

*“Ladies, Now Let’s Get in Formation”*  
*Understanding Activism, Empowerment, and*  
*Feminism of Black Female Popular Artists*

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines the messages of activism and empowerment that are present in the music of currently popular Black female artists. Specifically, it analyzes in which ways these messages of empowerment can be placed in a Black feminist discourse. Furthermore, it explores if mediated feminism can present new forms of womanhood, and whether the presence of feminist messages in popular culture aid in the strength of feminism or leads to its demise. The case studies included in this research are Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj. Grounded in theories of feminism by Kimberly Crenshaw, Stacy Gillis, Angela McRobbie, and Anastasia Valassopoulos, theories of Black feminism by Patricia Hill Collins, Ula Y. Taylor, and theories of popular culture by Jaap Kooijman and Diane Railton and Paul Watson, the analysis of instances of female empowerment in personal and performance feminism showed that both women present different forms of Black feminism. Although Beyoncé and Minaj show different practices and degrees of activism and empowerment, both presented new paradigms of womanhood, and their forms of feminism, although mediated, did show feminism's demise.

**Key Words:**

Feminism, Black feminism, popular culture, Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj, intersectionality, pop music, female empowerment, activism, social change.



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# Table of Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>1.1 Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Music</i>	3
<i>1.2 Activism and Black Female Performers</i>	4
<i>1.3 The Issue of Whiteness</i>	7
<i>1.4 Introducing Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj</i>	8
<i>1.5 Methodology</i>	10
<b>Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>1.1 Gender Studies and Black Feminist Theory</i>	14
<i>1.2 Theories of Popular Culture</i>	19
<i>1.3 Feminism in Popular Music</i>	22
<b>Chapter 2: Beyoncé</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>2.1 Personal Feminism</i>	26
<i>2.2 Performance Feminism</i>	29
2.2.1 Lyrics	30
2.2.2 Performances	36
2.2.3 Visual Imagery and Music Videos	39
<b>Chapter 3: Nicki Minaj</b>	<b>44</b>
<i>3.1 Personal Feminism</i>	45
<i>3.2 Performance Feminism</i>	47
3.2.1 Lyrics	48
3.2.2 Performances	53
3.2.3 Visual Imagery in Music Videos	55
<b>Chapter 4: Discussion</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>4.1 Personal Experience and Group Knowledge</i>	58
<i>4.2 Significance of Change</i>	60
<i>4.3 Feminism and Projects of Social Change</i>	62
<i>4.4 New Paradigms of Womanhood</i>	64
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>5.1 Summary</i>	66
<i>5.2 Conclusion</i>	67
<i>5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research</i>	70
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>77</b>

# Introduction

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Over the last few decades American society has become increasingly aware of race and gender inequality. Movements fighting for equality for people of color, such as Black Lives Matter, have gained media attention and their protests have made those who are not personally victim to the struggles of color painfully conscious of prevailing issues of discrimination. Police shootings of young Black men—who oftentimes turned out not to be armed or violent—have globally reinstated discussions on racial profiling and institutionalized racism (Blow; Cole; M.S.). Police brutality in the United States has been frontpage news in many European countries (M.S.), and has sometimes been discussed more than problems within Europe itself—news of the Ferguson shootings and riots was covered in European newspapers more extensively than the anti-semitic riots in Paris in July 2014 (M.S.). News and implications of Black Lives Matter and their protests reach far beyond American borders, and have therefore, amongst many other influences, globally reignited discussions on racial inequality and discrimination.

In addition to racial inequality, gender inequality and discrimination are still present within American society. New figures have emerged showing that female employees still earn less than males, and are less likely to promote to executive positions (Hill 4). This inequality is even larger for women of color, who are paid even less of a percentage of men in the same professional environment, and are even less likely to hold an executive position. These women are not only faced with the issues that come with being either female or Black, but have to deal with several intersecting oppressions simultaneously. Furthermore, women are continuously being exploited and sexualized in their everyday lives and in the media, which revived the need for a transnational, multiracial feminism. Black women, therefore, face a multitude of oppressions that are not faced by their White or male peers. Struggling with both the stereotypes and expectations that come with being female, and those attributed to being Black, this intersecting oppression calls for a new approach to discussing gender and race, which is inclusive of all women, not just the White middle-class. New in this approach is presenting a multifaceted feminism that recognizes the intersecting oppressions of gender and race, yet does not exclude women facing different intersecting oppression. Important in this approach is the way in which young Black women come into contact with feminism. Due to

the large reach and influence of popular culture, this is a medium where women of color as well as people who do not face similar oppressions can be made aware of the struggle of Black women.

Feminism has been viewed as a generally “[W]hite’ discourse that upholds divisive borders” (Valassopoulos 198). In breaking through the barrier of White privilege that is present even in current day feminist thinking, or third wave feminism, scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis draw attention to the experiences of African-American women in the field of feminism. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states that she feels as though she is “one voice in a dialogue among people who [have] been silenced”, and uses her own experiences and the stories of women she encounters to break the silence and give a voice to those who have been othered and silenced (xiv-xv). By portraying the experiences of Black women not merely as a sub-category of experiences of womanhood as a whole, but as something with the right to have its own field of scholarly discussion without being compared to its White counterpart, Collins draws attention to the difficulties present in the discussion of Black feminism. Seeing Black feminism as a movement in its own right further highlights the importance of new approach to intersectional feminism: women of all colors are embraced in Black feminism through its focus on various forms of oppression. The challenge in analyzing the activism, empowerment, and feminism of Black female popular artists using a new intersectional form of feminism is establishing how it differs from previously established theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw), and establishing why a new form of feminist thought is needed—especially considering the individualism present in third wave feminism.

In order to grasp the impact of Black feminism, I intend to research the connection between the growth of the Black feminist movement and the portrayal of Black women in popular culture. The aspect in which this will be most present is in the music industry, as it is easily available for consumption through platforms such as Tidal, Spotify, and Youtube, and as it forms an integral part of people’s lives—Americans listen to over four hours of music a day on average, and that number rises when in the age group of 13- to 24-year-olds (Stutz). Therefore, although popular culture consists of a wide array of different cultural aspects and social processes, I have decided to focus primarily on the consequences of Black and female portrayal in popular music. To fully reach an understanding of the current impact of Black female popular artists’ empowerment and activism, I intend to provide a brief history of Black activism, female activism, and the connection between the two fields that has resulted in a separate Black female activism. The activism that will be discussed is not a political activism,

rather it focuses on the strength of empowerment in popular music, and the way in which this can affect society. Using the changes and influences of (Black) feminism in the 20th and 21st century, the performances and beliefs of current-day Black female artists will be examined. The place of the Black feminist within an ever-changing and highly influential industry will be examined by discussing two case studies of Black women within the music industry, namely the greatly successful artists Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj—both in different fields of popular culture, both conveying explicit messages of empowerment, and both highly influential and outstanding businesswomen. An important critique to the analysis of these two artists' feminism is that as they are part of a capitalized industry, their messages might lose meaning through commercialization. However, an examination of the artists' gender roles, body politics, and performances, along with their statements on their own feminism and femininity, will prove that even though music is made to sell, it can still hold activist, inspiring, and empowering messages, and will ultimately result in better understanding of the importance of Black feminism in gender studies, and the importance of Black, openly feminist, female performers.

### **1.1 Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Music**

Feminism and popular music play a large role in contemporary life. Although not everyone is as aware of, or willing to acknowledge, the issues of feminism and femininity, they have become an intrinsic part of (female) popular artists' lives. This is demonstrated, for example, by interviews in which female artists have to continuously explain whether or not they consider themselves feminist, a question full of implications for the artists' public perception. A recent trend which involves female singers negating their affiliation with feminism—their reasons usually having to do with their belief in equal rights and their love for men (“10 Celebrities”; Hampp)—shows that the term ‘feminism’ still suffers from misunderstanding and very negative connotations, most of which have to do with a hatred of men. Although this trend seems to be slowing down—female artists are increasingly involved in discussions on feminism and femininity—the necessity of asking celebrities whether they would identify as feminists shows the strong connection between feminism and popular culture.

This connection goes beyond personal beliefs on equality and feminism, and is also present in many works of popular culture—work that is consumed by the masses and able to reshape and reeducate millions. As will be explained in further detail in the following chapter, both feminism and popular music have the ability to suggest and endorse certain ideas on a

global scale, and are thus capable of shaping identities and altering public opinion. Both are able, in their own ways, to challenge social constructs of gender and present new concepts of identity. Popular music is able to identify, criticize, and reshape representations of race and gender in society. It is able to “challenge and redefine hegemonic representations of femininity” (Railton and Watson 18), and can thus present a great platform for feminist discussion.

Theories of Black feminism and popular culture are further able to connect the two fields. The historical exploitation and misrepresentation of Black women goes hand in hand with popular music’s—and especially music videos’—ability to change media representation of women. The over-sexualization of the Black female body and the over-sexualization of all women in the music industry show similar oppressions, much like the prevailing masculinity of certain music genres, such as rap and hip-hop. Popular music, like feminism, gives women agency to control their own body and their own representation. Therefore, placing feminism within the context of popular music can result in new notions of self-identification. Chapter one will establish in which ways feminism is present in popular culture, and how this is relevant in the discussion of new forms of activism and empowerment. Works by Patricia Hill Collins, Railton and Watson, Byerly and Ross, Crenshaw, and McRobbie—amongst others—will provide the basis for a discussion on feminism, popular culture, Black feminist thought, and the way these are all connected. Feminism plays a large role in current-day society, and as pop culture serves as a representation of society, is increasingly present in the works of singers of popular music. Therefore, the connection between feminism and culture places the case studies this thesis will examine at the center of the two fields. Popular music’s ability to convey messages of feminism and empowerment is demonstrated by the analysis of Beyoncé and Minaj’s work. Using this interconnectedness, a better understanding of activism, empowerment, and feminism as presented by Black female popular artists will ensue, and will further establish whether these performers present new paradigms of womanhood or aid in feminism’s demise.

## **1.2 Activism and Black Female Performers**

To discuss the manner in which Black female artists engage with activism, empowerment, and feminism, the efforts and achievements of Black female performers need to be considered. This reference to the past is necessary to show how activism of Black female performers has changed, and to add to the importance of the case studies that will be

examined. To limit the scope of this brief historical detour I will focus mainly on artists that hosted explicitly activist messages from the 1920s to today, providing examples of the most important female artists in the development of Black feminism to get a brief overview of the rise of the Black female artist in American popular music. Although this will not be discussed in more detail throughout this thesis, offering examples of activism and empowerment by Black female artists from several genres of music in several time periods will provide a background from which we can move to the present to examine the feminism and activism of currently popular Black female artists. Connections between these women's activism and that of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj will provide interesting insights into aspects of feminism in popular culture today. Therefore, even though further examination of the historical impact of messages of activism and empowerment by Black female performers will not be provided, this brief overview will show that the activism and empowerment in current music is much more overt and thus much more effective.

Firstly, female blues singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith—popular during the 1920s and 1930s—paved the way for a discussion on female sexuality. Both women “preached about sexual love, and in so doing they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed” (Davis 9). Rainey and Smith articulated a new Black female sexuality that was linked to the personal and social freedom that had for so long been repressed. Although sexuality was present both in men's and women's blues, female singers openly “[emphasizing] love and sexuality” (Davis 11) changed the notion that women belonged in private and domestic spheres. As Ula Y. Taylor states in a chapter of *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*:

[By critiquing] male chauvinism, patriarchy, and domestic violence...performers such as “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith generated their own black feminist consciousness...an assertive, independent, and sexually aware model for black women...[Blues] singers pushed beyond middle-class black feminist restraint by asserting their sexual equality with men in both public and private spheres. (65)

Blues women pushed the boundaries of what was expected of them and took control over their sexuality, thereby creating a new form of resistance and activism that made them, at least in some aspects, equal to men.

Billie Holiday, a jazz singer with noticeable roots in blues, was an important figure in the late 1930s. Although formal blues was not very noticeable in her repertoire, themes of individual freedom, love, and sexuality were still greatly present in her work. Mostly through love songs, Holiday challenged perceptions of the Black woman whose function is solely to wed and support her husband, and later provide domestic comfort for her children. Her work “bears the mark of a new moment in African-American history, a moment characterized by an accelerated process of individualization in the Black community” (Davis 171). Furthermore, the highly political “Strange Fruit” established Billie Holiday as an activist. This “‘personal protest’ against racism...radically transformed her status in American popular culture... ‘Strange Fruit’ firmly established her as a pivotal figure in a new tendency in Black musical culture that directly addressed issues of racial injustice” (Davis 181). Her performance of “Strange Fruit” brought to mind images of the horrors of lynching, and once again put resistance and protest at the center of Black musical tradition. Therefore, “Strange Fruit” shows a new development of Black feminism in the music industry:

Holiday was following in the footsteps of a host of black artists who preceded her, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who to varying degrees—and against the social conventions and expectations of the dominant culture, including the music industry itself—incorporated into their music their own brand of critical social consciousness. (197)

Billie Holiday thus combined traditions present in Black musical culture and incorporated them in a modern form of jazz.

Several famous Black female singers followed in the footsteps of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday, such as Tina Turner—whose 1993 album *What's Love Got To Do With It* discussed issues of domestic violence and female strength—Whitney Houston—who defied expectations of stereotypical exploitation of the Black female body by using her voice to gain stardom (Kooijman, “True Voice” 305)—and Janet Jackson—who explicitly urged her fans to “join voices in protest/ to social injustice” on her album *Rhythm Nation*. Starting in the 1990s, African-American women began to find their place in the rap and hip-hop scene. Rapper Missy Elliot established “sexuality as power” (White 615), while continuously questioning and thus threatening “the heteronormative, patriarchal systems that [maintained] men’s dominance in the rap industry” (619). Elliot used her social status as a way to make her audience aware of the male domination in her field. Missy Elliot was among the first women



to be truly successful in the hip-hop music industry, and thus exemplifies a great leap in African-American women's standing in popular music: from blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith who explicitly discussed female sexuality, to rapper Missy Elliot who challenges the patriarchy through rap.

Although this seems like a big leap in time, it shows how throughout the twentieth century, Black female artists have presented messages of empowerment and activism in their music. This brief overview of Black female popular artists who have been instrumental to the position many Black female artists find themselves in today is by no means all inclusive, nor do I claim that it fully grasps the importance of all these artists in the struggle for equal rights. What I have aimed to do is provide a historical context for the case studies that will be discussed in chapters three and four. Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj would have never been able to convey messages of feminism, nor engage in activism without the efforts of women such as Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Missy Elliot. The way in which these women have paved the way for discussions of sexuality, inequality, and heteronormativity is important to keep in mind when examining the power of contemporary Black female performers, as it shows how similar issues of inequality and reclaiming the female body remain important.

### **1.3 The Issue of Whiteness**

Important to note in a discussion on Black feminism and the way it is portrayed in popular music is how society, including fields of feminism and pop culture, has historically been whitewashed. As Richard Dyer notes:

Research—into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software—repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard. (3)

This attention to White as the norm, thus resulting in abundant representation of White people in media, offers a starting point to discuss the relevance of Black feminism and images of people of color in popular culture. Both aspects that will be discussed in this thesis are part of a discourse that has traditionally been part of a White mainstream, thus needing extra emphasis on the importance of their Black representation. Popular music has mainly seen successful White artists, resulting in the belief that it is particularly notable when a Black

female artist becomes popular. The same can be said about mainstream feminism—it has for so long been a field in which mainly White middle-class women’s issues were discussed, that it can be seen as distinctive when a separate feminism that fights for Black female rights emerges.

It is, however, quite dangerous to state this dichotomy between White popular culture and feminism, and Black pop culture and feminism, as it implies that the latter simply emerged from the former and is thus in some way inferior. Seeing Black feminist thought as an afterthought to mainstream feminism—which would be a direct implication of placing Black feminism as emerging from a White discourse—discredits the legitimacy and individuality of the experiences of Black women<sup>1</sup>. Of course, it is relevant to note that both feminism and popular culture have been predominantly White, but Black feminism and culture should not be placed directly opposite White hegemonic culture. Rather, I choose to briefly highlight this point to show the importance of Black feminist thought and the representation of Black women in popular music. Comparing White feminism and Black feminism in order to reach a conclusion on what Black feminist thought entails seems counter-productive in this thesis: in order to properly analyze the empowerment and activism of Black female performers they need to be examined in their own right, not by standards that are not representative of Black experience. Therefore, it is important to remember that feminism and popular culture have been part of a White discourse, but merely because it adds agency to the discussion on representations of Black feminism in popular music.

#### **1.4 Introducing Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj**

The two case studies that will be discussed in the following chapters are singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter—going by the stage name Beyoncé—and rapper Onika Tanya Maraj—professionally known as Nicki Minaj. Beyoncé is a singer of pop music, whose latest album *Lemonade* has over 2 million units of album consumption<sup>2</sup> (Christman). Viewed as the most

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<sup>1</sup> Placing Black women’s experiences and ideas separately from those of White women ensures Black feminism and Black female struggles remain central to this thesis. Not elaborately using whiteness, therefore, ensures Black feminist thought can be seen as a movement within its own right (Collins viii).

<sup>2</sup> Album consumption includes sales of both physical and digital albums, album streams, and track streams. *Lemonade*’s 2.01 million total album consumption comes in under Drake’s *Views* with 3.57 million units, and Adele’s 25 with 2.10 million units (Christman)

powerful pop star in the music industry, and by her fans referred to as “Queen Bey”, Beyoncé’s influence is larger than that of most popular music artists (Davies; Knight; Trier-Bieniek 1). Representing “glamour and unrestrained consumption”, she offers “if not a solution, then an apparent salve to the enduring effects of racism” (Cashmore 135). Beyoncé represents a new Black woman fighting for her rights, using self-empowerment and new forms of activism to make whoever listens to her music aware of the message that she is trying to convey—Black women are equal to, if not better than, all others.

As will be explained in more detail later in this thesis, Beyoncé embeds notions of Black female sexuality in her lyrics and music videos, and this embedded feminism has been largely studied by academics (e.g. Cashmore; Durham; Trier-Bieniek; Weidhase). However, the question I am posing on the presence of new forms of activism and empowerment in her personal and performance feminism deviates from what previous research has examined; namely how is this new activism connected to Black feminist thought, and thus different from previous forms of activism, and how does this add to the danger of over-mediated feminism. In order to answer this question I will distinguish and analyze different messages of empowerment, and examine how these instances of empowerment relate to aspects of Black feminist thought—which will be clarified in chapter one. Furthermore, the concept of womanhood is related to the presence of activism and empowerment in the instances of empowerment and activism in the personal and performance feminism of both Beyoncé and Minaj.

Minaj has been discussed less than Beyoncé has in previous research, but comparisons of Minaj to other African-American rappers are certainly present (White), as well as analyses of her portrayal of Black sexuality and the Black female body (Turner, J; Wallis). Being the biggest female rapper in current popular music (Grigoriadis), Minaj dominates a field that has historically been a masculine one. Leading the hip-hop industry, Minaj has overcome this male hegemony, and thus represents a different struggle and feminism from Beyoncé: White women have long dominated pop music, whereas Black men have generally controlled rap music. Theories of gender become relevant in the case studies as both women use the strength of femininity in their music. Moreover, they both rely on issues related to with womanhood to convey empowerment and present messages of activism. Both women faced different issues in their rise to fame, and thus present different forms of activism and empowerment to convey messages of Black female strength.

## **I.5 Methodology**

To examine the ways in which currently popular Black female artists incorporate issues of race and gender, as well as the extent of their activism, specific case studies will be discussed to provide an in-depth analysis of the importance of feminism in popular music today.

Themes that have been present in music by Black female performers over the last century, as has been discussed previously, will help identify the new forms of activism present in the work of these popular Black female artists. Using the six distinguishing features of Black feminism, which will be presented in chapter one, the presence or absence of aspects of Black feminism in works by both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj will be examined. Questioning the way in which international audiences are able to relate to issues presented by the artists will result in a clearer idea on the possibility of a transnational form of feminism. Reviewing the way in which the artists' works and ideas are received by a global public, and comparing this to theories of Black feminist thought will lead to a better understanding of the effect of an intersectional Black feminism. This will be done separately for both case studies, ultimately leading to a comparison between the two women and their portrayal of Black feminism.

After discussing the necessary theories, the subsequent chapters will establish the presence of messages of empowerment in Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj's work, as well as the resulting activism and feminism. Both case studies discussed in chapters two and three will consist of two main aspects in which representations of feminism will be examined: personal and performance feminism. By assessing interviews Beyoncé and Minaj have given, either on paper or on film, documentaries, and statements on social media, a conclusion can be drawn on the manifestation of their personal feminism. The assessment of performance feminism consists of three distinctive parts: the review of lyrics; the feminist messages that are apparent during their performances; and the imagery that is present in music videos. As popular culture has the power to produce and reshape images of gender and race, the adherence to stereotypes in their performance feminism will form a big part of the analysis. Research by Rana Emerson, Theresa Renee White, Cara Wallis, and Jacob S. Turner will aid in the examination of race, sexuality, and black womanhood in music videos. Comparisons and contrasts between Beyoncé and Minaj will be discussed in chapter four, as well as how their activism and empowerment are part of a Black feminist discourse. Lastly, chapter five will place Beyoncé and Minaj's music in a grander narrative regarding feminism. Their personal and performance feminism need to be placed within the feminist discourse in order to become relevant for further research, which will also show the importance of intersectional feminism

as stated in research by Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, and Ula Y. Taylor. This will also show the presence of new paradigms of womanhood, and the danger or success of mediated feminism.

Using both a brief historical approach and an approach from racial and gender studies places Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj at the center of Black feminism within this thesis. By examining how messages regarding intersectional oppressions can be identified in both women's personal and performance feminism, as well as the way in which these artists are able counter these oppressions through language and visual imagery, will provide a deeper insight into the presence of Black feminist thought in their works. Keeping in mind the importance of the music video in the representation of gender, race, and sexuality, and the way in which popular artist are able to use their power to change public perception on, and awareness of, social and cultural issues, can offer new insights into the influence of Black feminist theory in popular culture. Examining the relation between feminism, Black feminism, and popular music will lead to an understanding of the empowerment and activism of female Black popular artists, as well as the way in which Black feminist theory enables new forms of activism through popular culture. My hypothesis is, therefore, that Black feminist influences can be found in the music of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj—both in their personal and performance feminism—and their status allows them to use their cultural influence to promote an intersectional feminism that strives for Black female equality. Black feminist thought will offer new perspectives in the study of popular music, in which new forms of activism and empowerment that are in keeping with the vital role of individualization in third wave feminism are offered.

# Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

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In order to discuss the importance of strong female African-American role models and the impact of their views on, and representation of gender and race struggles, this chapter will present the necessary theories required to answer my research question: How do currently popular Black female artists represent aspects of activism, empowerment, and feminism, and in which ways to they use this empowerment to create new paradigms of womanhood? To reach a conclusion, it is vital to establish a clear connection between gender studies, race studies, and popular culture. With this link in mind, I will discuss the concept of gender studies and Black feminist thought. In this chapter, a distinction will be drawn between different forms of feminism, specifically White and Black feminist theory. As feminism has historically been part of “a ‘white’ discourse that uphold[s] divisive borders” (Valassopoulos 198), Black women have for a long time not been properly represented in issues present in feminist dialogues. Additionally, Black women have been part of either the White-dominated field of gender studies, or participated in protests concerning the struggles of the African-American community, but have rarely had the means to produce own intersectional theories on the struggles of Black women. Lastly, theories of feminism and popular culture need to be linked in order to properly analyze the presence of Black feminism in popular music. Thus, feminism and popular culture become connected, and need to be examined in relation to each other. This will be done by first separately presenting theories of feminism and popular culture, which will then allow for a more detailed discussion on the interconnectedness of both fields.

Underrepresentation and misrepresentation go beyond the field of feminist studies, and can also be seen in popular music. This misrepresentation in popular culture partly stems from third wave feminists’ growing focus on the body and individualism (Shugart et al. 194), and the emphasis on women’s right to control their own sexuality and “having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are” (195). This individual feminism, seemingly without rules or consequences, could result in the possible representation of third wave feminists as reckless and unconcerned with the results of their sexual liberation, making it undoubtedly easy for media to conjure up images of young women acting in what by hegemonic society could be considered as amoral ways. The opposite could also happen—women who self-identify as feminists and do not fit the binaries that are present in society are simply not represented in mass media. The mainstreaming of feminism through media

therefore becomes twofold: the media have finally accepted feminism and their attention can aid in the progress of women, or this phenomenon is “dangerous for feminism, largely due to the slick media conventions to convey [representations of feminism]” (196). When the presence and mediation of feminism are considered dangerous, the statement that “it is precisely the media’s appropriation of feminist issues that contributes to the undoing of feminism” (Railton and Watson 22) presents a daunting juxtaposition—media attention to feminism results in feminisms demise.

This media attention to feminism and the possible death of feminism through overexposure results in a call for new forms of activism. Existing forms of feminism and activism have, as Railton and Watson suggest, been overly mediated and thus no longer represent society. Establishing new forms of activism that are in keeping with new paradigms of womanhood that are present in third wave feminism leads to an activism that is more personal than it has ever been. No longer do women need to march and protest in masses to create awareness and to dispense with oppression, rather they fight individual battles in their personal spheres—or even online—to battle the inequalities that are present in their lives. Being a third wave feminist no longer means going out into the world to present collective experiences of discrimination and imbalance, but combating oppression from your personal experience. Activism can be a woman clearly stating to the world that she is a feminist and what exactly she beliefs in, or it can entail individual action that shows she is in fact battling suppression. Activism can be superstar Beyoncé performing in a large stadium in front of a sign that reads ‘FEMINIST’, or it can be a young girl discussing inequality in school.

This new activism and feminism thus results in new forms of empowerment. Empowerment no longer arises from group dynamics, but from individualization and self-identification, where a woman’s *choice* to either fight or adhere to stereotypes is empowering. New forms of empowerment can also involve adhering to stereotypes while simultaneously resisting them by self-defining as someone different than how you are perceived. Adhering to expectations of being a woman—of being a Black woman—does not mean you cannot be empowered, even though you cannot directly act upon your empowerment. Empowerment thus comes from within, and although linked to new forms of activism, does not mean an empowered woman needs to explicitly vocalize and express in which way she is part of the feminist discourse. New forms of activism battle the over-mediated feminism by providing new platforms of individual empowerment.

The historical Whiteness of feminism, misrepresentation in popular music, over-mediation in popular culture, and new forms of activism and empowerment are all relevant

aspects in discussing the importance of representation of Black feminism by popular Black female artists. Establishing a historical framework of Black feminism and the way in which hegemonic feminism has been whitewashed will provide a theoretical background to the necessity of new forms of feminism and activism. Misrepresentation of Black women in popular culture, and specifically popular music, will lead to the same conclusion—that new forms of activism are present and necessary. After establishing the existence and scope of all aforementioned aspects, it is vital to see how this pans out in the real world. Applying theories of Black feminism and popular music to two case studies will show that new forms of activism and empowerment are present, and that the influence of popular culture goes beyond national, cultural, racial, and gender boundaries. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to establish a clear understanding of Black feminist theory and the way in which it is incorporated into popular music, as well as offer a clear set of constraints with which the personal and performance feminism of both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj can be analyzed.

### **1.1 Gender Studies and Black Feminist Theory**

Feminism has long been of interest in many fields of research. Discussions on social class, nationalism, politics, and popular culture usually include some degree of feminist dialogue. It is not surprising, therefore, that these aspects can be connected to each other by viewing them through a feminist lens. As “[there] have always been women writing about, concerned with and acting in the interests of women” (Gillis et al. xxi), it is important to recognize the different movements in feminism that have been present throughout the last three centuries, with specific focus on the latest movement of feminism. These moments of resistance and activism have been categorized in three waves: the first involves women who partook in the nineteenth-century women’s movement; the second shows a “self-identified feminist movement” (xxi) during the 1960s and 70s; and the third—although opinions on the existence a third wave, ‘postfeminist’ movement vary—has been the time after the 1990s (xxi-xxiii). The latter two are most important to keep in mind when discussing the presence of Black feminism in popular music, due to the aspects of self-identification and individualism.

Contention on the existence of a third wave feminist movement lies mainly in the belief that third wave feminists seem to lack knowledge of the history of the women’s movement. The move away from the political to interpretations of society and culture appears to show a move away from ‘the personal is political’ standpoint that has long been present in feminist discourse. A shift “away from ... power blocks ... to more dispersed sites, events,



and instances of power” (McRobbie “Post-Feminism”, 256) marks this move from group activism to individual agency. This is further characterized by a hatred towards being labeled as a feminist, which is the result of “the new female subject [being] called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl” (260). Silence and reluctance to identify as feminist is a large part of individualized third wave feminism, as “few young women identify themselves as feminists. It is old and weary...For many young women, feminism at best refers to the battles fought by their mothers or their teachers way back in the 1920s” (McRobbie, “Sweet Smell” 211-2). To self-identify as a feminist is no longer the admired thing to do, and has been celebrated in popular culture with famous female singers such as Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Katy Perry claiming to not be feminists. A famous singer stating, “I am not a feminist, but I believe in the strength of women” (Hampp), suggests to (young) women all over the globe that to believe in the advancement of women is different from feminism, thus rendering the latter inconsequential.

This representation of feminism as redundant becomes even more important when considering social classes and races that are heavily underrepresented in media, business, politics, and popular culture: only 10% of U.S. House seats are won by African-Americans; just 13% of actors in top-grossing films in 2014 were African-American; and under 1% of American CEOs were black in the Fortune 500 last year (Ostermeier n.p; Santhanam and Grigger n.p.; “Here’s Why”). This means that Black women are not only being told it is no longer important to fight for the female cause, they are also greatly disadvantaged due to lasting prejudice and continuing, forced, absence of Black representation in several cultural fields. Black women are stripped of any platform upon which they can build their form of feminism—they can neither rely on mainstream media justify issues of race, as their struggles are simply not represented, nor turn to mainstream feminism since it is no longer considered relevant. Famous Black women who self-identify as feminists are thus important to advance a feminist movement specifically tailored to better the lives of African-American women, as it creates visibility for a group of women who have for too long been silenced.

Due to the prevalence of White hegemony in feminist studies, there appears to be a “basic unwillingness by many US White feminists to alter the paradigms that guide their work” (Collins 8). Canonized theories of feminism tend to focus on White middle-class Western women’s issues that are problematic to relate to for many women of color. To challenge this White hegemonic feminism, a form of feminist theory that embodied the oppression and suppression faced by African-American women needed to be established. Unlike calls for multiracial feminism in the 1970s, this Black feminist thought was not a form

of edited White feminism, but expressed the true issues and wishes of the African-American female. This does not mean, however, that women of color “emerged in reaction to (and therefore later than) white feminism” (Thompson 41). Women of color had long been active in “white-dominated feminist groups” (40), and Black feminist organizing emerged at roughly the same time as White feminism. It was not until much later, however, that African-American women successfully separated from mainstream White feminism and were recognized as a group with a need for specified Black feminist thought.

The need for Black feminism is spelled out in Patricia Hill Collins’ book *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins analyzes how US Black feminist thought arose from African-American communities, and its importance in modern-day society. Much like Becky Thompson’s statement on the inclusion of Black women in mainly White movements and the gradual appearance of separate Black feminism, Collins highlights the historical suppression of Black female scholarship, and the necessity of an intersectional feminism that incorporates issues much different from those found in the canonized White, second wave feminism. Collins does not discuss at what point exactly Black feminist thinking came into existence, rather she states that two “especially prominent moments characterize Black feminism’s visibility” (34). The first moment in which Black feminism became clearly visible was at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when several black women’s clubs, focusing on health, education, and racial uplift, merged and formed the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. This formation of a national association clearly demonstrated a combined effort of African-American women to stand together to support their cause, effectively making Black feminist thought visible. Secondly, the “Black feminist movement was stimulated by the anti-racist and women’s social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s and continues to the present”. In “Black Feminisms and Human Agency” Ula Y. Taylor adds that Black feminism’s visibility is “directly connected to, and [an] outgrowth of, key movements in African-American history” (61), namely the post-civil rights era during which many forms of feminism were institutionalized. Throughout these different moments of visible Black feminisms, however, African-American women were supporting either their race, or their gender, and did not yet have a separate place within the movement to fight for both race and gender. This separation between gender and race will be discussed later, when the importance of intersectionality within black feminist thought is examined.

After these three moments of visibility, Black feminist thought and scholarship became increasingly important in general feminist discourse. Black feminism distinguishes itself with several features that cannot be found in other forms of feminism. Collins explores

“six distinguishing features that characterize Black feminist thought” (25), hoping to establish a feminism that many women of African descent can identify with. The six most characteristic features of Black feminism are, according to Collins: the unifying power of common challenges; the issues coming from these challenges that create a tension in linking personal experiences and ideas; the connections between personal, differentiating experiences and the resulting group knowledge; the importance of female African-American scholars; the significance of change; and Black feminist thought’s relationship to other social justice projects (28-48). The first three of these six distinguishing features focus on the relationship between individual and collective understanding, the last three once again show the importance of visibility within the social and academic community. Due to the limitations of this thesis I will focus my analysis of Beyoncé’s and Minaj’s activism and empowerment on three main points: the connection between personal experience and group knowledge, the significance of change, and Black feminist thought’s connection to other social justice projects. The aspects mentioned by Collins concerning the unifying power of common challenges and the tension between linking personal experiences and ideas can be placed within the three aspects I am discussing, and therefore do not require individual attention. Furthermore, as this thesis is not focused on Black academics but Black performers, the importance of African-American female scholars will also not be part of the analysis.

An important factor linking all six aforementioned features is the idea that “Black feminist thought must be tied to Black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (Collins 35). These ties to women’s lived experiences must go beyond U.S. borders to establish a form of global Black feminism. This presents a challenge, as African-American women undoubtedly have different experiences than Black women living elsewhere. However, “Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women’s particular needs” (26), thus creating a transnational form of feminism that exceeds local issues of race and gender. What is viewed as third wave feminism has generally been a White, academic feminism and has “not yet fully articulated possibilities for global feminisms” (Gillis, et al. xxix). Feminist theories are still largely dictated by the demands of social groups within particular Nation-States, and are therefore entrenched in a nationalist discourse that prevents the establishment of a global movement. The need to “free feminism from nationalist discourse” (Valassopoulos 207) in order to create a transnational feminism becomes especially apparent when examining the juxtaposition of Black feminism’s wishes of representing all women of African descent, and hegemonic

feminism's struggle in defining who exactly belongs to the category of 'woman', thereby excluding certain social groups in their "battle of hermeneutics" (Chakraborty 104).

The significance of a global, transnational Black Feminism becomes especially apparent when the "matrix of domination" (Collins 246) that is present in Black women's lives is examined. Describing the social organization within which intersectional oppressions are present, a matrix of domination shows the similar oppressions that are faced by Black women both within and outside of the United States. Although relations of "dominance and resistance" (247) differ throughout the globe—race relations in Western nations are very different from those in Jamaica and postcolonial nations—a "transnational matrix of domination presents certain challenges for women of African descent. Intersecting oppressions do not stop at U.S. borders. Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation constitute global phenomena that have a particular organization in the United States" (250). The interconnectedness of Black women's experiences ensures that U.S. black feminism should be viewed "as part of an "intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement"" (252).

To connect intersectional oppression and Black feminism, Collins states that the broad interests of the Black feminist movement are due to the many challenges African-American women have to face in different aspects of their lives.

If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would be unnecessary. As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions. Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated, Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs. (25-6)

Intersectionality, therefore, is an inherent part of Black feminism, and can be used "as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" (Crenshaw 1296). Viewing intersectionality as a vital aspect of Black feminism not only opens up discussions revolving around many different parts of U.S. Black women's lives, but also connects experiences from Black women all over the globe.

Lastly, sexual politics constitute a big part of African-American women's feminism, activism, and self-definition. Historically, images of Black women as Jezebels and whores,

“mules or objects of pleasure” (Collins 143) have dominated social constructs of Black female sexuality. Where the Black woman was depicted as a woman with loose morals, the White woman remained pure, “asexual [and] to be protected by marriage” (144). Lasting images of “the myth that all white women were chaste, all black women were without virtue, and all black men were rapists” (Taylor 66) ensured the Othering of the Black female sexuality, and ensured its absence in feminist discourse. The silence surrounding this particular form of oppression can be viewed as “‘the last taboo’ of disclosing ‘not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism’” (Collins 134), since challenging the ideas of Black female sexuality might challenge racial solidarity. However, activism regarding changing perceptions of sexuality does not have to be explicit, and can be part of resistance through self-definition. Refusing to abandon self-definition, some women “pretend to be mules and mammies and thus appear to conform to institutional rules [while] they resist by creating their own self-definitions and self-valuations in the safe spaces they create among one another” (220).

## 1.2 Theories of Popular Culture

Since the growing popularity of mass culture, it has become increasingly accessible: current developments such as music streaming through programs like Spotify and Tidal, online videos on YouTube, and television shows and movies on Netflix make it progressively easy for people to consume popular culture. This mass production of culture that arose from the industrialization of society after the 1920s, when a shift away from European high culture towards American popular culture altered “the balance of power in the relations of culture” (Hall 287). Establishing how this mass production of culture is significant in modern society will provide clear insight into the influence mass culture can have on society. Also, theories of popular culture need to be linked to particular fields of research in order to be fully effective as tools to examine the influence of popular culture on society. Although popular culture “cannot be defined except in relation to particular theories” (Strinati xvii)—particular theories meaning theories present in other fields of study—an explanation of the different aspects of theories of popular culture needs to be offered before trying to connect one field of research to another.

Before linking theories of popular culture and pop music to different fields of study we need to establish what exactly popular culture is. Popular culture can be seen as “culture which is produced by the industrial techniques of mass production, and marketed for profit to

a mass public of consumers” (Strinati 8). Popular culture thus becomes a lucrative way to convey messages to large audiences. Critics of mass culture have pointed to the success of the use of aesthetically pleasing images by the Nazi party during the Second World War, stating that mass media “transmitted and inculcated the official ideology of the fascist state because they could be controlled centrally and broadcast to the population at large”, which means that “mass media [equaled] mass propaganda [equaled] mass repression” (Strinati 4-5). Although the use of mass media to spread fascist ideals is presumably absent in many forms of American popular culture today, the efficiency with which mass culture can transfer information remains similar.

Another aspect that is vital in a discussion on popular culture is the fear of Americanization. The rise of America as a world power “and, consequently, as the center of global cultural production and circulation” (Hall 286) ensured American hegemony in the field of popular culture. In order to legitimize this claimed threat of Americanization, consumers of popular culture and mass media would need to be part of a passive audience without ability to connect their personal, heterogeneous experiences and beliefs to the homogeneity of popular culture. However, this has proven not to be the case. America’s dominance in global popular culture allows “active cultural appropriations in which mimicking and mocking often go together ... [to present] different perspectives” (Kooijman *Fabricating* 139). Non-Americans listening to Miley Cyrus’ “Party in the U.S.A” can both recognize the patriotic ideals represented in this song, and distance themselves from this American patriotism by comparing the seemingly perfect American life to their own experiences. In this thesis, a fear of Americanization is replaced by the embracing of transnationalism. Although focused on the presence of new forms of empowerment and activism in the two case studies, the global influence of superstars Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj cannot be neglected.

The reception and interpretation of popular culture outside its original context removes fears of homogeneity. The critique of Americanization shows that “popular culture is not homogeneous or [standardized] but offers diversity and difference, especially when it is reinterpreted and re-evaluated” (Strinati 35). This re-evaluation of popular culture traverses national borders due to its dependence on personal experiences of certain social classes, racial difference, and gender. In this way, popular music can at times come dangerously close to folk music. A recent example of the fading borders between the two genres can be found in Beyoncé’s latest video album *Lemonade*. This album features songs that seem to be directed at a specific audience—a Black female audience—and discusses issues such as

discrimination, police brutality towards Black youth, and issues of Black femininity. A Saturday Night Live skit of White co-workers watching “Formation” and stating “maybe this song is not for us” (“The Day Beyoncé Turned Black”), highlights the fact that even popular music can have elements of folk music. This does not immediately mean, however, that *Lemonade* can be considered part of folk music, but does warrant a change in popular music. As bell hooks remarks:

Viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color. (“Moving Beyond Pain”)

It is challenging, therefore, to suggest that the album itself was aimed towards a particular audience. Important to realize, even at this point, is that popular music can address issues that are more recognizable for some listeners, but this does not mean that audiences are excluded.

Furthermore, to suggest there is such a thing as a separate Black popular culture means that, in order to qualify cultural products as such, they need to “pass the test of authenticity” (Hall 290). Products of Black popular culture must refer “to [Black] experience and to [Black] expressivity” (290), otherwise they cannot be considered part of this specific field of popular culture. The aforementioned skit “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” shows precisely this process—her newest album refers explicitly to Black female experience, and is thus considered part of a small niche of popular culture. To state that any form of culture that does not pass the authenticity test cannot be part of Black popular culture can be quite dangerous, since—as bell hooks remarks—claiming that any form of popular culture is intended for anything but the masses misses the point of popular culture completely. Essentializing Black popular culture “naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic” (Hall 291). Just like White popular culture need not pass an authenticity test to see if it truly reflects White experience and expressivity, Black popular culture can represent many other things—popular culture is “a theater of popular desires [and] popular fantasies” (293). It is made to sell and to be profitable, and can therefore not be only intended for a small, specified market.

Popular culture seems to have a growing transnational influence, as “people’s lives in western capitalist societies appear to be [increasingly] affected by the popular culture

presented by the modern mass media” (Strinati xii). Generally viewed as no longer inferior to other, higher forms of culture, mass culture is perceived as a message that can be interpreted by people from different nationalities and social backgrounds, and can vary in meaning depending on who is listening. Popular music can thus convey ideas that can start discussions in different social and cultural groups. As will be explained in more detail in the following chapters focusing on the case studies, delivering a personal or political message in popular music can be a form of activism, in which audiences can be made aware of certain issues. Popular culture can, therefore, no longer be considered exempt from Saussure’s ideas of signification, and like a good painting its meaning can be established or interpreted by the viewer.

### **1.3 Feminism in Popular Music**

The vast effect popular culture can have on society and individuals—being able to shape identities and changing discourse—results in an increasingly important role of representation within popular culture and the media. The “symbolic annihilation of women” (Strinati 162)—meaning the misrepresentation, absence, or over-sexualization of women—that is present in modern mass media is especially worrisome due to the influence mass media have on the reconstruction of reality. Excessively mediating imagery of women creates a hyperreality in which images present in the media and popular culture are no longer representational of those who should be able to identify with the image that is portrayed (Shugart et al. 196-7). The hyperreality that is constructed consists of “a continuous simulation that creates the real as just another sign in a chain of signs which endlessly refer to each other” (Kooijman *Fabricating* 71); images that keep appearing in popular music refer to similar images that have already been presented, resulting in a lost connection between the imagined and real. This mediation and endless chain of recycled images becomes particularly challenging when considering the absence of women of color in several forms of media, and the way in which feminism—deeply embedded in media messages—continues to focus mostly on women within the White hegemonic Western world (Byerly 3-6). This hyperreality becomes especially important in the discussion on the creation of new paradigms of womanhood through popular music, which will be explained in more detail later, and the ‘demise of feminism’ as discussed at the start of this chapter.

An important aspect in the connection between feminism and popular culture is the way in which mass culture and gender are “intricately bound” (Strinati 171). In *An*



*Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, Dominic Strinati describes how “women have been held responsible for mass culture and its harmful effects, while men are privileged to have the responsibility for high culture” (170), by stating that the language used to describe popular culture and its audience are very similar to the way in which femininity is perceived—passive, vulnerable, prone to consumerism, and open to commercial exploitation (11, 164-5, 172-3). The same can be found in other genres music, where appeals to a male audience include aggression, sexual dominance, and boasting, and music intended for a female audience “plays on notions of female sexuality as serious, diffuse, and implying total emotional commitment” (Frith and McRobbie 141-2). The discourse of popular culture is thus filled with gender-based language, suggesting strong masculinity and weak, passive femininity. This suggests that the statement that “gender is merely another aspect which needs to be included to make the picture of popular culture more complete” does not suffice to explain the relation between popular culture and feminism. Popular culture and feminism are intrinsically connected through the vocabulary that is used, and the stereotypes this language evokes are part of female oppression (Strinati 171).

Another vital part in examining the relation between feminism and popular culture is the commercialized femininity that can be found in music videos. A feminist critique of music videos can emphasize the misrepresentation of the image of an inherently good or bad female. In the former, “women are identified as providing good role models ... by ... producing videos which celebrate ‘female resourcefulness’” (Railton and Watson 18), and the latter identifies women as sexually exploitative body parts. Music videos can be seen as sites where “dominant discourses are reinforced and reinscribed” (19), and where society can be both represented and criticized. Popular culture cannot only aid in the reproduction individual identities and the ideals that come with these identities, but can on its own help construct definitions of personhood (28). As a result, music videos can be seen as sites “capable of reinvigorating our critical and political imagination” (37), and can therefore be understood and interpreted in many different social and national contexts.

Accepting popular culture and the music video as sites “where definitions of both women and feminists are *produced*, not simply reproduced” (Railton and Watson 28), would mean that music videos could be viewed as the most influential medium in popular culture through which meaning can be conveyed. A move away from seeing “cultural representations as possible illustrations of theoretical ideas” (33) is a direct result of the interpretation of music videos as producers rather than reproducers of identity. Cultural representation in music videos can, therefore, not only critique or glorify certain aspects of femininity, but also

constructs entirely new paradigms of womanhood. This view gives several new positive meanings to the importance of popular culture—for it once again shows that it is not consumed by a passive audience, and in its own way has the ability to create a dialogue on gender roles—but also has a downside. The music industry, especially those businesses that aim to produce popular genres of music that are well-liked by the masses, remains an industry based on profits, and will therefore portray the cultural aspects that are most likely to sell. This means that even though music videos are able to create and reform constructions of gender, race, and sexuality, if the views are not profitable and in accordance with the masses, new representations will probably remain absent. Both the importance of music videos' ability to shape individual and group identity, as well as the reinforcement of stereotypes within popular music are fundamental in the discussion on the visual aspect of performance feminism.

Reframing persisting images of traditional femininity and masculinity can also result in changed perceptions. The challenge posed here is the difficulty in recognizing the difference between elected self-objectification and objectification by the male gaze that “projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 9). Important to distinguish between the two is to identify the main focus of the music video. A female singer choosing to be portrayed scantily clad and erotically dancing conveys a different message than a male rapper with a chorus of girls in bikinis—Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” expresses a very different visual sentiment than Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines”. Although the viewer can never be sure that Minaj chooses, without interference from managers of producers, to self-objectify, we can assume that she would not release a music video without her consent and artistic influence. However, the women in Thicke’s music video are merely there for the entertainment of the male singer, and thereby make the viewer believe the girls are there to watch and objectify. The difference between elected self-objectification, misrepresentation, and exploitation remains challenging, but can be analyzed by visualizing the intent and context in which objectification takes place. Use of the erotic does not always imply “a sign of female inferiority” (Lorde 53), but can offer “a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation” (54).

## Chapter 2: Beyoncé

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Born in Houston, Texas on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1981, Beyoncé Giselle Knowles started singing and dancing at merely seven years old, and was part of a group performing in talent shows by the end of high school. This group, which became known as Destiny's Child, signed at Columbia in 1997, marking the start of Knowles' career. The group's most popular release was the 2000 single "Say My Name". Upon releasing her first solo album *Dangerously in Love* in 2003—which debuted at number one in the Billboard 200 ("Beyoncé Branch")—Knowles' solo career started. Releasing five more albums between 2003 and 2016—all reaching number one in the Billboard 200 chart upon, or quickly after their release ("Beyoncé, Branch")—and starring in several top grossing movies, Knowles quickly became an international icon in popular culture. In 2009, Beyoncé Knowles changed her name to Beyoncé Knowles-Carter after marrying rapper Jay-Z, but her stage name Beyoncé remained the same ("Beyonce Knowles").

Beyoncé's accomplishments go beyond the immediate success of her albums and her cinematographic career; reviews of her music and recognition through winning awards add to her iconic status. Among many other awards, she received 20 Grammy Awards ("Beyoncé: Past"), and 24 VMA awards, making her the most awarded artist in the event's history (Shenton). Her most recent album, *Lemonade*, was one of only 20 albums that received a 5-star-review in Rolling Stone since 1999—and one of two albums by Black women to receive a perfect score, the first being Donna Summer's 1979 album *Bad Girls* ("Rolling Stone"). I mention all this not to demonstrate what an amazing artist Beyoncé is, but to show that wide audiences receive her music; it has a large reach and thus the ability to communicate ideas. An artist with her status is able to more effectively raise certain issues than someone who is less successful, and is therefore much more interesting to examine.

As mentioned in the introduction, I will examine two aspects upon which to base the discussion of activism and empowerment: personal and performance feminism. The aspect of performance feminism is further divided into examinations of lyrics, performances, and visual imagery. This chapter will focus on providing examples of activism and empowerment present in these two aspects of feminism. After specifying in which way all examples exemplify activism and empowerment, chapter four will use these examples and analyze them using features of Black feminism as presented in Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*. The aim in this chapter, therefore, is to establish in which ways Beyoncé portrays

new paradigms of womanhood, new forms of activism, and supports individual empowerment.

## 2.1 Personal Feminism

To discuss the activism and empowerment that comes from representation of Black feminism in popular music, it is important to establish personal beliefs artists have on activism and feminism. The following conclusions will be based on several interviews given by Beyoncé, two documentaries, and a short piece she wrote that was published in *Essence* magazine. The recognition of personal ideas is not only relevant to justify instances of activism and feminism in performance culture, but also provides insight into the importance of personal ideas of Black feminism in Black female popular artists' music. Nevertheless, it remains challenging to truly grasp Beyoncé's personal feminism, as even in interviews she has to keep her performance persona in mind. However, as Beyoncé is her own manager and thereby in control of the 'Beyoncé product', what she states remains her personal opinion—even though chances are it might be somewhat modified and mollified to adhere to established social norms.

As mentioned before, I will use three aspects of Black feminism as a guideline upon which a discussion of new forms of activism and empowerment can be based. The first aspect I will examine is the connection between personal experience and group knowledge. This connection is especially critical in an exploration of personal feminism as it is the site that will offer the clearest connection between the individual and the group. As Beyoncé writes in an *Essence* Magazine cover story, “[w]itnessing the power, beauty and strength of women—especially those living in places where their liberties are limited—is what moved me the most” (Knowles “Eat, Play, Love”). Here, she establishes that “the strength of women” as a collective, sharing struggles and victories, is what has moved her most throughout her career. She shows that the strength of women—that she unquestionably harbors—is a connecting factor between herself and the larger group she places herself in. She continues by stating that she feels “empowered to reevaluate [her] life and to do things that will make a difference. Because let’s face it, girls, we run the world”. This is a clear reference to her 2011 song “Run the World (Girls)”, in which Beyoncé presents a forceful message of female solidarity and strength, but nonetheless demonstrates how Beyoncé connects her personal feeling of empowerment to a larger group of girls who have the power to run the world.

In many interviews, as well as in the 2013 autobiographical television movie *Life Is but a Dream*, Beyoncé refers to growing up in her mother's salon, her parents' 13- to 18-hour workdays and their struggle to be successful. In *Life Is but a Dream*, Beyoncé further explains how she spent many days in this salon talking to the women that visited, and how this taught her many things about womanhood and solidarity. Addressing a collective struggle and need for female solidarity, she says:

We're all going through our problems, but we all have the same insecurities, and we all have the same abilities, and we all need each other ... I have been around the world, I have seen so many things ... but there is nothing like a conversation with a woman that understands you. I grow so much from those conversations; I need my sisters.  
(00:31:25)

This quote shows how, despite individual differences, Beyoncé relates her personal experience of growing up to other Black women's experiences, sharing histories and struggles. Although it is a bold statement to say that all women "have the same insecurities", she seems to refer to the similar struggles all women face. It is unclear whether the sisters she alludes to are all women, African-American women, or in fact her real sisters—suggested by the shot of Beyoncé, Solange Knowles and Bianca Lawson. In the context of this quote, Beyoncé's "sisters" appear to be the African-American women who understand her, facing the same problems, insecurities, and abilities. She establishes that shared knowledge within the (Black) female community is vital to personal growth, and individual experience is vital to collective improvement.

Secondly, the significance of change that can be seen in Beyoncé's personal accounts of feminism, activism, and empowerment needs to be examined. In an interview on Piers Morgan Tonight in 2011, Morgan and Beyoncé talk briefly about the struggles faced by her parents and grandparents during segregation, and enduring *de facto* segregation. She mentions how her young nephew was amazed by the public's focus on President Obama's race, and concludes that people no longer see her as a Black woman, but as an artist and performer. Although this statement is risky—and to my belief no longer valid after her own focus on Black heritage in her latest album—she tries to demonstrate how society has changed and how this has shaped her personal experiences and success. She ends this discussion by saying: "It is great to see the growth and [it is] great that my parents could live to see that" (17:45),

proving that the changes that her parents have been through have enabled her to become the artist she is, and should not be taken for granted.

The change from segregation to seeming colorblindness reveals a fundamental part of Black feminist thought: due to the changing conditions of race perception in U.S. society, new forms of feminism and activism continue to be developed. Beyoncé's iconic status, as well as her feeling of being perceived as 'colorless', allow her to start a dialogue other Black women can profit from. She has the ability to enhance Black feminism's visibility, not only through her music but also through personally stating to the world that she is fighting to change inequality and discrimination. As she remarks in an interview in *Elle*:

If celebrating my roots and culture during Black History Month made anyone uncomfortable, those feelings were there long before a video and long before me...I'm proud to be part of a conversation [on police brutality and injustice] that is pushing things forward in a positive way. (Gottesman)

Her acknowledgement of her pride of partaking in the fight against social injustice shows how a continuously dynamic process is required to ensure change, and that the influence of 'superstars' can provide visibility and possibility for change. In this instance, the Black superstar places herself within the Black feminist universe, but through her connection to group knowledge does not become trapped in her own version of this universe. Working in several social justice projects, Beyoncé not only connects her personal experiences to group knowledge, but also recognizes the significance of change that has allowed her to become an important figure in the discussion on Black feminism and activism.

Lastly, Beyoncé uses her status not only to promote her personal feminism and activism, but an intersectional approach in which several social justice projects are addressed at the same time. Working with several philanthropic organizations, such as Chime for Change and Global Citizen, and organizing concerts on World Humanity Day, Beyoncé establishes that she fights for humanity, not just feminism. Stating that "these issues [of inequality and disproportionality] related to education, health, and sanitation around the world affect a woman's entire existence and that of her children" (Gottesman), she feels she is more a humanist than a feminist, fighting for more than just the female cause. She notes she does not want "calling [herself] a feminist to make it feel like that's [her] one priority, over racism or sexism or anything else" (Gottesman). Although this quote seems to suggest Beyoncé does not consider herself a feminist, I argue otherwise: it perfectly illustrates Patricia Hill Collins's

Black feminist thought, and Beyoncé's feelings of humanitarianism and willingness to rise above labels verify her involvement in the Black feminist movement—this connection of humanitarianism and Black feminist thought will be explained in more detail in chapters 4 and 5. Being involved in more than just feminism, and connecting it to several other social justice projects does not make Beyoncé exempt from the feminist discourse, rather it presents a perfect example of someone that is part of Black feminist thought.

## 2.2 Performance Feminism

Having established a clear presence of aspects of Black feminism in Beyoncé's personal views on equality, race, and her participation in the feminist discourse, the rest of this chapter will focus on examining the presence of new forms of activism, empowerment, and paradigms of womanhood in three different aspects of performance feminism. For all examined parts of performance feminism, I am mostly interested in Beyoncé's two latest albums, the self-titled 2014 album *Beyoncé* and the 2016 visual album *Lemonade*, as well as the song "Run the World (Girls)" which is part of the 2012 album *4*. Furthermore, I will discuss the song "Naughty Girl"—a hit song on her first solo album—and "Independent Women, Part I", recorded with the group Destiny's Child, to establish a continuing development in forms of feminism and the resulting activism and empowerment. Most songs will be examined in all three aspects of performance feminism to provide the most in-depth analysis of all songs. However, for some songs this will be either impossible, due to absence of live performance recordings or music videos, or is simply unnecessary due to repetition of what has already been established.

In assessing individual parts of Beyoncé's repertoire, a more general examination of the presence of feminism, activism, and empowerment in her work will be provided. Starting with early works portraying girl-power and female independence and moving towards an album that tailors specifically to Black women—although, as mentioned in chapter one, this should not be obfuscated with color-blind capitalist production of popular culture—will show how Beyoncé has become increasingly public and empowered in her urge to share a message of Black female activism. Concerning her Billboard Awards performance of "Run the World (Girls)", she states in *Life Is But a Dream* that "the urge to get my message out was so overwhelming" (37:10), and this message only got more powerful in her latest visual album *Lemonade*. Connecting individual songs, performances, and albums will show how her forms of feminism, activism, and empowerment have changed, or at times remained the same,

throughout her career, and will provide basis for an understanding of how these three aspects are most forcefully and explicitly present in her latest work.

### 2.2.1 Lyrics

As mentioned before, popular music has the ability to communicate messages and ideals through its wide reach and large audience. One way in which this can be done is by incorporating certain themes in lyrics, thereby making the audience aware of issues within society. This can be done in quite a straightforward manner, by stating explicitly what you're trying to convey—such as in “Independent Women, Pt. I”, “Run the World (Girls)”, and “Formation”—or by more subtly addressing issues in a new, unconventional manner—much like in the songs “Naughty Girl” and “Partition”. I will first discuss songs with lyrics that can be considered part of the latter approach, and then move towards increasingly more apparent messages of activism and empowerment present in the lyrics of Beyoncé's repertoire.

Firstly, several songs in Beyoncé's repertoire encourage female self-empowerment through sexual individuality and liberation, in a way that does not simply adhere to the male gaze and transcends the notion that ‘sex sells’. Although music revolving around sexuality is not a revolutionary aspect in popular culture, most songs—both by male and female singers—seem to revolve around the taboo of female sexuality and male pleasure. However, in “Naughty Girl”, featured on *Dangerously In Love*, a message of female sexual confidence is conveyed. The chorus of the song most aptly demonstrates this:

Tonight I'll be your naughty girl  
 I'm callin' all my girls  
 We're gonna turn this party out  
 I know you want my body  
 Tonight I'll be your naughty girl  
 I see you look me up and down  
 And I came to the party. (Beyoncé “Naughty Girl”)

The lyrics above show that although Beyoncé offers herself as the unidentified male's “naughty girl” to presumably be used in whatever way he wants, but also shows agency in the way that the “naughty girl” has confidence in her own sexuality. Stating that she “came to the party” shows she wants to act and be viewed as the self-assured “naughty girl” that wants to



experience sexual pleasure herself—although this might be quite a stretch since labeling herself as the naughty, sexually confident girl only enables male pleasure. Despite its adherence to the male gaze and providing male pleasure, the song does offer a starting point to examine Beyoncé’s message of sexual liberation, even if it is not yet overtly present.

Sexual independence and liberation that is more explicitly part of a discourse of self-empowerment can be found much later in her career, on the 2014 album *Beyoncé* in the song “Partition”. Once again, parts of the lyrics are quite conflicting, as they seem to focus mainly on male pleasure, such as “he so horny, yeah he want to fuck / he popped all my buttons and he ripped my blouse / he Monica Lewinski’d all on my gown”, and the seemingly anti-feminist “I just wanna be the girl you like” (Beyoncé “Partition”). The first quote focuses solely on male pleasure and references an inappropriate sexual relation in which the male is much more powerful than the woman, which is confirmed by the latter quote in which the female should merely adapt to whatever the man wishes. However, the critique of this song being yet another song in which women are instruments to male pleasure is discarded within the lyrics themselves. About halfway through the song, a spoken, French fragment states the following:

Est-ce que tu aimes le sexe?  
 Le sexe. Je veux dire, l'activité physique.  
 Le coït. Tu aimes ça?  
 Tu ne t'intéresses pas au sexe?  
 Les hommes pensent que les féministes détestent le sexe,  
 Mais c'est une activité très stimulante et naturelle que les femmes adorent. (Beyoncé  
 “Partition”)

This fragment highlights that exploring female sexuality and wanting to provide male pleasure does not necessarily mean that a woman cannot be self-empowered, rather that sex gives women the opportunity for empowerment—as demonstrated by the last two lines, stating “men think that feminists hate sex, but it is a very stimulating and natural activity that women love” (translation mine). Where activism through sexual empowerment is implicit and disputed in the first half of “Partition”, it becomes instantaneously explicit in the second half of the song due to a statement on feminism and sexuality. Presumably addressing a female audience that should not be interested in sex due to societal conventions and perceptions of female innocence—“are you not interested in sex?” (translation mine)—the lyrics establish

that women are certainly able to be both feminists and enjoy sex, and establish giving pleasure as part of sexual liberation and self-empowerment. The danger, however, of viewing these two songs as expressing sexual self-empowerment is, once again, the critique that ‘sex sells’. Beyoncé’s reliance on displaying female sexuality in her songs might be part of the belief that the inclusion of sensuality and risqué imagery will be more profitable. However, she chooses to display her body in this manner, and is thus in control of the way audiences are allowed to view her. Her choice to provide sexually loaded lyrics becomes part of a self-empowering narrative in which she encourages women to demand back control over their own bodies and sexuality.

Secondly, messages of financial independence elicit responses of female empowerment and activism. In this case, activism consists of women taking control of their professional and financial situations and no longer relying on men for support. This is apparent in many of Beyoncé’s works, among which are “Independent Women, Pt. I”, “Run the World (Girls)”, and “6 Inch”. Part of the lyrics of Destiny’s Child’s 2000 single “Independent Women, Pt. I” consist of a list of things that the three women have been able to provide for themselves:

The shoes on my feet, I bought it  
 The clothes I’m wearing, I bought it  
 The rock I’m rocking, I bought it  
 Because I depend on me, if I want it  
 The watch I’m wearing, I bought it  
 The house I live in, I bought it  
 The car I’m driving, I bought it  
 I depend on me. (Destiny’s Child)

Although this list of acquired goods is surely not attainable for all women across the globe—few women have the same wealth as the members of Destiny’s Child—it does convey a strong message of independence and empowerment: if you want to have something, do not depend on men to get it for you. This list is followed by a shout-out to all women who provide for themselves: “All the women who are independent ... / All the honeys making money ... / All the mommas who profit dollars / Throw your hands up at me” (Destiny’s Child). In this case, women are encouraged, and rewarded if successful, to be financially independent. The message in this song, however, differs from later instances of empowerment

and activism in Beyoncé's works. Where this song establishes that the three women are wealthy and able to buy what they want and take care of themselves, later music highlights the importance of all women being financially successful as a part of a larger independence.

Unlike "Independent Women, Pt. I", the three other songs are not solely dedicated to financial empowerment but do feature small mentions of individual financial gain and the power that can be achieved through it. The song "Run the World (Girls)" conveys a more general message of female empowerment, but also explicitly addresses the power of financial independence and professional success:

I'm repping for the girls that's taking over the world  
 Help me raise a glass for the college grads  
 .....  
 Boy you know you love it  
 How we're smart enough to make these millions  
 Strong enough to bare the children  
 Then get back to business. (Beyoncé "Run")

An important part of this passage is how it does not deny some women's wishes of having children; rather it incorporates the baring of children into female strength and empowers women who have both children and a career. Furthermore, it celebrates female intellectuality by saying that educated women have the opportunity to take over the world, and should be encouraged to do so. Empowerment, in this fragment, thus becomes threefold: women are empowered to work hard, get educated, and become mothers without having to choose—fierce enough to do all these things if they choose to do so.

Another song highlighting financial independence while simultaneously calling for sexual liberation is "6 Inch", written and performed in collaboration with singer The Weeknd for Beyoncé's latest visual album *Lemonade*. The song describes a woman that "walks in the club like it's nobody's business" (Beyoncé and The Weeknd) wearing high heels, and it is implied that she is in some form of sexual work: "She grinds from Monday to Friday ... / And she worth every dollar, she worth every minute". These lines already ascertain that this woman is very confident and does not care about other people's opinions. The song goes on to describe her financial and professional success:

She stack her money ... everywhere she goes

She got that Sake, her Yamazaki straight from Tokyo  
 ... She got them commas and them decimals  
 She don't gotta give it up cause she professional  
 .....  
 She grinds from Monday to Friday  
 Works from Friday to Sunday. (Beyoncé and The Weeknd)

The woman works hard and is rewarded for her hard work, it even seems like she devotes her life entirely to working and has very little time for anything else. This can also be seen later in the song, when it is described that this woman is “pushing herself day and night ... / ... fights and sweats those sleepless nights / but she don't mind” (Beyoncé and The Weeknd). This shows that financial gain does not come easily and requires hard work, but the power, confidence, and empowerment that comes from financial independence is worth the struggle. Once again, hard-working women who are able to provide for themselves are celebrated, showing that if you work hard and push yourself you are able to succeed.

As well as striving for collective female improvement through financial gain and sexual liberation, Beyoncé's latest album specifically advocates Black female excellence and the relation of Black feminism to other social justice projects, such as Black Lives Matter. This is most evident in “Formation”, where Beyoncé explicitly addresses her African-American heritage: “My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana / you mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas bama”. In this part of the refrain, Beyoncé addresses issues of being perceived as a person without intelligence and style—a ‘bama’—and the connection between being seen as without style and intelligence, Southern, and Black. She changes this negative meaning by portraying pride of her Black and Southern heritage, stating: “I like my baby hair with baby hair and Afros / I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils / Earned all this money but they never take the country out me” (Beyoncé “Formation”). In these sentences, she quickly establishes that she embraces and adores Black physique—Afros and “Jackson Five nostrils”—highlights Black excellence by mentioning a greatly successful Black pop group, and acknowledges the influence of her Southern roots. Furthermore, she proves that being Black does not mean you are not successful or stylish: her musical success allows her to take a denigrating term and reclaim it in a way that allows people considered to be “bama's” to be proud of their heritage.

Beyoncé further addresses issues of Blackness by stating she is just as successful as prosperous White people, and does not care for their negative views on her work. This becomes most apparent towards the end of the first verse and the start of the chorus:

I might get your song played on the radio station, ‘cause I slay  
 You just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making, ‘cause I slay  
 I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making  
 I see it, I want it, I stunt it, yellow bone it  
 I dream it, I work hard, I grind ‘til I own it  
 I twirl on them haters, albino alligators (Beyoncé “Formation”)

In these six lines Beyoncé establishes four important things: she has a lot of influence due to her artistic success; this success has enabled her to become very wealthy and financially independent; she works extremely hard for the things she wants; and she rises above White critics of her work. These four things combined portray in a woman with enormous power and influence, and the specific mention of White aggressors and critics—“albino alligators”—as well as the comparison of herself to Bill Gates show her dedication to Black excellence and equality. Her confidence and success transcend personal gain and help improve the lives of many African-Americans: other Black women—addressed as “you” in the quote above—can achieve as much as Beyoncé.

Lastly, the final lines of “Formation”, and thereby the last lines of *Lemonade*, prove Beyoncé is aware of the provocative aspects of the song and album (which will be discussed in more detail by looking at live performances and visual aspects), and show that she even intended for the album to cause discussions: “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation / Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper”. These lyrics show that she set out to create conversation through the issues raised in her album, and that she knows the influence she can have on society. Therefore, the issues of gender and race that she incorporates in her music are not merely there for financial gain or because she wants to impose her views upon her audience. Rather, it portrays that she wants to raise questions and start discussions, and shows that these issues are not merely a reflection of her own opinions but a reflection of issues in society at large. Her call for the collective experience of Black womanhood, the change that is needed to improve this Black womanhood and general Black experience, and thus the connection between Black feminism and lasting racial injustice show that *Lemonade* is unquestionably part of Black feminist thought and highlights the importance

of Black female success: the best way to beat the White hegemony in society and popular culture is to become more successful than your White counterparts.

### ***2.2.2 Performances***

The second important aspect that will be examined is the way in which Beyoncé's live performances facilitate and display aspects of Black feminism. In order to grasp how new forms of activism and empowerment are present during her performances, and how these forms can accelerate the creation of new paradigms of Black womanhood, I will discuss three recent shows. First, I will look at Beyoncé's performance of "Run the World (Girls)" at the 2011 Billboard Awards, then I will discuss her 2014 MTV Video Music Awards performance, and lastly her performance at the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show. These three performances all feature explicit references to Black feminism in three distinct ways by suggesting female empowerment, feminism, and activism.

Beyoncé's 2011 Billboard Awards performance starts with a powerful statement on female power and empowerment: "I am woman, and when I think, I must speak. Men have been given the chance to rule the world, but ladies our revolution has begun. Let's build a nation. Women everywhere, run the world!" ("Beyoncé – Run The World"). This immediately sets the tone that this performance will be unlike others—Beyoncé intends to send a message out into world about female strength and advancement. She is stating that the time for female justice and power has come, and women need to unite to achieve greatness. After this statement, she spends over a minute alone on stage performing in front of a screen that portrays a growing army of animated Beyoncés. This 'army' simultaneously represents individual strength, as all soldiers are animated versions of the same person, and collective strength, since there are so many soldiers that they are much stronger than one person could be. The animation changes and real-life Beyoncé and one animated Beyoncé fight two male dancers, and unsurprisingly the Beyoncés win.

After two-and-a-half minutes spent on stage by herself, with the brief interruption of having to fight two men, Beyoncé is joined by a small group of female dancers. Within a minute the group has doubled, then tripled, and the whole stage is filled with female dancers. The large group performs a synchronized choreography, and two large blocks that were dividing the stage are lifted to reveal two new groups of dancing women. The even larger stage is now completely filled with dancing women, marching and raising their fists in a portrayal of female strength and solidarity (see picture 1 in the appendix). The two groups of women in the back are holding up flags to represent the nation of womanhood—the filmed

performance does not feature images of what is on the flags but the presence of the flags alone signifies a united nation of womanhood. The whole performance is an elaborate show of female rise to power, inciting women across the globe to achieve self-empowerment, and is a protest against the male domination of society.

The second performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards demonstrates clear references of feminism, female empowerment, and individualism. Although this performance of a medley of her fifth album *Beyoncé* features less of a call on solidarity and collective female empowerment—which is to be expected as the song “Run the World (Girls)” in itself hosts more aspects of collective female power than the entire album *Beyoncé*—different parts of empowerment are present in the performance. Much like the individual songs on the album, the performance focuses greatly on female sexuality. Female dancers in revealing outfits, red lights on stage, and explicit sensual dances ensure the audience knows this performance is about female sexuality and having the power to reclaim it. Although a show, of course, is always performed to give pleasure to the audience, Beyoncé’s choice to focus a 15-minute medley on female sexuality—nearly without visual reference to male pleasure—demonstrates that it is her decision, as a woman, to present the female body in a certain way. She ascertains that women should not have to hide their sexuality, and that this overt sexuality is inherently part of womanhood—albeit exaggerated for performance purposes.

Moreover, the performance clearly establishes Beyoncé’s stance in a discussion on feminism. Around ten minutes into the performance, she starts the song “\*\*\*Flawless” with eight women, seemingly naked due to placement of light and nude colored clothing, moving across the stage while the following text is displayed word for word on the screen behind them:

We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, "you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man". Feminist. (“Visuals” 10:28-10:48)

The screen continues to say feminist as Beyoncé comes onstage, and the audio continues: “Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” (“Visuals” 10:48-10:55). This text is part of a speech by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and is also present as a spoken interlude in the song “\*\*\*Flawless” on *Beyoncé*. The added effect of this text in the live performance is the fact that the audio continues while the screen continues

to say “Feminist” and Beyoncé stands in front of it (see picture 2). She highlights the importance of feminism, the importance of reclaiming sexuality, and does so by sampling the work of a renowned Black female intellectual. The performance that came before this statement can therefore no longer be seen as a simple display of sexuality to please the audience, but as confirmation that girls can be just as sexual as men, and that they are encouraged to be in control of their own sexuality.

Lastly, Beyoncé’s 2016 Super Bowl Halftime Show was the most explicitly activist performance that she has given to date. Her performance was part of a collaboration with Coldplay and Bruno Mars, but as Coldplay’s performance did not at all mix with Mars and Beyoncé’s performances, I will look only at the latter two. More specifically, I will only take into account Mars’s performance when it is in direct contact with Beyoncé’s. The performance of “Formation” at Super Bowl Halftime Show was just one day after the song’s release, and one day before the Formation World Tour was announced. However, this did not take away its success and impact: the performance was featured in many news outlets across the globe, and established what sort of album *Lemonade* was going to be—although existence of a following album was still speculation at the time. Beyoncé’s single was immediately placed in a Black activist framework, and the work that followed was expected to start discussions on discrimination and Black female activism, as indeed it turned out to do.

Just as in the 2011 Billboard Awards performance of “Run the World (Girls)”, the Super Bowl performance presents a powerful army of women. In this case, however, the group consists solely of Black women, all wearing the same leather outfit, black cap, and having the same hairstyle—perhaps due to the use of wigs, which only highlights the relevance of the hairstyle (see pictures 3 and 4). Their outfits bear strong resemblance to the outfits worn by the Black Panther Party during their protests, consisting of leather pants, leather jackets, and black berets (see picture 5). Although not completely similar—Beyoncé’s dancers wear much more revealing outfits than the Black Panther Party’s members—they do have some striking resemblances: both consist entirely of leather or leather-like fabric, both are completely black, and both have similar black berets, thus immediately connecting the two. The performance, therefore, becomes closely linked to Black Panther Party protests and Black activism.

The link to Black activism goes beyond the close visual resemblance to clothing worn by Black Panther Party members. The all Black group of female dancers perform a powerful, coordinated dance that exudes confidence, authority, and control. Their movements are well timed, harsh, and forceful. The dancers march or walk vehemently, and perfectly straight lines



resemble the lines in which soldiers march. Once again, a powerful army of women backs up Beyoncé, moving collectively and identically, thus portraying the strength of a unified Black female protest. This strength of togetherness becomes even more apparent when part of Beyoncé's company moves close to Bruno Mars's, and the strength of the women greatly overpowers the loose, freestyle dance of the male group. The message radiating from this image is that when united, women are much stronger than men, and once again: that women run the world.

### ***2.2.3 Visual Imagery and Music Videos***

The most powerful aspect of popular music with the most resources to convey meaning is the visual aspect. As mentioned in chapter one, representations of society in music videos aid in the reproduction or reinscription of certain ideology, and can further help establish paradigms of womanhood. Having the ability to not only reproduce and represent, but also *produce* and *present* new forms of feminism and activism, music videos are the most effective tools in analyzing how popular music can establish new forms of empowerment and shape ideas of femininity. With Beyoncé's latest album being a visual album, the effect visual imagery can have on conveying messages becomes even larger. Not only do the individual songs need visual representation, the album tells a story that connects to an overarching meaning linking individual songs. The visual aspect of *Lemonade* thus becomes difficult to split into twelve different music videos, as they are all part of a larger narrative. Therefore, I will discuss several aspects that are present throughout the album, and not always link the visual to the particular song: rather, the visual aspect of *Lemonade* will be examined as a whole, and the spoken narrative connecting songs will be considered part of the visual aspect. I will start this section by discussing the music video of "Partition" before moving on to a more elaborate discussion of *Lemonade*.

Firstly, the music video for "Partition" is perhaps the most sexual video Beyoncé has ever released. The video starts without music, with a shot of Beyoncé and a man, who later turns out to be her husband Jay-Z, having breakfast in a grand palace. The man does not give her any attention despite her stares, subtle flirtation, and attempt to get his attention by dropping her napkin. With the drop of the napkin, the music starts and we move to Beyoncé's bedroom, where she performs a sensual dance without visible spectators. The rest of the video shows several venues where she and backup dancers are wearing revealing attires, performing dances either for the spectator within the music video—the man at the breakfast table—or the viewers that watch the video. There is no distinction between the two gazes, as whenever the

viewers see the man watching the performers, the focus still lies on whoever is performing; watching over his shoulder, or following his hands on Beyoncé's body. We only get two shots that prove that the man is truly paying attention—both in the same room, him smoking a cigar and quietly watching. The whole video revolves around female sensuality and sexuality, and the fact that viewers only watch over the man's shoulder ensures they know the performance is not intended for them. This creates a sense of voyeurism, which is further highlighted by the use of silhouettes.

This performance for the spectator, and the viewers' continuous watch over his shoulder establishes an explicit male gaze: we only get to see what the male spectator sees. However, the beginning and the end of the music video turn this male gaze into something entirely more complicated. As mentioned before, the video starts at the breakfast table, then provides a shot into the bedroom and within seconds moves back to the table where Beyoncé tries to get the man's attention. However, she seems to be lost in thought before the video turns back to the bedroom, the car, and a strip club. At the end of the video, we once again move back to the breakfast table where the man is still reading his newspaper and Beyoncé is still trying to seduce him. This last shot implies that in the duration of the video no time has passed, and that all the previous scenes were part of a fantasy concocted in Beyoncé's mind, as a way to get the man's attention. Establishing the bigger part of the video as a fantasy ensures that the viewer is not simply presented with a male gaze, rather it shows that the viewer is shown Beyoncé's fantasy of sexual power. In this fantasy, she controls his pleasure, and she allows the fantasy man to view her and objectify her. Therefore, she gains control over her own sexuality, and she chooses to self-objectify. Thus, the male gaze from the spectator and the viewers becomes complicated, as it turns out the viewers are not limited by what the spectator sees, rather by what Beyoncé wishes to show both the spectator and the viewers, while simultaneously allowing them to project their own desires on her silhouette.

The belief that *Lemonade* is a tribute to Black women and their struggle is very difficult to find in the lyrics of the twelve songs featured on the album, but becomes tremendously apparent in the visual aspect of the album. As mentioned before, the fact that *Lemonade* was released as a visual album in which all songs are connected to tell a story makes this work unique—no other artist has released an album with this much focus on visual imagery. Several aspects highlight the importance of Blackness and Black women in the visual album: the large presence of images of Black women, the connection to Black heritage and representation of Black culture, and the significance of colors in connection to African-American history.

Firstly, most people that are featured on the visual album are Black women. After the first song, the first time we see anyone but Beyoncé, two Black women are shown, standing in a dark tunnel, followed by a shot of woman on a porch. A few seconds pass and we see at least twelve Black women standing and sitting on a roofed stage (see picture 6). The camera moves through the group and we see more women that were not present in the first frame. The film continues and shows several individual close-ups of Black women in different settings, all motionless and emotionless. Several similar shots are present in the rest of the video, where Black women are present in a group either moving intertwined and connected or standing completely still—in the group, either they all move or they all remain still (see picture 7). This in itself offers a larger symbolism that can be applied to the struggle of Black women in society—change comes when a large group works together to connect their personal beliefs and experiences to help the community.

Furthermore, the video does not only portray the importance of connectedness in Black female experience, but highlights Black female excellence by hosting a wide range of cameos by successful Black women. The visual album features, among others, Serena Williams, number one tennis player globally at the time the album was released (at the time of writing this thesis, she had moved one spot to number two in the WTA rankings (“Women’s”)), Canadian high fashion model Winnie Harlow, actresses Amandla Stenberg and Zendaya, Academy Award nominee Quvenzhané Wallis, and ballerina Michaela DePrince (Kimble). These cameos ensure that the album not only celebrates the collective strength of Black women, but also showcases the individual success Black women can achieve. However, these professionally very successful and renowned women are not disconnected from the other Black women in the videos—apart from DePrince who performs a solo—and are placed among the other women in groups. This shows that not only these women can achieve excellence, but that *all* Black women can achieve success, and famous Black women should not be viewed differently; they too are part of a united Black female group.

Secondly, there are many instances in which images connected to Black heritage are presented. The first moment this becomes apparent is about 16 minutes into the visual album, when a small group of Black women sit in an altered school bus and sway along to the background music during the spoken narrative. The women’s faces, necks, and arms are painted in different patterns with white paint, the color of peace (see picture 7). Face painting has long been part of African cultural tradition, and different patterns convey different meanings. The use of face paint is the clearest reference to African history, and an identifiable

moment in which Beyoncé establishes the importance of Black heritage in *Lemonade* and the lives of all women of African descent. In this shot, Beyoncé herself does not wear any form of body paint, but a few minutes later we see her standing in front of the bus with face paint—albeit noticeably less than the other women—and wearing traditional African jewelry (see picture 8). Once again, the jewelry is an explicit reference to African culture, and shows Beyoncé’s acknowledgment of African heritage.

Black heritage and culture can also be seen in a politics of hair. Throughout her career, Beyoncé has had an array of different hairstyles and colors, but most of them involved either bleaching or straightening her hair. However, her straight, or slightly wavy styled hair is nowhere to be found in this video. Rather, she hosts a variety of hairstyles that are typically associated with natural Black hair. Although still blonde, her hair is much more naturally curly, braided—either in a regular braid or cornrow braid—or in a styled updo. The other women in the video also sport traditional Black hairstyles, such as tight curls, Afros, Bantu knots, box braids or dreadlocks (see picture 9). The fact that all women in the video wear their hair in a way that is either natural or a hairstyle traditionally worn by Black women once again shows the importance of Black culture in this visual album. The traditional hairstyles celebrate Black women’s physique, and show that women of African heritage do not need to “whitewash” their hair in order to adhere to set standards of womanhood.

Lastly, color plays a large part in the message that is conveyed through visual imagery. As can be seen in pictures 6, 7, and 10, the times women gather in larger groups during the spoken narrative they all wear white outfits. This can also be seen when the women stand in water during the song “Love Drought”, holding hands and portraying solidarity (00:37:09)—while wearing white sheer dresses—and when they watch Beyoncé perform “Freedom” (00:47:23), although some women are wearing black overcoats. This creates a stark contrast between black and white, and thereby Black vs. White. White is seen as the color of peace and tranquility, and the white dresses the women wear strongly call to mind images of slavery, where plantation workers wore clothes made out of cheap, often lightly colored fabric due to the cost of richly colored cloths, as well as the white dresses worn by women participating in the Suffragette movement. The white clothes in the visual album thus result in the portrayal of inequality, restrictions, and discrimination, while simultaneously representing freedom, peace, protest, and solidarity. Combining these connotations and sentiments shows the true significance of the visual aspect of the album and the message that Beyoncé attempts to send out into the world in all aforementioned songs and performances: through solidarity, codependence, representations of Black female success, and a lasting

connection to Black culture and heritage, we can achieve equality and rewrite what it means to be a Black woman in modern-day society.

## Chapter 3: Nicki Minaj

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Onika Tanja Maraj, professionally known as Nicki Minaj, was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1982. The family moved to Queens, New York, in 1987, where she attended La Guardia High School for the Arts and focused mainly on acting. At the age of twelve she wrote her first rap song, and after being discovered and collaborating with several other artists, she released her first single, “Massive Attack”, in 2010, for which she received a BET Award for Best Hip-Hop Female (“Nicki Minaj Biography”). After her first single she released three more albums: *Pink Friday*, *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*—as well as a renewed version of this album called *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded –The Re-Up*—and *The Pinkprint*, released in 2010, 2012, and 2014 respectively. Her immediate artistic success ensured her influence in the hip-hop and rap scene, and her ability to switch between several genres of music made her an authority in popular music.

Due to her success in a field that has been dominantly male, her beliefs on female empowerment gain an extra dimension. A message of female strength, empowerment, or individuality becomes much more potent when delivered in a cultural field that continuously degrades and objectifies women. To examine in which ways Nicki Minaj implements messages of female empowerment, activism, and feminism in her music, I will start by examining her personal feminism. By analyzing two recent interviews in *Vogue* and *Time* 100, her cover story for *Nylon Magazine*, a profile in the *New York Times*, and the short MTV documentary *Nicki Minaj: My Time Again*, her personal beliefs on empowerment and activism can be established. The MTV documentary can also be used in the analysis on her performance feminism due to the comments she offers on the meaning behind her songs and performances. In order to further examine her performance feminism I will look at several songs on all of her albums, with specific interest in “Fly” from her first album *Pink Friday*, “I’m Legit”, “Freedom” and “I Endorse These Strippers” featured on the second album, and “All Things Go”, “Anaconda” and “Feeling Myself” which were part of her latest album.

The aim of this chapter is equivalent to that of the previous chapter: using Minaj’s personal and performance feminism, I will provide examples upon which a discussion of the presence of new forms of empowerment, activism, and womanhood in her work can be based. However, less focus will be on the importance of being a Black performer—as rap and hip-hop are generally Black fields of music—but more on being a female performer and the reclaiming of the Black female body in hip-hop culture. Her distinctive place in the hip-hop

scene and ability to move between different genres of music will add to the importance her personal beliefs on activism and empowerment, and the way in which she implements this in her music. Being the most successful female rapper and ninth highest earning rapper globally (Shepherd), Nicki Minaj has been able to change the hip-hop music industry, and her music can affect people's perceptions of rap and Black womanhood, and many Black girls' lives.

### 3.1 Personal Feminism

Throughout her career, Nicki Minaj has been outspoken about her beliefs on equality and discrimination. She never seems to shy away from voicing her opinion on any subject matter, and questions regarding her place as a woman in a male dominated field of culture always elicit strong reactions on female power. Her personal background is not much different from many other rappers—growing up in a poor neighborhood in Queens, with little financial opportunity, and an abusive father (*Nicki Minaj: My Time Again*)—and like other artists, she draws on these experiences in her music. She utilizes her background to provide a message of hope for other women and girls in poor areas, to convey that the opportunity for improvement always exist. This opportunity for improvement is aimed towards Black women specifically, and can be found in messages of the importance of academia and Black female excellence, sexuality and self-objectification, and financial independence.

In the television documentary *Nicki Minaj: My Time Again*, Minaj visits her hometown and tells the children in the neighborhood that they should stay in school and do their best, stating: “they feel like ‘she made it out of here, and I can make it out of here too!’... Those little kids are proud to say they’re from Southside Jamaica Queens, and they should be... They give me hope, really, because they make me feel like I can do anything” (20:03-20:44). She explains that she wants to encourage her young fans to do well in school and work hard because they view her as someone who has managed to rise from poverty. Minaj embraces this image and often refers to it as a motivator in her career. Her childhood in a poor, rough area of Queens made her into “someone that can face anything” (22:35), which is the idea she tries to communicate to her fans. Although she does not consider herself to be political, during her shows she does “do two minutes of talking to [her] girls, boosting them up... They’d go home feeling, ‘Can’t nobody tell me [shit]!’” (Grigoriadis). Her continuous inspiration of children and young women and encouragement to prosper academically is a big part of her personal activism—improving the lives of young children living in poor neighborhoods, and thus reaching equality for Black women, starts with proper education.

Minaj also advocates Black female excellence by working together with other Black female musicians and being in charge of her own ‘brand’. In her Time 100 interview, Nicki Minaj states: “Before I could remember wanting to do anything else, I knew that I wanted to be in charge...My mother didn’t have a job where she was the boss, and I always looked at that and wished that she was the boss, and that she did make her own rules” (Tsai, Trianni, and McCluskey). For this reason, Minaj has taken control over her own life and business, and everything she produces—from music, to clothing, to pictures on social media—has her stamp of approval: “I want people to know, when they see my name, that I’m fully part of it, I’m fully passionate about it” (Shepherd). Being in charge of the Nicki Minaj brand also means that her choices for collaborations are her own. Minaj’s collaborations with other Black female artists, such as Rihanna and Beyoncé, further show her belief in Black excellence. On working with Beyoncé, she states:

Whenever I do something with her, I can feel the impact. It just feels like young women are being empowered and inspired, because...it says a lot when you see two young women at the top of their field...owning who they are, and owning the business, and owning the industry, and not taking no for an answer, and not being apologetic for who they are. I think that it inspires women, young, old, Black, White, whatever. (Tsai et al.)

This shows Minaj not only wants to display Black female strength and excellence, but also that she is aware that she succeeds in conveying this message. Her collaborations with Beyoncé and Rihanna are not merely means by which a popular, profitable song can be created, but also to convey a message of empowerment and inspiration. She believes that “Black women are held to higher standards” and that she “exceeded every expectation ... people had for a rapper” (Tsai et al.), and her success in business is her retaliation against those that believe Black women are inferior.

The second way in which Nicki Minaj articulates female empowerment, activism, and feminism is the way in which she portrays sexuality and self-objectification. In an interview featured in *Vogue*, titled “Newly Single Nicki Minaj on Feminism, Meek Mill, and Rapping at 50”—the start of this headline on its own raising questions about the portrayal of women in media—Minaj states: “There are sexual things that I do that aren’t for a man. I feel empowered sometimes by being sexy...a lot of [women] struggle with that” (Frank). Minaj not only mentions this in relation to her



sexuality in her music, but also to explain her personal experiences with sexuality. Reclaiming her sexuality—both privately and publically—has given her a form of empowerment that people cannot easily take away from her. The importance of reclaiming sexuality and self-objectification will be further discussed in the next section, nonetheless it is important to note that Minaj not only uses her sexuality in music, but also personally feels that sexuality should not be ‘performed’ to please other people.

Lastly, Nicki Minaj’s personal beliefs on activism and empowerment can be found in her call for financial independence. On the legacy of her career, and the most important thing she learned, Minaj says:

I wanted to leave behind ... that I write my own raps. A man doesn’t have to write down your thoughts, you’re intelligent enough to write down your own thoughts, and ... that I would become a mogul ... One thing I learned along the way in business is the necessity for you to be unapologetic about asking for how much money you deserve ... Women have the tendency to feel that they shouldn’t ask to be compensated as much as a man doing the same exact thing. If you know you’re great at what you do, don’t ever be ashamed to ask for the top dollar in your field. (Tsai et al.)

Here, Minaj encourages women to be just as bold as men in asking for higher pay, and illustrates that she has been successful because she was confident enough to demand equal pay. Women need to demand equality in all aspects of life, and in business focus mostly on financial equality. If a woman is excellent in her field, she should not be denied top pay—in the same way that men receive best pay for exceptional work. In conclusion, Nicki Minaj personally advocates (Black) female equality by highlighting the importance of academics and female excellence, supporting women’s choice to define and reclaim their own sexuality, and encouraging women to be independent in all areas of life.

### **3.2 Performance Feminism**

The same aspects that are present in Nicki Minaj’s personal feminism can also be found in her music. The call for financial independence can be found mostly in her lyrics, not in the visual aspects of her music. Therefore, I will only look at this part of her performance feminism in

the examination of lyrics to avoid overly generalized statements without adequate examples. The other aspects can be found in all three parts of performance feminism that will be examined, and will thus provide the most insight into Minaj's representation of new forms of activism and empowerment, providing a basis for the discussion on new paradigms of Black womanhood as portrayed in popular music. Some examples will show overlap in themes and forms of empowerment, which might seem as repetition of what has already been said, but upon closer inspection will only emphasize the importance certain themes of empowerment in Minaj's music. Furthermore, the examination of music videos will provide new insight in the ways Minaj conveys these messages of empowerment.

### ***3.2.1 Lyrics***

Much like in interviews, Nicki Minaj explicitly addresses issues of inequality in her raps. The three ways in which she discusses her success and the importance of fighting for your rights is through highlighting her personal success and Black female excellence, sexual freedom and female sexuality, and financial independence. Lastly, her newest album—which she branded her most personal album to date—discusses issues that are unique to the Black and/or female experience from her own perspective, providing an exceptional view into issues related to (Black) womanhood. I will highlight each of these aspects in the songs mentioned at the start of this chapter to establish a basis upon which a discussion of new paradigms of womanhood and presence of Black feminism in Nicki Minaj's work can be based.

Firstly, Minaj discusses Black female excellence in her music. By highlighting her own success in the rap industry and working together with other Black female artists who provide messages of success, she shows how Black women can be highly prosperous. Both these forms of portraying Black excellence can be found in the song “Fly”, which Nicki recorded in collaboration with Rihanna, “I’m Legit”, recorded in collaboration with Ciara, and “Feeling Myself”, recorded in collaboration with Beyoncé. The song “Fly” presents a message of strength, in which the two artists “came to win, to fight, to conquer, to thrive...to survive, to prosper, to rise”. This victorious message continues in Minaj's rap: “[The sharks] start coming and I start rising / must be surprising, I’m just surmising / I win, thrive, soar, higher, higher, higher, more fire” (Minaj and Rihanna). Where Rihanna came to win, Nicki Minaj has already won. She beats her enemies by rising above; she defeats them by being even more successful and continuously improving. This is supported in the next verse, when Minaj raps:

I will remain where the top begins  
 .....  
 I am not fly, I am levitation  
 I represent an entire generation  
 I hear their criticism loud and clear  
 That is how I know that the time is near  
 So we become alive in a time of fear (Minaj and Rihanna)

The entire generation Nicki Minaj represents refers to all (young) Black women that are trying to succeed in life. Her representation might be of millennials, but her influence on representation of Black women in the media impacts women that are both younger and older. Furthermore, her feeling of “a time of fear” shows the struggles still faced by Black women, and her call for “coming alive” suggest a need for protest and the increasing success of Black women.

The same sentiment of Black female excellence and a need to rise to power can be found in “I’m Legit”. Ciara starts the song with the text “I’m the shit with no makeup / don’t have to curl my hair up...real bosses stand up / ladies throw your hands up” (Minaj and Ciara), highlighting that Black women are beautiful without having to conform to society’s White standards, and that the real bosses and ladies need to be celebrated. Minaj continues addressing her own success as a Black female rapper at several points in the next two verses: “I graduate with honors... I did a freestyle then I got a shout out from Obama... I’m like really famous...I like independent bitches like July 4<sup>th</sup> / Now that’s what young Harriet died for” (Minaj and Ciara), referring to Obama’s addressing of Nicki’s rap in a song by Lil Wayne where she pledged support for Mitt Romney, which she later deemed as sarcasm (Lopez). Her success and her independence, she states, exemplify what activist and abolitionist Harriet Tubman fought for—the triumph of Black women.

The same triumph can also be found in “Feeling Myself”. The song, performed by the two most successful female artists in current rap and pop music, Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé, revolves around Black female autonomy and confidence in female sexuality. The last verse explicitly highlights the women’s success and their confidence in their triumph:

Stingin’ with the Queen B and we be whippin’ all that D  
 Cause we dope girls we flawless, we the poster girls for all this  
 We run around with them ballers, only real niggas on my call list

I'm the big kahuna, go let them whores know  
 Just on this song alone bitch is on her fourth flow (Minaj and Beyoncé)

In this segment, Minaj references how she and Beyoncé are 'poster girls' for success, and that their empires and domination of the popular music scene are the height Black female success. She establishes that she is in charge—she is the “kahuna”—and that even this song alone provides her with power and wealth that other rappers cannot achieve, which allows her to be versatile and provide “four flows”, four cadences and styles of rap, within a single song without taking away from its success.

Secondly, many of Minaj's songs revolve around sexuality. Although this is not unusual in rap music—a few examples are “Candy Shop” in which rapper 50 Cent lets ladies “lick the lollipop”, “#!\*@You Tonight” by The Notorious B.I.G and R. Kelly in which they elaborately describe their sexual plans with a lady, or Blackstreet and Dr. Dre's “No Diggity” describing a girl with loose morale—female sexuality as a choice, or focus on female pleasure is difficult to find in music by other established rappers. Minaj's lyrics are openly sexual and she is not disinclined to self-objectification, as can be seen in “I Endorse These Strippers”, “Anaconda”, and “Feeling Myself”. All these songs reference female sexuality, the reclaiming of sexuality and glorifications of the Black female body. Even leaving out of this discussion a song dedicated entirely to Minaj receiving sexual pleasure, “Get On Your Knees” from the album *Pinkprint*, does not take away from the presence of female sexual individuality in Minaj's music.

The song “I Endorse These Strippers” tells the story of Nicki Minaj visiting a strip club ‘Sue's Rendezvous’ in Mount Vernon, New York. Strikingly, the song title as well as the opening lines of the song resemble the way in which presidential candidates advertise during their campaigns: “I endorse this message ... I am Nicki Minaj and I support this message...I endorse these strippers ... I am Nicki Minaj and I support these strippers” (Minaj, Tyga, and Thomas Brinx), suggesting that she is an authority in the rap scene that wants to convey a certain message to the audience. The song continues: “all these chicks is ridiculous, conversations is frivolous / man, fuck all these bitches I am a polygamist ... my money can't fit in clips / I tell the hoes when they strip / that they can play with my clit” (Minaj, Tyga, and Thomas Brinx), and although many listeners might take offense in hearing lyrics that are considered vulgar and overly sexual it is exactly this hesitation in the acceptance of her excessively sexual lyrics that shows the impact of Minaj's tremendously open and direct approach to her sexuality, and the empowerment of reclaiming sexuality that comes with it. It

is not unusual for male rappers to talk about receiving sexual pleasure, so it should not be too surprising that Minaj talks about wanting the same. This double standard in the reception of sexually loaded lyrics—although these lyrics can hardly be called ‘loaded’ and are more an explicit call for sexual gratification—shows how Minaj succeeds in breaking barriers and changing perceptions of female sexuality. However, her tactic of selling sex and using the female body as a product might be considered as part of a consumerist, capitalist tradition. The excessive sexuality in her lyrics once again shows how ‘sex sells’, and might not be considered a political message at all. Nonetheless, repeating focus on female sexuality and her control over the representation of her own sexuality and body do show deeper meaning: although it is quite possible that these lyrics were written partly because of the profitability of sex, they still show the power of reclaiming sexuality.

A similar message can be found in Minaj’s “Anaconda”. The bridge in this song features the following lyrics: “He can tell I ain’t missing no meals / come through and fuck ‘em in my automobile / let him eat it with his grills ... He keep telling me it’s real, that he love my sex appeal” (Minaj “Anaconda”). This again shows Minaj’s openness about wanting sexual gratification, but also adds the message that being sexually open should not be something to hide but to celebrate. Minaj’s reclaiming of sexuality provides opportunity for the celebration of female bodies that do not adhere to society’s conventional standards of beauty for women: slim, tall, and, unfortunately, White. Rather, some of the lyrics provide messages celebrating curvy girls—perhaps specifically tailored to the Black female body: “Little in the middle but she got so much back”, “This one is for my bitches with a fat ass ... Fuck them skinny bitches” (Minaj “Anaconda”). Although this message of embracing curvy girls is brought with good intent, the suggestion that validation of this body type comes from men—“he want something he can grab” and “My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun”—along with the idea that “skinny bitches” are not sexy, suggests that Minaj’s lyrics are not at all inclusive, but still attempt to place the worth and appeal of one body type over the other, albeit reversed from the usual order. However, Minaj does encourage women with fuller figures, and Black women with more curves, that they should not consider themselves unattractive. The difficulty remains, however, in deciding whether this is a message of body positivity or still part of a body shaming discourse, and whether the lyrics truly call for self-acceptance of curvier bodies: stating that “[h]e said he don’t like ‘em boney / he want something he can grab ... My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun” (Minaj “Anaconda”) still shows the need for male validation of the female body.

The last song I want to discuss concerning sexuality before moving to messages of financial independence is “Feeling Myself”. As has already been established, this song hosts messages of Black female excellence by showcasing the success Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé have. The song additionally features a message of sexual independence, the title itself referring to women who are comfortable with their own sexuality. The song further mentions a vibrator that was made popular by the series *Sex and the City* (“Feeling Myself” *Genius*)—“I’m feeling myself, *jack rabbit*” (emphasis added)—a conversation between Nicki and a lover during a sexual act—“He said ‘Damn, Nicki, it’s tight,’”—and bouncy sexual acts—“*Hanky* full of that bounce, baby” (Minaj and Beyoncé, emphasis added). The two most successful Black female artists’ acceptance of, and openness about, sexual pleasure reestablishes that women should no longer be considered as either non-sexual beings or solely sexual for the pleasure of men, and that women need to be in charge of their own sexuality—being a woman should include being allowed to be a sexual woman.

Thirdly, Nicki Minaj advocates female equality and success by highlighting the importance of financial independence and professional achievement. These messages of financial and professional accomplishment can be found in the songs “I’m Legit” and “Feeling Myself”. In the first song, she mentions how she has outgrown her background, rapping: “Imma burn the beat down no matches though / No they can’t keep up they molasses slow / I’m the greatest Queens bitch with the cash’s flow” (Minaj and Ciara). The first of these three lines establish that Minaj thinks of herself as an amazing rapper, the second shows that nobody can keep up with her and that she remains at the top, and the third determines that Minaj has risen from the poor neighborhood in Queens that she grew up in and can now be considered a magnate—or, as she states in the Time 100 interview, a mogul. In “Feeling Myself”, this is most apparent in the third verse, rapped by Nicki Minaj:

Bitches ain’t got punchlines or flow  
 I have both and an empire also  
 .....  
 Why these bitches don’t never be learnin’  
 You bitches will never get what I be earnin’  
 I’m still getting’ plaques, from my records that’s urban  
 Ain’t gotta rely on top 40  
 I am a rap legend, just go ask the kings of rap  
 Who is the queen and things of that? (Minaj and Beyoncé)

This fragment establishes three things within half a minute: first, that she is an amazingly successful businesswoman that has built her own empire; secondly, that she earns a lot of money through this empire and her shows and that no other artist can achieve what she has achieved financially; and thirdly, that she is the queen of rap. Much like in “I’m Legit”, Minaj equates financial success to professional success, and with her status as a distinguished rapper. Minaj determines that her financial accomplishment and triumph in business allows her to be independent, and to rule her own universe—and this independence should be available to all women.

Lastly, Minaj’s “All Things Go” discusses several experiences in her life that are relatable to women and African-Americans facing unprovoked violence. The first experience that is relatable to women is her decision to stay in a relationship even though she did not really want to. She addresses this by saying: “Just yesterday, I swear it was ‘o-six / Ten years ago, that’s when you proposed / I looked down, “Yes, I suppose”” (Minaj “All”). The hesitation in accepting this marriage proposal is apparent in her use of “I suppose” as an answer, showing that getting engaged was not her wish. Secondly, Minaj speaks about the murder of her cousin, who was shot due to a case of mistaken identity (“Mistaken Identity?”): “I lost my little cousin to a senseless act of violence ... [people] trying to kill him, he ain’t even call me” (Minaj “All”). Shootings of young Black men who were neither aggressive nor criminals are painfully familiar to many African-Americans, and the focus on her personal experience of this issue connects her to the struggles of a larger group. Lastly, she talks about a child she lost sixteen years ago: “My child with Aaron would’ve been sixteen any minute”. This is an experience that is relatable to all women who have had miscarriages, could not keep their child and had to put their children up for adoption, or decided to have an abortion. Minaj addresses issues that are difficult and related specifically to women, showing once again a connection between her struggles and those faced by women everywhere.

### **3.2.2 Performances**

Another aspect in which the presence of Nicki Minaj’s activism and empowerment of women comes to light is during her performances. Even though Minaj’s lyrics can be very explicitly sexual—as has been established in the previous section—her performances of the same songs do not reflect this sexuality. In order to examine the presence of activism and empowerment, and her place in a discussion of Black feminism in popular culture I will discuss two different performances: a performance of the song “Feeling Myself” with Beyoncé at Tidal X in 2015,

and a performance at the Good Morning America Summer Concert Series. Both the visual aspect of these performances as well as the way in which Minaj addresses her audience will provide examples upon which a discussion of Black feminist thought in Minaj's music can be based.

Minaj and Beyoncé's performance at the Tidal X event in October 2015 was a portrayal of female solidarity and strength. Where the lyrics of "Feeling Myself" reveal a song that is mostly about female sexuality and explicit mentions of masturbation, the performance was not as sexual as would be expected. The two women and their backup dancers did not wear outfits that were overly revealing, nor did they perform intensely sensual choreographies or try to seduce the audience in any other way. Parts of the choreography did consist of sensual dances but they were performed in such a manner that they became a show of power and intimidation, rather than of sexuality. The two artists and the dancers 'feeling themselves' did not convey sexual freedom more than sexual intimidation and female strength—the 'feeling' was not inherently sexual, rather it was extremely powerful. The performance ends with a small 'diva-off' in which Minaj and Beyoncé face each other and try to be as impressive as possible, which is broken by the two women smiling and hugging, showing strength in solidarity. Although the song is very sexual, and all dance moves individually could be seen as sensual, the performance as a whole is not one that is meant to sexually please the audience—it is a performance that shows the power and solidarity that comes from embracing female sexuality. The performance shows that sexuality does not have to be the focal point in pop music to convey messages of sexual liberation, and that the possibility to be sexual means gaining power.

Another performance of the song "Feeling Myself", as well as "The Night Is Still Young", is Minaj's show at the Good Morning America Concert Series in 2015. The performance itself is not very revolutionary and does not visually portray true aspects of activism and empowerment, apart from Minaj's continuous empowerment through sexual independence. However, halfway through the song "The Night Is Still Young" Minaj takes the time to address the audience:

All my flawless women make some noise! Listen, I want you to promise me you'll always chase your dreams. Don't you let anybody steal your joy. You're beautiful, and you're worth every ounce of love, and respect, and attention. Promise me you'll stay in school. Get your own education, your own job, your



own career. Don't you ever depend on a man for a damn thing! ("Nicki Minaj GMA" 10:20)

Minaj specifically addresses the women in the audience, and empowers them to be individuals, to be successful, and to be educated. She inspires these women to be in control of their own lives and their own careers, and not to rely on men to prosper. The message of activism and empowerment she attempts to convey in her performances thus becomes explicitly voiced: women not only need to be independent, they should want to be independent, and Minaj empowers them to succeed autonomously.

### ***3.2.3 Visual Imagery in Music Videos***

Lastly, Minaj presents forms of activism and empowerment, and reinvents womanhood through the use of music videos. Much like in her lyrics, Minaj addresses issues of sexuality, Black female excellence, her professional success, and body positivity in her music videos. I will examine two music videos of songs that have not yet been discussed, "Only" which was recorded in collaboration with rappers Drake, Lil Wayne, and Chris Brown as part of Minaj's third studio album *The Pinkprint*, and "Freedom", which was featured on her second studio album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*. Additionally, I will look at representation of the Black female body in the music video for "Anaconda". This section will focus on the representation of sexuality, success, and the female body in Nicki Minaj's music videos, which will lead to a conclusion on the visual presence of Black feminism and new paradigms of womanhood in Minaj's work.

Minaj's video for "Only" centers around female domination of men, which is emphasized even more by the fact that the song is recorded with three other male rappers. The video opens with a shot of four women trying to capture a man in an urban wasteland—graffiti on the walls, smoke, and isolation—and continues by showing a man struggling to stand up with cuts and bruises on his body and face (see picture 11 in the appendix). The man that has been captured is then tied to a chair, along with the man with cuts and bruises, and another man is seen lying on a table, appearing to be unconscious. Two women wearing revealing Black leather outfits watch the men, and the song starts. The video continues showing the beating and captivity of several men, while Minaj seems to supervise the whole project, holding a whip (see picture 12). Subsequently, the men and women move to a larger room to dance, no longer controlled or in control. The rest of the video shifts between images of Minaj, Drake, and Wayne rapping in front of the party, images in which men are physically

restrained and dominated, or occasional close-ups of Brown or Minaj. The men are portrayed as slaves, beaten and mistreated, yet still desiring the women; the women always remain in control. The song that is textually about sexual activity gets an additional meaning of female control over male sexuality. Minaj presents a form of sexuality that does not belong in the mainstream—images of bondage and domination are the main focus of the video—and thus presents a woman who is in complete control over her own sexuality and of the men that surround her.

Another video that revolves around forms of sexuality is the music video for the song “Anaconda”. In this case, however, the focus is not on controlling male sexuality but embracing female sexuality. Additionally, the song and video focus on the embrace of Black female bodies and attempt to convey a message of body positivity. As mentioned in the discussion of the lyrics of “Anaconda”, this message of body positivity is not completely successful as it ‘body shames’ women who are skinnier. The music video, however, does not present this negative view of thinner women and focuses solely on the beauty of women with a fuller figure. The video is set in the jungle, where Minaj and several female dancers move in a way that shows off their assets (see picture 13). The setting in the jungle immediately brings to mind the postcolonial idea of the wild Other that cannot control her urges, and the way that her body is portrayed permits this fascination with the ‘strange’ form. The only aspect that negates this view of Minaj’s body as something that is other and needs to be studied is the fact that she chooses to portray her body in this manner—she self-objectifies. Her self-objectification reverses the idea of being the Other, and establishes her body as something that needs to be glorified rather than studied.

Although the video does not contain imagery of control over male sexuality, it does feature aspects that suggest apathy and condescension regarding men’s pleasure. Towards the end of the video, Minaj is seen standing in a kitchen—in the jungle—with a countertop full of different kinds of fruit and vegetables. After putting whipped cream on herself, and adding strawberries, Minaj is seen holding a banana—a clear phallic symbol. However, after tasting it she decides not to eat the banana, takes a knife, determinedly cuts the banana into pieces, and bisects a cucumber. The destruction of these two objects unmistakably references her disdain of male pleasure, and her indifference towards the sexual pleasure of men. Starting off trying to seduce men by using the banana to reference sexual acts, the cutting of the banana and bisecting of the cucumber demonstrate taking back power and control. In a video that revolves around women feeling comfortable being curvy, and women celebrating other

women—Minaj shows admiration for all the dancers’ bodies—a part of empowerment is still present: remain in control of your own body and sexuality.

The last music video that will be discussed featuring aspects of empowerment is “Freedom”, which presents messages of Black female excellence as well as Nicki Minaj’s professional success and her status in the music industry. The video opens and closes with an image of a staircase leading to nothing but darkness, standing in an otherwise empty landscape (see picture 14). The staircase leading to nothing could symbolize two things: first, that even if you try to succeed, work hard, and eventually become the best, there is nothing good at the top; and second, that Nicki Minaj has already made it to the top, but darkness still looms. That Minaj has made it to the top is established in two different settings in the video, where she either wears a crown and an elegant, yet extravagant dress, or she sits on a throne (see picture 15). The latter shows a Nicki Minaj that is more authentic than any other shot of her in the video, wearing a fur coat, more natural looking makeup, and a head of large, curly hair. It is this ‘natural’ Nicki Minaj that has risen to the top and is in control of her own empire, the Minaj that other Black women can most easily identify with (very few women have natural bright pink hair).

Minaj further establishes her dominance in the rap scene by equating herself to Jesus Christ. The lyrics already do this—“they never thank me for opening doors, but they ain’t even thank Jesus when he died on the cross” (Minaj “Freedom”)—but the imagery of the video further ascertains the connection. A display of a large wooden cross on withered train tracks, with four large keys hanging from it—supposedly the keys Minaj used to open doors—as well as a modernized crown of thorns made of metal thread associate Minaj with Christ, suggesting that she too brings salvation and freedom (see pictures 16 and 17). The religion Nicki Minaj teaches would be a religion of female empowerment, making her a prophet of female independence that fights for the rights and equality of Black women. Although this is quite a hyperbolic statement, fitting the way in which the music video presents Minaj as a prophet, the message she tries to convey is made very clear through this analysis: Minaj establishes herself as the queen of rap, a Black woman at the top of her game who uses her power to promote ideas of female empowerment, strength, and solidarity.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

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Where the previous chapters aimed to provide examples of activism and empowerment in the personal and performance feminism of artists Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, this chapter will link these examples to theories of Black feminism as defined in chapter one. Three aspects of Black feminist thought will be the basis for this discussion, namely the connection between personal experience and group knowledge, the significance of change, and the connection between feminism and other social justice projects. Furthermore, I will discuss whether or not Beyoncé's and Minaj's music presents new paradigms of womanhood, and if their focus on feminism strengthens the cause or leads to its demise. To come to a conclusion, the connection between sexual independence and the financial independence of women, as well as Black excellence, self-empowerment, and Black feminist thought will be examined.

Both artists use different ways of conveying messages of empowerment and thus present different forms of activism. This chapter will focus on the similarities and differences between the various forms of activism utilized by the two women, and will further highlight in which ways they establish new paradigms of womanhood. It will not yet offer definite conclusions on the presence of Black feminist thought in the music of both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, which will be done in the final chapter. Rather it will examine which of the examples provided in the previous two chapters demonstrate instances of Black feminist thought. The aim of this chapter is to link theories of (Black) feminism to frequently occurring aspects of empowerment in the personal and performance feminism of Beyoncé and Minaj.

### 4.1 Personal Experience and Group Knowledge

Both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj draw on the connection between personal experiences and group knowledge in their personal views of feminism, as well as in messages of empowerment and activism in their music and performances. They do this by referring to their youth in neighborhoods that were mostly Black. Beyoncé discusses spending a lot of time in her mother's salon and hearing about other Black women's experiences, and Minaj relates growing up in Queens and her success and confidence to having to rise from poverty. Their personal backgrounds, although very different—Beyoncé's family, even though having to work very hard, never had to struggle financially, whereas Minaj continuously struggled

with finances, having an abusive father, and having to sell her mix tapes on the corner of a street in Queens (*Nicki Minaj: My Time Again*)—inspired both women to include messages of empowerment and female strength in their music. The group knowledge they call upon is mostly present in claims of female strength and Black solidarity. As shown in chapters two and three, both artists portray Black female solidarity in different ways, but both draw upon collective strength through connections to Black heritage, Black female experience and excellence, and sexual and financial independence.

The focus on sexual freedom and financial independence portrays feelings of collective experience and improvement. Empowerment and activism are encouraged through a call for collective strength and reliance on joint experiences, and in the songs discussed in chapters two and three, the collective strength and empowerment can be achieved through hard work, financial gain, and sexual liberation. The common factor that unites women, and that is part of Black womanhood is, in this case, working hard, “stacking paper” (Beyoncé and The Weeknd), and thereby gaining the confidence to acquire sexual freedom and control over all aspects of women’s lives that have historically been dominated by men. Both Beyoncé and Minaj explore the positive sides of female sexual liberation, and relate this to the wishes of a female collective—all women love sexual pleasure (Beyoncé “\*\*\*Flawless”), and women should not be shy about voicing their desires (Beyoncé “Partition”; Minaj, Tyga, and Thomas Brinx; Minaj and Beyoncé). The focus on the body that is present in their work clearly demonstrates the post-feminism that is described by Shugart et al., and the collective strength that both women call for adheres to Crenshaw’s description of the “necessity of group politics” (1296). Beyoncé and Minaj’s personal experiences of sexual freedom, gained through their superstar status and outspokenness about their wishes, are related to what they believe should be a common goal for all women.

Furthermore, both Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj connect their personal experiences to group knowledge by addressing issues of Black femininity, female success, and struggles in the Black community. This is most apparent in the visual aspect of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, the song “Formation” featured on the same album, and Minaj’s “All Things Go”. Both artists present issues that are unique to the female experience—betrayal by men, failed relationships, the loss of a baby—and issues that are unique to the lives of many African-Americans—police brutality, the shooting of innocent young Black men, the struggle for equal rights—thus creating music that connects the personal experiences of both artists to those of many other Black people, as well as the knowledge of struggle and survival that many Black women have as a result. Beyoncé’s performance of “Run the World (Girls)” and her inclusion

of Black women exclusively in her visual album *Lemonade* highlight the focus on female experience and group knowledge. Minaj's insistence on the beauty of Black female bodies in "Anaconda" shows awareness of physical struggles of Black women, thereby placing Minaj at the center of a discussion on body positivity as a tool in the more general advancement of Black women's place in society.

The presence of open sexuality, calls for financial independence, and issues relating directly to Black female experience establish that the first aspect of Black feminist thought can be found in both Beyoncé's and Nicki Minaj's music. Their experience as Black American women within a "heterogeneous collectivity" (Collins 33) and the group knowledge that arises from their experiences connects them, as individuals, to a larger group of Black women. They portray and address issues that are faced by many—if not all—Black women throughout the United States, and their iconic status allows them to successfully unite Black women. The group knowledge that arises from the issues and struggles that are portrayed in Beyoncé and Minaj's music leads to a global connection between Black women, a connection that supports and boosts the Black female fight for equality.

## 4.2 Significance of Change

The second aspect present in the works of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj that shows a connection between their music and Black feminist thought is their portrayal and inclusion of the significance of change. Beyoncé and Minaj must incorporate the changing social conditions that affect Black women's lives in their music in order for it to be considered fully part of a Black feminist discourse. The fact that Beyoncé has gained the iconic status of being the most successful female pop artist in the current music industry, and Minaj's success as a woman in a field that has been dominated by men, shows that the music industry as well as the way in which people consume music have changed to allow, or rather applaud, two Black women to become highly influential musicians, thus demonstrating a change in the social conditions that surround artistic 'superstardom'. This change needs to be embraced and pushed forward by Beyoncé and Minaj to gain relevance. The presence of two Black women at the top of the music charts needs to be recognized as something that was not always possible for it to become beneficial to other Black women's lives. Only when Beyoncé and Minaj acknowledge the significance of their current position in society do they fully become part of a Black feminist discourse.

Recognition of the changing social conditions surrounding the music industry is present in the music by both women, and they promote further change through messages of Black female excellence. Additionally, they encourage the continuing process of autonomy for women by addressing the importance of female individuality regarding sexuality and education. Firstly, Beyoncé recognizes the unique position of successful Black women in society by hosting many famous Black women in her visual album *Lemonade*. She celebrates Black female excellence by showing that Black women are at the top of many different fields of culture—sports, by showing tennis-star Serena Williams; fashion, by showing images of model Winnie Harlow; film, by including actresses Amandla Stenberg, Zendaya, and Quvenzhané Williams—thus displaying how the social landscape has changed to allow these women to eclipse their White counterparts (who have for many years monopolized many fields of culture). The visual album *Lemonade* thus seems to become a tribute to Black female success<sup>3</sup>, showing that Beyoncé acknowledges the significance of her success and uses it to encourage other Black women to prosper.

Nicki Minaj highlights the changing social conditions that have allowed her to become the ‘queen of rap’ by continuously referring to female independence and her personal success in the rap and hip-hop scene. Her songs “Fly” and “I’m Legit” especially show her domination of the rap scene, and in “Feeling Myself” she and Beyoncé once again emphasize their success both in their careers and financially, showing how their independence has given them the opportunity to flourish. The relevance of Black excellence in current-day society becomes especially important when looking at Minaj’s position in the male lead hip-hop scene. A move from male domination to female independence regarding sexuality and wealth portrays the significance of change, since these songs show that female individuality has changed and grown over the years, and needs to be supported and enlarged in order for it to truly succeed. Social conditions have changed and the financial and sexual independence in the songs discussed in chapter three show how Minaj embraces this change, and encourages other women to profit from these improved social conditions for Black women.

Lastly, changing conditions regarding female sexuality are part of the significance of change in a Black feminist discourse. Beyoncé and Minaj’s openness about sexuality is only possible because of the changing social landscape on the recognition of female sexuality.

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<sup>3</sup> Important to keep in mind when viewing *Lemonade* as a tribute to Black women is bell hooks’s comment on consumerism and commercialized political messages, which was mentioned in the introduction.

Where women used to be regarded as non-sexual beings whose only wish and use for sexuality was in reproduction, efforts by second wave feminists in reclaiming their sexuality lead to an increasingly open discourse on female sexuality. Beyoncé and Minaj do not explicitly refer to the change that has taken place that has allowed them to be so open, but do clearly utilize this sexual revolution in their music. As explained in chapter two, Beyoncé subverts the male gaze in her own fantasy during “Partition”, showing facets of self-objectification that can lead to female self-empowerment. The same self-objectification can be found in Minaj’s “Anaconda”, where Minaj celebrates the Black female body and intentionally self-objectifies to convey a message of Black sexuality. Minaj reverts the idea that female sexuality is inherently connected to emotional commitment (Frith and McRobbie 141-2), and establishes that women can be sexual solely for their own pleasure. She also reverses the stigma of the Black ‘Other’ with uncontrollable urges into a message of Black female sexual empowerment, thus addressing the necessity to reframe the Black ‘uncontrolled’ sexuality (Taylor 66). Although this could be viewed as an image without a message—as bell hooks remarks on the self-objectification of Nicki Minaj in “The Passion of Nicki Minaj”: “Is there something that I’m missing that’s happening here?” (Grigoriadis)—using the stigma surrounding Black female sexuality to create messages of self-empowerment shows how changing social conditions have enabled Minaj and Beyoncé to create music that embraces female sexuality and conveys messages of female self-empowerment through reclaiming sexuality.

### 4.3 Feminism and Projects of Social Change

The last aspect that will be examined to establish whether Beyoncé and Minaj’s music is part of a Black feminist discourse is the connection between their ideas of feminism and other projects of social justice and change. As can be seen in the examples provided in chapters two and three, this is much more present in Beyoncé’s work than in Minaj’s. Where Beyoncé specifically addresses issues faced by African-Americans in both the lyrics and the visual aspect of her song “Formation”, Minaj addresses larger issues of other social justice projects solely in relation to the personal violence faced by her nephew. Beyoncé hosts mothers of young African-Americans who have been shot by the police in her visual album *Lemonade*, shows images of a young boy dancing in front of a police line, and makes clear references to the “hands up, don’t shoot” protest by Black Lives Matter. These clear references to the Black Lives Matter movement and thus the struggles faced by African-Americans throughout the



country show a direct relationship between messages of Black female empowerment and more general improvement needed in the lives of people of color living in America, and through the reach of Beyoncé's music shows clear intent to globally address issues of inequality.

Minaj does not address these issues in the same manner, thus somewhat lacking aspects of Black feminist thought concerning the connection of her music to other social justice projects. She does, however, personally address more general issues that come with being a minority and growing up in a poor neighborhood, and through her continuous insistence on the importance of academics for young, underprivileged children acknowledges issues of children dropping out of school to work and provide for their families. Promoting the education of underprivileged children shows her fight to improve the lives of many young Black children, but the message that she conveys through personal interactions cannot be found in her music. Her activism thus stops at the border between the personal and the professional, although she does briefly address the importance of education in the songs "I'm Legit"—"I graduate with honors"—and in "All Things Go"—"I want Caiah to go to college just to say 'We did it!'". As previously mentioned, the latter song also addresses more general issues facing women and African-Americans, but does not directly host an activist meaning like Beyoncé's *Lemonade*.

Beyoncé's personal beliefs on feminism also fit in the intersectional approach of Black feminist thought, as she considers herself to be more of a humanist than a feminist (Gottesman). This belief in humanitarianism as well as her participation in many different humanitarian organizations once again shows her involvement in varying projects of social change. Combining this with her messages of female empowerment, individuality, and the activism that stems from this empowerment—*Lemonade* overwhelmingly consisting of images of Black women and showing Black excellence, as well as advocating female strength during her performance of "Run the World (Girls)"—gains even more momentum through her extensive participation in projects advocating social change. Where Beyoncé's music, especially her latest album, explicitly delivers messages of Black (female) empowerment, Minaj continues to focus mainly on the sexual and financial liberation of women, which, although a very powerful message, also is a persuasive sales technique.

#### 4.4 New Paradigms of Womanhood

As mentioned in chapter one, popular music has the ability to invent and reinvent identity and is thus a powerful tool in conveying messages of what can be considered as a good or bad form of humanity. More specifically, music videos can produce new paradigms of womanhood by presenting new forms of being feminine, or through reclaiming aspects of womanhood that were previously deemed unacceptable. Establishing new paradigms of womanhood through music videos means that the music videos that have been examined in chapters two and three need to portray new ideas of being female that fit in the changing social landscape of femininity and feminism. Beyoncé and Minaj do present new forms of womanhood—albeit in two different ways.

In her music videos and the visual album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé shows the independence and strength of women. Furthermore, she uses her performances to establish new forms of womanhood. She relies on the collective strength that comes from female individuality, with focus on aspects of sexual freedom and embracing heritage. Instances of independence that comes from sexual freedom, as has already been put forward in chapter two, can be found in “Partition”, “6 Inch”, and “\*\*\*Flawless”. In “\*\*\*Flawless”, the use of a sample of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx speech draws specific attention to the freedom of women to choose to be sexual, much like in the French spoken-word part of “Partition”: if women want to be sexual, they should be. This sexual independence has only just gained status in mainstream society, where women are slowly embracing their sexuality and are increasingly open about their wishes. The representation of autonomous sexual identity that is present for more than just the wish to reproduce is one of the new aspects of womanhood Beyoncé puts forward, reclaiming Black female sexuality as something that is not uncontrollable but willingly displayed, and removing the uncontaminated status of White female chasteness by stating that *all* women have the ability to be sexual.

Secondly, Beyoncé establishes that acknowledging your heritage and thereby presenting a more natural form of yourself should be a vital part of Black womanhood. Acknowledging her African heritage in the visual aspect of *Lemonade*, as well as embracing the natural Black form—mostly through a politics of hair—shows that Beyoncé advocates a more inclusive Black womanhood, in which women do not need to alter their appearance to look more like the conventionally attractive White woman—a practice that results in women of color to straighten, relax, and dye their hair, and in its most extreme form bleaching their skin (Bray). Minaj also addresses this acceptance of the Black female body in “Anaconda”,

where she highlights the beauty of the curvaceousness typically associated with Black women's bodies. Embracing a more naturally Black beauty constitutes the second aspect that establishes new paradigms of womanhood specifically tailored to Black women across the globe.

The difference in the way that both artists present these new forms of womanhood is Minaj's insistence on female sexuality and financial independence, and Beyoncé's more intersectional approach including collective female strength, embracing of Black heritage, and autonomy that comes from reclaiming sexuality and being financially independent. Minaj draws from images of the 'Other' and subverts them by self-objectifying and thereby glorifying the Black female body, as well as using the tradition in rap and hip-hop music to refer to her own financial wealth and success. Being part of a different musical genre, Beyoncé had to reinvent conventional tropes of pop music to address similar issues. Unlike Minaj, she does not address her own financial and professional success; rather she inspires other women to be financially independent and to focus on their careers. Beyoncé does not use her personal gain to promote messages of empowerment; she speaks as an individual that is part of a collective to create female strength. In this way, Beyoncé places herself in the middle of the discussion, while Minaj places herself above it. Minaj relies on post-feminist individualism in breaking through White barriers (McRobbie "Post-Feminism"; Valassopoulos). Following their individual place in the discussion of new womanhood, Beyoncé's messages of empowerment, activism, and feminism establish paradigms of womanhood that seem more suitable for all women. Beyoncé advocates a new, more rounded form of womanhood that Minaj, in her music, does not present in the same way. Therefore, although both women highlight different aspects that are important to the empowerment of women and the establishment of new accepted forms of womanhood, Beyoncé uses her music, performances, and videos to promote this new way of being female, whereas Minaj solely establishes that she is a sexually and financially independent woman.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

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With the blurring of boundaries between high culture and popular culture came the ability to convey messages through song that could reach large audiences. This ability of communicating ideas through music created a connection between popular music and several other fields of study, such as politics, race studies, and gender studies. In a time where police violence predominates and prejudices against African-Americans continue to exist, popular music becomes an effective site for public messages of equality. Additionally, women still face inequality in professional spheres, as well as their personal lives, and the intersectional oppression faced by Black women is only slowly gaining attention. These issues, that are so prevalent in current-day society, can be addressed in popular music to reshape society and help in the struggles faced by Black women and all people of color—as is done by singers Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj.

### 5.1 Summary

Two instances of feminism, activism, and empowerment were examined in the discussion on Black feminist thought relating to Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj: personal and performance feminism. Theories of popular culture (Hall; Kooijman *Fabricating*; Railton and Watson; Strinati), feminism (Crenshaw; McRobbie; Valassopoulos), and Black feminist thought (Collins; Taylor) were used to highlight the importance of messages of social change in popular music, with extra emphasis on the significance of shaping and reshaping identity through music videos. The theories that were discussed in chapter one established how popular culture and feminist discourse are intertwined, and how popular culture should always be examined with the help of other academic discourses. Furthermore, the theoretical framework presented in chapter two established that although popular music is always produced to be profitable, this does not take away from the powerful way in which it can convey messages.

The examination of instances of activism and empowerment in Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj's work in chapter two and three revealed several similarities in the way in which both women address issues of Black female inequality, and how this inequality can be reduced. The two case studies distinguished four different ways in which Beyoncé and Minaj incorporate messages of activism and empowerment in their music. Firstly, both women

explore sexual independence by reclaiming their bodies, or through self-objectification. Beyoncé does this by reappropriating the male gaze to display her personal sexual fantasies, Minaj by explicitly referring to sexual acts, thus shocking the audience while showing sexual freedom. Secondly, they convey messages of financial independence and the importance of academics through their music and personal opinions. Both women refer to financial success in their music, and both encourage other women to gain the same freedom. Furthermore, they highlight the necessity of getting an education in the quest for independence. They address this by either celebrating women who have a college education (Beyoncé “Run the World (Girls)”), or encouraging children to do well in school (*Nicki Minaj: My Time Again*). Thirdly, both Beyoncé and Minaj recognize the influence heritage and personal background have on identity. Beyoncé attributes the way her music speaks to other Black women to her time spent in her mother’s hair salon, and Minaj states that her struggles growing up made her into the businesswoman she has become. Beyoncé further addresses the importance of her African heritage in her latest album, where she portrays African traditions and repeatedly shows imagery of Black women. Fourthly, Beyoncé’s music hosts frequent calls for collective female strength. Her latest album seems to be directed towards showing Black female experience and struggles, and her memorable performance of “Run the World (Girls)” was her most explicit message of the power of collective strength.

## 5.2 Conclusion

These four different instances where messages of empowerment, activism, and feminism are presented, are all part of a larger discussion on Black Feminist thought. Sexual and financial independence, collective female strength, and the connection to heritage can all be placed in three aspects of Black feminist thought. The analysis of Beyoncé and Minaj’s personal and performance feminism, which used the connection between group knowledge and personal experience, recognition of the significance of change, and the connection between feminism and other projects of social change showed that their activism is part of a Black feminist discourse. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between the forms of activism and empowerment hosted in the two artists’ music, showed that Beyoncé and Minaj present different forms of feminism, both with different intents.

The connection between the empowerment, activism, and feminism of Black female artists and Black feminist thought was much more apparent in the case of Beyoncé than in Minaj’s music. Beyoncé’s call for collective female strength and her recognition of Black

heritage relates her experience to group knowledge, and her insistence on reclaiming sexuality and financial independence, as well as celebrating the possibility of Black female excellence show she acknowledges the significance of the change that has taken place in society. Additionally, her feelings of humanitarianism as well as the representation of police brutality in *Lemonade* establish that her beliefs of activism and empowerment are connected to other social justice projects. This confirms that Beyoncé represents Black feminist thought in the activism and empowerment that is present in her personal and performance manifestations of feminism.

The same cannot be found in Nicki Minaj's music, although she does present lyrics, performances, and imagery that show connections to the first two aspects of Black feminist thought. Unlike Beyoncé, Minaj does not call for collective female strength but highlights the power of the individual. She does this by showing how liberating sexual empowerment and financial independence can be, additionally using her professional success as the epitome of Black female excellence. Aspects of personal experience and group knowledge are present in her recognition of the beauty of Black female bodies, as well as her attention to issues that not only Black or African-American women have to face. She personally connects to a larger group by addressing her younger fans and encouraging them to get an education and to prosper in life, and by telling female members of her audience to be in control of their own lives. Minaj also uses the changing environment of the music industry to present messages of independence, once again mostly regarding sexuality and finances, and her own success. She does not, however, explicitly connect all this to the change that has taken place. Therefore, she does not overtly recognize the significance of change that has allowed her to be this outspoken and successful, rather she focuses on her own rise to fame and her own struggles.

Moreover, Minaj does not host many messages connecting the fight for Black female equality to other social justice projects. She addresses the need for improvement in the lives of many underprivileged African-American children, but only does so by relating it to her experience growing up in a poor neighborhood. A fight to improve the lives of these children is not present in her work, nor does her music tackle other, more diverse issues of intersectional oppression. She solely reclaims her own sexuality and thus presents a new perspective on the 'uncontrollable Black sexuality'. Minaj's constant portrayal of Black female sexuality creates an expanded form of calls for sexual independence that are found in Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith's music. Expected, then, would be Minaj using this power by achieving more than Rainey and Smith did: she could have related her sexuality to a collective reclaim of sexuality by women around the globe. However, her intent stops at her

choice to focus solely on celebration of Black female bodies and her own sexuality. Thus, Beyoncé's messages of feminism are more easily connected to aspects of Black feminist thought than Minaj's. This does not mean, however, that Minaj's music does not feature any forms of empowerment or activism—she does encourage female individualism, sexual independence, and financial autonomy. However, Minaj, although presenting music that inspires women and personally addressing issues of inequality, does not present all examined aspects of Black feminist thought. She empowers women that grew up in poor neighborhoods to prosper, and African-American and Black women to be more comfortable with their body. Nevertheless, she does not use the power of popular music to actively address other issues that are present in Black women's lives, or in various social justice projects.

Lastly, combined theories of popular culture and feminism that were discussed in chapter one presented the statement that popular music can reshape identity and thus form new paradigms of womanhood (Railton and Watson 22). Furthermore, they suggested that overt attention to feminism in the media could create hyperreal, mediated images of womanhood and femininity that could lead to feminism's demise (Kooijman *Fabricating*). As discussed in chapter four, Beyoncé's activism and empowerment present new paradigms of womanhood. She places herself in the conversation on Black female equality and female strength, and subsequently emphasizes how collective female strength, independence in all aspects of life, and staying true to your heritage should be part of a woman's identity. Much like Janet Jackson's emphasis on collective female strength, and Tina Turner's album on domestic violence, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* presents a story of united Black female strength in times of personal struggle. Her music thus hosts messages of resistance that have for long been central in the Black musical tradition (Davis 181). This cannot be found in Minaj's representation of feminism, since she focuses solely on sexual empowerment and financial liberation. She does not present a fully renewed womanhood, and merely establishes that she is a successful star with the ability to shock and be controversial. This does not mean, however, that Minaj's representation of Black womanhood is inconsequential: rather it shows that her activism, empowerment, and feminism are less developed than Beyoncé's. Nevertheless, her move away from 'characters' in her music towards more personal messages suggests that more elaborate and inclusive forms of empowerment may be yet to come.

The hypothesis that Black feminist theory offers new perspectives in the study of popular music, in which new forms of activism and empowerment that are in keeping with the individualization of third wave feminism can therefore be applied in the examination of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj's personal and performance feminism. Both women use the

importance of autonomy that is so prevalent in third wave feminism to convey messages of female strength and empowerment, and they both use their influence on society to express feminist thought. Although Beyoncé and Minaj convey different messages of independence, and do not represent aspects of Black feminist thought in similar ways or to the same extent, they do both focus on Black female experience. Influences of Black feminism are present in their music, and Beyoncé specifically promotes an intersectional, multifaceted feminism that strives for Black female equality. She presents issues that are not always unique to the Black female experience, or for African-Americans, but touches upon aspects that women of color around the globe can relate to. Minaj does not offer this versatile form of feminism, and her excessive sexuality could even exclude women without the liberty—or wish—to be similarly sexual. The over-mediation of this focused form of feminism that mainly revolves around sexual and financial independence represents what Railton and Watson see as the danger of feminism in popular culture. That this would result in feminism's demise, however, is a hyperbolic statement. It might be true that some audiences are unreceptive of Minaj's outings of empowerment, but this does not take away from the power and reach her beliefs on empowerment, activism, and feminism have.

Where Beyoncé already presents activism and empowerment that challenge inequality that various groups in society face, Minaj's activism is just at a starting point. Her move away from the characters she presented in her first two albums towards the personal messages on *The Pinkprint* show that she is developing music with deeper meaning. The personal aspect of her newer music, and perhaps the music that is yet to come, will be the connecting factor between her experiences and those of other women (as can be seen in "All Things Go"). Very successful artists and businesswomen openly addressing issues of inequality and their celebration of Black female success might lead to some criticism, but is still able to start a discussion and change the social landscape. For when two role models tackle inequality and continuously show messages of collective Black female strength, women around the globe have the opportunity to reshape their identities. By displaying aspects of Black feminist thought in their music, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj reconstruct society's beliefs on what feminism is, and in the process present new ways of celebrating womanhood.

### **5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Due to the scope of this thesis, I did not have the opportunity to fully investigate reception of the messages of feminism presented in Beyoncé and Minaj's work, which would be an



interesting subject to examine. This thesis only explored the portrayal of feminism and the messages that were hosted in the music by Beyoncé and Minaj, not the way in which the public perceived these messages. The reception of the self-objectification and sexual liberation in the non-western world might show how Minaj's accounts of activism cannot be part of a transnational Black feminism, and might support sentiments of anti-Americanism. Also, some scholars (Emerson; White) draw interesting connections between Nicki Minaj and the place of Missy Elliot in rap music, which would provide more insight into Minaj's current standing in the rap scene, and further establish how her place as a woman at the top in the hip-hop genre is such an exceptional position. This could also present an interesting exploration of the importance of hip-hop feminism in current popular culture.

Another subject that is interesting to further research that the limitations on this thesis simply did not allow for is how messages of Black feminism in popular music differ from messages of feminism by White female popular artists, or whether they adhere to aspects of Black feminist thought as well. Furthermore, a more detailed historical examination of instances of activism and empowerment in popular music might provide more insight into the effect music can have in reshaping societal conventions. Looking more closely at the changing in pop, rap, and hip-hop in the way that messages of activism and empowerment are included should prove fruitful. Analyzing the ways these messages have changed in explicitness and effectiveness through the examination of several popular artists throughout the last century will provide an even better understanding of the activism, empowerment, and feminism of Black female popular artists. Lastly, connecting the individual components of messages of activism and empowerment in lyrics, performances, and visual imagery to each other rather than to Black feminist thought might present new insight into the artists' feminism.

Nonetheless, the examination of how Beyoncé and Minaj incorporated aspects of activism and empowerment in their music already provided interesting conclusions on the presence of Black feminist thought in both their personal and professional demonstrations of feminism. It showed that the mediation of this feminism does not result in its demise; rather it provides new paradigms of womanhood that empowers women across the globe.

## Appendix

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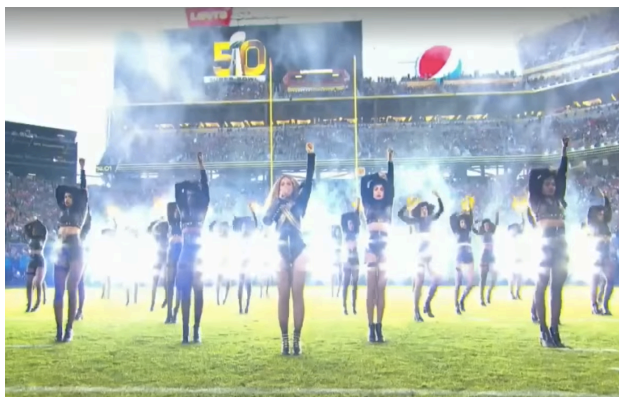
**Picture 1:** 2011 Billboard Awards Performance of “Run the World (Girls)”  
Screenshot 06:57 (“Beyoncé - Run The World (Girls) Live”)



**Picture 2:** 2014 MTV VMA performance, Beyoncé standing in front of a large screen reading “FEMINIST” while audio of the speech “We Should All Be Feminists” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is playing.  
Screenshot 10:50 (“Visuals”)



**Picture 3:** Beyoncé and back-up dancers wearing outfits resembling those worn by the Black Panther Party  
Screenshot 02:17 (“Super Bowl”)



**Picture 4:** Beyoncé and dancers raise their fists during 2016 Super Bowl Halftime Show.  
Screenshot 01:53 (“Super Bowl”)



**Picture 5:** Members of the Black Panther Party protesting at the New York City courthouse in 1969 (Fenton)



**Picture 6:** A large group of Black women standing on a stage.  
Screenshot 00:02:29 (*Lemonade*, Dir. Åkerlund et. al.)



**Picture 7:** A group of Black women dance with connected sleeves.  
Screenshot 00:11:08 (*Lemonade*, Dir. Åkerlund et. al.)



**Picture 8:** Black women with body paint on a school bus.  
Screenshot 00:16:26 (*Lemonade*, Dir. Åkerlund et. al.)



**Picture 9:** Beyoncé with face paint and traditional necklaces.  
Screenshot 00:19:57 (*Lemonade*, Dir. Åkerlund et. al.)





**Picture 10:** Women at a large table, all with different hairstyles.  
Screenshot 00:49:06 (*Lemonade*, Dir. Åkerlund et. al.)



**Picture 11:** Four women succeed in capturing a man, the man wears black trousers, the women black outfits with much leather  
Screenshot 0:03 (“Nicki Minaj - Only”)



**Picture 12:** Minaj is in control of two men tied to a chair, holding a whip in her right hand and exuding confidence. Screenshot 0:55 (“Nicki Minaj – Only”)



**Picture 13:** Opening shot of the music video “Anaconda” showing Nicki Minaj and four dancers posing on a bridge in the jungle. Screenshot 00:18 (“Nicki Minaj – Anaconda”)



**Picture 14:** An empty staircase leading to nothing at the start of the “Freedom” music video. Screenshot 0:05 (“Nicki Minaj – Freedom”)



**Picture 15:** Nicki Minaj sitting on a throne, making her the queen of her empire. Screenshot 1:49 (“Nicki Minaj – Freedom”)



**Picture 16:** Nicki Minaj with a headpiece resembling a modern crown of thorns.  
Screenshot 0:44 (“Nicki Minaj – Freedom”)



**Picture 17:** A cross with four large keys hanging from strings.  
Screenshot 0:18 (“Nicki Minaj – Freedom”)

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