

“Baby it’s Your World Ain’t it?”:

A Rhetorical Criticism of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abstract

This qualitative study's general objective is to explore sexuality, gender, class, and race within the lyrics and the correspondent video to the hip hop song "High School" by Nicki Minaj. The scholarship cited explores the experience of exposure to and identification with music to discover its historical content and affects. In applying this scholarship, I analyze the song using rhetorical criticism and feminist and gender theories. By doing so, I argue how the topics explored reinforce previously identified tropes within rap and hip hop music.

Introduction

Like most media, rap and hip hop songs display the social construction of both masculinity and femininity, along with the social construction of race, class, and sexuality. Each song, and if applicable, corresponding video, sends a public message which may affect audiences' views of sexuality, relations between genders, and provide a guideline for how men and women should or do act, according to the artist.

Misogyny and Colorism in Contemporary Society

Popular culture often portrays women as inferior to men in America's patriarchal society. This can be found in music, as well as in other forms of media representation. Jennifer Siebel Newsom uses her documentary *Miss Representation* to depict the sexism within American media's advertisements. Similarly, Jean Kilbourne created a series of films entitled *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* and wrote the award-winning book *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* in order to demonstrate the role of advertisements in shaping how society views women. The need for artifacts such as these are not only useful in creating awareness of the ever so popular use of submission of women in advertising, but also illustrates the messages that these reoccurring portrayals of women reinforces. The impact of continued sexual violence and rape culture, which is depicted in the advertisements they analyze, takes a toll on what sex and sexuality *is*, and consequently, what femininity looks like within our society. Sexuality, and sexualization, is emphasized in other forms of rhetoric including video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*,¹ television shows such as

¹ Advertisement for the video game *Grand Theft Auto* includes images of sexualized women as accessories to the vehicles and crime related images. Furthermore, players may kill prostitutes in the video game.

Jersey Shore,² and movies, including *Twilight*, *CSI*, and *Transformers*³. It is important to note that in my analysis of hip hop that I recognize the intersectionality of oppressions. Gender does not operate in isolation, but is influenced by race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and class – amongst other identifies. Some media does an excellent job of recognizing this as well, as demonstrated by *Dark Girls*, which informs the viewer of how prejudices intersect both in American society and globally.

Specifically within rap and hip hop, director Byron Hurt created the documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. He articulates areas of hip hop regarding negative and narrow racial and gender constructions, including sexuality and violence. This is all important content to analyze within musical lyrics and images, as seen recently with songs that have provoked controversy. In spring of 2013 a few mainstream male rap artists were under close speculation as they released new songs with clear misogynistic lyrics. The first that I will discuss is “Karate Chop”, released in February 2013 by Future and featuring Lil Wayne. The lyric “beat that pussy up like Emmett Till ” (RapGenius, 2013) sparked controversy. Emmet Till was a 14 year old boy tortured and murdered in a racist hate crime. The family of Emmitt Till demanded an apology. The lyric was overwhelming criticized, but less for the violence against a woman, and more for Wayne making a disrespectful reference to someone who became a civil rights icon after his death. Airicka Gordon-Taylor, the Till family spokesperson, commented on the lyric: “The images that we're fortunate to have (of his open casket) that *Jet* published, they demonstrate the ugliness of racism. So to compare a woman's anatomy – the gateway of life - to the ugly face of

² The main characters in the reality show *Jersey Shore* articulate the double bind for women, where they are expected to be ‘down to fuck’, but also ridiculed for being ‘overly’ sexual.

³ In the film, *Transformers*, actress Megan Fox is seen in many objectified or dangerous scenes, and maintains a most vivid sexual appeal during times in which she encounters violence and portrays helplessness. Similar characterizations of women can also be found in the film *Twilight* and in the television show *CSI*.

death, it just destroyed me” (Talbot, 2013. thegrio). Soon, sponsors, i.e. Mt. Dew, dropped Lil Wayne Because of the negative reaction.

Following Wayne, but in the same month of that controversy, rap artist Rick Ross released the following lyric in the song *U.O.E.N.O.*, “put molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it. I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it” (RapGenius, 2013). Molly is a slang word for a date rape drug. His lyric describes a situation in which he drugs a woman and has sex with her without her ability to consent (otherwise known as rape). Ross argues the lyric was misinterpreted because he never said the literal word “rape”, but his lyric is a description of just that (Huffington Post, 2013).

In a third, but not officially released, song, rapper Chief Keef announced in the song *You*, “you ain’t gonna let me fuck and I feel you, but you gon suck my dick or I’ll kill you” (RapGenius, 2013). Chief Keef is not the only artist with lyrics of sexuality and violence against women. During the debate sparked by the above artists’ lyrics, another, older, lyric resurfaced. Rap artist Tyler the Creator, released *Tron Cat* in May of 2011 included the misogynist lyrics: “rape a pregnant bitch and tell my friends I had a threesome” (RapGenius, 2013). While researching this lyric, however, I noticed several others of concern: “she running round this motherfucking dungeon, her legs loose, until I accidently get the saw to her head, oops”; “victim, victim, honey, you’re my fifth one”; “I fuck bitches with no permission”; “put her in the lake, her body sinks great”; “starve her...carve her... shove her...cut her...” (RapGenius 2011). All these lyrics reinforce a culture of rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and violence against women.

Rape Culture

In order to understand the culture in which these lyrics emerge, I will define rape culture in this section, and give examples of its implications. Rape culture is a society’s participation in

validating and perpetuating rape. A rape culture normalizes violence against women and sexual coercion, rather than recognizing rape as a problem. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud devised the theory of the unconscious to explain why women spoke on childhood sexual abuse, which he did not believe occurred (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 51). Sexual violence against women, however, is not a childhood's game of pretend, rather a reality with very real statistics that demonstrate its pervasiveness: "a woman is raped every five minutes in the United States" (Wilson II, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2013. p. 146).

When violent sexuality is normalized and eroticized in society, it violates women. When sex crimes are thought of as only violence, without an analysis that considers how this violence is gendered, the analysis fails to recognize what has been *made of sex* and what has been *done to women through sex*. MacKinnon describes a feminist theoretical approach to understand desire and power systematically:

The feminist theory of power is that sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized. In other words, feminism is a theory of how the erotization of dominance and submission creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them. Thus the sex difference and the dominance-submission dynamic define each other
(MacKinnon, 1987. p. 50).

Particular advertisements, television shows, video games, and music all share in the normalization of sexism and misogyny. In fact, America's mass media, including news coverage, eroticizes violent crimes against women to appeal to an audience for profit rather than to tackle the issue (Wilson II, Gutierrez, and Chao, 2013. p. 147). Like most media, news channels disreputably offer images that reinforce sexist and racist notions: "the rape of a white woman by a Black man is the most commonly covered type of rape, while the rape of a Black woman by a

Black man is the least commonly covered”, demonstrating the idea that white women are more significant than Black women (Wilson II, Gutierrez, and Chao, 2013. p. 146). Moreover, it associates Black men, as opposed to men, as perpetrators of rape; a justification for society’s belief to associate Black masculinity with crime and fear.

Based on which rape cases are covered by the news, most information communicated is the race, gender, and class of the individuals involved, which often offer racist, sexist, and classist inaccuracies. Most rape occurs between victims/survivors (women) and perpetrators (men) of the same race and class (Wilson II, Gutierrez, and Chao, 2013. p. 146). Rather than focusing our attention on the perpetrator as a criminal, the news covers the woman and often centers their analysis on her sexual history. This causes a great deal of stress for not only women, but victims’ process, if they chose to report the rape, in the legal court system.

Similarly as Freud had little trust for women’s claims of abuse, women undergo a tedious procedure throughout their report to our current legal system. A “rape [case] comes down to her word against his- but it really *is* her perspective against his perspective, and the law has been written from *his* perspective” (MacKinnon, 1987. p.90). Because the law does not validate her perspective, women are often violated not just by the experience of rape, but also by the legal system. MacKinnon continues to illustrate the court process, “if he didn’t mean it to be sexual, it’s not sexual. If he didn’t see it as forced, it wasn’t forced. Which is to say, only male sexual violations, that is, only male ideas of what sexually violates us as women, are illegal” (1987. p. 90). In the rare case a woman does win in the court of law, I have personally heard people argue that “she wasn’t raped; she just did that to ruin his life”. Unfortunately, regardless of whom wins in court, both lives, but especially the victims’, are severely impacted.

During a rape, the criminal may use terms such as “bitch, slut, ho, whore, [and] cunt” to further hurt their victim. Following the rape, the same type of victim blaming may occur, with even the same language used to harass the woman either directly, or through ordinary vocabulary in daily media toward women as a group. This results in, as MacKinnon argues, a conflation of sex and rape – where rape is often thought of as a normal sexual act.

Conscientious Artists

Now that I have elaborated on the misogyny, violence, and sexualization of women within a larger context, I will now move to analyzing hip hop as a sector within our culture. Because of historical stereotypes and oppression, prejudice occurs within society and media. Despite sexism in the industry, many artists identify politics and oppose degrading deeds which have been normalized in society. Two examples of female artists’ lyrics I find useful to mention, based on the current controversial status of lyrical messages, include an older statement by Queen Latifah rapping ““a man don’t love ya, if he hits ya,’ or rapes ya, or raps about raping ya” (CrunkFeministCollective, 2013) and poet Sarah Jones, of *Your Revolution*, repeating the line “your revolution will not happen between these thighs” while referencing, and mocking, the lyrics of some mainstream rappers (Jones, 1997).

There are male political activists and feminist allies as well. Lupe Fiasco, in *Bad Bitch*, narrates the negative affect hip hop has on our youth by identifying the audiences who are listening to the music and how they may respond. In the first verse he describes a scenario where a young boy watches and listens as his mother sing along to the lyrics of another song, ““niggas, I’m a bad bitch, and I’m a bad bitch, something that’s far above average”” (RapGenius, 2013). Because the boy notices his mama identifying as a “bitch”, Lupe raps, “he may skew respect for dishonor”. In the second verse, Lupe mentions girls, ages nine through twelve, watching the

video vixens alongside the male artists to learn “what makes a bad bitch”, that is “high heels, long hair, fat booty, [and] slim”. Finally, Lupe clarifies a confusion of the youth in verse three when the two meet; “And he thinks she a bad bitch and she thinks she a bad bitch. He thinks disrespectfully, she thinks of that sexually”. Lupe is a rapper within an industry that constructs narrow views for artists to be successful (Balaji, 2009; Campbell, 2004; Richardson, 2007; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009; Railton and Watson, 2005). Because he produces music of political substance, he is not as well recognized in mainstream music as artists whom present the constructed Black man and woman’s image in hip hop. His song *Bad Bitch* demonstrates a negative consequence as a result of the narrow viewed constructions.

Moreover, white artist, Macklemore, an ally to the LGBTQ community, released the song *Same Love* in 2013. The lyrics and corresponding video bring awareness to the oppression of people because of homophobia. He sings, “If I was gay, I would think hip-hop hates me. Have you read the YouTube comments lately? ‘Man, that’s gay’ gets dropped on the daily. We become so numb to what we’re saying. A culture founded from oppression yet we don’t have acceptance for ‘em. Call each other faggots behind the keys of a message board. A word rooted in hate, yet our genre still ignores it. Gay is synonymous with the lesser” (RapGenius 2013). Beyond the direct language, audiences are affected by the indirect messages of gender constructs and sexuality. By exploring the use of predominate images and language of heterosexuality as well as gender norms within the music, we will further understand the oppression toward not only women and racial minorities, but members within the LGBTQ community as well.

Literature Review

Tropes of Race and Gender throughout History

In order to understand the current sexualization of women in the media, I must first demonstrate the historical context for which it exists. To recognize the historical significance is important because Western society has so severely embedded the idea that women are inferior, that noticing this “big lie” (meaning the falsehood that women are inferiority) would unfold all of civilization (Haskell, 1973. p. 1). Building the United States government was achieved from those of European descent enslaving those of African and Caribbean descent. Slavery could not have been endorsed based on race alone; with a patriarchal view in place, female slaves had a different experience than their male counterparts. Moreover, as wealth became powerful, those of low economic status (many of whom were stripped of possessions) were the enslaved, later to become indentured servants. Post-slavery, including today, descendants of slaves may still be facing poor financial conditions or racial/gendered prejudices. People experience each of these three (race, gender, and class status) identities in different ways. Although one identity may trump another at any particular time, for or by any particular person, the intersectionality of these three, and other identities, is the equation for life experiences, both positive and negative. In other words, these identities may influence an individuals’ economic position in society, sometimes through privilege and sometimes through oppression, but never the less, one experiences life on each characteristics.

In the 19th century, Black women were seen as more sexually intense, primitive, and abnormal (in comparison to the normalized white woman). Their buttocks and genitalia were seen as animal-like and uncontrollable (Railton and Watson, 2005. p. 54). Victorian discourses (via art, literature, and medicines) claimed Black women to be sexual, dangerous, and Other; while white women, particularly those of a higher economic standing, were seen as sexually pure

and regulated sexually by males within the private sphere. Virtuous, white women who fit within the gender norm, were within the newly colonized America as “guardians of sexual morals, cultural refinement, asexuality, embodied virtue, and ‘civilizing primitive people’” (Railton and Watson 2005. p. 55), that is the primitive, uncivilized Black people. White women were seen by white men as reproducers of the white race, and “sexually achieved” by their male partner only through courtships, marriages, and romantic love. Thus, they were white men’s most valuable property and needed to be protected at all costs, especially from the Black man (Railton and Watson, 2005. p. 55).

These historical portrayals of gender are reconfigured, and considerably reinforced, in today’s music. Those who analyze the virgin-whore dichotomy argue a difference in sexuality of women according to their race and economic standing. James (2008) identified the dichotomy on the basis of ethnicity, similar to Railton and Watson’s findings, that white women are nonsexual, “good” women who models is the Virgin Mary. They are disassociated from their body and passive of or have no sexual desires at all. On the contrary, Black women are presented as bad, hypersexual, and uncontrollable of her violent sexual desires (James, 2008. p. 412). Although she did not speak on race, Haskell affirmed this emphasis on sexual dualism for women; “the taboos against sex, encoded in the paralyzing edict that no man would marry a woman who was not a virgin (with the unexpressed corollary that untasted sex was a woman’s prime attraction for a man) held fearful sway...” (Haskell, 1973. p. vii) Sexuality is a defining feature for women and, thus, their individual worth. Moreover, as sexuality is constituted through raced and gendered imaginary for women, it has also been for men.

Language & Constructions rooted from Slavery

The historical understanding of race and constructions of sexuality is important because it informs the current state of gender relations in rap and hip hop. Rhetoric that signifies language influenced by slavery is still used today.

Mainstream rap and hip hop music's usage of video vixens and references of women as "bitches" and "hoes" demonstrate a historically racist and sexist society. Historical European notions of the "wench" and the "jezebel" may have been altered in this terminology yet resemble the stereotype of "loose and immoral" Black women. Richardson defines these labels as a reference to enslaved women who used their body to "sexually allure" men to "exploit them"; justifying the production of wealth, labor, and the slave force (Richardson, 2007. p. 790). And the same truth is demonstrated in the jargon of today's Black men "pimping" as similar to the hypersexual "black brute" of slavery. The brute was "good for breeding and impregnating the wench who reproduced the slave labor" (Richardson, 2007. p. 790). Media often highlights these racist connotations and further hegemonic views.

Europeans first associated dark skin and Afrocentric features with crime and fear. Therefore, colorism is still prevalent today as Black males are depicted as perpetrators of violence (Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009. p. 138). However, Eurocentric, light skinned females in music videos, generally, are shown as submissive to men, victims of sexism, and in provocative attire (Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009. p. 138). The "in-group" of Eurocentric features could create pressure to adhere to universal beauty standard while the "out-group", or racist associations with Afrocentric features, may lead to negative representations for both white and Black, male and female identified artists and characters within the music videos.

In contemporary rap music, a Black woman with Afrocentric features and a large butt is presented as distrustful, by the male rap artist, because of the alluring sexual behavior of her

character (Campbell, 2004. p. 502). A distrustful character such as this does not have the right to expect respect. For example, Campbell wrote on “neo-pimpin” discourse, “in Notorious BIG’s openly misogynist song ‘Big Booty Hoes’; it is a woman’s willingness to perform graphic sexual acts on Biggie [the pimp] that makes her “deserving” of disrespect, and therefore of the name ‘ho’” (Campbell, 2004. p. 502).

Social construction as a pimped out “gansta” brother is an image contemporary Black male artists sometimes present. As argued by Balaji, in 50 cent’s “Straight to the Bank”, the gansta represents three approaches to life: glorification of consumption, hyper masculinity, and a self-centeredness of the artist. His role is a dangerous Black man, violent, and reinforcing the “other” stereotype. The thug lifestyle is about owning things such as “cars, money, buildings, and women” (Balaji, 2009. p. 26). The artist is able to depict an image by capitalizing his own life experiences in a way he can sell.

If “pimpin’ women”, an image associated with material wealth and drugs and alcohol, is used by male artists to sell their music and persona, Campbell argues, it is “a constant reminder of Black patriarchy’s role in the Black community”; men learn to normalize “sexual domination and humiliation of Black women” and women learn to accept a constructed notion of beauty (Campbell, 2004. p. 502). Since many other scholars agree with the constructions of race and gender in hip hop within the Black community (Balaji, 2009; Railton and Watson, 2005; Conrad, Dixon and Zhang, 2009; Wallis, 2010; Gordon, 2008; Richardson, 2007; Charles, 2011), scholars must ask themselves the following: if this is a reoccurring, widely known fixation, what does it indicate and how does that identify with Black culture? These questions are worth exploring because the language and visual images associated with Black hip hop and rap are utilized by artists of varying ethnicities, races, and gender.

Black Masculinity Culture

Continuing the discussion by Campbell, the scholar writes “‘mainstream’ black culture is pimping unrealistic black sexuality to white people” (Campbell, 2004. p. 505). Balaji further argues this point to say that Black men present a “thug” or “playa” persona, that is one that “pimps women”, to sell their music (Balaji, 2009. p. 21, 23). However, the CEO’s who shape the music industry, many of whom are white men, create these narrow images for Black artists which they must conform to in order to enter mainstream; reinforcing “institutional racism and patriarchal capitalism” (Balaji, 2009. p. 34).

The demasculinization of Black men, which further entrenches white men patriarchy, has now promoted the Black man to desire belittling women, and increasing materialistic wealth. To be equal in masculinity is the ability to spend money, play a role in consumption, and discard women (Richardson, 2007. p. 798). Moreover, Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, explored controversial themes in texts of rap and hip hop that include images of glamorized sexual activity and violence, sex, and materialism as desired wealth. Specifically, Black female sexuality feeds an already determined representation, but white female sexuality is open to reinvention (Railton and Watson, 2005. p. 62). This exposed redefinition secures white privilege yet leaves a narrow view of Blackness for women.

White Artists Acquiring “Black Feel”

This reinvention is demonstrated by Miley Cyrus, a 20 year old, white female pop singer and former Disney channel star, who requested a song from writing brothers Timothy and Theron Thomas that was “urban; I just want something that just feels Black” (Platon, 2013. np). The framing of her request drew immediate interest and concern from many critics including Wilbert Cooper. Cooper interviewed African American Studies Professor, Akil Houston, from Ohio University, regarding the new song and video, “We Can’t Stop”. Akil, referring to bell

hooks, says that perhaps Cyrus reinforced a long tradition of using commodity culture to enhance her white persona in culture and individually (Cooper, 2013. np) To differentiate appreciation from mockery, Akil suggests the documentary *Blacking Up: Hip-Hop's Remix of Race and Identity*. Although the professor does not criticize Cyrus further than saying she may want to take a few African American courses if she is looking to present Black culture in her music (Cooper, 2013. np), critic Dodai Stewart posted her discomfort with the artist's technique.

Stewart identifies Cyrus' friends in the video as "mostly skinny white boys and girls" yet uses people of color as a background accessory. Stewart makes mention of other instances where this display has occurred; including Paula Deen's ideal southern dinner party in which Black waiters and waitresses serve white diners (Stewart, 2013. np). Cyrus and fellow pop star, Ke\$ha, in her song and video "Crazy Kids", both, separately, include images of "ghetto [and] ratchet culture": "gold grills, extensions, long, intricate fingernails, [and] contorting fingers into gang signs". Stewart requests for one to consider their privilege when acknowledging the ability to mimic someone else's life experiences; "But blackness is not a piece of jewelry you can slip on when you want a confidence booster or a cool look. And playing at being poor- while earning a profit by doing so- is just distasteful" (Stewart, 2013. np).

Ironically, there is a connection between both Cyrus herself and her audiences to the previously mentioned Lupe verse regarding little girls watching "bad bitches" as video girl acquiesces to the hip hop artist. Cyrus, formally known as Hannah Montana on Disney, has an established young audience. To them, and more viewers, she is presenting herself "twerking", or popping her body for her butt to shake, as well as displaying Black identified video vixens and very skinny white models. We, as scholars and as audiences, need to analyze what these messages infer about gender, race, sexuality, and class in our society.

Justification

Years of research on the depictions of women in media results in the same conclusion: a woman's worth lies in an image where *she* is dehumanized into body parts rather than a whole person with feelings and thoughts, as well as men's desirability for her physical and sexual appearance (Gordon, 2008. p. 246).

The hypothesis Lupe makes in his lyrics regarding the affect rap lyrics have on its audiences, researchers find similar in analyzed results. Scholars Maya K. Gordon, Elaine Richardson, and Melanie Lowe conclude comparable responses from females ageing as young girls, tweens, and teenagers, and identified as either Black or white.

Of text favored by girls, 81% of teen magazines and 70% of television programs contained advertisements for appearance-related products; the magazine articles focused on women's physical appearance 37% of the time, fashion 32%, makeup 18%, and hairstyles 16% while television programs, commercials, and films commented on appearance and body size of women more than it did for men (Gordon, 2008. p. 246). Although these statistics did not include the ethnicity of the models in these specific texts, American media is often criticized for ignoring Black women or presenting them as the stereotyped enslaved Jezebel. Since Black youth are the highest media consumers, this racist and sexist image, or a lack of an appearance at all, can be problematic for Black youth (Gordon, 2008. p. 245).

Gordon surveyed 176 Black girls ranging from thirteen years of age to seventeen years of age on the levels of exposure to a variety of media and the amount of identification with the performer. The rationalization of the survey was to acknowledge a correspondence between those factors and the importance of self-worth and group-worth based on attractiveness. The results were as follows: Black girls whom identify with the media's sexualized character also

hold a great judgment of physical attraction (appearance, sexual appeal, and attraction to a romantic partner) to their self-worth; a replicated result to the same survey of white undergraduate women (Gordon, 2008. p. 253). The identification with the sexualized model not only positively correlates with personal judgment but of women as a group. Identification with a less objectified model, yet in an environment regarding love and romance, still affected the audience to consider attraction as an important factor in self worth. However, this identification does not influence the audience to hold the same standard for the group's worth (Gordon, 2008. p. 253).

More exposure to the images also had a positive relation to Black youth "expressing more stereotypical gender attitudes and assigning greater importance to superficial qualities when describing the ideal man or woman" (Gordon, 2008. p. 247). Regardless the levels of exposure to and identification with the media, youth (especially Black girls) are affected by judgments of appearance both of their self worth and group worth. What is exposed and identified *is* women-as-a-group.

Referring to the women in the music as "girls", "strippers", and "tip drills", in another study, three Black teenagers' opinions on a series of hip hop songs and corresponding video are analyzed. Even though they use behavioral terms to identify the women, the girls acknowledge stripping, or stripping like behaviors in music videos, as a career choice rather than the woman's being. Lowe analyzed a similar pattern in her study of presumed (because race was not identified) white teens ages twelve to fourteen; in which the girls called a favorite white female artist a "slut", "whore", and a combination of the words, "slore" (Lowe, 2003. p. 124). Through the language used, the scholars identify a perplexity of the girls understanding of the discourse; the girls believe women in the videos are free agents, not working under "males' sex drives", yet

also comprehend that the women position themselves as sex objects, male's sexual pleasure, to establish financial gain, particularly from men (Richardson, 2007. p. 799; Lowe, 2003.). In the analysis section, I will demonstrate the empowerment argument verse the sexist restriction argument of female artists' participation in the creation of a sexual image for financial gain.

The girls in Lowe's study respect the artist's accomplishments, her appearance, and success but do not approve of her provocative clothing as well as her vulnerable and desperate lust for a man (Lowe, 2003. p. 129,135). The virgin/whore dichotomy (used to describe women in the two extremes in many forms of media; discussed further in this analysis), is reiterated in the study when the gender inequality and multiple personas surface among the artist's career and remind the girls of the disparity they face at school. The merriment and criticism of their favorite artist, one who they identify with and are exposed to often, is confusing for the girls. Ironically, the girls mention concern for her "whore" persona influencing a younger audience, to later follow up with how they are persuaded by other women's influences them (Lowe, 2003. p. 131, 132).

The girls in Richardson's study assume patriarchy as the underlying factor for the women's performances but appreciate their ability and reward, calling them "bad sistas" (Richardson, 2007. p. 799). However, they further recognize that the music degrades, objectifies, and generalizes all Black female sexuality as loose. As hard as the girls try to distinct individuals from the group, Black women are descendents of exploited ancestry. The group is reinforced of the hypersexual stereotypes and "indicates that non-blacks hold certain stereotypical beliefs about Blacks whether or not they watch such videos" (Richardson, 2007. p. 802). The youth are aware of the racist, sexist, and hypereconomical world in which they live. They are also cognizant that they need to survive, but do not possess the tools needed to escape

internal victim blaming. Interestingly, the Black female artists I will be analyzing, Nicki Minaj, quoted Lauryn Hill in her school yearbook photo, “to survive is to stay alive in the face of oppression” (RapRadar, 2010). Media can be oppressive.

Regardless of the amount of exposure or identification with the performers, mass mediated messages influence the audience. Based on the discussions concluded, it is evident the interpreted messages the young girls gain from watching the videos affect themselves and effect their perceptions of male and female genders. My research will not only indicate the messages communicated through the presented depictions, but what they signify to me, as a listener, about societal norms and behaviors.

I will be analyzing distinct song lyrics and the corresponding video to the hip hop song “High School” by female artist Nicki Minaj featuring Lil Wayne. Minaj won BET’s nominated award for 2012 best female hip hop artist and consecutively nominated for 2013 (BET, 2013). Moreover, in May 2013, Minaj performed “High School” at the Billboard Awards; while on stage, she delivered a lap dance to Lil Wayne. The choice to analyze this artist and song is because the award-winning, world-known Minaj has a large fan base and “High School” has garnered popularity.

Methodology

Rap and hip hop are media outlets for millions of people world-wide. This research is necessary to analyze the interpretation of lyrics and images to identify messages some American youth, and more, may be consuming regarding race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. To identify these tropes, I will first use a rhetorical criticism approach known as Fantasy-Theme Criticism; a method created by Ernest G. Bormann to interpret “a story about a group’s experience that constitutes a constructed reality for the participants” (Foss, 2009. p. 99). The method requires identifying the characters, the actions of the characters, and the settings in which these actions occur. Simultaneously, I will be utilizing feminists theories and further experts’ research, to analyze the rhetorical vision, a “unified putting together of the various shared fantasies”, of my artifact (Foss, p. 100).

Some feminist and gender theories which I will apply are derived from Catharine A. MacKinnon, Patricia Hill Collins, Tricia Rose, Molly Haskell, bell hooks, and Joan Morgan. These scholars, and more, have insights surrounding issues such as, but not limited to, violence, gender constructions, homophobia, heteronormativity, monogyny, and love. I will apply the knowledge from my readings to the interpretation of my analysis to explore the meanings of reinforced, or counter, messages regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality within the hip hop song “High School” by Nicki Minaj and Lil Wayne.

Application of Analysis

As demonstrated by my literature review, common tropes within rap music are the sexualization of women and the privileging of light skin, or colorism. While my research does not focus on how these tropes affect those who consume these songs, it is important to have an understanding of how misogyny and colorism is demonstrated within popular culture. This analysis lays the groundwork for further analysis to determine in what ways the audience internalizes ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality as communicated to them via the songs. By applying a feminist and fantasy-themed rhetorical criticism analysis, I will illustrate the nuance of the power dynamics that inform the viewer about constructions of race and gender. I will focus my analysis by analyzing one song, “High School”, by Nicki Minaj featuring Lil Wayne, which I utilize as a case study. In identifying the power dynamics at play in “High School”, I will help us discover and understand whose interests are being served through the various tropes communicated in our mass media.

Using Fantasy-Themed analysis, I will list the characters, the actions of the characters, as well as describe the setting in which they interact. To this end, I focus on Nicki Minaj, in scenes where she is by herself and when she is with Lil Wayne, female models in the video, and several of the males who are seen in the video for the song. I will link these descriptions to theoretical perspectives to determine what they tell the viewer about the tropes I have identified.

My theoretical perspective is informed by feminist criticism, which I will use to discuss how the video and the lyrics portray normalized relationships. I consider what this then means within a larger societal context. Although each person, setting, and interaction offers a major message, I have most focused on the interactions between Lil Wayne and Nicki Minaj and what it tells us as viewers about gendered relationships. Finally, I will demonstrate practical implications that these portrayals of gender and race have in our society.

Categories of Characters, Actions, and Settings

Female Rapper, Minaj

- Before the lyrics begin, the scene opens with Minaj strolling alongside a swimming pool in a one piece swimsuit and heels. Later, in the same outfit/location, she is squatting with her legs crossed.
- She takes a pose in which one leg is bent and the other is straight; the camera angles capture the curves of her legs and butt. One arm is on her hip and the other is raised near her head; her face is imperceptible because the camera catches glare from the sun.
- As Minaj is standing, the camera is first angled at the back of her calves and moves up the back side of her body; her body's curves are emphasized in this image.
- The camera is focused on Minaj as she opens the rap lyrics while outside. The video again is shot at an upward angle which showcases her chest while she stands in a yellow dress, gold jewelry, and straightened blonde hair looking down towards the camera.
- Minaj is then wearing neon yellow swimwear in which she shows cleavage. She is in a Jacuzzi while she moves her shoulders and turns her neck; her hair is wavy from getting wet.
- Minaj is then seen leaning against a railing inside the house wearing a brown low-cut top and maroon skirt; she is wearing a gold watch and her hair is still straight. In the next scene, Minaj is again outside in the yellow dress and gold jewelry.
- The videographer utilizes a sequence of quick images to show Minaj in the neon suit again by the pool. As water drips off her body, her back is bent and her head is tilted back.
- Again, Minaj is seen by the railing in the brown top and maroon skirt before being shown outdoors in the yellow dress.

- In the pool scene, the back side of Minaj’s body is visible to the camera. As she is looking over her shoulder at the camera, she slowly rises out of the water. The swimwear is cut in a “V” shape to expose the top portion of her butt. Shown again, she is facing the camera bending over and exposes her cleavage. As she sings the chorus, Minaj rubs water along her arms and hugs herself. Outside of the pool, dry, Minaj plays with her dry but wavy hair as the wind blows.
- During the chorus, Minaj is hugging herself, in a cleavage revealing outfit while she plays with her hair.
- Closing just as the video opened, Minaj is squatting down with her legs crossed near the pool in her pink swimwear and beige heels. Back in the neon swimwear, Minaj is seen on her hands and knees, body facing up toward the camera, in the grass; cleavage is shown and pieces of her hair are in her face. Again in the pink swimwear and beige heels, while the camera is angled upward toward her, Minaj is seen walking along the poolside.

Visual Depictions of Gender and Race

In every scene where Minaj is present, the camera is slanted to view different angles in which the curves of her body, specifically her breasts and butt, are visually emphasized for the viewer. The visual portrayal of Minaj in this video is a clear example of the ‘male gaze’. This term was coined by Laura Mulvey to describe the ways in which women’s bodies are presented on film in a manner that makes it appear as though their bodies are sexual objects for the viewing pleasure of heterosexual men. Images and angles emphasizing a single part of a fragmented body create an erotic impact in a shallow screen shot. This strong visual signifies male desire and reinforces the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of women (Mulvey, 1975. p.4). Close ups of particular body parts are controlled to generate different modes of arousal. The video is constructed in a

way that the male gaze is managed through the main male character's, who is an agent of male viewers, control and fantasy. The arousal is produced through the erotic objectification of Minaj for both the male characters on screen and the male spectators of the video (Mulvey, 1975. p.5).

The way our society view women's body through the male gaze is identifiable in women's representations on billboards, magazine covers, and in television commercials and music.⁴ While a comparison to pornography may seem far reaching, these images mirror what one sees more explicitly in pornography. MacKinnon notices this gaze in pornography "that eroticizes the despised, the demeaned, the accessible, the there-to-be-used, the servile, the child-like, the passive, and the animal. *That* is the content of the sexuality that defines gender female in this culture, and visual thingification is its method" (1987. p. 53-54). It seems absurd to view the man's body in a similar fashion. Men are not positioned in such a way that women are unless to mock gender power relations.⁵ Despite the unseemliness of situating men in the same poses as women, the manner in which society views women's bodies is not recognized as ludicrous in the same way.

⁴ Magazine covers are notorious for presenting (predominately white) women in the male gaze. Magazines intended for a male audience use women as accessories to material things such as cars in *Hot Rodding*, sporting materials in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN*, and music albums in *Rolling Stones*. As well as to reinforce a patriarchal hierarchy where men are standing in business suits and women are crouching or modeling in sexualized and objectified poses in swim suits, or less, in *GQ* and *Forbes*, where *his* description reads "money masters" (Google, 2013. A) and *hers* reads "money makers" (Google, 2013. B). And, of course, *Playboy* allows for viewers to see most of women's bodies. Magazines intended for women often present products to buy and use in an effort for *her* to "improve" for *him*, i.e. *Seventeen*, *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *People*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue*. Television commercials also depict women through the male gaze to sell a product. For example, *Axe*'s spokesman says "the world is facing one of the biggest crises in the history of history; girls are getting hotter and hotter. This is causing guys to lose their cool" while simultaneously displaying women throughout generations wearing less and less clothing (YouTube, 2013). Gentlemen's Clubs, Adult Stores, Victoria's Secret and most other businesses all participate in sexualizing women to gain consumers' interests via male gazed images through billboards, newspaper articles, and other mediated advertising.

⁵ At the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Diversity Conference, I presented an educational awareness exhibit of the male gaze where cismale audience members were asked to voluntarily pose in prior-chosen advertisements using women models. Although they found it humorous for the few seconds they did, it was evident the men did not want to continue their stance in the vulnerable position. Another example is a photo gallery of men posing like pin-up girls, on a social media site called *imgur* (*imgur*, 2013). Furthermore because of the sexual objectification of women in "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke, a parody was created to demonstrate, and mock, the gender power relations (YouTube, 2013).

Minaj is observed in images that seem accessible and passive. Minaj is observed as child-like and animalistic characteristics. As she bends over, bringing her arms and shoulders in, Minaj raps “I call him daddy like daughters”. This type of language reinforces gender hierarchy; it represents a particular type of eroticization where women and children are positioned as powerless under male supremacy (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 53). Her body is literally lower and the height differential seen in their interactions visually reinforces a hierarchy. Additionally, her line “he like it when I get drunk, but I like it when he be sober” further emphasizes his sexual control over her. In the analysis section of her and Wayne together, I will clarify how she is situated lower, via camera angles, in sexual positions and in a manner that correspond with MacKinnon’s statement that women are to be “despised, demeaned, servile, and there-to-be-used”.

Continuing in the child-like role, during the chorus while Minaj raps “they holler at me but it’s you, you, this ain’t high school” she tries to imply she is more mature than high school relations yet her shrug is quite young and innocent looking. Finally, in images where Minaj is squatting, her position is that of a child, both in the literal stance and in the physically lowered height. Sexuality, particularly in heterosexual relations, is itself a power structure (MacKinnon, p. 89). The way Minaj explicitly reinstates the hierarchy while further positioning herself as lower enforces the social construct of male supremacy and equating women with children.

Minaj is also seen in what appears to be a powerful strut obtained through her sex appeal. Although many critics claim women who sell their sex appeal is empowered/ empowering, I argue this choice, like many decisions, is complicated to classify as such. From an economic stance, up-and-coming female artists may find it empowering to sell their sex appeal to becoming well-known in their music and entertainment. However, in an industry which women are sexualized, and are only rewarded and accepted in if they fit the lens of the heterosexual and

feminine appearance of sexualization, the empowerment seemingly is mediated by the power of patriarchy. For many long term female artists, in an institution run by men, with male rappers and record executives holding most of the power, there is no way to argue that sexual display is empowering without also considering that it is “male desire [which] is the driving force behind sexual encounters” (Rose, p. 170). Beyond patriarchy, Black female artists further face historically racial obstacles in defining their own sexuality.

Minaj created her sexual image filtered through both Eurocentric and Afrocentric features, similar to those described in the literature review. Being of Trinidadian roots, Minaj has a naturally light skin complexion, however, in an interview with Extra! Minaj admits that due to the amount of light complexion make-up she wears, she has been accused of skin lightening as well as plastic surgery on her nose (sheisdiva, 2013). The light skin, narrow nose, and bleached blond straight hair are all historically Eurocentric desired features. While she may be rewarded for portraying some Eurocentric features, she still presents features associated with women of color. She has implants in order to achieve the desired Afrocentric, and stereotypical, large butt. Nevertheless, defining her own sexuality is not just that but what historically has been defined as a part of Black sexuality throughout patriarchal history. For example, American media featured long slender legs, hips, and small butts as the desirable female sex symbol. This image is rooted in racist assumptions beginning during slavery when white slave masters identified the white female body as beautiful and the Black female body as “Other”. The images of white women further depicted facial features such as small nose and thin lips, straight hair, and light skin complexion; some of which Minaj has incorporated in her image. The larger sized hips and butt of the Black female body were viewed as primitive, animal-like, and uncontrollable; a look to identify female sexuality through the male gaze defined above by Mulvey. Rose further

identifies the intersection of racism and sexism by defining the three stereotypes of Black female sexuality; The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. The Jezebel “defined by her excessive, exotic, and unbridled sexuality”, and Sapphire “loud, excessive, and irrepressible”, images are continually reinforced in commercial rap and hip hop (Rose 2008. p. 152-153; Richardson, 2007. p. 790).

Black male and female artists identified the butt as a significant source of Black female sexuality; a body shape once valued as inferiority by white European slave masters. By doing so, however, it further remains a sexualized symbol of Black female sexuality (Rose, p. 168), and thus created a narrow lens for what was deemed sexually desirable of Black women. In an interview with Byron Hurt regarding machismo and sexism in hip hop, Michael Eric Dyson explains this further: “two hundred years ago when black women and men were looked at for their gluteus maximus, for their latissimus dorsi, for their pectorialis major, for their testicles, [was] to see if they were durable enough to procreate in order to extend slavery. Isolating body parts like that represents a sexualized fetish tied to the racial subjugation of black bodies by white supremacists” (Forman and Neal, 2012. p. 361)

Because her strut is viewed through camera shots of her body, specifically her large butt, Minaj is virtually portrayed in a manner that creates the allusion that the male viewer can possess, or own, her. Similar images are depicted throughout the video; where not only the viewer observes, but Wayne, as the male possessor in the video, observes and touches.

Standardized Sexism

In response to the argument that “hip hop is not responsible for sexism”, Rose responds by arguing that “sexist ideas often rely on labeling and controlling the value and expression of women’s sexuality as a central vehicle for limiting women’s potential” (Rose, 2008. p. 152). In

other words, although hip hop did not create sexism, oppression is maintained by continuing to miseducate people about social constructions and individual/group identity. Because construction of Black culture and negative views of women are presented within rap, as well as society at large, rap music reinforces the acceptability of misogyny. Thus, viewers (especially young viewers) are affected by the lyrics and the images depicted (Gordon, 2008; Lowe, 2003; Richardson, 2007). Therefore, in order to instigate change in how women are viewed, we must hold everyone responsible, including rap artists.

Although one could argue that female rap artists may be empowered by the sexuality they present in their videos, it is important to question whether that empowerment is actually what is occurring within the larger societal context: “what appears to be [an] expression of sexual freedom is, in fact, participation in an industry that reinforces male sexual fantasy and power” (Rose, 2008. p. 177). Therefore, what may be empowering on an individual level, can easily be construed to bolster patriarchal norms. Minaj, and women in general, are often judged by others in society based on their sexual actions. These opinions are often expressed in “slut shaming”, that is blaming women for what they are wearing, how they are behaving, and, amongst other things, the language they are using. Consequently, then, the women who are potentially reclaiming their sexuality are referred to as “bitches and hoes”.

Women who do not challenge sexism and the gender hierarchy which supports patriarchy are rewarded by men; we can reflect on this compensation by re-recognizing the “empowerment” of up and coming and current female artists. Seemingly, there are only two options, to be nonsexual or to be a player; the virgin/whore dichotomy. This demonstrates a double-bind for women.

In “High School” both Wayne and Minaj refer to Minaj as a “Bitch”. As Minaj describes herself and her efforts to and for Wayne, she raps, “bitches this pretty, that’s seldom” while simultaneously lifting herself out of a hot tub to where the camera angle focuses on her butt crack. Not only does this line and image reflect Minaj as a bitch, it also identifies “bitches” as “pretty” but not as pretty as her, a sexualized “bitch”. This line is yet another example within the lyrics implying her efforts to help him and *be* for him. Her “prettiness” is her sexualization, wet body and butt exposed. And it is for him. During Wayne’s verse, when Minaj insists “make me a wife”, he retorts “bitch, you crazy”. Here, Wayne identifies Minaj as a “bitch”. He further asks her “fuck wrong with you?” Now, she is not only a sexualized bitch but also a crazy bitch.⁶

Unfortunately, this is the core of sexism. Rose claims, “the line between women who ‘deserve’ to be called these names and those who do not does not exist. Winding up on one side or another of this imaginary divide is at the discretion of the males (and sometimes females) around you; it’s not a choice you get to make” (Rose, 2008. p. 178). In the case of music, rap artists have the power to decide that position for the women they talk about, “bitches and hoes” is who they talk about. Sadly, sexist name-calling normalizes sexism for all women.

Standardized Misogyny

Society influences rappers; the lyrics within music reinforce the behaviors and views of a general population. When rappers, actors, athletes, comedians, and still others decide there are women “who deserve” to be called sexist names, they too justify the oppression and misogyny all women then face.

⁶ This is not the first time women have been identified as “crazy bitches” by men. For example, the 2006 song “Crazy Bitch” by Buckcherry describes a scene where a man is paying a woman to have sex with him; he says “You’re crazy but I like the way you fuck me. Hey. You’re crazy bitch” (MetroLyrics, 2013).

MacKinnon describes the power dynamics between men and women in a patriarchal society thusly:

Men say all women are whores. We say men have the power to make this our fundamental condition... Men define women as sexual beings; feminism comprehends that femininity 'is' sexual. Men see rape as intercourse; feminists say much intercourse 'is' rape. Men say women desire degradation; feminists see female masochism as the ultimate success of male supremacy and marvel at its failures. (1987. p. 59)

Violence, through violations of sex and sexuality, against women is eroticized in our culture.⁷ The films, television shows and commercials, songs, billboards, and other forms of media which reinforce the sexually violent images consequently reproduce misogyny as standard.

In the outro lyrics of “High School”, Lil Wayne and Minaj are not shown together. The visual focus is on Minaj as reiterates the sexual desire and power he has. She raps, “I know you want it, boy. I see you tryin’”. As she continues, “Just keep on pushin’ I’ma let you slide in”, Wayne is standing behind her with his forearm around her neck. Here, the arm around her neck is both violent and erotic. The lyrics reinforce an assumption of “try harder and you’ll get what you want”. Perhaps that is what MacKinnon is referring to when she says many men believe rape is intercourse and feminists say much intercourse is rape because of the unequal power distribution in many sexual relationships. Further, because the lyrics are sung and the image is

⁷ The television network, Lifetime, has films, which are mostly produced and directed by men, that are notorious for story lines and images of women’s deaths and other elongated pain; pains inflicted through intimate relationships with men, i.e. *Our Mother’s Murder* (1997), *She’s Too Young* (2004), *Taken From Me* (2011). Another example is television commercials; Axe body spray for men also produced a horror story of a male zombie on the attack of a half dressed woman prey. Although it ended with her spraying the zombie with Axe, which apparently seduced her (as in all the other Axe commercials), so the two began making out.

allowed by a female artist, and she is smiling, further presumptions may be made; that women enjoy being degraded.⁸ As MacKinnon argues:

This social status in which we can be used and abused and trivialized and humiliated and bought and sold and passed around and patted on the head and put in place and told to smile so that we look as though we're enjoying it all is not what some of us have in mind as sex equality (1987. p. 41-42).

Returning then to the video I am analyzing, Lil Wayne communicates to the audience his pleasure versus her pleasure based on dominance and submission. Dyson sees this as a common theme, “society is teaching many young men and women to believe that the only way to be an authentic man is to dominate a woman. To make matters worse, many young men see women almost exclusively in sexual terms” (Forman and Neal, 2012. p. 361).

As I analyze the way in which this is communicated, I too analyze the reinforced idea that women actually enjoy being subordinate that women take pleasure in being sexually oppressed.

⁸ The question becomes, why and how do women participate in this system? The answer is through the social construction of femininity; “we spend our money to set ourselves up as the objects that emulate those images that are sold as erotic to men. What pornography [music videos, public speaking, movies etc] says about us is that we enjoy degradation, that we are sexually turned on by being degraded” (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 53, 91). I attended a public speaking event hosted at my university by “sex therapist” Daniel Packard, who is not a licensed therapist by any means. What I, and many others, heard during his talk was that of rape culture and reinforced misogynistic advice to students regarding “love”. He asked women to identify what they fantasize. With answers similar to, and including, “cuddling on a blanket under the stars”, Packard responded “that’s not love”. As he continued on, he managed to advise the women that they enjoy degradation and, to the men, he suggested “no really means yes”. To close, he insisted the men grunt and the women, in their “sexist voice, scream yes” louder and louder until he left the stage. A similar message is demonstrated in the 2013 song “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke. The women in his unrated video are naked, prancing in the background and mouthing “meow” while he sings about domesticating women. In one image, a woman is on her hands and knees with a stop sign, so small it is almost not visible, on her butt while he sings “I know you [a good girl] want it...talk about getting blasted” (YouTube, 2013). Another reference made to consumers that no does not mean no.

Minaj and Wayne Together

- In the opening scene, an expensive car is seen alongside a building with three male figures outside. The audience sees Lil Wayne exit the vehicle with another Black man, and approach the male figures in front of the house while Minaj raps a description about Lil Wayne and their relationship.
- Near the beginning of the video, while Minaj is rapping in the house, Wayne walks up smiling and joins her by the railing. Wayne is first seen walking into the house with the other men. Then, while in the house, Wayne is witnessed watching and smiling at Minaj while she raps. When he walks in, Wayne notices Minaj walking down the stairs. He waits for her to step to the bottom and then acknowledges her with a kiss on the cheek. Flashing back to the two on the railing, Wayne steps away, holding Minaj's hand.
- As the three male characters talk, Minaj is seen walking and standing on a ledge above them; she is not still; she is swaying and playing with her hair and is looked upon by Wayne, who eventually joins her.
- While Wayne raps, Minaj is seen wearing a white, lacy corset in front of a window.
- In another scene, still in the corset and beige heels, Minaj is on her hands and knees hovering over Wayne in a bed.
- In the next, very quick, scene, Wayne and Minaj are talking in the hallway.
- Back in the bed, Minaj is seen kissing Wayne's chest. When the camera returns, Wayne is behind Minaj, kissing her neck. The camera shows the two almost kissing on the lips but not quite. Next, as Wayne is sitting up and Minaj is lying down, the camera shows Wayne viewing the back side of Minaj's body. In another shot, the camera, again, almost catches the two kissing on the lips, but not quite.

- In another room, with her brown low-cut top and maroon skirt, Minaj is talking with Wayne but not looking at him.
- With no vocal accompaniment, the camera shows numerous quick images of Minaj and Wayne in different positions on the bed; touching, rubbing, laying down, looking at each other and at the camera.
- In the brown low-cut top and maroon skirt, Minaj is singing as Wayne is hugging her with one arm, from behind.
- As Minaj and Wayne get physically close, a person with black gloves, a black hoody, and a sparkly face mask is stealing money and jewelry from a safe within the home.
- Wayne is seen flagging down a helicopter. Minaj jogs out the door by Wayne barefoot carrying her heels, a name brand bag, and the mask the robber was wearing. She hands Wayne the bag and drops the mask as they approach the helicopter.
- In the last scene of Minaj and Wayne, the two are holding hands, smiling, in a slight dancing/ swaying motion.

Construction of Black Masculinity and the Desire to Obtain Wealth and Power

In *We Real Cool Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks describes the switch from Black people's critiques of white supremacy and capitalism to the assimilation of whiteness and greed of money. She does so by revisiting the politics of the Civil Rights Movement; one of the major fights was that of equal pay for equal work, a struggle for economic survival which became, through the influence of white male counterparts, an ethos of greed (hooks, 2004. p. 17). She continues to explain the change in Black family values as Black students enrolled in predominately white universities, where they learned success is tied to monetary wealth, and an

excess amount, in a capitalist society; “Black men who could show they had money (no matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful” (hooks, 2004. p. 19).

Achieving power, obtaining money, and acquiring women are among the top desires of previous and contemporary mainstream rap artists (Campbell, 2004; Richardson, 2007; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009; Balaji, 2009). The description Minaj raps about Wayne is similar to that of many other contemporary artists, who are mostly dark skinned Black men. She first makes mention of his possession of land, “he owned a couple acres”, and his conquered monetary wealth, “he was getting’ money”. As hooks elucidated, how the money is attained is not necessarily through integrity and ethical values but how Minaj described “with the movers and the shakers” and with “bricks in the condo and grams to Sing Sing” references to drug-dealing. Additionally, this economic gain is similar to that of professional basketball athletes, another fundamental economic success of Black men, “ball like a couple rings”. Historically, hooks notes, professional sports were an outlet for Black men to assert manhood of self and make money. Now, however, “politics of materialist greed” have corrupted the once empowering economic outlet to allow few other alternatives, including music, for gaining “masculinity rooted in dignity and selfhood” (hooks, 2004. p. 22).

Of course selling drugs is illegal, thus criminal activity will land someone like Wayne in prison, “5-year bid up”. Here is a reinforced Eurocentric ideology that all dark skinned Black men are associated with criminality and danger (Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009. p. 138). This image is an additional example to the high-doses of glorified “gangsta/thug cultured” street life that defines Black patriarchal masculinity in mass media. hooks describes historically Black men recognized “work” as labor under the white man and a loss of respect while doing so. Many men then, turned to cons, hustlers and pimps. hooks describes the attraction of criminal activity as an

instant gratification to money, a sense of strength in a “survival of the fittest” environment, and an acknowledgement to avoiding a system of historical racism (hooks, 2004 p. 26-28).

Consequently, participants tend to become one of the outrageous numbers of intelligent and capable Black men in prison⁹, a child or father in a relationship that does not exist, and/or dead.

Continuing images of constructed masculinity, Wayne also obtains another indication of wealth: women. Minaj explains his previous relations with other women and his relation with her, “[he] gave up on love, fucking with them heart breakers”, “left arm, baby mother tatted”, “I let him play with my pussy then lick it off of his fingers”. In these lyrics, Minaj confirms the sexual relations as not loving. Moreover, as the song continues, the relationship between the two grows through sexuality where power and dominance of patriarchy are presented. Power and possession of wealth, throughout the song is evident in Wayne’s control over Minaj.

During his verse, Wayne raps, “I tell her make me some money”. Accordingly, as the video comes to a close, Minaj does just that. A person with a hooded sweater and a diamond covered mask is seen stealing money from the safe of the homeowner, as Minaj meets Wayne at the escape scene she hands Wayne the bag of cash and jewels and throws down the mask before exiting the scene. Not only had Minaj performed all his sexual requests “give it to you whenever you want, put it wherever you want...I’m a let you slide in”, she also fulfills his monetary request to “get [him] money”. Wayne’s highest ambition, crime, was successful because of

⁹ There is an imbalance as to who is prosecuted; which is why there are more men and women of color in jail than white men and women. Wisconsin, in particular, is known for having high rates of black incarceration. The Sentencing Project advocates for criminal justice policy issues by stating that there is “*an increasingly disproportionate racial composition, with particularly high rates of incarceration for African Americans, who now constitute 900,000 of the total 2.2 million incarcerated population...Overall, data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics document that one in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. The prevalence of imprisonment for women is considerably lower than for men, but many of the same racial disparities persist, with black women being more likely to be incarcerated than white women*” (Mauer and King, 2007. p. 3).

Minaj. Further demonstrations of hypermasculinity through sexual dominance and hierarchical practices by Wayne are established throughout the following sections of this analysis.

Rappers tend to recreate an image that is socially constructed within society and within the industry. In “High School”, Wayne told Minaj “put on something tight, don’t judge me, I get life”, a lyric which complements the social construction of female sexualization and Black male criminality.

Love and Abuse in Marital-Type Bonds

Minaj suggests in the beginning of the song that her and Wayne’s relationship is a sort of partnership in which he is all hers thus she is all his and so they, or she, will do what is needed and expected to continue the relationship. It is not clear that he, too, understands the relationship in such a way. Minaj, as a female artist and partner, seems to affirm patriarchal notions rather than use her position to undo them. This is a reoccurring theme in rap music throughout past generations (Rose, 1994. p. 150). In patriarchal beliefs, the father of a family holds the authority and importance. One example of Minaj supporting this belief is that she refers to Wayne as “daddy” and they both later make mention of Wayne in the traditional family roles as a husband, lover, and brother. With each name, Wayne is presented with the statuses that are authoritative of and important to Minaj.

When Wayne is describing their relationship, he raps “I tell her make me some money, she tell me ‘make me a wife’”, here it is evident he has control over what is or is not their relationship and what they, or she, will do within that bond. Her response can be read two ways: either she is not necessarily interested in being his wife so she uses the metaphor to say she is not necessarily interested in getting him money either, or, she is willing to get him money if he makes her his (either way, the wealth of her and the money are under his ownership, or at least of

his decision to be of his possession). In the following line, Wayne says “I tell her ‘bitch you crazy, fuck wrong with you?’” the vulgar language depicts his power: he is in control, and do not care what she wants because she is below his status. This is emblematic of a systematic reinforcement of male supremacy.

Understanding Relationships among Genders

Minaj focuses on their relationship, “anyway I felt him, helped him, put him on lock, seat belt him”. Minaj identifies herself as a “ride or die” partner. Often female rap artists, and feminists of color, refuse to criticize their male colleagues because they are aware of the societal discrimination against Black men. Cornel West examines this relation as “internally hierarchical and often mediated by violence: black men over black women” (Rose, 1994. p. 148-149).

Joan Morgan also distinguishes the internal hierarchy. In her book titled *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, she writes

for most of our lives the folks who put food on the table, clothes on our backs, roofs over our heads, and educated our minds were black women doing it all alone. We were raised to believe that it was the women, not the men, who were the stronger, capable, more responsible ones. They were the ones we could trust and rely on. The men, we learned, were apt to drop the ball (Morgan, 1999. p. 122-123).

The more boys are taught to make excuses, engage in predefined destinies of crime and imprisonment, and told “all men are dogs” are the same boys ageing into the men who may then be relationship partners and fathers. Morgan continues to recognize that not much is taught on the role the Black man has in shaping the girls and women, and boys, in his life. It is not until they are involved in unhealthy and unsuccessful relationships that women come to the realization.

Not shockingly then, does Minaj bullet list the criminal activity Wayne participates in, yet reinforces the acceptance and further love she will continue for him; a couple fake visas cause he never got his papers...but he was gettin' money with the movers and the shakers, he was mixed with a couple things, ball like a couple rings, bricks in the condo and grams to Sing Sing...5-year bid up, north they rated, anyway I felt him, helped him...this box¹⁰ better than the box he was held in.

Abuse in Black Relations

Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, writes on the “conspiracy of silence, about Black men’s physical and emotional abuse of Black women is part of a larger system of legitimated, routinized violence” (Hill Collins, 1990. p. 187). Women’s sexual freedom of expression is encouraged through male fantasy and domination. To witness this for Black female sexuality, especially by both or either a Black man and Black woman, is damaging; “sexual explicitness with sexual exploitation is hurtful and destructive for black women and for black male/female relationships and the black community generally” (Rose, 2008. p. 184).

Like Rose, Hill Collins is cognizant of the historical sexual stereotypes of Black women and femininity. She argues that the hostility between Black men and women is rooted within Eurocentric ideology and that any man who reinforces it objectifies not only her sexuality but his too. Hill Collins continues by quoting Alice Walker, who states, “we are not only descendants of slaves, but we are also descendants of slave *owners*. And that just as we have had to struggle to rid ourselves of slavish behaviors we must as ruthlessly eradicate any desire to be mistress or ‘master’” (1990. p. 186). Numerous texts are published describing sexual, physical, financial, spiritual, and emotional abuse toward Black women in relationships with Black men: Zora

¹⁰ Minaj refers to her vagina as “this box” being more pleasurable than “the box he [Wayne] was held in”, referencing a jail cell.

Neale's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970); Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982).

Sexual Politics in Society

To help us further understand sexual politics, it is necessary to identify theories and concepts by credited feminists. MacKinnon states "feminism is a theory of how the erotization of dominance and submission creates gender, creates woman and man in a social form in which we know them" (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 50). And what we know is violence against women. This is recognized through the large statistics in which pornography, prostitution, rape and attempted rape, battery, homicide, assault, harassment, and sexual and financial segregation occur to women.

In the repeated quick camera shots of Minaj and Wayne in the bedroom, the audience views several different positions in which either Minaj or Wayne are on top. In the bed, while Minaj is on top, she is straddling Wayne and holding down his arms above his head, a position of dominance. However, due to the drapes and lighting, the eye does not first see Wayne on bottom, but a side shot of Minaj's butt and legs through an opening in the drapes. Moreover, during this scene Wayne is rapping "And then she try to tell me I'm the only one that's hittin'". The line insinuates that any other man who wants her, which he assumes are a lot, is "hittin'" her. The line not only tells the audience that any man with her as a sexual desire is fulfilled, but that it is a violent act of sex. In the following lines, Wayne raps "And I say, 'what about them niggas?' She say, 'what about them niggas?' You right, what you doing tonight? Put on something tight" during which, his pleasure is shown on screen; his eyes slowly close while she is seen going down on him. Again the audience is exposed to his pleasure and his desires through the male gaze.

The pattern is continued in the lines “all I had to do is rub it, the genie out the bottle” in which Wayne is seen first behind Minaj, then taking a bow between the two female models near the pool. “All [he] had to do” was not much work but the bow represents a job well done. The next image on camera is Wayne positioned on his knees behind Minaj who is bent over. He raps, “pussy so wet” while tilting his head to view the area of Minaj’s body and “I’mma need goggles” again near the pool, where the female model runs her hands along her own body. When the camera is on his viewing pleasure, a literal male gaze, Minaj’s face is not the focus. The audience is further informed Wayne is going to get goggles to “dive in” to her, similarly as he would dive into the pool; or perhaps the other female in his reach. He closes with “she tell me that it’s mine”, a hierarchical of possession statement, “I tell her stop lying. Mine and who else?” again, Wayne is assuming multiple men who have possession of her sexually.

A series of images are quickly displayed one after another with music, but no lyrics. In these depictions, Wayne is seen being sexually pleased by Minaj as she is seen doing most of the work: Minaj is in much motion as her hair is swung back as the two following images show different positions in which she is rubbing on Wayne’s body, back and stomach. Her butt is then seen coming closer to his body, followed by her breast cleavage as she straddles him. Next, she is kissing on his chest, and a slight image is seen of her cleavage between the drapes. These images repeat until the two come close to kissing on the lips.

Other Women

- Two other women, both light skinned women of color, are shown in the video. They are briefly shown during only a few quick scenes near the swimming pool with Wayne as he raps. One is seen in a purple one piece swimsuit, cut to display cleavage, with big gold hoop earrings and gold heels. The other is in a white bikini, white skinny earrings, and white heels.

- The woman in purple is standing near Wayne, swaying with the music, rubbing her hands down her body and playing with her hair.
- The woman in white is seen sitting on the ground, similarly how Minaj was in the opening scene: heels, butt, and hands on the ground, knees up, back bent, and head back. The only other position she is seen is lying on her back in the water, floating past Wayne where her cleavage and stomach are visibly on display.

Sexual Orientations and Approval

While these women are modeling, they are on each side of Wayne as he raps “she got a nigga at home, and one on the side. Best friend is a dyke; they fucked around a few times”. Of course the majority of the song is focused on Lil Wayne and Minaj’s heterosexual relationship, this is the first and only reference either of the two makes regarding another sexuality.

Heteronormalization is one aspect of the “mythical norm”, a term coined by Audre Lorde, to demonstrate the normalization and idealization of, white, rich heterosexual, able bodied men (Hill Collins, 1990. p. 194). Historically Black lesbian relationships have been silenced. Lesbianism was viewed as the definitive “Other” in Eurocentric thought for European scientists believed these women, as well as prostitutes, had physical abnormalities (Hill Collins, 1990. p. 194). The European sciences and arts comprised of an interesting similarity within the image of the lesbian and the image of the prostitute.

Interestingly, in “High School”, Wayne refers to Minaj’s best friend as a ‘dyke’ or lesbian. Because of the way that the best friend is presented (in provocative attire, bare legs, rubbing on her own body, as an accessory to Lil Wayne), the lesbian/ prostitute image is reinforced. Hill Collins articulates “the sex/gender hierarchy functions smoothly only if sexual nonconformity is kept invisible” (1990. p. 194). Her sexuality may be mentioned, but there are

other ways in which her sexuality is either demeaned or ignored: Wayne uses offensive language describing her to prove his power; Wayne insinuates Minaj participates sexually with her friend but does not account for her own queerness or bisexuality; Wayne questions Minaj's interactions with male counterparts but does not worry when she "fucked around a few times" with a female friend. Dyson understands this double standard as that "lesbian sexuality can in some cases be tolerated, even encouraged, because it can be subordinated to the heterosexual male erotic economy: two for the price of one" (Forman and Neal, 2012. p. 368).

In terms of defining masculinity and manhood, supported sexism and homophobia are distributed when "weak" men are called "bitches" and "faggots", or when heterosexual men make reference to actions associated with homosexuality then "take it back" by saying "no homo" and "pause". Homoerotic bonding occurs among heterosexual men in daily life. Scholars account for homophobia and hatred within the queer community among heterosexual people as they find self-doubt, or questioning of others, on their sexuality in their attraction to people of the same sex (Hill Collins, 1990. p. 195; Forman and Neal, 2012. p. 368). Labeling, and the perplexities associated with the terminology, affects individuals' ideas about and relationships with one another. Because Lil Wayne did not identify Minaj as a lesbian, it had not affected his relationship with her. All the same, because he did recognize her friend as a lesbian, his belittling views of her were distinguishable.

Other Men

- Three men are seen in the opening scene outside the house as Wayne pulls up in the car; they approach him and the man he came with.
- The man Wayne is seen with is a dark skinned Black man with tattoos, wearing sunglasses and a leather jacket and jewelry (including earrings, necklace, a pinky ring,

and a watch. He is first seen posing for the camera and later sitting with all the men talking.

- The other man looks of Hispanic descent. He is in a white business suit, clean shaven and slick back hair, while smoking on a cigar. He has what appears to be two body guards on each side of him as he acknowledges Wayne's arrival. The two white body guards are wearing black business suits and black sunglasses.
- As the video continues, quick images are shot to depict the men walking indoors, standing and later sitting while in conversation. There are bottles of alcohol sitting on tables around the men. The Black man tosses a name brand bag to the Hispanic man; after searching through it, the Hispanic man gives it to one of the body guards to take out of the room. The Hispanic man talks on the phone, and eventually walks out of the room, while Wayne looks at Minaj on the upper level ledge. The Black man nudges Wayne as he points to Minaj; indicating Wayne to approach her.
- Then, the Black man is sitting alone. No one is seen again until the end of the video; the Hispanic man checks the safe to notice all the riches have been stolen. He instructs the guards to investigate.

Reinforced Male Gender Construction and the Music Industry

The opening scenes of the video depict each of the characters engulfed in materialist consumption. The camera angles first display Minaj's body and the expensive exterior of the home, then focuses on the shiny, expensive car pulling up to the front of the home. Images of Minaj's femininity and the men's masculinity are shown before viewers are introduced to the wealth exhibited in the interior of the home. Wayne and his male partner have a similar image of material consumption. The camera focuses on the two men's tattoos, baggy dark clothing, and

many accessories such as a watch, sunglasses, rings, and a necklace. These depictions embrace “an ethos of greed, one in which having enough money to be self-sufficient is not what matters, but having money to waste, having excess” (hooks, 2004. p. 17). The Hispanic man, the homeowner and land possessor, and his body guards also reinforce a desire of wealthy through their business suit attire, smoking on cigars, and sipping on hard liquor.

One defense of hip hop is that rappers are “keeping it real”; that their lyrics and images depict truths about poor Black urban life. However, Rose argues against this claim of authenticity. It is simply a “response to criticism that hip hop lyrics are contributing to negative social conditions: encouraging violence, representing the criminal life, supporting sexism and homophobia” (Rose, 2008. p. 134). Similar to how Black female artists are “empowered” in selling their sexuality as members within the music industry, Black male rappers’ “authenticity of keeping it real” in rapping negative social conditions is their freedom of expression in an industry “actually constrained and channeled by media corporations” (Rose, 2008. p. 155; Balaji, 2009). A few of the administration who supply these depictions are corporate executives Universal chairman Doug Morris, Warner chairman and chief executive Edger Bronfman, Song chairman Andrew Lack, and Viacom president and CEO Phillipe P. Dauman (Rose, 2008. p. 154-155).

For Black men to endure, hook believes

Black male material survival will be ensured only as they turn away from fantasies of wealth and the notion that money will solve all problems and make everything better, and turn toward the reality of sharing resources, reconceptualizing work, and using leisure for the practices of self-actualization (hook, 2004. p. 31-32)

“Baby, It’s Your World, Ain’t It?”

“Give it to you whenever you want. Put it wherever you want. Baby, it’s yours.

Anywhere. Everywhere. Baby, it’s your world, ain’t it? Baby, it’s your world, ain’t it?” is the hook to “High School” by Nicki Minaj. Perhaps Minaj is referring to the same world in which MacKinnon has acknowledged defined by men:

[White, heterosexual, middle class, Christian, able-bodied] “men’s physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life defines art, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other- their wars and rulerships- define history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex”- (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 36)

Not to mention educational and voting votes were once not accessible to women, reproductive rights are still not in the power of the woman, the legal system and philosophy theories are written from *his* point of view, slut-shaming and victim blaming against women who have been violated by men exists, as do the teachings to women that we belong *for* men sexually.

MacKinnon continues to define the world and how we come to understand it:

Women know the world is out there. Women know the world is out there because it hits us in the face. Literally. We are raped, battered, pornographed, defined by force, by a world that begins, at least, entirely outside us (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 57).

If I can doubt it, maybe it doesn’t exist- comes from the luxury of a position of power that entails the possibility of making the world as one thinks or wants it to be. Which is exactly the male standpoint. You can’t tell the difference between what you think and the

way the world is- or which came first- if your standpoint for thinking and being is one of social power (MacKinnon, 1987. p. 58).

The invisibility of female pleasure and participation in a man's world, and specifically within hip hop, Rose defines as the "what women? syndrome" (Rose, 1994. p. 151). A syndrome in which a man does not acknowledge a woman's pleasure or participation or is appreciative of her work, especially a job in which she empowers him, emotionally, financially, sexually, or spiritually. This invisibility is evident in "High School" where the male gaze and patriarchal notions are presented supplementary to Minaj's sexual pleasure. The syndrome is also featured in demonstrations of Lil Wayne's accessorized women by the pool as well as his financial and emotional gains that Minaj produced. Hill Collins further identifies the "man's world" concept in Aretha Franklin's song "do right woman, do right man" where Franklin stresses her acknowledgement for a man's world but says it is not needing to be proven by using and abusing women (1990). In Wayne's lyric "she love me like a brother, but fuck me like a husband", he states a commitment Minaj has to him by providing an insight to his benefits from her commitment. That loyalty, Franklin concludes, is acknowledged by both parties and does not need to be exploited to prove male benefit.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Although my analysis focuses on oppression, I want to leave with encouragement. I write this for you, the reader, no more than I write this for myself. Fortunately, there are people within hip hop and rap who are working to combat racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Including all the authors and researchers I cite in this piece. Hip-hop feminist, Joan Morgan colloquially reminds us that:

We are daughters of feminist privilege. The gains of the Feminist Movement (the efforts of black, white, Latin, Asian, and Native American women) had a tremendous impact on our lives—so much we often take it for granted. We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mothers' generation could not begin to fathom. Most of us can't image our lives without access to birth control, legalized abortions, the right to vote, or many of the same educational and job opportunities available to men. Sexism may be a very real part of my life but so is the unwavering belief that there is no dream I can't pursue and achieve simply because 'I'm a woman' ... defining ourselves solely by our oppression denies us the very magic of who we are. My feminism simply refuses to give sexism or racism that much power (Morgan, 1999. p. 59-60).

It is important to think in terms of survivor rather than victim. Many supportive women's empowerment groups do just that. To learn more and get involved with these concerns, I suggest books such as *Half the Sky* by Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas D. Kristof which discusses abusive situations globally and dedicates many pages to information on local, national, and global programs and organizations working with individuals as well as working against the system. The movement is online at halftheskymovement.org

Specifically with rap and hip hop music, we can and should protest rappers who are misogynist. We can do so by writing letters and emails to their agents, voicing our disgust on twitter and other social media by using a hashtag symbol to trend the concern, and choosing to buy the albums of artists who use their talent to produce music that is respectful. During many long hours that I researched my headphones were flooded with artists like India Arie, Erykah Badu, and Tupac. Moreover, songs such as Saul Williams' "Black Stacey", Lupe Fiasco's "Bad Bitch", and Macklemore's "Same Love" are songs that describe the oppression of sexism, racism, and heterosexism within society and the hip hop community.

Universities and local communities often sponsor events and host activists to speak on these topics. Even if you are not at a university, you can look online or seek out groups who are advocating for equality. Diversity and Inclusion, Cultural Celebrations, and Social Justice are identifiable key terms. At an event hosted by the Women's Center at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, I received a flyer that read "Feminism is ideology and activism based around the concept of political, economic, and social equality of all people". Feminism is needed because, as Lowe states, "today's girl is the woman not yet determined" (Lowe, 2003. p. 140). And today's youth are the leaders not yet developed. A feminism that is empowering on spiritual, material, physical, and emotional levels is needed. Everyone in society participates, therefore is responsible, for communicating messages about racial relations and gender hierarchies to our youth. Whether as a rap artist or a movie producer, or a parent, a community member, an educator, or a human being, we must understand the system in which we, and our youth, live in order to criticize and change it. A feminism that can do that is needed.

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