

“Homosex, Hermaph, or Trans-a-vest...Hate Fags? The Answer’s Yes”: Hypermasculinity in America and Commodified Homophobia Through the Lens of Hip Hop

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Abstract

Birthered in the Bronx in response to socioeconomic frustration and political invigoration, hip hop equipped youth of color in the U.S. with a dynamic platform to both communication resentment towards structures of systemic oppression and act as an outlet for fun, innovative, and uninhibited creative expression. However, as this cultural revolution transformed from an underground movement to a mainstream commodity, rap music that reflected stereotypes of Black hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity were prioritized, and rappers who embodied these roles and the ideologies paired with them rose to the top of the charts. As a result of the music industry’s prioritization of hyper-masculine, heteronormative rap, a genre with the power to project the voices of marginalized communities of color in America at the same time became an active participant in the marginalizing of another—the LGBT+ community. Yet as rap music is notorious for its attacks on the LGBT+ community, I argue that this homophobia is not contained or exacerbated within hip hop, but rather is a by-product of a homophobic society that, through hyper-masculine and heteronormative norms, nurtures these attitudes within the male-driven genre. Through a textual analysis of rap lyrics, my paper highlights where the homophobic attitudes within hip hop stem from by locating broader societal structures that foster these ideals outside the genre. Taking this step back and looking at the larger issues within American society that nurture this homophobic environment within hip hop allows us to understand and address the phenomenon within the genre more clearly.

Keywords: Hip hop, rap music, homophobic hip hop music, hypermasculinity, Black masculinity, gender stereotypes, racial stereotypes, heteronormativity, commodified homophobia, LGBT+ community

Introduction

Emboldened by the tumultuous climate of the 1960s during which a host of marginalized communities communicated their socioeconomic frustrations, musicians in the decade to follow fashioned a musical atmosphere that nurtured this politically invigorated ethos. In response to this highly charged era, bubbling underground lurked, arguably, one of the greatest and most unprecedented experimental musical developments of the century: hip hop. Emerging in its liminal stages during the late 70s as “bubble gum rap¹,” the dynamic

¹Light-hearted, funky, recreational rap/dance vibes

genre quickly shifted gears during the 80s as it grew to become an outlet largely for black youth to reveal and publicize such sensitive but salient issues as systemic racism and oppression, police brutality, and poverty endemic to black communities, particularly those growing up in disinvested neighborhoods. Hip hop equipped black youth of America—namely black male youth—with a creative and energetic platform to express and disseminate their frustrations while offering them a new, uninhibited space to form a sense of self-identity. However, the newfound sense of freedom that the genre provided black youth of America was at the same time heavily restrictive. As a largely black, male-dominated genre, hip hop often falls victim to brandishing societal standards of black hyper-masculinity. The notion that black men are hyper-sexual and hyper-masculine has been routinely enforced by a white male-controlled society in order to demonize, police, and pathologize the black body. These deep-rooted inscriptions are employed to maintain control, power, and privilege through “othering” the black male. Such negative inscriptions and the pressure to uphold them, in turn, affect how black men act and conceptualize their self-identity.

In order to live up to these routinely ingrained hyper-masculine standards, black men are pressured into abiding by strict heteronormative codes lest they should sacrifice their manhood and their blackness. These values naturally seeped into the culture of hip hop and are manifest through homophobic lyrics that assert this prioritized image of black hyper-masculinity. As a result, rap music is widely demonized for its often one-dimensional, negative depictions of the LGBT+ community. However, as these highly disseminated and largely consumed portrayals certainly contribute a level of damage to both its consumers and the marginalized group itself, these images and the language wielded by rappers stem from deeply rooted stereotypes, norms, values, and standards in American society. In order to address this specific problem within hip hop, it must first be understood and addressed in American society at a larger level.

“BETTER WATCH HOW YOU TALK WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT ME, CUZ I’LL COME AND TAKE YOUR LIFE AWAY”:

American stereotypes of black hyper-masculinity and sexuality

Birthed from white fears during slavery, the stereotype of the hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual black male is regularly reinforced through media (mis)representations in an effort to sustain a racial hierarchy that others the black male. Black male bodies have been historically policed and pathologized through their portrayal as wildly masculine with inordinate, uncontrollable sexual desires (Jackson, 2006, 41). Marlon T. Riggs (1999) posits that “black macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: strong black men— ‘Afrocentric’ black men— don’t flinch, don’t weaken, don’t take blame or shit, take charge, step-to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt” (p. 311). This debilitating standard of unwavering black manhood limits, regulates, and restricts black men in their capacity to accept and express their own range of emotions. Compromising their “unflinching” manner means compromising their masculinity, and any breach in this standard of manhood places the male at risk of donning the ultimate antithetical label—the homosexual.

Heteronormative (white) culture in America sets the standard for appropriate sexual behavior based on archaic sexual practices and beliefs, and those who do not fall within this unmalleable mold are subject to demonization. Commonly stereotyped as effeminate, overdramatic, flamboyant “fairies,” gay males are irreconcilable with the archetypical male standard, as true paradigms of masculinity are not permitted to exhibit such feminine qualities associated with homosexuality without surrendering the authenticity of their manhood. Yet how authentic is this image if it rests upon the denial and suppression of such innately universal characteristics as sensitivity and vulnerability—characteristics synonymous with portrayals of such “inferior” identities as the female and the homosexual? As C. J. Pascoe (2007) suggests, heterosexuals rely on homosexuality in order to assert and affirm themselves as normative heterosexuals, as the homosexual is “a position outside masculinity that actually constitutes masculinity...the masculinity, in part, becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the threatening specter of the fag” (p. 67). The renouncement of the homosexual/traits that clash with (hyper)masculinity reinforces a hierarchy that positions heterosexual males at the apex of power, respectability, and authenticity. Because the identity of the male homosexual is stereotyped as the antithesis of masculinity, becoming one means

becoming less of a man, and in the process losing the superficial authenticity married to the prototypical heteronormative image of masculinity. C.J. Pascoe (2007) argues that the “faggot” insult preserves its power in disciplining boys because it contains both sexual and gendered connotations (p. 49 & p.67). This suggests that the slur can be employed not only to directly insult or criticize one’s sexual identity (i.e. sexual connotations), but also/instead to attack a man’s strength or competence (i.e. gendered connotations).

While black men suffer from the stigma attached to their identities, the employment of a politics of shame targeting the homosexual cements notions of hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity that, in turn, positions black heterosexual males in a place of relative power. Resultantly, the demonization of the homosexual is heightened for black gay men as sexual shame, stigma, and standards of hyper-masculinity work in tandem to invalidate, marginalize, and crucify them as the ultimate “Other.” Because the identity of the male homosexual is at complete odds with stereotypes surrounding black hyper-masculinity, oftentimes black gays are faced with the harrowing choice between identifying as black or gay—two separate, contradictory identities that are unable to coexist. This phenomenon is described by Devon W. Carbado (1999):

there is an awareness in the Black community that homosexuality undermines blackness. What I mean by this is that one’s authenticity as a Black person is linked to, among other things, one’s sexual identity...Real Black men and real Black women are resolutely heterosexual. In some sense being out as Black gay or lesbian in the Black community is race negating. (p. 285)

The idea that “real” black men are firm heterosexuals reinforces a standard of hyper-masculinity that, if broken, will not only undermine their authenticity as a man, but also undermine their authenticity as a black man. This is not to suggest black communities are more homophobic, but rather that this clash of identities was born from the creation of the hyper-masculine black image by white America.

“I GOT 99 PROBLEMS AND A BITCH AIN’T ONE”:

The music industry and hip hop critics

Despite the diversity of artists, sound, and content that hip hop contributes, the genre is often ruthlessly attacked for its discussion of crime, sex, violence, and drugs. Politicians from George W. Bush to Bill Clinton and celebrities from Bill Cosby to Spike Lee have criticized rap music for “glorifying” such taboo lifestyles, with little consideration for the liberating, cathartic, and politically empowering effects addressing such topics may have on both the rappers and the consumers. This opprobrium generated by a noteworthy chunk of the American public is also highly misguided, considering that the hyper-masculine, homophobic, and misogynistic songs are often favored more by hip hop’s largely white consumer base (Oware, 2011, p. 32). According to Matthew Oware (2011), rappers who essentially perpetuate denigrating and belittling stereotypes of blacks, especially black males, appeal to market forces. In this constrained and limited environment, there exists a symbiotic relationship between record companies and rap artists whereby, from the label’s perspective, only certain types of lyrics or imagery are believed profitable, thus the demand for that kind of music. Understanding this demand, artists offer songs that mainly consist of misogyny, violence, and homophobia. (p. 32) Pressured to sell hit records, rap artists who perhaps valued hip hop as a cathartic space to express themselves or form a sense of self-identity amidst a society that heavily polices black bodies again find themselves restricted to embodying one-dimensional images of black masculinity in order to succeed.

Understanding this toxic cycle, rap artists either cave to these pressures, speak out against them and risk their career, or juggle a curious mixture of both². In embracing imposed standards of masculinity in order to become more commercially successful and relevant in the music industry, rappers often perpetuate homophobic narratives that accessorize hyper-

²The controversial high-profile rapper Kanye West often touches on this dilemma faced by rappers, most notably exemplified in his hit “Jesus Walks” through the lyrics, “They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus/ That means sex, guns, lies, videotape/ But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, huh?” (2004, 37-39). While West is no stranger to using homophobic slurs in his raps or capitalizing on the demand for commercial rap, he has managed to juggle an image that both abides by and rejects mainstream standards.

masculinity. Those who choose to embody these stereotypes face double vilification both from figures who enforce these stereotypes yet then condemn the genre for its “inappropriate” content, and critics who are disappointed both in the systemic casting of racial stereotypes and the subsequent ease with which rappers embrace these inscriptions. Expressing the latter concern, Michelle Alexander (2011) likens gangsta rap to a modern-day minstrel show, arguing that “it is a for-profit display of the worst racial stereotypes and images associated with the era of mass incarceration—an era in which black people are criminalized and portrayed as out-of-control, shameless, violent, over-sexed, and generally undeserving” (p. 173). Along the same vein, Rabaka (1972) argues that hip hop is “the last stubborn bastion of self-congratulating homophobia” (p. 203). While both Alexander and Rabaka emphasize the role society has played in creating and prioritizing these racial stereotypes, their censure of hip hop’s, at times, destructive images and content (gangsta rap in particular) downplays the genre’s heterogeneity.

Arguably one of the greatest gangsta rappers of all time, 2Pac embodied the image of the out-of-control, violent, over-sexed black male of which Alexander expressed her disapproval. However, at the same time he expressed deep concern for the state of race relations in America through his commentaries on police brutality, poverty, and mass incarceration in his music, while also rapping openly about unconditional love, family, and consent. The duality of 2Pac’s music is mirrored by countless rappers, so to berate an entire sub-genre for its image means to categorize it as having only one image. Meanwhile, to suggest that the, at times, homophobic messages conveyed through hip hop are attitudes that are both largely congratulated and contained within the genre likewise ignores hip hop’s multiplicity of images and content. In his article “I’ll Be Forever Mackin: The Social Construction of Black Masculine Identity in Hip Hop’s Platinum Age,” Jonathan W. Gray (2009) expresses his resentment towards such critics that equate the criminality that hip hop music depicts with actual criminal activity (p. 404). This view falls in line with the defenses of such homophobic slur-yielding rappers as Eminem, who argues that the slurs and attitudes in his music do not reflect actual personal beliefs or hatred, but rather represent societal attitudes towards the LGBT+ community voiced through his rap alter-ego, Slim Shady.

Assuming this is true (though hardly believable, given the history of his music and, especially, his recent issues with newly out-of-the-closet rapper Tyler, the Creator³), this method of thinking implies that hip hop consumers are able to distinguish the difference between the blurred lines of story and reality; it likewise assumes that if they do acknowledge this difference, they are impervious to the influence such stories and language have on their own attitudes, actions, views, and/or self-worth (in the case of LGBT+ individuals consuming the homophobic messages). While Gray's concern with hip hop's critics leaping to conclusions based on the stories the music recounts addresses a valid point in the nature of storytelling through music, it is at the same time concerning to downplay how these stories mold the perceptions of its consumers, whether the stories are grounded more in truth or more in art. He also firmly argues against the idea that hip hop is a failure, with the reasoning that it exists "to serve the symbolic and intellectual needs of a given community" (Gray, 2009, p. 403). This too, however, has a fatal flaw—what of the black LGBT+ youth that are often demonized and neglected within the hip hop community? How are their needs being met? This mentality supports the destructive division between identifying as either black or LGBT+, but not both concurrently. Certainly, as Gray suggests, it is still reductive to disregard the liberating affects hip hop provides to both its artists and its consumers; however, it is also important to keep art in check, especially when it exhibits marginalizing attitudes and language that affect not only the larger LGBT+ community, but also LGBT+ people of color as well as LGBT+ individuals in the hip hop community.

Still, though, perpetuating the narrative that hip hop is highly homophobic is problematic because it assumes that this level of homophobia does not originate from and exist to the same extent outside the genre within society. Blatant barrages of homophobic lyrics can be easily located throughout hip hop, but these attitudes do not exist within a hip hop vacuum and can be likewise identified in plain sight within other genres of music. Rap music certainly

³ Eminem fired shots at Tyler, the Creator on *Kamikaze*'s track "Fall," saying: "Tyler create nothing, I see why you called yourself a faggot, bitch" after feeling insulted that Tyler, the Creator was dissing his music on social media (Mathers, 2018, 50).

showcases homophobic attitudes at a higher rate than other styles of music, but this is due to a combination of prioritized content by the music industry, societal pressures to uphold standards of black hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity, and the undeniably competitive nature of hip hop. With a rap jargon that developed centrally around boastful lyrics and jabs at other MCs in underground rap battles, it is no surprise that the male-dominated rap scene is littered with homophobic lyrics. In order to assert their lyrical dominance, rappers will swing at the authenticity of other MCs (and other males in general—arguably anyone in their way or on their bad side); the easiest and most effective method of undermining their adversaries is executed through an attack of their fragile masculinity with the use of any number and combination of homophobic slurs. This competitive nature allows room for homophobia in hip hop—room which largely does not exist in other genres of music precisely because of the inapplicability of this level or style of competition between artists.

Even though this particularly competitive nature is unique to hip hop culture, rappers are not the only artists who are vocal about their homophobia or micro-aggressive attitudes. Punk songs “I Don’t Wanna Be a Homosexual” by Sloppy Seconds and “I Wanna Be a Homosexual” by Screeching Weasel, pop songs “Ur So Gay” by Katy Perry, “My Boyfriend is Gay” by Hailey Rowe, and “Picture to Burn” by Taylor Swift, country song “I’m Still a Guy” by Brad Paisley, and rock songs “One in a Million” by Guns N’ Roses, “Money for Nothing” by Dire Straits, and “Walk on the Wild Side” by Lou Reed employ homophobic slurs, portray LGBT+ individuals as tired stereotypes, use homosexuality as an insult, and/or suggest that identifying along the spectrum is something shameful. Why, then, is hip hop so viciously attacked for its homophobia while other perpetrators are seemingly overlooked? Because this opposition to rap music by mainstream society denotes the inherent white privilege accessed by musicians who do not fall within the black-driven genre of hip hop.

Rather than blindly persecute a genre and a community for the portrayal of a particular image and set of values and beliefs, the pervasive role of both the society that nurtures and engenders the perpetuation of these attitudes and mindsets as well as the music industry that prioritizes and capitalizes from them must also be taken into account. Themes of homophobia

exist across a myriad of media platforms, genres, and sub-genres; these messages mirrored through rap music are by-products of a society that has nurtured a lexicon leveraging anti-gay attitudes through deep seated values and practices of hyper-masculinity and sexual shame. Thus the claim that hip hop is destructive to American youth due to its content is both reductive and misleading. These diatribes portray the genre and its messages as monolithic rather than varied and nuanced. At the same time, this argument neglects to acknowledge society's role in prioritizing certain hyper-masculine, misogynistic, and homophobic rap content—content that reaffirms pre-existing standards and stereotypes of black masculinity.

“MONEY AND BLOOD DON'T MIX LIKE TWO DICKS AND NO BITCH”:

Homophobia in hip hop

The music industry's continuous promotion of one-dimensional images and standards of black men reinforces hyper-masculinity as the norm, which welcomes the execution of a highly homophobic hip hop literature. Although not all rap music is overtly or even subtly homophobic, those artists and songs which display homophobia as an embellishment to their hyper-masculine persona are privileged and circulated at an extensive scale and rate in order to maintain the dominant societal framework that imposes heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. This places an overwhelming burden on rappers to embody a specific image in order to succeed both in the industry and as “real” men. As a result, such degrading insults as “faggot,” “homo,” and “dyke” are almost ubiquitous in the rap lexicon. Whether a provocative, conscious, or trendy rapper, standards of hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity—and their accompanying friend, homophobia—infiltrate the music of a host of hip hop musicians, as exhibited across the spectrum from artists like Eminem to Migos, J.Cole to DMX, Kanye West to Lord Jamar, A Tribe Called Quest to 50 Cent, Grandmaster Flash to N.W.A., Lil Wayne to Ski Mask the Slump God, Jay Z to Nicki Minaj, The Beastie Boys⁴ to A\$AP Rocky, Notorious B.I.G. to Cam'ron, Nas to hip hop's first mainstream breakthrough group the Sugar Hill Gang—and the list goes on.

⁴The trio's hit album *Licensed to Ill* was originally set to be named *Don't be a Faggot*

Notorious for his hard image and raw lyrics, DMX constantly fired shots at the LGBT+ community at the height of his career, most notably in the hit single “Where the Hood At,” with lyrics from the first verse that read:

Last I heard yall n***** was havin’ sex with the same sex
I show no love to homo thugs
Empty out, reload, and throw mo’ slugs
How you gon’ explain fuckin’ a man?
Even if we squash the beef I ain’t touchin’ ya hand
I don’t fuck with chumps
For those who been to jail, that’s the cat with Kool-Aid on his lips and pumps
I don’t fuck with n***** that think they broads
Only know how to be one way, that’s the dog.
(2003, 17-25)

Through these lyrics DMX showcases his prized homophobia as soon as the song begins. He explains that he dislikes gay men so much that he would empty out rounds of bullets on them and feel no remorse, and continues the thought by claiming that he is so repulsed by gay sex that he would not shake a gay man’s hand even if they were on good terms as individuals. At the end of the section, he says that he will not associate with trans women because it is unnatural and “he only knows how to be one way, that’s the dog”—or, in other words, a man with “natural” animal instincts. By denouncing homosexuality with claims that he will not even shake the hand of a gay man and will not associate with trans persons/cross dressers/effeminate gay men, DMX asserts his dominance as a paradigm of masculinity.

The culture of strict hyper-masculinity that feeds these attitudes exhibited by DMX’s lyrics stems from the immense societal pressure to abide by the “appropriate” gender norms. Anything outside these distinctly categorized norms is abnormalized, demonized, and attacked in the fight to recognize and assert oneself as “normal.” Blumer (1969) argues that

“the meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through a process of indication—a process that is necessarily a social process” (p. 111), which suggests everything is inherently meaningless, and, instead, we create meaning. American society has defined male homosexuality as negative and unmasculine through one-dimensional stereotypes and portrayals of the LGBT+ community, and these definitions are sustained through societal behaviors in response to this image of queerness. To be labeled as gay questions the very nature of a man’s masculinity, leading men to overcompensate out of fear of jeopardizing the authenticity of their manhood and, resultantly, their entire image and reputation. As we base our actions on the actions of others, we perpetuate a culture of homophobia—a culture that is both echoed and reinforced by popular mainstream raps such as “Where The Hood At.”

While gay men generally bear the brunt of anti-gay attacks in rap music, both the politics of sexual shame and notions of hyper-masculinity extend to women in hip hop as well, though in a slightly distinct fashion. The principle of embodying a tough, masculine image to preserve authenticity in hip hop culture is maintained by female rappers as they situate themselves far from the subordinate image of the arm piece. Instead, they portray themselves as female versions of their hyper-masculine male counterparts who manage to (in many cases) balance both an image of sexiness with one of rawness and hardness—an image that Lil Kim, for example, manages to juggle well. However, the consequence of sustaining this derivative of the hyper-masculine male persona are the corresponding homophobic rhetoric and undertones that are paired with hyper-masculinity. In a verse from hip hop legend Notorious B.I.G.’s “Get Money,” Lil Kim closes the rap with the line “Nah I ain’t gay, this ain’t no lesbo flow/ Just a lil somethin’ to let you mothafuckas know” (1995, 59-60). The obligation to clarify that her hard image is not to be confused with homosexuality—as gay women are often stereotyped as masculine—promotes a one-dimensional representation of female homosexuality and a hierarchy of sex that suggests falling into this sexual category is less-than.

Meanwhile, the incredible popularity of the 2017 anthem “OOOUUU” by contemporary butch lesbian rapper Young M.A challenges the notion of an anti-gay atmosphere in hip hop through

her very presence as a popular artist in the genre. However, this phenomenon is made possible through her access of the hyper-masculine male image. By manifesting the emblematic hyper-masculine persona without any trace of feminine sexiness, Young M.A is instead transformed into “one of the boys.” Young M.A’s widespread success, though, does not erase the harmful language and negative attitudes towards “dykes” in hip hop music. While women are granted more freedom for sexual fluidity than men in modern-day society—perhaps because it does not pose a direct threat to masculinity—this tolerance is limited in its reach and is not as progressive as it appears once it is made clear that female homosexuality is only acceptable if it is for the pleasure and satisfaction of men. The very term “female homosexuality” is an oxymoron in the eyes of many men, who are convinced that no woman is completely gay, and can simply and easily be changed with some good, old-fashioned hetero sex. This concept is exemplified through a straightforward line in A\$AP Rocky’s “Fuckin Problems,” when he claims he can “Turn a dyke bitch out, have her fuckin boys,” (2012, 17). Here he is suggesting that female homosexuality is a trait that can be easily fixed in the hands of the right man—an exhausted trope and debilitating microaggression that is overplayed, oversimplified, and downright frustrating.

Depicting a similar misrepresentation of female homosexuality, Kanye West’s lyrics, “Girls kissin’ girls cause it’s hot, right/ But unless they use a strap-on then they not dykes,” (2012, 33-34) from the track “Don’t Like” likewise exhibit a complete misunderstanding and oversimplification of gay women by arguing that unless they engage in sex with a strap-on, then sexual acts between women are simply fun and games, not homosexual, and, of course, for the pleasure of men—because it’s hot, right? These lyrics not only portray male fetishization of women “playing” with women, but they also reinforce heteronormative ideals by supporting the idea that legitimate sex occurs only when a penis and a vagina are present. Here again we are confronted with an instance where standards of masculinity and heteronormativity work hand in hand to delegitimize and other the homosexual. These lyrics underpin a common theme in American society that proposes that sexual relationships are only recognizable in terms of “man” and “woman” gender roles. These troubling stereotypes were not invented by rappers, but their perpetuation through such a popular mainstream

media outlet afflicts the lives of many gay women by promoting ideas that they “just haven’t found the right guy yet” and that their sexuality can be reversed, which ultimately discredits both their existence and their experiences.

While these attitudes circulate at the same rate outside the hip hop community as they do within, what makes this unhealthy language particularly problematic is the medium through which these homophobic messages are disseminated. Varied forms of media such as film, television, and literature are no strangers to publicizing homophobia on a large scale; however, homophobia in music—especially in such an explosively popular genre as hip hop—is an immense epidemic due to the commonplace practice of repetitive listening and singing along. The habitual reiteration of homophobic lyrics in the, at times, heated tempers typical of rap normalizes the use of this derogatory language and anger towards the LGBT+ community. It is the seemingly unconscious participatory nature of singing along to music that is especially infectious in the both blind and unconcealed involvement with and spreading of homophobic attitudes. Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) argue, in fact, that this is the “... triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities...” (p. 71). In essence, homophobia and homophobic microaggressions are advertised via popular raps like “Where the Hood At” and “Fuckin’ Problems” and, in turn, the consumers advance this advertisement through the repetition of its lyrics which appeal to these imbedded systems of heteronormativity.

To make matters worse, rap is primarily consumed by white, suburban teenagers (Alexander, 2011, p.173) who are unable to relate to many issues afflicting black communities that are often the subject of hip hop music. Heavy exposure to (mis)representations of communities outside one’s own without actual real-life involvement can lead to a total misunderstanding of another culture. This is triply endangering for hip hop culture based on its consumer base, as the music industry’s marketing of the genre can affect the way its listeners perceive black communities, the LGBT+ community, and homophobia in black communities—not to mention how these images and messages impact the ways in which these communities view themselves. The homophobic language and attitudes exhibited through hip hop music can

certainly be consumed without inspiring hatred towards the LGBT+ community because, oftentimes, the real messages conveyed through music are lost within the beat (which is why MAGA crowds still eagerly consume Pac, Kendrick, or Cole's music), but this still does not erase the effect the music has on normalizing the casual use of hateful language and slurs.

“I COP BOYS...I COP HOUSES, AND FILL ‘EM WITH SOME LEO DICAPS AND COLE SPROUSES”:

Queerness in hip hop

Yet a genre so cluttered with homophobia is curiously entangled with queer culture through deliberate lyrical expressions alluding to gay sex. Countless rappers have sprinkled their music with depictions of overtly homosexual affairs, usually in a degrading or threatening manner. Yet it is these same rappers that are most often guilty of brandishing their homophobia through their music. DMX serves as a prime example. He is notorious for his often homophobic lyrics which are regularly juxtaposed with overtly gay innuendos. This is plainly illustrated through his hit “Where the Hood At.” While the anthem takes off immediately with almost an entire verse dedicated to anti-gay proclamations, the final verse of the song is at complete odds with its introduction as he raps such bold statements as “since we all right here, you hold my dick while he suckin it” and “I beat my dick and bust off in your eye so you can see me comin’” (DMX, 2003, 61 & 65). DMX's overall hyper-masculinity and homophobia appear as celebrated attributes that verify the authenticity of his manhood, so it may seem surprising that he would risk this image with such overtly gay innuendos. However, gay male sexual encounters are largely admissible in certain settings so long as the subject is the aggressor because, as C. J. Pascoe (2007) suggests, it is gay male effeminacy that is pathologized (p. 52). While the lyrics are still undeniably gay in nature, as DMX occupies the dominant role in the situation he is expunged of any accusations of weakness or femininity and is resultantly able to maintain his prized masculinity.

The power dynamic of emasculating sex that is highlighted through such lyrics is leveraged to demasculinize the effeminate Other through the rapper's portrayal and embodiment of the dominant, aggressive role. And what better way to invalidate the authenticity of another man than to devastate his masculinity in the most extreme, violating way? Through his gay innuendos in "Where the Hood At," DMX hyper-masculinizes himself by asserting his dominance while simultaneously demasculinizing the feminized male Other. However, this exclusive permissibility of homosexuality is damaging not only because it perpetuates a system of male dominance and the inferiority of the submissive Other, but it likewise invalidates the experiences of LGBT+ individuals by prioritizing case-specific displays of homosexuality. This semi-acceptance of homosexuality portrays a regressive dynamic of LGBT+ relationships that is categorized in relation to heteronormativity through distinctly gendered and stereotyped dominant and submissive roles.

Further entwining the genre with queer culture is its inspiration from and recurrent access of historically queer pop cultural forms and products. Yet the communication between these two seemingly divergent cultures through the sampling of queer/flamboyant music is not sufficient to harmoniously fuse the two. According to Reiland Rabaka (1972), the heterosexualization and hypermasculinization of Hip-Hop hinges on a distinctly heteronormative, hyper-sexual, and hyper-masculine historical amnesia that completely downplays and diminishes how flamboyant, feminist, and queer musical forms—such as funk, punk, new wave, disco, techno, electronica, and house music—directly contributed to the development of rap music and Hip-Hop culture. (p. 201)

With such deep roots in queer culture, it is vastly hypocritical that the hip hop community nurtures such a non-inclusive space for a community whose artistic products have contributed largely to their success. A generous chunk of music within the genre samples songs from overtly gay musicians, which is further complicated when the samplers of LGBT+ music have expressed their homophobia and are privy to employing homophobic rhetoric in their art. Though he has expressed his support for the LGBT+ community, Kanye West is no stranger to using homophobic slurs in his music in the past. Yet in his glory days his hit "Good Morning" sampled from out-and-proud Elton John's "Someone Saved my Life Tonight."

Meanwhile, A Tribe Called Quest's "Solid Wall of Sound" likewise samples one of Elton John's classics, "Bennie and the Jets," while the wildly homophobic repertoire of Eminem boasts a duet with the flamboyant pop star; Kanye and Jay-Z have also sampled from Luther Vandross, whose sexuality has been notoriously questioned for decades, in their hits "Slow Jamz" and "Excuse Me Miss,"—and the list goes on. This sampling of music from queer artists in raps delivered by musicians who have expressed their homophobia in their art is a prime example of the appropriation of a marginalized culture by a marginalized culture: many rappers demonize the LGBT+ community yet thrive off of the exploitation of queer musicians' products.

The curious relationship between queer culture and hip hop is likewise demonstrated through the backwards act of rappers publically proclaiming acceptance of the LGBT+ community yet continuing to use homophobic slurs in their music. Artists such as A\$AP Rocky, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and Nicki Minaj have openly expressed their support for the LGBT+ community, yet have still sprinkled their music with homophobic slurs even after declaring themselves as allies. In a bold move during an MTV News interview in 2005, outspoken high-profile rapper Kanye West criticized the genre for its homophobia and came forward in declaring his ally status with the LGBT+ community, admitting that he has a cousin who is gay whom he loved dearly and unconditionally. However, while he has made a conscious effort in his most recent music to avoid any derogatory language against the queer community, much of his music after the 2005 interview still displayed homophobia and a lack of understanding of the LGBT+ community, as aforementioned through his remix "Don't Like," which was released in 2012.

Caring for a LGBT+ family member or close friend does not excuse homophobic language or attitudes. bell hooks (1989) comments on this ambivalence about sexuality, claiming that the real threat to gay rights does not reside within black communities who may verbally express homophobia because they are unable to actively exploit the LGBT+ community through laws that discriminate against them in areas such as housing, employment, etc. (p. 208). She uses the example of a boy who makes homophobic jokes when with his friends, but who, at home,

is the central support system for his gay sister (hooks, 1989, 208). While valid to an extent, this mindset is dangerous in that it does not acknowledge immense impact perpetuating homophobic language and attitudes in everyday life has on the mental health and self-worth of LGBT+ individuals and, particularly, LGBT+ youth, who attempt suicide at a rate five times higher than heterosexual youth (“Facts About Suicide,” 2018). This simply points to a lack of understanding regarding the harmful effects of perpetuating such language, as well as what it actually means to support the LGBT+ community. Support cannot simply end in a declaration of acceptance or circumstantial acceptance—support must translate to action and a conscious effort in following through on changing homophobic behavior and practices in any circumstance.

Even in the face of unwelcoming lyrics, though, hip hop is still widely accessed by the queer community, and the growing acceptance of gay rights in society is mirrored in the genre through a more welcoming atmosphere towards LGBT+ hip hop artists. The at times “feminine” or gender-fluid fashion choices of Kanye West, Jaden Smith, Andre 3000, Lil Uzi, Pharrell, A\$AP Rocky, and Young Thug challenge the dominant notions of the hyper-masculine (black) image, while queer hip hop artists such as Frank Ocean, iLoveMakonnen, Taylor Bennet, Azalea Banks, Kevin Abstract, Young M.A, and Tyler, the Creator challenge the overarching heteronormative standard in hip hop. Meanwhile, popular former slur-yielding artists such as Jay-Z and Common have, in recent years, used their platform to express support for the LGBT+ community through lyrics that depict the struggles many LGBT+ individuals face living in a society that often rejects them. Other wildly popular LGBT+ rappers have used their platform to speak on their own experiences. In an unanticipated move from the once homophobic slur-yielder, Tyler, the Creator surprised his fans and the larger rap community when he came out on his recent album *Flower Boy*. Despite the fear of losing fans due to his newly revealed sexuality expressed through his songs on the album, *Flower Boy* was still wonderfully received; perhaps as a result of this love and acceptance, Tyler was less shy about his sexuality on his summer freestyle “Potato Salad” with A\$AP Rocky, rapping openly about his sexual preferences.

On his most recent album legendary rapper Jay Z dedicated the song “Smile” to his mother’s struggle as a closeted lesbian in a heterosexual marriage. The accompanying music video beautifully depicts the heartbreaking situations in which many closeted lesbians were and still are faced to live as told viscerally through the story of his mother Gloria’s strained relationship with another woman while trapped in a heterosexual marriage with multiple children. The lyrics provide immediate exposure to queer culture and experiences (for those who might not watch/have access to watch the music video) through Jay’s loving and progressive first verse:

Mama had four kids but she’s a lesbian
Had to pretend so long that she’s a thespian
Had to hide in the closet, so she medicate
Society shame and the pain was too much to take
Cried tears of joy when you fell in love
Don’t matter to me if it’s a him or a her
I just wanna see you smile through all the hate
Marie Antoinette baby, let ‘em eat cake (2017, 9-16)

Both the lyrics and the video serve as a poignant example of life in the closet as someone identifying across the LGBT+ spectrum, and exposure to this experience through the widely accessed music of such a high-profile, internationally renowned rapper is beneficial in spreading positive attitudes, messages, and images regarding the LGBT+ community.

“WHY YOU ALWAYS RAP ABOUT BEIN’ GAY? ‘CAUSE NOT ENOUGH N*** RAPPIN BE GAY”:**

Moving forward

Despite the homophobia present within the genre, the varied queer-friendly facets of hip hop culture equip the LGBT+ community with positive icons that defy stereotypes, break overbearing norms, and provide refreshing access to queer-friendly hip hop music. The

LGBT+ community, however, does not restrict themselves to solely consuming this queer-friendly margin of hip hop music and do not avoid indulging in the more homophobic anthems. Perhaps the LGBT+ community resonates with hip hop because it is a genre grounded in struggle and to that they can relate, even though the homophobia present in a generous chunk of rap music equally marginalizes them. Perhaps they feel as if they are in on the joke. Perhaps when repeating homophobic slurs in hip hop, the LGBT+ community reappropriates these terms and exclaims them as phrases of empowerment instead, as if they were the ones saying the words in the first place.

This re-appropriation, however, does not justify homophobia in hip hop—but what will the elimination of homophobic slurs in hip hop really do if the root of the problem locates itself in the broader framework of American society? Should rappers be using these slurs in their music? No. Will the absence of these slurs in their music inhibit others (and even rappers themselves, through their lived behavior outside of their music) from expressing their homophobia? Also no. But whether anti-homophobic rap music is influencing the lived behavior of consumers (and the rappers themselves) or not, it will at the very least eliminate the practice of repeating these normalized slurs and attitudes in singing along to new, non-homophobic rap music. While this may not serve as a direct line of impact in restructuring concrete laws that systematically work to oppress the LGBT+ community in schools, housing, the workforce, etc.⁵, it will at least halt the perpetuation of degrading stereotypes and language in the most widely listened to genre of music. As a result, this may translate to more inclusivity, awareness, and understanding regarding varied LGBT+ stories, struggles, and experiences. Opening a positive conversation about queer life and struggles in mainstream (and non-mainstream) rap music would offer refreshing perspectives on a likewise marginalized community. While dismantling the homophobia in hip hop might not be the chief concern of the many straight hip hop artists spearheading the genre, this exposure to diverse

⁵Only 15 states protect LGBT+ youth from conversion therapy; only 14 states address discrimination against students based on sexual orientation and gender identity; only 21 states prohibit discrimination in the workplace based on sexual orientation and gender identity; only 18 states address hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity; only 21 states prohibit discrimination in housing based on sexual orientation and gender identity (“State Maps of Laws & Policies,” 2018).

experiences would promote a healthy departure from the rigid, exhausting standard of masculinity that men—in particular black men—are forced to embody. In turn, this inclusive hip hop environment will ultimately benefit not only the straight men participating in and consuming the music in the genre, but, importantly, LGBT+ individuals who will feel more welcomed in the hip hop community.

Fixing the issue within the genre, however, is just one small piece in a bigger picture. Creating an inclusive environment within hip hop cannot happen without first understanding, addressing, and educating people on the larger issues of homophobia and hypermasculinity in American society that fostered the ideals reflected in a variety of hip hop's music. As we move towards a more accepting space in American society—a space where we actively work to dismantle constructs of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity—the media that we produce will likewise reflect these positive changes. So in discussing homophobia within hip hop, it is imperative to understand that these attitudes are not contained or worse within the genre, but rather they reflect the ideals, stereotypes, and attitudes of the society in which we live. We cannot expect hip hop to change unless we do.

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