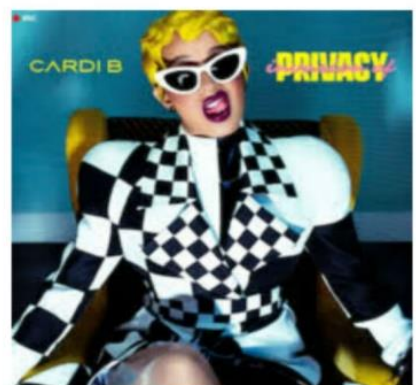


"I Don't Dance Now, I Make Money Moves"

Female Representation in Contemporary Commercialized American Hip Hop Music Videos



**Linda van Rooij
MA Thesis
North American Studies**

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Front cover:

Cardi B, “Bartier Cardi.” 2 April 2018.

Cardi B, “Bodak Yellow.” 24 June 2017.

Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy*. 5 April 2018.

Drake, “Nice For What.” 6 April 2018.

Drake, *Scorpion*. 29 June 2018.

Kendrick Lamar, *Damn*. 14 April 2017.

Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. 16 March 2015.

Nicki Minaj, “Anaconda.” 19 August 2014.

Nicki Minaj, “Barbie Tingz.” 4 May 2018.

Disclaimer: this thesis contains strong language and sexually explicit imagery.

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Abstract

This thesis examines female representation in contemporary commercialized American hip hop music videos through visual imagery and lyrics, contrasting the ways in which successful male and female artists portray women in their visual discourse. First constructing a theoretical framework on hip hop history and concepts of race, gender, feminism and female agency in the first chapter, four selected case studies are explored on topics of sexism, the female body, notions of masculinity, femininity, female agency and sexuality. These analyses are conducted over two chapters, the first one focusing on the female case studies of Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, and the second chapter addressing the visual discourse of male rappers Drake and Kendrick Lamar. All four case studies consist out of two parts, the first part encompassing a more general profile on the respective artist, followed by a close-reading analysis of a relevant contemporary music video selected from the artist's repertoire. Ultimately, the conclusion is drawn that even though contemporary commercialized American hip hop music videos show a general tendency towards a more progressive representation of women in their visual frames, a strong set of gendered dynamics is revealed to still dominate hip hop culture, heavily influencing the ways in which female and male artists are able to portray women in their music.

Keywords: gender representation, contemporary commercialized hip hop, black feminism, female agency, race, sexuality, the female body, femininity, masculinity, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Drake, Kendrick Lamar

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Introduction

The concept behind this thesis was born in one of the most un-academic, unexpected places one generally thinks of when thinking about theses: the club. On a random Tuesday evening, the dancefloor exploded when this one hip hop song came on that everyone seemed to know and was happily singing along to. Finding some of the lyrics rather questionable, it was the act of looking up this song and its accompanying video the next day that eventually led me down the path to find the topic for my MA thesis. The fact is that I have always considered hip hop to be a genre of music with a horrible track record regarding the representation of women. Discovering that the popular song *Swalla* by Jason Deruolo, Nicki Minaj and Ty Dolla \$ign indeed contained the lyrics “All you girls in here, if you’re feeling thirsty, come and take a sip, cause you know what I’m serving” (“Swalla” 0.38-0.47), and was accompanied by a video showcasing groups of girls scarcely dressed, licking lollipops and twerking for the camera (Video Chart “Swalla” 1-8), awoke the feminist in me. This was the song everyone was singing to in the club. This, apparently, was still the set standard for the representation of women in popular music in the 21st century. This revelation sparked my interest as I started looking at more videos primarily by female artists. Why did rappers like Nicki Minaj seem so willing to participate in this blatant sexism? Why would someone as successful as Beyoncé adhere to this obvious misogynistic culture? The contradicting feelings of pride and disdain that erupted when viewing for instance Minaj’s “Anaconda” video, once more confirmed to me that something more complicated was going on here than I initially had thought. As a self-proclaimed feminist, I struggled to understand the ambiguous feelings I felt towards female artists and the way they represent women and sexuality in their videos. These feelings — and the rapidly changing gender dynamics in the entertainment industry today — brought me to explore the parallels of gender in the commercialized American hip hop arena today with the research question:

In what ways are women represented in contemporary commercialized American hip hop music videos by male and female artists through visual imagery and lyrics?

By analyzing four successful contemporary hip hop artists — Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Drake and Kendrick Lamar — and their remarkable visual discourse on topics of gender representation, sexism and sexuality, I aim to add a new dimension to the ongoing conversation on hip hop, feminism and the differences between male and female artists in an industry that has always struggled with equal gender representation.

As stated above, it is no secret that hip hop as a hyper-masculine and male-dominated genre can be said to have always had issues regarding gender representation. Misogyny first seeped into the larger hip hop culture in the late 20th century, and combined with the so-called ‘pornification’ of the genre has resulted in a visual discourse that has blurred the lines between music videos and adult pornographical content (Kitwana 87; Rose 168; Hunter and Soto 171). The sexist representation of women which largely protruded into 21st century hip hop is therefore not a new phenomenon. In the words of theorist Tricia Rose: “Clearly, the issue isn’t *if* hip hop ... promotes sexist and demeaning images of black women as its bread-and-butter product” (114). The genre’s growing commercial appeal combined with the development of globalization, however, have transformed hip hop from a marginalized subculture to a powerful homogenized and commodified product, which today has the power to influence a large global audience (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 122; Hunter and Cuenca 27). This popularity of the genre has normalized a dangerous sexist standard in visual framing, through which “women are routinely sexually humiliated [and] used for male sexual pleasure” (Hunter and Soto 172; “A Taste for Brown Sugar” 7). Naturally, there are also exceptions to this blatant sexism in hip hop, as female rappers have resisted some of the culture’s more sexist practices from the start. Artists such as Queen Latifah, Salt ‘n Pepa, and Lauryn Hill started what can be called a rare feminist stream in hip hop. They too, however, adhered to some of the culture’s sexist traditions, as hip hop’s dependency on the exposed female body as a product, its inherent hyper-masculinity and its rejection of femininity and female agency have created a context in which women are limited in their self-expression if they want to reach commercial success (Balaji 8; Chung 37; Durham, Cooper and Morris 721). These artists’ adherence to a patriarchal model that they also overtly resist, therefore reveals the beginning of an ambiguous and immensely interesting gendered relationship that still exists between female artists and their genre.

Relevance

There are several different reasons why it is relevant right now to explore this complex relationship and the more general limited representation of women in commercialized American hip hop music. One of these reasons is the unprecedented popularity and accessibility of hip hop videos. Processes of globalization and innovation in the media have helped transform music videos from mere promotional tools accessible on MTV, to influential social markers (EAS “Music Videos”). The video’s availability on online platforms ensures easy and direct international accessibility, ensuring a direct contact between audience and

product that has increased the influence of the music and its visual frame in the 21st century. A significant example of this in contemporary popular entertainment is Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, which could be accessed immediately by anyone with internet access seconds after it was released: "This synchronicity between performance and reception intensifies the connection between Beyoncé and her audience and thus increases her cultural power" (Hartmann 2). This development — together with the influence of social media which has increased global visibility and shareability of music — has impacted the reception of music and especially music videos, which is apparent in the increasing number of views that these clips enjoy. When specifically focusing on hip hop, this trend becomes evident through for instance "Anaconda" by Nicki Minaj, which came out in 2014 and has amassed almost 800 million views on YouTube thus far. The hip hop record holder for most views is Drake's 'Hotline Bling', which came out in 2015 and has amassed a stunning 1.4 billion views since then. This immense number of views not only shows the popularity of the genre, but also gives an indication of the huge number of people who are exposed to sexist imagery. The importance of hip hop music videos also explains why within the limited scope of this thesis, the arena of performativity through the analysis of live shows of artists will be excluded.

The relevance of focusing on gender in contemporary hip hop music videos — besides their dangerous global impact — moreover lies in different developments in society today that seem to have slowly affected gender dynamics in the music industry. One of these developments is the now prominent conversation surrounding the current #metoo movement, which can be said to have started officially in October 2017 when the viral hashtag metoo initiated a global discussion on sexual harassment and gender equality, eventually injecting the topic of feminism and female representation into the entertainment industry (Salam) For hip hop the last few years specifically, a small trend which has been called the 'queering' of hip hop has emerged, leading the genre down a path that deviates from the dominating hyper-masculine tendencies usually associated with the male-dominated genre: "the recent popularity of queer-friendly, fashion-obsessed rap superstars such as Kanye West and Pharrell Williams threatens to destabilize the hyper-masculine identity associated with mainstream hip-hop culture" (Penney 322). Even though in the commercialized hip hop industry the set formula in which women are scarcely dressed and reduced to what is seen as the more relevant body parts still dominates (Kitwana 87), this 'queering' trend combined with the influence of the #metoo conversation create an important and interesting context in which the analysis of visual framing in contemporary hip hop videos has become relevant.

Grounding Myself in the Conversation

As a white, European woman writing about this gendered but also strongly racialized topic, I have to properly ground myself and recognize my privileged position in the debate I am adding to. I recall walking through the Bronx for the first time when I was 13 years old, completely unaware of the significance of this place and its strong racialized dynamics that birthed one of the most prominent forms of popular music. I was therefore confused when an African American man walked by and stated that he did not think he would ever see a white girl smile in the Bronx. Obviously, at that moment I did not fully understand the meaning nor relevance of his statement, but in hindsight can say that this one short interaction has made me think countless times about not just the subject of race and gender in hip hop, but also my own role in writing about this topic. Being white, I want to strongly enunciate that I am not claiming a lived experience nor am trying to dominate any conversations regarding African American music and its heritage in this thesis. I am merely aiming to tackle an important contemporary topic which carries global significance for all women and especially women of color. As an educated Dutch woman, I am well aware of the influences of gendered prejudice and sexism in Western societies. It is primarily this area of gender studies that I aim to add to in this thesis, as the sketching of a narrative of agency by women of color is an especially significant part of this research, since women of color's victimization often takes central stage over narratives of agency and in particular erotic agency ("Black Feminist Thought" 144; hooks 44-45). Therefore this thesis does not merely aim to map out a part of the commercialized contemporary sphere of hip hop, but also serves to "[delve] into popular culture to see the production of proactive scripts for female sexuality and erotic agency" (Nash 15). By exploring the various and often unrecognized ways of female sexual expression, a still undervalued and often misunderstood topic in society becomes more tangible. As bell hooks writes, it is important in today's society that we shift from just identifying as feminist, to actively advocating for feminism for all women, not just white ones (qtd. in Rose 35). This thesis is an attempt to do just that.

Evidently, my thesis is a part of a larger conversation and builds on other academic theories. Works by leading black feminists bell hooks and Patricia Hills Collins will be serving as the base for the feminist discourse so vital to my topic. In this thesis I will especially draw from *Black Looks: Race & Representation* by hooks, and from both *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender & the New Racism* and *Black Feminist Thought* by Collins. Diving into the actual academic dialogue surrounding hip hop and gender in a contemporary setting, Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk*

About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters is of importance to this thesis as it clearly outlines the most contested debates surrounding 21st century hip hop, gender representation being one of them. Particularly focusing on the ‘pornographical’ turn in hip hop that in many ways defined the commercialized genre in the 21st century, both Mireille Miller-Young’s *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* and Jennifer C. Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* will serve as important building blocks to this work. As the female perspective in hip hop is especially centralized in this thesis, academic works on the female hip hop experience are useful to this thesis. An example of such a work is Rebollo-Gil and Moras’s article “Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space”, as it contextualizes the unique position of women in hip hop and how female artists navigate this male-dominated genre of music. Another valuable piece of academic writing is the book *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* by Soyica Diggs Colbert, as a few specific chapters outline the complex nature of female sexual expression in the public and scrutinized sphere of popular music. What all these works have in common is that they are written by American academics. It is therefore essential to note that this thesis not only adds a contemporary dimension to the ongoing debate on hip hop and gender representation, but also adds a different and transnational perspective to this primarily American debate. This work can therefore be seen as a stepping stone to possible future academic analyses on the European hip hop scene as well.

Definitions & Parameters

Having grounded myself in the topics of race, gender and hip hop, and after situating myself in the current academic debate on these topics, clear parameters must be set on how the subject of gender representation in hip hop in this thesis will be approached. It is therefore important to shortly define the terms ‘genre’, ‘misogyny’, ‘sexism’ and ‘sexuality’, which will be abundantly used and — unlike the terms ‘gender’, ‘race’ and ‘feminism’ — will not be thoroughly explored in my theoretical chapter. When mentioning the word ‘genre’ in this thesis, I refer to a category of both artistic and musical composition defined by a certain style (Merriam Webster “Genre”), which in this thesis will always apply to the diverse medium that is the hip hop musical genre (ESA “Hip Hop”). When referring to ‘sexuality’, I am indicating someone’s sexual receptivity (Merriam Webster “Sexuality”). I will predominantly use this term to contrast sexual desires between the different sexual orientations of heteronormativity and queerness in this thesis. Differentiating between ‘sexism’ and ‘misogyny’ is also vital, as

the two terms are closely linked but have slightly different meanings. In the dictionary, ‘sexism’ is defined in two distinct ways, one of them being: “behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex” (Merriam Webster “Sexism”). The definition of sexism used in this thesis will therefore encompass both these attitudes and conditions, but also specifically takes into account their consequences. These consequences can be found in the second definition of the term in the dictionary: “prejudice or discrimination based on sex; especially: discrimination against women” (Merriam Webster “Sexism”). Sexism in this thesis will therefore constitute both gender discrimination and all tools and attitudes that help uphold and sustain this inequality in society, which specifically targets women. ‘Misogyny’ in the dictionary is referred to as ‘a hatred of women’ (Merriam Webster “Misogyny”), which is a somewhat limited explanation, but does summarize the core of the definition used in this thesis. In this piece of writing, ‘misogyny’ will indeed refer to the act of hating women, but will include actions and attitudes that hurt women, and which can be seen as fueled by the aforementioned hatred.

Having established specific definitions, it is integral to state that I do not see the sexist and misogynistic tendencies of hip hop as proof of what some have labeled a ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘inferior’ black culture. This false perception of hip hop is often discussed by conservative public figures in the US (Rose 61-62), and stems mostly from racial prejudice and an interpretation of rap as factual and authentic. The black tradition of bragging in the first person, and hip hop’s stance of ‘keeping it real’ have installed the notion in many that black rappers are the representation of black life, and are therefore representative of the African American race in American society. Rap, however, is neither fiction nor truth, but can be said to be something in between the two (Rose 38; 41); in certain ways it does showcase real-life problems, in other ways it is exaggerated purely for credibility and success. It is moreover important to acknowledge that the hip hop songs most people are exposed to is *commercialized* hip hop, and that different subgenres of hip hop exist which go against the violent and sexist notions of the dominant and commercialized stream (Rose 77). When this thesis refers to hip hop, it will refer to this commercialized form of hip hop, as it is this kind of hip hop that utilizes videos as influential marketing tools online which are watched by millions around the world. It is moreover also this type of hip hop that has an inherently problematic relationship with women.

Revealing hip hop to not necessarily be an accurate representation of black life, and the existence of non-sexist hip hop, however, does not take away from the fact that a significant part of rappers do make music that hurts black people — especially black women

— by depicting them in harmful ways. Some feel that hip hop is singled out unfairly because it is a black form of expression and therefore overly scrutinized because of its marginality (Dyer 8). Sexism is after all present everywhere in society (Rose 152). This is something that I acknowledge; hip hop is certainly not the only cultural institution in which sexist tendencies and patriarchal notions are strongly grounded. I am therefore not unfairly singling out hip hop in this thesis, but am exploring an area of interest that is currently undergoing important developments and is therefore relevant to research. In a way, the explanation of sexism in hip hop which solely focusses on the unfair targeting of the genre is merely the dodging of responsibility of perpetuating sexist images in society. Even though it is true that hip hop is not the only misogynistic or sexist institution, in regards to “misogyny and representations of hyper-sexual and exploitative behavior, language, and imagery targeting black women, hip hop is considered the key society culprit” (Rose 76). Another way in which responsibility of the sexist tendencies in hip hop is shifted is by blaming women who work in this genre — whether as dancers in videos or as artists — for cooperating with such blatantly sexist culture (Richardson 794). Blaming women is easier than changing the culture, and this blame game also conveniently shifts the responsibility away from the men that do perpetuate these hurtful gendered premises (Rose 176-177; hooks 107). Due to their small numbers, the voices of the black women in hip hop are in general overly-scrutinized as they are seen as representing *all* black women, which creates a false perception and an immense amount of pressure for female participants in the hip hop culture (Rose 122). Instead of blaming women or highlighting black cultural deviancy, I aim for a nuanced and fair conduction of gender analyses in my selected case studies.

Method & Structure

Before beginning the first chapter of this thesis, I must first sketch out a framework of methods and their underlying theories through which my analyses will be executed. A visual theory by Stuart Hall is especially significant to this thesis, as it explains how visual imagery is constructed along the lines of certain codes which can have a variety of influence and meaning. A product — such as a hip hop music video — is created from a framework of knowledge, and can therefore be seen as being encoded with certain meaning. Once the product itself is realized, the only way in which it is possible to convey meaning to the targeted audience is through decoding its message (S. Hall 130-131). This decoding procedure will constitute a large part of this thesis, through which imagery and meaning of gender and sexism in hip hop videos will be found. These aspects of code are never equal; every society

has what is called a “dominant cultural order” (S. Hall 134), which pushes people’s association and interpretation of a constructed product like a music video to specific and generally accepted political, social and cultural views (S. Hall 134). These specific ways of creating meaning by usage of codes, and in what way decoding creates meaning in a product, is significant to the case studies in this thesis because it is integral to understand how tactics embedded in a video might influence the audience to interpret it via the dominant cultural order. This dominant order becomes especially relevant in American video-making, as the majority of commercialized hip hop videos are constructed through what is generally referred to as “the male gaze” (Mulvey 833-837).

The male gaze is a way of constructing gender through images, editing and storyline, which can be said to still be the dominant way of filmmaking today, and can also be called extremely sexist. The male gaze is constituted of two main elements. The first is narcissism, which is the pleasure one experiences when looking at one’s self. In the male gaze, visual narratives are mostly shot from the man’s point of view: through male experiences and framing men in subjective ways, the audience is encouraged to adapt the male point of view. This is hurtful because simultaneously, the male gaze contextualizes women as objects by utilizing voyeurism: the gaining of visual pleasure by looking at someone, and the second significant element of the male gaze construct (Mulvey 833-837; Benshoff and Griffin 243-243). By never placing women in lead roles, and by primarily showing them on screen in objectified shots, women are reduced to sub-human passivists, who are fetishized and under the control of their male crew, male actors and the audience (Mulvey 843; Benshoff and Griffin 244;247). Even if women get to visually star in lead roles, they “are ... carefully prepared to maximize their ability to attract sexualized attention from the heterosexual male spectator” (Benshoff and Griffin 245). Especially in hip hop videos, it has become common to frame women without their heads, causing the audience’s focus to be solely on the body.

Apart from considering Hall’s theory of decoding and Mulvey’s theory on the male gaze, I will also look for specific representations of women in my case studies, which are called ‘sexual scripts’. Sexual scripts in the context of the hip hop music video focus on how people look at sexuality and what is acceptable in larger society. According to Ross and Coleman: “Sexual scripting theory focuses on the ways in which culture shapes one’s perception and expression of appropriate and normative sexual behaviour” (158). As commercialized contemporary hip hop music videos are strongly conveyed through racialized and sexualized perspectives that reinforce heterosexuality and stereotypes, looking at sexual scripts in these videos is integral to my research as these scripts can be seen as constructing

these harmful and sexist narratives that are normalized through the videos in which they are prominently used to frame a narrative (Stephens 169-170). In total, eight distinct sexualized African American female scripts can be found in hip hop music videos: Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangsta Bitch, Earth Mother, Sister Savior, and Baby Mama. Although these scripts all differ from each other in distinct ways, they can all be identified as sexualized scripts which reduce black women to passive, sexualized objects as they all emphasize the black female body. Notably, the last three scripts only sporadically occur in the contemporary visual frame (Stephen 171; Ross and Coleman 158-159). Abundantly used today, the Diva and the Gold Digger refer to women who intentionally have sex either to enhance their social status or gain material goods. That the scripts can be contradictory in nature can be seen by the Freak and the Dyke: The Freak is an African American woman who has sexual intercourse with many partners for her own gratification, while the Dyke is someone who rejects intercourse through her own masculinity. The script of the Gangsta Bitch “shows a “street tough” woman who has sex to demonstrate solidarity with or to help her man” (Stephen 172). Since it has been proven that sexual scripts influence the way audiences develop sexual meaning, sexual behavior, and influences their perception of African American women, identifying these different scripts in my case studies will be a vital part of my research (Stephen 172).

To be able to find and explore relevant patterns, sexual scripts and constructs of the male gaze in contemporary hip hop music videos, research on my individual case studies needs to be executed through a method of visual analysis. The analyses in my thesis will therefore rely on the method of *mise-en-scène*, as this methodology assumes that any element of visual discourse carries the potential to be significant as every aspect of a frame is consciously chosen and therefore serves a purpose. The *mise-en-scène* method explores nine distinct aspects in a visual work, which are then divided into elements of setting and image, and elements that center on focus and movement. Lighting, costume & make-up, color, props and décor are part of this first group, while action & performance, space, framing and the position of the camera are the element making up the focus and movement group of this method (Bordwell and Thompson 119; 43; Gibbs 6-12). With a focus on the way gender, is represented in these videos, these nine distinct elements will be integral in my journey of discovering in what way male and female artist represent the female gender. It is important to acknowledge that each individual element on its own can be important to the message of a video as well as that different elements hold different levels of significance depending on what aspect of a video is focused on. When looking at for instance the representation of the female

body and possible stereotyping, elements such as clothes and make-up become more relevant to explore. Another element vital to the representation of the female body is framing, if for instance attention is drawn to specific body parts in the video (Balaji 12-13). This is why the *mise-en-scène* method suits my case studies so well, as it allows me to focus on any element on the screen that might be relevant to my topic. *Mise-en-scène* will furthermore support my case studies as my appendix will contain video charts of corresponding screen shots of scenes that I refer to in my analyses.

Now that I have explored my topic and set out my overall research plan, I will sketch out a larger context and framework of theories on the subject of hip hop and topics of gender, race and feminism in the first chapter. After this theoretical chapter, I will analyze my case studies in two distinct chapters; chapter two will explore the visual discourses on gender in two videos by female rappers, and chapter three will explore this in discourses by two male rappers. In the analysis of my case studies, I will work with specific subquestions which give my research direction. These questions are all linked to each other through the concept of gender, but are all specifically distinct in the areas they explore. My first subquestion is focused on patriarchal hip hop traditions which will be outlined in my theoretical chapter, and investigates in what way and to what extent these sexist conventions are still used in hip hop videos today. Another important subquestion that is linked to this first question is specifically aimed at the representation of the female body, and how it is showcased or portrayed in the videos I will analyze. It is also significant to consider in what way and to what extent female sexuality and female erotic agency is utilized in these videos, which is why this topic constitutes my third subquestion. My fourth subquestion explores the wider but still important concepts of masculinity and femininity, and wonders how these concepts influence the representation of the female gender in these videos. My last subquestion ties the previous four subquestions together, as it asks how all these different factors — from sexist traditions to concepts of masculinity and femininity — are represented and used differently when comparing my female case studies to my male ones. It is integral to note that these subquestions will not be specifically discussed, but all function as present guidelines through each single case study. These four case studies have been selected using multiple criteria. All artists functioning in these case studies grew up on the North American continent and are immensely successful in the contemporary American hip hop scene, which means their visual representations of gender are relevant since they have immense influence through the high number of views their videos have. Next to popularity, these videos have been selected within a specific contemporary timeframe: all videos were released between December 2017

and May 2018, meaning that these videos were shaped in the same political and social context ranging over six months. Most importantly, however, these videos have been selected on relevance in gender representation, as each of these videos represents the most progressive gendered direction of its respective artist. These specific selection criteria allow me to dive into the contemporary hip hop scene and its seemingly changing gender dynamics.

Chapter 1: Hip Hop's Gendered Journey: The Powers of Race, Gender & Black Feminism

1.1 “*I Said It Must Be Yo Ass Because It Ain’t Your Face*” The Emergence of Hip Hop as a Masculine Genre

In the words of hip hop theorist Tricia Rose: “Hip hop’s sexism is visible, vulgar, aggressive, and popular” (114). Anyone who has ever closely listened to a commercial hip hop song can attest that hip hop as a musical genre indeed contains some of the most misogynistic and sexist content in the world of popular music. When trying to map out a part of the sexism in commercialized American hip hop music videos during a time of rapidly changing gender dynamics, it is first vital to understand how hip hop as a musical genre emerged and how hyper-masculinity and misogyny eventually became inherent themes in this popularized urban music stream. This chapter *Hip Hop’s Gendered Journey: The Powers of Race, Gender & Black Feminism* aims to contextualize hip hop’s larger gendered journey from its emergence in the Bronx to the role in which it functions today as a commercialized million-dollar market. Drawing from theorists such as Bakari Kitwana, Emmett George Price and Tricia Rose — who are experts in hip hop culture — subchapter 1.1 “*I Said It Must Be Yo Ass Because It Ain’t Your Face*”: *The Emergence of Hip Hop as a Masculine Genre* will set a framework for the emergence of hip hop as a form of African American expression, and will furthermore explore the development of its innate sexist tendencies during the time in which the music was popularized at the end of the 20th century. This framework — which dives into relevant contemporary hip hop debates — will serve as a theoretical base for the four case studies offered in this thesis. Attempting to outline the development of hyper-masculinity and its accompanying misogyny in the hip hop genre, subchapter 1.2 will discuss the power of the intersecting notions of gender, race and stereotypes, and their influence on both American hip hop culture and their harmful exertion on American society as a whole. This subchapter will exemplify as to why this subject of misogyny and the representation of gender in American hip hop is not just relevant but vital to discuss right now. My last subchapter will dive into the female perspective in hip hop, showing the important but often neglected narrative of resistance by female artists, proving the existent but inherently complicated relation they have with hip hop. Before I am able to do this, however, I must first explore the emergence of hip hop, and its development into an established adult genre.

It is integral to acknowledge that hip hop pioneers never set out to create a genre that was misogynistic. Emerging in the 1970s, early hip hop culture can be described as an up-

and-coming African American movement, which mostly concerned itself with critiquing poverty and racism (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 119). Built on a legacy of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the first hip hop generation came of age in a time in which integration was considered ‘normal’, but in reality was an often not practiced and highly politicized subject (Kitwana 90-91; Price 2). Granted that laws such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did in ways improve lives of American citizens of color, equality for all people regardless of gender and race remained an untouchable goal for many in the US. Even though the famous American Dream in theory has always promised all US citizens that hard work equals achieving your dreams, this idea has always been accompanied by small but significant subtext. In the words of Jim Cullen: “When the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all men are created equal, the writers of that document really did mean men, by their lights” (51; 6). Women, people of color and especially women of color have been excluded from the American Dream and all rights and freedoms it promises from the very start (Cullen 6; 51).

This inherent inequality of gender but particularly race became painfully clear when in the 1970s the US was hit with stark economic downfall, which hit hardest in its inner-city black and Latino communities (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 119). Chronic unemployment and loss of affordable housing combined with harsh conservative politics created an environment of poverty and criminality for many African Americans (Rose 43-44). Poverty spurred increased pimping, drug dealing and other forms of crime that were highly racialized by the conservative policies of the government. This combination of poverty, racialized policies and crime negatively affected black communities across America. Many scholars have researched these different policies and the influences they have had on African American populations, confirming that most black children growing up in that time did extremely poor in school, and that black people were more likely to divorce and to be incarcerated for drug offences compared to their white peers (Alexander; Burt, Simmons and Gibbons; Lang; Hayes). Statistics furthermore point out that the majority of African Americans in that time lived in what can be classified as the lowest economic class in the US (Kitwana 5-6).

This socio-economic context in the 1970s is so important, because the hardships of life in the US as a citizen of color are what spurred the creation of hip hop, functioning as an outlet of pain for its practitioners. It is no surprise then that the epicenter of hip hop emerged in the poorest borough of New York City: The Bronx. Often called ““America’s worst slum” or “the epitome of urban failure”” (Price 4), this borough in the 70s — which was predominantly black — was considered extremely dangerous, criminal and impoverished (Price 4; 6). One dominant issue facing citizens in the Bronx was the violent gang system,

which eventually served as a basis for the emergence of hip hop and many of its still prominent themes. Gangs were popular as young black men — tortured by poverty and little outlook on a bright future — took to the streets to forge a new life which brought money, status and street credibility. As black communities were struggling to survive, many youngsters turned away from traditional institutions such as school, church and family to create a new, much rougher identity on the street (Kitwana 7; Price 8-9). This gang system was inherently dangerous because it went hand in hand with gun violence. When truces were called due to gun violence escalation, hip hop was slowly born, as “Gangbangers began to use dance and other expressive means to rid themselves of their frustrations” (Price 10).

This emerging hip hop culture that grew out of these gang frustrations, socio-economic hardships and youth rebelliousness entailed many components, such as fashion and beat boxing. The four foundational elements of hip hop culture, however, are graffiti, DJing, b-boying and MCing (Price 21). When talking or referring to hip hop, this thesis will generally refer to the art of MCing or rapping. Although the other founding elements are not to be discarded in either their importance or the impact they had on larger American society, rap can be seen as the most direct way in which young black youth could communicate their dissatisfaction about society: “Rap then, irrespective of its particular subject matter and stated purpose during its initial stages, must be viewed as an important socio-political innovation” (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 119). Rap is furthermore the one element that has protruded into the 21st century to become the core of what contemporary commercialized hip hop music is today.

This new hip hop culture can already be defined as a male-dominated, but not yet fully sexist stream of music due to its gang-related origins, as in both street and prison culture, male loyalty was essential (Kitwana 101). Hip hop emerged as a part of that street culture, because men practicing dance or music literally needed open space and an audience to practice their art. This removed them from the domestic space — which was generally seen as feminine — and caused hip hoppers to further reject femininity in the culture (hooks 35). Women were less active in hip hop from the start, as popular cultural forms in that time generally prescribed women to stay indoors, preventing many from participating in spheres outside of the household (ESA “Domesticity”). Although rap has some feminine elements — such as the way male rappers often profess their love for the genre (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 124) — the popularization of hip hop in the 1980s and 90s furthered the rejection of femininity and women in the culture, creating a hyper-masculinity that became an inherent part of the music, and which rapidly turned the music into a genre with strong misogynistic tendencies.

In the popularization process of hip hop, two exact locations and streams of hip hop are distinctly recognizable in laying the foundation for the genre as a mainstream one (Price 3; Starr and Waterman 429-430). In New York City, hip hop had spread to other boroughs where groups such as Run DMC and the Beastie Boys became platinum record selling artists, as hip hop's audience found its way to a much larger, whiter mainstream fan base (Starr and Waterman 431). Especially the Beastie Boys' success shows the increasing acceptance of rap music in the mainstream music industry, as they were the first *white* rap group to rise to prominence practicing an originally black form of music (Starr and Waterman 432). It was the emergence of West Coast gangsta rap, however, that propelled the already male-dominated genre of hip hop to become an outrageously sexist genre of music in which hyper-masculinity took central stage. As California became the site of hip hop innovation — spurring legends such as MC Hammer and Ice-T — it was rap group N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) that “created a direct “in-your-face” radical and graphic rapping style in the 1980s that has been a now continued aspect of rap music” (Kitwana 86-87). This successful group created songs that were “saturated with images of sex and violence” (Starr and Waterman 437), and can be called immensely misogynistic. Even though gangsta rap groups like N.W.A realistically represented hardships that black men in America faced, they created a subgenre of music in which the hate black men held for an unfair racialized system became unjustly aimed at black women (Kitwana 87). Bragging about being gangsters and pimps, this music emphasized an aggressive hyper-masculinity of toughness, heteronormativity and a clear and unequal sexual hierarchy, in which controlling women purely for sexual purposes became the dominant discourse: “The ‘g’s up, ho’s down’ mentality of late 1980s hip hop laid the groundwork for the pimp-playa-bitch-ho nexus which has come to dominate hip hop” (Rose 168).

This heteronormative and sexist gender hierarchy that is now common in the commercialized hip hop industry was established through this groundwork by what can be called the ‘pornification’ of hip hop (Hunter and Soto 171). As one of the US’s largest entertainment industries with a yearly revenue of \$10 billion (“A Taste for Brown Sugar” 7), the porn industry easily fitted the sexist attitudes of gangsta rap, and the cooperation between the industries seemed a logical step in increasing sales, helping to establish hip hop as a broader lifestyle (Hunter 16). Through rhetoric but especially through music videos, the adult entertainment industry actually merged with commercial American hip hop, as its hyper-masculinity and rebelliousness provided the perfect framework for the images the porn industry thrives on: objectified shots of women (“Hip Hop Honeys” 272). An essential part of using imagery in hip hop to strengthen hyper-masculinity is the continued reaffirmation of

heterogeneity present in these clips, which fuels homophobic perspectives through fear of the naked male body. This body is remarkably never present in any of these videos, as “compulsory heterosexuality, fear of homoeroticism, and homophobia disallow desire to be gauged on their bodies (arousal of the phallus) and exposed” (“Hip Hop Honeys” 275).

Slowly but surely, the creation of sexually explicit content in hip hop became the new industry standard and dominant cultural order. One key aspect that can be pointed out as greatly adding to the misogyny of commercialized hip hop is the use of language, as after the 1990s: “album after album was littered with rap songs referring to Black women as bitches, gold diggers, hos, hoodrats, chickenheads, pigeons, and so on” (Kitwana 87). Especially the term ‘bitch’ — which has entered colloquial language today as well (“Black Sexual Politics” 121) — is a word that is commonly used and contains many hurtful connotations. Derived from the working-mule image of slavery, ‘bitch’ is often used to demean and limit African American women: “the controlling image of the ”bitch” constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” (“Black Sexual Politics” 123). The term’s reference to a female dog furthermore sexualizes it, as not only are women now depicted as animals instead of humans, but are also turned into ‘baby machines’ (“Black Sexual Politics” 130; “Black Feminist Thought” 77).

Apart from normalizing the use of derogatory names, the pornographical turn in hip hop furthermore sees a clear shift from celebrating the black female body to objectifying the black female body (“Black Sexual Politics” 128). One vital aspect in this development is the emergence of a long-standing obsession with the backsides of women of color in hip hop. A black woman’s bottom is always portrayed as something which invites the male gaze, blocking out the person behind the body and therefore successfully confirming sexualized deviancy of black women and stereotyped sexual scripts (hooks 63-64). That the butt is often referred to as ‘booty’ shows the underlying sexual connotation of the way rap often portrays the black female body: booty in this context becomes a spoils of war, something to be desired and taken, and something to become justifiably angry about would access be denied (“Black Sexual Politics” 150-151). This objectification of black women’s behinds might be most apparent in “Tip Drill”, the famous and controversial dirty South music video by Nelly, which uses soft porn imagery to objectify and demean women of color by only focusing on their ‘booties’ (Hobson and Bartlow 10).

It would be unfair not to note, however, that there are larger powers at play in the hip hop arena which spurred and continue to fuel this pornographical, misogynist and homophobic shift in the genre. Due to unprecedented profits generated by gangsta rap at the

end of the 20th century, hip hop exploded as West Coast rap's proven earning potential spurred a wave of record deals, leading to the rapid mass consumption of the music by a larger and much whiter audience than before. Matched with the power of globalization, hip hop became a musical genre to be reckoned with on the international stage, as it officially entered the global arena of consumption. Simultaneously, however, the switch to major media meant a significant loss of control for black hip hop artists over their work, eventually resulting in a new and commodified stream of hip hop which was created specifically for mass consumption and therefore limited in its representations of blackness (Hunter and Cuenca 27): "2/3rds of hip hop listeners are white, which means that the industry caters to them specifically, suiting their market's needs for stereotypes they grew up with and therefore recognize" (Rose 88). One should realize that all of hip hop's harmful stereotypes have been created and are perpetuated by the music industry specifically for this market ("Black Sexual Politics" 190), as these images resonate with and are recognizable to the target audience. This shows that not only gender but also race plays an significant role in both the creation and reception of contemporary commercialized American hip hop music and its hurtful representation of women (Hobson and Bartlow 2; Kitwana 95). It is therefore vital that before an accurate analysis of female representation in contemporary commercialized American hip hop music videos can be performed, the interlocking powers of race, gender and feminism in hip hop should be thoroughly explored.

1.2 “*They Dyke Bitches*” The Interlocking Powers of Race, Gender & Stereotypes in Hip Hop and the Larger American Society

Since this thesis focuses on sexism and gender representation in American hip hop music videos of artists of color, it is vital to lay a groundwork of the intertwined meaning that both race and gender carry in the US. It would be impossible to accurately analyze the role of gender in any hip hop video, without first understanding the power dynamics of race and gender, and their role in the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes in hip hop culture and the larger American society. Starting with the exploration of race in the US, I will rely on definitions by Omi and Winant, Jacobsen, Dyer, Bhabha and Lott when discussing the meaning of this concept, as these theorists all discuss the unique binary system of blackness that prevails in American society — and its inherent connections with the hurtful practice of stereotypes — but all have a different area of focus when discussing the topic. Examining the power dynamics of gender in the US more closely, both Patricia Hills Collins and bell hooks and their exceptional views on gender dynamics and black feminist thought serve as important building blocks in this subchapter. By contextualizing the powers of race, gender, and the accompanying usage and creation of ethnic stereotypes and significant concepts such as the triple oppression of black women, a changing gendered and racialized society and perpetuations of homophobia, a framework can be created in which I will be able to ground the visual and textual analyses of my case studies.

Even though race is commonly perceived as a straightforward term that refers to one’s skin color and accompanying overt bodily characteristics, race should actually be seen as a socio-historical man-made construct (Omi and Winant 4-5). This can be strange, as often “we tend to think of race as indisputable *real* ... it seems a product not of the social imagination but of biology” (Jacobsen 1). The truth is that the term race has been used primarily by white people throughout history to both define and control others through racial formation, which refers to the process of adding social, political and economic connotations to the word race (Omi and Winant 5). This has been done throughout periods of colonization, in which white people assigned themselves to be the ‘pure’ category, creating a color line in which anyone who deviated from being white, was labeled ‘the other’ (Omi and Winant 3). This practice made it easier to place people in groups along a racial hierarchy to create order in society (Bhabha 18; Jacobsen 2). Of course white always took up the top tier, as the caucasian race that created the color line does not consider itself to have a color at all, as “There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human” (Dyer 2). That race is a man-made

construct that exerts extraordinary power over American society, can be seen in the unique way the US still classifies race and specifically blackness today. In the US one is considered black when they are colored, no matter how dark or light they are, or through which ethnicity they define themselves. This black and white, binary system of color is peculiar because especially in the US, race is strongly tied to one's identity, heritage, and 'pureness', yet even if you have a white family or a white parent, one is considered black if colored (Omi and Winant 4-6).

In a society where whiteness is set as a standard of humanity, being easily identifiable as non-white automatically marks you as different (Dyer 9). An example of how color lines were used to create a certain order in society is the way in which it justified slavery in the US, as black people were seen as naturally inferior through this racial hierarchy (Omi and Winant 7). The persistent existence of beliefs of black inferiority throughout US history becomes evident through for instance the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, as it were constructs of black inferiority that these movements fought against in the 1960s. That these movements, however, did not succeed in their quest is evident in the era's that followed the Civil Rights era. In contemporary society, issues such as police brutality, segregation and an increasing wealth gap between black and white are still undoubtedly present (Lopez, Animashaun and Zarracina)

Racist notions have been able to survive for so long *because* race is a man-made term, meaning that it is able to develop and fuel new racial myths which are more fitted to urban modern life. An effective way to do this is through stereotypes which are frequently used in hip hop lyrics and video imagery as sexual scripts, as they appeal to the white market audience. Stereotypes rely on repetition as they are false; many black stereotypes directly contradict one another, meaning that repetition is the only thing keeping the unstable existence of the stereotype alive (Bhabha 18). That black stereotypes resonate so much with a white audience has to do with the contradiction of phobia and fetish that exists between mainstream white society and the so-called 'other'. By using stereotypes and specific sexualized scripts, whites are able to control the narrative surrounding black people by demonizing them, which is integral because non-whites threaten the solidification of a 'pure' group (Bhabha 27). Simultaneously, blackness often serves as an object of fetish, sparking a desire in many as black skin is so present but different: "The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural – colour as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural 'identity'." (Bhabha, 31). This paradoxical relationship white people have with African Americans and especially their culture is what Eric Lott refers

to as ‘the black mirror’, a fragile tool which is used for both racial assurance and panic, for both a fascination of beauty with ‘the other’, as well as a demonic ugliness: “Whites need that mirror to see ourselves healed, allied in innocence (or angrily disgusted) with the symbolic figure our reliance on whom reveals the violence and guilt we attempt by this means to overcome” (Lott 6). Much research has been done on this complicated relationship between white society and black stereotypes (R. Hall; Woodard and Mastin; Pratto and Pitpitan; Bloomquist), and one aspect all scholars agree on is that black stereotypes are *always* used in a gender specific way, which brings me to the next topic of discussion relevant for this thesis: gender.

Gender in society should be seen as a socio-historically constructed term, even though like race, the term holds a strong connection to the biological term of sex, which refers to overt bodily characteristics of someone, marking them either male or female. Sex and gender, however, do not share the same meaning: “Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves as the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler 6). Consequently like race, gender in the US is a social construct which has functioned as a powerful influence on society and shaper of social perceptions in that society (Delinder 987). This becomes evident through the powerful construction of the white nuclear American family, where women are expected to limit themselves to the private sphere of the household, occupying a solely nurturing role. It is the man who is allowed to function as head of the household, going out into the public sphere of economic providing (EAS “Family”; “Black Feminist Thought” 46). This division has created an unequal and gendered hierarchy in American society, where women are still seen as inferior to men.

Black women in this gendered American society are generally perceived as most disadvantaged as a consequence of interacting gender and racial dynamics; black women are both ‘the other’ because of their skin color, and simultaneously part of the ‘inferior’ sex. This is often referred to as the triple oppression of black women in the American society (Benjamin 37; Nain 17), as the interlinking powers of race and gender often cause these women to live in the lowest *class* of society as well. Besides purely looking at skin color, one reason women of color are viewed as inferior to white women is because their race prevents them from ever being able to achieve true ‘womanhood’ by white standards. Even middle-class black women can often not afford to stay in the private sphere as the perfect image of white womanhood prescribes, as economic work is needed to make ends meet (“Black Sexual

Politics” 139). Black women furthermore can never fully adhere to the white beauty standard that is accepted in society and inextricably linked to the image of perfect white womanhood and femininity: “Blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other- Black women [with] classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair” (“Black Feminist Thought” 79). Apart from being seen as inferior through skin color, the inferiority that comes with being black but also a woman causes many women of color to frequently be stereotyped and dehumanized through prejudices such as “female-headedness, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, poverty, and welfarism” (Barnett 164). Although it is true that black men are stereotyped as well, it is especially relevant to take a closer look at black female stereotypes in this thesis because dehumanizing and controlling black women through stereotypes of sexual deviancy is a longstanding American tradition used for control: “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (“Black feminist Thought” 77). This is important, because hip hop in the past has shown itself to be a medium through which black women are controlled this way.

There are many different female African American stereotypes, but the stereotype most abundantly used in hip hop and one that therefore does much damage to the image of black women in society, is that of the jezebel. The jezebel — also called “whore, or sexually aggressive woman” (“Black Feminist Thought” 77) — is a racial tool that portrays black women as immoral, devious creatures who use their sexuality to seduce and exploit men. This image stems from slavery and was used to justify the widespread sexual assault of African American slaves (Richardson 790; “Black Feminist Thought” 77), as it is embedded in the belief that women of color could never truly be raped. Portraying black women as animals who always desire sex, functioned as an ideology that therefore justified the suppression of black women in society on both gendered and racial premises. This allowed white society to attempt to limit black fertility and harness black female sexuality. These stereotypes moreover function “to make racism, sexism and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (“Black Feminist Thought” 68; 50-51), which is how stereotypes still function today.

That sexual deviancy, objectification and dehumanization are central elements of this powerful jezebel stereotype clearly show how the sexualized scripts commonly used in hip hop videos today are based on this stereotype. The ‘sluts, ho’s and bitches’ present in hip hop today are derived from the jezebel image, but modernized to fit today’s society. Commercial rap videos and their use of sexual scripts to create objectified images through the male gaze still function like stereotypes, as these images are still currently “helping to reproduce the

hegemonic ideologies and replicate social inequality” (Richardson 790). This exploitative relationship becomes especially evident in the pornification of hip hop, as it are always women of color who are objectified and sexualized, as “constant images of white women “on the pole” or sexually servicing black men with oral sex would surely garner national outrage, especially by white audiences” (Hunter 18). Women of color are moreover used in these videos because they can serve the earlier mentioned sexual white fantasy of the black mirror, which caters to the desire of the primarily white audience (“A Taste for Brown Sugar” 9; Lott 6). Depicted as updated jezebels in the form of strippers and prostitutes, black women are also more easily degraded and humiliated through the colored pornographical gaze used in hip hop videos, which allows the white target audience to consume the video without feeling insulted or embarrassed themselves (Hunter and Soto 174).

It is particularly remarkable *why* some black men — who are victims of black stereotypes themselves — continue to demean and dehumanize African American women by perpetuating harmful imagery. Next to appealing to a white mainstream audience, African American men’s usage of these images actually stems from a history of stereotyping black men in American society. As bell hooks writes: “The portrait of black masculinity that emerges in this world perpetually constructs black men as “failures” who are psychologically “fucked up”, dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context” (89). This image of the African American man might be a black stereotype, its core is still closely tied to the construction of masculinity and what it means to be a man — and especially a black man — in an American patriarchal society. Having internalized some of these masculine notions, black men want to be perceived as real men in society. One way to accomplish this goal is to be superior to black women, in the same way that white men are superior to white women (hooks 92). By suppressing black women in dominant discourse through hyper-masculinity, black men can continue to live one step above their female counterparts on the ladder that is a racialized American society. This reinvention of harmful depictions to aid black masculinity works especially well because it is in agreement with how the white dominant culture perceives these gendered premises (hooks 98). It is through this patriarchy in hip hop, that black men can draw power from suppression in a society that suppresses them similarly (Hobson and Bartlow 2; Kitwana 95). This inherent sexism used as a tool of suppression to establish masculine power in hip hop is furthermore often ignored, because many believe that eliminating this will eradicate the expressive hip hop tradition as a whole (hooks 111).

Another way in which male rappers are able to assert themselves in powerful positions

is by suppressing yet another group, namely the LGBTQ community. From the beginning, hip hop has been a hostile environment for queer people, as the culture's hyper-masculinity is "in direct opposition to homosexuality" (Smith 362; Shange 35). Due to the fear of especially male homosexuality — which directly threatens the heteronormative core of hip hop's masculine roots — the LGBTQ community is not suppressed by objectification or the male gaze, but through song lyrics which denigrate and demean them (Smith 362). A good example of how homophobia and sexism often go hand in hand in hip hop is the song "Trick Trick" by rapper Trick Trick, in which he calls lesbians 'dyke bitches' and furthermore threatens to violently kill any 'faggot' he encounters, a word so commonly used in hip hop that like 'bitch', it has found its way into colloquial language ("Black Sexual Politics" 121). Male artists, however, are not the only ones who use homophobic and sexist rhetoric to appeal to audiences and convey certain messages in their songs and videos. Female rappers themselves can be said to have always had a complicated and often misunderstood relationship with their genre of music and its inherent forms of masculinity and sexism. Before being able to analyze case studies of my four selected artists, the female side of the narrative — which is one filled with contradictions of resistance and sexism — needs to be explored as well.

1.3 *“Okay Ladies Now Let’s Get in Formation”* **Black Feminism & the Ambiguity of Female Representation in Hip Hop**

Even though hip hop is a masculine, male-dominated genre of music, women have always existed in this culture, occupying the expected roles of back-up dancers, but also those of artists, activists and even feminists. The fact is that there have always been some women present in hip hop, but due to their small numbers they are often perceived as insignificant, non-existent or not belonging: “Numerically speaking, there are fewer b-girls, graffiti grrlz, and femcees in hip-hop; smaller numbers too often means less visibility; less visibility and representation too often results in assumptions about ability ... which then feeds into ideas about subcultural ownership and belonging” (Pabón-Colón 181). The different spaces that women and especially women of color occupy in such a misogynistic and hyper-masculine area of music, makes their relationship with the culture one of intense ambiguity in which identity politics, resistance, appeasement, sexuality, representation and beauty all intersect and merge together. This subchapter will explore the intricate and often overlooked side of female hip hop, and all of its contradictions and complications. I will create this narrative by relying on different theorists who can be viewed as the leading female voices in black feminism, such as the previously mentioned hooks, Rose and Collins, but also activist Audre Lorde. I will furthermore use theories by Colbert and Smith, as they both have significant material that is thoroughly grounded not just in black feminism, but also in the contemporary debates surrounding commercialized entertainment. By looking at the ways in which black women themselves negotiate their place in the hip hop music industry, the complications and ambiguity surrounding gender and sexual expression that come with being female in the hip hop genre will become evident. This is where the relevancy of this subchapter lies, as it serves as a framework for my female case studies in comparison to the male ones when focusing specifically on gender representation, sexual expression, femininity and masculinity.

As explained in the previous subchapters, hip hop has a deplorable track record regarding the representation of women. It is therefore not unexpected that a resistance movement against these tendencies has emerged over the years, which is strongly connected to the related movement of black feminism. This is self-evident, as black women together share the experiences of racial and gender discrimination that causes their triple suppression: “Black women’s experiences with both racial and gender oppression ... result in needs and problems distinct from white women and Black men” (“Black Feminist Thought” 20). Even though other streams of feminism exist that condemn sexist and misogynistic practices — like

the wrongful representation of women in hip hop videos —these mainstream feminist movements often ignore the racial dynamics that women of color encounter in their struggle for equal rights (hooks 123), which urged black women to found a separate movement for their cause. One key belief of black feminism — and therefore many female artists of color — is that of the power of self-definition. By self-defining one's identity and representation, women are able to directly oppose the dehumanizing and sexist imagery of themselves in mainstream society. As Audre Lorde states: "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment" ("Black Feminist Thought" 26).

It is vital to understand, however, how hard it is for women of color especially to go against the hurtful images of them created in society, particularly if they are perpetuated by black men. Women who resist or critique hip hop and its sexism are frequently labeled anti-hip hop, anti-black, anti-community or just outright crazy by their black peers (Rose 124). This practice prohibits African American women from furthering their cause (hooks 54), as the labeling of black women as irrational and incapable of reason helps perpetuate the image of female subordination and aims to block forms of feminist resistance (hooks 103). The problem is moreover that the commercialized hip hop culture which impacts a large global audience so heavily relies on these sexist and stereotyped images, making it hard for female artists to have success and change the status quo coincidentally (Rose 158; 174). That hip hop is a black and male-dominated genre catered to a white mainstream audience, also ensures that it is not a safe-space for the free-flow of speech for women. Women's voices are often perceived as less valuable or legitimate when compared to their male counterparts. As Smith describes: "when it comes to the actual content of their songs, "women's" lyrics are often still viewed by men and women themselves as not valid...women's versions of reality are somehow suspect" (qtd. in Rebollo-Gil and Moras 127). That female artist moreover do not have access to the same financial backing as men, makes female success in this industry an even larger challenge (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 127-128). Often lacking the means or opportunity for overt activism, survival in itself can already be viewed as a form of resistance, maybe even the most common form of resistance by women of color ("Black Feminist Thought" 140; 145-146). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the breakthrough of female artists in such a women-unfriendly and masculine industry as hip hop in itself should already be perceived as an act of resistance.

When women do find the tools to defy the status quo, resistance and agency are often not acknowledged because the story of African American victimization takes center stage. Even though it is true that women of color can be said to have experienced much collective pain and suffering through racialized and sexist policies, reducing black women to mere victims omits the larger narrative of resistance by many of these women (“Black Feminist Thought” 144; hooks 44-45). Another reason why female agency in specifically hip hop is often overlooked is because it comes in the form of the erotic, which is generally seen as a disempowering and disresponsible form of agency for women. As Lorde writes: “Erotic has been used as a sign of female inferiority and used as suppression, but can be seen as a source of power and information within our lives” (53). In this quote, Lorde asserts the claim that generally women are taught that explicit expression of their sexuality and desires is wrong and should therefore be suppressed, but that the erotic actually holds much power when openly expressed by women (53-55). This rhetoric is in line with theorists who rightfully state hip hop to contain an inherent contradiction of female sexuality and gender: on the one hand, hip hop is misogynistic and over-sexualizes the black female body for the purpose of serving the male gaze; on the other hand, hip hop as such a sex-oriented culture can be utilized by women as a platform to more openly express their sexuality and desires, which is something society has systematically suppressed for decades. In the words of Mark Neal Anthony: “the critique is to protect women from the dirty things that hip-hop is doing to them. What about the women in another context that see this as a space to express their sexuality?” (qtd. in Chang 237). Hip hop is therefore not only a genre that helps suppress black women in society, but in itself can actually be an integral tool for black women in expressing their feelings on sexuality (“Black Sexual Politics” 133; hooks 56-57).

One area in which the discussion surrounding feminism and sexuality in hip hop is most evident is in the previously mentioned pornification of hip hop, where the ‘respect vs. respectability’ debate clearly shows the ambiguous nature of expressive female sexuality in the culture. In many of these sexualized videos, women of color are stigmatized for working against the image of respectable womanhood many women of color have tried so hard to create (“A Taste for Brown Sugar” 4; 6). These workers, however, should not automatically be labeled anti-feminist or anti-respectable just because they work in an industry that relies on the sexualized image of their bodies for profit, mainly because it is a claim embedded in hypocrisy: “we live in a world in which women are constantly harangued into being lusted after, but [that] punishes sex workers for using that situation to make a living” (Eddo-Lodge 182). Women of color working in these industries are furthermore generally aware of what

they represent, and often engage problems on their own terms, creating performances that motivate the viewer to reinterpret sexual and racial dynamics (“A Taste for Brown Sugar” 13). From this perspective, women of color working in this entertainment sector today can be seen following in the footsteps of entertainers like Josephine Baker, in the way that they define for *themselves* what respectable black womanhood means to them (“A Taste for Brown Sugar” 6). This claim coincides with that of the pro-pornography feminist stream, which “[argues] that participation in pornography constitutes the epitome of female liberation” (Nash 15), and clashes directly with that of anti-pornography feminists, who claim that pornography in itself functions to secure male power because it reinstates the inferior position of women under the patriarchal system (Nash 9).

Applying this discussion and its opposing perspectives directly to performances by female artists — who often depend on the selling of particular sexualized images for success — a conflicting relationship can be found between both resisting and appeasing inherent sexism, but also to what can and should be perceived as sexist, and what in actual fact could be called sexual expression and self-definition. Soyica Diggs Colbert describes this tension perfectly when she elaborates on the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory nature of the performances of female hip hop artists: “They make use of the double bind of entrapment — the access of inclusion and the demands of assimilation — to capture the viewer and expose the unauthorized use of their bodies” (65-66). By doing this, the blackness in their videos is simultaneously objectified and humanized, as sexualized imagery is used to deny exclusion and degradation that comes with being a person of color in the US (Colbert 65). This explanation therefore shows that labeling a video by a female rapper as either resisting or appeasing the sexist culture is in fact a false binary, as images often blend into each other to form complex narratives and meanings. One rule that is therefore vital to keep remembering in this thesis is that explicitness is not necessarily exploitative (Rose 123).

Prominent examples of this contradictory representation of the female body by female artists in the contemporary popular entertainment scene, where “they affirm black female beauty and yet often preserve the logic of female sexual objectification” (qtd. in Smith 168) can be found in videos by Beyoncé, where she performs blackness in this contradictory way in areas of beauty, agency and sexuality. Using her black body as a “media of signification” (Hartmann 7), Beyoncé’s sexualized videos motivate the acceptance of a variety of women with different skin colors and hair styles (Hartmann 7), challenging white beauty standards even as she frequently adheres to them. Adhering to white beauty standards is something many artist of color still do to come across as sexually desirable to a wider mainstream

audience (hooks 68-70). These sexualized and sometimes whitewashed images, however, do often go paired with the messages of agency and independence, as is the case with Beyoncé and how she adheres to a black female tradition in popular culture which presents blackness not as something inferior, but as something out of which strength, identity and even beauty can be drawn (“Black Sexual Politics” 134). Over the years, black female rappers have used this agency in the form of loudness and assertiveness as tools to take control of their sexuality and change it into an object of eroticism and exploration (“Black Feminist Thought” 166). Artists such as Missy Elliot, Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill have often done this by depicting themselves as strong, vocal women in control of their own desires, representing a new form of hip hop feminism (Balaji 8). One important way in which Beyoncé successfully deviates from her predecessors in this process, is in her usage of her alter ego Sasha Fierce, which allows her to openly express her sexual desires and to put her body on full display in videos, without being labeled an unrespectable woman of color herself. As Griffin writes: “Unlike her predecessors, she has not been forced to choose between “respectable lady” or “bombshell”. She comfortably occupies both spaces, having selected the persona Sasha Fierce to express the latter” (qtd. in Colbert 83). For female performers of color, this alter ego can be seen as a necessary shield, used to both exude the power of the erotic and self-expression, but also to separate one’s self from this sexualized self-identification which is still not accepted in society.

Another way in which female performers are able to exist and perform in different spaces in hip hop — and which complicates their performance of gender and sexuality even more — is that of queer expression. Unlike their male counterparts, women in hip hop are freer to explore areas of queer expression and homosexuality in their music as well as in their videos. This is not illogical as “by the nature of their existence, female rappers complicate simplistic readings of hip hop as a uniformly masculine and heterosexual space” (Smith 360). This perception combined with the perspective of female homosexuality as serving the male gaze helps create these ambiguous spaces for women and their sexuality in hip hop culture (Smith 361; 363). That women are allowed more room for queer desire when compared to men, however, does not mean that female queer sexualities are fully accepted in hip hop today, which is evident in the stereotype of the Dyke: “women creating women-friendly lyrics and images that do not repeat the hateful, misogyny of those often created by male artists are derogatorily labeled as “Dykes”” (Smith 365). This shows that female queer desire and sexual expression is only acceptable in hip hop as long as it caters to the male gaze and fits certain traditions in the culture, adding yet another complication to the layered representation of

gender and sexuality in hip hop.

After having sketched an extensive history on the beginning of hip hop and its transformation into the sexist mainstream genre of today, having elaborated on the immense power that race, gender and its accompanying notions of hyper-masculinity and femininity carry in American society, and after having explained the different ambiguous readings of female artists of color in hip hop and their sexual expressions, I have created a strong base for the analysis of my four case studies that now follow. In these analyses — which will consist out of four artist profiles and a close-reading analysis of one of their relevant contemporary music videos — I aim to discover in which ways female artists negotiate their place as women of color with their own bodies, sexual desires and expressions in a contemporary setting and genre of music which so far has not treated its male and female artists equally. I furthermore aim to compare them to their male counterparts to be able to explore how men of color represent the female gender in their music videos in a time of renewed feminism and changing gender dynamics. While doing this, I will naturally be focusing on concepts of sexism, the female body, masculinity, femininity, female agency and sexuality, as stated earlier in my subquestions.

Chapter 2: Barbies & Bitches: Navigating Gender Representation in Videos by Nicki Minaj & Cardi B

2.1 “*O My God, Look at Her Butt*”

Profiling Nicki Minaj: Alter Egos, Body Products & the Question of Feminism

When discussing gender representation and sexuality in the complex discourse that is visual contemporary commercialized hip hop, Nicki Minaj is a remarkable case study. As an artist, Minaj holds the title of “best-selling female rapper in history” (Hunter and Cuenca 26), having been able to carve out an unprecedentedly strong and authentic female space in hip hop culture (Grigoriadis). Through her musical success, Minaj has become an “expert at modeling the ways that women can wield power in the industry” (Grigoriadis). Whether Minaj indeed is a feminist trail-blazer championing the power of women in the hyper-masculine genre of hip hop, or whether she is just an artist that has successfully been able to repackage the standard misogyny of hip hop for modern mass-consumption, is a much contested topic in academia; her portfolio of well-known videos and songs have been said to both contest and support toxic masculinity and the sexist male gaze (Hunter and Cuenca 27). By exploring Nicki Minaj and her style as an artist, and by performing an in-depth analysis of both the lyrics and imagery of one of her videos “Barbie Tingz”, this case study aims to add to the ongoing debate about Minaj and feminism, exploring how she as a successful female rapper of color uses and represents aspects of gender, sexism and sexuality in her music and especially her videos.

Born in Trinidad in 1982 as Onika Maraj, Nicki Minaj moved with her parents to Queens, New York when she was only a few years old. Minaj has often spoken about her turbulent childhood, as her father was addicted to drugs and abused his family (Sarmadi 7; Grigoriadis). In her teenage years, Minaj attended LaGuardia High School, where she studied drama. After school, she started working as a waiter in 2002, while trying to break through as a rap talent in the industry. It was not until 2009, however, that she was signed to the *Young Money Records* label by rapper Lil’ Wayne, which is when her journey to fame began (Grigoriadis; Sarmadi 7). Even though academics today are divided on the labeling of Minaj as feminist, what all agree on is that she — as a woman — has been able to create a unique space of female representation in a genre in which female presence alone had been shrinking significantly the last decade. As mentioned before, the ‘pornification’ of hip hop pushed female artists out of their roles as emcees and into the limited representations of women as

sexualized objects (Hunter and Cuenca 29). This turn served the male gaze, shrinking the already small space female rappers had to express themselves. That Minaj managed to become so successful despite this shrinking space for women has much to do with her unique and versatile rapping style, which has been said to push boundaries of not just female representation in rap, but of the genre in itself. This style mixes femininity and female empowerment with a more widely accepted, authentic style of rapping: “Queen Minaj’s verbose, hyperbolic braggadocios rhyme style qualifies as rap for rappers” (Shange 34). In fact, according to Grigoriadis “Minaj...assumes a persona as aggressive, dis-happy and vulgar as any man in hip hop”. This vulgar rapping style solidifies Minaj’s existence in hip hop, as it shows she is as equally talented and fearless as her male counterparts. Minaj’s way of mixing this authentic and often sexist style of rapping with female empowerment and femininity, however, is unique and an accomplishment she is generally applauded for. As Warren writes: “Minaj’s ability to be a successful woman rapper and to expand the boundaries of feminine performance at the same time is no small feat amidst the shrinking space for women in commercially successful hip hop” (qtd. in Hunter and Cuenca 28).

One aspect of Minaj’s performance style that allows her to walk a tightrope between hip hop authenticity and feminine innovation is her use of alter egos, which as touched upon in chapter one, are a tool utilized by women of color to express themselves fully on stage while guarding their identities. Minaj’s most prominent personas are Roman Zolanski — a masculine and wild gay man — and the hyper-feminine doll Harajuku Barbie (Grigoriadis; Hunter and Cuenca 32; Video Chart Alter Egos 1-5). Using these alter egos — which are prominently present in her music videos as each possess their own tonalities, accents, postures and outfits — allows Minaj as a performer to seamlessly switch between modes of sexual expression, embodying different identities of femininity and masculinity in a single song or video (Sarmadi 3; Shange 40). This not only creates a successful and interesting riff between Onika as a person and Nicki as a performer, but furthermore extends what can be defined as the creative boundaries of authentic hip hop. As Minaj herself states: “I can rap in a London accent, make weird faces, wear spandex, wigs, and black lipstick. I can be more creative than the average male rapper. And I can show my boobs. Guys can’t do that” (qtd. in White 621).

This use of alter egos is particularly remarkable, because it allows Minaj to exist in a unique and ambiguous space of queerness. As Keeling states, Minaj’s existence as a successful woman in the world of hip hop on its own already “dislodge[s] the racist, sexist, and homophobic conceptions” so inherent to this genre’s masculine and heterogeneous traditions (qtd. in Shange 35). Moving between femininity and masculinity, Minaj as a

woman often assumes the role usually prescribed to the male rapper, an identity which is translated through her song lyrics in which she frequently expresses her desire to sleep with women as well as men (Shange 35; Smith 361). This desire has been obviously present in Minaj's music since the very start, as can be seen in one of her first singles called "Go hard". Released in 2009, this song sets the precedent for Minaj's direct approach of expressing queer sexuality in her career, as she is heard clearly stating that when she drives around town she will "only stop for pedestrians, or a real, real bad lesbian" (Smith 363). Visual imagery has also been important in the creation of Minaj as a queerly ambiguous artist, but can be seen as a more subtle tool used by Minaj to indicate her sexual fluidity, mainly employing visual symbolism to hint at her possible queerness (Shange 35-36). In interviews, Minaj has moreover remained ambiguous about her sexuality, never truly coming out as bisexual, but hinting at it constantly while avoiding directly answering questions about her true sexual orientation (Shange 38). This — what has been called 'strategic queerness' (Shange 30) — functions to both disarm and empower the patriarchal model in hip hop. From one perspective, Minaj's sexual ambiguity empowers her as a female artist, allowing her to escape the strict rules of heterogeneous and misogynistic hyper-masculinity while creating a safe place for women and LGBTQ people, both unwelcome and marginalized groups in hip hop (Smith 360; 362). From another perspective, female queer desire is often perceived as still serving the male gaze, which is why Minaj can exist in a sexually ambiguous space and still be considered authentic (Shange 36).

Next to having fabricated a space for female creative freedom and ambiguous queerness in contemporary hip hop, Minaj can be seen as an artist who has taken control over when and how she represents and exposes her body. Called a 'sexual entrepreneur' by White, Minaj's agency over her body shows a distinct break from previous passive and solely objectified representations of women in hip hop (White 610). Minaj therefore shows to at least partly possess a conscious understanding of sexual oppression, an awareness that is established in a tweet by her in 2017, in which she denounces the double gendered standard in the music industry (Tweet Chart 1). This is essential, as social gendered awareness is a feature black female performer are often not credited with having (White 620). Apart from feminist reasons, there is clearly a commercial aspect to Minaj's strategy of exposing the black female body, which is one of otherness and racial recognition that has proved to be immensely successful in the music industry today. By presenting an exaggerated and theatrical image of her own body, it both becomes a point of reference for women of color, as well as an object of fetishization for a white audience. Minaj's theatrical performance of her hyper-sexual body

also serves as what has been called a body-product: a body that is collectively accepted as fake, but is created and offered purely for public consumption (Hunter and Cuenda 30; 34).

Minaj's ways of transcending multiracial boundaries and empowering women through hyper-sexual expression is also where much feminist critique is aimed at her. This critique is mostly directed at her use of hurtful tropes of African American women in her videos, through which she embraces "the phallic idioms and lyric violence of her male peers" (Jackson 127). This becomes especially evident in what might be called Minaj's most iconic video: "Anaconda". Watched an astonishingly 800 million times on YouTube, this video has caused much controversy due to its explicit description and depiction of the black female body. The focus of this clip on the backsides of women of color and especially on Minaj's (Video Chart "Anaconda" 1-3), has been compared to the spectacle that was Hottentot Venus. Hottentot Venus can be seen as the "first original icon of Black female sexuality" (White 611), but also an embodiment of Lott's earlier mentioned 'black mirror' fetishization, as Venus's rump was monetized through its exposure to fascinated white crowds in Europe in the 18th and 19th century (White 611; Jackson 127; Lott 6). This comparison and the video's rich use of the male gaze, clearly speak against Minaj as a feminist icon. There are academics, however, who speak of Minaj signifying stereotypes of black sexual deviancy, stating she actually takes control of the hurtful tropes that have ruled over women of color for so long. Centering as the agent of a song featuring an African American man rapping about the size of women's behinds — "My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns hun" ("Anaconda" 1.13-1.18) — and a white women's voice exclaiming fascination with that size — "Oh my god, look at her butt" ("Anaconda" 1.19-1.21) — Minaj is seen taking control over black women's bodies and their representation in mainstream music (Hobson 112-113). In a tweet hinting that "Anaconda" was not nominated for an MTV Video Music Award due to its explicit depiction of thick, black female bodies compared to its thinner white counterparts which were nominated (Grigoriadis; Hobson 108; Tweet Chart 2-4), Minaj exemplifies how she at least to some extent is aware of her position as a black female artist in the industry. Other aspects of the video such as the cutting up of a banana, the video's sole focus on women, and not letting the one man present in the video touch her exude notions of anti-phallicism and attests to "the fact that Minaj is in charge of her own objectification" (Grigoriadis; Video Chart "Anaconda" 4-9). Her interaction with the exclusive crew of women in the video furthermore establish her as queerly ambiguous, strongly going against prescriptions of patriarchal heterogeneity and homophobia in the culture (Video Chart "Anaconda" 6-9). The question whether controlling the narrative automatically means that it

is feminist or falls on the right side of respectability is still debated. As bell hooks states in works by Stoeffel: “They can exercise control and make lots of money, but that doesn’t equate with liberation” (qtd. in Hunter and Cuenca 39).

2.2 “I’m a Bad Bitch” Deconstructing Gender in Nicki Minaj’s “Barbie Tingz” Video

When exploring contemporary dimensions of gender in hip hop videos, Minaj’s video of her single “Barbie Tingz” can be perceived as the perfect case study. Released on the May 4, 2018 precluding her newest album *Queen* by only a few months, “Barbie Tingz” contains many progressive and relevant representations of women today, while simultaneously displaying Minaj’s signature style as the video exhibits her alter egos, explicit sexual content and her unique rapping style. Co-directed by Minaj herself — next to Giovanni Bianco — and watched over 50 million times on YouTube, “Barbie Tingz” is an interesting example of the ambiguous and complicated branded textual-visual discourse created by female rappers, which is both to fit the up-and-coming popularized brand of #metoo, as well as authentic hip hop and its more sexist dominant cultural order.

An important part of “Barbie Tingz” is that it marks the return of alter ego Barbie, who Minaj for a while had traded for her own identity as Nicki in her songs. The contrast between Nicki and Barbie in “Barbie Tingz” is striking and vital to the contradicting discourse of misogyny and female empowerment that is present in this video, and becomes clear through mise-en-scène video analysis. Nicki as an artist is present in two distinct narratives. Revealed in the opening scenes, Minaj walks towards the camera taking off her jacket, revealing a black outfit which leaves little to the imagination (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 1). In this scene, she can be heard rapping the chorus of “Barbie Tingz”:

“I’m a bad bitch, fuck the bitch,

Bitch get slick, Imma cut the bitch.

I’m a bad bitch, suck some dick,

If that bitch get slick, I’ll cut the bitch” (“Barbie Tingz” 0.00-0.09).

The first image of Minaj seen after this chorus is the second Nicki in this video, and is an embodiment of her signature look: again walking towards the camera, Minaj is wearing a fur jacket, golden jewelry, and a thong which accentuates the asset she is best known for: her bottom (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 2). These first 18 seconds are significant because they

make clear that through Nicki herself, at least some sexist traditions of the larger hip hop culture are present in “Barbie Tingz”. Minaj seems to clearly engage with accepted patriarchal notions by wearing clothes that play into the male gaze, and by using language that is deemed derogatory for women. This animosity towards other women is a continued trend in “Barbie Tingz”, as a central theme during the song is calling out other women and accusing them of attempting to mimic Minaj, which is made clear through lyrics like: “rap bitches tell they team: ‘make em like Barbie” (“Barbie Tingz” 1.06-1.08) and “let’s be real all you bitches wanna look like me” (“Barbie Tingz” 0.47-0.49). Assuming the role of the male rapper, these quotes showcase the highly aggressive and masculine tradition of ‘dissing’ one’s peers, which for Minaj are rival female rappers. These lyrics are performed with the appropriate amount of masculine attitude and aggressiveness, as Minaj can be seen using prominent hand gestures, directly rapping towards the camera while always occupying the middle of the frame (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 3-5).

The misogyny reaches its height when the chorus is expanded in the middle of the song, and extensively discusses the cutting, beating-up and — if interpreted a certain way — even rape of other women:

“I’m a bad bitch, fuck the bitch,
 Bitch get slick, Imma cut the bitch.
 I’m a bad bitch, suck some dick,
 If that bitch get slick, I’ll cut the bitch.
 I’ll cut up the bitch, I’ll gut the bitch,
 Had to fuck up the bitch, man, fuck the bitch.
 Won’t shoot her but I will gun-butt the bitch,
 When we say “fuck the bitch” dick-up the bitch.
 She was stuck-up so my niggas stuck up the bitch,
 Still draggin’ her so don’t pick up the bitch.
 Get the combination to the safe, drug the bitch,
 Know the whole operation, been bugged the bitch” (“Barbie Tingz 1.32-2.02).

Noteworthy in this chorus is the frequent use of the word ‘bitch’. Its use is striking because even though the verse obviously contains many misogynistic phrases — as women are threatened to be cut up, dragged and drugged among other things — Minaj shows the double bind of entrapment that comes with being a female performer in the hyper-masculine genre of hip hop (Colbert 65-66), by utilizing the word bitch in different ways. Apart from the traditional use of the word to degrade women, Minaj starts her chorus with calling herself a

‘bad bitch’. This is a tradition sometimes practiced by female artists to reverse the meaning of the word. By calling strong women bitches, the word becomes a term of empowerment instead of suppression, in the same way as African Americans are now using the word ‘nigga’ as a term of empowerment (“Black Sexual Politics” 123-124). The word-shift from “I’ll fuck up the bitch” to “I’ll fuck the bitch” (“Barbie Tingz” 1.45-1.48) furthermore shows a wordplay that engages with Minaj’s ambiguous queerness, as she goes from attacking the woman victimized by her lyrics, to desiring her. Minaj’s usage of the term bitch to empower herself but demean other women in just two lines of text — and moreover uses adherence to masculine traditions to hint at her queerness — serves as an example of her overall complex and contradictory discourse of gender representation.

Another example of this contradictory discourse is the visual design that goes along with the misogynistic lyrics in “Barbie Tingz”. Having clearly established that through the hip hop traditions of bragging and dissing “Barbie Tingz” contains much misogynistic rhetoric, it is surprising to find that its visual message does not seem to match its lyrical one. Like in “Anaconda”, women are the main focal point of “Barbie Tingz”. That Minaj plays with gender roles can be seen by the fact that the few men present in the video function solely as back-up dancers: roles usually reserved for women in hip hop (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 6-9). In many of the other scenes, Minaj can be seen representing strong female solidarity by dancing, and sometimes even grinding with other women, hinting at her ambiguous queerness (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 10-13). This is striking for a song containing lyrics that rely so much on hostility between women. Remarkably, Minaj’s lyrical adoption of the male rap identity in combination with her performance of female solidarity does not prevent her from adhering to certain hurtful sexualized scripts in “Barbie Tingz”, which becomes especially evident through lyrics such as: “But ain’t non you hoes pussy good like me / Pussy so good his ex wanna still fight me/ I cut all my niggas off, but they would still wife me (still wife me)” (“Barbie Tingz” 0.54-1.05; 2.18-2.30). By bragging about her sexual prowess and by being hostile towards other women in her lyrics, Minaj is seen assuming the role of both the Gangsta Bitch and Freak, who are both sexually devious, hateful towards other women and desire having intercourse with many different men.

As much as Nicki in the “Barbie Tingz” video adheres to certain patriarchal notions by dissing other women through lyrics, misogyny and adherence to sexual scripts, her alter ego Barbie in “Barbie Tingz” represents the completely opposite, almost functioning as a sort of anti-Nicki. Barbie’s overall presence in this clip adds a second and more meaningful layer of social commentary to the video, exposing part of what makes Nicki Minaj such an interesting

case study and successful artist. The first remarkable gender commentary Barbie adds to the video is one of how women are controlled in the industry, which becomes apparent through the mise-en-scène in what can be called the puppet master scene: Barbie's first appearance. In this scene, it becomes obvious — even to audience members unaware of the existence of the Barbie alter ego — that they are watching a doll. Suspended from four black cables, Minaj in this scene is the ultimate puppet: wearing a bright yellow wig, a tight pink top and a see-through hoop frame without an actual dress, everything from Minaj's robotic movements to her make-up suggest towards her not being an actual human being (Video Chart "Barbie Tingz" 14; Sarmadi 4; 17). Obviously controlled by the strings attached to her body, Barbie has no agency over herself in the video, which can be seen as a literal representation of the role women often occupy in hip hop culture. Having spoken about the limited roles for women in hip hop before, Minaj through this narrative can be seen commenting on how the industry controls women not just to look a certain way, but to act a certain way. The white background and spotlight on Minaj furthermore create two distinct shadows behind her, which is one way in which "Barbie Tingz" subtly hints at Minaj's queerness but still engages with the male heteronormative fantasy. All identical, these shadows stand in close proximity of one another, often — when pulled by the strings from above — ending up in what could be interpreted as sexualized positions (Video Chart "Barbie Tingz" 15-16). The shadows in fact create a threesome of identical women, a Minaj à trois as one might call it.

Next to critiquing the limited space for women in hip hop, Minaj comments on the larger meaning of womanhood, race and gender in another scene in "Barbie Tingz", in which Minaj morphs her Barbie alter ego to embody what can be labeled the image of respectable black womanhood. Elegant and poised, she and a group of four other women dance gracefully and synchronically around a room, the other women made unrecognizable by wearing masks. The white background used throughout the whole clip creates a sharp contrast with the corsets and large hoopskirts the women are wearing (Video Chart "Barbie Tingz" 17). The clothing and physicality of the scene motivate the audience to view the women as traditional feminine ladies — damsels in distress almost — an interesting image in a clip home to a culture where women are often portrayed as nothing more than sexual objects or scripts. That the majority of the women are wearing masks indicates the fakeness of the image created in the video, seemingly indicating that the perfect white image of heterogeneous womanhood is a fabricated notion, an identity to hide behind which is neither attainable nor real. As discussed before, this definition of femininity and womanhood is never fully attainable for women of color, both because of their skin color and their socio-economic situations that are often a

consequence of racism and sexism (“Black Sexual Politics” 139). As the only woman not wearing a mask and sporting natural hair in this scene, Minaj seems to also comment on this unfair unattainability of white womanhood, showing how women of color can indeed be ladies, even when not holding themselves up to standards of white society. Especially Minaj’s hair is a relevant aspect of this commentary, as Minaj has been criticized by feminists before for not wearing her hair naturally. Always seen wearing straight, colored wigs, her representation of black women and adherence to European beauty standards in her videos goes against the natural-hair movement for women of color that has arisen the last few years, which advocates beauty and value of hair in all its shapes and forms. That Minaj chose to wear her hair in a more natural style in this scene, is therefore a clear social commentary on the beauty of natural hair and a criticism on white beauty standards (Sarmadi 17-18)

Minaj’s rejection of these standards is acted out by Barbie and her crew of ladies as they literally start rejecting accepted notions of heterogeneous white femininity as the video unfolds; with an angry look on their faces, the crew of women aggressively approach the camera, revealing the sneakers they are wearing under their dresses. In this short scene, their demeanors are successfully changed from passive ladies who invited the male gaze in, to that of active rebels fighting against white womanhood, beauty standards and even traditional heterosexual society (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 18). This development is also apparent in the lyrics that go along with the scene. Even as she dances elegantly, Minaj’s verse contradicts the respectable image shown to the audience, as she brags about her importance, placing herself next to successful male peers such as Lil’ Wayne and Drake while taking credit for her own success: “Cuz we the big three, don’t need a big speech / We made the biggest impact check the spreadsheets / That’s Lil Wheezy the Barbie and Drizzy Drake” (“Barbie Tingz” 1.25-1.32).

By specifically commenting on the fabrication of her body for public consumption in “Barbie Tingz, Minaj is able to critique society in yet another way in this video, exposing the unhealthy obsession hip hop and the larger society have with the black female body. Barbie’s appearance as a puppet on strings in an earlier narrative is an example of this. Particularly Barbie’s plastic outfit serves as a double commentary on the creation of Minaj as an artist, and on the fabrication of both her alter egos and her body for mass consumption, as it exposes her posterior, but acts outside of her control (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 14-16). Minaj’s awareness of the construction of her body and especially her backside become most evident in a short scene in the video where her enlarged silhouette fills the screen, as tiny men literally dance on her hips and jump on her buttocks (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 19-20). The

blackness of the silhouette therefore functions as a literal reference to a fascination with the black female body and furthermore refers to the workings of the paradoxical black mirror which serves to both obsessively desire and detest the black body on display (Lott 6). These different scenes play into the carefully constructed image of Minaj as an artist, and furthermore showcase her dependency on the selling of her body product.

Eventually, “Barbie Tingz” can be said to be a video with interesting gender representations which play with notions of gender, femininity and masculinity. The video is an example of Minaj’s unique use of multiple layers of identity and meaning created through alter egos and her smart application of visual symbolism to set up a contradictory discourse that can satisfy both a feminist audience as well as a more traditional one. An image used towards the end of the video might summarize this contradicting message best. Reminiscent of Kara Walker’s silhouette art style, (MoMA; Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 21), Minaj in her clip has constructed a silhouette image where all of her gender discourse falls into place (Video Chart “Barbie Tingz” 22). That this final image is one summarizing all the complex racial and gender dynamics working in the video is no coincidence, as Walker’s silhouette style is known for the way it “highlights the potential of silhouettes to intervene in the current discourse on race, class, and gender” (Mehring 208), using the silhouette aesthetic as a powerful tool connected to prejudice and stereotypes to expose sexist and racist views in the larger society, touching upon topics of slavery, racism and sexual exploitation (Mehring 210). This contrasting and powerful way of using silhouette art is imitated in a visual frame in “Barbie Tingz”. In this frame, a group of men stand tall on the right side of the screen: raising their fists and holding their masks like swords, they represent the proud hyper-masculinity of “Barbie Tingz”, which is present in Minaj’s rapping, her attitude but also her misogyny. On the left hand side two pairs can be spotted; one heterosexual couple, and one where two women with Minaj masks stand together, showing how Minaj occupies both heterosexual and queer spaces in her video. Lying on the floor is a man holding up a Minaj mask, which literally refers to Minaj’s versatile way of moving between femininity and masculinity. In the center background of the image stands Minaj herself, as similar to the video, everything still revolves around her as an artist.

2.3 “*I Don’t Dance Now, I Make Money Moves*”

Profiling Cardi B: Blatant Honesty, Inclusive Feminism & Stripper Respectability

Another rapper with a discourse of videos and songs that is especially worthwhile exploring when discussing contemporary American hip hop and its present gender representation is Cardi B. Labeled ‘the year of Cardi B’ by magazine *The Rolling Stone* (Spanos), 2017 marked the year of Cardi’s recent rise to American fame. Relatively new to the commercialized hip hop industry, Cardi B is such a relevant case study because she embodies the contemporary element so integral to this thesis: despite the many relevant and progressive gender dimensions present in her visual discourse, relatively little has been written about Cardi B and the presence of gender and sexuality in her videos. Cardi’s wild public persona and her successful monetization of her past as a stripper furthermore have her being hailed as a new feminist icon by many (Williams 1114-1115). This is remarkable, as her portfolio of well-known songs and videos showcase a complex and sometimes contradictory mix of messages and narratives when more closely inspected on gender roles and the representation of the black female body. By first sketching a clear profile of Cardi B, her style and her outspoken personality, and by then diving deeper into the complex visual narrative of one of her latest videos “Bartier Cardi”, this second case study intends to establish how Cardi B as a new female rapper to the industry navigates topics of gender, sexism and sexuality in her music and especially her videos.

Cardi B was born as Belcalis Almanazar in 1993 in the same place as the genre of music she is home to: the Bronx. Dropping out of college to pursue a stripping career to make ends meet, Cardi rose to fame on Instagram through her blatantly honest content about being a stripper in New York City (Kameir; Spanos). With quotes such as “I’m a stripper hoe” and “a hoe never gets cold”, Cardi amassed a huge online following (Kameir). To quote *The Rolling Stone*: “In a culture reshaped by streaming and social media, where the kids, without much corporate nudging, get to decide who the stars are, Cardi B is what you get” (Spanos). Eventually, Cardi signed with the major American label *Atlantic Records* to monetize her reality fame (Spanos). As a female rapper, Cardi B enjoys an unprecedented amount of success in the hip hop genre, maybe only rivaled by that of Nicki Minaj. Cardi’s first single “Bodak Yellow” was released in June 2017 and paved the way for her enormous success, having amassed more than 550 million views on YouTube since its release; numbers that far surpass other rapper’s entrees into the commercial music industry, Minaj included (Sims 14; Oware 217). “Bodak Yellow” actually became the first single by a female rapper and woman

of color to sit at the no. 1 spot in the Billboard Charts — without another artist appearing on the song — since Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)” in 1998 (Oware 217). An impressive feat and one that established Cardi B as a trailblazer for women in the contemporary music industry (Sims 16).

Cardi B’s unfiltered public persona and her unapologetic stance on topics such as gender, sexuality and sexual desire have become important building blocks in her personal brand today. Cardi’s candid comments about especially feminism and race show her to be an artist that is both conscious of sexist and racist influences in the industry, and as one that is willing to fight them. In 2016, Cardi addressed her millions of followers on Instagram in a video message, after being accused of not fitting into what many see as traditional feminism, stating: “If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don’t understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have a education, that have a degree” (qtd. in Williams 1115; Oware 217). Chastising people who define feminism to be solely for those enjoying higher education, Cardi’s stance on feminism is one showcasing a more modern and wholesome form, which aims to include rather than to exclude. This feminism is a departure from more traditional and mainstream feminism which — as mentioned before — mostly caters to white middle-class women (hooks 123). This already becomes evident in what is generally seen as the birth of the American Women’s Movement: the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Addressing the inequality between men and women in American society by drafting a “Declaration of Sentiments”, this convention — although an admirable and important first step to gender equality — already selected which women were truly worthy of equity, as it mainly addressed “disadvantages of primarily married women” (“The Women’s Rights Convention” 53). By openly defining herself as a non-traditional feminist, Cardi B breaks away from her feminist predecessors and hip hop peers to publicly start a much-needed conversation on what feminism means for women of all classes and colors, challenging traditional notions of womanhood and gender that are usually defined by white society (Oware 217-218; “Black Sexual Politics” 139).

As an artist who seems to have no problem sharing opinions publicly, it is no surprise that Cardi has also been vocal about issues of race and cultural appropriation. When questions arose about Cardi’s claim to black culture due to her light complexion and Trinidadian and Dominican heritage, she openly shared her struggle with fitting into the US’s narrow system of binary racial identities (Omi and Winant 4-6), stating: “It gets to the point that you ask yourself, ‘Damn, what the fuck am I?’” (qtd. in Spanos). Eventually defining herself as Afro-latina — “someone of mixed African and Latina descent *or* someone of Latin descent with

supposed Black physical characteristics” (Sims 16) — Cardi can be defined as an artist who not only challenges notions of contemporary feminism and womanhood, but also those of racism and binary identity politics which arise when one is neither fully black nor fully white (Spanos; Sims 16).

Cardi B’s clear stance on notions of race, feminism and womanhood are so relevant to discuss because they are visible in her popular musical discourse. Her debut album *Invasion of Privacy* — which was released early 2018 — has received raving reviews about its message of female empowerment. As *The Rolling Stone* writes: “*Invasion of Privacy* is even better than everybody was hoping it would be, a whirlwind tour of Planet Cardi, a place where female warriors reign supreme, taking occasional breaks to plant a Louboutin heel on a rival’s throat” (Sheffield). With lyrics such as “I think us bad bitches is a gift from God” (Sheffield) and “Bad bitches do what they want” (“I Do” 0.43-0.45; 1.57-1.58), Cardi establishes herself as an activist for female empowerment, transcending the limited and objectified roles usually reserved for women in hip hop (“Black Sexual Politics” 128). As these quotes indicate, however, Cardi B takes on the mantle of feminism through language which can still be considered degrading and hurtful to women, uncovering that Cardi too makes use of the double bind of entrapment, allowing her to function both within and outside the sexist dynamics in hip hop (Colbert 65-66). As Oware writes: “woman rappers like Cardi B may feel it necessary to adhere to rap convention by using language labeled anti-feminist ... Overall, women artists operate in a sphere where they are forced to figure out a winning strategy to garner mainstream appeal” (218). In other words, adapting to a bold and braggadocios masculinity in her rapping style, helps Cardi justify her existence in the genre (Oware 218).

Cardi B’s existence in an ambiguous space regarding topics of sexism, feminism and gender as a female rapper is also evident in the way she sexualizes herself in her lyrics and videos, where she again walks a tightrope between showcasing female empowerment by explicitly expressing erotic desire — which as Lorde advocates is a non-traditional form of female agency (53; 55) — and serving the heterosexual male gaze (Oware 217). Unlike other successful women of color in the industry, Cardi B does *not* make use of alter egos to express herself sexually, which means she makes no distinction between herself as Belcalis the person, and herself as Cardi B the rapper. This allows Cardi as an artist to draw her material about sexual expression directly from her experience being Belcalis. As mentioned before, Cardi B turned to stripping after college. This shows that Cardi B — even before she became a rapper — was already in the trade of selling the image of the black female body for money.

Cardi's utilization of her past as a stripper is remarkable, as it both enhances and attacks the sexism present in her genre. Cardi enters the aforementioned 'respectable vs. respectability' debate on the pro-pornography side, lifting the stigmatization which is often associated with that line of work through her music ("A Taste for Brown Sugar" 4; 6). As Williams writes: "Cardi B owns and discusses her past employment in strip clubs without shame" (1116), and has actually developed stripping into a practice of female empowerment through her songs. Especially "Bodak Yellow" can attest to the fact that stripping and other sex work can function in a non-traditional way to empower instead of demean women, which becomes clear in the song's chorus where Cardi establishes herself as powerful through her journey from dancer to rapper:

"I don't dance now, I make money moves.
 Say I don't gotta dance, I make money moves.
 If I see you and I don't speak,
 that means I don't fuck with you.
 I'm a boss, you a worker bitch,
 I make bloody moves" ("Bodak Yellow" 0.31-0.45).

This progressive view on sex work and its potential to empower women is one that is clearly articulated in the video of "Bodak Yellow" as well, where Cardi B utilizes the visual narrative to establish female power through self-representation and symbolism. Always confidently present in the center of the screen, she is framed as being in full control of the video (Video Chart "Bodak Yellow" 1-3). Using props, clothing, lighting and body language, "Bodak Yellow" furthermore portrays women as important by using symbols representing royalty — such as women wearing golden laurels on their heads — or by depicting them as warriors (Video Chart "Bodak Yellow" 4-6). Despite its more feminist discourse, "Bodak Yellow" can also be seen playing into the sexist dominant cultural order of hip hop in both its lyrics and visual imagery. By rapping lyrics such as "My pussy glitter as gold" ("Bodak Yellow" 2.36-2.37) and "I need to let all these hoes know that none of they niggas is safe" ("Bodak Yellow" 2.45-2.48), Cardi uses her lyrical narrative to play into various sexual scripts confirming the so-called deviancy of black women, while also making use of derogatory language. Narratives that play into the male gaze — such as Cardi dancing in front of a sports car (Video Chart "Bodak Yellow" 7-8) — are furthermore threaded throughout the more progressive narratives of "Bodak Yellow", creating a complex dialogue between images that both adhere to and attack the more misogynistic traditions embedded in hip hop. Like Oware states, Cardi B "gesture[s] towards upholding *and* defying the status quo surrounding

gender norms” (218), demonstrating the immensely ambiguous relationship that female rappers have with feminism, female empowerment, and their dependency on the fetishization of the black female body to be successful.

2.4 “*Your Bitch Wanna Party with Cardi*” Deconstructing Gender in Cardi B’s “Bartier Cardi” Video

The ambiguity of Cardi B’s work regarding the representation of gender is especially evident in her video “Bartier Cardi”, directed by Petra Collins. Released on April 2, 2018 and watched over 35 million times on YouTube, “Bartier Cardi” sets the tone for *Invasion of Privacy*, released only a few days after the video. With its explicit sexual content and its original sound, “Bartier Cardi” exemplifies Cardi’s signature style as an artist. The video’s shallow adherence to a patriarchal model, but especially its present feminist characteristics, make it a video that is able to attract a traditional hip hop audience, as well as fit more progressive feminist views. These characteristics clearly establish the inherent ambiguous nature female rappers have regarding gender representation in their work today, making “Bartier Cardi” the perfect case study.

One essential aspect of “Bartier Cardi” that showcases the video’s relevance in gender representation is its feminist critique on the established, limited roles for women in hip hop through its prominent use of gender role reversal. In this reversal women are presented in diverse roles, but are always vocal, active and in charge of the scene. To the contrary, men are limited to passive roles and are mainly present to be looked at, indicating a complete reversal of the prominent ‘g’s up, ho’s down’ mentality in the culture (Rose 168). Using the *mise-en-scène* method, this fascinating gender switch already becomes apparent in the opening scenes of the video, where various women can be seen managing large stacks of money while they watch Cardi B perform on a television. Heaps of grapes, laurel plants and Greek statues fill in the various backdrops in these scenes, creating an atmosphere emanating royalty and importance (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 1-3). This sole focus on women as financial entrepreneurs is already remarkable, as women are portrayed as active and important instead of fitting into the limited industry standard which prescribes “She is something men rappers love, something they do. She does not act, she is acted upon” (qtd. in Rebollo-Gil and Moras 126). The male gaze is furthermore actively omitted in this video from the start, as the camera only focuses on the women’s faces and shoes, even when a woman is seen sitting undressed in

a bathtub (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 4).

That “Bartier Cardi” switches this clear division of gendered action is seen when a group of men is introduced to the audience: standing in a poorly lit room, these men are dressed in nothing more than tight silver underwear, their oiled-up midribs clearly exposed to the audience. In their scenes, they are the ones who are acted upon: standing in two neat rows with their hands behind their backs staring either at Cardi — who is portrayed on a television in the room — or at the camera, they resemble servants, passively waiting and ready to take orders (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 5-6). As the chorus ends, the scenes of the women counting money are alternated with scenes involving the men, who remain static except when recorded mouthing the word “Cardi” at the end of sentences in the first verse:

“Who get this mothafucker started? (Cardi)

Who took your bitch out to party? (Cardi)

I took your bitch in the party? (Cardi)

Who that be fly as a Martian? (Cardi)” (“Bartier Cardi” 0.45-0.52).

While the men mouth her name, the camera zooms in on their necks, showing the audience that Cardi’s name is actually tattooed into each one of them (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 7-8). These elements are relevant because they all exist to serve a single goal: to establish Cardi as the one in charge. It shows that the men in the video only function in relation to her, as they are used as props to reaffirm her power through actions of authority affirmation: they mouth her name — confirming her questions about being the best — and are literally engraved with her initials. In full control of the narrative, Cardi becomes the one who acts, while the men are those acted upon

This interesting reversal is enhanced through other relevant aspects in the video, one of which is the male gaze. Returning to the men standing statically in the darkly-lit room, the camera can be seen roaming freely around the space, playing with the expected gendered visual narrative by filming the men in an objectified matter (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 9-10). Utilizing this element of voyeurism, a new perspective is created — a counter-functioning female gaze as one might call it — as the focus on the men’s bodies and their passivity successfully reduce them to de-humanized objects of fetishism (Mulvey 843; Benschoff and Griffin 244;247). Framed in this way, the men in “Bartier Cardi” resemble the “near naked, unrealistic back-up dancers used to enforce the masculinity and sexual prowess of ... male rappers” usually found in hip hop videos (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 129). Through this reversal, “Bartier Cardi” seems to specifically criticize the sexualized representation of women in hip hop videos as well as its accompanying hyper-masculine notions, by for once

placing men in this limiting position. Complicating the creation of the male gaze, the group of objectified, half-naked men are also frequently framed watching Cardi (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 11), who is present on the television in the room in this scene. This creates a complex relationship where the men who are being gazed at by the audience, are gazing at Cardi as well. That these scenes are alternated with the group of women looking at Cardi on the television as well (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 2; 4) creates a triple gaze; one which is not necessarily female or male, neither heterosexual or homosexual, but one that objectifies both the group of men and Cardi on the television, creating a space of overt sexualization and queer ambiguousness unprecedented in hip hop. This shows that the video’s role reversal functions not only to empower women, but also to question the dominant cultural order in hip hop, as topics of objectification, female sexual expression and homophobia are tackled (“Hip Hop Honeys” 275).

The innovative gendered power dynamic created through the representations of women and men stands in sharp contrast with how Cardi herself is portrayed in “Bartier Cardi”. In the opening of the video when the women are introduced, flashes of Cardi herself are shown as she is revealed on a television which the women are watching. Contrasting the way the other women are represented and ignored by the male gaze, *every singly aspect* of Cardi’s visual frame in this narrative is sexualized: her hand gestures, her body language and her outfit — a red set of lingerie paired with a feather boa and an abundance of jewelry — all seem to have been created for the sole purpose of attracting a male heterosexual viewer (Benshoff and Griffin 245), as the camera seems to prefer showing Cardi’s body, over her face (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 12-15).

Another way through which Cardi adheres to the generally-accepted, more patriarchal notions in the hip hop culture is through her lyrics, in which she expresses herself as a sexual deviant woman using language which plays into the traditions of sexualizing and demeaning women. This becomes clear through the chorus of the song, which actually functions as the first verse of the video:

“Your bitch wanna party with Cardi,

Cartier Bardi in a 'Rari (21).

Diamonds all over my body (Cardi),

Shinin' all over my body (my body),

Cardi got your bitch on molly” (“Bartier Cardi” 0.17-0.24).

Immediately striking is the use of the word bitch, which in this chorus is always paired with the possessive pronoun ‘your’. This pairing of words creates a context in which not only a

woman is demeaned, but also assigned as property or belonging to the man Cardi is actually speaking to, which again contradicts the much more progressive roles of women in the video. The sentence “Cardi got your bitch on molly” furthermore refers to Cardi drugging another woman, as the urban dictionary states the word molly to be “used to refer to MDMA” (Urban Dictionary “Molly”). By establishing herself as the person other women want to party with and take drugs from, Cardi is able to adhere to the hip hop tradition of bragging about herself, while simultaneously tapping into the space of queer ambiguity available for women in rap music. From this perspective, Cardi in this chorus can be seen adapting to black masculinity (Oware 218), assuming the role of the male rapper, as she brags about her wealth and about all the women available to her. This queer ambiguity rooted in the adaption of the male rapper persona is remarkable because when identified through a male rapper, this masculinity immediately becomes synonymous with homophobia (Smith 362; Shange 35). That Cardi’s adaption has the opposite effect again shows the truly complex relation between women, masculinity and sexuality. Lyrics such as “I got your bitch and she naked” (“Bartier Cardi” 2.54-2.56) and “I’m poppin shit like a dude” (“Bartier Cardi” 2.46-2.48) strengthen this complex gender adaptation even more. Another aspect of “Bartier Cardi” which exists through Cardi’s adaptation of the male rapper, is her obsession with her stage persona ‘Cardi’, which is the primary way Cardi refers to herself throughout the song. Following in footsteps of male artists such as Usher and Jason Derulo, Cardi uses her own name as yet another way of adapting to the confident male persona, as men in especially hip hop are viewed as legitimate enough to vainly keep referring back to themselves without anyone questioning them. This way of referring to herself is therefore a way to equalize the so-called gendered playground of hip hop, in which no other female artists announce themselves in this self-conscious, possibly arrogant, way. This emphasis on Cardi as the one in charge is translated into visual discourse as well, as Cardi is the center of every frame, always delivering her lyrics confidently to the camera (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 16-19).

What makes Cardi’s adaptation to the role of the male rapper so peculiar — next to it allowing her to switch from spaces of homophobia to a more positive queer ambiguity and its sharp contrast with the imagery in the video — is that this adaptation does not prevent her from adapting to sexualized scripts, which function to stereotype and limit female representation (Stephens 171; Ross and Coleman 158-159). That Cardi plays into stereotypical notions of the sexual deviancy of women becomes clear in the second half of the chorus:

“Cardi took your man, you upset, uh

Cardi got rich, they upset, yeah

Cardi put the pussy on Offset (Say what?)” (“Bartier Cardi” 0.31-0.37).

By publicly mentioning bitches, drugs and sexual prowess in one chorus, Cardi identifies herself with the sexual script of the Gangsta Bitch. Cardi B’s devotion to this sexual script is significant, as this adherence is part of a larger female hip hop tradition in which female rappers attempt to reshape or reinvent the already existing canon of sexualized images of black women. Instead of just ‘ho’s’ or ‘bitches’, black women in these videos present women to be hustler Gold Diggers or Gangsta Bitches, who are independent, powerful and in control of their own sexuality, which is an improvement over other more dehumanizing images. The more independent sexual scripts, however, are still rooted in patriarchal perceptions of black womanhood: “Whether she “fucks men” for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media” (“Black Sexual Politics” 127-128). These more female-used images therefore still maintain the current sexual hierarchy and the belief that black women are naturally sexually deviant, which is the hurtful message most black male rappers also sell to their audience (Rose 124).

The last element of “Bartier Cardi” relevant to its discussion of gender is the appearance of male rapper 21 Savage as a featuring artist on this track. In a darkly lit room with a wall of televisions that all show static, two women are shown expertly tying 21 Savage to a chair, as he sits there willingly rapping his lyrics (Video Chart “Bartier Cardi” 20-21). That all televisions are turned off — which in other scenes is where Cardi B performs a large part of the song — shows how for a short moment, 21 Savage takes over the leading lady’s position. The peculiar aspect of this moment is that in taking over Cardi’s reigns, 21 Savage is much less in charge of what happens in his part of the visual narrative when compared to Cardi, as like the other men in the video he takes on a passive role. His lyrics can be stated to be sexually aggressive in its representation of women, with containing lines such as: “I pulled the rubber off and I put hot sauce on her titties / I’m in a Bentley truck, she keep on suckin’ like it’s tinted (21)” (“Bartier Cardi” 1.55-2.01). Next to these sexually explicit lyrics that serve as a standard example of the normalization of reducing women to sexual objects (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 126), 21 Savage follows little other sexist tendencies which are so strongly embedded in hip hop’s hyper-masculinity. On the contrary, the visual imagery used during his verse contest the actual lyrics spoken by him; even though the bondage of 21 Savage has many sexual connotations, he is the passive person in the room as the women tie him up. In no moment is he allowed to touch the women, even though they do touch him. This

contrast between 21 Savage's sexually aggressive lyrics and his passive stance compared to the active women is striking, as in hip hop, the aggressive aspect of "men's tales of conquest focuses on making the black female body silent" (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 127), but in this clip the black female body is *anything* but silent.

The symbolism in 21 Savage's narrative furthermore operates to enhance images of female agency, the women's afro hairstyles in this scene reminiscent of those worn by women in the Black Power Movement. Especially mirroring images of Angela Davis — who has become the representing image of women's fashion in the Black Power Era — the choice to showcase women with afro's in this scene is a reference to female activism, as well as the natural hair movement, fitting Cardi's inclusive style of feminism (Video Chart "Bartier Cardi" 22-23; Ford 3-4). This reference is ironic, since the general connection made between Davis and hair is something she herself — as a prominent feminist — dislikes, as it reduces her achievements as an activist to mere fashion statements (Phu 167). Still, the use of this imagery can be seen as a statement on female power, especially because the few women who are remembered as prominent in the Black Power Movement had to fight for their place in the hyper-masculine era of the movement (Phu 173), which is a parallel mirrored in the way Cardi herself has to establish herself in the hyper-masculine, male-dominated sphere of hip hop. The establishing of female empowerment which contests 21 Savage's aggressive lyrics can furthermore be seen in the fact that this song by a female rapper features a male rapper. Due to previously mentioned gender prejudice, women's voices in the hip hop industry are viewed as less worthy and authentic than men's voices (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 127). Most songs therefore follow the prescribed 'male-sponsorship' model as described by Emerson, which dictates that if women want to be seen as relevant, they must be featured on a song by a male artist (Shange 35). Cardi B hosting male rappers on her tracks today therefore not just shows a gender role reversal in the video, but attests to a shifting power-dynamic in which successful female rappers are claiming authority and space in hip hop.

In the end it can be stated that "Bartier Cardi" by Cardi B is a video containing many interesting but contradicting gender representations. The prominent gender role reversal together with the clip's creative use of a female gaze and Cardi's more general adaptation of the male identity in rap, creates a narrative of female agency and empowerment in which limited roles for women, homophobia and male endorsement are all critiqued. Many of these more progressive aspects of "Bartier Cardi", however, function in a double bind to also support more traditional patriarchal standards in the music. This becomes clear in especially Cardi's adaptation of the male identity, which allows her to implement ambiguous queerness

to play into the male fantasy, and into sexualized scripts of women. At the same time the obvious avoidance of the male gaze on the group of women is canceled out by the extreme objectification of Cardi in the video, not the mention by the sexist and misogynistic rhetoric used by both her and Savage 21. Eventually, “Bartier Cardi” can be said to be an enigma of a complex gender discourse, which is sexist but empowering, traditional but innovative and patriarchal but feminist.

Chapter 3: Nice Guys & Gangsters: Navigating Gender Representation in Videos by Drake & Kendrick Lamar

3.1 “*Started From The Bottom Now We Here*”

Profiling Drake: Heritage, Cultural Belonging & an Identity of Niceness

Having established the ways in which both Nicki Minaj and Cardi B as female rappers navigate the contemporary American hip hop scene and its inherent hyper-masculinity, it is time to more closely inspect how successful male rappers today engage with notions of gender representation, misogyny and even feminism. Although this means broadening the scope of the US to encompass Canada as well, an analysis on contemporary commercialized American hip hop and gender would be incomplete without mentioning Drake. Emerging as one of the most popular rappers of the early 2010s (Westhoff 135), Drake’s popularity today is still unprecedented in contemporary commercialized hip hop. Having released his latest double-album *Scorpion* in June 2018, Drake today is outranking entire genres of music by occupying no less than one third of the Billboard charts (Wang). Besides Drake serving as an interesting case study because of his enormous success, the Canadian rapper’s relevance to this thesis also lies in his musical discourse, as Drake has always distinguished himself from his competitors on grounds of hyper-masculinity and gender representation, by framing himself as emotionally vulnerable in his lyrics. First outlining Drake and his style as an artist, this case study serves to analyze one of the seemingly most feminist videos known to contemporary hip hop: Drake’s summer hit “Nice For What”.

Born in Canada as Audrey “Drake” Graham (Travis 105), Drake had a somewhat turbulent childhood. Growing up, his parents divorced when he was three due to the many struggles they faced: his father was battling a drug addiction, while his mother suffered from arthritis. As an only child, Drake loved performing, and while living with his mother in Toronto he landed a role in the teen series *Degrassi: Next Generation*. Moving schools to live closer to the set, Drake finally discovered hip hop, as this new school was the place “where he first tried rapping in public” (“Drake Runs From His Feelings”). Honing his skills, Drake released his first mixtape in 2006, called “Room for Improvement”. It was not until he stayed with his father in Memphis, however, that Drake fell in love with the Southern style of American rap, which he still practices today. It was also in Memphis where rapper Lil Wayne discovered the young rap prodigy, taking him on tour until eventually signing him to his *Young Money Records* label (“Drake Runs From His Feelings”).

Discovered in an American town and signed to an American record label, one remarkable aspect of Drake as a male rapper — which already distinguishes him from others — is his Canadian identity. Practicing an African American art form, Drake's nationality as a Canadian clearly differs from that of the traditional black US citizen, which is how the vast majority of male rappers in the commercialized American hip hop industry identify themselves (Travis 105). Drake is furthermore what can be considered of mixed race — having a black father and a white Jewish mother — which complicates his identity even further: As Caramanica states in the *New York Times*: “Biracial Jewish-Canadian former child actors don't have a track record of success in the American rap industry”. Corporate America, however, seems to find Drake's complex and diverse heritage a point of attraction, as it favors them to market him differently from — as business manager Shawn Gee states — “your prototypical rap artist” (qtd. in “Drake Runs From His Feelings”). Having struggled before with his racial identity and belonging (“Drake Runs From His Feelings”), Drake as an artist himself sees his racial identity and Canadian heritage as an advantage as well, as it allows a diverse audience to forge personal connections with him as he is neither white nor fully black: “I get a lot of love everywhere in the world for just being diverse, instead of just being straight out [one thing]” (qtd. in Travis 105).

This positive outlook on Drake's mixed heritage, however, is not shared by everyone on the rap scene. Neither fully black nor a US citizen, many feel that Drake is not able to truly connect to hip hop, as hip hop centralizes the black American male identity; something Drake does not possess. This black male identity is crucial to American hip hop because the genre was born out of racial hardship and inequality. The dominant and often patriarchal aspects performed through the black hyper-masculinity present in hip hop, can be strongly linked to a form of manhood attempting “to define itself in a world that has often tried to deny the very existence of Black men” (Belle 289). Missing a personal connection to contemporary political and social disenfranchisement in the US, and a link to African American heritage (Travis 105), other male rappers often use Drake's nationality and deviating origin to question his legitimacy in hip hop (“Drake Runs From His Feelings”). In the words of rapper Common: “You so black and white, trying to live a nigga's life / You ain't wet nobody, nigga, you Canada dry” (qtd. in Singh and Tracy 97).

This Canadian, racially mixed heritage — and its implications for Drake's legitimacy in hip hop — is relevant to this thesis because Drake can be seen using his sometimes unpopular nationality to strengthen stereotypes which play into an identity of niceness. According to Singh and Tracy, Drake uses the Canadian stereotype of niceness, by fitting it

into his public persona, presenting niceness as an inherent trait in his identity. Playing into the important hip hop niche of ‘keeping it real’, Drake represents himself as an alternative rapper by using his nice-guy persona, distinguishing himself not just through nationality, but also in terms of personality and rap style: “I am a very nice guy. That’s how I was raised. I’m a cordial, very nice guy. I don’t like confrontation” (qtd. in Singh and Tracy 96). His rap skills and industry affiliations impressive enough to command attention and convince the audience of his hip hop legitimacy (Singh and Tracy 96-97; 105), Drake’s seemingly obvious lack of a gangsta persona helps to reinforce the idea that as an artist, Drake’s Canadian identity allows him to exist in a different space from the hyper-masculine and misogynistic black male identity so important to contemporary commercialized hip hop. This persona becomes evident through his music, as Drake can often be heard rapping about his emotions and anxiety in a way few other male rappers do. An example of this is his song “Do Not Disturb” where Drake openly struggles with his newfound fame. Containing lyrics such as “Saw a side of myself I just never knew” (“Do Not Disturb” 1.12-1.14), and “I want to make sure they learn from me” (“Do Not Disturb” 3.01-3.02), Drake frames himself as a role model, publically showing how male rappers too can be emotionally vulnerable. A somewhat older song, Drake has kept in line with this trend, his new album *Scorpion* being called “entrancing and emotionally articulate” (“The New Face of Hip Hop”). This pattern of vulnerability shows how Drake might just represent a contemporary, romantic turn in his genre, as he strays from the strict roles of masculine toughness and feminine weakness, by turning away from patriarchal prescriptions and opening up his genre to emotional topics that used to be off-limits (Namaste-Maiato 1). According to BBC’s Greg Kot, Drake indeed has made vulnerability cool, rightly calling it “no small achievement in a genre where testosterone is often a must, swagger a given, toughness a requirement”.

Even though it is true that Drake has opened up hip hop to a new array of topics that used to be strictly off limits due to the genre’s hyper-masculinity, his deviation from the set patriarchal standard in hip hop also has a more negative consequence, as it enables him to actually play into the traditional masculine identity which he so openly avoids. An interview with Drake on CRWN serves as an example of how the rapper uses his projection of niceness in different ways. When asked about the increasingly aggressive nature of his rap, Drake stated “That’s just the kind of nature of rap and hip hop music” (qtd. in Singh and Tracy 99). Although true, by simply stating that aggressiveness is in the culture, this quote shows how Drake is able to shift any responsibility from him to the larger culture. Not acknowledging the corporate machine he operates in, Drake can be seen projecting his public persona of niceness to excuse

any adherence to hyper-masculinity — including misogyny and sexism — with a simple explanation: he is nice, so it is not his fault. When asked about the abundant use of the word bitch in his songs, for instance, Drake simply states “I’m not, definitely not, you know, the type of guy that demeans women” (qtd. in Singh and Tracy 101; 106). Theorists Singh and Tracy discuss how the new possibilities that Drake brings to hip hop as a genre, are actually counterbalanced by this adherence to the hyper-masculine set standard, and his avoidance of any responsibility on content linked to this standard (106). This content is undoubtedly present in Drake’s music and videos, and is shown through his use of demeaning gendered language, and through prominent displays of wealth and objectified shots of women as validations of success in his videos.

Drake’s famous song “Started From The Bottom” is a good example of the counterbalancing act that Drake performs opening up the genre to a more progressive topical range, while still choosing to abide by a patriarchal model in his videos. Topically centered on Drake’s rise to fame, “Started From The Bottom” contains many images seemingly rare in hip hop: by depicting Drake playing soccer in Canada as a kid, Drake working a retail job to make ends meet, and by even introducing his mother, Drake is able to build his success around what can be deemed recognizable imagery that strengthens his Canadian persona of niceness (Video Chart “Started From The Bottom” 1-3). The clip however, also strongly relies on tropes of masculinity, which are symbolically present in the clip’s prominent display of luxurious cars, golden chains, and shots of women featuring the male gaze (Video Chart “Started From The Bottom” 4-8). That Drake objectifies women in this video is quite apparent: there is even a 30-second long scene in the clip dedicated to a man speaking to a woman’s cleavage (Video Chart “Started From The Bottom” 9). This — for male rappers — traditional representation of women is also present in one of Drake’s most popular videos: “Hotline Bling”. Lyrically built around the topic of a booty call, “Hotline Bling” mostly features Drake dancing around an empty room (Video Chart “Hotline Bling” 1). Even though for a hip hop clip, the video can be labeled low in both economic and sexist braggadocios content, many frames in the song still rely on the male gaze to sexualize women (Video Chart “Hotline Bling” 2-4). Lyrics in the song confirm this objectification, with sentences such as “Wonder if you’re bendin’ over backwards for someone else” (“Hotline Bling” 2.56-3.00) and “Doing things I taught you getting’ nasty for someone else” (“Hotline Bling” 3.03-3.07), which frame women in solely sexually explicit contexts. Even lyrics that seemingly reference Drake’s more feminist views by stating “You should just be yourself” (“Hotline Bling” 3.20-3.21), are always followed by a statement in which Drake shows how he judges women, only framing them in relation to how he states they

should act or be, which lyrics such as “You got a reputation for yourself now” (“Hotline Bling” 1.02-1.07) and “Going places where you don’t belong”(“Hotline Bling” 2.08-2.11) showcase. What these clips all prove is how “Drake simultaneously acquiesces to, and distances himself from, what he sees as the conventions of the hip hop genre” (Singh and Tracy 101). These examples therefore prove how Drake’s nice guy persona allows him access to more feminine topics in his lyrics, while it also provides a shield for the way he still abundantly participates in sexist practices. This adherence can eventually be said to at least somewhat thwart his claims of superior niceness and progressive originality (Singh and Tracy 101; 105).

3.2 “*You Gotta Be Nice For What?*” Deconstructing Gender in Drake’s “Nice For What” Video

One relevant example on Drake’s interesting visual discourse regarding the representation of the female gender is his summer hit “Nice For What”. Released on April 6, 2018 and watched more than 265 million times on YouTube since then, “Nice For What” is so remarkable because even though the song can be said to be the embodiment of a typical Drake song — received with praise, fast-paced and infused with an American “bounce-indebted beat” (Klinkenberg; “Drake Runs From His Feelings”) — what is strikingly different about “Nice For What” is its representation of women. Its progressive lyrics, diverse depiction of women and obvious lack of male gaze seem to indicate a revolutionary shift in American hip hop, portraying Drake as the potentially first male feminist ally in the genre of commercialized hip hop. Deconstructing this seemingly extremely feminist video through *mise-en-scène*, it slowly becomes evident that Drake’s feminist anthem might not be as progressive as initially expected.

As a hip hop video, “Nice For What” from the start is remarkable in its focus on many different women, without once utilizing the male gaze. Even though Drake himself is present in flashes throughout the clip performing the song (Video Chart “Nice For What” 1-2), the vast majority of scenes are created through 15 distinct narratives that are alternately shown and revolve around a female lead. It becomes immediately obvious through the different narratives that “Nice For What” is not just attempting to show a somewhat different discourse from hip hop’s sexist dominant cultural order, but aims to make a prominent feminist statement. This statement is made through the way women are framed and interact with their surroundings in their respective narratives. One of the first storylines introduced in the video already establishes this statement by showcasing a woman of color to be sitting at what appears to be a conference table. Surrounding solely by older, white men, the woman is the only female, non-white

presence in the room (Video Chart “Nice For What” 3). Already through this one storyline, a clear social critique on pay equality, gender representation and racial discrimination is established, through the sharp contrast created by the woman as a minority in the room. The scene furthermore functions to display strong female agency, as the woman is seen asserting female empowerment by standing up and firmly telling the men to sit down, commanding both the room and the audience (Video Chart “Nice For What” 4-5). This way of framing social critique and female agency is unique for visual narratives in commercialized American hip hop, but is present in many different narratives in “Nice For What”.

Apart from conveying messages of social critique, certain narrative in the video also seem to specifically target and undermine sexualized female stereotypes prominently embedded in contemporary hip hop and the larger American society. One storyline, for instance, shows a woman of color as a mother. Holding up her children and playing with them while smiling (Video Chart “Nice For What” 6-7), this image of motherhood can be labeled as revolutionary in the arena of commercialized hip hop, where women solely exist as sexualized objects. Other narratives continue this trend of showcasing different representations of women that usually have no space of existence in the contemporary genre. This is exhibited in a storyline showcasing a woman of color as a student: wearing a Harvard sweater and sitting opposite stacks of books (Video Chart “Nice For What” 8-9), this representation is one asserting the intelligence of women, which again is remarkable in a genre that standardly emphasizes women’s bodies over their brains (Chang 311). Utilizing symbolism as a tool to empower women and destroy sexualized scripts is a prominent aspect in “Nice For What”. Women are depicted smoking cigars, as skillful equestrians, sitting on golden thrones and as purposefully throwing away etiquette by wearing sneakers under their ball gowns. (Video Chart “Nice For What” 10-13). The importance of this symbolism not only lies in the assertion of the power that comes with a more realistic and diversified representation of women — which is also showcased through the variety of beauty standards depicted in the clip — but is also asserted through the lack of men in the scenes, since women in the video are portrayed as independent in any role they adapt. “Nice For What” as a video is furthermore completely dedicated to omitting the male gaze, which becomes apparent through scenes where attention is drawn to the female body. In one specific narrative, a woman can be shown practicing ballet, allowing the silhouette of her body to be prominently featured on screen. As the camera zooms in on her lines, however, the emphasis in this scene is on her muscles and her skills as a dancer, rather than on her body as a sexualized object (Video Chart “Nice For What” 14-15). Consequently, this narrative is a prime example of how the black female body has the potential to be used for

the empowerment of women in hip hop (Lorde 53; 55), next to its genre-specific male use purely for objectification.

Besides depictions of women being used to diversity and humanize the role of the woman in rap music, “Nice For What” also indirectly affirms female empowerment through the women represented in the video, as all women present in the clip are successful and well-known through their affiliation with either the sport- or entertainment industry. Issa Rae — the woman sitting in the conference room (Video Chart “Nice For What” 3-5) — is a famous actress and writer, known for the strong progressive political content on her shows. Tracee Ellis Ross — depicted dancing in a field (Video Chart “Nice For What” 16) — is an actor and activist well-known for renouncing patriarchy and asserting female empowerment. The point is that the women present in “Nice For What” were not randomly selected to participate: representing independence, power and diversity, *every single woman* in this clip is at the top of her respective industry, openly fighting for equal rights in one way or another. Imperative is that these different celebrities showcase Drake’s strong desire to be seen as feminist. By showcasing well-known women fighting for diversity and gender equality, Drake not only earns automatic affiliation with feminist causes, but indirectly also the participating leading ladies’ endorsement — all of whom are properly credited at the end of the video (Video Chart “Nice For What” 17-18). That this video was made in collaboration with female director Kareena Evans — whose name is clearly showcased at the start of the video (Video Chart “Nice For What” 19) — moreover establishes Drake’s desire to be seen as truly feminist, as Drake obviously chose a female director specifically for “Nice For What”, since his videos are generally produced by other directors.

The lyrics and music in “Nice For What” as a song also showcase Drake’s commitment to overt feminism, as the content of the song revolves around how women have to navigate their lives around men, the chorus repeatedly stating: “you gotta be nice for what, to these niggas. I understand” (“Nice For What” 1.21-1.27). Other lyrics in the song strengthen the notion that Drake seems to be aware of hardships women deal with, and how they in reality are more than able to exist and even thrive independently from men; a representation of women that is currently rare in hip hop. This view becomes apparent through lyrics such as “Had a man last year life goes on ... working hard girl everything paid for” (“Nice For What” 1.31-1.59) and “Working 8 AM, finish round five ... you know dark days, you know hard times” (“Nice For What” 1.37-1.47). By depicting women as independent, hard-working people who confidently make their own decisions, Drake showcases a more nuanced representation of women and their general existence in today’s society through these lyrics.

Alongside its more realistic and diverse representation of women through its lyrics, the most remarkable musical component in “Nice For What” is its prominently used sample of “Ex-Factor” (Klinkenberg), a song by Lauryn Hill in which she emotionally holds a man accountable for his promises:

“Care for me, care for me, you said you'd care for me,

There for me, there for me, said you'd be there for me (Lil Weezyana shit).

Cry for me, cry for me, you said you'd die for me (Murda on the beat).

Give to me, give to me, why won't you live for me?” (“Nice For What” 0.15-0.35; “Ex-Factor” 3.24-3.49).

Looped in the background throughout the song, “Ex-Factor” has a prominent place in “Nice For What”, as its rhythm provides the general hook to which Drake raps. Called someone who uses “varying degrees of feminism” in her music (Balaji 8), Lauryn Hill’s “Ex-factor” is an emotionally vulnerable song about a relationship from her critically acclaimed album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*: an album which has been hailed as one of the first feminist hip hop albums, and which was allegedly inspired by the 1997 Million Woman March in Philadelphia (Durham, Cooper and Morris 721). Lauryn Hill’s appearance in this song is therefore no coincidence, as it not only adds a much-needed air of old-school, soul-induced sound to the song, but also functions to enhance the song’s credibility as feminist, utilizing Hill’s reputation as a feminist rapper for this goal.

At this point in the analysis, it seems like Drake’s “Nice For What” perfectly fits notions of contemporary feminism through its progressive representation of women in both visual framing and lyrics. What all previously mentioned feminist aspects of the video show, however, is the intensity with which Drake tries to become feminist. That his lyrics, visual narrative and even the sample used can all be said to convey feminism in one way or another, shows how hard Drake is playing into the prominent #metoo discussion on feminism and sexism in the industry. This is not an issue in and on itself, but Drake’s sudden switch from a conventional but somewhat more emotional narrative to an intensely feminist one is worth exploring, as this would not be the first time the rapper attempts to associate himself with particular conventions he does not truly embody or condone, just because they are popular. As his history in the industry and especially his collaborations with other artists reveal, is that Drake has a tendency to engage with personas and qualities which benefit him, enabling him to monetize trends he can later cast aside. Especially Drake’s previous collaborations with artists such as Jay-Z uncover this tendency, as Jay-Z’s more gangsta persona has allowed Drake to authenticate himself with the genre and its audience, without truly being a gangsta rapper. As Singh and

Tracy write: “In effect, Drake attempts to preserve the integrity of his individual authenticity while cashing in on the authority of artists who built their careers on personas and qualities that contradict Drake’s self-presentation” (99). From this perspective, Drake’s ode to feminism in the form of a Lauryn Hill sample is transformed into a dishonest act, in which Drake as a male rapper uses Hill’s legacy and feminist persona to play into current popular discourse, without actually transforming the sexism present in the music or genre in itself.

This new perspective of Drake hopping on the popularized #metoo trend, uncovers that “Nice For What” may not be the flawless feminist anthem one would like to be. Drake’s not abundant but repeated usage of the word ‘hoes’ in the song serves to exemplify how even in a song constructed to be a feminist ode to modern women, Drake still follows sexist hip hop conventions in his lyrics. Drake furthermore does not deviate from his usual way of contextualizing women in relation to himself, which becomes evident in certain verses:

“Gotta hit the club, gotta make that ass jump,
Gotta hit the club like you hit them motherfucking angles.
With your phone out slapping like you Febo,
And you showing off.
But it’s alright, that you’re showing off,
But it’s alright, it’s a short life” (“Nice For What” 1.53-2.07).

Engaging with lyrical imagery that aligns with the tradition of discussing the backsides of women, Drake shows how even women he describes to live independently from men asserting their power through overt sexuality, need his approval to do this by repeatedly stating that “it’s alright”. This way of framing women as needing Drake’s endorsement to act in a certain way returns frequently in the song, and is also exemplified by the “I understand” that follows in the title lyric “you gotta be nice for what”, proving how Drake still upholds certain gendered dynamics even in this so-called feminist video.

The song’s more deeply rooted devotion to sexist gender dynamics is also present in the video’s omission of overt queer inclusion. Deriving much of its prominent beat and rhythm from the New Orleans-originated bounce music, “Nice For What” opens with the prominent vocals of Big Freedia, a legendary bounce artist. With the lyrics “I know who motherfuckin’ representin’ in here tonight!” (“Nice For What” 0.00-0.03), Big Freedia’s booming voice opens “Nice For What” by setting the tone for its inclusive feminist content while also immediately functioning as an ode to the musical style it draws from. Remarkable is that Big Freedia — who currently dominates the hyper-masculine Southern hip hop bounce-scene as an openly queer drag artist (Declue 220-221; Taylor 60) — is not visually included

in the video itself, even though her vocals are noticeably present throughout the song. This is striking, as Big Freedia as a queer icon would have been a perfect addition to the already star-studded cast of ladies used in a song whose main message seemingly revolves around feminism, gender equality and inclusivity. That Drake does depict women in his video that have publicly come out as bisexual, shows the limitations of his progressive inclusivity. Even though he shows queerness in a more progressive light when compared to many of his fellow male rappers, Drake is still obviously only able to support queerness as it exists in the space of female ambiguity: he is able to showcase queer women, because they still fit into the hyper-masculine framework in which female queerness can play into the male sexual fantasy (Smith 361; 363). Depicting a six foot tall, male-born fashionably loud drag queen in his video (Declue 220; Taylor 60) — even though her vocals and music style are prominently featured in the song itself — is apparently a step too far removed from black hyper-masculinity for Drake to be comfortable with. This ambiguousness of including queer voices vocally but not visually has become somewhat of a trend in popular music. Well-known for her vocal features in Beyoncé’s song “Formation” — with its video that revolves around life in New Orleans — Beyoncé too shares “the sonic space with Big Freedia but not the visual theater of the ... video” (Declue 220). Drake’s larger adherence to sexuality politics and queer ambiguousness in relation to prescribed rules of masculinity is furthermore evident in the presence of the many different women in the video. None of them exceptionally old or young, all women depicted fall within a limited age range, while most of them are also known for their exceptionally good looks. Depicted in many progressive roles, it is clear that the women used for the video have been chosen for both their feminist affiliations as well as their beauty, fueling the unexplored but present possibility for them to be sexually available to Drake as narrator and only male presence in the video.

In conclusion it can be said that “Nice For What” as a hip hop song by a male artist is an exceptionally feminist video in the way it showcases a diverse cast of powerful women, placed in narratives which critique sexism in the larger American society. All of these main narratives serve to emphasize the independence and power of women in the different roles they embody in real-life, diverging far from the sexist and limited female representations that are so typical in the commercialized American hip hop industry. In various ways, however, the progressive gendered message of the song is misleading, as its surprising over-the-top feminism is still deeply rooted in a patriarchal model, which is present in part of the song’s lyrics and its limited depiction of relevant inclusive queerness which function to establish Drake’s masculinity. This present emphasis on Drake’s masculinity, Drake’s history of trend hopping and the

exceptionality of “Nice For What” when contextualized in Drake’s larger repertoire, uncovers “Nice For What” to be a feminist clip that monetizes the current political context of the #metoo movement, instead of existing as a genuine attempt to challenge and change the limited and hurtful representation of women in the larger hip hop genre.

3.3 “*This is Why I Say That Hip-Hop Has Done More Damage to Young African Americans Than Racism in Recent Years*” Profiling Kendrick Lamar: Pulitzer Prizes, Socio-political Awareness & the Black Male Experience

In today’s commercialized American hip hop arena, there is no rapper as famous for incorporating socio-political critiques into his music as Kendrick Lamar. Named a “Generational Icon” and even having been invited to the White House to discuss struggles African American youth face today (Langmia and Tyree 5), Lamar is a prime example of how rappers can venture from the commercialized domain to influence social markers and perceptions in larger American society. Lamar’s candid style about especially racialized issues is loved both by a mainstream fan base as well as a more high-brow audience: his last album *Damn* — which came out in 2017 — has won seven Grammy’s and is furthermore the first work by a hip hop artist to receive a Pulitzer prize (Oldfield 1643), having Lamar being hailed as the “voice of black America under pressure” (Lynskey). Clearly a socio-politically conscious artist, examining Lamar’s discourse on gender representation develops inherent relevance in this context, especially because Lamar’s style of laying-bare the black male experience in America has caused his gender representation to be one of complicated and a relatively one-sided nature. By first outlining Lamar’s background and signature style, an in-depth analysis of his music video “Love” will showcase his strenuous relationship with gendered discourse. It will furthermore help to uncover whether Lamar as the prescribed representative of black America speaks for all black people, or follows the larger hip hop trend in solely representing the male point of view.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth was born in 1987 in Los Angeles. His parents moved to California in hope of a better life, ending up in one of the state’s most notorious and impoverished neighborhoods: Compton, the birthplace of gangsta rap (Langmia and Tyree 5; Goodman; Starr and Waterman 437). Growing up among gang violence and poverty, Lamar’s childhood was relatively peaceful. Even though the men in his family were heavily involved in the local drug business to make ends meet, Lamar’s father managed to stay out of jail,

providing a stable home environment for Lamar and his siblings. Attending high school, Lamar discovered his gift for poetry and rhyme as soon as he was able to write, and used any opportunity in school to rap in front of an audience. Honing his skills, Lamar's fourth mixtape caught the attention of producer and former N.W.A member Dr. Dre, who eventually signed Lamar to his label and collaborated with him on his second album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, which marked Lamar's entrance into commercial success (Goodman; Love 320).

Noticeably, being born in the place which gave shape to gangsta rap — and many of the today's hyper-masculine and misogynist streaks in hip hop — has not caused Lamar to simply follow in his predecessors footsteps. On the contrary, Lamar seems to consciously avoid a repertoire focused solely on hyper-masculine notions of violence, sexism and material success to address more pressing concerns: "Lamar shies away from shallow and undesired ego boasting and flaunting of wealth and women, staying virtuous and discussing more urgent matters instead" (Hilkens 79). Still constructing a clear identity of blackness — showcasing a style of aggressiveness often aimed at his competitors — many of Lamar's songs are constructed around his own experiences being a black man in the US (Spradlin 44; Goodman). As Lamar states about the lack of gangsta persona and violence in his music: "I'd rather talk about my reality ... I'd rather talk about something a little more deeper than that. The real reasons and problems and solutions behind it" (Capper 2.27-3.36). This tendency to touch upon pertinent contemporary issues can be called the core of Lamar's music, and is especially present in his last two albums, which can both be labeled contemporary as they were subsequently released in 2015 and 2017.

His album *To Pimp a Butterfly* — which came out in 2015 — can be seen as establishing Lamar's style of socio-political critique, containing significant tracks which show Lamar's focus on the black male experience. Addressing "a culture of fetishizing and racial commodification of black experience" (Spradlin 44), the popular song "King Kunta" for instance heavily draws from the black perspective during the Atlantic slave trade, and more specifically the famous slavery novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley. Lamar also successfully addresses contemporary topics of race in his song "Alright", which has been called "the anthem of the Black Lives Matter Movement" (Oldfield 1642), as it discusses police brutality and poverty, topics that also appear in songs like "The Blacker the Berry" and "How Much a Dollar Cost". By incorporating these different black experiences in his songs, Lamar is able to shatter the post-racial construct of contemporary American society by confronting his audience with racism in many different forms, prioritizing his content about racialized society over that of more conventional, braggadocios topics (Graham 125).

As Lamar states about his music: “it invites people in to get another perspective. It bring a whole other side of the world to Compton” (Capper 3.06-3.12). Lamar’s 2017 album *Damn* strengthens this style, as is evident in the songs “Duckworth” — in which the rapper discusses his father’s criminal past — and “Fear” — in which he addresses the angst of living life as a black person in the US. The most overt way in which Lamar expresses social and especially racial critique on *Damn*, however, is through a use of Fox News samples incorporated in two of his songs. In one excerpt, two Fox News hosts can be heard criticizing Lamar’s performance at the 2016 Grammy’s (“Blood” 1.49-1.58) — which addressed police brutality — while the other excerpt clearly features a Fox News host stating: “This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years” (“DNA” 2.56-3.02; Leight, Reeves and Lee). The existence of these two excerpts in the first two songs on the album, sets *Damn* up as yet another socio-political conscious work, showcasing this awareness to be an important building block in Lamar’s style and most recent work.

Although Kendrick Lamar is not the first rapper to utilize his music as a storytelling tool to addresses serious issues, his way of connecting his own personal experiences with his lyrical narratives creates an emotional vulnerability and investment which is rare in hip hop today. Using his ability to contextualize his life in the impoverished neighborhood of Compton (Love 320), Lamar creates songs which have been said to move the listener emotionally, physically but also consciously, creating successful rap music while simultaneously forcing the listener to think about structures of racialized hierarchy and violence (Spradlin 44). This mix of honesty, musical innovation and skill show the extent to which Lamar has creative freedom over his music, as well as how his intricate style creates a strong contradiction in his songs. From one perspective Lamar’s songs strongly connect to the hyper-masculine identity of being a black man in the US, as most of his songs focus on this experience. This can be seen not just by the content of his music, but also through Lamar’s abundant use of sexist rhetoric in his otherwise socially aware lyrics, as the word bitch has become a staple in his music. Simultaneously, however, Lamar actually removes himself from the realm of rap’s black hyper-masculinity by not complying to its prescribed limited scope of topics, openly discussing emotional distress, vulnerability and trauma in his music.

Lamar’s ambiguity regarding black hyper-masculinity and some of its highly sexist practices is present in his visual discourse. His songs revolving around socio-political issues, many of Lamar’s visual discourse also exclusively focuses on the black male experience (Video Chart The Black Male Experience 1-6). This in itself is not problematic, but

unfortunately does cause him to neglect serious issues facing the black female population. As Love writes: “Lamar uses rap music to paint an intense, beautifully blemished picture of his struggles to overcome, yet often succumbing to, peer pressure, misogyny, alcoholism, and violence” (320). The ignoring of socio-political female issues results in visual frames that — even though they are not solely revolving around the male gaze — still sport humble amounts of objectified imagery. This becomes apparent in for instance the video for the previously mentioned “King Kunta”. Lyrically encompassing many significant cultural references to African American heritage, its visuals still heavily rely on tropes of wealth and women (Video Chart Wealth and Women 1-3). Another example is Lamar’s video for the song “Loyalty”, where luxurious cars and women again do not serve as focal points in the narrative, but are still prominently featured (Video Chart Wealth and Women 4-6). It can therefore be said that even though saturating his videos with sexualized shots of women is seemingly not the goal or primary message of Lamar’s videos — which are always a collaborative work between him and director X or video producer Dave Meyers — he can be seen using objectification as an additional enrichment to his visual discourse on the black male experience.

An example of an attempt by Lamar to for once also address the black female experience is apparent in “Humble”. Being Lamar’s most watched video on YouTube — with over 560 million views — “Humble” exhibits Lamar’s limited representation of women in a video from his last album. At the start of the song, Lamar can be seen laying on a table where women dressed in only underwear are counting stacks of money (Video Chart “Humble” 1-2), imagery clearly playing into the validation of Lamar’s success as a rapper through the hyper-masculine tropes of displaying wealth and women (Singh and Tracy 106). The main narrative in the video, however, clearly focuses on the social critiquing of American society through various frames of symbolism, which again mainly revolve around the black male experience (Video Chart “Humble” 3-5). One of these critiques, however, references unattainable beauty standards for women, as Lamar raps “I’m so fucking sick and tired of that photoshop / give me something natural like ass with some stretch marks / still I take you down right on your momma’s couch in polo socks” (“Humble” 1.43-1.56). These lyrics are heard alongside a split frame: on the right side a woman dressed-up with heavy make-up is shown alongside Lamar himself on the other frame (Video Chart “Humble” 6). Quickly, the two switch sides, the dividing line acting as a de-photoshopping tool for the woman, who now on the left side of the frame sports no make-up, natural hair and a simpler outfit (Video Chart “Humble” 7-8). Later the same set up is used when zooming in on the woman’s posterior (Video Chart “Humble” 9). Although surely an attempt at a social critique from a more feminist angle, this

excerpt from “Humble” actually showcases how Lamar is able to shine light on a social issue impacting women, while still creating a narrative in which his desires as a man are centralized as he determines what a real woman should look like. This combined with the fact that “Humble” as a song contains the word bitch more than forty times, clearly establishes Lamar as a rapper who might not directly follow sexist hip hop conventions, but does not avoid nor successfully fight them either.

3.4 “*If I Didn’t Ride Blade on Curb Would You Still Love Me?*” Deconstructing Gender in Kendrick Lamar’s “Love” Video

One video by Kendrick Lamar which is interesting to more closely examine when exploring themes of female representation in contemporary commercialized hip hop, is his song “Love”. Released on the 21 December, 2018 and part of the *Damn* album, “Love” has been watched more than 73 million times on YouTube and features singer Zacari. “Love” is in line with Lamar’s signature style, containing original hooks, a catchy rhythm and poetic lyrical slang. The song is said to be one of the few commercialized rap ballads created in the last few years (Leight, Reeves and Lee), which makes it a relevant case study. Especially the song’s lyrical message of platonic love, its mellow ambience and what is labeled an “artfully composed video” (Kreps), highlight “Love” to be a song but particularly a video of exceptional feminist content when placed in Lamar’s larger visual discourse. Directed by Dave Meyers, the video’s diverse and realistic representation of women — but also the imminent need to showcase naked female bodies in a song focused on romantic love — debunk the sole interpretation of this video as purely feminist, making “Love” a perfect video to analyze in this thesis.

The first remarkable aspect of “Love” when connecting the song to hip hop’s dominant cultural order is its lyrical content, after which its visual content is shaped. As a ballad, “Love” has a gentle sound, the song starting with Zacari’s soul-induced chorus, painting the picture of an affectionate relationship in which a man begs a woman to love him: “Give me a run for my money,
There is nobody, no one to outrun me.
So give me a run for my money,
Sipping bubbly, feeling lovely, living lovely.
Just love me” (“Love” 0.07-0.27).

It is at this point in the song that Lamar enters, as he repeatedly adds the sentence “I wanna be

with you, ay” (“Love” 0.27-0.37) to the chorus. This beginning is already remarkable, as it establishes that both artists in the song are addressing the need to be loved by their partner, which is an unprecedented vulnerable way to start a hip hop song as a male artist. Lamar in this song carries forward what can be labeled as the romantic turn in hip hop, by turning away from typical notions of masculine toughness (Namaste-Maiato 1). This becomes visible throughout the entire song, in which Lamar not only dares to stay emotionally vulnerable through his lyrics, but also rejects notions of wealth and solely sexual relationships in favor of one woman’s love, prioritizing the relationship with his partner above everything else, which becomes apparent in lyrics such as:

“Am I in the way?

I don't want to pressure you none,

I want your blessing today” (“Love” 2.13-2.16).

What this short segment proves is that in “Love, Lamar substantiates the woman he is in love with to be more than just a sexualized object. By asking her serious questions and touching upon topics such as pressure, he makes clear that she is an equal partner to him in a serious relationship, which revolves around more than sexual relations. Even when Lamar touches upon the topic of a sex, he carefully constructs his lyrics to create a message of a faithful monogamous relationship:

“Hol’ up, we gon' function, no assumptions.

Feeling like Tyson wit' it, knock it out twice.

I'm with it, only for the night, I'm kidding.

Only for life, yeah, only for life, yeah” (“Love” 0.57-1.09).

In addition to this message of being in one equalized partnership for life, Lamar deviates even further from hyper-masculine premises by openly rejecting notions of material success and the prospect of many women — all validators of male success in the industry and markers of hyper-masculinity (Singh and Tracy 101; 105) — for a desire to be loved for who he is as a person. Omitting any use of misogynistic or sexist rhetoric, Lamar touches upon themes of trust and truth as being crucial to a relationship in the extension of the chorus, where he is heard asking the woman he loves whether she loves him for his success or his authentic self:

“If I didn't ride blade on curb, would you still (love me).

If I made up my mind at work, would you still (love me).

Keep it a hundred, I'd rather you trust me than to (love me).

Keep it a whole one hund', don't got you I got nothing” (“Love” 0.39-0.53).

Presenting an extreme emotional vulnerability to his audience and his partner, Lamar strays from the genre's more sexist traditions, which he is allowed to do through his reputation as a skilled rapper as well as through his adherence to other important rap conventions in the song. This is seen through his use of slang, which is showcased through the construction of riding "blade on curb" — which means getting money through hustling (Urban Dictionary "Blade on Curb") — and "keeping it hundred" — going all out and being authentic (Urban Dictionary "Keeping it Hundred"). Lamar moreover draws from the inherently important hip hop characteristic of 'keeping it real' in his desire to be loved for who he is, as authenticity and being true to one's self is an inherent part of being viewed as legitimate in the hip hop genre (Rose 38; 41; Singh and Tracy 95; Namaste-Maiato 3). This chorus extension also functions to expose Lamar's musical versatility, as the stanza is built around a call and response pattern reminiscent of gospel and blues performances (Starr and Waterman 124). As Lamar raps his verse, the "love me" at the end of every sentence is sung by Zacari. This way of constructing the chorus extension can be seen as mimicking the dynamics of a discussion between two partners, as one is heard responding to the other on the topic of love. The chorus extension therefore not only functions to give the song multiple musical layers, but also symbolizes the message of a relationship between equals, which is emphasized throughout the entire song.

That Lamar's message about women in "Love" is one of affection is also translated through the visual discourse of the song, which becomes visible through a *mise-en-scène* analysis. One interesting representation set up in the video is a narrative featuring Lamar and a woman in a house. Alternating different scenes of them in a living room "the course of a relationship is shown from the perspective of a dinner table, where Lamar and his girl make love, talk and loudly argue" (Kreps; Video Chart "Love" 1-4). Besides this representation serving to humanize both characters as multiple emotional sides are exposed — thereby surpassing the representation of women as solely sexualized objects and that of men as having little feelings at all — a scene where the couple is fighting is remarkable as it showcases the woman being aggressive, smashing a plate on the table and pushing Lamar into his chair (Video Chart "Love" 5-7). In this specific scene, the traditional patriarchal roles of men and women that are usually constructed in hip hop — in which the woman is represented as passive and is only acted upon (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 126) — are reversed, as the woman is portrayed as aggressive and active, and Lamar as passive. This imagery of switched traditional gender roles is called upon later in the video, as the woman is seen braiding Lamar's hair into cornrows, before affectionately draping her arms around his shoulders (Video Chart "Love" 8-9). This diversity in representation not only humanizes the woman in

the clip — the articulate display of different emotions preventing her from becoming a mere sexualized script — but also functions to more realistically represent the role of the man in a healthy relationship, deviating from toxic-masculine hip hop conventions which dictate that being a real man is inherently tied to aggression, wealth and getting with many women (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 127; Singh and Tracy 101; 105).

These elements of diverse gender representation are carried as a theme throughout the video's visual narratives, and are especially evident through a group of women, whose imagery is weaved throughout the larger narrative of the video in flashes. This starts at the beginning of the video, as with every "love me" by Zacari in the extended chorus, the camera switches from Lamar walking on the beach to imagery of the group (Video Chart "Love" 10-12). Only featured shortly, these images already show the audience a diverse cast of women with different sizes, hair structures and skin colors. As the video continues, the group of women is more prominently featured with Lamar sitting in between them, the camera not just prominently showing the different women, but also focusing on for instance the pregnant belly of a woman (Video Chart "Love" 13). This again contributes to the overall impression of "Love" as a feminist video that depicts women in different roles, omitting the solely sexualized parts women often play in hip hop to represent women in a more realistic way, through for instance partnership and motherhood.

The representation of women in this clip as realistic and less sexualized, however, does not automatically assert that no naked women are present in the clip. In fact, large parts of the clip specifically focus on the naked female body in different perspectives. One scene which is used multiple times throughout the video is remarkable in the way it showcases naked women, as it utilizes the male gaze in a curious way, manipulating it for more progressive purposes. Set against a black background, various different women appear in lingerie in this narrative, as they directly look at the camera while slowly moving to the music. Even though their bodies are overtly on display, the use of vague contouring and shadows on the women (Video Chart "Love" 14-16) — and their often quick appearance and disappearance — add an element of mystique to the scenes. Still utilizing the male gaze, the use of light, clothing, special effects and the message and gentle flow of the music manipulate the audience into a perspective of love instead of lust, returning to the tradition of celebrating the black female body, which was a common practice in hip hop before the pornification of the genre ("Black Sexual Politics" 128).

As noted before, it is important to remember that explicitness in hip hop is not necessarily exploitative (Rose 123), and that the female body displayed in "Love" denotes a

representation of a more upstanding and artful nature becomes clear through another narrative in which the female body is prominently displayed. Against a white backdrop, a naked African American woman can be seen striking different poses, as the camera is used to mirror her silhouette, causing the video to show two of her. Completely coated in silver body paint and white diamonds, the woman slowly shifts poses, showing off her body while keeping certain parts protected from the audience's gaze by placing her hands and arms in obstructing positions (Video Chart "Love" 17-19). Present in the spotlight of the scene, the woman's movements and constructed overt appearance make her more closely resemble an artwork or statue than she does the typical video vixens so familiar to hip hop videos. Her hair exquisitely constructed around her head like a crown, the fact that the woman is coated in silver dust and diamonds, dominates her screen time, and furthermore seems to decide herself what parts of her body she shows to the camera alludes an air of authority, as well as one of beauty and importance. This narrative therefore shows how the male gaze in hip hop videos can also be used to draw attention to the female body to celebrate it, without fully objectifying it.

Although this analysis so far has "Love" being hailed as an ideal popular hip hop video regarding how to more realistically and progressively represent women, unfortunately many of the visual aspects that allow for this more feminist representation are misleading as they are built around patriarchal assertions. In a song revolving around romantic love, the overwhelming presence of so many naked female bodies in the first place already denotes Lamar's dependency on the hyper-masculine trope of heterogeneity; Lamar can only be allowed to tap into the more feminine emotions of vulnerability and love in the arena of rap music, if that message is paired with a visual discourse which heavily focuses on the naked female body. Many other elements in "Love" also engage with these underlying notions of hyper-masculinity, as most progressive female representations in the video are actually established through Lamar's adherence to underlying patriarchal notions, which motivates the existence of the many women in the clip in the first place. An example of this complex and contradicting construct is the presence of the group of women in the clip, which at first glance emanate the positive messages of diversity, varying beauty standards and an extended representation of women in asexualized roles. Upon closer inspection, however, the existence of this group also functions to re-establish Lamar's masculinity, as he is often seen sitting in the middle of the group as the only man present (Video Chart "Love" 20-21). Lamar framed in the center of the screen surrounded by many beautiful women, proves how these scenes strongly play into the heterogeneous aspect that is so important to hip hop's masculine core.

This complicated construct of a more progressive female representation which is used to enhance Lamar's image as a masculine rapper is also evident in the narrative showing the mirrored woman. Again, the main impression of this narrative is one of a more progressive nature, seemingly celebrating a black female body which has often been marginalized and mistreated in mainstream society (Richardson 790; "A Taste for Brown Sugar" 9). This narrative, however, also causes the woman to perform erotic acts of queerness, as the mirror causes the naked woman to press her own body against herself, creating highly-sexualized scenario's in which she touches but also almost kisses herself (Video Chart "Love" 22-23). This scene therefore both acts to celebrate the black female body, as well as plays into the male sexual fantasy which is constructed around the ambiguous queer space that women occupy in hip hop (Smith 360-361; 363). Other smaller indicators in "Love" add to strengthen the notion of Lamar's masculinity, such as the unaltered male gaze that is used in a short scene where a woman is unnaturally exposed and made-up when she is lying in bed (Video Chart "Love" 24). A different perspective on the video by *The Rolling Stone's* music reporter Steve Kreps reveals yet another alarming interpretation of the overall message of the storyline created in "Love", as he reveals an interpretation in which the many different representations of women in the video only serve to distract Lamar from his one true partner. Casting all the other women in roles of temptresses, Kreps writes that a large part of the "Love" video "focuses on Lamar's attempts to get back with his girl, even as he's tempted by dozens of other women on a music video shoot" (Kreps). This way of interpreting the video — which has some supporting evidence as indeed at one point a clapperboard appears in the video as to indicate that a video is shot within the video (Video Chart "Love" 25) — emphasizes the female cast in the video as sexualized scripts, labeling them as jezebel's whose aim is to steal away Lamar from his one true love. This interpretation exposes "Love" to actually have multiple meanings and forms of gender representation, some of which are not progressive or positive at all.

In the end it can be said that "Love" by Kendrick Lamar is immensely progressive in the way it presents women and especially the female body. Using a message of romantic love and partnership, Lamar strays from the established dominant cultural order to show multiple sides of women; whether in relationships, in beauty standards or in roles that women can take on. By celebrating the black female body in interesting and artful ways, Lamar strengthens the progressive message of his song, which for the most part paints women to be equal to men and also establishes male emotional vulnerability. The necessity of the naked female body that is so prominently featured in different ways in the video, and other aspects of the video

such as Lamar's engagement with female queerness for purely heterogeneous purposes, the use of the male gaze and the creation of a narrative playing into women as jezebels do showcase that even though "Love" can be considered more progressive than most hip hop videos in its representation of women, many of the clip's premises are still built around patriarchal premises. Many aspects of the song — such as the abundant presence of many beautiful and scarcely dressed women — serve to emphasize Lamar's masculinity, exposing the song to be progressive on the surface, but still rooted in the more sexist dynamics that still rule hip hop even in its most feminist forms today.

Conclusion

After having established a theoretical framework and four different video analyses, it is time to summarize and recognize important patterns in my four established case studies, through which valuable conclusions can be drawn on the topic of gender representation in contemporary commercialized American hip hop music videos. Before this conclusive analysis can be performed, however, it is first critical to recognize the limitations of this thesis in the way it frames music videos and female representation. It is integral to acknowledge that due to the limited scope of this research, it has been impossible to more broadly incorporate two important spheres of visual framing in contemporary hip hop that are relevant when analyzing female representation. The first one is that of the performative sphere, as the way artists perform their songs and lyrics on stage is also of paramount value to their styles and the way they frame topics such as gender. The second one is that of the extended creative influence of the director on the creation of music videos. Since this thesis has analyzed videos as representations of songs and artists, it is important to state that every video is a collaborative process between director and artist, but unfortunately the influence and style of directors is an aspect that could not be explored thoroughly in this thesis. This area is also where my thesis leaves room for further research, as the exploration of the creative influence of directors on their respective music videos could be a well-fitted extension of this work on female gender representation. Another way this thesis could be of value in future research is in extending the geographical scope of this analysis to encompass specific hip hop in for instance Europe or the Netherlands, where different thriving hip hop scenes also exist in a rather ambiguous relation to female gender representation. Lastly, my thesis and future work on gender representation in hip hop in general could benefit from more research on female erotic agency, which — as my conclusion will soon point out — is still an underappreciated way of female empowerment.

The starting point of this conclusive analysis is to use my four subquestions — which inspect the use of sexist conventions, the female body, concepts of femininity, masculinity, female erotic agency and sexuality — to contrast female gender representation between my male and female case studies — which is the premise of my all-encompassing fifth subquestion. Comparing the case studies of Nicki Minaj and Cardi B to those about Drake and Kendrick Lamar, it becomes immediately apparent that the male rappers somehow seem to have constructed a more *present* progressive narrative in representing the female gender when compared to their female counterparts. This is surprising, as my profiles on both Minaj and

Cardi point out that both women — at least to some extent — are aware of gendered prejudices in their industry and from a certain perspective can even be called feminists. Contextualized in a wider theoretical frame, however, this strange occurrence of male rappers actually being more openly feminist in their visual framing when compared to established feminist women, will reveal a still dominating set of gender dynamics which influences how both male and female rappers are able to represent gendered discourse and specifically the female gender today

The first important reason why women might come across as less feminist, is through their dependency on exposing the black female body for success in the industry. As clearly established in this thesis, female rappers today are still inherently tied to the exposure and objectification of their bodies to sell their music. Both considered the most successful female artists in their field, Nicki Minaj and Cardi B exemplify the importance of the naked female body as a body product in their respective visual discourse. In “Barbie Tingz” Minaj uses outfits to pull focus towards her famous posterior, and furthermore can be seen engaging with the male fantasy through the use of female queerness as well as silhouettes of her enhanced curvaceous body. In “Bartier Cardi” Cardi prominently plays into the male gaze by sexualizing herself in many of the clip’s scenes, showing how the highlighting of the female body is still very much a part of women’s existence and success in contemporary commercialized rap music. Both women furthermore enhance the focus on their bodies by incorporating notions of sexual prowess and deviancy in their lyrics, making use of the ever-present black mirror in which stereotypes and sexualized scripts appeal to a wide target audience. This exposing of the female body combined with lyrics heightening this sexualization means that imagery of this kind is exceptionally present in videos by female rappers. Although this aspect of the videos can in ways be called female erotic agency — especially as Minaj herself was also collaboratively directing “Barbie Tingz” and can therefore be said to utilize the integral black feminist practice of self-definition— sexual expression by women today is still generally perceived as “a sign of female inferiority” (Lorde 53), which helps shape the image of “Barbie Tingz” and “Bartier Cardi” as not exceptionally feminist in its female representation.

That women are still tied to certain prescribed patriarchal rules, however, does not mean they do not use the limited space that is available in contemporary hip hop to create a more meaningful and progressive narrative in the area of female representation. This becomes evident in both “Barbie Tingz” and “Bartier Cardi”, which are two visual and lyrical products that merge forms of resistance with more misogynistic and sexist traditions. The adaptation of

both Minaj and Cardi to the role of the male rapper is an especially important tool in this construct, as it creates a space for the women to loudly assert themselves as powerful, independent and in control, while the braggadocios and more masculine characteristics that accompany this identity expresses itself in misogynistic attitudes and sexist rhetoric which both women also abundantly make use of in their songs.

The overt attempts of these rappers to create videos that deviate from the set sexist standard in hip hop becomes evident through especially this use of sexist rhetoric, as both Nicki Minaj and Cardi B can be seen trying to combat general negative connotations of female derogatory words by using them in different contexts. The word ‘bitch’ is a prime example of this, as it is used in both singers’ songs to demean women as well as to empower them. Another example of this can be found in the sexual scripts that both women engage with, as the *Gangsta Bitch and Freak* can be seen as more progressive and less limiting stereotypes, although they of course remain strongly rooted in the hurtful image of the jezebel. Therefore Minaj and Cardi should be seen as feminists — even if their resistance is more ambiguously present because it functions in a double bind of entrapment — as both of their videos showcase narratives which openly fight the limiting and sexist dominant cultural order of hip hop. In “Barbie Tingz” Minaj’s sole focus on women as protagonists, her casting of men as back-up dancers and her reference to Kara Walker’s silhouette art show a conscious progressive trend. Especially her creative puppet and damsel storylines exhibits how her visual discourse is consciously thought out to represent women positively, while especially the framing of her body and use of misogynistic lyrics ensure her to still fit into the model that confirms her continued success as one of the few female names in the industry. In “Bartier Cardi” Cardi B’s prominent gender role reversal in the video and in real-life, as well as her playful manipulation of the male gaze show her too to be working within the limited space available to change the music from within and empower women through both visual and lyrical frames that still fit into what is generally accepted in commercialized hip hop, as her objectification and sexual prowess still play key roles in her visual narratives. What these examples make clear is that the few successful women who exist in the contemporary commercialized American hip hop industry still exist in a limited space of self-expression because they are women and therefore automatically viewed as less legitimate and less belonging in the industry. They also show how female rappers today do fight patriarchal traditions through their music and visual discourse, utilizing the limited space that they have for resistance by manipulating solely sexualized and hurtful imagery into something more complex, ambiguous but also progressive.

Besides women's progressive narratives being ambiguous because their gender still presents them with an inherently limited and sexist formula for success — and because some of their female erotic agency is not fully recognized yet — a contrast between my female and male case studies also exists because of the creative freedoms male rappers in the industry *do* enjoy in constructing visuals. Consequently, both Drake and Kendrick Lamar's videos seem more progressive because their gender allows them to more easily deviate from the patriarchal model, if they choose to do so. This becomes evident in Drake's "Nice For What" and its over-the-top feminism, which avoids the male gaze, diversely represents women and barely contains sexist rhetoric. In Lamar's "Love" this deviation from set sexist practices becomes apparent in the way the video emphasizes equal partnership, uses an affectionate lens on the male gaze and furthermore avoids the complete use of any sexist rhetoric. As my profiling of the two artists points out, however, is that both Drake and Lamar in their larger visual discourse still often rely on tropes of wealth and especially women to fabricate an image of hyper-masculinity. Upon closer inspection, both "Nice For What" and "Love" stay true to this formula by highlighting heterogeneity to express their masculinity which only seems more feminist because this highlighting is less overtly present when compared to for instance the exposure of the female body by female rappers, or their abundant use of misogynistic rhetoric. The emphasizing of heterogeneity, however, is as much if not more a practice rooted in a hurtful patriarchal model which suppresses women, and still prescribes limited roles to both men and women, while also being especially hurtful in exuding homophobia.

Since male rappers can be said to have a lot more creative freedom and space in hip hop as a male-dominated field — their gender working in their advantage as it confirms them as legitimately belonging in the industry — the feminist visual discourses of both "Nice For What" and "Love" feel somewhat disingenuous because they are only progressive on the surface. Although arguments can be made that male rappers too have to adhere to a set hyper-masculine standard to be successful in hip, both Drake and Kendrick Lamar have successfully deviated from this standard before when it benefitted them personally. This becomes visible in the ways in which both male artists use a more progressive and romantic style in their songs to open their music up to a larger array of topics, allowing them to rap about emotional vulnerability and personal traumatic experiences. This shows that both rappers at least in this point in their respective careers have the power to change hurtful gendered premises. Both rappers, however, can also be seen using this more romantic style as a shield for their adherence to more deeply rooted sexist premises, which enables them to tap into a more openly feminist discourse while still grounding their music in hurtful gendered ideas. In "Nice

for *What*” a diverse but still universally beautiful cast of women function as the protagonists in the video. That the overtly beautiful group of women in this video also has a specifically limited age-range strongly insinuates their availability to Drake as the male narrator of the video. The existence of these women in progressive roles only seems possible as long as the obvious possibility is present for Drake to engage with them in sexual relationships. In “Love” the same standard applies, as the presence of so many different women, and their often revealing outfits — even when portrayed in more affectionate than purely sexualized ways — reveals how the showcasing of multiple attractive but diverse women in a clip functions to establish the male rapper as masculine through the opportunity of sexual relations each of the women presents to him. This strong influence of patriarchal traditions on the establishment of Drake and Lamar as masculine also becomes apparent in the way Drake still only frames women in his lyrics in relation to himself even in his most progressive song, and in the way Lamar is able to paint a diverse cast of women as jezebels in a song celebrating equal and affectionate partnership. This is not to take away from the more progressive narratives that both male artists have created, but it proves that even in their most feminist visual discourse, both rappers still adhere to many different patriarchal prescriptions to cling to the image of masculinity, while still presenting these respective videos as revolutionarily progressive. That even Drake’s and Kendrick Lamar’s most feminist videos are not free of many hurtful representations of women, shows how hip hop today still has much ground to win on female representation by its dominating male rapper population.

Another consequence of Drake’s and Kendrick Lamar’s strict adherence to masculine heterogeneity is the continued existence of the one space in hip hop in which contemporary female artists are freer to express themselves than men: queerness. As becomes evident through the four case studies I analyzed, showcasing imagery of queerness is only possible in hip hop when solely depictions of women are involved. Drake’s “Nice For What” is a good example of this, as its cast contains women who identify as bisexual — as bisexuality leaves room for possible heteronormativity while also playing into the male fantasy of female queerness — but visually omits showing Big Freedia, who is a queer transgender icon and would be a relevant and logical presence in the clip. In “Love”, the double side of female queerness is also apparent, as an artful scene of a mirrored woman strongly celebrates the black female body while simultaneously playing into the male fantasy of sexual female queerness. The use of ambiguous queerness by female artists to deviate from patriarchal and sexist notions in the music becomes evident through the female case studies in this thesis. In “Barbie Tingz”, using queer ambiguity in self-representation allows Minaj to create strong

frames of female solidarity, while Cardi B in “Bartier Cardi” is able to use queerness to create layers within the male gaze, complicating the overt sexualization of men and women in the video to encompass a much broader sense of gender and erotic agency. This queer ambiguity therefore gives women a limited but important space of resistance and self-identification within contemporary hip hop, which allows the creation of female empowerment, a reconstruction of the male gaze and opportunities to fight against the homophobia so deeply rooted in the culture. The space of ambiguous queerness is so effective because it allows women to break with patriarchal tradition in rap, without straying too much from established and accepted traditions as these self-representations also often play into an established male fantasy. This general practice of visually playing into the male gaze and utilizing misogynistic rhetoric while also engaging in ambiguous queerness moreover prevents women from outrightly being labeled unattractive ‘Dykes’, once again proving the complex and often contradicting powers at work in hip hop music today.

In the end it can be said that contemporary commercialized American hip hop videos today contain many different ambiguous dynamics regarding female gender representation. Generally, it seems that this genre of music is moving towards a more realistic and progressive gender representation of women, both lyrically as well as visually. That male rappers seemingly create stronger progressive gendered content than female rappers is an ironic consequence of gender dynamics that are still at work in the hip hop industry today, where women are more closely tied to overt sexist traditions to prove their worth. These women, however, should be credited with slowly changing the music from within, as female rappers can be seen working within the space that they have to create better representations of women throughout their larger visual discourse in which they push boundaries of accepted female erotic agency utilizing the double bind of entrapment. Male rappers also exemplify this romantic turn through their videos and music as many sexist conventions are consciously omitted in videos. This possibility of avoiding overt sexist traditions, however, is in itself evidence of still strongly dominating gender dynamics, in which male artists are freer to deviate from these sexist traditions — if they choose to do so — simply because they are male. This means that even though men seem more progressive than women, they cannot and should not be measured by the same standards as their gender on its own already influences much of what is possible in the area of resisting and fighting sexism and misogyny in the larger culture. The abundantly used practice of men highlighting their masculinity through emphasis on heteronormativity in their most feminist videos should therefore partly be considered as not pushing the boundaries of progressive discourse hard enough, especially

because both male rappers in this thesis do seem able to deviate from masculinity if it helps them, in for instance broadening their scope of topics in lyrical content. The male rapper's hurtful continuation of highlighting masculinity through heterogeneity even in videos that are presented as exceptionally feminist furthermore raises the question of whether the men are attempting to change the culture or are just playing into the popular and feminist #metoo movement. This emphasis on heterogeneity does ensure the continued existence of the space of queer ambiguousness where women are freer to express themselves when compared to men. Whether American hip hop artists will continue to slowly but surely move towards less hurtful and more feminist content is something only time will probably tell. For now at least it seems that when it comes down to progressive representation and changing the culture from the inside out — in the words of Queen Latifah — ladies are still first.

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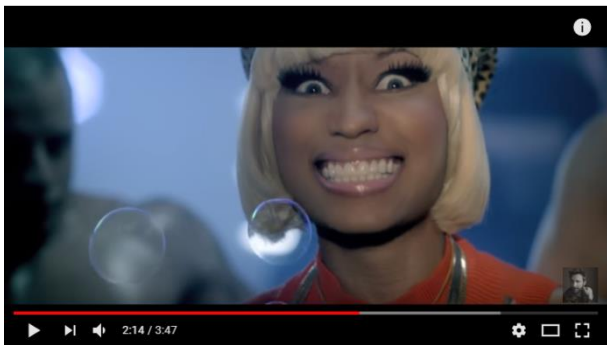
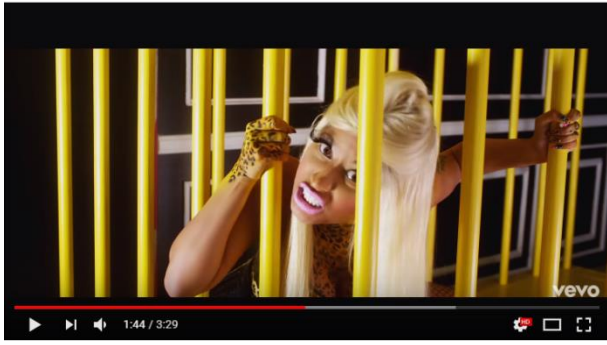
Appendix:

Video Chart: “Swalla” by Jason Derulo featuring Nicki Minaj & Ty Dolla Sign

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. 0.26 |  |
| 2. 1.12 |  |
| 3. 1.19 |  |
| 4. 1.39 |  |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| <p>5. 1.54</p> |  A video frame showing a bright green sports car on a dark stage. Four people are around the car: a woman in a purple outfit leaning against the front, a woman in a black outfit standing behind the car, a woman in a purple outfit crouching by the front wheel, and a man in a grey jacket and black pants standing to the right. The background has colorful vertical light bars. The video player interface at the bottom shows a progress bar at 1:54 / 3:55. |
| <p>6. 2.34</p> |  A video frame showing a woman with long black hair wearing a red bikini top, black thigh-high boots, and a colorful visor. She is sitting on a yellow chair in a tunnel-like structure with walls made of colorful, parallel lines. The video player interface at the bottom shows a progress bar at 2:34 / 3:55. |
| <p>7. 3.00</p> |  A close-up video frame of the woman from the previous frame, wearing the same red bikini top, black thigh-high boots, and colorful visor. She is pointing her finger towards the camera. The background shows the colorful tunnel structure. The video player interface at the bottom shows a progress bar at 3:00 / 3:55. |
| <p>8. 3.24</p> |  A video frame showing three people on a stage with a blue background. On the left, a woman in a colorful bikini is clapping. In the center, a man in a grey shirt is pouring a drink from a can. On the right, a woman in a blue and red bikini is holding a drink. The video player interface at the bottom shows a progress bar at 3:24 / 3:55. |

Video Chart Alter Egos: Roman Zolanski and Harajuku Barbie as Nicki Minaj alter egos

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| | Nicki Minaj as Harajuku Barbie in “Beauty and a Beat” & “Superbass.” |
| 1. 3.33 |  A screenshot from a video showing Nicki Minaj as Harajuku Barbie. She is wearing a pink tutu and a pink top, standing in a pool at night. The video player interface shows a progress bar at 3:33 / 4:52. |
| 2. 0.14 |  A screenshot from a video showing Nicki Minaj as Harajuku Barbie. She is wearing a pink and white patterned top and has long blonde hair with pink tips. The video player interface shows a progress bar at 0:14 / 3:38. |
| | Nicki Minaj as Roman Zolanski in “Where Them Girls At” & “Stupid Hoe.” |
| 3. 2.14 |  A screenshot from a video showing Nicki Minaj as Roman Zolanski. She is wearing a red top and has blonde hair. The video player interface shows a progress bar at 2:14 / 3:47. |
| 4. 1.44 |  A screenshot from a video showing Nicki Minaj as Roman Zolanski. She is wearing a black top and has blonde hair, standing behind yellow bars. The video player interface shows a progress bar at 1:44 / 3:29. |

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| | Nicki Minaj as both Roman Zolanski (standing) and Harajuku Barbie (sitting) in “Monster.” |
| 5. 0.49 |  |

Tweet Chart: Nicki Minaj Tweets on double gender standards & “Anaconda” not being nominated for the MTV Video Awards


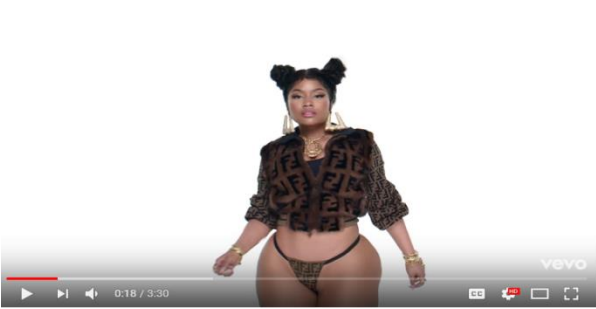
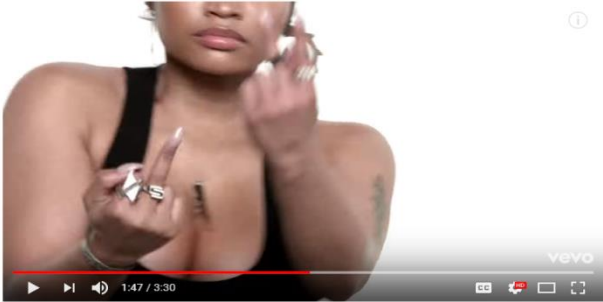

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Video Chart: “Anaconda” by Nicki Minaj

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Scenes from “Anaconda” in which the male gaze and an emphasis on Nicki Minaj’s posterior are highlighted. |
| 1. 0.24 |  |
| 2. 2.20 |  |
| 3. 3.42 |  |
| | Images of the video showcasing female empowerment. |
| 4. 3.22 |  |

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| <p>5. 4.30</p> |  |
| <p>Imagery of an all-women crew that dominates the “Anaconda” video.</p> | |
| <p>6. 2.09</p> |  |
| <p>7. 2.29</p> |  |
| <p>8. 2.41</p> |  |
| <p>9. 2.51</p> |  |




Video Chart: “Barbie Tingz” by Nicki Minaj

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| | Two different personifications of Nicki herself as a character in the video. |
| 1. 0.09 |  |
| 2. 0.18 |  |
| | Nicki Minaj performing her braggadocious, masculine style of rap, adopting to the role of the male rapper through performances of facial expression, hand gestures and attitude. |
| 3. 1.47 |  |
| 4. 1.56 |  |

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| 5. 2.47 |  |
| Men solely functioning as back-up dancers in “Barbie Tingz.” | |
| 6. 0.23 |  |
| 7. 1.43 |  |
| 8. 2.44 |  |
| 9. 2.58 |  |

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| | Scenes of women dancing together, showing female solidarity. |
| 10. 1.27 |  |
| 11. 2.08 |  |
| | Nicki Minaj asserting her queer ambiguity in “Barbie Tingz.” |
| 12. 1.59 |  |
| 13. 1.49 |  |
| | Nicki Minaj as a Barbie puppet on a string. |
| 14. 0.20 |  |

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| | The use of the Barbie alter ego to assert Minaj's queer ambiguity through the use of shadows. |
| 15. 0.50 |  |
| 16. 0.57 |  |
| | Visuals engaging with the false and perfect image of white womanhood. |
| 17. 1.14 |  |
| 18. 3.07 |  |
| | Nicki Minaj's body enlarged as a silhouette, functioning as a body product and as commentary on society's obsession with the black female body. |
| 19. 2.31 |  |

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| <p>20. 2.32</p> |  |
| | <p>An example of Kara Walker's silhouette art: <i>Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart</i>.</p> |
| <p>21.</p> |  |
| | <p>A silhouette image reminiscent of Walker's silhouette art summarizing Minaj's contradictory and complex gender discourse in "Barbie Tingz."</p> |
| <p>22. 2.53</p> |  |






Video Chart: “Bodak Yellow” by Cardi B

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Cardi B being in charge of the narrative, confidently performing her lyrics and functioning as authoritative figure in the video narratives. |
| 1. 1.13 |  A screenshot from the video showing Cardi B sitting in a high-backed, ornate chair. She is wearing a dark, patterned top and has her hands raised near her face, with fingers spread. The background is dark and moody. |
| 2. 1.25 |  A screenshot from the video showing Cardi B standing in a club-like setting. She is wearing a shiny, metallic, futuristic outfit and has her arms raised in a celebratory gesture. There are various objects like hookahs and bottles on a table in front of her. |
| 3. 3.25 |  A screenshot from the video showing Cardi B sitting on a couch, wearing a black, shiny, form-fitting outfit. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. A cheetah is lying down next to her, and she is gently touching its head. |
| | Symbolism in “Bodak Yellow” referring to the importance of women. |
| 4. 2.43 |  A screenshot from the video showing three women sitting in the back of a car. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The woman in the middle is wearing a white shirt and a black hat. The woman on the right is wearing a black top and has her hand near her face. |

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| 5. 1.33 |  A person in a dark, possibly outdoor setting at night, holding a flaming torch aloft with their right hand. They are wearing a dark top and a necklace. The background is dark with some light sources visible. |
| 6. 2.15 |  A person in a dark setting, holding a flaming torch aloft. Two vertical light sources are visible in the background, creating a dramatic effect. The person is wearing a dark top and a necklace. |
| Shots from “Bodak Yellow” that play into the male gaze. | |
| 7. 1.00 |  A person in a dark setting, holding a flaming torch aloft. A car is visible in the background, and the scene is lit with a warm, yellowish light. |
| 8. 3.16 |  A close-up of a person's face, looking upwards with an open mouth. The person has dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The background is dark with some light sources visible. |



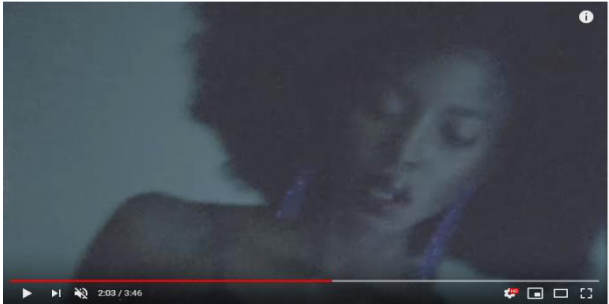

Video Chart: “Bartier Cardi” by Cardi B

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| | Different women managing money in a setting filled with Greek memorabilia, which emanates an atmosphere of royalty and importance. |
| 1. 0.05 |  |
| 2. 0.21 |  |
| 3. 0.42 |  |
| | A shot of a woman undressed in a bathtub which purposefully omits the male gaze. |
| 4. 0.24 |  |

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| | Men in the video showcased in their passive roles of objectified servants. |
| 5. 0.36 |  |
| 6. 2.40 |  |
| | A screen shot showing how the men in the song have the word 'Cardi' tattooed in their necks. |
| 7. 1.09 |  |
| 8. 1.12 |  |
| | Men turning towards the camera, exposing their naked torsos to the male gaze. |
| 9. 1.02 |  |





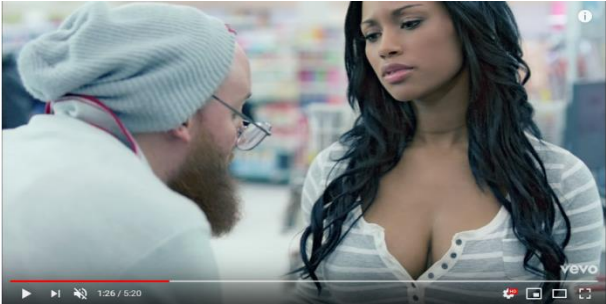
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| 10. 1.07 |  |
| | Men gazing at Cardi B on the television, complicating the male gaze. |
| 11. 0.53 |  |
| | The male gaze centering on Cardi B performing on television. |
| 12. 0.13 |  |
| 13. 0.14 |  |
| 14. 0.52 |  |

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| 15. 2.14 |  A close-up shot of Cardi B performing in a red, feathered outfit. She is wearing a red bra-like top with large red feathers on the shoulders and a matching skirt. She has a large, ornate necklace and is looking down. The background is dark with some lights. |
| | Cardi B confidently performing her song, always in charge and being the center of attention. |
| 16. 0.33 |  A shot of a television screen in a dark room. The screen shows Cardi B in a red outfit, performing. The room is dimly lit, with a small light source visible on the right. |
| 17. 2.23 |  A shot of Cardi B in a red outfit, standing in front of a background of red tinsel. She is wearing a red bra-like top and a matching skirt. She has a large, ornate necklace and is looking towards the camera. |
| 18. 2.34 |  A shot of Cardi B and another woman in a red outfit. Cardi B is wearing a red bra-like top and a matching skirt. The other woman is wearing a red top with a large, ornate necklace. They are both looking towards the camera. |
| 19. 2.52 |  A shot of Cardi B in a red outfit, standing in front of a crowd of people. She is wearing a red bra-like top and a matching skirt. She has a large, ornate necklace and is looking towards the camera. The crowd is in the background, and the scene is lit with stage lights. |

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| | 21 Savage passiveley sitting in a chair while two women tie him up. |
| 20. 1.35 |  |
| 21. 1.48 |  |
| | Women's hairstyles reminiscent of femininity in the Black Power Movement. |
| 22. 2.03 |  |
| | A photo of Angela Davis, a well-known member of the Black Panther Party. |
| 23. |  |

Video Chart: “Started From The Bottom” by Drake

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Visual frames used at the start of the song which strengthen Drake’s public persona of Canadian niceness. |
| 1. 0.03 |  |
| 2. 0.23 |  |
| 3. 0.38 |  |
| | Imagery in “Started From The Bottom” which shows Drake’s adherence to a standard masculine set of hip hop conventions by validating success through displays of wealth and women featuring the male gaze. |
| 4. 0.27 |  |

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| 5. 2.36 |  |
| 6. 3.04 |  |
| 7. 4.24 |  |
| 8. 4.37 |  |
| | A screenshot of a 30-second long scene in “Started From The Bottom” where a man is talking to a woman’s cleavage. |
| 9. 1.05-1.35 |  |

Video Chart: “Hotline Bling” by Drake



| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Drake dancing in an empty room: the main narrative of “Hotline Bling.” |
| 1. 0.32 |  A screenshot from the music video for "Hotline Bling" showing Drake in a bright yellow, empty room. He is wearing a red jacket and is captured in a dance move, leaning forward with one arm extended. The room has a high ceiling and a single light source, creating a strong yellow glow. A Vevo logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the video player. |
| | Frames showing how “Hotline Bling” relies on the male gaze to represent women. |
| 2. 0.53 |  A screenshot from the music video for "Hotline Bling" showing two women in silhouette against a bright purple background. They are positioned on either side of the frame, looking towards the center. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of their bodies. A Vevo logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the video player. |
| 3. 2.54 |  A screenshot from the music video for "Hotline Bling" showing a woman in a black dress crouching in a bright yellow room. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The room is the same as the one in the first screenshot. A Vevo logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the video player. |
| 4. 4.29 |  A screenshot from the music video for "Hotline Bling" showing Drake and a woman in a bright white room. Drake is standing on the right, looking down at the woman who is crouching on the floor on the left. The room has a high ceiling and a single light source, creating a strong white glow. A Vevo logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the video player. |

Video Chart: “Nice For What” by Drake

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| | Flashes of Drake rapping in the song. |
| 1. 0.49 |  |
| 2. 2.08 |  |
| | A narrative depicting a woman of color sitting at the head of a table in a conference room, which is filled with older, white men. |
| 3. 0.44 |  |
| | Imagery showing how the woman asserts herself as powerful by confidently commanding the room and the audience. |
| 4. 0.51 |  |





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| 5. 1.15 |  |
| Motherhood represented in “Nice For What”. | |
| 6. 1.44 |  |
| 7. 2.24 |  |
| A narrative referencing the intelligence of women, a rare sight in commercialized American hip hop. | |
| 8. 1.48 |  |
| 9. 1.49 |  |

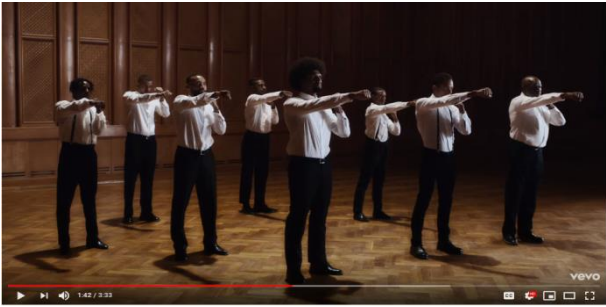

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| | Images of symbolism in narratives of “Nice For What” that depict women as skillfull and powerful, distruping the passive sexualized stereotypes and scripts typically used in commercialized hip hop. |
| 10. 1.32 |  |
| 11. 1.07 |  |
| 12. 2.09 |  |
| 13. 2.49 |  |
| | A shot showing how “Nice For What” avoids the male gaze by framing the black female body as strong and empowering. |
| 14. 0.23 |  |

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| 15. 0.38 |  |
| | A narrative depicting actress and feminist activist Tracee Ellis Ross dancing in a field. |
| 16. 1.27 |  |
| | Examples of how all women in the video are properly credited at the end of the clip. |
| 17. 3.41 |  |
| 18. 3.48 |  |


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| | Karena Evans being credited as director of the video at the start of “Nice For What.” |
| 19. 0.19 |  |


Video Chart The Black Male Experience: a specific focus in Kendrick Lamar's videos

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|--|
| | Screen shots taken from the video "Alright" in which especially police brutality against black men is a prominent topic. |
| 1. 2.35 |  |
| 2. 3.05 |  |
| 3. 5.52 |  |
| | Frames in the song "Element" from Lamar's album <i>Damn</i> , showcasing different socio-economic issues black men in the US face in contemporary society. |
| 4. 0.45 |  |





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| 5. 1.42 |  |
| 6. 1.49 |  |


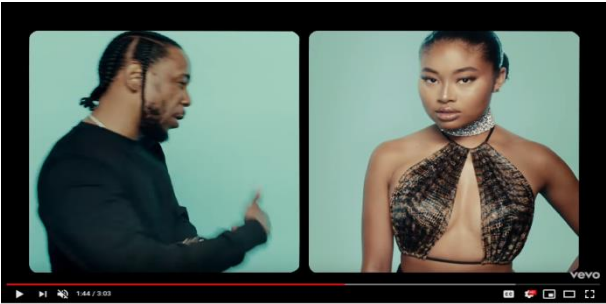
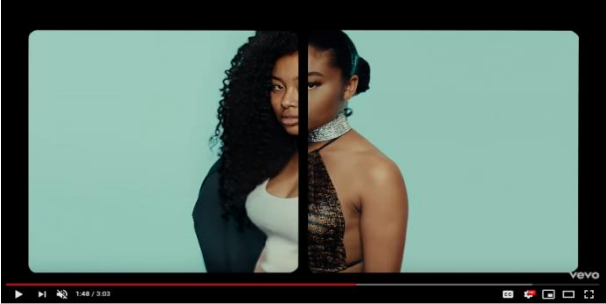
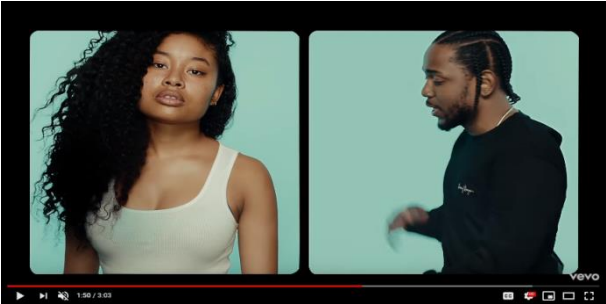

Video Chart Wealth and Women: Kendrick Lamar validating his success by overt displays of wealth and women in his videos

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Screen shots from the “King Kunta” video which contains various displays of wealth and women. |
| 1. 0.37 |  |
| 2. 0.51 |  |

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| 3. 1.28 |  |
| Screen shots from one of Lamar’s most recent videos “Loyalty”, showing imagery featuring luxurious cars and the male gaze. | |
| 4. 0.31 |  |
| 5. 1.54 |  |
| 6. 3.27 |  |





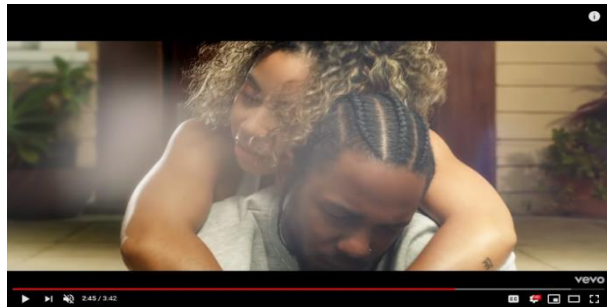
Video Chart: “Humble” by Kendrick Lamar

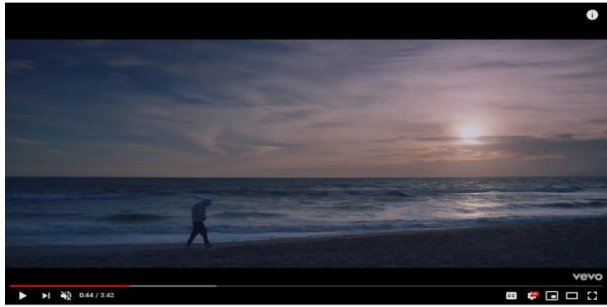

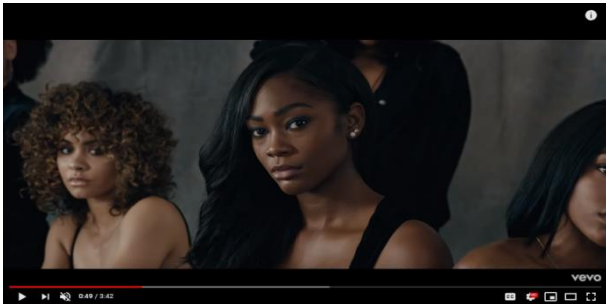

| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | Imagery from “Humble” showing how Lamar uses the male gaze in his videos. |
| 1. 0.20 |  |
| 2. 0.26 |  |
| | Imagery from “Humble” which exhibits narratives which again revolve around the black male experience in the US. |
| 3. 1.01 |  |
| 4. 1.19 |  |


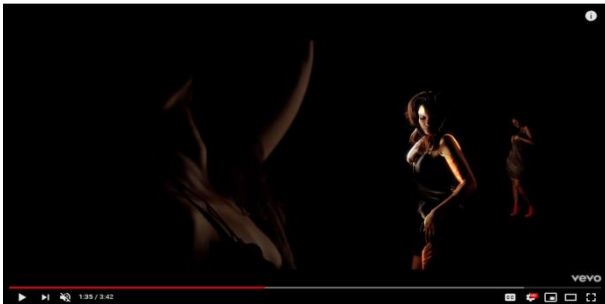
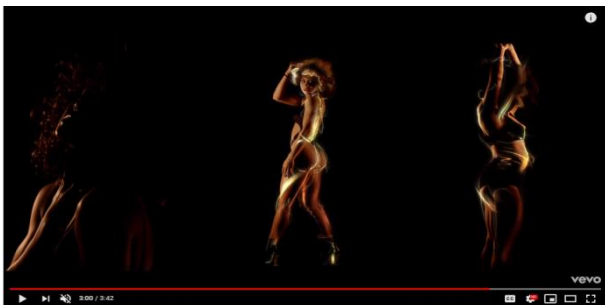


| | |
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| 5. 1.37 |  |
| | Frames showing how Lamar addresses unattainable female beauty standards in “Humble.” |
| 6. 1.44 |  |
| 7. 1.48 |  |
| 8. 1.50 |  |
| 9. 1.53 |  |

Video Chart: “Love” by Kendrick Lamar



| Reference Time: | Corresponding Screen Shot: |
|-----------------|---|
| | A prominent narrative in the video through which the audience is shown different moments in a couple’s romantic relationship. |
| 1. 1.01 |  |
| 2. 1.05 |  |
| 3. 1.09 |  |
| 4. 1.17 |  |

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| | Imagery showing the couple fighting, in which the woman is portrayed as active and aggressive, smashing a plate and pushing Lamar. |
| 5. 1.14 |  |
| 6. 1.14 |  |
| 7. 1.18 |  |
| | Screenshots showing the woman braiding Lamar's hair, strengthening the realistic representation of both of them in the video, going against limited and sexist stereotypes typically used in hip hop. |
| 8. 2.41 |  |
| 9. 2.45 |  |

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| | Imagery in “Love” featuring a group of women representing diversity and various beauty standards, which are alternated with images of Lamar walking on the beach. |
| 10. 0.44 |  |
| 11. 0.45 |  |
| 12. 0.49 | . |
| |  |
| | A screen shot of Lamar sitting in the middle of the group of women, expanding the roles of women in hip hop videos to contain motherhood. |
| 13. 2.05 |  |

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| | A scene overtly displaying the naked black female body by showcasing women slowly moving to the song wearing lingerie, drenched in shadows and white lines of contour. |
| 14. 1.33 |  |
| 15. 1.35 |  |
| 16. 3.00 |  |
| | A narrative showcasing a mirrored and naked silver painted African woman. |
| 17. 1.43 |  |
| 18. 1.46 |  |

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| 19. 1.48 |  |
| | Lamar establishing his masculinity by being the only man sitting in the middle of a group full of beautiful women. |
| 20. 2.47 |  |
| 21. 3.02 |  |
| | Scenarios playing into the male heterogenous fantasy by having sexualized acts of queerness performed by a mirroring image depicting two women. |
| 22. 1.40 |  |
| 23. 1.53 |  |

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| | The male gaze used in a short scene where Lamar looks at his partner asleep in bed, as she is unnaturally exposed to the camera. |
| 24. 2.38 |  |
| | A screenshot showing a clapperboard, supporting Kreps' interpretation of the women in the clip serving as tempresses to Lamar in the creation of the video. |
| 25. 1.55 |  |