



AFRO-CARIBBEAN WOMEN RECLAIMING THEIR BODIES AND SEXUALITY: NICKI MINAJ AND CARDI B'S AMBIVALENT SELF-PORTRAYALS

MACARENA MARTÍN MARTÍNEZ
UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA

Existing scholarship on the cultural representation of the Black female body has primarily focused on the dominant stereotypes imposed upon it (Bennett and Dickerson 2001, 4), rather than its self-representation. To counteract this critical neglect, the present article considers the roles fulfilled by Nicki Minaj and Cardi B's music videos. These artists' explicit videos and songs are believed by some to reinforce the hypersexualization and appropriation of Black women's bodies. However, others assess these US Afro-Caribbean rappers as role models whose discourse can help reclaim Black female bodies and sexuality—like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, US Representative in Congress, who has re-signified the acronym WAP as Women Against Patriarchy.¹ Particularly, “Anaconda” (Minaj 2014) and “WAP” (Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion 2020)—the songs that I will analyze in the paragraphs to come—are explicit odes to female sexuality. Interestingly, both have reached top places on the US Billboard list and have broken streaming records. In this light, this paper firstly explores the negative reading of these works as part of the capitalist commodification and hypersexualization of Black female bodies, and secondly analyses these works as examples of how Black feminist activism within the music industry aims to reappropriate Black women's curves and sexuality.

Afro-Caribbean women are intersectionally sexualized and objectified due to their racial and ethnic origin. The racist and patriarchal discourses and forces that affect them can be traced back to the bodily practices of colonization and slavery that bell hooks contends continue to operate per the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” one of the most effective forms of what Foucault called biopower (hooks

¹ See the tweet by @AOC August 15, 2020.



2004, IX; Foucault 2003, 277). Because these videos and songs are part of the capitalist music industry, one may conclude that they commodify Black women's bodies to obtain economic profit and reproduce patriarchal and racist ideologies. Ariel Levy believes that the rise of raunch is not about opening our minds to female sexuality, but "endlessly reiterating one particular—and particularly commercial—shorthand for sexiness" (Levy 2005, 25).² In a panel discussion titled "Transgression: Whose Booty Is This?" bell hooks took a similar stand regarding Minaj's "Anaconda." She wondered whether Minaj's images were the result of real "sexual freedom," or if they were rather "part of the tropes of the existing, imperialist, White supremacist, patriarchal capitalist structure of female sexuality" (Uwumarogie 2014). According to hooks, these artists might exercise control over their productions and self-portrayals, but these works do not mean Black women's sexual and corporeal liberation. Making millions of dollars with their music grants Cardi B and Minaj a privileged position from which they have the agency to choose their self-representations. However, their discourses and representations might not be that liberating for black women, since their decisions might be influenced by the capitalist system in which they are immersed and whose aim is not the sexual liberation of black women, but the productivity of their bodies. Neoliberalism might be giving us a false idea of agency and individual freedom that is downplaying any notion of influence and coercion. Thus, the "free" choice, or individual agency, of these women does not necessarily mean female sexual liberation as a whole.

Upon careful consideration, the imagery used in the videos might well be reproducing patriarchal and racist ideologies that reinforce the hyper-sexualization and dehumanization of Black women. The fact that Minaj is caged and in chains while she displays and sings about her prominent buttocks can be painfully reminiscent of Sarah Baartman (Dines 2014).³ Furthermore, the presence of snakes as metaphors of temptation, the women's association with savage animals, and their use of animal print clothes in both videos evoke the "Jezebel" stereotype, traditionally used for portraying Black women's bodily attributes as symbols of sinful hypersexuality and animality. As Kaila Story claims, "the imagery surrounding Black female bodies was and is both erotic and propagandistic" (2010, 41). More recent scholars, however, critique hooks' and Dines' premise by pointing out the oversimplification of parallels between contemporary Black female eroticism and Sarah Baartman, and recommend overthrowing the "Hottentot Venus reading strategy" (Nash 2008, 53). Cardi B and Minaj may be

² In *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005) Levy coins the term "raunch culture" to define a growing highly sexualized American cultural genre in which women are objectified and encouraged to objectify themselves with the seeming neoliberal aim to fulfill the male fantasy of unlimited female availability rather than to promote feminist sexual liberation.

³ Sarah Baartman, a.k.a Hottentot Venus, was a South African woman who, due to her [large buttocks](#), was exhibited in a freak show during the 19th century in Europe.



enacting a persona in their performances to rewrite this imagery. As the iconic Josephine Baker suggested by using bananas in her provocative performances, playing with Black women's stereotypes regarding animalization and hyper-sexualization precisely makes the semantic structure of differences that constitutes identities crumble.⁴ This internal Derridean deconstruction implies a decentralizing strategy that denounces the dehumanization that justified labor and sexual exploitation wrought during colonization and slavery, and that continues abusing and objectifying Black female bodies through neocolonialist and consumerist patterns.⁵ By embodying the stereotype, a reversal is made. The body is no longer a recipient of dominant racial and gender discursive regimes, but rather a discursive tool for black women's subjectivity and for their bodies' reclamation.

It is obvious that, as hooks believes, the music industry is dominated by capital, a traditionally White supremacist and patriarchal power. However, artists like Cardi B and Minaj are insiders in the system, and they not only economically benefit from it, but also, as Black women, use it to convey through their music and performances their own views towards bodily and sexual representation. It could be argued, again, whether these views are entirely theirs. Debates about determinism versus voluntarism have animated discussion for more than sixty years. Since human subjectivity is constructed by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan), or discourse (Foucault), any action must also be to some extent a consequence of them (Ashcroft et al. 2020, 9). The post-colonial theory of Bhabha and Spivak, which concurs with this position on subjectivity, admits agency is a troublesome question. Others suggest that although it may be difficult for subjects to escape those forces that 'construct' them, it is not impossible. This paper, therefore, aligns with this "recent marked turn to agency" that younger scholars posit to reject the previous feminist ideas of female victimization and to give prominence to questions of choice and empowerment (Gill and Ngairé 2013, 241-258). Although the remaining systemic oppressions that Black women still face needs to be acknowledged, it is also necessary to recognize that mass media and embodied performance could be subversive tools for contemporary Black women to re-signify their sexuality and bodies.

Minaj was the highest-ranking female rapper on Billboard's list throughout the 2010s and is on the list of the best-selling music artists. Cardi B is the only solo female rapper to win the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album and achieve Billboard chart-

⁴ Baker was an American entertainer and [civil rights](#) activist. She was the first Black woman to star in a major movie. Rihanna, another US Afro-Caribbean singer, has been inspired by her and her style, as she revealed in a tweet where she made a comparison between one of Baker's outfits and hers (@Rihanna June 4, 2014).

⁵ To further develop the idea of deconstruction, play and difference, see *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1967) and *Writing and Difference*, specially the chapter on "Structure, Sign and Play" (Derrida, 1966).



topping singles in two different decades (2010s and 2020s). Their privileged position within what has traditionally been a male-dominated music genre—rap—already implies a challenge to the system. The music industry provides US Afro-Caribbean women like these artists with a massive platform to negotiate their identities and aesthetics. Thus, hooks' argument against these artists and their work from a feminist perspective can be easily contested. Hooks believes that these artists' agency only works at an individual level and therefore does not manage to create a real change for the Black female community. However, being mainstream does not only mean making money, but also creating collectivity. Indeed, the US Afro-Caribbean author Elizabeth Acevedo places these artists as the models that lead the Black female protagonist of her narrative, *Xiomara*, towards celebrating her body and desire, rather than rejecting them.⁶ As Rachel Quinn would put it, this character discovers “a bridge for transnational relations” on the internet that lets her create her own female genealogy (25-44). Thus, mass media not only implies the individual and personal empowerment of “wealthy and marketed bodies,” as hooks claims, but also entails a structural change, since it affects social collective consciousnesses (Uwumarogie 2014).

Black women who are not highly educated feel more connected with these artists than with Black feminist scholars because of their media presence and relatability. Minaj and Cardi B's lives were not always award-winning. In fact, they had very hard childhoods. Minaj's father was an alcoholic that burned their house down in Trinidad. Cardi B worked in a strip club to make money, just like the protagonist of “Bodysuit,” a short story written by the also US Afro-Caribbean author Lorraine Avila, who claims to identify more with the rapper than the feminist scholars—such as “bell hooks or Cherrie Moraga”—she has never heard of (Avila 2019, 156). Likewise, *Xiomara* relates to Minaj better than the White religious figures who her devout Dominican mother sets as her virginal female models. Thus, *Xiomara* makes Minaj part of her own sanctuary to show that she neither fits the hypersexual stereotype—resulting from the racist and patriarchal discourses surrounding her race and ethnicity—nor the virginal one—resulting from the patriarchal Catholic ideology that prevails among the Latin diaspora. This construction translates into the concluding sentence of “Bodysuit”: “theories ain't no real answer for the women I know, I might not have a fancy degree, pero I know it is only through action that we survive” (Avila 2019, 161). Kimberly Springer also criticizes Black feminist scholars who act as gatekeepers of the “cultural production of women” like Cardi B and Minaj (2002, 1068). Although these divas are not erudite, and some of their attitudes are not very feminist—after all, neither has

⁶ *Xiomara* disregards the criticism around Minaj's “overly sexuality” and draws from her example when celebrating her body and desire in her developing slam poetry, titling some of the poems after Minaj's songs. Thus, she rejects the disassociation between her hyper-sexualized curves and her non-existing libido.



shown much sorority towards the other, as Cardi B and Minaj's overt competition has resulted in open demonstrations of hate, including throwing high-heels at each other—, Black women uphold them as models because they relate to them. In fact, Hip-hop feminists have insisted on the need to accept contradictions, otherwise feminism would be relegated to an academic project that is not sustainable beyond the ivory tower (Durham et al., 2013). Nicki Minaj and Cardi B's music and performance definitely affect the collectivity of Black women who look up to them for having succeeded despite their challenging upbringings.

Although these artists' music and performances are not isolated acts as they clearly impact black women, there is room for wondering whether their discourse can facilitate real liberation. I contend that these works suppose an emancipatory move for Black women through the reclamation of the bodily and the sexual. Minaj's lyrics about the desirability of big buttocks—the attribute which has traditionally been a marker of Black femininity—challenges the notion of grotesqueness associated with Black female bodies and contests their exclusion from standards of beauty. For Janelle Hobson, Minaj proves most subversive in exposing race and gender as artificial constructions with the pastiche jungle featured in "Anaconda" and her surgically altered body (2018, 113). At the same time, Minaj and Cardi B's surgeries can be read as activist moves towards embracing what has traditionally been perceived as a sign of grotesqueness. Still, one could argue that these artists only embrace their curves for a sexual purpose, as evidenced in the explicitness of their content which ultimately reinforces the artists' hyper-sexualization. In fact, a cult of secrecy—avoiding sexual expression—was believed by some Black women to be the only way to counter negative stereotypes, including hyper-sexualization, and achieve respectability (Hine 1989, 915). Although the "politics of respectability"—dissemblance strategies to dismantle the dominant negative discourses around Black women—have improved these women's socio-economic conditions, this rhetoric of survival also functions as a tactic of surveillance and control that restricts agency, impedes self-representation, and reinscribes systems of power (White, Dobris, Durham et al). Therefore, junior and senior scholars, such as Audre Lorde, have not only turned toward agency, but also moved away from respectability. Sexist and racist narratives must be contested by self-representation. To paraphrase Lorde's book's title, their silence will not protect them. To resignify hegemonic discourses about their sexuality and bodies, black women need to foreground them; and nothing better to self-represent and reclaim the body and sexuality than to do it through the body itself, that is, through embodied performance, as Minaj and Cardi B do.

Before Vogue deemed the 2010s "the Era of the Big Booty" (2014), rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot recorded "Baby Got Back" (1992) complaining about being "tired of magazines sayin' flat butts are the thing." He praised female curves by uttering the line Minaj subsequently used in her own song: "my anaconda don't want none unless you got

buns.” However, Sir Mix-A-Lot’s defense of big butts not only despises other women’s bodies, but also prescribes them to male sexual pleasure —the anaconda being a phallic symbol. Minaj’s rewriting of the song claims that big asses are not only meant for “some brothers to play,” as Sir Mix-A-Lot claims, but for some sisters to enjoy. Thus, the female rapper, as a counter to “those rap guys’ girlfriends” or “groupies” that Sir Mix-A-Lot mentions, narrates her experiences with men, who she “fucks” rather than being fucked by, and casts herself as a sexual subject rather than a sexual object. Since agency is defined as the ability to act (Ashcroft et al. 2020, 9), by being an active subject Minaj reinforces her agency and empowered position within affective or sexual relationships, and rewrites traditional gender roles within them.

Indeed, both videos highlight stereotypes about female sexuality to rewrite them. As said, the use of snakes, savage felines, animal prints, tropical fruits, and the jungle set deconstruct the Jezebel stereotype. In “Anaconda,” as Hobson claims, what begins in a jungle of the Global South develops into different feminine spaces apt for female reclamations of the body. One such setting is a kitchen where Minaj symbolically castrates the phallus by slicing a banana while staring directly at the camera. Like in her cover, she confronts the male gaze, as she had previously done in “Lookin Ass Nigga” (2014) (2018 113, 2005 106). Minaj precisely recognized the significance of this scene: “that was important for us to show in the kitchen scene, because it’s always about the female taking back the power” (Fisher 2014). Furthermore, she does not let Drake touch her when performing a lap dance. Like the protagonist of “Bodysuit,” she is touched “only cuando me dan las ganas” (Avila 2019, 158). Minaj had already emphasized women’s sexual agency and desires in “Feeling Myself” by showcasing a big taboo: female masturbation. In “WAP,” Cardi B also reverses stereotypes by showing herself as the active agent of sexual action—“I tell him where to put it... I run down on him ‘fore I have a nigga running me” —and sexual desire by using anaphoric lines that describe everything that she wants—“I wanna gulp, I wanna gag, I wanna choke.” Her likes are especially relevant because they include actions such as choking that are normally performed by men in the porn industry. Besides this, the Spanish singer Rosalía appears in the video wearing a bullfighting outfit in an ironic reversal of the masculine figure of the bullfighter. The bullfighter is an emblem of masculinity even if the role is not always fulfilled by men. Furthermore, there is phallic imagery employed in the act of killing, such as swords and spears. On top of that, male bullfighters have been traditionally understood in popular imaginaries as particularly virile figures. Such a reversal is a powerful statement: women are no longer prey, but the hunters.⁷ Indeed, Cardi B concludes, “in the food chain, I’m the one that eat ya.”

⁷ In the reggaeton song “Relación” Rosalía claims to be “mataora” (killer), again reversing gender roles—as bullfighters are typically called “matadores”—and the sexist tradition of this music genre (see “Relación” by J. Balvin, Daddy Yankee, Rosalía and Farruko).



While other vindications by feminists regarding the Black body are applauded, Cardi B's and Minaj's are likely criticized because of their very "excessive" embodiment of the Jezebel stereotype. These accusations of vulgarity are sometimes made by the same people who, denoting a double standard, do not condemn reggaeton videos that are similarly explicit, but refer to male sexuality. Such recriminations are based on patriarchal conceptions of femininity as pure and virginal. However, Acevedo's Xiomara perfectly recognizes this embodiment to be a "persona" enacted to throw attention upon the ways Black women's bodies are made visible while they simultaneously rewrite the script (Acevedo 2018, 180). Indeed, the performative use of their own bodies in these artists' videos makes them integrative instruments of subjectivity rather than just sets of different parts (buttocks, breasts, etc.) (Louis 2001, 162). It is no longer about the textuality of bodies, perceived as a tabula rasa for dominant racial and gender discursive regimes, but rather about the embodied discourse of their performance. Hence, although Nicki Minaj and Cardi B's sexually explicit videos and songs operate within the music industry, and are therefore subjected to racist and capitalist patriarchal regimes, these works need to be readdressed beyond the discourses of hyper-sexualization and commodification. Examined through a more critical lens, these performative and embodied discourses inspire and empower other Afro-Caribbean and Black women, as shown in the narratives of Elizabeth Acevedo and Lorraine Avila, to reclaim agency over their own bodies and sexualities, thus contesting stereotypical definitions of Black womanhood.

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