

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time—2 hours

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

Twenty year-old American rapper Lil Nas X (born Montero Lamar Hill) released the song *Old Town Road* in December 2018. The viral, 2-minute phenomenon reached number one on the *Billboard Hot 100* list and charted on the *Hot Country Songs* list as well, but was subsequently disqualified by Billboard and removed from Country music stations for not “[embracing] enough elements of today’s country music.”

Carefully read the following seven sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed argument for your own position on whether *Old Town Road* demonstrates enough Country elements to qualify as a country song.

Your argument should be the focus of your essay. Use the sources to develop your argument and explain the reasoning for it. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Leight)

Source B (Chow)

Source C (Klinkenberg)

Source D (Coroneos)

Source E (Zoladz)

Source F (Paul and GQ)

Source G (Cyrus)

Source A

Leight, Elias. "[Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind.](#)" *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Rolling Stone, 26 March 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

The following is excerpted from an online article from the music features section of a popular culture magazine.

Expelling Lil Nas X's single from Hot Country Songs points to a complicated racial dynamic. The music industry still relies heavily on old-fashioned definitions of genre, which have always mapped on race — Billboard's R&B chart, for example, was originally titled "race music," while the Latin songs chart lumps together a myriad of genres and languages under one ethnic umbrella.

In today's streaming world, however, songs can go viral before labels, radio programmers and playlist curators can sort them into genre buckets. When the music industry enforces genre borders after the fact, it becomes part of a power struggle about who has the right to make what and, in this case, whether black artists can fit in predominantly white genres. "When do we get to the point where [black artists] can be accepted and played on other formats?" the insider says. "That's still the question."

Danny Kang, who co-manages another viral country sensation, Mason Ramsey believes that Lil Nas X's race had nothing to do with country's decision to symbolically exile "Old Town Road." "That's a hip-hop song," Kang says. After the publication of this story, a representative for *Billboard* provided a subsequent statement indicating that race did not play a part in the decision to remove "Old Town Road" from the country chart.

None of this made much of a difference to Lil Nas X four months ago. He released "Old Town Road," which suggests an unreleased Key & Peele spoof of the sub-genre dubbed "hick-hop," in the first week of December, when the internet was crawling with cowboy memes. "[Lil Nas X] is very internet savvy — he understands how to play with the internet and manipulate it to create viral moments," Kang says. His team started communicating with Lil Nas X on December 18.

Lil Nas X was shrewd about positioning his banjo hip-pop mash. "On SoundCloud, he listed it as a country record," Kang says. "On iTunes, he listed it as a country record. He was going to these spaces, gaining a little bit of traction on their country charts, and there's a way to manipulate the algorithm to push your track to the top. That's favorable versus trying to go to the rap format to compete with the most popular songs in the world."

"Old Town Road" also became a smash on TikTok, where truckloads of young users (over 6 million in the United States) create short video clips set to music. The app enjoyed a burst of new interest Stateside just before Lil Nas X released his oddball single. Indify, a company that uses streaming and social media data to identify potential stars early in their careers, saw "Old Town Road" start to gain traction on SoundCloud in late December, according to Connor Lawrence, the platform's chief marketing officer. "Now, the growth is insane," Lawrence adds.

Source B

Chow, Andrew. "[Lil Nas X talks 'Old Town Road' and the Billboard Controversy.](#)" *Time Magazine*. Time, 30 March 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

The following is excerpted from an online article from the Entertainment section of a weekly news magazine that features an interview with rap artist Lil Nas X.

In an interview with TIME, Lil Nas X discussed the controversy as well as his impetus for creating "Old Town Road."

What was your life like before the success of "Old Town Road?"

Everything was very stressful. I would probably get three hours of sleep, staying up on the internet trying to promote my music at my sister's house before coming back home. I would be over there sleeping on the floor—I didn't want to come back home because I knew my parents would be mad at me. I had headaches, literally almost daily, I guess from depriving myself of sleep. And I was just being talked down to because I left school.

...

"Old Town Road" was recently removed from the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart, but it remains on the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart. Do you consider it a country song?

The song is country trap. It's not one, it's not the other. It's both. It should be on both.

Do you think your removal from the country chart had racial undertones?

I believe whenever you're trying something new, it's always going to get some kind of bad reception. For example, when rap started, or when rock and roll began. But with country trap, I in no way want to take credit for that. I believe Young Thug would be one of the biggest pioneers in that.

Source C

Klinkenberg, Brendan. "[Billboard May Revisit Decision to Remove 'Old Town Road' From Country Chart.](#)" *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Rolling Stone, 6 April 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

The following is excerpted from an online article from the music features section of a popular culture magazine.

Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" is a sensation. The genre-bending "country trap" song has jumped from TikTok-aided hit to a cultural phenomenon (see: Ellen DeGeneres dancing in a wig and cowboy hat), and its success may put it back on the Country charts after its initial removal. The song is earning more daily streams than any other song in America on Spotify, and its video has over 26 million views on YouTube. The Friday release of the song's remix with Billy Ray Cyrus — which is great — couldn't have hurt, either.

Fueling the success of "Old Town Road" is the controversy surrounding it: Over a week ago, Billboard opted to remove the song from its Country chart. According to the publication at the time, "it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version." The decision to remove the song sparked a wide-ranging backlash, and led to an ongoing debate about genre, race and the music industry.

Since then, the song has only become more popular. It's currently Number 15 on Billboard's Hot 100 and was the most-added song on pop radio last week. But its unexpected achievement adds additional scrutiny to its current genre classification. According to a Mediabase report, 33 country music stations played "Old Town Road" last week, and it received the co-sign of a recognized country star in Cyrus — both make the case that "Old Town Road" is a country hit, regardless of its chart classification.

Despite the mounting pressure, Billboard will not be adding "Old Town Road" — or its remix — to its Country chart. However, according to a statement released to *Rolling Stone*, the publication is still deciding how to classify the song. "Our initial decision to remove "Old Town Road" from the Hot Country Songs chart could be revisited," a representative wrote. Read the statement in full below.

Billboard offers category-specific charts simply as a tool for people in the music business to better gauge the success of songs relative to others in a given format. We are often times faced with difficult categorization choices.

"Determining which chart a song lives on is an ongoing process that depends on a number of factors, most notably the song's musical composition, but also how the song is marketed and promoted, the musical history of the artist, airplay the song receives and how the song is platformed on streaming services.

Billboard welcomes the excitement created by genre-blending tracks such as Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" and will continue to monitor how it is marketed and how fans respond.

Our initial decision to remove "Old Town Road" from the Hot Country Songs chart could be revisited as these factors evolve.

Source D

Coroneos, Kyle. "[Billboard Must Remove Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road From Country Chart.](#)" *Saving Country Music Blog*. 23 March 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

The following is excerpted from an Op-Ed written under the pen name "Trigger" on a Country Music web page.

The debate about what is country music and what isn't is an eternal one, and can turn nauseating and redundant very quickly in the way different factions fight back and forth about the definition and boundaries of the genre. That debate won't be resolved here or anywhere else. But a 1:53-long viral "song" that is really nothing more than an internet meme entitled "Old Town Road" by rapper "Lil Nas X" has rekindled the debate anew, with critical implications behind it.

Lil Nas X, whose birth name is Montero Lamar Hill, is an Atlanta-based hip-hop artist who released "Old Town Road" in December. He's not entirely new to the music scene. The trap artist and DJ released a 7-song EP in the summer of 2018 called *Nasarati*. But it's "Old Town Road" that has put him on the national and international map, along with its accompanying video set randomly to scenes from the Wild West video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* like your teenage son may do to one of his favorite songs.

"Old Town Road" is no more country than The Beastie Boys' "High Plains Drifter." Including Wild West signifiers or references to horses in no way qualifies a rap song with a trap beat as country. Furthermore, Lil Nas X is not professing to be a country artist. He's not signed to a country label, and has no affiliation to the country industry whatsoever. Lil Nas X has no ties to the greater Nashville music campus in any capacity. There are no country artists guesting on the track like you had with Bebe Rexha's collaboration with Florida Georgia Line's "Meant To Be." There appears to be absolutely no credible reason to include this song on a country chart aside from a bigoted stereotype bred from the fact that horses and cowboy hats are referenced in the lyrics.

Nonetheless, Lil Nas X and "Old Town Road" debuted at #19 on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart dated March 16th, and also was labeled country by iTunes and other music providers in their metrics. This set an incredibly bad, and possibly historically significant precedent that could result in existential ramifications in the country genre, and make complaints about Sam Hunt, or even Bebe Rexha getting placed on country charts for pop songs pale in comparison.

These concerns are underscored further by how "Old Town Road" has gone viral. Partly fueling the phenomenon behind an otherwise pedestrian hip-hop/trap song is Instagram and other social media users creating their own memes and using the song in the background. Yes, people are making memes of this meme. Sometimes these memes are just fun, but some appear to be demeaning or lampoon cowboy and rural culture. Celebrity culture has also played a critical role in the explosion of "Old Town Road," with Brian Kelley of Florida Georgia Line giving the song an endorsement on his Instagram account, and Lil Nas X's affiliation with the Nicki Minaj "Barbz" Stan army playing an important role.

Source E

Zoladz, Lindsay. "[‘Old Town Road’ Isn’t Country or Rap or Even Internet -- It’s Pure Bliss.](#)" *The Ringer Magazine*. 8 April 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

The following is excerpted from an Op-Ed written for a Sports and Pop Culture Magazine / Podcast.

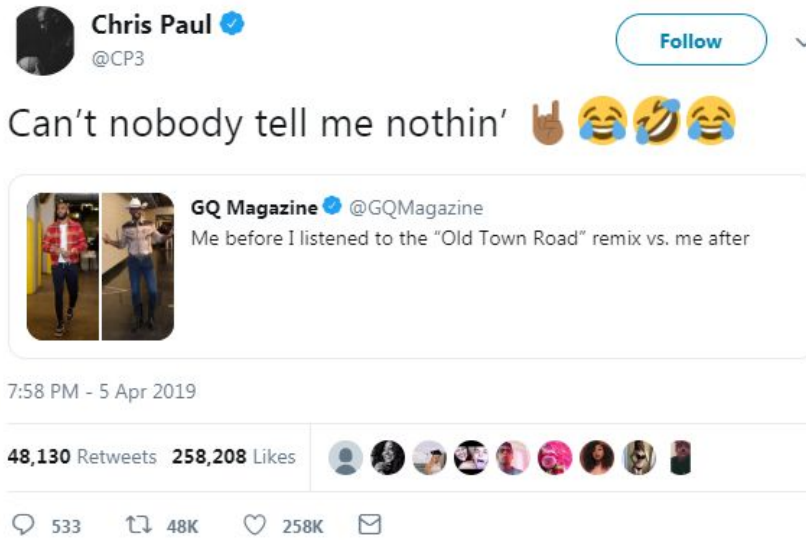
Although it was uploaded to SoundCloud in December, “Old Town Road” didn’t take off until it hit the popular video app TikTok, a kind of Vine replacement that lets users easily experiment with in-camera editing effects. “Old Town Road” spawned the #YeekChallenge: Over that opening lick, a person stands before the camera in plain clothes and then, with a sudden hop—like the jump cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* when filmic magic upgrades an ape’s bone to a spaceship—they land back to earth in cowboy attire. An even simpler version of the meme is flourishing too, in photos (like, say, these of Chris Paul) depicting people before and [*dons cowboy hat*] after listening to “Old Town Road.” The notion that “goin’ country” is a surface-level performance, an identity that can be worn or removed as easily as a hat, might be offensive to those invested in the notion that there is such a thing as “authentic” country music or fans. But the message of the yeek memes also calls to mind the hook of a 2009 Blake Shelton and Trace Adkins song (that is, for the record, infinitely sillier than “Old Town Road”), “We all got a hillbilly bone down deep inside.”

The boundaries between country music and genres like pop and hip-hop have been blurring for years. Of late, artists like Florida Georgia Line, Sam Hunt, and even the twangy warble of Post Malone have blended styles. Last year, the record for longest-running no. 1 single on the Hot Country Songs chart was shattered by “Meant to Be,” a ubiquitous smash duet between Florida Georgia Line and the pop singer Bebe Rexha, who hails from that country mecca Brooklyn, New York. (After the song spent an astounding 34 weeks atop the country chart, Rexha said, “I’d never think a New York City girl like me who grew up writing pop music would stumble into the country world.”) Still, the true kindred spirits of “Old Town Road” aren’t country songs or even necessarily rap songs so much as they are other recent hits that rode viral “challenges” to the top of the charts: Drake’s “In My Feelings,” Rae Sremmurd’s “Black Beatles,” and, most closely, Baauer’s 2012 hit “Harlem Shake”—which debuted at no. 1 on the Hot 100 the week after *Billboard* added YouTube streams to its chart calculations. Lil Nas X’s story has a tinge of Cardi B to it, too—another self-made internet phenom who built a devoted digital audience first and *then* decided she would try her hand at becoming a rapper. Whether or not Nas is a country artist or even a cowboy, he has proved himself to be a frontiersman, forging ahead on terrain uncharted by the music industry.

Source F

Paul, Chris and GQ Magazine. [Twitter posts about “Old Town Road”](#). *Twitter*. 5 April 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

**Chris Paul’s Tweet about “Old Town Road” (he retweeted GQ’s meme)*



GQ Magazine’s Tweet about “Old Town Road”



**Chris Paul is a NBA basketball player for the Houston Rockets*

Source G

Cyrus, Billy Ray. [Twitter posts about "Old Town Road"](#). *Twitter*.
5 April 2019. Web. 21 April 2019.

Billy Ray Cyrus's tweet about "Old Town Road"



Billy Ray Cyrus ✓

@billyraycyrus

Follow



It was so obvious to me after hearing the song just one time. I was thinking, what's not country about it? What's the rudimentary element of a country and western song? Then I thought, it's honest, humble, and has an infectious hook, and a banjo. What the hell more do ya need?

3:52 PM - 5 Apr 2019

43,398 Retweets **267,590** Likes



875

43K

268K

