted as softer, focusing more on sharing emotions and abiding to popular trends when compared to the masculine rapper who wants to prove their authenticity (Li, 2018). Even so, X identifies himself as a pop singer of international renown, just like Justin Bieber. After stating that other rappers are invisible to him, which serves as a masculine concept, X willingly states that he is similar to a pop star, a more feminine role. This represents the balance that X shares in "Industry Baby." He is confident, proud, and unwilling to back down, adopting a masculine delivery, beat, and attitude. Yet, his confidence and pride stems from his feminine qualities and identities.

This trend continues with the next lines, as X (2021) raps that he does not "fuck bitches," as he is queer. X takes a traditionally masculine phrase in the genre of rap and flips it on its head. As Rose (1994) finds in her studies, "rappers also tend to reinforce the male sexual domination of black women and confirm and sustain the construction of black women as objects and status symbols" (p. 229). This is a common theme in many of the studies concerning rap music. To mass audiences, male rappers have become infamous in their ability to objectify and sexualize women in their lyrics or music videos (Oware, 2011). The ability for a man to control women and engage in sexual intercourse with multiple women can become a symbol of success. And in one line, X deconstructs this image. Still with his masculine delivery and attitude, X confidently

states that he does not sexually dominate women because he is queer. This clear, assured announcement of his sexuality is a direct contrast to McCune Jr.'s "down low" (2008, p. 173). Rather than attempt to hide his identity to avoid more controversy, X embraces who he is and ensures that all listeners will hear about his sexuality and what it means to be him. X's presentation of his queerness is delivered in the same strong, masculine tone that most rappers use to describe their sexual intercourse with women. X is a successful rapper, but he does not need to brag about his power over women to prove it. Instead, he will place his feminine identities and qualities at the forefront of a masculine delivery, hinting that progressive masculinity can garner just as much success as traditional masculinity.

Following X's first verse, he repeats the previously discussed pre-chorus and chorus sections, further repeating his pride in his progressive masculinity and his status as a popular rapper. However, after the chorus, listeners are greeted with a guest verse from rapper Jack Harlow. Harlow is a white, 23-year-old rapper from Kentucky who has gained a large following in recent years (Nguyen, 2022). Harlow presents himself as an easy-going, charismatic master of words who references current celebrities, events, or subjects in his music (Nguyen, 2022). Most interesting in the case of "Industry Baby," Harlow identifies as a straight man who will rap about his ability to flirt with and charm women, leading to sexual encounters.

Upon initial analysis of "Industry Baby," Harlow's inclusion felt like a roadblock. In a song that features X proudly describing his ability to be a masculine and feminine hybrid model of success, what place does a rapper who claims that "These girls know that I'm nasty, / I sent her back to her boyfriend with my handprint on her ass cheek" have (Harlow, 2021)? Yet upon further reflection, X and Harlow's collaboration can serve to mark the development of progressive masculinity in the genre of rap. As Li (2018) writes, "hip-hop culture has not been a

place where gay rappers are welcomed...queer hip-hop is still predominantly indie music and has not truly re-shuffled the rules of the hip-hop game” (p. 2). And yet Harlow, one of the most rapidly growing rappers in the genre, went against the societal expectation and served as a feature to a queer rapper’s song. I believe this is a sign that progressive masculinity and the abandonment of what is expected of men is beginning to find its place in the genre and in society (Calton et al., 2014). “Industry Baby” becomes an example of progressive masculinity, fighting against tradition, and the blurring of the masculine and the feminine (Calton et al., 2014). Most of the song features X, who is a queer rapper who openly claims his status as a disruptor of masculine rap music and speaks of his sexual encounters. Then, halfway through, a predominantly masculine figure enters and shares his experience. To end the song, the more feminine X takes back over and closes with his refusal to back down and his confident claiming of his identity. Outside of X himself, the song becomes a representation of the hybridity of the masculine and feminine, and has seen success, hitting number one on Billboard’s Top 100, and earning 40.6 million streams in its first week of release (Billboard, 2021). The song was no fluke and reveals that songs that promote messages of progressive masculinity have a place in popular culture (Calton et al., 2014).

Music Video of “Industry Baby”

A song that characterizes blurring calls for a music video that does the same, which X and director Christian Breslauer delivered in July of 2021. As the video opens, X is sentenced to a prison, which already hints at the complex notion of Black masculinity (2021, :10). On the surface, research by the National Institute of Justice states that as of 2008, one in fifteen Black men ages 18 and older are incarcerated, and one in nine Black men ages 20-34 are incarcerated. In more recent studies, John Gramlich of Pew Research Center (2020) found that black men are

still incarcerated at more than double the rate of white men, with about one in twenty Black men ages 35-39 located in state or federal prison. The prison system consistently exploits Black men not only physically, but mentally (hooks, 2004). As hooks (2004) writes, “Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out” (p. ix). Prison is a consistent threat to black men across the United States, and yet X purposefully sets his music video in this setting.

Further, the concept of masculinity in prison is convoluted with a mixture of hypermasculine violence and queer relationships. Trammell (2012) found that prison violence is often at the forefront of prison culture and institutional rules, although this violence can be a product of inmates “perform[ing] for other inmates and develop[ing] culture” (p. 7). In order to avoid being the victim of violence, some prisoners may feel they need to be overly masculine and threatening in order to gain control. The concept of “prison macho” resembles that of standardized masculinity: hide one’s feelings, appear tough, and dominate others (Hua-Fu, 2005, p. 1). However, masculinity in prison can transform. In his writing on homosexuality in prison, George L. Kirkham (2000) explains that male prisoners go through a “figurative castration” in which they are deprived of heterosexual relationships (p. 250). Separation from the normalized sexual pursuit of women can cause male prisoners to feel a disconnect to standard masculinity. Sex becomes a topic of constant discussion and want. This can lead to what Kirkham (2000) describes as “situational homosexuality,” in which inmates describe their sexual actions as a reaction to sexual deprivation and as completely emotionless (p. 252). In order to maintain masculinity, inmates who engage in these acts must ensure it is not perceived as queerness.

As a result, a social hierarchy of queerness can be established in prison institutions, in which prisoners are labelled as actively seeking queer sex, engaging in sex because of weakness, or an ideal masculine figure who participates in sex simply because he needs to fulfill an

emotionless sexual desire (Kirkham, 2000). To comprehend the blurring of former understandings of masculinity and the seemingly feminine acts they are performing, men in prison attempt to designate a hierarchical system that still established some form of desired masculinity. Yet, inevitably, their understanding of themselves and their masculinity will change. Outside of sexual experience, serving time in an institution can lead to self-reflection and an evolution of one's understanding of who they want to be. Nandi (2002) further studies this idea of constructing masculinity in prison by noting that the experience of prison forces men to reevaluate their masculinity. Rather than focusing on sex, aggression, or violence, Nandi's participants touched on how masculinity means that one "isn't afraid to cry...A real man has compassion for those who have none for themselves" (2002, p. 97).

X adopts this setting of blurred masculinity for his music video and utilizes it to share that he will not be ashamed of his identity. X is sentenced to prison for his aforementioned acts in the "Montero" music video, but he never once apologizes for his deed. Instead, he pays his penance in jail while maintaining his progressive masculinity and escapes with that same identity. Further, he does not succumb to the hierarchy of situational homosexuality by presenting himself as primarily masculine or primarily feminine. Rather, the focus is on his blurred identity that capitalizes on both gender identities and his ability to demonstrate both at once.

For X to not only place the setting of this music video in a prison, but also to ensure that all the prisoners are Black men wearing bright pink jumpsuits, speaks to his ability to blur the masculine and feminine in a way that connects with social commentary (Breslauer, 2021, :10). As X explains himself, he "wanted to go to a place people would least expect me to go in a music video, an overly masculine place and make it gay asf. I also wanted to visualize the theme

of breaking free from the shackles society places on you” (2021). As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) would note, X is using his music video to “evoke deep stirrings of connection, and challenge habits of indifference and disregard” (p. 14). X is aware of the power his visuals have on his audience, and the power of images to encourage change. In this way, X promotes a civic spectatorship in his viewers, and encourages them to consider what shackles they may feel in their lives. Situating progressive masculinity and the abandonment of traditional masculinity in a prison setting allows for X to comment on both his comfort with his own identity and the evolution of progressive masculinity in society (Calton et al., 2014).

In a theme that will continue throughout the music video, X asserts himself as a dominant leader in this prison setting who is also proudly queer. From :18-:32, we see two men accompanying X through the hallways and holding onto his pockets, continually staring at him as if X is in full control of their actions (Breslauer, 2021). From the opening scenes, Breslauer places X, a queer Black man, in a position of power inside a setting that has stolen humanity from Black men. The concept of X with two men holding onto him and following his every move is an interesting play on the misogyny and control over women that male rappers have exhibited in the past. As Cundiff (2013) explains, male rappers have drawn on misogynistic tendencies to control or own women in their music, a concept that X seems to be playing with in the music video. This is a unique take on the gaze, especially with the presentation of the Black masculine body. There are no women presented for desire or sexualization as Mulvey (1975) would note; it is men who seem to be in a sexual relationship with X. When considering Li’s (2018) writing that rap music videos are often filled with homophobia, this is a direct visual form of rebellion. Rather than flaunting women and treating them as objects, X emphasizes his queerness with two men in pink jumpsuits who hold onto his pockets and follow his every action

(Breslauer, 2021, :22). This is X's way of claiming a masculine space and making it more feminine. X can still present himself as an attractive figure, but he does so in a way that highlights his queerness and his identity.

X and Breslauer (2021) continue to place feminine actions and characteristics at the forefront of this masculine space in the next scene. From :34-:48 in the music video, X and a group of black men dance in the prison showers, completely nude with their genitalia blurred (Breslauer, 2021). Again, X draws on the expected standards of a rap music video and places themes of femininity and queerness in them. Avery (2017) notes that rap music videos have previously been critiqued for their "abundance of sexualization and degradation of women," most notably with scantily-clad women dancing in front of the camera (p. 162). In the "Industry Baby" music video, X and Breslauer (2021) present Black men as the figures to be sexualized, and that sexualization is celebrated. As Just and Muhr (2019) write, feminist thought has evolved to believe that sexualized representations can be empowering. X and these men are not placed in subaltern positions; their dance moves are confident and direct, implying that X and these men are proud to be placed in this position (Breslauer, 2021, :34-:48). As Ewen (1999) writes, individuals do not have much say in how their class identity is presented and consumed. However, X counters this belief by placing himself and his dancers in an image where Black queerness is visually confident. These masculine figures present themselves in more typically feminine roles, (literally) revealing themselves and their progressive masculinity to millions of viewers.

The hybridity of the masculine and feminine continues in the prison yard scene starting at 1:00, featuring X and other muscular men lifting weights in their pink jumpsuits (Breslauer, 2021). Oware (2011) notes that "rappers routinely engage in hyperbolic masculinity, rhyming

about their virility and strength, flaunting their muscles or pumping their chests on their album covers and music videos” (p. 23). Breslauer (2021) presents these masculine figures of strength in bright pink outfits, a color predominantly associated with femininity and softness (Johansson, 2017). Similarly to Lebon’s (2016) work in the “Nikes” music video, Breslauer (2021) finds ways to mix masculine and feminine images in the viewers’ eyes, encouraging them to reconsider their previously established notions of gender identity. As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) write, images “can linger in memory, evoke deep stirrings of connection, and challenge habits of indifference and disregard” (p. 14). Perhaps a viewer sees the presentation of traditionally masculine figures in bright pink and reconsiders their previous indifference to the color as it was usually associated with feminine figures. For other male viewers who may wear pink, perhaps this image strengthens their identity and reinforces their belief that progressive masculinity is possible (Calton et al., 2014). X and Breslauer’s (2021) presentation in the music video serves as an example of blurring that can enforce new ways of thinking.

This scene provides further clouding of the masculine and feminine starting at 1:07, in which X is featured dancing while holding two dumbbell weights (Breslauer, 2021). X’s dancing is not reserved, again showing a confidence in his ability to blur the more traditionally masculine action of lifting weights with his more feminine pink pants. And in a more direct moment, X throws away one of the dumbbells and performs what is referred to as the “limp wrist” in popular culture (Breslauer, 2021; Harris, 2006). The term “limp wrist” was used to describe a man whose physical stature or actions were more feminine, drawing from the historical notions that feminine figures were weaker and did not possess the natural strength to hold their arms in powerful, straight positions (Harris, 2006). “Limp wrist” became a synonym for phrases such as “you throw like a girl,” but could also be utilized to describe a man who was seen as weak-willed

(Harris, 2006). As time went on, this “limp wrist” began to be used as an insult to queer men – to shame them for not abiding by traditional masculine expectations (Harris, 2006).

Yet in this scene of the “Industry Baby” music video, X utilizes the “limp wrist” in a moment of confident reclamation. As he throws the weight and strikes the pose, he raps “I don’t fuck bitches, I’m queer,” representing both a verbal and nonverbal acceptance of his progressive masculinity (Breslauer, 2021, 1:11). By adopting a more feminine action that was used as a homophobic insult in the past with a masculine conviction, X again presents his pride in his identity and his sense of progressive masculinity, refusing to submit to the homophobia present in traditional masculinity (Calton et al., 2014). Rather than allowing the “limp wrist” concept and action to reduce his pride, X re-articulates it as a purposeful action and reclaims it as an action that can characterize his identity. In this moment, X is presenting McCune Jr.’s (2008) conceptualization of the negotiation between “masculine bravado and black queer culture” (p. 302). With his more traditional rap beat and masculine, lower-pitched delivery, some may not expect X to present himself in such a feminine style. Yet, X is not afraid to include both aspects in his identity and performances, instead using them as both a subject in his music and as moments in his music video. Again, X continues to contradict the popular images and the gaze that would be forced onto him. For young viewers who may identify with X due to this racial identity or queerness, this is a powerful moment that stakes a proud claim of progressive masculinity in rap. As Ewen (1999) writes, when the public witnesses a style, they want to emulate it. X shares his style of progressive masculinity with bravado. Even in this masculine space of the prison yard and weightlifting, X presents his queerness through more feminine actions. This direct hybridity of the masculine and feminine in the music video continually positions X in a place of power that allows him to share his progressive masculinity and

encourage audiences to recognize this identity as normal and just as worthy of success at other more traditional identities.

Viewers see the first appearance from masculine guest feature Jack Harlow at 1:19, as Harlow provides X with a book that contains a small pickaxe to help X escape from his cell (Breslauer, 2021). A masculine figure helping a more feminine figure is a rare occurrence in rap, according to Li (2018). Li (2018) explains that male rappers have continually used queer slurs in their lyrics, and phrases such as “no homo” have turned into “genuine tokens of hip-hop culture” (p. 2). From the early days of rap music, male rappers have attempted to distance themselves from acts or qualities of queerness, believing that it did not have a place in the genre or appear weak (Li, 2018). For the masculine Harlow to directly assist a queer Black figure escape from a more masculine setting of prison is a visual representation that this attitude toward queer rappers may be changing. This may seem like a small step, but as Hariman and Lucaites (2016) write, photography “not only records something but displays it to a spectator for dedicated, artistically enhanced observation and response,” which can lead to civic spectatorship and more discussions concerning vital social issues (p. 14). Even the action of a clearly masculine rapper collaborating and helping a queer rapper can serve as a foundation to speak on progressive masculinity in the genre and the normalization of this hybridity. Rather than be stuck in what is expected of a masculine figure, Harlow leaves these standards behind and adopts a stance of equality (Calton et al., 2014).

This point is further proven by Harlow’s continued appearances in the music video. During his verse, Harlow is seen with a female police officer putting on her pants, implying that Harlow and the woman were engaging in sexual actions (Brislauer, 2021, 2:16). While this is certainly a more traditionally masculine presentation of a sexualized woman, I encourage

viewers to consider the placement of this traditional masculine image in juxtaposition to the remainder of the music video. It is rare to find a rap music video that features queer men fawning over another man, nude men dancing together, and a heterosexual relationship. The fact that these aspects are all seen in one video indicates that some artists are no longer afraid to express themselves, which helps pave the ways to other. This is evidence that progressive masculinity is emerging in the genre. For a genre that was so vehemently opposed to queerness, this visual collaboration asks a question previously unseen: why can't a heterosexual and queer rapper come together (Li, 2018)? Viewers who are fans of Harlow may consider their own approach to queerness in their lives, encouraging a civic spectatorship that encourages "ongoing discussion about public affairs" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016, p. 15). To have a song that promotes queer confidence and acceptance, and suddenly feature a masculine verse, highlights the fact that both the feminine and masculine can co-exist in rap music. Brislauer (2021) is not afraid to feature both, hinting that this hybrid combination of masculinity and femininity should not be some hidden concept; rather, it is now normal and acceptable to put it on the world's most viewed screens.

Brislauer (2021) continues to show a literal blurring of the masculine and feminine starting at 2:39 in the video. In this moment, X and Harlow are seen taking mugshots together and switch nameplates at 2:41 (Brislauer, 2021). Although this is a quick moment, I believe this passing of the nameplates characterizes a literal blurring of the masculine and feminine. X and Harlow are both comfortable enough with their respective identities that they can trade the nameplate associated with the masculine for a nameplate associated with the feminine and vice versa. In a genre such as rap that has built "its reputation as hyper-masculine, sexist, and homophobic," this literal and symbolic trading of identities is a pivotal moment (Li, 2018, p. 8).

Rather than purging or omitting queerness, “Industry Baby” promotes an acceptance of this identity in the world of rap, encouraging a normalization of the blurring of masculinity and femininity in the genre.

This concept is celebrated in the final scene of the music video, as the prison yard is filled with X and Black men in pink jumpsuits performing another dance (Brislauer, 2021, 2:55-3:20). This dance, filled with more traditionally feminine movements, continues to promote the proud acceptance of progressive masculinity, disregarding the expected masculine standard, and X’s status as a queer rapper in the music industry (Calton et al., 2014). This prison yard is a predominantly masculine setting, taken over by more feminine performances, serving as a representation of X’s introduction and continued presence in the genre of rap (Brislauer, 2021, 3:00). The masculine and feminine are put on display together, showcasing the growing reality that the genre of rap and society is seeing a convergence of these two gender identities. As X raps, he isn’t going to lay low or be on “the down low,” and neither is the wave of progressive masculinity.

Live Performance of “Industry Baby”

If Frank Ocean’s live performance of “Nikes” was an example of blurring through subtlety, X’s live performance of “Industry Baby” could be its antithesis. On September 12, 2021, X and Harlow took to the stage of the MTV Music Video Awards to perform “Industry Baby” (MTV, 2021). With the opportunity to perform in a televised event with many viewers, X wasted no opportunity in his continued presentation of progressive masculinity. Scholarly work by authors such as Rose (1994) have found that much of the attention on live rap performances is “fixated on instances of violence” and further degradation of women (p. 28). X’s performance

avoids these stereotypical concepts, and instead focuses his performance as a self-assured declaration of his identity and his ability to mix the masculine and feminine.

At the beginning of the performance, X confidently arrives on stage in a bright pink drum major outfit with a marching band behind him (MTV, 2021, :22-:30). This moment stands out as a grand entrance of X's identity, and the pride and acceptance that comes with it. McCune Jr. (2008) writes of the down low, and the historical habits of Black queer men to hide their identity in fear of exposure or ridicule. X has no such concern; his entrance seems to be designed to focus every audience member's attention onto him and his identity. Further, X's status as the "leader" of the band in a bright pink jumpsuit encourages an additional acknowledgement of his identity and the success he has garnered with it. As the implied grand marshal of this band that follows his steps, X is exhibiting the same control and domination over a group of people that scholars such as Cundiff (2013) have come to expect in male rappers. Even so, X opts for a bright pink outfit to lead this unit, a stylistic choice that would typically lend itself to more feminine standards (Johansson, 2017). From his first steps onto the stage, X explicitly showcases his comfort in blurring the masculine and feminine.

This hybridity continues to be spotlighted when X's shirt is ripped off by a crew member, presenting a toned, muscular chest (MTV, 2021, :52-53). Again, X displays a balance between his more masculine features and feminine identities. Oware (2011) writes about male rappers' tendencies to display muscles as an example of their power or dominance over the other, but it is rarer to see a rapper doing so while wearing bright pink pants to compliment the muscles. The stereotypical expectation of how a male rapper should perform is further challenged when X and his background dancers (all men, donning all pink outfits and pink ski masks) begin a choreographed dance that features more sexual dance moves (MTV, 2021, 1:11). X and his

dancers are not shy with their bodies, performing dance movies that mimic what scholar Aisha Durham (2012) would label “booty dances” (p. 41). Durham explains that dance moves that prominently feature a performer’s “booty” are often “associated with Black women in rap music videos” and are typically defined as a more feminine characteristic (2012, p. 37). As Parasecoli (2007) notes, media provide “a recurring theme of the Black body perceived and described not only as a source of nourishment...of sexual attraction and repulsion, danger and fascination” (p. 111). Often, this nourishment is found in curves, with terms like “bootylicious” used by Black artists such as Snoop Dogg and Destiny’s Child to describe the curvaceous nature of Black women (Parasecoli, 2007, p. 111). As Durham (2012) also points out, booty dances can be used to emphasize an authentic sense of Blackness and connection to culture, potentially serving as a symbol of pride and power. In this moment of X’s performance, he and his male dancers draw on a stereotypically feminine action to present an image of confidence and acceptance. As Grisard (2017) writes, it would be harmful to assume that all booty dances or all feminine body movements are inherently feminine, as there are certainly body movements that are part of masculine culture. Rather, we should focus more effort on breaking the binary of gender and accepting that X’s moves could also be deemed as masculine from certain perspectives. The stage is filled with men performing booty dances, disregarding any care for what is expected of them. Instead of a concert performance that features the degradation or sexualization of women, X presents a group of men who disrupt the norm. Rather than appease audience expectations, X offers a convergent presentation of the masculine and feminine, encouraging his audience to understand the two as cohabiting in one’s identity.

A further blurring of the masculine and feminine comes in the choreography from 1:23-1:30 in the performance (MTV, 2021). During the aforementioned “I don’t fuck bitches, I’m

queer” line, X strikes the limp wrist pose, again proudly placing his queerness and more feminine traits on display while surrounded by masculine figures (MTV, 2021, 1:23). However, following this pose, X and his dancers throw punches at imaginary targets, then throwing out a knee as if in a fight (MTV, 2021, 1:28-1:30). Following an action that traditionally projects femininity, X and his crew resort to more violent, masculine moves that mimic fighting an opponent. In an instant, X transitions from a feminine dance move to actions that imply “extreme toughness, invulnerability, violence” (Oware, 2011, p. 22). Rather than let the feminine action dominate the definition of X, he incorporates a masculine action right after, showcasing that he is able to slip from a feminine to masculine performance in a second.

This trend continues through the performance, with combining gendered elements that are specifically highlighted in the dance section from 1:50-2:16 (MTV, 2021). While rapping his chorus about how X is what they have been waiting for and challenging his critics to gather their soldiers, X alternates between more feminine dances and more masculine actions. At one point, he and his background dancers drop to a squat, accentuating their booty dance (MTV, 2021, 1:58). This action emulates the authentic, sexual confidence that Durham (2012) notes in her study of the Black female body. Following this, X stands up straight, pointing to the crowd and pounding his chest in a victorious manner as he raps, “when I’m back up at the top I want to hear you say” (MTV, 2021, 2:08). The confident poise in X’s posture and his challenge to the audience speaks to the same braggadocio and bravado that Kopano (2002) notes in studies of traditionally masculine rap music. The rapid succession in which X invokes these different identities represents his ability to switch in and out of masculine and feminine identities. The blurring that occurs on the stage works to educate audiences that men do not need to abide by the traditions that have forced on them (Calton et al., 2014). His performance shows there is an

increasing presence that progressive masculinity imparts on the culture of rap music. Instead of shying away from showing these traits on a nationally televised stage, X proudly leans into them and encourages the vast number of viewers to recognize and normalize these characteristics of progressive masculinity.

Following this chorus, Jack Harlow emerges from a cage in an all-black leather outfit and begins rapping his verse (MTV, 2021, 2:24). X comes into frame, visually encouraging Harlow, and connects with Harlow in a moment of clapping their hands together along with the beat of the song (MTV, 2021, 2:36-2:38). This moment also symbolizes a coming together of the masculine and feminine. X, in his pink and more feminine outfit, and Harlow, appearing in a more masculine all-black outfit, both feel comfortable and confident with each other and connect in this moment to perform a shared action. The blending of these two gender identities appears in a physical form, as X and Harlow show the ability to come together. This is a direct opposition of Li's (2018) research that notes that rap often steers away from queerness and has been littered with homophobia. Rather than avoiding one another, Harlow and X have a direct moment of comradery and respect with each other. This hints that rap may be entering a new era, where the masculine and feminine can co-exist in a place of mutual respect. Rather than trying to separate queerness and rap music, artists like X are discovering a way in which to blend the two. As McCune Jr. (2008) writes, hip-hop and queerness have both served as disruptors in traditional society by challenging norms. In his eyes, "the relationship between hip-hop and black queer expression is, in a sense, a meeting of the queers" (McCune Jr., 2008, p. 302). X is the representation of this relationship between the two. By proudly including notions of progressive masculinity in his live performance, X is declaring that his identity should be respected and accepted in the industry. He is not going anywhere, and he is proud to say so.

Final Thoughts on Lil Nas X

Through his lyrics, the images in his music videos, and his live performance of “Industry Baby,” Lil Nas X encourages his audiences to refresh their mindsets and develop a sense of respect for a blurring of the masculine and feminine. In “Industry Baby,” X (2016) refuses to be held down by critics who have bashed him for disrupting the norm, and proudly shares that he is, and will remain, a star that refuses to burn out. With a masculine approach, X reminds his audiences that he will not shy away from his more feminine characteristics and identities. X’s play on the “industry plant” term reveals his confidence in the face of critiques, and his comfort with his identity. In the music video for “Industry Baby,” Brislaue (2021) places the feminine in a masculine setting and proves how dominant a feminine figure can still remain. X is always seen in a position of power, even when in a prison setting. Whether he is followed by two men who fawn over him, breaking out of prison and knocking out a security guard, or leading a group of confident male dancers, X is able to balance the masculine and feminine traits of his identity to break out of a physical (and mental) prison that attempts to repress and oppress him (Brislaue, 2021). Lastly, X’s live performance of “Industry Baby” continues to draw on this blurring in a live setting, as X switches from masculine actions to feminine dances, revealing the constant comingling that occurs between the two gender identities in his life. Harlow’s inclusion in this performance implies that rap may be entering a new era, in which queer rappers are provided a spot at the table. Rather than avoid the feminine, X and Harlow connect in this performance and showcase how the blending can lead to both material success, and a heightened level of self-acceptance and authenticity.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The previous chapter highlights how male rappers such as Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X are assisting in the evolution and normalization of progressive masculinity in rap music. Through the enactment of delineative gender identities in their lyrics, their music videos, and live performances, Ocean and X work to solidify progressive masculinity's position in the genre by creating both written and visual rhetoric that normalize the abandonment of traditional masculinity (Calton et al., 2014). Additionally, both artists' unique approach to promoting progressive masculinity reveal that it can be expressed in various ways and deserves further study. This chapter will summarize the implications to address the purpose of this research and address the future possibilities of examining the rhetoric of progressive masculinity in rap music, music in general, and media.

Expression of Progressive Masculinity

Before delving into some of the more specific implications, I believe one crucial conclusion of this research is important to note. Calton et al.'s (2014) progressive masculinity is in a state of emergence; therefore, I believe that trying to label a rigid, precise way in which to express progressive masculinity would be counter-intuitive to its foundational framework. There is certainly an aesthetic of converging masculine and feminine traits to present a new understanding of gender identity, and that can be expressed through physical presentation or spoken word. As Marlon Bailey (2013) describes, queerness revolves around "a way to denaturalize and destabilize categories, such as lesbian/bi/gay and straight/heterosexual and male/female and man/woman" (p. 17). The concept of queerness strives to avoid strict understandings and categorizations of identity and performance, meaning it would be unfair for me to label one correct way to express progressive masculinity. Ocean's expression can be seen

as more subtle and embedded, while X is more direct with his messages and performances. Although both men differ in their delivery, their message of progressive masculinity and abandoning traditional masculinity remains similar (Calton et al., 2014). Further, as Li (2018) states, queerness would not be as empowering if it represented a “set of images” that place one’s experiences in a concrete box (p. 62). In the spirit of this application of progressive masculinity, it seems more fitting to conclude that there are various ways in which an artist can blur the masculine and feminine, and, as such, it can open a multitude of avenues for future research (Calton et al., 2014).

This understanding of progressive masculinity can provide rap listeners with a new understanding of how masculinity operates inside of their favorite genres. Rather than continue to be exposed to hypermasculine rappers who encourage actions of sexual aggression, domination, and homophobia, Ocean and X are providing a new understanding of how a rap listener can express their own masculinity. For young listeners who may feel they need to hide their progressive masculinity, or their own identity, Ocean and X are role models who can encourage confidence and assuredness. In a climate of social change and discussions on race and gender, Ocean and X become stalwarts of positive change, by showing how the blurring of gender can serve as a healthy and successful way to live. Further, they establish pride in their own Black masculinity, which can serve as inspiration to listeners who may need to hear that message.

I believe this serves as an invigorating and inviting conclusion for future artists and scholars. The emergence of progressive masculinity encourages explorations of expressions that an artist can mold into their preferences in disregarding tradition (Calton et al., 2014). Using the foundations from this research, future scholars could note the presence of progressive

masculinity in other media, such as pop music with stars like Harry Styles who wear feminine clothing, or in athletics with basketball players such as Russell Westbrook and Kyle Kuzma arriving to games in feminine clothes and pushing the boundaries of fashion. What is it about these contexts that make it easier or more difficult for an individual to blur gender identities? Further, scholars can explore an area to better understand the issue of race and progressive masculinity. Why have white artists such as Harry Styles been mostly celebrated for his choices, when X, instead, faced criticism and backlash? Lastly, while the potential benefits and impacts of progressive masculinity have been considered, researchers should work to specifically locate the effect of artists such as Ocean and X on audiences of all ages, as well as how an adaptation of progressive masculinity affects one's understanding of themselves and their self-image.

Rhetorical Studies

I believe that this research highlights the benefits of utilizing rhetorical criticism, while also suggesting areas in which the study of rhetoric can still evolve. At the beginning of my project, an approach of rhetorical criticism was beneficial in uncovering persuasive messages that may have been hidden in the texts (West & Turner, 2018). Rather than perform a content analysis to locate when Ocean or X mentioned queerness, a rhetorical approach allowed me to investigate more deeply how their lyrics, visuals, and performances challenged gender identities and traditions. This was beneficial in both my study of verbal and visual rhetoric. A content analysis would not have been useful in highlighting the use of a prison for X's music video, or Ocean's use of more feminine vulnerability in lyrics or a simple stage design in his live performance. Utilizing rhetorical criticism allowed me to locate the meanings behind how these artists' lyrics or performances drew on cultural notions of gender identity and tradition in order to promote their messages of progressive masculinity.

However, this project also reveals the shifting nature of rhetorical messages and why it is crucial that scholars evolve along with them. I find it difficult to imagine being able to successfully note the effectiveness of Ocean and X's messages without the combination of feminist and queer criticism. Further, this project would have suffered without the combining of verbal and visual rhetoric to understand these artists. I believe this is representative of the current complex nature of society. With a constant connection to media, the continuous drive of political and social movements, and various issues of human rights and safety in our world, the world can change in a nanosecond. It is becoming increasingly difficult to rely solely on tradition, and it is important that academic studies do not fall into the trap of depending on the past. While the foundations of rhetorical criticism are important, there is room for a continued combination and evolution of theories that allow for a more nuanced approach to artifacts. Rather than abiding by a traditional approach to a text and only searching for specific elements, I encourage scholars to complicate how they study texts. There is room to combine theoretical approaches, to explore how they complement one another, and to utilize them to better understand complex messages. We should not become too focused on searching for traditional aspects and miss out on what modern rhetors are creating. Much like progressive masculinity encourages evolution, I believe academic studies could benefit from a hybridity and a willingness to evolve along with our complex society (Calton et al, 2014).

Further, this project encourages a heightened sense of media literacy when approaching the rhetoric of music as a listener and a scholar. As a listener, studies such as this provide a new lens in which to understand their favorite music. Rather than be completely enthralled and distracted by the beats or the spectacular visuals from an artist, listeners are better equipped to understand what kind of messages their favorite artists are spreading, and whether those

messages are harmful or helpful. It is my hope that the reader of this study will try to understand what music is trying to promote, and that they can make educated choices on how to choose and understand different artists in the industry. Further, this project helps the media literacy of researchers too. Scholars must be apt to notice when a rhetor's message is subtly or overtly countering a master narrative, as Ocean and Frank took two different approaches with their messages. A scholar who is not careful may have seen X's project as more powerful or important, simply because they are more direct. Further, this study encourages scholars to fully understand the artists they are studying and how their context influences their music. An understanding of Ocean's elusive nature and X's history of disrupting norms were crucial for this project.

Verbal Rhetoric and Visual Rhetoric

Foss writes that "critics engage in rhetorical criticism to make a contribution to rhetorical theory," and my research in this project exemplifies this by noting the way in which modern rhetors can twist tradition to create and deliver a persuasive message (2018, p. 7). When considering the traditional aspects of feminist rhetorical criticism, a scholar often looks to find ways in which a rhetor completely opposes a dominating tradition (Foss, 2018). When studying notions of hegemonic masculinity, many feminist critics search for ways in which an individual is defying traditional standards of masculinity and noting how that individual is resisting expectations by straying from them completely. This study reveals that rhetors can stray from traditional acts of resistance and still promote an effective message of counteraction. Similarly, it shows that the study of rhetoric is constantly evolving, and rhetorical critics should be open to new and potentially unpredictable messages from rhetors.

The rhetorical work of Ocean and X does not align with traditional acts of feminist resistance, as they do not fully dispose of traditionally masculine standards. Certainly, both men enact aspects of femininity and more traditionally feminine messages in their music and performances, but it would be inaccurate and naïve to say that they fully abandon traditional expectations of masculinity. What has made their work so riveting is the fact that they balance both. Yet, I believe that these two rappers are using their music to promote notions of both feminist and queer theory. In this sense, we can move the study of rhetoric forward by addressing how many modern rhetors no longer abide by rigid standards. A feminist message may not fully abandon all notions of dominant ideology, but that does not mean it is ineffective or unimportant. Instead, we can adopt the mindset of Ocean and X, and be more open to blurring expectations and resistance. In a way, these messages that converge both gender identities may be more effective in reaching large audiences and inspiring change.

Further, this research emphasizes the importance of *kairos*, or the timing and context of a rhetorical message (Sipiora, 2002). With references to everyday issues such as the prison industry, X draws on the current cultural climate to deliver a message that resonates based on a salient contemporary issue. By taking such a masculine and controversial space like a prison and subverting gender identities in his music video and performance, X capitalizes on controversy for an even more effective blurring of the masculine and feminine. By exercising control over a topic that has dehumanized both Black and queer men in the past and turning it into an area of confidence, X claims power through his persuasive performance. In a time of provocative discussions regarding the place of race and gender in society, it is paramount that scholars continue to push forward and explore more ways in which progressive masculinity is developing in the current climate.

This research also advances the current understanding and application of visual rhetoric by emphasizing just how impactful and prevalent visual rhetoric can be. While the lyrics of Ocean and X are powerful on their own, the visuals in the music video and live performances of both artists serve as strong foundations for progressive masculinity. The way in which both men could express their blurring of the masculine and feminine through visuals is striking and engaging and helps encourage further research into how artists can use the avenues of music videos and concerts to spread their messages. Hariman and Lucaites (2016) draw on the idea of civic spectatorship, or “an extended social relationship that works more like a process of attunement or affective alignment than a logic of direct influence,” and this thesis confirms how the effectiveness of music videos and performance to establish civic spectatorship (p. 15). As these two men establish notions of progressive masculinity and abandoning traditional masculinity through live performances, concert fans feel more connected to their message and may even incorporate such messages into their lives (Calton et al., 2014). A music video with millions of views can reach global audiences and promote a message to be digested and discussed. In a world dictated by screens, visual rhetoric is steadily gaining influence and is worth deeper analysis.

It is also important to consider how Ocean and X’s work engages with the idea of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Rather than perpetuate the idea of the male gaze in which women’s bodies are presented to be viewed and consumed, these artists infer that the gaze should view any gender identity with equal respect and acceptance (Mulvey, 1975). The “Nikes” music video places women and men at the same angle, noting that both identities should be viewed equally powerfully and beautifully (Lebon, 2016). X places his body and other Black male bodies in naked dance scenes, subverting the expectation that women are the only ones who can be seen as

sexy, at least in music videos (Brislauer, 2021). One caveat here is that these rappers do not escape the commodification of the Black body. While the gaze is shifted to be more equal, it still places the body as the thing to be viewed. Rap artists and record labels are still concerned with the bottom line, so highlighting the body in these ways, even if they promote more gender equity, still reinforces and renders the Black body as a commodified object. This complex presentation of the Black body and how the gaze continues to affect the content of music videos should be further studied.

Further, this study encourages an evolution of how we approach the study of visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric, primarily, is noted for its use of connotative meaning and messaging (Danesi, 2017). As Danesi (2017) points out, images such as photographs and videos rarely have denotative meaning and depend more on a cultural understanding or approach to the content of images to establish a message. The literal content of an image is often acknowledged, but not analyzed, and instead a focus is placed on the message behind the presentation. However, the visual presentations and performances of Ocean and X challenge this notion, and hint at the idea that the denotative approach can be beneficial when studying notions of gender identity.

Much of the most effective blending presented in Ocean and X's works come from the literal blurring of the masculine and feminine. A man rests his head on a woman stomach's while her arm is placed on his chest (Lebon, 2016, :48). A group of fully naked men dance together in a prison shower (Breslauer, 2021, :35). These images are examples for how deeper meanings exist; but, their denotative meanings are just as direct and thought-provoking. Human bodies are positioned and presented in a way that represent the co-existence of the masculine and feminine. And X's nude dance crew is a shocking and powerful image even without deeper examination. These two men present visuals that carry meanings and messages through the presentation of

gender blurring. In a sense, this encourages a fresh approach to visual rhetoric that promotes a study of the “vernacular life” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016, p. 12). Rather than focus on the deeper inductive meaning, visual rhetoric can simply present “where life is lived most of the time” and abide by a deductive approach that has been oft abandoned for the inductive study (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016, p. 12).

Feminist and Queer Theory

This research provides evidence that both feminist and queer theory are useful orientations to adopt when studying modern rhetoric. With the evolution of social movements that focus on women’s rights, queer rights, and an overall inclination toward equal human rights, I believe these two theoretical orientations are beneficial tools to understand current rhetors’ messages. Further, I believe these two perspectives continue to complement one another effectively, as both feminist and queer theory center around disrupting oppressive norms by encouraging a new understanding of gender identity (Marinucci, 2016).

Feminist theory advances a resistance to hegemonic, albeit patriarchal, domination, and this thesis reinforces why this lens continues to be useful in academic research. The utilization of feminist theory was crucial in locating notions of patriarchal traditions and how Ocean and X’s work combatted them. The feminist scholars referenced in this work provided understandings of traditional gender identities, and indications when Ocean or X would draw on masculine traits, feminine traits, or a combination of both. Additionally, feminist theory was beneficial as it allowed for a better understanding on how the male body is produced and discussed by and in society (Wiegman, 2002). Reminiscent of this research as a whole, feminist theory allows for a hybrid investigation of masculinity and femininity, and it proved crucial in understanding how

these artists performed both gendered identities. I believe it should continue to be utilized in future studies of progressive masculinity.

Similarly, queer theory played a pivotal role in this research for its ability to locate messages and actions that disrupted societal norms. Queer theory allows scholars to highlight that “which we choose not to speak, or do not speak about,” which was a fortuitous fit for studying queerness in rap music (Allan, 2020, p. 20). Queer theory’s focus on locating and discussing the non-normative was crucial in addressing a previously taboo subject such as queerness in rap music. Facets of queer theory allowed for vital insight in order to note and comprehend how Ocean and X’s lyrics, visuals, and performances differed from the norm, and how those disruptions were a purposeful strategy. Rather than allow progressive masculinity to be a confusing and difficult subject to discuss, queer theory provided the navigation for understanding progressive masculinity’s characteristics and effectiveness in dismantling tradition. I strongly believe queer theory is a crucial part of progressive masculinity, and it should continue to be utilized.

Rap Music

Through this research, we learn that rap continues to evolve as a genre and is beginning to evolve beyond the previous criticisms of promoting misogyny and homophobia. As Li (2018) states, queerness in rap music used to be a completely hidden topic. Ocean and X are playing a crucial role in ensuring queerness establishes a seat at the genre’s table. This should not come as a surprise, as rap has always been characterized by evolution that challenges traditions (George, 2004). Ocean and X continue to carry the torch of the founders of rap, and they are leading the genre into a new era that highlights inclusion and the freedom to express one’s identity.

Future studies should incorporate how performance studies has relevance with rap music. According to Schechner (2013), performance studies accounts for behavior, or how and why a text was created, how that text interacts with viewers, and how that text changes over time. Performance studies strives to show that actions and behaviors are never universal; rather, an individual's performance is unique and inherently linked to social factors, meaning each performance has the propensity to mean something differently (Schechner, 2013). In the genre of rap, performance is crucial. Whether it was the era of gangsta rap in which rappers appeared with their posse to portray a rough and tough image or the performance of gender blurring by Ocean and X, rap music is centered around behaviors and actions that display specific messages. Future work that examines the blurring of gender in music, television, or film should incorporate performance studies to better comprehend how the cultural context relates to certain behaviors or actions, and how the dominant culture will accept or challenge them.

This research also offers a fresh perspective on how hegemony can operate in the genre of rap music. Previously, notions of hegemony and rap music were centered around the idea that music labels used their social power to force artists to act and speak in certain ways. This research reveals how rappers can operate in their own productive hegemony to encourage evolution in the genre. Gramsci (1971) infers that hegemony is neutral, and that replacing a hegemony involves the introduction of another hegemony that is ideally more egalitarian. The hegemony of rap can then become a productive tool that rappers can utilize to spread their messages of growth. As Wheeler (2006) writes, rap music represents multiple levels of the Black community – from the lower class to the highest class. Rap can become its own hegemony that empowers the Black community into a new hegemonic position. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) note that hegemony can be considered a central concept of power, rather than a marginal one.

Hegemony can be seen as a concept of fullness that uncovers a stable identity. As a result, rappers have the power to authentically use their agency and subjectivity to address issues of oppression and cement themselves as important, influential members of society. Further, the growing presence of Black independent rap labels signals that new hegemonic productions are possible and that rap can create a new hegemony that transforms the meanings of gender performances.

I believe these two artists are paving the way to change the genre because of both their material success and their influence on other rap artists. Both Ocean and X have seen material success in the form of awards, music streams, and recognition from other notable artists. Ocean and X have performed collaborations with primarily masculine figures in the genre of rap, while simultaneously rappers who express homophobic or misogynistic views are now criticized for these beliefs (Kolarić, 2020). Further, the work by Ocean and X has been paramount in encouraging rap artists such as Tyler the Creator, Kevin Abstract, and Steve Lacy to speak on their own gender identity and sexuality. Rap music is a form of cultural resistance, and I believe it is transitioning into an era of resisting hate and inequality in relation to gender identity (Kopano, 2002).

The Future of Rap?

I believe this research reveals that the foundation of rap music is still alive and well, and that the genre continues to transition into a new era of tolerance and respect. Rap music was founded and commended for its ability to “go against the grain” and challenge expectations, and Ocean and X are continuing with this tradition by challenging notions of hegemonic masculinity in the genre (McCune Jr., 2008, p. 302). Although there are always exceptions, much of rap has been criticized for its misogyny and promotion of violence (hooks 2004; Perry, 2004). Many

modern rap songs are filled with lyrics relating to a rapper's ability to sleep with the most women, to assert dominance over other rappers, and to flaunt wealth (Li, 2018). However, like DJ Cool Herc who came before them, Ocean and X are on a search for expansion and evolution of the genre of rap music (George, 2004). Their advocacy for progressive masculinity in their music and their performances is rare and has faced backlash on numerous occasions, yet they persist. In a time when critics may argue that rap music was promoting traditional, potentially unhealthy messages, Ocean and X stand out as the ushers of a new era.

In a genre so focused on the spoken word, Ocean and X continue to emphasize the power of the rhetoric of rap lyrics. Rose writes that "rap's cultural politics lie in its lyrical expressions," and these two men continually alter the landscape of the genre through their work (2004, p. 270). It would be inaccurate to say no artist has done this before – as mentioned, Deep Dickollective and Big Freedia are two of many underground queer rappers who spoke on similar themes – but since Ocean and X have used their lyrics to catapult notions of progressive masculinity into the mainstream discussion, they can reasonably be described as trailblazers regarding gender in rap music. Both Ocean and X have utilized their platforms to perform a rhetorical reconstruction of the climate of rap music. A new era of rap music is emerging, in which inclusion and acceptance of multiple identities are overpowering the traditions of domination and hypermasculinity (Asward & Setoodeh, 2021). Recently, artists such as DaBaby have been reprimanded and seen their performances cancelled for using homophobic slurs at a concert (Chan, 2022). I do not believe it is farfetched to say that if DaBaby had used these terms at a concert in the early 2010s, he would not have faced as much backlash. However, Ocean and X, through their lyrics, visuals, and performances have restructured the landscape of rap music, including what is acceptable and not acceptable.

This is not a surprise, as Alim (2006) writes that rap lyrics serve as powerful forms of discourse. However, what is worthy of research is how a discourse rooted in feminist and queer theory plays such an impactful role in the traditionally masculine genre of rap. This trend calls for more research on why this rhetoric has been effective in the current climate of the music industry. As mentioned, it is hard to know if artists like Ocean and X would have seen as much commercial success if their music occurred earlier. DDC and Big Freedia, for all their talent, struggled to earn mainstream rotations on radio channels or streaming platforms, while Ocean and X are both winners of a Grammy award.

I believe it is fair to question whether this change is legitimate or driven by an industry's desire to capitalize on the growing climate of social acceptance. However, I believe that this is a legitimate change, and we will continue to see more rap artists abandoning traditional masculinity and adopting progressive masculinity in their music (Calton et al., 2014). Ocean has been accepted by and worked with traditionally masculine rappers such as Jay-Z and A\$AP Rocky, while X has seen features from Jack Harlow and rap legend, Nas. Queer rap artists such as Kevin Abstract have openly stated that Ocean and X were his inspiration to have more confidence in himself and his messages (Kranc, 2021). These two men are having a noticeable influence on the genre of rap, and it seems as if that trend is generating traction.

This new evolution of masculinity and the masculine identity in rap music should not be a surprise, as rap was built on the constant desire for change and growth. As George (2004) writes, stalwarts such as Cool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, and Grandmaster Flash were the early founders of a rap music that promoted curiosity and evolution of the genre. The work of the two men analyzed in this thesis draws on these traditions and seems to hint that rap music is still a constantly evolving genre. Although some older fans may complain that all rap music sounds the

same and the modern style of mumble rap has caused a decline in the quality of music, Ocean and X are prime examples that the opposite is true. Modern artists are continually pushing the boundaries of the genre, on what it means to be a man in rap, and on the idea of gender identities in society. Like those legends who came before them, Ocean and X's music personifies the original goal of hip-hop: to inspire change and alter the world.

Masculinity, Femininity, and the Blurring of Gender Identity

If there is one conclusive message to be delivered through this research, I strive for it to be that gender identity can serve as a blurred, ever-evolving cultural notion, and that this realization can be a momentously positive experience. It is understandable why individuals feel the need to conform to what is expected of their assigned gender identity. Works by bell hooks (2004) and Patricia Hill Collins (2004) clearly discuss the complexities of Black masculinity and what has led to the establishment of traditional masculinity in culture. However, what this work and future research should continue to study is how these traditions are constantly morphing. Ocean and X help lay the foundation to understanding how one can navigate through this co-existing of the masculine and feminine in one's presentation, and the benefits that can come with it.

While noting this co-existing, we should problematize the binary concept of gender. Although the binary was beneficial in identifying actions that were traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine for purposes of this thesis, this research reveals that trying to separate the two can often be more harmful and convoluted. Rather, Ocean and X teach that the binary dichotomies can be incredibly restrictive and discourage an artist from expressing themselves authentically. Although I drew on this binary to identify traditionally masculine and feminine traits and actions, I believe we have entered an era where we can abandon these notions. Future

investigations into gendered performance in rap music should explore how gender is a discursively constructed concept that often reinforces power inequalities (Butler, 2006).

Ocean and X's music offer a positive and empowering representation of progressive masculinity. Although both artists address deeper topics in their lyrics or music videos, the presentation of progressive masculinity primarily highlights the pride and excitement they have with their identities and their abandonment of traditional masculinity (Calton et al., 2014). Ocean, although lamenting for a love, spends the second half of "Nikes" speaking on how he accepts his life as it is and is happy with caring for his partner regardless of circumstance. He is not disappointed or ashamed of himself for the "two versions" that he carries with him; rather, they are an accepted dichotomy in his identity that allows him to grow and accept his current situation (2016). X presents a louder, prouder presentation of his blurring and assures the listeners that he will remain steadfast. Progressive masculinity can be seen as a freedom from the "prison" in which these men have been forced in the past, a concept that is worthy of future research (hooks, 2004, p. ix). The liberation from gender identity could supplement efforts at empowerment beyond gender identities, as well.

This study counters Goodwill's (2019) argument that Black masculinity is a "stagnant monolith" (p. 289). Rather, Ocean and X provide a fresh, radical view of Black masculinity in which notions of sexual aggression and domination can be replaced with a blurring of gender identity. Rather than the reclamation of masculinity as centered around traditionally masculine notions of dominating others, Ocean and X articulate how power can come from unabashedly expressing the identity that makes them feel most comfortable. Black men do not need to hide their identities and sexualities to remain on the down low, but can draw on the masculine and the feminine to create their own sense of Black masculinity (McCune Jr., 2015).

We can see this ever-growing notion of progressive masculinity in real-world examples as well. Black rappers such as Kid Cudi and Young Thug have recently performed professional modeling shoots or made public appearances while wearing dresses and traditionally feminine attire. Russell Westbrook, nine-time NBA All Star and one-time Most Valuable Player, posts online pictures of himself in skirts. Lakeith Stanfield, an Oscar nominated actor, has been seen on covers of magazines wearing heels and stockings. This mindset is expanding outside of rap music, and artists like Ocean and X contribute to the reasons why. The blurring of the masculine and feminine is gaining public acceptance and encouragement, and the work of Black musicians such as Ocean and X is, at least in part, leading the charge. The confidence, pride, and influential verbal and visual rhetoric of men such as Ocean and X are working to shift the cultural landscape and dissemble previously established notions of gender identity.

One area that future studies should continue to investigate is the modern presence and rhetoric pertaining to the Black transgender body. The Black transgender body has been placed in an unstable position where media have acknowledged and revealed Black transgender representations; yet, the Black transgendered body is still ridiculed and shunned in society (Brooks, 2016). Some of this may stem from ignorance about transgender bodies and the complex processes that are associated with them. Ocean and X provide a perspective in which to understand the Black transgender body through their work. Through their messages pertaining to the comfort and confidence that comes from the blurring of the masculine and feminine, listeners are introduced to the notions of transgender bodies and the power that emanate from them. Future scholars should continue to study artists and public figures who reveal or perform Black transgender bodies, and how their rhetoric continues to craft a world in which the transgender body is accepted and better understood.

Limitations

Inevitably, there are limitations in this research. To begin, I only studied two artists who exhibit progressive masculinity in their lyrics, visuals, and performance. While these two artists are often the two most cited when speaking on queerness in rap music, it is difficult to believe that these two men are entirely representative of queerness in rap. As mentioned, progressive masculinity is expressed in various ways, and future research should explore how other rappers promote progressive masculinity. Further, the study of only rap music is a limitation in the sense that gender blurring could occur in other genres of music in similar or different ways. By only studying one genre, I limit myself to one specific understanding of the expression of progressive masculinity, and the topic could be approached differently in the various genres of music. I encourage future scholars to study these genres. Lastly, the scope of this project serves as a limitation. While the analysis of a song, a music video, and a live performance are beneficial in offering a comprehensive view, this research still only focuses on one specific song and its messages. It is possible that Ocean and X offer additional or different presentations of progressive masculinity in their other songs, and future studies could perform analyses of Ocean and X's discographies as a whole, and how progressive masculinity operate in them.

Final Thoughts

This research encourages the rejection of terms such as “manly” or “girly” to describe clothing, beliefs, actions, and any aspect of life. Through the verbal and visual rhetorical work of Ocean and X, we can clearly see how rap music continues to hold a powerful influence on aspects of society and the constant quest for evolution. Queerness, once shunned in the genre, has earned its rightful place in rap music; two stalwarts of resistance and creation are collaborating to create a more welcoming environment.

And for a kid like me who loved language and wasn't quite sure where his place would be in society, Ocean and X serve as exemplars of how one does not need to change who they are to earn acceptance. It is not a sign of weakness of a man to be more submissive, to apply makeup, or to live one's life in a way that defies tradition. Conversely, these are all normal aspects of one's identity that can strengthen them, and are small, necessary parts of a beautifully complex puzzle of humanity.

The world is shifting. The power of language is constantly evolving, and so too should how we study it. The genre of rap, founded on resistance, continues to challenge the status quo and help establish new mindsets. And gender identity itself is blurring into an individualistic performance of what helps one feel comfortable in their own skin. Artists like Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X capitalize on the influential power of rap music to encourage these evolutions and assist in establishing a world in which one can live a life of pride and acceptance in whomever they choose to be.

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