

“I Never Hesitated”: A Quare Analysis of Rap Non-Binary Identity in Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* Interview

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On July 16, 2022, Grammy-nominated, Philadelphia rapper Symere “Lil Uzi Vert” Woods trended online after quietly changing their Instagram bio pronouns from he/him to they/them; the action prompted fans and media outlets to believe the rapper had seemingly come out as non-binary (Draughorne). “Nonbinary” is an umbrella term within a broad spectrum of gender diversity, covers many identities (e.g., a-gender, bi-gender, post-gender, gender-queer, and gender fluid), and indicates an overall nonconformity to gender stereotypes (Vijlbrief et al.; Green and Maurer; Richards et al.). Occurring two days after International Non-Binary People’s Day (July 14), Lil Uzi Vert’s pronoun update ignited a slew of mixed reactions on social media, with some praising Lil Uzi Vert for presumably coming out as non-binary and other fans threatening them to change their pronouns back to he/him or risk losing their loyalty and musical support (Keith). The rapper’s problematic past also resurged in public discussions, as critics revisited their felony assault of ex-girlfriend Brittany Byrd, prior transphobic lyrics in their 2019 single “That’s a Rack,” and alleged Satan-worshipping musical themes and symbolisms (Johan).

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Despite being referenced as “officially the best non-binary rapper of all time” and a “representative of the LGBTQ+ community” by online fans, Lil Uzi Vert offered no public confirmation of a non-binary identity or statement regarding the pronoun change, rejected comment offers from media publications, and simply responded to a tweet posted by rapper Noah “Yeat” Smith with “Yo Yeat” when Yeat tweeted “Yo they” on July 17, 2022 (Draughorne). As an artist, Lil Uzi Vert combines androgynous fashion, imageries, and alter egos with facial piercings, eccentric hairstyles, and a melodic approach to rap music to cultivate media spectacles and public attention. Their music draws on emo, punk rock, Atlanta, Georgia trap, and Chicago, Illinois drill rap subgenre influences. Though Lil Uzi Vert fuses their visual imagery and musical selections with androgynous, genre-bending themes, lyrically, their music dually upholds rap’s normative ethos of cisgender identities, heteronormativity, misogyny, sexism, and violence towards women and LGBTQ+ communities while exploring darker themes of deception, drug addiction, loneliness, and loss of identity (Williams; Smiley).

Therefore, Lil Uzi Vert’s reticence to confirm a non-binary identity or explain their pronoun change caused many to speculate if the action was simply a public relations tactic to generate media coverage, troll fans, and promote their “surprise” SoundCloud exclusive extended play (EP), *Red & White* (Chudy). The EP was released shortly following media coverage of their Instagram pronoun update. Yet, their silence drew attention to an important fact that pronouns cannot be bijectively mapped to gender, for not all people who use they/them pronouns are non-binary, and not all non-binary people use they/them pronouns (Clarke). Still, the rapper’s pronouns change queered hip-hop’s privileging of cisgender, heteronormative, gender binaries and pronouns while opening discourses on non-binary hip-hop representations in popular culture.

After nearly a year of silence, fans and spectators alike were delighted when German magazine *032c* announced Lil Uzi Vert discussed their adopting of non-binary pronouns in a June 2023-released, Summer 2023, magazine series titled, “Culture Crisis: Therapies for the Confused.” Lil Uzi Vert was certainly not the first nor only popular musician to change their pronouns or come out as non-binary in recent years (e.g., Janelle Monáe, Halsey, Demi Lovato, Kehlani, Sam Smith), yet their *032c* interview served as a watershed moment for non-binary representations in hip-hop. Rarely had a non-binary rapper or one who publicly changed their pronouns from he/him to they/them attained Lil Uzi Vert’s rap commercial success and visibility. To date, Lil Uzi Vert has sold over 43

million records worldwide with two *Billboard 200* number-one albums and remains a profitable commodity in global popular music and rap (“Lil Uzi Vert Chart History”).

Rap remains an impoverished site for cultural exemplars of the racial, gendered, and sexual diversity that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) and non-binary rappers represent (Rabaka). Queerness is not associated with rap’s performative brand of Black heterosexual, misogynistic, violent masculinity. Throughout hip-hop’s fifty-year history, Black LGBTQ+ rappers faced industry discrimination and a presumed glass ceiling in the heteropatriarchal markets of hip-hop and rap music (Coleman and Cobb). Over the past twenty years, digital media increasingly permitted LGBTQ+ artists to circulate their music outside mainstream record labels, build global audiences independently, and attain major record label deals (Smalls, “Queer Hip-Hop”). While there exist noteworthy stories of LGBTQ+ artists earning rap success, most of those rappers have identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or queer, not non-binary or transgender. Although the term “LGBTQ+” represents an oppressed group of people based on sexual or gender identities, grouping these identities often undermines significant differences among them and implies an equity that does not exist for non-binary and transgender people (Meyer; Rodríguez Rust). Such factors are highly significant when considering Lil Uzi Vert’s pronoun change, non-binary identity, and *032c* interview discourses.

There is a dearth of literature on the unique experiences of Black non-binary rap artists. This article redressed that lamentable scholarly shortcoming, for Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview offered insight into the intersectional experiences of a commercially successful, Black non-binary rapper. Recognizing such factors, the current study conducted a critical discourse analysis of Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c Magazine* interview to answer the following research question: How does Lil Uzi Vert use the *032c* interview to discuss their pronoun change decision and identity as a non-binary person and rapper? Framed by E. Patrick Johnson’s queer studies and Shanté Smalls’s hip-hop queer aesthetics theoretical frameworks in *Hip-Hop Heresies*, the authors examined Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview to interrogate their intersectional articulations of being Black, non-binary, and a rapper in a music genre hardcoded with gender binarism, heteropatriarchal misogyny, and queerphobia.

Quare Studies and Hip-Hop's Queer Aesthetics

E. Patrick Johnson conceptualized quare studies to question the whiteness of mainstream queer theory and investigate LGBTQ+ people of color queer identities. As noted by Gloria Anzaldúa, the term “queer” has homogenized all “queer” people irrespective of class, gender, nation, or racial differences, while erasing multiple differences among queer people of color. Acknowledging intersectional voids, quare studies is concerned with the multiple oppressive systems impacting racialized queer communities and the complex intersections of racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) embedded in the material realities of LGBTQ+ people of color (Johnson). It also gives attention to the racialization of the bodies, experiences, and knowledge of non-binary people, transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (Johnson).

Queer theory privileges white queerness to group all queer people as one (Anzaldúa). In addition, queer theory does not typically locate Blackness as queer when placed within American white, cisgender, hetero-patriarchal power structural contexts (Keeling). In *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling noted Black people are queer because of the relationship that Blackness and queerness share with American iconography. In this context, Blackness exists outside the parameters of whiteness and is deemed queer based on historic racial categorizations in globalizing capitalism and colonial narratives about the deviance of Black bodies (Keeling; Patil). Thus, Blackness is queer because it shifts and challenges material sociopolitical processes (Keeling).

One source of such shifting and challenging is the convergence of Blackness, sound, film, art, and musical cultures like hip-hop. Hip-hop is equally located outside of queerness and whiteness. As a counter-public sphere, its historical origins are rooted in 1970s postindustrial politics that economically marginalized and diminished social services in New York City for impoverished Black and Brown populations (Pough). From these political, material, and social conditions, hip-hop culture emerged as an alternative identity formation for African American and Afro-Caribbean youth that served to challenge the greater public sphere using body, technology, poetry, art, and oral history (Rose). Hip-hop artists reproduce narratives of heterosexuality, sexism, and homophobia that affirm that hip-hop's authenticity relies on Black cisgender, heterosexual, hypermasculine men (Smalls, “Queer Hip-Hop”).

Queerness is seen as counter to “authentic” hip-hop and the “authentic” rap performer, and its “authentic Blackness” is “linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations” and “the imperialism of heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia” (Yep and Elia 31). From this perspective, Keeling’s theorizing of Blackness and Black artistic cultures as queer is appropriate for an examination of Lil Uzi Vert’s discourses as a Black non-binary rapper because Black artists must operate inside of, outside of, and in opposition to a commodified, predominately white-owned entertainment industry that does not privilege Black non-binary hip-hop artists.

Acknowledging these industry politics, Shanté Smalls advanced queer aesthetics as a theoretical framework to examine the “productive tensions aesthetics introduces when paired with a Black artistic form like hip-hop” (*Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). From their perspective, queer aesthetics indexed “a propagative slippage between racial, sexual, and gender subject positions” that “sometimes cohered to already-in-place categories” and at other times yielded “less stable or less recognizable categories that lacked or evaded value as imposed by the state or the marketplace” (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). This queer aesthetics, whether conjoined with Black LGBTQ+ and non-binary bodies, “produced visual and sonic Black performing subjects who experimented with staid notions of bodily fungibility” and leveraged queer aesthetics as a normative category to assert their queer identities (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). Queer aesthetics and the use of quare studies are necessary when Black queer rap artists disrupt gender, racial, and sexual identities that hinge on the existence of whiteness and binary notions of existence (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies*). These theoretical frameworks aided the researchers in analyzing the queer temporality that foregrounded and underscored Black queer people and queer moments like Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview discussions of non-binarism.

Non-Binary Gender Representations in Popular Culture, Music, and Rap

The history of non-binary gender representations in American popular culture is too vast to discuss comprehensively in this work, for non-binary media visibility includes self-identified non-binary people and content as well as media actors and content that are “read” as non-binary by non-binary fans and communities (McNabb). The visibility of non-binary people in popular culture remains a

contention point. While gender minorities have always called for more representation, in legacy media, the presence of non-binary people remains largely unacknowledged despite a longstanding presence of self-identified, non-binary celebrity figures and non-binary-related themes across all mass media genres and platforms (Erzepski). However, in recent years, non-binary celebrities and public figures achieved heightened popularity and visibility in popular culture (e.g., Asia Kate Dillon, Emma D'Arcy, Demi Lovato, JD Samson, Sam Smith, Janelle Monáe, Timothy LeDuc, Vico Ortiz), assisting in the presentation of gender diversity to global audiences and increasing representation (Willans).

Examining non-binary gender identities in popular culture, Charles McNabb noted three contributing factors to the increased visibility of non-binary gender identities in mass media and popular culture:

First, the Internet and social media in particular have extended the reach and impact of content dissemination. Second, greater numbers of nonbinary people are coming out, and in many cases, they are coming out at younger ages than previous generations. Finally, several celebrities have allied themselves with nonbinary politics or come out as nonbinary themselves. (55)

Non-binary identities are not new phenomena, yet the actual terminology as well as “coming out” as a non-binary person are still relatively new in Western popular culture and society (Yeadon-Lee). Increasingly, non-binary celebrities leverage the power of Internet and social media platforms to publicly express their gender identities to fans and followers before engaging media outlets for formal interviews. When celebrities come out online as non-binary, their narratives spark online trending topic discussions, mass media coverage and public interest, and integral societal discussions beyond the traditional gender system and hegemonic, mediated representations of gender (Willans). Further, they immediately draw attention and education to expansive forms of gender and sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the public sphere (Martinez). Such discourses reveal how the celebrity is often a sign that embodies unique meanings for the majoritarian public, which “represent typical ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking in contemporary society that have been socially, culturally, and historically constructed” (Dyer 15-6). Under this prism, non-binary celebrities “articulate what it means to be a human being in contemporary society” (Dyer 7) and serve as “embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation” (Dyer 18).

Non-binary celebrities circulate as core textual fabrics on which non-binary identities become legible as recognizable subject positions within popular culture and society (Villarreal), yet they still face a difficult conundrum from industry peers and publics. On one hand, their online narratives create a zeitgeist within which society begins to not only acknowledge non-binary people's identities, but also to attempt to understand their complexities (Fiani and Han). On the other hand, gender non-binary celebrities (and non-celebrities) experience discrimination, intentional invalidation of their gender identities, misgendering, online harassment, sexuality questioning, stereotyping, and other forms of inequality in their attempts to navigate industry-specific politics and social perils related to a stigmatized gender identity (Davenport; Dev et al.). Emblematic of the challenges facing non-binary celebrities is Demi Lovato, who publicly readopted she/her pronouns in 2023 after announcing she was non-binary on Instagram in 2021 and detailed the social challenges of being a non-binary public figure (Irvin, "Janelle Monáe Explains"). The singer explained the decision in a 2023 *GQ Hype Spain* interview, "I constantly had to educate people and explain why I identified with those pronouns. It was absolutely exhausting" (Irvin, "Janelle Monáe Explains").

Nonetheless, non-binary celebrity coming out narratives still serve "as a biographical device to establish their public personae (or public facing identity) and self-brand, to build solidarity and trust with followers, and to set up a viable narrative canvas" (Abidin 615). Their discourses illustrate the ways in which the Internet operates as a safe space for non-binary celebrity and non-celebrity populations to disrupt and challenge gender binaries, create open spaces for non-binary media discourses and representations, and advance counternarratives about non-binary gender identity experiences and social stigmas (Paradis). Recognizing such factors, it is important to situate Lil Uzi Vert's online declaration of non-binary pronouns, non-binary identity, and *032c* interview discourses within the contexts of prior non-binary musician representations in popular music and rap.

Gender nonconformity is common in music, as musicians employ androgyny, camp sensibilities (e.g., parodic characters, ironic humor, extravagant aestheticism, and theatricality), and in some cases, cosplay and cross-dressing to gain algorithmic visibility on digital media, fans, commercial success, and sustained public interest (Figueroa). In popular music, musicians, like David Bowie, Mick Jagger, and Prince, transgressed gender through androgynous style

choices, adoption of several personas, and the inclusion of gender-fluid and non-binary themes in their music (McNabb). Although these artists did not identify as non-binary, there exists a lineage of popular musicians who self-identified as non-binary and utilized media interviews and social media platforms to share their experiences. For example, British singer Sam Smith came out as “non-binary genderqueer” in a 2019 interview with actress Jameela Jamil (Moore). When asked about the reasoning behind their decision, Smith declared:

When I saw the words “non-binary” and “genderqueer” and I read into it and I heard this people speaking, I was like “Fuck, that’s me.” Non-binary genderqueer is that you do not identify in a gender. You are a mixture of different things, you are your own special creation. That’s how I take it.

(Moore)

Other popular non-binary musicians include Gerald Way of My Chemical Romance, G-Flip, Halsey, Kehlani, King Princess, Miley Cyrus, and Shamir to name a few. Hip-hop has also witnessed its fair share of non-binary artists. Non-binary rappers—such as Angel Haze, M(x) Blouse, Mykki Blanco, and Princess Nokia—advanced musical themes and rap identities outside of privileged gender binary expressions in the genre, yet their visibility rarely crossed over to mass audiences and were confined to underground audiences at best (Amber; McNabb). The relegation of non-binary rap artists to underground markets is reflective of popular music and rap’s longstanding complicated relationship with queerness and the limited spaces for Black queer bodies in their mainstream mediums (Taylor).

Perhaps the most prominent non-binary hip-hop musician is rapper and singer Janelle Monáe. On January 10, 2020, Monáe tweeted the hashtag #IAmNonBinary, and like Lil Uzi Vert’s Instagram pronoun change, sparked non-binary identity allegations and trended across social media platforms (Schild). After a year of subtle interview mentions about the tweet and public speculation, Monáe came out as non-binary on the Facebook series *Red Table Talk*, stating, “I’m non-binary, so I just don’t see myself, solely...I feel like God is so much bigger than the ‘he’ or the ‘she.’ And if I am from God, I am everything” (Street). Since coming out as non-binary, Monáe interviewed with various media platforms (e.g., *The Breakfast Club*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*), sharing their experiences as a Black non-binary person, discussing pronoun preferences, and dispelling social stigmas about non-binary populations (Irvin, “Demi Lovato”).

Based on this history of non-binary musician representations, Lil Uzi Vert's use of social media to publicly adopt non-binary pronouns and discuss them in the *032c* interview bear significance for three reasons. First, like other high-profile, non-binary musicians (i.e., Demi Lovato, Janelle Monáe, Sam Smith), Lil Uzi Vert announced their adoption of non-binary pronouns first online before deciding to self-identify (or not self-identify) as non-binary in a highly anticipated media interview. Second, LGBTQ+ celebrities (e.g., Caitlyn Jenner, David Bowie, Ellen DeGeneres, Frank Ocean, Janis Ian) historically utilized media interviews as rhetorical tools to come out, clarify gender and sexual identities to the public, offer humanizing stories of LGBTQ+ lived experiences, and cultivate favorable attitudes towards non-celebrity LGBTQ+ individuals and issues (Miller and Behm-Morawitz). Third, Lil Uzi Vert operates in a music genre hardcoded with gender binarism, heteropatriarchal misogyny, and queerphobia. When a rapper comes out as LGBTQ+ in any identity form, it bears sharp consequences, for queerness undermines the level of authenticity, street credibility, and model of cisgender, heteropatriarchal masculinity needed to attain success in hip-hop and rap (Shimeles; Coleman and Cobb). Thus, their decision to confirm (or deny) a non-binary identity in *032c* signals a turning point in the rapper's career and begets substantial consequences for future musical successes. This trifecta warrants the academic investigation of Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* interview as a case study in non-binary identity formation in hip-hop culture and a climactic catalyst for future mainstream discussions and representations of non-binary rappers.

Methodology

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* magazine interview was undertaken to address this research question: How does Lil Uzi Vert use the *032c* interview to discuss their pronoun change decision and identity as a non-binary person and rapper? As a form of discourse analysis, CDA recognizes the power of language and how it can contribute to oppression and be used for liberation (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse*). Further, it allows for the study of how individuals "present themselves, manage their relationships, assign responsibility and blame, create organizations, enact culture, persuade others, and make sense of social members' ongoing interactional practices" (Tracy 734). Thus, its approach is characterized by a realist social ontology, which regards both

abstract social structures and concrete social events as parts of social reality (Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis”). From this perspective, CDA analysts provide a dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, the relationship between discourse and prominent social events (e.g., Lil Uzi Vert’s non-binary pronoun adoption on Instagram and the *032c* interview), and how discourse reconstructs social life in processes of social change (Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis”). This was a key benefit to this research, as it considered the impacts of Lil Uzi Vert’s interview discourses on current and future representations of non-binary rappers in rap music.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedure. The researchers obtained Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview directly from the magazine’s Summer 2023 issue titled “Culture Crisis: Therapies for the Confused,” which contained the full interview transcription. A data collection sheet was created, and researchers noted specific ideas, stories, and statements that coincided with Lil Uzi Vert’s discussions of their non-binary pronoun adoption decision, potential identity as a Black non-binary person, any music industry or societal challenges facing them as a non-binary rapper, and references to LGBTQ+ and non-binary social issues in rap and society. Once data were collected, the researchers used a qualitative inductive thematic analysis to discover themes in the interview, which enabled researchers to pinpoint dominant themes to describe the phenomenon under study. The researchers employed Fereday and Muir-Cochrane’s (2006) six-step process for conducting thematic analysis, which requires the use of an inductive mode of analyzing data. Per their thematic analysis process, the researcher: 1) developed a data collection sheet; 2) tested the applicability of the data collection sheet to the phenomenon under investigation; 3) summarized the collected data and identified emerging initial themes; 4) collected and organized data into categories; 5) connected the data and identified themes among the categories; and 6) corroborated and legitimized the coded themes to identify findings and draw conclusions. (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane)

Findings

“Uzi is a Cartoon of Themselves”: Lil Uzi Vert’s Pre-Interview Framing by *032c*. Conducted in a Brooklyn, New York photography studio, the twenty-nine-question interview, led by Stephanie Perez, prefaced with an analysis of Lil Uzi Vert’s popular culture and rap legacy, which prompted an investigation

by the researchers. Lil Uzi Vert's 032c interview chronicled the rapper's career and journey to publicly proclaiming a non-binary identity while offering keen insight into their views on addiction struggles, artistic banditry in the entertainment industry, prior rap deaths, and the politics of being Black, non-binary, and a rock-inspired maverick in rap. Authored by Stephanie Perez, the preface advanced numerous descriptors (e.g., "formidable player in mainstream hip-hop," "oracle in youth culture," self-proclaimed rock star) and narratives concerning the rapper's image (e.g., eccentric designer clothing, makeup, scar, and tattoos), speaking voice (e.g., "melodic tone, percussive cadence, and staccato interjections"), connections to SoundCloud rap and deceased SoundCloud rappers (e.g., Lil Peep, Juice WRLD, and XXXTentacion), and "uncanny ability to anticipate what's next in music, dance, and fashion" in popular culture (112).

Specifically, Perez framed Lil Uzi Vert as an "oracle in youth culture" and calculatedly linked them to "Gen Z," a term used to describe Americans born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock). Citing Gen Z's popular signifiers (e.g., *Adult Swim* cartoons, anime, emo-rap, pop-punk, and "hodge-podge, maximalist outfits"), the interviewer painted Lil Uzi Vert as a trailblazer whose rap and rock star persona incorporated elements of animation, gender-fluid aesthetics and expressions, and Gen Z cultural trends in their artistic, popular culture, and visual appeals to youth audiences. The interviewer noted:

Although Uzi's love of anime and Adult Swim has long inspired the artist's visuals, I realized, after spending time in their presence, that they are more than just a fan of animation: Uzi is a cartoon of themselves. (Perez 112)

Perez's framing of Lil Uzi Vert with Gen Z and animation was significant given their artistic interests, age and gender identities, and rap status for two reasons. First, the Pew Research Center named Gen Z (formally Generation Z) as the most diverse generation of Americans to date in terms of LGBTQ+ identity and the shifting of gender norms, with sixteen percent of Gen Zers identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community and increasingly, outside of the man/woman binary (Dimock; Eldridge). Alison Eldridge also declared more than half of Gen Zers believe public forms and profiles should allow for sex or gender options other than "man" and "woman." Second, animation remains a popular media consumption trend among Gen Z, as they are more likely than prior generations to watch anime and cartoons due to the anime genre's comparative willingness to tackle taboo topics and feature LGBT relationships, an influx of global animation

offerings on digital media and streaming platforms, and the generation's fascination with "borderless [media] content from other cultures" ("These Are the Entertainment Genres").

According to Dimock's views, since they were born in 1995, Lil Uzi Vert is a Millennial, yet, because some porosity between the end and the beginning of each generation certainly exists, they also emblemize Gen Z's disruption of hegemonic mores of gender, sexuality, and social taboos. They also position and stylize themselves within a popular Gen Z media genre rife with genderqueer, LGBTQ+, and non-binary fantasy art, characters, sex and sexuality depictions, and visuality. Hence, Perez's description of Lil Uzi Vert as a "cartoon of themselves" acknowledged how the celebrity figure's artistic fascinations, gender disruptions, non-binary identity, and public image underscored Gen Z trends and granted them cross-generational access to this influential, profitable media demographic. Yet, it also raised the following question: "Given their knowledge about the Gen Z demographic, have *Symere Woods* and their record executives intentionally fashioned the artistic persona of *Lil Uzi Vert* as a non-binary, fantasy cartoon-like character to pander to Gen Z's emergent LGBTQ+ identification, disruptions of hegemonic views of gender and sexuality, and media consumption trends?" Ultimately, *032c*'s conception of Lil Uzi Vert as a "cartoon of themselves" underscored insidious authenticity questioning and the attempted invalidation of gender identity and artistic persona faced by non-binary celebrities via media interviewers and the reduction of Black queer and non-binary bodies to stereotypical caricatures in entertainment media.

"*It's Not Okay to Be 'Non' Anything!*" *Lil Uzi Vert Shares Their Non-Binary Experiences*. Lil Uzi Vert transparently recounted their pronoun change, confirmed non-binary gender identity, and directly answered *032c*'s queries related to their lived experiences. Consistent with Afiah Vijlbrief et al.'s research on non-binary adult identity formation themes, Lil Uzi Vert used the interview to outline their process of discovering and defining themselves and credit supportive family members and the non-binary community for offering safe spaces. In their responses, Lil Uzi Vert cited personal desires to "figure who they were" as a key inspiration, briefly referenced their education process on gender non-binary identity ("I did take my time to learn as much as I could about this before I was able to proceed.") and praised the sense of community afforded as a non-binary member (Perez 118-9). For them, being non-binary represented a discovery of themselves that mirrored finding one's life purpose and reason for being alive.

Consequently, the methodical, well-researched decision emancipated and prepared them to come out publicly.

Moreover, they denounced any hesitancy with changing their pronouns to they/them and being non-binary given their celebrity status and its potential ramifications. For example, Perez asked Lil Uzi Vert: “In the summer of 2022, you changed your pronouns to they/them. Given your prominence and visibility, the implications of this are huge – some would say historic. When did you realize those pronouns felt right? And did you ever hesitate going public with this choice because you feared negative reactions?” (118). In response, Lil Uzi Vert declared:

No, I never hesitated. But I did take my time to learn as much as I could about this before I was able to proceed. Taking the time to figure out who you are is a big part of what it means to be alive. Once you figure out whether you’re here with it there with it, or both, you’re not alone anymore. (Perez 118-9)

The rapper humanized the non-binary community as one that offered “access to a certain kind of support that you might not have had [previously during] your entire life because you weren’t raised that way” (Perez 119). Reflecting intersectionally on their upbringing, Lil Uzi Vert made it clear that they came from a household “where it’s not okay to be ‘non’ anything,” and as a result, their Philadelphia inner-city environment framed their gender identity and its role expectations before they could discover or frame them for themselves (Perez 119). However, they equally acknowledged family acceptance from their mother and grandmother and their roles in allowing them to explore eclectic artistic hobbies and taboo fashion choices. The rapper noted:

Nothing that I do is a surprise to my mom or grandma. I’ve been into everything I’ve been into since I was little. I started drawing upside down crosses on my clothes in high school. I’m the same person I always was. I’m just older now, and I have a platform. (Perez 119)

Lil Uzi Vert’s descriptions of the non-binary community, their Philadelphia upbringing, and family acceptance became nuanced when situated within queer studies. On one hand, their Philadelphian account acknowledged the multiple oppressive systems impacting Black non-binary and LGBTQ+ people in urban communities and the complex intersections of racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) embedded in their material realities, which pushed them into invisibility, shame, and silence as protective mechanisms (Johnson). By denying the advent of “being ‘non’ anything,” Lil Uzi Vert’s social environment illustrated

the discursive process of communal identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that spoke to the material existence of acceptable ‘Black cisgender bodies’ at the exclusion of Black non-binary bodies (Johnson). On the other hand, Lil Uzi Vert suggested that family acceptance from their mother and grandmother operated as an initial safe space for them to explore, develop, claim, and later disrupt the hegemonic gender rules of their Black Philadelphia community as a musician and non-binary person.

By allowing them to “draw upside down crosses on clothes” and queer Black masculine gender scripts, Lil Uzi Vert’s mother and grandmother liberated them to experience and express motions of gender through art and fashion, which later manifested in their musical aesthetics and non-binary identity. As noted by Corinne Cath et al., safe spaces are essential for young people identifying as queer in their explorations of gender identity and sexuality. They also serve as integral spaces for Black non-binary people, like Lil Uzi Vert, to reclaim identities and produce alternative narratives (Nicolazzo). Furthermore, Lil Uzi Vert’s status as a non-binary celebrity and their commendation of the non-binary community elucidated the power of LGBTQ+ celebrity figures to spark societal discussions beyond hegemonic, mediated representations of gender and to offer education on expansive forms of gender and sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the public sphere (Martinez).

In addition to discussing their gender identity, Lil Uzi Vert’s rap persona was interrogated by *032c*, leading to meaningful discussions of LGBTQ+ signifiers and queer aesthetics within popular culture and rap. First, the rapper was questioned about their infamous 2021 decision to implant a pink diamond in their forehead. While Perez hypothesized the rapper’s pink diamond implantation functioned as an “oracle” to harness superhuman powers and a “third-eye chakra,” Lil Uzi Vert attributed the decision to the popular Cartoon Network animation series *Steven Universe*. Its character, Pink Diamond, wears implanted pink diamonds (Perez). Lil Uzi Vert stated, “I used to watch a show called *Steven Universe*, and one of the characters in the show had a pink diamond in his belly button.”

Referring to the series as “[their] favorite cartoon,” Lil Uzi Vert’s embrace of *Steven Universe* was noteworthy given their non-binary identity and Perez’s framing of them as an animation fanatic. *Steven Universe* was created by non-binary animator and screenwriter Rebecca Sugar, and the series was highly praised for its inclusive representations of LGBTQ+ characters, themes, and queer

love (Hubbard). Additionally, Steven Universe was a genderqueer character deemed by the series' creator as a "super-expansive, hammy kid" and an antithesis of traditional male youth media roles, while Pink Diamond was genderless and pansexual (Hubbard). Hence, Lil Uzi Vert's identification with the series and these queer characters granted insight into the media representations that inspired their genderqueer rap aesthetics and prior exposures to LGBTQ+ animated content. More critically, Lil Uzi Vert's affinity for *Steven Universe* showcased how LGBTQ+ media provide greater stages for gender minorities and the visibility of gender diversity for minoritized audiences (Yeadon-Lee).

While Lil Uzi Vert did not explicitly offer any criticisms of LGBTQ+ rap social issues, they reflected on their decision to come forward as a non-binary rapper. Coining the action as an "act of bravery" for a "Black and previously male-identifying artist in the hip-hop space," Perez asked the rapper if they viewed being an out non-binary rapper as courageous. Lil Uzi rejected the notion, and instead compared the identity to a "good product" similar to fashion products curated by LGBTQ+ designers for "gangster-ass guys" to wear. They declared:

No, because bravery has only a ten percent chance of living. I'm not brave at all. I just think good product is good product. Think about fashion: gay and trans designers are some of the biggest talents out there, and gangster-ass guys wear their stuff without a thought. What you make is what matters, not how you identify. (Perez 119)

The rapper's response yielded conflicting interpretations from the researchers. While Lil Uzi Vert conceded some level of privilege (related to class and celebrity status) and protection from potentially life-threatening consequences commonly faced by non-famous and non-wealthy, non-binary and LGBTQ+ members, their comparison of non-binarism to a fashion product problematically likened the gender identity to a commoditized, apparel trend worn or removed at the rapper's convenience. Their discourses risked the reduction of non-binarism to a visual aesthetic or consumable product detached from the lived experiences and systemic oppressions of non-binary people such as acts of violence, discriminatory laws and practices, harassment, and other forms of social inequality. Yet, Lil Uzi Vert's words also debatably suggested if their "product" was "good" and sold within a capitalistic music industry, their gender identity should not matter, especially if the music was not subversive and aligned lyrically with normative rap ethos.

Lil Uzi Vert also linked the “gangster-ass guy” rap persona and gay and trans queer aesthetics as co-producers of hip-hop fashion, supporting Smalls’s theorizing of queer aesthetics and hip-hop as an open, unfixed, and ungendered cultural space in *Hip-Hop Heresies*. On the other hand, Lil Uzi Vert participated in stereotypical rhetoric of queerness in hip-hop as marginal to Black masculinity by inferring that trans and gay designers could not also be Black, gangster, and queer. In this sense, Lil Uzi Vert upheld Smalls’s exploration of the complex ways Blackness and hip-hop hide their historical queer artistic tendencies. There was an overall lack of understanding the queerness of Blackness and hip-hop by the interviewer. Perez’s depiction of Lil Uzi Vert as “brave” illustrated the lack of language and framing available to Black non-binary rap artists—something that may be observable in the more general media discourse. In congruence with Smalls’s queer hip-hop scholarship, when hip-hop aesthetics are disrupted from the typical heteronormativity of Blackness, people do not know how to frame those experiences and how they fit into hip-hop.

Situating Lil Uzi Vert’s comments on gay and trans hip-hop designers within the context of queer aesthetics raised another consideration. Hip-hop has traditionally been in conversation with queer and nonnormative genders and sexualities, including queer people in the shaping of its cultural signifiers through behind-the-scenes employment as choreographers, songwriters, make-up artists, hairstylists, set designers, fashion experts, and other roles stereotypically attributed to queer culture (Hill). Thus, “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and queer, intersex, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming (QIGGNC) bodies have been both integral to U.S. hip-hop cultural production and denied as integral to said production” (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 126). Nevertheless, queer and trans people in hip-hop shaped mainstream rap’s aesthetic even if their contributions were appropriated and ignored in the overwhelming noise of the genre’s cultural landscape (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies*). From this perspective, Lil Uzi Vert’s statement foregrounded the silenced centrality of LGBTQ+ people in the evolution of hip-hop’s culture and poetics, which enabled the genre to capture a multicultural and transnational audience. However, though hip-hop incorporates queerness in aesthetics, fashion trends, and ideas, it still does not privilege the prospect of an out-Black non-binary rapper. This topic was unexplored by Lil Uzi Vert or *032c*’s interviewer yet critical to an understanding of their gender identity’s impact on future rap successes and opportunities for non-binary rappers.

Conclusion

The current research analyzed Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* interview as a cultural cataclysmic moment for Black non-binary discourses and representations in hip-hop, popular culture, and rap. Public Enemy member Chuck D once described hip-hop as the "CNN of Black America" due to its pedagogical ability to bring Black identities and social issues to the Black community's collective consciousness. In a critical discourse analysis of Lil Uzi Vert's interview discourses, this study offered insight into the intersectional experiences of not only a commercially successful, Black non-binary celebrity and rap figure but also unveiled, by means of the artist's lived experience, the complexities of being Black and non-binary in America.

Supporting previous research on non-binary identity formation and quare studies, Lil Uzi Vert unabashedly claimed their non-binary identity and lauded the non-binary community for enabling them to discover a sense of personal identity, purpose, and security, as well as encounter a community safe space. They also shed light on Black cultural pressures and geographical oppressions that pushed many Black non-binary people into invisibility, shame, and silence. Their *032c* responses communicated the perils of being raised in a Black urban environment where non-binarism was denied as a gender identity due to hegemonic, racialized gender mores and simultaneously attributed their mother and grandmother as safe spaces for early explorations of gender identity and sexuality. Such findings illuminated the necessity of safe spaces for Black non-binary people to claim their identities and produce alternative gender and racial narratives while exposing hard realities of Black LGBTQ+ populations in urban communities indoctrinated with prevailing notions of gender normativity (Nicolazzo).

Lil Uzi Vert's rap persona was an investigative focal point by *032c*, a factor that drew paradoxical discourses from the rapper and their interviewer, Stephanie Perez. Beginning with the interview preface narratives, Perez framed Lil Uzi Vert as an "oracle in youth culture" whose animation, gender-fluid aesthetics, expressions, and knowledge of Gen Z cultural trends granted them mainstream popularity, yet the interviewer referred to them as "a cartoon of themselves" and highlighted the problematic authenticity questions and invalidation of gender identity faced by non-binary celebrities via media interviewers. By reducing Lil Uzi Vert to a "cartoon," Perez exposed the historic tendency of media outlets to

diminish Black queer and non-binary bodies to stereotypical, racialized caricatures in entertainment media and demonstrated the lack of language and framing available to Black non-binary celebrities and musicians.

Despite this shortcoming, Lil Uzi Vert debunked Perez's hypotheses concerning their rap aesthetics inspirations (e.g., the pink diamond in their forehead), cited LGBTQ+ cultural signifiers (i.e., Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* and the characters Steven Universe and Pink Diamond), and demystified the interviewer's claim that coming out as a non-binary rapper was "an act of bravery." However, the rapper's comparison of non-binarism to a fashion product worn by "gangster-ass" rappers yielded varying interpretations worthy of notation. On one hand, it detached non-binary identity from its societal positionality, and risked reducing non-binarism to a commoditized, fashion trend that could be temporarily worn or removed at Lil Uzi Vert's convenience. On the other hand, their inclusion of "gay and trans designers" in the discussion amplified LGBTQ+ people as co-producers of hip-hop fashion and queer aesthetics while (intentionally or unintentionally) upholding historically disparaging rhetoric of queerness in hip-hop being subordinate to Black masculinity.

Our findings bear significance to Black non-binary and hip-hop studies, for they showcase the intersectional complexities of being Black and non-binary in an American society ripe with anti-Black racism, gender normativity, and queer oppression and Lil Uzi Vert's positioning as a non-binary cultural figure in a music genre and larger entertainment industry that does not privilege the advent of a non-binary rap artist. This study also displays the relationship between Blackness, queerness, and the need for interconnectivity when examining queer discourses and moments in hip-hop and rap. On the VH1 television special *Out in Hip-Hop*, rap pioneer and member of the legendary group Run-DMC, DMC addressed hip-hop's reluctance to accept queer rappers, stating, "With hip-hop, it was like you could be gay, but you could not be the rapper. If you were anything except the rapper, you were cool" ("Love and Hip-Hop: Out in Hip-Hop"). While Lil Uzi Vert is non-binary and not gay, DMC's statement supported Marc Lamont Hill's research on hip-hop and queer identity, which accentuates hip-hop's reluctance to accept queer people as mainstream rap artists.

Though queer rappers experienced mainstream successes through LGBTQ+ rappers like Lil Nas X and Young M.A, non-binary rappers were predominately relegated to rap's underground circuit before Lil Uzi Vert. This factor raises

numerous questions beyond the scope of this analysis: How will Lil Uzi Vert's non-binary gender identity impact rap audience's perception and consumption of their music? What impacts will their *032c* interview have on future discourses surrounding non-binary artists in hip-hop? Will Lil Uzi Vert's gender identity derail future successes?

Since the writing of this analysis, Lil Uzi Vert released their third studio album, *The Pink Tape* to commercial success. *The Pink Tape* debuted at number one on the *Billboard 200*, allowed Lil Uzi Vert to cross one-hundred charting singles on the *Hot 100* with its release, and became the highest charting hip-hop album by a Black non-binary rapper. Likewise, it was the first #1 rap album of 2023, hip-hop's fiftieth anniversary. As hip-hop extends beyond fifty years of existence, queer and non-binary rap artists (like Lil Uzi Vert) are breaking into mainstream consciousness at increasing numbers and "queering" status quos of gender normative, heteronormative, and homonormative masculinities within rap. However, to continue this trend, there is still a need for the genre to critically engage and include more Black queer hip-hop artists across gender and sexual identity spectrums.

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