"Cause Not Enough Niggas Rap and Be Gay": Redefining Black Queer Masculinities Through Intersectional Dynamics and Performativity in Contemporary Rap

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Abstract: This paper addresses several elements to be found in hip hop culture regarding the antinormative performativity of Black masculinity/-ies by African American LGBTQ+ rappers. It focuses on the emancipative catharsis at the center of much of hip hop culture. With the examples of rappers Kevin Abstract, Lil Nas X and singer Franck Ocean, I explore the queer intersectional position of U.S. hip hop queer music and probe the LGBTQ+ dynamics that have come into the spotlight. Through their music videos, their onstage performances, and the very content of their lyrics, I analyze both form and message to assess their impact on their audience. In this respect, the interpretation of YouTube "Reaction" videos is a precious measure of the reception of these messages by people of African American descent. These performances and responses are addressed as phenomena, namely as objects reflecting the emancipative goals of the performers in their decisive relation to their audience.

Résumé : Cet article interroge plusieurs éléments concernant la performativité anti-normative des masculinités noires de rappeurs LGBTQ+ africains américains. En m'arrêtant sur les rappeurs Kevin Abstract, Lil Nas X et le chanteur Franck Ocean, j'analyse la position intersectionnelle queer du hip hop étasunien et j'examine les dynamiques LGBTQ+ qui en émanent. Au travers de leurs vidéo-clips, leurs performances scéniques et les paroles de leur chanson, j'étudie à la fois la forme et le message et je mesure leur impact sur le public. Les vidéos de réaction sur la plateforme YouTube sont une mesure précieuse de la réception de ces messages par les Africains Américains. Ces performances et les réponses qu'elles engendrent sont analysées en tant que phénomènes, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'objets reflétant le but d'émancipation des *performers* dans leurs relations au public.

Keywords: Black masculinities, Hip Hop, homosexuality, hypermasculinity, intersectionality, performance, Queer Black men, rap

Mots-clés : Hip Hop, hommes noirs queers, homosexualité, hypermasculinité, intersectionnalité, masculinités noires, performance, rap

On January 19, 2020, Pastor Troy, founding member of the gangsta-hardcore rap group D.S.G.B. (Down South Georgia Boyz), went on a homophobic rant on Twitter where he criticized both younger generation rapper Lil Nas X and Applebee's because of the time he saw two gay men having lunch there. In his attack, he used a language rife with homophobic signifiers that indicated animosity particularly against African American same-sex relations. He claimed that homosexuality weakens the representation and strength of the Black[1] race—i.e., of Black men especially. He wrote:

> "Welp, Guess I won't be winning a GRAMMY…If this what I gotta wear. They love to push this shit on Our Kids!! The other day @applebees had some punks kissing and laughing eating mozzarella sticks. First Thing My 14 yr old Son said was, 'F**** Applebee's' And It Brought Joy to My Heart!! He sees it…their agenda to take the masculinity from Men, Black Men Especially. Some may say, 'He Making Money!!' Rupaul do too, but I ain't bumping his CD!!! Integrity is Priceless. Y'all Better open that 3rd Eye and let your Sons know What Is Real…Or They Ass Gone Be Headed Down That Old Town Road Foreal!!~P.T. #TheyGoneRiiiiiiddddeeeTiltheycantnomore #BlackOwnedandIndependent #NotMySons #ItAintWorthIt #Taketheroadlesstraveled #Youwillstillgetthere #DSGB #Wontbeonmypagelong

This tweet and the account were later erased given the controversy that erupted after the post.[2] It was not the only time Lil Nas X was criticized for his outfits, as I will show below. Yet, this post is important as it allows us to understand what Pastor Troy considers to be an inherent opposition between African American masculinity

and homosexuality. It shows a tension between "us" and "them" and uses a vocabulary that could be linked to conspiracy theories when it goes on about a supposed queer and White "agenda" designed to undermine Black men. It is not new, but this example suggests the shortcuts that can be found to supposedly define masculinity in Black communities—namely, the notion that a Black man *cannot* be a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Research suggests that the antagonism between Black and LGBTQ+ identities is set in a parochial understanding in which the vision that each community has of the other is biased and based on stereotypes. Scholar bell hooks in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, despite some moralizing passages, defines Black masculinity as a way of conforming to White patriarchal societies' mores. She writes:

> Whereas an unconventional perspective on masculinity had given black males alternative grounds on which to build healthy self-esteem, the embrace of patriarchal masculinity meant that most black men measuring against the norm would also be less than a man, failures, unable to realize the ideal. (14)

Furthermore, sociologist CalvinJohn Smiley along with mental and public health professor David Fakunle explain that, after being portrayed as "foolish" (352) during the institution of slavery, Black males became a threat to the White dominant society during the Reconstruction period (353). The menace epitomized by the Black male is at once physical, political, and economic, but above all one of power and domination. The two scholars demonstrate how, throughout US history, there has been a transformation from the benevolent African American male individual toward the criminalization of Black men in US society, dating from the 1900s (Smiley and Fakunle 353-354). From the mid-twentieth century onward, the socio-economic context has made it harder for these men to start and maintain a nuclear family, as young Black men are more often incarcerated and/or subject to police brutality than any other racial group of the US population (Hoston 26-27).

The association of racism with the socio-economic environment, the responses to the stereotypes of race and gender, as well as the contemporary lives of these Black men in the urban spaces of the big cities has created another cliché depicting these urban individuals as tough and hypermasculine. As stated by sociologists Kamesha Spates and Brittany C. Slatton when they analyze the construction of Black male identities:

> Contemporary men of color face a unique challenge. They dwell in a place where it is virtually impossible to live up to socially constructed notions of masculinity and sexuality. Stereotypes about black men, such as being hypersexual, hyper-masculine, dangerous criminals are commonplace in the minds of many Americans. Thus, an integral part of black male identity formation often includes attempts to counter these conflicting and impossible definitions of manhood. (2)

This struggle is characteristic of the formation of African American male identity insofar as the latter necessarily includes race, gender, class, and sexuality as co-constructed aspects of these individuals' identities in U.S. society.

From the 1970s (and until now), a growing number of young Black men started to adopt the codes of the street, something bell hooks argues comes from a depiction of a supposed Black masculinity in the mass media culture (26). In this environment, hypermasculinity was correlated with the Gangsta culture that endorsed easy money obtained by the selling of drugs, hustling, and the affiliation with street/ghetto gangs (25). These images were amplified through the emergence of hip hop in the 1970s and more particularly of gangsta rap in the 1980s—a style that ultimately became archetypical of the musical genre in White America (Kehrer 5).

When DJ Kool Herc created and spread hip hop in 1973, it was synonymous with celebrations. Very soon, MCs (Masters of Ceremony or Microphone Commanders) became more prominent than DJs (Disc Jockeys), and this musical genre attracted a large audience. By the late 1980s artists politicized further the genre,[3] as the group Public Enemy with their committed track "Fight the Power" (1989). Thenceforth,

hip hop has become a means for minority communities to express their struggles and to protest, as well as a place of emancipation against discriminations and racism. Simultaneously, many critics have labeled rap as violent, misogynistic, and homophobic because of the way women and LGBTQ+ people have been depicted in numerous tracks by gangsta rappers. In addition, several prominent rappers have denied the presence of non-male artists in the industry (Kehrer 14). Not only have they tried to push out women, but also queer and gender non-conforming artists from hip hop culture.[4]

Due to the predominance of gangsta rap in the 1990s, images of hypersexual and hypermasculine Black male gangsters in hip hop culture are widespread, namely: Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent who play on the stereotypes of the gangster and the pimp; Jay-Z who, along with Kanye West and P. Diddy, signify the commercially successful rapper; or younger artists such as Wiz Khalifa, Drake, Kendrick Lamar or even Kid Cudi. Although the last two have shown much sensitivity as they address their therapy and depression in their lyrics, their (Black) masculinity is almost never questioned.

More recently, alternative visions of Black masculinities have surfaced in the rap genre. Changes in gender depictions within the African American/Black communities can be observed in these musical styles. In his 2019 book, XinLing Li tackles the presence of Black gay men in hip hop, he explains that "[f]or gay rap music to build a mass audience it would require ultimately the de-heterosexualisation of our collective superego, that is, to make same-sex experience as relevant to the heterosexual as the heterosexual experience is to the homosexual" (155). His analysis mainly focuses on underground gay rappers, explaining his assessment that Black gay/queer rappers cannot be accepted or are limited to repeating sterotypes if the heterosexual norms remain predominant (151). Yet, just one year later, he would be proved wrong with the success of young rapper Lil Nas X. Lauron Kehrer further showed the limits of Li's argument when writing:

> The proliferation of online and print articles in the mid-2010s profiling openly queer and trans rappers such as Big Freedia, Le1f, Mykki Blanco,

> Zebra Katz, and others, as well as more recent writing on Lil Nas X, suggests that the success of these artists is newsworthy because they are anomalies. (19)

The amount of press coverage is indicative of a shift in the exposition of those gay/queer rappers. The irregularities do not reside in the number of stereotypes of gay/queer Black men that are brought into the discussion, but in the reappropriation of existing codes and, above all, of the assertive embrace of sexual and gender identities. These changes reflect interrogations about the dynamics of intersectional identities in contemporary rap and hip hop, and I intend to bring forth some of them to deal with the construction of the Black queer identities of several twenty-first century rappers, expanding on Kehrer's and Li's works.

I am going to focus on three "out" artists who self-identify as cis-gender male gay/queer artists to discuss the intersectional dynamics to be found in their respective works. The choice is made on account of their fame, of their advocacy for the redefinition of Black masculinity in its intersection with queerness, as well as of the way their discourse is brought forward by various media to represent some kind of change in hip hop culture. In doing so, I will address the connection of several aspects of hip hop culture with the performativity of black masculinity/-ies by African American LGBTQ+ artists and the antinormative characteristics that result from said performances. I also want to focus on the emancipative parts at stake when these queer artists display their iconoclast masculinities in their lyrics, in their videos, on social media, in the interviews they give, and even in the attire they wear in their public lives. My analysis will rest upon the lyrics of some of their hit tracks, some of which aroused much controversy at the time of their release. In that way, a semiotic approach using the diverse tools of African American studies, queer studies, and cultural studies at large will allow a better grasp of the construction of intersectional Black and queer identities in the case of those rappers. The choice of Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean is also due to the ultra-contemporary aspect of their work in a U.S. society that, after

the election of Barack Obama, was supposed to be post-racial and post-queer,[5] and set in or after Donald Trump's term.

Since hip hop art has often been grassroots committed art, integrating social factors of racial existence in U.S. society, the entrenchment in urban, individual, as well as community-based realities and experiences that are fixed in that racialized environment can be found in the music made by rapper Kevin Abstract and R&B singer/rapper Frank Ocean. As for rapper Lil Nas X, he inscribes his rhymes in a more personal setting, creating a completely different universe. Their songs nevertheless have striking similarities when they mention their struggles, the ordeals they have faced, or even sometimes their hopes to have better lives and that are transcribed in their lyrics and music videos—something that is quite common to every rapper, whether straight or queer, in hip hop culture (Li 12). Each artist expresses his own experience in his own fashion, thus leading to various ways of enacting intersectional dynamics in hip hop culture—that is, intersectional because they are at once Black, male, queer/gay individuals, who often come from single-parent and/or working-class families, and who used to live in the "ghetto."[6] They use their songs as media to encode these intersections in their on-stage and off-stage performances.

When I use the word *performance*, it ought to be understood as the artistic routine of an artist directed to an audience. Yet, the term will also refer to the concept demonstrated by Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* in which she explains that:

> acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (185)

Consequently, I will interrogate the discourses of these performers both in terms of lyrics and interviews, but also of physical presence, including clothing. In hip hop culture, rap is to be delivered to an audience by an MC (the rapper) and, although in this article I will primarily deal with the content of the tracks and videos, I will always

have the audience response in mind. Accordingly, I will end by tackling the reception of the different messages by the public.

Changing the Game: Queering Masculinity and the Genre(s)

In addition to lyrics, the representation of Black masculinity in rap is particularly noticeable in the various music videos that accompany the rappers' rhymes. One of the artists who reinforce this specific depiction of Black heterosexual men most is 50 Cent, for instance in the track "P.I.M.P." from his 2003 debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. This song and its video exemplify the hackneyed hypersexual and hypermasculine facets of Black men that are repeated throughout hip hop culture. Although he is a "pimp," 50 Cent does not have the stereotypical perm and Cadillac that represent these procurers, and the latter are presented as objects of ridicule. Even though there seems to be an underlying criticism of a particular haircut, which is demonstrated in the work thanks to the interlude skit with Fiddy's (another name for 50 Cent) introduction to and subsequent enthronement in the Pimp circle, the position of panderer is the desired one as it involves multiple female partners (a harem that is visible in the film) as well as social and economic success. This is perceptible in Snoop Dogg's verses when he raps, "I got my niggas[7] in Queens, I got my bitches Uptown / I got my business in Manhattan, I ain't fuckin' around." Though stereotypical, the commodification of women as well as the position as dominant Black males in this song and its video reinforce the commercially solipsistic, one-sided vision of African American men as womanizers and gangsters. Those attitudes are thus encouraged in the various recipients of this song, and this image of African American male identities will continue to disseminate as the only possible behavior to be expected from young Black men (Clay 1355–1356). However, non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal songs are more and more conspicuous and some hit songs such as Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)" (released in 2011) or Megan Thee Stallion's "Shots Fired" (2020) are merely two illustrations of this evolution in representations of previously utilized minorities[8]—although it is still possible to interrogate their impact.

This is also what gay rappers Kevin Abstract and Lil Nas X do in their respective ways in the lyrics of their songs and the images they broadcast in the accompanying videos.

In December 2018, Lil Nas X, born Montero Lamar Hill, released "Old Town Road"—a song that is defined as "country rap," namely a mix of two allegedly antithetical genres. After the re-release of the track by Columbia Records in a remix featuring Billy Ray Cyrus in April 2019, when it had been at the top of the charts worldwide for some weeks, the rapper decided to come out on Twitter on June 30, 2019, the last day of Pride month. This decisive moment can be considered performative given that it became a discursive foundation of Lil Nas X's public queer identity.[9] As he was topping the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, his decision to come out was made in a moment when his commercial value was high but could have instantly crumbled because of the desertion of more traditional hip hop listeners. On the other hand, announcing his homosexuality was an act of confrontation showing that a Black gay man could be commercially successful in rap, in complete opposition to the reifications that are presupposed by the industry and to the expectations of what the sexual and masculine identity of a Black man should be. By embracing the rainbow flag (symbol of the LGBTQ+ communities) in his tweet and by revealing its presence on the cover of his EP, Lil Nas X sought to combine masculinity with queer identity. Because his success at that time was relying on the song "Old Town Road," the reading of its lyrics associated with its "official movie" video still show a rapper who demonstrates a form of virility linked to the symbol of the cowboy.

In a semiotic interpretation, the character depicted by the rapper in the video insists on his Americanness as an original founder of the "Frontier West,"—a bandit and a hustler to be sure, yet a hero of the construction and expansion of the United States. Jeremy Agnew writes, "The mythic cowboy also has to have various guns, including revolver, carbine, rifle, or shotgun, to back up his virility and toughness, to resolve physical conflicts, and to bring order to the frontier" (91). Though in this role Lil Nas X does not have a weapon and is

all smiles, the figure of the bandit/hustler ought also to be linked to the image of the gang member and the thug, anchoring him in a representation of Black male rappers that is founded on a hypermasculinity based on violence, theft, and easy money. Furthermore, by playing on the image of the cowboy, Lil Nas X adds up to the presence of Black people in the conquest of the West and their partaking in the construction of the symbol of the virile hetero-patriarchal man (Allmendinger xi, 95). Signs of this hypersexuality/hypermasculinity are further demonstrated in the lyrics when the artist rhymes, "Cheated on my baby / You can go and ask her." The use of a pronoun referring to a cis-gender woman apart, the possession of the female body is displayed as the rapper flaunts 1) the fact that he cheated on her, becoming a womanizer just like 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg, 2) that he is the powerful, masculine member of the relationship who can do as he pleases and who will always be accepted when he comes back.

Although two other singles followed "Old Town Road," it was in his hit "HOLIDAY," distributed in 2020 and the first not to be included in his EP *7* (therefore that was released after his coming out), that Lil Nas X responded to the criticism that he received. It is not a diss track,[10] still he addresses the questions of his sexuality, of his success and, while he does this, he reemploys masculinist codes that are however queered. Just like in subsequent singles ("MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)," or "INDUSTRY BABY," for example), the rapper uses his songs to mark his position in the music industry—as a successful artist as well as a young Black gay man. His rhymes become performatively political in the sense that they convey the positions which he defends as far as his identity and his art are concerned.

In the track "HOLIDAY," he raps the following:

> Ayy, it's a holiday
> I got hoes on hoes and they out of control, yeah
> Ayy, this another one
> All my niggas on go and I hope that you know it …
> I might bottom on the low, but I top shit (But I top shit),
> Switch the genre on you hoes, do a rock hit (Mmm)
> I got the biggest damn song, fuck the charts, sis, I don't need 'em.

In addition to the transformations that he contributes to making in hip hop (the genre is mixed with country music in "Old Town Road," "F9mily (You & Me)" mixes it with pop punk, there are R&B and pop in "C7osure (You Like)," etc.), the references to sexuality are telling of his decentering hip hop from heterosexuality, but also of his queering masculinity. In this extract, he uses a lexis that originates from the (Black) LGBTQ+ community and uses it to refer to sexual practices. These references are combined with his position in the music industry and reveal the importance he gives himself in hip hop culture. In that manner, the verbs "bottom" and "top" respectively refer to the person on the receiving end of a (gay) intercourse and to the one who is on the giving end. Thus, Lil Nas X elaborates on the fact that a Black man can "bottom" and still be the leader, consequently queering hyper-masculinity in his performance. In the song, he addresses an audience made of "sis" and not "bros," at the same time as he disparages them as "hoes" whom he cannot control. The music video is going further by starting a trend that the rapper will continue in following videos, namely he focuses the point of view on his own persona.

Setting the plot in the future (dated Christmas Eve 2220), all human characters are performed by Lil Nas X in a high-tech Santa Claus's abode, office and factory. When he talks about having "got hoes on hoes and they out of control," it is a group of robots that are on the screen. Even if the fictionalization implies the pretense as an actor, the subtext abounds with explicit details that are to be correlated to the performance of his sexuality while changing the established codes. Along with this vocabulary proper to gay sexual experiences, he employs the slang used by self-identified "straight" Black men who have intercourse with other men. Jessie Heath and Kathy Goggin explain "the Down Low (DL) encompasses more than just clandestine same sex relations. In the media, it has been described as a subculture unto itself; a secret, dual sexual lifestyle practiced predominately by young, urban, hyper-masculinized African American" (17). Consequently, Lil Nas X's private life and sexual behavior are linked to his insertion in the hip hop world that he eventually dominates both as the powerful person in his sexual intercourse and the dominant artist in the genre.

The discursive significance is important because it imposes the presence of gay men in a hypermasculine and hypersexual environment that is no longer only heterosexual. Furthermore, I argue that the presence of queer identity is conveyed by the ungendered robots that make up Lil Nas X's harem—one where gender is not commodified anymore, intermixing hip hop culture with more LGBTQ+-oriented praxes. The vernacular that is used by Lil Nas X is obviously one that will be understood by his fans and the other people familiar with hip hop, creating new perspectives and epistemologies.

Marvin Carlson, in his seminal book *Performance: An Introduction*, explains that gay performance:

> involved shifting the performance of identity from the stigma itself (homosexuality) to what Esther Newton in a 1972 book on female impersonation calls the "halo effect," the violation of culturally standardized canons and gender-coded canons of taste, behavior, and speech that normally signal sexual orientation. For men such violations might include "effeminate" or overly "delicate" speech or behavior, an "aesthetic" orientation, an interest in fanciful or decorative costume, unseemly concern with personal appearance, and so on. (136)

This is what the rapper does in his music videos and in his public appearances. He is also notable for his effete conduct and his outfits that have garnered a lot of praise but still more criticism. Instead of the customary urban streetwear worn by many male hip hop performers, Lil Nas X favors skin-tight, futuristic couture garments that queer hip hop culture in its fundamentals.

Kevin Abstract, another gay rapper who has strong artistic and friendly relations with Lil Nas X, is one more example of a gay Black rapper who enacts and flaunts his sexuality in his tracks. His first album revolved around a straight, closeted performance of himself, something that is relevant of an "epistemology of the closet," wherein the closeted person is safe but always subject to being found out. Talking about this closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick signals that "The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression" (71). In order to succeed in the hip hop industry, Kevin Abstract (just like Lil Nas X

in "Old Town Road") repressed his sexuality. Hip hop culture, as was previously said, is linked to a physical and lived experience environment, namely that of the (urban) Black community in the United States, the community's aspirations and the stereotypes that were created about them. By performing as a straight rapper, Abstract, on the one hand, responded to the expectations of what a Black male rapper ought to be, and on the other hand can be considered trapped in the oppressive system of living in a given community, that is the ghetto and its underlying significance—therefore he was trapped in the closet generated by these milieus. However, starting from his second studio album, *American Boyfriend: A Suburban Love Story* released in November 2016, he talks about being gay and relates it to his heritage as an African American man. His lyrics reveal the tensions that he feels because of his pertaining to two minoritized communities and his need to advocate for the existence of LGBTQ+ African Americans. The overdetermination of Black gay men is further criticized in the video "EMPTY" where the rapper is being fellated by a person who at first seems to be a woman but then appears to be a White man who will die by suicide at the end, once more shifting the stigma from the Black individual to one who, if the doxa were true, should have been inserted in a progressive, thus accepting and benevolent, community.

In his track "Miserable America," Abstract deals with the intersection of his Blackness and his homosexuality when he rhymes, "My boyfriend hates me, won't let me meet his parents / Says my skin might scare 'em, not afraid of my appearance … / They love gays but they hate niggas / What else are we to do rather than talk and paint a picture?". Earlier, in the first verse of the song, he raps, "My boyfriend saved me, my mother's homophobic / I'm stuck in the closet, I'm so claustrophobic / I just want help if, my best friend's racist … / I'm so claustrophobic, I just wanna know shit / Well, we all love Young Thug." Within these lines lies an illustration of one shared experience of the way a young Black gay rapper can be torn between his racial and sexual identities. Abstract presents the underlying myths of a homophobic Black community and a racist White group, with on the one hand, his mother who does not recognize him as gay, and on the other

hand, his White in-laws who, although they are progressive enough to accept their son's homosexuality, cannot bear that his boyfriend is Black. This way, Abstract shows how young Black gay men (and rappers) are stuck in an overdetermined position, where they have no choice. As a Black rapper, he ought to rely on his masculinity to represent his race, something that frightens his boyfriend's parents. As a gay man, he should be effeminate, something at odds with his own identity and the construction of the latter in a Black environment. The reference to rapper Young Thug—who is well-known as a heterosexual, cis-gender, male rapper who nevertheless publicly wears eccentric clothing that is generally defined as female's (i.e., dresses, skirts, etc.)—adds to the ironical denunciation that Abstract is doing. The image of the closet is striking as it can once more be linked to Sedgwick's "epistemology of the closet" when she decries the binaries of sexuality and of representations, which Abstract is doing here as well.

Additionally, the esthetics and themes of the music video are indicative of the ambivalence that Abstract criticizes in the track. The plot revolves around the young man as he is undergoing a conversion therapy, hanging upside down in the front room of a seemingly lower middle-class, supposedly Christian fundamentalist White man's house. Surrounding the rapper are six Black women who are lasciviously dancing around him, until one of them grabs a shotgun and kills the hostage taker. As the liberated hostages celebrate their newly acquired freedom, the images reveal several underlying symbols. First, there is the condemnation of the fact that a Black man should only be attracted to Black women and partners. This in turn questions the binaries since the trapper and symbolic villain is a White religious man. That it is not Abstract who kills that man but one of the Black women who is as trapped as the rapper may be a way to insist on the rejection of these binaries as a female is as powerful as a male person. While the narrative unfolds and the White man's victims celebrate, the characterization of Abstract frantically dancing in the background while the women are sitting on a couch and drinking champagne, not even paying attention to him, shows the acceptance from both

parties and their mutual respect. Indeed, the women have understood Abstract's suffering given that they suffered like him and with him during their ordeal.

This is developed further in the lyrics of the song "JUNKY," released with his collective BROCKHAMPTON when he states:

> He gave me good head, peepin' out while the windows tinted…
> Is it homophobic to only hook up with straight niggas?
> You know like closet niggas, masc-type?
> Why don't you take that mask off?
> That's the thought I had last night
> "Why you always rap about bein' gay?"
> 'Cause not enough niggas rap and be gay
> Where I come from, niggas get called "faggot" and killed
> So I'ma get head from a nigga right here
> And they can come and cut my head off, and
> And my legs off, and
> And I'ma still be a boss 'til my head gone, yeah

By mentioning his fantasy about being attracted to "straight niggas," Abstract may also be referring to the Black men on the down low, even *trades*, namely, to use a definition from *Urban Dictionary*, "young hyper-masculine looking gay [men], usually black or latino in urban contexts." This hypermasculinity is moreover queered as Abstract is in the dominant position as this man "gave me good head, peepin' out while the windows tinted." In this text, the rapper contributes to the process of disidentification developed by performance scholar José E. Muñoz. In the introduction to his book, Muñoz explains:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

In that way, for Kevin Abstract, those "closet niggas, masc-type," because of the concealment of their sexuality to the general community, are wearing masks that the rapper thinks it is time to shed (which he also applies to himself). That is the reason why his rap is political, as he performs his sexuality that he considers is co-constructed with his Black identity.

Abstract discursively performs his stance when he links it to the geographical place of the ghetto that he essentializes as homophobic and where "niggas get called 'faggot' and killed" because of their homosexuality. He chooses to expose that sexuality to his public because he is gay *and* Black and understands the risks he is taking ("So I'ma get head from a nigga right here / And they can come and cut my head off, and / And my legs off, and / And I'ma still be a boss 'til my head gone"). In keeping the discourse centered on the sexual act, Kevin Abstract purposely does not talk about sentiments. He knows that this is going to be interpreted and homophobically excoriated and he awaits the criticisms. He defends non-heteronormative rap in hip hop culture in several interviews, just as when he tells Chris Mandle:

> "I'd see negative comments and forget [being gay] was a big deal to some people, that some people hadn't heard it before," he says. "My goal is just to normalise it. Straight rappers talk about their sexual relationships without warning me. And they are more explicit and violent. I have to express myself and who I am."

In another interview, while talking about LGBTQ+/BIPOC fans to *LA Weekly*'s Artemis Thomas-Handsard, Abstract adds, "I want to speak for people who can't speak; they're afraid to speak . . . They can play that song and sing it back and feel empowered." Consequently, Abstract—just like Lil Nas X does—implants queerness within the long-established hip hop conventions and performances to advocate for himself and other marginalized people.

Intersectional Identities: Binaries, Fluidity, Representations and Reception

By acting out of their queerness and Blackness, these artists "diss" their homophobic counterparts and put LGBTQ+ people within hip

hop culture in the spotlight. Even if Lil Nas X's celebrity has outreached the intimate circle in which he started to become a worldwide phenomenon (his song "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" that overtly depicts homosexual intercourse briefly reached #1 in Saudi Arabia (Lang)), and although Kevin Abstract and his supergroup BROCKHAMPTON were in the lineup of the 2022 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival (Veneziano), not everyone in the mainstream audience is as familiar with them as they are with Jay-Z or Kendrick Lamar. However, some have reached a certain prominent position in the hip hop industry and a singer like Frank Ocean—whose songs are rather well-known and who collaborated with Tyler the Creator, Jay-Z, Kanye West (a.k.a. Ye), Pharrell Williams, Diplo, Calvin Harris and Migos, or A$AP Rocky—also performs his sexuality in his songs.[11] His being close to more mainstream and more traditional rappers echoes the changes that are progressively observed in the genre and the culture.

Ocean had already started to address his sexuality and expose it, although in an indirect way, with the lyrics of his song "Thinking Bout You" and then more straightforwardly in the open letter he posted on *Tumblr* on July 4, 2012. In his coming out letter, the rapper says that he looked for an answer from God about his sexuality, something that Lil Nas X also dealt with almost a decade later in his song "SUN GOES DOWN" as he "prayed God would take [these gay thoughts] from me." The search for a divine answer to same-gender loving attraction can be related to the importance given to religion in many African American communities and these Christians' rejection of homosexuality (Griffin 111). Yet, one could argue that, often, Christianity leads to a binary perception of the world.

In his single "Chanel," Ocean sings, "My guy pretty like a girl / And he got fight stories to tell / I see both sides like Chanel / See on both sides like Chanel," expressing his ability to perceive how representations of identities cannot be Manichean. Because he enunciates his idea in Janus-faced terms, it is often considered that the singer expresses a question of binaries, which is not what he articulates. Ocean's letter

explicitly deals with his feelings. Talking about Kanye West who also shows emotions in the track "Put On," Matthew Oware writes, "This level of emotional outpouring contradicts current media portrayals of black manhood," (59) thus reaffirming the deeper meaning to be found in rap songs. Here, Ocean's implication in hip hop culture is paradigmatic of the intermingling of the rap and R&B categories into one.[12] The feelings he shares in his letter are of a first love which is obviously not reciprocal, and this crushes his heart. While he wonders about this event in his life, he writes, "It was my first love, it changed my life. Back then, my mind would wander to the women I had been with, the ones I cared for and thought I was in love with," insisting on the ambivalence of his emotions, but also opening a possibility toward not just binary, but the prospect of fluidity in the performance of the self and of identities.

On March 15, 2017, journalist Chris Mench addressed the presence of queer themes in Frank Ocean's lyrics in an article which he somewhat erroneously concludes, "All of this brings us back to 'Chanel,' which continues *Blonde* and *Endless*'s themes of duality, challenging notions of masculinity, and being unafraid to include strikingly queer lyrics in a major release." The notion of masculinity, from a hip hop point of view, is further challenged when the singer makes use of his falsetto voice to express his emotions in his songs. This is particularly relevant when listening to him pouring his heart out in "Thinkin Bout You" as he once again talks about his love interest. It is exactly this masculinity that is reenacted, remodeled from a renewed mold when it is performed by these three Black gay/queer male artists.

The interviews given by Kevin Abstract and Frank Ocean, as well as the tweets posted by Lil Nas X, indicate the omnipresence of audiences in their art. Recognizing this singular relationship between the rappers and their public leads to a greater appreciation of what rap is and how it falls within a more general Black culture. Imani Perry writes:

> Rap music fits within the call-response trope in a number of critical ways. First, the intertextuality of black musical texts lies at the heart of rap on

> both an oral and musical level. Hip hop's great dependence on the music of an earlier generation, the music artists often recall from their youth, combined with the reconfigurations of that music and its offering back to the general public, constitutes a kind of conversation with the black musical tradition. (34)

This conversation entails sharing the same language, often articulated through "Signifyin'" which literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines as "a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (52). Thus, Signifyin' is a way of constructing a coded meaning to a text that is understood only by those who can decipher it—which emphasizes the strong link between the artists and their audiences. In addition, "Part of the unspoken pact between MC and audience is that the MC is authentic, that what he or she is saying is sincere or real" (Bradley 154). Oftentimes, fans look to their favorite artists as idols. Yet, as Bradley adds, "Rap has proved itself quite skilled at toeing this line, of balancing its audience's need for idols with its desire for connection" (197). Because of this correlation between authenticity, idolization, and position as witness, the call-response trope is fundamental to the analysis of Black queer Masculinities in contemporary rap.

In fact, when they rhyme, Black gay/queer rappers mainly address a group of fans who will find echoes of their own experiences in their tracks. Even though Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean have their faithful fans, their music is also broadcast to more and more people thanks to social networks such as *YouTube*. This, in turn, gives way to reaction videos that can be found on this platform. Among them can be located positive reviews (Lost in Vegas's for instance) while others are plainly negative to those expositions to LGBTQ+ lives and desires (see the video by The CartierFamily). However, the point is not to satisfy the requirements of those traditional listeners watching the music videos or listening to the songs, but to make them understand that the hip hop community is more diverse than usually thought—something that Lil Nas X does when he trolls his detractors,

especially in his various responses to attacks on Twitter that compare him to more "traditional" rappers.[13]

The use of digital social media in the relation between artists and listeners is not new, though the contemporary utilization must be above all related to the new generation of rappers and listeners. They are part of Generation Z (Gen Z), namely they correspond to people born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s—which is the case of Lil Nas X and Kevin Abstract who were born in 1996 when Frank Ocean was born in 1987. "Gen Z" also refers to people who have always lived in a world with digital media and computers (Palfrey and Grasser). Talking about rapper Fly Young Red's track "Throw that Boy Pussy," Eguchi and Roberts write, "Social media's capacity for spreading 'Throw that Boy P***y' to a large audience through Internet sharing has further contributed to disrupting and quaring[14] the traditional capitalist approach to controlling the production of mainstream music (i.e., record labels)" (153). Therefore, they show the transformation of the record industry, and the way younger artists manipulate their image and the communication with their audiences.

Additionally, because of the margins that many critics and listeners put on the genres, they miss the opportunity to enrich the culture they defend; an argument that all three artists have voiced in their various songs, videos, and conversations with the press. In an interview with Melissa Bradshaw, Frank Ocean gives his opinion about the limits imposed when trying to define a musical genre (here, with the term "Alternative R&B"), saying, "you're limiting it. And that's why I always say that about the genre thing, because that's what it does. When you say 'it's that', you listen to it in a certain way. And you might not necessarily miss it, but it's just inaccurate, and you'll miss a couple of things, contextually." Although it may be considered only a remark about musical genres, it can be extended to the queering of hip hop and R&B. For the three artists, these types of music must not be circumscribed to their commonly accepted boundaries. The latter must be pushed to include more diversity and, by doing so, to encourage reconsideration of the intersections of identities of the

artists and the listeners. The labeling of identities is politically questioned given that these markers are bound to exclude some features that are however present in the corresponding individual. Therefore, by disrupting the expectations of the hypermasculine Black man, heteronormative artist, mixed-genre track or again the ghetto as one of the prominent containers of the cultural identity of the urban Black community, Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean impose the presence of nonconforming individuals and interrogate—as several female rappers did before them—the monolithic vision of rappers, Black men, hip hop culture, and so on. The music and images they create first represent their own personal experiences but, as they stand as spokespeople of a category that is barely known, they progressively become representations/-tives of this community of the margins where African American LGBTQ+ men are relegated.

In *Hip Hop Heresies: Queer Aesthetics in New York City*, Associate Professor of Black Studies Shanté Paradigm Smalls explains the need for Black queer artists to use their own platform and not let other dominant voices speak for them. Smalls later argues that letting others address the presence of queers in hip hop culture "shapes the queer as threatening to dominate Black masculinity and produces a discursive visual archetype of the gender variant queer that should be avoided by those adhering to authentic hip hop Black masculine ideals" (139). I contend that while the Black male figure is decentered and made queer, and that therefore the traditional clichés should collapse, it is only to be replaced by other stereotypes. The performance of African American non-heteronormativity in hip hop allows many circulations and hybridizations (whether of the genres or in terms of intersectional identities), but it also generates a great deal of interrogations about the reception of the music and its lyrics, the videos, and the rappers' performances by members of the Black communities and/or by the (White) mainstream audience—something that, despite some studies such as XinLing Li's *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music*, Shanté Paradigm Smalls's *Hip Hop Heresies* or Lauron Kehrer's *Queer Voices in Hip Hop* (among a few others), still necessitates further analysis, at the

same time from the point of view of the rappers, that of their Black queer fans, and of Black queer people in general.

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1 In the course of this article, I will capitalize both the words "Black" and "White" when they refer to races. I contend that races represent groups of people, their cultures, folklores and traditions, their histories; therefore it includes "Whites" not in order to put the race on a pedestal, but to cover the entire meaning behind the referred group. In that sense, I will quote Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton writing for the Center for the Study of Social Policy when they explain their reasons to capitalize the word: "we intentionally capitalize 'White' in part to invite people, and ourselves, to think deeply about the ways Whiteness survives—and is supported both explicitly and implicitly." The rest of their argument is available online: https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/. I will also use the terms "gay," "queer," and "LGBTQ+" to define sexualities and identities. When I use "gay," I refer to men whose sexuality is defined in terms of same-sex relations. "Queer" is used when referring to identities that do not fit the patriarchal and heteronormative society. At last, I use the acronym "LBGTQ+" (for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay,

Trans, Queer, and more) as an umbrella expression that includes people whose sexualities and identities do not necessarily correspond to the (straight) norms established in US society.

[2] This quotation comes from a screenshot that was posted by Twitter user Ronald Isley (@yoyotrav) on the same date.

[3] Harking back to poet Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" in 1970.

[4] The presence of female, of queer, and of gender non-conforming artists in hip hop culture is quite ambiguous. In many male rappers' music videos and lyrics, women are commodified and sexualized (with the major exception of mothers and grandmothers; see Perry 143). Yet, some female rappers have succeeded both commercially and in their inclusion in the genre. Musicologist and ethnomusicologist Lauron Kehrer explains that for them and for queer and/or gender non-conforming rappers, to reach this position, there is a constant negotiation of gender, sexuality, and representation (5, 50–66).

[5] On these subjects, see for instance: Ruffolo, David V. *Post-Queer Politics*. Ashgate, 2009, and Tesler, Michael. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?, Race and Politics in the Obama Era*. U of Chicago P, 2016.

[6] The use of the term "ghetto" in this article is indebted to Loïc Wacquant's definition in which it is described as both a physical and symbolic place. Wacquant argues that the forces of confinement of the ghetto are there to comfort a dominant White population when, at the same time, it is a "protective device" that has allowed the making of a rich culture and where communities have built their own cultural identities (123). However, as he further elaborates, the negative symbolic of the ghetto generates "sentiments of self-doubt and self-hatred" for its dwellers, contrasted with a feeling of "collective pride even as it entrenches the stigma that hovers over it," thus leading Wacquant to call it a "tainted identity machine" (125).

[7] Throughout this article, I will use the iterations of the n-word, b-word, f-word, and other derogatory or crude words in direct quotes of song lyrics, and interviews only in order to preserve the words of quoted persons.

[8] Both songs were released by dominant women in the music industry. The artists tackle the empowerment of women in the music/hip hop industry. Thus, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, showing intersectional identity as a Black woman, mother and entrepreneur, sings, "I think I need a barber / None of these niggas can fade me / I'm so good with this / I remind you I'm so 'hood with this," before adding "smart enough to make these millions, strong enough to bear the children, then get back to business." Megan, in her rap, talks about the attempted feminicide that she lived through and how the experience made her a stronger woman: "You shot a 5'10" bitch with a .22 / Talkin' 'bout bones and tendons

like them bullets wasn't pellets / A pussy nigga with a pussy gun in his feelings," before adding later, "Who you takin' shots at, goofy-ass bitch? / Watchin' me succeed from your knees, suckin' dick / I know you want attention from the niggas that I get / I'm a steak, you a side plate, shrimp, stay in your place."

9 On January 10, 2023, Lil Nas X came out as bisexual. However, because the songs I am analyzing were released before that date, I will contextualize them and examine them from the point of view of a rapper who had come out as gay.

10 On *Urban Dictionary*, contributor RainTube explains that a diss track ("diss" is an abbreviation of the word "disrespect") is "A song full of insults meant to insult or personally harm another singer or person." Diss tracks often make existing feuds between artists more visible to the public. A recent example is rapper Eminem's "Killshot" in 2018 as a response to Machine Gun Kelly's "Rap Devil" (already a play on Eminem's 2013 "Rap God").

11 Because the singer has refused to label his sexuality as to whether he is gay, bisexual, or otherwise (something that conforms his point of view about "labels," and that I will tackle shortly), I will use the adjective *queer* to refer to him.

12 One can also refer to Robert Komaniecki who underlines the blurred lines between R&B and rap since the latter's initiation: "Since rap music's advent, there have been artists that blur the line between rap and R&B genres, splitting their time in a verse between less purposefully pitched rapping and more precise singing" (37).

13 For example, when he is compared to Tupac wearing a white tuxedo, Lil Nas X is wearing a wig and a purple dress/suit. To the criticism that reads, "Rappers then / now," he answers back, "can y'all please stop spreading this! spread this one instead, it's a much better angle." In another example, when pictured next to a beefy, shirtless 50 Cent, his tweet is uncompromising, "this is not fair youre *(sic)* comparing a legend who has changed music forever to 50 cent."

14 In his essay "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," E. Patrick Johnson argues that "quare" "not only speaks across identities, it *articulates* identities as well. 'Quare' offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges. … Quare studies is a theory of and for gays and lesbians of color" (emphasis in the original, 3).