‘This Is How You Made Me’

The Current State of Hypermasculinity in Mainstream Rap through the Lens of Jay-Z’s Lyrics

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Abstract in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker utviklingen av hypermaskulinitet og hvordan den har blitt gjenspeilet i kommersiell amerikansk rapmusikk gjennom de siste tiår. Med hypermaskulinitet menes et overdrevent og stereotypisk tankesett rundt maskulinitet og manndom, som tradisjonelt manifesteres gjennom blant annet kvinnehat, homofobi, og glorifisering av vold. Disse tre elementene har vært hyppig representert i kommersiell hip-hop helt siden ankomsten av «gangsta-rap» på 80-tallet. De siste årene har det derimot skjedd store og fundamentale endringer i hvordan maskulinitet fremmes og bekreftes i populære raptekster, i den forstand at enkelte hypermaskuline tendenser virker å gradvis bli faset ut. I denne oppgaven sporer jeg denne utviklingen ved å se på og sammenligne tekster av artisten Jay-Z fra de tre siste tiårene som omhandler kvinner, seksuelle minoriteter og representasjoner av vold. Grunnet hans mangeårige karriere, langvarige relevans og respekterte status i kommersiell rap, fungerer han som et barometer for utviklingene i sjangeren.

Det overordnete målet er å vise, gjennom analyse av Jay-Zs sangtekster, at de hypermaskuline tendensene som tradisjonelt har vært del av kommersiell rap har endret seg i tråd med en dominerende svingning mot liberale verdier i det amerikanske «mainstream». Grunnet rap-sjangerens verdensomspennende rekkevidde og enorme popularitet, har den en mulig evne til å forme og påvirke diverse meninger og perspektiver hos millioner av mennesker. Videre er det for tiden store debatter og diskurser rundt tradisjonelle syn på kjønn, kjønnsroller, og kjønnsidentitet, og tematikken er derfor spesielt aktuell. En oversikt over hvordan en av verdens største musikksjangere forholder seg til vårtids dynamiske syn på kjønnsforhold vil kunne bidra til økt forståelse rundt sosiale endringer som forekommer i samtiden og hvordan kommersielle interesser forholder seg til disse.

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Introduction

Among recent big names in mainstream hip-hop the last couple of years we find the likes of Drake, Jack Harlow, Post Malone, Young Thug, and Lil Uzi Vert. These artists have accomplished great triumphs in their own, unique, and sometimes untraditional ways in the context of rap. Although they differ in certain respects, they all share a general deviance from the previously conventional, commercialized, and cultivated ideal of rugged and aggressive masculinity that a rapper was meant to embody during the 90s and 00s. Due to this fact, it is inconceivable to imagine them having their current level of success only a decade or two ago. Most notable, however, is the openly gay rapper Lil Nas X, who actively uses his sexual orientation as part of his public image and has achieved enormous success in an environment that has not only been traditionally dominated by heteronormative males but has also perpetuated and fostered overt homophobia. The very fact that a gay rapper can thrive in the manner he has done must be seen as an indication that there have been fundamental developments in the genre. The reality that many of today's rappers do not abide by the traditional ideals of exaggerated stereotypical masculinity, or "hypermasculinity", also supports this claim.

Against this backdrop, the present thesis sets out to illustrate how certain well-ingrained hypermasculine practices and tropes pertaining to representations and affirmations of manhood in mainstream rap have seemingly disappeared while others have persisted. These include tropes around misogyny, homophobia, and representations of violence. One way to demonstrate this evolution is to examine and analyze mainstream rap lyrics from the past three decades and compare them with more contemporary ones to assess what elements

have changed and what have remained the same. The scope of a MA thesis does not allow for a comprehensive and comparative examination across various artists and their lyrics. However, by focusing on a single rapper whose works cover multiple decades and who has consistently been at the heart of the mainstream spotlight one can use them and their evolution as a barometer for the genre as a whole. For this reason, I have selected world-renowned rapper Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter as both the subject of analysis and representative of mainstream rap throughout this project. Ultimately, I will in this thesis argue that by analyzing Jay-Z's body of work, one can see the hypermasculine tendencies that have been a staple of commercial rap for decades evolve along with American mainstream cultural values and sensibilities, essentially becoming more aligned with contemporary and mainstream views on masculinity. Due to the current prominence in public discourse of conversations around traditionally held views on gender, I believe it is important to examine and investigate how one of the most world's most consumed genres of music contributes and adapts to changes in how gender is perceived and understood.

Hypermasculinity and its Relation to Rap

The term hypermasculinity was introduced in 1984 by psychology professors Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin as part of a research article titled "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation". In their research, they identified three related components as being central to the hypermasculine mindset, namely "calloused sex attitudes towards women, a conception of violence as manly, and a view of danger as exciting" (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984, p. 151). Mosher provided a further definition of hypermasculinity in a separate paper in 1991, where he emphasized that hypermasculinity is "a disposition to engage in exaggerated sex-typed performances", essentially enacting stereotypical traits related to sex and gender to an extreme degree, often manifested through misogyny and homophobia (Mosher, 1991, p. 200.

Mosher and Sirkin also posited that one might act in a hypermasculine manner from a "desire to appear powerful and to be dominant in interactions with other men, women, and the environment" (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984, p. 151). In other words, hypermasculine males will try to assert their manhood by valuing, promoting, and participating in "dangerous risk-taking, exploitative sex, or violence" as a way of uplifting themselves while dominating others (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984, p. 152).

It is not hard to find examples of the three above-mentioned components of hypermasculine behaviors and attitudes in mainstream rap, which is the form of the genre intended for mass-consumption. Many of the most circulated, iconic, and well-known rap songs from the past decades are steeped in explicit misogyny, overt homophobia, and graphic depictions of violence, where the dominance of the rapper and his status as a superior male is portrayed as undeniable. Due to the genre's tradition with and propensity towards such content, rap has historically been the target of heavy scrutiny and criticism. Condemnation and disapproval of the genre have come most visibly, although not exclusively, from institutions and individuals outside the hip-hop community (Ogbar, 1999, p. 164). An illustrative example includes the time journalist and former TV-host Geraldo Rivera who in 2015 claimed that rap had "done more damage to black and brown people than racism in the last 10 years" (Kreps, 2015).

Similar claims and statements have been made by countless politicians and social commentators in the past decades. The tumultuous history of rap as a point of contention in American society can best be illustrated by the fact that the genre was a target in the culture wars of the 1990s, with active efforts from mainly culture-conservative individuals and organizations to ban or censor the genre (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 186). For decades, politicians, scholars, critics, and media institutions have attacked and problematized the influence of rap music, often implying that the future and well-being of both "culture" and

"morality" were being jeopardized by the mere presence of rappers in the cultural and social spaces of the nation. As part of these attacks levied by critics and politicians, rap lyrics were often described as detrimental to the very fabric of American youth due to the alleged violent, misogynistic, and morality-eroding nature of its content (Ogbar, 1999, p. 165). Although the motivation and authenticity of much of the outrage can be questioned, it is reasonable to say that the criticisms were not wholly unfounded, given that certain aspects of rap music have had tendencies to glorify violence and uncritically perpetuate misogynistic and homophobic attitudes.

Much has been written regarding the topic of the broader sense of masculinity in hip-hop, often in conjunction with oppression of marginalized groups through misogyny and homophobia. Given that hip-hop has been "identified not as one black culture among many but as the very *blackest* culture – one that provides the scale on which all the others can be evaluated" (Gilroy, 1994, p. 52), scholarship has tended to see the problematic elements related to masculinity in rap as rooted in, and a continuation of, both African American history and the broader historical view on masculinity in America. A significant example and contribution is found in the influential author and professor of race and gender studies bell hooks and her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, in which she seeks to understand, explore, explain, and contribute to the discourse of African American masculinity.

As part of this work, she looks at different elements that make up African American manhood and links these elements to important and defining historical periods and events in the U.S. history as a means of explaining their inception and development. Suffice it to say that she delivers comprehensive and compelling arguments for the idea that hypermasculinity, or "patriarchal masculinity" as she calls it (hooks, 2003, p. 2), was partially ingrained in African American men through the horrific and traumatic history of slavery. She

argues that, as slaves, Africans and African Americans witnessed and experienced a brutally violent form of masculinity at the hands of the European American slavers. Over time, the slaves became socialized in equating masculinity with domination, and internalized an understanding of manhood as hypermasculine patriarchal masculinity expressed through the violent subjugation of others.

She continues to argue that African American ideals of masculinity were increasingly directed towards encompassing a hypermasculine glorification of violence throughout the twentieth century. In short, she emphasizes that the societal expectations and perceptions of African American men as inherently violent built on centuries of racist and stereotypical depictions to a certain degree became internalized in these men, with some choosing to meet the expectations and "surrender to realities they cannot change", ultimately feeling that "if you are going to be seen as a beast, you might as well act like one" (hooks, 2003, p. 45). Furthermore, she argues that "long before any young black male acts violent he is born into a culture that condones violence as a means of social control, that identifies patriarchal masculinity by the will to do violence", essentially claiming that young African American males are socialized in a culture that believes aggression and violence to be simple means for all men to establish manhood (hooks, 2003, p. 46).

hooks draws direct lines from these historical points related to the development of African American masculinity, to the various manifestations of hypermasculinity that has been cultivated in contemporary rap music. She writes that "although it intensifies the problem of black male violence against women and children, misogynist rap did not create the problem. Patriarchy put in place the logic and patriarchal socialization that lets men take it to the level of practice", essentially arguing that the harmful masculinity traditionally represented in rap through sexist lyrics is a symptom of the internalized "patriarchal masculinity" that has been ingrained in African American men throughout African American

history (hooks, 2003, p. 57). All of this serves to demonstrate that the issue of hypermasculinity in rap is complex and multi-layered, and not as simplistic as has often been suggested in public discourse seeking to demonize the genre.

Why Jay-Z Specifically?

There are a multitude of tremendously influential and iconic mainstream rappers to pick from in order to gain an overview of the rap genre through analyses of lyrics. Artists that spring to mind include the likes of 50 Cent, 2Pac, Eminem, Snoop Dogg, Nas, The Notorious B.I.G., Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, and J. Cole. However, for a plethora of reasons, no one is a more obvious first choice than Jay-Z. One reason is the fact that his body of work includes 13 studio albums spanning three decades, beginning with the release of *Reasonable Doubt* in 1996 all the way to the critically acclaimed *4:44* in 2017. Given that I intend to investigate developments spanning a longer period of time, this sort of longevity in terms of material for analysis is immensely helpful and will allow for more accurate comparisons between different decades. There are other artists with similar or even greater catalogues in terms of quantity, such as Snoop Dogg with his 17 studio albums and Nas with his 14, but these arguably lack the same high level of sustained relevance and impact in terms of music that Jay-Z has had throughout the years and still maintains today.

This brings us to a second reason why Jay-Z is a suitable candidate for analysis, namely his influence and relevance within both the genre and the culture around mainstream rap. Not only has he produced a considerable quantity of songs during his career, but the quality and impact of his work has established him as one of the most revered and admired figures in rap. Both the fact that he has reportedly sold more than 50 million albums and 75 million singles worldwide (Jones, 2018), and has continually been praised and listed as an inspiration by some of the most prolific rappers in recent years (Taysom, 2021), speak to his

high status in space of mainstream hip-hop. Jay-Z very humbly refers to his own legendary renown and standing on the Kanye West song “Never Let Me Down” with the lines “Hov’s a living legend and I’ll tell you why/ Everybody wanna be Hov, and Hov still alive” (Kanye West, 2004), with “Hov” being one of the monikers often used to refer to himself in the third person. Furthermore, his induction into the “Rock and Roll Hall of Fame” in 2021, an honor only bestowed to a handful of rappers thus far, speaks to his cultural impact in America (Bowenbank, 2022). One can argue that there have been past rappers, and even some present ones who have had equal or higher levels of influence and import compared with Jay-Z. However, as mentioned, they are not making relevant and impactful music today, and the younger and more contemporary rappers who are currently dominating in the mainstream do not have a body of work that extends all the way back to the 90s. The key difference between Jay-Z and the other influential figures in mainstream rap, therefore, is the fact that no one can boast to have both his level of status *and* his comprehensive catalogue of classic albums. In other words, due to his longevity, sustained relevance, and influence over both hip-hop culture and newer generations of rappers, Jay-Z is in a unique position to function as a barometer for the developments in the genre in terms of how hypermasculine values and attitudes are represented.

Approach Regarding Analysis

There are two main reasons why it is worthwhile to examine, discuss, and devote an MA thesis to the evolution of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap. The first has to do with the power and reach of commercialized rap music, which has increased exponentially ever since the explosive and controversial introduction of gangsta rap in the 1980s (Chang, 2005, p. 303). In recent years hip-hop artists have consistently been among the most streamed, and the genre itself was the single most streamed in America throughout 2020 (Ingham, 2021).

Millions of people all around the world consume rap music on a daily basis, and hip-hop culture has become increasingly incorporated and ingrained in other aspects of mainstream entertainment, which ultimately gives the genre a great potential to influence the attitudes and perceptions of a mass-audiences in various ways. Anything with that sort of reach and potential sway is worthy of critical investigation.

The second reason involves the manner in which discussions and debates around traditional understandings of gender and gender relations have increasingly become part of public discourse in many parts of the world, including America. A great deal of information and awareness around the complexities of both gender identity and the nature of gender itself, whether it is biological or socially constructed, has become more prominent in recent years, and new perspectives and ideas are constantly being introduced. What has been considered conventional views and beliefs around gender are currently being questioned, and the masculinity and the strict gender roles, traits, and relations between men and women as perpetuated by mainstream rap is no exception. An examination of the traditional hypermasculinity and its developments in rap can therefore be situated and related to the broader examinations of gender currently taking place in various societies.

As stated, I intend to demonstrate, through both older and newer lyrics of Jay-Z, that the hypermasculinity inherent in mainstream rap has undergone a dramatic evolution in line with contemporary American mainstream values. Seeing as hypermasculinity can manifest in many various ways, it is not plausible to exhaustively examine every facet in a project of this scope. I have therefore chosen to limit the focus of the analyses on three main themes and tropes within the genre that embody and represent hypermasculine ideals. These are misogyny, homophobia, and portrayals of asymmetrical violence in lyrics used in a manner designed to amplify and assert an exaggerated form of masculinity. I will discuss and analyze each of these tropes in the three chapters that follow, where a selection of lyrics from Jay-Z's

entire catalogue of songs pertaining to the given theme is presented and examined. More specifically I will in each chapter analyze lyrics from the earlier parts of his career in an attempt to establish a tradition and practice of employing either misogynistic, homophobic, or violence-oriented lyrics, as well as to examine the nature of how and why these lyrics are utilized. I will then compare the nature of that practice with analysis of newer lyrics to see whether there are any substantial differences between the past and present that indicate changes in the way each individual trope operates both aesthetically and thematically.

In the fourth and final chapter, I will compare and discuss the previous chapters in light of each other and in combination with possible factors that can help explain the developments seen in terms of the three hypermasculine tropes. These factors include the presumed personal beliefs held by artists, the commercial industry behind mainstream rap, and the sensibilities of mainstream entertainment America in which rap is firmly situated. The first factor will entail a discussion on whether or not it is plausible that Jay-Z's personal experiences and views can have affected any developments seen in the various chapters. The second factor relates to the commercial and corporate aspect of mainstream rap and how these elements have possibly affected the genre in the interest of protecting and increasing the financial potential of the artform. Finally, the third element relates to the unwritten rules that govern what is and is not tolerated within the space of mainstream entertainment in America. For anyone who has paid attention to commercial hip-hop during the last decade or two, it is unquestionable that rap has continued to entrench and solidify its position in the heart of mainstream American culture, carving a larger and large space for itself. As such, the genre has gradually had to adapt in certain ways to the conventional norms that apply in the mainstream. It is reasonable to presume that if the norms governing the space of mainstream America were to change, those finding themselves situated in that space will adapt as best they can to follow suit in order to maintain their favorable position. Interestingly enough,

there appears to be a correlation between rap's increasing status within mainstream America and the growing diversity of in terms of both content and representations of masculinity in the genre, which will be discussed further in chapter four.

Chapter 1: ‘Bitches & Sisters’

Given that I am interested in the frequency, intensity, and nature of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap over the past three decades, it will be fruitful to examine lyrics from different periods pertaining to certain tropes that align with characteristics of hypermasculinity. In this chapter, I will examine misogynistic rap lyrics as one such trope. The topic of misogyny in rap has been a subject of much discussion, scrutiny, and examination since the 1980s (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 939), with interest in the matter increasing dramatically after the meteoric rise of “gangsta rap” in the late 80s (Chang, 2005, p. 327). Although the criticisms often tended to unfairly treat rap as a simplistic and monolithic genre of misogyny as well as exaggerate the frequency of misogynistic sentiments in rap songs (Boise, 2020, p. 462), there is no credible denial of a misogynistic tradition within mainstream rap over the past decades (Rose, 2008, p. 114). Moreover, contemporary discourse indicates the unfortunate fact that the tradition of misogynistic lyrics also persists in more recent rap songs (Nwoko, 2018). My goal is not, however, to argue that mainstream rap is no longer misogynistic or hypermasculine, but rather that the long-standing traditions within the genre are changing as part of the space that is mainstream culture. Seeing as rap has become “the sound of the mainstream” by dominating the space of music in American pop culture (Bruner, 2018), the genre will naturally be more incentivized to adhere to the criteria all mediums in the mainstream space must act in accordance with in order to thrive.

As stated in the introduction, due to his uncommon longevity and relevancy within the genre, Jay-Z possesses a catalogue of work uniquely suited to function as a barometer for the developments of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap. My primary analysis of lyrics will therefore be based on his songs, ranging in material from the very beginning of his career to

the present day. As such, I wish to examine two main ways in which misogynistic lyrics can manifest themselves, both exemplified in Jay-Z's lyrics. The first manifestation is that of lyrics objectifying women by either explicitly or implicitly likening them to valuable "commodities" to be conquered and owned as a way of socially dominating rival men in a bid to affirm one's own notions of masculinity through "sexual conquest" (Collins, 2004, p. 150). Lyrics of this nature tend to deprive women of their agency, relegating them to objects being used as a means of strengthening one's own masculinity while at the same time weakening that of rival men.

The second manifestation of misogyny I want to examine are lyrics that in essence vilify certain kinds of women, viewing them with contempt and making them out to be "adversaries" that must be abused, mistreated, and degraded in the pursuit of actualizing a sense of masculinity. Misogyny of this nature has manifested itself most clearly in lyrics of mainstream rap that traditionally have degraded women in a myriad of ways, either through name-calling, villainization, "slut-shaming", sexual objectification, or dehumanization to name a few. In this particular form of misogyny, women are categorized into different groups that carry varying levels of favorability in the eyes of men, with the combativeness against women being reserved towards those that are put into the less favorable groups (Rose, 2008, p. 119).

Women being objectified is, however, not a type of misogyny exclusive to hip-hop (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 940), nor is that of categorizing women into groups worthy of respect and groups worthy of abuse (Rose, 2008, p. 120). Indeed, objectification of women has for instance in America been a staple of advertising and popular culture for decades (Kitwana, 2002, p. 103). Categorization of women in America with accompanying levels of respect and contempt has also been a long-standing practice within political and religious leadership and communities, especially those of a conservative nature (Rose, 2008, p. 120).

This is evident in the way certain conservative elements of the U.S. seemingly value women based on their ability to conform to patriarchal expectations of woman- and motherhood. One could even argue that this strain of misogyny has been so ingrained in American society that hip-hop merely adopted and adapted it (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 941). The fact that the practice of categorizing women in rap lyrics is not always explicit in nature, speaks to how ingrained such categorization is, seeing as there are lyrics that implicitly refer to the system of categorization in a manner that presupposes the audience's familiarity with it.

As discussed above, respect and abuse in rap lyrics are doled out to women depending on the women's "group-belonging" or the "archetypes" of women they represent. Examples of common archetypes or categories repeatedly used in mainstream rap are those of the "mother figure", the "sister", the "housewife/partner", the "hoe", and the "bitch", with different traits and characteristics associated with the different archetypes (Rose, 2008, p. 173). Without question, the "hoe" and "bitch" archetypes have traditionally been the receivers of the most degrading abuse and the most intense contempt in mainstream rap lyrics these past decades, while the "mother figure" has been the one most highly praised and respected. This contrast in the different ways women have been viewed becomes crystal clear when juxtaposing the 2Pac songs "Dear Mama", released in 1995, and "Wonda Why They Call U Bytch", released in 1996. On "Dear Mama", 2Pac expresses nothing but admiration, love, and respect for his mother, praising her strength and endurance for managing to raise him under difficult circumstances. Similar sentiments have been expressed by other mainstream rappers when writing about women who fit the archetypical "mother figure". On "Wonda Why They Call U Bytch", however, 2Pac's tone is different, seeing how on this song he is addressing women fitting the "hoe" and "bitch" archetypes. Throughout the song, he denigrates promiscuous women for not living up to patriarchal expectations of how a woman should be and act in order to be worthy of respect. It must be said that these two songs are

from the 1990s, and although they can provide great insight into the traditions of the genre set in the past decades, they are not as suitable when examining the views being presented in a more contemporary mainstream climate. It is, however, important to be aware of the hypermasculine standards of the past so as to compare them with more contemporary ones as a means of studying potential developments regarding hypermasculinity in the genre. In the next section I will look at the practice of objectifying, categorizing, and degrading women in older rap lyrics, specifically by Jay-Z, as a way of exemplifying the certain ways misogynistic lyrics would be presented in the past. Towards the end of the chapter, I will examine more contemporary lyrics by Jay-Z with the intent of comparing these with those of the past to assess potential differences and similarities. This will hopefully provide insight into the possible developments regarding misogynistic sentiments being expressed in lyrics, which will again serve as part of the overarching goal of studying the development of hypermasculinity in the genre.

The Misogyny of Past Jay-Z

The first Jay-Z lyric to be analyzed is found in the song "The City Is Mine" from his second studio album *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* released in 1997. Although it is one of many, the lyric in question is particularly blatant with regard to misogyny. The song itself, in short, is about Jay-Z returning to assert his dominance on the rap scene after the release of his debut album *Reasonable Doubt* the year prior, and as such, the lyrics of the song are filled with braggadocios lines establishing both his superior skill as a rapper and his masculinity as a man compared to those "beneath" him. The line that speaks to the present discussion is found in the third verse of the song, when Jay-Z raps "I snatch your girl cause your arm ain't strong enough" (Jay-Z, 1997). This seemingly simple line betrays quite a bit about his misogynistic view of certain women during the early years of his career, as well as the value of dominance,

in this case physical, over other men. Furthermore, the sentiments expressed in the line, which will be discussed below, accurately represent the predominant view of women as portrayed in mainstream rap at the time of the release of "The City is Mine".

As I see it, the line can be interpreted in two ways, either literally or metaphorically. If read literally, Jay-Z appears to be physically snatching a woman away from a man, or "rival", in a manner that overpowers the man, rendering him unable to hold onto her due to his physical inferiority. In addition, the use of the word "snatch" adds a further dimension of movement or intensity to the ordeal. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the verb "snatch" as either grabbing something in "a rude or eager manner", stealing something or kidnapping someone "suddenly", or "quickly take when the chance presents itself". These definitions, with their use of "eager", "suddenly", and "quickly", carry with them a quality of intensity that leads you to almost picture Jay-Z violently pulling the girl from the weak clutches of this man that he is dominating.

The lyrics can, however, also be interpreted metaphorically. The line, with its use of the verb "snatch" as well as reference to physical arm strength, invokes images of sports that require quick movement and physical prowess, such as American football and basketball, where burly and imposing men run around and occasionally snatch the ball out of the hands of rival team members. If the line, then, is interpreted as a sports metaphor, Jay-Z and the rival male are opposing team members playing sports, and the girl in the scenario is relegated to being the ball. By making it a sports metaphor, the aggression associated with "snatching" becomes linked with the act of snatching within the sport rather than an act of physically snatching a woman. In the first interpretation one imagines an act of intense physicality being enacted towards a woman, while in the metaphorical interpretation she is a ball to be played with, making it appear more playful and fun at first glance. In this way, Jay-Z can distance himself from aggression towards women by having it be metaphorical aggression towards a

ball, while at the same time achieving the domination of the rival man, which was his intent with the line to begin with. Whether or not he physically snatches the girl, the metaphor serves to demonstrate the fact that she is now with him due to the weakness and inferiority of the other man. The argument for this being a sports metaphor is strengthened by hip-hop culture's close and intertwined relationship with American sports and the tradition of rap-artists frequently referencing elements of sports culture (Bukowski, 2008).

However, regardless of whether the line is interpreted literally or metaphorically, one cannot escape the misogynistic view being presented. In either case, the girl in the scenario has been deprived of agency; she is relegated to being a coveted object that is to be snatched from one man's possession to another's. The objectification of the girl is further enhanced by the fact that Jay-Z is simply using her to increase his own standing and domination in relation to the rival man. This exploitation is evident in the fact that he addresses the rival "losing" the girl, rather than the girl herself, indicating that the value of snatching the girl lies not in "acquiring" her in and of itself, but in showing his superiority by depriving another man of her. She is irrelevant, it is about using her to increase one's own status while at the same time diminishing that of the rival.

This view of women is also evident in Jay-Z's song "Money, Cash, Hoes" off his third studio album *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life* released in 1998. The song is a celebration of opulence and indulgence, as well as braggadocios in the sense that Jay-Z is showing off his different accomplishments and how they symbolize his superiority over other men who have not achieved similar feats. In this song, the hook consists of the line "Money, cash, hoes, money-cash-hoes" being repeated eight times. The hook, and the title itself, equates "hoes" with monetary capital, another asset often used to assert masculinity and enact dominance over those men who are financially lacking. "Money, Cash, Hoes" is a song that undoubtedly carries misogynistic sentiments. However, Jay-Z complicates things a little in the second

verse of “Money, Cash, Hoes” when he raps “I know they’re gon’ criticize the hook on this song/like I give a fuck. I’m just a crook on this song” (Jay-Z, 1998). Two things stand out here, the first being that he is self-aware enough to know what is being said in the hook is worthy of criticism, and the second is his attempt to distance himself from this criticism by stating that he is purposefully being a “crook on this song”, thus in a sense separating the content from his actual views and beliefs. Regardless, the hook perpetuates the same misogynistic sentiments expressed in the line from “The City Is Mine” discussed above, of women being objects that one can possess in order to increase one’s status as a man. By distancing or excusing himself from the criticism, Jay-Z could be attempting to appear less in line with the misogyny of rap while at the same time meeting the expectations of misogyny put upon mainstream rap-artists by both the genre and the audience that consume it. This view of women as coveted objects to be possessed by men as a means of increasing men’s status, standing, and dominance is of course not unique to rap-culture. It has, however, been one of the staples of mainstream rap music as a genre for decades.

Another and similar element has been one of dealing with women in an almost adversarial manner, where the goal is not so much to dominate other men through the possession of women, but rather to dominate women through abuse and degradation as a means of affirming and elevating one’s own manhood and thus achieving and actualizing a sense of masculinity (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 948). As discussed above, however, the abuse is not directed towards all women; just those unfortunate enough to be categorized into unfavorable groups.

A Jay-Z song that explicitly categorizes women in the manner previously discussed, is the song “Bitches & Sisters” from his 2002 album *The Blueprint 2: The gift & The Curse*. In this song, Jay-Z basically divides women into two groups and values them differently based on the groups. The term “sister”, as it appears in the title and in the lyrics of the song, is not

used to refer to a sibling, but rather to reference women who are considered "real" women in the sense that they possess characteristics and traits that are deemed good and virtuous by patriarchal standards, and thus stand as the counterparts to "bitches". In the first verse of the song, Jay-Z is addressing the women who, based on the logic of the categorization of women, fall under the category of "bitches". In this verse he gives a general idea of the kinds of behaviors the so-called "bitches" are engaging in that would lead to them be labeled as such. In the second verse Jay-Z seemingly addresses the listener as he presents a comparative analysis of the two categories "sisters" and "bitches", outlining the characteristics of women supposedly belonging in these categories by contrasting them against each other. It comes clearly across that he idealizes the "sisters" and villainizes the "bitches" as exemplified in lines such as: "Sisters will help you progress, bitches will slow you up", "Sisters work hard, bitches work your nerves", and "Sisters tell the truth, bitches tell lies" (Jay-Z, 2002).

What is interesting here is that Jay-Z's portrayal of "bitches", intentionally or not, is perpetuating stereotypical images of African America women that historically have been used to justify oppression. Sociologists Terri M. Adams and Douglas B. Fuller argue that "bitch" and "hoe", in the context of rap lyrics, are new words used to refer to old and stereotypical archetypes of African American women that long pre-date the rap-genre, specifically the "Sapphire" and the "Jezebel". In describing these older stereotypical archetypes, Adams and Fuller write that "the Sapphire ... is filled with attitude, has a fiery tongue, and she squashes the aspirations of her man or men in general", while the "Jezebel represents a loose, sexually aggressive woman" (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 945). They argue that these images are part of a larger "mythology" surrounding African American women meant to justify the centuries long oppression they have faced, and that it has historically been accepted as reality "throughout dominant American culture and literature" (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 946). Furthermore, they contend that rappers are harkening back to this stereotypical mythology in

their lyrics, albeit in more contemporary language, as a result of internalizing "these myths and stereotypes" due to "the great shaping effect the dominant culture has on all components of society" (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947). In other words, the misogyny of "bitch" and "hoe" as found in certain rap lyrics is not new, but rather new manifestations of internalized historic stereotypical misogyny targeted at African American women.

As demonstrated in songs by both 2Pac and Jay-Z, who represent opposite geographical sides of the United States, "sisters" are women to be valued, cherished, loved, and protected, whereas "bitches" are potential threats or adversaries that, if you are a "real man", are to be demeaned, manipulated, used, and discarded. If this sentiment was not expressed clearly enough by Jay-Z in "Sisters and Bitches", he makes sure to explicitly drive the point home by finishing the song with the line "I love my sisters, I don't love no bitch" (Jay-Z, 2002). Similar sentiments are also expressed in other songs by Jay-Z early in his career, such as "Can I Get A..." from the 1998 album *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life* where on the hook he raps "Can I get a fuck you/ to these bitches from all of my niggas/ who don't love hoes, they get no dough" (Jay-Z, 1998). In terms of the abuse directed towards women who are deemed to occupy the category of "bitches" and "hoes", there seems to be justification through a "they brought it on themselves" mentality. Jay-Z demonstrates a portrayal of this with the line "Sisters get respect, bitches get what they deserve" (Jay-Z, 2002), echoing the sentiments of classic "victim-blaming", where the accountability for the abuse is shifted from the aggressor to the target of the aggression. The tendency to victim-blame was much more prevalent in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, but has since become less acceptable as there has been more backlash to such tendencies and increased awareness of the problematic nature of victim-blaming.

Another aspect of the categorization and labeling of women that corroborates the justification of abuse, is the perceived nature of the categories in terms of rigidity and

mobility. With rigidity I mean the "absoluteness" of the categories and labels in the sense that the label defines a woman wholly and there is little room for nuance and complexity when it comes to the individual characters of women, at least in the general space of mainstream rap lyrics during the early 2000s. Without such a rigidity and lack of space for complexity and nuance, it would be harder to justify the abuse given to "bitches" and "hoes". This rigidity is for instance effectively exemplified in the chorus of the Dr. Dre song "Housewife", released in 1999, where the artist Kurupt raps the line "you can't make a hoe a housewife" (Dr. Dre, 1999), indicating that the categories of "hoe" and "housewife" are mutually exclusive. Jay-Z also exemplifies the same sentiment in his song "22 Two's" from his debut album *Reasonable Doubt* released in 1996, where he raps the lines "Too many bitches wanna be ladies, so if you a hoe/I'ma call you a hoe, too many bitches are shady" (Jay-Z, 1996), effectively arguing that a woman cannot ever be anything other than a "hoe" if she is already labeled one.

With mobility, in the context of categorization of women, I refer to the idea of being able to move from one category to another, which is something one would think not possible based on the two lyrics just presented above. It is interesting to note, however, that the rigidity of the labels only goes one way, in the sense that a woman can go from a "good" category to a "bad" one, but not vice versa. This "one-way street" is succinctly presented by Jay-Z in the song "Song Cry" from his classic 2001 album titled *The Blueprint*, with the lines "They say you can't turn a bad girl good/ But once a good girl's gone bad, she's gone forever" (Jay-Z, 2001). It is almost as if women become tainted if they traverse into the categories of "bitches" and "hoes", without the possibility of "redeeming" themselves back to the categories of "sisters" and "housewives". By this logic, being a "hoe" or a "bitch" is unforgivable, and one is therefore justified in abusing anyone labeled as such. It is easy to see how a view that assigns value to women based on their belonging within different categories

can be weaponized; if you find yourself in conflict with a woman, you can simply label her an unfavorable category and thus justify treating her poorly because her value has "diminished". Such weaponization of labels can be used to effectively nullify strong women that might threaten fragile notions of masculinity, thus enabling men to maintain their sense of masculinity.

Contemporary Jay-Z and his Portrayal of Women

One would be hard-pressed to find a single point in Jay-Z's body of work that marks a clear transition from "Hypermasculine Jay-Z" to "Non-Hypermasculine Jay-Z". However, if one examines his entire catalogue chronologically, one will find certain tendencies and practices appearing and disappearing over time that positions him at different points on a "Hypermasculine/Non-Hypermasculine" spectrum. The evolution and emergence of new practices are, I would argue, something one would expect to see in the work of those considered great artists, as they strive to reinvent themselves and push their respective mediums and artistic forms to new heights. In the following sections I will discuss Jay-Z's more contemporary work, mainly from his critically acclaimed 2017 album *4:44*, to trace how misogynist views change from the hypermasculine ways discussed in the sections above.

Two things stand out when comparing the lyrics on *4:44* with the lyrics on some of Jay-Z's earliest albums. First, there is an aesthetic shift in the way he refers to women throughout *4:44* when compared to, for example, *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse*. Secondly, there is a thematic shift in his lyrics when rapping about women, going from lyrics that at times express a brazen disregard and contempt, to lyrics that express a more empathic, humbler, vulnerable, and remorseful approach. Nowhere is this new approach more evident than in the song "4:44", which shares its name with the album, where Jay-Z expresses remorse for the way he has treated women, especially his wife Beyoncé. In the opening lines

of the song, Jay-Z raps “I apologize, often womanize/ Took for my child to be born, to see through a woman’s eyes” (Jay-Z, 2017), indicating that becoming a father has allowed him new perspectives on women and womanhood that he did not previously have, and that he has come to see the error of his ways, for which he apologizes. This sentiment of fatherhood having changed him is again expressed on the song “Kill Jay Z”, which is about him allowing the persona of “Jay-Z” to die along with his faults, rapping: “You had no father, you had the armor/ But you got a daughter, gotta get softer” (Jay-Z, 2017), thus showing how becoming a father has led to a certain introspection and emotional maturity. He goes on to take responsibility for his actions later in the verse when he raps “I apologize to all the women whom I toyed with your emotions/ because I was emotionless” (Jay-Z, 2017), which deviates from the tradition of “victim-blaming” discussed earlier in the chapter by assuming personal responsibility for the mistreatment of women rather than arguing that they “deserve it”. Furthermore, he goes on to acknowledge the damage and harm caused by the misogynistic and hypermasculine tendencies expressed in his older lyrics when he raps “You matured faster than me, I wasn’t ready/ So I apologize/ I seen the innocence leave your eyes/ I still mourn its death” (Jay-Z, 2017), lamenting the pain he has caused and the consequences of that pain.

There is also a thematic shift in the sense that women, as represented by lyrics on the *4:44* album, no longer are primarily portrayed as sexual objects to be owned or conquered, but instead as complex human beings with unique experiences that Jay-Z now seemingly empathizes with, and who can offer more than just sexual gratification. Jay-Z expresses this shift of “priorities”, so to speak, in “4:44” with the line “What good is a ménage à trois when you have a soulmate?” (Jay-Z, 2017), showing preference for a more emotionally fulfilling relationship over the sexual conquest he preferred on his earlier albums. There are still remnants, however, of potentially problematic views on “4:44” in the sense that the lyrics

elevate certain patriarchal expectations put upon women. One such expectation is for a woman to become a mother, which is something Jay-Z elevates and glorifies on the song "Smile". The song itself is about enjoying the present despite of a difficult past, and the celebration of motherhood is apparent with the lines "Push through the pain so we can see new life/ So all the ladies having babies, see ya sacrifice" (Jay-Z, 2017), which express admiration for women who go through the experience of giving birth. An important change on *4:44* compared to earlier albums, however, is that although Jay-Z celebrates women who live up to certain patriarchal expectations, he does not condemn or demean women who do not. The references to women are also of a more personal nature on *4:44*, with lyrics addressing both Jay-Z's wife and mother, which would make celebrations of motherhood more natural than if he was referencing women more generally throughout. Nevertheless, one cannot credibly deny there being a general shift in the way Jay-Z raps about women, which I believe is effectively demonstrated in the song "713" from the collaborative album *EVERYTHING IS LOVE* made with Beyoncé and released in 2018. On "713", Jay-Z ends the song with the lines:

> To all the good girls that love hustlers/ To the mothers that put up with us/ To all the babies that suffered 'cause of us/ We only know love because of ya/ America's a motherfucker to us, lock us up, shoot us/ Shoot our self-esteem down, we don't deserve true love/ Black queen, you rescued us, you rescued us, rescued us. (Jay-Z, 2018)

These lines acknowledge the unjust treatment and abuse often experienced by black women at the hands of black men, and express gratitude towards black women for showing black men what love is in spite of the way they have been treated.

As mentioned above, there is not only a thematic shift to be found in Jay-Z's lyrics on the *4:44* album, but also an aesthetic one in terms of the words used in relation to women.

Some of the lyrics and song-titles cited thus far have shown Jay-Z's propensity, at least in the earlier stages of his career, for using derogatory words like "bitch" and "hoe" when referring to certain women. For example, on the 2002 album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse* there are exactly 30 instances of the words "bitch" and "hoe" being used by Jay-Z himself in some form, and the count increases significantly if one includes the words being used by the other artists on the album. He has by no means been alone in this regard, given the strong tradition and prominence of using of these words in rap lyrics, as well as in a variety of other genres (Kleinman, Ezzell & Frost, 2009, p. 57).

On *4:44*, however, there is not a single occurrence of the word "hoe", and there is only one instance in which "bitch" is used, and even in that case, it is used not as a reference to a woman, but rather as part of a slang-phrase to indicate that one is present ("I´m up in this bitch"). Going from 30 cases of "bitch"/"hoe" on *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse* to a single case on *4:44* is in and of itself a considerable aesthetic shift. It is hard to imagine the disappearance of derogatory and misogynistic words on *4:44* as being coincidental, given Jay-Z's reputation and esteem as songwriter. Furthermore, the argument for intentionality is supported by the line "I'm in the skrrrt with ya – yeah right" on the song "Moonlight" (Jay-Z, 2017), which is about the repetitive nature of commercial and "mass-produced" rap lyrics. Here, Jay-Z implies that he is in a car, referred to as "skrrrt" from the sound tires on sports cars make when suddenly accelerating at high speeds. Furthermore, he indicates that he is in the car with someone's possession, implied by the slang-form "ya" of the genitive second person pronoun "your", but he does not explicitly state what or who he is in the car with because he stops himself from finishing the sentence. Through context clues and a general knowledge of how braggadocios rap lyrics function, one can reasonably assume that the line was going to finish with the word "bitch", thus indicating that Jay-Z is in the car with "your bitch", having conquered her from you. However, the line is performed with a tone and

delivery laced with a sense of irony, thus parodying the younger and less mature rap artists, including the younger Jay-Z, by looking at the dominance play of conquering "another man's woman" as something laughable and nonsensical. He ridicules this type of mentality, as well as the use of the word bitch in this context, when he interrupts himself from finishing the line with a dismissive "yeah right" at the end, marking a shift from his older lyrics where this type of behavior and language was unproblematic.

An aesthetic shift in terms of vocabulary makes sense when seen in conjunction with the thematic shift previously discussed. Seeing as the themes regarding women on *4:44* are more centered around "mothers" and "wives", as opposed to women as sexual objects or adversaries, it is not surprising that the language in the lyrics would reflect such a thematic change. This relationship between the thematic and the aesthetic makes it difficult to say anything for certain regarding changes in misogynistic attitudes based solely on aesthetic pointers; the words "bitch" and "hoe" may just as well be absent simply because he is not rapping about "bitches" and "hoes" on these songs. However, when the lack of such derogatory and misogynistic words is seen in unison with the apologetic nature of sentiments expressed in songs such as "4:44" and "Kill Jay Z", both discussed above, the case for a change in attitude becomes stronger. Regardless, whether there actually has been a change in Jay-Z's personally held beliefs and attitudes is not necessarily relevant. What is relevant, though, is that that there undeniably has been a significant decrease in explicit misogyny in Jay-Z's more contemporary albums.

Why Does Misogyny Phase Out?

There are several factors that potentially play part in effectuating the development discussed above. Melina Abdullah, a professor at California State University, lists some of these factors in her essay titled "Hip Hop's Prospects for Womanist Masculinity", where she discusses the

evolution of gender-relation in the context of rap. According to Abdullah, the prospect of an artist evolving in regard to views on gender depends, among other things, on "broader societal trends, the messages pushed by hip hop gatekeepers, how the artist views hip hop "knowledge", the artist's own personal experiences, and the relative power of the artists themselves" (Abdullah, 2011, p. 141). Furthermore, she argues that the severity of objectification and thus "mass commodification of women" (Abdullah, 2011, p. 145) is a result of the corporate takeover of hip-hop during the mid 1980s and the capitalistic priorities that intensified as a result of corporate interest in the genre (Abdullah, 2011 p. 143). With this take over, corporate interests gained, through record labels, the role of gatekeepers in terms of hip-hop artists' access to mainstream success. Although the role as gatekeepers has diminished some due to the age of internet-and-streaming, the arena of mainstream rap is still more readily accessible through corporate means and channels. Furthermore, corporations have historically shown themselves to be more than capable of objectifying and commodifying women in the pursuit of capitalist gains when it is economically sustainable and profitable. Abdullah consequently argues that a surge of misogyny in commercial and mainstream hip-hop can be observed after the corporate commercialization of rap (Abdullah, 2011, p. 142).

Corporate interests do not operate in a vacuum, however, and are greatly incentivized to appeal to the sensibilities of their consumers. I would argue that the mainstream cultural space of today is more "politically correct" than that of the past, and the commercial aspect of that space has adapted to align itself with the trends of what is considered "acceptable" and hence consumable. When it comes to misogyny and hypermasculinity, there thus appears to be more awareness and rejection of the patriarchal traditions that have inhabited various form of media in popular culture, and corporations are taking notice (McHale, 2019). Given Abdullah's premise that mainstream rap music has been, and continues to be, strongly shaped

by commercial and corporate influence, one would expect "broader societal trends" that affect corporate practices, such as those relating to gender-relations, to also affect commercial mainstream rap music in an almost chain reaction-like manner. If mainstream societal trends are moving away from traditional patriarchal and misogynistic notions of gender-relations, then commercial and mainstream hip-hop, Jay-Z included, has a great vested interest in accommodating and adhering to these new directions.

As to whether or not Jay-Z's "own personal experiences" has affected the change in misogynistic lyrics, one can only speculate. He has, as demonstrated in this chapter, attributed changes in attitudes and perspectives regarding gender and gender relations to him becoming a father and husband, but then again, the credibility and accuracy of such claims cannot be measured. What is undoubtable, however, is that Jay-Z's relative power is immense within the space of commercial and mainstream rap, and he has undoubtably had more freedom to move in the space compared to other artists who are more shackled by corporate restrictions and expectations. Even though one cannot accurately measure the degree to which this freedom has affected the changes demonstrated in this chapter, it is still important in that it allows someone like Jay-Z to potentially pave a way for more restricted artists who deviate from the hypermasculine norms of the past. In the next chapter, I will examine if the development seen in terms of misogyny in Jay-Z's lyrics also appears in relation to homophobia as a second trope of hypermasculinity.

Chapter 2: Homophobia

Much like misogyny, homophobia is a facet of hypermasculinity that has historically been a main ingredient in mainstream rap. The connection between homophobia and an exaggerated form of masculinity has been thoroughly discussed by Gregory M. Herek, a professor of psychology, who has dedicated much of his research towards the study of sexual prejudice. He argues that, historically, heterosexuality has been of vital import to traditional American notions of masculinity, and that through homophobia, men could "affirm their masculinity by rejecting men who violate the heterosexual norm" (Herek, 1988, p. 472). This is, Herek argues, particularly true of men who are prone to insecurities regarding their masculinity (Herek, 1987, p. 291). Kanye West, one of the most successful mainstream rappers of all time, echoed this sentiment in a 2005 interview where he discussed the homophobic aspects of hip-hop. In the interview, West spoke of having his masculinity questioned by fellow students in high school, which in turn led to him adopting homophobic attitudes in an attempt to distance himself from everything "non-masculine" as a way of asserting his questioned masculinity (Aderoju, 2021). This connection between affirmation of masculinity and homophobia in hip-hop is further strengthened by Tricia Rose, who writes that "Hip Hop reflects the important role that homophobia plays in defining masculinity" (Rose, 2008, p. 237). Thus, similar to the aspects of domination regarding misogyny discussed in the previous chapter, homophobia plays a part in the affirmation of masculinity in the hypermasculine mindset. This link between homophobia and traditional hypermasculinity makes homophobia a well-suited topic of investigation when examining the nature of hypermasculinity in the rap genre, seeing as how potential developments regarding homophobia may indicate a larger evolution in terms of hypermasculinity. Thus, my aim in this chapter is to examine whether there are noticeable changes in the way homophobia

manifests itself in mainstream rap, which may in turn argue for a larger evolution of hypermasculinity within the genre. In this vein, mainly through analyzing and comparing older and more contemporary Jay-Z lyrics that pertain to attitudes towards sexual minorities, I argue that the prevalence of homophobia in mainstream rap has decreased dramatically this past decade.

Marc Lamont Hill, a prominent activist and professor at Temple University, argues that rap lyrics have traditionally been "one of the most prominent and accessible sites for transmitting antigay beliefs and values within hip-hop culture" (Hill, 2009, p. 32). Furthermore, he specifically brings up rappers who have enjoyed massive mainstream success, such as Jay-Z, 50-Cent, Nas, DMX, Eminem etc., as promoters of homophobic rhetoric (Hill, 2009, p. 32). According to Hill, homophobic lyrics in the mainstream have typically been used to either disparage and ridicule gay people, making them targets of hate and using them as punchlines, or to "emasculate real and imagined enemies" by associating them with homosexuality (Hill, 2009, p. 32). As pointed out by Hill, the latter was exemplified in the highly publicized and somewhat legendary feud between rappers Jay-Z and Nas during the early 2000s (Hill, 2009, p. 38). During the feud, the artists released songs attacking each other through witty and venomous lyrics meant to ultimately discredit and dominate the other. In these songs and in a bid to elevate their own masculinity at the cost of the rival's, both Nas and Jay-Z used homophobic lyrics to humiliate and emasculate each other by claiming that the other part had engaged in homosexual activity or was secretly gay. As Hill points out, even though "either rapper likely believed the other to be gay", the effective strategy of attack by using homophobic lyrics to indicate the homosexuality of rival rappers speaks to "the inherently pejorative meaning of gay as a signifier within the hip-hop world" (Hill, 2009, p. 39).

Several scholars within hip-hop studies, including XinLing Li, Jožef Kolarič, and Matthew Oware, have attempted to examine and explain the reasons why hip-hop has historically been so permeated by homophobia. Their arguments, which are not mutually exclusive, vary in nature, and will be presented briefly here with the intent of illuminating the later discussion and analysis of Jay-Z lyrics pertaining to homophobia. In his 2019 book *"Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music: Black Gay Men Who Rap"*, Li writes about homosexuality and rap with a focus on how gay rappers have carved out a space for themselves in a homophobically hostile hip-hop world. Li essentially argues that the homophobia in hip-hop can be explained through an examination of black men's masculinity throughout African American history. He provides a thorough overview of different historical factors, including slavery, the Civil Rights movement, the church in African American communities, black nationalism etc., that have arguably impacted and shaped the dominant ideas of masculinity as held by African Americans. In short, Li argues that black masculinity to a certain extent has, emulated the heteronormativity, gender definitions, and gender-politics of the historically dominant culture in the US. As such, African American males have for centuries operated with a standard or criteria for masculinity established by white men in America; criteria which, historically, African American men have been denied fulfilling (Li, 2019, p. 19). The withholding of opportunities to affirm one's manhood led to a crisis of masculinity in African American men, where the inability to live up to ideals of masculinity left a feeling of being "unmanly, inferior, and ultimately gay" (Li, 2019, p. 20). This, in turn, led to an intensification of the pursuit of masculinity, where the goal was to conform to the model of "heterosexist family life" imposed by white American men and ultimately become "men" themselves (Li, 2019, p. 21). Although there were few available paths to masculinity, Li argues that Christianity, more than anything else, "offered African Americans the legitimate pathway to heteronormativity" and further intensified the emulation and adoption

of traditional American masculinity (Li, 2019, p. 18). There grew a need to eliminate anything that could be perceived as a detriment to the pursuit of masculinity and heteronormativity, and homophobia became a large factor in that regard.

When it comes to homophobia in hip-hop specifically, Li writes in-depth about how hip-hop culture was infiltrated and used, mainly by black nationalists like Amiri Baraka, to emasculate and eradicate those who were in opposition of the "rigidly prescribed codes of hypermasculine conduct" (Li, 2019, p. 33). The ultimate goal was, through homophobic effeminizing of others, to shape the rap audiences into hypermasculine men ready to fight back against centuries of emasculation (Li, 2019, p. 34). Whereas Li employs a focus on African American history, Jožef Kolarič emphasizes the sociocultural environment in which homophobic rap lyrics are made as a crucial contributor to homophobia in hip-hop. He does not necessarily disagree with Li. Nevertheless, he argues that the space in which homophobic rap has been made, namely American society, has a long history with prejudice against sexual minorities and unbalanced gender relations, which cannot be ignored when discussing the homophobia in hip-hop (Kolarič, 2020, p. 120). In other words, to understand the prevalence of homophobia in rap one should include the larger American historical perspective as well as the sociocultural environment in which the lyrics are made, rather than solely focus on African American history.

Finally, sociologist Matthew Oware approaches the topic of homophobia in rap differently from the previous two in the sense that he focuses more on the motivations and effects of homophobia in rap than the historical background for it. Oware argues that the hypermasculine mainstream rapper has relied on asserting his masculinity by contrasting himself with, as well as attacking and opposing, those who do not subscribe to the tenets of hypermasculinity. This primarily means means women, gay men, and men who are considered "weak" or "effeminate". By establishing these non-hypermasculine groups as the

"other", a rapper can position himself as the hypermasculine counterpart, thus affirming and projecting his sense of masculinity (Oware, 2010, p. 25). Homophobic attitudes and lyrics that either directly or indirectly disparage sexual minorities has, as such, been the primary means through which such affirmation of manhood have been done in hip-hop. In other words, by setting up homosexuals as the ultimate antithesis of masculinity, one can affirm oneself as the truly masculine through the suppression and destruction of that which is not. As discussed above, one can also weaponize this "anti-masculine nature" associated with gay men by imposing it upon rivals, consequently lowering their perceived masculinity while heightening one's own. Furthermore, Oware stresses that this "sexist and ostensibly hateful" aspect of mainstream rap is not unique to the genre, but rather draws on the "badman" trope, which is described as an unruly African American man "feared by whites and middle-class black society for his non-conformity, eschewing established rules, norms, or laws of society" (Oware, 2010, p. 25). Many mainstream rappers have had a history of embodying the "badman" through their projection as "Drug dealers, hustlers, pimps, and players" through which they "emphasize their sexual and physical prowess, fully embracing misogyny and homophobia as part of their character" (Oware, 2010, p. 25).

Although there are rap lyrics that express disgust or hatred towards homosexuality, I would argue that the vast majority of homophobic lyrics in mainstream rap, certainly in the case of Jay-Z, are of a nature that weaponizes homosexuality to attack and ridicule rival men in a bid for supreme masculinity. In the next section, I explore how early hypermasculine Jay-Z's lyrics exemplify such weaponization, while also examining if and how his more contemporary lyrics break with the tradition of homophobia in mainstream rap.

Homophobia in Jay-Z's Earlier Lyrics

Two things stick out when reading through Jay-Z's catalogue of rap lyrics. The first is how relatively infrequently homophobic slurs and the like appear in his lyrics when compared with the lyrics of other mainstream rappers like 50 Cent, DMX, and Eminem. The second is the unequivocal use of homophobic lyrics to attack other men, not on a basis of them legitimately being gay or not, but rather on these men's perceived lack of masculinity. In other words, it is very challenging to find a single example of lyrics that directly disparages gay men for being gay men. However, there are plenty of lyrics that use the ingrained notion of homosexuality as incompatible with masculinity to essentially emasculate and dismiss rival and oppositional men, which then either explicitly or implicitly positions Jay-Z as the masculine counterpart.

An example of this kind of lyric can be found in the song "Takeover" from Jay-Z's 2001 album *The Blueprint*. The theme, energy and tone on the song are rather aggressive, and mainly consists of Jay-Z asserting his dominance in the face of several on-going feuds with different rival rappers. Given this context, the song is naturally filled with violent imagery, masculine bravado, and separate verses dedicated to "dissing" the artists involved in the feuds. On the second verse of the song, dedicated to attacking one of the members of the rap-duo "Mobb Deep" named "Prodigy", with whom Jay-Z was feuding in the early 2000s, he utilizes different strategies to belittle and ultimately dismiss his rival. One of these strategies involves questioning Prodigy's masculinity, which he does when he raps the line "When I was pushing weight back in '88/ You was a ballerina, I got the pictures, I seen ya" (Jay-Z, 2001). The beginning of the line is a reference to Jay-Z's well-established history as a drug dealer, which frequently served as subject matter in his earlier lyrics. He invokes this image or persona, one of the supreme symbols of masculinity within hip-hop, to contrast his high-level masculinity with Prodigy's perceived lack of manhood for allegedly having been a

"ballerina" in the 80s. At first glance, there is no explicit homophobia in this line, but taken in context with the socio-cultural environment in which the line arose, the more problematic side becomes apparent. Jennifer Fisher, a professor of dance history and theory, has researched different aspects associated with male dancers in America. In one of her papers, she discusses male ballet dancers and how these men had to adapt and adjust in a broader culture that had characterized them as being "feminine, homosexual, wimp, spoiled, gay, dainty, fragile, weak, fluffy, woosy, prissy, artsy and sissy" (Fisher, 2007, p. 45). At a certain cultural level in the United States, these characterizations and stereotypes speak to a view of ballet dancing as something feminine and "gay", and therefore counterproductive to hypermasculine pursuits. Jay-Z uses that view on ballet to emasculate his opponent by insinuating Prodigy to be gay and, as such, not live up to the standard of masculinity expected of "real men" in both American and hip-hop culture. This use of existent homophobia in American society harkens back to Jožef Kolarič's argument discussed above regarding the role of the socio-cultural environment on homophobia in rap lyrics. Jay-Z is not "creating" homophobia with a line that insinuates another man to be gay for dancing ballet, he is simply utilizing and reflecting the already present and inherent homophobia in American culture and society to achieve his goal of dominating and destroying a rival. Although this distinction might mean little to excuse or justify the homophobia in rap, it does help to counterbalance the view of rap music as an inherently villainous and detrimental machinery from which all harmful things in society originate.

More explicit instances of homophobia in Jay-Z's lyrics are to be found in his frequent use of the homophobic slur "faggot" during the earlier parts of his career to denote those who fail to exemplify "real men". Even in these cases, however, the slur is never used exclusively to denigrate actual gay people, but rather used as a shorthand for emasculating and attacking those who do not fall in line with hypermasculine ideals. Examples of "faggot"

being used in this manner occur, among other cases, in the songs “22 Two’s” from Jay-Z’ debut album *Reasonable Doubt* released in 1996 and “Heart of the City” from his 2001 album *The Blueprint*. The first of these, “22 Two’s”, is an early display of his lyrical capabilities and his ability to play with words, where the title of the song derives from him rapping “too”, “to”, or “two” 22 times during the first verse. As for content matter, the lyrics mostly pertain to the different kinds of challenges facing an up-and-coming rapper like Jay-Z in terms of hostile and manipulative people he must navigate through, all from gold-digging women to jealous and vindictive men. In the second verse of the song, Jay-Z raps “Too many faggot niggas clocking my spending/ Exercising your gay-like minds like Richard Simmons” (Jay-Z, 1996). In the first part, he refers to men who “count other men’s pockets”, who find themselves preoccupied with counting how much money Jay-Z has, as “faggot niggas”, clearly showing his distaste with this sort of behavior. However, any man who finds himself concerned with Jay-Z’s finances, is considered a “faggot nigga” in this case, regardless of their actual sexuality. In the second part, he describes these men as having “gay-like” minds, most likely due to their perceived obsession with Jay-Z, another male, and his belongings. He also utilizes a simile when referencing Richard Simmons, a fitness advocate who frequently appeared in various exercising-shows during the 80s and 90s. Simmons’ sexuality was a topic of speculation during the 90s due to his somewhat flamboyant disposition, and by invoking a comparison between this kind of slur and Richard Simmons, Jay-Z furthers the emasculation and dismissal of these men through the use of the inherent “anti-masculine” nature of homosexuality during the 90s and early 2000s.

In “Heart of the City”, released 5 years after “22 Two’s”, Jay-Z is lamenting the downfall of influential entertainers in the hip-hop sphere, while questioning when his time will come due to different oppositional forces working against him. In the first verse, we see another example of homophobic slurs being used to describe men who are preoccupied with

Jay-Z's money in the line "Mo' money, mo' problems, gotta move carefully/ 'Cause faggots hate when you getting money like athletes" (Jay-Z, 2001). The first part of the line, an indication that his wealth has made him a target, is an homage to the song "Mo Money Mo Problems" by the late rapper Notorious B.I.G., whom Jay-Z frequently references and quotes in his lyrics. In the second part, Jay-Z once again uses "faggots" as a denominator for those who exhibit the "un-manly" behavior of finding themselves concerned with another man's money, using the connotations and homophobia associated with the slur to swiftly dismiss such men regardless of any sexual orientation. Furthermore, by adding a dimension of jealousy and envy to these men, he emasculates them even further, seeing as how from a sexist standpoint these emotions are stereotypically associated with women. This viewpoint is explicitly articulated by Jay-Z himself on the same song when he raps "Males shouldn't be jealous, that's a female trait", implying that men who feel jealous have feminine tendencies and are, therefore, not "real men". He also effectively heightens his own masculinity by likening himself with athletes, which, as discussed in the chapter regarding misogyny, are seen as being among the pinnacles of masculine men in both hip-hop and American culture. The effect of positioning himself next to athletes is similar to the "drug dealer/ballerina" dichotomy used in the line from "22 Two's", in the sense that Jay-Z utilizes the juxtaposition of "athlete/faggot" in "Heart of the City" to contrast and project a sense of superior masculinity at the cost and detriment of "lesser" men.

As shown by these examples, the homophobia of earlier Jay-Z lyrics played heavily on the homophobic sentiments and stereotypes present in society at the time to diminish the masculinity of other men in a hypermasculine bid to elevate his own masculinity. As far as actual gay people are concerned, I have found no lyrics in Jay-Z's work that speak to any targeted degradation based solely on sexual orientation. The homophobia is mainly used to target rivals, and any harm towards gay people, of which there has been plenty, can be seen

as a sort of collateral damage in a war for masculinity. In the next section, I will examine more contemporary Jay-Z lyrics that deal with issues regarding sexual minorities and homophobia, to see if there are any possible changes in attitudes and practices.

Contemporary Jay-Z and the Shift Away from Homophobia

Much like in the previous chapter regarding misogyny in Jay-Z's lyrics, there appears to be both an aesthetic and thematic shift in the way he raps about sexual minorities when going from older to newer lyrics. The aesthetic shift follows the same pattern as the one having to do with misogyny, which boils down to not using problematic words and labels. In the same way that the words "bitch"/"hoe" where not used on the 2017 album *4:44*, the word "faggot" does not appear a single time on any of Jay-Z three latest solo albums, which include the 2009 album *The Blueprint 3*, the 2013 album *Magna Carta: Holy Grail*, and the 2017 album *4:44*. The absence of homophobic slurs, however positive it may be, is not sufficient in itself to argue for a fundamental change in attitudes. However, there are other indicators, both implicit and explicit ones, of such a change present in his lyrics, which argue for a thematic shift in how homosexuality is treated in his work. One is the fact that, although Jay-Z continues to emasculate men on these newer albums, he does so without using homophobia to achieve it. In other words, he has found alternative ways of dismissing and dominating rivals, whether through monetary superiority or through promises of violence that do not explicitly build on and perpetuate societal and cultural homophobia. Such a choice could be a calculated one, motivated by the increasing intolerance for homophobic sentiments in mainstream cultural spaces, or it could be genuinely motivated by an increased awareness and sensitivity in Jay-Z towards discrimination of sexual minorities, or perhaps a combination of the two. Nevertheless, it does point towards a development of decreased homophobia in his

lyrics, which again can be an indication of a larger development regarding hypermasculinity in mainstream rap.

Furthermore, an explicit indication of a thematic shift in attitude towards homosexuality can be found in the lyrics of one of the songs on *4:44* titled “Smile”. The song itself explores how “bad times” and negative experiences can potentially become good memories that shape and influence who we are as people and how we deal and interact with the world, with Jay-Z using the different verses to look back on different parts of his life. On the very first verse of the song, Jay-Z raps about his mother and some of her experiences as a “lesbian-in-hiding” with the lines “Mama had four kids, but she’s a lesbian/ Had to pretend so long that she’s a thespian/ Had to hide in the closet, so she medicate/ Society shame and the pain was too much to take” (Jay-Z, 2017). Here, Jay-Z shows awareness of and brings attention to the different challenges and hardships facing many sexual minorities through the specific but unfortunately not unique experiences of his mother. Furthermore, he uses the subsequent lines in the verse to express his love and acceptance of her, while also advocating for the rights of gay people when he raps “Cried tears of joy when you fell in love/ Don’t matter to me if it’s a him or her/ I just wanna see you smile through all the hate/ Marie Antoinette, baby, let ‘em eat cake” (Jay-Z, 2017). The last line, regarding Marie Antoinette and cake, is in reference to a massive public and legal debate that was taking place in the U.S. during the 2010s about whether a baker, due to religious beliefs and values, could legally refuse to bake wedding cakes to gay customers (Corvino, 2017). With this context in mind, the “let ‘em eat cake” line becomes a call for allowing love to flourish, regardless of its shape and composition, without discrimination, and clearly expresses Jay-Z’s public position in this debate as one of acceptance and tolerance towards gay couples. In addition, the song ends with Jay-Z’s mother, Gloria, reading aloud a poem that beautifully articulates the harms of hiding one’s true nature and encourages all to love freely. While this poem could not be

considered Jay-Z lyrics per se, the decision to include it on the song and album, thereby promote it and its content, strengthens an argument for a pro-gay attitude, or the public projection of one in the very least, present in the more contemporary and mature Jay-Z.

By looking at Jay-Z's body of work with a focused lens on homophobia, one can consequently observe a development of going from a practice of weaponizing homophobia in order to emasculate one's enemies, to completely dropping all use of homophobic slurs and openly endorsing gay rights while displaying awareness and understanding of certain struggles experienced by marginalized sexual minorities. A change such as this might seem dramatic; however, one must keep in mind that Jay-Z has been making lyrics for over three decades, and that the changes highlighted by juxtaposing his work have not happened over night, but rather occurred over a substantial period of time with many possible factors influencing and affecting the changes. In the next section, I look at some of these factors and discuss possible reasons for why this development in terms of homophobia has taken place.

Personal, Business, or Both? Reasons to Abandon Homophobia

Trying to approach developments in the writings of a particular author or songwriter from a strict "cause-and-effect" line of thinking can be a fruitless endeavor, seeing as it at times is extremely difficult to pinpoint a singular and definitive reason for certain artistic choices and developments in literary works. However, this does not mean that one cannot engage in constructive and well-reasoned arguments in terms of factors that, with varying degrees of likelihood, can have contributed to the evolution of a writer's work. As such, any aims of explaining the developments discussed so far regarding homophobia in Jay-Z's lyrics are perhaps best achieved through identifying different factors that arguably have been instrumental to change, rather than trying to find a single and definitive root cause. One

obvious factor is the nature of Jay-Z's personal life and relationships. He has, as discussed above, expressed both love and admiration for his lesbian mother on different songs. Several studies researching attitudes towards sexual minorities have found a significant correlation between "personal contact" and tolerant attitudes in relation to the LGBT-community (Lewis, Flores, Haider-Markel, Miller, Tadlock & Taylor, 2017, p. 871), meaning that a person is more likely to hold or develop positive attitudes if they personally know or interact with sexual minorities. In the 2005 interview mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Kanye West explained how his turning point away from homophobia came when his cousin came out as gay, putting a familiar face to those West had previously denigrated (Wakefield, 2021). In other words, familiarity seems conducive to tolerance and acceptance. However, it is impossible to "measure" the degree to which Jay-Z's personal relationships, such as the one with his mother, have affected the seeming change in attitude, and an argument that relies solely on his mother's sexuality runs a risk of being too simplistic and lacking in nuance.

Changes in the sociocultural environment in which rap is made, as well as capitalistic interests, are also factors that have arguably been instrumental in affecting the way both Jay-Z and mainstream rap engage with homophobia. As previously discussed, Jožef Kolarič emphasizes the ingrained attitudes of American society from which most mainstream American rap lyrics are made as an important factor when discussing why homophobia is so prevalent in the genre (Kolarič, 2020, p. 120). Therefore, one can reasonably argue that changes in the dominant and prevailing attitudes of the sociocultural environment that is mainstream America will eventually lead to similar changes in attitudes expressed in mainstream rap. This argument is further strengthened when considering the implications of rap's current position in the U.S. as "the sound of the mainstream". In other words, mainstream rap has become increasingly more entwined with the general mainstream culture of America and has consequently found itself more sensitive to mainstream sensibilities.

There has no doubt been a general shift over the past decade in terms of how sexual minorities are represented and portrayed in various American mainstream entertainment media, such as movies, TV-shows, music, and video games, moving away from a tradition of ridicule and "othering" to one of increasing respect and acceptance. A 2017 study, conducted at the Pepperdine University in California, examined the correlation between media exposure and public attitudes towards homosexuality. The study found an increase in positive and diverse LGBT-representation in American entertainment media in recent years, as well as said medias impact in shaping positive and tolerant attitudes (Gonta, Hansen, Fagin & Fong, 2017, p. 28). This shift has had certain implications for mainstream rap, in the sense that the genre has found itself needing to adjust and not find itself in opposition of the prevailing attitudes in order to maintain its prominent position in the mainstream sphere. The awareness of these circumstances has recently been expressed in rap lyrics by J. Cole on the 2020 song "the.climb.back", where he raps the line "One phone call get you canceled like a homophobe in this PC culture" (J. Cole, 2020), bragging about his ability to end his rivals' careers, making them face the same fate of a "canceled" homophobe in this "politically correct" mainstream culture. For Jay-Z specifically, these changes in mainstream attitudes make it more difficult to rap types of lyrics he would rap in the past while still maintaining his position in the public eye as a dominant figure of the genre.

Capitalistic interest surrounding mainstream rap is another factor that in certain ways is connected to both mainstream sensibilities and the fluctuations of homophobia in rap lyrics. As the genre became increasingly commercialized during the late 90s and 00s, its ability to generate profits became a natural and leading drive for both industry gatekeepers and artists alike. The machinery surrounding the industry that is mainstream rap was happy to maintain and intensify the homophobia connected to the hypermasculine image of the mainstream rapper so long as it was profitable. In that same vein, the machinery has a vested

interest in accommodating mainstream sensibilities and attitudes, and thus the mainstream audience, in the pursuit of protecting capitalistic interests. In the current mainstream climate, homophobia can be a detriment to anyone, hip-hop artists included, seeking to profit from mainstream audiences. The recent controversy surrounding DaBaby, a mainstream rapper who received public and corporate backlash after making homophobic remarks during a live show in 2021, is a great example of how certain attitudes can lead to loss of status and revenue. As part of the backlash, DaBaby found himself losing several scheduled performances at prominent music festivals, as well as missing out on collaboration opportunities with several prominent mainstream artists who public distanced themselves from the rapper (Mullin, 2021). It is not unreasonable to assume and argue that one would not have seen the same kind of reaction, backlash, and media coverage to those same homophobic remarks had they been made in the early 2000s. As such, anyone seeking to stand in opposition of the prevailing anti-homophobic attitudes in the current climate of entertainment-America, must consider the possible monetary ramifications of doing so. Jay-Z has long developed and maintained an image as a highly competent capitalist who, through sheer determination and hard work, went from rags to riches. It is therefore not unlikely that the increasing backlash against public homophobia over the past decade has factored into his decision to refrain from using homophobic sentiments in his lyrics. It is important to stress, however, that other factors, such as his personal relationships or genuine growth towards tolerance and acceptance, may have been more prominent in pushing towards this change. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the presence of a monetary incentive as well.

Any developments regarding homophobia in mainstream spaces would arguably have implications for hypermasculinity in those same spaces as well, seeing as how homophobia can be considered a manifestation of hypermasculinity. It would seem, given that homophobia has become less profitable on a larger scale, that corporations and consumer-

based companies are distancing themselves from traditionally problematic elements, thus leaving smaller room for hypermasculinity to maneuver the way it traditionally has in mainstream culture. Seen in isolation, the shift in attitudes towards homophobia in mainstream culture could signal that hypermasculinity is no longer palatable for mainstream consumers and audiences. However, the prevalence of violence, which has traditionally been seen as a pillar of hypermasculinity, would argue indicate the opposite. In the next chapter, I examine the occurrence of violence as a manifestation of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap lyrics, and whether one can observe any changes in the frequency and manner in which violent lyrics are used, which again may reflect larger changes in terms of hypermasculinity in the genre.

Chapter 3: Violence

In the two preceding chapters we have seen a trend over time of diminishing hypermasculine tendencies relating to attitudes toward women and sexual minorities. In this chapter, I investigate the occurrence and development of the representation of violence in mainstream rap songs with particular interest in whether or not the theme of violence follows the same trend as that of misogyny and homophobia. Violence has, at least in the field of psychology, been seen as intrinsically linked with certain notions of masculinity, notions that are naturally determined by cultural context. In his definition of hypermasculinity, psychology professor Donald L. Mosher includes the practice of projecting an exaggerated form of masculinity through performative "manly actions in gender-relevant scenes that embody dispositions towards toughness, daring, virility, and violence" (Mosher, 1991, p. 200). As such, violence, much like homophobia and misogyny, makes for a suitable topic of analysis when examining the broader concept of hypermasculinity in rap. The "gender-affirming" violence of hypermasculinity can manifest differently, whether physically or psychologically, and can be targeted at different victims, such as men, women, as well as children. In this chapter the focus lies mainly on physical violence, or the threat of it, directed towards rival men, seeing as that is the most prominent way violence manifests itself in rap lyrics. However, it is still important to acknowledge that men are not the only victims of violent affirmations of exaggerated masculinity.

In the previous chapter, the socio-cultural environment in which rap lyrics are created was seen as significant when attempting to explain the occurrence of homophobia. Keeping in line with this argument, it would be productive to briefly examine that same environment and its relationship to and history with violence. In its relative short time as a nation the United States has experienced and enacted a great deal of violence, both within and outside

its borders. Professors of social work Burt Shachter and Jeffrey Seinfeld concisely summarize the integrality of violence to American history in the following:

> Recall the genocidal wars against Native Americans by the early settlers; the lawlessness of the American frontier; the violence of slavery; the fratricidal Civil War; the massacres of early union organizers; the long history of violence against racial, ethnic, and political minorities; the violence against women; the romanticizing of the gangsters of the Roaring Twenties; and the imperialistic wars against Third World countries. (Shachter & Seinfeld, 1994, p. 347)

A contemporary rewriting of the quote would likely include the violent and horrific tradition of public mass shootings that has been plaguing the U.S. in recent decades. Although "American history is characterized by its exceptional levels of violence" (Jackson, 2022, p. 11), history is not the only area in American society that has been permeated by violence. Much has been written on a "culture of violence" that seems ingrained in the very soul of the nation, and that shines through in everything from politics (Jackson, 2022, p. 18) to entertainment (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 175).

In terms of politics, Africana studies scholar Kellie Carter Jackson provides an interesting overview of how violence has equated to "political language" in American history, as a means of oppression and enacting inequality as well as of fighting oppression and inequality (Jackson, 2022, p. 13). For instance, she argues that African American abolitionists, having experiences all kinds of violence, retorted with violence with the goal of "enacting social change" by speaking to the white supremacist slavers "in their own language" (Jackson, 2022, p. 13). Another glaring example of violence in the political sphere domestically in the United States is the long history of actual and attempted assassinations of U.S. presidents. Furthermore, America's history regarding foreign policy post-WWII can, in certain cases, be reasonably categorized as fraught with militaristic and diplomatic violence.

In more recent times, as Jackson points out, the rhetoric used during Donald Trump's political rallies as part of his campaign for president was occasionally filled with calls for violence against or desires to personally physically assault attendees who were there to protest (Jackson, 2022, p. 18). Trump is not the only politician to use violent rhetoric in this manner. In 2018 the then former vice-president Joe Biden responded to a question about whether he would debate Trump by saying that he wished they were both still in high school so that he could "take him behind the gym and beat the hell out of him" (Stracqualursi, 2018). Similarly, Biden's off-script statements about Putin and the 2022 war in Ukraine is not of a deescalating and pacifist nature (Zurcher, 2022). This connection between politics and violence has not gone unnoticed by certain rappers, who frequently reference political figures associated with African American history and the often-violent struggle for equality. Both 2Pac and Kendrick Lamar, for instance, have referenced the use of violence to silence those trying to upset the political and social status quo. On the song "Changes" released in 1998 2Pac references the activist and co-founder of The Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton and his assassination when he raps "It's time to fight back, that's way Huey said/ Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead" (2Pac, 1998). In the same vein, Kendrick Lamar envisions himself getting murdered for his political activism on the political song "HiiiPoWeR" released in 2011, when he raps "I want everybody to view my autopsy/ So you can see exactly where the government had shot me/ No conspiracy, my fate is inevitable" (Kendrick Lamar, 2011). Another frequently referenced figure is Malcom X and his "by any means necessary" approach towards equal rights, often used in rap songs with strong undertones of condoning violence in the pursuit of social and political change. In other words, violence is not foreign to the sphere of American politics.

When it comes to America's affinity towards violence as entertainment, the prominent position of the "Action" genre as the domestically top grossing movie genre in 2021, with a

whopping 51% of the market shares compared to the 17% held by the "Adventure" genre at second place (The Numbers, 2022), speaks to the marketability of and proclivity towards violence in certain forms of American entertainment. TV-shows can serve as another example of violence in entertainment media, with some notable examples being *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Dexter*, *The Witcher*, all of which feature explicit violence and have enjoyed great success. It is also interesting to note that violent content is often not as severely age-restricted than other forms of controversial content in America, being mostly rated PG13 or lower. Given the international success of the mentioned shows, one can clearly argue that the love of on-screen violence is in no way unique to American audiences. Having said that, America can still arguably be considered the historically dominant supplier and originator of violent blockbuster movies and TV-shows around the world (Thompson, 2012).

Not surprisingly, violence in entertainment can also be found in American music, with gangsta rap perhaps serving as the most prominent, explicit, and controversial example with its frequent incorporation of gun-violence (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 182). However, as professor of public health science, Jeanita W. Richardson, and professor of gender studies, Kim A. Scott, argue, American music featured violence long before the emergence of gangsta rap and rap in general. They provide a brief overview of how different genres have used violent content matter, from country music to heavy metal, ultimately arguing against a view that violence in American music is "limited to rap or gangsta rap" (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 181). They claim it is a reflection of America's "culture of violence" (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 182), as well as a symptom of capitalistic priorities given the fact that "the more violent the entertainment content, the greater the appeal to youth" (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 184). Furthermore, they strengthen their argument for a "culture of violence" by looking at the discrepancy in the ways rap music has been scrutinized and demonized for its violence as

compared to other genres, indicating that the historical witch-hunt against rap and its proclivity towards violence may not actually be about violence itself, but rather about *who* is promoting the violence (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 186). Tricia Rose, one of the leading authorities within hip-hop scholarship, echoes this view, observing that "Hip hop's violence is criticized at a heightened level and on different grounds from the vast array of violent images in American culture" (Rose, 2008, p. 40). This difference in how violence is viewed based on where it originates is rather reminiscent of how the NRA (National Rifle Association), a staunch opponent of any form of gun control in the U.S., argued for gun control during the 60s when The Black Panther Party were increasingly using their legal right to arm themselves and openly carry firearms in California (Jackson, 2022, p. 17). Violence and guns are fine in America, so long as they are in the "right" hands. One could write an entire project on the topic of violence in the U.S. and its part in the very fabric of the nation; however, for this project it suffices to say that violence seems deeply ingrained in the essence of American culture.

When it comes to violence in hip-hop specifically, it must be stressed that not all sub-genres of rap are as inclined to utilize or promote violent content, and some may feature violence in a critical manner that problematizes the prominence of it. Richardson and Scott explain and contextualize the historically violent content in certain rap music as a response to and a symptom of, "the very social inadequacies that plague and are perpetuated in poor urban communities" (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 181). They argue that rappers use the "the verbalizations of violence" to "call attention to structural and cultural injustices of the larger social system in America" (Richardson & Scott, 2002, p. 188). Rose supports this sentiment, adding that one must ride a fine line between reality and fiction when discussing violent rap lyrics, writing that "Although hip hop's penchant for stories with violent elements isn't purely a matter of documentary or autobiography, these stories are deeply connected to real

social conditions and their impact on the lives of those who live them, close up" (Rose, 2008, p. 40). Furthermore, Rose goes on to emphasize the importance of context when trying to understand violence in rap, of how rap originated in "violent urban communities" that were violent due to policies and environmental forces from the mid 1970s and onwards that exacerbated each other and caused "the serious dismantling of stable communities and ... several forms of social breakdown, one of which is increased violence" (Rose, 2008, p. 42). However, she is cautious of how certain rappers, Jay-Z included, have tried to justify the exaggerated violence in their lyrics by using this context to argue that they are simply bringing mainstream awareness to the many challenging conditions in these communities to hopefully incite change. Rose argues that conditions in poor urban communities did not improve as a direct result of violent stories in rap songs, yet the lyrics became increasingly violent, which resulted in increased profits. She continues to argue that one cannot ignore the promise of increased revenue as a motivation for including violence in one's lyrics (Rose, 2008, p. 42). The profitability of violent lyrics is not surprising when considering the previous discussion on the profitability and massive success of violent movies in America. While it might be true that some rappers incorporate graphic violence in their work to genuinely bring awareness to the lived experiences of those living in detrimental circumstances, the promise of monetary success in writing violent lyrics as a way of adhering to an expectation, or a tradition, associated with the rap genre must be considered when discussing the motivations behind violent lyrics. This adherence to expectation might have become more relevant as rap music became increasingly popular and in-demand, with music gatekeepers pushing and promoting formulaic ideas of rappers and their content for maximum success.

Furthermore, one must consider the different ways in which violent lyrics may manifest, meaning that the reference to violence can vary in nature and target different kinds

of victims with different motivations in mind. For instance, the violence may be comically exaggerated or graphically realistic, and it may be directed towards men or women of varying social and political status and position, with perhaps the goal of imitating real life, ridiculing, projecting strength, garnering laughs and so on. Although much of the media and scholarly attention has been devoted to gun, gang, and drug-related violence in rap, there are a plethora of ways in which violent lyrics may be utilized. For the purposes of this project, which aims to examine the development of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap, I will focus on violence as a means of affirming hypermasculine notions of masculinity by undermining other males' masculinities while uplifting one's own. By this I have in mind lyrics that portray or entail male-on-male violence, usually from a position of unbalanced strength in the sense that the speaker possesses superior means of enacting violence upon "lesser" males. In the next section I examine forms of violence in Jay-Z lyrics spanning the earlier parts of his career.

The Violence in Jay-Z's Earlier Lyrics

With 13 studio albums as well as 4 collaborative albums, Jay-Z has touched upon many different themes and in multiple ways. It is difficult to generalize his approach in the way he incorporates, promotes, glorifies, and problematizes violence. However, I would argue that much, if not most, of the violence depicted in his songs are both reactive, in the sense that the violence is in response to real or perceived threats, and disproportionate, meaning that the violent retaliation is often overwhelmingly exaggerated and non-balanced when compared to the original offense. I will argue that the vast gap between offense and retaliation serves as a way to establish and signalize ultimate superiority over those around Jay-Z.

A good example can be found in the song "Threat" from his 2003 *The Black Album*, which functions as a verbal warning and threat of violence to all those who are seeking to dethrone or depose him. He opens the song with a little intro before the first verse which

states: “I done told you niggas 9 or 10 times, stop fuckin’ with me/ I done told you niggas, 9 albums, stop fuckin’ with me” (Jay-Z, 2003), declaring that the song is aimed at those who, from his perspective, are “fuckin’ with me”. He goes on to describe the violence that awaits his enemies in the very first lines of the first verse where he raps “Put that knife in ya, take a little bit of life from ya/ Am I frigtenin’ ya? Shall I continue?” (Jay-Z, 2003). The violence keeps escalating throughout the song, going from stabbing to gun violence with the lines “I put the gun to ya, I let it song you a song/ I let it hum to ya, the other one sing along” (Jay-Z, 2003). This escalation to more graphic violence continues, before culminating in the ultimate exaggeration of violence when he finishes the final verse with the lines “I’m especially Joe Pesci with it, friend/ I will kill you, commit suicide and kill you again” (Jay-Z, 2003), which is a reference to Joe Pesci’s character in the violent 1995 mobster movie “Casino”, which Jay-Z has referenced multiple times throughout his career. Although the song “Threat” is a warning laced with violence, Jay-Z manages to incorporate the use of clever wordplay, references, and similes when delivering these threats of violence, as exemplified by the previous line. A similar example of movie references can be found in the second verse where he raps the line “I’ll Castor Troy you/ Change your face or the bullets change all that for you” (Jay-Z, 2003), referencing the character “Castor Troy” portrayed by Nicholas Cage in the 1997 action thriller “Face/Off”, in which the plot revolves around two people exchanging faces through surgery, hence the “change your face” line. A different example can be found, again in the second verse, when he raps “Y’all niggas is targets, y’all garages for bullets/ Please don’t make me park it in your upper level/ Valet a couple strays from the .38 special” (Jay-Z, 2003), where Jay-Z equates his bullets to cars and his enemies to garages, indicating that his bullets belong inside his enemies the way cars belong in garages.

One function of the violence exemplified in the lines above, is to situate Jay-Z as the superior, masculine man due to his ability to obliterate anyone who challenges him, aligning

very much with the hypermasculine idea of violence as a means to affirm masculinity. Although the violence seen here can be argued to be reactionary, in the sense that it is in response to oppositional forces that keep "fuckin'" with him, the response is overwhelmingly devastating, mirroring in many ways the rhetoric around and contemporary understanding of America's superior military capabilities to respond with overwhelming force to any outside threat. This link is explicitly explored in the song when Jay-Z raps "Y'all wish I was frontin', I George Bush the button/ For the oil in your car, lift up your hood, nigga run it" (Jay-Z, 2003), indicating that he, much like then-president George Bush, is in a position to enact great devastation, and he is not afraid to push "the button". The line also plays on the popular notion at the time that Bush's war with Iraq was ultimately about access to oil, and that Jay-Z is not afraid to use violence in the pursuit of resources.

Another example of violence as a reaction to perceived threats to establish oneself as the superior male can be found on the hit song "99 Problems" from the same album, where in the third verse, Jay-Z raps "Now once upon a time not too long ago/ A nigga like myself had to strong-arm a hoe/ This is not a hoe in the sense of havin' a pussy/ But a pussy havin' no goddamn sense, try and push me" (Jay-Z, 2003). There are a couple of things worth unpacking here, namely the use of "hoe" in this context, as well as the justification for physical violence. At first glance, the second line seems to imply a situation in which Jay-Z exercises physical violence against a female. In the very next lines, however, he goes on to clarify that his use of "hoe" is not in reference to a woman, but rather used to reference, and effeminize, a weaker rival male. The argument that "hoe" does not refer to a woman in "99 Problems" is supported by Jay-Z himself in his 2010 book *Decoded*, where he sets out to explain and further elaborate some of his lyrics from various songs. When writing about "99 Problems" he emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings carried by words based on the observation that the same word can be read "a dozen different ways", as well as a rapper's

ability to play with these meanings by using words in different contexts (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 55). Furthermore, he explicitly states that "At no point in the song am I talking about a girl" (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 56) when discussing "99 Problems".

However, regardless of the target being female or male, there is still imagery of violence being depicted in the song. The violence is reactive in nature, in that it is in response to this weaker rival male not having any "goddamn sense" as he attempts to oppose or instigate something with Jay-Z. By having the violence be a response to a former offence, it takes on an air of justifiable self-defense, or as some logical, Newtonian outcome. The portrayal of the rival as having "no sense" further helps entrench the image of Jay-Z as the superior and most masculine male within the framework of hypermasculine notions of masculinity, seeing as it was completely illogical and senseless of the rival male to oppose him in the first place due to their apparent difference in manhood. These examples of violence as reactions to forces external to Jay-Z himself serve to both justify the violence as well as establish him as an ultra-masculine man through his capability of physically and violently dominating those who are deserving.

The last example I wish to highlight regarding such reactionary violence is the song "D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune) from his 11th studio album, *The Blueprint 3*, released in 2009. To properly analyze and discuss "D.O.A.", some background context is required. In short, the mainstream rap of the time in which the song was released was experiencing developments that many within the hip-hop community saw as rap becoming effeminate and "going soft" or deviating from certain hypermasculine traditions which were seen as integral to mainstream rap in the years prior. Part of these developments was the increasing use of "auto-tune", in large part due to the rise of mainstream artist T-Pain, to alter the voices of rappers in a more melodic direction. Critics of this trend saw it as antithetical to the gritty and rugged essence that was "real" rap, as well as antithetical to the ultra-masculine image of rappers that had

dominated the scene for so long. It was in this climate that Jay-Z released "D.O.A", with an explicit ambition of saving "real" rap by bringing about the "Death of Auto-Tune" through a song laced with hypermasculine sentiments regarding manhood and violence. The very title of the song itself can be interpreted to imply violence; auto-tune is dead, and Jay-Z killed it.

In their attempt to situate Jay-Z as the savior of traditional mainstream rap the lyrics exude hypermasculinity with countless glorifications of behaviors and ideas that subscribe to traditional hypermasculine ideals, while simultaneously criticizing, rejecting, and dominating elements in mainstream rap that seem to defy these ideals. The criticism towards the perceived "weakening" of mainstream rap, as well as the rappers responsible, can be seen in the third verse of the song where Jay-Z raps "You niggas singin' too much/ Get back to rap, you T-Pain'n' too much" (Jay-Z, 2009), effectually turning the artist T-Pain into a negatively loaded verb. Here, Jay-Z situates singing as something feminine and counterproductive to the hypermasculine image of rap, which should be gritty and aggressive. This view of singing and rap as oppositional forces is also evident in the first verse of the song when he raps "My raps don't have melodies/ This shit make niggas want go and commit felonies" (Jay-Z, 2009), boasting how his work aligns with the rugged and tough nature of, in his view, real rap. Furthermore, he continues to villainize the "foreign" and "unauthentic" elements that have seemingly infiltrated and effeminized rap, identifying the effects of this effeminizing when rapping "You niggas' jeans too tight/ Your colors too bright, your voice too light" (Jay-Z, 2009), as well as "All your lack of aggression/ Pull your skirt back down, grow a set, men" (Jay-Z, 2009). These lines clearly indicate that there is a set expectation of how one should look and act in the space of mainstream rap, an expectation built on hypermasculine notions of manhood that rejects any deviance.

These lines also make it seem like rap and its masculine nature is under attack and engaged in a war, a sentiment that is furthered when considering that the cover of the single

for the release of “D.O.A.” had the “O” in the title resemble a hand grenade. The only way to save mainstream rap’s masculinity and win the war, according to Jay-Z in “D.O.A.”, is through the ultimate virtue of hypermasculinity: violence. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lines which conclude the verses, in which Jay-Z states that the song itself is violence. This is manifested when he raps “Nigga, this shit violent/ This is death of Auto-Tune, moment of silence” (Jay-Z, 2009) at the end of the first and second verse, legitimizing the song as “real rap” by tapping into the subconscious glorification and authenticating nature of violence in traditional mainstream hip-hop. On the third verse, he slightly alters the line as such: “If you a gangsta, this is how you prove it to me/ Nigga, just get violent/ This is death of Auto-Tune, moment of silence” (Jay-Z, 2009). The change further glorifies violence as a means of authenticating one’s status as a “gangsta”, the ultimate form of gritty and rugged manhood in the hypermasculine mindset of 2000s mainstream rap. The notion of the song being violent in and of itself is explored elsewhere in the lyrics, such as in the beginning of the second verse with the lines “This ain’t a number one record/ This is practically assault with a deadly weapon” (Jay-Z, 2009), which makes sense when considering the song’s purpose of being the “Death of Auto-Tune”. In short, “D.O.A.” exemplifies hypermasculinity in mainstream rap by setting up violence as both crucial and authentic to manhood and glorifies it as a form of salvation in the face of effeminizing forces.

With these examples discussed above, we see that Jay-Z’s views on violence as they appear in work from the earlier parts of his career follow a strict adherence to hypermasculine notions of violence as integral to masculinity. In addition, violence seems to be a natural tool with which to assert one’s manhood, either through domination of other men, or through opposition to those who would seek to undermine the perceived masculinity of mainstream rap. An interesting question is of course whether there are any apparent developments in these views based on lyrics stemming from the later parts of his career.

The Persistence of Violence

When listening through Jay-Z's most recent album *4:44* released in 2017, one might get the impression that he has moved on from the practice of using violence to establish, affirm, and project masculinity, or that his attitudes and perspectives on violence might have changed given the apparent lack of the kind of violence exemplified in the previous analyses. That impression, however, only lasts until one gets to the 7th song on the album, titled "Bam". Given that the album deals with varying themes of introspection and rectification of problematic attitudes and behaviors of the past as discussed in chapter one, "Bam" serves to correct those who might mistake his vulnerability and self-criticism for weakness, as well as to boastfully remind any and all who might doubt Jay-Z's status as a legendary figure of mainstream rap. He does this very effectively by ultimately operating with two personas at the beginning of the song, where he balances the seeming paradox of being both humble and apologetic on one hand, and cocky and unapologetically dominant on the other.

The first persona is referred to by his birth name, Shawn Carter, and represents the more mature and "softer" side on the album in songs like "Smile" and "4:44". The other persona is simply called "Hov", which is short for "J-Hova", which again plays on the name Jay-Z and Jehovah to project Jay-Z's position as the "god of rap". The name "Hov" or "Hova" is well-established to those familiar with Jay-Z's work, as it has been frequently used throughout his career, especially in songs with a braggadocious nature; after all, proclaiming oneself to be the god of anything requires a certain level of confidence and ego. Given this context, one can see a clear change in personas in the very first verse on "Bam" with the lines "Fuck all this pretty Shawn Carter shit nigga, HOV/ Shawn was on that gospel shit/ I was on the total fuckin' opposite" (Jay-Z, 2017), where Jay-Z basically proclaims that this particular song is reserved for the unapologetically cocky and hypermasculine "Hov" at the cost of the introspective and humble "Shawn Carter". He therefore provides us with a great opportunity

to compare “Bam” with similar songs of the past to assess any potential developments in terms of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap over time by looking at potential similarities and discrepancies between the songs.

The first thing that stands out when comparing “Bam” to a song like “Takeover” from the previous chapter is the distinct lack in “Bam” of explicit homophobia and misogyny to assert and enhance masculinity. This difference in Jay-Z’s content matter makes sense given the developments in mainstream culture of moving away from using homophobia and misogyny in lyrics, as discussed in the previous two chapters. A common thread, however, between the two songs is the inclusion of violence against one’s enemies as symbolic of supreme manhood masculinity. On “Bam” this violence is exemplified in lines such as “Shit, stuff a million dollars in the sock drawer/ That’s a war chest in case you need your chest knocked off” and “Sometimes you need your ego, gotta remind these fools/ Who they ‘effin with, and we got FN’s too” (Jay-Z, 2017), with “FN’s” being a reference to the products of a global manufacturer of firearms. Although these lines might appear “mild” or “tame” when compared to violence themed lyrics on other songs, the fact that “Bam” stands alone on the *4:44* album in terms of this kind of content enhances its impact.

It is however not the only contemporary song where Jay-Z uses representations of violence in lyrics. On the 2021 song “Love All” by fellow mainstream rapper Drake, Jay-Z features as a guest artist and provides a verse containing themes of violence against those who threaten him and his. He opens the verse justifying the subsequent violence by establishing the existence of enemies seeking to harm him, rapping “Niggas want to kill me and y’all still with ‘em/ Nigga, y’all chill with ‘em, and y’all wonder why we not friends?” (Drake, 2021). Shortly after, he raps the lines “I could send a team to come drill you/ I got a billion or two and I know where the fuck you live” (Drake, 2021), going on the attack with threats of deadly violence with “drill” being slang for shooting someone. An interesting

observation, however, is that the violence in contemporary Jay-Z lyrics seems somewhat different than that of past lyrics. It differs in that it is not as intimate, in the sense that he seems to be outsourcing the violence to others through his accumulated wealth. This lack of intimacy becomes clear when comparing the violence of having to personally "strong-arm a hoe" on "99 Problems" in 2003, as discussed above, to hiring "a team to come drill you" on "Love All" in 2021. The ability to outsource violence through monetary means, as Gould suggests, can serve to further affirm and establish a superior masculinity by dominating rival men financially, which plays into the hypermasculine ideal of financial success and means as a traditional marker for masculinity (Gould, 1991, p. 61).

Jay-Z's entire verse in "Love All", ironically given the title of the song, is dedicated to violence and conflict, and together with "Bam", these songs indicate that violence is still a valid avenue where one can assert a hypermasculine notion of manhood in contemporary rap, whereas homophobia and misogyny seem like less valid options in today's mainstream climate. Jay-Z himself comments on this unique position of violence in present-day rap in "Love All" with the line "Only thing we 'spect now is violence" (Drake, 2021), with "'spect" being short for either "respect" or "expect" or possibly both. Intentional or not, the line adequately encapsulates the role of male-on-male violence as one of the pillars of older mainstream rap traditions that persist to this day. That is not to say that it is the only one, however, seeing as lyrics flaunting materialistic wealth and braggadocious attitudes regarding one's skills are very much still utilized. However, of the themes examined and analyzed in this project, violence is the only one to seemingly still be accepted by a mainstream audience. It is consequently necessary to examine the reasons for this endurance of male-on-male in modern rap lyrics.

Why Is Violence Tolerated?

Given that it is impossible to accurately assess the precise nature of something as intangible as a mainstream audience and its taste, it is difficult, if not impossible, to legitimately argue for the existence of a single root cause or explanation for the apparent mainstream acceptance of hypermasculine violence in rap songs. Any endeavor seeking to understand this complexity would, therefore, benefit from a multifaceted approach that examines different possible factors that may be involved. One such factor was discussed at the start of this chapter, namely the pervasiveness of violence in American culture, especially in American entertainment media. The constant stream of representations of violence in media (Melzer, Happ & Steffgen, 2010, p. 702) may have facilitated a collective numbness towards violence to the point that it occupies a unique space in the subconscious of the American mainstream and therefore is able to survive the judgement facing other aspects of hypermasculinity. In addition, a true confrontation with violence in America would likely shake the nation to its core, given that its history is built on a foundation with various layers of violence, be it slavery, civil war, foreign policy, mass-shootings and so on. A genuine and blanket condemnation of violence would, therefore, potentially crumble the American myth of the U.S. as "the greatest nation on earth". Obviously, there are examples of U.S. politicians on both sides of the American political spectrum condemning violence now and again, especially after acts of public violence like mass shootings. However, these condemnations rarely result in tangible change, in large part due to the traditional American view of violence that is perhaps best encapsulated in the conservative slogan "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun", meaning that violence is evil only when enacted by the wrong people. For better or worse, American rap is a product of America, and a meaningful confrontation with the violence in rap requires a confrontation with violence in America. Jay-Z recognizes this connection with the line "Don't forget America, this is how

you made me" (Jay-Z, 2013) on "Picasso Baby" released in 2013 before going on to describing himself violently shooting an automatic rifle.

Furthermore, rap has a unique history connected to violence in that it is a genre that arose as part of hip-hop culture to give voice to the otherwise voiceless living in troubled communities plagued with violence due to political neglect (Chang, 2005, p. 14). This history may give rap a unique license to feature violence as part of the genre. After all, many mainstream rappers have argued for the necessity of violence in their lyrics to accurately and realistically portray the challenges facing the communities they hail from (Rose, 2008, p. 42). However, it is debatable to what degree the mainstream rap of today can be said to still embody the essence of historical rap traditions and motivations in its utilization of violence as artistic expression. As Tricia Rose points out, violent rap lyrics became somewhat of a prerequisite for anyone with ambitions of becoming a prominent figure in mainstream rap in the 2000s (Rose, 2008, p. 43).

Another factor affecting the seeming lack of outrage towards violence in mainstream rap songs could be the nature of the violence that permeates hypermasculine mainstream rap lyrics, one that tends to be directed at males. Based on trends discussed thus far in this project one could argue that lyrics portraying explicit violence against women or sexual minorities would face backlash in the same way homophobic and misogynistic content does, and that the lack of such content in today's mainstream rap scene is partially due to fear of such backlash. Interestingly, when the victims of violence are heterosexual and cis-gendered men, however, the reactions lack the same level of concern and demands for justice. The pervading contemporary social and political discourse that identifies "the patriarchy" as an oppressive force places heteronormative males low on the list of those in need of social justice, which is understandable from a historical perspective. Furthermore, there might be an ingrained cultural view that heterosexual men cannot be victimized in the same manner as women or

sexual minorities. This is especially true when considering the stigma and discourse in the U.S. around for instance male victims of domestic abuse at the hands of women, and how this is often minimized and, in some cases, ridiculed (Stiles, Ortiz & Keene, 2017, p. 5).

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that violence seems to be an acceptable way to manifest hypermasculine ideals of manhood in the contemporary space of mainstream rap, a space that is otherwise experiencing pushback on other forms of hypermasculinity. In the next and final chapter of this project, I look at the developments regarding hypermasculinity discussed in the different analysis chapters and examine them together to explore what these developments can tell us about the current status of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap music.

Chapter 4: Why Hypermasculinity is Evolving

In this final chapter, I will discuss the overall findings of the analyses on Jay-Z's lyrics and their significance in terms of a general development of hypermasculine expressions of masculinity in mainstream rap. Furthermore, I aim to consider possible explanations as to why representations pertaining to ideas of hypermasculinity have changed, and continue to change, mainly with two questions in mind. The first question is related to whether the developments in attitudes and views as represented in lyrics can reasonably be argued to reflect genuine developments in the artists themselves. In other words, to what degree can one argue that rap lyrics reflect reality in terms of attitudes and perspectives as actually held by the rappers themselves. The second question relates to whether the evolution of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap can be linked to that of the contemporary American mainstream entertainment space. When looking at this space, the focus will be on the forces that would potentially effectuate and influence the kind of changes seen thus far in Jay-Z, as well as in mainstream rap's susceptibility to such influence due to the genre's entrenched position in contemporary American entertainment culture. Before such a discussion, however, it is helpful to briefly revisit the analyses of "misogyny", "homophobia", and "violence" in Jay-Z's songs.

Both misogynistic and homophobic lyrics decrease sharply from the early 2000s to the later 2010s. Not only is there a decline in such derogatory lyrics, but there are also explicit and implicit sentiments against misogyny and homophobia on Jay-Z's latest solo album *4:44*. Seeing as homophobia and misogyny are often considered markers of hypermasculinity (Mosher, 1991, p. 200), one could argue that these developments reflect a larger evolution in the genre of mainstream rap where hypermasculine practices are not as prominent. However, as demonstrated in the third chapter regarding violence in Jay-Z's

lyrics, certain manifestations of hypermasculinity are very much still present in contemporary mainstream rap. In contrast to misogyny and homophobia, there are no noteworthy or dramatic developments in lyrics depicting violence to assert dominance and establish masculinity. The fact that Jay-Z still writes lyrics that equate violence with manhood, which is one of the explicit hallmarks of hypermasculinity (Mosher, 1991, p. 200), weakens any claim seeking to argue that mainstream rap no longer perpetuates hypermasculinity. It is consequently more reasonable to argue that the hypermasculinity of mainstream rap is evolving, rather than disappearing.

The Separation Between Art and Life

Rap as a genre has had the somewhat unique quality of oftentimes being uncritically conflated with reality. Both audience and critics alike have tended to "characterize rappers as speaking entirely autobiographically" (Rose, 2008, p. 37), thus treating their stories as told through their lyrics as "statements of fact" and "truthful self-portraits" (Rose, 2008, p. 38). For a long-time listener of Jay-Z, and most mainstream rappers for that matter, it is therefore natural to assume that attitudes and opinions as expressed through the lyrics are wholly the personal attitudes and opinions of the artist. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that any development in terms of attitudes as expressed in lyrics could be, in the minds of the audience, equated to real and personal developments in the artist. In other words, if Jay-Z addresses the harms of misogyny in his lyrics, as well as reflects upon the damage he himself has caused in terms of misogynistic lyrics, it must be because he as Shawn Carter has experienced personal development and self-reflection in that regard. Following this logic, one could argue that the evolution of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap reflects personal changes in rappers' attitudes.

However, such an understanding between art and reality would be an oversimplification of a rather complex issue, and the default practice of assuming rap songs to be autobiographical and "a direct reflection of the artist who performs them" (Rose, 2008, p. 37) is a faulty one. Although it is true that the content in certain rap songs may contain elements of lived experiences, a large part of the storytelling in rap is, like in most other artistic forms and genres, the product of exaggeration, vivid imagination, and creativity. This tension between reality and fiction is perhaps best explained by Jay-Z himself as quoted in English professor Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*:

> In hip-hop, the whole "keep it real" has become more than a phrase. Scorsese and Denzel are not tied to the films they make, so people see the separation between art and life. Unfortunately, they don't see that separation between Shawn Carter and Jay-Z. As far as they're concerned, everything I talk about is happening for real. To them, at no point is it entertainment. Rappers in general, THEY ARE the guys telling their story. To me, real is just the basis for a great fantasy. Not everything I say in a song is true. I'll take a small thing from life and build upon it, and usually it becomes a fantastic story. (Jay-Z quoted in Bradley, 2009, p. 141)

Why, then, has there been such an insistence on interpreting rap songs as true reflections of real life, and what factors have contributed to blurring the lines between fiction and reality? The answer, according to Rose, is complex and hinges on both external and internal forces in relation to rap culture.

By external forces is meant the American public's fear of "black criminality and violence as particularly anxiety-producing threats to whites" and how this fear is built on a long history and tradition in America of painting "racial images of black men as "naturally" violent and criminal" (Rose, 2008, p. 38). For centuries, there have been political agendas perpetuating racially motivated policies based on this "history of association of blacks with ignorance, sexual deviance, violence, and criminality" (Rose, 2008, p. 39). In more

contemporary times, politicians and critics alike have not afforded rap the same separation between art and life that is given other forms of art and entertainment mediums (Rose, 2008, p. 38). Instead, there has been a habit of framing rap as reality and another manifestation of the stereotypical, false, and racist image of the black man as dangerous, effectively weaponizing the genre in the eyes of the public to further political and cultural interests. In other words, it has been easy to equate elements of rap with portrayals of reality, because much of the content in the lyrics align with, and has been distorted by, a history of negative stereotypes associated with African American men.

However, the conflation between rap lyrics and real-life has not solely been brought about by those outside of hip-hop, as it has also actively been fostered by internal forces through both "rappers' own investment in perpetuating the idea that everything they say is true to their life experience ... and the genre's investment in the pretense of no pretense" (Rose, 2008, p. 38). When Jay-Z, as quoted above, makes it appear as though the listener is responsible for equating rap with reality, he is only telling half the truth. The other half is the fact that the rap industry has had a vested interest in, and profited immensely from, maintaining the illusion that rappers are simply "keeping it real", and that nothing about them, from their stories to their image, is fictitious. The delusory semblance of authenticity achieved from fronting the idea that the lyrics are autobiographical became a form of precious capital that increased an artist's credibility, of which any rapper aspiring to reach the upper echelon of fortune and fame was deeply dependent on (Rose, 2008, p. 136). As Rose puts it, "Keeping it real has become a genre convention as much as a form of personal storytelling" (Rose, 2008, p. 136). It has also become integral to the formula used by the music industry as part of the process of creating, promoting, and capitalizing off mainstream rappers. As for Jay-Z, it is rather ironic that he expresses grievance over not being afforded the same separation between art and life as is given to those in the movie-industry, while

simultaneously making statements like “This ain’t a movie, dawg!” (Jay-Z, 2003) on the song “Public Service Announcement” from the 2003 *The Black Album.* His proclamation that his songs are not products of “make-believe”, feeds into the misconception of mistaking rap lyrics as real life, a misconception he himself seems annoyed with.

As Rose further says, maintaining the illusion of rap as autobiographical has served as a broad defense for the less savory and oft criticized elements of mainstream rap’s content, “no matter how manufactured, invented, distorted, or insanely stereotypical it may be” (Rose, 2008, p. 137). By arguing that rappers are simply sharing their lived experience, one can justify the content by arguing that these songs help spread awareness of various problems and difficulties plaguing certain communities in America in the hopes of effecting positive change in the long term. While this argument might hold true for some rappers, it is doubtful that it applies to all, especially when considering the monetary gains to be had by sticking to the genre convention and expectation of “keeping it real” (Rose, 2008, p. 136). In addition, maintaining a perception of rappers as storytellers relaying authentic, true, and autobiographical stories from a disenfranchised perspective in American society, allows the industry around the genre to continue to accumulate profits while skirting valid criticisms “for their role in reducing and narrowing the stories told by the same young people they claim to represent” (Rose, 2008, p. 137). A facade of authenticity has, therefore, been highly valued within the framework of mainstream rap, and there have been great monetary incentives to perpetuate the idea of rap lyrics as a window into reality.

While Rose emphasizes the cultural, political, and corporate elements surrounding the blurry lines between fact and fiction in mainstream rap, scholar of race and popular culture Adam Bradley focuses more on how rappers contribute to this blurring of the lines through the artistic and technical choices when creating their lyrics. In *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, he operates with the idea that “Every rap song is a poem waiting to be

performed" (Bradley, 2009, p. xiii), and he accordingly views, analyzes, and discusses rap lyrics through a lens of analytical terminology and literary theory reserved for traditional poetry. As for the relationship between reality and fiction, Bradley touches upon this in chapter five of the book, which deals with storytelling in rap. He opens the chapter by echoing the sentiment of authenticity as granting "considerable weight when it comes to an MC's social capital" while it also has "less to do with the craft of writing great rhymes or telling good stories" (Bradley, 2009, p. 134). Essentially, he emphasizes a rapper's need to seem fully grounded and oriented in reality, while simultaneously relying on their imagination to tell stories. Furthermore, he views this symbiosis of reality and fiction as a strong suit of the genre, arguing that the true artistic beauty of rap unfolds to us only when we "acknowledge rap as a kind of performance art, a blend of fact and fantasy, narrative and drama expressed in storytelling" (Bradley, 2009, p. 137).

As for how rappers achieve an autobiographical feel to their fantasy-laced stories, and actively contribute to dissolving the separation between rap and reality, Bradley argues that this is due to how "voice", defined as "the perspective poet's take in relation to their audience" (Bradley, 2009, p. 137), is utilized in the genre. When discussing rap's use of voice, he relies on T.S. Eliot and his distinction between three different voices used in poetic narrative. Eliot is in that context quoted as follows in relation to the topic of poetic voice:

> The first is the poet talking to himself – or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (T.S. Eliot quoted in Bradley, 2009, p. 137-138)

Bradley points out that the second and third voices presented by T.S. Eliot, the narrative and dramatic voices respectively, are quite frequently employed by rappers. The narrative voice is used when the rapper wishes to directly address the audience from an apparent place of reality, whereas the dramatic voice is used by "the persona of a constructed character to address an audience", thus incorporating elements of fantasy (Bradley, 2009, p. 138). Furthermore, these two voices often intertwine in the rap genre, fusing the "intimacy of the narrative voice with the imaginative freedom of the dramatic" (Bradley, 2009, p. 138), making it difficult for audiences to tell them apart and differentiate between the different poetic voices of a given rapper. It is in this entangled use of poetic voice that rappers manage to keep the level of authenticity required to succeed in the genre while at the same time telling exaggerated and fantasy-infused stories. Mainstream rap has found tremendous success in this mixing of narrative and dramatic voice, but it has also suffered social and political costs (Bradley, 2009, p. 138). By this is meant that the distortion of reality and fiction has contributed to perpetuating negative and stereotypical images of black men in America by presenting exaggerated and fantastical stories violence, crime, and sexism as projections of reality.

It is true, as Jay-Z points out, that few people associate Denzel Washington or Martin Scorsese with the art that they make, but neither of them operate within an artform that is incentivized to present fiction as reality and actively tear down the separation between art and life in the mind of the audience the way rap does. Thus, when considering the nuances of authenticity and the supposed autobiographical nature, an understanding of rap as a true reflection of reality is too simplistic. Therefore, any argument seeking to claim that hypermasculinity in mainstream rap has evolved due to the personal growth and evolution of the artists on a basis that rap is genuinely autobiographical is somewhat weakened. It may very well be true that Jay-Z has evolved lyrically beyond the point of using misogynistic and

homophobic lyrics as a means of asserting masculinity due to personal growth and increased empathy. However, the genre of rap and its commercialized motives of mutilating and twisting reality and fiction muddles any claim that hinges solely on the content of rap lyrics; are Jay-Z's lyrics expressing remorse and empathy as part of reality, or are they products of a carefully calculated fantasy? Then again, one can ask oneself if the initial misogyny and homophobia were even real in the first place, or if they were just part of a strategically curated image meant to succeed in the space of early 2000s commercial and mainstream rap. Considering the difficulty of asserting a clear separation between imagination and reality in commercialized rap, it may consequently be more productive to explain the evolution of hypermasculinity in the genre by examining the social political nature of the mainstream entertainment space in which rap is situated.

Mainstream Entertainment and Social Politics

The word "mainstream" is defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as "the prevailing trend of opinion, fashion, society, etc." when used as a noun, and "belonging to or characteristic of an established tradition, field of activity, etc.; conventional" as an adjective. In everyday discourse, the adjective form is often used to express that one is talking about the most conventional and heavily consumed form of a product or thing. The word can also carry negative or unfavorable connotations in certain settings, in the sense that certain "mainstream" products can be perceived as watered-down and bland in their attempt to appeal to as many people as possible. After all, mass appeal in an individual-centered society and culture can be viewed as counterproductive to the desire of being "unique" and "one of a kind", and it is not unusual to hear people proclaim a dislike for certain forms of entertainment simply due to their being considered "mainstream". Furthermore, the word has also been negatively charged in certain political circles in America, on both sides of the

political spectrum, with an active distrust for “mainstream media” as spewers of “fake news” working in the interest of maintaining the status quo of the political elite.

In the present MA thesis, however, the term has simply been used to denote both the most consumed, popular, and conventional forms of rap music, as well as the many outlets that make up the “mainstream entertainment spaces” in which various media of entertainment is readily distributed and made available for mass consumption. Rap’s influence in the mainstream of American entertainment is undeniable when considering the status and popularity of not only the music, but the artists as well. In 2020, “R&B/Hip-Hop” was the most streamed genre in the U.S. in terms of on-demand audio streams with 30.7%, followed by “Rock” at second place with 16.3% of streams (Ingham, 2021). In early 2022, artists like Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Eminem, 50 Cent, Kendrick Lamar, and Mary J. Blige, all of them major mainstream figures in hip-hop, headlined the half-time show during Superbowl LVI, which amassed over 103 million American viewers (Gough, 2022). This sort of prominent position in entertainment America carries with it both favorable and unfavorable implications. Some arguably favorable ones include monetary opportunities, fame and social status, cultural influence, and the like, which can serve as highly motivating incentives to do what is necessary to keep one’s position in the mainstream. Some unfavorable implications might include increased political and social scrutiny and criticism, of which the rap genre has experienced plenty, due to the potential reach and influence over large portions of the population. Another possible one is restrictions to the freedom of artistic expression through a sense of having to stay within the accepted political and ideological beliefs and norms of the mainstream entertainment space. In other words, being “the sound of the mainstream” might be extremely lucrative, both financially and culturally, so long as one conforms to the unwritten rules of conduct within mainstream entertainment America.

These rules are prone to change over time, however, and one might see reflections of these changes in any entertainment medium that wishes to retain their popularity. A demonstrative example of this is found in how, over these past two decades, overtly homophobic content in mainstream entertainment has become increasingly less tolerated (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2017, p. 12). Not only has overt homophobia become less accepted, but there has also been an increase in positive depictions of sexual minorities in mainstream American media to the point of such representation being called the "new mainstream", "suggesting inclusion of the LGB community is now considered the norm for television" (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2017, p. 20). That is not to say that there are no longer any problematic forms of homophobia in American public discourse, only that clear and overt expressions of it are "no longer allowed without some level of reproach" (Teal & Conover-Williams, 2017, p. 23). A similar development has occurred in mainstream hip-hop, as discussed in chapter two, in the sense that overt homophobia is met with potentially debilitating backlash that can halt otherwise promising careers. Furthermore, awareness and condemnation of sexism has also increased in the past decade, marked most notably by the "MeToo"-movement, which rapidly spread on social media in 2017 and sought a reckoning with sexual harassment and assault in all manner of parts in society, the mainstream entertainment industry included (Ng, 2020, p. 623). The developments in terms of homophobia and sexism arguably reflect a larger, decades-long trend of popular entertainment culture aligning itself with, or striving to be perceived as aligning itself with, liberal and political left-leaning values. There appears to have been an intensification of this trend during the past 5-6 years with growing public awareness and discourse around ways in which certain aspects of American popular culture has been problematic, which in turn has led to growing conservative pushback against the perceived "tyranny" and "oppression" of political correctness. The term "cancel culture", which denotes the recent climate in where it

has become custom to withdraw “any kind of support ... for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective” (Ng, 2020, p. 623), has become a hot topic issue in this liberal vs. conservative culture clash.

It is in this climate and period of increased orientation towards more tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive values, whether genuine or optical, that hypermasculinity in mainstream rap has evolved in a manner that attempts to align with contemporary mainstream cultural lines. Therefore, it is fruitful to examine and understand the nature of this increasing focus on political correctness and social justice. In an article titled “Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?”, political scientist and Harvard University professor of Comparative Politics, Pippa Norris, argues that parts of the emergence of “cancel culture” can be explained in a congruence with certain analytical theories and perspectives. Although the article focuses primarily on “cancel culture”, her discussion is nevertheless useful when examining the broader overall leanings towards liberal values in mainstream cultural America. Of the different factors Norris discussed and highlighted, the two referred to as “Modernization theories of Cultural Change” and “Group Communications” are the most relevant and helpful in trying to understand the shift in American public opinion these last decades towards a more “socially liberal and progressive direction” (Norris, 2021, p. 9).

The first factor relies on “modernization theory”, which argues that whether “the dominant moral culture in any society reflects conservative or liberal values” hinges on if it is “systematically associated with long-term processes of societal modernization and cultural change” (Norris, 2021, p. 9). Norris emphasizes a cornucopia of “cross-national and time-series survey data” collected from surveys “conducted in more than 100 societies during the last four decades”, which point to the observation that “conservative values usually persist as the majority view of social morality in many poorer developing countries” (Norris, 2021, p.

9). In other words, the less modernized a society is in terms of industrialized development, the more likely it is to subscribe to and abide by "a range of traditional attitudes, beliefs, and values toward social and moral issues" (Norris, 2021, p. 9). This adherence to tradition regarding social morality includes "approving of the strict division of sex roles for women and men, the importance of binary gender identities and traditional forms of sexual behavior" and "disapproval of homosexuality and transgender lifestyles and LGBTQ rights" (Norris, 2021, p. 9). In the same vein, there have also been evidence showing the inverse, namely that "public opinion on a wide range of issues has gradually shifted in a more socially liberal and progressive direction to become the majority view in public opinion in many affluent post-industrial societies" (Norris, 2021, p. 9). These liberal views have typically manifested in ways that are "more favorable toward LGBTQ rights and fluid gender and sexual identities ... and support for principles of gender equality, ethnic diversity, climate change, and racial justice" (Norris, 2021, p. 9). Modernization theory argues that "progressive liberal values have gradually risen in popularity since the 1960s and 1970s to become mainstream beliefs today" in highly industrialized societies as a result of "long-term processes of demographic turnover and growing levels of college education" (Norris, 2021, p. 9). Given the fact that the U.S. can be considered an affluent post-industrial society, this premise would help explain why conventional American entertainment culture has become increasingly liberal in recent decades in terms of, among other things, LGBTQ representation and gender equality.

It is rather interesting to note how the hypermasculinity in Jay-Z's lyrics appear to have evolved in accordance with Norris' definition of "liberal values", which include favorable views on LGBTQ rights and gender equality. Equally interesting is how Norris' definition does not mention pacifism as part of the cultural shift toward liberal values. Accordingly, as seen in the analysis from the previous chapters, there have been no substantial changes regarding violence in Jay-Z's lyrics. Furthermore, there have been

noticeable developments in mainstream culture regarding both views on the LGBTQ-community and women's rights, as exemplified by the increase of LGBTQ representation in entertainment and by the massive impact of the "MeToo"-movement, but there has been no such public reckoning with regards to violence. It is true that the sweeping Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 following the death of George Floyd included outrage against police brutality and violence, but the issue of violence enacted by the police is not solely about the violence in and of itself, but one heavily influenced itself by racial elements and the power-imbalance involved. In addition, outrage could reasonably be expected in public situations where violence is motivated by homophobia or misogyny, however, such outrage would most likely be directed at the homophobic or misogynistic aspect, rather than the violence in and of itself. It would therefore appear that, in the current climate, misogyny and homophobia are conventionally considered unacceptable, whereas violence not tangled by other problematic elements is accepted. With basis in the analyses in the preceding chapters one could then argue that elements of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap have evolved in order to stay in alignment with the cultural shift towards liberal views in mainstream entertainment America. Furthermore, one could argue that depictions of violence against rival males have persisted in Jay-Z's lyrics because that form of violence is still tolerated by the mainstream audiences.

The second factor discussed by Norris, namely "Group Communications", can be seen in tandem with modernization theory to help explain why certain hypermasculine tendencies in mainstream rap songs have evolved to comply with the liberal values described above. In essence, Norris emphasizes that the dominant moral values in a society are reinforced by people either withholding their dissenting opinions or simply conforming to the conventional way of thinking. She argues this by drawing on Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's concept of the "spiral of silence", which suggests that "on moral issues where the balance of opinion is deeply divided within a group .... those holding what are seen as minority views ...

are predicted to be more reluctant to express their attitudes and beliefs" due to fear of facing social isolation for "violating prevalent group norms" (Norris, 2021, p. 8). Furthermore, Norris also points out that caution about expressing non-conventional opinions "can be expected to be strongest on controversial, sensitive, and polarizing topics, such as those concerning issues of sex and sexuality, gender identity, and sexism, racism, and ethnic or religious identities." (Norris, 2021, p. 8). Due to the lack of voices that conflict with the dominant line of thinking, "support for what is perceived to be the majority view appears stronger and more publicly visible in deliberative discussions" (Norris, 2021, p. 8). This further solidifies the dominant view as the mainstream one, which might again increase the fear of expressing sentiments that do not conform with the mainstream.

If we understand the American mainstream entertainment space and its audience as a culture that has increasingly emphasized a liberal view on social and moral issues, according to the premise of modernization theory, the entities that operate within that space have a great interest in either complying and conforming to that liberal view, or in the very least *appear* to do so. In other words, it is reasonable to argue that overt misogyny and homophobia in Jay-Z's lyrics have declined these recent years as part of mainstream rap's fear of losing its prominent position in mainstream America.

Conclusion

Rap music has, ever since the meteoric rise of gangsta rap in the 80s, been associated with all manner of degeneracy in public discourse. Politicians and social commentators alike have, often disingenuously, attempted to paint rap as a threat to the moral fabric of society, claiming that it encourages a range of criminal activity and general lawlessness. Although much of this kind of criticism has been levied with ulterior motives, it cannot be denied that the genre has provided plenty of material worthy of criticism. Various subgenres of rap, including gangsta rap and mainstream rap, have traditionally perpetuated and profited off of a hypermasculine perspective on manhood that essentially strives to affirm masculinity through the abuse and domination of marginalized groups. This assertion of manhood has perhaps most explicitly manifested through overt sexism, homophobia, excessive flaunting of material wealth, and depictions of various types of violence.

In this MA thesis I have attempted to demonstrate how the representations of hypermasculinity in mainstream rap has evolved in recent years. Mainly, I have done so by analyzing and comparing older and more recent lyrics by Jay-Z pertaining to themes of sexism, homophobia, and violence, and effectively using him as a barometer for the hypermasculine tendencies within the genre. Jay-Z was an obvious choice when considering candidates for analysis, mainly due to his unique longevity and sustained relevance in mainstream rap, as well as his vast catalogue of albums. The very fact that he has remained in the spotlight of mainstream rap for so long speaks to his ability to adapt and keep up with the developments within the space.

Through analysis of material from the earlier parts of his career, it is evident that there exists a firmly established praxis around the use of misogynistic, homophobic, and violence-oriented lyrics. The majority of such lyrics are used in a way that effectively elevate him and

his image at the cost of women, sexual minorities, and "inferior" men. It is important to stress, however, that these types of lyrics were both made in, and influenced by, an existing culture of misogyny, homophobia, and glorification of violence in America. In addition, the music industry cultivated and demanded a certain image of rappers as tough, rugged, and sexually aggressive men that did not abide by politically correct standards of behavior.

By comparing his past practices with his more recent work, with particular emphasis on the album *4:44*, it becomes clear that there have been substantial developments in terms of his artistic approach to themes about women and sexual minorities. The overt homophobia and misogyny of his past songs are more or less non-existent in his recent material. Instead, there are occasional lyrics that explicitly seek to make amends for his past transgressions and abuse of marginalized groups. This same sort of development cannot be seen in regard to lyrics depicting violence, however. Both on *4:44* and on songs released as recently as 2021, Jay-Z still raps about violently dominating rival males in a bid for supreme masculinity, and violence as a theme therefore continues to be an avenue in which hypermasculinity can manifest in mainstream rap.

That evolution of hypermasculinity, where misogynistic and homophobic elements seem to phase out while representations of violence remain, is not coincidental. Rather, it appears to align with a decades-long cultural shift that has taken place in mainstream entertainment America, where the balance in opinion has increasingly become more liberal regarding certain moral and social issues. As part of this shift, overt abuse and degradation of marginalized groups is not tolerated, whereas, interestingly, violence in and of itself still seems acceptable by mainstream audiences. Due to the prominent, and therefore lucrative, position the rap-genre holds in mainstream America, there is a great interest in retaining that position. With this in mind, it is reasonable to argue that mainstream rap, as represented here by Jay-Z, has adapted to accommodate the dominant sensibilities and values of the

entertainment culture in the U.S. in order to not be shunned from the mainstream arena. This has consequently been done by dropping the elements that are not tolerated, while retaining the ones that are.

The hypermasculine representation of violence and the apparent tolerance for it is a rather complicated issue that is without a doubt intrinsically tied to a broader "culture of violence" in America, which is so thoroughly and systemically ingrained into the fiber of the nation. It is important, however, to stress that the tolerance only extends to violent content that is not tarnished with other problematic elements. Representations of violence interlaced with homophobia or misogyny is typically met with backlash, whereas depictions of violence as enacted by and against heteronormative men is tolerated. From an outside perspective, systematic changes on an incredible and nearly unfathomable scale are required to untangle the complex relationship between American culture and violence, and only time will tell if the trope of violence in American entertainment, as seen in American movies for instance, will meet the same fate as homophobia and misogyny.

Further research on the evolving nature of hypermasculinity might center on a broader selection of current artists within mainstream rap to investigate whether they follow the same pattern as Jay-Z. Interestingly, Kendrick Lamar released a new album a week before the deadline of this thesis, titled *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*. On a preliminary listen, the album seems to deal with issues of homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and sexual abuse in a progressive manner that would lend itself very well to examination in light of the findings presented here. Alternatively, one could also point the lens toward the perspectives of female and LGBTQ rappers within the mainstream arena and examine how they have dealt with the hypermasculine tradition in rap and contributed to its evolution. Furthermore, the nature of mainstream America and the mechanisms around how certain things are and are not allowed could be a focus of research that would naturally build on and contribute to the

understandings developed in this thesis. Such a focus would be particularly interesting in the present moment with the ever-increasing divide in the U.S. between liberals and conservatives. In particular, the tendencies to seek out and stick with media that both echo and reinforce existing views, values, and attitudes makes one wonder if the future will bring with it two distinct “mainstreams”, one liberal and the other conservative.

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