

Voices inside the outside: Queer perspectives in hip-hop, RnB and rap.

by

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Abstract

This study investigated how queer artists of color within the hip-hop, rap and RnB genres of music expressed narratives of oppression and resiliency, as well as interrogating mirrors of misogynistic messaging from previous research. This research was investigated from Black Feminism, Intersectionality, and a critical Queer perspective. Utilizing a sample of thirteen queer-identifying artists and 205 songs from 1990 to 2022, I examined lyrical content with an Ethnographic Content Analysis framework, and data was also gathered through coding thematic elements. Results indicated that artists were unable to isolate their experiences with racism and queerphobia, rather speaking of them as interconnected. Religiously justified oppression was a predominant portion of these experiences, from a basis of racism and queerphobia alike. Despite this, *Resiliency* was the most frequently coded thematic element, showing messages of hope and positivity were at the forefront. Additionally, there were concerning trends of depression, self-harm and suicide mentioned explicitly within most albums. This study also found a dearth of misogynistic or anti-femme messaging in comparison to prior research on non-queer artists. Collectively, these findings have implications for future research, as well as policy changes to support the mental health of this vulnerable population.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mentor, David Westfall, and good friend Sylvia Westfall, who have both been with me every step of the way and urged me forwards no matter the hardship. Without their continued support and confidence, none of this would be possible.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Hip-hop, rap and rhythm and blues (RnB) have long since been modes of resistance and protest amidst oppression (Rose, 2008). Gaining speed in the 1990's, hip-hop especially began blending in the revolutionary noise of slam poetry and civil rights speeches with the bars and rhythms of rap and RnB. Roots of these genres (e.g., messages on anti-racism, anti-police brutality, prejudice, and politics) have been celebrated up to today, but those whose voices once helped push the movement to the surface and allow it to thrive in the limelight, have been all but forgotten. These are the voices of LGBTQ+ people of color, who piloted many staple sounds in the genres as well as pushing the boundaries of such a revolutionary form of art. Voices such as Meshell Ndegeocello, The Deep Dickollective, Gaye Adegbalola, as well as artists post-2000s such as BROCKHAMPTON, Shea Diamond and Keiynan Lonsdale make up just a corner of this large area of artistry. These artists, self-identified as LGBTQ+, are also often not investigated as thoroughly as their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. Modern day circles of the genres have identified the surge of LGBTQ+ artists into the limelight as something 'new' and, in some cases, a threat. This comes as a result of LGBTQ+ artists being historically silenced in these music scenes, as well as being underrepresented in academic research, despite these artists' presence since the beginnings.

It is my intention in this thesis to amplify these voices, and to analyze the expressions of their struggles as a result of their unique intersections of identity. Additionally, I seek to pinpoint the contrasting discussions of power, oppression, and resiliency alongside any of the heteronormative gender norms which occur broadly throughout the genres (Randolph, 2006). The study began specifically from January 22nd, 1990, to November 20th, 2022. These specific dates are in reference to the American Music Awards, spanning from the 17th award show

conducted in 1990 to the 50th show in late 2022. Additionally, this wide span of time was utilized in order to help gain perspective on a misconception of queer artists in the genre being a ‘new’ development. My primary research questions for this project are as follows: (1) What narratives of oppression and resiliency in these lyrics are being built? How are these messages specific to the artist’s intersectional identities and their struggles? (2) In what ways do the messages in LGBTQ+ artists’ lyrics mirror the misogynistic or anti-feminine messaging within heterosexual/cisgender artists songs?

Firstly, there must be an in-depth understanding of the significance of subculture, historical backgrounds of LGBTQ+ communities, and the current understandings of these genres within the literature. Then, a chapter on the theoretical frameworks used follows, working from the creation and need of Black Feminism, and linking these origins to current Queer theory through Intersectionality. The subsequent section includes methods of how the sample was determined, collected, and analyzed, determining how artists were chosen and how the main methodology of ECA (Ethnographic Content Analysis) applies specifically to this project. The results and data collected is then explained and laid out, giving reference back to the stated research questions and discussing the results in detail within the conclusion following.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter of the thesis refers to previous studies conducted in the areas linking to the crucial points of my focal point on the voices of LGBTQ+ artists of color in these genres, particularly focusing on three main areas. The first section consists of necessary definitions and defends a position on how subcultures can be considered 'resistive-in-nature' and why this is important to the context of culture in general. The second assists in defining the importance and history of performativity in LGBTQ+ communities. And finally, the third considers Hip-hop feminism and the connection of a feminist perspective to an area which is otherwise often seen as 'anti-feminist' or often misogynistic. Each section begins with broader connotations in order to give context to available literature, but ultimately focuses on orienting the project's purpose, identify contributions, and answer how this research fills in gaps in past literature.

Primary Definitions: Culture, Ball and Queer

First, there must be a framework constructed over the categories and terms which are relied upon for the remainder of the project. Primarily there must be a mutual understanding of the word 'culture' as it is discussed herein – using mainly the conceptualization of culture as a shared set of norms, beliefs, and practices in everyday life (Andersen & Taylor, 2020). Culture is often seen as an umbrella, and underneath this there are three different strains: hegemonic, residual, and emergent (Williams, 1977). As the primary source this project draws upon relies on an extremely specific and marginalized cultural group, there must be an understanding of their existence – despite their malignment with dominant values. Thus, this 'emergent culture' is the focus during the further research of this project, and it is important that we differentiate it from other forms.

There must be first an understanding of the term ‘dominant culture,’ in order to understand how *subcultures* are created in relationship to it and how they are treated. This definition of the dominant culture will assist in explaining how common ‘dominant’ ideals are seen as standard and thus mark ideas outside of those as ‘Other’(Chandler, 2022, p. 108). ‘Hegemonic culture,’ a term referring to the idea of cultural hegemony coined by Gramsci (1971), identified this as a use of social institutions by the dominant class in a society in order to control the norms, values, and behavior of all others. As media sources and distribution have grown, a considerable number of researchers began to concern themselves with how the hegemonic cultural sphere controls or destroys cultures with different norms and beliefs from the upper-class (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1982; Hebdige, 1979) These perspectives often agree that all subcultures are subsumed underneath the control of the dominant ‘hegemonic’ culture.

However, elsewhere in this area of critical culture theory, scholars such as Williams (1977) created a position which acknowledged there are cultures that do not fit into the hegemonic mold, nor are squashed completely by them. These groups were subsequently referred to as ‘subcultures’ (Hebdige, 1979). Williams’s (1977) conception of the dominant, the residual and the emergent groups of subcultures break down based upon how they relate to the structure of hegemonic culture. Dominant cultures, though there may be differences in their appearance, all support and back up the norms associated with the hegemonic culture. In example, these dominant cultures can be anything from certain political groups, corporations or even non-profits such as Focus on the Family (which supports a hegemonic heteronormative position through conversion therapy) (Karly, 2005).

Residual cultures borrow parts of dominant culture, shifting them into different reinterpretations and creating meanings separate from the hegemonic culture’s norms (Williams,

1977). An example of this may be the ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’ from the 1950s and 1960s in Britain, who used symbolic materials of the dominant culture such as old-style Edwardian suits (in the case of the Mods) but changed the meanings of the clothing (Cohen, 2011). Finally, the third portion of these categories is closest to what will be described later as cultures resistive in nature – and that is ‘emergent’ cultures. Emergent cultures are new creations of norms, relationships, behaviors, and material symbols that are separated from the mass, often due to the hegemonic cultural beliefs repressing them in violent ways (Williams, 1977).

‘Resistive in nature’ cultures is the language used specifically to highlight those emergent subcultures which are *oppositional* to the norms and beliefs held by those who control the hegemonic cultures. This distinction is important, as emergent cultures are not necessarily resistive to the beliefs of the dominant sphere, simply separate from them (Williams, 1977). There must also be a short contextualization of the specific type of emergent culture which is discussed further on. Those with identities outside of the binary or those identified as LGBTQ+, often find their expression at odds with the values and beliefs of the hegemonic culture, creating an emergent culture which is resistive in nature due to these contradictions. Additionally, the members of the LGBTQ+ community have increasingly been pushed further into the spotlight, and have congregated on reclaiming a slur in order to bolster resilience – ‘Queer.’ As the label of ‘LGBTQ+’ and ‘Queer’ is used interchangeably from here on out, it is important that there be an understanding of the history and current use of the word.

Conceptualizing Queer

As a term, ‘Queer’ has had a long history of abusive use against LGBTQ+ people and any of those who do not fit into a heterosexual binary (Worthen, 2022), but there has been a resurgence in modern times with the word being reappropriated and used as a ‘blanket term’

(Kolker, et al., 2020). ‘Queer,’ in a colloquial context, is often used to refer to any of those who do not have a heterosexual or cisgender expression, a relationship to gender expression and identity which gains reproach from a homophobic binary society (Worthen, 2022). A similar explanation is given by many (45.9%) of those interviewed in the community who use ‘Queer’ as a self-label (Kolker, et al., 2020).

These people often claim it being ‘easier,’ as it is “...acknowledging both... gender and sexual orientation in one fell swoop...” allowing them to get across their inclusion to the community whilst avoiding disclosing any private information (Kolker, et al., 2020, p. 1350). In addition to a number of these LGBTQ+ individuals self-labelling as queer, studies have shown that groups tend to perceive themselves as gaining power once reappropriating previous slurs, supporting the community’s growing viewpoint of using such a term as ‘Queer’ for empowerment (Galinsky et al., 2013). Individuals in the LGBTQ+ or Queer community, in search of acceptance within a hegemonic cultural structure that alienates them, seek out spaces of connection – one such area being in ‘ballrooms.’

Defining ‘Ball’

Queer people often find home and acceptance in areas where they are free to express and explore breaking the gender boundaries, one such space being found in cities across the United States. This is ‘ball culture,’ a cultural landscape, a physical space and a social grouping all wrapped in one. The physical ‘ball’ space is regularly found in urban areas, held at convention or recreation centers or even houses, and are performative and competitive events, regularly held by queer people-of-color (Bailey, 2014). ‘Balls’ are considered to be places in which LGBTQ+ people can participate in a type of ‘drag,’ or performative exaggerations of gender roles to extremes, by those whose identities may not fit into the binary (Bailey, 2011; Mann, 2011).

‘Ball’ culture, relies upon the structure of a specific gender system which is regulated and critiqued upon at ballroom showings. This gender system, although varying slightly from city to city and community to community, largely relies on the gender performances which are put on at these venues to the awaiting spectators and judges. Judges mark the ‘realness’ of a participant’s physical appearance, walk and dance – or in other words, how similar the performer seems to a cisgender, heterosexual person of the gender they are attempting to mimic, and the goal being undetectability of their assigned gender at birth (Grey, 2021). The better an individual can perform this ‘realness’ the more points they are afforded, and while this is blended in with how well they match the themes of the night and the quality of their performance, the gender-assessment holds priority. This is an important aspect to highlight, as the performance of ‘realness’ is indicative of survival tactics, queer people in ball being an emergent subculture of people, resistive to the hegemonic binary culture.

The Resistive Power in Emergent Subcultures

Many conversations around emergent subcultures are not in favor of them as being ‘pure’ sources of anti-hegemonic messages; however, in fact, several theorists posit that a true counter-dominant cultural perspective cannot exist. Adorno and Horkheimer (1982) offer the perspective that all forms of mass-produced entertainment are merely constructed from tools of the larger hegemonic culture, and thus influenced by manipulative intentions of the upper class (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1982). As such, a Marxist-influenced perspective would claim that all modern forms of what is considered the ‘mass-produced culture industry’ (art, music, movies, television, and now social media) are completely controlled by the political and economic interests of the dominant class.

There is definite merit in understanding the economic and capitalistic influences of production, media/acting agents and industrialization, upon art as a medium of expression. However, Marxist theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin come to contention with other voices when they broadly claim that “...the style of the culture industry... has no resistant material to overcome...” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1982, in Parker, 2012, p. 421). This consideration of the industry as being monolithic and controlled from the top-down is invalidating to many emergent subcultures. When Adorno and Horkheimer make broad sweeping claims such as “Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism,” they conglomerate all forms of media-based art into one, ignoring those who work outside or even against hegemonic power structures (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1982, in Parker, 2012, p. 426). Even with the consideration that Horkheimer & Adorno’s investigations of the culture industry took place in the 1980’s, when television, movies and mass media was in infancy, this trend applies to today, furthered with the introduction of mass-media production and social media. Or, when scholars such as Hebdige claim that any subcultural styles will eventually be “...incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology form from which it in part emanates,” they strip away the power in perspectives that are necessarily, by their violent exclusion from hegemonic culture, resistive in nature (Hebdige, 1979 in Parker, 2012, p. 510).

Who This Leaves Out

Scholars such as bell hooks (1992) and Hall (1980 & 1989) have identified aspects to bring issue against these limiting perspectives on non-dominant cultures. Hall (1989), in particular, identified the multi-faceted nature of cultural identities, denying the broad-stroking statements that all cultures fall into one pure conglomerate ruled by the dominant classes (or subsumed through eventual assimilation and violence), but instead that “Cultural identity... is a

matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”... they undergo constant transformation,” meaning subcultures may not be conformed to the ‘norm’ but, at times, are instead assigned as the ‘Other,’ isolated into their own circles (Hall, 1989, in Parker, 2012, p. 546). Thus, these cultural identities and groups purely by their existence may be instead made invisible, marked as deviant and vilified (Cohen, 1997). hooks herself speaks of the ‘oppositional’ viewpoint that is given to Black women, a cultural positionality held from the start, one which she explains as “[In film]...our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogocentric gaze,” generating a perspective moving forwards in which, “As critical spectators, black women looked from a location that *disrupted*,” excluded from representation in dominant culture and opposed to it (hooks, 1992, in Parker, 2012, p. 273 & 275). Due to this multifaceted, often oppositional, and historically contextualized perspective, the material and art people in these cultural groups produce are not simply emergent but counter-hegemonic and resistive-in-nature.

Queer folks, coming from a similar space of necessarily oppositional view and ‘Othering,’ have long use performances as spaces they can freely express their identities as ‘art,’ creating community and critiqued by fellow LGBTQ+ people, and these expressions of self are all by their existence, resistive (Bailey 2014; Levitt 2019). This is due to the fact that queer bodies challenge gender and sexual binaries, heteronormativity, and specific racialized gender stereotypes by directly flipping these roles on their head – as “...being queer means fighting about these issues all the time...” (Cohen, 1997). Drag and ballroom culture are some staple examples of performative art using one’s body which have both resistive as well as connective powers, as is explained further in the proceeding section.

Queer Histories, Performativity, and Important Concepts

The historical background of queer communities is complex, long-standing, and too numerous in material to discuss and explain within the span of any reasonable project – but is still a necessity to touch upon when speaking even in passing of such a variable yet tight-knit community. As both Emerson’s work on ethnographic fieldnotes and Geertz’s concept of thick description point out, in order to appropriately respect the culture one is researching, the author must “...write... in ways that capture and preserve indigenous meanings,” including comprehending the terms people using within the cultural context they live in (Emerson et. al., 2020, p. 117; Geertz, 1973). Language in different areas of the queer community can be just as varied as the identities and expressions of self, contrasting often with recent institutionalized definitions or concepts of gender and sexuality.

Thus, those who are familiar with terms used in gender and sexuality theoretical frameworks in sociology or even scholars focused on queer theory might find themselves at odds with the language used in casual conversations at gay bars, lesbian pubs and in ballroom culture (Bailey, 2011; Valentine, 2000). The contrast is best described by Geertz (1973) as, “...culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context,” a context which can only be respectfully expressed through thick descriptions and using the indigenous terms of those within its boundaries (p. 316). These contradictions between academic or medical institutions and those native to the cultures they attempt to reach have caused tensions and difficulties to arise in who can get the assistance needed and who is excluded.

For instance, one such tightly held and relied upon concept in sociological views and perspectives (especially those with an identity politics basis), is the separation of gender from sexuality (Andersen & Taylor, 2020). This is often expressed as perspective that gender identity

interacts with sexuality in-so-far as to define how someone's sexuality is expressed (i.e., someone who identifies as a woman would not be considered 'gay' if she is only attracted to men.). Unfortunately, such one-dimensional definitions and viewpoints on LGBTQ+ identities do not create spaces that give freedom to how many queer folks see and express themselves (Levitt, 2019), especially true in the areas of what is considered 'ball culture.'

Ball culture, related yet separated from the popularized images of drag, is tightly held onto in the LGBTQ+ community – as they are both areas of economic and emotional stabilization/connection, as well as being centers where many young queer individuals have opportunity to practice and play with the performativity of queer identity (Bailey, 2014). Due to high levels of homelessness for LGBTQ+ individuals as a result often of lacking familial acceptance – displayed as nearly one-fifth (19%) of transgender / gender-non-conforming respondents from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey in 2011 noted experiencing homelessness as a direct result of their identity– many queer people are alienated from their biological families (Grant, 2011, p. 4). Thus, finding a community of acceptance but also of economic and physical safety is essential, and many queer people find this in ball culture's 'houses' or 'families.'

Families and houses are seen slightly differently in the community, as these 'gay families' are understood as physical houses and a family system in which multiple non-biologically related people live together, support one another financially and emotionally, as families of *choice* (Levitt, 2019). Importantly, it is noted that these 'families' are "...performative... [as] it takes on the actual labor of social support, affirmation, and critique..." expected to be afforded by birth family, new modes of kinship that even have hierarchical similarities to biological families; as with a head 'mother/father' figure and so on (Bailey, 2014,

p. 496). ‘Houses’ can mean something slightly different, in that while they also provide emotional and social connections, they are mainly places in which queer and gender-non-conforming people can develop “...competitive skills in dance, fashion, and aesthetic regional and national competitions that occur between houses,” these competitions themselves often referred to as ‘balls’ and the cultural space as ‘ballrooms’ (Levitt, 2019, p. 280).

These spaces are important historical mappings of where LGBTQ+ people, almost exclusively people of color, were congregating and gaining strength and protection from an outside world which threatened them. As is seen and discussed further on, these spaces have not only grown in size, but have transcended the boundaries of their original walls in urban recreation centers and clubs. The language of the gender system in ballroom culture, as well as the performativity of the ‘ball’ itself, has been moving bit by bit into the limelight of the music industry as acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities has been growing across the world (Clay, 2007). With this continued push into the limelight, however, academics must be wary not to push queer people into boxes defined by hegemonic ideas such as the binary but allow them to define themselves.

The Dangers of Labelling Queer Identities

Valentine (2000), while conducting ethnographic fieldwork within queer communities in New York City and working on outreach for the Gender Identity Project in the city, ran into many contrary issues and faced his own frustrations with attempting to fit the previously described non-normative community (primarily of ballroom and ‘family/house’ structures) into the boxes and forms typical of an institution. This danger begins with the attempts of the GIP and likewise projects to create a classification system of who does and does not fall under the ‘transgender’ label. Many of the people whom Valentine spoke with had their own community-

based terminology with which they identified, often claiming “I know what I am,” and were unfortunately faced with much tension between how they described themselves and the identity-based perspectives of the institution.

One such case was displayed with Anita, a self-identified Puerto-Rican drag queen on feminizing hormones, preferring to be referred to as a woman, states “...I do everything... like a woman...” while also saying, “I know I’m gay and I know I’m a man.” (Valentine, 2000, p. 345). This situation was repeated once again with Jade’s interview, in which she identifies as both a ‘hard-daddy,’ a butch and ‘more man than not,’ whilst also being a woman as she connects it to motherhood – all of which obviously confound and confuse Valentine (p. 333). If one’s understanding of gender and sexuality comes from a basis in identity scholarship, this might sound as a contradictory or ambiguous statement, as there is no place for such descriptions within the confines of such strict boundaries. Through the insistence of a standardized ‘transgender experience,’ one runs the risk of creating a ‘normative’ idea of how queer identities must be described, expressed, or perhaps even experienced by LGBTQ+ folks, something which academics and activists both should strive to avoid lest a new form of cultural erasure occur (Valentine, 2000, p. 360-361). A further creation of strict binaries (cisgender versus transgender) threatens those on the margins, an antithetical result from a movement which should be seeking only to increase inclusion, not leave swaths of people out of the conversation.

It is imperative that we break into the definitions of expressions which many of those within the LGBTQ+ community use, as many of these labels are heavily used and referred to within the lyrics which were analyzed. We must keep in mind, however, that not every queer individual has the same understandings of each word mentioned, and that none of these (as was experienced first-hand by an initially confused Valentine) are mutually exclusive from one

another as some identity theories might claim. First comes the understanding of terms which are regularly used only for queer people raised under a female designation or male designation, which are often referred to as transmasculine, FTM, assigned-female-at-birth or AFAB, and conversely, transfeminine, MTF, assigned-male-at-birth or AMAB (Grant, 2011).

Popular Terms from Ball Culture

There lies an importance in the overview and understanding of common terms in this community, as there are words used which may seem an entirely different language and which have traveled into the lexicon of the broader queer community. Terms such as ‘Butchqueen,’ a frequently used identity marker, is often understood as an equivalent designation given to gay men. Although as has been seen in Valentine (2000) and Grey’s (2021) pieces, it is not uncommon for people who consider themselves women to also call themselves this – it is mainly used with AMAB peoples who are attracted to men, regardless of gender expression (Grey, 2021; Bailey, 2011; & Bailey, 2014, p. 492). On the other hand, ‘butch’ is term which is used by any AFAB person who identifies more with a masculine identity than a feminine one, whether this be transgender men or some WLW (women-loving-women) folks, mainly with reference towards their attraction to women (Bailey, 2014; Levitt, 2006; Levitt, 2019). ‘Gay’ as is used in most LGBTQ+ communities, has more recently been used as a catch-all term, referring no longer only to sexuality, but to any form of gender, sexual and expressive non-conformity.

By contrast, ‘Femme,’ ‘Futch’ (a middle-ground of androgyny), and ‘Butch’ are primarily used by people who consider themselves WLW, or *women-loving-women*, and are rarely used outside of these circles (Levitt, 2019, p. 279). ‘Stud’ is an additional term that is especially specific in the context of their use – only ever used by AFAB individuals of color, and usually not with strict connotations of sexual preference, instead indicative often of “...wear[ing]

male clothing... [and being] more generally masculine than others born female.” (Parenthesis my additions, Kuper et. al., 2013, p. 28). ‘Butchqueen up in drags’ may, to some, suggest drag-queens, but instead is regularly used to identify oneself as a AMAB person who presents and dresses femininely or as a woman but refrains from such outside of balls or events (Bailey, 2014 & Levitt et al., 2017).

‘Realness’ and ‘passing’ are similarly important concepts to LGBTQ+ communities, all indicating how someone chooses to express their gender to remain safe in daily life. When one ‘passes,’ they can come across as being cisgender in the gender they present as, sometimes only in order to avoid violence (Grant, 2011, p. 27). ‘Realness’ is referred to frequently in drag and ballroom culture alike, understood as “...a participant who [looks like a] “straight” or a mainstream normative male or female,” both for the performance’s sake of looking as close to cisgender as possible, as well as for safety when leaving the ball to avoid harassment or violence (Grey, 2021, p. 21). These previous brief conceptualizations will be of assistance in maintaining an equal ground of understanding when moving forwards in this project. As is seen and discussed further on, these spaces have not only grown in size, but have transcended the boundaries of their original walls in urban recreation centers and bars. The language of the gender system in ballroom culture, as well as the performativity of the ‘ball’ itself, has been moving bit by bit into the limelight of the music industry as acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities grow across the world (Clay, 2007). The attention of detail to the specifics of ballroom culture is thus to help link the performative nature which is a basis of LGBTQ+ history, a key component in ballroom competitions, into how it is now being displayed in music.

Heteronormativity

On the topic of terminology, heteronormativity, as is considered and referenced within this piece, is borrowed from the challenging conceptualization by Cohen (1997). This restructured form of the word differs from the monolithic definition of heteronormativity which some theorists still rely upon, that which focuses solely on the broad idea of heterosexuality and its institutions as a stage of privilege. Cohen's, as well as my own perspective of heteronormativity instead "...understands that heteronormativity interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and oppressed subjects," and that such a system is unable to be separated for easy critique (Cohen, 1997, p. 447). Thus, this identification of heteronormativity as intersectional in nature, includes the aspects of both queer and heterosexual subjects who do not conform to a 'perfect' view of heterosexual roles expected, and to understand that treatment differs greatly due to one's positionality on all fronts; race, gender, sexuality (both orientative and expressive), and more.

Heteronormativity, as defined by a non-radical perspective, might perceive a heterosexual person of color working as a sex worker as broadly benefitting from heteronormative structures – despite the dangers and scorn attached to their profession. Although the artists included further in this project are from a pool of self-reported queer individuals, the importance was put more upon their entire multifaceted identity as being defined by external heteronormative structures as 'deviant.' For instance, it is not solely from one's queer identity that pejorative comments or violence originates, but also a blend of 'what kind of Queer' they are labelled as by others – this can be based on their expression (femme, butch, futch, etc.), their race (studs), their presumed biological sex ('real,' drag queens and butches) and many other intersecting qualities.

Exploring Hip-Hop Feminism

In a similar vein as the prior discussed contradictions between academic understandings of gender versus those of LGBTQ+ communities, hip-hop and feminism may, to some, seem like nearly oppositional and incompatible terms and communities. This is because many of those who are interested in the genre of music are familiar with the concerning aspects of misogyny found, used often as a tool, gag or sign of power and prestige. However, there is a two-way street here, as scholars within feminism have also, on occasions, placed hip-hop performers under fire for their public claims of being feminists themselves, pointing out the content of their lyrics as being ‘anti-feminist’ messages. Indeed, one of the major struggles within Hip-hop Feminism as a discipline lies in the tension between some feminist perspective’s propagation of what is called ‘purity politics’ - the concept that a revolutionary subculture can only truly have resistive value if it is free of any and all methods of oppression.

This viewpoint, however, leaves a wash of differing culturally relevant texts such as music, art, and literature in the metaphorical dump, as it has been hard pressed for hip-hop feminists and researchers themselves to find any artist within the genre whose personal opinions align perfectly and do not contain marginalization. Women of color invested in and surrounded by messages of the genre are similarly left behind or even reprimanded for this, and many hip-hop feminists of the past have warned that “...the young women whom “we” purport to save have agency in their own ways, and, by their own means, do exercise that agency,” fighting against another form of discourse in the genre adjacent to purity politics, uplift versus appreciation (Peoples, 2008, p. 29). Much of modern hip-hop feminists, therefore, “...insist on living with contradictions...” and staunchly assert themselves as ‘percussive theorists / activists’ - or those who give equal heed to themes and ideas which may seem even antagonistic towards one another (Durham, et al., 2013, p. 723).

Towards a Grey-Feminism

The dialogue of this recent literature puts forth an important distinction of avoiding an all-or-nothing perspective, holding true to the historical basis of the movement (both in the theoretical and activistic spheres) during the 1980's and 1990's. This was created in contrast to a white second-wave feminism of the 1970's, that which not only excluded women of color but also demonized a genre and culture which was important to them. The third-wave feminists of color building the basis of the movement expressed this difficulty of cosigning their varied identities and splitting them, feeling that they were being told, "A feminist must never compromise herself... [and] She fears that if she wants to be spanked before sex, wants to own a BMW... prioritizes racial oppression over gender oppression, loves misogynist hip-hop music... that she can't be a feminist," simultaneously with any attempts of entering feminist academia being limited due to race and economic background (Clay, 2007, p. 57). Grappling with the economic challenges of affirmative action, loss of welfare, feminists who were pushed out from the mainstream movement, told their love of a genre made them exempt from resistive thought and 'anti-female,' tackled the research of said music with vigor. Their studies focused firstly on the direct expressions of structural family changes due to the rise in single-parent households, absenteeism, and by extension the remodeling of gender roles.

Historically, this focus of much Black feminist studies had not strayed far from its grassroots focuses upon these direct effects of new economic, family and thus gender shifts on the genre. In more modern and recent studies prior to the late 1990's by Hip-Hop feminist scholars, however, there has been a slight change of source of their investigations – relocating the focal point from directly structural effects to the cues *of* gender-relations within the music. As hip-hop has blossomed into mainstream culture, gaining not only grounds and attentions

nationally but even on a global scale, the genre has become increasingly a site of influence on how gender, sexuality, and race are expressed and understood. These studies post this shift have thus begun to question how narratives brought up by artists in their lyrics might not only express how they understand these identities, but how they attempt to teach the listeners to act as well – such as with hyper-masculine and hypersexualized ideals (Randolph, 2006).

Tricia Rose, a staple name in African American studies and one of the originators of the term ‘Hip-Hop Feminism,’ contends with this change which occurred across the entire genre, stating “...since the middle to late 1990’s, the social, artistic, and political significance of figures like the gangsta and street hustler developed into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes—” - this, in her perspective, explains the different conversation being constructed in the literature of the field (Rose, 2008, p. 2). This is not to claim, however, that there is a lacking resistive and revolutionary quality to the entirety of the genre (lest we make the same mistakes forewarned against by previous scholars), but instead to point out that the timeline of such a change lines up closely with the commercialization and rising popularity of the music genre following the late 90’s. Rose, as well as many other Hip-Hop feminist scholars, find the importance of continued literature and research in this area lies within understanding these necessarily percussive contradictions, not devaluing and ignoring them.

In just one specific example of percussive arguments, Oware’s investigation spanned the lyrical content of top Hip-Hop songs during the 1990’s, all of which were written by women, and of which each song totaled an average of 7.57 instances of ‘braggadocio’ (self-congratulatory language) per song, whilst at the same time having an average of 3.11 instances of derogatory language towards women per song (Oware, 2009, p. 799-800). This researcher chooses to focus their attentions on the power gained by female artists through their self-sexualization and

‘bragging’ lyrics, comparing such a claim to power to the oppression and hyper-sexualization which women of color often face at the expense of their bodily autonomy and choice. This is an important example of the uses of such percussive research, as Oware does not seek to devalue nor take significance away from the empowering and self-appreciative substance of these artists’ works, but rather draw attention to the fact that contradictory languages of empowerment and derogation can coincide. This is only one staple argument in the literature, but one of which this project seeks to highlight and break down further, whilst adding in a perspective which is not often discussed: queer-identified artists.

The Need for Queer Voices

Though there have been few additions to the literature on queer artists and their contributions to hip-hop feminism, this is still a rare area of research, and much of the percussive investigations of contradictory themes is conducted purely with heterosexual and cisgender artists – focused further on gendered displays between the binary rather than outside. Often, queer artists and artistry is not included in research of themes of misogynistic messaging, not because it does not exist, but as it can be expressed in a way dissimilar to messaging from cisgender/heterosexual artists. Some queer artists may use derogatory language or call out other queer individuals for performing ‘too’ femininely or display a belief of hierarchy between feminine and masculine queer people. One such uncommon piece, “Like an Old Soul Record,” by Clay (2008), investigates specifically the creations of the bisexual artist Me’Shell Ndegeocello – pulling apart her lyrical content and comparing it thus to Black Feminism critique as well as the concepts in third wave feminism. Unfortunately, this analysis is also limited in its scope, building a specific narrative applicable to only one artist’s specific identity and position as

a bisexual cisgender woman of color, leaving a blank canvas on the issues of non-cisgender identity.

The intentions are not necessarily to compare queer and LGBTQ+ artists to cisgender/heterosexual ones, but instead to investigate if the same forms of anti-femininity, homophobia, and misogyny can be found. Queer subcultures and spaces, with specific understanding of ballroom culture and performance art like drag, are often seen as spaces with the widest acceptance, or even celebration, of femininity, gender expression and LGBTQ+ identities. Thus, Queer-identified Hip-Hop is a unique and understudied cross-road between two cultures which have been increasingly understood or assumed as opposites (Hunter, 2009; Peoples, 2008). Part of the importance of the study lies in this distinction and investigation, of if the blending of these two communities (LGBTQ+ and Hip-Hop) regurgitate the same images as the heteronormative counterparts which do so on a wide scale, and to analyze them.

Additionally, as is staple of other Hip-Hop feminist literature, there is consideration given to percussive aspects (i.e., seemingly juxtaposing ideas) which these artists may build within their stories. These ‘percussive’ aspects are inclusions of both positive and negative messages that are “...objects of inquiry (put) together that may not traditionally fit,” but are important to be investigated (Durham et. al., 2013, p. 724) This will help to understand what forms of positivity or empowerment can be found about queer identity and belonging to the community, and will work to fill in a gap of understanding of a group of people regularly left out, a gap which the theoretical literature calls for more research upon (Vallocchi, 2005, p. 768). The basis of Black Feminism, Intersectionality and Queer theory as a whole champion further focus and research onto groups such as these artists, yet little research has been done since these theories had their historical founding.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Perspectives

This project is informed mainly with three branches of theoretical perspectives which are of best fit for these areas of study in Hip-Hop, LGBTQ+ communities and feminism. These perspectives are that of Black Feminism, Intersectionality, and Queer theory, with a reference to an important principle of the latter; Heteronormativity. The historical roots of Black Feminism, as well as the importance to its creation, will be lined out foremost. Intersectionality will be used as a connective position between Black Feminism, formed earlier on, and the later coined area of Queer theory. Bridging the gap between Black Feminism and Queer theory is especially important for this specific project, as having a mixture of perspectives is crucial when investigating LGBTQ+ artists of color. Defining the concept of heteronormativity within Queer theory is also an important task, as this definition coined by Cohen (1997) organizes a similar viewpoint as Queer theory in general, but factors in both sexuality and class explicitly. Theories that deal with gender, race, sexuality, and other identities are necessary for the accurate analysis of these artist's works, which additionally points to the need for intersectionality to bridge gaps left behind by either Black Feminism or Queer theory.

Historical Feminists Perspectives & Who is Left Out?

Feminism as an area of study, activism and theory has been historically an area of division when it came to 'who' the movement works for (Davis, 1983). Especially prior to the late 1960's, what is often considered the first roots feminism often prioritized certain women's rights over others within the movement due to their privileged class and racial positions, dividing the movement on 'who' it was supposed to support (Crenshaw, 1989; Zinn, 1996). This time period of the late 1960's saw a rise in objections to the idea of a 'universalism' of women's experience – that which states that each woman suffers the same types of oppression regardless

of race, ethnicity, ability, or sexuality differences (Zinn, 1996). Prior to the call for a new multifaceted and race-conscious viewpoint on feminism, this made the movement feel exclusive to only middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual white women's experiences with oppression.

Unfortunately, even up to the 2000's, feminist researchers still tend to "...acknowledge the need for diversity, yet omit women of color from their work," indicative of a remaining split within the area (Collins, 2000, p. 6). Thus, although initial movements had issues of blatant exclusion and based their ideas on a white, middle-class perspective, modern movements follow this trend in subtler ways. Many Black feminists turn instead towards an idea of separatism from what they viewed as a movement still piloted by mainly white women's interests. It was the call for a separatist versus a universalist standpoint, and a rise in multiracial feminism which created the grounds for a new area of feminism specific to American feminism: Black Feminism (Collins, 2000, Zinn 1996).

Black Feminism

The founders of Black Feminism emphasized a role of race within the area of gender oppression, one which had been historically ignored by the extremely white-washed feminist perspective (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983). As put explicitly by Crenshaw (1991), women of color's experiences "...are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism..." and their experiences would be discounted by a movement made solely on the basis of gender (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). The original political movement wherein this concept of interlocking oppression was discussed was within the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, a statement of purpose for the feminist organization named the same – which gained ground in academia and activism (Frazier et. al., 1977). The statement was brought about by a coalition of African American women who banded together due to their expressed issues with

both white feminism and the discrimination they faced as women of color, as non-middle-class women, and as lesbians. This group was a collection of activists, working together through multiple meetings to write the statement, as they saw their voices were going unheard in both areas of gender activism and feminism as well as anti-racist activism.

The activists of the Combahee River Collective (1977) expressed a disconnect from those in what they called the ‘white women’s movement,’ as not only were they excluded, but also had issues with the required separationism from men. As they expressed, “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism,” and thus Black Feminism in the minds of these activists would call for an understanding of how identities are often made of multiple layers of oppression (Frazier et al., 1977, p. 5). Prior to this express demand for ‘Black women and lesbians’ to have their voices heard and listened to, there were those who championed a similar rhetoric such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett to name a few, yet were either silenced or ignored in the white feminist scenes (Collins, 2000).

As a basis to their perspectives, Black Feminist’s theorists define oppression as not specific to a single identity marker but is instead as “...any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society,” and it is this which is used (Collins, 2000, p. 4). Intersectionality as an area of study, a methodology, and a theory has roots within Black Feminism, that which calls for attention on the specific areas of race, gender, and class (Davis, 1983). Coined by Crenshaw in 1989 due to her work prior in Black feminism, intersectionality in contrast holds this definition of oppression to all areas in which it could apply, not only with race, class, and gender. Similar staple connections of Black feminism to intersectionality lie with the concept of ‘intersectional subordination’ found

in Black feminism. Intersectional subordination “...is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment,” and a gateway into the term of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1249).

The premise of studying an individual’s multiple identities and oppressions in such a way started within Black Feminism, and led to what was later built as ‘Intersectionality.’ Intersectionality is described as being a place of infinite modality, “...a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation and other inequalities,” in order to focus on understanding a multidimensional experience (Cho et al., 2013, p. 788) Intersectionality, however, sought to retain an aspect of the Combahee River Collective Statement which seemed to be falling away in further Black Feminism – the intersections of sexuality, class, ability, and many more areas of oppression (Cho et al., 2013).

Intersectionality, broader-in-nature yet ideally still considering both gender and race, is thus defined as a view of people as multidimensional, or in having intersecting identity labels which change the ways in which they interact with the world (Cho et al., 2013). This means that intersectional theorists understand individuals as having many social identities which interact with one another and place each person within social power hierarchies, leading to specific statuses of oppression based on their multiplicity (Collins, 2000 & Crenshaw, 1991). Multiplicity, understood by Collins (2000) is meant to not simply take a ‘sum’ of one’s identity based upon their social labels, but to understand how each label such as race, gender, class, and ability, interact with one another. This is an important distinction to make, as the multiplicity model allows theorists to understand how complex inequality and discrimination become.

Intersectional theorists such as Crenshaw (1989), Davis (1983), Collins (1990), bell hooks (2015) and others have this perspective of identity in common with those in the area of Queer theory, specifically in relation to the structures of heteronormativity. Thus, intersectionality can act as a bridge between the areas of Black feminism, wherein intersectionality owes its roots, and Queer theory, which similarly calls for attention on how differing sites of oppression interact – with a focus upon LGBTQ+ oppression emphasized (Valocchi, 2005).

Queer Theory & Heteronormativity

Queer theory “...first and foremost recognizes and encourages the fluidity and movement of people’s sexual lives,” basing theories of sexuality, and by extension gender, as constructs which are labelled as either normative or ‘other’ depending upon how they interact with heteronormative structures (Cohen, 1997, p. 439). Heteronormativity is a staple term and concept in Queer theory, grounded in the radical definition given earlier, and creates a power structure that places “...the privilege, power, and normative status invested in heterosexuality...” above all else, even those who are heterosexual yet perform their sexuality in ‘deviant’ ways such as in hypersexuality or non-monogamy (Cohen, 1997, p. 445). Queer theory calls for a destabilization of the status quo of gender and sexual binaries, the radicalization and politicization of these categories to establish a ground for conversation, and to break down the idea that gender/sexuality is uncontestable (Cohen, 1997; hooks, 2015; Valocchi, 2005).

By breaking down these barriers, Queer theory and activists can lay groundwork for people to challenge the normative structure of this ‘ideal’ form of heterosexuality, that which is privileged above all else, even negatively impacting heterosexual people (hooks 2015). The important aspect of ‘sensationalism,’ or radical expression of self-identity and bodily autonomy without shame, within Queer theory and politics is also considered (Ahmed, 2017). This radical

acceptance of one's identity and sensationalism of expression in the face of stringent boundaries on gender and sexuality is purposefully provocative and is embraced as a way of protest through the strategy of weaponizing one's oppression (Taylor, 2018). As a key aspect within queer activism and theory, sensationalism identifies the importance in the expressions of self despite shame or censure caused by external oppressive institutions.

Application to the Current Project

Black Feminism and Intersectionality were the frameworks considered when analyzing the lyrics of LGBTQ+ artists in Hip-Hop, Rap and RnB. This is necessary in order to contextualize the lyrical content of each artist within their entire multidimensional identities. It is important to come from an intersectional perspective when analyzing the lyrics of these artists, an investigative process that prioritizes their experiences from their all of their identities. Additionally, the artists of these genres are conducting resistive work which Queer theorists express as extremely important; that is, initiating discourse on their experiences with inequality to a mainstream audience (Ahmed, 2017). Thus, only a critical Queer, intersectional perspective of identity will allow proper investigation, by understanding how experiences of these artists cannot be solely identified as the sum of 'queer oppression' and 'racial oppression,' but a multiplied *product* of their many social identities. There lies an importance in the voices of the artists being investigated, and the applications of these theories supports this – anything less than a framework which considers them as multifaceted people as intersectionality and queer theory do, would miss out on the messages within. This is also highlighted in the importance of choosing ethnographic content analysis, a method which labors with the meaning and context of the research subjects (in this case, the lyrical content), in order to not omit the context of the artist's social identities.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

Sample

This project will investigate the lyrical content of queer artists within the areas of Hip-Hop, Rap and RnB. Though a focus was placed upon investigating artists that are considered to stick within these genres and consider themselves as hip-hop/rap/RnB artists, there was not strict boundaries put on an artist if their songs move towards pop or other areas. This is to avoid a misstep by music industries and public media which has historically limited the expression of people-of-color to these genres and not allowed them the creative freedom to enter in any others. Thus, although the main focus was upon artists whose primary genres are hip-hop, rap and RnB (such as most or many of their albums staying within the genres chosen), there will also be inclusions of songs which are not necessarily considered within these areas. Additionally, the selection of the artists within the sample depends upon three factors: time period, explicitly claimed Queer identity, and primarily people of color. There are important reasons for sticking to these factors and each artist must meet the criteria to be included.

First, artists and songs in my sample are located between the dates of January 22nd, 1990, to November 20th, 2022. This time frame was selected to best illustrate how these themes and elements have shifted over time, to illustrate whether an increase in said artists has occurred, and the specific dates decided upon being the American Music Awards held those years. The beginning point of 1990 was chosen due to the genres of hip-hop, rap and RnB having a large surge during this time period (Rose, 2008). Second, for the criteria Queer identity, it is of importance that the artists selected are not 'assumed' to be LGBTQ+ but instead claim such an identity for themselves. This is to avoid prior discussed labelling of queer individuals which is harmful to their autonomy and presumptive often based upon bias (Valentine, 2000). Thus, every

artist selected must have an explicit interview, statement, or claim to their own queer identity in order to avoid assumptions. This meant that only those who have given explicit claim to their identities within interviews, songs or social media were included.

Finally, the sample only included people of color, primarily situating the sample to contain artists who may face racial discrimination as well as sexual and gendered oppression. This category was similar to that of queer identities, in that there were only artists who claim an identity as people of color, mention as much in their songs, or define themselves with similar terms. This is a focus needed in order to understand the intersectional oppressions these artists face and how they contend with their multifaceted relationship to themselves, as well as to bring to attention a group of individual artists which the literature has little research upon.

Data Collection

The songs investigated start specifically from the date of January 22nd, 1990, and extend out to November 20th, 2022, as these are the dates of the 17th to the 50th annual American Music Awards. The specific use of these dates gives context to the music scenes of the time, and the American Music Awards can be used as a way to compare how some of said artists have come further into the limelight compared to those of the 1990's. Further, the songs investigated were chosen by album, one to two albums per artist, and decided upon based on descriptions of the albums as discussing the artist's identities or struggles. Some descriptions were offered by online communities such as the subreddits 'r/HipHopHeads,' 'r/QueerMusic,' sourced from the music-hosting site Spotify, or the lyrical-focused blog Genius. It is understood, and expected, that some artists were unintentionally left out from the sample, as some artists are not as well-known, or may not have streaming options available. As songs from smaller, marginalized communities

often lack the monetary support to fund such streaming or an audience who calls for such, some may be left out due to a lacking accessibility.

There was an expected number of around thirteen artists, dependent mainly upon availability of their content and focusing importance in on the lyrical content over the quantity of artists. Each artist had one to two albums of which will be investigated, and the albums chosen were decided upon based on their described content relating to aspects of the artist's identity, found on the Genius website which breaks these themes down in summary form. This meant albums centered on the artist's struggles, celebrations of self-worth, memories, and of self-reflective nature; a characteristic staple in these genres, will be prioritized. Artists in the genres of hip-hop, rap and RnB tend to stay within the area of fifteen to twenty songs per album, and thus there were around 200 songs analyzed.

Data Analysis

My methodology relied upon the use of ethnographic content analysis (ECA) with special attention towards a narrative and thematic approach that considers contextual relevance of utmost importance. This specific style of methodology was outlined first by Altheide (1987) and replicated in many similar forms of lyrical analysis in the past, although not in the areas of which I will be investigating. Ethnographic Content Analysis' primary purpose is thus, "...to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships." (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). This includes a process of conceptualization of the themes/concepts under investigation, instances of concepts are coded, and then given rich descriptors of the narrative being built (as used often with film, contextualized with timestamps). These concepts were identified prior to investigation, tallied, and then explicated for their contextual and narrative meanings and value.

The most significant differences herein between the less-used ECA and more frequently relied upon QCA (Quantitative Content Analysis) methods lie in the approach to observing data, the flexibility of application, and the interpretation of the text from a perspective which considers the narrative being built, in a similar way to ethnographic note-taking. ECA, although ethnographic in its name, holds onto the quantitative portion of coding which QCA has, but adds in an essential layer of understanding towards the cultural context and interprets through comparison. This comparison is often done internally to each piece (film, scene, song, etc.) being analyzed, although some have used such a template to compare between materials. My own plan is to use such comparison internal to each piece of music, and to put a broader emphasis on the narrative aspect whilst also contending with the rate of occurrence similar to QCA in order to get at my secondary research question. The layout moving forwards will be a blending of elements of tallying such thematic elements with charts, as well as in-depth and narrative focused comments on specific lines which have significant meaning.

Ethnographic thick description and fieldnotes are included in this context of the narrative-portion of ECA, in order to allow for a three-dimensional viewpoint on the artist's visions and their stories. By investigating how an artist describes their struggles and defines themselves on their own indigenous terms will give the voice to those artists, rather than imposing my own perspectives or assumptions onto them. Thus, my own voice and viewpoints can have as minimal effect on the observations made as is possible. Though there might be differences in my 'jottings' to those commonly used in field ethnography within a cultural context, there was still extensive note-taking of the lyrical content, album art and the interviews with artists, if possible, in order to grasp at the full cultural environment the artistry invokes (Emerson et. al., 2020). This ethnography-influenced approach ensured much of the artists original meaning is preserved –

such as how they used language to empower themselves, took back power held over them (through reclamation), or otherwise pointed out their own oppression and resisted it.

Following an initial listen to the selections, there were concepts parsed out relevant to the lyrical content – such as how previous literature included ‘Braggadocio,’ ‘Derogatory Towards Women’ and other themes, then their occurrences were noted within each song (Oware, 2009). The themes chosen in this project are specifically relevant to those identified throughout the lyrical content, through active listening. The narrative approach was utilized in a similar way to others who have used QCA previously, and specific instances of the themes identified by the artist or authors as especially important to the narrative of the songs is explicated. This includes explaining what the lyrics are describing by taking extensive notes, as much of these are written in a style somewhat difficult to discern, and artists' own explanations as to the lyrical content’s meaning was relied upon wherever possible. If no such explanations were publicly available and the lyrical content vague, I attempt to explain the meanings within the context of the artist’s self-stated experiences or identity.

This research project gives attention to a group which is largely ignored or silenced within activism, theory, and academia – queer people of color. By providing the aspect of queer identity to the focus of Hip-Hop feminism, there is greater context and comparison given to the multiple previous studies done with cisgender/heterosexual artists. This fills the gap within Hip-Hop Feminism which has largely strayed away from such ventures, whilst also opening up dialogue on assumptions of queer communities being a juxtaposition to these genres. Queer theory and activism could also benefit from this further research, as theorists have pointed out the numerous calls for investigation such as this, yet the lacking research actually done (Vallocchi 2005). This project offers the perspective of critical queer, intersectional, and

ethnographical analysis to a small community which has obtained little to no publicity historically. It intends not to ‘give’ a voice to the community, but to elevate the autonomous voices within, to have them heard and seen as valuable to the theory and literature of academia – those of which tend to parrot the same concepts that the artists have been writing on for decades.

Reflexivity

As the interpretation of the lyrical content is a large portion of the analysis of this project, it is important that I disclose and consider my own experiences and background as transparently as possible. Being a person of mixed descent of half Iroquois/Cherokee and Irish, though passing as white, I have my own perspectives as well as a privileged experience with regards to race. Additionally, as is relevant in the results, I am a practicing follower of Judaism, and thus my interpretation of Christian elements of the songs is affected by that background. Especially relevant to this sample, I am a non-binary intersex person, who has been openly identifying as queer for twelve years. Being coercively assigned and raised as female, I additionally have experiences of gender oppression, which is of important note for this research. Finally, I have identified myself as, and been a part of, the queer community for fifteen years, and have much experience both personally and professionally with working as an activist in the community.

Chapter 5 - Results

Two research questions guided my analyses: (1) What narratives of oppression and resiliency in these lyrics are being built? How are these messages specific to the artist's intersectional identities and their struggles? (2) In what ways do the messages in LGBTQ+ artists' lyrics mirror the misogynistic or anti-feminine messaging within heterosexual/cisgender artists songs? These two questions can be answered by three themes each, and the details of the overarching themes will be expanded upon further below. These themes were chosen due to their relevancy to my chosen research questions, repetitive use, and/or if artists with a larger span of influence consistently used them. Additionally, album art or music videos were also included and analyzed for their thematic elements as they pertained to the research questions to help further understand the artists' cultural landscape.

Sample Description

Prior to presenting these results, it is necessary to understand the demographic information of the artists at hand. Each of these thirteen artists (listed below) identifies openly in some way as African American or Black, as well as queer in any orientative expression such as sexuality, romance, or gender. The inclusion of self-stated pronouns is also a requisite to ensure appropriate respect is given with all future discussion of the results. This is necessary, because such identities as Meshell Ndegeocello's bisexuality contextualizes much of her songs on romance. Similarly does Keiynan Lonsdale's identity as half-Nigerian give background to how he speaks of Afrocentrism and Black Power. In this sample, 205 songs were investigated, making up around 12 hours for a single listen-through, and each artist identified themselves as a

part of the genres of Hip-Hop, Rap and/or RnB. See Table 1 for more information on the artists included in this sample.

Table 1:

Artist Demographic Information

Artist Title (Artist Name)	Album Release Date(s)	Race / Ethnicity	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Sexuality	Genre(s)
Gaye Adegbalola	1999 / 2008	Black / African A.	she/her	Cis-Woman	Lesbian	Blues / RnB / Soul
Mykki Blanco (Mykki Quattlebaum Jr.)	2016	African A. / Jewish	she/they	Non-Binary	Queer	Rap / RnB / Hip-Hop
BROCKHAMPTON (Kevin Abstract)	2017	Black / African A.	he/him	Cis-Man	Bisexual	Rap / Hip-Hop / Trap
Cakes da Killa (Rashard Bradshaw)	2016	Black / African A.	he/him	Cis-Man	Gay	Rap / Hip-Hop / Trap
Shea Diamond (ShaGasyia Diamond)	2018 / 2019	Black / African A.	she/her	Trans-Woman	Straight	RnB / Soul / Blues / Pop
Deep Dickollective (Juba Kalamka, Tim'm T. West & Phillip A. Goff)	2007	Black / African A.	he/him (all)	Cis-Man (all)	Gay (all)	Rap / RnB / Performative
Angel Haze (Raykeea A. Wilson)	2013	Black / African A.	they/them	Agender	Bisexual	RnB / Soul / Pop / Rap
Keiynan Lonsdale	2020	Nigerian A. / Australian	he/him	Cis-Man	Gay	RnB / Pop
Lil Nas X (Montero L. Hill)	2021	Black / African A.	he/him	Cis-Man	Gay	Hip-Hop / Pop / Rap / Rock
Lizzo (Melissa V. Jefferson)	2019	Black / African A.	she/her	N/A – Labelless (Queer)	Pansexual	Rap / Pop / RnB
Meshell Ndegeocello	1993	African A. / German	she/her	Two-Spirit / Woman	Bisexual	Rap / RnB / Hip-Hop / Performative
Frank Ocean (Christopher E. Breaux)	1996	African A. / French	he/him	Cis-Man	Labelless – Queer	Rap / Hip-Hop / Trap / Performative
Tyler, The Creator (Tyler G. Okonma)	2017	Nigerian A. / African A.	he/him	Cis-Man	Bisexual	Rap / Hip-Hop / Trap / Experimental

Research Question 1

The first research question sought to understand the narratives of oppression and resiliency being built in the lyrics, while keeping in mind how these messages are specific to the artist’s intersectional identities and their struggles. To answer this, I analyzed the ways in which artists speak about their experiences of oppression, and the tools of resiliency they utilized *Oppression, Resiliency, and Toxic Resiliency*. Each of these overarching themes include relevant

subthemes as they contextualize the broader themes specific to the artist's intersectional experiences, a secondary goal of research question one.

Oppression

Oppression, as one of the most important and common themes making up 29.94% of all of the overarching themes (Table 2), will assist in answering the first research question. This theme was conceptualized as the artists' lyrics mentioning experiences of unjust treatment based upon harmful ideologies, including the collateral consequences of said treatment. Any lyrics which explicitly mentioned external prejudice, such as violence or judgment from others towards the artists was included. Four total subthemes inform the overarching theme of *Oppression*: *Religion*, *Racism*, *Racism and Queerphobia*, and *Collateral Consequences*. Perhaps the most salient subtheme of *Oppression* revolves around experiences of religious oppression.

Religion

The subtheme of *Religion* consists of references to religious oppression experienced by the artists, whether this be based in racism or queerphobia. This is one of the most frequently mentioned experiences within the overarching theme of *Oppression*, and is often mentioned within the specific context of the artist's identity. For instance, Meshell Ndegeocello references an especially distinct way in which she experiences religious oppression as an African American bisexual woman. In her song "The Way," Ndegeocello sings of the juxtaposition of her and her family's attachment to Christianity despite the historical ties with racism (Guasco, 2019). She states "I, too, am ashamed on my bended knees / Praying to my pretty white Jesus," highlighting the tendency of Western art to depict Jesus Christ as white, due to a past of white supremacy (M. Ndegeocello 1996, track 2). Ndegeocello contends with the difficulties she faces in her faith as a Christian at the time, with its background of white supremacy in the United States, as well as

with her identity as a bisexual woman. Moving forwards to call out to her fellow Christians, she states, “Your fathers condemn me,” a direct commentary on homophobic views held in many religious institutions (M. Ndegeocello, 1996, track 2). This analysis was made with the context in mind that Ndegeocello had in 1996 only recently come out as bisexual, and many of the songs on the album mention the religious oppression she faced as a result.

A similar account of religious-based oppression is found in many of the artist’s lyrics, including Gaye Adegbalola’s song “Speech,” which is a performative piece of poetry. Herein, Adegbalola expresses her frustration with the oppression she has faced as “...both black oppression and the oppression of the queers is justified by the Bible,” and although she identifies and has good memories of her faith, it has also been used as a tool of oppression against her as a lesbian black woman (G. Adegbalola, 2008, track 17). Echoes of this can be found in mediums outside lyrical content, as in Lil Nas X’s controversial music video (evidence of controversy!) of his song “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name).” Employing biblical Christian imagery, including persecution and a symbolic pole-dance into hell, Lil Nas X expresses his experience with religious oppression as a Black gay man (Lil Nas X, 2021). This music video was seen as controversial with its homoerotic depictions and imitations of biblical imagery, resulted in backlash from conservative Christians who claimed Lil Nas X was seeking to corrupt children, and was momentarily removed from the YouTube platform due to this (Romano, A., 2021).

Racism

The subtheme of *Racism* focuses upon lyrical content wherein artists speak on the racism they have faced in everyday life, either through violence, prejudice or judgement used against them. BROCKHAMPTON himself expresses his experience with his first encounters with racism in “FIGHT,” a song laying the ground of how he learnt to defend himself and survive as a

young Black man. In “FIGHT” he recalls his teachers telling him “Little black boys have a place in the world / Like hanging from trees or dead in the streets,” and this, alongside his father’s violent nature exposed him to expectations of black masculinity which he sought to replicate to avoid being hurt (BROCKHAMPTON, 2017, track 12).

Shea Diamond also speaks on such racially motivated violence in her song “Don’t Shoot,” released in direct response to murders as a result of police brutality. Diamond sings in her chorus:

Hands up, please don’t shoot.

They’ll say that you love it if your mouth stay mute,

They say they don’t see color, but the blood stain show the proof.

(Diamond, 2019, track 1).

These lyrics aim at the idea of ‘colorblindness,’ a racial ideology which has become more popular, that which claims to not ‘see’ race (“Research help,” 2023; Doane, 2017). This is problematic in how it ignores the history of racism in the United States and dismisses the lived experiences of people of color in a racialized society. Diamond draws this comparison of the claimed ‘colorblindness’ to the violence still perpetuated through police brutality and racial hate crimes. Often, however, racism was not mentioned in complete isolation to itself, but rather alongside queerphobia.

Racism and Queerphobia

While the subtheme of *Racism* was on occasion mentioned in isolation, Queerphobia was commonly only mentioned in connection to racism. Queerphobia is understood as lyrical content which speaks on prejudice, violence and judgement towards artists based on their queer identity, such as sexuality, gender or otherwise (“Research guides: Anti-oppression,” 2023). Thus, the

subtheme of *Racism and Queerphobia*, or an intersectional experience of oppression based on race and gender or sexual identity, was created. In this subtheme, artists speak of both their experiences with racism as well as queerphobia, without separating the two or splitting them up. This is an important connection to make, as previously noted in this study, an artists' experience of oppression must be understood as a *product* of their social identities, not simply a sum (Crenshaw, 1991).

One such exemplary case of this inability to split their experiences into pieces was with Gaye Adegbalola, in her song "Deja-Vu Blues." In this song, she commiserates how the times have not seemed to have changed, that she is still experiencing both extensive racism and homophobia, and that neither feel different to her. Herein she states,

"I was called Sambo, I was called nigga,

I was called out on my name,

Now I'm called an abomination.

Feels quite the same."

(G. Adegbalola, 2008, track 16)

Here, she recalls the racism she faced growing up in a segregated South, while also admitting that the oppressions she still faces as a now-out lesbian woman feels similar to the racism she grew up with, going along with the title 'Deja-Vu' as she feels she cannot escape such derision. BROCKHAMPTON likewise expresses his own experiences with putting on a face of realness, or passing as heterosexual, and in his song "JESUS" he claims, "I'm lying, I ain't a Drake-ass nigga / I'm more like Troye Sivan with a whole lotta mela-nahn!" (BROCKHAMPTON, 2017, track 8). For context, Troye Sivan is an extremely popular white pop-artist who has been openly out as gay prior to the start of his career in 2013, an artist which

BROCKHAMPTON compares himself to, as a contrast with how he instead waited until long after he was successful to come out as queer (Nelson, 2022). These together display a merging of both queerphobia and racism, themes of oppression which are intrinsically tied together in the lyrics of each artist who mentioned them.

Collateral Consequences

Experiences of oppression were also not always expressed explicitly as violence or harassment, but rather as extenuating consequences of oppression. Therefore, the subtheme of *Collateral Consequences* includes experiences with domestic violence, homelessness/displacement, sexual assault, or mental health struggles and suicidality as a result of oppression. In “Leviticus: Faggot,” Meshell Ndegeocello paints a picture of a young queer boy facing such difficulties as a result of queerphobia, including domestic violence, “And every night, the man showed the faggot what a real man should be,” as well as homelessness, sexual assault, and in the end, his death. The music video of this song also depicts explicitly the violence and mental health struggles which the young boy encounters as a result of being kicked out of his home at fourteen for being queer (Ndegeocello, 1996, track 5). Within the video, we follow the boy as he faces violence from his father, religious prejudice from his mother and a difficult time living on the streets. Eventually, this leads into the boy getting involved in sex trading and drugs, and the final scene depicts him overdosing alone in a restroom (Jfahr, 2007).

Speaking of violence of any form, including domestic abuse, sexual assault and even lynching as a result of oppression, was a common point for many artists. This could be found in many contexts, such as personal experiences of domestic abuse, as in Gaye Adegbalola’s first marriage to a man, “There was fire in his eyes and fire in his fists, but I had nowhere to go,” calling out to the listener that “You Don’t Have to Take It (Like I Did),” explaining her own

struggle as a result of gendered oppression (G. Adegbalola, 2008, track 3). Or listing the names of lynching victims mid-song, as in “For Colored Boys” by the DDC. Leaving off with a message of resistance as they speak on the atrocities committed against the community,

Like haters who paid us with slings and arrows to walk the fire,

These pomo-homo-afro negro stories will see the light.

The slice had me frightened, now I’m ready to fuckin’ fight.

(DDC, 2007, track 17).

‘The slice’ referencing the violence broadcasted across the news on the killings of queer people of color, a phenomenon still occurring at rising rates across the country (Admin, 2023). This expresses the fear and danger which the artists experience through their everyday lives, as a direct result of oppressive circumstances and/or hate. Explicit and upsetting mentions of sexual violence and abuse were also found in higher rates for the artists who identified as women, such as in Mykki Blanco’s “High School Never Ends,” where she speaks in detail of a frightening night where, while she and her friend were drunk, the men they were with attempted to assault them (M. Blanco, 2016, track 3). Gaye Adegbalola at first speaks somberly of her own experience with being sexually assaulted as a child by a trusted figure in her 1999 album “Bitter Sweet Blues,” and goes forwards to reference this once more in her 2008 album with the song “Lying Preacher Blues.” Herein, she paints the image of a violent, hypocritical Christian preacher, who launders money, supports war and molests children, giving the chorus of, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, what would Jesus do? What would Jesus wear? Who would Jesus screw?” pointing an accusatory finger at religious institutions which condemn queer peoples while perpetuating violence themselves (G. Adegbalola, 2008, track 10).

Albums created post-2013 were considerably more likely to speak often and in detail of their struggles with mental health in response to oppression and there was a concerning higher trend of lyrics mentioning suicidality across these artists. The timing of the increase in mental health content may have to do with the increasing positive representation post-2010 in popular culture of mental illness, possibly allowing movements of openly speaking on mental health becoming more widespread (Pressbooks, 2021). Additionally, there may be fault in the faltering in mental health support after this time period, the increase in suicidality in these lyrics being a concerning factor (SAMHSA, n.d.).

Lil Nas X also describes suicidal urges blatantly within the chorus of his song “SUN GOES DOWN,” stating,

I wanna run away,
Don't wanna lie, I don't want a life,
Send me a gun, and I'll see the sun.

(Lil Nas X, 2021, track 10).

Here, Lil Nas X, speaking from the perspective of his younger self, admits that he is thinking of ending his life, stating that if he had a gun, he believes he would be able to see ‘the light’ (‘the sun’) and thus would escape his pain. Angel Haze reveals similar feelings when they speak of their own issues in “Angels & Airwaves.” In Angel Haze’s piece, they paint a vivid picture of suicidality and self-harm, empathizing with any listeners who may currently be in the same mental state as they have been, “When you cut open your wrist looking for loving in the slits,” attempting to assuage the listener’s worries and convince them to stop (Angel Haze, 2013, track 6). Further concerning depictions of self-harm and severe depression can be found across many

other artists such as Mykki Blanco, BROCKHAMPTON, Gaye Adegbalola, Tyler, the Creator, and Frank Ocean, found especially often from artists with a large following.

Resiliency

Resiliency, as the most common theme tallying out as 42.41% of the total of all thematic elements, is essential in answering the first research question (Table 2). This overarching theme can be understood as acts, behaviors or tools used to celebrate, protect or gain autonomy in the face of oppressive circumstances. It was a common trend across many of the albums for oppressive experiences to be alongside messaging of resiliency, and was rare to see one without the other. Such depictions of *Resiliency* have been utilized similarly in past research, as in Oware's piece which found female rappers engaged in strong subthemes named 'female agency' and 'empowerment' (Oware, 2009). Belle (2011) also used *Resiliency* in their investigation of Black masculinity from non-queer hip-hop artists, with artists such as 'Dead Prez' who "...offer a version of Black masculinity that is connected to the civil rights movement," noting revolutionary ideas as a common subtheme (Belle, 2014, p. 296). It was with prior research in mind that the subthemes of *Queer Hope/Positivity*, *Revolution*, *Queer Sexuality/Love*, *Black Power*, and *Slur Reclamation* were identified.

Queer Hope/Positivity

Though *Resiliency* appeared in numerous forms, one of the most frequent subthemes was that of which I termed 'Queer Hope.' This concept differed from other subthemes in that it expressed a certain hope for a future in which anyone considered 'queer' to be not only accepted but celebrated. This idea creates a difference of the meaning of 'queer' from that which I previously defined, and includes those who diverge from the norm. Artists from before 2010 expressed this frequently, such as the Deep Dickollective (DDC) in their song "Other Countries,"

where they state, “I ain’t holdin’ much hope, but I’m open to more.” (DDC, 2008, track 2). As this song sings about the world being populated with people just like them, queer people of color, the DDC appear to be looking outward and to the future, placing their hope in the youth.

Modern artists such as Keiynan Lonsdale, Shea Diamond and Lizzo base a majority of their resiliency messages within the ideas of Queer Hope, as does Tyler, the Creator. In Tyler’s song “Where This Flower Blooms,” he encourages those of the younger generation to express themselves, “Tell these black kids they could be who they are / Dye your hair blue, shit, I’ll do it too,” painting a picture of a future where queerness and uniqueness is celebrated rather than passively accepted (Tyler, the Creator, 2017, track 2). Or, with Keiynan Lonsdale’s introductory message to his song “Gay Street Fighter,” which shouts loudly, “Anyone who thought they couldn’t be themselves and be the hero too / Your time is now,” the song itself pinpointing the importance of being oneself despite hatred (Keiynan, 2021, track 2).

Revolution

An equally common subtheme of *Resiliency* was Revolution, often including calls-to-action (CTAs) to the reader to get involved and make a difference. This oft came in the form of either more vague CTAs which called for a general sense of ‘revolution,’ or specific CTAs, calling for attention to specific issues. Revolutionary themes were especially common within albums considered to be RnB, Blues or Soul genres, such as in Meshell Ndegeocello’s “Plantation Lullabies.” Ndegeocello’s song “Shootin’ Up and Getting High” in specific describes her and her partner’s discussions on racism, sexism, poverty, and state-sanctioned segregation, urging the listener towards “Revolution against this racist institution,” a common throughline in much of the album itself (M. Ndegeocello, 1993, track 4). Similarly with Keiynan Lonsdale calling out to queerphobic people, “...our blood’s been spilled, by your hands and I’ve had

enough / Yo motherfuckers turnin' me into a Gay Street Fighter,” claiming the end of his patience for the violence put upon queer people (Keiynan, 2020, track 2).

Additionally, revolutionary themes can be found in Shea Diamond's "American Pie," wherein Diamond sings on her inability to attain things promised to her as an American, crying out, "Who's gonna say my want is not a need?" referring implicitly to the rise of governmental control over bodily autonomy of transgender people such as herself (S. Diamond, 2018, track 1). Diamond calls the listener to investigate who is claiming to own the knowledge of what is 'wanted' versus 'needed,' a powerful revolutionary CTA. Gaye Adegbalola also extends a Revolutionary idea on gender structures and links it to Queer Hope, in her song "The Great Pretender," where she states, "Our spirits are born free / And society looked to our bodies to decide whether we'd be a he or she," and calls for the listeners to "...rise up and stand... We've gotta fight for human rights without limitation / We can't liberate our creed and race without liberating orientation," citing a hopeful future ahead (G. Adegbalola, 2008, track 4). As queer love and sexuality has been shamed, limited and silenced for generations, the explicit celebration of relationships between queer folk can be seen as a form of *Resiliency* on its own.

Queer Sexuality/Love

Queer love and sexuality were *Resiliency* subthemes coded throughout nearly every album and hold an importance in how artists openly proclaim and speak on their queer relationships, offering representation to their listeners. From expressions of positive moments and romance, as seen in Shea Diamond's sensual "Good Pressure," in which she tells her lover,

Outside these walls, people don't understand us,
They try to pass these laws, uh,
'Cause people don't understand our love.

We'll always fight oppression,

But we need just one night off.

(S. Diamond, 2018, track 4).

Urging him to lay down so she can put 'good pressure' on him and wash away the oppression of their day-to-day lives, celebrating their love throughout the song. Some also express heartbreak, such as in Cakes da Kila's "New Phone (Who Dis)," in which he mourns the relationship's end, "Really thought you were the Ken to my Barbie," giving the listeners queer love songs which they can relate to (Cakes da Killa, 2016, track 5). The artists in the latter portion of the sample (post-2010) all displayed ways of explicitly referencing their queer forms of romance and sexuality, perhaps in part due to shifting acceptance of queer identities in the latter years, possibly in part due to the election of the first openly queer-positive United States president in the year prior (Flores, 2014).

Black Power

Black power as a subtheme embodies any empowering messages of Afrocentrism, self-love and appreciation for culture and echoes of Black feminist thought found throughout the lyrical content. RnB artists such as Gaye Adegbalola, Shea Diamond, Meshell Ndegeocello and Keiynan Lonsdale had these ideas throughout their discography. Gaye Adegbalola in specific gets to the roots of Black feminist thought with impactful lines such as,

Washed and ironed all the white folks clothes,

Nursed their babies, now she works in nursing homes.

Had to be twice as good to get half a chance,

Still fired first and hired last.

They talk about a glass ceiling, but don't you know,

She's down on her knees on a concrete floor.

(G. Adegbalola, 1999, track 5).

Here, Adegbalola characterizes the exact frustrations which Black feminists expressed at the time over the issues which white feminists brought up such as the glass ceiling. As she expresses, such a perspective assumes every woman is on the same level field of opportunities, unaffected by racism. Adegbalola was definitively not alone in her piercing narratives of Black feminism and Black power messaging, as Meshell Ndegeocello paved a similar road in the 1990's. Ndegeocello a vivid imagery of getting high with her deceased lover and speaking about these issues of poverty, birth control and racism, stating,

We found beauty in our black skin,

Amidst the Covergirl and Clairol ads.

Makin' no mistake that white is right.

(M. Ndegeocello, 1993, track 4).

Ndegeocello's frustrations with the white-washed and racist standards of beauty ring true in this and many of her other tracks on this album, but also leans into the ideas of self-love and appreciation to resist against such messages she receives. Following this, she makes explicit references to white supremacy even more rampant during this time, her tone full of animosity, "Dehumanise me, set aside and criticize / I'm livin' in the midst of genocide." (M. Ndegeocello, 1993, track 4). Expressing revolutionary ideas and explicitly campaigning against systemic oppression is not the only way which these artists resist as they also use language to reclaim the power once used against them.

Slur Reclamation

Reclaiming slurs used against the community is a common act for individuals who wish to wrest back the power taken from them by such language (Worthen, 2021). As such, slur reclamation and use of terms regularly seen as derogatory on oneself was coded as a subtheme of *Resiliency*. This often included derogative terms such as ‘faggot,’ ‘freak,’ or ‘abomination’ artists utilize to refer to themselves, an act of sensational resistance that takes back the power used against them. A major use of this was in the DDC’s album, wherein they often call themselves and their community, “Rap faggots and T-boys,” ‘T-boys’ meaning transgender men. This is utilized in a positive and inclusive way despite both terms being regularly considered slurs in other contexts (DDC, 2008, track 2).

Gaye Adegbalola also uses slur reclamation in her references to herself as an ‘abomination’ and ‘woman-ish’ in many of her songs, terms often used against queer and gender-nonconforming women (G. Adegbalola, 1999, track 4) Keiynan Lonsdale does this similar trend within the initial lyrics of “Gay Street Fighter,” stating he is ready to “Teach these niggas why us pretty boys rule,” reclaiming the term ‘pretty boy,’ one still often seen as derogatory in the queer community to this day (Keiynan, 2021, track 2). Trap artists like Cakes da Killa followed this trend of reclamation as well, such as when he states, “I’m just that freak – come crawlin’ like a cryptid,” characterizing himself as a ‘freak’ and embracing the derogatory label within the positive context of queer hypersexuality in the song (Cakes da Killa, 2016, track 3). By reclaiming terms such as ‘freak,’ ‘pretty boy,’ and even ‘faggot,’ which are often used against queer folks, the artists can wrest back the power in such slurs. Additionally, they put a positive spin on their meanings, even partially taking away the pain of the terms used against them. Sometimes, however, certain tools used towards the goal of resiliency can harm those who use them, or set standards for listeners which can be harmful.

Toxic Resiliency

Unfortunately, not all resiliency tactics taken by those under oppressive or dangerous circumstances may be completely beneficial. These tactics were categorized under the theme of *Toxic Resiliency*, not based upon a value scaling of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ resiliency but rather the results of using these tools as being only partially helpful to the artist. Thus, the theme *Toxic Resiliency*, in context of this research, is best understood as acts, behaviors and mechanisms used to protect or gain autonomy in the face of oppressive circumstances, but tend to have negative effects upon the artists who mention utilizing them. This portion was separated from *Resiliency* as a major theme due to the negative way which the artists speak of these methods, either wishing they could escape it, or otherwise perpetuating unreal standards to their listeners. The subthemes considered to be tools of *Toxic Resiliency* were *Drug & Alcohol Abuse*, *Hustle Culture*, and *Sex Trading*.

Drug & Alcohol Abuse

Drug and Alcohol abuse, one of the most common subthemes in Toxic Resiliency, was included if the artists spoke of a degree of negative effects or impacts from their usage. For instance, Meshell Ndegeocello in her song “Shootin’ Up and Getting High” speaks mainly positively of getting high and talking revolution with her lover, but also that they were “Shootin’ up to cope in this dehumanizing society,” and after her lover overdoses, Ndegeocello changes to talk about it in a negative light (M. Ndegeocello, 1993, track 4). Or, in the case of Mykki Blanco in her song “Rock’n’Roll Dough,” where she speaks on the difficulties she’s had with addiction, “Turned up every night, where’d my life go?,” referring often throughout her album to her love-hate relationship with drugs, as she uses them to cope but despises how they make her feel out of control (M. Blanco, 2016, track 13).

Hustle Culture

Another common Toxic Resiliency subthemes was Hustle Culture, meaning references to the American cultural expectation of being able to build one's fortune and wealth with only 'hard-work' or 'hustle.' Hustle culture focuses all energy upon gaining money, prioritizes wealth over other areas of life and blames a lack of wealth upon not 'hustling' hard enough. This sets a standard of work-culture which places economic gain above health, relationships and anything else. While hustle culture can be conceptualized as a tool of *Resiliency* in a capitalistic society, it celebrates unrealistic, toxic standards and unhealthy work patterns (Oware, 2016). Artists such as Lil Nas X sing about their sudden successes in such a way in his song "DON'T WANT IT,"

I wanted fame and I wanted riches,
Wanted happiness, wanted forgiveness,
Started focusing on all these wishes,
Crazy how this shit came to fruition.
(Lil Nas X, 2021, track 12).

This perpetuates Hustle Culture by insinuating that the listener may be able to gain all he has by simply 'focusing' or hustling harder. The rest of the song insinuates this loudly with its lyrical content, as audio samples of Lil Nas X's award shows, and celebratory news praising his success, is laid within the track. Additionally, the preceding line "...I'm fuckin' living proof that if you want it / You can have anything right before your eyes," contains the same sentiment that simply working hard can get you anything you want (Lil Nas X, 2021, track 12).

Angel Haze also falls into this hustle culture ideology by claiming in their song "Echelon," "I don't need no friends, bitch / I'm better off with my money," and can be found in not only the title of their album "Dirty Gold," but also the album art which depicts their face

coated in real gold shavings (Angel Haze, 2013, track 2). These are depictions of *Toxic Resiliency*, as while they are tools used by the artists to overcome oppression in a cultural landscape that does not welcome them, such as with the music industry, they are also extremely inaccurate depictions of wealth gain in the United States, setting unrealistic expectations (Oware, 2016). This form of *Toxic Resiliency* gives insight towards answering the primary research question of *Oppression* and *Resiliency*, giving perspective to the many tools which artists use to remain resilient in the face of oppression.

Research Question 1 Summary

With all of the evidence and analysis considered, the cultural narrative of each artists' portrayals of *Oppression* and *Resiliency* (whether toxic or otherwise) is necessarily complex. As each individual artist has their own specific background, identities, and interactions with oppressive structures, their intersectional experiences cannot be subsumed into one single summarizing narrative. However, common trends of how they narrate *Oppression* and *Resiliency* can be construed, such as that of the tendency for artists to be unable to split their experiences with oppression into 'racial' or 'gender/sexuality' based ones. In answer to my primary research purpose, artists often spoke of their oppression as well as the tools of resiliency they utilize within the same songs, frequently following up any discussion of their struggles with a message of inner strength, positivity, or hope. Whilst some of these resiliency themes collected were portrayed as having negative effects on the artists or their listeners (*Toxic Resiliency*), *Resiliency* occurrences still outweighed every other thematic element.

While notating and participating in thick description on the sample, there were many interesting trends commonplace across all or many of the songs investigated. One such trend found was a concerningly pervasive theme of intensive mental health struggles and suicidality

due to oppression experienced by the artists, one which will be further explored later on in the final chapter. Next, I will delve into my second research question regarding whether these artists portrayed similar instances of misogyny and anti-femininity as their non-queer peers.

Research Question 2

The second research question aimed to investigate the lyrical content that mirrors misogynistic and/or anti-femme messaging which is commonly found in previous analyses of cisgender and heterosexual artists. In order to answer this, I notated each use of misogynistic or anti-femme language, as well as oppressive language of misogyny, anti-femme or queerphobia which the artists used against themselves. These overarching themes were thus named *Misogynist or Anti-Femme* and *Internalized Oppressive Messaging*. Including these two aspects together is important in answering my second research question, as the ideas of anti-femininity and misogyny were also expressed as internalized messages directed towards the artist themselves.

Misogynist or Anti-Femme

The broad theme of *Misogynist or Anti-Femme* language is best understood by the associated subthemes. *Sexist Language* was conceptualized as mentions of language which objectifies or is derogatory towards women and supports patriarchal views. Baker-Kimmons and McFarland (2011) investigated this theme across Black and Chicano artists in the rap genre, finding lyrical content that relies upon gender hegemonic ideals even when attempting to stray from a toxic form of masculinity. The secondary subtheme of *Femmophobic Language* includes all lyrics which derogates or demeans feminine-aligned or presenting peoples, regardless of gender identity. One of the most important factors to understand about the overarching theme is that, unlike prior research done in Hip-Hop Feminism which coded exist language only within

the lyrical content of cisgender/heterosexual artists, I wanted to include anti-femme messaging in general. Thus, I would be able to make note of trends of anti-femininity which queer artists may express in ways not seen in cisgender/heterosexual artists' works or pieces. However, this does not mean that the lyrical content of these artists was completely free of sexist language, as it was still utilized as a tool of power in a similar way to their non-queer peers.

Sexist Language

Although making up a comparatively lower portion of the results, at 4.87% of the total of all thematic elements, artists still utilized heavily sexist language and imagery of violence against women (Table 2). High-profile rapper Frank Ocean, for example, states in his song "Futura Free" that although he "...don't cut bitches no more / But your bitch an exception," threatening another rapper by aiming violence at his girlfriend through demeaning language (Frank Ocean, 2016, track 17). Similarly sexist language and vivid imagery of objectification was used by Tyler, the Creator across much of his album. In Tyler's "Droppin' Seed (ft. Lil Wayne)," the famous rap and experimental artist states, "I drop a seed in her panties if it smells like pansies / I'm a banshee in her panties, nigga ask your mammy," using similar language as noted in previous studies of artists who describe sex in such ways, painting themselves as sexually dominant or predatory over women (Baker-Kimmons & McFarland, 2011; Tyler, the Creator, 2017, track 11). Artists such as BROCKHAMPTON also employed both sexist language and violence against women, such as with his song "SWAMP" wherein he claims, "I'll cuff her if she don't suck me right," (BROCKHAMPTON, 2017, track 5). Artist's portrayals of *Sexist Language* were commonly seen beside the secondary subtheme of *Femmephobic Language* but were isolated to being aimed at women. *Femmephobic Language*, however, was often used to derogate those with feminine presentations or traits, no matter their gender identity.

Femmophobic Language

Femmephobia refers to an ideology which systematically devalues all forms of feminine presentation and traits, seeking to maintain the power of gender hegemony. As this has been utilized within queer spaces for decades and still an ongoing issue, *Femmophobic Language* is an important subtheme that emerged within the overarching theme of *Misogynist or Anti-Femme* (Hoskin, 2019). One example of such expression of anti-femme messaging unique to queer artists was with the DDC's "Butchqueen," in which a skit takes place where a character states they saw,

Two brothers going at it – Nah!

You listen here, I ain't wearin' lipstick, you are!

I ain't no bitch, I fuck you!

(DDC, 2008, track 7).

This is a line of thought applied often to feminine queer people, utilizing sexist comparisons to women in order to justify demeaning and subordinating them to masculine queer people. As an ideology, this endangers all who perform femininity, especially in the case of queer people who perform femininity and are subjected to femmephobia by others in the queer community.

Cakes da Killa was an artist who often utilized both femmephobia and sexism in his lyricism within the same songs. While speaking on who he would have sex with, Cakes da Killa uses *Femmophobic Language* against gay men who are feminine, "You're a... cunt / I only fuck with dykes," referring to the feminine queer man propositioning him as a slur. Additionally, he uses sexist language, "...bitches stay in they place," both aiming at prioritizing masculine queerness and reifying gender hegemony (Cakes da Killa, 2016, tracks 2 & 4). Most commonly,

Misogyny or Anti-Femme messaging is seen perpetuated by the cisgender men in this sample though similar concepts are echoed in other artists' language, it is regularly used to a different effect. This is often to the effect of internalized messaging, and is expressed by artists in self-deprecating ways or with messages they use against themselves which mirror external oppressive viewpoints.

Internalized Oppressive Messaging

Artists also expressed internalized oppressive ideologies of femmephobia, sexism and queerphobia, using language and depicting themselves in derogatory ways based upon these viewpoints. This theme, *Internalized Oppressive Messaging*, refers to these derogatory and stereotyping beliefs directed at one's own identity or self. This is an important distinction between this theme and the previous *Misogynist or Anti-Femme*, as these messages are expressed by the artist towards themselves, rather than used externally by the artist towards others. This was found when artists use sexist, femmephobic or queerphobic ideologies against themselves, either through internal critique, guilt, and shame, or assuming such stereotypes onto themselves as a defense.

Internalized Queerphobia

One of the most common types of internalized messages was with the subtheme *Internalized Queerphobia*, wherein artists often portrayed shame or guilt in their queer identity. Some of this theme may be subtle and implicit, such as in Meshell Ndegeocello's "Stay," in which she tells her lover, "I must admit, the forbidden always arouses my temptations," as she characterizes the love she has with her girlfriend as forbidden, and often throughout the album as sinful (M. Ndegeocello, 1996, track 9). In DDC's "Butchqueen," they state, "Imma be undetectable, respectable," referring to their ability to pass as straight as being a

‘respectable’ person, internalizing anti-femme messages as well as queerphobia which labels anything not straight passing or masculine as not being respectable (DDC, 2007, track 7).

Internalized messages of queer phobia were frequently mentioned, recurrently with allusion to religious persecution. In Lil Nas X’s “SUN GOES DOWN,” he ruminates on the negative self-thoughts he grew up with, “These gay thoughts would always haunt me / I prayed God would take it from me,” painting a picture of his attraction to men as ‘haunting,’ feeling both guilt and shame enough to look to religion to escape it (Lil Nas X, 2021, track 10). This sentiment echoes a sense of guilt which often is pressed upon queer individuals by religious organizations which see queerness in a similar light. There are many other instances of these internalized oppressive messaging repeated by others like Frank Ocean, Shea Diamond and Tyler, the Creator.

Culture

Culture is an important portion of results from the previous literature in the field of Hip-Hop Feminism. Most previously noted cultural subthemes revolved around themes called ‘*Braggadocio*’ as well as ‘*Hook-up Culture*.’ As these themes were marked as important and crucial to artists investigated by other researchers, I sought to include them in my own. However, after finalizing results, I found the artists herein did not utilize these subthemes as heavily as did their non-queer peers. Still, it is important to consider the components of culture in these genres as a comparison to non-queer artists in other studies. One of the most salient subthemes of culture was considered in previous literature as a staple piece of the hip-hop and rap genres; *Braggadocio*.

Braggadocio

The subtheme of *Braggadocio* was developed by Hip-Hop Feminist researchers to define instances where artists brag and boast about their wealth, relationships, or success in the music industry (Oware, 2009; Hunter & Soto, 2009). Making up a proportionately lower amount of the total themes, *Braggadocio* was primarily seen in the lyrical context of albums in the rap genre. One such case was with Angel Haze’s song “Echelon (It’s My Way),” wherein they brag about their career success, wealth, and relationships. Haze claims, “My bitch looks like she Jasmine, my nigga look like Aladdin,” boasting on both of their partner’s attractiveness and flaunting their own (Angel Haze, 2013, track 2). BROCKHAMPTON is similarly boastful on the riches he has gained as a result of his musical success, as he raps in his song “QUEER” on his struggles with being a successful queer Black man. Herein, BROCKHAMPTON states he “Used to get arrested, all I get is checks now,” boasting further on the money he makes now changing the opinions of those who used to scorn him (BROCKHAMPTON, 2017, track 2). Though rap artists utilized such *Braggadocio* within their lyrics, a lower portion of the *Culture* theme was made up of mentions of *Hook-up Culture*, another subtheme seen as salient in past research.

Hook-up Culture

The subtheme of *Hook-up Culture* can be primarily understood as mentions of repetitive casual sexual encounters which are celebrated and weighed as more substantial over other types of sexual/romantic relationships. This was found to be a frequent occurrence in past research, though made up a smaller proportion of all lyrical content for these artists (Oware, 2009). However, this does not mean the subtheme did not occur, as in Lil Nas X’s “SCOOP (feat. Doja Cat),” Lil Nas X describes his involvement in *Hook-up Culture*. Singing to his one-night lover, Lil Nas X says, “Baby I ain’t tryin’ to be your baby / Understand, I’m just tryin’ to be the daily scoop,” using the metaphor of a newscasts’ daily ‘scoop’ as an analogy for how short of a time

he wishes to be a part of the other man's life (Lil Nas X, 2021, track 6). Though a short piece of the total thematic elements across all of the lyrical content, as my secondary research question sought to find mirrors and comparisons to previous literature, *Culture* is an important theme to consider.

Research Question 2 Summary

Though making up a smaller portion of the total thematic elements, the themes of *Misogyny or Anti-Femme* messaging and *Internalized Oppressive Messaging* express concerning trends of objectification, derogation and violence towards women and feminine-aligned people. In a similar trend to past literature considering mainly non-queer artists (Baker-Kimmons & McFarland 2011), the sample had tendencies of cisgender male artists to demean women through sexual domination or putting down women by threatening to steal their lover, which is consistent with previous research (Belle, 2014; Oware, 2009). These were tendencies of misogyny and anti-femininity which were mirrored in the lyrical content of my sample, though only within those albums which were of the 'rap' genre demographic.

Overall, there is an identifiable trend, solely of those artists who delve into the rap genre, of misogynistic and anti-femme messaging, a concerning fact despite the proportionally low frequency of the occurrence within all of the themes tallied. The subthemes of the final overarching theme of *Culture*, that of Braggadocio or Hook-up culture, similarly followed trends of non-queer artists, yet also were engaged with much less prevalently than in previous studies, and only occurred with artists in the rap genre. Altogether, these comparative results, and the narratives which each artist portrayed, are especially important when considered in connection with the intersectional perspectives offered from research question one.

Emerging Trends of Interest: Bridging Topics Across Research Questions

The theme of *Misogyny or Anti-Femme* brings out an interesting and puzzling trend which was found across many, if not all, artists within the genre of Rap in the sample. This was contradictory messaging, routinely characterized by messages of *Resiliency* being followed in an album or even within the same song by messages of *Misogyny or Anti-Femme*. This can be readily found in the previously mentioned “Butchqueen” by DDC, but also in artists like Cakes da Killa. Within one song Cakes da Killa states, “Peep the revolution, steady sippin’ through ya third eye,” coded as *Revolutionary* messaging, as he relates a spiritual awakening of one’s ‘third eye’ to becoming aware and a part of the revolutionary push against gender hegemony. And then, in the same song, he moves into misogynistic, violent language, “Have her talkin’ slick? Douse a bitch with some kerosene.” (Cakes da Killa, 2016, track 10).

Many of the artists who perpetuated this trend objectified women, as Angel Haze compares women’s bodies to speakers, “Bumpin’ like the asses on them thick bitches at stadium.” (Angel Haze, 2013, track 16). While, within the same album, they also express explicit *Revolutionary* and *Queer Hope* subthemes in pieces such as “Battlecry (ft Sia)” (Angel Haze, 2013, track 9). This is an important trend to note, as it is in line with much research conducted in the past as well as the theoretical concept of ‘Grey Feminism’ which is essential in hip-hop feminism as a whole. This is the idea that revolutionary and what I termed as *Resilient* themes can be found alongside hypermasculinity, sexism and gender hegemonic themes, yet the value of the former is not taken away by the latter’s inclusion. The results presented here do well in answering the research questions I sought to answer previously, and a substantial amount hold links to the theoretical foundations of this paper.

Results Summary

The first research question considered required a careful investigation of the intersectional perspectives of artists' experiences with oppression and the tools of resiliency they utilized. The narratives which artists wove revealed an inability to split their experiences of oppression into explicit types, such as with queerphobia and racism. It is also of great concern that the most salient portion of *Collateral Consequences of Oppression* was suicidality and/or self-harm, revealing a worrying trend of mental health being negatively impacted by oppressive circumstances. However, encounters with oppression were frequently followed up with messages of positivity, hope, and resiliency, with *Resiliency* being the most common of all.

With regards to the secondary research question on the mirrors of misogyny and anti-femme messaging in comparison to non-queer artists, there were substantially less mentions of these themes. Making up only 56 out of the total 698 thematic elements, nearly all mentions of *Misogynist/Anti-Femme* and *Internalized Oppressive Messages* were isolated to those in the rap genre. Though smaller in proportion compared to their non-queer peers, the artists within this study still expressed dangerous, violent, and derogatory language towards women and feminine people. Each of these findings, as well as the trends surrounding them, are important contributions to past literature, and have deep connections to the theoretical ideas founded in Black Feminism, Hip-Hop Feminism and Queer theory.

Table 2

All Thematic Tallies

Album (Alp. By Artist)	Theme 1: Oppression	Theme 2: Resiliency	Theme 3: Toxic Resiliency	Theme 4: Misogynist/Anti-Femme	Theme 5: Internalized Oppressive Messages	Theme 6: Culture	Total Tallied Elements (by Album)
Gaye Adegbalola (Bittersweet Blues 1999)	12	15	1	0	0	0	28
Gaye Adegbalola (Gaye without shame 2008)	17	22	1	0	1	0	41

Mykki Blanco (Mykki 2016)	11	20	16	0	3	1	51
BROCKHAMPTON (Saturation II 2017)	20	15	21	2	2	8	68
Cakes da Killa (Hedonism 2016)	3	21	11	5	0	6	46
Shea Diamond (Seen it all EP 2018)	5	10	0	0	0	0	15
Shea Diamond (Don't Shoot Single 2019)	5	1	1	0	0	0	7
Deep Dickcollective (On Some Other 2007)	33	42	5	6	3	1	90
Angel Haze (Dirty Gold 'Deluxe' 2013)	28	26	11	4	2	3	74
Leiyann (Rainbow Boy 2020)	4	33	3	0	0	0	40
Ill Nas X (MONTERO 2021)	16	7	11	2	2	7	45
Lizzo (Cause I Love You 2019)	0	16	1	0	0	3	20
Meshell Ndegeocello (Plantation Lullabies 1993)	15	21	4	1	1	5	47
Meshell Ndegeocello (Peace Beyond Passion 1996)	13	9	2	3	2	0	29
Frank Ocean (Blonde 2016)	11	24	11	4	0	0	50
Tyler the Creator (Flower Boy 2017)	16	14	4	7	2	4	47
Total Tallied Elements (by Theme)	209	296	103	34	18	38	698

Chapter 6 - Chapter 6 – Conclusion & Discussion

This study brought to the forefront voices within the rap, hip-hop and RnB genres which are too often left unheard from or historically ignored. The narratives these artists built within each song are imperative pieces of the landscape of their intersectional identities and struggles. Below, I discuss the study's results and connections these narratives made towards the theoretical bases of Black Feminism, Intersectionality, and critical Queer theory.

Summary

There were many interesting connections created throughout the narrative investigation of these lyrics, such as the inability for artists to disconnect their experiences related to their intersectional identities of race, gender, or sexuality. Additionally, artists were likely to speak of these experiences of oppression as linked, and frequently followed up discussion of oppression with messages and tools of resiliency. *Resiliency* as a theme, utilizing positive tools of resistance, revolution, or hope, was the most salient of all themes observed, and all artists used these depictions across each album (Table 2). In the context of the theme *Oppression*, the most salient of subthemes centered around religiously justified queerphobia and racism, also centering an important trend – the inability for artists' experiences to be divided. Rather than speak of them as separate and unrelated, artists expressed their encounters with queerphobia and racism together, revealing the multiplicity of their identities, a result consistent with the framework of Black Feminism (Frazier et. al., 2015). In contrast to previous literature on lyrical content of these genres by Hip-Hop feminists, there was a dearth of misogynistic language and anti-femininity (Table 2). While these tropes and themes still existed, they were not as prevalent as heterosexual/cisgender artists investigated previously.

Discussion

Similar to the ideas brought to light in the Combahee River Collective Statement, artists contended and expressed their difficulty of splitting their identities into pieces by refusing to do so (Frazier, et. al., 2015). Across many albums, they would often instead never speak of encounters with queerphobia in isolation from their experiences with racism, rather discussing them side-by side. This implicitly supported the idea that people are a product of their identities rather than simply a sum which can be separated, a key component of thought founding Intersectionality and as the basis of Black Feminism (Cho et. al., 2013; Frazier et. al., 2015). Rather than distinguishing their struggles with queerphobia as an issue unrelated to racism, artists spoke of how these identities intermingled and affected them in many ways.

Also, results mirrored the theoretical basis in modern forms of Hip-Hop feminism, the idea of 'Grey-Feminism' previously discussed in this paper. This theoretical basis lends explanation to the contradictory messages of both hopeful positivity towards all and the sexism/femmephobia found in some of the lyrical content. Grey-Feminism, as a concept, brings to light the idea that, while there are often messages which seem to contradict one another's messaging, this lyrical content can still hold positive revolutionary value. As a counter to modern purity politics which demand all messaging of revolutionary thought be free of any level of prejudice, Grey-Feminism gives a more forgiving lens, understanding that artists do not live in social bubbles outside of prejudice, but this should not take away value of the powerful lyrics which push for change (Clay, 2007; Durham & Cooper, 2013). These concepts were found across many of the artists who utilized sexist or femmephobic language, as these instances were often followed or occurred beside messages of *Resiliency*. Similar themes of such contradictory messaging were found readily in the analysis of past research in the field (Baker & Kimmons,

2011). However, my own sample contained differences with regards to the occurrences of misogyny/anti-femme messaging, a trend common across past analyses.

The results found in this study did not completely mirror past research, as these analyses found a lower frequency of misogyny/anti-femme messaging and Braggadocio (a subtheme of *Culture*) (Belle, 2014). However, there was still a concerning trend of the themes of sexist language, specifically occurring in albums of the rap genre. This could perhaps be indication of a need to express a certain type of masculinity which is prized in certain circles of the rap genre, as it is also found frequently in cisgender/heterosexual artists (Baker-Kimmons & McFarland, 2011 and Belle, 2014). These studies found patterns of artists attempting to build forms of masculinity external to the mainstream concepts, yet still leaning heavily upon a hegemonic gender ideology. Feminist studies on hip-hop, as an area of research, are frequently heavily saturated with investigations of sexist or femmephobic lyrical content, yet little of this element was found across the lyrical content of these artists. This commonality of past research is noted by Peoples (2008) in their foundational piece on Hip-Hop feminism, which attempts to create a form of a school of feminist thought which would shift away from this focus.

The major importance of this study's findings lies in the highly reoccurring subtheme of *Resiliency: Queer Hope*. Such an idea was repeated across nearly every album by each artist, and commonly perpetuated an idea of hope for the future, often with reference to younger queer people being able to live and celebrate their queerness in a free and safe world. This points not only to the *Resiliency* of the community, but that such messages have been in circulation in these genres since the early 1990's. As such, common claims in popular culture that queer hope and positivity in the genres of hip-hop, rap and RnB is a recent development (Smith, 2023) can be

shown as false. An additional key finding was the persistent mentions of religiously justified persecution of queer people and as justification for racism.

This trend is crucial, as it is an explicit expression of the generational trauma felt by a community, and this is supported by the same messages being repeated from the 1990's to the 2020's. From Ndegeocello's album "Peace Beyond Passion" in 1996, to the immensely popular Lil Nas X's self-titled album "MONTERO" released in 2021, artists within this demographic assert the *Oppression* they have endured over the decades as a result of such religiously oppressive ideals and history. This is a direct illustration of the findings of the effects of religious oppression of queer peoples and extreme practices such as conversion therapy found in prior research (Jones & Jones, 2022). Additionally, past literature points out queer 'collective trauma,' a concept of trauma which is felt collectively by a group who sees themselves as connected, feeling effects such as fear or anxiety because of hate crimes or hateful ideologies (Kelly et. al., 2020). This is expressed often through the lyrical content of these artists, especially in the context of religiously motivated collective trauma. Unique to the artists post-2010, however, was a concerning trend of mentioning self-harm, depression, and suicidality in explicit lyrical content across most albums. It is unknown whether this is perhaps in part due to the shift of mental health conversations becoming more open during this time, as celebrities and authority figures began to come out openly about mental health struggles (Pressbooks, 2021). Or perhaps due to faltering mental health support, as is revealed in the reports on the falling funding which occurred during the same time period (SAMHSA, n.d.). This finding parallels past research into suicidality within queer communities, as well as the theoretical concept of the 'school-to-coffin pipeline.' This pinpointing a concern of heightened and normalized suicidality for queer young

adults, created by institutionalized oppression in schooling and the stressful shift from high school into college (Haas et. al., 2011; Wozolek et. al., 2017).

Regardless, this is an extremely urgent and distressing issue which requires further investigation, as many of those who openly speak on these urges are especially high-profile artists popular with young queer people, an acutely vulnerable population. Each of these key findings offer important contributions to past research, giving insight to the concerns of a community of artists who have little representation nor attention in the academic sphere. This paper allows an audience for those who have been singing on their struggles, resiliency, and resistance for decades, and who must be given further attention moving forwards.

Strengths & Limitations

Though there are many strengths within this paper, there are limitations which I must be transparent on. One such weakness lies in the dearth of artists investigated, as it would have been preferable to include a larger quantity in order to attain further information. This is mainly due to the time constraints of my research, as this study was built within the limited timespan of a master's degree. Further, the limitations of time and availability meant that there is a somewhat lacking portion of artists during the early 1990's in the sample, largely due to economic barriers on publishing for artists during this time. A few albums were not able to be included due to a lack of access to them or limited information on the artists who created them. One limitation upon the analysis was that many of the lyrical content analyzed had to be transcribed by hand through active listening, due to a complete absence of lyrics online. This meant that portions of narratives may have been missed out on, more time needed to be taken to transcribe entire albums, or lyrics could possibly have been misheard due to human error.

This research owes many strengths to its use of an intersectional lens on the analysis, which allowed each artists' lyrical content to be investigated based on the multidimensionality of their identities. By keeping in mind each person's stated background as well as making their spoken experiences the paramount in the analyses, the narrative technique put the intersectional lens into action. This paper also holds strength in how it gives insight to a community regularly overlooked in research as well as in popular culture. This is important, as the current portrayal of queer people of color 'invading' these genres is contrary to the evidence herein – that these artists have been here since the start of the movements. Finally, the artists chosen within my sample were not limited solely to hip-hop, rap and RnB, though each person works closely to the genres, this prevented the limitation of the artists' self-expression, which is a common failing in popular culture towards artists of color. This is due to a tendency of boxing in people of color to a single genre, often of those of rap and hip-hop, rather than understanding the vastness of their expression. This piece gives incentive towards imperative policy changes and further research moving forwards.

Research & Policy Implications

All of the preceding evidence and analysis heralds a needed change in both academic research and policies to better represent an underheard demographic. The narratives and struggles identified by queer people of color in this study as important must be considered with greater importance. The repetitive connections of religiously influenced oppression, with both queerphobia as well as racism, must be further interrogated in academic research from an intersectional lens. Also, within Hip-Hop Feminist academia, the demographic of queer people needs to be included, with appropriate understanding of the multidimensional nature of individual identities. Towards policy, the repetitively mentioned themes of suicidality, self-harm

and depression raises alarm for greater attention on queer mental health. Moving forwards, programs for outreach should be offered at initiation for college freshmen new to campus, such as the Trevor Foundation, on-campus resources, and the True Colors project – all who give service to, education and advocate for queer youth. This is because the artists who mentioned such topics regularly were those not only with larger audiences, but younger queer listeners as well, many of whom are dealing with the stressful change from high school into university. This may also be a preventative measure for the ‘school-to-coffin pipeline,’ a vacuum of stress for queer youth moving into university (Wozolek et. al., 2017).

Conclusion

The investigations and results found in this paper give a perspective and voice to a demographic of artists who are too often overlooked or silenced. By offering an intersectional lens keeping in mind the multidimensional backgrounds of these artists, their experiences, struggles, and hopeful messages are given audience frequently denied to them. Moreover, the identified important themes of religiously sanctioned oppression, suicide/mental health struggles and the inseparability of racism and queerphobia, pinpoint areas which require further investigation as well as movements towards policy change. Altogether, this paper succeeds in amplifying the voices of a community given far too little audience and attention within both the academic and popular spheres. A community at the forefront of political and academic attention at this time, whose voices should be given more weight than those who attempt to speak for them.

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Appendix A - Your Appendix Title

