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Keeping it Real:

Analyzing intersectional narratives of gender and sexuality in popular Hip Hop today through Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education
Supervisor: Hanna Musiol

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the importance of varied narratives of sexuality and gender through intersectional rappers in popular Hip Hop. It examines how this is portrayed by Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X today. This is done through looking at previous representation of intersectionality in rap, as well as important theories from Crenshaw (1991), Collins (2000), Pough (2004), Oware (2011), Penney (2012), and Roach (2019). How Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X provide new narratives of sexuality and gender in popular Hip Hop through their lyrics is examined with emphasis on their disregard of Black respectable currency and Black hypermasculinity in the construction of their self-definition.

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Introduction

“Get on your knees and eat this pussy right,” Megan Thee Stallion raps in Plan B, presenting a narrative in which her sexual pleasure is the main priority (2022). Expressing sexual desires so bluntly is a part of what Megan does as a rapper in order to assert her wants as a woman. “Sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered”, Hortense Spillers declares in her essay, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words”, regarding the representation of American Black women and their sexualities (Spillers, 2003, p.157). The ability to express one’s sexual wants and needs in the mainstream is an act of empowerment. It is about providing a new narrative in dialogue with already established ones. Diversity in expressions of sexuality are constantly developing within cultures and within various genera’s of music. Hip hop and rap’s ability to be a place of discussion and change is recognized in the monumental *Black Noise* by Tricia Rose. In the introduction, Rose writes that in rap “relationships between Black cultural practice, social and economic conditions, technology, sexual and racial politics, and the institutional policing of the popular terrain are complex and in constant motion” (Rose, 1994, intro xv). This constant motion indicates that there is a possibility for change that incorporates new narratives of sexuality and gender identity in the popular terrain. In an interview with Zane Lowe and Apple Music, Lil Nas X expressed how the representation within rap has developed over the later years, and how this could evolve further: “We haven’t seen this ever, so many female rappers that are just fucking killing it. [...] I feel like a decade from now it’s gonna be the same with gay rappers or any rappers. I feel like there is gonna be entire trans rappers and what not just killing it, because why not?” (Nas X, 2021a, 09:59).

The current level of cultural inclusiveness pertaining to sexual orientations in mainstream Hip Hop has reached a peak in recent years compared to previous decades. This decade presented us with Lil Nas X, an openly gay rapper who is recognized both nationally and internationally for his music (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p.353). His representation of sexuality and gender is unique in popular Hip Hop, as his openness around his sexuality and his gender embodiment stands out from other large rap figures previously and today. Even though other members of the LGBTQ+ community have emerged in the indie Hip Hop scene, no other openly gay rapper has garnered such profound mainstream success and recognition while showing such pride and comfort in their sexuality (Hughes, 2021). The way that the Hip Hop community has affected the lives of Black gay men today is noteworthy. Hip Hop has not always been inclusive and welcoming to Black gay men, as the Hip Hop culture has pushed the narrative

of straight hypermasculinity amongst Black men (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p.353). This narrative leaves little space for other gender expressions and sexualities. Therefore, the need for other narratives in the mainstream is vital.

When reflecting on how the social world is composed, Crenshaw believed that taking various grounds of identity into account was necessary (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1245). Black women are marginalized in both their blackness and their womanhood as intersectional individuals, as modern discourses are shaped to respond to either of them, not the issues that arise where the two of them meet (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1244). In order to have greater representation, we need to take into account multiple grounds of identity and how those intersect. “Rap music is a social form that voices many of the class-, gender-, and race-related forms of cultural and political alienation, and it voices this alienation in the commercial spotlight” (Rose, 1994, p.184). These alienations confronted within rap are evolving with the progression of society, as the social issues of previous decades differentiate from those of contemporary time, but they still show that many of the former struggles continue to persist. The alienations that people rap about do not only change with society, but rap can be a vessel for changes in these alienations (Pough, 2004, p.13) This is why various intersectional artists are essential, as they have the opportunity to voice their own views and concerns and create new narratives.

This thesis aims to:

- 1) Analyze the importance of varied narratives of sexuality and gender through intersectional rappers in popular Hip Hop.
- 2) Examine how this is portrayed by Megan Thee stallion and Lil Nas X today.

To be able to reach these aims, it is necessary to answer this question: How does Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X provide new narratives of sexuality and gender in popular Hip Hop through their lyrics?

This thesis examines popular rap music and Black sexualities. I will focus on Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X’s portrayals of sexuality and gender, and discuss how they provide intersectional narratives that are important in society today. I will focus on this through an intersectional lens, and will do so through analyzing lyrics and looking at the development of sexualities in hip hop through a historic perspective. Historic context is especially important, as “by ignoring the past we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p.117). In the first chapter, I will focus on Megan Thee Stallion’s portrayal of sexuality and gender

through exploration of the historical representation of women in rap. Following that, I will analyze Megan Thee Stallion's lyrics from three selected songs in the time period from 2020 to 2022 through an intersectional lens and with Roach's term Black respectable currency. In the second chapter, I will discuss Lil Nas X's portrayal of sexuality and gender by looking at the historic context of queerness and homophobia in Hip Hop culture, as well as focusing on the historic prominence of Black hypermasculinity within Hip Hop. In analyzing his lyrics from three selected songs from 2020 to 2021, I will look at how Lil Nas X dismisses the policing of Black hypermasculinity. This thesis will be concluded by discussion of how these artists have contributed to the larger narrative through their representation and their expression of sexuality and gender in a culture that previously has had a rather fixed narrative on gender roles and sexuality. The thesis will show how Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X could become these artists in the future, and how their stories have impacted the narratives within popular culture.

Both Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X represent important narratives in Hip Hop, as they both offer imperative experiences and narratives of gender and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw remarks in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" how it is important to have various images and narratives that portray a greater variety of Black experiences (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1249). Intersectionality is essential in this thesis, as it is about two popular rap artist's creation of new narratives of sexuality and gender. Both Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X have intersecting grounds for identity. Their unique experiences and lyrics provide a narrative with them as the subject. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins approaches sexuality as a place of intersectionality, and highlights the importance of self-definition where these intersecting oppressions meet (Collins, 2000, p.128). Just as systems of oppression rely on controlling the erotic, empowerment can be found in the self-definition of sexuality. The future of music should hold stories in which the needs and wants of the artists are told by themselves on their own terms.

"The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women" (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1252). The same goes for antiracism and homosexuality. Discourses about antiracism and acceptance of homosexuality have the same

issues, as the resistance strategies of the two do not show the struggles that occur when the two of them intersect. Previously, survival was focused on sticking together with the same narrative. Now that Black lives are not threatened in the same way as they were in the Jim Crow era, the need for sticking to the same narrative is not imperative for survival anymore. Now various narratives of Black experiences are important in order to represent the complexities within the people (Collins, 2000, p.201). “People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intercommunity problems” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1256). This is still an issue, but with a greater variety of voices being offered, then a greater understanding of the complexities of people’s identities will be reachable.

Chapter 1: Megan Thee Stallion Shapes Thee Narrative

“Just like how the guys are doing that and nobody’s questioning it, I feel like it should be the same way for me as a woman and for other women” Megan Thee Stallion told music journalist Kathy Iandoli in relation to expressing your sexuality as a woman in Hip Hop. (Iandoli, 2019, p.288). Megan voices a difference in the popular reception of sexual content between women and straight men in Hip Hop. How are some allowed to express their desires as sexual subjects, while others are unable to do so without backlash and harsh reactions? Should she not be allowed to express her desires as a sexual subject? “The sexual value of women, unlike that of men, is a depletable commodity; boys become men by expending theirs, while girls become whores” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1285). This narrative from multiple decades ago has evolved much in recent years, far from the fixed and rigid opinions of the past, but there are still remnants of it in these judgements about women who express their sexuality freely. Hortense Spillers famously said in her essay “Interstices: A drama of small worlds” that “sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered” (Spillers, 2003, p.157). Megan Thee Stallion demonstrates how she is empowered as a sexual subject by clearly expressing her own sexuality. She wants to hold the power of her own sexuality. If we take the sexual objectification and the historical silence into account, it is easier to understand the resistance and the attempts to redefine their own sexual imagery that Black women provide in rap (Rose, 1994, p.150). The images, narratives and symbols in music and other media shape much of what audiences recognize and care about. Central to shaping our social realities are these images represented in media (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 297). The expression of different sexualities has shown to be essential for the development of new narratives in popular culture. Hip Hop and rap music could be a space where new narratives are development, as Gwendolyn Pough believed that rap could be the stage for change (2004, p.13). A stage that Megan Thee Stallion stands firmly on, as she aspires to provide an alternate narrative of the relations between men and women within Hip Hop.

This chapter will focus on Megan Thee Stallion’s representation of sexuality and gender as a Black woman in popular Hip Hop. As the thesis statement articulates, I will argue the importance of varied narratives of sexuality and gender through intersectional rappers in popular Hip Hop today and how this is portrayed by Megan Thee Stallion. Using an intersectional lens, I will analyze her lyrics and look at Black feminist theory as well as Hip Hop feminism. I will start with some of the focal points from the representation in the

previous decades, and lack thereof, before analyzing Megan Thee Stallion's representation of sexuality and gender in Hip Hop through her rap lyrics. This will be discussed with focus on Kimberlé Crenshaw's and Patricia Hill Collins' reflections on intersectionality and how Eurocentric ideologies has affected the image of sexuality of Black women (Collins, 2000, p.129). In the analyzation of lyrics, I examine how Megan Thee Stallion breaks this pattern and how she does not let Black respectable currency impact or manage her identity and actions as a Black woman in Hip Hop (Roach, 2019, p.11). Historical context is very important within this representation, as the Audre Lorde quote in the thesis introduction states. The past is important for women in Hip Hop, as it laid the foundation for women in the culture today. Gender expression and the sexuality of Black women in Hip Hop has been developing over the decades, and still is.

As the quote in the beginning of this chapter implies, women expressing their sexuality is met with more reactions than men who do the same. At the Scholar and the Feminist Conference IX in 1982 "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," Ellen Willis stated that "The tendency of some feminists to regard women purely as sexual victims rather than sexual subjects, and to define the movement's goal as controlling male sexuality rather than demanding women's freedom to lead active sexual lives, reinforces women's oppression and plays into the hands of the new right. It is a dead end, a politics of despair. Feminism is a vision of active freedom, of fulfilled desires, or it is nothing" (Brooks, 2021, p.252-253). Women in Hip Hop have the opportunity to create and shape a discourse that promotes active freedom and a place where they can portray themselves as sexual subjects on their own terms. The future enlightened path in society was to Ellen Willis one with music at its center "that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated – as well good rock and roll did" (Brooks, 2021, p.247). Willis wanted a future where the artist's story would be true and all encompassing. The future of music would hold stories in which the needs and wants of the artists are told by themselves on their own terms.

In the 1970s Hortense Spillers' quest for non-fictional texts concerning the sexuality of American Black women, written by Black women themselves, resulted in mostly a disturbing silence (Spillers, 2003, p.153). In the lack of material and representation regarding the sexuality of Black women, Spillers describes Black women as "the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (Spillers, 2003, p.153). Their sexuality exists, but they do not have the ability to fully express it. How could they ever

fully be sexual subjects, if their stories are never truly told? A voice here is fundamental. Spillers goes on further to say that if their sexual experiences are depicted, it is usually not by themselves, and when it is, it is in the “self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues” (Spillers, 2003, p.153). Even though blues music has its limitations, its importance and impact on the visibility and representation of Black women should not be disregarded. In “Slave Codes and Liner Notes” (1977), Michele Russell articulates how important jazz performers such as Bessie Smith has been for the representation of Black female sexuality:

she articulated, as clearly as anyone before or since, how fundamental sexuality was to survival... With her, black women in American culture could no longer just be regarded as sexual objects. She made us sexual subjects, the first step in taking control (Russell, 1977, p.2).

Russell further goes on describing the importance of Bessie Smith, as she “humanized sexuality for black women” (1977, p.2). Music has been an important platform for expressions of sexuality for many decades, and within Hip Hop and rap, this space for expression continues. In *God Save the Queens* (2019), Kathy Iandoli explores issues such as sexuality, gender, and objectification in Hip Hop while acknowledging the women early on in Hip Hop, as well as today for their importance and contributions. In one of the interviews in the book, she among other things discusses the sexual representation in Megan Thee Stallion’s songs with the artist herself. Iandoli refers to Megan as “real” as she says “there is no character creation here; Megan is simply Megan” (Iandoli, 2019, p.237). Megan offers a true representation of Black womanhood, where she is true to herself and her audience. As an artist, Megan is someone contemporary Black girls and women can relate their experiences to. In fully offering herself and her lived experience in the world she provides an important representation of Black women in Hip Hop culture.

Hip Hop had its very beginnings in the South of Bronx in the beginning to early mid 1970’s. It has since then become a culture and a youth movement with global range. This global range especially includes rap. Rap is a form of music that comes from within the Hip Hop culture (Pough, 2004, p.3). Black women have always been a part of Hip Hop and rap, even though they are not always recognized for it. As Gwendolyn Pough states in *Check It While I Wreck It* that “women’s contribution to Hip Hop culture has been lost, or rather erased” (Pough, 2004, p.8). The women of Hip Hop have fought against their constant marginalization since

the genre's formation. Women's presence in this male dominated music culture has had a declining curve from the mid 90's (Hobson & Bartlow, 2008, p.3). In the late 1980's, women rappers such as Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa, established their own personas in the Hip Hop scene alongside male rappers (Chang, 2007, p.445). These women were rappers who were respected alongside their male peers. The demand for rap increased across the next decade. As Hip Hop's mainstream popularity grew exponentially in the mid 90's, Hip Hop became a very lucrative business for bigger corporations. The power shifted towards big media monopolies, as they detected that there was an opportunity for large profits (Chang, 2007, p.440). This growth in influence and power of big corporations and major labels directly narrowed which voices could be heard. The music industry went for bigger projects that could generate more money, this shift in focus and priority led to a dramatic fall in the diversity of which voices were represented. For the mass audiences, this led to a decreased availability in diversity of opinions, ideas, art, sounds, and news within rap music. In this instance, the women of Hip Hop lost the most. Lauren Hill and Missy Elliot were successful female artists in the decade after, but they were more of an exception than the rule. Women rappers were not prioritized by the labels, so there were limited women voices left (Chang, 2007, p.445).

At the turn of the 21st century, rappers such as Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Missy Elliot, and Remy Ma were some of the biggest women rappers in Hip Hop. Even though they had the talent to challenge the bigger male rappers at the time, their careers did not ascend higher than their breakthroughs. These women rappers had various struggles that affected their success – such as sudden health complications and incarceration – but the one thing that affected them the most was the labels not prioritizing women and funding for women rapper's projects (Iandoli, 2019, p. 245). Women's voices were still not prioritized by those holding both the power and funds at the time, which operated towards a bigger decline in the representation of women voices. The hegemonic power of major labels seemed like a barricade for women rappers, until the internet and social media grew forth as a platform. Artists were now equipped with a new space where they could distribute their own music. Social media, such as Myspace at the time, played an important role in artists finding each other and growing their fan bases. With social media as a new apparatus for self-promotion, new rappers were not as reliant on labels to gain a following (Iandoli, 2019, p.248). In 2007, Nicki Minaj was found on Myspace and got signed from it, an interaction that would not have transpired without social media (Iandoli, 2019, p.272). She grew further as a rapper over the next years, and with "Super Bass" (2011),

she entered the global market. She made an album that pop audiences enjoyed, while staying true to Hip Hop where she delivered strong bars and lyrics that displayed her sexuality in an unapologetic way (Iandoli, 2019, p.274). In November of 2017, Nicki made history as the first woman to be featured over a hundred times in the same decade on the Billboard 100 (Iandoli, 2019, p.281). Even though Nicki Minaj often got in altercations and showed aversion towards other women rappers, she showed them – and the world – that women could be successful, and that people would listen to them (Iandoli, 2019, p.282).

Since Nicki Minaj's domination of the Hip Hop scene, women rappers have become numerous. Streaming services such as Spotify has changed distribution as well, projects get released now in forms of singles (Iandoli, 2019, p.285). With these new frameworks in place, especially social media, popular women rappers are becoming more visible in popular Hip Hop. This is the framework that made it possible for women rappers to gain recognition, rappers such as Megan Thee Stallion. Megan is a second-generation woman rapper, as her mom was also a rapper (Iandoli, 2019, p.286). With the wisdom and realness from her mother, Megan offers a real persona that builds upon the history of women rappers. Kathy Iandoli describes Megan as “the product of all female rapper's past” (Iandoli, 2019, p.287). In this new emergent scene of women rappers, there is a unique opportunity for Black women to narrate their own life and experiences in popular culture. Voices that have previously been demoted to the margins of public discourse, now have a considerable chance to articulate their desires and needs through rap (Rose, 1994, p.146). Through rap, Black women are able to cultivate the power of their own narrative.

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, Audre Lorde discusses different kinds of power, where she focuses on the erotic power in females. “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, 1984, p.87). Lorde articulates how the erotic is a universal power, and that as a power it has not been evenly distributed in society. It is difficult to connect with your erotic power, when there is no outlet for it, and no public discourse around your ability to have it. This is why self-definition and representation of Black women in Hip Hop is so important. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter “sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered” (Spillers, 2003, p.157). The complex relationships between Black cultural practice as well as sexual and racial politics are in a continuous movement within rap (Rose, 1994, intro xv). Women in rap can use this constant shift as an opportunity

to produce new narratives that represent their own beliefs around their gender identity and sexuality. “The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance” (Lorde, 1984, p.90). As systems of oppression rely on controlling the power of the erotic, self-definition holds great importance and stipulates power. Because of this inherent power of the erotic, Black women’s sexuality can be a significant place of resistance when sexuality is defined by Black women themselves. Collins sees a path towards Black women’s empowerment through harnessing the power of the erotic and self-defining it (Collins, 2000, p.128). Crystal LaVoullé and Trisha Lewis Ellison analyze the performances of both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, where they are compared to each other, and their work is seen in a historical context considering race and sexuality. In describing “The Bad Bitch Barbie” they describe it as “a woman who rises against opposition and stands her ground. She is both a Black feminist and someone who acknowledges that intersectionality and racism exist.” (LaVoullé & Ellison, 2017, p.67). In acknowledging issues that affect Black women, they are able to be self-defined without negotiation.

Historian Evelyn Higginbotham coined the historiographical term “Black respectability politics” to describe the resistive strategies of Black women from the Jim Crow era (Roach, 2019, p.11). This term has now been further developed in order to suit today’s social climate. In her analysis of Nicki Minaj, Shoniqua Roach practices her own term for the kind of Black respectability politics that is emerging, called “Black respectable currency”. She describes this currency as “the tangible and intangible forms of cultural capital that accrue to Black women who have markers of “respectability” such as class privilege, an ostensibly heteronormative partnership, a clear affiliation to a Western religion, legible gender embodiment, able-bodied privilege, US citizenship (however tenuous) and so forth” (Roach, 2019, p.11). Roach believes that this Black respectable currency is creating temporary management and surveillance of Black women (Roach, 2019, p.11). Megan Thee Stallion habitually breaks with this respectable currency, and therefore provides a passage for Black women from this social management and surveillance. In the analysis of Megan’s lyrics, this scarcity of Black respectable currency, or absence of consideration for it, is apparent. As Nikki Lane stated “Megan dismisses standards of femininity, or Black middle-class femininity that is rooted in proving one’s adherence to white, middle-class patriarchal notions of femininity” (Lane, 2021, p.295). In the analysis of Megan’s lyrics, her self-definition and lack of regard toward Black respectable currency is palpable.

Megan Thee Stallion has many songs across several albums where she is the sexual subject. I will mainly focus on three of them that displays in various ways how she represents sexuality and gender through an intersectional lens. About her own music, Megan says that “I want to give my hotties something good to feel when they hear me spit. I want them to hear that aggression in my voice, that confidence in my tone” (Megan Thee Stallion: Iandoli, 2019, p.287). She wants her fans (the hotties) to feel good through her expressions and abundant confidence. Not only will her songs provide representation of women as sexual subjects that break gender norms, but she will also provide a positive atmosphere. A narrative where women that builds upon developing gender roles and expressions can be found in the first four lines of the song “Thot Shit” (Megan, 2021). Megan Thee Stallion opens the song with these lines: “Hands on my knees, shakin' ass, on my thot shit / Post me a pic, finna make me a profit / When the liquor hit, then a bitch get toxic / (Why the fuck you in the club with n___s wildin'?)” (2021). Megan takes control over the word “thot” that is usually meant as a derogatory term against women. She is being called various names by people and she is owning “thot”. She sees it from a perspective of jealousy or an attempt to yield her power. In rap lyrics, regular mentions of “hoes”, “bitches” and “thots” can create hostile atmospheres for women in Hip Hop culture (Pough, 2004, p.19). She wields the word as an empowerment, deviating from gender norms. She is not afraid of lacking Black respectable currency, she instead leans into her lack of it, establishing a new standard. It is about taking a negative connotation and owning it. Megan Thee Stallion is proud of her “thot shit”. Controlling it as a narrative is important, because of its power to demean women can be turned into a term of empowerment and erotic power.

In the second line, Megan Thee Stallion raps about how such an insignificant thing as posting pictures and making money from it is a possibility for her. This braggadocio line shows how she can profit from the slightest things. She establishes dominance in an economic standpoint, where she as a “thot” has agency of her own body and actions. In the third line, she establishes further dominance by taking control over the slur “bitch”. She is not afraid of what perception people have of her and at the same time creates a space where she dominates with a word that has been used to denigrate. In three lines, she has called herself “thot”, “bitch” and “toxic”, all the while asserting dominance. In the fourth line, a man’s voice asks her why she is at the club. The question from a male perspective shows a form of possessiveness towards Megan, but she discards it by not acknowledging it. He is trying to control her

actions, while she ignores his efforts. She also deviates from Black respectable currency, as she ignores the bounds of a heteronormative relationship (Roach, 2019, p.11). With or without a boyfriend she will still enter the club and act as she pleases.

Another way Megan Thee Stallion asserts her dominance, is in the redefinition of the figurative imagery of being called “a snake”: “Hoes tryna call me a snake, shit, I guess I can relate / 'Cause a bitch spit a whole lotta venom / And since these hoes all rats, when they come around me / All I see is a whole lotta dinner” (Thee Stallion, 2021). When people try to talk Megan down by calling her a snake, she uses the term in a new empowering way. A snake is powerful, like Megan, and will therefore be intimidating to those around them. She spits venom when she raps because the bars she “spits” are strong and intense. The people afraid of her knows that she has power, and tries to diminish it by calling her a snake. Their attempt to disempower her only provides her with a new perspective on how powerful she is in comparison to them. She returns the favor by comparing them to rats around her, a comparison with further establishes a power dynamic where she is coming out on top. Rats are food for snakes, and their projecting of their own insecurities in meeting with her only feeds her ego. She is secure in herself and will only grow stronger when people are “hatin’ on” her, people who are unable to be as secure as Megan is in herself. Her security in herself and her power is threatening to others and seems uncontrollable, similar to what a snake could be described as. The imagery of the snake is one Megan uses in multiple songs through different albums, like reincarnation.

After her snake analogy, she goes on to describe how she likes to walk around at home: “I walk around the house butt-naked / And I stop at every mirror just to stare at my own posterior” (Thee Stallion, 2021). Being completely naked could be linked to being vulnerable, but in Megan’s instance, her nakedness is connected to power. She stops in front of every mirror in order to look at herself and admire what she sees. People might be rats around her powerful snake, but she also sees her power when she is alone at home. A comparison is not needed for her, she is fully aware of her beauty and power without needing comparison or the validation of others. She admires herself. She possesses the erotic power of owning your body and sexuality. “Megan clearly doesn’t care about people’s issues with her “masculinity” as she has taken on the gender-fucked moniker Stallion (which is a strong, powerfully built male horse that is un-neutered, “hot blooded” and difficult to control)” (Lane, 2021, p.295). Bringing power to her own figure, she shows how she loves the body that might be deemed in

terms of Black respectable currency as not a legible gender embodiment (Roach, 2019, p.11). She is a powerful and strong woman, she is Thee Stallion.

Megan Thee Stallion's presents herself as powerful in both the body and within Hip Hop as a successful women rapper. Even though she focuses on her success as a rapper, she will indulge in sexual activities freely: "Booked, but I squeeze a lil' head in my calendar / Lookin' in the mirror like, "Damn, I don't brag enough"" (Thee Stallion, 2021). She is doing great with her career and spends her time working, but she still will set aside some time for sexual encounters. Her career is a number one priority, and she is doing well in it, as she has little time for other things. Using "squeeze" she implies that she has little time available and high demand for it. She is in high demand in both arenas. In the next line, she reiterates the inclination of her looking at herself in the mirror. Unfazed by the Law of Jante, she is expressing her individuality and superiority. Once more Megan is mentioning how attractive she looks and that she does not brag enough about it. This serves to underline how remarkable she believes herself to be. Extensive braggadocio is needed to encapsulate just how enthralling she is. As a woman in the Hip Hop culture, she encapsulates how men have bragged about themselves and how they "get" women in rap lyrics, by doing it from her perspective as a woman in power. She represents a narrative in which she is steadily in control. With this new narrative, Megan is continuing to develop the interpretative framework of male rappers, as she takes the role that men often do within rap (Rose, 1994, p.182).

To Megan Thee Stallion, her body image is of great importance. Even though she focuses on herself, she has dealt with many people criticizing her clothing choices and appearance:

"I've received quite a bit of attention for appearance as well as my talent. I choose my own clothing. Let me repeat: I choose what I wear, not because I am trying to appeal to men, but because I am showing pride in my appearance, and a positive body image is central to who I am as a woman and a performer" (Thee Stallion, 2020a).

In the lyrics to her song "Body" (2020b), Megan shows little regard to the critiques she has obtained, as she raps about her own figure. She is not afraid to visualize to her audience how her body curves. When she describes her own body, she does so with a boastfulness. "The category is body, look at the way it's sittin' (yeah) / That ratio so out of control / That waist, that ass, them titties (that waist, that ass, them titties)" (Thee Stallion, 2020b). In saying "the

category is body,” Megan is making a nod toward Ballroom culture where people walk different categories. The space that ballrooms have created for Black and Latina LGBTQ+ members rarely get such affirmation in mainstream culture. Ballroom members respond to marginalization and exclusion by producing performances that transform the normative into a space of support, affirmation, and communal celebration (Bailey, 2014, p.390). While showing appreciation for the ballroom space, she is also developing her own space within her music for Black women. In this space, she develops the support, affirmations, and the communal celebrations of Black women through her own celebration of herself. She is praising her physique as a Black woman who is proud of how she looks. The music video matches this narrative, as the music video displays and focuses on the beauty of various Black women’s bodies. The music video also nods toward ballroom culture with Megan voguing at the start of the music video. The category is body, so every woman in the video is giving this. Megan makes the song and the music video a space for support, affirmation, and communal celebration of Black women. She is doing so with inspiration from the ballroom scene, where Black women have played an essential role. Through “Body”, Megan is paying homage to a sub-culture where gender expression is essential and using this expression zone to build a contemporary space for the praising of the Black woman. In her own praise of her body, she is allowing others to do the same. She is proud of the way her body naturally curves.

Megan wrote this song while in quarantine in 2020 as she mentions in an interview on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. Many people were living isolated lives at that moment and got their “quarantine bodies”. Her body did also change, but she chose to embrace the changes that naturally occurred from living in a changed society. Instead of making the quarantine body something negative, Megan just saw it as attaining more body than she had earlier, which is a body she loves. She had women around her praising her figure, and in their eyes, she was able to praise herself (2020, 01:18). The female body is ever-changing, from different factors such as aging and pregnancy. Megan is showing how she still loves her body, even if it goes through changes, because this is her natural body.

If I wasn't me and I would've see myself, I would have bought me a drink (hey)
Took me home, did me long, ate it with the panties on (ugh, ugh, ugh)
I could build a house with all the brick I got (yeah)
Bitches spend a lifetime tryna get this hot (tryna get this hot) (Thee Stallion, 2020b).

Megan Thee Stallion employs a perspective outside herself as if she was meeting herself. She implies through the bars that she is highly desirable from an objective standpoint. Anyone seeing her would be interested in being with her. Her desirability is so strong that whoever “got with her” would not be able to contain their excitement while going down on her, so they would not be patient enough to remove her panties before indulging in them. She is demonstrating when people want to be with her it is almost impossible to contain oneself in her presence. Megan is not saying that anyone can be with her, she is saying that people want to be with her. She has the erotic power, she is the sexual subject. Megan Thee Stallion is tinkering with gender norms and gender expectations, while also praising the female body. Firstly, she is stating dominance by being explicit about what she would want if she saw herself. She is not afraid to vocalize her own desirability, she is aware of her own appeal. Secondly, she describes the sexual acts that she would want to be performed, something that is more commonly stated by men. She is taking control of the situation in both parts, where one side of her desires herself while the other is being praised. By controlling both parts, she shows a greater dominance as a commendable individual who can acquire both pleasure and praise. As she is both the giver and receiver in the narrative the buying of the drink becomes less gendered than if the giver was a man. Imagining herself as the person meeting her reduces the gendered expectations in the situation.

Megan Thee Stallion does not only rap about how her body looks, but also about the agency and autonomy she has in her own body. In the instance of her song “Plan B” (2022), she corrects the gender roles in rap songs concerning accidental parenthood. In one of the most widespread rap songs “Gold digger” by Kanye West (2005), he raps about women who “got you for 18 years”, in reference that women take men’s money by getting impregnated. This is a narrative that is common throughout rap, a narrative that portray women as opportunists that need to deceive men in order to reach economical attainment. Megan Thee Stallion counters that narrative with this line: “Popping Plan B's 'cause I ain't planned to be stuck with ya” (2022). In this line, Megan gives the agency to herself. He is not the one that is apprehensive about having a child with her, she is apprehensive about having a child with him. The interaction between them is purely sexual from her perspective. Hooks states in *Black Looks* that Black female sexuality in popular rap is fictitiously constructed merely as a commodity, used for money and power where pleasure only comes secondary (hooks, 1992/2015, p.70). Megan perishes the narrative, as she does not want power or money from him, pleasure is the only objective. Once again, Megan disregards the societal pressure and management of Black

respectable currency, as she challenges the gendered power dynamics and displays how she as a woman is purely looking for pleasure in this relation, not a romantic heteronormative relationship. As exhibited here, the perspectives and themes in women's rap lyrics can challenge dominant perceptions of heterosexual courtship (Rose, 1994, p.170). Megan clearly holds the power in this narrative and has no intention of taking the relation any further. She positions herself dominantly in the situation. "I ain't scared of shit, man or bitch / To everybody hating, y'all can suck this clit" (Thee Stallion, 2022). In Plan B, Megan shows how she gives equal opportunities to men and women, as she is not scared of either. She is in a sense developing an equality. She does not see fear as a gendered notion, and she shows no weakness to either of them. She equalizes genders when professing that she has no fear for any "man or bitch". By doing so, she establishes herself among all her peers, with no notion upon their gender. They are all equals. In the next line, Megan establishes dominance over her challengers by saying they "can suck this clit". She takes a phrase that is used by men to show dominance and turns it into a powerful one from a woman's perspective. By rephrasing an expression that is used to establish male dominance, she establishes her own dominance. Here she is controlling her own narrative to be in power, without concern of how it might affect markers of "respectability" through her gender embodiment (Roach, 2019, p.11).

The emphasis on women's place in relations of power continues in the chorus. In the first line of the chorus, Megan focuses on how women should prioritize loving themselves. "Ladies, love yourself 'cause this shit could get ugly (shit could get ugly) / That's why it's, "Fuck n__s, get money" (fuck n__s, get money)" (Thee Stallion, 2022). Self-love is primary, all else is secondary. Relations to men can have negative outcomes, so women should rather focus on themselves than their romantic relations. In the next line, Megan changes the phrase "fuck bitches, get money" to one that shifts the gender roles. A phrase that usually is derogatory towards women is now formulated in a way where women obtain the power. By changing the phrase, she provides more balance in the narratives of sexuality and gender roles within Hip Hop culture. This advances a dialogue surrounding gender roles and power relations within rap. As mentioned earlier, women rappers such as Megan Thee Stallion maintain and encourage dialogue between young Black women and men (Rose, 1994, p. 182). She continues to develop this dialogue later in the song: "You better get on your knees and eat this pussy right" (Thee Stallion, 2022). This line that the thesis opened with encompasses Megan Thee Stallion's assertiveness in sexual relations. Owning her own sexuality as a woman, she is articulating her sexual wants and needs. Holding the narrative of her own

sexuality, Megan articulates in an interview with The New York Times how she sees a difference in the reception of this expression by women vs those done by men. “When women choose to capitalize on our sexuality, to reclaim our *own* power, like I have, we are vilified and disrespected” (Thee Stallion, 2020a). Megan is explicitly describing sexual acts in “Plan B”. Here she is among other things rapping about someone giving her oral sex. This explicitness has garnered a lot of attention and outrage and sparked conversations about what female rappers can say and what male rappers are able to get away with saying. In an interview with Dua Lipa, Megan commented on how this double standard is highly relevant in hip hop today:

“A boy could start rapping about popping pills and enjoying four women at one time, and that song nobody will have a problem with that. Nobody will have anything negative to say about him talking about drugs and orgies. Now, Megan Thee Stallion says “eat my pussy” one time, with instant uproar. Goddamn” (Lipa, 2022).

Megan Thee Stallion places emphasis on how men have been able to rap about what they want without meeting much reaction from the general public, while women still do not have this luxury. This divergence between what is accepted when women voice their desires, compared to reactions do the same, shows a dichotomy in which narratives are viewed as acceptable in the public lens. The straight male narrative that has dominated within Hip Hop has been an important departure in studying the effects Hip Hop and the narratives within it has on the youth. In her qualitative analysis of how Black girls understand their sexuality, gender and race through the lens of rap, Bettina Love discusses the impact and direct influence Hip Hop has on the youth. Even though some segments of Hip Hop have its shortcomings, there is an indisputable power in this artform (Love, 2011, p.132). This power lies in the acknowledgement of the past, present and future issues within Hip Hop, and also the opportunities that rest within the culture.

It is precise because rap discusses controversial issues like sex, violence, drugs, and homophobia that we must use rap to bring these issues to the forefront. We cannot acknowledge the profound impact rap music has upon our youth and yet continue to disregard its potential (Love, 2011, p.132).

Love saw the importance rap has for engaging with topics that can be devising. In this chapter, it is articulated through the analysis of Megan Thee Stallion's lyrics that rap and Hip Hop culture not only is a reference point from which these themes can be discussed, but it is also a space for change within these controversial issues. Issues that are highlighted within rap also have the ability for change within rap. Gwendolyn Pough sees opportunities within Hip Hop culture and rap, since it is so influential on younger audiences, and specifically young Black women. She describes Hip Hop as "the vehicle that I hope one day will lead us to change" (Pough, 2004, p.13). Love emphasizes the importance of representation within popular culture, and why it is important that teachers are knowledgeable on the subject (2011, p.132). Megan Thee Stallion is a Black woman rapper who is not afraid to show her sexuality and gender embodiment in her lyrics. She authentically expresses her wants and pleasures without any consideration of Black respectable currency. The narrative she provides is pivotal in providing a space in which women can be confident in their sexuality and gender identity. Through her lyrics she provides this new narrative. "The subject matter and perspectives presented in many women's rap lyrics challenge dominant notions of sexuality, heterosexual courtship, and aesthetic constructions of the body" (Rose, 1994, p.170). In challenging dominant notions, Megan is the perfect example. As mentioned by Lane, Megan dismisses the standards of femininity with her resilient masculinity (Lane, 2021, p.295). Black respectable currency, as Roach mentions, is creating temporary management and surveillance of Black women (Roach, 2019, p.11). Megan Thee Stallion is creating her own narrative, where she thoroughly disregards the impact of Black respectable currency in her gender performance and her display of her own sexuality in her music. Megan is just Megan.

Chapter 2: Lil Nas X Creating New Space

While accepting his award for male artist of the year at the iHeartRadioMusicAwards in 2022, Lil Nas X spoke about how he got established in the music industry by being delusional.

“Believing that I could drop out of school and become an international success within a year, it’s the hoods you know. Believing that I could come out of the closet in the height of my career and [...] to think that I could do that would be delusional (iHeartRadio, 2022, 00:52).

Lil Nas X establishes how he would have to be delusional to think that he could be open about his sexuality as a Black gay man, as he grew up in a country where racism and homophobia are inseparable (Lorde, 1984/2007, p.41). The original function of Hip Hop was to express opposition against forces of oppression (Hobson & Bartlow, 2008, p.7). In the context of today’s society, some of the most oppressed voices would be those of Black gay men. An important part of Hip Hop culture is evoking change, and via queer representation through artists such as Lil Nas X, it might do so. Relations between Black cultural practices and sexual politics in rap are intricate and constantly evolving (Rose, 1994, intro xv). This constant development opens the possibility for more representation that is not heteronormative within rap.

Rap as a genre offers an outlet for people who are silenced, oppressed, and marginalized in American society (Oware, 2009, p.787). Some of the most silenced and marginalized voices in the United States are the voices of Black gay men. By using rap as an outlet, artists can express their thoughts and identity in an arena which has great social influence. This chapter is about the importance of varied narratives of sexuality and gender in popular Hip Hop, and how Lil Nas X creates new narratives and spaces through his lyrics. By utilizing an intersectional lens and looking at the historical context which surrounds these themes, I will look at how Lil Nas X presents himself without concern of already established narratives in Hip Hop culture. This chapter will focus on Lil Nas X’s development of new narratives of sexuality and gender as a Black gay man in popular Hip Hop. Firstly, I will look at how Black gay men have been portrayed historically in popular Hip Hop and how Black hypermasculinity makes Black gay men’s sexual identity and gender expression a convoluted one. Secondly, I will analyze how he breaks with traditional ideas around sexuality and gender norms in Black men through the works of Collins, Pough, Oware, Penney, McCune, and Jones and Ferguson. Thirdly, utilizing an intersectional lens, I will look at how he demonstrates his sexuality and gender embodiment through analyzing his lyrics. In the

analyzation of lyrics, I examine how Lil Nas X breaks with the norms of Black hypermasculinity and does not let it manage his identity as a Black gay man.

Lil Nas X, through his representation of gender and sexuality, truly encompasses the original and intended use of rap as a medium. He provides a new voice to the popular narrative. The development of voices like this within rap in Hip Hop culture has been especially strong in the last years and is still ongoing. In an interview with Zane Lowe and Apple Music, Lil Nas X speaks about how other rappers coming out as queer has helped him through the same process. He remarks how fellow Black queer artists, such as Frank Ocean and Tyler, The Creator, facilitated him in being comfortable with his sexuality. "Artists like Frank and Tyler made it easier for me to be where I am, comfortably" (Lowe, 2020, 1:18). This representation from other queer artists paved the way for Lil Nas X's belief that he could exist and thrive in the Hip Hop sphere as an openly gay Black man. Seeing how their representation allowed him to find his own space, Lil Nas X is now further developing and promoting this queer representation in Hip Hop through his actions and lyrics. He came out to his family at roughly the same time as he did to the public, a secret he swore to keep for life at the age of 14 (Hughes, 2021). As an openly gay rapper in mainstream music, Lil Nas X continually construct new narratives within Hip Hop culture through his mere existence.

As Patricia Hill Collins remarks, Black people in America have on a general basis tried to ignore the topic of homosexuality, which has resulted in a lack of serious analyses of the problem of homophobia within the Black community (Collins, 2000, p.125). In recent years, Black queer people and homophobia within the Black community has been examined further, by scholars such as Penney, Oware, Jones and Ferguson. Having research and a discourse about this topic establishes the issue and brings a collective attention to it, it is also beneficial in the process of repositioning it. In Hip Hop culture, further inclusivity and promotion of all sexual orientations and genders have developed over time. Even though recent years has seen some positive developments through Lil Nas X and the ones who came before him, there are still issues present within the culture. In some cases, the narrative of the hypermasculinity of Black men is directly at odds with the narrative of Black gay men, leading to a less secure space for Black gay men in the culture. If a Black man in the Hip Hop community deviates from the conditioned hypermasculinity, they might often be met with homophobic slurs, such as "faggot" or "sissy" (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p.353). This negative connotation concerning behaviors that deviate from hypermasculinity leave Black gay men in a position where they

either feel like they have to conform or suffer stigmatization. The position of Black hypermasculinity as the dominant gender representation in Hip Hop for men seem problematic, as it leaves little room for other representations of gender and sexuality that deviate from it.

Even though there have been some positive developments concerning inclusivity within the Hip Hop culture, there are still large issues concerning gender and sexuality representation. The roots of hypermasculinity and homophobia become really apparent in the infamous DaBaby rant at the Rolling Loud Miami music festival that happened only a few years ago. In DaBaby's disreputable call to action in his set on Rolling Loud Miami in 2021, the rapper made comments that was shockingly homophobic and heavily stigmatizing towards the gay community: "If you didn't show up today with HIV, AIDS, or any of them deadly sexually transmitted diseases that'll make you die in two to three weeks, then put your cellphone light up," DaBaby said at the beginning of his rant. He continued and ended this rant with the same homophobic tone: "Fellas, if you ain't sucking n—a d—k in the parking lot, put your cellphone light up" (Ridner, 2021). These articulations point to an ominous sub-layer within the Hip Hop community concerning the policing Black men's sexualities. Having an associate rapper expressing this is bad in and of itself, but that he even felt comfortable enough to say it on the stage at a popular Hip Hop festival display a disturbing level of comfort in the expression of blatant homophobic statements in public. Hypermasculinity within Hip Hop upholds the standards where people who happen to be born male are not allowed to express other gender identities or sexualities that deviate from it. The actions of big rappers are really important, as Hip Hop culture influences the lives of countless young people (Pough, 2004, p.13). The influence that these people wield should be used to further progress society, rather than their actions regressing it.

Issues concerning the progression of society in the context of Black queerness is not a problem exclusive to the Hip Hop culture. Misrepresentation or the exclusion of communities and voices of color and LGBTQ+ communities occur within mainstream media, archives, museums and libraries (Caswell et al., 2017, p.14). Even though this issue is expansive and wide-ranging, the further development of representation within mainstream media through rap can be the pathway for change. Gwendolyn Pough believed that Hip Hop could be the medium that sets forward change (Pough, 2004, p.13). Greater representation through Hip Hop could be an opportunity to shift narratives, as the heteronormative narratives still

dominate the culture. Black romantic or sexual relations outside the heteronormative narrative can be met with alienation which are affected through multiple factors. “Black queer performance, of any type, must be understood as always informed by the interplay of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (McCune, 2008, p.300). In an effort to build somewhat of an understanding of this intersectionality, the representation of the people affected by it is fundamental. “Identity continues to be a site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups. We all can recognize the distinction between the claims “I am Black” and the claim “I am a person who happens to be black” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1297). Lil Nas X is proudly saying that he identifies as a Black gay man. He did not have this representation when he was an adolescent, which led him to believe that there was something wrong with him and created a thought pattern in his mind where he promised himself that he would never reveal these emotions to anyone. Before he reached his current levels of fame he was closeted, but during his rapid growth as a rapper, he decided to come out as gay (Hughes, 2021). Through his actions he became the representation he himself ought to have had as a young Black gay boy.

In *Can't Stop Won't stop* Jeff Chang writes about the history of the Hip Hop generation. Within this book, Hip Hop history crosses from the very start of Hip Hop in the 70's and until the start of the 21st century, as it was first published in 2005. Representation of Black gay men in this history of Hip Hop is mainly portrayed in the book through slurs and homophobic actions by people in the Hip Hop culture, or in the questioning of peoples sexuality who seem to act outside the stereotypical Black hypermasculinity (Chang, 2007, pp. 254-255, p.327, p.413). An openly gay Black male rapper did not make a single appearance in the approximately 500 pages of Hip Hop history. The only time Black gay men were mentioned in the book in a somewhat positive light, was in connection to the Million Man March in 1995. In this march about Black solidarity amongst men there were approximately 150 Black gay men who walked in their own section. They were chanting in the street “Gay men of African descent!” and carrying signs that said “I AM A BLACK, GAY MAN. I AM A BLACK MAN. I AM A MAN” (Chang, 2007, p.403). These Black gay men showed support to the other Black men in the community as well as represented themselves that day. On this day there seemed to be some unity (Chang, 2007, p.404). This incident showed that there were opportunities for Black gay men to be noticed as a positive contributor in the Black public space.

Matthew Oware's article "Brotherly Love: Homosexuality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap" examines how the stereotypical Black masculine aesthetic that Hip Hop reflects, frequently encompasses hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia. He specifically mentions how gangster rap is rife with sexist themes and lyrics. He also attempts to further unpack the idea of hegemonic Black masculinity, presenting an alternative understanding of its deployment and manifestation in music (Oware, 2011, p.22). This stereotypical Black masculine aesthetic makes it difficult to publicly identify as gay, as that would break with some of the constructed systems of Black hypermasculinity. Stereotypical Black hypermasculinity creates an environment where homophobia can flourish on the surface. The reality of homophobia within the Hip Hop community has encouraged some black gay men to live a life on the down-low (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p. 353). The lack of acceptance and representation of Black gay men within the Hip Hop community makes it more difficult to live openly with a sexuality that does not align with the popular narrative. When black men live a life on the down-low or "DL", they have sex with other men without identifying themselves with normative descriptions of sexuality (McCune Jr., 2008, p.298). They might want to have sex with men, but they do not identify as gay or a "faggot".

In his research meeting various men on the DL at a gay Black club in Chicago, McCune Jr. describes this discretion as a tactic for survival (2008, p.299). This club provided a Hip Hop space where the Black queer men could identify as "normal" and feel liberated at the same time, "as the culture of the space encourages homoerotic desires for each subject, as he dances in the largely heteronormative playground" (McCune Jr., 2008, p.310). This club created a physical safe space for queerness in Hip Hop culture, but Lil Nas X is creating a space within the culture that is not a sub-genre or on the down-low, he is providing a highly visible mainstream outlet for Black queer men. "Queer space is not one place: it is an act of appropriating the modern world for the continual act of self-construction" (Betsky, 1997, p.193). Through his actions, Lil Nas X seem to be developing such a space, a queer space in the modern world.

Presenting oneself with attributes that can be connected to queerness has also been an issue historically. In 2012 Joel Penney wrote an article titled "We Don't Wear Tight Clothes: Gay Panic and Queer Style in Contemporary Hip Hop", where he looked at the queer-inflicted style that challenged the pre-existing construction of hyper-masculinity within Hip Hop. (Penney, 2012, p.321). Penney mentions how the queer-influenced Hip Hop artists who wear

tight clothes and use electronic pop music, especially Kanye West and Pharrell Williams, unbalance the hypermasculine identity in mainstream hip hop (Penney, 2012, p.331). Neither Williams nor West identifies as gay, but their acceptance of homosexuality combined with their willingness to be influenced by commercial forces outside the hypermasculine Hip Hop scene changed the landscape in contemporary Hip Hop. In his conclusion, Penney is unsure in his predictions for the future:

It is unclear at this point whether contemporary Hip Hop's adoption of queer style is just a flash in the pan spurred by aesthetic experimentation and commercial pressure, or if it instead represents a major shift in the politics of gender and sexuality within the genre (Penney, 2012, p.331).

A decade later, the politics of gender and sexuality within hip hop has undeniably had a greater adoption of queer style. Now rap has Lil Nas X, an openly gay man who is recognized and respected both nationally and internationally for his music (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p.353). Hip Hop has become more inclusive to various genders and sexual orientations, but this was not the case for many decades. Hip Hop as a culture has not always been welcoming of Black gay men, partially because it has been conflicting to the narrative of hypermasculinity among Black men within Hip Hop (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p. 353). The aesthetic that Hip Hop has mainly reflected throughout history has not been that of people like Lil Nas X, and he is still in the process of creating a space in which actual queerness is represented in mainstream Hip Hop and rap.

Joel Penney's findings surrounding queer influence on mainstream Hip Hop revealed that this hypermasculinity in Hip Hop was already threatened a decade ago (Penney, 2012, p.331). This does not mean that hypermasculinity is not the main narrative, it simply means that with its roots exposed, a new queer branch can grow beside it. Lil Nas X has used the opportunity of this instability of the masculine narrative to create a new queer space within mainstream Hip Hop where queerness and blackness can openly be represented. A representation that is unquestionably needed. Even if general society is more open today, being gay and Black brings upon a double stigma that impedes people's status, and their standing which can lead to the denial of equal opportunity for these individuals. It might impede them less than before, but "less" does not mean that Black gay men do not carry the unjust burdens that stem from homophobia and racial prejudice (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p. 336). For a chance to be

relieved of these burdens, one factor is essential, a voice. Lil Nas X might provide this much needed voice of Black queer expression in popular Hip Hop. With national and international recognition, he is unapologetically showing his desires and needs to the world within rap and popular music.

As previously mentioned in chapter one, the development of mass media has been important in the spread of ideas through music, especially with the internet and social media (Iandoli, 2019, p.248). Ideas need a space in order to be circulated. “An increasingly important dimension of why hegemonic ideologies concerning race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation remain so deeply entrenched lies, in part, in the growing sophistication of mass media in regulating intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p.284). Mass media can reproduce hegemonic ideologies, but they can also be a platform where they challenge and oppose the dominating ones. Lil Nas X has used his knowledge of social media thoroughly connect with his fans and his haters. In an interview with Zane Lowe and apple music, they discuss how Lil Nas X uses the internet for promotion and how he interacts with people publicly on social media platforms. They talk about picking your battles online and which dialogues online can contribute to change. Lil Nas X sees potential dialogue in many of his received hate messages online, as he himself has developed his own opinions within the last years (Nas X, 2021a, Sep 21). He uses these initial negative discourses online to develop a conversation that develops more understanding and acceptance. Through this process he has seen some of the faults he himself carries, within those who hate on him online.

Lil Nas X was a closeted man when he gained notoriety and came out as a gay man in the public eye in 2019 when his number one song “Old Town Road” was in its 17th consecutive week on top of the chart (Hughes, 2021). The time it took from he came out to this fact actually being reflected in his lyrics was about a year and a half. In the song «Holiday», Lil Nas X presents one line that displays his sexuality. “I might bottom on the low, but I top shit” (Nas X, 2020). This song was the first song that Lil Nas X referenced his sexuality directly after he came out in 2019 (Hughes, 2021). Previously, references to his sexuality within his music did not take an apparent shape so as the listener would know that he is a queer man. With this one line, Lil Nas X creates a space in which he operates as an openly homosexual man in Hip Hop culture. He is still positioned within the Hip Hop culture, and with this line he steps outside the traditionally masculine to express himself. “Bottom” as a term has been used within masculinity standards as a title ascribed to those inferior in terms of masculinity

(McCune, 2008, p.308). In Lil Nas X's use of this term, he uses it as something that is a part of him. He is a gay man, that's a fact. He does "bottom", which within the policing of Black hypermasculinity is seen as negative. Lil Nas X disregards this policing and finishes the line with mentioning how he tops the charts as an out gay man. He is "coming out on top" while affirming himself and disregarding the conditioning of Black hypermasculinity. "Sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered" (Spillers, 2003, p.157). Lil Nas X empowers himself through this line in *Holiday*, as he expresses his sexuality within a position of power and social influence. On his later album, *Montero*, he reiterates this expression of sexuality in an expansive way (Nas X, 2021b).

The first single on *Montero* was the title track "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" (Nas X, 2021c). Lil Nas X felt inspired from watching the movie *Call Me By Your Name* to write a song with the same name and theme (Guadagnino, 2017). He stated in an interview with Genius that *Call Me By Your Name* was "one of the first gay films" he had ever watched (Genius, 2021, 4:45). The movie and the theme of the song correlate strongly because the lyrics of the song. Similarly to the movie, confront different challenges within homosexual love affairs while also highlighting the beauty of them (Guadagnino, 2017; Nas X, 2021c). Similar to most heteronormative relations, their relations are formed by a connection between two individuals who want to be with each other in some way.

Romantic talking? You don't even have to try
You're cute enough to fuck with me tonight
Looking at the table, all I see is weed and white
Baby, you living the life, but n___a, you ain't livin' right
Cocaine and drinking with your friends
You live in the dark, boy, I cannot pretend
I'm not fazed, only here to sin
If Eve ain't in your garden, you know that you can (Nas X, 2021c)

Nas X is visiting his potential lover and is interested in being with him for the night. To Nas X, there is no need for anything else in the moment, as he only wants to "sin" with the other person. "Living life" is defined differently by Nas X and his potential lover, as there are references to various drugs around, and Nas X does not want any of them. The lover might be living a life where they get high from drugs, but the only high Nas X is looking for that

evening is a sexual one. There is a stark difference between the two regarding what they believe to be a good life. The line “you live in the dark” Lil Nas X described to Genius as a double entendre “as in your life is not in a happy spot, at least that’s what I’m receiving from you, and it’s also with these eyes you’re making at me, like you live in the dark, like in the closet kind of thing”. (Genius, 2021, 3:36). By using the metaphor of dark or darkness, Nas X is signaling that the way the other person is living his life is not prosperous. Light symbolizes joy, which is the opposite of darkness. They might believe that being in the closet and partaking in recreational drug use is the right way to live for them, but it only emboldens the darkness in their life. Nas X is eager “to sin” and does not want any drugs. This is the light side, the side of joy. He cannot pretend to not want to feel the joy of the two of them together sexually. The dark is connected to shame about who you are and what you desire. There are various religious connotations in the lyrics, as he among other things refers to the act of sex with another man as “to sin”. He also uses the imagery of Eve in the garden as a reference to a girlfriend in a heterosexual relationship. What he wants to do with him is seen as a sin, but being with a woman is seen as pure in a biblical context. By voicing these religious issues with the metaphors of light and darkness, Nas X changes the narrative. “To sin” is connected to joy and light, while Eve in the garden is a part of the shadows and darkness. He is out and openly sins in this light.

Lil Nas X’s ability to embrace his sexuality in such a public space opens the possibility for others. Even though he is out and proud, others around him might not have the opportunity or want to continue living on the downlow. At the end of the chorus Lil Nas X remarks how the other person still lives on the DL: “Tell me you love me in private / Call me by your name (mmm, mmm, mmm) / I do not care if you lying” (Nas X, 2021c). Nas X wants to be told that they love him, but he accepts that it has to be done on the DL. In the movie *Call Me By Your Name*, the love affair between the two men is also private, but it does not mean that it is any less passionate. The two men have a strong bond together, they just cannot have it in public. Open love in public is a privilege that is primarily enjoyed by the people in heteronormative relationships. “Racialized queers [...] cannot afford, to be “out”” (McCune, 2008, p.311). This fact makes it ever more important to have Lil Nas X’s representation in Hip Hop culture.

In this representation of what is usually a heteronormative privilege, Lil Nas X provides a space where Black gay men can display this love in public. This song is a display of public queer love and its intricacies. Lil Nas X yields a heteronormative privilege and expresses his

emotions without concern for how he will be perceived. He is showing a vulnerability that usually is difficult or impossible for Black gay men to express safely publicly. “I was like the most real and the most even vulnerable at times I’ve ever been like on a song [...] it’s gonna be super important for me and for a lot of other people” (Genius, 2021, 00:00). Lil Nas X provides a narrative where his vulnerability is not concerned with Black hypermasculinity. He does not suppress his wants and needs, he freely expresses his emotions with no concern of if it will fit existing narratives within Hip Hop. His layered representation challenges the static constructions of gender and sexuality in popular rap (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 312). He further develops his expression of lust after the chorus: “I wanna sell what you’re buying / I wanna feel on your ass in Hawaii / I want that jet lag from fucking and flying / Shoot a child in your mouth while I’m ridin” (Nas X, 2021c). Lil Nas X slips last line in after voicing all he wants to do to his love interest. As the fourth line of the verse, it surprises the listener as it deviates from the pattern of the three former lines. It is also surprising in its theme, while at the same time the theme is building up in the verse. In the three former lines, Nas X is mentioning the things he wants. He is testing the waters. The strong word choices Nas X has made in reference to sexual relations between two men can be seen in relation to Hip Hop culture. In rap and Hip Hop the use of homophobic slurs such as “faggot” is commonplace (Pough, 2004, p.19). By employing his strong word choice, he is offsetting the power balance of Black hypermasculinity. Explicit language is common in songs by straight rappers, Lil Nas X accomplishes the same from a queer perspective.

“Let’s normalize having these fuckin’ lines in songs the same way, you know, somebody might talk about fucking a girl or fucking a guy, you know with opposite genders, you know? I feel like that’s very important for representation in general, and this is gonna open more doors for one day when somebody says this, it’s like, “Oh this person said that, and I didn’t even think about it you know?” (Genius, 2021, 6:31).

Lil Nas X is not only displaying sexual wants in his music, notions of romantic love is also an important theme. In an interview with Jazmine Hughes for *New York Times*, Lil Nas X revealed that he tried to hit on someone online after he had successfully performed “Montero (Call Me by Your Name)” on “Saturday Night Live”. The recipient was flattered but respectfully declined and explained that they could not be with him as they had a boyfriend. Nas X could have taken this as a negative experience of rejection, but instead told the interviewer: “I love it. You forget sometimes that people are, like, really loyal, and it’s like, I

want to do that” (Hughes, 2021). He underlines in this interview some of the same emotions that he does in his song “THAT’S WHAT I WANT”: “Need a boy who can cuddle with me all night / Keep me warm, love me long, be my sunlight / Tell me lies, we can argue, we can fight / Yeah, we did it before, but we’ll do it tonight” (Nas x, 2021d). Lil Nas X expresses how he wants a loving relationship with another person. He conveys forthrightly that the person he is seeking is another man, a man to be in a relationship with when he uses the gendered word “boy”. After asserting that the person he wants is a man, he goes on to describe positive feelings and affirmations connected to what he wants from him. Again, Nas X uses the dark/light metaphor, where he describes that he wants someone to be his sunlight and keep him warm. Being in a relationship is what he wants, even the parts which people often complain about. He wants to argue, fight, and build habits that become routines. Every aspect of an established romantic relationship is his desire. Where he previously in “MONTERO (Call me by your name)” (2021c) described people on the DL as living in the dark, he is now describing an open display of romance between two men. Nas X is open about his emotions connected to wanting love and how much he needs it. In rethinking Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Oved believes that love should not be categorized as psychological needs, but as a part of the basic needs. “Love is an important prerequisite for a feeling of safety both in materially secure modern societies and in primitive and dangerous societies” (Oved, 2017, p.537). In every community, love is, according to Oved, a part of people’s basic needs. Through his lyrics Nas X seems to also see love as a basic need.

Still searching for this basic need, Lil Nas X struggles with loneliness. “These days, I’m way too lonely / I’m missing out, I know / These days, I’m way too alone” (Nas x, 2021d). The first and third line is repeated, but he reiterates his “lonely” to “alone”. He starts by expressing that he feels lonely. Then in the repetition, he does not only feel lonely, but he is actually alone. Being alone and feeling lonely, Lil Nas X envisions a romantic relationship that can release him from this solitude. Lil Nas X is comfortably displaying these emotions, and therefore breaks with the norms within Black hypermasculinity. He is not afraid to deviate from the “hard” masculine narrative within Hip Hop culture (Penney, 2012, p.322). By doing so, he creates an aperture where marginalized thoughts, ideas and identities within Hip Hop has a clear voice. Rap as a genre offers an outlet for people who are silenced, oppressed, and marginalized in American society (Oware, 2009, p.787). In the next part of the song, Lil Nas X continues with the narrative of lusting for love: “And I’m known for giving love away, but / I want someone who love me / I need someone who needs me” (Nas x, 2021d). In the first

line, Lil Nas X remarks how he previously has been giving love to others, indicating that this love was never reciprocated. If he is to love again in the future, it has to be an equal love between two parts. In the two following lines, he proclaims his wishes and needs for love. Lil Nas X is displaying his desires for a relation where the love he offers to others gets reciprocated. He wants a man that loves him back, a vulnerable but essential statement. By displaying this raw vulnerability, Lil Nas X creates a space in the public domain where honesty and realness is set far above the need to fit within the frames of hypermasculinity.

He reiterates this realness at the end of each chorus: “Cause it don't feel right when it's late at night / And it's just me in my dreams / So I want someone to love, / that's what I fucking want” (Nas x, 2021d). In the evenings he feels a deep solitude within himself. The dream of becoming a renowned artist is finalized but does not have a partner to share his dream life with. One thing is missing, and that is romantic love. He reiterates this notion of wanting love and emphasizes it by swearing in the last line. Again, Lil Nas X stresses how he wants love, as it is a basic need (Oved, 2017, p537). This honesty resembles the reimagination of “keeping it real” that Penney alludes to when describing the queering of Black masculinity in Hip Hop culture. Even though artists like Lil Nas X might face challenges and reactions within the community, they must not be discouraged from “keeping it real” in their display of sexuality and gender (Penney, 2012, p.331). This thought about “keeping it real” as an idea for the future of Hip Hop aligns with the ideas of Gwendolyn Pough when she stated that she believed rap could be “the vehicle that I hope will one day lead us to change” (Pough, 2004, p.13).

Lil Nas X creates a new narrative in Hip Hop where sexuality and gender identity can exist outside heteronormative standards and the management of Black hypermasculinity. As a rapper, Lil Nas X represents a new possible space for Black gay men in Hip Hop. By expressing his reality and his desires as a young Black gay man, he is “keeping it real” more than many of his straight peers. This “realness” is something that writer Damon Young recognizes in Lil Nas X:

These are real stakes that Lil Nas X grapples with his music. Real demons. Real identity. Real haters. Real people. Real heat. Real life. Which makes me feel some sympathy for men such as Boosie and DaBaby. ‘Cause they’ll never be the realest alive as long as Lil Nas X is drawing breath (Young, 2021).

Lil Nas X seems to be the representation that is needed to build a new queer narrative concerning sexuality and gender in popular Hip Hop. From the analysis of his lyrics, it is apparent that he is not afraid of the consequences of deviating from the conditioned Black hypermasculinity (Jones & Ferguson, 2020, p.353). Lil Nas X demonstrates a purposeful lack of care for the management and surveillance of Black hypermasculinity, while using Hip Hop for its original function; “to express opposition against forces of oppression” (Hobson & Bartlow, 2008, p.7). An important part of Hip Hop culture is evoking change, and via the queer narrative that Lil Nas X provides, it might do so.

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the importance of varied narratives of sexuality and gender through intersectional rappers in popular Hip Hop, and how this has been portrayed by Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X today. Empowerment is important in these narratives, as “sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered” (Spillers, 2003, p.157). Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X as intersectional rappers have various grounds for their identities (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1245). It is important to recognize sexuality as a place of intersectionality, and how important self-definition is where these intersecting oppressions meet (Collins, 2000, p.128). Just as systems of oppression rely on controlling the erotic, empowerment can be found in the self-definition of sexuality. Through the analyzation of Megan Thee Stallion’s and Lil Nas X’s lyrics, I have examined how this self-definition is an important part of their worldmaking. Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X has provided important narratives of sexuality and gender within popular Hip Hop through their lyrics.

Megan Thee Stallion builds this narrative in the development of the women rappers that came before her, which is evident in the disruption of Megan as “the product of all female rapper’s past” (Iandoli, 2019, p.287). Lil Nas X did not have a history of Black gay popular rappers to build his through, so he created his own new narrative. A commonality between these two artists and in the development of their narratives is their disregard for factors that are supposed to manage and surveil them. Megan Thee Stallion does so by thoroughly disregarding Black respectable currency’s policing of Black woman. Lil Nas X does the same with Black hypermasculinity, as he expresses his feelings and desires as a gay man openly in his lyrics. It is not the rapper’s scarcity of Black respectable currency or Black hypermasculinity that makes these narratives key, it is their absolute disregard of its policing in their worldmaking and storytelling. The reimagination of “keeping it real” that Penney alluded to could be applied to both Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X, as they do not let previous notions and ideas within Hip Hop culture discourage them in providing new narratives (Penney, 2012, p.331). These intersectional rappers provide representation that is important for individuals who constructs their thoughts upon their own sexuality and gender through rap (Love, 2011, p.132). Perhaps these narratives can be built upon further to expand further the representation within popular Hip Hop. As remarked by Lil Nas X in the quote in the introduction of this thesis, we might have trans rappers topping the charts in a decade, “because why not?” (Nas X, 2021a, 09:59).

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Appendix: Pedagogical implications

Why is it important in the ESL classroom?

Treva B. Lindsey's "Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis" explores the significance of hip-hop feminism in education, and what you can achieve by using hip-hop feminist theory to incorporate the lived experience of Black and Brown women and girls. "For hip-hop feminists, excavating and clearly articulating how women and girls shape hip-hop situate the culture within a herstory of defiance and resistance" (Lindsey, 2015, p.54). Using theory from Hip Hop can be used to discuss difficult themes. In Bettina L. Love's qualitative analysis of how "African American Girls Made Meaning of Their Sexuality, Race and Gender through the Lens of Rap" she emphasizes the importance of representation within popular culture, and why it is important that teachers are knowledgeable on the subject.

"Like any art form, hip hop has its flaws, but there is an indisputable power in the words of those artists who exercise that influence over our youth on a daily basis. It is precise because rap discusses controversial issues like sex, violence, drugs, and homophobia that we must use rap to bring these issues to the forefront. We cannot acknowledge the profound impact rap music has upon our youth and yet continue to disregard its potential" (Love, 2011, p.132).

Love saw the importance rap has for engaging with topics that can be devising. In this thesis, it is articulated through the analysis of Megan Thee Stallion's and Lil Nas X's lyrics that rap and Hip Hop culture not only is a reference point from which these themes can be discussed, but it is also a space for change within these controversial issues. Issues that are highlighted within rap also have the ability for change within rap. The pedagogical institutions can be a vessel in this change, by utilizing rap in the classroom.



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